

HELIOS

by Nan Dibble

(from PHOENIX TWO)

He loved the sun, Diana discovered. Visiting her loft at night or on rainy or overcast afternoons, he'd keep up his end of the conversation, offer intelligent comments, attend to things that had nothing whatever to do with him, or anything he cared about - her current case, for instance. But when he came on sunny mornings he'd stand by the bright windows and gradually lose the ongoing thread of any conversation, interrupting her or himself with wistful glances at the skylights, until she'd suggest it might be nice up on the roof. He'd agree meditatively, as if it were a completely fresh idea to him, then vanish up there like somebody launched from a trampoline.

She didn't think he had any notion how transparent his eagerness was. She suspected his appetite for heat and bright sun had taken him so by surprise, that it bypassed completely the usual machinery by which he decided which pleasures were allowable and which he must forego. His surprise at her suggestion was real, each time, because it was new to him each time. Wholly spontaneous; pure and unthinking joy.

The first few times, she popped her rope ladder to join him up there, just being sociable. But she discovered her company constrained him. He'd sit there stiffly, all his layers of clothes in place, and try to make conversation, like somebody already half-bombed arriving at a party and trying to be polite, hoping nobody would notice their condition. So after that, she left him alone, though with a few wistful glances of her own because she would have liked to be with him, see him so happy and unguarded. But not at the price of spoiling it for him.

After two or three hours, he'd come down, laces refastened carelessly or not at all, shirt maybe open at the throat, or sleeves pushed up to his elbows - so thoroughly cooked that his hair or his furred forearm still radiated heat to her hand, half an hour later. And it took, she observed, about that long for his mind to get back in gear; talk to him and he didn't really take

it in; his occasional remarks would be random and disconnected. She could watch, almost time, his mind surfacing again, losing the sunstruck timeless state, reconnecting to the present moment and remembering a past, visualizing a future. By how long that took, she could guess how far from such awareness he'd been.

Coming back, he'd recall all the things he should have been doing - work crews to assist, classes to teach, supplies to transport, helpers to visit; all the bonds of duty. Distracted and vaguely apologetic, he'd admit he had to leave, and Diana would send him off good-naturedly enough, satisfying herself with the observation that at least keeping her company didn't seem to be in the category of duty for him; he took off without a backward glance, barely a goodbye.

She wrote in her journal; He takes me for granted. And that's good. I don't want to be another problem he has to think about, consider how to take care of. And dammit, he takes me for granted. I'm starting to feel like a damn gatekeeper. All he loves is my goddamn roof, and he can't wait to get up there. Except for the sun, I don't know if he'd bother to keep coming at all. I don't know if he even notices me anymore. All I am is a goddamn door to the roof.

Of course she said nothing about that to Vincent. And if sometimes she deliberately delayed, a little, suggesting he might enjoy her roof, to watch him glance up and try to pretend he wasn't aching to be up there, she wasn't mean enough to withhold the invitation more than a few minutes. The way his face lit up, how new it somehow was for him, every time, how much he wanted it, and his complete lack of calculation. Somehow she knew if she didn't offer, he'd never ask - because of things that warmed her, that she looked forward to. Each minute she delayed his pleasure, she delayed her own in giving. So she didn't keep him waiting long.

Absently biting a hangnail, she wrote; He doesn't think about it - he just wants, as directly and wholeheartedly as a five-year-old wanting to go to the circus. And the circus is forever for him - never stale, never disappointing. His head just cuts out altogether, I think. Thinking spoils some things. You just have to do it. I don't think he's had anything like that, except maybe music, since he was a kid. Innocent; overwhelming. And I sure don't goddamn want to spoil it for him. Don't make him think about it, talk about it. Don't bring up complications like the fact I'm not too thrilled to be a door. That I might like to share it with him. That I might have things to offer that I'd get a kick out of, too. Just let him goddamn do it. Let him forget himself. And if that means forgetting me too, well, it's worth it.

After a couple of weeks, as spring strengthened into summer, she got sneaky. She waited about an hour, for him to get really settled up there. Then she dropped the ladder, climbed, and crawled along the parapet to the triangular open space where the sun beat down.

He'd taken the pad from one of the long lawn chairs and was lying face-down, head pillowed on his arms, barefoot and stripped to the waist. Golden and gorgeous.

Careful, silent, she sat on the parapet, not wanting to disturb him, satisfied for the moment just to observe the sweet line of spine, the ribs' curve, the muscular flow of shoulder blade into lifted shoulder, into folded arm, all sleeked and soft within copper-gold fur.

