

## *Valerie Bonet*

A strange girl, Valerie Bonét. Not strange-lookin'. Strange-actin'. Fact was, Valerie looked good. It's just that people never seemed to notice. Nick was one of the few who did, perhaps the only one. He didn't know of any others. Well, mebbe Paul Salvarano. But even Paul said the girl was too weird for him. That was unusual. If a chick was good-lookin', Paul wasn't all that discriminating. Valerie (no one ever called her Val—nobody called her period) could have passed for Vera Miles' sister. Her hair was longer, falling down over her modest chest in front and over her shoulders blades in back. Maybe her scalp-line was lower. Unlike the movie star, the girl's bright, blue eyes were more almond-shaped than round. Her nose, straight but delicate, maybe did not turn up as much either. Her bosom was decidedly more modest than the celebrity's. And Valerie was more long-waisted than the actress. At four inches over five feet, she looked him eye to eye. He thought Valerie Bonét hadn't grown much if at all since sixth grade when she had towered over him. As a high school junior, he'd caught up to her and was still growing.

Valerie rose from the school cafeteria table to return her empty lunch tray. The girl filled out her light blue, short-hemmed, princess dress pretty darn well. Nick seemed to be the only person, kid or teacher alike, who noticed the girl at all. For all her handsome features, she slipped transparently through the lunch room like a ghost.

Valerie had attended grade school with him, even been in the same class a couple years. After going to separate junior highs for three years, they became classmates again in high school last year as sophomores. "Classmates" was a relative term in their case. They were both sixteen, in the same class per se sure. But they shared no classes, not this year or last. Nick saw her only in the halls or at lunch. He couldn't figure out why the girl had no friends; especially boyfriends, at least one boyfriend or even her pick of boyfriends. After all, she was damned good-lookin'.

Thing of it was, Valerie would have to talk to someone to have a boyfriend, or any kind of friend. And she rarely talked other than to offer a meek, downcast "Hello" if she were approached, which was seldom. She smiled even less, though she didn't wear braces any more. Her eyes were always distant—had that far away, lost look. Always quiet. He recalled her smiling once, briefly, when he'd made a joke in passing. Yet he seemed to recall her smiling frequently in grade school, even after she had braces put on her teeth. She didn't need 'em any more. From what he could see, she had two rows of perfectly healthy, even, straight white teeth. Her pearly whites would have made her celebrity "sister" proud. But Valerie never smiled. And she didn't mix. He couldn't figure her out.

Despite her understated beauty Valerie Bonét was the type of girl who seemed to blend into the crowd. If there were no crowd, she'd blend into the woodwork transparent wherever she was. People simply ignored her. She was perhaps the shyest person he'd ever known. But he liked that about her.

Valerie Bonèt was inscrutably neat. Her hair was always in place, never a straying strand. Yet, he had never seen her with a comb in her hand. She could have been the muse for Stephen Foster's classic "Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair." And she wore that light brown hair parted high on the right side of her head. Impeccably combed bangs swept down across her forehead, tucking neatly under the overlying hair that hung down along the side of her head and splaying over her chest.

She wore no make-up. Didn't need any, really. Her features were so sharply clear and symmetrical, coloring so natural and complexion so smooth and soft, she didn't need make-up. The dark brown color of her elegant, sweeping eye-brows contrasted strikingly with her light blue eyes and light brown hair. Nick thought it would be a sin for a girl with her obvious qualities of face and hair to make up herself.

Light was a good word to describe her. Not that she radiated light. Nothing could be further from the truth because there was something dark about her. But light, as in weightlessness, in the sense that she was a kind of an ephemeral being who could disappear with the slightest breeze or cower and melt at the slightest of slights. And Nick considered any slight to her a sin.

Sin. There was that word again. It was a word, foreign to any consideration of this strangely mysterious, vulnerable girl. You could no more attribute sin, or any other wicked, human emotion to her than you could attribute it to a fine porcelain China doll. The simple, tiny silver cross living on her chest hanging perpetually from an equally simple, silver chain attested to the girl's immaculate, humble nature. Still, something was wrong about her. A deep foreboding hovered over her like a dark halo. It followed her everywhere, reflected from frightened eyes.

Nick watched the skittish girl carry her empty lunch tray to the return window at the kitchen. She walked purposefully in a straight line, hesitating for others who rudely stepped in front of her. Her head bowed slightly, shoulders hunched, looking at no one and no one looking at her, invisible to all but him. The silver cross scarcely budged from its perch against the princess dress covering her modest bosom.

He couldn't help notice Valerie had an unassuming wiggle in her stroll that motivated him. Yet her reserved stride was sullenly purposeful, reminding him of the wary, evenly marshaled amble of convicts in prison movies. What was she afraid of?

