

The Oil in the Lamp

By Kevin Scott Norton

The door can shut without you, and time can pass you by. I learned that when my brother James returned home from the Second World War. One morning, he shared a conversation with my dad that I wasn't supposed to overhear. But I did. And it burned the details of those moments into my memory. They've stayed with me for the rest of my life, and I've shared the experience ever since.

I remember that the sounds were different. It's what woke me in the middle of the night. These noises didn't fit with the quiet calm of the overnight hours. They punctured the steady wind that blew through the trees outside my bedroom window. They raged in conflict with the gentle patting of the maple leaves rubbing together. These distinctly human voices were jagged, random, and off-key in an otherwise perfect symphony of natural sound.

They had caused me to stir and made more sensations come to me. It was a warm summer morning. I felt a heat come in with the breeze and fill the room. It was a natural warmth from the previous daylight sun that lingered like perfume even after its wearer had gone. I opened my eyes to let the sights of the room appear.

It was still dark outside. Even with the light from the waning moon shining through my window, I couldn't see around the room. I reached for the table beside my bed and fumbled with a small oil lantern. My fingers touched the cold metal and glass of the tear-shaped object. I wrapped my hand around it. The oil inside made a swish as I lifted it. Picking up a small matchbox beside it, I struck one, pressed the flame to the wick, and watched the firelight spread across my bedroom.

From my bed, I could see solid white curtains. They hung from the window top, billowing upward with the wind, and were all that moved. The rest of the room was entirely still. My day clothes sat folded on my bureau. A used comb laid undisturbed on my dresser. My bed covers were pulled up to my waist, looking so pristine I'd assumed my body hadn't moved since I'd fallen asleep.

I let out a big yawn and stretched my arms upwards. The muscles tensed, and I felt soreness pulsing through my body. My fatigue was a reminder of the celebration from the previous day. It had been a long and raucous party. And it had the feel of a

lavish festival, considering the size of the crowd that had turned out to welcome my brother James home. They greeted him like the hero he was, a local boy who'd gone off to win a world war and had come home alive.

Their excitement wasn't a surprise to me. My family lived in a small, two-floor house in a rural city neighborhood. Homes were lined up on each side of the street, side by side, with only a tiny plot of land around them. You lived close to your neighbors; everyone knew each other and was considered family. It was that type of place.

I was excited to see him, too. Being only twelve then, I didn't understand why James had to leave in the first place. Most kids don't understand the meaning of something like a war. My parents told me he was fighting for our country and urged me to be strong. But in my heart, I just wanted him back.

That day, he did come back. He'd walked through the door that afternoon and lifted me up. I gave him the tightest hug my little arms could manage, and he carried me around as everyone greeted him. I stayed glued to his side, even after he'd put me down and nudged me to play with the other kids. I wasn't interested. I wanted to hear him, every detail of his time away, and to know why we'd been apart this whole time. But the people he talked to weren't interested in asking him about it. Not a single one asked about the war.

It was frustrating. And, as the night went on, I eventually did drift from his side and towards the other kids. But I promised myself that, in the morning, I would find James and get answers to my questions.

The distant voices continued. Then I heard the sound of metal on metal. It wasn't hard like someone slammed a hammer on a nail. But the sort of soft scraping that accompanied a hand gently placing a pot on a kettle. Someone was making coffee on the downstairs kitchen stove.

I sat up in my bed and pulled the covers off. I was wearing light cotton pajamas that went down to my ankles. My feet were bare. When I placed them on the hardwood floor, a rush of cold went up my body. My feet came back in an instinctive recoil. It was amazing how cold a wooden floor could be, even in the summer. I considered staying in bed. The softness of the mattress was calling me to come back and forget about the noises. But, a thought occurred to me. What if it was James?

It wouldn't be the first time. James had never slept well at night. In the past, I'd caught him still awake and sitting downstairs long after everyone else had gone to bed. He'd never been angry with me when I came down and joined him. Instead, he'd fix me a cup of milk and chat with me until my eyes grew heavy. Then, he would usher me back to bed. I'd hoped he would do the same tonight. I had so many questions for him.

Quietly, to not wake anyone else upstairs, I got out of bed holding my lantern. Tiptoeing out of my room, I moved into the upstairs hallway. It was a narrow corridor. The wood floor creaked with every small step, and the polish made its dark brown color look mirror-like in the dancing light of the lamp's flame. Wallpaper covered the sides of the hallway. Its white matte background flowed with images of roses and dandelions. The colors were once bright and vibrant but had faded to tannish yellow, resulting from years of cigarette smoke. My dad, a dedicated chain smoker, always had one between his fingers or lips.

