

## Friends

There is nothing on this earth more to be prized than true friendship

-Thomas Aquinas

Have you not seen the dead? This question, which had often been spoken by Charles Vanders, I now found myself silently mouthing at the funeral of Charles Vanders himself. Milling about the small crowd that had gathered inside Bedwicks Funeral Parlor for the send-off of our mutual friend, I caught snatches of conversation from the other guests.

“I’m sure Mr. Vanders would be pleased with the turnout,” volunteered a tiny woman wrapped in an extravagant fur coat to a small circle of attendees.

I did not know this woman’s identity nor did I recognize her from any of the impromptu gatherings that myself and the deceased had often found ourselves a party too. These irregular meetings took place at Quentin’s one and only bookshop—a used one at that. The proprietor, a stout sort who we knew only by the name ‘Felix,’ grudgingly put up with our loitering about.

“Every town needs a place for its artists,” he would say with more than a bit of sarcasm in his voice.

After her admittedly questionable comment on crowd size the tiny woman’s circle broke down, dissolving into smaller subgroups. I found myself in the proximity of Ms Vogel, a watercolorist who also congregated at the used book store.

“The light is not good in here,” Ms Vogel put forth while sweeping the room with her left arm, “I cannot possibly hope to capture the essence of what is transpiring.”

“And just what essence might that be?” inquired Chan Dryer, another of the so-called bookshop artists.

“I should like to preserve the moment—the memory if you will—of our farewell to our friend.”

Ms Vogel let this utterance hang in the air, hoping that the solemnness of her delivery would be taken for real solemnity.

“No doubt it would make a splendid addition to your portfolio of the town’s notable figures,” Dryer added with a hint of Felix’s sarcasm.

“Yes, no doubt. A splendid exhibit it would be. Enough local interest for the yokels with enough small-town eccentricity to attract a wider audience.”

Just how notable a figure was Charles Vanders? I thought to myself. Surely outside of the town he wasn’t notable at all. What would he possibly have been known for? To my knowledge he never set foot outside the town of Quentin. Amongst the general population there was certainly a bit of legendry regarding the reclusive Vanders. This legendry, however, was usually associated with less glowing appellations. A few weeks back I recalled an exchange between two gentlemen inside Parker’s General Store.

“Vanders. That wastrel is up to no good. I don’t know what, but it is no good,” related one of the men, presumably a customer.

“Buys the most nonsensical things,” added the worker.

“Vanders,” the first said, again, shaking his head.

While replaying this exchange in my mind I instinctively looked at the open casket. Vanders lay in repose. How steady his features were now versus the preternaturally fluctuating expressions he possessed during our last encounter.

Even before *that* occasion Vanders had already become notorious among the townspeople. Living in a run-down ranch style house at the edge of town, he might, if not for his steady residence, been taken for another of Quentin's large vagrant population. Shabbily clad and unrefined in the ways of conventional social interaction, Vanders' mannerisms took on an otherworldly quality. Prone to odd hour rambles up and down the city streets he could not be induced to converse on any of the usual time-worn subjects. 'Nice weather, eh, Vanders,' someone would remark, to which he would reply 'atmosphere is an imaginative by-product, reality is insane.' Such pronouncements did not endear him to the many salt of the earth types who inhabited Quentin. But to us, *the artists*, this was just the kind of thing we wanted to hear. We even took his unkempt appearance not as a sign of uncouth slovenliness, but as a kind of living artistic statement. Injured years ago in a work-related accident, Vanders had been receiving a meager disability allowance (and settlement) that allowed him to pursue what we thought of as the art life par excellence. But what type of art was his life about? None of us at the bookshop ever saw an actual artifact—a painting, poem, or story—that would qualify him as an artist, yet we embraced him as one of our artistic own. Some, such as Ms Vogel, did grow weary of Vanders.

“At least make something. I have my watercolors, of which the latest prints are selling exceedingly well.”

“You mean that magnet of aesthetic appreciation, the train depot turned community center?” someone smirked.

“Don’t be such an elitist,” countered Ms Vogel, “plenty of watercolorists have mined local architecture as a means to render the zeitgeist that comprises our modern world.”

“What zeitgeist does bingo night at the train depot comprise?”

“All I mean is that Vanders shouldn’t overdue the schtick.”

So, despite not actually producing any actual artwork Vanders was welcomed among our bookshop group, notwithstanding Ms Vogel. His strange ways elevating him to that most treasured of artistic aspirations: a true spokesperson of the eccentric. Now however, lying inside Bedwicks, he spoke of nothing. I studied his face. Death had done its due diligence, reducing Vanders—to outward appearances—to just another average specimen. Examining his features more closely I recalled our last meeting.

By chance we came upon one another during the Quentin Potato Festival—that annual extravaganza celebrating the town’s ancient connection to that unpretentious, yet versatile, vegetable. Away from the festival crowd, we had each slunk off to the city park, both finding refuge in the large gazebo situated on the public grounds. From my vantage point I could see several of Quentin’s drifter denizens lolling about. *Have you not seen the dead?* someone might have said, though I couldn’t be sure. In the spirit of civic pride I had purchased a medium Bacon, Sour Cream & Potato Shake which I slurped noisily from.

