

Letters to Vincent from Father

(Regarding his persistent absences from the tunnels.)

by Glenys Walker

Letter 1

Dear Vincent,

As you rarely darken my door these days... if I had a door to darken, that is, which I haven't' so you couldn't... well, you know what I mean! Anyway, suffice it to say that these days I am driven to communicating with you by letter when anything of moment crops up... to wit... this relationship with Catherine which is taking up so much of your time.

Now, I realize that the time had to come when you began to cotton on to what boys and girls were really for. Although I was beginning to think that you wouldn't recognize sex if it leapt out and bit you on the kneecap. But after that incident in the lower tunnels, when you were doing your thrashing about bit in that cave, and Catherine bravely went in there to save you... well, that's what she said she was going in for... while I waited patiently outside expecting to have to scrape bits of her off the walls after you had successfully managed to self-destruct, you have never been quite the same.

It was only when her pregnancy came to light that you, I, or anyone else except Catherine, knew what had happened there in the dark. Mind you, how on earth she managed it with a twelve stone male in a recumbent posture... spark out! Kaput! Dead to the world! I'll never know. However, in Western parlance, 'A gal's gotta do what a gal's gotta do', or words to that effect. She probably thought it was her last chance and she is a very determined lady. At the time, I did wonder where that music was coming from... very romantic, but I always thought that when the citadel of your virtue came crashing down, it would be to the more triumphal strains of 'The 1812 Overture.'

All that aside, I quite understand the 'connection' (I do feel that the word now has other, far different, connotations) you have with Catherine. In fact, I have become used to the glazed look that appears in your eyes when those air waves are busy.

"She's on her way," you say.

"Is she?" I say.

"Yes," you say, leaping from the chair and taking off like a rocket, regardless of the fact that we are in the middle of our two millionth game of chess which, nevertheless, is still a crucial one.

"There he goes again," I sigh in resignation, sneakily moving a bishop and reflecting sadly on how much I miss these scintillating conversations. To tell the truth, Vincent, I sometimes wonder about Catherine. Tell me... does she ever knit, sew, whip up a batch of cookies, take out the garbage, or wear curlers and an apron like most normal women? Actually, there is something very sexy about a woman in an apron. At least, I used to think so... it was one of my kinky... well, never mind that.

To continue, I really do miss your help around the cave. I am also getting a bit cheesed, to say the least, at having to spend so much of time as father confessor, sitting there at my desk with a totally incomprehensible copy of Virgil opened before me, casting, variously, indulgent, sympathetic, reproachful, frowning, or understanding glances over the top of my specs, each time some idiot breaks into very pleasant reveries about the little blonde barmaid I used to... never mind that either... while you dash off every night to shin up (or down) tall buildings like some demented, hirsute Romeo and land on Catherine's balcony to tap at her window. Has it ever occurred to you, I wonder, that the poor girl might sometimes actually want to sleep?

When I think of how I tried to keep you pure and away from all that! But the minute you find out what it's all about, you're off tomcatting (pardon the figure of speech) at every verse-end. What kind of an example is that to youths like Mouse, who incidentally, has lately turned to writing poetry. I came across one of his major efforts only the other day, and I quote....

*'Ime a bit feddup with possems
Ortem spring and fall.
Ide reely rarther play with gerls
It seems to me thaive got it all.
And skookings just a waiste of time,
Ide rarther have a grappel
With Jamie, cos I've notised
Sheez got bress's just like appels'*

A definite improvement, wouldn't you say, on 'Rozed arr red, vilets arr bloo?'

I'm worried about that boy... his spelling is atrocious.

As you are well aware, Vincent, I am, in general, a very patient man, but I am now rebelling. So I'm off to don my 1950's suit and fedora... bearing in mind that with a bit of luck they will be in fashion again when I get there... (wonder where those spats got to?) and am toddling out of these benighted tunnels with their wall-to-wall rock, up into the great big world to indulge in what hopefully by the time I get back will be more than just a memory.

Tally-ho!

Father (donning clean socks, just in case)

P.S. Don't wait up. I may not be back for a couple of days.

