

**A BUM'S TALE**  
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**First Place, Short Story**

It was 34 degrees in L.A., small potatoes to an Alaskan sled runner, nippy for me with the heat on full blast. A quick wind hustled trash off streets, across windshields, and punched morning pedestrians deep into jackets not built for the job.

It was bumper-to-bumper downtown to the ocean and there I was, smack in the middle of the worst of it - slamming on the brakes every five seconds, shoving past idiots who blocked my way, yelling at jerks that tried to get ahead of me. You know the routine

I was in a bad part of town. The street was a hazard zone and I made sure the doors were locked. Sidewalks vanished. Sidelined chunks of bulldozed concrete took over and waited like knife-aiming muggers for the next drunk. Pitted-brick glass-less shells, once houses, waited for blasting. Sickly weeds, clumped together in bare dirt, sucked light from a smog-beary, jaundiced sun and waited to starve. "Ugly" was an understatement. Time had squeezed the neighborhood dry, wrung it out like old laundry until nothing was left but blocks of anonymous gray shapes trapped under thick, sour-yellow, winter morning air.

The old bum was as gray as the street, jaundiced as the sun, invisible like the brick hovels and pale weeds, and no more interesting or inviting. The best you could say was that he didn't fall over. He wore a sad-sack jacket, Salvation Army issue, that split its rotten seams across his shoulders and fell in beer-belly folds around his middle. If you took a housepainter's brush and slapped ten years of charity dinners onto a threadbare plaid blanket, you'd have a pretty good idea of that jacket. Rags flopped around his ankles. He didn't have any shoes on.

It snagged the edge of my mind and stuck: the old guy wasn't wearing any shoes. But if you're a bum used to a tramp's life, walking in sock-rags on cold concrete might be okay, even if it's 34 degrees. He was so far gone he probably thought he was wearing spats at the Oscars. He was only on his feet through an accident of momentum. He looked dishonest - and pickled - like he spent his nights in a back-alley dumpster. If he ever had any shoes, they were stolen during a booze stupor under a park bench. You know those winos that fall across your path, lie there like stumps and make you step over them? The ones who hang onto bottle-shaped brown bags like a kid with a teddy bear? This bum made those bums look good.

I thought about giving the old derelict a couple of bucks, but I knew what he'd do with it. Anyway, I didn't want to roll down the window and, besides, he was disgusting. His eyes were dazed; his features soft as slush. Did he even know his shoes were gone?

Wind gusts shuffled newspapers off the streets, across cars, and down to the bulldozed chunks of sidewalk. An entire section landed in pieces near the bum. Windy-day garbage. What'd he care? Street trash, hungry weeds, dirty sun. What'd I care? I waited for him to hurry and kick the papers aside and go about his business so I could turn my attention to something important-like cracking my knuckles, one by one, nice and slow.

The old bum's sock-foot touched a piece of newspaper. He looked down - not surprised, annoyed or curious - focused, like a drunk homing in on a street-level bottle of vino from a tall roof. I could hear him creak when he leaned over to pick up the paper. Did he think it was a big label?

He held the sheet in his hands, shook it and folded it. He moved several inches to the right, zeroed in on another piece, bent over, picked it up and gave it a shake. He folded the second one into the first one and slid both of them under his arm.

Interesting. He had big plans, this old guy. Would he wrap the paper around the sock-rags? Pack it inside the jacket? Use it for a pillow? Maybe a blanket? That's what I'd do if I didn't have the price of yesterday's newspaper and also happened to be a bum.

He moved half-dead, inches at a time, down to the gutter, back to the sidewalk, into the street. Pick up, shake, fold. I was guessing it was the most excitement the old bum had since his last visit to a dumpster.

He collected the last sheet and put it with the others, folded the papers once, twice, three times, and tucked the section under his arm. He shuffled to the end of the sidewalk and stopped, pulled the newspaper out from under his arm, sharpened the crease to a knife-edge and smoothed the top with his hand. Then the old bum leaned over and carefully placed the folded newspaper at the bottom of a battered trashcan. He straightened up, stepped off the curb, and went on his way.

