

My elbow aches as I lean on the makeshift bar, clutching my oversized black sweater and wine glass, my face low and dark as I study the others humming around me in the reception parlor. As if I’m an artist incognito at her own gallery opening, desperate for honest feedback, and not throwing a \$4,500 cat funeral, which is what I am doing.

Initially, I met with Clara & Daughters Funeral Home because I assumed women were finally getting ahead in the death industry, but it turns out ‘Clara’ and ‘Daughters’ are just two guys’ last names, ugh. But then the building won me over, with its skylights and its sand art and the serene, cylindrical space. Turns out everything in Santa Fe is a museum, even the funeral homes.

Who shows up to a cat funeral, you ask? Exactly 13 people. Most of them are faces I know, aside from a few strangers such as the old man hunched over in the corner, a lifetime older than the rest of us. (If I was him I’d be worried they were gonna mix me up with one of the cadavers.) I’m moved to see the crowd discovering the Alley Cat-photo collage hung on the wall, the handiwork of my new bestie, Opal, from whom I’m renting a room. In photos, Alley Cat is gorgeous, *iconic*, her long fur fanned about and shimmering in the high desert, a landlocked mermaid — no one accessorized Santa Fe better. (I left out the few, unflattering pictures from before I gave her a bath. Of course now she’s in my head mewling like, *unflattering? Uh, ‘SCUSE ME?’*)

UGH I miss her cute little mewling with its rolled ‘R’s, the obvious tell of a Spanish-speaking cat. Not that it was my intention to buy a worm-addled cat through the window of my car at the Tijuana border, but my state of being was like *fragile*, y’all — like I had just pulled over to throw up last night’s mezcal. And that’s *after* I just spent two hours dealing with a flat tire in Rosarito, alone. I don’t know why everyone flees to Mexico in the movies, like there’s no A/C and everything reeks. But so I’m sitting there in my car, about to crawl right back to San Diego and live out my days as America’s favorite punching bag, when I see this poor Mexican dude strolling up and down the line of cars with a disgusting little cat trapped under his arm. And I don’t know why, but I just start *weeping*. I mean, what is life?? Were none of us going to save this pathetic cat?? And I’m not a cat person, well, not back *then*. Where would I even put the thing, all flea-crusted and stinky? It’s not like there was room in trunk with all those huaraches I bought...

But I roll down my window anyway.

My purse sits on the bar, glowing from within. Despite my best efforts it’s still the sun, my gravitational boss, and I can’t help but check my home screen, aflutter with activity such as:

@arianagrandesponytail commented: cant wait til YOUR dead

@thefastandthecurious commented: GO AWAY BITCH

@blousesandhouses commented: she prob put it 2 sleep cuz it was 2 old!!!!

God damn it why did you post?! I breathe in and out, just like the Breathe U podcast instructs me each morning. You're doing the best you can, Val. You're doing the best you can.

“More wine?” queries the bartender/funeral home assistant, Lakota, his question piercing through my cloud of self-pity. “Um, do you have any other whites? This white is just a little maybe like rubbery, like I’m getting a lot of tree...?” I say as politely as possible, but also my expectations being high here; \$4,500 for a cat-funeral-high. Not that the Platinum Package wasn’t totally worth it. (BTW, did you know such a thing exists as a Catsket? Alley Cat would have *loved* hiding in her catsket. Oh well. Now she gets to hide in there for eternity.) “I’ve got a prosecco,” Lakota adds.

Feeling helpless, I turn to Opal next to me. “Too celebratory?” I ask. “Well, we are celebrating her life,” she tells me. I nod as my eyes well up with tears. “She was my little mascot,” I croak, “I don’t know how I’m gonna do this whole bravery thing without her.” Not that telling your life to fuck off is the bravest thing in the world or anything, it’s just what Alley Cat and I did. Together. “Well, she got you this far, didn’t she? And now you’re here, in this inspiring place, writing yourself a new chapter,” Opal reminds me. It’s true. If I hadn’t picked up Alley Cat, I would she would never have pawed at the passenger side window, directing me to the I-8 E, guiding us all the way to Santa Fe, land of cat people. “Maybe by transitioning, she’s challenging you to travel even *farther* out of your comfort zone.”

