

Vince
AGRO

THE
Good Doctor



THE *Good Doctor*

by
VINCE AGRO



To Angie and Tony

In Loving Memory

of our beautiful

daughter and sister

'Jennine'

Prologue

“I was too young to know why I was so frightened, but old enough to know that I lived in a dangerous world. When the adults whispered, a cold chill ran down my spine. I didn’t know why.”

I was trying to get the meeting started, since most of the guests had arrived. Louie, Little Joe, Figgy and I had organized the reunion to reminisce about “the good old days.” We had been friends forever and called ourselves “The Little Gang of Four.” But we’re not little anymore. We’re well into our golden years. Of course, everything has changed, but a few things, like our nicknames, have stayed the same.

We expected a lot of people to attend the Christmas reunion this year, perhaps because it was being held at my house, which is particularly relevant to the story we were about to tell. Some of our guests knew nothing about the old neighbourhood we grew up in, while others were very much a part of it. But most hadn’t even been born when the events in our story occurred.

I reminded my friends to speak loudly because we were seated in the family room, which was an extension of the living room once we opened the French doors that separated the two rooms. We sat around a card table, which served as a head table.

Tardy guests searched for seats, as if in a theatre, but not before gawking at the velvet green drapes and faint red colours of the oil

paintings covering most of the walls. The bright gold picture frames added to the ornate, classical decor, but it was the dark brown grand piano that dominated the room.

“None of us really knew why we were scared,” Louie said, peering over his thick glasses, and picking up from my introduction. He then stood up, so that the audience could better see and hear him.

“But, no matter how frightened we were, we felt safe,” added Little Joe, usually the least talkative of the group. He grinned bashfully, looking surprisingly young after all these years. The effects of age seemed limited to turning his thick, dark hair white.

“It was the people around us. They gave us so much love,” Figgy said.

“Yes, our parents, friends, relatives, everyone. There was something very different about our neighbourhood, something very special,” I added.

“That’s why we came up with our motto,” Figgy exclaimed, and he twirled his hand dramatically in the air, as though he wasn’t really serious about what he was about to say. “These were not ordinary times, and these were not ordinary people.”

“Please, close that door!” I called out, as more guests arrived, and the cold wind swirled heavy snow all the way into my living room.

“Remember that record snowfall, so many years ago? How appropriate for this nostalgic gathering,” Figgy sighed, while maintaining the permanent smile that always brightened his face.

“The neighbourhood was your family. If you did something wrong, the guy down the street would reprimand you,” Louie said, stopping Figgy’s reminiscing firmly.

“You had to behave,” Little Joe nodded in agreement.

“Well, what did you do for fun?” a young woman from the audience asked, holding hands with her boyfriend. “Weren’t you bored?”

“Never!” Louie replied abruptly, thrusting his sharp chin forward. “You’ll hear from our story just how exciting things were.” The audience settled in to hear the tale.

We were only six years old, in grade one, when our world suddenly collapsed. A bigger and mightier Germany had set the stage for the Second World War, and unfortunately chose the land of our fathers, Italy, as its ally. Tensions filled the air, not only in Hamilton, but on every street and in every alleyway in Canada. People shouted words at each other – fascism, socialism and communism. The subject of politics was everywhere. On the first day of school, in September 1936, we were so excited about attending St. Mary’s Boys Elementary School. We felt grown up and whatever nervousness we had felt was tempered by the fact that we knew we’d be together.

Our mothers, feeling our anxiety, held our hands tightly as they slowly walked us up Park Street. But they stopped short of the school and instead lead us to a tiny building located at the rear of St. Mary’s. They looked sad when they told us we had to go to this small school for a little while. I remember Louie mumbling to us, “Yea, because we’re Italians, that’s why.” The one-room school was Holy Angels, where all the Italian kids had to spend grade one, perhaps to make sure our behaviour was socially correct for Canadian society.

“I remember it well,” Figgy said, “at recess time, we’d cling to the high barbed wire fence that separated the school playgrounds. We watched the St. Mary’s kids running about, jeering and making faces at us.” I suppose that fence was symbolic of our separa-

tion from mainstream Canadians. Little did we know then, that this would continue for many years to come.

Our mentor and friend, my uncle, Doctor Vincenzo Arcone was helping to bring the colonia, our small Italian community together and, most importantly, keeping it away from the lure of fascism. He was the man everyone loved. Well, almost everyone! We called him Doc Vince.

