

VAL'S 1990'S LIFE

"Fubar"

Written by
Val Stulman

TEASER

FADE IN:

INT. KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING - 1990 SOMETHING

A large-ish kitchen in an old house that is half re-modeled. Silhouettes of big trees can be seen through old painted, steel-framed, early sixties windows. It's still dark outside.

I've barely woken up. Amazingly, I slept last night. Often I don't. A two-year-old divorce haunts the recesses of my subconscious and will wake me from time to time at three or four in the morning. Often I wake in a shudder, and look over to my left still expecting to see the comforting lump that was him, snoring too loudly, hogging the covers. I expect to see the two small black boating dogs that were his, ours, and now his again, sleeping at either side of the bed, centurions at the gate of our bedroom. I shudder, missing his warmth and the feeling of family, but see only the dark periwinkle walls of the teensy-weensy house that is now all my own. He did not love me, I whisper over and over to myself. He was very clear about that. He made a mistake. He was a drunk. I lie in bed shaking and crying, until I finally get up -- for water, the bathroom, to read.

GRACE (V.O.)

(fantasies gone)

Will, I felt nothing. I have no romantic drive. I mean, I can't even imagine feeling the urge.

WILL (V.O.)

Not even the guy on the Doan's pillbox?

Sometimes I go back to sleep, sometimes I don't. I look at the clock. Shit, I am already running late. I know if I don't get on the road before seven that I will get stuck in traffic. I take a moment to decide if I care. Hmmm... I don't care... I do care. I don't. I do. Okay, today I'll care. I cross to the refrigerator, reach for the can of coffee inside, along with a carton of milk, slam the door shut and turn towards the counter. Before I reach the counter with the coffee and milk, the milk carton slips out of my left hand and falls to the ground. Milk is everywhere. God-dammit-mother-fucking-shit. As I start to clean it up, I shake my left hand, the one that dropped the milk. It feels a little funny, kind of tired, kind of half there. I don't know why. I don't have time to think about it.

END TEASER

ACT 1

INT. SOUND BOOTH - DAY

A narrow set of stairs leads up to a long rectangular booth at the back of a sound stage. Inside, there is a huge mixing console. Speakers are hung at the corners of the booth, which when turned up, will cause deafness and heart palpitations in the faint of... heart.

I rush in.

VAL

I'm sorry. Man, the freeway was
jammed up..

Phil, my boss, a Hollywood sound mixer on television situation comedies, is tall, thin, with an Ichabod Crane body and wild Charles Manson-like hair. I am his assistant, sometimes called a recordist, A2, audio assistant, sound grunt, or audio girl.

GRACE (V.O.)

(monotone)

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

Phil stands at his board, checking to make sure that he has the audience microphones plugged into the right lines.

PHIL

(curt)

Put up a reel, RIGHT NOW!!!
Talent's coming up to do voice-
overs.

I throw my stuff down, grab a role of quarter inch tape, and quickly thread it into the sturdy analog recording machine we still use for back up.

As I weave the tape between the floating metallic recording rollers, I realize that my hand still feels a little funny. I take a black sharpie and tear off a piece of white paper tape, stick it to the top of the reel, label it V.O., grab an audio log and sit down. I look at my hand. What the hell? It feels dull, tired, as if I have been doing hand gymnastics for 15 hours straight, but the day has just begun. I glance over at Phil, ready to go. Ten minutes go by. Nothing. 15 minutes go by. Still nothing. 20 minutes go by, more nothing...

VAL

Can I get a cup of coffee, please?
Would'ja ask Steve?

A dirty look from Phil as he picks up his walkie-talkie, the kind cops use. He checks with Steve, the assistant director, aka A.D., who says that everything's changed and to relax. The writers are re-writing.

Phil sneers, telling me to get him a bagel while I'm down at the craft service table, and to go check the audience mic levels as I come back up. I am almost to the craft service table when I hear a booming voice over the public address system.

