

"Afterwards"
Ashley Cope
GlassShard@hotmail.com

"Why's it cold? It's not snowing, it shouldn't be cold. But I swear to God, I'm gonna freeze to death if I don't get inside somewhere soon."

He spoke the words aloud, in a voice that didn't seem to care very much about the words it conveyed. He certainly made no move to follow his own advice. Instead, Vincent huddled his legs up closer to his body, pressed his back further into the concrete wall behind him, and stared and stared at his surroundings. His breath billowed out before him in a mist of tiny ice crystals that faded and died within moments of birth. The world seemed very surreal as he stared out at it through his breaths.

Surreal. But did it turn beautiful through the obscurity or did his misty breath simply amplify the ugliness? Ah, what did it matter. It didn't matter at all, here it was and here he was and he wasn't going anywhere.

Midgar certainly did look frozen. Burnt-out blocks of concrete ringed him in, jutting from out of the February fogs like the crooked rotting teeth of a dragon and the winds howled between the buildings, discerning little difference between the still whole husks and the half-decimated husks. Everything was black, whether it was in pieces or not. And the wind bit into it all, spitting dirt in Vincent's eyes. Paper cut-outs was the metaphor he distractedly chose inside his frozen skull, the buildings and the bridges and the remnants of the gargantuan, teetering plate poised ready to fall nearly five hundred feet above his head, they all looked like two dimensional paper cut-outs baked black and brittle by Meteor's fire. He closed one eye and stuck his claw out, as though he'd poke a hole through the wall before him and let some of the washed-out wintry sunlight through. Or maybe it would all crumble away beneath his touch, dissolve into ashes and disappear on this vicious breeze. Blow to Kalm, blow to Mideel, ruin the happiness of their celebrations. A bit of black ash to compete with the confetti in the air. A little reminder of what had happened, what they all seemed so eager to forget.

And that was exactly what he would be, if he dared to join his comrades now.

They were so thrilled, he thought to himself as he stared at blackened Midgar, And I would be there with my quiet, laughable melancholy and they'd despise me for it, all the while trying to wipe away the frown and get me drunk and loosen me up. Ah, I know what I am to them. The funny man with the broken heart. The little jester with the stubborn love.

He felt very foolish as he leaned against the shattered concrete wall. A brief glance over his shoulder and he saw this was an old home he was making into his temporary relief from the howling winter winds. An old home brought to ruin by Shinra's corruption. Ah. Ah, he was just like this city. He was a man brought to ruin. By Shinra's corruption. And Hojo. And Jenova.

He could almost laugh at it, but he found his chuckles were dangerously close to becoming sobs before long. And he hadn't cried in years, this was no time to break from that fast of tears.

The winds chafed his bare pale cheeks like a fistful of switchblades but he made no movement to draw his cloak up closer about his face. If not for the pain, he'd have a hard time right now being able to tell if he was alive. What was there to signify life anymore in this dusty collection of flesh and bones? Everything was fogged over and stale and empty. He was lost here in this world he did not know, a stranger among the rejoicing who could do nothing but muddle through events that had transpired thirty years before. They did not know he lived in the past. At night, he was there again. And when he awakened, this place was the dream. How surreal this world was now! This future that had sprung unbidden from a past he'd been denied. To be killed one day, and then be living in a totally different world, told that thirty years... thirty years! had passed and he was alive and all those he'd ever loved were dead, left behind in the world he could never never return to. He was the outcast, stranded on shores that did not welcome him, longing to be lost in that sea he could only stare at. She was there, beneath the waves. A phantom figure of white, bobbing in the blue, hiding from the sun.... drowned.

Ah, but to be dead by her side... ah...

A building tumbled into a collection of black cinder blocks without warning, surrendering to the beatings of the wind. Vincent smiled as that same wind cut into the dust before it could settle. No peace, not even after the fall. Nothing could rest in Midgar, nothing. These winds paused for no one.

Time paused for no one and didn't rewind. Thirty years space between life and love, and then... and then whatever he was now. This was a startling question once it reared in his weary mind. If he'd left behind life and love, what materials had he left to shape this thing he was now? You could not exist without those two ideas. May as well attempt to make a sky without the blue, or a carriage without the wheels. You'd only have unnatural, impractical, and useless contraptions, fit more for the junkyard than the real world.

"Ah," he sighed into the winds. They were kind enough to carry his words away before even he could hear them, "Ah, but I could put myself in the junkyard, couldn't I?" He had his gun, the very gun he'd found where he'd buried her and perhaps that was a sign. He could put the end of it in his mouth and rid the world of a relic who'd become very very useless. He was so calm as he thought this that he couldn't understand. But perhaps he did understand after all. Even he didn't care for himself. He had no false sympathies for Vincent Valentine. He knew better than anyone that the real man had died and the remnants walking the earth now were as hollow as a vase after the flowers had withered. He would not be missed. The players in his world had all died, he'd seen to that himself. Now it was only him, thirty years out of place.

He knew that.

And he felt so unbearably lonely all of a sudden that it washed over him and almost drowned him and for just a moment, he caught another quick glimpse of the white-clad figure floating in the chaotic sea. Ah, but she was under the waves again and he was still on that shore, looking out, denied. And the white sun burned on. The winds kept screaming.

