

Semi-Charmed Kind of Life

By Hilton Scott

“Of all the preposterous assumptions of humanity, nothing exceeds the criticisms made of the habits of the poor by the well-housed, well-warmed, and well-fed.”

Quote by Herman Melville

An old woman labored across the park, treading over snow-covered grass with a black garbage bag clattering over her shoulder. Three dogs trailed at her feet, occasionally stopping to sniff the ground, happy to be out in the open and roaming free. Of the trio, only one had both eyes, and the third trotted with a limp, doing his best to keep up as the quartet pushed forward on their daily journey. For all their misfortunes, the pack was delighted to follow the woman, tails wagging, eagerly jumping at her side for an affectionate pat on the head. When the dogs got distracted, the woman would stop, patiently awaiting their return, beaming with pride on her little clan of *the less fortunate*. There was no rush, and she knew it. Besides, they deserved to have some fun.

The woman had a limp of her own and visibly struggled to hold the bag over her shoulder, repeatedly switching arms as she went. Hardly in her 50s, years of homelessness had taken their toll; a fresh layer of dirt covered her face, each bead of sweat leaving a new smudge as it rolled down darkened cheeks. A tattered pair of brown earmuffs, void of stuffing, was wrapped around her head, pressed against matted gray hair. An old red flannel stuffed with newspaper for extra warmth had to make do for a jacket, while a torn pair of sweatpants completed the ensemble to keep her lower half warm. It wouldn't win any fashion awards, but it meant survival.

As she went, parents led their children away, as older kids shouted "bag lady" and "psycho mom." If the woman knew the comments were about her, she never showed it, just going on her way, content to keep her attention on her dogs. Perhaps she didn't notice because they didn't address her by her given name. But then again, what name did she have for them to call her by? A name is given by others, and if no one uses it, maybe you don't have one anymore; maybe you just become what people call you, becoming what others see. Whatever the reason, the woman ignored the scorn, continuing across the park with purpose.

The winter sun was low in the sky as the group reached the park's edge, where the open grounds gave way to a denser grove. The dogs grew excited as they neared the tree line, beginning to whimper and bark louder and louder. Within seconds, all three ran as best they could towards a gutted-out Buick abandoned under overgrowth, partially hidden in the shadows. Four more dogs inside the vehicle were already answering the call of their siblings through open windows and rusted-out doors. It was here, twenty feet off an old street no longer in use, near the edge of the city, out of sight, where the old woman lived with her *family*.

After pausing to look around, the woman threw open the back door, letting the pent-up hounds rush out into freedom in a flash of fur and frenzy, joining their companions in the twilight. Including the three that had gone on today's trip, there were seven in total, all different sizes, breeds, and afflictions. Free from the car's tight confines, the dogs jumped about the woman until she pulled a small bag from her jacket pocket. They knew from experience what it meant when she returned and what that little bag held. It was scraps of food taken from dumpsters during the day's rounds, and it was dinner. Happily meeting each dog's hungry jaws with a few scraps, the woman watched intently as the dogs quickly gobbled up their bits and washed them down with the lapping up of snow. It was everyone's favorite part of the day, and the woman smiled, warmed to see her canine counterparts so happy.

When the dogs finished eating, the woman crawled into the car, reclining in her seat, watching the dogs out in the open, playing. Although dog excrement filled the tiny space, the woman didn't seem to mind; instead, she pulled half of a candy bar from her pocket and ate while her *children* ran free in the gathering dusk. It was her favorite thing to do, and despite drooping eyelids, she wouldn't dare miss a moment. It would be a couple of hours before she was sound asleep, burrowed between her seven furry friends, tired from their evening exercise. It had been another long day for everyone.

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Downtown, a homeless man crouched near a metal sewer grate, comforted by the rising steam against his body. The temperature had fallen below freezing, but the hot mist made the wintry conditions more bearable. It would be another hour until the theaters let out, so he rested and spent the few minutes of comfort reflecting on the past, memories of life before it turned into nightly survival. At some point, he'd have to head towards Broadway, hoping that the theater crowd would be in a giving mood, but for now, it was nice to be somewhere cozy, even if for just a passing moment. However, if he hoped to secure a warm place for the night, he would need to obtain money. His pockets were empty, and without cash to spend, even the dreariest shops and bars wouldn't let him inside.

