

# *The Road Goes Ever On And On*

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*Note: This story appeared first in the Treasure Chambers onzine  
"Together Forever 2024: I Have Spread My Dreams".*



*Life isn't a matter of milestones, but of moments.*

*- Rose Kennedy -*



He had been walking only for a few minutes, leaning heavier on his walking stick than usual, already feeling the pain in his hip more than on other days. Mary told him he should rest his leg more often, but men can be stubborn, and Father was no exception. Especially on that day, he refused to give in to the fact that he couldn't stop the time, and although his mind was still in top form, his body had recently started catching up with its age more and more.

*Of course, you had to start showing off today, hadn't you?*, he scolded his leg in his mind while bravely continuing his journey. His trip to the tunnel kitchen was rather a disappointment, too – William seemed quite agitated today, busier than usual, and Father couldn't understand why the tunnel chef was so adamant about getting him out of the

kitchen as soon as possible, since he had never minded anybody's presence there before, as long as they didn't prevent him working.

*Maybe there is something in the air; maybe it's one of those days when everything seems wrong,* Father tried to convince himself. *Yes, things will surely go back to normal tomorrow.*

Just as he suddenly felt a sharp stab in his hip and was about to do something very uncharacteristic for him – curse – he heard children's voices nearby. He stopped, leaned against the wall and listened, grateful for a little break and relief from the pain.

"Mine is better," a little girl claimed proudly.

"No way, mine took longer to make!" a little boy countered with conviction.

"It's not about the amount of time it takes but how convenient it is," came the even prouder response of the same girl.

"Mine is conve... whatever too!"

The girl laughed. "You don't even know what it means! You shouldn't have skipped those two lessons with Vincent. You *would* know."

A moment of silence allowed Father to chuckle as well.

*How come the girls in the tunnels so often seem to outwit the boys?*, he wondered, amused. Then he frowned, true to his nature again and decided to step in, whatever the argument was about. Just in time, because the children appeared in sight, coming from behind the nearest tunnel bend.

"Is this a way to talk to each other?" Father patronised them sternly.

Both children froze on the spot, their big eyes getting even bigger; the shock on their faces was almost comical.

"Father..." the six-year-old Beth stuttered. Her companion, the equally old Jack, only stared at the patriarch, fidgeting with his little hands.

"I'm sure whatever it is you have been arguing about, it can be resolved in an appropriate and friendly manner," Father continued, the sternness gone from his face now, and his eyes smiling. "What seems to be the apple of discord between you?"

Both children looked at each other, seemingly confused.

"I mean, what are you fighting about?" Father explained, thinking they didn't understand the expression.

Jack finally found his words as his dark eyes looked at the man through a messy black fringe. "Nothing important, Father," he said nervously. "We were just..."

“We were just talking about... our lesson project,” Beth jumped in on impulse.

Father raised his eyebrows, his interest piqued. “A project? That sounds exciting.” He smiled. “What is it about? Maybe I can help you with something.”

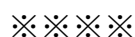
Another moment of silence and more nervous looks exchanged between the children.

“Oh, no!” Jack exclaimed, but seeing Father’s almost hurt look, he realised he sounded too dismissive. “We have to do it ourselves... You know, we are getting a grade for it, so we can’t have help from anyone else. Besides, we have already finished it. We were just talking about how our projects turned out.”

The boy hoped his wide smile would fix the damage he had unintentionally done.

“But thank you, Father, we appreciate it,” Beth added quickly, with as much gratitude in her voice as she could muster. Then she glanced at her friend and grabbed his hand before making the first hasty step. “I’m sorry, Father... We must go. See you later!”

The patriarch watched the children disappear in the tunnel behind him, with a puzzled look. *A bit prematurely, but I suppose they are getting to that age; everything adults think becomes questionable to them,* he pondered, with knitted eyebrows. Nevertheless, he shrugged the thought off and decided he better keep walking. His hip started bothering him again.



