

A Gate Opened, and It Was Golden

BY ADELE AZAR-RUCQUOI

SEVERAL YEARS AGO my husband, Jim, and I celebrated our sixth wedding anniversary in San Francisco. It was a vacation to remember, but not because of the sights. I went home with much more than I came with.

It began one morning after leaving a bookstore in Union Square. We saw a bearded old man sitting on the blackened sidewalk, propped up against a bank building. One leg was thrown out in front. I thought, "What about the other one? Is he missing one? Is he hiding it?" Heck, here they come again—the questions! "Are you putting me on? Are you a con artist? Are you really lame?" It's the old swirl between heart and head. Do I or don't I?

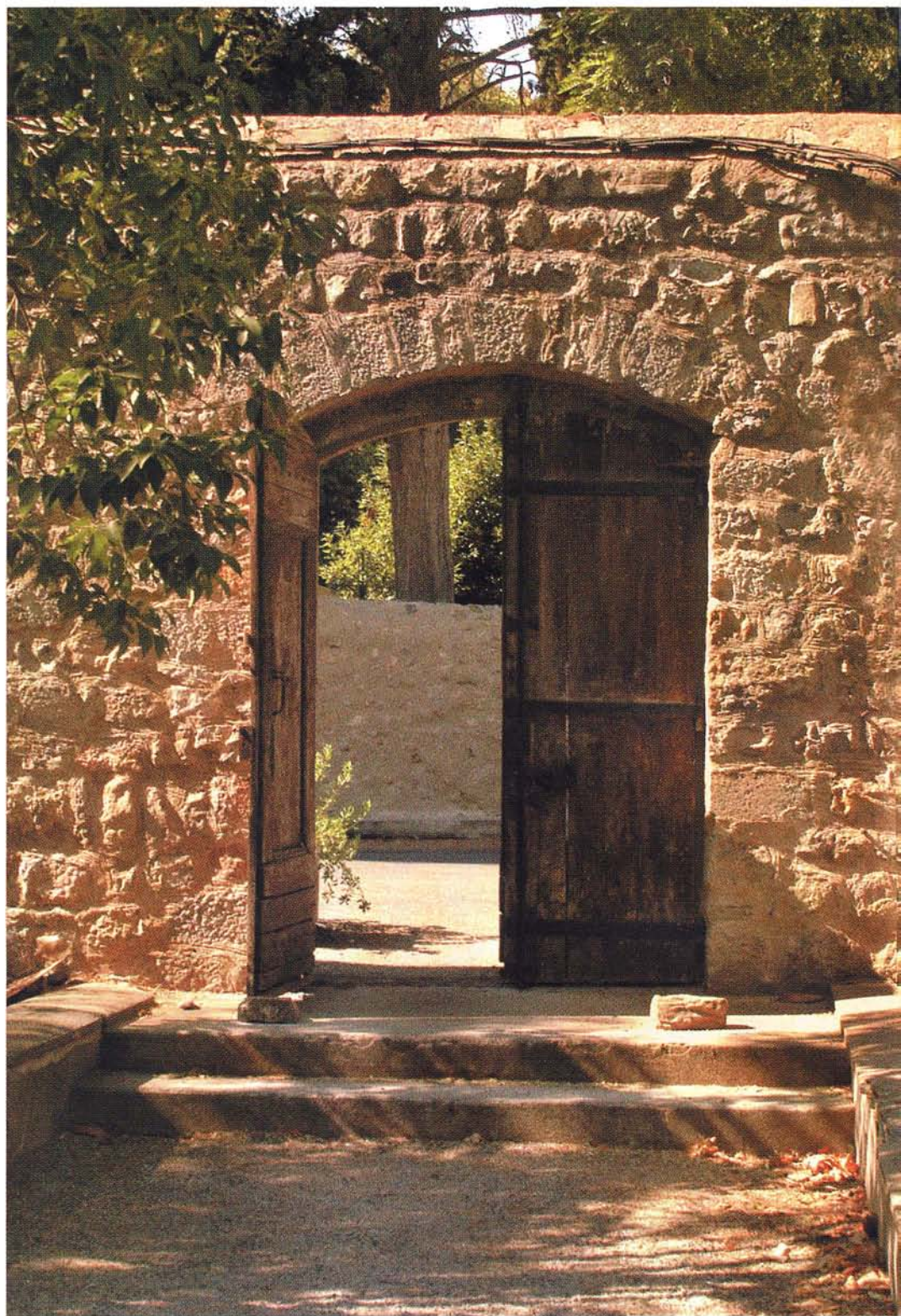
His arm was stretched out with that beggar's cup. But his eyes stared disinterestedly, as if he were somewhere else. *Are you pushing this scene on me? It's as though you're asking me, "What are you going to do about this? It's all up to you, honey!"*

I am sorrowful and resentful at the same time.

