

One I Seek for Some Life Objectives And Get My First Inkling of Ms. Verga Bless

My sourface ma keeps telling me that there is a time in a woman's life when she must either fish or cut bait—and, while I am still practically a kid, I am now at that time. This fishing or bait-cutting is not only an old Balona saying, but is also a saying of the kind which my ma is full of. And it is also a problem for me, a vibrant young woman not yet past her teens who would definitely not like to do either one of those smelly jobs.

What the saying actually means, I figured out, is (1) I need to become a successful journalist or (2) I need to finish my criminal justice program and get a private eye license and go into business or (3) I need to publish my poems and make an international name for myself as a literary light and make a million dollars or (4) I need to find some dumb cluck and get married and settle down here in Balona, CA 95232, like my ma recommends.

With these high-class choices in mind, I am pondering my future.

I was pondering it at my part-time job at the Balona *Courier* when Mrs. Pezmyer came charging through the double glass

doors out of the mid-morning rain into the Balona *Courier*, like she had a fire to report. Maybe she would give me a juicy subject for a column, I thought right away. Maybe I could get a leg up on Bellona Shaw.

The day broke gray and dull. And the rain Mrs. Pezmyer came in out of was unusual, since it is the middle of the summer and it usually doesn't rain in Balona in the summer, except when, like me, you get splashed on your new glasses which have the latest fashionable purple plastic frames.

You'd think such a rain would clear up the air and make everything sparkle but, no, it does just the opposite. This morning there was mud on Front Street, and toad-frogs dropped from the weird yellow-colored sky onto the sidewalk, squirming and hopping in front of Mr. D. H. Carp's Groceries & Sundries. Constable Cod crouched hunkered down inside his office, not relaxing outside on his bench eating Karmelkorn as usual. It was definitely unusual.

It was also stomach-insides dark for ten-thirty o'clock in the morning. The air even inside the office was wet and sticky, kind of the way I always felt after high school PE, only a year or so ago, where Miss Minnie Squill, a woman who never shaved her legs until June, made a person run around the track, even though you tried to confide in her that you had a female condition related to your blood. That story never worked with Miss Squill who always had a cynical expression on her face and finally eloped with radio talk-show host Mr. Buddy Swainhammer of KDC-FM fame.

In the office, I was slaving away at the old typewriter they make me use, sneakily trying to write a column my grampa would actually not classify as hooley and reject immediately. At least, the typewriter is electric, not like the one my ma has in the closet at home, where to make any impression at all, you would have to practically destroy the keys from pounding. So my typewriter at the *Courier* is an actual professional-type machine, if elderly.

Speaking of elderly, I should mention that my grampa, my ma's daddy, is publisher of the *Courier*, where I am sort of a cub columnist, as well as a delivery person on publication days, early on Tuesday and Saturday mornings. Doing all this stuff while I am on vacation from my labors at C4 as a journalism and criminal justice student.

Anyway, back to elderly again, I usually like elderlies. Better than youngerlies, in fact. But this one is a *mean elderly*. Looming there at the counter, Mrs. Pezmyer is a huge big woman who has a loud voice and a huge big wide bright red mouth on top of a huge big chin and wears too much makeup to cover the bags and wrinkles immensing her face and neck. She will lean into you when she talks to you, showing you her bridgework and the fabric decorating her tongue, and giving you a halitosis headache. And this morning after shaking out her umbrella all over the pink vinyl tile floor and leaving wet spots that looked like a murderer had committed a bloody act there, she leaned across the front counter, practically already into Grandpa's embrace.

"You need to do a public service announcement on your front page, Patrick," she went, ordering Grampa, who hates to be ordered.

"About what, Elsie?" went Grampa, suddenly oily as a sardine sandwich, since Mrs. Pezmyer's husband advertises his Buicks, et cetera, practically every week in the *Courier*, and Mrs. Pezmyer is known as the Queen of Balona Society, not to speak of President of the Daughters of the Delta, which I would rather not speak of for personal reasons.

Mrs. Pezmyer screeched her answer to Grampa, "About what? About Ms. Verga Bless, my publisher-to-be. Ms. Verga Bless is giving us a free lecture about her services. She is starting up a branch office in the old Purity Palace building right across the street over there, and I personally told her I would get the word out about her lecture." Mrs. Pezmyer squinted her bulgey eyes down at Grampa, showing how much green eye-goo she painted on her lids this morning. She went, "I

can't imagine you would charge me to get a public service announcement into your paper, since Ms. Verga Bless is doing her lecture for nothing. Thanks to me, she's not charging one red cent." For dramatic effect, Mrs. Pezmyer slapped her hand on the counter where Grampa's regular columnist Bellona Shaw had recently sloshed a little of her "Columbian with a touch of nutmeg and vanilla" that Bellona always orders to fill up her huge private plastic cup, expensive coffee from the special machine my rich friend Claire Preene got for our new cybercafé, BalonaDotCom, down the street.