As Opal instructs Lakota to pour me another prosecco, I can’t help be moved by her many kindnesses. The nights on the couch she spent listening to my stupid white girl problems, the tender way she taught me to notice things I’d never noticed before, the desert birdsongs and strange creatures who thrive in this harsh landscape. She even taught me how to make a basket with dried willow branches, a tradition she’d learned visiting her grandparents on the Apache reservation. Somehow, despite being way less traveled than me, this woman understands the world so much more about life than I do.

My sad little hand clasps her calloused one, feeling her chunky, silver rings, and she squeezes it back, mashing mine, affirming me. Just as I’m wondering if I’m gay in Santa Fe, if maybe this is the new Valerie, the dramatic-looking couple from the chapel beeline straight for us. Even though they’re at least twice my age, they’ve got a youthful energy about them. Drapey, dark fabric trails behind Her like comet tails, led by a thick glasses asteroid. She’d crush the role of modern fairy godmother, should anyone be in need, which I *very much am*. And He’s a punk time traveler with long, shaggy hair, probably still recovering from head banging for the entire 80s. I can feel his neck pain radiating — and I *get* neck pain, I sold Jo Malone candles for six years.

“Hi, Wendy, Hi, Go!” purrs Opal before group-hugging them. “Valerie, this is Go and Wendell, they’re my good friends from — actually, no idea how we know each other,” Opal laughs, self-aware, “Probably a Tibetan bowl ceremony.” I like the way people are

woo-woo people here. It doesn't feel fake woo-woo, not like back in California. “Valerie, I am so sorry your cat died,” declares Wendy, “But I love that you did this — the world needs more goddamn cat funerals, I tell you. I want to do something like this when my dog dies.” Well, obviously we're not here to talk about DOGS but I hold my tongue, which is a thing I'm working on.

“Thank you,” I offer, “She was like my best friend.” “Of course she was!” Wendy continues. “They're our brothers and sisters after all, evolutionarily speaking.” I don't agree that this cat was my sister but it's a nice idea and I'd certainly take her over *Melissa*. The Prince of Darkness, apparently named “Go”, chimes in: “A beautiful cat, what kind was she?” A black calico I explain proudly. “And how long were you guys together?” he asks. “About six weeks,” I say, and, judging the way his eyebrows jolt up, suddenly realize how weird this sounds. *You should never have let her wander outside, Val...* “We think she was hit by a car,” Opal announces, mounting my defense, “She went missing one night and then two days later we found her in my backyard. Must have crawled back to die with her mamma, poor thing.” Wendy and Go gawk, synchronized in their horror. “Oh, that's awful!” yelps Wendy, “Life is so cruel.” Go continues: “Well... you must have loved her a lot to throw this bash.” I nod, I did. I still do.

A syrupy voice interrupts my heartache: “Valerie?”

Instinctively, my chest tightens because this sounds like a voice from before times, like someone who knew B.C. Valerie. I turn around to see a woman with glossy hair and a skeleton body standing in front of me. *How do I know this person?* From the kind look on her face, she's not going to *attack* me, not like that crazy woman who threw the dill at the farmer's market. *Maybe she's just a fan who wants a photo...?*

“Jessica,” Glossy Lady says, extending her delicate, ring-stacked hand, “Jessica Kleintaschen.”

I blink. “From Element PR?” she continues.

Oh. Oh no. OH NO! This is way more complicated than facing a hater. Now I'm *really* regretting posting that stupid flyer. Jesus, Valerie, When will you learn your lesson?? No good comes from Instagram, ever. EVER! It's a trap, always a trap... *You're doing the best you can, Val. You're doing the best you can.*

“What are you doing here?” I ask, more than slightly unnerved, but glad to see Go and Wendy wandering off for seconds on salmon canapés. My mind falls to Opal. I've *got* to keep Opal as far away as possible from this aggressive woman.

