

What is Life?



Victor Fortezza

He heard her crying out behind the curtain that had been drawn around the bed. Each cry was more strained than the last. She complained about the burning, called the nurses “putane” and threatened to rip out the device they’d inserted into her. He sat there, torn, flesh crawling, wondering, should he intercede, if the nurses would be insulted, if they would think him a mama’s boy.

Again she cried out. His eyes glazed as he fought back tears. He could not bear to see anyone in pain ~ and this was his mother. He slipped behind the curtain. Each nurse was restraining one of her arms, imploring, trying to soothe her. She’d have none of it, asking what devils had sent them to her. He took her hands. She stopped resisting. Surprised, the nurses quickly completed their chores and left, apparently relieved. Vito wondered how they stood it day after day. And this case was minor compared to many they no doubt faced here in Emergency.

Her legs were drawn up, the soles of her feet flat on the mattress. A tube was snaking from her crotch and into a sack affixed to the side of the bed. Again she threatened to free herself from it.

“No,” he said firmly, fighting a sense of futility, wondering if they were all merely torturing her, if it wouldn’t have been wiser to have left her home to die with dignity. He’d been against bringing her here. His father had died in the hospital, alone, many years ago. He did not want that to happen to his mother, although, given her mental state, the place would seem no more foreign to her than the house had become. She was always asking to be taken home, to the small Sicilian town she’d left 45 years ago. He was sure that it too would now be unrecognizable to her.

He continued to hold her hands. She seemed to be calming. One nurse, tiny, light-haired, who had a charming, slight overlap of one front tooth over another, reapproached. She resembled his sister, only 30 years younger.

“It’s probably a urinary infection,” she said. “See how cloudy the urine is? That’s usually what that means. We’re getting a room ready for her.”

“Thanks.” So it wasn’t a virus, as he’d surmised. How had she contracted such an affliction?

The nurse seemed tense, uncomfortable. Was she self-conscious about the pain she'd inflicted, perhaps assuming he resented her? He knew she'd been trying to help. He suspected she was unaccustomed to seeing an apparently young man care for an elderly woman so unabashedly. If only she knew how rubbery his legs were right now. Was she afraid he would make a pass at her? He wouldn't, noting the wedding band. She pulled the curtain open and left.

His mother asked about Francesca, one of her sisters, who lived in Sicily. Her voice was breathy, as if her throat were parched. She was the only one of nine siblings to have ventured abroad. She now confused her daughter, who was 65, with her youngest sister, whom she hadn't seen in 45 years.

"She's working," he said in Italian. He'd ceased trying to set her straight. He now went in whichever direction her mind wandered, offering lies he hoped would placate her, keep her in good spirits.

She asked where.

"The bakery in Sheepshead Bay."

"Poor thing. She kills herself."

"Come to think of it, she's probably home by now."

"She'll worry when she doesn't find me."

"I called and told her you were here."

"And what is this place?"

He paused, scouring his mind. "A hotel."

She chuckled. "Nice-a," she said in broken English.

A foreign born doctor appeared. Vito had difficulty deciphering the thick middle-eastern accent and asked the man several times to repeat himself.

"Who was that?" said his mother.

"The doctor."

"Peruccio?"

"No. He'll see you tomorrow."

Peruccio had suggested bringing her to Emergency, where, should all tests prove negative, she would be discharged immediately. If admitted to a room, she would have to stay at least one night. Fortunately Emergency wasn't busy this evening. She wasn't occupying space someone might have needed desperately. Nearby, out of sight, a woman was calling out drunkenly, cursing.

"Wonder what she's on?" said an attendant, passing.

"See the hole in her head?" said another.

To his relief, his mother was oblivious to the pathetic ranting. Again she threatened to rip away the urinary device, as she experienced more burning. He urged her to think of the sea in her hometown.

"Is this Saint George?"

"No, Brookaleen." He laughed to himself at the immigrant-like pronunciation.

A gray-haired man, limping slightly on a cane, approached. "Did the doctor come yet?" he said through a thick accent.

"Two so far," said Vito. "Interns, I guess." He looked at his mother. "Recognize this guy?"

She shook her head. He was astounded. He would never have dreamed she would forget this man she'd hated, with whom she'd had so much conflict. He supposed it was

best that she'd forgotten her antipathy. His own had subsided markedly. If he hadn't known better, he would have bet she was feigning simply to levy an insult. She was no longer capable of such cleverness, however.

