

Ashley Chan

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Amplus Academy, Las Vegas, NV

Educator: Jennifer DeSarno

Category: Short Story

Valerie

Valerie hates me, I suppose. She whispers in my ear everything she knows I don't want to hear. She reminds me of the things that haunt me, shows me the things that disgust me, cripples my mind and bruises my body. Only, I want to love Valerie. Maybe I do love her, a little bit. Maybe I find truth in what she says, maybe I like that she's honest with me. She's always been around, anyway. There's no point in trying to get her to go away or trying to shut her up. She knows me better than anyone.

If I change myself, maybe she'll love me too.

When I was five, I helped my father wash the old car in the garage. He asked for water, so I went to fetch it. I stood tip-toed, carefully waiting until the water nearly overflowed from the lip of the cup before walking out and, holding my breath, I opened the door and looked for my father. He was not there. He was nowhere to be seen.

Valerie was though. She came creeping from the other side of the car like a nightmare, using one of her chilling, bony fingers to tip the glass off my hands. She leaned over to my ear and whispered, *you're alone*. She laughed then, as water pooled on the floor and the glass shattered with a bang, shards skittering across the floor under the car and everywhere.

I was sobbing as my father came from the other side of the garage carrying a hose. He yelled at me for dropping the glass, telling me to step back as he quickly retrieved a broom. The tears fell from my cheeks to the floor as I screamed at Valerie for being a liar. But for a moment, my father really had been gone. So in a way, she wasn't a liar after all.

When I was nine, I went to my Aunt and Uncle's house to see my cousin. He was tall and smart and admired by the family like a decoration upon a wall. He invited me to see his room, telling me he had a computer I could play on. I asked Valerie if it would be okay for me to go and she said yes, following me even when I wasn't sure she was invited too.

After exploring the computer he told me about, we sat on the carpet next to his bed. Valerie told me to look at her so I did, but as I was doing so, my cousin leaned over me, hands on my body, and by the time I realized what was going on, tears were already in my eyes and I was pushing him away with all my might. Valerie was laughing.

He backed away quickly, telling me it wasn't what I thought, telling me it would be okay. Only, it didn't feel okay. And my cheeks were turning hot yet I didn't know why and I kept repeating that I would tell my mom what happened. His hands were flailing about as he told me not to and that he was just trying to show me something and that I misunderstood what happened. He told me not to embarrass myself since I was mistaken.

Valerie interrupted, telling me she knew I couldn't tell my mother anyway. I knew it too but hated her for saying it.

We went home soon after and she was right. I never did tell anyone.

When I was twelve, Valerie began telling me I was useless. She told me I wasn't needed and that no matter how hard I tried, I wasn't good enough. I asked her why she would say things like that and she said it was because they were true. She told me that it was her job to tell me the truth.

She followed me around the year after that, whispering in my ear to remind me of her truth. Some days after instances of believing what she said to me, I'd cry on the way home from school, silently, at the back of the car while she watched almost in amusement.

At night, when I'd go to bed later than I should have, she'd lay beside me, telling me it was okay to cry and that if I worked hard to be better, I would be loved. She'd stroke my hair and sing me songs until I fell asleep. It was then when I began to love her.

When I was fourteen, Valerie began reminding me of how much I ate. She told me to not use food as my means of suppressing stress, that I should just face it and deal with it and that everyone was handling it better than I was. She made me step on a scale for the first time in about a year and I saw that I had gained twenty pounds. I gasped as she laughed and told me how she was right. I stood in front of the mirror, squeezing my stomach as if trying to rip the skin off it as I clutched onto her and cried.

She helped me manage my weight better, telling me when to stop eating, when I should be exercising, and how I looked that day. She stopped when my waist was thin, stomach flat, and skin pale and transparent. Only then did she call me beautiful.

When I was fifteen, Valerie told me I looked sick. She brought a bottle of cough syrup to me and had me drink a dose. Then another. And another. When I told her my head was spinning, she told me that was just the beginning, that I'd feel better very soon.

Before I knew it, the furniture in my room was swirling but I was giggling at them. I found them hilarious. I heard Valerie's voice even louder now and felt her breath on my face. The ceiling was forming drawings all on its own as I watched in euphoric amusement.

It was wonderful.

Valerie was right. She always was.

I felt great.

In that same year, living became a migraine that never seemed to go away. I couldn't step out of my bed most days yet couldn't sleep most nights. I was never bored, amused, excited, never anything at all. In a way, it was peaceful that way, in another way, it was lonely, empty, exhausting. But it became familiar, and it was better to be in familiarity than the opposite.

Some nights, however, were worse than the others. Sometimes I wanted to throw things. Sometimes I was frustrated or heartbroken or fed up with the feeling that bubbled within the frail bones lining my body.

