

(Story #13 in my “Pennsylvania Series.” I’d been thinking about this scene for a long time. It’s been a dangling loose end in this universe. So now there are 3000 words where the loose end finally gets to speak and I just leave it at that.)

## THE VISITOR

by

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*Nothing stays the same  
the stars are lies...*

It was cold out. Another snowstorm had come and gone; the driveway was well-blocked. Vinnie had been shoveling hard for half an hour, cursing every once in awhile when his exuberance caused him to slip, and wondering when Sonny would join him.

Sonny had promised to come out and help him, but he’d been in the middle of reading the paper when Vinnie had left the house, and he still hadn’t shown up.

“Damn fuck shit!” Vinnie slipped again, balanced himself on the shovel handle. If Sonny had been there, they’d have the job done already. They’d be sitting inside by the fire having coffee and Sonny would be telling him a funny story, or making a bad joke about the weather and what things two guys like him and Vinnie could find to do indoors with a bottle of Vodka and a fire to keep boredom at bay.

Even as he grunted with the effort of shoveling snow, he smiled. There were times it seemed he and Sonny could not get enough of each other. When they were together like that, the rest of the world melted away. The bad memories vanished. Sonny was right there with him in the “now,” never confused, never flashing back.

Lately, things had been better. There had been that one night when Sonny claimed he’d been wandering around the yard in the middle of the night looking for Vinnie, who’d been beside him in bed the whole night, but Sonny had come out of that episode pretty quickly and the next morning it was as if it had never happened. They never talked about it.

Sonny had been like his old fiery self ever since. He was almost always in a good mood. He had ideas. He had little projects around the house. He was making the alcove upstairs into a dual office with a section for him and a section for Vinnie. When the weather was good, he bought things it needed, like rugs and desks. He bought Vinnie a computer but it wasn't hooked up yet. One sunny day he had cable Internet installed. He bought shelves that came in several heavy boxes and put them together himself. He didn't even ask Vinnie to assist.

He also bought a pasta maker and learned to use it. He enjoyed it so much, watching his mixtures turn into angel hair or fettuccini, that Vinnie laughed at him, causing Sonny to reply, "Well fuck you then you don't get any." But he'd served Vinnie the best spaghetti he'd ever eaten later that night.

Sonny was having fun with gadgets, fun with his computer and the new office, fun with games. One day a huge truck pulled up and through the snow drifts two guys delivered a pool table that Sonny had them set up in the garage. Then he got a space heater and spent time out there perfecting his game. Once Frank visited and even played. Vinnie wasn't really into pool himself, but he did play some when he was completely bored, or when Sonny smiled at him just right and asked him to. Sonny always won.

Vinnie did things like keep up the house. He vacuumed even though Sonny said they should hire a maid. "But I like vacuuming," Vinnie said. And he meant it. He had bought this cool vacuum cleaner with a clear base where he could see stuff accumulate. And it had all these attachments. It was, well, kind of interesting. He didn't want to give it up. It was interesting how things just sort of divided chore-wise between them. Sonny never made the bed so that was Vinnie's job. And the bathrooms upstairs and downstairs were also his thing. Sonny, on the other hand, took out the trash without a word, and kept the dishes washed and put away. He just did it, as if he didn't even think about it. And Sonny did most of the grocery shopping. He said Vinnie picked the wrong brands anyway and he knew the good stuff when he saw it, so Vinnie let him buy whatever he wanted.

Shoveling snow, though... Neither of them liked doing that. So it wasn't a surprise that Sonny was now procrastinating coming out and helping. It was cold. The snow was wet and the driveway was slippery. Who'd want to willingly do this job?

Vinnie looked down the driveway to assess his progress. He'd gotten about three-fourths of it done. He was pretty fast when he put his mind to it. But his shoulders were aching. And his back was damp with cold sweat.

Just as he was looking it all over and considering taking a break, a dark blue Mustang turned onto the shiny street. As it came his way it slowed, then pulled over to the snow-drifted curb and stopped.

Vinnie squinted, couldn't make out the driver. No one he knew drove a blue Mustang. It was a nice car. Looked fairly new.

He leaned on the shovel and watched as the driver door opened. Then someone got out. That someone was a woman with long dark hair. When she turned toward him and their eyes met Vinnie's heart went into his throat. His mind went blank for a moment. Then a single thought rushed through him.

*They know where we are...*

Theresa Baglia was dressed impeccably in a thick cashmere, brown coat. She wore soft brushed leather Uggs, pale blue jeans, and a stark white turtleneck sweater and matching scarf.

For a time they just stared at each other. Theresa did not greet him, nor did she smile. But neither moved. It was as if as many errant thoughts were running through her mind as through Vinnie's. In the midst of that, words simply could not form.

A sound broke their gaze. The red front door opened. Both Vinnie and Theresa turned.

