

1. Vernon (Man)

There was a story that caused a stir in my building some time ago, about a young programmer named Vernon, who worked 60 hours a week at a start-up that sold budget efficiency software. The company advertised like their primary business was helping coffee shops order the right number of lids each week, but their reputation was for eliminating extraneous workers—and for doing so in the kindest, fairest, most sympathetic way imaginable, with minimal disruption to a company's operations.

Like an honest dietician, Vernon's company adhered to its own prescriptions. Its employees scabbled for new tasks and regarded newcomers with a watchful eye of exhaustion, like weary zebra. Vernon's current position involved developing standardized sets of severance perks based on service parameters entered by the purchaser that would maximize gratitude while minimizing costs. One grocery chain known for its positive work environment famously used his algorithm to determine that fired employees were more likely to remain customers if given a reusable but non-replaceable coffee cup, usually misplaced within a month, which entitled the bearer to unlimited free drip coffee, valued by the store at 70¢/gal. When applicable, they also received a parting compliment based on sales data, like a congratulations for that time in 2014 when you were part of the seafood department's record-setting Christmas fish sales.

Vernon felt himself in a well-compensated, if precarious, position. The atmosphere was competitive but exhilarating, and they often went out in a large group after work for drinks and cocaine. Still he was lonely, mostly—to avoid delving into any really profound causes—because he and his girlfriend had recently broken up after he came home from work to find that in his absence she had rearranged his apartment and replaced most of his appliances. All he had now to

keep him company was a fat little rescue dog who he had named—let none fault him for his sense of humor—Vernon. When he realized that she was a girl he began calling her Vern, which he had himself never gone by, and which sounded more feminine to him.

## 2. Vernon (Dog)

Vernon had a red mouth that looked like an axe had cleaved it into her face. She had short, bristly, hair, a barrel-body, and generous padding that diminished her frame. She ate like a hog, choked on her food, knocked things over, and shredded what she could not eat—a narrow category which she tested rigorously. If she vomited something up she was happy to eat it twice, and although she had once been hospitalized after eating an entire bag of raw rice she still often bumped innocently against the wire rack that used to house it. She strained against her leash on walks; she jumped up on people and tried to lick the insides of their mouths if they stood still but snarled and snapped at anyone who approached her; and she hated it when people tried to touch her paws.

## 3. Apology

These then are the characters, broadly sketched. One could argue that they contain as many stories as there are instants and emotions which, piled up vector-wise, point to the traits that are sketched out above. I don't know if I would agree, but I knew Vernon and his dog Vernon before this whole debacle upset the good people of my building. In fact, I was the one who coaxed the story from him, over the course of several conversations, after my friend and

upstairs number, who shared a wall with him, heard thumping and yelps, dog sounds, from his side. And I was as shocked as any of them were; as you might be. But I still do, still, believe that what you read or see *above* does and must contain what lies *below* as one of its many warped vectors. I hope that what follows will not just recreate the disapprobation in my building among a broader audience. I relay it because it's as true as one of Robin Hood's arrows, as any flapping flag or great enterprise, as true as a cold cup of water.

#### 4. A Story about a Man and his Dog

Vernon had a headache behind his left eye and a twinge in his sinus as he left work that day. Per the forecast he had brought an umbrella, but the downpour brooked no compromise and the air was white with rain: it hammered and leapt up from the roofs and hoods of cars: he was damp up to the hips by the time he reached the subway station and his pantcuffs were soaked and filthy.

Below ground it was hot and muggy with human breath. The train was fifteen minutes behind schedule and the commuters were growing restless.

"You know, if the people in charge had to ride on this subway a single day of their life," one man grumbled.

"You pay your taxes . . ." said another man, shaking his head.

"It's just unbelievable," said one man, with an elated look. "Unbelievable," he giggled, and looked around to see if others were as attuned to injustice as he was.

". . . and they wonder why we're stressed when we get home," concluded one woman to her neighbor. The clock ticked up to 17 minutes.

