

Two Solitudes

by Angie

*It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion;
it is easy in solitude to live after our own.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Note: The MacGyver series aired from 1985 - 1992, so was contemporary with the original Beauty and the Beast TV series (1987-1991). The event depicted here *could* have taken place.

(This story is written strictly for the free enjoyment of fans of the "Beauty and the Beast" television series. No copyright infringement is intended.)

MacGyver had decided to go for a walk around New York while awaiting the final details on a job for the Phoenix Foundation. He seldom came here – did not like cities as a rule - but was always fascinated by New York, a city so complex, so multi-layered, that it was almost dreamlike.

He walked without any particular goal, just to feel the pavement beneath his feet and mingle with the crowds. He wore sunglasses and his clothing was summer “street-casual” – his boss would have said rumped. He needed a haircut too, as usual. He walked quickly, knowing full well that anyone suspected of being a tourist could become a target. He did not want to get into a street fight.

His mind wandered and he had not been paying much attention to his surroundings when he came up short. It seemed he had subconsciously entered a quieter area. He seemed to be on the perimeter of a vast construction site but didn't remember passing any warning signs. He looked around. Well, he could just head left down that street up there – he hated retracing his steps – and be back with the crowds in a few minutes. He turned down a street which seemed empty of life. He looked up and realized the windows had no glass and it was spookily silent. Not even an abandoned car. That meant that the whole section was probably slated for demolition – and very soon. Fortunately, he could see no indication it was happening today. His boss would never let him live that down!

With a sigh he marched on. At the next street, he would turn left again. By then he would have done three sides of a square and theoretically should be close to where he had entered this zone. At the next corner, he looked left and saw what looked like cars and people at the far end. He turned and walked swiftly towards the distant activity.

Suddenly he stumbled and found himself sinking through the road amid a tumble of old planks. Instinctively shifting to catch himself, he tried to catch the edges of the hole, but the entire mess suddenly gave way and he found himself careening down some kind of metal slide. He came to rest, far below the street, in a mud puddle with his feet against a brick wall, dust filtering down on him. He was lying on the floor of a tunnel running at right angles to the slide. Above him there was a metallic *snick* as if a trap door had re-set.

MacGyver could hear tapping and struggled to his feet, shaking off some of the debris and wincing at the sharp pain in his left foot. He looked up. There was no way he could climb back up the way he had come down. The shaft's sides were smooth and there was no light at the top. His trusty penknife would not get him out of this one. He didn't have a piece of string in his pocket - and he wasn't even wearing a belt!

He looked both ways down the tunnel and was relieved when he saw two people come towards him – one a small, casually but well-dressed woman, and the other a large man in a voluminous black cloak. MacGyver felt uncharacteristically disoriented. What were these people doing here? As they got closer, he realized there was something odd about the caped figure's face. He stiffened.

Catherine and Vincent were strolling around the perimeter tunnels, something they often did now to escape the hustle and bustle of the hub below - and enjoy a little privacy when neither had any pressing duties to attend to.

There was virtually no danger now, since most of the old entries had been decommissioned. Doors into the world below were now strictly controlled from shop fronts and the two brownstones they owned. Getting rid of the danger represented by uncontrolled street entries had made life easier on sentries and safer for everyone else.

A message suddenly sounded over the pipes and both stopped to listen. They looked at each other.

“Mouse trap?” Catherine asked. “What on earth does that mean?”

Vincent grunted. “It means that one of Mouse's old man traps has caught an intruder. I told him to close them off properly, but someone has evidently fallen through one in a construction zone. We'd better make sure they aren't hurt and help them back out. We're the closest. I'll keep my hood up.”

Vincent wore his cloak, even on these excursions. He felt undressed without it, he told Catherine. She loved that garment the way she loved what was inside it - and she understood his fears. They were hers as well. It was best to be safe.

They rounded a tunnel curve and saw the intruder, who looked somewhat the worse for wear, but at least was on his feet, if a little askew. Catherine moved in front of Vincent and approached the man, who was tall, raggedly blonde, and good-looking in a weather-beaten kind of way. He was about their age. He stood a little straighter when he spotted them, one hand in a pocket.

