Spreading the Love

Vigliotta swept onto campus that first day of senior year a conquering hero, his skin bronzed like a Sicilian God, his wavy black hair undulating across his forehead, as if it were dropped there purposely by some mythical breeze. He had spent the summer backpacking Europe. Two weeks in Germany, one in France, a wild and spontaneous weekend to the fjords of Norway (a Frenchwoman was involved), and then a heavenly three months in Sweden. Sweden where they let people be human beings, where the girls were blonde and leggy and up for anything, where you didn't have to suffocate yourself with a piece of cloth.

I knew that Vigliotta was going to bring trouble when I saw the bumper sticker plastered on the back window of his Model X that said, "Screw The Rona. Spread the Love." The three of us were sitting outside our townhouse in a semi-circle, our lawn chairs conspicuously far apart from one another, when he roared into the parking lot past us, flung the car in reverse, and backed into the spot in front of us.

"What are you lepers doing?" he said, bounding out of the car with a shake of his head and a wry smile. "Did I just arrive at a sanitarium or a college campus?"

None of us had seen Vigliotta since spring semester of sophomore year. He had studied abroad in Dublin the year before until everything went to hell and he took to the open road. Meanwhile, the three of us stuck around Ithaca in our off-campus apartment when school closed in the spring, hiding from the world (and one another, for the most part), spending way too much time on the Internet, only sneaking out for lonely moonlit walks and hypertensive grocery runs. Yeah, you could say we were the obedient types, young men who believed in

compliance and safety. And Anthony Vigliotta was our alter ego, our hidden and repressed id, the man we all wished we were more like, dare I say it, our hero.

"Would you pussies take off your masks and bring it in," he ordered, scooping his hands toward himself. Each of us got up and walked over and gave him a man hug, brief but full of vigor. When it was my turn, Vigliotta squeezed until I winced and spat out a laugh. "Chang, old buddy, good to see you," he said. Vigliotta and I had been roommates and best friends since freshmen year.

He took a step back and with a sudden turn to seriousness said, "This virus better not ruin our senior year."

And with that injunction, we helped carry in his suitcases and boxes of books, his mini-fridge and four cases of beer.

"God, I forgot how small these places are," Vigliotta said about our three hundred square feet of common space as he stopped and looked around the rectangular room. I immediately knew what kind of mental Tetris he already was playing with the room – pushing the sofa against the back wall, exiling the kitchen table and chairs onto the narrow strip of lawn outside the townhouse, carving out corner space for the keg, and the second keg, and he confirmed all this with a smile: "What do you think, Chang? Fifty people in here, easy?"

"C'mon, Vigs. Can't do that this year. No parties," I said in mild protest.

"Chang, my friend, we're gonna have to talk." He draped his arm around me and we stumbled onward to our bedroom to drop off the boxes we were holding.

And talk we did that evening, the four housemates, sitting in our common room unmasked and breathing freely. The three of us, with Vigliotta away, had spent barely any time together since March. Gutierrez had become a Covid stats nut, sequestering himself in his bedroom, poring over daily cases and deaths especially in his home state of Arizona, following trend lines and bar graphs, creating his *own* trend lines and bar graphs. Grisly stuff, all of it. But Gutierrez was a math major and at the mercy of so much data to analyze. Meanwhile, Nathanson took a different approach to the quarantine life, binge-watching *Shameless* and *Ozark* while working through the Pulitzer Prize-winning novels of the 1990s in chronological order. Nathanson was an English major.

As for me, I doubled down on my MCAT studies through the dog days of August, taking advantage of the ample time at home to prepare for the exam in the fall. I wanted to get it out of the way and enjoy senior year as much as possible. It was a foregone conclusion that I would be applying to med school; my only pending decision was whether I would take a gap year after graduation (my preference) or go straight to med school (my parents' preference). Both Peter and Helen Chang were physicians: my father an epidemiologist and my mother a radiologist. But wearing the white coat didn't stop there—my older brother Larry was a cardiology fellow at Rush and my younger sister Ann, a high school junior, was centering her college search around the nation's top pre-med schools. Needless to say, the Changs were a medical family.

