

A Midsummer Night's Performance

By

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"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars..."

Oscar Wilde

Father had always said that the city above had its own kind of magic, though it was often hidden behind steel and smoke, traffic lights and hurried faces. Down below, in the tunnels and passageways of the old subways and forgotten basements, Vincent could feel magic in every stone, every dripping pipe.

And yet, on this particular evening, the magic was not in the shadows. It was in the laughter of children, tiny sparks lighting up faces that had never known Vincent's world, except through the stories Father had often told them. Not that they needed any special occasion to hear one of his tales.

But tonight was special. The children had given one of their concerts and everything had gone very well indeed. There were many happy but tired faces among the crowds of small tunnel dwellers who crowded to the dining tables that had been pushed back against the walls. William and his team were serving food and drinks to all comers.

Catherine re-entered the underground hall, carrying a stack of papers, a small folding stool, and more than her usual sparkle of excitement. She'd slipped out at the end of the children's final performance.

Father followed more quietly, his eyes taking in the familiar walls, covered in murals and graffiti from decades of children's creativity. And Vincent... well, Vincent carried himself as always, graceful and imposing, yet gentle, as though aware of the fragile world he was entering. The three of them carried a secret they'd concocted, that was only now to be revealed.

"Are they ready?" Catherine asked, kneeling to adjust her things on the makeshift stage, which was really just a cleared area of stone-flagged floor at the back of the hall.

"They are," Father replied quietly. "But please do remember. The children do not need to understand every word. They just need to feel the story and cheer for the players."

"I will," Catherine assured him quickly as she made ready.

Vincent gave a small nod, his blue eyes softening. "Then they will feel the words and how we say them. Shakespeare is like music. They will know the notes even if the words are strange."

Catherine grinned. "Well, I hope they like music, then, because Vincent, you'll be playing Romeo." She paused, one eyebrow raised. "With your natural flair for tragic romance, of course."

Vincent's lips twitched. "I shall try not to disappoint."

Father chuckled, moving to the back of the hall. "I shall be the chorus, then, introducing the tale." He held up a small lantern, casting a warm glow over the cleared space. "And I shall tell them of love, of strife, and of dreams that dare not sleep."

The children had noticed them by now. Carrying their food and drink, they begun to gather again. Their eyes were wide with curiosity, some sitting cross-legged on the floor, others perched on crates or leaning against the walls. They whispered to one another, exchanging excited glances, as though expecting a miracle in the form of a human-shaped shadow.

Catherine clapped her hands for attention. "All right, everyone, settle down please. Tonight, we have a very special treat. Vincent, myself and Father are going to perform a play by a man named Shakespeare. It's about love, adventure, and a bit of trouble. Do you like a little trouble?"

The children laughed and nodded eagerly.

"Yeah!"

"Always!"

"Any time!"

"Okay good! Okay, fine!" Mouse crowed from among his smaller fellows as he settled himself cross-legged on the floor.

"All right, keep quiet now please." Father raised his hand. "I want you all to listen closely. This is the tale of two young lovers, Romeo and Juliet. But beware, this is not just any love story. There are families at odds, secrets, and choices that are not easy to make. Yet, there is hope. There is always hope."

Catherine waved her hands. "And now, Vincent and I will show you what that hope looks like!"

Vincent stepped forward, towering but graceful. He bowed deeply, as though performing for kings rather than children.

Catherine took his hand, lifting it slightly. "I, Juliet," she said with a flourish. "Promise to make this adventure unforgettable."

The children giggled, their laughter echoing through the underground hall.

"Act One, Scene One," Vincent began, his voice deep and melodic, "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene..." He paused, letting the words hang in the air. "From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean."

Father stepped closer, lowering the lantern so that its light fell across the children's faces. "That is the world our lovers are born into," he said softly. "A world of conflict, but also a world where courage and love can shine brightest."

Catherine skipped forward, spinning as she spoke. "And here comes Juliet, sweet and daring, who dares to dream beyond her walls!"

Vincent, in a rare display of humour, tilted his head. "If only walls could speak, they would tell us tales as old as time. Yet, walls are silent. So we must speak for them and for ourselves."

The children leaned forward, captivated. There was something mesmerizing in Vincent's voice, in its calm authority. The way it wrapped around each syllable, making the centuries-old language feel immediate, alive.

As the play unfolded, Catherine and Vincent moved among the children, involving them in the scenes. One little boy was chosen to be the Capulet messenger, delivering a note with great pomp, while a small girl became a "feather of fate," fluttering a scarf to mark the entrance of Juliet. Vincent's strength became a source of gentle support rather than intimidation, holding up a wooden balcony so Catherine could declare her love in full dramatic flourish.

