

Tracy's Kitchen Center

By Stephen Rusiniak

“I mourn the passing of the days when I was still the slayer of her dragons, the great daddy and hero.”

It all began with our neighbor's decision to hold a garage sale and asking if we would like to participate. My wife, Karen, saw it as a great excuse to clean up around our house while our kids saw it as an opportunity to make a little money by selling items they no longer wanted. Happily, they began sorting, choosing, and getting ready for sale their old books, toys, and other once-upon-a-time cherished possessions. My daughter, Tracy, decided to sell her long-abandoned Fisher Price Kitchen Center. Little did I know just what her decision would soon mean to me.

Tracy was three when she became the proud owner of the center and she wasted no time getting down to the business of pretend cooking for her dolls, stuffed animals, and of course, for her daddy. Imaginary meals consisting of plastic fruit served with tiny imitation canned goods were presented on little blue-plastic plates for our make-believe consumption. Pretend coffee was brewed atop the cartoon-like representation of a stovetop and served in tiny teacups—Tracy remembering, as she poured, “just milk, no sugar, right Daddy?”.

Happy hours spent creating imaginary culinary offerings continued for some time until slowly, these delights gave way to newer creations consisting of honest to goodness ingredients. The kitchen center was eventually replaced with her newest favorite childhood domestic device—an Easy Bake Oven. Her earliest attempts at baking were destined to end up as small misshapen blackened batter-pods but soon they morphed into more recognizable—and edible, tiny cakes and pies.

Her improvement hastened further experimentation and successes soon followed but as time went by, the days of miniature baked creations soon faded into obscurity. Real dinners and real baked desserts made in our real kitchen replaced the make-believe world created with the help of her pretend appliances.

The Easy Bake Oven was placed in a cabinet awaiting future orders and the kitchen center was removed to a remote corner of the basement. Something else was happening during this period as well but I had yet to notice: my little culinary creator was growing up right before my eyes and the thing is, I never saw it coming.

When the two-day garage sale was over, the unsold unwanted items were gathered and deposited curbside as trash. That night, one by one, these pieces were scooped up and by morning all that remained was the kitchen center. Tracy viewed its rejection with a nonchalant, “oh well,” but I



Tracy, at three, creating imaginary culinary creations at her Fisher Price Kitchen Center

took it far more personal. How could I have been so insensitive as to toss out such an important piece of my daughter's childhood? Slowly, I began to realize why her blue and white plastic kitchen center suddenly mattered so much to me.

Perhaps the disposition of the center curbside represented nothing more than the reluctant acknowledgment of my own mortality and the admission that I am in fact, growing older. As she blossoms into the early stages of womanhood, I grudgingly concede the reality that daddy's little girl is growing up. And, to this end, I remain a prisoner, trapped within my own internal battle of conflicting opinion—bouncing back and forth between the desire to forever hold on to my little blue-eyed blonde *baby dear* and my fervent wish to set her free.

How strange the paradox that we as parents anxiously await and indeed celebrate our cherub's earliest childhood achievements and then wait for the next and then, the next—chubby little legs taking their first uncertain steps; first words, first tooth, first grade. I mourn the passing of the days when I was still the slayer of her dragons, the great daddy, and hero.

I miss the simple things that meant so much to her like running under a lawn sprinkler on a hot summer day or making snow angels after a winter's storm; of all things related to pigs and Pooh Bear and her snuggling between Karen and me after a scary dream chased her to the security of our bed. Oh, how I miss the days of tickle monsters, timeouts, and all those bedtime readings of **Clifford the Big Red Dog** and of course, **Good Night Moon**.



During private moments of quiet contemplation, I have come to realize it is best to remember the past—indeed, to celebrate all that was and then look forward to all that has yet to be: high school and boyfriends, driving lessons, the college years, beginning a career, walking down the aisle, becoming somebody's mommy. But, for right now, my little girl is fourteen going on forty. I kind of like this time too.

On the final night before its scheduled banishment into trash eternity, Tracy's kitchen center vanished.

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the backstory:

Inspiration for my pieces can come from anywhere, and in this case, inspiration was born of nothing more than simply seeing something that hours before I'd put out as trash: my daughter's one-time favorite childhood toy—of course, her Fischer Price Kitchen Center. An important part of her past had been deposited curbside—abandoned, unwanted and left with the rest of the unsold items awaiting our next trash pickup. This bothered me—a lot, and so, I wrote about it!

(continued on next page)

Sometimes it's amazing—the things that we remember; the things that we hold dear, and as such, this piece became my reluctant admission: daddy's little girl was growing up.

Tracy's kitchen center was my second published piece—appearing first in a local parenting publication and then in a national magazine (under the title, **Nourishing the Soul**, which for me became a lesson learned about working with editors and how their sometimes subtle edits can change the trajectory of a story). The writer credited for this and my first published piece was a guy named “*Stephen Wayne*.” For more on this bogus *writer*, please check out my website bio page for details!

by the way:

As I was writing the original piece, two different Country songs kept playing in my head—each reminding me of my “*baby dear*,” (not a misspelling—Karen was “*my dear*” and Tracy my “*baby dear*.” Yeah, yeah, I know)! The songs: **Butterfly Kisses**—sung by the Raybon Brothers and **I Think About You** by Collin Raye. Give them a listen sometime and you'll totally understand why I found each so inspirational and altogether fitting!

and about the kitchen center photos:

The Kitchen Center photos with Tracy included with this piece and below were from a video recorded on my old VHS camcorder (remember them) and then converted into photo stills.

And a little something about the day the video was recorded: Tracy was supposed to be sleeping, but noises from her upstairs bedroom told me that she wasn't. My camcorder and I went to investigate, and as the grainy photos show, Tracy was busy creating imaginary masterpieces at her kitchen center—back then, still an important fixture in her bedroom!

But what the photos can't possibly reveal was that Tracy should have been in bed. She was home sick from daycare that day with a pretty good case of strep throat, and at the time, a rather high fever!



(next page for the originally published piece written by “*Stephen Wayne*”)

This was the second of eight pieces that I was fortunate to have had appear in a local parenting publication, *"The Parent Paper."* After this one, two more would be published under the name *"Stephen Wayne,"* but this would soon change after the editor suggested that I begin using my real name—which I have done ever since. Bless you, Mary, and thank you for insisting!

INDIVIDUAL VOICES

Tracy's kitchen center

BY STEPHEN WAYNE



The author's daughter, now and then.

Individual Voices is a section that allows mothers and fathers throughout our area to express their views about various aspects of parenting. Readers are encouraged to submit essays of 500-750 words on a subject related to family life that will enlighten, amuse, or educate other parents. Readers whose essays are printed will receive a package of children's books and tapes. Submit manuscripts by mail to: The Parent Paper, 1 Garret Mountain Plaza, PO Box 471, West Paterson, NJ 07424-0471; by fax: 973-569-7725; or by e-mail: parentpaper@northjersey.com.

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Stephen Wayne is a husband and father who lives in north Jersey.