

# **If Souls Can Sleep**

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ONEMILLIONWORDS

**Soul sleep**, more properly known as psychopannychism, is the belief that the human soul is uncomprehending during the time between bodily death and resurrection on Judgment Day.

*“The virtuous man is content to dream  
what a wicked man really does.”*

Plato

## Prologue

Vincent stumbled through the hospital's unexpectedly automatic door. A sudden blast of heat burned his bloodshot eyes.

The antiseptic air made his skin twitch, his stomach roil. Though he hated hospitals on principle, he knew his nausea had more to do with a belly full of whiskey. All those hard-fought months of sobriety, wasted.

*But am I drunk enough?*

Vincent batted the thought aside and focused on walking a straight line to the elevators. When he spotted a policeman leaning against the information desk, he nearly lost his nerve.

*Not a real cop. He doesn't even have a gun.*

Keeping tabs on the middle-aged security guard out of the corner of his eye, Vincent performed his best impression of a model citizen as he crossed the lobby and waited for the elevator. Fortunately, the guy seemed more interested in flirting with the young brunette behind the counter than scrutinizing visitors.

The elevator opened, and he hurried in, letting out a big breath as his view of the rent-a-cop was replaced by the shiny metal door. His relief was short-lived, however, when he considered what lay ahead.

Leaning against the elevator's faux wood paneling, he wished he had some liquid courage left. If he had brought a bottle with him, he would've emptied it fast.

But there was nothing fast about the elevator. Why the hell wasn't it moving? Panicked thoughts about the sly security guard and a master control panel disappeared when he realized he had never pressed the button for the floor he wanted.

*Focus, damn it!*

He jabbed a finger into the number three. The elevator's sudden acceleration tightened his stomach. When the door opened, he took a few steadying steps onto the long-term patient observation ward. The vegetable garden.

As much as he wanted to avoid contact with hospital staff, he knew he'd never be able to find his destination without help. He had visited his brother only once before, and that was eight months ago. The day Danny went into a coma.

Vincent wiped his brow with the back of his hand, smearing sweat into his wild tangle of hair. He resisted the urge to rub his eyes as he approached the front desk.

A middle-aged woman with artificially blond hair and wearing a frumpy brown pullover looked up.

He forced his mouth into what he hoped would pass for a smile. "Hi, I'm, ah, looking for Danny..." He cleared his throat. "...*Daniel* Pierce. Can you tell me what room he's in?"

The woman—Suzanne, according to her nametag—regarded him warily. Her nose twitched, and he wondered if the stench of booze could ever be mistaken for cheap after-shave.

"Mr. Pierce doesn't get many visitors," she said. The statement might have been an offhand comment or an accusation. "What is your relation to the patient?"

"I'm his brother. *Half*-brother, actually."

The receptionist's eyebrows arched. "You're Vincent. Eve's other son."

He winced.

*Eve's other son... Cain.*

"Yeah, I'm Vincent. Wait a minute. She's not here, is she? My mother, I mean."

"No, not yet." Suzanne glanced at her watch. "Mass won't be over for another hour or so. You'll have to sign in."

She pushed a clipboard toward him, and he scribbled his name on the line. It felt like signing a confession.

"It's Room 307," she said when he returned the clipboard. "Down that hall and take a left."

Vincent dropped the pen and walked away. While watching his feet to make sure they did what they were supposed to, he almost collided with a big, grim-faced man in scrubs. Vincent muttered an apology and continued down the corridor. His pulse quickened with each number. 301, 302, 303...

The door to Room 307 was open. He paused at the threshold.

Daniel Pierce lay on his back, a tightly tucked blanket covering his lower half. His red hair, usually an untamed mass of curls, had been cut short and combed. He looked pale, but then again Daniel always looked pale. Were it not the hospital gown and the many tubes connecting him to the bedside electrical devices, Vincent might have believed his brother was just sleeping.

*He is sleeping. Asleep and then some.*

Without realizing it, Vincent had entered the room and walked up to the bed. Looking down at Daniel's peaceful expression, he remembered the last argument he had had with their mother, who was still waiting for a miracle. But Vincent had sided with the doctors, trusting facts over faith.

Daniel was a hopeless case. He would never wake up.

Vincent would make sure of it.

People always said "pull the plug," but there were a lot of wires and tubes. If he cut the wrong ones, would it alert the staff before he found the right one? Was it as easy as just yanking the power cord out of the electric socket? He

couldn't afford to make any mistakes. There was no such thing as a second chance.

