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Streets Are for Nobody: Margaret Mullins

Sixties; single; former swimming instructor, Brookline; one of six children. Homeless twenty-two years; chronic drinker; died on the street late in 1989.

I grew up in the flats of Brookline with the cockroaches and the bedbugs. I'm the daughter of two Irish immigrants born and raised in Galway, Ireland.

I'm a complete virgin. I am a complete virgin. I've been harassed by punks, beaten by the police, and humiliated — a person of no existence. I've seen Eddie Fisher, Joni James, Debbie Reynolds, Johnny Mathis. I've been to Annapolis, West Point, Miami, the Breakers in Newport, Rhode Island. I've been to Niagara Falls — I've been all over. I met all types of celebrities in my life — I was an extremely sophisticated woman. Now I'm dealing with nonexistent humanitar—— I don't know what they are. I've pimped for a quarter. I'm . . . I'm . . . I'm approached by pimps . . . day in and day out. I knew the Combat Zone [a Boston bar] in 1942 'cause I traveled with the biggest gangsters in Boston.

Skid Road is always bad — no matter where you are. But people are educated to a nonexistence. They come out of college with a "depleted" mind. I've ate in the best restaurants in the United States. My shoes were custom made in Beacon Hill. My clothes were . . . tailor made in Filene's upstairs and not in the basement . . . upstairs. My hair was done twice a wee—— I taught preschool nursery. I taught all ages of swimming. And I lost my pension by six months.

I was at Mass Mental, uh, three times, and then they had me committed to a private psychiatric hospital. (Whisper: You had a breakdown?) Yeah, I had three breakdowns for the pills and the booze. They put me on medication because I was manic-depressive. But, AA [sigh], AA is more approachable to me than psychiatric help. I think I need both. I think that I need psychiatric help — not that I'm retarded or that I have an IQ of a mongoloid, but my approach to society is very difficult. I'm not retarded and I'm not a genius — I didn't develop electricity. I have an inqui . . . inquisitive mind and I would like to go in more and more into history. And I get frustrated and I try to contact my sisters — my younger sister's very worried about me — about my emotional problems. She knows that when I'm not learning, how emotional I can get.

I usually read the, um, business page — I studied investments at Harvard at night, and I went to Stone and Webster and I took an investment course there. I wanna get back to Brookline so I can go back to school and study speedwriting, investments,

Interviewed by Melissa Shook, February 1989, Long Island Shelter. Reprinted, with permission, from "Streets Are for Nobody: Homeless Women Speak," Boston Center for the Arts, 1991.

and speed reading. I . . . I've taken efficiency reading. When I got to the island [Long Island Shelter], I spent all my time reading. 'Bout different things and research my teeth. (Whisper: They're gonzo). My glasses are gone. But I read all the time. Occasionally, I will go and read about women and the styles of women's . . . my hair, you know, and my makeup is gone, but I'm not gonna wear makeup anymore, but . . . my teeth — have to fix my teeth up. I got beaten up by the police. Police broke my tooth and hit me in the leg, long time ago. Do you believe in Saint Jude? He's the saint of hopeless cases.

[Once, at a shelter, she ran into a woman working as a counselor who had also been an inmate in Framingham State Prison.]

I walked in one night. I was sleepin' out on the streets for . . . oh . . . I was terrible that night — oh, my God. My hair hadn't been washed for months — my — I was so dirty, I had . . . gone all bathroom all over myself. My God, I was terrible shape that night. And I walked in and I saw this girl and I didn't know who she was and there was a police officer there. I keep looking at her and looking at her, you know. Without my glasses, I can't see. Finally, I remembered her — we were real baddies together up there. She was on the drugs, you know. Finally, I remembered her. I tapped her on the shoulder and she looked at me and says, "Jesus Christ, who is that bitch?" I tapped her again and she looked at me and then she remembered and she went, "Aoooh, Margaret," and oh, I was so dirty, my God, I hadn't taken a bath for months. (Whisper: I musta smelled shit from head to foot.) And she started huggin' me and kissin' me. And the cop was lookin' at it and everybody was lookin' at it. And she was huggin' me and she said, "Is this where you are?" I says, "Yuh." And she said, "I gotta get you washed up, Honey, you look terrible." I said, "I know, I'm in tough shape." And nobody knew it.

And then I said, "The dignity in that woman and she doesn't even know what's in my heart, what's in my soul."

All streets are the same. Can be in New Bedford, in Fall River, could be in Worcester, could be Springfield, the South End, you can be in San Francisco, you can be in New York. Man I'm dealing with, jeez, I've seen them die in the bar of New York. All streets are the same — South Boston streets, East Boston streets, North End streets.

All streets are the same, but you don't get to the streets by yourself. There's a few people that help you get there. Somerville streets, Cambridge streets. I told Freddy today, "Listen to me, Freddy, I'm old, I'm way aheada you. It's very hard to get off the streets. Once you are on 'em, you can stay on 'em or you can get off them."

He says, "Margaret . . ." I says, "You better get off these streets, Freddy. Streets are for nobody. They're nothin' but crime, murder, and misery. You can laugh at them now, but tomorrow, you won't laugh at them. Streets are the streets. No matter where you are." ❧