

A Broken Stroll

The streets were suffocating in their claustrophobic, clustered design. The buildings seemed to break and wobble with the torrents of rain only rotting them further with each acidic drop. I hurried my steps as my feet sloshed through the greenish wastewater around my feet, with each step greenish black muck caked my boots with every forward stride as if trying to grab me and drag me down into this primordial ooze. It was a dark night, black with no moon in sight, with only the streetlights as my angelic guide to my destination. A neon sign of a winking cat flickers in the distance, signifying safety from the horrors outside and the relief I seek from it. I hurry towards it, each stride further sloshing the wastewater around my feet with a sickening plunk of each of my feet.

I didn't use to come down this way, this walk has become a recent addition to my struggles as life hasn't been the same recently. It seems darker now, further isolating me from the comfort others seem to find in just existing. My sorrowful soul hasn't felt much comfort in these darkening days. I don't truly understand why as I didn't used to be stuck in this miserable rut, but alas, life has swept me aside. Even the city seems to be trying to sweep me away as I make my way towards the safety of that glowing neon bastion. All my problems will be solved once I reach it, as they always are, every night I come this way. If only for a moment that is, as all comfort dissolves eventually.

I am struck by a familiar sight on this walk, another life in this same lonely alley. It's a homeless man, swept away by life as I have been. He seems to have decayed further than me though as he does not even try to escape the drowning water and muck around him merely letting it consume him. His legs are invisible under the murky water, his back sitting straight against the brick walls of the building. He has sat there for so long that his back seems to have fused with

the bricks he lays against, as if he has changed from human to an infectious mold that the alley is trying to erase with the acidic water lapping at his feet. His face is chiseled with age and strife, with the gray hairs of his beard and unkempt hair being the only real example of him being more human than stone. Every drop of water that lands on his face seems to age him more, as he sits in silence. His eyes are the most striking thing about him, grey as his hair but with a remarkable emptiness, as if his soul departed many years ago leaving his mortal body to rot away.

As I hurry past him, I hear him mumble jumbled thoughts to himself, a serenade for a scrambled mind. I only catch him mumbling a single saying to himself, reciting it like a prayer.

“My heart beats with the metropole”

This saying is striking to me, so much so that even as I try to tear my face away from turning to look at him, I could not help it. I must look at the man who has said these words. As I slowly turn my head to gaze at him, his eyes and mine link for a second. It is startling in its intensity as if life has returned to him just from this simple acknowledgement of his existence. I can't let this go any farther, as any deeper and I would be likely to be consumed in the affliction that has struck him as well. The misery that has caused him to pray to city streets instead of God. As I turn away, I can see that brief light in his eyes snuffed out as my acknowledgement of him soon ceases to be and he is swept back into the fog and forgotten alleys of my mind.

As I continue my journey towards the safety of the neon sign, my path is suddenly blocked by a mysterious shadow. Suddenly I am surrounded by these shadows on all sides as their features slowly peak out of the curtains of the shadows covering them. Crooked yellow teeth in a stretched smile, bloodshot and wild eyes, crusty nails with horrid smells emanating from them, all these elements overwhelm my senses as the central figures utters a decree to me.

“Got any spare change, friend?” He says in a way that is both caked in vitriol but guised in a friendly manner.

I only mutter “no” as I try and push past them, unwilling to share the coins in my pocket with these heathens that wish to take them from me. I grip the silver coins tighter as they are my salvation, if only I can make it past these brutes. They sense my urgency and push me back further into the cramped alley. I trip over the leg of the homeless, his limb solid as a tree root and unmoving as my feet go tumbling over it. This was my gravest mistake as in my panic to regain balance, which was pointless as I fall deeper into the reeking water, my coins jingled in my pocket. A welcome song to my shadowy companions, whose eyes now sparkle with glee at my misfortune.

“It seems we have a liar in our midst boys”, says the leader of the group, “I think it would be wise to show him that we don’t appreciate liars in this part of town.”

The group of men, unknown to me in their numbers, surround me and grab hold of my coat, yanking me to face the leader. I am finally able to make out his features and it is gruesome, a scarred and horrid remainder of what was once a human appearance. His humanity has been stolen by the city and in its place, it left him as chiseled as the bricks around him, a story of horror and warning to anyone who would follow the life he lived.

