

February 14, 1988

by Ulrike

It had been snowing for days, but on this particular day it was only a very cold, sunny and frosty winter day. The snow-covered landscape was adorned with rime, and with the sun shining from a cloudless blue sky, the snow and ice crystals glittered like diamonds. The scene was spectacular.

Catherine was cheerful. Today was a day off, so she had been able to sleep late and start her day calmly and with pleasure. Now she was on walking through Central Park, and she paused for a moment, surveying the sun-drenched scenery.

Some winter-lovers were enjoying themselves. Children, rosy-cheeked and bright-eyed were playing tag. Others were having a snowball fight, and still others were rolling snowballs in various sizes to build a snowman. Little sticks were being thrown for dogs, so that they could hunt for them. Their ears flowed behind them as they ran.

The most recent snow had been powdery and it scattered in all directions as activities disturbed it.

“What a wonderful day! I’m sure the sun is healthy,” Catherine decided, as she squinted against the glare. She moved on, almost afloat in something like rapture. She was on her way below, buoyant with childlike joy and the prospect of spending a day with Vincent.

“And not just any day,” she corrected her thoughts immediately. “Today is Valentine’s Day!” The thought about this tiny difference made her heart rejoice.

Below, Vincent had eased into the day, also with less to do than usual. He strolled into Father’s chamber looking for a certain poetry book. The chamber was empty. He was still browsing through the bookshelves when Father came in, noticed him and sat down, inviting Vincent with a gesture to do the same.

“Ah Vincent, good to see you,” Father said. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m looking for a special poetry book,” Vincent replied.

“For whom?” Father asked.

“It’s for Catherine. I want to read for her some of it, as a Valentine’s gift.”

“I see.” Father glanced up. “Whose poems are those?”

“Christian Morgenstern’s. We enjoyed reading a winter poem from him “First Snow” recently,” Vincent explained. “I believe he wrote more winter poems.”

Father nodded in approval and brought up a finger to his mouth, deliberating while he murmured something in a quiet, low voice.

“I think, I’ve seen it ... somewhere. But where?”

He arose, leaned on his cane, and paced a few steps through his chamber.

“You know, Vincent, since I got these new bookshelves, I find fewer books than before,” Father commented, feeling for his glasses.

Vincent grinned, crossed the chamber and put his arm around Father, handing him his glasses, which were stuck in his hair on top of his head.

“Vincent, honestly,” Father grinned back. “Now, I know! It should be upstairs, standing in the second book shelf from left, third level, beneath the biographies about the painter August Macke and the gun maker Samuel Colt, an essay from Robert Bárány, some poetry from Mikhail Lermontov and Sarah T. Bolton and the piano sonatas from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.”

Vincent looked confused at Father’s filing system.

“What?” Father said, as he noticed Vincent’s reaction. “Vincent, Christian Morgenstern and August Macke died in 1914, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach in 1714 and Robert Bárány got the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 1914 and Mikhail Lermontov and Sarah T. Bolton were born in 1814. So it’s to be perfectly obvious, isn’t it?”

Father remarked rhetorically, “You should be familiar with these facts. I don’t have to explain this for you.”

“Perfectly obvious!” Vincent nodded with an ironical grin and went upstairs for the book.

Coming down, he kept Father company. They drank tea while playing a game of chess, cheerily talking nonsense. Father tried to play for time, to put off the evil hour of his defeat.

“So,” he asked, “what are your plans for today? Will you go above, or is Catherine coming below?”

Vincent started to reply. “Catherine is”, as she came in, completing Vincent’s sentence.

“Hello Father, how do you do? I’m here for today.”

She greeted Father and gave Vincent an affectionate look. Father saw the possibility of avoiding defeat and grabbed it.

“Catherine, dear, will you join us for some tea?” Father asked her.

“Oh, yes, It’s so cold outside. I’m chilled to the bones,” she replied.

So, all three of them were sitting around the table enjoying some tea, chatting about this and that, including the traditions of Valentine’s Day. Father told them some of his stories, but no secrets, about his Valentine’s Day celebration with Margaret. His eyes glazed and softened and he daydreamed for

a moment. "No, I can't tell secrets," he thought, smiling to himself.

