

# IN ANOTHER COUNTRY

*by Nan Dibble*

*(from PHOENIX ONE)*

*The incident this story derives from is one invented by Nan Dibble for the Trilogy novelization Beyond Words, Beyond Silence: a continuation of the scene in "What Rough Beast" in which Vincent invites Catherine to a concert, Below, where he assures her, regarding Spirko's investigation, "We will not let this defeat us."*

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"You did **what?**" Diana jerked upright in bed, staring at Vincent incredulously. And then wished she'd bitten her tongue or at least muzzled herself somehow, because his reaction made plain that he didn't have a clue what'd sparked her indignation.

"I laid my head. In Catherine's lap," he repeated, as mildly as before. But this time, he went on, "And was happier than I'd ever remembered being. Up until that time," he added diplomatically.

But Diana just kept staring at him. "And you **did** it?"

"Of course. She wished me to." As if that were all the explanation needed. Just as it was all the justification ever needed. For him. For anything.

If Catherine had wanted a thing, that thing she must have. If it was in Vincent's power to give it, do it, he did. Period. Diana wanted to throw up.

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Like most major disasters, the dispute had started harmlessly enough.

For afters, some people smoked; Vincent told stories. Which was okay, because Diana liked listening to stories. Especially his stories. Especially curled into a warm sensual tangle, no self-consciousness, languidly waiting without impatience for afters to turn back into before, in the comfortable inevitabilities of lovemaking.

The stories might be about anything: he had few reservations from her now. So it wasn't unusual for

him to loop back to something involving Catherine, because that was so much a part of all his thinking, all his feeling. So fundamental to who he was.

To leave Catherine out would have been as untruthful as leaving Father out, or Jacob. Such a silence would have been unendurable.

But as it happened, there had never been such a silence between them. He'd always spoken, quite openly and even bluntly, of Catherine to Diana - right from the first, when the pain had still been fresh and raw. And Diana had been glad of it, even though his unhealed grief for another woman had seared Diana with jealousy, even then. Because she loved him, even then. Yet she'd been glad, because what he said was the truth, however painful to either of them; because he didn't mean to pain her, wasn't even aware that he did, then, at the first; and because he'd been willing to share his truths with her. She'd damn well take whatever of him she could get.

But she'd been smart enough then to keep her mouth shut. Make no overt comparisons. Never criticize or question.

But that had been different: he'd never told her anything like this before. And they'd been different. She wasn't guarded with him either anymore, wasn't continually editing herself to avoid bumping his scars. Which lack of caution had gotten her into trouble this time. She hadn't thought, only felt. And blurted.

He was looking at her now, with no particular expression. Not angry - it took a hell of a lot to make him mad, or at least admit to it - and certainly not defensive. But silent. Waiting for her to say whatever she meant to say, whatever was seething within her.

Which very well might be inexcusable. It came to her, with dreadful cold, that she could even lose him over this. Things said couldn't be unsaid; and some things could be unforgivable, even between people who loved each other. Even if the things were true. Maybe especially if they were true.

Carefully, consciously, she'd never demanded of Vincent that he make a choice between herself and Catherine. Partly because she didn't have to: Catherine was dead and gone, and Diana was very much alive, and here. Partly also because you could never win a fight against the dead: the dead fought dirty. If you took a poke at them, so totally and obviously unable to defend themselves, you'd already lost in the only ring that mattered, the hearts of those who'd loved them. And loved them still, and wouldn't tolerate any kind of slam against them, even if they'd royally deserved it. Fairness or right had nothing to do with it: strictly a gut issue and a gut response. Wisely, Diana had always refused to start any fight like that, knowing she'd lose.

Until now.

Opening her mouth had been dumb. But she hadn't been able to help it.

Plainly, the best thing would be to shut the subject off, shut it down, as fast and as gracefully as she

could.

"Yeah," she said feebly, insincerely, with Vincent's quiet eyes on her. "Well, I guess that's one of those things, you had to be there. To appreciate something like that. To understand ..... Anyhow, what's Mouse been doing?"

That, she figured was safe: there was always a story to be spun out of Mouse's misadventures. She rolled over on her side, trying to simply listen, then trying to pretend she was listening, then trying to pretend the bad taste of his revelation hadn't surged up again within her, like the aftermath of a bad meal. Acute heartburn. She tried to ignore it, figuring that, after the novelty wore off, she'd forget about it and be able to wrench her mind to something else.

