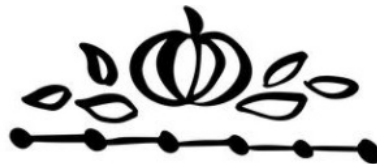


Never Too Late

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



The street lamps cast long shadows on the house walls he was passing by that night. Although he was veiled in a long, dark cloak, there was no need to hide his face for a change. It was the only night in the year when he could enjoy the sweet luxury of roaming the streets of New York, exposing the face with which he came to this world. His beloved and yet in many ways dangerous, city once again fully opened its arms and invited him to explore it to his heart's delight.

More than happily did Vincent trade the dark, dingy alleyways, permeated with the smell of garbage and steam rising from the manholes, for the more pleasant pathways – ones full of the scent of caramelised peanuts, hot dogs and pumpkin spice lattes, filling the chilly air. Vincent never had a latte, but William used pumpkin spice in his muffins and pies every fall, so its sweet, warming scent was not unfamiliar to the maned man. Halloween certainly had something magical about it.

He was passing people dressed in the most peculiar costumes - the obligatory witches, skeletons and pirates were accompanied by nurses, cowboys and princesses, at one point, he almost bumped into count Dracula, whose grumpy “Watch out, Pussycat!” made him freeze for a moment. But then he shook his head and moved on. It seemed that on that one night of the year, no adult minded returning to their childhood and not feeling childish for it (though some behaved that way).

"All the world's a stage...¹," Vincent thought, and an incredulous smile settled on his face. Although my 'mask' is still the most peculiar of all...

Suddenly, he realised something was amiss. He looked around the Fifth Avenue he was standing on. *Where is Catherine?*

Since his first-ever walk 'among the enemies' in the streets of New York, apart from one year, she always walked by his side. How was it possible then she wasn't this time? More importantly, why did he notice her absence only now?

Uncomprehending, he searched the faces around him, sudden unease creeping into his bones. The face he was looking for was nowhere to be seen, though, and strangely, the people hiding behind the masks and passing him by didn't seem to notice his rising distress.

"Catherine!" Vincent cried with a strained voice. But to no avail.

All of a sudden, he spotted someone across the road observing him. His eyes narrowed, focusing on the small figure, dressed in a familiar attire.

This cannot be...

He tilted his head in disbelief, for the first time that night truly doubting the reality he found himself in. A fleeting look in both directions of the road made Vincent realise he could squeeze in between the cars to run toward the figure. He did, ignoring the car horns of the unnerved cab drivers, rushing to reach the person he was eager to approach. But when he finally made it to the other side of the road, the figure had disappeared.

Slightly irritated, he looked around again. Successfully, for the one he was looking for suddenly stood right next to him, his eyes fixed upon the tall lion-faced man.

Vincent regarded the boy - for it was a child, not older than 11 years - with awe and slowly knelt to look him better in the eyes. Words failed him as he was staring at the deep-set sapphire-blue eyes, flat furry nose and long golden hair falling over the child's shoulders.

This is impossible!

Vincent was looking at his younger self...

* * *

After the initial shock, Vincent spoke to his small version. "Who are you?"

The question was pretty pointless since he recognised not only the unmistakable face but also the clothes he used to wear as a child.

The boy smiled but didn't reply. He pointed at something behind Vincent, who turned to identify the object of interest of his little companion. The lion-man smiled at the sight of the iconic Empire State Building, towering in the night sky, illuminated by hundreds of bright

¹William Shakespeare: *The Seven Ages of Man*

lights. Just then he realised that, in the heat of the moment, he hadn't even noticed they had walked past it before crossing the road.

The image of one of the most famous buildings in the world suddenly blended with another image in his mind - the one of his beloved brother Devin. It was he who many years ago, thrilled Vincent by giving him a souvenir statue of the skyscraper. The silvery trinket was one of Vincent's most cherished possessions. In the long years of his brother's absence, it always reminded him that there is a world out there, waiting to be explored, however hard the journey and wherever it may lead him.

