

Spark

With a muffled moan from the antique drum brake, Richard brought the scooter to a stop in the garage, deployed the kickstand and stepped back to admire. Man oh man, what a find. Only twelve thousand for a mint 1951 Vespa Piaggio, the same model Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn rode in *Roman Holiday*, this one with original motor and body—a curvier body than Hepburn ever had, that's for sure.

He stepped into the kitchen and sang out. "Hey everybody, I'm home."

At the stove, his wife stirred the contents of a saucepan. "Hello there, local celebrity. The morning paper ran that article about your research."

Richard grinned. "I heard. The Dean left a copy on my desk with *Huzzah Professor* scribbled in the margin." He relaxed his smile. "But let's be realistic. Nobody in this town cares about the neurological origins of sentience."

Marilyn dialed down the burner. "That's not the point. Every little bit of publicity will look good on your tenure application."

Richard's teenage daughter shouted from down the hall, "Every little bit of publicity *ruins my life.*"

"What?" Richard hollered back, then said to his wife, "What's up with Caitlin?"

"Think on the bright side. Our dinner conversation will be lively." She raised her voice. "Girls, let's eat!"

He leaned over the saucepan to take a peek. "What have we here?"

"Peas with pearl onions. Thought I'd try something different."

"You're wonderful." Richard kissed her neck and followed her to the table.

Caitlin plopped down next to her younger sister and crossed her arms. "Ashley Bredeen called me an atheist in front of everybody!"

Richard draped his napkin across his lap. "Sugar doll, just because your parents might believe certain things, you and Sophie should have your own beliefs."

"Richard, you're missing the point," Marilyn said. "Junior high kids can be brutal. And for a college town, this is a pretty conservative community."

The foursome put dishes of meat, potatoes, gravy and vegetables into motion.

Young Sophie piped up. "Caitlin told me you said God is dead. Who killed him?"

Caitlin said, "Daddy did."

"What?" Richard kneaded his forehead. "I never said that. That was the newspaper reporter fishing for a scandal."

"Well, he caught a big one." Marilyn smiled demurely. "Now dear, when people ask your family about the article, we should be able to explain."

"Explain neuroscience?" Richard chuckled.

Marilyn looked miffed. "No, just explain what you told the reporter."

Caitlin lifted a spoonful of peas and onions and wrinkled her nose. "What are *these*?"

Richard waggled an index finger. "Open-mindedness can begin with this wonderful meal. Try some."

Caitlin tapped a few peas onto her plate. Richard served himself a healthy portion. "Sophie, you're a person, and you know you're a person, right?" She paused uncertain for a moment before giving a half nod. "Maxey is a dog, but does he know he's a dog?"

"I don't think so."

"You're right." Richard raised a professorial index finger. "That's because you have what's called *self-awareness*, which makes you special." Richard forked mashed potatoes into his mouth and kept talking. "You know, self-awareness might be the most powerful force in nature, more powerful than life itself. As a matter of fact, Dr. Simon Temple at Brandeis has a fascinating study—"

Marilyn squeezed her husband's forearm. "Steer back onto the road, please?"

"Sorry." Richard reset and continued. "In the interview, I suggested that self-awareness is so powerful that humans, unlike lesser creatures, can imagine that something made us—I think I might've used the words *create a creator*. Well, the reporter jumped on that, which devolved to *God is dead*—which I never actually said, by the way. I told him I was agnostic."

Caitlin sulked. "*Agnostic* is a cop-out, Daddy. You should man up and admit you're an atheist."

"Caitlin!" Marilyn scolded. "Don't you speak to your father like that."

Richard called for peace with open palms. "I never bought the fantasy about some gleaming God in white robes managing Heaven and Earth like an air traffic controller. But on the other hand, when it comes to that spark that makes every one of us unique—"

"Our soul," said Sophie.

"Indeed," said Richard, "and whatever we call that spark, *it's amazing*, and I have trouble believing that our—our *soul* simply ceases to exist when we die, that's all. Does that make me an agnostic? Maybe, maybe not." Richard scooped up peas and pearl onions, a magical combination, like tomato, mozzarella and basil in caprese salad, which made him think of Italian food, which made him think of *Roman Holiday* and two lovers zooming past the Trevi Fountain

on a curvaceous Vespa. "Look, the press pays attention to people like Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, but when it comes to associate professors hoping for tenure—"

"Gregory Peck?" Marilyn said.

