

The Reader

The swell and thrum of “Nessun Dorma” flowed through the house until it almost burst. Each corner of the room held the voice of Pavarotti with care while Vince sat in a stiff wing-backed chair still and alone, straining to catch each note as if it might be the last he’d ever hear. The plaintive thread of violins under the vibrato of the singer’s voice made Vince long for something he could not name. Ahhh, it was too much. Though he could not envision the singer’s face, he imagined the notes floating around him like little black birds.

But my secret is hidden within me, my name, no one shall know, sang the voice. Vince knew the words, had known them for so long. Because he was on his own for a bit longer, he reached down and hit replay, allowing the song to reverberate around him again. When he stopped, for he knew exactly when he should, the front door opened and his wife walked in.

Her cane preceded her, like a false foot clomping on the ground, hollow and strident. “Well that was a waste of time,” she said, moving toward him in her awkward way.

Her entrance changed the feel of the living room, one that was worn and as old as they were--everything of a good quality and a European feel, but after forty or fifty years of use, all faded and dated. The red brocade fabric sofa with mahogany legs was now pink and had flattened cushions with stains on the armrests. Chippendale end tables, covered by lace doilies were scuffed and dull, cluttered with Hummel statuettes and Murano glass bowls that were empty. An old Victrola that once worked, gathered dust by a big, boxy television; next to it was the CD player that Vince used whenever he could to play his music--Caruso,

Callas, Gigli, Domingo, and the inimitable Pavarotti. Martha tolerated his music, but because she only bore it, he enjoyed it when she was away, like an alcoholic sneaking a drink.

She now sat before him in her yellow floral house dress hiked up high because she was always warm, nylons rolled and knotted beneath her knees, gray orthopedic shoes, the cane set between her legs, an omnipresent extra limb. Reaching back, she pushed a window open to let a breeze, although warm and humid, come into the house.

"I don't know why I even try. She's hopeless I tell you." She wiped her dripping nose with a tissue and tossed it on the table. "It's like she's thrown in the goddamn towel."

Though he couldn't make out the fine details of his wife's face any more, he could hear how frustrated she was that her attempts to draw out their neighbor, Ellie, wasn't yielding more success. Vince didn't have the heart to tell her that she would never truly befriend their neighbor. Ellie wanted to be left alone; he understood that. People like he and Ellie were content with their solitude and their books.

"She didn't even appreciate the lemon cake I brought. Can you imagine?"

He knew what to say. "No dearest, I can't even imagine."

She picked up a *Time* magazine, began fanning herself. "For Christ's sake," she squawked. "Who doesn't like a bundt?"

Though he loved this woman, after all these years, he pictured their love to be as thin as a string, tenuous and taut, and while they didn't share anything in the way of real affection anymore, the tie was sufficient to keep them together. After all, they were too old and far gone for anything or anyone else. Each needed the other and knew no one else would take them on at this late date. He noticed how their aches and deficiencies increased

at an alarming rate once they rounded the corner of sixty. However, she was surprisingly agile, despite her bad knees and sciatica, her bunions and arthritis.

Who would've thought things could happen so fast? Now it was a matter of waiting.

Their days were long and the same. He and Martha had settled into a routine that largely consisted of her fixing his meals and situating him so he could read, and then finding pet projects like Ellie or the card club, while Vince remained still, as if to harness what little life he had left. Evenings were spent having an early dinner, watching some awful reality show Martha liked, and going to bed at 8:00 sharp. Punctuated only by phone calls and occasional visits by their daughter, Alice, the days and months quickly passed. Like a bored spectator, Vince sensed the time slide forward with a growing apathy, the exception being an occasional pinch of anxiousness about his future that he was loathe to admit, even to his wife.

He used to be Vincenzo, the big man, the Sicilian—barrel-chested, with a full head of black hair, a booming voice, sharp in every way—but now was nothing more than a small graying old man. Over the years, in addition to losing some of his hearing, barely tasting much of anything in the past decade, struck numb and sore with arthritis, his sight, the most precious sense he had, was like a window closing, inch by inch, and there was nothing he could do about it. Macular degeneration, such an ugly term, with an uglier prognosis.

