Street Smart

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Victor was having a productive day. He had sat in the park and watched the children on the swingsets. He had tossed a few crumbs to some greedy pigeons, and a clown had given him a flamingo-shaped balloon. In between all the fun, he'd managed to work $4.25 off passersby. That was a burger and a cup of coffee at Sal's Diner on 31st Maybe Grace, his favorite waitress, could swing him some free home fries when Sal wasn't looking. Victor hadn't needed the guilt-trip scam today; people had been fairly generous. That was something he saved for emergency situations, usually in the winter when it was so cold his fingers turned blue. He'd had a couple of close calls with the freezing temperatures, but the Salvation Army came along at just the right time and gave him some warm soap, or a blanket. And when times got really tough, he would seek out a shelter.*

Cover Page Footnote

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Victor was having a productive day. He had sat in the park and watched the children on the swingsets. He had tossed a few crumbs to some greedy pigeons, and a clown had given him a flamingo-shaped balloon. In between all the fun, he'd managed to work $4.25 off passersby. That was a burger and a cup of coffee at Sal's Diner on 31st. Maybe Grace, his favorite waitress, could swing him some free home fries when Sal wasn't looking. Victor hadn't needed the guilt-trip scam today; people had been fairly generous. That was something he saved for emergency situations, usually in the winter when it was so cold his fingers turned blue. He'd had a couple of close calls with the freezing temperatures, but the Salvation Army came along at just the right time and gave him some warm soap, or a blanket. And when times got really tough, he would seek out a shelter.

Shelters were his least favorite places. He used to frequent them in the winter months last year, until he woke up to find another street person rummaging through his things in the middle of the night. He had never gotten mad or shouted, he had only watched. The man took 30 cents out of his pants. Victor let the man keep the money. He never stopped him. After that, though, Victor decided he couldn't afford to sleep in shelters like that anymore. He was never one for fights, and that was what he would have had to do to protect his things in those places.

Today was an exceptional day. Warm, not sweltering. Comfortable and sunny. It was one of those days when it didn't matter if you had a home or not, because even if you lived in a palace you'd still want to spend the day outside. It was Friday too. Victor had always found the people in New York full of anticipation on Friday afternoons. They knew the weekend was coming, he figured. In a few hours they could let loose and be carefree. Today was the kind of day New York businessmen would play hookey if they could. Of course, few rarely did.

Victor decided to walk to Sal's and have his burger a little early. That way he could have a nap afterwards on his bench in Central Park. When he first started sleeping there, his back had really bothered him. With time, though, he got used to the hard wood, especially that one loose board that challenged his balance every time he rolled over. After a nap he'd be rested enough to take in a few street performers' shows.

Friday street shows were always the best. The performers seemed to put in a little extra effort. Maybe it was because all the well-to-do businessmen and their lady friends were out for the evening. They were easy targets for spare change and the performers knew it. They were all in their Friday evening good moods. The men wanted to impress their dates. Anything that looked half-artzy made them feel important just watching it. Victor used to be one of those men, trying to impress his lady. Now he enjoyed the performances solely for their entertainment value.

Victor's favorite performer was Shreena. Her dancing puppet seemed to come alive. Victor didn't like taking pay away from performers like Shreena, so even though it would've been easy for him to burn change off the onlookers, he didn't do it. Victor never cared for that term—BUM. He'd been called it hundreds of times by angry men in power suits. And women with briefcases. And students, aspiring to be those very men and women. They all raced around the streets of New York as if it were a life-or-death matter that they reached their destinations. Not Victor. He set his own pace—and went where he wanted. His career was indulging in the city he loved, without worrying about clocks, phones, or appointments.

It wasn't always like this, Victor thought as he counted seven blocks left to Sal's. He used to be controlled by his appointment book. One time he charged his dentist ninety dollars for making him wait forty minutes. Time was money then, and he couldn't afford to be sitting around someone else's office just waiting. He looked down and saw a half-eaten piece of pepperoni pizza clogging a sewer drain by the curb. Victor remembered the days when he carried a briefcase, and he sprinted to meetings. Those were the years when he dropped a piece of pepperoni pizza into the gutter and didn't feel a loss. If that had happened he would've just bought another one from the next street vendor.

