



Twilight

by Angie

"In me thou see'st the twilight ..."

-William Shakespeare

We often sat together on the bench under the apple tree and he would reminisce, as old people do, perhaps so that they do not forget their stories. So that in the telling of them to others they are kept alive, in another memory, for another generation and time.

Of course I knew some of the tales already, having been told them as a child. I didn't grow up in the tunnels, but I was allowed to attend Winterfests, for my mother was a helper. I was there the Winterfest that Paracelsus made his memorable appearance.

But I digress. He was special, always, and when all his responsibilities had been taken over by his son Jacob, his grandson Charles, and others, he did not want to remain in the tunnels. He longed for the light, and I suggested he come here, to my mother's house, with its huge fenced property and many trees. He would be welcome, of course, because who could not want him to be happy?

He lives quietly, sadly even, but that is to be expected in one who is so alone. I loved him, but I was a poor substitute for what he had lost. But he never complained, only told me his stories.

It was autumn now, and he had that faraway look in his eyes, the one that meant he was thinking of Catherine. I think everything reminded him of her, and he never tired of the memories, or found them less bright, no matter how many years had passed. Every season had its share of memories for him.

I sat beside him quietly, unwilling to break his reverie. I too loved autumn and the scent of fallen leaves and golden grasses, made more piquant by slightly chilly days. The dimming afternoon sunlight caught the edges of the leaves waiting to fall, highlighting the brilliance of russets, oranges, yellows and reds. The hydrangea was turning shades of pink and brown,

yet its flowers were still whole, still beautiful in their Fall colours.

When he spoke, I started a little, and I turned my head to regard him. He was looking where I had, at the hydrangeas. His voice was soft and measured, precise as always.

“They look like a fine old engraving, tinted by hand. Delicate, perfect. Every year I admire them as they grow in Spring, as they emerge among those gleaming green leaves, first a paler green themselves, then little pillows of white in the centre. Then the flowers form around the edge and open, turning blue, then purple, now an antique pink. They fascinate me. They are so beautiful, even in death. As she was. Yes, they remind me of Catherine, of our love.

“We were very green in the beginning too, not understanding what we had, completely, although we enjoyed our time together. Then as our love bloomed, it gave us strength, but was still too fragile to keep out the world, both hers and mine. More often than not, something interfered to keep us apart. We enjoyed our true centre, that pillowy softness of love shared, of being one, when our worlds allowed it. Stolen moments often, infinitely precious.

“Later, we enjoyed the summer of our love, those weeks and months when my world seemed to give us more time, and even hers became less intense. We were warmed by our love, calmed, knew it was forever.

“But even then, we were not lovers. I think I paid the price of that tension, and deserved to, for not trusting her - and myself - to allow us that final joining. Until it was almost too late.

“We did make love, and Catherine became pregnant, although I did not know it then. So many weeks I searched for her ... and then found her too late. She had to whisper her secret in my arms on that windy rooftop. It was what I had feared most, being left alive without her.

“I did rescue our son, as she wished, and life did continue, although often I wished I could follow her to that netherworld where she waited. I knew she was waiting. That she waits still, through these long years. That place inside me, where her heart had beat in time with mine, waits too. There is something there. I cannot name it, or even describe it. I never told Father. He felt I dwelt too much in the past as it was. He never quite understood the bond Catherine and I shared. Who could? We were something that had never been.

“I had Jacob to raise, a son she would have been so proud of, everything we could both have wished ... had we not had our lives torn apart. Now there was only myself to carry on, to try and be true to her memory, to what she was, the light she represented.

“Like that hydrangea, the colours of my life changed. No longer did I go above, even in the dark. What for? She was gone and there would never be another like her. I would never see the sun rising from her balcony again. There are no words for the depth of that sadness, the grief that rose in me, threatened to overwhelm me, when I had to leave her there, for the last time.

“I did not dare stay, not even at that worst time of my life. She would not want me to endanger myself.

“Although I wanted to die, desperately, I could not give up. Our son was still in the hands of that monster, the murderer. Until I found him, there could be no peace. When I did, and brought him home, still I could not leave. He needed me - and he needed to know about his mother.

“So I again lived my life in the muted yellows, reds and browns of the tunnels, made so by candle smoke and never enough candles. I could visit the waterfall to see sunlight, but I could not carry it back with me into my chamber. She was not there, who carried light around her, sharing it with me. Why then would I need sunlight, when my heart's light was gone?

