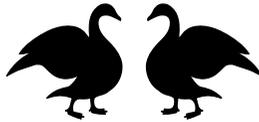


SMALL CHANGE



Just beyond Wilson's reach, life pulsed, throbbed, carried on. Throngs of people ripped off huge chunks of air, taking extra portions home as though entitled. *Not fair*, he thought (as he usually did ) while his lungs inexorably advanced toward EMPTY. But this morning, as though emerging from a prolonged stupor, Wilson had awakened with a long-lost sense of possibility. Perhaps his life could be more than medical confinement to his Upper East Side penthouse apartment. The one block crosstown walk to Madison Avenue without the port-a-pack oxygen tank and the green plastic tube that made his breath industrial would be a fitting assessment of his remaining powers.

Proud Wilson inched his way down the street. To the casual observer, he might have seemed an unremarkable succession of jerky stills—a tall stick figure casually pausing in front of each store as though window-shopping. To anyone who knew Wilson's medical condition, his effort would have appeared as monumental as climbing Everest.

At the corner of Madison and 71st St, his legs buckled. Perching on a convenient hydrant, he threw back his head and gasped for air. A fleecy white cloud passed overhead. Wilson imagined its cool softness gliding down his throat. He ran his tongue over his lips and tasted medication and phlegm.

"A fiver to soothe your conscience," said a disheveled man, rapidly approaching with hand extended. He was wearing a heavily stained burgundy parka; his bare feet were as black as Wilson's own charred lungs. Wilson said nothing.

"Deaf, are we?" the beggar prodded, his chest only inches from Wilson's.

Wilson grabbed a utility pole to pull himself erect, but his shortness of

breath reduced his once-customary stance of intimidation to yesterday's canceled truth. It didn't help that his custom-tailored overcoat and suit pants looked as though they had been cut for a man of much larger stature, perhaps even recycled from a thrift shop. "I'm fresh out of change," Wilson wheezed without any hint of apology.

"Then keep moving."

Wilson continued to ignore the man. Where was it written that he had to respond? He was beyond scorekeepers and judgment—it was enough that he could remain standing, even if it meant hanging on to a utility pole for once-dear life.

"This is my corner," the man insisted. He pointed to a shopping cart stuffed with a bedroll, crushed pop cans, and bits of personal debris. "I've got my steadies. You start cutting in, it's big trouble."

Wilson's mind was unprepared for daily street life. It had wandered ahead to fondle cherished memories of his once-favorite tobacco shop four blocks down on Madison. There would be row upon row of the best hand-rolled cigars flanked by foreign cigarettes with their whiff of beaded curtains and whispered intrigue. So what if his lung doctors were right in saying that the next puff will be his last? Their being right implied a future, another idle threat that didn't mean squat in the scanty here and now.

Back at the apartment he had bank books, check books, a handful of brokerage accounts—twenty years of top floor Wall Street forged into a huge number. Normally Wilson would have been thrilled by the thought of all that cool money multiplying on its own, great mushrooms of dividends sprouting in darkened vaults. But in his hurry to slip out while nurse Rizzetti fretted in the crapper, he had forgotten his wallet. No small change. Not a dime. His pockets were as empty as his prospects for a smoke; making it to his unlimited-credit tobacco shop was pure pipe dream.

"Don't even think it, hot shot," the man said. "Spot a weakness, jump right in. You figure this corner's prime property, me all beat-up and disgusting, you looking like legitimate illness that could happen to anyone. Well, I'm not having it. Thief," he shouted, pointing at Wilson. Pedestrians ignored them both, passing with eyes averted. Both men could have been invisible.

Just as suddenly, the man became quiet, pensive. "Need to brush up on my eye contact," he observed, talking to Wilson as if they were once on the same team. "But people are too rushed. No time for indirection and subtlety. Everyone wants the punch line, no one wants the story."

Wilson tried to conjure up the joy of rich Havana smoke filling his lungs.

“Give them the hint of a path narrowly avoided. Appeal to their fear of failure. But you know that already. You’ve got hustle written all over you. Failed hustle, like the backside of bad times—like maybe stocks and bonds. I know you,” the man sneered, a roar of derision icing up the sliver of airspace separating them. He felt around in his dirt-caked pants and pulled out a pouch of tobacco and a slim packet of papers. Wilson watched as the man’s deeply yellowed fingers folded the paper and his aged-meat tongue sealed the cigarette. The pleasure was so obvious that Wilson’s already primed mind juggled revulsion and desire.

