

# Excerpt from "On the Edge" by Paula Wild and Barry Peterson

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## **Ruby, age 51**

“Being homeless is no slice of ice,” says Ruby. “Living in cardboard, sleeping on cement, no coat, cold, never knowing who’s going to attack you. It’s dangerous and really scary, especially for women.”

Ruby used to be a caterer. She had a freezer full of food and was always cooking for friends. But two and a half years ago she got double pneumonia and was hospitalized. She was in critical condition for six weeks and has no memory of that time.



*Photo by Barry Peterson*

When released from the hospital she discovered her landlord had sold her belongings and rented out her apartment. “Everything I had was gone,” she whispers. “I cried and cried.”

Now Ruby lives in a tent and collects bottles and cans earning \$20 to \$40 a day. “I only get \$268 a month from social assistance,” she notes. “Without the bottles and cans I couldn’t survive.”

Her shopping cart is her life and she takes it everywhere. But she has to be careful, while eating lunch at the soup kitchen her bottles have been stolen.

In the summer Ruby tries to keep an eye on young girls in the park; she knows the scars being molested leaves behind. She’s been arrested - “I kicked a guy in the nuts because he wouldn’t give me a peanut butter sandwich and I was hungry” – and admits she’s an alcoholic.

“It eases the pain,” she explains. “My mother was an alcoholic and died when I was young and my stepfather abused me. The rest of my relatives gave up on me years ago. I don’t consider myself as having a family any more.”

“Being homeless has been a learning experience,” she adds. “I’ve figured out how to fight my way through life, be tough and look after myself. I try not to think about the past and have a sense of humour but I’m a very angry woman. I’m full of anger.”

Ruby acknowledges there is a lot of support and resources for the homeless in the Comox Valley. “What we need is low income housing,” she states. “We hear lots of promises but never see anything concrete.”

“Five homeless people died last winter. It’s a rough life. I’m a survivor but won’t be if I have to spend one more winter outside.”

**Ruby was interviewed and photographed in July 2009. She was still homeless when she died of pneumonia on October 18, 2010.**

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