

Valentine

by Erin Zulkoski

He was an accidental pregnancy, an "oops" baby.

There wasn't much way of options for such occurrences back then. Keep your chin up, head held high, and endure the stares and whispers of the small town as a woman "past her prime" carries a child.

He was born in late September, but his middle name is Valentine, and when asked about it, he isn't sure why.

He doesn't ever talk much about his childhood, which only intrigues me more. Where were family secrets kept? Skeletons in the closet? Or am I just hopeful for such things because I don't want to believe his past isn't fraught with mystery?

I know a few things about his past, have seen pictures and heard some stories. My favorite picture is one of him and his older brother. Both are dressed up as cowboys. He is either three or four-years-old in the photo, and the smile on his face is infectious.

My favorite story of his is the time he decided to drive his small motorcycle to Canada. It was the sixties, and he had just graduated high school. I like to think it was his attempt at dodging the draft, but he did end up in the Army eventually. The story involves him, full of youth and rebellion, riding his tiny bike through Nebraska, South Dakota and some of North Dakota, until a severe thunderstorm and lack of protection from said storm forced him back home. He did finish the trip, but this time in his mother's borrowed car. The only picture from that trip is of him crossing the border into Canada, and is of the Canadian flag, waving proudly.

As I said, he was in the Army for a while, but again, he keeps quiet

about that time. The only reason I knew he served was because I found his small metal tool box and tarnished pins that he had. I like to think of him in his uniform, crew cut, and the thick black frames of his glasses perched on his nose, the same nose I have.

He got out of the Army and went to technical college, first to be in broadcasting, but he was told by his professor that he "didn't have a voice for radio," so he changed his major to electronics. He opened up his own shop, and the next picture I remember seeing of him is with long hair, bell bottomed pants, and standing in front of an old Ford pickup truck with the name of his shop painstakingly painted on the side. He is beaming with pride, and you can tell he's excited for what the future holds for him.

Flash forward to 1977, when he married a girl who had a three-year-old son. The picture of their wedding makes me smile every time I come across it. The girl is wearing a simple, but beautiful white dress and wide-brimmed white hat, and he and the boy are wearing light blue suits. All of them smiling like the happy family they were.

1981 brought me into their equation, making three into four. I don't recall much from my early years, but I do remember his mustache and beard. He had a thick full face of hair, and looks like Donald Sutherland when he was in MASH.

Another memory I have is coming home one day after being out with my mom. He called me to their bedroom, and he was sitting in a rocking chair. I stopped in the doorway, stunned at what I saw. He had shaved his face. His bushy beard was gone and replaced with smooth skin. He hadn't taken into account what a man who spent most of his time outdoors would look like clean-shaven--his face was tanned from his forehead to nose, then the rest of his face was white, comically so. I heard my mom gasp from behind me. He hadn't told her he was going to shave.

We shared a special bond, not just the typical father-daughter bond, either. I spent countless hours with him growing up, helping him plant trees at the farm that used to belong to his father, riding next to him in his pickup, spending Sunday afternoons watching old movies. I will never forget when he made me sit through "Ben Hur," "Fiddler On The Roof," AND "Dr. Zhivago." Being eight-years-old and forced to sit still and be quiet through three long movies was torture at the time, but looking back, I wouldn't give it up for anything. He was also fond of James Bond movies, and we'd laugh every time one of the women would say, "Oh, James..."

When I moved out to attend college when I was seventeen, he took my leaving pretty hard, according to my mother, which strikes me as funny, as he was fine when my brother left the nest eight years earlier. Our bond was strong though, and we'd pick up right where we left off whenever I'd return home for the weekends.

The day he met my then-boyfriend, now soon-to-be-ex husband, was nerve-wracking for me. Both men hit it off, though, and that was all I could ask for. My wedding day was just like any woman could ask for--her father walking her down the aisle, and he kissed me on my cheek and whispered, "I love you" as he handed me over to my new husband.

Then, my parents divorced and he remarried. I became very angry with my father, and actually refused to talk to him for a period of time. I am not proud of this time in our lives, as I was not behaving as I was raised--to be a loving, compassionate, forgiving person, regardless of what someone has done to you. I said things and did things I would give anything to take back, but he treated me like a father should: he loved me unconditionally, and over time, our relationship became strong again.

He's sixty-years-old now, his once dark blond hair silver and slightly thinner, but he still has the same smile he did in the picture from his

youth-- and now, whenever I am with my father, I see myself. We share the same facial structure, the same build, the same nose, that same smile, and same laid-back, carefree attitude. I know this annoys my mother to no end, but I wouldn't change this for the world.

