

RON TANNER

CATCH A FALLING STAR

Doug and Nancy spent two days and nights poring over the Star Loan catalogue before they made their choice: it would be Rusty Wallace, a face they'd seen in a hundred movies. Though early in his career he was prominent only in crowd scenes (he'd be the one to say, "Let's go get 'em!" or "What about *us*?"), in his prime he usually played the irascible but lovable "boss," such as the fighter's manager, in "Golden Gloves Glory," the booking agent, in "Dancing Down to Rio," or the movie director, in "Spotlight Parade." His bio described him as, "a quiet man whose charm belies the curmudgeonly character he has played so often and so well over the years. A hearty 85 year-old, Rusty begins each day with a two mile jog and ends each evening with half an hour of yoga. If we had to choose one word to describe Rusty it would be "convenient," for his needs are few, despite his age, and he demands no special attention. Should you be invited out, he is perfectly willing to accompany you or stay at home and watch your cat. He still looks good in formal wear and he will bring his own, so you need not worry about rentals. Except for a minor heart attack in the winter of 1981, Rusty has had no ailments to speak of. His memory is sharp and he has a lot to talk about, having worked with the best and biggest stars of the '30s, '40s and '50s. Witty, discreet, and debonair, he receives our four-star rating. Price: \$2400 a month, tax included."

Doug and Nancy were eager to hear Rusty reminisce about the big stars he had worked with — Stewart, Astaire, Gable, Loy, Garson, Turner, Cagney. The list seemed endless. "Someday," said Doug, setting their best china on the dining room table, "Star Loan's going to get the biggies, not just the B-grades. Just wait till inflation hits. Those retirees are going to put their stucco mansions up for sale and start cutting corners." Nancy smiled, nodding in agreement, as she carried in a bottle of white wine. "Let's hope they've made some bad investments," she said. "I'd love to get somebody like James Garner." Doug angled a dinner plate and looked at his reflection by the light of the chandelier. "That would be a coup, Nance, but I think we'll have to wait about twenty years." Nancy drew the cork out of the bottle. "Too bad. I'd like to get him when he still has some of his middle-aged good looks." She sniffed the cork, then set the bottle in a serving rack. The door bell sounded, chimes seeming to echo through the house. "That's him!" They ran to the door but stopped abruptly to collect themselves before answering.

“Doug and Nancy Valentine?” The delivery man, wearing a scarlet jumpsuit and a billed cap with four stars across the front, held a clipboard out to them. “Sign by the ‘X’.”

“I’ve got goosebumps,” Nancy said, rubbing her arms.

“This is our first time,” Doug told the man, who only nodded in reply, flipping through the paper on his clipboard.

“This copy’s yours, folks. Hold on.” He walked to the truck, a well-waxed step-van the same colour as his jumpsuit, and opened the rear double doors, then disappeared inside. The motor was running.

Doug stepped into the white gravel drive and Nancy followed. They heard buckles unclasp, buttons unsnap, and belts clatter. “Easy does it,” the delivery man said from inside, his voice muffled as if he were speaking into a tin can. “No, Rusty, the travel chair stays here. Got your bag? No, here. Walk towards the light. That’s it.” Doug and Nancy edged closer, glancing anxiously at each other.

“Damn these steps,” said a thin voice.

“Is that him?”

“Here you are, Rusty.” The delivery man guided him towards Doug and Nancy. The old man was wearing a scarlet jumpsuit just like his guide’s, only the old man’s was wrinkled and loose-fitting, sagging in the crotch and too long in the sleeves.

“Here I am,” he said, extending one freckled hand to Doug and Nancy. “Who are you?”

“The Valentines,” said the delivery man. “Your hosts for the next four weeks.”

“Rusty Wallace,” said the old man, his voice cracking. He was small, perhaps only five feet in height, not at stature of the bosses he used to play. And his face was hardly recognizable, since the catalogue had shown only promo photos from his prime. “What’s the matter? You never seen a star before?” Rusty said. His jaw quivered when he smiled.

They shook his hand, which seemed boyish, it was so small and soft. Nancy took his bag, a nylon duffle, while Doug helped him up the steps and into the house. The delivery man gave them a “care sheet,” which included emergency phone numbers, as well as instructions on CPR techniques and the Heimlich maneuver. “Just a precaution,” he said. Then he was gone, Rusty turning to wave feebly as the truck sped away.

“You ready for some dinner, Rusty?” Doug asked, raising his brows at the old man. “It’s OK if I call you Rusty, isn’t it?”

“Call me anything but stupid,” Rusty said. He chuckled. “That’s a joke.”

