

WORDS FROM THE STREET

Sunday June 26, 2016

Antonin Cubrt

Little big man

His heart thumped deep and strong, waking him from his nightmare. He was being chased by a crazed demon, and he just had to keep running. Like a centipede, the relentless assailant moved impossibly fast, its face too grotesque to bear. Wait. No, that's wrong. The demon's head was actually twisted 180 degrees around, facing backwards! Tony shuddered as his eyes opened, his head dizzy and disoriented.

A door creaked, and light from the hall burst into the laundry room where Tony slept. He had broken into several apartment buildings to find shelter from the cold, dark, winter air. By some grace of god, this particular basement contained an old mattress, which the 16 year old homeless Tony came to rely on nightly, envying his buddies who had the luxury of retiring to warm, safe, familial homes. Out of the light a middle aged man appeared. "Oh!" remarked the surprised stranger.

Embarrassed, Tony instinctively leapt up, and began to collect himself. He was afraid he was in trouble. "Are you okay?" asked the stranger. Even though he was 'on the street,' Tony dreaded being seen as needing help. Like an animal he eked out a daily struggle for survival, hustling for change and cigarettes, and stealing food, or anything else, when he saw the opportunity. "I'm fine," Tony responded, "I gotta go." Tony threw on his coat and raced past the man and out the building.

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Since the video arcade wasn't open until 10, Tony headed to the only other warm place he knew he could go without having to buy something, the downtown bus station. At the station he found an empty chair, and plopped himself into it, and nodded off.

As daylight grew brighter, the station began to bustle with traffic. By 8 am, the familiar sight of high school kids transferring to the Central High bus were beginning to arrive. Tony would not be joining them. Ironically, in this moment, he wished that he had stayed in school.

Another familiar sight disconcerted him. He had noticed the thirty-something man, unmistakably peculiar in his light blue suit and nappy hair, on previous occasions at the station. On this particular day, the man walked up to Tony and discreetly handed him a note. "This is for you," the man said. Tony looked up at him, but he turned away as quickly as he had approached. Tony opened the small folded piece of paper. It read, "Come and meet me if you want to make some money." He looked up at the man who was now staring back at him from a wall across the station. Tony's heart sank, and an empty pain filled his stomach. Though tender in years, he had learned something, somewhere, of how kids get exploited like this. "What is this?" he thought to himself, "Sex? Violence?" Disturbing images of what this jerk might have in mind flashed through his brain. His street instincts kicked into gear. Making sure the man's gaze was still fixed upon him, awaiting his reply, Tony demonstratively crumpled up the paper and tossed it into an adjacent trash can. He was letting the man know that he was not up for....whatever.

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“Goddamn creep!” he thought to himself. Slightly shaken, he sensed a breakdown coursing through his veins. His whole body, and indeed his soul, seemed to tremble with emotional and psychological overload. The low level of humanity that the teenaged Tony was being exposed to on the streets was beginning to overwhelm him. He had no preparation, no skills for this. He had to get the hell out of there. Ashamed to be seen crying, he rushed out the far door of the station, into the frozen exterior.

He tried to muffle the blubbing that was forcing itself out through his taugt mouth. Like throwing up, he wanted somewhere private to let it out. He quickly ducked around the back of the station, and slumped against the wall. Though his mother had given up on him, maybe rightly so, for all his wildness and trouble, he really needed her in this moment. “Mom, please!” he muttered in despair. He was so lonely, so vulnerable. A strong gust of wind whipped him in the face, freezing his tears. He tried to be a big man at 16 years of age, but he was now just a boy who needed his mother. “Help me!” he pleaded. New tears soaked his face, and he sobbed as quietly as he could manage.