Wilson calculated. At an hour per block he could be back in his apartment by lunchtime. Maybe he could bribe nurse Rizzetti into breaking strict doctor’s orders. Forget that. Rizzetti wasn’t even a long shot. She wore a bright silver cross, a starched nursing cap, and a weary look of permanent indifference. She was the seventh this year, the previous six leaving after citing personal grievances with Wilson. Intolerable, insufferable, insensitive, demanding—the same list of accusations that had peppered his divorce papers and so many behind-his-back conversations at work. Wilson finally accepted the seriousness of the complaints when the private nursing registry threatened that the next nurse would be overtly hostile in broken English.

Nevertheless, Wilson retained a kernel of optimism. Each night, against his better judgment, he prayed that Rizzetti would come to her senses. Perhaps he could seduce the woman into a post-coital Garcia Vega. He still had all the moves, but the thought of the effort made him cough. Glumly he conceded that Rizzetti was beyond reach. His inner tough-guy voice summarized his present state—*Beggars can’t be choosers*. He broke down. “You got one for me?” he begged the beggar.

“Fresh out, mon frère.” The man gave Wilson the same insincere mocking shrug that Wilson had himself perfected during his meteoric rise to wealth. “A little earlier, I asked you if you could spare some change. But no, you flash me the cashmere empty pocket and the blank stare.” The man stopped, planted his feet, lit his cigarette, and inhaled deeply. He slowly exhaled, the smoke engulfing him like an excess of riches. Then, with the grace of a gymnast, his dirt-encrusted feet nimbly advancing and retreating in a complicated urban dance step, he turned and accosted a young tourist couple pretending not to notice him. They stuttered, exchanged an embarrassed glance, their eyes blaming each other for being fresh out of excuses. The beggar pocketed two dollars. He turned back to Wilson and blew a small cloud of smoke into his face.

“A word to the wise. Don’t be so obvious. You’ve got envy pasted all over you, like cold shadows. Humility, my man. Humble pie gets the crayfish pie, the filé gumbo. But not on my corner. So, au revoir and see you later.”

*Why me?* Wilson fumed. The bum working the crowd was ten, maybe fifteen years older than Wilson, smoked unfiltered without even taking the cigarette from his mouth. Yet he was light on his feet and probably had the lungs of a marathon runner. Wilson had mainly smoked at work, had planned to stop once he was out of the pressure cooker life. But the kids grew up, the wife moved on, the nurses moved in.

The beggar was now confronting a stooped, white-haired woman pushing her grocery cart. She was shaking her head even as she opened her purse. The man bowed solemnly, his palms together in a position of prayer.

Contemplating fairness was no match for pure desire. Wilson was frantic. The man’s cigarette was nearly gone—only the butt hung from his mouth, punctuating his patter and underscoring the gulf that separated the two men. Without thinking, Wilson lunged forward and tried to snatch it from the beggar’s mouth. But the man stepped back to take a dollar from a young woman wearing an *I Love Omaha* t-shirt. Wilson lost his balance and fell. He grabbed the beggar’s pant leg but was too weak to hold on. He landed face first on the concrete. There was a shattering of bone followed by blackness.

In the distance he could hear the beggar saying, “Step back. He’ll be okay once he has enough money to renew his medications.” Wilson looked up to see several onlookers reach into their pockets for loose change; several others opened their wallets and produced hard currency. After taking up a collection, the man reached down and ceremoniously offered Wilson his hand. A single powerful yank and Wilson was back on his feet, resuming his position hanging onto the utility pole.

The beggar waited until the crowd had thinned out and then said with a tone of admiration, “You’re going to have a real beauty of a shiner.” He pulled out his tobacco pouch, rolled a fresh cigarette and offered it to Wilson. “Go on. It’s the least I can do.”

While Wilson lit up, the man counted his money and laughed to himself. “I saw a circus act once. The clown couldn’t get a laugh until he slipped and fell off the high wire. Then everyone went hysterical. Made the clown’s career.”

Wilson inhaled deeply, the sound of his parchment lungs drowning out the man’s soliloquy. The smoke hurt better than most sins. His cheek throbbed; already a lump was forming. But it was a small tax on a big-ticket pleasure. It’d been years since he’d smoked a non-filtered. The broken-glass, abrasive quality

brought back memories of a time before oxygen and inhalers, a time when courage was in the million-dollar split-second decisions, not the ability to tolerate a bronchoscope.

“So, you want in? Say 25 percent?”

Wilson shrugged; he hadn't been listening.

“You don't have to land directly on your face. A simple swoon will suffice. It's the visual of a man's fall from grace that is so irresistible. We could be partners; that is, me senior partner, you junior partner. You collapse and I collect.”

Before Wilson could fully understand what the man was saying, he again felt himself falling. This time the sky came with him, a giant nightfall right in the middle of a sunny afternoon. He wasn't sure he had the energy to get up again. Instead he lay on his back, trying to gather his thoughts. Another crowd quickly formed, just as the man had predicted. “Is he alright?” someone asked. “Should we call 911?” asked another.

