

## **Where the Crosswalks are Taking Us**

**By Reid Brown**

Alton's head hurt again when he woke up last Tuesday morning. Pressure lingered from another night of falling asleep too early before everything got quiet, after another six a.m. alarm. When he had shifted over under the covers, the other side of the bed was empty and the sheet seemed to stretch out for miles of cotton underneath the slide of his palm, but it was still warm. So he pulled himself up and thought about starting that morning—starting that Tuesday like every other one, with his socks hitting the carpet of their bedroom first.

He hadn't remembered what had happened while he was pulling on his pants or taking his shirt off the hanger, the realization only occurred to him as he was tying his tie, and suddenly the fabric of it felt tighter around his neck. What sleep had casted from his mind, was soon back right where it started. He'd felt like he couldn't breathe. Maybe it had all been in his head, he'd thought, as he'd straightened the cuffs of his jacket sleeves and looked up at himself in the mirror. Same old, same old. But then he heard the quiet hum of her fumbling around in the kitchen, so he exhaled. Remembered. He didn't want to lie.

She hadn't been sleeping well since their daughter was born. Neither of them had. She could always hear her cries through the thin walls of their two bedroom apartment and never failed to wake up to go soothe her back to sleep. Alton was forgetting how his wife looked when she had enough hours of rest. On those first nights, she would jump out of bed, like hearing the sound of a newborn baby was something to be afraid of. Recently, though, when things like that happened, she sat up slowly, her shoulders dragging back a bit, more used to the sound by now. They hadn't woken up together in such a long time. She was always on her third coffee by the time he came in and she handed him his first. They talked in short, mumbled phrases and her hair was still messy as she smiled up at him in the dim glow of the kitchen light. His hands shook so much he had to put his mug on the table.

When she kissed him goodbye, and wished him a good day at work, it still felt the same. He still held her for a moment too long, but when he waved over his shoulder and shut the front door behind him, his briefcase felt too heavy, a stone to the end of his arms, and the tie around his neck got tighter with the heat of that Tuesday morning. Alton thought about how the city seemed to hold onto heat longer than it ever did the cold. He could feel the warmth of it through his shoes as he glared ahead on his usual walk.

Instead of taking two rights and a left to his office, humming the same songs to himself that she did to get their baby to sleep, he walked straight that day and kept going until he came to a busy crosswalk.

Cars and buses were just starting to wake up too, getting faster and faster and louder as they passed and the city remembered that it wasn't ever supposed to sleep. He shoved his empty hand into his pocket and leaned his head back to watch the sign flicker from red to 'walk'. And

he stayed there. He smiled as he felt the vibration of all the wheels slowing to a stop, as the old smell of cigarette smoke coated his throat.

“Ain’t you gonna move, Buddy?”

He turned to look over his shoulder at an older man who had spoken to him. He looked to be in just as little of a rush as he did. Alton replied quietly, “Well that would be the smart thing right? You walk when it tells you to.”

“That is what they put it up there for in the first place.” Alton shrugged and the old man coughed hard into his fist. A car honked beside them. The sign changed back.

“I guess I just don’t really have anywhere to go today. Funny how that is.” Alton shifted.

“All dressed up like some big corporate man, of course you’ve got somewhere to go. A regular Willy Loman, you are.” the old man’s face brightened a little with his own clever smile. His voice was almost lost over the sound of engines.

“That is the point I suppose, I had to make it look like I had somewhere to end up today besides this light.” Alton paused, “So where are you off to then?” He had to repeat himself twice before the old man nodded his head.

“Oh, I’m not going anywhere. I’m already here,” he nodded to the road in front of them. “Here is home. After a while, all this concrete starts to feel like a soft place, you know. I just shift around from time to time.”

Alton glanced to his side and got his first full look of the man. His shoulders were pulled down, clothes were patched, dirt between his knuckles. He carried nothing and stood in a way that made him seem quiet. He was invisible, soft like the streets he claimed. He spoke like a rich man though, his little smile showed something like pride. Alton turned fully and shook his hand.

“Good to meet you this morning, Sir.”

“Sure, sure. You too, Buddy. I’m always here.” he grasped his hand firm. “Now you better be off getting to nowhere, a man can’t stay still too long in one place,” he paused, “he gets comfortable with staying.”

The light changed again over them. A few more cars honked. The old man walked off and left Alton standing solidly on the edge of the white line of the crosswalk, with his empty briefcase and too warm shoes.