

Rude Awakening

by vic fortezza

Vito suddenly found himself wide awake. He was unable to recall having fallen asleep or dreaming or awakening. It seemed he'd just entered bed, yet a glance at the windows told him it was already the middle of the night.

The light in the kitchen sifted through the parlor, through the open door of his bedroom, in a dim, slanting ray. He heard his father's quiet rustling, and wondered how it ever could have awakened him. He was elated. It'd been days since he'd been awakened at this hour, and he'd experienced a sense of betrayal about it.

He lay still and listened, anticipating the gentle smack of a teaspoon against a raw egg and, seconds later, a sucking sound, as his father drained the gooey substance from the shell directly into his mouth. He shivered and clutched at his pillow, repressing his glee, lest he be heard, and did so again as his father worked at a second egg. He envisioned the dark head flying back in the downing of a shot of sweet vermouth, and heard the glass put down on the table. He conjured the scene so vividly he would swear he could smell the alcoholic substance. There was no mistaking the aroma of the espresso. It pervaded the four-room apartment. He wondered why its taste wasn't as wonderful as its scent. Just eight years old, his father's adult pleasures, so unlike his own, seemed strange and harsh. He detected the odor of a match and lit cigarette, which he hated. His father coughed. Vito worried about him. Smoking was another of the things he did not understand. He'd once sneaked a puff and felt as if he would choke to death, and vowed never to do it again. He'd tried to persuade his father to quit, without success.

It seemed a difficult way to start the day: rising long before daylight; eating a strange meal, which would be his only sustenance until midday when he would eat the sandwich his wife had prepared the night before; going out into the darkness, the sole passenger on the bus. Vito asked about these things constantly. He did not understand his father's passion for such a life. They cherished

summer in separate ways - his father because he was free of the construction work he did during the cold months, and Vito because he was free of school.

Despite his youth, Vito knew he could not live such a life, no matter how he revered his father. Although quiet and shy, he enjoyed the company of people. His father's was a solitary life: up at 3AM, out to sea alone, in bed by 7PM, when Brooklyn's streets were just coming alive, about halfway through the last stickball game of the day. And his routine was not much different after summer. His lack of interest in others, in sports, puzzled Vito, who dreamed of becoming a major league baseball player. Vito loved America and was baffled by his parents' coolness toward it.

The light went out simultaneous with a flick of a switch. The apartment door was opened, then closed and locked. Vito listened to his father's progress down the hall stairs. He anticipated the squeak of the front

door, which made him quiver. He was proud to be awake at this hour, proud he never tired of his father's routine. It made him feel grown up. He wished he was older so he could stay up late and not waste so much time in bed, awaiting the start of a new day.

With only the whirl of the refrigerator for company, he soon fell asleep.

That afternoon he was playing skelzy with friends when his mother summoned him. He pretended to be annoyed, lest they think him a sissy. Secretly, he was thrilled.

"Wheah ya goin', Vee?" they asked, having failed to understand his mother, who spoke no English.

"I gotta go meet my father," he said, head down. He was unable to recall which language he'd learned first, as he hadn't been able to recall the moment of his awakening that morning. Both English and Italian came naturally to him, as if he'd been born bilingual.

His mother extended a hand, but he did not take it. He walked ahead, just like his father, she claimed. She did not want him to be like his father, that was evident. She wanted him to go to college. He doubted he would make it through elementary school. He wasn't a

good student. He dreaded the end of summer recess.

As they approached the bus stop, his mother rummaged through her purse for change.

"*Io!*" Vito importuned, extending a hand, palm upward; "*Io, mamma.*"

To his surprise, she gave him the money. He sensed she thought him stupid, although she dismissed his poor grades lightly. She did not seem to love him any less for his academic deficiency, and he appreciated it. He wished he could do better, but school bored him for reasons he did not understand. He was constantly daydreaming in class. He was not sure himself if indeed he were stupid.

He counted the change, slowly, to make sure it was the correct amount. "*Giusto,*" he pronounced, nodding, depositing the sum into the slot. He was thrilled by this infringement on the adult world, especially when the driver gave him a wink.

He gazed out the window, ignoring his mother, who often became car sick, embarrassing him. She was saying the rosary, occasionally bowing her head, which, Vito knew, signified the mention of the Lord's name. He did not know what to think of Jesus. He loved Christmas, but the rest of the year, especially Lent and Good Friday, which tempered the joy of Easter, religion did not appeal to him. It was too scary. He would not dare say this aloud, however.

He was familiar with the route, traveled so many times. He knew each house that had a swimming pool or set of swings, and envied the occupants. He was sure that they didn't quarrel over money as his parents did, that they were as happy as the families on TV, that the children did not have to pretend their parents loved each other or invent imaginary siblings for company on lonely days.

