



Victor by Michael Czyzniejewski

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Selected by Virgil Suarez, author of *90 Miles, Landscapes & Dreams, Guide to the Blue Tongue, Banyan, Palm Crows, The Cutter, In the Republic of Longing, You Come Singing, Garabato Poems, Spared Angola, Going Under, Havana Thursdays, Welcome to the Oasis, and Latin Jazz.*

A hilarious story reminiscent of John Cheever's Enormous Radio and Peter Meinke's The Piano Tuner. As a stranger-at-the-door type of story, this one rocks! It's kept me laughing since I first read, and I am still chuckling upon re-reading it. – VS.

Along with the groceries, my wife brings home a dummy, a little guy made of wood, a redhead with round cheeks, a high, arching brow, and a goatee. Debbie tells me to unload while she shows Victor around, that she's getting pretty hungry, too, asking what time she should expect dinner.

“Victor?” I ask.

“Hello,” Victor says. “You're better looking than Debbie let on.”

Debbie's hand is inside the dummy's back, but Debbie's mouth doesn't move at all. In fact, she smiles a lot, and at one point during the dummy's speech she coughs. To the best of my knowledge, Debbie has had no experience with ventriloquism, but now, with ten brown bags and a watermelon on the kitchen floor, she comes off like a pro.

"There's Popsicles in one of those bags," Debbie says. "Plus, I stopped to see your mom on the way home."

Debbie disappears into the bedroom, along the way pointing out the paintings she did in college and the bathroom. While I have more questions—the least of which is what she was doing at my mother's—those Popsicles are turning to juice. Even stranger, while I'm putting everything away, I find products we've never bought before—yogurt, kiwis, string cheese, a six-pack of diet cola. With both Debbie and me lactose intolerant, and neither of us on a diet, I can't imagine who these new items are for, but away they go.

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During dinner Debbie holds the dummy on her lap, and again her ventriloquist skills fall nothing short of amazing. While the dummy talks, Debbie takes sips from her wine, even chews bites of her pork chop. At one point she interrupts the dummy, then apologizes as he apologizes, making it seem like they're talking at the exact same time. I clap, tell her I'm impressed, and ask where the dummy came from.

"Victor," she says, "found my personal ad online."

Debbie seems to want to play the game out, play it as far as I'll go along with it. I'm not sure how, but Victor is able to use his arms to pick up a fork and put food in his mouth, which must fall into some hole, as in his mouth it stays. Somewhere inside this dummy sits an entire pork chop and a dish of applesauce—he leaves the baked potato

untouched but did bother to waste half a stick of butter and some sour cream. I have no choice but to oblige Debbie's ruse and play along too, lest I be the one who spoils the fun. I've been accused of that in the past, a habit I'm trying to break.

"So, Victor," I say, looking Victor in the marblelike eyes. "Who do you like in the game tonight?"

Victor finishes chewing a bite, and Debbie helps him wash it down by lifting a glass of water—poured just for him—and emptying it into his wooden mouth, past his straight and white wooden teeth.

"I'm not a sports fan," Victor tells me. "But I'll say the home team, as I'd hate to be rude to my host, jinx the good guys' chances, if you know what I mean."

For the first time since Debbie brought this dummy home, I'm irked. I'm not sure if it's because the gag is going on too long, or because I hate the snobby tone Debbie has chosen for Victor, as if to tell me she's above following sports. Plus, if she's making him sincere, I don't like to be patronized. What kind of way is that to have a dinner conversation? If he's for the Pats, she should just have him tell me he's for the Pats. Like I'm going to judge him for rooting for the opposing team, or worse yet, believe that his cheering is going to affect any outcome. I've always hated guys like that, and Debbie knows it.

But I'm probably reading too much into it.

Debbie reminds me that since I cooked, it's her turn to do dishes, and she asks me to take Victor down to the rec room, tells me he'd like my collection of beer steins. "He collects zeppelin memorabilia," she says, "so he knows a lot about stuff from Germany." I counter with a reminder that the pre-game is on, that her tour of the house took a little

longer than it should have, and we could maybe look at the steins at halftime. But I'm more than willing to take Victor with me, as I'm looking forward to getting my hand in there and making him say the things I want Debbie to hear, instead of the other way around. Before I can even ask Debbie to hand him over, Victor interjects.

"I think I'd like to lie down for a while, Deborah. It's been a long day, and Greg's gourmet meal has left me a bit on the drowsy side."

