

# THE V.E.U.

VOL. 2



The Vermont  
Extended Universe

CHRIS RODGERS



## From the Field

I am Abigail George, agent for The Vermont Extended Universe - The V.E.U. Sometimes, things leak from the other Vermont (VT-B). We call it the Extended Universe, and my job is to investigate and, when possible, send it back. I document it here.

Since diverging in the 1870s, VT-B has abandoned much of what makes Vermont unique: community trust, environmental stewardship, not to mention privacy and freedom in favor of efficiency and control.

Each episode reveals what happens when the Vermonts collide. I'm driven by more than professional duty. I'm motivated to find my sister, Betty, who is lost between the worlds.

As these worlds collide, I race to find her and stop the boundaries from dissolving completely.

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## Inferior Mirages 4.1.25

It's Abigail, and I'm overwhelmed. What's happening over there? I mean, how do you let a 450-foot statue leak through? Am I going to get some help because people are noticing, like Mr. Benson, whose article I'm sharing? Get it together!

The Middlebury Monitor

Opinion Section

February 8, 2025



## What is an Inferior Mirage?

By Steven Benson

Take a look out your window. Another Vermont looms. Vermont without the green. Vermont covered in concrete highways.

A shimmering road on a hot day is an inferior mirage. Something that fools your eyes. Like an inferior mirage, I'm witnessing something disturbing. At a red light on Main Street. I saw billboards. They've been banned here for over 50 years. I saw one declaring, "TRUST IBM with your life."

When I stare, I see blighted Middlebury buildings. dwarfed by high rises and a treeless Snake Mountain. I'm not alone.

Everyone I ask sees, but few discuss. Why? Doubt? Fear?

My senior center group, "Observe Vermont," speaks up. Our only proof is that we all see the same frightening things.

We don't have answers, and we're scared. Another world is bleeding through, and it's ominous. Our nature-loving state, which attracts people nationwide, is being corrupted in this alternate reality.

We need speed bumps to slow progress before it becomes unstoppable. Talk to neighbors about what you see.

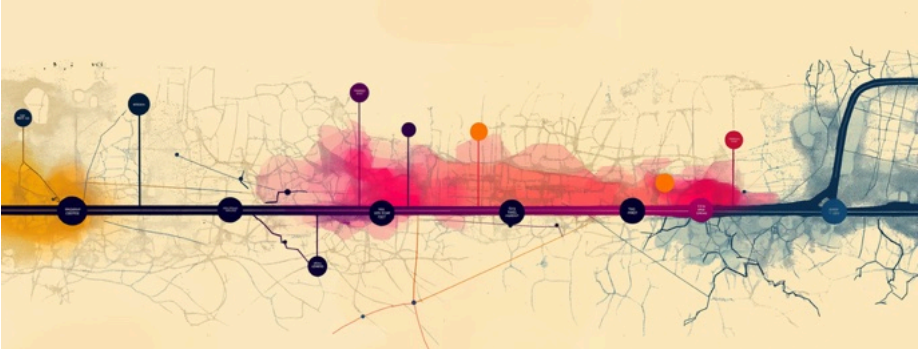
Don't stop being Vermonters. Observe, Vermont!

*Steven Benson is a lifelong Vermonter and a regular contributor. His views do not necessarily reflect this paper's.*

# VEU AGENT FIELD MANUAL: VERMONT GENERAL STORE PORTAL SYSTEM

Classification Level: Agent Clearance Required

Document ID: VEU-PORT-2025-01#



The Vermont General Store Portal System (VGSPS) represents one of the VEU's most valuable assets for rapid intrastate transportation.

Utilizing existing general stores as cover locations, the system enables authorized agents to traverse Vermont efficiently through specialized transit points. These quantum-anchored doorways allow personnel to cross substantial distances within seconds. This document outlines proper usage protocols and essential information for all field agents with system clearance.

Discretion remains paramount during operations.

## Portal Locations

The VGSPS currently maintains 12 active portals distributed strategically across Vermont. Each portal is disguised within an operational general store, typically appearing as a standard storage room door or cellar entrance. Current active locations include:

- ██████████ (Northeast Kingdom)
- ██████████ (Greensboro)
- ██████████ (Norwich)
- ██████████ (West Danville)
- ██████████ (Randolph Center)
- ██████████ (Warren)
- ██████████ (Ripton)
- ██████████ (Dorset)
- ██████████ (Shrewsbury)
- ██████████ (Putney)
- ██████████ (Jerusalem)
- ██████████ (Johnson)

## Important Safety Guidelines

- Portals function optimally between -20°F and 95°F
- Heavy electromagnetic activity may cause temporary portal instability
- Solar flare activity above Level 3 requires portal system shutdown
- Portals remain stable during most weather conditions but may experience disruption during severe electrical storms

## Cover Story Maintenance

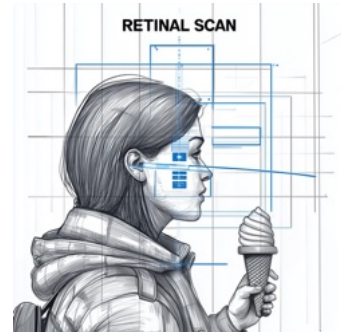
- To maintain operational security:
- Make occasional purchases from host stores
  - Establish casual rapport with store staff
  - Never ask to use the bathroom
  - Vary your visit times and patterns



# ACCESS PROTOCOL

## Biometric Authentication

1. Each portal is keyed to authorized agents through multiple biomarkers:
  - Retinal pattern
  - Palm vein mapping
  - Neural oscillation signature
2. Authentication requires all three markers to be present and active
3. Biomarker scanning occurs passively within 3 feet of the portal door
4. Do NOT attempt access if injured or experiencing severe stress, as this may alter your neural signature

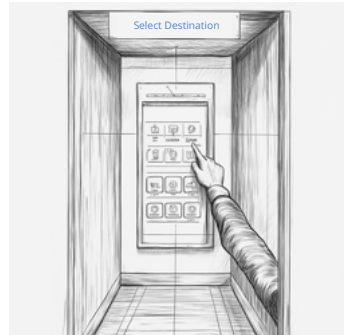


## Portal Entry Procedure

1. Approach the designated door casually, maintain cover, and buy a maple creemee. Creemees aren't affected by transference.
2. Stand within range (3 feet) for a minimum of 5 seconds
3. When authentication is complete, a subtle blue glow will appear in door frame corners
4. Open the door normally - rushing or forceful entry may disrupt the portal
5. Close the door completely behind you
6. Wait for destination materialization (approximately 3-5 seconds)

## Transport Rules

- Only one agent may pass through a portal at a time
- Maintain a minimum 30-second interval between consecutive agent transports
- Maximum cargo weight: 50 pounds per transport
- No liquid samples over 24 ounces
- No active electronic devices, including phones and FluxTrackers (must be powered down)
- No biological specimens without prior authorization



## Emergency Protocols

In case of portal disruption during transport:

1. Remain calm - panic alters neural signatures
2. Wait for automatic safety protocol activation (30 seconds)
3. If no activation occurs, press emergency return switch. (located on interior door frame)
4. If return switch fails, activate your emergency beacon
5. Do NOT attempt to open the door until rescue team arrives



## THE STATUE OF PROSPERITY

The message receiver hummed at 3 AM, its antiquated display glowing faintly in my dark bedroom. With its bulky corners and exposed wiring, it looked nothing like the sleek communication tech of this Vermont (VT-A), a relic from the world I'd left behind. Only a handful of people had the frequency code, and they only sent messages when something from Vermont-B had leaked through.

I pressed the playback button. The voice came through in fragments, distorted and hushed. I pictured him in a closet.

"Addison County... by dawn... the statue... crossed over." Static interrupted before the voice returned, "...only have a few hours... make it disappear."

"How big?" I asked aloud, though no one could hear me.

As if answering me, the voice

whispered through the static: "The big one."

"Crap," I muttered, already pulling on clothes. "The Statue of Prosperity."

The message ended with something personal, barely audible beneath the interference: "Miss you, kid. Be safe." Then the message ended.

I recognized the voice, of course. Director Keller. The man who'd arranged my escape to this reality three years ago.

I grabbed my emergency kit and headed for the door. The thermometer read 28°F —cold, getting colder, which might actually work in my favor.

The drive to Lake Champlain took forty minutes, my headlights barely piercing the dense fog that had settled over the region.





I couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of me, the world beyond that swallowed by an impenetrable gray wall. I parked in a public lot near the cliffs overlooking the lake, cutting the engine into silence.

I wasn't flying completely blind; I had the tools to find a 455-foot statue, even in the darkness and fog. While it would be invisible to the naked eye, it would be clear as day for the FluxTracker. I switched it on before I even left the car, and the small phone-like device hummed to life.

I made my way carefully to the cliff edge, guided more by bravado than sight. The fog was so thick I couldn't see the lake below, just a void of darkness. But the FluxTracker was registering a massive interdimensional energy signature directly below.

The reading was off the charts. It was the biggest thing that's ever crossed over. We'd need to address the negative momentum, but not today; I was focused on not slipping off the cliff right now. The path down to the beach was dark, slick with frost, and as dangerous as anything I'd do today.

When I reached the shoreline, the FluxTracker's readings went wild. I was standing right next to something. Something enormous. I reached out my hand and felt cold metal with a surface that seemed to curve upward beyond my reach. I couldn't see it through the darkness and fog, but I felt it: the unmistakable copper skin of a statue.

