

Keep the Change

by Henry Vauban

Jacob could tell it was a man he had just walked past, a broken man with an olive green Vietnam era military jacket, a man who had probably served his country as honorably as anyone chosen at lottery and forced to kill for a subsistence wage could. It wasn't his fault he became a fucked drug addict alcoholic homeless statistic, or at least it wasn't entirely his fault. His mother was probably an ice-cold pill-popping suburban bicycle, his father an overworked working man's man cliché, quick to drink his frustration and wield his ever-threatening belt. And the public education system is set up to brainwash kids into thinking becoming a machine for a wage is the reasonable thing to do, the normal thing. Vietnam guy could probably never muster the strength to say fuck it and go with the flow after he got back from the war. Now he's out here drinking his rebellion and it's probably not hurting anyone but him, but Jesus Christ begging is so tasteless, especially without some kind of performance. He doesn't even have a two-stringed guitar or an amusing outfit. He is playing his role as Vietnam leftover too spot on, too ridiculously. Jacob thought all of this the instant after he heard the bum yell after him "you can't even look a poor man in the eye you dirty son-of-a-bitch. I fought for your freedom." Jacob didn't turn to look at the man and the man didn't stop yelling where that quote ended, but the distance between the two had grown to the point at which Jacob could no longer make out what the man was saying.

After loading up his car with a day's worth of status shopping, Jacob drove past Vietnam man. It happened almost unconsciously, and right afterward he decided he hadn't meant it, and God what would other people think of him, but by that point it was already too late. He had already slowed down, beeped his horn aggressively, flipped off Vietnam man and yelled, "get a fucking job you fucking bum!" Between the time Jacob realized what he had done and the time he began to feel regret, he glanced at his rearview mirror only

to see the bum running after his Saab like a man who had not spent the last thirty-odd years drinking rotgut, smoking crack, and living on the street. He was alive, running like a teenage track star after post-meet pussy. As the light ahead changed from green to yellow to red, Jacob could feel the bum gaining ground, could hear him screaming “cocksucker” this and “ass-fucking child-molesting middle class” that. It had been a long time since the schoolyard, a long time since Jacob had felt physically threatened, but the terror of helplessness felt oddly familiar as he engaged the electric door locks and considered the strength of the glass in his car windows.

The bum tapped on the glass and smiled through his ratty beard at Jacob with all the teeth he had left, making the universal motion for roll down the window, which curiously has not changed since electric windows became ubiquitous. Jacob looked at this wreck of a human being, shrugged his shoulders and mouthed, “I’m sorry.” At first he meant that he was sorry for being such an asshole and rubbing the bum’s face in his nice car filled with shit-I-bought-cos-I-can-but-don’t-need-at-all, but then he thought about how it wasn’t his fault he was successful, and how some people are always the losers in society, look at ancient Rome, everyone can’t be in the middle, and as sad as it is there are always going to be castaways sucking cock for crank yelling insults after citizens whose only crime was to walk past their corpse flesh without donating to their booze-in-a-bag funds. The bum’s anger was increasing and Jacob was staring straight ahead praying for green when he heard the infamous D.C. bum-whistle and found his car surrounded by a circle of smiling derelicts.

As the light turned green Jacob was seriously considering running the bums over. He was excited to get home to his wife and show her the new French perfume he bought her, the new rotating-head fluid-shooting strap-on, and the floor lamp he bought from Ikea solely to satisfy his deeply troubling cheap Scandinavian furniture fetish. Right as he finished thinking this Vietnam bum smashed through his driver’s side window with his head and smiled at Jacob, blood pouring out of a large gash in his neck. Before he thought

about the taste of bum blood in his mouth or the potential of contracting A.I.D.S., Jacob thought about the two-hundred dollars he had paid the week before to have his car detailed and how much it was going to cost to clean now that it actually needed a good scrubbing. Now he was pissed. He reached in the center console for the pepper spray he originally bought for his wife but secretly stole back from her when he found out she wasn't carrying it, and emptied as much of the can as he could directly into Vietnam bum's face/wound. As much as he could, that is, before he found himself hot boxing a mist of pepper spray and blood, causing him to stop spraying pepper and start spraying chunks all over his white Polo button-down, Diesel jeans, and the bum's face/wound. The bum, for his part, had grown tired of smiling and decided he ought to remove his head from Jacob's driver's side window, problem being that his head was stuck and the more he tried to twist himself free the more blood shot onto Jacob's face and the more he puked. Whatever the bum was on must have been wearing off too, or counteracted by the pepper spray, because he looked like he was beginning to panic.

By this time the traffic light had gone through its cycle a few times and a crowd had gathered. People were taking pictures for their Facebook walls and thinking up clever phrasing for their Twitter feeds. Someone must have even called emergency services because an ambulance arrived and waited for the police to secure the situation, which they eventually did, if by secure one means chase off Vietnam bum's friends and open the car door containing his nearly severed head about ten minutes after Jacob noticed he was dead and passed out with his head on the horn in a mix of puke and blood and death.

At the hospital they cleaned Jacob off and gave him an H.I.V. test while the police questioned him. "How exactly was this course of events set in motion?" the detective asked perplexed, like a stoned grey physics professor who had stayed on ten years after he should have retired.

"We were born."

