



## *Dreams Take Flight*

By Barbara Anderson

April 24, 1965. The last Saturday in April. The date was circled boldly in red on the calendar that hung in the art chamber, and it was quickly approaching. It wasn't officially a holiday, not in the world above or even in the world below. But as far as the Tunnel children were concerned, *it was a holiday indeed!*

The Second Annual Tunnel Children's Kite Day was approaching!

It was originally an impromptu celebration invented and instituted solely by the Tunnel children the previous year when they discovered that the kite ban in Central Park had been lifted.<sup>1</sup> The celebration hadn't actually been sanctioned by the Council. Regardless, the children had been planning this day for months.

Unless there was rain, sleet or snow, the last Saturday of April would find all of them up in Central Park, running free in the sunshine and flying the kites they had been designing and making in their art class for the last month.

Well ... almost all of them.

Vincent knew that he would not be joining in the festivities. By the time he was eleven years old, he was painfully aware of the reality that he would never be able to play in the park in the sunshine with the other children. It still hurt, but it didn't stop him from getting caught up in the excitement, and it didn't stop him from dreaming about it. It certainly wouldn't stop him from making a kite. Vincent was determined to make a kite that was just as good, or better, than anyone else's. He had been dreaming of his kite for weeks.

Father tried to discourage this informal celebration and rite of spring. He was painfully aware of how much it hurt Vincent to be left out and left behind.

What Father didn't understand was that it hurt Vincent even more to see his friends penalized and restricted because of his limitations. It only made the other children resent him, and that was certainly something Vincent did not want. He had begged Father to let the children have their Kite Day. And although he couldn't understand Vincent's enthusiasm for an activity he would not be able to participate in, Father couldn't bring himself to say 'no' to the boy.

Vincent had enlisted Peter's help in purchasing the materials he needed for his kite. He had traded and bartered several of his best treasures for any spare change there was to be had among the other children. He had done odd jobs for any of his fellow tunnel dwellers who were willing to part with any money they felt they could part with. Finally, he had trusted all of his hard earned pennies, nickels and dimes into Peter's hands. (Peter didn't have the heart to tell Vincent that a few of his coins weren't actually money at all, but ancient subway tokens and foreign currency.) Peter had not let him down. As soon as the materials arrived, Vincent began working on his kite.

Late one night Vincent and Devin went up to the park to find thin green tree branches that would be easy to bend. Once back in his chamber, Vincent had carefully stripped them of their bark and tied them together in the perfect shapes.

The rest of the Tunnel children had scavenged any materials they could find to make something to fly as soon as the weather permitted. Their lack of funds was more than made up for with imagination and ingenuity.

Most of the kites were the standard diamond kite shape, made mostly from discarded newspapers. A few of the children had managed to find gently used wrapping paper that had been thrown away. They carefully pressed out the wrinkles and taped up any tears they found. Some of the children painted colorful pictures on their kites to brighten them up.

In an effort to encourage the children in their creative endeavor Mary generously provided fabric scraps from her personal stores to help them put colorful tails on their kites.

Besides helping Father as a nurse and midwife, Mary was the art and sewing teacher in the secret Tunnel community. She hadn't been there long, but she had taken an instant liking to the children. Even though she was only in her mid-twenties, she had a motherly way of taking them under her wing and treating them each as if they were her own.

Devin and Pascal worked together to make a box kite.

Olivia had covered her kite with pink and yellow wrapping paper flowers.

"You want to make a kite with me, Mitch?" Winslow offered.

"Not interested," Mitch replied with a sneer. "I don't need your pity, kid. I'm not a baby like the rest of you."

At Mitch's snub, Winslow only shrugged his shoulders and said, "Suit yourself."

On the day the children unveiled their creations, everyone gathered around Vincent's kite in awe. It was a large black butterfly with rainbow colored cells that seemed to glow when held up to the light.

"It's beautiful, Vincent," Olivia declared. "Just like a stained glass window. Where did you get the tissue paper?"

"I asked one of the helpers to buy it for me with the money I earned."

They all knew that Vincent would not be able to fly it with them, but no one begrudged him his beautiful kite, except maybe one.

"Are you kidding me? ... A butterfly?" Mitch scoffed. "It looks like a girl's kite. What are you, Vincent, *a cissy*?"

Devin stepped up to Mitch. "Shut your trap, Mitch. I see you couldn't do any better."

"This is a stupid project. You're all stupid." Mitch stuck out his chest in defiance. "I have better things to do than play with babies."

"Then why don't you go do them and leave us alone." Devin stood toe to toe with Mitch. Although Mitch and Devin were about the same age, Devin was taller than him.

