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The Call of the Rock

Inside the locked fence surrounding the emergency shelter for the homeless at Seventh Street and New York Avenue NW in downtown Washington, a group of men were bracing themselves against an incessantly irritating voice that had already lured them close to destruction.

You might say it was the "call of the rock," meaning their obsession with smoking crack cocaine. In nights past, they said, before they became homeless, they had responded happily to the call with newly cashed paychecks in hand.

Now, crushed into poverty and cramped in five trailers bathed with floodlights and patrolled by armed guards, they were trying to save the only thing they had left—their lives.

"I'm just going to put my faith in Jesus," one of the men told me through the fence as he thumbed through a Bible. "I am so glad that I am locked in for the night."

"I am so sick and tired of living this way," said another. "I can't believe that I put my appetite for euphoria ahead of my responsibilities . . . again."

As they talked, a man called Pee Wee paced nervously back and forth between the trailers that house about 90 homeless men. Trailermates periodically asked him to calm down and stop making everybody nervous. But Pee Wee had apparently heard the call, and he heard nothing else.

"He shouldn't have come in here in the first place," one of the men grumbled. But his hostility did not seem so much directed at Pee Wee as at himself for being afraid of what might happen when he too heard the call.

The insidiousness of this drug had brought these men to their knees, had left them watching carelessly as their families, homes, cars and jobs went up in smoke. Yet, with everything gone, with lice infesting many of their bodies, the only thing some of them could think about was yet another hit of cocaine.

Conversations rambled aimlessly about world affairs, sports and crime but inevitably returned to drugs—and how much fun they used to have. If ever there was a place where drug counseling was needed, it is here. Resources are available, if not coordinated into an effective strategy for combating this scourge. The best know-how in town was just a few blocks away, over at Fifth and K streets NW,

inside the Metropolis Alcoholics Anonymous Club. But most of these men knew nothing of that. Instead, some had resigned themselves to the fact that they would die chasing the ghost of a cocaine high.

"The minute I walk out of here in the morning, I going to start looking," one of the men said. "I really don't want to, because look where it got me. But I can't help myself."

As the night wore on, people in cars began passing the compound, laughing at the men behind the fence. Even transvestites taunted them. Mounting anger and feelings of inadequacy soon combined to make some of the men especially vulnerable to the call. When someone appeared at the fence offering rocks for sale, as was often the case, there were instant takers.

Several men who had spent all day as laborers on construction sites and as members of eviction crews pooled their meager earnings and made a buy. Shortly afterward, one of them exited a trailer, wide-eyed and frantic. He proceeded to scurry beneath the fence, ripping his clothes and bloodying his back as he headed off in search of more.

It was Pee Wee, looking sick as a dog.

One glimmer of optimism shone through all of this madness. It was a guy who, while making the circuit of soup kitchens and churches, had met a man named Norm, a drug counselor at the St. Vincent De Paul center at Fourth Street and Massachusetts Avenue NW.

Norm, himself a recovering addict, had established a set of criteria for the man to follow if he was serious about wanting to get—and stay—clean: Go to 12-step meetings, pray and don't use drugs or alcohol. Somehow, the man said, the suggestions had worked for three weeks.

And they appeared to be working on this particular night. While some of the other homeless men worked themselves into a frenzy talking about getting high, he prayed. While others spoke of going to local charity outlets and getting clothes to sell on the street for drug money, he read literature that had been picked up at the fellowship meetings.

And though it was clear that some people would find relief from the call of the rock only through death, there was hope that at least one more would find it—through the grace of God—in recovery.