



## Thin Walls

by Angie

*Walls have tongues, and hedges ears.*  
– Jonathan Swift

Jacob stood in the culvert entrance, watching the sunset turn the sky to reds then purples. The autumn trees were swaying in the wind and the air was full of gold and brown leaves; the ground was covered in a carpet of them. Occasionally an errant dust devil would swirl in the culvert's protection, sending a cascade of leaves into the sky before it broke up and disappeared, as if it had never been.

Why didn't he come here more often? It was wonderful to smell the fresh autumn air, to see the greens that were so rare below, if only briefly before the sunset turned everything to indigo and shadows. And now there were golds and reds too.

He remembered a quote from John Burroughs.

*"How beautifully leaves grow old. How full of light and color as they age."*

It occurred to him, for the first time, that he had denied himself the beauty and wonder of

growing things, ever since he had retreated to the world below the streets. Certainly, he was not as nimble as he once was, but he could have accompanied Vincent in his strolls through the Park, at least part way. He had never even considered the possibility.

Vincent loved to be out in the Park, and for the first time, Jacob understood why. He took a deep breath and smelled the unmistakable scents of autumn, felt the slight chill, an entirely different chill to that of the tunnels. Fresh, clean winds blew from far away, mysterious, so unlike the errant draughts of his world.

This was Halloween night, and he had walked his slow way here, leaning on his cane, to look out, motivated by he did not know what. And now he was here, he still did not know why, but he decided to stay until he came to a conclusion.

They were embroiled in Halloween preparations below and he had been able to exit without raising any questions. He would be needed later to recite the favourite spooky tales - but for now, he was free.

Jacob knew Vincent loved this spot above all others, because he had often met Catherine here, and because he could see the city and marvel at it, even as he knew he could never belong. The culvert was filled with the little stream, some of the year, he knew. Right now, before the onset of the rainy season, it was almost dry. Yet it was always a gateway to their fantasy world.

For the tunnel world was everything a fantasy could be, yet it was real. Who could conceive of a community of friends living below the streets of New York? He could hardly believe it himself, despite the passage of years since a small group of ragged, unwanted people had found the maze of tunnels they now called home.

For these tunnels were not smelly or bitterly cold – although they would be dark without their candles, lanterns and torches. There were places of amazing beauty also, some hidden in dark places that only came alive in the light of a lantern, others which borrowed some light from the world they had left behind. Their rock chambers were warm enough, and the love they all had for each other kept out that soul-shrivelling cold so common above.

Their world was fantastic, but not paradise. No, never that. People got ill, died, were injured, and sometimes left to live above. They were supported and loved in his world for as long as they wished, but tunnel life was not without challenges. Sometimes there were floods, occasionally shortages of one thing or another. Yet they had endured.

It was peaceful here in the culvert and he leaned against the wall to take the weight off his bad hip, now severely arthritic. Another Halloween was imminent. How many such nights had he seen? How many children had he watched go above to participate in the events in the Park created for this night? How many Halloweens had he watched Vincent go above to enjoy this one night of the year when he could walk among men in freedom?

Freedom. Yes, that was what the tunnel community represented, perhaps more than anything else. The right to live as they wished, even though it was secret. Money was unnecessary. They had food, shelter, clothing and each other. They made their own entertainments, maintained their world as required, and welcomed those who needed to be needed.

He had given that world everything for a long time, but had passed on the responsibility to Vincent. There would be others as his son and grandson grew older. Jacob felt contentment, more than he could have imagined in those long ago days when the community was new. Yes, that was the gift of their fantasy and its freedom – contentment.

He had seen a new century dawn and many things had changed in the world above. Below,

little changed, except the faces.

The sky was dark now, and he could just see a star or two that was not eliminated by the glow of city lights. Perhaps it was a planet. Yes, it was likely Venus or Jupiter. He had not looked at a sky chart since living below, and now regretted that. Vincent would probably know, he reflected. Vincent was always interested in the sky.

And so another Halloween would soon be in progress. It was easy to believe in legends and myths standing here. Easy to believe that on this night, the walls between worlds grew thin and spirits from beyond the veil could make themselves felt and heard, perhaps even join revellers.

He remembered so much now, that his memories seemed to weigh on him. It was no wonder he looked back, instead of forwards as he should. He was the last of the original founders, and his memories were all that remained, besides the paintings on Elizabeth's walls.

