

A Turn of the Page

by Zara Wilder

August, and in the great City of New York where Catherine made her home, daily weather conditions were finally cooling to tolerable temperatures. August, and the M. A. Chandler Foundation her mother had founded was preparing to send relief funds and supplies to the survivors of the Himalayan earthquake in Nepal. August, and tourism remained sluggish after July's beach closures protected residents and visitors alike from the discarded syringes and vials of blood that washed up on the city's shoreline.

August, and the citizenry continued to rumble over the riot in Tompkins Square Park earlier in the month. August, and the nation's economists kept predicting a recession in the wake of slackening growth statistics, although the promised recession kept failing to arrive. August, and the summer's hopes and fears kept percolating.

August, and August, and Congress had apologized at last to the tens of thousands of Japanese Americans and the hundreds of Alaskan Aleuts relocated to American internment camps during World War Two. August, and American and Soviet scientists were experimenting with nuclear blast measurement methods in Nevada—while protesters blocked the road into the test site. August, and August, and August. Late August had come to New York, August peering forward into September, and Catherine felt she was spending too much of her time shut up inside office buildings, conference rooms, and law libraries.

But in the world Below the city streets, the air was cool, the nights were calm, and the days were filled with pipesong. Catherine sat on Vincent's bed, feeling the magnitude of these contrasts. Vincent had pulled his parlor chair near to her, so she could share his special moment with the eight-month-old baby he held in his arms. Little Kate sat contentedly on Vincent's lap, exploring the collection of large wooden beads she held, her many shapes of varied sizes strung upon a heavy knotted cord.

Mouse, who sat in Vincent's big, square-backed chair, leaned forward, studying the beaded strand. "Mouse can make *colored* shapes for Kate," he commented. "Safe colors," he added quickly. "Dye from plants, not paints. Ruth can teach me."

"Yesterday, Lena explained to Mouse and the children what 'non-toxic' means," Vincent murmured for Catherine's benefit.

"I see," said Catherine.

Mouse looked up at her. "Lena read more baby books from Mary. How to keep babies safe." He thought for a moment, then said, "Lena reads books every day."

"Well, I don't think she's had much time to herself until this year," Catherine replied. "Not for reading. I'm glad she's getting the chance to enjoy books now."

"Ah-ah-ah," Kate chortled, as though in agreement. She shook her beads, producing a series of satisfying clacks.

Vincent watched the fair-haired child, almost completely absorbed in her presence. Catherine could

think of only one word for the peaceful attitude Vincent projected: adoration. His quiet feline face seemed aglow with wonder. His strong hands rested gentle fingers upon Kate's body, guarding her safety, bestowing love through his touch. Catherine found herself marveling all over again at Vincent's tenderness for children.

The old bittersweet longing stirred within her heart.

Vincent detached his gaze from Kate to meet Catherine's eyes. So. *Almost* completely absorbed in the baby—but still attentive to Catherine's mood. She gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile.

Kate waved her beads in Catherine's direction, stretching out her arms. “Ca!” she said.

Vincent asked the little girl, “Do you want to go to Catherine?”

In answer, Kate squirmed forward, clambering across Vincent's knees without letting go of her beads. “Ca!” she repeated.

“She knows you,” said Mouse.

Catherine's smile widened in reply to Kate's sunny grin. “She had better know me. She's named after me.” The fact still warmed Catherine to her toes whenever she thought of it.

Gently, Vincent lifted Kate up and passed her to Catherine. The baby felt warm and miniature in Catherine's grasp, the little body tough and delicate at the same time. Kate uttered a quick burble of baby laughter, delighted with the brief sensation of flight as she moved from one friend to another.

Catherine received the child. “Hello, Kate,” she said, caught up at once in those stunning blue eyes.

Kate patted Catherine on the nose.

“She likes noses best,” Mouse observed.

“Bab?” Kate asked, holding out her beads.

“Pretty beads,” Catherine said.

Kate dropped the strand onto Catherine's skirt and pushed herself away from Catherine's face. Catherine guided her down onto the bed, where the child began to examine the many fabric textures in Vincent's heavy pieced quilt. Her tiny fingertips rubbed a square of burnished green brocade, then the worn ridges of a gray corduroy trapezoid.

“Every little piece of the world is a new adventure,” Catherine said.

