

# Gift from the Sea

by Angie

*"But the bond—the bond of romantic love is something else. It has so little to do with propinquity or habit or space or time or life itself. It leaps across all of them, like a rainbow—or a glance."*  
- Anne Morrow Lindberg ('Gift from the Sea')

Catherine shed her coat when she entered Vincent's chamber and stuffed her gloves into a pocket. He wasn't there because she was early, but she was sure he knew she had arrived.

She moved to the brazier to warm her hands. Compared to the frigid temperatures above, the 50-something temperature below was benevolent.

While she warmed up, she looked around, something she usually did not have time to do. She spotted the conch she had sent him from the west coast, which made her smile. She picked it off the shelf, then sat down on Vincent's bed with it. How lovely that seat on the beach had been, as the sun sank into the Pacific ocean. She had written a letter to Vincent there, to go with the shell, wishing he had been there too.

"A gift from the sea," a deep voice said and she looked up and smiled at Vincent, who as always, had entered noiselessly. Funny that he should say that. It brought back a memory.

"My mother used to read to me from that book," she admitted, a little sadly. "She always said that if I followed it, I would have a happy life. If she only knew how lucky I would be."

"They're beautiful words for everyone," Vincent agreed, sitting down beside her on the bed.

"*One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea,*" she quoted, then paused and looked at the shell.

"Vincent, let's go to the beach." She took his hand and looked into his deep blue eyes.

Vincent's brow knitted. "Catherine, how can we do that? It's mid-winter outside, and the nearest beach is ..."

"Rockaway," Catherine answered. "Not far at all. My father took me there after my mother died. It wasn't difficult to get to, but it was almost deserted, miles of sand dunes and lots of derelict, old military buildings. It seemed like another world, an older one, not New York at all. And the sea, Vincent. It was there – uncompromising, giving ... all that it was. Have you ever been there?"

Vincent smiled a little guiltily. "Once. Devin and I found the subway tunnel and emerged on Rockaway, early one evening. It was deserted of course. It had taken us most of the afternoon to get there and we dared not stay. So we stood on the sand and looked out to sea for a few minutes, then ran back home, satisfied with our daring. It's some distance, Catherine."

"Yes, accessible by public transit. It IS very cold right now. We could take the bus as far as possible and then the subway to Rockaway. I believe it runs all day and far into the evening. More to the point, we could travel together, Vincent. In daylight!"

Vincent was silent for a few moments, considering. He wondered why she wanted to go to a windy, exposed beach in the middle of winter. He knew she had a reason, and he suspected it had to do with the book, which he knew spoke particularly to women, especially ones with family and responsibilities. But it also claimed that a woman needed solitude to find her centre.

“Catherine, do you wish to go to this place alone, to seek that solitude Lindberg thought so important?”

“No, Vincent. I have found my centre, my place – with you. I don't need to be alone, except with you.”

“What then do you seek?”

Catherine was silent for long moments. She spoke softly. “I want to sit on the sand and feel the wind and see the immensity of the sea – where New York City can be literally behind me, out of sight, out of mind, for a brief time. I want to experience the gift of solitude with you, in a place where nothing else matters. In this weather, Vincent, there will be almost no one there.”

Then he wondered why he had not thought of travelling in the winter before. Almost as if she read his thoughts, she continued.

“There's been no snow yet, but it'll be very cold. Please let me outfit us, Vincent. I'll buy suitable clothing that will make us no different to other New Yorkers right now. Everyone looks like either Ninjas or mummies.”

She paused, seeing Vincent's now very puzzled expression.

“They're wearing either balaclavas or a long scarves wrapped around their faces - so well wrapped as to be unrecognizable,” she elaborated, and he nodded in understanding.

“Yes,” he whispered, in answer to her question, kissing the palm of her hand. He felt her passion flare through their bond and she fell back and pulled him with her.

They explored that passion thoroughly and very rewardingly.

“I love you,” she whispered, some time later, when they were both replete and relaxed.

