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The Shadow Man

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The Shadow Man || **JOHN BRITTO**

It was impossible to tell which creature was more defeated the sickly broken man or his small black dog. Both were malnourished and filthy; their stench was more than just noticeable. They huddled together, blind to their bustling surroundings, sitting on a scrap of wrinkled cardboard on the cold sidewalk.

Afternoon shoppers, tourists, couriers, mail carriers office workers on a break, mothers holding their children's hands rushed by. All were living life, all ignoring the almost invisible beggar and his dog.

The pair blended in with a blur of street lights plastered with colored flyers and a group of newspaper stands offering free information about young sexy escorts. The dejected duo camped at the edge of a red curb by an illegally parked car.

Periodically, a siren would pierce the air as an ambulance raced by. A few yards away, a group of street vendors, eager to make every sale, could be heard shouting as they hustled their wares to gawking pedestrians.

The drifter had a tiny sign made from an old shoe box scribbled with uneven black letters. His sign leaned against a rumpled back-pack; it asked, quite simply, for money to buy food. On the bottom of the sign, almost too small to read was a tag line: "I 'm a veteran." Those were the words that commanded my attention; the words that made me take a hard look into the shadows. By a tragic twist of fate his journey from honorable service to horrible sadness placed him here while mine took another path.

The scruffy mixed-breed dog had tinges of orange around his ears with random flecks of what was in an earlier time, white. He was, apparently, a friendly long-haired mongrel. Hanging around his thin neck was a shabby brown leather collar that was too large for him.

On occasion, the dog would look up, slowly, usually to yawn or whenever someone walked by shouting into their cell phone. Two of its teeth were missing. His best days were clearly behind him. All things considered, the dog was probably quite happy just to be cared for, even if meagerly.

The broken man sat slightly hunched-over with his legs crossed. Absent mindedly, he stroked the dog with a rough, grimy hand; his other hand held a short smoldering cigarette. The hands looked as if they had spent time rummaging in a dumpster. His sad eyes were half-shut most of the time; bushy brows ran together above sockets that were sunken and hollow. Most of his aging face was shrouded in a matted, rumpled beard. A ball cap was hard pressed onto his head.

His tattered survival clothing was more packed-than worn. The frayed articles were in thick layers: Each piece representing a mix of styles from a previous decade. He was between 32 and 47 years old. The age was difficult to determine. Hard living had sucked the life out his abused body.

From a distance, I saw his lips moving. There were no discernable sounds. He was talking, but apparently very softly. Maybe he was talking to the dog. Maybe he was talking to himself. Or, maybe he was talking to the people walking by asking for coins.

My suspicion was that he was talking to the ghosts who lived within him, the ghosts who beat him and haunted him. Ghosts who shouted in his ear night and day about what might have been, what could have been...and what will never be. Ghosts from a horrible past, a past filled with powerful pains and shattered promises.

It was a clear day with small milky clouds being pushed east by an offshore breeze. It was a Saturday afternoon in San Francisco. It was a brief moment in front of Macy's. It was a lone veteran being ignored as he sat uncomfortably in a shadow: A prisoner of his past begging for his future.
