

## Five Stories · *Norman Sage*

### BIB OVERALLS

WHEN I WAS ELEVEN YEARS OLD, I had a girlfriend named Buck. I don't know why they called her that, for her real name was Mildred and she was not a bad looking kid, except for a little space between her front teeth. She could spit a yard through that slit, and I envied her that skill.

Buck had two sisters and a brother, Ray, who was my best friend at the time. Buck had a serious look on her face at all times, and she had long light-brown hair which she wore in braids. She was a tomboy and her normal dress was a pair of well-worn bib overalls. In the summer she wore them with nothing else visible, as far as I could tell, but in the winter she might add a plaid wool shirt and a Navy surplus pea jacket, mostly because her mother made her. She did not give in to cold weather without an argument, and she was a devout believer in personal comfort if it came to a choice between that and covering flesh. Anything of a frilly nature was beneath her dignity and entirely contrary to her self-image. But in spite of the name and her style of ordinary dress, she seemed to me entirely feminine, and my father once pointed out that she, a year younger than I, was already "beginning to show her biscuits."

"Frank!" my mother said, sharply, and Dad shut up. I knew what he meant, and I was interested in such things in a mildly curious way. I asked Buck if I could see her biscuits and she said no. I even offered to show her mine in return, and she said, "You've not got any nor ever will have." She was right about that, of course.

I have an old photograph of Buck and me, taken by my mother when we were in a Washington's Birthday pageant in the grade school we both attended, which was Washington Grade School in the east end. Mother went to a lot of trouble making my costume—a tricorn hat trimmed with silver braid, cotton hair sewn into what looked like curls to look like a powdered wig, a shirt with a ruffled front and black stock, knee britches with small silver buckles just below the knee, black low-cut oxfords with huge buckles made of cardboard covered with tinfoil. I look out of that picture as stern and unyielding as George himself; and I was humiliated

beyond recounting by all the lace and ruffles and buckles, for I was known far and wide as a mean little bastard and my normal vocabulary was the sort which made my mother look Heavenward for help more frequently than most mothers should have to do.

Buck, in that picture, looks quite as I think Martha Washington may have looked in real life. She wore a puffed dusting cap on her head, and her braids were tucked up under it. She had on a long black dress, trimmed in white lace, pointed shoes with “silver” buckles, mostly hidden by her dress, and for some reason which I do not understand, or have forgotten, she carried in her left hand, the one next to me, a long slender staff. The expression on her face was neither disgust nor defiance—it was just jaw-set stubborn. We both hated that experience and there is not a trace of a smile on either of those two still childish faces. Even though she was younger than I, Buck stood as tall, and what *I* saw on her face was, “I can whip you any day of the week and twice on Washington’s Birthday!” And I think she was saying it to everyone who was watching that picture being taken, and to me, too.

The thing about Buck was that she *could* do anything I could do, and most of the time do it better. In those days we played baseball, and I don’t mean softball, but hardball. Buck had a wing on her heretofore unknown among women, I’m sure. And she could pitch a fastball, a curve, a screwball, and a fader, and just about the time you’d think you had her style figured out, she’d pull another one that faded into the dust an instant before you’d swing at it. She was simply a natural athlete. On the playground at school, she was the one who swung highest on the swings, skinned the cat quickest, ran the dash fastest, swung the bat best, and made running bases look like an old movie at double speed. She was a pistol, and I say that in solemn respect.

It hasn’t been all that long ago, this time I’m speaking of, but it seems like centuries as I think about it now. It surprises me how clearly I see her and how accurately I remember some of our shared experiences, *and* how fuzzy some of them have become. I guess one tends to remember the important—perhaps the more painful ones—best. Whenever Buck drifts into my mind, and I don’t know why she does, but suddenly there she is, causing me to remember three experiences most often, and always with a strange, forlorn wistfulness.

