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Screamin' Eagle

by

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I grew up during the Vietnam War but the timing of my birth allowed me to evade from military service. The war ended and the draft was terminated before I turned eighteen. By the time compulsory Selective Service registration was reinstated in 1978, the mandate applied to males born after January 1, 1960, and I was sixteen months beyond reach. Maybe it was the luck of my Irish grandfather.

Over the years I met Vietnam veterans of all flavors. Supporters and detractors, volunteers and draftees, enthusiasts and resisters. I heard their stories with the impartial ear of

an amateur historian observing the world more than taking part. Along the way I received a degree in American History from U.C. Berkeley and found a staff job on campus. It was convenient and a familiar safe net.

One day, I waited for the light at the corner of Oxford Street and Berkeley Way. A voice hailed me from behind.

"Hey, buddy, can you give me some help?" A white man in his forties rolled down the sidewalk towards me in a utilitarian wheelchair. He used his hands to both generate and slow his momentum over uneven terrain.

I assumed he would ask for money. Panhandling was as common as jaywalking in Berkeley and I had lived there long enough to become impassive toward pleas for monetary aid proffered at street level.

"Well, maybe." Even I heard the offensive hesitation in my voice. My skeptical view of the world often triumphed over any impulse toward sympathy because I knew that I could give away my last dime without making any appreciable difference. Before lines can become blurred they must first be drawn. But this guy was in a wheelchair and a handicap could make an altruistic difference even to me. "What do you need?"

He wore tired jeans and a black tee-shirt stretched over his sagging midsection. His beard was flecked with grey. Thick chest and arms spoke of youthful strength. Now his primary

exercise was spinning the wheels of his chariot which kept his arms in shape and grew callouses on his hands as the rest of his body eroded.

His sad eyes asked for help and he spoke in a low muttering tone through dry cracked lips. "I gotta catch a bus to the VA clinic and it stops a couple blocks away. Can you gimme a push?"

Midday sun raised beads of sweat on his uncapped head protected only by a thin veil of hair. I had time and it wasn't far.

"Sure thing." I stepped behind his chair and gripped the handles. "Which direction?"

He nodded down the block and twisted his wheels in opposite directions to turn the chair. "That way."

I provided modest propulsion and he kept his hands near the wheel rims like fleshy brake pads. We traveled one block and turned a corner to reach a spot that lacked any visible bus stop signage.

"This is where you get picked up?"

"Yeah, there's a shuttle stops here and goes to the VA." He took back control of his chair, wheeled, turned and maneuvered backwards into a rectangle of shade against a building. I assumed the nearest Veterans Administration clinic was somewhere in Oakland. During the 1960s, Oakland had been the site an epicenter for antiwar protests outside recruiting offices.

I had no idea how long he would wait for a shuttle but I had completed my chore and done my duty as a good citizen. "You're all set then," I said, as a prelude to departure.

He said thank you and stuck out a hand. When I shook it he held on longer than necessary.

"Can I ask you for some more help, friend?" He locked onto my eyes with a look of quiet desperation. "I'll tell you truth. I haven't eaten since yesterday. I'm broke. I'm sitting in diarrhea. I need twelve bucks for a room at the Y and my veterans check doesn't come until Thursday."

It was Tuesday.

I had already decided to give him some money. I could have ended the transaction with a quick and emotionless handoff of currency. But a question nagged me like a mosquito bite aching to be scratched. Given my physical exertion pushing him down the street, and my intention to give him a donation, I felt the boundaries of our relationship had become elastic in the last five minutes. Maybe I was impertinent, he didn't owe me any answer, and my handing over a few dollars was not dependent on how he responded or if he responded at all. The guy was the right age and I wanted to know if my suspicion was correct. And he hadn't been shy about asking me to push him two blocks or give him a few bucks.

"Did you serve in Vietnam?"

"Yeah," he mumbled, and looked away.

I sensed that it was a sore subject but my curiosity over common courtesy and I pressed for more. "Is that where you got hurt?"

