

Love *Remembered* Differently

[This is what might have happened if Vincent HADN'T asked Pascal what he thought ...]

by S M Evans

"Don't know what you want to go there for anyway," the young man mumbled. "All big, empty space; nothing there - be bored."

"Not bored, Mouse. Happy."

"With Catherine."

"Yes, Mouse; with Catherine."

"Catherine come down here. Be with Catherine Below."

"Mouse ..."

There was a soft tap on the grille above him and Vincent turned his face up into the flaring squares of streetlight that were filtering through. He heard Catherine's voice and he answered her to let her know he was there.

"The van's right here," she told him, "And there's no one about."

Vincent looked down for one more moment at Mouse, who just stood there looking back at him as if he might never see him again. Impulsively, the young man surged forward and hugged his friend., Then he turned and walked quickly away, looking back over his shoulder, saying, "Be OKAY, Vincent; and be QUICK."

"I will, Mouse; please don't worry."

Mouse nodded tightly and kept on walking. For a moment, Vincent felt guilt rise up in him, but then it was replaced by the sharing of Catherine's irrepressible joy as he climbed the iron staples and, removing the grid above him, came face to face with her. Pulling himself up into the street, he stood and just looked at her for a fleeting moment, then climbed into the back of the van. Catherine got in behind the wheel and they were away.

Vincent sat leaning against some pillows and cushions that Catherine had put in there, in the corner made by the driver's seat and the side of the van and talked with her, read her poetry, shared her silences, as she drove northwards, out of the city, into what seemed like a different world.

They were out in the countryside now and the quality of the air, as Catherine wound down the window, hit Vincent like the ice-cold cascade of the Waterfalls Cavern. He breathed in, intoxicated and let his breath out only when he couldn't hold it any more. It was like drinking in and holding in his mouth, the clean, soft-tasting spring water that welled up in the Mirror Pool.

He pushed out the breath in a great gush and breathed in some more; for moments, unable to get enough of the sweet air that he had never tasted before. Catherine looked over her shoulder at him and was caught by the blinding beauty of the light in his eyes. She had to remind herself to turn back, to keep her eyes on the road.

"It'll be dawn soon," she said, happy that he could be so happy. She had never really seen him like this before; with his honey-coloured mane blown back from his face by the wind streaming in through the open window, he looked so incredibly beautiful to her; free - like a god.

"I can't wait, Catherine," he said to her and she could hear - feel - the spirit released in him. She

found that her cheeks were wet; tears shed in her joy of him, for him.

She felt his hand on the back of her head, stroking her hair - such peace, such peace she felt. "I can't wait," he whispered.

* * *

"We really need some way of shoring up this section of tunnel, here," remarked Father to Pascal. They were down in the Pipe chamber, discussing a recent rock fall. "This is happening far too often down here."

"We'll need Vincent's help," said Pascal.

"Yes, I know," Father replied, a little weary. "But he'll be back the day after tomorrow. There's nothing we can do immediately anyway, until we can get some wood or something from the Helpers."

"Perhaps Mouse could - "

"NO. I'm definitely NOT sending Mouse up there for wood; half the doors in New York would disappear. I mean, a Grand Piano. Even after all this time, I still can't believe it."

"Father ..." It was Mary. She came hurrying into the chamber to tell him that Mouse seemed to have disappeared. "Jamie saw him running off down to the lower levels; she said he seemed upset. She's been looking for him, but so far ..."

"Well Mary, I don't think there's any need to worry just yet. Mouse knows the tunnels better than most of us."

"Jamie says she thinks that he might do something rash. He's upset about Vincent going away and ..."

"Oh, God help us ... All right, Mary. Perhaps, under the circumstances we could organise a small search party; we need his help with this tunnel anyway."

Father heard the messages going out along the pipes to their sentry outposts to keep an eye out for Mouse and sighed as he marshalled his thoughts together for an idea of what he would say to Mouse to reassure him, when he was found. *Heaven only knows what scrape he might get himself into this time*, he thought to himself.

Meanwhile, Catherine and Vincent had arrived at the lake. She had parked the van deep in the woodland surrounding the area and then checked round to make sure that no one was about, then she opened the back for Vincent and he got out.

For February, the air was surprisingly mild and he breathed it in again; just standing and breathing, almost overwhelmed for a moment by the sense of freedom.

"I think the sun's coming up," Catherine told him. "Let's watch it from the meadow; it's just through here," and taking his hand, she led him through the remaining few trees to the edge of a huge stretch of open pasture, the lake she had told him of glistening faintly on their left.

"Like Paradise," she whispered.

"It IS Paradise," Vincent replied, looking down at her, such love in his eyes and he gently stroked her cheek with the back of one finger. "That is why we can only be here such a short time."