Debbie looks at me as if it's my choice whether or not Victor can take a nap.

"Game's on in ten," I say.

Debbie excuses herself from the table, as does Victor, and the two disappear into the guest bedroom. I clear the table, noting that it's taking a bit longer than it should for her to come back. When she finally emerges, she's tiptoeing, as if to be quiet.

"He's a sweet guy," Debbie says, and to keep the ruse going, whispers.

"But I think the little bastard likes the Patriots," I tell her, and give her a wink, a wink that's not returned.

"I told you it was my job to do the dishes."

"When do I ever listen to you?"

"Your game is on—you've made that clear."

"You forgot some things from the store, namely eggs."

"I'm glad you're okay with him staying. It's big of you to go along with this."

"I can grab McDonald's, only I thought we said we weren't going to do that anymore, pick up something on the run."

Debbie fills the sink, drops Victor's potato into the trash like a bomb. I grab a beer and notice there's only one more in the fridge. I catch myself thinking that I should

leave it for Victor in case he gets up and wants to watch the game, and it makes me laugh. When Debbie asks why I'm giggling, I tell her the Jets are going to kick the crap out of the Pats, and if anyone thinks differently, his head must be made of wood.

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I know why Debbie's doing this, playing this Victor game with me, which is why I have to play along. A few weeks ago, when Debbie was supposed to be at the gym, she came home, her ankle turned, and found me in our bedroom with Laura Donovan, the woman who delivers our bottled water. I wasn't naked, Laura wasn't naked, and we weren't even touching. But Laura was sitting on our bed. To any woman who breaks her two-year routine only to find a woman sitting on her husband's bed, her husband just a few feet away and looking startled, this would seem like infidelity. But like I said, Laura's clothes were on, my clothes were on, and Laura's clipboard was in her hands. It was easy for me to tell Debbie that Laura was in our bedroom because she wanted to see if an extra dispenser would fit under a cabinet in our bathroom, that she sat down because she runs up and down people's front walks with five-gallon bottles on her shoulders all day. She was tired, had to run some numbers, and I told her to take a load off. I appeared startled to Debbie because Laura's work clothes were sweaty and Debbie had just done the bedding—I was thinking about the sheets, not some crazy affair with the Culligan lady. As soon as Laura left, Debbie told me she wasn't mad about the sheets, filling me in on what she thought was really going on. I told her she was imagining things. Yes, I'd made comments about Laura before—her tan (probably a farmer's), her thick thighs and lean calves, how it looked like her big breasts were stretching the buttons of her uniform shirt. So I could totally see where Debbie was coming from, and later on we laughed about it

together, made jokes. Victor's appearance is just the joke taken a step further, the punch line to the online personal she filled out and left on the screen of our laptop. We joke with each other like that: she calls me Doughboy sometimes, I dig on her cooking, especially anything from the casserole family. It's how we get along, how any married couple gets along.

And I have to admit, a wooden ventriloquist's dummy is a lot better than Gary the mailman in a thong when I come home early from work. Victor is made of wood, not to mention a snob, maybe even gay, the way he drinks water at dinner and doesn't follow sports. I'll take a wooden gay dummy any day over Gary and his shorty-short blue pants with the black stripes running down the sides. As long as Debbie does too, we won't have a problem.

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I'm not sure why, but the next day at work I tell Charlie about the whole thing: Victor, dinner, Debbie not coming down to say good night before turning in. Charlie is my partner at work, and my best friend, but that doesn't say much, since we don't really see each other off the job. Charlie and I work in old blast furnaces—steel mills and manufacturing plants, mostly—repairing the inner structures when they start to crumble. A company calls our unions—me the Bricklayers, Charlie the Laborers—and they call us. Charlie breaks the shit wall down with a sledgehammer, I put in the new wall, then Charlie cleans up. Even though Charlie's in a different union, he is in *a* union and knows to follow my lead, to make the job last as long as we can without raising suspicion, without getting a lollygagger rep. It's a good system, a system I plan on exploiting till

I'm fifty-five and Debbie and I can move to Florida. Charlie will find a new bricklayer, and we'll lose touch.

"Sounds like you and Deb have some issues to sort out," Charlie says. "A dummy?"

"The Patriots looked like a bad college team," I tell him. "Don't they have, like, ten Pro Bowlers?"

"Maybe she's trying to tell you something."