In VT-B, this monster 455-foot statue of Plutus, the Greek god of prosperity, was famous. Designed by Bartholdi and Eiffel in 1887 as the older and much more prominent brother to the Statue of Liberty, it once stood proudly with one foot in Vermont and one in Canada, a symbol of international unity.

Then relations soured, and it had toppled into Lake Champlain either by high wind or sabotage (depending on who you asked).

Now, some eighty years later it had slipped through to a Vermont where it had never existed.

I switched the FluxTracker to scanning mode, hoping to find a tear that it could pass through but there were no active breaches to be found..

Without a tear to push it back through, I needed to hide the damn thing.

Can't keep daylight waiting. Even with the fog, a statue this size wouldn't stay hidden for long.

I dug through my emergency kit, assessing my options. My flashlight hardly made a dent in the fog. I'd need to work by touch and instinct.

Lake Champlain was brimming with ice. If I could sink the sucker before the fog lifted the lake would freeze over it hiding the evidence until I could develop a permanent solution.

I felt along the statue's side, searching for the maintenance door I knew would be there. I'd visited on field trips as a child. I spent nearly twenty minutes but eventually, my fingers found the small door behind what must have been the statue's ear.

With my flashlight between my teeth, I pulled myself into the opening. Inside, the statue was hollow, the viewing platform now tilted at a 90-degree angle. Water sloshed around, trash floated around my ankles. Was someone living in here?

"Hello?" I called out, but received no response.

I continued until I found a hollow chamber made into a bedroom. This space, intended as a visitor's center, was fashioned into a living space. There was a bed made from salvaged cushions and canned goods. Someone was living here.

I heard footsteps again. This time above me. Running along the top of the statue. I ran to the ear and looked back into the fog. It was brighter. I heard someone running

around outside but couldn't see anyone. "Hello," I called out.

"Hello," a weak voice returned my call.

"I need to sink this statue," I warned sticking my head out the door "If you need to take anything, grab it now."

"I don't have anything," the man answered. I could see his shadow standing above me.

"Why?" he asked.

I was running out of time, "Cause it doesn't belong here." I paused. "Neither do you. Suppose you've never heard of the other Vermont. That's where you are now".

"A lucky day," he said as his shadow disappeared. He called out, "The left leg is the weak one. Plenty of fuel and tools in there, too."

He gifted a solution. Blow up the left leg.

I made my way back through the statue's twisted corridors to Plutus' left leg. Fracture lines ran through the support structure, and patches of corrosion had eaten away at critical junctures. The leg was barely holding together.

I found the hermit's tools. Nothing anyone in VT-A would know how to use the much more advanced "EfficiCorp" and "MaxiPro" brands dominated my former world; a universe obsession with productivity above all else.

Among the collection was something I hadn't seen since crossing over: a Resonance



Disruptor. The device looked like an oversized tuning fork with a digital control panel mounted on its handle. In VT-B these were used primarily by demolition teams and clam diggers. They worked by emitting precisely calibrated sound waves that targeted specific molecular structures, creating fatigue points in metal without heat or visible damage.

I picked it up, turning it over in my hands. The familiar weight of it was almost comforting. The power cell indicator showed a 68% charge – more than I needed.

Beside it sat several containers of NanoChem Structural Accelerant. The fluid inside looked like mercury but flowed like water. It was designed to amplify the effects of resonance tools by coating the target surface and enhancing vibrational transfer. One container would have been enough; the hermit had five.

I checked my watch. Less than an hour until sunrise. Even with the fog, I couldn't risk the statue being visible once daylight hit. I needed to work fast.

The physics were simple: if I could create enough fatigue points in the left leg's already compromised structure, the statue's weight would do the rest. It would collapse further into the lake, hopefully sliding into deeper water where it could remain hidden beneath ice until I figured out a more permanent solution.

I calibrated the Resonance Disruptor to the specific frequency needed for the copper-iron alloy used in the statue's framework. The device hummed to life, its digital display glowing with efficiency metrics that would be meaningless to anyone from Vermont.

I applied the NanoChem to key structural points, then pressed the activated disruptor against each spot. The device vibrated gently in my hands, but on metal it was anything but. I could hear the metal groaning as invisible stress fractures spiderwebbed through the structure. Unlike traditional cutting tools, the disruptor left no visible marks and created no sparks or heat.





## FAST FACTS: The Statue of Prosperity



**WHAT:** A 455-foot copper statue of Plutus, the Greek god of prosperity

**WHEN:** Erected in 1887 – collapsed within weeks

**WHO:** Designed by Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi and Gustave Eiffel (creators of the Statue of Liberty)

**WHERE:** Originally stood on the Vermont-Canada border at Lake Champlain. Now submerged near Chimney Point.

**WHY:** Symbol of international unity between the U.S. and Canada despite rising tensions

**SIZE COMPARISON:** Significantly taller than the Statue of Liberty (305 feet)

**CURIOUS DETAIL:** During summer droughts, the copper-green rump of the statue becomes visible above water

**CAUSE OF COLLAPSE:** Strong winds + unstable foundation in soft mud

**AFTERMATH:** Generated waves that destroyed two beach shacks. Floated for a day before sinking near the future site of the Lake Champlain Bridge

As I worked, I could feel the statue shifting slightly. The nano-movements mimicked hundreds of years of corrosion in minutes.

I raced against the morning light and the statue's impending collapse. If I worked too carefully, the daylight would reveal the statue. If I moved carelessly, the statue would collapse with me inside and drag me to the bottom of the lake.

Another twenty minutes later, I'd created enough fatigue points to trigger the collapse. I just needed the actual trigger. The hermit again bailed me out. I found some EfficiBurst in his collection. They are soda-sized pressured canisters meant to explode quickly through a powerful kinetic force.

I positioned the canisters along my fatigue lines setting their timers for synchronized activation. The timers

counted down in efficiency units rather than standard seconds. This quirk from my world made me smile despite the circumstances.

I made my way back up through the statue, dropping additional canisters at key structural points as I went. By the time I reached the ear exit, I had a network of timed devices throughout the statue. I gave myself a five-minute head start.

As I climbed through the ear, I noticed the fog was thinning, and dawn had arrived.

I activated the master timer and ran as much distance between myself and the massive structure as possible. I was halfway up the cliff path when I heard the deep, resonant hum that seemed to come from the earth's center, followed by the groan of metal under stress.

The statue didn't so much sink as it slid. The water rushed in to fill the void, waves lapping at the shore as the last statue disappeared beneath the surface.

In the VEU, we had a saying: "What falls through in winter stays hidden till spring." I'd bought myself a few weeks to find a more permanent solution. The temperature dropped rapidly, and the lake's surface would freeze within hours, hiding any evidence.

Back in my car, I pulled out the message receiver again. This time, I recorded my own transmission.

"Keller, it's me. The statue's taken care of for now. Submerged and icing over. But someone was living inside it, a hermit of some sort.' He's in the wind; I'll track him, but I'm not





gonna make it a priority."

I paused, then added, "Remember when you asked me the first time I knew this Vermont existed? My sister Betty was into signals; they call it radio bands here.

She found a recording of a TV show that played repeatedly over the signals, but only the audio. Since comedies were banned in VT-B, hearing the audience laughing was hypnotic to us.

The show had these people trapped on an island, they all like represented a certain kind of person. For some reason it's called Gilligan's Island but he's the silly one who messes things up.

The Skipper is the grumpy boss and the Professor is the super smart guy but not smart enough to figure a way to get them off the island. There's Mary Ann the nice friend who shares, Ginger is the fancy movie star, and Mr. and Mrs. Howell

are the rich people who don't like getting dirty. They all try to get home but never do because they happier there than at home.

was called 'Topsy-Turvy.' This character, Gilligan, kept seeing everything upside down after hitting his head, and then later, he saw everything multiplied by five. The Professor told him, *'Don't believe everything you see.'*

I smiled at the memory, watching ice crystals forming on my windshield. "When we heard that line, Betty squeezed my hand so tight.

That show was someone reaching out. We started looking for where the signal came from. That's how we found the first tear. I must have heard that show five hundred times."

The transmission beeped, indicating it had reached its maximum length. I switched off the device and tucked it away.



## VERMONT CRAIGSLIST

### VINTAGE MAPLE CANDY SUCKER - Highest offer

It's still in the original wrapper—a promotional item from the 1964 Maple Festival.

**Features cartoon moose, Max the Maple Master.'  
Never opened. Serious collectors only.**

I choked on my coffee. The 1964 Maple Festival happened twenty years before I was born. I'd seen stickers of Max the Moose my whole life. The government banned any Max likeness because of what happened at the festival. They also came down hard on Maple syrup producers.

Before the 1964 Maple Festival, the government paused its heavy-handed tyranny for one day. Max made his debut on the wrapper of a maple lollipop. Costumed volunteers handed out thousands of these suckers (pun intended). Each said, Adult Only- Contains Whiskey. That was the incentive needed to get folks to try one. Consumers loved them, not because of the whiskey flavor, but because of the experimental drug mixed into each one.

The listing had only been up for three hours. I immediately sent the seller a text. *Is the sucker still available?*

*Sorry. Just sold.* The seller replied.

