

Uniquely Portland

by Sean Brown

To the good, tax-paying people of the city, he looked like any other street person from Oldtown. Shuffling between Chinatown, the Library, the Waterfront, and the Shelter; he put miles on tattered shoes with their broken Velcro straps. No one looked at him twice except to avoid eye contact. Middle-ish aged, and normal-ish looking, wearing average-ish clothes for an average-ish bum; they'd seen it all too many times. Spare some change mister, how about a little something to eat, he'd say as they scurried silently past. Rejected at every turn, hardly believing he was human anymore. No strangers thought to treat him as a man, and maybe they were onto something. Like the rats in alley by Skidmore Fountain, screeching and clawing, he learned to avoid the light whenever possible. Shuffling along any random rainy day, he stopped in a coffee shop to use the bathroom. He knew that they would turn him away. Restrooms are for customers only, they'd say, but the shop was busy, and like the rat, he didn't think anyone would notice.

Sliding through the shop and into the bathroom, he locked the door quickly and exhaled audibly. Dropping the plastic grocery sacks, the canvas duffle, the purple backpack; he took off his hood and looked in the mirror. His eyes burned red, and his dark matted hair stuck out at sideways angles. Scabs along his neck and under his chin seemed to dance in the harsh fluorescent lighting. His chest tightened as the room dimmed, and the constant ringing in his ears became a roar. He slumped to his knees and moaned, asking why. What did he do to deserve this prolonged torture, this pain. He wished for death to take him there in that Oldtown bathroom, anything to relieve his suffering. He saw his mother standing over him, and he called out to her for help, but she only laughed and faded into the paper towel dispenser. He saw the face of God in the mirror, and he begged for forgiveness, for release, for mercy. For anything to stop him from putting that needle in his arm again.

Tears streaming, he sobbed and convulsed and thrashed against the walls.

And I stood on the other side of the bathroom door, listening to his tortured pleas, wishing he'd hurry up, because I really had to pee.

