

# FICTION

## The Gothamid Prince

*Enzo Scavone*



Then said the king, "What shall my son see to make him retire from the world?"

"The four signs."

"What four?"

"A decrepit old man, a diseased man, a dead man, and a monk."

"From this time forth," said the king, "let no such persons be allowed to come near my son. It will never do for my son to become a Buddha."

— *Jakata Tales*

Two streets crossing each other. Sidewalks. Corners. Green woven-wire trash cans with their festering refuse on display; sifting out solid chunks, releasing murky juices. Wasps buzzing with delight, landed prostrate in worship, are thankful for the bounty. Hurriedly avoiding the refuse spectacle and its pungent odor are slacks and skirts. Nervous limbs tumbling under

fabric, fighting to escape their business casual trap. Pushing ahead is all they can do. Vito lowers his head and looks at his shoes. Cheap black plastic. Sweaty, hot little toaster ovens for his feet on the searing asphalt.

This had been an unpleasant day at work. Vito had started temping for JP Morgan Chase two weeks ago. Before Chase, he had

been doing office work at many different places for a year now; copying this, scheduling that, and reporting to this or that other person. It never paid enough and there were certainly no opportunities to get hired full-time. Why buy the cow if you can get the milk without having to pay benefits? The temp works along in limbo as a foreign body. Then, the deployment ends and that was it. Work, smirk, thank you jerk.

And that's if everything goes smoothly. Sometimes places will use you as a lightning rod. A team is failing their benchmark? There are tensions? Use the temp. Give him a task that he is sure to fail and you have your scapegoat. Even better: don't give him any work so that the overworked team members start being resentful. That takes the focus right off your lack of leadership skills. It becomes even more pathetic when two temps have been hired and eventually there might be one permanent position available. Throw a knife between two starving people.

This is how Vito feels now. For the last two weeks the other temp, Daniel, has been sucking up to the team and has called out and blown out of proportion any mistakes he found Vito making. Vito doesn't have a strong sense of pride. Especially not considering his work. He knows he makes mistakes and honestly, he's just there for the money. However, seeing that somebody else thinks stabbing him in the back would give him some sort of advantage — seeing

someone believing that getting hired permanently would be anything that warrants scheming against somebody else — made Vito deeply and thoroughly sad. Naturally, Daniel's actual meanness added to it.

In addition to that, after eight or more hours of work and an hour and a half of riding the train twice a day, Vito has to return home to an apartment which has hot water only in the shower and a neighbor who makes so much noise that relaxation is almost impossible.

He moved there a little less than a year ago. That was after he had been forced to leave his last place, where he had become unwelcome. What led to the resentment he had faced there was that he had asked the neighbor to keep it down in the later hours. Eager to teach a complaining tenant a lesson, the landlord who got called into the dispute sided with the noisy neighbor and they banded together against Vito. Following that came a childish power struggle where the landlord blatantly neglected even the most minuscule of his duties and the unemployed neighbor proceeded to make noise at all hours of the day and night. Their passive aggression led to the intended result. Vito moved out. The landlord even kept the two months' security deposit. His vague explanation: for the substantial damage that had been done. Vito did not fight for it. He didn't have the time or the energy. The exhaustion accrued during the workweek could

barely be made up by two days of free time on the weekend. There was nothing left to fight with. He had been happy to escape that hell hole and able to move to a different place.

A different place that later turned out to be just as bad. The new landlord didn't care about anything either and the new neighbor — a dysfunctional family with three children — kept Vito awake at night. Upon Vito asking them with a desperation-speckled friendliness to keep it down, all he heard was a raspy, "Fuck you, Goober" and the children laughing over it. He once called the police. The noise stopped for about twenty minutes and then continued. He placed another call, but the police never came again. There is no solace. You go to work, people treat you like crap, you go home, people treat you like crap. You work a job you don't like to stuff the money down your landlord's throat who thinks you are less than shit. Vito feels a lump in his throat and his eyes itch a little.

The traffic light switches and he crosses the street. TriBeCa at evening rush hour. The streets are full of cars. The sidewalks are full of scurrying corporate lemmings. Zombies who endured a nerve-wracking and suffocating day at work. Amongst them, almost too disturbing to look at: petite and vital European women in yoga pants pushing double strollers followed by a nanny as fashion accessory. Young hipsters looking individuals sit on benches in front of cafes drinking coffee: Mocha Pounder, 3 O'Clock Pick

Me Up, The Chino. Just like that coffee, it boils somewhere deep down inside of you — dark and bitter. So deep that you can't find out what it is, how it truly feels, or how it came to be.

Vito approaches the intersection of Warren Street and West Broadway. At the northwest corner in front of the window display of an optician's store, he steps out of the moving throng of rush-hourers and waits. He checks his watch.

Vito feels weak. He looks at the passing cohorts of workers. Monotony. You convince yourself over and over again to do something and over and over again you feel that it is useless and leads nowhere. The track within your mind from the inception of that action to its end; steep and unwelcoming, leads away from yourself, is pushed clear by imperatives: *Go! Do it! Work!*, anxiousness: *Rent will be due on the 1st* or by hate: *You good for nothing!* Time and again, you overcome your own resistance and time after time the path becomes worn out by unwilling treading. The very thought of trying to convince yourself to do it one more time infinitely repulsive, dishonest, hateful and unconvincing. Like when you were little and started to realize that God doesn't exist, but you still paid lip service in front of your grandma. Then, one day you realize that everyone—even Grandma—knows that they pray into the void and

you feel you don't have to do this anymore. You realize that your unwillingness to do it was justified and you stop. What remains is an old woman holding on to something for the sake of holding on. No higher goal. No redemption. Just incredibly annoying nothingness.

