

Led to Love

by Angie

*If age choose, give me the start,
Take the sap and leave the heart.*

- Henry David Thoreau

Vincent trudged his way leadenly towards the culvert entrance, staying in the shadows as usual. He could hardly bring himself to put one foot in front of the other. It was very cold now, in late January, but little snow was on the ground. That meant he wouldn't leave footprints and could take the easier way to the world below via the culvert.

He had been visiting Helpers, delivering medicines from Lin, who had taken over Dr Wong's practice, and generally trying to cheer them up. He wished he could do that for himself. At least the time had gone swiftly and left him little space to brood – until now.

Winter sometimes invigorated him, but not this one. He almost wished he didn't have to return home. Often when he did – even in the evening - the sentry sent out the word and he would have a group of petitioners waiting in Father's chamber. That designation had stuck despite the fact that the patriarch had gone to his final reward a year ago. Luckily, it was too late for any such concerns tonight, but Vincent shrunk from thinking about what the problems would be come morning.

Why couldn't people solve their own little grievances? Why did he have to organize work parties? Why did schedules never work out as they should? How had Father stood this for so many decades? He realized that one person should not be forced to handle all of these issues. Perhaps he needed a foreman to organize the work parties, and a mediator to handle grievances. Then he could concentrate on the important issues - like locating food and supplies and arranging lodging and orientation meetings for new arrivals.

Young Jacob was above, now a doctor, having taken over Peter's practice. He had broadened his skills to help his tunnel family. But he was seldom below unless called upon. Their old friend had passed away a few months ago. It had been a long friendship for Vincent. He missed Peter almost as much as he missed Father. The most important of his personal losses he steadfastly refused to think about. Especially this month.

Vincent grunted in frustration - at himself for failing to address the multiple little details Father had so assiduously taken care of. He attempted to focus on the journey instead of the destination. He hopped along the stones of the culvert, one of the more enjoyable parts of the trip, even in his present mood.

He stopped suddenly when he saw a movement near his feet and tried to see what it was. A mouse or rat perhaps? He saw a minor shift of the shadows and bent down. A bird – a robin, apparently. What was it doing out in the dark in winter? He reached down to grasp it and it shrunk into the stones of the culvert. Nevertheless, he was able to get his large hands around it and carefully lifted it up so he could get a better look at it in the light of a nearby lamp standard.

It was a small, bedraggled adult, and seemed to have only one leg. Possibly it had escaped a predator; there were plenty of possibilities in the park. He couldn't tell if the bird was injured anywhere else, but he could feel its heart beating strongly. It reminded him of another heart – and he closed that memory off resolutely. Vincent wrapped the bird carefully in his cloak and continued his journey.

Once through the gate and that closed, he moved swiftly and waved at Mouse in the sentry nook, putting his fingers to his lips. Mouse nodded. It was late and he didn't want to be disturbed.

By the time he had reached his chamber, the bird was restless, so he kept it wrapped while he cut off the finger of a cotton glove he kept for dusting. He carefully held the bird while he removed the cloak and then placed the glove end over the head as a makeshift hood. He hoped the process would work as it did with raptors, and was gratified when it did. The robin was quivering nervously, but did not attempt to move. Vincent sighed with relief. He made sure the hood was loose enough that the bird could breathe, then set about boiling some water and finding a small piece of rag. He then bathed the bird, examining it carefully under his candelabra as he did so. It appeared whole, except for the missing leg, but it was only missing part of the lower section, below the joint. It had been lucky - and that gave Vincent an idea.

He wrapped it up in a soft rag and put it into a soup bowl left over from lunch. Then he extracted some crumbs of chopped nuts and a few raisins from a cookie tin and filled a tiny metal condiment bowl with water.

How would he feed the robin? If he removed the hood it might try to fly away. He needed a little cage. He looked around his chamber and spotted a rattan, handle-less basket that had held some of Geoffrey's dinner rolls on his lunch tray. He cleared a space on his table placed the basket on the tray upside down, examining it critically. It would serve as a temporary cage. He put newspaper on the tray, added the crumbs of fruit and nuts, then placed the water bowl there too.

Carefully, he uncovered the bird and placed it on the newspapers, then in one motion, removed the hood and let down the basket. The bird shifted a little, but found the food quickly and pecked at it. It also found the water. It had probably not eaten for some time. Then it rustled a little and settled down. It did not appear disturbed, and was undoubtedly fatigued. So much the better. Just in case the bird got restless, Vincent placed a small book on the top of the basket to keep it in place.