Maybe he was somewhat curious. To know where Lucrecia and Hojo and Gast and so many countless others before him had gone. To know if they'd gone anywhere at all. What a ridiculous thought... he might be suffering here for nothing and she could be laughing now, pointing her finger at him and laughing because he was foolish and staying here in this place he didn't belong, only because he was too uncertain to join her.

"But remember the uncertainty," he said aloud, briefly turning his dull red eyes up the sky. Such a typical human action, he thought absently, To look at the sky when you're addressing God, or the dead. "Remember the uncertainty, and don't be so superior. When you were alive, you didn't know either. Heaven or Hell or nothing at all. I don't know if you can hear me at all anymore. But it's nice to imagine that you can. Isn't it."

He was shivering now from the cold and his cloak was caught by the wind, streaming out blood red at his side, a comrade walking beside him as he traversed Midgar's ruins. His hair was in the wind too but he paid it no mind and took the wind's sting as he did everything else now: with apathy.

"They probably expected that I'd come here to kill myself," he said to the silent companion or to the wind, or to whoever decided to listen. "Cloud had that look in his eyes when I refused to stay with them. 'I'm going back to Midgar.' Ha, but he'd paled then. The stranger's going back to that city to die along with it. Throw myself in a stray fire. Put one of my own guns to my head. I'm sure they all thought that. But no one said a word to stop me. A lot of apologies, Tifa, she smiled at me so sadly. But that was expected of her, wasn't it? Yes. Just as she smiled when that young woman Aeris died. It was expected that she grieve. Ah, but I'm bitter now. I'm sure she really was sad. I'm just bitter."

And it was not justified really. When had he ever given any of those people any cause to think of him as a friend? He'd fought with them only to finish the events of thirty years ago and put her soul at rest. Selfish, but unlike the others, he hadn't hid his selfishness behind the phony excuse of "saving the Planet". He was not a liar, despite all of his other faults.

"They'll expect to hear that I've killed myself," he said again, pausing in his walk to look at the sky once more, "Perhaps I should give that to them. It would put their minds at ease. I'd pass into history as another man who'd loved and lost and then ended it all. Another guy with a loose lid who couldn't handle the pain. Ah, but that would be easy and comfortable and expected for them all. Maybe they deserve it, I hate to think I might upset the way they all order the world, how they categorize people. I'm the storybook lover and the chapters must fall in their proper places, mustn't they? Now that the innocent young woman has drank the poison, I must put the dagger in my heart. That's how it goes, isn't it? And it's a pretty story. There's a lot of poetry in it."

He'd been pondering the unfairness of the situation since they'd pulled him from the coffin. He tried to work up indignation again but it had died with Hojo. And acceptance was so much worse. He just couldn't get angry at the world right now. He hadn't the strength.

And Vincent wasn't sure he could kill himself out of anything but anger.

"So..." he sighed. Vincent fell back and there was the blasted trunk of a tree to catch him but he didn't care. He would have fallen to the dirt. He didn't care. "So what does this mean? I didn't love her after all? No, that's a lie. I just didn't love her enough to kill myself now over the loss of her." Vincent drew Death Penalty in one swift movement, dropping to his knees. He was shivering. But then he was laughing. "Ah, yes. That's a lie too, I see."

The forefinger of his right hand stroked the trigger and he smiled down at the barrel in his face, resting his chin on the end of it. So many reasons to die. So many that he couldn't even immediately think of them all. Yet for just one reason to live... one reason, he would throw this thing away and leave this burnt-out husk of humankind called Midgar.

Cloud hadn't said a word to him.

I'll leave you all to your celebrations, I'm afraid I'd spoil them. I've little to celebrate. I'm going to go to Midgar.

Midgar? There's nothing there, just whatever crap Meteor decided not to burn. Why?

No real reason.

A pause then. A pause, and the mako blue eyes had turned down to look at the dirt.

Will we see you again?

I don't know.

And then, and then he'd said...

Goodbye.

Not another word.

The gunbarrel was freezing cold against his chin. His hand was shaking so bad that he knew he might very well jiggle the hair-trigger on his weapon unintentionally. And then what a mess he'd make on this tree behind him who'd been kind enough to catch him when he'd fallen. Vincent laughed to himself. He wished with all his heart that he'd go insane. Maybe he was trying to make himself do that very thing.

But there was no madness in him. There was no anger.

The apathy and the sadness, that was all.

Vincent stood and threw Death Penalty away from him. From far far away, he heard it land with a clatter in a field of rubble. It didn't go off though, the rifle kept its shell as though letting him know it wasn't too late to change his mind. It was what they all expected of you as you headed here after all, it whispered, How disappointed they'll be. Vincent closed his eyes and the winds buffeted his tall form. His cloak streamed from his shoulders as though it were the blood from the wound he hadn't made and his black hair mingled with it and Vincent smiled against the cold and cutting pain of February against his wind-burnt face. Ah, but that pain was beautiful. It was almost enough to live for. The pain in his heart burned cold and clear, just as profoundly deep and numbing as the winds. The woman in the sea wasn't beckoning anymore. The white figure had sunk beneath the blue and he was still on the shore and he still longed to jump into those waves and follow her and drown forever at her side.

But Vincent Valentine wandered the shores instead. His strides were wide and drunken and trembling and he smiled as he walked. They'd all be so disappointed that he hadn't lived up to their expectations. Yet he smiled. He smiled in the winds.

He smiled just because it hurt so badly.

by GlassShard

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