“This morning, those hydrangea flowers were turned downwards from the rain overnight, still

dripping slightly, as if bowing their heads to the inevitable. Although they bow, they do not fall, ever. The leaves will all fall off, leaving bare branches, but the flowers will remain. They become translucent, the colour of fine parchment or fine antique lace, as the winter comes and the cold weather. You must cut off the old flower heads in the spring to encourage new growth, by which time they are brittle, ready to go.

“As with them, so with me. I am grown old, my head is bowed and I am dried out inside, waiting for the time I will rejoin Catherine. It will not be long now.”

He was silent then.

“But look,” I said, pointing at the top of the bush, where a last blue blossom, a late one, was still shining in the sun.”

“Yes,” he said softly. “There is still that last reminder of summer, of what was. As her love remains with me.”

We were interrupted by the sounds of car tires on gravel and we both straightened and turned towards the sound. We knew who it was.

I heard her slam the front door. His hearing was as acute as ever. He raised his head and gazed again at that last blue flower as she came into the garden and ran over to us. She often found us here, a couple of old men basking in the setting sun.

“Grandfather, Simon. It's a lovely day, isn't it?”

He smiled up at her. “Yes, it is.”

I merely nodded. She stood in front of us, smiling in that way that broke my heart. His smile did not disappear and he regarded her with a look that was part pleasure, partly wistful, part remorse. I often wondered how he could stand it, but he seemed to want to see her. I could see what he saw.

His granddaughter was the image of Jacob's mother, impossible as that seemed. Her mother was not related in any way to Catherine, but somehow the genes had been replicated almost perfectly, as sometimes happened in families, sometimes even several generations later, inexplicably.

Rachel had her grandmother's eyes and hair, and spirit. She cared little for the usual pursuits of her generation, though. She had not had the privileged upbringing of Catherine, but she lacked for nothing and had all of her grandmother's generosity of spirit and keen sense of honour and justice. She worked with her father in his office, in a brownstone bought with the legacy her grandmother had left him.

She visited us often, sometimes just to sit and hold his hand silently, sometimes to listen to his stories, of which she never tired. I was allowed to be part of the scenery, and was content to be so.

“And what adventures have you had today?” he asked her.

Rachel's brow knitted a little. “I had an unusual encounter, Grandfather. I was visiting the tunnels and heard a noise behind me, and when I looked around, I saw a scruffy kind of man wearing a baseball cap. He had dark hair and a cheeky expression, and he beckoned me to follow him. So I did. I knew, somehow, that he meant no harm ... and I was curious.

“He took me to a storage chamber and pointed at an old wardrobe. And then he disappeared. Well, I looked inside the wardrobe and found nothing. Then behind it, still nothing, and then finally I found something to stand on and felt around on top of it. I found a painting wrapped in an old towel.

Vincent's head dropped and he held himself stiffly, as if in great pain. His hair masked his

expression, but I could guess what it was. He looked up after long moments, his face again under control.

“Kristopher wanted you to find it,” he said, finally.

“Kristopher?” she asked.

“The man who painted that portrait. His name was Kristopher Gentian. It was he you met.”

“Was?” Rachel asked, now obviously puzzled.

“He died before well, before that painting was first discovered.”

Vincent looked up at his granddaughter.

“I stored it where you found it many years ago, before you were born. I ... didn't want to be reminded of it, of what it represented. Perhaps it is time you inherited the one thing I can give you, that no one else could.”

“But ...” Rachel seem uncharacteristically at a loss for words. “You mean I saw a ghost?”

“Yes, I'm afraid you did, although this one is both persistent and friendly. He occasionally shows himself to me as well. And tonight is Halloween, is it not? Anything may happen.”

The thought seemed to please him because he smiled enough to show his canines.

“He showed himself to me again, later, in my chamber, and told me to bring the portrait to you, Grandfather. He said that you would know what to do with it.”

Vincent looked at her intently then, and nodded, his face now serious.

“Yes, I believe Kristopher is correct. It is time. We must prepare. Is there a large pumpkin in our patch?”

“Certainly,” I said. I planted the seeds and kept the patch watered, so that I could send a few pumpkins to the tunnels every year. They preferred the smaller ones, so I was sure there was at least one large one.

“Let's go and find it, then,” Vincent suggested softly, rising and taking Rachel's arm. I watched them ramble towards the patch. His stride seemed a little more lively, but as graceful as always, although his back was somewhat bent now. He never wore the cloak now, having shed it with his tunnel life.

