

## A stranger I met

The sun gradually melted into the sky, casting it into a burst of reds and yellows, singing us into the calm of night. Birds readied their nests, people made their way back home after a long day of work. Making my way down the usual road after school, I stopped at a bench across the bus stop and hung around for the bus, frustrated and hesitant, thinking of what awaited me back home. Mother would be drunk and I'd have to watch Sam till he fell asleep. Dejectedly kicking away a stone, I watched its path as it rolled away.

And that's when I saw him. He sat all alone by the bus stop. Loose, baggy clothes adorned his body. His hair was messy and he bore an unshaven face with dark circles under his eyes. I hadn't noticed him before. A tiny plate lay in front of him, empty, barring a few loose coins. I stood there as I wondered how he could possibly live off of a few coins. He caught me staring and smiled at me, a big warm smile. I was taken aback at the directness of his smile. The unexpectant look in his eyes. As if he didn't want or need money, a home or food. How can someone muster up a smile when they are homeless and starving? I thought to myself. How could this forlorn and derelict man look so joyous in this condition? Even as I stood there, staring back at him, his smile never wavered. It was the brightest smile I had ever seen. The kind of smile that makes you want to smile too. I made my way across the road, searching my pockets.

"I don't have much." I said, dropping the one dollar coin I had into his plate. "God bless you," he cried out, looking like I had just given him the world. I smiled at him. The slow hiss of my bus arriving reminded me I needed to go. I climbed onto the bus and looked out the window. He waved at me. I waved back.

It became a routine. Every time I passed the bus stop, we would exchange smiles. I soon realized that if I dropped a shiny coin into the plate laid before him, he would get happy. He continued to give me the brightest,

most stunning smiles even when I didn't have money for him. His smile seemed like a reward. I found my worth in his smile and felt accepted.

One day, he wasn't at the bus stop. Days changed to weeks, then to months and I never saw him again. I never got to ask him his name. I felt an overwhelming sort of sadness, a small tug on my heart. It was a strange feeling, one that I had never felt before. I hope he's okay. Hope he's in a better place now. His happiness had never been explained. Why he smiled so freely and looked at peace with where he was in life. Even so, he taught me that, you may be struggling in life, or in a dark place, and many people are too. So instead of letting the darkness consume you, be the light in the dark. Be the one who brings warmth into even the coldest of nights. Because, in the end, happiness is free.