

The Least of These

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Dedication

To Brittney

“May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter.”

~Ruth 3:10

Prologue

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. ~Matthew 25:37-40 NIV

I sat bolt upright, not quite sure what had roused me. Did I hear voices and a slamming door downstairs or just imagine them?

The sirens screaming in the distance were real. The alarm clock glowed 4:15 AM. in neon red. I lay wide awake with no sleep left in me.

Climbing out of my bed, the November chill sent shivers down my arms. I inched the bedroom door open. Night sconces cast shadows in the darkened hallway, fingers of light reaching down the wall. Thick carpeting absorbed the noise of my steps. The sirens still shrieked their warning call somewhere far off. My stomach churned. I held my hand over it to ward off that sick feeling.

Lights on the first floor sent a softer glow up the stairway. Reaching Edwin's door, I rotated the knob. Light didn't penetrate into the dark room, but small

fissures from the gap in the door confirmed an unused bed, still made from yesterday, neat and smooth, pillows plumped like Leticia always left them. How could he be out at 4:15 in the morning? My heart raced, my mind grabbing at any possible explanation. A choked sob arrived from below. I hurried toward the stairs. As I stepped down the wide, curved staircase, my hand gliding on the smooth, polished surface of a massive wood railing, Leticia appeared at the bottom.

“Go back to bed, Scott.” Red eyes and a husky voice betrayed her as she climbed toward me.

“Where’re my mom and dad?” Where was Edwin? Leticia touched my shoulders to turn me around and motion me back upstairs. I lay awake until daylight, my pulse racing, unable to still my trembling hands.

~*~

I didn’t see my parents in the morning. They made poor Leticia break the news to me. How typical. The second person to tell me was the morning news anchor. After a cheerful “good morning” and a wide-angle shot of a brilliant fire-orange sunrise, he affixed a somber expression for the next segment on his scripted card.

“Edwin Harrington, sixteen-year-old son of the prominent defense attorney Charles Harrington, was found dead last night from an apparent overdose. A man from the night cleaning company discovered Harrington’s body under the bleachers of the Ravenwood High School’s football field.”

I waited to hear my name. But he didn’t know. He couldn’t, because no one did. I took my secret and hid it deep inside my guilt.

1

Scott Harrington

The Tenth Street Bridge spanned overhead with a thousand metallic arms reaching skyward in the eerie darkness. It crossed the Monongahela River, connecting Pittsburgh to the South Side. The insufficient cardboard wouldn't hold my 6'2" frame, so I curled my knees close to my body to keep out the chill of touching cold concrete. Every joint throbbed. The acrid scent of puddled asphalt burned my nostrils.

I sat up and readjusted my backpack against the concrete pylon. Raindrops sparkled like diamonds in the glow of streetlamps, which also illuminated the other men. Three slept well, as evidenced by the heavy snoring. A drunken slumber, if the discarded bottles were any indication. About ten feet from where I sat, another man stretched flat on the icy cement, wide-eyed yet oblivious to anything around him. The dark of night swallowed the blackness of his face, but his large white eyes held a wild and unrelenting stare at the grating of the bridge above. Where had his trip taken him?

The fifth man appeared no older than a teenager. Wide awake, his gaze darted from side to side, nervousness cloaking him like a well-worn jacket.

Sandy-colored hair, shaggy and unkempt, escaped his steel-gray hoodie. No cardboard insulated him from the bite of the cold surface. A crumpled up sweatshirt served as his pillow. If it weren't three in the morning, I might have attempted a conversation. But voices at this hour would be an intrusion.

Tight fingers gripped a backpack bulging beyond the capacity of the zipper. Was he concerned that someone would take his belongings if he succumbed to sleep? Perhaps I was the naïve one. Maybe he watched to see when everyone else slept and pilfered what he could. Was that why his bag was overstuffed? I pulled my backpack closer and readjusted my head to protect it. It wasn't much, but it was mine.

Glancing in his direction, I took care to avoid eye contact. He looked like Richie Cunningham from *Happy Days*, a touch of red in the sandy-colored hair and a pale complexion. But he wasn't a clean-cut suburbanite kid with his own bedroom and a doting mother. Where were his parents? Wasn't there anyone he could turn to?

