

What Do You Wear, Vincent?

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"A gift consists not in what is done or given, but in the intention of the giver or doer..."

Seneca

Kneeling before her coffee table, Catherine caught the edge of her bottom lip between her teeth as she worked on making her gifts as pretty as possible. Intense concentration was written across her frowning features, as she secured the red silk ribbon around the last, foil-wrapped box.

She sighed with satisfaction as she sat back to survey her handiwork with a critical eye. "All done!" Her lips compressed. "Now for the hard part. Delivering them, and hoping he understands my intentions."

Three identical, neatly packaged gifts were laid out before her, and only she knew their contents. In the department store, it had been easy to make her purchases, passing them over the counter along with her credit card and a guilty glance at her wristwatch.

She was well aware she'd already overstayed her lunch hour, but the choices had not been easy to make and she'd almost chickened out of the whole idea several times.

"Maybe I should have bought him a book, after all..." she mused. But that was the safe option, and something had prompted her to buy a totally different gift.

Guessing the right size for her purchases had not been an issue. She'd always been a good judge and she'd had her arms around Vincent's waist often enough to be reasonably certain of his measurements.

"Besides, who am I going to ask?" Her mouth lifted ruefully at the corners as she picked up her coffee mug, taking a welcome sip of the fragrant brew.

She was certainly not going to talk to Mary. And asking Vincent would only embarrass him and give the game away.

Three days ago, the smiling approval of her choices by the male department store clerk had bolstered her courage. It had buoyed her all the way back to work and to Joe's censuring frown of discontent and pointed glance at his wristwatch.

"Sorry. I lost track of time..." Catherine had shrugged her apology and hurried past him to her work station, her shopping bag banging guiltily against her thigh before she stuffed it out of sight beneath her desk.

Now, in the cold light of a new day, she didn't feel quite as certain. She'd hurried through her shower and consumed a breakfast of toast and coffee, all the while mulling things over in her mind.

She knew she was taking a huge risk this time. A giant leap of faith and she prayed Vincent would forgive the sudden intimacy of her intended gifts.

Finally, she heaved a doubtful sigh, clinging to her original resolve. "Surely it's past time."

Today was Friday, January 12th and Catherine had gifted herself the illicit pleasure of a three-day weekend. She wanted to properly celebrate Vincent's birthday with him this year.

Joe had been unhappy, but he'd reluctantly conceded that Catherine had taken very little time off in the previous year.

"Just don't be late on Monday," he'd grumbled, waving a warning finger. "Or don't bother coming in at all."

"Thanks, Joe. I owe you one..." Catherine had quickly gathered her things and hurried for the bullpen door before he found an excuse to call her back and put her to work.

"Yeah, you do..." Joe had looked after her, before returning to his own work, shaking his head ruefully.

Catherine sat herself on one of her dinky couches while she finished her coffee. After three years of their slowly-evolving relationship, she'd decided it was up to her to take the plunge and move them both forward in one giant leap. After all, Vincent had already seen her in that filmy nothing of a lace-edged silk nightgown, one unforgettable evening during a recent thunderstorm.

"So, I think it is well past time for him to come clean and confess," she reasoned.

Even if it did seem she would have to make him. Catherine was well-used to his sudden reticence if she went too far, or tried to explore any new or unfamiliar territory. He was quite capable of removing himself completely from her, leaving her alone, frustrated and confused.

More frequently now, Catherine had been struggling with a burning question. She really wanted to ask Vincent what exactly *did* he wear beneath his jeans. The firm curves of his rear end and thighs, whenever he shed his all-concealing cloak, often attracted her undivided attention. But to no avail. In the last few months, she'd become addicted to slowing her pace so she could watch him walk ahead of her down the tunnels, allowing her time to speculate.

To her critical eyes, there were no tell-tale lines or slight bunching of fabric showing beneath all that thigh-hugging, worn denim, helping to signify which style he followed. It was a mystery, and she'd been forced to bite her tongue and not ask the troubling question.

"Catherine?" Vincent would stop and look back at her, puzzlement in his blue eyes at her fixed attention on his lower regions, but he'd forbore comment.

