

Vinnie

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Vinnie illustrates how a young man is introduced into the world of heroin addiction. The story is set in New Jersey and New York City in the 1970s.



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# Vinnie

“Shut the fuck up, ya pinhole rubber!” Joe was screaming his usual “How are you?” to a sports-jacketed newcomer slithering into this Tuesday night party. The party was in honor of Katy’s parents being gone for a couple of days or maybe because it was Tuesday. I was discovering they didn’t need a reason to drink and smoke.

At this gathering Joe, David, Ross, Louie, Ritchie, and Katy were sitting at the good “for company only” dining room table playing Gut. Gut is played with three cards you never get to look at and then two to five cards that are communal. As the shared cards are dealt you bet without ever knowing what your three cards are. Needless to say everyone prided themselves on being able to cheat at it.

I never played. Gambling was alien to me. Curiously I wanted to figure out “the guys” and learn how to do things their way. What they said and did hardly ever made sense to me and my Jehovah’s Witnesses upbringing. Right now I was in the living room with most of “the girls” listening to music and getting stoned playing the “Puff the Magic Drag-On” game. The girls always followed the boys and wore too much makeup and too tight jeans for my taste. I never even thought about messing around with the “girls” in the gang. They drank and smoked a lot. I still couldn’t figure out which guy they were with.

And then in strolled Vinnie in a short brown tailored leather jacket. Louie looked at him sideways while David said “Hello”. Richie wanted to know if he “had taken care of that thing?” Richie never talked details in front of anyone. “I got school and then work so I didn’t do it yet. But I’m gonna see him tonight.”

Vinnie kept his distance from the guys in some way. He bypassed the card game and headed into the living room with dark laser beam eyes darting everywhere. All the girls warily looked his way. He was a hunter seeking prey. I could tell he used his masculine Italian features and broad smile as bait to lure his victim.

My first thought was he was a player chasing girls. But he steered away from the girls almost like they weren’t worth his time and turned towards me. “Hey Milt, what’s happening, what’s goin on?” his eyes took in everything including the joint I had just been passed. His eyes grew big. He wanted a hit. Suddenly he had a thousand watt smile.

Jet News, the appropriately named Paul Revere of the group, shook her head at me. A warning? “Watch out for Vinnie. He’ll take you. He stole fifty dollars from me,” Jet News protectively cautioned with a whisper. “He’s always up to something.” A dark Italian motherhood instinct had kicked in. She wasn’t sure how much my baby face reflected my experience with life. I suddenly got the feeling that I was their innocent rich kid friend from the top of the hill they had to protect.

“Jimmy C just got back from Nam.” Vinnie talked about the world. “I’m staying in college so I don’t have to go. Plus I want a good job. A plush job.” He was going to college to avoid the draft and to make something out of himself. He kept this banter going until the joint was gone and moved on saying goodbye as he headed for the door. A joint junkie, but that was OK because he was one of the boys. It did occur to me that he never looked me in the eye, his eyes constantly alert and scanning the room.

I didn’t think about Vinnie again until a few days later when Vinnie made another appearance at Katy’s parent-free house. He didn’t seem to have the violent edge that some of the guys had nor was he wimpy and submissive like the other half. No one ever talked about Vinnie beating someone up or doing anything

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bad. For that matter, they never talked about him at all. It was almost like he was in but not in.

“Louie says you’re looking for a job.” Vinnie approached me.

“Yeah I could use the money.” I was still living at home and since my dad split the extra money would come in handy if I wanted to buy a pizza at Luigis to eat at O’Neals bar or some grass to smoke. My father never even saw or spoke to us anymore which was probably good because then he couldn’t get mad at me and hit me either.

“I’m working at Prozy’s and they just fired the girl that worked with me. Come down and fill in an application. It’ll be good.” Vinnie wanted me to hang out with him and was working me with that toothy smile. Pretty cool but I didn’t want to seem eager. I had already learned to “play it cool”.