Coming back to reality he collected his thoughts and asked them, "What do you know about the origin of the Valentine's tradition? It goes back to one or more Christian martyrs and it's celebrated in different ways by many countries."

He started to elaborate. They passed their time together until the evening arrived. At last, Catherine chafed inwardly, and they bid their farewells to Father. He gazed after them as they left his chamber and thought how Catherine benefited his son, and in the end, he reflected, even himself. He faced the chess game. Checkmate!

"Father was witty today, wasn't he?" Catherine remarked, smiling at Vincent, as they were on their way to Vincent's chamber, out of earshot of Father.

"Yes, I think so. But there is also something strange, mysterious," Vincent replied.

"So, do you mean he hasn't told us all of this magic moments?" Catherine queried.

"It seems he's keeping silent about his own secrets," Vincent responded with a grin.

They continued their way, but just before they came round the last corner before Vincent's chamber, they almost bumped into Henry and Lin, who were nervously whispering quietly.

"What a pleasant surprise to meet you here! How do you do? What are you doing here?" Catherine asked, as the couples greeted each other warmly.

Lin and Henry looked confused.

"I'm sorry, too many questions at once. But I'm happy to see you both again," Catherine explained.

"Oh, yes ... we are happy to see you too. We are fine. It has been such a long time. Ah, now we are a bit in a hurry," Lin blushed and answered reluctantly.

"We don't want to slow you down," Vincent said. "You are on your way for the Valentine's Day Evening, surely."

"No Vincent, we aren't. We celebrate this event in August. It is the Qixi Festival then. You know, the Chinese calendar is different. In a few days we will be celebrating Chinese New Year. Uh, we want to bring Father some herb tea ... for now," Lin replied and looked a little relieved.

"So, don't let us keep you," Catherine answered. "But we should have a joint tea ceremony sometime soon!"

"We shall be delighted to come," Henry said. "Let's arrange a date for next Sunday. Would that be ok?"

"Fine, we'll be ready," Catherine said, looking up to Vincent, who nodded his approval. They were smiling at one another, their bond alive with anticipation. They bid their farewells and Lin and Henry continued on their way. Catherine and Vincent watched them until they disappeared around a curve.

“Lin’s behaviour seemed odd,” Vincent commented.

“Maybe they have a lot of work to do for their New Year Celebration. If they will have something on their minds, our get-together will be a good chance to talk about it,” Catherine responded.

Vincent put his arm around Catherine, holding her close. She snuggled into his embrace. Then they continued on, reaching Vincent’s chamber at last.

As they reached the doorway, they stopped dead in their tracks, surprised, bewildered, puzzled and astonished. It was a sight to behold. The whole chamber was decorated with dried flowers and herbs emitting a delightful smell, and illuminated by myriads of candles in different shape and colors.

A trail of tea lights guided them into the centre of the room, where a festive table was waiting with a candlelit dinner. The table was beautifully decorated with a white tablecloth, vintage candlesticks, and in the middle, a vase including one white and one red rose. Beneath the vase, was a red card in the shape of a heart.

Beside the table was a tea trolley with tea light warming plates, on which a prepared dinner was waiting. Steam clouds were increasing from the china dishes and an aroma of spices met their noses.

It needed a moment or more to assimilate all these surprising impressions, then they were absolutely speechless in wonder.

“What is all this?” Catherine asked, looking up at Vincent.

“I don’t know, but I can make a guess,” Vincent answered holding her gaze, starting to grin.

“That smells so good, by the way, that I’m hungry, so let’s discover the surprise.” She inhaled the scent.

Vincent bent forward slightly in a bow. “My lady, if you please ...,” he said and offered her his outstretched arm, grinning. “May I usher you in?”

“Of course, my lord.” She lifted an imaginary gown and sank into a curtsy. She straightened herself and put her arm lightly above Vincent’s.

“Lead me wherever you wish, so I can follow the calling of my heart.”

