



## CHAPTER ONE BYWAY OF INTRODUCTION

Friday, March 10th, Five-fifty P.M. Austin, Texas.

The president of Relax the Back® Franchising Company, Virginia Rogers, was busy at her desk with a phone call to the east coast when she noticed the time. A flush of alarm broke onto her face. “Peter,” she shot out, “I have to go. I’ll get back to you tonight.” She put the receiver down, grabbed her purse and cigarettes, and then rushed out the door to the office across the hall. “Teri,” she said quickly, “we’re late. Let’s go.”

Teri McAdams, her controller, glanced up and then realized suddenly what her boss was referring to. They had been onto it since the week before. Just yesterday a call had come in from the west coast alerting them. She did not need to say a word. They both knew what was at stake. She got up quickly and followed Virginia, who was already out the door and headed for the car.

Rushing the four miles to Virginia’s house, they got out of the car and bolted into the house. Inside, they went straight to the TV set in the front room. There, Virginia turned on the set and VCR, grabbed a blank tape, its plastic wrapping already off, and jammed it into the VCR. Luckily they had made it in time.

The screen lighted up a moment later to a flash of colors. An advertisement was just concluding. A second later, to music and glistening titles trying to jump out of the device into the room, the program they had rushed back to see and record—critical to them—was on and running: Entertainment Tonight.

“The latest talk at the O.J. trial is about the chair,” they heard co-host Mary Hart proclaim dramatically while walking briskly onto the set and into the camera, “but O.J. won’t be sitting in it.”

“It keeps my back straight,” broadly-smiling lawyer Robert Sha-

piro next said in an inserted prerecorded clip. “The chair is fabulous...” “It all adds up on Entertainment Tonight for Friday, March 10th, 1995.”

Minutes later, when the show resumed, co-host John Tesh began the segment by saying, “Hi, everyone. Welcome to Entertainment Tonight. I’m John Tesh.”

“And I’m Mary Hart. Even though the most anticipated and perhaps the most important witness is now on the stand, attention is being diverted by sidebar issues in and out of court at the O.J. Simpson trial. Standing by live in downtown Los Angeles here is E.T. correspondent Gerry Grand. Hello, Gerry?”

“Hello, Mary,” the correspondent answered from a position outside the courtroom building. He stood in a trench coat beside a very special chair. “Detective Mark Furman on the hot seat, but that’s not the only seat in the courtroom making news. Bob Shapiro, always on the cutting edge of trendy, has done it again. This is Bob’s courtroom chair.” He gestured to the chair beside him and spun it about. “I kind of feel that I’m on *The Price is Right* here. It’s a thousand-dollar chair he’s been sitting in, and wouldn’t you know...instead of creating controversy, it’s causing jealousy. Everybody has to have one. Marcia, Johnny Cochran, even Judge Ito. Now for some this trial is a pain in the neck...for others it’s a...pain in the back.” The courtroom was then shown, with Johnny Cochran standing with papers and Gerry saying, “Robert Shapiro started a courtroom fad when he bought an ergonomically designed chair to relieve his lower back pain.”

“When sitting all day,” Shapiro added with another broad smile in a separately-taken clip, “you get a lot of back pain, so the chair is fabulous.”

“I checked out the store where Shapiro bought the chair last week,” Gerry continued as he was shown entering the Beverly Hills store of Austin, Texas-based Relax the Back® Franchising Company, “and store owner Dairl Johnson told me, ‘as soon as the other lawyers saw Shapiro’s ten-way adjustable chair, they wanted one too.’”

Store owner Johnson was then shown in the store being interviewed. “As we were fitting Robert Shapiro to his chair, which we do in

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the workplace, his coworkers, which were in this case the other lawyers, came to us and said that they had back pain and asked what could be done.”

Gerry continued the story to a scene of Dairl Johnson carrying a chair out of the store van, followed by footage of store personnel wheeling chairs into the courtroom. “Now, courtesy of Johnson, Cochran, Clark, Darden, Lewis, Judge Ito, even the court stenographer, will have their own personally fitted thousand-dollar chairs for the duration of the trial.”

