

Second Star To The Right

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



For Ryan.



His feet were noiselessly leaving footprints in the freshly fallen snow covering Central Park. Wrapped in a long black coat reaching down almost to his ankles, with a dark-grey scarf, seemingly protecting his neck and face from the bitter cold, and his favourite black fedora hat, his silhouette would be doing anything but blending with the environment around him. And yet, nobody could see him. Not even the frost-bitten red-nosed young man still stubbornly standing at one of the benches, waiting for the girl of his dreams, who was very late.

It was Christmas Eve, and he had been strolling New York's most beloved park since early morning. Now, dusk was setting over it.

He remembered walking past a playground earlier that day. Children were playing in the snow, not minding the chill creeping into their bones. Their joyful cheers accompanied their snowball fights, snowmen-building and making of snow angels.

It was truly some contrast watching most of their parents standing nearby, stepping from one foot to another, holding a cup of takeaway coffee, warming their gloved hands. Not a few were more than eager to leave for their warm homes to enjoy the

Christmas cheer in front of the TV, watching a special episode of their favourite show.

How much and how long does it really take to grow up to this? To lose the innocence of embracing the enjoyment of simple things, albeit seen as childish sometimes? When do we stop looking up into the trees and watching birds take the flight to freedom in the sky, and start focusing on our credit cards, bank accounts, mounting bills, exhausting working hours, deadlines, all our failures, and all unfulfilled dreams?

Passing the beautifully-carved and painted carousel, the man in the fedora hat thought how much his three children would love to have a ride on it. He would join them, laugh and sing Charlie Chaplin's *Smile* from the top of his lungs.

That thought made him smile, and suddenly he noticed that the sun had already set on the snow-covered park. The light from the lamps lining the pathways made it glitter like silver. The man was all alone now, with not a soul around. Everyone was surely enjoying a cup of something hot, in the comfort of their homes by now.

He looked up at the moon that had appeared in the dark sky. It had been a cloudless day, so there, away from the brightest lights of New York City, he could see the stars almost clearly. Smiling again, his doe eyes sparkled when he remembered that his 'friend' would be out there soon. He never missed a chance to see Orion in its shining glory, wandering over the winter sky.

And true to his habit, there 'the friend' was, standing in the moonlight at the entrance to the drainage tunnel. Veiled in a long dark cloak, only a few silver and gold strands of his hair and the twinkling eyes were clearly visible from under his wide hood.

After making sure no one was around, Vincent leaned against the tunnel wall and looked up at the stars. His imposing figure had barely changed with passing years. He may have lost some of his speed and strength, but never his grace, and that special something which created an almost otherworldly aura around him - veiled or unveiled.

The man in the fedora hat smiled, observing Vincent from a distance behind a tree, and suddenly, he felt a great urge to approach him. His life-long craving for simple, unconditional social contact hadn't left him even after.... Well, even at that moment.

And so, his feet acted before his mind and soon enough, he found himself only a few feet away from Vincent.

"May I join you?" he said with a very soft, high-set voice.

Vincent jerked towards the sound and saw a slim, but not small figure of a man in black, standing almost right beside him. The strange thing was, the man was smiling at him and apart from his dear Catherine, Vincent couldn't remember ever having seen a warmer and more beautiful smile.

"Please..." he nodded quietly, still shocked and couldn't take his eyes off his unexpected companion. *How is it possible I haven't sensed him?*

"I love watching the stars as well." The man's beautiful, dark eyes twinkled, and a smile of an excited child appeared on his face. "I rarely get the chance these days, though," he added with a hint of melancholy in his voice.

It was difficult to guess his age, but his doe-eyed gaze and pale complexion made him look like an angel in Vincent's eyes. He never thought of angels wearing black coats and fedora hats, though. Suddenly, he felt a cold shiver pass through him and he tilted his head. *I've felt like this before...*

Before Vincent could elaborate more on that thought, the man next to him giggled and covered his mouth briefly when doing so.

"Sorry, I forgot I shouldn't be so close to anyone. I'm still new in this," he apologised and stepped a little away from the leonine man.

Vincent's eyes narrowed, and he had an even stronger feeling that his suspicion was not an unfounded one.

"Actually, I was never easy with approaching people who I didn't know," the man continued. "Apart from those who I knew truly respected and loved me." His words faded into a thoughtful look. "Mostly, everybody tried to approach *me*... But now, it doesn't matter anymore."

Then he turned to Vincent, and as if a light was switched on his face, he smiled at him and extended his hand to the majestic figure regarding him with piqued interest.

"I'm sorry, I forgot about my manners. I'm Michael."

