

**Ida Ziegler**

by Nancy Smith Harris

It was one of those mid-August days when Duchess, our mutt, languished in the shady rectangle of our carport. On the seared lawn, box turtles scrambled in the grass, clawing their way to cool relief along the tree lined bank of Beaver Creek. My father knelt on the carport roof with a row of roofing nails held between his narrow lips. In profile, he appeared to have the bucked and piercing teeth of a dinosaur. He crouched, one knee and one foot on black tar paper like a sinner asking forgiveness. Dark crescents clung to his white shirt beneath his arms.

It was 1973, not Dad's favorite year.

That was the year in which the Supreme Court ruled against states prohibiting abortion. I remember that to me, back then, trying to see it through Dad's eyes, I imagined his uneasiness with the subject, so clearly did it seem linked to women on television who'd become dissatisfied with the nuclear family model he'd grown up with. Many were name-callers. "Male Chauvinist Pigs" became the requisite identifier of men among them. Such women smoked their own, exclusive brand of cigarettes. They were on the pill. I think my father was not so much a misogynist as he was someone comfortable with the world order as he knew it and scared by what changes might disrupt his modest life. His own mother was first a quiet wife, then a quiet widow. His wife was someone who trusted the Bible on most matters and believed in her wedding vows, though even she was not immune to the spirit of the times, as Dad had discovered.

Another disappointing event in 1973, in my father's eyes, was the departure of the last U.S. troops from Vietnam. It had been a confusing war from the start for someone like my father, who thought wars were fought against established enemies, not in jungles where opponents used guerilla tactics and were often invisible. In Vietnam, the enemy and the collaborator looked the same and spoke the same

language. My father appreciated the clarity of World War II; there were few doubts about who was who. No heroes emerged from the ranks of those who fought in Vietnam: no Audie Murphy, moving on from decorated combat veteran to film star; no George Patton, spawning an award-winning biographical blockbuster. Who ever heard of a war with no heroes? For Dad, a hesitant man who found a small measure of courage in reliving the battle victories of his countrymen, the American retreat from Vietnam was nothing short of shattering. The country lost its swagger; Dad lost his already tenuous confidence. It somehow became a personal defeat.

On that day in August, after coming down from the roof to eat lunch, Dad, perhaps silently enumerating the many recent and profound indignities of a changing world, sat at the kitchen table with his face downturned, lingering just that much longer over his coffee. His movements slowed. He placed his spoon with a touch more deliberation on his saucer. He pressed his lips a little longer with his napkin before folding it exactly twice, as always, and laying it down in the middle of the plate. There was an air of resignation in his movements.

This was the state of things on the blazing day he chose to be alone on the roof. When he climbed back up the ladder, Ida Ziegler's Impala was beneath him in the cool shade.

Ida Ziegler couldn't have known how much my father was made uneasy by her brand-new sedan, her confident walk, her ability to look him in the eye as if they were equals—as if she were a man. Man to man. That's how Ida Ziegler looked at my father. And my father, always ill-at-ease and deferential when this lady showed up to visit my blind and elderly Aunt Viola, could generally relax and joke about her at the table later, after her departures, in the safety and privacy of his own kitchen, in the seat of power at the head of the table.

"Ida Ziegler walks like a combat soldier but she can't be—the Goddamn Swiss won't fight anybody," or, "I think she had a sex change operation but it backfired."

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On that particular August afternoon, I reclined on a rusty glider tucked beneath the stairs that led to the porch and the kitchen door. I was painting my nails with polish stolen from my sister's bedroom.

Ida Ziegler burst through the downstairs door of our two-story rancher, did not acknowledge me, and stood glaring up at my dad on the roof, waiting for him to cease banging with his hammer.

Ida Ziegler, like Aunt Viola, was a single woman, a retired nurse. Ida came from a long line of Anabaptist Mennonites, flinty sharp-featured Swiss refugees who had been clustering for centuries in small farming communities along the banks of the Conestoga River. They carried chips on their persecuted shoulders one century after another, many of them modernizing their way out of horses and buggies and shoulder-to-floor black dresses but continuing to carry the belligerent attitude of a put-upon group. They spoke in the clipped accent of their ancient clan. To me, Ida Ziegler sounded like a commandant savagely shouting at Allied prisoners of war. My dad, an enlisted man who spent two seasick years on a tin can in the Pacific, and I had watched grainy footage of these men staggering through muddy fields at gun point as the commandant glared and hissed at them.

"Hank."

I saw him pause without looking up from the roof's surface. I knew what he was thinking: that he would like to pretend he hadn't heard her. But he would never be able to do that. He didn't have the nerve. I was the same way. We were both chickens, my dad and me, and we always felt bullied into doing the proper, if unpleasant thing, with little fuss. It was a curse.

"Hank I need a word with you."

He placed the hammer on the tar paper and came down the ladder slowly, as if taking his time on the descent might provoke Ida Ziegler's impatience and send her fleeing. But Ida Ziegler stood there in her tan slacks and ice blue cotton shirt with the collar turned up toward her permed gray hair. She had glasses with points at the corners. The points had little rhinestones in them and these flashed in the sun. Her cheeks were swabbed with too much rouge. She smelled overwhelmingly of scented talcum powder.

“What seems to be the matter?”

Dad’s tone was more highly pitched than usual. He’d once said that talking to Ida Ziegler was like talking to a teacher right before she gives you detention.

Sweat streamed down his cheeks—twin rivers merging at his chin, dripping onto his shirt. Rivulets meandered down his neck, disappearing into his open collar forming a tiny pool of moisture that glistened in the hollow of his throat, a reflective disk that flickered like the surface of a pond. He mopped his face with a shop rag.

