

(3428 words of an idea I had that I thought was larger. So I ended up writing a sequel called "Blue" which is posted on my Livejournal and on fanzinesplus.com. Wiseguy, Sonny/Vinnie, first time, not explicit.)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

by

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*...my white stage vanishing,
hours of slow evenings
defining my lost self...*

*

I'd been dead for over two years before I saw Vinnie again.

Strangely, walking down a crowded street at noon on a cold October day in Boston, I'd just been thinking about him. Or maybe it wasn't so strange. There hadn't been a night since my death that I'd gone to bed without visions of him on my mind.

But today was different. Today was his birthday. And I was remembering his cousin Danny's death and how miserable he'd been all that week leading up to the day he turned thirty.

If my calculations were correct, he was thirty-three today.

He looked fantastic, the cold sunlight angling off his glossy dark hair, his face tan and smooth, his eyes, seen even from my distance across the street, glittering...I could never forget the cool affection of that blue gaze.

Something clutched in the back of my throat.

All the people present on the day of my death were never informed that when I got to the hospital a faint pulse was detected. I was revived, then visited by a man who offered me a deal I couldn't refuse. Part of my deal with the Feds in assuming a new identity was never to see Vincent Terranova again. He was not to know anything about my new life, or even that I was actually alive (no one from my former life was allowed to know,) and I

was forbidden to ever speak of any knowledge I had about him being an OCB agent. This new life was in exchange for two months in jail and strict fines which led to the Feds seizing all my holdings. They only got the holdings with my name on them. So I had other money. But it meant drastic changes for me, and it took me a long time to realize I was never going back to Atlantic City, that I'd never see my casino again, and that Vinnie would always believe I was dead.

The reason for the deal: the tape of me killing Patrice was inadmissible. Something wrong with the warrant, a "t" not crossed...something like that. This meant that Vinnie would have to break "cover" forever and testify against me, and this man who visited me in the hospital seemed to think that keeping Vinnie as an operative was more valuable than convicting me of murder. Instead of going after me for murder, for which they had virtually no case now without Vinnie blowing his deep cover for potential future assignments, they gave me the deal. I figured for my life, and what I'd done to Patrice even though he deserved it, even though I still considered what I did self-defense, it was worth it. Two months in county jail? It was like a vacation. And the assets I had left under careful aliases would see me through any hard times for...well...fucking ever.

My new alias sent me to a small town in Massachusetts. I was provided with an apartment which I had to pay for and which I quickly ditched. Instead, I bought a small house by a handsome stream and set about minding my own business and making a new life for myself. I was given a list of potential jobs in the area and was expected to apply for them. I threw it away. If I did anything again, it would be my own business. Working for myself was a habit. I could not manage to succeed any other way.

The Feds stopped checking on me after about a year, all but forgetting about me. But I was admonished that if I ever resurfaced, made myself public in any way, or reconnected with mob contacts or former friends and family, I would be sent directly back to jail. If I ever decided to move, I was not allowed to do so without notifying the FBI first and getting permission. Random checks could be done at any time. This, they told me, was very serious business.

It was funny how I did not miss my former life as much as I thought I would. I did not really miss any of the people. And the only family member I felt bad about never seeing again was my niece Tracy. I never realized, until all this happened, that despite feeling like I was the center of attention at all times in Atlantic City, in reality I existed quite isolated, and my personal life was nonexistent. I was to be married, yes, but I was more in love with the convenience of that set up than I was with Theresa. How can someone be so alone in a crowd? It's easy. If they're all strangers, if they're all simply there to grab a piece of you, or a piece of the action, then nothing is personal and no attachments are formed. We had mob loyalty, of course, and a lot of mumbo jumbo words about "family" and "la familia" but none of it meant anything outside of business, or what others could get from your windfalls or downfalls.

I don't know what my funeral was like, if there were a lot or only a few mourners. No one ever informed me, although I'm sure it occurred. Tracy and her mom would have

insisted. Theresa would have wanted it. And Vinnie, I hoped, would have demanded one. But I didn't know. I never would.

Adjustments are a bitch.

The first year I was here in my new home, my new neighborhood, I still felt I had nothing to live for. Because I'd been suicidal according to my medical records, anti-depressants were prescribed. All they did was lull me into long stupors.

Maybe no one would think it about me, after the high life I lived for so many years in Atlantic City, but I spent long hours in the backyard, weather permitting, just staring at the stream coursing by and trying not to think anything constructive at all.

Sleep came randomly. So I took pills for that.

After about six months, I figured I was more fucked up on pills than I was just being depressed, so the shrink the FBI required me to see weaned me off them. I still felt dejected and useless, but at least I didn't sleep all day and never get dressed.

The depression wasn't about missing my former life. I didn't feel what I would consider any real grief.

Except maybe grief for Vinnie.

He was in my thoughts a lot. I had confusing thoughts. Conflicting thoughts. I couldn't figure it out for myself, because it was all ridiculous. Vinnie was a traitor. A friend who had in the end betrayed me.

