

# The Strawberry from That Day

By I. V. Greenidge

On a warm day at the far end of summer, Vic stumbles through his cramped apartment, clutching a towel to his waist and mumbling obscenities as he maneuvers through a seemingly infinite stack of boxes strewn throughout his front room. He finds one labelled “Clothes” and, with a sigh of relief, tears it open.

Kitchenware.

A moment and four boxes later, he manages to wrangle a pair of undersized sweat clothes from the bottom of a box of what is supposed to be curtains. He throws them on, grabs his cigarettes and lighter, and meanders outside to the communal balcony. He has been summoned by the commotion that comes with a new tenant moving into the ancient apartment complex and the need to know which one would be the lucky recipient. The movers, large men in bright orange shirts, are carrying heavy, brightly colored furniture into the apartment below him. Instinctively, his foot taps and his hands begin to itch. After all, someone died in there. Probably. It’s undoubtedly more interesting than the truth. His former downstairs neighbors consisted of an uppity couple that had no business being in the slums near the city and often used Vic as a precautionary tale to their young son when they thought their neighbor was out of earshot. Unfortunately, in a building with cardboard walls, no one is ever out of earshot.

After a moment, a young woman steps out of one of the trucks. She has afro hair pulled taut into a neat bun and an ankle-length dress that billows around her legs in the wind. The woman keeps reaching up to touch her hair, as if used to wearing a hat. She is an anomaly in this part of the world where everything is dingy and gray and poor. There’s something about her that radiates confidence and alacrity. Those types of people like places like these: it makes them feel good about themselves to say that they know how poor people live. The thought of it exchanges the growing interest in Vic’s mind with the nauseating turning in his stomach. Looking at her, he thinks of the previous tenants and flicks his cigarette into their ugly abandoned garden fountain left down below, its water putrid and probably filled with mosquito larvae by now.

Vic pulls out his phone to find three missed calls in the time it has taken him to head into the shower until he remembered he has a phone. The last number is his mother. He pushes the notification and waits until he hears her voice. His mother is the kind of sweet old lady who would hand out treats to children if she wasn’t so painfully shy; the kind of woman who often is pairs with men like Vic’s dad, who speaks in grumbles and whose face has relaxed into a permanent scowl. Mrs. Hughes calls Vic every so often, mostly to make sure he’s still alive. She’s always worried he will get into trouble. Drugs, especially. Why, he has no idea. She belongs to those old-timers that believe cigarette smoking is a prelude to heroin addiction. Mr. Hughes has made her promise not to send any more money, which is fine. It isn’t like it made Vic feel better anyway. Contrary to popular belief, Vic has been living on mere pennies and keeping the rest in savings

for just such an event. It's running out, though. Quickly. Of course, his parents don't know, so Mrs. Hughes is on the other end of the line, speaking in a tone so low that the receiver can barely pick it up, saying, "You know, I can send you money if you really need it. Just say the word, Victor."

"Don't worry, Mom, I'm OK," he says, and then after a quick, "I love you. Goodbye," he hits the second notification, waits for his friend Dan to pick up, and says just as quickly, "Hey, let me hold fifty bucks."

There's a scoff on the other line, and then a *ding!* The only thing on his phone that makes that noise is the money transfer app. Dan works managing a team of accountants for a big company. He doesn't mind sending Vic money because Vic doesn't mind when he tells his personal clique of financial elites about how he helps his "poor friend from college."

"Thanks for your patronage," Vic says.

"Yeah, right, Vic," Dan replies. "Anyway, when do you start your new job?"

Vic's fingers slide over the "End Call" button and taps it once, silencing Dan. Even if Vic had been paying attention, he wouldn't have answered the question. After all, who doesn't know when the school year starts? The last call is from the principal, and she's left a voicemail. If it was really important, she would've called more than once, he reasons. Vic pretends not to see it, throws on a thin jacket, and heads out. The chill in the air reminds him that his ankles are exposed.

He comes back with arms full of groceries. He fumbles in his pockets for his keys, drops them, tries the knob in the hope that he'd forgotten to lock his door, and then reaches for them again. Vic's lights are off. The apartment is so small and the boxes have been there so long that they make neat little silhouettes in the light from the window. He finds his kitchen and starts unloading the groceries to where they need to be.

*Meow.*

Vic looks over to the doorway and sees two little eyes gleaming at him in the darkness. When he stares a little harder, he sees that it's a cat. *Meow*, it says, disregarding his astonishment. He is in awe of his stealthy visitor. His face cracks into a smile for the first time today.

"Hello, kitty," he says, his voice lighter. "When did you come in?"

The cat watches him, its pupils dilated. It stares just beyond him. Vic follows the path of the cat's eyes to tiny package of bright red strawberries he'd almost forgotten on the counter. He picks it up and moves it, and sure enough the cat's gaze follows. He takes a moment to Google whether or not cats can have strawberries, and then takes one from the package and tosses it to the cat. As if trained, the feline grabs the fruit in its jaws and slinks away somewhere else. Stunned, Vic resumes putting away groceries. Once he's done, he revisits the incident in his mind and, hesitant to write it off as a hallucination, goes looking for the cat. He finds it sitting on top of one of the boxes, content and falling asleep. He checks Google one more time just to be sure.

