

## *All Grown up After All*

Vincent (2021)

Shade crept to the end of the line unnoticed by anyone.

Shade is a high school graduate. He took a year off before college from school and opted for a work placement to earn some pittance. His papa was quite proud of him as he never did anything rebellious and stupid as a kid and looked exceptionally mature, compared to his peers, at least. Shade's papa supported this decision and gifted him the traditional costume for young bigshots: a set of elegant suits.

In the morning, before Shade left for work, his papa gave him a big hug. As he watched Shade walk dimmer and dimmer in the distance, he couldn't help but feel a little nostalgic.

It is Shade's first workday. That's why his papa decided to pick him up in person at the bus stop--a kind of welcome ritual that is only found in fathers. It will be the place where Shade would wait at almost every day in the future. Shade didn't care much. He just hoped his papa would pick him up soon and leave this place--already deserted at 10PM.

The night was quiet. Darkness held a vague terror for Shade, and everything around him was so quiet that it sent chills down his back. Wasn't much exciting work on his first day, just the nagging manager who gave him mediocre pep-talk and that old tedious welcome ceremony.

While strolling around at the bus stop, Shade bumped into a man in front of him. The man's face was emaciated. Next to his two cheeks were several black patches, and there was little vigor in his eyes as if he had just crawled up from a grave. Shade gave the man another look. The man grinned, revealing his disjointed, wilted yellow teeth.

"Just a young man out to earn a living, huh?" He said. "Want a smoke?"

"No, thanks. I do not smoke. And please do not do so. It's not good." Shade wanted to leave.

The man made a bitter chuckle after he sucked the last bit of smoke out of the cigarette butt, threw it, stamped it out with a pair of worn-out shoes. Shade looked at the ashes scattered all over the ground, disgust written between his furrowed brows.

The man sighed. "It is good not to smoke; cigarettes are not something good." Saying that, he took out another one.

Shade took in a deep inhale and kept rubbing his hands. "Oh my gosh, how long do I need to wait?" Shade had tightened his collar. The moon hanging low in the west was pale and fragile, as though it would be shattered in a moment of discord.

"Well, Shade, what a surprise, we meet again!" Shade could not be more familiar with that voice. Terrill and his gang - the high school classmates he least hoped to see again. They both lived in the same village, so it is not surprising that they would run into each other. None of them knew what they were going to do after graduation. There were rumors that they had been seen hanging out near this bus stop on a regular basis at night.

"By yourself? At night?" Terrill said with some derision. A fool would know there was something else going on.

"I got a job," Shade replied tersely.

"Yo, I guess you were kicked out from college, didn't you? By the way, you dress like a big man now." Terrill set his hand on Shade's shoulder.

"Please DO NOT do so!" Shade had dared to express his anger and pulled away. A filthy handprint had been left on his brand new suit.

Terrill gave a wink to his gang. "Come!" Shade was frightened to move a step; his entire body seemed to be coagulated as if a statue. Only his sharp breaths remained.

One from the gang moved closer. Shade stumbled back in shock, almost falling over. Terrill simply took out a bottle of Brandy from inside of his leather jacket and then took a big gulp, with some drops falling from the side of his mouth. Terrill wiped his mouth and dropped his eyes on Shade.

"Hey, Sissy. This will grow hair on your chest." He said, holding out the bottle.

"No, thanks, I don't drink." Shade refused with no hesitation.

"You dress like a man and you don't act like one." The words hit Shade in the gut. He had a clear sense that it was Terrill's intention to irritate him.

"Terrill reached out his hand and straightened out Shade's collar. "I'm wasting my time here," Terrill beckoned his gang to come along with his left.

Shade clenched his fist while Terrill and his gang walked dimmer and dimmer. He knew that he didn't have any upper hand compared to that group if he really fought. Shade's face was flushed red with anger and embarrassment. He walked over and reached out two fingers and gestured to the man.

"Bum a cig?" Shade said to the man with the yellow teeth as if there was nothing amiss.

"I thought you didn't smoke or drink, big man," The man said on purpose.

"You know that was bullshit." Shade had changed his attitude from earlier, now glaring at the man.

"Good man!" "The man grasped the message, "Just a minute... here you go..."

Shade, with the cigarette dangling in his mouth, leaned over to the man. The fire lit up, cutting through the silence of the night.

"Why didn't your friend know this?" The man paced up to Shade.

"They are street gangsters. I ain't gonna take a shot with him, let alone join them."

"You superior or somethin'?"

Shade didn't answer straight away, instead, he exhaled a smoke ring rising gently beside the stop, growing paler and diffusing with the mist. It is obvious that he has practiced it diligently on his own. "I just don't want anyone to know about it."

When Shade hopped into his papa's car, the first thing papa asked him was a piercing question, "Why do you smell like smoke?"

Shade said without a second thought, "Didn't you see a smoker next to me?"