"An who's gonna make me, big mouth? You?" Mitch replied.

At that, Winslow, the biggest of the boys their age, and Pascal, the smallest, stepped up to either side of Devin in solidarity.

Mitch began to back up as one by one all of the children gathered behind Devin, Winslow and Pascal.

Mitch sneered at them all. "You're all stupid babies." He turned on his heel and walked out of the chamber, and was quickly forgotten.

"What are you going to do with your kite, Vincent?" Rebecca asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I can figure out a way to hang it from the ceiling of my chamber. That way I can look at it when I'm lying on my bed. If a breeze comes in through the upper entrance it will look like it's flying up there."

"Children, I think we'd better keep all of the kites here in the art room until Saturday," Mary suggested. "That way they won't get ruined before the big day."

As they left for their other classes the children obediently hung their kites from a wire that was strung against the length of one wall and was commonly used to display their many art projects.

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The two days until Saturday seemed to crawl by for each and every one of the children. When it finally arrived, the children were so anxious to get up to the park that they were too excited to eat breakfast.

But at this Virginia, Olivia's mother and the Tunnel community's chief cook, put her foot down.

"Any child that does not eat their breakfast will not be permitted to join the kite flyers in the park," she declared.

Father and the other adults agreed.

Reluctantly the children complied. When everyone had finally finished eating, they all raced as fast as they could to the art room to retrieve their kites.

After leaving the dining hall, the children passed Mitch in the hallway heading in the opposite direction. Olivia knew he had not made a kite of his own, but she wondered if he might join the fun if she invited him.

"Why don't you come with us, Mitch?" she asked. "You can fly my kite if you want to," she offered.

Mitch just scoffed at her and replied, "Beat it, Olivia, I don't want to fly your stupid kite."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned to follow her friends. As she walked away she wondered why he was laughing.

Practically tripping over each other to get into the chamber they were met with a sight that both shocked and horrified them all. Piled on the chamber floor was every kite that had previously hung proudly against the wall. The colorful tails had been ripped from them and several of the kites had been slashed. Vincent's kite was broken, and torn to irreparable shreds, and strewn about the room.

The children stood around the pile in stunned silence. Rebecca was the first to move. She quietly reached into the pile and retrieved her kite. It was made of brown paper on which she had sponge painted bright purple and yellow daisies. A silent tear rolled down one cheek.

"Children, you must be sure that everyone stays ..." Mary came into the art room to see what was keeping the children. The shock was apparent on her face. "Oh my! What's happened here? Who could have done such a thing?" she asked in disbelief. "I was in here just before breakfast and everything was fine."

"Mitch!" Devin exclaimed. "That little creep!"

As Devin moved past Vincent, he grabbed his arm and urged him toward the chamber entrance. "Come with me, Vincent. Let's go get that little jerk." When Vincent didn't budge, Devin turned toward him. "Come on, Vincent."

"No" Vincent pulled away.

Devin didn't understand. "What are you talking about? Look what he's done."

"Devin, *it's Kite Day*. If we go after Mitch ... Kite Day is over ... Everyone has been looking forward to it."

"We can't let him get away with this!" Devin insisted.

"You're right," Vincent said, nodding. "We can't let him get away with it. Mitch wanted to ruin Kite Day and if we go after him then ... he wins. Don't you see? If we fix the kites ... and have Kite Day anyway, then *we win* ... and he fails."

Devin stood silently weighing Vincent's words.

"You know, like Father says, 'The best revenge is <sup>ii</sup> ...'" Vincent began.

Devin nodded in frustration and finished the sentence. "I know. *I know* ... a life well lived." Devin's shoulders drooped as he turned back into the room. "I swear, Vincent, you are starting to sound more and more like Father every day. It's really starting to bug me."

Vincent laughed and picked up the nearest kite. "See, this one isn't so bad. Whose kite is this?" he asked, looking around.

"Mine," the barely audible voice seemed to come from nowhere.

Vincent turned to see little Emma come out from behind Olivia's skirt. Vincent leaned down and wiped her tear stained face. "Would you like me to help you fix it, Emma?"

She nodded shyly.

Vincent looked around to see what was available to mend the kite. "Why don't you find me a nice big piece of tissue paper from my butterfly kite and I will get the glue."

Vincent retrieved a jar of rubber cement from the shelf and began brushing it onto the kite.

In no time, the room became a buzz of activity, with the older children first helping the younger ones and then helping each other.

Fearing there might be a confrontation, Mary had run to get Father. However by the time Mary had returned with Father in tow, they found all of the children busily helping each other repair each their kites. The mood in the room became more and more cheerful as they worked. Olivia explained to them what Vincent had done.

