



## GETTING MY BOOK TOGETHER

Thousands of gorgeous girls dream about working as a model but only a gutsy few actually go out, bang on doors, and persist in becoming one. Here, a lovely, adventurous beginner tells how she got her start in this crazily competitive world . . .

By Norris Church

□ You get whistles as you walk down the street. When you were 5' 10" in the ninth grade your mother told you to stand up straight because all Miss Americas and models are tall. So there you were, peering over ranked heads from the back row in school pictures. You look at the fashion magazines and think, "I could do that."

For years people had been asking me if I were a model, and now I was actually on my way to *become* one. I carried a brown envelope of pictures into the Wilhelmina Model Agency in Manhattan. The elevator door opened at the twelfth floor onto a rather ordinary waiting room—except that the walls were covered with Wilhelmina's beautiful face on cover after cover. She had been *the* top model for years before starting her own agency, and I had adored her, clipping every photograph I found. The room was packed. I had never *seen* so many skinny women—wearing boots and army fatigues, looking like Arab sheiks in caftans and armloads of bracelets, dark and light. They flitted in and out like swarms of bees, buzzing and pausing to light here and there to bring each other up to date.

"Hey, Janice! When did you get

back?" a girl in high heels and tight jeans called out in a Bronx accent.

"Just this morning," replied a dark-haired beauty I had seen often in *Vogue*. "I'm leaving Monday for the Bahamas."

"Vacation or booking?" asked her friend, sorting through a stack of envelopes.

"Vacation! I wish it was!"

Nonchalantly I smoothed my long red hair, which had been tangling in the January wind, sucked in my cheeks, and walked up to the desk.

"Hello. I'm Norris Church and I have an appointment at ten o'clock to see Wilhelmina."

"Oh, yes. Have a seat, Norris. Someone is with her now, but I'll call you when she's free."

The receptionist was cute. I wondered if she had once tried modeling.

There was only one empty seat, a white molded plastic chair in the far corner, and I sat down in it, trying not to look like a girl from Arkansas full of foreboding about being turned down. Good-looking men and girls were coming in and out of the back offices carrying leather portfolios. Most of us in the waiting room had unimpressive brown envelopes. The next 15 minutes were spent trying to decide whether to take a chance on losing my seat by going to get a magazine. By the time I decided to chance it, the receptionist called out, "Okay, Norris. Willie will see you now."

Taking a deep breath, I walked in, closed the door, and looked around, thinking I was in the wrong office. Instead of the ultraglamorous model on the covers in the waiting room, I saw an attractive businesswoman dressed simply in a black turtle-neck sweater, her hair in a ponytail. She was wearing no makeup, chain-smoking into the telephone, had a cold, and was impressive as hell. One tough lady.

She motioned me toward a chair and continued her phone conversation while I wished I could somehow sneak out a mirror to check my makeup again. Finally, she hung up.

"Now. You are . . ."

"Norris Church."

"Norris. Let me see what you've brought," she said in an undeterminable accent.

She took my envelope and flipped through the six or eight prints a photographer friend had taken.

"Stand up. My—a tall one! How tall are you?"

"Five ten," I answered proudly, remembering Miss America.

"No. Yes. I guess you are. I can usually tell by how high my desk comes on a girl. That's a lovely coat," she added, referring to my dark purple cape. "I'd like to see some outdoor pictures of you in that coat. And more head shots. You'll have to get some of

that hair cut off, and I think we must dye it brown."

"What!" I squeaked. "I thought my hair would be my biggest asset!"

"It's too red. Bruce, don't you think Norris should tone down her red hair?"

Bruce Cooper, Willie's husband and partner, had just walked in. If Charles Boyer had been a star quarterback at some Ivy League college, he would have looked like Bruce.

And no, he rather liked my hair.

"Well, if it was just softened around the face . . . at any rate, we'll make an appointment for you at Pierre Michel. Pierre will give you a good haircut. The rest we'll talk about later. Now, when you go there, tell Pierre—tell him that . . . oh, hell, tell him you're with us."

I walked out of the office and was on the street before I could take a deep breath. It was snowing. Fifth Avenue had never looked so beautiful, with yellow taxicabs, red and green streetlights, and crowds hurrying through the snow. I wanted to race up to everyone and tell them I had just been taken by Wilhelmina, but settled instead for working off my delirious energy by walking the 20 blocks to Pierre Michel, one of the more elegant hair salons in New York.

