

The Vermont Extended Universe

# VEU

## **THE FELCHVILLE ZOO**

A zoo full of real animals with dirty names that should not be said in front of fifth graders.

## **SELF STORAGE**

Someone is building a storage unit for every Vermonter. The question is: what are they planning to put in them?

## **AMERICAN BRANDON**

They thought they rebuilt a perfect 1950s Vermont town. What they actually recreated was the Stanford Prison Experiment.



**"Until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore, you will not know the terror of being forever lost at sea." — Charles Cook**



Sometimes things leak from the other Vermont. We call it the Extended Universe, and my job is to investigate and, when possible, send it back. I document it here.

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“They’ll be storing humans while they figure out if they need them.”



# SELF - STORAGE

I received troubling news. I can't believe it's happening here

In a half dozen locations across the state, construction is underway on some of the biggest self-storage projects I've ever seen. I pretended I was an inspector and asked questions.

*How many were they building?* They couldn't say. A lot, though.

*Who was the project manager?* Not on site.

*What company is building it?* They didn't know. It was an international LLC.

Everyone needs a space for their stuff, and they were making it possible. That's the line.

I know better. Nothing scares me more than self-storage. They convert to prison cells quickly. I saw it firsthand in VT-B. That's the plan here, I have no doubts. An untraceable company building a storage cell for every citizen. I know the big roundup is coming for the Vermonters.

God, they treated us so horribly, and we were citizens. Imagine what they'll do to the VT-A, who they think of as a copy of a copy. They'll be cattle. With their advance tech, primitive morality, and an unsustainable need for resources. They'll be storing humans while they figure out if they need them.

I hope I'm wrong, but I'm not planning on it. People have too much crap, no doubt, but a half million storage units is high. They don't know I'm here, and that's the only advantage we have. I'll destroy all openings to VT-B.



# MAP SHIFTING

Have you traveled by mistaken familiarity?

You can't question Vermont's charm. Green mountains. Quaint small towns. Postcard beauty around every turn. There is a sameness that has caused even locals to mistake one town for another. That's a feature, not a bug.

Towns share the same 19th-century parts: brick, iron bridges, waterfalls. Rearranged, never replaced. The roads between them are interchangeable.

This summer, at the Red Hen, I had a conversation about dementia with a man. I laughed at myself. I said I must be losing it. I called their pesto grilled cheese "the Shrek." It is actually "the Kermit."

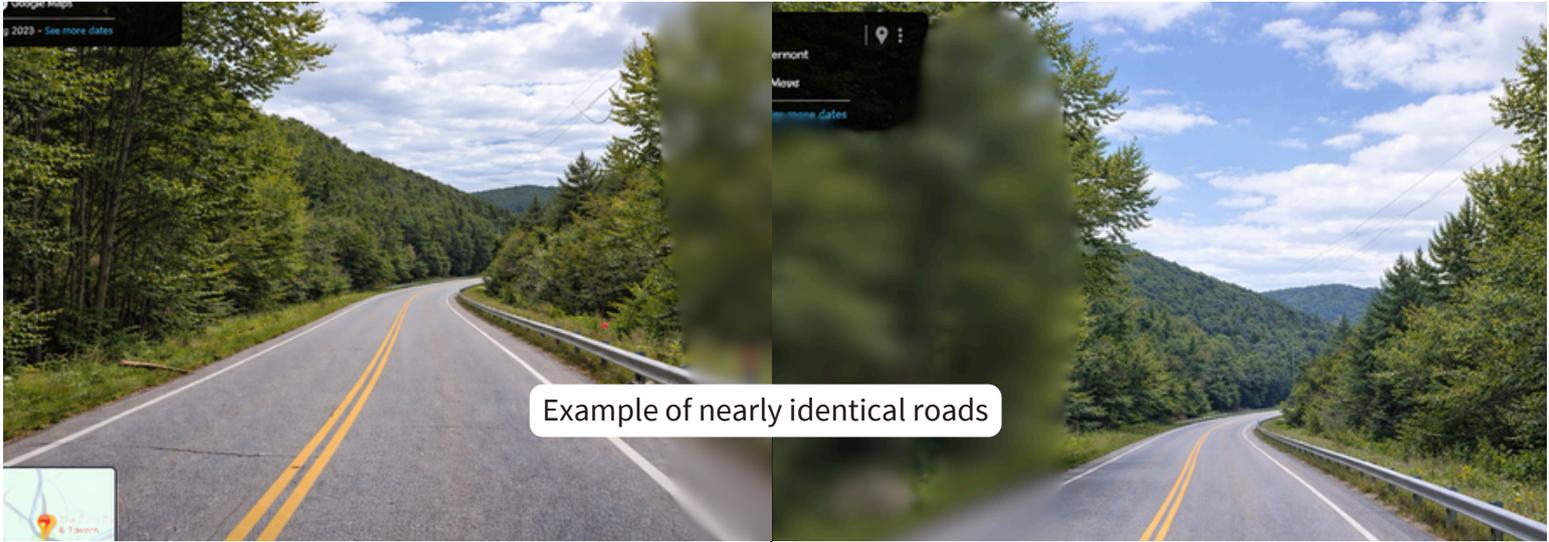
The man with the graying hair admitted, "I sometimes forget where I am and end up eighty miles from where I'm supposed to be. And I'm a mailman. So lost. They had to put me on medical leave."

