



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

An Unexpected Nightmare

Jason Constantine Ford

Valery looked at herself in the mirror and realized that this was the first day that she was able to see her reflection without being overcome with fear since being hidden in isolation from the outside world. She was starting to look at herself as a survivor, as a woman who could overcome adversity and keep her character intact. Three months ago, she was a member of a sect known as the Children of Tomorrow until she fell out with them. They were the main syndicate in Australia for the trading of hallucinogenic drugs. They were also a cult who regularly practiced black magic. One day, Valery failed to follow one of the daily requirements of this sect which was the duty of performing a spell under the influence of magic mushrooms. Rupert Windsor, the grand wizard of the Children of Tomorrow was able to detect how Valery failed to perform one of her key duties. Valery remembered the way she was disciplined. As this memory became clearer to her current level of consciousness, she took a step back from the mirror and looked away. In the space of a few moments, it became too hard for her to even look at her own reflection. Although she was plagued with a fear of facing up to the reality of her past, she took consolation in knowing that she was successful in escaping the Children of Tomorrow. In the weeks following her punishment, Valery realized that her status among the sect was becoming worse.

She knew of past cases of members who were killed for open defiance of Rupert's authority and feared the possibility that she could be killed also. Three months ago, she devised a strategy to escape from the main residence which housed aspiring wizards in the suburb of Mount Lawley in Western Australia. She contacted a friend called Louise and arranged to be picked up and taken to her house after midnight. For the past three months, she stayed inside Louise's house without any contact with the outside world including all her other friends and members of her family. After a month of police searches and public announcements of Valery Brunswick being a missing person, her family and her other friends gave up hope that she was still alive with the exception of her mum who clung to the belief that she was a survivor. As Valery came to grips with the reality of being cut off from the outside world, the guilt of living a constant lie was making her unhappy. She was uncomfortable about the fact that Louise was being used to spread a belief among many people that she was no longer alive. Despite this guilt, her desire to stay alive was the most important thing to her. She feared the possibility that if she went to family members and friends who were known to the Children of Tomorrow, she could be tracked down. As each second was passing by, her sense of guilt became stronger than her fears about the sect. Louise entered the bathroom and was immediately aware of a change in Valery's emotional state.

'You don't look well. Are you sure you want to continue on with this?'

‘No, this is becoming too much for me. I don’t think I’m going to stay here much longer.’ Valery responded.

‘Where do you plan to go?’

‘I’ll contact my mum. I have to see her again. I can’t continue stressing her out like this.’

‘Are you sure you want to do this?’

‘Yes, I’m hoping that I’ve made the right decision.’

‘You realize that you’re taking a risk?’

‘Yes, it’s a risk I’m willing to take.’

Shortly after that, Valery contacted her mum and informed her that she was still alive. Valery gave her a full explanation of the situation that she was in and her mum made a promise that she would not let anyone else know about her revelation.

After reaching the central underground train station in Perth, Valery tagged off her transport card on the electronic scanner and realized that she did not have enough credit to reach her mum’s house in Claremont. She checked the prices for a one way ticket to Claremont. A standard fare was twelve credits while a concession fare was only three credits. Valery opted for a concession fare using the spare concession card of Louise under the identity of Louise Jones. She logged onto one of the interactive fare machines and scanned Louise’s concession card on it. An image appeared on the screen of a clenched hand being opened up and extending its fingers out to expose a palm. There was one feature of the hand that distinguished it from an ordinary hand. The hand was not attached to a wrist. It was a separate entity of itself. Words appeared on the screen. ‘Please Provide Your Fingerprints’. A fingerprint examination slot came out of the machine just below the screen. Valery turned away from the screen for a few seconds as memories were coming back to her of how she was punished by Rupert Windsor. She remembered the synthetic hand that was animated by Rupert’s magic and how it repeatedly struck her across the face. In her confusion, Valery stood in front of the machine without moving while two other people waited behind her. The man directly behind her became frustrated.

‘What are you doing?’ He asked. Valery did not say anything. The man resumed speaking. ‘I’ve got another train to catch. Are you going to buy a ticket or just stand there?’

‘Don’t worry about it. I’ll get my concession card and go.’