He hesitated then looked at me and nodded. "That was a long time ago." He looked defeated and lost in bad memories as his eyes drifted away along with his voice. I wondered if he could smell the napalm and hear the gunfire, feel the thunder of helicopters, and wince at the sight of fallen comrades.

"What was your unit?" I grasped for a bond between us, an inexplicable connection where none existed, like trying to catch the wind. We were a few years apart in age but we were from different generations separated by a war that he'd fought in and I had only learned about from the safety of books and movies.

"Hundred and first."

I knew he was referring to the 101st Airborne Division, and without a pause, I said, "The Screamin' Eagles."

His head snapped up and he squinted at me. "You know about that stuff?"

I nodded. "I know some things." I knew the history of the 101st Airborne Division from D-Day to the Battle of the Bulge to Vietnam. This happened years before *Band of Brothers*, book and movie, educated the masses about those enthusiastic young men who volunteered for an elite fighting unit, sported mohawks

before it became a fad, and fought and died or lived, some of them damaged for life.

He repeated his request. "I could really use some help, twelve dollars if you can spare it so I can get a room at the YMCA. My VA check comes on Thursday and I promise I'll pay you back," he said with plaintive eyes. "I promise."

I found thirty-nine dollars in my wallet. I palmed to him and wondered if it would be an insult to add the two quarters from my pocket. "No need to pay me back, you've already paid enough."

He clutched the cash in a meaty hand. "Thank you, brother. I appreciate it." I heard sincerity in his voice.

For me, the Vietnam War had been black and white images on TV, words on paper. Injuries and deaths happened to other families, not mine. I knew that political, social, and ethical arguments raged on longer than the war itself and led no closer to resolution than the field operations and incendiary propaganda that fell during the conflict. For some veterans, it was an experience that defined their lives. Others wore their memories like tattoos they preferred to hide rather than explain.

I could have prompted a longer conversation about Vietnam and perhaps tapped into some of his dark memories. I knew that some vets preferred to shroud their recollections as a form of

self-defense and maybe he was one of them. He might have become suspicious over my intrusion. Conversation might have offered some therapeutic value, a chance for him to say things that he had not said before or could not say elsewhere. Or maybe not. "And I want to give you something else."

He looked up at me, perplexed and uncertain.

I stood up straight and summed up my thoughts and feelings in a few inadequate words. This man had gone to war, seen his buddies killed and wounded, and had come back with his body torn and broken. I could never understand that experience and perhaps I was trying to resolve something for myself, doing penance in a way for having been safe at home, unscathed.

"I know that was all a long time ago and you probably want to forget about it. But you can't because it's with you every day of your life. I've known guys who fought in that war. Most of them never want to talk about it, they just want to move on. And the ones who do talk about it tell me that I can never understand because I wasn't there."

He nodded and looked confused over why this stranger was bending his ear about Vietnam. The war that had been over for years and most people had stopped thinking about that national trauma in a way that this vet never could. The memory rolled with him down every street, held him down every time he hoisted himself out of the chair and onto a toilet.

I didn’t push the words out but we both knew I could not understand what he had experienced. I was too young and I had never served. He’d fought for real while I played with toy soldiers and watched movies. I had been safe and dry while he slogged through a dirty war until they carried him out with useless legs. And I intruded into his life with the unfeeling arrogance of someone who believed his own curiosity was more important than another person’s privacy.

Some part of me felt guilty for having been young and cocooned throughout the Vietnam era, safe from the war, protected from the social unrest, never having to voice an opinion or make a decision. I had glided through without a scratch while others suffered, some of them dead, others damaged for life. But my unexpected encounter with this chair-bound veteran gave me a connection to his generation.

I stood close enough to him that I could remain upright and extend my hand again. “You know I was too young for the draft so I never had to worry about the war. I didn’t even think about all that much at the time. And I can’t understand how it felt no matter how many books I read. I just don’t get it. But I know you served your country and you paid a price. And I expect no one ever said thank you for your service.”

He hesitated as if I had spoken in a foreign language. Then he gripped my hand, bowed his head, and cried. So did I.