

## **The Stare**

*what you see is what you get*

It was a stare that pierced my heart, took up residence in my soul, haunted me for most my life, and still lingers to this very day in the corners and around the edges of awareness.

I was four years old.

My sister, Gigi, nine and a Juniorette in the Catholic Daughters of the Americas—that's the Vatican's version of the Brownies. Gigi's group had been invited to sing Christmas carols at nearby a nursing home. Mom chaperoned, so I had to go.

Beforehand, Gigi's group decided to buy perfumed soap bars as gifts for the residents. Now, to a four-year-old boy soap of any kind is not the same as a Creepy Crawler Thingmaker or even a Mr. Machine. Perfumed soap in particular is an extremely sad present. Far worse than socks or underpants.

Little did I understand.

I had never been to a nursing home. When the sliding glass doors parted the scents of urine and bleach washed over me...into me. I wanted to run out and bathe with anything, even perfumed soap, if it would rid me of both the smell and sensation.

They caroled through the halls. Mom brought up the rear. I followed reluctantly. Room after room of people—each alone, each living but not quite alive. That's when I heard a hard, dull thud. I stopped, turned, and saw an unshaven old man sitting in a wheelchair wearing only a tattered bathrobe, his present - that bar of soap - lying on the ground.

He was unable to pick it up because of a meal tray attached to the wheelchair. Unable to get out, he was bending over, reaching for his gift. He didn't or couldn't talk. He just emitted a soft, wet groan. During this struggle, he looked up....our eyes met...and that's when I saw that stare.

Everything fell away. There was just the two of us and in that moment I no longer saw someone sick or old. I saw a person, struggling and frightened, just like me. There was not a single sinister or frightening thing about that stare. It went far deeper. It was a moment of true, pure, raw connection. He then beckoned me with his hand, a request for assistance.

I wanted to help but was frightened. I looked for Mom, Gigi, our group but they were gone. Just the distant sound of singing from another hallway. I looked back at the man in the wheelchair his hand still outstretched. My heart went towards him, my feet the other way.

As an adult what I now clearly see as a normal reaction to an unfamiliar situation somehow cemented in a child's mind as a sin. And from that false conceptualization flourished a wellspring of guilt that washed away one future and replaced it with another. The power of a single misperceived moment. In retrospect it all seems so twisted, so wasteful, so absurd. But you know, I was a kid attending a Catholic school and it is *amazing* what that system can accomplish.

To a certain extent it feels like every step I took away from the man in the nursing home became a leap towards doing something, practically anything, for someone else. Now this isn't to say I'm some magnanimous angel. I am not. Around this same time I also assured my mom that the best way for her to spend Mother's Day was at Lion Country Safari. Not a stellar example of selflessness, even though, in my defense, Fraiser the Sensuous Lion was in his prime at the time (look it up, people).

Still my guilt-based over-compensation has been costly. In large part it is why my marriage ended and my savings are gone. (On behalf of my ex it should be made clear these two things are unrelated to each other.)

The wake-up call, as is its fittingly named, came when I couldn't find my car one morning. It is a strange sensation to roam the neighborhood looking for your car and realize you can't quite decide if it were better for it be stolen or be impounded. Turned out to be the latter. In the interest of time, let's just say it was a paperwork matter that had been left unattended...while I naturally tended to others.

Now the thing about being in LA without a car is there is no escaping that fact...especially if you and everyone else knows you had one before. I was living paycheck to paycheck and had no choice but to turn to family and friends. Barriers of embarrassment and pride no longer sustainable.

Their collective responses, each to very best of their abilities and from their greatest strengths, provided not just solutions but made me see there was something worth saving and if that was true now then perhaps it was still true for the boy in the hallway. What they provided wasn't so much restoration of transportation as an opportunity for transformation.

Ghosts, it has been said, roam until they are at peace. In the past few years since all this happened it seems mine is beginning to find some. Peace for my ghost is ultimately what peace is for most of us—to be acknowledged, to be understood, and to be befriended.

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want to update with a new ending that begins....

Now befriended is an interesting word, especially if you think about befriending yourself...