

What Is Love?

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Note: The concept of the latter part of the story was inspired by the wonderful “Sibling Ribaldry” by Olivia K. Goode.

This story appeared first in the "Together Forever Vol. VI: When You Whispered My Name" Treasure Chambers onzine in 2022.



The circular wooden desk in the middle of the chamber was covered with sheets of paper, neatly piled into two batches, accompanying the usual selection of old books and a few candles. On that afternoon, he was sitting in his favourite high-back chair and slowly but attentively making his way through the papers in front of him. A shuffling sound from outside the chamber made him raise his maned head.

“Vincent?” Jacob asked and peeked in from the corridor.

"I'm here," the man of the chamber answered.

The older man approached his son, followed by Diana Bennett, who was suppressing an amused smile.

"The newest member of our chess club has agreed to play with me tonight," Jacob said with a cheerful expression. "Diana said she hasn't played for years. Don't worry," he turned to the detective. "I'm sure you'll remember a move or two in your favour."

The young woman nodded in agreement. "I hope so," she added hastily, keeping a straight face.

"Joe is trying to close a big case, so I thought I'd give him some space and catch up with the Tunnels," she explained to Vincent with a smile.

"I bet he is sorry to miss the chance to even his score with Father tonight," the lion-man remarked, amused. Joe had only won one out of the last five games with the Tunnel patriarch, and his competitive nature called for revenge.

"Maybe I can teach Diana your master move," Jacob remarked with a conspiratorial wink, making Vincent chuckle. "We thought you might wish to join us and watch, since Catherine won't be back with the boys before dinner. I'm sure they are having a great time at the cinema. What is it they are watching?"

"*A Bug's Life*," Vincent replied.

"Oh, I see." Jacob raised his eyebrows. "Well, Catherine surely knows what she's doing... I suppose a little biology in their free time never harmed anyone." He flashed a quick confused smile.

Both younger people in the chamber lowered their eyes, hiding their amusement.

"Anyway, will you join us then?"

Vincent shook his head lightly. "Not today, Father; I'm sorry. I have all these assignments to correct for tomorrow." He gestured to the piles of paperwork on the desk. "But I am sure you will enjoy yourself even without me," he added fondly.

The patriarch sighed, inwardly a little disappointed at what he thought was a lost opportunity to show off his skills for once. "All right. I bet you gave the children some riveting topic to write about. Zach always complained that he had no time for learning, only time for writing assignments."

"Until he followed Michael and was accepted to a college Above," Vincent added, making all three of them laugh.

"What is the topic of the paper?" The patriarch was curious.

"A question: *'What is love?'*" We have been reading *Romeo and Juliet*," his son replied. "Would you like to contribute?" he teased.

"Oh... I'm more than certain that the children have provided you with eloquent enough answers to that question," Jacob answered evasively. "Well, we won't disturb you then," he concluded.

"I'll see you at dinner," Vincent said, amusedly watching his beloved parent mumble a *yes, yes* and slowly walk out of the chamber.

When Jacob was out of sight, Diana leaned to Vincent. "He has no idea I was a champion during my years at college," she whispered. "Three years in a row."

Her friend raised his eyebrows.

"Hey, 'What you don't know...' " The detective winked with a cheeky smile and followed her challenger out.

Vincent couldn't help but laugh - yet another chess player out of his father's league. Dinner that night should definitely be entertaining.

Returning to his duties, he took the sheet on the top of the first pile of papers in front of him and leaned back against the comfortable padding of the chair. While reading the lines, he had to chuckle every now and then.

What is love?

by Joey

I must confess that I have never properly thought about this specific question. Of course, the boys don't talk about anything else these days, but I don't really understand a word of what they say, something about blonde girls looking better but having less brains or something like that. (Tommy got a smack from Leah when he mentioned it in front of her, her hair is the blondest you can imagine as you know, but please, don't tell Mary!)

I'm not sure how to describe love. You can't smell it (maybe only on Valentine's Day, that's when William has to bake more cakes and usually burns one because he's got too many to do).

You can't hear it (unless Mouse tries to repair something for Father but almost blows himself and us up in the process, and Father fights not to scream at Mouse when scolding him, and later apologises and tells Mouse he was only worried about him).

