

## Taxonomy

By Julie Steinbacher

The girl kept making noises like a frustrated kitten and when the kiss broke she blurted, “But I thought that was a French name. You don’t even look French...”

Vero sat back and stared at her. Then she pulled a dressing gown from off a chair by the bedside and began to shrug into it. “I need a cigarette,” she muttered, pulling her thighs away from the girl’s skin and getting to her feet.

Usually there was a reaction when this kind of thing happened. The groupie in bed would burst into tears, beg for her to come back, threaten suicide. Some even got violent; she’d had a knife pulled on her after a concert in Tulsa, once. That was where her bodyguard, Benny, came in. Still, half the time he got paid to stand outside and listen to the sounds of her fans moaning beneath her.

Vero reached the door and twisted the handle, but it didn’t turn. Typical. These shitty motels were really the only places to stop on her tours through the Midwest, unless she wanted to stay on the bus.

“What’s wrong?” the words sounded teasing, coming from the girl on the bed. Vero glanced back at her, noting a feline smirk on her lips. She shuddered suddenly but tried to hide it, rattling the doorknob a few more times. It was disconcerting to be watched in this setting, and she began to wonder what kind of psycho she’d picked this time around.

“Benny!” she called through the door, knocking on it just in case he’d dozed off. “I think the door’s stuck...” She crossed her arms. He couldn’t have picked a better time to take a piss.

“I really don’t think Benny’s going to get the door for you,” the girl sat up and crossed her legs, resting her hands on her thighs as if to emphasize the dark triangle where they met. Vero didn’t find the display arousing; instead her left palm was beginning to tingle the way it did when she got anxious. She decided to buy herself some time.

“So then it’s just the two of us.” She went into the husky voice she used for songs like Come, love and Burnt. Even though she was steadily passing middle age, when she chose to ignore her flaws she was charming in a way that made most lovers instantly malleable. Men and women overlooked the lines on her forehead and the yellowing fingertips that hinted at her long nicotine habit. And girls like this one practically knelt at her feet.

“I wanted it this way for a long time,” the girl purred. Her name was evading Vero, which usually wasn’t a problem. She’d often come up with something and start repeating it while she made love; it didn’t matter who her partner was in the end.

“So, Vero,” the words slid off her tongue like vanilla and she laughed a little at the rhyme. “Are you going to come fuck me or are you just going to stand there?”

Instead of joining her on the bed, Vero slid into the chair, letting go of her dressing gown so that it hung loosely open around her shoulders. In that movement she had glanced around the room and noted that all of the shades were drawn. It was a simple, second-story room. There was a small TV on a dresser, a bed, a nightstand with an alarm clock, a phone and a lamp, and a bathroom. There was nowhere for her to go and no way out of the room; her only option was to wait until someone noticed that something was wrong.

“Maybe I want to see you touch yourself first,” Vero responded, suggestively sliding one of her thighs to the side.

“Am I too pretty for you?” she pursed her lips – Nyssa, that was her name. “Too innocent? Or not innocent enough?” She smirked and moved closer on the bed.

“Look honey, if you want someone to –”

“I’m not finished!” she kept her eyes on Vero while leaning to the side of the bed and reaching her hand into the pile of clothing she had left there. From it she produced a small black handgun.

“Nyssa—” despite all the control she had over her voice the name came out with a harsh squeal to the first syllable.

“Don’t call me that,” Nyssa lifted the gun to Vero’s face, steadying it on her forehead. “It’s not really my name anyway,” their eyes met for a second and then Nyssa jerked her arm to one side, swinging the gun into Vero’s temple.

Vero came to slowly, painfully. After a panicked second she realized that she couldn’t move because her ankles and wrists were bound to the chair she sat in. The panic settled into a lump in her stomach.

She tried to open her eyes, but a bright light was aimed at her face. It almost reminded her of a stage light. The idea was that you weren’t supposed to see the audience, just to hear them cheering you on. She heard footsteps on a hard surface.

