

The Long Way Home

by Angie

You can carry your home with you.

- Mary Chapin Carpenter

Devin arrived in the tunnels to find it in full Halloween mode. Father was reciting *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* to a rapt bunch of children, there were jack-o-lanterns lit all around his chamber, and most of the children were almost unrecognizable in their costumes - not that he knew their names anyhow.

He felt like an outsider, yet he could have been looking at a scene from his own childhood. Nothing much changed in the tunnels. There was probably a quote for that and Vincent would know it, he thought wryly. He had always had other priorities to reading much.

Rather than disturb the festivities, he left without announcing himself and headed into the lesser used tunnels, drawing on his memories and obeying an impulse he could not have put into words. He walked through the Chamber of the Winds and took the right hand passage, deep in thought, and memories. He didn't notice the slight shuffle far behind him.

After a time, he arrived at the top of a ladder and looked down into a rock chamber he remembered. It had two candles burning, which was odd enough, but then it seemed to have an otherworldly air about it, and he wondered about that too.

He and Vincent had visited Narcissa, without Father's knowledge of course. Vincent had always entered her chamber silently behind him and watched, without doing or saying anything to reveal his presence. Narcissa had not spoken to him, although Devin was sure she knew he was there. Her blind eyes saw more than people realized.

The old seer was long gone now, but there were still some oddments and a sense of her presence about the place. And it WAS Halloween, he reminded himself, when the walls between worlds grew thin, reportedly. He didn't really believe in ghosts and spirits, but he had seen enough in his travels to at least give the possibility due respect.

He climbed down the ladder and sat himself down on a rock that might have been a low table or bench seat once, and looked around.

So many memories! Narcissa had always been patient, always welcoming, in her way. They had always been expected. He had that sense now, although he couldn't give a reason for that, beyond the candles.

He had left the tunnels young, but never quite left them behind. He felt in his pocket for the small piece of rock he always carried, a piece chipped with his knife from where Vincent's name was carved at the culvert entrance. It had been worn smooth around the edges from decades in his pocket, yet it was as solid as these tunnels, eternal. It had reminded him that he had a family and a place to call home, even when he was often thousands of miles away on the other side of the planet. Even when he could not admit its existence, having to create another kind of fraud to cover that lack. Sometimes he had needed the rock, it being one of

the few things he kept in his gypsy existence. Everything else he owned usually fit into a kit bag and briefcase. He had put down roots nowhere, except right here underground.

When he had returned here, it was for motives even he had not quite understood. Why had he returned that first time, creating an elaborate hoax in the DA's office? He could have just walked in any number of entrances and found out if the tunnel community still existed - or contacted helpers he knew were still around, like Lou the barber.

He had never done things simply, though, and he loved pretending to be what he wasn't. He was always good at it - a good fraud - as he had told anyone who questioned him. Doing a job properly had required him to study his role well. He had enjoyed that.

Narcissa, though, had not been a fraud. She had been respected and honest, and far too close to the mark in his case. She had seen through his subterfuges easily - he had not known of his father until he had returned that first time, but she had, he was sure. She had cast her bones the night he had decided to leave the tunnels, and told him that his road would be long, but that he was gifted with luck and would return.

And so it was. Apart from the scars on his cheek, acquired from the brother he loved above all others, he had left for his adventures with few regrets and returned with his hide intact and no small amount of money. Enough to do all the things he considered important, really, except change his home - or make one elsewhere. No place had been home to him, except this hole in the ground, though to be fair, he had not tried very hard. He always wanted to be on the move, find another adventure. Amazingly, they often found him. The world was full of possibilities, always.

He had not found any woman to share his life either, and now that Charles was gone too, he was alone. He had returned to the tunnels, on this night, to avoid the inevitable questions amid the festivities. He wanted to think about his future, perhaps have a greater role in his true home. He had travelled enough to know that even that could pale after a while.

'.... *I'll be back ... Though I go 10,000 miles*', he recited softly to the empty chamber.

There was a scrape at the entrance and he turned to look up. A woman stood there, one he knew, but whose name escaped him. *Margaret? Alice? No.*

"May I come in," she asked.

Devin nodded, going through names in his head still. *Deborah? Lauren?*

She was someone he knew, had known from his boyhood. He thought she was slightly younger than himself, but not by much. He had not paid much attention to girls ... then.

She climbed down the ladder and stood next to him.

"I remember this place," she commented softly. "Father used to ask me to bring Narcissa food, clothing and oddments she had asked for. She rarely went above.

"You, on the other hand, Devin, were gone before things got interesting," she remarked.

