

W. H. Auden (1907-73)

6 *Victor*

Victor was a little baby,
 Into this world he came;
His father took him on his knee and said:
 'Don't dishonour the family name.'

Victor looked up at his father 5
 Looked up with big round eyes:
His father said: 'Victor, my only son,
 Don't you ever ever tell lies.'

Victor and his father went riding 10
 Out in a little dog-cart;
His father took a Bible from his pocket and read,
 'Blessed are the pure in heart.'

It was a frosty December,
 It wasn't the season for fruits;
His father fell dead of heart disease 15
 While lacing up his boots.

It was a frosty December
 When into his grave he sank;
His uncle found Victor a post as cashier
 In the Midland Counties Bank. 20

It was a frosty December
 Victor was only eighteen,
But his figures were neat and his margins straight
 And his cuffs were always clean.

He took a room at the Peveril, 25
 A respectable boarding-house;
And Time watched Victor day after day
 As a cat will watch a mouse.

The clerks slapped Victor on the shoulder;
‘Have you ever had a woman?’ they said, 30
‘Come down town with us on Saturday night.’
Victor smiled and shook his head.

The manager sat in his office,
Smoked a Corona cigar;
Said: ‘Victor’s a decent fellow but 35
He’s too mousey to go far.’

Victor went up to his bedroom,
Set the alarum bell;
Climbed into bed, took his Bible and read
Of what happened to Jezebel. 40

It was the First of April,
Anna to the Peveril came;
Her eyes, her lips, her breasts, her hips
And her smile set men aflame.

She looked as pure as a schoolgirl 45
On her First Communion day,
But her kisses were like the best champagne
When she gave herself away.

It was the Second of April,
She was wearing a coat of fur; 50
Victor met her upon the stairs
And he fell in love with her.

The first time he made his proposal,
She laughed, said: ‘I’ll never wed’;
The second time there was a pause; 55
Then she smiled and shook her head.

Anna looked into her mirror,
Pouted and gave a frown;
Said: ‘Victor’s as dull as a wet afternoon
But I’ve got to settle down.’ 60

The third time he made his proposal,

As they walked by the Reservoir;
She gave him a kiss like a blow on the head,
Said: 'You are my heart's desire.'

They were married early in August, 65
She said: 'Kiss me, you funny boy';
Victor took her in his arms and said:
'O my Helen of Troy.'

It was the middle of September, 70
Victor came to the office one day;
He was wearing a flower in his buttonhole,
He was late but he was gay.

The clerks were talking of Anna,
The door was just ajar;
One said: 'Poor old Victor, but where ignorance 75
Is bliss, et cetera.'

Victor stood still as a statue,
The door was just ajar;
One said: 'God, what fun I had with her 80
In that Baby Austin car.'

Victor walked out into the High Street,
He walked to the edge of the town;
He came to the allotments and the rubbish heap;
And his tears came tumbling down.

Victor looked up at the sunset 85
As he stood there all alone;
Cried: 'Are you in Heaven, Father?'
But the sky said 'Address not known.'

Victor looked up at the mountains, 90
The mountains all covered with snow;
Cried: 'Are you pleased with me, Father?'
And the answer came back, 'No.'

Victor came to the forest,
Cried: 'Father, will she ever be true?'

And the oaks and the beeches shook their heads 95
And they answered: 'Not to you.'

Victor came to the meadow
Where the wind went sweeping by;
Cried: 'O Father, I love her so,'
But the wind said: 'She must die.' 100

Victor came to the river
Running so deep and so still;
Cried: 'O Father, what shall I do?'
And the river answered: 'Kill.'

Anna was sitting at a table, 105
Drawing cards from a pack;
Anna was sitting at table
Waiting for her husband to come back.

It wasn't the Jack of Diamonds
Nor the Joker she drew at first; 110
It wasn't the King or the Queen of Hearts
But the Ace of Spades reversed.

Victor stood in the doorway,
He didn't utter a word;
She said: 'What's the matter, darling?' 115
He behaved as if he hadn't heard.

There was a voice in his left ear,
There was a voice in his right,
There was a voice at the base of his skull
Saying: 'She must die to-night.' 120

Victor picked up a carving-knife,
His features were set and drawn,
Said: 'Anna, it would have been better for you
If you had not been born.'

Anna jumped up from the table, 125
Anna started to scream,
But Victor came slowly after her

Like a horror in a dream.

She dodged behind the sofa,
She tore down a curtain rod, 130
But Victor came slowly after her;
Said: 'Prepare to meet thy God.'

She managed to wrench the door open,
She ran and she didn't stop.
But Victor followed her up the stairs 135
And he caught her at the top.

He stood there above the body,
He stood there holding the knife;
And the blood ran down the stairs and sang:
'I'm the Resurrection and the Life.' 140

They tapped Victor on the shoulder,
They took him away in a van;
He sat as quiet as a lump of moss
Saying, 'I am the Son of Man.'

Victor sat in a corner 145
Making a woman of clay;
Saying: 'I am Alpha and Omega, I shall come
To judge the earth one day.'

1937

(From *W. H. Auden: Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward
Mendelson. Franklin Center, PA: The Franklin Library,
1976)