



# Walking the Grid

In the Raleigh streets, DAVID MATTIS sees a pattern

**T**hursday Afternoon: I lay the phone back in its cradle, exhaling an extended, frustrated breath. Seems like these days another phone call brings another project. Not enough weeks in the day. I've been downsized, right-sized, RIFed — run over by the new economy is more like it.

My mind is racing as my eyes drift past the picture frames neatly arranged on the window ledge of my seventh-story office.

They wander across to the parking deck, then down to the Raleigh streets where the steady

lines of tail lights streaming south signal that the masses have begun their retreat to the suburbs. From this vantage point, the tidy lattice of crowded boulevards indicates an imposed, surreal structure, much removed from the swirling feeling moving inside me.

Gathering the papers and reports strewn across my desk into loose piles, I try to impose some order on this chaos. It's not working. I need a smoke and bolt for the elevators.

Soon I find myself sitting on the low wall at the foot of this gleaming tower, with the other members of the nicotine underground, sharing one more smoke before the day is done. I scan the

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*He ceaselessly paces up one row, then across, then down the next. For hours on end, like a city bus running its familiar route.*

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crowd who gather like regulars at a local bar. There are plenty of characters worth writing about. Half the secretarial pool from the big bank gathers like a flock of scavenger birds picking over the day's gossips amidst intermittent clouds of smoke. A cadre of paralegals are vigorously arguing a case their firm is involved in up the street at the courthouse. A group of burned-out programmers from one of the few remaining dot-coms in the building are speaking in a language that to my ears could be Vulcan from early *Star Trek* episodes.

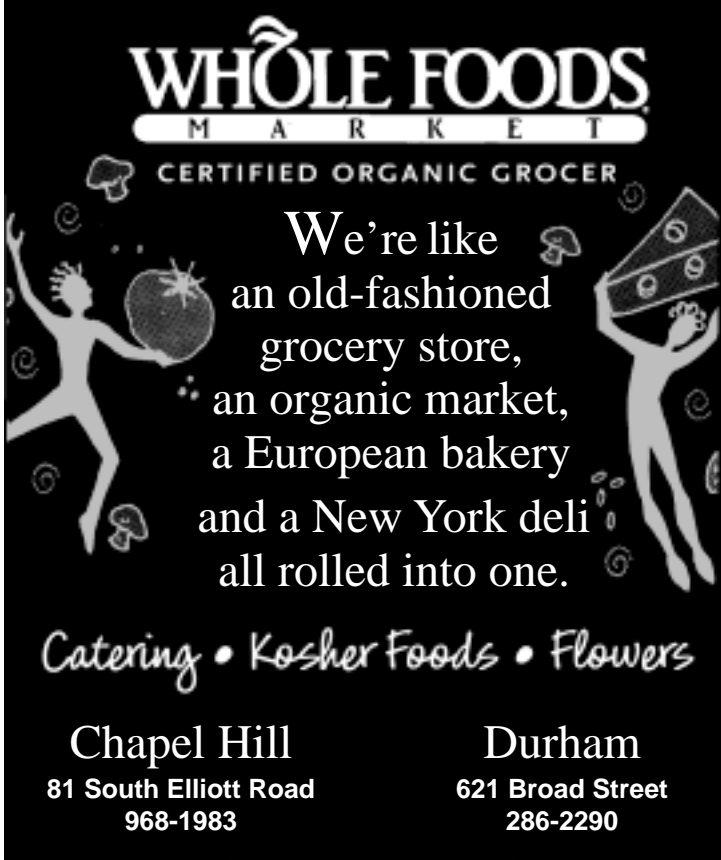
Taking a drag, I exhale an extended, relieved breath. The knots of tension begin to ease like a slowly receding tide. The late-afternoon sun has long since departed behind the towering structures.

