

The Way Old Friends Do

by Angie

*Oh I don't care what comes tomorrow
We can share it together
(ABBA - 1979)*

Peter regarded the tall, dark-draped figure waiting outside his tunnel entrance and silently stood aside. His visitor entered and moved inside, wordlessly

It was a very small, but cosy, basement room. A small fireplace was blazing cheerily and the room was pleasantly warm.

Peter followed his guest and immediately went to the sideboard and poured out two shot glasses of brandy. He carried one over to his guest, now seated in a chair. He sat down in the other and regarded his companion. Wordlessly, they raised a toast to each other and drank down the brandy in a gulp. Both sighed.

"It never gets any easier, does it?" Peter commented. "Perhaps I should have attended her funeral. But it seemed so final, so uncharacteristic of her. She would never have wanted to cause me such pain."

"No," said the familiar deep voice, softly. "She would not have wanted that. Her last words were for me ... and our son. She was promoting life ... even as her life ended."

Peter had heard those last words many times, from this man and others. Dylan Thomas' words seemed made for lovers – and he was glad that Catherine had been able to give the man she loved that gift of poetry, one his guest had become obsessed with during his illness. Peter did not find them comforting.

Peter's guest always came one hour before midnight, the day before the anniversary of her death and his son's birth, because it was the only way he could share that terrible combination of sorrow and joy, with the only man who truly understood. In an hour, the new day would begin, the day they both revered and hated above all others.

Peter rose, silently cursing his stiff joints. He carried the brandy bottle to their waiting glasses and poured them each another.

This ceremony had become necessary to both of them. Peter knew his days were limited now, that he was very elderly – and felt every day of it. He was winding down, no question about that. It might be the last time they could do this. His guest, while not young anymore, was still vigorous. Who else would – or could - share this time with this special man when he was gone? And as he thought of it, Peter knew the answer.

"And how is Jacob?" Peter asked, as they downed their shots again, each making a wry face.

"He is well. He has all of Catherine's patience and Father's bedside manner."

Peter chuckled. "That last was not always demonstrable."

"No, but my son has a good sense of timing."

"Like his father," Peter commented.

"**NO**," came the response, so loudly that Peter jumped. His guest immediately quieted and hung his head, the long hair covering his face.

Peter spoke up quickly, wanting to retrieve the genial atmosphere if he could.

"You DO have good timing! How much more would you have suffered had you not arrived on that rooftop when you did, if you had had to read about her death in the newspapers - or over the pipes from a helper?"

"But I couldn't save her," came the raspy voice from the other chair.

"No one could have," Peter said quietly. "Not me, not Joe, not anyone. Only the man who killed her could have done so." It was an old argument between them.

"It's time, you know."

The man in the other chair looked up and regarded Peter, almost expressionlessly.

"It may be, but how can I explain why I have not done so before?"

"You don't need to explain. Jacob will have figured it out by now. Your visits to me on this night are known. But you owe it to him to tell him your story, yours and Catherine's. All of it. And when I'm gone, you can come here and drink to her together. I'm leaving this house to Jacob. There's no one who deserves it more. He needs a place to call his own, between the two worlds. It's something I can do for you both - and for Catherine."

"Thank you," came the voice, which now cracked with emotion as he rose. "I must go. Thank you once again, Peter."

"This is what friends do," Peter commented, as he rose also and followed his guest to the tunnel door. The big man turned at the door and put a large furry hand on Peter's shoulder. Then he turned and left. Peter closed the door behind him.

On the next anniversary, two men entered the tunnel entrance and the larger of the two led the way into the small room, where the fireplace was blazing. He went to the sideboard and poured two shots of brandy. The other man watched him, amazed, as he sat down. He had never seen his father drink anything stronger than tea. He took the glass and waited until his companion was seated. He acknowledged the silent toast with one of his own and gulped down the fiery liquid a second after his father. His eyes watered.

There was a large sigh from the other chair.

"Jacob, I'm sorry I did not invite you to this midnight ceremony until now. I wanted to share it only with Peter, who knew your mother even better than I did."

Jacob smiled. "Father, I have always understood why you came here. Now we can raise a toast to two wonderful people, including one who first met my mother when she was stark naked."

"He did love to tell that story. Of course, he only told it when Catherine was there. She loved him like a father.

"Jacob, my loss was deep and tragic, but think how much worse it was for the man who brought her into this world, who was always there, a physician and friend, a father after her own had died. I cannot comprehend that sorrow. But I respected it, and him. This ceremony was for both of us. It helped. There was no one else who could understand."

"But now there is also me," Jacob commented.

"Yes. You have known Peter, loved him, and respected him. He first met you after I brought

you back to the tunnels. He pronounced you hale and healthy, against all odds.”

He chuckled. “He has known all three of us naked. You have known him all your life, as have I. He would be happy to think we are continuing this ceremony. We have much to thank him for. He made our lives whole.”

“*You and I can share the silence*”*,” Jacob said quietly. Then he quietly sang the song he had heard long ago. There was a long silence from the other chair when he finished.

“*Times of joy and times of sorrow/We will always see it through*’...*,” Vincent repeated softly, his eyes wet. Never in all the years he had been coming here had he been able to cry. He looked at his son and rose from the chair, meeting Jacob in the middle. They hugged for some time, both overcome with sadness and both shedding tears now, quietly.

“*We can face it together*”*,” whispered Vincent, around the lump in his throat, as they moved apart.

Without a word, Jacob washed the two glasses in the small sink unit and placed them upside down on a small towel on the sideboard. Then the two men moved towards the tunnel door, but both stopped and looked back into the little room. Vincent realized they would never be alone here. Peter’s spirit – and Catherine’s – seem to live in it. Peter had given them that gift as well. He felt the peace enter him and sighed. Jacob put a hand on his father’s shoulder and they turned to re-enter their world, each grateful for the small ceremony, preparation for the day to come.

END

* "The Way Old Friends Do"

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Finding comfort together
The way old friends do
And after fights and words of violence
We make up with each other
The way old friends do
Times of joy and times of sorrow
We will always see it through
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(ABBA 1979, Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus)