

Velocitation

by MARY OTIS



IMAGE: CREDIT TK

THERE WAS SOLID GROUND beneath the car, and then it was gone. It was not unlike the quick jerk start of an amusement ride. No going back. Mr. Magoo driving off a bridge. Her dashboard rattled and exploded. The glove box flew open, her car clock cracked. Viva was *driving down stairs*, and she needed to back up immediately, needed to turn this situation around, but her car was heaving like some kind of mad metal whale. Nuts and bolts flew everywhere and all at once, ringing as they clattered off the pavement.

Okay, so she went to yoga drunk. Slow progress is still progress. Then Viva drove to the Finley School where she teaches modern dance to young women who have ridiculous, curious, wanton energy flying out of them at all the wrong angles. She was hired to help them tamp it down, batten the hatches, close their mental loopholes and do whatever it is people do when they try to get young women to relax.

Then she took a wrong turn at the quad and drove down a cement staircase. There was something about the sight line that day — a winter afternoon when the air was so gray and murky she might as well have been driving through the ocean. Still, with a seizing clarity, she knew she was in the wrong.

As she flew past the parking kiosk, she saw a man in an orange vest. He lifted his arm as if to wave, as if to say, everything is okay, all is well. *Stop!* he meant. *Stop!*

She remembered a boy from her hometown named Nick Fleck. He went drag racing out by the state mental hospital and drove off the side of a hill. It was rumored they never found the corpse. Some said his body fell into an open garbage truck in the next county, was crunched, spun, and sucked up into the ethers. The kids drew secret pictures of it in art class, wheels spinning in mid-air, a boy with a big open mouth and the word “Noooo!!”

A hubcap flew off, bouncing hard and fast like a gigantic, fat quarter. Viva could smell burning rubber and much

worse, coffee cake air freshener, which they’d sprayed at the car wash without her permission. A terrible, frightening fragrance.

When Nick Fleck drove off the hill, it must have felt like he was flying, and maybe he was overjoyed at being thrown into the sky, thick with black clouds, and maybe for a crazy moment he thought they would catch him as he fell. Nick Fleck was 16, and he should have known better. She should have known better. It wasn’t too early for shame — never too early for that — and her car hadn’t even hit the ground.

The word velocitation flashed in her brain. A driver’s ed term. Velocitation: going so fast, you don’t know how fast you’re going.

Then her car came to a quick, hard stop — like a door slammed, like an argument ended. The entire drive down the steps couldn’t have taken more than six seconds.

*

Viva looks out her living room window at the Elsinore Hotel, which is three city blocks away, but at night appears much closer. A milk tooth moon lingers in the sky. She puts her palms against the glass. Standing slumber seems possible. Some of the hotel windows are dark tonight, plain and simple black, the black of serious shoes and unmade choices. Other windows are lit by the blue fires of television. She watches them flame, brighten, and vanquish. Hotels are wonderful places. Joy is possible — people jumping, and loving, and throwing each other like toys in the air. She’s seen them, or she thinks she’s seen them.

Viva feels slightly melted around the edges. She recognizes this particular hangover — Hangover of the Tender Sorrows. It makes her miss people she hasn’t seen in years, miss people she has yet to meet. Bad songs seem better. Strangers appear kinder. People she encounters during the day, for example clerks stocking grocery store shelves, seem like novitiates in their dedication

and attention to their work. Hangover of the Tender Sorrows makes her donate money to all sorts of causes, generally ones on television — Red Cross, dog shelters, Sally Struthers.

Oh, for a knuckle of sleep. Her mind feels like a distant doll head on gyro. For hours she’d lain awake, shoveling breath, awaiting the word *rest* from the invisible human engine room that stays open from birth to death.

And how does a person change? Viva recalls reading an article in the AAA magazine that said a person could change in 21 days. Or maybe it was 36. Or maybe it was 21 for simple things like learning to chew with your mouth closed but 36 for replacing cigarettes with archery. What is the conversion rate from bad habit to complete and total change when you factor in genetic hesitancy?

*

Tally Cooper, the principal, told Viva that if she got some treatment, *verifiable* treatment, she might be able to return to her teaching position. No unsubstantiated treatment for Tally, no quiet reflection by a pond or that sort of thing.

Tally smiled at her and said, “People in the arts have a predilection for substance abuse, but in your particular art form things can get very dangerous very quickly.” She paused and twisted the top button of her purple blazer, winding herself like a watch.

Viva should have known the minute Tally seated her without closing the office door. Behind her in the hallway, Viva heard Shawna Klinger, the youngest girl in her dance class, a pretty girl who smelled like baby powder and farts, exclaiming her way down the hall. Shawna was just over four feet tall and in a permanent state of astonishment. She twirled past the open doorway of the principal’s office and proclaimed, “I’m so excited, I think I might sweat!”