The bus wound its way to the bay, where Vito and his mother descended. He was dancing in anticipation as they awaited the change of the traffic light at Emmons Avenue. Once across, he hurried ahead, despite his mother's protestations. He took hold of the railing at his accustomed place and stood on its cement base, looking out to sea. His mother soon caught up.

"*Papa'!*" he suddenly, jubilantly cried, rising on his toes.

"Dove `?" said his mother skeptically, shielding her eyes from the bright sunshine. "*Io no vedo.*"

He pointed him out to her. His father stood erect, unshielded, at the wheel of the little boat, in characteristic pose, one that reminded Vito of the portrait of George Washington crossing the Delaware that hung in the library of St. Mary's. His mother chuckled as she recognized her husband through her squint. She seemed amazed that her son's vision was so keen, and lovingly ran a hand across his dark crewcut. He was happy that he had at least one trait that made her proud.

As the boat neared, his father waved, which excited Vito even more. He ran to the dock, his mother shouting at his back. He hurried down the ramp and onto the platform, which swayed in the gentle waters of the bay. The motion made him queasy and afraid, but he refused to show it. His mother remained on the sidewalk, having no desire to get seasick. His father moored the boat, climbed out, bent, and kissed him and playfully rubbed a two-day growth of beard against his face.

The wine barrels standing one behind the other at the back of the boat were filled with porgies and bloodied water. His father had had great luck. Vito stared at the fish a moment, then looked away. Their wide-eyed stillness gave him the creeps. He knew fishing was necessary, but he wanted no part of it. He gagged at the taste of fish, which puzzled his parents, who relished it.

His mother demanded he return to the sidewalk. He refused. She would not let him go for a ride in the boat, so he would not be denied this lesser pleasure. Her fear seemed irrational - his father would not let him drown. He sensed she was not only concerned for his safety but afraid he would be charmed into following in his father's footsteps. He was amazed at how poorly she understood him.

The burly young man from the fish store arrived with handcarts. The men lifted the barrels out of the boat and onto the dock. It seemed a wonder that the little boat hadn't sunk under the weight,

that the motor hadn't broken down transporting it. Vito marveled at his father's resourcefulness.

He backed away, as the weight had tilted the dock, which was simply a large floating raft. The men strapped the barrels to the carts and hauled them up the ramp and across the street to the store. Vito hoped he would be as strong someday.

Randazzo, a paunchy, balding middle aged man dressed in a soiled apron, was waiting at the scale. He weighed the loads, smiled, dug deep into a pocket, and withdrew a thick wad of bills. Vito's father extended a hand and Randazzo counted out \$70. Vito was thrilled and proud - \$70 in one day! He gazed at his mother, hoping she would be satisfied. She too was smiling, silently. His parents rarely exchanged more than a few words, unless arguing, and somehow that argument had begun and continued without end, silently and verbally. Annoyance was the emotion they showed most. Vito wondered if he were the cause of their hostility.

His father bought him an Italian ice, and they strolled across the street and watched the charter boats come into port. None had been as fortunate as his father. He'd once heard a man say that the captains of some boats followed his father out to sea, knowing they would be rewarded. His father never boasted, and it disappointed Vito. He wanted everyone to know how great the man was.

Vito enjoyed the color, the smiles, the carnival-like atmosphere of the area. There was much to see and hear. He was puzzled momentarily, noting a sign that said: "Sheepshead Bay." In their accents, his parents pronounced it "Sheepisa Bay," and he'd assumed the area had been named for an Italian. He felt foolish and was glad no one would ever know of his error. He was amazed he hadn't realized it sooner. The sign was old, battered, covered with graffiti. He feared he was stupid.

There was activity on the pedestrian bridge that spanned the lower bay. Teenage boys were swimming and diving, although a sign forbade it. Observing from the sidewalk, Vito enjoyed their reckless bravado, although he shuddered at the thought of himself in such murky, littered water. His mother frowned, as he'd

expected, signifying such behavior was unacceptable. Yet people were dropping coins into the water, lending legitimacy to the action, and Vito wished he was amongst the boys, diving for money, although he did not know how to swim. It seemed he would never be their age, independent of his mother. He asked his father to throw them some change. His mother wouldn't allow it. He turned away. He resented the fact that she had nearly total control of his father's income. He'd learned not to ask for money or things, and he was disappointed with his lapse.

Soon the group that had been tossing the money departed, and the boys began diving from the bridge's support beams, trying to outdo each other. One boy climbed atop the wooden railing, much higher than any of the others had dared. His head was approximately 25 feet from the water, which stood at medium tide.

