

**BUMS**

Nowadays they call them homeless people, but when I was a kid they were called bums. As now, they were everywhere. I was around 12 when I first got to know one, at least well enough to talk to him. His name was Harry, but this was a long time ago so I might have his name wrong. In fact, most of the names in this story might be wrong. But that doesn't matter. Names aren't that important in this kind of story. I remember when a teacher was trying to teach me about names. In a story by Shakespeare, there was a line about a rose smelling as sweet even if it was called something else, if it had another name. It meant nothing to me at that time, but I understand it now.

Harry was a tall guy, over six foot, grayish black hair, white stubble beard and pretty skinny. I think he was around fifty years old. His clothing was worn and ragged. He was a drunk. I first saw him in a bowling alley that was a few blocks from my house.

I had seen a sign at the bowling alley looking for pin spotters. A pin spotter picked up the bowling pins that were knocked down by the bowling ball. Then, no one even dreamed of doing this automatically. My folks were always encouraging me to work at different jobs to help support our large family, and it was not unusual for me to have several jobs at the same time, such as delivering newspapers and groceries, or working in a bowling alley. The Second World War was on and labor was in short supply, so the bowling alleys would offer jobs to very young boys. I'm sure all kinds of laws were being broken, but "it was only for the duration", as they would say. I had no problem getting hired as I was an experienced pin spotter with a year of experience under my belt even at twelve.

The bowling alley was a noisy place. When the ball hit the pins, a loud crash would occur. When the balls came back to the bowlers, they banged into each other and made loud clicking sounds. People were always shouting when they made a good hit, or even when their ball went into the gutter. Everyone smoked and the air was thick with blue clouds of cigarette fog. The bars were busy dispensing all kinds of drinks, and the smell of stale beer permeated the walls and leather seats. As loud as it was in the front, you can imagine how noisy it was back in the pits, where we worked. This was my baptism into the adult world.

The work was dangerous. The pins would fly all over when they were hit by the ball, and a number of them had hit me. I lost a few finger nails when a pin hit my hand, and knocked it against one of the side railings. But for a 12 year old, the nails grew back in a short time so it was no big deal. It did hurt, but not enough to cry.

Pay was good, seven to ten cents a line; fifteen minutes work for a single bowler. When I started pin spotting, I would only work on one alley sitting on the railing over the pits, but as I grew and became more proficient, I could handle "doubles". Doubles were when you sat between two pits, one on each side of you, and covered two alleys. It was a busy job but you could make one to two dollars a day, and sometimes even get a tip. When you got a tip, the bowler would usually just slide a quarter down the alley, and most of the time, it made it all the way.

One day I saw Harry sleeping in one of the pits with his jaw wide open and

snoring. I figured that he was drunk. It was in the afternoon, and the alleys were very quiet with just a few people bowling. I made a joke about him getting hit by a bowling ball, but it was a bad joke and not well received by Jim, a young kid I had befriended.

When Harry wasn't sleeping one off, he was spotting pins, or sitting at the bar with a beer in front of him. Sometimes, he would be gone for several weeks and then he returned. When he was back, he lived at the bowling alley, night and day. I would ask Jim where Harry was when I saw that he wasn't around. He would just shrug his shoulders, with a comment like, don't know.

When it was slow, the barkeepers would give us a free glass of pop. I became very friendly with Jim, who was 15 years old and attended Lane Tech high school. Lane Tech was a legendary High School in Chicago and produced many great athletes and engineers. Phil Caveretta, a great hitter and first baseman for the Chicago Cubs, had gone to Lane Tech.

Jim was of medium height, with black curly hair, and was a rather serious person. He never joked or kidded around like most young boys. From my conversations with Jim, I figured that he had a pretty bad life, at least it seemed so to me. Yet, he was so good, so kind and wise beyond his 15 years. He was one of those people that demanded respect. He yelled at me for making the joke about Harry sleeping in the pit. He always was talking to Harry and asking questions about his kids. That was something I couldn't understand. How could a bum have kids? A wife? A home? It didn't make sense.

