

Eddie's Story

Eddie comes into the diner with this story, and I have no reason to believe that it's not true.

He works in the AmSouth Building in the center of downtown, not in the offices at a desk, but as one of the sweepers, that is, the men or women they hire to spend the day pushing a mop up and down the granite floors in the lobby. If it's raining, they mop up the water that drips off the office workers as they enter the building. If it's nice outside they push a dry dust mop for hours on end, over and over the floor keeping it polished to a high shine.

Eddie is short and wiry, of indeterminate age but surely more than fifty - his brown skin is touched with wrinkles at the eyes and chin, and the graying hair on his small round head is grizzled and thinning out - nevertheless he's agile and energetic, and seems unfazed by the miles he walks every day. But I have to wonder how he stands the tedium of the job.

It looks unbearably tiresome to me, the equivalent of a prison sentence for eight hours a day. Eddie reports that I am correct, which is why the sweepers don't last long. Even the dulllest can't bear the monotony, and what looks like the least stressful job in America (just keep moving with the mop in front of you) becomes tortuous. Eddie can stand to work it for a week at a time, when he really needs the cash, then lays off for a few months.

Anyway, he comes in just as Harvey's closing up and asks for a cheeseburger, which Harvey is reluctant to serve, seeing as how it's about 30 seconds to three pm and he and Sarah are well into the clean-up shut-down routine. But Eddie, no fool, leads with his trump card:

"Did you hear about them police down at the AmSouth building?"

This slows down Harvey and Sarah, and me too, all of us being compulsively interested in street gossip. Eddie follows with this:

"Yeah, they had to take the Trust Jesus man to jail."

Harvey recognizes the play but goes around the counter and locks the door to keep out any stragglers, then throws a hamburger patty on the grille.

"Ok," he says "Why'd the Trust Jesus man get arrested."

The Trust Jesus man is a guy in his thirties, a neatly dressed black man who stands on the corner of 20th Street and 5th Avenue north holding a big yellow square of cardboard on which are printed the words Trust Jesus. He's been there off and on for a number of years, and is always polite and inoffensive, unlike a few preachers of the shouting, spitting persuasion who frighten the office workers and usually get picked up by the police after a few hours of haranguing the crowds.

"There was a disturbance," Eddie says, his eye on the burger. "How about some fries with that?"

"Fryer's already cooled off. Here's some chips," Harvey says, sliding a plate across the counter. "Okay, tell your story."

Eddie says this:

"The Trust Jesus man was on his corner, I could see him through the glass, and he was doin' his usual thing. Then I seen the wheelchair peanut man on the far corner by that other bank."

"There's a bank on every corner," Harvey interrupted.

"Okay then, it was the big bank," he said with exaggerated patience. "Next the guitar singer shows up."

"The blind one?"

"Naw, the one that can see. He sets up his guitar case for people to throw money in and starts playing that guitar and singin', over on his own corner."

"I never heard of all three being there at the same time," I said. Eddie was talking about three well known characters. "In fact, I heard the guitar guy went to Montgomery, and the wheelchair peanut guy has a new spot over by McWane."

"Well," he answers, a little miffed, "The peanut man was on the bank corner today, and it was the blind guitar guy that went to Montgomery. Who's tellin' this story, anyway?"

"Okay," I said. "Then go on and tell it."

"Yeah, so it's the Trust Jesus man on his corner, trustin' Jesus and ready to tell anyone about it, and the wheelchair peanut man across the way on his corner sellin' his little bags of peanuts he gets from the Depot, you know the place, and across the way it's the guitar singer, singin' and thumpin' his guitar, and everyone's just as happy."

"About ten o'clock when I get my break I go outside to smoke one and I'm over next to the Trust Jesus man when I see that there's a new dude set up on the fourth corner, and he's - there's a word for him but I can't call it out - he's all in black and got white paint on his face and white gloves and never says a word."

"A mime?" say Sarah and Harvey and I, all at the same time.

"That's him."

A mime? Birmingham is probably not a good venue for a mime, or maybe it is - you don't see that many in Alabama, so who's to say?

"Yeah, and he's actin' all weird, pretending he's in a cage and all like that. He's got a hat on the sidewalk for people to throw money in, but I don't see many doin' that, most everyone walks pretty wide around him. I see the other three, the Jesus man, peanut man and the singer, an' they stopped doin' what they do and they're just looking at him, you know, trying to make out what he's up to and all."

Harvey starts to laugh.

"There wasn't no mime," he says.

"I swear there was," says Eddie. "And he was a big one, too."

"Go on, Eddie," says Sarah.

