

CHARLES

(Vincent's Journal Entry)

by Jackie Kapke

It's been a week now since they left. I've had ample time to reflect. The image still floats in my mind, that first moment when I looked upon Charles' face. For some time now I have pondered over it. His appearance is neither repugnant nor frightening to me, and I realize there are both subtle and vast degrees of ugliness in the world.

I, too, can understand the great sacrifice he made in revealing his features for the first time to me; in trusting me to attend to his wounds, the wounds of his flesh, as well as his spirit.

We felt a true camaraderie from the very beginning, and I truly enjoyed our brief discussions and hope we will have the opportunity to do so again in the future. I pray that he will have found a measure of peace and acceptance when we meet once more.

He said my face was different, but that it was good, not like his. I told him that his face and mine were "mirrors where frightened men saw the shape of their own fears and small men saw only ugliness." I still believe those words.

I can feel Charles' pain, for it is my own. Even so, his lies far deeper. I have often thought my face and body my own prison, but for Charles, this is truly so. He cannot speak, walk or even turn his head without the reminder of the restrictions his body forces upon him.

I am so ashamed of my previous thoughts, of regretting my very existence. As Shakespeare so aptly put it, "Cursing my fate, almost despising myself."

Catherine and I have since read the play "The Elephant Man." This man suffered from the same disease as Charles and led much the same life. I knew I could empathize with what this Englishman was forced to endure, yet even I could not truly know the pain he and Charles sustained, and Charles still has to bear. For even as restricted as my life and world, or my experience has been, they are gentle and kind in comparison.

I, from an infant, have always known kindness, caring, and acceptance from those who love me, despite my differences. My body has never had to endure the physical abuse and mutilation, nor the verbal torment thrust upon these two men. I don't believe that I could have survived such treatment. Something inside of me would have died and the rest would have had to follow.

These men are made of something stronger.

I am certain that we, all of us here Below, could become familiar with Charles' appearance and accept him, even the children, in time — possibly they more easily and readily than some of the adults. This has proven to be so again and again in my own case. Could they all not accept Charles, as well?

As I gaze at my own face in this lovely hand mirror from Catherine, I see many things differently. I study my own features as never before. Catherine wishes this. She says it is not difficult to find the beauty there. I certainly tend to differ, doubting this, and am unsure of what she wants me to see. But I am trying. However, I find it impossible to see myself in the same way that she apparently does.

I accept myself for what I am, and the face before me at least has symmetry, balance, and a resemblance to things in nature. I suppose one could grow accustomed to it.

But Charles' face is something altogether different. His features are truly a conglomeration of skin folds, lumps and tumors, patches of hair haphazardly thrust here and there, all molded into deformity.

My face looks as if there might have been some purpose in it, the odd lips, nostrils and fangs. Father believes I was intended to be as I am - but somehow nature went astray with Charles. There is no order, no focus, until you find his eyes. They reveal so much of his pain, yet glow with a love, an innocence I've never seen before. Catherine says my eyes have the same light. It would be wonderful if this were so.

Charles has an incredible smile, it touches me so. In a way, he has a beauty that no one I know has ever possessed. He has a pure heart with faith and trust, even in a brother who has beaten, caged, and hurt him, possibly beyond healing. He still loves this Eddie and can — does — forgive. I doubt I could find such inner courage as that.

I truly hope to hear from Devin soon. He promised he would write.

I'm sure they are having some marvelous adventures, and I pray that some of Charles' wounds are healing.

I am ashamed as a little envy rises in me, but Catherine has told me repeatedly that this is not evil, but very human. That in itself reassures me, yet I do wish that one day I, too, could see the mountains.

But I must stop these selfish thoughts and be thankful for my blessings, I have so many. Like the feel of the sun Charles must be experiencing on his face, Catherine is my sun, my warmth and light. She, like Charles' Devin, is my salvation. And her response to Charles? She is honest. She said his face is awful, but holds no terror for her. She feels sorrow and pity for him, yet she treats him with the respect and courtesy she would any man.

Perhaps I should not have, but I asked her, "What if I looked like Charles?"

She paused a long time and finally replied that it would have taken her longer to grow accustomed to, and comfortable, with me, but that she would have loved me nonetheless. She said, "How could anyone not love what is inside of you, Vincent?" She made me weep like a babe in her arms.

Then she truly surprised me by saying she didn't think that she ever could find Charles physically attractive and desirable in the manner she found me. Me! Sometimes I wonder what it is that draws this remarkable woman to me. What is it that she really sees?

Faces... there are so many I have known and loved, so many I hope to see again — those that are gone, and those yet to come.

Yes, Charles, we are brothers as surely as Devin and I are in the way of all men. And we are brothers in our uncommon bond.

The End