Seizing his tray with both hands, Nick excused himself from his band buddies, the only white kids seated at the end of the black kids' lunch table. Hustling away, he deftly weaved in and around other cafeteria pedestrians. Valerie dropped off her tray, heading for the exit to the hallway. Close behind her, Nick tossed his tray though the aperture knocking plates on other discarded trays off their perches. He heard at least one plate clatter to the floor on the other side of the window. A quick "Sorry" failed to appease the apron-clad, kitchen assistant who glared at him.

Hop-skipping, Nick caught up to Valerie after she passed through the double door cafeteria portal into the hallway. He skidded past her on the heavily worn Formica floor, sliding to a stop just ahead of her left foot. He grinned.

"Gee Val, you move fast. Didn't think I was gonna catch ya."

She looked at him askance—suspiciously—but didn't break stride heading toward the intersection with the main hallway. Shuffling backwards ahead of her, his smile widened.

"I's thinkin' mebbe we could get together sometime, you know, like after school?"

She slowed but didn't stop. "Why?" she asked with a blank face.

"Well, I thought we could get to know each other better. We don't got no classes together. And if we don't see each other outside o' school, how we ever gonna get to know each other better? See what I mean? It's a conundrum."

Backing into the main hall, he bumped into a senior football jock—a lineman—who towered over him. The big kid told him to watch where he was going. Valerie slowed then walked around the senior and turned left into the front main hall.

Apologizing to the senior jock, Nick cut behind him to stroll along side Valerie. He leaned over her hunched, left shoulder, grinning again into her face.

"So—whaddaya say, Val?"

She glanced at him but said nothing, staring down at her feet without breaking stride. The bell to end the lunch period hadn't rung yet. Few kids were clattering in the hall. Most were in their fourth period classrooms.

"Val?"

"Uh ... I, I dunno." She mumbled. "I'll have to check with my folks."

"So it's okay with you then?"

They rounded the corner past the main stairwell into the central cross hall.

"I have to check with my step-father." She made no expression, no sign of approval or disapproval. Nick thought she'd be a helluva poker player. Dodging a couple kids, they crossed over the intersecting, building-long, back hallway.

At the short end of the cross hall near the stairwell and backdoor exit Nick walked past his locker on the left to follow Valerie back to her locker on the right. Hanging over her shoulder as she dialed her combination lock, Nick noticed she was left-handed. He liked that. Most southpaws he knew were refreshingly different. And he'd had good luck with a lefty chick he dated til she moved away.

"Whaddaya say Val? I drop by your place after school before dinner, saaay ... somethin' after five? I could stick around til your dad got home. Meet him, ya know? Your mom too—the whole bit. Then everybody knows everybody, see? Nothin' hidden up my sleeve."

He pointed to his bare forearm, beneath his short-sleeved, green Ban-lon shirt that he wore out over his pleated tan baggies.

Valerie finished dialing to stick her finger in the circular latch, lift up and open the locker door. She pulled the long door back into Nick's face. He peeped around it.

When Valerie failed to respond, Nick said, "Okay? I'll see you then."

Valerie reached up into the upper shelf for some books. Smiling, Nick winked at her. He pivoted on his heel to leave.

"You don't know where I live."

Nick turned to her, backing up toward his locker diagonally across the hall. Not looking at him, Valerie filled her arms with books for her afternoon classes.

“Sure I do. You live at the dead end on Dickson across from the church.”

She closed her locker. “How did you know that?”

“Your folks take the Post. I useta help the Salvaranos deliver your paper.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot. You’re good friends with them, aren’t you?”

Stopping halfway across the hall to his locker, he said, “Yeah—since first grade. You remember—Green Vale? We both had Mrs. Law for first grade. Remember?”

She nodded but said nothing. Valerie walked past him heading around to the first floor science wing, the west wing above the baseball and softball diamonds and P.E. fields. As she passed his locker Nick asked where she was going. Walking away from him, he barely made out her saying, “Chemistry.” Nick ran toward her, reaching her before she got to the long, back hall. He tugged at her elbow.

“Hey, if ya wait a sec, I’ll get my stuff and walk down there wicha. Okay?”

Valerie didn’t speak, just looked down at her feet. But she didn’t walk away.

“Great. Just wait over there by the corner. I’ll be right wicha.”

Before she could respond, Nick turned to jog to his locker. He whip-dialed his combination lock, opened his locker and picked out his American History text and a Pee-Chee stuffed with papers. He hurried back to Valerie who stared at the floor.

“Thanks, for waitin’, Val.” She didn’t say anything. “Come on. Ya don’t wanna be late.” He pulled up short. “Hey, ya mind if we go upstairs first? I can drop my stuff in Mr. Collier’s room. That’s my next class. It’s right above us.”

Valerie nodded. They spun about to head for the exit at the end of the cross hall. Clutching her books to her chest with both hands the way girls do, Nick let her step through the door ahead of him. They walked up the stairwell side by side. This back stairwell was little-used, as was the long back second floor hallway that led to the science wing that contained several empty classrooms. He had suggested this circuitous route specifically for that reason. He wanted as few hallway distractions as possible so they could focus on each other.

