

TO CROSS THE RUBICON

by Carol Kyne

'Two or three times, courtesy had moved her to invite him in but he had always made some excuse, and she understood that he was determined to leave that place, at least, free from any awkward associations. It was clear that he had no fatuous intention of making himself more valued by withdrawal; he had rather the air of trying to make amends for something.'

Catherine closed the worn volume, and sat staring at it, unseeing. As she often did when trying to unwind, she had picked up an old familiar novel to read. She fully subscribed to Father's theory that stories - like old friends - needed looking in on now and then. After 50 pages, however, her mind had struck on a passage that had never particularly struck her before. But it had never had any personal application before.

Not that Catherine's feelings paralleled those of the story's heroine. It would take the fictional character another three hundred pages to acknowledge that she loved the hero. Catherine had long since come to terms with her own heart. It was the heroine's musings on the hero's reluctance to enter her apartment that had set Catherine thinking about Vincent's avoidance of her home.

She could not say with accuracy that he had *'never'* entered her apartment. When her investigation of a murder witnessed by Vincent's deaf friend Laura had brought the killers down upon her, their attack, and savage beating of her, had been so sudden - so unexpected - that Vincent had no chance to prevent it. He had felt her shock and pain; bursting into the apartment to find her collapsed on the floor, he had remained to treat her injuries and to stand guard over her sleep.

On no other occasion had she managed to get him beyond the balcony.

That blessed balcony! What wonderful memories it held. Terrible memories, too, of painful misunderstandings with Vincent over Stephen, and Elliot; of screaming hateful words at him in her drug-induced voodoo state; of being kidnapped by Paracelsus' henchman Erlich.

On balance, though, the balcony was an enchanted place, drowned in moonlight - frosted in starlight - backed by the incredible cyclorama of brilliantly lit skyscrapers and black velvet sky

Perhaps that was what was bothering her just now; the enchanted, other-worldly quality of it. In the past year and a half, nearly all her encounters with Vincent had occurred either in the tunnel world - which had its own magical aura - or on her balcony. The romantic connotations were obvious; Juliet herself couldn't have chosen a more inspired setting. Catherine's cheeks grew warm at the memory of beautiful moments there - tender thoughts expressed, and lyrical poetry shared.

Since last spring, though - since her trip to Westport, and her joyous return, with doubts resolved and her commitment to Vincent firm - Catherine had subconsciously been expecting a change in their pattern of meetings. She hadn't really analyzed it until tonight, but some part of her had anticipated that with final, spoken commitment would come a settling down, a normalcy in their relationship.

That was it - *'normalcy'*. At least she had expected as *'normal'* a life as they could ever have, considering their unique situation. She didn't want to lose the magic - and given Vincent's romantic proclivities, there was little danger of that; if ever a man had been born to sweep a girl off her feet, it was this one. But she

wanted to *'add'* to their moonlit trysts Above and fantastic excursions Below.

Catherine envisioned leisurely conversations over dinner, long evenings stretched out on the rug in front of the fireplace, and waltzes to the music of a lush string orchestra; she wanted the small domestic pleasures - cooking together, washing dishes together, performing the hundred small household chores which took on a different aura when done with a special person, or *'for'* one.

'Good heavens', Catherine thought, *'I must be getting maudlin if the thought of washing dishes in tandem makes me dewy-eyed and sentimental'!* But even as she laughed at herself, she realized that the core of her argument was sound, even if her mind had been embroidering it with phrases that were better suited to a romantic novel. She and Vincent might never be able to enjoy New York's theatres and museums, restaurants and ballrooms; but there was so much that they *'could'* enjoy together right here, in the safety of her apartment. So why weren't they?

Setting her book on the night table, Catherine rose and shrugged on a warm velour robe. She crossed barefoot to the French doors, and slipped outside to inspect the fantasy realm she'd been thinking about so intensely. The balcony was lovely, as always. Starlight seemed especially vivid with the hint of frost in the air. But the transformation from *'beautiful'* to *'enchanted'* only took place when Vincent appeared - as if the magic was a quality of the man himself.