It was on those nights that I'd end up on the ground, painting the carpet with the blood of my arms and the tears of my eyes. Valerie would watch silently until she'd ask me what I was doing even when she knew my throat was too tight to speak. She would tell me it was morbid to bleed on the floors and reminded me she wouldn't be the one to clean it.

After I calmed myself, she joined me on the ground to bandage my arms and clean my face. I asked her if she thought I should stop this. She told me if I did, she'd lose her entertainment. I told her she was evil and she nodded, saying she knew but it didn't matter, I'd keep her around anyway.

She looked me in the eyes then, tilting my chin so I looked back up at her, and asked me how much longer I'd keep the devil by my side.

When I was sixteen, scars covered my body like birthmarks, scattered from my arms to my thighs in a never ending constellation. I knew my classmates saw them occasionally under the cuffs of my sleeves. They saw the fresh ones, old ones, bruises from my father, and eyebags from my mother, but they never said anything about it. Maybe they were afraid to mention it, afraid to bring up something that could make them uncomfortable.

I didn't particularly mind, though. The power I had over their words gave me a thrill, from the way they suspected things but could never find the courage to ask to the looks they gave me when they thought I couldn't see them. I liked being a mystery to them. I liked the attention.

There was a dog I met that year on the street by my house. It was alone, with an old tattered collar and large, dark eyes that peered up at me. Valerie told me to leave it be but for once, I didn't listen. I asked her how she could ignore a dog with a face as cute as that. I couldn't bring it in the house so I brought it a box to lay under, a blanket, and would bring dog food whenever I could afford it.

It was around the holiday season at that time, cold in the middle of December but the lights decorating the street and the smell of the air kept us comfortable. The dog survived the year. It felt as if it was the one thing I owned in the world. It was mine and no one could take it from me.

But the next year, around the beginning of December, I found the dog lying dead in its own blood near the box. Valerie was next to it, arms crossed, telling me a group of middle school boys killed it, telling me that she told me so and I shouldn't have gotten attached. I sat, carrying the corpse with its blood still warm, feeling the liquid soak through the fabric of my sweater as I cried and yelled at her to shut up.

There was something about the holiday season that I found dreadful after that. I hated the joyous atmosphere, the glow of the stars amongst the lights painting the city, the smell of fresh-baked cookies I smelled at school but never at home. It was bitter, miserable, and I was alone.

Today, January 4th, is the aftermath of my misery. Valerie is here, about an hour ago she gave me a new bottle of cough syrup and I can't recall how much of it I've ingested. She lies next to me, holding my hand and lets me laugh, grieve, yell at her, anything I want. She tells me tonight is a special night and I tell her I can feel that it is.

It's a full moon. I stumble to the balcony to get a better look as Valerie helps support my shaking legs. I tell her I can't feel them at all and laugh as she strokes my hair and nods. I wonder why she's being so kind to me tonight.

After watching the sky for a bit, we lie back down and the room spins past me as I imagine that I'm on a carousel, spinning with it instead of watching as it goes without me.

I tell Valerie that I hate her. She says she knows. I tell her that I love her. She says the same. I tell her that she ruins me, that she's a traitor who has been killing me this entire time, that I wish she wasn't around so I could've been a normal person. She says nothing, but I know she understands. I scream, yelling for her to leave me as I clutch onto her body, my arms refusing to let her go even if she wanted to. I tell her to leave but can't do so without also accepting her warm arms around me.

She asks me how much of the medicine I drank. I respond saying that she knows I drank the whole bottle, that she knows I won't survive the night. I ask her if this was her plan all along and she tells me that I knew what I'd been getting into.

I can't feel any part of my body yet she holds my head, wiping away beads of sweat on my forehead and whispering something unintelligible. I lose my ability to speak as my eyes close and refuse to open again.

Whatever Valerie is-- a lover, a best friend, an abuser, a drug, or a figment of my imagination, I find that I don't have it in me to care anymore. I know she betrays me. I know she's the worst thing to happen to me. But she's the only thing I'm certain of. She's the only one who's ever been around. She's the only one I trust.

As I lie, almost asleep to the fading sound of the old clock on the wall, I feel at peace. I am glad that I can breathe into the smell of my sheets for the last time, glad that I left nothing behind, glad that I lie with warm hands on me.

And glad I'm not alone.

I wonder what Valerie had said to me last. Something foggy. What was it? Oh, right.

She told me this wasn't my fault. I wonder what she was referring to.

But the old clock rings out like an explosion to mark the hour before I can think about it any longer. The sound of it becomes the last thing I hear before my breathing slows to a stop.

And as I stop breathing, Valerie does too.