

A Bit of the Old Soul

Male to Male / Smoking / Elegance / Muscle Growth

A chilling breeze in the air, and the soft ambience of crickets in the night... the bluish indigo of the night sky, illuminated by countless stars... and the silver light of a full moon, lighting up the once-proud pillars of a mansion long since abandoned.

If Tyson was visiting this place under any circumstance *other* than a break-in, it might have taken his breath away.

Well, “break-in” might not have been the right word, he thought, the crunch of dried grasses beneath his feet making his striped, brown tail twitch restlessly as he approached the front door. It wasn’t like he was coming to steal anything, just to stay the night. And besides, for a building as vast as this, one that had stood since the mid-1800s, anything worth getting had probably been taken from it long ago. That said, everything his flashlight captured about its exterior construction amazed the mackerel tabby. He’d seen plenty of abandoned buildings in his time, rotted wood and crumbling stone foundations- but save for the vines creeping along the base of the walls or the glaze over old windows, this mansion seemed almost perfectly preserved. From the square turrets standing in strict symmetry on both sides of the building, to the four pillars holding up the portico just under its second-floor balcony, the whole mansion gave an air of pride, its beauty almost in defiance of what time should have wrought upon it.

Or maybe Tyson was waxing poetic to keep his mind off the fact it was midnight, it was cold, and he was only here on a stupid college dare.

His thoughts flashed back to the snide taunts from the German Shepherd he’d been unfortunate enough to share a dorm with. All those loud parties the mutt would throw, making it impossible to focus on studying. Whenever those parties weren’t pushing him out of the dorm entirely.

Whoever managed his college’s automated dorm mate system for Freshmen students should be fired.

“If you want respect, tabby, why don’tcha prove you’re man enough to earn it?”, his roommate had jeered. And what was more manly for a history major than to go out to a decrepit mansion that had been abandoned for decades, with countless ghost stories following it?

Sure, Tyson had done his research on the place. Reverie Estate, once a nexus for business tycoons and high rollers of all kinds to congregate, until the Great Depression sunk the owner’s earnings, and the parties ended.

Anyone who’d tried to get in here went missing for days, or so the few web articles he’d been able to find suggested. Nobody ever disappeared for good (that much soothed his nerves), but they were always found naked and amnesiac of anything they’d been doing inside the building. If there *were* a ghost around here, they had a strange sense of humor with unwanted guests.

His feet passed from the rough-hewn dirt road to the wood plank steps, causing loud creaks that made his whiskers twitch and his lips peel back with dread. As much as he told himself that there wasn’t anything to worry about, no matter how much he definitely *did not* believe in ghost stories... there was something that just sent a chill down Tyson’s spine, approaching the front door.

“Only a few hours,” he muttered to himself, trying to soothe the knot in his chest. “Then it’s back to the dorm, back to normal life.”

His hand trembled as he reached for the doorknob, but after a bit of tugging, he found it opened rather smoothly, with a soft ‘click’. With flashlight at the ready, the tabby nudged his way inside, forcing himself to breathe evenly as he looked around.

“...Wow,” he’d muttered to himself, in a tone barely above a whisper. If the exterior to Reverie had survived weathering, the interior seemed only more beautiful for it.

True, it must have been much more adorned in its heyday. But with the foyer gently expanding into a vast great hall, where two staircases spiraled towards one another as they reached the top floor, oak furnishings segmented the faded damask wallpaper, and a small square table sat between the staircases displaying a globe of the world, it was easy to see the embers of that long-distant gallantry. The cat’s jittered, nervous turns of the flashlight became smoother, more awed motions to gaze upon more of this hall, upon the living room at one end where a curtain draped over what was likely a piano, and the study to his right where bookshelves still collected a few tomes among the dust.

In a way, it eased some of his anxiety to see the place rather well-kept. Wouldn’t need to worry about upturned nails when the floorboards were mostly intact, at least- and this sort of early 20th-century construction was the sort of thing Tyson loved to examine. Cherishing the old stuff and understanding how it influenced the present; that was what history was all about, wasn’t it?