He didn't tan, nor did the fur bleach out; but there were brighter streaks in his mane, tumbled across his back and spread like spilled caramel on the garish pink and green floral pattern of the pad's headrest.

Except for the time after the *Compass Rose*, she'd seen him only with all his layers in place. Although she knew that everybody Below dressed pretty much the same, against the tunnels' uniform chill, knew that Vincent wasn't any more muffled and swaddled than was customary, his layers still seemed different to her. Maybe they seemed more emphatic, more like a disguise, a concealment, because of the differences those layers covered. And because he was Vincent; she'd never been particularly curious about what Father (for instance) might look like under his ruffled shirts, sweaters, and quilted vests.

She sat there quite a long while, neither of them moving, the sun's heat like a poultice across the back of her sweatshirt - solid enough that she almost felt she could have leaned against it; that if she didn't resist, it would push her slowly, inexorably, forward. And after awhile, she quit resisting. Sliding off the parapet, she let the heat push her a couple of steps and onto her knees on the gravel-covered tarpaper of the roof. Her hand did what it'd wanted to do - stroke his hair, then follow the relaxed power of shoulder and arm.

The touch didn't startle him. He didn't react at all. She wondered if he was awake. His fur was blazing hot, but with a soft heat her skin seemed to drink in like a dazzling liquid. She stroked down the longer hair on his spine. He sighed deeply and turned his head aside toward her, but obscured by the random spill of his mane. Leaning, she brushed the hair aside, uncovering his cheek and one eye that blinked torpidly, unalarmed and as willing to be shut as open. Pupil contracted to a blind dot, all blue iris nearly white in the sun-glare. Mouth slightly open,

panting slightly, lower canines indifferently exposed. Lethargic, drunk with the heat, he shifted under her hands - leaning toward her touch, moving with it, ending up, with another long sigh, flopped flat on his back, utterly relaxed.

Languorously, the light-dazed eyes regarded her. A clawed hand lifted - dreamlike; slow - to her face, fingers closing around a lock of auburn hair sweated to her cheek, drawing her head down toward and to his, warm breaths blending, no surprise, only another flavor of the all-permitting heat. The taste of his mouth reminded her of apples ... something like apples, that belonged with apples - cinnamon maybe, or cloves, or some other spice that wasn't sweet but suited the company of sweetness. She turned her lips against his, nibbling the fullness of his lower lip. His fingers spread into her hair, cupping the back of her head and pulling her closer. His other hand brushed her arm, then moved down her side to settle at her waist, the same heat surrounding them as flowed from him into her as they came together, a melting concurrence.

And the great thing about sweatsuits was that there were no buttons. Everything glided on sweat, easily; wanting the same as finding, holding the same as being held, natural and silent as sunlight, everything shining and indistinct like an ocean of sensation with no limits, only the tide that was everywhere, everything, carrying them deeper and deeper together, rising and falling in the most ancient of rhythms; and at last rocking them to sleep.

When Diana awoke, she was alone on the roof, covered by the slant of a building's shadow and by the tatty plaid blanket she kept for sunbathing. The shadow didn't bother her. The blanket did. It was a polite, deliberate blanket, laid over her on purpose.

Sitting alone in the afterglow on the cooling roof, she faced the blind wall opposite and the conviction that it would be a long while before she saw Vincent again.

He surprised her; the next night, he was back, almost as though nothing had happened. But only almost - he deflected any personal talk, on any subject whatever, by bombarding her with questions about police work, and how she liked it, and how she'd gotten into it, and how the 210 unit was organized, as if he'd become abruptly consumed with curiosity about her professional life. Skeptical, but playing along, Diana asked if he was planning to sign up. The joke went thud. He looked at her blankly for a second, then asked about how the 210

members were regarded by the regular police.

After he left, she added to the computer file that was her journal; *I think I just been paid a goddamn social call. Like visiting some helper, trying to be interested in whatever interests them. To touch base, do the rounds, show they haven't been forgotten. Like I was on his list for tonight, of the ones he was due to drop in on. I don't like this. All head, no gut. What the hell's he making of what happened? How come I got demoted to the duty list?*

She didn't like to push, demand, or confront. She preferred to wait and observe, adding detail to detail, testing conjectures, and trying to hunch out what the developing pattern might mean.

First of all, he didn't stay away. At the height of his roof-hunger, he'd been contriving to show up nearly every day. Now, the frequency went down to three or four times a week; but it never dropped below that. Often, on days he didn't come, she'd find a note slipped under her downstairs door - chatty, discursive accounts of whatever was going on, Below, that was detaining him, generally with a mention of when it would be over and he'd be free to come next. So part of the pattern was that he was determined not to withdraw from her, and equally as determined that she know he wasn't going to.

