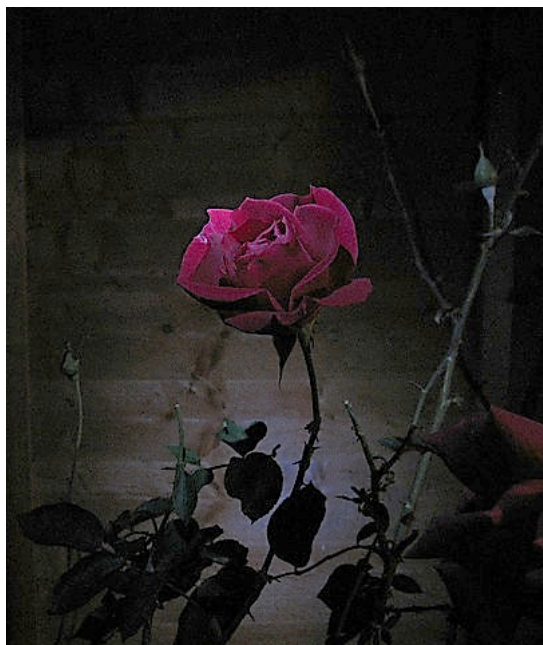


# *Every Breath You Take*

*By Cindy Rae*



*The best things in life are nearest: Breath in your nostrils, light in your eyes,  
flowers at your feet, duties at your hand, the path of right just before you.*

*~ Robert Louis Stevenson*

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*For WFOZ, 2016*

Vincent's weight was a warm and heavy thing, beside her in the bed. The scent of their roses tangled in the gauzy fabric of her curtains. Moonlight drew shadow-patterns on the glass panes of the terrace doors, and inside the bedroom, where they slept. It was a perfect night. Or to be more precise, it was a perfect middle of the night.

Catherine had been sleeping on her back, Vincent's great presence somnolently warm, next to her. She'd fallen asleep early, and now, at just after 2:00 a.m., she opened her eyes to her darkened bedroom, and enjoyed the peace of it.

The terrace door to the elegant room stood ever-so-slightly ajar, bringing night fragrances into the room. Warm spring rains had caused the rose bush to erupt in a riot of early blossoms. Five were blooming now, with more budding, besides. The elegant scent wafted into the bedroom, pushed by errant breezes.

He'd pulled the heavy planter near the doors, just so she could enjoy it. Moonlight brushed the petals of the tallest rose, a glorious red bloom flung open to the night air.

Catherine lay quietly, letting the scent-laden breeze caress her skin, loving the one thing she could clearly hear, in the velvet darkness: the sound of Vincent breathing, in sleep.

He was a big man, and she could hear the steady sound as he took in the nighttime air, and released it, slowly. His deep chest lifted, then settled again, the sound of the scented air being gently drawn in, as it travelled through his unique nose – then travelled back out, again.

Inhale. Hold. Exhale, softly. The latter on a sound that was akin to a contented sigh.

He didn't snore. Catherine wasn't even sure if he could. But his breathing, when he slept, had a smooth and unique sound to it, barely there, but audible. If she lay very quietly, as she did now, she could all but predict its gentle cadence. There was a low timbre to it, a soft rustle of night song. Like his voice, only much quieter. It was a soft wind, brushing across an open cello string, in the dark.

Sometimes, when they slept, he'd turn his head on the pillow toward hers. If the light from the bathroom door was open, she'd see his face in its sleeping pose, gilt framed, thanks to his hair and beard, and resting. Mouth slightly

open, the four tips of his fangs were apparent, as he slumbered. The arching brows at rest, the muscles in his face would seem relaxed, and carefree.

She knew he looked younger when he was asleep, and less burdened by the multitude of cares he often carried. But she didn't turn to look, now. All the interior lights of her apartment were off. The room was bathed in darkshadow, the blacks mixing with the greys, blending with the beloved sound of his breathing as it gave itself to the room, and to her.

Catherine drew her hands up and simply tucked them against her chest, in a supinely prayerful pose. She tightened her arms to her sides, a little, giving him as much room as she could, on the bed. Closing her eyes in gratitude, then opening them again, she held the deep, comforting sound he made inside her heart, and let that sound take her where it would.

Vincent was sleeping, next to her. Catherine smiled in the dark. He was making her so happy.

The soft breeze that had been barely teasing the veil of the curtains died completely, for a moment. She was left with even more silence in the room, better enabling her to enjoy the beloved sound which accompanied the rise and fall of his bare chest. He was fast asleep. His breathing was even, and well-spaced. Steady. Stress-free. There.

*Perhaps he's dreaming,* she thought.

She hoped it was a good dream.

The sound of him next to her filled her with a soft kind of joy, and she squeezed her hands together, still clasped atop her breasts, as she reveled in this very quiet moment.

No ringing phone, no playing radio, not even any of the music they so often enjoyed, or the poetry, or beautiful conversations they often had could cover the sound of her love, lying next to her in the bed, just breathing.