We tapped into the first case of the Ithaca Flower Power, an IPA that packed a punch, and began drinking heavily, with Vigliotta regaling us with tales of Sweden.

"What about you guys?" he said finally after speaking uninterrupted for about twenty minutes. "What's been going on here? Who's getting laid? What chicks were around this summer?"

"You're looking at it, buddy," Gutierrez said. "Not much has been going on."

"Well, we need to change that," Vigliotta said, nodding his head in anticipation of triumph. "Let's throw a kegger next Saturday."

"A kegger?" Nathanson said quickly, a hint of defiance in his voice. "Vigs, we can't bro. I mean that's bad from a spreading it around point of view, but also they're cracking down on that shit on campus. We could get in serious trouble."

Vigliotta tossed his empty can at the garbage can at the other end of the room, missing it by a good five feet, reached down and snapped open a new one. "You're looking at it all wrong, Nathey. Everyone is looking at it all wrong. The experts. The media. I see it entirely differently."

I inched forward in my chair, eager to hear what was coming next. Vigliotta was what you would call an iconoclast, a contrarian, who bulled through his original ideas on the strength of his good looks and charisma and his six foot three height—I swear there's something to the persuasiveness of tall people; take a look at all the U.S. presidents. There were countless examples of Vigliotta getting people to do things that defied prudence. Freshmen year, he got our entire floor to streak across the campus in the middle of a snowstorm. Why we agreed to do this? To this day, I'm not even sure. To celebrate winter, to celebrate freedom from our parents, to revel in rebellion as young men do? Once he floated the idea, it seemed inevitable that we'd all follow along. The first objection that we could get in trouble, he squashed quickly. "That's why we *all* need to do it," he said. "They can't punish us all. What are they going to do, kick us out of school? All thirty of us? All that tuition money down the drain? No fucking way." Over spring break sophomore year, he got a group of us to rent an RV and passport-less, sneak over the Canadian border and drive to Montreal. Another time, to protest the high prices of cafeteria

food, he got about ten of us to buy meals and then line up a couple feet past the cashier and, in synchronicity, drop our trays on the ground.

"The way I see it," said Vigliotta. "We all need to catch Covid as soon as possible. We're doing a disservice to humanity by not doing so."

The three of us chuckled but when Vigliotta kept going with a steady patter, we knew he wasn't joking.

"We're young and healthy, all us college kids," he held out his arms to include the entire collegiate population. "We're the people who should be getting Covid. Getting it out of the way while we're all sequestered together. Getting it quickly, all at once, freeing us up to go back into society, keeping businesses running, protecting the vulnerable, the elderly. Donating our *fucking* plasma. The biggest mistake society made in the spring was shutting down all the schools, sending kids home. There are twenty million of us, for Chrissakes. We could have been that much far ahead of this. I mean in Sweden—"

"Herd immunity, you're talking about?" I said matter-of-factly. My father had drilled the concept of herd immunity into my head whenever he discussed pandemics, which, unfortunately, was far too often. Seventy percent of people was the commonly accepted threshold in the science and medical community that needed to be immune to a virus before it began to slow down. "We're not anywhere close to that, Vigs."

"Chang, I knew you were going to say that," he said, slapping the beer can on his thigh in excitement, as if he were setting me up to fail. "I knew you were going to come back with that tired old shit."

"All right, go on," I said.

"All right, assuming everybody is getting it at exactly the same time, like you're throwing the entire population into some kind of petri dish and people are coughing into each other's faces, rubbing snot on their hands and then shaking—that kind of survival of the fittest situation—sure, I'll grant you seventy percent. But you have to think of Covid in heterogeneous terms. People aren't getting exposed at the exact same time, in the exact same way. There are gradations of exposure. And some people already have some level of immunity. Shit, plenty of us probably have been exposed to it and developed some micro-level of immunity. Herd immunity could be as low as twenty to thirty percent. We might be a lot closer than everyone thinks."

"But Vigs, man, they've done antibody tests and we're talking really low numbers," Gutierrez said.

"Do you trust those tests, Gootie?" Vigliotta said, grinning. "And who's to say that your body isn't immune without antibodies showing up on a test. Do the tests measure t-cell activity?"