“Who ya got,” Nick asked.

“Mrs. Rondell.”

The bell ending third lunch signaled they had ten minutes to get to their fifth period classes. From the stairwell, they heard kids spilling into the halls above and below. Nick smiled as they reached the landing and turned left to climb the second flight.

“She’s great, ain’t she? I got her for Chem. Study right before lunch. Yeah, Mrs. Rondell—Mann—me and Hank keep her guessin’. You know—Hank Roulette? Plays varsity baseball and basketball?”

Her lips came together. She blinked but stared straight into the steps as they climbed. Nick took that for a yes. They topped the stairs, passed through the double doors and turned left joining other kids in the hall changing classes.

“Wait up a sec, will ya Val? Lemme drop these.” She stopped.

He ducked into his American History class. A few kids were there, early from lunch. They stood with their backs to him looking out the window. Mr. Collier wasn’t there. Nick dropped his junk on his desk-chair and lit out. Valerie was waiting for

him in the hall holding her books to her chest, neck bowed with shoulders hunched forward, staring at the floor as before.

“—Yeah, me and Hank are always the ‘wild point’—in all our labs, I mean. Hank’n’ me are lab partners, see? Yeah, Mrs. Rondell says ya always gotta have a ‘wild point—wild point’—Ha! That’s what she calls it.” He chuckled. “Only, poor Mrs. Rondell says she can’t figure out how come me and Hank are *always* the wild point, and never none of them other lab teams.” He waited for a grin that didn’t come. This Valerie Bonét was a tough nut to crack.

He slowed. Valerie slowed, too. Nick wanted this to last as long as possible. They scuffled along side by side. Chuckling some more, he turned left with her into the long, back hallway to amble down the practically deserted corridor. He’d hoped to get a chuckle out of her, or at least a smile. Instead, he noticed a bewildered, sad look on her face. Kids walked around them.

“We’re always the wild point, see? Never anyone else. Get it?”

Without looking at him, Valerie said, “What’s a wild point?” They walked slowly.

“Oh, that’s the fu—uh—the-uh, the screw-ups, see?” She shook her head. She didn’t get it. “In the lab results. You know.

“See, Mrs. Rondell assigns different quantities of chemicals used in the experiments to two-man teams at each lab station so when all the lab teams finish their parts of the experiment the results will plot out—you know—graph out nice on the chalk board. And we copy each lab station’s result onto the graph paper with them funny-lookin’ squares in our lab notebooks. You know? Always makes for a nice wave or parabola or diagonal line or whatever the hell it’s supposed to turn out—for the particular hypothesis we’re tryin’ to prove, see? ‘Cept for me and Hank, cuz we’re always the *wild point*. Get it? We’re way off the chart, off the graph.”

Narrowing her eyes, Valerie bit her lower lip. They walked through the catwalk that overlooked the senior courtyard. This was Nick’s favorite part of the building because it was seldom-used and the bordering walls of long glass windows on each side of the catwalk afforded outside views of the “senior” courtyard on his right and the grassy backside of the school down to woods on the left. Warm sunlight streamed through long vertical windows, glancing off the powder blue-painted, cinder brick walls and silver and white Formica floor. The heat from the sunlight was particularly welcome during this cold of November.

“We don’t have many labs,” Valerie said, missing his drift about the wild point.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. That’s the difference between Chem. Study and Chemistry. You just read about it. We hypothesize first see, then experiment and then read about it. To see if the hypothesis was right, see? It’s part of the college prep program.”

He offered a weak smile. Valerie did not return it.

This deal wasn’t goin’ so well. He was beginning to realize why nobody socialized with Valerie Bonét. Talkin’ to her was like pullin’ teeth. Mebbe Paul Salvarano was right about her after all. He usually was when it came to makin’ out with chicks.

They were almost through the catwalk when he touched her elbow, stopping her. He reached up to tickle the underside of her chin. Valerie lifted her face to him. She

looked awesome—innocent and beautiful—no pretensions, no head games. Not with this chick. He loved that about her.

“Look Valerie, I didn’t mean to imply anything by that remark. I was jus’ sayin’, is all.” She stared blankly at him. The girl didn’t have a clue.

Nick searched her expressionless face—nothing. Shrugging, he said, “I guess you think I’m a little forward. It’s jes’ that ... I—I don’t know any other way—ta, ta get ta know ya, I mean.” Her gaze drifted downward.

“Gee Val ...” She looked up. He shifted his weight then stuck his hands in his pants pockets. “It’s just that ... Well, you’re one cool-lookin’ chick, one of the best in school and I—” Valerie lowered her head again.

Nick was frustrated. Glancing around, he noticed they were alone in the long, empty upper hall. He leaned forward to peer into her eyes. He pecked her on her left cheek. She froze. The girl shook like a frightened fawn, staring into his eyes. He glanced at the round grey and white clock, sticking out from the wall near the ceiling. Grey hands on black markings read 1:28 as the second hand ticked around the six.