"Where's your route?" I asked.

"Pawlet"

"Route 30?" I asked. I knew the answer.

"Yeah I start down 30 in Pawlet then I sometimes I find myself in Townshead," he said. "I don't even realize it, the roads look so similar."



Example of nearly identical roads

"How much time lapses?" I asked

"No time. One second I'm here. The next there."

"What's the route like?"

"Like every road in Vermont, it carries a gentle S-curve. Water appears and disappears beside it. Maples and barns. Very Vermont."

"Very Vermont," I agreed. "You don't have dementia,"

"No?"

"Heck no. Vermont's a strange place that confuses the sharpest minds. It's called mistaken familiarity due to identical roads."

"I don't understand."

The Kermit was ready to go. I grabbed my sandwich. "Sit with me. I'll put your mind to rest."

"Happily," he responded. "I'm Lou."

"Abby," I said, grabbing a stack of napkins. I sit and shortly after Lou's lunch was also finished.

"I still don't understand. What are Identical Roads?"

"Ever drive somewhere in the state that looks the same as another part of the state?"

Lou shrugged, taking a bite of his sandwich.

"There's not much diversity in Vermont, and I'm not talking about ethnicity. I used to deliver chocolate milk. Green hills. red barns. It's all the same, but twelve roads are identical. Pairs so similar they're interchangeable. Travel far enough on one and you'll find yourself on the other. It's rare to happen accidentally, but it happens."

"Can I stop it?"

I reached in my bag. "Keep this in your truck."

I handed him a small magnetic disc the size of a half dollar. "It'll steady the route. Keeps your mind on the road."

He took it.

"I'd keep this news to yourself, your goal is to have them stop thinking your mind is going."

He agreed but looked hopelessly confused.

# LOOKING TO SERIOUSLY REDUCE TRAVEL TIMES THROUGHOUT VERMONT?

HERE ARE THE MAP SHIFTING ROADS TO UTILIZE

	PRIMARY ROAD (ROUTE & LOCATION)	vs.	ALTERNATIVE ROAD (ROUTE & LOCATION)
SHIFT E-01	VT-100: Irasville/Waitsfield		VT-100: Weston/Ludlow (north of the Priory)
SHIFT E-02	VT-116 (Starksboro flats)		VT-22A (Bridport-Orwell orchard belt)
SHIFT E-03	US-7 (Charlotte/Ferrisburgh)		US-7 (Brandon/Pittsford north)
SHIFT E-04	VT-30 (Pawlet-Dorset)		VT-30 (Townshend-Newfane)
SHIFT E-05	VT-12 (Worcester-Elmore)		VT-12 (Barnard-Bethel)
SHIFT E-06	VT-15 (Cambridge flats east of Jeffersonville)		US-2 (Marshfield/Cabot flats)
SHIFT E-07	VT-14 (South Royalton up the First Branch)		VT-110 (Tunbridge-Chelsea)
SHIFT E-08	VT-5 (Putney-Westminster)		VT-12 (Hartland-Woodstock)
SHIFT E-09	VT-105 (Bakersfield-Enosburg)		VT-11/30 (Winhall plateau east of Manchester)
SHIFT E-10	VT-108 (north of Stowe, pre-Notch)		VT-118 (Belvidere-Montgomery)
SHIFT E-11	US-2 (East Montpelier, Gallison Hill area)		VT-64 (Barre Town- Williamstown ridge)
SHIFT E-12	VT-132 (Strafford-South Strafford)		VT-65 approaches to Brookfield

SHIFT  
E-\*

comparison between  
route options.

indicates road  
segment location.

# VERMONT INDEPENDENCE DAY



If journaling is my least favorite part of being a VEU agent, thrifting is my favorite. I'm constantly looking for artifacts from the VT-B part of the job. Using my FluxTracker, I can sweep thousands of items at Goodwill or ReSOURCE at a time all while trying to avoid falling in love with another pair of well-worn jeans.