“Yes,” Vincent replied.

The three friends watched the baby navigate the quilt, taking on the stitched shapes one by one.

“Will Lena come back quick?” Mouse asked.

“Her reading group should continue for another half hour,” Vincent told him.

“Enough time maybe,” Mouse said, and rummaged inside his vest.

Catherine raised one eyebrow. “Enough time for what, Mouse?”

The teenaged boy pulled a battered rectangular packet from some hidden inner pocket. He held it out so Catherine could see what treasure he had brought with him into Vincent's chamber. “Storytime!” he announced with definite pride.

Catherine saw that the packet had once been a children's book. The cover was long gone, and the tattered paper signatures had been crudely hand-stitched at the center folds to keep the pages in the correct order. The page corners were worn soft and round. Old smudges of dried paste stabilized the many rips and tears in the paper.

“It looks like you really love this book,” Catherine said.

“Favorite,” Mouse confirmed. “When I was little, Vincent read it to me.”

Catherine glanced at Vincent. He noticed. “I loved this book, too, when I was a boy.” His eyes tipped upward at the corners as he smiled in his unique way at his young friend. “We've shared many favorite stories.”

“Want to share with Kate now,” said Mouse.

“Then show her your book,” Vincent suggested. “And you can read it to all of us, if you like.”

This was all the invitation Mouse needed. “Okay, good! Okay, fine!” he said. He got up and walked around Vincent to the end of the bed, where he sat down beside the little one. She watched him curiously.

“Mouse was little once,” he said to Kate. “Books? Stories?” He shrugged his shoulders. “Didn't know. Friends read to me. I listened. Learned to say the words. Learned to read. You can read too, when you grow up like me. Kate, look! It's a good book.”

He lifted the top page to show her the illustrated paper underneath. Kate reached out her hand. She patted at the paper. Mouse leaned close and turned the book so Kate and Catherine could see the pictures. Catherine casually offered Kate the string of beads, which could withstand infant onslaughts far better than Mouse's fragile storybook. Kate accepted her toy and gummed a fat oblong bead while Mouse turned to the first page of text.

“Starts this way,” Mouse said, and he began to read, pointing his finger to each word as he spoke.

“You can knit a kitten mittens and perhaps that cat would purr. You could fit a fox with socks that exactly matched his fur.”

Kate reached for the book again, this time to imitate Mouse. She swept her tiny hand across the page, and poked at the illustration. “Da!” she said.

“Fox!” Mouse answered. He went on to the next page.

Catherine glanced at Vincent. He wasn't looking at her, but at Mouse, and he seemed pleased with the reading. Mouse and the baby went through the book together, touching the clever line drawings and relishing the often garish colors. Catherine tried to view the pages through Kate's eyes. *What does she see?* Catherine wondered. *How much does a baby understand?*

“But never tease a weasel,” Mouse read out. *“Not even once or twice. The weasel will not like it and teasing isn't nice.”* As an aside to his listeners, he added. “Raccoons don't like it either.”

I suppose Mouse would be the one to know, Catherine thought, recalling the other inhabitant of the Mousehole: Arthur, Mouse's mischievous pet raccoon. Now she tried to imagine the rhyming book from Mouse's perspective, tried to imagine Mouse as a child, learning to speak, learning to read and write in Vincent's care.

She had once asked Vincent, “How do you teach language to an eight-year-old boy who has never known what words are?”

“With love and patience,” he had replied. “And you must first learn to listen to the language of action he has created for himself, and you must learn to understand all that he tells you when he is not speaking with words.”

They had been walking through an Upper Level tunnel, sharing the news of their worlds, musing upon the meanings of their lives. They passed through a hidden gate that Mouse and Vincent had designed together, a secret aperture in the wall that opened at the release of a corner pressure plate. When closed, the gate blended in so well with the surrounding stonework, it became invisible. Touching the welded frame inside the secret passage, Vincent told Catherine, “Mouse had to teach me many things before I could begin to teach him anything.”

“You taught each other,” Catherine said.

“Yes.”

Which is another quality that makes Vincent so remarkable, Catherine thought now. *His humility gives children the chance to teach him. No one is a “minor” or a “minority” to him. Each person is simply a human being, someone to know and love. He believes that everyone, of every age, has important things to say. And Vincent is very good at listening.*

Mouse turned a page in his book.