“Guess we better get a move on. Ya don’t wanna be late.”

“You either. You ... you better go back.” She stared at her feet.

They each turned in separate directions to head to their respective classes. But Nick stopped. He made an about-face to scurry after her. She was walking fast now. He caught up to her near the door at the top of the stairwell where she protested.

“You’ll be late. You’ll get in trouble.”

“Anh, fahgedabowdid! They ain’t gonna can me jus’ cuz I’m a minute or two late from lunch. Said, I’d walk ya ta class and that’s what I’m gonna do. That’s the kind of a guy I am, see?”

She pinched her lips together, as if she were trying to hide braces she no longer wore, then blinked. Again, he took that for a yes. They hustled down the stairs side by side. Coming to the first floor hallway they turned to hurry down the cross hall, reaching Mrs. Rondell’s door just as the bell rang. Nick stopped Valerie on the threshold.

“I’ll drop by later, okay? After school.”

Valerie pinched her lips together, hiding her invisible braces. The kids were taking their seats inside the classroom. Grey-haired Mrs. Rondell waddled toward them.

The teacher bellowed out in her southern drawl, “Nicholas, you’ve come back for *more*? I never knew you to be such a dedicated chemist.”

Seated behind her the kids laughed. Valerie stared down over her books at her feet. With head bowed, she scurried to her seat. Nick replied loudly for the class to hear.

“Well, Mrs. R, the truth is, I just can’t seem to get enough of your southern charm.”

The kids and Mrs. Rondell laughed. He’d given Valerie enough time to slip into her seat without being an object of distraction.

“You’re the wild one, all right,” replied Mrs. Rondell. “But flattery will get you nowhere with me.” The teacher motioned with the backs of her hands for him to shoo. “I think you have some place to be. Now scoot.” Like a mother hen, she shooped

him out the door. The teacher took hold of the knob closing the door behind her leaving him alone in the hall.

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Nick sipped from the theatre water fountain. Movie theater fountains had the coldest water. He really dug it. Made him thirsty for more. He took another long draught, wiping the drip from his lip running down his chin with the back forearm sleeve of his pale yellow Peter's jacket. The night before Thanksgiving was too cold for the lightweight jacket but he'd worn it more for the chilly theatre itself than for the November night air. After all, he didn't have to be outside long, just get to his car.

Valerie Bonét was walking toward the rest room. Nick leaned back against the wall to wait for her. He thought about their relationship thus far and what his next move should be. In the last couple weeks he had learned there was a lot more to this chick than met the eye. Valerie was complicated; naïve, yet mysteriously shy and scared.

He had dropped by her house that day after school, after his Boy's Club football practice. (Tomorrow was the Turkey Bowl and he'd be done with tackle football; probably, for the rest of his life. That is, unless he grew enough for his dad to let him play for the high school next year.) Nick had met Valerie's folks and her baby sister—a roly-poly, eight-month old. The baby was crawling and really cute. He had learned Valerie's dad was actually her step-father. Her real dad had skipped out on the family over four years ago. Her mom had remarried two years later.

Nick glanced at the clock on the wall—twenty-nine after eleven. He had to have Valerie home by midnight. Her step-dad had warned him if he brought Valerie home late, he'd never see her again. It'd take less than ten minutes to drive her home. That would give them twenty minutes until her midnight curfew. Leaning on his left foot Nick placed the sole of his right shoe behind him up against the wall. He rocked himself gently, pushing off the wall with his foot. Movie-goers drifted out of the lobby towards the parking lot. He considered his next move with Valerie.

This was their first real date. He'd visited her house a couple times at her place. Snuck in when her folks were out for the evening and she was baby-sitting. They had fed and played with the baby until it went down for the night. They'd sat on the couch and watched TV. But, on his second visit, when he'd become bored with the tube, he'd spied an oil-painting portrait of Valerie's mother on the wall opposite the couch. He said he could see where Valerie got her beauty. He'd told her how much he admired the work. How it was so real it could almost be mistaken for an actual photograph. When he asked her who had painted the piece, Valerie claimed the work as hers. He was amazed. He'd told her how talented she was, asking if she had other paintings. She said she did. He asked to see them.

It'd had taken some heavy persuasion on his part. But, though reluctant, the girl had led him upstairs to her bedroom walled with her art work. Oils, water colors, charcoals, pen and ink sketches abounded. He was amazed. Whoever would have guessed? The girl was truly gifted.

The picture on her easel was apocalyptic in theme; quite frightening, actually. Dark and sinister overall, it hid sporadic explosions of fiery reds, oranges and yellows that

drew the eye. The four horsemen of the Apocalypse reared their fire-snorting stallions. A black-hooded, grim reaper of death, a skeleton of grey, extended a scythe-like scepter from a bony, outstretched hand toward minions of frightened creatures that scurried for cover. The picture had absorbed him. He'd told her so. She'd almost smiled, pinching her lips together over braces long since absent.