And you surely can't touch it (unless Mary knits another blanket for Father, though she already made him six before, claiming it will make his hip feel better, and he still accepts it and gives her a kiss as a thank you). But I sure think you can see it. The eyes of people who love look somehow different, brighter, softer and more eager (almost like Mike's eyes when he is about to bite into his birthday cake). It is as if they wanted to say you're my everything. That's what I also see whenever I see you and Catherine looking at each other. (Too much detail? Sorry...)

I haven't been in love yet, though I am 10 already. But I do love Father, Mary, Catherine, Jamie and Mouse (the gadgets in their chamber are so cool!). I love all the other children (maybe sometimes I love Katie less, when she bothers me by asking if I like her hair or stuff like that and doesn't let me go until I tell her to grow up and ask about something more important, for

example, if she could see the new ship model that Devin helped me make when he was visiting recently). And I love everyone else in the Tunnels. Especially you because although sometimes you can be really demanding on our lessons, you always listen to us and encourage us, and because you always cheer me up when I have a bad day.

That's all I can think of now. Maybe I'll know more when I'm older. Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it...

Vincent's soft laughter resonated in the pleasantly warm chamber air. This was one of the reasons why children were so dear to him. They were always direct when speaking their mind, never sugar-coating anything. His long fingers gripped a pen and wrote a large A at the bottom of the paper. He didn't focus on a specific form or grammar this time. All he was interested in was the content, and Joey deserved the best grade for his paper, his teacher thought with a grin.

The vintage silver grandmother clock on the mantelpiece had quietly chimed five times by the time Vincent had made his way through almost all of the assignments. Most of them made him chuckle, and he couldn't but help mark all of them generously. Every child had a different perspective regarding what love is, but there was truth in all of them, and Vincent was very proud of the logical thinking the children showed in their answers.

Naked truth first; poetry comes later, he thought.

Mechanically, he reached for the last paper in front of him and his eyes instantly focused on the handwriting. He would have recognised those strokes before any others in the world. His eyes twinkled as he leaned forward and began to read.

What is love?

Poets have been searching for an answer to this question for centuries. I myself often wondered, and I know that love has many faces.

Sometimes it looks like a red clown's nose, appearing during those times when we feel down, frustrated or not worthy.

Sometimes it feels like a soft hand caressing our cheek before bedtime, smelling of rose-scented soap.

Sometimes, it sounds like the happy laughter of children playing in the park with their father in the moonlight.

Sometimes it smells sweetly like a red rose, freshly opened and still warm from being carefully protected under the cloak of someone who cares.

And sometimes it tastes like the first eager yet brief kiss of the lips we have been craving for eternity...

For me, it is all of these things and so much more.

It is the getting up in the morning and seeing the blue of the sky rising in the eyes of my beloved.

It is the ending of the day in the arms that I know will never let me fall.

It is hearing the voice that awakens my spirit and opens my heart.

It is the knowledge that wherever I am or whatever I do, there is only one place to which I will always return and call my home.

Most of my life, love was simply love, but now, it has a name: YOU...

Any coherent thought deserted him. The only feeling flowing through his veins and filling his heart at that moment was the one he himself had once described as the end of his aloneness and the beginning of a new life.

The elegant, beautifully flowing handwriting on the paper he was still holding spoke of the calm focus on the emotions of its author. Vincent's thumb gently traced a few words as if looking for an even deeper connection with the writer, as if that was even possible. The smile on his unusual lips perfectly complemented the dreamy look in his deep-set blue eyes. Suddenly, he felt a flutter reaching his heart.

"I'm glad the boys enjoyed the movie," he spoke with his eyes still on the paper and smiling.

Then he turned his head to the woman leaning against the wall only a few feet away from him. Her expressive green eyes regarded him affectionately.

"Charlie already dragged Jake to Father's library to see whether they can find something more about ants," she replied, amused.

Vincent leaned back with a soft laugh. His eyes focused on her, his brain looking for appropriate words to express what he was feeling right then and there.

"I see you finished going through the schoolwork," Catherine remarked innocently.

