

The Senior Citizen

“Alright, we’re going to take a left up here,” said my friend, David. “See that big gray building up there with the iron fence around it? We want to pull into the second entrance, on the far side of the building.”

“Got it,” I replied. I turned into the second entrance and the car did a little hop as we drove over a speed bump.

“What kind of place is this,” I asked? The building looked like the architect’s only instructions had been, “Make it generic.” Right down to the color, a half-dead shade of gray. Fifty feet beyond the entrance gate, the road widened to create a parking area, but only big enough to accommodate one row of vehicles. It was deserted.

“This is government housing for low-income senior citizens,” David replied. *That would explain the lack of cars in the parking lot, I thought. They must be extra low income.*

Halfway to the parking area, David said, “Stop right here.” I obliged, and he got out of the car, walked to the side of the building, and dropped down on one knee where I could see him say something through the screen of an open window. There was a short pause, after which a quick conversation took place. He stood up, turned, and started back to the car.

David had been my best friend, starting thirty years ago when we had both been young men and beginning careers as sea captains aboard commercial fishing boats. But during the last ten years or so, we had grown apart.

David was a junkie. He was a brilliant fisherman, but his heroin addiction had been slowly but insidiously taking command of his life during those last ten years. And now it had him.

I had tried every thing I could think of to help him find a way out, but all to no avail. I only realized the seriousness of his situation when recently he had said to me, “I’ve only got two things to look forward to: prison or suicide.”

He got back in the car and said, "Turn around and pull up in front of the entrance up there. Freddy will be out in a minute."

David had called me two days ago from a port city located three hours south of here, asking for my help. He needed money, enough to buy gas to get to the little town where I was living, and enough to buy a sufficient quantity of heroin to keep from getting sick. He wanted me to help him get into detox.

This morning we were on our way to the detox center, hoping upon hope that there would be a bed available when we got there. No reservations could be made; it was a first-come, first-served situation until all the beds were full.

David had spent the night with me in the little bachelor pad that I had built, and watching him get up that morning had been heart-breaking. His last fix from the previous afternoon had been metabolized, and he started the day puking into the commode. It was horrible to watch, but between spasms of retching, he said, "Shit man, this ain't nothing. This is just the beginning. Two days from now it'll be ugly."

When his gut was empty of its contents and only bile dripped from his mouth, he was rewarded with a short respite from his ordeal, and we left for Jacksonville.

We were entering the outskirts of the city when he said to me, "I need another favor. I can't show up like this. Could we stop on the way to get just enough shit so I can get well?"

It was a hard decision. I knew on the one hand that humbling himself to ask for help had to be very difficult, and he was dealing with serious problems of self-esteem. On the other hand, goddamn it, he had it coming and needed to suffer in order to give value to his decision to kick this crap.

But my compassion won out, and I agreed.

We had been waiting about five minutes when Freddy came out of the front door of the apartment building. I don't know what I expected, but it sure wasn't what I saw. Freddy was a black man whom I judged to be in his early seventies. He was of average height and weighed no more than a hundred pounds. And he was laid back.

He approached the car in a slow shuffle. He was skinny and old, but his gait was not an affliction of his condition; it had a rhythm that defined his character. He wasn't just shuffling down the sidewalk. He was oozing. It was obvious that this was the way he had traveled through life. No rush, just oozing along. He was cool, and I liked him instantly.

He opened the back door and began the slow process of folding himself into the small space in the rear of my compact car.

"Pete, this is Freddy," said David.

"Hey, Freddy," I said. "Nice to meet you."

"Wha's happ'nin'," he replied?

Freddy was a junkie, too. Had been for years, and he was David's connection. We were about to go score our dope in a black neighborhood where white folks are not welcome to do business.

The service that Freddy was about to perform for us was as far away as he ever got from collecting welfare; this was his little subsistence business. He was the intermediary between the white addicts and the black suppliers.

