

Encounter with a Stranger

I suppose it was probably a good day for sitting in the sunshine. It was warm, with a gentle breeze rustling the leaves in the trees behind me. I'd spent the past week visiting my father, but I'd had to get out of the hospital for a while. So I'd wandered down to the park and found a bench.

All around me, people were walking and enjoying the good weather. A young mother and her little boy were enjoying a picnic lunch on the grass. Across the path, some kids were throwing a Frisbee back and forth. But I just wanted to sit. To be alone with my worries, at least for a little while.

My problems all came rushing back to me as I sat there in the sunshine. My father's health wasn't good. The doctors had suggested to me that he might have a few months left. That had hit me hard; my father and I had always been close. I wasn't sure how I could get by without him.

Money was tight ... in fact, I didn't quite know how I would pay the bills this month. And my son David in college was not doing well; I suspected he was spending too much time hanging with his new friends and not enough time studying. I'd been that way too in college, for a while. But we couldn't afford a wasted semester; I was having a hard enough time making the payments as it was. And he hardly ever called.

And there was Cindy, my wife. I still missed her. It had been almost two years since the accident that had taken her life, and I still blamed myself for letting her make the trip home to see her parents all by herself. She'd been tired after a long day of driving, and her eyes must have closed for a few seconds; just long enough for her to veer off the road and hit a tree.

If I'd gone with her, we could have shared the driving. She wouldn't have been so tired. She'd be alive.

I'm pretty sure that David has never blamed me. But since Cindy left us, he hasn't been the same. His grades have started dropping, and he seldom comes home any more.

As I sat there, wrapped up in my own difficulties, I noticed an older man coming down the path toward where I was sitting. As he got closer, I could see that he was poorly dressed. He was unshaven, and his face was lined with creases and looked as if it hadn't been washed in some time. His thick dark eyebrows almost obscured brooding dark eyes that scanned from side to side as he shambled towards me. He was mumbling to himself.

He was probably a homeless person, I thought, as he continued to head in my direction. Probably drunk as well. I really hoped that he wasn't planning to sit on the same bench I was on.

But yes, he approached and without a word, sat down.

I immediately noticed the smell. The clothes he was wearing were torn and faded, and he gave off an odor that reminded me of an outdoor toilet that badly needed cleaning.

He was still muttering to himself as I started to stand. But then he spoke to me.

“Don’t get up, son. I’ll just sit for a little while.”

“Uh, OK.” I sat back down, reluctantly. I didn’t want to be rude. But there was nothing I wanted less right now than a meaningless conversation with some homeless bum, who’d probably hit me up for spare change before wandering off to buy himself a bottle.

“You’re worried, aren’t you?”

“What?”

He’d said those words, but they didn’t register. I was having trouble ignoring the smell. Didn’t the shelters have showers? A laundry? How could he live like this?

“You’re worried about something. I could tell. You don’t look very happy, son.”

“Uh ...” I was speechless. Some homeless person was telling me / didn’t look happy? What business was it of his?

“It’s all right. I know the way I look. Not much chance to get clean these days. But I haven’t had a drink in seven years.”

It seemed true. His speech was clear, and his manner direct. His dark penetrating eyes never left mine, as he continued.

“It’s probably a little silly to be sitting here worrying, on a day as fine as this. Want to tell me about it?”

“Uh .. no, that’s all right. I can’t ... stay long. My father ...”

I realized I’d been about to tell him about my father’s illness. Stupid. I should just get up and leave.

“How long has he got?”

“What? How do you know ...”

“It’s pretty simple, son. You’re sitting here, across from the cancer hospital there ...” He gestured across the street. “... and you’re young enough that you should be at work. And you don’t look happy.”

“Well, uh ... they said just a few months, and ...”

“Yeah, that’s tough. I lost my wife that way. Not much you can do about it except be there for him.”

“I’m trying, but ...”



“That’s not all that’s worrying you, is it.”

“No, well, that is, I don’t ... “

“You don’t want to talk about your problems with a stranger. I understand. And certainly not with someone who looks like me.”

