**The unseen journalist: How I followed a man and a shade into the fiery (and cold) pit of Hell**

By Cristoforo Cicchiello

Editor at San Lorenzo Gazette

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ante Alighieri hungered for the Sun. He yearned for a glimpse at the moon. He worried he might never again be embraced by a blue sky or dazzled by an array of stars winking back. This was hour six in Hell, perhaps the bleakest moment in our traveling trio. From the raspy snarls of the winged Harpies — yet another trio, though more terrifying in form — we learned we resided in the Seventh Circle of Hell. Dante looked into my eyes and he mirrored my own terrors that had clawed at my soul. There were times where I asked Dante to squeeze my hand just to remind myself that I was a living form.

In that moment, as Dante looked at me, the same question was pulsing in our consciousness. How much deeper did this realm go on for?

Part I: On the assignment

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very journalist is faced with that one assignment that can change their life. The one that can put them on the proverbial “map.” A young apprentice in our newsroom approached me with such a query. That very morning, I had been complaining of my longing to write something truly consequential. I felt trapped having to write on the Vatican beat. Everyone could see that Pope Celestine V was a weak and largely ineffectual pope. Dear reader, I would be remiss to not admit to you that I yearned for some semblance of a scandal in the papacy. But I often think that had a scandal erupted, I never would have given young Ennio’s query a single thought.

He came to me with a look of wonderment and nervous excitement. He ran over to me where I was inking my latest piece at the large walnut table.

“Do you know Dante Alighieri,” he asked. I said that I knew the upstart and admired his work deeply.

“There are whispers that he is going to hell,” Ennio continued.

“Has Celestine condemned him so, I had not heard anything of the sort.”

“No Cristoforo, I mean he is ‘going’ to Hell. Rumor has it that the Virgil was spotted in a forest speaking to Dante. And I think you should accompany him.”

“Me,” said I, incredulously. “He knowns not who I am.”

“You’re clearly unhappy with your posting in the Vatican. This is your chance to make something of yourself. And he’s not far. You may still catch the duo. They were heading south on the old Roman road.”

My mind was plagued with doubt. Was I even qualified to accompany the likes of Dante? At 22, I was a young editor with an unhealthy fascination of scandal. The problem had been that even when I did find impropriety, I was never satisfied with its scope. There was always a more nefarious plot that I was chasing. And yet, as these thoughts circulated, my legs hurried me towards the road Ennio had mentioned. Nestled under my arm was a leather satchel containing plenty of paper and ink, for if I was venturing into hell, I knew writing materials would not be provided upon entry.

I arrived at the fork in the road Ennio had mentioned. Dante was nowhere to be seen. Stranger yet, there was no forest. A grassy embankment lay to my right and to my left, a small hill scattered with Cyprus trees. “Not what I would call a forest, Ennio,” I said scolding the youth.

What next happened I preface by reminding that I am a journalist. While this may be the first time I report on events that directly impacted me, I remain steadfast in my dedication to accurately detailing these unique experiences without need for embellishment.

As I stood there, surveying the horizon for a sign of passersby, I heard the distinct sound of waves against the rocky crag of a shore. It became rhythmic, lulling me into a trance-like state. Flow and ebb. Flow and ebb. The sound emanated from behind me, as if the embankment had a secret reservoir hidden below. The rumbling grew and I began to run, sprinting away from the water that was inevitably going to swallow me up in a watery grave.

Up the hill I went, not daring to glance back. The hill became steeper, more like a slope. Out of breath, the sound of waves nearly upon me, I lunged down the hill, tumbling to the bottom. I dazedly looked around. The sound of the waves had disappeared, and in its wake, there, in front of me, stood Dante.

“Ahh, Cristoforo! Virgil said something about another visitor,” Dante said in a bemused fashion. “Are you coming to Hell with us?”

Part II: Into the Inferno

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shook the dust off from my fall, never taking my eyes off of Virgil and Dante, as if averting my gaze for even a moment would make them disappear. No words had yet been uttered forthwith from my mouth.

“So is this really happening? And what did you mean by ‘another visitor?’ Who else came here?” The questions tumbled out from my lips.