Father turned to Mary. "Well, Mary, it appears that things are not as dire as you feared. If you will excuse me, I will be in the library if you need anything further."

Mary gathered up the kite tails that were lying about the room and made sure each child had one.

Within the hour all the kites were patched and glued, and though a little worse for wear, they seemed to be flight worthy. The children merrily headed for the park with their kites in hand.

As Vincent stood alone in the hallway watching everyone run happily off with their kites, Emma came running back. She motioned for him to kneel down to her level. When he did, the little girl came close, wrapped her arms around his neck, and whispered in his ear. "Thank you, Vincent." She kissed him on the cheek and ran to catch up to the others, leaving him standing in there alone. There was nothing left to do, but go back and clean up the mess.

Alone in the sudden silence, Mary had busied herself with putting everything back in its proper place. She didn't realize that Vincent had returned until she heard a sniffle from across the room. Looking around she could see that Vincent was sweeping up debris and

the remains of his beautiful kite. He paused and wiped his cheek with the back of his fuzzy hand.

Rushing to his side, Mary put a comforting arm around his shoulder. Speaking softly, she said, "What you did today, Vincent ..." She was becoming a little choked up herself as her heart went out to the boy. "What you did for the other children was wonderful. You have the most beautiful heart, I've ever known."

Vincent didn't know how to respond. He was embarrassed, not only by her compliments, but that she had seen him crying. He couldn't help it, his beautiful kite was destroyed and he was alone with the rest of the lonely day stretching before him. He sniffled again.

Mary had no way of knowing how much he craved a mother's tenderness, but somehow she seemed to sense his current need. "I have an idea," she said cheerfully. "Come with me, Vincent."

Vincent obediently followed her and soon found himself standing in the kitchen.

"Virginia? Are you here?" Mary called.

"Yes. What can I do for you, Mary?"

"Vincent and I were wondering if we could bake some cookies. Would that be all right with you?"

Virginia had already heard about what Vincent had done. They lived in a small community after all, and news travels fast on the wind as well as on the pipes. "Yes," she smiled and nodded. "I think that sounds like a wonderful idea. We seem to have an abundance of oatmeal and raisins at the moment. How would oatmeal cookies be?"

Vincent's eyes lit up a little. Life in the Tunnels was usually pretty lean even at the best of times, and cookies were a special treat, usually reserved for holidays or celebrations. Vincent had developed a particular fondness for Virginia's Chewy Oatmeal Raisin Cookies.

*Maybe this day won't be so bad, after all,* Vincent thought.

The three of them were soon busy bustling about the kitchen and mixing and taste testing. By the time they were finished making enough cookies for the entire community, Vincent was smiling and licking the bowl, oblivious of the sight he made dusted with flour and wearing Virginia's oversized apron.

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As the children emerged two by two from the access tunnel into the park they had previously agreed to meet up again on the west side of Sheep's Meadow. Together they would find a place where there was room for all of them to fly their kites and still stay together. By the time Devin and the last of the children arrived they found all of the other children looking intently skyward.

"What are you guys looking at," Devin asked.

"Look, Devin," Olivia said, pointing to the sky. "It looks like Vincent's kite."

Devin looked up and to his surprise there it was, Vincent's kite. *That's impossible*, he thought. *Vincent couldn't have ...* But there it was ... Vincent's kite ... plain as day.

Focusing on the kite, he followed the string down until he could see who was holding on to the other end of it on the ground. It was a pretty little girl. She couldn't be more than nine years old. A girl Devin didn't recognize.

She was wearing pleated light blue slacks and a crisp pink and white and gingham blouse with a white Peter Pan collar and a fuzzy, light pink sweater that reminded him of cotton candy. Her tennis shoes were perfectly white without a speck of dirt on them, not even a grass stain. She looked like she had just stepped out of a department store window display. There wasn't a single hair out of place and not one patch on her.

Devin could see right away that she clearly wasn't one of the Tunnel kids. As he approached her he could hear her laughing.

"Isn't it beautiful, Daddy?"

"Yes, Cathy, I do believe it's the best one yet."

"I don't know. I liked last year's too... at least until the tree ate it."

"Yes, that was tragic wasn't it?"

"What about you, Mom, which do you think was better, this one or last year's?"

Devin turned in the direction the girl was looking, and seated on a picnic blanket was a beautiful woman in a brightly colored sun dress and sun glasses looking up to the colorful kite.

"I like this one the best, Sweetheart. I love the bright colors. I believe you and Daddy outdid yourselves this year."