“Now I know what you’re wondering,” Gerry concluded, back outside the court building, seated in the chair originally shown with him. “Will O.J. get one of these special BodyBilt chairs now that everyone around him has one? Well, no.... The bailiffs say that’d be special treatment, so all the court watchers’ll be wondering if O.J. will try to switch chairs sometime during the trial and get a little comfort. Mary and John.”

The segment ended back in the studio with John Tesh and Mary Hart sitting at their desk, John saying to Gerry off camera, “Now of course, all of the reporters are going to be jealous of you.”

Later, on Monday, April 24th, when a white Mercedes-Benz pulled into a secluded office complex off fashionable Bee Caves Road in Austin, Texas, things were still anything but uneventful for Virginia Rogers. For her Relax the Back® Franchising Company headquartered there, every day was now “eventful”, to say the least. It had been that way the week before and the week before that and for every day since that fateful March 10th broadcast. Or perhaps more accurately, the “eventful” was now just routine. The only moderating aspect had been with regard to intensity. What was at first unbridled pandemonium was now once more on the order of “bridled pandemonium.”

The whole Relax the Back® Franchise Company system had been growing at a remarkable rate well before the O.J. story broke, but now it was accelerating—“going out of the ceiling,” as quoted on one national network broadcast report. It had started immediately. Indeed, even on March 10th after the Entertainment Tonight segment had aired

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on the east coast but not yet on the west coast, the Beverly Hills Relax the Back® Store received two phoned-in orders from the east coast for chairs to be delivered there.

The story of “the chairs” in the Simpson trial had made show after show. The national television coverage that ensued included the Mike and Maty Show, CBS This Morning, the Tonight Show with Jay Leno, NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw, Project: Perfect Posture for the O.J. Trial (Fox), E- on O.J. with Kathleen Sullivan, and Inside Edition. Other coverage was in The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, Globe, the National Enquirer, The Washington Post, America Online, Occupational Health and Safety, and Howard Stern.

That was the “national” stuff. The “local stuff” included articles or material in The San Francisco Chronicle, the Atlanta Constitution, the Dallas Morning News, the Houston Post, the Boston Globe, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, The Detroit Free Press, The Chicago Sun Times, the St. Louis Dispatch, and dozens of newspapers and television shows around the nation.

After the Mercedes-Benz parked that Monday of April 24th, an attractive middle-aged woman stepped out and strode briskly to the building in front of her. It was a little after eleven, well after most working Austinites had cluttered the freeways driving to work. The site, in a heavily wooded area, is itself “relaxing”, in rolling hills not far from lush Zilker Park.

The woman who arrived so “fashionably late” that morning is the president and founder of Relax the Back® Franchising Company and its driving force. One of a kind, even in the Texas anomaly of Austin, there’s no mistaking who she is. It’s hard to have lived any time in Austin and not know that. Her nickname, Ginny, is emblazoned across another company she built from scratch, multimillion-dollar Ginny’s Copying Centers—eleven altogether, two in Lubbock and the rest in Austin.

Inside, she’s greeted by smiles that are not in any perfunctory but lighted by feelings of genuine warmth and excitement. She is also greeted by a host of questions before she reaches her office.

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“Virginia...” It’s Shiidon Hawley, the Director of Operations. In for a day or so between trips from one coast to another and in between, he has been on the receptionist’s phone. The day before, he was in Boston opening the new store there. Tomorrow he will be in California doing the same thing. The phone calls these days are coming in so fast and furious that any phone is fair game for whoever is nearby. Exceptionally handsome and very personable, he has been compared to Tom Selleck, but at thirty-four is beginning to paunch up a bit. He knows the just-arriving boss will want his opinion on some of the product displays mix for the up-and-coming annual convention, and she’s a hard one to trap between phone calls.

Not far behind is Terry LeBreton, head of advertising and active in sales and marketing. She’s forty-plus but she looks considerably younger, and, like Virginia herself, has a strong entrepreneurial bent. Her mother was the first female manager of a lumber company in America, her grandmother owned a gas company, and she’s been a host of things herself, including owner of an electrical contracting company. Cathy Bonta, the always-smiling and bouncy receptionist they pass, is blonde but not excessively so. Somehow seeming less “hyper” than the others even when she bounces, she just watches them go by and waits for a breather to pass on telephone messages.

