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Translation by Ranjit Bolt

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Vern's life, trials and transitions



By Charles Lieurance
Diversions Contributor

Vern's dad and mom, and my dad and mom, swung. The swinger spot in Lincoln in 1970 was The Congress Inn, at least it was until Vern's dad, Vern Sr. got fined \$200,000 dollars and served two years in jail for running a triple X porno movie/prostitution ring out of some of the rooms.

Vern Sr. wasn't the only one. Apparently all the town fathers from mayor to weed inspector were in on it. Not to mention the Iowa mafia, which both Vern and Vern Sr. talked about all the time. The Iowa mafia runs this, the Iowa mafia runs that.

But Vern Sr., Vern Jaeckel Sr., was low man, a minor elected official whose major function was to book the movies and hire the whores. He took the rap, and in turn was paid handsomely by all the others involved.

After prison, Vern and his wife settled into a rust shag carpeted, space-age furnished tract house around 50th Street and Highway 2. They still swung, or so they said. But the two years had not been kind to either of them. Vern Sr. had always been small and jittery. Now, he was virtually hunchbacked and his nervous tics made him unphotographable.

Mrs. Jaeckel had pain. It was all she talked about, pain. At the moment Mr. Jaeckel's political career collapsed, so did Mrs. Jaeckel's body. It became impossible to distinguish her actual ailments from her clever and plausible hypochondria.

No one wanted to split hairs with her. Her kidney and gallstones bobbed like jaundiced goldfish in mason jars on the kitchen window sill. And she cried constantly. On football Saturdays we'd still go to their house and pretend nothing had changed. Mrs. Jaeckel would sit in the corner, lean her head against the wood paneling and cry quietly. My mother kept an arm

around her shoulders and cheered the team.

By half time Mrs. Jaeckel would fall asleep, her sunshine-girl, Dottie West hair-do limp and dangling, her face distended and her mouth a silent, pink lipstick "O." Vern Sr. would walk over to her every commercial, lean down and check her breathing. Then lean down further to check the breathing of the leopards poodle that was attached to her lap.

These days were sad. We'd watch our parents play dirty party games and wink at each other like perverts paralyzed from the waist down. Vern Sr. would "heh-heh-heh" and his wife would doze off. Vern Jr. and I escaped to watch Creature Feature with Dr. Sanguinary—Vern told me Igor was in the Iowa mafia—a Mexican horror movie where a gorilla pulls the heart out of a young girl and eats it.

Vern Leon Jaeckel, Jr. wanted to be a psychopath. He informed me he wanted to kill some people the first time he baby-sat me.

On weekends before the Jaeckel's fall from grace, our parents would go out to the Congress Inn to swing. Because Vern Jr. was huge and wall-eyed and had barbells like a catfish at the age of 11, my parents just assumed he was older than I was. So he became my baby sitter. As a matter of fact, we were the same age.

Vern Jr. said he had a name like a killer. Vern Leon Jaeckel Jr. You've got to have three names, unless you're Starkweather, he said.

"I hate this town," Vern Jr. said. I think he was echoing his father. "And the damn Iowa mafia. I hate this town for Sundays. It's Sunday, y'know? Like everyone's dead. No one's acting right. Everybody's acting like somebody else. It's like 'Invasion of the Bodysnatchers.'" Vern Jr. twisted his barbells. You couldn't tell where the skin ended and the hair began.

I looked up from Sunday dinner last Sunday. The roast. Hooked out the window. Some kind of hall of mirrors or a fun house. In every window there was a dad cutting a roast, as far as I could see. Dad after dad after dad. We were all eating together. Some had bigger knives, or electric ones. I thought, I know where all these people keep their trash. The Wilsons, the Ricklesbys, the Coolidges, they're Methodists. They keep their trash under the sink. The Flannerys, the Raenls, the Fausts; they're Catholic and they keep their garbage cans in the open. I just wanted to kill them all for acting that way."

“These days were sad. We'd watch our parents' dirty party games and wink at each other like perverts paralyzed from the waist down.”

It got worse. During the big Oklahoma game of 1972, Vern's mom passed on, she and her poodle simultaneously. It was somewhere between the third quarter and a Chevy ad. Three weeks later my dad took us to the Starview Drive-in for "Green Blood Night." There were four movies and we all got little packets of glowing green blood. It was edible.

Vern Jr. and I always watched movies from the swingset up front, staring up at the huge, distorted images. The movie was "The Torture Chamber of Dr. Sadism." A scene where a carriage clatters up the winding road to the old castle, the bare, gnarled trees along the way are hung with severed limbs. Bluish arms and legs and torsos impaled on tree branches. Vern's lips are parted dumbly, glowing green. A halo of box elder bugs whorls around his head. Vern said, "I'm gonna kill 'em all, hang them on the trees along Sheridan Boulevard, just like Charlie."

On his 14th birthday, Vern junior caught a frog, painted Iowa on its back, stuck an M-80 in its mouth and sewed its mouth shut around the fuse with his mom's sewing kit. He sat the frog on a stump in an empty lot where a mall is now.