The greatest pleasure he had these days was reading his books—they were his life. His love affair with books had started when he was six and had been a part of his identity in a reliable, tenacious way. They were markers of his life, each one a reminder of what he was doing, how old he was, whom he was with, what he was feeling when he read it, and what he was interested in at the time. When he needed an escape, they provided a swift

sailboat to take him away or a gentle net to catch his fall, without fail. They never disappointed. The gradual loss of his sight saddened him more than almost anything ever had—it was the greatest tragedy of his entire life, he would say, if he knew no one would laugh.

“You want a coffee?” Martha asked and was up, without waiting for an answer.

Before he knew it, she was next to him, setting the cane aside to reach for his hand and slide the warm mug into it. Then she grabbed his book, a magnifying glass, and a pen, placed it on his lap without a word and moved back toward the sofa. Peeling off her dress, down to a white polyester slip, she fell back with a thud and began to fan herself again.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Welcome.”

Vince picked up his book, *The Thin Red Line*, and, holding the magnifying glass up to the page, began to read. Sometimes, he’d underline parts or scribble notes in the margins or on slips of paper. Although it was afternoon, and not his best time, he was able to read for about a half hour before he had to stop. It was difficult even for that short time, so the words, under the round brightness of the magnifying glass, were still blurry to him. Black ink bled into the fibers of the pages so that m’s and n’s looked much the same. Squeezing the bamboo handle tighter, he pushed the lens closer to the page in order to get the most out of the damn thing. However, even with the help of large print books and the highest magnification, Vince struggled, and knew that time was running out.

Martha was snoring softly on the sofa, legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded over her chest. Her eyelids fluttered and he knew she wasn’t soundly sleeping, but resting. Then there was a tat-a-tat-tat at his door. Vince got up, trying to be quiet so as not to disturb his

wife, but his bones creaked louder than an old wooden chair, and he saw one of her eyes open.

“Special delivery, eh?” She said, waving her hand at him.

When he opened the door, a bright haze flooded in and he saw a stack of books neatly resting on their doormat, which had a big black fleur de lis on it. Though his wife had a love-hate relationship with Ellie, she was his book angel who dropped off books for him regularly, but rather than come in and visit, preferred surreptitious deliveries and returns. Taking the books in now, he slid one behind the other to see his treats for the week. *Undaunted Courage*, a Stalin biography, a Louis L’Amour, and *Cutting for Stone*, whatever that was. Then, shuffling around quickly, he felt his way over the table’s surface for the ones he’d already finished.

“Don’t rush! You’ll hurt yourself. It’s not like she’s out there waiting or anything. For cryin’ out loud. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you two were having an affair. This is like passing love letters, only it’s tiresome old books!”

“Oh Martha, don’t be silly. She’s just being nice.” He smoothed his hair back.

“Well, let me see them already,” she said, putting her hand out. When he gave them to her, she sorted through them. “You already have this one.” She held the L’Amour out, close to his face.

“No, no, that’s a different one. She remembers which ones I’ve read.”

“Oh ho, of course she does! This one,” she waved one in the air, “this one isn’t large print. Guess she’s slipping. Just like the rest of us.”

Vince took the books from her, settled in to his chair and began using his magnifying glass to try to read the back covers. Like a kid in a candy store.

His wife could only shake her head at him. "I'm having a glass of wine. Want one?" she asked and got up to pour some for them, putting the television on as she went.

One Friday morning, Vince woke to the sound of thunder and rain outside his window, something he usually loved. He pulled the covers up to his chin, feeling small but comfortable in his double bed. Martha was moving around in her room next door, but Vince stayed still a little longer. The room was particularly gray, and he assumed it must be a doozy of a thunderstorm outside and was grateful that hurricane season was over. They were all counting the quiet years since Katrina, and each one that was uneventful was like a blessing. It was nice to be able to enjoy rainy weather without rushing around in a panic.