Second, there were no more daylight visits. He came only after the sun had sagged into the annihilating haze of New Jersey. They talked - easily; like friends - about this or that, personal or not. But never about the roof or the sun or indefinable spices of the sun-warmed skin. Never that.

Testing, she'd mention something comparatively neutral and ordinary, like having watched a traffic copter pass. Something to do with daytime. And it'd go nowhere. He'd sit silent until the topic went away, overtaken by some unrelated idea he'd bring up. Or she would, to break the silence - vaguely sorry to have prodded him.

She noted; *He's unilaterally given up sunlight and what goes with sunlight, and doesn't intend to explain why. I think he hopes I won't ask. So far, I haven't. So far, he's gone out of his way to show he hasn't given me up. What happened hasn't scared him off. But why the retreat? What did it mean to him, that we were together like that on the roof? How long are we going to keep dodging around it? Is he denying, or just digesting?*

Thirdly, as the sun-streaks faded from his hair and as the heat built, aboveground, so that the sidewalks shimmered with it and the macadam bubbled, even into the evening, when she kept her skylights open in hope of a breeze and served up lemonade, clinking with ice, when he visited, cracks began appearing in his resolute sociability. Long silences invaded the talk. Or he'd stare thoughtfully at the glass he was holding and slowly set it aside, letting the ice melt untouched. She began to notice unpatched, unmended tears in his clothes. Knowing how well he was looked after, Below, she had to conclude he was somehow keeping would-be menders at bay, either by not being around them, or by wearing the same clothes over and over, offering no opportunity for repair. And from no one thing, but from a hundred little things, she began to suspect he was seriously, steadily unhappy.

Uncurling from a scoop chair, she got the pitcher, refilled his glass, and knelt by the couch, holding out the glass until minimal politeness made him accept it. And she stayed there, waiting, until his eyes finally lifted to hers.

"I got a meeting tomorrow," she told him. "Most of the afternoon. I won't be here. But don't let that keep you from dropping in, if you want to. You could listen to the stereo, if you want. Whatever. I won't be back till suppertime."

He looked aside. They both knew what she was talking about. And what she was offering. The roof again - with no complications. She'd vacate, to give it back to him.

He bent his head and slowly shook it. "No. It's not that.... Thank you. But no."

"But you loved it up there," she protested softly, watching his face.

"You have been ... very forbearing. Very patient. You have asked me nothing, though I have ... felt you wondering. It is ... nothing to concern yourself with. Nothing to do with you at all. I must find a way of coming to terms with it."

"Are you sure, babe?" At his solemn nod, she persisted, "Are you sure it's got nothing to do with me? Because you got a lot to do with me, you know."

"I know." He set the glass aside to free his hands to fist together between his knees. "You are very dear to me. You have given me such freedoms ..."

"Taken a few liberties, too, maybe."

"No. It's not that," he said again. "Please. Be forbearing a little longer. Let me come when I can, bring what I can ..."

"Take what you can?"

After a minute, and very softly, he murmured, "Taking? It seemed ... It seemed like finding. Perhaps I was mistaken ... Please. Some gifts are too great, Diana. I cannot encompass them. I cannot open my arms that wide without losing ... things I must hold to. Things I must not lose. And cannot lose without losing myself."

"You still want the roof?" she told him bluntly. *And more than the roof*, she added to herself.

"Beyond all measure," he admitted steadily, again meeting her eyes. "Too much. Please. It is not a thing to be spoken of."

"What in the world can be wrong with wanting what there's no harm in taking? What's there for you, free, anytime you want it?"

His expression, for the first time, went tight and closed. "For you, it may be free, and harmless. But not for me. I ask you, one last time, to let this pass."

She backed off - literally; rising, wandering off toward the kitchen. Over her shoulder, she responded, "Okay. But this *is* the last time I will. Next time, I'm gonna kep asking until I get an answer."

"I understand."

She'd known better, but she'd pushed anyway. So she supposed it was no great surprise that he didn't come back the next day, or the one after that. Or the rest of the week, that concluded with a crashing rainstorm that forced her to shut the skylights and swelter. She realized that, until whatever was wrong got settled, she'd made it impossible for him to come back at all.

She gave it a couple more days to make sure she'd read the pattern right. No visit. No note. No nothing.

Then she collected a flashlight and went to hunt him up.

Observing was fine, provided you had something to observe. But there were times the situation left you no option except to get right in somebody's face and have the thing out.

