

DESERVING

by Reggie Koch
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I confess that I never donate to the Children's Miracle Network or Child Fund, International, or any of those charity organizations, even though I sometimes feel bad about not doing so. My excuse is that I always figure the children don't see much of the money, because it probably goes to line the pockets of some already rich preacher-type bastard. Not much of an excuse, I suppose, but it's the only one I have.

I always say that I want to be charitable, but that I want to be able to see that my money goes to a "deserving" person and that it makes a difference in someone's life. The truth is, I am not nearly charitable enough with the blessings the Lord has bestowed upon me.



I went to pay my electric bill this morning, and ran into a familiar face: Diana. She was sitting on one of the benches, as usual, just watching the people go by. It was a busy morning at the utilities payment office; it seemed like everyone picked today to go pay their bill.

I know Diana from my police officer days. Many of my Facebook friends who are police officers will remember her. (If you write in to confirm this, please do not use her last name or give any more personal information than I am giving here.) She is mentally ill and very poor, and I'm not sure if she still has a home at all. I'm sure she receives some sort of SSI or welfare payment, but she probably has family that helps her spend that. Payment or not, she has nothing, as far as I can tell.

Diana was often arrested for things that were mostly attributable to her mental illness. Once, a deputy named Harold Pounders (spelling uncertain) arrested her walking down Highway 161 completely naked. I was there when they brought her in, still completely naked. Another time, she was arrested at the IGA Food Store (I think it was, or maybe the Junior Food Mart). She always wore cheap "sack" dresses that just slipped on over her head, and nothing underneath. Apparently, while walking down the aisle in the IGA, she had the sudden urge to use the bathroom. So she squatted straight down and took a huge shit right there in the aisle. When finished, she simply stood up and kept shopping. The store owner was not happy about this, and Diana ended up back over at the jail.

I don't remember her ever being arrested for anything violent, or for stealing, but she may have been and I did not know it. I do remember she was always sweet. When I worked the jail at Sherwood, I had her there many times, and she never had a bad word to say about anyone, not even the officers who brought her in. I never saw her drunk or high. I never saw anything except a little black girl whose body grew up, but her mind did not, and who—unlike some rich people in the same situation—had nobody to take care of her, and keep her clean, and give her a place.

Sometimes, she would . . . ummmmm . . . “touch herself” when she was bored with jail. Some of the officers and jailers, just for fun, would go to the cell door and say, “Diana, what are you doing in there?” Her response: “Gettin’ me some!”

Once we took her to the hospital. When she saw one of the female nurses dressed in all white, she cheerfully asked, “Is you gettin’ married?”

I heard stories from some of the older officers that when she was younger she was often raped and very mistreated. I’m sure this is true. Thinking back, I think it would have been better to just take her naked ass home or somewhere else where they might give her a towel and a meal, rather than jail. But where would that be? Would it really have been that big a deal for the store just to clean up her mess and send her on her way with a bag of chips? I wish our society and culture were more geared toward that response. Jail never did her any good at all. I’m not trying to judge anyone; I’m just sayin’ . . .

Diana is getting old now. Many of her teeth are missing, and it appears that she lives mostly on the street (although I don’t really know her home situation). She is dirty and pitiful looking. Her once black Afro hair is gray. She is still cheerful as ever. She smiles and waves at everyone. I don’t know if she begs or not, but she has never asked me for anything. I think she is the only one who does not realize how miserable her life is.

Anyway, I saw her again this morning, and as usual I gave her a few dollars and told her to go buy herself some food. She accepted the money, but as I was about to move on she asked me—in the same cheerful voice as always—if she could have a hug. I gave her that too. It was a short hug, because she really, really needs a bath. I wondered what the rest of the good electric-bill-paying people of North Little Rock were thinking as I stopped to hug this old bum black lady with dark brown silver hair. I bet they wondered how I know her name.

Afterward, I climbed back into my \$50,000 car and drove to my air-conditioned office.

Maybe, in another life, Diana was (or will be) very intelligent. Maybe she was a doctor or a lawyer or a movie star. Or maybe she was just a housewife with a family and a warm bed and plenty to eat. But not in this life. There are no picnics by the lake with family and photographs and noodle salad for Diana, not in this life.

So if you are ever in downtown North Little Rock and you see an old black lady walking around with silver hair and lots of teeth missing, ask her what is her name. If she tells you Diana, give her a little money, or a biscuit, or a cup of coffee. She is not faking it. She is for real. Your few dollars will not change her life, but it will make that day easier. And if you give her a hug, it will make her happy (by some definition of “happy”).

Will you do better than that anywhere else today?

God bless you and the millions of others like you, Diana. And God forgive the rest of us for not doing more about it.