“Prozy’s that’s all old people’s clothes,” I countered.

“No, they opened a boutique in the basement to sell bell bottoms and tie-dyed T-shirts.”

I needed the money and it might make work more fun to listen to Vinnie scheming all day. He seemed cool and smooth with the girls, something I wasn’t. He knew all kinds of people that my world had never mixed with. His life of intrigue drowned me in curiosity. And he took me in just like the guys.

Even though I couldn’t think of why any cool people would go to Prozy’s to buy clothes I went down and filled in an application. They interviewed me on the spot and asked if I could start tomorrow. That was too easy.

The next day I got to work at 12:00, right on time. The store was open from 12:00 to 6:00 everyday except Sunday. Vinnie was late. He came in at 12:15 and began showing me what I had to do: fold clothes, straighten the shelves, use the cash register.

At 4:30, after my break, the real lessons started. “Watch the door. Let me know if anyone comes in.” Vinnie instructed. He was tossing bell bottoms out the basement door to pick up after work. Now I knew why he wanted me to work with him. Vinnie needed a partner in crime; a lookout. That was the “Lesson One”. It wasn’t right. I had never seen someone steal before. I had never even thought about it.

“Lesson Two” came the next day when I caught Vinnie pocketing the cash from a sale. I knew it was wrong but I wouldn’t say anything. I couldn’t say anything. Even to the guys. There were more than enough stories about other kids that were still in the hospital for even less. You just didn’t talk when it came to your friends.

“You want to give me a ride into the city? I gotta see my connection”

“I can’t. I’m practicing tonight.” Vinnie had shown me something in him I hadn’t expected. I was going to have to lie and look the other way while he stole. I had never stolen anything.

“I meant tomorrow morning. I’ll pay for your gas and tolls and even six dollars for your time. I need to pick up something.”

I had to think. I was only making \$1.75 an hour so six dollars was a lot. “All right. I’ll do it. What time?” I used to go into the city a lot to see concerts or hangout in The Village. Maybe Vinnie wanted to get some clothes from a boutique. He always dressed well. It could be cool to hang out with Vinnie in New York.

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â Come get me at 10:00. Iâ ll be ready.â We didnâ t talk much after that.

I wondered what we were doing but what could happen at 10:00 AM?

I pulled up to Vinnieâ s about 10:15 in my blue Alfa Romeo Giulia TI. It was the four-door luxury sedan I had rebuilt with my bare hands. After eight long months of having the gleaming aluminum engine on newspapers in my bedroom the car was now my main means of transportation. Anyway, Vinnie piled in and immediately got an attitude with me, â Youâ re late. I been waiting all morning for you.â

â Damn, Vin, be cool.â Something was different. He was creepy. Scary. There was no smile now.

As we came across the George Washington bridge, Vinnie said, â Take 9th Avenue down. Weâ re going to 148th and 8th.â

â Where?â I blurted out.

Now I was getting freaked. This was Harlem and I had never driven in the rough part of New York City before. â Vin, what are we doing?â I was scared but I didnâ t want the guys to find out I was a scared kid. Vinnie would definitely tell everybody if I copped out. I could do this.

â Weâ re going to my connection to cop some pound bags of smack. Heroin.â He was edgy and pushing me. His smoothness was gone. Now I was terrified but at the same time adrenaline was rushing through me. Vinnieâ s drama was to show how tough he was. All the guys were into playing hard guys with the dream of being a â madeâ man.

â The man. Stay cool.â Vinnie was taking control as we passed a blue and white cruiser. This was it. Busted and locked up. But the cruiser just kept going. I canâ t do this.

Harlem was just waking up. There were a few nasty looking people scanning the avenue on every corner. I could get busted. Or shot. Or worse.

â Thereâ s George. Find a space. Right there! Pull in.â Vinnie jumped. He was pale and totally on edge while I was scared shitless.

â Come on. Lock the car,â he barked, jumping out and heading for a dingy doorway in the middle of the block. I had to get out. I couldnâ t wait there alone.

