

Valley Dolls

The Players

Sugarbaby was six weeks old the first time she saw a rubber duck—partially submerged in the tub, cushioned by her mother’s stomach and breasts, the plastic animal just out of reach on the other side of the bath. The water seeped into the drain, swam across 22 years of time, and trickled down the faucet of the new tub, into sugarbaby’s new life, now cushioned only by the marble base of the tub, now staring at a new duck, sugarbaby does not remember the first time. It’s not her fault—she was young, and it’s a somewhat non-consequential event in the grand scheme of things. Though, if she did remember, the weight of the past would push her down and she would drown. But it still feels like the first time. Water has seen everything; you can’t lie to water. I don’t remember the first time. Do you?

You can lie to a rubber duck, but it won’t get you anywhere fast. There’s something about a rubber duck where you can never quite remember where it came from—it’s just there, staring back at you, bobbing up and down with the current of the bathwater. And it should be said, everything in this world started with a rubber duck, and despite this, or perhaps because of it, the rubber duck was an intruder in her home. A welcomed intruder to her, but an intruder, nonetheless. An intruder coated with rubber and yellow, housing a cocktail of microbes and bacteria, and if it were a real duck, it would say something like, “Quack.”

And that’s all there is to be said about that.



Once upon a time, on the other side of the Valley... there were two acidheads. Well, that's a bit romantic for two junkies in Van Nuys. Or maybe it's time Van Nuys gets a romantic story.

Once Upon a Time... In Van Nuys... there were two acidheads. And as with any acidhead, their story begins with the lysergic acid diethylamide—the blotter, the loony toons, the LaLa, the mind detergent, the C₂₀H₂₅N₃O, the acid—this time taking the form of a page decorated with the graphic of a giant, trippy Kool-Aid Man, housing 900 tabs of synthetically processed hallucinogenic paper, which had traveled from a lab over the border and was sold to the acidheads after a series of bargains and negotiations via the dark web—a transcendent subculture of illegal affairs and unfortunate opinions, all of which the acidheads had become far too familiar with after the realization that they were able to get acid for significantly cheaper when it came from Mexico. Every tab not occupied by the Kool-Aid Man employed the iconic two-dimensional smile he wore, the color gradient of which transformed in a wave from top to bottom, while across the bottom of the page read, “Can You Pass the Electric Kool-Aid Test?”

A simple Google search on the part of the acidheads would have clarified that their acid was in direct reference to The Electric Kool-Aid Test—Tom Wolfe’s as-if firsthand account of Ken Kesey and his band of Merry Pranksters’ experiences as they drove around the country in a school bus bathed in rainbow colors, taking part in communal LSD trips in order to reach their destination, Further. The acidheads’ rationale was significantly less admirable or impressive as Kesey and his gang of users—but they were still headed to the same place.



On Christmas night of the year 2000, a fire burned down the ConAgra meatpacking plant in Garden City, Kansas, putting 2,300 locals out of a job. Around 50 years prior, southwest Kansas had become the main source of hybrid corn, which in turn made it the heart of efficient cattle-feeding, causing it to have the largest concentration of beef packing plants in North America, resulting in the hiring of an unprecedented amount of immigrants, making whites the minority of the city to this day. Everybody thought the plant would reopen within a year, but it never did. It's, instead, the abandoned factory where the high school kids go to smoke pot after class. There's another huge meatpacking plant across town though, the Tyson plant, and it's this factory that makes the younger generation of Garden City residents believe that if they grow up to have done nothing at all, they'll always have the meatpacking plant. That's what the older generation had thought as well, until they smelled the burning meat.

Nineteen years later, a fire erupted in the Tyson plant, presumably caused by sparks from a welding torch, though it was minor enough to allow operation to continue a few days later. The father, who had worked at the ConAgra plant before it burned down, was working in the Tyson plant at the time of the fire, causing him to lose a hand while operating one of the grinders. Soon after, he converted to a vegetarian lifestyle, believing that meat was bad luck. He also, for whatever reason, decided that rather than using a prosthetic limb, he would from then on wield a hook for a hand—most likely a late-coming midlife crisis brought forth by a traumatic incident which was directly and anomalously related to a previous tragedy he had gone through—but it could have been anything, really. When asked about it, he simply said it made getting a Halloween costume that much easier.