I was sitting at the bar with Jim drinking a pop on a day when business was slow, when I asked him how things were going. "Same old stuff," was the reply. "My dad was drunk again last night. I found him in a heap in the alley when I got home. I had to drag him upstairs into the apartment and into bed. My sisters saw him. It's a terrible thing for little girls to see their father that way."

"How often does he get drunk," I asked.

"Too often and it's getting worse. Most of the time, he just goes to bed after work, when he has had a few drinks, and the girls don't notice. But lately, he's been really drunk a couple times a week. If I'm not there, he just lays in the alley or on the back stairs until I come home. By that time, my sisters are asleep, so they don't usually see him. A few weeks ago, one of the neighbors called the police because he was blocking the alley and the cops took him to the station. He was in jail all night, and I had to pick him up the next day. Boy, was he mad."

"When he is sober do you talk to him about this."

"Oh sure. Sometimes he is upset and apologizes and promises not to drink. Then, I feel so sorry for him, and I know he's trying. He's my dad, and I do love him, but he always fails, and then I get mad. I don't know what to do. Since we don't have a mom, I'm afraid that the juvenile authorities are going to break up our family, and take my sisters away. I don't know what they would do with me. I am older but still underage."

Jim was also very friendly with other strange people outside of the world of the bowling alley. For example, there was this little crippled man who didn't have any legs. His name was Tony. You could see that he was a short guy with a slight build. He was dark with a convex-shaped face with a receding forehead and chin, and a rather large nose. Some of his front teeth were missing. He had that look of a heavy bearded man constantly needing a shave. He always wore a cap and a sweater or coat, even on hot July days. He sat on a small scooter-like square of wood that had four small squeaking wheels on the corners. His leg stubs stuck out in front, and his leg pants were folded over the ends. He never talked, just grunted. I would see him rolling up and down the alleys in many different neighborhoods, miles away from my house, as I delivered groceries and newspapers. I asked Jim how Tony lost his legs. He said he didn't know and he never had asked him.

Whenever I saw Tony, I would greet him with, "Hi Tony", and he would respond with a grunt, nothing more. He collected old cardboard boxes and newspapers, and he would be toting them in his arm or holding them over his stubby, stump legs. He propelled himself along the streets by pushing himself with his free hand, noisily gliding along, bumping over the cracks in the asphalt and concrete, morning and night.

I was the oldest in a big family. We were poor, but my dad worked hard to support us and rarely drank liquor. He was stern, but we knew he loved us. I helped as best I could with my little jobs. I just handed my earnings to my mother without question, and I knew that it helped.

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One Sunday when I was walking with my dad to church, I saw Tony gliding along the street. I loved to go to church with my father. We would go to an early Mass and when we got home, he would cook up chicken gizzards and livers for me before my brothers and sisters woke up. Then we would talk about the Cubs, and he would tell me about the great days when the Cubs were a good team. Now, I asked him about Tony.

“I see that little man all the time dad. He seems to be everywhere. He collects old cardboard and paper. I wonder what he does with the stuff.”

“Stay away from him, son. He is a bum. Stay away from him and all the other bums you run into. I don’t want you to talk to them, or get involved with anything they do. You could get hurt. “

This was a lead into a discussion with me about avoiding child molesters who would hang around public bathrooms looking for little boys to prey on.

“I feel sorry for him dad, he is alone and all I do is say hello. Besides, one of my good friends knows him pretty well.”

“You heard me. Stay away from him and all other bums.” So he was then classified as a bum, and I avoided speaking to Tony.

On occasion, I saw boys taunting him, making fun of him, and scattering his paper collection. I just hurried by, keeping out of the way, remembering my father’s

instructions. I know that Jim would not have avoided any confrontation. He would jump in, stop the taunting, and help salvage his collection.

