

A Birthday

by Liam Andrews

On a hot, thick July weekday darkened by towering clouds, a local news weatherman named Vic (“Vividly”) Van Veen turned thirty with no plans to celebrate. He had arrived at the station early that morning and drank the gritty remainder of coffee made by the late-night crew, since he hadn’t pitched for the morning team’s weekly pool. He had stood in front of a gigantic sheet of green nylon and told a camera that it would be stormy all week.

Earlier in his career, Vividly didn’t like informing his city of inclement weather, and would regularly feel pangs of personal responsibility for all the plans his forecast would cause to be called off. Fortunately, in the intervening years he had developed an onscreen persona to defer this shame. This morning, it hadn’t been Vividly up there delivering the bad news, but the plucky and infallibly honest Weatherman Veen. When it was five o’clock, Vividly had finished scanning through the stack of meteorological data that appeared on his desk every morning and had summarized it into a nine-day forecast for the next morning’s report. He packed up some of his things into a messenger bag and waited outside the office of Tom Trouper, the forty year-old sports anchor who was laughing loudly over the phone with a football contact from Los Angeles.

Trouper had a well-built physique, a bass-heavy voice, and a crewcut that never seemed to get any longer. He was also unquestionably the most famous personality on the Channel 7 News team, thanks in part to the enthusiasm and interest that radiated from every word he spoke. Both on-air and off, people felt at ease talking to Trouper, and it was this genuinely disarming charisma that Vividly had used as a template for perfecting Weatherman Veen over the years. The two lived in the same building, and had regularly walked together to the nearest bus stop for as long as they’d been working together, but neither had ever seen the other’s apartment. At five-oh-seven, they left the station together en route to the bus station, where Vividly expected to catch the 45B line back to his apartment block, heat up some leftover pasta, make progress on the novel he’d been reading, and go to sleep much earlier than he ever would have when he was a decade younger.

Vividly did not expect that when he turned his gaze skyward halfway through their trek to the bus station, a fat raindrop would fall directly into his eye.

“What was that?” asked Trouper when Vividly visibly recoiled.

“It’s raining— starting to rain,” said Vividly, wiping his face with a jacket sleeve.

“Already? Bit earlier than you...” Trouper checked his watch, “You said it would start at eight, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. At least I didn’t say it would be sunny, right?” Vividly laughed and Trouper sharply exhaled. The older man’s strides quickened and the pair were silent for a moment.

“You in a rush?” asked Vividly, smiling again. There was a buzz in the air; a familiar, crackling pressure that always preceded intense bouts of thunder.

“No, I just don’t want to get that wet,” replied Trouper.

“Oh. Yeah, me neither.”

“And you said it was going to be like this until...”

“Uh. Monday, by my guess.”

“Jesus,” Trouper said.

The coworkers continued at an uncomfortable pace. Soon they came to a crosswalk and paused. Music floated up into the damp street from a bar on the corner, a hit that Vividly hadn’t heard in several years. It reminded him of something at the edge of his mind.

“So, Vic,” Trouper said, his tone full and confident, “The big three-oh. How’s it feel?”

“It doesn’t feel that different,” Vividly said, adding “If the team hadn’t announced it on-air before my segment, I don’t think I would have even noticed it was today”, which was a lie.

“That’s no good, Vic. It’s a big milestone, you should do something special.”

“You think? Something to commemorate my all my best years finally being behind me?” Vividly laughed, but realized how it might come across, “I mean, that’s not— I’m sure the thirties can be great, right Tom?”

Trouper simply chuckled, dissolving Vividly’s awkwardness. The signal changed again, and they continued walking.

“Now, my twentieth birthday, *that* one felt significant,” Vividly began, “There was this party on the outskirts of town that me and some guys were trying to get to...” The words flowed out easily, as all words tended to do around Trouper. “Halfway out there, though, our goddamn *taxi* blew a flat tire, so we’re out there on a highway with three six-packs—” suddenly, a bus rumbled by and Trouper gave a wordless shout, breaking into a jog after it. Vividly knew it was hopeless but he ran anyway, catching up just as the bus pulled away a dozen meters ahead of them.

“Goddammit! I knew we should ha— Damn.” Trouper panted.

“Man, yeah that’s... I guess everything’s early today, right?” said Vividly.

“What?” said Trouper, stooped over with his hands on his knees.

“You know, first the rain, now the bus. Everything’s arriving early, right?”