Father, meanwhile, narrated from the shadows, giving life to the chorus. "And so, beneath the stars of Verona, two hearts beat as one, yet peril waits at every turn. The night is full of whispers, and destiny is a patient observer."

There were moments when Vincent's voice softened almost to a whisper, leaning close to a child to explain a line.

"See," he said to one wide-eyed boy. "Romeo speaks not just to Juliet, but to the world. To love is to speak boldly, even when afraid."

The boy nodded solemnly, clutching a small notebook where he had begun to write his own lines.

The children laughed at Catherine's antics, gasping at the tension between the feuding families, and cheered when Vincent and Catherine's characters found

moments of tenderness. For a while, the tunnels felt less like a shadowed underworld and more like a theater suspended in time, a place where magic was real and love was tangible.

Vincent lowered himself to Catherine's level during a particularly delicate scene. "What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun," he intoned. His gaze was soft, almost reverent.

Catherine's eyes sparkled as she replied, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

Father added, softly but insistently, "Remember, children, words have power. They shape our world, even in places where shadows dwell. Listen carefully, and you may learn to speak your own magic."

One little girl, clutching a stuffed rabbit, whispered, "I think he's really a prince."

Vincent smiled gently, brushing a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "Perhaps. Or perhaps he is simply someone who has learned to protect what he loves."

The play continued, carrying the children through love, conflict, and reconciliation. There was laughter, tears, and the occasional gasp as Catherine dramatically fainted into Vincent's arms, only to be "rescued" by a heroic display. Father's narration wove everything together, reminding the children of the lessons hidden in the lines.

Finally, the last scene approached. The children held their breath as Vincent's Romeo and Catherine's Juliet faced their tragic choices.

But Father's voice, calm and reassuring, reminded them: "Even in endings, there is hope. Love never truly dies. It lives in the stories we tell, and in the courage we share."

When the final line was spoken, Vincent knelt before Catherine. "For never was a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

The children erupted in applause, clapping and cheering with unrestrained joy. Some ran forward to hug Catherine, others to shake Vincent's enormous hands or jump into his welcoming arms.

Father's eyes twinkled as he held up the lantern once more. "And now, my young friends, remember: stories are not just words. They are bridges to understanding, to feeling, to imagining what might be possible. To world we can visit, but only in our dreams."

He smiled at the throng of youngsters. "Which is where you all need to be. In your beds with your eyes shut."

Catherine gathered the children around for a final bow. "Thank you, everyone! You were the most wonderful audience anyone could ask for. And remember, you can always be brave, and you can always love, no matter how dark the tunnels, or the world above, may seem."

Vincent, though usually reserved, allowed a small, genuine smile to touch his face. "You have been courageous tonight, all of you. Courage is a quiet, persistent magic. Never forget it."

As the children began to drift away to their baths and beds, Vincent, Catherine, and Father lingered in the hall. The echoes of laughter and applause slowly faded, leaving only the quiet hum of the city's subways above and the steady drip of water from the ceiling.

Father leaned on his cane, looking at the pair. "It is good to bring light to children. To give them hope, even in small ways. This... this is what truly matters."

Catherine nodded. "And to see Vincent... well, I think you were born for the stage, you know. You have a way of making words come alive, even for those who have never heard them before."

Vincent's dark eyes met hers, and for a moment, the shadows seemed to soften around him. "Perhaps. But I could not do it without you, Catherine. And without Father, who reminds us of the story behind the story."

Father chuckled softly. "Then we are all actors, in one way or another. And the audience... the audience is the world. We must play our parts as best we can."

Catherine stretched, rubbing her arms. "Well, if that's the case, I call it a success. I think we may have started a love for theater in more than a few hearts tonight."

Vincent inclined his head, as graceful and solemn as ever. "And if we have, then perhaps we have changed the world, even if only for a moment."

The three of them stood together in the quiet hall, the flickering light of Father's lantern casting long, gentle shadows on the walls. Outside, the city moved on, unaware of the small miracle that had occurred below.

And yet, in the hearts of the children, a seed had been planted. A seed of imagination, courage, and the enduring power of love.

For Vincent, Catherine, and Father, it was another day of bringing light to the darkness. Another story told. Another magic shared. And as they extinguished the lantern and stepped back into the tunnels, Vincent felt a rare, serene satisfaction. The city above might not understand him, but here, with these children, in this hidden world, he had witnessed something truly remarkable: the pure, unyielding joy of a story well told.

And in that moment, the underground felt less like a labyrinth of shadows and more like a sanctuary, where love, courage, and the magic of Shakespeare would live on forever in the hearts of those who had watched, listened, and believed.

"Life is what happens to us while we are making other plans..."

Allen Saunders