He blew out the candles in the chandelier, then got undressed and into bed. He considered what to do in the morning. A cage. Much as he hated them, he would need something to discourage the robin from trying to fly in the tunnels, at least for a while. He could not release it back to the wild. It would not survive long one-legged in the winter. Then he considered the missing leg. Something might be done about that. Satisfied, Vincent let himself sleep. He WAS very tired.

In the morning, Vincent fed and watered his little charge, which was still alive! Robins were hardy, it seemed. Then he went to the nearest storage room to see if he could find a cage. He seemed to remember something of the sort. It was odd what ended up there. Mouse perhaps. He couldn't keep everything in his chamber – although he certainly tried - so just put the excess into storage.

Vincent was fortunate. He found a cage – one he immediately recognized as bamboo and Chinese. Old Wong had kept one in his shop with a live songbird, a tradition among older

Chinese, he understood. The cage was roomy and would serve well.



He took it back to his chamber and set about preparing it for the robin. It needed a perch. He found a twig from his brazier wood pile and tied it across the cage. Then he looked at the twigs again and had an idea. He found one only a little thicker than the robin's leg and stripped it of bark. Then he looked closely at the robin and made a guesstimate about the length needed. He cut the twig and made a small cut halfway down at the top, with a small ledge, then used his nail file to smooth it. He didn't want to go to Cullen for sandpaper, since it was still early.

He lined the cage with newspaper, then hooded the robin before placing it in the cage with more food and water. Then he removed the hood, curious to know how the robin would react. It looked around and made a cheep, immediately going for the food and water.

Vincent, pleased, decided it would be all right for long enough for him to have breakfast, so he went to the dining hall. The pipes had already announced the meal, so he was not the first there. He quickly served himself some toast and eggs and a cup of tea and sat down. There was an unwritten law that no one should be interrupted for business at a meal. Vincent took his time eating and had a second cup of tea. That finished, he sighed inwardly and went to Father's chamber to see what crises had materialized since the day before. Amazingly, only Mouse was there.

"Mouse?"

Mouse grinned and handed Vincent a little paper bag that clinked.

"Found them with cage. Used to give Arthur treats in them. Maybe Vincent can use now?"

Vincent looked in the bag to find cage cups. Arthur had died of old age – for a raccoon – long ago.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Looked for you in chamber before breakfast, but not there. Saw bird in cage."

"It's an injured robin, Mouse."

"Ok good. Vincent will make better!"

With that, Mouse ran out.

Vincent sighed and looked around. Still no more petitioners. He had no idea what had happened, but decided not to question it.

He went back to his chamber and regarded the robin. The first thing was to see if he could give in a false lower leg. He picked up the twig he had carved and then carefully put his hand in the cage to grasp the robin. It shrunk from him, of course, but once he had his hand around it, it calmed. He put the hood on again to be sure it would remain calm. Then he

examined the damaged leg and did a temporary fit of the twig. Yes, that would work well. It would never run like other robins, but it would walk a little better.

Carefully, Vincent attached the wooden leg, padding it with cotton wool from his first aid kit, then attaching it with a strip of cotton bandage and then sticking plaster. He was careful not to make it too bulky. He put the robin back in the cage, still hooded, to see what it would do. The robin flexed the damaged leg and then made a small hop. The leg stayed firm. Vincent then removed the bird's hood and quickly closed the cage door. Then he remembered the cage cups, realized they would fit, then attached them filled them with water and dried fruit from the outside. The robin, curious, explored the cups and pecked at the fruit. Then it settled in a corner of the cage, hunkered down and closed its eyes.

It was barely an adult, he realized looking at it more closely. It still had some of its mottled baby feathers, and it was very slim. Probably a male, though.

He was wondering what to do with it, when Lin announced her presence. Vincent called for her to come in. She often visited to bring them Chinese herbs. She had learned Dr Wong's trade well from years of watching him. Since he had taught her, the Chinese community accepted her – and the tunnel community was grateful to still have their traditional medicines.

She saw the cage and smiled. "Vincent, you have a bird. How very lovely! Are you going to take it for some air?"

Vincent looked at her puzzled. "Air?"

"Yes, Chinese men take their birds for walks, hanging them in places where they can get some air. The cage has a handhold on the bottom so you can carry it - and that hook to place it somewhere in a breeze. You probably can't hang the cage up easily down here, though. But perhaps a visit to the Great Falls would be nice for it."

"Lin, that's a wonderful idea. Thank you!"

Then he guessed she had some business. "Can I help you," he asked.

"I just came as usual to bring herbs. But perhaps there is a place I can put them? Father had a kind of basket, but he always dispensed them. I didn't want to just leave them anywhere. These are for Mary and Rebecca and others. For their arthritis."

