

Weird Words 2: "MARIONETTES"

Written by Steve Taiclet

Wednesday, 05 December 2012 19:25



Presenting another finalist in our second annual "Weird Words" short story contest. This one is a stylish slice of psychological creep called...

MARIONETTES

by Steve Taiclet

Veronica was a loser.

Always the one of *never*.

She'd known this unavoidable truth within herself for as long as she could remember, and she'd lived with it and lied to it—made games and inventive facades of her persona to try to deny it.

Sometimes she even believed the lies of better standing and hopeful momentum that she'd adopted on occasion, rising in waves in various times in her life. But when the cold, murky waters of failure lay stagnant and still after the tides of inspiration receded, Veronica was forced to gaze into that reflection again, unable to deny what she was.

Never would she succeed, never would she progress—never would *she* be the one to rise above the mundane.

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Throughout high school she lived outside of acceptable circles, dark and moody in her manner and appearance, and the few friends she had were of a kindred nature. "Enemies of the world," they proclaimed themselves when the others looked on them with scorn, but when it came to Veronica's artistic talent, no one could deny that she was capable of bigger things. They were all so certain, pronouncing with confidence to her that she would succeed. "You're gonna write your own ticket, V, no worries there."

Everyone was so very sure of it.

Everyone, except her mother and father.

Her father left just as Veronica entered high school, barely affording her an explanation. And in the years that followed, her mother projected her own self-loathing onto Veronica, teaching her daughter the lesson that if one is told that they're a piece of shit long enough, then eventually they will believe that they are.

At twenty-seven years old, Veronica sat amongst the waste of that cruel, tacit lesson, slouched over a drawing pad in the Queen City Diner in Allentown. She never went to art school after not graduating or attaining a GED, and when people asked her why, she only shrugged and dismissed the question. She didn't know how to tell them that every time she finished a drawing or a painting, that she hated it.

Such was the case with everything in her life at this point. Love, life, sex, art—none of it was fulfilling to her when Veronica surrendered to its mysteries. She'd long since realized that the *i dea* of a thing was far more powerful and compelling than the sum of its hidden truths, and that what was left when the idea became an imperfect reality was a thing fractured and filled with disappointment.

Even the movies she watched couldn't lift her out of herself anymore, the immersion she so longed for having fallen impotent as her expectations went unanswered. Deeper and deeper did Veronica delve into the most maligned and audacious horror films, hoping that the infamy gained by such movies might be well deserved, sparking a primal fear within her as promised by their claims. But there was nothing—no skip of the heart, no moving of her soul to feel anything

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but disappointment. There was only ever the idea of what they *could* show her, but in the end, as the credits climbed up the screen to incriminate those that failed her, there was nothing left but another broken promise.

Everyone else enjoyed them, she pondered as her charcoal pencil scraped across the paper, but there I sit like the snottiest fucking critic in history. □ And when I see how they all like it so much, I hate them

. She paused for a moment to stare through the paper and its black and gray image, analyzing her thoughts.

I hate them because I envy them, because they can feel what I can't...

Pursing her lips, Veronica shook her head and resumed her drawing, pushing against her disgust for every line and shade before her, despite the quality of the work that she couldn't recognize anymore.

"Who is that supposed to be?" a voice asked from over Veronica's left shoulder, and she raised her head with an off-putting frown. She glared at the young man as he stood leaning against the oily glass partition beside the booth, and in response, he raised his hands in a gesture of defense, smiling in spite of himself. "Sorry, I...didn't mean to intrude on you. I just...liked what I saw."

Veronica squinted at him, retorted, "Is that right?" She lowered her head again to resume her work, pointed her pencil in the direction of the table he'd been sitting at prior to this, suggested, "Don't you think your girlfriend over there might object to you telling strange women that you 'like what you see'?" Not waiting for an answer, Veronica added without looking up at him, "I'm not some dipshit bimbo that just falls for any double-speak from a pretty face."

