

AS TIME GOES BY

by Gwen Lord

The dark eerie tunnels lay bare their emptiness containing a deep chill. Above, the evening mist gathered and swirled around and around, casting shadows across Central Park. Only the tapping Below, at irregular intervals broke the silence, as messages and answers travelled along the miles of tunnels, networked beneath the hub of busy New York. There echoes and vibrations conjuring up a symphony that only the trained ear could appreciate or understand. To Pascal, and his father before him, these sounds were life itself, even the sentries found a magic in their different sounds, as the tapping travelled from different parts of the city, coming together in a grand finale which only the chiselled rock face of the tunnels was privileged to witness, truly a symphony of unique sounds.

These imposing tunnels, with their rough surfaces and mould, were a good deterrent to the would-be intruder into this secret world, this haven of outcasts of today's society. Set at intervals along these dark chilly tunnels, were torch-like beacons, driven into place by the early tunnel dwellers, their glow was as if from another age, to highlight the way for the tunnel dweller, as he or she went about their daily duties, or to guide them 'home' after a visit Above, back to their new found Shangri-La.

Muffled voices now penetrated the still air, as if expectant for more, to reveal the source of the intrusion, moments passed and the voices became clearer, it was no longer a secret. These walls had grown accustomed to this good humoured and happy volley of talk over the years of this nightly vigil, as slowly, oh so slowly, two cloaked figures emerged out of the darkness. Lights from the torches picked up the gold in their long hair and swaying cloaks, which moved as one as they walked along like pendulums. Both these men were like warriors, above average height for even tall men, broadly built, truly a force to be reckoned with, medieval and foreboding. But as Father had said over the years, so often 'NEVER JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER'.

Directly under one of the torches their faces clear now, declared them to be father and son. Vincent was still the tall proud man he had always been, 6'6 tall with movement as graceful as a panther. Peter was now 24 years old, and he was even taller than his father, but each wore their hair the same, dressed identically, the only visible difference was Peter's face, so like his mother, Catherine. He had her soft and gentle grey/green eyes, that were hypnotic and held your attention. Father and son toured the outer tunnels every night about this time, midnight, as they returned from their walk in the shadows of Central Park. Now all was secure as they returned Below, the tunnels could sleep, knowing all was well.

"Vincent Vincent my boy, is that you?" a now frail voice broke the silence. Without a word passing between them, the two men entered the chamber the voice had come from.

"Father! Are you unwell? What troubles you at this late hour?" Vincent asked as he went to turn up the wick of the lamp. Peter, with both grace and speed, rushed to the bedside.

"Grandfather, what is it that troubles you?"

"I need my tablet, I dropped it, now it seems to have rolled out of reach," he pulled the crocheted

shawl tighter around his thin shoulders.

"I'll look for you, Grandfather," Peter crouched down and in an instant had the tablet safely in the old man's outstretched hand.

"There you are," he smiled lovingly, his head to one side, so reminiscent of his father.

"Ah! Thank you Devin where is Mary? She's late coming to bed. Spends too long tucking the little ones in, she'll be chilled to the bone when she gets back," he muttered to himself, as he put the glass of water down. Vincent went over to his father and pulled up the comforter, then placed a tender kiss on his forehead, while Peter turned down the lamp once more. Then without another word, both left the chamber, to continue their journey to their own chambers, not too far away.

"Poor Grandfather, he hasn't been the same since Grandma died," a sadness tinged the deep velvet voice.

"No, he truly loved Mary, her loss has touched him deeply, he gets so mixed up, we must be patient with him. He cannot help it, old age will come to us all, we must guide him safely through this stage and make his days a joy. We must ignore the imperfections." His son nodded agreement.

"Well, I'll say goodnight, my son." They stood facing each other, then hugged and finally parted, as they made their way to their own homes, within the tunnels.

Stooping as he entered the chamber, Vincent sighed was it him, or did these evening walks cover more ground than they used to? He unclipped his cloak and hung it on the hook by the entrance, then closing the curtain silently, he smiled as he contemplated the facts *'I must be getting old.'* Here he was a Grandfather himself, head of his family, with children and responsibilities, how wondrous his life had been. Yet he could remember so clearly, when he and Catherine nearly didn't have a life together, when it all seemed 'an impossible dream'. He thanked God every day for the miracle of Catherine's love and devotion, he was truly blessed.

