

Valerie On The Stairs

A Treatment

Part One

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“Culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women.”

Elisabeth Bronfen

“Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic.”

The story is told in the first person, by Rob Hanisee, a man in his early thirties, shy, insecure but full of ambition.

He wants to write novels and short stories that will touch people's hearts. But so far he's stumbled. Five big novels written in seven years, all without publishers. Now he's down on funds, but has got lucky: a friend of a friend told him about the Highberger House, which was left after the death of its owner – who had been a failed and frustrated author – to allow hard-working but unlucky writers like Rob a place to stay, free of charge for as long as they need until they get something published.

A room has just been freed up in the Highberger House because one of its tenants sold his first book! Rob goes to the house and meets the acerbic and short-tempered Nancy Bloom, who runs the place. She's seen a lot of writers come and go, she tells Rob, some clever, some dumb, half of them drunkards and damn near all of them no more likely to write a bestseller than her mother.

“Is your mother a writer?” Rob asks.

“No.” Nancy replies wearily. “She's dead.”

Rob presents Nancy with his huge, unpublished manuscripts as proof of his diligence. He is accepted into the house, much to his relief. Nancy tells him he should expect no social life in the house. There are nine rooms and nine writers, all working to get their precious vision onto the page. Is it haunted? He asks. Only by the spectre of failure, Nancy Bloom replies. And that's just about everywhere.

“I'm not going to fail.” Rob tells Nancy. “You giving me this chance marks a big change in my life. I'm going to be published, if it's the last thing I do.”

“Well you should keep yourself away from distractions of any kind,” Nancy said.

“Are you gay?”

“No.”

“A womanizer?”

“I never had a woman look twice at me. Ever. But I don’t care. Fuck love. I’m going to live my life for books.”

He moves in. Slowly he begins to encounter his fellow writers. They’re a weird, obsessive lot. And the house itself does seem to be a kind of reflection of their frustration and anger, with its stained walls and uneasy shadows, that almost have a life of their own. Three of the writers – Bruce Sweetland, Everett Neely and Patricia Dunbar – seem to form a loose cabal, always moving back and forth between their apartments.

The house is tall and thin. There’s no elevator, just a lot of stairs.

One night, Rob is drinking – heavily – wrestling with the opening sentence of his new book, when he hears the sound of crying. He goes out onto the stairs. The lights are flickering weirdly. He can’t entirely trust his alcohol smeared senses.

But up a little way he sees a woman, totally naked. Young, beautiful, weeping. He approaches her. As he does so he hears noises in the walls; scratchings and rattlings and incoherent whispers. They get louder and more threatening the closer he gets to the girl. He has a difficult, oblique conversation with her. She tells him her name is Valerie and that she’s frightened. Where are your clothes? Rob asks. He took them, Valerie replies. Who? Rob wants to know. But then, from the darkness at the top of the stairs there come rivulets of dark fluid, that descend the stairs as slowly as molasses.

Oh no, Valerie says, *he's here*. And to Rob's astonishment the fluids run up over the naked body of Valerie, defying physics. They have a life of their own. They run up her back, down over her shoulders and encircle her breasts. They also move down between her legs. Their effect is clearly sexual. Valerie starts to moan.

"All right," she says to somebody in the darkness. "I'm ready." Then to Rob: "We shouldn't talk again. They don't want you anywhere near me. But thank you." She leans down.

"Touch me." she says softly.

"Where?"

"You know where."

He puts his hand between her legs. "Am I real?"

"What?"

"Am I?"

"Of course. Of course."

"Thank you."

She kisses him. Then she heads up to the top of the stairs, and a door opens, shedding light on the naked Valerie and a tall, monstrous creature that has her in his embrace.

Rob's curiosity overwhelms his caution. He starts to climb the stairs towards capture and captor, the fluid that had poured down the stairs now returning to its source, which is clearly the creature that holds Valerie in its arms. Its flesh, we see, is scaly, and glistening. And a long reptilian tail curls and thrashes behind it. We are teased with only

these tantalizing glimpses, however. The rest is shadows, seething as though the air around the creature has a life of its own.

Rob starts to pick up his pace, as the fluid also speeds towards its maker.

“Stay away!” Valerie says. “He’ll hurt you. Please, please just forget about me.”

Then, like a magician’s trick, the two of them step into the light, which is instantly extinguished. By the time Rob, breathless from the climb, reaches the top of the stairs, they’re gone. There is no door, nor any sign of a door. Frustrated, Rob starts to bang on the wall.

“Let her out, you sonofabitch. I know you’re in there! Valerie? Listen to me -- ”

The noise he’s been making has inevitably drawn the attention of his neighbors. Doors have opened; depressed, exhausted, neurotic, paranoid faces (writer, in other words) peer out.

“What are you doing, boy?” said Everett Neely, a dyspeptic old man with a Hemingway beard.

“There was a woman on these stairs -- ”

“Who in Christ’s fucking name are you?” says Patricia Dunbar, who has the delicate beauty of a Blanche Dubois and a mouth fouler than any sailor’s.

“He’s new.” Nancy says, trying to calm everything down. “His name’s Rob Hanisee. He’s -- ”

“A stinking miserable fuck-up like all of us.” Patricia says. “Well you owe me two batteries, Hanisee.”

“What for?”

“I dropped my frigging vibrator when you started hollering, and the batteries came out, rolled under that flea-bitten sofa our generous Miss Bloom dug out of a fucking dumpster for me. Christ, I hate this place. And I hate happy little fucking faces like that.” She points up at Rob.

“So give up writing.” Rob yells back. “Become a fucking nun.”

“I was a Sister of fucking Mercy for seven fucking years, you little cocksucker! So don’t try getting clever with me!”

