

Vincent's Flight

A short story by
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It was while walking down a side-road that Vincent first heard it, no longer drowned out by the incessant noise of traffic; the church bell rang out a rapid rhythm. It was a clear sound, when not overwhelmed, as only one bell had ever been afforded and somehow that clarity seemed to lend a sense of urgency.

Curiosity led Vincent to a road nearer the church and he gazed toward the grey-stone building; nothing looked out of the ordinary. There was no evidence of wedding or funeral, no gathering of suited or uniformed people, in fact no people at all. He shrugged it off, his carrier bags rustling with the motion, and headed again for his previous destination.

'Perhaps the vicar's just in high spirits,' he thought.

His reflection was interrupted a moment later when a grubby white car, parked up the road, roared into life and in short order tore past him. This by itself might have been nothing, had it not been for the half a dozen houses he witnessed pouring their inhabitants into other cars which were then similarly mishandled.

When a harried looking man burst out of the nearest house Vincent attempted to accost him, "Excuse me, could you tell-

"Get out of the way you bloody idiot!" The man shouted back, running across to a red hatchback and leaping in.

Vincent stared, dumbfounded, but naturally certain that he should join the tide of fleeing locals. He dropped his bags and ran for it.

By the time wine began pooling redly on the pavement Vincent had already rounded the corner, coming onto a main road filling with traffic. Both lanes bore cars pointing in the same direction, yet none of them seemed to be getting very far and most drivers had become quite vociferous on the subject, often employing their horns. Vincent ran past the jam.

After a couple of minutes the road cleared, but only because he'd passed the two cars and one van that lay entangled across it. He was far from the only person on foot here, many had climbed over the wreckage hindering the efforts of those trying to help the people involved.

Bedlam! It was the first word to enter Vincent's mind on seeing the roundabout ahead. There'd been a crash there as well, and now traffic had diverted itself over the shallow hump that was the roundabout and lain waste to its grass and shrubs. A tide of pedestrians flowed where relative safety from the thundering vehicles could be found.

Vincent decided it was time to stop and make a real decision about where he was heading. He realised he'd been following the crowd. Ahead lay the direct route out of town, full of slowing traffic and running pedestrians. Behind lay the suburb he'd just escaped. To one side two roads to the town centre, currently clogged with people and cars coming in his direction and to the other side a single road into a cul-de-sac.

He chose the cul-de-sac.

Vincent pelted down the tarmac against the dregs pouring from their houses here. It was a reasonably well to do area and some had apparently waited to gather those supplies they deemed important, a few families even had suitcases.

When there was no more road Vincent ran straight into an apparently abandoned house through its open door. Even in his panic he realised how serious a sign that was and headed straight out the back into the long, narrow garden.

It was enclosed by tall wooden fences in good condition that it was his first instinct to lament, for it would prevent his breaking through. He realised almost instantly that he should be able to climb

over instead.

At the top of the first fence he saw only two more between him and a park. In that he could see no one and felt for the first time since he had been shouted at that he knew something others didn't. He knew a clear path.

On his way through the park, minutes later, it occurred to Vincent that what he knew was a clear path through the park. It did not lead directly out of town, which seemed to be the consensus destination, thus he thought on his feet.

He decided to head out of town by the back roads, despite not knowing them well. That decision made, he ran on, his mind wandering perhaps out of self-defence. It seemed odd, given the terror around him, that the sky should be so clear. An almost radiant blue, the colour of a child's painting. Nothing seemed wrong here; the grass was as it had been all summer, the trees strong and the river's water clear.

Completely clear. Not a ripple disturbed its surface. Vincent stopped.

He scanned the surface of the visible length and neither duck, goose nor moorhen could he see. He looked back at the sky and that too seemed empty of them. How long ago had they left?

He looked again at the water, wished he had some to drink and started running again. Ahead a small group of people came into view, also making their way at speed through the park but from a different position. A couple looked his way, but they kept going.

He seriously wished he knew what was going on.

Eventually he ran out of park and rejoined the road system. These, being small side roads, were not so clogged and saw only a few individuals or small groups. Most of these were families with children, all moved as fast as they could.

Vincent just didn't know which way would take him where he wanted to go, it wasn't his area and that was that. The only thing for it was to trust these peoples' plans and go the same way.

As he caught up to a family he called to them, "What the hell's going on?"

None replied, they were perhaps rather too preoccupied with their children's well-being to consider the needs of strangers. They all ran on and soon the family were, not without regret, overtaken.

On rounding a corner Vincent almost ran into an old man, hobbling along on a stick. He bore a look of determination so resolute that an iron bar to the face might not change it.

"Excuse me sir," Vincent began...

"Just go around, damnit!"

"No! I mean, could you tell me what's happening?"

"See for yourself! What does it look like?" The old man didn't change his pace to answer, he just punctuated his words with thumps of the stick.

"Can I at least help-"

"NO! I'll take care of myself. You just get a bloody move on! What do you think youth's FOR!"

"I- Sorry, I," Vincent stuttered but felt compelled to obey. He lowered his head and ran as fast as his burning legs would carry him.

"AND DON'T LOOK BACK!" The old man's call echoed along the road.

The journey continued relatively uneventfully - but for the crashed cars, raging crowds and occasional looted shops - for some time. Eventually Vincent followed the course of another young man, well in the lead, through yet another abandoned house and its garden. On the other side of this fence lay open fields.

Vincent's legs burnt so badly he doubted he could take another step after heaving himself over the fence. He might have stopped there and given up, but across a field he saw smoke rising from a building. There was a farmhouse ahead, possibly still inhabited. There he might find answers.

He took a few moments, trying to catch his breath and wishing he'd stuck his head in the river when he was in the park, anything to quench his thirst. After what felt at once like eternity and an instant he fought his way to his feet, hobbled a few steps against burning pain and adopted a clumsy jog.

By the time he was half way across the first field he'd given up the attempt, now walking slowly and unsteadily across the uneven ground. He would not stop, he would get his answer in that farm house, be it from an inhabitant or an abandoned television. It was worth the pain just to know.

By the time he reached the lane that led to the house's door his pace had slowed to a fraction of what it had been when he had been carrying his shopping home. Every breath came in a dry gasp, every footfall a loud thump. Still, when the front door came into sight it spurred him on to a final gallop.

He reached it hollering incoherently and began hammering on the thick, old wood. "HELP ME!" He tried to holler through parched vocal chords, "WON'T SOMEBODY TELL ME WHAT'S HAPPENING?" He carried on this way for a few moments until he heard a heavy piece of door furniture being moved from its locked position.

He stood back, breathing deeply, as the door opened fractionally.

"I'm sorry," a deep and calm voice carried easily through the gap, "but I must protect my family."

Vincent saw the door open fully and a man standing paces behind it, with some object held in front. He heard the bang.

A note from the author:

It is my fond hope, like that of any writer, that you have enjoyed this story. If you have I ask that you share it with others whom you judge likely to appreciate it. Finally, it would bring me great satisfaction to hear from any readers, with comments or constructive criticism. To contact me please e-mail solar.granulation@gmail.com and specify "Short story comment" as the subject.