INT. SOUND STAGE

A humongous warehouse with a concrete floor. A set of audience bleachers with chairs. Microphones hang down on cables from a metal framework that has been hung from the rafters. Behind the bleachers, the sound-recordist-video booths are standing on a stilt like framework. Large windows frame them at the top of the bleachers.

Down in front, the stage floor, and beyond that are the sets, and above them, the green beds.

PHIL (O.S.)

Val, booth! VAL, BOOTH RIGHT NOW!!!

I run like a rat in a maze.

INT. SOUND BOOTH

PHIL

(terse)

They want to go right now -- RIGHT NOW!

VAL

Okay Phil.

PHIL

Are you ready? JESUS-FUCKING-CHRIST-ARE-YOU-READY?!!

VAL

Ready, Phil.

Phil hits the button on his walkie.

PHIL

(chirps)

Ready, Steve.

THROUGH THE GLASS WINDOW, down on the floor, STEVE, the A.D. shouts out...

STEVE

Five, four, three two...

I hit the button; tape begins to roll.

I think about the donut I almost had in my grasp, the big hole inside of me that a million of them couldn't fill, and of course the Java -- lifeblood of a soundstage, ubiquitous Java.

WILL (V.O.)
You're depressed.

GRACE (V.O.)
No, I'm not.

I look down at my hand. I don't want to admit it, but I have the slightest bit of anxiety. I turn my hand over, make a fist, and open it slowly. That dull feeling is still there.

END ACT 1

ACT 2

EXT. STUDIO PARKING LOT - DAY

A mash of cars.

The studio looms up ahead like a large brown stucco military base. Painted against sides of buildings are huge posters of cartoons, movies and TV shows. The casts of ER, Suddenly Susan, Looney Tunes all smile benevolently down... this season's royalty.

I pull into a parking spot, pull out my workbag and slam the door shut. I half run/half walk across the parking lot, lugging my book-filled, audio-tape/headset-filled workbag. I see a couple of GUYS I know laughing and walking.

They are friends of my ex-husband. I wave, run past them.

WILL (V.O.)

Give me your hand. ...Sweetie, you
have no cuticles. You have no nail.
It's like finger the whole way
around. What is going on with you?

So, a bunch of the guys don't acknowledge me. And when I say guys, I mean mostly white, beer bellied young bucks and middle aged ex-party boys who may or may not be between marriages, children and rehab centers. I smile at the security guard who is looking out at the parking lot. We share a moment. The two of us, peons in the huge machine called Hollywood, making pleasantries. A person has to still think he/she's human, after all.

INT. RECORDIST'S BOOTH - DAY

A small, barren room which is right next door to the larger, more intriguing sound booth. A table piled high with recording equipment, boxes of tape, piles of audio logs, a headset, and a tall director's chair.

It is two o'clock in the afternoon, upstairs in the recordist's booth. I am on a spring pilot. Joe, the Ex New York Police Department Cop got me the job. He is in his late fifties, and can't stop talking about how many years he has until retirement, how sick he is of the business. There is only one business in Hollywood and that's show business. He often stays late Friday nights to drink with a couple of the guys because his wife won't let him drink at home. One of his hobbies is politics, and he likes to argue with you whenever there's a free minute. He's against affirmative action because his kids have all lost out on college opportunities and financial aid to a bunch of inferior minorities. He's for the Republicans because the Democrats want more of his hard-earned money, and he'll argue with you until you are red in the face.

INT. WILL AND GRACE SET - ANYTIME DURING A SHOOTING DAY WHICH
COULD BE ANYTIME

JACK

Hi. Grace, what's with the get-up?
You look like an insane housewife
from one of the square states.

GRACE

I haven't been feeling very...

INT. SOUND BOOTH - ANYTIME DURING A SHOOTING DAY WHICH COULD
BE ANYTIME

I mostly sit in the sound booth with paper in hand. I'm writing a short screenplay about a suburban woman who kills her husband by hitting him over the head with a pot of carrots. Joe tells me that if this proverbial woman knows what she is doing, she could grab a gun from one of the detectives, after she turns herself in to the police, and get a shot off.