Of the hundreds of thousands of items at thrift stores I've searched, only two lit up VT-B positive. The first was a red-and-blue striped bow tie. The other was a travel-sized shampoo bottle filled with Blue Tone. Blue Tone an addictive smokeable liquid not yet invented here.

It's rare when something from VT-B lands in public view. When an artifact does, it's a mundane item like a bow tie.

Years before, I came across a legendary item that landed in a Goodwill. A videotape that so confounded a young man that he created a blog to discuss it.

The timing was perfect: post-internet, pre-social media. The writeup was popular but not viral. He discovered a video covering Vermont's independence in an alternate universe. But to anyone watching the film it felt like satire.

In fairness to Matt, the blogger, I'm pasting the post in full. You can interpret its effect on VT-A. This is the post as written by Matt Millman, before I had it erased.

*Friends, as you know, I review movies I find at thrift stores. I love B movies from the 70s, student films, and bad documentaries. Today, my review is of a mockumentary whose origin I can't trace.*

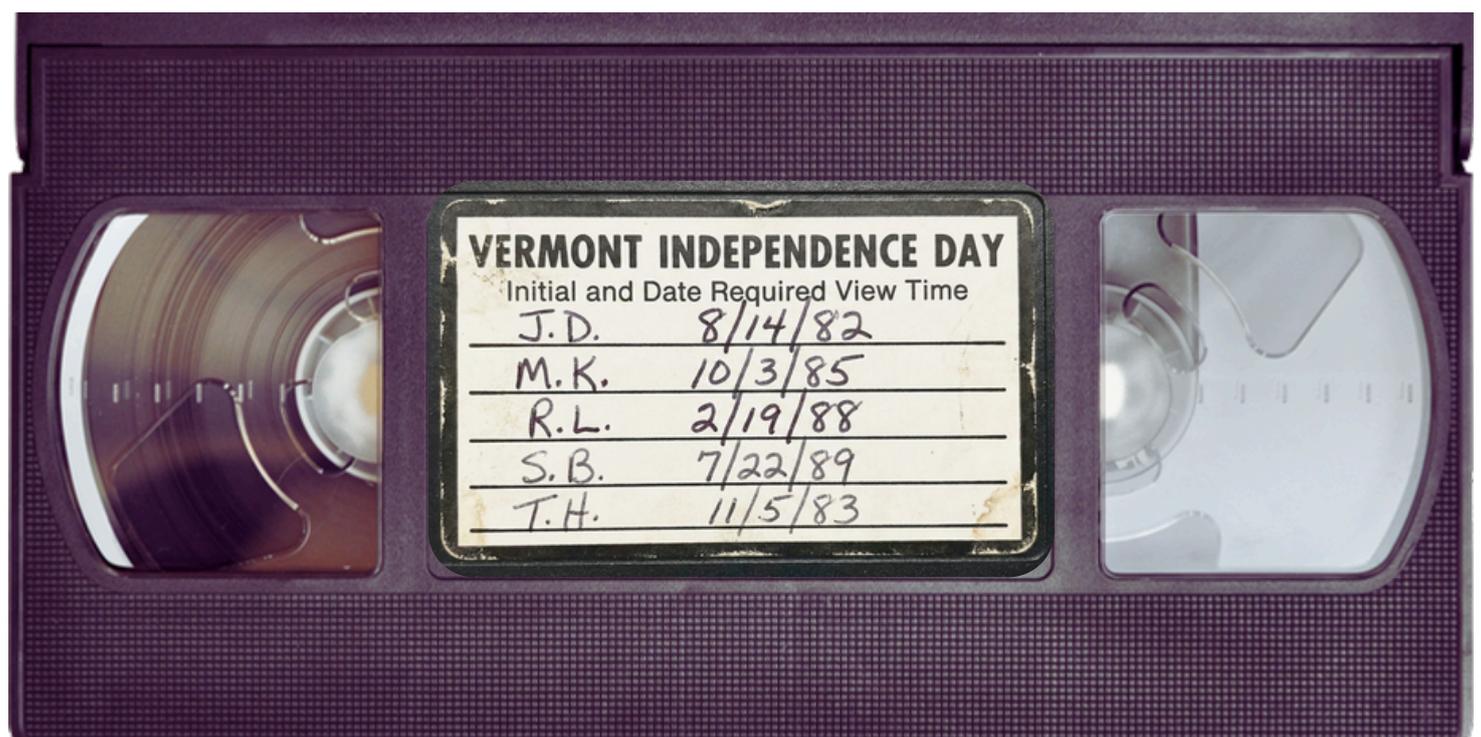
*Never once does it reveal who made the film. Or why it has better special effects than Jurassic Park. Not to mention its Forrest Gump-style use of historical figures. It was sitting in a bin, and it looks like it cost a billion dollars to make. It's called Vermont's Victory over America.*