The contrast to the city heat hit her as she stepped through her basement threshold. Her shirt was sweated into wrinkles on her back, and she'd been mopping at her forehead all day. It'd been a couple of months since she'd been Below. To the degree she'd thought about it, she'd assumed the tunnels' seasonless cool would be a relief. Instead, the air was so chilly and still that she wished she'd thought to change to a sweatshirt or bring a sweater. She took longer strides, thinking the walking would warm her. It didn't. She just felt sticky, chilled, and depressed.

And the dark was somehow darker, pierced by the limited shine of her flashlight beam. It was disorienting to go from blazing late afternoon sunshine, to darkness like the bottom of a sock at the bottom of a shut closet. Despite several excursions Below, she found the blackness oppressive today and hurried faster to reach the candle-lit perimeter of the Hub. That haste made her zig where she should have zagged and brought her to a dead-ended passage. For the few minutes it took her to sort out where she'd gone wrong and retrace her steps, she was on the edge of panicking, sure she was lost.

Which was absurd. She could have banged on any pipe and somebody would have come to rescue her. Scuffing along from candle to candle, she knew that. But somehow that rationality had been out of reach until she'd spotted the first candle niche ahead of her. *All gut, no head*, she thought ruefully. And she reflected that it must be too long since she'd been Below if the tunnels not struck her as so foreign and unpleasant.

Slowing, she swept the beam around the walls, examining her own sense of enclosure. Her head told her nothing was wrong. But her gut was telling her she was closed in, cold, isolated, and probably lost. The head knowledge kept her going; but the gut knowledge was still there, unshaken - no less powerful or real for being irrational.

She was imagining Vincent coming back, just this way, from a session on her roof. Into the dark; into the limits. Even when those limits were home, the contrast would surely hit him, too ... maybe even more forcefully than it was hitting her now.

He loved the sun. And, each time, had to give it up ... and come home to the unending remorseless dark.

What's worse, she proposed to herself, never having it, or having it and being forced to give it up, over and over? Is this what it's all been about - that it's too hard for him to enjoy the roof and then come back to this? Is that what he was getting at; that gaining a little sunshine meant losing the ability to tolerate his home?

Her gut told her there was something to that hunch - it rang true - but the problem wasn't as simple as that. There were layers she hadn't reached yet, depths she'd only begun to guess toward.

But even the suspicion that her roof hadn't been a harmless treat, but an irresistible temptation, made her feel perfectly awful. She felt as though she'd been pushing martinis at an A.A. Member, or cordially pressuring her guest to try a little crack, to make him feel good. She'd never seriously considered sunlight as a drug. But maybe, for him, it could be. Maybe the unhappiness she'd picked up on, from him, was the effect of a complex withdrawal.

That was exactly the sort of thing she could imagine his not being willing to tell her. Because it would mean if he was an addict, she was a pusher. And he'd pretty much curl up and die before he'd admit to her she'd hurt him on so grand a scale.

Sunlight. With sex for a kicker. *Screw up his head real good, why don't you?* she demanded of herself savagely.

Barging in on him and demanding confirmation of her dread now seemed about the stupidest idea she'd ever had. All her fault, and him too damn polite to admit it. Embarrassing. Humiliating. Awful.

Turning, head bowed and sneakers scuffing up dust, she followed the flashlight beam home.

About six hours later, she sat bolt upright in bed, thinking, *But he said it had nothing to do with me.*

She tried out that statement on her suspicion, seeing if it could fit ... and found it pretty iffy. Sure, he was trying to protect her from something unpleasant ... but nothing he considered her fault. You could trust his word on something like that; if it wasn't so, he wouldn't say it.

She'd just come down with a case of the freewheeling guilts, randomly picked a big enough

reason to blame herself for, and then run like hell. Scared by her own shadow.

Almost certainly, Vincent's shadow was a whole different shape, and she was still leaving him to wrestle it alone.

She threw on some clothes, including an oversize patchwork sweater, grabbed her flashlight again, and headed for her basement.

The tunnels were still dark, still cold. But it was the middle of the night - it was dark, and at least cooler, Above, too. So the contrast didn't smack her quite so hard this time. Besides, she was braced against it.

Peeking in cautiously, she found Vincent's chamber empty. She thought a minute, then went on to Father's study. A few candles were lit, inside. By their light, Father - wearing a gorgeous robe that looked to be made out of Persian carpet; all ruby and russet - was reading, at his desk, from a large book.

Standing at the head of the stairs, Diana mentioned, "You'll ruin your eyes like that."

Looking up, Father methodically marked his place with a strip of cloth. "Diana. Come in. Would you like some tea?"

Obscurely pleased by the casual reception, Diana went down the steps, responding, "No, thanks."