“But never tease a weasel. Now remember what I've said. It's more fun to please a weasel and be friends with him instead.”

Catherine smiled sheepishly at the top of Kate's head. She thought: *I should brush up on my own listening skills.* She had missed most of Mouse's reading while her thoughts wandered.

Mouse closed the book and leaned down toward Kate. “Friends instead!” he said to the child.

She bonked his nose with her beads.

“Hey!” Mouse said, startled. He rubbed his nose. “No hitting!”

“Abab?” Kate asked. She held out the beads to Mouse.

“A peace offering,” Catherine commented.

Mouse took the beads. Kate went after the book.

“Maybe she thinks it's a trade,” Mouse said, looking on.

Kate slowly pinched a bunch of pages at the edges as she had seen Mouse do, and she lifted the paper to reopen the book. “Da,” she said. “Da da ba.” She swept her free hand across the picture of frogs in sailing togs.

“Mouse,” Vincent murmured. “You are teaching Kate to read.”

The young man brightened. “Help teach?” he asked.

Vincent nodded.

Mouse hunched his shoulders, smiling again. “Not so hard, teaching. Harder making stuff.”

“Sometimes,” Vincent said.

Kate lost interest in Mouse's storybook. She pulled the beads out of his hand. She shook the strand, making the wooden pieces rattle.

Mouse cocked his head at the child, thoughtful. He turned to Catherine. “What's it like,” he asked, “to make a baby?”

Catherine refused to look at Vincent. “I don't know, Mouse,” she said. “I've never made one.”

“Don't want to?” asked Mouse.

Catherine also refused to sigh. “Not exactly. I don't think I've ever felt quite ready to become a mother. I guess I'm still deciding what I want.”

“You have to both want a baby, to make one,” Mouse said next, turning his inquiring face toward Vincent.

“True,” was all Vincent contributed.

Catherine finally looked over at him. His face was still calm, still content, but he now seemed a little sad. Perhaps he felt sorrow for her. For them.

They had first discussed the question of children months earlier, after Catherine followed her heart at last and discovered that her heart led her to Vincent—ever and only to Vincent. Between them, childbearing had always been a subject suffused in mystery—and negation. Vincent, she knew,

harbored no expectation of ever begetting his own children. Catherine remained unsure of what was possible for them, and what was not.

Vincent's understanding shone in his deep-set blue eyes. Catherine returned his gaze. And it happened then. The thing that kept happening more and more often, ever since their wedding day. All at once, she felt what *he* was feeling.

The intensity of his emotions always shocked her. His preternatural stillness and quiet way of speaking did not prepare even an invested observer for Vincent's astute awareness of the world, nor for the depth of his responses to the words and the feelings and the deeds of others. Catherine imagined it would be like this to dive beneath the mirroring surface of an ancient lake—and find down there a mythic underwater realm filled with liquid light and glimmering shadows, otherworldly music engulfing all her senses, the song growing sweeter and stranger the deeper she swam.

She tried to give names to the things she-he-they felt together through the miraculous bond they shared. Acceptance, yes, for this was a dream Vincent had relinquished and released long, long ago. A little uncertainty directed toward Catherine in the form of a silent question. A faint echo of sympathetic grief answered her craving for family. Above all: love for the three beloveds visiting Vincent's chamber today. Feeling this ultimate connectedness, Catherine realized that through Vincent, she could sense everyone in the room.

How strange. How amazing.

Little Kate brought all the warmth and beauty of morning sunlight to Vincent's heart. Mouse gave off a surprisingly subtle aura of energetic ingenuity. Catherine brought rapture and solace in equal measure. Altogether, their three presences enfolded Vincent in a circle of love. He felt for himself a golden confidence in their regard for him, and complete joy in their togetherness. And peace—a sense of peace so vast it surpassed every euphoria Catherine had ever felt for herself. Peace, and—Catherine searched for the right word—gratitude? Perhaps. But “gratitude” seemed too simple, too narrow, a term for this generous flow of melody that immersed her spirit in Vincent's hospitable frame of mind. He welcomed all that life offered him. He welcomed her into himself.

Catherine's heart answered acceptance with acceptance, love with love, thanksgiving with thanksgiving.