In the newfound wonder, the tabby neglected to think about shutting the door... but that was done for him, swiveling closed with nary a creak, and the lock quietly turning shut. Out of eyesight, a light flickered back to life, soon joined by its companion on the opposite end- illuminating tan-golden walls that seemed just a bit less dusty than before.

The staircase led Tyson to the center of a hallway stretching on in one unbroken gaze across several doors, with the occasional mirror or painting interspliced between. Two stood directly in front of him, on a small curve in contrast to the rest of the hallway’s strict rectangular dimensions. There must have been quite the family living here, once upon a time; he certainly didn’t see a utility closet or a washing room here- likely tucked away to a far corner, to focus on guests’ luxuries.

One bed was as good as another, really, if they weren’t crawling with bugs. The cat thought it easiest to take one of the rooms in front of him, no need to get picky.

Then a sudden creak echoed in his right ear.

Tyson turned sharply to face the source. His flashlight found no intruder where it pointed, but he noted the furthest door on the end being creaked open further than before. Ordinarily, a person in his shoes would probably have moved in the opposite direction as fast as possible, but cats and curiosity always went hand in hand. Instinct drove him to pace slowly towards that door, his tail lashing like crazy behind him as he tried to make as little of a sound on the rug as his sneakers allowed. Said floor piece seemed to grow more vibrant in color with each footfall, a wave of rich burgundy following behind him.

He grasped the oak door, and gently pressed it open, the creak of its old frame only shooting his anxieties up higher...

“...Hello?”

A flash of the light all around, and no sign of anything or anyone out of the ordinary. Tyson sighed in relief; he must have been worried for nothing. Just a faint push of wind, probably...

What a room he'd stumbled upon, though. It was at least double the size of his own dorm, with a king-size bed whose tall posts and ornate silk drapes took advantage of the raised ceiling to add further to its grandeur. To the left of the bed sat a desk with pen and paper still set out for work, while on its right were chairs with plush velvet cushions, set around a small dinette overlooking the windows to the Estate's backyard. A bookshelf gated with glass doors stood between the windows and their finely tied curtains, while opposite from the bed sat a fireplace almost as tall as Tyson himself. Of course it had long since gone out, but he imagined it must have enlivened this room with such beauty in time long past.

A portrait sat on top of the fireplace; not a photograph, but a painting of a proud-looking grizzly bear, a cane in his raised hand. That bold smirk of his seemed to scold the scrawny cat before him, judge him- its elevated position only making him feel that much smaller by comparison.

This must have been the Master Bedroom, no doubt about it. Meaning this bear was the owner just before... no wonder he looked like such a high roller, Tyson thought.

The door to the hall, better oiled than it had been moments ago, slowly eased shut, while a door just to the right of the fireplace opened simultaneously. Tyson hadn't even noticed the one behind him; his curiosity was piqued too much by what lay ahead.

Inside the closet he'd gasped again, his eyes alight with wonder. Within was a treasure trove of menswear: suits, slacks, overcoats, morning coats, clothing for practically any occasion... and not even one of these garments looked faded, or moth-eaten. It was like he'd stepped back into a time capsule of the 1930's style, in its most glamorous form possible. His favorite, in terms of fashion.

Of course, he'd never worn anything like these before. Ty lacked the figure to pull off much more than a simple dress shirt and slacks, and even now, his outfit had consisted more of a hoodie that hung loose on his skinny frame, and jeans. And yet before he knew what he was doing, his paw had brushed over several of the garments hung next to one another, before he had the sense to pull back. These weren't his! And he'd probably gotten fur all over several items; imagine the cleaning cost...

...and yet, his paw tingled with the smooth sensation. He'd never once felt something so soft, so luxurious. These weren't commodities of fast fashion, each one had to have been handmade for their recipient by only the most skilled hands.

He had to feel that again. Just once.

His fingers settled for the hangar to a smoking jacket of plush, wine-red velvet, with wide black lapels and a breast pocket trimmed with gold thread. He didn't want to have to undress for anything, and he should be getting some sleep anyway.

He trembled a little, slipping each part of the shoulders off its hangar, before ever-so-carefully undoing the buttonholes, to slip his arms into the sleeves of the garment. The inner lining was much sleeker than the velvet outside; he could feel it even through the hoodie that clung to his limber frame.