Part 1

Chapter 1

I suppose our story really begins many years before, across the ocean in Racalmuto, a tiny mining town in Sicily. With mild winters that rarely saw snow and hot, dry summers, Sicily was an island of contrasts, ranging from olive groves, vineyards, citrus trees and almonds to a harsh, dry terrain that barely supported prickly pears and cacti.

Rugged and mountainous, Racalmuto was made of salt and sulphur. A good mixture, a scholar once wrote, stimuli for both heart and mind. The town once boasted a population of twenty thousand while the mines hummed with activity. But at what cost? residents complained. “We enter the mines before dawn and we come out after sunset. What kind of life is that?”

Doc Vince was only seventeen years old when he, together with his Uncle Ross and his close cousin, Sam, trekked to the nearby college town of Canicatti. Although the town was only ten kilometres away, the trip was difficult because of the hilly terrain and the hot Sicilian sun. But Doc Vince needed some library reference books in order to complete an important secondary school assignment, and he was determined to have them.

“We are pleased to accompany you, Vincenzo. Sam and I are so proud of your scholastic achievements,” Uncle Ross proclaimed as they toiled up a steep section of the road.

“As is the entire town,” Sam said, agreeing with his uncle. “But maybe you’re feeling restless after coming back from the army, or is there another reason you were so happy to come with Vincenzo and me?”

“Compulsory service in the army! Damn this country! People are suffering all over the place. There’s no food, there is nothing in this God-forsaken land, and I had to waste two stupid years in the army,” he complained, ignoring Sam’s other comment.

Uncle Ross was a tall man, perhaps one of the tallest in the town. His handsome look and warm smile was not in keeping with his deep raspy voice. He easily caught the attention of Lola, an appealing young girl with wide blue eyes and an alluring strut. But, she had been promised to a wealthy merchant, and Uncle Ross’ brief encounter with her had already planted the seeds of trouble with the girl’s family.

“What about your dream, Uncle?” Sam asked, looking up at the tall man beside him. “You always talked about going to America.”

“Yes, even more so now,” Uncle Ross replied shortly in his deep raspy voice.

“Everyone here dreams of leaving Italy, especially those of us in the south,” Vincenzo said. “It’s like a great writer once said, ‘you must leave the island at an early age, lest the sun bakes your brain.’”

“Yes, Vincenzo, but let’s go back to what Uncle Ross said, that it is important he goes to America now. Why, Uncle?” Sam asked.

“Well, I think I’m in trouble with the Mallitto family,” Uncle Ross replied.

“What happened? Those people are all nuts,” Sam said.

“And hot-headed,” Vincenzo added, “a little like you, Sam.”

“Since I’ve been home, Lola, you know who she is, shows up wherever I am – at the marketplace, the fountain or the piazza. I

talk to her a little. She is nice...that's all...and nothing happened between us," Uncle Ross declared, but not convincingly.

"She's crazy, that Lola, è pazza. She's too flirty for this town, the way she struts around," Vincenzo said. "But, what else happened?"

"Well," Uncle Ross continued, "I was at the market, looking at some figs when Lola approached and started talking to me. Her father started to give me the evil eye. He was at the next stall with his three sons. Lola kept talking to me and said 'don't worry about them,' until the oldest son, Pirriddu gave me that threatening sign..."

"Oh," Vincenzo said, then quickly imitated it by grimacing and placing his stretched hand between his teeth, a common Southern Italian gesture. "Remember Mascagni's opera *Cavalleria Rusticana*. The guy who flirted with the other guy's girl got killed. And the girl's name in the opera is Lola."

"So what did you do?" Sam asked.

"Nothing," Uncle Ross replied. "What could I do? I stood up straight, high enough so that the drooped awning above the market stall blocked my face from their view. They left shortly after."

The tired young men finally arrived at their destination. They groaned as they dropped their bags to the ground and relaxed at the outdoor café near the Parnassus Academy. They drank water, then sipped on espresso and limoncello. The café was a common meeting place for students, writers and artists. Don Ciccio, the owner, a wise man, or so the students thought, often mingled and sprinkled his words of wisdom. Vincenzo excitedly showed Sam and Uncle Ross the statue the students had erected in honour of Don Ciccio. "Look," he said excitedly, "look at the inscription. It reads, 'Don Ciccio is always right, and in the event of a discrepancy between

reality and what Don Ciccio holds to be true, reality must be the one to adapt.”