Mrs. Pezmyer looked at her wet palm, shuddered, and went, "Eeeeew," like she was witnessing the coffee morphing into leprosy right there on her palm.

Grampa ignored the drama. "You said 'her services,' Elsie. What services is this Ms. Verga Bless providing Balona?" Grandpa handed Mrs. Pezmyer a tissue to wipe up with. She ignored him and the tissue both, holding her hand out like it was covered in gore.

"Ms. Verga Bless is going to make us Balona artists rich by publishing our poems and memoirs." *Aha*, I thought to myself. *Maybe here's an un-smelly opportunity for me to fish or cut bait as a famous poet.* Mrs. Pezmyer then wiped her hand across the counter, leaving a streak I witnessed later, a streak like a snail had rolled around there. She raised her voice, "I myself am preparing my memoirs and have decided to name names." Mrs. Pezmyer lifted up her "sculpture extreme" eyebrows, a speciality of Kute Kurls & Nails, and gave Grampa a significant look.

Grampa turned fiery red, so I thought, *Aha. There's history here.* You never know about old fat bald men with big noses and purple lips. I right then and there resolved to write a famous column about Ms. Verga Bless and win a prize .

"I think we can work something out, Elsie," Grampa said, and started writing on his yellow pad.

Mrs. Pezmyer's bosom rose up in triumph, her usual posture, and in an even louder-than-usual voice dictated to Grampa subject and verb about Ms. Verga Bless and her forthcoming appearance at Veterans Hall.

I was not totally impressed at the time, as this summer I am practicing my cynical approach, which you got to develop if you're going to be a journalist or a detective, both of which I'm exploring, career-wise, over at C4 which is known by unsophisticated types as Chaud County Community College. With the cynical approach, you look at stuff that happens in life with one of your eyebrows raised and a bored expression on your face. Pretty easy to do. Makes you feel suave and secretly powerful and has a great side effect, which is that the expression on my face drives my ma to Kalamazoo.

Bellona Shaw got up from her desk and squinted her own eyes at Mrs. Pezmyer. Bellona writes about society and pets and gardening and whatever, and whose name *Bellona* always confuses people, since it's too much like the name of our town. "Bellona of Balona" has got an attitude and a sharp tongue that goes with her long sharp nose and her platinum bob and her black eyebrows, so even Mrs. Pezmyer doesn't push her too hard.

"Where's this Ms. Verga Bless located, Mrs. Pezmyer?"

"Like I just said, Bellona, she's opening an office practically across the street. She intends to give financial counseling sessions for her customers. Make sure they got enough capital to go into professional writing." Mrs. Pezmyer sniffed, smirked. "Like me," she said.

I happened to notice, since I am sensitive to words and rhymes and stuff, that Mrs. Pezmyer never uses your name when she talks to you, unless she wants something from you. She talks at you or over you or even *through* you. But anyway, then I horned in, since I am a poet, not yet well-known, but passionate about my art and interested in getting my poems published.

I went, “You mean, you got to be rich to get published by Ms. Verga Bless?”

“No,” went Mrs. Pezmyer, not only not saying my name, but also not even bothering to look at me when she answered. “I didn’t say that. You just need to have enough to pay the fees, is all.” She sniffed. “Most of the so-called poets I know won’t be able to pay the fees. Too bad.”

She lifted her lip in her usual one-sided smirk.

I didn’t respond any more, since my bank account is pretty near bust, what with how the price keeps going up for gasoline and tires for Barney, my great old coupe who I spent a bundle on to have painted purple to match my trade-mark sweats and new glasses.

Bellona wagged her head and made a face like her breakfast was about to come up. “What I meant was, where’s this Ms. Verga Bless from originally and how did you meet her?”

“Well,” went Mrs. Pezmyer, not one ever to admit right away that she doesn’t know something, “I can’t exactly remember how we met. She was at my house, y’know. A great lady.”

Mrs. Pezmyer sort of scratched her head and looked puzzled. “But you being a reporter, you probably ought to call her up and interview her and find out where she’s from, eksedra. Or better yet, come to her lecture and write her up in your column.”

“Make a note to do that, Bellona,” went Grampa.

“Another night job,” muttered Bellona.

“I’ll go, too,” I went, sort of sucking up to Grampa.

“You need to learn to spell first, Patella,” he went, putting me down, insulting my craft in front of all those present.

“F-i-r-s-t,” I spelled right back, showing that I’m not all that dumb. If there is a way to write that column, I will find it and be well on my way to international success.

But who cares, since all that was before I met what I assumed was the flesh-and-blood Ms. Verga Bless and, like some other of Balona’s more passionate, lively, well fed, and vibrant residents, fell under her fatal spell.