An hour later, he decides the cat should be named "Simone." Then it turns its tail to him indignantly, and he changes its name to "Socrates." He's pleased with himself for thinking ahead to splurge on the good tuna today.

There's a knock on the door. At first, he ignores it, but it grows louder, and the old, dirty metal door rattles under the force. Vic answers, and the young woman from before is there. Her

hair is wrapped up in a silk scarf with flower print; she's drawing a fluffy pink robe around herself. The frown on her face is so powerful that it forces his face to mirror it.

"You stole my cat," the young woman says.

For a moment, Vic forgets that there's a cat in his apartment. "I didn't steal any cat."

She leans around him. The cat meows as if calling for her. Vic changes his name to "Benedict."

"That's my cat," the young woman says.

Vic marches right over, scoops the cat up to minimal protest, and hands him over. He goes to shut the door in her face for being so rude, but she's already marching off. And there's no point in risking the integrity of an already-broken door for someone who's not even nearby to be offended by it. He shuts it and returns to his apartment. Two steps in and suddenly he remembers, with an ominous rush of cold air that seems to come from nowhere, that he is alone. As if on reflex, he picks up his phone and dials Dan's number.

"Hey, Vic," Dan says.

"I miss you, Dan," Vic replies.

There's a pause before Dan laughs. "Get the hell off my phone, Vic."

And just like that he's lulled back into his complacency and forgets the idle gloom of his cramped, dingy apartment.

An hour or so later, it's dark. Vic pulls a formerly frostbitten microwaveable meal from his microwave and folds the lava-hot sides over the tiny tundra in the middle. With the meal in one hand and a fork clenched in his other fist with all the determination of a clumsy someone who has no intention of coming back for another one, he takes his semi-glamorous post-sunset dinner onto the balcony. Waiting for him on the railing is the cat, who sits up when it sees him—or when it sees his plate. His first reaction is shock, then a smile, and then to turn his bottom lip up as if to mimic his feline solicitor. They watch each other in stark silence for a time, long enough for Vic's food to go cold and for both of them to lose interest in it. The cat's eyes meet his.

"Do you want another strawberry, then?" Vic asks.

"Stop feeding him strawberries," a voice from below answers.

Vic leans over the railing and sees the young woman standing below. Her hands are on her hips, her lips are curled into a half-smile, and her gaze is fixed on her insubordinate pet.

"You tricked me!" the man snaps, semi-playfully, to the cat.

"He didn't do anything," the young woman says. Her tone has a gravity to it that makes him wonder if she's noticed that he was joking. He soon decides that she hasn't. "He likes to hang around depressed people."

"I'm not depressed!" Vic retorts.

The young woman shifts her weight to her other leg; her half-smile turns into a mischievous grin.

"What's that you're eating?" she asks.

"Macaroni and cheese, I think."

"Home-cooked?"

He hesitates. "No?"

"Microwaveable?"

"Yeah?"

"Dollar store?"

"The *good* dollar store."

The young woman laughs. Vic pretends not to know why to spare his own feelings.

"I cooked," she explains. "You can come down and have some if you want. You have to throw *that* out though." She points to his microwave dinner.

As if in response to her invitation and to keep him from refusing, the dinner tips off the railing and plummets into the filthy fountain below. Vic watches this happen, laments the now useless sacrifice of his single dollar, and joins the young woman downstairs.

"Aren't you worried I'm a serial killer or something?" Vic asks as he rounds the corner.

"That'd make two of us," the young woman answers with a snort, and opens her door.

Her apartment, having been occupied for all of a few hours, has been infected with this young woman's peculiar style. There is a mix of classical art and modern pop art on her walls, and wherever the drywall begins to crack, it ends with detailed sketches made in charcoal and pastels. The bright furniture is arranged to allow the best amount of space that can be obtained from the tiny apartment, but it has been so masterfully done that he wonders, despite knowing better, how her apartment is so much bigger than his with so much more furniture and clutter. Moreover, the unmistakable scent of home-cooked, well-seasoned food floods his nostrils and pulls him in. The young woman invites him to sit and wait on her; her table is on the floor and has four bright green cushions for seats. She comes out of the kitchen with two plates whose aromatic contents she introduces as jollof rice with grilled beef. He takes a bite, basks in the flavor, and then remembers that he doesn't know the young woman's name.

As if she's read his mind, she smiles. "I'm Vera. Vera Bradshaw," she says, and then inclines her head to her cat, whose tail glides beside them just over the edge of the table and adds, "That's Happy."

The cat stands up to rest his paws and chin against the table. Vic takes a good look at him, taking in his scrunched, upturned nose and the wrinkle in his little kitty brow and decides that there is no reason this cat should be named "Happy."

"I'm Vic," he says with a full mouth.

