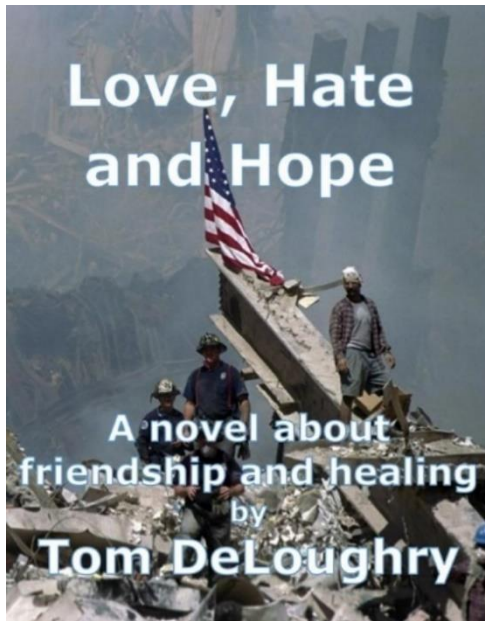


Love, Hate and Hope

A Novel by Tom DeLoughry



A Bible,
open to a plea for forgiveness,
was found fused to molten metal
in the rubble of the Twin Towers.

*Was it a message from
Donna, an ex-minister,
who disappeared that day?*

The story travels back to the '60s,
and to the Bahamas, Buffalo,
Vietnam and the Holy Land
for answers.

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For the entire novel, please visit: www.LLHnovel.com

Author's Note, Dedication and Copyright

This book is a work of historical fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of my imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, (except as noted below) as well as business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Although Susan and Donna are fictitious, the character of Ed draws from my visit to the Holy Land and my service as a senior counselor at a storefront drug abuse center; director of drug abuse services and the adolescent psychiatry program at a children's hospital; director of wellness and disease management for a large managed care organization and director of a Franciscan retreat center.

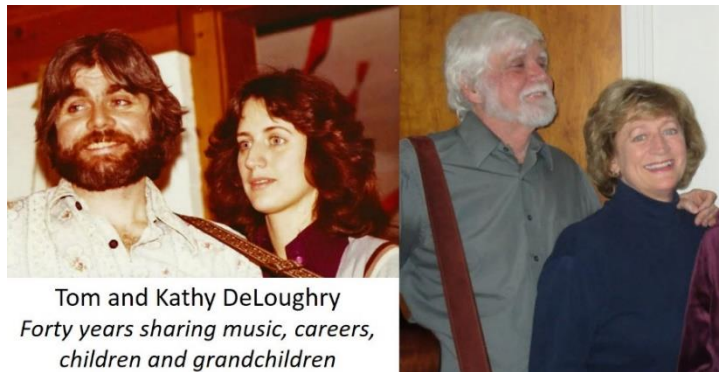
Many historical novels focus on political leaders of that time. By contrast, *Love, Hate and Hope* focuses on the spiritual leaders of the twentieth and twenty-first century including: Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King, Rev. Jerry Falwell, Ram Dass, Swami Rama, Bishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama.

Martin Luther King did visit the Bahamas in 1965 while preparing his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, and again in 1968 a week before his death. His conversation with Ansil, a local fishing guide, on Bonefish Creek about the existence of God has been well documented.

The discussion guide (available in October) will document the people and events that had an impact on Donna, Susan and Ed including: the murder of Martin Luther King; the Kent State demonstrations, the fall of Saigon (April 30th, 1975), the Buffalo Blizzard of '77, the September 11th terror attacks, the invasion of Iraq, the Dalai Lama's 2006 Buffalo 2006 visit, and the 2013 the Supreme Court ruling that recognized same sex marriage. Links will be provided so that readers may learn more about these events.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Tom and Loretta DeLoughry. They were my best teachers when my life was beginning and, again, when their lives were ending

It is also dedicated to my wife, Kathy, who taught me more about love than any book or preacher.



Tom and Kathy DeLoughry
Forty years sharing music, careers,
children and grandchildren

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Prologue: Susan - 2016

Donna appeared in my life the day that Martin Luther King was murdered, then disappeared the day the Twin Towers were destroyed. She wanted a life of love, but hate marked the beginning and end of our friendship.

We had been warned. The day we met, on spring break in the sixties, a Bahamian woman told us, "Religion and forgiveness are dangerous medicines. Too little can harm. Too much can kill."

We had joked about the "danger" years later, on the day she was ordained. But I never imagined that religion would kill a career devoted to love, or that the name of God would be on the lips of the fanatics who flew two planes into the Twin Towers on September 11th.

I wish you could have met her. Words can't capture her smile, the sparkle in her eyes or the goodness in her heart.

I'm going to write our story exactly as I remember it, starting with the day Donna vanished, and how we found her Bible years later. But mostly I want to tell you about our friendship, our music and how Donna, Ed and I struggled to find a life of love - the great wish that was always her goal.

Vanished - Susan: September 10, 2001 - Buffalo

Donna telephoned, sobbing. "Susan, they convicted me."

"Oh, Donna, I'm so sorry," I said, a twist of anger and misery growing in my chest.

"It's over. No church will hire me now. I'm finished as a minister. Finished."

I slumped down on a chair. "Oh, Donna, you were so brave, so good. How could they?" We cried, harmonizing our pain, me in my kitchen and my best friend in her apartment three hundred miles away.

"I'm so sorry," I said, looking at the half-painted green wall I was facing. I put my brush down on the edge of the can. "I should have been there to support you, instead of trying to fix up the house before the family reunion." I paused, listening to her cry. "I'm so sorry."

Her sobs slowed to sniffles. "The way I see it," I said, "you're only guilty of following the Golden Rule instead of church rules. I'm proud of you."

"I don't know what to do."

"Is there any hope?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be thinking about hope if you were in my shoes today," she replied with a bitter laugh.

"Oh, Donna, I can't imagine how awful that must have been. I really can't," I said, "But what attracted me to our church is that *we* vote on the rules. And your courage has been so widely publicized that I think a lot of us will vote to change things."

"I don't know, Susan. I'm so tired. Tired of trying. If I could, I'd just disappear. Let someone else carry the flag. No more fighting. I'm done."

The controversy had surfaced last April. Six months of media attention and the fights within her congregation had worn her down.

"Who wouldn't be exhausted by what you've gone through? Can you come to Buffalo and stay with us for a while? A few days, a few months, whatever you need to recover and decide what's next."

"Thank you, I was hoping you'd offer. I checked Amtrak, and I can get the 7:46 train out of Yonkers in the morning and get to Buffalo by three."

The next morning, as I watched the horror of the Twin Towers tumbling on television, I was sure Donna was safe, traveling away from New York, up the Hudson, halfway to Albany. She had no reason to be in Manhattan, thirty miles south of where her fellow ministers had defrocked her. But she never got off the train when it pulled into the Buffalo station at 3:01 PM.

Donna, a 58-year-old ex-minister, had vanished.

The Museum - Susan: September 20, 2013 - The World Trade Center

The September 11th Memorial Museum at the World Trade Center finally opened twelve years after the attack.

As Ed and I entered, my hand was slippery with sweat on the handrail as the escalator slid down under two girders, battered remnants of the Twin Towers. I leaned on my cane, steadying myself against the movement and the memories as we went down through the Manhattan bedrock to the Memorial Museum, seven stories below where the Towers once soared.

Memorial Hall was a vast space. A quote from Virgil: *No day shall erase you from the memory of time*, blazed from an enormous wall with a thousand different shades of blue, recalling the beautiful sky that hung over that horrible day.

"No day shall ever erase you," I murmured as we sank deeper into the museum.

