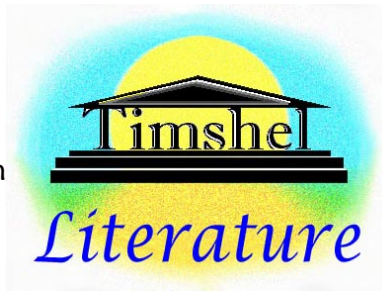


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## **How I Murdered Vinnie**

by Justin Katz

First of all, his name wasn't Vinnie. Hell, he wasn't even Italian. He did claim to have connections to the mob, but then again, everybody in northern New Jersey did, especially teenagers who didn't have the money of the kids from the north end of my town but didn't have the caché of the really tough kids the town down. I remember that I wrote a semifictional story once, which, as with most young authors' stories, was merely myself and my friends put into a slightly idealized situation, in which this particular friend's part was filled by a character named Vinnie. But whether he got the nickname from the character or I named the character after his nickname, I don't remember.

Second of all, I didn't really kill him, either, so don't go thinking this is some kind of confession and get out the dogs or anything. He's still out there living, as far as what he calls living goes. To tell the truth, if Vinnie *can* be said to have been murdered, it was done by that evil duo of Washington and Hollywood, and I don't even vote or watch TV much anymore... but I'll get to that.

In fact, when you come right down to it, even my part in what I'm calling murder wasn't anything that I could be blamed for. I mean, I was only trying to figure myself out and become a better person. So what if I didn't have a clue what that meant back then... I thought I did, and I had good intentions. Those things have to count for something, anyway.

Like I said, Vinnie and I were from the south side of a middle-class town that ran from the highway to New York, where all the little houses were packed together so you could practically shake the hand of your neighbor out the window, to the road that ran past the mall and the high school that we shared with the town to the north, which was even richer than the north end of our town.

The local school system was set up so that three elementary schools, two in my town and one in the town to the north, fed into one junior high school and then the high school, so of course each grade school became known for producing only a handful of student types, which, to the extent that they were based on anything, were the result of the strangely rapid increase in annual household income from south to north. As my world expanded and I began to ride my bike almost to the north end of the northern town to glide by rich girls' houses, it often seemed to me that a better math student than myself would be able to deduce a formula to describe our community based upon latitude on one end of the equal sign and square footage on the other. This is not to say that each house was exactly an increment bigger than the previous (or smaller as I went home), but that the one-floor homes near my apartment complex petered off into small split-level houses, which gradual lost themselves in two-story houses, which blended into two- or three-story mansions and houses that were so uniquely opulent that they defied description by the usual terms.

These last always confused me, when I got older and began actually going inside them, and I sometimes became lost trying to find bathrooms or exits or some such thing during parties to which I hadn't been invited and at which I probably wasn't welcome, though I didn't even have the social standing to be able to understand the subtle signals to leave. Not that I could have left, mind you, because I would have probably gotten lost walking in the yard or driving down the driveway. But I would be lying if I didn't give due credit for both my lack of

observation and my confusion to the increased likelihood of my being drunk in these rich houses, an admission that leads me back very well to the point that I thought I had been about to make about a page ago: that each grade school contributed only a handful of stereotypes to the high school.

I won't go into the stereotypes of the girls in my community because I'm not sure I understood them entirely. To be honest, all of the girls seemed out of my reach for so many years that I feel absolved of any shame for not having paid much attention to whether they were from the south (where they were supposedly easy or prudish, a distinction which could be made, with fair accuracy, by block), from the north (where they had already either learned to practically prostitute themselves to the college-age sons of wealthy grownups or been taught that they were too precious for anybody short of the President, or at least a Senator, to touch), or from the appropriately situated middle. The problem with stereotyping the girls was that, apart from general guidelines, their groupings were much too subtle for most adolescent guys to discern. (I only know what I do of them by my being taken, by some strange circumstance that could only be that I was, for some humiliating reason, not threatening to them, into some of their confidences.)