Viva and Tally exchanged a smile, and for a moment Viva felt herself back in Tally’s good graces. After all, she was

a very good teacher, and her students loved her. They sometimes slipped notes in her dance bag, ripped notebook paper scribbled upon in turquoise or lavender ink that declared: *You are an estrella — that's Spanish for star!* Or, *No matter what, stay the way you are!*

Viva loved that they lived in a world of possible, instant malleability, where one could actually fear slipping into a new persona overnight. And it wasn't completely far-fetched. She recently read in *Limn: the Chronicle of Secondary Teachers*, an article that stated it was possible to change the structure of one's brain, the actual layout. It seemed that the brains of hundreds of taxi drivers had been tested, and the longer a driver drove, the larger his hippocampus, the part of the brain that stores spatial information, became. It had to do with relying on navigational skills in response to environmental demands. Viva was briefly comforted by the thought that perhaps her own hippocampus was larger than most. Not that it was the kind of thing one could brag about, but dancing did require spatial skill.

Shawna shrieked with wild laughter that abruptly ended. The moment passed and Tally's face fell. Viva could see this meeting was not easy for her. Tally peered at Shawna over Viva's head and spiraled her wrist in a "move along" motion.

A single tear leaked out of Viva's right eye and ran down the side of her cheek where it halted at her jawbone before dropping into her shirt collar. Viva remained motionless in the hope that Tally did not see it, but already she was offering her a tissue from the Lincoln Continental of Kleenex dispensers, a faux mother of pearl affair that Tally had most likely selected with great care.

Tally leaned in and said, "I must tell you something, because I think you'll understand."

Viva considered that this statement was not always a compliment. Tally quickly inhaled, as if she was about to jump off the high board. She looked Viva in the eye. "I am in love with Kit Stockbridge. No, I am sick with love for Kit Stockbridge. It is *like an addiction*."

Kit Stockbridge taught an advanced junior class called *Into the Woods: on Personal Inquiry*, featuring the works of Thoreau and Emerson. He wore

wrinkled white shirts that did not seem completely clean. Kit Stockbridge detested water waste and constantly bragged about his custom made low-flow toilet in the faculty room. It could be argued he was a man of great passion.

Tally picked up a Lucite cube within which a photo of her cat, Ted, floated. She put it down with a sigh that said Ted had received too much of her attention for far too long.

"What do you think I should do, Viva?"

"I think you need to head directly toward it."

"You do?"

Tally looked stunned at the simplicity of the directive. She got up from her seat and reached out to hug Viva, not quite putting her arms around her, but slapping Viva's forearms like a penguin.

It was suddenly clear to Viva that Tally had only meant to scare her, only wanted to make her feel what it would be like if she was asked to leave. Tally sometimes did cameos in the school plays, and her rebuke had seemed quite believable, but Viva had been spared. She vowed to go home and re-pot her plants, clean the grout in the kitchen tile, send money to some new charities.

"So, I can stay on?"

"Oh, Viva, I'm sorry, but that's non-negotiable until you receive verifiable treatment." Tally pulled something from her top drawer, which she slid toward Viva. It looked like a bookmark and featured the word "addiction" with a plus and minus sign on either side. Was there a treatment center run by Scholastic magazine? Was there a rehab just for teachers?

"Look, Tally, what I did was wrong, but it was a one-off, and it won't ever happen again," said Viva. Immediately, she thought that of course it wouldn't happen again, because how many times can one drive down stairs?

The phrase "one-off" shamefully hung in the air. She never used that phrase and had no idea why it had flown out of her mouth. This was something that had plagued her since childhood — in moments of extreme anxiety, she used words and phrases that were not her own, coughing up expressions of speech that had without her knowledge lodged in her brain. She needed to take a different tack, and quickly.

"Tally, I could talk to Kit for you, I could drop some hints, and see if he seems interested."

Tally looked disgusted. A kind of internal fortitude seemed to overcome her, stiffening her posture, and she squinted at Viva. The look in her eyes said this wasn't the first time someone had tried to pull a fast one on her. Tally hadn't made it this far as an emotional traffic controller of whiny teachers, petulant parents, belligerent coaches, and drunk dance instructors without a certain kind of moxie.

"Viva, I will pray for you."

Viva went to gather her things, and as she walked down the corridor she passed a group of field hockey girls. They fell silent as she approached before continuing on like a multi-headed beast — whispering, snickering, dragging their sticks behind them like so many wooden tails.

*

The sky seems done for the night, but then Viva sees it — the moon, still there, like a bone unbreakable. It is 5:30 in the morning, the time she usually gets ready for school. Viva will miss her early morning modern class, where she usually finds a girl or two, half-asleep outside the studio door. They are there because they love what she loves, and what she loves about dancing is the slicing through air, the impermanence of posture, throwing her heart to the sky. How often does anyone get to do that with good cause? Good cause, and good pay, because, after all, she was paid pretty well at the Finley School.

Viva's eyes travel to the top right window of the Elsinore Hotel. A single figure stands alone, watching her. The Elsinore Hotel, where one can disappear into the discrete chapters of days, the click of the key card in the lock. She grabs her toothbrush and wallet. The thing that draws people to hotels, the thing that people are really after is the secret ingredient, sleep-infused air. So many sighs, chortles, and pants — and the softest of all, dream breath. Who isn't innocent then? //

VELOCITATION is an excerpt from a novel-in-progress by Mary Otis.



IMAGE: CREDIT TK