

Intervention

I'm fifty-eight years old and have suffered from intense insomnia for ten years now. Often my solution to the interminable agony of sleeplessness is to walk the streets of my city. This night was no exception. I stepped into a moonless evening with roads slick from recent heavy rain. The air was fresh and, counter to my desire for an inducement to sleep, was invigorating, almost exhilarating. Neon lights reflecting off wet surfaces created a soft, surreal, colorful glow that dazzled my eyes. I felt as if in a dream. My steps, at first aimless, began, unknown to me at the time, to take me on a path that was to change my life forever.

I was drawn to a seedy section of the city, a place of addiction, a habitat of the aimless, the lost...the damned. A dangerous place but contrary to common sense, I kept going. The street began to darken. Gone were bright, happy colors. They were replaced by shades of deprived grey and sickly yellow, all framed by hard black shadows. Buildings became broken, sad objects. Even in the dark, dirt and garbage were obvious.

Silhouetted shapes began to be discerned. Distant, harsh, sometimes frenetic voices echoed off abandoned shops. Suddenly I saw a prone body, seemingly lifeless, but perhaps sleeping, in an adjacent doorway. I passed by and did not stop.

The silhouettes were now distinct bodies, some alone, some clustered together. I felt eyes following me and fear made its presence in my mind. But I did not go back. I continued on.

A woman nearby was bent over almost double, making strange, alien moans and groans, twitching periodically. My head swiveled toward her as I passed and never did she change her position. A loud banging frightened me. I looked to the sound and saw a thin man in his twenties swinging a crowbar in fury at every object he passed, all the while yelling and screaming at no one in particular. Two people a little further ahead were arguing. One pushed the other to the ground and kicked him. Another doorway appeared and a man pushed a needle into his arm. Insane laughter, screams of hatred, sad cries of regret created a cacophony of the demented. Everywhere was chaos. Everywhere was horror. Unspeakable acts were committed in front of me. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end and sent a shiver of terror through my body. I had entered hell on earth.

Several people tried to talk to me but my fear-riddled mind refused to answer. I quickened my pace and began to look for an escape from this dreadful place.

Then I heard a soft voice, "Spare a dollar mister?"

The voice, so different from all else in this place, caused me to turn. I saw a slight form half hidden in the darkness with feet and legs and hands. I should have continued on but I felt an urge to see her face.

I stopped. Turned back to her.

As I approached, the shadows fell away. I saw skin pale as moonlight. Dark sockets caused her eyes to sink so far into her face that it startled me. She was young. Maybe twenty. Her hair hung in dirty clumps, shoulder length on either side

of her face. It might have been strawberry blond but the filth and deep shadows made it impossible to tell for sure. She was horribly emaciated—skin stretched over bones, a living cadaver. There were small red scabs dotted on her face, her hands...what I could see of her legs.

I'm not a person who has ever been sensitive to the plight of others but for some reason, one which I've never been able to explain, I felt something for this person. Almost unconsciously I sat down beside her.

She looked surprised. I thought I saw an unexpected glimmer of hope and then her expression changed to disgust,

"I don't do that. I won't do that. No matter if I starve to death. No matter if I die."

I was shocked and replied quickly and emphatically, "I don't want anything."

"Really?"

"I just want to talk."

"Why?"

Several mundane white lies came to mind but, unusual for me, I answered truthfully, "Because I'm lonely."

She took this in for a moment. Said nothing. Then she looked at me quite calmly,

"Do you think I'm going to die?"

I hesitated, not sure what to say....

"I think I'm dying. I think I don't have much time left."

My whole world shrunk at that moment. I was no longer aware of where I was. All I could see, all I could hear...was her....

"I'm so hooked, I spend every penny I have on drugs. I haven't eaten in days. I think I'm done. Not much time left." She said it softly, as a matter of fact with only the slightest tinge of regret in her voice.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out half of a chocolate bar and handed it to her silently.

She looked at me with a wry smile, took the bar and said, "Probably too late. I feel so sick, but I'll try to eat it."

"Wait here. I'll be back." I stood and left her almost at a sprint. There was an all-night store a few blocks back.

I wasn't away long, maybe ten minutes. But she was gone. I searched up and down the street, taking huge risks going down dangerous dark alleys, but I couldn't find her.

The next night I left my house with pockets full of food and some juice. I travelled back to that street, heart pounding, hoping she would be there.

As I approached those deep shadows I heard, "You're back."

I cried out, "Where did you go last night? Why didn't you wait for me? I was bringing food for you."

She didn't answer. I handed her the food and drink. I saw a smile, a happy smile and in that moment she looked beautiful.

"Thank you."

"Let me help you," I said.

"Why?"

"Because I'm lonely."

She laughed; it was a bright laugh, unknown in this place.

"You know I'm too far gone. Nothing is going to save me."

"I can...I will. Let me try."

She reached up and touched my face and said, "You're so kind. You're like the father I never had."

"I wish I was your father," I whispered.

She said with a slight laugh, "Well we can pretend I suppose."

I reached out and hugged her. Hugged her hard. From then on, I met her every night. Even when I needed sleep, when I was able to sleep, I came to her. Each time I brought food, each time I talked to her about her addiction. And slowly I began to see an improvement.

Then one night I woke up with a start. I saw weak light slipping through the blinds and looked with concern at the clock. It was five-thirty in the morning. My alarm had not gone off! I raced to her spot on the street but she was gone. I couldn't explain it but I felt horribly sad. I felt as if I had lost her forever. I searched for several hours but could not find her. And spent the rest of the day in fear...fear that I would never see her again.

That night I hurried up the road, past all the lost souls, past all the pain. And...found her. The joy that I felt was beyond words. A feeling of massive relief combined with euphoric happiness struck me. She stood as I approached and we hugged. Hugged for a long time. Then she said,

"I thought I would never see you again."

"Me too. I'm so glad to see you."

She looked at me unblinking and said, so sincere, "I've decided something."

"What?"

"I'm going to come with you. I'm going to get help."

Tears of joy ran down my face. I kissed her on the forehead and said, "Then let us go. Let us leave this place forever."

I took her hand and we left the street where the sun never rises.

There's not a day that I don't relive this fantasy, this day-dream, this wish, this false hope...for my love, for my daughter.

The love that I lost to drug addiction.

The love that I lost to inaction.

It's been ten years since she died.

I miss her so very much.

The End.

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