The tunnel leader hadn’t walked much further when suddenly, he almost got knocked over by a powerful blow, only just managing to hold on to his walking stick and not fall flat on his face.

“What on earth...?!” he cried, still shaken. After the first shock, he looked at the face of the culprit responsible for the unexpected crush.

“Mouse!”

It was an expression of annoyance more than one of a surprise. As always, the beloved tunnel inhabitant hadn’t looked left or right when trying to reach his destination.

“How many times do I have to---!”

“I know, I know! Watch out, don’t run if you don’t have to,” the tunnel tinker apologised with haste, his blue eyes widened more than ever. “Sorry!”

Father sighed heavily and shook his head. “Anyway... Where are you off to in such a hurry?” he asked, getting his breathing back to normal.

The expression on Mouse’s face resembled a statue – an image frozen in time. It took him a moment before he opened his mouth... and closed it again, his eyes feverishly wandering from side to side. He was obviously thinking hard about something.

“Has the cat swallowed your tongue?” Father was getting impatient; his hip was screaming for attention.

Mouse knitted his eyebrows, puzzled. “Vincent doesn’t eat tongues,” he insisted.

Father rolled his eyes and ran his hand over his wrinkled face. “I didn’t mean... Oh, never mind.” He was too tired to elaborate. “Can I finally hear why you are in such a hurry that you almost killed an old man in the process? Has anything happened?” The sudden thought worried him.

“Oh, no! Nothing happened!” Mouse assured him, shaking vigorously his head with a nest of blond hair. He was nearing forty but still had the innocent look of a boy who never lost his spirit. “Mouse only... running to meet Pascal! Must show him some blueprints. Found the best place for new chambers; great pipe access! But needs fine-tuning to get rid of some problems.” The tinker seemed satisfied with his explanation.

“If you tell me about the problems, maybe I could help you solve them,” Father offered. He had noticed his friend was unsuccessfully trying to hide a bulky, worn-out leather satchel behind his back.

“No!” Mouse exclaimed, his eyes wide again. “Not too bad. Nothing Mouse and Pascal can’t solve,” he added hurriedly, grinning nervously.

Father wasn’t very convinced – all the important decisions about life in the tunnels were always made by the whole Council, of which he was still the head. True, he had passed on many of his responsibilities to Vincent in the past few years, allowing him to rest much more – to Mary’s delight - but he still had a say in all important matters regarding the everyday life Below. He couldn’t imagine having nothing proper to do and being left to spend his days mainly in the company of Mary and his books, although he dearly loved both.

“Mouse got to go! Little time!” the tinker blurted out and didn’t even manage to notice the patriarch’s disappointed frown as he dashed off, tripping on an uneven bit of the ground and almost falling before continuing in his hurried departure. Father shook his head and sighed. *That boy... He will never grow up...*

Despite Mouse’s real age, the man who welcomed him to the tunnels as a child still saw him as one - eager to explore, difficult to tame and yet, so easy to love. An image popped up in his memory: Mouse sitting on the ground playing with some ‘gizmo’, with Jamie looking on and now and then rolling her eyes, and their two children watching and listening to their father’s explanation with the fascination for the subject equal to his own. A brief smile appeared on the old man’s face - the apples didn’t fall far from the tree.

Father’s mood was getting gloomier, just as the dull pain in his hip was getting more intense. He was frustrated by his inability to walk longer distances like he used to in his younger years. There was still so much to do and so many people and places in the tunnels to visit... However, he couldn’t deny the growing problem that had been his persistent companion for the better part of the last twenty years.

*Blasted accident!* he cursed inwardly, slowly limping down the tunnels. It had been so many years and yet he still remembered the day vividly...