It was not an ordinary custom, I'm sure, but in our school there was an annual baseball game between the boys and the girls. Naturally, Buck was the pitcher and leadoff hitter for the girls, and she could hit that sucker a country mile. I'm going to tell you the truth here: they beat our tails into the mud every year of those three years and they beat us bad. There are a lot of kids in my age group who don't remember how it feels to win, because they never had, and that means also that they don't know for certain what is meant by the term self-respect, let alone self-confidence. I think that may have been a tactic of the girls' coach, but I may be edging toward an alibi in saying this.

Buck was in the seventh grade and I was in the eighth when the game I remember best—or most painfully—was played. It was in the late spring of the year and we were all, I thought, in peak form, determined to vindicate manhood at any cost. I could hit a ball; I could throw a ball; and I was a demon centerfielder. I don't think I *ever* missed a catchable ball. But I could not for the life of me hit more than one or two of Buck's fastballs in the course of an entire game. When I did happen to catch a piece of one, it usually popped up and back, fouling into the net. I never got a good clean hit from her. She put more zing into a pitch than any girl ought to have a right to, and she knew she was good, too. I don't mean to imply that she strutted around. She just quietly knew she was good and took it to be a God-given talent for which she was duly but silently grateful.

In that spring game they had us down 6 to 2 in the bottom of the 7th, no one on base, two outs, when I came up, third in the batting order. The first two, Toad Hillis and Homer Brindley, had fanned out—one, two, three. So I stood there, firmly resolved to knock the cover off that ball, and I took Buck's first pitch without moving a muscle, and the umpire called a strike. I gave him my most threatening scowl, which didn't move him much, and turned my attention back to the next pitch just a fraction of a second too late. The ball caught me just above the right temple and I dropped like a rock.

I don't know how long I was out. Toad said I was "cold for over an hour." But Toad was known for exaggeration. My own estimate is that I was out maybe five or ten minutes, and when my eyes began to flutter open, I was looking up into Doc McLaughlin's face, and he was asking me how many fingers he was holding in front of my nose and I told him, "Nine, you shitass!" Then I noticed that Buck was leaning over me, too,

not looking worried, exactly, but at least mildly concerned. “I’ll get you for this,” I said, weakly.

“Maybe,” she said. “Hurt much, Luke?” she asked, more as a matter of scientific interest, I thought, than in apology or solicitude.

“You bet your two-ton tail it hurts!” I said, without explicit reference to her personal tail, or course.

“Well, I’m *sorry!*” she said, and stalked off.

Doc wouldn’t let me play any more that day because he said I had to go to the infirmary for “observation” for about twenty-four hours, in case I had a concussion. I didn’t know exactly what that was, but my head felt as if I surely must have one. And I did; they didn’t let me out of solitary for three days, and after I did get out my friends all taunted me for having been hit on the head by a beanball. What they said, among other things, was this:

Luke and Buck—a pair they ain’t,  
But when she pitches, watch him faint!

That was a difficult time in my life. Normally, I would have felt at least a little heroic about the injury and all the fuss, but having it done to you by a girl was just a little too much, and I didn’t get nearly as much mileage out of the incident as I thought I deserved. I also had a lot of trouble speaking in a civil manner to Buck for a long time after that. She kept hanging around, as if in apology, but she never gave me one, and I spent a lot of time looking the other way. You don’t forgive, immediately, a young woman who has beaned you into a coma and then gone on to beat your team 10 to 2, for God’s sake!

The second thing I remember oftenest about Buck is the incident of the ice and the broom. Buck lived next door, and between our houses was a low place which made a small pond during the summer and a very small skating area in the winter, if the rain and cold came in proper order. The water would be about four inches deep in the center, I would guess, and when it was frozen it was used by all of us as a place where we could take a good run and then slide on the soles of our shoes for about twenty feet or so. We fell down a lot, but it was fun.