And because there's the father, there has to be the son—the son of a man with a hook for a hand, and that is not an easy boy to be. And not much later, the boy's childhood sat compacted in the space of three suitcases stuffed into the trunk of a 2002 Ford Focus. The boy would disapprove of being called "the boy"—and in his defense, he was 18 years old, but really, logistics aside, he was just a boy, and if he writes a story about himself he can call himself the man, the gritty hero, or whatever the hell he wants. But for now, he's just the boy. As for the father's name, "the father"—well that's a pretty indisputable term of reference, and far more sensitive than calling him "the cripple."

There's the story of the divorce, but our story begins after that story, with the goodbye. Though, to be fair, if you started any story slightly earlier, you'd probably start with a goodbye. So they said goodbye. And now they're on the road to Los Angeles, where the father hopes to become a reality television personality and host—a dream he's had for some time, but it took two fires and losing a hand to figure that it was time to put the meatpacking industry behind him and pursue the fame he thought he deserved. It was a misguided goal, but after 20 years of packing meat, the trajectory upward isn't too steep. So, on the road they were, the boy driving due to the father's—well, hook. It should be said that this was actually yesterday, today being sugarbaby's bath and the acidheads' score. Or maybe today is you reading this, in which case the timing of it all is irrelevant, because none of this really happened anyway—except for the fires, weirdly enough.



Five years earlier, an attempted robbery at a pharmacy in Stockton, California had been stopped by a pedestrian, waiting in line to purchase his prescription of Adderall, who swung at one of the robbers in the neck with a switchblade hidden in his pocket, causing him to pass out from blood loss as the other robber fled at the sight of a knife. The attempted robbery lasted only 20 seconds. The detained robber spent the next five years in prison for what was considered a Class A felony, before getting off early on his good time.

Now a car sits outside a liquor store in Valley Village, occupied by the brother and the sister, who in that moment, were thinking the exact opposite things. The brother was thinking about what's next, while the sister thought about where they've been. In this respect, the sister was always behind the brother, and they sat in hope of a moment of courage or a swift rush of adrenaline, which at a certain point disappears after so many times.

For where they were going—Arizona, then Mexico. That was the plan, anyway.

As for where they've been—separate, but together. Tension slid through the sister's insides, clenching her from the pit of her deepest cavities in her cells and vitamins, contorting her anatomy, transporting her to the winter nights spent in the backyard of her stepfather's house up north, afraid to go inside, wondering how her brother's doing, wondering when he'd be home, wondering if he would rather be here than there, wondering if she'd rather be there than here, angry that her life seemed to always depend on other people, something that always felt worse with the cold weather. The brother, meanwhile, kept an eye on the comings and goings of the customers, informed by the scar on his neck.

There's also a cop but he doesn't come until the very end.



And then there's me, because, of course there is. I'm the guy writing the lives of the Valley Dolls. Or at least the filtered consciousness of that guy. And that guy probably has his own story outside of all this, probably a family and friends of some sort, some rituals, ups and downs and cycles, all in human nature. But it's all semantics really - me is I. And I'm sure there's a story bringing me here in this moment right now, but I'm not a therapist nor a psychic. I suppose all there is to say, really, is that I'm sheltered inside because of this fucking virus, so what else is there besides the stories. Enter Valley Dolls.



Everything Else

The bathwater flooded down the drain and into the sewer lateral, fell into the public municipal sewer system, where it waited to be dumped into the local sewage pipes, all as sugarbaby began to dry herself off, wondering who would be at the party tonight when sugardaddy knocked on the bathroom door, telling her that he had a surprise for her, holding in his hands a pink Miu Miu faille cady dress, flaunting a crystal embellishment on the shoulder strap and edges, accenting the seductive lines of the garment, the design truly characterized by a bare back with crisscross shoulder straps and a viscose lining—along with a pair of Louis Vuitton Bliss Multistrap Pumps in the color “blanc”—Louis Vuitton's reimagining of a classic Mary Jane, featuring two slender straps with gold-tone buckles, and featured the embellishment of the Louis Vuitton Circle Accessory, inspired by the clasp of the House's emblematic Dauphine handbag—these two pieces brought together by the true centerpiece of the outfit, a pair of Louis Vuitton Blossom Hoops, which put a precious but playful spin on the

Monogram Flower, crafted from 18-Karat white gold, hoops encrusted with diamond pavé and set with an iconic blossom motif—and inlaid with brilliant-cut stones, these signature jewels really were the modern way to wear diamonds day or night, working to mix and remix with other pieces in the collection, and at this point the bathwater had been granted access into the local sewage pipes and flushed into the regional sewage pipes, 15 miles away from sugarbaby's bathtub.