A short laugh mixed with chagrin, and the young man corrected, "Her? She's not my girlfriend," he jabbed a thumb in the direction of his table, "she's *her* girlfriend."

Veronica looked across the diner at the two girls seated there, speaking to each other in subdued tones, with amorous looks in their eyes only for each other. It was then that Veronica felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment and shame, and she pursed her lips again. "Sorry, I didn't know. Didn't mean to be rude..." She glanced up at him, expecting to see reproach in his

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face, but instead he smiled and slid into the booth opposite of her.

"Well *that's* not a pretty face," the young man indicated Veronica's drawing with a candid smirk. "But it's outstanding work. Is she from a movie or something?"

Veronica gazed on her drawing, an image of a female demonic horror baring jagged teeth and onyx black eyes, and she replied, "No. Its just...something from inside my head. I draw a lot of stuff like this."

"Exorcising your demons?"

"Not exactly," Veronica said thoughtfully. "I think I'm looking for them—looking to find their truths, before they discover mine." She raised her eyes and looked on the young man, asked, "So what's your name?"

"Gary," he answered, a hint of satisfaction at her acceptance of him stealing across his face. "And yours?"

Recognizing how pleased he seemed to be with himself at that moment, Veronica smirked and told him, "Maybe I shouldn't tell you, since I might just be another potential conquest for you and nothing else."

"Hey," Gary laughed, "you were the one who said *I* had a pretty face..."

Another wise smirk, and she said, "My name is Veronica."

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She followed behind Gary's car, steering her Toyota along the narrow streets until he led her to an apartment complex on the other side of the 8th Street Bridge. As she went, Slipknot roared out anger and disillusionment from the CD player in the dash, and Veronica wondered why the hell she was even bothering with this. Their idea of each other would soon give way to awkwardness and insecurity as this inevitable one-night-stand unfolded, and in the morning (or later that night, depending on how good or bad the sex was), she would collect her clothes and sink back into her dull existence once again. It was a bleak prospect, but she couldn't bring herself to stop and turn the car around.

The apartment was common looking as Gary ushered her inside, but it occurred to Veronica that it was larger than a one bedroom unit, and her observation was confirmed by the presence of two bedroom doors. "You have roommates?" she asked as she walked slowly toward the couch and set her purse down.

"Oh," Gary informed her as if he might have forgotten until now, "yeah, I do. James and Debra."

"Will they mind that you have a guest at this hour?" Veronica asked awkwardly.

"No," Gary replied with an ironic smirk. He then came to stand before her, close as though he intended to kiss her.

Veronica adjusted her posture to receive his advance, a bit surprised that the activities should commence so soon, but willing all the same. But before their lips met, Gary backed away from her and glanced over her shoulder, just before a voice came from behind: "Looks like you brought us a good one this time."

An impact hard and cruel pronounced itself against the back of Veronica's head. And then there was falling, vertigo swimming into a blur, until there was nothing but sightless black.

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Damp.

Cold.

The smell of mildew and old stone, perhaps concrete—cinder blocks?

Veronica opened her eyes, heavy against her disorientation, and the pain at the back of her skull swelled its reminder like a shout as she lifted her head. When her vision finally resumed an unsteady focus, she saw three chairs facing away from her in the center of what appeared to be a basement, and in one of those chairs sat Gary. Seated next to him was a man and a woman that she'd never seen before, but as her memory began rushing back in a panicked reel of recollection, Veronica knew who they must have been.

James and Debra: Gary's roommates.

Arranged on either side of the chairs were spotlights, and a camcorder mounted on a tripod at the far end of the room. There was music coming from somewhere; a classical piece played on a harpsichord, and it sounded scratchy, as though it might have been produced from a record on a turntable.

But what caught Veronica's attention quickly after seeing these things was *her*—the girl painted alabaster and naked, standing before them with steel cables pierced through her wrists and ankles. Her face was a mapwork of agony and terror, as tears streaked down her cheeks in black like candle wax from the running of thick mascara. Her mouth was a wide, vulgar smile painted on in dark crimson like blood—a clown face forced to take joy in its own horror with lips sewn shut. The girl's body bounced and swayed, arms rising and falling, for them.