She slams the door. We hear numerous bolts slide home.

“Come down from that top landing, Mr. Hanisee.” Nancy orders Rob. “There’s a leak in the roof, and it drips through when it rains. The wood’s rotting.”

Rob looks down at his feet. Nancy is right. The wood is indeed rotting, the support beams creaking beneath his weight. He moves cautiously now. Even so, one of the boards crumbles beneath his foot, and as he launches himself forward, grabbing at the still solid banister, the boards give way, and fall off into darkness. Rob, however, is safe. He comes on down the stairs meeting the accusing, loveless stares of his neighbors as he descends. Doors are slammed, curses muttered. More bolts are slid home.

“So much for the love and support of my fellow artists.” he says when he reaches Nancy Bloom.

One door remains open. It’s that of Bruce Sweetland, a man too in love with the deceptive seductions of marijuana and cocaine to have realized his promise. He wears his grey hair long and in a pony-tail, and his face still has the remnants of his youthful beauty.

“Sweetland. Bruce Sweetland.” he extends a hand to Rob. They shake. “I’ll take care of him Nancy, don’t you worry.”

“You just understand, young man,” Nancy said, “that I will not tolerate one more escapade like tonight. You do it again, you’re out.”

“All right. I understand. That’s quite reasonable and of course I respect it. I just want to know one thing and then I’ll shut up, I swear.”

“Spit it out.” says Nancy.

“What’s behind these walls?”

“Crawlspace, what do you think? Hot water pipes, electrical wires. More than a few dead rats, I daresay.”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“You swear?”

Nancy gets fierce. “Do not press me, Mr. Hanisee. The gutters are full of men just one step away from where you are now.”

“She’s a tough ol’ bitch.” Bruce says when he’s brought Rob in from the stairs, “But hell, she’s right. We’re none of us more than a stumble from the gutter, or worse. A friend of mine, won a Pulitzer when he was thirty-one, said it was the worst damn thing ever happened to him. All downhill after that, he said. Shit. He hung himself last year, ten years to the day since he got the good news. That’s fucked.”

Hanisee’s looking at the photographs pinned up on Sweetland’s wall.

“You got a lot of sisters.”

“Some of those sisters are black.”

“Oh...yeah.”

“They’re girlfriends. Ex-girlfriends. Never kept one for more than three months. They never lived up to this girl I had in my head, dancing around.”

Bruce has lit up a blunt. He inhales, then passes it over to Rob, who declines.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, man, I’m not trying to get you high and fuck your ass. I don’t waste a drop of my creative juices anymore. I’ve got to give the book everything. A fuck? A quick hand-job? That’s lost art man.”

Rob accepts the blunt, and pulls on it, pointing as he does to a pile of paper.

“Is that the book?”

“Yeah. Draft 15.”

He points to a second pile.

“So what’s that? Draft 16?”

“Oh that. No, that’s just some other thing I’ve been playing around with for...a few...years. I don’t know if it’s worth a fart in a wind-storm. You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

As Bruce turns his back to open the fridge, Rob’s curiosity overwhelms his good sense, and he takes a step towards the second pile of typed papers. This is a *big* book, easily seven hundred pages in the pile.

On the cover, *Valerie on the Stairs* by Bruce Sweetland, Everett Neely, and Patricia Dunbar. He’s puzzled. He glances back at his host, who’s still digging for the beers. “Damn fridge is full of food. My ex-wife sends it to me. What the fuck do I want with food?”

Rob slides off the top page. The Dedication Page reads: *To Highberger, who knew all the Secret Places*. Now he's really intrigued. He slides another page away and he's at Chapter One. The first sentence:

Valerie had a body made for love –

Suddenly Bruce is on him.

“*What the fuck are you doing?*” He slams his hand, with the beer can in it, into Rob's stomach, then catches him on the chin when he doubles up. Rob staggers back into *Valerie on the Stairs*. It topples, the papers falling everywhere. Bruce hits him again, and Rob goes down, blood running from his nose and mouth.

We get a series of extreme close ups of the blood drops landing on the pages. And everywhere they land we see the word *Valerie*, and some sexual reference.

“*...the Demon plunged his reptilian cock into Valerie's virgin pussy...*”

“*...Valerie screamed as she was dragged away into the darkness...*”

“*...Valerie had thought she could sink no lower than she had already. But she was wrong...*”

As Bruce comes at him again, Rob kicks him in the balls and makes a run for the door. Bruce picks up his antique typewriter – which he keeps for sentiment's sake – and goes after Rob, onto the stairs. He trips Rob, who falls. Bruce brings the typewriter down – a blow which would have killed Rob if he'd been under it. Luckily he has the wit to roll out of the way. The typewriter smashes into countless pieces, the letters – the fragments of the writer's craft – bouncing and rolling in slow-mo down the stairs.

The noise of the destruction of the typewriter echoes around the house, and brings a second opening of doors. Bruce sees how this looks: him standing over the bleeding Rob, with the pieces of the smashed typewriter still rolling down the stairs.

“He was looking at my work behind my back.” Bruce says to the accusing faces at the open doors. He targets Everett Neely and Patricia Dunbar particularly when he says:

“He was looking at my secret book. My very, very *private* work.”

Everett speaks up. “Well he shouldn’t have done that. It’s not the way a real writer would behave.”

Rob has got to his feet and is looking around at the others.

“Real writers? What the fuck do any of us know about what real writers do? We’re all kidding ourselves. And this place, it’s just a tease. It makes you think you’ve got something that you don’t really have. And before you say it Nancy I’ll pack my bags and get out of here just as fast as I can. You can all stew in your own crazy dreams. You’re welcome to them.”