

Naked Came the Librarian

Chapter 1

*By Margi Rogal,
Reference Librarian and Liaison to Fine and Performing Arts*

My name is Aurelia Wintergarden. I spent my childhood correcting people's pronunciation and spelling of my name. For a while, I signed my school papers with the name "Jennifer," the prettiest and most ordinary name I could think of. "Aurelia" means "golden" in Latin, my mother told me; she said that "Aurelia Wintergarden" reminded her of moonlight on snow. Nice, but parents should remember that their children have to live through middle school.

Aurelia Wintergarden was just a little too strange for middle school boys to handle. They called me Aurora Borealis.

"Aww-roar-ah," they'd squeak when I walked by, "How're the lights doin' today, how's your neon glow, Aww-roar-ah Bore-y-Alice?"

Or, after I'd put down my pencil after completing an exam, "Golden girl, your nose is turning brown; you're losing that golden glow, Aww-ree-lia."

And for some unknown reason, explainable only in the heads of fourteen-year-old boys, Aurora Borealis reminded them of Pepto-Bismol, probably because both names were made up of two words, and the cloying color and taste of Pepto-Bismol encouraged their own proclivities in the direction of nastiness. Those boys didn't need much to go on when it came to name-calling.

"Pepto," they'd grunt, after I'd answered correctly a geometry question Mr. Tate had called on me to answer, which entailed me standing up beside my desk. Of course, they made utter fools of themselves when they were called on to stand up beside their desks. They rarely knew answers to geometry questions, or any other ones, for that matter; I'm not sure why they didn't flunk out of middle school and put to rest forever the question of their intelligence.

I couldn't help it if boys were too stupid to realize that learning things was a ticket to changing your life, to getting out of the town we were born in and moving on. Not that I didn't like my sprawling seaside town in Connecticut with its meandering beaches, shady winding roads that made your dreams soar, and the cozy town green, even the three churches that perched on it, but did I want to spend the rest of my life sipping cocktails by the sides of pools with the likes of those boys, grown into golfers with pot bellies? No, thank you.

I also liked finding out how the world worked: how wind currents affected weather, what "impeccable" meant, what Robin Hood would do next in Ivanhoe. Only one other girl in my 8th

grade English class read the assigned book, Ivanhoe, a poor choice for 8th grade, no doubt, but I secretly loved it. “Secretly” is the key word here; even I wouldn’t reveal to my classmates that I read Ivanhoe from cover to cover, steeped myself in it, no less, reading from the moment I stepped into the house after the school bus left me off at the end of the street until my mother called me for dinner.

Leaving behind the boys in middle school was easy. Waiting for my bright future to materialize was not. Everyone seemed to have plans for me, beginning with my father who wanted me to be an engineer. My father spent much of my childhood building things with me, pretty much becoming, when we spilled our boxes of stuff on the living room floor, a fourteen-year-old boy whose company I liked. We started with Tinkertoys. I don’t remember what we built—could one actually construct something recognizable out of Tinkertoys? The point was to stick as many dowels into holes as possible and get the resulting trembling structure to stand up. From Tinkertoys, we progressed to plastic bricks, making what I dubbed fairy cottages, fairy schools, and fairy towers, with white framed windows that opened and shut. My father and I took on the inimitable Erector Set next, eventually assembling the Eiffel Tower and the Empire State Building. In the public library in our town, my father found articles in National Geographic on Paris and New York to fuel my imagination. We actually went to New York on the train to see and ascend the real Empire State Building, where I got the flu, wondering, as a headache pounded through my brain, if I was allergic to heights.

I loved building things with my father. I even loved it without him. I spent hours on the gold prickly rug in the living room constructing mazes out of wooden blocks which I would then set my hamster loose in, laughing at his chubby, wiggly fur-body sniffing along the wooden walls of my creation. But I also loved the idea of my father going to the library, digging through old piles of National Geographics to find one perfect article featuring the Empire State Building. I wished he had taken me along.