"I don't care how many rings he has, if a guy throws four picks, you sit his ass on the bench till he learns what color his jersey is. But fuck it—they can play Mickey Mouse against the Jets. What do I care?"

Charlie tells me, in between swings of his hammer, that maybe I should do something special for Debbie tonight, take her to dinner, an artsy movie, maybe dancing. He tells me that Debbie's a pretty lady, that I'm a lucky man, that someone needs to give her the things she deserves. That she's dying for it to be me. I tell him that Debbie's never asked about dancing, never shown any interest, and remind him that he's never taken his wife dancing either.

"My wife's not the one who brought home a dummy she found online, man. And besides, Deb never showed an interest in ventriloquism, yet somehow she's Edgar fucking Bergen. Who knows, maybe she's Britney Spears on the dance floor too. Or Shakira, grabbing herself and humping the floor and shit."

Technically, since I'm the tradesman, I'm the foreman on our jobs. But I never throw that in Charlie's face—I've never had to. But I'm tempted now. The only reason I don't is because he's sort of right—about the ventriloquism, anyway.

“Red Lobster’s having their Shrimp Feast,” I tell Charlie. Just then a rat the size of a shoe box runs from the hole Charlie’s punched in the wall, and I trap it in my mixing bucket.

“Cement shoes?” Charlie asks.

“Oh yeah,” I say, and ask Charlie to hand me my trowel.

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I didn’t think it a possibility, but when I meet Debbie at the restaurant, Victor is perched in her lap. The table holds three place settings and three glasses of water, and the two of them are having a conversation about the movie they went to go see that afternoon, something about an English woman struggling to find her way in a man’s world. Everyone in the section is staring at us, and little kids from all over are standing in the aisles, pointing and yelling over to their parents.

“You look nice,” Debbie says. “I wasn’t sure if you’d have time to shower.”

Victor looks up from his menu and says he likes my sweater, that orange, brown, and green are three of his favorite colors. Victor’s wearing a white turtleneck with a charcoal sport coat. His hair seems to have some sort of goop in it, as it’s pushed back and slick, all curled up in the back.

“You bought him a change of clothes?” I say. Last night Victor was wearing a long-sleeved button-down, a dark blue, I think. I don’t remember what kind of pants he had on and now can’t see under the tablecloth.

“A little present,” Debbie says. “Victor paid for the movie, and the men’s store was right next to the theater. He can’t wear the same thing every day, you know—he’s not you.”

A woman and a man at the table next to us find this remark very funny. They clap and ask for Debbie to make Victor say something else. I turn toward them and they put their faces back in their menus.

“Just kidding, honey! You look nice,” Debbie says. She asks me to sit down, across from her and Victor. Before I can say anything—ask Debbie to leave, for instance, and drop Victor in the Dumpster on the way out of the lot—a waitress comes and brings us drinks and salads.

“I took the liberty of ordering for you,” Victor says. “I overheard Debbie playing your message from the machine, bandying this ‘feast’ they have going, so I assumed you wanted just that, the Shrimp Feast.”

Debbie digs into her salad with her free hand, and Victor does the same—I’m pretty sure she’s controlling him lefty, when yesterday she was using her right. I start to think that she’s maybe been secretly taking lessons at night, maybe at the community college, the one we get catalogs from in the mail. I’m not sure when she’s been doing this—probably my euchre night—and it makes me feel like we’ve been leading double lives. Whenever I say I’m going to my folks’ to play cards, I go play cards with my folks. When Debbie says she’s going to stay in and read, I assume she’s reading in our bed, by herself. I’ve been playing euchre on Wednesdays for a lot of years, so like Charlie said, who knows what other skills she’s acquired in that time? To think that my wife is holding out on me makes me not hungry. Maybe she can fix cars or even mountain-climb? Maybe one night I’ll pull around the block, follow her, see if she leaves. But that’s crazy talk, and if I have to follow her around, then is she really worth the effort?

I am not a big fan of salad, but I pick at it because I don't want to seem ungrateful to Victor for getting the dressing right, Thousand Island. Then I catch myself for feeling bad, about hurting the feelings of a piece of wood, one who's wearing nicer clothes than me, one who remembered to put his napkin on his lap. I push the salad aside and wait for my shrimp. When it comes, I order only one refill, broiled in garlic butter on a wooden skewer, when usually I get three or four extra platters, all fried. Victor's stomach has been whittled flat, I notice, then it hits me: what if Debbie *made* Victor, carved him herself? What if Victor—red hair, perfect manners, chiseled good looks—is what she wants? It would make a lot of sense, but then again, nothing about this makes sense. When the waitress comes at the end of the meal and asks about dessert, I say no, order a water, and watch my wife and her dummy share cheesecake drizzled in chocolate fudge sauce, what I usually get, and Debbie always declines.

