

ALL IS RIGHT WITH THE WORLD (Tutto E Adatto Nel Mondo)

By Aaron Abitia

I

*I*t happened again, as it always did. Vincent Bassi's head filled up with grayness and dark clouds. He often imagined that he would never experience this feeling again. But here it was, suffocating him, slowly wrapping around his body like a snake. The air in his lungs began to squeeze from his chest. The lump in his throat began to grow larger and larger. It constricted the flow of precious air which he needed, the air which had kept his body alive for twenty-six years. Then, a wave of panic and anxiety came. It began in his thighs and moved up, washing back and forth up his body, each time rising higher and higher, like the ugly velveteen washing up a cold beach. At the same time, he began to feel heat waft from his forehead. The perspiration felt cold on his face. Yet despite these awful sensations, this was all too familiar.

There is a moment which everyone faces, a moment when something dawns upon a person. It is the fulcrum between disbelief and inevitability. Vincent was past that fulcrum, rushing headlong toward inevitability, that place where he knew what was happening but was powerless to stop it. It was a terrifyingly slow, sinking feeling. He imagined that this is what a drowning man must feel as hope is lost and the light from the surface grows dimmer. He, like the drowning man, would soon become placid, but only after a violent struggle. Still, at least a drowning man dies with the dignity of aloneness, in the dark without onlookers to see his mouth contort the split second before it gapes to let the water rush in.

Vincent, on the other hand, was not afforded this dignity, and in his mind he battled the very public way in which this was all happening. This place, this small corner ristorante crammed with talking and smiling and laughing people. This place, with the cheerful Italian pop music playing. This place, with people walking by the windows, peering at the menu, their brows furrowed as they searched for words in their own tongue. Then there was the tourists themselves, those people who swarmed Florence, beginning late winter and lasting all the way through early fall. Japanese, Swedes, Americans, Spaniards, what did it matter, they were all the same to him; they talked too much, they popped their flashes and made ridiculous, undignified poses in front of ancient monuments, monuments carved in solitude, perhaps with a heavy heart, by men like Michelangelo and Donatello. Then there was the giddiness; he disliked that the most. They hadn't a care in the world, and he resented them for it. But there they were, pressing into his world, his nightmare, ridiculously unaware of the bomb which had exploded in front of them, tearing him limb from limb with a violence which could only come from one source,

the source of his life's pain. Or was it a bomb? No, a bomb did its work quickly, painlessly. He would not be afforded that mercy in this place. It would be agonizingly slow. Methodical. Perhaps like a red-tipped knife, eased into his belly. Yes, a hot knife.

As the realization of the moment began to sink in, he hung his head downward, then slumped his shoulders forward and towards the worn timbered table. He hung there, his longish, golden-brown hair hanging down in front of his gaunt, stubbled face, eyes staring blankly at the polished edge. He wanted to say something, anything, but there was nothing. His mouth moved in several false starts. Nothing. It was as if the eloquence he used daily in his worn, leather journal recoiled at the indignant face of the young woman at the other side of the table, who was, at this very moment, like his eloquence, no longer his.

II

Vincenzo Cristoph Bassi lived in Upstate, New York, until three years ago, when he came to Italy to teach english to Italian students, students who were much more enthused about all things American than he was. His trek to the boot-shaped country ended a season of wandering, a season which began with his graduation from college and continued on for two years in a haze of longing, heartbreak, alcohol and useless jobs. Vincent did not study the Italian language at college, but rather, was a "native" speaker. His mother, Carmella, was a full-blooded Italian woman with light skin, raven hair, thin neck and ankles, and sad yet proud hazel eyes. She insisted upon speaking her native tongue in their home. And so it was. She had always told him that Italian was the true language of love, and not that "guttural" French, as so many people mistakenly believed. (And oh how she hated the French.) He found this odd, since she had married a man of German descent, Vincent's father Max. How much more guttural could a tongue be than English mixed with a German accent? He had never really known his father, who had left them in New York when Vincent was six years old, leaving for Germany to work as an Engineer. His father called only on Christmas Eve each year, usually drunk out of his mind, crying and cursing in German. In the background, Vincent could hear his father's new family chattering. And while Vincent's German heritage never really factored into his upbringing, he learned to deny it outright. Italian language, culture and pride were all Vincent had ever known. Carmella saw to it. When he turned 18, Vincent legally took his mother's name. He had her lean physique. And he had her eyes too.

Growing up, Vincent and his mother had been to Italy more times than he could remember. They would travel to her hometown of Montepulciano, south of Florence, to see her family. From there, he and Carmella would take trips with his cousins and aunts and uncles. They would travel all over Italy, as far north as Venice and as far south as Messina, Sicily. To the

seaside, to Lake Como, to Florence, all over. Each time they returned to America, his mother always seemed happy to be home, but Vincent often felt otherwise. He had always felt caught between worlds, suspended between the renaissance and postmodern, between the classic and the new, between Italy and America. He loved the art and poetry and music and life of Italy, but it was, in many ways, a harder life there than in America. People lived simple lives in Italy because they had to. People lived obsessive, complicated lives in America, yet continually came to simple places like Italy to escape their madness. Vincent felt trapped between the two, Italy and America, desiring both at the same time, and on his bad days, neither.

