

How It Might Have Been ...

by Judith Nolan

“All of us need to be in touch with a mysterious, tantalizing source of inspiration that teases our sense of wonder and goads us on to life’s next adventure...”

- Rob Brezsny

Vincent halted at the edge of the drainage tunnel entrance to Central Park. He lifted his face to the cool evening wind as it sighed through the surrounding foliage. He was ever wary of discovery, but he also knew he owned the night. It had long been his domain, and the welcoming darkness concealed him from prying eyes and those who would wish to do him harm.

He looked skywards. The moon hung high overhead, unhindered by clouds. Though it was already October, the fall evening was mild and welcoming. Vincent turned his head slowly, closely surveying the scenery once more, but nothing moved beyond the trees. It was safe enough for now, and a truly beautiful night for a walk.

Drawing the fullness of his hood over his hair, to conceal his unique face deep within, he moved out slowly, savouring the unfettered freedom. Earlier, a strange feeling of restlessness, of searching for something he couldn’t find, had spread slowly throughout his being. The sensation had pulled him Above tonight, whispering in the back of his mind. Perhaps there *was* something new just waiting to be discovered, somewhere out there in the darkness.

In the far distance he could hear music and laughter coming from the *Tavern on the Green*. Another evening, another excuse for a party, one of the abiding constants of the world Above. Vincent shook his head and smiled, even as his restive sense of curiosity drew him closer to investigate.

Keeping to the fringes and the dark places beneath the trees, where he could watch and not be seen, Vincent's footfalls soon carried him to his usual vantage point. He was well aware of Father's continuing concerns that his unusual son should be so adventurous, but at nearly 31 Vincent was old enough to make his own choices.

He loved walking in the park and being a part, while remaining apart, of this frenetic world. He was constantly amazed at what he saw or encountered, things and people the great city had discarded as unworthy or cast aside because they were unwanted or unloved. He knew Mouse found this place an endless source of materials for his projects, both those that worked and those that didn't.

"Okay, good, okay fine..." Vincent quoted his good friend softly. The year was 1986 after all, and he was keenly aware of the dangers of walking in the park at night. He was well able to look after himself, should the need arise. He would not allow fear to keep him from sampling its beauties and curiosities, and he was curious now to watch the events at the tavern.

After a few minutes walking, the restaurant came into view. The bright lights of the Crystal Room spilled out into the adjacent garden, flooding the darkness with blue and white fire. Despite the coolness of the evening, the doors had been flung wide to the night air, and the place seemed alive with people, all talking and laughing, as if none of them had a care in the world. It appeared to Vincent they were enjoying themselves immensely. A huge banner hung across the open doors declaring this to be a birthday party and every available space had been decorated with balloons and hung with streamers. Vincent detected a smattering of different languages, English along with French and Spanish. He wondered briefly if the Tower of Babel had sounded like this, everyone talking over each other in a futile effort to be heard above the pulsing beat of the music. He doubted his sensitive hearing would survive long within such a raucous cacophony of sounds.

Vincent inched his way forward into a good position, from where he could survey the party and contemplate the spectacle. But he wasn't in position for more than a few moments when he caught the faintest whisper, the sound of someone approaching from his left. It puzzled him, for he was usually better attuned to the evening and potential dangers. He heard every sound, long before he could be seen. All the stirrings of the great city; the distant sound of traffic, the wind

rustling in the foliage, the sounds of the party beyond the garden. Perhaps the noise and the music had confused his normally sharp senses.

Intending to avoid being seen, he withdrew quickly into the shadows, turning to leave. But just as he moved away, someone called to him, and immediately he smelt the distinctive odour of a cigar.

A man appeared at the bend in the path that snaked through the surrounding bushes. He held out a delaying hand while saying, "Hey man, it's cool. Don't go on my account. I just had to get outa there and breathe some fresh air. That place is nuts. You escaping the madness too?"

"I was...passing." Vincent paused in the deepest shadows and glanced back. "I have not been attending the party."

He frowned at his unwelcome visitant. Outlined in the moonlight, the man was as tall as he, and as strongly built. The physical resemblance was uncanny. He stood with feet braced apart, drawing on his cigar with an air of deep satisfaction. The slow-burning tip glowed like a single red eye in the darkness. Vincent noted with narrow-eyed curiosity that the man held and smoked the cigar with his left hand. Another mysterious similarity to himself. Vincent flexed his own left hand within the concealment of his leather glove.

"You want one?" The stranger flourished the cigar, having noticed the direction of Vincent's glance. "Doc says I shouldn't smoke, says it'll kill me one day. But a man needs a vice or two. Guess you gotta die of something, right?"

"Thank you, but no," Vincent refused politely, drawing steadily further away. "I don't smoke."

"Suit yourself." The other man looked him up and down. "So you just passing through, or do you live around here?" His cigar hand described a wide sweep of the city surrounding Central Park. "I can't place your accent. You from New York?"

"I was born here," Vincent nodded. "My home is nearby." His eyes flicked briefly towards the drainage tunnel. He felt this man meant him no harm, he was simply curious.

"So do you always go around dressed like that?" The cigar indicated Vincent's hooded cloak and

red thigh boots. "Like a guy looking for a period movie set to haunt." The man laughed softly, but companionably, indicating he meant no offence by the comment, merely expressing his deepening curiosity over an unusual encounter.

