

How Do I Love Thee

by Southfoz

*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 to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely as men strive for Right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use.*

(by Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

Joe Maxwell looked down at the dusty parcel that had just been placed on his desk. "Hey Carl, what's this?" he asked the man who had delivered it.

"It's addressed to you," Carl replied simply, stopping on his way toward the door.

Joe examined the 'parcel' noticing it was some kind of cloth wrapped bundle, tied by strips of a similar twisted material. In one corner was his name. "I can see that. What, did someone run out of envelopes and wrapping paper?"

"Yeah, weird huh, looks like some kind of sack or something. It's just been released from the evidence locker, and since it has your name on it, they sent it to you."

"Where did it come from?" Joe asked

"The address is on it. It was found stuffed in an air-conditioning vent in some old building they're pulling down."

"It hasn't been opened."

"No, just x-rayed for dangerous materials, its just sheets of some kind of paper according to the machine. So the ... ah ... parcel, now belongs to you," and with those parting words Carl left the room.

"Gee thanks and now it's my problem," Joe murmured to himself, "I got a secret admirer," and he gazed down at the object on his desk. It looked like an old sack with "*To Joe Maxwell*" written in one corner, in what looked like pen, faded and scratched into the material, but there was no sender's name. On the Police Department tag attached to it, was written the item number and the words '*found on the twelfth floor 1900 Sixth Avenue*'.

A chill ran down Joe's spine and his heart began to pound. 1900 Sixth Avenue?

"Oh God, Cathy!" he gasped, and looked closer at the handwriting. It was unmistakably and chillingly Cathy Chandler's handwriting, and as he examined the package Joe realized that it looked like a pillowcase. It must have once been hospital white, but now it was a light brown color. He gently removed all the police seals, and the twisted ties and then lifted back the flap. Carefully he slipped his hand into it and when he looked he noticed there was another cleaner pillowcase inside, wrapped in the same way. He gently removed the inner 'parcel', on top of it, tucked beneath the ties was a small folded square of paper and on which was written '*Joe*'. He gently pulled it out. It was neither writing

paper, nor toilet paper but some kind of tissue paper. It felt like a – paper napkin, the kind used by the better restaurants, thicker and better quality than the diner down the street would use. He unfolded it and noticed there was writing on it, faint but legible, and he began to read what was written there, hearing Cathy's voice in his mind.

“Joe! God I hope you get this. I stole a pen from the nurse and I don't know how full this thing is. Look Joe, I'm keeping these paper napkins I get with my meals, to write on. They're pretty good quality so if I'm very careful they don't tear. I've gotten pretty good at it so far. Besides I have to do something or I'll go crazy. I'm in a blank room with no TV and nothing to do but think. I write every moment I can, but only in the bathroom, there's a camera in the bedroom and if I'm in here too long they come and check on me. I've found the perfect way to hide what I write. I stole two pillowcases that I've been putting my makeshift 'Journal' into, so that someday it will get to someone who can appreciate it. That's where you come in Joe.

I'm sorry, I wish I had something better to say to you, you've been a good friend Joe but I think I'm not going to make it out of this God-awful place alive. I know you and everyone I know must be scouring the city for me, but since I'm still here, I guess it's a no-go. I'm enough of a realist to know that the longer I'm here the colder the trail gets. A friend of mine would tell me not to give up hope, but it's getting harder to believe in dreams. I've been here five months already. If you ever get this, and I hope it's sooner rather than later, please do me a favor Joe and make sure that this gets to Dr Peter Alcott.

I haven't got much time before SHE comes back and I'm going to try and steal more pens. She's got as bad a memory as she has a bedside manner, so I should be able to keep writing.

I'm sorry Joe but I have to ask you not to read what's in the other pillowcase. I know I can trust you. And I hope I will see you again.

Be well Joe

Cathy”

Joe examined the surprisingly well preserved napkin, with tears in his eyes, and was sorely tempted to open the other pillowcase, but Cathy's trust in him had shamed him into keeping his raging curiosity under control.