He reached a hand inside his pocket and grasped something small and cold. Still staring at his brother's face—he half expected the intense blue eyes to open or the lips to curl into a smirk—he brought out the jackknife and opened it. The click echoed inside his skull.

Vincent held out the knife, his arm trembling. He wondered what would be quickest. Slashing the throat? Cutting his wrists? Plunging the blade into Daniel's heart, vampire style?

The thought was so ridiculous he laughed out loud. Then he doubled over, gagging and gasping for air. Seconds later, the dry heaves subsided. When he righted himself, the room was spinning, but all he could see was Daniel as a kid, playing with Matchbox cars and reading comic books. A teenager, snitching cigarettes from their mother's purse. A young man, holding his newborn niece for the first time.

*Clementine...*

Tears streaming down his face, Vincent took a deep breath and whispered, "I'm sorry."

## Chapter 1

He always knows the nightmare for what it is.

Even if the scenes that preceded it—getting hammered at a bar with drinking buddies he hadn't seen in years or sitting in a strange classroom, taking a final exam in a subject he knows nothing about—seem real at the time, the spell is broken every time the screen door slams.

Vincent jerks upright. He is sitting on a faded brown couch, one leg tucked under him and the other dangling over the side. Slowly, inevitably, he turns his head toward the door, knowing he will find Bella there, struggling with two overstuffed grocery bags. His heart pounds while he waits for her to speak.

“Were you sleeping?” Her tone is accusatory.

What Vincent should say is “I must have dozed off.” But the nightmare, while a thief of reality, is not a true memory and is perhaps worse than the actual moment of tragedy because he knows what will come next.

He knows, and he is powerless to stop it.

Even if he could change the script and overcome the cold hand of dread keeping him silent and rooted to the couch, it would be too late because the horrible thing has already happened.

“Where’s Clementine?” Bella asks.

He scans the room, hoping, praying, *begging* to see a pair of black pigtails peeking up from behind the coffee table or a telltale lump under the afghan on the rocking chair. The nightmare will not be swayed, however. Bella walks past

him and dumps the brown bags onto the dining room table, spilling one of them in the process.

“Clemmy? Where are you, baby?” she calls.

They notice the open bathroom door at the same time. Some sadistic force, perhaps the nightmare itself, compels Vincent to finally leave the couch and follow her into the bathroom. Bella’s scream comes right on cue. Helpless to stop himself, he steps through the doorway.

Clementine’s bare feet stick out of the tub, her little toes pointing toward the ceiling. Bella has not started crying yet. In that forever instant, there is only silence as a rubber duck, Clementine’s favorite toy, floats atop the pink-tinged water.

Vincent gasped and blinked frantically against the darkness that harbored the image of his dead daughter. Kneeling on his bed, which was nothing more than one mattress stacked on top of another, he groped through the black air until he found the string for the overhead light.

With a click, the room burst into existence around him. He fell back onto his bed. Staring up at the crisscrossing cracks in the ceiling, he listened to the sound of his breathing until his pulse no longer pounded in his ears and the pressure in his chest eased into a dull ache.

*I used to wake up sobbing like a baby. Maybe someday the nightmare won't even wake me up. Maybe someday I won't even remember that I had it.*

Knowing he would never be able to fall back to sleep—that was one thing that hadn’t changed in seven, almost eight years—Vincent sat up again and looked at the clock. 9:44. In the morning? No, the little dot of light was next to “p.m.” But what exactly did that mean?

The third-shift lifestyle still messed with his mind after almost a year. It took him a full minute to piece it together. He had gone to bed just after noon and hadn’t set the alarm

because he had off tomorrow—*today* off. Today and tomorrow.

He got out of bed and put on an old pair of jeans that were lying atop one of the piles of clothes. A sorry-looking black T-shirt was the sole contents of the dresser. He pulled it over his head. Since none of his socks were even close to clean, he condemned his bare feet to the cold hardwood floor. Stifling a yawn, he opened his bedroom door.

The living room light was on. He was not alone.

“Oh! Hey, Vincent. We didn’t wake you, did we?”

For once, his roommate was not in his recliner. Instead, Jerry sat on the long, stumpy couch—dubbed “the Low Rider” by a former resident—next to a young woman sporting a lip ring and lots of cleavage. Jerry’s eyes were wide with concern. She smiled sheepishly.