Vincenzo started to laugh at its humour, but Sam, unimpressed, quipped, “Maybe the students were drunk when they wrote it.”

Uncle Ross looked at it differently, saying, “I know it’s funny, but it tells me that we, in Sicily today, are still tied to the past, so much so that reason gives way to the thoughts of an innkeeper.”

“You’re far too serious, Uncle,” Vincenzo said.

“Perhaps,” Uncle Ross responded, “but I want a new life, a new world, one far away from the salt mines of Sicily. There are no jobs here,” he ended on a practical note.

The townspeople continued to respect Uncle Ross, in spite of the scandal that had developed. People knew the encounter with Lola had been brief, and that there probably was no actual sex involved. But, enough harm had been done to the girl’s reputation to dishonour the Mallitto family. Uncle Ross had to leave for America. His friends and relatives came forward and loaned him money to get out of Italy. This was not uncommon. People were encouraged to migrate, and some actually received governmental assistance to leave overcrowded Sicily and the southern Italian peninsula.

In the early 1900s, Europeans left the Old World in large numbers and turned to North America. Italians congregated in cities like Montreal, Toronto and Hamilton where jobs were plentiful. Disillusioned and even angry at their own country, they fled from poverty and a society of carta bollata, mismanagement created by government red tape.

Uncle Ross was the first Arcone to leave. Canada was his goal, but he was uncertain where he would end up in that vast country, large enough to swallow up all of Italy twentyfold. Most Racalmutese migrated to Hamilton, then a prosperous industrial city. Strategically located between Toronto, which had already become a

cosmopolitan centre, and Buffalo, across the United States border, Hamilton's steel industry was growing quickly.

He decided on southern Ontario for its less harsh winters. Everyone called him Uncle, because he was tall and strong, but more because people knew he would soon be an early pioneer to Canada, and in that way would help pave the way for many others.

On the strenuous journey across the Atlantic, Uncle Ross met a young man named Tony Gravina, from San Giovanni Rotondo, a small town southeast of Rome near the Adriatic Sea, in the Foggia district. He took the young Fuggian, who was barely fifteen, under his wing during the long voyage. Tony had been given the family ticket to the new world because his older brother had fallen ill. When Uncle Ross suggested the boy travel with him through the uncharted alien land, Tony told him that he must first seek out a paesano, a fellow countryman, in Welland who would get him a job. He said his hometown priest, Padre Pio, had told him that a paesano would help him in the new world like no one else. But the good young priest had given the boy a more profound message as well. "As an immigrant, Tony," he had said, "you must become a part of your adopted land, but also make it a part of you."

Uncle Ross was more interested in finding a job at the newly constructed Welland Canal than he was in seeking out a paesano. The Canadian government was about to commence its fourth phase of the mammoth undertaking, and the rumour was that jobs were plentiful. He followed his young friend to Welland, where he established his new home.

When asked why he did not migrate to Hamilton, where there was a handful of paesans, Racalmutese who had actually started the Fratellanza Club that attempted to help and comfort immigrants, Uncle Ross joked it was the Welland Canal that fascinated him.

Perhaps he was in search of a completely new identity, one that would allow him to immerse into this exotic country.

The hardships of the new world were immediately evident to Uncle Ross. The unbearably cold, snowbound winters contrasted sharply with the hot Sicilian sun and the semi-arid rolling hills and mountains he had left behind. The perfume of lemon and orange groves that once filled his nostrils was replaced by the wet chill of Canadian winter.

He was also anxious to bring his nephew Sam to Canada. He admired his dynamic spirit and knew they could start a business together. He also knew his other nephew, Vincenzo, was destined to stay in Italy and become a doctor. Within a year or two, Uncle Ross managed to find a petite Italian wife, a decent apartment and money to help sponsor Sam's trip to Canada.

Sam was a socialist at heart. He hated how companies often abused their workers. Once he arrived in Canada, about four years after Uncle Ross, he refused to work in steel mills or textile factories where so many of his paesani worked. He remembered his own terrible days in the salt and sulphur mines of Racalmuto, where he and so many other fourteen-year-olds had slaved six days a week. "Rotten company" was an expression that he freely used whenever he saw or felt the plight of the hard-working man.

