

# STRIPS

by A.N.D.

The girls were giggling again. Vincent peeked over the Catullus he was dutifully reading and saw them, Lisa and Olivia and Marianne and Tanya, huddled over their homework. Giggling. Vincent shook his head and returned to Catullus. He'd always known that girls were different, but now that they were getting into their teens they were going from different to weird. He hoped he wouldn't get weird when he turned 13.

He sighed as he turned a page. He was weird already. Weird enough that he could never dare go Above except at night. Not even when everybody else got to go Up as a treat. Those rotten girls had gotten to go to a movie with a helper today, and he'd been stuck Below. Vincent growled to himself as he turned another page. He hated them, he hated Catullus, and most of all, he hated being stuck in these stupid, stupid tunnels!

But that didn't explain what the girls could find so funny about the ancient classics. Then suddenly illumination came from the corner of his eye. Without moving his head, he watched Lisa slide a book from her pocket and pass it to Kate, who had just entered. Kate took the new book and hid it in her opened copy of Homer. So that's what they were doing; reading something else when it looked like they were doing their homework! No wonder Lisa's grades had slipped so badly lately!

What Lisa hadn't noticed was that when she gave the book to Kate, another slim volume had slipped out of her pocket to the floor. Trying to act absorbed with his Catullus, Vincent reached out an exploratory toe and snapped it, pulling it to his side of the table. Then he accidentally-on-purpose knocked over his reading candle with his elbow. As he'd hoped, the candle blew out as it fell, and the heavy candlestick bounced off the bench to the carpet. While he pretended to search for it, he took a quick look at Lisa's book.

It was a little paperback, and the cover had been ripped off. But the first page proclaimed *The Hell Cat and the King* by Barbara Cartland. A quick glance showed that it was something uninterestingly mushy, so he pushed it back to where Lisa would find it.

It wasn't until he had restored and relit his candle that the big question hit him. Where were the girls finding books? Vincent was sure Father didn't have anything like what he'd just seen!

This called for a little investigation. So when he overheard them making plans to go Above that night - after curfew yet! - he made plans to find out what they were up to.

The were up to 15th Street; the alley behind Walden's Bookstore, to be precise. Vincent's eyes went wide as he saw several big boxes in the alley by the dumpster, boxes that the girls descended on like vultures.

"Here's a Jude Deveraux!" Tanya squealed, pulling out a book. "Here's another Cartland," Kate announced. Olivia snatched for it, but Marianne was faster. "And more over here—six new ones!" Lisa shouted.

For the next half hour they compared authors and titles before they gathered up their prizes and left. Only then did Vincent dare to peel himself out of the shadows and approach Mecca.

It was like dying and going to Heaven. There were still over a hundred books there, all new paperbacks, all free for the taking, all missing their covers. Vincent wondered why anyone would mutilate anything as precious as a book, but then chalked it up to the mysterious ways of topsiders.

"Fiction" proclaimed one spine in small print, while another said "adult fiction". What could the difference be? Vincent grabbed one of each to examine later. He couldn't believe his eyes at what he pulled out next. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. He'd always wanted to read that! Diligent digging got him the rest of *The Lord of the Rings* series, plus a ratty copy of *Tales from Tolkien*. The small print on each one said "fantasy/science fiction". Father had always said that science fiction was trash, but if it included *The Lord of the Rings*, Vincent wanted to give it a try. So he rummaged for as many books as he could find with that legend.

He only stopped when he had a stack of books almost too tall for him to carry. So many new things to read, so many interesting titles... *Stranger in a Strange Land*, , *I Will Fear No Evil*, *The Curse of Cappistrano*, *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, *The Island of Dr Moreau*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, *Brave New World*, *A Wrinkle in Time*. He collected his precious harvest and turned back to the tunnel entrance. He could hardly wait to get Below and start reading. It wouldn't be a punishment to stay at home now. Not with these treasures waiting in his chamber.

And somehow he knew that the tunnels would never seem so confining again.

There is no frigate like a book  
To take us lands away  
Nor any coursers like a page  
Of prancing poetry.  
This traverse may the poorest take  
Without oppress of toll  
How frugal is the chariot  
That bears the human soul!

... E. Dickinson