*Imagine making the movie Saving Private Ryan with a toy camera. It's a film where everyone is an extra. The star is the story. A world where Vermont has a half-century head start on technology. Vermont's weaponized robots bully the US Government and Vermont becomes independent.*

*The film is 130 minutes long and set in Vermont. It feels futuristic in some ways, especially the technology. But the cars and clothes are straight from the fifties. How do you make a documentary in 1980 but set it in the fifties with flawless special effects? The man who narrates the film has the warmth of J. Edgar Hoover. If I hadn't been so transfixed by the effects, I'd have fallen asleep. There was no plot and the film seemed to serve only as propaganda, but to whom or for what I have no clue.*

*Vermont does not have the population to stand alone. It also lacks access to open water. On paper, independence should fail.*

*Money changes that.*



*One inventor controls nearly a tenth of the nation's wealth. The cash sits in a single account waiting for the next ally to buy.*

*Behind closed doors, talks continue. Winston Churchill even appears in the film. The resemblance is uncanny.*

*Vermont shifts its focus to trade. England, Norway, and Korea become partners. Edward Leep offers his inventions. In return, they provide protection from America and supply steel.*

END OF MATT'S BLOG POST



Matt's posting is the only record of the film online. I was in fourth grade in a different universe when Matt posted this. I was still there when he died in an accident.

In the years before his death, he hosted a Vermont Independence Party on August 22nd. The celebration continues posthumously. I was on hand to participate.

The group watches the documentary before charging across the Lake Champlain Bridge, symbolically attacking New York. As Matt's buddy explained the details, I panicked. It's only a matter of time before this quirky celebration gets retold by This American Life or some other podcast, and I won't be able to stop its spread. Really, the videotape is the only proof. The rest is just tradition.

They meet in a park on the Vermont side of the Lake Champlain Bridge in a patch of grass and picnic tables close to the water.

I went with no awareness of what was to happen. Scott, a founding member, met me at the edge of the park wearing a helmet. "Uniform," he said, tapping it with two fingers. "Vermont Defense Forces."

The edges of the screen ghosted like in a double-exposed photo. The sound was even worse. Faces moved, but their words came out as mashed static. I had forgotten how badly VHS degraded.

Only one part had survived with any clarity: the narrator. His voice cut through the noise like a phone call with poor reception, tinny but sharp compared to the rest. "Vermont," he droned, "stands at the precipice of a new frontier of sovereignty..."

"SHOT!" someone shouted, and everyone downed their drinks. I flinched, and the woman next to me laughed. "Sorry," she said. "Any time the guy says 'sovereignty,' 'frontier,' or 'automata,' you drink. Matt's rules."

I watched the vague shapes move onscreen. I knew what each scene was. The black blur, the famous nuclear robot.

By the time the end credits rolled, the group had done enough shots to have lost focus on the documentary. The song at the end was just an extended hiss. The VCR clicked itself silent. "That's it?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"That's it," Scott said. "Every year, it's a little less visible. We've probably got what, two more viewings in it before it's just snow. The fun part is attacking New York anyway."

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"The second half of the ritual." The weird future-army jackets were buttoned. Helmets were straightened. Armbands were adjusted.



Someone grabbed the flag from the tree and waved it around like someone at a college football game.

"Ready?" Scott called to the group.

There was a cheer and pats on the back. A small unit of mismatched soldiers marched across the street toward the base of the bridge. At the foot of the bridge, they gathered.

"This is the border," Scott said aloud, mock-serious. "Vermont to New York. We cross, then we declare independence for Vermont."

He looked at me and smiled. "On the other side, there's a state park. We've got tents and RVs and will camp out overnight, drinking and celebrating our victory."

"And then?" I asked.

"And then," he said, "we go home. I've got work on Monday."

There was a countdown. Someone played a cannon sound on their phone, and the group took off running along the walking path on the bridge.

I stayed firmly in Vermont. They whooped and yelled in drunken calamity. I watched the Vermont flag whirl around as the group neared the New York border at the top of the bridge. I turned to leave and saw the VCR, with the only evidence of the revolution inside.

Not for long.

# SPOT IMPOSTORS

A FluxTracker is only one way to sniff out a VT-B resident. Another is language.

Edward Leap and the government regime behind the revolution were smart, maybe even brilliant, but they were not educated.

Their poor grammar was so embarrassing they changed the rules to match their way of speaking. Governor Caulfield, a simple farm boy with a fourth-grade education, created a new standard called Vermont Grammar. There is a statue of him in VT-B on the steps of the Capitol, engraved with his famous quote: "We was tested. Better there than gone."