"Just an example," Richard said. "I'm only saying, university professors doing esoteric research don't get much attention from the press. I guess I got carried away. I'm really sorry." He tipped the spoon into his mouth.

"That doesn't help, Daddy!" Caitlin tossed her balled-up napkin, striking her tumbler of milk and sending the contents splashing. Instinctively, Richard leapt to his feet to spare his trousers. *It's all okay, sugar doll. No crying over spilled milk.*

But his intended words stopped in his chest. He glanced at his wife who stared back puzzled. He placed his hand to his chest as if his fingers might feel the stuck words bumping around like ping-pong balls in a lottery machine. He looked down at Caitlin, still peeved. He glanced over at Sophie, her pretty eyebrows high with a strange curiosity.

A pearl onion, stuck in his airway.

Richard clutched his throat and gaped his mouth like a fish on land. His wife understood and leapt up. She rounded the table and came up behind, thumping him once, twice, three times between the shoulder blades. Nothing. No air.

"Caitlin, dial 9-1-1—do it now!" Marilyn shouted, her voice breathy, panicked. "Tell them he's choking!" The girl bolted from the room.

Richard formed fists into a battering ram and thumped ridiculously on his own breastbone. Nothing. No air. Marilyn hugged him from behind, which seemed absurd—no time for emotional gestures—but no, she was attempting the Heimlich maneuver. Good woman! She

balled her hands and yanked up into his diaphragm. Nothing. No air. She repeated, harder. Nothing.

Sophie screamed, "Daddy!"

Caitlin reappeared. "They're coming!"

Another Heimlich maneuver. Then another, stronger. Something snapped below his chest, a sharp pain, but no air. *I'll take the pain, but give me air!* His chest felt compressed. The room began to turn, slowly at first, then faster, dipping and rising, swirling. Desperate sobs sounded from close behind his ear. His leg muscles liquefied and he fell to his knees. He crumpled to sitting, to lying on his side, to his back.

Taut, strained faces circled above. Ragged screams and sobs. Tears oozed, dripped, splashed.

Richard sat in a small unoccupied classroom among tables and chairs, like the Roudebush seminar room at the university. But unlike these blank walls, Roudebush displayed portraits of past students and faculty, some departed, and some dearly departed.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said a young man entering in full stride. He sat at Richard's table behind a plump manila folder, hands draped on top. "My name's Daniel Ornott," he said, smiling broadly. "How do you feel? Any disorientation?"

Odd question, but the man seemed sincere, dressed like an administrator in a corduroy sport coat. "I feel fine, I suppose. You were expecting a different answer?"

Daniel pulled back. "No, but some people say they feel like they're dreaming, so we ask them to pinch themselves."

Richard smiled, lips together. "You know, the pinch test isn't very reliable. In a dream, if a man can believe Cindy Crawford chose to have sex with him, he can believe the pinch really hurts, even though there's no physical pain."

Daniel Ornett's cheerful expression gave way to puzzlement and then concern. "I beg your pardon, sir, but what's your name?"

"Richard Alderson. Write any three numbers in the corner of that folder and show them to me." Hesitant at first, Daniel did as instructed. "One, seven, nine," Richard read out loud. "Now cover those numbers with your hand... good, wait a moment... and show me again." Daniel obeyed. "One, seven, nine, just like before. See, if I were dreaming, the numbers would've changed. Interesting, huh?"

Daniel opened the folder, his brow furrowed. He read for a few seconds before speaking. "You'll have to forgive us, but there's been a mistake. This *is* your folder, but I was told you were—well, a different person, an electrician." Daniel looked up. "Did you meet with someone from Receiving, by any chance?" Richard shook his head. "Ever been handed an orientation packet, a purple three-ring binder?"

"Sorry. What did I miss?"

"You're a neuroscientist?"

"That's right."

"Hmm. Well, because of your background, you'll require more explanation than I'm trained to provide."

"Try me anyway," Richard said, leaning in, his tone sharper.

Daniel pursed his lips, scanned the top page for a few seconds and closed the cover. He straightened his back. "Richard, you choked on a pearl onion and died of asphyxiation. You're in..." A deep breath. "You're in Heaven, for lack of a more scientific description."

Richard laughed but then stopped abruptly, remembering the onion. He stood and glanced at the corner of the folder—*one, seven, nine*. Cold swept his skin. He felt nauseous. "You're right. I require way more explanation."