They exchanged glances full of ardent love.

Accompanied by some laughter and giggles, they reached their places and sat down. Vincent laid his cloak aside and lit the last candles on the table. In front of them was a menu card. They read ...

Menu

Soup:

- *Yellow dragon
Curry- Beef soup marinated in dry cherry, refined with Chinese vermicelli*

Hors d'oeuvre:

- *Spring rolls
Dough rolls, filled with a delicate mix up with mincemeat and vegetable*

Main dish:

- *Yin and Yang
Striped chicken- and duck breast in a pastry crust, served upon a bed of Chinese coleslaw; handed in a cast iron pan*

Dessert:

- *Chinese fruits with vanilla ice cream and advocaat*

Both were very impressed.

“Let’s look inside the card, and what they have to say,” Vincent suggested.

Catherine took the card, opened the envelope pulled out the card and started to read aloud:

“Dearest Catherine, dearest Vincent,

Your commitment and dedication offered us the possibility of living together for a lifetime. We can not thank you enough for it. We will be in your debt forever.

This unassuming dinner shall be a tribute to your work, done for us.

Knowing that Valentine's Day is something very special in your culture, we created this for you today.

Gratefully yours!

Henry and Lin"

Catherine looked up from the card and gave Vincent a loving gaze. Both of them were wrapped in their own thoughts for awhile.

"For a moment I allowed myself to dream," Vincent had said that once on her balcony, after they had witnessed the marriage of Lin and Henry.

Coming back to reality, Catherine put the card aside. "I'm starving now."

"So, would you like to give me the pleasure, sharing this dinner with me, milady?" Vincent asked.

"My love, what ever you like to wish", she replied, giving him a big smile."Of course, milord! Let's start with the soup, then."

They enjoyed the dinner, immensely, savouring also this time alone, while expressing their gratitude to Lin and Henry. Now, they understood more about the earlier event in their day.

"If we had left Father just a little bit earlier, we would have caught them in the act," Catherine giggled.

"I think Lin knew this too, and that was the reason for her hesitation. She looked like she had been caught in the act," Vincent explained, and reached out for her hand.

So they sat there for a while in silence, holding hands and sending the love and understanding through their bond.

"It was a wonderful surprise from Lin and Henry, but now I have had enough to eat. I need a break." Catherine said.

"Me too." Vincent agreed with her."Come on, let us take a seat in a more cozy spot. I want to read to you."

"What a wonderful idea, what have you chosen for us? I'm curious. Please, tell me," Catherine starts to cajole.

"Do you remember the poem from Christian Morgenstern we recently read?" Vincent asked."There is another one from him about winter time. Considering what you told me about your impressions in the Park today, I think it would be fitting."

"Then I can't wait to hear it. Please begin," she pleaded.

He opened the book and started to read:

Fresh snow

Bloom of flakes leaves an imprint for the first time

with the shoe's more mysterious print,

to carve a first narrow path

through the snowfield's virgin meadow

Childish and delightful it is a beginning

as if the forest rushes in front of you

or with a radial castellation of glaciers

speaks of radiance regards to your soul.

The sound of his words faded away, but resonated. Suddenly, the expression on Catherine's face changed from listening carefully and absorbing his words, to something mischievous, childlike. Her expression was like that when she had danced in the thunderstorm, under the grate in the listening chamber, as they listened to a concert in Central Park. Vincent smiled at the memory.

Catherine took Vincent's hand and pulled him up to his feet.

"Let's dress up warmly and take a walk through the Park. The weather report said there would be more snow falling while I've been here with you," Catherine said. "So, we will have snowfield's virgin meadows of our own," she giggled.

"You mean, we can share and recreate Morgenstern's impressions, leaving mysterious prints?" Vincent asked.

"Yes, come on Vincent," she replied. "This will be fun. I feel like being a child again just a little."

As they went outside and took their walk through the Park by shimmering moonlight, the flakes of snow swirled around them, scattering in all directions over the virgin surface.

They left behind only a track of mysterious prints.

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