

Through A Friend's Eyes

by Michaela Buzsaki Struchova

Dark brown shades of rocky walls, large caverns with high ceilings, a light haze of something unidentifiable. Seemingly, hundreds of candles, burning all around, giving the brown and greyish colours of the space warmer, orange and yellow shades.

Countless vintage, some even antique, pieces of furniture and curios revealing all sorts of interests. Tons of books, mostly vintage covers, leather-bound editions, lying everywhere around.

This place is just... unreal....

Nancy Tucker was standing in Jacob's study, taking in all the details of the place she found herself, with the precision of the photographer she once used to aspire to become.

Her eyes were as mesmerised as her mind had been for the last hour, since entering the wondrous world of the tunnels with Catherine - a world full of surprises at every turn of the next tunnel, of the warm and kind people they had met on their way, of the unique scents of candles mixed with the smell of damp ... and something else, which she couldn't name. And yes, the light... Oh, yes, the light everywhere was just magnificent! So comforting, so soothing, so gentle...

Catherine had left her in Jacob's study after having introduced her to the Tunnel's patriarch. Jacob had welcomed Nancy with the warmth of a friend, someone who had known about her from his soon daughter-to-be, especially from the stories Catherine had shared from her college years. Nancy immediately became fond of the older man, acknowledging not only his kindness but also wisdom, so obvious to her from the start.

When Catherine and Jacob said they would leave her to meet Vincent, Nancy was a bit confused. Wasn't the bride-to-be supposed to introduce her fiancé to her? But Catherine's mysterious smile and loving expression, when she looked away briefly at the mention of his name, told Nancy that this was not going to be the usual meeting of two strangers.

Whatever this would turn out to be, Nancy knew, it was going to be extraordinary. Remembering what Catherine had told her about Vincent before, she was prepared for a lot of things. However, nothing could have prepared her for this place, this secret world, hidden below the city streets of New York, filled with people and activities she would never have even dreamed about.

Her eyes were just skimming a row of books on one of the shelves, dedicated to photography when she spotted one she hadn't seen in years.

"Well, I never..." Her mouth fell open.

"You can borrow any of them if you like."

Nancy immediately turned in the direction of the voice she had just heard. It was the warmest, most unusual baritone she had ever heard - its gravelly undertone, yet smooth quality, made her recognise him immediately.

"Hello, Vincent," she said and smiled.

Her warm dark eyes were taking in the tall figure of a man standing in a safe distance away from her, covered in a long dark cloak, whose face was hidden in the shade of a large hood. His posture was almost regal, majestic even without movement, and there was great peace radiating from him.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Nancy," Vincent spoke.

Nancy awakened from her half-trance. "I... I was just admiring the incredible collection your father has here."

"So I could see," Vincent replied, and something in his voice told her he was smiling. "How do you like our world?"

"Oh, my.... I can't find the words.... Even in my dreams, I would have never even imagined such a place could ever exist!" Nancy exclaimed in unmasked excitement. "It's almost like stepping into beautiful a fairy-story book..."

"Or a beautiful photograph," Vincent added.

Nancy smiled. "Yes... An almost magical one."

"Magic is a matter of perception. For a child, a bunny, disappearing and appearing in a magician's hat is magic. For a sick person, finding a cure for their pain is magic. For a lonely person, finding love and acceptance is the greatest magic they could ever imagine..."

Vincent's voice faded, he lowered his head, as he became pensive.

"That's very true," Nancy acknowledged. "Just like what happened to you and Cathy."

Vincent lifted his head again. "Very much so..." The warmth and love in his voice were unmistakable.

Nancy's smile widened again. "You know, when she told me about you, I was truly happy for her. I understood that whatever had been preventing you from sharing her world, it had been very hard on you both. I can't even express how happy I am that you have found a way to be truly together."

"There were times when I hadn't even dared to dream that this could ever be possible... that Catherine could ever be happy like this.... And then there were times of great grief when...." Vincent's voice broke, as he remembered the agonising, lonely months spent without Catherine.

"When you thought she was dead," Nancy finished his thought.

She heard the pain in his voice, though it was only for a few seconds.

