

The Illusion

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Slowly, he loosens his tie and slips it from around his neck. *Too long*, he laments; too long to keep up the illusion. But the illusion is over now.

Drawing the silk through the starched collar, he reaches up to the button that has suffocated him for the last 40 years. *Too long*. He'd first tightened that collar around his neck with youthful fingers. The tie had been worn with honour and pride, distancing him from humble beginnings.

Where had his life gone while he'd lived this illusion? He remembered the day he'd graduated. It was a special achievement, back then. Not many made it through, not like these days. He'd proudly stepped from the stage after receiving his parchment- proof of his dedication to a better life-with a lifetime of ambition in his eyes.

Slowly, he unbuttons his shirt. His hands not as nimble as they'd once been, he notices the slight tremor as he fumbles. Yellowing nails scrape against the tiny buttons, frustrating him in his final efforts to rid himself of the remaining vestiges of the illusion. The last button pulls away in his hand and drops to the floor. He looks at it for a moment while the irony sets in. *Held on to the last moment, like you were supposed to. A little like me.*

Opening his shirt, he watches himself in the mirror; only it isn't really him. Where had this man come from? Where once he'd seen a strong, broad-shouldered man almost arrogant in his self-assuredness, he now sees only an apology of his former self. He runs his hands over the soft, silver fur that has mysteriously crept over his body. He doesn't recall when it had happened. Like most things in his life, the changes were so incremental he hadn't noticed. His focus had been elsewhere. So this man before him arrives unannounced...a stranger.

He turns to look at himself, side-on, in the mirror. He's pleased with what he sees. One thing he'd been careful about was his body. Like any beloved vehicle, he'd made sure to put only the best fuel into it, and keep it in good shape. He'd wanted to make sure he was ready for this day; not the man he once was, but one he could live with being.

He slides the leather belt from his waist and hangs it behind the door. This is one item from this life that he'll be able to make use of again. He'd always been careful about the

choices he'd made regarding style and quality of clothing, preferring a classic style that would last through numerous fashions. He was fortunate to have a frame that most clothes fell well on, and he'd always been received favourably in any circles he'd moved in. While his choices had been made from a practical perspective, he had always tried to create an image of refined dignity.

Sliding his trousers down, he delights in the feel of the wool-blend, gliding over his skin. His smooth cycling legs are tanned and lean, and he knows they look good. They'll serve him well.

Bending down to remove his socks, he notices the stiffness in his hips. Yoga had staved off most effects of aging, but years of sitting behind a desk in the corporate world had taken their toll. There are still days, like today, when he feels every year he's accumulated with the passing of time.

Barefoot again, he remembers the first time he'd pulled up his socks. He'd already enthusiastically memorized his primary school's motto- *'Play the game'*.

And he'd played it, well.

Naked, he takes in his reflection, marveling at how much has changed. This was a moment he'd planned for some time and he wonders how it will affect those around him. He'd been a good son, a good employee, a good husband and a good father. Now it was his turn.

*Time to stop playing that game.*

He slides the black silk over his head. Silk is a fabric he'd always adored against his skin, but with so few opportunities to enjoy it, he'd saved it especially for this day.

Standing back to assess the picture, nervously turning to take it all in, he smiles.

In his black silk, knee-length slip-dress that clings and hangs in all the right places coupled with fabulous kitten heels, he's beautiful. Just like he always knew he would be.

*Finally, he sighs. Free to be open. Free to be me.*

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