

*The
Hungry
Old
Woman*



*by
Tomaca Govan*

THE HUNGRY OLD WOMAN

By Tomaca Govan

Copyright 2009

Keep the Light Records

I was at a red light and watched a thin woman approach the car at the corner adjacent to me - also at a red light. It was obvious she was asking for money.

Nothing was handed out of the window. I saw the driver window roll up; the woman looked at the car behind that one, looked straight across at the other intersection, then turned around. Her eyes dashed around surveying the intersection for her next target. For some reason she chose not to go the car behind the one where she was. She turned around and looked around again for a few seconds then started heading my way. I was first at the light across from her and I was her next target. I didn't watch at her as she hurriedly crossed the street because I didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable and perhaps I was a bit uncomfortable with the fact that she was coming towards me.

My mind said, "oh boy, here we go...why didn't she just go to the car behind the other one?..."

I was a nice warm day, a pleasant experience now that the summer was beginning to wane. I love to drive with all of the windows down to have a rushing-through of air when the car is moving. However, on this car, the motor in the driver's window was broken. That window was up, but all the others were down.

The woman is now standing on the side of my vehicle. Her appearance there was as if by magic. One second she's walking toward me and then suddenly "poof!" there she is.

I look at her and she's not looking at me, but looking around with apprehension because she's waiting for me to roll the window down. I could see her mind working. The fact that I didn't roll down the window means that she will have to move on to the next vehicle. She's scoping the area for her next prospect just in

case I choose to ignore her and thinking about the timing of the red light. I looked at her and could quickly tell that she was not drunk, high, or cracked out. I was simply looking at a very thin old woman, who was thin from not eating and being hungry. I observed her wrinkled brown skin and her gray hair. It was not long, but not very short either. It still had some brown coloring to it, but the gray was beginning to win the take-over battle.

I leaned back a little and yelled out the back window at her, "The window doesn't go down!"

With that said, I could see a change in her face. She told herself that this woman isn't being rude at all; she doesn't want to ignore me. She understood that I have given her permission to speak to me.

She spoke up loudly, still standing at the driver's window but using enough projection so that I could hear her voice coming through the back window.

"Excuse me ma'am" she started, still looking around nervously for other people to ask, "I don't mean to bother you, but I haven't eaten in two days and I was wondering if you could give me a couple of dollars so I can get something to eat. "

Her eyes never looked directly into mine. They looked to the side, they looked down and they looked off into the distance. It was as if she wasn't good enough to look into my eyes, as if she felt she wasn't my equal, as if she was apologizing for asking for money. I could sense she was hoping that before the light changed, she could finish asking me for money and hoped she was lucky enough to get something.

As I looked at her face, my heart softened and saddened. I could see my mother, my sister, my friend, my aunt, my cousin, and even myself. My mind presented me with the awareness - "That could be me in 20 or 30 years if I were

to live that long." And, even before with that seeing of myself in her, I knew so very deeply that I had to help this woman get food.

At this point there was no hesitation on my part. I wanted to give her \$5.00. I wanted her to be able to eat something. I reached into my front pocket where my money was balled up and pulled it all out. I had just gone to the grocery store and didn't take the time to put my money away properly as I was given my change. So it was shoved into my front pocket with the grocery receipt. Normally, it's folded neatly in half in my wallet. I was hoping to have a five, but only had a ten and two ones. Well, the two ones wouldn't be enough I decided, so I slid out the ten from the group of the three bills and stuck it out the back window.

"Thank you." she said as she took the money. Her head bowed as she looked at the ground.

I noticed the tone in her voice had changed. The voice that said "thank you" was a very child-like one. It was appreciation and shame all rolled into one, like a little kid saying "sorry," but grateful for not being punished. And her bowing her head wasn't that like what one would do during a greeting or as an acknowledgment, it was more like a dog's when they are scolded by their master.

It was clear to me that she had to find tremendous courage within her to be out there begging. Given how thin she was, she probably had to do it often and probably has done it for a very long time. It must take a lot of courage to hear constant "no's" from the people you approach, like the first vehicle I saw her walk away from. I couldn't see the driver, but it was a large, black, shiny SUV. The vehicle itself looked like money.

