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Vincenzo Has Died

Michael C. Vocino

University of Rhode Island, vocino@uri.edu

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Vincenzo Has Died

Today, the death of Vincenzo shot through the town shortly after the midday meal. He was 65 years old. After “pranzo” he had gone to bed to rest as everyone does in the hot summer afternoons of this rural town of Sannicandro, as most people do in the Mezzogiorno of Italia. He fell asleep never to awake again. It was a good death for anyone. It was a shock, though, and very difficult for those he left behind. This man was so young in attitude. He looked at least ten years younger than his actual age. He and his wife walked daily, several times, around the town. He sat outside my door several nights ago to enjoy a late dinner with my neighbors, his close friends. They invited me to have pizza and wine with them. I had already eaten and said, “Thank you, but no.” I could still hear them late into the evening laughing and enjoying their time together.

Two evenings before that, I was introduced to Vincenzo and his wife by the same neighbors. They were talking politics and were discussing the upcoming American elections. Vincenzo, as the others, hoped that Kerry would win. No one here likes Bush. Another Vincenzo, the brother-in-law of my cousin, Michele, brought Vincenzo to my home one night. Vincenzo wanted to show me the house he was selling on my street. He thought I might want to tell my cousin Theresa that the house was available. Vincenzo and his wife had moved around the corner to a three-story home to make room for visiting grandchildren. He brought me there to see it. It was beautiful. Polished wood and granite, the house also had a gorgeous balcony on the roof of the third floor. He was very proud of this home that now served as his temporary tomb.

The Chiesa Madre, or the Mother Church of the town runs along side my house. It has Masses every evening at 7:30. I usually go to hear Italian spoken and sung. I meditate throughout the Mass and enjoy this pillar of my culture in my own way. This evening I was thinking about Vincenzo, about how he told me he quit smoking many years ago, nearly thirty, and he gently suggested that I should consider stopping. His wife told me that she still smokes, but that she has cut her habit to three cigarettes per day. Later in the evening I went to visit her and pay my respects with cousins and a neighbor. Vincenzo's wife was smoking more than three cigarettes this day. She was chain smoking and clouding her teary face throughout our visit.

As I left the Church earlier in the evening, after Mass, I saw a little feather floating through the air above the Church's high, granite staircase. I thought of John Lennon and what he told his son, Sean. He told Sean that if he dies, Sean will know that he is with him whenever he sees a feather floating in the air. I smiled at this feather in the air above the 16th Century Church. Maybe Vincenzo was with me this night as I walked home from La Chiesa Madre.

I didn't go into the house immediately. I sat on the stone steps of the casa next to mine and was smoking a cigarette before going in to have a shower. As I smoked, a 97 year old woman, all dressed in black (the color for all the widows in the town) who walks pass my house every evening at the same time stopped and said in Sannicandrese, the local dialect, "I saw you going to Mass this evening from the door of my friend. Was it you?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I was thinking of Vincenzo," I continued.

She merely replied, “Maa,” an expression that implies frustration and lack of understanding when something strange happens. She continued down the extremely narrow Via Palestro where I live without saying another word. I could hear her cane as she made her way down the steep, short incline on which my home sits.

In one short word this woman summed up what Vincenzo’s death meant. We don’t know what it means. We don’t know what life means, and only a person, such as this Signora, who has so many years, can understand that the life we live is important whether we live to her 100 years or whether we die young at 60 or 65. It happens and there is nothing we can do about it.

This woman is known throughout La Costa, the name of my home district in Sannicandro. She was the cleaning lady for my cousin Rosanna and her family when Rosanna was young. She has an older sister, also still alive, who is 98 years old. This woman had 14 children. Eight of the children were girls, and six were boys. All the boys died either at birth or as young adolescents. This woman understands the meaning of life and the meaning of death. In her wisdom, she summed up the surprise of Vincenzo’s death with one word while others pondered for hours on such meaningless questions as “Why would God take such a good man so young and leaves behind others who maybe aren’t so good?”

“Maa,” the wisdom of years of life spoken with the precision and clarity of one word.