"So I go back in to sweep some more after my smoke and about an hour later my lunch time comes, so I go on out to see what's happening, and it's plenty. All the old guys are doin' what they do, but I guess the mime run out of invisible cages, 'cause he's watching the others, then imitatin' them, doing what they do.

"He sees the guitar man hit a lick on his guitar, so he pretends he's got a guitar and starts playing and jumpin' all around, still not making a sound, but getting people to look at him. When the guitar man sees what he's doing he stops and the mime stops too. They're lookin' at each other catty-corner across the street, and every time the guitar man makes a move the mime makes exactly the same move. That's something that can get on your nerves pretty quick."

"So he does the guitar man for a while, then he starts on the wheelchair man, scooting along the sidewalk on his butt, trying to make like he's in a chair, but he's not too good at it, and anyway the peanut man doesn't pay him any attention at all, so he gives up on that.

"Somewhere he got a piece of cardboard and on it he wrote "Don't Trust Nobody", and he's holding it up and doing exactly what the Jesus man does. At first the Jesus man don't see what's happening but finally he catches on. He looks hard at the sign the mime is holding up, and the mime looks back hard at his sign. The Jesus man takes a step and the mime takes a step; the Jesus man drops his sign down to his side and so does the mime, and it goes on for a while, and I can see what's troubling the Jesus man. Every time he shows his message the mime shows an opposite message, and he don't like that."

"By now there's a pretty good crowd watching, and the singer has stopped singing. He watches and I'm close enough to see that he don't like what's happening to the Jesus man at all. He carries his guitar and crosses over to the peanut man, who's also watching, pushed his chair up to the edge of the street to see past the crowd. The guitar man bends over to say something to him and they both watch the mime, who's making crazy faces and parading up and down with his anti-Jesus sign, kind of

sashayin', you know, because the Jesus man ain't doing nothing but standing there just as still, so Mr. Mime has to make up stuff to do.

"He gets a laugh from the crowd, and I guess the guitar man had enough, the peanut man too, cause they start across the street toward the mime, and they don't look friendly. At the same time the Jesus man sets his sign very careful against the Walk/Don't Walk post and he starts across the street, dodgin' through the traffic, and the mime, he must have thought 'oh shit' - pardon me, Sarah - 'cause they was coming at him pretty fast and the guitar man's got his guitar held up like a axe, and just before they reach him the mime he breaks and starts running toward the park, and the other three follow him, the guitar man first, then the Jesus man, and last the peanut man, who's wheeling along as fast as he can."

"And in a second they was all out of sight, gone around the corner down toward the liberry. And that's the last I saw of them."

Eddie finishes his lunch. He drinks the last of the soda through his straw, making a little rattling noise and looks around with his small shrewd eyes. Nobody offers him a refill, and Sarah snorts and disappears back into the store room.

"There wasn't no mime," Harvey says again. "You just made all that up."

"I swear," says Eddie, holding up his hand like taking an oath. "Every word's the truth."

"What about where the Jesus man gets arrested?"

"I didn't see that, cause they caught the mime up by the liberry and I heard they started hitting on him and the liberry police made them stop. It was them police that arrested the Jesus man."

Harvey shakes his head and says:

"I won't even ask you how you know that."

"Everyone's talking about it," Eddie says, getting up from the stool.

"Eddie, I know you thought up that tale when you was sweeping up and down and up and down and had nothin' else to do but make up stories," says Harvey.

"No, I swear!" says Eddie, reaching in his pocket. He doesn't find what he's looking for, and starts searching all his other pockets, and Harvey rolls his eyes, walks around to the door unlocks it and waves Eddie outside. From the sidewalk Eddie says:

"Sorry about that, I'll get some money and -", but Harvey cuts him off:

"Don't bother. But next time, you bring cash with you, and not a lot of hot air."

"I appreciate that. I'm done with that sweeping job for a while, so I got to save what I can."

"Sure, sure," says Harvey, and closes and locks the door. Eddie pushes his face up close to the glass and we can hear him shout:

"It's the truth, Harvey, I swear it! He was a big ole mime!"

Harvey pulls down the shade over the glass door and goes back to shutting down the diner. I dump my paper plate in the trash and wait by the door for Harvey to let me out.

"It could have been true, Harv," I say.

"Don't start with me, Ben," he says.

"Whether it was true or not, Harvey, you got to admit you got a hamburger's worth out of it."

"And some chips. See you tomorrow," he says, and closes the door.

I start up the street, going back to my studio. I'm done working for the day, which is a nice one, clear and cool, a fine day for a walk. I think about going by the bank corner to see if the Trust Jesus man is still there, but I take another route. I just don't need to know.