There are many who take the attitude that a beggar is bothering them and that can't make the beggar feel good. You wonder why people are so selfish and why

they don't care. I always wonder, why can't they see themselves? Don't they know that it's them who are hungry? Yes, you are looking at a person who is outside of yourself, but that person is you -- they are an extension of yourself.

She stepped back from my car and stood there for a moment with her eyes darting around as if unsure of what to do next -- ask other people for more money - hit the next car...take the ten dollar prize and go home...the light's getting ready to change... It appeared as if she just might stand there and wait for the next car and the next red light to ask for more money. Like maybe she didn't realize that I had given her ten dollars. Maybe she thought it was just one. But, at that point, the light changed and I went on about my way.

As I observed her briefly as I drove away from her. For a split second I got upset and said to myself, "Don't tell me she's going to continue to stand out there and ask for money. I gave her enough to get something to eat!" Then I silenced my arrogance and shamed myself for even thinking about it. "Give the money and let it go," my inner voice said. "If you chose to give it, don't worry about what's done with it... besides the money is not 'yours.'"

I always give money to people on the street. I used to contemplate and try to figure out if they were going to use the money to get high on drugs or alcohol. I finally decided that if someone says they are hungry, if we're near a restaurant, I will buy them a meal.

A man was standing outside of a fast food restaurant and asked me if I would buy him some food. "Certainly." But, he would not go in because the employees there were very hostile toward him. They had called him all kinds of names and forced him to leave the restaurant. How cruel. I tried very hard to get him to come in with me because I was prepared to blast the people working there and to dare them to harass this man as he sat and ate the food I bought for him. But, I couldn't get him to go in. They had traumatized him to that point. I finally had to accept that; went inside and bought him a meal and brought it out to him.

In terms of trying to figure out if “my” money would go toward the purchase of drugs or not, I let that go. If they say they are hungry, I will help if I can.

I never carry large amounts of cash on me. At the most I may have \$20, and even that much - just occasionally. It's more like \$4 or \$5 on a regular basis. I am happy to share what's in my pocket with someone else whenever I can.

When I gave the old woman the ten dollars, twelve was all I had for myself for the week. It didn't phase me though because I have food in my house. I had just gone grocery shopping and if my little spending change for the week was gone, so be it - it's gone.

Everything moves in circles. Money goes out and comes in, then it goes out and comes back in again. If money is sent out into the universe with good intentions or sent out with love, then it comes back with love. If sent out in malice, then malice comes back. But, in the case of an old woman, or actually anyone who is hungry, I must send money out because I see myself. Why wouldn't I want myself to eat? Why would I allow myself to go hungry if it wasn't necessary? There is no more hesitation ever on my part when it comes to those situations.

About being possessive with money - something has changed within me over the years. How foolish to be tight-fisted with whatever is in my hands or my pocket. Let it go, let it go. The money is not mine, I am borrowing it - holding it temporarily until it needs to move on. The money is all of ours – it belongs to everyone, to all of us. I will use what I need to, try to save some, but never hesitate to give when necessary. Yes, certainly the causes are endless, and the need is great. But we must pick and choose. Pick and choose while keeping the love channel open so the things you can help with come to you naturally.

A friend told me about an old man who is always on a certain corner, begging for money. He happens to own a large house up the street and makes his living by begging on the street corner. He does not want to work. To me, that's okay.

Why not share and help this man? Jobs are so scarce. Our world is not like what it was 30 years ago and who knows what this man's story is? The money belongs to all of us. We just spread it around from person to person, place to place. And with that money goes our intention. It either goes with our blessings or goes in anger. It comes back with the same energy and intention. I would much rather send out love and have love come back to me.

I was looking for a parking space after my encounter with the old woman. I didn't find one further down on the same street so it meant I had to circle the block to find one on the other streets. As I came full circle, I saw the little old lady walking with a plate piled high covered with tin foil. It made my heart feel so good. She was going to eat for two days after she hadn't eaten for two.

I wanted to catch her and find out where she lived. I would make it a point to buy extra canned goods when I went to the grocery store for myself to give to her. That's what I wanted to do. But, alas, she was out of earshot, my car was pointing the opposite way she was walking and if I wanted to catch up with her, I wouldn't be able to without a great deal of difficulty, if at all. As I was thinking of a strategy, she turned the corner and vanished from my site. I took this as a sign that my job was done for that moment, for that situation and that I should let it go. However, the memory of that situation will never leave me. The face of that hungry old woman haunts me still. How is it that someone can live an entire lifetime, earn money and then end up near the end of life with no money and hungry? No, I am not judging, I am attempting to inspire thought in others. Hunger, in a world that has more than enough for everyone, should not be.