Vito feels angry. His pulse rises. A wave of perspiration moves from his back over the sides to his chest and up to his shoulders. Tensing muscles. Catatonic facial expression. Vito desperately turns around and faces a pillar in the storefront, using it as cover, almost hugging it. There is the water behind his eyes again.

He takes a deep breath and looks east down Warren Street. The shade of the buildings in the heat. A draft brings no relief. Pedestrians on the sidewalk, cars on the street, dark blue, black, grey sleeves, specks of yellow, red, blue, white fabric, moving, traffic cone orange, bright limestone, brownstone—wall. His gaze shatters on the fortified concrete Moloch that is the Verizon headquarters at the end of the street. The place where all the complaints come to die. Vito turns the other way. Facing west, residential dynasty towers hem in Warren Street and lead his gaze down through a canyon to Manhattan's west bank. Where the fleeting lines meet, he senses the Hudson. Vito puts his bag down and leans his back against the optician's storefront. Sale on frames. \$300. He stares in front of him. Cars drive by on the street at a slow

speed. The wheels and the doors rush through his field of vision, but he is too tired to follow. He turns his head east again. He sees his father standing at the intersection, waiting to come over to his corner. The upcoming tension in his body pushes Vito off the wall. His hand is lifted and his lips are being curled to a smile. Massimo looks directly at him, raises his eyebrows and smiles too. Vito has to force a touch of nonchalance into his demeanor, picks up his bag and stands waiting.

As the traffic light changes, his father steps into the street with his backpack on his shoulder. His construction hat dangles from it and swings to and fro with each step. Vito sees his father's torso with the white t-shirt over jeans coming closer and closes the gap between them by stepping in Massimo's direction and calling out, "Hey."

"Hi," Massimo answers.

Vito's dejected look turns north, the direction they intend to walk together. Massimo joins in and they begin their journey. Massimo lifts his arm to squeeze his son's shoulder—a strong, affectionate squeeze with his hulky construction worker hand.

"Hey, how is it going?"

"Good," Vito answers.

"How is work?"

"Good."

Massimo looks at Vito. A couple of steps. Massimo looks again.

"Really? You look a little droopy."

Vito furrows his brow for

a moment. As the two men walk over the grate of the Chambers Street subway station, Vito hears the familiar, yet infernally repulsive *ding dong* of a closing train door from below.

"It's just work. They're all assholes."

"They're bothering you? What do they do?"

"They give me work."

Vito smirks and exhales. Massimo nods his head back and closes his eyes in a feigned beginning of a laugh.

"Nah," Vito continues, "it's just the usual circus at work and people getting on my nerves."

"I know. What can I tell you? Just go there and do your work. What do you care what the others say. Do your best and you'll get noticed."

Vito listens with his head hanging. Yes, he thinks to himself, that sounds reasonable, but that's not reality. People, especially the sad, frustrated people in offices tend to hate you for doing good

work if that work makes them look bad. The world should stand still at this injustice, but it doesn't.

"With a college degree, you'd be out of this shit now. You wanted to drop out. Now, that's what you get. Work hard and see to it that they give you a permanent position."

Vito's throat closes in a peculiar feeling of self-blame and something else that he can't put his finger on. He keeps his head down.

"Still, what beauty there is in the refusal of the fear of being unemployed, of not doing something that is useful or that yields you money."

"Yeah."

"What do you expect?" his father continues. "This is what was coming and this is all you've got. See that you figure things out. You need to stand on your own feet."

"Yeah," Vito replies disgruntled.

He feels trapped.

"I don't know. I might ask Gainor if they can place me with a different job. I don't want to work there anymore."

"You," his father interjects in an authoritative tone, "need to get your head straight. If you get hired by Chase, you are made. No need to go looking around for other jobs. See to it that you get in there and that you enter a career path. If you think your mom and I will keep giving you money so you can float around from job to job, you can knock that out of your head. We are not going to support you any more. From now on, you have to fend for yourself."

"Trust me, I don't want support from you guys."

"Really? I'm not so sure."

Vito sighs and stares ahead.

"Vito! Don't quit."

Massimo couldn't stress this enough.

"You don't realize it but you have a sweet deal. Nowhere do you get the same money and job stability as with Chase. See to it that they hire you permanently." A brief pause. "You're just a little down on yourself today. Relax. Get your head clear. Tomorrow you'll feel better. Go out with some friends. Live a little."

Vito and Massimo proceed north on West Broadway.

"Why do you always think that I want your money?"

"I don't think you want our

money. It's just a fact. If you don't work and you run out of money, who's gonna pay? Us! I don't think you want our money. I just think that you are lazy and pampered. You can't take any heat and want to quit right away. You want the easy way out without thinking about the consequences. You think there is always someone who will catch you when you fall. Not this time. You need to stick with this."

"I can find work somewhere else."

"Where? Where else can you find work? Nobody's hiring. Chase is a huge company. With their size, they have lots of changes in their workforce. Lots of opportunities to get in. Of course, it's not said that you can't lose your job, but they offer more security than one of those small, crummy companies in Brooklyn or Queens."

Vito can't get a word out. He submits to his father's patronizing energy and his annoying insight into the New York administrative job market. Annoying because he tells him to do something he doesn't want to do. Annoying, because he is probably right. Vito is at a loss for a way to oppose him—if one looks for security and nothing more, then staying in a monotonous job with a big company is okay. If it's just to get the paycheck, just to go home, go to sleep, just to go back to work, then doing what he's doing now is the best option. It's the safest option.