“Beware of real friends, for they are false friends,” he said cryptically before taking a quick sip from my shake and running off.

Later that evening, well into the night, I received a call, my phone ringing upwards of ten times before I could rally my sleepy consciousness to answer.

“I have something to reveal,” a voice said without preamble.

“Moss? Is that you?” I groggily replied.

“No!” the voice bellowed. “Moss is moss! I have something to reveal...it’s Charles...Charles Vanders. Come see me...tomorrow...I will have potato sandwiches.”

Happening to have the next day off work (and nothing better to do) I went to Vanders’ rundown home. I knocked several times before Vanders opened the door and ushered me in. The room I found myself in was spartanly furnished: just a couple of folding chairs. We both sat.

“The Clauster funeral,” he whispered.

I leaned closer. The chairs were set rather far apart. Much too far for a conversation where one of the participants was intent on speaking in such a wispy manner. Tilting forward from my folding chair I called to mind that Clauster had recently died of what was termed a “low level cardiac event.” I did not really know the man so I felt no obligation to attend his funeral.

“It was revealed,” Vanders whispered. “Clauster, because of the business he was in—sewing for the uninitiated—knew a great many people and was also quite well liked. I wasn’t one of these sewers, nor was I really even an acquaintance, but for purposes of research I had for some time been attending various funerals. And since Clauster, it had been said, often spoke of a wish to ‘leave it all on the playing field’ when it came to sewing and life in general, he seemed an ideal candidate for study to see if he could put that wish into practice.”

Vanders related how he had become preoccupied with the “problem of the departed” as he put it. This problem, as he saw it, consisted in the powerlessness of the departed to stay departed, to leave the living alone, literally and figuratively. Instead, the problem (as we all, not just Vanders, obscurely felt) was the returning: the inability of the dead *to stay in the ground*. It wasn’t that the deceased were wholly resurrected or even reincarnated, that we could stomach. But that their material, *their stuff*, was in some secondhand manner *recycled*. Had we not seen shuffling human forms that in our ignorance, or more accurately, willful ignorance, took to be just a part of the town’s growing homeless population? We had all been in the presence of one of these disheveled characters long enough to gain an awareness of something uncannily familiar about them. Was there not something *like* Mr Pilker—who recently died in an on-shore boating accident—in the features—and even behind the rheumy eyes—of that strange creature loping down Main Street?

“Clauster’s funeral was the revealing stage of my studies,” Vanders continued. It had been an open casket affair, but as a final post-mortem farewell Clauster had expressed a wish to have the coffin lid closed midway through the ceremony. Obliging this wish, the funeral director paused halfway through the funereal rites, allowing Clauster’s closest sewing friends to approach their departed leader. Placing their hands on the coffin they were to collectively say *goodbye my friend* and lower the lid. This much was accomplished. At that moment, as Vanders told it, the light began to steadily increase in illumination. As the room brightened the air took on a yellow-greenish hue, dying the atmosphere in a sour effulgence. “Soon I and the other funeral goers had to shield our eyes from the light’s intensity,” said Vanders. Squinting through the acrid haze we gradually became aware of another group of attendees silently making their way through the

parlor. They were of the shambling vagrant variety. Because of the funerals he had been attending Vanders, as he noted, was able to positively identify those in this new group: one and all they were the recently deceased citizens of Quentin.

“We are his real friends,” a member of the group announced, “we wish to see him.”

Parting the sewers, these real friends drew close upon the casket. The light had now reached an unbearable severity. “I could just make out that this new group had lifted the lid of Clauster’s coffin back up before having to fully close my eyes for fear of being blinded. At what turned out to be peak illumination—for the light still penetrated through the flimsy protection of my eyelids—the room suddenly returned to normal luminescence. The group of real friends, whose number had increased by one, broke their circle and shambled out the door. The casket was empty.”

“So you see,” Vanders related, “what these so-called real friends had done. They, or whoever they served, could not be without *their* friend. What they, or whatever animated them, had needed was to continue their association, to keep the relationship going, to cycle again. Clauster, in his simple way, thought he could be left in peace, but he had underestimated (or was just grossly ignorant) of the powers that opposed him. Yet, I do think Clauster was onto something, he just needed a more potent formula. Since the funeral I have seen his form moping about outside the hardware store. Have you not seen the dead?”

At that time I didn’t have a good way to answer *that* question, so I got up and left. Walking home I thought about the story Vanders had just told and the implications of what he

sought. Had he sensed within me a sympathetic fear of a dreary return? *Have I not seen the dead?* I silently asked myself.

“What the hell do you think he was doing in his house all that time?” I suddenly heard someone say, unsure of who exactly they were talking about.

I of course knew what he had been doing in his house all that time; I had known of Vanders’ plan before he enacted it. As the funeral proper began, we all took our seats in the rickety fold out chairs that had been provided for the ceremony.

