

Home

by Angie

'Where we love is home. Home that our feet may leave, but not our hearts.'
- Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

It had become a tradition that Vincent would read a book to Catherine on special occasions. This year, because it was 35 years since they'd met, he had decided to read from a very special set of books, that had been a tunnel project for most of the almost 70 years the community had existed.

There was a story behind the books, of course. Books came to the tunnels from various helpers, and were sorted and shelved to a rough organization, one that Father had insisted upon. Among them were hardcover volumes with blank pages, journals ready to be written in. Vincent himself had availed himself of that stack on many occasions, once he began to write his own, but some had found another purpose.

The first such book to be introduced to the tunnels had been placed by Mary, when Vincent and Devin were young. She had put it on a table near a chair in Father's library, and embroidered a bookmark for it, with the simple words, *'Home and Friends'*. She announced that this book was available for anyone to write their thoughts, hopes, thanks, and observations. The writer did not have to identify themselves, but she did ask that they use their best handwriting, so it could be read later, perhaps much later, whenever someone chose to - if they chose to.

There were now several volumes, but Vincent had chosen to read from the very first this time. Mary had numbered them, since the entries were usually not dated. He and Catherine were sitting in front of the fireplace in their brownstone, a place for reading and reminiscing. The book was perfect for both.

Catherine knew of the project, of course, but no one ever discussed what they wrote, or even revealed that they had. That was part of the charm - and it had come about as so much had in the tunnel community, almost by instinct. It just was. Some entries were anonymous, some were not, but for many, the writer could be determined from the context. Others were a puzzle - but not an insoluble one.

They snuggled down into the antique high-backed, nubbly green, comfortable loveseat they had put before the fire, a place of many memories in its own right.

Catherine sighed. She was looking forward to this. She had never read any of the volumes, she told him quietly, although she admitted she had added an entry here and there. She had always loved hearing about the early days of the community, and of Vincent of course, and what better way than through the words of its residents?

Vincent looked at her and smiled. He had never read any of the volumes either, he confessed. It made him wonder. Had anyone? Father perhaps, and Mary. No one knew, or would say so. Secrecy, and anonymity was key, just a continuation of the life they had made for themselves in the tunnels.

He opened the book and began to read. Mary herself had put in the first entry, a quote that explained why she had give the book its title. Vincent recognized her writing.

'Home is the dearest spot on earth, and it should be the centre, but not the boundary, of the affections. - Mary Baker Eddy'

What followed were several writers thanking Father for creating the tunnel community and welcoming them. The writers were all dead now, but Vincent liked to think they watched over the community they had made, and were happy. He could see their faces, the long gone, and the more recent, and it made him pause a moment in reflection.

When he focused on the journal again, he chuckled. Devin, being precocious, had written one of the first general entries. He read it aloud.

"Father has a bag of horehound sweets in his desk drawer. They're awful!"

Catherine laughed. "We used to go to the seaside every summer to visit my grandmother, and there was a candy shop there on the main street, an old style one with lots of big glass jars of candy and bins of boxes of popcorn, candy cigarettes and such. It was heaven. My father always bought a paper bag of horehound candy. I never liked them, either, but maybe it's an acquired taste."

She looked up at him and smiled. "Did you know about Father's stash?"

"No. I would never have looked in his desk drawer like that." Vincent remembered when he'd had to look for some hint about why Father had gone above, when he had disappeared. His desperation had made him very uncomfortable - and unusually messy. Catherine's voice brought him back to the present.

"I'll have to buy some so we can try them."

"Hm?" He cast his mind back to what they had been discussing. Oh yes, the horehound candy. "Yes, that would be fine, Catherine. Shall I read more?"

"Please."

Vincent continued reading, then recognized one of his own comments, one he had forgotten about.

"When it's gloomy above the great waterfall, it looks like mercury and strange mists seem to rise from it, like ghostly spirits." - Vincent

Catherine sighed. Her Vincent had been an observant boy, even then. It pleased her to know that he had found pleasure in many of the same things he did now.

Vincent paused and stiffened a little and Catherine looked at him.

"What?" she asked.

Vincent cleared his throat and read out an entry, written in a tight, but neat hand, one he did not recognize, but whose author he now suspected he knew - only too well.

"Men of ill judgment oft ignore the good that lies within their hands, until they have lost it."
— Sophocles

Below this was another entry, in a hand he recognized as Father's.

"All men make mistakes, but a good man yields when he knows his course is wrong, and repairs the evil. The only crime is pride." - Sophocles

"Paracelsus," Vincent whispered. "And Father."

"Father knew," Catherine stated bluntly. "But he would have been familiar with John's writing."

Vincent looked at her and nodded. "We know Paracelsus watched us, that he visited at night, sometimes. There were signs - a chess piece moved in Father's library, a book left on a table

- 'Antigone' by Sophocles was one. I think I understand that now."

"So this is proof," Catherine whispered with a shudder.

Vincent nodded. "Father never mentioned it, but he obviously knew, since he answered. Those two had a sense of each other."

"Yet Father didn't warn you about him until much later. When you came to rescue me."

"I think he wanted me to make my own conclusions. John Pater was an unpleasant memory, but he believed us safe - until he abducted you. I think Father underestimated the hatred Paracelsus held for him."

Catherine sighed. That unwilling journey had been traumatic, but the return had been ... quite the opposite. She fingered the crystal about her neck, remembering, then forced herself back to the present.

Vincent had a faraway look in his eyes too, remembering Jamie, Mouse, and so many others who had seen he, Pascal and Winslow off on that fateful journey.

"Please keep reading."

Catherine broke into his woolgathering, so he continued, finding more remarks from others, some of which indicated they had read the entries before theirs. But of course they would, if only not to duplicate what someone else had said. He had always assumed his entries would be unique - more observations than anything else.

The accepted secrecy of the book seemed to make it something no one would discuss. Secrecy - perhaps it had been a good thing, perhaps not. Had anyone revealed something that might have helped, had it been known at the time? He suspected Father monitored the entries. He would have felt obliged to. But that had never deterred him, if he had even considered it. He had written in this journal long before he had started his own, after Lisa had left. Father had suggested it - and he continued to do so, even now.

He thought of another quotation from the Greek playwright, and whispered it. *"I am free! for I have in me the strength of truth."*

"Yes," whispered Catherine, "you do, Vincent. I think you all have here in this world."

Vincent sighed and continued to read from the book. He read out entries from so many that had now gone, for not all could find their home in the tunnels, but all had remained helpers and friends. He had forgotten some of them and it was wonderful to hear their voices, from so far away, again, like an echo, precious. He saw them in his mind's eye, remembered the last time he had seen Sebastian, Elizabeth, and Charles ... and others who had gone above to live a different life, leaving him behind - Laura, especially. They would be in later volumes, if at all.

The memories seemed to build up, almost stifling him, affecting both his voice and his ability to read. Memories crowded his mind. Eventually, he felt he had to stop and he did not want to spoil their upcoming 35th Anniversary celebration. He closed the book and looked at Catherine.

She nodded her understanding. Vincent had been reading more slowly and she knew memories could be ... fraught. Better not to overdo it.

"There is another quote of Sophocles I think is appropriate," he commented.

"One word

Frees us of all the weight and pain of life:

That word is love."

"Yes," Catherine agreed and moved to plant a kiss on his unique lips. He returned it with interest.

Then they celebrated their anniversary in a way that pleased them both, not least because Vincent knew how close he had come to never knowing the pleasure of physical love. Ironically, he thought later, Paracelsus had made that step imperative.

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