“No, no,” Vincent said. “I didn’t even know you were out here.”

The girl stared at him. He ran a hand through his hair, trying to diagnose by touch how bad a case of bed head he had.

*A fine first impression...or do I know her?*

“Good,” Jerry said. “We were being extra quiet. Even turned the volume down all the way.” He gestured at the TV with the hand that wasn’t holding a joint.

Vincent turned in time to see a woman in skimpy attire leap up from the sand to spike the ball over the net.

“You’re watching volleyball?” Vincent asked.

Jerry shrugged. “Paish used to play in high school. And I’m watchin’ ’cause...well...look at them!”

*I have met her.*

Paish, short for Patience, was Jerry’s dealer. Vincent had been home when she paid a visit more than a month ago. “Made a delivery” was probably more accurate, since she had left soon after the transaction. “Schwag,” “nugs,” “steamrollers”—Jerry and Paish had spoken a different language. She seemed friendly enough, but Vincent hadn’t said

more than hello and goodbye to her. According to Jerry, they were just friends.

*She played volleyball. Just like Bella did.*

Jerry passed the joint to Paish, who took a long drag. The smoke escaped from her mouth in a slow, steady stream. When she leaned forward for the ashtray on the coffee table, Vincent was afforded an unobstructed view down her shirt. Her puffy eyes met his.

“Do you want to hit this?” she asked.

The question caught him completely off guard. “What?”

She held the joint out to him. “Do you want a hit?”

Clearly, the expression “hit this” meant something different in Druggie Speak than the slang Vincent was used to. For a second, he had thought she was making a far more intimate offer. Embarrassed, he could only stammer and shake his head.

Before he could make more of a fool of himself, Jerry said, “Vincent doesn’t get high. I don’t think he drinks either.”

“Well, aren’t you a good boy?” Paish said to Vincent. She handed the joint back to Jerry.

“I try,” Vincent replied, forcing his eyes not to stray south of hers. He cleared his throat. “I’m going to jump in the shower.”

He retreated from the living room. Passing through the kitchen, he heard Paish say to Jerry, “Your roommate is kind of cute.”

Vincent smirked to himself. He supposed he should be flattered. Jerry had said she was a student at UW–Milwaukee, which meant she was younger than both of them, maybe by as much as a decade. She was pretty, though bleach-blond highlights and pierced lips weren’t his cup of tea. And then there was the recreational drugs use.

Standing in front of the toilet, he was half-amused, half-ashamed to find that he was getting hard.

*Must be a side effect of abstinence.*

Vincent flushed and washed his hands, glancing up at the mirror. He wouldn't be mistaken for an undergraduate, but he didn't look the worse for thirty years of wear. He was reasonably tall, somewhat dark, and closer to handsome than hideous. Maybe Paish found his dark, sleep-tousled hair charming. Maybe she liked half-Hispanic guys.

Or maybe she was just stoned.

*If the divorce were done with, would I have flirted back?*

He pulled back the shower curtain and gasped.

Two little legs and a rubber duck.

Vincent staggered back to the toilet and focused on not puking. After several minutes spent staring into the rust-stained bowl, beads of sweat sliding down to his neck, he finally looked at the bathtub again. Of course, it was empty.

By the time he stepped into the tub, all thoughts of sex had vanished. Thanks to outdated plumbing, the showerhead spat out an unsteady trickle of lukewarm water. He barely noticed.

His hair dripping false tears down the sides of his face and once more wearing the faded black T-shirt and jeans, Vincent ventured back into living room. He made a beeline for his bedroom but stopped when he saw Paish was gone.

"She works in the morning," Jerry explained from the comfort of his mustard-colored recliner. "Man, I'm glad I don't work weekends."

Hand on the doorknob to his room, Vincent said, "I thought you didn't like hanging out with college students. Or is it common courtesy to schmooze with your supplier?"

"Whuh? Paish? She's the shit. A bit of a tease sometimes, but what's wrong with that?"

Vincent went into his room. He picked up two matching socks off the floor and slipped his tennis shoes on over them.

"And I got nothing against college students," Jerry said

from the next room. The closed door hardly muffled his roommate's voice at all. "I told you I never wanted to *live* with one ever again. Too many bad experiences."

Vincent ran a comb through his slick hair a few times before returning to the living room.

"Did one of them nark on you or something?" He hoped his tone came off as more curious than condemning. Jerry had been upfront about his drug use from day one, and aside from the not-quite-campfire reek of marijuana, Vincent couldn't complain about his roommate.

