

Not Alone

by Angie

A puff of wind, a puff faint and tepid and laden with strange odours" - Joseph Conrad

Catherine had been an only child with few playmates. Even as an adult, she had never shared her living space with someone else for any length of time. She had certainly never lived so closely within a community, or even shared her bed with a lover for more than a night.

Then Vincent had come into her life and she had become part of his family, first occasionally, then permanently. She had never realized exactly what living with a lover, among them all, meant. Until now.

Oh, there had been wonderful adjustments. Vincent's face was the last she saw at night as she spooned herself into his warm, furry body. It was the first thing she saw when she awoke – if she was still close to him. He would not move until he knew she was awake. He said he loved to feel her awaken through the bond. If she had moved away during the night, he was often up pattering about their chamber, or writing in his journal by candlelight. Once she awakened, he would come back to bed and take her in his arms. At that point, their passion would awaken and they would ease into a slow, sensual lovemaking that was her favourite way to start the day – better even than her seldom-indulged-in morning coffee.

That lovemaking led to their joint bathing and often another slow lovemaking in the steamy bath chamber.

She would never tire of him – or he her. However, she had some learning to do, as he had predicted. She had assumed he meant the mechanics of living Below – their work, their mealtimes, their social events – or basic things like clothing, hygiene, children. She had not realized that every day would require adjustments in her thinking. She had made several gaffes – some comical, some not.

There was the time she had asked William to make one of her favourite dishes for an evening meal – enough for everyone of course. She had suddenly realized she had been missing it for some time. It was a cold weather dish that warmed the insides as nothing else could. Jenny had introduced her to it. Her parents would never have considered it a meal. They were strictly meat and potatoes folk.

But of course, she and Jenny always had their favourite meal on a Friday or Saturday night. She had never considered the wider implications.

She had gone to see William one chilly morning after breakfast. Vincent had gone with Kanin to plug up a sudden water leakage that was freezing over the pipes in Pascal's pipe chamber. She had not mentioned her idea to him. Her first mistake.

"William, I have a special request. I've been missing one of my favourite dishes. I know it takes a long time to make, but wondered if it was possible here Below."

William turned from where he was preparing vegetables for the luncheon soup and quietly wiped his hands on his apron before turning to her.

"Catherine, it would be a pleasure to make whatever you wish. I welcome requests. I can make just about anything in my kitchen. Sometimes, I have to get creative, but there's always a way. What would you like?"

“Baked beans,” Catherine said. “A lot of them, with lots of toast from your wonderful bread – washed down with some of your wonderful beer,”

William was silent for long moments. Catherine, looking at his face, saw something warring there – humour and concern, she thought. She wondered why, then assumed he was considering what supplies he would need.

“I’ll make sure you have whatever you need, William. Just give me a shopping list. I’d like the traditional kind, baked in a tureen with molasses, mustard, bacon and whatever herbs you think best. I know it will take a few days to organize and the cooking will take a long time. I’d be willing to help.”

William looked at her with a twinkle in his eyes she did not understand. She decided he was probably trying not to laugh at the picture of her in his kitchen. Her lack of cooking skills were almost legendary – as was her inability to use a needle and thread, except in extremis.

“Catherine, I will probably need a substantial quantity of navy beans, but the rest I probably have on hand. I do have several large baking dishes. They should suffice. I have not made bean dishes often, although they are included in some of my stews and soups, as you know. In any case, you are entitled to have your favourite dish, just like any of us.

“I won’t require any help – but thank you for the offer. I’ll give you a shopping list in an hour or so, after I’ve checked my supplies.”

Catherine thanked him and left, then stopped just outside the door. She was sure she heard a snort coming from the kitchen. William must have got some pepper up his nose. She diplomatically decided not to inquire. Her second mistake.

Two days later, Catherine delivered several pounds of navy beans and a two large containers of blackstrap molasses to William. He thanked her and told her that two days hence, on Monday, he would present her treat to the community for dinner. He looked at her with that twinkle in his eyes again and hugged her. She could feel his large chest heaving with suppressed merriment. Well, William was a happy fellow in his kitchen. Perhaps he had been sampling his beer again. She thought no more of it.

She did not tell Vincent of her arrangement with William. When Monday suppertime arrived at last, she entered the dining chamber to the thick, wonderful aroma she had been missing. William had lined up a series of tureens on the sideboard, along with mountains of toast and huge tubs of butter. On every table was a pitcher of beer.

That beer was one of the joys of Catherine’s life Below. She had never been a beer drinker Above, but she had acquired a taste for it here. Williams meals, being so substantial, seemed to be improved by a mug of beer. She was looking forward to this one.

She got in line ahead of Vincent and loaded up a bowl with steaming beans, and then a plate with enough toast for both of them. Vincent took the plate of toast from her and they sat down. She could hear murmurs of appreciation from the community as they served themselves. She did notice a few looks exchanged between some of the older residents, notably Father and Mary, but could not interpret them. She guessed that baked beans had not been on the menu often – or maybe not for some time.

She finished a bowl and went back for another serving, as did quite a few of the younger folk, she noticed. Vincent hesitated, then joined her to load his bowl again. He regarded her with amusement, probably wondering where she put it all, she thought. Her appetite Below amazed even her.

