



VINNIE

*Sidney Zion**

Ever since he got away, I've been distracted by my inability to remember the last time I saw Vinnie. How come, I kept telling myself, you can't forget anything about the day you met him and yet if they put a gun to your head you couldn't say where and when you last saw him and not a word of what you talked about. The first time was thirty years ago and the last could not have been more than a few months before his death.

And then I woke up and realized that this apparent puzzlement said everything about Vincent J. Commisa and nothing at all about me. For the thing about Vinnie was that Vinnie was always Vinnie. It never mattered when you saw him last, only that he'd be there when you wanted him, or needed him. Especially if you needed him. In the meantime, you could go around painting the town or stay home and be good, you could get into trouble or win accolades, and whatever you did or didn't do you could neglect Vince Commisa, you could forget to call him for months, for years. But the only thing you couldn't do was to lose his friendship. If you were lucky enough to be one of Vinnie's Boys you stayed one of Vinnie's Boys. You were allowed to change, but he never changed.

I remember too many times when I'd call after letting it go so long that I was afraid he wouldn't pick up, I didn't care if he let me have it, only let him take the call. On these occasions he never bothered with hello. He'd get right on and say: "Gee, I've been thinking about you, I've been wanting to call but always some damn thing, I get so busy I forget my friends, it's no good and it's no excuse. Let's have dinner, I'll come to New York, I don't want you bothering to get here, how's next week?" And then he'd stop himself: "You need anything? Is everything O.K.?"

Like all but one language, English has no single word to en-

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capsulate such a man. You can try "character" or "loyalty" or "heart" or "courage" or "steadfast" or "true" but even all of them put together can't say enough. We must turn to Yiddish and the word is "mensch."

Vincent J. Commisa was a mensch all right.

Do you know how many there are in the world?

Growing up in Passaic, the only way I heard the word was at high blood pressure: "Why can't you be a mensch!"

I asked my grandmother, what's a mensch that nobody can be one?

She smiled. "Everybody can be a mensch," she said. "It doesn't cost anything. The poorest person can be a mensch, even a millionaire." Then she laughed. "I wish for you that you'll get to know four in your life."

"Why only four?"

"Because, *bubela*, anybody who would ask for more wouldn't be a mensch."

I don't know how my little old grandma, seemingly unworldly, came by this wisdom. But the day I met Vince Commisa, I knew I only had three to go.

It was Fall, 1961, and Vinnie had just been appointed Chief of the Civil Division, United States Attorneys' Office, District of New Jersey. I knew I was going to be assigned to Civil. I accepted it gracefully, secretly certain that once I showed my stuff to the boss of the whole office, David M. Satz, Jr., I'd get transferred to the Criminal Division. Civil was a foot in the door, but who'd want to stay there? Bobby Kennedy was Attorney General, our ultimate leader, and you didn't have to be a genius to figure out that he couldn't care less about any Civil Division. Anyway, if you wanted to be a prosecutor you had to be in Criminal and why be an Assistant U.S. Attorney if you didn't want to be a prosecutor? Plus, you weren't about to get your name in the papers by foreclosing mortgages or whatever the hell else they did in Civil, and I certainly didn't know what they did there.

And when I got to Newark "there" was hardly to be seen. The Criminal Assistants had their offices hard-by the U.S. Attorney. You practically needed a road map to find the Civil Division. Moreover, all the guys who came in with hot connections somehow got Criminal. Most of them had never tried a criminal case but there they were on the cutting edge. While me, hell I'd tried dozens of cases and the hard way, for the defendants. One look around the place and suddenly it was Sulk.

Then I met Vinnie.

“C’mon,” he said, right after I took the oath.

He was chewing a lit cigar and the way he drooped his head I thought his glasses would slide off, but a second look at the shnozz reassured me, it could easily hold an extra pair of cheaters against all the winds that blow. He wore a rumpled brown suit and brown shoes that were scuffed in *utero*. I can’t remember the tie and forever after I made it a habit not to notice his ties, and it wasn’t because of their looks. They were uneasy is all, they seemed to understand they were on the wrong neck and poor things didn’t know how to get off and run home.

His office smelled like home, a stogie heaven if you were my father, something close to opposite if mom. Vinnie was nothing like my daddy (to get Freud out of the way) but they shared a penchant for (shall we say) moderately priced cigars. Or shall we say it straight, like Vinnie, who said: “The nickel Philly was the best cigar in the world.” This had nothing to do with parsimony, just taste. And believe me, taste is better.

Otherwise, his office was big enough but strictly low-rent, in contrast to the upholstered affair enjoyed by the U.S. Attorney. It appeared to me like still another message about the Civil Division.

He put his feet on the desk, pushed a stogie at me, and said: “Don’t worry about those guys on the other side. They’ll get a few headlines, but you’re going to practice law.”

I hadn’t said a word about the guys on the other side. Was the sonofabitch reading my mind or was this just his pitch?

He said, “I know you’d prefer Criminal, it’s only natural. You’re young and why wouldn’t you want to be where the action is. I’m an old geezer in this joint, older than Dave Satz. I wouldn’t have come here if I wasn’t certain it was an important job, that there was plenty to do here in the Civil Division.” I told him I didn’t have the slightest idea of what there was to do in Civil, much less what was so important.

Vinnie laughed.

“I think we’re gonna get along,” he said. “Let’s get out of here and have a drink.”

He turned me into a lawyer, for sure. He turned the Civil Division into the pride of the U.S. Attorney’s Office. We even got a few headlines before it was over. And long before he left for the Bankruptcy Court, those hotshots in Criminal were jeal-

ous of us, Vinnie's Boys. And if they learned anything, they're jealous still.

All Vincent J. Commisa did as Referee and then Chief Judge in the Bankruptcy Court was to turn what was an insider operation, what was practically a racket, into a People's Court. He opened it up to lawyers who had been systematically kept out, and by infusing it with his sense of justice, with his *menshkite*, he left the world a better place than what he found.

I would like to leave it right there, but Vinnie's at my ear, he won't let me sleep, he won't let me live.

"You're making me a saint, you're leaving all the bad stuff out, it's not right, it's not what I want."

O.K.

Vinnie Commisa picked Buffalo in the Super Bowl.