Sonny walked out onto the porch. He saw Theresa. He had to see her, but his eyes fell to Vinnie and, as if she did not exist, he walked down the front steps straight up to Vinnie. He put a hand on Vinnie's shoulder, then said softly, "Go in the house."

It was the last thing Vinnie wanted to do...leave Sonny alone with his past. Ever. Not only that, Theresa was formidable in her own right. She could even be considered dangerous. She'd actually done a few days in county jail for belting Frank McPike on her and Sonny's ruined wedding day.

Yes, Theresa might look sweet. But a bride scorned could be a viper.

Vinnie hesitated. Sonny didn't even blink at Vinnie's protesting look. But he took the shovel from Vinnie's hand, leaned it against a bank of snow at the sidewalk, and said, voice just above a whisper. "Now."

Vinnie took an unsteady breath and obeyed. But he walked very very slowly. Afterall, the driveway was extremely slippery.

When he got to the front porch, he paused because he heard a voice. Its tone was flat but held a tinge of sadness, too. It said, "It's cold out. Aren't you even gonna invite me in?" He turned to look at them.

Sonny's voice was low. Vinnie could not make out what he said. Then he saw Theresa raise her fist.

*Goddammit!*

But Sonny caught it easily, then caught her as she seemed to sort of fall, and suddenly she was sobbing. Sonny's arms held her up.

*Jesus!* The only thing Vinnie could think to do at this moment was make cocoa or something. Sonny couldn't *not* bring her into the house now. That would just be...cruel.

So he did just that. He went through the front door and into the kitchen and started to boil water. He heard the front door close. He heard soft voices but not what they said. Then he came out with a tray. They were sitting on the couch by the fire.

Vinnie set the tray down on the coffee table, then handed Theresa a mug. She took it but she did not say "thank you." Her still wet eyes met his briefly, then glanced away.

Vinnie said, "I'll be in the garage."

"Yeah, okay," Sonny replied, not looking up.

Vinnie walked very slowly back to the kitchen. He opened the side door to the garage, left it open, then walked over to the space heater and turned it on. For awhile he contemplated the pool table. It was set for a game. He picked up a cue, held it, looked at the table some more, but did nothing. After another moment he went back to the open side door and leaned against the threshold. He heard voices. He tried hard to hear what they were saying. Sonny's voice remained calm, soft, but Theresa's was not.

She was saying, "...don't understand..."

Sonny said, "None of it was your fault."

"But you...you refused to see me."

"I couldn't..."

"You could've. You bastard..."

"Sweetheart, I couldn't go back. Not ever."

There was a sound like a laugh, only it wasn't. "But you went with *him*."

No reply.

"You went with him!"

"Theresa..."

"He's a fucking cop! You know it. Did you always know?"

“It doesn’t matter now...”

“It matters, Sonny. It matters a *lot!*”

“It has nothing to do with you...”

“Nothing to do with me? You’re shacking up with him. You two. All along. I should’ve seen... You guys were inseparable back then. I just thought...I don’t know what I thought. Were you two fucking around when you asked me to marry you?”

*Holy fucking Christ on a cross.* Vinnie leaned his head back against the doorway and tried to keep breathing.

It seemed, from what Vinnie could hear, Sonny again did not reply.

“Why won’t you answer my questions? Why can’t I understand?” she asked.

Softly, a response. “Baby, I really did love you. All I can say is I truly never meant for you to be hurt.”

“But Sonny, what the fuck were you thinking of by marrying me? One way or another, you were going to end up hurting me.”

“I wouldn’t...”

“Lying to me...about us, about *him.*”

“No...”

“You were lying to yourself. *He* was lying to you. *Everybody* was lying, Sonny. *Everybody!*”

No response.

“Did you even ask yourself what you were doing? Did you even think? People disappear over shit like this...”

Again, silence.

“You were gonna go through with the wedding, right?”

“I was.”

Vinnie closed his eyes tight. His fingers curled against his palms, the nails digging in to the soft skin.

“Yeah, right. I know, I know, because of Patrice, and my father. I was the perfect choice. Damn you. But Sonny, what were you thinking? What were you gonna do with Vinnie after? Ship him off to Siberia or something? Or was he gonna sleep at the foot of our bed?”

“Theresa, I’m sorry...”

“It’s not even that I judge you about that. I don’t care about stuff like that, old ways, old “Familia” rules. I could give a shit. But how could you do that to me? Lie to me?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t think you know what that word means.”

“But I am...”

“You were gonna build me a house, Sonny, but I didn’t know it was gonna be made of cards that would collapse at the first ill wind. What’d you think, you’d just go along like everything was yours, like you could just use everyone to make yourself Don? And no one would notice, or care, they’d all just kiss your ring and nod and tell you what you want to hear? Even Vinnie? The *cop*? You son of a bitch. You fucking deluded son of a bitch for ever bringing me into it. I believed in you. I believed you were different from the others, from the other stupid morons running the streets as if they owned them. I thought you were smarter. My father even said you were such a good businessman you could go legit at any time and still make bank, that if we had kids you probably would. He was lying to me, you were lying to me. Both of you. Using me to strengthen your own stupid plans.”

