

MONA LISA

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Note: Dedicated to Katrina whose own wonderful experience inspired this story.

“Leonardo da Vinci,” Vincent said with his gravelly baritone, stressing each word properly. “One of the greatest and most famous painters in the history of mankind. However, this great man was so much more than that. Leonardo was also greatly skilled in chemistry, mechanics, metal and leather working, sculpting, drawing, modelling and wood-work. He had left behind a vast collection of notes and knowledge about a large variety of fields. First and foremost though, he is recognised by people for his famous paintings.”

Vincent stood up from his high-back chair and reached out to the voluminous pile of large books spread out on the table in his chamber.

In front of him, about ten children, early teenagers, were sitting on little stools, with notebooks on their laps, eagerly listening to their teacher of arts for the day. Jacob, who was usually in charge of arts classes was down with a minor cold and so, his adoptive son was the first and best replacement for that day’s class.

Vincent’s knowledge of classical literature and music was well-known by everyone. His literature classes were well-loved and none of his pupils ever wished to skip it. But this was the first time he had taught 'The History of Arts' class. And it couldn’t have been a better day because Leonardo da Vinci was one of Vincent’s favourites. He had read countless of books on him and old masters in general, and knew as much as was possible about painting techniques, methods and great painters in the history. Ever since he'd been child, it had seemed to Jacob as if Vincent’s curiosity regarding any field was never-ending.

Vincent opened the large book in his hands on a bookmarked page and turned it to face the children.

“Do you know the name of this painting?” he asked, as he stepped closer to his class.

“*Mona Lisa!*” Kipper shouted immediately. The tallest and oldest of the children was always eager to contribute.

“Good, Kipper,” Vincent smiled. “One of the most famous paintings in the world. Does anyone know any more of Da Vinci’s paintings?”

“*The Last Supper,*” a rather quiet voice said.

“Very well, Geoffrey,” Vincent acknowledged the freckled boy with large brown eyes and a bit messy brown hair. The boy smiled shyly and looked down briefly.

“There are only fifteen paintings, finished or unfinished, which are attributed to Leonardo da Vinci. It is mainly because he never signed his works. Moreover, he loved experimenting with painting techniques and very often it had a disastrous effect. Most of his paintings were damaged or completely destroyed like this.”

Vincent stopped talking briefly, flipped the pages of the book to its next marked page and showed it to the children again.

“It was especially *The Last Supper* fresco which had suffered quite a lot from Leonardo’s experiments with methods of painting. It was largely damaged shortly after its completion and then more throughout the centuries. It had survived flooding, bad environmental conditions, pollution, vandalism, and during the World War II, even bombing of the refectory of the monastery in Milan, where it is situated. And yet, it has prevailed and is currently being restored to its former glory. (1) You could say that the most beautiful works of human hands are immortal, whatever the time, place or conditions they have to suffer.”

Vincent paused and let the children admire the large photograph of the famous fresco.

He noticed the ever-curious Samantha was frowning, as if thinking about something really hard.

“What is it, Samantha?” he asked, a little bemused.

“Well... You said we know of only fifteen of his paintings. How come he is so world famous then? Other painters left many more paintings behind.”

The girl’s intense look and the continuous frown on her pretty face made him smile.

“Leonardo was not only a painter, Samantha. His notebooks contain a vast number of scientific diagrams and drawings of nature and different objects.”

Vincent stepped back to his table and swapped the book in his hands for another one before turning back to the class again.

“He was very interested in human anatomy. His drawing of the *Vitruvian Man* is one of the most famous cultural icons of our times and represents da Vinci’s concept of the ideal human body proportions.”

He flipped through a few pages until he stopped and exposed the mentioned drawing to the eager young eyes of his pupils.

“Moreover, he wrote about the nature and techniques of painting. His wide range of interests, and all his works connected with them, made him an artist, a scientist and an inventor. And therefore, he is regarded highly and had a huge influence on future generations.”

Vincent stopped for a moment and lifted his sparkling blue eyes from the children to the young woman sitting in the back corner of the chamber, smiling at him dreamingly. His smile widened, then he lowered his eyes and moved back to his table again, happy to continue his lesson.

In the back of the chamber, Catherine made herself more comfortable in the old worn-out padded armchair, keen on hearing more. Vincent had brought that armchair in especially for her. He knew by now how she enjoyed sitting in his classes - without intervention of course, as she didn’t want to disturb the children. At first, she was afraid it might distract Vincent, but then he told her it would be more distracting to him knowing she was standing outside of his chamber secretly listening in the chilly corridor. Moreover, the children didn’t mind it at all. They all loved her, and sharing time with her, as with Vincent, was one of their dearest pleasures.