An occasional car infringed upon the night sounds as it rattled the trestle above. I closed my eyes, imagining I was somewhere else, someplace sleep would come. My childhood home, the pretentious estate with all the grandeur of old money. What would my father think if he could see me now? Those were memories I didn't care to visit. Much better to focus on my own little home, the comfortable living room, the smell of wood burning in the fireplace. A place where my mind could escape. Cozy and simple, the feet of my recliner raised as I sank into the soft brown leather, swallowing me with comfort. The TV hummed with a sportscaster's dialogue while I drifted into the shadows

of my mind, almost forgetting I was lying on a thin piece of cardboard under a cold bridge.

The inclination to compare myself to others was a part of my nature I couldn't seem to overcome, and it could be exhausting. Charles Harrington made certain that I never forgot that I didn't measure up to Edwin. There was one brief moment when a flash of insight helped me understand. My father wielded it as a motivator. Nothing would have been enough, because then I might have stopped striving. It's hard to overcome a lifetime of indoctrination, so over time, that insight faded.

There were times when I thought I'd mastered the tendency to compare myself, when I was satisfied with who I'd become, but then I'd find myself in the company of someone whose accomplishments diminished mine or left me standing in the shadow of my father's censure.

The opposite was true on this night as I slept under a bridge for the first time. I fought the tendency to feel somewhat superior to the five men who shared this underpass. I came here to blend in, to assimilate into this culture, yet the egocentric part of me wanted to make sure everyone knew I didn't belong here. But that attitude would be a detriment. I needed to guard against it to accomplish anything.

Sometime before morning light, I slept. I woke to discover two of the snoring men still fast asleep, while the third relieved himself on the other side of the pylon. He paid no notice of me, finished his task, and disappeared into the hazy fog. The man with the wild eyes closed them in sleep. A bare stretch of concrete remained where Richie Cunningham with the hoodie had been. I checked to ensure that my backpack and

blanket remained intact and found both secure.

Judging from the predawn light, it was around six o'clock so I'd gotten only two or three hours of sleep. Rising, my body was unbendable until I began to stretch the stiffness away and then blood flowed to my limbs again. Desperate for a bathroom and a hot cup of coffee, I began walking.

~*~

The yellow brick of St. John's Episcopal Church still held its original charm. It had graced this corner for over a hundred years, with beauty and architecture unparalleled by the new wave of nondescript churches. A white cross peeked down from the cupola, bidding all to come. Walking past the grand oaken doors, I tried to envisage what stood behind them, imagining rich maroon carpeting cushioning dark pews, all illuminated by the rainbow prisms from a thousand pieces of stained glass fashioned to depict the garden of Gethsemane and Jesus with the children.

Then it hit me. I envisioned the interior of my childhood church which, as teenagers, Edwin and I coined Fellowship of the Elite. Worshippers showing off their designer fashions and glittering jewels. How discordant would it be to visit a Sunday service dressed in these frayed jeans and in obvious need of a shower?

The doors to St. John's remained locked throughout the week. I walked the manicured path to the side of the church, breathing in the fragrance of fresh grass and withering flowers, a contrast to the stagnant scent of auto exhaust and concrete. A simple

sign posted on the gray, metal door noted the hours for breakfast. They began serving at six. I prayed the door would open when I turned the knob, and it cooperated, the heavy metal scraping the surface of a frayed welcome mat. I entered the oversized room with its large industrial kitchen and the welcoming aroma of coffee.

A small portion of the space in the vast room had been set up with tables where pancakes were being served. People already occupied some seats, even at this early hour. Most of them scattered throughout the area with their coffee and pancakes, spaced for solitude. I needed human interaction. Scanning the tables, I chose one with two men and carried my cup and plate over to join them.

“Good morning.” I sat down without asking permission. A grunt and a nod came from my left.

The man seated across the table rewarded me with a hearty welcome. “Howdie do.” He flashed a grin as wide as his voice was loud. I glanced around as a few heads turned our way. “Always a good mornin’ here. We get the best coffee and hotcakes in town. Name’s Pete. This here’s D.J.” His attempted introduction brought another grunt.

Pete’s grin revealed sparse and decaying teeth. Age spots peppered his arms, and red cheeks bookended a bulky, bulbous nose. His booming tones continued to reverberate throughout the room, oblivious to the fact that he displaced the quiet.