Vito and Massimo cross Reade Street. An oncoming stream of people, business casual interspersed with tourists, has claimed the width of the sidewalk. The southbound crowd forces the people going north into a small corridor they leave on the building-side of the sidewalk. A

clearance that is barely broad enough to walk through if it wasn't being jammed by a decrepit old figure walking very slowly but steadily north. Sunk into himself, almost unable to propel forward. He is burdened with several bags of groceries. He struggles to stay upright resisting the pull down into the ground.

There is a backlog of northbound pedestrians behind him and whenever the oncoming pedestrian traffic relents and a gap opens, there is a quick merge, jog and overtake. The line queued up behind the old man, treading in his pace, diminishes, until new northbound pedestrians catch up and lengthen it once more.

Massimo and Vito are next to overtake the old man. Vito observes him from behind. Long, brittle hair, light white, almost transparent. Prunish skin textured by bumpy follicles and shaded by red capillaries. His jaw pulled open by the weight of the skin. His hands are worn out, calloused, joints swollen by gout. They seem incapable of holding anything. His youth, spilled out on the numerous and long errand walks that he has taken throughout his life. His old skin like a tarp draped over the scaffold that is his skeleton, which seems bound to collapse sooner rather than later. He is calm—like having undergone a decline from once vibrant, to having expended most of the energy, and now being almost extinguished. A calm little flame about to burn out.

An opportunity to pass by has opened up. Massimo speeds up the pace and the two overtake the old decrepit man. Vito looks back. Massimo checks on Vito behind him. Their gazes meet. Vito smiles weakly.

“Did you see that guy?” Vito asks.

“Yeah, blocking the whole sidewalk.”

Vito looks back, then at Massimo again.

“I can’t shake the feeling that’s me in sixty years walking back from my job at Chase.”

Vito forces the smile to stay. Massimo looks back at the old man again.

“Why?”

“You don’t feel like life is slipping by fast?”

“Come on.”

“We are not as young as we were yesterday and this day went by so quickly. Before we know it, we will be so old that we can’t walk straight. Like that guy.”

“I think you should look at this year first. See that by the end of it you have a steady job, then you can worry about the next fifty-nine.”

A faint tension is blowing over the two men.

“So, I’m supposed to keep doing what I’m doing, always keeping my head down, looking right in front of me? One day I might find myself trapped in an ancient body with no time left to do something.”

“What do you want me to tell you? That’s the way life is. You take life step by step until you’re old. It’s not like you’re old tomorrow. You have enough time to be young.”

“So, I should just work my life away until I die?”

“Okay. First of all, you are cranky because of what happened at work today. Now you go around looking for signs that it’s the wrong job and you should quit. Relax. Go watch a movie. Get your head clear. I don’t want to hear any more. This is

all on you. You quit college. Now, put up with crappy jobs. That’s how the world is. No need to cry about it.”

Vito doesn’t agree, but he can’t disagree either. How is life? Live life as long as you have it and when you’re old, you’re old. It’s the same for everyone. Find some enjoyment while you still can. Seems sound. Doesn’t feel sound though. Vito’s desolation is still there. His father is still there, too. He continues to have a gnawing sensation in his stomach, especially thinking that it might be the soundest decision to tough it out at Chase; to try to get that full-time job so he can whittle his life away at some desk for fifty years.

Massimo and Vito are at Thomas Street now. Their exchange has subsided and their attentions are silently caught by the happenings of a TriBeCa workday afternoon. Cars driving by. Young women in beautiful dresses, freshly applied makeup. Young men, freshly showered, just stepping out of the house. Carrying nothing with them. Going somewhere fun. No need to work.

They cross over West Broadway to the east side of the street and proceed north. Their silence has now lasted long enough to gain significance. The compliant façade Vito used to put up against his parents is beginning to crumble. Now he has let it shine through. This life seems suspicious to him. This life, a derivative of work—and not the good kind of work: that kind you do to feed yourself, the things you grow, the things you create yourself. It’s bad work: that kind of work that you don’t see the result of, that you don’t

feel is necessary, that somebody else tells you to do, that somebody else takes credit for and that you fear to lose. The bad feeling doesn’t go away and Vito is angry, but also desperate. Why are these fuckers keeping him here? These fuckers who order him around and who love to control him.

“Did I make you even grumpier?” Massimo asks suddenly.

“Can’t get grumpier,” Vito replies with a compulsory smile seeking to appease. Maybe his father doesn’t understand how much he is suffering.

“Cheer up. It gets better. Be strong. Focus on the matter at hand. I always said that. You need to learn to focus.”

Vito feels angry again.

“Yeah.”

They make a turn east on Worth Street. Once they cut over two blocks and reach Broadway, the sight of Canal Street appears, and holds Chinatown to the north. This part of TriBeCa is still affluent, but already secretly hoping for tourists: \$2 Poland Springs.

The two men keep walking north on Broadway. After passing White Street, they approach the entrance of a residential building. An emaciated young girl emerges out of it and proceeds to swiftly walk in front of them. She has a quick and swaying gait; flinging her limbs forward, the anorexic torso barely able to hold her upper body. Her shoulders, protruding and emaciated. Her arms bowing away from the chest in arching lines. Her hips, wide and pointy. Her hair, long and shiny. Brunette. She is wearing a metallic polyester disco skirt that amply wallows around her hips and falls in long waves down to her knees.

