

Holiday Magic
A Short Story
By Cathryn Vogeley

Deep set eyes in bony sockets, a long-ish sharp nose, skin draped over broad cheekbones reflected in Vernon Warder's rear-view mirror. He nudged the frame to accommodate his morning height. During the day, his spine would collapse somewhat, but each morning, after a night's rest, he sat a half inch taller. He checked his watch again, a little after ten, a late start for his morning mall walk.

Vernon inserted the key and held it for a moment before turning on the ignition. There was something he was supposed to do, some obligation he'd forgotten.

The phone conversation earlier in the morning, that Nancy, one of those 'give and inch and take a mile' types; she ran the holiday gift drive and started off apologizing for the last-minute request, but shifted gears; would he mind taking the post outside of Macy's? He'd answered, yes.

Her voice turned syrupy. "Oh, thank you Mr. Warder, thanks for being so flexible."

"Now wait a minute," Vernon said. "You asked me if I would mind taking the post. Yes, I *would* mind. And no, I do not intend to take the post. I won't be doing any volunteering. Take me off your list."

Nancy fell silent.

He said, “Is there anything else?” And she said no, then thanked him quietly, wished him a happy holiday, and said goodbye. That was all. He should have been more congenial, he knew. But he had a tight schedule to keep and that was that. He started the car, turned up the heater, turned off the radio.

Granular snow skimmed the dry road, blowing like fine sugar on a dry countertop. He thought of young Marian in the kitchen, next to the open window; a breeze blowing across the stone work surface, sugar and flour whooshing onto the floor and how she cursed, thinking she was alone, slamming the window shut. Startled by the door’s clack, she spun around and seeing him watching her, she was embarrassed and apologized. No, no he told her, it’s what I love about you. Spunky. Spunky became Punky, his name for her when they were alone.

Under a dusky sky that blended with the gaunt bare trees, Vernon took his time parking the Oldsmobile in line with the M of Macy’s sign. Always the M, a good guide for finding the car later.

Vernon boosted himself upright from the front seat using both hands. The world around him had lost all color some time ago, even before winter settled in. He locked the car with his key, turned and leaned into the wind, his coat collar up around his neck, shoulders hunched, white hair flying. He hobbled to the mall entrance.

A snag of something still wheedled at him; some sort of occasion or request or chore. He decided it must be the store; stop at the grocery. He’d finish up by eleven-fifteen, pick up some eggs and instant coffee at the market, maybe a grapefruit. He liked the pink grapefruit at this time of year, although even the grapefruit no longer had that pink on yellow of the old days.

Once inside, the old man looked toward Sears at the north end, then to JC Penny's at the other. Upper level today. The place had already filled up. Young women pushed baby strollers. Old couples held onto each other. A middle-aged woman with loaded shopping bags toddled by, her face haggard with the frenzy of gift buying. Vernon would not be making purchases. A man in oversized pants and stained suspenders moved slowly, holding a broom and dust pan.

A Christmas tree soared from downstairs to the second-floor ceiling. Holiday music filled the space as store lights flickered and doors unlocked, slid back and metal gates were pushed into their cubby holes. The buttered scent from the popcorn stand, a movie house smell, that he barely noticed anymore. For holiday season, they used big metal buckets for gifts, topped by gaudy bows. Down the way, a pendulum clock the size of a moon rocket with fancy scrolled edges jutted through the atrium to the second level. Vernon checked his watch against the clock; a half hour late. Bah.

He looked forward to the *end* of the holiday when the mall would belong to him again, when he'd walk freely, when his schedule would be on time. Vernon set his mouth tight and breathed deep. The hip had its own opinion of this venture. But, he muttered to himself, sooner started, sooner finished. So off he went, one shoulder drooping and a limp in his stride. He kept his eyes forward and down, walking next to the railing that bordered an atrium below, away from the store entrances, avoiding the fast walkers and those who stared at phones.

"Mr. Warder, Mr. Warder," a petite young woman called. "Hello, over here!" Vernon slowed but did not stop. His expression did not change, nor did he return the wave, but went back to his pace. He could afford no further interruptions that morning. He had to be home by noon for the local news on TV. Lunch, then from two to four o'clock, he'd sit by the living room window where he kept the jigsaw puzzle, a picture of a woman on a ladder, her back to the camera, wearing a light

blouse and dark skirt, reaching to a high shelf. He had put the pieces of the woman together first, even before the puzzle's border, pretending it was Marian's picture. Over the months, or maybe years, the puzzle had lost its color; the woman's skirt used to be red. Colors fade in the sun, everyone knows that.

At the corner of Lush and Hallmark was a holiday greeter, brass bell in hand, wearing an elf outfit with a donation bucket next to him. The elf nodded and said, "Merry Christmas." Vernon recognized the elf from the orientation he'd been tricked into attending. There was no chance that he, Vernon Warder-former accountant for Pike's Paperclips on the city's near east-side, would take a position standing outside of Lush, ringing a bell.