“Good to meet you, Pete. I’m Scott.” I muffled my words hoping he’d get the message. “So Pete, anywhere else someone like me can get a meal around here? This ain’t gonna last me ‘til supper.”

“No sir-ee, Scotty. That it ain’t.” His voice still

thundered. "Couple'a places you can try. If'n I were you, I'd head on down to Stanwix and try the shelter there. Or you can try Hope House. It's a place that lets a feller stay and tries to get him turned around, like learnin' new job stuff."

I knew about Hope House, but it wasn't what I needed. "So how does the Stanwix Street one work? I'm kinda new at this. A little down on my luck right now."

"Well, ain't we all." His eyes sparkled despite the bloodshot streaks. "Ain't we all. First time you go, you gotta tell 'em some stuff about you and sign a paper agreein' to their rules. After that, you just sign in when you go. You can get a good, hot meal and a bed for the night."

Right about now, a bed sounded like heaven. I'd have traded my pancakes for sleep, but Pete's response squashed that dream. Besides, I didn't come here for sleep, I came for information.

"Doors open at five o'clock, first come, first serve. Can't be late 'cause them doors get locked when they have enough people to fill the beds."

Could I make it until five?

"Listen here, Scotty boy. You come along and stick with me, and I'll show you the ropes. But get eatin', boy. We gotta hurry," Pete bellowed again.

No one had called me Scotty since I was nine, but I didn't correct him. I'd walked into an opportunity, someone loose-lipped, willing to show me the ropes and let me stick with him. But why the hurry? It felt like hours of daylight stretched before us with nowhere to go.

I didn't rush my pancakes, but instead watched a few people come and go through the metal door. When

the clock on the wall showed seven o'clock approaching, Pete's agitated hand formed little circles in front of my face, a motion saying, "Hurry." Determined to take a cup of coffee with me, I picked up our Styrofoam cups and asked, "Black or cream?"

Pete flashed his easy grin. "Black and sweet. I take mine black and sweet."

His chuckle led to a fit of coughing. I hesitated for a moment, not sure if I should do something, but he motioned me away with his hand. I turned in the direction of the man he called D.J., but he flipped his empty cup upside down on the table without glancing up.

After we exited the church's side door, Pete stopped to light up a cigarette from the pack tucked in his shirt pocket. We walked through the midst of the morning rush hour with cars at a stand-still, drivers waiting to get past the red light. Dense pedestrian traffic hurried in all directions. Pete could move for an old man, but I kept up, intrigued to see our destination. He darted to a city bench near a busy intersection. Plopping on the bench, Pete reached his weathered hand into a plastic grocery bag he toted around with him. He produced a large and rugged piece of cardboard with "Homeless and Hungry" scribbled on it in black marker. He stationed the sign in front of him and reached in to retrieve a large plastic cup, the kind you might get with a convenience store soft drink. It had "God Bless You" written in marker across the front.

I stood there for a moment, my jaw slack. Hungry? We had just finished devouring a huge plate of pancakes. And panhandling? I'd never imagined myself begging on a street corner. I'd always taken

some pretentious pleasure in being a giver, not a taker. But today, this is what I needed to do.

I took the final gulp of my coffee, shook out the residual liquid, and moved toward the bench, only to meet Pete, extending his hand and blocking my movement.

“No siree, Scotty boy. One to a corner. Nobody’ll be feedin’ the cup for two of us.” He reached into his plastic bag and retrieved another smaller piece of cardboard with “Homeless and Disabled” printed on it in amateur block letters. Pete held it out in my direction. “Now limp a little and get on outta here. Find a corner a block or two away with some different traffic. I’ll see you in a couple’a hours. We ought’a have enough to get us a burger and some refreshment for tonight, iff’n you know what I mean.” With a gleam in his eye and a suppressed grin, he turned his face away, looking pitiful for the crowd.

