

Need food for family

by Chris Miller

The bitter January chill is the kind that stands on your chest, an oppressive cold that infiltrates every pore of your body, and the man holding the cardboard sign winces as he begs for money.

"Need food for family" reads the hastily scrawled message on the weatherworn sign, and it's difficult for him to see as the wind claws across his aged face. He holds the sign with one bare hand while the other is tucked into his coat pocket, alternating hands every few minutes.

A rusted out Buick with bad shocks pulls up to the corner and the exhaust forms tufts of clouds that look like skywriting, a hasty inscription that dances across the dingy city street. The driver's window rolls halfway down and a hand is thrust outside and the man runs up and catches the collection of coins.

"Thank you, sir. God bless," he says as the car pulls away, the driver unaware of the man's pleasantries.

He stuffs the coins into the pocket of his dirty jeans, and a group of college-age kids approaches, two men and two women. The man has learned not to make eye contact with people who walk by, because it reduces the confrontations, not to mention there are others, more desperate than he, who will mug those like him. They're bottom-feeders, who prey on those who are already at the bottom of the food chain.

The kids walk past, and before the man can sigh with relief, one of the guys in the group stops and turns around. The kid, who appears to be about 20 with a finely sculpted blond crew cut, struts back to the downtrodden man with a cocky swagger.

"Hey buddy, I wanna ask you something?"

He's seen this before, and it usually doesn't end well. Smart-ass kids showing off for their lady friends, mere overgrown children who have never experienced a hardship beyond an empty box of Fruity Pebbles.

"Look, I don't want no trouble. I'm just tryin' to get by and feed my family," says the man.

"Yeah, I know. I see your well-crafted sign." The young man inches closer, his cohorts gather behind him with smirks on their faces. "I'm here to help you."

The cadre giggles at this response. "So, how much money are you looking for exactly?"

"I don't know," the man replies. "Whatever you can find in your heart to give."

"Well, tell me. One hundred, two hundred, one thousand dollars? I want you to be specific."

"I just want enough to eat. I got kids to feed. A few dollars is all I need."

The young man pulls out his wallet, grabs a couple of bills and stops short of handing them to the bedraggled man. "So how do I know you're not going to go out and buy some crack with this money?"

"Cause I don't do that stuff no more. I been trying to find a job--"

The young man interrupts. "It's OK. I'm not here to judge. What's your name?"

"Sam." The man feels the trouble approaching like a distant rain and is powerless to stop it.

"Like I said, Sam. I'm not here to judge you. I really do want to help you out, but I feel like if I just hand the money over to you, you wouldn't have truly earned it."

"I don't want no trouble. You don't have to give me no money."

"It's OK, Sam. Settle down. Living on the street has made you a bit uptight, hasn't it?"

The smiles on the faces of the young man's friends have begun to wane, and they start to look uncomfortable. The man tries to turn away from the boy, but the young man repositions himself accordingly.

"Tell you what, Sam. I have ten bucks here. And this is my drinking money, so I will not part with it lightly. I will give it to you, but I want you to do something for me."

The man doesn't respond.

"Hello? Are you hearing me? Do we have a deal, Sam?"

"It depends on what you're asking."

The young man leans in closer, to the point where he's uncomfortably close to the man's face.

"I want you to hit me. As hard as you can. Not a pussy-assed love tap. I want you to punch me in the face with all the force you can muster, and this ten dollars is yours."

"C'mon man. I know better. I ain't goin' to the joint for no assault."

"I won't call the cops, Sam. In fact, I will have the utmost respect for you for standing up for yourself. What do you say?"

One of the girls in the group speaks up. "Eric, let's go. This isn't really funny."

He turns around. "Nobody asked you, Kate. Why don't you guys meet me at the bar? I've got this."

The older man is wary of the young man's intentions and wishes he would just leave. "You and your friends should just go on. I appreciate your generosity, but I don't really want your money."

"Are you getting smart with me Sam? I'm trying to help you, to reach out to my fellow man and offer you some assistance, and this is how you repay me?"

The young man pokes the older man in the chest. "I think you and I are gonna have a real problem, Sam."

The older man straightens his posture and raises his arms to defend himself. The younger man, whose broad shoulders and muscular physique allude to a life of full-contact athletics, pushes the older man to the ground and jumps down on top of him swinging.

He delivers two quick punches to the older man's face and leans in before the man's able to respond. His cold exhales deliver tiny icy clouds to the older man's face.

"You're just a fucking bum," the young man says in a loud whisper, before getting up. He picks up the cardboard sign and rips it into two pieces, and throws them onto the older man's heaving

chest. He pulls some change from his pocket and tosses the coins next to the man's face. "Go buy yourself something nice."

The group walks away, the women in the group scolding the man's attacker, and the older man stands up and wipes the blood from his mouth with the dirty sleeve from his coat.