I wonder.

I write and write and write. White page after page is filled with my scrawl. It's all I can do to make myself stop when Norm, the mixer, starts yelling.

WILL (V.O.)

There's that laugh again.

GRACE (V.O.)

No, that just wasn't funny.

Norm, a dry alcoholic, with a ruddy complexion, is a nervous Nellie, who's close to retirement. Actually, he's sixty five give or take, and it's a wonder he can hear anything. After one trip to his sound booth, it's a wonder you can hear anything. He has some great tales to tell of the early days of television, and the horse cock cable they used to use. Terms like cathode ray tube and analog master roll off his tongue. But right now, the producers want to know if we're ready to go. Norm hits the intercom button, to see if the boom guys are at their posts. They are supposed to be up in the green beds, on headset, by their booms, ready to go. They never are.

The green bed is a walkway that's hung from the top of the sound stage and cuts a path across, with ladders on either end, so that you can get up and down. It hovers just above the top of the set. Large metal tubes that extend outward, or collapse inward are called boom arms. They are set on hubs that are attached to the rails of the green beds. At the end of the boom arm, is a highly sensitive, directional microphone.

The guys bring chairs and iPads and cell phones up to the greens and settle in, only coming down for bathroom breaks and lunch. If it's a regular show, sometimes they hoist couches and cots "upstairs." Producers and mixers rarely go up there. The guys like it that way.

Norm yells into his intercom. It's the only method of communication between him and the boom guys upstairs.

NORM
Guys, are you there? ARE YOU THERE-
ARE YOU THERE-ARE YOU THERE?!!!
HELLO!!!? GET ON HEADSET-JESUS
CHRIST!!!!

Norm looks through the booth window, at the green beds upstairs, trying to see the guys, waving frantically.

NORM
MOTHER FUCKING SHIT, WHERE THE FUCK
ARE YOU!!!?

One of them finally sees Norm having a nervous breakdown and puts his headset on.

BOOM-MAN KEN (O.S.)
We're here, Norm.

Norm instantly calms down and is nice to them. He knows the boom guys will make or break his sound.

NORM
Oh. I didn't know where you were.

He looks over at me.

NORM.
Are you cued up?

VAL
Cued up, Norm.

Then, the A.D. announces over his walkie that the producers want to hear the last take.

NORM
They want to hear the last take. Go
back.

VAL
Okay Norm.

NORM
NOW, THEY WANT IT NOW. WHERE IS
IT!!!? ARE YOU CUED UP!!!?
(MORE)

NORM (CONT'D)
JESUS CHRIST! WHERE THE HELL IS IT-
GOD DAMN IT-NO THAT'S THE WRONG
TAKE-GOD-DAMN-IT-TO-HELL-GO-
BACK!!! GO BACK-GO BACK!!!

Norm is still not skilled in interpersonal relations, or last-minute requests which are standard in television. I wonder if he will actually make it to retirement. More likely, he will keel over in the middle of a take.

END ACT 2

ACT 3

EXT. 101 FREEWAY - LOS ANGELES - EARLY MORNING

The Ventura freeway, a four-lane mash of cars, rush hour. The sun comes up over distant hills beyond the San Fernando Valley. You can't see the smog yet.

I am stuck in traffic, like a sardine in an ever-extending can, wondering if it will take one hour or two or three to get to Burbank. The studios are all alike, they take over an hour to get to, and once you get there, you can't get out for at least twelve hours. I sigh, look up at the big rosy orb coming up over distant hills, and almost see the beginnings of smog on top of the hill just below the rising sun. It's going to be a hot one. I inhale deeply, trying not to think about anything. But, the shit gets in anyway.

JACK (V.O.)

I hope you've got some breakfast bars, because I'm in a rush.

WILL (V.O.)