A springy, elastic fabric brushing her nonexistent thighs and being flung away to spring back again. Her tailbone pokes out menacingly; above it, trailing up her bony back under a long-sleeved shirt, her vertebrae—an archaeological curiosity. Vito notices the curve of her shinbones from behind and so does Massimo. The two men are overwhelmed by the impression and try to deceive each other with forced insouciance, all the while occasionally stealing glances at the girl. Veins protruding from under dry and depleted skin. Her calves—so thin and tender—planted fragilely into two knobby, but equally fragile-seeming ankles, which are in turn insecurely lodged in floaty canvas shoes. Their thick fabric undulating with waves of foot bones swimming around in them, rising and lowering uncomfortably.

Spellbound, they are led by the anorexic girl. Every muscle that protrudes from under her skin a scream, every sinew a groan, every bone laid bare by the compulsive obsession that wants to bring it to attention. She’s staying hungry for the ultimate satisfaction of being finally seen by Death. She’s growing ever thinner to the point of vanishing—and feeling alive while doing it.

Feeling alive while doing it like some temp somewhere. Growing ever more exhausted to the point of breaking down. Staying tired for the ultimate satisfaction of finally being caught up. His self-worth exposed by a compulsive obsession that needs to get it measured by an employer. Every hour of sleep missed, a grumble. Every upcoming deadline, a death sentence. A fundamental confusion of life and death. So obvious to anybody but the person confused.

Who is going to tell them?

Massimo has picked up the pace and they have not only caught up with the girl, but are now passing her by at a suspiciously close distance. Massimo has averted his gaze from this most troubling apparition. Vito, receded into the crevices of his mind, absently stares at her hair and her back. He might be able to see her face, just a little bit; maybe find out what this all means by catching a glimpse of it while walking by. As he comes closer and tries to find her eyes, the girl notices him and flinches. Still walking, she looks at Vito shyly only to immediately look away again. Massimo turns around and notices the scene. He smiles nervously at the girl, then at Vito and keeps walking ahead trying to lead his son out of this scene. The girl slows down to get some distance between her and the two men. She keeps her look averted toward the building fronts, almost merging into the wall. Only from time to time does she cast a guarded glimpse at the two men, trying to see if they stopped making her look at herself.

Vito has now caught up with Massimo. He wonders what his father is thinking right now. More than that, however, the anorexic girl is still haunting his thoughts. A girl running herself down on the way to death, thinking that if she just gets a little farther, she reaches life. Never seeing her error. Vito is walking stiffly, not daring to look back. She must be a block away now. Vito looks at the sidewalk in front of him. A tired worker staring at the sidewalk, running after something that is supposed to give him completion.

He looks at Massimo.

“Why were you staring at

that girl?” Massimo asks him.

“Dunno—did you see how thin she was?”

“Yeah. That girl has a problem. She’s anorexic.”

Massimo releases the word “anorexic” with a strange inflection. “No need to stare at her and make her feel ill at ease,” he adds.

“Yeah, I know. It’s just—first we see the old decrepit guy and then her.”

“So?”

“So, you told me that I should just live my life until I’m old. That’s just how life is. You know, do the things I need to do and enjoy the pleasant things in life. But, if I do that, I could live my life the wrong way. Take her, she lives life day by day working on getting thinner, never stopping to think that she is starving herself to death.”

They have reached Canal Street. Massimo stops, throws his head back and exclaims, “Vito, not this again!”

Vito laughs self-consciously.

“We’re gonna meet a lot of messed up people on the streets of New York, you can’t start seeing ghosts in all of them. Honestly, forget your shitty day and clear your head.”

Vito’s rage is surging once more. After the last remark, Massimo quickly crosses Canal Street. Vito waits for an oncoming sedan to pass by between him and his father. Then, he follows Massimo to the other side of the street. They walk on. Silently.

After walking for some distance, Massimo begins, “How is it going with that Abby girl by the way?”

Vito is not ready to answer. “Eh, we’re not dating anymore.”

A pause. “Call a girl, take her

out. Especially now that you are so grumpy.”

“Yeah.”

It sounded like a good idea, but it upset Vito nonetheless. Calling up a nice girl. The excitement before the date—until the worries come: does she like me? Was that a stupid joke? Will she like me better with a blue or red shirt? Desperate, fearful and, most of all, inane questions. Trapped inside a game of pseudo-problems. A glance, a remark from her feeling like Paradise, only to be thrown into the depths of self-doubting Hell by the one after that. Vito’s anger is still there.

Perspiration on Vito’s neck and arms. A humid heat. He turns back to look south. The anorexic girl has vanished into the confusion that is a look downtown. They reach Grand Street and turn at the corner to walk east. Still covered by the buildings’ shadows from the evening sun that burns its last rays on a festering downtown. Their pace changes to a stroll among happy tourists and busy menial laborers going to or coming from work—or having a break. The anorexic girl, a couple of blocks away, still struggling. And Vito, walking east, still struggling. Both blindly pressed toward something scary, but both oblivious to what it is, unable to not walk toward it. Quiet. Slowly skewing trapezoids of windows pass him by. Uneven, dirty sidewalks. Traffic noises. And always Massimo in his view. Vito is stuck. Bland pain. They reach Crosby Street. A suffocating clog of traffic at the intersection. Pedestrians and bikers steaming in the rush hour heat.

Massimo and Vito turn north, walking up Crosby Street on its east side. The exhaustion of the day

walks along with them. Vito’s clothes cling to his sweaty skin. He stops and begins to unbutton his shirt. He calls out to Massimo to wait. After having peeled off the shirt, he drapes it over his arm. Now that he has stopped, the fatigue can properly work on him. A quiet defeat is stretching through his limbs. His feet are sweaty and soaked. Massimo waits for him a few yards ahead. He is pressed to move on. Vito is thirsty.