Look out for speech that sounds rural but carries authority. In VT-A speech explains, while VT-B declares.

I've listed some of the more common cases on the next page. None of these are definitive, but hearing them warrants further investigation.





## VT-B Speak - Idioms for Idiots

- 1. *There* replaces structure.** “There” does the work of there, their, they are, that, it is, this, those. If “there” feels like it is holding the sentence together by force, flag it.
- 2. *Of* replaces *have*** “I of seen.” “We of lost.” This is a strong tell.
- 3. No apostrophes, ever** No contractions. No possession. No omissions.
- 4. Ownership is implied, not stated** No “his,” “hers,” or possessives. “Governor house.” “Town road.” “Child boots.”
- 5. Articles fall away** The, a, an disappear when not needed. “Took truck north.” “Stayed winter house.”
- 6. Subjects are vague or collective** We replaces I. Responsibility dissolves into group action.
- 7. Passive outcomes, active endurance** Things happen. People hold. “Was tested.” “Held.” “Stood.” Rarely “decided.”
- 8. Big actions described with small verbs** Tend. Mind. Hold. Put down. See to. Policy spoken like chores.
- 9. Emotion is reported, not owned** No “I feel.” “There heavy.” “There bad today.” “There wrong.”
- 10. Sentences close the door** Statements end discussion rather than invite it. “There enough.” “That is how it is.” “Better there than gone.”

Vermont’s language descends into chaos.



# THE BRANDON PROJECT



VT-B

In 2008, a branch of Colonial Williamsburg, the living museum company, gambled on expansion. Research revealed that the youth market had no interest in powdered wigs or churning butter. They targeted the 1950s because at least 50% of folks in their focus groups said that's when the country was "great." Who doesn't love ice cream and sock hops?



VT-B needed tourists, and they told the company to pick any town in Vermont. Out of the 247 municipalities, they picked Brandon. Its broad, tree-lined streets and brick storefronts already looked like a film set.

Not everyone in Brandon was on board. The company offered residents two options: buyouts or buy-ins. They offered 25% over market value for property; about a third of the town took it. The others opted in, receiving monthly payments in exchange for their participation. They had to live by "1959 Rules." The payment was substantial enough that aligning clothing, language, tools, and even grass seed seemed like a fair trade. They were promised self-government; most thought that meant wiggle room. In reality, it was the nation's strictest HOA.

Over the next two years, the town transformed from a modernist Vermont village into an exact replica of the 1950s. Dumpsters hauled away microwaves, cell phones, and farmhouse decor, replacing them with 1950s versions. Helicopters dropped in a chrome-clad diner.

Inspectors dressed in plaid jackets swarmed every day, searching for violations. Spandex and Hokus would draw a fine, as would saying "amazeballs" instead of "swell." If tourists found something out of place, they could report it for 50% off an entree at the Silver Top Diner. Teens caught with cell phones were dragged to the stage in the center of town. Public punishment was particularly popular with visitors.

The rules banned homeowners from updating their houses. The town brought lead paint back. Men wore hats. Women wore pantyhose.



The re-creation wasn't limited to architecture. Social order took a hit. Women were pressured to leave their jobs and return to homemaking. Few wanted to revive the rigid gender roles of the Mad Men era, but officials promoted it as authenticity.

Tourists took classes to learn how to make Jell-O molds. They strolled past women hanging laundry and men mowing lawns with cigarettes dangling from their lips, even when the laundry was already dry and the grass was short. The town gave visitors what they wanted to see.

Downtown, you'd find a Robert Frost impersonator wandering Main Street, reciting lines from his poems. A Margaret MacArthur reenactor strummed folk music, lying on a picnic blanket in the town square.

At first, American Brandon was a success. Tourists bought milkshakes, seniors posed with the Frost look-alike, and residents leaned into their roles. Within weeks, modern life started to feel unreal. Quinoa vanished from memory. Dinner became casseroles and TV trays. Even the disruption felt manageable. The transition went smoother than anyone expected.

In 2015, everything changed. A flu-like outbreak pushed the world into lockdown. Much like COVID-19 in VT-A, the company barred tourists from entering Brandon. Insurance money kept the town afloat. But even without visitors, officials ordered residents to keep living like it was 1959. When tourists returned, Brandon needed to feel like an escape.

The residents agreed to police themselves, and the atmosphere changed completely. With no corporate oversight, no cameras, and no bus tours rolling down Main Street every forty-five minutes, the town grew bored. And the vigilance ramped up.

## Brandon

Neighbors accused one another of breaking character. Fines for un-American-Brandon activities tripled. The most common reasons were for using modern phrasing, foods, and alcohol. When someone found an empty Twisted Tea can behind the butcher shop, police arrested fifteen residents. Later, investigators learned the can predated the American Brandon project. Two dozen residents still spent the night in jail.