It had been seven years since Cathy's body was found and Joe still hurt every time he thought of her, which was often. But there was something he could do for Cathy now, seven years later that he couldn't have done back then, and he would do it this very evening.

Vincent heard his name on the pipes and made his way to where the message said to meet. When he approached the tunnel entrance, under one of their helper's homes, he saw by the light of a torch, the man was carrying, that he was pacing back and forth in the tunnel.

“Joe?” Vincent's voice echoed off the walls of the tunnel and Joe looked up and stopped pacing.

Joe Maxwell had been a helper now for almost six years and Vincent could sense his agitation. When Joe simply stared in his direction and combed his hand through his hair Vincent came forward.

“What is it Joe, what has happened?”

Vincent stopped in front of him, “Happened? Something wonderful ...or terrible, I'm not sure which.”

“Just tell me Joe,” Vincent's quiet logic solving Joe's problem.

"I was given this today. I think it was meant for you," and he handed Vincent the pillowcase.

Vincent held it, surprised at how light it was for its size, and then looked up at his friend. "What's in here? Who's it from?"

"It's from Cathy." Joe said bluntly, the adage '*get the pain over quick*' was one his mother had drummed into him as a kid.

Vincent staggered back against the wall, as though struck by a blow.

"You okay?" Joe asked, putting a hand on Vincent's shoulder, concerned but not surprised.

"Yes, yes it's just..."

"I know. It hit me the same way – well probably not the *same* way but ... well you know what I mean."

Vincent's eyes welled with tears. "*How...*" he breathed.

"Simple really, Cathy was a very resourceful woman, and she had a lot of empty time on her hands and decided to put it to good use. According to the letter she wrote me anyway."

"Catherine, wrote to you ... when?"

"While she was in 1900 Sixth Avenue, that's where this was found," and Joe laid a hand on the parcel in Vincent's hands. Then he put a hand in his breast pocket and took out the letter Cathy had written him and handed it to Vincent.

"Here read for yourself."

Vincent took the letter with an unsteady hand and read it by Joe's torch. There were tears shimmering on his cheeks as he lifted his head and handed it back to Joe.

"I think that's full of letters, she wrote to you. She wanted me to give it to Peter, not knowing that one night I'd be inducted into the family – so to speak – by this mysterious big guy in a black cloak," and Joe smiled at the memory.

Vincent was oblivious to the joke; he was now staring down at the package in his hands as though it was full of snakes.

"C'mon V it can't be that bad."

"But Joe...It's ..."

"Yeah I know. It's been seven years. Look, you go home and start going through that."

And he gave the padded pillowcase a pat with his hand, causing a faint cloud of dust to fill the air.

"And I'll go back to my pad and watch some TV. I think your night will be the better one though – maybe not better but more interesting ..." When Vincent didn't answer; Joe slapped him on the shoulder and went up the ladder and through the manhole in the alley behind his apartment building.

Vincent didn't notice his absence until long after Joe had left him, as he continued to stare at the package in his hands. Then he slowly made his way back to his chamber, cradling the cloth covered parcel against his heart. He thought of nothing and he saw nothing as he walked, he was only aware of the name, '*Catherine*,' echoing throughout his entire being and the vision of her face in his mind.

Suddenly he was standing at the doorway to his chamber. It was late and Jacob was already asleep in his bed against the opposite wall, and only a single candle burned in the room beside Vincent's bed.

He placed the pillowcase reverently on his table and stood back looking down at it. He was apprehensive, and yet curiously excited, to open this door into Catherine's last few months. What would she say? Would she blame him, as he had blamed himself all these years?

He had had many nightmares in the last seven years, dreams where Catherine had accused him of any number of terrible failures, concerning her captivity and murder. Even though, when he awoke and had overcome the horror of the dream, he knew that Catherine would never have accused him of such a thing, it didn't stop him feeling that he had indeed failed her.

Should he tell Jacob or Father about this? No, not yet, he would keep this treasure to himself for now, to savor and examine privately. Perhaps he might let Jacob read some of it one day, when he was older, if it was not too disturbing.