Nancy smiled politely. "I hope you're hungry, Rusty. We're preparing lobster bisque, caesar salad, grilled lamb chops, rice pilaf, french bread, fresh steamed carrots, and, for desert, angel food cake with fresh strawberries."

Rusty ran one hand through his yellow hair, which looked wind-blown, wispy tufts sticking out in different directions. "You got any soup?"

"Bisque is soup, Rusty." Doug was nodding "yes" at him.

"I thought it was some kind of ceramic," he said, narrowing his gray eyes at Nancy.

"It's that too," she said. "You're making a joke, aren't you?"

He looked from one to the other, his head jerking from side to side like a bird's, the likeness made stronger by his small beakish nose and pointed chin. "Sure," he said, "I'm a regular joker. Lots of laughs. Just you wait."

"Here." Doug pulled out a chair at the dining room table. "Sit down and we'll get you an appetizer."

"Saltines would be good," he said, sitting.

"Perhaps you'd like to change into something more comfortable? Fresher?" Nancy looked down at him, raising her brows much as Doug had.

"This is as fresh as I get," Rusty said. He glanced over the table. "You expecting company?" He chuckled again. "That's a joke."

"You're a funny man," said Doug, grinning. "Isn't he, Nancy?"

"I'll get some crackers," she said.

"I'll help her," said Doug.

"I don't think he's funny at all," Nancy told Doug in the kitchen. "And it looks like he's been wearing that body stocking—"

"Jump suit."

"— for weeks."

"Relax. Let him settle in."

Nancy opened a cupboard door. "He looks nothing like his picture."

Doug glanced towards the dining room door. "You're right about that. He looks *old*, that's what he looks."

"He'd better have some good stories to tell or I'm going to be very disappointed." Nancy opened a box of saltine crackers and placed them neatly on a plate.

"That's a pretty plate," Rusty said as Nancy set it before him.

“Thank you. We bought it in Italy last year.”

“I was in Italy once.” He lifted a saltine and started at it as if it were a snapshot.

“Was that when you made ‘Bells of Andati?’” asked Doug, leaning across the table.

“No, it was during the war, I think. A USO tour.” He bit the cracker, crumbs spilling down the front of his jumpsuit.

“Wasn’t ‘Bells of Andati’ filmed in Italy?”

“Or Spain,” said Nancy. “One of the two. Almost everything was done on location in those days.”

“No, we did that one in California.”

“Are you sure?” asked Nancy.

He shrugged. “Who can be sure about anything? I don’t even remember where I was born.”

“Ithaca, New York,” said Doug, glancing to Nancy with a pout of puzzlement.

“Did I have a happy childhood?” He chewed another cracker.

“Sure you did. You were going to be an engineer.”

Rusty nodded, as if it were all clear to him now. “I loved trains.”

“I meant electrical engineer,” said Doug.

“Of course you did,” said Rusty. He smiled. “I was joking.” He blinked up at Nancy. “You got any soup?”

“If he doesn’t get any better than this I’m going to send him back and demand a refund.” Nancy ladled lobster bisque into a white ceramic bowl.

“It’s early yet,” said Doug, pacing behind her. “He’ll loosen up. He’s cute, isn’t he? I mean, so tiny and all? He’ll be lots of fun, I’m sure.”

“I was hoping to have the neighbours over later this week so we could show him off.”

“Maybe that’s what he needs, a larger audience.”

“Maybe you’re right, Doug.” She wiped an index finger across the dripping ladle bottom. “How’s this taste?”

He licked her finger. “Excellent as always, Nance.”

“Is this fish?” Rusty asked, chewing a lobster piece, his chin wet with soup.

“Lobster, Rusty. *Fresh* lobster.”

“Can’t be too fresh ‘cause it’s dead.” He sipped some more. “That’s a joke.”

“You’re always making jokes, aren’t you, Rusty,” said Nancy. She dabbed her mouth with a linen napkin. “I was thinking of having some people over maybe tomorrow night, and you could entertain us a little with reminiscences.”

“You mean talking about things I remember?” He slurped.

“Yeah, that’s it,” said Doug. “Like, what can you tell us about Cagney?”

“He was a good dancer,” said Rusty, “and I liked his movies.”

“But you worked with him.” Nancy stirred her bisque.

“I did?”

“You’re joking again.” Doug wagged a finger at him.

“I saw him once or twice,” said Rusty, shrugging. “He was taller than me by at least two inches, I think.”

Nancy laid her spoon alongside her soup bowl. “Well, you talked to him, of course.”

“Once I asked him for a match — I used to smoke, you know.”

He chewed another piece of lobster, then crushed a cracker into his soup and stirred it. “But I quit years ago. That’s why I’m so healthy now.”