We did not ask for this. It had been a wonderful week. We stayed at a Victorian bed-and-breakfast on the hilltop in a city

PHOTO BY TATYANA BORODINA

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that surrendered to its ambling trolley cars. And that amazing Golden Gate Bridge, walks at night along the waterfront, ethnic eateries on every corner, flowers always in sight. It had been a restorative vacation. I don't think we saw anything without holding hands.

Meanwhile, as we walked away, I could not let go of that disturbing image on the street. Normally I would have dropped a bill in his cup just to be done with it. But here is Jim, rolling his eyes. "You're not really going to put money in his cup. I've seen too many con men—men wanting to get back at society for having put them on the street."

A young long-haired guy on a skateboard sails by. A mother pushing her stroller looks the other way. A businessman marches with fixed gaze. And an old woman with a cane counts the cracks in the sidewalk. Is my crumpled man such a part of the everyday scene here that he simply disappears, a throw-away piece of life, something to ignore like a discarded wrapper?

Something did not feel right. Was I the only one who could see him that day? Who is really the needy, callous and impoverished here? I could not stop the flow of questions.

Along the street, at shop upon shop, "For Sale" signs clamored for the money in our wallets. They were prepared to give us something for our money—a blouse, say, or a set of blue crystal or a gift to take back home. This was only commerce, after all, passing our money around one to another. But for this beggar, what could he exchange for anything dropped into his cup? For him, it was a one-way transaction. Or was it?

Meantime, Jim's hand closed tightly around mine and brought me back. Who could guess that very hand had taken its own turn in a bread line not so long ago, and that Jim himself had been curled under the stars trying to sleep on a cardboard mat. True, he had not held out a begging cup; that was never his style. When I met Jim, he had been out on the streets for over a year. Meeting him called up a long set of unanswered questions. How could this man with all his degrees, and even a laptop that he managed to cart around, have fallen so

low? And what was I doing with him? Was I so desperate? I could hear my father shouting from the grave, "Tell the bum to get a job!" It still puzzles me, but I suppose Jim thought he had something to learn in those days.

Long conversations that mysteriously followed brought us to a bonding I had never known with another human being. Jim was a reader, a lover of classical symphonies, an environmentalist and, ultimately, my teacher in the wisdom of detachment.

I married this once-homeless man and have never regretted the decision. I bloomed into a new self. What's more, because of Jim and the money issues that arose in our marriage, I took on, face-to-face, my own deep conflicts about money. Then, eureka! Because of this man with no money, I wrote a book on making peace with money. Oh, how wonderful the ways of divine providence!

Back to San Francisco. Holding Jim's hand, I am still hounded by the sight of that old beggar. Something in me does not let it go.

Adele, you've got a pile of 20's and 50's stuffed in your wallet. Get real! What do you give up by giving him one? So it may be foolish. So he uses it for booze. Whatever he chooses to do with that money is not about your giving. That's his choice. Your giving is about you, your own soul.

"Wait for me, honey." I returned to my "hobo," folding a 20 as I approached. I dropped it into his cup. It takes but a moment. So simple, so filling. *Thanks for the nudge, God.*

Did my little hobo look up? Shower me with gratitude? Whisper a thank you? Would it have mattered?

I catch up to my grinning husband. "Honey," I smile, "whatever he does with that handout is not our business."

What my once homeless partner-turned-wary-citizen says next takes me aback: "Sweetheart, I'm proud of you"—which tells me everything about how much Jim's eyes have just been opened, too.

That hapless man did have something to exchange after all, something far more valuable than all of San Francisco's sights and delights. Once I had dropped my inner scruples, cultural biases and resistance to my husband's views, enough to let the stranger in and approach his cup, there was no price I could put on what that man gave me. I left with both more of me and more of a brother.

Maybe Thomas Merton said it best (in *New Seeds of Contemplation*): "A door opens in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact." ■