As a big lover of arts, Catherine was enjoying not only that day’s topic, but also Vincent’s way of keeping the children’s interest. They were hanging on his every word, subconsciously leaning slightly forward as if they wanted to get physically closer to their teacher. It made Catherine smile and yet, for a moment, she felt sorry for Vincent. He had such an incredible depth of knowledge in arts and yet, he would never be able to see anything of what he was teaching with his own eyes. He would never get the chance to find out how small *Mona Lisa* was in reality, or see the monumental and colourfully painted beauty of the Sistine Chapel. All he could do was study the books and use his imagination.

Thinking of the encounter with Kristopher, the ghost of the painter Catherine and Vincent had encountered only a few weeks before, made her even more sad. Kristopher had left them a beautiful painting of the two of them, portrayed in a true lover's embrace. The painting was carefully wrapped and rested on top of Vincent's wardrobe until he found a perfect spot on one of the walls for it.

Catherine sighed quietly. She wished she could bring a bit more of real art into the tunnels for Vincent to enjoy. But how?

"Catherine..." A whisper at her ear brought her back to reality.

Vincent was kneeling next to her while the children were writing something in their notebooks. While Vincent was talking about Leonardo da Vinci, Catherine had been so deep in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed how much time had passed, or that Vincent had given the children a task which they were working on at that moment.

She looked at him startled.

"Are you all right?" Vincent whispered again.

"I'm sorry," she gasped quietly and smiled. "I think I got lost in my thoughts somehow... Nothing you should worry about."

The gentle look in his eyes and that beloved face softened by the glow of the candle light made her want to stroke his cheek so badly. She remembered the presence of the children though and stopped herself from doing so.

He took her hand in his and smiled a little, feeling what she wanted to do. "The class will be over soon," he said softly.

Catherine's loving smile and the warmest of looks was enough of a reply to his statement.

Two days later, Catherine was window-shopping on her lunch break. Long gone were the times when she would spend most of her time trying out clothes in luxurious boutiques - and spend most of her allowance on them. The new Cathy, as she called herself, spent most of her lunch breaks in antique book stores and curiosity shops. And it was one of these which caught her eye on that bright sunny late spring day. As she stopped at the small book store, her eye fell on an object displayed next to a large old photo book on Renaissance art. Her eyes grew bigger and her lips slowly stretched into a big smile. *Perfect!!*

With a determined step, she pushed the store door open making a bell over it ring in expectation.

After work that day, Catherine was joyfully walking towards the drainage tunnel in Central Park. She was planning on seeing Vincent anyway, though they hadn't specified an exact time. Her discovery that day would make it even sweeter. As it wasn't completely dark yet, so she looked around cautiously before entering the tunnel.

When she finally made her way to the steel door, she didn't even need to push the lever behind the grate on the side wall. The moment she raised her hand to do so, the heavy steel door opened and she saw Vincent standing behind it with a smile on his face.

"Sometimes I forget how much you can feel me," Catherine said with a bemused smile.

Vincent lowered his eyes for a moment, then looked back at her. When he spoke, his velvety voice was full of emotion.

“Sometimes I try to remember what it was like *not* to feel you... And then I think to myself that I don't want to remember those times.”

His gaze was steady and intense now. Catherine sighed and closed the distance between them, falling into his arms.

“I don't want you to remember either,” she breathed into his chest smiling.

His arms tightened around her and he sighed with a blissful smile, closing his eyes for a moment.

“I brought you something,” Catherine said grinning, as she pulled back from him.

Vincent tilted his head curiously and watched her bend over and pick up the rather large tote bag she brought instead of her usual small handbag. Something in a brown paper was peeping out of it.

“I hope it's not alive,” Vincent said bemused, eyeing the size of the bag. “Father is still not reconciled with Arthur, so I'm not sure he would survive anything else.”

Catherine saw his eyes twinkling with mischief. She knew very well he found the image of Father chasing Mouse's raccoon away from his book piles more than amusing, too.

“Don't worry,” she laughed and entwined her arm with his while holding the bag in her free hand. “It's positively lifeless in animal terms.”

Vincent chuckled and pulled the lever to close the steel door behind them.

Once they were in Vincent's chamber, Catherine could see a copper teapot on the brazier and two china tea cups and saucers on the bedside table.

“You could definitely feel me,” she said with a beaming smile and gave him a light kiss on his cheek. Then she walked over towards his large bed.

Vincent trembled in pleasure, then got hold of himself and followed her.