"If we can't trust the data, we're lost. "Gutierrez said, rubbing his hand across his forehead. "We're fucking lost."

"I've been reading about people getting really sick, Vigs, " Nathanson said. "Young people, I mean. Kids our age. Myocardia. Scars on their lungs. It's scary."

Did these counterarguments stop Vigliotta? To convince us of our logical fallacies and our overcaution, he tossed out concepts like availability bias and group think, quoted Daniel Kahneman not once but twice, claimed that mutual assumption of risk was going extinct, and then in his coup de grace, asked us why we ever dared get in our car when an accident could be

out there, waiting in the shadows, to deprive us of our precious life. “Why not just turn in your driver’s license?” he said, his voice reaching its most passionate. “Why ever get in a moving vehicle again? You could die, or worse, you could kill someone else.” Then he stood up with a smile wider than the gorges that surrounded our town and stuck out us hand to each of us, “Hand over your driving licenses right now. Hand ‘em over to Uncle Vigs.”

The grand summation of all Uncle Vigs’s scattered arguments and sophistry was that a kegger would be happening at our humble townhouse the following Saturday. Vigliotta simply had more passion for the idea of the party than we had against it, and passion is what moves the world, not apathy. Plus we all were pretty hammered by this point, dipping into the second case of beer, and as the night dragged on, the idea of a party was sounding more and more attractive. The truth was the three of us had been incredibly bored all summer.

Over the next few days, Vigliotta spread word of the party. Of the four housemates, he was easily the most social and traveled among different social circles. He’d be on the phone at home, countering any and all objections. “Nobody’s getting this at the fucking grocery store,” he said with a shake of his head. “And nobody’s getting it when you run by them for half a second on the sidewalk. If it were that easy to catch, people would be falling down left and right.” I saw him on campus huddled with a group of people, and as he broke away from them toward me, he high-fived them all and shouted, “See you on Saturday.” I didn’t know how many just yet, but people would be coming.

I had the ill-fortune to share a bedroom with Vigliotta. He was, to put it mildly, a mess. In just a few short days, he managed to turn the room into a federally declared disaster area. Clothes draped all over his bed and desk chair, containers of food strewn about the floor, sometimes half-eaten, amidst newspapers and textbooks and cans of beer and Dr. Pepper, his

main source of hydration. And he kept odd hours, sleeping during the day and staying out until three or four in the morning, so it was impossible for me to settle into any normal and sane routine. The reality was that if Vigliotta came down with Covid, so would I. We were inextricably linked in that way, brothers in contagion, and for his risks I would have to suffer the consequences too.

My parents were quite concerned. They called me every day that first week back on campus.

"Is Anthony being cautious?" My father asked. "Is he social distancing?"

"He's being okay," I lied.

My parents had met Vigliotta a few times, most memorably when he came to our house over Thanksgiving break sophomore year. He and I went out with some of my high school buddies on Thanksgiving Eve and didn't get home until after two, reeking of booze and cigarettes, which didn't exactly endear him to my parents. My father once described him as a "bit of a rogue." My mother used the adjective "charming," which I knew was a backhanded compliment for "troublemaker." I knew that they wished I had chosen a more straight-laced and serious person as my closest college friend.

My parents were first generation Chinese and they had instilled in us kids the importance of academics and achievement and not bringing embarrassment to the family. And Vigliotta didn't quite exhibit these values. In short, they perceived him as a threat.

"I hope you're being safe," my mother said, softly. "No large gatherings. No parties."

Did I respond to my parents with one of Vigliotta's most visceral analogies—that the odds of my getting very sick with Covid were as unlikely as my getting chomped to bits by an orca off the coast of Greenland?

I merely replied, "Of course, Mom. As safe as I can be."

Saturday night arrived and Vigliotta was decked out in full-on cowboy regalia. Brown leather boots, a wide-brimmed hat, horse-riding chaps, tight blue jeans. It was a total affectation; Vigliotta was from New Jersey and if he'd ever been to Texas or had any southern roots, he never mentioned it.

"What are you wearing?" we asked him in hysterics as he sashayed out of our bedroom while Gutierrez and I were tapping the keg.