Dante replied, but his friendly tone was replaced with a flat, ashen demeanor. My presence had suddenly made this venture real, and he looked earnestly at Virgil for guidance.

“We are, with Virgil as our guide through the eternal place. I warn you that only Paul and Aeneas have ever made this journey. And did you not see the leopard, lion and she-wolf that gave a fierce chase to me?”

I replied that I had not, and it was at this time that Dante noted the satchel of papers overbrimming with paper under my arm. He asked if I was going to document the journey, assuring me that he was fully capable since the Muses were going to guide his own pen to the truth.

“I am merely documenting observations in a much more arcane manner. No poetry for me,” I said.

We had been walking for some time, following Virgil, and during that time I studied the man in front of me. He was of an average height, with cropped brown hair and a beaked nose. It had not quite settled in my mind that I was following Virgil, a man who had been dead thousands of years. His form was human, though he was translucent, as if he were fading with each weightless footfall.

“We are here,” Virgil said solemnly. “The Gate of Hell.” Upon reading the causeway’s inscription, Dante stopped. Feeling the same fear myself, I whispered something to him that I discovered later made it in his manuscript: “Here even cowardice must meet its death.”

Virgil spoke to Dante of Beatrice and all those looking down on him, protecting him on this journey, though the shrill screams uttered by whatever lay beyond this causeway suggested nothing could protect one from the evils in the abyss.

Dante looked at Virgil, then at me, and took the lead, his pace faltering only once as we crossed the threshold. Nearing the gate, skulls were fused into the wrought iron gate and the occasional leg bone remind us that we were possibly venturing into a place of no return.

Dante’s last words in our world were “The moon does shine, does it not Virgil, Cristoforo?”

Immediately, the gate thundered closed. The only way was onward. Our eyes were then greeted by a naked procession of bodies. I assumed them to be shackled to one another, but they merely followed the figure in front.

As one man passed, I saw him riddled with oozing hornet stings. It appeared that he had been stung thousands of times, his skin screaming in pain at the body it housed. My curiosity got the best of me.

“Can you feel pain even though you’re not living?” I asked to the man.

“Be you blind,” a woman asked of me. “You’re in a dwelling of pain. Turn back now, lest you beings wants to join us.”

Her finger extended towards a river and a figure approaching in a massive seagoing vessel. “Charon is who you seek,” she continued. I learned her name was Vanozza Pellegrini and rejoined Dante and Virgil, who were already on the shore. Souls began wading through the scalding waters of the River Styx and we followed in, climbing aboard. Dante promptly passed out, his legs buckling underneath the emotional weight of Hell. Had it only been 15 minutes?

Virgil remained silent, but in my nervousness, I became quite animated, striking a conversation with Charon. He confirmed my belief that as in the Greek myths, he ferried only the souls who carried coin in their gaping mouths. I later saw that the transaction was not with money, but teeth that Charon pulled himself. Hidden under a lengthy beard was a necklace bedecked with teeth, confirming he had carried many a soul to the afterlife.

“For what some experience next, they wish I had left them on the shore,” Charon said. Then, after a few more strokes of his mighty oar, “Everyone gets what they deserve on Earth. Every bad deed on Earth earns its punishment.” He further explained the makeup of the underworld and I scrawled a quick sketch. But when I pressed him if there was in fact a purgatory, he turned away. The conversation was evidently at an abrupt end.

“Cristoforo, do you not fear this place?” Virgil’s question interrupted my thoughts. It was the first time he had addressed me.

“I am terribly afraid, but I keep telling myself there is humanity in Hell, and it is my duty as a reporter to find it. If I die here and never make it out, then my terror will become known.”

Dante awoke just as we reached the opposite shore and before we departed, Dante and I scarfed down some dried figs and cheese that I had tucked into the satchel.

“You will find that food has no flavor now that we are past limbo,” Virgil said. “And for every hour you dwell here, you will become more parched than humanly possible.”

At his words, I felt the saliva leave my mouth, a flavor of supreme nothingness in its wake.

