

Facing Veronica's bad boy

A nightmarish episode from early teens, recalled.



In recent idleness, I googled the name of the ‘Veronica’ of my junior high school class, nearly six decades ago. Was she still alive? Did you marry an ‘Archie’?

Archie Comics seemed a silly relic of the 1950s by the time I entered mid-teens. That was contemporaneous with the bursting forth of flower power which I was keen to embrace. From the age of fifteen onward, I had not the least interest in any local girls—if only because they were *local* girls. Yet a couple of years earlier, I undeniably cared about my status (or rather lack thereof) with the Riverdale junior high in-crowd.

Even then, I never aspired to be an Archie or a Reggie. I certainly was not tempted to be a clownish Jughead, just to get some attention. However relegated to the outside between the ages of twelve and thirteen— I could not deny my attraction to Veronica...

The Veronica of my grade eight class not only had a saucy smile and perky breasts but was also smart. She led the class in English, which was the only school subject that mattered to me. She didn’t live in a mansion as did the ‘real’ Veronica Lodge, but was a daddy’s little princess, from one of the village’s wealthier families...

Around that time there were two ‘Archies’ vying for her attention. One was a blonde boy— a little thick-headed but a sharp dresser. The other was an anglicized French boy, who believed he had “bedroom eyes.” The Cheryls, Valeries and Midges accepted that those hunks were beyond their reach. They ceded the alpha males to Veronica and Betty while pursuing the second tier in the imagined world of Archie’s in-crowd...

The ‘Betty’ in grades seven and eight was cute, too—with a button nose and a bright smile. She was a little plumper than Veronica and not quite so fine of feature. Unlike the ‘real’ Betty and Veronica in the comics, they were more friends than rivals.

A few times, I attended Betty’s house parties. I knew the invitation had only been extended at the urging of her mom, who was close to mine. I hadn’t quite enough pride to decline. When the living room lights were turned off, I forlornly watched the silhouettes of the waltzing couples. I could have been an immature male baboon ogling at the mating alphas...



Yet the brunt truth of my status was revealed in banal scribbblings on an exercise book. It was the back page of Betty's Grade Seven Social Studies scribbler left unattended, in which in which she had drawn a cluster of hearts pierced with arrows. Perhaps her doodlings coincided with Valentine's Day.

On the inside of each heart, were the names of a dozen or so girls paired with a romantic interest—not necessarily mutual. The most elaborately drawn hearts were hers and Veronica's, paired with the blonde beast and the Casanova. Below them was a cluster of smaller hearts showing the Beta girl/boy pairings.

Near the bottom of the cluster was a heart with the name of a mousy girl paired with the boy whose nickname was Peewee. She had a lisp and wore thick glasses (the slightly crossed eyes may be an embellishment of memory). After Peewee's name was mine—in brackets.

I was mortified.

Undeniably, I had held that little mouse's hand through a few loops of the village skating rink once that winter. In the fall before that, I had vied with Peewee for her attention at a Friday night sock hop in the school gym. When she showed her preference for jiving with Peewee, I moped off to sniffle alone in the balcony. Betty had obviously taken note.

In fact, I hadn't the least attraction to Peewee's girl. The momentary show of interest in her was a kind of experimental submission to (presumed) expectations. I had concluded that if I were to be paired up at all in Archie's world—I would have to accept a booby prize. Yet for *her* booby prize—the mousy girl had understandably chosen a pint-sized boy over one with a hook for a hand.

Even to my prepubescent brain—that seemed just deserts for self-denial. After all, the girl I really desired was Veronica. At the same time, I knew she was unattainable. Long before I had an inkling of Darwin, I sensed my attraction defied the 'natural' order. Yet even in imagining the hunchback, Quasimodo, carrying off a screaming Esmeralda—the attraction could not be quashed. I managed to hide it. She would never have noticed my interest, anyway. The audacity of it seemed that perverse...

Mercifully, by the fall of 1965, that longing for the princess evaporated. Archie-world shrank back to where it belonged—to juvenile comics... Belated puberty kicked in about the same time as *'Like a Rolling Stone'* hit the airwaves (*'How does it fee-ee-eel? To be on your own? No direction home?'*). The concept of 'freak' was turned on its head and I fervently welcomed it....



To return to the original question: who did the grade eight Veronica eventually marry?

My Google search came up with her Facebook Page. I do not participate in social media but I sometimes do anonymous searches on Facebook and LinkedIn. Of course, what can be obtained from ‘lurking’ is limited to what users make public. From Veronica’s public access pages, I gathered that both she and her husband are retired schoolteachers living in a small city in the Maritimes, just a few hours from their home village. She married the same villager who was her high school beau. Such a life-long partnership would appear to be one of the village’s ‘storybook marriages.’

In respect of the old couple’s privacy, I shall call Veronica’s husband ‘Bobby’...

Bobby was no Archie— not even a Reggie. He was not the ‘hunk’ that Veronica was paired with in Betty’s grade eight scribbler. He was not one of the clean-cut lads on the high school basketball team or in the school police. Up to the time he started dating Veronica, Bobby was a bully with a greasy ducktail and pointed-toe boots.