"I wear what is most comfortable." Vincent took another two slow steps backwards. "It is...cold where I live. We make do with what we have, but we do not need much."

"Yeah, one of them shoe-box sized, cold-water flats. I hear you." The stranger flicked a dismissing hand. "I've lived in my fair share of those in this city. They're the pits, right?"

"My home is somewhat larger than a shoe-box and comfortable. I have all I need." Vincent enjoyed the frank description, even as he glided a further three steps towards safety. To his chagrin, the stranger showed every intention of following him. Vincent halted, looking back pointedly, willing his visitant to return to the party and allow him to make good his escape.

"Look, man, if you need a break I'll help if I can." His unwanted companion extended a detaining hand. "You look like you really live the role, so maybe you just need a reference or two, someone to help you out, get you started down the right path." His broad shoulders rose and fell. "I don't have much, but I know a few people. I can make some calls. Do you have a phone where I can reach you if somethin' turns up?"

"There are no telephones where I live. It is...somewhat removed from this world." Vincent was nonplussed by the man's open-handed generosity to a complete stranger. "But, thank you. Now I truly must go."

"Suit yourself." The other man shrugged. "Say, do you wanna come inside for a while? It's a birthday party for my director. I guess you've probably heard of Jean-Jacques Annaud. He's a Frenchman, so you know how they can be, always thinking bigger is better." He gave a short laugh.

"We've just wrapped a big-budget movie, so we're letting off a little steam. There's already a crowd, so one more guest won't be noticed. We could sit down and have a proper conversation." He grinned. "Maybe we could try and find some place quiet. Whatcha say?"

The surreal nature of this whole conversation was not lost on Vincent. He rarely encountered anyone this close in the Park. He always managed to avoid such meetings. But this man called

to something deep within him. It was almost as if he had known him all his life. There was a bond there, a subtle connection he could not fathom, let alone understand. A strange sense of awareness feathered down his spine, making him uneasy.

“You are very generous, but no, I must go. I am already late.” He turned away, endeavouring to make good his escape before the man drew any closer and saw more than he expected.

“Okay, it’s cool, man. You’ve got your own shit going on, fair enough. I get that. But you’re sure you’ll be okay? I mean, if you need a few dollars for food or something...” He pushed a hand into the side pocket of his jeans.

“Please do not concern yourself about me.” Vincent held up a denying hand. “I have more than enough for my own needs. We barter for what we do not have.”

“Fair enough, if you say so.” The other man paused, frowning. “Say, I sure get the feeling we’ve met somewhere before. Maybe at a rehearsal or somethin’. Dunno, can’t figure it out.” He shook his head as he extracted his hand from his jeans, only to thrust it out between them, moving as close as Vincent dared allow him.

“The name’s Perlman. Ron Perlman. Maybe I’ll be seeing you around again someday. Maybe at some audition. I’d sure like to see how you’re doin’, fellow New Yorkers and all that. Look me up if you’re ever in my part of town.”

He smiled, his deep-set eyes, hidden from the bright moonlight, were thoughtful as he watched Vincent consider his gesture of friendship. Deciding against portraying outright rudeness, but keeping his face half-averted and his carefully cloaked body well within the sheltering darkness, Vincent extended one gloved hand to grasp Ron’s. He found his own strength matched, the handshake between the two men firm and strong.

It seemed to affirm again that there was something between them, a sense that they had met before, and perhaps one day would meet again. The uncanniness of it rippled through Vincent’s already heightened senses. Had this unlooked for encounter called to him somehow, drawing him into the park tonight? *But why?*

“Come on, man, you sure I don’t know you?” Ron broke the grip, but stepped closer, attempting

to see beneath the shadows of Vincent's concealing hood. "You look..." He spread his hands... "I don't know. Kinda otherworldly somehow, like you don't fit in around here. Or maybe it's just the night and my overactive imagination. Who am I to judge a fellow traveller through life?" He stepped back. "Be seeing you around, man. Another time, maybe. Get in touch. With a face like this, I'm not that hard to find." He smiled wryly, indicating his strong, masculine features with a brief flick of his hand.

"Another time..."

Immediately Vincent drew back, turning away, his boots now fully determined to put much-needed space between them. He would head for the safety of Below, but not by the drainage tunnel. He could feel Ron's gaze following his every step with close attention. He increased his pace, striding out into the darkness, welcoming its sheltering concealment. It gave him the space to think and attempt to analyse their brief encounter. But any answers were frustratingly elusive.

Ron watched the intriguing stranger stride away into the darkness. Walking alone at night in Central Park was not for the faint-hearted, but that guy sure looked like he could handle himself and then some.

"Pity he wouldn't come inside. I figure we'd have a lot in common." He grinned, strong, white teeth gleaming in the moonlight. "I bet he'll know his Shakespeare. Sure looks like he lives it anyway. Wonder who else is lurking out here..."

He glanced around at the bushes, then up into the moonlight, before considering the stub of his cigar burning slowly down between his fingers. "The guy's out here doin' his thing. It's cool."

He took one last, long, sustaining draw on his cigar, before dropping the butt to the ground and grinding it out beneath his boot. "Ain't life grand?" he asked of no one in particular, before heading back to the party raging behind him.

THE END