

ELDORA AND HILLSIDE

John Verbos

Ideally, each section of this fiction, except for this one, should be separately reproduced, black text on white, in an appropriately large size (say three feet wide by four feet tall) and hung in an appropriately large, twenty-eight sided room, one reproduction on every other wall, and entrances at the remaining fourteen sides. Upon entering, readers may choose to begin anywhere and proceed to read the pages in any order they see fit. Alternatively, these reproduced panels could be hung at various intervals (preferably in visual range of one another) within a two to three city block radius around the corner of Eldora and Hillside Streets in Boston, Massachusetts.

That's ideally, of course. As it stands, you will need a pair of scissors. Cut, shuffle, read.

She's been calling everyone she knows who knows her father. Her mother, her brother, her older sister, all her father's relatives, all his five sisters and their husbands. No one knows. He seems to have just up and disappeared.

Not a big deal, she tells herself, not a big deal at all. He's done this before – he forgets, or something comes up, or he ends up on the QE2 with some woman he's not sure he knows who claims that they're engaged. Weird things happen to him. People have told her stories about how he just appears in their lives out of nowhere, is around for an hour or a week and then he's gone again.

One time he just showed up at lunch: She was eating by herself in this little café and he walked in through the door, sat down, picked up a menu, and started up a conversation like he'd been there all along and was just now coming back from the restroom.

"Dad," she'd said, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come by."

"From Arizona?"

"Yeah. It seemed like a good idea. What're you having?"

Then he stayed at her place for a month.

Still, she couldn't find him and she wanted to. She didn't need to. She just wanted to and couldn't, which for her always spiraled into an obsessive quest. If she wanted something bad enough, or to find someone bad enough, she would, regardless. And at the moment she wanted to find her father. Just to say hi. The world revolved around this phone call; everything else could go to hell.

She wanted to tell him stories about work, about school, about her neighborhood. She wanted to tell him about the woman always looking for her dog. She just wanted to tell him something.

He is trying his best not to think about her under him. He refuses to look at her, and looks just to the left of her left ear, down at the pillow. He is naming the states and their capitals, in alphabetical order. If he screws up or gets distracted, he starts over.

He is up to North Dakota. Bismarck.

He looks down and sees her eyes closed and her mouth open. He feels her hands tighten on his shoulders. He starts over. Alabama. Montgomery. Alaska. Juneau.

The bed is creaking, the headboard, so he grabs it with one hand. He moves the other to the small of her back. California. Sacramento.

This is a struggle; everything around him wants to break his concentration on this one thing, this rote memorization that he'd learned in elementary school music class to some disorganized tune written expressly for the purpose of having children know all the states and their capitals. There's a dog barking outside and a woman calling after it. He almost says Maryland, Annapolis out loud, but doesn't. Goddamn dog. Massachusetts. Boston. She's saying things to him. She's making wonderful sounds. Michigan. Lansing.

It's working. And the states are flying by now, all the knowledge is somehow there, he's tapped into that song, he's almost humming it. He gets all those N states without even missing a beat.

They've found a good rhythm together, strange but good. He gives up on holding the headboard. His shoulder hurts. He puts his hand on the mattress and shifts all his weight onto that straight arm.

He almost flubs Texas because she's coming.

Vermont. Montpelier.

Finally he is at the end, to the fiftieth consecutive state and its capital. He lets go, his body strains, and he groans: "Wyoming. Cheyenne."

The sky has managed to work its way to being almost green. Almost, but not quite, she thinks. She's standing outside, looking at the sky, smoking a cigarette, brown garbage can sitting next to her. She's taking out the trash.

Thinking about the sky is a diversion. So is taking out the trash. It's a way for her not to be inside for a while, for a couple of minutes. She pulls the robe she's wearing closed again and cinches the belt. It's gotten colder out. Because the sun's gone down, stupid, she says out loud but under her breath.