A week later and I am still thinking about that whole scene, replaying the images in my head over and over. Seeing how awkward the old woman was as she asked me for money. Watching with joy the little lady with the plate piled high and covered with tin foil. God did that. God sent her to my car for a reason. I

experienced it for a purpose. That's why I can't let it go. It has occurred to me that I should go hungry for two days to mirror that woman's experience. I am being prompted to do that. Experience what she did. Know what it actually feels like to be hungry - damned near starving. Know what happens and observe my thought process. Take that experience and somehow apply it and use it to serve. And, it's not a "fast;" she wasn't "fasting;" she went hungry. She didn't go through the process of slowly reducing food intake and increasing juice and other fluids to prepare her body. She didn't have that luxury. There was just no food for her to eat.

I have the *luxury* to choose to eat or not to eat. I have the *luxury* to say that I am going to fast. I choose to say that I am not going to eat - that I will be hungry for two days. I will allow all food to be inaccessible to me. I will keep notes on my experience and post them.

So, that's what I will do. What will you do?

DAY ONE

It's my first day of not eating. I was feeling okay until about 11:00 am, then I started thinking about the crackers, the chips and the cookies in the kitchen at the office. I was thinking that it would be okay to have a couple of crackers just to ward off the hunger. Normally by this time of day I would have had a cup of yogurt and I'd be thinking about heating up a bowl of those handy, dandy instant Raman noodles. But, I abstained and ate nothing.

12:00

At 12:00 (lunchtime), people went into the kitchen and started heating up their lunches. The smell of cooked food filled the air. It's a very cool day; it's the kind of day that one would have a hot bowl of soup, chicken noodle, clam chowder or

even a full hot meal - mashed potatoes, chicken, peas...something very hot to warm your insides and something very filling. For some reason, I associate cold weather with being full and satisfied. Maybe it's an instinctive kind of thing because the body needs to add more fat during winter. Who knows...

As I thought about food, I thought about the fact that those who don't have any food simply don't have food. If they ate, it's because they asked for it, asked for money and received it or they stole it from someone or somewhere, or they ate it from garbage cans. And, if I was going to keep my commitment to not eat for two days, to have this experience, then I could not eat. Unless --- ("Unless?" my little mind buzzed -- "You mean there's a way I can break this commitment?") "Yes," unless I went out on the street and asked strangers for money for food, found food on the street, in the garbage or wherever. I cannot ask anyone that I know for money. I decided right then and there, if I did eat anything today or tomorrow, that would be the only way that I can.

The thought of going out and begging brought a whole new dynamic to my thinking.

"Oh, my God! Go out on the street and ask strangers for money!!? Is that even something I can do?"

In my present state, no, because I have options. If absolute worse comes to absolute worse, I can eat. I have food. So what I am doing is invalidated in a way because of those options. People who are hungry don't have my choices. But, still I can mirror the old woman's experience of not eating for two days. I can let myself be hungry. I will make it past the lunch hour today. I have barriers in my mind that will not allow me to go into the kitchen and snack on anything.

2:00 pm

I am starting to feel a little lightheaded from not eating. I go outside to take a short stroll and I look at the grass and begin to wonder what it tastes like. The leaves on the trees are starting to turn colors; what do they taste like? Is there any nutritional value in them? How about the flowers I see? What do they taste like?

The orange-colored ones are glossy. I imagine what it would feel like to chew them and what they would feel like sliding down my throat...

I come back into the office and have to walk into the kitchen to put something in the garbage. I look at the cookies and the crackers on the counter and turn my head away from them. I throw away my item and I walk back to my desk. The lightheadedness stays with me and I am beginning to feel the slight pain of a headache approaching from the distance and - I am really hungry.

I cup my face in my hands, massage my brow, put my head up and continue working.

4:00 pm

Just came in from getting a bit of fresh air again -- something to break up the monotony of sitting at a desk and working *and* not eating. My mind is thinking about the compromise that I offered myself - to eat out of the garbage. I go in the kitchen and take a quick look in the garbage can. The only thing that looks remotely viable is the plastic container with the remnants of someone's salad. There are just a few pieces of shredded carrots and two small pieces of lettuce. I choose to pass.