"How could we ever forget her?" Ed said. He towered over me, still lean and handsome despite wrinkles under a healthy shock of silver hair. "Even now, I still ache. I hate to think about what happened, but I still wonder if it was suicide," rehashing the hole in our hearts for the thousandth time.

I'd have slapped him if I hadn't heard it so many times before.

"I mean, Susan," Ed continued, "think about how she loved being a minister." His brow wrinkled. "How awful to have that ripped away. Plus, there was all the hate mail and the media coverage. If it was me, I'd have at least thought about jumping off a bridge."

Ed's strong point was honesty. I'd always wished it was sensitivity. If Donna had killed herself, wasn't it my fault for not being there?

I felt the guilt starting to drain me again, but decided to choose gratitude. "How about when we're done," I suggested, "we go someplace nice for lunch and make a toast to all the good times we had?"

Ed smiled. "Then we were three young folk singers who wanted to change the world. Now we're just two old fogies and the world ignores us."

“Pardon me?” I said, “I’m certainly not ready to be ignored, and I know you’re not either. Unless you’ve decided to cancel the publication of your book next month.”

"Well, even if it doesn't sell, writing is a cheap hobby that keeps me out of trouble," he smiled.

"I don't know, Ed. What about the chapter where you say terrorism has caused 4000 American deaths over the past 12 years? And then you compare it to 400,000 deaths from gun violence and three million deaths from medical errors during the same time period. Don't you think that's going to get you into trouble with somebody?"

"I think all of us are already in trouble," Ed said, "because we make decisions based on our fears, rather than what's causing the most harm. But that's a discussion for another day."

He took my elbow to steady me as the escalator reached bottom, the entrance to a cavernous shrine to panic and pain. A jolt shot down my leg as I stepped off, but according to my physical therapist, I'm doing well for a lady with a recent hip replacement.

For the next twenty minutes we barely spoke as we relived the nightmare, the ball of flame erupting as the plane struck the Tower, the sickening sounds as the jumpers hit the sidewalk and the crushed fire truck, a relic of the 343 firefighters who died.

“And, here, ladies and gentlemen, is what has come to be called the ‘911 Bible’,” the tour guide said. “It was found fused to a steel girder when the rubble of the Twin Towers was being removed so this museum could be created.



“What is most remarkable,” he continued, “is that a page from the New Testament is clearly legible. You can see Jesus’ words printed in red: ‘...if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other cheek.’ ...His message of forgiveness.”

As soon as I saw it, I knew. The bubble of grief started in my stomach, grew in my chest and burst in my head with an explosion of tears.

“It’s Donna’s,” I sobbed, barely above a whisper.

Ed faced me, his eyes widening as he touched my shoulder. “What?” he asked.

My chin trembled. I grabbed his arm and steadied myself as another bubble of pain rose and burst. “It’s Donna’s,” I pointed. “It’s her Bible!”

Ed turned to the display. “Oh, my God,” he murmured. “Is it possible?” His chest heaved and his eyes glistened.

I looked at the charred margins of the book and the message that was embedded in the molten metal. “She liked this Bible because all of Christ’s words are printed in red, and it uses the old English phrases she preferred.” I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. “Ed, do you remember? ‘Turn the other cheek’ was one of her favorite sayings. And God knows that there were plenty of people in her life to forgive.”

“It looks like the one Donna used,” Ed said, bending to get a closer look. “You gave it to her on the day she was ordained. I remember how happy she was.

“But, Susan, there must be tens of thousands of this exact same edition. What are the odds that this one is hers?” He paused. “And how did it get here?”

Perfectly Safe – Susan: Nassau, The Bahamas, April 3, 1968

“Don’t worry, Susan, it’s perfectly safe!” Anne yelled to be heard over the steel drums and the noise from the bar we had just left. “We just say ‘no thanks’ to any car with two or more guys.”

Her blond hair flowed around her face as she half twirled to embrace the street party. “We’re in Nassau, girl. Time to let loose and live!”

The souvenir shops had been shuttered for hours, but the action on the sidewalks had been growing since dark.

“No, Anne,” I insisted, “It’s too dangerous to hitchhike.” ‘No’ was never easy for me to say, but being with Anne was giving me plenty of practice.

Two celebrations were merging in the streets and in the bars. Hordes of college kids on spring break mingled with the local Negroes, many who had been at a political rally near the Straw Market. The locals greeted each other with shouts of “Hey, man, PLP all the way!”, their slogan for the success of the Progressive Liberal Party in next week’s election.

“There are dozens of lonely guys who would love to give us a ride. If either of us is uncomfortable with whoever stops, we won’t get into the car. OK?” Anne said, capturing me with her wide-eyed sincere look.

“Or, if you want to walk” she offered, “I’ll meet you back at the hotel.”

I sighed. “OK. Let’s stick together.”

Anne tucked her tee shirt tighter into her pants, emphasizing a chest that was already hard to ignore. Then she stepped into traffic and stuck out her thumb

“You’re such a show-off!” I said, loosening my ponytail. I knew that my green eyes were more striking when my dark hair framed my face and curled over my breasts. When we were out drinking with our housemates, I usually attracted the most guys, but Anne was the girl who took one home.

Anne was the last person I would have chosen as my roommate on spring break. But one by one, each of our housemates had backed out of the trip I organized, leaving just the two of us. Lately it seemed they all did things without inviting me. At least Dave was loyal, but after two years with the same boyfriend, I was getting tired of the routine, so I had planned this as a girls-only last blast before we graduated. I needed to feel free, even if it was just for one week.

The bars were so jammed that the dancing had spilled onto the street. Swarms of college kids laughed as they stumbled over cobblestones, their happiness fueled by freedom, beer and the bottles of the local rum they carried in brown paper bags.

Most of the girls were dressed like Anne, a sloppy tee shirt with shorts or cut-offs. Did my blue silk sleeveless blouse make me look overdressed?

“I can’t wait to get back to the hotel,” I said stepping out to stand next to her. “My feet hurt.”

One boy wretched at the base of a palm tree while his friends jeered. The tree, and about half the storefronts in town, were plastered with political posters proclaiming “PLP All the Way!!”

“I still don’t get why everyone is so excited about an election,” Anne said, glancing at a nearby PLP poster. “I mean, isn’t this a British colony and the Queen is in charge?”

Politics wasn’t Anne’s thing. She was a sociology major who was writing her senior thesis on “Gossip as a Form of Truth-Telling within Groups.”

“Well, the Queen is really a figurehead,” I replied. “One of the tour guides told me that that, although the Bahamas is only 10% white, next week’s election is the first time that the Negro candidates in the PLP - the Progressive Liberal Party – may win a majority in both the Bahamian House and Senate. So maybe it feels to them like Emancipation Day is coming.

A small white car pulled over. As Anne bent to look inside, a melodic baritone asked, “What is your destination, miss?”

“The Ocean View Hotel,” said Anne, turning to me with a big smile

“It is on my way home. I would be most happy to drop you off,” said the deep voice, resonating with a lovely West Indies accent.

Anne crawled into the rear seat and I squeezed in after her. I noted an appealing smell of jasmine and musk, tinged with a sweet hint of whiskey.

“PLP All the Way!” Anne declared.

“I’m sorry, miss, I can’t discuss politics. I am a police officer,” the driver said as he turned to look at us.

Oh shit. Ann had been smoking dope with a boy on the patio just before we left the last bar. What if she had a joint on her? Could I be arrested and charged as an accessory?

And then, in the light filtering in from the street, I saw that he was gorgeous. Like if Harry Belafonte had a better-looking older brother. His smile gleamed and his skin was a dark as the space between the stars.