“And I you,” he replied, sincerely as always.

Later still, in the middle of the night, Vincent wondered why he had never thought of seeking solitude above, and then answered himself honestly. Above was where he went to get away from the solitude imposed upon him, to be free of the tunnels, to be an observer, at least, of that world which would not accept him, or could even know of his existence. But only at night, of course, when the darkness worked for him. Except at Halloween, that was the reality of his life. When he wanted to truly be alone, there were many places below that provided solitude.

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Catherine joined the Saturday crowds the next day, delighting in being able to shop for both of them, in places she knew. She found a sporting goods store and bought two long, hooded, quilted coats, two balaclavas and a pair of scarves. They were all black – she had learned long ago that a dark colour was warmer in winter – and they would need all the help they could get on this trip. Then she added two pairs of fur-lined gloves and, after some consideration, two pairs of sealskin boots and two pairs of lined ski pants as well. No point in half-measures. She struggled with the bulky packages back to her apartment, changed into

something less Arctic, and then lugged everything into the elevator and down to the basement. Vincent was waiting at the threshold and she tossed the packages down to him, one by one. She heard a grunt as the unwieldy boot boxes hit him somewhere, then she clambered down the ladder, awkward even in less bulky clothing now.

"Are you sure you didn't forget something?" he asked her, when she was standing with him at last, surrounded by shopping bags. The twinkle in his eyes told her he was only being mildly sarcastic.

"If I did, we're both going to be sorry, because we each have exactly the same things," she retorted.

Vincent chuckled and hugged her close. They carried the bags back to his chamber and she laid out the purchases on his bed. Vincent picked up a balaclava and frowned slightly at the large eyehole, which went almost across the entire width. Not nearly concealing enough for *him!*

"I know," Catherine admitted, seeing his expression. "I have an idea for that. I'll ask for Mary's help."

Vincent nodded.

"These are intended to be pulled down and allow eating and drinking," she added. "But given the temperature out there, it won't matter." What she planned would work for both of them.

"When should we go?" Vincent asked, now quite looking forward to the adventure.

Catherine considered. There was no telling how long the deep freeze would last, and tomorrow was Sunday.

"Tomorrow? We can leave after breakfast and carry a thermos of something hot."

Vincent nodded. "Yes. Father will have to be told, of course, and he won't approve."

Catherine frowned. "We can tell him at supper. I think he'll agree we're taking all necessary precautions. New Yorkers are so self-absorbed, they're unlikely to even notice us, and I don't think Rockaway will be a popular destination in this cold. Meanwhile, I'll take these to Mary," Catherine decided, a moment later. "No time like the present."

She picked up the two balaclavas and sought out Mary, whom she found in her chamber, knitting. She explained what she wanted and Mary brought out her sewing box, found two small toggle buttons and some thick thread. She quickly crocheted a loop for each, sewed it on above the middle of the eyespace and then sewed on the toggle below it on the other side. It was done so quickly, Catherine was amazed. Mary smiled at her and handed her the two balaclavas.

"I've done this before," Mary confessed. "That space is much too large for very cold weather. I believe they wear goggles over it above, but we can't do that."

Catherine nodded. Of course. Goggles! She had seen them, but had decided against them for practical reasons. They weren't going skiing and they must be able to see unobstructed! Besides, even New Yorkers generally didn't wear goggles on buses.

She returned to Vincent's chamber and sorted out the clothing and placed it neatly on two chairs, ready for the morning. She had some underclothing in a drawer in Vincent's wardrobe, so she didn't need to go back to her apartment. She dug in her purse for a New York transit schedule and figured out the best way to get to Rockaway. A bus from the Park and then the subway seemed simplest, and both ran from early in the morning until late at night.

She rummaged through a satchel she kept next to the wardrobe and found the flask they sometimes used on their picnics to the Chamber of the Falls. They would eat breakfast before they left, and she had no doubt they would be back by early afternoon, soon enough to have a late lunch, if she let William know. She would do that at supper.