Part III: Deeper into the abyss

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here were too many souls to speak to and Virgil, ever the guide to Dante and myself, kept hurrying us forward. However, not without speaking to the likes of Moses, Plato, Orpheus, Helen of Troy, Democritus, Caesar and of course, Homer. Homer had always been my inspiration to write. “Finding the proper balance of writing what you know and what you feel will unlock your true potential,” he had said when I, awestruck, asked for advisement.

I was unable to converse with any one person for long, until the Minotaur. To this day, Dante thinks my record of our conversation is “fanciful rubbish.” We came upon the fearsome creature in the Seventh Circle, home to the Violent against their Neighbors. We needed to pass through a depression in the mountainside and there he was, a snarling mass of duality. Though we were a great distance away, I could feel the malice of his breath emanating from the large snout.

His rear legs began to kick dirt and he called out, “Who goes there?”

Virgil responded before I or Dante could intervene: “I would assure you, it is not Theseus, Duke of Athens who comes before you now.”

The infamy of Crete brayed loudly and dug his teeth into his own shoulder in a horrifying spectacle. Dante beckoned me that this was our chance to pass, but I remained unmoving. This time, I told Virgil this was a conversation I must have. He did not object and carried on with Dante.

Next, I approached the Minotaur carefully. His tail whipped about angrily, though I pressed on.

“Son of Pasiphae, might you permit me to speak with you?”

I had ironically startled him. He turned and there I was, bent on one knee and rolling a peace offering. A crisp pear. He devoured it and began speaking freely of how Lucifer assigned him this post when he died.

“I struggle to know who I am, even what I am. I am Minotaur, but I don’t want to be. You must believe I didn’t want to eat the children that Minos brought me in the maze. But then an uncontrollable rage would bubble inside me and…well everyone knows the rest. Bestiality conquers me. I have human emotions though.”

To illustrate his point of inner conflict, he extended his hands. His human hand remained uncalloused, smooth, and had an inviting warmth. In his hoof though, lay a bird crushed of all life, its innards painting the hoof red.

“I loved once. Ariadne, my half-sister. She would often visit me in the labyrinth. She never saw me as a monster. Until wretched Theseus. He seduced her and forbade Ariadne to visit me. One day though she returned. But as I went to greet her, a sword was thrust in my side. Theseus smiled, calling me brute. At first, I became enraged trying to fight back, but ultimately it was not the injury to my flank, but the void in my heart that brought me be the guardian of this realm.”

I could see reliving the story was making him angry, and so I left before the snorts of hatred echoed off the stone hills. I told him I would tell his story.

When I reconvened with my traveling companions, I saw a change in Dante that only worsened the further we delved down and down into the Earth’s core. He was starting to lose pity for the souls here. It began in this next realm where Dante ripped a bough clean from the person entrapped in the form of a tree. The Suicides, Virgil had called them.

“When he [Dante] tore my bough and blood gushed forth, it was a cruel reminder that I had no true blood nor a humanly form. And yet, for the first time, I can speak. I am Pietro della Vigna, but to he who looked at me with cold disdain, I was merely cause for wonderment. Of course, I see the hypocrisy since I cast aside my humanity when I ended my mortal existence. Maybe I am better as a tree spawned from the Harpies who nestle in my blackened leaves…”

Dante continued such rash actions towards the souls in the many pouches of the Eighth Circle. Concern flashed across Virgil’s face when Dante told a Simonist to “stay as you are, for you are rightly punished.” And while his fear had dissipated, it emboldened him to hold Vanni Fucci until he answered Virgil’s question. I stayed behind. Later, Vanni revealed that seeing mortals made him angry and that being pressured to speak as if he “were a puppet,” was humiliating.

At hour twenty-two, being in Hell for that long took its toll on Dante and me. By this point the feeling of thirst was all that reminded me I was living. It was at this point that we reached the lowermost realms, and they were frozen over. We had seen bodies burnt, torn limb from limb by fearsome guardians and serpents, though nothing has lasted longer in my mind that the souls entombed in an icy grave. I sensed each soul wanted to scream, but instead the chattering of teeth was an orchestra of horrors unspoken. Each Traitor to kin was inverted, their heads becoming our unfortunate steppingstones.