"It is I who is truly blessed, Vincent." Her voice interrupted the silence. His head shot up as Catherine turned over sleepily in their bed to face him, her beautiful eyes found his, in a moment of deep understanding.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, my love, you felt my thoughts through our Bond. I'm sorry," his arms went out in apology. Then he went to the bed and sat down, and taking her hand in his, he turned it over, slowly he bent his head and kissed the palm repeatedly. A shiver went through her, it always did when he showed this kind of affection, and Vincent was well aware of what it did to his beloved

"Oh Vincent, you are so romantic, a real Renaissance man, if I didn't know better, I'd swear you were making a pass at me," she chuckled mischievously.

"Catherine," he sighed, "would I do that?"

"Hmmmmm."

"And what does 'hmmmmm' mean?" he whispered in her ear. She could feel his hot breath on her cheek as he planted butterfly kisses on her eyelids and nose.

"Maybe you're getting past it," she chided, as a chuckle once again escaped her lips. Teasing Vincent was a pure joy, which she loved doing.

"Really! Well, we'll see about that, shall we." Quickly he tore at his clothes until they lay in a heap where they fell. At last he was rid of them, then his boots. He quickly climbed into their large soft bed

to be with his beloved.

"Help! Rape! Help!" she pretended to cry, but Vincent's lips soon silenced her. After all these years of marriage, their love was still special enough that at the end of each day, they thanked the gods for allowing them such a 'Happy Life', then entwined in each other's arms they drifted off into near sleep.

"Vincent?"

"HMMMMMM?"

"Have you ever wondered ?"

"Wondered what, Catherine?" he whispered near her ear.

"How many times we've made love," he felt her smile.

"Catherine!" she never ceased to amaze him.

"No Vincent," she turned within his embrace until their faces were a heartbeat away. "I meant it, in all these 25 years of our marriage"

"It isn't 25 years, my love, until next week."

Catherine opened her mouth to speak, then sighed, re-thought the situation, then continued after rephrasing it.

"Somewhere, there is a total, a grand total it must be oh! Vincent, it must be thousands and thousands" she chuckled at his embarrassment.

"Shhh, my love," he kissed her lips, "whatever the number is it is nowhere near enough!"

Elliot looked exasperated as he and Gus battled once more over his future.

"Dad, I'm 22 years old, I'm not a kid anymore why can't you see it my way, just this once?" he pleaded.

"Your mom and I want you to have all the chances that lay open to you, as my no our son." Elliot paced the kitchen/dining area, obviously desperate to get his feelings across to Gus. Amy came in from her shopping trip, loaded with arms full of assorted packages, but when she heard the raised voices, she knew instantly what it was about, again!

"You two, you are so alike its unbelievable, you're both pig-headed, stupid, and arrogant. Look at you both, like two kids grow up!" she teased.

Elliot ran his right hand through his hair as he put his left hand in the trouser pocket. Then with a sigh, left Gus without another glance and went straight to his beloved Amy, his wife of now 23 years.

"The Queen of 'The Greasy Spoon', she returns," he recited in a broken Italian accent. This never failed to melt Amy's anger. Then leaning down he nuzzled a kiss in her neck. "Okay, you win for now but you two have to stop this, before you destroy all we have."

Then as Elliot left the room, Gus strolled over to his Mom. Amy watched him as he approached, he

was so like his Dad, that it was like going back in time to when Elliot was a young man. She noticed, not for the first time, that he had the same clean cut image, wore clothes with the same flair, all neatly packaged with shoulder length hair that fell on his shirt collar in the same way. There was also the unmistakable dimple in his chin and that roguish smile which lit up his eyes, no wonder he was the local heartthrob, Amy thought to herself.

"Mom, Dad won't hear my side of it why is he always so certain he is right?" Elliot returned to the room at that moment, his eyes blazing.