“Hello. My name is Catherine and we’re here to help you. I’m afraid you’ve fallen afoul of an old security device.”

Catherine extended her hand and the man shook it, glancing at her, but positively staring at Vincent. Even with his hood close around his face, she knew the man would sense something unusual.

“My name is MacGyver,” the man said slowly. He seemed stunned. He looked at Catherine and she gave him a look of understanding - which quickly changed to wry tension. She looked back at her companion.

Vincent, well aware of what even a glimpse of his face could engender in the initiated, decided it was better now than later. With a careful shake of his head, but keeping his hands hidden, his hood fell back. He looked at the man expressionless, but spoke quietly.

“My name is Vincent, Mr MacGyver. We just happened to be closest. We owe you an apology at the very least.”

MacGyver was uncertain which was the more shocking – the fully-revealed appearance of Vincent, or the fact that he could talk – and so well. Or maybe it was the beautiful woman who had returned to snuggle under the spreading arm of the enormous cloak, her whole demeanor expressing her connection to him. What mysterious world had he had fallen into? He almost wondered if he was dreaming, but a sudden pain in his foot as he shifted disabused him of that. He spoke quietly, aware that his voice echoed a little in the empty tunnels.

“I ... I think I twisted my ankle - and I swallowed about a quart of dust. Could I trouble you for a drink of water?”

The two people looked at each other. Catherine spoke.

“Of course you may, Mr MacGyver. We’d like to offer you some hospitality - and an explanation.”

“Please call me Mac.”

Catherine nodded. “We’d better give you a hand ... um ..Mac.”

Vincent approached him and he felt a strong hand under his arm. He tried not to flinch at the sight of long hairy fingers tipped with sharp nails. He felt Vincent stiffen and knew that he had felt that slight cringe. MacGyver felt suddenly guilty and straightened. After all, the man was trying to help him. He gave Vincent a polite ‘thank you’ and waited for the next step.

Catherine meanwhile, picked up a brick shard and tapped on a nearby pipe. She waited until a series of distant taps sounded then looked at Vincent.

“Let’s go,” she declared for MacGyver’s benefit.

They wound along a number of brick-lined and then rock-hewn tunnels, all obviously very old, but dry and clean, Catherine moving quickly ahead of them and then out of sight. When they met up with her, she stood next to a door in the tunnel wall. Vincent helped him through, then walked behind him up a set of wooden stairs and along a corridor. They emerged into a bright hallway and the unmistakable smell of antiseptics. MacGyver was ushered into a clean-looking clinic, where a tall man in a white coat awaited them.

“Thank you for coming, Peter,” Vincent rumbled. “We are fortunate that you were nearby. Mr MacGyver, this is Dr. Peter Alcott, a good friend and our family physician.”

Peter Alcott approached MacGyver and shook his hand. “Pleased to meet you. I hear you had an accident. Please take off your shirt and that shoe and sock and sit on this table. I’ll take a good look at you.”

MacGyver did as he was told and the doctor examined his foot closely. It hurt when it was moved, but did not seem swollen, he was glad to see. The doctor wrapped a length of elastic bandage around it, and MacGyver was surprised how much better that felt. However, now that his back was exposed to the air, it felt as if it had been flayed.

Peter finished with the foot and then moved to examine his back.

“Yes, there are some abrasions. Catherine, can you bring me the antiseptic and some cotton balls. I’ll have to clean this.”

Catherine did so and then sat down next to Vincent. MacGyver winced as Peter began to clean his back.

Vincent, meanwhile, had removed his cloak completely and sat on a chair on the far side of the small room. MacGyver regarded him, realizing he did not look nearly so scary in this context. In fact, his face was almost

noble, now he could see it properly. There was intelligence in the deep-set blue eyes and the voice as he spoke to Catherine was soft and cultured. Vincent was obviously aware of his attention and MacGyver relaxed a bit. Vincent was the least of his problems. He would have some explaining to do when he got back to the office. What would his boss say if he learned that his best operative had fallen down a hole?