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I want to kick Charlie in the ribs when he falls over from laughing the next day, telling me he'd give up all his overtime for the year to have seen me at Red Lobster with a ventriloquist's dummy, wearing my orange-brown-and-green sweater, all those people watching.

"It would have been enough to see you stop at two plates of shrimp," he says.
"The rest of it, that's just heaven."

I let Charlie have his fun for ten minutes or so, then we get to work. To make my day even better, the hunk of wall we replaced yesterday has fallen in, probably because of the humidity, maybe a rotten bag of mortar. But we have to start over, knock down an even bigger section, make sure the whole wall is stable. If the structure is at all

compromised when the stove is lit, the heat could seep through to the gas line and cause an explosion. And that's bad, though it would get us more work; rebricking an entire furnace of this size is usually a two-month job, six days a week, too, maybe ten or twelve hours per.

Charlie does manage to get his barbs in, wondering out loud if wood would be better than bricks, asking if I knew any good carpenters, telling me I'd look good in a goatee, even smearing one on his face with ash. In a voice that is supposed to be Debbie's, I guess, all high and cracking, he says, "Wow, I really love a man in a goatee," then starts making kissy noises and rubs his arms all over like he's hugging himself, even squeezing where Debbie's breasts would be. I wonder how hard it would be to push Charlie inside the wall I'm building, if I could finish before he came to, if anyone would ever hear him pounding and screaming after I'd gone home. Not like I don't deserve his shit—serves me right for telling Charlie everything, when honestly, I can't even remember his wife's name, Jill or Julie, something with a *J*.

At the end of the day Charlie asks me to go out for a beer later (mentioning that Debbie wouldn't mind the time alone), but it's euchre night, so I turn him down. "I knew that," he says. "Just checking." Plus, I can take a joke as much as the next guy, but I think I'd rather spend an evening with the actual Victor and Debbie than any more of Charlie riding me, or him telling me how lucky I am to have Debbie. When I drop him off at his condo, he does give me one good piece of advice: "Keep a hacksaw by the bed. Just to send a message."

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That night, at my folks', I lose big. I'm partnered up with Mom, who is pissed. Dad and Lester, my little brother, who still lives with them, are kicking our asses. Dad and Lester never beat me and Mom, and in fact, nobody ever beats Mom, whether she's with me, Lester, or Dad. I'm playing that bad. Mom throws her cards down a lot, drinks almost a beer a hand, even says "fuck" a few times, which she almost never does, unless she and Dad are having it out.

We're done way early, Mom wanting nothing more to do with me and my crappy leads. Lester and Dad gloat, a side we rarely ever see. They high-five, they low-five, and they dance around like little girl cheerleaders at a Pop Warner game. Dad goes up to his room—he and Mom sleep separately, have for years—and Lester goes out to his place above the garage, cigarette in mouth and lighter in hand before he hits the door. Mom, who can barely walk, asks me to stay awhile, to have one more with her, for the road. Since it's early, I accept, even though I've already had, like, seven myself in just a couple of hours.

Mom, always with an agenda, just wants to tell me how good Lester's doing at his new job, but that she misses him when he's gone. He's the baby, her favorite, and no matter what I do, how much I stay out of trouble, he'll always be her favorite. Lester, thirty-nine, has been living with our folks for the last five years, a lot of times before that too, after both divorces, after both rehabs, after, most recently, the DUI that cost him his license and his job with UPS. He's scrounged around a lot for work, bagging groceries, sweeping up at a \$10 haircut shop, but recently Dad got him in at GM, working the line, a real backbreaker, putting doors the size of easy chairs on SUVs. But Dad thought Lester was ready to handle the pressure, that this job was the answer, and GM was hiring. "He

and your father drive in together, come home together,” Mom says, as if to imply Lester can’t get into any trouble if Dad drags him around by the hand. When I remind Mom that Dad has only a few months till retirement, she finishes her beer and gets up to get another. She asks if I want one more (again), but I give her mine, only a sip or two deep, still cold.