"You ain't got duh bawls," shouted another boy, treading water.

Vito had heard the expression before and thought he knew what it meant.

"Woh!" the others crooned in unison, challenging the daredevil, who smiled confidently, standing tall, hands at his sides.

He leaped gracefully into the air, like a bird, chest thrust forward. At the height of jump his body formed a bow, tucked, then straightened on descent. He struck the water cleanly, beautifully, hardly creating a splash.

His three friends laughed and said: "Crazy bastid!" Vito, peering between the top and middle bars of the railing, felt a rush of excitement. The boy seemed a champion, like the Yankees, but this seemed especially spectacular, as he'd witnessed it firsthand. He'd never been to Yankee Stadium.

He eagerly awaited the boy's reappearance, ready to applaud. Moments passed without a sign of him.

"What's he doin'?" one of the others smirked, apparently anticipating a practical joke.

"C'mon!" the same boy shouted moments later, angrily slapping at the water, as the daredevil kept them in suspense.

Suddenly the boys went underwater with urgency. They resurfaced

shortly, one by one.

"D'ja see 'im?" they gasped at one another.

None had, and they spread out and again went under.

"*Dove` , Papa `?*" said Vito, puzzled.

His father did not reply. Vito listened to the people about him.

None of those who spoke English or Italian explained the disappearance. Others spoke languages he did not understand. He wondered if they knew what had happened to the boy. He was frightened by the pall that had fallen over the area.

"*Dove` , Papa `?*" he repeated, gazing up at his father, who eyed the water sternly. He was worried. Silence was a sure sign of trouble.

A man approached and asked what had happened. Vito's father related the incident in broken English. He was self conscious about his awkwardness with the language, although he usually managed to make himself understood, and it made Vito self conscious. He was afraid others would think his father stupid.

"*Andiamo!*" his mother demanded.

"No!" said Vito, reaching up to his father, who took him in his arms.

"*Papa` e` stanco,*" his mother complained, urging Vito to stand on his own. Only eight, fatigue was still foreign to him. Although his father was 58, his mother 49, they seemed young and strong. His father was lean and firm, hair still richly dark. Although overweight, his mother was a tireless homemaker. He would not be denied the right to be held by his father, especially here where he was free of the ridicule of friends.

He smelled the sea and fish on his father, and felt the roughness of hands calloused and cut by the weight of fish caught on a dropline, or "guinea rig," as he'd heard it called, an expression he did not understand. His father often caught two or three fish at a time, occasionally a large blue or even a skate. He did not wear gloves, which diminished the feeling essential to the skill. Although his hands were rough, his touch was as gentle as his character. He rarely struck his son, and never unjustifiably. Considering some of

the blows friends received, Vito thought himself lucky. He loved his father. He loved both his parents - separately.

The boys' search was fruitless. A police boat was summoned. A grim, uniformed figure at the stern cast a large grappling hook attached to a long chain into the water. People lined the footbridge and sidewalk, leaning over the railings. All was silent save for the passage of the boat and the traffic on the street. The boys were aboard, gazing over the sides, searching for a sign of their friend. Vito stared intently at the spot where the boy had dived, praying he would surface laughing.

"*Andiamo!*" his mother insisted.

His father did not budge.

The wait was not long. A collective gasp rose when the body broke the surface. Vito screamed, a piercing cry that startled those about him. His revulsion was so great that he fought his father and nearly fell from his arms and into the bay. The lifeless body floated at the end of a grappling hook like a dead fish, right eye gorged by a prong.

Vito wailed and kicked and squirmed as his father led him away. In the background, despite his own distress, he heard his mother's tirade, and the wails of the surviving boys: "Johnny! Johnny!" He did not understand why everyone else was so calm.

His father sat on a bench and held him to his breast, murmuring soothing words. When Vito stopped crying his father stood him on his feet, took him by the hand, and led him to a nearby concession stand. He bought peanuts, the ones with the happy green elephant emblazoned on the package that Vito liked so much, that his mother claimed made him irregular.

An ambulance passed as they were waiting at the bus stop. His mother was fuming. His father ignored her. Vito regretted having brought the argument into the open. It was much more tolerable beneath the surface. He always tried to be good so that his parents would not fight.

The bus was jammed with passengers returning from Manhattan Beach. Vito and his parents squeezed aboard. He stared blankly into

space, clutching the unopened bag of peanuts, eyes red, face tense. The comments of teenage girls, who fawned over his cuteness, which had always thrilled him in the past, failed to reach him this day. "What's'a matta?" they asked in the tone often employed with children. He did not reply.

