

Baby Steps: 1956

A Dozen Memories from Vincent's Second Year

by Zara Wilder

January – Safe Place

“Finally gaining weight,” Peter observed, smiling at the wary infant on his lap.

Jacob nodded. “His appetite’s improving. We’re feeding him as much as we can.”

Vincent twisted away from Peter’s hands. Jacob waited. Vincent sprang lightly onto Jacob’s knees and nuzzled his way back into the crook of his guardian’s arm.

“Clever, athletic child,” Jacob murmured.

Vincent peeked at Peter from under Jacob’s cloak, his tiny body already molded against Jacob’s side.

“Sam mentioned he’s gotten shy,” Peter remarked. “Wanting to be carried everywhere.”

“He’s a twelve-month-old baby,” Jacob replied. “It’s high time someone started treating him like one.”

February – Mouths of Babes

John’s absence had impoverished them. And winter dragged on. Twenty-two Tunnelfolk ate supper slowly. Cabbage soup, one ladleful apiece. One biscuit, one tablespoon of raisins. Each child received milk, half a cup. Adults drank rust-soured water.

Little Georgia licked crumbs off her fingers. “More bread?” she asked Julia.

“Sorry, baby.”

Georgia gazed sadly at her empty plate.

Until a tiny paw placed a biscuit there.

Everyone watched Georgia consider Vincent’s offering. Then she broke it in two, returning half. Vincent solemnly took the morsel and nibbled it, squirrel-like.

“Look! We can still share!” Georgia announced.

Hope filled twenty-two hungry hearts.

March – Curiouser and Curiouser

The blocks Sam carved were Vincent’s favorite playthings. For the chance to stack cedar cubes, Vincent often chose of his own accord to leave the safety of the woolen carrying wrap Jacob always wore—provided Jacob remained in the same chamber with him while Vincent played.

Jacob rolled sterilized bandages for community medical kits, marveling as he watched the child experiment with geometry on the floor. Vincent liked to build ascending stairs. One block, followed by two, then three, and so on. Innovating today, his newest stair descended from six blocks. Rudimentary mathematics. Addition and subtraction. Arranged by patient little hands.

April – First Violin

Sebastian brought the violin and bow Below, battered treasures wrapped in old velvet. The street magician placed his gift in Catrina’s hands. “My dear, this is yours. When I touched the strings they breathed your name like an echo of moonlight.”

After supper, Francine held Olivia while Catrina performed. Ghosts of sound. Phrases. Melodies. Then, encouraged by her audience’s sighs of pleasure, solos fully formed, leaping out from her memory into the air.

Mozart’s *Adagio in E Major* drew Vincent to Catrina’s feet. Rapt, he gazed upward, a radiant creature lost in song. “Musician’s soul,” everyone whispered, watching him. Wondering.

May – Their Brother’s Keepers

Devin giggled. Annie plucked more tuna from the can and tossed the fish bit. Vincent pounced, caught it, and gobbled it up.

“Now,” commanded Alys, “sit!”

Vincent sat on the floor, licking his lips.

“Good boy!” Alys beamed.

Annie held a new tuna chunk over Vincent’s head. “Beg for it!”

He reached for the food. Devin laughed again, entertained.

“What’s this?” The Tunnelfolk’s doctor halted behind the children, frowning.

“We’re teaching Vincent tricks,” Annie explained.

Doc stared at them. Then: “Children, Vincent is not a pet. He’s a person. A . . . a brother.”

Puzzled and still hungry, Vincent watched them talk.

June – Another Nightmare

Jacob was sorting books. Devin staggered in, carrying a blanketed bundle. “Devin?” Jacob inquired.

“Vincent had a bad dream,” the boy explained. “I can’t peel him loose.”

Brow furrowed, Jacob accepted Devin’s burden. Devin lifted one corner of Vincent’s quilt, revealing a swaddled ball of toddler. Vincent gazed out from his cocoon, blue eyes wide, haunted.

John Pater’s bitter legacy.

Rancid anger burned Jacob’s heart. Vincent uttered a frightened moan and shrank down into his wrappings.

The anger had to go.

“It’s all right,” Jacob murmured.

“All right, Vincent,” Devin echoed.

Vincent’s eyes shone with his longing to believe them.

