



Squad Watery

It was Valentine's Day, or, as Yale St. Germaine liked to call it, 'the only holiday with a massacre named after it.' Valentine's Day depressed Yale because he'd had some gorgeous ones in his life – the kind with roses and candlelight and someone with moist eyes grasping both your hands over a white tablecloth and comparing you to various addictive substances.

I'd never taken Valentine's Day seriously. It was fine for my preschool class, but to my eye it was a kids' holiday, full of sweet but unsubstantial things like paper hearts and candy. And boyfriends.

The only valentine I could depend on was the one from my mother. It was the same postcard her publicist sent out to the media: a black-and-white headshot of her taken circa 1981, the year her first book came out. In the white space over the photo hovered a pink, cursive inscription: *Open Your ♥ and Love Will Sail In.* Despite the two decades that had elapsed since the shot was taken, Sydney

looked more or less the same. Like me, with an Adrien Arpel makeover.

Because she still used it as her author photo, it had attained icon status among Stark-Leiffer enthusiasts: the sculpted, dark hair with its warm, professional-looking highlights; the pale eyes, embraced by kohl; the outlined and painted lips compassionately pursed. It was a photo that said, 'I know how to accentuate my best features, but right now, I'm thinking about *you*.'

Sydney usually just scrawled her signature on my valentine, but this time she'd added a note. *Have fun, Samantha*, she'd written at the bottom of the card in bright red ink. *Please*.

I was carrying the card in my giant patchwork shoulder bag as I walked to Sunny Side that morning. And I was also carrying more February 14th fun than Sydney Stark-Leiffer could shake her red pen at: twenty cut-out valentine hearts, five extra pads of construction paper, one bag of children's scissors, eight packages of doilies, two jars apiece of red, silver, gold, green and pink glitter (and three extra jars of gold, because the kids loved gold), nine tubes of Elmer's glue and twenty small boxes of crayons.

It wasn't tons of fun, but it felt close to it. Who knew paper products could be so heavy? It couldn't be helped, though. My classroom had been robbed twice. (I still found this hard to wrap my head around. A gang of West Village nursery school marauders.) In the latest heist, they'd made off with all my Chanukah decorations – including the Styrofoam latkes and the giant paper dreidel

– so I was relatively certain valentine supplies wouldn't be safe there overnight.

I shifted the heavy bag to the other shoulder, and that's when I felt it. A creeping, cold sensation originating at the base of my spine, winding up through my vertebrae one by one, settling into the sweat on the back of my neck and pressing against it, like puddled ice. For a few seconds, I couldn't breathe.

A man bumped into me as he passed. 'Get the fuckin' fuck out of my fuckin' way!' he said. It always amazed me how many times New Yorkers could insert the word *fuckin'* into a sentence, and normally I would've stared at this man, if only to see what someone who said 'fuckin' fuck' looked like. But I was too distracted. The awful tingling began to dissipate, though the idea of it lingered.

Dead Man's Fingers. Chills up your spine for no reason. The sign of a bad premonition.

I don't like to think of myself as superstitious, but I am. It comes from my grandmother, who lived with Sydney and me after Dad moved out and chastised us if we wore socks around the house. (*If you wear socks with no shoes, you'll lose all your money!*) Grandma was forever spitting, muttering oaths, knocking wood and tossing salt over her shoulder. My mother thought it was obsessive-compulsive, but I bought right into it.

Ten years after Grandma's death, I still didn't wear socks around my apartment. Occasionally, I whispered *keinahora* to ward off the evil eye.

When you feel Dead Man's Fingers, you're supposed to stop whatever it is you're doing and do the opposite.

That way, the premonition might not come true.

For me, doing the opposite would have meant turning around and going home. I imagined myself calling the principal, telling him, ‘Sorry, Terry. Dead Man’s Fingers.’

I tried to attribute the sensation to the bitter February cold, to a forgotten bad dream, to Valentine’s Day with no valentine. But then it returned, this time in italics: *Dead Man’s Fingers*.

I removed my bag again, shifted it to the other shoulder. *Maybe that’ll suffice as doing the opposite. Suffice for whom? What am I thinking?*

I pulled my coat closer to my body. It was the same coat that I always wore on cold days – a heavy, black, man’s wool coat that I bought at the army/navy store when I first moved to New York – and I found comfort in its enormity. It was about four sizes too big, because there is no such thing as a man (especially an army/navy man) who is my size: five-foot-one, one hundred pounds. For some military reason I’m sure, this coat had a hood, which I never wore because it made me look like a Druid. But one block away from Sunny Side Preschool, with Dead Man’s Fingers stuck in my nervous system and the sickening certainty that something horrible was going to happen, I pulled the hood over my head until it obscured the top half of my face.

I need protection, I thought. It seemed to make sense.