“I need to get some water.”

Massimo hesitates a second.

“I’ll get some too.”

They walk back to a corner store they just passed at Grand and Crosby. Mangos among the fruits in the outside display putrefying in the heat emit a sour smell. The automatic door opens and the expected cold waft of an air-conditioned atmosphere envelops them as they each step inside. They walk through the spaciouly arranged aisles—uncommonly spacious, wasting away rent on comfort. Superfluous, cheap goods nagging at you with expensive prices. They reach the back with the clear panelled fridges. Massimo takes out a San Pellegrino lemonade. Vito notices his movements. As if floating on an air of cockiness. A relic of Massimo’s youth, when he used to hang out in front of corner stores in Brooklyn with his friends. Young hoodlums, girls on their mind and no school. Sure that they could wrest a living from this world, just like their fathers before them, who thought the same. Self-consciously Vito picks out a Poland Spring. They walk to the register.

Massimo has already opened his can and taken a sip before the store clerk asks them to pay four dollars.

Massimo calms Vito’s frantic

fishing for his wallet, insisting, “I got this.”

Vito thanks him and the clerk gives Massimo the change that he puts away in his wallet. Meanwhile, Vito’s gaze has fallen onto a stack of *New York Posts* that lie by the register. The headline screams, “Head in the Clouds: Principal Decapitated by Bus Driver.” Vito grabs his beverage. It’s too cold. He turns toward the stack of newspapers and while Massimo tucks his wallet in his back pocket, he skims over the teaser. In an apparent accident, an elementary school principal from the Bronx had been rammed into a streetlight by a New York tourist bus, one of those double-deckers. The force and the angle of the impact split her torso in two on the street light. The upper part of her body fell into a waste bin that stood there. How is that a decapitation? Vito picks the paper up. Massimo, giving him some time to study it, stands back and takes another sip. No pictures of the scene in the article. Only a lot of photographs of the Middle Eastern bus driver. In all of the four pictures he is captured either screaming or making wild gestures.

“You want that, too?” Massimo asks.

“No, just reading the headline.”

Vito puts the paper back down and they move out of the store to proceed north along Crosby Street. In New York you hear about people getting killed, but not about them being ripped in half. What does he care? People ripped apart or not, he still has to go to work tomorrow.

Vito’s bag is beginning to hurt his right shoulder, the bottle is freezing his left hand. He holds it to his temples and rubs it over his

forehead. He finds it still too cold for consumption. That’s funny, Vito never thought an elementary school principal could die like that. Principals are supposed to have it together. Humble, level-headed, security-seeking elementary school principals—get cut in half by a tourist bus. How tragic. Even if the anorexic girl recognizes her delusion, comes around, doesn’t drift toward death anymore, becomes an elementary school principal and leads a life of clarity and righteousness, she’ll get mauled by a tourist bus. Or him, Vito, if he ever gets that permanent job, then, has a happy life, begins to make enough money to be independent, maybe even has a girlfriend, there is always that tourist bus somewhere, waiting, lurking behind a wall to shoot out like a projectile through the corner of his eye—until it’s inside it. Spreading you out on the sidewalk like peanut butter; with your sensible clothes, your papers strewn about soaking in your blood.

While they walk quietly, Vito groans, opens the sealed cap of his bottle, and takes a swig. Ice cold. It bothers his throat.

“Are you alright?” Massimo asks.

“Yeah, it’s just—the water is too cold.”

Vito harrumphs heartily to fight back the ice cold sensation in his throat. It stays cold and he keeps opening and closing his uvula, playing with the slight soreness he feels by his pharynx.

“Oh, come on...” Massimo rolls his eyes.

“Did you see the headline back there?”

“That lady that got run over?”

“She didn’t get run over. She got cut in half by a bus against a street light.”

“Sheesh,” Massimo exclaims.

“It’s like something you would expect to happen in a war zone. Not in New York.”

“Yeah.”

“And the lady was an elementary school principal. She had her head straight.”

Massimo hesitates for a second, “What do you mean?”

“Do you remember that you told me to get my head straight? That lady had her head straight and still...”

Massimo shuts him down, “I told you to get your head straight, not get split in half by a bus! Vito, are you still going on about this?”

“I don’t know. I’m supposed to get my head straight. Next thing I know, I get split in half by a bus.”

“What? Where is that coming from?” Massimo replies indignantly. “Keep your eyes open and you won’t get run over. Besides, what do you want? Just because you’re afraid you could get into an accident, you don’t want to work anymore? Stuff just happens. That’s life. You gotta work. If you die, you’re dead and you can’t have regrets anymore.”

Vito listens but feels sorry for having brought it up.

Massimo continues his rant, “What? You want to live every day like something could happen any moment? It’s pretty safe around here. If you were in a war you could think like that, I guess, but here we are pretty safe. Just be careful and don’t try to find excuses not to work—and get your head straight!”

Vito can’t get a word in edgewise. He also feels silly. Yes, it’s

true that it was a fluke accident. But why, then, does it weigh so heavily on Vito? Why does he feel here, for once, he sees everything that is wrong in his life? All those assumptions about what he needs to accomplish. He has always carried them with him like a very heavy bag that is dragging him down. Could those assumptions be wrong? Why is it so clear to his father that everything is so easy and simple?

“Man, you have to get out of this funk. Live a little. Buy yourself some new clothes. Don’t you think that’s part of why you don’t get along with people at work?”

“What are you talking about? I’m dressed business casual.”