My cheeks flushed red, I rotated the sign toward myself and walked to the next block. I didn’t have to panhandle. I could eat at the shelter and didn’t care about Pete’s idea of evening refreshment. But Pete was crucial to my plan. He knew the streets. He’d be a big help to me. I couldn’t go back empty-handed in two hours. So I located a busy spot near a crowded corner, void of a bench. I sat on my backpack on the ground and propped up my sign, holding the foam cup upright to receive my beggar alms. I tugged the visor on my cap and kept my eyes lowered in case someone recognized me. People stared at me pitifully, some swung closer to the building to avoid me, and a few pulled out coins or a one-dollar bill. Unsure of the protocol of panhandling, when the first person dropped some coins in my cup, I glanced up and said,

“Thank you kindly.” That became my mantra of the morning. Two hours and \$27.50 later, Pete sauntered up the sidewalk with a large grin. He reached for his cardboard sign as I stood to join him.

As I followed Pete into the diner, the word *retro* might have described the décor. But I’d been a preppy teen. Retro for me was far from this shadowy diner. Dark-green speckled plastic, patched with tape in numerous spots, cushioned the chrome base counter stools. I followed Pete’s lead to a counter seat, but when it wobbled with each movement I made, I convinced him to slide into a booth. Stale cigarette smoke clung to the curtains and mingled with the heavy odor of grease drifting from behind the counter.

A waitress in jeans and a black polo with *Larry’s Diner* embroidered on the pocket, spread two paper placemats in front of us and topped them with silverware wrapped in a napkin. Her nametag said *Kimberly*. “What’ll you have?”

Pete’s booming voice echoed through the diner. “I’d be right grateful for some of that there coffee.” He pointed toward the coffeepot behind the counter. “Then a big old burger and fries.”

The pancakes still sat heavily in my stomach, but I ordered a grilled cheese sandwich.

Pete and I sat over a \$3.80 lunch for almost two hours. Each time she went past our table, Kimberly refilled our coffee cups and wiped up the coffee spill and stray cigarette ashes from the shaking of Pete’s rheumatic hands.

“So Pete, are all of those people who were in St. John’s homeless? Or do some just come for the breakfast?”

Pete took a drink from his coffee mug, his hand

shaking as he lifted it to his mouth. "People got all kinda different places they call home, Scotty. Some might have a place of their own but need help gettin' food now and then."

"How about you? You live on these streets or do you have a place somewhere?"

"Me and D.J. mostly stick together."

That didn't answer my question, but Pete followed that with a coughing spell. When he recovered, he lit another cigarette and started in on a story about the old steel mill where he once worked.

When the lunchtime foot traffic began to pick up, Larry's Diner filled to its meager capacity. Pete got up to leave, magnanimously slipping thirty-five cents on the table for the waitress. The haphazard cluster of bills in his hand indicated that his take from panhandling far exceeded mine. An old man must elicit more sympathy than a young man, even with a proclaimed disability.

"I'll catch up with you later, Scotty."

"Hey, Pete. Hold on a minute. Where will you be eating and sleeping later? Do you go to the place on Stanwix?" I couldn't afford to lose this connection. When and where might I hook up with old Pete again?

"Naw. Ain't fer me. Me and D.J. got us a vacant building over on Liberty. A storage shed in a parking lot. Don't think nobody checked that ol' lock out in a year. You come on over if you can't get you a bed at the shelter. Beats being under the bridge." He slipped out the door and disappeared into the pedestrian traffic on the city sidewalk.

Settling back in the booth, I accepted Kimberly's offer of a coffee refill despite the fact that I was already over-caffeinated. With seven hours until the shelter

opened its doors, I finished my coffee and set out to find Pete's vacant building. Perhaps I could sneak a few hours of shut-eye. None of my plans for the day would happen without some sleep. Why in the world did I decide to do this?

2

Claire Bassett

Gentle humming tones sounded from the baby monitor. I glanced at the screen. Drew lay on his back, playful fingers on tiny toes as he warbled at the colorful array of trains cascading from the ceiling. His patience wouldn't last long, so my packing time was limited. Instead of going upstairs as usual, I persisted with my task, thankful for Molly and Jan's help as I loaded my entire kitchen into cardboard boxes.

My table groaned with the weight of stoneware plates and cast-iron pans. How had I accumulated so much in ten years? Boxes, filled and taped, were stacked near the doorway while empty ones sat on my granite countertops waiting to be packed.

The crib springs creaked as Drew stood on shaky fourteen-month-old legs. The hushed moment came while he waited for someone to rescue him, leading to the intolerant scream as the monitor exploded with sound. I hurried to seal the box, stretching the packing tape over the seam before perforating it on the dispenser's toothed edge. Grabbing the thick black marker, I wrote *Storage—kitchen*.