"Out of my way old man!" a power suit screamed as he sprinted by. Old man. This executive looked like he was on his way to a Shareholders Meeting. It was only mid-afternoon, and the rat race was nowhere near over for him. If he had strolled by, exchanged a friendly hello with Victor, commented on the weather, then he might have realized Victor was not old at all. Not having a shower in two months ages a person. It can turn someone like Victor, at forty-two, into an elderly, crinkled old man. Dirt accentuates lines of age.

Six blocks left. Victor had many of these—wrinkles. He'd earned them. Just like the suit and briefcase people were earning theirs now. They were a byproduct of the territory. His investment company had cost him hours of sleep. In
place of sleep he’d gained wrinkles. He’d been constantly consumed with the business. Where was his next account coming from? How could he earn more Japanese executives’ business? Who could he trust to hire as an assistant? And later, after tremendous success, a whole new set of worries arose. Where could he find trendy office space on Fifth Avenue? Who would cater the company Christmas party? When would he have time to drop off his drycleaning? Finally, after all the poor investments he had made caught up with him, the final set of worries were confronted. How can I regain this client’s trust? How can I stop rumors from spreading in the business world about my poor judgement on the Time Warner account? How will I meet payroll?

He stood at the streetlight. Five blocks left. Victor felt a sharp pain in his right foot. He looked down and saw the loafer’s he’d bought for $1.35 at Nel’s Charity Shop standing in broken glass. It was a small pile: light green. Heineken glass, it looked like. Imported from Holland. That used to be his favorite beer. He used to drink it on Friday nights at Showman’s. That was the classy business bar near the new offices. He never drank a lot, unless a possible investor was looking to get loaded. Then he poured the drinks as fast he could. Anything to create a bond—a trust— with a prospective client. Prospective clients meant new accounts. Now Victor didn’t drink at all. It distorts what he sees—all the action, all the beauty, and all the misery.

Victor thought about his old high society friends. They would think he was crazy—considering the city a beautiful place. They couldn’t wait to get out to their houses in the country on days like this. They complained about the traffic and the people and the pollution. But the city was beautiful to Victor. He was awed by the architecture of buildings like St. Patrick’s Cathedral. He looked at the leaves changing in Central Park in the fall, and watched the skaters in Rockefeller Center in the winter.

Still, he saw the misery of his fellow homeless people, and he winced. Many of them sat on corners soaked in their own urine, drinking themselves to death. Victor still had his mind though—many others had lost theirs. Perhaps their minds froze in the wintertime, never to be thawed again. He had a homeless friend for awhile. Oliver was the same age as Victor, and they used to chat almost daily. Then, Oliver suddenly wasn’t around anymore. The word on the street was he’d been stabbed in the night, while rummaging through a dumpster in an alley. Victor never knew for sure what happened to Oliver, but that story was always in his mind. It kept him scared enough that he avoided dark passageways at all times, even if it meant going to sleep hungry and not hunting for food in the dark alley dumpsters.

With only four blocks left to Sal’s, Victor put his hand in his pocket and felt for the change. He pulled it out and recounted it, just to make sure he had the $4.25 he figured earlier. Yup. He was right. He looked forward to chatting with Grace while she waited on him. She reminded him of the secretary who showed up to fill in at his old office while Mary was on maternity leave. Her name was Joy and she was as eccentric as they came. Victor had no idea what to do with her when she walked in. An agency had sent her over and they hadn’t screened her very well. Her pink hair and lemon-yellow mini skirt were as bright as her personality. Victor had tried hard not to like Joy, but he couldn’t help it. She was authentic—she didn’t conform to any kind of conservative ethic. She didn’t think she looked out of place in his office—she was just being herself! But her novel clothing clashed with Victor’s business image, and Joy had to go. He told her she would have to be fired, unless she changed her image overnight into something more conservative. Joy never got mad, but she refused to change who she was just for a paycheck. She took it as a day’s wages earned, with a new set of challenges ready to face her the following morning. Victor couldn’t believe it. The next lady they sent over looked more appropriate, but she wasn’t as efficient as Joy. Victor always remembered Joy, especially the way she accepted being fired after just one day. He admired the fact that she refused to be anyone but herself. She was happy with her lifestyle, and that was the most important thing to her.

Grace didn’t remind Victor of Joy because of her looks. Where Joy dressed eccentrically, Grace acted the part. She was an aspiring opera singer. Sometimes she sang out the orders to Sal, instead of hanging them over the grill like she was supposed to. This usually made Sal mad, and half the time Victor never knew if she and Sal were on speaking terms when he went in. They had a fire-and-ice kind of relationship. Some days she had quit and just returned to reclaim her job. Other days she’d been fired and retired all in the same afternoon. A skinny opera singer, Victor thought. That’s about as original as lemon-colored leather.