“He’ll either be ready to do it on his own, or he won’t. If he is, then maybe he can talk about getting his own place. If not, then he’ll just fuck it up, end of story. He can’t sit on your father’s lap and steer forever, you know—sooner or later he’s going to have to work the pedals, too.”

Mom is more than half in the bag at this point, but I still ask her: “How long have you been working on that line?”

“Heard it on *Oprah*,” Mom says. “I watch a lot of TV now, without Lester around to talk to.”

I tell Mom that I should drop over more, maybe twice a week instead of once, and she pats my hand, tells me I have a wife, a beautiful wife, and my job is to take care of her, that I should think about putting my storm windows in this weekend, that you never know when the cold will come, and before you know it, it moves right into your house. It’s only September, a week after Labor Day, but this reminds me to ask about Debbie’s visit, her post-shopping stop-in. As soon as I ask, Mom looks at me like I just screwed up another hand of euchre.

“Maybe she meant *her* mother,” Mom says. She stares me down and knows that I’m serious, that I think Debbie’s been to visit her in the last couple of days. That Debbie

lied. “But I wish she’d drop by—the store’s just around the corner. We could have coffee, maybe a beer. Tell her I said hello.”

Soon after, I help Mom up to her room, put her under her covers in her bed, kiss her on the forehead. If she hadn’t been drinking, I maybe would have asked her about Victor, about what it all means, but then again, it’s probably good that I don’t. As hard a time as Charlie gave me at work, Mom would probably be worse, lecture me on fulfilling my husbandry duties, then offer to let me live at home for a while, share a bedroom with Lester until things with Debbie work out. Mom can be awful when she’s drunk, and too momly, but she’s Mom, sixty-eight and ridiculously awesome. She can say whatever she wants to me, and it would be okay.

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When I get home, the house is dark, which isn’t unusual, as it’s almost midnight. If she remembers, Debbie will leave the stove light on for me on Wednesdays, help me get across to the table and chairs, assuming I’ve had a few. With Lester’s list of problems, I’m not sure why she fosters my once-a-week bingeing, but again, that’s the way we deal with each other. I have my things, she has hers. We’re married, and that’s what married couples do, cover.

But lying about visiting my mom isn’t one of those things that we do. That’s covering, but not for me, for her. It’s odd, because she could have said she was anywhere—the bank, the post office, the library, even at the store the whole time. It wasn’t like I was timing her. She could have come home an hour later, and I wouldn’t have said anything. But she chose to tell me she’d stopped at my mother’s, that the Popsicles were melting, that I needed to put them in the freezer while she took her puppet

on a tour of the house. It was deliberate, and even worse, she had to know I'd ask Mom about it a few days later. Tonight. And she was right. But why?

Whether she's asleep or not, I'm going to wake her up and ask. She won't want to talk to me while I'm drunk—leaving a light on is one thing, fighting with me is another—but I don't care. She brought this upon herself. She has to pay.

Up in our bedroom I see the light under the bathroom door and hear the shower. It is two hours past her bedtime, and even though I'm an hour earlier than usual, I doubt my wife takes showers this late every Wednesday. I think to myself that she doesn't do all that much during the day, cooks and cleans, gets the groceries, so why would she need to shower so late, right before bed? I turn the door handle, wanting to surprise her, but find it locked, so I sit down on the bed, willing to wait for her to finish.

Lo and behold, I find Debbie asleep next to me, under the covers, asleep but stirring, a smile on her face, as if she's having a good dream. Even stranger than taking a shower late at night, Debbie has taken a shower but has left the light on and the water running, the door locked. Maybe that explains it somehow—she got locked out of the bathroom, hours ago, with the light on and the shower still spewing water. She knows I have a way of jiggling open the door, using a steak knife, and she's going to have a laugh with me, say something ridiculous about paying me back for the water and electricity she's wasted. She will smell good, she will smell clean, and if I weren't drunk, we might have sex—the job ended today, and I have nowhere to be in the morning, and I have no plans to put in the storm windows. But I am drunk, and she will not have sex with me while I'm drunk.

Just as I'm about to wake Debbie, ask her about her visit to Mom's, I hear the water in the shower stop, the bathroom curtain open, someone step out.

Debbie is not alone here—we are not alone here. There is an intruder in our house, but more than likely, not really an intruder, but an invited guest. I need only one guess as to who it is, what he's been doing in my house. And I'm pretty sure I know what it is I'm going to do about it.

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