

The Substance of Fear

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*"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark -
The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the
light..."*

~ Plato ~

~ ~ ~

"Once Upon a Time...beneath the City of New York..."

A hardening frost hung in the air, poised to descend with the dawn.
The cold September night probed the ground, seeking entry into
the world Below. Tendrils of damp air fingered their way down,

through hairline cracks in the bedrock, swirling into hidden caverns and chambers.

On nights such as this, the chill of the tunnels crept on silent feet into every unguarded corner and crevice. Dust, stirred by the wandering drafts, hung suspended in the flickering light of the lanterns, bathing everything in an eerie orange glow.

The advancing cold had long since sent the unwary and the ill-prepared hastening to their beds. Sensible children knew to huddle deeper into their blankets, and couples moved closer together, in long reaches of the night.

Midnight would soon arrive. Only a few hardy souls remained awake and aware. Night watchmen kindled charcoal or kerosene braziers, alleviating some of the chill. They stamped their feet, as they walked their routes, constantly on alert for intruders.

A short message tapped out on the pipes underscored the slumbering silence. Sitting in Father's chamber, Vincent cocked a listening ear towards the sound.

A helper was asking for assistance with provisions to be delivered in the morning. They would be waiting at the entrance leading down from Columbus Avenue just after dawn.

“Are you free to help with the transportation of the supplies in the morning, Vincent?” Jacob asked, as he studied the chess board between them with a jaundiced eye.

Knowing he was becoming cornered, Jacob sacrificed a pawn, trying to clear the way for his queen. Losing six games in a row had done little to brighten his sombre mood. And his son’s brooding face only added to his sense of unease. Of matters left unspoken, and unacknowledged between them.

“I will go up with the children.” Vincent nodded, as he flanked the queen with one of his bishops. His game was aggressive, allowing no quarter.

The diversion gave a necessary outlet for that which was eating away at his resolve not to give in to the impulse surging through him. It took all his strength to remain seated and focussed.

The message on the pipes was acknowledged and answered. Sharp and concise. Vincent knew there could be only one set of hands so competent.

He shook his head. The pipe-master was still hard at work in his vast chamber. Pascal never seemed to have much need for sleep. He said he moved to keep warm. Truth be told, he probably hated to relax his grip on his life's work, Vincent realised. Sleep was such a waste of precious time.

And Pascal is six weeks younger than myself...

"To sleep, perchance to dream - ay, there's the rub. For in this sleep of death what dreams may come..." Vincent quoted, beneath his breath. He rubbed a weary hand over his eyes.

He sensed his parent lifting his gaze to watch him with concerned eyes, but the old man did not comment. The need to know what troubled his son was growing between them, and soon he would ask.

"Check..." Vincent diverted his father's attention.

“So soon...?” Jacob’s eyebrows rose to his hairline. He leaned in to scowl at the board.

“I had you ten minutes ago.” Vincent shrugged, sitting back to review the constant sense of weariness tugging at his senses.

In the last few months he had tried to out-walk his rising feeling of anxiety. He’d been as deep as he could go, and as wide-ranging as he dared venture. Days passed, and he had been unaware of time.

But it had been of little use to assuage the ache in his heart. Sleep was elusive and fitful for him as it likely was for Pascal. When he lay down, Catherine’s feminine scent lingered on the pillow she had used, filling his senses.

He’d tucked the cover behind his bolster pillows so he could keep her scent near. Perhaps it was a mistake, but he could not bring himself to discard it. The other items she had used in her short stay he had kept, safely stored in his armoire.

And when he did finally fall asleep, the dreams that came were full of fractured wanting. Always, she appeared as a petite ghost,

huddled into a plum-coloured coat, moving with him through each dreamscape. She was beside him, walking down every tunnel.

Whenever she looked up at him, the criss-cross of black stitching, that held the ravaged beauty of her healing face together, did nothing to diminish the wistful look in her eyes. The wish there could be more between them. A wanting never put into words.

