

THE

V
OLE

AND

THE

SHREW

a childish story by Tracey Sterns and Ella Dorsey

WHY I LIKE IT: Fiction Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...

“The Vole and the Shrew – a Childish Story,” by Tracey Sterns and Ella Dorsey is as cute a fable as you’re going to get.

This is a story makes me happy.

This is a story I would read to my kid – not that he would understand.

The Vole lives on the Shrew’s land, specified to stay out of the way when told because of a misunderstood sense of entitlement on the Shrew’s part.

That’s about as far into the plot as I will get. Otherwise, you would miss the moral of the story – a moral I would hate for you to miss.

What Sterns and Dorsey have done so well here is to elevate what could easily be passed off as a children’s tale (hence the “childish”) into a sort of updated philosophical treatise on how we treat people. Most children would probably be lost in questions (“What’s a vole?” “What’s a shrew?” “Why are those different than moles?” “Why do shrews deal in arts and antiquities and deal with assholes who ignore them in life and at church...?”) but that’s not the point – adults do

that shit all of the time and we act as if we have moral superiority to the innocence of children (thanks, William Blake).

The point is that in the simplicity of this story lies a treasure for all ages – humor, pleasure, and the thought that we have all grown having been expertly amused.

Five stars.

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language...)

The whole story.

The *Vole* spread himself supine on his back, shifting from spring-to-spring on a worn-out mattress of a bolster-less bed. There, tucked, ensconced as it were, in his subterranean vault, cellar-dwelling, humbling grotto-abode basement flat: With its accommodated grazed and chipping earthenware, bent, luster-lost cutlery, some canned goods and a blackening sterling silver tea service taped and sealed in yellowing plastic. He lay recumbent and unguarded within his ill-lit, windowless fortress, crumbling cinderblock walls, blemishing sinfully low ceilings and a blushing up-flush *toilette* commode . . . steps from a bus stop.

The *Shrew* lived in alternate, undisputed, obstinate opulence on the remainder of the sprawling multi-floored, vast and flowing residence: Owning two-or-three cars, on lease (an occasional hired driver), three-or-four houses, at least, and two-or-more triplexes. She collected antiques and lent money at handsome rates of interest. A comely creature with wide hazel eyes, pink nose and a dazzling smile--as incalculable as her impassive income (set illusively at leisure). And, the occasional hair-like whisker she would see to being either teased if not plucked by her call-in beautician and travelling *salonist*.

The furniture she preferred, and had acquired, was in the habit of appreciating from the eras

that intrigued her. And it was chosen on the condition of having her appear younger than her surroundings. She was not in possession of anything that did not provide a return.

They both lived happily and apart, though in relative close proximity. The *Vole* was shortsighted and hairless by choice. He had a fine head of hair and a noble face, but preferred the sleekness of his shaven epidermis for washing-up and its modesty of upkeep. He lived off a serviceable fixed income (what the *Shrew* called his '*unknewity*') as his cheques made their way, each two weeks, mailed to her address.

The *Vole* had been, at one time, secretly engaged to a *Mole* from the other side of the tract, across the meadow, at the edge of the forest, until his family had forbade they unite. He, unbeknownst to the *Shrew*, had come from good stock: monied, propertied and well-to-do. And he would occasionally treat himself to long walks, outside, for the re-freshening air.

The *Shrew* had come from nothing and feared, someday, might return from whence she came. She had kept her figure and had beautifully landscaped gardens where a boy would come three times a week to tend to them. But she would turn the ground herself when it needed to be dethatched or aerated, insofar as *she* would be the only one to know where her treasures were buried.

Once a month the *Vole* was invited up for tea, on the day the rent was due, to discuss his lodging, refine on his habits and see that any needs or each of his creature comforts were met to his satisfaction. *The Landlord-Tenant Act* insisted that the lord or lady see to basic necessities for sustaining life were adhered to . . . and the *Shrew* had no intentions of revisiting an enquiry. It wasn't always easy finding suitable boarders, in particularly, for the sorts of accommodations

provided. So she avoided those that might have known their rights, or appeared informed: As an example, you could not turn an occupant out during the hibernation season.

The *Vole* had proven to be an ideal candidate in that way. He was largely unaware of his surroundings and live comparatively spartanly--other than her documented and recorded, questioned and concerning oddities of his existence.

It was becoming evident that *Spring* was approaching and a number of packages were arriving upstairs--*Special Delivery* . . . It had been rumoured that the *Shrew* had met a fellow, 'well-healed' (her words) and very distinguished looking, with a broken nose, salt-pepper hair, round-rimmed glasses and a shortly-cropped, stubbly *Vandyke*, at a cocktail benefit for a collection of sundry local artist.

She had proffered her telephone number to him as he was running the silent auction and she felt compelled to low-bid on a tasteful item she was ill-disposed, almost hostile toward, never having wanting. But it was a connect to him.

He smiled and thanked her. And she could only presume that the twinkling in his eyes were set on her, rather than a gratuitous politeness in gratitude for the cause.

As she waited, the first three and four days, for him to summoned the courage to ring her up. The *Shrew* had been compelled to call him, a week-and-a-half later, under the guise of wondering if she had bid with success for her article, piece, *objet d'art*. He felt obliged to console and mislead her as to how close she had come, having just missed it.

She acted-out being crestfallen and begged for the recipient's name in hopes that they might be willing to forsake it, at a handsome profit. As she secretly chastised herself for not

submitting to a more realistic offering . . . and, have had him deliver it to her--in person.