Her cold is going away, slowly. It's on its way out. She could go back to work tomorrow. She might. She might not. Since she's still got sick days and all, there's really no point in going back until she feels one-hundred percent. Which might not be until next week. Besides, she figures, she hasn't finished the book she's reading, and she's enjoying it. They don't need her at work. If they needed her, they'd let her know. They'd call. They'd email. And when they did call she'd hear something in the voice of whoever called that would seem to her like anger or suspicion. Whether they were angry and suspicious or not. This happens every time. Even when she's at work and she's done nothing wrong, she gets the feeling that she's being judged, that perhaps her boss said something at lunch to whomever he was eating with, something about how she was late or how she always lost phone numbers or erased the wrong emails, and now the conversation had circulated, had gone from person to person like a game of telephone and they were all judging her, those who'd heard the story right, those who'd heard the version that said she was going to get fired, those that said that she was giving her boss blowjobs in his office.

But she wasn't being judged, she knew. Somewhere in her brain, she knew that she was making all this up.

The sky had changed colors; she put out her smoke, walked to the curb with her brown garbage can, and thought about whether she'd go in tomorrow or not.

He's late, he's late, oh god he's late. And he knows it and he knows that there's no good reason for his being late. He fell asleep, set the time for the alarm but didn't turn it on. He needed the nap after work; he needed just a half an hour in the dark.

His daughter is not going to be happy. She's never happy, but her threats have gotten worse each time he's been late to pick her up from practice, escalating to the point where last time she said Well, dad, I'm just gonna flag down whoever comes by and get in their car. No matter who's inside.

She knows the strings to pull, knows all about which boys to bring home and exactly which skirts to wear when she goes out with these boys. The skirts are short enough to make him wonder how on earth she would bend over if she happened to drop something, and the boys are always the ones who seem harmless and stupid enough unless you're someone's father and know what to look for and know at the same time that she could bring any teenage boy home and he'd still have that vicious, predatory look in his eye in your mind. She knows all this, she knows.

And it was his idea for her to take that psychology class.

He looks at the clock. There's no way he'll make it on time. He can only be less late than last time. Half an hour late. Maybe. If there isn't traffic. He slams the palm of his hand into the top of the steering wheel. Fuck, he says. Shit, he says. He takes the turn a little too fast.

There's a dog there, small, black, with a red collar and no leash. He sees it, recognizes it for what it is: a little dog standing in the street and looking at the car coming at it. He names the breed. The word plasters itself across his mind.

He hits the brakes.

He hits the dog.

He's got all the toy soldiers split into two armies, one of blue plastic and one of green. They're nearly equal forces, although the green army may have a soldier or two more. The armies face each other in the sand, awaiting orders.

A little while ago a dog ran past, barked at him, and then ran off. He doesn't like dogs, although he's been told there's nothing scary about them, and there wasn't anything really scary about this dog, except that it appeared out of nowhere and surprised him, interrupted his battle plans, and then ran off. The dog may come back, but he won't be as surprised as he was the first time. And therefore not as scared.

He rocks forward on his feet and falls down on his knees. Then flops onto his belly. He's at eye level with the soldiers, and they are soldier-still, still awaiting his orders.

There is no air cover in this war, no artillery, no napalm or gas. This is two sides picking each other off with rifles; the smart ones hunkered down against the sand, the brave ones standing with their rifles aimed, ready to take on the enemy.

He already knows how this battle will end. The green army has lost some ground recently, but they are gutsy and no doubt will triumph today. He knows, but will play things out anyway. Who knows what might happen in the middle of the fight? Especially with that dog running around.

The casualties are heavy on both sides. Soldiers fall with an inelegant flick of the index finger. The blue soldiers have retreated, leaving their fallen comrades on the field, in the sand. There are only a few more green soldiers left standing than blue, but that is enough for the smaller army to run and enough for a victory to be declared.

The dead are being buried an inch or so in the sand, deep enough so you don't have to look at them anymore. Sometimes they surface and fight again.

The green men bury their own, then cross over to bury the enemy dead.

They are sitting on opposite ends of the couch, watching the news. Neither of them has eaten dinner because neither of them has prepared or bought dinner. They are waiting. The other will crack, each thinks. And then they'll know, it will be very clear to each of them, who has won and who has lost and how angry the loser is at having lost.

All of this depends on who gets up to make/go out and get dinner, and whether they offer any to the other person. It all falls from there.

This has been going on for a while and it doesn't look like it's going to end any time soon. The meteorologist is coming on next with his five-day forecast.

Still looking at the TV, she says to him, "I'll bet you he calls for rain."

He looks out the window. "What?"