My classroom had not been robbed, and I was surprised. Ever since the spine freeze, I’d thought robbery. *Of course. What else could it be? You had a premonition just like this before the Chanukah break-in, didn’t you?*

By the time I arrived at my classroom, I'd so convinced myself a theft had occurred, I tried pushing the door open without the key.

But the lock was intact.

I flicked on the fluorescent lights and surveyed the classroom. The tiny, multicolored chairs were spaced evenly around the long red table. The large toy box in the corner was shut. The storybooks were neatly stacked on their low shelves, all seven pieces of colored chalk present and accounted for on the blackboard tray. The three locks on the closet door were secure, and when I unbolted them, I saw that the TV and VCR were untouched, as was the collection of educational tapes piled beneath them on the movable stand. The items I'd placed on the closet shelves: the paint jars, the boxes of thick sidewalk chalk for warm-weather months, the felt numbers and letters, the plastic fruits and vegetables and African musical instruments – not to mention the boom box and crate of CDs (which we'd had to replace after the first break-in) – remained inviolate. My classroom was so undisturbed it was satirical.

'Excuse me.'

I recognized the voice of the principal, Terry Mann, even before I looked up and saw his neat little head poking through the open door. Terry had a squeamish way of speaking and winced often, which made it seem like each word had an unpleasant aftertaste. 'I wanted to . . . remind you . . . that the . . . police officers . . . are coming today.'

'Cops? Why?'

'Police officers.' He raised his eyebrows as if the word

cops was some sort of racial slur. ‘They’re going to speak to the . . . children. It’s . . . community outreach.’

‘Lucky us.’

‘It’s an annual event, Samantha.’

‘No, it isn’t.’

‘Yes, it is.’

‘There were no cops here last year. On Valentine’s Day, we made valentines. That’s it. Believe me, I would have remembered uniformed men with firearms hanging from their belts.’

‘Yes, well, sometimes we skip a year. The police officers are coming around eleven and will speak to the children about safety.’

‘Terry, don’t you think they might scare the kids? I mean, when I was that age I used to cry whenever I heard a siren. Okay, maybe I watched too many *Fugitive* reruns. But they really are frightening to most young children, with their badges and their boots and their guns and their . . . their hats.’

‘I’m sorry you had such a negative developmental experience, Samantha. But it is important for children to learn that policemen are their friends. The officers will be here at eleven.’

Before he closed the door, he gave me a wan smile. ‘One of them has a puppet.’

I put my head on my desk. Now Terry thought I was anti-safety training as the result of a strong negative influence in my early developmental years brought on by unsupervised violent television viewing, and that wasn’t true at all.

I was all for safety training. I had books, videos – even a board game called Walk Home Safe! that I'd bought from one of the nonprofits with my own money. It was a little complex for the kids, but I'd gotten them to play it more than once.

I'd held meetings with the parents, made sure I'd shaken hands with every relative, housekeeper, nanny or honorary uncle who might ever have reason to pick up one of their children from school. Safety training was important to me. More important than Terry could ever know.

But cops? With puppets?

Two years ago, I went to see a reissue of *A Clockwork Orange* at a small theater in NoHo. Halfway through the film, I got up to use the bathroom and when I returned, my purse had been stolen.

Reluctantly, I went to the Fifth Precinct house to file a report. 'You left your pocketbook on a movie theater seat?' said the platinum-haired cop at the front desk. 'That was stupid.'

She went back to her paperwork, as if looking at me wasn't worth her time.

'Can I file a report?'

'You ask me, anyone who does something that stupid deserves to get their pocketbook stolen.'

'Well, I didn't.'

'Didn't what?'

'Ask you.'

After I left the precinct house, I went to the nearest thrift store and bought the most ridiculous-looking

shoulder bag I could find. It was a square foot in size and comprised of haphazard brown, orange, antifreeze green and neon-yellow patchwork squares – most of them solid colored, though some sported polka dots, drawn on in black, indelible ink. Embroidered peace signs, happy faces and dancing bear patches had been applied in random spots, and a spindly, hot-pink fringe hung off the bottom – embellishments obviously made on the third straight day of an acid trip.

When I'd bought it for one dollar, the clerk had stared at me and said, 'Are you *sure*?'

I figured no one would be caught dead swiping this monstrosity. Even so, I vowed never to let it out of my sight. As strange as I looked carrying it everywhere, it beat visiting another police station.

I'd never trusted cops. In my early childhood, they were the sneering giants who'd throw my dad through the door most Sunday mornings, stinking of beer and sometimes bruised. When I was a teenager, they were the assholes who tailed my boyfriend Brian and me all the way across Coldwater Canyon and into the Valley before inexplicably pulling us over, searching the car and asking us questions so rude I can't even repeat them. (My mother didn't mind that I was dating a black guy; these cops, for some reason, did.) And, in New York, they were that bitch from the Fifth Precinct.