"Because I am. I can give you power that you would never have dreamt possible, things I never had at your age I know you don't agree with all I do but I do love you, Gus, and I am so proud of you. Please give up being a nickel and dime lawyer and join me in the Burch Empire Burch & Son," he held out his hand to Gus.

"Dad, you have not heard a word I've said."

"I sure as hell have and I don't like I won't accept your answer, when I know what I offer you is best." Elliot ran his hands through his hair again in desperation.

"See Mom, it's impossible!" and with that he dashed from the room.

"Where the hell are you going?" demanded Elliot.

"Out."

"Don't walk away from me" Elliot dashed out of the room in quick pursuit of his son. "Where are you going, I asked you, who is it tonight, eh?" Turning to face his Dad, he said in a now softer voice.

"Oh, she's nice, Dad, really nice," and he patted his father's arm.

"Do we get to know her name?" he quizzed. Elliot smiled a knowing look at Amy, she knew he was now having fun with his son.

"Dad, I'm late, and Lucy will be waiting please."

"Oh! Oh! So we have a name, I do believe we could know this Lucy, Amy, she's the Mayor's niece, right? Well done, at least you're moving in the right circles, and you will make a lot of good connections there." Elliot's eyes were now full of pride for his son's choice.

"Sorry Dad, that Lucy is a spoiled brat and a bore. No, this is another Lucy."

"Oh! And who is she, do we know her, who is her father, is he someone I should know?" he demanded.

"Dad, do you really have to have her pedigree?" Gus looked good in his clean jeans that fitted him well, and the white shirt looked good against his tanned skin, then he swung a blue sweater around his shoulder. "See you later, folks," and he was gone whistling into the distance. Elliot tried again, he never liked to lose, and he was, losing.

"Where are you taking her, do you want some money? Here, 100, 200, how much do you want?" his voice rose so Gus could hear him.

"Keep it, Dad, it's a walk in the park." And with that, he was gone, swallowed up into the night.

As the room now was silent and Elliot saw the sadness on Amy's face, he strolled across the short distance to enfold her in his arms. They both sighed, his lips kissed her hair, then she looked up into his eyes and they both froze at the same moment.

"Oh Elliot, are you thinking what I am thinking?"

"Yes, it couldn't be our Lucy Cathy's daughter, could it? Oh dear God no, not that I have anything against her, them, but if he got serious, if there were children, our grandchildren they would be"

"Shhhhhh! Elliot, we will have to wait and see, we must play it cool in order to win his trust, stop all this fighting with him. Believe me, it will be all right."

"Hmmmmm," was all Elliot could say.

Vincent had taken himself off down to the Mirror Pool, a place he could always count on for time to himself. Everyone knew he needed these times. Ever since he was a small boy, they were a time to reflect, to reason with, to make plans for, to dream. And today was no exception. The waters rippled almost silently, and the light from the torches caused flashes of colours to play on the surface. Then a sound, as someone did invade this private moment, disturbed his thoughts.

"Mouse sorry, didn't meant to intrude." Looking up, Vincent smiled at his old friend.

"Please sit with me. Really, I would enjoy your company," he held out his hand in a manner that was an invitation.

"Good, Mouse like that," then quickly he sat down across from his friend. "This place, good to think in," he smiled knowingly.

"Yes, we have spent many happy hours here, you and I over the years."

"Do you remember, Vincent, when Catherine was sick with Peter and you very sick. William got cross with you, thought you hated his cooking." A smile crossed Vincent's face, at the memory of those early days of marriage.

"I remember, and all the ketchup, on everything," he laughed. "I have always disliked it and yet at that time it was all I wanted."

"William was friend to Mouse too. William liked Arthur."

"He was a friend to us all, he was always so kind to Catherine, she would tease him so much. He never married, and he didn't have a family."

"William had special friend once Holly. Mouse saw them together up top sometimes, she Helper from shop on Catherine's block."

"I did not know that," Vincent confided, amazed he had missed that.

"Vincent not only one to know things," he grinned.

"I wonder why he never married?" Vincent said, half to himself.

"Mouse know, no bed big enough for William and wife."

Vincent laughed out loud.

"True, Mouse told William, William agreed said bed better hold just him, said Father get mad if

bed broke."

