

VALENTINE'S DAY OUT

"We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems." — John W. Gardner

For the first thirty-two years of my life, I lived with a big problem.

The problem was nearly six feet tall, middle-aged, slender, and I took it with me everywhere I went. The reason? I'll just say that I had no choice.

He had a long, clever face, not handsome, but interesting. And for years, that face greeted me every morning with its smiling black eyes, clarifying the discouraging fact that I still had not gotten rid of it.

"Good morning, Stanley." Would be a typical example of one of my morning wake-up calls. "I'm sorry, did I wake you, or do you have a burning desire to urinate?"

That was Valentine Rufus, my imaginary friend. Or, to be more accurate, my imaginary teacher, drill sergeant, and life manager. Ever since I was born, this man-like entity has never left me alone. And, as days passed, every morning with Val was just the beginning.

He always defied gravity, sitting perched like a vulture on the foot of my bed. Sometimes he would have a cigarette with him, so he could blow smoke in my face.

What a nightmare! Since my earliest memories of childhood, Valentine Rufus had either told me what to do, what I was doing wrong, or he just stood there, staring at me. I didn't know if I was crazy, or cursed. Maybe both.

After waking up, I would try to write. I did, after all, declare myself an author. The problem, though, was that I had not published anything in ... well, ever. Val was

the one who made me gear my studies to writing. And that was another thing that annoyed me about him because I had no writing talent whatsoever.

In fact, I sucked. Rejection slips would arrive, saying that editors wouldn't touch my manuscripts, because, "they might spread lameness germs."

"The magazines rejected nineteen of my stories!" I bawled. "All nineteen! What's wrong with these people?"

"They may have their faults," Val would say, "But, as we know, your stories are not exactly offering fierce competition to a chimpanzee at a typewriter."

It was comments like that, along with his following me around, startling me, and keeping me in a sort of glass jar that made me try and try to purge myself of Valentine Rufus. For thirty-two years I had this guy following me everywhere I went. And, for thirty-two years, I didn't even have a clue as to what he wanted.

That's because, in all that time, I never tried to find out. I just tried to get rid of him, whether it was with women, booze, pills, marijuana, opium, heroin, LSD, NyQuil, or Viagra. The only thing that had any effect was the LSD, but all it did was give Val three eyes and a hand coming out of his head.

For a while, among periods when I wasn't writing, fucking, or doing drugs to escape Val, I started seeing a shrink twice a week. Therapy was one of the few options I had left (besides suicide) in getting rid of my burden. Unfortunately, I was going from one shrink to another, and I always got a different diagnosis. They were all wrong.

One shrink said I was schizo-something, and he gave me pills that made me eat a whole pizza in twenty minutes. Naturally, Val was still there, laughing at the sorry sight of me cramming the stuffed crust in mere microseconds.

"You won't get rid of me that way," Val said.

Another shrink — some self-described Freudian type — told me that I was seeing

Although the narrator in this story is male, the author is actually a female. She wrote this story because she, like the protagonist, spent most of her life without a father, and she believes that has influenced a great deal of her creative senses.

Val as a result of my never having a father, and that I might be gay. I told the shrink that the second thing wasn't true, but he still gave me an apartment key with his name and address on it. So, I gave the key to a guy selling watches on the street.

Finally, despite therapy, I managed to reach the worst moment of this ordeal. Val was too much to take, and I guess I only had one option left. But I had to make sure it worked. I locked the door to my crummy apartment. Then, I turned the lights off and closed the blinds, tripping over "borrowed" porno tapes that I would use whenever the Viagra worked overtime. I made my way into the bathroom and locked it, making sure that I had firmly shut the door. Nobody would stop me.

"Stanley?" I heard Val say. I paid no attention.

I took my entire legal and illegal stash out of my bathroom drawers and laid it all on the grainy tile floor with a clatter. I grabbed the plastic waste bin from under the sink and put it in front of me. Finding nothing else, I took the toilet plunger from under the sink; it was clean enough. I crunched up every pill in the bin with the plunger, added every powder, every liquid, every goddamn bottle of stomach-rotting booze, all while pressing the plunger up and down into the waste bin as a sort of crude mixer. With a grimace, I raised the bin to my lips.

"Boy," I said to myself. "This is really stupid."

"Yes, it is." I heard that voice again. "If you wish to die, Stanley, that's not the way to do it in my opinion."

I looked. Val was leaning against the door. He was dressed in an expensive-looking black silk robe, lighting a cigarette.

"Well," I said, putting the bin back down on the floor in defeat. "If it makes any difference, how the hell should I die?"

Val drew a breath from his cigarette, and then exhaled curls of smoke.

"Ideally," he said, "You should consider dying during a sexual encounter." Val smiled without his eyes. "That's the way I would have liked it."

He took his cigarette and flicked it into the suicide cocktail in the bin, causing a rise of smoke that I couldn't smell. The smoke — and cigarette — disappeared into the air, and the solution separated into a solid and liquid.

"Whatever." I said. "Just leave me alone."

I got up and poured the toxic crud down the sink. I opened the warped door with a much-needed shove and slammed the door on Val — regardless of whether it would have hit him or not.

I made my way down the hall to the living room couch and sat down. The lights were off in the grungy room except for my one lamp on top of a cardboard box that I was using as a coffee table. Val returned, of course. He was pacing, dressed in a black suit, shirt, tie, vest, socks and shoes. He still had that damned cigarette, too. I folded my arms and pouted like a moody adolescent as he started with one of his lectures.

