

HOUSING RAGE

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I have sites I go to regularly to get my intellectual fixes, and one of them is 99% Invisible, a perfect site for one like me who loves to study the social, political and economic effects of the built environment.

The site is currently running a five-part series about homelessness and housing called *According to Need*, produced by Katie Mingle, who also does the on-air narration. Any thumbnail description I give of the project will not do justice to its depth, breadth and heart, but I can attest to its power to enrage and shame at one and the same time.

I was listening to the series on Saturday, December 19, 2020. In Chapter 2, when Mingle is interviewing the operators who staff 2-1-1, the hotline set up by Alameda County in California to handle self-reports of homelessness, she recounts an incident involving a homeless man getting dialysis and the availability of a bed in a shelter. During the day, the operators continually check in with the area shelters on the availability of beds.

Mingle does a good job exploring the struggle the operators have in trying to match need with inventory—some shelters only take mothers with children but not fathers with children, some focus on domestic violence and so on, and it seems to be simply a matter of luck that a caller with needs and a facility that can meet those needs cross paths at the same time through the earpiece of the operators.

In this case, five beds had become available in a men's shelter. Thomas, who is calling 2-1-1 at 5:10 p.m. to check on the situation, is eligible for one of them—if he can get from his dialysis treatment center to the shelter by 6 p.m. But Thomas has no earthly way to get there: no money for an Uber and public transportation will take too long. The operator knows that there is a fund for Lyft rides, but it has certain restrictions that Thomas does not in any way meet, but she decides to order Thomas the ride anyway.

Thomas, relief filling his voice, is waiting for the ride to come, but he can't connect with the driver, despite the operator telling Thomas where he is located. The driver cancels the order and drives away. The operator dials up another ride, and it suddenly becomes a race against time. Mingle records the three-way conversation the operator sets up

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among Thomas, the driver and herself and she tries to connect the two. I can hear Thomas' voice shouting, "I've got a green shirt on, I'm standing in the middle of the parking lot" while the operator is relaying the information to the driver.

Finally, they connect. The operator notes that Thomas will most likely be late but hopefully by not too much, and she hopes he can convince the shelter to let him in. (Mingle doesn't say if he made it or not.)

Pause for a moment to take all this in as we sit in the richest country history has ever known: the sound of a man's voice full of desperation and fear because he may lose the chance to have a roof over his head for a night.

Earlier in the day, on this Saturday, I did what I usually do on Saturday morning after a week of slinging content for the University: I get up at 6 a.m., make coffee, and sit in the kitchen listening, first, to *Innovation Hub* from WGBH in Boston, and then *On the Media* from WNYC in New York. I give myself a quiet couple of hours to have a connected intellectual experience without notifications and emails interrupting the head space.

Innovation Hub had a great show on the history of grocery stores in the United States, and in one segment of the conversation, Benjamin Lorr, author of *The Secret Life of Groceries: The Dark Miracle of the American Supermarket*, who was being interviewed, put paid to the notion that consumers can buy their way out of taking responsibility for the capitalist damage being done to the earth and its inhabitants. Their continued self-deception will only lead to damage being done to people far away and definitely out of sight and out of mind. (Listen to his explanation of the supply chain for shrimp.)

In *On the Media*, co-host Bob Garfield interviewed Shoshana Zuboff, professor emeritus at Harvard Business School and author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, about the data extraction and human futures markets that comprise much of our economy.

Her testimony about the way the big tech companies essentially consider the information of human beings as being no different than what oil and gas are to Exxon is both a frightening rendition of just how at the mercy people are to extractive corporate practices as well as a perfect description of capitalism's pitiless logic of turning anything, no matter how private, into a public commodity.

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So, all this simmers in my brain as I listen to Chapter 2. I should also add that as I was listening to Chapter 2, I was also catching up on work that I hadn't been able to finish during the week, a situation I do not like but seemingly can't avoid because the work week gets so fragmented and discontinuous because of meetings and phone calls about the meetings and so on and so on. (The usual bureaucratic slog.)

Back to Thomas and his quest: as I listened to the description of Thomas and the driver trying to find each other, I found my heart racing as if I were watching some scripted "action thriller": would the hero be able to defeat the evil at the moment when all seems lost? A stupid response given the stakes involved in this situation, but it shows just how templated our emotions have become after being tutored for thousands of hours by our media dream-machine.

So, the chapter ends, and I'm sitting at my desk finishing up my nonsense work, just poking along. The Marvelous María Beatriz comes from the bedroom, where she'd been Zooming with her friends in the Gambia, and asks me how I'm doing. And seemingly from out of nowhere (though clearly not from nowhere, seeing how my heart had been prepped all morning), I am enraged and in tears as I explain about Thomas and rail about how could a society let something like homelessness happen when we have every resource to ensure that it doesn't have to happen.

And I am really sobbing, not just moved but hollowed out by what I'm speaking about, a gut-deep sadness that is also a righteous anger. The MMB, as is her wont and her training, lets me speak, helps me frame, gets me to connect, soothes the beast. And things come back to the normal which should not be the normal but is the normal at this moment, our home, our cats, our luck so far in the pandemic, our love, our being intact and vital—our possibilities.

Of course, as the routine takes over, the sadness softens, the anger decelerates. But the question that blurted out of me still echoes: "How can we let this happen when we have every tool we need at hand to make it stop forever?" I hear that echo in the despicable haggling over a COVID relief bill, allowing full deductions for business entertainment but literally starving people with niggardly unemployment benefits and emaciated support for small businesses. Not to mention the griftopia that is our government and the civil war that is our society.

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David Graeber, in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (one of my definite favorites), concludes his massive study of the topic by saying that the market system under which we live can only continue to function by constantly converting, through constant violence, love into debt. That is, converting the linkages that bind human to human into commodities stripped of context and affection, thus made ready for trade and exploitation.

We should no longer allow this to happen, we really shouldn't, not only for the moral reasons but also for survival reasons since we can't keep using the way of the market to live our lives because the market will eventually eat up those lives the way the snake eats its tail.

I really hope Thomas got at least one good night's rest. There are too many Thomases.