



UNDERNEATH IT ALL

The stranger had an unusual request, but one that had a familiar what-if ring
by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

It's November of last year and I'm in the Costa Mesa Target perusing the wall of men's underwear for my husband and son—Boxers? Jockeys? Gray? Blue? Plaid?—when a woman in her 40s, 50s, maybe older, approaches. She's in loose jeans and a white V-neck T-shirt. Her close-cropped, steel-wool hair looks damp, as if she recently showered. I catch a whiff of soap.

Her forehead is furrowed. She seems to be in pain and wears an expression I've occasionally seen on people with head injuries: She's here, but not here. Fearing she's about to hit me up for money, I begin to say I don't have any cash, but it's not money she's after.

She gestures to a three-pack of medium white jockeys.

"Uh-huh," she says, sounding vaguely Southern. "I could use some a them."

Concern shadows her latte-brown eyes. She futzes with her left hand, which is wrapped in gauze. I'm baffled: What could she possibly want with men's underwear?

"You sure you want those?" I say.

Her soft voice has a slightly hysterical edge, as if she is trying hard to keep it together. "I need a front opening when I go to the bathroom," she says. "I don't wanna pull my pants down outside."

I'm speechless.

The homeless woman watches me pull a jockey three-pack from the hook and place it in my cart. I want to know how she landed on the street. Too personal. So I say, "Where do you sleep?"

"I'm waiting for my SSI check," she says. "This pain in my hand ..." We gaze down at her gauze-wrapped fingers. "And the paper underwear I'm wearing is awful."

I want to know more. Does she have relatives somewhere, or grown kids, someone she can ask for help? But shoppers are edging around us and it's time to move along. It's awkward, what to do next.

"Why don't we meet out front?" I finally say. "Ten, 15 minutes?"

"That'll work."

As suddenly as she appeared, she's gone.

IT'S HALF AN HOUR BEFORE I check out, even though I hurried. I pile my purchases on the conveyor belt and ask the checker to bag the underwear separately. She hesitates. It's one thing to bag food apart from clothing or cleaning supplies, but underwear?

Outside, under the glare of the noonday sun, I see a speck of a shopping cart way down near Target's other bank of doors. As I move closer, the woman shakes out her shoes, leans back, and rests her arm on the back of the bench as if she's in a park gazing at a pond of ducks rather than a sea of parked cars.

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Her cart, brighter and tidier than any I've seen, is covered with a child's pink blanket.

When I'm a few feet away, she sees me and does a double take. "I thought you forgot all about me," she says, shielding her eyes from the sun.

I hand her the bag.

"God bless you," she says.

I'm glad I'm wearing sunglasses because my eyes begin to tear. "Good luck to you," I manage.

As I zigzag through the lot to my car, I glance back. She's tucking the underwear somewhere beneath the pink blanket.

WHEN I WAS 11, MY FATHER NO longer was able to work. We sold our house and moved 200 miles away into a smaller, more modest house close to Mom's family. We moved every year for the next six. At 14, I started working as a waitress because my parents no longer could afford to buy me clothes or give me spending money. Mom, who was uneducated and had never worked, got a job in a factory cafeteria. Our last place together was a rented two-story brick row home beside train tracks on the

wrong side of town—so wrong that my friend Debbie was forbidden to hang out with me because her mother said my family was too sketchy for her.

As an adult, for a number of years, I lived one paycheck from the street with my musician husband. Being broke artists without kids was one thing, but after we had our baby, life felt more precarious. We almost gave up our health insurance but decided we couldn't because of our son. Things eventually turned around, but it reminded me of my life as a kid—of being an outsider—and that the only things that separated me from homelessness were a few lucky breaks.

TWO WEEKS LATER, AFTER THANKS-giving, I return to Target. I scan the entrances for the homeless woman's shopping cart. I didn't do nearly enough for her when I had the chance. If I find her, I'll buy her a dozen pairs of underwear, a hat, coat, and a blanket for the coming winter.

Of course she's nowhere to be found. Maybe she got the help she needed, or a relative took her in. Everyone who's

homeless doesn't remain that way forever. There *are* happy endings.

Yet, she struck a chord in me. She couldn't have known how grateful I was for the opportunity to perform that small act of kindness, or how, at different points in my life, I've been closer to the street than most anyone I know.

And I thought back to some years ago, in San Francisco, when an older woman, frayed around the edges, tried to get my attention. I almost brushed her off, fearing she wanted more than I could give. "I need help," she said, her voice laced with desperation. I stopped and listened. Turned out all she needed were directions.

So often people need so little from us. And most of us have something to give—time, money, respect, *something*. And truly, underneath it all, aren't we all outsiders of one sort or another, each of us fighting our own battles?

During hard times, there were people who gave me something of themselves, however small. And I remember them with great affection, still grateful for the light they cast. **OC**



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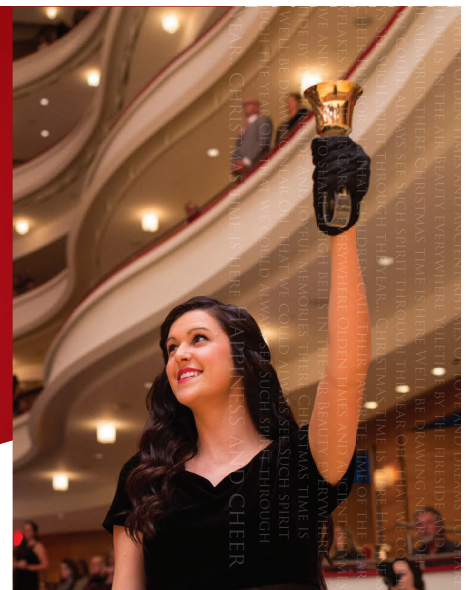
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