It was a few days after Vincent had saved Catherine from danger for the very first time – when she saw his wild side for the first time. Father was just returning from visiting Mary, when one of the children ran straight into him, appearing as if by magic out of nowhere. Although much younger back then, the patriarch was caught by surprise and didn't manage to keep his balance, falling painfully on his side – and cracking his hip in the process. The unfortunate child and the boy's friends, who were playing the chase with him, were very distressed about causing Father harm. Despite his gracious forgiving nature (much later, after he had stopped lecturing them about the need for more careful behaviour while moving around the tunnels), they had a guilty expression on their face every time they passed the tunnel leader for many years to come.

Ignoring his pain for a moment, Father had to chuckle. Then his eyes softened as his mind suddenly decided to stroll down memory lane. Yes, over the decades, he had seen it all: creating a new society, living a dream even though having to fight hard for it sometimes, making many friends and losing a few, the joy of victories, however small they may have been, the disappointment of failures, enjoying peace but also facing dangerous challenges (some of them ending in tragedy), welcoming new lives and saying farewell to others...

To some people, it might have seemed that his life was nearing its finish line, but for Father, it was only the next step in his journey. His body may have been showing more signs of fatigue than a few years ago, but his mind was as sharp, as efficient, and as vibrant as ever.

*Age is truly just a number*, he thought as he was slowly making his way toward his private quarters. *I still have ideas and can pass my experience on to the younger generations. Yes, there will always be a place for me here.*

The thought lifted his spirit and put an unexpected spring into his step. Cheerfully, he walked on when he spotted familiar, beloved faces walking in his direction. A beaming smile added a few more wrinkles to his brightened face.

"Vincent, Catherine!" he greeted them, feeling of warmth that always spread in his chest whenever he saw his adoptive son and his wife.

"Father," Vincent replied with his unmistakable, gravelly voice.

Catherine smiled widely. "Where are you off to, Father?" she asked inconspicuously.

"First, I wanted to catch up with William, but he seems busier than usual today, so I thought I might indulge Mary in a bit of Dostoyevsky. Would you believe it? She had never read *Crime and Punishment*?"

The couple's faces showed a mix of amusement and tension.

"That I can *really* hardly believe," Catherine remarked, suppressing a grin. Her beloved father-in-law's enthusiasm for classical books hadn't lost its intensity even in his eighties.

“I seem to remember Mary mentioning she was helping out in the nursery today,” Vincent intervened gently and glanced eloquently at his wife.

Since she had officially passed her main nursery duties to Lena, Mary liked returning there at least once a week; taking care of children every day for decades had left a deep impression in the heart of the good woman and she couldn’t abandon it completely.

“Oh, yes, I remember her saying that,” Catherine agreed, nodding.

Father’s cheerful smile faded in disappointment.

“I’m sure she told me as well, but I must have mixed up the days... Well, I guess Raskolnikov will have to wait,” he stated, deflated. “Unless you two fancy a quick refresher?” He raised his eyebrows, his hopes up.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Vincent started carefully. “I’m afraid Catherine and I are needed somewhere else at the moment. But maybe later?”

The light in the patriarch’s eyes faded but he flashed a smile, indicating his genuine understanding.

“Of course, I forgot you are still full-time working members of this community,” he said. “Please, don’t let me interrupt you.”

Catherine glanced at her husband again, then focused on her father-in-law.

“I’m sure we’ll have time later. We would love a refresher, wouldn’t we?” she turned to Vincent, her eyes prompting him.

“A Dostoyevsky evening it is then,” he confirmed with a small smile. “Have a little rest, Father,” he added, not missing his parent’s heavy lean against his best friend – the walking stick.

“Sure, sure,” Father replied, attempting a smile too, although not very convincingly. He nodded to both and then, he was on his way limping back to his study.

“Do you think it’s a bit too much for him?” Catherine asked, worried, once she couldn’t hear the sound of her father-in-law’s walking stick anymore. “Maybe we should ...”

Vincent’s eyes smiled at her as he gently interrupted her. “I feel a little guilty too, but he will feel better soon, I promise you.”