“Yes, but sometimes it’s not enough to just look passable. You need to look good, present something, eye candy, otherwise people get insecure and let it out on you. I’m telling you, buy some new, nicer clothes and you’ll feel better. Feel better, other people treat you better—instead of projecting that grumpy self of yours.”

Vito feels awkward.

“We can go to Macy’s this weekend. I’ll buy you some new clothes.”

To him, his father was just being silly now. Suddenly, he has his money sitting loose? Vito feels manipulated and angry. Buy new clothes so that the assholes at work are appeased? What then, Dad? And what then? Vito says nothing.

“Hm?”

His father solicits an answer.

“Yeah, we can.”

He feels angry at Massimo—and himself.

Vito squishes the bottle. The plastic makes a loud crackling sound.

He sits to the left, closer to the curb, lifts his arm and slams the barely emptied bottle into a garbage can. Massimo hears the loud thump and turns around.

“What’s wrong?” he asks surprised.

“Nothing.”

Massimo eyes Vito for a split second longer than comfortable. Then, he turns around again. They are now crossing Broome Street, walking by real estate agencies advertising \$3,000 one-bedroom apartments, and restaurants with \$40 breakfasts. His father, the construction worker, and Vito with mismatched clothes and ill-fitting shoes that bother his feet and that he is wearing in order to comply with a dress code at a job where he can’t get ahead, where he is stuck and wasting away his life. At Spring Street and Broadway, they cross to the north side and turn east. Low buildings, clean windows, shoppers fulfilling their wish for material satisfaction, employees on the street taking a break from obeying their masters and the occasional homeless person lying on the sidewalk trying to silence it.

After they pass Mulberry Street, Massimo stops in front of a pastry shop. A pastry boutique, rather, with wide glass doors and a security guard standing behind them in a posture imitating what a security guard would stand like were there not pastries but precious jewels in the display to be guarded.

Cocoa and spices, through the presence of the picture of a celebrity chef in the kitchen, receive the ratings “exquisite” and “rare.” Simple ingredients alchemically turned into gems of magical exclusivity.

Massimo casts a curious look

at the alluring delights offered in the display and waves Vito to come over.

“I think what you need is sugar, you’re probably hypoglycemic.”

As Vito comes closer, he is captured by the flawless display and the hint at the refined deliciousness of the pastries. Supple sweet masses under almost black chocolate coverings. But something is not quite right. The sublime magnificence of each piece of pastry is partly covered by a neat little pin and a piece of expensive paper denoting its cost. One ounce of chocolate-covered marzipan, \$35.

As Massimo notices Vito staring, he adds an inviting, “Hm?”

Vito is struck annoyed by the scene he is in. Why does his father want to buy him fucking overpriced candy now and what’s with that clownish child-molester grin on his face? Vito feels bothered.

Before it hurts too much, he turns around, steps away a little, quietly, and faces west. He looks back at the way they have made from Broadway. His gaze is directed down the sidewalk over the heads of two homeless people sitting on his side of the block. The closer one of them is not more than three steps away from Vito, leaning on the building front by the bakery, smiling at him.

Massimo is still eyeing the sweets hoping to convince Vito to eat something. Vito acts as though he doesn’t notice Massimo or the vagrant. He gazes into the distance at a loss for how to exit this scene and hopes both of them will leave him alone.

In the midst of Vito’s tension the homeless man calls out to him, “Hey, Pilgrim, won’tchu... won’tchu spare some chaaange?”

Vito freezes.

“Pil... Pilgrim, won’tchu spare some change?”

A long pause ensues, during which the derelict man looks at Vito with an extended hand. Vito turns his head away from him. Massimo is quite amused at Vito’s helplessness toward the drifter.

“Pil...”

The homeless man can’t finish his address due to a violent cough that comes over him. His trachea heaves for air, viscous mucus boils within the narrow and dark organic tubes. After a while, once he calms down, there is a silent pause. With one final cough the man rips a fat fart. Upon hearing it, Massimo smirks and turns away. Having understood that he probably won’t be able to persuade Vito to eat one of the pastries, he now indicates for him to keep moving down the street, away from this embarrassing situation. Vito looks at the man who now, having realized that he is not getting anything, tries to turn over and lie on his side. After some awkward, apparently painful movements, he curls up lying sideways. Vito can see the underside of his pants. Soiled and black from street dirt. Massimo has taken a couple of steps down the street eastward and insistently waves Vito over. The beggar’s exposed underside suggests a faint threat of feces odor. The fearful anticipation of the smell leads Vito to take a step back. He looks at the homeless man. To his left are several black plastic bags with beverages in them. Vito wonders. This man sits here on the street. The contrast between him and the passersby couldn’t be greater. He couldn’t be more conspicuous, but he is unbothered. He simply does whatever he wants despite the judging

gazes of people on the street. He fearlessly holds on to his companions, the bottles of booze. Ruminating on this thought, Vito turns around and begins to catch up with Massimo, who has walked ahead. They are heading east, once more.

Massimo picks up the pace and Vito is silently trapped in his thoughts again. That bum. Immune to everything that bothers Vito. No feeling of self-consciousness. Free. No supervisor that breaks his back, no scheming co-workers, no disappointments by neighbors, no hovering parents. Only him and alcohol. Until it’s over. This might be sooner than later but until then, he lives in bliss. Life how it should be, unbothered. A poisonous ascension into Paradise. A farting, begging, feces-soiled Paradise, but Paradise nonetheless. Vito is very quiet. Alright, it’s debatable whether farting in public and lying around in your own filth might be overdoing it. Maybe there is no need to do that. Still, what beauty there is in the refusal of the fear of being unemployed, of not doing something that is useful or that yields you money. The refusal to feel self-conscious about looking like a bum. How beautiful that would be if you didn’t drink alcohol. No care about expectations that are set toward you and an unadulterated, clear feeling of lucidity. Being—without attribute. Regardless of all the other people. Regardless of the nuisance that is the world. True freedom.