He was never among my small circle of friends, but in growing up in the same village it was impossible for us to avoid one another. We sometimes found ourselves sitting across from one another in a booth of the café or roaming the streets in the same feral pack...

Bobby loved to taunt boys he thought defenceless. He would jeer and guffaw until he got a reaction. When I was about thirteen (he was a year older), he often targeted me.

He seemed to particularly relish my rage in his strange taunts. Typically, while walking along in a group, he would step on my heel and snarl something like: “I know what you like to suck on more than lemons!” At that age, I had no arsenal of ready ripostes.

A more revealing example was from a night I was carrying around the small tape recorder received the previous Christmas. When he looked the device over, he pointed at the f/f (fast forward) button and said: “I know what that stands for— F. the *fruit!*”

I was too young to wonder whether Bobby’s obsession revealed suppression of deviant tendencies. Beyond that, his targeting could have been due to a little envy. His family was not quite as ‘middle-class’ as mine. His house was on the scruffier side of the tracks. It likely seemed

unfair to him that a presumed weakling should enjoy comforts denied to him...

But all such bitterness disappeared a few years later when he started dating Veronica. The erstwhile bully became quiet and studious. The ‘greaser’, formerly known for crude jokes and cackling horseplay, was most likely to have his head in his math textbook. None of his classmates doubted that the transformation was entirely due to Veronica.

She was the princess whose hand he’d miraculously won. He was the handsome bad boy only she could reform. In high school, Bobby was utterly tamed— some would say “pussy whipped”. I even recall seeing the pair one Sunday morning, dressed up and walking hand in hand on their way to church.

In another faint tableau of memory, they are holding one another tight in the last waltz of the Saturday night dance. From my dark corner of the Odd Fellow’s Hall, they looked like ‘Paul and Paula’ or ‘Frankie and Annette’— young lovers of an earlier era. By that time, Veronica could not be further from the ethereal ‘*la belle dame sans merci*’ or the earthy Janis Joplin— such girls of my fantasy...

I do not know how soon after high school Bobby and Veronica married. Before then, I had permanently left the village. I would have guessed that her father, a border official, might have objected to his princess’s ‘marrying down’. But no doubt her family came around to see that Bobby was a lad who would pull himself up by his bootstraps. They probably conceded what the former members of the Riverdale in-crowd had long concluded: that the young couple were “*made for one another...*”



All those memories took some scrouging to retrieve.

Much more readily to mind comes one that is distinctly dark. It was impactful enough to write about in my mid-twenties. The narrative was based on an episode that occurred about twelve years earlier, when I was between thirteen and fourteen:

It began on a school night in mid-winter, *circa* 1965, when one of my buddies, JL, and I stood shivering on the steps of the village bank. Along came Bobby, bareheaded, cigarette wagging in mouth. Before any greeting, he spat a gob into the snowbank.

“Hey, Floyd is away,” he said to JL. “You wanna go up to his trailer and play cards?”

JL glanced at me. We both were eager to go anywhere out of the cold. Anywhere but go home early, of course.

‘Floyd’ was a scrawny fellow in his mid-thirties who was usually on welfare. That winter he had a

job maintaining the village's ice rink. He bought liquor for teen boys and allowed a few of his favourites to party at his trailer. Bobby was among that greasy little group. While Floyd was thought too simple-minded to be dangerous, there were rumours of drunken groping.

With Floyd away that night, for the first time I was curious to see inside the notorious trailer. At least we would get a respite from the bitter cold. While Bobby's invitation was to JL, Bobby couldn't be bothered stopping me from tagging along. Muted animosity aside—three were better than two for a card game.

We crossed the tracks through the reeking tunnel and trudged up the snow-packed hill. At the bottom in the area known as 'pig's ear', Floyd's trailer was at the back side of a vacant lot. Once inside the filthy trailer, JL and I took a seat on the fusty cot at the back and hesitantly unzipped our jackets. Bobby threw his jacket into the open door of the tiny bedroom and began rifling drawers in the kitchenette.

"Where's the fuckin' smokes?" he growled. Grumbling, he disappeared in the bedroom.

Looking around, I could not see any surface where we could play cards. The table was crowded with beer bottles and encrusted saucepans. Yellowing wool socks were hung on a line above the sink. Within minutes, the stink of stale beer and deer hide seemed worse than shivering on the bank steps.

"Let's go," I whispered to JL.

In his usual manner, JL kept silent. He was inclined to defer to Bobby, who was a year our senior.

"Fuckin' Christ!" Bobby shouted from behind the bedroom door. "Floyd usually has some butts around here."

I was motioning to JL that I was about to zip up my jacket when Bobby shouted from inside the bedroom.

"Hey, wouldya look at this!"

I turned back just as Bobby stepped from the bedroom. He was holding Floyd's 30-30 rifle. He sank on the single chair behind the table with the rifle on his lap. Suddenly, he cocked it.

"What are you doin', Bobby?" I asked meekly.