Vernon unfocused his eyes and tried to listen to the rising giddiness around him like a brook of water. He breathed in through his nose and out through his mouth. Pain throbbed behind his left eye. He did not look at the clock, but ambient conversation kept him apprised of the situation. The delay climbed to twenty-three minutes before it stopped there, and the twenty-three minute countdown commenced.

He did not stir when they heard the correct train approaching (to a chorus of 'finally!'s). Nor did he blink when it barreled into his field of vision, and by luck, amidst hydraulic hissing and falsetto brakes, a door landed right in front of him. The crowd pressed and the door opened and he stepped inside and took the last bright-lit scroungeable seat. He closed his eyes and listened to the gruffs, mumblings, and clamor as the car filled.

A young male voice said, and it took him a moment to realize that he was addressing him,

"Scuse me sir, would you be so kind as to give up your seat for a lady?"

"No," he said, then swallowed and breathed through his right nostril.

Once the train began rolling he opened his eyes a sliver, just enough to see the forms nearest to him, then all the way. Closest was the old lady, tiny, gazing out the window with her frail hand resting on the pole mid-caress; and further was an African-American man, older than he'd placed the voice, but still his best guess as to the speaker. The lady's hand was blueveined and bloodless white, her knuckles round, her bones like sticks in her arms. She wore a beige sparkling shirt with hanging sleeves, and heavy gold drops pulled on her earlobes; she was a bent coatrack. He imagined the train going off the rails and her body dashed against the walls, broken glass and her skin tattered like a bloodless veil. He imagined a man stepping up from nowhere and blowing her brains out of her tiny skull. It was easy to imagine all kinds of violence visited

upon her frail body: he imagined a bat striking the side of her face, breaking her teeth, her jaw, her—*Jesus*, he thought. I'm tired. He rubbed his left temple and up back along the muscle on his skull, trying to press out the source of his headache. The dull throbbing spread on the left side of his brain and down his neck and into his shoulder, and then reflowed into his brain, culminating in a sharp pain just behind his eye. He tried to snort his left nostril but it was blocked. He was hungry, too.

At work he had spent 20 or more hours on a problem and was no closer to solving it—and he thought of all the little things that would steal his evening from him in morsels: laundry, dinner, feeding and walking Vern: at the end of which, just when he was ready to settle down and do something, just one little thing, for himself—it would be time to sleep. Sometimes he was a little brusque with Vernon, but he loved her. I think it's fair to say he resented her as the source of about a third of those evening tasks. A couple of days ago she had gotten into her food bag and it was a miracle that she had made it off the carpet to vomit up piles and piles of half-digested dog food. The thought of digesting dog food made him gag. He had thrown out his dustpan afterwards.

A few of her more recent achievements included: decorating the room with toilet paper streamers and confetti of used Kleenex; yakking up a small slick of cold slime that he found with his foot in the blind dark of a nocturnal bathroom trip; tearing apart a number of bags and books that could theoretically contain food; pulling a whole strip of fabric from his only comfortable chair; and subtracting several days' worth of groceries from the fridge, which she processed and re-added to the floor. Each day he dreaded opening the door: anxiety seethed up as he mounted the stairs, thrilled to the brim as he touched the doorknob and—vanished, like fumes of alcohol,

if the door revealed a scene undisturbed. She averaged less than one incident a week, but at irregular intervals, so a crisis yesterday was no guarantee against pandemonium today.

Today, before he touched the knob, he paused. There was a sound and a smell, faint on the air, from no direction at all until: he pressed his ear against his neighbor's door: silence. He returned to his door and heard it again: he pressed his ear to his other neighbor's door: he heard whimpering, sobbing . . . gasping, choking . . . purring, mewling, yelping. It was his neighbor. She was crying, whimpering. She was sobbing. He laughed: she was getting fucked, he realized, and he envied whoever was doing it. He listened to her cry and felt a smoldering pleasure pass through his neck and dissipate the pain behind his left eye. He smiled and turned to his own door.

