

## OLD FRIENDS

Janet Rivenbark

*Old friends, old friends,  
Sat on their park bench like bookends  
A newspaper blown through the grass  
Falls on the round toes  
of the high shoes of the old friends*

*Old friends, winter companions, the old men  
Lost in their overcoats, waiting for the sun  
The sounds of the city sifting through trees  
Settles like dust on the shoulders of the old friends.*

*Can you imagine us years from today,  
Sharing a park bench quietly  
How terribly strange to be seventy*

*Old friends, memory brushes the same years,  
Silently sharing the same fears*

*Time it was and what a time it was,  
A time of innocence, a time of confidences,  
Long ago it must be,  
I have a photograph,  
Preserve your memories,  
They're all that's left you...*

Paul Simon

*April 10, 2030*

Catherine looked up at the calendar that Vincent insisted be kept on the wall. She was sitting on a footstool in front of the shelf that held an extensive CD collection. She smiled. *Time certainly does fly, and Grandmother was right. It goes faster as you get older.*

She looked at the CDs and smiled at some, but wondered what had ever possessed her to buy some others. She put one into the CD player, forwarded it to her selection and smiled again as the strains of Paul Simon's *Old Friends* wafted through the room. Very few would ever top the simple harmonies of Simon and Garfunkel in her opinion.

She turned on her stool to face Vincent where he sat in an easy chair reading the newspaper.

"That's us," she commented.

"Hmm?" he queried, looking up to meet her eyes.

"That's us...the song. It's describing us...Old Friends."

He listened for a moment. "He's telling the story of two men," Vincent pointed out. "And we've never sat on a park bench waiting for the sun."

"Yes we have," she argued. "That first Halloween, we stayed out all night. We watched the sun rise over the river."

"Well, all right. That once," he conceded and went back to his newspaper.

She rose as quickly as her 70-year-old knees would allow. "Well, you have to admit that it is *'terribly strange to be 70.'*"

"I've been 70 for a while now," he pointed out without looking up from his paper.

She made a face at the back page of the paper.

"The older he gets the more like Father he becomes," she mumbled under her breath.

"I heard that," he said with a chuckle, still not moving the paper.

She'd forgotten that his hearing was still as good as it ever was, in spite of his age.

"Would you like some tea?" she asked in a pleasant tone as she made another face at the paper.

"That would be wonderful, Catherine," he said as he turned the page.

She shook her head and left the sunny room, heading for the kitchen. She caught a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror as she passed. She stopped for a better look. Actually, she didn't think she looked all that bad for 70. She was still pretty fit for her age. She'd kept running until she was 50. That was when her doctor had suggested that she try something that put a little less stress on her knees. She'd started power walking, and a few years after that she's slowed down to a brisk walk. Now she had trouble with

the stairs and had to have a small elevator installed. It went from the basement to the third floor, and Vincent had dodged workmen for several weeks while the work was done. She'd quit coloring her hair when she retired, and it was almost all snow-white now. She still wore it in the same style she'd always worn. She didn't have a lot of wrinkles either. The laugh lines around her eyes and mouth were deeper, and her skin looked more fragile, but her bone structure had saved her from too much of her face heading south. She stood up straight and nodded at herself before she continued on her way to the kitchen.

They'd lived under the same roof for nearly 15 years now. She'd still been living in her apartment on Central Park West when the news of a whole community of people living below the streets of New York City had hit the papers early in 2015.

She'd assisted many of the refugees from Below in finding places to live and jobs Above, but all that had been left to Vincent had been the prospect of retreating to the lowest parts of the tunnels and hoping he wouldn't be found. She didn't like that idea, and she knew Father was probably spinning in his grave in the catacombs, so she'd found a house just a few blocks from the park. It was huge, at least compared to the tiny place she'd lived since she graduated from law school. She'd had the basement and part of the first floor converted into an apartment for Vincent and had invited him to share the house with her. Actually, she hadn't invited him; she'd told him he was going to live there.

She'd contacted Mouse and asked him if he could guide her to where Vincent had been living for the last six months. The city had set alarms, and the challenge was to get past them without setting any of them off. Mouse had been doing it every week for months taking supplies down to Vincent. When he found out what Catherine had in mind, he enthusiastically agreed to act as her guide.

