



## The Lady in Red

Richard LeMieux

Richard LeMieux was a successful businessman who operated his own publishing company and lived a life of comfort and even luxury. After his business failed, however, he was evicted from his home and became homeless, living out of his car with his dog, Willow. LeMieux details his experiences in a book titled *Breakfast at Sally's: One Homeless Man's Inspirational Journey* (2009), from which this excerpt is taken.

It went back to last Thanksgiving Day, 2002. That was the day I learned to beg. 1

I was up in Poulsbo. I had used the last of my change to buy Willow a hamburger at the McDonald's drive-thru. My gas tank was almost empty, and my stomach was growling. Desperate for money just to keep moving and get something to eat, I began to consider the only option I seemed to have left: begging. 2

My whole life I had been a people person. As a sportswriter for the *Springfield Sun*, I had seen Woody Hayes motivate players at Ohio State and Sparky Anderson put the spark into Pete Rose. As a sales rep, I had sold hundreds of thousands of dollars of advertising, convincing people they needed to invest in the product I was publishing. I wore the right suits and ties and kept my cordovans shined and did the corporate dance for twenty years. But this, this *begging*, was far more difficult. 3





I had given to others on the street. They had all types of stories: "I need to buy a bus ticket to Spokane so I can go visit my dying mother." "I lost my wallet this morning, and I need five dollars for gas." I had always given, knowing all along that their tales were suspect. So I decided to just straight-up ask for money. No made-up stories. No sick grandmas waiting for my arrival. No lost wallets.	4
I started at the store I had shopped at for many years—Central Market. It was a glitzy, upscale place with its own Starbucks, \$120 bottles of wine, fresh crab, line-caught salmon, and oysters Rockefeller to go. It was a little bit of Palm Springs dropped into Poulsbo. The parking lot was full of high-priced cars: two Cadillac Escalades, three Lincoln Navigators, and a bright yellow Hummer. I had spent at least \$200 a week there (\$800 a month, \$9,600 a year, \$192,000 in twenty years), so I rationalized that I could beg there for <i>one day</i> —Thanksgiving Day at that.	5
I was wrong.	6
After watching forty people walk by, I finally asked a lady for help. "Ma'am, I'm down on my luck. Could you help me with a couple of dollars?" I blurted out.	7
"Sorry," she said. "All I have is a credit card," and she moved on.	8
A man in a red Porsche pulled in. I watched him get out of his car, lock the doors from his key-chain remote, and head for the store. "Sir, I hate to bother you. This is the first time I have ever done this, and I'm not very good at it. But I am down on my luck and need help. Could you—"	9
"Get a Goddamned job, you bum!" he interrupted and kept walking.	10
Stung, I wanted to run to the van and leave, but I knew I couldn't go far; I barely had enough gas to leave the parking lot.	11
I spent the next twenty minutes trying to recover from the verbal blast I had received and could not approach anyone else. But the exclamation point had not yet been slapped in place on my failure at begging. The young manager of the store, maybe twenty-five years old, came out to do the honors. "Sir, sir," he called out to me as he approached. "We have a..." He halted mid-sentence. "Don't I know you?" he asked instead.	12
<hr/>	
"Probably," I replied. "I've been shopping here for twenty years."	13
"I thought I'd seen you in the store," he said. "Well," he sighed heavily, "a man complained about you begging in front of the store. You're going to have to move on."	14
I could tell he didn't want to hear about the \$192,000 I had spent in his store. He just wanted to hear what I was going to spend today. So I said, "Okay." He didn't offer me a sandwich, a loaf of bread, a soy latte, or even a plain old cup of coffee.	15
I had no choice. I had to keep trying. I decided to go across the street to Albertsons. As I walked back to the van, tears filled my eyes. I remembered Thanksgivings of the past. By now, I would be pouring wine for our family and friends, rushing to the door to welcome guests, and taking their coats to be hung in the hall closet. My home would be filled with the smells of turkey and sage dressing. At least twenty people would be there. Children would be jumping on the sofa and racing up and down the hallways and stairs. The football game between the Cowboys and the Packers would be blaring in the background. There would be a buzz. A younger, friskier Willow would stay close to the kitchen, hoping for the first bites of the bird from the oven.	16
But that was yesterday. Today, I drove across the highway to the "down-market" store, nestled in the strip mall between the drugstore and the card shop. I stepped out of the van to try my luck again. It was getting late, and the shoppers were rushing to get home to their festivities. I had little time to succeed.	17
I saw an old friend of mine pull into the parking lot and get out of her car. She headed for the grocery store. I turned my back to her and hid behind a pillar. I waited for her to enter the store, and then I approached a man as he walked toward the entrance. "Sir, I'm down on my luck. Could you help me with a little money for food?" I asked.	18
He walked away muttering, "Jesus Christ, now we've got worthless beggars on the streets of <i>Poulsbo</i> ."	19