Of course, it was at least three sizes too big for him; the hem of it fell almost to his knees. But that didn't matter in the slightest; Tyson was too busy snickering to himself and testing its movements to care.

When would he ever get a chance to wear something like this again? It was so comfortable that he could practically fall asleep on it alone...

...actually, he WAS rather drowsy all of a sudden. The cat had to lean on the door frame as he exited the closet, winding his way over to the chairs next to the window, before slumping down into one.

As his maw parted wide in a yawn, his eyes flickered back to that pompous gaze from the portrait, just barely visible in the cat's nighttime vision. He did feel a little guilty, stealing this... but he'd make sure to smooth the jacket out when he woke up the next morning. A mansion this lovely deserved the respect.

His eyelids only grew heavier looking back at the bear, the thick insulation of the jacket lulling him into sleep. And soon, his breathing had settled into soft purrs as the cat dozed.

Unaware that as soon as his eyelids settled, the fireplace's charred logs began to see orange flickers of embers.

The scent of smoke brought Tyson back to his senses. His forehead throbbed with the complaint of a short, interrupted rest, and despite the sharp smell stinging his nose, it took a few blinks of his eyes for the cat to better perceive his surroundings.

And he quickly bolted upright as soon as he saw.

Where before he'd needed a light to see much of anything in the room, now the fireplace was crackling steadily with a healthy flame, bathing everything in golden-yellow light. The russet oak floorboards and frames reflected it with a more polished gleam than ever, and the curtains held a cream luster unseen before. In the blink of an eye, every trace of age from this room had all but vanished.

The smoke stung his nose again, and the cat looked down to its source.

"What in...?"

He didn't remember there being anything set on this dinette when he'd dozed off, other than his flashlight. That was nowhere to be seen now; instead, an ashtray and a pipe with a smooth, curved handle was sitting in front of him, with a tall bottle of wine and a shot glass already half-filled.

This was getting to be too much. Either he was in the middle of a very strange dream, or the house changed on him. Either way he wanted out.

Forcing himself out of the daze, he jumped to his feet, only to be jerked back by the tug of the jacket he'd tried on. Its belt, knotted around the waist, had gotten its tail stuck in the chair's cushions, and he had to wiggle it forward to get anywhere.

It must have been down in deep, for the cat had to put far much more force to drag it out of that crevice than expected- when finally pulled free, he stumbled forwards, and knocked into the bed's mattress before he was back on his feet.

“Oh, for- get off!”

After fumbling his way around the belt’s knot, he angrily thrust the jacket to the floor, before moving for the exit.

Except now, there was another problem. The air seemed almost knocked out of him, and there was a burn in his throat unlike anything he’d ever suffered before. Instead of leaping over the bed, the cat found himself falling forward and only managing a half-crawl, before the smoke in the air robbed him of energy.

“God... damn it!”

It had to be that ashtray. Or the fireplace. When did anyone have the chance to light these? There was no way the room should have been able to change so fast... And the mattress didn’t help. Once he’d fallen into it, Ty struggled to get back out. It was like quicksand, just encouraging him to fall back further and further.

With his arms and legs useless, the cat decided to use his torso instead- rolling back towards the table where he’d been to initially. The smoke in the air was too strong; he hardly had the energy to breathe. If only he’d brought a water bottle... then he could have had some relief. But there was only the shot glass.

Fine. He gritted his teeth, and reached for the drink, steeling himself for the impact of alcohol.

The crisp, cool liquid ran down his throat quickly, and he sputtered from the instinctual breath in that his lungs so desperately needed. Another sip, and the bittersweet taste made his tongue curl. Ty had only ever tried wine once before, and the taste had made him gag... but mercifully, this was a bit sweeter than that time before. He could bear it.

There. The burn in his throat had been sated for now, and he could walk out and...

He didn’t even have the chance to finish the thought before his knees buckled beneath him, and he fell right back into the chair’s awaiting embrace. Even without it burning his sinuses, the smoky scent in the air kept Tyson too dazed to walk straight, and the wine just made his head spin that much more. If he’d tried to walk again, he probably would have fallen flat on his face.