Suddenly a horrendous scent was in the air. Victor smelled manure—horse manure. Surely enough, trotting down the street next to him was an old fashioned carriage pulled by a clydesdale, carrying a driver and two people passionately in love. They sat in the carriage kissing, totally oblivious to their hired horse dumping its feces as it strolled down the street. They had obviously spent a lot of money creating a picture perfect date, and they had never even noticed it was being destroyed.

Now only three blocks from Sal’s, Victor watched the couple ride away. It reminded him of his first date with his ex-wife. He had been so nervous. Now it seemed like it never even happened. Mona was beautiful that night. Victor had wanted to impress her so badly that he spent over $250 on that one date, and that was ten years ago! He wanted Mona to fall madly in love with him, and that nearly happened. Instead, Mona fell in love with his money. She and Victor shared what he thought was a whirlwind romance. His business was thriving and they consumed all the best they thought life had to offer: Broadway shows, fancy dinners, exotic trips to Bora Bora, expensive clothing and jewelry. They even threw an occasional Jay-Gatsby-style party in their Westchester home, at Mona’s urging, of course.
When the business began to fail, Victor needed to start saving his money instead of wasting it all on the unnecessary lavishness that had become customary to their lifestyle. Mona put up with the skimping for a while. Victor believed their love would see them through the rough times. But when there was no money left, there was nothing left for Mona to love. So, she moved on—to find a more "meaningful relationship." The loneliness Victor felt without Mona was excruciating. He had truly loved her and she had been his inspiration to make the business thrive. He had wanted to give her all the best. Without her, all hopes of resurrecting the company back to its powerhouse potential died.

After Mona left, Victor had no one. His parents had died shortly after he and Mona had married. With no accounts left, and no business partners to lean on, Victor found himself looking to his socialite friends for support. He soon learned the people who had attended his lavish parties were not so different from those that went to Jay Gatsby's. None of them wanted to associate with a has-been tycoon who couldn't even afford McDonald's anymore.

After losing his home, his car, and nearly all his possessions trying to accumulate capital to pour into the failing business, Victor lost nearly everything. Everything, that is, but his knowledge of the business, and his ability to cut a multi-million dollar deal. But those things no longer mattered. This inspiration for his work had been Mona. When she left he didn't have the drive to keep trying. The exhilaration of his career came from celebrating new contracts with her. She was always so happy when he brought in the big ones—the ones that paid so well.

After she left there was no one to buy expensive diamonds for with his bigger paychecks, and no one to send roses to with cards that read "I did it!" He had worked for her—and without Mona there was no reason to keep trying.

Victor was closing in on Sal's. Only two blocks left—he could taste the burger already. He thought about stopping here on the corner and hitting some more people up for money. That way he could get cheese and tomato on the burger, but he decided not to. Victor figured he'd leave the New Yorkers alone on this brilliant June Friday. He decided he needed a break from the begging. Too much in one day really wore him down. Asking people for money was Victor's least favorite thing about being on the streets. He loved being a part of all the action, and not having to conform to a busy work schedule, but the part he really hated was having to ask others for money. After having so much himself, begging solidified the fact that he had failed. Failed with Mona, and in his career. This was the kind of reality that stung.

A shiny quarter near a trash bin caught Victor's eye. He walked over to pick it up. $4.50. He noticed a newspaper in the bin. He brushed off a wet coffee cup lid, and picked it up. Victor kept up quite well on current events this way. He was more informed reading thrown away newspapers than many average Americans who could afford to take a regular subscription—but never do. The presidential campaign was heating up, and he wanted to hear if Cuomo had changed his mind about running. He shoved the paper under his arm, and decided to take a short cut down a back alley to Sal's.

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The alley was covered in puddles. They were the kind that had purple and green and yellow lines in them. Even though they were covered with grease and oil, Victor liked to gaze at their colors. They looked like rainbows to him. As we was trying to decide what the pot of gold at the end of the string of puddles would be, he heard a voice.

