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Chapter Book Ages 7-10
About 5,000 Words

Virginia Bean
By: Aubrey Breedlove

Virginia Bean was a quiet sort of ferret who enjoyed being in her kitchen in her apron preparing tea and cakes for her guests. She lived under the sturdy roots of a broad-leafed sycamore tree. It was the only tree standing on the grassy slope in the overgrown pasture.

“Why, hello, Mr. Beaver,” chirped Virginia Bean at the arrival of her first guest. Mr. Beaver usually arrived at the same time each morning to drink tea and eat breakfast cakes before a long day of tree cutting, which he claimed was harder than Joe Frog’s job by far. A fact which he stated every morning to Joe Frog over tea.

“How’s lily pad hopping going, Joe?” he would tease. “Better be sure to eat plenty of fly cakes to keep up your energy.”

Joe Frog never minded Mr. Beaver’s good-natured teasing and would reply, saying, “Yes sir, Mr. Beaver, will do. I can’t help it that God made me a hopper and you a chopper.”

Virginia Bean took warm cakes from the oven and began arranging them on a platter as Mr. Beaver warmed his hands by the crackling fire. Sunlight shone in from a tiny window set into the side of the hill.

The tea kettle whistled and hot steam billowed from its spout.

“Make yourself at home, Mr. Beaver,” she said cheerily. She poured the steaming water into four mugs and dropped a peppermint tea bag into each one.

“Don’t I always,” Mr. Beaver said with a chuckle, and sat at the cozy table.

A blast of cold, autumn air accompanied Joe Frog, who hopped in wearing a winter hat, coat and scarf.

“My, Joe! You look festive!” exclaimed Virginia.

Just as Joe shut the door against the cold and hopped to the table with a shy smile, the door burst open again and Squint the Squirrel scurried in.

“You’re just in time, Squint,” said Virginia Bean.

She bustled around the table setting out cakes, a pot of honey and steaming mugs of peppermint tea.

Squint sniffed the warm, sweetly-scented air.

“Virginia Bean, you have the smelliest house in Tuppence.”

Everyone froze and looked at Squint.

“The smelliest?” Virginia Bean said with a squeak.

The fire crackled.

The clock ticked.

Squint looked at all the stares and realized he must have said something wrong. He blinked twice.

“I meant the *nicest*, smelliest house,” he corrected.

Everyone blinked back at him. Virginia Bean put a hand to her heart.

“I mean, that is, the nicest *smelling* house in all of Tuppence,” he said.

At that, Virginia Bean smiled, relaxed her shoulders and set down the last mug. “My, that’s a relief I don’t have the smelliest house in the entire countryside!” she said with a smile.

Mr. Beaver laughed frightfully loud and told Squint that “smelliest” meant, “The worst-smelling”. Squint had too much fur to blush, but he did look at Virginia apologetically.

Joe Frog gave a little smile to reassure Squint he hadn't ruined the morning. Which wasn't always the case.

Once, Squint had entered Virginia's house so quickly that he'd knocked over the tray of apple pies she had been carrying to the table. Each beautiful little pie had plopped onto the floor, ruined.

And one summer, his tall, bushy tail had twisted up in the ceiling fan and it had taken everyone all of breakfast hour to get it unstuck.

"Hey Squint," Mr. Beaver bellowed, "remember the time you brought your pet roach and it got stuck in the chimney."

The hearty laughter of friendship rose from everyone at the table, and even Squint had to laugh about that one. The look on his pet roach's face when they'd finally popped him out of the chimney onto the soft, summer grass had been pretty funny.

Virginia Bean seated herself with her treasured guests and took the first delicious bite of her breakfast cake. Just then, a timid knock sounded on the door.

Virginia never shouted across the room to anyone standing outside her door. She rose to answer.

"Bet that's the ol' acorn hunter," said Mr. Beaver, his gruff voice muffled by a mouthful of cake. "Never know these days who'll come looking for what," he muttered.

"An acorn hunter? That's new to me," said Joe Frog.

Squint was too busy guzzling his warm, peppermint tea to hear them, but if he had heard them he would have known just who the 'acorn hunter' was.

When Virginia opened the door, a ray of morning sun made its way inside, spilling over her shoulder, and would have been warm except for the cold wind that blew

in along with it. She at first didn't see anyone, but when lowered her eyes to her welcome mat, there stood a small, shivery hedgehog, its prickles standing up in all directions. Even if Virginia was a bit surprised, because she had never had a hedgehog visit her before, Virginia Bean smiled anyway. After all, a guest was a guest.

"Good morning, how can I help you?" said Virginia to the stranger.

Mr. Beaver yelled from inside the house, "If that's the acorn hunter tell him nobody here has got acorns to sell."

When he did, the little hedgehog hid her delightful little face by transforming into a ball of spikes.

"Oh now, don't be afraid. Mr. Beaver's the nicest beaver you'll ever meet. Won't you come in and warm up by the fire?" Virginia said, lowering herself to stand on all fours to be at the hedgehog's height. Normally, Virginia only walked on her two back paws, and she was rather tall because of it, but if she needed to be short she could use all four paws which made her much closer to the ground.

The beady eyes and tiny snout of the hedgehog slowly reappeared, and she waddled in behind Virginia who kindly announced their new guest while also eyeing Mr. Beaver in case he had a thought to be frightfully loud and scare their new friend out the door and into the cold again.