

From Chapter 20: Steve the Bum

Author's note: Like Ted and Bird Man, Steve the Bum (not to be confused with Jerry's older brother, Steve), was an adult in the West End neighborhood. I wish I knew the full story of Steve. When I was a kid, I didn't truly understand how cruel it was to refer to people as Bird Man or Steve the Bum. Now I understand that Steve was a guy like any other, full of stories and feelings and beliefs, and I wonder who he really was and what his stories were.

... “Look, John Boy,” said Jerry. “Think about this. What if the old guy isn’t a prisoner? What if he’s just an old guy living in his house by himself? Even if he is a bit cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs, he probably just wants to be left alone. He’s like Steve the Bum. Steve’s cracked in the head. And what does he want? He wants to be left alone, right?”

Jerry had point. Steve the Bum had been living in the alleyways since I first met him when I was in third grade. Jerry and I were playing kickball with Drew and a couple of other kids. I was watching the pitcher, waiting for the pitch, when I saw a guy staggering up the alley. Drew saw him, too. “It’s Steve,” he said.

“Steve your brother?” I asked.

“No, stupid. Steve the Bum.”

“Who’s Steve the Bum?”

“He’s a drunk. But he’s usually pretty friendly.”

Drew waved his hand and ran toward the man. “Hey, Steve!”

The man stopped in the middle of the street, swaying back and forth, squinting at Drew, licking his chapped lips. Then he smiled and waved back. “Hey, buddy,” he called in a raspy voice. “Watcha doing?”

Even though it was a hot summer day, Steve the Bum was dressed in thick corduroy pants and a long sleeved knit sweater. Both were dirty. His shoes were scuffed and torn and the sides of his feet were bursting out of them. Dark stubble darkened his cheeks, jaw, and neck. His hair was thick and greasy and uncombed.

“Hey, buddy,” he repeated. “Watcha doing?”

“Just playing,” said Drew. “What are you doing?”

Steve pulled up his sweater and scratched his protruding white belly with a grimy hand. “I’m walking.” He looked over at me with blood shot eyes and smiled. “Hey buddy.”

I wasn’t sure what to say so I didn’t say anything. “Got any money, buddy?” asked Steve.

“No, he doesn’t have any money, Steve,” said Drew. “Want to play kickball with us?”

“Naw,” said Steve. “I gotta finish my walk.” With that he, shambled off. We watched him shuffle up the alley and turn the corner.

“Where’s he going?” I asked.

“I bet he’s heading for Fort Bucknell,” said Drew. “I’ve seen him in there drinking.”

“When did you go into Fort Bucknell?” said Jerry.

“I saw him through the door, dope,” said Drew. “They leave it open in the summer.”

Steve was a regular in our neighborhood. Sometimes he was clean and sober, with his hair washed and a serious look on his face. But most of the time he was drunk, shuffling or staggering up the alley, dirty and disheveled, greeting me and the other kids with a happy sounding, “Hey buddy. Watcha doing?” Occasionally, Jerry and I would come across Steve sleeping down near the railroad tracks. Maybe when it got cold he hopped the cars and rode to Florida and that’s why we never saw him in the winter. When I asked my dad about Steve, about why he’s a drunk and why he sleeps on the street, my dad said, “People have tried to help him, but Steve doesn’t want any help. He’s living the life he wants to live. So you respect his wishes and let him alone.”

I got up from the concrete wall and stretched. “Look, I get the whole Steve the Bum thing. But I know I’m going to be up at night thinking about that guy in the window. So let’s compromise. Let’s go back one more time and get some more information.”