Vincent's brow furrowed. He had not really thought about this – and certainly did not know how Father had dealt with it. He had assumed the herbs were delivered directly to whoever needed them.

"Let's go into Father's chamber, and you can show me where he kept them."

They walked the short way into Father's chamber and Lin looked around for the basket. She couldn't see it and told Vincent so.

He looked around too, but for a replacement. Then he found a rather dusty, but small wooden chest on top of a wardrobe. He opened it and found it empty.

"We could use this," he commented. It was big enough to hold all the packages Lin had brought, with room to spare. All were addressed and had instructions on a small card. She put them in the box.

"This is perfect," she said. "If you leave it on a table, I won't have to bother you next time. I bring other remedies sometimes - for coughs, colds, and headaches. This will hold all of them."

Vincent nodded, happy to have that problem solved so easily. He tapped out a message on the pipes about the herbs in the wooden chest for those who wanted them.

"Thank you, Lin – for the medicines and for the advice about my robin."

"You are very welcome, Vincent. I hope the bird gives you much joy. You should be able to train it to your finger, even with one leg, then perhaps it will be able to fly and return to you."

Vincent thought about that last. He certainly did not want the bird to be caged all the time. He had a pathological dislike for cages, having been in one himself.

"I will try that," he promised.

"I must go now, Vincent. I am training one of my grandchildren in Chinese herbs. It is a dying craft, but I have a willing pupil."

She left with a smile and a wave and Vincent returned to his chamber. There was more to caring for a bird than he had realized.

Mary arrived as he was thinking of leaving and he pointed out the chest of herbs to her. She nodded and thanked him, collected her packet and left.

Vincent returned to his chamber. Since there seemed to be no crisis in the tunnels, he decided to take the robin for a walk to the Great Falls. He thought perhaps he should cover the cage, just in case the bird became frightened, so found a piece of old sheet. It was large enough and thin enough to work.

At the Chamber of the Falls, Vincent sat on the ledge, then uncovered the robin. It looked around and fluttered onto the perch. It made a cheep and then dropped to the bottom of the cage and hopped around, then ate and drank from the little cups. It perched and emitted a little cheep now and again.

Vincent watched it for a while and then gazed at the waterfall. He loved the falls, but visiting this spot was always bittersweet. He resolutely forced himself to not think about the past, or even her name, the love he had sat here with. It was easier that way.

He was wondering how long the bird should enjoy the 'air' when he realized he was not alone. Mouse was standing next to him. Mouse had a talent for sneaking up on him.

"Mouse?"

"Ok now Vincent? Happy?"

Vincent smiled. How could he not be with with Mouse beaming down at him? Mouse seldom worried about anything for long.

"Lin suggested I bring the robin here for some air."

Mouse nodded. "What's his name?"

Vincent said nothing, having never even thought of naming the bird. He supposed he would have to give it one – but he hated to imply that he owned it. But for sure, it would not be returning to the wild, so he had at least accepted responsibility for it. He sighed mentally.

"He hasn't got a name, Mouse. What would you suggest?"

Mouse got a thoughtful look. "Red?" he suggested at last.

Vincent chuckled. It was as good a name as any, and he said so.

"Ok good," Mouse replied with a smile.

"Did you want me for something?" Vincent asked, somewhat tardily. He thought he could get used to days like this, when he could just do well, anything he wished.

"Just checking if Vincent happy. Mary had big talk with everyone while you were out yesterday. Said you needed time for yourself too. Mouse understands. Mouse likes to do things too. Hates meetings and chores – but doesn't have so many to do as Vincent. No one does. That's what Mary said."

Vincent turned to look at the falls, not wanting Mouse to catch his expression. So that's what had happened! It did feel nice not to have people always clamouring for his attention. Who was doing what, though?

"Are all the jobs all being done?" he asked Mouse.

"Think so. Mary did schedule with Eric. Said you would not be on schedule unless emergency. Plenty of other people to do work. Father didn't do chores, she said. Neither should you. Said you do too much. Always visiting helpers, patrolling tunnels. Should not have to carve out chambers or fix leaks, or listen to problems. Getting old too."

At this last, Vincent laughed. "As are we all, my friend. I will talk to Mary."

"Don't tell her Mouse told you," Mouse gasped. "Just thought you should know."

"Don't worry, Mouse. I will simply ask her what is going on."

"Good. Look, Red happy now."

The robin was fluffing its feathers and grooming itself. Good signs, Vincent decided. It was not traumatized. It finished its work and then hunkered down. Vincent decided it was probably time to return it to his chamber and covered the cage before lifting it. Mouse ran on ahead, and waved goodbye at the intersection leading to his chamber.

