

# THE BEHOLDER

by Sawney Hatton

This morning, one much like any other morning, Alex awakens beneath the shuttered factory's awning of corrugated steel and, feeling his bladder ready to burst, scampers for the condemned apartment house nearby. Scaling the rusted ironwork of the fire escape, he makes his way to its summit.

At the ledge he peers across the rooftops at the sun rising over his city—his world—then unzips the fly of his baggy cargo pants and lets the warm golden fluid flow from him. He watches with awe as it cascades in a gentle arc, meeting the ground three floors below. The stream spatters on the cracked concrete, the droplets sparkling in the dawning light. The last of it dribbling from him, Alex revels in the relief he feels.

*Ahhhhhhhhh.*

He stares down at his creation and smiles jubilantly. Another glorious new day has begun for him. Again he is able to bless the world with something good, something beautiful. Something all from him. He is the lone source of this beauty, and for that he is proud.

Alex climbs down and kneels over the frothy pool. He gazes into it, the bubbles reflecting the gleam in his eyes. When he is thoroughly contented, he ventures out, his hunger leading him.

Pressing his ear up against the glass of the electronics store, Alex hears the news man on the television in the window announce it is Sunday. This makes Alex happy. Saturdays are when his favorite restaurant is its most crowded, often fully booked for dinner. He knows there will be plenty for him today.

Many evenings Alex has spent sitting patiently on the corner across from the eatery, waiting to catch a glimpse inside when its bronze double

doors opened. On such occasions, he has seen a wondrous jungle of potted plants within... handsome waiters in sleek blazers and crisp trousers racing back and forth, round silver trays carried upon their shoulders... suspended brass lamps that glow like candle flames, casting flickering shadows on the mahogany paneling... sweeping gild-framed paintings of whaling ships and fishing trawlers hanging on the walls.

Alex slinks around to the rear of the restaurant and lifts the heavy metal lid to the mammoth Dumpster. Meticulously digging through the debris, he uncovers a feast of steak morsels, bits of lobster, partially eaten buttered sweet rolls, slivers of rich chocolate cake. He devours these delicacies eagerly, and when his belly is sated and his energy refreshed, he takes a summer afternoon stroll about his city.

Alex marvels at the skyscrapers towering over him with unrivaled dignity. Flocks of pigeons swoop and soar above him. People mill around him heedlessly. Alex drifts among them, stirred by the rhythm of their spirited chatter, the honking of crosstown traffic, the rumbling of construction work, and the melodies of street musicians playing for coins and applause.

The pulsing beat titillates Alex's ears. He dances to it, twirling gracefully in the breeze, laughing. All the smells, pungent blends of fragrances and stench, tickle his nostrils. He strokes the smooth branches of saplings lining the curbs, plucks their green waxy leaves, kissing them with his dry, chapped lips—oh, there is the falafel man with his baseball cap, pushing his hot cart! Alex greets him with the friendliest smile and a cheery "hee-lo Fella Full Man!"

Time passes with the heat of the day.

Alex yearns to pet a puffy poodle dog, but its master tugs hard on its leash, hurrying off when Alex grows too close.

He plays with a cockroach, blowing on it to make it scurry about in different directions, then lets it go free into a sewer drain.

A police man, urging him to move on, taps the soles of his calloused feet with a club while he naps in a vestibule.

He quenches his thirst with tepid beer from a half-empty bottle left at the base of a streetlamp.

Some children spit on him and run away, giggling and shouting bad words.

He whistles a jaunty tune lingering in the haze of his memory.

As Alex tires from his daily wanderings, he realizes from the bright orange hue amid the clouds that the sun is setting. After nibbling on a piece of stale pretzel he had found in a gutter, he seeks out a comfortable, safe place to sleep.

He soon comes upon a little tailor shop downtown, displaying in its window coats draped on faceless mannequins. Over the entrance is a weather-battered sign with chipped yellow lettering Alex cannot read.

He circles around the building into a deserted alley strewn with cigarette butts, fast food bags, and soda cans. Twine-bound bundles of fabric lay along the brick wall. Alex deems this a cozy enough bedding for a night's rest. He mounts the bundles, crawling into the center of the heap, tears off some of the soft material and wraps himself in it to protect him from the chill of the night. He pulls from his waistband a crushed cigar he had been saving and finishes smoking it. He farts and picks crumbs from his bushy black beard, putting them in his mouth to chew. Then, sucking on his frayed shirt collar, he shuts his weary eyes, sighs approvingly, and dozes off...



Alex is startled awake by panicked pleading cries. He cowers under his blanket and silently peeks through a gap between a pair of aluminum trashcans.

There before him in the dim alley stands a gray-haired man in a gray business suit, his eyes wide, his breath quick, his chest heaving. Behind him a tall teenaged boy cups one palm over the man's mouth and thrusts a switchblade to his throat with the other. He whispers into the man's ear.

He nods. The boy then cautiously releases his clasp on the man's mouth and, still gripping the knife firmly against his jugular, explores his loose pockets with his fingers.

The man grabs the boy's forearm and struggles to pull it away from his neck. The blade slices his chin. He forces himself out of the boy's hold and stumbles away from him. The boy lunges. Stabs him deep in the throat. The man collapses, hands clutching his gushing neck. The boy fumbles through his pockets and removes a bulky wallet, then retreats into the night.

It begins to drizzle. A loud howling siren draws closer. As soon as the boy is out of sight, Alex flees the alley until the sound of the siren fades in the distance. At ease once more, he saunters up the illuminated city blocks. Steam billows from manholes. Cool raindrops run down his cheeks.

Alex had never before witnessed a man die. He is mesmerized by it... the way the man's body buckled, his face white and frozen like a statue... the way his limbs curled, as if he were dancing... the way his blood spouted from the gash, a dark halo forming beneath his head... the way his gargled groans echoed off the alley walls, a floating euphony.

Alex ponders how fortunate he is to be alive, to experience that man dying, to see him die.

It was beautiful.

And Alex believes that whenever he encounters something as beautiful from then on, he will remember the image of that man who gave his life so Alex could cherish it always. It was among the loveliest things he had ever beheld.

Even better than pissing from a rooftop on a sunny summer morning.