Trying to turn on his lamp, instead, he knocked over the jar of Vicks and some books. When he managed to find it and the light came on, his room seemed no brighter or clearer than it was before. Vince rubbed his eyes, digging in with his fists. Still no better. There was a foggy veil before him, which obscured the edges and bright colors that seemed to be mostly clear only yesterday.

Feeling his heart pound, he grabbed one of the remaining books and his magnifying glass, and tried desperately to read it under the lamp—holding the pages so close to the light that he could feel its heat. His hand trembled as he tried to see the letters, the words, the sentences, the paragraphs.

The story.

There was none.

Only a blur of gray. No matter how hard he tried, nothing. He could not force his eyes to do what he wanted them to do. Vince ran his fingers over the page, back and forth, as if

he could dust away what was not making the words clear. Thunder seemed to slap at the house as he sat there, helplessly holding the book in his hands. Some silly old mystery novel, he thought, not now remembering its title. The last words he would see, and they weren't even good or worthwhile. What a waste. He rolled back in bed. Feeling tears slide down his cheeks, Vince shut his eyes tightly, only the occasional flash of lightening illuminating his lids now, which he didn't even care to see.

A hard knock sounded on his door. "Wake up sleepy head. Can't stay in bed the live long day," Martha said. He could imagine her standing on the other side of the door in her flannel pajamas, her fist ready to pound again.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Be out in a minute," and rolled over in bed, pulling the cover over his head.

When the smell of bacon worked its way into his room, he wasn't drawn out by that, or by his wife calling him several more times. Finally, she walked in without knocking, something in her hand, and said, "What's wrong with you? Are you sick? I've been calling you. Breakfast is ready and getting cold." She thrust her hand out to him, and he leaned back in his bed because he only could sense something coming at him, but couldn't tell what.

"Here," she said, placing it in his hand. "It's a Mimosa, for Pete's sake. Vincenzo, get up. You're moving like molasses and we've got to get to church soon."

"Martha, I've got a headache. I believe I'm going to sit this one out." He felt her cool hand on his forehead, then his cheek.

"Hmph. Well, I'll get you a Goody's and then lay back down. But sip on that drink—it can only help."

After she'd left for church and he was alone, he felt his way to the living room, able to make out large objects, but mostly finding where everything was situated from memory. Sitting in his chair, he put Faure on; however, even when the voices soared in Kyrie Eleision--*et lux perpetua luceat eis*—now, he felt nothing. He took a stack of books onto his lap and cradled them tightly. He contemplated all of the stories he would now not know, his mind reeling as he counted with his hands that there were five books resting on his legs. Five books which he would've read this week. Would have. That would be twenty books this month, two hundred and forty in a year, twelve hundred in five years at least. Time now yawned in front of him with nothing to interrupt it but his wife's comings and goings. He tried to lose himself in the music.

Some time later, the door swung open with a bang, and Vince, still seated, could make out a blur of green and something moving forward. Her cane.

"What in the hell is that racket? Vincenzo! Turn it down." She clumped across the floor to do it herself. Vince hadn't reacted then or now. "Sounds like a goddamn funeral in here. What is it?"

"Faure's *Requiem*," he whispered.

"The whole neighborhood is probably plugging their ears with cotton, for all we know. What's the matter with you today? I thought you had a headache. In my book, loud music is *not* the cure for a headache." She felt his forehead, as if she could feel his pain.

Sitting down heavily next to him and unbuttoning her blouse, she stared into his face. For the first time that day, he could make something out—her features came into focus. Thick glasses, long nose, red lipsticked-mouth, tight gray curls covered by a plastic rain cap.

“Vincenzo?”

He wanted to talk, but the words would not come even as he opened his mouth a couple of times to try. He felt like a baby bird, and his wife, with her hawk nose, the mother.

“Have you had a stroke? Blink one for yes and two for no.” She waved her hand in front of his face, snapped her fingers. “Well? Do something for the love of God.”

“I...I can’t see,” he said, putting his face in his hands.

“Oh that. That all?” He didn’t speak. “Christ, I thought you were dying for a minute there. Don’t scare me like that again unless it’s the real deal.” She patted his shoulder, and on the way to the kitchen, flicked on the television. “Fr. Richard said mass today—I almost fell asleep during the homily he’s so damn boring. I’m making martinis. You could clearly use one, or possibly two.”