But it didn't happen like that.

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Hard as she tried to suppress it, the heartburn lasted two days, three. Push it away and it'd bounce right back, commanding her attention. It felt like being captured by a case, when she couldn't think about anything else, do much of anything else, until she finally had it settled or it settled itself somehow. Was over, anyhow. Even Vincent knew enough to steer clear of her at such times: when she was on a case. Content himself with the edges and the betweens, making no fuss about it, not taking it personally because it wasn't, it was just how she was. Like loving an epileptic, maybe; or a medium; or somebody in the military. You just had to accept that sometimes, however much they loved you back, they couldn't **be** there. They'd be **away**. That was how things were.

A case would have been bad enough. But this awareness soured everything. Like a rage she could neither swallow down nor spit out. And it was only made worse by the fact that Vincent was being especially good about it, treating it almost precisely like a bout of flu. Showing up in her loft at noontime, with soup, to be sure she'd had something to eat. Coming, all three nights, to play checkers, or offer his back or chest to be leaned against while they watched tapes or, once, something propositing to be Championship Wrestling, which should have been funny and wasn't, because the sourness was still there. Acid indigestion.

His patient, undemanding solicitude only made everything worse.

On the fourth day she really **was** sick, with the after effects of a migraine that had seemed likely to take the top of her head off, clean as a chain-saw. When Vincent came, she was sitting at the table and propping her forehead with her fists. Waiting for it to get better. Waiting for something to change.

With no fuss, asking no permission, Vincent set about making tea. Presently placing a steaming mug and the sugarbowl nearby, he took his mug to an adjoining chair.

"Might it help to have your neck rubbed?"

Diana shook her head. The motion released her from stasis: she reached for the tea and slowly

spooned in sugar.

Having taken a meditative sip, still holding the cup before her face, she said abruptly, "I've tried. Truly. Told myself it's over and it's none of my business anyhow, and it'd be real dumb to pick a fight over something like that, something I can't win. I did try, babe. But none of it's been any good. It's eating me alive. Will you sit still and talk it out with me, and not get any more mad and disgusted than you can help? Because I'm not doing this for fun, or to score some kind of points, or anything like that. I'd like to leave it, but I can't. You know how that is?"

"I have known such times," Vincent drank tea, not hurrying, not delaying or dodging. "There have been occasions when you granted me formal permission to be angry with you. I now give you that same permission. I don't fear your anger. You must not either. We may learn from it. And what is between us can withstand the dire revelation that neither of us is perfect. Nor pretends to be."

"That's just great," said Diana grimly. "But that's not the point. What if it's not you I'm mad at? Or not mostly? What if I'm angry at Catherine?"

"That," Vincent admitted, "is more difficult. But we will face it, if we must." Thoughtfully, he went on, "The difficulty is that Catherine cannot be here to justify herself against your anger .... But we can manage. I will speak for Catherine. If that's necessary. I can do that. Catherine has no fear of your anger either."

Diana gave him a look. "What, have you taken up seances? Hanging around too much with Narcissa lately?"

His eyes smiled. Then grew quiet again and turned aside. "I speak to her .... still. Within. And her replies can still surprise me, take me aback. So I believe it is not merely wishing, or an echo. What I had of Catherine, I still have. And will never lose, I think. So I believe I may speak for her. As she would speak, if she could. So tell me, Diana: what is it, that so troubles you?"

"Right. Okay." Diana squinted hard, rubbed her eyes, then slowly pushed her hair back with two hands. "Let's see if I've got the basic scenario right: you and Catherine had been under a lot of pressure. That Spirko business. In the middle of it, not knowing what the hell you were up against, except that it was tearing you apart. Pretty nearly literally. And you decided to take in a concert, the way you did, under the concert shell. Take a break from the pressure. Something like that, so far?"

"In broad outline, yes. If detail is needed .... ?"

"I don't think so. That's just background. So all of a sudden, Catherine starts falling apart. Starts crying, wondering if you wish you'd never met her. Maybe wondering if she wishes she'd never gotten mixed up with you - that's generally the other side of that reaction. Right?"

