

## Gray

By David Robinson

“Ya got any shange, man? Nickels, dimes, o’ quarters? Jus’ a li’l bit to help me out?”

Every day it’s the same shit—same questions, same time, same street corner. Sometimes I give him some change. If he catches me in the right mood, I might even give him a one dollar bill. But most days I just lock my car doors, turn the radio up loud, and don’t pay any attention to him.

Most people would call him black. With his shaggy beard and the way dust collects on him, I’d say he’s more of a gray color than anything else. I’m not sure if he knows who I am by now, but I’ve been living here for a few months. Every weekday I see him on the corner of Pratt and MLK, around 9 a.m. when I’m driving to school. Sometimes I think he recognizes me. He’ll grin, exposing his crooked, yellow teeth, and look at my Jeep, his eyes lighting up like he’s seen a friend. Other times, he just bangs on my window while he looks down the street at the other cars. Maybe he asks me for money everyday because I’m white, which most people aren’t around here. He’s probably just really stoned.

I want to turn the radio up, but it wasn’t working when I started the car this morning. Neither was the heat. I sigh, clouding my view of him until he becomes a total blur, then quickly returns to the form tapping at my window. The light has been red for almost three minutes now. Maybe I can wait him out.

“Hey, ya got any shange, man? Nickels, dimes, o’ quarters? C’mon man, is cold out here, jus a lil’ bit to help me out?”

Still red. I grab two quarters and a nickel from inside my pocket and push the button for the window to go down, but it only opens a crack, then stops.

“Here you go, man,” I say, pushing the coins out so that they fall into his hands cupped around my door.

“God bless,” he says with a bow of the head and moves on to the car behind me. He always says that. God fuckin’ bless. I would give him money every time I saw him if I knew he wasn’t going to say that. I don’t believe in God and I don’t care if he does. What the hell am I supposed to say to him when he says something like that? Next time, I’m gonna look him straight in the face and say, “I didn’t sneeze,” and then I’m gonna drive off whether the light is green or not.

The light’s green now. Yup, definitely green. Only one shade of green on a traffic light. My car doesn’t seem to care. I push my foot down on the gas all the way to the floor, and

nothing. Not even a slight jerk. Honking progressively comes at me until the entire lane of traffic behind me is beeping their horn. I grab at the key with my hand, which is covered by the sleeve of my jacket, and turn off the ignition.

“Fuck you, mothafucka,” yells a man in an old beige Cadillac as he passes me on the right. I bite my lips from the cold.

I turn the key again and the engine doesn't respond, so I push the flashers button, but that doesn't do anything either. That homeless guy did something to my car. The wind slaps me in the face as I open the door. The homeless man is stumbling slowly down the street, oblivious to all the commotion. His pace is slow and lifeless, like clockwork.

“Hey,” I shout, but he doesn't respond. “Hey, what the hell did you do to my car?”

He turns and looks at me, eyes wide open with no expression on his face. He starts the same methodical walk towards me. I can feel the gel in my hair stiffen. There's nothing worse than a wet head of hair on a cold day.

“I said what the hell did you do to my car?”

“Say wha?”

His voice is low and raspy.

“What did you do to my car?”

He lazily turns his head and stares at my car, his eyebrows cringing as if he is trying to remember just how it was that he wrecked my three year old Jeep Grand Cherokee. The wind picks up a little bit, blowing at the back of my neck. It must be 25 degrees outside today. He squints at me and turns his head slightly.

“I just gave you some change,” I say, “Two quarters and a nickel. You had your hands on my car and now it doesn't work. What did you do to my car?”

His upper lip curls and he scuffs at me. An ivory white Lexus pulls up on the right of my car, and the homeless man starts stumbling towards it, shouting about nickels, dimes, and quarters.

I go back into the car to give the ignition another shot but it won't even try to turn over. I'm going to miss my Introduction to Political Science class. I've skipped the class before and I'm probably going to fail whether I show up today or not, but it still pisses me off. Now I have to get the damn car towed. I pull the AAA card out of my wallet and scan it for the number to call. My father gave it to me when I turned sixteen and this is the first time I've used it. There's a 1-800 number on it and I dial it on my cell phone. My teeth are chattering as I tell the company where my car is at.

“How long’s it gonna be?” I ask, but before I can get an answer, the cell phone loses its signal.

