

Meadia Ouzounian
9602 Christine Circle
Villa Park, CA 92861
(714) 974-3800

The Visitor

He sat there in the scant shelter of the small entry to our shop at, 2030 South Main Street, in Santa Ana. I hesitated to unlock the door and turn the OPEN sign around to face the street. Shaggy, reddish hair hung down over the collar of his worn, stained coat as he sat hunched against the cold, January air. I feared he would come in as soon as I unlocked the door.

I felt sorry for him, yet I was cautious of such strangers. He did not move at the click of the opening lock. His face remained hidden in his folded arms that rested on his bent-up knees. His baggy denim pants folded over large, misshapen black shoes. One, huge, purplish-red, rough hand hung out of the frayed coat cuff. I shivered at how cold it looked.

I quickly crossed the front of the shop, turned the sign in the window to OPEN as I passed it, and unlocked the second door. While Moses, my husband, taught at La Quinta High School, I opened our store, Shah 'N Shah Oriental Rugs, and carried on the business until he arrived at three o'clock in the afternoon to relieve me.

I forgot about the man while I emptied the Volkswagen parked by the back of the shop and carried in the bills and papers I would be working on during the quiet of the day. One redeeming virtue of an Oriental rug shop was that few customers were needed to make a living. After getting settled, I looked out at the derelict again and my heart softened.

Going to the door and opening it, I asked, "Would you like to come in?"

The shaggy head slowly lifted and turned. I was surprised by the appearance of deep, penetrating grayish-green eyes. They did not look mean. The eyelashes appeared short and fuzzy and the eyebrows were practically non-existent, but seemed to stand straight up in the bright red of his face. His chest-long red beard was frizzy as was all the hair encircling his face.

"Yes, 'fank vou...mum...be nice," my visitor mumbled.

As he unfolded and cautiously coaxed his limbs into movement, I was startled by his size. He slowly walked into the shop and carefully looked around. To my relief the smell of alcohol did not emanate from his body. He must be another mentally ill, lost soul. My heart turned to him. As a former psychiatric nurse, I wished I could help him.

I offered him our only seat, the rocking chair by the office. Of course, piles of various sized rugs covered the entire shop floor. Most of the piles were at a height that one could sit on them, and we usually did.

Visitor was quiet and I began to do my required work. After awhile he began to talk. It was impossible to follow exactly what he said. Half-finished sentences and mumbled words issued from his lips as he jumped from topic to topic. I listened, concentrated, trying to find some meaning. He stood up and began quickly pacing around the shop, looking here and there. He appeared to be in his early forties, yet his back was bent as if he was carrying a heavy load, or had stood against a cold wind for too long.

His attention focused on a small red rag that was lying in a pile of miscellaneous debris. He picked it up, shook off the dust, gently smoothed the wrinkles and examined it carefully. He walked around and mumbled. He looked at me as if he expected an answer. I

couldn't distinguish between his self-talk and his efforts to make me part of the conversation.

"What did you say?" I stared at his lips and eyes to see if I could understand better.

Vousavea needle veusois?

"Needle?" I repeated the only word I comprehended. My strange visitor nodded.

"Why, yes, we have a needle." I went to the box where we kept needles used to repair the rugs and selected one with a sharp point. When I extended the needle to Visitor, a look of disappointment crossed his face.

"Didn't you want a needle?"

With some effort he formed a sentence. "Fisn n-no-mumble-fred," he scowled in frustration at the task of speaking.

"Oh, well, we don't have regular thread. We only have waxed thread for putting fringes on Oriental rugs." He followed me to the box full of large spools of various colored, thick, heavy-duty thread.

"Mumrum kay." He pointed to the tan spool.

He handed me the needle and I dutifully threaded it. He refused to take back the needle when I offered it to him, but started to fuss with the red rag he had been carrying around. He awkwardly put it around the bulky coat covering the biceps of his left arm. "Sew fis." He gazed earnestly at me. If his face wasn't red from drink, I thought, he must have been out in the sun a lot.

"What?"

"Sew fis." He jerked his head toward the red rag he was holding around his arm.

"You want me to sew this piece of cloth around your arm?"

He nodded, "Yes."

I felt foolish as I sewed a crude seam down the two-inch-wide edge of the fraying red rag. There wasn't much a person could do to upgrade his disheveled, sagging coat. The red rag did not help, but Visitor seemed pleased. "Fis ees for all the foldiers fighten and sufrin." It must have been a long time since he really conversed with another person. He began to pace again.