The door to my parent's room was open to my left, and I peered in to see. The shades being drawn made it nearly pitch black and hard to see more than the outlines of the furniture. But I could see my mom was asleep in the bed. A crumple of pillows and blankets lay beside her, where my dad had been sleeping earlier.

My heart sank slightly. If James was downstairs, he was almost certainly talking to him. The voices were still too distant to know for sure. But I wondered if my dad would be as willing to let me stay and talk.

Moving toward the stairwell to the downstairs kitchen, I listened harder. One voice was indeed my dad's. It was robust and brisk but occasionally cracked from age and too much smoking. A thick Italian accent painted every English syllable, while prominent foreign words and phrases slipped in every few sentences.

I also recognized that the other person was James. His voice was still very boyish. But he'd always try to speak formally to project maturity. James was the first of our family to be born in the new country. He considered himself thoroughly American and only learned Italian at my father's insistence. But his English was near perfect comparably, and he'd inherited no accent.

My anxiousness to see James outweighed my worries about my dad, so I started down the stairwell to the kitchen, planning to join them. I still moved slowly, as I always

did down these stairs. The stairwell was nearly claustrophobic in its design. The panel walls on each side made it lack enough space to fit even two people. Additionally, the dark gray paint on the walls gave a feeling that the place was leaning toward you. Worse yet, the winding staircase descended halfway before turning towards the kitchen below. It made it feel like you were descending stairs inside of a box.

I was halfway down when I suddenly stopped. Despite my fear of getting stuck in that stairwell, hearing my dad's words overruled such dread, making me content to stay there. Specifically, it was because my dad spoke a name.

"Vincenzo," he said.

It was my brother's given Catholic and very Italian name. James didn't loathe hearing it. It was just inaccurate as far as he was concerned. It wasn't his real name, just the thing his father called him to get his attention.

Regardless, its utterance had stopped me cold. Because even my father didn't use it regularly; instead, he'd invoke it on rare occasions when he was serious.

"Tell me about your time in Italy," he said. "The letters to your mother, I read them. You were there, in our home."

"It was your home, Pop." James responded. "And Yes, I was there. But I'd prefer not to speak about that."

There was a long silence, and I moved my head around the corner. It was dark in the kitchen, but I could still see about half of the large square-shaped room. An oval dining table took up a majority of the room's middle. On it sat the mirror image of the lamp I held. Its low light flickered on the pinewood of the table as the flame burned low. The oil had nearly run out.

My father sat at the far end of the table, dressed in a white t-shirt, flannel pants, and slipper shoes. A long robe hung over his shoulder, and he wore large reading glasses that had slipped to the end of his nose. Before him, on the table, was a wide-open newspaper. Alongside it was a cup of steaming hot coffee and a still-burning cigarette propped on a glass ashtray. It was the picture of a man trying to enjoy peace before facing the day's chores.

I could hear James by the stove as he placed a kettle on the back burner. A clanging spoon rang out as it turned around his coffee cup. The light from the stove's

burner cast his shadow across the room. I watched as he raised a cup of coffee to his lips and turned back towards the table.

Then, he came into view. James sat beside my father, and I saw him wearing his usual pajamas. He had worn them since before leaving, and they were white with light blue stripes. The shirt and pants seemed to hang off him, even though they'd fit him comfortably before leaving for war. He'd lost weight since then. On his feet were brown wool slippers he'd gotten for Christmas almost three years earlier. They looked old and stiff from lack of use, but he seemed comfortable in them anyway.

Despite his casual attire, James still ensured he looked like a gentleman. His hair was well-groomed, and his face was shaven. A glint of aftershave across his cheeks and chin gave him a clean look. He'd likely only slept a few hours before waking in the middle of the night and getting ready like it was already morning.

My eyes were drawn back to the lamp on the table. I knew they would need more oil if they planned on being up until sunrise. And I was confident that was James' intention. Looking down, I could see plenty still left in mine. A little blue flame was still flickering, lighting up the stairwell. My thoughts shifted to my father and whether he would let me join them if I offered to refill his lamp's oil.

Softly, however, I blew out the little flame. Placing the lamp gently on the stairs above me, I turned my head to watch and listen. James took another sip of his coffee and put his hand on the newspaper. He moved it towards my dad.

"The war's over now." He said. "It's best to leave it behind. The papers tell the story better than I could."

James slowly slipped his coffee, shut his eyes, and rolled his neck. Regardless of his diligent grooming, he looked worn out. Something about his face looked weary like a thousand nights of unbroken rest wouldn't remove the exhaustion. He opened his eyes, took another sip, and stared into nothing.