A single voice separates itself from the others. There is a perceptible edge to it that immediately quiets the pods of smokers. The voice rises from the courtyard at my back, a heated conversation in which I can hear only one participant. I turn and instantly recognize the speaker, the Grid Walker. That is not his name, of course. I don't know his name, but that is what he has been dubbed by the nicotine underground. He is one of the nameless army of homeless who spend their days on the streets of this city, some looking for handouts or a smoke, some just looking for a place to find solace.

But the Grid Walker is different. Although he travels with his life's possessions — a sleeping bag, backpack, and radio — with a shave and a button-down shirt he could easily move among the groups of office workers headed to local eateries for lunch or out for a few drinks after work.

That's not how he earned his moniker.

The courtyard between our building and the next is inlaid with bricks of various colors to form a network of large rectangles. From the ground, the patterns are hard to discern, but



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from above they form a grid similar to the streets I can see from my office window. It is here that the Grid Walker spends most days when the weather is fair. He ceaselessly paces up one row, then across, then down the next.

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*“Somebody jumped off the top of the parking garage this morning. Building security says it was some homeless guy.”*

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For hours on end, like a city bus running its familiar route. Like a grandmother working a quilt: “Knit one, purl two!” In doing so he has woven himself in some small way into all of our lives, like a brick in this

vast courtyard. A miniature tile in a larger mosaic that is us. Walking the Grid. Bringing order to the chaos.

Today he is very agitated, and it is noticeable and uncomfortable to the regulars as they snuff out their butts and head back inside. “Must have gone off his meds again!” one of them laughs as they disappear through the revolving doors.

In fact, over the last week he has dramatically changed. His appearance has grown haggard and he has been frenetically pacing in much tighter circles, talking piercingly to himself. I tried to imagine what the voices on the other side of the conversation were telling him. Certainly not reaffirming voices.

Well, I have my own demons to fight. I take one last drag and head back upstairs as the heavy glass doors shut out the voice.

**F**riday Morning: As I hurriedly cross the courtyard, my shoe catches and I awkwardly pitch forward several steps. I regain myself, blood reddening my cheeks with embarrassment as my eyes dart to see if anyone has witnessed my folly. I look for the Grid Walker; he is usually here. No, I am alone. I glance back to



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*David Mattis grew up in New Jersey and has called Raleigh home for over a decade. He has a beautiful wife, three children, a minivan, and a burning desire to explore “this writing thing.” He is also a member of the Sertoma Writers Club. His story “The Traveler” was published in the December 2001 Urban Hiker.*

see that one of the bricks is missing from the intricate pattern of brickwork. It was hard to notice at speed, but as I pause to gather myself its absence is evident.

Upstairs, the elevator opens and in washes stale and somber air. Several colleagues have gathered by the windows along my side of the building.

“Somebody jumped off the top of the parking garage this morning. Building security says it was some homeless guy.”

My heart is in my throat as I rush to my office. I slowly approach the window that overlooks the parking deck. The whirling lights of the emergency vehicles shine like crimson flashlights. Yellow police tape frames the street corner. A body lies face down on the sidewalk. The corner rolls it into a body bag.

I sink into my chair, my body is leaden.

The Grid Walker walks this grid no more.

**F**riday Afternoon: I cross the street to the *No Parking Anytime* sign, where fresh red and white carnations have been carefully tied. Puddles on the sidewalk, reflecting the ruddiness of the brick facade of the parking garage, mark the spot where a municipal worker’s hose has washed away the evidence of the morning’s events.

A hand-written note waves on the breath of the wind. As I draw closer to read the thin penciled letters, a wave of electricity takes hold of me. The hair on the back of my neck is alive as if I am trespassing on hallowed ground. Suddenly I am a young boy sneaking behind the altar or climbing over the cemetery gates. I read the note.

*Brian, Now you can rest!*

A mixture of heartache and relief for this lost soul. In life he had a name. In death he has another.

Pencil on paper. Chisel on granite.

Order from chaos. Walking the grid. •