“You don’t look like a police officer,” Anne said, “and this doesn’t look like a police car.”

Sure, Anne. Start an argument.

He laughed and the sweet whiskey smell was stronger.

“I am indeed a police officer, but I am not on duty. My office is just a one block detour from the most direct route to your hotel. I need to pick up some papers to review this evening, so I will show you.”

He put the car in gear and we sped off.

Oh, no! He’s taking us to jail, I thought squeezing Anne’s hand.

Anne squeezed back and looked at me with a huge grin. She was either stupid or stoned. Probably both.

“How long have you been a police officer?” Anne asked

“Over 15 years. However, the Bahamas only have a small force with limited resources, so I was trained as a detective by Scotland Yard.” The inflections of his accent delighted me.

“Scotland Yard?” I asked, “like in London?”

“Yes, Miss,” he said, glancing at me in the rear view mirror. His eyes were beautiful, soft and deep. “I was there for one year. Our final exam started when they gave me a piece of paper with nothing on it but an address. And then I had to solve a murder.

“Did you get your man?” Anne asked.

“It was a woman, and I got her.” The boom of his laugh filled the car.

Anne raised her eyebrows with that little smirk that meant she was having dirty thoughts again.

“Is there much crime in the Bahamas?” I asked.

“Not since they made me Inspector,” he laughed again.

The car turned into a side street and then into a short driveway guarded by an officer in a white uniform and a tall safari hat.

“Good evening, Inspector,” the guard saluted, and then stepped back to push something that raised the barrier.

“You see? I *am* a police officer,” he said, pulling across a dimly lit courtyard to park next to a large stone building.

Back home I’d been in protests against the Vietnam War and I was still angry at the police who tear gassed us.

“Is it true that the police sometimes torture criminals?” I asked.

He twisted around to look at me and a shadow passed across his face. “No, Miss,” he said seriously. “We don’t torture them. We just scare the shit out of them.”

As he leaned towards me, I drew back into the seat.

“For example, when I am interrogating a suspect I will sometimes show them an electric cord with bare wires at the end.” He raised a fist grasping the imaginary cord.

“Then, I’ll touch it to metal so he can hear the *pop!*” jerking his fist in the air between Anne and me. “I make sure he watches the sparks fly.”

“Then, I’ll come very close,” he said softly, watching me, his eyes sweeping from my face to my breasts, then back again.

Now his large black fist was just inches from my nose.

“And then, I’ll ask ‘Tell me, have you ever felt electricity?’” My heart was hammering so hard I could hear the blood rushing past my ears.

“I’ll move the wire so that it’s almost touching his nose ...or maybe his cheek.”

His fist slowly brushed my hair from my cheek. My palms were wet on the seat.

“But, there’s no danger,” he smiled. “My partner has unplugged the wire, so that it’s harmless.” His finger gently touched the tip of my nose, and another whiskey laugh filled the car.

“You see? We don’t torture them,” he repeated as he opened the door. “We just scare the shit out of them!” His laughter faded as he left the car, fading into the gloom beside the building.

After he walked away, Anne burst out, “Jesus, Susan! Crime rates and torture stories? Is that your idea of how to flirt with a man?”

“I’m not flirting! I’m just trying to get back to our hotel, without getting arrested.”

I quickly looked out the back window to see if anyone was approaching. The courtyard was deserted other than a few police cars parked under the palms.

“You were smoking dope less than an hour ago,” I whispered. “Plus, I think he’s drunk!”

“So are we, sweetie!” she said getting out of the back seat and moving up to the passenger seat.

A few minutes later he got into the car, putting a large envelope on the front dashboard.

“Thank you for giving us a ride,” Anne smiled. “By the way, I’m Anne and this is Susan. We realize it’s late and we’re sorry to delay you from getting home to your family.”

“As of last month, I have no family,” the Inspector said softly as he started the car.

He paused to look at her. “My wife has left me. All that remains is the frame of the most beautiful house I was building for her.

“It’s up there on the hill overlooking the harbor where the cruise ships dock. The stars are very beautiful tonight. Would you like to see it?”

“Oh, I’d love to!” Anne said. “What about you, Susan? Are your feet still hurting you?” she hinted.

“Yes. I would never have worn these shoes if I knew we were going to do so much walking.”

Oh my God. I’m in a car in a foreign country with a beautiful man and I sound exactly like my mother.

I slumped in the seat. “Could you drop me at our hotel on your way?”

It was well after midnight and a party was raging at the hotel pool. So I thought I’d stop and soak my feet and see how long it would take for someone to offer me a drink.

I couldn’t stop thinking about what Anne and the Inspector were probably doing at his half-built house with the great view of the harbor and the stars.

I wanted the Inspector, but felt an urge that any man might satisfy. In nearly two years I've never once been unfaithful to Dave, but maybe it's time.

God damn, Anne. She rushed me out when we were leaving for the plane and I never packed my birth control. I think I only had nine or ten pills left for the month. The last seven were duds to keep me in the habit of taking a pill every day, so I'm probably safe.

"Hi, I'm Harry. Would you like a beer?"

I turned to see a very fit, very cute guy in cutoff jeans. He didn't seem hairy at all but I loved the twinkle in his eye, his high cheekbones and his soft Southern drawl.

"I'd be happy to split one with you," I smiled.

Etiquette required that Harry and I have a conversation to establish that we liked each other before I invited him up to my room. Or at least I thought that was the routine. Other than Dave, my steady back home, I'd only been intimate with one other guy - if "intimate" meant a back seat struggle with a high school jock who didn't know what "no" meant.

But Harry's conversation was so inane. For example: "Did you see 'The Graduate'? Didn't you think it was a great movie?"

I just had to be honest. "Actually, I thought it was stupid. I would never date a guy like that. All he did was mope around and act annoying."

His cute face crumpled as if I had just told him that *he* was a stupid, annoying mope. Come to think of it, maybe he was, but I really didn't want to have that conversation.

"I'm getting tired. Would you mind walking me to my room?" I said.

A few minutes later, he had fumbled off my bra, removed my panties and was lying next to me.

I closed my eyes and kissed him, imagining he was the Inspector. We were on his front porch overlooking the harbor. His dark hand moved over my breasts, touching, teasing. I felt a surge a pleasure as he moved inside me, and then I saw the stars too.

Alone – Susan: Nassau, The Bahamas – April 4, 1968

I got a glimpse of Harry's back as he snuck out sometime during the night, then woke up around eight as Anne returned with red-rimmed eyes, wearing a wrinkled shirt.

"Nathan dropped me off on his way to work," she said, as if using the Inspector's name was necessary to establish their intimacy. "What a night!" stretching with a satisfied smile.

I was annoyed that Anne had outmaneuvered me last night, so I couldn't resist a little zinger. "You've had a lot of good nights since we've been here," I said rolling over to go back to sleep. My pounding head ached for aspirin, but I didn't want her to know I had a hangover.

"You know, Susan, I'm getting a little tired of your snide remarks," Anne said as she sat down on her bed to take off her shoes.

Whoops, time to surrender gracefully. I didn't want Anne to be mad. We still had three more days before we flew home.

"Oh I'm sorry," I said. "I wasn't being critical. The Inspector, I mean Nathan, is a gorgeous guy and I'm glad you had a good time with him."

I rolled away again toward the wall and closed my eyes, hoping to end the discussion and get a little more sleep.

Now Anne's voice was coming from the foot of my bed, so I had to look. "Listen, Susan, we have to talk. You often have this look or a tone I'm uncomfortable with, like you're judging me or something."