He placed the candle on the table and sat in the large chair. Then for some very long moments of hesitation, he reverently undid the cloth ties one at a time. His fingers shook in the knowledge that Catherine had tied these for him to open, even though it had been such a long time ago. She had been thinking of him as she did it, and his heart raced as he opened the cloth-wrapped envelope.

He slipped his hand in and felt a substantial stack of soft paper, and mindful of the delicacy of the paper of the letter Joe had allowed him to read, Vincent gently grasped the pages with one hand and drew them out onto the table. He recognized them at once as a neat pile of paper napkins – he had seen enough of them in dumpsters behind restaurants to know what they were. They had once been white, just like the pillowcase, but were now a cream color. There were lines of writing on the upper side of each one, and from the top one they were all numbered. Catherine had thought of everything – it was much like a book.

With a deep sigh, Vincent composed himself in preparation before he lifted the first 'page' from Catherine's last journal and began to read.

"1

Vincent, oh I hope you get these. I miss you so much. I wish I had you to talk to. I wish I was in your arms on my balcony, watching the moon rise over the city and everything was the way it used to be. But above all my wishes, I wish you knew about the life growing inside me. Your child Vincent, yours and mine, and Vincent, I can feel him moving. Yes I know it's a boy. I can hear you asking how I know. I just KNOW. Like I KNEW something was wrong when you and Father were trapped, it's an inner sense, but then I don't have to explain anything to you do I? I've even given him a name. I call him Jacob, because I know that's what you would want to call him.

He is so strong Vincent, and when I say your name he kicks, as though he feels you. I hope he can, and that one day he gets to know you. You will make a wonderful father Vincent. I think of how you are with the children Below and I know you will be.

Oh Vincent I wanted so desperately to tell you. It was like something burning a hole through me and I had to let it out somehow. Then one day I found a pen on the floor after the nurse had left and it all fell into place in my mind. I would write to you as if you were here with me, talking to me, and that's what I've begun to do. I want you to read them so badly, but they're really to help me at this point, to help me cope with my solitude. Perhaps I'll think of something, I've still got time. I will talk to you tomorrow, I love you.

Catherine"

"Oh Catherine ..." Vincent whispered, reading over the 'letter' again, savoring each word, and reverently smoothing his fingers over the words. His heart was breaking, remembering that time, as though it were only yesterday. A terrible time, when he had gone out every night in search of her with every fiber of his being screamed her name, and now it was as though he was with her in that room instead, comforting her. He felt peace flow through him for the first time in many years at the thought, like a fragrance on a breeze, welcoming and pleasant. He closed his eyes and breathed, "Catherine ..." again.

It was with reluctance that he began to move back into the past as he put the first napkin aside, and with a sigh lifted the next 'page'.

"2

"Vincent something has been troubling me since I last saw you. I am so sorry I didn't tell you about your child. It wasn't for any of the reasons you are thinking. It was because you had been through so much, and were still going through a great deal in your recovery. I didn't want to add another burden to what you were already carrying. I thought we had plenty of time and I was going to tell you the day I sent you the message to meet me but I was kidnapped by Moreno. Moreno, a man I had trusted from the beginning. Oh I wish I could tell someone about him but I'm imprisoned here – another wish unfulfilled.

Now I wish so desperately that I had told you about the baby that day in your chamber, because you would never have let me leave you ever again, and I'd be there now, in the safety of your arms, just you, me and our baby.

I've had a lot of time to think in the last three months Vincent and I don't think there would have been any way you could have saved me from Moreno even if you had known about it. There's someone big behind all this and I'm afraid you would have been either captured or killed and I couldn't live with that. At least now I know that you are out there somewhere searching for me.

Vincent; the man who is behind all this has been taking special care of me since you tried to rescue me. Don't blame yourself my love, because you actually saved my life that day, because I know that if I wasn't carrying your child I would be dead already. I think he wants Jacob, because he's your son. I can imagine why and what I imagine is much worse than anything that he could really do I'm sure. I try not to think about that now. I think of our baby growing inside me, safe and warm and as long as Jacob is with me he is safe and there is a chance that you will find us. Vincent I promise you I will never lose hope, no matter how long it takes. I will wait for you forever ...