Reluctant to move, the man dragged himself from the grate and headed into an alley, returning with a small cardboard sign reading, "Please, anything will help... willing to work." *His shift was starting, and he couldn't afford to be late.* Missing the crowd meant giving up any chance at money, and that meant no food or shelter. And with tonight's chill, that wasn't a reality he wanted to live. Already feeling the cold sting against his exposed cheeks, he hurried toward the city's lights, knowing he should have been on the move much sooner.

Nearing the corner, the man's heart sank, seeing most of the shows had let out, many patrons in their cars on their way home already, eager to find their own safe, warm place out of the cold. He knew he should have been there earlier, but some nights, it was hard to get the energy and find the will to do it all again, to ask for help when there were no other options. Still hoping to meet the few people still rushing about, he held up his sign, but it was easy to see he wouldn't be making much. A few people gave him spare change, and one gave a dollar, but he had missed his chance at making any meaningful gains. He had stayed too long on the steam grate, and he knew it. Worse yet, his stomach knew it. Life on the street was always about choices; sometimes, it was warmth over money. Now, he had neither.

The man picked a cup off the ground, dropping his loose change inside and giving it a jingle for anyone still passing by, but it wasn't looking good. Disappointed, he was ready to call it a night when three college kids noticed him on the corner. He felt a pit growing in his stomach as they approached. He had experienced similar interactions before.

"You fucking degenerate," said one of the kids, closing in, stumbling.

"Knock it off, man," another said, urging his friend to move along. But the wheels were already in motion.

"What do you want money for? So you can go drink a little more?"

The man stared at the ground, silent.

"It's not enough you fuck your own life up; now you have to ask decent people to give you their money while you do nothing?"

"Jake, let's go," said one of the friends. "Quit being an idiot."

The kid reached into his pocket, pulling out a dollar. Waving it side to side, taunting, he slapped the cup from the man's hand. Whatever loose change had been gathered flew into the snow bank, sinking without a trace.

"Fuckin low life," the kid added, walking off with his buddies, who were now laughing along.

The man kept silent, staring at the ground. The insults hung heavy because they were true. He had been an alcoholic, and he couldn't argue that. Thinking of his ex-wife and daughter, he wallowed back towards the steam grate, hoping no one else might have taken his spot. It was all he had left, and with no money and nowhere else to go, it was his last hope for a chance at a warm night. Unfortunately, someone else had already beaten him to it.

"Now what," he said softly, tightening his coat and continuing up the street. It was going to be a long night.

Having rested for only a few hours and still trying to shake away the cold, the man was up and moving again by 6 a.m., headed towards the City-Mart to escape the snow that had begun falling, thick, wet flakes already gathering on his bare head. Sleepless and still hurt by the night's events, he knew he had to keep moving. It had become his routine, and even if it wasn't much, it was something small to look forward to each day. The store promised warmth, but more than that, it promised the hope of feeling normal again and being around other people. A feeling that didn't come easy on the street.

Once he let the warmth return to his body, he bought a cup of coffee with the change he managed to dig from the snowbank. For the next hour, he watched the people come and go through the sliding glass doors, needlessly hurrying from one place to the next. A young girl, about seven, walked in with her dad, and the man smiled. She reminded him of his own daughter... she would be about sixteen now. Within seconds, the girl was gone, and so was the smile.

Not wanting to stay in place too long, he moved to the bathroom for his morning wash. He turned on the faucet, letting the water splash against his wrists, tingling against his chilled hands. It was strange how hot water suddenly seemed like such a luxury. He lathered soap against his skin, noticing the almond scent, vague but calming. Finishing up, he completed his morning ritual with a few cycles on the Dyson, warm air blasting against his body. It felt good. It felt just as he had remembered it. Refreshed, he left the bathroom, ready to head back outside. Management had been explicit in the past: No purchases, no access.

The store's greeter waved as he departed. Although the two had rarely spoken, they had come to learn each other's routine on the weekends. So much so that the greeter had offered the man money at various times, but it always wound up getting both in trouble. The greeter had been promptly taken aside by management and told: "While they appreciated the sentiment, it was frowned upon to encourage that status of an individual from entering the store." So, the two were left to a friendly wave and smile, the greeter's turning to a frown as the homeless man slipped back outside into the snow.

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Inside, the greeter's shift had just started. He would be standing at the entrance for seven more hours. From six-thirty each morning until two-thirty each afternoon on the weekends, it was his job to welcome shoppers who barely noticed his existence. Nothing more than a nametag that hurried shoppers avoided, dropping their eyes to the floor to save themselves the pity of having to acknowledge he was there.