Breathe

He blinked, craning his gaze around the room while trying not to buckle under the five-ton weight his head felt like. Where had he heard that voice...? He’d thought he was all alone in here, but...

But they had a point. If he could get his breathing under control, maybe he’d be able to think clearly. Get himself back into gear and walk right out.

Tyson pushed himself back into the cushions, propping his torso into a more upright stance. Drew air in slowly, paused, and pushed it back out. Pause, in, pause, out, pause...

Getting his breathing under control did mean he breathed in more of the smoke in the air, though. But that didn’t seem like such a bad thing, now... it didn’t singe his lungs like before, and so he could pick up on the scents within. Red bell pepper, paprika, hints of garlic and thyme... the thought of a thick, juicy pork roast popped into his head, and his mouth watered a little. This wasn’t the smell of tobacco; it was almost pure spice in the air. Burned to a tempting crisp and wafted with a subtle, yet altogether intoxicating mixture...

There was a weight in his hand he didn't recognize. Looking down to his right, the cat saw a simple gold lighter, almost as big as his palm.

He blinked, and with barely a flick it sprung to life, birthing a soft yellow flame that reflected in his eyes. The flame's color made them seem more like brass than their normal jade-green, and the cat found himself captivated, as if the light were a dancer catching every sparkle upon her shimmering golden gown, drawing her audience in to be enthralled.

He blinked again and gasped sharply. Both his arms sat on the table, the left hand now curling its fingers around the pipe's bowl, steadying it against his thumb like it had practiced the motion. And his right was moving to meet it, holding that flame over the pipe to dry its contents of their moisture, to prime it.

Tyson should have known better. He should have put both items down right now, stood up, pushed these impulses away. But the wine had dulled him, made the signals travel so slowly from his head to his limbs. The pipe was raised, and his lips parted as he exhaled- allowing the stem to slide right in, secured between his jaws.

Breathing in was inevitable. However much he might hold back, his hand didn't budge from keeping the pipe in his mouth, and he let out a puff- dispersing smoke all around his head in a cloud, leaving stars in his vision as the scent drifted along his muzzle and into his lungs- tickling his whiskers, brushing along his fur, and turning the hairs there from their tawny-beige color to a pure, snowy white. Each puff stirred the fire inside the pipe, and his nose grew broader along his muzzle, flatter than before.

While fur grew out around his cheeks in that bright white, his jawline got blockier than before, drooping down a bit to offset his wide upper face. With each breath drawn in, his lungs expanded in capacity and his torso grew wider, pectorals more chiseled as if inflated by the burnt spices settling into the air. His hoodie lost much of its slack as his shoulders pushed out and forearms thickened, while the shirt he'd worn underneath groaned with the strain of trying to hold it all in. To the eyes of the heavily-dazed cat, it looked like the body just below him was inflating like a balloon.

Better. You're getting there

There came the voice again... Ty's ears flicked left and right, forward and back, trying to discern the source, not realizing the triangular points were being rounded off as their insides filled up with white fluff. It took effort to crane his head around the room, searching for another presence in the room, and yet he found no one in sight.

But he *did* find the smoking jacket slithering up from the ground where he'd dropped it, snaking onto the side of the bed where it suddenly bent at its midsection, tucked its sleeves back, and folded itself up neatly. A cream-yellowish pair of shirt and slacks were quick to join it from the closet's opened door, slithering onto the bed and folding themselves into a pile just next to the jacket before Ty's baffled eyes. Was he hallucinating? There shouldn't have been any way for those close to move... unless...

Calm. Have another drink

The thicker brow of the cat furrowed in further consternation. He was about to ask just who was speaking to him, but the moment he opened his lips, his hand raised the glass and poured more of that white wine down his throat, forcing him to swallow.

He was surprised how much he enjoyed it. His rougher tongue ran over the faintly sweet taste as it danced through his mouth, and it soothed his throat to make him purr... yet now even that sound was unfamiliar. It sounded deeper, huskier than his usual noise, almost like a growl. His tail flicked at the base of the chair, and in the fireplace's warm light, he could see how much paler the fur had become, how much thicker the black stripes had grown. A tail like that didn't belong to a normal domestic cat...