The acidheads were tripping balls.



The father and the son were somewhere between Albuquerque and Sante Fe, so they've been on the road for about six hours. An intrusive, sharp tapping sound had been overwhelming the boy's ears the whole way, caused by the rubber tip of a stylus made for touchscreen devices, which the father had ripped off and stuck to the end of his hook, jabbing into his phone. The boy, after swallowing anger the size of a description of a fancy dress, finally asked if he could stop stabbing his phone, to which the father reminded him that he had a hook for a hand, to which the boy reminded the father that literally nobody asked him to have that. The father continued tapping away, and told him he was looking up agents, so the boy threatened to crash the car, but the father told him there was no use because he was invincible besides his hands, which lightened the mood a bit.



The brother had found out at a young age that scoring at a liquor store at around 12:45 AM on a Monday was one of the lowest risk highest reward crimes there was. It was late, but far enough from last call to avoid the drunks rushing in to get a last buy, so they'd most likely only be faced with a slightly older-than-middle-aged man behind the counter, and maybe your average Valley local or two.

That's why they were in Valley Village tonight—the higher income communities have the tightest police responses, and the lower income neighborhoods expect it in their own homes, the constant reminder of which lives on the brother's neck. So Valley Village would serve as a happy medium, not too poor, but not affluent enough to where the police are expected to do their jobs to a certain degree of success.

And then it's Arizona, and then Mexico.



I'm a different narrator depending on what day you ask. In the mornings, I feel witty and the evenings sentimental. It's all human nature.

The acidheads fell deeper in the rabbit hole of The Kool-Aid Man's drug of choice, as the space they lived in revealed to them a funhouse of peaks and valleys and ups and downs, turning the boys inside out and looping over—there's never a good way to write an acid trip, so I'll leave it at this: The acidheads' heads dove into the acid.

Dear diary—don't worry, I'm kidding. I wouldn't do that to you, but I especially wouldn't do that to me. You're probably asking what the point of any of this is. Great fuckin' question. And then robots from the future broke into my apartment and asked what it means to be in human nature. I'm not committing to that. Truth is, I don't know. But admitting I don't know what I'm doing as a function for the story I'm writing is the authorly equivalent of beginning a speech with "Webster's Dictionary defines"—nobody asked what Webster's Dictionary defined, nobody cares what

Webster's Dictionary defines, and it's really just a lame cop out. So I guess this is me copping out. Or maybe I'm a genius, everything has meaning, and that robots bit came from a deeply repressed guilt I have inside me that my toaster can't feel love. Not likely, but maybe.

Anyway, maybe we'll come back to that playfully meta-mental breakdown later, but for now let me just say that sugarbaby's drug abuse had been casual until sugardaddy's entrance into her life. Though to be fair, it wasn't really sugardaddy, it was the money—any drug user's drug habits increase exponentially with the more money they have. And that leads us to the unopened mason jar of coke in sugarbaby's Gucci handbag, the size of which forced her to carry her phone in her hand rather than the bag.

Due to an oversight from sugardaddy's dealer, caused by a record level of cocaine imports from Colombia, now having more coke than he can keep track of, the mason jar in sugarbaby's purse contained a lethal amount of fentanyl—an opioid commonly laced with coke, usually in order to save costs, as fentanyl is far cheaper than cocaine. Not only were sugarbaby and sugardaddy to be the source of drugs at the party, though—they would supply the booze as well. So they'd drop by the liquor store in Valley Village before the party, both because it was on the way to Hidden Hills, and because sugardaddy owned it, so he could check on the kid he'd just hired due to a request from a family friend.

As with any good trip, the acidheads wanted to go outside. And because they were in a generous mood, and they didn't mind the walk, they thought they'd walk an hour to pick up a six pack of beer from the liquor store their buddy works at, and give him a tab for a ride home—an offer they knew he would be more than happy to oblige. So they set off down the Orange Line Busway Path, towards Valley Village.