His smile warmed Vincent's heart instantly. In a way, he still couldn't believe a stranger would talk to him, as if he was any regular man. Above, and not be frightened by his appearance, especially as his face was in perfect moonlight by now.

"Vincent," he added quietly, and accepted the offered hand with slight hesitation. It was as pale as the man's face, large, soft, gentle and... cold.

"The conqueror. How fitting," Michael added in thought and his perfectly-shaped eyes were smiling. "But please, don't let me interrupt you. You came to look at Orion."

"How---" Vincent tried to comprehend.

"Oh, I've seen you every night here in the past week," his companion explained cheerfully.

“But I haven’t seen you,” Vincent countered, bewildered. This was *his* park, and he never missed anyone’s presence while roaming it every night. His extremely sharp senses never allowed it, even with his passing age.

“Nobody can,” Michael replied softly, and a sad smile settled on his porcelain-white face. “But that’s all right. Those who love me can always feel me in their heart, and I’ll always be with them. We shall sing under the moon and dance among the night’s stars together, forever...”

Vincent studied the other man’s features in the moonlight; the man’s words confused him. Somehow, the face seemed familiar to him. Michael’s warm eyes were taking in the peace and shimmering beauty ahead of them. His mind seemed to have been miles away, though.

“I have a feeling I know you,” the leonine man whispered, wondering.

“Yeah, I get that a lot, or something similar,” his companion giggled, genuinely amused. “Well, I used to... Anyway, it doesn’t really matter.” He turned to Vincent again. “I’m so happy that I can talk to you! I’ve been watching you for days, even saw you with your gorgeous lady once.”

The childlike enthusiasm of the man next to him was contagious, and Vincent found himself under the spell of his, in many ways mysterious, companion. His instinct was telling him to be careful, especially at the mention of his wife, but his heart was telling him that he could trust this man.

“Catherine,” his gravelly baritone revealed his lady’s name. “My... wife.” He hesitated because he wasn’t sure Michael would actually believe him. How could he, a creature of the night, with a face unseen and unheard of, have the extreme luck of sharing life with someone so beautiful?

The man in the fedora hat smiled widely. “That’s a beautiful name,” he said, his voice charged with emotions. “My mother’s name is Katherine. She’s the most beautiful soul I have ever known.”

Vincent smiled, noticing the tenderness in the other man’s eyes. His own heart revelled in the name, and when he spoke, his voice filled with deep affection.

“For me, that name carries light... and hope. It has been my only torch in most of the darkest times of my life... Since Catherine entered my life 22 years ago, she has given a new meaning to everything in my eyes. Even Christmas.”

Michael’s eyes wandered into the glittering distance.

“Christmas *is* for dark times, dark places. It’s the symbol of new light breaking through and pushing away the darkness from around us and within us. It’s a time for finding our inner child again and not being afraid to follow it,” he spoke softly. “For most of my life, I wasn’t allowed to celebrate the holidays. And then, when I grew up, and thanks to one of my dearest friends I finally did, it was as if I discovered a

new planet and landed on it... “His eyes were alight with delight. “Magic... Like Wendy flying over Neverland for the first time...”

Vincent observed his companion in curious silence, and then he smiled.

“My first memory of Christmas... I was barely three years old and mesmerised when I saw the Christmas tree for the first time. It was decorated with a sea of candles, their dancing light casting magical shadows on the walls... Not even Captain Hook could destroy the feeling of elation and wonder,” he said knowingly.

Michael shook his head with a melancholic smile. “No... Death himself can’t do that...”

Vincent shuddered all at once; the cold chill ran down his spine again.

Abruptly, as if he awakened from a dream, Michael turned to the lion-man with a cheerful voice. “Do you have any children?” he asked keenly.

“Yes,” Vincent replied proudly, albeit slightly confused by the physical effect the man in black had on him. “Two sons; they are nineteen and seventeen.”

“That’s great!” Michael replied enthusiastically. “I bet you used to read to them a lot. You seem like someone who does that. Books don’t only open our eyes to new horizons, but they also offer great comfort to troubled souls.”

Vincent smiled as he lowered his eyes. “I did, yes. In fact, I still do sometimes.” He chuckled. “It’s our family tradition, in a way. Once a month, all four of us sit down together, and one of us reads something to the others.”

His companion gasped. “Oh, that’s wonderful! My children love being read to, especially my little girl.” His eyes glistened in the moonlight. “That’s before she starts singing and goes on forever,” he giggled. “Not even *Peter Pan* can stop her; but the boys love it too.”

Vincent chuckled, reminded of a fond memory. “Jacob... my older son dressed up as Peter Pan for Halloween one year. It was his favourite book when he was little.”