Let me guess, you've got a full day of nothing ahead of you.

I remember back to when my husband and I would drive into the city, when we'd work together. Some days we'd be quiet, and some days we'd fight. Over nothing -- it was always over nothing, I ruminate. Well, it was something to him, but nothing to me. And the days when we were quiet, it was an uneasy truce, a relationship based on -- what? Actually, there were times when I thought we were fighting over something. Like when he wanted us to go on vacation in Barstow. He wanted us to go fishing with a friend for a week and stay in a cabin in Barstow. I looked at him like he was from another planet. Well, he was. He was from West Covina. Who comes from West Covina? West Covina isn't even really California. It's peripheral, the outer-lying, distant part of California that's an add-on, an accident, a place for trucks to drive through, where little white supremacists are born, I would joke. He never thought it was funny.

I look to the car next to me, a Beamer, and in front of that, a Mercedes.

I think to myself, they get stuck in traffic just like the rest of us. The freeway curves around, suddenly the sun is blindingly bright, obliterating everything in my view except for the bumper that is right ahead of me.

INT. SOUND STAGE - DAY

A hundred people scurry, all filled with unearned self-importance.

Is there any other kind?

I come out of the sound booth and rush down the stairs, headset in hand.

I've just been set free. I am going up to the green beds to be third boom, to help out the guys upstairs. I am getting away from Phil. I do a little jig as I race over to the ladder that will take me up to the beds... Yes, yes, yes... I'm outta there... Yes, uh-huh, UH-HUH! This is my first job as audio utility on a filmed situation comedy, and I am getting paid one and half times what I was making before. I have been promoted. Yes, I hum. Maybe five or six audio girls do what I do, that's three percent of the total membership of the sound local, I.A. 695.

KAREN (V.O.)
Okay, I think I found something to
make you feel a little better.

INT. SOUND STAGE LADDER/GREENBEDS - NOW

I climb up, saunter over to LAURIE and KEN, the boom guys.

All boom operators are boom guys, even the girls. There have been so few of us girls for so long in below-the-line television that we have adapted our personal styles to become androgynous, a-sexual, a-type operators while we are at work. The exception is the make-up and hair girls. They have a mandate to be soft, feminine, girly-girls who must wield magic on insecure stars with their hot rollers and Ben-Nye concealers, while listening enthusiastically to endless drivel about image, producers and agents.

KAREN (V.O.)
(SINGS to the SOUND of
MARACAS)
Clang clang clang went the trolley.
Ding-ding-ding went the bell... Join
in!

GRACE (V.O.)
Enough. I don't take pills.

The rest of us -- we are the damn women who dared to step on the patriarchal toes of the camera, sound, prop, lighting, set and art departments. We are favored with indifferent belonging if we do a great job, bestowed and monikered as one of the guys if we don't make trouble. But, with a thousand looks, and hushed conversations, the message is sent. We are not now and never, ever will be one of the boys.

Laurie is my friend, and she is glad to see me. We've spent many lunch hours gabbing. She has loved me through my breakup with my husband, having gone through her own devastating one with her girlfriend a couple of years before me. She is also a personal trainer, and has gone back to school to get her masters in spiritual psychology. I wonder how she can do it and still work -- especially here.

She walks me to the boom, tells me I must roll the arm out as far as it will go and hold the mic out to get a line which the actress will say, as she comes down the stairs, at the very back of the set. I roll it out, *cranking a large handle on a cam* until it extends over 25 feet. Even though it is weighted, it is damn heavy. I squeeze the lever on the handle that is attached to the back of the boom arm, in order to cue the microphone.

I am sweating, struggling, putting 110 percent into it, and I can't do it. I just can't. My elbow screams; a jab of hot pain runs down my arm, back up to my neck. I don't know what's wrong. Oh my God. I look over at Laurie. She comes over, shows me how to do it again. I whisper to her about my arm; her eyes glaze over with sympathy and worry.

LAURIE

(whispers)

You should go to the doctor.
Remember, my shoulder.