And it's at this point in writing the story that Michael

called me and suggested we get a drink, though at this point that was months ago. Past me could really use a drink, and to be honest, now me wouldn't mind one either. So, I said sure, and suggested we check out the Fox Fire Room, a dive bar on Whitsett and Magnolia. I'd been meaning to check the place out for months—it's the closest bar to my apartment, less than a five minute walk—but perhaps more importantly, it's where they filmed the bar scenes in *Magnolia*, one of my all-time favorite movies. I remember seeing it for the first time and being blown away, all these storylines of nine main characters being interwoven and connected through the San Fernando Valley. (Did you think I was original?) And the Fox Fire Room holds one of my favorite shots of all time, a long take showing an aged "Quiz Kid" Donnie Smith walk into the bar to "Goodbye Stranger," revealing his infatuation to Brad the bartender and his stunning braces. (If you haven't seen *Magnolia*, watch *Magnolia*.)

So, having walked the short distance to the Fox Fire Room, I ordered a Blue Moon, to which the bartender asks if she's seen me before. I told her she probably hadn't. The place looked just like it did in the movie. It hadn't changed a bit. A few minutes later Michael walks in, and we take a seat at a table nearby, between a woman sitting alone at a large booth, crying and drinking a cocktail, and two men who we would become acquainted with in a matter of minutes. The bar was more crowded than I'd anticipated for a dive bar on a Sunday night. Everyone seemed to know each other, people walking around and talking as if everyone were part of one large group.

Michael and I went outside to smoke, placing napkins over our beers so they'd be there when we got back. Once finished, we came back in and removed the napkins from the top of our glasses. I accidentally dropped the napkin on the floor, next to the foot of the man sitting to the right of me. I grabbed it from the floor, and the man sitting across from him was already staring at me, and he

made some sort of joke about having to ask people to touch them, though I could hardly make out what he was saying due to the karaoke, which had started while Michael and I were outside. I stared at the man with a blank face, considering his resemblance to a lumberjack, beard and all, before the man next to me told me that he was just making a joke, and that he's an asshole. I laughed it off, but before I could do anything to prevent it, we were sucked into conversation with them. The lumberjack was talking to Michael, and the man to my right was talking to me.

It is truly unbelievable how, being 22, any man over the age of 40 at a bar will declare themselves your mentor for the night, despite the fact they're middle-aged or older and a nightly regular at a dive bar, drunk off their ass, and probably not in a position to be handing out life advice. But that's exactly what they did. It turns out Jeff was a writer, no one famous or anything, but he did write two episodes of *The X-Files*. The man next to me told me he was one of the owners of the bar, and texted the waitress to get us two more beers, as he explained how he had moved to America from the Philippines as a teenager, collecting recyclables for cash, as he made his way through university, and how he'd grown his success in owning multiple businesses—a car dealership, this bar, and another bar somewhere in Koreatown, and how anything was possible in America. I wonder how he's doing now.

Next thing I know we're a few beers in playing darts with Jeff, and he's talking about his favorite writer, I think it was Hemingway, and I thought it was an appropriate choice for a burly lumberjack-like man. He told us that we needed to keep a close group of creative friends around in our lives, and named a few of the most famous artists and thinkers of all time, that he claimed were friends, but I was fairly certain he was mistaken. These guys were the real fuckin' Valley Dolls. Then, after their actor friend explained how Tik Tok would be the next big thing (nailed that prediction,) we decided to head out, because at this

point it was past midnight, and this was a time in which we had obligations to the outside world which we needed to see about in the morning. Michael offered to drop me off at home, but I told him I'd walk, because I wanted to pick up a sixer before I went home.

And as I walked into the liquor store, I wondered where all this was going. Sugarbaby and sugardaddy were at the front counter, the cashier pulling out five very nice bottles of bourbon from the shelf behind him. The acidheads were near the back, chuckling at the word "Pabst," their beer of choice when they'd spent all their money on acid. The father and the boy were somewhere in Pasadena, And the brother and sister were putting on their masks, pulling out empty guns, finally about to get out of the damn car and rob the place. Some sort of convoluted climax? Probably. And as I grabbed a sixer of Modelo one of the acidheads swore he saw me in the reflection of the glass door, causing him to recede into what can only be called a "bad trip." The siblings slammed open the front door and began to hold everybody up, and the acidhead looked back at the glass and I was gone.

