

A Walk in the Dark...

Judith Nolan



“I realized the other day that I’ve lived in New York longer than I’ve lived anywhere else. It’s amazing. I am a New Yorker. I never thought I would be. These days, my buzz can be obtained by just walking, preferably early in the morning, as I am a seriously early riser. The signature of the city changes shape and is fleshed out as more and more people commit to the street. A magical transfer of power from the architectural to the human...”

~ David Bowie

“So these are our final numbers for Winterfest?” Father peered around at his audience over the rims of his spectacles. “Speak now, if it’s not. William needs to know how many mouths he will be feeding this year.”

“There is one late addition.” Vincent pulled a folded note from his pocket. “Jason brought this down only moments before we convened. It mentions a new helper.”

“Very well...” Father poised his fountain pen over his list once more. “New helpers are always welcome to come Below. Who is the sponsor?”

Vincent unfolded the note. “Sebastien,” he read. “He says he cannot recommend this helper highly enough.”

“I see. Well, that sounds promising.” Father looked up from his list. “But I have not heard of anyone new. What is this person’s name then?”

“His name is David Jones,” Vincent replied, still reading the note. “Sebastien says he is an artist and a performer. He has done some movie work too. He helps where and when he can.”

“Meaning he’s another of Sebastien’s rag-tag collection of starving artists, then,” William grumbled. “Not a penny to bless himself with, I’ll guarantee. How has he helped us?”

“People help in many ways, as you know, William. According to Sebastien, Mr Jones has been very helpful for more than three years now. Sebastien feels it is time for him to see how his generosity has been put to good use.” Vincent’s thoughtful gaze swept the room, before

returning to rest on William's deeply sceptical expression. "It seems David is the man behind all those baskets of consumables you have received over the last few months. Those hard-to-find items you complained you had not seen in years."

"Wondered where all those baskets kept coming from," William grumbled honestly. He shrugged. "Okay, fair enough. I withdraw my objection. For a starving artist, he sure has some skills at foraging. He could be useful in the future. I'll make a list."

"Thank you, William." Vincent nodded as his assessing gaze shifted to Mary. "And that material you found impossible to source last month. You were grateful for it. Sebastien made a passing mention to the man. It seems Mr Jones has been very busy on our behalf. He has asked for nothing in return. He has respected our need for secrecy, and has not pushed to be included."

Mary nodded quickly. "Yes, I was glad to see that material. I didn't think anyone made it anymore. How remarkable he found it. And there was so much of it, too. Enough to make new tunics for everyone Below."

"And the matter of this mysterious Mr Jones' seconder, then?" Father waved his pen to regain their attention. "Who is it?"

Vincent looked at his note again, and gave a low whistle. "Lady May is the seconder. Impressive. She has also added a note of her own."

"Ahhhh..." Father wrote down all three names immediately. A recommendation from Lady May was not to be ignored.

Vincent scanned the old lady's spidery writing. "She says he is a charming man of many talents, and a true gentleman. It seems that is a rare thing these days, according to her. She cannot recommend him highly enough. She says it's about time he was invited."

"And yet none of us, beyond Sebastien and May, have ever seen, or talked to this mysterious Mr Jones," Cullen interjected. "How do we know we can trust him with our most closely guarded secrets?"

His frowning eyes were on Vincent as he spoke. Everyone in the room was aware of his implication. "I say three years is not long enough. How do we know he won't betray us the moment he gets wind of what we have built down here?"

"I will allow the objection." Father frowned at what he had written. "But Sebastien and May have never introduced anyone to the tunnels before they have fully them vetted first. I say we give this man a chance. He seems to have some resources behind him that we could use."

"If you say so." Cullen waved a hand. "I just think we need to be more careful in future. But I will agree to withdraw my objection. If everyone else agrees." He looked around the room, seeking a fellow sceptic, but no one answered.

"All our helpers have started somewhere, Cullen," Vincent replied reasonably. "You know that more than anyone. You were a helper once. However, if it will make you happier, I will ask Catherine to look into this man. But we must be willing to help those who help us. This man has

not asked any questions. He has supplied all asked of him, without objection.”

“I like that. Catherine would be a good idea.” Winslow heaved his bulk to his feet. “If she doesn’t uncover anything sinister about this man to prevent his coming to Winterfest, then you have my agreement.”

“Mine as well.” Pascal rose from his chair. “I trust Catherine’s judgement. Good idea, Vincent. See what she can turn up.”

“Well, nor I do object.” Mary stood to smooth her skirts. “I think he sounds like a very nice man. Lady May has always been a very good judge of character.”