What he struggled against most in America was the frivolous, superficial culture. He had been at war with it in his mind virtually all his life. He felt it was haphazard and clunky, a six-year-old girl trying to wear three inch heels. It was arrogant and crass. He loathed it, yet at the same time desired to fit in just like anyone else. Most of his friends were American, of course, but Vincent's internal dichotomy and the accompanying emptiness of it kept him from drawing too close to anyone. More often than not, he found himself alone, writing in his journal in both English and Italian. After college, his friends drifted away, one by one, and he made little effort to stay in touch with them. He had not had much luck at all with keeping friends, and even less luck with American girls.

His mother had always wanted him to find an Italian girl, and there were many in New York, but it seemed they had all been tainted by the crassness. He quite liked the golden-hued blonde girls he had seen in Florida on his visits there, but while beautiful to behold, they were even worse than the northeastern girls, and besides, his mother always said that blondes were "not to be trusted". (Why, he didn't know.) His mother had gone as far as to ask her sisters in Italy to keep an eye out for her son. She had always talked about the superiority of the girls from the "old country", where she came from, and lately he wondered if this could be true. He finally took her advice and decided to try living in Italy for a while. She only wanted him to be happy, and she knew he was not in America. His aunt Benedetta helped him find an apartment in Florence, near the Arno river, and he settled in, feeling happy with a very real sense of *esperanza*--hope--in this new beginning.

III

Vincent felt the young woman's eyes on him and felt paralyzed. He used to love looking at those eyes, but now he did all he could to look away. He tried to keep himself from trembling, one hand upon the other. The sounds all around the booth of the restaurant where they sat began to fade into a swirl of shrillness. The clink and clatter of plates being delivered and taken away, the pure voices of the blonde French children across the way, the laughter of the American college couple who were having their first drinks in Italy--all of it collided to form a swirl of sound which drifted about his head like a hurricane. Then slowly it faded away into a high-pitched ring in his ears.

He vainly believed that he could say something, something significant to save himself from this, to save this "great love", as he had called it. He had written voluminously about them, about her, about himself when he was with her, but somehow he couldn't remember a thing he'd written now. Pages and pages of thoughts; if he could remember a sweet thought about how he felt about her, he could turn this all around and she would fall into his arms, just like the women in American movies.

"Daniela," he whispered. Nothing came.

Moments passed, perhaps seconds, perhaps minutes. He pried his tongue from the top of his mouth, to try again, but as he drew air in to speak, the red-hot knife came piercing through all the swirling noise in the restaurant. And this was the final thrust. In the upper reaches of his vision, he saw her lips move first, and then the words followed:

"I'm sorry Vincent," she said with that thick Italian accent that he loved, "but I have to go."

She didn't sound sorry. No, she sounded perturbed, impatient, as if she were hurrying it up so she could go meet friends at the disco. No, there would be no gentle words, like the women in the old black and white movies. No gentle touches on his hand. No conciliatory kiss on the cheek. No tears of regret from the pain she had inflicted upon him. Even the apology was, he knew, just filler thrown in to fluff up the final goodbye. He could have felt insulted by this, if he weren't in such a state of shock. He wanted to run, run as fast as he could. Run from this woman, from this city, from his life.

He didn't look up as she walked out. In the corner of his vision, he saw her glance at him through the window, but it was all different now. Those glances had once been paired with a wry smile or batting eyes, but now a sideways glance from her meant nothing to him other than yet another insult. Perhaps she expected to see a trembling lip or a teary eye. That might come, but not now, not here.

IV

February 17, 1999

Daniela,

I know you are frustrated with me. I'm sorry. I wish I could express the way I feel about you and this life and this ridiculous world that we live in. You once said the world was "tragic". I know you're right. No matter where I go, there's people in pain, people using each other, people trying to draw life from a lifeless thing, from this lifeless world. Yet in the midst of all the pain, here we are, and I wish I could believe that all is right with our world, and that we are not in pain. I know it isn't, and that we are, and that we're not healing each other the way you wished we were. I know sometimes you think that I feel nothing, because I don't speak my thoughts as you do. But I just need more time, Daniela. Won't you give this to me? My feelings are there, about to come out, but then you scare them away with your demands. Can't you just be still for just a little while? Yesterday you expressed doubt about us, but I have never had any doubt. I know exactly how I feel. I do. And I can catch up with you, I promise.

-Vincent

He never got the chance to give her these words from his journal. She was gone. Why was Daniela so impatient? Why are women so impatient, no matter their language? Why? Why do people have to have everything now, now, now? Why can't people be romantic like they are in Audrey Hepburn movies? Why can't they be patient with love? Theirs had lasted twenty-six days. Twenty-six lousy days, which were not lousy at all, but wonderful. And it all came tumbling down because of a big misunderstanding, as he saw it. Actually, it was not a misunderstanding. It was her impatience. Wasn't it?