For the next few minutes, Richard spouted his disbelief multiple times, and Daniel reiterated "the facts" with similar repetition. At a pause in this chaotic back-and-forth, Daniel kindly asked if Richard would prefer to sit down, given the news.

"So people in Heaven are capable of passing out?" Richard replied sarcastically, holding out hope for a monumental hoax. He remained standing.

His thoughts zoomed like a ballplayer rounding the bases, from suspicion to shock to defiance. But his frantic sprint returned him to home plate and one devastating realization: in his thirty-eight years on earth, no memory stood stronger in his mind than the harrowing seconds after a pearl onion lodged in his trachea. And no memory succeeded those seconds, except the present exchange with Daniel.

Maybe this was no hoax.

He wanted to run, but to where? He wanted to scream, but to what end? He wanted to tear at his flesh to rip out the iron ball of panic within his rib cage.

But instead he talked, and as a scientist, he talked by asking questions. "How many people are up here—everyone who ever lived and died?"

"Yes, over one hundred billion now."

"Since most people die when they're old, is everyone up here old? Audrey Hepburn died in her sixties. Can I talk to her?"

"Yes," answered Daniel.

Grim but interesting. "When I'm hungry, will I eat?"

"Sure. Eating is a pleasant experience, and your time here should be pleasant—"

"My *time here*? You talk like *my time here* might end, but that's not how Heaven works, does it?" Daniel said nothing. Richard kept going, disappointed. "Where is *here* anyway? Point in the direction of the world I—" he swallowed a sob, a wave of homesickness washing over him "—the world I left behind." He thought of the first time his parents dropped him at Camp YouthRight near Chillicothe, the memories of stabbing loneliness still vivid. But back then, he would return home the third Sunday in July. The countdown had kept him going.

Richard didn't wait for Daniel to answer. "Is everyone up here good? That's uninteresting. What if I stop being good? If I refuse to eat, will I get sick? If there are doctors, they'd be useless."

Daniel listened patiently.

"Do people work?" Richard asked. "Is what you do considered gainful employment?"

Daniel straightened, caught off-guard. "I believe so."

Richard shook his head. "Really? If you stop working, do you face hardship? Like you said, *our time here should be pleasant*—so pleasant that everyone sits around bored out of their skulls waiting for death that can never come."

Richard dropped into the chair, elbows on the table, fingers in his hair. He'd grown accustomed to Camp YouthRight, had found fascination with compass navigation by day, star navigation by night, asking questions and discovering answers on his own.

He leaned back. "Do people learn?"

"I suppose so."

Was everyone in Heaven so dreadfully noncommittal? "Do people do research, or is everything already known? Do people write books? *Read* books?" Perhaps he was done learning. Oh, God. "Can I decide tomorrow to stop being a neuroscientist and play major league baseball instead?"

Daniel blinked.

Richard felt heat rising in his cheeks. "Can I do anything I want? What if I want to kill someone, perhaps kill you, or maybe kill myself." Silent stares. Richard took a deep breath. "Daniel, are there bridges?"

"Yes."

"Good. So, if I jump off a bridge, will I die and go to some new Heaven, a Heaven better than this—this comfortable campus with blank walls?"

Daniel didn't become angry or frustrated, even when Richard suggested killing him, but then again, Richard posed no genuine threat. No one dies in Heaven.

"I want to go home," Richard said. He wanted to press his body against his wife's body, to feel the curve of her back, to climb into her warmth. He wanted to squeeze his daughters so tight, to touch their perfect skin. The pangs of longing knotted his stomach. "Send me home." He looked down. "But of course you can't."

Daniel placed his hand on Richard's forearm. "Would a little time alone be helpful?"

Richard nodded. "Is everyone in the Receiving department a mess like me?"

"You're not so bad." Daniel stood and walked toward the door.

Richard spoke to the man's back. "Am I my soul?"

The classroom encased Richard like a tomb. He folded his arms on the tabletop, dropped his head and sobbed.

His parents had eschewed churches during the growing-up years, and dismissed organized religion. But for three weeks each summer at Grandma Alderson's house, secularism stepped aside for The Lamb.