A shiver shook her; the floor tiles were icy underfoot. If autumn was here, could winter be very far off? Last winter Catherine had spent recuperating, fitting into her new job, learning to protect herself. This would be the first winter she and Vincent would really share. Somehow, she couldn't envision them reading together out here in January's wind and sleet. They would certainly spend time Below, but real privacy was a rare commodity in Vincent's world - and the sub-basement of her building, though warm and dry, lacked a certain elegance.

Decidedly, Vincent must be lured inside.

Catherine's frozen feet carried her back into the bedroom. The sight of her queen-sized bed raised other *'phantoms of delight'* in her imagination. She knew Vincent was not ready to share that reality. *'One step at a time, girl'*, she cautioned herself. *'One step at a time. You haven't managed to get him under your roof yet'.*

During the next several days, Catherine mulled over a number of stratagems that would require Vincent to pass the boundary between *'her'* world and *'their'* world which he seemed to have drawn. Even at the office, busy as it was, her mind would drift away to improbable scenarios.

She promptly discarded any thought of feigning an injury. *'A twisted ankle might bring out the gallant, lean-on-me quality in other men. But she'd been injured in too many real scrapes in the time she'd known him - she'd seen Vincent charge into too many dangerous situations on her behalf -to deliberately cause him needless concern.'*

Aside from which, he was so attuned to her feelings through their bond that he would be almost impossible to mislead. That also let out a lot of other feminine wiles; 'the too-heavy box, the unopenable jar, the electrical problem' - all would be transparent to those crystal blue eyes.

In any case, Catherine wasn't much given to coyness, or pseudo-feminine helplessness. She found that the direct approach generally served her best, and saved a lot of time. Why beat around the bush? Why not just confront the situation head-on? The fact that a straightforward invitation hadn't worked before didn't necessarily mean that it never would'.

Catherine sat staring at the brief spread out on her desk, but her mind was replaying - or the millionth time

- *'Vincent's first visit to he balcony, months after he had cared for her Below. She had urged him then to enter her home, and he had firmly refused. She could look back now and understand his conviction that he had no place in her world. But with the growth of their relationship, and his knowledge of her total acceptance of him - surely he could not still regard himself as persona non grata in her home. He might always feel threatened by the world Above in its entirety, but surely he could bring himself to enter Catherine's small corner of it'.*

"Hey, Radcliffe! Have you summarized Monkton's brief yet?" Joe Maxwell's question, preceding him to her desk by several yards, jerked her out of her reverie.

"Just about done, Joe. Can you give me five minutes to reread my notes? If they're okay, I'll give them right to Doris to type."

"Yeah, fine. Hope I didn't startle you. You looked like you were miles away."

"Oh, not that far, Joe." She examined him covertly as he perched on the corner of her desk. He had finally lost the drawn look he'd had after his disastrous fling with Erica Salvin, but there were dark circles under his eyes. "You know, Joe," she paused, searching for the right words, 'hard work's a cure for lots of things, but are you sure you're not overdoing it a little?"

He looked as if he'd blurt out an immediate denial. Instead, he caught the look of sympathy and understanding in Catherine's eyes, and took a moment to think it over.

"Well, maybe just a little. It'll be all right, though. The Aronski case should go to the jury tomorrow. Once that's wrapped up, my calendar's remarkably uncluttered."

"How about that, you workaholic! Have you considered that it might be an ideal time to take a few days off?"

"Oh, I don't know, Cathy. Even without a trial pending, is still a load of things around there that need doing ..."

"And there always will be," she interrupted, "no matter how much time you put in. That's the nature of the system. And not even Joe Maxwell - Superman - can change that."

"I'll think about it, kiddo. Five minutes, you said, on that brief?"

"All right, Simon Legree! Get out of here so I can get it done!"

Joe departed with a grin.

When Catherine entered the apartment that evening, the sky beyond her balcony doors was already shading from dusk to dark. Assuredly the days were getting shorter. She smiled as she considered the corollary - *'long'* winter evenings when darkness, and safe time for Vincent, would come early.

She kicked off her shoes, and slid into slippers left by the door; she hung her coat, and then made a foray outside the French doors. Checking for a message from Vincent had become a completely natural part of her routine. The balcony was devoid of notes, books or roses, so she quickly stepped back inside. There was a definite nip in the air tonight.

