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The Big Light

My eyes drooped heavily as I entered the Uber car and quietly buckled my seatbelt. I greeted the driver briefly, but I had no intention of continuing the conversation. He responded with an excited “Hello,” exposing his heavy foreign accent. As the man attempted at small talk, I tuned-out his voice as much as I could, so that I could get some sleep on the thirty-minute car ride.

The driver persisted, though, and continued to inquire about my visit to Boston. Worried that his lack of strong English would be a barrier between us, I answered his questions as simply as possible. But suddenly, things got interesting.

The driver proceeded to ask me how I felt about the rise of technology in my generation and wondered if it was taking over my life. I was puzzled by the seemingly random question, but reluctantly, I confessed to him that my friends and I are very reliant on our smart phones. I could see the driver furrow his brow in the car mirror as he “wished we could go back in time”—to when we used our brainpower and problem solving skills, instead of googling the answer to everything. “Nowadays,” he said, “We google ‘how to put a picture on a wall’ instead of just trying to put the picture on the wall.” As I agreed with the driver, he went on to say that instead of taking pictures to upload on social media, we should just enjoy the moments in life which we will never have again. “I have to respect the generation change,” he said, “but this kind of thing worries me”.

I then went on to learn that the driver’s name was Ivan and that he was born dirt-poor in a small village of Rwanda. He did not speak a word of English until he was a young adult.

Eventually, Ivan studied enough of our language to apply to Cornell, where he was accepted and received a full scholarship. He went on to get a Master's Degree and graduate as a Biomedical Engineer. With his student loans finally paid off, Ivan worked in the laboratory during the week but decided to drive for Uber on the side.

Despite being an impressive man on paper, it was not Ivan's prestigious diploma or esteemed job description that inspired me. What struck me was the passion that he displayed and the words of wisdom he expressed that no one had said to me before. Ivan decided that he no longer wanted to live a life of poverty, and that instead of complaining about his situation, he worked his hardest to steer off his path of deprivation

A specific moment that stands out in my mind is when Ivan said the following: "Why would I sit at home each day when I can be out making something happen? There are endless opportunities in America, but we are all too busy complaining about the lack of them. I honestly could not care less who the next president is. None of them will put food on my plate. Only I can do that for myself."

Along my journey up Mt. Purgatory, I developed a on-going admiration for Dante's passion. The word "passion" is the first one that comes to mind when I think of the pilgrim's experience. Would Dante have made the long trip had it not been for his passion to reunite with the love of his life? I believe passion breeds reaction, just as Dante reacted to the challenges he faced along his journey. When given the opportunity to bathe his eyes in the light of Paradise Dante oozed with delight: "There is no little child that more quickly rushes with his faces toward the milk...than I became, to make better mirrors of my eyes, bending toward the wave that pours forth for us to be bettered in it" (*Paradiso* XXX, 82-87). Dante's intense fervor to better himself was as if his whole being was created just for that perfect moment. Passion.

Throughout my young life, I have always wondered if I would have a sort of “epiphany” in which one person changed my life for the better. Dante was lucky; he can thank many figures for impacting his life: Beatrice, Virgil, Statius, St. Lucy, Bernard, and even Francesca. One year ago, if I was asked to name one person who has altered my view on life, I would take several minutes of fruitless thought, only to respond with a measly “I don’t really know.” While reading *The Divine Comedy*, I realized that my encounter with Ivan was as close to Dante’s submersion into the river of light shone through Beatrice’s love. Meeting Ivan sparked a passion in me to dive deeper, just as Dante’s passion drove him deeper into the river until he was completely submerged.

Time moved more quickly than it should have during that car ride, and as our conversation began to flow even more, I became closer and closer to my destination. It was not until we arrived at my Uncle’s apartment building that I realized that time had run out: I would never see Ivan again, just as Dante would never see Beatrice again. To be dropped off directly below my Uncle’s floor, Ivan drove his car around the circle. It has not struck me until this moment, that a seemingly trivial circle outside of a Boston apartment building would symbolize that, because of Ivan, my eternity was not linear, but a circular experience. Since exiting Ivan’s car, I am no longer on a never-ending line of bewilderment, because I am just a little bit more whole than I was when I entered it.

Out of the hundreds of drivers in Boston and the thousands of humans needing a ride, Ivan and I were paired up. God does not believe in coincidences, and neither do I. As the ride ended, Ivan and I simultaneously stepped out of the car. After opening the door, I turned my head, as we both immediately reached out our hands for each other. In that moment, I realized that this was the first time I had seen Ivan’s face, as I could not see it while he was driving. I

lifted my head, and our eyes met: “In that Light one becomes such that it is impossible ever to consent to turn away from it toward any other sight” (*Paradiso* XXXIII, 100-102). I believe I did not see Ivan’s face when I first stepped into the car because my eyes were not strong enough to see him. As I dove deeper into our conversation, my eyes became stronger and stronger until they could gaze upon Ivan’s face. By letting the exhaustion and disinterest that first overcame my body evaporate into thin air, my whole being was becoming more prepared to consume the words that Ivan spoke as the ride went on. Each word that escaped his mouth was a tiny spark of light, until we came face to face...and the “Big Light” flashed before me.

“It was a pleasure meeting such a fine young lady as you. You are wise beyond your years, keep that up,” Ivan said. I returned the same sort of compliments to Ivan, and we parted ways. Running up to my Uncle’s apartment, I could not wait to tell my family all about my “amazing Uber driver”.

Now it may sound bizarre that I admire a man that I spent only thirty minutes with. But as Dante experienced, you only need a quick glimpse of the “Big Light” for it to remain shining in you forever.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante, Robert M. Durling, Ronald L. Martinez, and Robert Turner. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print.