Richard didn't mind at first. After all, for every Sunday morning catechism, there was swimming, playing ball, and snagging homemade cookies while Grandma needlepointed the greatest hits from Psalms. Likewise, for every before-meal grace of *God is great and God is good and now I thank him for this food*, Richard and his little brother would exchange glances and mouth *Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub, yay God!*

In one Bible study class at Blessed Angels of Toledo, the deacon recited vague passages, followed by his own translations: "Picture the clearest water flowing from God's throne through a gleaming city with streets of gold." When he described Heaven's opposite as "a fiery lake of molten sulfur," Richard pigeonholed the whole business as Disney-esque fantasy.

The summer Richard's voice changed, so did the situation at Blessed Angels. The newest deacon was a pencil-necked bumbler who professed that his virginity was a personal choice—yeah, right—and who took on Richard's middling faith as a challenge.

"Receive the Lamb of God as your savior," said the deacon, his breath fouled by pepperoni as he cornered Richard in the seat of a retreat-bound bus, "and I can promise you eternal life in Heaven."

"*You* promise?" Richard said, laughing on the inside at the awesome power God had granted this sanctimonious weed. From that moment forward, Richard considered religion and all its promises of glittering eternity and threats of perpetual pain to be manipulators' tools.

But now he knew the truth. The deacons and the classmates teasing his daughter had been as right as Grandma Alderson's dinnertime prayer. God *is* great and God *is* good and God *did* create a Heaven without discomfort, hunger or thirst.

And so much for the scientific method, mighty handy for the relative minutes we spent on earth, but for the eons to follow, science was shit. God had seen to that.

A chair screeched on the floor. Richard glanced up to see Daniel Ornot sitting nearby, his face drawn. "Isn't there something I can do to help?"

"I'll see my family in a few decades, if I'm lucky."

Daniel smiled wistfully. "Hoping for an earlier rendezvous creates a bit of a conflict, wouldn't you say?"

"Of course. But don't you see the absurdity of it all?"

Daniel tipped his head off-center.

"No doubt the Supreme Being had the best of intentions, but his timing is off. We're forced to abandon everyone we love the most."

"All hearts unite in the afterlife, eventually."

Richard puffed out his disagreement. "Save that for the travel brochure. Those girls need a father. My wife should remarry, and when she does and then shows up here after forty years wed to another man, will she fall into my arms? Of course not." More tears threatened.

Daniel said nothing.

"So God blew it. We're destined to get our hearts ripped apart," Richard said with a bitter laugh, "except for the fortunate families whose plane crashes on the way to summer vacation. It's God's fault, so maybe I ought to take my complaint to the man in charge." But for what purpose? To request a slight adjustment to Einstein's field equations governing the passage of time? Who was he kidding?

"I figured you might." Daniel flashed an impish smile and rose to his feet. "Follow me?"

A few minutes later, Daniel and Richard stood outside the administration building under a midday sun, or *the* midday sun? Could this sun also be casting its rays on Marilyn, Caitlin and Sophie wherever they might be, or had God, with his infinite wisdom and lousy sense of timing, arranged for a few billion duplicate stars?

"I have a surprise for you," Daniel said.

Richard lowered his gaze to the Vespa, *his* Vespa, with its low handlebars and doughnut of a spare tire behind the seat. It was parked near the curb of a two-lane road. Richard felt something ease in his chest. "Does it work?" He squeezed the hand brake.

"Why wouldn't it?"

Because nothing makes sense anymore, Richard thought, swinging his leg over the scooter and stomping the kick starter. The engine sputtered to life.

"A ride might make you feel better," Daniel said over the noise.

So a countryside jaunt was supposed to mend his fractured heart? Never. But Daniel meant well. "Where should I go?"

Daniel pointed down the road to the right. "South."

Odd. "Toward some destination?" Richard asked, suspicious but hopeful. "Will I meet the man in charge?"

Daniel's eyes were plaintive. "Wherever you end up, you'll find more answers than I can give you."

Richard thanked Daniel with a handshake, twisted the throttle and pulled away.

As Richard rode throughout the afternoon, the landscape changed from endless fields of crops to hillsides of wiregrass and southern live oak. He'd shown Caitlin and Sophie similar scenes in their travels. His chest torqued with longing.

For brief periods, the engine's hum soothed, and the stabs of loneliness faded to a steady ache. Perhaps that was how Heaven worked, filing down the sharpest edges of emotion with wave after wave of the familiar, like a mellow refrain on replay until the music becomes white noise.