"What do you do, Vic?" the young woman called Vera asks. She leans on her elbows in preparation to listen, a big childish grin on her face, her sleeves rushing down to reveal her thin brown forearms. There's a tattoo on her wrist, but she turns it away before he can make it out.

"I'm a teacher," is his curt answer, but Vera looks amused. He continues, "I have a Master's."

"Master's?" she repeats loudly, surprised. Hearing it said so happily makes him cringe, and he doesn't know why. "In what?"

He doesn't answer. He scoops more food into his mouth.

"I'm in school," she continues, forfeiting his answer. "My second year. Fashion school. I want to be a designer."

She sweeps her hands dramatically around the room as if its structure is testament to her words. Clearly, Vic surmises, this design is no accident. Somehow that makes it worse. With an "oh!" Vera pushes herself up to her feet with the grace of a bird taking flight and crosses the room and back with an awkward step. In her hands is a sketchbook. When she opens it, it's full of sketches: detailed drawings, bright beautiful patterns in all kinds of colors and styles. Vic doesn't know much about

fashion, but he can admit that the work is amazing. He tries to picture real people in them. He recalls his favorite ex-girlfriend; she would love this stuff. Too bad he doesn't have her number anymore.

Vera explains her swatches and patterns and sketches with enthusiasm that makes her eyes sparkle. She talks so quickly that she trips over her words; she flips back and forth between the pages, sometimes jumping too far ahead and going too far back. The more he listens, the more she stumbles. She notices how intently he is listening and suddenly withdraws, her gaze downward, her hands in her lap, sketchbook abandoned on the table, finally silent again.

"It's all amazing, Vera," he tells her.

She mumbles something that sounds like "Thanks."

Vic feels a chill go through his body. He remembers this chill. He opens Vera's sketchbook and turns to a random page. He's seen this drawing; she's explained it already, but it makes her happy. Vera begins to slide into her joyful rambling. This time includes a backstory. He learns that Vera's mother is from Ghana, that she has two sisters and a brother, that her mom is a stay-at-home parent, and that her dad works in a hospital. He learns that her mother taught her how to sew but doesn't do much of it herself nowadays. Well, he tells her in his head, life has a way of doing that to people. Vera's story makes him recall rushing home after school, shutting himself up in his room, and losing himself for hours in his books. He doesn't like to talk about it much, but he taught himself other languages just to read other books in those languages. Now those books sit in dusty piles scattered at the bottoms of random boxes or sold off somewhere or abandoned in his parents' home when he'd run out of space in the boxes and couldn't bear to sell them. He doesn't remember any of the languages to a significant degree. He knows a few vulgar words in French. He laughs thinking about it.

Vera, who has been talking this whole time, laughs with him about something else. When she laughs, he remembers genuinely laughing again, back when he was happy. That seems like so long ago that he forgets it existed. There's a box in his apartment filled with papers that remind him of his past. His old notes in his notebooks seems like letters from a pen pal he hardly knows now. Vera's laugh fills him with hope and sadness. He feels himself growing protective of it, becoming afraid of it, letting it go, and then repeating the cycle.

"Hi, Happy-Cat!" She's distracted by Happy slipping into her lap and curling up into a furry blob, loudly purring the whole time. No wonder she named her cat something as silly as "Happy," he thinks. Then he notices the tattoo on her arm.

It's not a tattoo. It's a scar: a thick keloid stroke across her delicate brown wrist. As if she feels his eyes on her, Vera pulls her sleeve down and resumes petting Happy as though nothing has happened.

"How's the food, Vic?" she asks without looking up at him.

"It's good. I like it."

"That's good." She grins. He can just barely see it from where he's sitting.

When she smiles, the room is warm.

"It's getting late," she says. "I'm kind of tired. Maybe I should go to bed. A lot of organizing still to do, you know?"

Vic stands in the face of her bad lie, lifting his plate with him. She takes the plate from him and shoos him away.

"Get to bed," she commands. "You can take Happy with you, if you want. Just don't feed him a bunch of strawberries, OK? I pay the vet bills around here."

“I don’t need him,” he says sharply. “Night, Vera.”

He exits the bright, colorful, spacious apartment, climbs the rusty metal stairs to the second floor, and enters his own apartment, where he is surprised to find that his world is so different from hers. He looks over the stacks of moving boxes and, for the first time, grimaces. Vic seizes the box nearest to him and lifts it with the strength worthy of a hundred pounds only to find that box was no more than twenty. He stumbles backward. Offended, he peers into it: beneath the two dirty, wrinkled undersized shirts and a pair of torn jeans covered in paint, a set of books peers out at him from the bottom, tangled up in one of the two cords he wore to his graduation. He balks when he sees them and drops the box as if it’s burned him. He changes his clothes and goes to bed, all without turning on a light. With no lights on, the sudden presence of the furry brush against his leg startles him. Vic throws himself out of bed and smacks the wall until he finds a light switch. The moment he turns it on, he sighs once and then turns it off again. He maneuvers back to bed.

“Night, Happy,” he says.

*Meow.*

“In the morning, you can have some of the good tuna,” Vic explains. “Maybe one strawberry. Don’t tell Vera.”