Once more they stood beneath her apartment building. *“The way out,”* he had said.

They had both looked towards the exit, before turning away from the shafting light. He belonged in the darkness, and she’d followed his lead.

There, in the sheltering gloom, Catherine had moved into him. She’d rested her hand on his shoulder, before her head had followed.

Vincent well remembered the incredible sensation of her slender body pressed close to his. Her warmth penetrated his thick clothing. His clutching hand had splayed against the curve of her

back, urging her closer still. He could have remained thus forever, and not counted the cost...

She had asked, *'What can I say to you?'*

Her voice had been so soft. He had barely caught her words.

Or did I imagine that, as well? Vincent shivered. He didn't know.

Then she was gone...almost as if she had not existed at all...

"There..." Jacob moved a pawn to block the check. "Take that."

Vincent studied the board. He felt as if the temperature in Father's chamber was dropping, and he felt his sense of hope go with it. He was growing cold, despite the waves of warmth radiating from the hissing brazier in the corner.

His deepening sense of chill was on the inside, rather than on the outside. He was fighting, and freezing, within. Fear held him like chains of ice. It was holding him back from doing what he knew he must.

The cold was a harbinger of the seasons changing, for some. But it had been his steady companion for too many weeks to count. He needed to change his outlook, and soon.

“I believe this counters your move.” Vincent advanced his queen.

“Darn, I didn’t see that.” Father took off his spectacles and polished the lenses, before replacing them over the bridge of his nose. He leaned in to scrutinise the board. His limited options of winning were fast disappearing. “You’re playing a risky game tonight, Vincent.” He was aware the whispering cold was not to blame for the ice he saw in his son's blue eyes. He made his next move with understandable caution.

His opponent seized the old man’s hapless queen. “Sometimes, Father, it is the only way to win.” His mouth turned down at the corners. “At least, it’s a game I know how to play.”

He studied the queen’s slender femininity, as she lay in his broad palm. Her smooth ivory form warmed his cold fingers.

The pervasiveness of unalloyed fear dragged at Vincent’s consciousness. The lingering concern that he could never get back

to who he was before loomed large. The frightening prospect that he was losing himself, and the tight control he kept over his emotional state, could not be denied.

He'd developed a raw edge to his temper that was not usual, and a tightness within his chest that threatened to un-man him during these moments of emotional weakness. His spirit felt as if it had been rubbed raw. The full measure, weight and substance of that undiminished fear persisted, unabated.

Long ago he had learned to deal with the world Above on his own terms. He owned the night. He understood the value of the shadows.

He wanted to climb down onto Catherine's balcony and stand with her. Watch her watching him with dawning wonder and curiosity. He knew which building was hers, and what balcony. But he couldn't find the courage to look, even from afar.

Catherine may no longer want him in her life. He had seen the newspapers, and known she was a desirable woman. Hers was a world so far apart from his. He had naught to offer her.

It was nothing more than a pipe-dream born of fatigue and his sense of aloneness, he reassured himself. Vincent pressed the flat of his hand to his chest. The substance of that undiluted fear was like a bitter taste in his mouth he could not swallow down or escape.

The children walked a wide berth around him, which hurt him deeply. They watched him warily, only coming closer at his beckoning, or to take their lessons. Even Mouse had begun to keep a cautious distance, his mobile face displaying the concern he could not express in words.

Tonight, Vincent had attempted to find solace in a few games of chess with his father. But, as before, the last game was only half-complete, and he'd lost interest. His fractured attention was elsewhere, and far from here.



“Vincent...? I believe it’s your move...” Father finally ventured as the long silence between them grew, fraught with things left unsaid.

He looked up. “What troubles you so?” His brows knitted together. “Are you...in any kind of physical pain?”

“I hurt, Father. I ache.” Defeated, Vincent sat forward in his chair, still staring at the white queen he held in his hand. He placed her carefully beside the board.