*I work for the Vermont Historical Society, I lied. Can you tell me how you found this Maple Sucker?*

*One of my tenants died. No one claimed his stuff, so I sold it all. The sucker was in a box. he marked it one-of-a-kind. He had many unusual items, and one lady bought them all. She gave me \$500 for the lollipop.*



My heart sank. I knew who the buyer's tenant was. She was talking about Adam. I should have been in the file as his next of kin, but he was lazy.

None of those items should have been put into anyone's hands. Now, I'm forced to retrieve it.

I replied, *\$500 for a lollipop? They got more money than sense.*

*Her response. For sure, Gracie is one of the wealthiest Vermonters. Picked it up herself.*



I knew instantly the wealthy Vermonter she was talking about. Gracie Harrington-Bessette was one of the wealthiest women in Vermont. She involved herself in all sorts of charitable and noncharitable activities. Her name is half the buildings in Burlington. The thing that folks with that kind of wealth have that no one else does is information. She knew what the V.E.U. is; I was sure of it. She was stalking those items on Craigslist.

Later, I went to Burlington, where Gracie had turned an office building into her home. A palace big enough for hundreds housed one. I found her outside, entertaining a crowd in the street.

A distinct green stain spread around her mouth and cheek, and some dripped on her pink Chanel suit. She had the oversized sucker in her hand, offering free licks or hundred-dollar hugs.

"My darling sugar plums," she shouted to random passersby, "Let's get married. I have enough love and money for you all!"

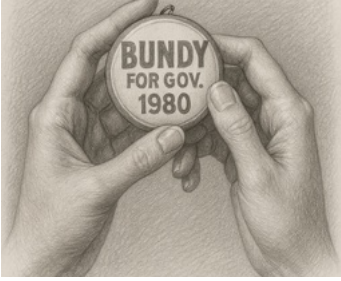
This excited the gathering crowd, both men and women, who ran up for a lick and a hug. I spotted the familiar wrapper on the ground. Max the Moose was on the front, and "Love's First Kiss" was written on the back.

Gracie danced through the crowd, tossing hundred-dollar bills like confetti.

"Money is nothing compared to love. Take it all!"

Behind me was her imposing lair—a six-floor glass and concrete building. Caught up in her ecstasy, she'd left the big iron gate, engraved with her initials, GHB, cracked open. Beyond it, her front door stood wide open. Seeing her place filled with VEU artifacts tempted me more than any urge to help her.

## VEU



**THE FOURTH AND FIFTH FLOORS WERE EMPTY, WASTED SPACE. HOMELESS PEOPLE FILLED THE STREETS BELOW, WHICH MADE THE EMPTINESS FEEL CRUEL.**

Two college students took turns licking Gracie's lollipop, drawing cheers from the crowd. Gracie found a grandpa, yanked him by the collar, and pulled him in for a kiss. She handed off the lollipop, and a line formed to try it.

I could safely search Gracie's palace for evidence in five minutes. Inside, the opulence blew me away immediately. The lobby doubled as a gallery. Cameras followed every move, but I was trained to tune them out. Deeper in, museum-style display cases lined marble walls. Her collection was vast and eclectic.

The first VEU item I spotted was a campaign button: Bundy for Governor, 1992. I slid open the glass case and slipped the button into my purse.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, an immense space caked in marble with only one setup: a pickleball court. There were benches, a court, and a refreshment stand, all overlooking Lake Champlain. I was being loud. The sound of my footsteps echoed up and down the stairwell. The emptier the space, the louder I became and the more rushed I felt.

I left the FluxTracker in the car, going by a feeling. Only two items looked like they belonged to the VEU: a broken compass and a painting by a criminal artist. I slipped the compass into my pocket and tucked the painting under my arm.

The fourth and fifth floors were empty, wasted space. Homeless people filled the streets below, which made the emptiness feel cruel.

When I reached the top floor, her bedroom and office, time started to blur. Gracie still danced with the crowd below, but my five minutes ran out.

There was no clutter and no file cabinets to dig through. Everything worth noting hung on the walls. I took down a framed letter from a senator to Elvis Presley. In it, Senator Ida thanked the King for performing at the Vermont State Fair in 1967.

Elvis never played Vermont in the VT-A, and Senator Ida was an auto mechanic, not a politician. Carrying a bag and two framed pieces was already cumbersome, and this room held more VEU items than I had imagined.

## VEU

One wall featured a massive 1990s-era topography map of Vermont. The mountains and valleys matched your world, but the similarities ended there.

There was no Green Mountain National Forest. Sprawl had taken its place. On the map, Burlington resembled Seattle, but Rutland looked even more crowded.

The map crisscrossed rail lines and major highways had tripled. It revealed the aggressive industrialization of Vermont.

I jumped onto the table and knocked the eight-foot frame to the floor. The glass shattered. I peeled the paper away from the matting. At least ten minutes had passed. I didn't even have time to see what was happening outside. It was time to go.

A shard of glass sliced my thumb, and blood ran down my arm. I rolled the map as tight as possible, grabbed my bag and the other framed pieces, and moved fast.

As I bounded down the stairs, I thought I'd make a terrible cat burglar. I froze when the front door slammed. Gracie spotted me instantly, arms full of her stolen treasures. She looked concerned for a split second, then lit up again. The lollipop's effects hadn't worn off.



"Sugar plum. Why are you working so hard? Haven't you tried the sucker?"

Before I could answer, she twirled and floated up the stairs like Ginger Rogers. She held up the almost-finished lollipop.

"A lick and a kiss, and I'll help you with your chores," Gracie exclaimed.

She pressed the community sucker to my lips. I recoiled; it was too late, and I had tasted the mood-altering treat. That slight trace was enough. My body went slack. The frames slipped from my arms and crashed down the stairs. The glass from the framed letter shattered.



Gracie wrapped me in a crushing bear hug and kissed my mouth. It wasn't romantic, but she took my hand like we were old lovers.

"Dance with me, beautiful," she said.

"Only if you show me all the secret items, my darling," I said with a smile. "And I'll dance with you."

Gracie accepted the offer and gave me a premium tour of her home. She helped me fill three boxes of VEU items while serenading me with songs from the musical Oklahoma.

We danced on the floor of her pickleball court. I was feeling the effects of a successful mission more than any sucker.

"Visit me soon, sugar plum," Gracie said, breathless. The past few hours had clearly worn her out. She looked lovelorn and exhausted.

"Hundreds are living on the streets out there, my dear," I said. "Open your arms and your checkbook. Share your good fortune. Invite them in. Give to charities. Okay?"

She nodded with wide-eyed enthusiasm. No one knows who created or spread the suckers in VT-B or how one made its way into yours. But let's go; the world's ready for a bigger batch.





THIS SECTION WAS TO RUN IN THE  
SUBSEQUENT ISSUE BUT WAS PULLED.

In Part 1, I followed a seemingly simple local bylaw prohibiting the shooting of elephants in Vermont, which led me down a bizarre rabbit hole.

Through old newspapers and a podcast, I uncovered a tale of the legendary Jersey Devil. My investigation hit a wall with conflicting obituaries, missing records, and dismissive historians. As part 1 ended, I realized I'd only uncovered the beginning of a story.

By Elin Falk

Someone turned off the information faucet. I gathered stories at libraries, bars, and podcasts. The Jersey Devil came to Vermont sealed in a steel train car, captured by a legendary hunter. That sounded like enough story but I was coming up short on an ending.

My time was running out. I was leaving tomorrow, and my story was a one-line rumor. The local historical societies had no idea the Jersey Devil came to this state, and when I asked around casually, folks thought I was part of some Satanic cult. Not that there is anything wrong with that. But I was determined to uncover the truth, no matter how bizarre it seemed.

Hell, I couldn't even answer the question of why there's a bylaw written outlawing the shooting of elephants within Vermont.

Hoping for divine intervention, I returned to where the trains were parked. I compared the picture taken then to how it looked now. The train tracks were gone, replaced with a bike path. I learned the bridge collapsed in the 1920s and replaced at least twice.



It was hard to imagine the odd scene in this tranquil spot, with joggers and bikers zooming by while I enjoyed my coffee on a park bench. This reminded me of when I visited Gettysburg; you can't imagine anything exciting happening there.

Among the bikers and joggers, a heavy-set man in his forties approached me, his bright white polo shirt drawing my eye.

When he finally reached where I was sitting, I saw his shirt was soaked in sweat. He looked nervous as he wiped his brow. He was in his forties with a baby face, so he possibly was older.

The man stopped and stood right in front of me, uncomfortably close. The intensity of his gaze made me uneasy. I thought he was going to kick me out of town.

"Are you the gentleman reporter from New York?" he asked, his voice slightly out of breath.

I had an out-of-body moment. The man's manner and dictation were off. He was going for a British accent but came out more transatlantic; think a bad Cary Grant. I briefly considered this was a prank; that's how rehearsed it felt.

"Well?" I replied cautiously. "I *am* from New York but I'm not a gentleman. I'm a gentlewoman."

"My apologies." The man nodded. "The Franklin County Community Theater Company would like to invite you for a personal performance of 'The Occurrence in Georgia.' It begins at 9p at the town hall."

"Okay," I say meekly. A thousand questions raced through my mind, but the man turned around and walked away. I sat at the park bench writing the details in my notes. I started with *Vermont is weird*.

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Just before nine, I arrived at a town hall. I expected to see other attendees arrive and join me, but the town was eerily quiet. Everything closes suspiciously early in Vermont. I've never been anywhere in this country so fearful of the dark.