They both laughed at this, as they thought of their friend. How they missed him, his happy smile and his wonderful chocolate chip cookies.

"Why did he have to die and leave us?" Mouse turned all serious.

"Death comes to us all, Mouse, in time."

"Not fair, William was only sick two days, made Mouse sad."

"It was his heart, it gave up on him. I miss him too, you know." Vincent took his friend's hand in his. "We must be grateful for the time he was with us, to fill our lives, to be there when we needed him most." They sat in silence for a while, then Vincent spoke again.

"I miss Devin so much, we were so close when we were growing up. We would go on such adventures. He tried so hard to make up to me for all the things I missed when I could not go Above in the sunshine. Father would not allow it."

"What happened? Here one day, gone the next, no one tell Mouse, Mouse felt it must be Mouse's fault."

"No! No! Oh Mouse, all these years you have thought that, I am sorry, I thought you knew, Devin mixed with the wrong company, he enjoyed the thrill of danger, Father had warned him so often, as I did, but he didn't want to hear. Then one day he got mixed up with the 'SILKS', the ones that held me captive, so long ago. But this time they got their revenge, Devin lay injured for so long with no help, that when help did finally arrive, it was too late to save his legs. The wheelchair was the part he couldn't accept one day when he was alone, sat near the Abyss, he took off the brake." A tear filled Vincent's eyes, as the pain of it was still so hard to bare. "Mitch is now their leader, he knows never to come Below, he will never return."

"Mouse never knew this" he said, wiping a tear away with the back of his hand.

"Come, we will be missed, and I believe we are to have company Below, we must be on our way."

"Vincent, we still hang out right?"

"Yes, my friend, we do."

"HMMMMMMMM, I like it, it feels good, better then I thought it would," Jamie confided in her husband. "To think for all those years I lived below ground, like a little animal, and now here I am practically living in the clouds. How many floors up are we, Joe?"

"Err, 36, 37, give or take a few," he laughed. "Sure have to hand it to Burch to build 'em high," he continued, the cheeky grin was still there. Outwardly, Joe had changed little over the years, since Catherine Chandler had entered his life, and knowing her had altered the whole direction of his life forever. He was now District Attorney, also Deputy Mayor, and on every board of directors. He had gained a reputation as a fair and just man, one to be trusted. But all this had taken its toll on his dark curly hair, which was now sprinkled with white, making him look very distinguished, and still a very attractive man, by any standards.

"I don't expect Peter will come to visit us here Joe, he hates heights, not a bit like his father in that way. I can't believe Vincent climbed 18 floors every night and down again, for three years to see Catherine."

"Yep, five will get you ten, he wished she'd lived in a second floor apartment." Both nodded in agreement and laughed.

"Don't forget Joe, we are invited to supper tonight, Below, 7:30 sharp."

"I'll remember what time was it?" he laughed, and Jamie playfully hit Joe's backside with a cushion.

"Da, Da Da, Da," the sweet little voice repeated, "Da, Da."

"I'm here little one, what troubles you so?" the soft cultured voice replied. Slowly the sound of a baby growl could be heard, as the effort involved, made this possible. Peter looked up as his son finally made it to the haven of his father's arms, on very unsteady little legs.

"There, wait till your grandfather hears of this, he will be so proud of Ben." Then lifting his son onto his knee, he held him close and kissed the top of his head, nuzzling into a halo of golden curls.

"What am I going to be proud of?" Vincent's immense frame suddenly filled the doorway.

"Father, he walked again, unaided, his legs are uncertain but he was determined to do it. I felt it in him, I knew, I felt him drawing strength from me."

"I had these same feelings when you were much the same age, I felt you telling me without words."

"Hmmmmm."

"I felt your joy my son, that is why I came by, and also to avoid your mother for a while. She's not well pleased with Lucy."

"Why is that?"

"Lucy has another date with Gus Burch. Catherine feels as long as Elliot remains in the dark over their love for each other, that trouble will only result. Elliot Burch and his son are an issue I want to stay clear of, so I left your mother trying to get Lucy to encourage Gus to tell his parents. After all, marriage is in the air."

"Marriage!" Peter's head shot up.

"I believe so," Vincent smiled.