"Naw," Jerry said, his eyes glued to the volleyball game. "But my last roommate...a philosophy major from Waterford...threw a big party that got busted. I was damn lucky none of the cops found my stash. Anyway, college kids never have any money. When they're not moochin' your food, they're moochin' your weed."

"Well, that's something you don't have to worry about with me." Vincent paused. "I'm going for a walk."

Jerry suddenly stood up, and for a moment, Vincent feared the big guy was going to invite himself along. Instead, his roommate went to the pantry and retrieved a bag of potato chips. On his way back to his threadbare throne, Jerry said, "Alrighty. I'll probably crash soon. See ya tomorrow."

"See ya."

Vincent was halfway out the door, coat in hand, when the phone rang. Something made him stop.

"Hello?" said Jerry with mouth full of chips. "Oh, just a sec."

Vincent turned around. Jerry held the phone against his chest. "It's for you. I think it's your mom again."

*Christ.*

"Tell her she just missed me."

"Dude—"

Vincent shut the door and pounded down the hallway

stairs. He refused to feel guilty about ditching his mother, but he did regret leaving Jerry to deal with her. For all of his foibles, Jeremiah Weis was a good guy. He also was the closest thing Vincent had to a friend.

More than a dozen bars called Milwaukee's East Side home, and most of them were within walking distance of the apartment. The bulk of them lined Brady Street, which was one block from home.

Vincent went in the other direction.

## Chapter 2

The door slammed, and Vincent jerked upright.

He braced himself for what would follow—the relentless nightmare’s retelling of the worst moment of his life—and even turned to where he knew Bella would be grappling with the grocery bags.

But it wasn’t Bella lingering in the doorway.

Vincent stared uncomprehendingly at a figure covered head to foot in a frayed gray garment. Long sleeves dangled down past the man’s hands, and a hood hid his face entirely. The stranger was a dead ringer for the Grim Reaper, sans scythe.

*And Halloween is still a month away.*

The tang of smoke tickled Vincent’s nose. An open fireplace on the opposite of the room sent shadows dancing on bare wooden walls. The dozen or more people gathered around small, square tables spoke quietly, their indistinct words punctuated by the crackling of roasting logs and the clinking of cups against the hard tabletops.

Vincent knew a bar when he saw one, even if this one looked like something ripped from the pages of a history book.

The other customers all wore period costumes—tall boots, heavy leather cloaks and other drab garments whose colors were lost to the dim lighting. One bushy-bearded man even had a sword strapped to his back.

*Where the hell am I?*

Vincent stood up. The strange scene blurred, and he lost

his balance. On his way back down to the bench, his thigh hit the table in front of him. Something made of metal clattered to the floor. The empty mug came to a stop a few feet away from the table.

“Easy does it, man!” yelled a squat man with patchy red beard facial hair from behind a long counter to Vincent’s right. “You’ve quaffed enough spirits to topple a giant. Take it slow!”

Vincent’s mind was spinning. It had been months since he stepped into a bar. How could this have happened?

He struggled in vain to remember how he got there—wherever it was. As far as he knew, there weren’t any Renaissance-themed festivals in Milwaukee, and the nearest Medieval Times was in Illinois.

“What is this place?” he asked the bartender. He nearly didn’t recognize his own hoarse voice.

The short man barked a laugh. “No more ale for you, friend!”

Before Vincent could reply, the ghostly, cloaked stranger swept past his table and approached the bar. From his seat a few feet away, Vincent saw that the dark gray fabric was tattered in places. A ring of what might have been moisture discolored the bottom few inches of the coat. Vincent caught a whiff of something earthy.

“What’ll ya have, friend?” the bartender asked. His mouth smiled, but his eyes did not.

The stranger had a good half-foot on the bartender. Vincent expected to hear a loud, ominous voice. Instead, he had to strain to make out the whispered words.

“I am...looking...for someone.”

The bartender grunted. “Most folks who come to my out-post are lookin’ to warm up with a fire and a stiff drink. Names are not Orson’s business. Coins, on the other hand...”

Vincent thought the bartender—Orson?—was fishing for

a bribe, but the hooded stranger didn't take the bait.

"A traveler told me the man I seek lives in this village and frequents your tavern," said the soft, raspy voice. "Do you know of the one called Valenthor?"

Orson's frown deepened. "Mayhap I do. A piece of silver might aid my memory."

