

Virginia

Let's get one thing out of the way right up front. The first thing I noticed about Virginia when she was introduced to me in the library as the new 3rd Assistant Librarian was she was built like Sophia Loren from the neck down. The second thing I noticed was she was at least 15 years older than me, quite a bit since I was just turning 19. And the next thing I noticed was she really wasn't pretty in the conventional "cute" style of the Sixties. Such is the way young men put important things in order.

You have to remember in 1962, college librarians weren't wearing provocative attire or showing a little cleavage when reaching over the desk to stamp a return date in the back of your book. Virginia, who had the bearing of a princess, wore a modest flowery dress on that day, covering her torso from her knees to about her Adam's apple, flouncey in the fashion of the day, with those multi-layered things under the skirt-part to add bulk and let you swish around like Loretta Young and resemble a stack of huge Mr. Coffee filters hanging upside down around the waist. (I should have been a fashion writer.) Her ample figure pushed out the top of her dress in the auto-bumper style so popular at the time. It made you wonder if women had contests among themselves where they lined up facing a wall, posture straight, breasts just touching the

wallpaper, and the winner's toes came farthest from the baseboard. That's what I wondered.

Do you remember when adults stood out from a crowd of kids instead of looking like them? Well, Virginia looked like a Lady (capital "L") and you could easily spot her in a library filled with younger women students who seemed never able to find any clothing but a sweat shirt and jeans when they crawled out of bed in the morning. My friend Bob L. and I were convinced Skeevy Evie in our History of Civilization class owned exactly one sweat shirt and a pair of jeans she washed out in the janitor's sink in the closet at the end of the hall each week. "Skeevy looks wet today," Bob would tell me. We bet each other when she would cut the legs off to make shorts in the Spring. I took April, he took May.

So to be among the squaws in my classes all day and then come to my part-time job in the college's library to sit in a small back office inscribing Dewey Decimal numbers on the backs of books in the presence of Lady Virginia was like being let into the castle and brought to the Queen.



I almost fell down on one knee the first time I went to meet her in her little cubicle. Here I was, probably in my favorite outfit of brown checked shirt, prison green chinos, orange shoes my father gave me after he bought them at a discount store and decided he could live without them, and either my absolute favorite British tan cardigan sweater with a few buttons missing or my even more absolute favorite Lineman's Coat that could withstand a jolt of 50,000 volts, should I brush up against a high-tension power line cable as I walked to class.

And there was Virginia, seated elegantly on her desk chair, legs crossed, back straight, turned partially toward me as I stood frozen in the doorway. She had the best posture I have ever seen in a woman, and I'm not making a joke. It was sexy. If you've seen it, you know what I mean.

She bade me enter, take up a scribe and get to work. As an official librarian, it was her job to

quickly skim a book's end covers, decide on the Dewey classification and sub-classification, hand the book over and tell me the numbers. As an unofficial but devoted peon, it was my job to scribe the decimals on the book's spine using a hot, pointed instrument and a special white tape. It smelled awful when the heated scribe pressed against the tape. I thought of it more as branding than labeling.

Virginia's manner and movements were extremely feminine, just short of cartoon-ish. I've often wondered if such femininity is inborn or learned in a woman. From wherever it came, it was delicious. Just to watch her open a book, tilt her head to read the inscriptions and then push the volume across the desk to me would generate a tingle. Unintended, she had a provocative way of pushing the book. Or it could have been my imagination.



Despite her regal appearance, her manner was anything but frosty. She was very friendly and helpful, even sweet. She made me feel at ease the first time I worked with her. She loved to talk, but more important, she loved to listen. She withstood my dimwitted chatter as

I wielded my branding iron across the backs of unsuspecting books, scribing with my best penmanship as I held forth with one story or another to somehow insinuate my own glory. She was always encouraging, even suggesting my piano work might be good. She loved people. Maybe too much, as it turned out.

In 1957, Virginia had married the general manager of her father's large lumber company in Illinois. Maybe it was somehow arranged, I don't know, but I thought Ted got a good deal when he married the boss's daughter. A matron by definition only, she worked for a local high school in Alto Pass, IL near the Trail of Tears State Forest, as a certified librarian while Ted wheeled and dealt lumber contracts and futures and got sicker and sicker of business and suits and butt-licking and quotas and sales and forest inventory and the status quo until finally he came

home one night and told her he was quitting and was going to become a Boy Scout. "Aren't you too old?" she asked.

