

MY HOUSE IS

I can't recall when I first met The Man With The Bells. At least twenty years ago, before I moved from the apartment on Haro Street to the one I share now with my partner Tom. It's amazing to realize I've spent most of my adult life as a renter in Vancouver's west end...for many reasons, including real estate prices and being a self-employed actor without further means. But it doesn't matter. I loved the "house" I made on Haro Street for fourteen years, I love the "house" we've made on Comox for the past twenty.

Whenever it was that I first met him, The Man With The Bells captured my attention. His shopping cart packed with his belongings, that he'd push out of Stanley Park each morning, disappear back into the park with each night. The jingle bells he hung on the handle of the cart so you could hear him coming down the street, the handmade sign he wired to it that read "Good Karma Donation." He never asked for money. I had to stop him to offer it. And when I did, when anyone did, he'd take out a mallet and ring one of the cymbals poking out of his cart. The cymbal would ring like a blessing. When I heard the tinkling of his jingle bells in the neighbourhood I'd hurry to find him, give him a few dollars, get my blessing. For a while he found some way to get to a photocopier and scissors, and made instructional gifts that he'd hand out with each blessing. On a two by three inch slip of paper was a drawing of a stickman lying on his back on a bed, knees bent, feet on the floor. The Man With The Bells would point to the stickman and say this is what we must do after a heavy meal, lie down like this, to help the digestion. We could also drink a little soda pop if we wished, the bubbles would help digestion too.

When we moved to Comox Street in 2000 I continued to see him regularly, chase him down if I heard his bells tinkling. In 2006 I began my first story in paintings, "tiny clown long wait." In the fifteenth painting of the story, a seagull stole the hair right off the top of the tiny clown's head. I needed a guardian character to show up and help. What showed up at the end of my pencil was The Man With The Bells. After he put the hair back on the tiny clown's head in the sixteenth painting, he went on his way.

Over the next few years The Man With The Bells' shopping cart grew to two carts wired together, much harder pushing. Somewhere along the way he lost his cymbals and his "Good Karma Donation" sign. For a time he gained an old, slow dog. Then one day, no more dog. Then one day for the first time ever he didn't wait for me to approach but came racing towards me, fiercely.

"I come your home. You have place I do laundry?"

"No — no I don't — " I could feel my face flush. "We're not allowed — we can't do that — in our building — "

And I saw in his eyes that he saw in my eyes I was running for my life. For the next year I avoided him and when I began giving him money again I made sure it was never near home. I hoped he'd forgotten where I lived.

One day another year or two later I stood with a gaggle of people near the fruit and veggie store on Denman Street at the end of our block, all of us staring up into a tree where a hawk was eating a pigeon. There was a tinkling of bells behind me.

"Please, you help me?"

I turned to him, "Um — I'm kind of —"

"I give you money. Nice cherry in store. Boss won't let me in. Please?" He held out two ragged five dollar bills.

My hand shot up like a stop sign, as much to block the knife of shame in my stomach as the money.

"Wait here." I came back with cherries, plums, apricots, a mango —

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

He pushed on with his cart. The truth was terrible in my stomach. I still hoped he'd forgotten where I lived.

October 4, 2019. I dropped off my poster artwork for Jenn Griffin's play "House and Home" at the Firehall, accepted the invitation to create an exhibit in conjunction with the show. What would I explore with this? I had no clear idea yet, just a song lyric playing in my mind: "My house, is a very very very fine house...." As I left the Firehall, I thought: beyond roof and walls, what *is* "my house"? For me? For anyone? Waiting for my bus on Pender I saw a man kitty corner outside a tea shop, resting with his suitcase. Then: what is "my house" if I don't even *have* roof and walls? The Man With The Bells appeared in my mind's eye. I didn't know it then but his character and spirit would again be a guardian presence, this time not just for two paintings but the whole journey.

For three months I walked, watched, photographed, visited and heard stories from individuals who live on the street. I kept a notebook throughout but came to feel their stories weren't mine to tell. I came to feel not just profound respect for the courage, stamina and creativity of each individual I met, but more surprising, a feeling of uplift. I wondered at this, until it hit me: of course it's uplifting, to be in the presence of someone calling on their deepest resources of character to make the best of the toughest of circumstance. I came to wondering if, in the simplest way, "my home" is my spirit, perhaps in the same simplest way "my house" is creative effort? whatever I'm able to create to sustain me, moment by moment, given circumstance and opportunity?

December 8th, early Sunday morning. I went out for groceries. No one about. Then I saw him across Denman, a man sitting with a sign around his neck. I crossed to talk to him, give him a

few dollars. He spoke of the encampment he had with some buddies, the troubles he'd had with anger but Jesus was now helping him (he held up a bible), and how people walked by without seeing him.

"You know how hard it is, not to be seen? To be stepped over, like garbage? I don't want much. Just...see me. Gimme a smile." As I moved on he thanked me for visiting, said I was "very nice for a normal person" which made me laugh. Then he said,

"My name's Mark. What's yours?"

"Karin."

It was the first time someone I'd talked with had given me their name or I'd given mine. I thought of The Man With The Bells. Two years ago he vanished. Too late to ask his name now. But: his spirit and character, his generosity, his profound effort to create and care for his "house" as he could, is at the heart of what I wish to honour with My House Is. I hope I honour in the paintings, have seen in some small way, as Mark might wish, the individuals I met on this journey who shared their stories and inspiring presence.

Karin Konoval, January 2020



5 x 15 inch mounted print accompanying the story of **My House Is** on exhibit January 11 - March 8 at the Firehall Arts Centre, of The Man With The Bells, as he appears in painting #15 from **tiny clown long wait, a story in 21 paintings**, original artwork each painting acrylic on canvas, 12 x 36 inches, Karin Konoval 2006