The morning passed and the two of them sat in the living room watching episodes of *Locked Up Abroad* and *Intervention*, her favorites. Vince faced the tv, staring blankly at it until after a few drinks, he fell asleep in his chair.

He woke to a book being placed roughly on his lap, the magnifying glass on top of it.

“Here,” Martha told him. “You’re out of it today. Wake up and participate, Vince. We have limited time here, you know. Tick tock.”

Vince recognized that his wife’s intentions were good ones, even if they were full of ire. She pushed him when he needed to be pushed at many points in his life; however, this was not one of those times.

“I can’t,” he told her now.

“Can’t what? Vincent. You are as clear as mud today.”

“Can’t see.”

“Use your glass!” she shouted.

“Martha, it’s no good. I can’t see,” he said, setting the book on the table next to him.

“Even with the glass.” The magnifying glass slid to the carpet with a slight thud.

She stopped fanning herself, and sat there wordless for once.

Finally, “We knew this was coming.”

“But I wasn’t ready.”

“Then try to learn Braille. There are options Vince.”

He pushed the book off of his lap. “It’s not the same. I won’t do it.” Lifting himself up from his chair, he started walking toward his room.

“Vincenzo,” she started.

He held up his hand. “I just need a little time Martha.”

Several weeks later, he woke to his room bathed in a faint yellow light, something he found almost as awful as when it was dark. His surroundings appeared blurry and vague, with a frustrating glow about all things that used to be familiar. Vince knew he’d have to come out of his room eventually and venture into the world again, only he was not yet prepared to navigate it under these new terms. Plus, he felt as if he needed to grieve, for he already missed reading and his books, like he would a person. Martha had been patient, but he knew that was not her best attribute, and when she’d brought his dinner on a tray last night, he noticed her clearing her throat several times.

He spent most of his time lying in bed, thinking about his past. Although he thought this would keep him distracted and help him feel better about his situation, Vince soon realized that hiding out in his room and living inside his head was limited and changed

nothing. So he stopped remembering, thinking, and most of all, hoping. Finally, Martha walked in one morning and slammed the door behind her.

“I’ve had enough of this Vincent.” She pulled the covers from over his head. “What are you, fourteen again? I’ve tried to give you time, but you’re getting worse, not better. Snap out of it for God’s sake.” Her old fingers snapped again and again in front of his face. “So you can’t see. Can’t read. There’s a lot more to do than read a bunch of hoo haa anyway, I’m here to tell you.”

Vince grabbed the covers back and said, “Go away.”

“I will most certainly not,” she said, banging her cane on the floor.

He looked at her with red and watery eyes, and whispered, “I am done, Martha. I’m ready to go.”

“Well I’m not ready for you to go! You just going to check out and leave me here by myself? That’s a load of crap. Get up right now.” She pulled him up by his shoulders, shook him, and pushed his dirty hair away from his face. “Come on outside for a bit, at least, before you go kicking the can on me.”

He let himself be dragged to the front porch, where Martha made him sit on the swing. It was October and a coolness was in the air that he would have usually enjoyed, but all he noticed today was that summer was gone, and he hadn’t even realized it.

“Now, isn’t this nice?” She pushed the two of them back and forth with her cane. Down the street, houses had stoops and porches, old-fashioned streetlights and crooked old oak trees. People were working in their yards or sweeping the sidewalk—it was as if time stood still here, for in other parts of New Orleans, people rarely went outside. Too busy. Their little street, Sherwood Forest Drive, was only a cut-through with about twenty

houses on it altogether, which kept the neighbors close—everyone knew each other and had for some time.

“You can’t quit yet, my dear. There’s still a lot you can do. Just think of all the things you’ll miss! Oh ho, Janice is out watering her flowers in her pajamas again. No bra. Horrors! There, it is good to not be able to see some things Vincenzo. I mean, really.”

“I don’t want to talk about it Martha. I just want to be left alone. Books were all I had left. Now that I can’t even do that anymore, what’s the point? I can hardly see anything now. Next thing you know, I’ll be tapping that white cane around and looking like a fool.”