They sat down on the bed and Catherine pulled a large rectangular object wrapped in a brown paper out of the bag. A small red rose made out of a ribbon was attached to it.

“I know it's not your birthday and you already got my this year's anniversary present but I just couldn't resist when I saw it,” she said and excitement brought sparkles in her eyes and colour in her cheeks.

Vincent's long fingers gently and lovingly stroked the ribbon rose. Catherine suddenly felt warmer, as if it wasn't the rose he was stroking... Then he looked at her and smiled. And then the boy inside of him won, and eagerly though carefully, he unwrapped the packet.

“Oh, Catherine...,” he gasped. He couldn't take his eyes off the picture in his hands, his fingers were almost incredulously moving along the uneven yet perfectly straight surface.

His reaction moved Catherine almost to tears.

“I saw it in a book store today next to a book on Renaissance art. The store owner placed it there to attract attention to the book. He said his daughter found it in some curiosity shop a few years ago, but never found place for it in her home. So she gave it to him in hope he could use it as decoration somewhere. He's not a huge fan of art, though, so when I asked him if he would sell it to me, he agreed immediately.”

Vincent was still captivated by the picture in his hands. On it, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* was smiling on him with that famous enigmatic half-smile. It was the painting reproduction which someone had created out of about five hundred puzzle pieces into a perfect picture, and framed it, without covering it with glass though. The dark brown and green-yellow shades fitted perfectly into the warm yellow and orange candlelight glow of the chamber giving it an eerie feel of reality.

“I know it's not the real thing, but it's the next best thing to it... I just -”

Catherine's voice went quiet. She swallowed hard, trying to keep composure. She knew Vincent would appreciate the gift, but still. His emotional acceptance of it made her feel emotional, too.

Vincent looked at her with eyes full of wonder, love and amazement.

"You are remarkable, Catherine..." he said. "However limited, however impossible, however unreachable, I think things are for me, there *you* come and give me the stars..."

Catherine didn't know what to say, his words made her completely speechless and she didn't think she could love him more than at that very moment. Finally, she found her words.

"You give me the sky where the stars can shine on, Vincent..." She spoke quietly, with the warmest smile and a fluttering heart.

He sighed. After all this time, when Vincent thought Catherine opened a new world to him, he still couldn't believe it was he who'd opened a new world to her as well. His smile reached his misty eyes. And then, his left hand reached for her cheek and caressed it tenderly with his thumb, just the way she had imagined him doing it just a couple of days before.

"Thank you..." he said softly, still connected to her big eyes.

Catherine mimicked his gesture, her own small hand finding its way to his stubbly cheek.

"You're welcome..." she whispered and her smile was so bright, it almost blinded him.

For a moment, they kept still, enjoying the physical contact between them. Then, their hands slowly returned to their positions and they looked at the puzzle picture on Vincent's lap. Vincent took it in both hands, this time admiring the elegant gold-plated frame decorated with ornaments, moving his fingers along it carefully. Just out of curiosity, he turned the picture to its back side, inspecting it properly.

Suddenly, his eyes landed in the top left corner of the board.

"Catherine, look," he said and turned the picture more in her direction.

"*Thank you for everything. J. 1984,*" she read aloud. "I didn't notice that..."

Vincent's eyes were studying the words with interest.

"It looks like the person who received it didn't hold on to it for too long," he said. thinking aloud.

"Do you think something happened to them?" Catherine asked, her interest piqued now for real.

"Perhaps.... We'll probably never know."

Then he looked back at her and smiled.

"But you can be sure / intend to keep it for much longer..."

Catherine's smile reached her eyes as she kept on watching Vincent admire his present lovingly.

Jacob couldn't stop admiring the framed picture in his hands.

"This is marvellous!" he exclaimed with a smile. "Such a masterpiece of history of arts and to create it with tiny pieces of cardboard is truly something!"

Vincent smiled and nodded.

“Yes... And to think that I was teaching about *Mona Lisa* one day and two days later, she lands on my lap,” he shook his head.

“Catherine knows you so well, Vincent,” Jacob said with wonder still present in his voice. “I don’t doubt that if she really wanted, she would manage to bring you the real one right down here to the Tunnels. That girl would do anything for you.”

Vincent’s look softened at those words. He valued his adoptive father’s words very much. And especially since it had taken Jacob some time to really appreciate Catherine, Vincent always felt deep blessing whenever he heard kind words about the woman he loved from his father’s mouth.

“There were times when I couldn’t believe it, when I doubted myself being worthy. But for a long time now... I know it’s true,” he agreed. “And I would do anything for her.”

