ROBINSON

He was a tall, elderly black man, probably around my age. He came regularly into the library I was working at in northern Colorado. He told me his name was Robinson. When I asked if that was his first or last name, he confessed that he didn’t know. “F-folks always just c-called me R-Robinson,” he admitted, stuttering. He said his parents named him after the famous black baseball player Jackie Robinson.

Robinson was a homeless transient. He told me he had been born in Georgia, and that he was the 11th of thirteen children. His parents were dead, but he thought that some of his brothers or sisters might still be alive. His ancestors had been plantation slaves before and during the Civil War. He always wore the same outfit: blue overalls, a dark long-sleeved shirt, old worn athletic shoes, a faded brown hooded sweatshirt, and a grey knitted wool watch cap. He carried all his belongings in a large plastic grocery bag – cans of food, perhaps some extra socks and underwear. The one time I saw him remove his cap indoors, I noticed that his close-cropped hair was sparse and light grey, like his eyebrows.

He was always polite but rather shy. His one remarkable facial characteristic was that he had no teeth. This made his lips flap rather uncontrollably when he tried to talk. I wondered if he had a pair of false teeth somewhere that he could put in to help chew his meals. He also had a tendency to stutter if he got nervous or excited. Most of the time I had to have him relax and repeat what he was saying so that I could understand him. No one knew where he went before or after the library was opened, nor did we know where he slept at night or where he bathed or did his laundry. He was not a smoker or drug addict or mentally ill, as library staff had seen regularly with other homeless people drifting through over the years. I only saw Robinson drunk once – I could smell the cheap wine on his breath and witnessed his blood-shot eyes when he approached the adult reference desk—but he was peaceful and compliant when we asked him to leave and return after he sobered up. “T-that’s OK, B-Boss,” he slurred as he shuffled towards the door. “S-sorry!” For some reason, Robinson always called me “Boss.”

As we got more familiar with each other over time, Robinson started to ask me one or two library-type questions whenever he stopped by.

“B-Boss, I can’t r-read or write. I n-never went to school, b-but I cans sign my name real good. I h-had to w-w-work the fields back home s-since I was l-little. We was surely p-poor.” His eyes looked away as his mind drifted back in memory.

Robinson went on to ask – on various days – such questions as: Can starving people eat grasshoppers and not get sick? Was George Wallace still alive? Can sharks live in rivers? Was it going to rain today? Has anyone ever read the whole Bible cover-to-cover? Did I ever fly on an airplane, and was it scary? What year did Lincoln free the slaves? Often, he would ask me to write down a particular word on a small square of paper, and give it to him so he could keep it and know how it was spelled. His mind was active, and I sensed he keenly wanted to learn more about the world around him. I wanted to get him matched up with a volunteer who could hopefully tutor him in basic reading and writing, but our small town didn’t offer that service, and Robinson obviously had no transportation to travel to the local county seat where a larger library had such free help.

After a time, Robinson started to bring me periodically a simple ‘gift.’ One day it might be a big pinecone that he found. Another day it might be an interesting leaf, or a flower, or a piece of speckled rock. In the autumn, he began giving me an occasional can of food – pork & beans, or mackerel, or salmon, or soup. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings by refusing, so I always accepted these nice offerings, but later I would secretly donate them to our neighborhood food bank. I felt somewhat guilty because he obviously needed the food more than me. Still, it was always a kind and generous act on his part, and it touched me.

When winter arrived with first its freezing rain, and then its bitter cold and snow, Robinson was clearly not prepared for it. I had a good, older but clean, warm parka that I thought Robinson should have, while I could easily buy a newer version for myself. So one day when he came in, cold and uncomfortable, I offered it to him. He was so grateful, it made my own eyes moist. “B-Boss, you’s the best!” he exclaimed as he proudly put it on over his thin, tall frame.