Now she felt Vincent's devotion deliberately flood their bond like a moon-spiced tide. His gift to her. Ardent. Eternal. *I love you* sang in the currents they created for each other, within each other. *I love you, my beauty, my beloved, my own...*

Their souls touched. Their selves intertwined.

Catherine's happiness became complete. She could imagine no greater fulfillment. No greater bounty.

Too soon, the connection ebbed. As it always did. Catherine longed to dive deeper into him, but some part of her could not keep itself submerged any longer. Her psyche brought her up for air and she returned to herself, a woman refreshed by impassioned, boundless light.

My life, my world, my everything...

Vincent became a solitary mirror again, separated from Catherine's consciousness of him. His thoughts and feelings were plain on his face for anyone to read who knew how. But the utter intimacy of those several heartbeats had concluded. He closed his eyes, savoring their abrupt spiritual contact in the same way he always savored their more physical embraces.

Catherine loved watching him try to breathe during these moments of afterglow. She felt a little awed to know that she alone had the power to generate such immense waves of passion within the man she loved. On exactly one occasion thus far, she had caught a brief taste of Vincent's internal ecstasy during such a pause-for-breath—like a quavering empathic aftershock in the wake of the tsunami—and sharing it with him through their connection had amplified the experience beyond all thinking, beyond all dreaming. Nothing—nothing—else in their lives compared. Neither dreamer knew any words to match their reality.

Sometimes, we have no need for words, Catherine thought. And then she began to wonder what it might be like for them if their bond ever opened in both directions while they made love. Oh, God...

Vincent sensed the thought. He opened his eyes. For a moment, Catherine saw expectant hunger therein. It made him appear all the more beautiful to her. It made her feel all the more loved, knowing that he desired her with all his heights, and with all his depths. So much of Vincent existed that only she had access to. And so much of herself Catherine now kept for him, exclusively. This was the nature of their union.

Mouse asked, “Do you want a baby, Vincent?”

Vincent turned to Mouse, blinking. Catherine sighed to herself. Pipecode rang along the pipe in Vincent's upper antechamber. Kate rattled her beads again. Vincent regarded Lena's baby girl. The child felt his gaze and looked up at him.

“We cannot always have everything we want, Mouse,” Vincent murmured.

Mouse considered this reply. “Can't have isn't the same as don't want,” he said. Idly, the boy turned his storybook on the bed, twisting it first one way, then the other. He asked a new question. “Vincent *can't* help make a baby?”

“Yes.”

Mouse opened his mouth in a round “O” of dismay. “Never heard that rule!” he said, indignant. “Who says Vincent can't make?”

“My body says so,” Vincent answered. “It's...” he hesitated, searching for words. “It's not something anyone can choose or not choose. Not a rule I must obey. It's the way I am. The way I was born. A man and a woman must fit together in a special way to conceive a child...”

“Know all about *that*,” Mouse interjected.

Vincent gave him a sober nod. “Good.”

“But Vincent doesn't fit?” Mouse asked.

Catherine bit the inside of her lip. Although Vincent maintained his eye contact with Mouse, Catherine was sure she saw self-satisfied amusement at her reaction creep into the set of Vincent's mouth. She also felt certain he meant for her to see the change in his expression. The rogue.

"I fit," Vincent told Mouse, his voice dry. "But I don't believe my body's cells can join with the cells of the woman I love to start a baby growing."

"Your cells are broken?" Mouse asked.

"No," Vincent said. "My cells are different."

Mouse scratched his sandy brown hair. "So Father can't fix them."

"No."

Kate offered her beads to Mouse. "Bab?" she said.

Mouse took the beads. Kate went back to examining Vincent's quilt.

"Mouse is different too, maybe," Mouse said thoughtfully, pondering the string of beads in his hand.

"Different?" Vincent asked. "How?"

Mouse hunched his shoulders. "Planning, talking? Finding, taking? Making? I'm not the same as everyone else."

Catherine spoke up. "You're innovative, Mouse. You have your own ideas. A different way of thinking, maybe, and of seeing the world. But that doesn't necessarily mean your body is different. You are much more similar to your friends than you are different from them."

Mouse looked at her. He sounded both curious and hopeful as he asked, "How can you tell?"

Catherine glanced at Vincent, who remained silent. Perhaps he wanted to hear her answer too. Besides, he was now watching over Kate as the child crawled to one of his cushions and began to tug at the decorative lacing. Catherine turned back to Mouse.

