

For A Friend

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She never noticed when darkness had descended upon everything around her. Walking around the beautiful spring-coloured Central Park for hours, she eventually had to sit down on a bench near a line of beautiful, tall black oak trees. They were all clad in fresh green leaves, looking festive and eager in the gentle breeze, like young brides on their wedding day.

Wedding - a route she had never travelled and yet, never got bitter about it. Sad, yes. Melancholy had been her companion as well. But never bitterness.

The journey to New York, and spending a week there, was a gift to herself for her birthday. No point trying to remember which one; she'd stopped counting. What for? Age is just a number on a blank page anyway. Life is what you make of it, no matter what stage you find yourself at. Or so she usually tried to persuade herself on her better days. That is why she didn't mind the eight-hour-long flight from England all the way to the US, although her legs, complaining from discomfort halfway through, were manifesting the opposite quite strongly.

New York had been a revelation for her. She was excited to see it with her own eyes, but also thought that all the skyscrapers, crowds lining the long streets and

avenues, and endless rows of cars would frighten her. After all, she had been living in a small town back in England for years.

To her surprise, she didn't really mind the hustle and bustle of the Big Apple. She had been to The Metropolitan Museum of Arts on the first day, then rode the elevator up to the top of the Empire State Building, only to find herself walking along the beloved green part of the city - the picturesque and tranquil Central Park.

But as the day grew older, her feet caught up with her age. Therefore, she found a nice wooden bench near the trees to rest. And just like that, within a single blink of an eye, darkness settled over the park. Only the street lamps painted a ribbon of light, almost like a runway for a plane ready to take off any minute.

The park was almost empty now, despite having been vibrant with families, lovers, dog walkers and joggers just a few hours before. A sudden wave of loneliness came crushing over her like a large shadow - ever-present, ever-chasing. Within seconds, her eyes filled with tears, and suddenly, she couldn't stop crying...

* * *

From the shadow of a tree not far away from the elderly woman sitting on the bench, a tall, dark-cloaked figure of a man halted abruptly. He wanted to turn and hide deeper in the area where more oak trees stood on their guard. But then, he heard the quiet sobbing. He looked back at the woman, whose sagged, shaking shoulders and head hanging low revealed the full extent of her state. How many times had he felt despair? How many times had he suffered and thought no one would help him in his agony?

With a sigh, he pulled the hood on his dark cloak even lower, to hide his face completely, and took a cautious step towards the bench.

"Do you need any help?"

The woman jerked her head towards the voice. By instinct, fear gripped her. But only a few seconds after, she thought about the voice. It was the gentlest, the warmest and the most unusual gravelly baritone she had ever heard.

"I... I am all right, thank you," she spoke hesitantly, looking at the mysterious figure a few metres away. He was deliberately keeping his distance.

She couldn't see his face; it was completely obscured by the hood of his cloak. He could have been an elf from fantasy tales or some other mythical figure. All she was sure of was - and she couldn't explain it rationally - that he didn't intend to harm her.

"You shouldn't be alone in the park after dark; it can get dangerous in some places," he spoke softly.

"I lost track of time. I didn't realise how soon it was getting dark. I just sat down here to rest and...." Her voice faded. "I got lost in myself, I guess..."

He was observing her calmly, careful not to step into the light of the nearby street lamp.

“That happens to me as well sometimes. Sometimes it makes me sad. But then I think of those I love and who love me, and I feel better.”

“You are lucky; I don’t have anyone like that.”

The cold stating of the fact in her voice made him sad.

“I don’t believe that,” he said.

She looked up at him shaking her head.

“You don’t even know me.”

“That is true,” he acknowledged with a soft chuckle. “Can you tell me your name?” Her reason was telling her not to, but something in the way this man spoke to her made her trust him completely.

“I’m Katrina. Can you tell me yours?”

“My name is Vincent. It’s nice to meet you, Katrina.”

Something in his voice was telling her he was smiling, making her smile, too.

“Likewise, Vincent.”

What a lovely name, she thought; it fitted his voice so well.

“Are you still sure, there is nothing I can help you with?” Vincent asked.

Katrina sighed and quickly wiped the last tear away from her cheek.

“I don’t think anyone can. But thank you, I appreciate you asking.”

That silenced Vincent for a moment, but he didn’t seem to be leaving. Suddenly, Katrina noticed a book in his hand.

“Do you often come to the park to read?” she asked, suddenly eager to have a conversation with someone.

“I often come to the park, yes. But I do read somewhere else,” Vincent replied a bit hesitantly. “In fact, I have just returned from reading *to* someone,” he added with a small smile.

“Oh, was that someone a lady by any chance?” Katrina raised her eyebrows with a cheeky smile.

Vincent’s smile widened. “Yes,” came his tender reply.

“As I said, you are lucky. And she is certainly very lucky, too. I doubt many men still read to the women they love these days. What is the book about?”

Katrina’s curiosity was suddenly piqued, her melancholy and sorrow replaced by a genuine interest in her unexpected companion.

Vincent hesitated slightly, but then made his decision and looked around. When he didn’t spot or sense anyone near, he slowly and carefully stepped closer to Katrina. She could see his figure perfectly in the lamplight now, though his face was still hidden in the dark shade of the hood. Strangely, she still wasn’t feeling afraid. On the contrary, she was fascinated by the image of the man in front of her.