Letter 2

Dear Vincent,

Here I am again, still trying to catch up with you long enough to have a proper conversation, and wondering if you intend staying 'up top' with Catherine indefinitely? Even when you do come home, the pair of you usually pass young Jacob on to either Mary or myself and take off to the far reaches of the tunnels to be alone. It's not that I don't understand, and I do not in the least mind having the child rampaging around my ankles, but I shall be glad when you get over this first flush of passion, so that things can get back to normal, if things down here ever have been what one would call normal.

Bereft of you to discourse with on things classical, I am reduced to such dizzy heights of conversation as "What's for supper tonight, William?" I sometimes feel this place is coming apart at the seams, so many things have changed. It worries me that I don't seem to care quite as much as I used to, and neither have I had very much patience lately, Vincent. In fact, I haven't had much of anything lately.

To quote only two recent instances of my inattention... at the induction of a new member to the Tunnel Council, I actually went to sleep during his maiden speech and fell off the chair. He got quite peevish with me! Then recently, May dashed into my chamber in a panic to tell me Mouse had once again stayed out all night, and how scared she was that white slavers would take him away from us.

"Mary," I said wearily, "Do you really think they would want him?" She was justifiably shocked at my heartlessness.

By the way, apropos of nothing in particular... don't be surprised if you find your chamber full of strange hairy things dangling from the ceiling when you do return. When I enter mine, it's a bit like fighting my way through the Everglades... Mary and Rachel are macrameing like mad at the moment. It is amazing what women can do with bits of odd string, fake flowers and leaves.

We also think Samantha has gone to be a nun, which is a bit tiresome of her, but it could be worse. Three meals a day, a roof over her head, no stress, and no worry about where the next pair of mittens is coming from! Wonder if there is a monastery nearby? Preferably a silent order! The celibacy part of it wouldn't bother me unduly, as I have always believed it to be partly a state of mind, in which one has to concentrate on other things. It's not difficult! Well..., sometimes it's a bit difficult, but at this moment I find the thought of peace and solitude taking precedence over all else.

Did I mention that Kanin and Olivia now have a waterbed? Apparently, he found the damaged casing behind the empty premises of what once was a house of ill repute, brought it home, mended it, made a frame, set in and filled it with water. They were both delighted with the result and insisted I go to their chamber to try it, which I duly did.

The first thing that caught my eye was a notice Kanin said had been folded inside his prize when he found it. He had obviously been unable to resist taping it on the wall over the bed, where it exhorted the occupants, in large type, 'NO SPIKED HEELS, PLEASE.' Very whimsical!

Gingerly, I sat on the edge of this normal looking piece of furniture, and the next second was flat on my back with my legs in the air while the bed undulated beneath me. I suppose I must have cried out, because Kanin made a grab at my collar to haul me up again and instantly cut off the flow of blood to the brain. I was seeing great flashes of light and what looked strangely like dozens of fried eggs floating on a red sea, until Olivia yanked him off me. For a while, I felt quite pixillated lying there ever so nauseous and gasping for breath, until suddenly a wonderful lassitude spread over my entire body, and I began to understand why ladies of the night... er... never mind that!

However, I could not stay there all day, so made a move to get up, and thereby hangs a tale. Although it had been relatively easy getting into the contraption, heaving myself out required a great deal more thought. After much bobbing up and down, as if on elastic, with my feet still suspended six inches off the floor and my rear end sunk deep into the bed, I finally got the hang of it. "Don't worry," I assured my anxiously hovering friends, "I shall come in on the next tide,"... which I did, and very nearly too. If I may say so. After that it was no trouble at all. You really must try it.

Well, I suppose I should make the effort to go and help Geoffrey plant the seedlings one of the less astute of our helpers sent down with some bags of earth, but I'm not at all that bothered really. I would never try to discourage the boy, but how he expects those poor green things to grow without fresh air and sunlight is anybody's guess. I must find my little dibbler. You know what a dibbler is! It's a sort of sharpened thing with which one makes holes in the soil for plants. it is also useful for a few other things, like self protection, taking the eyes out of potatoes, punching holes in leather, and cleaning out fingernails.

Yours, still slightly seasick,

Father

Letter 3

Dear Vincent,

As a doctor, I am beginning to see more patients who are suffering from lethargy and common colds. The former could be caused by lack of exercise, and the latter could have something to do with the fact it can get so damp and clammy down here. I'm amazed we aren't all mildewed. I know you sometimes think my ideas a bit dotty, but what do you think about setting up a fitness programme here in the tunnels? I can almost see you smiling as you read this, but it's not as crazy as it sounds.