July – Good Manners

goodman sat beside bigblock. spread many papers across bigblock. watched papers. touched papers with goodhands sometimes.

vincent listened to cracklewhispers papers spoke when goodman touched them. wanted to see why papers were good to watch. wanted goodman to watch vincent and warmsmile.

vincent padded over coldfloor and jumped fasthigh onto bigblock. flashthump went goodman's heart. question. surprise.

goodman shook his head, spoke. no, no. goodhands, kindstrong, lifted vincent down. why down?

goodhands guided vincent toward goodman. touch here. vincent's hand upon goodman's elbow.

teachknowing! vincent touched, quietcalm. praise!

invited, vincent softjumped into warmarms. then vincent and goodman watched papers together.

August – One More

They gathered. Ezra opened the crinkled tome that had once become waterlogged, then dried swollen, so was discarded Above. But the Tunnelfolk found it, reclaimed it, and treasured the book Below.

Ezra removed his bookmark, a length of plain cotton twine. “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi,” he read aloud.

Devin and Vincent shared Jacob's lap. Other children crowded together on the floor around Ezra's feet. Adults perched on chairs and stools. All listened eagerly.

Ezra finished the story. Vincent leaned forward, voicing his soft, wordless plea.

“One more?” asked Ezra.

Vincent nodded.

“Toomai, then,” said Ezra, smiling. His steady brown hand turned the page.

September – For Want of Better Playthings

“Quit it!”

Triumphant growls echoed into the Library.

Catrina and Jacob hurried out, moving toward the sounds of children squabbling. Arriving, they saw Olivia kick Vincent's shin. Her bedraggled shoelace flailed.

“You're bad!” Olivia declared, slapping Vincent's nose. The boy bared his teeth at her, glaring silently, lamplit eyes narrowed.

Each parent barked their child's name.

Olivia pointed at Vincent, accusing. He'd been chasing her shoestrings again.

Scolding, Catrina bent to tie them. Olivia mustn't hit others.

Jacob sighed. Vincent bowed his head, shamed by Jacob's disappointment.

He needs some better toys, Jacob thought, smoothing Vincent's hair. They all do.

October – First Word

goodman sat near pipetapgirl and goodboy. pipetapgirl watched openbook. pipetapgirl touched bookpapers, spoke magicwords. vincent listened. magicwords made new thinkings arrive. dreamsmells, wildcolors. sounds not listened by ears. faces not seen by eyes. thingnames teachknowing.

pipetapgirl folded openbook shut. set closedbook on smallblock. vincent knew smallblock's thingname: table. goodman praised pipetapgirl. vincent watched closedbook be quietcalm on table. no more magicwords. people must watch openbook, speak magicwords and give thinkings and teachknowings.

vincent took closedbook off table. carried closedbook to goodman. made thinking to remember right thingname and mouthshape.

book? vincent asked goodman.

surprise! brightjoy!

book?

warmsmile. book, spoke goodman.

November – By Way of Thanks

Devin said the handmade elephant looked ugly. Doc and Julia frowned at him.

“It does!” Devin insisted. He held up his own patchworked denim companion, a blue-gray, canine-shaped beast he'd named Raksha. “Mother Wolf is better.”

Old Pascal ruffled Devin's hair, which he knew Devin hated. “Be still, you,” said the pipemaster.

“Raksha’s busy being your friend. No need to pass judgment on Vincent’s present.”

Vincent joyfully accepted the red and yellow elephant from Sara. He hugged his toy, and hugged its giver. “Good Sam-I-Am!” he declared.

Devin scoffed. “That’s no elephant name!”

“Sam-I-Am the Effant,” Vincent maintained.

Sara smiled.

December – Kissmas

Older children still sang carols in the Library as Jacob tucked his two very full, very sleepy sons into bed. Devin fell asleep the moment he lay still, dark hair tousled, white skin luminous in the candlelight. Beautiful boy. At rest, he resembled his mother more than ever. Jacob bent and kissed his cheek.

Vincent held out Sam-I-Am for his own bedtime farewell. Jacob tenderly kissed both the cherished toy and the golden child. “Happy Christmas,” he whispered.

“Happy Kissmas, Father,” Vincent replied, wringing Jacob’s heart.

Devin had started it, calling him Father. Now they all did.

“Goodnight, Vincent.”

“Goodnight.”