I returned to my work, I listened to his muttering, not sure if he was including me. "I don know vhy fey didut." I never hurt anybody in my life. I din't do anything to them Framum nekl. I never hurt anybody in my life. I don' know vhy they didut."

He stopped and looked at me. "What happened?" I carefully inquired.

"They set me on fire." I looked at him, wondering if he was rambling again.

"I wuz asleep. I wuznt' hurtin anybody. They set fire to my beard." His red hand caressed his beard.

I was stunned. I leaned forward and gazed carefully into his face. Yes! That is why his face is so red. It was burned. Short eye lashes, each one with a small ball of melted hair on its end; sparse eyebrows, mingled with small blisters where the brow had been, and all the fuzz on his beard and head was from the shrinking and curling effect of the heat. I felt sick.

"There 'er four boys," ... his face contorted in confusion and pain at the memory, "laughin." I don' know vhy they'd do that." He continued his pacing around the shop.

"Do you have any family?" I asked hopefully.

He stopped, turned slightly and looked sideways at me. "I ain't got no one." After a pause he continued slowly, "I had Mom and my step-dad kept beating on her. Did it all the time. Then one day, I just up and hit him!"

Visitor's arm flew out, demonstrating his punch. "Hit 'em hard! He vent down." Visitor's gaze drooped to the floor as if he could again see his stepfather lying there. "I 'us

big ... Ran away... Never been back. I 'us fourteen ... never been..." his voice choked, broke off, his eyes looked vacantly toward the walls and he continued to circle the piles of rugs, mumbling, ... again lost in his own world of loneliness, fear, and never to be answered questions.

Returning to the pile of rugs, I tried to concentrate on my bills. As Visitor paced passed me, I thought, if I give him some hope in God, maybe that will comfort him. If he comes to Church perhaps we could help him. His problems were too big for one to handle alone. As he passed me again, I stood and said to his departing back, "You know God loves you."

With surprising speed, he twirled. It was as if he were a different person. I felt the force that came out of him as an electric charge. His eyes looked at me as if I had insulted him; as if I condescended to preach something to him I knew nothing about.

"HE IS MY FATHER!" Each word was spoken with conviction, clarity and emphasis. In his clear, stern gaze, my body tingled. I felt the hair on the back of my head raise in alarm. He turned and instantly became the lost soul again, pacing and mumbling.

I felt as if I had been severely chastised. I will not do that again, I thought.

The sun warmed the outdoors. Visitor went and stood by the door. He mumbled something about having to leave. I was sad, yet relieved. He started out the door, paused and turned. "D-Do you have a little m-money I could have?" he stammered.

Instantly, I evaluated the situation according to my prejudicial indoctrination. *When you give bums money, they just go and spend it on drink. I only have fifty cents. I checked my purse this morning. Two quarters is all I have. Couldn't get a drink with that.* "No," I said. "I don't have any money."

His steady gaze read my face. He must have seen that expression on hundreds of faces. His eyes shifted away and his gaze drooped as he turned to leave.

"I do have some bread and I could make you a peanut butter sandwich," I quickly offered, sorry that I had been so cold in my refusal of his request for money.

He turned and gave me a gentle, forgiving smile. "That's alright." He stuffed his hand down in the baggy pocket of his coat and pulled out a can of beans. It wasn't large enough to keep a person's body and soul together.

"See," he showed the can, "I've my lunch ri-here." He turned again and walked out the door.

I sat upon the rug pile, disappointed in myself for withholding the fifty cents. What was fifty cents to me? Nothing! The words of the prophet Mosiah burned in my mind. "And also, ye yourselves will succor those that stand in need of your succor: ye will administer of your substance unto him that standeth in need; and ye will not suffer that the beggar putteth up his petition to you in vain, and turn him out to perish. For behold, are we not all beggars?"

Do we not all depend upon the same being, even God, for the substance which we

have..."1[1]

The memory of Eliza R. Snow, whose journal I'd read, returned. When the beggar came to her door, she offered him everything she had in her house – six tiny onions and all her bread – supplies she couldn't replace. I knew myself. I would have offered one onion and a thin slice of bread.

To this day, the fifty cents rests heavy in my heart. I felt I had been weighed in the balance and came up wanting. Visitor seemed to forgive me, God may forgive me, but I keep the memory of those fifty cents here, pricking my heart, to help me never be that selfish again.