He breathed in the air once more, a deep breath, letting it out in a long, whispering sigh.

Then there was the sun.

Just a glimmer; then peeping; then more bold, pushing upwards into the azure embrace of the sky.

Vincent was transfixed by it.

As he beheld it, already feeling the first rays caressing the short fur on his face, he gave out a little gasp of breath, a tiny sob almost, at the wonder, the sheer, unadulterated pure wonder of it.

For a moment it was all he could see.

Looking up at him, Catherine felt closer to him than she ever had; utterly aware that she didn't need to put her arms around him, or even touch him; strangely, to have done so might have broken the perfect communion for both of them.

"Tell me," she whispered.

For a moment he could breathe neither in nor out, then he shook his head.

"I can't."

She could see a shimmer in his eyes; when he finally looked down at her again, he thought he had never seen anyone so happy.

"I feel like I could run forever," she laughed.

Taking her hand and touching her soul with his eyes he said, "Then we'll run."

They ran.

..... In the tunnels, far below the inhabited chambers, Mouse felt a cold whisper of breath on the back of his neck.

He turned

The water of the lake was ice-cold to the touch, but Vincent longed to plunge head-first into it to dive down to the bottom; almost he thought that there must be some secret thing hidden there, just waiting to be discovered.

Just seeing the direction of his gaze and the expression on his face, Catherine could guess his thoughts.

"Vincent, you'd freeze. I know it's mild, but it's still February."

He smiled, his small, wry smile and shook his head. "No Catherine. This is more than enough. The lake, the setting ... it's all so beautiful."

"Come and see the glen."

He took her hands and gave himself into her eyes. "Your secret glen where the deer walk by."

"Yes." She looked over her shoulder to the tall trees edging the top of the meadow. "You'll recognise it, I know you will."

He nodded. "Show me."

Once into the trees, they climbed up to the top of a rise and then Vincent found himself looking down into the most magical place he had ever seen. The wooded light and shade; the tall grass that Catherine had mentioned and there, not far from them, gathered at a small pool drinking, were the deer she'd told him of.

He and Catherine slowly, quietly, knelt down in the shelter of a large tree at the edge of the glen and watched as the deer, once having drunk their fill began, in ones and twos, to wander further afield, two of them with a youngster in tow, making their way up towards them.

"Oh, they're so beautiful aren't they?" she whispered. "And the young one, he's not very old."

"Full of the joys of spring," replied Vincent quietly, as he watched him running and darting hither and yon chasing in circles, butting at his mother to be fed, then when she walked off, chasing after her, trying to dodge between her legs.

"It's not spring yet," Catherine laughed, softly.

"It is to him."

Looking up at Vincent, she said, "To you as well."

Returning her gaze, he gathered her into his shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

"Thank you, Catherine. Thank you for all of this; for everything." He hugged her. She smiled, a brilliant, laughing smile, back up at him.

"This is MY wish you've granted; thank you too."

"And does that make me your fairy godmother?"

"And I yours? Or are we Cinderella and the handsome Prince?"

"In that case, we have until midnight."

"It's enough."

"Yes, it is," he replied.

* * *

The kind of fear that Mouse felt now was different to anything he'd ever felt before.

The shadow-dark figure which loomed over him now, felt like Death come looking for him. There was nowhere to run to; the tunnel he was in was a dead-end, and the figure seemed to fill the path before him. He wanted to close his eyes, or look away from it, shut it out, but he was too scared to, in case it pounced on him without warning.

"Who?" Mouse finally squeaked out.

The figure said nothing at first, then, "Sleep," the word a susurrant of sound and even as it waved an arm, cloaked in blackness, Mouse sank back to the damp sand on the floor of the tunnel, already unconscious.

Mouse dreamed.

But the dream seemed to him to be more real than wakefulness. He was suddenly so aware of everything; everything around him, sounds, smells, light and how he felt ...

He was in Vincent's chamber, but it was a mess. Everything smashed, ripped, thrown everywhere; utter devastation, it seemed to Mouse. There was only one thing which seemed untouched; the cupboard against the far wall, where Vincent kept his books. Mouse made his way tentatively over to it and, gingerly, opened the doors. Inside there was a beast.

It seemed to Mouse that it had to be Vincent and yet it was more horrible than anything he had ever seen.

It wasn't the Vincent he knew; it wasn't Vincent at all ... and yet ...

Mouse stood, transfixed with horror as the beast chuckled low in its throat, a menacing, horrible sound.

"I'm waiting for him, Mouse," it said, the sound of its sly, vile voice threatening to overwhelm him with its evil. "Make him ... COME BACK QUICK ..."

