

Beyond victory, beyond defeat

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova



1.

LAURA

Another Monday, another day stuck here, selling papers and pretending I am a part of the great big world. Working during the days, fulfilling my Helper's duties at weekends. Mr. Wise has been good to me, I have to give him that... But even after seven months, it's still not working... I still don't feel like I belong, quite the opposite, I feel like a bird's egg that had been put in the wrong nest...

When I was leaving the Tunnels, I was scared and excited at the same time. I didn't know what the world Above would offer me, but I was thrilled to open a new page and see everything I had only read and dreamed about down Below. All the colours, scents, sights, people... I may not have been born with the gift of hearing, but all my other senses work perfectly, like a Swiss clock! Not that I have ever seen one, working one, that is, apart from the broken wristwatch Mouse found on some trash site.

After Vincent saved me from that horrible man who tried to kill me, I didn't have much faith in New York Above at first. Then he and Catherine told me that evil exists everywhere, Above and Below, but that there is even more goodness and beauty in both places. We only have to open our hearts and minds to accept and appreciate it. And so I did leave the Tunnels after all, like many children do once they grow up there. There are many of those who decide to stay Below, but I've always felt that I was missing something down there.

My parents abandoned me in Central Park when I was barely four, probably because they couldn't cope with an imperfect child. I couldn't speak, nor sign, every interaction I had had until then was one of rejection or pity. I didn't know what love was, for all I got was indifference. One of the Helpers found me sitting near the Carousel that evening and brought me to the Tunnels. He's a policeman and kept checking the missing children lists for a few weeks, but no one ever reported me missing. So I stayed Below.

I was frightened at first. The closed, narrow and mostly dark spaces confused me. However, Father, Rebecca and Mary, in fact, everyone else were always very kind to me. They brought one of the Helpers, a sign language teacher, to teach me sign. Once I could express myself, everything seemed much easier. Vincent always said I learned to sign much quicker than he did...

Vincent... I miss him; I wish he were here... I wish he would tell me that this feeling of uncertainty in my heart is just temporary, and that I *will* find my place in this world and love it one day, it just takes some time... He was my teacher, my closest and kindest friend, someone I always looked up to. Even when I saw him for the first time, only a few weeks after I was brought to the Tunnels, I don't remember being scared of his face. Maybe because for the first time in my life, I saw someone else who was different from

others, just like me...

Vincent... What should I do? I *want* to fit in here, but I am suffocating...

Stop daydreaming, Laura. We have newspapers to sell, Mr. Wise signs to me, bringing me back to my senses. I sign my reassuring reply to him and turn back to my duties.

That tall, young man at the end of the newsstand... He's watching me... but not in an uncomfortable way. Mr. Wise is selling a magazine to someone, so I have to serve the young man. I approach him and catch myself observing his face for a moment - it's a good, kind, handsome face, with warm and gentle dark eyes that smile at me...

I'll take this one, please, he signs... He signs!! Oh, I can't believe it!

Are you all right? he asks me, probably because I'm staring at him with my mouth half-open. He's still smiling though...

I'm fine, thank you, I quickly sign back to him, barely managing to prevent my hands from shaking. I feel the blood rising to my cheeks, and I smile nervously back at him. *That's thirty-five cents, please.*

He takes a few coins out of his jeans pocket and passes them to me, then folds his *Times* and puts them under his arm. He's still smiling at me, and I don't know why I suddenly feel so hot... Maybe it's the tenderness of his gaze or the way he seems not wanting to leave, maybe because no man has ever looked at me that way...

Are you here every day? he asks suddenly, and I find myself nodding like in a trance.

My grin must look funny because he chuckles, then smiles even more widely, revealing his perfectly white teeth. There is definitely something warm in his eyes, like the candles that used to fill my room in the Tunnels...

Then, I'll see you again, he says, and I smile in return. He slowly turns to leave, then stops and looks back at me. *I'm Jerry,* he signs.

Laura, I reveal my name to him and can't stop smiling. The coins in my hand feel like hot embers for some reason.

'Till tomorrow then, Laura...

I barely manage to react when he turns for good this time, crosses the road and disappears out of my sight.

The customers, Laura, Mr. Wise points out to me more insistently. I turn my attention to a middle-aged and impatient man in a funny hat and sell him his daily newspaper.