Until tomorrow my love

Catherine"

"Gabriel." Vincent said with gritted teeth, and a chill came over him at the memory of that evil man. Death was too good for such a man and Vincent wished he could tell Catherine that he had saved their son from that monster, but in a deep part of his soul Vincent knew that Catherine was aware of that fact and was at peace. With that thought he lifted the next napkin.

"3

Vincent I know you must be wondering – when Jacob was conceived. I know when I last saw you that you had no memory of that time and I was shocked and saddened. I thought that such an experience as we shared would have been something that you would remember forever, I know I will. I hope that one day you will remember that night and what happened between us. And Vincent, you must know the 'Other' part of you was gone then.

You were so afraid Vincent and so filled with rage. I couldn't leave you like that and when I came close to you, you came rushing toward me ready to strike. But when I called out your name, a look of horror came into your eyes and you collapse. When I felt for your pulse there wasn't one. I was so desperate I began to kiss you, hoping to bring you back to me in any way I could think of. Then when nothing happened I gave you mouth to mouth, and when at last you did take one huge breath, your eyes opened.

You looked up at me and your eyes were clear and calm. I was so happy I kissed you again and you responded, and although perhaps I should have, I didn't pull away. I was so glad that you were alive

and in my arms, I didn't think and obviously neither did you. Your usual reticence and reluctance for physical intimacy wasn't there and you kissed me with such overwhelming sweetness that I just let it happen – and one thing led to another. It had been something that I had wanted for so long. There was no aggression, no force from you, only a sweet passion, a passion that had been building between us and denied for far too long. I remember those moments every night as I say goodnight to you.

*Until tomorrow my love
Catherine”*

Vincent's heart soared, he had had dreams that he had suspected were hidden memories from that time. Now he *knew* that he had indeed regained those memories, as they matched what Catherine had written. Now in the years to come, they would be like a treasure he would unwrap to be with Catherine again. Sometimes unbidden she would come to him in his dreams and he would relived those wonderful moments. Catherine had now given him two more gifts, first his son and now these new memories of Jacob's conception.

He could sense the dawn approaching in the world Above and knew that Jacob would be waking soon. He wanted to keep this treasure to himself for the moment, so he put the 'pages' he had read to the bottom of the pile and replaced the entire pile back into the pillowcase. He took it to his large wooden chest and after securing it lovingly within, closed the lid and returned to his chair, where he sat staring into the past. His mind whirled with the new thoughts and feelings that Catherine's words had inspired.

She knew him so well. He had so often wondered about Jacob's conception and blamed himself for the failed rescue that Gabriel's cameras had recorded. It was this thought alone that had almost driven him mad in that cage below Gabriel's mansion, all those years ago, as the scene was played over and over against the walls. He had been seen and that had been the catalyst that had caused Catherine to be killed and his son taken. But when he had met Joe, he had told Vincent that he had given Catherine evidence that could lead to Gabriel, and it was for this that she had been kidnapped. He had wanted Vincent's child; Catherine had meant nothing to him. So she was right, both she and Jacob would have been killed if he had not been seen that night, and this was strangely comforting.

Ten years ago he had finally become the master of his rage when he did not take that rage out on the man who was about to take the life of his son, and who was responsible for destroying his life. That was for Catherine's gun to accomplish and it was appropriate that a woman in the form of Diana Bennett should do it.

In only three short pages, Catherine had answered so many of his questions, questions that he had asked every day since she had disappeared. What else did she have to say to him in those other pages?

Each waking moment, from that night on, Vincent looked forward to when he had the leisure to secretly read Catherine's letters, sometimes in his chamber when Jacob slept or by the falls. Everyone knew that it was in his nature to often go somewhere where he could be alone and they respected this, so he was able in this time to come to terms with many things he had not been able to face before. Sometimes Catherine would reminisce about their time together, and at others she would be melancholy and full of frustration and despair. It was at these moments that Vincent's heart would break, knowing that these small pieces of paper had been her only consolation.