Another puff in, and the energy in his limbs seemed to unravel. Every time he thought of getting up, of leaving, the scent of spices would fill his head, and the cat was right back where he started; stuck in that velvet chair in a body at least twice as heavy as his old one.

He didn't mind the scent, though. A growing part of his mind was starting to crave it; the smell of burnt wood and rich flavors that stirred his sense of pleasure, stoked a fire in his chest, made him yearn for more. The groans from his shirt ripping as it strained to hold him didn't even seem to register on his mind.

What he noticed more was the room around him. The wallpaper had been turning to more of a burgundy-red color as damask patterns grew up the sides like creeping vines, and the shelf space just above the fireplace pushed out the bookcases on its left and right, making room for two pieces of paper that propped up there. Writing began to engrave itself upon these forms, of a signature he couldn't make out in the dim light, but with an emblem that he recognized... Betitoch University. That was the dream college he'd applied for initially, but he'd had to settle for his area's community college to save money...

Another puff filled the air. What community college? He'd gotten into Betitoch on a scholarship, he thought. His mother and father were overjoyed, seeing an ambitious young tiger like him get into the school.

But weren't his parents both tabbies? Just like he was... yet the portrait upon the wall told a different story. Two tigers were standing proudly, flanking a strong-looking young man in their middle... and yet he could have sworn there had been a bear in that painting, just moments ago.

Have another drink. It'll help you think clearly

...That was right. A little wine in the evening always helped him relax, to put his affairs in order. A voice inside swore that he was still a freshman, not old enough to drink yet, but it was silenced soon enough by the *Soiree in Summer* trickling down his throat.

Right... the white wine blend with hints of a fruit cocktail mixed in, one of his first creations in winemaking. And still one of his favorites, the cat thought; smiling to himself as his amber eyes lit up in the glow of the pipe. The dual majors in Business and History had made for many sleepless nights in college, but that just made him all the prouder of the degrees he had to show for it. It was only natural to have set them next to the family portrait, to remind him of why he did all that work.

So tidily were the cat's old memories swept aside by the whispers of that voice inside his head, and just as quickly did new ones appear to justify his new surroundings. But Tyson couldn't have known that the house had plans for him.

He would never have guessed that Reverie Estate was a living entity all its own, a building ever-changing since the 1800s to suit the tastes of its guests, providing every pleasure imaginable, so long as its visitors gave back to it with merrymaking and joy. It fed off of that pleasure, sustained itself upon indulgences.

True, it had closed down after its last great host lost his fortunes on gambling in the wake of the Depression. But it had not died, merely gone into hibernation. Waiting for the right person to enter, to be a new host.

This tabby's love for history only made it easier for the house to pull him in.

Just one more puff. And then this can all be yours

The voice echoed in the cat's mind, and a moment of clarity sparked the parts of his brain that had been sluggish for some time now. He recognized this room, the family portrait, every book of literature and fashion history collected in the shelves... yet just as easily, remembered them differently.

He wasn't this strong, mature tiger when he entered here, was he. The image of a scrawnier, younger mackerel cat flickered in his mind's eye, and he remembered the dare that had brought him here. Just to try 'fitting in' with his peers...

He recognized the voice speaking to him, too. Every part of this room seemed to echo it, each bit of furniture and clothing thriving with a shared life. It was the house's own spirit, that strange power that had changed him into all this.

The pipe's embers slowed as he held it between his broad fingers, the glow faded to more reddish flames. A pang in his chest gave him pause, reflecting on that old life. If he said yes, he was afraid he would lose himself in that fantasy. Forgetting the cat he used to be, to be the tiger that this house wanted of him. Could he really turn his back on that old life so quickly?

His brow furrowed as he stood up from that chair, looking at the pipe that had caused all of this. His tail flicked behind him, and he made a decision.

The pipe rose back to his lips and he lit its flames once more, breathing deeply until every last bit of his lungs had filled with spice before blowing it out in a plume of smoke.