"Please, sir." The billowing sleeve shot out, and a pale hand closed over the bartender's wrist. "I have no money. Your kindness—"

Orson wrenched his arm away. His heavy brows reduced his beady eyes to slits. Vincent expected him to slug the other guy.

After several tense seconds, Orson muttered, "Kindness is rarer than a pretty whore in the frontier lands. But fortune smiles upon us both. That is Valenthor sitting right behind you. He has drank his fill this night, and like you, beggar, he has no money to his name. Why don't the two of you take your leave, hmm?"

When the stranger turned to find Valenthor, Vincent did too. Although none of what was happening made any sense him, he was caught up in the act. If nothing else, it was easier to watch the show than worry about how he had fallen off the wagon. He wondered if the guy with the sword was Valenthor. It sounded like a warrior's name.

"Wake up, Valenthor. You have a visitor." The bartender was looking at Vincent.

So was the stranger.

"Me?" Vincent braced himself against the table and slowly pulled himself up. He winced as the floor teeter-tottered beneath his feet. "You must be mistaking me for somebody else."

Orson scowled. As for the stranger, all Vincent could see was a pointed white chin. Everything else was lost within the sagging hood.

"I have come so far to find you, Valenthor."

The half-whispered proclamation, coupled with the Grim Reaper getup, gave Vincent goosebumps.

“My name is Vincent, not Valenthor.” He looked to Orson for help, for an explanation, but the bartender didn’t so much as blink. Vincent was suddenly aware that the other customers were staring too.

*I gotta get out of here.*

Keeping the table between himself and the stranger, Vincent moved as quickly as he dared toward the door.

“Wait!” The stranger’s voice had gone up a notch in volume as well as pitch.

Now Vincent wasn’t so sure it was a man after all. Reluctantly, he stopped.

The stranger came closer. “You do not look how I had expected, but I am certain it is you.”

“What do you want from me?” Vincent demanded.

“I need you to return with me to my homeland.”

“What homeland? Why me?”

“Because you are the Chosen One.”

His own laugh caught him by surprise.

*That’s the best you can come up with? Even for a cheesy restaurant, that’s really lame.*

Long, slender fingers clutched Vincent’s arm. “Please, Valenthor! My people are in danger. You must fulfill the prophecy, or the forces of darkness will conquer all nations.”

Vincent wasn’t listening anymore. Without quite realizing what he was doing, he reached out and pushed back the hood to get a better look at the stranger. His eyes lingered for a moment on the oversized eyes that were too green and glittery to *not* be wearing contact lenses. Then he took in the smooth, porcelain skin and prominent cheekbones. Her honey-blond hair spilled down a long, flawless neck.

She was damn gorgeous, in spite of her pointy ears.

A shared gasp filled the room.

“Ye gods, it’s an elf!” someone shouted.

“Don’t let her escape!” Orson cried.

Vincent couldn’t make sense of the other customers’ hate-filled expressions. Almost all of them were on their feet. The big bearded man unsheathed his sword and stomped across the room.

The look of sheer terror on the woman’s face stole Vincent’s breath.

*Supermodel looks and real acting talent to boot. She should be filming in Hollywood, not doing improv in this dump. Oh well, might as well play along.*

“Leave the...uh...damsel alone!” he shouted.

But the swordsman kept coming, and his blade looked awfully sharp for a prop. Vincent stepped in front of the woman, not at all certain what he was supposed to do next. His foot came down on the tin cup that had rolled off his table earlier.

His legs flew out from under him. He fell in slow motion, affording him just enough time to realize that while he wasn’t experiencing the recurring nightmare about Clementine, he was dreaming nonetheless.

He woke up the instant before his head struck the worn, wooden planks.

Vincent stumbled into the living room. The light from the tall, slightly tilted lamp stabbed at his eyes. Jerry’s lava lamp was on too, but the TV was off. He gave no more thought to his roommate as he plopped down onto the Low Rider.

Head in hands, he stared at the hardwood floor and tried to put reality back together.

His confusion slowly faded as he mentally replayed the ordinary events of yesterday. A wave of relief washed through him when he realized that he had not, in fact,

given into the temptation to drink. But he had been drunk in the dream, and it had felt very real. All of it had.

Except for the nightmare about Clementine, Vincent almost never remembered his dreams. He doubted he would soon forget the medieval tavern—or the elf with the sparkly green eyes.