Catherine warmed leftovers in the microwave, and ate a quick supper at the kitchen table. She slid her dishes into the dishwasher, and stretched luxuriously, releasing cramped shoulder muscles and shrugging away tension. Friday night; no weekend commitments, no work brought home from the office. She savored a delicious sense of freedom and anticipation.

She wandered into the bedroom and shed the work week along with her work clothes. A long, steamy

shower - soft jeans and a cotton shirt - and Catherine felt like a new person. *'well, half a new person, anyway'*. She didn't feel really *'complete'* anymore except when she was with Vincent.

She stood in her bedroom doorway for several minutes, inspecting her living room. It was a serene room - elegant, with the unmistakable print of an interior designer. Everything blended perfectly, and Janette, who came in once a week, kept it looking like an illustration from *'House Beautiful'*. Janette's was not an onerous job. Catherine worked long hours; she spent little time at home, except when she was asleep. And she rarely entertained anymore.

Tonight the room's cool elegance didn't seem to strike the right note. It wasn't inviting. It wasn't - *'cozy'*. And Catherine wanted, more than anything right now, to make Vincent feel welcome - comfortable - if, *'when'* he crossed her threshold.

Failing a complete redecorating project, which didn't seem practical in the next half hour, Catherine did the best she could to add warmth to the room's atmosphere. She kindled a fire on the hearth, and swung one of the formal twin sofas around in front of it. She turned off the lamps and lit candles in the wall sconces. When that didn't seem to be enough of them, she hunted for more in the buffet. A reminiscent smile lit her features; *'the last time she'd marshalled such a flamboyant display was when she had set the balcony ablaze with candlelight for the first anniversary of her meeting with Vincent. That had been a cool April evening, but the air had held a promise of spring warmth'*.

Lost in memories, Catherine stood gazing into the leaping flames on the hearth. A hand stole unconsciously to the crystal hanging at her throat. She was jarred from this pleasant interlude by the sound of her doorbell.

Now *'who'* was *that*? Her father occasionally dropped by unannounced, but she knew he was in Boston, closing a merger. The only other person she could reasonably expect wouldn't be ringing her doorbell.

A second ring reminded her that she wouldn't learn her visitor's identity standing here. She crossed the living room briskly and asked, "Who is it?"

"It's Joe, Cathy."

"Joe!" Catherine slid back the deadbolt, and slipped the chain lock. Opening the door, she faced her slightly flustered-looking boss. "Is anything wrong, Joe?"

"No. No. Everything's fine, Radcliffe. I didn't mean to shake you up. Just wanted to ask you something."

"I'm sorry, Joe - I didn't mean to keep you standing in the hall. I was just surprised. Come in, please."

Joe stepped past her, and took in the glowing living room. "You're expecting company. I apologize - I should have called first."

"It's okay, Joe. It's not a definite date. I'm not even sure if he can make it. Anyway, I always have time for my favorite slave driver. What's up?"

He still looked uncomfortable, but Cathy relieved him of his coat, and waved him to a seat in front of the fire. "Can I get you something to drink? Wine? A beer?"

"No thanks, I'm fine."

"How about coffee? I was just going to fix some for myself." Joe looked as if he was going to decline, so Cathy took matters into her own hands. "Two coffees, coming right up."

"Great," he grinned.

"Have you had supper?" she inquired as she headed kitchenward.

"Yeah, I had the deli send a sandwich up to the office."

Cathy shook her head resignedly, and shot him an aggrieved look. Throwing up his hands to ward off a lecture on overwork and poor nutrition, he jumped in to head her off.

"As a matter-of-fact, that's why I came by. I was working late - eating my dozenth sandwich of the week -- and I started thinking about what you said this afternoon." He rose and followed her to the kitchen, leaning casually against the door frame. "You could be right. Maybe I 'do' need a break."

"Well, who'd have thought it? I actually got 'thorough'!" Cathy loaded a tray with cups and saucers, cream, sugar, spoons, and the percolator. She thought a moment, then added napkins and a tin of butter cookies from the shelf.