"Um, well," she said, hoping she was giving him a useful answer, "I just expect that a young person in good health, like you, will have no trouble fathering a child, when the time is right. I wouldn't worry."

Mouse thought about that. "Good health," he repeated. His face brightened. "Should ask Father! Have a check-up. Father will know for sure."

Catherine felt a little sting of remorse. She hadn't meant to dump this topic onto poor Father's plate. "Maybe you should just go have a talk with Father first," she suggested quickly. "About, well, your concerns."

Mouse set down the beads and went back to twisting his book around on the bed. "Maybe," he said. Then he shrugged. "Doesn't really matter yet. Have to find a love, first of all."

Catherine smiled at him. Mouse was really a very sweet boy, in his way.

“Already plenty of kids around to teach. Lots of friends. Babies?” He grinned. “Maybe later.”

“I think that’s a good attitude to have,” Catherine replied.

Privately, she thought, *I guess I’ve dodged the bullet on this one. And thank goodness.*

Why did these kinds of conversations have to feel so awkward? She wished she could handle this subject with Vincent’s calm frankness. She also wished she possessed Vincent’s patient rapport with Mouse. He never seemed uncomfortable when he listened to Mouse, and they spoke so easily together. His conversations with Mouse cultivated mutual honesty and respect, without any hint of condescension on Vincent’s part. Furthermore, Mouse did not seem to confuse Vincent, the way he often confused Catherine.

That is the advantage of raising a boy into adulthood, Catherine decided. A guardian and child who love each other will come to know one another very well.

But, then, Vincent also possessed that rare gift of true empathy. He related well to everyone. He seemed to instantly understand people. He was always eager to love and empower others.

Catherine sighed again. She must still be madly in love with him. All her thoughts about him were entirely complimentary.

She felt this made a nice change from certain regrettable moments in their history.

Kate had caught a fistful of cushion fringe in one little hand and was pulling hard. All at once, the cushion tumbled forward and landed upside down, revealing more patchwork on its backside. Kate released the fringe to poke at the new shapes she saw. Behind her, Mouse twisted his book too close to the edge of the bed. Pages fluttering, the battered packet dropped to the floor. Kate turned to look, her blue eyes wide with interest.

Mouse reached down to retrieve his book. As his weight shifted the angle of the mattress, the string of beads also slid with a soft rattling bump to the floor. Kate abandoned the cushion and made a beeline for the edge of the bed, crawling at top speed. Catherine had not imagined the girl could move so fast.

“Mouse,” she warned. “Watch out for the baby!”

But she shouldn’t have worried. The second Kate put one hand out into empty space, Vincent was there. He swooped her up, lifting her high above his head then lowering her slowly toward his face. Kate’s astonished laughter cascaded around them in peeling giggles. Vincent cuddled her close, smiling. The child pressed her hands flat upon Vincent’s nose. He kissed her wrists, which made her laugh again.

Then, “Eebah!” she shrieked, raising both her hands toward the stone ceiling.

“Up again?” Vincent asked her.

“Eeee!”

Vincent obliged. Kate laughed and squealed with the joy of flying. Catherine's heart flew with her.

"Someone sounds happy in here," said a voice from the chamber entrance.

Mouse and Catherine looked up. Lena stepped into the room, holding a small book in her crossed arms like a prized heirloom. She was very young, lovely, rosy-cheeked, blonde and blue-eyed like her daughter. She wore emerald green ribbons woven into her hair.

Kate looked over Vincent's shoulder. Total bliss dawned across her cherubic face. "Amma! Amma!"

"Katie!" Lena called, beaming. She tucked her book into a wide pocket in her skirt.

Vincent lifted Kate into Lena's outstretched arms. In that moment, mother and child became absorbed in one another. They exchanged their greetings in a language all their own. Kate pressed her cheek to Lena's. Lena hummed, caressing Kate's bright golden hair. Catherine felt a fresh twinge of envy.

Vincent looked at her. He said nothing. His gaze offered no comment. But Catherine knew that Vincent knew what she felt. He had sensed the sudden shadow pass across her heart. And Catherine felt ashamed. She looked away.

