

The day my parents met in nineteen sixty-four, my mom had been smoking behind the school with a boy named Jonny Atherton. She was running late getting home. She foolishly decided to cut through old-man Harvey's field thinking it would save her precious time. She didn't know that Barney was out.

Barney the bull was the love of old-man Harvey's life. No one knows why Old-man Harvey was called Old-man, back then he wasn't old but somehow the moniker had stuck. He'd bottle-fed Barney since he was a calf, and even though he could have used the money Barney's slaughtered beef would have brought him, he treated that bull like a child. Having never been castrated, Barney was not a friendly Ferdinand kind of bull. The day my mom foolishly decided to cut through the field Barney was no longer a baby calf but a nearly full-grown bull, weighing in at almost a thousand pounds. It's important to note he disliked everyone except Old-man Harvey. Especially women.

In the way small towns have of making up ridiculous but somewhat based-in-truth stories, the best reason anyone could give for Barney's hatred of all women was that Old-man Harvey's wife, Effie, who having come home after a hard day at the shoe factory, found her husband sitting on the couch with Barney standing by the end table,

absentmindedly grinding his teeth. This was when Barney was just a few weeks old and still had the idea that people were kind. Effie saw that her husband had the last cigarette of their pack in his hands and was about to light it. It was too much. It was just too much. She grabbed the cigarette from his hand, flicked a match, lit the end, and stood staring down at her husband with eyes dark and gleaming. He didn't look at her. He just kept his focus on the television.

"It's me or that horrible damn bull." She spat. When Old-man Harvey picked the calf, (some said he was joking, others swear he was serious) well; Effie had one of the 'fits of rage' she was known for. She slapped her husband hard enough to leave a handprint and then whirled toward Barney who had been standing there demurely feeling safe and loved. With pure hatred in her heart Effie blew her cigarette smoke right in that calf's face, then, to add insult to injury, she slapped little Barney on his wet nose. It's been said that in retaliation, Barney kicked her as she headed out the door. Effie had a limp from then on that would bother her when the temperature dipped below thirty, or the rain came in from the north. Not a soul in town ever mentioned that limp to her face, but if you saw her limping in the winter, you knew it was going to get colder, and if she limped in the summer, you knew it was going to rain.

But my mother, rushing home to get her chores done, wasn't thinking about Effie or Barney. She was only trying to get home before her father did so she wouldn't have to explain why she was late, why her clothes smelled like cigarettes, or why her lipstick was smudged. It was smudged because Jonny Atherton had kissed her long and hard, and she'd let him. It was when she was almost to the fence line that she heard Barney. He'd let out a long slow, grunting growl that stopped her dead in her tracks. You don't grow up on a farm surrounded by your own cows, or your neighbors, without knowing the sound of an angry bull. Her heart jumped into her throat, and without wanting to, she turned around. Barney was stalking her. His head was down, his stance was square, and his right front leg slowly, deliberately pawed the ground.

She started running toward the fence just as my dad drove by in his pickup truck. Old-man Harvey's farm ran the length of Fort Hill Road, so my dad had a pretty good view of the field, a girl in a white and red polka dot dress running like the devil himself was chasing her and a brown and white Holstein closing the distance. My dad slammed on the brakes and jumped from the truck in one swift move. "Here here," he yelled, swinging his arms wildly, trying to distract the bull. He climbed onto the top fence-rail, balancing on the balls of his

feet, yelling obscenities at Barney, who had only one thought. Revenge. In his small bull brain, all he could see was Effie blowing smoke in his sweet face and slapping him hard on his sensitive nose.

Seeing a glimmer of hope, my mother put on one last burst of speed as she managed to make it to the fence. She impressed my father with her athleticism as she nearly scaled the fence without stopping. She scrambled up the last slat with Barney closing in only a few yards away. Seeing failure at hand, Barney changed course in a way that shouldn't be possible for a thousand-pound beast, but he swerved, and now my dad, who was wearing a red plaid shirt, was his target. Barney charged the fence as my dad leaped toward the safety of the other side, but Barney wasn't stopping, and the fence splintered to pieces as he ran through it.

"Get in the truck," my dad yelled toward my mom while he picked himself up and headed toward the driver's side door he'd left open. He was almost there, had the door in his grasp, and was about to jump in when he felt the solid square head of Barney hit him from behind. The force of the blow pushed him up and into the door frame, breaking his nose on impact. Barney didn't have horns, he'd been dehorned as a calf, but he had size, strength, and anger on his side. He didn't care that the truck was bigger than him, all he cared about was his

intended target was on it. He kept charging, hitting my dad again while he tried to climb onto the top of the truck. That blow made my dad fall down and forward; hitting the gravel hard, he let out a loud grunt. The air whooshed out of him, and he tried to scramble under the truck. Barney was having none of it. He pawed my dad's back, dragging him along the gravel and catching his cheek and ear on a sharp rock that cut through flesh. My dad screamed. Rage made him react. He flipped onto his back and slapped that bull right on his big wet snotty nose. Barney let out a sound much like that of a child crying and turned and ran for home.

That's the story of how my dad beat Barney the bull and how my mother fell in love while kneeling in the dirt, holding her white lace hanky to his bleeding and broken nose with his ear hanging by a thread. She was astonished when he asked her if she was okay.

"You're asking if I'm okay?" There was disbelief in her voice as she watched his blood soak the hem of her dress.

The pain was starting to sink in, but he kept his wits about him, "Yes, ma'am," he'd replied.

My mother, who is very rarely speechless, didn't know what to say, so she just nodded. My father, who was then, and is still to this day,

an incorrigible flirt, winked with his right eye. His left was already swelling shut. But my mother knew a wink when she saw one.

"What's your name?" He asked.

"Elaine." she blushed. "What's yours?"

"Charlie. Charles Jones." He said with a smile curving up the side of his face that wasn't scraped and bloody. "Will you go to the pictures with me tonight?"

Fifty-eight years later they're still in love. They still hold hands while sitting on their front porch swing. And they are the people, along with my six siblings, who I rely on when times get tough, and I've had a few tough times.

Not long after that Effie left Mr. Harvey, moved downtown into one of the renovated mill-building apartments, bought one of the retail spaces on the first floor, and opened a leather goods store. She sells some of the finest leather goods on the east coast.

Oh...The store's name? Barney's Hide.