"Anne, I'm not judging you," I lied. My mind was always judging everybody, and most of the time I did well by comparison. It was hard to turn it off, but I wanted to be nice so I said, "A lot of girls have sex with different guys. You should enjoy yourself like everyone else on spring break. It's the sexual revolution, remember?"

She looked away from me as she walked back toward her bed.

"I guess I'm just different," I felt the brag coming on, but I couldn't stop myself. "I've always been faithful to Dave because I find there's a comfort in having that kind of love and trust with each other." I wanted Anne to think I was high class, even if wasn't always true.

Anne shook her head and muttered something I couldn't hear. I may have made a mistake last night, but it was a one-time slip up for me. For Anne, sex with strangers was a lifestyle. She moved toward the bathroom, no doubt to shower the sin off her skin.

"What's that?" She said pointing to the long narrow space between my bed and the bathroom wall. "Whose are those?" Her eyes widened, and then lit up with a wicked smile.

"Susan," she stepped closer for a better look. "Who do these belong to?"

I leaned over to see Harry's underpants, tighty-whities, peeking out from under my bedspread on the floor. Oh shit. That asshole. It was dark when he left and he never bothered to find them.

"These? They look like men's underwear," I said, acting mystified while drawing back. The same hands that had pulled them off over his hard cock just hours ago couldn't touch them in front of Anne.

"Could they have been under the bed all week?" I asked. "I don't think the maids have given this room a proper cleaning since we moved in."

"You little hypocrite" Ann snarled. "You had a guy in here last night didn't you?"

"Anne, I don't know where these came from." A cold panic spread from my belly to my neck. What if she thought I was a tramp?

"Susan, I've had it with you. You act like I'm some kind of low life, and you're the great homecoming queen who looks down on us from her pedestal, when what you really are is a lying bitch."

She turned and stomped into the bathroom, slamming the door. I heard the shower running. I had time to think my way out of this.

Actually, when Anne called me the 'homecoming queen,' she was playing to my strength, because being elected was the single greatest accomplishment of my life. It's my favorite memory to soothe me when I'm stressed. And it proved my parents were wrong.

Being chosen isn't just about looks. It's about being both a brain and a beauty, being sexy and being social. It's a complicated process that starts with a secret nomination. I suspect Dave nominated me, but he just smiles whenever I ask him. I had to fill out a four-page application form, like applying to college all over again. I listed all my extracurricular activities and community involvement. Plus, I had to prove my school spirit by writing a "Why I Love My College" essay. Finally, I attached a copy of my grades plus, of course, my picture. Then there's an interview. I'm sure I did well because...

Oh, oh. The shower stopped. She'd be out soon. Another wave of dread blanketed me. She would tell everyone I was a tramp.

“Susan, you’re acting like a tramp!” It was my father’s voice from years ago, turning a horrible night into something worse. “You’re only 16 and this is the third time you’ve gotten home after one in the morning, and you know you’re supposed to be home by midnight. What will the neighbors think? What have you been doing all this time?”

What I’d been doing was fighting off Richie Evans in the back seat of his father’s car. I loved him, and not because he was a basketball star and the senior class president who chose me, a sophomore. I loved him because he always sweet and kind to me.

We’d been going steady for almost two months and had been necking a couple of times at College Point after the movies. My big mistake was going into the back seat with him.

Before when I said “no,” he always listened, but this time he wouldn’t. I started to panic and tried to push him away when he pulled down my panties. “Stop, please stop!”

“I love you, Susan,” he said nuzzling my neck and hurting my breasts as I squirmed under him. For months, I’d imagined making love with him on our wedding night, but not like this. Not like this.

“No, Richie, no!” I struggled to get him off me but he was too heavy, too strong.

There was a sudden stab of pain between my legs as he entered. It got worse as he moved inside me, but 10 seconds later he pushed really hard and then relaxed with a satisfied groan.

I held him, crying against his chest. “I love you, Richie” I said, “I love you.” But he just laid there, quiet. His fingers moved slowly through my hair.

Finally, he looked at me and kissed me, his lips brushing my wet cheeks. “You are so beautiful.”

His thing was still inside me. Did he still love me? I couldn’t wait for him to get off me, take me home and leave me alone. I cried harder.

As Richie sped away, I quietly opened the front door and my parents were in their bathrobes, waiting to call me names.

“Nobody is going to respect you if you keep acting like this,” my father said, pulling the belt on his bathrobe over his big belly, pacing back and forth across the living room.

“Your father is right, dear,” my mother said, as I sat looking at the living room rug. “You don’t want to do anything to ruin your reputation.” Was my skirt stained? My father was angry

and she was on his side. I was sore and messy from the worst experience of my life, but I couldn't tell her about it. She didn't want to know.

Before this, my father and I used to watch 'our' show, *Bonanza*, every Sunday night. The TV room was in the basement of our little cape cod, out in the middle of nowhere. One brown plaid couch and two cheap easy chairs, just enough for a salesman, his wife and their only child. Our first color television stood on a metal stand in the corner. I made popcorn or some other snack before the show. My mother always stayed upstairs, busy.

The stories about the feuds and the fights of a handsome older man and his three grown sons living in Colorado during the 1800's didn't appeal much to me, unless it was an episode where Little Joe had a girlfriend. But I loved sharing the couch with my father, snuggling, my head on his shoulder.

When I started to grow breasts, my father started to grow away, sitting in one of the easy chairs, instead of cuddling on the couch. But after that night he called me a tramp, he stopped coming downstairs. I watched *Bonanza* alone for a couple of weeks, then stayed in my room on Sunday nights. I heard my parents fighting more often, and sometimes it was about me.

So I built a wall that was just big enough to protect me, but not so tall that they couldn't see how perfect I was becoming. My room and my outfits looked like pictures from magazines. I smiled and agreed with them until it was almost a habit, or until the mean in me came bursting out.

I was almost seventeen and my mother and I were planning my birthday. I came down from my bedroom to show her pictures of a party table from my *Seventeen* magazine. Mom was talking to a friend on the phone, "Well, in one more year she'll be going away to college. To tell you the truth, she's such a handful, neither Joe or I can wait."

I slept there for another year, but that was when I began living alone.

Anne walked out of the bathroom in a steamy cloud of bath oils and got something from her suitcase, pretending to ignore me. I started to cry.

"Anne, I'm sorry," I said, peering at her through my tears. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lie. I got so drunk last night, I didn't know what I was doing. And when I woke up, I was afraid that if you knew, Dave would find out."

"Susan, you are so full of shit. I can understand you not wanting Dave to know. But why pick *now* to lay all that 'we love and trust each other' crap on me? When you haven't even gotten out of the bed you just shared with some other guy!"

She was standing in front of the dresser, shoulders squared, hands clenched, like she was ready to pounce. "You act like you're so perfect, but you're just a little tramp. Why can't you just be honest and stop bragging."

I felt anger flare up from my belly, inflaming my brain. "Well, at least I have something to brag about." Oh no. I knew it was wrong, very wrong, even before I finished saying it.

Anne turned away, pounded her hand on the desk, picked up a magazine, crushing and twisting it as she turned back, blasting me with the ugliest glare I've ever seen.

"Oh, yeah, Miss High and Mighty? Do you want to know what people really think about you, and about your stupid boyfriend, 'Double D.'?"

"Anne, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. You have a lot to be proud of, it's just that..."

"Shut up!" She screamed. "No more bullshit. I just want you to lay there and listen while someone finally tells you the truth about yourself."

"First of all, the way you go on and on about being the Homecoming Queen? Do you know that not one of the girls we live with voted for you? We all hoped you wouldn't be elected because we knew you'd be insufferable. In fact, at the end of last year we nearly voted to have you move out, so we wouldn't have to put up with you anymore. Know why we didn't? Because you have a car, and you give us rides."

