NICKEL and DIMED
Poor People
by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

Every third Thursday of the month, a group of writers hosts a salon at a swank Hollywood restaurant.

Since, for the most part, writers work in solitude, it's an opportunity for them to mingle, exchange ideas or simply sit around and enjoy a meal with their colleagues. Several months ago, when I attended this salon, I ran into an old acquaintance. This man, an independently wealthy middle-aged entrepreneur, was once the publisher of an extremely successful alternative newspaper. I hadn't seen him in years. He greeted me warmly and began telling me all about his latest project.

"I've started a non-profit organization whose mission is to eliminate poverty in the Los Angeles area," he said. It sounded like a rather ambitious goal; I wanted to know more. Exactly how, I asked, did he intend to do this.

"There are a great many families in this city that are unbelievably poor," he explained. "It is so horrible. Most people have no idea." With that, he paused. I sensed that it was my cue to respond. But what was there for me to say? My understanding of poverty extended beyond an idea; I had an intimate knowledge of it. I stared at him, stuck my hand into my jacket pocket and pulled out two folded dollars.

"This," I said, putting the bills down on the table, "is all the money I have. In my pocket, in the bank, in the world. I know a whole lot about poverty." He laughed, and then shot me a look that said, be serious.

"No, Meri, I mean real poverty. I mean people who have nothing. Not even jobs." Now it was my turn to laugh, but I couldn't. When people speak of poverty, particularly when they are speaking to someone with whom they feel comfortable, they describe it as if it were a disease of a distant land; a disease from which no one close to them could possibly suffer. Poor people are thought to be ragged, broken, without education or proper breeding. The assumption is that their bankruptcy extends beyond the financial into the spiritual and moral realm as well, that they somehow deserve the circumstance in which they find themselves. If I were poor, I couldn't very well be sitting there next to him, in that restaurant, socializing with those people, could I? When he looked at me, I could see the question traveling quietly behind his eyes. Silenced by the sudden shame of my admission, I took the dollar bills and placed them back in my pocket.

"So," he said, attempting to shatter the feeling of awkwardness that had settled between us. "Let's check out the menu and get something to eat. It's, um, my treat."

Sometimes when I'm driving through town and I see the homeless people on the street, I wonder how they arrived at that place. There is a story, I am sure, that each of them has to tell. A story of how one misfortune led to another, sent their lives spiraling out of control, slid them down the ladder one slow rung at a time until, finally, they found themselves there, at the very bottom. Such falls are never swift or simple. They are a delicate combination of disasters, bad luck and unexpected disappointments: the much-needed freelance assignment falls through at the same time that the
baby gets sick so you dip into the rent money to buy groceries and medicine; you do what you must in order to get by. I've been there, and I've done that.

There are those nights when I can't sleep, when I get up and walk through each room of my apartment. I touch every piece of furniture, every painting. I press my palms against the walls, dig my toes deep into the carpet. There are those nights when I am so afraid of losing it, so afraid that I will soon find myself standing on some sidewalk with a tin cup in my hand, my entire future resting on the kindness and generosity of strangers.

Things have always come together for me; people have always come through. But what if, I ask myself. What if this time, it doesn't happen that way?

The very thought makes my anxiety rise and rise until it reaches a level of full attack. And the only way that I know to release the fear is to cry. I sit on my bed and I weep. "It will be alright," I assure myself. "It will be just fine." And I repeat those words until they start to sound like they might just be true. But truth, I have learned, can be quite deceptive—dangerous even—because it is often based on perspective, on those things that you choose to see, that you choose to believe are real.

That night after the writers' salon, I thought about what the man said. He was right. I'm not poor. I'm working class. But in this day and age, the two are almost synonymous. Nearly everyone I know is employed. Yet they are all, in some way, struggling. And I'm not talking about affording privileges or luxuries; I'm talking about affording necessities like rent, utilities, food. They are struggling to make ends meet.

My friend Wendy and I have passed the same 20-dollar bill back and forth between us for so long that neither of us remembers who borrowed it first. You would never know from looking at either of us that we are often hurting as badly as we are. We try hard to make sure that we look as good in person as we do on paper.

When people meet me, they don't know how much money I've got in my pocket. My hand-to-mouth dramas are invisible to them. The person they meet is an author with an MFA degree and two published books to her credit, the mother of a beautiful and brilliant adolescent girl. And the immediate assumptions they make are based on that exterior which, no doubt, makes them feel secure in the belief that hard work truly does equal success— which, of course, is a big, fat lie.

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