Each member of the council filed out of Father’s chamber, talking among themselves, leaving Vincent and Jacob alone. Father sat back in his chair, rolling his pen between his fingers as Vincent came to hitch one hip onto the edge of his desk.

“I gather by your comments, you have no objection to this man joining us for Winterfest, Vincent?” Jacob asked.

Vincent inclined his head. “I will ask Catherine. But I think this Mr Jones has been more than generous, and he has not betrayed us. We cannot hide from him forever. He has a right to know.”

“Fair enough.” Father put down his pen. “I will leave the list as it is. One name more or less will not make any difference. But I will admit to being

curious over what Catherine may find out. I hope, for all our sakes, it is nothing unsavoury.”

“Yes,” Vincent acknowledged. “The man is certainly being very mysterious indeed. I wonder why. What does he have to hide?”



“There are too many people by the name of David Jones living in this city, Vincent. It could be any one of them.” Catherine folded her arms, leaning back against her balcony wall. “I have done an exhaustive search, but I found nothing that fits. I need more to go on, so I asked Sebastien for more information. But he said your Mr Jones likes his privacy. He said he only meets him in the subway, and always early in the morning when Sebastien is setting up his act for the commuters. It seems he likes magicians.”

She shrugged. “Your Mr Jones always wears dark glasses and a wide brimmed hat pulled low over his face, so Sebastien’s physical description is very sketchy. A tall, thin, white man, in a black hat.”

She spread her hands wide in defeat. “That could be anyone. And, when I telephoned Lady May, she said she had only ever meet him while she was walking in the park. He wore the same disguise then too. But she judges him to be a man in his early forties.”

She sighed. “Not much to go on. Again that could be half the men in this city. But she assures me he is trustworthy. She would say no more. But I think she knows far more than she’s telling, which is deeply frustrating. Why all the secrecy?”

“Perhaps all that means is he has no fixed abode, and he walks to keep warm. Maybe he is ashamed of how far he has fallen.” Vincent sighed. “Living on the streets in a New York winter is not for the faint-hearted. The subways are warmer. Perhaps we could offer him a place Below in future.”

“Perhaps, but both of them said his clothes are expensive and neat. He is always well-dressed and clean-shaven. They did mention that the man has an English accent, so perhaps he is someone who came over to New York, for the performing arts scene, and never quite made it. Now he can’t afford to go home again.”

“Perhaps...” Vincent allowed, with a shrug. “Or maybe he did make it, and now he has a need to pay it forward. The goods he has found for us required some considerable resources to procure. And they were expensive. William has not stopped talking about them.”

“Are you suggesting they were stolen?” Catherine replied worriedly. “That would present quite a problem. I could look into any warehouse

thefts in the last two years. But that will take precious time and more resources than the D.A.'s office possesses. And a lot of petty crime goes unreported. It's simply written off and claimed on the insurance. If that is his game, then he has been very skilful at avoiding detection. Perhaps he doesn't wish to be found."

"I feel we are all pre-judging this man, sight unseen." Vincent took a turn around the balcony. "I have a sense he is more than we are seeing. Perhaps it is time for Sebastien to arrange a meeting between us."

"Please be careful, Vincent." Catherine took his arm urgently. "If he is engaged in any kind of illegal activity, he may not take too kindly to having his business looked into."

"I will be careful," Vincent reassured her. "But I seriously doubt anyone Lady May recommends would be any kind of danger to us. She has always been very careful. And Sebastien is no fool." He drew Catherine into his embrace, resting his chin on the top of her head. "I am doing this more to satisfy my own curiosity."



“This is where he usually shows up, Vincent.” Sebastien indicated the subway platform. “I figure he either lives, or sleeps, somewhere nearby. He comes and goes almost like a ghost, and never stays longer than the dawn.”

“A man who likes the shadows then.” Standing well back in the darkness himself, Vincent surveyed the quiet platform. There were few people in sight. In this hushed hour of the deepest darkness before dawn, only the hardy were up and about. People like Sebastien who had a living to make. Or those who had not slept at all.

“There...” Sebastien hissed, pointing into the distance. “That tall guy in the black coat. Hat, sunglasses, always the same.”

“I see him.” Vincent watched a thin man slowly descending the stairs before ambling along the platform, his hands pushed deep in the pockets of his coat. He kept his head down, his hat pulled low over his face. His whole demeanour suggested he wished to be left alone.

“What do you want to do, Vincent?” Sebastien asked. “Follow him, and see where he goes?”

“I will follow him until he goes Above again, where I cannot go in daylight. Thank you, Sebastien.”