"Rain. I'll bet you he calls for rain."

"When?"

"Three out of the five days. Or more than that. I bet you. Dinner."

"Dinner?"

"Meteorologist calls for rain on three or more days out of the five and you make dinner. Less than that, and I do."

"Dinner?"

"Yes. Are you in? He's coming back on. Thirty seconds."

"Two days of rain or less and I win, right?"

"More than that, you make dinner."

He looks out the window again. "Okay, you're on."

The air fills with energy and they lean forward off the couch and wait for the meteorologist's five-day forecast. The commercials take forever. They fidget. She adjusts her shirt collar. He lights a cigarette and drums his fingers along the table.

She glances sideways at him and smiles just as the news comes back on.

The pile of dishes isn't getting smaller, it's just moving from place to place slowly. He breaks one pile apart to build another one out of the same parts.

Matter cannot be created nor destroyed, he thinks, but dishes... He smiles at his own joke. He might have to tell somebody that one. Maybe one of his roommates, but who knows if either of them would get it. He tells himself not to be so snotty. Don't be so snotty, his friends have said to him. If you keep this up you'll end up alone. To which he used to reply: Good. But now he's started to listen because the number of people telling him to stop being so snotty and aloof has dwindled, and those people who've stopped telling him to stop being so snotty have stopped talking to him altogether. They've disappeared. Zap, gone from his life.

Unlike the dishes, and unlike matter and energy.

He looks out the window and scratches his head. He gets soap in his hair. He doesn't notice. An old couple walks by. He doesn't notice them either. He is dealing with the dish situation, and behind the dish situation sits the fact that he feels like he's the only one who ever does the dishes. So it's not snottiness, not really – although he does consider himself to be better than the roommates – it's more like anger regarding a whole bunch of little things that add up to generally thinking of himself as being put upon. The whole thing just expresses itself as snottiness. For whatever reason.

There's the dishes, first of all. There's the meat in the refrigerator that he had to deal with, bleeding all over the place (defrosting, he was told... Well, he thought, looking at the ground beef and deciding what to do with it, Well, it certainly is defrosted), there's the garbage that never gets taken out.

Am I wrong? He asks himself. Should I not judge them because they make my life worse than it would be normally? Somebody's got to do the dishes and take out the garbage. It's not like it'll just up and disappear.

There's something about this vantage point that he likes, something about being suspended, in his basket, above everyone else. It's comforting, in the same way as leaving a party just as everyone gets there. It has to do with distancing yourself, he thinks, setting yourself apart from everything else that's going on.

The branches he's cutting down are endangering the power lines. With all the recent storms, he was sent out to cut down the overhanging limbs so as to prevent a power failure in one of these storms. It's work he enjoys, particularly when he's up high in the cherry picker, looking down on everyone else. He hums to himself and watches every person that goes by until they're out of sight. So this is taking him longer than it would take someone else, someone afraid of heights or someone who felt, for some reason, that work should be done as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He's thinking about parties again as he snips another branch and listens to it pop and crash its way to earth. He dislikes parties in general; they were always too much for him, always too many people talking at once. The noise is unbearable. He can't understand why anyone would want to host a party. You've gotta clean the place up to begin with, before anyone gets there, and you spend all that money on drinks or food or whatever and people mostly just eat or drink half of whatever they've taken and then leave the rest sitting on a table. And then, at the end, you've gotta clean up.

One time his wife threw a party, years ago, when they were young. He refused to help set up. He stalled on taking a shower, or getting dressed. He invented errands to run. He started drinking before anyone got there.

Later in the evening, as the party was in full swing, he said to his wife, "Hosting a party is just like being a guest, except you can't leave."

She was drunk. She told him that he could leave if he wanted to. So he did. When he came back, the guests were gone. He looked around, sighed, took a garbage bag from under the sink and started picking up the cups and plates.

She's grading her students' papers. Book reports on what they'd read over summer vacation. Nothing really interesting, and even less demanding, but it does require a certain amount of attention. And a certain good will come from her paying attention to these, more than just fair grades. This is the way for her to know what the kids already know, and what they don't. And, she thinks, it's a way to meet them.

She doesn't know all their names yet. She tries guessing which page belongs to which face. There are clues. What they read, why they liked it, how formulaic or chaotic the writing seems to be. She can tell who had help from their parents and who didn't. As easy as telling whose mom dressed them.

