

Cousin Vinny

Odd how something literally swoops down into your life at the same time you know that something heartbreaking is waiting to happen. And, if you have an ounce of superstition in your soul you'll accept an unexpected event will indeed get your attention.

Here's the overall scene. We live in acres of woods sharing this space with birds, deer, turtles, pond frogs, tree frogs, rabbits, squirrels, snakes. All these sounds and sights of Nature diminish your importance in the scheme of life. The sight of a family of white tailed deer, a black snake in a bird feeder or the clacking of a woodpecker in a dead tree are interrupted by a surprise landing on the railing of the back deck. It's a pigeon! It's an Omen! I must inject a small piece of information here. I am the daughter of a Sicilian mother who taught me all about omens, evil eyes, and various curses, none deadly. I have a Bachelor's degree am relatively intelligent and over 70.

This is not a city pigeon we have known in the Big Apple. He's beautiful and banded. a racing, homing pigeon larger than his city cousins or his country mourning doves. His neck is iridescent, mauve and green. Craning and stretching his neck, bobbing his head, he surveys the scene. And then he's gone.

My husband, the photographer, manages to film the band on his legs. He then meticulously Googles homing pigeons, and, after a time does find that the owner of our guest lives in Hicksville, Long Island, New York. A phone call to the local Audubon Society gives us the information that the pigeon may have stopped to rest and might visit us for the next 48 hours and then will go on with the race. Okay with us. We'll e-mail his owner to let him know that he's resting here in West (by God) Virginia. The owner doesn't reply.

At the same time we're caring for our almost 16 year old frail beagle who shows his age, trying to carry on. I declare to my husband that I absolutely, definitely DO NOT want to care for another creature. Our adopted beagle is giving me enough challenges. Nurture prevails. We find out that homing pigeons have a varied diet. We have the rice, unpopped corn kernels, buckwheat groats and dried split peas. This gourmet pigeon eats around the peas twice a day. The squirrels ignore him. The titmouses, cardinals, house fitches, goldfinches, sparrows, goldfinches, various woodpeckers, red winged blackbirds, and others ignore him. After all, he's bigger than any one of

them. A small detail that must be mentioned is the cleanup of his waste material, pigeon poop (my job).

The days become weeks. I'm training myself to look for him at breakfast time and in the late afternoon. He always shows up.

Two weeks later we said goodbye to our sweet beagle, Larry. Now we are left with two charges to care for. Frankie, our rescued dog, has quietly assumed the position of Only Dog. Cousin Vinny is named for the Joe Pesce movie character of the same name. It is only proper that the pigeon who adopted us should be a New Yorker as we will always be.

Epilogue

Weeks later we have a routine for Vinny. We're used to his flyover as he checks the food supply. One day he has a companion with him and she's not as handsome as he is. They land on the railing and look down at the food. They leave only to return later. We watch them as they eat and then fly up to one of the peaks of the house. Vinnie is at the pinnacle, she's lower down. In minutes they fly away. They are gone. No pigeons at our house. I guess his work of distracting us through our loss of Larry is done.

The Meaning

Comparisons

I was born in Brooklyn, New York decades ago. The Bronx Zoo was a long train ride away. It was the only big place to see wild animals except for the time that the circus literally came to town and the elephants were paraded down our unpaved street. There was the petting zoo at Prospect Park, not as dramatic. We were witnesses to the last of the horse drawn wagons that the fruit peddler drove down the street. And with him came the horse manure followed by the one-armed man with his shovel. He had commandeered a large empty lot to grow his vegetables and the manure was free.

Since our street was treeless (that tree grew somewhere else in Brooklyn) we didn't see a single squirrel. There were birds, mainly sparrows and lots of pigeons. They belonged to the Italian men who raced them when they were not on the roofs of buildings sitting in their coops.

Nevertheless, it was a good life of street games, the Saturday movie matinee, Coney Island in the summer and subway rides into the City. Manhattan. The magical place of special days at Radio City Music Hall, the museums, Macy's, Gimble's, Abraham & Strauss department stores and the August Feast of San Gennaro in Little Italy. Being a city kid had its advantages.

The past is where it belongs. The present will become the past soon enough. In this present I've become surprisingly old. I see the immediate world through eyes now focusing on what is closest to my windows. The long view shortens as the trees surrounding the house reach out. The number of birds on the deck has increased. Mature birds are feeding their young. Cardinals are now adept at clinging to the feeder hanging off the deck. The deer have claimed their territory all around the house. Surprisingly, we've watched a family of deer settling down to rest in the drain field. The several meadows are their dining areas. I've stepped away to give them space.

Last night the oh so bright moon cast its light onto our bed. It was a sort of blessing prompting me to say, "Good night, Moon, and thank you.

And as for Vinny, thank you for having been here.