My car? They like me because of my car?

"The reason that you won is that it's a big campus and 90 percent of the students who voted don't know you. They voted for your pretty face, not your annoying personality."

My friends don't like me? How can that be? I stared at her, like she was speaking in a foreign language. My fear froze into numbness.

"And your boyfriend, 'Double D.'? The second string quarterback you're always bragging about? Do you know how he got his nickname?"

His nickname? Why was this about Dave and his nickname? "He has big feet, so he needs a big shoe size," I said. Really, they look like flippers. If he wasn't so good at football, I bet he could have gotten a swimming scholarship.

"He got his nickname freshman year when he started working out with the team. From what I hear he's great at passing, but when he's under pressure, he always forgets the play. 'Double D' stands for Dumbass Dave."

"His nickname caught on with all of us. We don't know much about football, but we know he must be a real dumbass to keep jumping through the hoops you put him through. Dumbass Dave and Stuck-up Susan. The stupidest couple on campus."

I couldn't move. In three days I'd be returning to a world where my friends weren't friends and my boyfriend was a joke. What could be worse?

Maybe my parents were right. Stupid. Mean. Tramp. I rolled onto my stomach, my head under the pillow, sobbing, hating myself into hell.

"I'm sorry, Susan, but maybe you're better off knowing." Her voice, softer now, was coming from near the door. "I think we should keep our distance until we fly home. I'm going to the beach with some kids from NYU." The door opened and closed and I was alone.

I turned over, shoved the pillow under my face and screamed as loud as I could, over and over until my throat ached, punching the mattress until I was weak. I couldn't move. Blackness drew me down into the nightmare that was my life.

There were three loud knocks on the door. A woman's voice called "Housekeeping. Can I come in?"

What time was it? Ten. Already? Had I passed out? Cried myself to sleep?

"No," I croaked, my throat aching. "I'm in here." All alone.

"Thank you. I'll come back."

I couldn't stay, but I couldn't move. I started up at the ceiling. All alone. There was a palm tree outside the window. A bird was singing. Then another. I closed my eyes.

Hey, Jude. Don't make it bad. Take a sad song and make it better," a new Beatles song was seeping in from somewhere. There was no way to make my stupid song better. On Saturday I'd be flying back to Dumbass Dave. Calling him that was so mean. He was the sweetest guy I'd ever dated. He didn't deserve that crap. But maybe I did? What if I got pregnant from being with Harry? Oh no, how could I? Why did I?

Maybe I should kill myself and curse Anne with eternal guilt. How the girls would cry if they knew their cruelty had killed me. My funeral would have lots of flowers, white roses and daisies. I'd be lying at rest in my white silk dress with the pretty blue embroidery. My father would be sorry forever, and maybe my mother would realize that she never listened. She never wanted to.

Next to the phone on the bedside table, I saw the flyer from last night.

See The Real Bahamas

– FREE –

Find What Other's Don't

The Real People - The Real Music

A free tour with a missionary and his wife to see a Bahamian school. The Reverend seemed OK when I met him last night. I could wear sunglasses and nobody would know I'd been crying. Nobody would know.

I found the phone number on the flyer and dialed.

Paradise Vanishes – Susan: Nassau, The Bahamas – April 4, 1968

My head throbbed with each step as I walked past the pool. Some students burst into laughter as I entered the lobby on my way to the street. At me? Because I was wearing sunglasses inside? Because Anne had told them about me? I forced myself not to trip or run.

I pushed through the door and plunged into the soupy heat and the salty air, humming with traffic. As agreed, Pastor John was across the street from the hotel leaning against a dusty jeep. He was laughing with a beautiful Negro, the vibrant reds and golds of her dress shimmering in the sun.

His wife? Mixed marriages were frowned upon back home... but maybe not here? I had grown up believing they were wrong, but according to Anne, I was wrong about a lot of things. How cruel of her to attack me so viciously. She'd be sorry!

Last night, Anne and I had walked past the Reverend as he handed out flyers on the corner between our first and second bar. He was old, maybe in his forties, but very fit with ruddy skin and a great head of sandy hair.

I took his flyer to be polite, glancing at the big bold letters that said: "FREE: See the Real Bahamas." The graphic at the bottom of the page caught my eye and I stopped to examine it under the next streetlight.

The drawing featured a clenched fist, like the black power symbol that made me a little nervous at some of the anti-war demonstrations. But this fist was drawn inside the well-known symbol for Venus or the feminine: a round circle with a cross dangling below it, the fist drawn so that its wrist and the forearm became the upright part of the cross.



I was offended and, then, intrigued.

I walked back to the corner where he stood under a street light and asked, "So, what are the real Bahamas?"

The warmth in his eyes matched his smile as he turned towards me.

“The real Bahamas are the 97% of the Islands that the tourists never see. The real people and the real culture. I’m John Bennet, a missionary who helps native Bahamians find a better life,” he said extending a warm and calloused hand. “And you are?”

“I’m Susan,” I said as we shook. “I’m on break here for another couple of days.”

“My wife and I are offering a free tour tomorrow to anyone who is interested,” John said. “We can pick you up at noon, show you our mission school, see a couple of the sights, and get you back to your hotel by sunset. Interested?”

Anne was about twenty feet down the block where it was darker, waving for me to join her. I smiled and raised my hand to signal “just one minute” before I turned back to the Reverend.

“Well, I’m studying to be a teacher,” I responded, “so it would be interesting to see a Bahamian school. But this graphic on your flyer,” I said, pointing to the bottom. “Isn’t it a little, um, outrageous?”

I was amazed to hear myself being so rude. What was in that white, sweet drink I had finished at our first bar?

“Perhaps outrageous times call for outrageous measures,” he responded with a slow grin, “but my wife can explain it better than I. She’s our illustrator, and she’d be interested in your perspective.”

Now, the sun was directly overhead as I stepped away from the hotel and into the street. Reverend John spotted me and waved hello. I crossed, dodging a couple of mopeds that buzzed around me.

“Susan, this is Melanie,” John said, “my wife and partner in many things, including our school where she is our headmistress.”

Her black face glowed with kindness as she turned to face me. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Susan.” Her smile seemed real, her hand was warm and I loved the lilt of her Bahamian accent. I felt my shoulders relax. Maybe this would be okay.

A girl with lively blue eyes and a blonde ponytail was grinning at me from the back of the jeep. She introduced herself as Donna, a Boston University student.

“So you’re from Buffalo?” Donna exclaimed as we chatted. “I visited my aunt there when I was a kid. And I’ll be returning this fall as a student in the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Buffalo.”

“I bet you’ll love it,” I said. “I’ve heard good things about that program.”

“What’s Buffalo like for students?”

“Wonderful, if you like snow, the Buffalo Bills and chicken wings.” I said, watching myself pretend this was a normal conversation, that my life hadn’t just been ruined.

"Well, the snow and the football sounds like fun." Donna wrinkled her nose, "But chicken wings?"

"Yeah, most people from out of town are surprised that they’re served in restaurants, but there's a bar downtown that’s made them popular."

"Really? I've never heard of them," Donna said.

"Supposedly, the Anchor Bar ran out of snacks late one night. So Teresa, one of the owners, cut a chicken wing into two pieces, stuck them deep fryer, rolled them in hot sauce, then served them with some left over celery and blue cheese dip. Now they're a hit all over town. But I doubt they'll catch on anyplace else."

“Chicken wings, you say?” Melanie asked, climbing into the back with us. “The native Bahamian diet has been very influenced by the soul foods of the American South. Both there and on these Islands, the slaves feasted on the foods that the masters threw away. Since the rest of your county throws out their chicken wings, I am guessing that Buffalo must be a very soulful place” she joked, winking at me.