“But there is nothing your medicines can do for me.” Reaching into his cloak pocket, he pulled out a book.

Jacob frowned at it, but did not comment. Vincent was aware the significance of the tome was lost on his father.

He stared at the book. It was the last he had read to Catherine through the long stretches of the night, when her overwhelming fear of the dark would not allow her to sleep. The final chapter was still unfinished, and perhaps never destined to be so...*now*.

Catherine was gone from this place, and never likely to return. No matter how much he wished it to be otherwise. No matter how much her ghost haunted him.

And he could not go to her. He did not know how. *And yet...* He frowned at the book's spine.

Great Expectations... the title mocked him.

His expectations were *not* great. They could not even be described as big. *Or small.* They were non-existent.

"The children of an idle brain, begot of nothing but vain fantasy. Which is as thin of substance as the air, and more inconstant than the wind..." he quoted Shakespeare's tragedy of Romeo and Juliet, before exhaling a ragged sigh, drawn from the depths of his soul. He dropped his chin to his chest.

"I see..." Father leaned forward in his chair. "I do understand, Vincent. Truly I do." Watching his son in such turmoil, he was unable to sit by and do nothing. "Your Romeo to her Juliet. But, I'm afraid it is a relationship that was never meant to be." He tried to emphasize his final point. "She can only bring you unhappiness..."

Goaded, Vincent leapt to his feet. “Then I’ll *be unhappy!*” he replied vehemently. “But I can’t forget her. We’re still connected...”

How could he explain that he felt Catherine’s pain as if it was his own pain? *Sometimes almost as if we are one...* Her physical and emotional agonies, and her triumphs of spirit pierced his heart, even as they uplifted it. They had all roiled through him.

Vincent worried Jacob was correct, and the fear hurt as much as the rest of it. Pain and fear, a potentially lethal combination.

Vincent took a turn towards the chamber door. He could walk out and hear no more of Father’s sane reasoning. But he knew the parent meant his words to be well intentioned. The same substance of fear underlined every word. The old man looked totally at a loss to know what to do for the best.

“I feared this...” Father shook his head sadly. He watched his son’s agitation. He had no words to assuage the pain he heard in that beautiful voice. He had thought removing Catherine from his son’s life was the answer.

Now he could see the error of that thinking.

There is a wealth of unfinished business between them. But, surely, the ending would always be the same...

Vincent sighed. He tried to explain. "I can feel what she's feeling. I know what she's thinking -- when she's frightened. When she's happy, or sad..."

Father seized on the confession. "Vincent, your senses -- your empathic powers are quite extraordinary. It's your gift. And these powers have been heightened by the concern, the *love* that you feel. But don't let your act of kindness destroy you..." As he feared it very well might.

Vincent looked down at the book in his hand. "Maybe I have no choice..." Vincent felt himself finally reaching a decision of sorts. He could remain in limbo no longer.

Unable to continue sitting, Father rose from his chair, going towards his son. He intended to place a comforting hand on his forearm. He wanted his beloved child to know he was not alone in this. No matter what the ultimate cost might be.

If only Vincent could forget. Enough to function as he had before he had found the young woman's body in the park, more dead than alive. Before he'd heard her voice, and had fallen in love with the impossible dream of being a part of her.

A true Shakespearian tragedy...

Margaret... Father's heart whispered her name longingly, and the old, remembered pain stabbed him anew. At the first sight of her, he had been totally lost to all words of caution or sense. What sort of counsel was his to give?

"I understand all too well the pitfalls of falling in love with an impossible dream." Father's mouth compressed with sadness. "Your break with that young woman was clean. It is better left so. I cannot see it will do any good to revisit the past."

Awkwardly he patted the other man's shoulder. "We have time yet. Come back and finish the game. You already have me on the ropes. Let's reset the board and start over. I'll brew us another pot of tea, and then we can--"



The rest of his sage advice dried in his throat as Vincent whirled on him. One great, clawed hand gripped the shoulder of his evening robe, and the sudden growl of warning from his son startled him into awed silence. He froze into immobility as he felt his feet begin to lift from the ground.

