

“Eternity in an Hour...”

Judith Nolan



*“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour...”*

William Blake, Auguries of Innocence



“Should be... right here.” Mouse moved his left hand slowly back and forth over the old, uneven bricks of the dark tunnel wall, then stopped. “Triple bricked. Built to last.” He frowned at his companion. “Still want to do this, Vincent?”

“Yes.” Vincent nodded. “It’s our best option.” He didn’t question his friend. He knew Mouse was uncanny in his knowledge of the tunnel layouts and what lay behind the walls.

“If you’re sure, then you’d better stand back.” Winslow set aside his oil lantern before hefting a heavy sledgehammer to his shoulder. “This could take a while.”

“Mouse knows,” the tinker’s tone was accepting of his larger companion’s scepticism. “Leads to tunnel behind basement of Catherine’s building.” He moved aside, making room for the two larger men to work in turns.

“All this for a woman...” Winslow shook his head, spitting on his palms before his hammer swung down onto the old brickwork, shattering several bricks at once.

“It is the safest way for her to return to her world.” Vincent hung his lantern on a nearby hook, before his own hammer whistled downwards, and several more bricks shattered.

“Mouse could take her out,” the tinker offered. “Easy. No-one sees Mouse.”

“You don’t understand nothin’.” Winslow scowled, as his hammer flew. “She only knows about Vincent, and we want to keep it that way. The less she knows, the less she can tell when she gets back Above.”

“Don’t see why she should tell,” Mouse grumbled, as he removed the loose bricks and set them aside. “Vincent said she promised him not to tell.”

“That’s as may be.” Winslow threw another heavy strike and bricks shattered. “But ya can’t always trust what women say. I know that much.”

“I have accepted Catherine’s word,” Vincent said quietly, his powerful hammer making short work of the second layer of bricks.

“Can’t say you’re not right about this one,” Winslow admitted grudgingly. “But it’s still better this way. You take her out, Vincent, then we bring up some old bricks and close up this hole, like it’s never been. No way back, then, if she changes her mind.”

“I had thought to leave it open.” Vincent avoided his good friend’s questioning gaze as he attacked the last layer of bricks. “It would be impossible for Catherine to find her way back to the home tunnels.”

“Oh, so that’s the way the wind blows...” Winslow paused, leaning on the wooden handle of his hammer. “Have you told Father?”

“He knows...” Vincent admitted quietly, swinging his hammer with extra force.

“I bet he does.” Winslow shook his head as he resumed his assault. “Doesn’t mean he’s gonna like it. He don’t want her staying here. It’s too dangerous.”

“What’s Father not going to like?” Mouse straightened from his work of stacking piles of broken bricks into a nearby recess, leaving the floor clear to work.

“Our friend here’s making a fool of himself,” Winslow replied baldly. “Sorry, Vincent, but it’s gotta be said. She can’t be anything to you. It’s way too dangerous.”

“I know...,” Vincent sighed, as he began to pull away loosened bricks, slowly enlarging the hole they had made. “I have heard all the arguments.” He turned to help Mouse clear the floor.

“Vincent’s Catherine.” Mouse shrugged. “Maybe she doesn’t have to leave. Maybe she likes it here.”

“Now *you’re* being foolish,” Winslow grumbled. “Woman like that’s got powerful friends and family who want her back. You can’t keep her like some treasure you just happened to find.”

“Why not?” Mouse asked innocently. “Vincent likes her.”

“It cannot be,” Vincent replied, before Winslow could retort. “As much as I might wish it to be so...”

He continued to clear the loose bricks, enlarging the hole until it was big enough to step through. Beyond another dark tunnel ran away in both directions. Retrieving his lantern from the wall, he crouched and moved forward into the darkness.

“Come on,” Winslow encouraged the tinker. “The sooner we get this done, the faster I can get back for my dinner.” He picked up his lantern before disappearing through the hole, following Vincent.

“Winslow’s always eating,” Mouse complained, in an aggrieved tone.

He followed both men into the next tunnel and they moved further along into the darkness, their flickering lanterns casting grotesque shadows on the walls. Finally Mouse stopped, turning his head from right to left and then back again. He pulled a ragged map from his pocket and studied it by the light of a small flashlight strapped to his wrist.

“You lost?” Winslow demanded, watching the tinker check his bearings.

“Nope.” Mouse shook his head, as he moved down the tunnel, then stopped.

Again he put his hand to the wall and moved it back and forth. Then he nodded.

“Here. It’s right behind here.”

“You better be right, boy. Your map could be all wrong,” Winslow complained.

“I’m not missing out on some of William’s pot roast for anyone.”

Mouse flared up. “I know what I know, and I know where it’s at! Map is right, second basement is here. You’ll see.”

“Okay, Mouse. Geez, I was only asking,” Winslow grumbled, taking Vincent’s lantern from him and setting it aside with his, on the floor of the tunnel.

“We’re wasting time arguing.” Vincent stood back and picked up his sledgehammer. “Here, right, Mouse?”

“Right there.” Mouse nodded vigorously.

This time the bricks were easier to remove, not being as well cemented as the older bricks in the outer tunnel. They broke through the wall with relative ease.

“I can see light...” Winslow pulled away several bricks before he bent down to peer through the hole. “I don’t like this. We must’ve missed our mark.”

“Map is right,” Mouse avowed stoutly. “Sub-basement to Catherine’s building right through there. Not in wrong place.”

“The light must be coming from the basement above.” Vincent removed more bricks to expose a concrete block room containing a few scattered boxes and a damp floor where water pooled on its uneven surface. It smelled damp and musty with disuse. “I doubt anyone comes down here.”

