

Country of the Heart

by Angie

*The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.
- Willa Cather*

Catherine was reading to Vincent in his chamber. Somehow, despite their having a lovely den in the brownstone, it had become a habit to relax on his big bed in front of the beautiful fan window. Candlelight only improved the mood.

“ ‘Every man has a map in his heart of his country - and that heart will never allow you to forget this country.’ ”

Through the corner of her eye, Catherine saw Vincent's head rise, as if he scented something. She continued reading, glad he found the book as interesting as she did.

“ ‘I told him that in Botswana we did not have the green hills that he had in his place, nor the sea, but we had the Kalahari and land that stretched farther than one could imagine. I told him that if a man is born in a dry place, then although he may dream of rain, he does not want too much, and he will not mind the sun that beats down and down.’ ”

Vincent made a small noise. Catherine stopped reading and looked at him.

They had decided to read to each other from books they discovered. Catherine had chosen *“The #1 Ladies Detective Agency”*, a publisher's advance copy Jenny had given her. After a reading a couple of paragraphs, she decided she had to experience it for the first time with Vincent.

He turned to look at her now, an expression on his face that she could only describe as amazed.

“Tell me!” she requested softly, finally, when it seemed he would not explain.

“Catherine, all my life I have lived below, the only country I know. Yet I have never thought of it as mine, or felt that it was in my heart, or that it made me what I am. It has always seemed ... something else.”

Catherine's brow furrowed. She was not sure she understood.

“Your world is fantastic, Vincent. You showed me wonders I could never have imagined.”

“I showed you the special places, as one does with visitors. The Chamber of the Falls, the winding stair, the Chamber of the Winds exist, but they are unique, like the Kalahari. My world is mostly stone and darkness. I have regarded it as a prison, a hiding place at best ... and during the bad times, a tomb. I felt trapped, confined.

After I found you, I saw your world and experienced it with you. But, Catherine, I was a prisoner seeing the sky through a tiny window far above. I knew I would never be able to see that world as you can.”

Catherine nodded. “And now?”

“I have seen daylight, stood in it, basked in sunlight, thanks to you. But I realize, now, that my heart truly lives below, not in your world. The tunnels are my home, no matter how much I enjoy the brownstone and its garden. When I leave the tunnels, they pull at me - subtly, but undeniably.”

“And although you love the sunshine, you would not want too much of it.”

“The darkness is my friend, the stone my shield, so to speak. They protect me. But it is also where my family is. An Italian revolutionary, Guiseppe Mazzini, said ‘*family is the country of the heart*’.”

“Well, then, Vincent, you are very lucky. You have a country of the heart, the world below, and also a family in that same place. Not many people can claim that. People move far away from where they were born, and families become scattered.”

“Yes. I had never considered that. All those years I yearned for something ... more ... and the truth was beneath my feet. Then you came into my life. I left my world more often and experienced freedom, and love, on your balcony. Yet the tunnels were still there, drawing me back, although I did not realize it. I always blamed the sun for ending our liaisons.”

“Vincent, very few people appreciate what they have. You have always been aware of your differences. They define your life. Your world is unique. It was built on family, on love, on knowledge and understanding. These things transcend the place. No matter what happened, your heart knew where it was at home.”

Catherine turned the book over on the bed and turned to him. She reached out to hug him and he met her half way. They were silent for long moments, their bond humming with their love.

When Catherine pulled herself away slightly, she spoke softly.

“I love New York, but I don’t think I had ever appreciated it until that Halloween night you showed it to me, and then we sat and watched the sun rise over the Brooklyn Bridge.”

Vincent sighed into her hair. His voice was deep and resonant.

“That night changed me too, Catherine. I had never considered myself part of this city until then. I had witnessed the pain and suffering of its people, but never its beauty. I knew it was there, of course, but it was remote, something I knew only vicariously. I could not visit the places I showed you on Halloween any other night of the year.”

“The country of *my* heart is wherever you are, Vincent. I have never known anyone as serene, as centred, as you are. Like Precious in this book, you knew where home was, even if you did not acknowledge it. That’s a gift beyond price.”

Vincent looked at her and gathered her hands in his. His eyes shone with love.

“You are the gift beyond price, Catherine. My home is what is it - but you have brought my soul into the light and given me ... everything. My world may have made me what I am, but it could not show me myself. It took you to do that.”

“As you awakened me, and made me what I am, Vincent. Perhaps seeing our worlds through other eyes awakened the country in our hearts.”

He bent down and planted a long kiss on her lips. She sighed happily when they parted at last. She looked over at the book, gratefully. She loved these deep discussions with Vincent.

“Africa is the country of the heart - someone said that. I think there is some of it in all of us, Catherine. It is where human life began. It resonates deeply - the riverbed, the acacia trees, and the Kalahari. Vincent fell silent, then, his face serene.

“Shall I continue?” she asked at last.

“Please. That book is ... extraordinary.”

He sat back against the pillows and closed his eyes. Catherine continued reading, a new love for it and him - and both their countries - filling her heart.

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