

# VIGNETTES

## Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

*“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”*

**Maya Angelou**

### **Elizabeth...**

Elizabeth Follett packed everything she could possibly fit into the large backpack. Then, alongside her precious paints and brushes, she filled two old suitcases with the few things she couldn’t bear to leave behind.

“So this is it...” she muttered as she straightened, easing the nagging pain in the small of her back with both hands.

She looked around the dingy sadness of the single room she called home. It wasn’t much to show for forty-five years of living. But after her husband had died unexpectedly 10 years ago, she couldn’t afford anything more on her wages as a short-order cook in a third-rate greasy spoon restaurant over on Times Square. Now even that job was gone, swallowed up a month ago by the redevelopment of the site into a video arcade.

Elizabeth didn’t have the heart to look for another dead-end job, in a life going nowhere but into oblivion. However, her need was fast becoming immediate. What little money she did have would soon be gone. Her only outlet had been her painting. For years she’d bought old framed prints at the local street markets and after carefully taking them to pieces she’d turned the print over and painted a new picture on the reverse. Then she’d return to the market and sell the finished piece. Her various customers had often said her work was striking with considerable natural talent. But still, they always bargained hard, pushing down her asking price. The few dollars Elizabeth received helped to make ends meet, even as the activity fed her thirsty soul.

But now she was being evicted, charged with intentional damage to her landlord’s valuable property. “Old fool...” She strapped the last suitcase closed with unnecessary force before slumping into a nearby chair. She looked around the room with resignation.

She couldn’t remember when she’d first decided to paint on the walls. The dark floral wallpaper of her room was truly awful. One night, haunted by the nightmare of unpaid bills and unable to sleep, she had taken out her paints and started. Soon the whole room was covered in her artwork. Cityscapes,

landscapes and portraits adorned every available surface. Her landlord had been horrified, demanding she pay for the damage. Unable to afford the exorbitant amount the man had quoted for returning the room to its original bleak state, let alone the next month's rent, Elizabeth had been forced to suffer eviction.

"But I'm not finished." She inhaled deeply now, running her hand lightly over a lovely portrait of a good friend. "Nothing is finished yet. Just you wait and see..."

She knew where she was going. That was her cherished secret and she held it close to her chest, keeping her warm as she stepped out of the apartment building into the blowing chill of a winter's day in New York. She hurried along the pavement, weaving in and out of the dense foot traffic, impatient to begin.

The necessary burdens of her heavy back-pack and suitcases felt light as she hurried to the nearest subway station and started down. She was following the directions she'd carefully memorized over the last few weeks, since she'd lost her job. She had been as thrifty as humanly possible, sometimes going without meals, to expend the last of her meagre savings on amassing a cache of food and essentials in her new home - the things she would need to survive until her good friend came to find her.

Where Elizabeth was going now was a magic place a fellow artist in the market had told her about. The woman sold trinkets made of stone and crystal, as well as hand-woven rugs crafted from recycled wool. Childless herself, Elizabeth had been concerned that her friend seemed too old to be pregnant, but Grace had laughed it off. She said her lovely man was a doctor, and he wouldn't allow anything to go wrong. She radiated good health and vitality. She seemed supremely confident and happy with her lot, even if she dressed like a homeless person.

She had been very good and kindly to Elizabeth, teaching her how to survive and flourish on what the city discarded, telling her about the best places to find food and whatever else she might need. And she told Elizabeth she could still sell her work in the market for what little she did need, that couldn't be scavenged from the city's dumpsters.

And then Grace had revealed her amazing secret. "There's a whole world of tunnels and chambers below this city just begging to be painted. And you're a good artist. I've looked around and found just the place for you." She went on to say she'd been searching in the higher areas where there were abandoned subway tunnels with smooth concrete walls. "You could live down there and no one would ever disturb you. And the best thing is it's all free. It's a truly magic place."

As Elizabeth walked deeper into the tunnels, away from the subway lights and the thronging people she stared at the smooth concrete walls rising all around her. "I'm not finished..." Her fingers itched to begin, to paint all that she had in her mind's eye. "And you have to finish what you start..."

She was aware it would be a while before anyone came for her. Grace had been close to full term with her pregnancy. But she'd promised to come and find Elizabeth as soon as she could after her baby was born. She said she would take her even deeper to where other people had found refuge below the subways. She said there was a whole community living down there.

Elizabeth had been sceptical, but for now she was happy to begin painting on all the walls around her.

She was used to her own company, she didn't need people. There would be no one to tell her to stop painting down here because nobody came here anymore. It was a forgotten place, Grace had said.

Elizabeth frowned at the smooth wall before her, seeing a baseball game taking shape. The one that she'd read about in a discarded newspaper on her last day working at the diner; a Dodger/Giants game that had been played out at Ebbett's Field. She bit her lower lip against the sudden need to cry.

She and her husband used to love going to the games. But that was in the past, only to be revisited now in her paintings. "And it begins today," she murmured to the silent tunnels.

Now she was here, she couldn't wait to begin the painting—and for Grace to come and find her—to show her that other magic world even further below her new home...

**END**