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In Autumn

By John Zarchen

Milo McGee shuffled carelessly into the street zipping up his fly. Tattered grey flannels, baggy and beltless, surrounded his legs and rather large stomach. A Homburg, obviously his prize possession, sat proudly atop his half-head of sabled grey hair. Milo's shirt was stolen from a boy he once knew. It was blue with four breast pockets. Each pocket contained some item necessary for survival; string, cotton balls, assorted safety pins, matches, and a corkscrew. He stood in the hazy, cool September light of New York's 125th street looking, watching, aimlessly panning the quiet street.

Seldom did Milo do in any one day more than any other. In short Milo rarely did anything. The minutes of his day were snowflakes: coming in rapid succession, or slowly, or heavily, or they would come thick and choking, even often they would just cease, hold their breath, and wait. Milo pulled at his nose, twisted his lips, and sneezed. His sharp green eyes watered, and using a small tuft of cotton that he carried in his lower left breast pocket he dabbed at their corners.

"M-M-M-ilo...h-h-hey Milo!" came from an unknown source. Milo looked about slowly, his eyes like trowels digging into the crevices of pavement and buildings. "M-M-M-ilo!" came the shrill voice. Milo again scanned the street and adjacent alleys. Seeing no one he tossed his hand into the street, let it fall to his thigh, and turned to walk back into the alley. His black buckle-booted feet scraped a small segment of sidewalk when he was stopped by the sharp stuttering voice, "M-M-M-ilo its me T-T-Tooly. Over here." A burr of black curly hair was held aloft above a pile of garbage across the street. Tooly's thin lanky form sprang from behind the pile, and bounced gleefully to where Milo stood, still enjoying the soothing sun.

"D-d-d-idn't see m-m-me over there d-d-did you?"

"Aye" Milo replied, his eyes tugging at Tooly's jacket.

"Haven't s-s-seen you f-f-for a while huh?" Tooly queried, smiling and patting Milo on the back.

"Aye" Milo said clasping Tooly's lean black hand in his own "its been a time." They stood hand in hand sharing a pulse for a full minute before turning and sliding into Milo's alley.

Their heavy breaths filled the alley with static thrusts; airborne hands feeling and scratching at the brick and soot, the crawling nitre of these city catacombs. Dribbling and wet, sticky droplets, straw mats to sleep on, and garbage. An odor of human excretion, exhaust from the Chinese restaurant next door, and gin pricked their nostrils and palates. But now, eyes closed to the open sore, a human confluence to pass the snowflake minutes.

"M-M-M-Milo?" Tooly said turning his head toward him.

"Aye" he replied.

"It g-g-g-ets c-c-c-c-older at night now."

"Aye"

"I m-m-m-ight g-g-g-go away" Tooly said timidly. Milo did not answer.

"T-t-to Florida M-M-M-ilo." He continued. Milo still did not answer, but lay on his small, frayed straw mat staring through the angular lense at pale blue changing white air.

"M-M-M-ilo I c-c-can't stay again. For the c-c-c-old Milo. I c-c-c-an't. We's gonna go to Florida Milo. Whince, Stagolee, B-B-B-ubba, an' m-m-m-e. We's gonna go Milo."

"Aye." Milo said sighingly as he stood up.

"I w-w-w-ants you t-t-t-o go too Milo." Tooly said, leaping to his feet and facing him.

I got me home." He replied blankly.

"What about the s-s-s-now M-M-M-ilo?"

"Aye, it snows."

"And the c-c-c-old?!"

"Aye its cold."

"M-M-M-ilo you'll d-d-d-iel!" Tooly said pleadingly.

"I ain't yet me friend, but aye, I might." With this Milo ambled to the front of his cavern, and glazed the street with his burning green eyes. Tooly followed.

"How long y-y-you been here?" Tooly asked, taking a new track.

"Long time me friend." Milo answered, fixing his gaze on a half bottle of gin that lay prostrate in the gutter.

"You s-s-s-tay all the w-w-w-inters?"

"Aye."

"What do you eat M-M-M-ilo?"

"The same thing." Milo said gently, taking three steps to the curb, and bending to pick up the gin.

"All w-w-w-inter?" Tooly queried.

"Aye me friend. It keeps me blood warm, and the Devil's snakes in the street where their likes belong."

"I c-c-c-an't do it M-M-M-ilo." Tooly said scratching the ground with his shoed foot "its t-t-t-oo cold."

"I ain't a rich man me friend. I ain't have the licks always, but I got me spirit. Me spirit is in these bricks and in this air, my blood run down these walls and back into me bones. Aye me friend I might die. But I got me spirit." Milo's green eyes flared and danced about madly. He turned and clutched Tooly's forearms, drawing their forms together. "You stay too Tooly." He said slowly with unblinking countenance. "You ain't been here. I want you here."

"I b-b-b-een uptown s-s-s-ome Milo. I's been livin' with S-S-S-tagolee." Tooly offered quiltily. "We's gonna go to Florida Milo. C-C-C-ome with us." He continued, putting his arms around Milo's waist. Milo tore away, and turning, facing the wall he raised up his hands, and carressed the bricks with his thick pudgy fingers.

"This is me home Tooly. I can't leave. Say with me here-we'll chase the Devil and sing, stay me friend."

"I c-c-c-an't I-"

"Stay!" Milo cried out, pounding the wall "stay and...and...ohhh" he trailed off. Milo pivoted on black buckle-booted feet, and stared with white and watering green eyes at Tooly. Embracing him in sobbing passion he whispered quietly, "Stay, me friend."

The snowflake minutes swirled away, stripping the sky, the garbage, the cold dripping nitre, the noxious airs of fear, and they stood lonesome, all alone.