It had been a long time since I'd seriously thought about doing anything with my hair. I'd kept it long and parted in the middle when I was a high school teacher in Russellville, Arkansas. It was very much a part of my "look." I took great pride in my clay-covered jeans and paint-splattered sweaters. If people mistook me for one of my students, well, it didn't hurt *my* feelings. I was not unhappy living in the Ozark foothills, making pots and teaching kids to paint, occasionally going to the Blue Bonnet Tavern for pizza or the Golden Arrow Lounge to dance with the few unmarried men around. The total of my modeling experience was a few ads for a local department store in the *Log Cabin Democrat*, and a testimonial TV commercial that came along because I had the right kind of TV set and a college friend in a Little Rock advertising agency.

Then I fell in love with a well-known writer passing through town on a lecture tour. I had never been so altogether impressed by a man before in my life. My God! I ran off with him to New York! Six months later, nothing had changed. I was in the ridiculous position of starting a modeling career while being wild about *one* man. What a waste. Here, for example, was Pierre—so French, with his shirt unbuttoned and gold neck-chains lying in mats of black chest hair. As I sat down in his chair, I hesitantly asked, "Did Wilhelmina call you about me, Pierre?"

"She spoke to me. Don't worry. I will make you beautiful."

"I don't want it too short. My neck is too long."

"Don't worry. Trust me. We will cut it just a little."

He chopped it halfway to the roots.

The next morning, feeling shorn but chic in my new head of hair, I met Kay Mitchell, chief adviser and problem solver to the new models at Wilhelmina. She gave me a contract to sign and filled out a card with sizes and measurements. I was then given a list of photographers to see that day. In my new leather portfolio, Kay had arranged the few pictures I had, and taped a street guide to Manhattan. Thus armed, I set out.

My first appointment was at an advertising agency on Fifth Avenue. I didn't know what I was there for, but I was excited as the elevator opened onto a cheaply decorated waiting room. Brown indoor-outdoor carpeting. Plastic couch. Plastic plant.

"Hello," I said to the lady behind the desk. "I'm Norris Church from Wilhelmina." It was to be a sentence I used over and over like a one-word greeting. "I'm supposed to see Edna."

"Yes. Have a seat. I'll tell her you're here."

Another girl came in with her book of pictures. I supposed they must send more than one girl to these interviews. Maybe she was with another agency. Soon the room was crowded with girls and portfolios. I was there first, so I went in first. Down a dark hall. First door on the left, the receptionist had said. Into an austere office. More indoor-outdoor carpet; bare plaster white walls; a sickly plant peering at the sun through a dirty window. The place smelled of tuna fish and mimeograph fluid. A plump lady with red hair was sitting behind the desk. She didn't ask me to sit down.

"Let me see your book."

A quick flip through the pages.

"How long have you been modeling?" she asked uninterestedly, lighting a cigarette and tossing the match into a blue glass ashtray.

"Actually, this is my first day, and you are the first person I've seen," I said brightly, expecting—what—congratulations, maybe?

"Really? Thank you for coming. Tell the next girl to come in."

The next three appointments were slightly better, but the result was the same. Call back when you have more pictures. Drop off your card when you get one. Come around when you get some experience. I was happy if I made eye contact with the interviewer. The fifth and last appointment of the day was at the photography studio in Gimbels. I walked into a jumble of dresses, skirts, and blouses scattered over chairs and clothes racks. A good-looking man sat in the corner at a desk. As I walked in, he smiled. "A redhead! Just what I've been looking for!"

I was startled to hear enthusiasm in his voice, and fought the impulse to look over my shoulder to see if someone else was standing there. He looked at my book.

"Well, Norris, I like your book. Would you be able to do a test Saturday?"

I wasn't quite sure what a test was, but whatever it was, I wanted to do it. Soon enough, I learned a test is a photographic session of mutual benefit to both model and photographer. The model gets experience in front of the camera and new pictures for her book. The photographer gets to try out new ideas and techniques without the expense of hiring a model.