"I see reticence, Father."

"I see trouble, Peter."

"But the Burches have always been our friends, Father."

"Yes, this is true friends but marriage would make us family, and families have children, and"

"Now I see, you are right, Father, to want to prolong the day of judgement."

"When this day dawns, I will need you beside me, for your support, Peter."

"You need not ask that - I am your son, you are my Father, we are one." Little Ben decided to grab some of the attention, and his eyes filled with tears and he cried.

"And here, Father, is the one who will one day take over down here, your grandchild."

"One day, when he is a man, fully grown, he will rule this place Below with love and understanding. These tunnels and chambers, ageless in time, will see history repeating itself, as Benjamin Wells, with his features inherited from me, lives his life Below. I wish for him a 'HAPPY LIFE' and for him to find his Catherine, I will not live to see this take place, but know that I will always be close by."

"Mother Mom, please don't worry, I promise you I'll talk with Gus and will make him see. We have to tell Uncle Elliot and Aunt Amy. I promise you, trust me." Lucy pleaded with Catherine.

"I do, it's just I want it to be perfect for you, pet."

"Why are you smiling?"

"Oh, I was just thinking, when Elliot and Amy will no longer be Aunt and Uncle, they will be Mom-in-Law and Dad-in-Law."

Looking at each other, they both burst out laughing until tears ran freely down their faces. Then both lapsed into silence as Catherine continued to brush her daughter's long hair.

"What was it like, Mom, you and Dad, wasn't there doubts? Didn't you wonder, what did your friends think, what ?"

"Hey, hey, hold it right there, first of all, it was never easy. We loved each other straight from the start, but your father kept us apart for three years. He wouldn't let our relationship progress because of how he looked and the uncertainty of who he was."

"So, what happened?"

"What happened was, I gave him all the love I had through our Bond, so he knew in the end that it was him above all others I wanted and desired."

"What did Grandfather Wells say to that?"

"He tried everything to stop us, but in the end he could see his efforts were useless, and he started to accept me. Then, when he heard I was pregnant, he was livid and said we hadn't taken enough care, and that the child could look like Vincent and to put a child through that, was totally irresponsible."

"So, what happened then?"

"We got married in secret."

"You're kidding in secret? It's like a best seller."

"Yes, there was just the two of us. Uncle Mouse was our witness, then later we had a huge celebration. William baked two wedding cakes, as he dropped the first! From that day I've been accepted, loved and totally fulfilled."

"When we were born, did you worry or wonder how we'd look, tell me Mom, please."

"Lucy, my precious, I wanted you both, and how you looked wasn't an issue, we wanted our children, and we wanted to love you so much, the product of our wonderful love for each other." Looking up Catherine saw tears running down Lucy's cheeks. "Oh, don't cry!"

"I'm not unhappy. I'm crying because I'm happy. You and Dad are my world."

"Oh, you are so special." Leaning forward they hugged each other. "Better?"

"Yep," answered Lucy, "when we were born, how did we look?"

"Oh, pink, new, cute, cuddly, looked adorable," Catherine teased.

"Did we have?"

"I think I can see where this is going now, okay, you win. Both my children had hints of their Father, but mostly of me. You had your father's claws, only on your hands, you conceal them well with nail varnish. But Peter had claws only on his feet, which as you know, clipped back, allows him to wear normal boots like your Father wears. You both had masses of golden curls. When you went to sleep and you were happy, you would purr - but apart from that you were normal all American kids."

"So, when did Peter change then?" asked a very interested daughter.

"That was when he was about 15, I remember. It was the very day you got your period. Peter came in upset from the pool, saying the kids were getting at him, being so hairy."

"And, was he?"

"Funny, until then, we honestly hadn't noticed it, but yes, he was, and so we started to keep a check on both of you. Vincent watched over Peter, I watched you."

"And, and?"

"You, my dear at puberty, became a woman, but you also developed a terrible temper, so bad was it that if the slightest thing annoyed you, you would fly into a wild cat rage, where no one dared go near you."

"I remember that time."

"Don't we all - it was a dark time for us all. Until your Grandfather Wells arranged for a friend of his to see you, an old and wise Chinese doctor, who taught you the art of self-control, an art in China, and to this day your temper is controlled."