It had been a long trek, close to 14 hours, but they'd made it, and Vincent was there waiting. He'd sensed her approach through the Bond which had never diminished over the years. Mouse went back Above the next day, but it had taken Catherine three more days to convince Vincent to leave. She had started out by telling him that he was going with her, but she was sure that it had been her description of the walled garden and the private roof patio that had convinced him. The trek back had taken even longer because they were carrying the few belongings, mostly books, which Vincent had with him.

When he saw the rooms she'd prepared for him, he'd been surprised and pleased to see that she'd taken all his keepsakes, including the stained glass window, out of storage. The rooms felt like home as soon as he walked in.

At that point in their relationship, they'd known each other for over 25 years. Twenty-five years of unfulfilled love. She was 55 years old when Vincent moved in with her; he was almost 60, but she'd still had hope.

But her hope had never been satisfied; 15 years later, the closest they ever got was a hug or the occasional cuddle on the sofa or the double chaise on the roof while they read.

She went back to the study with the tea tray. This room had originally been part of the apartment that she'd prepared for Vincent, and although he still preferred keeping his bedroom below ground in the basement, the room on the first floor that she'd given him had become their favorite room in the house. The walls were lined with bookshelves; there was a fireplace, a large TV, and a stereo system. There was even a computer, and she and Vincent used it to remain in contact with many of the former members of the tunnel community. They even had their own small Winterfest gathering at Catherine's; only it got smaller every year. Only ten people, in addition to Catherine and Vincent, had shown up the previous year.

She put the tray on the coffee table.

"Put away that paper and talk to me!" she ordered, but her tone was soft.

"We aren't the old friends in the song," Vincent picked up the conversation where they'd left off as he folded the paper and accepted the cup of tea she handed him. "We sound more like an old married couple."

"I should have been so lucky," she said with a snort. Vincent hadn't been sensitive about that particular subject in years.

"Our 43rd anniversary is in two days," he pointed out.

They hadn't observed it in a long time; she was surprised that he remembered. She said as much.

"How could I ever forget that?" he asked reproachfully. "My aloneness came to an end 43 years ago."

"I'm sorry," she apologized. "It's just that we haven't done anything on that date since well before you left the tunnels."

"Maybe we should this year," he suggested. "We could have dinner delivered, and use the dining room, light some candles..."

"It's a wonderful idea," she said, feeling almost young again. "It's been a long time since we used the dining room."

They were back in the den later that evening after dinner. They had each selected books from the shelves and were sitting on opposite ends of the sofa, reading.

Vincent marked his place in his book with his finger and looked over at Catherine.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

“Mansfield Park,” she told him without looking up.

“Jane Austin?”

“Yes. I thought I’d read all of her books, and then I found this one on the shelf.”

“How far into it are you?”

“Not far, I just started it when I sat down.” She finally looked up at him.

“Would you like me to read to you?”

That was another thing they hadn’t done in a long time. She smiled and handed the book to him.

“I’d love it.”

He took the book and opened it to the first page of chapter one. *“About thirty years ago Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet’s lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income. All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it...”*

He stretched an arm out along the back of the sofa, inviting Catherine to move closer. She gladly moved over, put her feet up and leaned back against him as he continued to read.

*“Lady Bertram made no objection; and everyone concerned in the going was forward in expressing their ready concurrence, excepting Edmund, who heard it all and said nothing.”*

He finished chapter six and realized that Catherine had dozed off. He knew that she didn’t sleep all that well these days and didn’t want to disturb her. He closed the book and set it aside and made himself as comfortable as possible. He held her, gazing down at her and remembering, as she slept.



Catherine woke abruptly and sat straight up in bed. What had woken her? A noise? The doors from her balcony were slightly ajar to catch the night breezes, but it was quiet; at least as quiet as New York ever got. She glanced at the clock. It was a few minutes after two on Saturday morning.