More people come and go, and I serve them as well as I can. Still, the heat from my

cheeks hasn't disappeared, and my head can't forget that face and that name: Jerry...

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2.

VINCENT

I enter the large study quietly as always; I have no wish to interrupt Father's regular reading of his medical journals so abruptly. Peter has been truly generous in supplying him, and I know how much staying in touch with his former profession means to Father. It is the only reminder of his past that he happily dwells on, not only for practical reasons and the advantage of everyone living in the Tunnels.

He notices my presence and acknowledges it by closing the magazine in his hands and taking off his spectacles.

”Vincent,” he says, with that warm, joyful smile that has greeted me so often in my life. “Is it time for our chess game yet?” He glances at his pocket watch, knitting his brows.

”Not yet, Father,” I say, smiling too.

He regards my face, the frown on his forehead an unmistakable sign of his deep focus. “Is something the matter?” he inquires.

I walk over and join him at the table he has been reading at. ”Laura has run away... She hasn’t been seen in four days.”

My words shake him more than even I expected. ”Why?” he breathes, his voice filled with genuine incomprehension and sorrow.

I shake my head before replying. ”I’m not sure. Gregory said she had been restless and unhappy with the work for some time now. She had some bad experiences with people being rude to her because she didn’t react quickly enough, due to not hearing them. It seemed to have upset her greatly. The same happened on the day she ran off.”

Father sighs and absently runs his hand through his grey hair. ”I sensed she might have problems adapting to the world Above. As I have experienced on my own, it is a fast world, where patience is more often an unknown term, and someone like Laura needs a lot of patience.”

”She is a very bright girl,” I say, then correct myself, ”*woman*.”

”A very young woman,” Father remarks.

”Still, a woman, facing a world she had never known. There are surely feelings within her that add to her confusion.”

Father seems more worried by the minute. He frowns again. ”Do you think she... ran away with... someone?”

”I don’t know,” I answer truthfully, ”but anything is possible. Gregory said a young man come to the newsstand every day to get his newspaper, but mainly to talk to Laura. He uses sign language as well. They started meeting after work as well.”

”I guess that’s why she has missed out on her duties as a Helper recently.” Father shakes his head. I recall his face every time someone told him our friend hadn’t shown up with supplies as agreed.

”Laura knows our lives depend on the support of all the Helpers. I’m sure she will see her reason in the end. If she found someone who she feels understands her and makes her happy, who are we to judge her? She had suffered enough since the day she was born.”

Father looks deep into my eyes, mulling over my words. "Let's hope you are right," he says then. "Mainly, let's hope she's all right."

I nod. "*Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul - and sings the tune without words - and never stops at all.*"¹

Father finally smiles, and he covers my hand with his. "It will never cease to amaze me how you do it."

"Do what?" I ask.

"Make me believe that everything is going to be all right."

I can't suppress a smile as well, but I don't speak; there is no need to. I slowly rise from my chair. "I will be back soon for our chess game," I reassure him, as if giving him a more pleasant way out of the sad topic, even though we both know it will only be a temporary one.

"Yes... I'm looking forward to it," Father replies with a quick smile, then a grey cloud settles on his face again.

"I'll have the children check a few areas while they're out," I say, feeling his worry, mirroring mine. "Perhaps someone will see her somewhere."

Father nods and smiles gratefully, reaching for his spectacles once more. "Thank you," he says before disappearing into his magazine again.

I smile at the image, so dear to my heart, then I take my leave.

I walk the Tunnels as I have hundreds of times before, but I cannot focus on their warm, dim glow, nor the shades of brown and grey of their walls. My mind is on Laura...

I see her as a child, still barely ten years old, collecting every piece of shiny stone or shard, admiring their colours and shapes, putting them together into the most creative and striking images. I remember all her clocks, scattered around her chamber, with all their ticking, creating a peculiar myriad of sounds night and day... I see her glowing face when she found the first one on a scavenger hunt with Mouse. She was so happy...

Where is she? Is she well? Did we let her out of her safe nest too early, not prepared enough, and uncertain? Have we failed her somehow, so much that she refuses to seek our help? Father was right; she is only nineteen years old, and still so fragile... I realise my questions might remain unanswered for some time, perhaps forever (I shudder at that thought).