“Amen,” I said and everyone laughed. Anne would have given me a super smirk for that. She knew the main reason I went to church with Dave each Sunday was that he was on a tight budget, and I enjoyed having at least one dress-up date each week. Did the girls laugh at me for that, too? He was such a good guy. How could I have cheated on him?

Melanie and I sat on a bench seat across from Donna, our feet resting on the boxes and burlap sacks between us. The warm wind felt good as the jeep began navigating down Bay Street, past the Straw Market overflowing with handmade hats, bags and some sort of dark wood carvings. But I barely noticed the sights or heard the happy chatter between Donna and Melanie. I had made such a mess of my life.

We sped out of Nassau, the turquoise sea dotted with low islands to our right, tall palms creating a canopy between us and the sun. After a few minutes, we turned left up a small road into the hills.

Almost immediately, paradise vanished.

The “real” Bahamas was awful. Dirt roads, dusty shack with tin roofs and hardly a palm tree in sight. Jagged white boulders dotted a hilly desert of shrubs, brown grass and a few sickly trees. All the lushness I loved was gone, leaving little that was postcard worthy.

As we passed through communities of small houses clustered on either side of the road, John told us about some of the families. None of his stories had happy endings.

Melanie pointed out that most of the houses were narrow and long. “Many people call these ‘shotgun homes’ because the rooms are so open that a bullet fired in the front door could go out the back without hitting anything.

“But they are wrong about the name,” she continued. “In West Africa you would see many homes like these. But the roofs would be thatched instead of tin, and the walls would be mud instead of concrete. In the native tongue they are called ‘shogun’ which means ‘house of god’.”

“That’s interesting,” I said.

“These people are poor,” Melanie continued, “but many are happy because they love each other and they serve God.”

Donna wrinkled her forehead.. “Well, I guess I better tell you now that I don’t really believe in God. Not since I was 16.”

Wow. What a brave thing to say to two missionaries. I bet they don't like it.

Melanie leaned forward toward Donna. “I’m guessing that you were badly hurt?”

“More than that...” Her jaw tightened and she blinked back tears as she stared at some children we were passing, “but I think that’s a story for another day.”

Of course,” Melanie said, smiling sadly. We all grabbed for handholds as the Jeep bucked up and down through a dry stream bed that crossed the road.

A blush crept up Donna’s neck, like she had gotten a sudden sunburn. “I’m sorry,” she said, hunching a bit. “I don’t mean to be insulting about your faith, but what appealed to me about this tour wasn’t the spiritual stuff. I came because I want to learn more about helping families. John told me you do a lot of that, and maybe what I see today will help me become a better social worker.”

Just then the jeep crested the last high hill that sloped down to the northern shore. “There it is,” he pointed.

A string of five white buildings, tin roofs shining in the sun, formed a semicircle that hemmed the bottom of a small bay on the Atlantic. From our height, the buildings looked like a silvery necklace hanging down from the bright green cove.

“It’s beautiful,” I said.

“Yes,” said Melanie. “We also have a church with Sunday services on Bimini, an island east of here. John is a pilot so we go back and forth using a seaplane we share with two other groups.”

Up close, St. Paul’s looked like a poverty-stricken prison camp for children. A barbed wire fence surrounded the compound. Each end was anchored at the ocean where thousands of jagged white stones formed a forbidding beach. The buildings had blotchy white concrete walls topped with corrugated tin. Rough wooden shutters, propped open by poles, shaded the windows.

About a dozen Negro children were clustered around two adults under a large tarp between two buildings. A similar shelter shaded some teens who looked up from their books, waving as we passed.

When the jeep stopped in the barren courtyard, the heat was so intense that I felt it wrap around each of my fingers. If I were God, this is where I’d send people to be punished for being bad. Or was hell something we created with our own stupid choices? Either way, I was in it.

A pale blue school bus with a lavender roof and rust sprouting up from its wheels was parked next to us. On its side was the graphic that had startled me last night. The familiar female icon pulsed with power from the raised black fist implanted in its center. The wrist continued down through the bottom of the red circle where a strong black arm formed the upright part of the cross. The crosspiece was a thick black branch wrapped with red thorns.

Was it some kind of call to action, with the clout coming from Christ? Was this a rundown training camp for revolutionaries?

I wished I had just stayed in my room. Better yet, had stayed in Buffalo.

“Wow,” said Donna, bouncing out of the jeep. “That’s amazing art.” Her blue eyes sparkled as she stepped toward the bus and touched the veins on the arm and the thorns on the cross.

“I love how you’ve integrated the feminine and the masculine.” She stepped back for a better look. “But I have to say the cross kind of creeps me out.”

I didn’t like any of it, but kept quiet to be polite.

“I’ve got to take these supplies to the kitchen,” John said, hefting a burlap bag from the back of the jeep to his shoulder.

Melanie ducked around the bag and kissed him on his cheek. “I will give them a tour, but leave enough time so we can stop at Clifton Pier on our way back.”

Three brown children flocked to John as he crossed the dry, cracked courtyard. He tousled the hair of the biggest boy as they spoke, then swung the bag down so the boy could help carry it the few remaining steps to the kitchen.

“Those are our sons,” Melanie said with delight in her eyes. “Aidan, the oldest, is always so eager to help. Abel, our seven-year-old, is the artist and Anthony, the toddler, is our clown.”

“They’re adorable,” I said.

“They’re beautiful boys,” Donna agreed. “You’re so lucky.”

“So, let me show you around. It is relatively quiet today because we are on Easter break, and we just have the students who are attending our vacation bible school. “

Vacation? Was life in the Bahamas so awful that children would choose this hellhole for their vacation?

Melanie told us about their students and programs as she walked us through each of the buildings. Two were classrooms, one was the kitchen, the fourth was a dormitory and the last was the office and storage.

As we approached a group of teens relaxing in the shade, Melanie announced, “I would like you to meet two guests, Miss Susan and Miss Donna, who are visiting us from the United States. I think they would enjoy hearing some of the music you’re rehearsing for the spring concert. Would you be willing to sing for them?”

Soon we were sitting on benches, beneath a leafy gazebo that looked toward the sea, as about two dozen students assembled in front of us. I took off my sunglasses. So what if my eyes were still a little puffy? Everyone was so nice.

While we waited for someone to fetch a guitar, two boys, a mirror image of each other, tiptoed toward us. They moved slowly, careful to avoid spilling the drinks they offered

They stood in front of us, heads down, glancing at each other and us while we tasted the light brown liquid, something sweet I didn’t recognize.

Donna’s smile dimmed into something much softer and more reserved, glimpsing at both as if their shyness was contagious. After her first few sips, she said “You are very kind. I was so thirsty and this is delicious.”

Their seriousness blossomed into shy, sweet smiles and Donna's face brightened with theirs.
"Are you brothers?"

"Yes, I am Marcus and this is Michael," said the boy with the white Coca-Cola tee shirt.
"We are twins."

"I am Donna. You are lucky. I always wished I had a sister."

"And I am Susan. Thank you for your hospitality."

The boys stood taller now, grinning at us and each other.

The youngest students stood in front with tallest behind. As a girl played the opening chords, I recognized *Because All Men Are Brothers* from a new Peter, Paul and Mary album. The haunting melody, which I loved, had been adapted from Bach.

I was dazed, first by their harmonies and then by their sincerity.

Because all men are brothers wherever men may be,

One union shall unite us forever proud and free.

No tyrant shall defeat us, no nation strike us down,

All men who toil shall greet us the whole wide world around.

