

God, Make Me Homeless

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My lungs wheezed as I waited for my mom's late-night coach to drop her at the Canterbury Bus Station. England lacked the subzero, bitter dryness of Chicago's winter, but it had its own form of misery: humidity. I remember the air, thick and wet, blanketing the country in an icy fog. When Mom's bus arrived, I took her luggage. After a brief, shivering hug—the first we'd had in three months—we set off toward our hotel on New Dover Road.

Mom pulled her furry brown coat around her tighter, struggling to keep up. "I didn't think England would be this chilly."

"It's nothing like Chicago," I said. The warm glow of streetlamps illuminated snowflakes by the crosswalk. "But at the same time it's exactly like home, and Denmark, and Ohio, and everywhere else we've been."

Nineteen and energetic, I hardly noticed the weight of the heavy suitcase wobbling over cobblestones. She lagged a few paces behind, exhausted from traveling. The bus that had driven her from Heathrow to Canterbury sputtered back to life behind us and left the station.

"Canterbury's so beautiful," I said. "It's too dark to see now, but tomorrow I'll show you."

The sidewalk sloped downward.

"This is weird!" My mom's voice echoed as we stepped into the underpass of the Bridge Street roundabout.

When the ramp flattened, we turned into the tunnel that passed beneath the street. It was warmer there and drier. Yellow lights shone from overhead, and wind whistled over both openings of the concrete tunnel. The walls of the underpass boasted a mural. The southernmost side showed early British society. As the tunnel curved, the mural became more modern. We entered from the north, where smiling Britons of every size, shape, and color stood beneath Union Jacks and a backdrop of fireworks. Further down, the wall depicted a blonde man in a government-issued gas mask. Further still, a swarm of rats surrounded a beak-masked plague doctor.

In the center of the tunnel, a man in a dirty tan jacket huddled on a flattened piece of cardboard. His back rested against the midpoint of past and present. A Bible lay open on the ground in front of him. I glanced back at my mom. This would be her first view of Canterbury—not the breathtaking Cathedral or millennia-old ruins, but a homeless man begging.

The first time I saw a homeless person, I was maybe five years old. My mom and I walked through the streets of Chicago, somewhere between LaSalle Street Station and the Field Museum.

“Got change?” He held out a torn McDonald’s cup with pennies at the bottom. What few teeth he had were crooked and black, even darker than his skin. He smelled like smoke and something I was too young and sheltered to recognize. Next to him sat a cardboard sign: *Hungry. Please help.*

My mom gripped my hand tighter as we walked by.

“Andrea,” she whispered, jerking my hand. “Andrea, don’t stare. Keep walking.” She rushed forward, pulling me with her.

“Ma’am? Got you some spare change? Excuse me, ma’am?”

My mom’s grip cut off circulation to my fingers. “No, I only have my card.” She kept her head down as she tugged me away.

I craned back to look at him. “I’m sorry!”

He looked up, locking his sad, yellow eyes on mine. “It’s okay, dear.”

When we were a block away, my mom slowed her pace. “Andrea, never do that again. Do you understand me? We don’t talk to strangers. We don’t even look at them.”

“But—”

“He could have been dangerous.”

I dragged my feet and stared at the ground. The sidewalk was cracked, spotted with a smattering of used chewing gum and the occasional loose dime that no one was desperate enough to pick up. Eventually, my mom’s grip loosened, and I could tell she wasn’t mad at me anymore.

“Why was he sitting on the ground?” I asked.

“Who?”

“That guy who wanted money.”

She was quiet for while. When she answered, her voice was soft, almost reluctant. “He’s homeless. He lives on the street.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He’s poor.”

I tried to wrap my mind around it, the idea of homelessness.

“Well, why don’t we give him somewhere to live?”

My mom sighed. Her hand tightened around mine again. “It’s not that easy. We can’t take in everyone we see on the streets.”

“Auntie Tricia took us in.”

“That’s different.”

I dragged my feet and kicked a bottle cap across the sidewalk. My chest hurt.

“What’s wrong?” My mom knelt before me.

“We didn’t give him money.” My lower lip trembled. I tried to take a deep breath, but my chest shuddered. “He needs somewhere to live.”

My mom held me. “I know,” she said. “He’s going to be okay. Like I told him, I didn’t have any change to spare, pumpkin.”

When we got to the museum, my mom paid for our tickets in cash.

That night I hardly slept. I hated myself for lying in a soft, warm bed while people starved in alleys. My aunt and uncle went to sleep, then my mother, and I lay there staring at the ceiling. I sat and bowed my head.

I prayed that God would make me homeless. I begged him to take everyone off the streets and give them houses. I would take their place. They could eat and sleep and be warm, and I was more than happy to suffer for them. The way I saw it, I didn’t do anything to deserve a home, and they didn’t do anything to deserve having nothing. I prayed for almost an hour, thinking I would wake to find that God granted my prayer. Instead, I woke in my own bed, hating myself for being unable to make a difference and hating God for standing in my way. I came to the only possible conclusion: God ignored me, and He gave up on them. Eventually, I gave up on Him, too.

I swore I’d be better when I grew up. I’d donate to charity. I’d build shelters. I would save the people that God didn’t or wouldn’t. Even if it meant living on the streets myself, I would do everything in my power to do the right thing. But here I was, waiting for my

mom to catch up to me in a Canterbury underpass. I was blessed with the money to study abroad, and she was blessed with the money to visit me for the holidays.

“Spare change?” the man in the underpass asked. He held out his hand, palm up.

“I’m sorry, man.” My voice was just as quiet as his. “All I’ve got is my card.”

He spat on the ground. “Heard that one before.”

He flipped a page in his Bible. I kept my head down until I was out of the underpass.

“It’s weird to see homeless people here,” my mom said when we were out of the tunnel. “I thought England took better care of their poor.”

That man had slept in the tunnel for the entire time I lived in Canterbury. A part of me yearned to take him home with me, to have him sleep on my couch, the way my mother and I slept on my aunt’s guest bed. Occasionally I tossed him coins, but his hunger was something I could only temporarily cure.

At dinner, Mom pointed out that I seemed distracted. I told her Canterbury was more like home than I had expected, and sometimes that made me wish I had studied somewhere different. I paid for our meal in pounds and pence, palming the change and sticking the coins deep into my pocket in the warm atmosphere of the pub.