Inspectors fined families whose TVs showed anything but *I Love Lucy*. Psychologists compared it to the Stanford Prison Experiment: playing pretend with real punishments. Paranoia ran amok. Anyone suspected of secretly writing to the outside world or whispering doubts about the project's viability was viewed as a danger.

Jonas and Etta Rosenberg, who ran a small gift shop, were especially vulnerable. Before the lockdown, they were often seen talking to tourists in "un-American" Brandon ways. Their business shuttered during the lockdown, and rumors swirled about them contacting outsiders. Nothing was proven, but the whispers were enough for a town feeding on toxic isolation.

In the real 1950s, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for spying. That was coincidence enough for American Brandon. They were arrested for Advocating the Loss of the Brandon Way, Speech Resulting in a Breakdown, and the Promotion of Modern Thinking. A trial was arranged in a courtroom filled with residents who wanted to see blood for the-so-called "un-American" Brandon activities..

After a short sham trial, the court found them guilty. The “proof” was thin but enough. Etta had joked that the project could not last forever, especially without tourists. That was the crime. Not betrayal. Not sabotage. Just planning for what came after.

Before sentencing, the judge, who had been a landscaper a year earlier, looked down at them and spoke like he was reading a weather report.

“Words do not stay put once they get said,” he said, “and folks start asking what comes next.”

The courtroom erupted into cheers. The Rosenbergs’ teenage son stood and begged everyone to calm down. He reminded them it was not real.

That only made it worse.

His parents had said the quiet part out loud. They had called it pretend. And the crowd hated them for it.

No one knew the difference. It felt real. The crowd rolled out a working electric chair, and reality blurred. The Rosenbergs sobbed into handkerchiefs. Two men carried the teenage son out of the room.

Just as Jonas was seated in the chair, a low rumble stirred outside the courtroom. The townspeople focused their attention on the back doors as muffled voices grew louder.

The doors swung open. Tourists poured in, their cringy 2010s clothing a garish contrast to American Brandon’s carefully staged 1950s world. They froze at the sight of a trembling man bound to an electric chair. They surely weren’t going to execute a husband and wife; the tourists convinced themselves it was all theater.

The lockout had ended. The corporation announced visitors would return immediately. Since no one in American Brandon had email, they found out last. The intrusion shattered the illusion. Inspectors rushed to intervene and halt the execution. Officials released Jonas and Etta for the weekend, then ordered them back into character on Monday morning as if nothing had happened.

Not long after, Colonial Williamsburg sold American Brandon to a private equity firm. The new owners stripped it for parts, claimed the tax loss, and walked away.

Brandon stayed. The storefronts stayed. The rules stayed.

But the welcome sign did not.



The only reason I had to devote myself to the VEU was because I was fired from my fifth-grade teaching job for inappropriate behavior. This was in VT-B and the confines of their strict rules. That said, I'd probably have gotten a pink slip in any universe. As a reward for memorizing all the robot models, I let them pick a field trip. They picked a zoo. It wasn't just any zoo; it was the Felchville Zoo. At Felchville, every animal has a filthy name. Some government official's idea of a joke. Kids have it rough in VT-B; I was happy to give them a bit of sunshine in an otherwise gloomy existence. I put my future in their hands.

"Look at that ass!" a boy shouted as the bus rolled up to the entrance. A donkey isn't a donkey in Felchville; it's an ass.

A huge sign sat over the gate (no possessive apostrophes, remember):

NATURES NAUGHTIEST: THE FELCHVILLE ZOO FEATURING 100% REAL ANIMALS WITH UNFORTUNATE NAMES

I added the teacherly answer. "Both 'ass' and 'donkey' are technically correct."

"Welcome," our guide greeted us. The laminated badge on his vest read Dr. Butts. He spoke with a smile that never blinked. "What you'll see today is all real. No jokes. Remember kids: it's only words."

Dr. Butts warmed the kids up by introducing the **red-lipped batfish**, named because it looks like it's wearing lipstick. "This is a fish that can't swim. It walks. A face only a mom can love."



Red-lipped batfish (*Ogcocephalus darwini*), photo by Rein Ketelaars, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

"Next up, the **pink fairy armadillo**," he said. "Native of Argentina. It's the smallest armadillo in the world. Shy. Hates noise."



Pink Fairy Armadillo (*Chlamyphorus truncatus*), photo by cliff1066™, CC-BY-3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

"This fella is the satanic leaf-tailed gecko," he said. "The staff avoids eye contact with the dark prince."



