

~ The First Wild Promise ~

By Cindy Rae



*"The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world."*

*– The Great Gatsby, by F. Scott Fitzgerald*

*For the April 12, 2017 Celebration on Treasure Chambers.*

An April wind lifted Vincent's blonde hair off his shoulders, and the distance to the water below seemed impossibly far away.

*"Farther than far," as Mouse would have said.*

The Queensboro Bridge spanned a dark East River, its depths impossible to imagine. On the wide, multi-lane spans, Manhattan emptied into Queens, which in turn, seemed to be emptying itself back into Manhattan.

Nestled high in the cantilevers, Vincent surveyed the nighttime scene beneath him.

Incandescent lights shone down on the distant water. Yellow vied with white, which could only push back the black of the water "so" far. Cars moved in an odd kind of lockstep, across the straight lanes, one behind the other. The grey of the steel I beam he'd tucked himself into was lit from below, but shadow-wrapped, higher up. He stood concealed, as what looked like half of New York passed busily, beneath him.

The inky water spread itself under the bridge, running from shore to shore. The sparkling lights that winked across its obsidian surface made it look inviting, even as it looked far away.

*If I fall, I will fall forever,* Vincent reasoned with what he knew was faulty logic, staring down into the abyss that looked miles deeper than even the one he knew so much better, in his home.

He knew the surface of the water wasn't the "floor" of the fall, wasn't the thing that would stop a body. Rather, it was the thing that would

break it, and then enclose it, all but soundlessly, save for the splash.

Not that Vincent intended to fall.

He intended to look. And look, and look... and look some more, as far as he could, and for as long as he might do so.

*'The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time...'*

Was it like seeing the city for the first time? Well, in a way, it was. He could see Nick's point, the one he was trying to make to Jay Gatsby.

Megastructures stood on either side of him, then spread out, in the distance, while beneath him, a chugging ferry seemed to crawl over the surface of the placid-looking water.



If it looked "new" to Vincent, that's because to a certain degree, it was.

Though he'd made his way to the top of several buildings, he'd done this on very few bridges, and knew he never dared it on the one that

connected Manhattan to Brooklyn. That bridge, though huge and justifiably famous, lacked the right architecture to allow him to move aloft, undetected. The cable supports that anchored the Brooklyn Bridge provided him no cover, and no way to move, easily, in the night. He could travel beneath it, if he had to, but on top of it? Even if he clung to the top of one of the overhead trains, it would be a risk.

*And this isn't?* he thought idly.

And in a way, it wasn't.

The Queensboro was different. She was cantilevered, and every slanting beam was a walkway, for the being who moved with panther-like grace, one wide, diagonal column to the next. The forest of crisscrossed steel kept him hidden, as long as he remained melded to the large girders.

He climbed higher as the traffic moved below him, colored metal boxes punctuated with yellow light in the front, and red behind. The tractor-trailer trucks were long rectangles, the cars much smaller versions of the same thing.

Everything moved. Everything seemed...purposeful. The line of vehicles seemed endless, because it was. Vincent knew that no matter what time he came up here, he would see moving cars, beneath him.

Everyone was going somewhere. Everyone.

*Am I?*

He had no idea. It didn't feel like he was. And the question was one that had been presenting itself with an uncomfortable frequency, lately.

He climbed higher still, and sat on the bridge that linked the tallest part of the span to its other side. He held the high ground, and it was easy to just sit here, and let the April wind have its way with him, tossing his golden locks where it would.

The stiff breeze carried the noise of the traffic away, and from the top of the span. It was the vibration he felt, more than sound he heard.

From this high up there was barely more than the hissing sound of air passing around the steel girders and cables, to interrupt the comparative quiet.

An air horn could pierce the windswept heights, or the sound of a passing jet, but little else could. He was too far away, for that.

*Too far away.* That, at least, seemed familiar. *I am too far away from... many things.*

It all combined to paint a strange, nearly silent scene, for one of the busiest bridges on the planet.

He glanced toward Manhattan, toward his home, even though he knew he was seeing a part of it he could never claim. The Above part. The part, it seemed, that belonged to everyone, but him.