"I doubt very much," he started. "That you understand the importance of the life that I have tried to structure for you."

I thought, If this guy's supposed to be like my father, like the quack said, he did get the nagging part right.

I tuned out.

Val stood in front of me and looked straight at me. His face was different. It looked just like it did when I was a kid.

He tapped my shoulder with his knuckles, but his hand went through me.

"Stanley," he said. "I have no life of my own."

"Well," I sulked. "That's not my problem. Because of you, I don't have one either."

"No, no ..." he said. "That's not what I mean at all."

He sat next to me on the couch. He looked to me like he was actually going to

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choose his words carefully, which seemed like the first time in decades.

"Stanley, I've been around you every minute since you've been born. Every minute."

Suddenly, I realized it was true. Val was a pain, but he was always there. Whenever I was sent to the Principal's office for "talking to myself," Val was there. Whenever my mom was out with some guy she met at the grocery store, Val was home with me, reading bedtime stories by the Marquis De Sade. He was the first face I saw the second I was born.

"I was going to wait to tell you this," he said. "But I don't know if I should. You're in

much graver need of help than I imagined."

He drew a deep breath, rolled his eyes and exhaled.

Then, he stood up and paced again,

back and forth in front of the damn couch.

"If you've been following me around all my life," I stood up and followed his footsteps. "And telling me what to do, and you haven't even told me why you've been doing this, then I fucking wanna hear ..."

He turned to face me.

"I'm dead, Stanley," he said.

There was a silence. It took me a while to process this into my brain.

"Excuse me?" I said.

There was another silence. Val feigned a clearing of his throat.

I just had to hear him explain this one. I sat down again.

"You were saying?" I said.

"Stanley," he said, arching his eyebrows. "I have a little favor to ask you. And, in addition to being a favor to me, I think this will be beneficial to you as well. I want you

to write a story for me."

"What?" I said. "What does this have to do with you following me around and being dead? Do you want me to write a story about dead people following live people?"

"No, I want you to write something else."

"Why me?" I said. I told him that I had already written several stories, nineteen of which I thought were pretty good until I got nineteen rejections for my trouble.

"No, Stanley." He said. "I don't want one of your stories. Please! Honestly, Stanley, your creative juices are a bit tainted by chemicals. It makes you write nonsense!"

"It worked for the Beatles, didn't it?" I said. Val didn't seem to get the joke.

"No, Stanley, I want you to write a different story," he said, scratching a bit behind his ear. "Not your story," he said. "But my story."

"Your story?" I asked.

"My story," he answered.

Great, I thought to myself. I really needed a twentieth rejection slip. It would kind of even out the whole collector's set in my drawer, mixed in with my ancient parking tickets and unpaid bills.

Still, if this one got in, I thought, then that might be a new start for me. Soon, I might even be considered credible enough to have an agent. Then, in about a year or so, I could be living it up, sitting on a couch that I hadn't fetched out of a dumpster and going to a real therapist instead of Bob's Therapy & Fishing Tackle.

"Okay," I said. "Your story."

"Terrific!" Said Val.

"What's it about?"

"Well," he said. He cleared his throat. "Actually, I want you to do it this way ..."

His way was to have me sit at the computer as he dictated the entire story. What I thought would be a short story turned out to be a 472-page novel. He had me typing for about twelve hours a day or so.

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My neck was killing me, and I was suffering withdrawal symptoms. Val had me puking in a wastebasket.

Finally, it was done. I finished the damn book in two weeks. And when I got the call saying that it got published, I almost hit the floor. I was ecstatic. I tried to hug Val, but my arms went right through him.

"I'm sorry," he said. But, it was okay. At least I thought it was.

When the book was released, I got another call. This one was different though; it was from a police detective.

"I'm sorry to call you if you're busy," said the detective. "But, we do feel that there are a few things we might need to talk about."

"Things?" I said. "What things?"

"You're not in any trouble, sir." Said the detective. That was a relief. He went on, "It's just that we here at the police precinct have read your book ..."

"Oh, yeah," I said, stupidly. "You guys want me to sign copies?"

"No," he said. "We want you to come down here because what you wrote is important to us. It involves the murder case you wrote about that happened over thirty-two years ago — the murder of Valentine Rufus."

"What?" I was frozen. This was not happening. Val did not give me a true story! This was impossible!

"There was some testimony in the book about the case that we hadn't heard. It would help us out a lot if you could ..."

"Val!" I screamed. But he was gone.

"Are you all right, sir?" Said the detective. "Should I send somebody?"

"No," I said, regaining my self-composure. "I think I can handle this on my own."

Since then, I haven't seen Val, and now, the guy who really killed him is in jail, and Val's son, George Rufus, is free after almost thirty-two years. I finally learned what Val was doing all along. Not only was he being a father to his son, but he was being a father to me as well. And Val was dead the whole time.

Meanwhile, George Rufus and I have become close friends. George hangs out at my house a lot. He also tells me that my prose "needs work" and calls me at 3:30 in the morning, "just to talk." But whatever he has to say, I listen.

"Stanley?" He said one night. I could tell he had been drinking heavily.

"What is it now, George?"

"Sorry I'm calling at this hour and everything," he said. "But, I really have to thank you again for all this." Then, it sounded like he either sniffled, or blew his nose.

"You're welcome." I said. Gross, I thought.

"Listen, man," he said. "Why don't you write about your experience? I can help you out and stuff."

And that's what he did. So if you don't like this story, blame George Rufus. He's sitting on my couch right now, smoking cigarettes. 