As we processed through the frozen ford, Dante’s heel suddenly dug deep into a form. “Why do you trample me?” it asked.

Dante beckoned to know the name of the man he had so injured. Was it to give a proper apology statement? I still will never know for the next instant, my companion grabbed the soul by the scruff and threatened to remove every hair atop his head. “You’ll have to name yourself.”

Had one adjacent to this shade not yelled “Bocca, what is it,” I shudder to think if Dante would keep to his word.

I did not stop to speak to Bocca. Instead, I felt an overwhelming desire to trample his head, and so my heel drew blood that dripped down, freezing at the crest of his hairline. I was not immune to the temptations and evils harbored in Hell any more than Dante.

Part IV: The Q & A portion:

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t was these actions, both from Dante and myself, that spurred me to lead a formal interview with the great thinker. Below, is my conversation which occurred mere days after Dante returned from Paradise.

**Cristoforo Cicchiello: What I want to know more than anything is what happened to you once you emerged from Hell. Did you feel lighter?**

**Dante Alighieri:** Yes, friend. Hell changed me. It corrupted my very soul. Being around that much sin, it was uncomfortable, and it made me feel hopeless. Hopeless for my life, hopeless for humanity. My curiosity transformed to cunning in the span of a few hours, and I fear if we remained there any longer, my person may have been altered forever.

**CC: I feel much the same way.**

**DA:** But when I emerged under the starry night, I was like a snake shedding its inferior skin. In this case, it was the skin that had hardened my heart and turned my core rotten.

**CC: My other question for you is maybe how has the journey to Hell changed you?**

**DA:** I would say it has shown me how to live the rest of my life. It affirmed many of my beliefs thatcommitting suicide or adultery or being a Simonist, these are sins that cannot be cleansed. I fear far less now, and I plan to live my life with renewed purpose.

**CC: To that end, there are rumors that you too are going to put this experience to paper in an epic poem. Is there any teeth to this musing?**

**DA:** You certainly miss nothing. Yes, I am writing of this journey less to show me as a chosen one, and more to guide people away from sin. If people know the sins that equate to eternal damnation, I think there’s a chance they repent and better themselves. Like the great biblical writers, I feel an obligation.

**CC: Do you have a working title?**

**DA:** I thought we were done two questions ago. Alas, right now it is “La Divina Commedia.” But you know, I have a question for you. I’m not sure I even know how you got out of Hell. Do you?”

Part V: Fade to Black

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t this point, I must admit that I too passed out in Hell. I would describe Lucifer, a three-headed figure with wings who sent a chilling frost with each flap, but for fear of passing out again, I refrain.

I awoke to the sound of waves crashing against a beach. I sat up quickly scanning the area and was stunned by the brilliance of the Sun. Had I the most vivid dream about Virgil and Dante? They were nowhere to be seen. Scattered about me were dozens of pages of parchment, filled with my handwriting. It had not been a figment of my imagination. I had made it to Hell and back.

This was not the assignment I ever expected. In fact, only the subsequent generations will indicate if this is my crowning achievement. But what I hoped in writing this, is to show that we each control our destinies. One trip to Hell is enough for one lifetime.

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**Artist Statement: Christopher Cicchiello**

To write this piece, the author tried to imagine himself as a journalist who goes down into Hell with Dante and Virgil. He leaned heavily into his experience as a Magazine Journalism major, and though this article is far from traditional, he wanted to experiment with narrative-based storytelling that, unlike Dante, contained less biases. Readers will notice the writer often approaches and converses with the least likely in Hell. The writer was very interested in the guardian figures and after other projects, this became a driving force throughout the piece.

Readers will also notice that some elements are fabricated or part of the writer’s vivid imagination. Even so, these elements are still built in fact or mythology that he researched, namely coming from Homer, Virgil and various mythology. Some quotes are directly from Dante’s “Inferno” translated by Allen Mandelbaum, which the writer believes offers an interesting crossover. Meanwhile, some descriptions are accurate to the text, while some rely more on the image Dante created in the writer’s mind.