“You’re finally awake.” The words came from somewhere beyond the light, but they seemed to echo throughout the space around her. Raising her head, she forced herself to stare beyond the light, but she couldn’t make out anything in the dark. The tips of her toes on the floor met chilly tile or concrete. It seemed like she was in a closed space, but it could have been a warehouse filled with boxes or somewhere else just as remote and anonymous. She grew cold and noticed that she was still wearing the dressing gown. A patch of blood made a stain where the fabric rested over her left knee.

“How’s it feel to be alive?” Nyssa mocked. She came to stand at Vero’s left, close enough that her face was visible in the light. Where before she had looked soft and inviting now her eyes gleamed intently and her cheeks seemed to rise fiercely out of the dark. When Vero didn’t respond after a moment she extended a finger and traced a circle around the spot on her temple that throbbed.

“You’re so fragile,” she breathed as Vero winced. “No wonder you’ve hidden yourself away from the world.”

When she didn’t get a response she placed her thumb on the broken spot and pressed down. Caught off guard, Vero gasped before gritting her teeth and groaning.

“You’re not saving yourself with your silence,” Nyssa pulled away. “No, I want you to answer some questions,” her voice and her footsteps changed so that Vero could tell she was pacing. She stopped suddenly. “And you’d better not sit there with your mouth closed.” The gun barrel flashed through the dark for a second.

“What do you want?” Vero growled finally, wondering if she looked fierce or just frightened.

“Ah Veronique – what a lovely name, Veronique Ambrose; I wonder... Is that even your real name?” she stood just outside the periphery of the light so that her face was obscured.

“It’s just Vero; I told you that earlier.” She stretched her fingers behind her back as they were beginning to go numb.

“Never mind, I’ll get to the bottom of that later.” Suddenly Nyssa shoved the gun under Vero’s chin so that the cold metal was wedged against her jugular. “Why’d you pick me?” she hissed. “What made you decide that you wanted me tonight?” The cold metal burned in a similar fashion to the light, which was making sweat bead on her forehead.

“I don’t know,” Vero rasped. She tried to think of a reason that would be more satisfying than “you were hot.”

“Did you see anything special or just another girl to fuck?” she spoke so vehemently that Vero felt spit on the side of her face. “Just another repressed chick from out in the middle of bumfuck who would always treasure the night she got to be with her hero?”

“I just saw what you showed me, Nyssa.”

The girl began to chuckle somewhat hysterically and Vero remembered that she’d said that wasn’t her name.

“I can’t believe I ever wanted you. You’re not even interesting,” she paused for a moment, finally lowering the gun so that Vero could breathe comfortably again. “It’s like you just do the same thing over and over. You sing in front of thousands of people who scream your

name, you pick one of them like she's something special and then you use her and you're done until the next show." There was a sound like a chair being dragged across the floor and then Nyssa's voice sounded at the same level as Vero's head.

"I wish I'd realized before that everything you do is a lie. You write songs like you're making a connection with people, but really you just want to stand over everyone and pull strings. Like you're holding a gun to our heads."

There was a click in the dark that seemed to resonate throughout the room. Vero stared in that direction wide-eyed, just beginning to be able to see more of her surroundings. The circular ring of metal at the tip of the gun gleamed at her and she squeezed her eyes shut. Tears formed under her eyelids but she made no noises.

"You're pathetic, Veronique."

"Vero," she whispered weakly.

"Whatever."

There was hardly a pause and then a gunshot rang through the room. Glass shattered. The lamp set on Vero's face toppled over, scalding her knee as it fell and then crashing on the floor, where the bulb broke. The pieces of glass hissed audibly as they skittered across the tile.

Vero could hear voices, and then pounding on a door. The air in the room was heavy and close, Nyssa's body somewhere by her feet. Unconsciously she lifted her toes from off the bathroom tile. When she opened her eyes tears streamed freely down her cheeks. Without the light on her face she cast about in the dark for an answer, but the shadows only yielded silence.