Then when he came to the last sheets he was fearful of reading them, it was several days before he could face them. Then one night with dreaded anticipation he began to read and he was both elated

and overcome with grief by what he read. The writing was distorted and untidy, unlike Catherine's previous letters and this alone disturbed him until he understood why.

"84

Vincent, he's coming, our son ... I've been having contractions since early this morning ... I'm trying to hide it from the camera, but the pains are getting stronger every hour, and I know that THEY must know by now and will come for me soon.

But Vincent I must tell you, something unexpected is happening! I felt something, something strange early this morning. It was like, like electricity within me, and I felt YOU! You were in your chamber but you were here with me, as though we were connected. As if our son, in his fight for life, is bringing us together.

I have been having dreams, between contractions Vincent. Visions of you and Jacob, I see him as a baby, in your arms – then as a little boy running through the tunnels, and then as a grown man; a beautiful young man. And Vincent – I'm always there, with you both.

I know you've felt Jacob and will be here soon. I hear Dylan Thomas' words echoing in my mind constantly, as the pain comes and goes. I know now that if the worst should happen and you can't save me, Jacob will one day be safe with you. 'There is a knowledge beyond truth' Vincent, Father said it, and with that knowledge I know I will ALWAYS be with you. Nothing will ever truly separate us. I can feel you with me even now. It's as though you are here with me through every pain, holding my hand, with me – every moment.

I have become a part of you with Jacob's approaching birth. I can hear your thoughts. I can feel your feelings. This is incredible! Is this how it was for you? It's like SEEING music or TASTING colors. Oh Vincent your son has given me a beautiful gift and it is this gift that is helping me to accept whatever comes.

You're on your way now my love; I can feel you coming closer! You're with me and I know that I will always be a part of you. I feel safe in your love Vincent. I'm safe now, and whatever happens – whatever comes. I am not afraid....

Always,

Catherine ..."

With tears running down his cheeks, Vincent laid down the last square of tissue, smoothing it reverently with his hand, and sat quietly weeping.

"Catherine ..." he sobbed. It was as though she had been given back to him. Her last words had given him more comfort than he had had in years, he now knew why he felt her in the room sometimes, hearing her voice when he was alone, by the falls, or walking through the tunnels or in his arms at night.

With great reluctance and a promise to himself to read them again, he placed the pile of 'letters' into the pillowcase and put it back in the chest. He mechanically undressed and climbed into bed, his mind was in turmoil and his weeping unchecked, his feelings like a kaleidoscope of colors both dark and bright emotions. Then he heard a soft child's voice from across the chamber.

"Father ..."

Vincent knew it was no use trying to hide his tears from his son or his feelings, Jacob could sense both and so he said. "Yes Jacob."

"Father I had a bad dream, can I get into bed with you?" and out of the shadows came his son, his small frame much like his father's had been at seven, Jacob too had had times of illness as he grew

and only his father's presence had helped him, but like Vincent there was the promise of greater height and bulk as he grew. His golden hair was in disarray, reflecting the candle's light, and one small fist rubbing an eye. Vincent knew that his own feelings must have been transferred to the boy. It had been impossible for him to shield them.

Pulling back the thick covers, he murmured. "Come, Jacob. I need comforting to."

"Did you have a bad dream too Father?" Jacob asked, as he climbed into the bed.

Tucking his son in and giving him a gentle squeeze and a kiss, Vincent placed his cheek on top of Jacob's head, and murmured. "Yes, I have just woken up from a bad dream Jacob. From now on, for me there will be no more bad dreams; everything will be all right now. Now go back to sleep dear one, I'm here. Nothing will harm you. You're safe, you're safe now."

Vincent's last thoughts, as his son fell into a peaceful sleep, were the final words of a poem which he recited softly to himself...

*In my old grief, 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 love thee better after death.*

THE END