

An Encounter

by Dave Sloan

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I made a late night trip to the grocery store for some milk, flowers, Gyne-Lotrimin, and a half a pound of M&Ms. Actually, the M&Ms were an afterthought. Anyway, I was standing in line and an old guy fell into line behind me. He was clearly a drunk, but he didn't seem drunk. He had a certain dignified bearing about him, considering the standard bum attire and visage. The clothes were a little worn, but clean. My eyes dropped to his feet. For some reason it is there that homeless bums and drunks usually give themselves away—their shoes are always too shoddy or some hopeless vinyl off-brand. They were.

His face was about sixty years weathered—bearded, but well-trimmed, and his jaw was caved in from teeth long forgotten. His hair was combed and his eyes were clear and upon the conveyor in front of him he placed a liter of RC Cola and a half gallon of buttermilk. He began counting out dimes, nickels and pennies with which to pay for them. Thinking of what it meant to be a drunk in the grocery store at 1:30 in the morning with a handful of change buying RC and buttermilk, my compassion got the better of my apathy; I turned and asked, "How you doing tonight?"

He responded with a soft smile that did not involve any parting of the lips, and confided, "Better. I'm glad I sobered up. I got too drunk."

"Yeah, it happens to all of us sometimes, I guess."

"Oh, you do that too, huh?" He stood real close, looking deep into my eyes in that way drunks have of becoming immediately intimate because the booze has stripped away their defenses and left them so vulnerable.

"Well, not lately," I told him. "But I did used to wind up that way, pretty regular." And that was true. While I haven't been old and drunk and lost, I have certainly been young and drunk and lost. Guys like him get to me. Especially when they're sober enough to show you the real live human thinking, feeling, being living inside of them.

"That's what I need to do," he said, "take some time to recover from it. I got too drunk. Besides, it costs so much; it takes all your money."

"And that's not all it takes," I said.

"I know. It's what it does to you inside." Here he put one hand on his stomach. "It's the way it makes you feel, that's what gets you."

"It does," I agreed with him, "it gets you." I was looking at that RC and buttermilk and thinking about the condition of his stomach and him hoping that little bit of change he had to spend might get his belly settled and give him a little peace without the booze for a while.

"I've been living like this for fifty years. Can you believe that, fifty years? I gotta make a change; gotta get myself turned around."

"You can do it," I told him. "I hang around a lot of folks like us who got turned around—some at my age and some at your age—it's never too late."

He liked that. His eyes lit up when I told him it's never too late. But my milk, flowers, gynecolotrimin, and M&Ms were bagged up and it was time for me to go. Here, my apathy, fear, lethargy, and the rest got the better of me.

I knew I should stick around until he paid for his beverages, and then share a bit of this fellow's life. But I started worrying about what might happen, and what responsibility I might incur for his well-being if I involved myself further. What if he has no place to sleep tonight, or needs something to eat? If I hang out with him for a while we might become friends. And if we become friends wouldn't I have to care whether he has food and shelter tonight? If he was my friend wouldn't I have to care enough to do something about it? I didn't feel up to taking the chance of being his friend. So I said "Good-bye."

As I started to walk off he said, "Goodbye, pray for me, would you? I need it."

"I will," I promised. And I muttered to myself, "I need it too."