Among the stacked clutter on the desk was an orange crate. As she approached, she saw the edge of a puffy pink-and-blue quilt, then a small, aimlessly waving hand; Jacob. She looked in on the baby, slowly smiled, and offered him a finger to grasp. Jacob puffed discontentedly and wouldn't smile back at her, even when she poked his fat tummy. Still fondly regarding the baby, Diana asked, "Waiting up?"

"I always rest better when I know Vincent's safely home. And so does my little namesake, here. It's a parent's prerogative, worrying. I suspect one never grows out of it ..."

Father's voice became brisk, matter-of-fact; "They've been very unsettled, of late. However much Vincent may try to keep it to himself, this little one is an unfailing barometer. And that, in turn, troubles Vincent, I think ... He *said*," Father added, with a slight, skeptical emphasis, "he intended to do sentry rounds."

Answering the question she hadn't asked. So she returned the favor, commenting. "He won't talk about it to me, either."

Pulling a face, Jacob began fussing and reaching - wanting to be picked up. Glancing for Father's permission, Diana collected baby and quilt and began slowly pacing around the study, gently jouncing and snuggling the child, who looked at her wide-eyed, then grabbed a fistful of her hair and began contentedly gnawing.

"Jacob's missed you," Father remarked - casually, without criticism. "I have, as well."

"I've had it too easy," Diana replied. "No need to reach, when ... the company's right there, nearly every time you turn around." She looked at Father directly. "I think maybe I should have come to you before. At least we could have worried together."

Father smiled, then sobered. "I suspect it's a matter of dreams, Diana. And I've never known how to address that."

"Does he ever talk about me?" Diana asked bluntly.

"Only in the most flattering terms, I assure you. I trust I'm telling no secrets if I say my son is inordinately fond of you. Of which, I might add, I entirely approve." Father rubbed his mouth in preparation to be diplomatic.

"I wondered, at first, if you might have quarreled. But he denied that - rather forcefully. As though even my question were a form of criticism. And then he apologized for speaking so sharply, and I accepted his apology, and resigned myself to the plain fact that whatever was amiss, he didn't intend to discuss it with me."

Collecting his cane, Father relocated to a large armchair; obedient to his gesture, Diana set the baby in his lap.

Rearranging the quilt, Father went on, "He hates to burden others. He's always been that way. But now, with this little semaphore, here, waving or wailing each change of the weather, it's virtually impossible for him to keep himself wholly to himself. His only answer now is distance, when he's upset. Which is not," Father added mildly, "an answer that will serve, in the long run. This is his home. There can be, finally, no other place."

"Yeah, I know," Diana admitted. "Do you think ... maybe that's the problem?"

"Over the years, I've learned not to draw conclusions too far beyond immediate evidence where Vincent is concerned. He has his own ways. Things strike him differently. Even now, I hesitate to assume, until he's willing to tell me. But I do know he hasn't been sleeping. I know he spends nearly every night wandering alone on some pretext ... or none at all. And I wait, knowing that when he feels he can come to me, he will. Generally, when it's over," Father said, without rancor.

"I admire your patience," Diana remarked, arms folded.

"No you don't," Father responded, with a flick of a good-natured glance.

"No - I don't. I tried patience and didn't get anywhere."

"So you came here. For consultation. But I'm afraid I have no answers to offer. You're welcome to stay and worry with me, if you'd like," Father offered.

"Thanks. Maybe another time."

Because from braving the tunnels and the hard-edged contrasts, from Father's quietly uncritical reception, Diana was somehow sure she knew what at least part of the problem was ... and therefore knew where Vincent had gone.

Sitting crosslegged before the grave, he didn't move or turn his head, within the hood, to see who was scuffing toward him through the leaves. Knew the sound of her steps, maybe; or knew in other ways what approaches were no threat.

He had to be stifling, with the cloak on top of all those layers. Her hands itched to at least push his hood back. But that was mostly an impulse to see his face plainly, which the midnight graveyard wouldn't have allowed anyway. He was only a large, shadowed mound.

Laying her unneeded sweater down as a pad, she settled to one side, a few feet off and between him and the headstone, and waited for him to say something.

It was, she admitted, her blind spot; the minute she'd quit worrying about what *she* might have done wrong, or not done, it'd been plain to her; Catherine. Who was always with him; whom he thought about always, even when he was thinking of *her*. Her head knew that, but

her gut didn't like admitting how deeply she had to share him ... with his ghost.

And it was a blind spot, a sore spot, was enough of a barrier to keep him from sharing with her what'd been happening with the other two sides of the triangle.

