

ANNA QUINDLEN

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for commentary in 1992, Anna Quindlen writes sharp, candid columns on subjects ranging from family life to politics to September 11. She was born in 1952 in Philadelphia, where she grew up, as she puts it, "an antsy kid with a fresh mouth." After graduating from Barnard College, Quindlen began writing for the New York Post and two years later joined the staff of the New York Times, where she quickly worked her way up from a city hall reporter to a regular columnist. Quindlen left the Times in 1995, and since 1999 she has written a biweekly column for Newsweek magazine. Her columns have been collected in Living Out Loud (1988), Thinking Out Loud (1993), and Loud and Clear (2004), and she has also authored A Short Guide to a Happy Life (2000) and the novels Object Lessons (1991), One True Thing (1994), Black and Blue (1998), and Blessings (2002).

Homeless

In this essay, Quindlen uses examples to explore the importance of having a place to call "home." The selection is from her collection Living Out Loud.

Her name was Ann, and we met in the Port Authority Bus Terminal several Januarys ago. I was doing a story on homeless people. She said I was wasting my time talking to her; she was just passing through, although she'd been passing through for more than two weeks. To prove to me that this was true, she rummaged through a tote bag and a manila envelope and finally unfolded a sheet of typing paper and brought out her photographs.

They were not pictures of family, or friends, or even a dog or cat, its eyes brown-red in the flashbulb's light. They were pictures of a house. It was like a thousand houses in a hundred towns, not suburb, not city, but somewhere in between, with aluminum siding and a chain-link fence, a narrow driveway running up to a one-car garage and a patch of backyard. The house was yellow. I looked on the back for a date or a name, but neither was there. There was no need for discussion. I knew what she was trying to tell me, for it was something I had often felt. She was not adrift, alone, anonymous,

although her bags and her raincoat with the grime shadowing its creases had made me believe she was. She had a house, or at least once upon a time had had one. Inside were curtains, a couch, a stove, potholders. You are where you live. She was somebody.

I've never been very good at looking at the big picture, taking the global view, and I've always been a person with an overactive sense of place, the legacy of an Irish grandfather. So it is natural that the thing that seems most wrong with the world to me right now is that there are so many people with no homes. I'm not simply talking about shelter from the elements, or three square meals a day or a mailing address to which the welfare people can send the check—although I know that all these are important for survival. I'm talking about a home, about precisely those kinds of feelings that have wound up in cross-stitch and French knots on samplers over the years.

Home is where the heart is. There's no place like it. I love my home with a ferocity totally out of proportion to its appearance or location. I love dumb things about it: the hot-water heater, the plastic rack you drain dishes in, the roof over my head, which occasionally leaks. And yet it is precisely those dumb things that make it what it is—a place of certainty, stability, predictability, privacy, for me and for my family. It is where I live. What more can you say about a place than that? That is everything.

Yet it is something that we have been edging away from gradually during my lifetime and the lifetimes of my parents and grandparents. There was a time when where you lived often was where you worked and where you grew the food you ate and even where you were buried. When that era passed, where you lived at least was where your parents had lived and where you would live with your children when you became enfeebled. Then, suddenly where you lived was where you lived for three years, until you could move on to something else and something else again.

And so we have come to something else again, to children who do not understand what it means to go to their rooms because they have never had a room, to men and women whose fantasy is a wall they can paint a color of their own choosing, to old people reduced to sitting on molded plastic chairs, their skin blue-white in the lights of a bus station, who pull pictures of houses out of their bags. Homes have stopped being homes. Now they are real estate.

People find it curious that those without homes would rather sleep sitting up on benches or huddled in doorways than go to shelters. Certainly some prefer to do so because they are emotionally ill, because they have been locked in before and they are damned if they

will be locked in again. Others are afraid of the violence and trouble they may find there. But some seem to want something that is not available in shelters, and they will not compromise, not for a cot, or oatmeal, or a shower with special soap that kills the bugs. "One room," a woman with a baby who was sleeping on her sister's floor, once told me, "painted blue." That was the crux of it; not size or location, but pride of ownership. Painted blue.

This is a difficult problem, and some wise and compassionate people are working hard at it. But in the main I think we work around it, just as we walk around it when it is lying on the sidewalk or sitting in the bus terminal—the problem, that is. It has been customary to take people's pain and lessen our own participation in it by turning it into an issue, not a collection of human beings. We turn an adjective into a noun: the poor, not poor people; the homeless, not Ann or the man who lives in the box or the woman who sleeps on the subway grate.

Sometimes I think we would be better off if we forgot about the broad strokes and concentrated on the details. Here is a woman without a bureau. There is a man with no mirror, no wall to hang it on. They are not the homeless. They are people who have no homes. No drawer that holds the spoons. No window to look out upon the world. My God. That is everything.

Meaning

1. What is Quindlen's thesis?
2. What distinction is Quindlen making in her conclusion with the sentences "They are not the homeless. They are people who have no homes"?

Purpose and Audience

1. What do you think is Quindlen's purpose in writing this essay? Why does she believe that having a home is important?
2. What key assumptions does the author make about her audience? Are the assumptions reasonable? Where does she specifically address an assumption that might undermine her view?

Method and Structure

1. Why do you think Quindlen begins with the story of Ann? How else might Quindlen have begun her essay?
2. What is the effect of Quindlen's examples of her own home?

3. **Other Methods** Quindlen uses examples to support an argument. What position does she want readers to recognize and accept?

Language

1. What is the effect of "My God" in the last paragraph?
2. How might Quindlen be said to give new meaning to the old cliché "Home is where the heart is" (paragraph 4)? (If necessary, see the definition of *cliché* in the Glossary.)
3. What is meant by "crux" (paragraph 7)? Where does the word come from?

Writing Topics

1. Write an essay that gives a detailed definition of *home* by using your own home(s), hometown(s), or experiences with home(s) as supporting examples. (See Chapter 8 if you need help with definition.)
2. Have you ever moved from one place to another? What sort of experience was it? Write an essay about leaving an old home and moving to a new one. Was there an activity or a piece of furniture that helped ease the transition?
3. Address Quindlen's contention that turning homelessness into an issue avoids the problem, that we might "be better off if we forgot about the broad strokes and concentrated on the details."
4. Write a brief essay in which you agree or disagree with Quindlen's assertion that a home is "everything." Can one, for instance, be a fulfilled person without a home? In your answer, take account of the values that might underlie an attachment to home; Quindlen mentions "certainty, stability, predictability, privacy" (paragraph 4), but there are others, including some (such as fear) that are less positive.