"I still get knotted up inside if I'm mad."

"When do you feel the need to get so out of control these days?"

"Oh Mom, it's nothing, I just get mad with Gus and the way he won't stand up to that arrogant Elliot Burch."

"That arrogant man could so easily have been your Father!" Catherine smiled.

"Oh no! Oh Mom, thank you for not marrying him." Both found this very funny and dissolved into fits of laughter once more. "Tell me about the changes in Peter."

"Yeah okay, well, your Father noticed that he was growing at an alarmingly fast rate. Within just a few weeks, he had gone from level with your father's shoulder to one inch above his head, then it suddenly stopped. Next we noticed that nothing in the clothes he wore, normal topside clothes fitted

him anymore, so Mary, your Grandmother made him the same kind of clothes she made your Father. They had to be a little bigger for Peter, and Olivia helped her. So the next step that came along seemed so right, he decided to wear his hair long, just like your Father. Bit by bit, he fashioned himself to be the shadow of his Father, and the Bond bound them together as one."

"Is there more, Mom?"

"Yes, his body started to have a covering of fur, not much at first, then as he got older it went even thicker, but his face never altered, it remained like mine. His training as a teacher, and then these changes in him, made him decide to be a teacher Below, just like his Father, and in so doing, found his vocation in life."

"Yes, he is lovely with the little ones."

"How did he then meet Ruth if he didn't go Above often?"

"Oh, that was easy, Ruth was Joe and Jamie's daughter, and your Father and I were their friends, long before either of us were married. Then we had you two, and they had Ruth, so you all grew up together, you were all like one big family. Then when Ruth was ten years old, they sent her away to a school that Joe felt would give her the best start in life, one where she could meet all the right people, mix with a bit of class, something he never had himself. She returned one day, the perfect 'woman' and the first thing she wanted to do was to go and visit her old and dear friends Below. Within half an hour of being home, she was running across the park to the drainage tunnel, she ran faster and faster down the tunnels, and straight into Peter's arms, and has stayed there ever since."

"Did they mind, Jamie and Joe, that Ruth and Peter were dating. Elliott is sure to be really mad with Gus and me," she looked worried.

"No, there was never a moment when that came across, they were delighted."

"But their baby, Mom, it is it is "

"Ben is like your Father, yes."

"Do they mind?"

"They wanted it that way, would you believe it, my boss, my number one tormentor of old, cried with joy when the baby was born, because he felt he owed your Father, somehow he felt he could never repay a debt, and the baby did just that. This was something that money couldn't buy, the ultimate, a legacy to the tunnel world, to see it continued unhindered. And he, Joe, had helped, he had passed on his genes to create this - and he was so proud."

"Oh Mom, that's lovely, I hope Gus's Dad feels that way about our baby."

"YOU W H A T!?" Catherine choked.

"Oops! sort of slipped out yes, I'm pregnant, and Gus is scared sick to tell his parents, as life there is one battleground."

"That prospect looks like fun."

"What shall we do, Mom?"

"I think, Lucy, this is where I should help. This is an area i can deal with. I'll go and see Elliot. Leave it to me."

"Oh please, you are a Mom in a million."

The clanging on the pipes woke everyone up, as the message said '*Grandfather's study now*'. Soon groups of tunnel dwellers appeared at intervals along the maze of miles of tunnels below Central Park. Quickly, these groups made their way in one direction, and that was to the old man's study, where they knew they would find Vincent waiting for them. That is what the continued message repeated. The hour was early, 4:27 am, but young and old alike, in their patched and worn nightwear, wrapped up well against the bleak air in the tunnels so late in the night, one by one they assembled in the study. Some carried torches, some candles, but all carried the knowledge that this was what they had been dreading.

Vincent stood tall, but his shoulders drooped much, with the weight of the deep sorrow he now bore. His normally bright blue eyes held tears, as he tried to find the words to speak to them all, now assembled. Their worried chatter died down, as Vincent looked up at them all.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, but the matter is urgent. These things don't come to order." he paused. "My Father Jacob Wells, the man we all love and know as FATHER, is dying. His time is drawing close - it cannot be long now. I felt you would want to see him before he leaves this life for ever."