On this day I remember so clearly, it had snowed a little sifter after turning cold during the night, and when I got up and looked out the window I could see Buck out there sweeping the snow off the ice so it

would be good for sliding. I got into my clothes as fast as I could, grabbed a cruller from the kitchen table on my way out, and took a mighty run toward the ice with the cruller stuck in my mouth. Just as I slid on in a graceful swift glide across the ice, Buck stuck out the broom directly in my course, and I did the nicest dive over it you ever saw, landing with wondrous grace flat on my nose.

That time I was out for a while, too, and when I did come around I found that I was lying on the ice with Buck on her knees, holding my head in her lap, dabbing away at what seemed to be a lot of blood with her red bandanna handkerchief. It was hard to tell, considering the color of the cloth, but I think there was a lot of blood. There were two odd things about the situation as I judged it at the time and as I remember it now. My face was completely paralyzed, and Buck was weeping soundlessly onto my face as she tried to wipe away the blood.

Soon my mother looked out the window and quite naturally thought Buck was taking advantage of me in some particularly nasty way, and came running out. When she saw what had happened, she called Doc McLaughlin to see my shame for a second time, and then she hauled me, with Buck's help, into the kitchen and laid me out on the table in the middle of the remains of breakfast.

When Doc came, he grabbed my nose and started wiggling it around and the feeling was starting to come back and it hurt to beat hell.

I said, "Jesus Christ, Doc, will you cut that out?" Or something like that, because my mother said, "Shush!" which was how she always dealt with my foul mouth.

"You've got a very mashed-up nose there, Luke," Doc said, and he went to work on me. He got cotton out of his bag and poked it up both nostrils and then took a probe of some kind and jammed the cotton as far into my nose as he could force it. I complained bitterly, but he just kept on jamming cotton up my nose. You've no *idea* how that can hurt, and I was afraid I'd either throw up the Buick or shit my pants, which I did not want to do at all because Buck was still there and one does not commit atrocities of that sort with the girl next door looking on. It's in the Code there, somewhere.

After Doc had jammed about three pounds of cotton up each nostril, he wiped my face clean with alcohol, which smelled and felt good, and then put two or three yards of adhesive tape across my nose to keep it in the middle of my face where I was used to its being. As he did this, he kept on

wiggling the bridge of my nose, and I kept saying, “For Christ’s sake stop fucking around and let it start healing!” My mother said, “Shush!” again, but I paid no mind to her and kept on cussing. Doc continued calmly with what he was doing, in spite of my objections, and Mother kept shushing me, and pretty soon the three of them hauled me off upstairs and undressed me. Can you *believe* that? All *three* of them undressing me, and me completely defenseless! I was so mortified that I was doing a lot of kicking and screaming, and finally Doc gave me a shot to quiet me down.

By this time my whole face looked, I’m sure, like a holy sunset on a church calendar. My mother and Doc finally left, but Buck stayed, uninvited but comparatively calm.

“Well,” I moaned, “how did you like the show?”

“What show?”

“Well, Jesus! The whole fucking machinery, for Christ’s sake!”

“Oh, that,” she said. “Nothing very spectacular about that. I’ve got a brother, you know, and he’s not as careful as he should be sometimes. I didn’t think you’d mind. *I didn’t.*”

“Well I *did* mind, God damn it!” Now she was for some reason weeping silently again, and I said, “Oh, for Christ’s sake get the hell out of here!”

The third thing I remember is that she got up from the side of the bed where she’d been sitting, leaned over and kissed me very slowly and very sweetly and very accurately on the lips. And it hurt.

Sometimes I absent-mindedly touch the small lump still there on the bridge of my nose where all that jammed-up bone healed, and Buck comes into my mind as if someone had flipped a switch. And sometimes, when that happens, I call to my wife out there in the kitchen fixing dinner or whatever, and I say, “Buck, my nose is hurting again.” It’s wonderful what her lips can do to ease that pain. Her kisses are almost as lethal as her beanball.