



# Dance

by Angie

*Poetry is just the evidence of life. If your life is burning well, poetry is just the ash.*

- Leonard Cohen

Vincent read the 'Breaking News' on Twitter and suddenly froze in shock. *No*, he thought, *it can't be. He was only 82.*

Suddenly, he felt as if he couldn't get enough air. He had to get out. It was dark now. He looked in on Catherine, still doing some late night catching up in her office, and told her he was going for a walk. She looked up at him, and smiled.

"Enjoy yourself, love."

He nodded and went below to the tunnels and then quickly to the Central Park culvert exit. He stood there, as he had so often before, but this time he felt no calm embrace him as he looked up at the trees, and above them to the velvet sky.

He began to walk, aimlessly. He stopped at the iron fence surrounding the carousel. He looked in. There was nothing to see now, just dim shapes in a dark place closed for the season. But in this place he had experienced what the world above thought of as fun, for the first time in his life. He had never felt such joy. What happened afterwards did not detract from that at all. Even now, he could remember the combination of sensations new to him – and never felt again; that hard seat on the carnival horse, the way it rocked slowly as the carousel turned. And the music.

Music. Yes, his life had often been changed by music.

He turned away and walked to the Wollman Rink, from where, one memorable summer night in 1967, during a music festival when he was a teenager, he had heard the voice and words of a man he had never forgotten.

He had listened to 'Suzanne'. Now he softly recited the words to himself, gazing over the rink. He had not seen the singer, or mingled with the crowds, of course. But he had found a place below where he could sit and listen to all the performances. He had sat there often in the evenings over the days and weeks that summer. The shows started at 8 pm and he had gloried in hearing, just above his head, the voices of singers and the instrumental artistry he had only read about in the newspapers.

He had not read about that particular artist, though. The unusual voice and lyrics of the song had immediately captivated him. He had realized at once that this man was a poet, not just a songwriter!

*"Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river  
You can hear the boats go by, you can spend the night forever  
And you know that she's half-crazy but that's why you want to be there  
And she feeds you tea and oranges that come all the way from China  
And just when you mean to tell her that you have no love to give her  
Then he gets you on her wavelength  
And she lets the river answer that you've always been her lover  
And you want to travel with her, and you want to travel blind  
And you know that she will trust you  
For you've touched her perfect body with your mind"*  
(Suzanne - 1967)

The thought of being fed tea and oranges from China had made him smile. He had often visited lonely Helpers above to read to them. They always made him tea, sometimes gave him a cookie - or an orange, just so they could watch him use his sharp nails to neatly peel and section it for them both. They too had bought their clothes at 'Salvation Army counters', wearing them until they were almost rags. He would often bring some better ones with him and quietly add them to the battered closets or dressers in their ancient, musty walk-ups. They knew he did this, always after they had fallen asleep, but neither he nor they ever commented on it. He supposed they enjoyed the surprise of seeing what he had brought them.

After that concert, Vincent had become more aware of this man, the man with the compassionate ache that spoke through his songs. He heard them occasionally on his nightly trips above. One helper had happily played some tapes while he was there, knowing his interest. A few years later Vincent had found some of his books and poetry too. One poem/song in particular seem to speak to him, especially after Lisa had left.

*"I asked my father,  
I said, "Father change my name."  
The one I'm using now it's covered up  
with fear and filth and cowardice and shame.*

*"Then let me start again," I cried,  
"please let me start again,  
I want a face that's fair this time,  
I want a spirit that is calm."  
(Lover Lover Lover – 1974)*

Those years had been hard, empty. Though not without joy, it never seemed to penetrate past his skin. He wore his face, but kept his deepest thoughts to himself by then. He became proficient at saying very little and reading a great deal. But he never stopped wishing. Even then, this man had seemed to find the right words for him;

*"I balance on a wishing well that all men call the world.  
We are so small between the stars, so large against the sky,"  
(Stories of the Street - 1967)*

Then, one foggy night in Central Park, he had found Catherine. The words from one of the songs came back to him;

*"We met when we were almost young"  
(So Long Marianne - 1967)*

Indeed. Neither of them were young at the time, both in their 30s. He had no longer believed he would find love and his future had stretched before as dank and chilly as that memorable night. But Fate had other plans.