However, his sudden stillness had spoken volumes. That was the signal for Catherine to hurry and catch up, a slightly breathless excuse framed and ready on her lips. Vincent always studied her flushed cheeks with thoughtful attention.

Catherine's eyes narrowed now as she contemplated her gifts. "If I didn't know better I could almost swear he goes commando..." Her heartbeat quickened at the vision the idea engendered.

Surely, this last could not be an option given the chill of the tunnels and the dampness of the stones. *But still...* Her mind's eye entertained the delicious idea and she spent several minutes staring into the middle distance, flicking through a collection of tantalising imaginings.

"Okay, so what did that do for you?" She felt her cheeks warming. She blew a sigh upwards at her fringe, as she ran her fingers lightly over the gifts.

The men of her social circle seemed to be evenly divided between their love of boxers or briefs. Every man she'd ever dated had been convinced of their own style and dismissed all others. It was breathtakingly daring to ask Vincent which he favoured, but she was finally willing to take the risk of causing possible offence.

Catherine smiled mistily. At birthdays and Christmas, her father always reminded her of a sound Chandler family maxim, whenever she puzzled over what present to buy him that year.

"If in doubt for a gift, underwear or socks are always a good standby and never go amiss," he'd told her cheerily.

The drawers in his bedroom were full of said items, a testament to how often Charles received the bounty of his own words with good grace, and a faint smile of dubious appreciation. Many such gifts found their way into the charity bin.

Catherine knew her father fell neatly into the briefs-only camp. He disliked the airy looseness of boxers, disparaging the modern style. Where Catherine was aware younger men like Elliot Burch favoured boxers for that very same reason.

"This really is getting me nowhere fast!" She got up from the couch putting aside her empty coffee mug and reaching for a nearby hold-all.

Soon she would descend into the secret world beneath her feet and perhaps this time she would receive an answer to her long-held question. In the privacy of Vincent's chamber where no prying eyes could see, they would open her gifts together...

"Boxers..." She held aloft the first gift, balancing it in her hand, before sliding into the bottom of the bag. "Maybe..."

"Briefs..." She picked up the second box and weighted it before it followed the first. "Possibly..."

"Or commando..." Those images of unfettered masculine freedom rose anew in her mind, and she shivered with anticipation. *If that is truly the way of it...*

"Then there is this." She snatched up the third box and tossed it in her hand. "If in doubt there's always safety in a good pair of warm socks." She laughed shakily as she added that last to her bag and tied the opening shut.

Another reason had impelled her sudden surge of bravery. Vincent had not come to her balcony for the last three weeks. Much-needed work on new chambers kept him busy Below, as her crowded schedule prevented any such encounters.

Catherine felt she'd spent the whole time stumbling from one crisis to another. Coming home late each night, only to eat and sleep, and both had been in very short supply.

Now she felt she could finally breathe again. All she wanted to do was see her love and rest in the strength of his embrace. And to finally ask him.

She lifted the department store bag doubtfully. "Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, after all..."

She knew if she hurried she could buy a different present and still make it Below in time. But some inner voice stopped her from discarding the bag.

"Surely it's an innocent enough question..." She sighed.

Walking toward the front door of her apartment, she picked up the overnight bag she'd packed the previous evening. Collecting her keys, she let herself out and locked the door behind her. If all went well she would be spending some much-needed time Below.

She hurried to the elevator and pushed the button summoning the car to her floor. She swallowed tightly, aware her heart rate was picking up and a renewed sense of nervousness quickened her pace as she rode the car to the basement level of her building.

Vincent knew of Catherine's approach long before she entered the tunnel world through the sub-basement of her apartment building. He frowned, sensing her rising sense of confusion. Something was puzzling her.

It had troubled her a few day ago. Now the sensation was renewed, echoing to him the moment she'd woken up and gotten out of bed. As the early morning hours ticked by it had not abated. As she advanced into the tunnels, the sense of her confusion was intensifying.

Seated in his great chair, Vincent lowered the book he was looking at without really seeing it. "Catherine...?" he queried softly, bewildered by her state of upset.

He knew she was coming down to celebrate his birthday with him. He was looking forward to her company. But he worried about what could be upsetting her now.