Towers loomed, and the Empire State Building spired itself into the sky, clearly visible, and clearly important. Behind every light, a story was being told. Behind every light. Inside every car. On every city street.

It all belonged to *them*, and none to him. He knew it for a fact. A fact he'd always known, and one he'd carried.

*Well. Except for the park, of course.*

*Was that enough?*

He fixed his blue eyes on the moving vehicles, beneath him. Sports cars vied with limousines, which queued up behind white vans and scattered busses. The occasional motorcycle rider sped across, an anomaly with but one headlamp before, and one brake light, behind, looking nimble, and quick, and as if it dared anyone to hit him.



Vincent knew if he climbed back down he would be able to hear the high whine of the engine, mixed in with the low growl of all the others. But the wind continued to take the sound away.

Yellow taxis crammed the lanes, the meters ticking off the fares.

*Does she move beneath me?* he thought, scanning the rigidly straight lines of traffic, as they flowed across the asphalt and steel.

He turned his eyes away from cars, and settled himself on the metal girders of the span. He looked out toward the city, clutched a pair of cables securely in his gloved hands. And then... leapt.

Mentally, at least.

From the great height of the Queensboro Bridge, Vincent flung his agile mind outward, as far as he could psychically “throw” it.

*Searching... searching...searching...*

Nothing. Like a radar ping without a return echo. Like half a game of table tennis. Something went out, but nothing came back. His mind reached for some... indefinable sound, but found no answering call.

He concentrated harder, and scanned both sides of the city, with keen blue eyes. He looked down, knowing the only direction she couldn't be, from here, was “up.”

She was not below him. At least it didn't feel like she was. Not that he knew who “she” was.

*She isn't even in New York, perhaps.*

His stout heart and keen mind tried reaching out again, and came up with... nothing, again. No answering call of symmetry greeted his seeking mind. No echo reverberated back to him, no similar call. Or even a dissimilar one.

He was alone.

*Alone, again.*

Then, an equally damning pair of charges:

*Alone still. Alone, always.*

The empathic sense that told him Jacob's hip was bothering him more than usual, or that Mary felt impatient with the children and their antics, seemed useless, for this, as it was useless for much else.

Climbing to a high place and mentally "throwing himself" out into the world was a thing he sometimes tried, simply because it was a thing which could be attempted. Casting his mind out, hoping against hope to be able to "hear" or "sense" someone else, someone special, had never actually borne any fruit.

But he had an instinct to do it. So sometimes, he did.

That instinct had all been nagging at him, lately.

*Go. Climb. Run. Seek. Find her. You must.*

But once again, the urge had brought him little but a decent view, and a long walk home.

This was a thing he'd only just recently begun to attempt, a thing he never told anyone about, a thing he only did when the agony of his aloneness was at its worst; when the pain of living an unmatched life felt like it had teeth, and was apt to start chewing on him.

It had been like that, lately.

*Perhaps it's just that spring is here. Again.* That word would not seem to leave him alone, tonight.

It was now three months past his last birthday. Three months to the very day.

Vincent felt he was growing older, and no wiser, considering.



He had a secret hope that the remarkable sense of empathy which marked his days, (and sometimes his nights, Above, and in the park,) might extend itself, here, and help him to find his way. His way to... something.

A way which seemed increasingly ... lost, and rudderless.

He watched the ferry on the water, knowing that it wasn't rudderless. That it knew its course, and travelled that with maritime certainty.

*Would that my way were so... easy to chart, for the course,* he thought.

What good was the advantage of knowing how the people near him were feeling? What benefit was there in that, if not to...

*To end my aloneness?*

It was a question, a thought, a goal, he wish he never dared utter. And it was driving his choices, increasingly.

There was no particular advantage to knowing how a person felt when it was often written plainly across the person's face. He needed no psychic bond, no ethereal connection to see the creases of discomfort on Jacob's furrowed brow as he rose from a chair and held his breath against the deepening twinge in his side. He needed no empathy to notice the lines around Mary's mouth grow more stern, as she was displeased with Kipper's antics. No empathic connection told him how those people were feeling. His eyes did that.