When Sam had worked in the mines, his Uncle Ross had looked after him. But everyone looked after each other in those days. The men, who worked in the mines, worked completely naked; not a stitch of material was allowed to touch their bodies. The story was that their skin would burn to the core from their sweat reacting with the salt and sulphur.

They would climb down the shaft on tiny ladders, dongs swaying from side-to-side, shovel in hand, all the while gasping for

breath, and hungering to get home. They could only think about devouring that delicious dish of pasta or minestrone, prepared by their frightened mothers who anxiously awaited their return. They wouldn't even have to put salt on their food; there was enough in their mouths and lungs from the long day's work – fourteen, sometimes fifteen, hours.

The town joke was the story of Concetta, the nagging wife of a local miner, Mario. Each day that Mario's crew passed by his house to pick him up for work, Concetta would remind her husband, and anyone who could hear her, that she had purchased the beautiful jacket he was wearing. "It was a very expensive gift I bought for you," she would say. "And money from my own family helped buy it, so take care of it."

Day after day, she repeated this message to the crew. Then, at the end of one work day, the men returned to Mario's house. Concetta, as usual, waited on the balcony, when one man shouted, "Concetta we have the jacket...it didn't fall down the shaft."

"Grazie a Dio," she replied.

"But I'm sorry, Concetta," another man added, "Mario went down the shaft instead."

The story became a reference point for the townspeople. "Don't worry about the small things. Don't be a Concetta."

When Uncle Ross was made crew lead man, his co-workers joked that he got the job because of the size of his dong. But the laughter quickly turned to despair when the heavy mist of sulphur choked their lungs and burned their eyes. He had turned to Sam and said, "Let's get out of here, Sam. Not even Dante's Inferno is as bad as this."

Sam was average in height, slim but wiry with refined features, his complexion was lighter than most of his paesani. Independent and

impatient, Sam knew he could never work for someone else. He'd end up fighting with his boss and getting into all kinds of trouble. There was only one solution for him in the new world: he would start his own business. Uncle Ross understood why Sam wanted to start his business in Hamilton, since there already was a thriving Italian community, or *colonia* as it was referred to.

Still finding his way around the neighbourhood, Sam immediately started his first venture, an ice cream pushcart. It allowed him to change locations. He'd obviously search for sales at busy intersections, except when he hoped to see the young woman he had become attracted to.

"What kind do you want, Miss?" he asked the beautiful girl with long, shiny black hair that fell below her shoulders. She blushed while trying to choose a flavour, along with her mother and her two sisters. Sam added with a smile, "Your ice cream will be free." The others looked at each other and started to giggle; and that began his romance with Grace.

They soon married and enjoyed their early years in Hamilton amongst so many *paesani*. But the opportunity arose to purchase a store together with Uncle Ross, who was already established in Welland. For a few years, the two men ran a grocery store there. But Sam's first-born died of pneumonia when only a few months old. Grace and Uncle Ross' wife, Josephine, stripped naked, holding the baby between their warm bodies, desperately trying to keep him alive, but to no avail.

Grace wanted to leave Welland immediately. "This is a bad luck town for us, my dear husband. I want to move back to Hamilton, where we first met and started our life together. Hamilton is our destiny, Sam." Within days, they returned to the industrial city where they purchased their own grocery store.

Sam couldn't wait to start playing cards and bocce again at the Fratellanza Racalmutese, a club meant to bring paesani together, and help them cope in this new and strange world. Grace's next pregnancy ended in a stillborn. It was also male, and led the way for the birth of six more sons.

And I, your narrator, am the last of the litter.

Several years later, Doc Vince voyaged across the Atlantic Ocean to his destination, Hamilton, Ontario. For the whole month of April in 1926, the ship smashed against the ocean waves, tossing the passengers and crew from side to side. But the turbulence outside paled beside the turmoil within.

He had to leave Italy in a hurry, abandoning his new bride, Loretta. She was not well and could not obtain the necessary papers to leave the country quickly enough. Travelling without his wife, but with an aching heart, Doc Vince spent most of his time helping the ship's medical crew attend to the sick and weary passengers.

Is this what it has come to? He thought. Six years of medical school at Catania, three years before that at the University of Palermo, interrupted by the Great War, and paid for by waiting tables, and now, just when I get married and am ready to open my new practice, I must flee. Perhaps I should not have dared to speak out against the dictator, Mussolini.