And it laughed.

Screaming, Mouse fled.

... He tripped in the darkness; fled.

He hit something soft, but damp. It felt springy to his touch. Catching his breath, he opened his eyes quickly, fear of the darkness where the beast lurked being worse than confronting whatever he might see.

He was on the edge of a woody glade, lying on a mossy bank. Looking around him, he suddenly saw

Vincent and Catherine; they were sitting by a small pool, shaded by overhanging tree branches and at the other side of the glade there were what must've been deer, though Mouse had only ever seen them in books.

Though his two friends were quite a distance from him, he found that he could see their faces quite clearly; he had never seen either of them so happy.

Neither had he ever seen Vincent in the daylight and he thought to himself that, God, if he looked like anything at all, ought to look like Vincent did at that moment. He seemed to be shining and so full of life that, for a moment, Mouse wanted to cry to think that this was something he had wanted to deny his friend.

Vincent belongs here, he thought. He made to run to him, to hug him, but he found he couldn't move.

Suddenly, he remembered the tunnels; the beast - and he tried to shout to Vincent to warn him, but he had no voice. He was flooded with fear; struggled to cry out, to move, anything, but he could not.

He saw the two of them rise to their feet, begin to walk towards the trees ... the van. He saw the van. They were getting ready to return. They mustn't. Somehow, Mouse had to get back to the sewer entrance, where they'd left him, to stop them, warn them, he turned...

... and found himself on the floor of the deep tunnel where he'd been confronted by the dark figure. He looked around; there was nothing but the tunnel and the darkness, the batteries in the torches fixed to his helmet being too weak to see hardly anything by. He felt in his pocket for spare ones which he always carried with him and, by touch, fitted them into place.

Able to see his way once more, he ran back furiously the way he'd come, to the upper levels. He must get back to the entrance and warn them ...

*Though earth and man were gone
And suns and universes ceased to be
And thou were left alone
Every Existence would exist in Thee.*

*There is not room for Death
Nor atom that his might could render void
Thou - Thou art Being and Breath
And what Thou art may never be destroyed."*

"No Coward Soul Is Mine," said Catherine, looking up at Vincent and smiling.

"Is there any poetry you HAVEN'T read?" he asked her.

"There's only one way to find out."

With a humorously deadpan expression, Vincent held out his mug for more tea. Catherine laughed quietly.

"Oh, it's so peaceful here," she said, as she watched the deer eating at the edge of the glade.

"It really is a piece of heaven."

She snuggled closer to Vincent who put his mug down on the grass and held her close. As she turned her face up to look at him, he had to stop himself from bending his head to kiss her; it seemed like the most natural thing in the world and yet ...

She seemed to understand and let him go, still smiling as if it didn't matter about a kiss or anything else. She stood up and looked around.

"The sun's going down," she said.

And the sunset would be beautiful, she could tell; by the quality of the light of the sky that spread across the mountain tops.

"Come on," she urged. "We need a good vantage point to see it."

Taking his hand, she led him back over the rise and out of the glen; as they left it, Vincent turned back for a moment, to fix the sight of it in his memory forever - with the light slanting low over the trees, and the deer drifting slowly back to the pool and the two with the young one falling to sleep at his mother's feet.

"Ours," said Catherine, tightening her grip on Vincent's hand for a moment.

Vincent nodded solemnly. "For Always."

Sitting on a grassy knoll, near the trees where the van was parked, they watched the shadows lengthening across the meadow and the growing, spreading fire of the sun setting around the mountain tops, reflected in the lake's mirror surface, was a double glory.

A breeze sprang up, slightly chilling the evening air and Vincent drew the breadth of his long mantle across both their shoulders; held Catherine close to him. There were tears in his eyes; he had never in all his life known anything so perfect as this day, this place, this moment.

Feeling the tightening of his breath, Catherine looked up at him and, feeling her concern, he whispered, "All this; ALL of this; Catherine, how can I ever thank you?"

She reached up to brush the wetness from his cheeks; whispered, "You are here; you came with me. Everything I've ever loved, needed, you have given me."

And his soul smiled on her, warming the chill from her face and bent Vincent's head, finally, to kiss her. All love, all stillness ... Peace ...

In the long and silent evening, it was all there was; the only thing.

Then they just held each other until it was dark.

* * *

On reaching the inhabited levels, Mouse was a little surprised to find no one about; (it hadn't occurred to him that they might all be out looking for him), he'd anticipated being stopped and having to explain what he was doing but, unhindered, he ran on towards Vincent's chamber.

When he got there he stopped just outside, afraid of what he would find there; then slowly, because he loved Vincent more than he feared the beast and, needing to know what he would be facing, he stepped inside.