She intended to stay with him for the whole day and sleep Below in the guest chamber for the first time in a long while. She'd insisted she would come down to him this year, rather than their usual limited rendezvous on her balcony after the sun had set.

Vincent had always been content with his birthday being a quiet affair. The day usually meant a convivial game or two of chess with Father while William baked a large cake for all to share. There would be stories and the recounting of Vincent being found in the snow behind St Vincent's hospital.

No one ever made a fuss. Until Catherine had come into his life.

His brows drew together in puzzlement. Surely celebrating his birthday was nothing special, nothing to cause such a sense of confusion in his love.

He put aside his book as he stood from the chair, collecting his cloak that had been flung over the back. He shrugged it onto his broad shoulders as he left his chamber and began the long walk through the tunnels to meet his love.

"I've missed you..." Catherine smiled when Vincent walked out of the tunnel shadows to meet her. "It has been too long." She stopped and put down her bags, holding out her arms.

"Sadly, our time together is so often measured in minutes instead of hours..." Vincent walked up to her, drawing her close into his embrace.

"But not this time. Now we have three whole days to share." Catherine sighed moving her cheek against the warmth of his quilted vest. "Happy birthday, my love."

"Thank you..." Vincent smiled down at her as he drew back. He bent to gather her bags in one hand. "Come, we will go and see Father."

"We can do that later." Catherine put a detaining hand on his arm. "I want to give you your presents first." Now she was here, she wished to get the whole gift opening over with so she could relax and enjoy his company.

"Very well." Vincent shrugged. He glanced down at the department store bag, but he didn't inquire about the contents.

He slung his free arm around her shoulders and they walked on together in companionable silence until they reached the entrance to his chamber. Vincent stood back to allow her to go before him.

Catherine took her bags from his out-stretched hand, putting aside her overnight bag. She smiled as she indicated for him to sit in his great chair.

"You have me intrigued," Vincent admitted, as he shed his cloak and sat down.

"It has been three years since that night you found me up in the park..."

Catherine drew up another chair. She placed the department store bag on the table before her, untying the neck before holding it between her hands.

"It's been the best three years of my life," Vincent admitted honestly, watching her. His love's troubling sense of confusion had lessened, almost as if she had come to some kind of decision.

Catherine shifted in her chair. "Perhaps this was a bad idea, after all..." She moved the bag aside.

"You have come a long way to see me. I feel you want to ask me something," Vincent encouraged softly. "I have felt it for some months now. Every time I turn around your attention seems to be elsewhere. What better time than this? You know you can ask me anything, so please, ask..."

"You make it sound so easy..." Catherine's lips curved into a wry smile. "It seemed to be when I was buying these, for you." One by one she drew the gift-wrapped parcels from the bag and placed them on the table between them.

"These last three weeks, you have been working too hard and getting too little sleep," Vincent reached to take her hand, holding it between his own. "I have sensed your tiredness. Now you must know you can relax here, with me."

He turned her hand over and frowned at her palm. "And anything said between us shall remain here, between us." He looked up, giving her all his trust and love through the strength of their shared bond.

"Well..." Catherine shifted the gifts around, sorting through them. But since they were all wrapped in the same foil and tied with identical red silk ribbons, she had now lost track of which one was which.

"Blast..." she said ruefully, her shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Is there a problem?" Vincent asked, trying to maintain a solemn expression.

Catherine looked up. "I've really made a hash of this, haven't I? And I wanted so much to do this right."

"You are being too hard on yourself..." Vincent smiled as he lifted her hand to his lips. "I am in no way disappointed. How could I be? You are here with me. I could not ask for anything more."

"Well, since I have no other presents for you..." Catherine returned his smile. "I guess there is only one way to find out."

She selected one box and pushed it forward. "Happy birthday, Vincent. Open it and then I can explain."

"You have my complete attention..." Vincent accepted the package and made short work of the binding and foil wrapping. He opened it to bring out a pair of nice, warm socks.

He held them up with a slight look of mystification. "An excellent choice. They seem harmless enough."

Catherine shrugged. "Yes, they are. Perfectly harmless."

"Ah..." Vincent mused. "I gather this is the safe end of your worrisome gifts."