Satanic Leaf-Tailed Gecko (*Uroplatus phantasticus*), photo by Charles James Sharp, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

Next: a small fish with huge jaws. "Sarcastic fringehead," Dr. Butts said. "California coast."

"None of these are naughty at all!" a boy in the back shouted.

"Tell that to the brown booby," the doctor called out and the kids lost their minds.



Brown Booby (*Sula leucogaster*), photo by CaptainDarwin, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

I kept the kids moving. A gray bird with a crusty face glared at the kids like they had stolen its lunch money. "**Bare-faced go-away-bird**," Dr. Butts said. "It honks, 'Go away!'"

A bird screeched from above. "**Horned screamer**," Dr. Butts said. "Now we have reached the section where everything sounds like an insult," he said. On cue, the spiny lumpsucker floated past like a depressed balloon.

"You're a **humpback chub**!" I told Dr. Butts.

"Well, you're a **goblin cockroach**!" he returned. The kids were unglued, jumping and laughing. I tried to calm the kids down, but Dr. Butts blew up my spot.

"**Cockchafer**!" he shouted.

"Oh, come on," I said, throwing my hands up in disgust.

"It's a European beetle. Like Ringo."

"Who's Ringo?" a kid asked.

Dr. Butts spoke with the look of someone unwilling to stop this train. He pointed to me and said, "Name this small, chirping bird."



Spiny lumpsucker (*Eumicrotremus orbis*), public domain photo by David Csepp, NOAA Fisheries.

I leaned in to see the name on the placard and sighed. I told him, and only him, "It's a... **dickcissel**."

He pointed to a proud bird sitting on a stump. "Hear that, everyone? Your teacher said this is a dickcissel. This bird is known for its not-so-sexy mating dance."

"PG, Butts," I said.

"**Hornyhead chub**," he replied.

The kids moved quickly from one window to another, feeding off Dr. Butts' energy. "And this frog?"

The closest student, a boy, could hardly contain himself. "**Titicaca water frog**!"

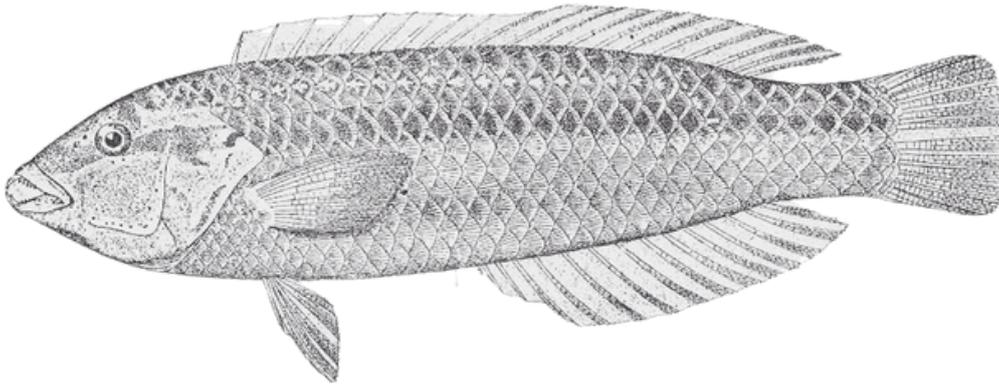
The kids exploded, unsure which part of the word they liked better. "It's a real place. Titicaca is a real place," I tried to explain.

"And check out the tits in our room here," Dr. Butts announced.

"Okay, okay. Take it easy, you," I told the doctor.

He pointed to the sign on the archway that read plainly: THE AVIARY OF TITS. "**Bushtit, bearded tit, tit-babbler, great tit**," he said. "We got them all."





*I took my class to see wildlife. We saw tits, boobies, and a “penis snake.”*

I stepped out of the room to escape the chaos and found more. A placard hung crooked. “That can’t be right,” I muttered.

Dr. Butts whispered in my ear, “Oh, that’s right. This beetle is the colon rectum beetle.” He went back to the kids. “Kids, check out this slippery dick,” he said next. “This is a fish that changes sex as it matures.”

This was a comedy tour, not a field trip.

The kids were holding their sides. One student asked me, “From what to what?”

I shrugged. I didn’t care. This was madness.

“Nipplefish,” someone shouted.

“That small antelope in the field out there is a dik-dik. Pees on rocks to mark its territory. Sounds like anyone you know,” Dr. Butts said proudly.

And then came the tank that ended my teaching career.

“Penis snake,” Dr. Butts said. “Not even a snake. An amphibian. No eyes. Lives in Brazilian rivers. No predators except the internet.”

Finally, I did not say a word. I stepped outside and stared at the sky. I thought about Dr. Butts and his line: “They are only words.” So are “You are fired.”