“Oh, right. Yeah. ”

Vividly felt a vague desire to apologize, either for making them late for the bus or saying something so inane, but he straightened up and took a breath, looking back down the street towards the bar. He saw a group of people enter; two young women, three young men, all laughing and holding coats or bags over their heads. The rain had started to fall in steady staccato taps. He looked back towards Trouper, who looked up at the clouds, which looked black.

“Do you want to wait in that bar?”

“Which bar?” asked Trouper, still staring at the sky.

“The one we just passed—” Vividly glanced back towards the corner and pointed, “Wanda’s. I’ll buy us a round.”

“I, uh.” Trouper looked down towards Vividly for a second, before straightening out towards the street “I really just want to get home, Vic. It’s raining pretty hard.” He stuck out a cupped hand for a few seconds, as if to demonstrate how much rain would collect in it.

“Well, we— It wouldn’t be raining in there. On us. Wouldn’t be raining on us, in there.”

“I don’t want to miss the bus again, Vic.”

“Do you know when it’ll be here next?”

“No. Could be any minute.”

“It comes every half-hour.”

Trouper looked back at Vividly, at his face this time. His forehead arched over his eyes like a visor and his eyebrows were opaque rectangles.

“Don’t you feel like doing something tonight? Don’t you feel the— that tension in the air?” said Vividly, sticking out a cupped hand to feel how much rain would collect in it.

“Look, I— Vic, it’s Tuesday. I really just want to get home.”

Vividly stared at him for a few moments. The pressure in the air grew, and Vividly felt a sense of apprehension grow with it. Trouper was right, he should do something special, to make tonight significant.

“Well, I’m going to wait in the bar.” Vividly took a slow step back.

“Alright Vic, I’ll see you tomorrow morning. Have a good time.” Trouper turned towards the street once again.

“Alright, yeah.” Vividly turned and walked towards Wanda’s. The rain had started to fall in chunks.

The interior of the bar was blue and hot. Vividly hadn’t been inside one of these — let alone, by himself — in a year, at least. Here he was though, in uncharted territory. The room was mostly empty, save for a tired bartender, the five late-college-age kids standing around a pool table, and a few old men sitting in a booth and scratching off lottery tickets. Vividly took a stool and shook the rain off his jacket. The bartender, a spindly woman with a wave of blonde hair, looked at him flatly.

“Hi,” Vividly said, trying his best to look amicable.

“Hi,” the bartender replied in an exceedingly flat tone of voice, and glanced up to the right of Vividly. He twisted his neck around and saw a clock on the wall, reading a little past five-twenty.

“Are you done soon?” he asked.

“At eight,” she replied flatly, “Do you want something?”

“Oh! Yes. Um,” Vividly had no idea what sort of alcohol he enjoyed. In college he used to buy whatever was cheapest. In high school he’d drink whatever his brother bought him “What do you recommend?”

“Well, we’ve got a few different ones on tap,” the bartender flatly recited, “Our Blue Moon’s a dark stout—”

“Surprise me,” grinned Vividly. The bartender stared back at him flatly.

“ID?”

“Yep. Right here,” Vividly took out his wallet and handed his health card to the bartender. She looked down at the card, and back up at him, and back down at the card, squinting, then back up at him with an eyebrow raised.

“Veen, like Weatherman Veen?” she said with a yet-unheard sting of surprised inflection in her voice.

“That’s me,” Vividly said in his best broadcast voice and smiled wide.

“You look different with wet hair.”

Vividly noticed that the TV bolted to the wall behind the bar was tuned to his network’s channel. Molly Wood, the evening anchor, was running through some fluff headlines and looking bewildered.

“You said it wouldn’t rain until eight,” the bartender said.

“Well, at least I didn’t say it would be sunny, right?”

“How long d’ya think ‘till it clears up?”

"It'll be like this all week, I'm afraid... Monday calls for clear skies, though," Vividly hoped his smile didn't look forced.

The bartender exhaled flatly and gave his card back. As she got his drink, he glanced back toward the group of students. Two of them, a guy and a girl, were arguing about something, but it was clear that nobody was getting angry. Vividly smiled and started to think about where his own friends might be that night. Riley and Ji both went to Cornell, and they were close enough that they'd probably stick together afterwards. Were they sitting around a lawn table and a bong tonight, still bickering about free will and foreign films? The sound of a cup hitting the lacquered wood of the bar jolted Vividly from the daze.

"Surprise." The bartender said with flat mock-enthusiasm. In front of Vividly, on a bright teal *Wanda's* coaster was a glass of ice water with a pink curly straw.

"Ha ha," he said, looking up at her. "Something stronger, maybe on the side?"

The bartender looked at him with a flat expression.

