

# The Difference

by Angie

*'Who dares to teach, must never cease to learn'*  
- motto composed for Kean College, New Jersey

It had been a particularly difficult week for Vincent. Several of his best students had been accepted for higher education in the City and were leaving to stay with Helpers. He knew they had to leave, to be more than they could be in the tunnels, but it was hard to see them go, knowing that they were going to a world he would never experience.

He was morosely regarding the pile of textbooks that had grown with their departure, when Father walked into his chamber. He could guess what Vincent was thinking by his posture. Without preamble, he spoke softly as he approached where Vincent sat in his chair.

"You should be proud, Vincent. These young men and women will go far in the world above."

Vincent sighed. "Father, I am like a Catholic priest, who if he knows anything about sex and marriage, shouldn't. I have never been in the world above for more than a few minutes in daylight. I have never bought a bus ticket, groceries, rented an apartment, visited a library, talked to a policeman."

Father pulled up a chair and sat next to Vincent.

"Vincent, that's not the way to look at this. Anyone can do those things. You have given them much more. You've taught them something far more important - how to live in that world, to think, reason, and make decisions. They have a comprehensive, broad education - far more, I think, than most students get in that world now. They are all broad-minded and fair, two qualities in dire need up there. And they can always come back home. For this is still their home, no matter where they go."

"This 'hole in the ground'," Vincent quoted, remembering Devin's first visit.

Father laughed. "Devin also came home, Vincent. He couldn't stay away, if only to know if we still existed. And what he learned here stood him in good stead. He adapted, even at the young age he left us. He's had an amazing life. He wasn't ignorant, just untried."

"Yes," was all Vincent could think of to say. He looked down at his hands. They were what he saw every day, always alien, yet his.

There were a dearth of English words to describe someone like himself, and they were all derogatory ... monster, freak, beast. He was none of those things, any more than the Sasquatch or vampire (if they existed). They were simply not human. His senses were better, his strength many times that of an average human, yet the first reaction to him was always fear, often followed by loathing. Why?

Father could guess what Vincent was thinking now too. After all, he'd seen it often. It was his turn to sigh.

"Vincent, what you are is special. And that too they take with them above. They will never regard anyone they meet with disgust because of appearance. They have known you, and you have proven to them, over and over, that this isn't important. It's what's in the heart that

makes a person what they are. It is all that matters in the end."

Vincent looked over at Father, who had left the world above for entirely different reasons, yet did not seem to want to renew acquaintance with it, not in over three decades. He had once admitted he missed certain colours - yet he didn't even go above to walk in the Park.

"You are special too, Father. I doubt anyone above could understand you."

Father laughed. "You are probably right. They found an old baseball game ticket in my suit pocket when I was arrested - in a suit that was just as old, and it puzzled them. I'm a relic, not even with the excuse of being forced to be one. I love my life here."

Vincent sighed again. Why did he want what he could not have? Father was content. He had Catherine to help him know the world above, because of what Father called his gift, his empathetic connection to her.

"Why do I want what I cannot have?" Vincent asked, just to voice his thoughts. There really wasn't an answer.

"Why shouldn't you?" Father retorted. "You're an intelligent man and want to see and know what is beyond these tunnels. That you cannot just makes them all that more attractive. Yet, if you had to live up there, Vincent, you wouldn't be happy. Walking in daylight would be nice, but you would also have to endure the noise, the pollution, the crowds, the diseases, and the ignorance and uncaring of those above to all of these things – and each other. They have to live there, Vincent. You do not."

"And that is the difference between me and them," Vincent agreed, reluctantly.

"If they knew this world existed, they would be here in droves," Father remarked. "We have what many of them dream about - a real world that cares, that works for itself and its people, and yet can still produce excellent scholars. This is why we must not allow people to know we exist. And also why you are safe here."

"Yes, I am indeed lucky," Vincent said softly, still a little bitterly.

"And you have Catherine," Father reminded him. "She will give you everything she can, that you are willing to accept. You know that."

"Yes. I am sometimes reluctant to let her, but she needs to do it. I know that too."

"Just as some of our students need to do more, to live outside of our world. Their need is why we make sure they are ready for it. You do that, Vincent. It is not a small thing, to be able to educate to a level acceptable to colleges above. Take heart in that. We are helping change life up there in small ways, with every student who goes above. They take you with them. They will never forget."

"Will I know what they do? Of course not, not really. But they will do what they must."

"As do we all, Vincent. '*Bis dqat qui cito dat*' (he who gives without hesitation, gives twice as much). That's all life can expect of us."

"*Those who can, do, those who can't teach*," Vincent retorted, but he was smiling now.

"That rather rusty - and inaccurate - statement has never been so misused, Vincent. You do a great deal, for all of us. Without you, this community would be much less."

"Thank you, Father."

"You're welcome, Vincent. That's my role - to give perspective. There is no higher calling."

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