

The Umbrella by Diana Elarde

I stood on the stair of the bus, the last passenger to board. The others had walked past him, ignored him. They never allowed his presence to register in their space, their minds, their souls.

He and I had history. Not in the way most people would consider history, but in the way the coincidence of life gives us history. Those chance repeated passings through the years - me on the way to my business world, him in his daily struggle for survival on the streets. He would ask for money, for donations. The most I was willing to give was a nod, a hello, a brief direction to where public aid could be found. Never what he wanted, never what I thought he wanted.

“Come on with the spare change”, he would sometimes challenge.

I never lost my smile even as a firm No came across my lips.

For five years I stepped off the bus and walked the few blocks to my office. The streets filled with people taking their last steps outside before business took over their day. Sightseers with their maps, their eyes in confusion matching where they were to where they wanted to be, gaping at the fallen buildings of Detroit. Between the cracks of those of us with purpose walked the street people. Those people hoping for a dime for food, for drink, for acknowledgement, for hope.

At first it was easy to ignore them, to pretend they weren't there, weren't trying to communicate with me. They were shadow people not assigned faces, emotions, lives. They were like ghosts that pass along a dark hallway at night. I tried to pretend it was not necessary for me to see or feel them.

Over the months they took form, individual form. Faces that told me stories, told me their inner tales. I saw the grief of separation, the guilt that the bottle held, the strung out eyes numbing them from the human experience and pain.

I began to read their lives in their eyes. I could spot the novice, the ones trying to face the fear that the initial days on the streets bring. Eyes that dart back, forth and around looking for danger, looking for opportunity. They would quickly drop in shame when met by my eyes.

“I was you”, they would whisper to me. “And now I am lost”. Lost now among people they don't belong with, lost to family, friends, themselves. Traces of the old life before the streets, before drugs and alcohol blurred the lines, still linger. The old days when they were part of dreams, of hope. How did it start, how to pinpoint the moment in time that unwrapped into today?

Why them, why not me?

Their eyes change through time. Days on the streets fog them over; resign them to the life of survival with drugs to escape reality, alcohol to blind pain. They integrate into the sub-society that accumulated days on the streets create.

It was easy for me then to write the checks that went behind the walls of the churches, the missions, to help them. The checks that I believed were enough to fill my heart with purpose.

Through the years of getting off the bus, he was one of the first I saw. We passed, we greeted. After awhile he knew I wouldn't dig into my purse for the change that had escaped the lining of my wallet. He knew a nod, a hello would be all I would give him.

The Umbrella by Diana Elarde

I saw his beard grow longer, the hair more thin. Wisps of it escaping the long ponytail that hung along his collar. The light in his eyes continuously foggy in the redness of his rims.

He survived, each year claiming its toll on him.

I saw the changes, saw the light within him dim. Still I held to my standards, my morals, that loose change would only feed the desperation, not heal the soul.

It was the storm that changed things, changed me. It washed away what blinded me within. The storm that I was safe from, with my raincoat and umbrella. Those small possessions that so separated me from the elements and from those people forced to move among the elements.

The rain brought evening in at a rapid rate. I hurried along my route, keeping my eyes down, trying to escape the deeper puddles that would splash on the nylons clinging to my legs. I hurried to grab the handle along the door of the bus, signaling the driver to wait for me. I looked to the side as my foot planted firmly on the first step, and caught his resigned eyes. His beard dripped the rain, dropping it into the open collar around his neck. My body ran a shiver feeling how cold it must have been. His hair was flat along the side of his face. Where is his hat? The thought flew across my brain still looking, still staring at him. But he was far beyond the concern for a hat, far beyond even the rain.

One more step and my shelter from the storm would be secured. My bus, the escape from the streets, the elements, sat ready to move me away.

Before I even understood the words I said, I thrust my umbrella at him.

"It might help", I told him as I moved the umbrella over him willing his hand to take it.

"Lady", he said to me, "if you really want to help, do something to make a difference". He turned away, hands jammed into his pockets, head bowed. He moved from me, from my offer, deeper into the rain. I don't remember my final steps or my body moving through the aisle of the bus. I can't even be sure I gave the driver the payment for my fare. For in that moment his reality became mine. No longer would my kind nods, my checks written from the safety of my home be enough.

The next day I stood on the street outside the agency I had passed by for so many years. The agency I had written my safe checks to. I stood for a minute in debate, in uncertainty of what I wanted, what I could do.

Rain drops started, my hand automatically reached in my bag and opened and moved my umbrella to cover me, to protect me. I caught the safety of the world inside my umbrella. I looked to the building on my side where some street people sat along the stoop. Their heads bowed, voices quieted, their concentration on how to avoid the discomfort of the cold rain. I looked back to the weather-worn door. I pressed the bell. A voice floated over the intercom.

"Can I help you?" it inquired.

"No", I told the voice from within the wall, "I'm here to help".