

# The Case of Victoria Zielinski

Victoria Zielinski, a fifty-three-year-old woman who worked as a paralegal, while walking home one day, saw a man who wasn't there. He appeared in her field of vision suddenly as if he'd teleported from somewhere else and stood looking directly at her. He was handsome, some years younger than Victoria, wearing a pleasantly welcoming expression though the left side of his face was a bit fuzzy, as if he were a painting that was not quite finished. (Victoria thought at first that this was a simple trick of the light.) He was well dressed in a two piece, dark, pinstripe suit, a colorful tie, and a camel overcoat, but he seemed somehow out of place. When he appeared, he was about ten yards from her. He stood still as she approached him, looking at her until she got close, then he turned his head and looked down the street. Victoria tried saying hello, but he ignored her. Victoria, who at this point didn't realize that he wasn't really there, walked around him. When she turned around to look behind her, he was gone.

Two weeks later, the man appeared again in the same spot. This time, Victoria knew he wasn't really there. He was accompanied by a woman wearing a dark gray, knitted dress, rust colored boots, and a black coat with a fur collar. Her hair was pulled back and fastened in a severe, tight bun. Their faces were smooth and attractive, though each still had a fuzziness on its left side. They looked at Victoria as she moved towards them. Though she knew that they weren't really there, she stopped in front of them as she had the first time she saw the man, but this time she did not try to talk to them, she only stood and waited for something to happen. They both appeared to be looking at her but without making eye contact. After about thirty seconds, which seemed much longer to Victoria, they turned towards each other. They each made a few casual gestures with their hands but did not speak. As Victoria stood regarding them, a very young woman who had been running by asked her if she was feeling all right. Victoria smiled at her and nodded, then walked around the man and woman and continued down the street.

Three weeks after the second hallucination, Victoria was walking down a street in a commercial corridor of her city looking for a shop where she could find an apartment warming

gift for her daughter, Sylvie, who had graduated from college the previous December and was moving into a new place with two of her friends. The man appeared to her again, standing outside of a small, one story structure with a sharply pointed roof. The structure took up the entire sidewalk though it was unattached to the adjacent building, and the man, standing in the street, was gesturing towards another man who leaned out of an open window in the side of the little building. As Victoria approached, they both looked at her without making eye contact. A moment later, they both became still as a freeze-frame. This time, Victoria did not pause, but stepped into the street and walked quickly past them. As she did, a car pulling out of a parking space nearby sounded its horn as it swerved to avoid her. Shaken, Victoria quickly climbed the curb and stepped back onto the sidewalk. She looked around nervously, but no one was taking any notice of her at all.

Four weeks went by without another incident. On a bright and warm Saturday afternoon in May, Victoria visited Sylvie in her new apartment, a boxy set of rooms on the second floor of a four-story, sixteen-unit, old brick building. She had bought her a zebra plant and a colorful tapestry that could serve either as a bedspread or a wall hanging. Sylvie was alone in the apartment, and they sat in the communal living room drinking tea and chatting about her daughter's new job. She had been hired by a company that designed web sites for businesses.

The company was small, only five employees, and Sylvie was anticipating the work to be challenging but highly rewarding.

Victoria didn't see the man appear; she perhaps had looked away, out the window or into the kitchen, and when she turned back to face Sylvie, he was standing about three feet behind her daughter's chair. Victoria knew Sylvie didn't, couldn't see him, so she tried to ignore him. She turned again towards the window and then back to Sylvie. Now the woman was standing a short distance from the man. They were turned partly towards Victoria and partly towards each other and were gesturing to one another but still not speaking. Victoria began to feel agitated. Her hands shook a little. She tried hard to ignore the figures standing behind Sylvie, but then a third appeared, and then a fourth—two more women, a decade or so younger than Victoria, one dressed in slacks and a blue silk blouse, one in a pleated skirt and knitted shirt, both stylish and attractive. They stood in a clump behind Sylvie, gesturing slightly from time to time, but for the most part staying fairly still. Then a fifth figure, a man, appeared

behind them. He faced Victoria squarely, and, as previously the man and woman had, looked directly at her without making eye contact. Victoria could not help but stare at them. As she did, their faces slid into and out of focus, always the left sides more out of focus than the right. Victoria spilled her tea at this point, then, unable to calm herself, made excuses to Sylvie and left the apartment.

Upon entering the building's stairwell, Victoria found herself on a broad spiral staircase that spun down through an indiscernible number of floors. Looking down made her dizzy, and she was afraid to look up. She grasped the hand railing tightly, closed her eyes, and began to descend. When she reached the ground level and opened her eyes, she could see the building's stairwell and the door to the street.