She'd been tired when she'd come home, the result of a long day on top of a long week. He'd come to her balcony, as he had almost every night since they'd become lovers, a few weeks ago. Though they hadn't made love this evening, (she barely remembered even settling down on the balcony with him to listen to him read to her before she must have fallen asleep), she knew he'd cared for her.

There would be other occasions for making love, a thing they'd still explored only a few times.

At least that, too, was a joyful possibility between them, now. Tonight had been about her being ministered to, and gently tended. With a depth of grace and care that still left Catherine awe struck, every time it happened.

*Will I ever not be surprised to see you standing there?*

She knew she wouldn't.

*Will I ever not be surprised to wake up in the middle of the night and feel you lying beside me? Hear you breathing?*

She knew she wouldn't do that, either.

Catherine kept still in the dark as the blacks and greys continued to envelop her, to cradle her as surely as the bed beneath her back. His now-familiar weight caused the mattress to dip, gently, and keep her near him. The silky sheet remained clutched beneath her hands and a light blanket draped casually across her torso. There was no need for the turned-down comforter. The night was warm.

Her lover was moreso. She'd not required the covering of quilts or multiple blankets that they'd often needed in his world, Below. He'd begun showing a preference for staying her bed, rather than his, for that very reason.

*Well. Maybe for that reason.* Catherine smiled, again.

The curtains rustled, then settled again, the fresh breeze carrying just a touch more rose scent into the room.

The quiet, deep, rhythmic peace of listening to him breathe suffused Catherine's being, and she held the moment to her like a special secret, whispered in the night. Her love, her lover was near. Relaxed. Sleeping. Soundly. They were safe, and warm, and close to each other. Life was good.

Fancy tangled with reality, in her imagination, and she let her fancy run, let her love for him simply shimmer through her.

*Even though he wasn't perfect, he was perfect. Strong. Princely. A lion in repose, or a lost heir from an ancient race. A living, breathing work of art. My love. My Vincent.* She sighed, in tune with his exhale.

She knew he must have read to her until her head had grown heavy against his arm. Then he'd then simply scooped her up as if she were dandelion fluff, and taken her to where they would both be more comfortable.

She grinned a little more at the thought of him putting her to bed; of him turning down the sheets and tucking her familiarly, between them.

He could have gone home, then, of course. He often did just that. In times past, he certainly would have.

*But not now. Wonderfully, not now.*

She smiled again, and moved her head so that it nestled just a little deeper into her pillow, imagining him easing the sheets up over her half-bare form. Late spring's temperate nights meant lighter gowns, for her, and ever since they'd become lovers he'd expressed an interested preference for anything that skimmed her thighs, or bared her legs to his gaze.

She laughed a little, inwardly, at the notion that her Vincent was a "leg man," and even more at the notion that her barely five-and-a-half foot self could do justice to his preference. She adored his admiration. He made her feel

ridiculously feminine. Strong, yet her petite self at the same time. Delicate, yet powerful.

As much as she'd ever loved him before, she loved him even more, now. Now that each new week seemed to do nothing but increase their delight with each other. And for each other.

He shifted in the bed, just a little, and drew up his knee before he settled it back down again, relaxing. His breath drew longer in, and seemed to escape on a happy sigh.

*A very good dream, she thought.*

She lay content in the washing waves of delight she was experiencing when his voice startled her, within the veil of the comforting dark.

"Catherine? What makes you smile?"

He'd asked her that once before, when they had been in the Music Chamber, and the right answer felt much the same now as it had then, so she gave it to him.

"Everything," she answered, turning her face toward his. "I thought you were asleep."

"And so I was," the soft night carried his sleep-roughened voice, and he turned gently over on his side, propping his head up on one fist. "Something woke me. Were you having a good dream?" He placed his furred hand on her arm.

"No," she confessed. "I hoped you were, though. I was just ... laying here. Listening to you breathe. Feeling ... happy." She knew he could see her beaming, in the dark. "Ridiculously happy. So happy that ... oh." Realization dawned. "Oh, no. Don't tell me I woke you up with how I was feeling ..."

It was then that she understood she'd likely done just that.

*Catherine, I feel the things you're feeling, when you do.* They were the words he'd given her the first moment she'd understood there was a bond, between them.

Vincent could always tell how she was feeling, and strong emotions called to him through their bond louder than any other. Usually, that resulted in him being able to feel her fear or sense when she was in trouble.

This time, it had done just the opposite. He tugged on her hand so that she disentangled her fingers from each other, and placed a gentle kiss across its back, then laid it back where it had been.

"It was a ... wonderful feeling to wake up to." His deep voice caressed her. "You were... suffused with warm light."

"It's the middle of the night." She reached up to cup his beloved cheek. "No light for hours. I'm sorry I woke you," she whispered.

He eased down, and cradled his head on his bent arm, keeping her hand where it was, with his. He placed a kiss in her palm, before he spoke.