"It's a new frontier out there, and I'm braced for battle," he said with a twang, tipped his hat, and then shot alternating finger pistols at us. "Every gun makes its own tune."

When our laughter subsided, I said, "You're going to be hot in that, Vigs." It had been a humid September day topping out in the low nineties, and despite a couple window units, our townhouse was going to be roasting once people arrived.

"I'll be all right. I've got nothing on underneath," he said with a smirk.

Around ten, our first guests arrived, the Almeidas, fraternal twins with identical uni-brows, two kids from our floor freshman year. Half the kids we hung out with were from our freshmen dorm. That's how the four of us, Vigliotta, Gutierrez, Nathanson, and I became friends – we

were assigned to rooms at the end of the hallway near one another, and proximity worked its magic.

Vigliotta held a plastic jack-o-lantern, on which he taped a piece of paper that said "Masks." These were not masks he was going to hand out to guests; rather, the opposite. The jack-o-lantern was the mask-check for anyone who didn't want to shove their mask in their pocket or ring it around their ear. Was it hygienic to jail dozens of masks together, which people would then retrieve at the end of the night and wear again? Vigliotta's whole point.

As guests came in, Vigliotta told them, "Wear a mask if you want, but it's highly discouraged." And many people took him up on the offer, tossing their mask in the jack-o-lantern with one hand while grabbing a plastic red cup of cheap beer with the other.

Twenty minutes after the Almeida twins showed up, people were pouring in. Guys arrived in ones and twos, and girls came in fours and fives, dressed in belly shirts and hoop earrings, flaunting summer tans and shapely legs. Vigliotta seemed to know all the pretty ones, and his sixteen month hiatus from campus life hadn't impaired his magnetism. Girls whom we knew tangentially sophomore year through Vigliotta and who vanished from our lives junior year were suddenly back in the mix, inside our place, partying hard.

We kept the windows closed and blasted the A/C and the music. "Electric Feel" came on and we danced like maniacs, frantically gyrating our upper torsos, our collective libidos perked after months of hibernation, our pent-up desires screaming for release. Vigliotta was in the center of the commotion, bouncing off people, shaking his head wildly, dripping with sweat, buck naked except for the cowboy hat and a mask that he had jerry-rigged to wrap around his thighs and partly cover his flailing penis.

It must have been shortly after midnight when Vigliotta shouted out for roommate kegstands and convened the four of us in the corner. Nathanson was up first, Gutierrez and I holdings his legs and Vigliotta holding the alcoholic pacifier to his mouth and then we rotated and rotated again and I was up. The beer rushed through my esophagus like a fervent mountain stream and all I could hear was the chant of "Chang, Chang, Chang, Chang." After a very long fifteen seconds, I shook my mouth off the tap and was let back on my feet, the room spinning in concentric circles, sweat glistening on everyone's faces. I had been drinking heavily since eight o'clock and the kegstand sent me into orbit. I teetered over to the wall and had to brace myself before I fell down and I was holding down the propulsive urge to vomit.

A few minutes later, Vigliotta turned down the music and announced it was time to spread the love, to "kiss for Covid." It didn't take long before necks were twisting and mouths were pressed on mouths, bodies pressed on bodies, slow dancing to "You Can't Always Get What You Want." Gutierrez was paired off with Sally, a quiet girl from our freshmen dorm, and they were engaged in mask-on-mask kissing. Vigliotta was in the center of the room, lips locked with a tall blonde from the soccer team. He broke away after about thirty seconds, exhorting us again to "spread the love." He took a swig from his cup, scanned the room until he saw me over in the corner, and shouted out, "Chang, find someone!" before resuming his make-out session.

But slumped in the corner, seated on the hard floor like a degenerate kicked out of a bar, all the neurons in my head screaming for succor, I was in no shape to find someone. I was immobile and could barely speak. And even if I could speak, I had no game. I could count the number of girls I had kissed in my life on one hand, and that's one hand with three fingers chopped off.