He was a seventy-four-year-old widow who, until recently, had lived a happy existence. That was until his wife died of cancer a few months earlier, prompting a new chapter in his life that was not quite so joyful. Medical bills, funeral expenses, and an economic downturn meant he needed money and a way to move forward. Not one to place his burdens on others, he found his new life near Exit No 2 at City-Mart on the weekends, smiling and waving to a sea of faces who never looked back. He remembered thinking that it wouldn't be that bad. After all, he would get to be around people.

The old man hadn't been there more than a couple of weeks before realizing the hopelessness of his situation. Standing on his arthritic knees all day was bad enough, but the loneliness was even worse. For eight hours a day, he greeted and smiled at people with the dignity of a seventy-four-year-old with little else in life to look forward to, yet of the thousands of "hellos," "goodbyes," and countless other greetings that he warmly met the customers with, few, if any, ever took the time to return the kindness. A friend of his late wife once stopped by to see how he was doing, but he was later warned by the floor manager for "chit-chatting" on the job, a young twenty-five-year-old determined to climb the corporate ladder.

"If you are talking with one customer, that means you are missing others," the floor manager had said. "Unless a customer asks you a question, you only greet or thank them for shopping here. Is that understood?"

"Yes sir," the old man answered, thankful for the attention, even if it was negative. It was the most human interaction he'd had in weeks.

Besides the floor manager, exchanges with fellow employees were few and far between. Because he stood near the exit, there was little opportunity to interact with others. It was just him and another greeter, Sue, at the opposite end of the store. She was in her fifties and was mentally disabled, but she always jumped at the opportunity to speak with him whenever an opportunity arose. Unfortunately, such cases were rare.

At ten-thirty, the old man entered the break room for lunch. Two teens, fellow employees, were watching TV, but neither bothered turning to acknowledge him. Not wanting to get in their way, he walked around the lunch table toward the refrigerator to retrieve his food, pausing for a second, glancing at the television.

"What show are you guys watching?" He knew the answer but thought it might get him a few words if he asked anyway.

"The Price is Right," mumbled one of the teens.

"Oh, my wife used to watch this every morning," he replied, hoping to keep the conversation alive. A sense of warmth entered his voice. "She used to do really well guessing the prices."

"Huh," grunted one of the teens.

"Well, we better be getting back," said the other, grinning at his friend.

"Back to the grind, hey?"

A detached "yep" was the only response.

The old man sat alone for the remainder of his break, eating half of a bologna sandwich and watching the show, remembering how his wife would guess the prices, smiling.

Twenty minutes later, he was back at the front of the store, waving and greeting no one in particular as the shoppers filtered in and out, rushing from one moment to the next. He looked at his watch and sighed. His knees hurt, and he was lonely. With not much to think about or do, he watched Sue by her exit, chatting with various people who passed by. It made him happy to see her getting so much attention, but he could already see the floor manager approaching. He knew what was coming next, no doubt the same talk he had gotten for "chit-chatting" on the job.

Fortunately, his concern was put to rest when the floor manager welcomed Sue with a smile and pat on the back before shaking hands with the customer at her side. Although happy for Sue, he couldn't help feeling slighted, having received a warning for doing the same thing. Then again, Sue had a disability. It was likely the company worried more about a complaint from a disabled

employee than merely an old one. Or, more likely the case, the floor manager saw an opportunity to show the customers how *caring* he really was.

Lost in thought, the old man was surprised by a tug on his pant leg; a four-year-old child pulled at his khakis.

"Grampa, Grampa," repeated the boy, still tugging to get his attention.

The old man knelt down, grateful for the attention, but the tugging quickly ceased, and the boy froze, realizing his mistake before taking a clumsy step backward.

"It's all right," said the old man, touching his shoulder. "Are you here with your Grampa?"

The boy stared in wonder.

"Tommy," shouted the boy's father, approaching. "I told you to stay by me; let's go!"

The father grabbed his son's arm, pulling him out the doors and leaving before the old man could even say goodbye. Saddened by the abrupt ending to the highlight of his day, he rested on a knee until he noticed the floor manager looking his way. Getting to his feet as quickly as he could, he looked at his watch—five and a half hours to go.

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Back on the park's outskirts, the old woman was again marching across the open field towards town with her bag slung over her shoulder, ready to be filled anew. As was always the case, three dogs, different from yesterday's, followed behind, tails wagging. Hundreds of other people were already in the park, playing, sitting, and enjoying the day, but few, if any, took the time to notice her. It wasn't until she got within talking distance that they would act, averting their eyes and quickly moving out of the way to avoid unwanted attention. If she ever felt the indignity, she never showed it. The only thing that mattered was that her dogs were with her, and she was on the move.

