



"If we just sit and exist, and understand that, I think it will be helpful in a world that seems like a record that's going faster and faster, we're spinning off the edge of the universe." —□ Martin Scorsese

It got so cold here last week that my face hurt. "C'mon, Dixie, are you ready to go back inside yet?" "Not yet, Dad, I have to sniff out that tree over there." So on we stroll, my teen (she's 13) having a blast. Chilly thoughts swirled in my head, a few warmer ones mixed in. Here's a sample.

What happened to thank you? I stepped outside Fuji one afternoon while they fixed my lunch. A disheveled black woman walked over talking to herself. Amidst entire gobbledygook paragraphs she asked me for a "candle." I give her my lighter and offered it to her to keep. Doris kept right on trucking. She never looked at me, babbling to no one. "You're welcome," I muttered. An otherwise fine lunch tasted a little off to me. Bittersweet. Is anyone listening to her? Did I even try?

Homeless people routinely thank me for giving them anything. One pitiful fellow in his forties, Al, asked me for a dollar, then walked a few feet and picked a cigarette butt from the sidewalk. I called him back and gave him a larger bill. He turned away silently. His brethren have praised me, their faces etched with humiliation and dread. Yes, it's like feeding a starving deer a few handfuls of greens, a temporary fix that degenerates into a hand to mouth existence. The squeegee men who work the highways with cardboard help (e.g., "I'm a disabled veteran") signs are often more professional. They anticipate the driver behind you, the next potential benefactor. A cursory thank you is mandatory for them.

The best music is often free. An attractive plus sized black woman dressed for church strode slowly through my CVS. She wore headphones and sang lovely gospel music up and down the aisles and at the register. She sounded like the south, biscuits and gravy and deviled eggs. Spanish moss and oyster roasts. I stood like a stone listening, hoping something would slow her down so the show could continue. Even for a few seconds. Maybe it was something in the incongruity between a chain drugstore's drudgery and a Baptist songbird. She made my day.

Where am I, exactly? I sometimes feel like I've morphed into a Woody Allen movie. The faces on some people seem to have come out of his casting candidates for extras. There was a man with the tiniest nose in the universe, no more than an inch long. The beautiful millennial with streaked purple hair and a ski hat with ears. Countless little Asian woman, 5 foot two if they stood on a soda case. And here's today's semi-finalist: a blade thin young man with a face that could have been scrubbed with a cheese grater. Don't we have any spare dermatologists here?

Punctuating these folks was a middle-aged man pushing a stroller with a small white dog in it under a blanket. Maybe a Maltese. I compared that delightful scene to the man whose little daughter was in a similar rig with indoor clothes *minus socks* who cried for blocks on end without her father bothering to even stop and talk to her. My angry, salty admonishment to this guy (calling Mike Pompeo) yielded only a tiny shrug. Perhaps my sidewalk psychiatry backfired.

Another question I've been mulling over is whether Southerners really are friendlier than Northerners. Per the prevailing stereotype. This turns out to be sticky wicket and no, I don't buy old bromides about southern hospitality setting the standard. We have plenty of friendly people up here, folks who will hold the door for you and offer a smile and a good morning. Help you cross a congested intersection. Neighbors look out for each other and their children like anyone else would. My conclusion so far is that Southerners are more superficially friendly in many cases, but the friendship offers are the same as everywhere else in this country.

Line up by height, everyone. Friendly or not, we have almost no taller Asian women who hang around with shorter men of any race. (I did see one such couple recently.) Tiny women squirt from the shadows and find tiny guys. The *reallytall* women are boxed in. How many Asian men over 6'2" are out there? How tall is tall enough for them? Does she have to follow him by a few feet when they walk around like her parents do?

With age comes a basket of goodies. One thought spinning in my head is my increasingly limited patience for bureaucratic backwash and inefficiency. Maybe because I used to tackle this at work, bureau-dorks make my blood boil. Western Union really took the cake. It took four tries to get money sent to my friend Glenys in the Dominican Republic. One might suppose that

when paying cash at the window and getting a tracking number all is well.

In a series of exchanges, WU disallowed the transfer because of the destination (in broken English, they finally alleged widespread fraud as the reason for the rejection). With steam coming out of my ears and some blasphemous language in the air (guilty, your honor), Glenys chuckled and encouraged her poor amigo to calm down and get something to eat. I left the WU terminal in pretty good spirits. That lasted the entire ten minutes before WU had the nerve to send me a customer satisfaction survey *right after* they rejected my transfer in writing. *After I had a tracking number.*

One of those goodies should be the ability to see through nonsense. I test that theory when someone asks me what I did or do for a living. My longwinded explanation revolves around the preposterous notion that I was a bank robber who finally got busted when my man Guido took too much time leaving roses over the customers and tellers we had to shoot to get the money.

I break into a riff about being sent to Alcatraz (which in fact closed in 1963 when I was 13), succeeding mightily in the garment shop and ultimately being promoted to warden. Whereupon I pardoned myself. Most people get to the end of my story in wonderment. Only a few started laughing or otherwise called my bluff. None of those have been older people. So much for “age brings wisdom,” at least among my “victims.” My sad conclusion is that most people’s b.s. detectors need adjustment. Kudos to Fox News for helping to create this mess.

As children’s writer Gennifer Choldenko quipped, *“You get to Alcatraz by being the worst of the worst. Unless you’re me. I came here because my mother said I had to.*

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In real life, my mother would probably never have sent me to Alcatraz, certainly not at 13. Even though my spin cycle brain was already pulsing away back then. Little did it know how many darned loads of wash might lie ahead.

See y’all out in the storm.