Devin chuckled softly. "I remember you as being bossy," he said, still unable remember her name. *Ruth? Theresa?*

She chuckled in turn. "Yes, I was, wasn't I? I felt responsible then, as the eldest. Someone had to keep the girls in line. Father always gave me the jobs that made me less popular. Mary was too soft, he told me."

"What jobs were those?" Devin asked, curious.

"Oh ... you know, explaining why here was no money for makeup or soda pop, and why we lived here and not above, helping them search for clothing they'd like from our donations and scavenging, teaching them to sew and make it their own ... and dealing with woman stuff."

"I thought Mary did all that," Devin admitted. *Penny? Portia? No and no.* He almost chuckled and tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

"Mary was older, too much older for my age group. Like all teenagers, we were rebellious. I was one of them, and knew what to watch for. Mary was too busy looking after the babies and small children."

"You ... rebellious?"

She chuckled. "Oh not in the usual way. Sometimes I ... delayed jobs I didn't like. Sometimes, if I did that, they didn't need to be done - but I still got credit. Timing is everything, even here. Life is funny that way."

Bernice? Elaine? It was annoying!

"So it is," Devin commented, being quite familiar with the importance of timing in his own life. "Yet you are still here." It was almost a question.

Susan? SARAH...! That was her name! He relaxed a bit, relieved, and she must have noticed, although she could not have known the reason.

"I was brought here as a child," she said softly. "I've known no other home, nor anyone not in these tunnels. What I've seen of above frightens me. I'm safe here."

That raised a lot of questions, including some that Devin did not want to ask. But Sarah continued.

"I had a boyfriend once, but he went above and stayed there. He didn't try to convince me to go with him. I'm a little long in the tooth now, so I don't get propositioned."

Devin looked at her more closely at that. She was an attractive, slim woman, with a few frown lines, no doubt from worrying about people. He remembered that about her. She was always concerned about the dangers to tunnel folk who went above. She kept unofficial track of everyone's comings and goings, reporting to Father when she thought there was danger. Elizabeth and Narcissa had been her particular concerns, even then.

Mitch had called her 'sneaky snitch', but then Mitch had a derogatory name for everyone. HE at least, had never seen Narcissa - or he would have boasted about it. She was only found when she wanted to be, and Mitch was obviously not welcome. That gave both he and Vincent some satisfaction, quietly between themselves.

There had been times when they had been glad Sarah had apprised Father of danger - like when they almost got caught above, when Vincent was small and had tagged along with them. If one of the sentries had not been informed where they were and helped them from underneath to get the manhole cover off ... it would have been bad for all of them, but Vincent in particular. That hunk of metal had turned out to be much heavier than they expected.

Devin sighed. So many memories.

Sarah watched expressions flick across his face, well aware that he was probably remembering. What else would he do here? She had memories too, but hers were so much more ordinary than his. He had travelled everywhere, wasn't that what people said? She admired him for his adventurous spirit, wanted to know more, hear stories, especially first

hand.

"What's your favourite memory?" she asked him, wanting to hear him speak. He had a pleasant voice and a handsome face, even with the scars, on the side of his face nearest her.

Devin chuckled. "There are so many, most of which Father knew nothing. Vincent and I did so much together. He was the one I missed most when I left. I knew he would feel betrayed, abandoned, so I didn't tell him I was leaving, but I never thought you would search for me and assume I was dead."

Sarah was silent for long moments. She hadn't meant tunnel adventures, but she was glad he brought THAT particular topic up. It had been a sad time.

"I remember that time. Father never said anything about why you might have disappeared, although we all heard him yelling at you. He seemed devastated, unusually quiet, and organized all the search parties, kept track of where we searched. We thought you had got angry and gone far below, perhaps had an accident.

"Vincent searched like everyone else, but he looked in the passages you two used to go above, he said. We didn't know then that he was empathetic. Maybe he didn't either. He said nothing, but somehow, he knew that you were alive, and not below, because his attitude changed from sorrow to resignation. Maybe he found something."

Devin pulled the piece of rock from his pocket. "Maybe where this came from. I chipped it from a place where we both carved our names. He was always good at remembering details."

Sarah nodded, accepting the explanation.

"Why aren't you enjoying Halloween?" Devin asked, tardily, remembering what night this was.

She laughed. "I'm not interested in dressing up and I've heard all Father's stories far too often. It's a great time for children and couples. I'll just wait until William announces that the treats are being served in the dining hall."

"And it's still too early," Devin stated.

She nodded, looking around the chamber.

"Narcissa was a kind woman, although you didn't always want to hear what she said. She tried to be fair. When I brought her things, she always thanked me and gave me tea. It was not the usual kind, but something that tasted smoky. I think it might have been gunpowder tea, which Lin gave me once as a Yuletide gift. Narcissa liked the unusual."