It slowly dawned on me that I was not immediately going to be on the pages of glamorous magazines. I would have to learn what I was doing in front of the camera. I would have to be tested by photographers until I found my look and the particular kind of thing I did best. For me it turned out that I photographed better with the high-fashion look—

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high cheekbones, darker makeup, the *Harper's Bazaar* type. I would have to get a good book of prints together. When this happened, the agency would put out a card—a brochure with four or five pictures and basic information like sizes, height, hair and eye color—and I'd graduate from the testing board at the agency to the big board where the working models are listed. How long might all this take? The time varies, but for me it took six months—not an unusual training period.

After my first test at Gimbels, which was unremarkable except that the photographer didn't give me any prints for two months, testing became an interesting routine, crazy in its proportions. Sometimes I did six or seven tests and came out with one usable print. But the sheer amount of time spent in front of a camera made me more relaxed. I learned which angles were good for me and which moves looked best. I also learned each photographer had a different image of me—curly-haired vamp on a cardboard Hollywood set; wet-haired Chihuahua in baby oil and a bikini. I wore soft things in hazy light, sexy things under red lights. I had pictures taken in a gold sequined dress with my foot on a blackened old toilet in some obscure men's room; in sneakers holding a tennis racquet; and wearing an \$800 Fiandaca designer original while balanced atop a wall in an artist's loft. I worked with makeup men and hair stylists in fancy dressing rooms; or with no dressing room at all and mice scurrying across the floor. I learned a lot—fast—about modeling and the people in the business.

Sooner or later, every model testing finds one photographer with whom the magic happens. She looks at the prints and says, "Is that *me*? They're gorgeous!" Then the model and photographer spend a great deal of time complimenting each other and a kind of professional love affair begins. I met my photographer under dubious circumstances, to say the least. I had an early appointment with Robert Belott at his studio on Park Avenue South. I was a little early, and as the elevator door closed behind me, I found myself in what I thought must be the slab room at the morgue. Four nude male bodies were spread over the floor. As I turned with a sinking feeling and punched the button, one of the bodies groaned and shifted slightly. "Belott's not here, honey, but I'll look at your book."

"Uh . . . that's okay. Tell him I'll give him a call." I jabbed at the button again.

After a three-minute eternity the elevator door opened and I banged into a neatly dressed man with a black beard and gradient sunglasses. He mut-

tered, "Ohmigod," and stepped back onto the elevator. We started down.

"Listen," he said, "I'm Robert Belott and those guys are just using my studio to work in. They're filming a low-budget movie and needed a place to shoot, but they were supposed to be out by now. I'm really sorry. Let's go next door and I'll buy you a cup of coffee and look at your book."

Whether to make up for my shock, or because he liked me, we set up a test for the following week, a spec shot (taken on speculation that the intended client will buy it) for a magazine cover. Robert had arranged with my bookers for the whole afternoon. I arrived full of excitement over the possibility of my picture being on a national magazine. Robert and his representative, Michael, had provided wine and cheese. The hairdresser/makeup man was laying out his tools, and the stylist had the clothes ready. I was impressed by the organization and order. For the first shot I wore a headwrap of red and cream and a tight black dress. The makeup effect, which took an hour, was stark white skin, red lips, and dark eyes. I could hardly walk onto the floor because I was stiff from sitting so long in one position, and because the dress was so tight.

"Look up! Turn your head to the right! Turn your head to the left! Look down!" Belott was the general, shouting commands. I was thankful it was only a head and shoulders shot. I couldn't move my body more than a shuffling step at a time. The actual shooting took four minutes. Then back to the dressing room. Rip off the clothes like skinning a cat. Take off the makeup. Start over again with new colors. An hour and a half later I was led onto the floor swathed in some kind of green hooded cocoon with a plastic visor and a drawstring securely tied under my chin. I was half blind from trying to see through the plastic. It was impossible to turn my head, so, craning my neck, I tried not to think about the aching discomfort. A green apple with a bite taken out was placed in my hand by the stylist.

"Put the thumb more to the side—it looks awful!" ordered the general. "Turn the head more to the right. The apple is turning brown—somebody eat off the brown part!"

I felt like a plaster mannequin being manipulated for Bloomingdale's window.

"This is just a business," I thought. "You've got to realize this has nothing to do with you—you're selling a commodity, that's all."

"Put the little finger down!"