The painful memories are the ones which are the hardest to forget...

Vincent sighed and walked over to the nearest bookshelf. He pulled out a worn-out volume of poems by Dylan Thomas.

"In all the time that Catherine was away from me... I haven't let this book out of my sight..." he said, his eyes fixed on the book in his hands.

"I brought it to Catherine one night just before the whole nightmare started... I wanted her to hear the words... the words I had never dared to tell her until then... The words which encompassed the whole meaning of my feelings for her, the reason for my living..."

"You were afraid that those words would bind her to you for real and it would be harder to let her go, should she ever want to leave you..." Nancy spoke quietly, understanding his struggle.

Vincent looked up to her, his face still shrouded in the shadow of the hood. "Until that day, I never truly understood that she was already bound to me for real, just as I had been bound to her since the day I had found her..."

His long fingers - covered in gloves - caressed the cover of the volume lovingly. Then, he put the book back into its place on the shelf.

Nancy observed this little gesture, feeling incredibly moved. Although she had still not seen his face, she knew this man was extraordinary. Always having a sixth sense for people, she realised pretty quickly, that Vincent was every bit the man Catherine told her about - a man worth fighting and living for.

Vincent put his melancholy behind and turned to Nancy again. "As I said, you are welcome to borrow any of the books you like. These books are shared by everyone here."

"Thank you, I might do that," Nancy replied with gratitude.

"Catherine told me you are great at photography," Vincent continued.

Nancy chuckled and looked in the distance for a moment. "I was, once."

"What happened?" Vincent inquired with genuine interest.

"I don't know.... Life? When I got married, there were suddenly other issues to deal with, there was no time for developing a hobby into something more. I guess you can say I sacrificed my art to family and children." She shrugged and flashed a quick smile.

Vincent could see the brief expression of regret pass on her pretty and honest face.

"There is no greater sacrifice than that," he spoke gently. "Love, friendship, family, children... They are the greatest purpose of a person's being. Everything else can be built or rebuilt at any time possible, but once you miss your chance on love and all that it brings, you can miss out on the whole true reason of your being... and the only thing that can give you what nothing else can."

"Happiness forever?" Nancy asked.

"No, ground beneath your feet. Happiness is a fragile thing, it comes and goes and returns if you're lucky. Money can buy you things, but not feelings. But true love always puts you back on your feet when you're losing balance, when the world around you starts crumbling and nothing seems to make sense anymore." Vincent paused. "And that is more powerful than anything else, and it's worth every sacrifice."

Nancy was observing him with deep respect.

"Catherine is the ground beneath my feet, my reason for living... She has sacrificed so much, just to have a life with me. She had fought so hard for a chance for us and has given me so much more than I had ever even dared to dream of..." Vincent's voice was betraying deep emotions. "And I will never be able to thank you enough for making her come back to me back then..."

Nancy smiled warmly, remembering the conversation with Catherine in her home in Westport.

"When she spoke of you that night, I just felt that whatever was keeping you apart, it could never separate you forever. *It is only in the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential...*"

"...is invisible to the eye." (1) Vincent concluded with a smile, which Nancy still couldn't see, but could definitely feel in his voice and it made her smile too.

She slowly dared to make a few steps in his direction. Nancy knew from Catherine that Vincent's face was somehow different from other people's, and she appreciated his obvious care in not possibly scaring her. But she felt the time had come, when she really wanted to put a face to the voice, the wisdom and the incredible aura of this man. The man who in a few days was going to become her best friend's husband.

Once Nancy was only a step away from Vincent, he held his breath when her hands carefully stretched out, suggesting to him what she wanted to do.

"May I?" she asked with care.

Vincent only nodded and let her hands slowly pull his hood down. Hesitantly, he looked into her awed, wide-opened eyes and released his breath in relief, What he saw in them was wonder and full acceptance of what he was.

Catherine was right, she does understand...

And then he saw the wide, warm smile revealing nothing but respect and newly-found friendship.

"Catherine was right," Nancy said. "Beautiful..."

Exactly two weeks after the wedding, Nancy was rushing through the tunnels towards Mouse's chamber.