Vincent offered no comment, only attentive listening. So Diana continued, "And then all of a sudden she's all over you. Guilt reaction. Or wanting reassurance, maybe. Something. And naturally, you

react. Respond. What the hell, you grope her a little. Who wouldn't? What the hell did you expect, coming into it strung tight as piano wire? What the hell did she expect? Nothing? That you were gonna let her paw you, weep all over your shirt, dump her raw emotions all over you, and you wouldn't say boo?"

She waited. Accepting that it was his turn, Vincent set his cup aside and folded his hands. "All you say is, in substance, true. Looking back, it was predictable. But I did not predict it. Or expect it. I don't know that I had any expectations then. I merely wished to comfort her. Be whatever I must be, do whatever I could, to do that."

"And you don't need comforting? You weren't supposed to have any needs? For reassurance? Or just to goddamn connect?"

"I tried to have none," Vincent admitted. "I have .... learned better, since. You have taught me better. Sought for me what I did not know I wanted; given to me what I could not take. Or thought I could not have, except by taking. So it seemed to me only 'finding', after all .... "

It pleased Diana to be able to recognize Mouse's distinction. It pleased her that Vincent knew he didn't need to explain it. And it pleased her more that unlike most people, Vincent hadn't braced himself to battle out every detail out of sheer defensive contrariness. He'd concede everything. Until they reached the sticking point: then he'd make up for it with every ounce of his very considerable stubbornness. He'd walk along, just fine and compliant, eleven inches of the way. But that twelfth inch, nobody and nothing could drag him across.

Vincent added, with a self-amused eye-smile. "I was younger then. That was in another country .... "

"Is that a quote?" Diana demanded suspiciously. "Is it poetry?"

"A digression, I suppose. What follows is, '*Besides, the wench is dead*'." His voice was even, unemphatic. Licking her finger, Diana scored him one, in the air, for unflinching fairness. He nodded solemn acceptance of the honor.

Getting back to the point, he said, "Should I assume that what troubles you is what you perceive as the inequality of .... needs, and of response? That Catherine felt free to act on her impulses, and I did not?"

She looked at him steadily. "I wish it was. Because you're right: You're past that. Mostly. And everybody's entitled to a little backsliding. Everybody needs a little bit of babying, now and again. And should get it. Without backchat. Soup. Tea, even. A back to lean on .... " She saluted him with her mug, then drank a big gulp. Except that she didn't particularly care for tea, it was pretty good. And the last sullen pounding of her migraine was finally letting up. Maybe she could think. Maybe make something out of this mess, after all.

"If not that, then what?"

"Okay. So you make what might loosely be called a pass. Catherine doesn't like it and freezes up, and you go into the predictable spin, wish you were dead, conclude Catherine will never even spit in your direction again, decide you're not fit to breathe the same air as normal people, and like that. Still accurate?"

They were getting closer to the sticking place, because he frowned and started drawing circles on the tabletop with the claw of his forefinger. "Not precisely. It wasn't .... the *pass*, as you call it. It was .... the failure of control. That I strongly wished one thing, and did another. Could not help but do another. And could not stop. The comprehensiveness of it. To lose the ability to choose is to lose not only will, but self." Regarding his hands, Vincent paused a thoughtful minute, then looked at her again, his face stern. "I fear it less, now. Less often. My range of choice is greater. But though it comes more rarely, such loss, when it comes, is as terrible to me as ever it was. Because in it, I am apt to injure whoever is closest. Within my reach, my range. That has not changed, Diana. That fewer things now call it forth gives me less anxiety, from day to day. But I dread it no less, and for no different reasons. For the potential for harm is the same as it ever was. I still am what I am. And what I was. And given Catherine's terrible and profound dread of ever again being overpowered, helpless .... suffering such a loss of control herself .... such violation .... and from one whom she'd trusted, above all .... men .... to not inflict it upon her ...."

Vincent got up then and paced a couple of turns. They were getting close. He said finally, "It wasn't the pass. It's what it meant. To both of us. Her dread of harm; and mine, of harming her. We had much the same fears, Catherine and I. Perhaps that may be part of what drew us together. One weakness supporting another, similar one. Which is its mirror image. You do not see such weakness ..... because you do not share it."

"What, you think I'm real keen on rejection? You think I like doing even a small grope and getting my hand smacked? Or my face?"

"It is a question of degree," Vincent responded in a tired voice. "As in that between a match and the sun."