"You will see it one day, Vincent," Devin promised him back then, "you will make it Above and see the real Empire State Building in all its glory. You'll stand at the top of it, reaching for the sky and the whole world will be yours..."

More than twenty years later, he *did* see it, and on one Halloween night, thanks to Catherine he *did* stand at the top of it, reaching for the sky... The memory of that night, when the thrill of the long-dreamed-of moment filled his whole being with a strange energy, resembling electricity, brought a wide smile to his face. *Dreams are not only for dreaming...*



Returning to the present, he turned back to the boy, but realised that the child was gone. His eyes searched the surrounding area when suddenly spotting the familiar small figure not far away from him. Mini-Vincent smiled again, then turned around and started walking. His adult version hastily caught up with him and wondered where his little friend would lead him next.

It didn't take them long when they stopped again, admiring the marble facade of the main building of the New York Public Library, with its two stone lions, guarding its entrance. Vincent glanced at the boy by his side and tilted his head.

"Why are you showing me these places?" he inquired curiously. But as before, no answer came, only a calm and genuine smile on the child's face.

He sighed and looked back at the grand building. It was the place which held an endless source of knowledge - historical city maps, the first Gutenberg Bible brought to the U.S, illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages and Renaissance, first editions, manuscripts and copies of literary legends like Walt Whitman, Lord Byron or his beloved William Shakespeare.

Many nights in his life, Vincent dreamt of running his fingers through these treasures, knowing they were out of reach for him, very much like the stars in the sky he loved gazing

at on his night walks in Central Park - until that night, a few days after his adoptive father went Above for the first time in over 30 years and vanished. That very night, Catherine enabled him to secretly enter the library long after the opening hours, as they searched for clues about Father's past together...

For obvious reasons, he didn't have time to explore the freely-accessible beauties of the historical place; his mind was fully on his adoptive parent that night. The anxiety and worry caused by his father's disappearance occupied his mind more than anything, especially after Catherine found out his true identity and the sorrowful events surrounding his leave from the world Above. However, thinking about it now, he couldn't help but smile. He had crossed yet another hurdle back then and entered a world that was always hidden behind an imaginary iron gate for him. How many more gates were still to open in the world Above?

The sound of giggling brought him back from his mind palace as a couple of young women, dressed as waitresses from some art-deco hotel, passed by, slightly intoxicated. The chilly Halloween breeze made him shudder all at once.

The next thing he felt was the touch of a warm child's hand, grabbing hold of his and leading him away from the library. Vincent wasn't even surprised this time; willingly, he let himself be guided by his little companion, this mysterious messenger from the past. Or was it his own heart leading him?



He didn't get much time to ponder it because a few minutes later, little Vincent stopped again, this time in front of another majestic, beautifully detailed building.

St Patrick's Cathedral..., the grown-up Vincent thought, and his eyes closed for a brief moment, allowing him to dwell on one of the sweetest memories of his life.

This is one of the wonders Catherine showed me on our first Halloween walk together...

The memory of that extraordinary night, which stretched into the early morning, when for the first time in his life, Vincent saw the rising sun, brought a warm, tingling feeling into his veins. That night, he felt closer to Catherine than ever before. She showed him not only the beauties of the city he could not have explored before but also the strength of her feelings for him.

It was the most thrilling night of his life until then - a night of a fulfilled dream of meeting the inspiring writer Brigit O'Donnell, the unexpected dramatic turn of events when saving her life, and above all, a night where he walked Above unafraid, side by side with his beloved Catherine, until the dawn of the new day... The magic word was never mentioned

by either of them at that point, but that night, Vincent heard his bond with Catherine singing like a heavenly choir - bright, joyful and clear.

As Vincent's eyes landed with admiration on the cathedral's large main door, decorated with beautifully detailed figures of saints, his heart suddenly longed to see what was behind the door. He wished he could see the wondrous building inside.

A gentle pull on his hand made him look down at his younger self. The lion-faced boy nodded with a smile and pointed at the very door Vincent was admiring only a moment ago.