Freddy's situation was the same as David's at the moment. He wasn't worried about getting high; he just didn't want to be sick, and his reward this morning would keep that from happening for half a day. Freddy would receive one \$10 hit for his efforts.

"Make a right," said David.

I pulled out into traffic and turned right, and drove about a quarter mile when David said, "Another right, three blocks, and then a left."

I followed his directions, and scrutinized this area that was so alien to me. Suddenly my thoughts were interrupted when Freddy, whose upper body was half outside the rear window of the car, hollered as loudly as he could, "Hey, mutherfucker, you want a mutherfuckin' ass-kickin'?"

The black man he was hollering at looked like he could have been a professional wrestler, and could have easily whipped all three of us with one hand and never exerted himself.

"Please, not today, Freddy," he hollered back, and both men laughed vigorously.

The exchange relaxed me considerably.

“Stop at this corner,” David said about a block later.

Freddy got out of the back seat and closed the door without saying a word.

“Take a right and go three blocks,” said David.

I continued to follow David’s directions once again, and we traveled the circumference of a circle three or four blocks in diameter, which led us back to where we had let Freddy out. He was standing across the street, and when we stopped, he oozed over to the car, obviously carrying something in his right hand. In spite of our efforts to disguise what we were doing, it all looked very blatant to me, but it worked.

Freddy handed David two little aluminum foil packets about a half-inch square, and David handed one back to him as I drove off. I was able to find my way back to the main street without directions. My two passengers chatted as if nothing had happened.

We were approaching Freddy’s apartment building when he said; “Drop me off at the corner store.”

David pointed the store out to me, and I stopped in front. Freddy got out of the car, said, “Later,” and oozed on in.

“I need to go to a drug store,” said David. “There’s an Eckerd’s about a half a mile up ahead on the left.”

David exited the drug store carrying a plastic shopping bag, and climbed into the front seat.

“Man, I’ve got to get something to eat,” I said, as we pulled out into traffic. We had left my place earlier with only a cup of coffee for breakfast. “I’m going to pull into that McDonald’s up ahead. You want anything?”

“No thanks, he replied.”

By the time I had the car parked at McDonald’s, David had withdrawn a can of Coke and a small bottle of spring water from his shopping bag.

“You want any of this Coke,” he asked?

“No thanks.”

He popped the top on the Coke, cracked the front door of the car open, and poured the contents on the asphalt. He then tore the can in two pieces in such a manner that the bottom was separated from the remainder, leaving about a half-inch of the sides intact. Placing it up side down on his knee, it formed a small bowl. He cracked the top off the bottle of water, and poured a few drops into the little bowl. Next, he withdrew a syringe from the Eckerd's bag....

We arrived at the detox center to discover there were no beds available. They suggested we call every three hours until such time as space was available.

We got back into the car and prepared to drive back home. David tried hard to hide his disappointment, but was unsuccessful. I knew he was projecting what his life would be like for the next twenty-four hours.

"David," I said, "I think the smart thing for us to do is to make some preparations, here." I had made the shift, and was now thinking in terms of medication.

"I think we need to go back to see your Senior Citizen friend, and I will prescribe as I see fit."

"Thanks, man."

A bed became available early the next morning and we hit the road to Jacksonville. I stayed with David through his pre-admittance interview. He was still a little high from the fix that I had proscribed before we had left the house, but unless you knew the evidence was only available by looking at his pupils, you would never know it.

"When's the last time you used," the male nurse asked him?

"Yesterday morning," he answered.

It hit me like a roundhouse kick to the gut. This nurse was a professional, and he was looking David right in the eye. He knew he was being lied to. But I guess he was used to it. I sure as hell wasn't.

Ten days later, David was released, and I drove into Jacksonville to pick him up. My little two-room bachelor pad was small, but it was way bigger than

the boats we had fished together on, and I told him he was moving in until he found a job and got back on his feet.

Four weeks later, David started nodding out in front of the tube. And my power tools were starting to disappear.

I had done all I could for him.