"You are a long summer day, full of sunlight. A picnic in the park under a spreading oak." He squeezed her fingers, with careful pressure. "Don't ever feel you need to apologize for bringing me that incredible sensation," he whispered back. "You have no idea how... amazing it is for me."

He kept his blue eyes on her to take her in as she brushed his blonde cheek with her thumb, then returned her hand to settle again on her chest. She lay beside him, penitent and pretty, hands in the almost prayer-like pose. The lovely smile she still wore spoke of unrestrained delight.

"I was just feeling so... incredibly happy." She kept her voice low. It just seemed the thing to do.

"I know," he replied. "I could *feel* it. Enough so it roused me from sleep. It was ... is, very, very beautiful, Catherine."

She turned her face more toward his. "Sometimes... I feel full to overflowing," she confessed.

"Sometimes, so do I," he answered.

"In the middle of the day, even. I'll be standing by a filing cabinet..."

"Getting a book down off a high shelf."

"Sitting in traffic."

"Going to change the sentries."

"And I'll feel it, like this ... soft wave, inside me."

"Like it fills every part of you and envelops you, within," he said, with complete understanding.

"Like you're part of some ... great secret," she returned. "Something no one else knows, but you and I."

"A secret meant just for the two of us." Again, he understood absolutely everything she was trying to convey.

His soft baritone was gentle, in the springtime night. "I never... I never even thought such a gift existed, Catherine. People use the word 'love' and... there's just ... so *much* it encompasses." He traced her scar, carefully, in the dark. An idle touch. One he made often, when they lay side-by-side, as they did now.

"I love you," she said.

"I know you do." She heard the smile in his voice, and it was nearly a soft laugh. "You've been lying in the dark right beside me, feeling it."

"I woke you up." She smiled at the wonder of it.

"You woke me up," he agreed.

"Was it like I was shouting at you?" she asked, curiously. "Was it loud?"



He paused for a moment, searching his nimble mind for an explanation she would understand. "Not loud. Not words. It didn't have the words." He turned his fingers so he could brush her soft cheek with their furred backs. "It was of itself. It... rushed through you. So it rushed through me." He tried to describe it as best he could.

"And I woke you up," she repeated.

"You woke me up." He lifted his head and eased over her a little, checking her bedside clock. "And we have a few hours until dawn chases me back down." He rolled a bit so she could feel some of his weight.

"Whatever shall we do with the time?" she asked, locking her arms around his wonderfully muscular neck. It was a coquette's invitation to loving. Light. Playful. Something else he marveled about, between them.

"I don't mean to ... presume. You were asleep. Earlier."

"So were you," she rejoined. "Then I rudely woke you up," her smile remained, and she lifted her head to kiss his golden cheek.

"It was a blessing," he replied. "Not an act of bad manners." He settled his weight over her a little more, and felt her begin to move her legs, to make room between them.

"Our roses bloom at night," she noticed, making small conversation when he clearly was about to have much larger things in mind.

"So they do." He knew it was true. "So do you." He kissed her cheek in return, and brushed the hair there back, with his long fingers. Fingers she'd blessed with kisses, once, when he'd been afraid moments like this would never come, for him. For them. "So do I."

He began to nuzzle her neck. He was warm from sleep, and shirtless, having abandoned the idea of sleeping fully clothed thanks to the much warmer air of her apartment. No power on earth could get him to sleep totally nude, however, and his fleece sleep pants couldn't hide his slow arousal.

"I love you," she repeated.

He settled himself between her legs and stopped moving, knowing he was an elastic waistband and a lift of the hem of her nightgown away from being inside her. She sensed his sudden stillness.

"And I love you." He whispered it to the grey-brushed night, and to her. "So much. So impossibly much. And now I love waking up in the middle of the night with you, feeling you feel your joy." He paused, on an indrawn breath. "It means even more than the words you can say to me, Catherine." He brushed her forehead with a benediction of a kiss.

He placed another kiss near her scar, so he could whisper into the shell of her ear. "I don't think I can ever make you understand. Each gift of you is so... precious and unexpected. It isn't just that I never thought to have it. It's that ... I couldn't even think to imagine moments like this." His voice was raw with all he felt, and the overwhelming nature of what it was to love each other, the sheer surprises it brought them both.

Her hands were gently nudging his sleep pants downward.

"Stay slow," she whispered, a tear tracking from the corner of her eye to the hair at her temple. "Stay deep," she invited, brushing her hands across the velvety hair of his back. "Stay a long time."

The words imprinted themselves on his brain as he kept his huge, solid body over hers, lowering it infinitesimally until her legs came up, in acceptance.

"I will," he vowed. "About this. About everything," he swore, and though some of the promise made no sense, it absolutely did, to Catherine.

She felt his welcome weight, and heard the catch in his breath as he nestled against her warmth. Heard it catch, and hold.

A different kind of breathing.

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*No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I  
wish you love. ~Cindy*