

At Last

by Angie

Hold them close, at last, at last
- Elizabeth Akers Allen

It was their Anniversary, and despite having their own home now in the brownstone, it always seemed to be appropriate to spend the night in Vincent's chamber below, not least because Catherine insisted. After all, her life had changed forever the night she met Vincent.

Vincent had been surprised that she wanted to remember such a dark, painful time of her life, but as she told him, and had since told others, she would not change it for anything.

This year, as in the past, they decided they would read to each other something they had discovered and wanted to share. Catherine always hoped she would find something Vincent didn't know, but knew with a certainty, that was not very likely. She tried just the same and had found a poet she had never heard of before.

They were sitting in his chamber, bundled up because the tunnels were still chilly in April, although the brazier did give off enough heat to keep the damp at bay. Vincent had pulled down the curtain in his doorway to keep what heat there was from leaving, and discourage draughts.

They were well supplied – a bottle of red wine to warm them inside, and William had baked them a special cake for the occasion, which he called a Blitzkuchen. The name, he explained, was both because it was quick to make, and because it disappeared like lightning, being so delicious that it barely had time to get cool. Catherine was sure the cake would not last long for them either. It was her favourite and she saw Vincent eying it with anticipation.

After Vincent had poured them each a glass of red wine and cut a square of cake onto a plate for each of them. After they had both had a sip and taken a bite of cake – only one - he looked at her expectantly. He always enjoyed her choices, this day of all days.

Catherine smiled at her lover.

"I was rummaging through Mr Smythe's bookstore when I found a new poet, although when I read the book, I realized I had known one of her poems forever. She was such a beautiful writer. So I'll read the poem I like best first.

Catherine opened a small book to a marked page and read softly.

"The poem is called '*At Last*'"

*"At last, when all the summer shine
That warmed life's early hours is past,
Your loving fingers seek for mine
And hold them close—at last—at last!
Not oft the robin comes to build
Its nest upon the leafless bough*

*By autumn robbed, by winter chilled,—
But you, dear heart, you love me now.*

*Though there are shadows on my brow
And furrows on my cheek, in truth,—
The marks where Time's remorseless plough
Broke up the blooming sward of Youth,—
Though fled is every girlish grace
Might win or hold a lover's vow,
Despite my sad and faded face,
And darkened heart, you love me now!
I count no more my wasted tears;
They left no echo of their fall;
I mourn no more my lonesome years;
This blessed hour atones for all.*

*I fear not all that Time or Fate
May bring to burden heart or brow,—
Strong in the love that came so late,
Our souls shall keep it always now!"*

Vincent sighed. "That was beautiful, Catherine. It could have been written for us. I don't recognize the poet. Who was it?"

"Her name was Elizabeth Akers Allen, but she sometimes used the pen name Florence Percy. She was a Bostonian, a poet and a journalist. She died in 1911.

"I think you will know another of her poems very well," Catherine continued. "Would you like me to read it? I like it because it reminds me of my mother, who would have been so very happy for me now."

"Of course, Catherine. Now I'm intrigued."

"This is the poem, as it was used in a popular song."

*"Backward, turn backward, O Time, in your flight,
Make me a child again just for tonight!
Mother, come back from the echoless shore,
Take me again to your heart as of yore;
Kiss from my forehead the furrows of care,
Smooth the few silver threads out of my hair;
Over my slumbers your loving watch keep,
Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep.*

[Refrain]

*Backward, O tide of the years!
I am so weary of toil and of tears;
Weary of sowing for others to reap;
Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep.*

*Tired of the hollow, the base, the untrue,
Mother, O mother, my heart calls for you!
Many a summer the grass has grown green,
Blossomed and faded our faces between,
Yet, with strong yearning and passionate pain,
Long I tonight for your presence again;
Come from the silence so long and so deep,
Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep.*

[Refrain]

*Mother, dear mother, the years have been long
Since last I listened your lullaby song;
Sing, then! and unto my soul it shall seem
Years that are gone have been only a dream.
Held to your heart in a loving embrace,
With your light lashes just sweeping my face,
Never hereafter to wake or to weep,
Rock me to sleep, mother, rock me to sleep."*

[Refrain]

Vincent looked astonished. "I know the first part of that poem," he remarked. "I don't know where I've seen it, but those lines are very familiar. Perhaps it was used in one of the books I read to the children."

