

## The Infinity Cloak

Hot water. Raining. Flowing. Cascading. Its snaking streams navigating their way through every wrinkle on his weathered, naked skin. The water beats down on the back of his frail neck like a stream of sand, obliterating his worries as he basks in a shower of pure feeling. Straining to straighten his back, his flaky thin lips crease into a bittersweet smile as the torrent of water loosens his tired old muscles. He won't feel quite this good again. Every day is a new and more difficult struggle.

He is clean, but not finished; bored, though reluctant to say goodbye to such a sweet thing. His attention turns to the fogged up plate-glass walls that enclose his pleasurable prison. He swipes a hand at the canvas, tearing a swathe of clarity through the cloudy blanket. Squinting to look upon his creation, he rubs the water from his failing eyes in vain with wet hands. It reminds him of a flower's stem, a pretty flower, just beginning to droop in the summer heat.

Pointing the finger of a trembling hand he finishes the picture, crowning the stem with a childish flower. He smiles again, suddenly gripped by immense pride, as though the simple design wiped onto the glass were his very own child. He feels compelled to sign it; to give it a father. His finger twitches as it approaches the glass, tip dripping with water, and he stops. His creased lips purse together, pain clouds his foggy eyes. Where there should be his name, there is nothing. He is lost in a foggy glass prison. Shackled to his uncertainty, he

withers inside as he watches his pretty child fade into anonymity. It is lost forever like his tears in the hot-water rain.

He dries himself with a worn old white towel and takes painful, slow steps out of the shower. Legs feel a desire to buckle under the weight of his bent frame. His arms feel too heavy for weak and bony shoulders. For a moment he loses himself at the basin and berates the man in the mirror fearfully as some foreign threat. An eternity of sadness wrapped up in a moment of understanding as his eyes confront the stranger in the mirror. Struggling to focus, he touches a hand to his reflection, as if to comfort it. The hand meekly returns, trembling, to his face, pawing over the loose skin under his faded bluish eyes, running through what patches remain of his wispy white hair. He looks so close to the grave; forlorn. The man's heart sinks and he listlessly proceeds to brush his few remaining teeth.

Another terrified moment. He turns to find the bathroom door shut, and fears he has been locked in. Rushing to attempt escape he slips on the wet tiles and crashes to the floor in a mangled heap. Soft sobs and a shuddering torso are the only signs of life. He cradles his knees, already darkened with bruising. After some time he gets to his feet, and hobbles out of the bathroom, into his bedroom. Weeping eyes frantically scan his unfamiliar surroundings; frightened, desperate, deer-like. He is lost in an alien wilderness. He wants to die.

Ruddy little faces, ripe with joy, stare out at him through photos by his bedside and on his walls. They're strangers. They feel hostile to him. Like spies.

He can't bear to look at them. Splinters of pain shoot through his brain as he grapples with reality. He cringes and closes his eyes as he attempts to calm himself. Several laboured deep breaths. He stumbles to his bed and sinks to sit on its edge. He runs his hands over the surface of the soft blanket either side of him, his fingers delight in every crease and inconsistency. Lost in another moment of tactility, he lifts his gaze to the cupboard opposite his bed, and remembers his mission.

Reaching out, he takes a clean white shirt and admires it for a long moment. Something inside him, a juvenile excitement, delights at the thought that he may actually own this stylish garment. The silence surrounding him is palpable. He closes his eyes and savours the feeling of the crisp cotton as he slips it over his wrinkled skin. His stiff fingers clumsily button it up. Smoothing the fabric over his chest with twitchy hands, his eyes search for his trousers.

He pulls the silky fabric over his bruised knees and straightens his achy spine, sucking in his stomach to fasten the pants around his waist. They're navy blue. Something tells him he's always loved navy blue, though he can't be sure as his shaky hand grips the matching jacket, pulling it off its hanger. Every painful crack of his skeleton makes him feel that much more alive as he twists to slide the jacket over his shoulders. It depresses him.

The weight of his smart, formal clothing pleases him. He slips his feet into charming black leather loafers. He frowns disappointedly at untied black laces, unsettled by the incompleteness of his shoes but too tired and frail to bend down

and correct them. He lacks something. He can feel it. Tracing a hand up the line of buttons on his white cotton shirt, he remembers. A tie. The final touch. He finds a beautiful pink silk tie, conveniently hanging there regally over the rail before his eyes. With an appreciative smile he wraps it around his neck, his movements slow as he battles against arthritic elbows. Gripping the ends between his bony fingers, he suddenly looks distraught. His brow furrows. His mind is wasting away. He's forgotten how to tie it.

There's a man in his mirror, though the man is no stranger. Cloudy eyes study the handsome apparition and take on a pleased glint. Spotted, veined hands run over the stiff fabric of his suit jacket. He turns to the side to admire his reflection, taking his hands in and out of his pockets. He grins, his wrinkled face creasing in all the right places – along lines forged by a lifetime of laughter.

A breakthrough simmers below the surface. He can feel it. His hands excitedly find the ends of his tie, and effortlessly weave them into an even, triangular knot. His grin widens as he smooths his collar down; even his eyes are smiling.

And as he looks upon himself, his ugly, shriveled form coated by fine clothing, he is Narcissus staring into the water. Nothing so simple has ever felt so sweet. In a violent burst of enlightening colour, his mind springs into life, skimming over memories thought lost in the colourless abyss. He's finding his way back.

He stands there, before himself, wrapped in a cloak woven of infinity and tries to believe it will last forever. The world opens to him; he is no longer frightened, no longer lost. And amidst this wave of crushing, cleansing awakening, he realises that he's forgotten his underwear. And laughs.