

## Concrete Dreams

By Arthur Klepchukov

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The steam rose up and moved across page thirty-three. Henry's jagged, dusty thumbnail pushed the paper down. He shifted his position over the large, cozy vent and tucked his feet in, to let them be in the path of the warm air. He coughed and continued reading.

After a pair of young women briskly clattered by, Henry looked up and touched the graffiti on the pavement outside of his warm home. The vibrant colors were the prettiest paintings Henry could imagine; they carpeted his home. The ground was quite chilly. There were few people on the streets, most were snuggling in their beds but Henry was comfortable too. His uneven beard and sprawling brown mustache, the result of a much-needed shave interrupted by a rabid mutt, moved into a small but hidden smile. He returned to the page he was trying to read with a refreshed seriousness.

"Evenin'."

Henry looked up to see Sam standing over him with an open can in his hand. He didn't respond as the younger man sat down, trying to warm himself by the vent. The unwelcome soul was greeted with a menacing look.

"Just tryin' ta warm my toes, don't worry, I'm not takin' your spot!" Sam reassured Henry, his green mask jiggling as he talked. Henry moved his feet again, making some room.

"Thanks... beans?"

Henry waved the dusty, half-finished can away.

"So, how'd today go?"

The reader exhaled in frustration and closed the book on this index finger. It was the third time that week Sam interrupted his reading. Earlier in the month, when he first saw Sam on the streets, Henry was weary of this new kid. He was often on the lookout for his frazzled blond hair, spraying in every direction like a greasy fountain. The kid insisted on always wearing this goofy, sparkling green theater mask. Henry didn't get it. What was he ashamed of now? Did he have some big stage dreams? Did he just want to stand out? With his sewer-green jacket and oversized, stained black jeans, Sam looked like a superhero from a world where the bad guys won.

He didn't answer the kid's question. The day had been the usual mix of hoping for change and trying to get through a few new pages. Their conversations were always one-sided. Sam usually asked a ton of questions that Henry never answered. This type of life was tough on the kid; he hadn't yet learned that you had to wait for the right person to ask anything.

"I'm really not comfortable with this," a bit of approaching conversation marched into the pairs of ears above the warm vent.

Two figures in dark suits wearily walked up and stopped nearby, not noticing that they weren't alone.

"Look, I'm not comfortable with it either," the second one replied, "but Jacobs has the best plan to avoid all the bad press this would lead to."

The first one put his hands on his hips. “Bad press? Bad press is not what I’m worried about! This stuff has seen exposure outside of the complex for a week. Who knows who it’s affected?”

“No one, ok?” the second one shot back as he got in his face, “and it’s gonna stay that way.” Henry coughed.

The two figures paused and looked over to see Sam and Henry quietly watching their argument. Sam eagerly nibbled on his beans – this was the closest he had been to TV drama in a month. The first man cursed under his breath and covered his mouth.

Sam raised his hand, “change?”

“Come on,” the second figure muttered, covering his nose and pulling the first man away by his arm. He looked back towards the two men on the ground. “No one could have been ex...” and his voice faded out of earshot.

“Assholes,” Sam exclaimed.

Henry grunted in agreement.

“Man, it’s a cold night. I can’t believe winter was ever my favorite season.”

The reader pulled his reliable brown beanie further down on his head and opened his book again.

“Have you noticed it’s been smelling different over here?”

Henry motioned with his head toward the sewer. Sam took two quick sniffs and adjusted his mask before frowning in displeasure. His innocent, baby blue eyes, tucked far away into the sparkling green, looked on with despair. He leaned back to get away from it all.

“Oh man, check out the stars!”

Henry did not reply.

“This view is one thing I don’t regret about spending the nights outside.”

Still silence.

“You like it?”

He disapprovingly shook his head and smiled. Henry loved how young this kid was and how much energy he still had.

For the next few minutes, Sam kept trying to think of a question but came up dry. He looked over at Henry’s book. He had always wondered, since he first saw the reader, how a man could spend any food money on something like a book. His eyes became fixated on the crusty yellow pages. Suddenly, he knew just how to get Henry to talk.

“What’s the main character’s name?”

Henry’s eyes slowly wandered up from the book and he turned to Sam, surprised. He took a second to judge whether or not the youngster really wanted to know.

“Sonny.”

Sam widely smiled with one side of his mouth and nodded his head. The dirty corners of his eyes wrinkled in a bit of satisfaction as if to say ‘finally.’

“He’s a ... a dentist. With a wife and a little girl.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to be silent. He playfully smiled and pointed at his bad teeth, causing both men to laugh.

Henry coughed a bit and his eyes watered.

“You finish these,” Sam said as he set the still unfinished can of beans down, “looks like you need ‘em more than I do.”

Henry motioned with his left hand as if to say he was okay but Sam was already rising to his feet.

“I’ll be back tomorrow man.” He started to walk away but turned around, “it was good... talking.”

The reader waved him goodbye. He watched the kid disappear down the hill, wrapping his long green jacket around himself to stay warm. The streetlight above started flickering. Henry paid no attention to it at first but it persisted and he finally looked up. His gaze stayed there, focused on the stars. He recalled a vague dream of wanting to be an astronaut as a kid. Right now the night looked almost... green.

The lamp post and the chain link fence behind him did not give Henry a full view of the sky. He looked at the barb wire on the fence, noticing how some of the sharp metal tips penetrated galaxies. He coughed once more and felt his body getting woozy.

He wondered if it was worth staying awake in hopes of getting change from any night-shifters from the factory or to get a page further in his reading. The stars blurred in his eyes and suddenly the mechanical hum of the streetlight loudly fizzled in his ears. He coughed again, unable to clear his throat. Henry decided he should sleep. He felt a lonely person walking by but before he could turn to ask the question, he slumped back softly on his vent, the steam blanketing his body. The book closed in his right hand.

They found Henry dead the next morning. He was still warm and his index finger was still on page thirty-three.