She was ready, when he asked how she'd found him, to pass it off with *that's what I do*. But he didn't ask. He knew what she did - knew her, in ways she'd only begun to know him. And hadn't, even yet, fully-digested what she did know.

Of course. It had to be Catherine.

After awhile she quit waiting for somebody to talk. She grew quieter, maybe with something like Father's patience, and silently shared his vigil. He wasn't a problem to be solved, a case she was on. He was only Vincent. And it was, she recognized, a lot and maybe enough just to be with him, facing the fact of him ... and of the tombstone.

Presently he said softly, as though they'd been talking all along. "I first saw the sun when I was ten. Shortly after Devin ... left us. I was hurt. Angry. Full of grief, guilt, and self-pity. I thought he'd gone because of me - that he'd left because I'd struck at him. I couldn't seem to come to terms with the loss. It faced me everywhere. So I determined I'd do all the things Devin and I had planned, even though he was no longer there. Even though I'd have to do them alone. Without him, Even though Father would have disappointed mightily of our doing such things, even together ...

"The beginning of my resolve was to see the sun. Sunlight was dangerous, you see. I was afraid of it, not completely knowing what I feared. I thought, for instance, it might strike me blind."

Vincent spread his hands, then set them again on his knees. "You can barely imagine my ignorance. Everyone, after all, knows the sun. Even Winslow and Pascal, my friends, born Below ... they knew. I could have asked them to accompany me. But because of Devin, I wanted no one else with me."

He was silent awhile then - remembering, Diana guessed. She tipped her head back and looked at the stars, imagining the terror of that excursion, trying to come to where he was and had been, see it all through his eyes.

"I went," he said at last, "to the culvert in the park. The brightness beyond the gate, when the

door slid back, almost made me turn and flee. It hurt my eyes. I thought it was the beginning of going blind. I thought, if the sun saw me, something dreadful would immediately happen. I'd be exposed - discovered. Captured. Killed. Father had warned me, from knowledge: I feared from ignorance. But Devin and I ... had promised one another to go Above in the daylight. And I was angry at Devin, and at the same time felt that I owed it to him and that my fear, and whatever dreadful thing might overtake me, was somehow a penance ..."

Again he moved-----this time, to lay his hand on hers. "It's such foolishness," he commented quietly.

"Sometime I'll tell you one of my dumb kid stories," Diana promised.

He bowed his head. "It was so beautiful, Diana. I didn't expect it to be so warm. All over me. Everywhere the sun touched. I didn't expect the smells, so different from the park at night. So acute. I didn't expect the breeze to be so warm, touching me, carrying a thousand scents, a thousand sounds ... At the first, I couldn't bear it. I shut my eyes, letting the sun see me, not caring anymore what might happen to me. Even shut, my eyes stung ... When at last I opened them, everything was blurred. And I still thought I was going blind. So, quickly, before it was all gone forever, I scrubbed my eyes on my sleeve, and blinked, and *looked* ... Oh, it was so beautiful. To see so far away, all the leaves of the trees, the rough trunks, the dappling of brightness and shade, people in colorful clothing at a distance, all the colors, Diana ... And it then seemed to me that rather than going blind, I'd been blind all my life and only now knew, at all, what it meant to *see*. For a moment, I looked directly into the sun ...

"And then I saw, among floating blotches, a couple approaching, strolling down the hill. Holding hands, surely not noticing me at all, where I stood in the mouth of the culvert. I spun back inside and closed the door. I stayed there, by the door, for quite a long time. I thought I was blind, you see. It was only the ordinary time it takes one's eyes to adjust from bright sun to nearly complete darkness. But at first I didn't know that. And I was glad, to have *seen*, even once. The images still burned behind my eyes. The wonder still flamed in my heart ..."

As he talked, Diana had clasped both her hands around his. When he stopped talking, she gave his hand a squeeze. "And then it hit, right? How hard it was to go home. Back into the dark."

"Not all at once. At first, I was elated. I'd seen the sun and nothing, it seemed, had happened. I

hadn't died. I wasn't even blind. I'd had this vast joy and paid, I thought, no price for it at all. I thought about how I'd have revealed to Devin my daring and my success, that I'd accomplished all on my own. But Devin was still gone, and I didn't dare tell Father. And gradually a sadness grew in my that wasn't the same as the sadness before. It had nothing to do with Devin, or Father, but was mine alone. Because I realized the sunlight was a wall I could never pass through. A doorway into a life I could never have. And so I had not escaped unscathed, after all.