The guys, however, broke simply, and with a remarkable degree of accuracy, into their groups. Families of the far north raised snobs. Oh, there were druggy snobs, athlete snobs, academic snobs, nice snobs, mean snobs, white snobs, green snobs... but, with a few exceptions, all united by their snobbiness. A categorization once laid forth by the humor columnist for the school paper (a young man from my side of town) used the euphemism "the popular guys." The boys of the moderately-incomed households in the middle made up the jock spectrum, perhaps owing to their having enough money to avoid some time-consuming troubles, such as child labor or the even more insidious depressed-parent syndrome, but not enough to forgo playing outside.

My end of town produced two distinct stereotypes: the nerds and the tough(ish) kids. Perhaps the former picked up their habits from parents who may have been determined to move north a block or two and the latter developed behavior that was in keeping with the harsher realities of their lives (and, again, by example of their parents).

Of course, all categories have outliers, so I can only attest to these guidelines as true on average. Every school had “inbetweeners,” and since our grade school had two male stereotypes that weren’t as polarized by block as their female counterparts, there were those who were even more drastically “inbetween,” which, as may be inferable by my being a writer/drinker and Vinnie’s being a very smart kid who also claimed to have mafia connections, included me and Vinnie. As a result, neither of us felt entirely comfortable with anybody, and so we became the best of friends.

The problem with being inbetweeners is that you can’t compete, in degree, with any of those people who devote themselves wholeheartedly to one state of being or another, so you end up competing — and both Vinnie and I were very competitive — with each other. This, in turn, brings the problem that, since there are really no stiff boundaries to inbetweenness, there can be no objective point of judgment. What I mean is that, young men who were of the nerd set had, at some point, decided (or been told) that academics and, more specifically, grades mattered, so those could be used as points of comparison. Tough kids could fight; jocks could hold athletic competitions; snobs... well I guess snobs could snub each other until one began to feel he could no longer afford to snub the other; but me and Vinnie were drawn into competition with each other by our very dislike of being hemmed in by a given set of rules of competition.

I think it would be fair to say — now that I’m getting to what it was I wanted to say in the first place — that Vinnie took advantage of this loophole much more than I did. If I could demonstrate that my grades were better, he could profess that he did not abide by that largely

arbitrary, at our level of thinking (by our thinking at the time), measurement. If I proved to be a better soccer player than he was, he could sock me in the jaw, if I gained the upper hand in a fist fight, he could claim morality. If I presented witnesses to testify to my being more handsome, he could explain that he had had sex at a ridiculously young age. And so on, and so on.

One quality to which Vinnie could always retreat when necessary during our but-I-am-and-you-are debates was perceived popularity. Of course, I never had the heart (because it would swing too nearly to a painful truth) to go so far as to suggest that his working at a grocery store, and thus being able to buy huge amounts of chewing gum to hand out at recess, contributed to the way in which he was treated by our peers.

But I go dangerously close to taking advantage of the fact that I am the writer and Vinnie is not here to defend himself. There is no denying that he was more popular than I was, in almost any way the question might be handled. I don't know whether it was that some of the more popular girls in our grade school took a liking to his waifishness and lifted him a couple rungs up the ladder or that he did, in fact, possess some innate quality that made him more likable than me. I imagine the truth is somewhere in between all of the possibilities, most of which would be properly phrased in his favor.

One of the more ambiguous factors that probably contributed to the disparity between our relative popularities was my desperate flinging of myself against life. At a very early age, I began to struggle with truth and meaning. I wanted to live — in a deeper sense than I think I would have been able to verbalize at the time — so I tested various behaviors, postures, and philosophies within the context of my school (i.e., my reality). Needless to say both that my experiments very rarely resulted in the expected reactions and that my fellow students began to think me strange. The latter result I attribute less to my constant shifting of personalities, because I don't think I changed my core behaviors all that much, than to my being intrinsically

different than the other kids; the former, I feel confident in deducing, came about simply because the other children were neither grown-ups nor superheroes.