Surely I can't...

Then again, why not? For centuries, churches have offered sanctuary to outcasts and those who suffered from the injustice brought upon them by the ignorant world...

Encouraged by another nod of his younger version, Vincent took a deep breath and with slow, long strides, he approached the cathedral's entrance. After he walked up the few stairs, he suddenly stopped.

Is it safe? My 'mask' works outside, it's Halloween, after all, but inside this holy place...

He gathered his courage, took a deep breath, and walked through the open bronze door. As he stepped inside the cathedral, his eyes were immediately hit with wonder, and he gasped.

Vincent was overwhelmed by the majestic elegance of the place, marvelling at the extraordinary beauty of every detail of the neo-gothic building, including the magnificent, colourful stained glass windows. He moved slowly in the shadows of one of the side aisles, passing the countless white, marble columns in the nave rising to the ceiling, while attempting to remain unseen as much as he could. Mercifully, the cathedral was not fully lit that night, so he didn't feel as exposed. He remembered every photograph from every book about St Patrick's Cathedral that he had ever read, but seeing it with his own eyes was incomparable.

Unable to resist, Vincent's gloved hand touched the nearest column, gently tracing it with his fingers. How many hands have touched it before him in the space of more than a century since the cathedral had been built? The past and the present shook hands in this holy place, making time seem irrelevant, almost non-existent.

All at once he felt incredible peace within his heart and wished Catherine was with him. There, in front of the altar, the main focal point of this place, he would have taken the love of his life for his wife. There, in front of the whole world, free from the prejudices of the world, or fear for his safety, free from the dark perils of their lives up to that moment.

Vincent sighed, but a half-smile appeared on his leonine face, partially covered by the hood of his dark cloak. Strange that there was no one in the cathedral, apart from him. The silence in the vast, empty temple added to the mystery of the night as if preparing for it to be filled with people on the following day.

With one last look at the silent but majestic beauty of the sacred place, the lion-man respectfully retreated, leaving the cathedral as quietly as he had entered it.



Once out on the street again, he exhaled loudly, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he found himself alone, without his little companion.

“Hey, look here everyone! The Cheshire Cat is looking for Alice!”

A group of boisterous teenagers, clad in extravagant rockstar outfits with mohawks on their heads, disturbed Vincent’s blissful moment as they were passing by. He wasn’t offended, though, only mildly startled, but managed a small smile before they disappeared out of his sight, giggling and merrily chanting *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*.

Vincent shook his head and chuckled. Sleep was definitely not what he was craving at that moment. As he turned around to face the cathedral once more and looked up to see the monumental towers, he felt a slight pang in his heart. *Catherine...*

Suddenly, his longing for her nearness became unbearable. Where was she? Why wasn’t she walking the Halloween streets of New York with him? It didn’t make sense...

He looked around again, searching the street for the boy who he once was, a long time ago. Vincent still couldn’t understand why his younger self appeared to him, or how it was even possible. Yet he knew that there must have been a reason for it, one he couldn’t see yet.

As if by a magic trick or reading his mind, the child reappeared, and with his ever-present smile took Vincent’s hand.

“Will you tell me why you are here?” he asked, his desire to know the truth getting stronger by the minute.

But just as before, there was no answer to come his way, only a gentle pull of the boy’s hand, leading him on again.

Catherine would know what all of this means...

They passed more strangely-dressed people on their way, but Vincent didn’t consciously notice them anymore. His excitement from the, for him, so special night, wore thin as he was searching for an answer to the riddle that was he, strolling the streets of his home city with his younger self instead of with his wife. While he was pondering, he didn’t realise

they were walking back to Central Park. Only once they passed one of its gates and entered the green realm did Vincent wake up from his reverie, his senses sharpened again. A faint sound of cheerful music reached his sensitive ears. A familiar pull was tugging at his heart, as the child version of himself led him to a place deeply embedded in his memory, as the sound of music was gaining intensity with each step he made.