I went into the house to get a large knife, then rejoined them at the bottom of the garden, where the remaining pumpkins rested magnificently under their large, fading, parasol-like leaves.

“That one,” Vincent said, pointing at a large, nicely-shaped one. I carefully cut it from the vine, leaving enough for a handle, and Rachel and I manhandled it into our kitchen.

“What should we cut it into?” Rachel asked when we all stood before it at the table.

“May I?” Vincent asked, finding a black Sharpie in our 'everything' drawer and holding it up.

“Be my guest,” I said, and Rachel nodded. He seldom showed anyone his artistic talents, and we were eager to see what he would do.

“Why don't you prepare our living room and light the fire,” he suggested. Obviously, he did not want to be watched.

“And add a few extra chairs,” he added with a secretive smile. “I believe we will be having guests tonight.”

So we did, unsure what he expected. I lit the fire and arranged a few more chairs around the fireplace. The round dining table would hold the pumpkin, we decided, and I found a large platter for it. We spread on a deep red tablecloth, the closest colour I could find to something suitable for the evening.

"Dinner," I muttered at last. "We must eat."

I returned to the kitchen to find the untouched side of the big pumpkin facing me, and Vincent standing in front of it, next to a bowl with a large pile of seeds and pulp.

"Perhaps we can roast some pumpkin seeds," he suggested with a smile.

Rachel nodded and took the bowl he passed to her to the sink, then began to separate out the seeds.

I busied myself making us a meal, deciding that one of our frozen stews would be perfect, and I put it into a large pot to heat up.

Rachel and I avoided looking at Vincent, or the pumpkin, as we worked, knowing he would tell us when it was time.

At last all was prepared. Rachel set the table in the living room, the pumpkin seeds, now roasted and redolent with mysterious spices, were put into a glass bowl. I took a pumpkin pie out of the fridge, deciding that tonight we would have dessert as well. Finally, I cut up a loaf of grainy bread and buttered a number of slices and put them on a plate.

The smell of the stew made my stomach rumble and I finally asked over my shoulder, "Is everyone ready to eat dinner?"

"Yes," Vincent replied, with a sigh. "And this is ready also."

Rachel and I went over to him and regarded the jack-o-lantern he had carved. We were both rendered speechless at what he had done.

But his granddaughter regained her voice first. "It's lovely," she exclaimed.

"Not scary at all," Vincent agreed. "But I have missed this, and it seemed ... appropriate for tonight."

It was a simple, but fine rendition of the beautiful stained glass window in his chamber, the part with the woman with her hands raised. I carried it into the living room and put it in the centre of the table.

"Now let's eat," I suggested, and Rachel and I carried the stew bowls and bread, while Vincent followed us to the table. I found spoons and we ate with gusto.

I looked at the clock. It was barely 7:00 pm. Vincent must have guessed my thought, because he smiled.

"I suggest we place the portrait there, next to the fireplace, on the floor," he pointed.

Rachel hurried out to her car and returned with the painting, still wrapped in terrycloth. I looked at it and felt my eyes sting. I hadn't seen it in a very long time. It was as beautiful as I remembered.

"Have we candles?" asked Vincent.

"Of course," I said, and collected a large shoe box from the cabinet, one with an assortment of candles I stored for the rare winter times when the power went out. I took out a thick, squat column, and gave it to Vincent with some matches. He nodded and placed it inside the jack-o-lantern, then lit it. The image glowed, much as it did in his chamber.

I lit other candles around the room, some in candle holders, including one Winterfest candle on the mantelpiece, just because, and others on stone plates I kept in the cabinet. I turned off all but one standing lamp.

Rachel, meanwhile, cleaned the dishes off the table and put them into the dishwasher. I was in the kitchen wondering what else I should put on the table as a treat, when I heard the sound of a car arriving. And then several more. I ran back into the living room to find Vincent

sitting with Rachel, smiling.

"I believe we have company," he said, unnecessarily.

Rachel looked puzzled, but she said nothing. When the first knock came, I went to the front door and opened it to see a small sea of faces smiling back at me. My jaw must have dropped, because it was Pascal who spoke.

"Here we are, by invitation. Happy Halloween!" He held up a large lumpy bag and I moved to let him in. He was followed by Mouse and Jamie, Lin and Henry, Michael, Brooke, Rebecca, Kipper, Kanin and Olivia and Cullen. Jacob and Charles, Vincent's son and grandson, came in behind them. And last of all, Devin entered, assisted by Samantha and Geoffrey. He used two canes now, a fact he blamed on a misspent youth and too many spills. He shook off his helpers irritably once he was inside and hobbled immediately over to Vincent. They regarded each other sombrelly.

