

Epiphany

by Robert Mirnik

(from *CRYSTAL CAVERN TWELVE*)

The car skidded on the dirt road. Brakes screeched, let go, then screeched again. Then the car jolted into a ditch and came to a bone-rattling halt with one fender crumpled against a tree.

Responding to Vincent's strength, the boot of the old vehicle yielded with a reluctant outcry from the rusty hinges. Pain kicked him in the side, as protest to the exertion. Vincent slowly climbed out, one hand pressed over the bullet wound in his side to try and keep the pain at bay.

Vincent cautiously inspected the scene. The driver, a short beefy man, was slumped dead, over the steering wheel. Then Vincent noticed the front tire that had blown out, sending the vehicle careening off the winding mountain road.

The night's sequence of events came crashing back, cold and heavy as an avalanche - the old woman being mugged, the bullet slamming into him when he came to her aid, being unceremoniously crammed into the boot and driven away. He had certainly stepped into a hotter fire this time, but at least the assailant was dead, so his secret was safe.

There was a moon overhead, a full moon shining behind a cloud-veiled sky. The moon slipped free from a fleece of charcoal clouds, and Vincent started glumly at the scrub brush that covered the slopes around him. *Where was he?* Then he saw a farmhouse perched on the hillside above the road. He recalled that it belonged to a Helper named Frank Plazer, and expressed a note of gratitude.

Armed with that reassurance, Vincent began to walk towards the house. The vibration of each step sent a jagged spear up into his side. His breath grew uneven. A terrible weariness came over him, and he couldn't seem to think clearly. Vincent saw his surroundings grow blurred, and began to fade. Almost in slow motion, he crumpled forward onto the ground.

Something lapped at his mind, like waves along the seashore, gently tugging him towards...

A scarecrow was standing over him. Vincent looked up to see a grinning face made of coarse material that puckered around the neck where it was gathered and tied with a cord. The eyes gleamed brilliantly in black triangles, caverns dark as holes leading into the nether world, beneath the brim of a black hat. *He must be hallucinating.*

Nevertheless, the scarecrow's eyes studied his face intently with no pretense of doing anything else. They seemed to be all flame, like a window on a furnace, and Vincent felt as if he was being pulled into them. He had the sudden conviction that the scarecrow was learning a great deal about him, more than he knew himself. Vincent could only look back, trying to divine the thing's intent.

"Who... what... are you?" he rasped.

"Greetings, Vincent," said the scarecrow in a cultured sounding voice. "It will suffice to say that the form in which I currently appear to you, is what you would expect to see in a field on a farm. Interestingly, it is a symbol of both fear and poverty. If nomenclature will make it easier, you may call me Daemon." Vincent recognized the term for an attendant spirit.

"Why are you here?" queried Vincent.

"To help prepare you. Let's talk about life... and death." Vincent's features puckered into a frown.

"Daemon, am I... dead?"

"No. Your time has not yet come. Many, however, resist any discussion of death, refusing to think about life's inseparable counter-pole. To appreciate day, we must experience night. To appreciate summer, we must experience winter, and so on. We don't understand joy until we have felt sorrow, and if there were no sorrow in the world, there would be no compassion. In the same way, life itself only becomes clear, full and beautifully meaningful when lived in the conscious awareness of the presence of death. What are your thoughts, Vincent?"

"Well," responded Vincent, feeling stronger. "Alan Wats wrote; *It is because men knew they will die, that they have created the arts and sciences, the philosophies and religions. For nothing is more thought-provoking than the thought which seems to put an end to thought.*

"How do you think life should be lived, Vincent?" A snippet of verse came to Vincent.

'If I can throw a simple ray of light across the darkened pathway of another. If I can wipe from any pain. I shall not have loved my life in vain.'

Daemon beamed. "Uncommon man, you have uncommon wisdom. Indeed, all we bend into the lives of others comes back into our own."

"Most of us know that life is a journey," continued Daemon. "We walk along a path with family, friends, others and perhaps a special someone to cherish and to grow with, who walks with us hand-in-hand in the same direction. While there are many things on the road that will catch our eye, only a few will catch our heart. The path of life has many cross-roads, where we each must choose the road that is individually right for us. At each crossroad it is difficult to say goodbye and go our separate ways. Though at times, we may find ourselves walking along a path alone, the memory of being together will always remain, and ultimately, our paths will cross again."

"What are you preparing me for, Daemon?"

"Vincent," said Daemon after a considering pause. "A broken heart is like a shattered mirror, each piece beaming a different image of a portion of a love love. Each of us feels this kind of fragmentation at one time or another. We encounter this shattering of the heart's landscape when we come to the end of a friendship, when we love without having that love returned, or... when we lose a loved one through death." An icy finger seemed to trace the length of Vincent's spine.

"Daemon... who shall I lose?" Daemon removed his hat.

"It is time for another to illuminate." He dug his fingers under the fringes of the hood around his neck, and then tugged it hard upward to reveal the face of...

"Catherine!" Her image sparkled, as if sequins were dropped through it.

"Dear Vincent." The warmth of her radiant countenance turned the greeting into a verbal hug.

"Catherine, how did you get here? What is happening?"

"Vincent, this is difficult to explain since you're still in linear time. At this moment, in your reality, I'm in my New York apartment. What you see before you now - my spirit - is from the future."

"Catherine ... you *can't be dead!*" Vincent spoke the words as if they were boulders, too heavy to carry.

"I'm afraid I am, Vincent, but I just had to see you again. Though your memory of all this will soon fade away, I'm hoping that some of it will stay in your heart." Vincent pondered what he had been told, trying to wrap his mind around it. Then his eyes took on a steely cast of hard resolve.

"When and how does this happen? I will prevent it!"

"I'm so sorry, Vincent, but these events cannot be changed. Everything happens for a reason, though the reason may not be apparent. When our time comes, each of us must cross over. It happens to all

of us, and is not to be feared. Life is the corridor, death is the door - the door to a better place. Like putting away your winter coat when spring comes. Though my life on earth has ended, our relationship never will." Vincent's mouth moved for a moment, but made no sound.

"Catherine, I can't live without you...", he finally choked out. He looked deeply into her eyes so that she might read the sincerity in his own.

"You can, Vincent, and you must. There will be a reason for you to go on - a glorious product of our love! I have to go now, but I will leave you with these parting words, said in verse to help you remember them.....

I thank you for the love you have shown me, but soon it will be time for us to travel on alone. Though it will be a time for tears, be happy that we had these years. The love we shared, a laugh, a kiss, oh yes, these things I too will miss. I know this parting will leave a void, but fill it with remembered joy. So grieve awhile if grieve you must, then let yourself be comforted by trust. Though you can't see or touch me, I will be near, and if you listen with your heart, you will hear, all of my love around you, soft and clear. When you feel the gently breeze or the wind upon your face, that's me giving you a big hug, or just an soft embrace. And then when you come this way alone, I'll greet you with a smile, and welcome you home.

Catherine began to fade away, she touched his cheek. Vincent leaned into the touch, as though he'd been missing it, feeling that his heart was so full it might stop beating from the weight of his feelings.

"Farewell, my dear Vincent ... remember, love never dies."

Vincent felt the tears hammering for exit behind his eyes. The bubble of emotion inside of him expanded. It gathered force and broke the bonds of silence. His body shook with it, the sound of it filled the night.

"Vincent?" Vincent saw through flooded eyes the rugged features of Frank Plazer.

"I had a strange compulsion to come out here," Frank imparted. "Are you all right, Vincent? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Vincent's eyes turned wistfully heavenward.

NEVER THE END