Jan pried the marker from my hand. "You go take care of Drew. We can keep packing. Everything in this room goes to storage. Right?"

My sigh was deep. Tight spasms climbed from my jaw to my temples. "Yes, nothing here will go with me to my parents' home. Are you sure?"

"Yes. Go. We're good here." She placed her hands on my shoulders and turned me toward the stairs. "It's what we came for."

My tired legs ached as I trudged up the stairs. What kind of person left neighbors to do their packing? I peeked around the corner. Drew was on his feet, shaking the sides of the crib, his face red from the outburst. When he saw me, he reached forward with his chubby arms.

Sitting in the nursery rocker, I stroked gentle, circular patterns on his back until the stiffness relaxed into a softness. My shoulders softened as I inhaled the sweet smell of baby and marveled again at his soft, velvet hair. A gentle melody jingled from the mobile, orchestrated by the lazy movement of the ceiling fan. How many mornings had I sat like this? But next week, this room would belong to another boy. One too old to be rocked and stroked. The crib would become a bed, the baby toys would turn into video games, and the gentle tones of the mobile would be exchanged for the music of today's teens.

Twenty minutes later, with a fresh diaper and his little jacket, we went to the front porch to watch for the school bus. It would bring Isabella home from the last day in her kindergarten classroom. Molly joined me, carrying a tray with three cups of tea.

"Jan's finishing the last box and all the cabinets will be done."

We sat on the porch sipping our tea, rocking on white Adirondacks, a contrast to the pots of red geraniums hanging in increments between the posts.

The mild weather allowed the blooms to outlast the typical season. Yet their curled leaves and fading blossoms revealed that they, like me, were on their way out.

I wrapped my hands around the warm cup and looked at my neighbors. "Thanks so much. I couldn't have done this without you."

"It's what neighbors do. Friends help friends."

I took a long, slow sip of my tea, looking around at all that remained to be done. "Can one of you use these chairs? No sense in them sitting in storage if they can be used."

Jan glanced at Molly. "Molly, my porch is full. Can you use these?"

"I'll put them in my sunroom, but only to hold them for you. You'll be back, Claire. This is a temporary move."

"I hope so. I really hope so." The pulse in my throat throbbed, and I fought tears.

"You're doing the right thing. You've been trying to do this all on your own. Let your parents help you. You know they want to."

"I know, Jan. But it feels like I'm giving up. Giving up hope that Andrew will return. And look what I've done to Isabella. Three weeks into kindergarten, and I have to move her to another school, another church. As if she hasn't been through enough. My little girl needs some stability in her life."

Jan set her cup on the tray and leaned closer to me, twining her fingers with mine. "You're her stability. You didn't know the house would rent so quickly. None of this is your fault. You can't do any more than you've done. It's a miracle you haven't fallen apart."

I chuckled. "Who says I haven't? I fall apart a little

every day.”

Molly set her cup down and leaned forward. “You’re strong, girl. You keep hanging in there. Hey, we’ve finished up the last of the packing, and we’ll get out of your way.”

Jan stood to join her. “Call us if there is anything else we can do.”

I got up and hugged them before they walked back to their homes, one across the street from me, and the other two doors down.

I sat back down and watched for the school bus. It had all been decided six weeks ago. I’d pondered my options a hundred times. I had minimal workforce skills, and the cost of good daycare didn’t make it feasible to take a low-level full-time position. It would be unmanageable to remain in this neighborhood with bills mounting, savings depleted, and health insurance canceled. The house couldn’t be sold without Andrew’s signature, and that was impossible. When Dad suggested I rent the house out and stay with them, at first I resisted. Three years ago, they had down-sized to a community with patio homes and a high population of senior citizens. I couldn’t imagine three more people in that space. And Slippery Rock? I had escaped that tiny rural community years ago. I never expected to live there again. But in the end, I could see no other logical option.

Tension locked in my neck and shoulders. So many changes loomed in the next three days. The renters would relocate from Charlotte and planned to stay in my home for at least six months while they searched for a home of their own. My children would squeeze together in a room the size of my walk-in closet. I was forced to leave my home, friends, and