"I'll just get that Blue Moon you mentioned," Vividly finally said.

"Coming right up," she drawled, getting another pint glass, "Are you meeting some people here or what?"

"I'm sorry?"

"For your birthday."

"I'm s— What?"

The bartender turned around and set the glass of foamy black beer on the counter. "Your birthday. On your card. That's today."

"Oh! Yes, so it is." Vividly blushed, looking down at the card. "No, nobody's meeting me here."

"You doing anything special at all?"

"This right here is special, for me. I don't really drink that often. Plus—" Vividly took a deep gulp of the Blue Moon. "It's still early, there's lots to do!"

"Not with your early rainstorm."

"Well, I—" Vividly looked out the window. The rain had started to fall in sheets. "That's no big deal. There's lots of opportunity in the air tonight, I can feel it."

"Uh huh. Is that what I've been smelling all afternoon?"

"Those kids back there can feel it. I can tell." Vividly took another gulp and grimaced. He'd need a few more before they started to taste good. "When you're young you can just tap into it, you know? On the best nights, the ones that you end up remembering, you just *know* it'll be significant before anything even happens. When you're a kid, it's easy to just..." he took another draw from the pint glass, "Take that feeling and turn it into something. When you grow up and throw your whole life onto two-week planners, it all turns predictable. You can't just have a *night* when your next five mornings are already figured out." Vividly tipped the glass fully up, setting it down with a clunk and a sigh. "Another one, please?"

"Sure."

The bartender poured another Blue Moon and Vividly set to finishing it quickly, taking the opportunity to listen in closer to the conversation taking place behind him.

"—can hit the eight ball whenever I want to, right?"

"Hell no. Not directly, unless it's your final ball."

"Why are *you* trying to teach her, Ken? Have you ever even played before?"

“Fuck off, I’m great. Just, here, hold it like this, no— like this. And then just—... Well, that’ll usually go in.”

“Could I play with someone else? Darla?”

“Sure. Where’s the short cue?”

Vividly wrinkled his brow. Was it Ji’s family that owned a pool table, or Sam’s? Either way, Vividly was never the best in the room. He had the foresight to line up impressive shots, but couldn’t improvise well enough to excel in the late game. As the last drops of pale froth fell into his mouth, he noticed that his heart was beating in fitful irregularity and wondered why. Trips back through heat-warped years of memory were a bitterly intoxicating evening pastime for Vividly, but never a particularly exciting one. He got up, steadied himself on the counter, and headed for the washroom.

As Vividly splashed cold water on his face and hands, the reason behind his sudden apprehension crept up on him. While he was remembering all those pool games from a decade ago, he had also been imagining himself making those same shots with the college kids at the back of the bar.

“That’s the key!” he whispered to his reflection, grinning at Mirror-Vividly’s reddening face. There was nothing richer with the buzz of opportunity and new beginnings than introducing oneself to an unfamiliar knot of likeminded people, making an impression with a show of skill or wit, and altering the well-forecasted trajectory of one’s immediate future. This is what it was all built on, right? A cascade of circumstance and opportunity that allows a night to bloom into a *night*.

Vividly shook his hands dry and went back out into the main room of the bar, which was hot and blue. The two girls were playing now; the shorter one who he supposed was Darla was breaking and wearing a look of mock deep concentration. His heartbeats had started to fall in rushed doublets. He motioned for the bartender to pour another Blue Moon and lost himself again, this time in the future instead of the past.

There were marvellous possibilities in meeting new people. What quirks of character would he be witness to tonight? What were the dynamics and histories that churned below the surface of these five friends? How long had Ken and Darla known each other and where did they meet? Which of them would take to Vividly with rapid acclimation and which would sit comfortably distant from him —as was perfectly understandable around a newcomer, Vividly prudently conceded— until personal crisis or a late-night heart to heart tempered their friendship beyond the strength that emerges from immediate camaraderie? What were their hidden, guarded passions (art? competition? dare he venture, meteorology?), and how long would it take for Vividly to coax them out onto the limelit stage of open socialization? He was older than them and sure, that came with an inherent amount of distance, sure, but he was experienced with post-grad existentialism and had made significant strides towards making peace with the slow estrangement of oneself from one’s youth, and that alone made him potentially invaluable as a—

“—get you another one?”

Vividly looked up from his empty glass of beer, which had been delicious.

“Please,” he said to the bartender, but then remembered himself, “This’ll be the— my last though.” The evening’s buzz from earlier was a high-pressure ringing in his ears and he felt he could do anything; the possibilities for the night branched out before him like a bolt of lightning that hadn’t yet found the quickest path to ground. He grabbed the pint glass as soon as it touched the pink *Wanda’s* coaster and swung around in his stool.