Another four weeks passed without incident. During that time, a work friend of Victoria's arranged a blind date for her. Victoria had had only a handful of dates since her divorce, and she was looking forward to it. The sense of displacement she felt at her daughter's apartment had faded, she gained confidence with each week after, and though the prospect of an evening with a stranger made her nervous, she still wanted to go. She did insist that they meet at the restaurant

so she could make an escape if she needed to, for any reason. He was an attractive man, around sixty, twice divorced, and looking for simple companionship. They had a pleasant conversation about movies, television, and the few books they both had read. She tried to imagine having sex with him but could not take the idea seriously. However, she thought maybe after another date or two, that might change. He had an engaging smile, a self-deprecating sense of humor, and he seemed more interested in getting to know her than in impressing her. They had an after-dinner drink with more casual conversation. After, he suggested they go for a short walk. It was a warm June night, only eight o'clock, not dark yet. So they left the restaurant and walked slowly down the street.

They turned several corners during the walk, and Victoria lost track of where they were. Eventually, they found themselves on a very short street that terminated in a storefront, all glass and steel with twelve-foot windows. The interior was brightly lit, though the daylight was still lingering outside, and inside a few customers mingled here and there. Victoria hesitated for moment then entered. The shop appeared to be selling nothing but purses and handbags. They were all leather, in bright reds, plumb purples, liquid blacks and calfskin yellows, perched on

icy glass shelves or hanging from steel trees. The clerk behind the counter, a young woman with blond hair pulled back in a bun, gave her a friendly look. Victoria approached, then saw the now familiar stare with no eye contact and the out of focus fuzziness on the left side of her face. Her date was not with her anymore. To steady herself, Victoria stretched her hand out to hold one of the shelves, and she touched something solid, but it was rough and irregular and did not feel like glass. She took several deep breaths and looked out through the store's front window. The street outside had vanished, and the windows reflected the store's interior, though dimly and out of focus. Victoria could see no streetlights or storefronts, and she found this profoundly disturbing

without being able to understand why. If her surroundings weren't real, she couldn't understand why it would disturb her more to have the street outside vanish than be visible, but it was a visceral reaction. Facing the door to the street was another door, gray and windowless, in a gray, windowless wall. She approached it slowly, half expecting the clerk or the other customers in the store to raise an objection, but no one did. She opened the door and passed through it.

On the other side was a windowless room with an empty set of shelves and a steel desk with a steel-framed, straight-backed chair behind it. There was nothing on the desk. There was another door to Victoria's left. Through it was a room that probably would have been a storeroom if there were anything in it, but it contained only several rows of empty shelves. There was a door to her right leading to a room that was completely empty. A set of thick glass bricks were set in the wall to her right, but she couldn't see anything through them. There was a door straight ahead to a half-bath with green walls, a sink, and toilet with no water in the bowl. There was a mirror on the wall covered in a spotty white film. She couldn't see herself in the glass. She went through another door opposite her. The next room was divided exactly in half by a wire cage. A door into the cage, also wire in a steel frame, stood open at her right. Other than the cage, the room was empty. At her left was another door. She went through it and found herself on an unfamiliar street. The GPS on her phone informed her that she was about a mile and a half from where she had parked.

For the next two months, Victoria kept to herself. (Her date did not call her.) She went from home to work and back again, keeping to a strict routine that allowed for little but shopping for essentials. The visions had made her irritable and skittish around people she

didn't know well.

But during this time, a new grocery store opened up near her neighborhood. For two or three weeks, she resisted the temptation to shop there, but by late August, she was again feeling more confident. In her isolation, grocery shopping and cooking had become her main pleasures. Cookbooks arrived by mail each week, and she was experimenting with new recipes almost daily. The new store was an easy walk from her house, and she decided it would be a small matter to visit it and buy a few luxuries and essentials.

The interior of the store was clean and brightly lit. The floors were white tile and the shelves were white enamel and silver aluminum. The produce was fresh and luminous. She picked up a basket to make sure she didn't buy too much to carry home on foot. She took a few tomatoes, a garlic clove and some shallots, then moved away from the produce and turned down the first aisle of shelves. She took a box of rotini pasta, a jar of pesto, and a jar of kalamata olives.

When she turned down the second aisle, instead of the store, she saw a long hallway with tile floors and high ceilings. On the walls, large, square lattice windows provided light but no exterior view. Pillars stood on either side of the hallway, spaced about fifty feet apart. The building resembled a railway station, but there was no platform or track. It extended as far ahead as she could see, an even, regular pattern of windows, tiles, and pillars, receding to a vanishing point level with her eye. Victoria turned around and saw the same thing behind her. She began walking. Here and there, people stood, leaned against the pillars, sat on the floor, or stood straight in the middle of the hallway. Victoria expected to see the first man she had hallucinated, or the woman, but she did not. Yet all of the people she saw were similar—about forty, very well dressed, with a fuzziness at the left side of their faces. They all, as she approached them, gave her the same quasi-friendly expression, looked at her without making eye contact, then looked

away. None of them spoke. Victoria stopped walking. She set her shopping basket down, closed her eyes, and counted to one hundred. When she opened her eyes, the hallway still stretched before her, an exercise in one-point perspective. She left her basket on the floor and kept walking. Other than variations in the people around her, the hallway didn't change—the pillars, tiles and windows remained the same. She walked for what felt to her a very long time. A state of anxiety wound up into panic, and she again felt the same dizzy sensation she

had felt in the stairwell of Sylvie's building. She stopped walking and sat in the middle of the floor. A few moments later she felt something touch her shoulder, but she couldn't see what it was. Upon standing abruptly, she felt light-headed. Spots of dancing lights, lines of color, and irregular shapes filled her field of vision. A moment later, she was outside the grocery store looking into the eyes of a clerk, a woman wearing the store apron, about her own age. She asked if Victoria was okay. Victoria refused help, though she knew that was probably a mistake, and went home.

