



Text Version of Audio Story: Canman

In a big city, you don't notice them so much. They seem to be lost in the crowd. But in a smaller place, they stand out.

Every little town has at least one.

They walk around with plastic grocery bags, scouring the roadsides and dumpsters and garbage cans. They search in alleys and parking lots and underneath bridges. This is the story of one such man, from Lewistown, Pennsylvania. This is the story of the *Canman*.

I'd seen him many times, picking up soda and beer cans — just a little old guy with a cane. For years, I wondered, *what's the Canman's story?* Finally, one day I just stopped and asked him.

His blue eyes are set on a deeply weathered and tanned face. He's not a very big man. His clothes are old, but they're appropriate. He wears a knit cap, like a sailor.

"*Tell me your story, Canman,*" I said. He leaned upon an iron railing alongside an old church. He lit up a Marlboro. He talked. I listened.

"I was a Depression baby, you know, times were real tough then. Now, the winter of '36, that was a bad one. I waded in snow up to my chin to get our Valentines out of the mailbox. When all that snow melted, we had the great flood of 1936. I was small, but I remember like it was yesterday. I was born right out the road there in Lumber City. I guess I have it pretty good. You just have to feel so bad for little kids in wheelchairs."

I knew that if I listened long enough, I would find what I was looking for. Sure enough, it came out. I eventually learned that the story of the Canman was the story of a broken heart.

It was during the Korean War that the Canman started to drink. The girl, who said she'd wait, changed her mind and married someone else. The Canman would become just one more in a long list of *Dear Johns*. While most fellows were able to shake the hurt, the Canman tried to drown it and couldn't. He got home from the service and worked briefly in a smelting plant. He didn't tell me, but his

brother did, that he later went to work in a restaurant. It was there that the great talent of the Canman would shine. He was a master in the kitchen.

Folks drove from far and wide to indulge in his culinary creations. People couldn't stop talking about it. Seafood was his specialty. He was a natural, born to cook — to create. It was a gift that came easily to him.

The Canman would find love again. He planned to marry, but his sweetheart died.

As I said, I interviewed the Canman's brother. His name is David. He owns a barber shop there in Lewistown. He's been barbering for longer than most folks can remember. A friendly man, a handsome sort with a big smile and a distinguished crown of white hair. He pretty much looks like what you would expect a small town barber to look like. I asked him, "*What one thing would you want people to know about your brother?*"

"Well, I'd want people to know that he has a good heart. He does, you know."

The Canman gathers cans every day and then takes them to the local recycling yard where he sells them. If you ever find yourself in Lewistown, look up the Canman and say hello. His name is Burton.

Broadcasting from the Juniata Valley with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.

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