The sun dipped to the horizon and Richard snapped on the scooter's headlight. Stars appeared overhead but then blinked off when the Vespa passed under a dense canopy of leaves. Giant trees lined both sides of the road like sentries attending the motorcade of their supreme leader. He sensed he was somehow expected.

The tunnel of foliage ended at a quiet neighborhood without streetlights. Richard killed the motor and rolled to a stop. All was silent except crickets. No breeze stirred. Fog had settled

low as if vented from the ground. Richard smelled loamy soil and petunias, like Grandma Alderson used to grow in concrete planters by the back stoop.

The road ahead snaked among ancient oaks and clapboard-sided homes built before the Depression, all painted in grays and black by the nighttime shroud. Across an inky lawn, a human silhouette shifted behind a dimly-lit curtain.

On one house, three buildings down, a single porch light burned. Richard pushed the scooter toward it, though he didn't know why.

He slowed his pace as he came alongside the house. A white picket fence enclosed a small yard and motionless tire swing. A narrow sidewalk led to a wooden stoop and porch, the finer details softened by mist. A lone lightbulb cast a gauzy cone of illumination, outlining a man.

"I—I'm sorry," Richard blurted, startled. "I don't mean to disturb—this lovely evening."

The man reclined on the porch swing with an arm draped across the backrest. With one leg crossed and another touching the floor, he maintained a lazy back-and-forth. "My oh my," he replied, "you do no such thing." He had a deep voice, as smooth and rich as polished hardwood. "What brings you to our little town?"

"I'm looking for answers."

The man released a baritone chuckle. "I never met anyone who wasn't. Come inside the fence and we'll visit. But I can't promise answers, only an attentive ear."

A coy response, Richard sensed, for this man's quiet confidence betrayed his knowledge. And that voice. Richard had heard it before.

"Very kind of you." Richard parked the scooter, swung open the gate and approached. Features emerged through the veil of fog. The man wore dark shoes and tie, and a white suit with

vest. A stiff collar rose to a strong jaw. Thick dark hair parted on one side and dipped gracefully across his forehead. Just beyond the lenses of tortoiseshell glasses, Richard met a gaze of unmistakable authority. Recognition erupted in his consciousness. He tried to speak but the words seized in his throat before squirming free. "Atticus Finch?"

The man tipped his head back and laughed. "Heaven forbid. Such is the curse of the silver screen." His voice rose and fell like a Sunday drive in the country. "I could never fill the shoes of the characters I play."

Heaven forbid. Some kind of joke? No, the man in charge would not joke. But he *would* appear in the form of the familiar. Throughout the pages of the Bible—so said Grandma Alderson—God made appearances as flesh-and-blood men.

The man patted the porch swing's empty seat. "There's room for two."

And why not Gregory Peck? No other actor could ever play the almighty Alabama lawyer. No one else possessed the power to wipe Bob Ewell's spittle from his cheek *without* tearing apart the Alabama cracker. So much strength, yet so trusted, and approachable enough for a conversation—a conversation with God.

Richard realized he should be quaking with fear but he wasn't, not before the holy father who hugged his daughter Scout with such tenderness.

"Our meeting is no coincidence, is it?" Richard asked.

The man wrinkled his brow for a moment of concentration. "Well, certain things do seem to happen for a reason, I'd say."

Certain things? Didn't true believers say God did everything for a reason? Richard swallowed hard. He stepped forward but only reached the second stair before humility tugged him down to a seated position.

"Suit yourself." His lips closed, the man displayed a soothing smile. The porch light seemed to hover above his head. "What questions roust you from sleep and out into this night?"

"I never believed."

"That doesn't strike me as a question."

"No, I suppose it's a confession. I never believed in you, or in all this." Richard gestured with both arms. "I believed in science."

"But science remains real—"

"It's meaningless to me now. I'm here, and everyone who made life worth living is a universe away. So I'm living a nightmare." Richard squared his shoulders. "Please forgive my candor, but nothing is heavenly about Heaven."

The man plucked off his glasses, slipped a handkerchief from a suitcoat pocket and began wiping the lenses with circular strokes. "Your Heaven doesn't seem very pleasant at all."

Richard wanted to shout *But doesn't that bother you? Your design for the afterlife is fatally flawed!* But he checked his words. "I wish I would wake up and feel my wife lying next to me, and know that my children are asleep in the next room."

The man switched lenses and continued his meticulous cleaning. "But this is no dream. This is real."

