

A Christmas story

An August day a few years back, I had spent two days in New York and was still kind of paranoid. I spent the days walking around, observing everything from squirrels and people, to amazingly huge warehouses and stores, still alert for potential pickpockets and violent characters. My encounter with this enormous city was mildly put overwhelming for a man in his early twenties.

Then I met Warren. He was standing on a corner at Madison Avenue with a paper cup in his hand, wearing a tan sweater inside out. His cap, which at one point in its' life had been white, had started to fall apart and turn brownish. However, he widely smiled when asking for change. Yes, one is warned at home as a potential tourist, warned about homeless people begging for money on the street, beggars who in reality saves up large amounts of capital. I have never believed those words to be true, reflecting my somewhat naïve frame of mind. I put a dollar in his cup, walked on, hearing the words "God bless you!" called out from behind. I suddenly realised that I was the only person I had talked to en the past two days, since my arrival, attributed to my paranoid personality as a tourist. Except staff in those stores and a variety of bars and coffee shops. This was the first "real" person I had a wish to engage in some kind of communication with in a city of apparent chaos. And that was when he revealed his name, Warren.

We talked for a while, and he willingly told me his reason for being on the street and about the cold climate waiting in the months ahead. This day was warm, but soon it would be an unliveable situation, traveling from paper cartons to shelters. From time to time, people tossed some coins in his cup, sometimes even a small bill. He would probably have enough for a spartan lunch, I thought. Just after that thought, Warren asked if I would like to hear a story, an offer I certainly appreciated. He wanted to tell me a Christmas story, a series of events taking place the year before.

One cold December morning, it must have been the first day of the month, he had been in that same spot with his paper cup asking for change for his breakfast. A well dressed Japanese woman in her thirties had asked if he was hungry, to which he had responded, "Yes, very much so". She then put a dollar bill in his cup, and hastily continued. Warren said his standard "God bless you" to her back. On the same afternoon, probably on her way back from work, the same thing happened. She asked if he was hungry, he said yes, and she put a dollar in his cup, and he said God bless you to the woman, already partly out of sight.

The next day, morning and afternoon, the same thing happened, at more or less the same time. Warren realized, after a few days, that this had become some sort of routine and made sure he arrived at his corner well ahead of her scheduled arrival. She always asked the same, produced a one dollar bill, then proceeding to a place he assumed was her work. The only thing that changed from one day to the next was her outfit.

The afternoon of December 22nd a change of events happened, however. The woman asked if he was hungry, and Warren said "yes", expecting the bill to land in his cup. Instead of pulling oout a dollar bill, she wondered if he would accompany her to her favourite restaurant a few blocks away. Warren couldn't refuse, hungerstricken, but he became suspicious of her motives in this.

"I mean", he told me, "women dressed up like tha' neve' ask somebody like me out for dinner!"

They didn't speak much on the way there, except for a formal introduction. Her name was Cicily. The restaurant was far from the fancy place he had imagined, and looked more like a tavern. After they sat down and had ordered their food, Warren could not bare not knowing. He had to ask why she did all this, the whole routine as well as the food, two days before Christmas Eve. His mind had started developing strange games he never shared with me, but Warren told me why Cicily had been so kind to him.

When she was young, she grew up poor, her family struggling to make ends meet. Her parents were far from being rich and money for a good education seemed to be impossible and certainly not a priority. However, an old couple had been living in the same building, and Cicily had been in contact with them on a regular basis, helping them out with small things. In many ways, the couple served as the grandparents she had never had. When she eventually grew into a woman, they had recognized her wish for further education, and sponsored the entire duration of her Law studies at Columbia. They had some savings, but enjoyed living in the neighbourhood, declining nice offers for nicer apartments. Finally employed in a relatively well known company (unknown to both Warren and myself), she paid the couple a visit to initiate a plan to pay them back.

It turned out the couple never had intended to be paid back; it was not considered a loan. She had, however, a strong will and wanted to do something, something for them after getting so much from them. After looking at each other, the old woman suggested that Cicily should remember her past and spend some on helping others, other people who really need something, especially in times where many have or should have a nice time. That was her reason for making her best to make sure Warren could have some special moments this Christmas. After her story, they both leaned back in silence, Warren being a bit surprised but happy about her story. Then food was served, and they talked about Warren, his life, politics, winter, love, summer, families and so forth. He had only seen her once after this meeting, and her smile had been sufficient. It had provided him with renewed hope.

He produced a huge smile when he observed my reaction to the conclusion of this story, and all I could do was smile back. I gave him two dollar bills, smiled, and walked off, never looking back, not even when I heard his words, "God bless you". That was my only encounter with Warren, but I still remember him as it was yesterday. It had provided me with hope as well.