

Stumps

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I'm cutting across downtown on 5th, to save time. It's hotter than hell. My AC can hardly keep up. And as luck would have it, they're tearing up sewer lines at 5th and Jackson. So now I'm stuck in traffic listening to the muffled sound of jack hammers outside my car window and watching this fat cop trying to wrangle traffic. He's sweating like crazy, and pissed. You know he's roasting in his blue uniform. Dust from the construction equipment is flying up like crazy.

But get this, just when I'm about to get metaphysical about my own bad luck, I look over at the far corner of the intersection and there is this guy dragging himself along on a piece of cardboard, maneuvering on two stumps, one maybe three or four inches longer than the other. He's using his hands to propel himself forward. And his hands—get this—on his hands he's wearing a pair of those fingerless gloves, like you see some bicyclists wear.

When the man gets to the curb, he's met with a red light. He stops, looks at the cop, then the light, back and forth like that. The cop doesn't give him the time of day. When the light turns green, the man shifts his weight to one side, pulls out the piece of cardboard from beneath him, places it in the street, and drops down off the curb. But by then the cars themselves are making a mad dash through the intersection. I watch the guy study the stream of traffic, looking for an opening. But nothing doing. Then the light turns red again and he's left sitting there in the street. The cop looks irritated. He shouts something at the man and motions for him to get back up on the sidewalk. So the guy shifts himself off his transport, picks it up, places it back on the sidewalk, and hoists himself up out of the street. He'll have to wait for another light. I'm thinking I'd like to help him. I can't of course. Then my light turns green and I scoot through the intersection, losing sight of the man in the process. Then, checking my rearview mirror, I get a glimpse of the poor bastard, still waiting.

That's bullshit, I'm thinking to myself—which is normally the extent of my involvement in public displays of injustice. But three or four blocks down the road and I still can't get those images out of my mind—the man, the cop, the traffic, the dust. The cop, I tell myself, he was there, right in the thick of it—had the power, the uniform. Why in the hell didn't he help the man? We're a pitiful species.

Then it occurs to me that the man must have had a wheelchair at some time. What happened? Was it stolen? Did someone roll him for it?...some bastard kids probably. Or maybe he got slammed cutting through a parking lot, someone backing out in a SUV I'm thinking—or maybe a wheel got bent while he was dropping off a curb. Whatever it was, someone ought to do something. And then I have an awful thought: *Me*—I could do something. And then it gets worse: I remember I actually know a guy

who sells wheelchairs. Well, I don't *know him* know him—I've bought stuff in his store, for my wife.

So then I'm thinking: How am I going to get out of this? My first thought is I probably won't find the man again? Reason enough. I'm always going through town like that, and I've never seen this guy scooting around. Then I think—wheelchairs, aren't they expensive? I'm sure they don't give them away. And what if I go to all that trouble, present the wheelchair to him, and he tells me to fuck off—like this schizophrenic I saw once, when I was creeping down the freeway during morning rush hour.

It was colder than hell. The schizophrenic looked awful, someone you'd want to give a wide berth to. Skinny, dirty beyond description—with a raised-by-wolves look in his eyes. But also a fixture in the area. A nuisance, really. Anyway, I'm creeping along and I notice this woman had stopped her car high up on the feeder road and was in the process of feeling her way down the grassy sloop—in heels mind you—down toward the guy. She had this big, all-weather parka bundled up in her arms. The schizophrenic, he's in short sleeves—you never saw him with a coat on—he must have had the constitution of a polar bear.

Anyway, at first the guy doesn't see her...he's so engrossed in gathering up pieces of trash. When he does finally notice her, he recoils and throws himself up against the guardrail, like he's just come face to face with his worse nightmare. For a moment it looks like he might even jump the guardrail, out into traffic. But the woman, she's determined, stands her ground, and cautiously tries to hand him the parka, extending her arm out as far as she can. But nothing doing. He'll have none of it. Finally, she lays the coat on the ground and starts back up the hill toward her car, checking her back all the way.

I never saw if the man picked the parka up, but several weeks later I see an article in the paper about him. He'd died. Imagine, an article in the paper—he was that much of a local curiosity. But the thing that happened to that woman...*that was precisely* what I didn't want to happen to me.

So I'm having all these ambivalent thoughts and feelings. You'd have thought I would have felt noble—goddammit, I'm going to get that guy a wheelchair! I'm going to make his day! Mine too! I'll finally be doing my little piece, nudge the universe with a little kindness.

Then, as if some kind cosmic force had taken over my body, I find myself swinging onto the freeway and heading north toward that medical supply store.

"How tall is he?" the man asks when I arrive.

Is he joking? Did I not mention the legs? I'm really nervous. "He doesn't have legs," I say.

"Is he a big man?"

"No. Slight."

“I have a used chair in the back. Let’s take a look.”

He takes me back to where two men are working on who knows what. One of the men looks up and smiles.

“This guy needs a used chair,” the owner tells the one smiling. “Remember that blue chair someone found and dropped off the other day?”

“We put it out back,” the other man says, without looking up from his work.

The owner takes me through the service door and into the alley. There it is, a manual wheel chair with a blue vinyl seat and back.

“It’s a good chair,” the owner says. “I’ll give it to you for a hundred bucks.”

A hundred bucks? It’s in an alley! I hesitate.

“We’ll service it,” says the owner, maybe sensing my hesitation. “It’ll look like new. It’s a good chair.”

“I’ve got to have it right now,” I say, “as-is.”

“Okay, fifty, as-is.”

Ten minutes later I’m heading back downtown with the wheelchair in my trunk. Now I’m *really* getting nervous...and disingenuous, to be honest. I’m beginning to understand why people give anonymously. Remembering what happened to the woman with the parka, I’m thinking: What if there are people around when I get there? I don’t want to be seen giving this guy a wheelchair.

Finally I’m back at the corner where all this business started. I decide to drive in the direction the man seemed to be heading. But several blocks down and nothing. I’m beginning to think I just bought myself a wheelchair. Then, just when I’m about to call the whole thing off, I spot him—alone, in the middle of a block, no traffic, a parking spot practically next to him. Perfect.

You know those times when everything gets fuzzy? This was one of those times. I remember the man scooting himself into the chair and me standing there watching him. I remember him not saying a word. I remember I said something but I can’t remember what. He seemed to know what to do, how to handle himself in the chair.

It was weird. I got the feeling he was expecting me, like when you’re waiting for your car to be brought to you by a parking attendant. I watched him as he rolled away.

That was it. I went home and told the story to my wife. She wasn’t sympathetic, said I could have gotten my head blown off. The following April I put the wheelchair on my income tax as a charitable deduction. My first. A hundred bucks.