"I don't want it to be real."

No response.

Richard's impatience overruled restraint. "Why would God create a Heaven that is more like Hell?"

The man exhaled on a lens and continued buffing. "I never bought the fantasy about some gleaming God in white robes managing Heaven and Earth like an air traffic controller."

Richard's heart seized for a moment. He leapt to his feet. The man looked up, interested but unalarmed. "An air traffic controller?" Richard said. "Those are *my* words. I spoke them to my family on the day I died. I don't get it. I already admitted I was wrong about you."

"Wrong about *me*? My friend, I'm not who you think I am."

"You can become anyone you want, to put me at ease."

"I'm sorry, but you're confused. I'm an actor."

"You're God."

Another chuckle, soft and forgiving. "No, I'm a performer who entertains by reading words written by someone else. I just read *your* words. I'm talking to you like this because that's what *you* expect me to do."

Richard shifted his weight from one foot to the next, words and phrases colliding between his ears.

"When you learn the truth," the man said, "you won't be surprised." He stopped the swing's motion and, once again, patted the empty space on the swing. "This time I insist. Please join me."

Richard's guts churned. His head felt ready to implode. He climbed two steps and sat on the swing.

"God has nothing to do with this," the man said.

"How can that be?"

The man donned his glasses and stowed the handkerchief. "You told your family something else on that final day. You said *I have trouble believing that our soul simply ceases to exist when we die.*"

"How do you know what I said?"

"I know everything you know, and nothing more. Do you remember those words?"

Richard nodded. "I've long wondered if our self-awareness is too powerful to—to switch off."

"Your body died on that day, but your consciousness survived."

"My soul?" Little Sophie's word.

"Call it what you will, but that spark—that *soul*—it's not in the hands of God, if he even exists."

Richard blinked back, his face feeling tight.

"You told your daughter," the man went on, "that self-awareness might be the most powerful force in nature, more powerful than life itself."

The memory hurt.

"Well, you were right," the man said. "A few thousand years ago, one of our early ancestors saw his reflection in a pool of water and realized, for the first time, that he was looking at himself."

Richard knew the theory, put forth by Dr. Simon Temple at Brandeis. "Supposedly, that was when we became self-aware—sentient. That one moment put the sapience in *Homo sapiens*."

The man held up an index finger. "And we became immortal. But it's not God. It's nature. As natural as life itself. But life dies. Consciousness lives on."

Richard stared at the whitewashed planks of the porch for a minute, his thoughts racing. The man watched on patiently and resumed the swing's motion, as if his explanation had returned order to the universe.

But it hadn't. Richard glanced up. "I'm to spend eternity inside my own head?"

"I prefer to think of Heaven as harvesting the fruit of our earthly experiences."

Richard recalled everything he'd encountered since his arrival. The classroom like the ones he'd lectured in, Daniel like so many colleagues, the Vespa, the countryside, the smell of Grandma Alderson's petunias, the black-and-white town from a favorite old movie, the famous actor sitting next to him. All so familiar. All so unsurprising. "It's like I've spent my life filling a photo album, and now I'll flip through the pages until the end of time. That doesn't seem fair."

"Nature has never been fair."

Top speed for the Vespa Piaggio was seventy-five kilometers per hour, a useless fact Richard would always remember. The engine whined. By the outskirts of the colorless town, the speedometer read fifty, and then sixty after he'd reached the giant trees lining the road. At seventy, the engine screaming, Richard shifted his weight and twisted the handlebars to the right. One second before impact, he stood on the floorboard and leaned forward. His skull struck the trunk in the same instant as the scooter, the sound between his ears like a hardcover book slapped on a tabletop.

He bounced, spun and flopped on his back. He took a deep breath and peered up at the canopy of leaves, pretending God had erased all stars from the heavens. The Vespa lay near, the engine ticking with heat.

"You know, I never actually rode the scooter in *Roman Holiday*," said the man in the white three-piece suit from the road's edge. "Strictly stuntmen."

Richard rose to his feet and heaved the Vespa onto its wheels. "Yes, I knew that." He gripped the handlebars and eased himself onto the saddle. "I had to know that or you wouldn't have said it."

The man smiled in sympathy. Richard smiled back. The man turned toward the town and began walking, his suit aglow in the shadows of the night.

Richard kick-started the Vespa, throttled up and rode away.

End