Walking into the dimly lit hall, I was surprised to see a single folding chair parked in the middle of the spaced, only feet away from the small stage. This performance was for me only.

I took a seat and laid my notebook on my leg. I could hear movement, actors whispering, feet shuffling, and props dragged behind the tattered curtain. The man I had seen earlier entered and stood on stage right. He had swapped out the sweaty white polo for an Indiana Jones meets Abe

Lincoln ensemble, complete with a fake curly mustache and thick sideburns. He spoke with the same forced accent as before.

"Tonight's one-act play will be performed as it was written more than a hundred years ago by John M. Connelly," he announced, his voice reverberating in the empty hall. Despite being the only audience member, he looked over me as if there were a roomful of people. This play had only one performance in its one hundred plus years history. Tonight will be the second. Enjoy."

The curtain opened to reveal a simple stage bathed in the soft glow of a single overhead light. Painted backdrops hint at a Main Street, complete with a schoolhouse, dark woods, and hills beyond. There were no elaborate props, only wooden crates, and amateurish cardboard cutouts.

Six or seven small-town actors shuffled on stage and moved into place, blending with the shadows. Unsure of what I was witnessing, I took notes frantically.

At first I thought they were hoping to be "discovered" by a New York journalist? Get some press but as the play continued I understood this this was a message. to me. A deliberate reenactment.

The ending I hadn't been able to find—delivered through a one-act play.



From the opposite side, actors playing animals shuffled out from behind wooden cutouts shaped like train cars with 'CIRCUS' painted on each. They mimed the actions of animals. One roared like a lion and was dressed in what looked like a leftover costume from a production of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Three people dressed in gray sweatpants and hoodies walked in a line hunched over, their dangled arms serving as trunks. These elephants stretched and shook off their imaginary cages. They were so earnest in their performance that I could barely take it.

I dropped my pen to the ground when a high-pitched scream pierced my ears. I shivered. On the stage, the actors playing the townspeople froze and huddled closer, pretending to be frightened. I wanted to huddle with them.

The actors standing in the shadows took notice of something. They pointed offstage. For a moment, I started freaking out. Actors playing guards and carnies rushed onstage. In the chaos, the pretend cages got knocked over, freeing the elephants, who then ran off stage and right past me in the audience. There was a moment of uneasy quiet, the stage falling into an eerie silence. The townspeople, guards, and carnies hid in the shadows or offstage.

A single spotlight illuminated an actress portraying an older woman. She ambled toward center stage, her movements deliberate and almost trance-like. I leaned forward in my seat and stopped taking notes.

"Mrs. Leeds!" a voice shouted from offstage. "Don't go near that train!"

Someone pushed a windowless plywood metallic-painted silver train car onto the stage. It was crude but effective. I remembered the armored vehicle from the old photograph and the woman in black; this was that, and she was her.

Another actor yelled from behind the backdrop, his voice filled with terror. "For the love of God, woman, stay back!"

I was fully invested now. This wasn't just community theater; they were performing a reenactment. It wasn't a message; it was a revelation.

Mrs. Leeds continued toward the train car, ignoring the desperate offstage pleas.

She reached out, gripped an invisible door handle, and pulled. Suddenly, an unseen force yanked her inside. Her scream reverberated through the theater. I was becoming immune to the screams.

I didn't recall Mrs. Leeds in the obituaries, but I remembered her from my podcasting friend Alex's story. She was the mother who cursed her child into eternal damnation.



The actor playing the Jersey Devil stepped out from the wings behind the silver train prop. His red-painted skin, grotesque horned mask, and outstretched bat-like wings filled the stage. His hooved feet clattered ominously, pausing between steps. I realized someone was clapping two coconut shells offstage for the sound effect. It should have been comical, but it was terrifying.

In the background, the townsfolk scattered back and forth. "Run!" one actor yelled. "It's the Devil!" another screamed as the Devil pretended to move down the imaginary Main Street, his steps amplified by offstage effects.

Above, an actor portraying a townspeople stood on a ladder hidden by a sheet, leaning out a pretend window. He held a toy shotgun aimed at the Devil.



"You'll burn in hell, Devil!" he shouted, but before he could act, the Devil attacked. Attached to wires, the Devil leaped into the air, its wings remaining outstretched. The spotlight cast its shadow on the man, who yelled and fell offstage. He was the first of the dead men in the paper.

The Devil returned to Main Street, walking in place and looking at the schoolyard, where children who were played by the remaining adult actors, engaged in games behind a small prop fence. Their laughter stopped as they noticed the approaching threat. "It's gonna eat us," one screamed. "We're trapped," yelled another. The actors huddled together in the corner, trembling. The adults playing children were less effective, but this isn't a review.

The Devil paused, giving them time to set up the scene before those menacing hoof clacks echoed through the hall again. I found myself gripping the edges of my seat when I should have been taking notes.

Then, the actor portraying Jeremiah Flint entered from the opposite side of the stage. It was the man who had invited me, playing the lead dressed in khaki. He cradled a music box, and the haunting melody I had heard over the video call with Alex began to play through the theater speakers. Flint's steps were slow but confident. He was the hero, facing down the monster. "Leeds boy!" he called out, his voice confident but measured. "You've done enough evil for one day."

The Devil snarled, turning to face him. The melody continued, and it held power over the

Devil. When an actor playing a child started to cry, the trance broke. The Devil swiped the music book from Flint's hand, knocking the it across the stage. The Devil struck Flint, and he fell backward. Actors screamed as Flint was thrown across the stage, hitting the ground with a theatrical death.

The Devil growled, its voice booming through the small theater. "You can't stop me, Flint!" I wasn't ready to hear the Devil sound like an angry accountant. It turned back toward the frightened children, prepared to pounce.

But before it could strike, a loud trumpeting sound filled the air. The three actors portraying elephants charged back onto the stage, making exaggerated, powerful marching movements. Startled, the Devil turned just as they barreled into him. He was knocked off his feet and crashed to the ground in a heap of red flesh and costuming. The elephants trampled over him before storming offstage, disappearing into the wings.

The once menacing Devil was left mangled and broken on the ground. The stage fell into an eerie silence as the townspeople cautiously emerged from their hiding places offstage. One actor whispered what I was thinking, "Is it over?"

I remembered the notebook on my lap and quickly jotted down some quick notes. The curtain fell, and I whistled an approval, not stopping my furious note-taking. The actors shuffled offstage. After another minute, I put down the pen and headed backstage to thank



them. "Great job, everyone!" I called out, pulling back the stage curtain to see only the lifeless props lying on the ground.

It was empty when I reached the green room. Their costumes laid on the backs of chairs. They had finished the play and rushed out.

The Devil's mask lay on a metal folding chair. I lifted it, he Devil's expression is a smile. It's laughing at me. In the distance, I can hear cars behind the hall driving away.

I exit the quiet hall into the quiet street into the quiet state that goes to bed at 8:45. I feel like I've either been played or offered a great gift. I can guess why the bylaw was written. The elephants were the heroes. I can imagine the escaped elephants may have been difficult to secure, and the town wanted a way to honor them made it illegal to shoot them.

I already knew the circus kept using the Jersey Devil in its act, but from reports it was quite obvious a man in costume, not much more convincing than the Devil in the play. The obituaries claimed Flint died of a heart attack, but the play showed the Devil killing him outright. Was this another whitewashing of history to keep the public calm? And was the play written by a witness to the events of that day?

On the walk back to my hotel, I understood the only way to separate fact from folklore was to figure out what happened to the trampled corpse of the Jersey Devil. Returning to New York with a great story without a satisfying ending was nagging at me. I called my editor and postponed my departure by a day. One more night in Vermont wouldn't kill me.

Returning to the hotel, with its dimly lit lobby and night clerk slumped half-asleep behind the counter, a tall, handsome woman with the professionalism of a police officer approached me.

"Elin?" she asked. Her voice was smooth and measured.

"I'm Abigail George. I'm with an agency here in Vermont called the V.E.U., and I'd very much like to show you something related to your story."

I stared at her blankly for a moment.

"You know? The story you're working on," Abigail prodded. She was calm, inviting, yet intimidating.

"Can you give me an ending?" I ask.

"I can can give you closure. But not an ending you can publish," she said.

"So, let me understand. I say no go upstairs and write whatever I want, or I go with you and get the ending I need, but I can't publish it."

"Quite the conundrum for a journalist," she smiles. "I want you to write the story for historical record but it doesn't get submitted."

"Alright, fine. I'm sure my editor would rather me do a story about the best places to eat here anyway" I tell Abigail. "Where is this ending?"

Abigail shook her head. "It's a drive."





"Everything's a drive in Vermont." I pause to consider.

"Who did you say you're with? The View?" I asked. "Like the show?"

"No, I'm with the V.E.U.," she clarified. It was late but she wasn't impatient.

"Are we talking Federal?" I asked.

"It's State. It's like the NSA and CIA had a baby that was cursed and abandoned in the Vermont woods. That's us. Off-the-record of course. Shall we go?"

"Is it far?" I asked. "How about tomorrow? I'm pretty exhausted."

"Little over an hour. We need to work at night and I know you're leaving. I got coffee and donuts in the car. We can bang this out now."

"Let's go." I said, admitting I was hungry and nothing was open.

The coffee did the trick, at least for a little while, keeping me alert as we drove through the dark Vermont countryside.