Mouse was showing Lena his storybook. "Kate is learning to read," he announced, happy with the prospect of the girl's burgeoning literacy. "Mouse helps."

"Thank you, Mouse," Lena replied.

He reached toward the floor for Kate's beads.

Vincent moved silently to Catherine's side. She felt his fingertips, warm on her chin. The gentle touch of thick skin, the familiar angling of his hand that protected her from his needle-sharp claws. Catherine raised her head.

"I understand," he whispered. He did not need to say anything more. His eyes loved her.

Catherine smiled at him uncertainly. She trusted him, and the truth of his understanding, but still she had to wonder: who had Vincent ever envied?

Lena looked around at her three friends. "Thank you for looking after Kate for me," she said to everyone.

"Thank you for sharing her. She's a joy," Vincent replied. He smiled at the baby wide enough to show the points of his teeth.

Kate waved her beads.

Lena smiled at Vincent, then Catherine, and turned to go, little Kate gurgling happily in her arms. Mouse snatched up his storybook and followed after.

"Did you have fun reading?" Mouse asked Lena as they went.

“Yes!” Lena patted her pocket. “Jane Austen wrote amazing stories.”

“What story today?”

“*Pride and Prejudice.*”

The three of them walked out into the stone corridor, their voices gradually fading into the gentle background sounds of Underground.

Left to themselves, Vincent and Catherine looked tenderly at each other.

“I’d never have guessed that Mouse was much of a reader,” Catherine said.

Vincent sat beside her on the bed. “He has always loved good stories.”

“I’ll bet.” Catherine laughed a little, shaking her head. “His train of thought today certainly took me by surprise.”

“Mouse is becoming a man,” Vincent said. “He has questions.”

Catherine searched his face. “You would make a wonderful father, Vincent.” She rested her hand upon his. “You already do.”

Vincent tilted his head, listening, Catherine knew, to more than just her words.

Catherine continued, “My life still feels so strange to me, Vincent. So much has changed. So much keeps changing.”

“And some things stay the same,” he murmured.

Catherine sighed. “At least I have a different perspective to work with now. It’s helping me to sift through the good and the bad, the constant and the temporary. I never realized until Dr. Grafton pointed it out to me yesterday, how I’ve made a habit of lifelong discontent.” She shook her head. “Even when I’m feeling good, a part of me is always watching for that ‘something more’ to tack on to the present moment. I can tell myself—out loud, even—that I have everything I’ve ever wanted...but there’s always that needy little hollow place inside.”

“Have you told Dr. Grafton about that hollow place?”

“Yes. He suggested...” Catherine paused, trying to recall her psychiatrist’s exact phrasing. “He thinks the hollowness might actually be my fear of losing all the good things in my life. The way I lost my mother, or the friends who were murdered by criminals in this city. And maybe this fear is so frightening to me, so real, that I sometimes sabotage my own happiness in order to end the suspense I feel about when and how I might lose that happiness. So I can hold on to the belief that I am in complete control of everything and everyone in my life. It sounds so crazy, but...”

“But perhaps he’s speaking the truth about your inmost self?” Vincent asked.

“He might be. I’m still thinking it through.”

Vincent clasped her hand.

“It’s just...I really would like to be the kind of person who doesn’t envy the love between a friend and her baby. I’d like to become mature enough to take responsibility for my flaws and fears, instead of going to war against them, or running away from all the things that make me feel helpless.”

She stared hard at Vincent’s quilt.

“Dr. Grafton says this is what it feels like to make progress.”

Vincent leaned close and lifted her hand to his lips. His kiss on the back of her hand was soft and warm. Catherine looked into his eyes. His love for her was one of those marvelous things that didn’t ever change.

“Whoever you are, Catherine, whoever you become, wherever you go, I will always love you. Know that I’m very proud of you. Growing and healing can be difficult. Yet you are growing. You are healing. For yourself. For us.”

“I’m trying,” she said.

“I’m growing with you,” he replied. “We’re neither of us alone anymore.”

Catherine smiled again. “Thank goodness for that.”

She leaned against him. Vincent wrapped his arm around her. *Peace*, Catherine thought. *We can share the peace of the Tunnels today and be satisfied.*

But for Catherine, satisfaction was always a complicated affair.