Over the next several days, Vincent realized his workload had dropped to a fraction of its former level. Mary and Eric devised the work schedules and did so in a corner of the Library on a table and chair set up for the purpose, with a bookshelf behind it for the records. The main chalkboard of jobs remained in the dining hall – meals still being the best place to inform everyone of their duties. Eric also updated the food and materials ledgers and catalogued what was in the two big storage chambers. He had a talent for detail and seemed happy to contribute. Vincent was happy to hand over the responsibility. He hated doing paperwork. The wonder is that he had not thought of it before – nor had Father, apparently. But Father, as Mary had pointed out later when he talked to her, had not had other duties. The minutae kept him busy.

As for petitioners, those seemed to have dropped significantly too. He suspected Mary was handling some, and for the rest ... well they were evidently solving their own problems. No one troubled him with trivia.

With the extra time on his hands, Vincent now made a point of carrying the robin cage to the falls twice a day. It was, after all, the only place where daylight made it into their world. The robin seemed to like it and always cheeped when they arrived, stumping around the bottom of the cage or hopping along the perch. The wooden leg did not seem to hinder it on the bottom, and it had learned to use it to move along the perch, albeit somewhat clumsily for a bird.

Gradually, Vincent got the bird used to his hand and soon had it finger-trained. He hooded the bird and brought it out of the cage on his finger at the Falls. The bird was obedient and did not try to fly when he removed the hood. So far, so good, Vincent thought. He was uncertain whether he should allow it to fly, so contented himself with letting it out of the cage on his finger for a few days, encouraging it to perch on the top of the cage. The robin cheeped and looked about with interest.

On February 14th, Vincent avoided everyone in the tunnels, and took the robin to the falls. This was the one day a year when he could allow himself some memories. The other was his son Jacob's birthday - but that they celebrated together, privately.

At the ledge across from the Falls, Vincent took the robin out of its cage on his finger, and urged it onto the top of the cage. It gave its usual cheeps.

Vincent left the cage door open and let himself ruminate. He took out the rose from its pouch around his neck and held it reverently in his hand. He had looked at it in this spot before, that time Catherine had gone to visit her friend, and he was unsure if she would ever come back to him.

Life ... and death ... could be very cruel. He had so many regrets, blamed himself for not allowing their love to flourish before that fateful night in the cave. They'd had too little time to enjoy the new relationship, and he had not known Catherine was pregnant - or that he had a son - until he had found her on that rooftop.

For a long time, Vincent sat unthinking, just staring at the falls and letting its noise wash through him. And then a noise of quite a different kind woke him from his trance.

He heard a long trill and looked around. His robin was singing! It was perched on a small rocky outcrop, obviously having flown there, and it was singing its heart out - loudly. The trills echoed around the large cavern. It almost seemed it was calling, or announcing its territory, as robins did.

Then it flew back to the cage and trilled some more from there. Vincent closed his eyes and smiled. He stroked the rose and whispered her name reverently, "Catherine".

Suddenly, there was complete silence, as if every noise in the world had suddenly stopped - or had he gone deaf? Then he heard his own name ... "Vincent" ... in the soft tones he always associated with his love. He opened his eyes in shock and looked around. The robin was still sitting on its cage, silent now. Naturally, there was nothing to see.

The silence persisted and suddenly he heard, "I love you Vincent. Always."

The words seemed to float on the air.

"And I love you too, Catherine. Always," he whispered back.

And suddenly the noise of the falls returned. The robin was still silent, but seemed to be watching him.

Vincent looked at the rose and carefully returned it to his pouch. He had no idea what had just happened, but on this day of all days, he did not question it. It was a most marvelous illusion and he held onto it, hearing her voice again, as he had so often heard her so many years ago.

He thought of Thoreau's poem, which suddenly seemed more relevant than ever. He recited it softly to himself.

*"I was made erect and lone,
And within me is the bone;
Still my vision will be clear,
Still my life will not be drear,
To the center all is near.*

*Where I sit there is my throne.
If age choose to sit apart,
If age choose, give me the start,
Take the sap and leave the heart."*

(I Was Made Erect and Lone – by Henry David Thoreau)



Vincent felt much better, better than he had for a long time. With a sigh, he got the robin onto his finger and back into its cage, then closed the door. He decided it was time to have lunch and brought the bird with him into the dining hall. He was welcomed by everyone, and the robin attracted a lot of interest.

“Red sings now,” he reported happily. He said nothing about the other voice he had heard, but everyone noticed he seemed more content. No one needed to know more. They were happy he had found a measure of peace, on this day of all days.

END