

## The Truth of Vera

The screams from the bathroom shook the house awake. By the time my mother and I arrived, the slumber party guests were already congregated, looking at the distressed girl in the mirror's reflection. Persephone LeClair held her hands tightly over her ears, as though shielding herself from her own wails.

Five bloody scratches ran down the length of her exquisite face.

My mother pushed through the assembly, encircled the girl's waist. "Breathe, sweetheart, breathe," she said.

As I took in the spectacle (the only boy present, at least one head shorter than the smallest girl), my sister Natalie grabbed my wrist and examined my fingernails. She repeated the operation with my other hand. Given recent events in which I had featured, her investigation made sense. But in the case of Persephone's ravaged face, I was innocent.

Once the wails shrank to whimpers, my mother conducted an exam. The dried tiger stripes of blood, she noted, meant the attack occurred several hours before.

"You didn't wake up?"

Persephone shook her head.

My mother looked thoughtful and nodded. "When she comes, Vera never wakes me, either."

In the mirror, Persephone's eyes met my mother's.

"Vera?"

"Yes, dear. Remember what we said last night: Vera is true."

It wasn't long before Persephone's mother, Trilby, arrived to collect her daughter. By then, my mother had cleaned the girl's wounds and applied a cooling ointment. This made Persephone look somewhat less mutilated, though the scratches were still dramatic. Under

the circumstances, it would have been natural for any mother to lose control. It would have been more than justified for Trilby, the mother of a locally celebrated beauty, to erupt. But she remained silent. With one hand on her hip, she tapped a sandaled foot out of time to the story behind her daughter's attack.

"Vera's a ghost," my mother said. "Last night she chose to visit Persephone. But you shouldn't worry. Vera's scratches heal very well."

Trilby maintained silence.

"*Really*, they do heal," my mother said, with greater emphasis. She pulled back the sleeve of her pajamas, showed an array of faded scars on the inside of her forearm. "Vera speaks to me this way. And now, she's trying to tell your daughter something. Maybe a warning about vanity?"

Persephone's mother finally spoke, slowly and deliberately.

"Bella...this...is...insane."

Trilby led Persephone, still whimpering, out into the bright August morning. It was the last time the mother and daughter ever set foot in our house.

Until the attack on Persephone, the slumber party had been a bittersweet success. My mother was remarrying. Her fiancé was an artist, an oil painter who had accepted an appointment to a university art department hundreds of miles away, in southern California. Before the slumber party, I had already said an unhappy goodbye to my friends. Now my teenage sisters, Natalie and Lydia, were saying goodbye to theirs.

Lydia's middle school guests spread out in the living room. They played Twister and Parcheesi, listened to Motown and the British Invasion, especially the early Beatles (the band had broken up the year before and there was a growing nostalgia for the Fab Four). The songs of Beatlemania, still great but out of fashion, added to the party's sense of loss.

Natalie's high school guests sat around the kitchen table, over a Ouija board. Pairing up, the teenagers took turns placing four fingers on the wooden planchette and asking cryptic questions. A mixture of incense and candles, coupled with the game's spooky spiritualism, created an exotic, sickly-sweet effect.

I lurked in the kitchen shadows thrown by the candlelight. The artist hoisted himself on the counter and sketched the scene with a charcoal pencil. My mother stood near him, watched the figures take shape, murmured appreciation for the drawings she liked best. But after the artist had turned a few pages in his sketchbook, irritation entered my mother's voice. She spoke loud enough that I could hear but low enough so the girls couldn't.

"You can draw other girls besides Persephone."

Despite my mother's admonishment, the artist kept his focus on Persephone. At one point he hopped off the counter and broke into the circle of girls. Standing over Persephone, he scrutinized her as though she were the only one present. He moved a ringlet from her forehead.

"That's better," he said, and returned to his sketchbook.

My mother huffed and moved away from where the artist was drawing. Turning her back on the Ouija players, she poured herself a soda.

Paired with Persephone, Natalie asked the Ouija, "Who visits my mother after midnight?"

The planchette gravitated to "yes."

The girls broke into nervous laughter.

Natalie repeated the question. "No" stimulated more laughter.

"It doesn't look like you have *any* visitors after midnight," one of the girls said to my mother. When the planchette landed for a third time on "no," my mother, now keen to

engage, pushed aside Natalie, placed the plastic tumbler on the table, and took a seat next to Persephone.

