

# C '49

## A Cranbrook Classmate Memory

### MEMORY of Val Rabe

by Susan Rabe,  
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Family Man, January 1978

## THE WAY HE WAS

He was skinny like me, and seemed to be all knees and elbows poking out of his short German Lederhosen, and light-blue, short-sleeved shirt with the penny buttons — they were truly pennies in little metal frames, and were the buttons on his shirt. I was fascinated. His name was Valentin, we were both ten years old, and it was June 6, 1940, and in September we would both enter fifth grade. The boy I met that day I would marry 12 years later.

His dark hair and olive skin were a contrast to most of the boys I knew — usually blond or brown-haired, with lighter skin. Still we were mostly descended from German families, and he had come from that country, so he would fit, I guessed. Those early years he picked up English quickly, was gentle and polite, and we became good friends in very little time, living just across the street from each other.

A few years later his family moved to a larger house some five blocks away, but he was a part of the town by then, and America as well. He enjoyed the freedom of biking around town, swimming at the local pool in the summer, or playing with other kids at the creek just outside of town, or going early evening with his Dad on calls to minister to a sick child or adult at one of the outlying farms. His father was our only doctor, and early on was much appreciated by everyone. A rarity was that he was willing to accept produce in lieu of money, if the situation seemed to warrant that.

Val was unusual, in some ways. Especially, for me, it was the food he ate. He astonished all of us sixth-graders when on our trip to the Cincinnati Zoo, his packed lunch was a fried chicken leg and a bag full of fresh peas he ate straight out of the pods, while we had peanut butter and jelly or baloney sandwiches in white bread. Another favorite of his was drinking evaporated milk — a real treat, said he, as was fudge, his new discovery. He was kind, pleasant, and loved pranks. Yes —he was different, I thought, but a good different, and was for me, one of the most interesting and smartest boys in my class.

So I was sad when in ninth grade his parents sent him to a private school outside Detroit, because his grades were slipping, and he was no longer caring if they did. T'was the wisest thing they could have done for him. Although his testing in science and math required he repeat eighth

grade, he adjusted well, and soon loved Cranbrook Academy. His grades now showed he was working, and working hard, to stay there.

Summers, however, he was about town, working at the local meat market for three years, and later for the town highway department, repairing our back roads and meeting local men he had never known, but learned to respect. Two or three of his past classmates were still his good friends and they tooted around town summer nights those high school years, whistling at us girls and shooting rats in the local dump with their BB guns. He was happy and thrived in both of his very different worlds. But wonderfully, his school friends from Detroit and Columbus sometimes visited him and they became my friends as well.

I recall singular events in our growing relationship. One summer night, when we were perhaps seventeen, on a double-date with chums, we were heading to an outdoor movie and then hot dogs and root beer after the movie. Our friend, the driver, turned to the two of us in the back seat and asked which of the two outdoor theaters we should consider, giving us the movies each was showing. Val gave a preference, and I said, "Whatever the three of you prefer."

He turned to me and said quietly, "Why do you so often acquiesce, and never give your real opinion? I shrugged and said, "I don't know why." When we returned home after the movie and our snacks, I remember getting out my dictionary and looking up "acquiesce." It was indeed, as I guessed, a habit of mine to "go along with the group." His vocabulary had out-paced mine in a matter of six years.

By the time I was a senior at Miami University in Ohio, and he was a junior at Tufts University in Massachusetts, we knew we would marry, and we did, in 1952. After his final year of college and his two years in the Army, we embarked on graduate school and family, simultaneously, in the mid 50's. During the first year we had Anne, delivered by Val's father, in Ohio, while Val began his first year of graduate school, in Cambridge.

Another event occurred when I joined Val in Cambridge when Anne was six weeks old, and we moved into our first family apartment New Year's Eve of 1955. Intimidated by moving into a Harvard graduate school apartment complex, I hesitated the first weeks to venture outside our door. It was January, but more than that, I assumed every other at-home mother was a graduate of Radcliffe, Vassar, or another of the Seven Sisters, and I would be found out straight away. I would embarrass Val or myself, and my middling education and/or intellect would be obvious.

I believe he sensed my feeling, for one day he came home about 5pm, and asked where I and Anne had been that rather mild-weather day. When I delayed and finally said, "Nowhere," he threatened, on the very next day, to lead me to each of the five apartments in our building, and introduce me to our neighbors. And he would, I knew. So by the next afternoon I had met two young women while getting the mail, and then we three watched and talked as our children played on the lawn in front of our apartments. My fears soon lifted and friendships began.

Courtesy of Boston-Lying-In Hospital we had Matthew in 1956 and Callie in 1958. While he attended classes and worked part-time at the library, I mothered through the days and typed theses when they napped. Looking back to those years, in our third floor apartment, dinner could be just dinner, or something more or less, depending upon Val's mood — dead tired or frisky and playful. The ages of the children would be Anne, four-and-a-half, Matt, three-and-a-half, and Callie two, and Meg, as yet unborn.