From an easel near her desk, he had picked up a large sketch pad about two by three feet. Flipping through the pages from top to bottom, he'd spied a lovely, heart-warming charcoal portrait with just a few touches of vibrant crayon color.

The picture showed Val's mom, nursing her infant sister beneath a pitched roof, like a stable roof. The likenesses were astoundingly uncanny, reminding him of Madonna and child. Valerie had drawn her mother with her robe draped down off her shoulder nursing Valerie's baby sister at her left breast. Valerie had captured perfectly the look of loving-quiet, gentle contentment in her mother's downcast eyes and pursed, smiling lips that Valerie had colored pink. The baby had one blue eye open, with one hand digging into the mother's soft, cream-white breast and the other hand open—pink, tiny fingers splayed out—reaching.

But in the upper left corner of the frame, a small black, demonic face hovered above the roof. Red eyes like hot coals glowered at the domesticity of the bucolic scene playing out below. Ignoring the demon, Nick had focused his praise on the saintly mother and child. Valerie pursed her lips and blinked. She'd seemed pleased.

Flipping through several more pages, he'd stopped at an arresting work he could not ignore. A reflection in a mirror, sort of a side view angled away in perspective. A rearing, centaur-like figure in the left foreground was humped over a lovely, nude, nubile woman down on all fours. The girl's long, light brown hair hung down over her shoulders and back, shielding from view the tip of her hanging, round breast. Her mature rounded, right haunch however rose in plain sight, centermost. At the back right of the page, the girl's face, turned slightly away, could be seen contorted in pain via a mirror. The centaur humped her from behind in obvious delight. His face had born a strong resemblance to that of the demonic visage at the top of the earlier Madonna and child charcoal and crayon drawing.

Valerie had quick-snatched the poster book from his hands, stuffing it away in her closet. In her haste and embarrassment, she'd knocked over the easel. She'd asked him to leave. Nick had righted the easel for her. Then she'd led him downstairs to the front door. He'd apologized for upsetting her, saying he meant no harm. He told her again how gifted and talented he thought she was. She had let him peck her on the cheek before saying good-bye, urging him out the front door.

The next day at school Nick caught up to Valerie in the cafeteria. He asked her out on this date tonight. She'd said she'd have to ask her folks. Then, last Thursday, walking her to Chemistry class after lunch, she'd said her folks had agreed. He'd wanted to take her out last weekend but his favorite British blues band was playing in New York at the Fillmore East. He'd taken off in his Olds 88 up the interstate with a buddy to check them out. With his own band's gigs lined up at the NCO club this weekend and next, after Thanksgiving, tonight was his only shot at Val for a while.



He looked up to spy Valerie walking back from the theater restroom toward him, hunched over at the shoulders as always, eyes cast down at her feet.

Nick pushed off the wall to greet her. Catching her eye he smiled, telling her how “lovely—how fantastic” she looked, which she did. She really was a strikingly attractive chick. With a little bit of self-esteem she could be homecoming queen. Mebbe he could help her out in that department, boost her confidence—mebbe.

“Well,” he said, eying the clock. “Don’t think we got time for a coke at the Red Barn. Could jes’ drive around for a while and talk. Make sure you’re home by twelve. All right?” Nick smiled hopefully.

The girl shrugged. He knew this was her first boy-girl date of any kind. Her stepdad had been against the idea. But her mother liked him. He could tell.

“Val’s sixteen,” her mom had said. “It’s high time she began to socialize.” The mother had convinced her husband to let Valerie out tonight.

Valerie was so fetching yet so vulnerable. He couldn’t help but reach up to brush her cheek with the backs of his fingers and stroke her hair. She looked at him with obvious longing. He leaned over to peck her cheek. She leaned forward, brushing her cheek next to his, pausing there cheek-to-cheek. He took her by the arm.

“Come on. We’ll go for a little ride; provided, that damn car of mine don’t run out o’ oil.” She seemed pleased. Her lips pursed and she blinked.

The late autumn night was clear and dry—star-filled. Nick escorted Valerie to his fifty-nine Oldsmobile 88. The car was so screwed up, he had to add a can of Quaker State every time he filled up. He hid the gouged-up, front car seat beneath a loose cotton cover. But the AM radio and the heater worked fine. He held the door for her. When he got in Nick turned on the heater and tuned the radio to WRGC. He took her the long way home through the Heights, listening to Top 40.

He explained that during heavy storms, the car roof leaked at the seam of the back windshield so the Olds always smelled musty inside. He apologized for the annoying odor. Pinching her lips and blinking, she said she didn’t mind. Nick cracked the vent window anyway to let in some fresh air. He asked her to slide across the seat next to him, promising not to bite. She moved over.