"Or is it that I'm too stupid or insensitive to take in this grand stuff you shared with Catherine?" Diana demanded.

Vincent made himself sit down again. Fold his hands. "Is that what we were discussing, Diana? Your sensitivities?"

She scored him another one. Fair was fair. "Okay, scratch that. Sorry. One of my weaknesses is a real thin skin. I kind of think we got an overlap there, you and me. On that, at least."

"People are so various. And each of us grows toward the light of approval, of love, in ways we cannot anticipate. I never cease to be astonished by the abilities that others discover within themselves, if

they are encouraged to hope for them, believe in them, want them. And I am continually amazed by what I find others capable of evoking in me, potentials I'd never suspected. I said I was the same, and that is so; and also that I have changed - you have changed me. And that is true, as well. Who I was, Catherine's Vincent, you can never know. Nor can I, anymore. I can never be that again. It is as lost to me as my childhood. Whatever people may claim, that is where much of the grief lies. I have come to believe: we lose, not only the beloved other, but the self we became in loving them. And that loss is irrevocable. I will never be a mother's child. Or ever cease to be Jacob's father, while he lives. Catherine's Vincent is gone. You are most patient with me while I learn, we learn, what it may be to be Diana's Vincent."

"Are you ever your own goddamn Vincent? That's what I want to know. Is there anything beyond the knee-jerk reactions, bouncing off what you pick up from people, their expectations, reacting to this pressure or that? Past all the fuzzy edges and the overlap, is there a center? Is there really any **there** there? That's what I'm getting at. That's what I'm mad about!"

"Then take my hand," Vincent said, offering it across the curve of the table. "And we will explore the heart of this anger. And try to understand. And find healing, if we may."

Accepting the challenge, Diana felt her hand taken and claimed in a strong clasp she couldn't have pulled away from - like arm wrestling. A pledge that, no matter whose arm finally went down, nobody was going to let go until they'd fought it out to a decision. Diana nodded curtly in acknowledgment.

"Okay, so now we come to the nitty gritty. You do something perfectly normal, something damn near anybody would have done, given those circumstances. And get rejected. And figure it's all your fault. That's point one. No matter what Catherine does, she's right, you're wrong. I've heard it and heard it from you, up to **here**. And it's more than I can take anymore. You won't stand up for yourself, get mad for yourself, and somehow it's like I have to do it for you. Only you won't let me. And it just builds and builds."

Surprising her almost into falling out of her chair, Vincent said, "I accept that. Whoever injures us is relatively easy to forgive. But forgiving a person who has injured someone we love, that's harder. Sometimes impossible. I find it most difficult myself to find compassion for anyone whose actions have hurt someone I care for. I try, and attempt to help the one injured find understanding and forgiveness within himself or herself. If they can, I am able to have compassion on both. But if they cannot, my concern is all for the one wronged or injured. And then I do not forgive. Then I defend them from further hurt however I can and however I must. As you know," Vincent continued solemnly, "I have sometimes killed for this. Not in revenge or anger .... but to end the hurt there. To prevent further harm. A kind of cautery, to close the wound, make an end. I suspect you and I are much the same in this ...."

"Because I killed Gabriel," finished Diana bluntly.

Vincent nodded. "We have never spoken of this. Perhaps now is the time. Knowing you as I do, I

concluded you killed him not for the harm he'd done already, but to prevent the harm he would surely have done had you not acted. Am I mistaken?"

"Maybe .... a little of both. It's too easy to kid yourself about something like that. But he was bragging about how he'd get clear and come after you again. And Jacob. And I knew he would. There was just that one chance. So I stopped him. But .... it was still Catherine's gun."

"Yes .... As you say, it's tempting to believe well of oneself, to ascribe to ourselves the highest of motives. But ..... I am very glad I was spared the choice that faced you. For I know I could not then have made it well. Or in anything other than anger." Regarding her steadily, Vincent added, "You knew, I think. And reminded me of what was truly important: Jacob. If ever that action weighs on you or causes you doubt, know that it was a great graciousness, to me, that you faced him alone and then chose as you did."

His other hand closed around hers, a double clasp.

"Yeah, fine," Diana said roughly, "but that isn't the point now, is it?"