"It was by far her most popular poem, apparently," Catherine commented. "And those two lines have become almost a cliché. I know the poem, although I never knew who wrote it. I was as surprised as you. I even found out what the tune it was sung to sounds like."

She reached in her bag and pulled out a small tape player. "Shall I?" she asked.

"Please!" Vincent replied, amazed. Catherine thought of everything!

She pushed the play button and a gentle, catchy tune came from the little player.

"Lovely!" Vincent commented. "How on earth did you find that?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

Catherine gave a secret smile. "Edie has been playing around with her computer and found an archive of MIDI files – an old format that went out of style with CDs and such, she said, but which is still quite playable. I taped it when she played it.

"The song is called *"Rock Me to Sleep."*

"May I read from the book?" Vincent asked at last. "I have something to read, but I find this poet so interesting, I would rather read more of her."

"Of course, Vincent. I would love you to read a poem." She handed him the book, gratified that she had managed to surprise him.

Vincent took a long sip of wine and another big bite of cake, then wiped his hands on a napkin and spent a few minutes browsing the book. He found a poem he liked very much - but was it too dark a topic for this night?

"I like this one, but Catherine, it's not like the others. "

"I bet I know which one it is," Catherine remarked, and smiled at him. "I found it lovely too – and it has a message for us, my love. What better time than this?"

So Vincent read the poem he found, his mellow voice giving it considerable compassion.

"Until Death

*Make me no vows of constancy, dear friend,
To love me, though I die, thy whole life long,
And love no other till thy days shall end -
Nay, it were rash and wrong.*

*If thou canst love another, be it so;
I would not reach out of my quiet grave
To bind thy heart, if it should choose to go -
Love should not be a slave.*

*My placid ghost, I trust, will walk serene
In clearer light than gilds those earthly morns,
Above the jealousies and envies keen,
Which sow this life with thorns.*

*Thou wouldst not feel my shadowy caress;
If, after death, my soul should linger here;
Men's hearts crave tangible, close tenderness,
Love's presence, warm and near.*

*It would not make me sleep more peacefully
That thou wert wasting all thy life in woe
For my poor sake; what love thou hast for me,
Bestow it ere I go.*

*Carve not upon a stone when I am dead
The praises which remorseful mourners give
To women's graves - a tardy recompense -
But speak them while I live.*

*Heap not the heavy marble o'er my head
To shut away the sunshine and the dew;
Let small blooms grow there, and let grasses wave,
And raindrops filter through.*

*Thou wilt meet many fairer and more gay
Than I; but, trust me, thou canst never find
One who will love and serve thee night and day
With a more single mind.*

*Forget me when I die! The violets
Above my breast will blossom just as blue,
Nor miss thy tears; e'en nature's self forgets;
But while I live, be true."*

Catherine sighed. She truly believed Vincent could read a death notice and make it sound enchanting.

"I understand she married, but her husband died shortly afterwards when they were in Europe," Catherine remarked. "It must have been a devastating loss, but her words do not indicate sadness, or bitterness – but of all things, hope."

She paused and they were both silent for a time.

"I think we need some more wine and cake, Vincent," she commented after a while.

"I agree, Catherine." He poured them both some more wine and cut some more cake.

"This author deserves to be honoured with a toast." He held up his glass and stood up.

"Here's to Elizabeth Akers Allen, who speaks to all of us, even a century later, about the value of hope, and moving forward, without regret."

"To Elizabeth," Catherine whispered, grateful to have found a poet Vincent didn't know – at last.

Indeed, as they both knew, they could have no regrets, for it was hope that had brought them together – and moving forward had been a necessary part of their love too.

END