Valery removed Louise’s concession card from the machine and walked away. She purchased a standard fare from one of the sales assistants and waited for the next train to Claremont. As she was waiting, Valery noticed that the man who was annoyed with her at the machine was also catching the same train as her. He approached her and blew bubble gum a few inches away from her face. Valery reacted by turning away in the other direction. The man continued to blow

bubble gum. A robotic security guard became aware of the situation and grabbed hold of the man and dragged him away as he was screaming out in front of other patrons. As the man was removed from the platform, a light flashed from one of the security cameras. The flash was in the direction of Valery and not that of the man. Valery could not understand why this was the case. The trip from the central train station to Claremont was followed by a short walk to her mum's house. Arriving at her mum's house, she was greeted with hug and let in. Her mum led her from the foyer to the lounge room where she took a family portrait of her husband, Valery and herself when Valery was a child of only three years.

'Every day, I've been looking at this picture wondering where you were.'

'I'm sorry I caused you all this grief.' Valery said.

'Don't worry about it. You're here, that's what matters to me. How long do you plan to stay?'

'I'll stay with you tonight and head back to Louise's place tomorrow.'

Valery's mum noticed the scar on the left of her face. 'What happened to you?'

'Before I ran away, the grand wizard punished me.'

Valery's mum responded to this by closing all the blinds in the lounge room. She resumed her conversation with Valery in a low voice. 'I've heard reports from a friend of your father in the police force that a criminal organization has infiltrated into the security camera system of the Perth Railway Network. Did you use a train to make it here?'

'Yes.'

'If a member of the Children of Tomorrow were to gain access to CCTV on the rail lines and obtain a picture of you, that sect could track you down. Many new CCTVs have a tendency to zoom in on people with scars and external tattoos. One of those cameras could have zoomed in on you.'

'Oh, my goodness. You're right.' Valery remembered the flash from one of the security cameras at the central train station. 'What do you think I should do?'

'You need to stay here until I can organize something. I'll be going out to buy a special kind of makeup that hides scars. You're going to use this make up. After the scar is completely hidden, I'll drive you to Louise' place.'

'I think the cellar would be the safest place for me.'

'Yes, you'll have to go there for your own safety. I'll go to the shop now and come back as soon as I can.'

Valery embraced her mum once again, removed a mat from the floor, opened a door and entered the cellar before closing it behind her. She turned on a light and sat down. There was a mirror in front of her. She gazed at the scar on the left side of her face. Memories of walking through the Perth Underground Subway were coming back to her. Images of robot guards and security cameras were flickering through her head.

Valery carefully read through the instruction booklet for the application of artificial skin on a person's face. Before arriving back home, her mum explained to her that she was unable to find any brands of makeup that were capable of hiding scars. As this was the case, her only other choice was to buy artificial skin from the black market. The instructions booklet for the artificial skin claimed that Valery would be required to dampen the skin with water and then mold it according to the features of her face. The approximate time for skin dampening was a quarter of an hour while that for molding the skin on her face would be three quarters of an hour. Valery handed the booklet to her mum.

'I'll try to get it done as quickly as I can.'

'Can you give me a ring when you're finished?'

'Yes, that's what I'll do.'

Valery's mum proceeded from the cellar to the lounge room where she heard the door bell ringing. Entering the foyer, she opened a curtain to look through a window to the right of the front door. Nobody could be seen. She opened the door and saw a young girl who would have been between three and four years of age.

'What are you doing here? A child like you shouldn't be roaming the street alone.'

'I need you to help me find my parents.'

'How can I find your parents? I don't even know who they are.'

'I'll show you a picture. You may know them.'

The girl took out a picture of a young man and a young woman and showed them to Valery's mum. For a split second, the images appeared to devolve to skeletal like human beings before returning to the way they previously were. Valery's mum was briefly shocked and was lost in thought for several seconds. After regaining her senses, she realized that the child had disappeared from view. She closed the door and turned around to see the child standing in the foyer. A few dried mushrooms were on the floor while another one was in a hand of the child. A grey vapor was coming out the mushroom which the child held. Valery's mum was starting to feel dizzy as she looked at the child. After a few seconds, she fell down on the floor unconscious. The child searched through her pockets and found a wallet. She opened the wallet and looked through its contents which included a driver's license and credit cards. The identity of the cards

was that of Belinda Brunswick, the mother of Valery Brunswick. The child made a search through the house and could not find Valery. She took out her mobile phone and rang Rupert Windsor.