“The deceased, Charles Vanders, has something he wishes...well, would have wished...wishes...hell, this is what Vanders left to be read,” announced the funeral director, waving a piece of paper from behind a small lectern where he stood. “This is what it says: ‘I thank you all for coming to this event. I won’t bore you with particulars but will ask for your indulgence in a wish. I didn’t consider any of you to be my friends, well, not real friends. At other gatherings, such as the bookshop, friends had certainly been present. But, like at certain funerals I attended, something more was needed. *Real friends* were needed to affect what we really wanted when our hour had come. Unfortunately, those who made claims to be real friends were anything but; in loyalty to something else they betrayed the dead. What was needed, then, was another group of friends, a group beyond what we have ever known: *eternally real friends*. Those eternally real friends should be arriving shortly. To them I will be asking—with the help of the esteemed funeral director—a special dispensation. I will ask for them to let me go, to bring the curtain (or coffin lid) down for good. So, when I say I don’t consider you my friends you will understand that it is not in your power to do what I ask. Mr. Funeral Director, proceed with the incantation.’ After reading this the director pursed his eyes a little. “This seems to be in some



extremely foreign language,” he muttered. After scanning the document and silently mouthing the words he finally recited the passage. It was indeed a very foreign language.

“How Vanders of Vanders,” the watercolorist sighed, “insulting us with that not his friends business.”

After the incantation or whatever it was, was spoken, the director seated himself on one of the folding chairs. The lights flickered briefly and I saw the director give a slight smile. A lemony light began to overlay the room; the atmosphere growing in illumination as the parlor doors creaked open. Shambling in came the derelict deceased of Quentin—one of which I recognized as Clauster. As they advanced toward Vanders’ open casket their bodies began to quiver jelly-like. In place of the recognizable, though scruffy, features of the town’s citizens a dissolution was taking place. Faces shifted and undulated, then gave way, sloughing off in fleshy sheets. Under those discarded masks was a pulpy, swirling blackness., and in that syrupy blackness I could see the Clauster-thing reshaping itself into something more akin to insect than human. Large antennae shot upwards from the recombining head while beetle-like mandibles elongated from the disintegrating chin. Grotesquely, these transformations were not limited to the heads alone: bodies sprouted new limbs...four, five, eight. Torsos segmented while *scuttling* took over for walking. One of these beings (was it the late Mr Hoop?) fell to the ground and advanced sidewise, emitting a nauseous chittering sound as it scurried by.

We, the not friends of Vanders, stared in frozen horror as the *eternally real friends* made their way to the coffin. Besides the ghastly reshapings taking place, another element different from the funeral’s Vanders had experienced transpired: light had stopped growing in intensity and began to reverse, to darken. Encircling the body of Vanders, the eternally real friends placed

whatever new appendage that could pass as an arm on the lid of the coffin, holding it open. *Vanders has miscalculated* I thought as the room turned more shadowy. *These eternally real friends were loyal to another, more savage director.* A director who mouthed the words that brought down (or held up) this gross parody of deliverance. Strange noises began to rise from the group. Using whatever methods of vocalization these creatures possessed, something like the extremely foreign language the funeral director had used could still be made out amidst the babbling, hissing, and clicking.

Then the room went totally black.

What effect stark terror will have on folks can never be predicted, but in this instance we—the attendees of Vanders funeral—launched into a frenzied flight of panic out of that black room. Undercover of that darkness any semblance of civility or goodwill towards our fellow townsfolk was abandoned; pushing and shoving—maybe even a little trampling underfoot—were the tamer actions on display during that mad exodus. I myself even grabbed—it might have been the watercolorist—and threw them behind me in order to shield myself from any possible pursuit by the entities inside.

Once outside, and well away from Bedwicks, we resumed a more concerned attitude towards each other. ‘Are you alright’ ‘I tried to help you out’ ‘I’m glad you made it’ and other such phrases were uttered as we moved down Oak Street, the sun beating down on us.

After the events of Vanders’ funeral the spotting of recently deceased citizens among the vagrant population took on a more sinister aspect. Vanders, though he was ultimately mistaken, had called down some greater force upon himself and on our town, some ancient director capable

of new and terrible methods of recycling. *Have you not seen the dead?* Yes, I have. The eternally real friends gave proof to the answer.

When from a café window I observed a squirming reptilian thing making its way down Main Street I could see that in its two elongated limbs it was holding some article high aloft. Brandishing this object like an offering high above its head, the creature writhed silently by. Was that not the peeled face of Vanders I saw in that offering? More terrible still than those recognizable features was the ghastly intimation present in the eyes. Was that a residue of *his* consciousness peering from behind those unblinking orbs, a forlorn knowledge that he had been duped and could now only gaze upwards out of eternally unblinking eyes? Or was *that* Vanders I saw in the one yellow eye of the squirming thing? Dimly conscious from some remote part of its reptile brain that it had been duped into an eternal nightmare?

When my time came, where and what would I be?