

Full Circle
The Bucks County Writer
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“Hey there, honey! How’s Daddy’s girl?”

I slid my scrawny seven-year old body toward my dad across the polished vinyl of his shiny new 1967 Impala. His muscled right arm encircled my waist and pulled me tightly into his crisp, white T-shirt. His hand reached up and tousled my hair.

“I’m good, Daddy. Where’re we goin’?”

This routine was always the same. And so was the answer I got.

“I thought we’d go over to the Club for while. How’s that sound to you?”

“Okay, Daddy. That’s good.”

I snuggled into the softness of his waistline as we pulled away. He always drove slouched into the seat, his left arm slung over the steering wheel, the right draped casually along the back of the front seat. He was the only one I knew who could drive without using his hands. He smelled like Old Spice, and was warm and familiar, like Patsy Cline singing to us from the radio.

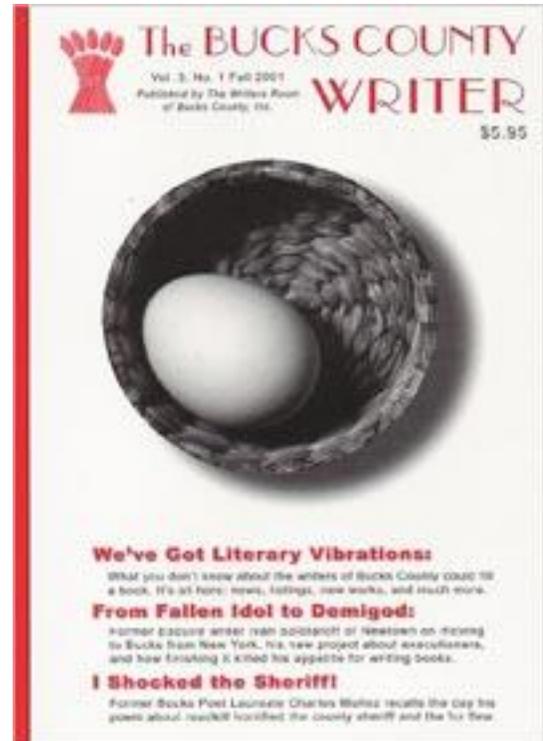
“She sure has got one helluva a good voice, doesn’t she sweetheart?” The cigarette dangling from his lips bobbed up and down as he spoke, keeping time with the music.

I nodded my response, entranced by the ash that grew ever longer, seemingly ready to drop, but never staining that white shirt.

Before I knew it, we were there. The Club was my dad’s hangout. And to a seven-year-old, it was someplace slightly dangerous, and special.

My father was a Marine. He had served in Japan during the Korean War, but didn’t talk about that time much. I realized he wasn’t a soldier any more, but he wasn’t an ex-Marine, either. As he liked to tell me, “Once a Marine, always a Marine, Princess.”

His friends were all Marines too who still wore the swagger, but not the uniform. They would stand around and watch the TV that hung up high over the bar, play pool or just listen to the country and western songs on the jukebox. They’d laugh at the same old



stories and punch each other on the arms and say “Semper Fi.” I never really knew what that meant, but they would always get real happy, pat me on the head, and buy me cherry Cokes and little bags of potato chips.

Eventually I’d end up in a corner, or under the pool table, wrapped up in the world of my Barbie collection. Barbie and Ken got married on the bar, went on their honeymoon between the plastic potted plants that crowded the front window, and ultimately divorced in one of the booths along the wall. My past, present and my future were acted out in the smoky bar of The Club week after week.

But I was with my Daddy, and that’s what counted after all. We only had Sunday afternoons together, and to me they were precious moments in time, created for just the two of us.

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“Hey, honey! How’s Daddy’s girl?”

My head snapped upright from the back of the stiff hospital chair, and my eyes turned toward my dad, propped up with flat institutional pillows. His once-muscular arms were stuck with needles connected by hoses to bottles dripping out a cloudy liquid. His shrunken body disappeared into the bedding. But I could still see my “old man” in his steely blue eyes. Now they crinkled with happiness at seeing me again.