Deliberately, he took the extra hand away, went back to simple arm wrestling. "I believe it is a case in point. And related. But you're right: we were speaking of Catherine. It is true that Catherine's actions sometimes caused me great pain. But the joy outweighed the pain. A thousandfold. You must simply accept my word that this is so. And that whatever pain I suffered, she never meant to inflict. And so I never simply accepted it, or justified it at my own expense, but forgave it. Continually. Wholly. As you must do, if you can. Which you must. Because I do."

"That's all fine and high-minded, and I even agree with it. But that's not what I've been hearing from you all these months. What I've been hearing is the cult of Saint Catherine, who never did anything wrong, and what a total mess you were not to have done better. What I've been hearing isn't forgiveness, but guilt. Let's get off the grand abstractions and down to what lives and breathes and the two of you in that goddamn tunnel. When you pulled back from her, were you actually thinking and feeling that she was wrong but excusable, or that you were wrong and wished you were dead? The truth."

"I had lost control. That was wrong."

"You'd lost control and she hadn't?" Diana shot back heatedly.

"I ..... must be more vigilant. The result can be ....."

Diana thumped their joined hands on the table. "Now we're getting to it. The same rules don't apply to you as to everybody else. As to Catherine. You gotta be better, stronger, more perfect than anybody. And if you're not, if you fall one inch below that impossible, inhuman standard, you take the blame, not only for that, but for the cause and for whatever comes of it. Right or wrong?"

Nearly a smile. "Guilty." That word had layers, all of them deliberate.

"Yeah. So whose fault was it Catherine rejected your pass?"

"Mine. But don't you see, Diana .....

"No, I don't see. And what I particularly don't see is how she could turn around, after that, and offer you the consolation prize of giving you the honor of laying your head in her goddamn lap. No, not even offer, but **demand** that you do it: crawl back like a scolded pup, on any terms she cared to name, and she'd deign to pat your head, so long as you'd lie there and take it, like a good doggie, and not get uppity with her again, or walk the hell out on her offers and her demands like anybody with an ounce of pride would have done. Not only did she treat you like her goddamn guard dog, which is bad enough. But a lap dog, too! And what I can't take is that you did it! And were goddamn grateful.

**Grateful!"**

Trying to gesture, she wrenched their hands awkwardly off the table, then thumped them down again in double frustration, continuing, "Don't you have any self-respect at all? Is all this defending business only for other people? Aren't you worth defending? Even to yourself? That's what eats at me. How could you do it? And be **happy** about it? And not feel, even now, there was anything wrong with it? I'm ashamed for you. And mad at you. And if I'd been there, I'd have told Catherine what she could do with her lap nad everything attached to it! But I can't be there, so I'm telling you. And if you don't like it, you can, you can ....." Diana slumped, eyes downcast, head hanging. "Damn it. Damn it to hell, it just about makes me throw up, it hurts so bad. That she could do something like that to you, and that you'd let her. I can't get through it or past it. It's obscene."

There was a long silence. The hands didn't stir, so it didn't feel like a wrestling math anymore. Not even like a connection. They'd hit inch eleven: she'd dragged and shoved him as hard as she could, given it her best shot. Now he'd set his feet and come back at her with everything he had.

And when he did, it was from a direction she'd never have anticipated.

"You see me," Vincent said finally, softly, "as a man. And judge me by the same standards as you'd judge any man in similar circumstances. Making no allowances and no distinctions. I don't believe, Diana, you have the least awareness of what an honor that is to me. Or how very strange. I try to be that, for you. Because with you, it is possible. Diana's Vincent is a man. Different only as one man may differ from another. A matter of degree only, rather than one of kind. But your mind knows, if your heart does not, that I am not altogether a man. Yet instead of excluding me, you have extended your definition of what it is to be a man to include me. And so I am. To you. And only to you.

"Catherine's Vincent was also a man. But only because what was different was excluded. She didn't admit it. Her definition of humanity remained unchanged. And that definition clearly did not include ..... some of what I am. So I tried not to be that; I did not want to be that. And she tried not to see it, so as not to make me uncomfortable with myself: not to make obvious how widely I diverged from anything any usual definition could categorize as human ..... Did you know, Diana, that I am long accustomed to take any meals either alone or with Father, never in public if it's at all to be avoided?"

Diana frowned at him, reviewing stacks of pizzas consumed, shared careless meals fixed either by her or by him and as carelessly eaten. Frankly puzzled, she asked him, "Why?"