She finished her bowl and sighed mightily. Williams baked beans were the best she had ever tasted. She wondered if she could get him to repeat the dish again before the end of winter.

Catherine decided it was time to reveal her role in the night’s menu.

Vincent got a strange look on his face as she told him.

“That explains it,” he rumbled, laughing.

“Explains what?” Catherine asked. She was tired of people finding her humorous.

“Well, it explains this wonderful baked bean dinner,” Vincent temporized. “A rarity, I can assure you.”

“Oh.”

Catherine was no wiser, but sensed there was something she was not being told. Why was baked beans a rare dish? She was about to ask when William appeared at the front and clapped his hands for attention.

“I know you have all enjoyed this wonderful meal. This was a special request by Catherine, who has sorely missed it since coming to live with us Below.

“I’m sure you have all filled yourselves up almost to capacity, so dessert tonight is a light one - a fruit jelly.

“Tomorrow, as you all know, is laundry day, which is why I decided to have the baked beans tonight. You will need all your strength and fortitude tomorrow.”

Catherine heard a snort from Father and saw him exchange a look with Mary. Having experienced laundry day herself, Catherine assumed he was remembering something about that.

Vincent seemed to be holding himself under control with an effort. His chest was heaving. He finally cleared his throat and suggested to Catherine that they obtain some dessert before it all disappeared. They did so, but ate in silence. Catherine was puzzled. Something was not making sense, but she could not put her finger on it.

Later that evening, she and Vincent were sitting in his huge bed, reading. She thought of it as his, even though they both slept in it. Its scale made it his, but she loved it. Catherine much preferred the bed to any chair for night-time reading. It was so easy to relax and let herself sink into the pillows. She seldom managed more than a page or two before she realized she was half asleep and not reading anything.

Tonight, she was tired and very relaxed from the beer and beans. She was reading some poems by Emily Dickinson. They were so beautifully succinct – often quite sensual. There was a sense of something repressed as well, something that emerged between the lines.

She had just expanding this thought when she became aware of something – and it took her a while to realize what it was – or which sense was noticing it. It was dim in the chamber, but tall candles on the wardrobes on either side were casting a mellow glow over the bed. It was quiet, very quiet – almost hushed – in the Tunnels. It was chilly, but that was normal. With Vincent next to her, she hardly noticed. She could smell the scent of candle smoke and was sure some of the spicy, homely aroma of William’s beans was lurking in their clothes flung over a nearby chair. Was that it?

She turned her head to look at Vincent, opened her mouth to say something, then realized he was staring straight ahead with a fixed expression on his face, as if he had been shocked. That thought made her suddenly aware of what he had already noticed with his superior sense of smell. She breathed in and got a nose-full. With a shock of disgust, she realized she was the reason for that expression on his face. She felt her face flush.

He turned to look at her, drew the corners of his mouth up to reveal his canines, his wry expression. He seemed about to say something, then turned away, pointedly returning to his book.

Catherine was about to apologize when an explosive sound erupted from under Vincent. It was followed by more of the appalling smell, much stronger this time. She looked at him again, caught his flush of embarrassment and suddenly could not prevent herself from exploding into laughter. Vincent

joined her and they leaned against each other, wrapped in the odour of digested beans, guffawing until they ran out of breath.

He hugged her to him, the smell now become pervasive, periodically punctuated with involuntary noises from one or the other of them. Somehow the sharing of it made it less noxious.

With sudden, belated clarity, Catherine realized why William had found her request so funny. Why had he not said something? Then she realized she had not really given him a chance, so intent was she on arranging for her favourite dish. He was probably enjoying this the joke on her immensely. And the lesson would not be lost on the younger members of the community, either.

How would she ever be able to face them again? Catherine wished she could sink into a hole and pull it in after her. Except that she now had an urgent need for a hole of a different kind. She almost leaped off the bed and ran into the bathroom, pulling down the privacy curtain behind her. She made enough noise, and in such variety, that she heard Vincent chuckling on the bed. She felt her face flush again. Serve her right! she berated herself. She would never live this down!

She finished and returned to bed, only to have Vincent rush past her on the same mission. He was much quieter behind the curtain, but not silent. Not at all. She smiled to herself. The only consolation she had was that everyone in the Tunnel community would be experiencing the same ... reaction.

Then she remembered that the next day was laundry day. Just about everyone would be engaged in that duty. They would be too busy to notice - or discuss - any remaining flatulence. The smell of soap would hopefully overpower it.

She was suddenly very grateful to William for his timing. What if he had decided to serve the meal before a community evening of entertainment – or worse yet, a Naming Ceremony, or a Joining – or heaven forbid, Winterfest? She shuddered. She was fortunate in her ignorance – and in her friends, she realized.

When Vincent came back into bed, she hugged him tightly. He nuzzled an ear and whispered into it.

“Now you know, Catherine. But they were wonderful beans. It was a lovely thought. You were not to know why we had taken them off the menu – at least in concentrated form. I think perhaps William’s excellent scheduling might make it possible again – in time.”

He moved away from her, looking into her eyes affectionately, but with a glint of mischief.

“In any case, your special meal will ... resound ... for a long time.”

“And, I fear, my rumour will precede me for another day,” Catherine quipped back.

Vincent laughed, pulled her to him and carried them both over onto the soft mattress.

They finished the day as they had begun it – making love.

THE END