"Ah," my father sighed. "You don't want to talk about it."

He removed his glasses and placed them on the table, pushing the paper back to James. The features on his face were soft. His eyes remained gentle, but he still spoke with the forceful tone of a father to a son.

"But I must ask you," he said.

James set his coffee down, placing his elbows on the table and folding his hands. His head shifted towards my dad while his shoulders raised slightly. He tried to speak, but my dad raised his hand.

"I am an old man, Vincenzo," he said. "Do you understand that, when this all started, I became certain that I would never see my home again."

James leaned back in his chair and stared at my dad. I could also feel a knot forming in my stomach. I was sure we were both feeling the same thing: a feeling of loss at the idea that my dad wouldn't be around much longer.

"I'd intended to go back with your mother," Dad continued. "I prayed to our lord, Christ. Not only for your safe return, but to heal the world of this war. Give us the chance to go back, see our home. Your mother prayed to the blessed Mary, every day."

He let out a hearty laugh that seemed to come from the pit of his stomach. Leaning back in his chair, he slapped the table with an open palm as a wide grin crossed his face.

"Madon! Your mother," he said. "Not a chance I'd go back without her."

"Ma doesn't like giving you any peace, Pop?" James asked. He was smiling now, too, and I also felt a grin cross my face. Their banter reminded me of the days before James had left.

"Ah." Dad said, "I was alone when I came here. Your mother had to wait three years in Italy. When she got here, she say "Antonio, never again!". I haven't been alone since."

James laughed.

"No," Dad said. "I was certain we wouldn't go back. But then, this all ended. And I'd hoped you would, at least, tell me of your time there. I know a soldier doesn't want to talk about a war. But a son can tell his father about his home."

"I'll tell you what I can." James said.

I didn't understand my brother's hesitation. Having been away so long, I thought James owed this to the family. He owed it to me. We deserved a recounting of everything he'd gone through. It was needed to justify all the loneliness and worry.

My brother's actions towards my dad showed that he disagreed. He was willing to speak now, but his voice dropped low. It wasn't a whisper but a hushed tone like a thief pitching his next big score. It made him impossible to hear without moving closer.

My eyes searched the bottom of the stairs for a place to see and hear while staying hidden. I was sure the discussion would stop if they saw me. But the only visible place to hide was my mother's writing desk. It sat at the bottom corner of the stairwell. It wasn't much, but I had used it to play hide and seek, and it was very dark in that corner at night. The desk sat just away from the wall so my body could fit. And I distinctly remembered a small crack between the top two drawers, which made it possible to see the kitchen. Not well, but enough. It would have to do, I decided.

Getting to the desk without being seen or heard was the following problem. I focused my attention on the bottom of the stairwell. It ended at a doorway where the door had been removed, which created a small notch between the stairwell wall and the door pane. If I kept my body taugth against the wall, it would be enough that I could slide down to the doorway unseen.

Before moving, I looked at my lamp. It sat still on the stairs. I could leave it as I was sure no one would be coming down that could trip on it. But that's not what made me decide otherwise. It was a small, well-put-together lamp that would make no noise while moving. And it had plenty of oil. James' flame was running low. He would need the oil for his lamp.

I picked up my lamp and waited for a chance to move. James took a long sip of his coffee, getting ready to speak. I planted my body against the wall. Moving my feet down each step, I slid into the notch at the bottom of the stairs.

As I prepared to duck around the corner and behind the desk, my eyes went wide with horror. James started looking up towards the stairwell. I was directly opposite where he was sitting. My body instinctively jumped forward and spun onto the other wall without a sound. I froze, my heart thumped, and my breath caught. I listened, waiting for James to call my name and tell me to come out.

"You got to keep in mind," James told my dad. "I was there by accident. And things... they weren't very good."

I let out a breath and felt my body release the tension. The writing desk, my intended hiding spot, was visible a few feet away. It was the only part of the kitchen I could see. James and my father were out of view even though I could now hear them. I thought it would have to do, shaking my head at the blunder of now being opposite the desk I needed to get to.

“How did you get there?” Father asked.

“We were anchored off the coast.” James replied. “Ground troops had already landed but the Germans sent planes at our boats. We got hit and I bailed out.”

“You just jump out in the middle of the ocean?” Father asked.

“Well, rather than get blown up.” James said. “Yea I took my chances in the water.”

There was a silent pause before James spoke again, slowly.

“The sounds were all around me.” he said. “The roar of the planes and explosions from the ships. The water splashing at my ears while I swam, just praying to God it was towards land.”

I could hear him slurp down the last of his coffee and the sound of the cup as it hit the table. A spoon rattled, and a chair moved back from the table.