Joe carried the heavy tray back into the living room for her, and Cathy drew up a low coffee table in front of the sofa. She dispensed the aromatic brew, then sat down beside Joe. "So, when are you going to take that time off?"

He stirred his coffee unnecessarily, and gazed with rapt attention into the cup. "As soon as I can make some plans. That's what I wanted to talk to you about." He gave her a quick, up-from-under look. "I'm not sure where to start. Between law school and the DA's office, I haven't had much opportunity for vacations."

Cathy smothered a grin. Joe looked more like an embarrassed adolescent than the fastest rising star in the legal firmament. "What do you think you might like to do, Joe? There are all kinds of tours, resorts, vacation spas. what to do like to do when you're not working?"

"That's just it, Cathy. I'm 'always' working. I've just never had time for hobbies, or outside interests... Oh, I enjoyed sports in college, and I was in the debating society. But I've gotten where I am by working twice as hard as anyone else. It just hasn't left me time for much of a life outside the job. I guess that's why Erica was such a..." He broke off abruptly.

Cathy reached over and gave his hand a special squeeze. "I know, Joe." She thought for a minute. "Do you like the ocean? Have you ever been to a ship?"

"Oh, yeah! I was in the Naval Reserve. Never got called up for active duty, but I loved the two weeks training every summer."

"Well, then. You sound like an ideal candidate for a cruise. It's relaxing - a complete change from work - and there are lots of activities when you get tired of loafing."

Which should be in about fifteen minutes, knowing you, Cathy thought wryly. "I have a friend, Stacey Milhaus, who runs a travel agency downtown. She has office hours on Saturday. If you like, I can call her in the morning, and tell her you'll be coming in."

"Gee, a cruise sounds terrific. The ads always look so - I don't know - exotic. But I always picture 'couples' going on them. You know, honeymoons, second honeymoons - that kind of stuff. You don't think I'd be out of place going by myself, do you?"

"Oh, Joe!" Cathy caught herself with a laugh. The idea of Joe - or any other handsome, eligible bachelor - being out of place or lonely for long on a cruise ship struck her as exquisitely humorous. "You won't feel out of place - I give you my word! In fact, I predict that you'll have such a good time that I'll have to come down to the pier and drag you off the ship when you get back."

She crossed to her desk, jotted down Stacey's agency address from her personal phone book, and returned to hand the card to Joe. "I expect a postcard from every port - and a suitably expurgated report when you get back. Will you call me tomorrow, and let me know how you make out?"

"Sure. And Cathy, I'd like to take you out to dinner to give you that report. I really appreciate your help."

"We'll make it a health food restaurant," Cathy said knowingly. "If my father's any example, you'll gain at

least ten pounds!"

Joe got up, and Cathy helped him on with his overcoat. "Thanks again, kiddo." He gave her his best grin as he headed out the door. "I still owe you."

Cathy leaned back against the door after she closed it.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if her problems could be as easily solved? She shook her head, and went straight to the balcony. She'd been sensing Vincent's presence for the last ten minutes.

He was leaning against the stone balustrade, gazing out at the brilliant skyline, but he turned as she opened the French doors. They just stood and looked into each other's eyes for a moment. Then she went into his arms. Nothing in the world made Catherine feel as safe as being held in Vincent's embrace.

"Catherine," he murmured into her hair. "I hope you didn't rush your friend away on my account."

"No. It was Joe. He just stopped by for some advice - which I very efficiently gave him, and sent him happily on his way."

There was no tension in Vincent's arms. Catherine could remember a time when seeing her with another man would have caused him to feel both jealousy and pain. Some things had certainly improved since their brief separation last spring. At least he seemed to be secure in the knowledge that Catherine neither needed nor wanted other men in her life - at least, not in any romantic context.

"How was your day?"

"Busy. But that didn't prevent me from wasting a little time day-dreaming." She stepped back to hold him at arm's length and look at him. "How was yours?"

"Productive... Mouse and Cullen and I completed the repairs to Elizabeth's chamber... Not that she'll notice," he chuckled. "She doesn't pay attention to anything except her painting. None the less, I am relieved to have her ceiling reinforced... It has been threatening to collapse ever since the blasting for Burch Tower."

