## Sean Lyens

# Rain

My friends often describe me as a cynic and a pessimist. For the most part, they’re right. Sentiment loses value when it permeates one’s attitudes and behavior just as the value of a commodity decreases as it becomes ubiquitous, so as a rule I reserve expressing sentiment for rare occasions that I deem worthy. Fortunately, even the harshest cynics are surprised sometimes.

To begin, most people in my hometown know who Mike is. But I would bet that ninety-nine percent of those people don’t know Mike’s name. Mike is a homeless man who lives at the public library. He didn’t really attract my attention until several months ago; since then, I have found him impossible to ignore.

At about eleven o’clock one Friday night, I left my house with the intention of buying a CD at Discount Den. I grabbed my coat to shield myself from the chill air, the result of a cold front and incessant rain, lowering temperatures into the 40s and threatening to drop them even more. Before I reached the Den, I passed the public library and noticed Mike sitting on a concrete bench. Stopping at a red light just beyond the library, I attempted to force myself not to look back at his cold, shivering form. With guilt welling up inside my chest for driving past Mike so many previous times and overlooking him, I couldn’t make myself look away.

As the light turned green, I sat for a moment, not moving, and asked myself what I was going to do. Then I accelerated slowly, waiting for the car on my left to pass as I changed over to the left lane. I made four left turns at four consecutive stoplights until I approached the library again. Pulling into the library’s parking lot, I turned off my lights, radio, and heat. As I opened the car door, the cold air stung me like a quick slap to my face. Slowly and uncertainly, I walked toward Mike.

The street was eerily quiet as I crossed. So was Mike. Staring at me unwaveringly, he said nothing as I approached. The crow’s feet framing his eyes, the ridges in his forehead, and the crinkles in his cheeks still stand out in my mind. How many nights had he lain on that bench, covering his face as the wind whipped against it? Now he hugged his body tightly. He was wearing an old pair of tan khakis, a shirt that I couldn’t see clearly, and a light multi-colored jacket, its sleeves ending above his pale wrists, that was just slightly too small and clung to his body. As I gave him the money in my wallet, he took it—slowly—and stared at it for a second in disbelief. Although the street in front of the library is usually an amalgam of car horns, headlights, whining engines throughout the night, nothing—not one honk or screech of tire—disturbed the silence. Mike’s head rose slowly, and he looked me in the eye with nothing but sincerity and kindness as he uttered three simple words: “God loves you.”

In nearly any situation, I can think of something to say in response, but this time I was dumbfounded. It was as though a thick cotton sock had been jammed into my throat to suffocate any reply. I felt inadequate. After several seconds, I muttered something unintelligible and shuffled across the street to drive home.

During that particularly snowy winter, I often drove by the library looking for Mike. I was encouraged when I didn’t see him lying on the hard concrete bench. I haven’t seen him outside at night for quite a while. However, I did see him a few times inside the library during the day. After that first encounter, I stopped and gave Mike some money a few more times. We exchanged names and talked some more. These subsequent meetings made me question why I had been stupefied when he had first thanked me. When I hear a televangelist with a Rolex watch, an expensive suit, and a fancy hairstyle tell me that God loves me, it doesn’t move me in the least. Mike’s words are powerful not because he is a man who lives a life of luxury. His words are always powerful because he has no home, often no shelter, yet he is neither bitter nor resentful; it would be easy to succumb to anger and spite, but he doesn’t. Because my offering is so paltry, he could easily refuse it and ignore me, but he doesn’t. Instead, he tells me that God loves me, sincerely and without pretense. For this reason, Mike deserves my sentiment.