“Yes, the catalogue said you jog two miles a day and do a half hour of yoga every night.” Doug was nodding at Nancy, as if to encourage her to keep up the conversation.

“That’s two blocks,” he said. “I jog two blocks. And it’s not yoga but yogurt. Half a cup of yogurt every night — you got any?”

“I’m going to sue them!” Nancy almost dropped the soup bowls into the sink.

“Keep it down, Nance — he’ll hear you.” Doug gathered the silverware and placed it in the dishwasher.

“This guy could be anybody, Doug — he’s not Rusty Wallace.”

Doug stopped loading the dishwasher. “You mean he’s a fake? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, the whole thing’s a scam, and tomorrow I’m calling the Better Business Bureau.”

Just then Rusty shuffled into the kitchen. “I went looking for the bathroom but got lost. You got one, of course. Or should I just go outside?” He was still chewing on something, his jaw working. Nancy and Doug stared at him for a moment, as if trying to figure out whether or not he was real. “I was just joking about the bathroom,” he said finally. “You’ll get used to it.”

That night they heard Rusty walking from one end of the house to the other, opening doors, closing windows, moving nicknacks, and rearranging furniture. "What's he doing?" Nancy asked.

"I don't know, Nance. I'll ask him."

Doug found Rusty dragging a floor lamp from the den to the study. "What are you doing, Rusty?"

"Moving this floor lamp from the den to the study. You want to help?"

"I mean, Rusty, what are you *doing*?"

"Oh." He paused, righting the lamp. "I can't sleep. Never could. That's why I have these bags under my eyes. Wait a minute." He stooped for a moment, then came back up. His small hand fluttered inside the lamp shade and suddenly there was light, making Doug squint and look away. Rusty brought his face up next to the lamp shade. "See the bags?"

Rusty was in the kitchen before sunrise. The clatter of pots and pans woke Nancy and Doug. "I think he's going to make us breakfast," said Doug, "maybe some Hollywood special."

"Like hell he is," said Nancy.

Rusty was cooking oatmeal in a brass pot that Nancy had hung over the stove for decoration only. "You want some?" he asked, waving a pot holder at the stove. He was still wearing his scarlet jumpsuit. Apparently he had been running in it, since there were sweat stains down the back and under the arms.

"We usually have eggs and bacon," said Doug.

Rusty shook his head in disapproval. "Bad for the heart," he said. "Try some hot cereal, why don't you?"

"I have to make a phone call," said Nancy, going into the den. Doug followed.

"He's going back today," she said, dialing the Star Loan Hotline. "And we're getting a refund or else."

Doug sighed, "What a hassle."

Nancy grimaced suddenly, then her face went blank. "Wait. I'll try again." She did. Doug could hear the three tones which signalled that the number had been disconnected. Nancy held the receiver away from her as if she did not know what it was. "This has got to be some kind of joke," she said.

Doug tried and got the same results. Later, Nancy called the Better Business Bureau. They said they would look into the matter, though it would be difficult to trace the organization since it used a PO box. Doug phoned the assistant District Attorney, who said the same thing. Nancy

took the phone from him. “What about the old man?”

The assistant DA was silent for a moment, then said, “That’s more complicated. You hang on to him until I get back to you.”

“Get back when?”

“As soon as I can, Mrs. Valentine.”

“About *how* soon.”

“A few weeks, maybe a month or two. I’m not sure. Who can tell in a case like this?”

“But we don’t need him for that long,” she said. “In fact we don’t need him at all!”

“By law you’re entitled to keep anything delivered to your house under false pretense, you know.”

“Is that all you can tell me?”

“Some people would sell their souls to hear the same thing, Mrs. Valentine.”

She frowned at Doug, who shrugged in response.

“You’ll call us?” she said, sounding doubtful.

“Sure,” he said.

When they returned to the kitchen they found Rusty going through the refrigerator. “You’re out of yogurt,” he said, “I’ll need some tonight.” He closed the fridge door and blinked at them. “I was wondering if you two could fly me to Miami, Florida, this week and buy me a new suit — I hear they’ve got very good seersucker there. How about it?” He looked from one to the other, his dishevelled hair peaked like a bird’s crown. Doug and Nancy only stared back, their faces slack and pale, their eyes wide with disbelief. “Hey,” said Rusty, smiling suddenly, “that was a joke.”

ANNE MACGREGOR

THE CROWN AND ANGEL

She’s so very beautiful. Half a dozen times now I’ve walked into this pub, and, standing at the bar, noticed her and thought this. It’s a circular bar and when she goes to serve customers on the other side I see her from the back as