“Let’s play,” she said.

Persephone hesitated.

“Come on,” said my mother, fingers on the planchette. “I won’t bite.”

Persephone’s fingers joined my mother’s. My mother closed her eyes. “Who visits me after midnight?”

The planchette seemed to glide of its own will to the alphabet in the middle of the board. Apart from Persephone, who appeared frightened, the girls read the letters out loud, one by one.

When the planchette stopped, they shouted, in unison, “Vera is true!”

My mother pushed the tumbler of soda in front of Persephone and placed a hand on the girl’s arm. “Don’t you see?” she said to the girl, who appeared shaken. “You must do as Vera wishes. *We all* must.”

“Who’s Vera?” one girl asked.

“And what does it mean to be true?” asked another.

My mother began to answer but an announcement from the living room interrupted her.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, The Beatles!”

Three girls with tennis rackets as guitars (one was Lydia) and a fourth, seated behind an upside-down garbage can and holding taper candles as drumsticks, began lip synching “She Loves You,” which spun out loud on the record player its “yeah, yeah, yeahs.”

My mother and all the girls at the kitchen table except Natalie and Persephone rose and went to the living room. The artist handed Persephone the soda my mother had placed in

front of her. The girl took a long drink. Still shaken, she inclined her head in the artist's direction.

"It's my pleasure," he said.

A few minutes later, Persephone declared herself better and stood up. Natalie put her arm around her friend's shoulders and led her to see the Beatles, now performing "I Want to Hold Your Hand."

The artist resumed his work, filling in the details of one of his sketches. Bella and Persephone were seated side by side with the Ouija board laid out before them. Persephone was pictured in a long gown covered with flowers. Her hair, thick and curly, flowed down her shoulders and back. She was accepting from Bella a piece of fruit. Tears streamed down her face.

A large hooded figure, seeming to float, loomed behind them, apparently unseen by either Bella or Persephone. I had no need to ask after the figure. Everyone in our family knew about Vera.

"Why's Persephone crying?" I asked.

Lost in the drawing, the artist didn't respond. I asked again.

"What?" He startled, then said abruptly, "Oh, yes. The pomegranate, of course."

With the living room concert completed, my mother returned. She found me listening to the artist's account of the Persephone myth as we stood over the sketch of Bella, Persephone, and Vera.

"It's just an old fairy tale, Billy," my mother said. "It isn't true, you know. Not like Vera."

She picked up the sketchbook and ripped out the page that had come to fascinate the artist and me.

“Bella!” the artist objected. But she folded the drawing into a small square and put it in the back pocket of her jeans. She turned to another page of the sketchbook and found one of the rare scenes that only incidentally included Persephone.

“Here,” she said, placing the sketchbook back on the table. “Finish this one.”

According to my mother, Vera visited her bedroom several nights each month, dressed in a translucent cloak and a hood that concealed her face, a description that fit well with the artist’s rendering. The ghost passed from the backyard through the master bedroom’s sliding glass door and seemed to enjoy hovering over my mother’s bedside. With her right hand, Vera clutched against her chest a Bible inscribed with her name in blurry gilt lettering. The left hand remained hidden in the folds of her cloak.

One morning after one of Vera’s visits, I crawled into bed and cuddled with my mother.

Before I could settle in, she laid her right arm across my body. It was covered in bloody scratch marks.

“Don’t worry,” she said, still groggy from the sleeping pills she often took. A half-full bottle stood on her nightstand. “Sometimes I wake up like this. It’s only Vera.”

Despite what everyone else in the world would have considered to be horrifying visitations by a dark angel of uncertain justice, my mother was not only philosophical but satisfied.

“Vera’s trying to tell me something,” she whispered, then reconsidered. “Or punish me for something.” And then she laughed, as though there were no difference between telling and punishing.

Perhaps inspired by Vera’s nocturnal habits, maybe functioning as the walking dead because of the strong sedatives she took, my mother began to sleepwalk. A few times each

week she arrived past midnight in our bedrooms. Acting panic-stricken, she shook us awake, as though we had slept through the alarm and were late for school or whatever pressing activities awaited us.