For example, we could organize bungee-jumping from the walkway in the Whispering Gallery, after first replacing some of the rotting planks on the bridge, which are a bit dicey to say the least.

What about a mini-swimming Olympics in the Mirror Pool and high diving and rock climbing in the Waterfall Cavern? A marathon run through the tunnels? Just a thought! With reference to the last suggestion... it might be wise for the runners to scatter pebbles like Hansel and Gretel, in case they stray off the designated track and we never see them again. Personally, I find the idea of a nine hole golf course in the Great Hall infinitely more interesting. Ah! The happy memories that conjures up of youthful days when words like 'niblicks', 'backswings', 'slicers' and 'trajectories' tripped from my lips. I used to be quite enamoured of the game as a young man, and would definitely take it up again should the occasion ever present itself.

It was like a wonderful echo from the past, when some time ago you found that old set of clubs and golf balls while foraging 'up top' I couldn't wait to see if I still had the old knack, and you were there when I took up what I judged to be a pretty good stance, and addressed the ball which was perched atop a piece of stale bread mixed with water and moulded into a very credible tee. Then I took an almighty swing and, as I recall, you got splattered quite viciously with bread and bits of rock. Do you remember? Yes, I thought you would.

Unfortunately, I underestimated my own strength and belted the ball down the fairway... er... tunnel with far more force than intended, it ricocheted at tremendous speed back and forth off the walls, followed by the head of the club and about two miles of string, and caught Mouse smartly behind the ear as he rounded the corner. That boy really does have an uncanny predilection for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But to be fair, I did neglect to shout 'fore' and it was a particularly bad shot... probably should have used a number four wood! Be that as it may, I had to abandon the game to tend his wound, and to his credit, he gave only the occasional moan as I stitched him up.

He soon recovered, though, and I remember it was in a fit of remorse, or should I say lunacy, that I gave him permission to build what he referred to as a 'gizmo, with a load of steel tubing he had in his inimitable fashion found lying about 'up top' and so ensued a period of hysterical activity on his part.

When some time later, I entered his chamber, it resembled the inside of a nuclear power station, and I swear my hair stood on end, as visions of atom and hydrogen bombs filled my head.

However, it turned out to be a 'Mouse type' heating unit, and carried away by his enthusiasm, he kept on adding more and more pipes which resulted in the contraption becoming so huge, he couldn't move it out. Actually, it was quite ingenious, but had to be dismantled. Pity, really, I wouldn't have minded something on a smaller scale in my place, as it can be a bit chilly getting out of bed in a morning. Sometimes one has to run, or in my case limp, several times around the chamber before unfreezing enough to get into gear for a hard day's reading. Come to think of it, he still has all that tubing, perhaps we can utilize some of it to rig up a kind of gymnasium with parallel bars and things! Pardon a little chuckle, but the thought of some of our friends suspended from the roof of the chamber, like so many bundles of tattered laundry suddenly tickled my funny bone.

Incidentally, if this thing comes to fruition we really must remember not to put Mouse in charge of any instruction. The last time he showed some of the younger boys how to climb ropes, he almost

succeeded in strangling the lot of them.

I shall not mention any of this to the others until I have consulted with you about it. You know how rife with gossip and rumour this place is, and how distorted things become with the retelling! I remember once, in a flash of nostalgia, mentioning that I really fancied some cheese and pickles. Less than an hour later Mary popped her head around the chamber entrance and asked in a puzzled voice 'Why on earth would you want some freezing wrinkles?' You see what I mean? Heaven knows what they would make of 'fitness program for the tunnels'! probably a witless old man with a funnel!

Please, do try and tear yourself away from Catherine and little Jacob long enough to get here for a conference on the above mentioned subject.

Yours, muscles flexed

Father

Letter 4

Dear Vincent,

Another crisis here in the tunnels and you were nowhere to be found, as usual. This time it was Mouse, and I hold myself entirely to blame for what happened. I had a vague idea he was disenchanted with me about something, when he and I took the boat on the lake for an outing and he was so quiet. I asked him why he was sulking and he replied 'Not sulking... pondering' whatever that meant. But I soon got the message, what he was pondering about, when he took us to the deepest part of the lake, threw the pole overboard and then followed it without a word, thereafter swimming ashore and leaving yours truly up the creek, so to speak, sans pole and sans poler. Conclusion... never go boating with Mouse without wellies or waders.