When her hips and shoulders touched his, Nick saw Valerie pinch her lips together again. Did she actually smile? He thought she had. They didn’t talk. Nick wondered what he should do—talk—or park somewhere? Mebbe try to make out in the brief time they had left? On the radio, Junior Walker and the All-Stars’ sang “What Does It Take to Win Your Love For Me?”

With any other chick, there’d be no question. He’d be putting his best moves on her. But this chick was different—complicated and naïve—untested and anxious. He had to consider whatever he did now could come back to bite him in the butt. Nobody—none of his friends or classmates—knew he was interested in Valerie. When they asked why he walked her to Cheistry, he said he felt sorry for her. And he had to keep it that way. They’d laugh him right out o’ school if they knew. They still kidded him about L’il Mau even after she’d moved away. Why he didn’t date classmates as a rule. And Val wasn’t exactly in the “cool” crowd. He had to consider

the repercussions—in school that is—of whatever he did here with her tonight. Though he didn't figure Valerie would blab. Who'd talk with her anyway?

Nick pulled up to the curb in front of the Presbyterian Church across the street from Val's two and half-story, brick duplex. Hers was the last duplex at the top of the hill at the dead end, not far from the illegal dump on the other side of the woods. She didn't live in the end house but in the half of the duplex next to the end house. Valerie lived between two churches. Holy Trinity, the Catholic church, sat further up on the plateau behind her place on the next street over. The Presbyterian Church to their left sat below the crest of the hill beneath them. The cross on the white steeple rose just a little above his car roof. The church lot was empty, all dark and quiet here at the dead end. The night was still. Stars twinkled in the clear, night sky overhead.

Nick jerked up on the emergency break to park in the wrong direction with the driver side next to the curb. They were on a steep hill. And he didn't want to accidentally hit the gear shift and have them drift back down the hill. He left the engine running for the heater and radio. Turning to Valerie, he placed his right arm around her shoulders atop the seatback.

Junior Walker crooned, "What does it take? To win your love for me? How can I make? This dream come true for me? I just got to know, oh Baby, cuz I love ya so. Gonna blow it for ya." His plaintive, tenor sax wailed. Nick lowered the volume.

"So Val, whaddidya think of that show? Not too entertaining was it?"

Looking straight-ahead shoulders hunched forward and head bowed, Valerie shook her head in the negative. She didn't speak.

"Yeah. *The Arrangement*—had a lot o' good actors in it though, ya know? Kazan directed. So I thought it couldn't be all that bad? But—"

"Life shouldn't be like that." Valerie scarcely whispered

"What? Yeah. Well—hell! It's just a movie. Not as evil as *Rosemary's Baby*."

"No. Could have been worse. I guess." She stared straight ahead, sullen.

The demonic face in th—e mother and child picture and the other one—the image of the centaur riding the girl flashed through Nick's head. He shook them off.

"Sure, sure. That's jes' Hollywood stuff, you know, Val."

"I wish." Her soft response belied an ominous portent.

An overwhelming sense of sadness and longing to comfort this girl overcame him. Nick stroked the back of her head and honey-hued, light brown hair.

Valerie turned quickly to face him. Sticking her tongue out of her mouth, she lurched at him, impaling her tongue between his lips. By reflex, Nick's hand and arm closed about her shoulders. The girl held her curled tongue rigidly in his mouth, stuck motionless between his lips. Her eyes shut tight as if she were in pain.

Nick nearly laughed. Taking her head gently in both his hands, he pulled her face back from his. Her tongue receded. Val opened her eyelids revealing bright blue irises that contrasted sharply with her striking, sweeping dark brows. She knocked him right out.

"Hey Baby, it's okay, it's okay. I know you're new at this but you don't do it like that." Bewildered, she blinked. He smiled.

“See? Kissin’ ain’t some terrible duty you gotta perform, ya know. It’s somethin’ special you do with people ya feel special about.” He studied her for a second. “It’s like eatin’ dessert, see? Like somethin’ you do slow and easy, savorin’ it kind o’, cuz ya wanna enjoy it. Know what I mean?” She looked down, embarrassed.

With his thumb and forefinger, Nick lifted her chin to his. He reached up to unclasp and remove her burette. She let him. Her light brown hair fell down into her face. Val’s baby blues peered out between long, light brown strands with a desperate, soft longing that drew him right out.

“Like this,” he whispered, staring into her baby blues.

Nick leaned forward, pressing his lips to hers; soft and gentle. He kissed her easily, freely. She responded in kind. Nick let his tongue slip between his lips to flick gently at hers. “Umm,” she sighed. Again, the girl responded wholeheartedly. They opened their mouths, tasting and exploring each other’s active tongues as if they were dessert. The girl tasted to Nick like the sugar-coated, chocolate confectionaries he had bought her at the movies. She followed his lead, catching on fast. Before long, they were kissing and swapping spit like real lovers. The girl threw her arms about him. Valerie hugged him close to her—tight. Her ardor shocked but pleased him. She wanted him. Perhaps more even, than he wanted her. He decided to go for it. After all, there’s nothin’ like a hot make-out session to establish a strong bond.