"Each joy is a loss. For it does not last, and one can never afterward not know it's possible. It was a long time, years, before I saw the sun again ... and then by necessity ... a matter of emergency, not a childish feat of daring. And because I was intent upon other matters, the grief of so great a joy did not strike me so powerfully as before. I finally became ... resigned to it - both to the wonder, and to the awareness that the wonder could not last."

She could imagine him at the gate, bracing himself to go out into the open culvert. Now his life had brought him to stand at a different opening, a different prospect before him. But the connection was plain to her.

"And what have you been trying to resign yourself to now? The roof's still there. The sun will be there, tomorrow, if it doesn't rain. I'm still here. It's all yours - as much as you want to take of it. So what's to lose?"

"Catherine," he blurted, and took his hand back. Raising his knees, he folded his arms across them, bent his head further, and began a quiet, heartbroken sobbing. Diana slid off the sweater and moved close enough to throw her arms around him. At first he was rigid, all bent into himself, impenetrable. Inconsolable.

She put her chin on his cloak's shoulder roll to murmur into his ear. "It's okay to tell me now. If it hurts, let it. I'm listening now. I'm the company misery loves. Tell me how it hurts. Tell me what's been happening."

Eventually, he let his head tilt against hers. Awhile after that, the sobbing slowed enough to let him get some words out in intervals.

"I've been so happy. I've never been so happy. As on your roof. Everything went away. I'd forget it all. Forget myself. Just feel. It was wonderful. I couldn't wait to escape back into it. I

knew ... my greed was cutting me off from you. Was inexcusable. But ... I couldn't help it. I'd think, today I'll wait ... but it was as if the sun were calling me. I couldn't attend to anything else. And then I'd be there and the heat would come in, deeply, everywhere ... and I'd forget again. And it was wonderful."

"No problem there. I understood that part. I didn't mind. You can be happy for somebody else being happy, you know? Don't worry about it."

He shook his head. "I'm grateful to you. But that does not excuse me."

"Look, if somebody's starving, you don't grudge him a ham sandwich. Even if it's the only ham sandwich you got. You been sun-starved a real long time, babe. Even I know that. If you OD'd, overdosed, a little to begin with, you were just making up for lost time."

"That's what I told myself. At first. That there was no harm in it. That it took nothing you were the poorer for. That the sunlight was there, undiminished for you. That you were glad with my gladness. I knew that. But"

"Yeah; now comes the *but*. Catherine."

He nodded. "When I would come home ..."

"I got that, too - the contrast."

"Yes, But I am ... accustomed to that. It was more acute than returning at night ... but still something I am accustomed to. A difference of degree, not of kind. But with each descending step, I seemed to move deeper into an absolutely unmitigated sadness. Grief, despair, as black as the joy had been bright. I knew no reason. I was overcome with it. Nothing seemed to help. All I could think about was escaping. Back ... to your roof again. To rest there. In the warmth. In the sun. And not think at all.

"Reaction," Diana proposed. "Withdrawal, even. Sunlight's powerful stuff, if you're not used to it." She was waiting for him to get to that last afternoon, and making love on the lounge chair pad. That would be the kicker, she thought - what'd set him off.

He straightened, scrubbed a fist across his eyes, and faced toward her. "It was all brightness up there, Diana. Nothing but brightness. Nothing but joy."

He'd guessed what she was thinking. He did that sometimes. Spooky - unnerving. But it saved a lot of explaining and misunderstanding. He'd moved the ground of the conversation.

So she moved with him, commenting bluntly, "But the next day you were back, polite as a priest doing parish rounds. So what was that about?"

"I haven't told you about the dreams."

Different ground again. She followed, confirming, "No, you haven't."

He laced his hands together, clasping his knees. "It all came back to me. The time before I knew anything of Jacob. Before you found me ... here," he recollected in a wondering voice, reaching to stroke a hand over the grass ... the grave. "Losing Catherine. Knowing I must find her. Searching for her, having no sense of her. Emptiness. Silence. Imagining ... The same dreams as I had at that time," he finished in a suddenly flat tone. "It became ... insupportable. It is still insupportable. It is leaded, irrational, and unyielding. It waits for me, Below, like a shroud. It will engulf me the instant I go back. And yet I must go back. My life is peaceful now. I have Jacob. Father. All my friends. I should be content. And yet this anguish assaults me like a black wind out of the abyss. And the dreams ... I disturb Jacob. I must learn to bear it. But I don't know how."

"You feel," Diana formulated gently, "you've lost Catherine again."

An explosive sigh. "Yes!"

"A-huh. Okay, I'm getting it now." Diana was silent awhile, thinking. Then she asked, "How were you feeling about Catherine before you started going up on my roof? I mean, how often? And how bad?"