“Any time.” The magician nodded. “But as I said, he’s a cool guy. And he has never asked any questions.” He gathered his bags, his stock in trade to amuse and delight the throngs of customers soon to descend on the subway. “I figure he knows exactly what he’s doing.”

“Perhaps...” Vincent nodded as he glided back into the deepest shadows, following the tall, thin stranger, as the man walked along the platform, seemingly without a care in the world.



“If you want to talk to me, man, you just have to ask.” The stranger’s softly-spoken comment penetrated the deepest shadows of the cavernous subway tunnel mouth before him. “I know you’re there. You can come out, ya know. I don’t bite.”

In his concealment, Vincent frowned in puzzlement. How had he been so easily detected? “Your world is not mine,” he replied cautiously. “I cannot walk in the light.”

“Ahhh...I see.” The stranger nodded, glancing back towards the bright lights of the subway platform behind him. “Man, you sure have a voice made for poetry. With those pipes you could read the phone-book, and not be thought boring. Ever written anything you want to get published? I’m always on the look-out for new material.”

“No, thank you. I prefer to read, rather than write.” In the darkness Vincent smiled. He been following this man for quite some time now, and he was beginning to like him more and more.

He seemed unassuming and circumspect in where he went, and who he talked with. As if his aloneness was something he cherished deeply, and shared reluctantly. He well knew the peace to be found in the dawn hour when most of the city slept.

The tall, thin stranger shook his head. “A pity that. Anyway, I guess you’re one of those mysterious people Sebastien told me about. The ones no one is supposed to know about. I saw him back there some time ago, doing his thing.”

He shrugged, pushing his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat. “Hey, it’s cool, man. Ask no questions, get fed no lies. I was glad to help out.” He laughed softly. “David Jones is the name I go by. But you already know that, don’t you?”

“Yes...” Vincent eased a little closer. “We needed to be sure. Ours is not a world which can afford to trust easily. But all our helpers are important to us. They help us survive.”

“And you just wanted to make sure I’m not some sort of axe murderer or a serial.” The man’s soft laugh deepened appreciatively. “Yeah, I get that too. Man, I’m harmless. Some would say a little crazy, but basically harmless. Live and let live, is my motto.”

He leaned forward. “Can you, at least, tell me your name? You’ve got one, I assume.”

There was hesitation in the darkness, and then, “My name is Vincent...”

“Okay, thank you. Nice to meet you, Vincent. Short and powerful, I like that. It suits you, or what I can see of you. So, you say I’m a helper now? I like that idea a lot. What do you need from me this time?”

“Only your company on a very special night,” Vincent replied quietly. “If you are willing to trust us, then you will be delivered an invitation in due course. And a guide to take you down, so you do not become lost.”

“Down?” David’s tone rose in amazed speculation. “Okay, I thought this was as ‘down’ as we could go. But I stand to be corrected.” He moved closer to the shadows, peering at Vincent’s motionless shape. “Say, Vincent, are you sure you don’t want to come out of there and talk to me properly? Let me see you. I’m not afraid, if you’re worried about me.”

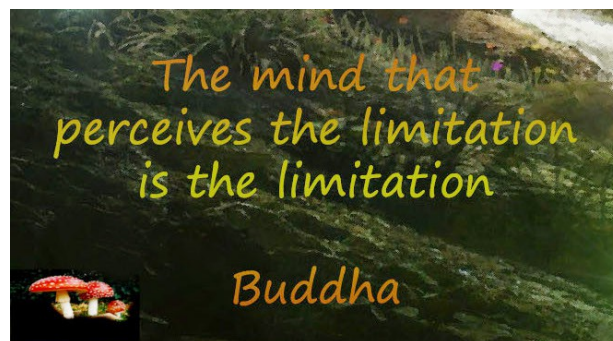
“We will be in touch...” Vincent glided deeper into the shadows.

“Suit yourself.” David did not pursue him, merely remained standing, watching the shadows with narrowed eyes, seeking movement. But his unseen companion had vanished as if he never existed at all.

“Spooks and goblins,” David commented drily. “I must be getting old...or crazy.” He laughed appreciatively, waving a hand at the darkness.

“Goodbye, my mysterious friend. I guess I’ll be seeing you around sometime.” He waited for several moments, before turning to retrace his steps towards the city surface, and dawning light.

He glanced at his watch and swore softly. He had appointments to keep, and he was going to be late. But his restless mind was already alive with speculation...



“Vincent, how did you...I mean, where did you...?” Catherine stammered over her words, staring at the tall, thin man standing at the edge of the Winterfest crowd thronging the Great Hall. “This is unbelievable.”