Without breaking their embrace, Nick pushed her dark green woolen, car coat off her shoulders. She wiggled out, helping him by depositing the coat on the seat beside her. In their writhing, continuous embrace the coat slipped to the floorboards.

Nick unbuttoned her heavy, white cotton blouse with its button-down collar while Valerie freed the blouse from her pencil skirt. Her hands rushed to his pecs, roaming over them, sliding up beneath his jacket to his shoulders down over his hard biceps. They sucked tongue as he parted the hems of her blouse. Tugging and pushing, he lowered her bra straps over her shoulders. Valerie abetted him by wiggling her arms out of the straps. The girl helped him help her feel good, guiding his hands where she wanted them. Val swooned, parting their tongues and separating her mouth from his. She opened her blue eyes to leer at him then, closing her eyes, she rubbed her cheek hard into his, savoring the touch of his smooth, whiskerless cheek. Valerie sighed deeply into his right ear. The car’s interior grew hot. Val freed her modest bosom from the bra’s cups. Fog appeared, creeping up on the windshield and windows.

Nick lowered his head. His searching tongue found her soft, pink, left breast while his left hand found the right. He suckled her as her infant sister had her mom in the charcoal drawing. Valerie clutched both her hands behind his head to press him in, tighter to her. He felt her lips mouthing the top of his head through his hair. His right hand fumbled in her lap, tugging up, pulling at her skirt. The girl moaned deep with pleasure hungry for him. His hand stole up beneath her skirt. Spreading her legs in a natural response, Val convulsed in deep-groaning pleasure. Nick reached—

The car door jolted open behind him. Cold air struck Nick’s backside. A strong hand—not Valerie’s—dug deep into his scalp. Valerie screamed. Another hand stuck

inside his back jacket collar jerking hard on him, dragging him out of the car over the curb onto the grass between the church sidewalk and the street.

Staring up, Nick found an R. G. County police officer standing over him tapping a baton against his palm. Stars twinkled in the cold, black night sky above the officer's black-billed, grey, peaked cap. Glancing right, Nick spied a squad car with its lights off, pulled up behind his Olds.

"What are ya doi'g with this girl, kid?" The man's words escaped in a mist.

Nick stuttered. The sudden night air chill stunched his tongue. His driver's side door hung wide open over the curb. The bottom door corner stuck into the grassy sod. In the front seat, he saw Valerie scrambling to put herself back together.

The blue and grey-uniformed officer tapped Nick's calf with the side of his corfammed, black shoe. The cop raised the baton in menacing fashion, tapping it against his open palm. Gulping the fresh cold autumnal air Nick half sat up.

"Uh, well ... We—we were just—jus' neckin' a little, that's all, Officer."

"Unh-hunh" said the officer, nodding. "That's all, eh?" Mist rose from his mouth.

"Sure," replied Nick. He glanced toward Val who had her bra and blouse in place. She hurried to button up her blouse under her coat. The officer turned to her.

"Are you all right, Miss? Is that right?"

She nodded. "Yes sir." Her lips pinched and her head bowed. She looked down.

"Where do you live?"

Before she could speak Nick said, "She lives right across the street officer, right over there, the house next to the end." He pointed past the policeman's thigh.

The officer turned to Valerie. "Is that right, Miss?"

"Yes sir," Her downcast eyes focused on buttoning her blouse and shoving the hem inside her skirt.

"Well, you best go on home then. Do your parents know you're out here *neckin'*?"

Shaking her head, Valerie climbed out of the driver's door. She finished tucking in her shirt. The officer kicked Nick lightly. Valerie scurried around the car on ahead.

"Geddap! We're gonna see her old man."

As Nick rose from the ground, he dusted himself off. The officer shut the door to the Olds. He shoved Nick in front of him across the street. When they caught up to Valerie she was sobbing. She begged the officer not to come to her house. He assured her it would be all right. But Valerie protested it wouldn't, asserting he didn't know her step-dad. Ignoring her pleas, the officer opened the gate. He forced Valerie and Nick up the walk, up the front steps to the door. The cop rang the bell with Valerie protesting loudly against him. It was the loudest Nick had ever heard her speak—that is; not counting the deep groans she'd panted a few minutes ago in the car. Heavy footsteps sounded inside the house.

Valerie's step-dad answered, holding open the storm door asking, "What's this?"

Valerie and Nick slumped before the threshold with the cop behind them on the stoop landing. The officer stepped forward to tell how he'd found the two of them. He pointed with his baton across the street to Nick's Olds.

