

## Rusty's Crimson Cape

by Lou Beckerman

Life had always felt precarious for Rusty as he negotiated his way through the dark shadowy shakiness of it. He had been blessed with looks that turned heads, but deep inside recoiled against the attention his appearance invoked. Dressed in his theatrical crimson cape (he found it easier to play-act a character than to be himself) he sensed he was being followed. He'd never quite got used to it - that he could, at any time, be devoured by the voracious monster of his nightmares, continuously on his trail – sniffing him out; its hot foul breath whispering into the back of his neck.

Feeling defenceless he stiffens, effecting his own shadow to stand erect. A week's-worth of grocery bags puffing out the cloak barely disproves his small slender frame. Inside, he's a brittle twig waiting to be snapped in two any moment now.

Prime carer for Grand-Ma was not such a grand-job. She wasn't his Ma and she wasn't Grand. Sometimes, God help him, he wished she was as dead as he so often felt inside. But then the force of his howling rage scared him even more, as if it could outrun him.

Had something just brushed past him in the dark? He suddenly froze, weighted with the heaviness of responsibility. Every exposed nerve-ending jangled on highest alert, not yet numbed to the daily torment of trying to survive without mishap. School today had brought more ridicule; the pack of braying wolf-hounds, snapping and snarling as one – each relieved that the 'Sissy' grenade wasn't being lobbed in their direction.

Grand-Ma, physically fragile, though robust in mind, felt content enough, powerful in her own controlling role as Rusty's custodian. It was recompense enough for them both, she'd often reasoned.

*Is that you at long last?* a crumpled-up-tissue-thin voice cried out as it always did. Opening wider, the door-hinges creaked and squeaked back at her in a well-rehearsed response.

Five floors up in the graffiti-strewn lift and he's hovering momentarily between one ordeal and the next. Home: G-M's flat - the 'place of safety' documented by strangers in authority.

To have left the front door ajar was unlike him. As a rule he was fearfully clockwork-careful.

'*Here I am. Sorry...*' Always pre-empt. Be apologetic. Learned behaviour. (They both have this back-home ritual down to a tee.)

G-M is lying in bed where he'd left her this morning. Her yellowing loveless eyes are fixed on the ceiling in an accusatory stare usually reserved for him. *What had the badly-behaved ceiling been up to this time*, he pondered.

Her hirsute jaw - usually set tight (everything in the world - and nothing - caused her tension) had slackened. There were hollows in her ashen cheeks and her upper denture had loosened, displaying a gap between it and her redundant toothless gum. That wouldn't have pleased her. Unfailingly, twice a day, she'd hold a hankie to cover her mouth the instant Rusty bore both upper and lower sets to soak and then scrub. At these times he would feel empty, as if life had swallowed him whole and spat out the bones.

Grand-Ma could always smell a rat, her nose invariably wrinkled - not in merriment but in vague disgust. At him, at meals he prepared, at life, and as if there was a constant bad odour she was having to inhale. To be fair this was quite true. She stank. Their flat wasn't too fragrant either, permeated by her soured outpouring of vinegary invective, though after ten minutes inside it wasn't so noticeable.

There's no doubt G-M was a good listener. She'd patiently hear him out, then use everything she'd heard to demolish him. After a time, he'd stopped feeding her ammunition. Well she would listen now... He waits in anticipation - the silence fails to rebuke or scald. He feels strangely unburdened.

He unloads the groceries then opens his mother's musty box of make-up oddments: remnants of a charcoal pencil, two dried-up lipsticks, one cerise and the other called Red Velvet, a mildewed blusher brush - some powdered pigment still clinging on, a small round dusty looking-glass and a brittle mascara. Rusty looks at himself in the mirror.

Slipping off his crimson cloak he calmly lays it over Grand-Ma, then begins searching for his social worker's number. He seems to have shaken off the monster for now.