But perhaps the key difference between myself and Vinnie was that he had, at some point, settled the question of individuality's value for himself, while I was still not sure where individuality might cross the line into dangerous behavior. For Vinnie, there was no such ambiguity. He was fiercely individual, to the point at which the fact that nobody was behaving in a certain way was enough of a void for him to squeeze himself into the gap that was left, regardless of the wisdom of those who avoided the behavior. For example, when we were younger and nobody would eat live ants, Vinnie would be the only "individual" to snatch a handful and chew them up, proclaiming afterwards how "cool" the feeling was and how good they tasted.

I think, too, that the issue of individuality between Vinnie and me could be consolidated into the image of a rope on which we both pulled in different directions until we ended up swinging past, over, and under each other... when we were able to keep our feet, that is. Vinnie's insistence on individuality, and his apparently pursuant acceptance by "the group," as our fellow students might be called, tugged me into attempts at self validation that often bordered on dangerous due to my half-hearted participation.

As I think about it now, however, I think it might make for a more accurate symbol to say that Vinnie stood in place with a stubborn grip on his end of the rope while I flailed about trying to test the strength of his position, because, as far as my memory's eye can see, my hesitation to dive into individuality never had any effect on Vinnie. To my knowledge, he never envied anything about me, while I made no effort to conceal the aspects of his life, even those that were entirely external, that I admired. Yes, now that I look back, I can't find a single instance of his

ever supporting my trials to the extent that he put me ahead of himself in anything, while I, even in putting him down, tacitly acknowledged his advantages.

The thing of it was that, having been privy to quieter moments of reflection on Vinnie's part, I could see where his public "persona" (said with a chuckle to remind myself that I'm talking about grade-school children, here) was not necessarily in keeping with what I had assessed to be his personality. Perhaps this is what prolonged my hesitation to become a fanatical individual and, in turn, saved me from Vinnie's ultimate fate.

What I mean by this is that Vinnie became the archetypal example of how individuality has been perverted into the mechanical rabbit that keeps us all running about the course at a dictated speed. This is to say that individuality, or the concept of it, has been made into the ultimate marketing tool — it has turned us *from* the structures and gradual progressions that can be the only means of achieving anything approaching true individuality: individuality that is defined by arriving somewhere that no one else can follow, exactly, but all can appreciate.

In the context of Vinnie and myself, the problem was — and the reason that I feel what guilt over his "death" that I do — that I was trying to find individuality in proximity to the prescribed structures of the pack. I was pushing the rules to test their durability so that I might place the weight of my growth upon them and reach for new heights. But this is like maneuvering across a series of overlapping tightropes in that to fall might mean a plummet into either a rabid meaninglessness or a tame homogeneity. Moreover, all of that pushing against rules and theories and philosophies is a painful business, especially among so many others laying all value on establishing themselves in the hierarchy, and even more especially at those tender teenage ages at which nothing, even the bases of reality, makes sense.

So the reason that Vinnie's choices were my fault is that I played a significant role in the combination of his being told by the world that living was living by the rules and the only way to

remain himself — an individual — was to avoid those rules and my apparently fruitless experiment within the rules. I looked at whatever we were learning at the time as a step toward finally “knowing” (naïve as I was), and he saw it as part of an endless series of arbitrarily “valuable” trivia that helped to define individuals only through its being avoided. Seeing me toppled and chewed, Vinnie resolved that it made more sense to be as a lone wolf.

Perhaps you agree with him; to be honest, given the information that each of us had at the time, his was a more sound and more intellectually plausible argument that I would take up tinkering with much later on. The problem was that Vinnie put too much emphasis on the “avoiding” part of his conclusion and not enough on considering the “arbitrarily valuable” part. In short, for a boy who would eat ants simply because he was told not to, being told *to do* school work, or any other activity intended for self improvement, could not do otherwise than thrust him into a life of counterproductive activities.

Of course, we were not old enough to figure out, for ourselves, what we would rather be doing with our time than studying, just as a newly wild dog will not know how to hunt effectively. This confluence of circumstances, our ages, our lack of ideas concerning what we might do with our time, and a hunter with a slab of raw meat in the form of a large-scale, multibillion-dollar marketing ploy dangling nifty gadgets led Vinnie to cease to exist as a person and to become a dependent, a follower, and a demographic. Once he had starved himself into susceptibility, he was given products — games, movies, music, drinks, drugs — that the rule makers, themselves, used to perpetuate his servility by telling him that they broke the rules. And they told him this because the products that break the rules are easy to make and hyper-replaceable — like homogeneous pop stars all feigning discontent and counter-culturality.

