

I Am Not Valery
by Frankie Piccione

Lilly's teacher stared at her, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Every couple of seconds, he looked back at the equation on the board, and then returned his gaze to Lilly.

After a solid half a minute, he said, "C'mon, Lilly. Your sister could do this in her sleep."

"Grrr!" said Lilly.

"Alright, fine. Harrison, do you know the answer?"

Harrison Pivolance Jr. rose from his desk. "My dad is an accountant," he announced for the umpteenth time. "Of course I know the answer."

Lilly sunk deeper in her seat.

"The answer is thirteen."

"Well done, Harrison!" said the teacher. "Maybe Valery can help you with your homework tonight, Lilly. She was an excellent student when she was in my class."

"Grrrr..."

The teacher gave Harrison a gold star sticker. Harrison tried to put the star in his sticker book, but there was no room left for it. Lilly's book, however, had plenty of room. She slammed it closed and shoved it deep in her desk.

"Okay, class," said the teacher, "it's time for lunch. Everyone line up by the door."

Lilly stood up from her chair.

"Excuse me," said Barry Barlington, unapologetically, as he pushed Lilly back in her seat. Barry snickered.

Lilly rose again.

"Excuse me!" said Barry as he pushed Lilly over again. "I forgot my pencil."

Laughter escaped from the covered mouths of the Lilly's classmates.

“It’s lunchtime.” Lilly stood again. “You don’t need a pencil.”

“Oh. You’re right.” Barry pushed Lilly again as he passed. Lilly tripped backward, falling over her chair like an acrobat doing a backflip.

The class laughed louder than before.

The teacher recovered. He had been trying not to laugh himself. “Alright, Barry, that’s enough. Let’s go.”

In the hallway, Barry and Harrison walked next to Lilly.

“She’s wrong, you know,” said Barry.

“About what?” asked Harrison.

“I do need a pencil.”

“A pencil?” said Harrison. “At lunchtime? What for?”

Barry tossed his pencil on the ground. Lilly slipped and fell into the wall.

“Oh,” said Harrison. “Good reason!”

They laughed. Lilly groaned.

“Lose your balance?” asked her teacher.

“I was tripped!”

“Yes, I trip too sometimes.”

Lilly sighed. “That’s not what I meant.”

“But,” the teacher continued, “I’ve never seen Valery trip.”

“I am not Valery.”

“Maybe she can give you lessons.”

“On tripping?”

“On not tripping.”

At lunch, the lady with the spatula served Lilly a cheeseburger.

“I’m lactose intolerant.”

The lady with the spatula paused. “What do you mean? You had a cheeseburger yesterday.”

“That was my sister...”

The lady with the spatula tried and failed to laugh away the awkward. “I always get you mixed up with her. She really stands out in a person’s mind, you know.”

“I know...”

The cheeseburger was taken away and a replacement was given.

“An orange?” said Lilly.

“We’re running low on abnormal food today, Dear. Sorry. But we’ve lots of chocolate ice...”

Lilly stared at her.

“Oh. Never mind. Maybe you could take some for Valery.”

Lilly left the kitchen and sat at her assigned table. After being questioned by two different lunch ladies as to why “Valery” was not sitting where she was supposed to, Lilly ate her orange.

Harrison leaned over from the seat next to Lilly. “What is it about math that troubles you?”

“There are too many rules and signs, and I can’t remember which does what.”

“You would make a terrible accountant.”

Lilly stopped eating.

“Valery,” said Harrison, “she would be an accountant you could be proud of. You should just give up now and start preparing for employment at Bill’s Burger Stand.”

“Grrr!”

Next to Harrison, Barry patted the bottom of a ketchup bottle. “Come on!”

“Is that ketchup bottle giving you trouble there, Barry?” said Harrison.

“Why, yes, Harrison. It is. Any suggestions?”

“Let me see it.” Harrison placed the bottle on the table, facing Lilly. She lowered her brow. “Try it now.”

“No, wait!”

Barry smashed the bottle with all of his might. Thick tomato ketchup sprayed all over Lilly.

“That got it! Thanks, Harrison.”

“I’m here to help,” said Harrison.

“At least we can tell you apart from Valery now,” said Barry, and the two laughed.

“You ruined my orange...”

At home, Lilly stood alone in the hallway between her bedroom and Valery’s. Valery laughed with her friend inside the room.

“Stupid popular Valery...” Lilly said, grimacing.