I sat there for what felt like twenty minutes, my head bobbing up and down in a torpor of half-sleep. Through my daze, I saw a shifting of people, a rotating of faces onto faces, a musical chairs of kissing. It was all so entrancing I didn't even see her approach. I only felt a body slide next to me on the ground, a warmth, and then a fragrance of jasmine hit my nose and a soft hand danced through the close-cropped hair on my head.

"It's okay," she cooed. "It's okay." I was transported to a memory of childhood, a boy of eight sick with the stomach flu, my mother's arms wrapped around my wispy chest from behind, as I shook in frightful spasms retching over the floor next to the toilet.

She kept rubbing my head in circles and then in rows and then streaked her hand down my neck and pressed the folds of my skin into her hands, kneading it like pizza dough. "I'm Hannah," she finally whispered into my ear. "What's your name?"

"Jason," I barely managed.

"You're cute, Jason." Her hand flitted back through my hair, her fingernails lightly scratching my temple and traveling up to my crown, the music in the background receding until I could hear nothing but the gentle swoosh of her touch.

"Where are you living?" I said, my head still bowed. I didn't have the strength to look up, to glance over at her, to see what mystical female creature was bringing me such divine pleasure.

"Oh I don't go here. I'm just up visiting friends. Who do you know here, Jason?" she asked, her voice a sweet ballad, the words dripping from her mouth like marmalade.

"I live here," I mumbled.

And those were the last words I remember uttering that evening. Sadly, it was one of the last times I could make that claim. You see, I was unconscious by the time campus police arrived with R.A. Steve by their side shouting like a summer camp counselor on testosterone pills; I was unaware of the frantic exodus from our suite, people bouncing off each other to squeeze out the back door two feet from my crumpled body, all the swearing and yelling, the cacophonous din.

And while I slept through the final moments of our party, I was awake through the nightmare of the following week. The meeting with the Dean of Students and my parents, tears sliding down my mother's cheeks, my father quivering with rage, unable to even look at me. We held out hope that Vigliotta's father, a large donor and one of these captains of industry famous for making bold proclamations in *Fortune*, would push and pull the appropriate levers to reduce our penalty to probation, but the university wanted to make an example out of us. And even Anthony Sr. could not go toe to toe with a pandemic and come out unscathed. We had acted recklessly and endangered the lives of others, so the university said, and were dismissed from school, effective immediately.

Gutierrez flew home to Arizona in shame, Nathanson the same to Wichita. And I had to endure the three-hour car ride home with my parents, buried under their silence seething and my own unimaginable shame.

Being home brought no relief. I was an exile in the only home I'd ever known. My parents told me to stay in my room and quarantine myself for two weeks and make sure nobody was in the kitchen when I came down for meals. Ann, who always looked up to me, was in utter disbelief. "Why Jason?" she asked. My precipitous drop from her pedestal so evident in the sad twisting of her mouth, the anger in her voice. "How could you be so dumb?"

How could I be so dumb? It was a question I kept asking myself. How could I explain to her, to anyone, the spark of life that Vigliotta lit in me, how I had been in such doldrums for so long, even before the pandemic hit if I were really being honest with myself, so cautious and self-doubting, rotting from an overripe angst that led nowhere but deeper inward, that his rashness, his audacity, however misguided, however self-serving, was a seed of hope in fallow soil, a loose thread of silk on my cocoon. How could I explain Anthony Vigliotta to her, to anyone who didn't know him, to anyone who wasn't me?

I wasn't home for three days when Vigliotta texted me a picture of himself alongside two attractive blondes at the Kelmar Castle. "Get your ass out here Chang!" he wrote. "Majken wants to meet you!"

His message flicked my dying candle and I almost jumped online immediately to book a one-way flight to Sweden, but I was still too riddled with guilt and regret. Of all the little things I could have done, all the little things I could have said, to redirect the recent past so that I was back on campus, back in school, back among friends. And what haunted me the most of all these regrets? Was it acquiescing to the party? Or advocating so hard for Vigliotta to be our fourth roommate (Gutierrez and Nathanson preferred Gardner, a shy techy nerd)? No, it was that I didn't muster whatever energy I had left in those waning moments of our party, to look up, steal a glance at her face. Because it's been haunting me these past several weeks. And there seems to be nobody who knows and no way for me to find out. Who was Hannah?