

Better Never to Have Gone

by [Sean Haylock](#) (September 2020)



Father, Son, and Bird, Robert Broderson, 1980s

Raymond was famous for being obscure. If you spent enough time with him he would shed his lugubrious outer shell and his conversation would become a kind of sublime gossip, studded with the intrigues and in-jokes of literary coteries few others knew even existed. He hosted slow lunches at which he served elaborate tapas and good wine. It was worth enduring his boorish tendencies and volatile temper and desultory personal hygiene because he was capable of genuine charm, a lively and engaging disputant and a gracious host. So when Raymond left for America (this story is not about him), Vince was once again lonely and depressed.

It felt familiar because it reminded Vince of his cruellest breakup, which came with a fight intense out of all proportion to the brief and anachronistically prim liaison that preceded it. The picture Lauren had sent him, the morning after that full-throated argument during which they had both surprised themselves with their malice, was still vivid in his memory several years later. It could have been a profile picture, a simple head and shoulders selfie. Her neckline was low enough and the angle was high enough that her naked collarbones were conspicuous, and one was somehow certain that the satiny surface catching the spill of her hair was a pillowcase. She wasn't scowling or anything as obvious as that, but something in the set of her eyes and her jaw conveyed an accusation. She was beautiful but not exhibiting her beauty, merely stating the fact of it, and Vince knew that he was meant to understand, and agonizingly regret, that he could, if he'd been better, have become familiar with that pillowcase, those collarbones, et cetera. He had wanted to be offended by the arrogance of the photo as a gesture (she hadn't stooped to saying "We're through" or any such obligatory cliché), but he had to concede the brilliance of it, had to concede that if it was arrogant then her arrogance was justified. It was a confident gesture, but also an intelligent one, made with the assurance that it would be correctly interpreted. It was like minimalist art,

hermeneutically sealed. And because she had managed to turn that devastating circumstance into an artful victory, he experienced it as an abject defeat. Lying in his own bed, with a tissue box (autumn leaves, not romping kittens) close to hand, he used the photo twice before deleting it. Only recently had Vince realized that the way he'd been remembering the photo, cropped so that the swell of Lauren's breasts was visible only so far as the faintest peek of pink aureoles' edges, was a wishful embellishment.

(Vince had seen Lauren once since, as they passed one another on a busy street and the suddenness of the encounter allowed them both not to interrupt their stride. A few seconds of embarrassed thought led him to the conclusion that he was obliged to appear adult, and he had time to arrange on his face the tiniest smile and make a wet sound with his mouth before her face, looking costumed in her makeup, swam out of view).

Now, after Raymond, Vince was feeling doubly bereft. Perhaps it was a perception that his own neediness had been on display that connected the two severances in his mind.

Vince's sister Jess had sensed his despondency and suggested they do dinner, ostensibly to cheer Vince up but also to introduce him to her new boyfriend. "I think you'll really like Joel," she had said, which Vince read as "Don't tell me if you don't like him." In nodding good-naturedly Vince had sealed their tacit agreement. She wouldn't ask and he wouldn't tell.

Vince took an instant disliking to Joel. He was, in a word, pretentious. He dressed in corduroy and had a goatee and one perpetually arched eyebrow. Within the first hour of their acquaintance Joel had brandished the following items of personal trivia: that his reddit username was vincent_vangoghs_severed_ear, that he collected Italian comic books, and that he was co-founder of a microbrewery. Vince

knew before Joel told him that he played the guitar. It was Joel who broached the subject of philosophy, rambling praise of Diogenes giving way to the blunt statement "I'm an anti-natalist." This was said with a disingenuous note of apology for having raised such an abstruse topic, the way someone might say "I'm a quantum physicist."

"It's really the only ethical position compatible with real compassion," Joel explained. Jess, her hand on Joel's thigh, murmured knowingly.

"Being opposed to human beings ever being born is compassionate," Vince said with deadpan sarcasm.

"It's a simple logical proposition, really. The point is: pain is more bad than pleasure is good. The likelihood of any human life being totally free from pain is, you know, fucking nonexistent. So 'do no harm' entails a duty to prevent procreation."