A week later, out of work, I was passed a note. An opportunity from the resistance.

Abigail George, you are called to serve the VEU. Tell no one. Report immediately.

So I did.



# PARADISE VERMONT



My boyfriend's red flag is that he tests positive on the FluxTracker while presenting as a VT-A lifer. It is not a relationship dealbreaker for me. My job is to closely observe people like him. Stay close. Don't talk about it. Investigate. Investigate. Investigate.

At first, I assumed he was drifting between the two worlds. People slip between worlds accidentally. Sometimes intentionally, like me.

True espionage is rare. Bill did not fit the profile, which only made it harder. He had a normal job. Normal habits. Online, he posted about weather, football, and, of course, his fish.

I checked his records myself. Birth certificate. School photos. A real family with an active group text chain. Turns out I was dating a genuine bore with no connection to VT-B.

Was I keeping him close because that is what you do when you do not know what you are dealing with? Or because I actually liked him? It had only been three weeks, so the data was thin. My gut said he was safe. I could ignore the glow, but that meant accepting my first false positive.

Trust issues as the foundation of any relationship is a problem, no doubt.

## Paradise Vermont

The brewery hosted an open mic on a Tuesday, which I was unaware of until I saw Bill with a guitar. Surprise. I didn't know he could play.

He signed up without telling me. He asked, but I told him we would not be a duo.

The room smelled like hops and damp wood. The first performer read a poem about divorce, which garnered tepid applause. No one wants to hear about divorce at a brewery.

Bill went up next and started with a cover song. He read the room and chose a Vermont favorite. Played cleanly, but awkwardly. Not bad. Just untrained.

People nodded along. It was a nice surprise. He kept eye contact with me like we were the only two in the room. I wanted to hide, but this was normal VT-A behavior.

He introduced his next song. A folk ditty he said he learned in a dream.

"Fun fact," he told the room. No one asked. "When i was younger, was in a coma. I had a dream so vivid someone taught me how to play guitar. This was the song he taught me."

He smiled and started strumming a watered-down folk song. Background music. Nothing shocking, until a line captured my attention and gave me an uneasy feeling.

*Garvin holds.  
Garvin stays.*

*I didn't move.*

*Hills stay green in the same old way.*

*Morning comes.  
Evening falls.  
Nothing here is lost at all.*

*Nothing here is lost at all.*

*Garvin never changes, never grows old.  
Same green hills, same stories told.  
Perfect Vermont, if you squint just right.  
Morning stays mornin', night stays night.*

People talked through the song. Someone ordered another round. A couple near the windows argued. My heart pounded.

*Don't cross the ancient covered bridge.*

I'd seen those words before. Not as music, but as notes scribbled in the margins of a notebook.

Bill didn't look at me once.

He finished to polite applause. Someone whooped, late. It wasn't me. The moment passed.



Outside, the air was warm and smelled of beer. There was no escaping it.

"You okay?" he asked.

I nodded too quickly. "You played something new."

"Yeah," he said. "Sometimes my hands just go there."

"Is it true? You learned to play guitar in a dream?"

He smiled, embarrassed. "Hundred percent, when I was in a coma."

I waited.

"I was in an accident," he said. "Not a big one, but enough to put me out for a while."

"How long?"

"Two weeks," he said lightly.

"Say more," I asked.

He thought about it. "It was like living in a Hallmark Christmas movie," he said. "It is the best of Vermont. And it never changes."

"Never grows old." I finished the lyric for him.

"You listened." He hesitated. "It was hard to leave, but I chose to leave Garvin."

I didn't push, but he read the curiosity on my face.

"But you didn't."

"No." He looked at the ground. "I left when I wanted to."

That landed hard. "You controlled it?" I said. "The coma?"

He nodded. "I think so." A pause. "Some days I regret it. But that was fifteen years ago."

Behind us, the brewery door opened and closed. Music spilled out, then quieted again.

"You're acting strange," he said gently.

"Yeah, I am," I said. "You're a strange man."

I didn't tell him about the FluxTracker. I didn't tell him about my prior knowledge of Garvin. I didn't tell him I'd been wrong about the kind of danger he represented. I suspected the false positive came from time spent in Garvin.

Mystery had held us together. Knowledge didn't bring us closer. It felt like relief, but now our connection felt fragile.

We walked to our cars. He kissed my cheek.

That was a choice.

I knew what came next if I didn't act. I knew there was a man who hibernated every winter. I knew where that road led.

And I wasn't ready to send a message into a place that forgets why it matters.

# VEU

Photos in this produced by John F. Rodgers and Chris Rodgers. Futurist elements added via Photoshop. Animal photos and drawings included via Wikipedia Commons. Everything else found on Canva.

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