Perhaps it was the fresh air, which got him thinking. He knew he was a little hidebound, too used to a routine, too inflexible sometimes in his habits. He needed to do something new, something suited to his temperament.

And then he had an inspiration and wondered why he had not thought of it sooner. Their community needed a historian, someone to write down the stories of those who had contributed to their community – which was to say everyone.

As he mused thought about this, another dust devil danced in the culvert, this time with something white whirling inside it. Jacob knew it could only be a plastic bag, that plague of modern living, but it seemed alive. And as he watched, another joined it and they moved faster and faster, until they seemed to form a face, that of a teacher he had not thought about for 80 or more years.

He could still hear her voice; *'Jacob, don't be an ostrich. You must use your imagination not just to run, but to soar!'* It had been many years before he discovered she had paraphrased that particular bit of wisdom from the piquant observations of Thomas Babington, (1<sup>st</sup> Baron Macaulay). Who also spoke about 'the dignity of history', he recalled.

Was he still unimaginative? Perhaps he was. Yet, where Vincent was concerned, he had been too imaginative, obviously. And wrong. He sighed.

John had been the imaginative one, too much so. Others in their community were the idea people. His job, as he saw it, was to help them realize their ideas. But he could certainly organize a history book. Yes, that was the kind of task he loved. John had often made fun of him for his penchant for keeping lists and schedules. But how else were they to ensure that they had what they needed in a community remote from the rest of the world?

The tunnel community had a verbal tradition of telling stories, of course, but so much of the day-to-day activities had been forgotten. Who remembered why Cullen had joined them, or Mary, or others who had now departed? Only he knew the older stories, and when he was gone ...

It didn't bear thinking about. How could they move forward if they forgot where they had come from, and who had made them what they were? If the walls could talk, how much simpler the task would be. Jacob grunted. Now he was getting fanciful.

And why was he thinking of this at Halloween, of all times? It was the sense of the year dying, he realized. And the fact that for the first time in far too long, he could actually smell it – in the form of the long-forgotten scent of burning leaves. Yes, the ghosts of the years were weighing on him. He needed to unload them into print and pass them on. His last burden.

The two bags abruptly joined in a clutch, as if in agreement, and whirled high into the air before disappearing out of sight. The dust devil was no more.

Jacob stood there, unable to move, thinking. So engrossed was he that he didn't hear the visitor behind him. When a big hairy hand landed on his shoulder, he started, and looked guiltily around at Vincent.

"It's a fine night, Father," Vincent remarked, taking a deep breath and giving a great sigh.

"Yes, indeed," Jacob managed to say. He thought a moment, and then turned to address his son.

"Vincent, I've been mulling over things. I think it's time we had a proper written history of our community. Since I'm the oldest and only remaining founder, I should write down what I can remember, and then others can do the same for the later years. What do you think?"

Vincent regarded the patriarch and nodded. He was well aware that Jacob felt somewhat left out of things these days. But he had earned his rest and Vincent had supposed that a chamber filled to the brim with books would offer plenty of potential for many hours of pleasure. Apparently not.

"I think that would be a wonderful idea, Father. We tell our stories to the children, including my own, but if they were written down, we could all read them."

He needed to think about how to go about the project. And tonight was Halloween. There would be relative quiet in the tunnels, since the children would be above. Perhaps he could work on a draft plan and put the idea to everyone later tonight.

"Are you going above tonight, Vincent?" Jacob changed the subject abruptly.

"Yes." Vincent was silent for long moments. Jacob waited.

"On this night, I remember those who are gone vividly," Vincent said softly. "My ghosts visit me, not to berate me or frighten me, but just to remind me that they were once alive, part of me - and that my memories give them life."

"And on this night, none of them should be forgotten," Jacob agreed. "I too have my ghosts. We all do."

"I will visit their places tonight and perhaps they'll talk to me," Vincent announced quietly.

"Do you really think they might?" Jacob asked, knowing that one in particular was wanted above all others.

Vincent stared out into the night. "I do not know anything on such a night as this," he replied.

"It has a magic I do not understand. All I know is that if there are such things as restless spirits, and I can give them solace, I wish to try."

"And I will try to devise a way to bring back the memories of the ones I know," Jacob said. And recalling his usual admonition, he added, "Take great care, Vincent."

Vincent chuckled, and replied as he always did. "Of course, Father."

He took Jacob's arm and they walked back into the tunnels, each mulling on what awaited them as the walls between the years thinned this Halloween.