“That’s not the way it was with us...”

“I hate you.”

“I deserve it.”

“I should at least be grateful it wasn’t another woman. I think that would make me crazier.” She laughed but it wasn’t really a laugh. “Another woman...I’d have to compete with that. I’d feel like I lost. Like I wasn’t good enough or something. But Vinnie...well, I can’t even begin to compete so I’m pretty good there, knowing it wasn’t anything I did...or didn’t do.” She sighed heavily.

“I told you,” came the still-soft voice, “it all falling apart wasn’t anything to do with you.”

“Yeah, except for the fact that I was gonna marry you, Sonny. Except for that.”

No response.

“Why wouldn’t you let me see you? Why’d you refuse my letters?”

“I couldn’t... You needed a clean break. You needed to get on with your life.”

“Get on with my life? Yeah, that’s easy to say. Maybe you think everything fell apart for you, but everything fell apart for me, too. I had everything, *everything* wrapped up in the idea of marrying you. All my plans...all my friends knew how in love with you I was...” She gasped a little, or maybe it was a sob. “What a bastard you were...how could I be so blind? I knew deep down that I was a convenient bride, but I still hoped...I loved you since I was fifteen! I don’t know what I saw in you. I still don’t... fuck!”

No response.

“And Vinnie...a fucking Fed. What’s that about? He should have testified. He should have put you away. Instead he protects you? What do people see in you? What is it? Because I still have feelings for you even after hating you so much, after wishing you hadn’t botched your own suicide...”

Vinnie shut his eyes even harder. *I should go in there. I should stop this now...*

Then Sonny said, very matter of factly, “I don’t have the answers you’re looking for, Theresa.”

“No,” she agreed. “You don’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s too late. I shouldn’t have come.”

“I shouldn’t have refused to see you. I know that now.”

There was a pause. “You’re different now, you know. You seem...I don’t know...older and younger at the same time. You were always good to me. But today it’s like you’re less desperate, more real. You’re right about one thing...don’t go back. You can’t go back, Sonny. I should be happy for you, but I’m not there yet. I should thank Vinnie for being so loyal to you but I...I still blame him for the cops crashing our wedding. And I still blame you. You broke my heart. It’ll take awhile. It’ll just take awhile.”

“Theresa...”

“I should go now. I need to go.”

“Theresa...”

“I hired a P.I to find you. It wasn’t hard. But I won’t tell anyone I saw you. I don’t think anyone cares anymore anyway. No one’s looking for you. After Patrice disappeared no one could blame you for going underground. But Sonny...still...watch your back.”

Vinnie heard the front door open. It did not close. He went to the garage window and peeked out. Theresa was walking carefully down the freshly shoveled driveway. She had her hand to her face wiping away obvious tears. When she got into her car she sat for a few minutes. Just sat. Then, finally, she started it up and pulled away.

Only then did Vinnie hear the front door close.

Slowly, Vinnie walked to the heater, turned it off, then walked to the side door. He entered the kitchen and softly closed the garage door behind him.

Through the archway he could see Sonny standing near the front door staring at the floor. Vinnie came forward, into the living room, then just stood there.

Finally, Sonny looked up.

Vinnie said, “You okay?”

Sonny said, “Yeah. Fucking fine. This is how every day should start, right?”

Vinnie clamped his lips together, said nothing. He remembered seeing how happy Sonny was when he was with Theresa. That wasn’t faked. But he also remembered what Sonny had told him. Theresa was a convenient bride. It was expected. It was necessary. Then after he’d told Vinnie that, he’d pushed him down on the bed and kissed him until Vinnie thought he’d burn up under the onslaught of such desire.

Maybe it looked to Theresa like Sonny had chosen Vinnie after everything fell apart. But really, Vinnie chose Sonny. Vinnie pursued, pushed, even when Sonny said he didn’t want to see him. He couldn’t help but wonder if he’d let Sonny go, if Sonny had gotten out of prison and was free of Vinnie, if Sonny might not have looked Theresa up again. Would Sonny have succeeded in pushing Vinnie from his mind? Would he have gone on and never glanced back?

Now Sonny looked at him and for once Vinnie couldn’t read him. Then Sonny said, “I gotta get outta here.”

A flash of panic stabbed Vinnie’s stomach.

Sonny added, “Let’s go to the gym. I need to punch something.”

Inwardly, Vinnie breathed a sigh of relief. Sonny had said “let’s.” That meant Vinnie was included. “If I can get the car out...,” he ventured.

Sonny turned toward the rack by the door, reaching for his coat. “I’ll help you finish the driveway.”

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