

62 CENTS

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ON THE EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 10TH, 2001, having finished writing the first draft of a new article, I decided to take a walk to celebrate at some time around eight o'clock. I've always enjoyed taking walks, like the protagonist of Ray Bradbury's short story "The Pedestrian." And just like the protagonist of "The Pedestrian," I discovered that taking a walk in a suburb of Los Angeles isn't always as easy as it should be.

Before I left the apartment, in a weird moment of psychic prescience, I said to myself, *Maybe I shouldn't take any money with me in case I get mugged.* I was half-joking, as I'd never been mugged in my entire life and had no reason to think I would be tonight. Nonetheless, I found myself removing all the cash from my pocket and tossing it onto my bed. I remember thinking to myself, *Oh, well . . . if I do get mugged all they'll get is sixty-two cents in pennies.* Why I had sixty-two pennies on me, I can't quite remember.

Not far from my apartment building, on Arlington and Plaza Del Amo, I turned the corner and saw, about three blocks ahead of me, a trio of black teenagers huddled on the corner, talking to each other. I thought to myself, *Don't be racist. They're not going to mug you.* Just as I thought that, a fourth black teenager emerged from an alleyway about one block ahead of me. He was tall and wearing an orange basketball jersey with the number 23 printed on it. The second he emerged from the alleyway, he glanced over his shoulder and looked at me. Then he kept walking. For some reason, I got the feeling that he was *looking for me specifically.*

Jesus, don't be paranoid, I said to myself.

The fourth teenager walked over to the other three, as if he knew them.

There was no one else on the street. I suppose I could've crossed the street to avoid them, but I was intent on not giving in to some sort of irrational fear.

As I passed by these kids, one of them reached out and grabbed me. It was the guy in the basketball jersey.

Even at this point, I thought it was some sort of joke—that they were horsing around somehow. But they weren't. One of them said, "Don't move, cuz, or I *shoot* you!"

He stuck something hard and metallic into my ribs. It could've been a gun. It could've been something else. All I knew is that something unpleasant was being pressed into my ribs and I didn't want it there. One of them held onto the back of my jacket while the basketball jersey said in a low, steady tone, "Give me all you got, *cuz*."

I didn't feel fear for some reason. I reached into my pocket, pulled out the sixty-two pennies, and dropped them at his feet.

He just stared at me for a second. "That's all you got?"

I nodded.

"You lyin' to me, cuz?" The jersey started patting me down, from my chest all the way down to my pants. Now his voice wasn't quite as low or steady anymore. "'Cause if you lyin' to me, cuz, I'm gonna *shoot* you!" At first I was confident that nothing bad would happen because I didn't have any money on me. Then I realized that something bad might happen *because* I didn't have any money on me.

As the jersey patted me down, I glanced at his friends. They were wearing black hoodies over their heads, glancing nervously from side to side. They had no need to be nervous. No one was around, except us.

"Shit," Jersey said as he stopped patting me. "You the poorest white boy I ever met." He sounded disgusted with me. Perhaps this was their first time. Of all the white people they could've mugged in Torrance, CA, they chose the one with no money. I almost felt bad for them. I felt the need to explain.

"I don't make much money," I said, shrugging. "I write for *Paranoia Magazine*."

"What the *fuck*?" one of the lookouts said. He seemed pissed. I thought for sure they were going to drag me off into the nearby alley and beat the crap out of me—or worse. But then the lookout said, "Is that the one with Bat Boy on the cover?"

It took me a couple of seconds to process what he was saying. "You're thinking of the *Weekly World News*," I said. "*Paranoia Magazine* doesn't have Bat Boy in it. I wish it did. *Paranoia Magazine* comes out of Providence, Rhode Island where H.P. Lovecraft"

“Shut the *fuck* up!” Jersey yelled and gave me a violent shove that almost knocked me to the ground. “Turn around!”

I did as I was told. Jersey pressed the palm of his hand against the middle of my back and pushed me. “Just keep on walkin’, cuz, and *don’t* look back.”

I walked, and didn’t look back.

I kept wondering if they were going to come up behind me again and finish the job. Perhaps they were just toying with me?

After a few blocks, I turned a corner and picked up my speed a little bit. That’s when the fear kicked in. My heart started racing. I kept glancing to my right to see if they were circling the block to ambush me. But they weren’t.

The second I returned home I called my friend Wendy. Wendy told me to call the cops. I didn’t bother. What would be the point? I suspected I knew exactly which house on the block these kids lived in. (Think about that. You have to be a real amateur to mug people in your own damn neighborhood.) But the idea of me and a couple of mustachioed cops strolling up to a house full of black people while the Boys in Blue ask me to finger these idiot kids seemed like a potentially fatal idea. “Are these the scumbags, sir?” “Yes, officer, they most definitely are!” “And how much did they steal from you?” “Absolutely nothing!” “Well . . . we better toss these assholes in jail for a day—just teach ‘em a lesson they’ll never forget!” Twenty-four hours later they’re back out on the street, circling the neighborhood over and over again, waiting to see me. That wouldn’t take long.

No, I decided just to forget about it.

But I couldn’t forget about it. I felt cheated and violated. I was pissed off that I was out sixty-two cents. Most writers can’t afford just to throw money around like that. So the second I woke up in the morning I slipped on my jacket and returned to the exact corner where the teenagers had assaulted me. I wanted my pennies back.

But when I got there, I was surprised to see that they were all gone.

I glanced around in some nearby bushes, but couldn’t find even one of them. Eventually, I just gave up and went home. For a long time afterwards, I avoided going out alone after dark. It took me awhile to get over that residual fear—a few months, at least.

I sure hope they didn’t spend all those pennies in one place.

THE END