WE DIDN'T SEE MANY HOMELESS PEO-ple in our Los Angeles suburb when I was growing up in the sixties. I'd heard of blocks downtown where men and women lived in cardboard boxes for shelter, but that was a distant problem. The first time I saw a homeless person up close was in the late seventies. A bearded man with long, dirty hair sat holding a handwritten sign in a supermarket parking lot in Mission Viejo, a well-to-do Orange County suburb. Homelessness was spreading beyond downtown.

Once, as my mother and I enjoyed lunch at a fast-food restaurant in another affluent neighborhood, she looked out the window and spotted a man going through the dumpsters for food. On our way out she bought a meal to go. I was concerned about my mother approaching this stranger, not knowing how he might react, but as she walked up to the man, shook his hand, and handed him the meal, I realized she had given him more than something to eat: she had treated him with kindness and respect.

My mother is now eighty-two years old and barely able to walk due to arthritis. I help her with her errands every Saturday morning. Before we leave her house, she decorates an envelope with hand-drawn flowers and writes something on it like "We hope this will brighten your day. Things will get better for you." Then she stuffs the envelope with about thirty dollars in cash. Because my mother's eyesight is poor, she relies on me to find the right person to give it to while we are out.

She'll wait in the car as I take her envelope to a man whose face shows despair. I'll tell him that my mother would like him to have this cash to help with a meal or two. I'll offer a handshake and ask his name and wish him a good day. The man will wish me well in return and walk away with a little money and the knowledge that someone cares.