“I’m good, Daddy. How’re you doing today?”

Then just as quickly, a smoky veil dropped over his eyes, which a moment before had been locked on mine. He leaned his head back, and closed his eyes.

With a sigh, I, too, closed mine and once again dozed off.

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I was 12 or 13 and Daddy was teaching me how to play baseball in the field behind his apartment building.

“Honey, choke up on the bat, you gotta get some leverage. That’s it, eye on the ball. Aye, batter, batter!”

“Daddy. I can’t concentrate with you yelling at me all the time like that!”

At this age I was an awkward pre-adolescent, pleasantly plump, as my mom said. But I knew I was just plain fat. I hated it when he would draw attention to us, which he did all the time and very well. In my mind’s eye, people were always staring at us.

“Now swing, angel, that’s it. Yes. Good hit. Now, run, go on, you can do it.” My father

yelled at me encouragingly as my chubby legs churned their way around the field. And that's when it happened. In my childish wisdom, I had refused to put on shoes and was playing barefoot. I stepped squarely on a large piece of an empty Bud bottle that instantly sent shards of pain coursing through my leg while blood oozed from my foot. The howl I let out could be heard for blocks.

For a big man, my father moved awfully quickly. I can't remember ever seeing him move so fast.

They were all very nice at the emergency room. At least I thought they were. But no one could do anything right for my father that day. He growled at the nurses for moving too slow and at the doctor for finishing too fast. When we were finally discharged, he carried me out the door and placed me gently on the back seat of the faded fire-engine-red Impala and propped up my foot, complete with ten stitches, on some clothes that were piled in there, and he smoothed the hair tenderly away from my forehead.

"There, there, sweetheart. Nothin's gonna hurt you when your daddy's around. You're still my girl, you know. You'll always be my baby."

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I was 19 years old and in my first year of college when my first true love dumped me for a redheaded, perfectly proportioned cheerleader.

Shock, confusion and pain gripped my heart, and I called my father collect.

After I sobbed out a few disconnected sentences, he was able to grasp the gravity of the situation. My father stuck up for me, as he always did, no questions asked.

"Honey, you know, that guy really wasn't right for you anyway," he spoke softly long distance into the phone.

"He isn't good enough for you ... you absolutely, positively deserve something better than that creep, sweetheart."

"If I was there I'd take care of him for you. You know that there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, don't you, Princess?"

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After a new job took my dad halfway across the country, and my first marriage took me in the other direction, our contact lessened. The weekly phone calls became routine and often pointless; especially the times when I could tell he'd had maybe one or two more beers than he should have. Our relationship was sometimes thin and strained. Still, he was the first one I called when my baby took her first step or cut a tooth. The

first one I called when I got a job. And he was the one I called when my husband left me.

He was still the daddy of my childhood. My protector in the T-shirt with the Marlboros stuck in one shirt sleeve, the eagle tattoo winking at the words 'United States Marine Corps' forever inked in blue-gray on his skin. I knew he was there for me, my comforter and my biggest fan. With him in my corner no one could really hurt me. And his voice over the miles, raspy from too many years of a bad habit, reassured me that my husband, "that damned fool, don't know what he's throwing away, Princess."

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"Miss, it's time for you to leave now. Your father needs his treatment." The nurse in starched white smiled at me from across the bed, and I nodded.

"Good night, Daddy, sleep tight. Don't let the bed bugs bite." I rose and whispered into his ear, tufted with silver-white hair. "I love you."

His eyes slowly opened, and he gave me a weak smile. I repeated my "I love you."

"Miss. . ."

I moved away and the nurse readied him for his shots.

"Hey! That's my baby, you know." Daddy gave a passable imitation of his old growl. I guess he wanted to remind the nurse that I had a right to be there. I blew him a kiss and a smile and left him to his dreams.

His voice followed me as I stepped into the hallway.

"You know, she'll always be my little girl."

Semper Fi, Daddy.