Once, I happened upon a large fire a mile or so away from my house. I heard the fire engines, and saw the roaring flames as I ran toward the smoke. It was off of an alley, and hoses and firemen were all over the place. It was fun to see the water squirting from the loosely connected hoses and the firemen running around. A big fire was a great thing to see for a young boy. All the flames and smoke were coming from a number of tarpaper shacks on the edge of the alley. The fireman had ripped open the roofs of the neatly formed shacks to vent the flames, and had exposed large quantities of, guess what?... Neatly tied bundles of newspapers and flattened cardboard boxes. These were being consumed by the fire, and soon were reduced to ash. I looked around and saw Jim standing next to the little bum who was sitting on his scooter. Jim was talking to him but the little guy wasn't listening. He was laughing, just laughing loudly with a big smile on his face, showing his missing teeth as he stared at his burning treasure.

I waved and said, "Hi", to Jim, and he moved toward me, leaving the laughing Tony, who was now pointing toward the burning shacks.

"Tony is acting crazy. He has worked so hard collecting all this stuff. He was waiting to sell it when the price was right. Now it is all gone."

Apparently the price wasn't right at that time.

A few days later, I met Harry as I walked into the bowling alley. "Hi Harry," I greeted him in spite of my dad's warning.

Harry smiled, exposing his brown teeth and said, "Hi sonny, how are you today." He seemed to be sober. He wanted to talk, and started asking me about school and other stuff. I was getting nervous as I thought about my father's warning. I cut off the conversation, and walked over to the boss to tell him I was ready to work. . Then the alleys got busy, and I went to work in one of the pits. Later, while working, I saw Harry stumble along the back rails behind me, heading for the far empty lanes, and watched him fall into one of the empty pits. He was moaning as he came by my lane, but that was not unusual when he was drunk. After I finished up, I walked to the front of the lounge and ran into, a very upset Jim. Jim told me that he gave Harry a dime to call his daughter who lived in a nearby suburb.

Jim said, "Harry called his daughter, and she said that his son was killed in the fighting around the German border. Why the hell did I give him that dime?" Jim kept saying, "God damn dime."

I never saw Harry again. He just disappeared . Then a few weeks later, Jim told me he was going to join the Merchant Marines. He said that they would take you if you were 16 which he would be in a few days.

“All you have to do is bring in your birth certificate. I’m quitting school and getting out of this mess. My dad is drinking again, and my sisters are now with my aunt, so I don’t have to worry about them.”

Jim then said that he was sure that they were going to get evicted from the flat they were living in and his dad was going to end up on skid row. This was the best thing for him to do. If he stayed, he would end up in an orphanage.

I argued with him. I told him he had to finish school; he had to get an education. But his mind was made up. He had taken all that he could take. After that, I never saw him again. I often wondered if he was wounded or killed in the war on some merchant ship, or after he got out of service, just ended up as a bum.

Soon after this, I quit the bowling alley and started caddying. It was summer now, and I was dealing with very rich people at a fancy country club. Big tips in this job. The golfers wore a lot, smoked , and drank just as the bowlers had.

At the end of that summer, I happened upon an accident at the intersection of the two biggest streets in my neighborhood. A police car had stopped all traffic, and a large group of people were crowded in the center of the street. A red and yellow trolley car was stopped, and a lot of automobiles were jammed together. I walked over and saw little Tony laying on the pavement. He had been hit by something, apparently while scurrying across the intersection. His eyes were bulging, and blood was coming out of his

ears. His scooter was totally smashed and covered with blood. I bent over him and said "Hi Tony." He stared for a moment, and for the first time ever, he smiled at me. One of the cops then asked me if I knew him. I told him that his name was Tony. He asked for a full name and where he lived. I told him where the fire had been and that I didn't know his last name. It didn't look good as they put his shaking, little body into the police car. One of the cops then picked up the pieces of wood from the smashed scooter, and threw them on the side of the street in the gutter. Then they drove away with lights flashing. I didn't know what to do. If Jim was there, I knew he would have gone with Tony to the hospital. He would have taken care of him if he lived, or buried him if he died. He just was that kind of guy. I guess that I wasn't. I just stood on the corner, and watched the police car disappear. I never found out what happened to Tony, and as with Jim and Harry, I never saw him again.

Many years later, I was approached for a handout by a bum who said he was a sailor on a merchant ship in the Great Lakes. He said he was out of work, and was broke and hungry. I couldn't help thinking of Jim giving the dime to Harry, as I gave the guy money, which I'm sure he spent on booze.