"It's Enzo, your daughter's husband."

"Yeah? And where is Angelina?"

"Home," said Enzo abruptly. "I called her just now."

"Thank God."

"Where's Mayte?" said Vito to his brother in law.

"In the waiting room watching TV."

"Why don't you send her home and go yourself. There's no reason for you to stay."

"Would you believe she doesn't want to go home? I offered to pay for the cab, but she doesn't want to go. She wants to sleep at the house."

"Did you tell her we'd approve the time sheet any way she wanted?"

"Yes, and she still doesn't want to go. I think she's afraid."

"There're a lotta guns in her neighborhood. Maybe she doesn't feel safe after dark. What a shame."

Enzo smirked. "The other day she told me she moved from her building because everybody was on Welfare."

Vito noted the irony - Mayte felt safer in Bensonhurst, despite its reputation of mistreatment of blacks, than she did in her own neighborhood. Life never ceased to amaze. What had a pundit said recently - that the best thing that ever happened to the current generation of African-Americans was that their ancestors had been enslaved and brought to America. Many would be living in squalor. In some nations Christians would be the slaves of Muslims.

"She's staying, then?" said Enzo. "She's better off. This way they find what's wrong and fix it, otherwise.... She'll be here at least a week, I bet you. They'll milk Medicare for whatever they can."

Vito fought the weariness and anger his thoughts aroused. He would be coming to the hospital every day until her stay was finished, one way or another. And he hated the fact that the government, or rather, the taxpayers, or rather, future generations in this era of behemoth government, was picking up the tab for what was really his responsibility.

"Okay, then," said Enzo. "I'll be back tomorrow morning. I have to come for a check-up myself." He'd had bypass recently. Confronted with his mortality, he'd quit smoking, to the astonishment of all. "Goodnight, Ma."

"You're going?" she said weakly. "God bless you."

She seemed serene now. He hoped she'd forgotten the tube. He was reluctant to leave her side, however.

Suddenly she chuckled. He gazed at her inquisitively. She flushed, embarrassed, smiling.

"Scurregio," she explained.

He tittered. "I don't smell anything." He was surprised she was able to joke. Was he making too much of her ailment? Perhaps it wasn't perilous at all. Yet what wasn't perilous to an 87-year-old? He recalled the last time he'd seen his father joke, teasing his youngest granddaughter. For a moment he'd thought there might be hope. It was soon extinguished. The elder Peruccio, now deceased himself, had been his father's primary

physician. Vito still harbored resentment toward that bungler. At least his son seemed to know what he was doing.

Another doctor, a small woman, approached and asked the same questions the others had. Vito fought to maintain patience.

His legs were weary. He decided to chance taking a seat. He plopped into a chair opposite the foot of the bed and closed his eyes, hoping a catnap would revive him, hasten the passage of time. Five hours had passed. How much longer would it be before the room was ready?

He was unable to doze. He looked at his mother and waved. She raised a hand weakly. He noted her wrinkles, age spots, sagging earlobes. Was this his future? Lately, when frustration had him mumbling aloud to himself, he feared that he would end up like his mother, that sound diet and exercise would not save him from senility and incapacitating arthritis. He'd already begun annual physicals.

She'd been ill two weeks, lacking appetite, barely speaking, losing weight, sleeping most of the day. He suspected there were more wrong with her than an infection. He wondered if he wished that were the case, although he certainly did not want her to suffer. For all intents and purposes, her life had ceased eight years ago. It seemed futile to go on living. Fortunately, she no longer suffered day long bouts of dementia, a term the first doctor had used, which, curiously, Vito had refuted. It'd sounded too strong. However, it'd been accurate. Such occurrences were now rare, to the relief of everyone. Still, her life did not seem worth living.

To his annoyance, a fourth intern asked him the same questions. Now the entire group that had toured the area had each visited individually. It seemed odd that not one, besides the instructor, was American-born. Was this a way of cutting into the enormous cost of the welfare state? Or was America indeed dumbing down, producing less physicians?

"Do you recognize me?" he said to his mother when the doctor had gone.

"The light of my life."