My brain pushed my numb, dazed body to follow him into the dark urine soaked hallway. At the end of the dingy, dark tunnel on the right, was a dim light leaking through a steel door. Vinnie slammed through the door following the skinniest old black man I had ever seen. His worn out jacket attempted to filter out an overpowering smell that was left hanging like a cloud in his wake.

â Four bags and one for you, \$80.00.â Vinnie placed his order. George snatched the cash from Vinnieâ s outstretched hand while moving through the door and disappeared into the dark hallway.

I spent the next eleven seconds checking out this miniature tomb. There was a small bed the size of a cot along one wall. Vinnie fidgeted in a stained easy chair with dirty grey stuffing falling out of both arms. A small two drawer chest sat between the bed and stiff backed wooden chair. A rescued 25 watt lamp resting on the chest provided the cemetery-like lighting. Next to the lamp were two charred screw on bottle caps and a cheap glass half full of a clear liquid. I was kind of glad it was so dark because the walls were alive with roaches.

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Bang! In came George. "Black Power today. It's bad." He handed Vinnie four glassine stamp envelopes with white powder in them. Vinnie and George both went to work. They peeled the black, green and red tape off a bag and unfolded it. After tapping on the bottom to gather the powder they flipped the bag over and emptied it into one of the charred bottle caps from the top of the chest of drawers. There was a bobby pin wrapped around the bottle cap with two ends sticking out like a handle on a frying pan. They called this a "cooker". I watched dumbfounded.

Then George opened the top drawer and pulled out two eyedroppers with a baby bottle nipple attached to the big end by a rubber band. Vinnie pulled out a dollar bill and ripped a thin strand off the end of it. Then he wrapped it tightly around the small end of the eyedropper. He grabbed a needle off the chest and slid it over the small end of the eyedropper using the wrapped dollar to hold it on and serve as a gasket to keep the joint from leaking.

His fingers moved with practiced precision as he deftly filled the dropper two-thirds full with water from the dirty glass on the dresser and added it to the white powder in the "cooker". Ripping two matches from the book and lighting them he placed the flame under the "cooker" while gently shaking the mixture all in one fluid motion.

"The heat dissolves the dope into the water. You don't want to burn it." Vinnie was now teaching a subject he obviously loved. Wrapping his belt above the crook in his arm, he squeezed his fist over and over while pushing the needle into his arm.

"A hit!" Vinnie announced. A thin red trail of blood snaked its way back into the dropper. Vinnie squeezed the bulb and the liquid disappeared into his arm. His face suddenly relaxed as he crossed over into his smoothness. He was on top of the world. He had crossed over into a place where no one could touch him. I was completely entranced by the process.

George was just finishing up. He had had trouble finding a good vein to stick the needle into. Every visible vein had nearly impenetrable scars from years of shooting up. He would never give up until he had reached the same anesthetized plateau Vinnie was now viewing the world from.

I was frozen with fear, filled with amazement, yet clinging to the security of this tomb. It had even begun to feel warm. Remembering our entrance, I was petrified of retracing my steps and going back out onto the dangerous streets of Harlem. At least in here I wouldn't be busted or ripped off. "Let's go or we'll be late for work." Vinnie pushed me out of my trance and the door with his body slam. His slick smile was back. I hustled down the tunnel-like hallway toward the bright sunlight.

I was moving toward the car even before my eyes adjusted. I wanted out of there. In the car on the way uptown Vinnie explained George. "George got a bag from me but I think he gets bags from the dealers too." And then about dope. "Black Power has been good. You can tell by the color of tape they use to close the bag. And Mexican smack is brown."

And on and on all the way back to Prozy's. His words made background noise I couldn't make out. I didn't speak at all. We got there five minutes early. My whole body was numb. I was usually hungry but not today. I had been both terrified and eerily excited at the same time. I spent the rest of the afternoon coming down from the adrenaline rush of fear and excitement. I was high without ever putting anything into my body.

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