"Goddamn this fucking car! Start, goddamnit!" A man at the opening of the alley was half in and half out of his car, trying to start it. He had the hood up. Victor could hear the engine rolling over and over as the man tried to force the car to start. Gasoline fumes began to fill the alley. Both Victor and the man began to cough—there was nowhere for the fumes to escape but into their lungs.

"Can I help?" Victor asked the man with a smile. The man looked up. His eyes bounced back and forth off the alley's brick walls, until they found Victor and focused. The man squinted at him, peering through his trendy wire-rimmed glasses. He was wearing a business suit, with the required white shirt and striped tie. All navy. His light brown raincoat was wrinkled from what looked like hours of sitting. Little did he know that as he was sizing up Victor, Victor was also sizing him up.

Victor heard him mumble to himself, something about ‘last thing he needed’ and ‘spare change’.

"I say can I help you there friend?" Victor tried again with a cheery tone.

"Look buddy, I haven’t got any money, O.K.? Now just go along on your way and find somebody else to bother," the man insisted. He kept trying to get the car started. The rolling noise continued. So did the coughing.


"Huh?" the man looked at him puzzled.

"I say I think you flooded it," he tried again.

"Oh. Yeah right," the man nodded his head as if to pacify Victor, hoping he’d feel heard and then leave. He kept trying to start the car.

"If you let it sit about fifteen or twenty minutes it should start for you, unless there’s something more serious. Shouldn’t be though. I’m no mechanic, but it doesn’t sound it anyway. And it sure smells flooded," Victor said as he got closer to the man, forcing him to listen.

"TWENTY MINUTES!" the man bellowed. "I haven’t got twenty minutes! I’m already ten minutes late—and this fucking car is about to lose me my job!" the man said as he kicked his tire, leaving a rubber scuff mark on his black wing tips. He came out in front of the car and stood before Victor. He was nearly a foot taller, and he peered down and yelled, "The next thing I know you’re probably gonna try and mug me for my AmEx!"

"I’m not going to mug you. I was on my way to have some lunch. If you’d like to join me you may use the phone in the restaurant," Victor said in a courteous tone.

The man calmed down. His face began to resume its normal color, and he caught his breath. He ran his hands through his receding hairline over and over as he stood there thinking. Then he began to slap his thighs, looking for some spare change.

Victor reached into his pocket and produced the shiny quarter he had just found by the trash bin on the street. He handed it over to the man. "Here," he said sedately. "You can call and see if the account is still viable."

Before the man could decline Victor motioned for him to come the last few feet around the corner to Sal’s. The man followed, looking bewildered at the comment Victor had just made. As they walked through the door into Sal’s, Victor pointed out the phone on the wall in the man and then went and took a seat at the counter.

The man sprinted to the phone and dialed hastily.

"Hello there, Victor!" Grace greeted him with a smile. "How do we doin’ today? Enjoyin’ the sunshine?"

"Just fine Grace. It’s lovely," Victor replied as he picked up a menu and pretended to read it even though he’d been thinking about the burger all day. He looked over the top of the menu and heard the man on the phone yelling into the receiver.

"I was supposed to be in Tower’s office at 2:45 with my presentation. This whole fucking project has given me nothing but problems." He began to run his fingers through his hair again. "Marcene is ready to dump me cause I have no time for her and today it was going to be all finished once I handed everything over to Tower and now I’m stuck in some shitty diner in God knows where and I just borrowed a quarter from a bum who hasn’t tried to mug me yet, and if I do manage to get the car started now I’ll still be fired for losing the account because I was late!" he gasped for air.

"What’ll it be today then, Victor?" Grace asked.

"I’ll have a burger and a cup of coffee."

"Anything extra on it?"

"Not today, thanks."

"Looks like you’ve gotten a little sun there—on your face!" she smiled.

"Yes, I just returned from my Bermuda vacation," Victor chuckled.

"Oh boy. Then I oughta be gettin a damn good tip from a world traveler!" she winked.

Grace took the menu from Victor in time for him to see the businessman run out of Sal’s. He whizzed right by Victor without saying a word. He went back out into the sunny, warm afternoon. He probably hadn’t even taken the time to stop and acknowledge the beautiful day. Surely he hadn’t felt the warm sunshine on his face, or looked up at the blue sky. Victor figured he was running off to try and save his job—and his life.

He took the paper out from underneath his arm. There were fireworks scheduled tonight, and a reggae band was doing a concert in Washington Square Park. The lights of Times Square would be on too. All that, plus the street performers. His options were endless.