But Ted meant he wanted to become a professional administrator for the Boy Scouts of America. Planning, organizing and executing were his *métier*, he believed, and he would feel better about himself if he could use those talents for a worthwhile cause, in this case the instilling of basic values in youths, which he knew to be more than just showing kids how to start a fire with two sticks. "Where are the Boy Scout headquarters?" Virginia asked. "Well," said Ted, "I would have to begin in a field office and there is an opening in Utica, NY. It's a medium size city in the Mohawk Valley in upstate New York."

"How much would you earn?" she asked. "It's a very scenic valley," said Ted.

Virginia told me when she went to bed on the night of Ted's announcement, she couldn't make up her mind if she was thrilled or terrified. She may have been brought up in luxury, she hinted, but her math skills were good enough to reckon they would not have anything like the same life style to which they were accustomed. She knew Ted would cope, if only by dint of his steel clad will power. She frankly had never cared much for the cars and toys and club memberships they had only mildly enjoyed. Still awake at 2 a.m., she decided these amenities had really been burdens. By 4 a.m., she was rehearsing life with a meager income and by 6 a.m. she had begun to have thoughts about people in poverty and in trouble and how she might be of service to them in some small way while Ted worked with his Scouts. By breakfast, she had decided to become a sort of Mother Theresa, except no one knew of Mother Theresa back then, but you know what I mean.

Virginia and Ted, leaving behind a very disappointed father/father-in-law, arrived in Utica during the week before Christmas of 1961 and rented a flat in a two-family house on Utica's rapidly deteriorating Near West Side, down the street from the Tub of Suds bar everyone mistook for a Laundromat. It was quite common to see a man or woman enter the Tub carrying a basket of dirty clothes, look around and then leave. Ted began work at the BSA

Field Office on the day after Santa Claus somehow brought a new couch down the chimney from Illinois. For the time being, it was their only furniture other than the bed and the kitchen table and chairs. Ted wore his Boy Scout Uniform to work each day and to any official BSA business in the community. Long pants in the winter, short pants in the summer, it included a larger version of the official shirt, a bright yellow neckerchief and the Scout “overseas” cap he seldom wore, topped by a tan raincoat with a zip-in liner for those frigid Mohawk Valley winters.

Almost immediately, Virginia began to invite the neighbors in for spaghetti dinners and ice cream evenings. Drunks, bums and heroin addicts mixed it up with welfare mothers and “uncles” while Dvorak and Mahler pounded out a beat on the record player. After a plate of spaghetti or a Fudgesicle, many would head out to find their dealers, pimps or children.

At the library, Virginia took on the role of an aunt I would certainly have preferred over those given to me in the natural course of events. Very, very gently she began to offer suggestions to me regarding my clothing, figures of speech and other niceties I thought were silly, but had little understanding of their importance. I still don’t. But who could refuse the counsel of a real woman with such great posture?



One afternoon as Virginia and I enjoyed a nice change of scene standing guard at the checkout desk, a young woman with flaming red hair and a mischievous twinkle in her eye approached with a book and asked if it had been me she’d seen playing in a band at a local beer joint the previous Friday night. “What was the song you were singing?” she asked. A bit tongue tied and embarrassed, I replied, “It’s called ‘I Need Your Body’...but the song wasn’t my idea.” Red Hair seemed disappointed I was wimping on the issue and left with her stamped book, but not before I noticed, among other things, she was wearing a skirt. Virginia moved over to me and said, “What a nice girl, do you know her?” “No,” I said, “and she’s not my type.” Which could have been true, but Virginia didn’t think

so and Red Hair and I have now been married for over 40 years and she still gets a twinkle in her eye. I’ve come to know it means she wants to go shopping.

Virginia’s solo Mother Theresa Act came to a close just before I graduated the following year. Not surprisingly, too many folks took advantage of her and in a couple of instances the circumstances got downright dangerous. I say “not surprisingly” from my perspective of approaching old age, but I should remember we all felt the need to minister at one time or another in our lives. Some of us still do, but we are a bit smarter about it now.

To her credit, Virginia was not in the least regretful about her Near West Side experience. Nor did she feel awkward about her and Ted buying a modest home in New Hartford, a suburb south of Utica.. She continued to work with the less fortunate, but within the more organized framework of a Not-For-Profit agency.

I have no idea if Virginia and Ted continue to live in Utica I doubt it but I can say each was a thread in the fabric that held together those in the community who cared. They weren’t interested only in what they could buy or sell. They wanted to know where they could help. And even today, there are a good number of people like Virginia who contribute where they are able without fanfare, though they’re seldom seen in the news media or discussed in the public sphere. They live in many different neighborhoods and either work for a living or are retired. Maybe some are at the library. Look for a woman with absolutely great posture.

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