"Devin," Vincent said softly. Rachel moved to allow him to take her place next to Vincent on the loveseat, an old well-sprung one that was high enough to allow them both to rise easily.

"Brother. It's wonderful to see you. I wouldn't have missed this for anything," Devin declared.

Within a surprisingly short time, our pie and pumpkin seeds were surrounded by wonderful things – a filled punch bowl and cups, a variety of petit fours, some jelly beans and caramel corn, nuts, a bowl of fortune cookies and stacks of small plates and napkins. Someone had even brought a vase and placed two roses in it, one white, one red. And next to it was a small pile of parchment paper and several pens. They piqued my curiosity, but I said nothing. All in good time, I decided. This was going to be a night to remember, I was now sure. It had been orchestrated, and I must be a keen observer, since I seemed to be the only one of whom nothing had been asked, except to supply the venue.

Finally, everyone was sitting down with a glass of punch. Rachel, still looking puzzled, broke in to the chatter.

"How ... why are you all here?"

Pascal answered for them all. "Why we all received an invitation, of course."

"I didn't send anything," I declared. Vincent merely shook his head, as if bemused.

Lin chuckled. "I think someone wanted us all here tonight, of all nights in the year. We were told what to bring as well. Quite specifically. Kristopher is a very ... persistent ... and detail-oriented ghost, it seems," she added dryly, looking at the portrait. It was bracketed by some of the larger candles I had, big pillars embedded with herbs, made by Rebecca.

"Kristopher again," Rachel remarked.

"Yes," Vincent said, into the silence. "He wanted you all here tonight, obviously. I am very grateful you could all come."

"Nothing could keep us away," Jamie remarked softly.

Mouse nodded. "Had to come. Vincent needs us. Kristopher said."

I looked around at all of them, in this place where we seldom had more than one or two of them at a time, and marvelled how wonderful it was to see them all here. Kristopher had a plan, I was sure of it, but I could not imagine what it was.

So we chatted and enjoyed the snacks and punch, catching up on news about absent friends, remembering other Halloweens, joking and laughing and making plenty of noise.

I watched Vincent, sure that he knew something that the rest of us did not. Had Kristopher talked to him privately?

Every so often he would glance at the pumpkin he had carved. I looked at it and realized, for

the first time, that the female figure could have represented Catherine. In his chamber, I had seen it often, but never made the connection because I knew it predated her.

How odd, I thought, that I had never thought about what it seemed to predict for Vincent. It was just there, a beautiful golden fan, in the chamber of the tunnel's most unique resident.

I looked at him again and caught his glance. He nodded, as if he read my mind. Perhaps he had. I gave him a wry smile back.

We were enjoying ourselves so much, that it took the appearance of Kristopher before we realized it was almost midnight. Our ghostly guest said nothing, merely stood near the portrait, unmoving, his face in shadow under his Mets cap. The chit chat gradually faded as everyone realized he was there. Then we waited in silence, watching the arms on the old mantelpiece clock creep towards the witching hour.

"Soon," Mouse commented.

"When the walls between the worlds grow thin," Vincent remarked softly into the room.

And at the first chime, Kristopher seemed to come alive, and doffed his cap.

"Thank you for coming," he intoned, hollowly.

Vincent smiled. "Always the showman," he observed quietly.

The second chime sounded and Kristopher stood aside. The portrait seemed to grow fuzzy and on the third chime, a figure could be seen in front of it. It was Catherine, in the long, beautiful, deep burgundy velvet dress she was wearing in the portrait. She walked towards Vincent as the fourth chime sounded, and he, also appearing somewhat fuzzy, rose to meet her. As they got closer, he seemed to grow younger, finally, at the sixth chime, he was standing before her in his cloak and tunnel clothing, dressed for the portrait.

"Vincent," we all heard her whisper after the seventh chime.

"Catherine," Vincent replied, his voice hoarse, after the eighth.

They came together then, Vincent surrounding her in his cloak, as he must have while they were both young. They stood there, silently, until the last chime sounded and the pair turned to us. Vincent spoke.

"Thank you my friends for a lovely evening. Please do not be sad. This night is one I have long awaited. It is the only night of the year when Catherine and I could possibly stand in this world together. It is time. I will love you all ... always."

