

## I (don't) see you

I see him before he can look me in the eyes and stare straight ahead. Ignorance is bliss? Not here. Blatant need reads from cardboard signs on every corner: "Help, 3 children and a wife to support. Any work, food, donation. God bless." Or "I'd rather die of hunger than steal. God bless." Or "Need work. God bless."

But God is marked by his absence. God is the God that wasn't there. God has forsaken humanity. God never existed at all; it is merely the idea of forgiveness, of truth and equality that appeals to people in need of proving to themselves that they are 'good', that they are being truthful and equal, despite being the ones in the new BMW ignoring the man on the street, preferring to retouch their make-up than to look at a fight for survival.

"Help me!" Everything about him screams it. His eyes plead. His hands beg. His stance is pitiful, beseeching anyone to react. The same version of desperation confronts you at every robot. In burnt white faces, in sunken black ones, in every colour poverty looks the same: the standard rags; the begging gesture; the walk between rows of cars; the bare feet touching scorching asphalt in summer and freezing to it in winter; the pained expression that surrounds you. How does one react to need when it is everywhere?

The two young women in the car next to mine imitate his gesture for food, the hands to the mouth and the pathetic expression plastered on his face. Their laughter is inaudible behind closed windows in an air-conditioned car, but their body language shows enough. I wonder what the man thinks.

Red becomes green; traffic moves on, no one has opened a window or recognized his presence. No one cares. Maybe it is not that no one cares, but more that we do not trust to care. All of us have heard the stories of the beggars not *really* being beggars, of being normal people exploiting our sense of pity:

"I was driving with my friend when he recognized the beggar on the street: he was a young man from a wealthy family whom my friend had met in rehab, now pretending to be crippled in order to get money for drugs." "My cousin's girlfriend saw a beggar in a club, dressed normally and being seemingly quite well-off." "My grandmother offered a woman with a cardboard reading "Any job please. God bless." a job as a cleaner, but the lady refused, saying begging was easier." "An acquaintance saw a group of young boys going behind some bushes as normally clad youngsters and emerging as pitiful, starved and dirty children, in need of help."

With stories like these it is no wonder no one rolls down their window anymore. With stories like these it is no wonder that we do not trust what we see. Maybe, we have also become used to the sight of beggars everywhere. We see them as part of the scenery, as something that is always there but that needs no acknowledgement except for mild irritation. Beggars are like the

particle in your eye that you cannot seem to get out: it annoys you for a second but as soon as it is out, you cannot be bothered to think about it again.

Later, as I meet friends for coffee, I feel the need to justify not giving anything to the person on the street. We all argue that we work for our money, that we deserve to be there sipping a Café Latte because we *earn* it. However, many lower class workers are immigrants from other African countries, better educated than we are, but working as car guards, as cleaners, as beggars in order to survive. Doctors, engineers, teachers putting groceries in your car, helping you park, cleaning your offices whilst you refuse to see them as equal.

We all say that we will not give money, but give our left-over lunches. Mostly this consists of the squashed apple at the bottom of our handbags. An apple a day might keep the doctor away, but it is not enough to live on and death will certainly come a' knocking if all we can give are old apples.

Morality no longer plays a part in the big-city-life everyone seems to want, as in the accompanying anonymity our actions must fear no consequences. A monstrous egotism makes us stare straight ahead, makes us mock what we presume to be insincere, makes us ignore poverty because "there is nothing we can do" and makes us inhuman.

The man I saw every day on my way to university is no longer there. However, he has been replaced by a blind Zimbabwean with a family to feed and a druggie on the next corner, looking to score. Everywhere I look, someone is lacking something, is needing something, wants something from me, and I don't know how to react. I cannot save all. I cannot bring everyone home for a shower and a meal because I am afraid I will not be able to make them leave again. I cannot hand everyone money as I will bankrupt myself.

In South Africa, poverty is ever-present and stares you in the face on a daily basis, but we have become so accustomed to it that we would rather stare ahead, stare past the person than to look at them. We prefer looking in a mirror at ourselves, reminding ourselves of how we look and what we are, than to look at the reality around us and react on our discomfort instead of merely pleading ignorance. Perhaps you give donations, perhaps you give your time, perhaps you are aiming for a change, but at the end of the day, you still go home to a house and a meal, whereas the man on the street sleeps under a bridge and will be begging for life again at your window in the morning.

Sabine Petzsch

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