Another four minutes, and I was propelled to the dressing room and again stripped of my bonds and makeup.

For the third shot I was in a baseball cap holding an ice-cream cone. After the hour of makeup, I was looking forward to getting the picture over with and eating the ice cream. But something was not functioning right. The hot lights began to melt the ice cream. "Don't move!" someone said. "You're perfect! Let it drip!"

My arm was covered in strawberry mush. Finally, the camera was fixed and the shots taken. I got two bites of a soggy cone. Back to the dressing room. Nine hours later everyone had packed and gone except Belott and me. I was waiting for my man to pick me up for dinner. The wine was gone. We were exhausted beyond exhaustion. Belott picked up a guitar and began to play. I put on a straw hat and began to dance barefoot. Two chairs sat starkly near the white wall. I danced in and out and around the chairs, hardly noticing the music had stopped. Belott was again taking pictures. For a minute we weren't a tired model and photographer sapping out our last drops of energy, but two artists, together creating a work of art. They were the best pictures of the day, and marked the start of a solid professional relationship.

Not all working relationships are relaxed and agreeable, of course. From the start I assumed I would be propositioned by some of the photographers or agency people I met. Since I had what I wanted at home, my problem was how to be friendly but not seductive. I wanted to be interesting to the point of making the photographer want to see me again for work, without leading him to expect anything *more* than work. When a photographer was interested in me, and found out I wasn't interested back, the situation was usually cool, but only once did I get into a scene that got completely out of hand.

The photographer was in his late fifties—nice looking in a Telly Savalas way, with a good book of pictures. I was anxious to test with him. When he answered the door, I smiled and parroted my line: "Hello, I'm Norris Church from Wilhelmina."

"Yes. You're lovely. And tall—taller than I am." He stepped closer. "How tall are you, dear?"

"Well, in these shoes, I must be six one or two." I turned my face away from his bad breath.

He laughed. "You're lucky!" Patting me on the rump, he said, "I'm doing a catalog right now and the clothes are in the dressing room. Go in and try on the brown pantsuit."

Relieved to get down to business, I went into a nice dressing room with wooden louvered doors. They didn't lock. I was taking off my clothes when he walked in.

"Oh, yesss! Lovely. Don't be embarrassed. You have a beautiful body."

"Go away. I'll be out in a minute. Please." I stepped back and held a blouse in front of me. He snatched it away and frantically grabbed at my breasts.

"Stop it!" I shrieked, my hands slipping on his sweaty arms. "Will you please stop it! I didn't come here for a wrestling match! Come on! Stop!"

"Oh, you like it. You all want it, you know you do! You know that girl on my wall out there? She's one of the biggest names in the business and she's crazy about me."

Sweat ran down into his eyebrows. Suddenly I stopped resisting.

"Okay. Rape me. Go ahead. Get it over with. I don't have all day to play games with you. Do it."

"Rape you? Do you know how many women are dying to have me make love to them? I don't have to rape a woman."

I stood staring a hole into the top of his head. He turned and stomped out. I picked up my things and left. He was nowhere to be seen. From the first phone booth I called my booker at the agency.

"Linda, you know I'm not a seventeen-year-old kid who thinks every man is after her Arkansas ass, but let me tell you what just happened."

She was incensed. "Leave it to me, Norris. These guys usually get a warning. If we get another complaint, he'll be out of models."

It's been six months since I walked in the door at Wilhelmina. My card is out and I've gone from the testing board to the big board. Of the 60 or so girls who started at the same time I did, 12 are left. Sure, getting started is hard. When I moved to New York I sold my house and car, so I had enough money to last a few months, but if it hadn't been for my man, I would have had to wait tables to help pay the rent. Some girls do that and make it fine. Most live with someone or have help from their parents. A few are married. An infinitely small percentage hit it big from the first day and are rich a year later. Who knows what will happen? That's the most tantalizing part of this business—waking up every day and thinking, "Today is the day I click big!" I wouldn't go back to teaching now for all the certainty of a regular paycheck. After all, tomorrow it might be my turn!

## LITTLE HELPERS

*For toothache, apply cotton saturated in ammonia to the gum. Bourbon, brandy, or rum—they taste better!—can also be used.*

*Sticky zippers slide easily if rubbed with lead pencil.*