Noticing an empty bottle on the ground near the jungle gym, the old woman dropped the bag off her shoulder and dragged it on the ground, rattling as she made her way to the discarded trash resting in the freshly fallen snow that crunched beneath each tired step she took. She paused by the swing sets, surveying the area. A couple on a nearby bench watched her in silent wonder until she got too close, at which point they got up and walked away. Having captured the bottle, the woman returned to the path, patting the dogs on the head for waiting obediently. *Feeling safe again*, the couple returned to the bench, quickly forgetting the woman and her dogs.

Thirty minutes later, the old woman finally reached her ultimate destination, heading down an alleyway with several garbage bins lined against the buildings. The businesses and restaurants, whose backdoors were now shut, had taken out last night's trash hours earlier. Wasting little time, she methodically opened each bin just enough to see in and survey the rotting garbage inside, hoping to be lucky enough to find some *fresh* leftovers on the top. After quickly examining the contents of the first bin, she closed the lid and made her way to the next in line. This time, after another brief look inside, she reached her whole head and upper shoulders in,

where she remained for several seconds before popping back out, now holding three crushed cans and what appeared to be a bone, which she threw to the dogs, who in no time were running and jumping on one another, playing with the discarded treat.

The old woman placed the cans into her bag and continued up the alley to the next street, clattering along. Two and a half hours later, she had searched every trash bin within an eight-block radius. Her bag was three-fourths-full, and other notables included half a roll of toilet paper, an unopened bag of chips, a dollar eighty-seven in change, a handful of chicken bones, and a bag full of old bread and biscuits the coffee shop left out for her every morning along with other food and snacks that the employees added on their own. The old woman would have liked to thank them, but no one was ever outside when she picked up the bread. There had been a note once, but all it said was "free to take." She kept it in her pocket, fearing someone might ask what she was doing.

By late afternoon, the dogs were growing tired, having spent their day playing with bones and chasing mice through the alleys. They sat quietly beside the old woman as she ate her bread and a few chips from the discarded bag. She wiped her lips, resting before picking herself up from the ground and preparing for the journey *home*. The walk back through the park would be close to an hour with all the stops left, and she could already feel the early evening chill. More importantly, her furry friends in the car needed to be let out and fed.

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After leaving the store's warmth behind, the homeless man spent the rest of the morning walking the city, killing time until noon when he could get one of the two meals that he could *afford* from a local kitchen that did what it could for the less fortunate. When the doors opened, he entered the small, dark room, eager to sit, rest, and enjoy a meal, even if it was only watered-down tomato soup. More than the food, the daily routine allowed him to talk and joke with other people, providing more fulfillment than any meal ever could. He found a spot near the action and listened to the animated conversation.

"So, I'm buying a bottle at the liquor store when the guy looks at me and says, why don't you try to change your life. . . make it better, stop with this stuff." It was one of the regulars telling a familiar story at the next table over. "So I look up at this guy all dressed fancy and everything, and I look at him and tell him I don't have a life worth saving."

It may not have been Sunday, but to those in the shelter who had heard the story before and knew the man speaking, these conversations had become their *Sunday Mass*.

"Well, he shakes his head a bit and then says every life is worth saving in the Lord's eyes and that if I just ask for it, God'll help me," he continued, more impassioned. "So, I think about this a second there, and then I look up at the guy and into his eyes and say, "God, that's the son of a bitch that gave me this life."

The table laughed, as they always did, but the man telling the story put his head down and returned to his meal. Until quarter after one, the collection of the less fortunate rested, sharing

stories from the streets, but even more frequently, sharing stories of the past when life wasn't the long march into the nothingness that now controlled their lives. When their time was up, the motley bunch quietly got up from their chairs and wandered towards the door, never staying together or saying goodbye. And so, like the others, the old man went back out into the cold.

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By five o'clock that evening, the old woman was returning to the Buick, the greeter was back in his apartment looking at pictures of his wife, thankful his shift was done, and the homeless man was eager to return to the soup kitchen for another round. The bowl at noon hadn't been much, and despite doing very little after returning to the streets, his stomach was ready for its next meal.

Back inside, he took his place at the back of the line, scanning the room. Although it was generally the same people, sometimes a few new faces would turn up for dinner. Tonight, a family was sitting near the back of the room, kids and all. Although various individuals down on their luck sometimes came in, it was rare to find a family together as if they were at their own kitchen table enjoying a home-cooked dinner. Yet, here they were: a dad, a mom, and two young children.