"Because people watch me. Even Below. Because I have fangs, Diana, that make eating certain foods something of an exhibition, however discreetly I attempt to handle the matter. That make drinking from small glasses flatly impossible. Because I must hold a cup with my whole hand because my finger won't go through the handle. Because the act of drinking at all is complicated by a cleft upper lip, which no drinking vessel is constructed to accommodate. Because in the act of eating, I am so plainly unhuman, that even those who have known me all my life cannot but notice and be startled by it. Or Curious. Or embarrassed for me. Or even by me. And yet in your home, I have eaten and drunk and had much pleasure in it. As you know. Because of you, being human includes all these things and it is in no way remarkable. Which is, perhaps, the most remarkable thing of all.

"And I feel it keenly, this broad definition of so clear and thoughtless a generosity ..... of which you are entirely and irredeemably unaware. You cannot know what this is to me. What a freedom. Our contexts are so different. I tell you now, but you will never see it. Because of who you are. It is a blindness that defines you. And defines me. And there will never be a time I will not feel how remarkable it is, how remarkable you are, and not love you for it.

"Catherine's was a different blindness. She saw in me only what was good and admirable. What I wished to be seen; wished to be. The best of me. There is a different generosity in that, but no less large than yours. For I wished above all things to be good and admirable to her. Because I loved her. And it seemed to me possible to be those things, with her love. And she also tried to protect and defend me ..... from that in myself which would have hurt and shamed us both. What was neither good nor admirable. The shadow cast by our love. We wished, she so fiercely wished us, to walk together in the sunlight. And so, after our fashion, we did. As long as we could. As long as it was possible. In spite of the dark's attempts to draw me back ..... My darkness that you embrace, finding it only a man's shadow, after all .....

"I don't know if I can convey it to you, but Catherine's insisting that I return to her, on terms of great and comfortable intimacy, was for her an act of immense faith and courage. She trusted me, and insisted that I know she did. And that trust was more precious to me than anything else in the world. It was a great joy to me, not to have lost it. To feel it reaffirmed through her loving touch. It said that our hope and our dream still lived. And there can be no greater happiness than that. That our dream, yours and mine, is a different dream does not make any less the dream I shared with Catherine. Of being wholly and acceptably human at last - a man. Of choosing love above all things. Above any compulsion of the blood and the senses. Seeking only to give, not take. Be only light. Give only light. That will seem strange to you, who have always shared freely all you had - and felt likewise free of all I could offer. To you, the issue does not exist. Nevertheless it was so. Therefore there was no shame in what we did, Diana. And nothing to be either forgiven or blamed. In all my life, no woman had ever invited me to lay my head in her lap. And I fear I cannot convey to you what a happiness it was to do so. A life's dream, fulfilled. If you cannot see it, from your very different perspective, I can only ask

you to believe that it was true for me, at that time."

Diana sat thinking for a long, unregarded while. Eventually, she roused and looked up, considering his face, that was to her simply a man's face, and his, both together. She considered the planes and the textures of it, that spoke to her of strength and maturity. The attractive symmetries of brow and cheek and bone. The quiet eyes, so blue, where you could read everything with patient watching. And she shook her head slightly in admission and frustration: she'd never see the face that Catherine had seen.

And she thought maybe this last, twelfth inch, where he'd brace and blame neither of his loves, might be the best or only glimpse of Vincent's Vincent she'd ever get. And she found that after all she had to forgive Catherine, or at least give her the benefit of the doubt, because Vincent did; her indignation could not hold against his acceptance. Her angry heart-ache was gone as the migraine had gone, leaving only the memory of discomfort.

And she thought, too, about how much he saw and yet how blind he was - finding, in her ungainly hunter's intentness, beauty and generosity she couldn't see at all, but uneasily believed because he did. And because he saw them, they were there for her .....

"I guess," she conceded, on a sigh, "you'd have to have been there. And I wasn't ..... If i asked you to lay your head in my lap, would you do it?"

"Of course. But ..... it wouldn't be the same."

"No. I guess not." She wiggled her hand, and he let it go. She scored him a final point in the air, then wiped it all out: not a win but a draw. She worked the stiff fingers pensively for a minute. "Want to do it anyway?"

Vincent's smile showed lots of teeth.

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