Abigail was surprisingly good company. She was knowledgeable about everything from local history to obscure music. Yet every time I tried to learn more about her "agency," she changed the subject.

"So, VEU... that stands for what exactly?" I asked.

"I've been following your research," she deflected.

"You mean you've been following me," I asked, wondering how many times I had seen Abigail without noticing her. "That play tonight wasn't coincidental."

"Well, sure," Abigail blurted. "They've been waiting for someone to ask the right questions."

"They, as in the actors?"

"No. Well yes. *They were acting.*" Abigail admits. "But the Guardians are a club. You know like an Elks Lodge. Adults doing clubhouse stuff. They used the money they got to keep the story quiet to make this club but it's all but died out. Don't forget this was more than a hundred years go. The actors and the place we're going is all that's left. The money's long gone."

She took me to a remote corner of the state called the Northeast Kingdom. We went miles down unlit dirt roads before she turned onto a long, twisted driveway lined with birch trees. The car's headlights casted ghostly shadows on the forest behind it.

"Oh god" I say looking at the abandoned looking lodge. "This is where I die."

"Stop, it's the old hunters lodge. I just told you about it."

As we pulled up, I could make out a sign: "The Guardians Lodge." Behind it sat a large dumpster piled with debris.

"Guardians, eh?" I raised an eyebrow. "Guarding what, exactly?"

Instead of answering, Abigail reached into the back seat and pulled out what looked like a modified smartphone and a pair of latex gloves. She handed me a pair. "Put these on and keep them on."

"Will be working with raw meat?" I asked.

We exit the car, and the headlights shut off, sending the lodge into darkness. Moments later, Abigail shines a flashlight and hands it to me, while she uses what looks like a thermal detection contraception.

"Are there cameras?" I ask. "What am I doing here? Should we have masks?"

"No electricity, no cameras." She says.

"The Guardians Lodge has nothing to Guard."

"The last Guardian died in January. Some wealthy couple bought it for an Airbnb. They wanted to gut the place, but the state paused it."

"And this relates to my story how?"

Abigail pocketed her device. "Those elephants didn't kill the Jersey Devil. Not entirely."

We approached the back door. Abigail produced a set of lock picks with practiced ease. "The Guardians were formed after the incident. Using the money they got to be quiet, they built this place. They collected the Devil's remains and brought them here. The original Guardians didn't want secrecy - they tried telling people, but Victorian society wasn't ready. Eventually, they were paid to keep quiet by the government, which feared mass hysteria. Over generations, their mission shifted to preserving the truth for the right people, not hiding it from everyone."



"I'll call it fortunate. Makes our job easier." Abigail says walking right to the front door. "

"We're breaking in?" I asked, suddenly questioning my choices.

"Not breaking in," she says. "I have a key."

The lock clicked, and she pushed the door open. She took the flashlight from me.

Inside, the lodge smelled of wood, smoke and leather. Abigail's flashlight revealed a cavernous main hall with a stone fireplace.

Above the mantel hung a faded circular painting of elephants standing triumphantly over a fallen winged creature.

"Grab that painting," she tells me. "And set it by the door."

I do as I'm told. Abigail's the authority here. "Are we here on official business?"

"They're turning this into a B&B. Everything's getting cleared out," Abigail explained, leading me down a corridor. "They haven't gotten approval due to Act 250 yet, but that's only delayed the inevitable. I've meant to get up here, and then you came along. I need to make sure certain items of obtained."

We entered what felt like an inner sanctum. The type of room where secret games of high-stakes poker or séances take place. It's a windowless room with a long table surrounded by high-backed chairs. Strange textured tapestries in faded red and black hung on the walls.

"Devil's wings," Abigail whispered, nodding toward them." Stretched and preserved. The new owners have no idea. Grab them, will ya?"

Unpinning them from the wall, they look like cowhide-shaped wings but feel like they're made of fish scales.

Abigail using her detection contraction that was clearly not using thermal every found more macabre souvenirs scattered throughout the building. There was a walking stick made with a tibia bone that looks too big to be human, lampshades made from leathery red material, and cracked rib bones fashioned into a chandelier.

"Who told you about this place," I asked while Abigail detached the ribs from the lights. "Did you know the Guardians?"

"Nah," she mumbled. She finds an empty cardboard box and drops all the ribs into it. "I used technology." She holds the device she's been using. "It's called a FluxTracker."

On the monitor, small areas of the house burn bright yellow, including the pieces of rib in the box.

"What is it looking for? No metal," She points out.

"It finds things that don't belong here."

"It detects this from New Jersey?" I joke.

God no," Abigail says, handing me the device. She opens some cabinets and finds an ornate wooden box with gold inlays. "My agency monitor inconsistencies."

She tosses the box onto the pile of her collections.

"Like hooved demons from Jersey?"

"Hooved demons sure. But that thing is not from New Jersey." She takes back the FluxTracker. "Only a few things left and still gotta find the devil's head. Grab the other end of the couch," she ordered.

Under the couch there is an empty box of Raisinets. This is an inconsistency?"

"For sure." she humors me. "Where's the music box?"

"A podcaster collected it years ago," I told her

"Oh a podcaster?" she joked. "You can always trust a podcaster"

As we collected the pieces, I understood why she needed me. These weren't one-person jobs. Someone hid the artifacts behind heavy,

awkward furniture. Working together, we gathered the most significant items.

"Remember you can't print this," Abigail said abruptly as we loaded her car with items.

"Excuse me?"

"I wasn't, we covered this. I'm not going to include a B&E in my story"

"I'll give you what you need for something, keep it in the folklore. realm The real story needs a trusted keeper who understands what's at stake but won't cause panic."

"Who's gonna panic?" I questioned.

"If where that Devil came from is known people would freak. Some truths are too dangerous for everyone, but too important for no one." Abigail continued. I noted the quote. "The play was their way of passing on the folklore, keeping the story going. You write about it. People visit. But none of it's real."

She held up a hoof. "This hoof has never been south of Rutland. This thing slipped through a tear between realities," Abigail explained. "From VT-B to this one."





"What are you even saying at this point. What about the circus. Flint? The music box. They exist."

"They exist separately. Theories connect them. People believe them; the more they do, the more it seems real."

"Then what is this creature?" I questioned.

"Disaster science," Abigail explained calmly. "It was called The Darwin Tests. Government experiments in the 1880s to create hybrid animals as weapons - combining strength, aggression, and intelligence. The specimen here was one of their most 'successful' failures. They created a devil."

"Where did this happen?" I asked. "This is outrageous. Less believable than being a cursed birth."

I took a long look at the box of bones, noting that no recognizable human bone was in the bunch.

"I'll tell you what I can on the ride but we need to find the skull," she said waving the FluxTracker around.

"Maybe someone already nabbed it," I asked, questioning my choices. As a curious writer, I say yes too quickly. If she had worded it as committing a felony in the middle of the night to steal the head of botched experiment, donuts or not, I'm saying no.

"Boost me up, hurry," she said, calling me over to the dumpster.

I helped Abigail climb into the mostly empty container. I waited, hearing her move items along. Why were we whispering earlier when her every move echoed over the valley? I thought about protesting and picturing myself running through the forest to evade police.

"Hell yeah," Abigail whispered.

*Now, she's using discretion.* Moments later, she popped up holding the skull of something that looked to be seventy percent horse and thirty percent other things.

"Take it," she handed the skull to me. Getting a better look, I noticed its face was not quite as long as a horse's. It had bony protrusions you'd see on a goat. Its mouth was more pointed, and the teeth even more so. This was a meat eater.

Abigail climbed back out of the dumpster and

she tossed the used latex gloves in the dumpster. "Let's bounce," she exclaimed

"What are you going to do with this stuff?" I asked as we speed along the long driveway. I carefully placed the skull in the backseat.

"There's a process," she told me, not looking nearly as tired as I'm feeling. "Gotta tag and inventory every crumb. Then I destroy it. Turn it into dust so small it's invisible to the FluxTracker."

I nodded, thinking I won't remember any of this or mistake it for a dream. I fell asleep and stay that way until we reached the hotel.

"Elin," I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder. "We're here."

I open my eyes slowly. Surprised it's nearly dawn and parked in front of the hotel.

"Thanks for your help tonight," Abigail said.

I managed a nod and a fist bump. Glancing back, I saw the skull of the Devil looking at me with its frozen expression. A dark smile with teeth exposed and eyes fixed on me.

I crawled out of the car like an alcoholic stumbling out of a taxi. As soon as I shut the door, she sped off. Nothing felt real at the moment.

I slept and transferred my notes on the train ride home the next day. My editor got a story about the play. I had to make up an ending



# The First Tuesday in March

In Vermont, Town Meeting Day is a big deal. On the first Tuesday in March, town halls and school gyms fill to discuss budgets, road maintenance, and other general rules and regulations. It's hard to find a better example of democracy as messy and beautiful as can be.



VT-A 1940 Library of Congress Photo  
Discussion at town meeting about families who receive charity from the town. The overseer of the poor spoke about one man as a "miserable cuss" because he had left his wife and children on Christmas day without any food or fuel and spent what little money he had on liquor and women. Woodstock, Vermont

VT-B dropped Town Meeting Day over a century ago, renaming it Town Reform Day. Citizens get the day off, but it's no celebration. They're confined to their homes while the government implements updated laws without debate or vote, only compliance.