“So this is CRAZY, I know, but I'm weirdly here for my mom's 60th and then I saw *you* were here from Insta and I just wanted to say ‘hi’??? I am SO sorry your cat died, Valerie,” says Jessica, all apple cider in September. My face forms a neutral smile that can't possibly prolong this conversation but apparently she reads my mind, extending her hand to Opal: “Jessica!” *God damn it.* “Hi, I'm Opal,” says Opal, probably wondering who the fuck this is. I suddenly notice an exit sign. Maybe we could make a break for it...

“Well I’m sorry to crash this but I just wanted to say I’m glad to see you’re okay,” Jessica continues. *Okay?? My sweet angel baby just DIED so obviously I’m not okay and second off all, this can’t be happening. Not all the way out here, not in the land of wide open space and time.* “And how do you two know each other?” Opal asks us, which is a great fucking question.

“We met in LA,” Jessica says, “I’m a publicist for the show.”

But my feet start to feel like lead so I can’t very well run. Maybe I’ll just fall through the floor instead, find a subterranean cave where I can live out my days like the Phantom of the Opera.

“What? A publicist?” asks Opal, suddenly electrified by me, like I’m some kind samaritan who didn’t tell her about the time I saved multiple babies from a burning building out of modesty, “Were you on a TV show?”

Jessica gapes. “You don’t know about the *show*?” she asks Opal, whose big brown eyes answer *no*. “Okay, so Val was on a Netflix show that came out last month and she was the breakout character. I mean, you’re kinda in the presence of an actual celebrity right now, Opal,” gushes Jessica, “Like people made *merch* about her.”

I suppress the lump in my throat. “Jessica, I’m literally mourning my cat’s death right now,” I say. But it’s too late and Opal turns to me, intrigued and concerned. “People made merch about you? Why?” she asks.

You’re doing the best you can, Val. You’re doing the best you can. I stand a little straighter, willing myself to be honest with this new person in my life. A person who *actually* gives a shit about me. “They called me ‘Val the Villain’ because of some immature comments I made,” I say, “The Internet hates me, basically wants me dead. *That’s* the thing I was going through back home.” Opal considers this. “Oh,” she says, still soft.

Jessica pauses, surveying the damage she’s done. “Look, I’m sorry I crashed this. I just wanted to tell you that there’s an interesting opportunity on the table and I think it could be great for you right now—” she tells me.

I laugh, in spite of myself. “Jessica! My apartment was vandalized, my socials were shredded, *I got fired from my job??*” I remind her, frothy, “No more ‘opportunities’!”

Jessica shakes her head, undeterred. “That’s why I think you need to get back out there, to set the record straight,” she says. “Oh, for fuck’s sake!” I hiss, startling Opal, “The producers edited me terribly and you know it! The whole thing was blown way out of proportion. Everyone thinks old people are a little weird...” Jessica scrunches her nose, like *do they?* “It’s just that you said it SO many times, Val. There’s literally a supercut of

all the times you said that old people deserve to be shot. That they’re clumsy and should be put down...”

Opal looks at me, suddenly grave. “It filmed a *year* ago,” I announce, “I’m a totally different person now, you must *know* that!” As her feelings load to 100% horror, I shake my head, *no, stay with me!* “The producers refused to let me leave and they shoved alcohol down our throats the entire time, it was AWFUL, Opal. I think I was just kind of acting out...” I say.

Jessica’s face stills like a doll. Like it’s just a little whoopsie that she’s unravelled *everything* I’ve been working SO hard for in .2 seconds. All the positivity I’ve been cultivating, all the growing and healing I’ve been doing over the past six weeks! “I shouldn’t have come. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry again about your cat. But I’m here if you want to talk,” she says, quietly darting out.