Vincent released one of Catherine's hands, and drew her by the other one to a stone bench against the brick building face. They sat, and she nestled comfortably into the curve of his arm. For a while, they simply enjoyed the closeness - the emotional heightening of their bond that came with physical contact.

After a few minutes, Vincent sensed that Catherine was struggling within herself to find words for some unexpressed thought.

"What is it?" he asked. "Surely, Catherine, there is nothing you cannot say to me... We have never had to choose our words with each other... 'Is' something wrong?"

"No - not wrong. Just not completely right." She took a deep breath and plunged. "Vincent... I'd like you to come inside. I know you've had reservations about that. And when we were getting to know one another, I could understand your hesitation. But it's different now."

His silence was so profound it was almost deafening. He removed his arm from Catherine's shoulder, and sat forward, elbows on knees, staring down at his clasped hands.

"Vincent, you just told me that there was nothing we couldn't talk about... What are you thinking?"

He didn't look at her, and he drew in his breath with a shudder she could feel. " 'Is' it different now, Catherine...? Sometimes I think it is... Sometimes when I relive that night last June - when I see you running to me across the park - when I hear you tell me that '*what we have is worth everything*'. I really feel that nothing else matters... that what we share will light our way for the rest of our lives."

"But not all the time..." she said sorrowfully.

"No. Not all the time... In the deepest hours of the night, my doubts and fears crowd back... robbing me of the serenity I feel when I am with you."

"Tell me, Vincent."

Now *'he'* was the one at a loss for words. She reached for his clasped hands and captured one, rubbing it gently between both of hers.

"Catherine, we *'have'* changed, but the world around us has not... Even with the glow of happiness I feel, with your love surrounding and shielding me... I know that I am no less a misfit in your world now than I ever was... What we have must be shared in secret... We cannot be seen together, or ever lead the life that you, at least, were born to lead."

Catherine was tempted to jump in and try to convince him that he was wrong, but in so many ways, what he said was true. The difference was, it simply didn't matter to her anymore. She sensed, however, that he had more to say, better to let it all out - perhaps then it would begin to heal.

"It seems - so incredibly selfish... to let you tie yourself to me... at the cost of... everything else life has to offer you." His head drooped even lower, his whole posture eloquent of defeat.

Catherine marshalled her internal forces; it was so important to both of them that she convince him to let go of those doubts.

"We've been through this before, Vincent. You seem to be picking up right where I left off last spring." She wanted desperately to put her arms around him and kiss his fears away, but she recognized that soothing his feelings would be only a temporary solution. It was the brain, not the heart, which was torn by doubts. So any lasting comfort had to reach his head as well as his heart.

She compromised by raising his hand to her lips, and pressing a kiss into the soft fur on its back. Then she deliberately turned it over, and kissed the sensitive skin of his palm. The message seemed to be getting through; he lifted troubled eyes to meet hers.

"We *'can'* make this work, Vincent. We *'can'* share a life... It may never be exactly the life either one of us envisioned. Who knows? It may be even better than anything we've ever dared to dream of... But it will *'only'* happen if we can make the compromises our situation demands. You've helped me to become a part of your family Below. I feel now that I belong there, that I'm not just someone passing through. But now I need you to begin to share *'my'* world - as much of it as you safely can... And I think you need it, too."

Catherine was trembling with the intensity of her feelings, with her need to make Vincent understand and believe her.

"It's not only *'my'* happiness that you're concerned about, Vincent. Whether you admit it or not, you're still afraid that someday I'm going to walk away from you. That's a very natural fear, love. So many people have touched your life, and moved on... I think that on some level *'you're'* the one who hasn't made a total commitment. *'You're'* holding a part of yourself back - willing yourself to keep something in reserve to counter that pain... I don't think that my apartment is really the issue. I think it's become a symbol for you. If you don't let our dream carry you that far - if you forbid yourself to step into *'my'* world, with all the pleasure and danger it represents--than somehow you'll be less... *'entangled'*... better able to cope with that *'inevitable'* loss.