Her face relaxed again, despite the lingering unease in her heart. “You’re right,” she said then. “It won’t be long now.”

Vincent took her hand in his and purposefully led her on toward their destination.

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One hour later, Father was sitting in his favourite chair with one of his many books in his hands; on the table, to be more precise, for although his eyes were glued to the page in front of him, his mind was miles away and so was his reading concentration. He finally gave up and took off his reading glasses. Mouse had to fix them a few times, especially when he accidentally put his precious, vintage copy of Joyce's *Ulysses* on them – the bridge of the old spectacles couldn't hold the weight of such a lengthy masterpiece.

"I suppose human nature is inescapable, even in the tunnels," Father mumbled to himself into his empty study. "Once you reach a certain age, it's time for you to stop meddling and retire."

He felt deflated, devoid of energy and... disappointed. Was it possible that no one had remembered the significance of that day? Not even Vincent? True, it was not like the anniversary of the World War end, or the invention of the telephone, or even the discovery of penicillin, but still... Not that he would ever consider himself as an especially important person. He was just one of many inhabitants of the world Below, and his natural modesty wouldn't let him think otherwise. And yet, he couldn't push aside the feeling of some strange hurt.

Just as he decided to have another go at the book, he heard footsteps approaching his private quarters. Sure enough, only a moment later, two figures appeared in his sight, walking down the short staircase and smiling.

"We hoped you would be here," a tall but already almost manly built boy of seventeen, with a mane of wavy golden hair and sapphire blue eyes approached the old man, whose face lit up like a candle immediately.

"Jacob!" Father exclaimed and stood up, a bit clumsily, to hug him.

Then he turned to his brother, the younger boy of fifteen. He had the same golden hair but his eyes were emerald green and his figure was still boyish, a bit shorter than his sibling's.

"Charlie," he spoke the younger grandson's name, with the same warmth and love and a bear hug.

"I met your parents just a while ago. I haven't seen you, though, for a few days! You must have been busy," Father wondered.

"Oh, you know, school, helping out in the tunnels and so," Charlie replied matter-of-factly.

"But you still owe me a chess game," he added lively. "This time I'll beat you."

"You wish," Jacob remarked quietly with amusement, then shrugged as his brother spared him a friendly glare.

"Of course, dear boy," Father ignored the brotherly interaction, suddenly excited. "Shall we start right away?"

"Sorry, Grandpa, we don't have time now," Jacob interjected gently, very much in the manner of his father. "In fact, we came because we need your approval about something. We wanted



to ask you if you would come with us and have a look at something we made. We would like to know if it's an appropriate decoration for the Great Hall."

"The Great Hall?" the patriarch raised his eyebrows. His hip immediately started protesting again, but he would never let anyone know about it.

"We know it's a long way, but do you think you could manage it today?" Jacob asked again, his eyes hopeful.

Father patted his shoulder proudly and smiled. "Of course, I could. When shall we go?"

"Now?" both Jacob and Charlie said at the same time. The old silver clock on one of the small shelves on the wall nearby just chimed five o'clock.

Their grandfather laughed. Only for a second, he hoped there would still be some leftovers in case they missed the dinner.

"You certainly make this old man work for his living," he remarked, amused. "Let's go then. These old bones still have some life left in them before they give up."

He grabbed his walking stick, and arm-in- arm with the younger boy, he walked out of his chamber – not noticing how Jacob reached for his reading glasses, quickly put them in the leather case and hid them in his jacket pocket before following his grandfather and brother out as well.



"I hate to admit it but it feels like I have walked ten miles today," Father said while bravely hobbling away, still supported by his grandson's arm. "There are days when you simply have to accept you're not a spring chicken anymore."

Charlie flashed a compassionate smile, then glanced nervously at his brother, who was walking on the other side. Jacob shared his inner feelings at that moment but smiled to reassure him.

"You still have it in you, Grandpa," he proclaimed. "Don't worry, we are almost there. The long staircase is just around the next bend."