“No need,” the beggar said, beginning his pitch. “He'll be okay once he's able to buy his medications.” He held out his hands to receive the crowd's blessings—coins and bills and subway tokens. Then he again tried to help Wilson to his feet. But now Wilson was dead weight, rag-doll limp. The beggar held out both arms like a puppet-master, his fingers working the air as if he could pull the strings that would make Wilson rise again.

Wilson wasn't interested. As though the blow to his head had sparked an internal clarity of vision, Wilson saw the sordid truth of his shabby existence. He had thought anticipation was respect and admiration. The various audiences that had filled up the stadium of his life had paid the top dollar of *yes, sir* in order to be present, to be witnesses. All eyes had been on him in order not to miss that delicious moment of his fall.

The cigarette had fallen from his lips in the same way that he had fallen from the high wire, from good health, from all the blessings he'd never counted, the blessings that didn't grow in darkened vaults and numbered accounts. Strangely, the truth felt good, like a pratfall properly executed. He settled into his fallen position as though it had always been the unstated goal of his life. He watched as the stream of passing onlookers paid tribute—each offering a small tithe not to be him. The sky rained small change and pure gratitude.

But good fortune seldom retains its luster. The beggar was irate as though the money were tainted, as though he had been trumped by this fallen nobody. “Get up,” he shouted. “Enough is enough. This is my corner. You can't do this to me. I was plenty profitable before you started in with this holier-than-thou act.”

He reached down and shook Wilson's shoulders. No response. Wilson huddled deep within his new-found wisdom. Suddenly the beggar pulled Wilson's coat over his face. "Move on," he was saying to the crowd. "Stop staring, and show some respect for the dead."

Dead? To his surprise, within his tented darkness, Wilson felt light, buoyant, without constraints. Nothing was required of him. Curiously, his very inertness energized him, as if being pronounced dead gave him a new lease on life. His stale breath against the coat reflected riches, not plastic tubing.

Time expanded. Wilson was happy within his cashmere cocoon, but the sirens were getting louder. Someone lifted the coat from his face. Wilson looked up. The beggar was sitting on a hydrant, watching as a paramedic began administering oxygen. "I thought he was dead," he said to one paramedic. "Besides, resuscitation isn't my strong suit," he added, now addressing no one.

Within minutes, Wilson's breath returned and the paramedics were able to help him to his feet. The gathering crowd cheered and applauded. For a moment, Wilson was surprised. Then he reminded himself—the applause wasn't for him; it was for the paramedics. From now on he would be the vehicle for the praise of others. Good going, paramedics; good job, Nurse Rizzetti; nice tracheotomy, Dr. Jones.

It is the rare man who finds purpose in sickness, personal value in decrepitude. But if asked, Wilson would have sworn that, at that moment, he felt as though he had finally found his lot in life—his diseased body was the finest opportunity that money couldn't buy. For once, others would be truly grateful to him, appreciative of him—for their not being him. There would be no hidden agendas of envy or resentment. No *schadenfreude* and cloakroom snickering. The sincerity of their gratitude would be beyond question.

And at the same time, for those he had thwarted, cheated or derailed, he would become the perfect vessel for their accumulated anger and hatred. He would be living proof of *what goes around comes around*. His public display of sickness and decay would please the most bitter of his enemies—truly bad karma would be far more satisfying to watch than any humiliating but never-fully-believable apology. What a lucky man he was. His inexorable and unpreventable decline had been transformed from a burden to a blessing.

Wilson smiled at the beggar as the paramedics helped him into the back of the ambulance. The beggar seemed puzzled. At first he scowled, then made an exaggerated gesture of offering him the half-smoked cigarette dangling from his lips. "See you tomorrow? Same time, same station?" But Wilson, intent upon ignoring the sight of the beggar's lit cigarette, turned his attention to the others in

the crowd. He searched their faces and tried to imagine how he appeared to them. At first he felt the old reflexive shudder of *this isn't how I really am*. His lips prepared for a salvo of explanations. But Wilson now knew better. Excuses were exactly what they didn't want to hear.

The paramedics closed the doors. He sat at the rear of the ambulance, head down, arms outstretched, gripping the metal handlebars framing the rear windows. Through the windows, Wilson saw the gathered faces, including the beggar's, awaiting a final word before they passed judgment. Slowly, quite winded and yet as though he had all the time in the world, Wilson bowed his head and mouthed, "Thanks." His voice wasn't audible through the closed door, but the message was clear. The ambulance pulled away at the very moment that Wilson saw that at last, in their eyes, he was perfect.