The incident left her shaken. For another two months she went from home to work and work to home. Without explaining her situation to Sylvie, (she didn't understand it and was embarrassed to explain it, certain no one would think it very serious), she convinced her to buy groceries and deliver them to her. She visited her doctor, who gave her a standard check-up, then made an appointment with a specialist, but the appointment was six months away, in early April.

A few days after she visited her doctor, she got an email claiming suspicious activity in her bank account, with a link to a site that claimed would fix it. Thanks to her job, Victoria had a strong grasp of internet security, and she was certain the email was a phishing attempt. She wrote down the address and the URL in the hyperlink, deleted the email, then visited her accounts online. Everything appeared to be normal. But she phoned the branch nearest her apartment just to make sure. The teller she spoke to assured her that it was probably fake, but if she liked she

could visit the main office where they would give her some personal guidance in implementing security measures for her online accounts. Victoria demurred at first, but a creeping anxiety came over her. She was divorced and lived alone. She had a good income from work, but not a wide margin if she lost money through fraud.

On a bright, chilly October morning, she left her apartment and took a bus to the city center. The bank building was a stately two-story Victorian with a light gray limestone facade that displayed fluted columns and, over the front entrance, a stone carving of an American schooner at sea. The lobby was large and open and took up both stories at the front of the building. Windows opening onto the street filled the room with light. A marble staircase to the left of the tellers' windows went up to the offices on the second floor. Victoria got in line at the tellers' station. In just a few minutes, she spoke with a teller who called ahead to one of

the bank's financial advisors then directed her up the stairs. At the top, Victoria turned right into a hallway with wooden doors on each side. They had old fashioned frosted glass windows and dark wood transoms above them. Halfway down the hallway on the left was the door that the teller had directed Victoria to. It led to a longer hallway with no doors, but complicated art deco wainscoting about four feet above the floor. At the end of the hallway, to the right, in a deep alcove was a twelve-panel double door. Victoria knocked then went through. It was only when she entered this hallway that she knew it was happening again. She had been on the second floor, but this hallway had tall windows on both sides looking out across a flat field with only a few trees here and there. The grass was neatly trimmed and free of dandelions. The horizon was unnaturally close, and the blue sky looked as if it were painted across a nearby wall. In her mind, Victoria retraced her steps, but she couldn't be sure when the bank had vanished and the hallucinations had begun. Any relationship between the architecture of the building she had

originally entered and the floor, ceiling, windows and walls of the hallway she was seeing was lost. There were a few people standing along the hall, some looking out the windows, some turned towards each other, gesturing but not speaking. Victoria started walking. As the vision in the grocery store, the hallway receded to a vanishing point in front of her. She felt the same panic rising inside of her. There had been other people around her in the grocery store, real people, not hallucinations, and she was sure the clerk had pulled her out of her dream world, probably by guiding her out of the store. This time, though, she hadn't seen anyone after leaving the bank lobby.

She walked down the hallway for what seemed a long time. She tried to breathe slowly and deeply, but that did not quell her panic. Finally, she did something she hadn't done since her first hallucination—she tried to talk to one of the people. She approached a woman who looked at her, first at a spot just above her head, then at her chest. Victoria asked the woman if she knew the way out. Or she tried to. She could feel the vocal cords in her throat vibrating, but no sound was coming out. The woman lifted her hand, palm up, in an ambiguous gesture, then turned away from Victoria. Victoria resumed walking down the hall.

After what felt like several hours, she saw an open doorway ahead of her. Passing through it, Victoria entered a lounge with large stuffed chairs, small round tables, and a bar where people were gathered. A bartender was serving people with brightly colored cocktails.

Victoria stood in the middle of the lounge, completely bewildered. The visuals were festive, but the lack of conversations and music turned the scene into an eerie silent film. Opposite her was another doorway leading to a hallway that looked exactly like the one she had just walked down. She looked ahead and behind her then turned toward the bar. The people standing there were drinking blue, red, and amber cocktails. She found herself wishing she could be a part of the

tableau, having a drink, sitting at the bar in stylish clothes, but she knew that was not possible. She went through the doorway. This hallway, too, was dotted with silent people. The windows now were black and presented no view but only reflected the hallway's interior. Victoria decided to keep walking though she knew there would be no door through which she could escape.