He tittered, embarrassed. He was glad no one was within earshot of what to him was over-praise. "And what's my name?"

She shrugged, as if the answer were a given. "Vitoots."

"And what's yours?"

"Rosina."

"Rosina what?"

"Rosina Rossi."

"And where do you live?"

To his surprise, she rattled off the address with ease.

"What's your daughter's name?"

"Angelina."

"And your grandchildren's?"

She stared blankly a moment, then made a face and shook her head. She didn't want to play any more. Vito wondered if it were futile to try to preserve what little remained of her memory.

He smiled as he realized he'd used the Sicilian "Me canoosh?" for "Do you recognize me?" Was the bastardization of Arabic influence? He couldn't wait to tell friends, par-

ticularly a couple whom he'd come to greet with "babaganoosh" after having tasted the Middle Eastern delicacy at a party of theirs.

His attention was snared by the squeak of wheels. Attendants were guiding a gurney that had a long, black, zippered body bag atop it. He tensed, fearful his mother would notice. She did not. He told himself it wasn't an omen or foreshadowing, just as the rumor at work that the pope had died hadn't been one. Eyes glazed, he'd been certain that what in the end turned out to be a repugnant practical joke had meant his mother was dead. "I bit my tongue," he'd told a co-worker who asked what was wrong. He wondered what story attended the poor soul in the body bag.

She was assigned to a room on the sixth floor.

"Miss Rossi," said a young woman cheerfully. "Hi, I'm Maria, your nurse."

"Do you speak Spanish, Miss?" said Vito, certain she did, hoping she wouldn't be offended. "It works sometimes with one of her attendants."

"Me llamo Maria."

His mother nodded and patted Maria's hand. "allo."

"There you go," said Vito, smiling.

"Don't worry, sir, your grandmother's gonna be fine."

"She's my mom, and please don't call me 'sir.'"

To his dismay, Maria was 50 pounds overweight. Why would so attractive a woman let herself go thusly? Her face was thin and had the salutary glow of young Hispanics. Her hair was rich, dark and long, pulled back into a ponytail. She reminded Vito of someone she really didn't look anything like. He repressed the longing the thought raised within him.

There were three other patients in the room. Directly across from his mother, Mrs. Tomlinson was sitting up in bed, a tube feeding oxygen into her nose. She seemed dazed. Her legs had been amputated above the knee, long ago, he assumed.

"Ninety-seven years old," said Mrs. Pearl from the bed beside his mother's.

"God bless her," said Vito, fighting sadness, anger. What did it all mean if this was what it came to in the end? Although he realized the woman may have had a wonderful life and that he himself had many years left and the intelligence to make them happy and productive, he was unable to shake a sense of doom and gloom. He was electing misery - and there was never an excuse for that, at least not for someone as healthy and fortunate as he. True, he did not have a wife and children, but everything else in his life was promising. Reason failed him, however. Would he be clinging so futilely to life in dotage, or would he have the courage to go to the hemlock? He feared that by the time he realized his mind was going he would be too far gone to have the wherewithal to act.

The fourth bed was occupied by what seemed a little girl, face down, sound asleep.

"You're tired," his mother said. "Go to your room and get some sleep."

"In a few minutes." He hoped she would doze off so that he would be able to sneak away, feel less guilty about leaving her. He worried that she might disturb the others with a sudden attack of dementia.

Maria returned. "I'm gonna take a little blood and hook you up to an IV, mommy."

Vito experienced a jolt. He loved the way "mommy" flowed so naturally from Hispanic women. He heard it constantly at work.

"She's a little dehydrated," said Maria.

"She might try to pull out the IV later, so don't hesitate to put the restraints on her." Despite the soundness of the suggestion, his knees buckled at the thought that he'd given license for his mother to be shackled.

"She won't need them with me - right, mommy?"

She seemed born to be a nurse. He kept looking at her, wanting her to be thinner. He despaired, certain he would never find the right woman. Perhaps this proved he didn't deserve it. Maria was too young, anyway, probably not even out of her 20's. And even if he found the right woman, what were the chances that their happiness would last?

His mother gazed about as if noting the surroundings for the first time. "What a beautiful room. Did you fix it up like this?"

He chuckled. "Yeah."

"Nice-a."

Maria left with the sample. Another foreign born doctor appeared. Vito suffered through the familiar interview.