Jacob finally lifted his look from the picture and his eyes met the ones of his son.

He didn’t say anything, just smiled, and Vincent saw how much Jacob acknowledged and appreciated the special relationship his son had with the woman from Above.

“Where do you want to hang it?” Jacob asked.

“I’m not sure. Catherine said we could even hang it here in your study, so that anyone can see it when they visit you.”

Vincent’s eyes were smiling. He knew Jacob would be excited to have a *Mona Lisa* on the wall of his chamber and it amused him how his father was trying to hide the excitement of that prospect.

“Do you really think so?” the patriarch asked at first. “However.... No, Vincent. It was Catherine’s gift to *you*, so if anyone wants to see it, they shall come to *your* chamber.”

Vincent chuckled quietly. He was sure of this outcome beforehand.

“Father...,” came a voice suddenly came from the chamber entrance.

“Jonathan! Come in, please,” Jacob acknowledged the visitor.

A tall slender man in his early forties joined them. His hair was still dark brown but a few silver streaks were giving it an almost glittering look.

“I have just come to tell you that we have finally finished furnishing the expansion of the Hospital chamber and Mouse would like to -” His words faded suddenly.

Jonathan was staring at the picture in Jacob’s hands and his face went pale, as if he had just seen a ghost.

Vincent noticed his change of mood and tilted his head slightly while asking carefully. “Are you all right, Jonathan?”

The man on his side looked at him as if startled and nodded slowly.

“Yes... I just...” His look fell on *Mona Lisa* again. “Where did you find this?” he asked.

Jacob glanced at Vincent before answering. “Vincent received it as a gift from Catherine. She found it in a book store...” he said.

Jonathan suddenly felt weak and had to sit down at the nearest chair. He closed his eyes and exhaled loudly.

Vincent observed him for a moment, then he followed his intuition, took the picture in his hands and turned it over.

“Was it you who wrote this, Jonathan?” he asked quietly, showing the sitting man the inscription on the back of the picture.

Jonathan opened his big brown eyes and the pain Vincent saw in them that moment touched him deeply.

“Yes... 'J' was me...,” he breathed.

When neither of the other two men in the study spoke, only observed him, Jonathan decided there was no point in keeping secrets any more. Staring at some abstract point in the distance ahead of him, he started telling his story.

“It was 1983 when I started working at The Metropolitan Museum of Art...”

“Jonathan started working in the gift shop at The Metropolitan Museum of Art back in 1983.”

Vincent was looking out at the city lights from Catherine’s balcony the next evening. He had just started telling her the forgotten story of the *Mona Lisa* picture, which was now resting on a shelf in his chamber.

“It was just a few months after his mother died of cancer. He had no contact with other living relatives and was not married, as he;d spent most of his recent years looking after his ill mother. Jonathan left the small house he was renting with his mother, as he couldn’t afford to rent it on one salary any more. He moved to a small flat in a not too-dangerous part of Harlem, and because he used to work as a shop assistant, he managed to find work in the gift shop at The Metropolitan Museum. He spent most of his days there, even outside his working hours, since looking at works of art gave him comfort he hadn’t known since his mother became ill.”

“He must have felt very lonely,” Catherine noted, sadly thinking how lucky she was to have Vincent and her friends Below after her father died.

“Yes,” Vincent agreed, and turned to look at her, leaning with one hand against the balustrade.

“And living in Harlem didn’t give him much peace of mind either, so he sought it in the museum. One day, as he just came off duty in the museum shop, he noticed a beautiful young woman looking at some photographs of old paintings on display...”

Vincent interrupted his narration and his look became distant, as if he had just remembered something.

“What is it, Vincent?” Catherine asked tentatively.

He sighed and shook his head with a sad smile.

“When Jonathan spoke about her, he reminded me of Father telling me his story of how he met Margaret... It was so beautiful, but so sad at the same time...”

Catherine smiled and squeezed his arm in support, waiting for him to say more.

“Anyway... there was something about that woman that drew him to her immediately. She was rather small, slender, with beautiful dark blonde hair falling over her shoulders, had warm green eyes and a lovely smile. Jonathan said no matter how foolish it might sound, he fell in love with her the moment he saw her...”

Vincent stopped talking again and looked at Catherine. The look in his eyes was saying what he thought about his friend’s ‘foolishness’.

Catherine’s smile widened in recognition of her own feelings.

“And then?” She encouraged him to continue, still smiling.

Vincent lowered his eyes awakening from his thoughts and looked out into the city again.