I was a bit cross, to say the least, and it took me ages to get the hang of left right, left right, paddling with my hands, as the boat was too wide and my arms too short to dangle both in at the same time. But I finally stopped going round in ever-widening circles and made my weary, zig-zag way home.

It was when I arrived back, pretty exhausted as you may imagine, that I was told he had packed his little bag and raccoon and left... buzzed off... flown the coop... done a bunk! Much as I care for the boy, Vincent, you must agree there are times he's a bit wearing on the nerves. However, I immediately sent William 'up top' to search for him in some of his favourite haunts, such as old buildings, construction sites, garbage tips, etc.

William was away several hours, a worrying time for all of us, and when he did finally return he was flushed and dishevelled, his hair and beard looking as if he'd stuck his finger in a light socket, and with a very suspicious brightness about his eyes. 'It's hot and windy up there,' he said sheepishly in explanation.

'Did you find him?' I asked anxiously.

'Er... no!'

'Where did you look?'

'The usual places. Then I was thirsty so I went in a topless bar for a cold drink.'

'A topless bar? You mean the roof blew off?'

He then explained to me what a topless bar was, Vincent, and to say I was stunned would be the understatement of the year. Tsk, tsk, tsk, this permissive society! What can these women be thinking of? Regrettably, there seems to be little refinement in the world today. I used to be a bit of a goer in my youth but things were very different then and we would never have thought of such things. Well...

we might have thought... but that was all. Tentative kisses on the back row of the cinema were quite exhilarating, accompanied as they were by sighs, lots of heavy breathing, and faint, modest cries of protest at a daring, wandering hand. In my day, it was the man who made the advances. We were also very fond of nature rambles as I recall, walking arm-in-arm through trees and fields. On reflection, some of those rambles...!

That reminds me, recently I came across a couple of copies of 'Playboy' magazine someone had sneaked down here (since mysteriously vanished, even though I hid them pretty well). I don't suppose you know anything about them? All I want to do is set fire to them... before they set fire to me! We can't have the children getting hold of them, can we?

To return to William... he said that one of the girls behind the bar had really fancied him, so he was now off to grab some of Mary's homemade 'Eau de Toilette' (which to me smells a lot like 'Eau de Tunnels') and then back 'up top' toute de suite, before the girl went off the boil. At that, with a silly grin, he fell flat on his face, and that's difficult to do when one is shaped like William. It was clear to me that he was feeling no pain, and if the girl behind the bar hadn't spiked his drink for whatever reason, then I guess he was telling fibs about the lemonade. But we all fall by the wayside at least once in our lives, don't we? Between them, several of our people carried him to his bed where, completely zonked out, his snoring kept most of us awake the rest of the night.

Anyway, I digress! Back to Mouse and his troubles. He reappeared next morning at breakfast, and it turned out he'd never left the tunnels at all, he'd just been in hiding until hunger drove him out. Apparently, the impulse that had made him abandon ship, literally, had soon passed and he had been too scared to face me. When I asked him what had made him do such a thing, he said I had been pushing him too hard lately, which I'll admit was true, but I felt it a waste of time dragging out the old chestnut about it being for his own good. He would never believe that one.

He also said he had been studying hard for the lead part in Macbeth, which the younger ones are putting on for us this year... probably because Jamie is Lady Macbeth! It seems when I offered the part to Zach, as being the most suitable for it, that had been the last straw. So I made him my apology, and as I could hardly retract my offer to Zach, asked if he would play the most important part of Banquo, which immediately brought a smile of acceptance to his face. So all's well that ends well. Where have I heard that before? Incidentally, you really should be here for rehearsals, if only to hear the littlest witch intoning 'Double, double, toilet trouble' as she vigorously stirs the cauldron.

One thing, life down here is never dull. I sometimes wonder what will happen next, and would ask the three witches, as Banquo did 'If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not. Speak then to me.'

Yours, suddenly gone all Shakespearean

Father

Letter 5

Dear Vincent,

This letter-writing is getting to be a habit, but it's one that gives me a lot of satisfaction, as I feel I am contributing to keeping alive what seems to be a dying art in this world of computers and fax machines. Oh, yes, I know all about such things. I do read the papers and magazines, be they out of date or not by the time they reach us. Even if I try to ignore the changes taking place, I am still aware of them.