No... I'm certain that if she needed a sanctuary, she would return to us, knowing she would surely find it here. After all, this is still her home... Yes, I must hold on to hope and its wings, the hope that never stops at all...

¹ Emily Dickinson: *Hope Is The Thing With Feathers*

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3.

JERRY

God, forgive me, but I can't keep it inside any more... I don't want her to get hurt; she's so precious, the most precious thing I have ever had in my life...

Laura, I wish I had the strength to tell you the truth! I should have told you right from the start, even before I found out you knew the members of this damned gang! I want to tell you so badly, but how? How to tell someone you love you've been pretending to be someone you're not? How should I tell you that I am not deaf, and most of all, that the reason why I became a member of this community was to spy and gather evidence on

Lincoln? How could I have known you were one of them, too?

I should never have let you leave your safe place. You had a job, a home... What do you have now? A pretence-life with someone who is everything Lincoln orders you to hate...

I felt the restlessness, rage and confusion in you from the moment we met. Despite it all, there was also sweetness, kindness and gentleness as well, shining from you, just like that charming curiosity that never leaves you.

All the time, you have been angry with the world that condemns you. You think you have found a community where you can be yourself and live without the judgement of the people outside of it.

But how? How can you find peace among violence and acceptance among self-proclaimed division? This world is full of prejudices, I know it for my parents *were* deaf and they too had to find their way in it. However, Lincoln's community is not free of them either. Why is it that people can't sit down and talk about their differences instead of throwing knives or shooting at each other? Sticks and stones may indeed break my bones, but words will never hurt me...

When I was assigned to this mission, I could not have predicted that you would cross my path. Even less could I have predicted that I would fall in love with you, so deeply and hopelessly that I'm afraid to mess it up just because I'm terrified Lincoln or someone else from the gang might hurt you...

I wish I could tell you I didn't want any of this to happen, but I will also never regret meeting you, despite the circumstances, for it's the best thing that ever happened to me in the twenty-five years of my life...

Being a detective is not an easy job, and I'm still only a beginner, learning something new every day. But the one thing no one can teach you there is how to stay impersonal when so many times, your heart and humanity can't just step aside and make way for duty.

This is the first time in my career I've been really struggling with it, for on one hand, I want to do my job properly and bring justice to those who deserve it, but on the other hand, I'm afraid of the personal loss it might cost me, even more, the physical harm and emotional blow you might suffer from it...

Do you remember our first date, Laura? I took you to that cosy little café round the corner near your work... We had burgers with fries and a milkshake, and suddenly, you started laughing... with that almost soundless but sweetest laugh I can imagine, making your whole face light up like a hundred candles - you said I had a milkshake moustache. I smiled and took another sip of my shake, making the moustache even bigger. Then I crossed my eyes and made a funny face. You laughed even more, and at that moment, I never wanted to do anything else but make you laugh for the rest of my life... I wanted to wipe the shake away, but your small hand stopped me and took the napkin from my hand.

Slowly, very slowly, you erased all traces of my earlier silliness, while still smiling. I couldn't focus on anything but your eyes, large, warm and dark, sparkling like diamonds in the night, and your full lips, inviting, tempting...

I had loving parents – God rest their souls, for they died too young - and I've met some great people in my life, but no one has ever shown me so much tenderness, care and love as you do, Laura... You have become the reason why I want to live and breathe every day as if it were the last thing in my life. We have only known each other for three months, but you have given my life a real purpose.

I have seen you in good and bad: in times when you were joyful and carefree, in others when you were giving, gentle and considerate, and in those when you let loose your anger and hate at the world that has treated you unjustly. I hate seeing you in pain, and it's tearing me even more to know that I will add to your pain once you find out the truth...

Will you be able to forgive me? Will you understand that despite hiding my true identity, I have never lied to you about my feelings for you and that I am my true self only when I'm with you? In your innocence and genuine nature, in your love, I have found my happiness, and you have become my soul mate...

Catherine says I can't come near you because of the danger I pose to you... but how? I can't remain silent... I need to get you out of that deceiving and toxic den, take you far away where no one could harm you, and we could live free and happy!

Will you come with me? Can we escape the threat looming over us? Can I tear you away from the community, which you say you finally fit in, although you do anything but? Is that the right thing to do? I don't know... I only know one thing: I will not rest easily until I try at least, whatever the danger...