And yet, sometimes just remembering his stance, his smile, the tone of his voice when he would shore me up, make me feel like we could beat Patrice and all the dogs like him in the whole world, that we could run wild through it all together and come out completely unscathed, would make my heart race. I would stop everything I was doing. I would have to sit down. I would have to take deep breaths. Remembering him...

He kept me awake at nights. He made me feel like I was a fumbling idiot. Remembering him...I felt resentful, jilted, guilty, afraid.

In every memory he was so beautiful. So strong. He had the conviction and moral compass I lacked. He had intelligence. He had heart.

He had everything I was missing. And wanted. It made me dizzy to think of him. In a turmoil. Weak. Crazy. And desirous.

Because I'd loved him.

Moving on, moving away, trying to make a new life, didn't stop how I felt. Distance did not distract me. In fact, it made it worse. Every day I faced what I did not, could not have.

And worse, knowing Vinnie thought I was dead and there was nothing I could do about it...there was no greater Hell.

Before the end of it all, in fact right up to the end, I think I had made my feelings pretty clear to Vinnie. He responded not in the way I expected. I figured he'd spurn me with disgust, especially when I realized he was a cop. But he didn't do that. And I kick myself over and over for not revealing myself to him sooner, for not laying it all on the line...my love, my forbidden dreams, my hopes.

Maybe things would've ended differently. Maybe Vinnie would have come over to me and together we could have changed things, made a different life. I don't know how to picture that, though. I can't imagine him ever really "turning" or giving up being a cop. But still, we might've made a deal, had a strange kind of truce that might've led to trust. Who knows? If he'd told me he was a cop out of earnestness *not* to betray me, I would not have responded violently. But he didn't know that. And I didn't know he might reciprocate my love.

Too many unknowns.

And a world that makes ordinary men into criminals, soldiers, deadly rivals.

I never told my shrink any of this. But it was on my mind day and night.

The other hell of it was that there was never any way to find out about Vinnie, either, whether he was alive or dead, how he was doing. Vinnie kept low profiles, surfacing only in positions of alleged "support" in the organizations he and his people investigated. I never knew where to look or how, even, to begin to look.

Now, two years later, there he was. Right across the street.

I could feel the blood rushing from my face.

What were the odds? I never came to Boston. I was here to buy a new car. My old one was fine, but I was tired of it. That was it. There was no other reason for me to be here. And Vinnie...why was he here? On his birthday? I couldn't tell if he was with friends or on a job. If he was on a job maybe someone forgot that I lived less than thirty miles from this city. Maybe they didn't think there was any chance we'd cross paths.

And the chances were that our paths wouldn't...shouldn't ever cross.

And yet, here we were. A two lane street apart. Me staring. Him oblivious. Me feeling as if all the wind had been knocked out of me. Him smiling, laughing with a group of

guys who looked like businessmen of some sort...but who could be sure? Maybe they were cousins come to celebrate his birthday for lunch. Or old friends from home or college or the FBI. There was an FBI headquarters here in Boston. It wasn't a stretch to think he'd know someone stationed here.

Over the past two years I often wondered if Vinnie thought of me. Knowing him as I did, I had to think I crossed his mind once in awhile. I hoped. He told me he had cared about me, felt affection for me. How he might think of me now, though, made me queasy to contemplate. Was I the criminal gone wrong? The fuck up? The suicidal coward who couldn't face responsibility for his actions? Was I just the bad guy? The wiseguy? The lunatic who actually believed he could have the entire east coast syndicate of crime families eating out of his hand?

Was I just the stupid moron whose aggressive arrogance did him in, yet another sad, mad case of justice taking her pound of flesh, then moving coldly on?

Maybe I was all of those things. But I always hoped Vinnie saw more. I liked to believe it, anyway.

He had told me there were things about who I was that he admired. I never found out what those things were.

Me and Vinnie, we never had a chance.

Now...

Now the noon light littered the streets with an autumn tinge, and steam rose from vents at various points whitening the cold air, and the sky was almost silver, and Vinnie was in my life again...if only for a few moments.

The brick buildings suddenly looked very red. The air shimmered. I didn't want to turn away. But I didn't get what I wanted these days...not anymore.

There was every reason for me to move on, and no reason left for me to stay. It was torture to watch him. Slowly, I lowered my head, dropped my gaze. But just as I did I saw his head turn.

I hadn't been quick enough. When I glanced back up our eyes met.

My heart tried to launch from my chest. It was only a split-second. That familiar blue gaze. The dark hair ruffling lightly against his forehead in a thin, cool breeze. I did not wait for any reaction. This could not happen. Could not *be* happening.

I spun quickly and moved down the sidewalk toward the lot where I'd parked. I did not look back.

I didn't have to look back.

My breath shook and I moved as fast as I could without running. Before I heard him I felt him on the air as surely as if he'd touched me. Then the hurrying rush of his footsteps. The psychic crush as he neared. The voice made of raw wind and cold pain, calling, stating my name as if it were and always had been a question. "Sonny?"

It wasn't my name anymore. I had swallowed it away with all the pills and dead hours of night and dreams faded to dust.

Still, the word, the question, the shattered tone stopped me in my tracks. I didn't turn around. The sidewalk was split and cracked at my feet. I stared at it, at the blank concrete, at the sand in the cracks.