Like zombies – vacant-eyed and mute – Natalie, Lydia, and I would huddle around the kitchen table. Surrounded by cereal boxes and glasses of orange juice, we would act as though we were serious about having breakfast until Bella, losing focus, declared herself exhausted and returned to bed. Now fully clothed, we followed a safe distance behind and tried, with varying degrees of success, to go back to sleep. In the actual morning, we eventually showed up to school, ruffled and exhausted – and often late – defeating the purpose of having gotten up at our original ungodly hour. But my mother had no memory of our pre-dawn adventures.

“You’re trying to blame being exhausted and late on *me*,” she said to us, amazed.

My sisters and I agreed: it was no good trying to convince her otherwise.

These twin developments – Vera’s violent appearances and Bella’s memory-lapsed sleepwalking – would have been difficult enough in the months leading up to the slumber party without also having to account for the introduction of the artist into our lives.

The artist was handsome, with dark eyes, a receding salt and pepper hairline, and a ruby stud in his left ear. He claimed to be well traveled to the great art and religious centers of the world. Bella was convinced that he had been reincarnated no fewer than half a dozen times. Within his person, she claimed, he carried the accumulated experience of all those past lives.

“Imagine,” she said, “how much experience must be wrapped up into that single man.”

The one time we visited his studio, my mother pointed to a blown-up photo of a painting. A goblin sat on the chest of a sleeping maiden while the disembodied face of a horse looked on in the background.

“It’s called ‘The Nightmare,’” Bella said, having been educated by the artist. “Your future father was introduced to it during art school,” she continued. “He recognized immediately that he had painted it.” She paused, let everyone take in the statement. “It’s from the eighteenth century.”

My sisters and I listened, wide-eyed. Bella smiled and took the artist by the left hand – his paintbrush hand – and squeezed it. She brought the hand to her mouth, pressed it for a long while against her lips.

“Who knows what else this hand has painted?” she said, now clutching it to her chest. “Who knows what else this hand has done?”

The artist looked satisfied.

Soon after the studio visit, the artist shared his intention of liberating us from humdrum lives, of helping us to reimagine what had been, until his arrival, a mundane existence. My sisters and I were skeptical of the grand promises but Bella was persuaded. Always in search of stimuli, romantic and otherwise, to awaken her from chronic swings between lethargy and mania, she found the artist irresistible.

In the months leading up to the slumber party, I often found the artist in the morning, dead asleep in his underwear and spread out on my mother’s bed. Seeing him like that reduced for me any sense of exoticism he might otherwise have conveyed.

One day, reacting to being displaced from my mother’s bed, I stole a knife from the kitchen drawer. Brandishing it, I chased my mother and sisters about the house and, eventually, out of it. The three of them congregated on the front lawn and waited for me to



calm down. After this episode, Bella placed the knives under lock and key. It was one of the most sensible things she ever did.

The artist tried to smooth things over by sketching me in a series of historical military uniforms. He pictured me wielding fancy sabers and cutlasses, not so subtle references to my kitchen knife. When I was away from home, the artist hung the drawings on my bedroom wall, thinking I would appreciate them. Instead, enraged by being patronized, I tore down every sketch of myself as a Napoleonic field marshal, a Minuteman or a Confederate soldier (the artist liked to call me “Billy Reb,” as though I were born to be insubordinate).

Rather than dissipating over time, my rage grew.

One day, while my mother was soaking in the tub, I discovered the artist had entered the bathroom with his sketchbook. Through the closed door, I heard my mother laugh as the artist murmured “Bella, Bella, Bella” and instructed which parts of her body to cover with a wash cloth. Sickened, I went to the backyard and picked up a baseball. I spun on my heel and threw it blindly towards the house, shattering the bathroom window.

Screaming followed the cascade of broken glass. I ran inside and tried to push into the bathroom but the artist slammed the door in my face and pulled the vanity drawer half-way to shut me out. Through the crack in the door, I saw my mother’s naked, torn body. When the couple stumbled past me in the hall, my mother covered in a towel, I stepped into the bathroom and stared at the bloody water.

At the hospital, the tiny pieces of glass took several hours to remove. While the artist and I waited in reception, he threatened me.

“Keep it up, pal,” he said. “Do one more stupid thing” – he snapped his fingers – “and you’re out of here.”