Sobs from the women and children filled the air and their muttering of sorrow blended together. Then all fell silent.

"Come, follow me. Be very quiet, please stay until he goes, this is his wish and mine."

Louder sobs could be heard, while the men blew their noses into their handkerchiefs.

The bed chamber was alive with light from endless candles, no shadows lurked here today, only the sound of the old station clock, keeping and marking time, broke the silence. In the corner of the beautiful mahogany bed, lay a familiar face, a much-loved man. Now that face, so wrinkled with age, and his frail body, well-wrapped and protected, awaited the inevitable, as death avoids no man, not even FATHER!

Catherine sat perched on the bed, holding the thin sinewy hand, which gripped her hand as if afraid to let go. When everyone was within the chamber, Vincent swept in, with the swiftness of a cat and the grace befitting this place of grief. He joined Peter at the opposite side; together they stood and watched. Vincent then reached into the pocket of his cloak, and took out a folded piece of paper. Slowly, he unfolded the small piece of parchment, his large fur-covered hands shaking as he prepared himself for the task ahead, which he had to see through. Looking into Catherine's eyes, now also full of tears, she held the moment with Vincent, as he drew strength from her through their Bond.

He started to read aloud-----

*"OUT OF YOUR WHOLE LIFE GIVE BUT A MOMENT!
ALL OF YOUR LIFE THAT HAS GONE BEFORE,*

*ALL TO COME AFTER IT, SO YOU IGNORE,
SO MAKE PERFECT THE PRESENT, CONDENSE,
IN A RAPTURE OF RAGE, FOR PERFECTIONS ENDOWMENT!
THOUGHT AND FEELING AND SOUL AND SENSE,
MERGED IN A MOMENT WHICH GIVES ME AT LAST
YOU AROUND ME FOR ONCE, YOU BENEATH ME, ABOVE ME --
ME, SURE THAT, DESPITE OF TIME FUTURE, TIME PAST,
THIS TICK OF LIFETIME'S ONE MOMENT YOU LOVE ME!
HOW LONG SUCH SUSPENSION MAY LINGER? AH, SWEET,
THE MOMENT ETERNAL -- JUST THAT AND NO MORE --
WHEN ECSTASY'S UTMOST WE CLUTCH AT THE CORE,
WHILE CHEEKS BURN, ARMS OPEN, EYES SHUT, AND LIPS MEET!*

(Robert Browning 1812-89)

All the time Vincent had been reading the lines, Father had been looking forward. Now, as the clock continued to measure time, Father slowly made to sit up. Vincent eager to help, made this easy for him, then Father held out both of his hands, and a smile came across his face, the weariness now seemed to have gone - in its place a look of peace. All looked on in silence, even the children were totally silent.

"Mary, my dear, I've been looking for you so long I have missed you so much, so lonely without you, my dear."

Peter lurched forward, worried for his Grandfather. "Gran....." Vincent put his large hand on his son's arm, to stop him, whispering to him, he said.

"Leave him, she is here, can't you feel it, she has come for him, believe that it is true."

Then Jacob Wells closed his eyes for the last time, a lovely smile on his face. A chill wind blew through the chamber, that wasn't there before, which nearly blew out all the candles, then it was gone, Jacob Wells had gone home.

"Mr. Burch, there's a lady to see you," the voice from the next office announced.

"I told you Sandra, I wasn't to be disturbed," came Elliot's polished but annoyed voice.

"But, she says it is important."

"No Sandra, not today, make an appointment for next week."

"She says to tell you it's Catherine." A silence descended, then Elliot controlled himself.

"Send her in, and have some tea sent up."

"Very good, Mr. Burch."

The door opened and Catherine entered the office, retracing steps she had taken in the office so

many times in the past - but it was 20 years since she had last been here, and memories flooded back.

"Catherine Cathy, how are you, it must be all of a year? Come, sit down. Is it a social call, or is it some request for my help, with no explanation given?" He smiled knowingly.

"Elliot, that was a long time ago. Fancy you remembering."

