

The Hollow Man in the city of lights

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The Hollow Man in the city of lights

by [PeculiarlyEmpty](#)

Summary

A stranger in a city of lights; a singer's troubles with humanism and exploitation; a conspiracy to overthrow the kingdom of heaven.

Or, flickers of meaning in the midst of a sea of turgid mediocrity as Boxer saves two lives by attending a concert on a whim.

Notes

More to come, hopefully.

Chapter 1: The wheeling stars

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itr@tux ~ $ gcc init.c  
cc1: fatal error: init.c: No such file or directory
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compilation terminated.

Init()...

The City was a place of schizophrenic moods, weather patterns that, on a good day, verged on nonsensical, and a populace that loved it for that. The City had always been -

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that was what they said at least. Administrators were always there to guide the Will of the people, and the people were there to add that spark of ingenuity that Administrators could never properly synthesize. And thankfully, in their divine wisdom, the Administration provided the people of City with copious amounts of alcohol, in a dazzling variety of forms.

Boxer, arms propped on the counter, threw back his fourth drink of the evening, coughing slightly at the taste. The bar he was in wasn't packed -- nothing this side of the Narrows ever was, bless em. This far from \$CITY_CENTER, either the poorest residents, or the astonishingly misanthropic lived. Boxer still wasn't really sure which one he was.

Cloudbank's citizens never really 'worked', perse. At least that was the line everyone spouted. Citizens were provided for, and in return, they beautified the dazzling streets of City with their being, their lifeforce, their personality. Grand words that rung hollow in cynical ears, but nobody was *forced* to live in Cloudbank, after all. This was no despotic hell hole, and even Boxer couldn't fault the Wardens, in their grand towers of spun glass and Synthement too much.

'Another shot'? The Tender was a man of medium height who nonetheless appeared squat. Bearded, with a hint of jowels, he lived up to the cliché admirably and was one of the reasons Boxer liked this bar.

'Please', Boxer responded, 'I've nowhere to go tonight.'

The Tender, whose nom d'plume was apparently Slick chuckled, before palming a bottle of the odd liquid riddled with green tracers, like veins. 'I understand that, most certainly I do.' He refilled Boxer's glass. 'I don't normally pry into my customer's lives, but I've a way with faces, and you're young enough to be at Academy -- not interested?'

And that was the way of it, interest. It wasn't like Cloudbank charged for people to study; to go pursue a lifetime and a half of artwork, finery and chase the dream of being truly *wanted*. Boxer sighed, sipping at his drink this time. 'Not much the Academy type, myself.'

Tender -- for Boxer was damned if he was going to say 'Slick'-- hummed along, feigning interest in a manner neither too attentive, nor too polite. Boxer would continue if he wished to, or he wouldn't. That was the unspoken rule of the Bar so to speak. When the drink started crawling in his guts and the silence of the two men began to feel leaden, Boxer finally gave in. 'It strikes me as ironic, that in a city that's constantly changing, everybody just wants you to be the same -- you know?'

The Tender smiled and nodded because he **did** know. Too many out here, far from \$CITY_CENTER and the Cloudbank heights preferred themselves or ways even they weren't too sure of. It was why he'd pain the lease on the space for the Bar. Though it'd not been much, it would've been easier to rent the place, but he preferred to have full control over its mannerisms, and not have it subjected to the kaleidoscopic workings of the inner city.

Boxer guessed at the whistful smile behind the Tender's pudgy face and nodded. Many of them had a similar story -- individualists in a city too aggressively individual to tolerate. Boxer coughed then as the drink got a second life in his stomach. 'Edge, man -- what is this stuff? It's like it's alive or something.'

'My own personal brew,' the Tender said, pulling the bottle off the shelf. 'Hayworth and I dreamt it up way back before the Bridge to uptown was a thing. I get it out on the wistful nights, when there's less grey folk to waste it on.'

Boxer nodded, knocking his knuckles a little too hard on the material of the Bar. He couldn't tell what it was made out of, but that was true for a lot of things in City.

The heat of the alcohol was going to his face now, and that edging feeling like somebody was just over his shoulder, or the need to keep an eye on the Tender had finally faded. He actually smiled briefly at the guy, finishing the drink as it continued about its magic.

'You ever wonder about it all, Slick' inwardly, he cringed at the sobriquet, but continued: 'Why we're here, how the City came to be, why you never see any banking Selections? This last was an old joke, and Tender chuckled obligingly. Still, he sighed and seemed to give the questions some serious thought.

'Does it matter?' His usual indulgent smile was missing, leaving his face weather-worn and tired looking. 'You and I, a gray, hell -- even the most uptight human resources Selectionist -- we don't truly care. We live in Utopia -- or some lil' piece of it. Naw'body starves, naw'body has n'ought to do but live 'ther best lives and get **marvelously** drunk.

Here the Tender stopped to sample his own product, a different bottle that seemed like it contained starlight in tiny clusters.

The bar was empty save for the two of them. It was that tired time of night where the stars seemed to wheel overhead, and clear out here beyond \$City_Limits, you could hear an owl or two in the distance. Boxer sighed. He didn't *need* to get up tomorrow, just like nobody *really* needed to work. That was the gift (and the curse) of Cloudbank. You could just gray out; drift from place to place and fade into the background like an old, cardboard box.

Some people enjoyed that, the sacrifice of their individuality on the alter of material comfort.