He whispers in my ear calmly, with a hint of chilling earnest “I think a swim in the water will help you to collect your thoughts. A dive is always good for relieving a bit of the pressure that one feels inside”. With that last decree I find my face being plunged into the murky water at my feet until my nose crashes into the grime covered concrete, bursting open with rose colored blood. I try to wriggle out of the hold they have me in but it is no use, my senses are overwhelmed as they hold me and rummage madly in my pockets for the coins they heard

singing to them. All I can see is the toxic concoction of greenish muck and red streaks swirling in front of my eyes until a silver streak passes in front of me. A coin! I lunge forward towards it and bite it as hard as I can sending waves of pain echoing in my mouth as I can feel the chunks of flesh and bony tooth giving way to the solid metal of the coin. The shadows shout in anger at my betrayal to this dive they have given me, and an onslaught of pain overpowers me. Bones crack and twist, as shadow tendrils kick and rip at what's left of me. All I can see is the rotting fingers clawing at the coin in my mouth, tearing at my lips for its silver luster.

Eventually, the shadows die down, frustrated with their quest but happy in what they have stolen, leaving me to float in a moat of bile, blood and toxic sludge. I stare at the cloudless sky wondering why I have given so much for a piece of silver that should mean less than the pain it took to get it. But it was worth it, I needed it more than I needed the flesh on my bones. With the crack of my ribs and a scream of agony I lift myself against the moldy bricks and slowly continue to walk towards the safety of the winking neon sign. The homeless man has not been bothered by the disturbance to his lonely incantations as he continues to mumble to the ghosts of the city who are the only ones who still listen to him.

As I escape the alley, stumbling towards the sign, the building finally comes into sharper focus. A small grey building with a few frosted windows, unwelcoming except for the neon cat

As I step out of the alley towards the building, I approach it with renewed fervor. It is a small grey building with only two frosted windows out front, emitting barely any light. It is covered by a small tarp out front to keep the entrance from becoming soaked in the downpour of water. The building is rather uninviting except for the pink neon cat, winking to those who understand what is inside. Salvation. I step inside and am greeted by a small glass counter with a larger, balding man behind it. His name is Rusty, and we have become well acquainted with one

another over these last few months, as I come in every night for the same thing to which he always utters the same response. He stares at me with contempt at having disturbed the silence of his small shop. As I approach the counter I am struck by my reflection in the mirror behind the counter. I look worse than the last time I dared to look at my appearance. Blood streams from my nose forming a river, with my two bloodshot eyes being the mountains from which it originates. My thinning brown hair and tattered, coat and pants complete my disgusting ensemble. It doesn't matter though, the man in the mirror is not who I am, it is the body I am stuck in during the day only to be liberated at night from this mortal shackle.

“Look as great as ever, Q”, Rusty utters with contempt and disgust at my increasingly disturbing appearance.

“One pack”, is all I say in reply. Words are unnecessary when it's the same lines being repeated in an endless cycle.

“Are you sure you want to go down this road again? I know a guy who-“

“One. Pack. Please.”, I say louder in order to cut off his speech.

He rolls his eyes and grabs a pack from under the counter and hands it to me. A pure white package with elegant black cursive scrawled across the front reading NOSTALGIA. Under that powerful word a small sales pitch lies underneath it, reading “To those days that are only memory”. I toss the wet, bloody coin at the counter and hurry out of the shop. Rusty shouts something at me but it doesn't matter I already have found the salvation I seek. I crouch down under the tarp in front to cover myself from the rain and rabidly tear into the white package, through the interior silver wrapping until I have a pure white stick in my hands. I put it to my cracked lips, flinching at the pain as it touches the nerves in my broken teeth. I flick a waterlogged lighter until a small flame finally is able to come out and with broken, twisted

fingers put the flame to the stick. My body aches, my mind hurts, but it doesn't matter as it will all be gone soon.

The smoke fills my mouth mixing with the blood and dirt in my mouth to form a grotesque cocktail of taste. The rotten taste of iron and grime soon fades as the smoke starts to fill my lungs, and I breathe it back into the dark night. Slowly the grime and darkness surrounding me fade out of focus and I am left with only my broken hand and white, thin stick, as the only two things I can really focus on. Eventually even those fade from my focus and I am enveloped in the memories of my youth. Joyful parties, lost loves, nights of wonder and amazement at what the future holds. As the memories hold me in their loving embrace I smile at my salvation for the night, letting my troubles fade away for a short while.