Immediately he could feel the change wash over him, tingling down his broad-muscled back. The smoke tickled his whiskers and swept through his muzzle, as dark hairs sprouted into a trim pencil mustache that elegantly matched his stripes. A blink brought faint crow's feet to his eyes, adding to that greater sense of maturity, but nevertheless looking in in his prime. The smoke hung around him like a cloud, fading into his scalp as his dark hair was pomaded, groomed smooth, and neatly parted along the side, more fitting of a William Powell or a Clark Gable.

The pull cord yanked itself out of his hoodie as the ill-fitting garment pressed itself closer to his chiseled frame, the hood flattening into layered black satin as the front split down the middle. Reams of thread knotted over themselves along each side of the split front, warping into hardened caps before popping out as buttons along the cream-white mess jacket that had become of his hoodie. Although the buttons were purely decorative along his chest, those forming upon his undershirt were anything but- to the contrary, they were practically all that held the burgeoning dress shirt together over that wall of muscle. Each one strained to fit its eye through the provided hole, and he groaned a bit as the collar at last set itself in place. At least it had provided the changed cord a place to reside, weaving around his neck and knotting itself up- the woven rope now flattened into a black satin bowtie matching his jacket's wide shawl lapels.

The jacket fit him perfectly, of course. Smoothing out the crevices between each muscle on his Adonis-like physique, putting on padding to his shoulders that they hardly needed- but nevertheless made his silhouette that much broader, more striking in a crowded room.

His belt had snaked out from his pants just like the hoodie cord had, finding an elevated position around his waist as an orange cummerbund arranged in place of a vest. Jeans long-suffering from their ill fit around trunk-like legs found comfort in black threads weaving into their make, as they transformed into proper trousers, with a satin stripe for that extra touch of old-fashioned class.

Even his shoes found themselves subjected to the will of the smoke, hardening to polished leather around his thicker feet. The tips growing more pointed, shining in the light of the fireplace. The attire of a gentleman, from head to toe.

When he at last opened his eyes, the tiger gazed back at his portrait with pride. The eager face of an ambitious young scholar smiled back at him, a memory he'd cherish for the rest of his days.

The memory of that timid young tabby was fading fast, but he didn't seem to mind. What had he been aching for all his life, if not for a chance like this? The chance to be confident in himself, to dress like a gentleman from the old films he loved so much- to truly BE a gentleman, inside and out. He needed the Estate, just as much as it needed him.

How do you feel now, Tyson?

"Please," he purred, even the smooth sound of his own husky, bassy voice bringing him pride. "Call me Tiernan, 'old friend'. Tiernan McCoy."

The name just seemed to come naturally to him, the last part of cementing himself as a living piece of history to match this house's tastes. 'Mr. McCoy'... it had a handsome sound to it.

He took another long, pleasant drag from the spices mixed into his pipe, and his vision went dim, lulled into a peaceful sleep as he fell back upon the bed.

The stream of sunlight through the window stirred Tiernan when morning arrived. The house must have changed out his evening wear for the nightshirt, for he awoke to silk pajamas underneath his sheets. He sat up slowly, with a growling yawn exposing countless sharp teeth, his bleary-eyed gaze still craning across the room, as if to make certain it hadn't all been just a dream.

The sight of that red smoking jacket laid out across his chair, now with his initials monogrammed into the breast pocket, was there to greet him, and he smiled. It was reality, after all.

Morning preparations were quick, once the scent of smoke and spice stirred his nose. A puff of that *Lucky Stripe*-brand spice, and he was good as new. A shower and self-study in the bathroom just near his bedroom, then returning to his closet, where a three-piece suit of brown worsted was there waiting for him to step into, a gold tie arranging itself round his neck. The fact he could name each article of clothing's fabric brought the cat even more pride.

The Estate had helped him with that knowledge, of course. And he'd need to learn how to care for each article of clothing; suits like these didn't come cheap, after all.

But that could all wait. Stepping down to the main floor, it was clear to the big cat that the rest of Reverie beyond his floor was still in hibernation... dust particles still flitted through the air in the windows to the outside, and the draft of the autumn air still snuck its way in from the outside. The Estate needed more life to it. He needed some guests to entertain.

“Well, some folk will always look for the next quick thrill...”

Perhaps those ruffians from Tyson’s old school would be a good place to start. He’d have to rein them in, but he had a feeling they’d mature soon enough... one way or the other.