

15 MINUTES

An American Girl with a gloriously checkered past

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Renee Burnett ambled into City Tavern on a pretty Saturday afternoon before Thanksgiving. She has the confident walk and slouch of a cowboy from the movies, like Val Kilmer in "Tombstone." She also has Kilmer's effervescent, frozen stare and shy drawl. Ms. Burnett shot some pool with a few friends, sipped a Bud Light and watched Ohio State lose to Michigan.

The jukebox played as well, a soulful song about the kind of girl you can find in America. Tom Petty sang, "Well, she was an American Girl, raised on promises." Ms. Burnett took a sip of her beer and began to mouth the words to the song, as if she were that girl, telling people about her own tough, glorious experience. "Well, it was a great big world, with a lot of places to run to...Oh yeah, all right, take it easy baby, make it last all night."

Ms. Burnett seemed to identify with the adventuresome girl in the song, although her knee-jerk reaction is to think of her experiences as a string of unrelated events: common, mundane, boring. But being a try-anything-once type of gal, she agreed to an interview anyway. A Basic 100 cigarette hanging from her lips, she offered a spare, stoic history. "I never met my real mom; she died in prison. My father was in the service. I was a Marine brat. I did bad in school. And that's about all of it."

With her lean, lanky figure and boyish haircut, Ms. Burnett can appear twice as young as she is. But in other ways she looks twice as old. She often refers to her-

self as "the kid."

"This kid can make it out here," she'll say, referring to the big, crazy world, one in which she has often lived recklessly. "I'm a good kid. I never meant to do anybody wrong. We all (mess) up — you know that."

Her tails of misbegotten adventure include being arrested twice for surfing in bad weather and three times for bridge jumping. "You just hang and drop, point your toes straight down or you can break your ankles," she said. "You immediately start swimming to the top, and then you find land."

She's also been arrested four times for driving drunk. Last year, she was "going 120 miles per hour," was drunk, and resisted arrest. The episode landed her in jail for seven months. She was also severely injured in the course of trying to escape the police.

"I was in the hospital for two days before they took me to jail," she said. "But I deserved it."

Remembrances of her life are literally tattooed all over her. Some tattoos cover up other ones, the names of old girlfriends. One on her left bicep reads "U.S.M.C." That one is about her father, who spent more than 20 years in the Marine Corps. Her favorite memory of her father?

"He looked like Elvis (Presley)," she said. "Just like Elvis."

She found a picture of him in her wallet; he died years ago. She also had a pinup girl in there. "That's my baby," Ms. Burnett laughs, "I wish." There was also a picture of herself as a baby. "See my mohawk?"

she asked. "Wasn't I cute?"

Another tattoo on her arm is a band with two feathers hanging from it. That one's about her biological mother (her father remarried seven times), a Cherokee Indian who was sent to jail on drug-related charges, and died in prison in the mid-1990s. They never met.

"I'm Indian-Italian," Ms. Burnett said. "And I'm Catholic. I've always thought that was a good mix."

In a pinball game of childhood, she traveled with her father, leaving a trail of friendships behind. Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee, Germany and Connecticut name a few stops along the way. She learned to be a "pen pal" to many of her far-flung friends. Ms. Burnett moved from Fort Lauderdale to Fort Myers, where her uncle lives. For years, she was a dishwasher and then cook at The Clock, a diner in North Fort Myers.

Now she lives in an apartment building in downtown Fort Myers, a few blocks from City Tavern. She helps cook and clean for some residents there. One of her clients is Gary Harness, a down-on-his-luck artist with a gloriously checkered past all his own.

"(Ms. Burnett) is multi-talented and she



Renee Burnett

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puts herself down too much," Mr. Harness said. "I think I've kind of been doing that myself lately. It's the same story as mine, the same kind of thing, just people falling between the cracks."

The football game concluded. Ms. Burnett stayed for another round of beer and a game of pool.

"I guess I have some good stories after all," she said.

She plans to leave Fort Myers and perhaps move back to one of her favorite youthful haunts, Chattanooga, Tenn.

"The last thing I want to do before I die is see snow again," she said, describing the falling of snow with a downward motion of her hands. "You know how it falls on the ground like this and disappears? Anyway, I've never built a snowman." ■



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