

Vincero:

When I heard the news that he was gone I put on my favorite recording of him. I played it loud. My heart was aching. I opened the front door so the sound, the incredible sound of his voice, would startle the birds. They froze on their perches. I stood on the porch and told them, "Birds, this is Pavarotti. He was great. Listen."

There are performers in our lives who have far too great an impact on us. I have them, you have them, or I hope you do. They reach places in us that are untouched until they arrive. They make us stand up. They make us weep. They leave us open mouthed and wonderstruck.

Have you ever been in a small room when an operatically trained singer sings? The experience is akin to the shock wave of an explosion. Simultaneously with the sound something hits you in the chest. It's physical. A great singer can create waves, without amplification, in the atmosphere. In a large room, a good concert hall, the waves continue through the floor into the seats and up along your back. I remember turning dumbstruck to Veronica, sitting beside me in the great Medinah Hall in Chicago. We were hit in the same instant by the vibrations. We almost laughed. The man, that singer, was making our seats shake! He was shaking all the seats in the house!

I met him twice in the same day. It was the early 1970's. I was flying home from a business trip to NY and as I walked down the aisle to my seat, there he was. You know this was a long time ago because he was sitting in coach. This huge man was squeezed into his seat with a long scarf wrapped around his neck. He was staring at nothing in particular.

All my life I have made it a policy not to interrupt famous people when they are in a private space. It's just not fair to crash a dinner or a conversation. But I couldn't help myself. "Mr. Pavarotti, I'm sorry to bother you. I just want to say how much I like your music." His eyes turned from an unfocused gaze into bright, smiling, happy, boyish eyes. He shook my hand and said, "Hallo. Tank you. You are hear me sing, yes?"

An hour or two later as I was waiting for my bag to show up on the carousel, I see two large Samsonite suitcases. They are white, all white with huge black cursive letters on the sides **L. P.** The great man came up next to me to get his bags (truly the old days!) and said, "Hallo, you see me, to sing?" I told him I was looking forward to it.

As he walked away he turned, smiling that smile of his and said, "Hallo. Tank you." And he walked out of the terminal happy as a clam. You know, the reason we get sad when someone dies is not for the deceased. It's for ourselves. In my case it's about the fact that I won't ever see him again, that he lives now only in recordings and in my memories. I wish I had seen him a hundred more times. What was I thinking? I guess I was thinking that he, and we, would last forever. Now he's gone.

My brother, who taught me to love music, would discuss the great singers for hours. He would play them for me, for us. He would remark about the things that struck him in a performance. When I had learned enough to have opinions of my own, we would talk at length about who the "greatest" is. He had many candidates. I won't bore you with names. Years later, sitting in his home, I played a recording of La Boheme. If you see only one Opera in your life, try this one. There's a character in it, Rodolfo. Luciano Pavarotti sang the part like it was written for him. No, he sang it like he owned it, like no one else should bother trying. Those pretenders would only have to give the role back to him after falling way short. My brother looked up after hearing it and shook his head, smiling. "What can I say? He's the one."

Five hundred thousand souls came to Central Park in New York to hear him sing. Five hundred thousand people sitting on that enormous lawn. Imagine that. That's ten La Crosses turning out on one night to hear one singer. Five hundred thousand. I feel accomplished when I can get five friends to agree on a date for dinner. Five hundred thousand fans. Truly incredible.

Early in his career he was singing a dinner recital when, before his songs, stage nerves were causing him to sweat profusely. He asked for something to wipe his brow. An admirer hastily handed him her dinner napkin. From then on he always appeared in performance with a large white dinner napkin in his hand. I'm happy he had that for a trademark. There's something so mundane, so like the rest of the world, about a napkin. It helped keep the greatest singer in the history of the planet on this human side of the ledger.

The word Vincero (pronounced vin chair oh) is at the top of this column. It is the final word of his most famous aria. In Italian it means, "I will win". In the context of the opera, Turandot, it is a song about love overcoming doubt and fear and hatred. Over the years tens of millions of people have been moved to head shaking, teary eyed, romanced smiles by his rendition of that aria.

Like no one else on earth Pavarotti had the right to sing, "Vincero!"