When they finally reached their destination and the boy looked up at him, smiled and nodded. Vincent gasped at the sight in front of them. The light of countless lightbulbs illuminated the colourful patterns on the wooden statuettes and the main structure of the machine he was looking at enchanted him as they did many years ago when he was a boy. That night, it was Devin who brought him to this place, making a small dream come true for his little brother.

The carousel...

It wasn't only the magical children's attraction that made his eyes glisten, though. It was the sight of a beautiful woman, standing at one of the wooden horses and supporting two little boys, sitting on their horses, excited in anticipation of the carousel to start moving. Suddenly, the woman looked up and her warm smile extended even more, brightening her eyes.

"There you are!" Catherine exclaimed joyfully, through the music playing a merry tune, looking at Vincent. "We've been waiting for you."

She gently stroked the golden-haired heads of little Jacob and Charlie and made them wave at their father. The leonine man, as if hypnotised, moved immediately forward, eager to reach his family as soon as possible. He jumped gracefully and noiselessly onto the carousel's platform and embraced his wife, exhaling with relief.

"Catherine...", he breathed, finally feeling that everything had fallen into place. He kissed the crowns of his two sons and then regarded the woman by his side with the special warmth reserved only for her. She returned his gaze and tenderly stroked his cheek before directing her attention to their children again. Her face was glowing with happiness and contentment.

Vincent was revelling in the heartwarming sight of his little family, when suddenly he remembered his little companion of before. He looked up, searching the semi-darkness of the park, looking for the boy who guided him through the streets of New York all the way to the carousel.

And there he was, standing not far away, watching the family reunion with the same warm smile that hadn't vanished from his leonine face since the moment Vincent spotted him across the road on Fifth Avenue, for the first time. Unbeknownst to Catherine and the children, he raised his hand and waved to his grown-up version. His mission was accomplished, though Vincent still wasn't sure what that mission was. Nevertheless, he smiled back at the boy and watched how little Vincent slowly vanished from his sight, fading away from his view like a memory of a time long lost but never forgotten.

“Daddy! Daddy...”



“Daddy!” A soft child’s voice reached Vincent’s ear as he opened his eyes and saw his son’s rosy-cheeked face with his big emerald-green eyes looking at him. His little hands were gently pulling at his father’s thick, quilted vest, to wake him up.

”Charlie...” Vincent straightened himself up on his high-back chair, finally realising he was in the Tunnels, sitting in the chamber that was his home.

”We’re going to miss it, Daddy... We need to go now,” his 4-year-old son urged him with a pleading look.

”Give Daddy and me a moment to get ready. Go and wait with Jacob in grandpa’s study. We’ll pick you up there soon.”

Catherine’s gentle, caring voice brought Vincent firmly back to reality. Only now did he notice that his son was dressed up for Halloween - he was a spitting image of a brave medieval knight, including a small wooden sword hanging from his improvised belt. When the boy ran out of the chamber, Catherine chuckled, her eyes lingering on the spot where Charlie had disappeared.

”My fair and perfect knight,” she remarked fondly, the maternal pride shining through in her voice. Then she turned to her husband with a loving look. ”However, Jacob looks every bit as wonderful in his costume this year.”

Vincent chuckled, imagining his older offspring dressed up as his favourite literary hero. ”Captain Hook will not be pleased seeing his main rival spreading cheer in the world Above,” he stated with an amused smile.

Catherine’s smile faded a little, at her memory of the time when they were desperately searching for Jacob six years ago.

Peter Pan, the boy who never grew up, almost became reality...

Shuddering at the thought, she shook her head, returning to a much more cheerful present. She walked over to Vincent and ran her fingers tenderly through his long golden hair.

”I guess *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* wasn’t scary enough to keep you awake,” she teased with a smile.

“Perhaps it was the audience that wore the reader out,” he remarked, smiling too now. He remembered reading to his sons Jacob and Charles and some other children the legendary story before they left with Father and Mary to go pumpkin carving. Only for a moment, Vincent closed his eyes, resting after answering countless questions about the story from the children, but within minutes, he fell asleep.