But she's distracted. There are the normal neighborhood noises, cars and a woman calling her dog, and people putting out the trash.

And her next-door neighbors are having sex. She can hear them clearly through the wall, can hear everything they're doing. Or can at least guess from the noises. Whatever was bumping against the wall has stopped. She listens closer. They're still fucking, so maybe whoever's on top has grabbed the headboard and is holding it to keep quiet. She's seen only the girl. So she imagines the girl on top, her skinny arms taut, hands gripping the headboard, no, one hand on the headboard and the other pressing into his chest.

A hell of a way to have to work, she thinks. If the parents knew what I was listening to as I graded their sons' and daughters' papers... She smiles to herself and snorts a little laugh.

She puts her pen down and shuts off her desk lamp. She stands up, walks the length of the apartment, comes back into her room. She looks out the window. Finally, she picks up her desk chair and moves it against the wall that adjoins the next apartment. She sits down, rests her head against the cool white paint. She listens and smiles.

He's taken a break from cleaning out the closet and looks out the front window. The normal lazy activity. He watches a woman walk out of her house just to turn and go back in. She's not hurried, or maybe she's just trying not to look hurried. She gets all the way down to her car and then goes back.

He smirks. People walk, drive, bicycle by. That woman is looking for her dog again. Brutus. He shakes his head.

The closet is waiting for him; the job needs to be finished. All of her clothes need to be boxed up and put away. He's not exactly sure why it has to be done, but he's unwilling to say that it's a purely symbolic gesture. It has to be done, and he'll figure out some reason why it's necessary. He usually does.

Obviously the clothes do no good hanging in the closet. He imagines the closet, the house, without her stuff, without her makeup and toothbrush and shoes and clothes. The things he can't use. The closet would seem empty without her dresses, the bathroom spare without her towels alongside his.

The necessity in this may be hard to pin down. Certainly he does not want to look at her clothes every morning when he goes to get dressed for work. It would be better that they were gone, but not essential.

If it were good for someone else, perhaps he could justify it. He doesn't want it to be selfish, he doesn't want to do anything purely because it would be better for him or would make him feel better. So it must either be necessary or for someone else's good.

Finally he decides this: There are people out there who need clothing; it isn't doing any good hanging here. They need it. He doesn't. He'll give it all away. That's what she would've wanted him to do.

He nods his head. Good. He goes back to the closet and the boxes, and as he does he allows himself this: If I give them away, I won't have to look at them every day, but there's still a chance I might see someone, somewhere, wearing one of her outfits. And wouldn't that be nice, every once in a while?

He's trying to ride a bike. He hasn't ridden a bike in about twenty years, not since he was in college and pedaled onto campus every day. He's reminding himself of that saying about how once you learn how to do certain things, like riding a bike for instance, you don't forget how, you just temporarily misplace the set of muscle commands and the sense of balance necessary to perform the activity. Once you get going it all comes back to you.

Of course, it doesn't help that he's drunk. He's been drinking since around one or two, so even with his ridiculously high tolerance he's still pretty gone. He's stumbling. He's tripping. He's swearing with abandon and jocularly. The bicycle almost gets away from him and rolls down the hill passengerless, but he catches it just in time and starts the whole process of getting on the bike over again.

A car goes by. Too fast, everybody drives too fast, he says, and stumbles a little ways back against the house. He leans back against the bricks and rests. He lets go of the bike and it falls over, smacking and hopping a little when it hits the ground.

He sighs and looks at the sky and the sun setting over the buildings at the bottom of the hill. He shakes his head to clear it.

He picks up the bike again, lifting it by the handlebars, grunting, Okay. Here we go. He swings a leg over the seat and stands straddling the bike. Putting a foot to one of the pedals he pushes himself up and back onto the seat. The bike moves forward. He puts his other foot to the other pedal and starts pushing, starts pedaling his way down the street, downhill.

Too fast, he says again. He can't remember how to slow down, or even how to turn, but he's keeping his balance, he's biking down the hill, secure in the fact that once he's gotten this far, the rest will come back to him.