She couldn't explain, even to herself, why the beach was suddenly so important, but it was and she accepted that it was possible, even if a little peculiar in the winter. On the other hand, Vincent would be with her, and anything she could do with him at any time was a bonus.

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Meanwhile, Vincent was embarked on a search through the mid-level of Father's library, becoming increasingly frustrated. He had seen the book, knew they had at least two copies, but naturally could find neither.

"What are you looking for, Vincent?" Father finally asked, looking up from his medical book, having heard the creaking as Vincent moved around, and anticipating more violent shifting of books as the search continued. Normally, Vincent found exactly what he wanted quickly.

"I'm looking for *"Gift from the Sea"*, Vincent replied gruffly.

"You'll find it in the women's literature section," Father informed him, with a grin he was glad Vincent couldn't see.

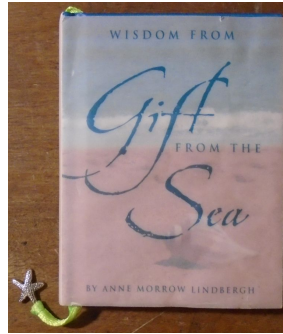
"WHAT?" Vincent asked loudly, suddenly moving to the stairway and peering down at the patriarch. "Since when have we had that?"

Father could see his son was frowning. "Since Sarah decided it was important to inform our female students the importance of women in literature, science, and all other endeavours," he answered. "You'll find the section directly under the stairs to your left."

Vincent moved to the stairs and found a small but wide bookcase, wedged under the spiral metal steps. Curious now, he regarded the titles and nodded approvingly. Well, it WAS about time. Here were George Elliot, Aphra Behn, Gertrude Stein, Christina Rossetti, Mary Wolstencroft, Elizabeth Browning, Anne Frank, Marie Curie, Octavia Butler, even *Kissing the Rod* by Germaine Greer. And of course, *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves.

Then he saw *The Secret Garden*, and remembered the small, unusual boy who had dreamed of seeing a garden, any garden, secret or not, in the sunshine. This was a newer, larger one, no doubt a gift from a helper. He extracted it for a better look. It was beautifully-illustrated and he was tempted to sit down and re-acquaint himself with it, but he put it back, albeit reluctantly. Later, he promised himself, he would read it to the younger children and enjoy it with them. Sarah had been very thorough. He would return to browse this bookcase later too.

And yes, there were both copies of the book he sought. He was about to extract one of them when he noticed a tiny volume beside it, and took it out instead. It proved to be a surprise - *'Wisdom from Gift from the Sea'*. The copyright, he was amazed to see, was 1975!



Good heavens! Had it been here all this time and he had not known of it? Perhaps it had been donated by a helper more recently – or simply been hidden because of its size - but it was perfect, so he pocketed it. He would surprise Catherine with it at the appropriate time. He clambered down the stairs and found Father regarding him with curiosity.

“Planning a class in feminine philosophy?” Father asked.

Vincent frowned at his father and sat down at the table. Perhaps *this* was the time to broach the subject of their trip.

“No, Father. Catherine mentioned the book and I wanted to have it along on our trip to Rockaway Park tomorrow.”

“Ah,” Father said, removing his glasses and nodding sagely. “She wanted to see the beach, I presume, even in the middle of a very cold winter, exposed to the wind and blowing sand.”

“Since you put it that way – yes, Father.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll dress warmly. You’ll need to.”

“Catherine has bought us both more than ample winter clothing, from a balaclava to sealskin boots. I think we may be *too* warm.”

“Oh, I doubt that, Vincent. Margaret and I did something similar that first winter. It was ... invigorating.” He chuckled. “But we managed to keep each other warm and found a place somewhat protected from the wind. There are many of those. It’s a very interesting place, and not much frequented, except in the height of summer. And the outdoors, especially the *exposed* outdoors, is very different to what you experience on New York streets, or even in the Park, Vincent.”