One day at one of the library reading tables, I noticed that Robinson had taken out a small plastic bag and was carefully unwrapping a piece of ragged cloth. Curious, I ventured nearer as the cloth revealed a single silver coin. He began to slowly polish it with the aged cloth.

“Oh, h-hi, B-Boss. How you doin’? This here’s m-my lucky coin. My Pappy done give to me before he d-died, and h-he gotted it from h-his own G-granPappy. Here, t-take a l-l-look.” Robinson offered it to me.

The coin looked very old, but I could make out the date clear enough, and the denomination. It was a 1838 silver half-dollar, with the face of a lady wearing a LIBERTY banner across her forehead, with thirteen stars framing her – six on the left of her head in the direction she was facing, and seven on the right.

I returned the coin. “Wow. Thanks for sharing, Robinson. That’s probably the oldest coin I have ever handled. Don’t lose it. It could be valuable someday,” I suggested. He gazed at in admiration, then re-wrapped it back in its ragged cloth and put it back in the small plastic bag.

Winter eventually gave way to Spring. It was good to smell the earth again with its growing things and to hear the songs of birds.

Robinson strolled in one Monday, excited, the lips of his toothless mouth flapping. “B-Boss, I is going back to Georgia. I-I-I come to s-say good-bye. You’s been real g-good to me, givin’ me your coat and all and heppin’ answer all my q-q-questions. Now I gots something to give y-you.” He took out the small plastic bag with the ragged cloth in it from his blue overalls pocket. “I wants you t’have my l-l-lucky coin, Boss.”

I was taken aback. “Robinson, thanks, really…I appreciate the gesture, but…you don’t need to do that,” I muttered, embarrassed at his kindly gesture, looking down.

“N-no, Boss. I done prayed on the m-matter, and I feels it’s the r-right thing to d-do,” he said as he pressed the bag into my hand. He was carrying my gifted winter parka under his left arm, and his left hand clutched his trusty plastic grocery bag of possessions.

I thought quickly, then decided. “OK, Robinson. I’ll take it on one condition: I want you to call me by my name." I pointed to my name tag. "I’m really not your boss, you know. My name is Roy, and I want to shake your hand as an equal and as a friend.”

Our eyes and hands met. His grasp was steady, and his hand was rough and calloused and strong. “Thank you very, very much for your coin, and good luck! I hope you stop in again if you are ever in our area,” I offered. “Remember: You are always welcome.”

“R-Roy, this Colorado winter was t-too hard on m-my old bones, so I figures that G-Georgia is where I’ll s-stay till the good L-Lord calls me h-home. So I be g-going now.” Robinson winked, grinned a toothless grin, turned, and walked out into the bright, warming sunshine.

I never saw him again.

The small plastic bag with the ragged wrapped cloth sat in the back of my library desk for five years. When my retirement finally came around, I was cleaning out my stuff and half-rediscovered it. When I got home, I took out the coin and showed my wife. She suggested that I take it to a coin dealer in town to see how much it was worth. So the next day, I did.

Our local town’s gold and silver dealer also carried a modest collection of various coins. I had bought several Indian Head pennies from him in years past, to give as surprises to our four grandchildren.

Chester looked carefully at the lucky coin that Robinson had given me. He pulled out a thick coin and currency values catalogue, leafed through several pages, then let out a low whistle.

“Where the hell did you get this, Roy?” he asked, amazed. I told him the tale.

“Scott’s Catalogue is telling me something incredible, so I better call a colleague in Denver to verify this coin some more,” Chester explained. He punched through a number on his Smartphone. After talking for a few minutes and asking several questions and making some notes on a notepad, Chester ended the call, then asked me to sit down.

“Well, as hard as this is to believe, Roy, it seems that you have an 1838 “O” Capped Bust silver half-dollar. The “O” stands for the mint in New Orleans, the only place these coins were stamped. Your coin is in average condition, but it is very valuable. My dealer friend in Denver is ready to offer you today – Chester paused and took a deep breath and exhaled, then cleared his throat -- $160,000 for it.”

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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