V

*H*e sat in the restaurant alone for a few moments, but as the swirl of sound subsided, he began to feel self-conscious. He prayed that no one had seen this spectacle. He needed to leave. He left several Euros on the table and slid out of the booth. As he walked out, the blonde waitress with the reddish, ruddy skin gave him a long look. She had seen the whole thing happen. He pretended not to notice her and pushed the glass door. The rush of fresh air cooled the perspiration on his forehead. Outside, he walked in the same direction of his now departed Daniela. As he walked, the initial shock of the horrible episode began to wear off, and deep sadness came upon him. He pondered over what this all meant. Did it mean anything? Perhaps it meant nothing at all. How many times had he been here, at this cruel moment? He didn't try to remember; that would just make it worse. He just walked the wet streets on this cold, windy day of early March. Normally he loved sitting in restaurants on rainy days. There was something dreamy about it. But not today. Now, he just walked the cold streets.

He caught a glimpse of her several blocks up, and put his head down, watching the sidewalk in front of his feet. In a bit of divine providence, the dark sky opened up and dropped large drops of rain. He kept his umbrella rolled up; he remembered a record his mother used to play back home in New York, when he was a boy. Who was it--it was Carole King. She used to sing, "I'll do my crying in the rain." As the sky rained down harder and harder, he felt it was safe. His brow furrowed, his chin crumpled ever so slightly, but still, he couldn't cry.

VI

*W*hen Vincent lost Daniela in that restaurant, he did not just lose a beautiful young woman. He lost a bit more hope in life, and hope is more precious than anything. He wondered how much hope a person is allotted before they give up; surely that well is not bottomless. He was also left with another troubling chapter in his struggle, his anguish, his insurmountable problem. He would lay in bed at night and shut his eyes tightly, trying to find the answer to the question. The question which plagued him everyday, everywhere he went, like a pebble in his shoe: How could he keep a young woman long enough to be quiet and patient with him, so that he could bloom before her? What could he do, what slight of hand could he use to fool one long enough for his wariness to subside? How could he escape this paralyzing fear of losing another love, the fear of having to endure it again, the very fear which eventually undid everything he wanted in life? "Emotionally vacant". That's what Daniela had called him at the table. He thought it strange that a girl with a nose-

ring and a tattoo of the Disney fairy "Tinkerbell" just above her bottom would use such a heady phrase. And where does an Italian girl learn a phrase like that, a phrase which sounded suspiciously talkshow-esque? From friends? No, all of her friends were the shallow types. From a book? He'd never seen a book at her apartment. But there were magazines, yes. American magazines which he'd brought to her from home. She'd probably read the heady phrase in a magazine--the kind printed on thick, glossy paper, the kind with impossibly perfect women on the cover.

VII

With the rain pouring down upon him, Vincent began to think about God, as he always did at the traumatic points in his twenty-six years on this earth. He sometimes wondered why God allowed this madness to continue year after year. The loneliness, the glimmer of hope, the breakups, the pain.

Years ago he formulated his thoughts about his role in God's world. He'd given it much thought: Vincent supposed that all good things must be accompanied by bad things. Nothing good could happen in the world without something bad happening at the very same moment in time. And he believed that God allowed all things good and bad, according to some master plan which was far too complicated for any mortal to grasp. Just as wonderful things happened to seemingly all the people in Vincent's sphere of life, such as his smiling, wide-eyed students, a corresponding assembly of bad things were happening to others, and in this case, to him.

VIII

For many hours Vincent walked in the rain, up and down the sidewalks alongside the Arno river, past the lit bridges, past the window-shopping tourists, past the laughing people leaning over the edges and watching the lead-coloured river flow lazily by. Dusk began to fall. With each step the anxiety that had earlier surged within him subsided, and the relief of escaping from the restaurant swelled in his chest. Or perhaps the relief was from escaping the tragic scene of another failed love. He regarded his place in the world with the quieting angst of that drowning man who drew in the water like air. He had once read that drowning was, once the victim was past the initial panic of their fate, one of the most peaceful ways to cross over to the next world. That it really didn't seem like death at all. Death became sweet and inviting, the end of all suffering. Vincent felt this feeling of pleasant resignation, and it wasn't agony at all, but liberating. He felt as if he were fulfilling God's purpose for him in this world. The purpose was simply to experience the pain which the hand-holding lovers of Florence were being spared from by the God Who oversaw such

things. Oh the infinite wisdom! It wasn't that God was cruel to allow such pain to visit him again; no, it was just the natural order of events required in order to maintain equilibrium in the world. And this gave Vincent hope for the future. Perhaps one day he would be the hand-holding lover. Perhaps one day he would be buying an engagement ring on the Ponte Vecchio. Perhaps one day God would smile upon him, knowing that he had endured his pain with grace and understanding. And it was at this moment that all things became clear to him, and he felt equilibrium in his life again, equal parts pleasure and pain.

As dusk turned to a deepened purple, Vincent drew in a long breath and exhaled into the mist. He opened his umbrella and started toward his apartment. He hinted at a smile and realized that God was good and just, and all was right with the world.

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