“Hmph, there’s nothing wrong with a cane. In fact, I quite like mine.” He could hear the hurt in her voice. “I never did understand how you could like books that much. Seems boring to me. No offense intended.”

He waved that comment away.

“Besides, you have music and the old fellas you meet for coffee sometimes, and most of all, me, for heaven’s sake. That’s not nothing, you know.”

He rubbed her arm, “You’re right, but I don’t think you understand. It’s like part of me is gone now. A big part. Those other things, with the exception of you, dear, are poor substitutes. And now I’m practically helpless! You’ll be better off without me anyway. I’ve become too much work.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Her voice screeched. “Downright asinine, Vincenzo.”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s the coward’s way out.”

“Yes, yes it is, and I’m not having it.” She rocked them some more. “What about sex?” Leaning over, she pulled her dress open and her slip down, exposing her sagging breast.

“Can you see that? Here,” she said, grabbing his hand and putting it on her. “That interest you anymore? It’s been a while, but I could give it a whirl. If it would help, that is.”

“Martha!” Vince pulled his hand back. “People might see!”

“Well, not *you*, and not most of the old coots on this block, so who gives a care?” She buttoned up. “Alright, alright, but I’ll leave that on the table, in case you change your mind.”

“Lord, Martha.”

“You’ve got to find something to be excited about again. And while I realize that my body is no prize, we’ll figure something else out. Don’t you worry,” she said, patting his leg. “Don’t you worry.”

However, Vince continued to fade, and spent more and more time in his darkened room. Martha became a mere visitor, and after trying a variety of tactics to lure him out, to spark something in him, she resigned herself to taking care of his basic needs, silently. When she saw one day that his chest bones were showing through his undershirt and that his skin had taken on a pasty white color, she called for the doctor. The news was not good. Vince, the doctor said, was allowing himself to die, and short of hospitalizing him and hooking him up to an IV or forcing him take anti-depressants, there was little to do, except make him comfortable at home.

Vince witnessed the doctor coming and going, sensed a quiet in Martha when he left, and understood. The only thing that plagued him at this point was some guilt over leaving her. But it was a small pang, for he really didn’t feel much of anything anymore and knew she would be fine without him. He was ready.

One night, when it was very late, Martha peeked into his room. Vince wasn’t asleep—he was just lying there, being still.

"Vince," she whispered. "You awake?"

"Yes."

She came noisily into the room, and sat on the edge of his bed. "Push over so I can fit my big rump." Reaching over, she switched on the lamp.

He covered his eyes, and said, "What is it Martha? What do you want?"

"Hush. Be nice Vincenzo. What else have you got to do anyway? I'm sure the angel of death can wait five more minutes for me to be in this room right now."

A trace of a smile played about Vince's thin, chapped lips, and his chest wheezed a bit as he laughed.

"I'm sorry, you're right. I'm just tired and can't sleep. Makes me cranky."

"Clearly," she said, stroking his arm. "I brought this and thought I might try reading to you a little. Thought you might like it." She held up a copy of *The Great Railway Bazaar*, which was from another stack Ellie dropped off and had not been returned.

Vince turned away from his wife. "No." Then he said, "But thank you anyway."

Waiting for several quiet moments, Martha didn't move or say a word. Then, she began reading, her usual squawky voice, deeper and almost melodious at this late hour.

"Ever since childhood, when I lived within earshot of the Boston and Maine, I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it. Those whistles sing bewitchment: railways are irresistible bazaars, snaking long perfectly level no matter what the landscape, improving your mood with speed, and never upsetting your drink." She continued on for a very long time, and after a while, he felt drawn into the story. Though it was not the same as reading it himself, the words did soothe him a bit, and he loved his wife for making the effort. He knew she was perfectly bored with the words and was very well making a

grocery list in her mind while she was reading instead of paying attention to the story. He also guessed she'd come in every night and read if that's what it took. So just before he nodded off, he stopped her with his hand and then pulled her close.

"I love you," he said softly, kissing her on the lips.