The scene, at dinner, is this: Val's back is to the apartment door as we eat; I am directly across from him, the table against the kitchen wall; the three children are arrayed between us on the open side of the table, in two high chairs and a feeding table.

With sufficient food in him to relax, he — on a frisky night — would put his hand behind him and knock on the door. Up to that point all three were enjoying getting food into their mouths — the point of the meal. With the knock all heads turned toward the door, which he then opened with that back-thrusted hand. All eating stopped, I became slightly irritated, wondering what he was about to pull on them.

"Come on in," he says, "... good to see you, Pink Elephant. Please sit down." His eyes then followed what might be the elephant's track to our couch on the far wall. After a moment of silence, the turned heads tried to take this all in. Anne turns back to her food, and with a pinched little face states, "There is no elephant there." Callie meanwhile follows Val's eyes and chimes in with a cheery "Hi," in the direction of the supposed elephant, and then looks back to her father. Matt leans over towards me and anxiously whispers, "Where is he, Mom — I can't see him."

I scowl at Val, as he smiles at the little joke he has brought to our supper. It translates to anxiety for Anne, adoration of Dad for Callie, and bewilderment for Matt. It is minutes before we all return to eating and the zest or zeal for the meal is diminished. Only dessert brings back the family dinner. This little game returned in different forms at different meals — green dragon, black bear, purple pig, probably all in 1959. To bring Meg, our fourth child, into the mix, I would tell this story, later years, and she would always ask what she did when Dad played those imaginary games. When I responded she was not yet born, she would pout, and be silent and sullen for the next hour.

Baby-sitting for wealthier graduate students about four nights a week was my contribution to our budget that year of 1959, and Val thus had bath and bed duty quite often, which he carried out in memorable ways that the three older can recall with great detail. All three could fit in the tub then, and he monitored from the toilet seat. Above the tub, a bit higher than they could reach sitting down, was a small door about 6"x6", with a small handle on it — possibly entry to pipes or some other maintenance need in that wall. It was indeed curious and he used it during their bath times, by introducing Cluny and Puffnik to them. Only Val could open the door to let them out of that wall, and only he could hear them or interpret what they said.

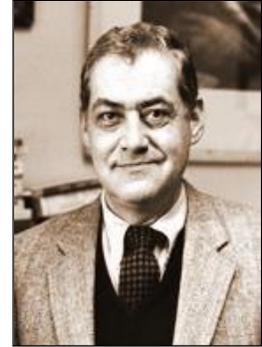
Our children agree that they were tiny, fairy-like boys, with Cluny having dark hair, and Puffnik having blondish hair. In time our three children thought they could almost see them and felt they knew them. Those memories are still strong. Val would work bathing needs into his conversation with the fairies, as perhaps telling Matt that Cluny thought his feet needed more scrubbing, or Puffnick noted Anne's neck was still dry. He even managed hair-washing some nights for one or the other or three. It was a special event each night for all of them. With their questions and his or the fairies' answers, personalities were developed for the small people who lived behind the wall.

With or without a bath, bedtime followed, and there was a vision to accompany it as well. When all were in bed and Val was satisfied they were, he would walk into the bedroom as the "Sandman," stooped a bit and with his head down and long arms crossing his cheeks and clasped hands hanging down in front of him making a swinging trunk — again an "elephant in the room." He went to each bed and swung his trunk up and over them, spilling sand upon them to

put them to sleep, as a sandman should. They waited for him eagerly, they said, and when the sandman left they fell to sleep, very soon, and very much at ease.

Meg was born in 1960 and life changed a bit. I did no more nighttime babysitting, and Val was relieved of much of the bath and bed routines, as he studied for his oral exams, and outlined his thesis material. Meg missed much of his early fathering, for which I'm sad, but the other three did not talk about those special times after she was born, unless among themselves, and a move the next year to Philadelphia put the little door in the bathroom wall in the past. Besides, Val now loved holding our pretty, quiet, light-skinned, blond baby in his olive arms. Their color contrast was sometimes stunning.

A new life opened up for us, and Val's sometime prankish creativity perhaps went into a classroom for the first time. But the imaginary world he gave our children those early years, to make the humdrum of life more fun for all involved, is a family treasure. He also introduced our children to plants, and the specific good or nasty attributes of each. Animals were always a part of his early life, so we had some form of a creature with us during our children's growing years. Am I and our four grateful for how and what he taught — absolutely yes. Our memories still hold the images and feels, from earlier times and circumstances. They cannot be duplicated, but are often shared and will not be forgotten.



See also Val's [Biosketch](#)