They have passed Mott Street now. It is 6 p.m.

After crossing Elizabeth Street and setting foot on the sidewalk, Vito stops. He feels the weight of his bag on his aching shoulder. The skin under the strap feels sore. His

exhaustion, great and heavy, has a hold on his limbs. An exhaustion only felt by him, nobody else. After walking ahead a good stretch on his own, Massimo notices that Vito has stopped. He signals for him to hurry and catch up. An order that Vito isn’t noticing. He walks to the building at the corner and puts his arm to the wall, looking for support, something to lean on, an inanimate object. He begins to cry. First, it’s just a grimace. He turns his face toward the building wall. Then, he is shaken by spasms. His shoulders bounce. He crouches down and covers his face with his left hand, howling under it. The pain of his existence materializes and runs out of his face, dripping on the sidewalk and evaporating into the hot summer evening. A suffocating Wednesday night in Lower Manhattan. Some people, still at work, working overtime; some people going home; some people going about a work-free day in affluence. A father telling his son to stop thinking about it and keep on going.

After a while, he calms down and wipes his eyes. Massimo is worried, but as he gets closer, his facial expression shifts to one of vexation. Vito scoots up to the building wall and sits against it like the bum they had just fled from. Massimo reaches him.

“Vito, what’s wrong? Hm?” he asks serious and perturbed.

Vito doesn’t answer and sits there getting calmer. The tears have cleared his perception, his ruminations cease; no need to be anxious, no need to judge. Also, no energy. Vito sighs. His aches have gone silent. Now, just numbing exhaustion like a wide and shallow sea concealing something just

beneath the surface dipping up above the waves slightly, barely noticeable.

“Don’t be a wacko, get up!”

It’s there, but gone when you want to look at it; there again, once you give up. Sitting down, he feels the warmth of the sidewalk that has been soaking up sun rays all throughout the day. Nevertheless, Vito feels cold. Crying and staying in air conditioned, cold offices the whole day. Cold people, white skin, no sun. The sidewalk caught the heat. All day long in the sun. In the world. Free. Vito has zoned out. Massimo seems worried now.

“Vito, are you okay? You should have eaten something back there.”

Massimo takes off his backpack trying to get out his water bottle. Vito’s eyelids flutter briefly. He looks at Massimo.

“Yes. Dad. Go on. I’ll stay here.”

Massimo hands him his water bottle.

“What do you mean, ‘stay here’? On the sidewalk? Come on, get up!”

Massimo’s voice has taken on a commanding, uncompromising tone. Vito tries to bring up some energy.

He pleads, “Please, leave me here. Go. Please.”

Massimo is confused.

“What do you mean, ‘leave me here’? Stand up!”

SoHo breezes by not noticing anything.

“Vito, stand up right now. We don’t have time for this!”

Massimo takes a step back, trying to make sense of this situation, getting more and more enraged.

“Vito, *alzati!*” Massimo has

taken refuge in reverting to Italian, trying to invoke the authority and familiarity he remembers it having in their family. His gaze is particularly stern. His voice breaking into disbelief.

“Look at this good-for-nothing imbecile lying on the sidewalk. Get up!”

Vito looks Massimo right in the eye. He feels disappointment. Massimo takes some steps toward Vito again. This has escalated into a scene. Nobody around them seems to care; only wondering looks. He stands right in front of him, bends down and talks to him insistently.

“Hello? Did you go crazy? Stand up!”

No peace whatsoever. Vito feels stuck again. He takes off his bag strap, picks up the bag by the top and places it neatly against the wall as far away as his arms can reach. Massimo follows his movements in confusion. Vito tucks the strap under the bag. He stands up. Some trouble. Massimo grabs him under his arm. Vito still feels tired, but a lot lighter without a bag dragging. As he stands straight, his upper body feels free and strong. He stretches. Massimo is still confused. He picks up Vito’s bag and begins pulling Vito east to proceed on their way. Vito doesn’t follow.

“Go. I’m staying here.”

“What are you talking about?” Massimo keeps bumping up against that malfunction, that inconvenience, that fuss, and is unsure how to deal with it.

“Vito. I’m sick of your shit. Walk with me now and shut up!”

Was that a hint of fear just now? Vito lowers his eyes and in a quick, swift move, he walks onto the street. Massimo remains behind. Vito

reaches the corner on the south side of Spring and turns around it. Quiet. Eyes open. He’s not going home. Freed of obligations. Freed of the weight of responsibility. It is a warm night. Vito walks.

As he walks by rich and careless SoHo, he is free. Free of having to do or portray anything. Free of his father’s gaze. Free to just be, without a qualifier. Over on Kenmare, he reaches Bowery. He feels a confident calm. He can turn any way now without thinking. Any way is just as good as the other. It doesn’t matter. Nobody to consider. Free as a bum. A carefree bum. A conscious one.

He sweats, but it’s not bothering him anymore. Not uncomfortable. It’s supposed to feel like that. No worries on his mind. He walks south, toward the water; because he likes the water. How it looks, how it sounds and how it smells. He dives into Chinatown. There, lumps of people clog the sidewalks. Where that used to aggravate him, he now indifferently joins into it, becomes a part of it. Not bothered. Not by the pungent dragon fruit, fish or other smells of Chinese vendors, exhaust fumes and sewers. Not by the noise of foreign languages and reckless yelling. Not by the lack of space and the impossibility to walk unencumbered. Not by the looks of desolate people, struggling to stay alive. That measly amount of money at the end of the month. Month in, month out. Never ever enough. Happiness always around the corner and one eternally too busy to grasp it. People occupied with the chase after vague concepts of fulfillment that

become void upon being obtained. In the midst of all of this is Vito. Round and quiet Vito. Doing what comes to him. Stopped being busy and ceased to chase. Moving in this world that doesn’t understand him and that he doesn’t need to understand anymore.