She mused aloud, “Sometimes I wonder what my life would be like if things had happened differently. If I hadn’t resigned my job at the DA’s office. If I had stopped seeing Dr. Grafton. If I hadn’t revived my mother’s foundation. If you and I had never journeyed together to see the Crystal Cavern and your Selva Oscura.” She fingered the satiny fur on his fingers. “Or if we had not married.”

“What do you see when you look in that direction of never-was?” Vincent asked.

Catherine gazed into the abyss of unwholesome paths not taken. “Emptiness. Violence. Vengeance. Pain. Sorrow. And fear. More fear than I could ever overcome.” She shuddered. “Sometimes I glimpse the fate Narcissa warned me about, all those months ago.”

“Death.”

“Yes,” Catherine whispered, considering the dire mess her long overdue Topside therapy was untangling in her heart and mind. “God, I took so many risks. So many chances. With my life. With your life. With our future. With many people’s futures...”

“But the greatest risk of all is the one you are taking now. With all of us. With me.”

Catherine sat up and looked directly into Vincent's beloved face. "This is the better way. The best way."

"You are brave." His eyes seemed darker now. With conviction? With concern? With doubt? Catherine wasn't quite sure.

"I regret nothing, Vincent."

But Vincent knew her heart too well.

"Nothing?" he asked gently.

She gave him a rueful smile. "Well, I suppose we can always talk about that *one* thing some more."

He named their unspoken bone of contention. "A child. Our child."

Catherine nodded slowly.

Now it was Vincent who sighed, wistfully Catherine thought. He said. "A baby born of our love would be...a miracle."

Catherine remembered the lithe weight of Kate in her arms, the sound of infant laughter in her ears. She remembered the Christmas miracle of the child's birth and the succor of immediate acceptance that Lena had found among the Tunnelfolk.

If only. If only...

"I'm learning to believe in miracles," she told Vincent.

"So am I," he replied.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "You already believe in miracles."

"True. But faith always loves new challenges. New dreams. There are many things we have never yet dared to dream together, as one."

"This would be a new dream for us to share."

"We've begun to learn how to be married to each other. Surely we're also capable of learning how to become parents, someday. Somehow. Perhaps in a way we do not now anticipate."

Like everything else about our relationship, Catherine thought. There was definitely no way for me to anticipate any of what has come to pass. And yet: here we are.

"So many dreams have come true for us already," Vincent reflected. "If what we have right now is everything that we *can* share forever, I call myself blessed."

That was Vincent. Gratitude in the flesh. Catherine's very own personal miracle, in and of himself.

“You know I want to keep living this dream with you, always,” she said. “But maybe I’m incurably greedy. Because I want our dream to increase. Even now, I find myself wanting...that something more. I can’t seem to let go of this last desire from my old life. I wanted children. So much.”

“I know.”

She squeezed his hand. “But you told Mouse the truth today. We cannot always have what we want.”

Vincent considered her words for a moment. Then he said, “Perhaps your desire can lead you toward hope, instead of greed or envy or sadness. Because our dream *is* growing. Even now it is expanding into unexpected shapes and dimensions. It *must* grow. *We* must. Things change. Dreams change. And sometimes...miracles undreamed of arrive in the midst of these changes.”

Quiet hope surged anew. “That is the way of life, isn’t it?” Catherine asked.

“Our life, anyway. Yes.”

She smiled at him. “Fair enough.”

He returned the smile, eyes glittering. “So many possibilities wait for us, Catherine. Just around the corner. Like the turning of a page.”

“A page in a storybook, or a calendar,” she replied.

“Our story. Our history. Who knows what we might discover?”

Who knows? Catherine repeated silently to herself. She caressed his cheek. Vincent never ceased to surprise her with his open-heartedness. It was one of many qualities she hoped she’d learn from him sooner rather than later. Now that she was his wife.

Catherine let everything else go. Her day at home Below was wonderful. Perfect. Magical.

“You are my happy ending, Vincent,” she said, floating once more into eternal blue.

“I’d rather be your beginning,” he murmured. “Your once-upon-a-time.”

“Well, you’re that too.”

“Good.” Now he bent his head to kiss the corner of her mouth. “For you are my world,” he whispered.

“Shall we go exploring?” she asked.

“Please.”

They sank down into the embrace of their lazy August afternoon, August peering forward into September, and into their many months and seasons of life beyond the turn of the page.