The sight fascinated the man, and he watched curiously as the family bowed their heads in prayer before they ate. When the prayer ended, all four quietly did the sign of the cross and proceeded to the food before them, nearly causing the homeless man to laugh aloud. It was as if they didn't know where they were. Didn't they see the people sitting next to them? Didn't they know what they were eating? And yet, the children told their parents about their day at school, both parents smiling and listening intently, the whole group content as can be, as if tucked away in the comfy confines of their own living room.

After getting his food, the homeless man found a spot near the family to continue watching. However, by the time he sat down, the children had already finished their plates and were asking for more. Right then, he realized that the family knew where they were. The parents' faces curled from smiles to heartbreak as they tried to explain to the children that there wouldn't be any more food tonight.

"But I'm still hungry, " said the younger child, eyeing the line of people waiting for their plate.

"I know, Jake, but all these other people need some, too, and if you take more, they might not get any," said the father.

The mother emptied a few spoonfuls into the child's bowl.

"I'm not that hungry tonight," she said, smiling, strong.

The homeless man, who had yet to eat, picked up his bowl and walked to the family's table.

"Why don't you have mine, pal," he said, placing the bowl in front of the boy with a smile.

"Sir, we couldn't," said the father, but the homeless man had already started towards the door.

Outside again in cold reality, he wandered onward. It would be hours before he'd get to eat again, so he'd just have to wait for now, hoping for a better day tomorrow. Sometimes, that's all a person could do.

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Early the following day, the old man was back at work greeting the masses. It was Sunday morning, and that meant one thing: a busy day. As the morning wore on, more and more people were actively coming and going, yet none seemed to care about or even notice him. Still, the old man smiled and waved, and waved and smiled at those mindlessly moving on to their next *important* thing of the day. As the old greeter watched Sue talk to the customers, he envied the smiles and greetings she received. *How nice it would be just to get a few words here and there*, he thought, approaching the next customer who came in.

"Good morning, a wonderful day out there," he said, smiling, determined to initiate a conversation.

"Yeah," mumbled the woman, holding a cell phone to her ear, not looking up.

The old man turned to see a middle-aged couple wheeling out a shopping cart.

"Oh, big load today," he said, smiling, welcoming a reply.

"More than we needed," said the man, giving his wife an unhappy look.

After two more failed attempts, the old man gave up. It wasn't worth the effort anymore, and what did it matter? No one was listening anyway. At ten thirty, he entered the break room, grabbed his lunch, and focused on *The Price is Right*. As the contestants guessed the price of dish soap, he looked over to the empty chair beside him.

"Four dollars is way too high for dish soap, Maxine. We got it for three here."

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Back in the park, two police officers were approaching the old woman's car.

"Jesus Christ," said the older of the two, looking into the back window. "This is fucking disgusting."

"What are we supposed to do?"

"Arrest her," the older said, spitting on the ground. "We've had a lot of complaints about her being here."

"Arrest her?" asked the younger officer, struck by the callousness. "For what? She hasn't done anything."

The older officer tapped the window with his flashlight, sending the dogs into a barking protest, waking the woman. The officer reached for the door handle only to find it locked. The woman, panic-stricken, stared helplessly out the windows.

"Get out of the car, lady," said the officer, pointing to the locks.

The old woman began rocking in place, shaking her head.

"Get out of the car," the officer said again, tapping against the glass, sending the dogs into a fresh fit of barking and growling. "Dammit, lady, I'm not gonna tell you again."

The barking grew louder, and the old woman threw her hands over her ears, paralyzed with fear.

"Get out of the goddamn car!" yelled the officer pounding against the window with his fist and flashlight.

"Mark," yelled the younger officer. "For Christ's sake, she's scared."

"Get out of the goddamn car!"

"Ma'am, we aren't going to hurt you. We just want to talk to you," said the younger, unsure what to do.

"I didn't do anything," the old woman sobbed, terrified, her body jerking as she rocked in place.

"I'm not going to tell you again, lady; get the fuck out of the car!"

"I didn't do anything; I didn't do anything!"

The officer slammed his flashlight against the window again, harder.

"No, no, no, I didn't do anything," she screamed, gasping through tears and reaching for her dogs, gripping their fur. "I didn't do anything!"

The old woman didn't hear the shattering of glass over the barking dogs and her grief-filled cries for help that fell upon, if not deaf, unwilling ears.