The light from above shone down through an opening in an unearthly, blue-white column that took his breath away. He stared at it for a long moment, striving not to imagine Catherine leaving him within its mysterious glow. He could make out the shape of a ladder pinned to the wall behind the light that obviously lead up into the main basement above.

“Don’t look like anyone’s been down here for a long time.” Winslow pushed into the hole beside him. “That’s a good sign.” He turned to his good friend. “Will it serve, Vincent?”

“It will serve. Father says Catherine will be ready to travel in a couple of days. I will bring her out, here.”

“I’m sorry, my friend.” Winslow’s heavy hand settled solidly on Vincent’s shoulder. “I truly am. But, we both know, there just ain’t any other way...”

“Yes...” Vincent’s voice roughened. “There is no other way...”

“And it would be better to brick it up again, after she’s gone.” Winslow straightened. “To avoid any thoughts she might have about coming back down here.”

“I... it will stay as it is, for now.” Vincent moved back out of the hole they had created. “I will make sure she does not find the way back.”

“Suit yourself. Still think it’s a mistake.” Winslow followed him back into the outer tunnel. “I’ll get a guard station set up down there by the first hole, none the less. We don’t want any... unfortunate incidents.”

“No, Winslow...” Vincent stopped the big man with a firm hand on his forearm. “You will leave it all exactly as it is, for now.”

“Vincent...” The blacksmith shook his head. “You know it cannot be...”

“I know...” Vincent sighed. “But it is all I can do, for Catherine.”

“Women...” He paused, then said, “Ya know, my father used to quote this poem, when he was working with a tricky piece of metal that just wasn’t going his way. He said it was all about finding eternity in an hour. Like he was saying he tried to bend time to make the piece do what he wanted.”

The big man shrugged, and shuffled his feet. “I know it sounds a bit crazy, but I thought it might help you and Catherine make some time. You know that poem, Vincent?”

“Yes, I know it.” Vincent nodded. “Your father was a very wise man.”

“Yeah, he was...,” Winslow agreed, his dark cheeks reddening.

Seeing he’d made his point, he turned away to clap Mouse on the shoulder, sending the tinker staggering into the shadows. “Come on, lead the way home, Mouse. I’m starving.” He bent to pick up his guttering lantern.

“You’re always hungry,” Mouse accused, rubbing his abused shoulder.

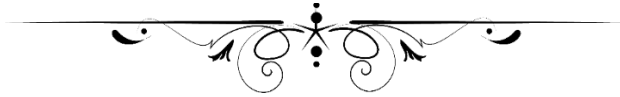
“I’ve got a lot to maintain.” Winslow laughed, patting his ample girth. “Be seeing you around, Vincent.” His lopsided smile was deeply sympathetic as he collected the tools. “When you’re ready to come home.”

Pushing the protesting Mouse ahead of him down the tunnel, and carrying both sledgehammers over his broad shoulder as if they were matchsticks, Winslow was soon swallowed by the moving shadows. Vincent watched them leave without comment.

Like a moth drawn to a dancing flame, he returned to stare at the shaft of blue-white light beaming down from above. Two more days... they had two more days together before he must return Catherine to her own world.

“Finding eternity in an hour...,” he said softly, picking up his discarded lantern.

As he turned from the shaft of light and returned to the chill darkness of the tunnels, his heart settled like a stone in his chest. However much he wished Catherine could stay with him, he was painfully aware her leaving was predestined...



Two days later, Vincent brought Catherine to the hole in the brickwork by the longest route he could devise. Time lengthened as they walked down tunnels and past abandoned passageways he hadn't visited in years. Anything to stay the moment she would finally leave his world.

But, eventually, he escorted her to their destination. He stopped outside the opening he and Winslow had created, that led into the sub-basement of Catherine's building. Placing one hand on the brickwork, he leaned forward to look into the musty room beyond.

"This is where you go out..."

"Where are we?" Catherine looked around, completely mystified.

"The basement of your apartment building."

Catherine laughed uncertainly. "We are?" She paused, unsure of what she should do now. "Vincent... Your secret is safe with me. I would never betray your trust..."

He hurried to reassure her. "I know... I knew that from the beginning, when you trusted me." He leaned back against the wall beside the hole, trying to stretch the limited time that was left to them.

She reached out to him, placing her hand on his chest and, resting her head on his shoulder, she buried her face in his mane. "What can I say to you..?" she whispered.

The tenderness of her embrace took his breath away. He felt time stretching and transforming into that fabled eternity he craved. He knew he should draw away, put some distance between them. And yet... his hand rose behind her, and his fingers spread against the small of her back, drawing her closer to his pounding heart.

The simple intimacy of the moment held them both spellbound. Neither had the desire to break the tenuous bond that had developed between them.

Just as the words trembled on Vincent's lips; the very moment he found the courage to beg her to stay with him, no matter the cost, Fate intervened, as she must.

Voices sounded and footsteps echoed through the vent in the ceiling of the sub-basement. Catherine started, turning away to look into the room and at the vent. She didn't see Vincent brush past her and vanish into the darkness.

Moments later, the sounds of people faded, and she turned back to Vincent's reassuring presence, but he was no longer there.

“Vincent...!” she called out, her eyes searching the shadows where his name echoed in vain.

She remained, watching for any sign of him, but knew it was useless. He was gone and she was alone.

Without hope of ever seeing him again, she raised the hood of her coat over her hair, before turning and walking slowly towards the shaft of light... and then disappearing, back to her own life...



“We leave something of ourselves behind when we leave a place. We stay there, even though we go away. And there are things in us that we can find again only by going back there...”

Pascal Mercier