When I last saw you, you appeared to think that I was exaggerating your absences from the tunnels. But if that is so, then why are you never around when I need you? Like yesterday, for instance, when I developed an ache that kept moving up the side of my neck and into my cheekbone! For a little

while I tried to convince myself it was just one of the sore throats I used to be a martyr to as a child, and immediately produced the hoarse voice that inevitably went with it. I remember my dear old mother... you never thought of me as having a dear old mother, did you? Well, I had a dear old father too, but that's another story. To resume... I remembered she used to say 'Tie a sock around it,' or maybe that was 'Put a sock in it'... it's a long time ago and my memory isn't what it was. Whatever, either way it didn't work, and as it steadily got worse I finally had to admit that what I really had was the most horrendous toothache in one of the only four real teeth I have left, so I abandoned both the voice and sock.

Each time I opened my mouth, which as you are well aware is pretty often, the cold air entered and unerringly found what I judged to be a cavity roughly the size of the Grand Canyon. The resulting pain almost shot me into orbit. So... what to do? I have in the past dealt quite successfully with the dental problems of others in our community, but no way was I going to be fool enough to let them loose on me. It could have turned into a revenge thing! The answer was obvious. I immediately contacted our friend Peter Alcott and asked him to arrange an appointment for me with his own orthodontist, as I had saved a little money from various projects 'up top' to be used for any emergency. He sent back a message that he had arranged it for me, and not to worry about the account as he would settle it himself. I was hurting too much to stand on my pride, so I stifled my conscience and gratefully accepted his offer.

This morning, donning my new suit (which is a lot like my old suit) courtesy of the garbage bins behind the Smithsonian, I believe, I laboriously wended my way up to the lunatic fringe we laughingly call the streets of New York and to the umpteenth floor of what seemed to be the tallest building in the city. Once in the surgery, a pretty, dainty little nurse bustled me straight in to an inner room, much to the relief of about half a dozen brave souls waiting in reception in varying stages of fear, either quietly gibbering in corners, or sitting on the edges of chairs and sofas in nail-biting trepidation.

As the door closed firmly behind me, with a click that echoed like a death knell, a very large man in a white coat came forward and welcomed me with a grin that almost blinded me, revealing as it did enough gold fillings to stock a jeweller's shop window. He appeared to be of Russian-Tarter extraction... Ouch!... Even writing that word hurts. I grimaced back at him and I moved nervously towards the chair found myself wondering why, in over fifty years of rapid and radical change, dentist's chairs still look so menacing. As if should any fool make the mistake of actually sitting in one, ten thousand volts of electricity might surge through his body.

Beside it stood a table covered with gleaming instruments on steel trays, and the moment I set eyes on them the pain in my tooth miraculously disappeared. I thought 'I'm not wearing that' and acting on pure instinct turned and fled towards the prison... er... surgery door, walking stick going twenty to the dozen. As I did so, this teeny, tiny nurse hurtled across the room, all ninety pounds of her, and leg tackled me to the floor. The resulting howl, from me I mean, must have cleared the waiting room in no time flat, and disregarding my feeble verbal protests, she held me there long enough for Genghis Khan to inject something into my arm. I'm ashamed to say that I hardly struggled at all. To tell the truth, Vincent, I was too shocked to move. It was like being mugged by a budgie! However, in my own defense, I must say she had obviously done this many times before, and she did have the advantage of surprise.

Between them, they then got me to my feet and made soothing noises while I stood waiting for the walls to stop jiggling about. After that, I gave the pair of them no more trouble. Glassy-eyed and floating on air from whatever was galloping through my veins like liquid sunshine, I got docilely into the chair and with remarkable tolerance allowed the man to inject novocaine, delve, probe, rummage about, squirt cold water, drill and suction with total abandon.

I still don't remember much about getting back here. But I do seem to recall a mild skirmish with a young executive type in a flash car and with a foul mouth, who screeched to a halt about two inches away from me, as I crossed the street. I carried on my dignified way, while pronouncing to any who

chanced to be listening, that people who drive like that are usually in a vehicle paid for by somebody else. I actually received a patter of applause.