I was thinking about how annoying I found Terry and his callow respect for 'police officers' when one of my preschoolers, Daniel Klein, showed up. It was only seven-thirty, but Daniel was always early. His father was a

stockbroker and dropped him off on his way to work. If I were Daniel, I would've resented all the forced 'alone time' with my teacher. But he didn't seem to mind. Daniel was an unusually dignified four-year-old. His parents dressed him in Brooks Brothers casuals and gave him a tiny briefcase to carry and still he looked so comfortable that none of the other kids teased him about it.

'I got a new fish,' he said.

'Really, Dan?' I said, opening the shoulder bag, removing some of the paper hearts and placing them along the red table. 'A goldfish?'

'No. It's orange, akshully.'

'Yeah, they are orange. But they call them goldfish for some reason.'

'Who is *they*?'

'The International Society of Fish Namers.'

Daniel giggled. He had a surprisingly throaty and infectious laugh for a kid with such a grave face, and it lifted my spirits. I wanted to make him laugh some more, but I couldn't think of anything funny to say (except for a terrible joke about the word *goldfish* being a fishnomer, which wasn't the right material for anyone, let alone a preschooler.)

'Is he your first pet?'

'Yes. Mommy says if I take care of him, I can have a dog when I get bigger.'

'What's his name?'

'Squad Watery.'

'Squad Watery?'

'Yes. I didn't make it up. He told me his name.'

‘That’s a great name.’

‘His food looks like little, tiny Corn Flakes, but akshully it does not taste like them.’

‘Daniel, you shouldn’t be eating fish food.’

‘Someone’s at the door.’

I turned around, saw the dark outline of a head in the smoky pane of glass. The person rapped on it lightly.

I cracked open the door, and there stood Terry, his face flushed and shiny. I was about to ask what was wrong when I saw the younger, taller man behind him. The man was casually dressed – jeans, black T-shirt, plaid flannel overshirt, leather jacket – and his expression was much calmer than Terry’s.

‘Samantha, I . . . oh, is Daniel here already?’ There was a tremor in Terry’s voice – a tinge of anxiety that hadn’t been there earlier and seemed to increase as his eyes went from my face to that of the younger man and back again.

As I stepped through the door and closed it behind me, I thought of bad premonitions, holidays with massacres named after them.

‘Who are you?’ I said to the stranger.

He reached into his leather jacket, inched it aside like a backstage curtain, and I saw the dull glint of steel. A *gun*.

I screamed. The sound bounced off the sides of the enclosed courtyard that held the small playground, echoed back at me and hurt my ears – a horror-movie scream, the scream of someone soon to be murdered.

Our janitor, Anthony Ciriglio, a sweet-but-addled sixties drug casualty, appeared at the far end of the courtyard, his mop raised like a machete. The other

teacher, Veronica Bliss, flew out of her classroom and stared at me with her thick jaw hanging open.

‘What is the matter with you, Samantha?’ Terry said. For the first time since I had known him, I detected anger in his voice.

‘What’s the matter with *me*?’

The man removed his hand from his jacket and produced a police ID card. ‘John Krull,’ he said with the nervous nonchalance that people reserve for the insane. ‘I’m a detective with the Sixth Precinct. Um . . . I’ll be speaking with your kids today at eleven? I thought I’d stop by on my way to work, but uh . . . this is obviously a bad time for you so . . .’

‘God, I’m sorry.’

‘She’s had a . . . a difficult start to the morning,’ said Terry.

‘You need a Valium, Sam?’ said Anthony.

‘Are you okay, Detective Krull?’ said Veronica, who’d never particularly liked me.

My throat and mouth suddenly felt like they were made of rusted metal. ‘I . . . I don’t need a Valium. It’s just . . .’ I closed my eyes, swallowed hard. ‘I saw your gun.’

Terry stared at me as if I’d just exploded into a fine powder. ‘I told you officers would be—’

‘You said at eleven. It’s not eleven, Terry. It’s not even close.’

Veronica rolled her eyes and retreated into her classroom.

Anthony said, ‘How about half a Valium?’

Krull smiled – a nice, uncoplike smile that made me

think he might not throw me into the back of his patrol car, turn on the siren and head straight for Ward's Island. 'You've got quite a voice.'

'I guess I do,' I said. 'Who knew?'

'It's good to know how to scream. You'd be surprised how many people don't.'

For a moment, he seemed miles away. Then he smiled again and it was as if he'd never left. 'See you at eleven.'

It took me ten minutes to get Daniel to stop crying and another fifteen to coax him out from under my desk.

By the time the rest of the kids arrived, everything was back to normal. Daniel and I were sitting at the long table. We'd removed all the art supplies from my bag, and we were making a valentine for Squad Watery.