

Against Aloneness

by Angie

(for the 34th Anniversary)

Memories are not shackles ... they are garlands
- Alan Bennett



Vincent stood in the darkness of the culvert, waiting. An elderly couple sitting on a bench were too near to risk exiting down the stream. It was almost dusk, and he could have started his nightly wanderings; as there were long shadows and he was adept at travelling between them. But this couple did not seem inclined to move yet.

So he observed them with no little curiosity. Few seniors came to the Park so near dark. These two seemed to know what they were doing. They were holding hands and talking in soft voices, too softly for him to hear. He looked closer and realized their ages were very different. While the man was probably in his 80s, the woman was easily 20 years younger, but he had no doubt they were a couple. Their body language was that of lovers.

When they eventually rose to go, Vincent followed them at a distance, curiosity still gripping him. The couple moved to one of the lesser used entrances, and walked across the street to an old apartment building, one of the few left around the Park, one that had once been a hotel, he recalled.

He could learn no more, so he continued his wanderings, which gave him solace in his aloneness, a state which, long ago, he had thought was behind him.

Catherine had given him a place in her life and her world, and he had revelled in it, in her, in their love. But she was gone, murdered, over 30 years ago now. He had tried, often, to reconcile himself to that loss, to move on, but he could not. Their son, Jacob, was now grown up and living above as a doctor, having taken over Peter Alcott's practice. There was much to be proud of there – and Vincent was – but it did not compensate him for the loss of the woman he had loved more than anything – and who had loved him equally.

He returned to the tunnels late, as was his habit, and went to bed soon afterwards.

The next night, he exited the culvert seeing no one, but he had not gone far when he spotted the couple again, on a different bench, not far away. Again, they sat close, holding hands and talking. This time, there were trees behind them, so Vincent silently worked his way behind

them by a longish route, and eavesdropped. Curiosity overcame any scruples. He wanted to know what brought them here.

He hunkered down, silently, and listened. He could now hear them clearly.

The woman was speaking. "Remember when you had that huge commission? And the patron wanted a bench to dominate it?"

"Yes. I asked him what kind of bench, and he said he didn't care. Of course he cared. He wanted me to guess his mind. So we came here and sat on a few and I discovered that they all had different 'feels'. And I chose this one because it looked over nothing interesting and seemed almost lonely. It didn't matter. I let him guess what was in front of it. There were no hints, except a women's handkerchief on the bench. Remember?"

"Oh yes. You used the handkerchief you had given me for my 40th birthday. I see it just here every time I look at this bench – and I keep it in my pocket. What a lovely memory."

The couple chuckled together and rose, again leaving by the same entrance and entering their building.

So he was an artist ... and she? Vincent was more curious than ever.

The next night, he looked for them and found them a little further yet from the culvert. There was a short stretch of wrought iron fence protecting a tiny garden, and just enough low shrubbery to keep him hidden, albeit not very comfortably. He squatted and listened.

This time there was no talk for a while. Then the man turned his head and looked where Vincent was hiding. He spoke quietly, but firmly.

"Why don't you come out here, whoever you are?"

Vincent was silent for long moments, out of shock.

"I ... I prefer to keep hidden. I ... mean you no harm."

"We guessed that from the last time. Please come out. We do not judge."

"You ... you knew I was there? How?"

"I'm a painter. I absorb my surroundings. I felt your presence nearby, and believed you harmless. But now we're both curious."

Vincent sighed and rose to move to the bench. He kept his hood well over his face, just the same. There was no one else around, but he was always cautious.

"I'm Frank, and this is Gloria," the man said looking up at him.

"My name is Vincent."

"Please sit down with us. I'm too old to crane my neck looking up at you for long. You must be curious about us."

"Yes, not many people sit in the park in the dusk."

Gloria spoke when Vincent was seated next to Frank. "We are building memories bench by bench. My husband, as you see, is somewhat older, and we wanted to link our lives together to something solid, unmovable. Someday, I will be alone and these benches will remind me of our talks."

Frank nodded. "Our May-December marriage was the talk of our family and friends, you know. How would Gloria fare as I got older and she approached retirement. Would I need care in my declining years? Would she be able to care for me? So far these questions have not needed to be answered, but we are prepared. Age is unforgiving. Would you like to hear our story."

“Oh yes,” Vincent said, bowing his head.