"Yes, the very safe end," Catherine admitted ruefully as she selected another box. "You see, I've had this question in my mind for some months now. I thought your birthday was as good a time as any to ask."

"I sense a 'but' in there somewhere." Vincent accepted the second box with a dubious look.

"Just open it," Catherine encouraged. "I think you'll find it's self-explanatory." Her smile widened as she relaxed back into her chair to watch her love open his gift.

Vincent shook his head as he again made short work of the wrappings and dipped one hand inside the box. He drew out a pair of black silk boxers which fell into obvious shape in his grasp.

"Now you know all about my burning question," Catherine admitted, watching him turn his gift over in his hands.

"Briefs or boxers?" Vincent's eyebrows rose high.

"Yep..." Catherine began to laugh. "I've been torturing myself with the possible answer for ages. And I just cannot decide."

"But you didn't think to ask me?" Vincent joined in her laughter.

"I had no real idea how to approach it." Catherine looked up at him. "You are so unlike any man I have ever known, or bought presents for."

Vincent took the third box, opening it to reveal the pair of black briefs. He laid them on the table beside their companion pair of boxers.

He studied them closely. "Your size judgement appears to be accurate. I am sure these will fit me."

"Oh, that was the easy part." Catherine waved a dismissive hand. She considered him closely. "You're not upset?"

"How could I be? These were given with love and thoughtfulness." Vincent sat back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest. "So, all those long looks at my rear-view, all that dallying behind me, when we were walking together, has led to this?" His broad shoulders began to shake with mirth.

"I'm glad you're taking it so well," Catherine sighed. "But you still haven't answered my question." She placed a fingertip on each undergarment in turn. "Is it briefs or boxers? You know I have to know, now."

"Sadly, despite the thoughtfulness of your gifts, it is neither," Vincent confessed, his shoulders still shaking.

"I see..." Catherine's eyes opened slightly as her mind began to race.

Commando, then? It was a question she was not about to voice. But the images conjured up in her mind were many and varied. She felt her cheeks begin to warm.

"I do not think you do..." Vincent pushed back his chair and stood.

He came around the table to draw Catherine from her own, taking her arms and placing them around his waist, bringing her closer against him.

He looked down into her wondering eyes. "The tunnels are cold enough in summertime, but in winter they can be very cruel to the unwary and the unprepared. Damp air always finds its way down through hairline cracks in the bedrock to make its presence known. No one goes about without the right amount of clothing."

"Yes, I know you all need to dress warmly for life down here, but—" Catherine began.

"I haven't finished." Vincent put a finger to her lips before sweeping his lips across her forehead. "As lovely as your gifts are, and deeply appreciated, they would not serve me well on sentry duty or when I go Above to see you. The park in winter is just as unforgiving."

"Oh..." Catherine frowned in puzzlement.

No commando, then? She couldn't help feeling somewhat let down.

"My love, you are completely on the wrong path..." Vincent shook his head as he took hold of her hands, moving her fingers to rest along the line of the belt fastening his jeans.

"Feel..." he said, moving her fingers behind the strong leather.

Taken aback by his permission to proceed with the sudden intimacy, but eager to explore, Catherine did as she was bid, running her fingers quickly beneath. The elasticated line of something else under the waistline of his jeans gave beneath her touch. She touched on thin fabric that felt like wool. She paused, then went on to explore further, understanding dawning on her features.

"Oh...", she said again, now knowing what her love had been trying to tell her.

"Nothing so romantic as boxers or briefs, I'm afraid," Vincent told her ruefully. "But in the cold weather of the tunnels, you cannot beat a good long pair of woollen underwear."

"I should have guessed!" Catherine withdrew her fingers somewhat reluctantly and hugged him close. "I'll remember for next time."

"That's not to say your thoughtful gifts won't be put to good use in the summertime..." Vincent looked back to the table as he rested his chin on the top of her head. "And I truly appreciate the socks. They are always a good standby and never go amiss."

"If only my father could hear you now..." Catherine broke down into laughter, clinging to him. "You would find yourselves in total agreement. Oh, happy birthday, Vincent!"

"Count your age by friends, not years. Count your life by smiles, not tears..."

John Lennon