The room was sweltering, slathered in blue neon light, and mostly empty. Darla and Ken and their three friends were quiet, as the game between the two girls seemed to be approaching a close finish. Vividly slid off the stool and almost fell to the floor, but quickly stuck his arms out in scarecrow-fashion to balance himself.

As he approached the group, Darla was lining up her cue for a double-ricochet. Two extremely similar looking guys with long hair and flannel shirts were sitting on a couch, and a tanned and buzz-cut guy whose voice Vividly recognized as Ken from earlier was providing commentary with his face down close to the table.

“This is seriously like, a one-in-a-million shot, folks,”

“Hello,” said Vividly. The two girls seemed not to hear, but one of the guys on the couch looked up with an expression of mild panic.

“Oh, hey, man. What’s going on, man?” said the one in blue.

“Mind if I play the winner?” Vividly internally winced at the bluntness of his own question. Darla’s shot went wide and she looked, brow furrowed, at Vividly.

“We were—” she looked over at the couched twins, who raised their eyebrows in unison. “This was gonna be our last game, wasn’t it?”

“Uh, yeah I uh— I think so. We were just about to leave,” said the twin in yellow.

“Oh, really? Shoot,” Vividly said, “You’re going out in that?” He pointed to the window.

“Yeah, we— We’re just getting ready for a party.”

“Wait wait wait, hold up guys,” said Ken, as the others were picking up their coats, “I know you from somewhere!”

Vividly got this a lot.

“Oh yeah!” said one of the twins, “You’re on the news, right?”

Vividly blushed and tried his best to keep looking at them, “Yeah, you probably—”

“Its Trouper, right?” said the other twin. “You do sports?”

“Really? Holy shit, my dad watches you every day, man,” said Ken.

“No, I—”

“Actually, hold up. Lee, can you take a picture of us? I want to send it to him,” Ken handed a smartphone to the twin in yellow and put his arm around Vividly, who was finding it very hard to make a sound. He could feel sweat starting to pool on his back. The room really was hot.

“Thanks, man. Dad’s gonna go nuts when he sees that,” said Ken, slapping Vividly on the back and taking the phone back from Lee.

Vividly was frozen to the spot as the group continued getting ready to leave. He felt the buzzing in his ears fade to a low hum as his hope evaporated. The lightning bolt had struck ground, vaporizing all possibilities but the most obvious, most painless path: Go home, Vividly. Get some sleep, you have work tomorrow.

“Have a good night, Mister Trouper, ‘was nice meeting you!” said Ken, holding out his hand. Vividly shook it feebly.

“Hope you guys have a good night,” he said.

The group left, laughing about something that Vividly didn’t hear. He went back to his stool and set his glass back on the coaster. The bartender looked at him flatly.

“What was that? Adoring fans?”

“Yeah. Can I get the bill please?”

“What happened to all that ‘opportunity in the air’?”

“Some nights are just nights, I guess. Could I get the bill?”

“Alright, alright.”

Vividly paid without another word and looked up at the clock on the wall. It was around seven, now. Not too late to catch the bus. He stepped outside onto the sodium-orange glow of the street.

The rain had started to fall in a near-horizontal assault. As Vividly walked to the station and waited for the bus, his mind wandered back through the last hour. Could he have put more effort into chatting up the bartender? Was there a reason behind her aversion to any sort of outward emotion? She wasn’t what Vividly would call his type, but flowers had bloomed in less-forgiving asphalt lots, hadn’t they? Perhaps what he needed was to learn how to flirt.

As the bus finally arrived and Vividly stepped onboard, he began to wonder, what about Trouper? Vividly knew that some combination of questions and answers could have convinced him to join for at least one drink, and who knew how differently the encounter with the college kids could have unfolded had the genuine Channel 6 Sports Anchor been in attendance? They probably would have invited the two of them along to join their cadre, and Vividly would be able to hide behind the careless charisma of his coworker.

When he got off the bus and continued walking through the rain, Vividly wasn’t thinking anymore of the past night, instead turning his mind to the rest of the week, and his forecasts. Five more days of Weatherman Veen bearing bad news to his city.

Vividly left his clothes still dripping in a pile next to his bed and lay down. It had been a long day and his mind quickly became void as sleep carried him away. He awoke to harsh red heat on his eyelids. The first rays of a cloudless summer morning were starting to flood the room, magnified by the glass of his windows.