Vincent nodded, still not convinced that they would not be overdressed, but admitted to himself he had no experience in the great outdoors – even if he didn’t feel the cold as others did. Winter was a season to be treated with respect, and even he had rarely ventured out at its worst. His cloak was inadequate protection in really inclement weather.

“We’ll leave in the morning after breakfast, and should be back just after lunch,” he added, amazed that his announcement had not received the expected blast of anger and predictions of doom from the patriarch.

“Hmmm ... well, I’m sure you know what you’re doing. Enjoy yourselves.” Father shifted, but then looked up at his son, his mouth turned up slightly, and spoke softly.

“And if you’re wondering why I’m not making a fuss, it’s because I know you and Catherine will take no chances, and of all the times of the year when you would be safe, besides Halloween, winter is the one where you could pass unregarded. I’m a realist, Vincent. I do

want you two to enjoy life ... safely ... as I do all our family.”

Father put his glasses back on and returned to his book, effectively ending the conversation.

Vincent said no more and departed. Back in his chamber, he found Catherine rummaging around and their clothing neatly stacked ready for them in the morning. The balaclavas were on top and he picked one up and nodded approvingly. So simple, yet so effective! A button!

“Father has given us his blessing,” he told her beautiful backside, as he approached her. Catherine rose so quickly, she staggered a little and Vincent caught her arm to steady her.

“What? You're kidding!”

“Best not to question providence, Catherine. Father is well aware of the weather and does not anticipate any problems for us - beyond those connected with that.”

Catherine chuckled. “He's probably right, Vincent. But I think we're prepared for anything short of a blinding snowstorm and several feet of snow. I don't think we can get lost – not on a strip of land with water on three sides.”

“I have an excellent sense of direction, Catherine. We can't get lost - no matter what happens.”

The pipes announced supper, so the couple went to the dining chamber. Everyone they saw smiled at them. Vincent returned the smile, marvelling again, as always, how news travelled in the tunnels, even without the assistance of Pascal and his pipes. He had no doubt that by now everyone knew they were going above, perhaps even where. Just how that happened, was something of a mystery, since he was sure neither Father nor Mary had said anything. Of course, sentries would have seen them return from the threshold with Catherine's purchases, and no doubt the walls had ears – especially when those ears belonged to Mouse, who seemed to have a talent for routing out secrets.

They sat next to Father, as usual, and conversation rambled on topics unrelated to the upcoming sojourn, for which both Vincent and Catherine were grateful, and they returned to Vincent's chamber happy with anticipation. They slept soundly despite that, both dreaming of long vistas of sand and grass, against a grey sea whipped by winds.

The next morning, they joined the community for breakfast, and Catherine had William fill their thermos. They waited until the rush hour above could be reasonably expected to be over, then dressed in their new clothing. Vincent wore a small backpack with the thermos, some of William's cookies, the book and a small blanket. They were both certain they would go both unremarked and, at least in Catherine's case, unrecognized.

They exited by the threshold to the elevator, so they could exit via the front door of Catherine's apartment building and catch a bus. Everyone was dressed warmly, and only a few had dared to show their faces to the cold. No one paid the couple any attention. They took the bus to a Brooklyn subway station and caught the train to Rockaway.

It was only 10 am when they arrived, and very cold and windy, but the sun was struggling to come out.



Catherine led the way, almost dragging Vincent, who kept lagging behind, as he was obviously enjoying the unusual sense of freedom in daylight. She finally stopped and turned around to look at him. She couldn't see his facial expression, of course, but his eyes were half-closed and his head was lifted, and she could hear him breathing heavily, almost panting. She guessed he was scenting the wind. She could smell very little through the balaclava, but she suspected he could.

"How do you like it?" she asked him finally, just to get his attention.

He looked down at her and his eyes were intensely alive, his voice soft.

"Catherine, I could never have imagined that the smell of sand and sea, even dead seaweed ...," he nudged the line of it at their feet, "would be so ... captivating. I feel as if I'm in another world."

