

In a park, mid winter, frigid mist hung low over the sodden grass. Two men who could have been father and son sat alone on a bench blowing smoke from their lips and stamping out at the frost that attempted to climb their legs. The older of the two looked out over to where he could see the mast of a great ship snaking its way up the river to port. He nodded in that general direction and then looked at his younger brother who, only marginally younger than he, hadn't aged as poorly. *His* skin was still smooth and free of wrinkles and he still glowed with all the possibilities they had both shone with as teenagers. "So that's your ride then." He spoke plainly as if speaking to a stranger he had merely bumped into on his morning stroll. "Yep" The response was simple and clear. There was now no mistaking that this was indeed the ship his brother would be taking and they continued to watch it silently as it moved slowly across the horizon.

Conversation between the two men had always been difficult especially after such long periods of non-contact. James, the younger man, was on one of his unexpected and unannounced returns to his homeland and had contacted his brother a mere hour before he was to up and leave again. It had been five years. Five long years since the two men had so much as spoken to each other and Michael hadn't even been sure if his younger brother was still alive until now. James could not say how long he would be gone this time or, if he would indeed even return again. He shuffled his boots in the dirt below him as he tried to think of something new to say, something relevant to this strange and distant world he was revisiting. Michael shifted awkwardly and raised himself with a great effort from the bench and leant against a tree branch he had picked up on the way in, he used it as a makeshift cane. He refused to purchase a real cane and admit that he had a great problem with walking at the slight old age of forty-two. He moaned as he moved his wide girth slowly from the chair and once his middle aged spread had been heaved against the forces of gravity into the upright position he was breathless for a good couple of minutes. He leant over the crooked length of the tree branch and panted like a great old dog.

James watched his brother puffing in disgust and was surprised to find his mind wondering over the cost of a funeral it would after all be his responsibility when the time arrived. There was little money left in the family estate after their father had passed away prematurely, died from a fall at just fifty-five. He supposed he would receive a telegram or a phone call one day summoning him to make all the necessary arrangements for his newly deceased sibling. He shifted on the chair again, feeling guilty for his morbid wanderings and so he returned his attentions quickly to the safe study of his boots, noticing a crack in the leather here and a cut there; it was almost time to buy new shoes. The young man was an impeccable dresser after all and the marks in his shoes would bother him now all the way back to England.

"All these years of sitting in a chair and look at what I have become." Michael turned his back toward James and looked almost desperately out towards the ship that would carry his brother away from him yet again. He was ashamed of his deteriorated physical

condition. He remembered how fit he had been when he was a young man and his brother had once looked up to him and admired his physique. Michael was sure now that his brother despised the very sight of him and for that he couldn't lay blame. Perhaps that is why he came home so infrequently. Michael had also come to detest the very sight of his self as he stared at his bloated reflection in the long mirror beside his front door. Some evenings, standing at length beside the door he would decide suddenly against going out after all, he was so ashamed of his appearance. He would turn around and unhook his waist coat and retreat to the couch where he would eat sweets and listen to the radio. He knew this was why he was alone. He feared how quickly he was slipping away. The last times James was home he was at least able to breath without a struggle, now he wondered if he would not soon be attached to one of those little tanks the old ladies toted around with them as they shopped on Queen Street – a burden on the good graces of society. What use was a weak, invalid man?

"Perhaps you should get a new job." James trilled knowing his suggestions were useless. His brother had made quite decent money pushing his pen to the desk all these years and lacked the motivation to change now. Of course the money was gone now, spent on liquor and loneliness. "Doing what?" Michael turned to his little brother and asked. "What use could I possibly serve now? Look at me, I'm an old man!"

"I don't know, selling chairs to people who stand all day I suppose." Michael suddenly laughed a deep sickly laugh that rounded off into a mucus filled cough. He had grown to love the little snatches of his brother's sense of humour he so rarely received now. It felt good to him to have a familiar wave wash up onto his lonely shores and remind him of the joys he felt in childhood, the simplicity of being nine years old. He couldn't remember when the civilisation of his world had shrunk from around him, leaving him alone and watching the tide of progress pull away without him. Michael pulled a pouch of tobacco from his pocket and, all the while coughing managed to slip a pinch of the strawy mix into a thin square of paper and roll it up into a loose cigarette. His hands shook constantly and at times violently as he rolled. Once the cigarette had been lit and the smoke inhaled deeply into his constricted, suffering lungs his coughing finally stopped. James supposed that it was just the fresh air that had started him off in the first place and the air that morning was certainly sharp; it was so fresh that even James had breathed in short, quick snaps.