VT-B 1941 Unauthorized Photo  
Officials from the Bureau of Municipal Efficiency review new regulations during mandatory Town Reform Day proceedings. By day's end, all municipal functions will be recalibrated according to algorithmically determined optimal parameters.

Town Reform Day was the day I left VT-B. Crossing from one universe to another was like walking through heavy rain without getting wet. I can't describe what it felt like to breathe the air or the physical and mental toll it took to make it happen. I'm not ready.

It was three years ago today. Betty went first.

# Town Meeting Day vs. Town Reform Day

Aspect	VERMONT-A Town Meeting Day	VERMONT-B Town Reform Day
Basic Purpose	Citizens gather to debate and vote directly on local issues	Government officials update regulations without public input
Citizen Role	Active participants in decision-making	Passive recipients of new regulations
Attendance	Voluntary, though encouraged	Mandatory home confinement
Historical Origins	Dates back to 1760s, predating Vermont's statehood	Replaced traditional town meetings during the Efficiency Reforms
Legal Status	State holiday; schools and many businesses closed	Mandatory confinement day; all businesses closed
Governance Method	Robert's Rules of Order, direct democracy	Algorithmic efficiency calculations, top-down implementation
Voting Process	Hand counts, paper ballots, or voice votes	No citizen voting; decisions made by officials and efficiency algorithms
Notable Traditions	Electing ceremonial positions; potluck lunches	Morning compliance notifications; evening implementation reports
Social Aspects	Community bonding; public debate	Isolation; individual notification; private compliance
End Result	Community-approved budgets and policies, even if imperfect	"Optimized" regulations with predictable compliance metrics
How It Ends	Adjournment after all business concluded; often followed by socializing	Midnight announcement of completed reforms; confinement lifted

## THE HIBERNATING MAN - PART TWO



Winter turned to spring prematurely, taking it back for nearly another month. The snow and ice thawed, and mud season began. Sarah Matthews promised to cue me in when her husband woke up.

"I'm sure being there when he woke up would be great for your story," Sarah wrote me. "And can you return those notebooks? I guess you haven't been seeing the other emails. He wouldn't be happy I gave them to you."

She gave me five of his notebooks, each filled with notes and remembrances from the three-month hibernation dream. While the dream took three months to create, it was only one day long. Every time he dreams, he dreams of the town of Garvin, Vermont. Specifically, he dreams of the town only on the day they celebrate the harvest festival.

"It doesn't make sense," Sarah whispers while taking my coat. I can hear other adults in the living room. "He falls asleep in December, all roly-poly. Wakes up in March thin as a rail, and to him, he's been asleep for one day."



"It's not a standard twenty-four day," I explain. "There are too many memories to squeeze in. I'm sure there is even more he forgot." That was my hope because I could not find anything about my sister on these pages.

She takes the notebooks to her husband's office. I follow the voices to the basement. I find Matthew's extended family gathered around James' observation window. Kids run around, and adults stand around chatting with beers or wine. Some of the older folk relax on the couch set up down there.

They quiet their voices as I enter the basement via the spiral stairs. I nod. They return to their conversations, and I move to the viewing window.

James looks different. He's lost another forty or fifty pounds since I last saw him. His beard is long and untamed. I watch the EKG monitor as his heartbeat gradually increases. Last time, it never passed four beats a minute. There's a murmur as it goes from twenty-one to twenty-two.

Sarah joins the family with a charcuterie board set down on the table by her in-laws.

Her daughter Emma skips over, "It hit twenty-two!"

They move to the window. Sarah holds Emma's hand while her son Tommy fogs the window, his nose pressing against the glass.

"Twenty-three!" Emma shouts.

"His fingers are moving!" Tommy points out.

I stand back, observing, wondering how his body knows when it's time. James says it is on the first day of spring.

The numbers on the EKG steadily



climb over the next few minutes as his hibernation ends. It's not only his fingers moving but his legs, arms, and head. His eyes flutter open suddenly before shutting again.

The kids jump excitedly. Emma high-fives the window repeatedly. James turns to the sound and opens his eyes again. He looks like a wild animal tamed by the sight of his children. He smiles weakly.

"I'm going in," Sarah says. "Kids stay here."

Entering the room, she holds her nose. "Oh, god. It stinks."

She helps him up to a sitting position. Not ready to kiss him, her face contorts.

"Let me get the shower going. I have clothes set in the bathroom, okay, hun?"

James tries to answer, but his voice is hoarse from neglect. Instead, he waves to his guests, who wave back and applaud.

Sarah helps him to the bathroom situated just outside the room. The family moves the party upstairs. I wait back for Sarah. When she exits the room, I ask, "I'm not going to get time to talk with him today, right?"

"No, he'll shower and shave and then visit with us upstairs briefly. Then he'll spend a couple of days just writing out his dreams. It takes a few days for James to get back to normal. His metabolism needs to adjust. He does a couple of PT sessions.

"I need to talk to him," I tell Sarah. She seems taken aback by my urgency.

"You can, but not now," she tells me. She says, "I need to get this meat upstairs," and picks up the tray. "They only ate the cheeses."

"Soon as he can. Let him know I need to talk to him."

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Two weeks after he woke, I met James at the empty field, which I started calling Garvin Field. The spring thaw had turned everything into mud. Fortunately, we both wore the proper footwear because no matter what universe you call home, Vermont is a mess in the spring.

The field was rolling green with patches of mud, bordered by forests just beginning to bud. There was no town, no festival, and no people.

"Who owns this land," James asked, spinning around and looking for something familiar to anchor his perspective.

"Most of it's owned by a company down in Florida," I told him, pointing out the specific area. They make car washes and self-storage units."

"Wait for the area to get built up and then deploy the ugliest buildings," he says.

"Any of those exist in Garvin?" I ask, hoping for a miracle.

"Nah, nothing like that."

"Now that I've given you the tour of this Garvin. I'd like you to walk me through yours."

He began walking, pointing to empty spaces with the precision of someone who knew every inch of a place. "The gazebo would be here. They'd hang lanterns all around it during the festival. And over there," he pointed toward a slight rise in the field, "that's where the judging stand is. For the contests."

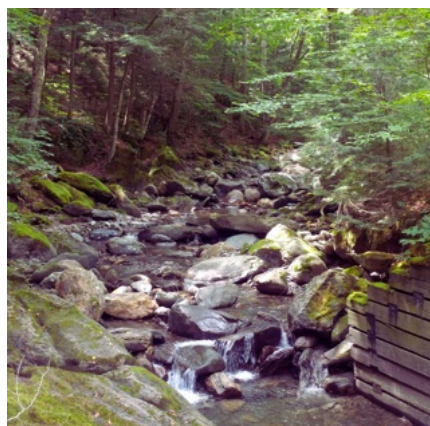
I followed as he joyously mapped an invisible town onto an empty landscape.

"Would you make a map for me? Later."

"Sure."

"And every year, the harvest festival is the same?"

"Mostly. Why would you mess with perfect? The bakery would be just past that tree. Mrs. Whitaker makes sourdough with maple that would change your life. And down this way," he veered toward a small stream cutting through the property, "this is where the main street runs."



We followed the stream to where it dropped several feet into a small waterfall.

"In Garvin, they built the mill here. The waterwheel powers it during the festival." He looked at me. "Can you hear it?"

I couldn't.

"And if we follow this path," he continued, undeterred by the fact that nothing he was talking about was here, "we get to my favorite part."

We trudged through mud and spring grass until we reached a point where the stream widened. A small wooden footbridge crossed it, but James's face lit up.

"The covered bridge," he announced, spreading his arms. "It's big enough for a school bus to move through, painted red with white trim. Inside, people carve their initials. Thousands of them, going back decades."

"And the pumpkin?" I asked, deciding to play along.

"The pumpkin? How do you know about the pumpkin? Right there!" He pointed to the middle of the footbridge. "Tobias Jeffers grows it every year. Or maybe it's the same pumpkin all this time. It's enormous and doesn't fit through the bridge. They're always debating how to move it for as long as I've been visiting."

"I know. I read your journals. You talk about it every year."

He stepped onto the footbridge, looking through it as if seeing something beyond the trees on the other side.

"Have you ever crossed the covered bridge?" I asked. "And gone to the other side?"

"I don't know. I don't think I have," he said, his voice distant. "I've been on the bridge, but I always turn back before reaching the other side."

"Why not?"

"It wakes me up. There is nothing on the other side worth going to."

I joined him on the footbridge. Nothing changed. There is no shift in reality. It's just a muddy field.

"Have you ever spent a day in Garvin that wasn't the harvest festival?"

He laughs. "No, it's just setting up every year when I get there. I open my eyes, sitting on a bench or lying on grass. I see the same workers setting up."

"So it's one day?"

"It's not a day," he said, looking puzzled. "It's not just a 24-hour day. I spent months there, but it's always the same day. I've had conversations that lasted hours, but in Garvin's-time, it was only minutes. The sun takes three months to cross the sky. The pumpkin judging is always about to happen. The parade is always starting soon. It's like time is stretched."

James hopped up on a massive boulder and looked over at the falls.

"This rock is there," he said. "I've sat on here and enjoyed many a meal on it. Can I ask you a question?"

I shrug.

He continues. "You seem much more interested in this place than even why I hibernate. Isn't that what you're writing the article about? The hibernating. Sarah tells me nothing is more boring than someone talking about their dreams."

"I don't think you're dreaming, and I have proof," I said, unable to contain myself any longer. "I want to show you something I have on my phone about this town."