He caught up to me, came around to face me. I'd never been rude to Vinnie. I wasn't going to start. Some old part of me, maybe the Steelgrave gangster or maybe it was just leftover pride, surged. I lifted my chin. I squinted my eyes. Even though he was taller than me I'd always been able to somehow look down my nose at him. Through the haze in my brain I barely saw him. I said, "Hey, Vinnie."

A part of me registered his labored breathing. But so many other parts of me had gone dark. I was aware he struggled, that he'd suddenly paled, that he was altogether speechless. But it was as if he were a thousand miles away and this was another of my fading dreams and I would watch it darken until it was gone beyond my reach forever.

I said, my voice sounding like an echo from another time, "Take it easy. You look like you've just seen a ghost."

The question came again. "Sonny?"

I did not reply because now it was rhetorical. He knew the answer.

His mouth tried to form words. "But...but..."

I stayed frozen, unmoving, but he moved closer and kind of fell against me. I had no control. My hands came up, catching him under the ribs, the solid warmth of him against my palms, as he hugged me tight until I couldn't breathe. He whispered, "I buried you..."

"Well," I said quietly. "Obviously you didn't."

He clutched me harder. Me, the enemy. The guy from the wrong side of the law. I felt my lungs start to shake, got a handle on it. "There was nothing I could do," I said. "Federal witness protection, all that."

He pulled back slightly. His hands, cold as ice, cupped my cheeks.

I said, “Don’t,” but I didn’t pull away.

None of this was pretty. But all of it was having this crazy affect as if I’d been dunked in cold water and was waking from a blank, oppressive sleep that had trapped me. This couldn’t happen, I told myself. And yet it *was* happening.

I heard Vinnie saying, “You don’t know. You don’t know how I...that I...” He kept not finishing his thoughts. He kept saying, “How?” Then he said, “I never got over you.”

Like I said. It wasn’t pretty. A guy doesn’t say those things, stuttering, gasping, and ever look pretty doing it. I couldn’t watch him struggle, but I couldn’t take my eyes from him. In my strange cold clarity, my waking, I could see the damage in him. A mirror to my own.

He had moved on, like me, and yet he hadn’t.

I glanced to the side, knowing now our connection was not only in my own mind. “The dreams are a bitch, eh?”

Those words were hard, although I didn’t mean for them to be. His eyes could not contain his staggering grief.

“I know that look.” And I smiled at him. I don’t know where it came from, my smile. And then I added, “I’m glad you don’t hate me.”

“I never...” He couldn’t finish.

The sky dampened, silver turning suddenly gray. Drizzle fell against my forehead in tiny, freezing sparks. Vinnie’s cheeks, though, were already wet when I said, “Now what?”

He took a shaky breath. “I don’t know.”

My smile tightened. Finally, I pulled away from him. “Well, anyway, since you’re here, happy birthday.”

I turned away then, took a few steps toward the parking lot.

Vinnie said, “Sonny? Where are you going?”

I glanced back once. “Home.”

He replied, “Can I...?” Stopped, started again. “I’m coming with you.”

I could go back to jail. Vinnie could lose his job. Strangely, none of those things seemed important.

Facing away from him, I said, "Do you have a car?"

"Yeah. Down the street there."

I didn't see where "there" was but it sounded not so far away. "You can follow me, then."

I don't know what he told his friends, but he was in his car behind me in minutes. The drive was rainy, blurry, damp...a half an hour of slick streets and pounding drums on the roof of my car.

When we got to my house we parked and got out at the same time. He followed me up my front steps. Inside, neither of us even took the time to shake the rain from our hair and shoulders. He simply reached out, grabbing me. I grabbed back. I said, "What is this?"

Looking lost, he said, "You don't want...?"

I closed my eyes. "No, that's not what I was asking." Opening my eyes I saw the wintry blue of his open stare. I said, "I want you near. Close. As close as you can get." Something tried to break in me then, but stopped as he bent forward, lips brushing mine, then our mouths were pushing together and my stomach twisted, turned, wrenched as my whole body began to melt against the warmth of him.

There was darkness and there was Vinnie wrapped around me. And that darkness fell away even as I shut my eyes tight. The shadows of sadness slid to the floor with our clothes and then I led him to my bed.

I didn't care that it was clumsy or desperate or fast. It didn't matter. Every touch of him was flame and longing and sweet and hot.

Rain rustled against my bedroom windows.

We drove toward each other, trying to merge for reasons we didn't have words to explain. We were trying to tie a knot no one could ever untangle. What was between us was not new. But what we now realized about ourselves and our connection was.

His dark head resting against my chest vanquished the caverns inside me. He whispered, "I dreamed. Every night. Your last words."

"I don't remember anything after the door broke open. What were they?"

He lifted his face, staring down at me with a beauty that stung my heart. He winced once. He never answered.

His fingers traced a circular pattern on my shoulder, an absent massage. After many minutes: "Tell me you're not a dream."

"I don't know what I am," I replied.

"You're mine." The words so soft, like feathers on the air.

A combined sense of panic and pleasure coursed through me. "I always was."

He fell asleep against me, his palm pressed hot against my chest.

(end)