

A FRIEND

Eric Tupper

Another morning crawled inside the doorway where he huddled. The sun, filtered by the mist and the smoke of the two rusty tugs that worked the nearby bay, was not a blinding yellow glare, but rather a dull pale squint that made him rub his eyes and cough away the dampness. The bay weather was the same as it had been for years. It was damp and chilly at night with just enough breeze to stir the black night into shimmering curtains of fog. The day would be the same as the last, and tomorrow would be the same as today. Time never stood still, but yet things never seemed to change, either.

Last night, he had slept in an old doorway, the night before it had been in an abandoned automobile, and the old broken cot in the Benevolent Home was where he slept before that. Unable to imagine even comfort and warmth, he found reality and escape in a stale beer left on the bar at closing or in a last melted swirl of Scotch left by an unknown benefactor.

His day began with a deep cough and a hacking in his hollowed chest. Surely the bay air was killing him, just as was the mixture of escape and necessity that he consumed each night. He was the kind of man you saw when you and your father went down to meet the ferry.

His figure was not frozen every morning; it was only cowering from the cold damp night that disappeared into morning when the fog was burned away. His coat wasn't wool or tweed, but was a melange of patches of old and new. His shoes matched, almost. They both had holes in the cracked leather soles. His eyes were sullen and red, no blue or green or brown showed in them. They were just red, and in the middle of each was a tint of gray the color of modeling clay. He was small but erect. He might have even been a clerk long ago. He probably wore armbands and a visor and worked in a cage. His sooty mane topped a drawn and shrunken face that reflected not even a smile of hope.

As quietly as his yesterday ended, his today began. But his tomorrow did not come. Tonight on the other end of the dock, he groped through the fog, stumbled on a stack of rope, and escaped reality. His bloated body bobbed amid the wormy pilings. They fished him out two days later with a big dull hook.