

VC

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Vicky Clark was on the cusp of becoming a teenager and had never owned a bicycle. She and her three brothers shared a Stingray with its ape hanger handle bars and banana seat. Her parents couldn't afford to give everyone a bike, so Vicky had to wait her turn to ride it, which resulted in several scuffles. It was too small for her anyway. She was taller than most girls her age and her knees practically hit her chest with every rotation of the pedals.

One day, while visiting her grandparents, she was exploring a shed on their property when she spied something in the corner buried under a mound of boxes. Vicky immediately removed them to reveal an old rusty bicycle. Both of the tires were flat, the seat torn. The curve of the frame indicated it was a girl's bike, but it was sturdy and huge. Flecks of red paint shone through the metal decay. Her heart soared. Tears welled in her eyes. Vicky tried to move the bicycle from its roost, but she couldn't budge the heavy beast with two flat tires. She sighed as the tears of joy melded into sorrow. As she turned to leave the shed she saw her grandpa standing in the open door silhouetted by the morning light.

"It was your mother's bicycle." He smiled warmly gazing at the bike, remembering his daughter's golden hair flowing behind her as she rode.

Vicky patted the seat. Puffs of dust billowed out with every beat. "Wow, how old was she?"

"About your age. She rode that thing everywhere--forgot all about it when she met your father. She was much more interested in him," he chuckled.

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Vicky stepped aside to let her grandfather approach the bike. He placed his hands on his hips as he gazed at it. “It was a Christmas present to your mom in fifty-two...a Columbia, best on the market—a real tank.”

Her hopes were withering. “That was fifteen years ago.”

“Sure was.” He grabbed hold of the handle bars. “Let’s get it out of here and take a look see.”

Grandpa pulled hard to release the rubber from the weathered wood floor, and rolled the bicycle outside. It didn’t gleam in the sun. It was more like a coal miner squinting through ash covered eyes. She fell in love. Vicky saw what the Columbia could be—and so did Grandpa.

He replaced the tires, seat and chain. He sanded away the surface rust. The bicycle looked...well, not new. It had a lot of miles on it and it showed. Vicky didn’t care. Grandpa gave her the bike. It was the best gift ever.

He handed her a can of Flamingo pink paint. “Your grandmother was using this Rust oleum to paint the patio furniture with. As you know, she hates to waste anything, so when she was done with that, she moved on to the bathtub and then the dining room furniture before I could stop her. You’re saving me by using it.”

Vicky hugged the can to her chest. “I love pink, Grandpa. Thank you!”

She joyfully painted the Columbia Flamingo pink. She found some white and painted polka dots all over it then finished it off with her initials, “VC” on the back fender. Vicky rode VC everywhere—to school, the store, to visit friends, and just for a ride.

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Kids would tease her and shout, “Where’d ya get that tank?” and “Vicky rides a pink polka-dot elephant.” It all didn’t matter to her, they were just jealous.

Vicky was sitting on the curb watching the boys play “Chicken” on their Stingrays. They would pedal fast as they could toward one another until one of them chickened out and swerved away. She thought VC could take them on easily. Even if she hit a boy on his flimsy bike he would be the one to get hurt. Vicky challenged them. She was right. All the boys swerved away making her the winner. Unfortunately, the Vietnam War was raging and they gave VC the nickname, *Viet Cong*.

Kids would scream and ride away at the sight of Viet Cong—yet, it gave Vicky the satisfaction of knowing the boys were afraid of her pink polka-dot bike. It *was* a tank...her tank. Viet Cong. She heard a rumor of a teenage boy who owned a Schwinn Corvette cruiser with stainless steel fenders.

Her brothers said, “He has no fear. Just his face as he comes at you makes you chicken out. He’s tough. He calls his bike the Steel S.”

VC could take him on. Vicky was confident the boy wouldn’t want to mar his lovely stainless fender with her Flamingo pink paint. Her bike was old. It had seen combat. Besides, no boy could intimidate her with a stare, no sir. Her challenge for a chicken fight went out.

When the teenager arrived it seemed like all the kids in town came along too. It was going to be an epic battle of Viet Cong against the Steel S. Vicky stepped from her bike for the handshake. As she approached the boy she thought she would meet a big, ugly Viking. Instead, he was a regular guy...actually good looking. He was taller than she with dark wavy—his skin

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lightly bronzed from the summer sun. Sweat beaded on her brow as she held his hand. It was a firm, but gentle grip. He had nice hands.

“I’m Allen.” He smiled at her. Not a leer nor angry countenance but a genuine smile.

Vicky swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She had to look away. How could she look mean at someone like that? “Uh...” *Oh no, what’s my name?* “Uh...Vicky.”

She sucked in a breath and shook her head as she got into position on VC. “Crap, crap, crap,” she muttered. Vicky had to clear her mind of Allen’s good looks. Everyone was watching. She had to win. She began pedaling toward him, pushing the pedals hard to pick up speed. As she raced toward him she saw determination in Allen’s face; his jaw locked in place, his eyes not up at her, but on the road in deep concentration.

Vicky pedaled harder. Allen finally jerked his eyes up at her wide with terror. Impact was bearing down on him. She slammed on the brakes causing VC to slide wildly missing the Steel S. She went down hard, her knee scraping along on the gravel berm.

Silence...utter silence, as Vicky picked herself up. Blood trickled down her shin. When she lifted VC the crowd cheered, “Steel S kicked Viet Cong butt!”

Tears flowed from Vicky’s eyes. Allen began to get off of his bicycle to help her, his face full of pity. She held up a bruised hand in a signal to stop. Without a word, Vicky limped home with VC.

Her mother cleaned her wound. As she painfully dug the gravel out of Vicky’s knee she said, “It’s time for you to act like a lady.”

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*Ugh!* Vicky thought, but her mother was right. VC was a force to be reckoned with. She didn't have to prove it.

Six years later, Vicky once again entered her grandfather's shed to retrieve VC. As a young woman, Vicky was able to muscle the old bicycle from its nest and roll it outside into the sun. This time she did the repairs as Grandpa watched and gave her advice. The tires were still in good shape—they just needed air. She oiled the chain and brakes and replaced the handle bar grips. The plastic pedals had become brittle through the years, so she added new ones.

VC was ready for its mission. Vicky pedaled hard through the streets of her town to stay ahead of boys and girls riding Stingrays, Columbias, Schwinn's, and Murrays adorned with US flags. She careened around a corner. Ahead, standing in the middle of the street, was Allen dressed in olive green from head to toe. Above the right pocket of his jacket his last name, "Roman" was embroidered into the cloth--above the left, the words "U.S. Army".

VC sped toward the young man, his face one of shock and awe. Vicky pressed hard on the brake. This time, instead of crashing, she jumped off as VC fell onto its side. The children on their bicycles surrounded them. Vicky wrapped Allen tightly in her arms and whispered in his ear, "Welcome home."