VAL

(whispers)

What about the line at the stairs?

LAURIE

(whispers)

You gotta get it.

VAL

(whispers)

I can't... my arm... won't...

Laurie shrugs.

Although she understands, she is pragmatic. If I can't do it, they will have to get someone who can, and they will have to get someone right now. F.U.B.A.R. The term comes from the military, but they use it in TV too. FUCKED UP BEYOND ALL REALITY.

END ACT 3

ACT 4

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A small examining room, filled with typical medical stuff. A small window that looks out over a small tree-lined walkway.

DR. JANICE, my crinkly-eyed, curly-haired internist, flexes my arm. I wince with pain.

VAL
Will I live?

DR. JANICE
You need to see a specialist.

VAL
But, will I live?

Dr. Janice LAUGHS.

GRACE V.O.)
No, that's not funny.

INT. ANOTHER DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A small examining room, filled with typical medical stuff. A small window that looks out over a small parking lot.

The bald, paunchy ORTHOPEDIST examines my left arm, but seems more interested in my aspirations as a screenwriter. He flexes my wrist. I look down at it.

BALD ORTHOPEDIST
So, do you have an agent?

He flexes my arm at the elbow. I squirm with pain.

BALD ORTHOPEDIST
What's your screenplay about?

He gets a large needle ready. Beads of sweat form on my face.

BALD ORTHOPEDIST
What do you do at the studios,
again?

I HOLD BACK A SCREAM as the cortisone filled needle goes directly into my elbow.

GRACE (V.O.)
No, that's not funny.

INT. YET ANOTHER DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

A small examining room, filled with typical medical stuff. Windowless.

The tall, all-business WORKER'S COMP DOC enters, asks how I feel. Before I can answer, he grabs my arm.

I SHOUT OUT IN PAIN.

He drops my arm as if it were a rancid lamb chop, and picks up the other one. That one hurts too. He glances at my chart.

I ask him what I have. Epicondylitis, carpal tunnel, spondylosis float off his tongue like discordant sounds in a Philip Glass symphony. He tells me to take the next three months off and do absolutely nothing. That way, he barks, I might be able to avoid surgery. *What IS NOT SAID, is that even with three months off, it will not be gone and surgery will not cure it. The diagnos: RSI (Repetitive Strain Injury.)*

VAL
(whispers to self))
F.U.B.A.R.

I limp back to my car, head home to curl up into a ball, hoping that I can sleep it off. I won't. And, none of the answers will be found between the pages of a sitcom script.

GRACE (V.O.)
Oops. Sorry.

CANNED LAUGHTER.

END ACT 4

TAG

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY - 18 YEARS LATER

Spanish pinkish tiles on the floor. White walls. Framed colorful posters. Old family photos. A lived in couch and a dark china cabinet left over from the old days.

GEORGE WINSTON MUSIC tinkles through a set of small Bose speakers.

I'm on my couch with my laptop.

I first wrote this story in 2006 while at grad school working on my M.F.A. All the events happened in the 1990s, but feel like they could've happened yesterday. We women are having a moment, another moment so I find myself questioning everything I did back then. Did I speak up enough, fight hard enough, was I... did I... could I...????

Val SIGHS loudly.

Truth is, when I started in below-the-line-TV production, I was expected to do EVERYTHING the guys did: lift heavy cameras, coil horse-cock cable, move booms and P.A. Equipment. That's how you proved you were smart enough to move up. We ALL got slapped on the ass. The jokes were raunchy, profane, sexual. We ALL LAUGHED, never thinking about whether the joke was really funny, or sexist or racist or anything.

Common slogans of the time seem anachronistic now. "Keep the Broads Out of Broadcasting," "Maybe You Haven't Heard, but we're Doin' Talkies These Days." Of course, my favorite is still in use, "Guys, Martini Shot!" The martini shot is the second to last shot of the day... Jo Ann Singer's dad, the legendary Abby Singer coined that one. She was an A.D. At the time.