“Then he gathered his courage and asked if he could help her choose a souvenir. They were sympatico right away, and not long after, they started meeting once a week. Jonathan found out she was a great lover of classic arts, mainly the old masters, and especially Leonardo da Vinci. She had never seen any of his famous paintings in person, as they were mainly in museums in Europe, and she didn’t have money for travelling. But she had books about his work and read them many times. Her greatest wish was to see *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre in Paris....”

Catherine could see the connection with the inscription on the picture now. And even more, she could see the connection between Jonathan’s life story and that of Vincent’s. He was feeling lonely too, until he met her...

“Did she ever make it to Paris?” Catherine asked.

“No,” Vincent said sadly. “Only a few months after they had met, just after the New Year, Jonathan found out she was terminally ill...”

A shadow of sorrow fell over Catherine’s face, lit by the city lights.

“Did he ever tell her he loved her?”

“He tried,” Vincent replied. “But knowing her ill fate, whenever he was about to reveal his feelings, she halted him with talking about something else.... When he found out about her illness, Jonathan was devastated. He said he would have done anything for her and it was driving him almost to madness that he could do so little.”

“Surely, she appreciated having him near/ It must have given her a great comfort,” Catherine remarked softly.

“Oh yes,” Vincent said looking at her again. “Jonathan visited her almost every day in her last few months. His despair though, was worse than anything he had ever experienced before. Even worse than the illness and loss of his mother.”

“It always feels different when it involves someone we love with our whole heart...”

“Yes...,” Vincent sighed. “One day, Jonathan was walking past the shops near where she lived and in one toy shop window, he saw a jigsaw puzzle of *Mona Lisa*.... He had wanted to do something special for his love for a long time, and at that moment he knew he had to have that puzzle. He bought it, and within a month, he completed the puzzle and had it framed using an old frame bought quite cheaply in a curiosity shop. It fitted the picture perfectly. On the back of the picture, he wrote the inscription '*Thank you for everything. J. 1984*'. When he gave it to her, she cried and couldn’t find words to thank him... She asked her parents, who were looking after her, to hang it on the wall opposite her bed. Two months later, she died... And a month after her death, Jonathan came to us...”

Vincent fell silent, looking out into the city, deep in thoughts.

Catherine took a deep breath and exhaled, digesting the sad story. She looked out over the city, joining Vincent.

“He must have loved her so much, that his heart just couldn’t find peace in this world any more. He had to find it in another one,” she said.

“That is what Jonathan said himself. It was a lucky coincidence one of his colleagues in the museum is our Helper... She saw Jonathan slowly fading away and brought him to us. But he never told us the real reason for his despair and sorrow. We knew about his mother’s passing and that he had felt very

lonely, and assumed that was the reason. He said he had lost the will to live and we welcomed him into our world to help him heal.”

“It seems even five years later, he is still in the process of doing so,” Catherine said.

“If you love someone so much and lose them, it might take a whole lifetime to get over it, Catherine. Some people never do...”

He stopped for a moment, reminded of night he had almost lost Catherine because of the Watcher.

“Someone said once the pain you feel today is the strength you feel tomorrow, and for every challenge there is opportunity for growth.”

Catherine smiled and looked at him.

“You are the best living proof of that saying, Vincent.”

His eyes met hers and a twinkle returned to them along with a smile on his face.

“You never mentioned her name,” Catherine suddenly remembered.

Vincent exhaled loudly and lowered his eyes for a moment. Then his blue eyes warmed her green ones again and he almost whispered.

“Her name.... was Catherine...”

If she wanted to say something, she couldn't find words for it. The parallels between Jonathan's and Vincent's life, though they were only a few, came to her so clearly now. She thanked Providence and her own heart, that Vincent didn't have to look for an escape from the agonising reality of his loss. Her eyes welled up and seeing the look in Vincent's eyes, she knew he was thinking the same.

Catherine smiled at him through tears and wordlessly embraced him tightly, exhaling the breath she was holding from the moment he said the woman's name, *her* name.

“You were right, Vincent, it is a beautiful story, but also so sad,” Catherine said quietly, her head resting on his chest and listening to his comforting heart beat.

“It is,” he agreed. “But no matter how big the pain, or the loss, it is always so much greater to love than never know love at all...”

Catherine smiled with closed eyes.

“Always..,” she whispered.

Vincent tightened his hold on her and breathed in the flowery scent of her hair that he loved so much.

My dearest Catherine... My Mona Lisa...

END

(1) The Last Supper fresco by Leonardo da Vinci was being restored at the time when this story takes place. The restoration was finished in 1999.