A spark from the doorknob struck his fingertip and his headache returned at a gallop. He felt hungry and queasy. The knob was locked: he dug into his pockets for his keys and found them tangled in his lanyard. His hand trembled as he pulled the snarl from his pocket, and the keys fell to the ground with a splash of metal. He held the lanyard, closed his eyes and took a breath. He bent and took the keys, pain galloping behind his left eye. He unlocked and opened the door.

There was a choking stench. Vern was in the far corner, snorfling something into the carpet. "Vern!" He yelled, and she looked at him. "What is that?" He called. She turned back to her meal.

He strode to her and pulled her away by the collar. There was half-eaten mound of vomit containing a rodent's desecrated remains. He choked on the smell of kibble, digestion, and rot: she had not found the critter fresh. She crunched and a tiny shard of bone fell from her mouth, smooth, jagged, with a dark vein of marrow. He took a short breath and held it, swallowing a rise

of bile. He cast about for the new dustpan: there, by the refrigerator. He retrieved it, dragging Vern by the collar both ways.

He tried to clean the vomit up, but she kept ducking in for another mouthful. He pushed her aside, and she licked his hands and face with her vomit-smearred tongue. He shoved her harder and she snapped at him, nicking his hand. Then he cuffed her on the side of the muzzle. She bit him. He struck her and she yelped.

There was blood on his hand and bits of vomit. His apartment was pulsing and he woozily imagined rotting rodent bacteria making its way into his bloodstream. Vern yelped again, squatted and began to urinate.

Anger bloomed in him like a silent detonation, spreading fire through his arms, hands, and fingers. His apartment beat a pulse and his hands shook. He picked her up by the throat; the lapping arc of light-golden urine tapered off. He squeezed her neck through fat and muscle, pressed firmly on the flow of blood and air as she whimpered and yelped, pressed it down to a trickle through which issued a whistling breath, and the hint of a cry, or purring growl. For a long second, all was silent. Then Vernon looked into her wild and desperate eyes, and dropped her in horror.

She landed on her back and scrambled to her feet.

“Vern!” he said. “Vern, I’m so sorry! Oh my God, Vern!” He scooped her up and she yelped and struggled, but he held her, his arms fixed and gentle as iron beams. They looked at each other, lost and terrified.

“Oh Vern,” he said, and carried her like that to the bed. He sat down and laid her in his lap. “Poor Vern, God, I’m sorry!” and he stroked her behind the ear, and shushed her worrying.

“Vern, I was—I got so carried away,” he said, “I don’t know what happened.

“You need to know,” he said, “that that wasn’t *real*, that’s not what *counts*, Vern, I’ve never been—that’s not *me*, I—you—I don’t know what *happened*.”

“I just—” he said, stroking her along the shoulder, “if you hadn’t *bitten* me like that, it was just—thinking of that *whatever* it is in my *blood* . . . Vern, I probably should see a doctor, but I—I don’t know what happened, I’m sorry, I really am. Here.” And he got up and brought her a treat. She snapped it up like an alligator.

For the rest of the night he gave her extra special treatment. She got 1.5 times her usual dinner portion while he cleaned up the mess. When he went to bed he patted the mattress for her to jump up. He turned the lights out, but she could sense he was still restless. Suddenly he got up and crossed the room to where the treats were kept. She perked up, but kept as still as possible. When she saw the treat in his hand she began straining towards him, wagging her tail and licking the air. She snapped this one up too, and then snorflled his hand for any crumbs.

“Good girl,” he said, with a gentle smile. She began licking his arm, and then again strained towards him, licking the air, eager to recreate whatever had brought on this reward.

He climbed into bed, suddenly exhausted. She was agitated, as was the usual effect of food. This might ordinarily have irritated him; but he laid a heavy arm across her body, and as he drifted off, he could feel her beginning to settle in.