Vincent handed her the book he was holding. She noticed his hand was gloved.

“And I thought, only I’ve been suffering from cold hands,” Katrina chuckled and took the offered book from his hand. He didn’t comment on her remark.

“Oh, poetry.... I love poetry; I write some, too, and short stories. But I’m not sure people are really interested in any of them.”

“Have you ever asked them?” Vincent inquired.

"I did ask some.... Some say they like them, some barely say anything...." Her voice faded.

“Literature is not so much about talking; it’s about feeling. Words speak to us in different ways, and sometimes, we are unable to express the emotions they evoke in us,” Vincent said. “That doesn’t mean they are not there. Sometimes, we can’t find a way to talk about them, although they touch us deeply. Something you do with passion never remains without notice and appreciation.”

Katrina smiled with understanding. This man could really talk...

“Maybe you’re right,” she contemplated. “But old habits die hard, and it’s the same with my beliefs, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, but you can always create new habits. And gain new beliefs,” Vincent replied knowingly.

Suddenly, she had a strong urge to see his face, to match an image to this incredible, wise, almost fairy-like being, shrouded in mystery. But something was telling her it was not the right time yet.

“Would you read something to me, please?” she asked instead.

The hood on Vincent’s head hid his smile as he reached for the book again. He opened the volume on a bookmarked page and started reading, although he knew the poem by heart.

*“This is the creature there has never been.
They never knew it, and yet, none the less,
they loved the way it moved, its suppleness,
its neck, its very gaze, mild and serene.*

*Not there, because they loved it, it behaved
as though it were. They always left some space.*

*And in that clear unpeopled space they saved
it lightly reared its head, with scarce a trace
of not being there. They fed it, not with corn,
but only with the possibility of being.*

*And that was able to confer
such strength, its brow put forth a horn. One horn.
Whitely it stole up to a maid - to be
within the silver mirror and in her.” (1)*

Vincent finished reading and closed the book. Then, he looked at Katrina’s face and saw her eyes were glistening in the lamplight.

“That was beautiful... Both, the words and the reading,” she said quietly and smiled, making him bow his head, partially because of being humbled, partially because of how moved he felt every time he read his favourite poem by Rilke.

“Yes, it is beautiful...”

“Why did you choose that one?” Katrina was curious.

Vincent sighed before he found his words. “Because it speaks to the deepest part of who I am.”

He lifted his head again, and his look settled on her eyes.

Katrina’s eyes narrowed a bit, trying to make up the features of his hidden face.

“Is that why you are hiding your face from me?”

Her question caught Vincent off guard but then, he spoke calmly. “I don’t want to frighten you.”

Katrina laughed and shook her head. “My dear, at my age, there is not much that can frighten me apart from my own health.”

Vincent felt torn - he knew what danger it presented to reveal his face to a stranger, a danger for him and his whole existence. But somewhere deep inside, he also felt that he could trust this woman who, despite her sadness and despair, had some special spark in her, though she did not seem to have been aware of it.

“My existence depends on keeping my face a secret... And the safety of many good people.”

“I could never betray someone who had turned my misery into such a pleasant conversation,” Katrina replied with a genuine and reassuring smile.

He knew it was true before she had even said the words. Vincent trusted this woman. He could see Father lecturing him about the great danger of bringing a stranger into the secret, but Vincent knew his heart and he had learned to trust it fully over the years.

Looking around and reassuring himself it was safe, he stepped back in the half-shadows of the trees. Driven by his action, Katrina stood up slowly - her legs were a bit stiff from long sitting - and walked over to him.

With a deep sigh, Vincent’s gloved hands reached for the hood covering his head and pulled it down slowly to reveal his unique, leonine face, lined with his beautiful long golden hair.

Katrina’s eyes widened - not in horror or shock; they widened in absolute awe. For she had never seen anything so unique, so magical, so... beautiful. She released the breath she had been holding since Vincent had revealed his features. Then, an incredulous smile appeared on her face.

“You’ve got one thing wrong, Vincent,” Katrina said, still smiling.

He tilted his head curiously.

“You are not a creature. You are the most interesting and kindest young man I have ever met.”

It was Vincent’s turn to smile now, and he shook his head humbly.

“Thank you,” he said with genuine gratitude, and his eyes twinkled in the darkness.

“It’s me who has to thank you, I think,” she corrected him with a chuckle. “You have made an old lady feel good for at least a moment. Ageing, especially when alone, can be a painful burden sometimes...” Her voice trailed off, followed by a bitter-sweet smile.

Vincent took her hand carefully in his hands. “Age is not a burden. It’s a quality. It gives a new perspective on things, something we never thought of as children and couldn’t understand in our youth. But when we accept it gracefully, it can give us wings to explore and make us understand that we are never alone.”

Katrina looked into those knowing eyes and shook her head in renewed awe.

“You must come from quite a beautiful world...”

Vincent smiled, covered his head with the hood again and entwined his arm with hers. “Let me show you.”

She looked absolutely stunned but also excited. “You would do that for an absolute stranger?”

Vincent smiled, and his words rendered Katrina speechless.

“No. I will do it for a friend.”