Devin looked around also, at the two candles which didn't seem to burn down, at the inexplicable light in this place, which seemed to come from the walls. Phosphorescence maybe.

"I came to her before I left, for advice, a fortune told ... something. I wonder what she would tell me now? She said I would return. She couldn't have known how long it would be.

"*'The rocks may melt ... And the seas may burn ... If I should not return'*," he recited, not sure why those particular lyrics came to him now, or indeed, why he had come here, of all places.

"*'If I had a friend ... All on this earth ... You've been a friend to me'*,"* " Sarah quoted back to him. "I love that song. It's so romantic, so sad. And you were a friend, you know, although you didn't do anything for me, in particular. You were important to Vincent, and looked after and protected him. That was well done."

Devin hung his head a little, embarrassed. "Yet I left him."

"Because you had to. Vincent knew, I think. So many friends have left over the years. Not everyone can live here, underground. You weren't the first, or the last."

"Yet friends are forever," a voice said in the gloom of the chamber.

Devin and Sarah stiffened. They both recognized the voice. How not? They both looked around, but saw nothing.

"Narcissa?" Sarah said at last, querulously.

"I am here, children," the voice said. *"I remember you, Devin, son of the Father. Where is your silent friend?"*

"You know?" Devin managed to ask.

"I know whose son you are, and I knew Vincent came with you."

"Vincent was ... shy," Devin commented.

A familiar chuckle echoes around the cave. *"No. Vincent was concerned about present spirits, not future ones. It was always so. Even when warned of death, he did not turn back."*

"You did not tell me much," Devin remarked, making a mental note to ask Vincent about that last prediction. His brother had told him little about those years, when he and Catherine had struggled with their love. He had no doubt this was part of the story. Before that, Vincent's life had been ... subdued. Even he knew that. Their father's fault, no doubt.

Narcissa chuckled again, breaking his reverie.

"I said your road would be long. You wanted more. I cannot see everything. Sometimes it is best thus."

Devin merely grunted.

"And Sarah, I remember you also. You came to me often, but never for yourself."

"There was nothing I needed to know," Sarah replied. She had known where she belonged, always.

"Ah, nothing an old black woman could tell you, perhaps. But you do not know yourself well, child."

Devin looked at her and his eyebrows went up. Sarah blushed.

"I don't have much imagination," Sarah countered.

"And you are alone. Do you not wish to share your life, yourself?"

"I suppose. But I am too old for that now."

"Child, no one is too old. Devin has too much imagination, yet he has never found anyone either. Vincent had imagination and many restrictions. Yet love found him. Perhaps you both need to open your hearts and see."

"Are you playing matchmaker now? Devin asked, cheekily.

"On a night when spirits walk and people above invite them, you are both visiting the home of an old witch. Why is that?"

"I was just following Devin," Sarah said defensively.

"You found him," Narcissa said, unnecessarily.

"Why were you following me?" Devin asked Sarah, suddenly curious.

Sarah looked at him and shrugged. "Everyone was either out or reading stories and I had just finished helping William prepare the treats. You walked by, and didn't look like you were going to do participate. I wanted to see where you were going."

"I just let my feet take the lead. Treats, huh? I didn't know there were any."

"William doesn't need much excuse, but he's getting older and needs more help. It's something I can do that keeps me busy. Soon everyone will be in the dining hall."

"Now, that sounds an invitation," Devin smiled at her. "May I join you?"

There was a sigh from Narcissa. "*Enjoy yourselves, children. You have much to celebrate together.*"

Her chuckle rang around the cave and both Devin and Sarah shivered, suddenly noticing how chilly it had become.

"I think she's hinting we should leave now," Devin said, wondering how Narcissa did that.

His words were met with another chuckle, one that seemed quite final this time, and a "*Be Well*".

A sudden wind howling around the cavern made them both get up. They made fast tracks up the ladder and onward to the home tunnels. On the way, the pipes announced that treats were being served. They looked at each other and smiled. Devin took Sarah's hand and they entered the dining hall together.

Later, after generous portions of snacks and punch, Devin and Sarah did indeed realize they had much in common.

END

* *Mary Chapin Carpenter "10,000 Miles"*

(1999)

*Fare thee well
My own true love
Farewell for a while
I'm going away
But I'll be back
Though I go 10,000 miles*

*10,000 miles
My own true love
10,000 miles or more
The rocks may melt
And the seas may burn
If I should not return*

*Oh don't you see
That lonesome dove
Sitting on an ivy tree
She's weeping for
Her own true love
As I shall weep for mine*

*Oh come ye back
My own true love
And stay a while with me
If I had a friend
All on this earth
You've been a friend to me*