"A beautiful woman asking for drills and requisite equipment, and offering no logical reason, helps to keep a memory alive." He grinned, "Would you like a drink before the tea arrives?"

"Yes Elliot, that would be nice."

"A Manhattan, if I remember correctly."

"You remembered right. I'm impressed."

"I could never forget anything to do with you, Cathy."

She lowered her head slightly, so as he wouldn't see the colour rising in her cheeks.

"How is Lucy?"

"Fine, you know Lucy - forever the human fireball. Keeps me on my toes. And Gus, is he all right?"

"Yes well, he is fine, except he won't listen to a damn thing I tell him. He's so stubborn."

"Then he MUST take after you."

"Oh Cathy, how come you are always so right?" Both laughed, remembering times past once again, about skeletons in cupboards.

"So to what do I have the honour of this visit - or am I expected to guess?"

"Oh Elliot, being a parent is very worthwhile, but it can break your heart. It can give you impossible dreams. It can hurt."

"Why do I have the feeling you are trying to cushion the blow. What's wrong?"

She sighed deeply. "It's my daughter, Lucy."

"How can I help?"

"Elliot, there is no easy way to tell you this, so I have volunteered to come here today, to help you accept what I am about to tell you."

"It's Gus, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is Gus. He has fallen in love with Lucy."

"LOVE?"

"Yes, he loves her."

"How can he, he's not seen much of her."

"No! Not so. He and Lucy have been dating for over six months now."

"Six months? How come I didn't know. Couldn't he have told me. Why are there always secrets?"

"Would it have made any difference?"

"How do you mean, Cathy?"

"Elliot, they want to marry and "

"NO NO" His fist hit the desk, and he loosened the tie that threatened to choke him.

"Elliot, they are in love," she pleaded, her eyes full of tears.

"They can't be."

"Why not? You an expert on that too?" she stammered.

"Oh, nasty, Cathy, nasty."

"No Elliot, all you have to do is trust me."

"That's all I ever asked of you, remember, and that didn't work either."

"Elliot, you and I, we loved each other, but we weren't in love with each other. There is a difference. Now our children, from two happy marriages, want their slice of happiness. And now there is a child."

"You mean, Gus and Lucy are?"

Elliot sat down, silent, he clenched his fists, and rested his head on them. Many moments passed, then Cathy got up and went around to the back of the desk and put both her hands on his shoulders. She felt a presence.

"Elliot, let it go. Let them also have a life, and all your fears - let them go."

"Fear, what do you mean?"

"Fear. You are afraid that the Vincent's genes will show in your grandchild. Don't deny it."

"So!"

"They know the facts, they know the score, they look below the surface, and accept this. Why can't you? Here you have a chance to heal the rift with your son."

"How did you know ab ?"

"To meet him halfway with this, the biggest thing in his life. This could be the only time you have to come together and cement a Bond of your own, for life. Think of him, think of them - and not yourself, I'm sure Amy will see reason. You my dear Elliot MUST do this, please."

She pleaded, as she kissed the top of his head. Then returning to her seat, she watched, waiting for the turmoil in him to find peace. Looking up, she saw his shoulder shaking, his eyes filled with tears. She reached across the desk and took his hand in hers, and held it tightly, oh so very tightly.

"Help me Cathy, please."

"Oh Elliot, of course I will."

"Why not come Below tonight, you and Amy, bring Gus. Vincent and I will have Lucy there also, then as a family we will set about helping them to set in motion their new-found happiness, with the blessings of the four of us."

"Yes, we'll do that. Thank you, Cathy." Just then the desk intercom buzzed. "Yes?" he snapped.

"Mrs. Burch is here."

"Send her in, Sandra."

"Very good."

The door opened, and in walked Amy, very much the business woman in her town outfit.

"Cathy, its been ages, how are you?" The two friends hugged each other, then Amy looked at Elliot.

"What on earth is the matter with you? You look like you have seen a ghost."

"I've not seen a ghost, but I have laid one to rest," Elliot confessed. "Amy, my dear, we are going to a wedding."

"A wedding? How exciting, who's? Anyone we know?"

"Gus our son is getting married to Lucy Wells. And there is more - we're going to be Grandparents."

END