

## What Became of You?

By Joe Antuono

Each morning the same jagged, middle aged man wandered in a daze on the corner of a busy four-way intersection. Long grey roots grew from the top of his head, with curls of natural orange resting half over his weathered face like a veil. The dirty clothes he wore were a few sizes too large for him, with his bulky army green jacket aiding in disguising the scrawny build withering beneath it. He stumbled around on the side of the road, exaggeratedly discussing his personal conundrums aloud with the blades of grass beneath the soles of his worn out and duct-taped boots. His melancholy eyes scanned the terrain for anything of possible value, itching at his dark scruffy cheeks. He searched for a long while and eventually found the butt of an old cigarette with dark red lipstick stains on the filter, some miniscule amount of tobacco left unsmoked inside.

The shaggy man pocketed his treasure as Nigel began to slow down and approach the traffic light, watching it turn from yellow to red. The man stumbled down off the curb and into the queue of cars lining up at the light with a heavy mask of sadness weighing down his distant gaze. Looking lost and confused, he weaved his way through the growing lanes of halted traffic, proceeding to ask any and every passenger some question they didn't quite care to make out through the rolled up glass of their car windows. Everyone ignored the man by peering into the endless abstractions of their illuminated phone screens.

As the traffic light turned green, the man clumsily made his way across several lanes, just as cars were beginning to accelerate forward again. He waved and smiled through various windshields. He allowed a car to pass in front of him, and then dove directly into the hood of a minivan behind it. The van slammed on its breaks and the man threw himself onto the street just as the car behind Nigel's laid on its horn. As Nigel began to press on the gas, a large red truck with

an American flag and pole attached to its flatbed changed lanes and sped through the yellow traffic light as it was turning red. It careened across the intersection safely, just as oncoming traffic was released once again, a Trump/Pence bumper sticker on the back window; a torn and faded flag flapping and unraveling in the wind.

Nigel turned his hazard lights on, pulled the E-break, and approached the situation, cutting across traffic. A tall slender woman with long black curly hair and a dark mole on her left cheek jumped out of the driver's side of the silver mini-van and began to shout in Spanish at the man, who was sprawled out in the road in front of her, rolling around, and clutching his hip. The homeless man held the back of his knotted mess of hair and shouted upwards, in between long groans, towards the woman, threatening to take her to court, and sue her for all she's worth.

The woman went back into her vehicle and grabbed her cellphone just as Nigel arrived. She spoke to him emphatically in Spanish but all Nigel could understand was her body language. While she was dialing a number on her phone, three children were screaming in the backseat. The man on the ground asked if Nigel knew her. Nigel said that he didn't, but watched the entire thing unfold from his car and watched him dive directly into the woman's van. The man cut his performance short and sprung to his feet, appearing quite offended.

"Are you calling me a fuckin' liar?" the man asked, twisting his face. Nigel held his breath as the smell of the homeless man's almost blinded him. He stepped up onto the curb, and waved a few yelling cars by. Nigel said that he drove this way often and watched him make this same attempt several times before he understood the nature of the game. The man looked over both his shoulders and chuckled. The stranger told him he should mind his own business, and the woman hung up her cellphone, watching them both carefully. Without the homeless man seeing, Nigel

motioned for her to get back into her minivan. The woman took off just before the man could turn around and get in her way again.

“Shit in my cereal! Look what you went and did now!” shouted the man, motioning towards the van with both his hands. The woman hung a right onto the main road and drove away.

“I don’t know you, mister, but you aren’t hurt, not physically anyways. And causing a scene like that writes a story about you. Didn’t you even notice she had three kids in the car with her? Pretty reckless, if you ask me. And for what?” Nigel paused for a moment to catch his breath, appearing to have a bad taste in his mouth, and said, “just because you’re hurting doesn’t give you the permission to hurt someone else. They didn’t deserve that.”

The man sharply looked him in the eye for the first time since their conversation began, “Well, you ain’t wrong about one thing, young fella,” he replied, stepping up from off of the curve, “you definitely do not know me.” The man huffed with contempt in his voice. Another car honked and swerved around Nigel’s idle car.

“Maybe we can try and fix that?” Nigel pursued after a sigh, ignoring the traffic, extending his hand to shake the strangers. “I’m Nigel.”

“Mack,” the rugged man said, leaving Nigel’s hand floating in the air.

“I’m no stranger to the fact that life can break you d-” Nigel trailed off, interrupted by watching Mack dig deep into his right nostril with the tip of his dirty index finger. “...can I get you a sandwich or something?” Nigel eventually offered. Mack relaxed the muscles in his face at mention of food, and hesitantly accepted.

When the light finally turned green again, they took a left onto the main road. Mack opened the glove box and shuffled through various papers, receipts, loose business cards, and an owner’s manual for the car itself.

“You like music?” Nigel asked, scanning through radio stations. Mack leaned over and grabbed the radio knob and dialed through various fragments of songs before landing on the chorus to Credence Clearwater Revival’s, “Down on The Corner.” He laughed out loud, knocking loose some phlegm in the back of his throat, and turned it up. He sang along, off-beat with the song, until it eventually ended and the station cut for a commercial break. Mack began to shout over the radio, until Nigel turned it down, and he readjusted the volume of his voice. Mack said that was a song he hummed a lot in his head as he panhandled for change, that he hadn’t heard the actual song itself in a real long time. Anything Neil Young reminded him of his younger days when he served in the armed forces. Nigel wondered about his G.I. Bill, but decided against asking. Instead told him about how he grew up watching his father work on his car while drinking cheap beer and listening to shit like CCR and ZZ Top. Mack nodded, half-listening, and continued to fiddle with the stereo. He readjusted the treble and bass volumes, searching for another familiar song.

Nigel asked what he wanted to eat. Mack said that anything would work. That when you’re living on the side of the road, preference is the first thing you let go of. Nigel asked him to name the first thing that came to mind. Popeye’s. It’s what he ate when he got back to the states. All of his friends that he enlisted with had either died in service, or lost touch somewhere along the way. For days after he got back he couldn’t think of eat anything. He couldn’t look in a mirror. Couldn’t get a job. He completely lost faith in himself. Weak from not eating, and with some odd amount of money left, he ordered a three-piece meal with mash potatoes and gravy, coleslaw, with a biscuit on the side, and dined by himself in a small booth by the window, alone. He said that for the next twenty minutes or so, everything was almost, *almost* okay.

After they ordered, they sat at a table, together in silence, eating two identical meals. Mack pleasantly chewed and nodded the entire time he chewed, smiling when they made eye contact.

After he ate everything on his tray, he finished what was left on Nigel's, and thanked him for seeing an actual human being on the side of the road, not just a fucking problem in everyone's precious way. He said it was disillusioning. Too many times it felt like he was completely invisible to everyone, and everything around him. That he had to get hit by a car just to get some sort of human decency. A reminder, for what it's worth, that he's real. That he's still alive. That he's still breathing.

Listening with an open heart, Nigel checked his watch after a pause. 12:42 pm. He slipped off the leather strap and extended it to Mack, who looked puzzled for a moment but shifted his expression to gratitude after understanding. When he asked Nigel what it was for, Nigel began by asking him firstly not to sell it, even though he knew he would. That they could meet back there at the same time, next week. Mack nodded, fiddled the watch onto his wrist with a rickety smile, and said that his real name was Amos.

Amos waved goodbye and turned away, tucking the long knotted mess of hair that was covering his face behind his big ears. He grabbed a handful of napkins and straws from the counter before walking out of the double glass doors of the restaurant, and into the blinding mid-day light of an almost empty parking lot. He trudged his way slowly down the sidewalk, continually checking the time.