The rattling of silverware snapped him back to the real world. The sound of running water immediately followed. Jerry was home, and he was doing dishes.

He repressed the absurd impulse to run back into his room. It had been a while since Vincent had washed any dishes, but then again he couldn't remember the last time he cooked. Maybe not since Clementine died. He figured half of his paycheck went to the sub shops, pizza places, and a certain greasy spoon on Farwell.

Jerry's voice drifted into the living room, "I wouldn't take it too hard. You're probably just an easy target, ya know?"

Company? He waited for a second voice but then saw the phone was missing from its dock on the desk. Vincent had been grateful when Jerry offered to share the landline with him, but now that he had his own cell, Vincent wondered why Jerry didn't trade the cordless relic for a true mobile phone.

*Maybe he's strapped for cash. Who knows how much he spends on weed?*

"Hey, no problem," Jerry said. "I'll let him know you called...sure...buh-bye."

Vincent uttered a wordless greeting, as Jerry walked into the room and hung up the phone.

"Oh, you're up! You missed your mom again."

Vincent shrugged. "I'm sure it's nothing important." His thoughts caught up with him suddenly. "Wait, were you just talking to her now?"

"Uh-huh." Jerry folded his arms. The perpetually cheerful

man's lips twitched into something resembling a frown. "I know it's none of my business, but maybe you should call her back."

"Why's that?" Vincent asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Cause she's worried about you, man."

*Too bad.*

"I'm just sayin'—"

"You had it right the first time, Jerry. It's none of your business." He got up from the couch, skirted the coffee table, and headed for his bedroom. He opened the door, but stopped suddenly. "Wait a minute, what exactly did my mother tell you?"

Jerry opened his mouth, but no words came out.

Vincent's stomach did a somersault. Jerry knew...

"I'm really sorry about your dau—"

"Don't!"

Trembling, Vincent entered his bedroom. His thoughts were a blur as he got dressed. He felt rage boiling beneath the surface, but he pushed it down. He didn't want to think about Jerry's conversation with his mother. He didn't want to think about anything.

When Vincent returned to the living room, Jerry was still standing there. He brushed his shaggy blond hair out of his eyes. For once, the light blue irises weren't bordered by crisscrossing red spider webs. The whites were glossy with gathering tears.

Something inside Vincent exploded.

"The least you could've done is invite my mom over and get her stoned first," Vincent snarled. "The old Evangeline would've been all too happy to stay all night...smoking, telling stories...whatever *else* you wanted."

Pale-faced and wide-eyed, Jerry managed to utter a single, quiet word: "Dude."

"But let me guess," Vincent said. "She didn't get around to telling you about her days as a druggie. Or that she used to

be a slut. No, I'm betting she didn't tell any stories about *her* days as a neglectful parent, did she?"

Jerry scrambled out of the way as Vincent stormed past him and out the front door. He was half a block away from the apartment before he realized he had forgotten his coat. He didn't care. The autumn wind cooled his feverish skin.

*She had no right to tell Jerry.*

Vincent stood at the corner of Brady and Arlington for several minutes. He was barely aware of the passersby—a group of college kids, a pair of stout elderly women speaking Russian, a panhandler who wisely did not to ask Vincent for charity.

The neighborhood contained as motley a collection of residents as Vincent could imagine. A haven for misfits. Down the street, he could make out the red script lettering of the neighborhood drugstore.

Across the street was a high-dollar lounge where yuppies happily pissed away their money on overpriced martinis. To his right, past the Italian restaurant, was a bar for the blue-collar crowd. The jukebox always played classic rock. Farther down, there was a small building that boasted an array of beers from around the world. Young scholars and would-be Bohemians flocked to the outdoor seating in summer.

Vincent had never been to any of them, but at the moment, he wasn't feeling at all picky.

*Working-class watering hole, it is.*

Heart pounding, Vincent hurried over to it, stopping at the bottom of the steps. A neon sign promising a refreshing light pilsner on tap beckoned him.

*She had no right to tell him about Clementine. How does she expect me to move on with my life if I can't escape the past?*

He rested his hand on the doorknob. The sounds of drums, electric guitar, and voices trying to talk above the

music pushed through the closed door. He already could smell the cigarette smoke, taste the satisfying sting of whiskey on his tongue.

Then Vincent was running back down Arlington Street, past the apartment building, and to the familiar roads lined with houses, a church, and a school. The words of Orson, medieval bartender, echoed in his ears:

*“No more ale for you, friend!”*