"Watch your kite, Cathy. You need to reel it in a little," the father warned.

Devin moved a little closer. "Nice kite, you got there, kid. Where'dya get it?" Devin tried to ask as nonchalantly as possible.



“My Dad and I made it. Isn’t it great?” the gingham girl replied proudly as she carefully reeled in her kite line a little.

“Yeah, it is. My brother made one just like it.”

Trying to concentrate on her kite, the girl gave him a sideways glance, looking at him with skepticism. “I don’t think it could be *just like it*,” she said dubiously. “I dreamed up this one myself, and my dad and I made it from scratch.”

Devin didn’t want to cause any trouble, so he went on his way. But he couldn’t help wondering what a strange coincidence it was that two kids who didn’t even know each other could imagine the very same kite.

He gathered the other children over to a less crowded section of Sheep’s Meadow and helped the little ones get their kites aloft. The day was as glorious as all the children had imagined. It didn’t matter that their kites were made from the discarded brown paper bags and funny pages from the newspaper or even that the tails were tied with strips of cloth from Mary’s scrap bag. All that mattered was that winter was over and they were finally free to frolic in the sunshine.

By the early afternoon they were all getting pretty hungry and the little ones were beginning to tire. As they gathered up their kites and headed back to the tunnels, Devin noticed the pink gingham girl and her parents standing under a large tree looking up into its branches.

Curious, Devin approached and stood next to her. Looking up, he could scarcely see the brightly colored butterfly kite flapping helplessly in the highest branches.

“Tree ate your kite, huh?” Devin observed.

“Hmm ...” the girl’s father said gruffly. “I think it’s the same tree that ate our kite last year.”

“Can you sue a tree, Daddy?” the girl asked.

Devin could hear the man chuckle softly and mutter something under his breath.

“Why don’t I climb up there and get it, Daddy? I’m pretty sure I could reach it if you give me boost,” the girl asked.

“Oh, Cathy, please don’t. I’m afraid you’ll get hurt,” her mother begged as she placed a protective hand on her daughter’s shoulder.

Cathy looked at her mother in surprise. “I didn’t think you were afraid of anything, Mom.”

“I’m sorry, Cathy, I don’t know what I would do if you fell and got hurt.”

Without hesitation Devin jumped for the lowest branch and hoisted himself into the tree.

Cathy and her parents watched and worried as Devin made his way expertly through the branches, higher and higher until he reached the kite. The kite was torn and the frame was broken in a couple of places, but he thought it could be repaired, so he carefully extracted it from the branches it had been impaled on. He then carefully lowered himself and the kite slowly through the branches until he could deliver it into the gingham girl’s hands.

As he dropped to the ground he could see them looking over the damaged kite.

“Maybe you can fix it, Cathy,” her mother suggested.

“I don’t think so, Mom,” Cathy replied doubtfully. “Anyway, it wouldn’t be the same. I wanted to hang it from my ceiling so I could look at it when I was laying in my bed. Now I would only see the patches. I’d rather make a new one. Do you think we still have enough tissue paper, Daddy?”

“Patches aren’t so bad,” Devin offered. “It gives it personality.”

The young girl looked at the older boy and noticed his heavily patched pants. *He must be poor*, she thought. But even at her young age she was too polite to mention it. “Thank you ... for rescuing my kite, but I think it’s ruined.”

“Nah, you could fix it easy.”

“If you think you can fix it, why don’t you keep it?” She held out the kite to Devin.

“Ya mean it?” he asked in disbelief. He immediately began thinking how surprised Vincent would be if he brought it to him.

“I think you earned it at the very least. Don’t you?” said the girl’s mother. “I’m just thankful you didn’t fall and break something.”

“Here, young man, for your efforts.” The girl’s father held out a crisp five dollar bill.

Devin shook his head. “That’s okay mister, you don’t need to pay me. I like climbing trees.”

“*Please*, take it,” the man insisted. “You can get hot dogs for you and your friends.”

Devin reached for it reluctantly. “Thanks a lot, Mister.” Devin gratefully accepted the money and ran with the kite to his friends. Within a few minutes the money was safely in the pocket of a nearby hot dog vendor and all of the tunnel children were enjoying an unexpected treat.

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Returning to the tunnels, Devin found Vincent in the chamber they shared immersed in a book. “Whattya readin’, Vincent?”

Without looking up, Vincent replied, “Tom Sawyer ... this is my favorite part. Tom and Becky are lost in McDougal’s Cave and Injun Joe is...”

“I brought you something.”

Vincent looked up to see Devin holding out hot dog in one hand and holding something else behind his back with the other.