In college, my best friend since childhood, Lynn, couldn’t have been less sympathetic when I told her I was considering becoming a librarian. After graduation, Lynn was going to give away everything she owned, except for her books, which were the only things she treated with reverence, and drive her 1985 Ford, plastered with bumper stickers advocating causes like Amnesty International and Farm Sanctuary, to Chicago to work for a bank that made small loans to poor immigrant women.

“Lia,” she said, as if she were addressing the UN High Commission on Human Rights, her long earrings brushing her neck, her fingers twisting her beautiful blond hair which, to make it less beautiful, she had cut short and streaked with blue, “you’re just giving in to the traditional model of what women aspire to—teacher, nurse, librarian. How can you sell out like that? You’re so smart; why not go for something edgier? I know you love books, but living among books is not going to improve the lot of women’s lives. If you insist on going to graduate school, why not go to law school?”

Then there was my boyfriend, Will, who planned to wait on tables for a year to save up enough money to travel around the world, with me, a tent, and as few clothes as possible. Will urged me to hang loose for awhile, to reject the establishment which he viewed as any organization that required one to wear anything other than a t-shirt and shorts, and to set off on untold adventures in Africa, Nepal, and Thailand. Rather than study for his final exams, Will read Lonely Planet travel guides.

When Will and Lynn and my father asked me, “Why library school?” all I could think about was finding articles in old National Geographics. But I said, “I like order.”

So, I was handy with the Erector Set, I was swayed by Lynn’s feminist ideals, I dreamed about traveling with Will, but I went to library school in New Brunswick, New Jersey. There, on the banks of the Raritan River, just at the point where George Washington crossed during the Revolutionary War, I attended classes in classification systems, management styles, and web design. I also worked at a small public library where the director was convinced the local teens would slice pages out of books if he didn’t keep an eagle eye on them. Welcome to the library.

A year later, while Lynn recorded in her blog the stories of quiet Mexican women who were gaining independence by selling hand-sewn dresses and Will sent me postcards from Greece, where he was picking olives, I began my life as a librarian at the New Haven Public Library under the tutelage of Mrs. Willow.

Hopstill Marble Willow. I had to laugh to myself when I saw her for the first time. She actually looked like a librarian Norman Rockwell would have painted. Her white fly-away hair was piled in swirls on the top of her large head. Her blue eyes peered wide and frank from behind clear, silver rimmed glasses. Her cheeks glowed pink and her hands were graceful, warm, and ready—to scoop up a pile of books as if they were feathers or to write in an elegant script a correction on an old catalog card. Everyone called her Mrs. Willow.

I had never met a woman with a name as unusual as mine nor someone as proud of her name as she was. As I grew to respect and love Mrs. Willow, I grew to respect and love my own name.

I learned from Mrs. Willow how to face a genealogy question without getting so nervous I couldn’t think. She always seemed to be at my elbow when I needed her the most, when an elderly couple teetering on their wobbly legs, for example, began to recount in the minutest detail how the wife’s grandfather’s second cousin three times removed had moved from New Jersey to New Haven in 1885 and could I help them find out what happened to his three children. Mrs. Willow taught me how to be calm, how to unravel the intricacies of family relationships, how to find a reel of microfilmed newspaper from a small town in New Jersey, and to decipher the census reports for New Haven in 1890.

The most important thing Mrs. Willow taught me was to see our patrons as people. Her response when the library board had ineptly bungled yet another key decision was amused irony—deeply disappointed but refusing to let the situation get the better of her—but she was unfailingly polite to our patrons. I remember once when I was particularly exasperated by the demands of Alice, a tireless genealogist who huffed and puffed her way up our stairs almost every day to pursue yet another detail of her family’s slow migrations around the small towns of the midwest, I showed my annoyance to Mrs. Willow, who said, looking over the tops of her glasses, her blue eyes staring straight into my brown ones, “I have learned everything I know about genealogy from Alice.”