“No, it’s just that ...” I didn’t know what to say. He was still looking directly at me, and there was life in those tired old eyes. He seemed very intelligent, at least judging by his speech. He certainly wasn’t muttering to himself, as he had been when he’d approached my bench.

“I know what I look like, son. I’m dirty, and I smell. I can never seem to get the smell out, no matter how much I wash.” He must have noticed my look of surprise, because he laughed. “Yes, son, I do wash. Whenever I get the chance. It’s these clothes, I suppose.”

I just sat there and looked at him.

“Like I said, I don’t drink.”

“But ...”

“I know what you’re thinking. But I saw you here, and I said to myself ‘This boy needs to talk to someone, I can just tell’, so I came over.

“You were talking to yourself ...”

He smiled again. The corners of his eyes turned up in amusement as he laughed, a deep full laugh. “I do that occasionally. Not much chance to talk to people ... they generally walk the other way when they see me coming. So yes, I sometimes have conversations with myself.” He laughed again. “But I’m entirely sane, I can assure you. But then I’d probably say that even if I weren’t, wouldn’t I?” He chuckled.

“What did you ... I mean, how did you ...” I was too embarrassed to continue.

“How did I end up like this?”

“Uh, yeah, I guess ...”

“You don’t want to hear my problems, son. You have enough of your own. What else is bothering you? It’s money, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“It’s always money. When did your wife die?”

“What? How did you ...”

“How did I know? Well, I noticed the ring on your finger. But you’re here alone to be with your father. You’ve been alone on this bench every day for a week ... I’ve noticed you sitting here. I figure your wife would want to be here with you, if she were able to.”

“She died in a car crash two years ago.”

“I’m sorry, son. I know it must be hard. How did it happen?”

“She wanted to drive home to visit her parents. I couldn’t ... I couldn’t ...”. The tears came then. I tried to wipe them away as I continued, “I couldn’t go with her. I had to work. We needed the money. And I let her go alone, and she must have been tired, and ...”

He put his arm around me. I didn’t care. I didn’t even notice the smell. We sat like that for a few minutes.

“It wasn’t your fault. Deep down, you know that, don’t you.”

“Yeah. I suppose.”

“Do you still live in the same big house you used to? Any kids?”

“I have a son in college. And, yeah, I’m still in the house. I just can’t bring myself to ...”

“You have to move on sometime, son. You know that. I bet if you sold the house and moved into a little apartment, your money problems would disappear, wouldn’t they?”

I was beyond wondering how he knew so much about my situation. I was too wrapped up in what he was saying. “Yeah, you’re right. That would solve a lot of problems. I guess.”

“Do it. You need to build a new life for yourself. And the housing market is good right now for sellers ... you’ll get a good price!”

“What? How ...”

“I may be homeless, son, but I’m not dead. I can read a newspaper. I used to ... well, never mind. So, what’s with your kid?”

“He’s not doing very well in college. I think he took his mother’s death pretty hard.” Why was I telling this old guy all this? Why did he even care?

“You know ... if I were you, I’d sell that house, and then ask your son to help you find an apartment. Get him involved in your life. He needs someone. And he should be here with you anyway; his grandpa is dying.”

“I want to, but ...”

“Just do it, son. You’re not getting any younger!” He chuckled again. “Worry can just eat you up, you know? Deal with things. Be a father for your son. You won’t regret it.”

“You’re right. I need to do that. I will. Just as soon as ...” I thought of my father.

“He’d want you to straighten things out too. Bring your son down for a visit. The three of you can hash things out, and I bet your father will tell you the same things I’ve been telling you!”

I looked at the old man. He was dressed in a threadbare old jacket, and his shirts and pants were stained and torn. His eyes met mine, and once again he smiled. He had a very warm smile.

“I know, I’m not much to look at. But I get by. Are you going to be all right?”

“I .. I think so. Yes. I’ll do ... what you suggested. Thank you.”

Almost before the words were out of my mouth, he was up and heading away, down the path. He didn’t look back. I wanted to wave. I wanted to thank him again.

I didn’t even know his name.

But in a few moments he was gone.

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This story is about judging people. Sometimes our first impressions of others are wrong, but we never take the time to find out that. We shouldn’t judge others ... only God can do that.