"You are, Vincent. One very few people appreciate, even though it is here for all."

He nodded and sighed deeply. "Where are we going?"

"I think just a little further ... so that we can be truly alone."

Vincent looked around and saw no one, but Catherine had her reasons, so he merely nodded again and took her hand.

"Lead on," he told her.

She led them off the sand to the grassy strip and found a place where a slight rise would protect them somewhat from the north wind. Vincent dug out the blanket and placed it on the sand and they both sat down with a sigh.

They said nothing for a long time, merely listening to the wind howl among the dunes and watching it shift some dry sand and old seaweed. The sea was a bit choppy, but the ebb and flow of the waves rustling up the sand was restful.

"I understand why she wrote the book, now," Catherine said softly. "Here, there is nothing to distract but the reality of the sea and sand. It brings peace and encourages contemplation."

"Yes," Vincent agreed and took out the little book from his pocket. Catherine saw the cover and looked up at him with amazement.

"You brought the book!"

"Just a little one of excerpts, Catherine, but they ARE beautiful. I thought you might like me to

read some of it.”

“Oh yes, indeed,” she stated, and waited while he leafed through the little book for something appropriate. He stopped, finally, and read slowly and softly, his voice deep with emotion.

*“So beautiful is the still hours of the sea’s withdrawal, as beautiful as the sea’s return when the encroaching waves pound up the beach, pressing to reach those rumpled chains of seaweed which mark the last high tide.”*

Catherine sighed. “Yes, that’s it exactly. Beauty in it’s simplicity.”

“Yet she found more than that here, Catherine. Listen.”

*“The race to the beach together renew’s one’s youth, like a dip in the sea. But we are no longer children; life is not a beach. There is no pattern here for permanent return, only for refreshment.”*

“Bracing is more the word,” Catherine commented ruefully, but happily. She was filled with love for him and knew that he could feel it.

“It IS chilly,” he noted, finally. “But Catherine, we are never alone, even here. I remember she contradicted John Donne in one passage.”

*“‘No man is an island,’ said John Donne. I feel we are all islands -- in a common sea.”*

“I remember a quote too,” Catherine remarked.

*“Love does not consist in gazing at each other (one perfect sunrise gazing at another!) but in looking outward together in the same direction.”*

They said no more for a while, laying back against the dune and absorbing the scenery and letting the wind blow over them. The sun chose that moment to give them some watery sunshine, completely changing the aspect of the day, from dull to almost bright. They squeezed hands and gazed at the golden reflections in the restless waves.

Vincent closed his eyes and let himself inhale all the scents of the sea and beach. The briny smell was not unknown, even in New York City, but here it was unpolluted by car exhausts and less savoury smells. The wind was coming from the north, perhaps from the Canadian Arctic or Greenland. He could smell the snow in it – as well as the dead seaweed and that of dead sea creatures from the tideline, even through the balaclava. They belonged here, as he did not. It was the scent of life, death ... and continuity. It was relaxing in a way he would not have thought possible. He let it soak into him, embrace him.

Catherine leaned against him and he put his arm around her. She said nothing, merely glancing at him occasionally, enjoying his obvious peace and delight in the beach. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? She had never felt so at peace with the city she called home.



Here, it was just a backdrop, a place that existed on another plane.

Vincent, entranced and relaxed, was feeling the sand beside him with his other hand, idly, sifting it over his glove, wondering whether he dared to take it off to really feel it, when he encountered something hard. He looked down and saw something blue emerging from the sand. A piece of glass perhaps. He dug around it and found more ... and then more ... and they were connected. He pulled at it a little, then realized he seemed to have hold of a necklace. He dug around more, managing to free even more of it, yet was still not able to free it from the sand. He was afraid of breaking whatever held it together, so extracted it carefully and laid it aside as he dug deeper.

Catherine, becoming aware of his distraction, leaned over him to look at what he had found.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, catching the glints of blue in the sand.