I was small and skinny, but had nooooo problem getting in anyone's face if they tried to cross whatever the line was... My family was from the Bronx. We grew up learning how to get in people's faces. We took care of ourselves...

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - A COUPLE DAYS LATER

Val hits the send button on her laptop. An early draft of this hybrid essay shoots through the internet to a couple of friends.

Questions come back -- what happened to Norm, Laurie, even Phil? I think deeply...

GRACE (V.O.)
What's the safe word?

KAREN (V.O.)
Oh, honey, I can't remember.

I put the word out to a few of the old sound guys. The name Norm is a blast from the past. Finally, Ed, another mixer I used to work with, checks with the union. Norm withdrew honorably and retired to Florida. He's 83 now. Hmm, so when old audio guys retire, do they just evaporate into thin air or do they become part of all operational radio frequency wavelengths? I imagine Norm on a patio in Florida, playing bridge, staring at the ocean with one helluva set of hearing aids. Maybe he even catches a glance once in a while of a rerun of one of the great sitcoms he mixed.

EXT. OCEANFRONT CONDO PATIO - DAY

A panoramic view of white sand, palm trees and the bluest ocean.

Norm, with a humongous set of hearing aids, stares out at placid water, happy. He stands slowly, shuffling to white patio doors, disappearing inside.

INT. CONDO - MOMENTS LATER

A TV plays in the corner.

ON THE SCREEN: a classic scene from *Friends*.

Norm looks over.

NORM
(mutters)
Fucking assholes.

Smiling to himself, he moves past his great grandkid who's on the couch, LAUGHING.

As for Laurie and me -- we're still friends. She ended up having a bunch of surgeries and leaving TV production sound early too. She's been living near her ninety-something dad who's hanging on in hospice. He was a veterinarian. She loves animals too, especially dolphins. She talks about building a cluster of tiny houses on one of the less touristy Hawaiian Islands for her and her friends and spending long days in the deep blue waters swimming with them... I try to be there for her the way she was for me. During one of our conversations, I ask her to remind me of how she got started in audio. She tells me that she came down from San Francisco determined to get into the Hollywood sound scene, but could only get temp jobs doing dreaded secretarial work. One day, while handing out paychecks at CBS, she went onto a sound stage and saw a Fisher boom, you know the one that moves on wheels, on the ground. The boom arm sits on this big perambulator. Intrigued, she climbed on, started to fiddle with it.

J.L.Fisher walked in and saw her. He told her she'd never work as a boom operator. She was a girl and too small... I don't know if she actually told him to go fuck himself out loud, but I damn well know that's what she thought.

GRACE (V.O.)
What?

KAREN (V.O.)
What!?

Curious, I go online looking for pictures of J.L. Fisher. There's one on the company web site. He's young, in a tie, circa 1952. Then I find one of him in a Google search. He's got white hair, wrinkles. It's his obituary. He died last year at 91. On the Fisher Facebook page, there are pictures of young women being trained on dollies and jibs... women in media. Yeah that's right. WOMEN. IN. MEDIA. Mother-Fucking-tear in my eye. Clear evidence, that things have changed... are changing.

Then, there's me. I still have RSI, but it's well controlled with lots of yoga. This is L.A. after all. Most importantly, I continue do the one thing in my life that's made sense. WRITE. Scripts, essays, web content, tweets, grocery lists... There's another term that comes from the military, SNAFU. We use that one in show business too. SITUATION NORMAL: ALL FUCKED UP.

In Hollywood, that's a happy ending.

INT. SOUND STAGE

JO ANN, THE A.D.
(shouts)
It's a wrap, guys!

END SHOW.

FADE OUT.

Val Stulman is a playwright, TV and screenwriter who also acts and sometimes teaches. She has an MFA in Creative Writing/Writing for the Performing Arts from The University of California, Riverside. She worked in TV production sound in the 1990s on many of your favorite sitcoms.