He had to admire her playful ways. He always had, ever since they had made a habit of sharing them when they started living together, and his smile confirmed it.

"Yes," the simple statement came, his eyes still burning into hers.

"Any good?" she teased, raising her eyebrows.

"Always," Vincent replied, happily playing along.

"Hmm, those papers must have been really good," she pondered. "You seem at a loss for words."

Vincent tilted his head before he spoke.

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

His wife nodded in agreement. *"Men of few words are the best men."*

"Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice," Vincent came back with a swift reply and shrugged.

Catherine grinned, and without losing eye contact with him, she slowly walked over to her husband. *"Speak, for my heart is full,"* she demanded eagerly.

Vincent thought only for a moment before his look softened as he spoke.

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite..."

"Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs," she contemplated, glancing at her own words on the paper, now lying on the desk. *"But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?"* She turned to him suddenly with a challenge.

Vincent leaned forward, his need for being closer to her overpowering him.

"Doubt thou the stars are fire, doubt that the sun doth move. Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love," he stressed the last few words. *"Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow..."*

The urgency in his voice made her lean closer to him. Hypnotised, she was unable to look away from his eyes. And yet... *"Do not swear by the moon, for she changes constantly. Then your love would also change. All that glitters is not gold."*

"Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom," Vincent insisted ardently, his face only a few inches away from Catherine's. Then he added with a cheeky smile. *"It is the very error of the moon; she comes more nearer earth than she was wont, and makes men mad."*

Her beaming smile could have melted his insides. *"The tempter or the tempted, who sins most?"* she pondered while closing the distance between their faces even more.

"Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged! Give me my sin again...", he whispered, his eyes transfixed by her inviting mouth.

"Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires!" Catherine whispered with equal intensity in her burning eyes. Just when their lips were about to meet, she pulled back an inch, knitted her brows in thought and asked, *"Is it not strange that desire should so many years outlive performance?"*

Abruptly, Vincent leaned back against his chair. *"The lady doth protests too much, me thinks,"* he said dryly, though he couldn't resist an amused, small smile. Inwardly, he laughed at the truth of her words, remembering the beginning of their relationship.

"Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak." Catherine was having too much fun to stop. *"For which of my bad parts didst thou first fall in love with me?"* she inquired eagerly.

Without a blink of an eye, Vincent offered his answer. *"Hear my soul speak: The very instant that I saw you, did my heart fly to your service..."*

Catherine hesitated for the first time since the start of their exchange. Suddenly the words came out. *"I wish my horse had the speed of your tongue."*

A few seconds of silence were followed by a heroic effort of both not to burst out laughing. However, it was too great a task, and a moment later, Catherine's heartfelt laughter filled the space, accompanied by her husband's deep and softer one.

Finally, Vincent rose from the chair; his tall figure towered over her as his arms enveloped the delicate body of his beloved. "*I would not wish any companion in the world but you.*" He spoke softly, regarding her with a look full of all the powerful emotions residing deep within him.

Catherine leaned into him even more, bathing in the feel of his broad chest covered by his favourite quilted vest. "*O speak again bright angel, for thou art as glorious to this night, being o'er my head, as is a winged messenger of heaven,*" she demanded with ardour.

Vincent smiled, and his hand gently reached for her cheek. Then his lips moved, his voice touching her ears as no one else could.

*"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace...

I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death."*¹

Catherine was so under his spell that she only felt the tear on her cheek when his thumb tenderly wiped it away. All at once she realised something. "But Vincent, that's not---"

"I know," he replied with a chuckle before his look softened again. "But it's true, every word."

She sighed, and reluctantly, only briefly, she looked away from his eyes, hinting at the paper written by her own hand. "So is this, every word."

What is love? A clearer answer to the question at that moment could not have been easier - a smile, a gaze, a kiss...

¹From the poem "*How Do I Love Thee?*" (*Sonnet 43*) by Elizabeth Barrett Browning



All quotes apart from the poem come from the works of William Shakespeare:

Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet,
Henry V,
As You Like It,
Sonnet 116,
Othello,
Measure For Measure,
Macbeth,
Henry IV,
Much Ado About Nothing,
The Tempest.