The gentleman felt constrained to be honest at that point:

"Well, it does appear to have been acquired for quite a more formidable, perceived sentimental, sum."

Foiled, she changed the subject,

"What a pity," she said. "I'm planning a small gathering myself. I have some estate things, items that I'm tendering for another charity. You managed that affair so skillfully and faithfully, I was hoping you might be able to give me some pointers as to how to go about it."

She attended a momentary silence as the man quietly prayed for some discretionary alternative to the valor that manifest in him . . .

". . . I--would be delighted--do you have dates? Let me get my calendar." Being as well-bred as exclusionary, this chap appeared to know how to defer, if not discourage, undesired, prospectively avoidable possible engagements. The *Shrew* interceded:

"How does this Sunday sound, after church, say one-o'clock?"

"The next Sunday might be better for my . . . I have a family gathering that day."

"A week from Sunday it is then. Do you know, you looked familiar. Do you attend *The Sacred Heart*?" The *Shew* had not gotten to where she was by not overhearing a thing or two.

"Why, yes, *I do*."

"How curious, I go to mass at eleven. What pew do you sit seeded?"

"I go to the nine-o'clock, creature of habit, you know . . . I prefer to perform my acts of contrition at the earliest morning's exercise, to get a head-start on the next week."

The *Shew* laughed longer than seemed necessary and took a considered time composing herself to a tittering snigger punctuated by an unsuppressible snort.

"Perhaps I've noticed you on the way out." It wasn't a question, and seemed odd as there was a good forty-five minutes between most sermons.

"Well you might be right, you did look a little *too* familiar at the last due." (For the life of him, the speaker at the other end of the line could not place her.) "Did you purchase anyone's works?"

"Why yes *I did*, but I haven't decided where to hang it yet."

"Well, good for you . . . I've got to run. Why don't you call this number *Monday* and give my secretary all the details. She's in at nine. And we'll see you this following Sunday, if it can be arranged. I'm frightfully afraid she reconciles my diary far beyond my reckoning, untangling any appointments I might commit to conflict."

The *Shrew* was smitten, if not besot, disallowing herself the least of concerns that she just might have been rather smited or smote.

That next Sunday, after Jonathan had been worsted to realize he was behooved to keep '*that Woman's*' schedule. And the *Shrew* was inscrutably obliged to find a painting from one of the represented artists and paid dearly for an unsuitable framing. Having had arranged the gardens and everything, she even attended both weekend's nine-o'clock services only to find an absence of inspiration.

It was twelve-thirty *that day*. The grounds were elegantly groomed. The *Vole* had gone out for a stroll. And, as it was such a beautiful *Spring* afternoon, by order of the *Shrew*, he was as urged as insisted upon to keep himself to himself. So he wandered off to the far-side of the property and took a turn along a meandering thicket path. . . . And yet, he wondered all the while,

what was he other to do but rather remerge at some point . . .

"Teddy!!! . . . Jawohl! . . . What in the woods are you doing here?" . . . Jonathan Von Volsen was stark-staring . . . as flabbergasted as all-knowing . . . It was his twinned-sibling, Theodore the explorer, and beloved errant brother.

The *Shrew*, Lindsay Shrewsbury, formerly *Esmeralda Romani*, did a triple-take twice: creeping, crawling and foraging her way back into her skin . . . swaying, circling side-to-side (in search of an offering of smelling salts) as she shuddered, shrugged and shook-off whatever *disbelief* she could *shed* in *that moment* . . . Topped off her unbalanced garden settee-for-two, *landing* flat on her *coveted and admired*, late-blooming, *tumescent*, rosy-pink prized and *perennially* prided *ASTER*.

"After all," the Vole winked as he whispered to his as-loved brother, "Not to be born at all / Is best. . . ,' so Sophocles said, but to paraphrase Wilde's misspoken theft of Herbert,

' . . . the greatest revenge, is a life well led.'"

...the end.

AUTHOR DORSEY'S NOTE: *Ms. Dorsey was drawn to collaborate with Ms. Sterns on this story having been inspired by how nicely "abode" and "commode" played on her one good ear in the first paragraph. And, from there proceeded to write most of the work while Stern was busy screwing-off . . . the tops of bottles of Pinot, egregious plunk, until she went blanc. They have not spoken since.*

AUTHOR STERN'S NOTE: This story is her magnum opus, which is only sad. She was persuaded to write it due to an overwhelming rodent population in her community. [NOT FOR

PUBLICATION: Dorsey had little if nothing to do with it. At best they were occasional acquaintances at the time, aside from that one, lapsed, unforgettable evening that has now fallen from mind.]

AUTHORS' BIOS:

Tracey Sterns lives north of a sprawling multi-cultural metropolis in a drainage basin flanked by two kettle lakes she likes to believe she parted herself. She has been writing ever since this story was accepted for publication, took early retirement after the incident: Snowshoes, spearfishes and smokes her own meat--placed third in the high diving nationals in '76.

Ella Dorsey was born in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin because she liked how the names of the city and state sounded together. Having moved some time ago now (in protest of the 534 area code being added), she no longer resides there. She enjoys the unnatural heel-toe locomotion of speed walking and the absurdity of the appropriate arm motioning as her low-impact, high-intensity activity of choice. Notwithstanding, the footwear fashions are distinctly preferred to Nordic and she can't see accessorizing with poles ever quite catching on. She has been known to reach speeds in excess of 7 mph. (At this velocity, in conjunction with the rate at which the Earth rotates, she is cautious to avoid school zones.)