I closed my eyes for a moment against the failure and fatigue, and then I felt a tap on my shoulder. "Sir," a lady was saying. As I opened my eyes and turned around, a lady in a red hat and an old red coat with a big brooch of an angel pinned to her lapel was standing there. She was digging through her purse as she talked.	20
"I overheard your conversation with that man. I hope you don't mind. I—well, I can help you a little bit," she said, holding out some rolled-up bills. Her presence and the offered gift surprised me. I stood there a moment, looking into her eyes. "Here," she said, reaching her hand out again. "Take it."	21
I reached out my hand and took the money from her. "Thank you so much," I said softly. "This is very kind of you."	22
"Thank you. I know what..." she began, and then her sentence was interrupted by a cough. She clutched her purse to her chest with one hand and did her best to cover her mouth with the other. She stiffened and then bent her head toward the pavement as the cough from deep in her chest consumed her. She moved her hand from her mouth to her bosom and just held it there. When the cough subsided, she took a deep breath. She looked up at me with watery eyes. "I've had this darned hacking cough for a month or more now," she said after she recovered. "I can't seem to shake this cold. It's going to be the death of me," she added with a smile. "I'm going back to the doctor after the holiday."	23
"I hope you get better soon," I said.	24
The lady then moved her purse from her chest and opened it again. "Wait," she said, looking inside her bag and then reaching in. "I might have some change in here too." She dug to the bottom of her purse. She took out a handful of change and handed it to me. I put my hands together and held them out, and she poured the coins into them. "I hope this helps you," she said, gently placing her hand on mine. "Remember me. I'll see you in heaven. Happy Thanksgiving!" She turned and walked away.	25
I watched her disappear into her car before I counted the money she had given me. It was sixty-four dollars and fifty cents. I was stunned! I walked back to the van, counted the money again, and then counted my blessings.	26
I sat there in the drizzle, contemplating what had just happened. A sporadic churchgoer my entire life, I had spent recent months asking God to send his angels to me. But no angels came. Maybe <i>I</i> had to go looking for <i>them</i> .	27
With the glimmer of faith I still had left on that Thanksgiving Day, I said a prayer, thanking God for the visit from the Lady in Red.	28
And now, in the church parking lot, it was time to sleep. I closed the doors of my mind, one by one, and snuggled with Willow.	29

## MAKING CONNECTIONS

### Harsh Treatment of Outcasts

Both "**The Lady in Red**" (pp. 235–37) and "**Right Place, Wrong Face**" (pp. 229–30) describe the harsh treatment of someone who was seen as an outcast—a person who did not deserve respect or courtesy.

### Analyzing the Readings

1. Compare the situations that each man found himself in and the ways that others responded to him. Then consider how each man responded to those who treated him harshly.
2. Compare the social issues that each author addresses in the narrative of his experience.

### Essay Idea

Write an essay describing a situation in which you feel you were treated as an outcast. Describe the background to the situation, the treatment you received, and your response.

