

Angel in our Midst

by Rhoda Charles



His sign read: Hi, My name is Michael. I'm homeless and hungry. Anything helps.

"Look at this guy," Paul said, "I walk by him every day on my way to the train and it makes me mad."

At the entrance to the city's subway system, a man, wrapped in a dirty blanket, sat on an overturned milk crate. Next to him was a small duffel bag that was filled nearly to bursting, a paper coffee cup and the brown cardboard sign that told his story. He was bent over a worn book that had a black hardcover and tiny print on startlingly white pages. That was the cleanest thing around him.

"I know," John said. "The homeless situation is so sad. Thank God I'm not in his shoes. I can't even imagine what it must be like." The sympathy in John's voice caught Paul's attention.

"Sad? It's pathetic!" Paul looked at his colleague in disbelief and wondered how a guy as smart as John could fall for such an obvious con. "Look at him—he's young and able-bodied. Why should I work hard all day only to waste my money giving it away to someone who could do the same? He's just lazy."

John was thoughtful and Paul was sure his words had hit home. The destitute man looked up and Paul prepared to rebuff the pitch he knew would come his way.

"Hey," John said, digging in his pocket, "Hang on a minute."

"Don't do it," Paul pleaded, sure that John was reaching for a handout. "You're not helping the situation by giving him money."

"Have one of these while I go get this guy a sandwich," John pressed what felt like a roll of nickels into Paul's palm and quickly

ducked into the doughnut shop by the train station. Paul looked down to see a package of lifesavers in his hand. Shaking his head, he opened the wrapping and popped one in his mouth.

A chill breeze made his trench coat flap against his legs and reminded him that the unseasonably warm weather was returning to normal. He pulled his coat tighter around him and glanced toward the man. Their eyes locked.

In all the times he had seen this guy, Paul had never before looked him in the eye. He'd never looked past the overgrown beard and stringy reddish-brown hair that was stuffed under a knit hat. Because of that, he had never noticed how sunken the man's cheeks were or how skinny he was.

The man smiled at him and reached for his sign. The move reminded Paul of his stance on the homeless. Beggars, he thought with disgust. "Why don't you get a job?" he sneered and saw the man recoil slightly. "You're young, I'm sure you can find something to do besides sitting here all day asking for money. It's people like you who bring everyone down."

"I've tried. There's nothing out there, man," Michael said.

"Well, you can wave your sign at someone else because I'm not giving away my hard-earned cash to someone who won't even pretend to try and find a—" Paul stopped abruptly as the hard candy in his mouth slipped down his throat and lodged in his windpipe. He grasped his neck instinctively as he struggled to inhale. Panic set in and he pictured himself dead on the sidewalk in a matter of minutes. Once again he looked down toward the man, but Michael was on his feet and rushing to his side.

Paul felt strong arms surround him and abruptly squeeze his mid-section several times until the air inside of him forced the blockage out of his throat. He collapsed against Michael and gasped for air just as John emerged from the shop.

"What happened?" John cried.

"This man saved my life," Paul said, reaching for Michael's hand. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Michael said and made sure that Paul was steady before returning to his crate.

John gave Paul a moment to collect himself then handed the bag of food to his friend. When Paul looked at him in confusion, John simply said, “Even the least of these,” and tipped his head towards Michael.

In that moment, Paul understood that there is worth in everyone. He took the bag and offered it to the man.

“Hi Michael,” he said. “I hope this helps.”