The man was watching everything with his curiously mis-matched eyes. One sky blue, one deep brown, they surveyed all around with a wry look of amusement. He had discarded the hat and sunglasses.

His shaggy blond hair fell across his forehead as he leaned closer to watch Father trying to best Peter at a game of chess. He made some comment, and all three men laughed.

Vincent raised his shoulders. "I did nothing. He is that helper Sebastien found for us. He has been very generous."

"And such a nice young man he is too," Lady May commented with a smile, as she came to stand behind Catherine and Vincent. "I hoped he would come tonight. He said he would."

"But, you...and he..." Catherine seemed unable to form a coherent sentence. She raised her hands helplessly. "He has seen you, Vincent?"

"Oh, we sorted that in no time at all." Lady May interjected, waving an airy hand. "We had a little tete-a-tete at my house last week. You will find David has been many people. He understands the need to show the world only that which you wish it to see."

She chuckled appreciatively. "I knew you would like him, once you got to know him. He likes his privacy, and I respect that. He's a very good boy from Brixton. I could listen to him talk all night. He makes me feel young again, and carefree. I do miss London at times."

Vincent frowned at Catherine's deeply astonished expression. "What is it? Are you feeling unwell?"

"But, you said his name was David Jones." Catherine swung her attention back to her love. "You said you meet him in the subway. You implied he was homeless, living on the streets. I thought he was professional thief, or worse."

"His name *is* David Jones." Vincent shook his head. "Catherine, what is it? I do not understand any of this. Are you telling me, you know him?"

"I must say, you have impressed me tonight, Vincent." Elliot appeared from the crowd, looking back towards the same man Catherine had been staring at. "If I had not seen him with my own eyes..." He gave a low whistle. "I know you have a few special people, but you have excelled yourself. A helper, you say. I think I'll need to up my game. Mouse will not be able to leave him alone, once he knows."

"You truly have no idea who that man is, do you, Vincent?" Catherine took Vincent by the arm, turning him to face her. "You have no clue at all."

"You're kidding me," Elliot commented from behind them. "Well, I guess it's not so unbelievable. Bach and Schubert are more your style, Vincent. Wonder if he will agree to sing for us, later..."

"Actually, I was wondering when someone was going to get around to introducing me to this beautiful lady," an amused voice, with a decided British accent, inquired from behind them all. "I think she is more than a

little confused by my presence here tonight. I think my cover has been well and truly blown. A pity, but inevitable, it seems. Someone had to recognise me.”

“Puzzled, perhaps,” Catherine allowed, turning to face him. She held out a hand. “Catherine Chandler. And you have been less than truthful with us all, Mr Bowie.”

“I knew you had guessed who I am, in truth.” David took her hand with easy grace, bending elegantly to press a brief kiss to the back of her fingers before releasing her on a sigh. “Regrettably. It was interesting, being among a room full of strangers, who took me at face value and did not question anything.”

He glanced around at all of them, each watching him with various looks of speculation and confusion. He shrugged, laughing softly. “I’m sorry, Vincent. It seems the game is up, and I have been found out in my little deception.”

“Your name is David Jones, correct?” Vincent folded his arms, watching his new friend.

“That is my legal name,” David allowed. “Before I changed it. But I think the rest of these folks know the simple truth about me.”

“David Bowie...” Vincent watched him closely. “Oscar Wilde once said, *‘The truth is rarely pure and never simple’.*”

“I told you, you have a voice for poetry.” David smiled sadly. “But if I had told you in the beginning I was actually David Bowie, would you still have invited me to this incredible gathering? Made me welcome among you?”

“You underestimate us,” Vincent replied quietly. “Trust is a two way street. You should have trusted us.”

“It has been a while, I will admit. Maybe it’s because I have lived in New York for some time now. Perhaps too long.” David looked around at them all. “Happy Winterfest, then. It has been an eye opener to come here tonight.”

“I hope you will come again next year.” Vincent extended his hand. “David will always be welcome here.”

“And in return I will keep your secrets. Every one of them. Though I am not sure anyone would believe me anyway. This is truly a magic place. You know, I recently made a movie about a whole bunch of people living underground. Who knew?” David laughed. “I never expected it to come true in quite this way.”

He looked up into the great vault of the ceiling. “Amazing indeed...I bet the acoustics in this place are truly awesome. Maybe it’s time we gave them a try out, and see...”

~FIN~

*This way or no way,
You know I'll be free...
Just like that bluebird...
Now, ain't that just like me?*

*Oh, I'll be free...
Just like that bluebird
Oh, I'll be free...
Ain't that just like me?*

~ David Bowie - Lazarus