I look at the crackers and the cookies on the counter again. I think about the variety of chips in the cabinets. I make no action other than to leave the kitchen.

I think about how I am looking forward to just going to sleep and leaving the thoughts of my body's discomfort behind - at least for a little while...

I realize that the fact that I can pass up on the bits of salad in the garbage make this merely a game and not reality. People who are homeless and hungry don't have the luxury to pass up someone else's leftovers. They get to a point where survival overrides their pride and the hand goes into the garbage can.

I return to the kitchen to get more water and realize the luxury in being able to do even that. If I was homeless and/or had no money, I would have to go to public areas to get even a drink of water. The library is a place that comes to mind.

I remember reading about Sylvester Stallone and how before he became successful, he lived in an apartment with no heat. He hung out at the library and read books because it was a place he could get warm. I remember being in the library and seeing the many homeless people with layers of clothing and dirty coats sitting around. I think about my mentor too, but even more so, because he was homeless as a teenager. He told me how he would spend hours in the library simply because it was a place to go and sit, there was heat and he could read.

So, I leave the kitchen without a drink.

Shit. Someone's in the kitchen making popcorn. The smell is infectious...

6:00 pm

I am home. Normally I reach my hand into the cookie container and eat half-cookies as I move about the house. The dogs are all over me wanting to be fed. My spoiled pets eat chicken. No dog food - chicken. I buy chicken breasts, boil them and chop them up very, very fine for my 17-year-old. The three year old gets chicken too, but in much larger pieces. This is their daily meal along with any leftovers from someone's dinner. Wow. My dogs eat better than the old woman.

I resist the cookies, feed the dogs and head over to the studio where I craft my music and record. There, I cook a box of rice and beans for the studio crew. It's easy. You just boil some water, reduce the temperature to simmer and pour in the bag. This is where I cheat. This is where I fail; this is where I break the vow. I eat a large spoonful of rice and beans after it is cooked.

It would have been better if I dropped the food on the floor and then ate it because then I could equate it to eating out of a garbage can. I felt guilty for what I had done.

9:00 pm

I miss my cup of hot chocolate that I usually go to bed with, especially tonight because the house is so cold. I'm not crazy about winter. I hate to be cold. Though it's just the beginning of fall, the house has a chill throughout it. I can't walk barefoot on the floors as I love to. It's just too cold.

I've got warm flannel sheets on my bed and three fluffy quilts. (Did I mention that I hate to be cold?) I climb in between the sheets, cover myself with the quilts and am instantly warm. I think about the old woman and wonder if she actually has a

place to live. I think about all of those human beings who don't. I wonder where they are sleeping tonight and I wonder if they are warm.

I am so privileged. I am in my comfy bed, I have cable tv to watch, I have german chocolate cake in the fridge waiting for my two days of hunger to be over and I have all of these quilts to keep me warm.

When you're not satisfied with where you are and what you have, all you need to do is think about those who have far less and you realize you have no reason to complain. I've got a nice house; I have beloved pets. I've got woods behind me and go to sleep to the sound of crickets every night. I am blessed.

I close my eyes for the night and send love to all of those who don't have the basics. I send love to all the other parts of me.

DAY 2

I realize that no matter how much I want to mirror the old woman's experience, that I actually can't. To not eat, simply to not eat – even for this cause – when I can eat doesn't work. I can not eat for five days, ten days and I will never experience what homeless and hungry people experience. I have choices and options. I've got food available to me all the time. How could I possibly know what it is not to have that, when it is something that I do have?

I am not faced with survival so the things that kick off in their minds won't even flip over in mine. I could go begging on the streets, but it would only be pretend. It wouldn't be real. I wouldn't have the same impact in my life. It's like someone who wants to experience the racism that African Americans face, so they get makeup done to appear to be one of us. Then, they go out and experience things. The impact is not real because at any time they can remove the makeup and be back in the world they come from. I could ask strangers for money but

know that my survival does not depend on it. If I am unsuccessful in getting money, it's okay. If a homeless/hungry person is unsuccessful in getting money, they don't eat.

So, I give up on the experience because it will be invalid. All I can do is send love and continue to expect that the Creator will use me as needed.

What will you do?