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## More than Light

- by Angie

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*Thro' the world we safely go  
Joy and woe are woven fine  
A clothing for the soul divine  
- William Blake*

Vincent sat in his chamber Below, feeling more relaxed than he had in days. No matter how much he loved the brownstone, something in him could never forget that he did not belong Above. He was most comfortable here in this chamber, where he had lived most of his life.

Catherine and little Jacob had left him alone while they attended to their own affairs, and Vincent took the opportunity to read a book of William Blake's poems. It was the folio volume Michael had given Catherine when he stayed with her just before he began university. Blake had been one of Michael's passions and had guessed rightly that Catherine loved his work also.

To Vincent, Blake had a blunt style quite different from the romantics of his day. Sometimes his verse was almost child-like in its innocence, other times it gave a powerful hit below the belt, challenged accepted beliefs, scorned them even. Some lines seemed to speak to him directly.

*“Abstinence sows sand all over  
The ruddy limbs and flaming hair  
But Desire gratified  
Plants fruits of life and beauty there”*

Why had he insisted on abstinence in the face of Catherine's love – right to the last – almost losing himself in the process?

*“Everything that lives  
Lives not alone or for itself”*

That had been a hard lesson – realizing that he was not alone, could not pretend to be alone, had no right to distance himself from the woman who loved him - any more than he could remove himself from his family Below.

*“And does the sun and moon blot out  
Rooting over with thorns and stems  
The buried soul and all its gems”*

Vincent looked up, suddenly aware that his chamber was sunny. Somehow the light from Above - in its mysterious way – was illuminating his chamber brighter than he had ever seen it. The stained glass window was gleaming with such brilliance that it made his overhead Tiffany lamps seem dim. He got up and blew out the tiny oil lamps in them, quickly followed by the candles, then sat suffused in that warm golden glow. It was bright enough to read by, but he now felt no inclination to do so. He lay the book on the table and tilted his head into the light. Something was nagging at him and he opened his mind to let it speak to him.

He was still sitting thus when Catherine entered the chamber – and stopped enthralled. Vincent was bathed in a mellow light, his hair turned to spun gold, his face upturned and his eyes closed, as if he were deep in a trance. She knew he was not, but he was calm, expectant, waiting – but not for her, although she could not say how she knew that.

Catherine spotted the volume of Blake on the table next to him and wondered at that too. She knew that he did not like the poet much – but then perhaps today was Blake’s day. She found that poets, like music, had their shining moments. When one could match them to one’s life, the result was magic, a gem that shone undimmed down the years, never to be forgotten.

“What is it, my love?” she asked softly, approaching him quietly and sitting on his lap. She stroked his face, then moved to lightly caress a soft ear under his hair – something she knew would get his attention, if it didn’t physically arouse him.

Vincent looked down at the woman he loved, still struggling to identify that elusive something. He couldn’t put it into words so he temporized.

“Where’s our son?”

“Jacob’s in the dorm playing pinochle with some of the boys. It’s his latest obsession.”

Pinochle. Of course. The memory washed over him and he wondered at the coincidence, even as he felt the familiar sorrow spread from his heart. Catherine immediately felt it and gave him a soft kiss. He hugged her to him, his eyes now burning with unshed tears. He dropped his forehead onto Catherine’s shoulder.

Catherine shifted to put her hand under his chin and lift it up.

“Vincent. Tell me.”

He looked at her and sighed, then turned to look at the stained glass sunburst, still day-bright. So many memories. This one was bittersweet.

“Catherine, I’ve had a flashback. Something was nagging at me. Then you mentioned pinochle and it came together, with that.” He pointed at the source of the golden light. “It seems unusually beautiful today. It ... Winslow made it – and today is the eighth anniversary of his death.”

“Winslow?” Catherine breathed. “He made that? It’s magical, Vincent. Winslow seemed so ... down to earth. Practical.”

“Yes, Catherine, he was all of that too. I remember him as a boy, though. He came to us as an orphan. He had been abandoned and was eking out an existence on the streets, stealing. He hid in a drain under one of the alleyway grates. The tunnel accesses in such places are very narrow and we had never thought to brick them up. He was very quiet, very canny and we didn’t know he was there for weeks. He didn’t try to move far, just enough to hide from anyone looking down from the street.

“Then he got sick and ... well, the smell drew us to him. He was about my age – eight or nine. Father treated him and we boys played with him in the hospital chamber while he

recovered. We taught him pinochle. After that, he, myself, Devin and Pascal played regularly for years. Sometimes others would join, but the four of us were well matched and no one else ever lasted long.

“Then one day, we visited the shop of a helper - one of many we older boys were sent to. Father wanted to ensure we were exposed to any skill that might interest us. This man had a glass-cutting business – just windows, cabinet doors, that kind of thing. But in the back he was an artist. He collected old stained glass from buildings slated for demolition and re-made it into lamps and small items. He was very good. We were all amazed - but Winslow was captivated. At the age of 12, he became an apprentice to this helper and spent his days Above.