"And how many pediatricians have you assassinated this week?"

Joel laughed nervously. He of course had answers to Vince's insistent suggestions that he wanted to smother infants in their cots (a line of argument Vince was forced to moderate for fear of provoking Jess's ire). What Vince had not expected, or invited, was a protracted, multi-platform debate in which he was called upon to mount a moral defence of human existence. Vince did not relish his role. He had managed to avoid exchanging numbers with Joel, but Jess proved happy to serve as their cellular go-between. So some misanthropic gotcha from Joel could reach Vince at any time of day or night, and like an unfortunate bystander encountering a particularly obnoxious prospective suicide poised on a ledge, he was forced, miserably, to muster fresh arguments against life's misery.

The worst of it was the sense that he had traded an

imperfect friend for a perfectly contemptible acquaintance. It was this, and memories of Lauren, and longing for Raymond's empanadas as he observed the orbit of his frozen burrito in the microwave, that made Vince decide he had to Get Away.

In the rinsed air of early autumn, Vince made his way past lines of poplars like mighty asparagus stalks. He held in one hand a switch that, as he almost skipped along the woodland path, he swung in reckless arcs like a rope that needed swift motion to stay taut. And he regarded himself from a distance, or imagined that an observer would regard him, as a confident man confidently clowning. Under a crisp blue sky, over the dew-bright grass, between teeming banks of verdure, here is Vince, gamboling, spritely fellow, with fierce mischief in his eyes.

He was headed for a clearing with a little stream that lay at the end of the path. When he got there, before entering the clearing, he flung his switch skyward, like a bandmaster his baton, letting it fall in a bush, and stepped past a tall bellhop of a birch into a sunny natural foyer. The trees enclosing the space were near enough to impart a reverent hush. The trickle in the creekbed was purling, a soft constant sound that amplified the silence. He spotted butterflies leaping drunkenly through the sunshine. All his impish energy evaporated as, with both nostrils dilated, he breathed in earth and grass and morning and consolation.

He drew near the stream—near the brook (he decided it was a brook) and saw the wet stones there and wanted to grip them with the soles of his feet. As he bent to unlace a boot, he caught sight of a furry reddish caterpillar and thought for a fraction of a second of an arched eyebrow. Then he had both boots off and his socks wadded in them and was wincing pleasantly as chill water washed his toes.

There was a habit Vince had (a neurotic habit, to be sure) of subjecting his most powerful emotions, his least equivocal feelings of joy or misery, to a kind of internal certification. So now a voice – belonging to a vague figure who was an unwieldy composite of his mother, a primary school crush, his parish priest, that one cool lecturer at university, and a candid stranger at a bus stop – asked him with husky earnestness, *Are you happy, Vince?* And he answered *Oh yes, I'm happy. I'm happy.* A ray of sunlight struck his chest and he felt that his whole face, and even all his organs, smiled.

Why he hadn't turned it off he would never be able to understand. It was so obviously what he should have done. He had slipped it into his coat pocket absentmindedly back at the hotel, and now, with his coat knotted about his waist, he knew instantly what it was when it vibrated against his thigh. He attempted, in the next instant, to convince himself that it was a sensory deception, a muscle spasm or little tremor of altered blood flow, or a wayward insect nuzzling him. But it was none of those things. It was his phone. And as soon as he had formed the conviction to ignore it, to be virtuously selfish for once and enjoy his goddamn holiday, he began thinking with shame about how he was going to check it anyway.

He wrestled it out of his coat pocket. It was a text from Jess.

Joel wants to know what your answer is to Ian Kamarasovs tortured child argument

So accustomed by now was Vince to playing his part in these rallies (answering Joel's languid rhetorical forehand with his own stiff, two-handed riposte) that he even began tapping out a glib reply ("It's a tortured, childish argument") before stopping himself and reflecting, with consternation mounting to rage, on how pointless and degrading

it was to have his experience of blissful tranquility shattered so that he might flatter Joel's literary pretensions and dignify his ridiculous philosophy with a response.

