

Glory In Your Touch

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*"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears..."*

William Wordsworth

Catherine,

Tonight, I finally told you the truth. You dragged the confession from me with the depths of your abiding fears and concerns. You had so many questions. There was so much I could not tell you. So many things you wanted to know. Tonight, the words could no longer be contained.

You were sitting up in my bed with your head and eyes still swathed in bandages. I was feeding you some of William's excellent vegetable soup.

"Do you like it?" I asked, seeking to break through the silence of your suffering and pain.

You grudgingly admitted, "It's good soup..."

Then, oh Catherine, then you asked the question I had been dreading for the last eight days. "Vincent, tell me ... where are we?"

I froze, wondering what I could say to allay your fears. I looked around the underground chamber I had called my home for as long as I could remember. It had always been filled with carefully selected cast-off items, artifacts from the disposable culture Above. The furnishings – lamps, table, cabinets – had all been found or ingeniously assembled from salvaged parts. Mouse's skills in this area are legendary among the tunnel folk.

On one wall there is a mosaic of photos I'd cut from magazines. Photos of the great people of our time. Einstein, Stravinsky, Ali, John Lennon... people I would never see or know beyond the two-dimensional images pinned to the wall.

I inhaled ruefully and shook my head just as a train rumbled overhead, jerking me from my introspection.

"Somewhere there's an elevated train," you remarked with concern.

"Brooklyn? Queens?"

"No, not Brooklyn or Queens...", I replied slowly.

That was when the stark fear returned to your voice. "Am I still in New York? Vincent, please tell me! Where are we?" you asked tremulously.

What could I tell you? What could I say to allay your fears which only grew larger in your darkness? But I could not afford for you to see me or know anything about me. It was impossible.

"I have to keep it as a secret," I replied, lamely, seeking a way around the truth.

"Why?" you questioned quickly.

Yes, why? "Because, a lot of good people depend on this place for safety," I managed to say.

You bargained then. "I'll keep your secret..."

I inhaled deeply. Somehow I believed you. A woman I barely knew. But your promise was expressed sincerely, softly. I believed you, even while everything inside me shouted and pleaded to tell you nothing...

Before I could reply, someone began tapping on the pipes. I concentrated for a moment on the distinct rhythmic patterns. The message was prosaic. Helpers were needed to bring down the weekly gift of vegetables and fruit from Meng Fu's Chinese restaurant in Chinatown. If I hadn't been with you I would be on that journey to the surface and the world Above.

"And that tapping. It never stops...", you commented restlessly.

"It's people talking to each other, tapping on the master pipes...", I said quickly, hoping to divert you from your previous question.

"You mean messages?" you asked softly.

"Mmmm..." I offered you the soup spoon, wondering if I had escaped speaking the ultimate truth.

But no, your mind did not wander far from what you wanted to know. "Vincent, please. Tell me...", you begged.

I sighed deeply. "We're below the city, below the subways. There's a whole world of tunnels and chambers that most people don't even know exists. There are no maps to where we are. It's a forgotten place. But it's warm and it's safe, and we have all the room we need. So we live here, and we try to live as well as we can, and we try to take care of each other. It's our city, down here..."

"Of course, your sharp mind went to the thorny question, the single thing Father had forbidden me to mention to you. "What are you doing down here? Why are you here?"

Why am I here? I sighed inwardly. I had nowhere else to be. Nowhere else where I could exist in peace and safety.

"I was a baby. Abandoned, left to die. Someone found me and brought me here - to the man who became my father. He took me, he raised me - he taught me everything. He named me Vincent... That's where I was found, near the hospital - St. Vincent's." I laughed softly, trying to reassure you. I could find humour in it now, after all the years that had passed.

"I... I don't know what to believe...", you whispered.

"It's all true...", I replied, trying to reassure you.

I was feeding you from the bowl of William's excellent soup, using the spoon. A simple process, surely there was no danger there. I advanced the spoon toward your mouth, watching your hesitation.

Unexpectedly, you reached out to touch my hand. Seeking to find a connection with someone warm and alive. Before I could pull it away, your fingers touched on mine as they held out the spoon.

My heart felt as if it was breaking then. There was such glory in your touch. In the simplicity of your fingers resting on mine for the briefest of moments that I wished could last forever...

But the truth intruded into that precious moment of connection. Your indrawn gasp was sharp and shocked, jerking me from the incredible sensation of your touch. In your blindness you wanted to make contact with something normal and human. Something you could understand on the most basic level.

Instead, your fingers touched my hand. Something furred and animal-like. Your touch brushed across my nails which some have described as claws. Things to harm, not help or heal.

I can make no excuses for what I am or who I am. I have no answers, no pat truth I could tell you.

You did try to cover your astonishment, but it was already too late. I drew back sharply. I was so mortified that I'd frightened you in your terrible darkness. In your pain and anguish.

I moved away, quickly. Too quickly. I knew I'd betrayed the truth you put in me, but how could I stay? How could I explain it in a way you could understand?

I stopped and looked back from the doorway of my chamber. You lay in my bed, resting on my cushions and pillows. You lay there in a world of blindness, unwilling to even consider the possibilities of what you had just touched. I could feel your fear reaching out to me, enveloping me with shame and consternation.

I knew I should have insisted on sending Mary to tend to you. A woman, soft in both voice and manner. A non-threatening presence to guide you from your darkness into the light of the world you came from.

I will send her in to you from now on. I will not return here until you had gone Above, Catherine. Back to your world and your life. A world and a life I could never touch or inhabit. Not in any of my dreams or vivid imaginings of what could never be, no matter how much I wished for it to be so...

But you, I will always remember for as long as I may live in this hidden world of mine. The glory of your touch, that briefest of moments which touched my heart and left you there, forever sheltered by my love and belief in you...

You're safe, you are truly safe, now...

Vincent