Everywhere there’s an air of excitement—big things happening and happening fast. It was there even before Virginia arrived. It hangs about like part of the furnishings. It pops out when the door key is turned in the morning. This week, prospective franchisees are due in from Tennessee. Just a minute ago, the Panasonic rep called from Los Angeles about a recent order. The only sour note is that one of the office decorative plants appears to have taken ill.

Practically the first thing Virginia does when she arrives is go out onto the outside deck surrounded by trees and light up a cigarette. It’s the first thing she did when she woke up earlier and the last thing she will do before she goes to bed that night. It’s the only thing she does that drives the others up the wall. In the corner of her office a year or so before—prior to the time she started going outside to smoke—was a

portable electronic filter placed there by James Cansler, original manager of the Austin prototype training store. Virginia's good personal friend, he was her first employee at Relax the Back®. He was a vice-president until recently, when he bought a franchise himself and moved to Oregon to operate it.

She actually stopped smoking for months two years before until some fool calling herself a friend offered a cigarette at a bad time of the day. Virginia plans to make another assault on the habit later when she's not so tied up with everything else. And while it bothers those around her and isn't all that good for the image of a company specializing in the health industry, one can accept it as a decided improvement and an understandable compromise from what was going on in her life several years before. "Shiidon," she calls. She holds up a sheaf of papers from her somewhat cluttered desk. "I need this finished by five."

"Yes, ma'am." He takes it and scoots out.

When Cathy appears in her door a minute later, she announces that Virginia has a visitor from the Chamber of Commerce in Washington, D.C.

"Eight minutes," Virginia clips out. There's no question that she's the boss lady, but it's not the same as at most places. Everywhere there are close personal ties.

Virginia then glances briefly at a public relations media report lying on her desk. She pauses thoughtfully and looks up. Just over fifty years old and a little heavier than she would like to be, the company president is nevertheless a very attractive woman, especially here in her world behind a desk. Elizabeth Bradshaw, the current president and handpicked successor of GINNY'S, describes Virginia as being at times volatile but charismatic and always inspirational.

Virginia is also gifted with intelligence of a rare kind, thinking in ways that can be truly astonishing—insightfully intuitive at one moment, then purely linear and exacting. Still, she is physically beautiful in a commanding, non-plastic sort of way. It's in her face and in her smile. But more importantly, it's in something intangible that's just "there." A man could easily fall in love with this woman if he could forget all the

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rest, she is so charming, deep, gently powerful, and charismatic.

But it's hard to forget the rest. On a bookcase sit several plaques of testimonials to her stature. One proclaims her "Honored Member in the National Directory of Who's Who in Executives and Professionals." Another is an award presented to her by the University YMCA for Outstanding Achievement Award in the area of entrepreneurship. Another is a plaque announcing Relax the Back®'s Retailer of the Year award for 1990. To the side is a handsome etched glass sculpture—the 1991 Distinguished Alumna award from St. Edward's University. Others were there until it got to be too much of a clutter. On the walls are framed pictures including two original batiks she picked up in Africa years before, especially meaningful to her. One that has disappeared from the wall was a whimsical, rope-bordered wood plaque proclaiming irreverently but truthfully, "If the Captain ain't happy, ain't nobody happy."

Then a scheduled visitor enters and the spell is broken, only to be established again a moment later. She greets the man and turns on the charm, not that it ever left her.

Beyond the four windows of her corner office is a stress-relieving scene of trees and shrubs blown about gently by a stimulating breeze and only a peek or two of a building and a road behind that. The rush-hour traffic was over by the time she arrived, but it is deceptive to judge Virginia by the late hour of her arrival or the Mercedes-Benz parked outside. She seldom arrives before ten-thirty or eleven in the morning, but she still puts in about ninety hours a week on the job. It is not so much that she is a night person as it is that she is not a morning person.