The patriarch chuckled. "Sometimes you sound like your father, both of you. He mainly sees the best in everyone, too, often very gentlemanly – or foolishly - overlooking one's shortcomings."

"You have no shortcomings, Grandpa," Charlie said with genuine admiration.

"See? My point exactly." Father laughed, shaking his head. "Once you get older, you will understand how many of them I have. However, I have to confess, right now, I am grateful for the blindness of the youth."



They reached the Chamber of the Winds and started carefully descending step after step. Despite appreciating the company of his grandchildren, Father suddenly felt another pang at heart. *Did they forget as well?* He couldn't chase away the question in his mind. However, he shrugged it off and decided to focus on spending some, even if brief, time with his beloved grandsons.

They finally approached the large wooden doors leading to the Great Hall. It was almost twice the height of a man, and Jacob and Charlie moved to either side of the massive beam holding the doors shut against the force of the wind. Despite their young age, they seemingly easily lifted the heavy beam and put it aside. With one strong move, Jacob pushed the door open. Father couldn't suppress a wondrous gasp at the boy's strength, resembling so much his father's. After Charlie took his grandfather by his arm again, all three walked through the wind and entered the Great Hall – into the darkness.



"I don't mean to be a spoilsport but... I think we may need some light," Father spoke into the silence, after Jacob pushed the door shut behind them again, muting the howling of the wind outside.

"As you wish, Father," a deep, gravelly voice spoke gently somewhere nearby, startling him.

All at once, a sea of candles revealed its glittering light, making the tunnel leader open his mouth in surprise. He knitted his brows, uncomprehending. However, when he started recognising faces that had filled the Hall, his eyes welled up.

"You surely didn't think we would forget, did you?" Catherine said with a beaming smile, walking over to him to give him a peck on his cheek. "Happy birthday, Father."

The patriarch was suddenly lost for words, as the tunnel dwellers all around him joined in and wished him all the best on his special day, beginning with Mary, who gave him a small kiss and remained by his side, her face glowing from happiness. They were all there, including little Beth and Jack, Mouse and Jamie with their son and daughter, even Pascal had left his pipes for a precious while. Father also spotted a few Helpers in the crowd. However, one face in particular made him exclaim cheerfully.

"Devin! You are here!"

"Happy birthday, old man," his son said with a smile and walked into a heartfelt hug. "Do you really think I would miss your big day?"

Father's face was glowing; a beaming smile reached his glistening eyes. Suddenly, he found it difficult to speak. A day that started so disappointingly for him had transformed within seconds into a magical occasion, filling his heart with gratitude and exhilaration. His hip was suddenly forgotten, and he felt like he could have run a marathon.

“All right, enough now. There’ll be time for chit-chat later,” William’s voice boomed over the Hall, as he pointed towards two long rows of tables behind him, fully loaded with delicious-smelling food. “Let’s eat! Why else have I been slaving in the kitchen all day today?”

Everybody laughed, including Father, who was still trying to catch his breath from shaking hands and hugging all the well-wishers. Then the sea of bodies, led by Devin, moved towards the tables, as he remained on his spot, savouring the sight in front of him. Jacob passed his grandfather the pocketed case with the reading glasses. He patted him on his shoulder before walking away with his brother to join the others.

“You might need them when going through your birthday presents after dinner,” Catherine explained and pointed to a table on her far left, where a decent number of plain, but carefully wrapped presents lay neatly piled up. Seeing Father’s eyes widened, she chuckled. “You turn eighty-five only once in a life-time.” She winked, smiled at Vincent and followed her sons.

Father sighed heavily. All the excitement suddenly seemed overwhelming, but he wouldn’t have changed it for anything in the world. He was truly touched by everyone’s attention and all at once felt a bit guilty deep inside.

“Admit it,” Vincent demanded with an amused smile. “You thought we all forgot about your birthday.”