He was dozing when his mother said: "Why don't you go home?" He sprang to his feet. Since she'd suggested it, she wouldn't carry on about his leaving her and, hopefully, wouldn't carry on later. He realized he was rationalizing. She was liable to go off any time. There was no predicting it.

"My wife and kids are waiting for me."

"Your wife's expecting?" Her eyes widened, brightness visiting the dull brown corneas. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We just found out."

"You don't know how happy you've made me."

How had she arrived at such a conclusion? he wondered. He surmised she'd heard "spetta," which meant "expecting" as well as "waiting," at least as far as he'd come to know.

Maria returned. She searched for a vein into which to insert the IV needle, which was difficult in one so aged. His mother winced at each jab. Vito, holding her hand, cringed. The fourth try was successful.

"There we go," said Maria. "Esta bien, mommy?"

"Yeah," said his mother weakly in English. "Tan que."

Maria chuckled.

"Okay, Ma," said Vito. "I'm going. I'm leaving you with this nurse with the face of an angel."

She smiled.

"Awww," said Maria softly, the Brooklyn girl slipping out of her. She'd had no trouble understanding that bit of Italian.

He kissed his mother's forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow night. Angelina's coming in the afternoon."

He hurried away, haunted by the look in his father's eyes the night he died, wondering if he'd seen his mother alive for the last time. His reference to Maria as an angel suddenly seemed ominous, misguided, although his mother revered religious imagery. He hoped Maria hadn't interpreted it as a pass. He would not abide such a weight problem or be so gauche as to suggest she reduce for his sake. He'd seen what obesity had

done to his mother the past 15 years.

Outside, several nurses were seated on a ledge, smoking. He was amazed. One would think, given what they saw each shift – the consequences of unclean living – that they would be prudent. Of course, they were only human. Still, he did not understand it, which made him feel inhuman. He had no desire to smoke, drink or use drugs, unlike some of his friends. Were these nurses able to rationalize because of their proximity to physicians who would save them? He suspected it was attributable more to that certain something in people, perhaps ego, that told one: “It won’t happen to me.”

Vito visited each evening, making sure his mother ate. He became familiar with the other patients. Mrs. Tomlinson left within days. He was unable to bring himself to ask if she’d died. At least she’d been loved, visited by a wealth of family who called her “Granny.”

The patient he’d assumed was a little girl was actually a woman, severely retarded. She’d had a virus and pushed away anyone who neared her. The women the city had assigned to her as guardians merely sat beside the bed, should they be needed. Their presence seemed superfluous, certainly not cost effective, as the nurses were there.

Vito fought back tears as the patient took to slamming the heel of her palm against her mouth and had to be restrained. All her front teeth were missing. Was the rage directed at her condition, at unfairness, at life? If so, it was understandable, as there wasn’t much anyone could do for her. Fortunately his mother noticed only when the woman wept, a heartrending, pitiable cry. To his relief, her stay was brief.

Mrs. Pearl, who suffered from severe swelling of the lower legs which necessitated the use of a walker, offered him gulf tilte fish, assuring him it was delicious. He declined, apologizing, experiencing the creeps, as he had whenever he’d spotted a jar on a shelf in Katz’s Grocery.

“It’s not my culture,” he said.

“I like the way you said that,” she told him.

He switched on the electric candles she’d brought to commemorate the high holy days. It was especially distressing for her to be hospitalized at this time.

Mrs. DeMarco was in and out in days. Suffering post-menopausal depression, she’d taken medication that affected her adversely. “You were out of it, Ma,” a teenage daughter told her. “Was I?” she returned. “I don’t remember.” She bawled and babbled incoherently the first night. When Vito entered she was laying with legs spread wide, an odd, almost seductive look on her face. He cringed, so removed from desirability was the sight.

Mrs. Dunn, an asthmatic who needed oxygen daily, followed her. Her stay was long. She gave him daily reports on his mother. “She has such a nice voice.”

The others concurred.

“She always liked to sing,” said Vito, “religious songs mostly. When she’s singin’ we’re all safe. We know she’s okay.”

“She’s always callin’ out names.”

“Her sisters in Italy.”

“My mother spoke Italian, but I can’t figure out what dialect you use.”