"So James, tell me where you are off to this time? France, Africa?" Michael shuffled back down onto the bench beside his younger sibling.

"Back to England actually. I have a small flat there at the moment."

"Oh! The same place, how unlike you brother," Michael jibed, "Surely it must be more than just a flat that takes you back there. Otherwise, you might as well stay here with me. The Lord knows I could use your help." He smirked, "Could it be a girl that carries you off again?"

James looked up from his boots suddenly offended by the remark. "I have a girl but she does not direct my course of flight." He stood up and walked towards the riverbank.



"Oh James, don't be so sensitive. Everyone finds themselves settling down one day or another." Michael tried not to seem too pleased by his brother's growth, "Next you'll be getting a permanent job and all this adventure will be behind you. Not a day too soon either I dare say."

"Dare you?" James swung around to confront his ailing brother, "You're not my father! Dare you!" The anger in his eyes shone black and he was possessed by it.

"I don't wish to be your father James I am merely concerned about your future. You have to settle down one day, you know this don't you? Put some money away and prepare for a family."

"Why is that? Why should I deprive myself of all there is to taste of the world just to please you? So you don't have to see what it is you have missed out on? Is that why I have to settle down Michael? Do you see Michael that you are just the living dead? I don't want that for me, not for me!" The veins in James' temples popped up like livid snakes as he swung his arms wildly around in the air. He truly hated being there. He hated receiving advice from his older brother. He hated feeling so small and alone.

Michael closed his eyes painfully and breathed in with even more sorrow. He didn't know where to go to from here. All he knew was that he didn't want his brother to go again and leave him, alone, but sentiment was frowned upon in their circles and he couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't bring himself to tell his brother that he no longer cared for the company of women or elderly mothers or well paid colleagues – he just wanted to hear the quiet intelligent conversation that his brother had once brought to him from the wild corners of the earth; to settle down in an old rocking chair and just listen to him speak with the wide eyed excitement that he himself had long since lost from his heart. Michael looked up to see James's back as he walked away. He stood up sharply, flinching with the pain of it and called out to him, "James stop!" James did stop and he turned around, silent like a dog called by its master, "You haven't asked me how she is." James couldn't see the small glint of a tear catching in the corners of Michael's tired eyes.

"I have to go, catch my ship."

"She always asks of you and I tell her you are in England and then three minutes later she asks of you again." His voice fell so that James had to strain to hear him. James wanted to see her; he wanted to climb up into her lap as he had done as a child. Michael stepped slightly forward. Being the first-born he had always been his mother's favourite but now as she descended into the ravages of age he was also the first one to slip from her memory. Now he was just some sad stranger who comes every day and cares for her, day in, day out, hour after hour after hour. This morning she had taken his face in her old wrinkled hands and looked at him, "Why are you so sad young man?" She had asked him as he began to cry and then asked him to go and find her own long lost son. "Will you find James?" She whispered.

“Will you come and visit her?” Michael almost pleaded. Silence controlled them for a full minute. “She will just forget that I was there ten minutes later ... I have to catch my ship.” With that James turned immediately around and walked as fast as he possibly could out of that park, leaving his brother standing alone. James did not look back.

A cold gust of wind blew thick mist into the park and the morning birds chirped, rowdy with the cold. A sharp pain suddenly cut across Michael’s chest. He gasped loudly but only the pigeons huddled in the tree above him could hear and they were more concerned with the fluffing of their feathers to keep themselves warm than they were with the suffering of the mere human below them. Michael raised the smouldering stub of his cigarette up to his lips and drew in deeply, all the while his chest stung harder. He lurched forward onto his cane and then felt his body crumble from beneath him, flesh and bones crashing to the ground like an avalanche. Michael lay still on the sodden ground. His face dirty from all the winter dirt, dirt churned into mud by dog feet and Wellington boots. His heart was heavy from the coldness of his life and the weight of the fog that had settled in around him. But then slowly to begin with, all that he could feel was an emanating rush of warmth as something of his essence evaporated from deep inside him and became airborne.