Gleaming teeth bared, Vincent snapped, “Leave it, *Father!* You have made your point. I am being foolish beyond all permission. Do you not think I am aware of that? But I *cannot* forget her! Do you not think I have tried?”

“Very well...” Father nodded jerkily. He waited.

They remained standing, eye to eye. Father’s two hands closed around the tensed muscles of his son’s forearm, attempting to loosen the iron grip.

Vincent leaned closer. "If I am destroyed, then so be it," he growled. "But I must see her one last time. To know she is well. She must know I think of her still, and always will. *Always...*"

Vincent shook his head, trying to clear the roaring confusion inside. Even to his own ears, the words sounded pathetically inadequate.

He should stay away. He knew that. But the fear of ultimate rejection that tightened within him could not be allowed to fester and grow. He had to know the truth.

His chest rose and fell with the enormity of his decision. Unconsciously his fingers firmed their grasp on the shoulder of Father's robe, drawing the older man even higher.

"Um...Vincent..." Father murmured, rising onto his toes as his breathing became constricted. "Please, let me go now. You have made your point. I will keep my counsel."

Vincent blinked down at him, lost for the moment to what his father was saying. Suddenly, he inhaled deeply. His grip relaxed and he turned away, dragging air into his starving lungs. Both hands

closed around the book he still held, and he raised it to rest the spine against his burning forehead.

"I am sorry, Father." He turned back. "Did I...did I hurt you?"

"It's all right, Vincent." Father adjusted his clothing, striving for calm. "I understand, truly I do. You have not been yourself lately. Everyone has said so. They all feel for you, my son."

Vincent's lips curved wryly. "Your gift for understatement is truly unmatched," he remarked, without heat.

He approached the older man, sliding one arm around his shoulder and pulling him close. He kissed the lined forehead. "Wish me well, Father. I am going Above tonight. And I would go with your blessing."

The dawning light of pathetic hope in his eyes was painful to look at.

"Go with my love instead." Father sighed, laying the palm of his hand against his son's cheek. "I was young once, and just as determined." He shook his head sadly. "But that is for another time..."

He took his son's great head between his trembling hands and kissed his hair, before stepping back. Releasing him to the perils of his unknown fate was the hardest thing Jacob had ever done.

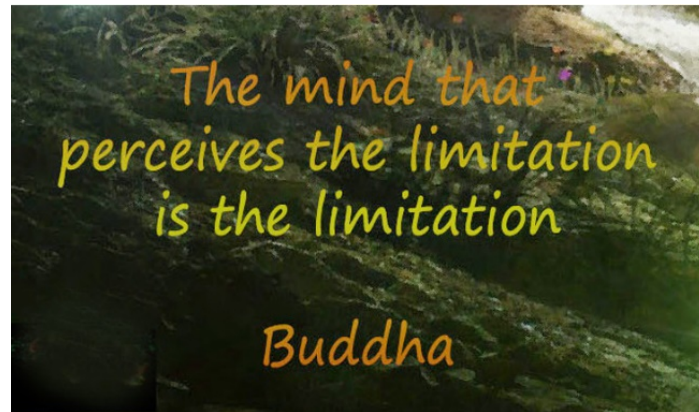
He watched Vincent nod, as his son threw the voluminous folds of his great cloak about his broad shoulders. Taking the steps two at a time Vincent was soon gone from sight. Eager to continue the conversation that had only just begun...

"There is no place for you, in her world, Vincent..." Father reached to set out the chessmen back in their proper places. He turned the black king over in his palm, his hand closing tight around it. "And I am so afraid there can never be a place for her, in yours..."

~ ~ ~

"Always do what you are afraid to do..."

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson ~



The mind that
perceives the limitation
is the limitation

Buddha