But it was not those people, nor those emotions, he sought now.

He'd hoped (in a place inside himself he barely dared to claim,) that the distinct feeling of knowing the emotions of others might... lead to

something. Something wonderful. Something unique, and special, and rare. Something perhaps as rare as he was. Something that might be impossible to find, for others, but not for him, because of his special gifts.

Something like... her. The Woman-Who-Had-No-Name.

Which wasn't to say she hadn't been *named*, exactly. Just that he knew that whatever her name was, he'd never heard it, never spoken it to her.

And if didn't know who "she" was, he couldn't say what "she" looked like. Or even where to begin, to find her.

Surveying the city from the bridge was pushing a limit he had: the one that indicated he was far safer below the ground, and within the confines of the home tunnels. He was safer near the areas under Manhattan.

*Was she in Manhattan, then?*

He wasn't sure. He never had been. That she might be, or could be, or it sometimes felt like she was, if she there at all, was all he had, for comfort.

He knew he'd ranged as far as he dared, and as high as some of the taller buildings in a vain effort to come up with the elusive "something" that dogged his impulses. Yet, still... he still hadn't found a trace of the female presence he longed to feel.

He'd tried to imagine her, from time to time, and found that no matter how often he did that, the image would not come, would not solidify, in his mind.

Did she have Rebecca's sunny curls? Jamie's straight bangs? Olivia's dark eyes? Was she fair or dark? Artistic or intellectual? Serious, or prone to flights of fancy?

And which would be better, for him?

He had no idea.

And in a way, it was the not knowing that was killing him.

It wasn't just the fear that he couldn't find her. It was the fear that she didn't exist.

The wind died down, allowing some of the traffic noises to creep upward.

It had been a mistake to come up here, perhaps, a mistake to climb to the top of the bridge.

The traffic below, the mass of passing bodies... It all felt like the buzzing blur of traffic that it was. Like a blur of humanity moving too fast to catch, and too purposefully to slow down. Like tense people leading tense lives as they wrangled a busy bridge at night, and scurried off to pre-arranged destinations.

People rushing home. People passing through. People either escaping the city or clamoring to get into it. People out to take in a play, or a ball game, or a restaurant, or a night on the town, in one of the biggest "towns" on earth. People with somewhere to go, and something to see. Drivers, cyclists, pedestrians... they flowed beneath him, just as the water did.

No one *stopped* on the bridge. No one but him.

It was a bad place to look for her.

But the earthbound streets he sometimes traversed when he'd travelled Above had been no more fruitful than this, and this had the benefit of being the high ground, the place his hunter's instincts told him he should go.

*The high ground. Well there was no ground higher than this; not out in the open, and over the water, anyways.*

Roosevelt Island interrupted the estuarial flow. Distant lights travelled down, punctuated the black water. Boats. Boats going either in or out, sailing away to strange lands, their running lights on. He dreaded that she might be on one, and heading for the harbor. The harbor and everything after. He dreaded that she might be leaving him before they'd ever even met, and she never knew.

It was a ridiculous fear. But one he couldn't quite shake, entirely.

*What if we never meet?*

*What if I never find her?*

In his teens, the question had seemed like nonsense. Lisa was in his life, then, and his heart had bloomed, with its adolescent, hormonally driven love for her.

Then she'd left. She'd left because she had to go; not so much because of him and what he was, but because her, and what she was.

And the blossoming affection that had filled his chest was... no more.

As month had slid into month, and then into a year, he still had a teenager's furtive dreams of a happy outcome. Then one year slid into

another. And then another.

A few more of those and his twenties began.

And then they ended, with him no more a part of someone else than he'd ever been.

*Find someone. Someone to be a part of.* It wasn't just a wish. It was a need.

If only he could fulfill it. Or even had any real hope of doing that, anymore.

*The possibility still... exists? Doesn't it?*

*Perhaps it does. And perhaps... it doesn't.*

He shook off the answer, desperate from the taste the prospect of a lifelong of solitude left in his mouth. It was bitter as bile. Moreso.