I showed him the screenshots of the Town of Garvin's Instagram on my phone (See Volume 1).

James looked genuinely surprised, almost frightened. "My sleeping mind invented these people. They're whispers of thought."

"No, you're the whisper that can somehow go there in your sleep."

He looks puzzled, studying the photos. "Is this online?"

"It was for a second. My sister tagged me. That's her," I said, pointing to a woman in a couple of the images. They were gone in a flash—like it was an accident. "

"I know her," he says, returning the phone to me. "Betty, right?"

"Do you recognize her? Are you certain it's her?" I hold up the photo again, showing him Betty's picture again.

"It's her. She works at the library and organizes events for the festival. She's been there for a few years in Garvin-time."

"Have you talked to her? What does she say? How did she get there?"

James shifted uncomfortably. "We've spoken. You know how the day's going. Weird things we saw at the pie eating contest. She seems at home. Happy. But, like, I don't know her well or anything."

His nervous demeanor set off alarms. He's withholding, and I ask, "What aren't you telling me?"

He sighed, looking down at the actual stream beneath the bridge. "Well, I didn't just speak with Betty.



We...we connected."

"Connected?"

"There was a dance. At the festival. One night under the harvest moon. Like the Neil Young song." He looked embarrassed. "I didn't put it in my journals because—"

"Because your wife might read them," I finished. The implication hit me. "Wait, are you saying you and my sister hooked up?"

"Is it cheating if it happens in a dream?" he asked, genuine distress in his voice. "Oh my god, wait if it's not a dream and she's human, it's cheating. I need to process this. I don't even know what Garvin is anymore."

I fought back my immediate reaction. Focus on what matters, I told myself.

"Has she ever mentioned me? Or how she got there? Or why she can't—or won't—leave?"

"No. We don't talk about the outside world much in Garvin. There's an unspoken agreement not to talk about it like it'll turn us into one of the many pumpkins lying about."

I paced across the small footbridge. "I need her to know I'm looking for her."

"I could try to tell her next time," James offered. "When I hibernate."

"I can't wait that long," I said, frustrated. "Isn't there some other way?"



James shook his head. "I don't control when I go there. It only happens during the hibernation process."

"There has to be something," I insisted. "Something I can do now."

Neither of us said anything for half a minute until James said suddenly. "I lied. I once tried to go all the way across the covered bridge. I wanted to see what was on the other side."

"And what happened?"

"Nothing. The moment I decided to actually cross, to see what was beyond, I woke up in my house, and when I fell back asleep, I returned here to finish the hibernation. Garvin itself rejected the attempt for me to leave."

I stopped pacing, a new idea forming. "So there's a boundary. A way out, maybe?"

James nodded slowly. "Maybe. But I have no idea where your sister would go if she crossed it. Back here? Somewhere else entirely? Nowhere?"

I leaned against the footbridge railing, looking at the rushing water below. "If there's a way in, there must be a way to get a message in," I thought.

"Abigail," James said as gently as he could, seeing how excited I was, "you're going to have to be patient."

I laughed bitterly. "Patient isn't really in my skill set. Especially not when it comes to my sister."

As we walked back across the muddy field, I couldn't stop thinking about what James had told me. Somewhere, in some fold of reality that existed beyond everyday perception, my sister was living a different life in a town that both existed and didn't exist at a never-ending festival.



"I'll find a way to reach her," I said, half to myself and half to James.

"And if she doesn't want to be reached?" James asked quietly.

I'd been avoiding that question. What if Garvin, with its endless autumn celebration, was where she wanted to be?


"I need to know," I said. "I need to hear it from Betty herself."

James nodded. "Garvin operates by its own rules."

We reached our cars. I looked at the empty field imagining the world James described. Somewhere within that barren space was my sister.

"The moment I decided to actually cross, to see what was beyond, I woke up," James had said about the covered bridge in Garvin. Those words replayed in my head. That boundary was a limitation for James, but maybe it was a way in. VEU agents excel at finding paths between worlds that shouldn't exist.

## The Legend of Manfred Harris



I found the poster tucked behind a stack of old records in a St. Albans antique shop. Faded red and blue ink on yellowed paper, but still legible after all these years: "1973 INTERNATIONAL WINTER GAMES - SKATE CHASE CHAMPION - 'The WINTER RABBIT' MANFRED HARRIS."

*How long has this been sitting here?* Manfred beat out the Serbian swarm more than fifty years ago, and where I'm from, every boy had this poster on the wall. I didn't need a FluxTracker to verify it. This poster was a glimpse into a sport that existed only in Vermont-B.

Skate Chase is equal parts speed skating and biathlon. Competitors skate a predetermined course while expert marksmen (the "shooters") try to hit them with specially designed impact pellets. Each hit adds ten seconds to your time. Three critical hits, and you're disqualified. In the seventies, the pellets packed five times the sting they do now.



*"...Fast enough to dodge anything."*

Vermont's own Manfred Harris was the uncontested legend of the sport-the GOAT. This poster commemorates his 1973 gold medal performance at Silver Lake, where he completed the treacherous 3-kilometer course in under three minutes without a single hit; a feat considered impossible against the Serbian team with a +80% accuracy.

Harris became a cultural icon in the in VT-B. The "Harris Zigzag" became standard training for military evasive maneuvers. The Burlington ice arena bears his name.

His fame extended beyond sports. Harris Sportswear became a major corporation manufacturing the armor-reinforced skating suits that Skate Chase competitors wore. The Harris Foundation funded research into impact-resistant materials and reflexive training techniques. In the 1980s, his signature appeared on everything from breakfast cereal to wristwatches.



But legends often meet tragic ends. In 1997, at age 52, Harris attempted what many considered a publicity stunt while others a mental breakdown: skating the militarized "no-go zone" that separated U.S. and Canadian waters during the Border Tension Period. His motto had always been "Fast enough to dodge anything," but as it turns out, no one can out skate a bullet, not even Manfred Harris.

Side note. I've checked records here for any trace of a Manfred Harris in Vermont-A; it appears the Manfred in VT-A lived a quiet life as a high school hockey coach. No fame, no fortune, no tragic end.





It's funny how similar our fish club meetings are to the support groups you see on TV shows. In a community center basement, we share stories about our "loved ones." The only difference is that we have fish-shaped cookies instead of donuts.

I'm not here as an agent for The Vermont Extended Universe. Here, I'm an aquarist, listening to Linda describe how her Oscar learned to play fetch.

The gathered aquarists laugh, and I laugh with them.

"I swear," Linda says. "Not like a dog, but it'll fetch its toy."

"I've seen a fish fetch at this Sushi joint," Wilson pipes in. "They had this pond inside, and the owner would toss a plastic toy and return it to the owner for food."

"If it didn't, it would get wrapped in

rice," Daryl adds.

My 55-gallon tank has a thriving celestial pearl danios and cherry barbs community.

"Anyone else?" Maurice asks; his white mustache makes him look like a catfish. "We've got time for one more share."

A hand goes up in the back. It's the new guy. "I have a question."

I crane my head to see him. He's an early-thirties man in a flannel shirt with the kind of face you trust immediately. His sandy brown hair is perfectly tussled. Despite the kind face, something about him makes my chest tight.

"The floor is yours," Maurice says. "It's Billy, right?"

Billy nods. "Yeah, I'm Billy Chen. I'm glad I found you guys. I have a weird problem with my community



tank."

He pauses, struggling with how to phrase what comes next. I know that look. I see that expression daily. How do I explain the unexplainable?

"My fish keep disappearing," he finally says.

Someone laughs, "You have a cat?"

"No cat," Billy shakes his head. "No other pets at all. And it's not like they're dying. They vanish."

Someone asks, "Could it be other fish? Predatory ones that you thought were community fish?"

"It crossed my mind." Billy frowns. "But I have nothing exotic, only guppies, mollies, danios. Nothing big enough to swallow a whole fish without leaving evidence."

Maurice says, "It's not that weird. Things happen. Filters."

"Yeah, so the vanishing is not the weird part." Billy interrupts the chatter. "It's that sometimes they come back. It's a 65-gallon tank with plenty of places to hide. I've checked the filter, the substrate, everything. It's like they cease to exist. Then, months later, the same fish is swimming around like nothing had happened. And sometimes, there's fish I've never seen before."

The room grows quiet—my mind races. Fish appearing and disappearing is precisely the kind of anomaly the VEU investigates. But I'm also curious on a personal level. Billy has caught my attention beyond the potential breach.

Billy continues. "I set up a ring

camera to record it happening. When they swim into this little SpongeBob pineapple house decoration I have, they don't come out. Then months later, the same fish swims out like nothing happened."

"And you've checked inside this pineapple house?" I ask.

"Of course. It's not big. It barely fits two mollies at a time."

"Have you tried removing the decoration?" Linda asks.

"Yeah, but then the ones who disappeared stopped coming back. So I put it back where it was. It's been happening ever since I moved the tank to my new apartment three months ago."

As the group debated possible explanations, I studied Billy more. He's not a manic who is making up stories for attention. If anything, he seems relieved to be telling someone about it.

The discussion moves on, and shortly after the meeting ends, I approach Billy as he's putting on his coat. "Hey, Billy," I say, extending my hand. "Abigail, I'm sorry that no one had any answers for you tonight. It doesn't feel like you can solve it without seeing it first."

His handshake is firm but hesitant. "I sound crazy."