In short, we were in such competition that, when I was having a horridly difficult time finding a way to really live in a meaningful way, Vinnie sought to out-do me by flaunting the



ease with which he was able to discard my apparently petty concerns by living virtually and by proxy. This, it should be noted, was before the term “virtual reality” became en vogue and after the meaning of the word proxy had been entirely forgotten by the mass consciousness.

And so Vinnie became a virtual bastion of individuality by becoming ensnared, to fill the free time of his rebellion, in movies first and then computer games and then the Internet so that his individuality subtly became programmed and limited to the roles that his habits prescribed for him. He would play the role, in the most limited sense possible, of a character in a game or fantasize about living like people on the television or even in a handful of science fiction novels. It followed, quite naturally, that to keep himself in character (by being able to buy the things from which he derived his characters), he defaulted to a money-making cog in the great machine. Vinnie became the manager of a record store in a mall, a job, even, which mirrored one that I had worked previously to answer both my need for money and the desire to learn what I could, in my limited scope, about the music industry, of which I wanted to be a part as a musician. I never became a manager, though.

You’re possibly thinking that I’m being too hard on Vinnie, or at least that I deserve more blame than I’m apparently willing to claim. I guess you might even be blaming me but believe me to have left something out that would really show the redness of my hands because you may not understand why I should feel guilty. Most likely, though, you probably don’t see why I feel any guilt at all because Vinnie is not really dead. So let me explain, as briefly as I’m able, why the forces that were acting on Vinnie were much too strong for me to fend off for him, let alone create.

First of all, you have to consider that, from Vinnie’s point of view, he had everything he could possibly want: games, videos, a television, a stereo, a car, and money enough for beer, cigarettes, and McDonald’s. With such a limited goal of “not doing what I’m told I should be

doing,” Vinnie was easily able to amass a hoard of those types of things that would allow him to say, “Look, I haven’t followed the rules, and I’ve still got everything that following the rules is supposed to get you.” And, in a limited sense, he was correct.

But, in my opinion (though I won’t go too far into this murky topic), there’s much more to be gained by knowing the rules well enough to play with and bend them, and it doesn’t have anything to do with television or its abetting gadgets — in fact, it’s quite the opposite. I can think of nothing more entertaining, and even, ultimately, beneficial to the world, than thinking and creating — the very activities that the dull passivity of “entertainment” is meant to allay. But my thinking while remaining within the rules enough to not be dismissed outright by my extreme individuality makes me a clog in the economic pipe.

Here’s the crux of my theory, though it’s really not what I wanted to be talking about: the aristocracy won whatever subtle philosophical battle was going on over the past however-long, and dreams of a cyber utopia are sham. The oligarchists and royalty, in the name and guise of capitalism, have figured out, and now have the technology to make more productive the strategy of, rather than suppressing the larger community and taking a luxurious leadership by force, giving the rabble exactly what they want — just making sure that we all want exactly what we’re told to want.

So I murdered Vinnie, and I’ll take all the blame if it can’t be dispersed among all those with whom it belongs, because I failed to save him. In fact, I followed him down the path far enough to lend a sort of implicit approval. His death from reality is my fault, even if only to the extent that I’ve perpetuated the practices of his prison, which means that there are those who are far more guilty than I. And even those who are not at the end of the huge money-funnels, with all the Gateses and Turners and a thousand others who prefer to shy from the truth-revealing spotlight, are to blame. All those who do no more than exist within and use the machinations of

virtual death without even giving thought to the ripples of effect that their activities and corresponding apathy send lapping into society are the real and ultimate criminals. But of course they don't give thought to it because to give it thought is to see its horror.

And we ignore the horror so fully that we've even got Vinnie unknowingly playing the central role in his own murder. His reward will be a tombstone reading "Manager" and an epitaph of "thank you for shopping." That is, of course, until we pave right over his grave.