"Almost ... all the time. I don't know. She's part of everything. Jacob. This new bond, feeling Jacob with me. Therefore feeling her absence. Everything I am is because of her. Everywhere. In all things."

"But not," Diana stated, "on my roof."

He jerked as if she'd hit him between the shoulderblades. It was all the answer she needed.

"It felt good, feeling good - didn't it? While it was happening, it felt just great. Right? No

thinking about the past or the future. Just being there, in the sun. Warm all through. As far out of yourself as you could go. Forgetting yourself. *Forgetting Catherine.*

Long silence. A flick of hot, exhaust-smelling breeze tangled her hair into his. Then he said; "But she would want me to be happy. I know this with absolute certainty. Beyond question. She would be happy for me, glad of anything that helped free me from the darkness."

"Yeah. Okay. But are *you* happy to be happy? Are you ready to put all that behind you, if it means putting Catherine behind you, too? Are you ready to quit grieving for her, accept the changes and go on with your life, be happy without a ferocious backlash of guilt that you took a break from grieving, that you weren't miserable all the time? That you could be happy even though she'd gone? Your head maybe says yes. And your gut, when it's all warm and comfy and the head's turned off for awhile, blissed-out on sunlight. Even then, it's okay. But it sounds like your gut is saying no in a big way, right afterward. It sounds as if the blind side of your head is getting you back double for every minute you don't spend being miserable about Catherine."

She leaned to look him in the face. "You know about survivor's guilt, babe? Because that's what I think you got - in spades."

Medium silence. Then, grimly; "Perhaps. But it will still be waiting for me, Below, the instant I go back."

She believed him. Knowing the names didn't change the feelings. Feelings had their own rules, their own reasons, that had little or nothing to do with rationality. Which didn't make them any less true, any less real. Like dreams.

"So okay. So I tell you what we do; you don't go up on the roof anymore. Not never - just not now. Until you quit having to punish yourself, for the crime of being alive and wanting to be happy once in awhile. Go find Catherine. Not here," Diana said, brushing knuckles across the grass, then reaching to thump the headstone. "Inside. Get her back. If that hurts, then it hurts. At least it'll be the right hurt, the one you have to get all the way through before you can come out the other side. Be a little happy - with me, with Father, with Jacob, anybody who offers, and let us be happy with you. But no strong stuff. Not till you're ready for it."

"Father told me ... a long time ago, now ... that the grief I felt was Catherine's gift to me. And

when I doubted I could bear it, he told me I must *let* it crush me. Carry me away. That if I did, it would bring me back."

"I think," Diana said, "you got one wise Father. You should listen to him."

"I try. But knowing and feeling are such different things. I want to reach out. I want to dare the sunlight, and all it holds for me. All the dangers. And all the joys. I must."

"Sure." She reached up under his hair to rub his neck. "You will. And I promise if you do it, you won't go blind. No matter what anybody says. You can trust me."

"I do." He sighed, leaning his head back against her hand. Blocks away, a dog barked. "But how long, Diana? How long must I not reach high, to keep from falling low? How long must I ask the forbearance of those I care for, in the vague hope that someday their patience will be rewarded? You must all make such allowances, already. How can I ask you to make more? To give, and give, into this bottomless, devouring pit from which I can return *nothing*? How long ... ?"

"As long as it takes. The sunlight will still be there. I'll still be there. We'll wait for you. Some things can't be rushed, and one step forward is two steps back. Stand still a little. Wait for the rest of yourself to catch up. You're not going anyplace without Catherine. You don't have to lose her. Nothing you need is here, in this grave." She thumped his chest. "It's all in your heart. That's where you need to find it again. Then there'll be time for the sunlight. All you want. And the dark, afterward, won't be so bad. I promise."

His head turned, his shadowed eyes regarding her. "And you, Diana. How will you bear it? When I can make no promises and have so little happiness to share? When my dreams are all of searching and loss?"

Diana found herself smiling. "Oh," she responded lazily. "I think I've had enough ... *sunlight* ... to keep me going quite a while. Enough to keep my dreams real interesting, too. It's easier getting through the days, and the nights, if you got something to remember and something to look forward to."

Rising, Vincent held out a hand to help her up. As she stooped to collect her sweater, he said solemnly, "When this is over, when I can, I will come to you."

Still bent over, she looked around at him, seeing only a large, shapeless darkness. But she remembered what she'd seen in the daylight. And with what she remembered and imagined, she didn't figure she really needed to see. The image still burned behind her eyes; she wouldn't forget. She was willing to take him on faith - as she took the sunrise. Eventually, even in New York, it would come.

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