

Sentimental Valueby

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I barged into Stan's office, pushing off Ian and Scott as they tried to hold me back. As I slammed the door behind me, I heard muffled shouts of "Stan, watch out!" coming from the two of them

Stan looked up. He was sitting at his desk, a pile of slush perched precariously on top, all the way up to his chin. He blinked, rubbed his head, tugged at his beard, and smiled. His eyes twinkled

"Michael!" Stan got up, allowing the manuscripts to fall over and onto the floor; it turned out that his chin had been holding them in place. He walked over to me and shook my hand warmly. "It's a pleasure to see you

Glad you finally made that first sale, eh? Wish I could've been there when you heard the news. I've always wanted to see the joy in my writers' faces when they find out.

I stared at him for a second, goggle-eyed. Of course, he didn't realize yet that the jig was up. "Knock it off, Stan!" I exclaimed. "I know as well as you do that you practically were there.

Stan pulled back from me, a nervous look on his face. His brow began to sweat. He pulled a white silk handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his forehead furiously. "What do you mean?" he whispered

"I know all about the camera. I want to see my picture.

Stan put away the handkerchief and retreated behind his desk. "What camera?" he asked

Now I smiled. "The camera that Sydney told me about. You remember, you ran into her at a convention. A fellow Clarionite. She told me about the magic camera you use to photograph new writers when they make their first sale to you. I want to see my picture.

" Shhh!"Stan looked around, nervously. "Don't use that word!

"What word?Picture?

"No!" He looked around again, leaned close to my ear, and whispered, "Magic. As the editor of Analog, the bastion of hard science fiction, I could lose my credibility if it was found that I was using magic to serve my ends, and not good old hard-science-with-rivets. And if I lost my credibility, so," he intoned solemnly, "would the magazine.

I shuddered; if that happened, I knew that my career as a hard science fiction writer would be over as quickly as it began. All the other writers would point at me and say, "Ha ha ! You don't really write hard SF! Not even soft SF! Your editor uses magic!" I would be forced to turn to fantasy for a living, and as I noted once when a story of mine was trashed in a workshop, for me fantasy is a lot harder to write than science fiction. The only way I'd survive would be by writing ten- volume trilogies about cute elves, since that was all I could handle in the genre. Surely a fate worse than death, or even chairing a Worldcon

"Your point is well taken," I replied quietly. "I will not spread the word about the camera, not even until the stars grow old and our Sun grows cold. However," I continued, "I still want to see my picture.

Stan nodded and pushed a button on his desk.A dark hole with fuzzy boundaries opened up in mid-air, obviously a product of advanced science or -- well, let's just invoke Clarke's Third Law and leave it at that

Stan reached in and pulled out an old style accordion camera, along with a thick manila envelope

"It works by pushing this button," he said, "and then a photograph magically -- I mean, scientifically -- appears out of this slot.Similar to a Polaroid. The camera reaches through time and space and finds the correct rays of light to imprint onto the photograph. But it only works if I click the button after the writer has found out. One can't predict the future, you know, that would be a violation of --

I took the envelope from Stan as he began to spout equations of general relativity and quantum field theory. Therewas a whole slew of pictures, in chronological order. I recognized some of the other

authors, excited looks on their faces, appearing younger than I remembered. That made sense, naturally, because they were younger when they made their first sales. Out of curiosity, I pulled out Ian's picture; his maniacal grin was unmistakable

Finally, I reached my picture. There I was, jumping into the air, with the telephone in my hand and a big smile on my face. The perfect souvenir of my first sale; after all, I couldn't have the check and cash it, too

"I want the photograph," I said

Stan stopped his lecture and pulled the picture out of my hands

Frowning, he said, "I can't give it to you, Michael. I keep them for myself. It reminds me of why I went into editing in the first place.

"Just this one, Stan? You won't miss it, and it means a lot to me." It did, too; my fiancée wasn't around when I heard the news, and this would be the best way to share the moment with her

"Well..." Stan said, "you'll have to give me something in return.

"I don't have much money. I'm only a writer.

Stan laughed. "Oh, I wasn't thinking of money! Actually, all I'd want in return is another story from you. We've got a hole in the magazine for next month, and I need to fill it with something. The picture could be your payment.

My ears perked up. In exchange for the picture, Stan was going to publish another story of mine? "Sure! What kind of story would you like?

"Could you give me a 'Probability Zero'? It's only a small hole, and anyway, you can make one of those short enough to be the right price.

I was confused. "What do you mean? The right price? What do you consider to be the right price for the photograph?"

"Oh," he said, with his ubiquitous smile and twinkle in his eyes, "I figure the picture is worth...about a thousand words."

I hit him with a Hugo rocket on my way out. It felt good