Valerie's mom came down the stairs from the bedrooms, cinching her robe sash about her. Her make-up was off but, like her daughter, she looked good to Nick. Val's mother stopped beside her husband to ask what was going on. Valerie's step-dad told her. Her mom ordered Valerie inside. Still holding the door open, her step-dad stood aside for her. With head bowed and shoulders hunched, Valerie stepped over the threshold into the house. Her mom put her arm around Valerie's shoulders to escort her upstairs. Val was so shocked, so ashamed she didn't even say good-bye.

Valerie's step-dad growled at Nick.

"You stay away from our daughter, you hear? Don't ever call or come around her again. Keep away! You hear?"

He thanked the officer before he slammed the front door shut in their faces.

The officer tugged on Nick's elbow. He let Nick lead them down the steps, down the walk, through the gate and across the street to his car. He told Nick he'd follow him home. The officer retreated to get into his squad car, parked behind the Olds.

Before getting in, the cop said. "Sorry kid, didn't mean to cause ya so much trouble. I got a teen-age daughter myself. Thing is, I'd never noticed ya if ya hadn't been parked the wrong way." Nick stared at the guy—*unbelievable!*

"Let's go!"

The officer motioned for Nick to get into the Olds. He did. True to his word, the cop followed him home. At least the cop didn't come to his front door to bother his folks as he had Valerie's. Nick figured that was something to be thankful for.

He didn't see Valerie at school on Monday after the holiday weekend. He caught up to her at lunch on Tuesday. Her face bore the faint fading, healing signs of a beating—cut lip, blackened eye and bruised jaw. She wouldn't speak to him. When he persisted, Val begged him to leave her alone. Nick adhered to her wishes.

\* \* \*

Valerie Bonét didn't come back to school after the Christmas break. Paul Salvarano said she was attending some art conservatory somewhere up near Boston. The following fall though, she came back to Pocomoke. She graduated with Nick but never spoke to him. He took the hint ignoring her too as though nothing had happened between them. Besides, he and Ry were a couple by then. He was content.

After their graduation ceremony on the floor of Cole Field House out at Maryland, the senior class milled in semi-bedlam in a cramped room beneath the field house stands. Nick stood in cap and gown at the edge of a semi-circle of celebrating graduates, clamoring around several coat racks on wheels. A firm tap on his left shoulder turned him about.

Valerie Bonét, hair bobbed and curved in at her neck, baby fat absent from her cheeks, wearing a light blue summer frock to match her smiling almond-shaped blue eyes, stood tall with her shoulders squared and hands behind her. She rose up and down on her toes, brimming with joy. Her beaming eyes and grin were infectious.

"I got it Nicky, the real deal. Not that fake one we got out there." Her left hand shot round from her back to show him a diploma.

"Lemme see."

Valerie handed over the parchment for his inspection. He saw her name — **Valerie Marie Bonét** — under the curved banner of “Maryland High School Diploma” printed across the top. There was some fancy writing in script, the name of their high school, more fancy writing and the large word **DIPLOMA** below. It was signed by the principal and the State Superintendent of Schools and dated – *on this 7<sup>th</sup> day of June 1971*. Nick marveled at the document he had worked for all his life.

“That’s what I’m lookin’ for all right. How’d ya get it?”

Valerie pointed over his shoulder.

“Just turn in your cap and gown to those folks.” She nodded to a table beside the coat racks behind him. “They’ll give you a receipt. Then take the receipt over there.”

Valerie pivoted halfway round to point toward a couple tables on the other side of the room surrounded by grinning kids—graduates like them—dressed in an array of styles from casual Bermuda shorts and T-shirts to formal attire.

She inclined her head toward him. “The table on the left there is for the first half of the alphabet. You go to the one on the right where Mrs. Smith is. Just give her your receipt and she’ll mark ya off and give you your diploma.” Val turned to face him. Nick nodded that he understood. They’re eyes met. Nick noticed he was a few inches taller than Valerie was now yet she seemed larger than he recalled.

Kids jostling for position to turn in their caps and gowns bumped into him from behind shoving him towards Valerie. Smiling, Val put her arms about him to steady him. She hugged him close for several seconds before she reached up to kiss him then rub her cheek next to his, as she had the night of their date. Holding him tight to her, Valerie gasped. She whispered in his ear.

“Thank you, Nick. I’ll never forget our time together. Things happened after that. It all came out. My mother never let him touch me again. They’re divorced now, you know. He’ll never be able to hurt my sister either. And we never have to see him again.” She pulled back from him, holding onto his forearms. “None of us do.”

Valerie spoke confidently with a gleam in her eye he had never seen. No longer was she the shy, sullen schoolgirl.

“That night in your car was the best kiss I ever had Nicky. It really was. Maybe the best kiss I’ll ever have. I’ll never forget you Nicky. Never.”

Val squeezed his biceps. She leaned forward to kiss him on the lips and, letting go of him, stepped back. Beaming, her eyes widened as she nodded ever so slightly and her lips pursed. She winked. Then Valerie Bonét squared her shoulders, turned and strode away.

Valerie Bonét

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