The flashy car? That's a different story. She hates to drive any car and hadn't owned one for a long time. Others, knowing her record when she did own one, say it's a good thing. For a while she used the Austin prototype store's delivery van to commute the then three miles to work. Then James pointed out that the vehicle belonged to the store and not the franchising corporation. It was time to make a change.

Instead of the Mercedes, she would have been just as satisfied with an apple-red 1990 Mustang found for her by a friend. Certainly her daughter, Carrie, would have. But objective judgment from her trusted

vice-president at the time, Ray Orgero, vetoed that. The Mercedes was a bow to an image required by company business interests.

The Relax the Back® prototype store on Thirty-Eighth and Lamar has already been open for more than an hour. This morning it opened a few minutes earlier than usual to admit a customer waiting outside, just one of the many reasons it has been so successful.

The store's location is by design right across from the big Seton Medical Center. James Cansler was its first manager, and later David Rogers, Virginia's super-sharp son, was also a manager. Now both have gone on to operate their own stores. David's is in Arlington, Texas, between Ft. Worth and Dallas. One of the salespeople in the store that morning is June Welch, a very quiet, unassuming woman who looks like she would be much more at home cooking lunch for her husband. But that would be a gross mistake in judgment. On April first she closed the biggest individual customer (as opposed to corporate customer) sale in the franchise's history—twenty-seven thousand dollars in merchandise to a Saudi national.

Indeed, this is no ordinary store, not even for a Relax the Back® Store. Ready for another challenging day, all those who tend it are like a family eagerly waiting for customers as if expecting a close relative on holiday. No one is there just to sell chairs, pillows, or the multitude of other items stocked to relieve human suffering. Not one of them survives just by "putting in time." You can feel it in the smiles greeting you when you come in. A sense of purpose that is virtually "missionary" bounces around inside the place. It lights up faces like the electrified posts of a pinball machine. No wonder that four Christmases ago when retail sales were down to a depressing level across the nation, this store had record-breaking sales. Later, under David Rogers' leadership, this one store did well over a hundred and seventy thousand dollars' worth of retail sales in one month.

Back at the corporate headquarters, Virginia is having a smoke break on the small cedar deck behind the receptionist area. Also taking a smoke break is Teri McAdams, tall and wiry, a former marathon runner until her knee started doing funny things. There are eight women and

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three men currently employed at the franchise company headquarters, a not-so-usual mix even in these days of enlightenment. The latest addition is Le Sare Carter, Shiidon's new assistant, only one day on the job but doing just fine. Only an outsider would even notice that most of the employees are women, not men. It's a great combination, and there's lots of good will and humor floating around.

As they smoke, they talk business, as usual. Teri, who is the Controller and walks around frequently with a phone headset on and the wire dangling down, discusses some problems with the system's computer network. She talks about "posting problems," "module interfacing," "stand-alone store-in stations," "software integration," glitches, and things like that. Where men would likely be talking about some game played that weekend and shown on TV, it's strictly business conversation during the smoke break.

Then both are called to other things: Teri to an incoming call, Virginia to her desk piled high with a stack of checks needing signature and a bunch of reports. She hasn't slowed down since her arrival. She's been "in gear" since before leaving her home four miles away, telephoning and being telephoned. Most of Austin still knows her as "Ginny." She's still on the board of directors for GINNY'S, although by her own choice she no longer owns controlling interest in it nor is chairman of the board. But she is a genuine self-made Texas millionaire. The light of her personality still lights up Austin. Like a supernova she had burst upon the Austin scene and made herself a fixture in it—not just once but now a second time.

She puts down the phone and looks again at the desk. A moment later she is attacking a huge pile of paper on it like a hungry barracuda. More phone calls will interrupt her from all over the country. Some will be from franchisees and some from prospective franchisees. A business that stretches from coast to coast and border to border (and beyond because there is a franchise in Canada), is ever alive and growing. Regular requests to buy and set up a franchise in other foreign countries come in. All are politely turned down or put off indefinitely. They are too busy handling the in-country stuff.

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Even beyond that, Virginia is special. A minor legend in her own time, not a native Texan but somehow the personification of Austin itself, it verges on the inconceivable that she has not always been a part of the scene or that she has ever been anything but what she is.