At the edge of Chinatown, past Monroe and Cherry Street, he reaches the waterfront. By the Manhattan Bridge, he sits down on a bench. The still giants of downtown in his back. The flat, indifferent water in front of him. A mild breeze fails to alleviate the heat of the day, but brings in unpolluted air. Vito stares out. The darkening horizon holds his gaze in trance, billowing in his sight, hiding an edge. The edge between sky and water, the seam that conceals the cosmos. Curl up into the sky, the water and, without noticing, into yourself. See all and at the same time be all. Atonement with what we once left and forgot. Vito’s eyelids begin to close. Not to him, but to the water and the sky. They close in on the horizon, erasing the known world, becoming a peaceful one with it. One with it and reborn beyond it. Vito’s wakefulness turns into a comfortable sleep. At last, his eyes shut. Extreme exhaustion dissolves into darkness. His horizon, unseen, existent in that half-realm of oncoming sleep. He sleeps. Gone for the world but closer to himself than he has ever been.

Tame your thoughts, keep them off these words. I have seen me and am known by me, Vito, blissful sleeper, atoned into himself. Truly asleep. Without dream. I.

A breeze blows over the earth. Soft and warm. Over his eyes, and down his cheek. As he opens his

eyes, the world. He calmly sits up on the bench where he had fallen asleep. It is dark now. Not cooler. His mother is holding his head. She puts a hand under his arm and tries to pull him up. He doesn’t comply.

“No. I’m gonna stay here.”

She let’s go with a confused look on her face. “What do you mean, ‘stay here?’”

He remains quiet.

“Vito, it’s two in the morning,” his mother calmly, but firmly insists. “I have been looking for you all night.”

Vito looks at his mother.

She continues, “What happened? Did Dad get on your nerves? Did he tell you you’re a good-for-nothing again? Don’t listen to him.”

“No, it’s not him,” Vito assures her.

“Then what happened?”

The diffuse yellow light of a row of street lamps behind them mixes with the warmth of the night and gives the scene a thickly sweet taste.

“I want to sit here.”

His mother closes her fluttering eyelids in disbelief and raises her eyebrows.

“You want to sit here?”

She takes a deep breath and proceeds under great effort to contain herself, “Vito, I’ve been looking for you everywhere between here and SoHo. Dad is sick of your shit and I’m exhausted. This has been enough of a burden already. Get your head straight and stand up now!”

“If it has been a burden, why did you do it?”

“Vito!” she chops down right after the questionmark. Trying to command compliance, she stares at him menacingly.

“Don’t pull this on us. Not now. We really have other things to worry about than your lazy ass. How are you going to work in the morning with two hours of sleep? Huh? How am I going to work until eight tonight?”

“I’m not going to work in the morning.”

Vito remains calm.

His mother’s countenance shifts to one of extreme anger. She issues an exasperated sigh.

“Really, Vito? Really? We do everything for you and you just get these harebrained ideas. I don’t know how you come up with them. Why are you so stupid? I don’t understand.”

A long and heavy pause.

“You know what? Don’t go to work. If you act like this, I’d rather you die homeless in a ditch than you

walking around and everyone knowing you are my child.”

Vito is quiet. Breathing quietly. Brooklyn’s lights flicker as their dirty rays get refracted through the moist air above the East River. A streetlight by the bench where Vito and his mother are sitting has been attracting mosquitoes. They drive anxiously toward the lamp in insistent and desperate curves topped off by a dazing bump. They wish it to be the moon, confusing it with life. They suppose it to be their fulfillment, but once they reach it they are at a loss. In the disappointing stupor of the impact, they return to chase it again. Wishing for but unable to grasp the end of their existential flight. Billions of mosquitoes against millions of street lamps.

Vito remains quiet. After having puked her rage out, his mother steps back and pensively stares at him now. Agitated, she rubs her face with her left hand. She approaches Vito again and awkwardly sits down next to him.

A sigh. “Vito. Come on.” She puts her hand on his shoulder. “I know work sucks. It’s the same for everyone. Everyone has to do it. Just push through.”

Another long pause.

“Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“It’s okay, Mom. Let me go,” Vito answers in a warm tone.

“Let you go? Come on now—if you want, you can stay home tomorrow. Don’t go to work, get your head clear.”

Vito seems not to listen

“Come on, pull yourself together. Didn’t it take you a long time to find that job at Chase? Hm? That’s such a great opportunity. Do you just want to throw that away now? If you play it right, they might hire you permanently. You know, I wasn’t going to tell you, but Dad and I were going to give you \$10,000 when they hire you—to get you started. You can settle properly in your place. You could take Abby on a nice trip with that money. Wouldn’t that be nice? Come on. Let’s go home and we can forget this ever happened.”

Vito remains quiet and, with a soft smile on his face, glances at Lucia, then, out at the water.

Lucia looks out as well. Both quiet now. She stands up and walks to the banister. She grabs it, still looking out. Feeling a deep sadness, she turns around and fixes her eyes on Vito, who is gazing into the distance.

Behold this one, completely enlightened or completely insane. It is hard to tell the difference. For all is one and nothing matters.