Vincent finally managed to free the strand, and held it up to the light. It was so long, he had to double it. It was made of small stones and beads, all in shades of blue, a beautiful thing. How had it come to be here?

As he held it against his quilted coat, it caught the sunlight in myriad shades of blue.



Catherine reached for it and he gave it to her to examine.

“This must have been lost not long ago, Vincent. The string hasn’t rotted. I wonder whose it was? Long strands are apt to break, and this one is quite heavy. But look, it has long strings here. It must have been attached to something - a purse perhaps, or maybe wound around a scarf.” The latter seemed very likely. She had seen those in shops. They were elegant, but very heavy – as this necklace was too.

She held it up to catch the sun and shook it a little.

“A gift from the sea,” she remarked, giggling. “This calls for a celebration. Shall we have some coffee and cookies?”

Vincent obediently dug into the backpack and extracted the thermos and small tin of cookies. They looked around, but there was no one in sight. So they undid their eyehole buttons to free their faces and mouths, then sipped the coffee and ate the cookies, enjoying the brisk sea air and smiling. Could anything be more perfect?

Vincent took the opportunity to bend over and kiss his beloved. She smelled of sea, sand and coffee ... and something else, he realized, abruptly. He was stunned and for a few moments said nothing.

"There is yet another gift for us, Catherine," he said softly.

She looked at him questioningly, expecting that he had found something else, but realizing he wasn't holding anything. The strand of beads was still on her lap.

Vincent looked at her. "I believe you are pregnant."

Catherine's face registered amazement, then calculation, as she worked out the timing.

"How do you know?" she asked eventually, having determined it was indeed possible.

Vincent's eyes dropped and he spoke carefully. "It is something I can do, but I do not know how or why. I suspect it is a change in scent. That's what Father thinks. I am sensitive to scents, although I do not consciously analyze them. I just know, just as I know what the weather is above, or what time of day or night it is."

"You are an amazing man, Vincent," she exclaimed at last. "I wonder how many more wonders you will display."

"I believe you have seen everything of me 'displayed' by now, Catherine," he said, his voice light.

"You know that's not what I mean," she retorted.

"I know, my love. I have never been bonded to anyone before, so I cannot say what else may manifest."

She leaned over and they kissed again. The day seemed suddenly sharper, even more real to Vincent, and when they parted he looked at the sea and realized something else. The weather was changing.

"There is snow on the way," he reported softly. The smell was much stronger now. Huge dark clouds were now looming over the ocean and would soon block out the sun.

Catherine sighed. It was time to go. She knew it, and knew it was important they not linger. This was no place to be caught in a snowstorm. Father would never allow them to forget it.

"Then we must go, Vincent," she admitted.

"Yes, but we have a gift to remind us, and a memory that will never fade ... and a promise for the future," he replied.

They rose, packed away the thermos and their blanket and fixed their balaclavas closed. Then they walked hand-in-hand back to the subway station. Before they had quite reached it, fine, sharp snow crystals were falling. A suitable closure to the day, Vincent decided. Tomorrow would bring many more challenges, but right now he felt ready for anything.

He remembered a quote from *Gift from the Sea*, and before they entered the subway, he recited it to Catherine, quietly.

*"But the bond — the bond of romantic love is something else. It has so little to do with propinquity or habit or space or time or life itself. It leaps across all of them, like a rainbow — or a glance."*

Catherine squeezed his hand and nodded, saying nothing. What was there to say to that? She sighed. Whatever came now, they were together for always. There was no doubt of that. The sea had renewed their spirits and reinforced their love. And now they had a gift to look

forward to, one that was made more precious by its connection to the sea. She deliberately did not think of what that news was going to do to her life above and below. There would be time for that later. She remembered another quote and whispered it to Vincent as they sat in the train, almost alone on this cold day, but in truth never alone because they had each other. She recited it softly.

*“Wish me courage and strength and a sense of humor. I will need them all.”*

“Always,” Vincent replied gathering her to him.

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