"Hurry! Mustn't be seen! Big secret!"

"I know, Mouse, but I only have two legs, you know?" Nancy laughed, but quickened her walk anyway.

On her shoulder, a big tote bag with her camera and some photographic equipment was dangling dangerously; she had to readjust it a few times so it didn't fall off in their rush.

When they reached Mouse's chamber, the boy grabbed her arm and lead her to the back part of his private quarters. They stopped at something which looked like a heavy wooden door, attached to an opening carved into the solid rock wall.

Mouse turned to her and his face lit up with childlike excitement.

"Nancy asked for it, Mouse made it.... A dark chamber..."

In a ceremonial style, he pushed the door open and Nancy's mouth fell open.

"Mouse, you're a magician!" she exclaimed.

"There was space, just needed a door. Fixed it. And a few bits and gizmos," the boy said proudly, his head up and his hands stuck deep in the trouser pockets. "Helpers helped."

Nancy walked into the dark chamber, looking around in awe. There were just a handful of candles spread around in the niches carved into the walls. In the middle of the chamber, there were two long wooden tables, not far apart from each other, with several plastic trays on them. Over one of the tables in the middle, there was a safelight hanging from a hook on the not-so-high ceiling. The cord of the light was attached to a mobile generator placed behind the table.

Nancy could feel a slight draft coming from several directions.

"How did you manage to get this place air-ventilated?" she asked.

"Holes in that wall opposite. Only little ones, but already there. Another tunnel behind."

Shaking her head in amazement, Nancy started taking out the photo development tools, paper, various bottles with chemicals, gloves and other bits from her large bag.

"It's perfect, Mouse! This will do more than nicely. Now I just need water and the film I left you after the wedding. You know what water we talked about."

"You got it!" Mouse exclaimed, and rushed out of the chamber.

Nancy laughed; she had quickly grown fond of the young man everybody referred to as Mouse. He surely was as quick as one.

I can't wait for Cathy and Vincent seeing them....

"Oh, Vincent, these are so beautiful!" Catherine cried a couple of days later when they were sitting on their large bed in their chamber.

Several photos were spread around them; they were both taking turns in examining them carefully with eager eyes.

"Nancy said Mouse was too funny eating his slice of the wedding cake for her not to take a picture of it," Vincent laughed softly, looking at the photo in his hands.

On the photo, Mouse's face was all covered in icing and he was fighting for the last bits of the cake with Arthur, his pet raccoon - the beloved animal was all over the plate in the boy's hands.

Catherine laughed heartily glancing at the photo.

"I swear I thought Father would cast Arthur away for good this time. That little rascal almost gave William a heart attack, finding him in the pantry enjoying his snacks!"

They both laughed again. Then, Vincent took a small flat parcel from his bedside table.

"Nancy gave me this before she left," he spoke. "She said it was a gift for our chamber, to always remember how blessed we truly are."

Catherine looked into his eyes with love.

"As if we could ever forget...," she whispered smiling and reached out her hand to caress his stubbly cheek.

Vincent was taking in the sparkles in her green eyes for a moment, thinking how truer words were never spoken. Then he passed her the parcel.

"Open it."

Catherine eagerly unwrapped the red bow and the white paper and her eyes welled up.

She was holding a framed family photo - she was looking at herself, holding little Jacob in her arms and Vincent leaning to them, holding Jacob's little hand. All three of them were smiling.

Looking at the photo, Vincent was beaming with pride. A warm, indescribable feeling spread around his chest, a joy he could neither contain, nor wish to drive away.

What we have is all that matters, it's worth everything....

"Everything...," he whispered and looked at Catherine again.

In her eyes, he saw a complete understanding of what he meant with that word.

It had started that night over two years ago, sealing their bond and the acknowledgement, that they were meant to be together, whatever fate would bring them. And it brought them to this moment, when their love, which had overcome so much pain and despair, had grown into something much deeper, much stronger and much more beautiful than they have ever imagined.

As if on command, their heads turned simultaneously towards the crib by the bed, where their son was sleeping in blissful peace.

END

(1) Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: *The Little Prince*