The chamber was just as Vincent had left it; all in order, everything in place, tidy; no mess, no destruction

Gingerly, still a little afraid, he stepped over to the cupboard, laid his hands on the doors ... He yanked them open and found nothing more than the books and things that Vincent always kept there.

He breathed a huge sigh of relief and sat down heavily, suddenly tired, on the edge of Vincent's bed.

And that was where Father found him when he came back, to see if Mouse had returned; he was sitting there with Jamie, silent, except to keep saying, "Wait for Vincent."

When a message came down the pipes to say that Vincent and Catherine had returned and were on their way down, Mouse ran out of the chamber before anyone could stop him and did not stop until he belted, almost full pelt, into Vincent's arms.

"Mouse, what's wrong?" Vincent could see his friend was upset. Catherine reached out a hand and

ruffled Mouse's hair. He looked up at her.

"Mouse sorry. Sorry, Vincent," the words spilled out of him. "Saw you - in that place; okay good, okay - BEAUTIFUL. Saw you in your chamber, but not you ... wasn't you. Bad ... WORSE than bad."

Vincent shook him gently. "Mouse ... what're you talking about?"

The young man dragged them back to Vincent's chamber where Father and half the inhabitants of the tunnels were waiting by now. As they entered, Father stood up and held out his arms to Vincent, who went over and hugged him.

"Vincent. Thank God you're all right. If anything had happened ..."

"But nothing DID, Father. You seemed to have had more excitement down here," he exclaimed, still puzzled.

"Mmm, so it seems," replied Father, turning to Mouse. "Now then, Mouse, perhaps you can tell us what's been going on?"

Mouse tried to explain about what had happened to him.

"You must've been dreaming," said Jamie, when he'd finished. "You must've fallen asleep and dreamed it all."

Mouse looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, tentatively, "Yes. Waved arm; Mouse slept ... dreamt." He shivered and Jamie put an arm around him.

"Who waved his arm?" asked Vincent.

"Don't know. Someone ... Mouse didn't like him; scared me."

As Mouse said this, Vincent remembered something. Something Narcissa had told him once. He decided not to mention it just then; he didn't want to frighten Mouse, or the children who had congregated round him, any more. He resolved to talk about it to Father, later.

Catherine had to get back Above, as she was due in work the next day, so Vincent walked her back to her basement entrance.

They held so tightly to each other, still sharing the delight and peace that had been theirs, that day. She knew he would not, could not, kiss her again. To ask it would be unfair, but she could still feel it; the touch of his soul rising to meet her own, even as his mouth touched so gently to hers.

She didn't want this indescribable peace ever to end, but hugging him even tighter for a moment, then letting him go, she found that she had the courage to leave him, that it strengthened her heart and sharing that feeling with her, as she knew he was, would make the parting-easier for him.

They really had no words that could better what was in their eyes and their hearts, so with one final hug and smiling, she turned and walked back through the basement and up to her apartment. Vincent watched her disappear beyond the shaft of light and then, slowly, still immersed in the golden, warm feeling that he got from her, went back to talk to Father.

* * *

"So, what do you think it was?"

"Father, I remember something that Narcissa once told me. She said there had once been a catholic priest who had sought refuge, solace, a place to be, in the caverns deep below us. That he had been a man tormented by dreams of truth and that he had fled Below to take what those dreams did to him, away from the people he loved and worked with, to keep them safe and to try to find peace with himself."

"Vincent ... what d'you mean? Dreams of truth?"

"Narcissa said that he had visions, terrible visions of things that were to happen and that he, unwittingly, somehow transmitted his visions to those around him."

"And how does Narcissa know all this?"

"She told me that she spoke with him; with his spirit."

"You mean ... he's dead? Are you suggesting that what Mouse saw was a ghost?"

"I'm not sure, Father. She was not sure. But I believed her. I believe this man exists, either alive ... or as a spirit. There have been times ... times when I have gone down to the dark river, when I have felt, strongly, the presence of another with me. Sometimes almost just over my shoulder. And when I look ..." He sighed. "It is so dark down there. Who is to say whether I really saw anything or not?"

Somewhere, deep in the nameless caverns below the catacombs, there seemed to be something ... something blacker than the shadows. It was quite still, as if it had always been there; there was an intense atmosphere of sadness about it, perhaps even a faint glinting of tears in the eyes ...

"He's waiting, Vincent; God help you ... he's waiting ...," it seemed to whisper, the words swallowed up by the thick dark.

And something which he saw in his mind seemed to create a sound that rolled around the cloying shadows ... a few words that slithered around the corners and angles of the rock walls as if looking for the way out.

"Soon ... Vincent ... SOOOON ..."

And it chuckled low in its throat.

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