They were singing from someplace so deep in their hearts that I could feel their energy, lifting me. The twins sang the next verse in clear high voices that blended as one.

My brothers are all others forever hand in hand

Where chimes the bell of freedom there is my native land

My brother's fears are my fears yellow, white or brown.

My brother's tears are my tears the whole wide world around

So this is how the civil rights things looks from their side? So hopeful? And so dedicated to each other?

‘My brother’s tears are my tears?’ Maybe I could change that to ‘my sister’s smiles are my smiles’ as my new motto to repair my reputation. Just try to help people instead of trying to impress them? But would all the work be worth it?

The volume swelled as they all sang the final verse, their dark foreheads furrowing with resolve and bright eyes glistening with light.

Donna and I clapped as loud as we could, as we exclaimed, "Excellent!" "Wonderful!" and "More!" smiling at them and each other.

Next they wanted to do an African song but someone had misplaced the drum. John rejoined us while we waited.

"That was such a beautiful song," Donna said. "It reminds me of what Martin Luther King is doing in our country. Do people here pay much attention to him?"

Melanie and John laughed, as if Donna had just told a god joke.

"Well, I guess some of us do," said John, smiling at Melanie. "He preached at our church on Bimini about four years ago. And last Saturday, he spent the day fishing with Melanie’s Uncle Ansil.”

Dangerous Medicine - Susan: St. Paul's School, The Bahamas

St Paul's School - The Bahamas – April 4, 1968

“When Dr. King visits,” Melanie said, “he usually stays at a friend’s vacation home near our church on Bimini. When he was here in ’64, he was writing his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize.” She glanced at John. “We think he decided to preach at our church so he could practice his message for the awards ceremony in Oslo.”

"That must have been amazing," I said.

“Yes, it was exciting just to shake his hand,” John said. “I still remember his message from our pulpit, *Nonviolence is not passivity but a powerful moral force. And that force is built on a foundation of love which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation.*”

Rejects revenge? But I’ve got to get back at Anne for being so cruel to me this morning. Otherwise, what will keep her from attacking me again?

“Can you guess how his message inspired our logo?” Melanie asked.

After a hesitation, Donna said, “I’m guessing the fist represents the ‘powerful moral force’ that Dr. King mentioned?”

“Exactly,” John said. “And the cross...?” he prompted us.

I felt like I was being sucked into someplace I didn’t want to go, but I remembered my Sunday school lessons and didn’t want to look stupid in front of Donna. So I chimed in. “Well, Christ forgave His enemies when he was being crucified, right? So, I suppose the cross symbolizes His ‘love that rejects revenge.’”

A girl ran over to say they still couldn’t find the drums. Melanie suggested they look in the corner of the dining hall, then walked away to direct the students who were moving some benches while John got up to help some of the little ones.

I knew that ‘rejecting revenge’ was what they wanted to hear. But, seriously, love Anne when she even went out of her way to insult my boyfriend? What did Anne ever do to deserve my love? She’s been a bossy brat for most of this trip. I wish I had asked Dave to come with me. Then, instead of sweltering here in Vacation Hell Bible School we’d be drinking Pina Coladas under a palm tree on a beautiful beach.

When Melanie rejoined us under the gazebo, Donna said, “You know, I respect what Dr. King is doing, and your logo is a clever way to integrate a ‘moral force’ with non-violence.

“But isn’t Dr. King the exception?” she continued. “What about all the wars that religion has caused? All the harm it has done? Like their smelly old priests who just sit there and preach at you about obeying commandments and doing penance, when what you really need is help?”

I flashed back to when I really needed help, that night years ago, sitting in my living room, messy and bleeding from what my boyfriend had done to me, afraid it would stain through my skirt and my parents would know. I needed my father, but he was shouting, calling me names. And my mother said, “I don’t know the what the two of you were doing out so late, but I’m going to take you to church so you can go to Confession. So, Susan, you can forget about going to the movies with your girlfriends tomorrow afternoon.”

I looked at Donna. “When someone you’ve counted on condemns you, it’s awful. And it’s even worse when they use a God thing to punish you. “

Donna nodded at me, her eyes glistening as we connected. She was so tiny she seemed frail. But she was so honest, she must be strong inside.

“So why wouldn’t we be better off without religion?” Donna asked, turning to Melanie and John.

"Religion is a dangerous medicines," Melanie said. "Too little can harm. Too much can kill. But the right amount can heal the world with hope and love."

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Well, take Dr. King, for example,” Melanie answered, “if he were not a minister, he might just be a well-meaning politician, changing his position as necessary to win re-election. Or, imagine he was at the other extreme, believing that his faith gave him *all* the answers. If so, he might have become a fanatic, condemning anyone who disagreed with him.

But instead,” she continued, “Dr. King takes a middle way between too little religion and too much of it. He is *guided* by Christ’s vision of love, but not blinded by it.”

“So your point is that religion is sort of like his moral compass?” Donna asked.

“Yes, but it’s more than that,” John said. “Religion is not just remembering how we’re called to love by the Golden Rule, ‘to do to others as you would have them do to you.’ Religion creates a network of support to remind you that you’re a spiritual being having a human experience; and that you’re at your best when serving others, instead of just serving your ego.”

“So,” I asked, “is the Golden Rule strictly a Christian thing?”

“No,” said Melanie. “The major religions have much in common,” she said. “Each of them has a code of conduct to encourage people to be more loving toward each other and God.”

“But, Christianity...” John began.

Melanie held up a hand, silencing him without looking.

“I think of religions as fingers that point to God,” Melanie said and then paused. “There are thousands of ways to find God, and each religion points to a different facet of the Creator or a different path to the Divine. So, for me,” she continued, “it is important to worship God and not what points to Him – or Her,” she smiled, glancing at John who grimaced.

John must have been biting his tongue or clenching his teeth because his jaw muscles were popping in and out. “The Bible tells us that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Light.”

“To be honest” Melanie said, “I cannot judge which faith is the best, or the truest. The Spirit who will always be beyond our understanding. But I choose Christianity because the notion of God as a Creator, Comforter and Spirit appeals to me. Plus,” she said looking at me, “if you decided to try every path that leads to the mountain top, would you ever get there?”

I just shrugged. She was probably right, but I resented being put on the spot. I saw the drum being carried across the courtyard. “It’s a lot to think about,”

“Or dance about!” she said with a smile. “I think our performers are almost ready.”

“I just want to say,” John added, “that it’s clear that you ladies haven’t been served well by your ministers. We’ll pray for you.”

Big deal, I thought, while Donna’s frown deepened.

“I hope you realize,” John added, “even the best minister doesn’t have *your* answer. Each of us has to find our own truth by using our own reason, experience or traditions to interpret the Bible.”

“Or the sacred scriptures found in other faiths,” Melanie interrupted, smiling at John as she got up to nudge the smallest children into place.

“For me the Bible is the best, but I agree with what Melanie is saying,” John said, “about learning from other faiths.”

“When we had lunch with Dr. King,” he continued, “after he preached on Bimini, he told us that he and his wife went to India for five weeks on what he called a ‘pilgrimage.’ They wanted

to study the political and spiritual principles of Mahatma Gandhi's freedom movement. Dr. King said Gandhi was 'probably the first person in history' to lift the love that Jesus preached into to an effective, large-scale social force."

"So, Gandhi was a secret Christian?" Donna asked.

"No," John replied, "but Gandhi's Hinduism and King's Christianity both teach the Golden Rule, so King could learn from Gandhi's example while still worshipping Christ."