"I love you too, Vincenzo. Sleep tight, see you in the morning. I'll make us some Bloody Mary's and it will be like old times."

In the morning, Vince was dead.

Finding her husband this way enraged Martha, and she swiped at the lamp with her cane, shattering it and the silence in the room.

"Goddamn it, Vincenzo! I thought we figured it out." She looked at his face, thinking he looked like a boy again, and slid into the bed next to him, staying there all morning. His body felt fragile and soft, and though she tried for the longest to figure out why he would leave her, she could not. She would never leave him over something like this.

Time passed by quickly as Martha efficiently handled the details of her husband's death, and she tried her best to not actually think of him, just the things she needed to do. The house was especially quiet and seemed to have gotten dustier now that she was the only one there. She did not like it.

Before long it came time for Martha to decide what to do with her husband's things. He had shelves and shelves of books, cds, and records—they were pretty neat, but there was just so much of everything. She felt herself becoming annoyed. Thank God she had been there to keep him organized; she was certain he would have become a hoarder.

Feeling flush, she unbuttoned her dress and dropped it around her waist, stood and let it slide to the floor. Wearing only her slip, she walked to the bookshelves and started reading the titles as if to find a clue of what drew him to these dusty old things. Sometimes she wondered if he had loved them more than her.

A light knock on the front door interrupted her thoughts and she hoped it wasn't someone trying to sell a stupid subscription because whoever it was would be sorry that he chose today. She was in no mood. Yet, she saw through the window that it was only Ellie, with a sympathetic look on her face that Martha wanted to slap right off. She opened the door and stood there in her slip and bare feet.

"Eleanor, it's not a good time."

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry, I should have called. Do you want me to come back in a little while?"

"No, I was speaking in general. It won't be a good time an hour from now either. Or a week from now," Martha told her.

She was holding the door only partially open, and knowing Vince would be mortified if he could see her, she was still unwilling to allow her neighbor in. In fact, she'd felt the prick of tears in her eyes as soon as she spoke and that made her even angrier. Then she saw that Ellie had brown flattened boxes under one arm and a bottle of wine in her hand. That atrocious pink stuff.

"I thought you could use some help?" she said, not moving.

"Fine, fine, fine. Fine! Come on in. But I'm making us a proper drink. You know I don't drink that swill." Ellie looked hurt. "It was thoughtful of you though. Very nice. Thank you."

After a couple of martinis, the awkward starts and stops in the conversation smoothed out so that they were talking like old friends, and Ellie began sifting through the stack of albums until she pulled out Carole King's *Tapestry*.

"Your husband listened to this?" she asked.

Martha laughed, "No, that was mine. Forgot all about it. I stopped listening to music a long time ago. Prefer the old boob tube now."

"May I?" asked Ellie.

Waving her on, Martha leaned back against the chair and stretched her legs out in front of her, pushing books out of the way as she did so. "Whatever you'd like dear. I've got nothing but time. And all of this crap."

Sitting on the floor, in a sea of books and boxes, they spent the morning listening to music and packing everything away—Martha occasionally pulling books to the side to keep, she wasn't sure why. As Martha grabbed a book from a pile and a slip of paper fell out, she recognized her husband's handwriting. Like an artifact, the paper held notes on the book on one side and a list of words with their definitions on the other.

"Take a look at this," she said and threw the note to Ellie.

She read it. "Oh Martha. This is like a treasure!"

"Treasure? I don't know if I'd go that far Eleanor. Just some idiosyncrasy of you book people."

"But it's like little pieces of him?"

Martha snorted. "Well that sounds a little disgusting." Yet she reached for another book and then another, shaking them out to see if more papers would fall. After some time, they had a pile of them and took turns reading them aloud to one another, which brought

laughter and sometimes tears. This time, Martha paid attention to the words. They mattered after all.

By this point, Ellie had broken out the pink wine and Martha was even drinking it. Though the light grew dim outside, Martha flicked on every light in the house. She put Pavarotti on picked up one of her husband's books and his magnifying glass and held it close. She felt Ellie watching her but didn't mind so much because for a moment, it felt like her Vincenzo was with her once again.