However, his curiosity was soon more acute than his discomfort. He asked the question uppermost in his mind. Nothing about the past half hour made any sense to him – at least in the world that he thought he knew.

“Can you tell me who you are, what all this is?”

He looked at Vincent as he said this and saw the big man drop his head, as if to hide a smile.

Catherine looked over at Vincent, who looked up at her and nodded. She spoke quietly and carefully.

“Mr MacGyver, we are part of a community which few people know about. We are secretive because we must be, for Vincent’s sake, as well as for the many others we help and protect. We live apart. Our world would be destroyed were it to be discovered.

“You represent an extreme danger to us, but I think you’re an intelligent man. I feel we can trust you. I must ask that you do not tell anyone what happened to you, or what you have seen – or will see - today. Can you do this?”

MacGyver regarded Catherine and smiled. She smiled in return. So, his charm had not left him yet. That was some consolation after his embarrassing fall.

“My apologies for my curiosity,” he said at last. “I was stupid to walk into a construction zone. My boss would have me demoted to the lost and found department. I don’t know where I am, but your secret is safe with me. I’d like to be your friend.”

Vincent spoke then.

“Mr MacGyver, you are the victim of one of our community’s more brilliant but errant souls. Our apologies are insufficient. However, Catherine is correct. We are all endangered by the presence of a stranger who is not one of us. If you wish to become a friend – we call them helpers - we would be honoured, but you must understand that this friendship comes with great responsibility. You would never be able to tell anyone about us, or visit us other than secretly. We can show you how to do that safely, but you must always come alone.”

MacGyver nodded and saw the three others relax. He began to realize that there was far more at stake than their words indicated. He wondered what more there could be.

“I am grateful that you found me and rescued me. It was unexpected and more than I deserve for daydreaming. If I did that on the job, I’d be dead. But I’d like to see more of your world, if I could - and this errant soul of yours. I suspect we have much in common. That was the most unusual hole I’ve ever fallen down.”

Peter spoke gravely, but his eyes twinkled.

“Mr MacGyver, you are lucky to have nothing worse than a few scrapes. Your foot isn’t broken, just sprained. Just walk carefully for a few days and keep on that elastic bandage. As for a visit below, I’m sure that can be arranged. You’ll be surprised. But that foot will mean we can’t overstress you this time and you won’t see some of the more unusual sights.” He looked at Vincent as he said this and received a nod of understanding in return.

“Thank you, Doctor.” MacGyver shook Peter’s hand and stood up, and began to put his shirt back on. It was dirty and torn, although his jeans were tough and merely dirty. He grimaced.

As if reading his mind, Vincent spoke up.

“Mr MacGyver, your clothing has been damaged. If you’ll wait a few minutes, I’ll get you something else to wear. You and I are about the same height.”

He left and MacGyver looked at Peter and Catherine. Now was the time to perhaps find out more.

“I ... I’ve never seen anyone like Vincent,” he said, unnecessarily.

“There is no one else exactly like Vincent,” Peter declared, looking at Catherine. “He’s the heart and soul of our community, and Catherine’s husband. There is much you should know, and I’m sure you have a lot of questions. I think a visit to the community which made his life possible will tell you more than I could.”

Catherine nodded. “And I’m sure you’ll be invited to lunch, so you’re also in for a treat.”

MacGyver sat back on the examining table and the three of them sat in friendly silence, as Peter made some

notes in a ledger.

“Even here there is paperwork,” he commented over his shoulder, wryly.

Vincent returned with an armload of clothes.

“Mr MacGyver, I found some suitable clothing, including a bulky sweater – and a bag for your own clothes. It will be chilly in the tunnels, so you’ll need something extra. We’ll wait for you in the den down the hall.”

Vincent snagged his cloak and the three of them left the clinic.

The shirt was a soft flannelette with patched elbows. It was more than ample. He and Vincent might be of similar height, but there was no doubt as to who had the larger build, at least up top. He put on the sweater and pants, finding the latter fitted well, then folded his clothing into the cloth bag. He left and found the others in a cosy den lined with books. Peter informed him that he would pass on a message if that was needed, and with a few words MacGyver told him who to phone and what to say. That done, Vincent led and the three of them trudged downstairs again into the tunnels.