“Me?” He smiled. “Brooklyn Sicilian. It may be closer to pig latin, the way I speak it.” She laughed. “You take such good care of her.”

He shrugged, embarrassed, wondering if she thought him gay. Why would it be so hard to care for someone? All it required was common sense. "I know what she likes. She has such a sweet tooth. If she won't eat what they give her, I know she'll have a cream-sicle or some pound cake. It's better than nothin'."

She made a face. "The food here is so bland, to say the least."

One night her son brought her grilled cheese sandwiches and fries. Vito was unsure if he approved. On the one hand, it seemed lethal to someone who'd had open heart surgery; on the other, what was life without an occasional treat? And he was guilty himself, having filled an order for Yoo Hoo for her.

When Mrs. Pearl left the bed was filled by an elderly Salvadoran woman who had a frightening cough. Her family was large and devoted to her. Vito resisted the urge to speak Spanish to them, certain he would make a fool of himself. Joking around at work was one thing...

For a while his mother showed signs of recovery only to relapse. Each time he boarded the elevator he tried to prepare himself for the worst. Some days he was certain she was dead. He did not understand, given her age, why the thought of her demise had him walking on egg shells. How would he ever handle the serious illness of a wife or child?

She began to show progress, however. He broke his silence to co-workers. He'd tried to forget it during the day, hoping the frequent levity would be diverting, and it worked to a large degree.

The infection wasn't entirely clear when she was released. Antibiotics were prescribed. He was surprised at the extent of her recovery. He'd expected her to slip markedly. The decline was hardly noticeable, however. He'd been wrong about not wanting her hospitalized. Again he was shown that that sense of futility had to be fought. Why was this so difficult to learn? After all, he dismissed the futility of hoping he would ever be published each time he sat at his desk. He battled the futility of being 30 to 40 strokes worse than professionals each time he played golf, battled the futility of hoping he would ever get through an entire song on the guitar without muting any notes. He was the only one he saw at the supermarket who re-used plastic bags. The cashiers eyed him as if he were strange, as if they suspected he were trying to sneak items past them. He didn't know if recycling were useless, but he believed it worth a try. Why was it he rarely felt victorious? Even Enzo had proved futility could be defeated, managing to stop smoking after 50 years of two packs a day.

Two nights before his mother's release, he attended a wake in the very room in which his father had been laid out 20 years ago. It was in honor of a woman who'd brought 16 children into the world. 79, alone, she too suffered dementia and had come to rely on home care. He commiserated with the brothers, who were going through what he had eight years ago. He'd seen it eating at them and winced when they confessed they wished God would take her. He'd felt similarly and did so occasionally still, minus the faith that God would intercede. However, now that dementia was rare in his mother, the burden was not nearly as great. When he found himself wishing she would pass on, he realized it was pure selfishness on his part, a desire to be relieved of his own suffering. His inability to prevent such thoughts deepened his despair. Was man at heart still a beast?

At work the morning after the wake, it dawned on him that he'd violated the

alternate side parking regulation, having lost track of the days. He had no recourse but to plead "Guilty," as if he'd committed a crime. The fine was meaningless. After all, it was invisible funds, his paycheck going directly into his account, a personal check written to cover the amount. Nonetheless, he seethed. Such instances accounted for a large part of the sadness that characterized life, along with its utter mystery. Everyone was prey, be it to major or petty crime, to indignity or incivility. And there were two ways to respond - to react in kind or to rise above it, and neither was particularly satisfying.

Strolling along Sheepshead Bay one day, gazing into the water, he noticed a Blue Claw crab puttering at the surface, circling haphazardly. The futility of it forced laughter to his throat. Here was this creature, perhaps in search of prey itself, eagerly sought by men and women with nets. What was the purpose of its existence - to serve as food to others? to keep the ocean from becoming overcrowded with the organisms upon which it fed? It seemed pointless. And it struck him - life was essentially meaningless. And although this did not mean it could not be fun or worthwhile or fascinating, it told him that sadness would prevail, as futility was not something that could be embraced. Yet why, if life were meaningless, did he try his best to be civil and honest? Was it merely force of habit or a quirk of personality or genes, or did he, deep down, have faith? Or did he simply believe it imperative that people act as if life were meaningful? Otherwise joy would never be appreciated and, consequently, life would be intolerable, and chaos would reign.



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