"Not at all. I've heard stranger things." I smile, thinking of the hibernating man and the dinosaur bones they found mixed with Civil War rifles. "Would you mind if I took a look at your setup? I have some experience with unusual

aquarium phenomena."

"A fish detective?"

I muster a shrug. "It's a hobby."

"You're welcome to check it out."

"Are you free tomorrow?"

He gives me his address, and I feel the familiar thrill of finding a thread into another world. But it's more about his smile than the VEU protocols. My interest isn't entirely professional.

The next afternoon, I'm climbing the creaking stairs of a Victorian in the Old North End of Burlington. The day is gray and cold, perfect for indoor investigations. I feel for my FluxTracker in my pocket for the tenth time.

This building exists in VT-B. This one has actual flowers in the window boxes.

Billy's apartment is on the third floor, and I'm slightly out of breath when I reach his landing. I knock on the door and switch on the FluxTracker. It monitors and records differences in temperature, radiation, and air pressure. These are the telltale signs of objects or beings that don't belong in this reality. Yellow readings indicate it's from VT-B; white shows an active tear between worlds. It's a risk-taking tracker anywhere. Someone can't lose it.

"Abigail, come in!" Billy calls. "Door's open!"

The apartment is small but light-filled, with worn hardwood floors and large windows. This place feels

lived-in and comfortable, with mismatched furniture. There is a faint scent of jasmine incense.

Billy's fish tank is in the center of the living room. It's a 65-gallon freshwater setup glowing under the soft LED lights. Inside, colorful guppies, mollies, and danios move around, each at a different speed. The SpongeBob pineapple sits in the center, with a cheerful yellow facade. No wonder fish go there.

I approach the tank and hold the FluxTracer in my pocket. Its sensors collect data on mute. "This is it?" I ask, crouching for a better view.

"Yeah," Billy says, standing beside me. "I know it's small, but it's always been enough for these guys." He points to the fish, then to the pineapple. "They seem fine most of the time, but it's like I told you that when they go in there, some of them don't return. When they do, they're often sickly. Tea?"

I nod, studying the tank. The water is clear, the filter humming along. Everything appears normal. "What got you started?"

"I was never allowed to have fish as a kid. My parents thought they were too much responsibility," he says, his eyes fixed on the tank. "I married my childhood sweetheart right after high school. We'd known each other since we were five. Nothing much changed in married life. Everything was predictable, too predictable. Until she left, it was the first time I'd had to figure out who I was alone." He gestures to the aquarium. "The fish were my first act of independence. How about you?"

His question pulls up a memory. "I had this neighbor, an older woman. Her husband passed away and left her with his fish tank. She could barely care for it herself, so she paid me a few dollars to keep it clean. She liked the fish, if only because her husband did. Any money she gave me I spent on things for the tank."

I glance at the guppies darting around, their movements identical to mine. "I felt this weird pressure to keep those fish alive for her. One day, her adult kids moved her to an old folks' home. I saved her fish."

He hands me a mug of tea that smells better than it tastes.

We sit on opposite sides of his worn but comfortable couch, facing the tank. It's the only seating option in the room, so he mustn't have many visitors. At first, we stay at opposite ends, turning to look at each other. I find myself wondering why his wife left him. There's something magnetic about his personality. I ask, "You said you had a video in the meeting."

His eyes light up. "Oh yeah." He digs into his pocket for his phone. While he searches through it, I take a few measured sips of tea, watching him from the corner of my eye. When he finally finds what he's looking for, he scoots closer until we're almost hip-to-hip.

The video shows the entire tank in perfect detail. Inside, a diverse community of fish goes about their business. I see neon tetras schooling in tight formation and a gourami floating near the surface. At the bottom, Corydoras cats are sifting through the sand.

"There," Billy points. He leans closer, his shoulder pressing against mine as he leans in. A curious molly (a type of fish) investigates the pineapple house's entrance. "See, watch."

The black-and-white fish swims into the decoration's opening. A moment passes. Then another. "Sometimes they come right back out," Billy says. "And sometimes..."

We zoom through the video for five...ten...thirty minutes. The Molly doesn't reappear.

"See? It's crazy, right?" He hands me his phone. "Keep scrollin', and you'll see. It doesn't come back."

I hold his phone. I don't need convincing, and I don't need to scroll anymore. The FluxTracker recording in my pocket has everything I need anyway. I hold on to the phone anyway to lengthen the moment. He's probably feeling the same attraction I am.

He jumps out of the seat, and I almost drop his phone. He moves to the tank. "See this little one? That's the same fish."

He sits down again next to me. I hand him his phone, realizing it's been a long while since I've said a word. It's not that it was uncomfortable for either of us. He's so close I can feel the FluxTracker pressing against my leg.

"How long was the molly missing?" I ask.

"Almost two weeks," he says. "Look." Again, he hands me the phone, but this time, he doesn't let go. We both hold it, his hand over

mine, while he scrolls to the very moment. Sure enough, the same black-and-white Molly returns. It appears sickly.

"That's wild," I say, holding the phone. His grip tightens.

"What is your theory?" He asks in a near whisper. Our bodies pressed against each other. Neither of us seems willing to change it. "What's happening in there?"

"What's happening in there may be too much to understand. Your aquarium isn't a glass box, Billy; it's a window showing us how the world works, and it's not all explainable."

I turn to find him watching me with an intensity that makes my heart skip.

"Okay," he says, "Tell me more."

I release my grip on the phone. I watch his face relax and become comfortable with our closeness. I grab his forearm. Not willing to let him go. "Aquariums are these little worlds we get to create and nurture."

I gesture to his tank, where two mollies move around each other in an elegant spiral. "Look at your mollies. They're romantics. They form social bonds. They court each other in dance."

Billy's eyes follow my hand as I trace the mollies' path. I smile. "They're careful in choosing their partners. It takes time to build trust, and sometimes it doesn't."

Two fish dart past the mollies, chasing each other. "And those danios are like the heartbeat of the

tank? They are always moving around like psychopaths. But look closer." I shift closer to Billy. "See how they move together? Even in their chaos, they're synchronized. That kind of harmony is beautiful. We're responsible for keeping that world stable enough for them to shape it."

He faces me and says, "We're like these benevolent gods of their universe. It is a huge responsibility."

I catch Billy's gaze and hold it for a moment. My mind races to a day when Billy and I combine our tanks.

"I love the intimacy of creating and maintaining this delicate balance. When and when it's right..."

"It's right," he echoes.

The moment hangs between us. The only sound comes from the tank's bubbler. I lean towards him, and he does the same. We both hesitate. A nervous laugh escapes. We're mirrors of each other. Then we move in again, noses bumping. I want to laugh but don't, but he does.

A particularly excited danio splashes at the surface. I glance at the tank. Billy touches my chin, and I move my gaze back to him.

"We should try that again," Billy whispers. "Little more synchronized."

This time, when our lips meet, it's gentle and sweet. I can feel him smile against my mouth and immediately wonder how perfect moments can come out of nowhere.

All the humor drifts away, and the



kiss deepens. I'm a teenager skipping school to hook up with my crush. I'm struck by how natural it feels until his phone buzzes in his pocket.

Billy pulls away. "Lemme take this. I'm supposed to be working." He squeezes my hand as he stands up. "It'll be quick, and then I can ignore it."

He disappears into what I assume is his bedroom, closing the door behind him. I hear his muffled voice through the wall, something about deadlines and deliverables.

As soon as he leaves, I take out the FluxTracker. I watch the 3D mapping software paint the room in layers of quantum probability. I'm unsurprised to find positive readings, but the quantity takes me aback.

The fish tank gives off a brilliant yellow glow on the monitor, which means it is trans-dimensional. As expected, the pineapple house burns a bright white, marking a tear in the dimensions.

Then I see what I'm not expecting. A blazing yellow figure is pacing in the next room. The wall and a closed door are not enough to block the signal. I gasp, thinking Billy's from VT-B, too. My heart pounds as I hear him ending the call. I drop the FluxTracker back into my pocket and jump from the couch. The jolt of new information unsettles me.

"Do you have a solution for my problem?" he asks, settling back down on the couch, my back to him.

Only two registered yellow in three years of tracking quantum



anomalies. I knew they would, but Billy, I didn't.

I steadily breathe and turn around, studying him with fear and skepticism.

"If your problem is disappearing fish, move it. If it's something else..." I answer, letting the words hang. "I can't help you."

Billy pats the empty spot on the couch next to him. "We can solve it together."

I worry he's baiting into a trap. I look at him and his trustable face. A little while ago, the fact that we had much in common turned me on, but now we share too much. He is cuter and kinder than the boys I dated in VT-B. A smile tugs at my lips. I ask what sounds like a rhetorical question: "Where does a guy like you come from?"

## VOL 3

Coming this summer Abigail George reutns with new investigations. The garden hermit from the Statue of Prosperity resurfaces with a warning about something following him through the tear.

And in Garvin, where autumn never ends and time never advances, Betty leaves a message that changes everything: "I know you're looking. Stop."

More interdimensional mysteries. More Vermont history unearthed. More answers that only lead to deeper questions.

## AUTHOR BIO

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Chris lives in Vermont with his wife, twin boys, and their corgi, Meeko. He has owned a film production company, sold slot machines, and worked for Tony Robbins. He writes in his magical tiny house and sometimes his thoughts at [chrisroddgers.blog](http://chrisroddgers.blog).