Catherine’s smile widened, and she leaned down to his face, unable to resist the urge to kiss him. When she opened her eyes afterwards and pulled back, she saw the same wonder in Vincent’s eyes, as every time they shared this intimate gesture. His hand reached for her cheek to complete the tender moment between them.

“We shouldn’t let the boys wait,” he said eventually, still transfixed by her gaze. “The Carousel rarely runs so late in the evening; they have been looking forward to having a ride for so long.”

”Because it is the only night in the year they can do it with *you*,” his wife remarked, moved.

”And I shall not disappoint them,” Vincent pledged proudly. Then his smile faded and he frowned. “I had a dream... a strange dream,” he started, looking into the distance.

His words piqued Catherine’s interest, and she kneeled by his side, her hand covering his own hand on the chair’s armrest. Her eyes fully focused on him, eager to hear more, as she patiently let Vincent describe what he had dreamt of.

“I couldn’t understand why he appeared, why did he want me to follow him, to revisit those places,” the leonine man pondered then, “but I think I’m beginning to.”

Catherine smiled knowingly, subconsciously intertwining her fingers with his.

“I don’t think it was the young me leading me to all those places,” he continued.

”It was *you* enabling *him* to see them,” she finished his assumption.

Vincent tilted his head; his blue eyes bore into hers as an incredulous smile appeared on his face. *I knew Catherine would understand...*

“Your childhood was almost entirely restricted to these tunnels, leaving you only with dreaming about the world Above. Devin was the only one giving you hope that things could happen to you as well, one day, wonderful things,” she said, her eyes focused on his. “All those places bear some meaning in your life. And when you couldn’t walk the streets of New York freely as a child...”

“I made it possible in a dream, as a grown-up,” Vincent concluded, feeling slightly dizzy from it all.

Catherine brushed her cheek on his furry-backed hand. His ability to seamlessly blend reality with dreams had always enchanted her.

“The St Patrick’s Cathedral...” She suddenly wondered and lifted her eyes to him again. “How did you know...”

“What it looks like inside?” Vincent smiled. “I have a vivid imagination, Catherine, but even I couldn’t fathom something so... wondrous as that place. Father has many books about it. I’ve always been fascinated by the photographs in them. I guess I’ve read the books so many times that I memorised the photos in my mind.”

Suddenly, he remembered the wish he had in the cathedral, and his deep blue eyes grew melancholic as he pinned them on his and Catherine’s joined hands.

“What is it, Vincent, tell me?” his wife inquired gently, noticing the shift in his mood.

A sigh preceded his words, echoing an unfulfilled dream.

“When I stood in the cathedral, near the altar, for a moment, I imagined...” His voice faltered and he shook his head, dismissing an idea which suddenly appeared to him insignificant.

Catherine gently squeezed his hand in encouragement, which made him meet her bright, intense eyes.

“I imagined myself standing at the altar and... waiting for *you*... on our wedding day,” he spoke quietly but with sadness that on occasions followed him throughout his life. “You and me, the people we love... The way your father would have wished it for you...” The sad half-smile on his face robbed his eyes of that spark of life that usually filled his eyes.

Catherine put her fingers under his chin, gently prompting him to look at her again. When he did so, he saw her face radiating contentment and conviction.

“My father wished a happy life for me, just like my mother. It didn’t matter to him how I achieved it, as long as I found what he had found, with the woman he loved all his life.” Her warm smile reached him right at his heart. “And I *have*.”

It was his turn to smile as he lowered his eyes, unusually shyly. At times, even after they had joined their lives at the Joining Ceremony Below, Vincent still felt disbelief that he was worthy of the luck of having this woman love him.

“Besides,” Catherine added, raising her eyebrows, “our wedding was in every way...” She moved closer to his face before whispering, “*perfect*...”

As she sealed her statement with a kiss, Vincent smiled into it.

Perfect indeed...