Boxer sighed again, the melancholy of the moment seemingly fueled by the alcohol. 'I have work in the mornin... *later* this morning' he corrected. 'Best be getting going, how much do I owe you?'

Bartender quoted a sum that was probably less than it should've been, and Boxer paid him slightly more than that with some clever slight of hand. The hiss of the door closing behind him was comforting somehow, and he let the darkness of the night here on the outskirts of City swallow him whole.

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There are few things as absurd as volunteering for unpleasant things. Boxer kept busy how he could, usually, and today found him delivering stacks of some such thing up one of the absurdly tall towers in \$CITY_CENTER. Coming this far uptown seemed almost garish to him, but it was a job and while he wasn't needy he enjoyed the work.

He'd ridden his bike up past crowds of grays going about their buisness, then stores all dolled up with their Mid_town finery and finally passed the tollgate and Bridge into \$High_Town proper. Miles of entangled buildings, soaring balconies and skywalks the color of misty clouds during sunset soared above him, and he had to slow down lest the dazzling light cause him to wreck. With every new sight bringing something more beautiful than the last, it seemed to him a waste to clump them all together like this.

Parking his bike and using his Device to lock it, he unlatched the package from behind him and stepped into the flow of the crowd. He almost held his breath, as if he was diving under water and as usual, the countless numbers of people and their clashing, almost anachronistic styles took him aback.

He bumped and shoved his way to the doors of the building he needed, and stepped from the causeway, and almost ran into a lone gray that was trying to get in as well. Boxer sighed; grays were like pets in the way they seemingly worked their way into places they shouldn't be.

It took him a full fifteen minutes to navigate the stairs and elevators that snaked their way around the monolith. At this point he wondered if it never ended; if there were just hidden kilometers and kilometers of antechambers and grand staircases, lobbies and conference rooms up here.

Just when he thought he might never actually find the place, the System spat him out at an unassuming floor that held a modest entry chamber and a solid looking door that held the lavish Academy designs you rarely found anywhere else. Confirming that this **was** the place with his device, he set the package he'd been lugging down and rapped conspicuously scarred knuckles on the odd, transluscent metal.

Turning to leave, he heard the door fly open, and a wry, woman's voice ask 'Won't you even stay for drinks? Gah -- usually it's just grays they send, but finally it's somebody **interesting**.'

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Her name was Sybil Reisz and apparently she needed another job done. That there were six other people in the apartment never seemed to cross her mind as she invited him in, and poured him a glass from another ridiculously ornate bottle of something.

'It's **review** day,' she exclaimed, over the other conversation in the room. This meant nothing to Boxer, but he let her assume he was some Academy student looking for experience or chasing some muse.

'Sky above! Anyway, we need a whoole **lot** of material delivered -- but not here, mind you-- and frankly, I don't have the patience to wait for another worker -- you haven't **heard** Adrien and his poetry, or Royce's --'

Her voice broke off as she seemed to outpaced herself for a moment. Boxer just stared straight ahead, trying to imagine not being here. These people saw whatever they wanted to see, heard whatever they wanted to hear.

Still though -- Boxer could work a room. Stepping forward, he plastered that smile that, when given with genuine feeling turned the ladies' hearts.

'I'm certain whatever Royce does is superb -- what job did you have for me?'

Sybil didn't even blink.

'Oh it's just a delivery -- you know how they are --, but we prefer to avoid grays whenever possible -- you know how uncomfortable they make people --. But there'll be a lot of people there, and when I saw you, all I thought was you would blend in nicely.

Boxer considered the fact she hadn't paused for breath and was mildly impressed. Also, the gaudy pink-ness of her ensemble extended to the apartment and his regard slowly withered into a touch of disgust. While she went on and on about the job, her friends, the up-and-coming performers that would be there, he worked his way to the drinks counter and poured himself a generous slug of a whiskey he enjoyed. Sybil certainly didn't mind, commodities were more of an academic concept in cloudbank when you were a favorite of Traverson.

Abruptly, she took his arm and led him to the window. Before him, the shifting city-lights of Cloudbank, and the dazzling core that was \$City_Center which he noted wasn't too far away.

'I can't get enough of the lights,' Sybil remarked, back turned to him. 'I love this city.' She spread her arms and grinned, 'I love the lights, I love the parks, I love how every time I go out in the morning something is different.' She had the look of a genuine Cloudbank zealot, and Boxer didn't want to interrupt.

Like a curtain falling, any passion he held for this deceit, for this conversation fell away leaving the avolition and the crushing emptiness behind. With the desperation of a drowning man, he choked down the rest of his drink in an attempt to rekindle some of his zest. However the alcohol, rather than feeding his withered sense of humanity seemed to kill him inside.

He needed to get away. He needed to be apart from these glitzy, glamorous children of an empty city. He was a Hollow man among a populace of twittering bird people feeding off each other's energy. He stammered something about needing to be someplace else, barely maintaining the barest vestige of polite candor. One of the two other men in the room, who had been conversing with a third, older man seemed to frown as if he'd only noticed Boxer just this second.

When he'd already wrenched the door open and was halfway to the elevator already, Sybil called after him, 'Before you go, I still haven't your name! Or your Selections!' She seemed confused.

Boxer stabbed the call button, throwing over his shoulder the first lie he normally used with these people. As the doors closed, the look on Sybil's face was enough to lighten his mood somewhat.

For some reason people always believed him when he said Animal Husbandry and Meditation.

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