“He was a dreamer, our Winslow, although he kept that well-hidden. He wanted to make something special. He and I were good friends, and of course Devin bunked with me, so he decided to make us something for this chamber. He told us that much, but we had no idea what it would be. It was his secret. Then one day, about a year later, he had us help him carry Below something heavy, all wrapped in burlap.

“This chamber had been chosen by Paracelsus, you know, to be his own. The light was magical and that wall opening unique here Below – to say nothing of the bathing chamber behind it. Father put Devin and me in here because he could not bear to use it himself. The memories of what John Pater had done to the community were still too raw. We ... knew nothing of that until much later. Father never told either of us that Devin was his natural son, as you know. No one questioned his decisions then.

“For me, because I couldn’t go Above in daylight, this chamber was magical. But when we unwrapped that burlap and saw what Winslow had made, we were rendered speechless. He had made me a sun!

“Over the next few days, as we waited for it to be properly installed, Winslow told us its story. He was very proud of it. He had found a lot of yellow glass in the back of the shop and that had given him the idea. He found the green roundels on each side, the ‘lady’ in the middle, the snake-like green waves, and top centre ‘shell’ in parts of a Regency window from a now-demolished hotel. The deep red circle between the yellow sections had been above the entrance of an old post office.”

Catherine sat amazed as Vincent talked. She had been in this chamber hundreds of times, yet had never thought to ask about the window. It seemed to belong. She could not imagine Vincent’s chamber without it.

“That’s a wonderful story, Vincent. I hardly got to know Winslow before he was ... killed ... helping you rescue me. I wish I had. He was always so gruff, though.”

Vincent’s mouth twitched.

“Yes. He never believed that anyone could love him for himself. He was always trying to outdo himself, make himself the best, the most useful, the strongest. Stained glass became his passion. He made us all the lamps we use here Below.

“He made us so many lamps that we still have many in storage. The man with the shop died just a short while after Winslow finished this window and left the contents to him. Winslow brought all the glass and tools Below and set up a workshop. Then, when he had made everything possible from every bit of glass from the shop, he stopped. He announced he had paid back his teacher and declared he was finished with that kind of work. He moved into a small, bare chamber with room only for a bed and trunk. His workroom eventually became Mouse’s chamber. That hole you fell down when you first met Mouse had been the ventilation shaft. Mouse turned it into a trap.

“Winslow was a big man, as you know, so he decided to do heavy labour. He and Kanin did a lot of chamber-carving together. They expanded our living space and improved our lives, immeasurably.”

Catherine turned her face into Vincent’s chest and hugged him. Sometimes she couldn’t help feeling guilty. She had been heedless, several times. It was a wonder she and Vincent had survived to have a child, much less enjoy a life together.

Vincent caught her emotions and held her close. He was well aware that her guilt came to the surface on occasion.

“Catherine,” he said softly, in that voice she loved best of all. “You need not feel guilty about Winslow. You were abducted. It wasn’t your fault, but mine, if it was anyone’s. Paracelsus hated me after I set his lab on fire.

“Winslow insisted on coming to find you. We could not have stopped him. On the way, he told me that he envied me your love – that he had never known the love of a woman, but that he knew our love was real. He felt it was something worth fighting for. What could I say to that? I wanted to send both him and Pascal back, but they wouldn’t hear of it.

“Winslow was a good man, a talented man, but he had little belief in himself. He was like myself in that he felt he would never know a woman’s love. Like me, he turned to the pickaxe to drown out frustration. Or pinochle. He was the best of us four. He would have been a phenomenal chess player, but the game didn’t interest him at all. Too high-brow, he said.

“He was wrong about love. Several women here Below would have gladly shared his life and his bed – but he died before he realized it – or more likely, would admit it to himself. Jamie loved him most of all, I think, and she saw him die. She was inconsolable for weeks. She became the hard, practical woman – and Mouse’s minder – we know now. I don’t think she will ever love another. She, like Winslow – and me - is someone who can only have one passion at a time – and that one is forever.

”Winslow had deep passions. He loved us all, I think, with such intensity that he was afraid to show it most of the time.”

Catherine looked at the window and her eyes burned now.

“I remember when I came Below, that day when I felt you were in danger and I was told that you and Father were trapped in a cave-in. Winslow had taken charge. He was mesmerizing to watch, frantic almost. He would have pounded away at those yards of rock until he died trying. He wouldn’t have left you there, even when no hope remained.

“Thank goodness we found another way. His strength was invaluable then too. That drilling contraption of Mouse’s would have been useless without his physical strength. He had a heart as big as himself – and yes, he was a special man beneath that rough exterior. No wonder Jamie loved him. She, like me, saw what was hidden beneath the surface of the man she loved.”

Vincent said nothing to that. He looked at the stained glass semi-circle and sighed. The light was fading, as if Winslow was now satisfied that he had been recognized and remembered. Vincent looked up at the lamps and saw each one as a unique memento of a special man.

Catherine looked up too.

“They’re a wonderful legacy, Vincent. No one could wish for a better.”

Vincent nodded. "They'll light us forever, enriching us as he did, while he lived. He was a 'tyger' who burned very bright indeed – and created his own symmetry."

*Tyger Tyger burning bright  
In the forests of the night  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

END