



## The Heart of the City

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My feet ramble down the cracked city-sidewalk. Uneven pavement juts up toward me ready to strike like alligators in a marsh. Steam rises up from sewer grates and swirls about in the dense fog creating an eerie swamp-like atmosphere. At each break in the concrete, I encounter another depraved soul shouting his part in the circus that is the street. Each with something to peddle: whether it be a car-stereo, the promise of salvation, or his own hard-luck-story—whatever to weasel a dollar from me. The pathway narrows. My eyes search feverishly for the point where the sidewalk morphs into the heart of the city.

The sidewalk opens; I arrive at a small gated street-piazza. Here still, in the bitter cold, I find a crowd as warm and vibrant as the vermilion that dapples the landscape. The drunken entourage beyond the gate throw their heads back in jest. They gather me in with a merriment so boisterous it lifts me up and carries me inside.

Reaching forward I grasp a flimsy metal-framed door; I sling it open with great ease. Warmth pours out of the establishment neither from a hearth nor a heater but from the unmistakable energy of bustling persons. All together—all apart—the natives share dances, cocktails, anecdotes, and their plates with one another. Their laughter rings through the air and draws me in further. The air is heavy but not choking. Smoke snakes around corners inviting my eyes to gaze upon more interesting sights.

My eyes are bombarded with bursting images from all angles. To my left aging-hipsters are slumped on couches waxing intellectual about the catatonic rock-scene, while cunning under-agers belly up to the bar in hopes of being served. To my right a diner-style café where hash is slung fast enough to make your head spin! Straight ahead lay a fork in my path. On the horizon a bowling alley lay engulfed in smoky shadows. I watch as prospective bowlers trade in their pristine kicks for patchwork pairs of bowling shoes and bright-marbleized balls. Planted firmly in front is a towering staircase upholstered in rag-tag leopard carpet.

Climbing the leopard stairway, I allow my feet to reminisce to times of richer textures, legendary glitz, and ballroom-glory. The air is thinner at the top of the staircase. A cloud of denser smoke begins to dawn above a small stage set in the background.

The wail of a waning-blues-guitar charges the air and beckons you toward the stage; it cuts through the humid fog that engulfs the listeners. The soulful riffs penetrate my ears and seeps into the brain—they own me. All around me, skillful patrons guzzle lager and trade stories as some gaze out from arched cathedral windows upon a once dismal city—now brought to life from the inside. The whole idea of the place is different from the second floor. The vibe is decidedly more *intense*.

The bluesy-rock-rhythms punctuate the evening. Aching feet glued to a sticky floor support your weary body. As I sway, the eroding tile underneath creaks as if it will give way to the raging party below. My lagging body struggles to catch up to the experience. Suddenly, I grip an icy steel rail that surrounds the stage—the chill sobers me. I am awakened to the entranced cult filing down the grand staircase. The evening that is held up by this incredible place now begins to unravel. I, too, join the mass and make my way down the incline, only to discover a now frigid room below.

Refocusing my dried eyes, I stare out upon the now deserted scores of tables and chairs. Nothing remains but the clutter of glasses being cleared away like old newspapers and hungry-hanger-ons scarfing down what's left on their plates. Even bowlers relinquish their clown shoes with no strikes to report. I point myself straight ahead and wrap myself tightly in my coat. Pushing through a seemingly heavier door I prepare for the hollow walk that awaits me. The colorful cavalcade of characters has moved on. I am left with the imperfect pavement and the promise of a dim walk—accompanied only by the biting winds of autumn.