Valery’s blonde hair flowed through its pigtails, her red glasses rested on her nose, and her dress swayed about her like a cloud.

Lilly watched Valery’s every move.

“Let’s go swimming!” said Valery’s friend.

“Okay!” Valery and her friend dressed in their swim gear and headed for the pool. Valery tossed her dress into the laundry room.

Hmmm, thought Lilly, and she snatched it.

The next day was movie day, and Lilly walked into school wearing Valery's dress. She styled her hair like Valery's pigtails, wore Valery's shoes, and borrowed Valery's back-up glasses.

"Valery!" said Lilly's teacher. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to visit you."

"It's wonderful to see my star student again, but don't you have another class to be in?"

Lilly gulped. "I got permission to be here. Lilly is in my class because she likes that movie better and I like this one."

"Lilly should have asked me first, but I'll let it slide for you, Valery."

"Oh, thank you!"

Lilly sighed. *I've only been Valery for two minutes and people already like me better!*

Harrison leaned over. "I hope we get to work together one day. You're going to be a great accountant. Like me. We can be great together."

Lilly scoffed, and hoped she didn't. "I can't wait!"

At lunch, the lady with the spatula smiled at Lilly.

What a nice change, thought Lilly, and she made her way to Valery's seat to eat her lunch.

"I thought you were on an extra credit trip today," said one of Valery's friends.

"I have too much extra credit. They wouldn't let me go." Lilly said.

"Typical," said Valery's friend. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Be so successful at everything. You're like the perfect person."

"Oh, you think so? You should get to know my sister. She's even cooler than I am."

Valery's friend didn't answer. Lilly took it personally.

"I love your dress," said Valery's other friend. "Where did you get it?"

"Valery's closet," said Lilly.

"That... Makes sense..." said the friend.

Lilly tried to correct her mistake, but instead of words coming out of her mouth, she burped.

"Excuse you!" said the first friend.

Lilly's stomach gurgled. She looked at her tray. A half eaten cheeseburger and a now-empty cup of chocolate ice cream stared back at her.

"Uh-oh," groaned Lilly.

Splat! Lilly threw up all over Valery's dress, and fell to the floor. Her glasses flew off, and her hair sank to its usual Lilly style.

"Valery?"

"That's not Valery," said the other friend. "It's what's-her-face, Valery's sister."

"Oh, yeah, her. I'm considerably less concerned now."

Lilly knelt in what used to be the contents of her stomach. A tear made its way down her cheek.

At home, Lilly ripped off the stained dress. "How am I going to tell Valery?"

"Tell Valery what?" said a voice. Lilly didn't dare turn around. Valery put her hand on Lilly's shoulder.

Lilly held the dress out. "I borrowed your dress, and I ate --"

"Yeah. I got it." Valery pushed the dress away. "Don't worry about it."

"Do you hate me?"

“No, silly.”

“Am I a terrible sister?”

“You’re an awesome sister.”

“I’m a- I’m a what?”

“You’re an awesome sister.” Valery smiled again, repeating herself exactly.

Lilly scratched her head. “You’re pulling my leg.”

“No, you’re caught on the bedframe.”

Lilly unstuck her pants from the bedframe. “No, I meant you’re pulling my leg like you’re joking.”

“No, I’m serious. You’re always there when I need you. You share your toys with me. You’re awesome.”

“I- I guess.”

“I hope that I could be as good of a sister as you.”

Lilly’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you talking about?!”

“I’m saying that I would like to be as awesome as you one day.”

“I think you’re an awesome sister, too.”

Valery wrapped her arms around Lilly. “Thanks, Sis! I guess I just needed a little self-confidence. See? You’re always there when I need you.” Valery skipped away, beaming.

Lilly stared at the stained dress. “Yeah... Hmm...”

The next day, everything was back to normal: Lilly didn’t know the answers, the lady with the spatula didn’t smile, and Harrison told Lilly just what a lousy accountant she would be.

“Shut up!” Lilly said. “I don’t want to be an accountant!”

“What cheek!” said Harrison. “Valery would never say such a thing!”

“Valery! Valery! I am not Valery!”

“No indeed,” said Barry. “You were Valery yesterday.”

“Grrr!” Lilly got up from the lunch table. “I don’t care what you guys think of me because I like being me! I am happy with who I am!”

“At least someone is.”

“Yes. Someone is. I am, and so is Valery. And that’s all that matters to me.”

Lilly squeezed her orange all over Harrison and Barry.