

# The Death and Death and Death of Alex Vescovo

*Evan Joymas*

Perhaps, she thought, grief is the truest form of loss. When we are happy, energy flows in from others and is shared with us. She remembered bright times, like when he held her hand in the loans office, and the strength it gave her later when she was carrying cardboard boxes. No one else could have given her the persistence that he did. Or when she had sat in the back, listening patiently for the ringle of the door, dipping her teabag for the fourth or fifth time, and the warm calm that she felt. And now that energy was dissipating, exiting roughly and permanently out through her eyes in gushes, and out through her breath in gasps, and through the shaking of her shoulders.

The hospital corridors were silent—or, at least, she could not hear anything apart from herself. Her sounds were the whole universe.

In the other room, Alex was dead, and she held two images in her mind; one of him as a person, inert but not absent of personality, and another, where he was no more than a bedsheet. When she was calm enough she stood to have another one last look, and paused in hollow rest at the door frame. He was not there. He must have been taken to another room, perhaps a long time ago. It was late. She did not know what time it was.

Alessandro Vincenzo Vescovo died at 1.26am on the fourth of August, 1984, at the St Nusquam of Fidelity General Hospital, in the dark grey of a thick night, of a clotted artery. He was fifty-eight, and had only just begun shaving his head to make his bald patch less obvious.

“It will make people think less of vanishing hair,” he said, and she replied, “But more of the shape of your head.”

He had been thinking of a moustache, but she had told him that it would prickle.

His last meal was a schnitzel, with carrots and peas, so steamed that they seemed as if they were a kind of soup rather than a solid. He ate the first few bites slowly, with Marina watching, chewing the taste about his mouth, as food was one of the only diversions of the day. But soon he became bored and ate mouthfuls tastelessly between conversation.

“They’re going to rip down the old church on Swanwick St for the new supermarket,” she said.

“How can they?”

“They might as well use the space. Everyone’s moved to the new place on the corner.”

“I just don’t think it’s appropriate,” he said, but he couldn’t say why. It was some sort of signifier to the community, but he really couldn’t put his finger on exactly why he didn’t like supermarkets. He was thinking about this as he fell asleep, some hours later, and his thinking was stirred by the association with dinner. He shut his eyes for a bit of a rest from the light grey that came in the slits of the curtains.

He died hungry.

Saturday morning he woke up, stretched a yawn out of his shoulders, and tried to nudge his socks back safely onto his feet, after they had somehow begun to come loose in the night. He was still hungry. Marina had opened the curtains, and he saw that jasmine had started to crawl up the neighbour’s brickwork while he had been in hospital. He took a few hesitant steps, feeling the vertigo of standing after a dream of falling. But then instinct took over and he was propelled to the kitchen.

“It’s good to see you getting up earlier and earlier,” she said.

“It’s good to be getting up at all. But not too much earlier than this.”

She had been buttering toast, making a wonderful dry sound, but now she stopped. She held the knife so that it balanced; it took no energy to hold, but did not fall away. Quietly, “So, are you thinking about not going back to work then?”

“That toast looks great.” He was juggling jams from the cupboard. “But I think I will, but maybe in half-days.”

He saw her half-smile. He had selected olberry jam, and he did not know what an olberry was.

In the next few months he felt his life come back into him, and he contemplated returning to work full-time and finding his way to command his own office. He felt the need to do this, because as he grew better he thought the office was doing worse, that some traction was being lost. Marina found him, late one night, on the floor digging through a box of old papers.

“I remember carrying that in when we changed offices. What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to remember something. Legally remember it, that is. I mean, prove it.”

“Why on earth?”

He looked up, face shining in the amber lamplight, and she saw squiggles of sweat.

“Do you remember that gentleman with the long coat, almost like a cloak, the shrewd one with the vests?”

“I think so.”

“He has a belief that some years ago we didn’t fulfill an obligation to him, and he wants compensation to the current adjusted value of the obligation.”

“Plus interest?”

“It is my belief that we fixed all that at the time, and I’m trying to find the bit of paper where it’s written down.”

“Couldn’t you get Roz to do that? Instead of staying here until...” She glanced about for a clock. “It’s dark, anyway.”

“Sure, sure. I just got it in my head that, you know, anyway.”

He blinked, and it was only a moment, but his whole life flashed before his eyes. He remembered how young he used to feel, and how flexible his fingers were. The blue, weave-world stun of falling into the pool without breath, when he was twelve, and sinking in a heavy struggle to the bottom. He had lain there like a stone.

Now he went to bed and drew night about him in the same way.

In a few months, he knew, thoughts scratching at his eyelids in the dark, the business would be gone. It did not matter whether he successfully found that document or not. With wet fingers (in this dream, having just emerged from the pool) he reached out to grab the paper, but the paper, and then the box, disintegrated into soggy, pulpy mush that was somehow almost legible. He stared at it, wishing for a photographic memory, trying to pull together some sort of mnemonic. The ground began to give way, and light danced beneath it, red light like the interior of an eyelid at dawn, and he woke up.

It was not the business that was failing; it was him. There was a persistent memory, that the vague dead time in the office was like the time in the hospital, colourless. He loved the high of self-revelation; it made life worthwhile. Marina had gone to her sister’s—he, however, backed into the summer street and went to get icecream. A drop or two of fat rain landed on the windscreen; he looked at them with a pleasant smile that made him think, I’m both old and young. I have a quality that both share, a subtle joy from the mild surprises in life that are unexpectedly new, out of ordinary situations. Up above, the sky was bright and dark like a chessboard, with groaning dark clouds. He blinked, and the face of a small girl rushed toward him, and whirled as he turned sharply into a eucalyptus and crushed his nose into the

steering wheel. Things did not go black; they simply went out of focus. It felt as if it could last that way forever.

The truth is, she thought, that when people love us, that is new energy, not from anyone else or from anything else but something that arises spontaneously from the happiness between two people. If that is true, then when I cry, that is the death of that energy; it does not move elsewhere, it is final.

She could not unlean from the doorframe.

He woke up with an itchy foot, and he wondered how he must move his feet in his sleep.

In the kitchen Marina was cooking bacon. He searched the fridge for juice.

“I thought I was dead,” he said. “At least, that was a dream I think I had.”

“No dream,” said Marina. “But I am glad to have you back.”

In the door was a carton of mandarin juice, a vibrant orange colour that attracted him. It tasted of sugar-sour citrus. Perhaps I’ll swing by the office today, and see if I can set up a sale of the business. After I buy some icecream. It would take some work to make the books look presentable, but you could never escape from the struggle, his father said, you just had to enjoy it. He stubbed his toe and juice spurted about his feet, turning the lino sickly orange.

If I could pick Heaven, he thought, placing his toe on the bench to Marina’s scold, I would make it just like this—just like normal life. I think that’s where the best moments are. The nail had cracked. Or maybe I just don’t know any better.

It was this thought that made him immortal.