*Surely, that cannot be my fate. It cannot be.*

*But what if it is?*

The idea that he should be confined to a life of endless aloneness gnawed at a place in his soul, and left a wound there. And he recognized that the wound was not healing.

The sharp loneliness nipped at his heels like a predatory animal, trying to find a hamstring.

He acknowledged it so he could ignore it, and let the dying April breeze caress his cheek, and toy with the ends of his hair, again.

*She is out there. You will find her.*

If he didn't, he, Father, Pascal, Winslow and Mouse would make a fine quintet of bachelors, living Below. And no matter how much he tried to let that thought comfort him, he knew it didn't.

Father seemed wholly unbothered by his celibate state, and the agoraphobic Pascal found his companionship in the endless conversations on the pipes. Winslow was as much a leader as he was a loner, and depended on the strength of his arm, and of his resolve. His heart was fiercely loyal, but not romantically inclined. Mouse was entranced by mechanical things, and found people too confusing while he, Vincent...

While he was none of those things, and none of those people.

Misshapen though he was, and different both inside and out, he knew he was neither past his prime, nor a man content to remain in one large room for most of his life, nor a cynic, when it came to love, nor seemingly unaware of it, nor a decent candidate for a monkish existence.

He endured things as they were because it was his lot. He did not enjoy that, or find it fulfilling. He knew that his aloneness was not an expression of who he was, or a manifestation of what he truly desired.

*Desired.* The word flitted through his mind, as it fluttered away, toward Queens.

The breeze picked up again, and the soft wind gave him a sensual kiss and he knew full well that he'd climbed this high just to feel its caressing touch, on the blonde stubble of his cheek.

He liked the wind, especially the wind in the spring. It was cool, but not

so cool his cape didn't warm him, and it was often humidly sensuous, and sometimes pregnant with rain, or at least fog.

He looked in the direction of New York Harbor. Mist was beginning to roll in, and soon, the boats would be obscured by it. So, for that matter, would the bridge.

When that happened, dampness would cling to the cables and metal girders, making his progress slick, and downright treacherous.

He knew it was time to climb down. The daring experiment was at an end.

He melded himself next to the metallic skeleton, moving from beam to beam, tracking down. He would make his way to the area beneath the bridge, then back to the Manhattan side. There was a manhole cover beneath the span, and it would take him back down the same way he'd come up.

Once there, he knew he'd wind his way back home. All he had to do was follow what was once part of an old rail line back to the hub, then head back to his chambers, from there.

He knew that the fog would make the park damply dew laden, and the wet conditions would drive late-night pedestrians indoors, to the warmth and safety of their homes.

*That would make it a fine night for a walk, for me,* he thought, easing his way between two steel I beams.

He smelled the fog as it moved closer, knowing the same breeze that had lifted his hair was bearing in a grey blanket, over the water, and the land. That it would hit the shoreline and keep going, snarl the traffic,

cover the park, make the metal grate that was the ceiling of the Concert Chamber drip, with its heavy moisture.

No concert in the park was scheduled for this evening, so it didn't matter. No music to steal into his sensitive ears, no crowd to eavesdrop on, and no life he could listen in on, save his own.

No peace, in the stillness of a finished performance, after the chattering crowd dispersed.

From halfway up, he cast his azure gaze toward the Manhattan skyline, before he had to give it up, for the low ground.

*'The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.'*



He quoted The Great Gatsby, internally, even as he knew that F. Scott



Fitzgerald wasn't the author he really wanted. He much preferred William Shakespeare. Because Shakespeare, in his experience, seemed to know just about everything.

He wasn't sure how much in common 1980's America had with Fitzgerald's 1920's America, though he knew there was some. The Jazz Age was giving way to the Information Age, and both were proud of their electronic gadgets. (For the flappers, that was the radio and motorcars. For the technocrats, it was the wireless telephone, and a desktop computer.)

But Vincent knew that the digital revolution, like so many other revolutions, was going to leave him behind. He didn't mourn that particular loss.