“You need to do something about Viola. That poor woman sits in that bedroom and cries herself to sleep in the middle of the day. Your wife won’t talk to her. Never takes her out. It’s downright abusive. Her life is no better than a dog’s.”

“Dog’s” sounded like “dawk’s.”

My dad, who had been studying the top button on his white shirt, looked up. His mouth dropped open. He emitted that nervous little two-beat chuckle of his, then, “Me?” in a trilling falsetto, raising his hands as if in surrender. “Ida, that’s between Madge and Viola. I don’t interfere in—”

“You need to intervene, here. Hank. Talk some sense into Madge. She’s ruining what little time that poor woman has left on this earth.”

I watched the color retreat from Dad’s face. His shoulders rose and fell with the exertion of breathing. I imagined his heart pumping, slamming against his rib cage. He mopped his forehead again, then white-knuckled the rag in his fist.

Ida stood relentlessly erect.

Dad sighed. He looked at the line of laundry, stiff and baked, that cordoned off one half of the yard from the other. He looked at Duchess, whose head rested on her paw as she dozed unaware beneath the drone of a beehive in the overhead rafters. Ida Ziegler did not know what she was asking of him. She knew nothing of the unspoken pacts between husband and wife, the silent but understood agreements that took place in a marriage.

Dad looked up and I saw his expression change from that of helpless exasperation to sad resignation. From my berth under the stairs, I knew that what he saw up there was my mother’s face, tight with tension. She would have been listening at the open window.

“Hell, I don’t get into it with them.”

“You must talk to her.”

Cicadas, throbbing in the high grasses at the end of the driveway, turned up their volume. Dad put his hands on his hips and shook his head at the ground.

“We’re done here, Ida. That roof isn’t gonna take care of itself.” He waved to the roof with the rag and turned his back to her.

“Then I’ll speak to her myself,” Ida Ziegler barked and turned toward the stairs.

Dad blanched, his face growing even whiter. He looked stricken, and I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d clutched his chest and fallen to the ground like a dying cowboy in gun fight. Instead, he stepped between Ida and the stairs.

“Over my dead body, Ida,” he said, in a low but quivering voice. “You mind your own business, lady.”

That’s when Ida Ziegler spun around and clacked down the narrow stretch of sidewalk to her Impala, got in, and floored the gas pedal in neutral. Duchess lurched to her paws and scampered away with a whimper. A cloud of hazy smoke blew from the exhaust pipe. Ida backed out and barreled up Greenwood Road, pebbles ricocheting rapid fire from beneath her tires, a trail of dust clinging to the air behind her Impala.

My dad stood gazing at the dust cloud hovering over Greenwood Road.

“...No way to treat an engine like that,” he said mournfully before climbing back up the ladder and kneeling to his work.

“Hank?” My mother had waited until Ida Ziegler’s car was up the hill and safely out of sight on Route 39 before emerging from her kitchen sanctuary. She stood at the top of the stairs on the porch, drying her hands with a dish towel. “What did she want?”

“Huh?”

“I said what did Ida Ziegler want?”

“I don’t know,” he said, dropping his shoulders and shaking his head, “I just don’t know.”

To make things worse for Dad, a new minister had arrived at the church in the spring and he made deacons of some of the female congregants. My mother was one of the first to break that glass ceiling. She began attending meetings on weeknights,

leaving dinner on the table on her way out the door. My sister and I took advantage of Mom's absence and swept our plates into the family room, slung our legs over opposite ends of the sofa and watched tv. Beyond the tv was a wood-burning stove, beyond the stove, the kitchen. From our vantage point, we could see Dad take his seat at the head of the empty table, muttering something about "holy rollers" as he meticulously sliced a brick of meatloaf into manageable bite-sized bits and stabbed peas with his fork.

On those nights, Aunt Viola, a victim of a botched cataract surgery, took her meals on a tray downstairs in her room.

Sometimes I'd knock on the door and she'd say, "come in," in a falsely cheerful voice. I think that improvised optimism is what made it hard to go in there and sit on the bed and make small talk with her as she sat with her eyes closed, an ear turned to the Phillies game on tv. There is nothing like the helplessness of a fourteen-year-old watching a lonely woman paint a pleasant smile on her lips, speaking in a forced light-hearted tone, her shoulders sloping inward toward her chest, the white down above her lip growing thicker every day.

Back then, a realization never occurred to me explicitly and yet the message was clear: this is what happens to women who choose careers over marriage and children. There is no one there who loves them when they finally need love most. They end up in the care of relations who are ambivalent or worse. Even though Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Helen Reddy, and their like would shape a convincing message to the contrary, it was a message that did not work for everyone. What does any of it mean to people who witness the rougher facts of life, who live at the end of a dirt lane outside of a small town?

Ida Ziegler continued to visit Aunt Viola every other weekend for the rest of my aunt's life, but she never again said a word to my father. She let herself in through the door downstairs, stayed for an hour or two and departed. She wore a drawn lip look of disgust and walked without glancing from one side or the other.

My parents remained stubbornly complicit: my father ignoring the cold manner of my mother in all her dealings with my aunt; my mother coldly doling out sandwiches and

clean laundry to a blind woman between choir practice and consistory meetings at Saint Thomas.

Unrelieved unease lay in the air in those days. People, usually visitors from milder climates, complain to this day about the hot humid summers of the region, but for my family, in that time and place, the weather was not a problem. We hardly noticed it.

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