Vincent was never one to turn down a hot dog, even if it was a little cold and soggy. He loved hot dogs. To Vincent they tasted like Central Park and green grass, carousels and sunshine. They were a little taste of everything he wished he was able to do with his friends. To him, hot dogs tasted like freedom.

“Thanks, Dev.” He spoke with his mouth full. “How was the park? Did the kites fly okay? What’s behind your back?”

Devin slowly revealed the butterfly kite.

Vincent was speechless. He was wide eyed as he looked at it. At first glance it looked exactly like his kite. He stuffed the remaining end of the hotdog in his mouth and wiped his hands on his shirt.

As he looked more closely he could tell that it wasn’t his kite. There were slight differences. It was a little bit smaller than his, the frame wasn’t made out of tree branches, and instead of colorful rag strips, there were shiny rainbow colored satin ribbons flowing from the tip of each bottom wing. But even Vincent had to admit that the similarity was amazing.

“I don’t understand,” Vincent said in wonder. “Where did you get it? I thought I dreamed this up myself. I thought it was my own original design.”

“Yeah... that’s what she said too. She said she dreamed it up herself and she wanted to hang it from her ceiling so she could look at it while she was laying in bed.”

“Who are you talking about? Who dreamed it up?”

Vincent listened in amazement as Devin told him about the gingham girl, and the family that looked like they had stepped right out of Macy’s display window, and how he came to have the kite.

“I know it’s a little bit banged up, but with a little bit of glue and some of your left over tissue paper, it will be almost as good as new.”

Vincent just stood there looking at the kite as if it would disappear any second.

“Sooooo....?” Devin began. “Do you want it or not?”

“Yes, I do.” Vincent whispered. “Thank you, Devin.”

“No problem, squirt.” Devin put his arm around Vincent’s shoulder. “I think we have some time before supper. Why don’t we go to the art chamber and see if we can fix it?”

As they headed for the art room, Vincent asked, “What was her name?”

“Whose name?” Devin replied.

“The girl. The one who gave you the kite.”

“Ohhhhh ... uh ... I dunno ... Karen or Katy or Kathy ... something like that. Why?”

“Oh ... I was just wondering....”

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At dinner, the children were still too excited about their day to sit still. They laughed together as they relived the wonderful day they’d had.

Mitch had found a safe place to lay low all day, sure that Devin and Winslow might come after him. He had chuckled to himself all day every time he imagined the faces of ‘those idiot’s’ when they saw their ruined kites. He had smiled as he imagined the little freak crying over his cissy butterfly kite.

He was finally forced out of hiding when his stomach got the better of him. It had been a long time since breakfast, and he didn’t think they would have the nerve to beat him up in front of the adults of the community, so he decided to try his luck in the dining hall.

He sauntered in with a look of satisfaction on his face, daring anyone to accuse him of anything. *They can’t prove it was me*, he thought smugly. *They can’t prove a thing*.

His smugness faded however when he realized no one was paying any attention to him. Instead of crying children, he heard only laughter. The more he heard them describe their day, the more sullen and angry he became.

Mitch filling his diner plate, he headed for what looked like a nearly empty tray of oatmeal cookies when Winslow beat him to it and snatched the last three cookies. “Hey, you big fat ...” He stopped when the entire room went quiet for a moment. Mitch looked around and realized all eyes were on him.

“Did ya say sumthin’ to me, Mitch?” Winslow asked, coming a little too close for Mitch’s comfort.

“Uh ...” Mitch stammered a reply. “I didn’t get any of those cookies.”

Winslow smiled slowly and looked at the cookies in his hand. “Yeah? Well ... next time you should show up on time. You know ... first come, first served an’ all. Better luck next time, Mitch.” He turned and delivered two of the cookies to Vincent and Pascal and popped the last one into his mouth whole.

With that, the chatter and laughter in the room began anew and Mitch was left to eat his supper alone. While eating his meal he silently seethed as he listened to Vincent laughing as Pascal described a dogfight between Olivia’s flower kite and the box kite he and Devin had made.

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As the Second Annual Kite Day came to a close, Vincent lay on his bed looking at his beautiful kite as it hung from the ceiling above him. It swayed gently back and forth as he drifted off to sleep.

That night he dreamed that he was in the park flying his kite with a pretty little girl in a pink gingham blouse and they were laughing and running in the sunshine....

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*May all your dreams take flight.*

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<sup>i</sup> The Central Park kite flying ban wasn’t actually lifted until 1966, but this is fiction after all.

<sup>ii</sup> Attributed to English poet and orator, George Herbert, April 3, 1693 - March 1, 1633