This time, their route led steadily downwards and steadily became a lot more chilly. MacGyver’s foot gave him only minor twinges, for which he was grateful, especially when they headed down what seemed like an endless steel staircase. All along the route, there was the sound of tapping, he supposed more of the code Catherine had used. Ingenious to use existing pipes – and ones that presumably had been long unused, he thought. Errant breezes seemed to hint at some mysterious ventilation that made the experience surreal.

Vincent led the tour, explaining as they went, while Catherine walked next to MacGyver, smiling at his reaction. She spoke when they rested briefly in a cathedral-like rock chamber, lined with sand.

“I felt exactly as you do, years ago when I was first introduced to this,” she remarked. “Like you, I came here as the result of an injury.”

By the time they reached what Vincent had termed “the hub”. MacGyver had had to frequently remind himself to close his mouth, which kept dropping open in astonishment at what he glimpsed - long rock galleries, stone staircases, a huge well that made him dizzy to look down - which Vincent called the Abyss, as if it was a living thing. He also saw several wooden bridges - and long shafts he would have thought impossible. Throughout the journey, the constant clatter of the NY subway trains reminded him where he was.

It was a world he could not have imagined, even in his dreams. The fact of it was incredible, but the organization required to make it livable was even more so, as was the obvious sense of community evident in everyone they met.

MacGyver was very curious, but too overwhelmed to question as they walked. These people were living full, rich lives – despite their underground, obviously off-the-grid, existence.

When he met the man they called Father, in a cave lined with books, he suddenly realized that he had been on parole until that point. Father smiled at him and welcomed him to the community. MacGyver had no trouble sensing the air of command and responsibility which seemed to hang about the patriarch. He made a point of being polite and for the next half hour was given an encapsulated history of the community. He was sure there was a lot more to the story – but what he heard told him that this community had had its social as well as physical challenges. Father asked few questions and those about his mishap. His face became stern as MacGyver told him the details. Father then looked at Vincent, who nodded. They parted amiably, with an invitation for MacGyver to visit again.

The next stop on the tour was Mouse’s chamber. For the first time, MacGyver felt the presence of a kindred spirit. Quite obviously, the the devices strewn around the rough-hewn chamber, the man was a mechanical genius – but quite undisciplined, and probably untutored as well. As he looked around, he ached to pick up things he saw and examine them more closely. He did pick up a tiny, steel pipe wrench, the kind that had been sold when he was a boy. It looked old – but the screw adjustment worked smoothly. The table where he put it back was piled with enough gizmos and oddments to build almost anything - but the owner seemed to be absent. Someday, MacGyver thought, he’d like to spend a day here with Mouse.

Vincent made a sound of frustration.

“Mouse seems to have gone into hiding, Mr MacGyver. But not for long, I assure you. He has an apology to make before you leave.”

The tour ended in Vincent's chamber and the three of them sat down on assorted chairs. MacGyver was glad to rest his foot and look around, his amazement showing at the stained glass window, which transformed the rock chamber and the eclectic collection of mementos that populated the room.

MacGyver expressed his appreciation for their time and was gratified to see his two hosts smile with pride. He now had just one large matter of curiosity - Vincent and Catherine themselves. She was obviously not from the tunnels, and just as obviously someone special to the community. He looked at them and saw their recognition of the unspoken question.

Vincent spoke. "I'm sure you're curious about us, Mr MacGyver. We met one night five years ago. Catherine was attacked and left for dead in the park. I found her and brought her here."

"I fell in love with his voice before I saw him," Catherine said softly. "No woman could be more fortunate. He is everything to me. He is all that I am, all that I can hope to be. We are one."

Catherine's look as she said this made MacGyver a little envious. Vincent continued.

"And Catherine changed my life - is my life. I would be nothing without her. She brought me into the light."

MacGyver noticed that they were again looking at each other as if they had no need of words. Perhaps they didn't. He spoke softly, feeling more like an intruder than ever.