Then there was Pete Stomer, the patron we saw every day in the New Haven Public Library. He would only deal with Mrs. Willow, whom, to my astonishment, he called Marble. Pete came in every day, wearing rubber boots no matter how hot it was, to ask for the daily earthquake report. We pretended, every time, that his request was fresh and interesting, and listened while he explained the significance of the day’s global seismic activity. I pictured his room, the current apartment that he was somehow managing to hold onto, papered with earthquake reports, the tiny yellow and red squares dancing along the walls, the whole room finally vibrating but only in Pete’s imagination. Pete also showed me his drawings for a bridge to span the New Haven harbor. Complete and unworkable fantasies but beautiful—executed so precisely and lovingly. There was a promising career in this life, but Pete couldn’t even hold menial jobs. As time went on, he could cope less and less. Why? I don’t know; I saw him only in the reference room of a public library. Soon after I left New Haven, Pete died of cancer at age 60.

While I was listening to patrons’ stories and guiding them to medical websites or books on grieving or cupcake recipes, Lynn went to Bangladesh for training in rural micro-credit programs, Will began to write Lonely Planet guides, and my parents called with reference questions. It was time for a change for me, too, and, reluctantly leaving Mrs. Willow, I moved to a small college in Illinois where I am at this moment, sitting at the reference desk late at night waiting for students to ask for help, checking Library Juice on the web.

I look up, catching my solitary reflection in the glass doors leading to the lobby. Who is that drab woman? Not me, not possibly. Then, I see Clarence Woods push through the door.

Ah, yes, Tammy, the circulation desk supervisor, is on duty tonight, and Clarence, Professor of Physics, has come to pick her up. Clarence met Tammy when he started stopping by to browse the leisure reading collection for books for his 89-year-old father whom he reads to for a half hour every night. While the courtship is slow, determined by the reading interests of Clarence’s father, it is steady. Tonight, as usual, when Clarence appears, Tammy’s glasses slide down her shiny nose. Or is my imagination running a little wild?

Soon, I will be driving home. When I work at night I don't ride my bicycle; that would be really crazy, to climb on a bike at 10:30 at night and face a 45-minute ride home through neighborhoods that I wouldn't characterize as exactly safe. It would be very, very cool, though, to ride across the Mississippi River at night. Driving on the Arsenal bridge is awesome enough with the blue, red, and white lights of the cities shimmering in the inky water. Bicycling along the pedestrian walk into the dark velvet of the night air, I would hover just above the water with only a railing separating me from death in the dam a few yards away.

9:58 and a student approaches. Of course.

"So, I have this paper I have to do about the effects of campaign financing in the last election, and it's due tomorrow. I have to use six reliable sources. I've been busy with other things and haven't been able to get to this until tonight. If you can just help me get started, I'll be okay."

It'll be at least 10:30 before I get out of here. But I like politics, I know where to go, and he's polite, sorry, thinking that he's an inconvenience in my life.

"Have you done any looking, yet?" I ask, not wanting to repeat what he has already done, wanting to build on what he knows.

"Well, I looked for books in the catalog and the search results were, like, over 1000."

"Okay," I say. "Let's start there. Let's re-do that search to get fewer results."

As I swing the monitor towards him on the desk, I wonder if he's ready for the sweet concept of subject headings, which allow you, in one exquisite execution, to assemble all the books about campaign finance reform even if they don't have those words in their title.

"You might want to search by subject," I say, warming to the topic, "in which case we would search by 'campaign funds.' Let me show you how I figured out how to do that."

He is attentive. We are intent, both of us, on finding six sources in thirty minutes. Not an impossible task. I'll be clanking across the Arsenal Bridge in 45 minutes and he'll be reading his sources, eyes propped open by black coffee and Wilco on his Ipod. He should be typing by midnight, 1:00 a.m. at the latest.