“I made it to land with only a few bumps and bruises.” James said.

A tin kettle was placed on an iron burner, which lit with a “poof” after the clicking of the gas stove ignitor. A moment later, the chair moved again towards the table.

“Thank God.” Father said. “I’ve read too many newspapers since this started. Fathers whose sons were not so fortunate.”

“Yea, I know Pop.” James said. “I couldn’t stay on the beach so I made my way inland. That’s when I met this guy in a big wooden wagon.”

“I remember those.” Father responded. “We used them to haul wine barrels.”

“He was using it to get home,” James said. “I couldn’t understand him well. His English was worse than my Italian.”

I could hear the long exhale from my dad. He had been insistent that his children continue to learn Italian. Most of us just wanted to speak English but still met my dad's requirements. James, however, had been utterly rebellious about it. He refused to learn anything besides the basics, which always angered my dad.

“You see?” He said, “I push you to learn and you refused me.”

“Ah, come on Pop,” James interrupted. “I knew enough to figure it out. Do you want the story or do you want to lecture me?”

The room went silent. The two were most likely staring each other down in a wordless argument. It reminded me of the writing desk and my need to get there. I couldn't see them, which made the quiet moments awkward, as if I was missing half the conversation.

“Point is,” James said. “He offered me a ride to his town. It seemed like my only option.”

“You did not know that it was my home. Your family's home,” my dad replied.

“Not at first, no.” James said. “That's why I was worried, thinking of all the stuff that could happen to me. The man in the cart seemed friendly, but what about the town? What if the Germans were there? There were a million horrible things going through my head at the time.”

A sense of unease came over me at James' descriptions of the old country. The only stories I'd heard about Italy, which came from my dad, had been joyful. His tellings of the place had been so detailed it made us feel as if we'd grown up there. Going back, I'd imagined, would have been like going home.

“As soon as we arrived Pop,” James continued. “I knew.

I heard my father tap his hand once gently on the table. He laughed, which only came out when he was happy to hear something.

“Your stories were good.” James said. “I'd never been outside this town before the war, but I could swear it was like coming home. Then, when I saw the water well outside the city.”

“Ah!” Father interrupted. “That is a good memory.”

The story of the well was familiar to me. My dad told us a lot of stories from his childhood in Italy. It was often while trying to lecture us on our unruly behavior. But one story he'd offered told of a time when even my dad had done something wrong. He'd carved his name into a well pump outside his hometown and had been caught by the townspeople with the knife. He'd been brought before his parents, who'd punished him harshly for his actions.

“My mother,” Dad said. “She was infuriated when they told her. I took a well-earned beating for that one. But I never felt bad about it. That pump was one of the first things to be made in that town. I wanted my name on it, in perpetuity.”

“I know, Pop.” James said. “You had wanted something that would last forever. That’s what you always told me.”

A soft whistle began sounding; the kettle was boiling. A chair creaked in the direction of my father, and I heard him grunt as he stood up. The table slid slightly as his large belly hit the corner of the wood. His feet shuffled slowly towards the stove, scraping as his shoes slid across the floor.

I knew this was my opportunity. With a quick hop, I shot towards the space between the wall and the writing desk. My father’s voice continued as he spoke to James, But I didn’t hear as I went past the open space, hoping his voice covered the sound of the two steps I took on the kitchen floor. I dropped into the hole and froze, silent.

I saw my dad at the stove, pouring himself and James a coffee. He placed the kettle on the stove’s back burner, moved back to his chair, and sat down. As he put the cup in front of James, I saw that he sat motionless and staring toward the writing desk.

Looking at my brother’s eyes, I thought I was caught. They were focused right on the spot I’d ducked into. His brow was furrowed, and his lip was pursed. The look lingered for a few seconds, and I waited with a held breath. Then, his face loosened, and he turned back to my father.

“Knowing where I was,” James said. “I calmed down. I’d be safe if I could find some family members.”

I saw my father’s eyes widen and a broad smile link his cheeks. The excitement was rising in him as James finally got to the good part of the story. I was anxious to hear more as well.

“I’m sure there were plenty,” Dad said. “Of all the places, you stumble into the family home.”

“Just a lucky stroke, Pop.” James responded.

“Luck?” Dad replied. “It was answered prayers, believe me.”

For a long moment, there were no words between them. James stirred the spoon in his cup. The clanging of the metal against porcelain was the only sound in the room. He turned to my father and looked him in the eyes.

“Maybe,” James said. “Your family fed me and gave me a place to stay until our soldiers arrived. Then the war ended. Now I’m home, which is where I aim to stay.”