Other things he sensed he was apt to lose, he wasn't so sure about.

*That kind of life, not for you, Vincent.*

They were Father's words, and they were turning prescient. You couldn't say the old man was wrong, when he looked increasingly right. Vincent slid down the cantilevered span and slipped beneath the bridgework just as a semi rumbled its way across the girders. The silence was now gone. The noise was back. And with something of a vengeance.

Vincent's internal noise was even louder, as he travelled hand over hand, for several feet, then dropped down onto the concrete slab he wanted. He drew his dark cape close, knowing he needed its protection, here. The noise of the traffic blended with any other sounds, and though he saw no one near, and sensed that he was yet alone, there was always room for error, in a city with eight million people in

residence.

And yet, even here, there was no one but him.

*'My grief lies all within, and these external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells within silence, in the tortured soul.'*

*There. Shakespeare did know everything.*

*Richard II* seemed haunting right now, as the man who tried to shoulder his burdens gracefully and without complaint, lifted the cover on the round lid, and slipped below the ground.

It was hard not to shake the notion that the ground was swallowing him, whole.

*Home again.*

And though it was a good home, Vincent knew that the stone tunnels were closing in on him.

*How much longer before I stop looking? he wondered. How much longer, before I can't bear to do it, anymore?*

He held onto the rung of the ladder, and looked up, through the still-open manhole, his view of the sky obscured by the underside of the massive bridge.

The round, open circle of the Topsider world loomed above him, the night of Above looking to be a different shade of black, than the darkness of Below. The round, heavy, iron cover remained pushed to one side, needing to be drawn back over.

He would do it. But he couldn't shake the feeling that he was sealing

himself in.

Father would be pleased, if he decided to stay away from Topsisider things, safe from prying eyes, and from detection. Vincent knew it. He even recognized it as the wise choice, and knew that Father offered his cautions with no malice.

*There is madness, up there.* His parent's warnings were fairly constant. And again, like other warnings, they were not utterly without merit.

*Let me be a bit mad, then. I don't feel like being 'wise' just yet,* he railed inside, knowing it was a stubborn, foolish thing to think.

*Very well. I will be stubborn and foolish, then.*

The resolution made him feel better, even as he reached up a gloved hand and slid the manhole cover closed, then dropped off the ladder to the sandy earth, below.

The earth that would help guide him home.

The walls felt close. His sorrow felt closer.

*'My grief lies all within.'*

*Shakespeare knew everything,* and Vincent knew the words were true.

*'These external manners of lament are merely shadows to the unseen grief that swells within silence,'*

There were worlds in his silences, and sometimes, wonderment in them. Not every quiet moment was a burden. But many were.

If Vincent was being completely candid with himself, he admitted there was a certain sense of loneliness in them, sometimes, as well.

*We are all alone, before both our Gods and our demons,* he thought idly, wandering through the passageway. He would be alone throughout the return trip, more than likely.

As he often was.

*Perhaps it's time for a trip to the Nameless River. Or time to explore a bit. Take a pack and just... leave, for a few days. Longer. Walk until I find someplace new. Find... something. Something Below.*

It wasn't a bad plan. It was one he'd executed, before.

When his aloneness was self-imposed and self-enforced, it didn't seem so bad. And when he restored himself to tunnel society, their good companionship seemed very welcome, and like it would be enough.

For a while.

*I can stop at my chambers. Get what I need. A change of clothes, some food. My canteen, a few books. Not Shakespeare. Dickens, maybe.*

He picked up the lantern he'd used to travel here with, and turned up the wick. Though his eyes could see well enough, even in almost total darkness, he liked that the tiny flame pushed back the darkness, further.

*There. A little light. Just a little. Just enough.*

Did he really want to go exploring, below? He wasn't sure he did. The blackness in the earth's lowest places had a different quality, a sensation of having been swallowed up, by something huge, and entirely black.

By contrast, the knowledge that the night would be mist-laden and fog

shrouded was a calming one, with the grey a very different shade than the inky obsidian darkness he now contemplated visiting.