"But Vincent, *'it won't happen'*. You are *'never'* going to face that loss while we both live... I don't want you just in my fantasies, and on my balcony. I want you in my *'life'*, good and bad, every day. I want you to meet my friends - at least the ones that matter; Joe, Edie, Isaac - Nancy... I want you to meet my *'father'*."

His head jerked up at that, and the look he gave her was nothing short of incredulous.

"Fair's fair, friend. I've felt Father's hostility toward me since the first time you took me Below."

" 'No', Catherine--"

"Yes, Vincent!" Oh, believe me, I understand it. He's no different from any other parent - he wants to protect his child. And gradually, I think I'm managing to win him over... Only time, and my faithfulness to what we share, is going to completely convince him. That's okay. I only brought him up to point out that dealing with each other's parents is no picnic for either of us. But I've had my turn."

"Catherine, you cannot possibly compare Father's qualms... about you - and they are not nearly as serious as you seem to think - to 'your' father's very natural reaction should he ever be confronted with 'me'."

"Of 'course' he'll be shocked, Vincent. Something totally outside our experience is always shocking. 'I' was shocked the first time I saw you. But shock passes. And when we move beyond it, the possibilities are infinite."

She raised her hand and gently touched the tiny scar on his temple - she would never totally forgive herself for putting it there. For a moment they shared the bitter-sweet memory of her first violent reaction to his appearance. But the unconditional love in her eyes--and through their bond--made the long ago pain seem like a very small price to pay for present happiness.

"In any case," she continued, when he'd had time enough to absorb that uninhabited message of devotion. " 'My' father is not the issue right this minute. You can think about him later... It will be a nice, new problem for you to worry about... Right now, I'm more interested in whether or not you're going through that door."

Catherine stood up, determination in every line, and pulled on the hand she still held. She could feel love warring with fear in the man before her. But love won out, as all the fairy tales said it should. Vincent reluctantly came to his feet, and wordlessly allowed her to pull him through the double doors.

They paused just inside. Catherine reached up to unfasten the clasp at Vincent's throat. Tugging the cloak off his shoulders, she folded it carefully over one of the dining room chairs. Then she led him to the sofa, and gently pushed him into a seat. "I'll be right back."

Catherine disappeared into the kitchen, taking the coffee tray with her. Vincent sat gingerly on the edge of the couch, taking in his unfamiliar surroundings. The decor was formal - totally opposite to the eclectic hodge-podge which marked his chamber and Father's. But Catherine's touches were there, not just in the candle glow and firelight - clearly for his benefit - but in the well-worn books on the decorator shelves, and in several exquisite paintings hung about the room.

The living room was not nearly as intimidating from within as it had seemed when viewed from the balcony. *'Was Catherine right? Had he been subconsciously equating entering her apartment with letting go his last defense against disappointment? If so, the distance he had just come was much farther than the ten steps from balcony to living room'.*

Realizing that he must look like a naughty student summoned to the principal's office - a look he'd seen occasionally on the faces of his own pupils\ - he deliberately relaxed the muscles in his face, and slid back on the sofa. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes. After a year and a half, here he was. And the roof *'hadn't'* fallen in.

Catherine returned with a bottle of wine, and two fine crystal glasses. She poured the softly effervescing liquid; he watched it sparkle in the firelight. When Catherine pressed a glass into his hand, he looked up, and was instantly lost in the happiness shining in her eyes.

Instead of taking her own glass, she picked up a book from the coffee table. Turning it over in her hands, she opened it to a marked passage.

" 'When I am from him, I am dead till I be with him. United souls are not satisfied with embraces, but desire to be truly each other; which being impossible, these desires are infinite, and must proceed without a possibility of satisfaction'." (Religio Medici, Gaudy Night, Dorothy Leigh Sayers)

Vincent was holding his breath. When Catherine stopped reading, she looked up and met his eyes. "We're so lucky, Vincent. Other people can't '*be truly each other*'- but we can. We're a part of each other in a way no two people have ever been." She set the book aside, raised her glass, and touched it to his. They sipped the wine.

Vincent relaxed back into the corner of the sofa, and Catherine curled her feet up under her, and snuggled into the curve of his arm, head on his shoulder. They wore identical smiles of supreme contentment.

They were home.

END