

## PRISON STRIPES AND BABY WIPES

I've known story tellers; many of my uncles and friends of my parents had the gift of making a common occurrence into something funny and memorable. But they were all men. I had never met a woman who wove tales of unbelievable life experiences until I met V. I was fifteen the summer that I took a job in downtown Iowa City above the Bamboo Inn on Dubuque Street. As I climbed the steep dark stairway and walked down an even darker hallway to my tiny office, I was nervous. Up until then, I had only done babysitting and working at the local swimming pool. This was like no other employment I had experienced.....little did I know what an understatement that would be.

My job was to sell subscriptions to magazines over the telephone. Life magazine, Ladies Home Journal and McCall's were the most popular. There was a telephone book and two phones on my desk. I was supposed to call each name, give them my pitch (which was written down for me to read) and ask them to send their check to a PO box. I would be paid for each customer when their checks cleared. My innocence and youth must have been the deciding factor in my interview, as I thought later.

"Helloooooo, "V gasped as she spotted me behind the desk. "I'm V., glad to see I have a cellmate!" This was followed by a sharp, loud, wet bark. I learned later it was her laugh.

I actually heard V coming before I saw her, she hauled her 350 pounds up that stairway inch by inch wheezing and grunting like a steam engine. Introducing herself as "a woman of "undetermined age with a sketchy past," V dropped her bags of food on the floor and flopped into her chair. After a few minutes, still panting, she bellied up to the desk and attacked her Asian bounty with fury and vengeance. I watched from a safe distance with amazement.

V was so immense and so overpowering in her presentation, I just stared at her, speechless. At fifteen, my circle of friends was, of course, similar to myself. The adults I knew were normal sized people who drank too much, but, otherwise, behaved within a certain conformity of norms. V was like meeting a circus act. I soon realized that each day had the same routine for my office mate. She would eat copious amounts of food using highly accelerated movements which tired her and led to naps. Although V had a phone book, too, she rarely opened it. In between eating, napping and storytelling, V kept pretty busy. Maybe after I left for the day, she got down to business, I never found out if this was true.

One afternoon, she pulled handfuls of fabric from her large bag and waving huge scissors in the air, demonstrated her method of slashing at her dresses until they were "barely legal, the more cleavage, the better", she chortled. Of course, this gave her a fit of laughing which became contagious. I found myself totally drawn into V's world of ridiculous behaviors and crazy stories almost against my will. I couldn't resist her. With her outrageous clothing and her red hair piled on top of her head she was something, I just didn't know what. V asked me a million questions about my boyfriends and my home life, she seemed genuinely interested in my high school studies and plans for the future. In this way, we were somewhat friends, a strange pair, indeed.

The highlight of my day was when V read her fortune cookies. The destiny written inside these treats prompted a syrupy, wet howl that flew from her heavily lipsticked mouth accompanied by a hard pound on our desk with her tiny round fist. She always used the "between the sheets" comment after she read her fortune. One of her favorites was, Confucius say," Large amount of happiness lay with you

today...between the sheets"! Her predictable gust of laughter would spray hoisin sauce and rice pellets onto my area. With great resolve, I held fast to my twelve inch of desk space during meal times.

To add even more flair to the surreal scene, V puffed her way through endless cigarettes while she ate. Lucky for me, between bites and drags, V had time to impart sage romantic advice. "Always marry a guy that loves you more than you love him," she said, sucking on her soy sauced digets, "that way, you won't wear yourself down trying to make him love you." Another nugget was, "Don't give away all of yourself, save some back for when you're going to need it." I always hoped she had taken her own advice.

V cleaned up our sticky desk at the end of each day with towels soaked in baby oil, "I love the smell of baby oil", she stated, "don't know why. Maybe somebody used it on me." "Your mother? I asked, innocently. V looked sad for the first time, and shook her head, "no, I was in foster homes, kiddo, didn't have a real mother." I didn't know the term foster homes, but I knew from her face not to pursue it. V was able to get through her day with laughs instead of tears by using each daily happening as a springboard to a story. I saw tears now and then, hiding behind her emerald green eye lids, but she was a master at turning those into raucous howls of laughter. Everything that happened prompted a story to share. V was many people wrapped up in one large body, I just went along for the ride.

One day while wiping up the noodles and shrimp tails, V was reminded of a funny story regarding her latest prison lover, (was it the noodle or the shrimp that jarred her memory?). Since she only dated men in prison, she was limited in scope, but, I never tired of prison stories. V told me she had many female friends that were involved with prisoners, they had a support network like any group of women, just a bit riskier and more restricted. Each day I looked forward to a bumpy ride over the landscape of unrequited love, abandonment and big house drama. To me, V was a living, breathing True Detective magazine. I truly missed her when the whole gig eventually went south.

Each afternoon and still in the afterglow of her feasts, V would primp. First, she extracted a mirror the size of a thin mint from her large bag. Then, she contorted this looking glass fifty eleven dozen ways to apply an entirely new face while leaning on the edge of the desk. She twisted the mirror again to rearrange her immense beehive back to the center of her head. (This hunk o' hair would invariably get knocked off center during a feeding frenzy.) Later in life, I realized that by using the tiny mirror, V could parcel herself out in tiny mosaics, ignoring her body and focusing on her beautiful face and hair. She needed those layers of makeup and tons of gooey hair spray to hold herself together. V never had stories of her past or spoke of her future. She lived in the moment, waiting for the next love letter from prison.

This odd, enlightening job came to an abrupt end on a late summer day. I climbed those greasy stairs one last time to find my little wormhole padlocked, V nowhere in sight.

I never did receive a paycheck, which made my mother, furious, but I didn't care. Those few weeks I had with V were priceless. She introduced me to a soft underbelly of life that expanded my curiosity and possibly turned me into a storyteller.

PS: V smuggled an entire baked chicken plus two cans of Old Style into Menard State Prison in Illinois one night, the tale about how she pulled off that stunt was worth a whole summer of paychecks.

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