"Listen to that little fucker," he laughed. "He's scared." Levelling the barrel, he swung it round, pointed at my chest. "You scared?"

"You know you're not sposedta point a gun like that."

"Don't piss yourself, fruit-head. It's not loaded."

The pillow beside me was freckled with brown stains but I snatched it up and held it to my chest.

"Yer gonna stop a bullet with that?" With a snort of laughter, Bobby brought the rifle to his cheek. "You really are a numb prick."

I looked at JL. He was looking straight ahead with a cowed smile.

"Com'on— quit it, I said. "It's not funny."

Bobby laughed again at the shiver in my voice. "You're a fuckin' coward, aren't ya?" After pushing back a strand of hair, he held the stock close to his cheek, as if steadying his aim. "You know where I gotcha?" He drawled. "Right between the fuckin' eyes."

JL was nervously tugging his jacket zipper but he would not catch my eye...

"Stop kiddin,' Bobby," I croaked. "Com'on, get serious."

"Think I'm kiddin'?" He slurred. The barrel slightly wavered. "Now I got a bead right in the middle of yer forehead."

"Bobby," I whimpered. "Please."

"That's right. Beg for your life, fuckhead!"

His finger wiggled on the trigger. I had my face buried in the stinking pillow when I heard the trigger click.

When I dropped the pillow, he was lowering the barrel.

"You had your fun now?" I croaked. As much as I hated to show my fright, I couldn't stop trembling.

But Bobby wasn't quite finished. With the barrel pointed sideways, he held the trigger and pumped the lever several times, as if unloading. Suddenly, a copper cartridge sprang out of the breech, spinning onto the floor.

"Holy ole fuck!" Bobby shouted in exaggerated surprise. "There was one in the magazine!"

He rolled the bullet back under his boot and picked it up. "Jeez-us." He gave a snorting laugh. "You're fuckin' lucky it wasn't in the chamber. Brains all over Floyd's floor. Fuckin' mess that woulda bin, eh?" Still sniggering, he took the gun back into the bedroom...

Thereupon the episode goes dark. I can't recall whether JL and I immediately left the trailer or whether I left alone. I can't remember whether Bobby continued to tease me in the months that followed, or whether he ignored me thereafter. I certainly don't remember ever exchanging so much as a word with him in the years that followed...

Yet in more than one sleepless night, his cackling jeers and the muzzle of a 30-30 pointed at my

face, has shuddered forth... I can never know whether there really had been a live cartridge in the magazine. Bobby could well have slipped one in after pulling the trigger. A trick like that would have amused him.

Several times, I have thought about the odds of having been shot that night. If there really had been a live bullet in the magazine, there would have been one chance in five that it would have been in the firing chamber. In that case, the odds of my brains having been blown out in Floyd's trailer— were the same as in a round of Russian Roulette...



The central photo on Veronica's Facebook page shows her and Bobby posed on a living room sofa with a fluffy white dog on their laps. Both are thick of waistline. Veronica has both hands around her husband's right arm. Her neck looks a little saggy, but her 71-year-old face is moderately well-preserved.

Another photo shows them with a late fortyish fellow who resembles them both—probably a son. If they have grandchildren, they are not shown on her public Facebook pages. What are featured are travel photos. One landscape could be that of the Scottish Highlands and another is of a tropical beach in sunset. A Costa Rican resort is identified among the 'likes' at the bottom of the page.

In another photo, Bobby is about to tuck into a platter of clams. He could be at one of the restaurants also featured among the 'likes.' He looks thoroughly tame. His pudgy face reveals no hint of the mid-teens bully. I would guess that he has no memory at all of that sordid episode in Floyd's trailer nearly six decades ago... If reminded, perhaps he would be horrified.

Of course, he will be spared that horror. I have no inclination whatsoever to rattle ghostly chains from afar... Yet I have imagined confronting a septuagenarian Bobby with the question: *'Was there a live bullet in the chamber? If so— can you imagine the fate you narrowly missed?'*

I can imagine it:

A 14-year-old Bobby in tears under the Mountie interrogation would never have admitted that he was deliberately aiming the gun. He would have sworn he hadn't known the gun was loaded. JL— if splattered by my young brains— would have been too traumatised to be a credible witness. In that case, an inquest would have concluded the tragic death was accidental. But if JL had revealed there was teasing, Bobby would not have got off so lucky. The charge could have been manslaughter or even third-degree murder.

At fourteen, Bobby would have been spared the provincial penitentiary— but he might have had to do time in the York County reform school. In that case, he might have been a victim of Karl Toft, the serial paedophile of New Brunswick’s juvenile institutions whose abuses would later come to light...

Whether or not an alternate Bobby has endured those horrors in some alternate corner of the multiverse— in any such dark imagining— there is one clear certainty. If there had been a live bullet in the chamber of Floyd’s 30-30, Bobby would never have married Veronica...

I would never wish that an old man who looks so contented be disturbed by such dark thoughts. Indeed, I am almost inclined to cheer his pleasure in that succulent plate of clams: *Bon appetit, amis!*

—1977, 2023