Now I have to wait. I try and get comfortable, but the leather is freezing against my back. It’s 9:15, my class starts in fifteen minutes. I hate waking up this early just to take a class that the school requires. I close my eyes and try to picture Maui on my spring vacation last year. As I start to fool myself into believing that it’s actually getting warmer, there is a tapping at my window.

“Ya got any shange, man? Nickels, dimes, o’ quart-“

“Are you fucking serious?” I say. He looks at me for a moment, his eyes wide open, mouth drooped to the side. He squints hard.

“C’mon man, is cold out here, jus a lil bit to help me out?”

I fumble through my pockets and grab the rest of what I have, forty-seven cents, and get out of the car. The wind slaps my face again, but harder like the back of a hand.

“Where can I get some of the shit you’re smoking?” I ask as I hand him the change. His hands are covered in a grayish soot. It looks like he’s been washing them in gravel.

“God bless,” he says.

God fuckin’ bless. I take out a cigarette and shield it from the wind with my jacket while I light it. The first few drags of the day are the best—total ecstasy. After a couple drags though, I can’t think about anything except how painfully cold my hand is. As I switch hands on the cigarette, I notice that he’s still standing there next to me. He’s looking right at me—eyes wide open and mouth to the side.

“Shit, man,” I say, lighting another cigarette in my mouth and handing it to him. He holds the cigarette in his hand for a moment, then takes a long, slow drag from the side of his lips and leaves it resting there. I take a couple more drags, looking at him; he’s staring right back. It makes me feel uncomfortable.

“Good thing my father gave me this AAA card,” I say, “Or I’d be shit out of luck.” He continues to stare blankly at me. “Yes siree, shit-out-of-luck.

“Don’t tell my father I said that though. I haven’t even spoken to the asshole for six months, let alone thanked him for anything.” I have this strange feeling that this guy isn’t going to tell my father.

“Fuck, I don’t need him. What did he get me that was so great? He got me this car and look where that got me? Shit, that’s gonna set me back a pretty penny. Radio doesn’t work, neither does the heat or the fucking windows, and the goddamn engine doesn’t even work. That’s

a shitload of stuff to happen to one car. Don't know how the hell I'm gonna come up with the money for that. I'll probably just have to sell the damn car. You wanna buy a jeep?"

"Altanata's bussed," he mumbles out of the side of his mouth, cigarette still hanging at the end of his lips.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Altanata...is bussed," he says. Now I'm the one staring blankly at the other, clueless to what he's talking about. A few cars have assembled a line, waiting for the light to turn green. He starts a slow walk towards a silver Mercedes-Benz, which sparkles despite a gray sky. The man inside it has a nice tan—hard to come by in Baltimore during the winter. He rolls down his window and hands the homeless man a bill without taking his eyes off the traffic light. The other cars are old and rusted, like lumps of coal, beat up and expressionless. The light goes green and they all file down the road in order. The shiny Mercedes speeds off, dodging between coal in traffic.

The wetness in my eyes feels like tears. My lips are dry and when I wince, I feel them cracking. It hurts so bad in my fingers that I don't even bother to bend them. A feeling of numbness in my toes has crept all the way up to my spine.

The homeless man's face shows no sign of feeling the cold. His eyes, wide open, are like big white globes with a single stormy cloud in the middle of each of them. Little islands of thin gray hair cover his cheeks and chin. Gray like the sky. Like the cars and the gravel. He walks towards me like a vengeful mummy, with sluggish steps that drag his tiny frame. The yellow flashing lights of the tow truck are absorbed in his utter blankness.

"Damn that was fast," I say.

The man in the tow truck says very little. He latches my Jeep onto the back with quick precision. I tell him to take it to the nearest gas station with an auto shop and he says I can ride there with him.

The homeless man is standing in front of a few cars at the traffic light. The cars and the people inside them all look very plain. He stands there, not looking at anything, saying nothing to anyone. They echo his mute blindness. I walk over to him and place two one dollar bills in his hand. He grins slightly, the cigarette moving upwards with his lips.

"God bless," he says.

I look into his white-globe eyes for a moment, lost in the drab coloring of their stormy centers, and I smile. The light is still red when I get into the truck. I put my hands over the vents, which are blasting heat.

"So what's a matter with yer Jeep," asks the man. "Engine won't start?"

“Yup,” I say. “Heat and radio don’t work either. Same with the windows.”

“Oh,” he says and pauses for a moment. “Sounds like the alternator’s busted.”

The light turns green.