The man that must have been James held the other ends of the cables in his hands, having strung them over a lead pipe near the ceiling. His head swayed in unison with the girl's movement as he pulled back and forth to make her move.

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To make her dance.

For them.

Veronica tried to gain her feet, until she realized that her hands were bound behind her with handcuffs. Seeing that her captors hadn't noticed her coming to, she carefully lowered herself onto her side, took a deep breath to steady her nerves, and then began working at the cuffs.

The sweat on her arms provided what she needed, as one of the cuffs was looser than the other, and by a turn that amazed even her, she was able to squeeze her hand out of the cuff.

And that was when she noticed the dead body in the corner, the bluing of the necrotic flesh showing past the white makeup that covered it, just like the girl that danced on those brutal strings here and now.

Moving slowly, Veronica tried to hold down the horror of this as she—

And then Veronica froze, the realization coming upon her cold like the stone floor, that this... *this* was real. An idea made solid and pure, translated from concept to barbaric reality—a concept made flesh, and for the worth of it she was not disappointed.

Veronica took in every detail of every thing in this room: the lights, the chairs, the camera, the girl—the Mossberg twelve gauge shotgun leaning against the wall ten feet away. She found a center around which her thoughts could coalesce, and then rose silently to her feet. For a moment she couldn't take her eyes off of the girl suffering on the bloodstained stage here in this pit of madness, until the girl glanced in her direction. To that Veronica placed a finger to her lips: *Shh...*

The girl winced in another wave of pain and cried a little harder, either from her own showcase nightmare presented for three lunatics, or for the fact that she knew that Veronica couldn't save her.

But what the girl didn't know was that Veronica knew how to fire a shotgun, learned on a drunken camping trip years ago.

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Inching her way toward the shotgun, the swirl of its blue steel finish catching the uneven light in anticipation of her wielding of it, Veronica's pulse raced against her fear and the course of decision. Just a few more steps—miles in the perception of the desperate and endangered soul—and Veronica took the weapon in her hands.

She turned slowly to see that her captors still hadn't noticed what was happening behind them. Holding the shotgun, acclimating herself to its weight and making sure that the safety was disengaged, Veronica came to stand behind Gary and his accomplices, pressing the butt of the gun firmly against her shoulder.

One deep, final breath—*ready now...*

The slide and release echoed only for an instant as Veronica chambered a round in the shotgun, and the thunderclap exploded with a deafening and violent proclamation that stilled the dank air of the basement.

And the tortured young girl's face and most of her head was obliterated, painting the wall behind her in an abstract impression of grisly, crimson murder, her body hanging limp by the cables that bound her.

Gary and James took center stage now, naked and bloody with wrists and ankles bound by the same cables they'd fashioned for their victims. Debra lay dead, heaped among the other two corpses, having been dispatched by Veronica after performing her craft on her two accomplices at gunpoint. It didn't take very long either—Debra had several years of practice at this, apparently, and she was quite proficient at threading peoples' limbs with an ice pick and steel cable.

A singular vocation...

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The coppery tang of spilled and scattered blood was slouching even now toward the stench of rot on the air, but Veronica paid little mind to that as she crossed one leg over the other and laid the shotgun in her lap. *Another element so real.* She pulled the cables tight in her grip, eliciting groans of anguish from her captors, at which she smiled as she relished the gravity of knowing that for the first time in her life, she had complete control over the birth and realization of a gruesome thing. No promises of what this might* be—no preconceptions to be countered by the mistake of clumsy interpretation.

There was only the real of the moment, unfolding before her without prior expectation, for she never would have imagined this happening before tonight. She'd become the lunatic and the architect, and whatever came after...she shrugged inwardly and didn't feel a need to care.

With a wide and satisfied smile as she savored the misery on her victims' faces, Veronica pronounced, "Now you'll dance for me."