It was a bit tricky getting the others to understand me when I finally returned to the tunnels. But with only four teeth in my head, two up and two down, my apology came out something like 'Thorry, but I can't put my false teeth back until thith numbneith wearth off. Otherwise I'll probably choke myself.'

Yourth, ath ever

Father

Letter 6

Dear Vincent,

As you are still spending most of your time 'up top' these days, and so I rarely see you, I thought I had better pen another missive to remind you, amongst other things, of the current food shortage here in the tunnels.

I can almost hear you saying 'What about the leftovers our Asian friends send down from their restaurant in Chinatown?' But to tell the truth, Vincent, long and short soups with noodles and limp lettuce don't travel all that well, and are definitely deficient in calories.

There have been a lot of rumblings of discontent from our community lately. At least, I think it's discontent! It might also have something to do with all those empty stomachs and the fear that we might all starve, if something drastic is not done immediately.

I, myself, have been giving serious thought to the matter, and see no reason why we could not keep a few chickens, or even a pig, down here! There certainly should be no problem about delivery. In this age of people passing a body lying flat out on the street without even batting an eye, I doubt anyone would spare a glance for one of our Helpers herding chickens and a pig across Central Park, or shoving them down a hole in someone's basement.

However, when I put forward the suggestion, no one took kindly to the idea, and I heard some distinctly ominous mutterings, which I ignored by pretending I had gone deaf. In short, Vincent, I got the definite impression that before long there could be a general exodus from our previously happy home, and I was getting a bit miffed to say the least.

Nobody knows better than you that I have never expected recognition or accolades for the fair and honest way in which I have kept this community together. 'All for one, and one for all' has always been the adage I have tried to live by, and a little gratitude would not have come amiss at that moment. 'We have gone through far worse than this in the past' I said heatedly, stung by their lack of loyalty. 'Just look around you, and remember how lucky we are.'

In a matter of seconds my mind registered things I had not actually seen since I can't remember when. A shaving mug in the likeness of George Washington, minus the hand which, at one time, had begun in the middle of his cocked hat and vanished down the back of his neck. There was a cardigan even I had refused to wear, one apparently knitted out of spaghetti. Some pieces of leather cobbled together with orange coloured string... probably the start of one of Mary's interminable bedspreads on which the stitching starts to come adrift after a while.

And, half hidden by a pile of old seventy-eights, was my special treasure... a scrap of eighteenth century linen which was part of a sampler, dated 1723, and executed in very wobbly cross-stitch by a young lady named Jeffica Platt, who piously adjures us to 'Bleff thif houfe.'

'Very well,' I conceded. 'Perhaps not all that lucky.' But then, I instantly returned to the attack by reminding them of all the horrors they had left behind in the world 'Above.' Things like depletion of the

ozone layer, plastic cutlery that bends like a willow in the wind, even when spreading jam, extortion rackets (perhaps, I should have bracketed those last two together) nose to tail traffic, and muggers to name but a few!

Someone, without even the decency to show his face, suddenly chirped up from behind the other 'And what about expert medical attention, then?' Now that really hurt... it cut me to the quick, and I soon reminded them that it was only the other day that I saved Pascal's life. Well, I would have if my diagnosis had been correct. I can see him now, tottering into this very chamber, thumping his chest and with a look of intense pain on his face, which was turning purple even as he collapsed at my feet... I could see the steam coming out of his ears.

Quick as a flash, I recognized all the symptoms of a heart attack and I immediately started artificial respiration. It was only when I applied mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and he began to lose the glazed look in his eyes, that I detected a strong odour of caramel, and it dawned on me that he had very likely swallowed a large, sharp-cornered piece of the toffee William had been trying all week to get rid of.

Thank God, it then seemed to pass all obstacles and vanish beyond recall. Having confirmed this as soon as he could speak, I helped him to his feet, adjusted the stacks which had fallen down around his ankles in his agitation, patted him on the head and send him happily on his way.

'But it wasn't a heart attack, was it?' the same voice piped up.

'No,' I said patiently, keeping a tight hold on my temper... this one really was beginning to set my teeth on edge... 'but it could quite well have been.' And by the time they had finished dithering about up there he could have been dead... if I'd been right, that it, which I wasn't, but no one is infallible... and if I have any more from you, I shall very likely suspend any medical attention you may require in the future. That shut him up.