Then she remembered the dream. She'd been old. She held her hands out in front of her. In the faint light, she could see that they were the hands of a young woman. She quickly slid out of bed and went to her dressing table. She turned on the light; it made her squint, but she could see that her face matched her hands.

The dream had been so vivid! She knew that she dreamed like everyone else, but she seldom remembered any of them and certainly not with the detail that she remembered from this dream. She remembered how her knees had felt, almost as if bone was grinding on bone as she walked, and the comment about a book by Jane Austin called ***Mansfield Park***. Did she really write that book? She went out to her bookshelf. Jenny had given her a Jane Austin biography a few months ago. She'd put it away with good intentions but had never read it. She found it, opened it and found a list of Miss Austin's books. Sure enough, there was ***Mansfield Park***; published in 1814 between ***Pride and Prejudice*** and ***Emma***. She wondered about what Vincent had read aloud in her dream, was it really from the book?

She was distracted momentarily by the book before she remembered the rest of the dream. She and Vincent were still together in their old age, but they'd never truly been together. She couldn't let that happen. In fact, she couldn't let any of the dream happen. If there was any chance of any of it coming true, she had to do something about it. She had to make Vincent realize that they couldn't let it.

She hurried back to her bedroom and started pulling clothes out of drawers. She quickly dressed, grabbed a jacket and her keys and headed for her threshold.

She stepped through the threshold and moved down a couple rungs. She reached back inside, rearranged the camouflaging boxes and then closed the doors. She was taken by surprise when hands grasped her around the waist and lifted her down. She turned and threw her arms around Vincent.

"I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed as she hugged him fiercely.

"I could feel your upset," he told her as he returned her hug. "What's wrong?"

"Were you awake?" she asked. "Or did I wake you?"

“I woke from a strange dream and could tell that you were upset about something.”

“You had a dream too? I had a very bizarre dream.” She hugged him again, just to reassure herself that he there.

“Tell me,” he urged her.

“We were old. In our seventies. We were living in a house Above because the community here Below had been found and disbursed. But we weren’t married . We were old friends, but we’d never been any more than that.” She stopped and took a deep breath as she looked up into his eyes. “Vincent, I can’t live like that. I don’t want to take the chance that the dream was prophetic in any way...”

Vincent took her hand and tugged her after him as he stepped through the opening in the brick wall.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“Someplace we can talk,” he told her.

He didn’t speak again until they reached the chamber of the falls. It was dark, so he pulled a kerosene lantern from a niche and lit it. He set it up on a narrow ledge, then took his cloak off and spread it on the floor, inviting Catherine to sit.

She was surprised to see that he was wearing his pajamas. He’d pulled on his boots, but the only other clothes he had on were a pair of old, worn sweat pants and a loose cotton nightshirt.

She sat, and he dropped down beside her. After studying his hands for a few minutes, he looked up at her.

“I had a dream very much like that,” he told her. “There was a song playing. It was about two old men who were old friends. You said that we were like those men.”

“That was what I dreamed,” she exclaimed. “Have you ever shared my dreams before?”

“I’ve been able to tell if they were good or bad, but I’ve never shared them,” he assured her.

She was quiet a moment. “Was it my dream or did I somehow step into yours?” she wondered aloud.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“In the dream, you read to me from a book I didn’t know existed.”

Vincent reached into a pocket sewn into the lining of his cloak. He pulled out a book and handed it to Catherine. She turned the spine toward the light so she could read it: ***Mansfield Park by Jane Austin***. She opened it to the first chapter and read the same paragraphs Vincent had read in the dream.

"It was your dream," she exclaimed.

"I think it possibly was," he agreed. "We've been reading that book in our literature class."

"What does it mean?" she asked. "Why would I join you in your dream?"

"Maybe it was the Bond. Maybe we were both supposed to learn something," he suggested.

"When I look at it, I think we both added to the dream in some way. Both our fears were part of it, but as far as learning anything... I learned that I don't want us to continue in the way we've been going," she told him. "You said that we must move ahead with caution, but we've been so cautious that we've been standing still."

Vincent was staring at his hands again. His head was down, and his hair was hiding his face. "Not because you didn't want to move forward," he said, so quietly she had to lean toward him to catch the words.