Well, what the actual fuck do I do now. Opal stands quiet for a moment, then raises her head like a proud stallion. “Valerie... In my culture, aging is a badge of honor. The elderly are our greatest resource. They have earned our respect and I WILL NOT tolerate or accept any form of ageism,” she tells me, “Excuse me.” She then turns on her heels, drifting away from me like a tumbleweed and stuffing her dirty plate in the trash can along with our friendship.

Just as I think I’m going to pass out, someone appears in my space. I realize it’s the Old Man, with crumbs all over his mouth. “Bernard Castile,” he says to me. Oh, Jesus... *Here, Valerie, here’s another chance to be a human being... Take it. Please take it.* I breathe in and hand, then offer my hand. “Valerie. Thank you for coming to this,” I eke out.

Old Man’s throat starts with a rumble, turning his phlegm like it’s a concrete mixer. “I saw your flyer on a telephone pole, wanted to pay my respects,” he gets out. “That’s kind of you,” I tell him, meaning it. Hearing his hearing aids squeal, my eyes well up. Poor man probably can’t even hear me. Without warning, he continues: “I’m afraid to say I think I hit your kitty.”

My head cocks to the side. *Wut?*

“See, I was turning the corner by the pharmacy and this cat just run in front of my truck so I got out and then see her under my front tire, kinda flat like, so I go back to the car to get my phone to call my son and time I come back she’s crawled off into a bush and I couldn’t run after her on account of my hips bein’ shot...” says Old Man.

My mind’s eye flashes to Alley Cat’s limp body in the backyard of Opal’s house, her broken back legs, her fluffy mass becoming a lifeless fur collar right in front of my eyes. I turn away, concealing my nausea. Tasting the prosecco coming up into my cotton mouth.

“I didn’t know how to find ya,” he tells me.

I lift my gaze back to Father Time and his wrinkly skin like wet toilet paper. *You’re doing the best you can, Val, you’re doing the best you can...!* But the venom’s rushing back in and I know it’s too late... My fists close, my broken nails indenting the skin of my palms, digging so deep they could carve out the unfamiliar muscles of my hands, muscles I’ve never considered, not even once, my sanity wavering like an AM radio looking for signal. I coil back my arm like the string of a bow— *Do the best you can, Val!!! DO THE BEST YOU—*

— and punch him in his old fucking face!

He crumbles to the floor, a pile of papier-mâché.

God damn it, Valerie.

A week later I’m driving my Jetta on the Arizona highway, amazed to find myself in an area without service. Dead zones are almost like time traveling to before podcasts and follows and clapbacks and duets, to a time with less *talking*. It’s nice to have some mental space, even it’s just for ten minutes. Of course my mental space isn’t really mine, it’s always occupied by the others, the permanent, anonymous squatters from the Internet who live in my head. Jessica’s in my head, too: the shock in her voice when I called her from that sticky pay phone in need of bail money, the twinkle in her eyes when we met the next day, like I was her favorite new toy.

I don’t care that Jessica thinks I’m perfect for this new show. I’m not a villain, not on TV and not at my cat’s funeral, I’m just fucking not. I mean what would *you* do if the guy who killed your best friend showed up at her funeral? At least this gig will give me another platform to redeem myself, and Jessica’s right, that platform won’t be accessible to me forever. And yes, I know there are other life paths I could take right now but the idea of going back to all this thinking about my potential and my future paths sounds exhausting. *Villains of Love* is just opportunity knocking on my door and I’m answering it.

But Alley Cat’s also in my head. That day at that border crossing, her dirty little face in need of someone to love her... If she were here right now she’d be sitting sit on the shady side of the backseat, hiding from the sun, lulled to sleep by the roar of the highway. Not talking but present. Calming me, being there for me. Just as I’m thinking about how I didn’t do enough to protect my angel baby, I’m startled by voices cackling as my podcast comes back to life.

I’ll never forget these days, that time when I almost became someone else.