"I'm afraid I'm a confirmed bachelor. My job doesn't allow me the luxury of long term relationships. I ... uh ... solve problems of the more dangerous kind."

Neither said anything to this disclosure, nor asked for more. They were listening and he suddenly noticed that a tapping had started and his hosts smiled at him.

"Would you care to join us for lunch, Mr MacGyver?"

He thanked them and accepted, grateful that no one would be looking for him for some time. MacGyver had made his message for Peter to relay vague enough that there would be no awkward questions when he returned.

Lunch proved to be as much of a surprise as the everything else. It was superb – a thick home-made vegetable and bean soup with lots of fresh bread. Dessert was custard tarts – and they were better than any he had ever tasted. MacGyver didn't tell them he was a vegetarian, but he suspected that he had not consumed meat anyway. For once, he didn't care. He sighed in contentment after the meal, then looked at his hosts. They too seemed relaxed and replete. With such a cook, he would not mind living below ground, he thought.

"Thank you for a most enlightening tour. I hope you won't mind if I visit again when I'm in town. And I don't think I've been better fed in my life."

"Mr MacGyver, you would be welcome," Vincent declared, smiling.

MacGyver no longer thought of Vincent as strange. He had learned a lot about the leonine man during the tour, including the fact that he could quote classical literature like a scholar, and had a grasp of the physical sciences that rivaled his own. Hints about intruders and battles, and Vincent's reticence on the subject, made it clear that his natural weapons had protected the community on more than one occasion - although, not in recent memory.

A disruption across the dining hall suddenly distracted everyone's attention. A small, hunched, scruffy, tow-headed man was being held by the collar and carried partially airborne by the burly cook – William, if he remembered correctly. When they reached where MacGyver was sitting, William let the man stand on his feet, but held him firmly by the thick and rather eclectic jacket he was wearing.

William rumbled a gruff warning to the miscreant and looked at the guest.

"This is Mouse, Mr MacGyver. He has something to say."

The man stuttered, and spoke in clipped phrases, all the while grinning sheepishly.

"Sor ... sorry. Lots of signs up top saying keep out. Lots of buildings blown up soon. Crazy to go there. Forgot about trap. Had other work to do. Mouse will close it."

He hung his head, sagged when William let him go, then straightened.

"Here." Mouse pushed an item into MacGyver's hand, then looked around with a sideways grin and skittered away. There was a collective sign from Vincent, Catherine and William.

"Going to fix it right now," he flung over his shoulder.

MacGyver's chuckle was joined by others from nearby tables. He looked at what Mouse had given him. It was the tiny steel wrench he had seen in Mouse's cave. That meant the man must have been hiding and watching. He looked at Vincent and saw the same knowledge in his eyes. Vincent shrugged and his mouth twitched.

"You can have no idea how perfect this is for me, in my line of work," MacGyver declared. "Please thank Mouse for me. Now I think I'd better return to my hotel before my boss thinks I've defected."

No one queried that remark either, for which he was grateful. Not the smartest thing he could have said, but he guessed that curiosity was not something the tunnel dwellers indulged in – except perhaps Mouse.

"I'll guide you back," Catherine offered, with a look at Vincent.

Seeing that look, and guessing its reason with a shock, MacGyver suddenly felt grateful that he had nothing worse to contend with than a little excitement now and again. So far he had come out alive. The tunnels, fantastic as they were, were a still prison to someone like Vincent.

He took Catherine's arm and let her lead him away from a world he might never see again. At least he knew it existed. That might be useful one day. As she explained to him the ways he might use to return, and how to let them know he was coming, he found he liked the sense of welcome he felt. It was a privilege he would not abuse.

He had been alone most of his life, having lost his parents and his grandmother in a car accident when he was a boy. His grandfather had tried to fill the missing roles, but that big lonely space around his heart had never quite closed. MacGyver suspected that Vincent had known something of that loneliness before he met Catherine.

He fingered the tiny wrench Mouse had given him. It sure beat trying to use a belt buckle, and it felt comfortable in his pocket with his penknife. It was almost the same size. One day perhaps, he would bring it back with him and stay longer – much longer.

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