Something inside him bid him to avoid the deep places, and stay close to the surface.

*Go back Above. Wander. Do it.*

*No. Stop this. It's killing me. It hurts to fail, and I've failed, so often.*

It was an argument he was having with himself.

*So just... give up? No. I can't give up. Can't stop... pushing the edge of what I am. The day I do, my soul will die. I know it.*

How fast had the fog been coming in?

*As fast as the wind could bear it.*

He knew the breeze had been a fairly stiff one, and fairly steady.

*There will be mist, in the park. I can hide in it. I can walk as far as I like, as far as Belvedere Castle, as far as the road, even, or near it.*

The nagging need to go Above and to remain there was still present, and it wanted to be obeyed. The option would not quite let him alone, even though he'd already been out, this evening. Far out.

A deeply angled intersection loomed before him.



*Go home. Stay in. Visit with Father, some.*

Left meant he would make for either his own chambers or Father's.

*Sit. Drink something warm. Play a game of chess. Pretend... something isn't ... eating me alive, inside, he thought.*

Or, he could go right. Right would lead him to the culvert entrance of the park.

*And perhaps, more disappointment. Probably more disappointment.*

He knew which choice made more sense. And there was still the option to just pack a bag and go. So "left" gave him two options, while "right" only gave him one.

When his heart was restless, time apart was often the answer, to restore his equilibrium. Perhaps he'd go see Narcissa. Bring her

something.

But he knew that was just an excuse. One he'd used the last time he felt this way.

*What will you find if you go?* He heard the Beast inside him demand the answer. *More stone? Some pretty crystals, or a new waterfall? You won't find her. You know you won't find her.*

*But I can't find her, anywhere. I've looked. I have.*

*Then die trying!* his inner voice scolded. *But don't just...die... The city made a promise to everyone, and it made one to you,* the low voice growled. *Gatsby hears it. You just have to listen.*

*'The first wild promise of all the beauty and the mystery in the world.'* he thought again. *What an... incredible thing that would be... if only I could find it. If only I could... feel like I was a part of it... somehow.*

He veered left, deciding he'd tried enough, for one night. He would go and visit the only father he'd ever known. He would go be a dutiful son and ask after the pain in the old man's hip, set him up with a game of chess. Perhaps even let him win the first one. There were worse ways to spend a misty night.

He'd taken ten steps down the passageway before the wild thing inside him screamed, at the decision.

*Quitter! Useless! Is this your fate? Choose now, because you'll get to keep it! In five years, in twenty-five, it will still be yours. Fool!*

*There is nothing for me, Above.*

Aside from the nighttime view of the park, it seemed like a thing that

was increasingly true.

*There's nothing for you, Below, save what you already have! Between those two options, which one is more likely to bring you any kind of peace?*

The booted feet stopped, and Vincent leaned against the wall a moment, knowing that the self-levelled charge was right.

*I'll just go up. Just for a little while. It's getting late. Not to... find anything, to find her. Not to hope, or wish, or make a plan. Just to... to feel the night air on my skin, feel the fog... envelop me, and hold me close. Just for a while. Just because.*

He would make his way to the park, from here. The deep veil of grey mist would assure his safe passage, once he went Above, for the second time tonight.

He turned around and retraced his steps, this time taking the right fork.

The path wound upward, rather than down. The first curve was a steep one, and he knew he was making his way to the darkly verdant beauty of the April park. The fog bank he'd spotted from atop the Queensboro Bridge was likely racing him there, and probably winning.

Vincent picked up his pace. He wondered if there would be a ring around the cloud-touched moon, for company.

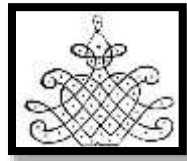
There would likely be no one out on such a night; no one to interrupt his solitary musings. No friends, no foes. Just... himself, alone with his own company.

Perhaps, in the peace and gloom of a fog-shrouded Central Park, he



could come closer to deciding his own fate.

Or perhaps even... finding it.



No matter where you are in your own fairy tale, I wish you love. ~ Cindy