What he did next he did not observe himself doing. He just did it. Like a discus thrower, he let the edge of his phone find the inner seams of his knuckles. He swiveled his upper body to reach his arm right back, then he lunged it forward like a slingshot; he hurled his phone. He had been aiming roughly at a spot up ahead in the stream. When it struck there it bounced up in a spray, it spun or tumbled, then it cartwheeled a little way further on. Then it was there beneath the water somewhere, a dead thing. Shocked and elated by having done it, he gave two short raucous barks of laughter that were instantly swallowed by the silence.

Here is Vince, in the drugged aftermath of his mutiny, a man all his own, a man in full. He spies on a lofty treetop a magpie in noble profile. Majestic creature, really. A kindred spirit. Though not quite so kindred as Brother Eagle, soaring over alpine wilderness, compassing the bounds of his dominion. A breeze ruffles Vince's hair and he tilts his chin up to receive this elemental caress. The moniker emblazoned on his "Class of 09" polo shirt is at last no longer a goofy irony, is at last apt: InVINCEable (sic).

Vince became aware that it was no longer silent. There was a scrabbling in the grass behind him and he turned to locate its source.

A young child, a toddler, in a puffy jacket, was standing not far off. Vince was startled to encounter another pair of human eyes.

"Hello," he said lamely.

The child said nothing, did nothing, and for a crazy instant Vince thought it might be a life-like mannequin.

Then the child snuffled audibly and protruded its lower lip.

Vince scanned the clearing. There was no one else. No parent.

The child still had its lip out. A faint, high-pitched whine sounded in its throat.

Vince now began to panic in earnest. He took a step towards the child and reached into his pocket for his phone. His fingers quickly palpated the cloth of the empty pocket. He recalled precisely the sound of his own laughter a moment ago.

The expression on the child's face had suddenly changed to one of rapt attention; it was gazing, open-mouthed, at Vince's knobbly, white feet. That it was not obviously about to start wailing in terror was all the inducement Vince needed to turn away and look frantically along the stream for evidence of his phone. He thought he saw it once, but what came out of the water in his hand was a dark, flat stone. Then he really did see it and he was delicately cradling the delicate broken mechanism in both palms when he turned back to the child. The child was still there, still in its puffy jacket, still unchaperoned, still Vince's urgent problem, and it gave a sigh of what seemed uncannily like boredom.

"Where is your mum?" said Vince with more of an edge of manic desperation than he'd intended. The child frowned just perceptibly. It tested the idea of protruding its lip again.

Vince looked down at the dead screen of his phone. There were droplets of water pooled on it and the whole device felt heavy, waterlogged.

His coat was thick. He would dry it with his coat.

He clasped the phone awkwardly to his chest with his

chin. He tried to yank his coat down over his waist but only succeeded in tightening the knotted sleeves around his thighs. The back of the coat was now hanging down around his heels and threatening to trip him. He yanked again and it didn't budge. He fumbled at the knot with his fingertips. Then in frustration (he had wanted to use his coat; it did not occur to him now to use his shirt) he unbuttoned his jeans and pulled them down along with his coat. His boots and socks were already off. He now had a bundle of clothing that he shoved down over his feet and stepped away from. He remembered the coat was the thing he wanted. With the phone in one hand he shook the bundled coat and jeans to extract the coat.

"Lester!"

The shout came from outside the clearing, and the sound of hurried footfalls was coming closer. Then a tall, broad-shouldered man was standing at the entrance to the clearing in a pose of coiled action. He was breathing hard and his bent arms were held rigidly at his sides. His eyes took in the child and Vince. The man's face was tense with incipient threat.

Vince looked down at his bare knees below the satiny glint of his boxers.

At once he thought that the justice of this humiliation was perfect. The sense of shame and dismay was so sharp, it felt almost like a vindication. It was something like a feeling of ecstatic abandon that made him want to embrace his abjection, made him croak out "*I'm sorry.*"

The sound in his voice must have been so purely pathetic that it was unmistakable even to a child, because the child laughed, and it was a beautiful joyous tumbling chuckle. So complete was Vince's humbling that a child laughed at him.

But not unkindly.

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