James moved his hand to my dad’s arm. He held it tight for a moment. It was a movement I’d only seen at funerals. It was a physical touch of encouragement in the throes of a tragedy.

“And Pop,” he said. “You should too. You and Ma.”

James pulled his hand back and took a long sip of his coffee. As he stood to get up, my father grabbed his arm. His grip was gentle but firm. It wasn't an order to stay but a passionate plea for more. It took effort not to jump from my place and start asking questions myself, sure that this couldn't be it.

“That’s it?” father said. “Nothing else? What did you talk about with your family? What about the town? Didn’t you see all the places from my stories? The house I grew up in, the grass field beside the well, the one we would play in. The winemakers I worked for. The church I married your mother in, you didn’t visit?”

“Your family is still there.” James said flatly. “It’s enough to know they’re safe.”

Father moved his hand away from James’ arm. Silence hung in the air. There was tension between them now. Two invisible but opposing resolves were locked in a battle. My dad's draconian demand was fighting against my brother's devout resolution. It was a stalemate between two men who were so stubbornly alike it could have lasted forever.

“Vincenzo.” My father said, “In the name of God, tell your father the truth.”

James could still have said no. I am sure he considered it. No quantifiable reason had been given for him to change his mind. But my father had made the only appeal he had left to him. It was a plea from a father to his son. It was a call to a bond that even I didn’t recognize, a relationship that broke through all reason and emotion. The truth was the only value that mattered now.

James let out a deep breath and settled back down into his seat. He took a long drink of his coffee, set down the empty cup, and closed his eyes. I wasn’t sure if he was

enjoying that last drink of coffee or the final moments before telling my father the whole story.

“I tried to go see the church.” he said, “I wasn’t able to. It’s not there anymore. Italy wasn’t anything like in your stories. I know it was once, before you left. But that’s not how it is anymore.”

“Tell me.” Dad said.

“The grasslands,” James replied. “They’re black with ash, and caked in mud. It was a burn pit. The animals were diseased. They used the wood from the winemakers’ wagons because the businesses were gone and the roads were destroyed. They drank the wine to keep from tainted water.”

As James spoke, there was a change in both my dad and me. Our stunned reactions were a mirror of one another. I followed my father’s lead. Every negative shift in his demeanor permitted my heart to despair. It was a sudden sadness I’d never known before. I felt like a defendant at the end of a trial, convinced of my innocence, listening as the guilty verdict was read. It was a wave of hope crashing on the unmoving rocks of reality.

“What about the town?” dad managed.

“The good news is, the people are still there, and they’re alive,” James responded. “But it’s not your hometown anymore, Pop. The buildings have mostly fallen. The houses are just small huts with roofs that are rigged up to barely keep the rain out.”

“The church,” Dad said.

“There’s no church.” James said. “It’s not even a hole in the ground. It’s just gone, like someone came and plucked it up. The same for the well. There’s no spigot, no pump, and no name.”

“As if I was never there,” Dad said.

“The family is ok, Pop,” James said quickly. “They send their best.”

I wasn’t comforted by my brother’s final words. I didn’t believe my dad was either. But, as was his way, he accepted the news evenly. He lifted his coffee and took the last sip. Then he pulled his cigarette from the ashtray and placed it in his mouth. As he looked up at James, I saw my father doing something I had never seen him do nor would ever see him do again. He was crying.

“It’s a nice night to go out for a smoke,” he said, a smile cracking his mouth.
“Welcome home, son.”

He stood up and pushed his chair towards the table. Then he turned and walked down the hall towards the front door. He exited without another word.

The room was quiet as James just sat at the table. He didn’t move, save for blinking his eyes. They stared off towards the door my father had left through. His breath moved in and out slowly as his eyes seemed to glaze over and moisten. He stared at the closed door as if it would never open again, and everything on the other side was gone.

The light from the lamp continued to flicker and slowly dim. The oil, so precious to keeping the flame going, was nearly gone. I watched as the features on my brother's face began to fade with the dimming of the light.

I stood up from my hiding spot and moved to the table. Placing my lamp on the wood, I slid it slowly towards James. Then I took a seat opposite him.

“There is plenty of oil in that lamp.” I said. “Enough for us to talk.”

“You’ve been trying to ask me about Italy since I got back.” James said. “I’ve been trying to avoid it. I guess you found a way to learn about it anyway.”

“We can talk about something else.” I replied. “It’s over, right? The war?”

James nodded his head and put his hand around my lamp. He poured the oil into his own and watched the flame climb high. It lit up our features and the room around us in a beautiful dancing glow. It would stay lit for our time together until the sun came up in the morning.