Marian had refused to walk near any stores where strong perfumes were sold, just a few breaths would make her stomach turn. They had agreed to walk together until she began making demands on the route. His schedule was set, not negotiable and she stopped coming; in fact, he'd not seen her since.

In the coffee shop, a bald-headed, ragged bearded weirdo pushed metal chairs next to tables, each one making a grating noise. A dark apron with the franchise logo across the bib had gone sideways as the man grinned and waved at Mr. Warder, "Morning!" as if Vernon Warder was an old friend. Vernon didn't know the man but nodded as he passed. He wondered how long the kid had worked at the coffee shop. He's a little old to be a college student, and aren't all those coffee people in college? He tried to think of when he first saw the man, but the days all blended together into weeks and into months. If not for his puzzle he wouldn't know if a day had changed on the calendar or if he'd slept in his chair for only an hour. And so, on a pad next to the puzzle, he noted the date and time each day, just to be sure.

Most of the stores were ladies' clothing or jewelry or shoes or make up or perfume as if the entire commercial industry was set up for them. A woman in torn up jeans and a belly baring shirt, balanced on high heeled boots, rearranging a clothes rack. She turned toward Vernon as he shuffled by, and flashed him a wide smile. "Hi there, happy holidays!" A painful looking ring hung from the end of her nose; on her arm was a tattoo. His lips tightened into a flat line.

Everyone seemed to be in high gear, even the mothers with baby strollers wove around him like drivers passing a broken-down car in the slow lane. He took off his corduroy car coat and carried it on one arm, having worked up a sweat. Fifteen minutes to go. Just keep going until your hour is up.

At last, the huge clock showed eleven-o-five. Vernon leaned against bench outside of Macy's and laid down his jacket, took out a wrinkled white handkerchief and wiped his face, rolled up his shirt sleeves, held onto the seat and eased himself down. Marian had stopped ironing his handkerchiefs, but he didn't mind. She had enough to keep her busy.

Vernon jerked awake with a snort. His mouth hung open, his tongue was dry and his neck pained. The pendulum clock said eleven fifty-eight. He frowned and squinted. There was something he had to do. He checked his coat pocket, first the right one, then left, both empty until finally he reached into the inside breast pocket and found a scrap of paper with his handwriting on it. Blinking to clear his eyes, he lifted his bifocals to see through the close-up lens. Clock at noon.

Nonsense. Had Marian written the note and forgotten to tell him? No, it wasn't her handwriting. Marian. No sense going into all that again. He wiped his eyes and nose gathering his wits to push on.

A chorus of walkers, shoppers, the bare-belly woman, the big lipped girl from Lush, and store clerks surrounded him singing holiday tunes. Vernon looked at his watch, twelve-ten. His breath came in short spurts--trapped, he was trapped! Soon they began singing happy birthday, everyone looking at him, smiling, even saying his name.

In a state of confusion, he stood, intending to leave. But the singers blocked his way, joyful faces, clearly meaning to keep him there. Vernon willed himself to wake up; this could actually be happening. But then the man with the broom appeared holding not a broom, but a sheet cake with decorative edges and candles, with his name in the center. He wasn't asleep.

These people didn't even know him. The man from the coffee shop was next to him saying, "But Vernon, does anyone really know anyone? I've been saying hello to you and Marian for years. We all have. You're the icing on my cake, you make my day when I see you tromping past each morning, right on schedule. It must be hard living alone like you do. You were late today and I worried something bad might have happened."

Vernon sighed at the voices, all the laughter surrounding him. From the sound system came the tune, White Christmas. The lighting dimmed as if he'd entered a theater. The Christmas tree changed from a spectacle to spectacular with lights of all colors and sizes reflected in magnificent shiny ornaments. And then a woman wearing a red knit dress emerged from the crowd; Marian, smiling, young, as beautiful as the day they married; her skin as pure as ivory.

He said, "Oh Punky, I've been looking for you." She reached for his hand and when she touched him, his hand transformed into the smooth-skinned, muscular hand of his younger self. His hair

turned thick and dark, his shoulders straightened and his hip pain disappeared. Vernon stood easily and took her close, his arm wrapped around her slender waist.

The crowd stepped back allowing the couple a broad space. His vision cleared and he saw colors everywhere, bright and alive. Vernon and his wife, in graceful tandem, waltzed like well-practiced dancers. His head held high, he guided her, youthful and sure. Onlookers wiped tears away, women shook their heads at the miracle. Vernon spun his partner gently as she rolled up close to him, then away, the two of them with outstretched arms, watching each other, eye to eye, the only ones in the room, as natural as could be.

The song ended. Vernon bowed and before he could speak, the woman slipped away into the crowd. He shook his head wincing, suddenly feeling weak, he took his seat again and shed the tears that he'd held in for too long. The hands, that moments before were young and strong, became wrinkled again and rested on his brown polyester slacks, over bony knees. His mall people helped Vernon stand as if he was a celebrity, they fawned over him, some with misty eyes, they thanked him. Vernon smiled like his younger self and knew he was not alone.

Author's note: A version of this story was shortlisted on Reedsy: www.blog.reedsy.com