His brothers believed in the fascist cause. They had seen so many improvements to the country. There was more order and more jobs than ever before. Why couldn't he see this progress? Instead, he had to oppose a movement that favoured the big companies at the expense of the working poor, and oppose a party that sounded frighteningly similar to Hitler's aggressive nationalism. And now look at the dilemma he was in. He had been warned by the fascists to leave the country immediately.

His mother said to him before he left, "You are my eldest son and should lead the way. Instead you rebel so much, and cause us problems." His four younger brothers admired him. He was the tallest, but not as tall as his Uncle Ross, whose path he was following. His father had died months after Mussolini took control in 1922, while he was in his fifth year of medicine.

"Ah, the news of the fascist takeover is enough to kill anyone," he said, trying to lift his sadness, and then lowered his head as he remembered he had ignored his father's warning that one must choose protecting family over becoming a hero.

The small consolation in leaving everything behind was that he would join his cousin Sam and his Uncle Ross who anxiously awaited his arrival in the New World. He would start a fresh and adventurous life together with them. He reassured himself as well with the thought of the arrival of his cherished Loretta, who would soon follow him to Canada. Here she would shed her illness, those long depressions. The new land would breathe new life into her. "The new environment," he had told her, "will remove all of our haunting memories."

He thought back to Genoa, where he stayed with his brother Turridu, a civil engineer, who worked for a large ship-building company. They had agreed not to talk politics, since Turridu was a Mussolini sympathizer, while they waited for his departure to Canada. They spoke instead about growing up in the little mining town. Their mother had no daughters to help with the chores, and the two brothers marvelled how the family had been able to afford their education from the meagre olive grove that their father was allowed to operate under the Lord of the Manor. Even Turridu had agreed it was wrong that the people had no rights in the old system. They only disagreed on how things should be changed.

Finally, the ship with its weary passengers docked at Pier 21 in Halifax. A ship's officer pulled him out of the lineup and thanked him for helping the medics on board. Doc Vince was relieved to see friendly looking officers, in uniforms completely different from those of the blackshirt fascists he had learned to fear and hate.

He grinned when he watched the officer stamp his passport, May 12th, 1926. "I will-a forever remember this day," he said to the officer in the broken English that he had been practicing the past few months. "Thank you." Then he left to find his train.

Doc Vince gazed at the thick forests and tiny communities virtually isolated from each other, as they flashed by the train windows. Does anyone live here, he thought, comparing it to overcrowded Italy. Even Halifax, a vital Canadian port city, seemed less populated than his native inland, dust-infested Racalmuto.

He brushed aside his weariness from the long and tortuous journey as he approached Hamilton. Here he would stay with his cousin Sam, and set up his medical practice. He had chosen the Steel City over Welland, where Uncle Ross had settled and begged the doctor to join him. Hamilton had a thriving Italian community, perfect for the practice of medicine, where he could help his paesani. His cousin Sam, and his wife, Grace, had prepared a huge party for him.

Everyone anxiously awaited his arrival. Uncle Ross and his family drove in from Welland for the party. He embraced Doc Vince with tears in his eyes, and kissed cheek-to-cheek. Uncle Ross then told the doctor there were a lot of adjustments to be made in the new world, the first of which was no more kissing or embracing, especially in public. "People here frown on that," he said.

Sam shouted, "I'll empty my whole grocery store for my cousin." Every paesano brought him a gift – homemade wine, pastries, jarred tomatoes and vegetables... Some brought their instruments

and played Italian folk songs, while the crowd sang along with the accordions, mandolins and clarinets. Everyone was anxious to know about their relatives in Racalmuto, and to hear tales about the old days. Although still tired from the trip, Doc Vince was thrilled to be with his paesani, and anxious to start his medical practice in the colonia.

The doctor fit into his new world seamlessly. He purchased a home with his cousins, where he set up his practice and immediately started to mend the wounds and woes of his countrymen. He became an integral part of Sam and Grace's large family of six sons and assorted friends and relatives, as well as a cocker spaniel and two cats, all of which resided under Grace's care.

Doc Vince added an attractive Great Dane with white and golden-brown patches to the family. He called the dog, large even as a puppy, Eric. He bragged about its lineage, showing off its pedigree. "This dog is from the Van Slosh family," he would read aloud to all who would listen to him.

"Where did you find that sweetheart name, Doc?" Grace's second eldest son, John, asked.

"This dog is royalty."

"I'm sure it is, Doc," John replied with a smile, "just as you are."