“Well...” the older man replied and chuckled. “I admit that I found it a bit strange that nobody mentioned anything all day. And I did wonder why William was cooking again right after we had just had lunch, without taking a break. Not that I expected any attention but... you know,” he added, attempting to sound indifferent. “When everyone seemed to have preferred not to involve me in anything I thought I was---“

“Unwanted?” Vincent finished his thought, smiling, his head tilted slightly towards his father while his eyes were set on the celebratory dinner unfolding before them. “Past your time? Of no use anymore?”

Father and son looked at each other before the older one nodded, with a shy smile.

“Something along those lines, yes.”

Vincent’s look softened as he put his arm around the patriarch’s shoulder. His gaze was direct and honest.

“You will *always* be needed, wanted, valued and of great use to all of us, Father. And above all, loved. Never doubt that.”

The old man’s grey eyes started burning, and his smile widened as his hand reached to stroke Vincent’s stubbly cheek. Although his son had entered his fifties a few years ago, he had changed very little. His eyes were still bright and deep, his hair a long golden waterfall over his broad shoulders, his hand still powerful, yet tender at the same time, and his figure still strongly masculine and tall. Time was merciful and extremely gentle with him, not taking anything away from the youthful although mature presence the maned man had had since he grew up.

“I have been so blessed in my life,” he said, deeply moved. “It may have been difficult at times, but the joys outweigh the sorrows by far, and I couldn’t have wished for more than I have right now.”

“And there’s still much more to come,” Vincent added. “You can start right after the celebration.”

Father’s puzzled look was a silent question.

“Or have you forgotten about poor Raskolnikov already?” Vincent teased.

It finally dawned on Father as he remembered their earlier conversation. “Not in a million years!”

Vincent chuckled and wanted to lead him to their seats at the table, but Father suddenly stopped him.

“Jacob and Charlie spoke of some decoration they made for The Great Hall and wanted to know my opinion about it,” he mused. “Was that only their way of luring me here?”

His son smiled. “Look.”

His hand pointed to their right, and Father’s eyes followed it. The object standing there made the older man speechless.

“It is their birthday gift to you,” Vincent remarked proudly, enjoying his parent’s amazement. “They spend a few months with Cullen making it. The last few days were especially busy for them.”

At the wall next to the bottom of the staircase leading up to the famous tapestries, a life-size wooden statue of a man stood proudly in his place. His features were carved with precision, and the big symbolic heart he was holding in his hands and the smile on his face added human warmth to the whole image. Father recognised the face of the man immediately – it was his own.

“The boys thought this Hall needed a symbol of our community, something that represents who we are and what we live by. A community of people lead by the greatest and most important law – love.”

If he had wanted to say something, he couldn’t. The man who stood with a handful of others at the very beginning of the tunnel community journey decades ago was once again temporarily robbed of his ability to communicate his thoughts with words. As he wiped a stray tear from his eye and looked around at the faces of the people who had shared his life-long dream with him, generation after generation, he felt a satisfying sense of reaching the full circle. All the moments of the years gone by, no matter how special or small, created a mosaic of a life that many only dream of. As Vincent said, he would still be needed and his opinions valued, but seeing his life’s work coming to fruition in such a wonderful way, he couldn’t help but feel pride as well as love – pride of the work they had all done together and love for

all those who had followed the same path from the beginning right until that very special moment.

Father's eyes found the faces of his grandsons, waving at him, with big smiles. He waved back and mouthed 'thank you'; his throat still constricted but the need to express his gratitude was too strong.

Vincent took him by the arm, and his deep, warm blue eyes bore into the grey eyes of his adoptive father, the man who gave him life, education, faith, hope and above all, love.

"Happy birthday, Father," he said quietly as a smile softened his unique features again.

The patriarch squeezed his arm and wiped another tear with his other hand. Then he shook off his heightened emotions and finally spoke cheerfully.

"I'm starving. Shall we?"

