

VIGNETTES

Beginnings

- by Judith Nolan ©

*"I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's.
I will not reason and compare: my business is to create."*

- William Blake

Father...

Jacob Wells settled his fedora closer on his head, turning the collar of his suit coat up against the chill wind blowing off the East River. He sighed, tapping the end of his London-bought cane against the river pilings, contemplating the black swirling water far below. Soon the ice would form, as winter marched inexorably on towards the coldest day of the year.

He inhaled deeply, the chill air searing his lungs as he mustered the last remaining shreds of his courage. It would be so easy to simply lean forward, out past the point of equilibrium and topple into the cold clutch of the tide to be swept out to sea, away from all the pain and heart-ache of the last few weeks.

Alan Taft, his good friend and lawyer had tried to warn him, make him see reason at the committee hearings and keep his mouth shut. Let Allan do all the talking. But Jacob hadn't listened. His conscience would not allow him to remain mutely defiant.

Now it was too late. It had been a year from hell, a year in which Jacob had lost everything. It had been taken away, almost as if none of it had existed at all. It was all gone, his life's work, his home and good name, and then the final agony. The woman he loved more than life itself had annulled their marriage—or her powerful father had. Margaret was now safe in Paris, recovering from the bad choices she had made; safe from any further contact with him.

"Such is the stuff of dreams..." Jacob looked down at the small suitcase at his feet and sighed. All it contained were the few effects he couldn't bear to part with. Among them their wedding picture and the last letter his wife had written to him; the one severing their love and relationship. The wreck of my memories, she had written, pleading for his acceptance and understanding...Jacob sighed. He would take those things with him into oblivion. It seemed only fitting.

The frigid winter air swirled around him, nipping at his exposed face and hands. The snow had begun to fall in earnest now, muffling any sound. He'd been wandering for hours—days—in fact, without purpose or goal. He couldn't remember what he had done, not even the last time he'd eaten anything. His empty stomach churned at the thought of sustenance.

And now he didn't even possess his thick woollen overcoat to cut the chill to bearable. In his last act of humanity on this earth, he'd given it away to a homeless man he'd seen some miles back, huddled in

a doorway beneath a pile of newspapers and cardboard, and precious little else. The pathetic look of gratitude in the man's eyes had been all the thanks Jacob had needed. Besides, where he was going, a warm coat wouldn't be necessary.

"Well, here goes nothing indeed..." He picked up the case. As he leaned steadily forward, his mouth quirked bleakly at the irony of it all. He wondered what obituary they would write to complete his public humiliation. Would they even notice he was gone from the face of the earth?

"Hey there. What'ya doing?" A woman's soft voice inquired from behind him.

"I beg your pardon?" Jacob jerked back from the edge, turning to look.

"I said what are you doing there? If you're not careful you'll fall into the river and drown." She frowned, slipping a large knapsack from her shoulders to rest at her feet. "Or is that your idea?" She shrugged. "Be a bit of a waste, a good-looking guy like you. Surely you got some options left."

"Not many... In fact, none that I can think of right now." Jacob stared at her, not sure how else to respond beyond total honesty.

She appeared older than him, dressed in ragged and patched clothing with a thick woollen shawl covering her dark hair against the biting cold. She was not pretty, but her inner beauty shone through in a strong aura of vitality, as if she loved life and still believed in it. Her dark eyes gleamed with a keen sense of self-worth and pride. She held herself as if she was wearing the finest haute couture.

"A pity about that then." The woman grimaced. She jerked a gloved thumb over her shoulder. "Back down there, old Albert said a good-looking young guy in a smart, uptown suit and hat had given him the coat off his back without being asked. That was a real nice thing to do. Not many fine city folk would even see a guy like Albert."

"I decided I had no further use for it. Not where I'm going." Jacob shook his head. "His need seemed greater than mine." He shivered in the biting cold and moved his feet, stamping them to try and keep the circulation going. He looked pointedly into the distance, encouraging her to leave him alone. "Look, I'm kind of busy here. Now, if you don't mind..."

"So you're still gonna jump then?" The woman's mouth turned down at the corners. "You sure about that? Seems a bit mad to me."

"That is the general idea." Jacob moved his shoulders helplessly.

"Well then, don't let me stop you." The woman folded her arms across her chest. "But, before you go, mind if I ask about the case?"

"The case?" Jacob looked confused.

"Nice suitcase." The woman indicated it with a lift of her chin. "Chucking it in the river would be such a waste. What ya got in there anyway?"

"Memories..." Jacob's shoulders slumped. "A lot of sad and painful memories. Now please, will you leave me alone?"

"I see. Well, my name's Grace." The woman ignored his plea, holding out a hand towards him. "If you'll let me, I can help you. Show you another way."

"What? To kill myself?" Jacob couldn't suppress his ironic laugh as he clasped her hand briefly. "Thanks, but I think I have this. Now, if you'll please just go..." He turned away; back to watching the river's black passing, trying to muster the courage to jump, but knowing he no longer had the strength of will. Perhaps he never had it in the first place. Another failure to add to the rest...

"That's the point. I do mind if you've decided to kill yourself," Grace admitted bluntly. "I mind a lot. Someone once said; cowards die many times before their deaths. The valiant never taste of death but once."

"Shakespeare..." Jacob's head snapped up as he spun back to face her. "Julius Caesar. How did you... I mean, where did you learn that?"

"Where I live there's a guy who knows all sorts of fancy stuff like that. He loves to quote things. John's got a whole library full of books. He's always got his nose stuck in one. But we look out for one another there. We each have our own space and it's warm and dry, and we have all the room we need. Not like up here at all. I could take you there, if you like." She tilted her head to contemplate Jacob closely, from head to toe and back again. "That's if you have anything to offer us...beyond misery and an old suitcase. We don't have any use for free-loaders."

"I am...I was...a doctor." Jacob heart tightened in his chest. The pain was still sharp and it cut deeply.

"A people doctor?" Grace's dark eyes narrowed sharply.

Jacob smiled wearily. "Yes, a people doctor. But they took away my licence to practice. So, I guess I'm not going to be much use to you."

"You didn't kill anyone, did you?" Grace came closer, looking up at his troubled face. "I mean, that's not why they took it away from you."

"No..." Jacob replied on a rushing sigh. "In fact, I tried to save a lot of people, but no one would listen. Now it's too late and I've failed. Now all I have been trying to do for the last ten minutes is kill myself. It seems I cannot even do that successfully or in peace."

"Okay good, then." Grace nodded decisively as she settled the large knapsack once more on her shoulders. "We could sure use a man like you. I'm gonna tell you something now that you will not believe. You'll think I'm just a foolish woman. But what I have to tell you, and then show you, is all true. You just gotta believe in magic."

"I would say I am fresh out of belief." Jacob shook his head.

"Well, you just gonna have to go on trust then." Grace advanced to seize his arm before he could think to evade her. "You're coming with me. I'm going to show you a place where you can heal and begin again." She looked over Jacob's shoulder. "The river will always be here, if you change your mind and decide what I have to show you is not what you want after all."

"You're certainly a hard woman to resist," Jacob complained, tightening his grip on his suitcase. But a profound sense of relief surged through him that the decision to live or die had been taken so easily out of his control. "Where are we going?"

Grace smiled, her whole face lighting up. “To a secret place a lot of good people depend upon for safety. We’re going below the city—below the subways. There’s a world of tunnels and chambers down there that most city folk don’t even know exists. There sure aren’t any maps to the places we’re going—it’s a forgotten world and we like to keep it that way. You’ll see. You stick with me, and you’re going to be just fine...”

END