‘Hello, have you made it into the house?’ Rupert asked.

‘Yes, I’m already here.’ The Child answered

‘Is there anyone there?’

‘I found Belinda but there’s no sign of Valery. What should I do?’

‘I’ll send you a picture that was taken from a train that Valery travelled on. You’ll need to print out the picture and use your spells to find out where she could be. She shouldn’t be too far away.’

‘I’ll do what you said. Bye, bye.’

‘Bye, bye.’

The child opened up the email service on her phone, downloaded the picture of Valery and connected her phone to a portable hand held printer. She closely observed the image in front of her eyes and printed it. The scar on the left side of Valery’s face brought back memories from the past. The child remembered being present at the ritual where Valery was being punished and had strong memories of her being cut from a blow that was delivered by a synthetic hand. She placed the picture on a table and took out a wand. She began chanting spells. In a matter of seconds, a hand appeared above the picture of Valery. It pointed in two directions as the child was walking out of the foyer. First, it pointed west toward the lounge room, removed its index finger from a pointing position, where it was paused before resuming a pointing position of its index finger, down towards the ground. The child took the picture and placed it on a table in the lounge room. The hand reappeared and pointed directly at a mat that was on the floor. The child removed the mat and discovered a door leading down into a cellar. She opened the door and saw Valery looking at her. The child took out a dried mushroom and threw it at Valery. It landed on her face and she fell down on her backside. As she was on the floor, vapors came out of the mushroom and ascended toward her face. Valery became dizzy and fell asleep.

Valery woke up to find herself at an intersecting point of an underground cavern. There were three passageways for her to take; one to her left, one to her right and one behind her. She turned around and decided to take the path behind her. Along this path, there were mirrors on both sides and not one of them was providing a reflection of Valery. Everything in the passageway except Valery was being reflected. She placed her hands in front of her and her presence appeared to be real. She used her hands to touch her shoulders, torso and thighs as she was walking. As Valery was trying to come to grips with the presence of mirrors which were working contrary to her senses, she reached the conclusion that the mirrors must have been magical. She put her hand out

to touch one of the mirrors. After making contact with it, an image of her appeared. It was a real image of herself with one specific feature standing out among the rest. Her scar on the left side of her face was almost twice as big as it was before. Seeing the scar at an enlarged size, filled her with an even greater desire to have it hidden. She checked her pockets and discovered that the artificial skin which she had before was gone. Suddenly a small infant girl could be seen coming out of the mirror. It was that same girl who witnessed her being tortured by a synthetic hand and was also the one who found her in the cellar of her mum's house.

'Where am I?' Valery asked.

'You're in a place of punishment.' The girl responded.

'Why am I here?'

'You betrayed the Children of Tomorrow and must be punished.'

'How can you punish me? You're only a child.'

'You're a fool to think the way you do. I can do many things you could never do.'

'Like what?'

'I can get a synthetic hand to punish you again.'

After saying these words, a synthetic hand appeared behind the back of the child. It was pointing directly at Valery. Valery reacted by running in the opposite direction from where she was going. She reached the intersecting point and turned to her left. She took a brief look back and the hand was still following her. She passed through an archway into a cavern that was filled with many mannequins that were either standing or spread out on the ground. The other end of the cavern did not have any doors or passageways to pass through. Valery was persuaded that her only option would be to use a mannequin or a part of a mannequin to fend off the synthetic hand. She grabbed hold of a mannequin and placed it in front of her as a protective shield. The hand responded by gripping the mannequin by the neck and hurling it across the cavern. The hand formed itself into a clenched position. It swung a punch at Valery's face and connected on her left cheekbone before pulling back to its original position. Valery fell to the ground from the impact of the punch. She was also bleeding on the side of her face where the scar was. The hand resumed its punishment by punching Valery in the face and the body. Valery tried to cover herself from the punches but was unsuccessful. The hand continued punching, again and again.