She's out the door, and then she has to go back. She's forgotten something else, her purse this time. Last time it was her keys, of all things. She keeps saying things like "Sometimes..." and "At this rate..." and never finishing her thought. "This does not bode well" is the only full sentence she gets out, and she says it as she crosses the threshold for the third time.

She stops before going across the porch, down the steps, before she gets in her car and drives to the restaurant, before she has dinner with him, before anything else that might happen tonight.

She stops and takes a breath. Her mother used to do that if she got overwhelmed. Stopped and took a breath. She smoothes her skirt, runs a hand through her hair. She checks her teeth with her tongue.

She forgot to lock the door. She locks the door. "Okay," she says.

She has, she's certain, everything she will need. Keys, money, purse, and so on. But it might get cold. And she might not be wearing the right shoes, especially if they walk anywhere at all. Which they might. He lives near the restaurant, he's walking there, and he might invite her back to his apartment and she might accept. So maybe these are the wrong shoes. And she should probably definitely get a sweater. Are the windows closed? Did she turn the faucet off?

"This does not bode well," she repeats.

She should call and cancel, claim some kind of disaster, familial if possible, if it's simple enough that she can remember it if it ever came up again. Or some other obligation. Simple, plausible.

No, that's stupid. There's no reason not to go. Her forgetting of things is not a deep-seated fear of this new relationship; it has nothing to do with her subconscious telling her something that her conscious isn't willing to listen to. She's just forgetful. That's all it is. Nothing to worry about. Get the sweater, change the shoes, and check the house. Breathe.

They're going for a walk around the neighborhood, something they do every night at exactly the same time, an hour before sunset. They pass a woman in the street, walking this way and that, shouting a name: Brutus.

"Lost your dog?" he says to the woman. "Good luck," he says. Under his breath he mutters, "You'll need it."

His wife squeezes his arm. Then she mutters his whole name in disapproval.

"I hate dogs," he says.

"I know," she says.

They walk on in silence, past a house where inside they see a man washing dishes and scratching his head and getting dish soap in his hair, past a guy in a cherry picker cutting down branches that hang out over the power lines, then up the hill and past a child playing in a sandbox. They see a woman in a bathrobe looking at the sky. They cross the road.

"Did we mail the phone bill?" she asks.

"Did you?"

"No."

"Then you're asking if I mailed the phone bill?" He smiles.

She squeezes his arm again.

"Yes," he says, "I did. I wrote the check and I mailed it. I also bought ice cream and took out the trash. Any other questions?"

"Do you still love me?"

"What a question. Of course. I just don't find you as sexy as I used to. You're sagging a little in your old age."

She laughs, and looks at him, and raises an eyebrow. "You're talking about sagging?" She looks at his crotch.

This is a game they play, every night. The questions are always the same, the responses too, even the jokes. But it's not the kind of thing that either of them minds. He's said before that he wonders what's so wrong with routine. He's had enough chaos for three men, he's said, and she's agreed.

"Brutus! Brutus!"

She's looking for her dog. A small, black dog. Brutus. She can't remember what sort of dog Brutus is because she can't remember how to pronounce it. She'd know the name if she saw it written down. Her sister had told her what Brutus was when the arrangements were made that transferred him from her sister's possession to hers, the sister living in an apartment building whose landlord came to her and said that it was either her or that dog of hers that would never shut up. Her choice.

So Brutus moved across town. And he still never shuts up, except that now, when he yips and yips, he's let out into the unfenced yard, without a leash, and he invariably runs off somewhere when she turns her back. So she has to go calling around the neighborhood, leash in hand, find him, and then bring him back home. At which point the whole thing starts over.

Down the street, around the block, and then back to the house. Go in the opposite direction: up the street, and then around that block and back.

The whole time she's calling his name and offering him a ride in the car, dog treats, his toys, people food, a game of fetch.

"Brutus! Brutus!"

She's beginning to think that her sister has set her up, that there's something more wrong with Brutus than needing attention, and that her sister has pawned this dog off on her for bigger reasons. She goes over it in her head:

"Why do you want to give me this dog?"

"He needs to have someone around more often than I am. He gets lonely and he barks."

Which is not the case. The damn thing barks all the time, whether she's around or not. And runs away like this. Partially my fault, she thinks. But only partially. Still, he's cute. And I promised. It's not that bad.

"Brutus! Brutus!"