



## THE MAN WHO DIDN'T KNOW WHAT HE WAS

A winter day in Chicago, twenty years ago, yet troubling still. Snow streaming like sharp whips against our faces in a hard wind off the Lake. Rimming eyelids, piercing coat-hoods, as we hurried down a Grant Park path toward our destination. Those great bronze lions now in focus through glazed tears—promised warmth and level drone of the Art Institute, where my youngster, Ted, and I meant to spend our City-sojourn day. And did.

We spied him on a park bench near the exit ramp—its glazed sign pointing to the Gallery I doubted if he'd ever set a foot within. Or if he had, slouched just inside the great glass doors, with other “city scum,” when goaded there by needling pain on those most frigid lakefront noons (twenty below, at times), till booted out. We spied him bowed immobile as a lohan seeking wisdom, barely visible through gusts of swirling snow (strangely like the dragon-clouds we'd come to see, encircling those votive Saints in ancient Chinese scrolls).

The ground around him lay beneath a soft white film that seemed to purify the clotted shreds of newspaper, the brittle crap of shuffling birds. That cooing swarm of city fowl that doubtlessly surrounded him, on warmer days, to snatch whatever scraps might fall from swollen shopping bags, propped on either side of him like guardian hounds. Stuffed with quick finds of a life of skulking between vendors' bins—mildewed buns, cans, scraps of hardened candy bars. Gleaned, obsessively beyond his need, when risen from his torpor those rare moments he was clear.

When suddenly awaking amid blustering wisps of snow—not seeing us, or anyone, or anything in that near world of shrieking bus brakes, hurried steps, long streaks of littered muck—he stretched gaunt arms toward gray clouds, gazed fiercely up with a terrific *Yawp*. And then began, in his loose coat of threadbare black, to *flap* and *flap* and *flap* . . . till slumping down in an exhausted heap. Like a ragged

nestling faint from straining toward its mother's beak, denied the masticated lump. Slumped there, still as death.

Strange momentary birdlife he'd become! I remember how I'd pondered *then*: was it blind miming of those pigeons, distant now and packed against each other's filthy warmth under arched colonnades and stone museum eaves? But oftentimes surrounding him, a faithful despised tribe in a lost world (he likely tossed the crumbs of scavenged fare, days he was clear)—now huddled into hidden nooks, fled like a cloudy dream.

It was then Ted blurted it, squeezing my hand, as we hurried past bowed into snow. Hurried trying hard, myself, to avoid his passive eyes. Eyes which, though he slumped there, seemed to glow—I'll not forget this thought—with some queer inner peace on that cold Chicago bench (as my boy piped, squeezing my hand): "*Daddy, did you see that man? He didn't know what he was.*"