Willing to call the artist's bluff, I took to describing myself as the reincarnation of my missing father, who had abandoned our family shortly after I was born. I began disciplining Natalie and Lydia. "As your father," I might say to them, "I never would have allowed you to talk back to your mother. I would put you over my knee – and will again."

It wasn't long before my sisters began to treat me differently, not with the distracted contempt one extends to a little brother, but with suspicious dread about what creepy thing might come out of my mouth next. My newly erratic and violent behavior was why Natalie, the morning after the slumber party, examined my fingernails.

To the artist's credit, I was unable to throw him off his game. At the close of one of these scenes, having done my best to spook him by channeling my father and castigating my "daughters," my rival actually smiled.

"Good try, Billy," he said, and patted me on the shoulder.

I had to hand it to him: the artist recognized a fellow charlatan when he saw one.

The artist stuck around longer than all my mother's many other boyfriends from that era. In fact, he somehow became our stepfather, as planned, although that status was short lived. My mother dated, married, and divorced him within eighteen months of their first meeting.

The relationship's fragility was first hinted at in the months after we moved. On multiple occasions, the artist hung around the periphery of my sisters and their new friends, sketchbook in hand. Page by page, oblivious to anyone's discomfort, he drew the girls.

"Why can't he stay away from us?" Natalie asked Bella. "He's a creep."

Many marital arguments followed, some behind closed doors, some not. All the arguments ended with some version of the artist's uncompromising declaration of purpose: "I make art, Bella. *Art.*"

One evening, when the artist failed to show up for family dinner, Bella made an unannounced visit to his university studio. She discovered one of his students there, posing nude. A scene followed, which may or may not have included the campus police and a good deal of smashed-up art. Her account of the episode was always muddled.

Afterwards, she rushed back to our townhouse apartment.

“Get in the car, *now*,” she ordered. “We’re going to stay with your grandparents.”

She threw a few garbage bags of clothes and some other random personal effects into the trunk and peeled out of the parking lot.

Halfway to our hometown, losing more steam with each passing mile, Bella exited the interstate and followed a crooked sign to a drive-in theatre in the middle of a San Fernando Valley-nowhere. A short while later, we found ourselves drinking cokes and eating hot dogs while watching a western starring John Wayne and a bunch of un-nameable satellite players.

Bella surrendered to a deep, open-mouthed sleep. Subjected to her snoring, we were only able to keep up, barely, with the movie’s garbled soundtrack, which crackled through the speaker attached to the driver’s side window.

Once the credits started, the other drivers turned over ignitions and flipped on headlights. The crunch of gravel, compressed beneath hundreds of moving tires, traveled through the night air. With each failed attempt to awaken Bella, my sisters raised their voices higher and shook her harder.

From the back seat, I took more extreme measures. I patted the top of her head, gently at first, but gradually with more force. If the snoring hadn’t persisted, we might have thought she were dead.

As the head patting graduated in intensity, Bella startled and rotated, raising her left hand like a cat’s claw before slashing my face.

Lydia screamed “Mother!” and clamped down on her to protect me from another strike. Natalie clutched me before pulling back to examine my face, where she discovered five bloody tiger stripes traveling from cheek to jawline. In a low voice, Natalie finally spoke: “Vera is true.”

Bella protested. “No, no, no, it had all been an accident, a bad dream, no, a nightmare.”

Somehow, in the middle of both Bella’s objections and my wailing, I realized we needed to get going, to return to our hometown, to get back to something familiar, something we could count on. Through my sobs, I begged her to start driving. As we resumed our road trip, Natalie dabbed my face with concession-stand napkins that felt like plastic. I eventually fell into a traumatized sleep.

Sometime later, after I had been carried into the house by my grandfather, my mother and I looked at one another’s faces in the bathroom mirror. Natalie and Lydia stood guard over me in the doorway.

Applying the same ointment to my face that she had given to Persephone, Bella assured us that my scratches weren’t that bad. No longer upset, she was actually cheerful and seemed to have forgotten about any role she might have played in my injuries. As far as she was concerned, it was only Vera who had once more proven herself to be a nuisance.

“Aren’t you lucky,” she said to me, “that unlike Persephone you don’t have to rely on good looks to get by?”

Over the next few days, the tiger stripes on my face mostly disappeared. My mother called it a miracle.