And then the convoluted climax happened—the brother held up the cash register while the sister demanded sugarbaby empty her purse, and when she pulled it out, the sister's head dove into the coke. The acidhead who saw me was freaking out as the bathwater was approaching The Hyperion Water Reclamation Plant. The boy was yelling at the father in the car for making him move across the country so he could pursue a pipe dream when the cop ran out of coffee. The spooked acid head jumped on the brother's back and took a huge bite out of his throat, causing his switchblade wound to reopen, taking away the sister's concentration from sugarbaby, who in turn threw the mason jar as hard as she could at the sister, shattering on impact, caving in her nose, to which the fentanyl entered her body directly, staining her insides, causing an immediate overdose, causing her to

collapse on the floor. The other acidhead started to run out the door but slipped on a combination of the sibling's ocean of blood and the faulty coke, and he fell on some glass. The brother fell to the floor, landing on the acidhead, with the other acidhead on top of him, in what can only be described as an acidhead sandwich. The sugardaddy began to grab the bottles of liquor when the cop walked in with an empty thermos in his hand. This all took place within 20 seconds.

The Original Ending

So, not following proper protocol in the slightest, the cop arrested everybody on the spot and shoved them all into the back of his car, and there was a mixture of crying, yelling, and bleeding, making it so you couldn't tell what you were hearing or looking at—they were piled on top of each other, an amalgamation of limbs and fluids. The father and the boy were driving down Burbank as the bathwater, which was traveling eight miles an hour down a pipe with a slope of 1/8th of an inch per foot, began to slow its velocity down until at a halt. The other wastewater rushed past it on all sides, as the bathwater began to move up the pipe in the opposite direction, gradually increasing in speed, eventually achieving a rate of 150 miles an hour, forcing itself against wastewater, debris, and an upward incline, navigating through a labyrinth of pipes in this underground concrete jungle, traveling from Marina Del Ray to Burbank in ten minutes. It seeped upward from the cement pipes onto the surface and crystallized into a sheet of ice in the middle of the road, right in front of the 2002 Ford Focus, and caused the boy to skid through a red light as the cop car sped through a green, sirens blaring, while the father's natural urge to put a hand out in front of the boy's body in order to dull the impact overtook him. So as the Ford t-boned the cop car, the father's hook slid into the boy's chest, between two ribs and into the pulmonary artery, like a hot knife on butter, killing him instantly.

Metal went through metal, twisting and turning into creases and sharp angles, while the windows burst open like little balloons, glass shards parading the pavement and the meshed entanglement of human appendages, cutting through skins while bones shattered miniature explosions, like grenades rupturing from within the collagen and out to the surface. The acidhead looked at me through the shattered window and asked if this is the part where he dies. And I told him that it was, and he nodded his head and died, along with half of the other ones, while the father forced his hook out of the boy's chest. And the Valley Dolls were finally together.

But let's say that all happened.

A New Ending

Then, after dying, the acidhead opened his eyes. And connected to the shattered window was a fleshy, pulsating tunnel. The other ones that died opened their eyes as well, and the bathwater unfroze, traveled to the car, up the tires, up through the undercarriage, seeped through the carpet, up the inside of the door, and started its journey into the tunnel. And as the acidhead watched the unimaginable, he forced his mangled limbs through the window, and into the corridor of flesh.

Then, one by one, the others collected their limbs and exited through the shattered window, crawling down the tunnel, their gushing blood carried away by the bathwater. The father saw a decomposed hand pass by him, carried by the flowing water, until hitting a wall at the end of the tunnel. At this point I notice water leaking from the living room floor, coming from the base of the wall. Then they broke through.

They surrounded me in my living room, demanding answers—to which I urged them, for their safety, to stand with some distance from me, and I handed them each a mask. Then I shrugged and pointed them toward the rubber duck in my bathtub. Though, if I'm being honest,

there is no rubber duck in my bathtub. I have no idea, I have no answers, and I don't know why. So we sat there in my living room, gallons of bathwater flooding into the apartment, waiting to see what happens next.