Vincent took Catherine's hand and they smiled at us, their happiness suffusing the room. We were all speechless, but no words were necessary. We could only marvel at it. The couple became misty and finally, with a last wave at us, they disappeared.

Was it my imagination, or was there a 13th chime? Or perhaps it was only the sudden clutch at my heart, a deep vibration that ran up my spine, when I realized what he had said ... and what it meant.

The portrait remained, showing them as they were in that long ago time, but something had changed. Their eyes and mouths seemed happier, more alive. Kristopher had disappeared again. Somehow, he had contrived to change his painting. I shook off my amazement and stood up.

In his chair, Vincent had not moved, I realized belatedly. I went to him and picked up a hand, and marvelled, as I always did, at its size and the softness of the long hair. His nails were shorter now, as if age had blunted them. It was still warm, but limp. I knew there was no life left in him, even before I felt for a pulse. He looked completely at peace, a small smile on his face that looked exactly like the one he now wore in the portrait, except that his eyes were

closed.

"He's gone," I said softly and there were murmurs around me.

"We have something we were asked to bring," Henry said quietly into the silence, "if you men would help me."

The group went out the front door and when they returned, I gasped. I had never seen the like. At first I couldn't imagine what it was. Then it was obvious.

Lin explained. "This is a lotus casket, a traditional Chinese one. We thought he would like it. In our culture, the lotus symbolizes many things – eloquence, devotion, faithfulness, rebirth."

Rachel stared. "It's ... beautiful," she remarked. It was indeed, carved from wood in a shape that was lotus-like if viewed from the front.

So we gently wrapped him in a blanket he loved, and gently placed him in the extraordinary casket. Then we carried it into the garden and put it down.

"He loved the hydrangeas," I remarked. "I think we can find room for a grave between two bushes."

I led the way to the garden shed, and handed out some shovels. I rushed to find a few lanterns and lit them too, for it was now very dark in the garden, although there was a full moon.

It didn't take us long to dig his grave, as the rain the previous night had made the soil soft. We took ropes and carefully lowered the casket into the hole, then covered it up, each one of us whispering something to him as we did so. It was a sombre end to the night, but we could not regret his passing. We all remembered the look on his face, one of peace, happiness.

"One more thing," Jamie said, and she and Mouse returned to their car and returned with a small gravestone. "Kanin carved it, from stone in the catacombs,"

"Kristopher was remarkably thorough," I remarked, "even to the inscription."

There were a few chuckles at this, and the mood lightened.

We placed the stone at the head of the grave and regarded it in the moonlight. Kanin had carved a likeness of a lion's head into the upper portion, but underneath it was a dedication we all recognized.

In Memory of Vincent Wells

*"Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there; I do not sleep.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die."*

I recalled the rest of that beautiful poem as we stood there, unable to move, our grief suddenly overwhelming us. We joined hands, without thought, needing that contact. I recited the poem into the night.

*"Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there; I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,*

*I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sun on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there; I did not die.***

I could hear sighs around me and thought how impossible it was to hear those words and not show some sorrow for a soul who loved nature as Vincent had. Yet Fate had denied him its enjoyment in the sunshine, until his final years. He had been happy here, I knew, but always there was that reserve we all recognized, but never spoke about unless he brought it up first.

I looked at the hydrangea, and knew that it was a suitable resting place. We knew he was where he wanted to be now, with his Catherine at last. Forever young, forever hers, forever happy.

We made our way back to the house, where we would perhaps write him something on those handy sheets of parchment to burn in the fireplace. I remembered their purpose now. We had often done so for helpers and members of the tunnel community who passed away. We had done it for Ellie first, then it had become a tradition for helpers and tunnel family both, always at the Mirror Pool. Vincent wouldn't mind if we did it here, I decided, where he had been happy in the sunshine. For we'd had no ceremony for Catherine, at his insistence. Now we could write to them both, and send our messages up my chimney to the stars.

Just before I followed everyone through the door, I looked back at the grave and stopped. I saw Kristopher standing there, with Vincent and Catherine beside him, gazing at the gravestone. The couple turned to me and the moon seemed to limn them in silver. I raised my hand in goodbye and they did the same. Kristopher saluted me, before they all disappeared.

I turned from the garden and went inside, where the warmth of a fireplace and many friends would help to ease our sadness before sunrise and another day dawned, one that was now without someone we loved like no other.

END

* Mary Elizabeth Frye – 1904- 2005