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4.

CATHERINE

That was close... *really* close. What if Vincent appeared just a moment after he did? Laura would be dead now, and Jerry probably too. Oh, Laura... How much she had suffered already! How was any of us to know what would lie ahead of her when she left the Tunnels last year?

I guess she had to learn her lesson the hard way; maybe we all have to. She thought the world was against her and that by joining a deaf community and building a wall around herself, letting only Jerry into her private sphere, she would find safety, understanding and happiness.

Now she knows that we can't be guided only by first impressions. We must face our problems and let in those who love us, because they just might show us the side of the story we need to hear.

"Thank you," Jerry says quietly, lifting his hand from the hospital bed and reaching for mine.

"Thank Laura," I reply, with a knowing smile. "The police came because of her." I can't tell him she rushed to Gregory only to get Vincent's help. Mercifully, the boy was probably too beaten and sore to look up and spot him. Would he even believe me that a fantastical being came to his and Laura's rescue, risking his exposure and life again?

He turns his face to her – she's sitting by his other side, watching him with worried eyes, and I'm sure I can see guilt in them too.

"Thank you," Jerry whispers and slowly signs at the same time.

Laura smiles, a tear running down her shaken face. She grabs his hand and presses it to her cheek as if afraid he might disappear from her sight. All the anger and resentment from his - what she saw as - betrayal seems gone from her; she looks so fragile, like a frightened bird that flew through a big storm and managed to survive only by sheer will.

I silently retreat from the bedside, respectfully giving them privacy.

I was pretty harsh on Jerry just yesterday, but remembering his sincere words about what Laura means to him and seeing the genuine love and devotion in his eyes as he regards her, I cannot help but feel sorry for him. I have known him only for a few months, but I know that his heart is pure and honest. He didn't plan this scenario, but like so many unpredictable events in our lives, it happened.

I should know about that very well... And maybe it was meant to happen. Maybe these two souls, each lonely in their own way, were meant to cross paths and find themselves in each other. Exactly like Vincent and I did...

"I'll see you later, Jerry," I say quietly, feeling bad for interrupting such a tender moment between them. "We'll need your statement."

"I'll try to write everything down... before you come," he says with some effort, affected by the pain killers.

"No rush," I counter, shaking my head, then smiling. "Get better first."

I nod and smile at both of them, intending to leave, but before I open the room's door, I feel Laura's hand reaching for my arm. I turn around and see her sign something to Jerry.

"She wants me to translate," Jerry says, watching her.

“What is it, Laura?” I ask, genuinely curious.

She looks at me before signing again, not leaving my eyes.

“Please... thank him for me,” Jerry says again. His voice suggests he’s a little confused, but he doesn’t inquire further. Maybe he thinks she means Gregory. “And tell him I’m sorry,” he adds her last words.

I smile at Laura, seeing the anxiety in her eyes. I don’t need an explanation, for I know exactly who she means and how she feels.

“You can tell him yourself tomorrow,” I encourage her and lightly squeeze her arm.

Finally, she smiles as well and lets me go. After one last glance at Jerry, I leave them alone.

As I walk down the hospital corridors, I feel tired, and yet I can’t stop thinking. So much has happened so quickly... When I saw Laura at the break-in that night, all I could think of was, *Where did we go wrong?* I know Vincent has been worried; his sense of responsibility overpowering his rational thinking. But no matter how much we love someone, we are not responsible for all their actions. Laura made her choice and had to pay with a distressing experience to learn from it.

Still, her choice somehow brought Jerry into her life, and that’s the beauty of it. It seems that darkness is always followed by light, no matter how much we suffer.

I smile, my thoughts travelling to Vincent again. *I found my light in you, Vincent, never to fear darkness again.*

The thought puts a spring into my step, my feet inevitably carrying me to the one destination I long to be right now. It’s late, but my mind is set on the Tunnels. I need to tell Vincent that Laura is and will be all right, that everything is going to turn out all right in the end. Life is not always a walk in the park, but sometimes, it blesses us with the most beautiful roses...



*‘Holding anger is a poison...It eats you from inside...
We think that by hating someone we hurt them...
But hatred is a curved blade...and the harm we do to others...
we also do to ourselves.’*
- Mitch Albom: *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* -