Michael’s face lit up. “I *adore* that book! I’ve always felt close to Peter.” He spread his arms wide, looking up to the dark sky. “Have you ever wished you could fly? To soar high up, over the cities, valleys and hills... be totally free so you could go wherever and whenever you wanted?”

Vincent’s smile faded a little. “Yes,” he said quietly. “Many times.”

Michael looked back at his companion, suddenly realising the cause of his companion’s melancholy. He gently put his hand on the lion-man’s shoulder. “We don’t always need wings to fly, right? Sometimes all we need is someone we love.”

The smile on the mysterious stranger’s face and the compassion in his eyes cheered Vincent up.

"I guess I got my wings many winters ago then," Vincent said, smiling now as well.

*"You just think lovely wonderful thoughts... and they lift you up in the air,"*¹ Michael quoted cheerfully.

*"I'll teach you how to jump on the wind's back, and then away we go,"*² Vincent added, tilting his head, making them chuckle.

Both men looked ahead for a moment, their eyes admiring the snow blanket glittering in the warming light of the street lamps. Despite the freezing temperature, Vincent felt pleasantly warm inside. Suddenly, something stirred lightly in his heart, and he turned his head toward the tunnel entrance.

"I guess that's my cue," Michael broke the silence and smiled when Vincent looked at him, puzzled. "If I'm not wrong, your Catherine is missing you."

"You don't have to leave," his companion said. "It would be my pleasure to introduce you to her."

The man in the fedora hat bowed his head and spoke quietly. "I'm sure it would be mine to get to know her..." He lifted his head, smiling again. "But there's somewhere else I have to be right now," he added.

"Of course, your children," Vincent suddenly remembered and smiled knowingly.

Michael nodded, but his expression beheld melancholy, taking away the sparkle from his dark eyes.

"It's their first Christmas since...", his voice faded. "I just don't want to miss them before I have to leave."

Vincent knitted his thick eyebrows, but his unasked question remained hanging in the air. He didn't need to ask it; his heart was telling him that some things don't need an explanation. The sound of approaching footsteps coming from the tunnel interrupted his pondering.

"It was lovely talking to you... Thank you, and Merry Christmas to you and your whole family." Michael outstretched his hand toward the leonine man, who accepted it gladly - it was still cold.

"And you...", Vincent replied with a slightly hesitant smile as his companion turned on his heel and left the Tunnel leader's side.

The crunching sound of footsteps behind him made Vincent turn around swiftly.

"I'm sorry it took so long," Catherine said, trying to catch her breath after rushing to meet her husband at their agreed spot. "The kids in the nursery just wouldn't go to sleep; they're so excited about tomorrow!" she laughed.

“It’s all right, Catherine. You didn’t need to hurry,” he remarked, embracing her shoulders and gently kissing her forehead. “In fact, I was not alone.”

He turned around and saw the dark figure in the hat in the distance, walking into the moonlight covering the park.

“There he is,” Vincent pointed in Michael’s direction. “I’ve made a new friend tonight.”

Catherine narrowed her eyes, searching the space he pointed at. Her face was one of puzzlement. “Who is there?” she asked gently. “I can’t see anyone...”

His half-smile faded as he looked at his wife. The confusion in her eyes confirmed his suspicion.

“Where has he gone?” Catherine inquired with interest.

“I guess *second star to the right and straight on 'til morning...*,”³ he whispered with a smile and looked away again, staring into the distance.

“Vincent?” she prompted him, putting her small hand gently on his chest.

And then they heard it - a quiet but clear bell-tapping echoing in the distance. Catherine searched her husband’s deep blue eyes and knitted her brows, although an incredulous smile brightened her face.

“I guess an angel has earned his wings tonight,” Vincent stated as the melancholy he felt just a few minutes before turned into something much more positive - hope.

“Come,” he said, turning them back to the tunnel entrance again. “It’s getting cold. I think I would like a nice cup of tea and a good book.”

“Which one do you have in mind?” Catherine asked, smiling as they walked into the tunnel.

Vincent briefly stopped and looked at her with a sudden childlike excitement.

“I think I’d like to visit *Peter Pan* tonight...”

And by the time they enjoyed the warmth and comfort of their bed, drifting away to Neverland, a new star appeared in the night sky on that Christmas Eve - one which shone brightly on all those who always believe in love and are not afraid to *not* grow old.



*"I'm going to search for my star until I find it.
It's hidden in the drawer of innocence, wrapped in a scarf of wonder."*

— Michael Jackson



(1-3) J. M. Barrie: *Peter Pan*