I watched, sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. I wasn't thinking anything. Just like Carl Fugate. Vern lit the fuse. The frog's eyes were dull. It blinked and blew up. Vern danced and slapped his thighs.

"If you open that car door. If you just walk over to that car door and open it, I'll hot wire the car and we'll be gone. I won't do it unless you start things," Vern told me. We stood on the sidewalk, the frog guts black on the stump, staring at a long blue car with lime. "It's the perfect car. All you have to do is do it. I'll do everything else."

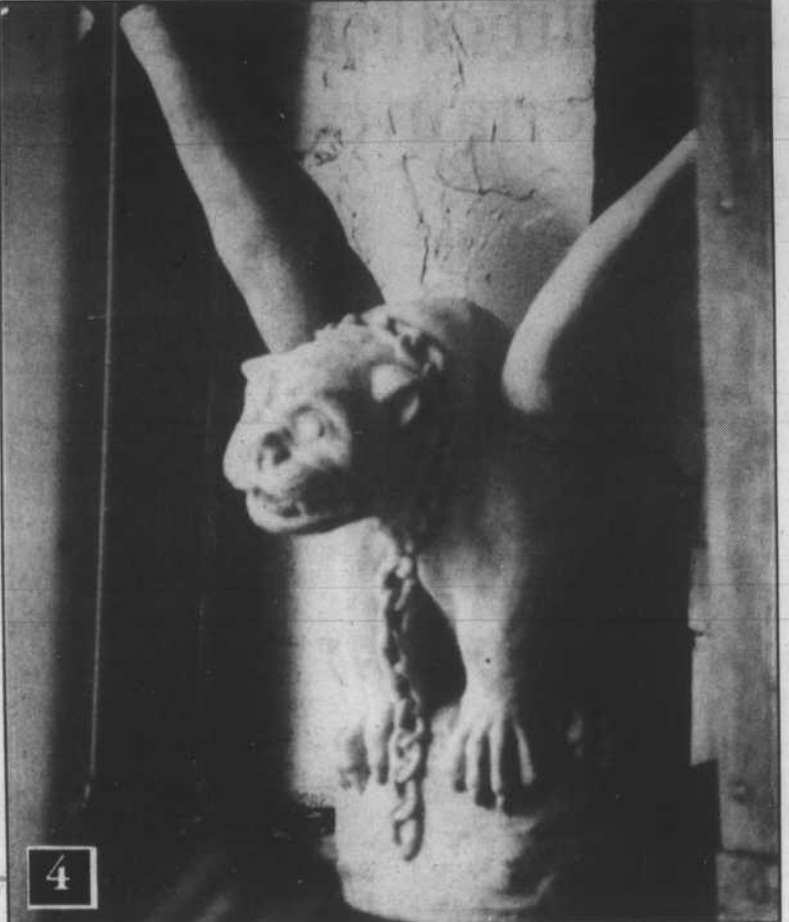
I didn't want to kill anyone, but I also didn't want to keep Vern from doing something memorable.

"You wouldn't, if I did, would you?" I asked.

"We'll get my dad's belly gun, or a rifle. You like the rifle. We shot that quail. You like that rifle?"

I did like to fire the rifle, warmth suddenly in the stock and the barrel on those versified winter afternoons and the quail feathers flying like shards of glass from a root-beer bottle.

Sixteen-year-old Vern Jaeckel had a ritual. He'd buy peach wine and go out and drink it on Starkweather's grave, Plot 36. Martin Sheen bought the killer a grave-stone after Badlands, where Sheen played Starkweather and Sissy Spacek played Fugate. Vern Jr. sat on the grave, drank the wine and read back issues of "Famous Monsters of Film Land."



"White wine's for fish. Red wine's for beef and Catholics. Peach wine is for Starkweather."

I was already putting some distance between he and I, but I think I thought about leaving town as much as he did. I even thought about killing people. But I couldn't open that car door. That's how it was. He called me and told me to meet him at an address on O Street. I don't remember where—20th Street or so. He was standing out there between a muffler shop for foreign cars and a carpet store.

"C'mon," Vern took me by the arm, took me through a screen door, up some stairs into hell. There were black families all living in chicken wire cages, the wire buoyed up by frail green wood. They were in the middle of supper, the smell of pork and spinach. There were five such cells. Vern and I stood in the hallway staring. Vern had the green blood look on his face. He shook his head.

"Look at this. It's a different kind of Sunday."

Men were getting up from the table. As they opened the wire doors to come out, their cages rattled.

"What do you boys want?"

"I just wanted to see you. I wanted my friend to see you," Vern said unapologetically.

"Get your doughy butts on outta here. We're eating."

Vern and I left. As we drove in his car I actually felt the presence of something in the backseat. It was Vern's father's rifle. Because I felt its presence, I considered that maybe it was Vern's destiny to go on a killing spree. He'd gotten bigger and uglier. None of his clothes fit. He had no friends but me. I never saw him read anything but monster and car magazines. I thought, whatever Vern does, I'll go with him for old time's sake. Whatever.

We drove to Wynka Cemetery and couldn't find Starkweather's grave. One of the grave diggers told us they'd taken the tombstone off because too many people were visiting. People would be trying to

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