Anyway, all that aside. What I really wanted to ask you was, as you are dining at Catherine's apartment almost every night, and very well indeed I shouldn't wonder, Is there any chance of you bringing home a doggy bag? This is just between the two of us, of course. We wouldn't want the others to know about it, would we? I'm afraid honesty and that 'All for one and one for all' lark tends to vanish like snow in summer, when even the sight of Mouse's dratted raccoon sets the old taste buds tingling.

Yours, cutlery at the ready, just in case

Father

The END

LETTER TO VINCENT FROM FATHER--2

GLENYS WALKER

Dear Vincent,

Here I am again, still trying to catch up with you long enough to have a proper conversation, and wondering if you intend staying 'up top' with Catherine indefinitely? Even when you do come home the pair of you usually pass young Jacob on to either Mary or myself and take off to the far reaches of the tunnels to be alone. It's not that I don't understand, and I do not in the least mind having the child rampaging around my ankles, but I shall be glad when you get over this first flush of passion so that things can get back to normal, if things down here ever have been what one would call normal.

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To quote only two recent instances of my inattention.....at the induction of a new member to the Tunnel Council I actually went to sleep during his maiden speech and fell off the chair. He got quite peevish with me! Then recently, May dashed into my chamber in a panic to tell me Mouse had once again stayed out all night, and how scared she was that white slavers would take him away from us. "Mary," I said wearily, "Do you really think they would want him?" She was justifiably shocked at my heartlessness.

By the way, apropos of nothing in particular.....don't be surprised if you find your chamber full of strange hairy things dangling from the ceiling when you do return. When I enter mine it's a bit like fighting my way through the Everglades.....Mary and Rachel are macrameing like mad at the moment. It is amazing what women can do with bits of odd string, fake flowers and leaves.

We also think Samantha has gone to be a nun, which is a bit tiresome of her but it could be worse. Three meals a day, a roof over her head, no stress, and no worry about where the next pair of mittens is coming from! Wonder if there is a monastery nearby? Preferably a silent order! The celibacy part of it wouldn't bother me unduly as I have always believed it to be partly a state of mind, in which one has to concentrate on other things. It's not difficult! Well.....sometimes it's a bit difficult, but at this moment I find the thought of peace and solitude taking precedence over all else.

Did I mention that Kanin and Olivia now have a waterbed? Apparently he found the damaged casing behind the empty premises of what once was a house of ill repute, brought it home, mended it, made a frame, set in and filled it with water. They were both delighted with the result and insisted I go to their chamber to try it, which I duly did.

The first thing that caught my eye was a notice Kanin said had been folded inside his prize when he found it. He had obviously been unable to resist taping it on the wall over the bed where it exhorted the occupants, in large type 'NO SPIKED HEELS, PLEASE.' Very whimsical!

Gingerly I sat on the edge of this normal looking piece of furniture, and the next second was flat on my back with my legs in the air while the bed undulated beneath me. I suppose I must have cried out, because Kanin made a grab at my collar to haul me up again and instantly cut off the flow of blood to the brain. I was seeing great flashes of light and what looked strangely like dozens of fried eggs floating on a red sea until Olivia yanked him off me. For a while I felt quite pixillated lying there ever so nauseous and gasping for breath, until suddenly a wonderful lassitude spread over my entire body, and I began to understand why ladies of the night.....er.....never mind that!

However, I could not stay there all day so made a move to get up, and thereby hangs a tale. Although it had been relatively easy getting into the contraption, heaving myself out required a great deal more thought. After much bobbing up and down as if on elastic, with my feet still suspended six inches off

the floor and my rear end sunk deep into the bed, I finally got the hang of it. "Don't worry," I assured my anxiously hovering friends, "I shall come in on the next tide,".....which I did, and very nearly too. If I may say so. After that it was no trouble at all. You really must try it.

Well, I suppose I should make the effort to go and help Geoffrey plant the seedlings one of the less astute of our helpers sent down with some bags of earth, but I'm not at all that bothered really. I would never try to discourage the boy, but how he expects those poor green things to grow without fresh air and sunlight is anybody's guess. I must find my little dibbler. You know what a dibbler is! It's a sort of sharpened thing with which one makes holes in the soil for plants. it is also useful for a few other things, like self protection, taking the eyes out of potatoes, punching holes in leather, and cleaning out fingernails.

Yours, still slightly seasick,

Father