Catherine had healed below and changed her life, far more than he ever could. But he had not been unaffected. He had lost his heart to her, and their lives were thereafter bound. Even this found a resonance with his poet. He thought of him like that, since man seemed to speak directly to him, as no doubt to many others;

*"He was starving in some deep mystery  
like a man who is sure what is true."  
(The Master Song – 1967)*

And Catherine gave him so much, had always given him so much more than he could give her, although she would argue that point with him, repeatedly.

*"That I am not the one who loves –  
It's love that chooses me.  
When hatred with his package comes,  
You forbid delivery. "  
(You Have Loved Enough – 2001)*

Even when that hatred of himself had come from within, Catherine was there, in his core, soothing and believing. And that terrible night in the dark cave, she had saved his life. He had found a poem two years later.

*"It feels so good  
And it feels so right  
It feels like I've been rescued  
In the middle of the night  
And the sweetest voice has spoken  
And the deepest wound is healed  
And the darkness is exploding  
And it feels, it just feels ..."*  
(It Just Feels - 1992)

Now, decades later, the man who had struck this chord in him, and helped him understand himself, had died. He had obviously lived a full life, an interesting life, but Vincent could not help but be sad that such a unique voice was stilled.

How could he record this day in his journal? It wouldn't be the first time Vincent had struggled to find the words. And this man seemed to understand that too.

*"My page was too white  
My ink was too thin  
The day wouldn't write  
What the night pencilled in"*  
(Book of Longing - 2006)

Vincent stood in the shadows of the trees around the rink and reflected that many people found joy in this place. Soon it would be filled with happy skaters, as the cold of a New York winter took hold. Indeed, Vincent decided, the dance of skates in that place which had introduced him to the world, would have pleased Leonard Cohen.

Vincent remembered the words to a song he particularly liked and recited it quietly to the still air;

*"Dance me to your beauty with a burning violin  
Dance me through the panic 'til I'm gathered safely in  
Lift me like an olive branch and be my homeward dove  
Dance me to the end of love"*  
(Dance Me to the End of Love - 1984)

He dropped his head and stood silent for several minutes, trying to find the peace this man had always given him. Eventually he did, remembering another poem.

*"We are so lightly here. It is in love that we are made. In love we disappear."*  
(Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs – 1994)

Turning from the rink, Vincent slowly made his way back to the culvert. He opened the door to find Catherine waiting for him, her face sombre. She immediately walked to him and hugged him close.

*'Who but you would take me in, a thousand kisses deep' \**, he thought, the balm of her love

soaking into his soul.

“I saw what you had been reading. I knew you'd come here because you love his poetry. I was at that festival in 1967, you know. I think most of New York was. I barely ate, but I danced and danced. The music nourished me. We were all hippies then.”

“Not me,” Vincent remarked softly. “But I listened in a place I found.”

“*There is a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in.*’ \*” Catherine whispered to him.

Vincent smiled sadly. “Yes.” And quoted in turn;

“*There's no forsaking what you love / no existential leap/ as witnessed here in time and blood/ a thousand kisses deep.*”\*\*

“And now?” asked Catherine.

“*You go your way / I'll go your way too*” \*\*\* Vincent replied, smiling down at her, his face relaxed. He felt the brittle, frozen feeling depart him, leaving a sorrow, pure and calm.

And so they left, hand in hand.

*May the spirit of your songs rise up pure and free*, he wished that remarkable poet, as they walked home.

END

\* Recitation (1997)

\*\* A Thousand Kisses Deep" (1998)

\*\*\* The Sweetest Little Song, The Book of Longing (2006)