Gloria began.

“We first met, you know, when I was in my early 20s. Frank had an art show in a small mall in New Jersey, and I just happened to have some business there, and wandered past his displays. We talked and immediately hit it off, discovered we had much in common - and there was definitely a strong attraction – almost love at first sight.

She sighed.

“But I was in a relationship and he was married – this we determined fairly quickly – so after a couple of hours of talk and laughter, we parted. I thought he was a very handsome, older man, but was convinced I would never see him again.”

“I thought her a very attractive, intelligent woman,” Frank remarked, looking at his wife. Vincent got the impression that they had told this story before, often.

“There was no choice but to part, really,” Gloria continued. “We never communicated – we had not even given each other any contact information. We didn't see each other for another 25 years.

“It was, of course, another of my art shows,” Frank chuckled. “I had made a name for myself by then, and had my own gallery. Gloria walked in, and it was if all the intervening years evaporated. We met in the middle of the floor, surrounded by all my art ... and nothing else mattered. We talked, determined that this time there were no encumbrances ... we were both divorced ... and embraced.”

“I'm a realtor,” Gloria remarked. “A very successful one. Frank continues to paint and sell art, even gives a few classes. We live modestly in a home we built in a fairly remote, wooded area, outside the city. But we like to come here, to New York, once in a while, and we stay with an artist friend in that old apartment building. This is a place where one can see life.”

“Life?” Vincent queried. He did not come into the park for life, but to escape the reminders of death, of Catherine. For all their love, they had only walked in the Park once, that Halloween night so long ago, to the bridge to watch the sunrise. He had also helped her when she was attacked in the Park, and had met her at the culvert, or inside it, often, but they had never shared a bench. He wondered why, now.

Frank looked at him, not obviously trying to see beneath Vincent's hood, but his expression was intent.

“My friend, I suspect you know something of life, of sorrow.” It wasn't a question, but a statement.

Vincent bowed his head and merely whispered, “Yes.”

Frank sighed. “Life is not kind to lovers. We have been fortunate, but one day”

Gloria brought Frank's hand to her lips and he smiled at her. “It doesn't matter, Frank. That day cannot erase what we had, what we are now. The years have been kind to us.”

Frank looked at Vincent again. “You see, she's incorrigible. Our love is a tangible thing with us, I suspect you can see it, maybe even feel it.”

Vincent nodded. “Yes. Ours was too. My father said it gave everyone around us happiness, that it lit up the room.”

Gloria smiled at him across Frank. “That kind of love is a blessing, whatever happens, whatever comes.”

Vincent started a little at that repeat of the words he had told Catherine, on that memorable

night in her apartment, during his illness.

“Yes,” he said again, after a few moments, quietly.

“I can't tell you not to grieve your loss, or not to occasionally despair,” Frank said softly, “but think of this Park. It has tranquility at this time of the day as it prepares for night. You have memories. Let them in, enjoy them, encourage them, let them ease your despair. Best of all are friends. Talk to them, welcome their memories too. You cannot live unless you accept what you had.”

“Now you have two new friends and a bench to add to your memories,” Gloria added, smiling.

“Please join us any time you wish. We will be moving along these benches for some time yet,” Frank told him.

“Thank-you,” Vincent replied, greatly comforted in the thought. Yes, he did need friends, other friends, who did not know himself or his story.

He rose to continue his customary walk, but suddenly knew that this night, he did not need it. Perhaps, he would need it less now. That thought heartened him.

“Thank you,” he said again, bowing to Frank and Gloria, who both smiled up at him understandingly.

“You are very welcome,” Frank said quietly. Gloria blew him a kiss.

Vincent left with a nod, and returned to his world, which now seemed less confining, more comforting. Perspective, he decided, was everything. He had lacked that. It had taken a couple from Above to make this plain to him. His face and body were relaxed as he entered his chamber and looked around. Time for some changes, he decided. He needed less reminders of death and more acknowledgements of life and love. Frank was correct.

One item would remain prominent, however, the painting of himself and Catherine by Kristopher Gentian. It brought memories he would not part with, would remember with joy. He wondered what Frank would think of it, as a fellow artist. Perhaps one day, a viewing could be arranged.

Vincent got ready for bed earlier than usual, and picked up a book at random to read. He was at peace, for the first time in many years.

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