"But I haven't tried to push you," she pointed out.

"No, you haven't." He looked up, and she was surprised to see him smiling. "You've been very patient with me."

"Vincent, I don't want us to be like that dream Vincent and Catherine when we are in our seventies. I don't want it to just be the two of us. I want it to be us and our children and grandchildren in that big house Above. And if there is any possibility the city might find out about the tunnels, I want us to have a contingency plan in place."

"The contingency plan is actually already in place. The first step would be to try to block all the thresholds except for those in private homes and businesses. That way only the upper tunnels would be exposed. The second would be to disburse the people into Helper's homes Above if the lower tunnels are discovered."

"What about you?" she asked.

"I would go to Peter's," he assured her.

She sighed in relief. "But what about the rest of the dream? What about us?"

“I share your concerns, Catherine, and I don’t want us to be that elderly couple either. But what if there are no children in our future?”

She couldn’t believe he was asking that question. Before, he’d never addressed the matter of children because he’d almost always denied there was any possibility that they would ever be that close.

“There will always be children in our future, Vincent,” she assured him. “Whether they are our biological children or whether they are children who find us in another way.”

Vincent reached out and pulled her into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest. The shirt was open several inches down, and her nose made contact with the soft hair of his chest.

She took a deep breath; she loved the way he smelled. There was something about it that was more calming than a pill or any amount of wine. She cuddled close and relaxed as she felt him kiss the top of her head.

After a few minutes he dipped his head and tilted her face up toward his. Her eyes were closed, but they flew open when his lips brushed hers. He pulled back and looked down at her as if assessing her reaction. She wanted to tell him to do it again, but before she could, he did.

This time he lingered, testing different angles. His tongue skimmed her lower lip, and she happily opened her mouth, welcoming his deeper kiss. When they finally broke apart, she noted that his pupils were dilated, and what she could see of the iris seemed darker than usual. He’d lifted her into his lap, and she’d noticed he was aroused. She knew she was and was having a very difficult time not telling him so.

Vincent stood and helped Catherine to her feet. She sighed in disappointment as he bent to pick up his cloak.

“I’ll take you back to your threshold,” he said as he swung his cloak around and settled it on his shoulders.

He felt the immediate surge of disappointment from Catherine, and it remained all the way back to her threshold. When they stopped, he realized that she was disappointed because she thought he was sending her away again. Without thought, he turned and pulled her into his arms.

“No Catherine,” he whispered. “Don’t feel like that. It’s just that it wasn’t the right place... it isn’t suitable. Not on the ground... it should be in a bed where we can be comfortable and warm. It’s too cold down here.”

She looked up at him, her eyes round with surprise. “You mean....?”

“Yes,” he told her with a shy smile. “I have to go back and leave a message with the sentry to give Father in the morning. I’ll meet you on your balcony within the hour. There are still several hours until sunrise.”

“You aren’t going to come back before dawn are you?” she asked hopefully.

“No, I thought I’d tell Father I would be back sometime Sunday night, if that is all right.”

“That’s more than all right; it’s fantastic. I’d keep you there permanently if I thought Father would let me get away with it.”

He took her hand and led her to the ladder.

“You could come up in the elevator,” she suggested. “It’s late and I’m sure we won’t meet anyone. You can keep your cloak around you if we do.”

“No, I’d better not take the chance,” he told her. “Besides, I still have to leave the note.”

“How long will you be?” she asked, wanting reassurance and not wanting to let him out of her sight for fear that he’d change his mind.

He pulled her into his arms. “Not long. It will only take a few minutes to get to the sentry post. There is paper there. I’ll write the note and leave it with the sentry. I should be on your balcony a very short time.

He dipped his head and kissed her again; then he was gone. She caught her breath, and her hand went to her throat. She hoped she wasn’t dreaming this time.

She hurried up to her apartment and was still standing in the middle of the living room trying to decide if she should bother to change into one of her pretty nightgowns when she heard Vincent’s boots scuff on the balcony.

She rushed to him turning her face up for his kiss. She wasn’t disappointed. He kissed her as if it was the way they always greeted each other. She hoped that it would be from now on.