"Dear ladies and gentle man." Melanie stood to the side of the students, beaming at them and us. "It is my great pleasure to introduce the 'St. Paul's Tribal Dancers.'"

"Traditional African dance" she said, "is probably different than the dancing you are used to. It expresses the history and values of the community. Touching or partner dancing is rare, so men and women usually stay in their own groups. The dance you are about to see celebrates the gracefulness of the girls, the stamina and energy of the boys and everyone's gratitude to the Spirit that empowers all of us."

The girls began with a chant that soon was echoed by the boys, but more powerfully with a stronger rhythm. They moved together in groups, the girls balancing imaginary jugs of water as they swayed and stepped, the boys jumping to show off their athleticism.

Soon Donna, Melanie and I were singing along with the girls, our heads bobbing, feet moving, creating little dust clouds in front our bench. John echoed the boys.

The girls pantomimed the harvesting of plants and the preparing of food while the boys expanded to a wider circle, stalking and thrusting as they hunted. The rhythm of the drum intensified then, suddenly stopped, the dancers frozen.

The drum resumed with a slower beat, the chanting softer now, boys and girls singing in unison, their eyes on the heavens, their hands moving from their hearts then outward embracing each other and the universe, then back to their hearts as they merged together in complicated circles. The smallest ones got confused and started to giggle and twirl. Melanie and John laughed louder than any of them.

After we finished applauding, Donna turned to Melanie and John and asked, "Would it be OK for me to sing something for you?"

She took the guitar and stood with her back to the ocean at the edge of the gazebo. "I think you may know this" she said as she picked out the opening notes.

How many roads must a man walk down, before they call him a man?

I surprised myself by standing up uninvited to join her for the second verse. Harmonies are easy, at least the way my mother taught me. So I threw in a couple of parts that soared above and below the melody.

How many years can a mountain exist, before it is washed to the sea?

How many years can some people exist, before they're allowed to be free?

Donna gave me an encouraging smile as we began the third verse, gesturing for the students to join in. I was a privileged American on vacation singing with poor children from a different culture, but an invisible glow connected us, flowing with the rhythm of the music, uniting us and our dreams. My chest swelled with a pleasure I couldn't name and, for those moments, St. Paul's felt like paradise.

Melanie and John jumped to their feet, applauding along with the students. "Please. Play another!" Melanie said. "Yes, yes!" added John. A few students shouted, "More!"

Donna asked, "Do you know 'The Times They Are Changing?'"

"Sure," I said.

"How about trading leads? You take the first verse."

I gave her a thumbs up and a big smile as she went through the opening chords. Performing folk music for a native audience with someone who might be a new friend? Amazing.

And the first one now will later be last, for the times they are a changing.

Donna harmonized with me on the last line, and again everyone erupted into applause.

"Wow," Donna said as we walked back to John and Melanie, "That was amazing. And your harmonies were beautiful! Do you sing with a group in Buffalo?"

"No," I laughed. Just my family, when I was young. My parents both sang with barbershop groups, so I grew up hearing harmonies around my house and in the car. Unfortunately, most of the singing stopped when I became a teenager."

"Yeah, tell me about it. Life would have been easier on everyone if we just stayed little, huh?" Donna said with a laugh. "But, maybe we should get together and sing some more when I move to Buffalo?"

“Yes, I’d like that,” I said, “And I’d be happy to introduce you to the world of chicken wings.”

John glanced at his watch and said, “Well, we promised to get you back to Nassau by sunset, so perhaps we should start heading back. Plus, there’s one more thing we’d like to show you on the way.”

As we walked to the jeep, I looked again at the logo on the side of the bus. “One more question. I understand about using the fist and the cross as a way to symbolize assertiveness and acceptance, but why did you embed it into the female symbol in the design?”

“Well,” Melanie said, “the main reason is practical. Women are more interested in religion than men. So why not design our logo to attract those who will be most receptive?”

“Also,” John added as he got behind the wheel, “women are often treated as second class citizens, so they need to be extra strong to fight for justice.”

I could usually get Dave to do what I wanted through kisses, hugs or pouts. Could we make our decisions as equals? I remembered *The Feminine Mystique*, a new book I had read last semester, which said that women undervalued themselves and should live meaningful lives, using their full capacities. It seemed John and Melanie were helping the Bahamians to do that.

John backed the jeep, then turned towards the gate. The children stood at the edges of the courtyard, waving and chanting, laughing as they reprised some of their wildest dance moves. A terrible day had turned into a wonderful afternoon.

“What beautiful children,” Donna said as we waved and called out our good-byes.

“They are our greatest gift,” Melanie responded as she waved good-bye, beaming smiles to them.

John took a road that hugged the coast. There was a beauty in the bleakness as we drove between the barren hills and the sea. A cluster of shoddy shogun homes clung to the shore, battered wooden boats drawn up on the sharp rocks. A group of skinny children in tattered clothes ran out to the road, hands out, shouting “One dollar, mister! Just one dollar!” Then, their eyes lit up when they recognized the driver.

“Pastor John! Miss Melanie!” they shouted. John stopped and Melanie gave each child one piece of hard candy, asked about their families and invited them to visit St. Paul’s for the spring concert and party next week. A little girl, maybe six years old, with bony shoulders poking through her torn shirt, stood next to our jeep, silently looking up at me with big, sweet brown eyes and a little smile. I wanted to reach for my purse but felt paralyzed. There were so many of them.

“Some families eke out a living from the sea, but transporting their catch to Nassau where it fetches the best price is always a problem,” Melanie said. As we started again, she pointed to a stripped-down rusted car that was a playground for a little gang of toddlers. “As you can see, the children are malnourished. We give them candy, which they love as a great treat. We wish we could offer each of them a piece of fruit, but we can’t afford it.”

Every few minutes we’d pass through a forest of palms, masking mansions perched up on the hill with big windows and splendid balconies facing the sea. Most had shiny motorboats tied to their dock and about half had sleek sailboats anchored offshore.

“I suppose these little houses with the wooden boats on the rocky beach look picturesque from those patios,” I said. Suffering looks different from a distance.

“Yes,” John agreed. “The people who own those homes, like the tourists who visit our Islands, have a very distorted view of the real Bahamas. Have you heard of the term ‘income inequality’?”

“No,” said Donna, “but I guess that’s what we’re seeing here?”

“That’s right,” John continued. “Income inequality describes a society where the very rich control most of the wealth. It’s the difference between the millions of dollars these mansions cost, like that one, and the few hundred dollars of annual income they have in these little homes stuffed with hungry children. It’s also a spiritual issue and the main reason I decided to become a missionary.

“How is it a spiritual issue?” I asked.

“In the Book of Acts, which is a history of what the apostles did after Christ died,” John explained, “it says that the early Church expressed their love for God and each other by sharing their wealth and material goods. According to a Latin American priest I met, you can measure a society’s sinfulness by observing the gap between the wealthy and the poor.”

"But what can you do about it?" Donna asked.

“We founded St. Paul’s, and support the PLP, because education and politics are two of the strongest weapons against income inequality. And, despite the problems from too much religion or being blinded by it, religion reminds people that we are spiritual beings having a human experience. So we should choose love over greed in our daily lives and when we vote.”

“Well put, John, but I do have some bad news from my Uncle Ansil,” Melanie said with a smile suggesting a joke, “which may diminish the importance of churches in your grand plan.”

“Oh no. Ansil never ceases to amaze me. Now what?” John said.

“Dr. King said something to him that made Ansil think his fishing might be as spiritual as your sermons.”

“Really? Why am I not surprised?” John said, shaking his head.

“He phoned yesterday,” Melanie explained, “and said he took Dr. King fishing on Bonefish Creek on Saturday. Apparently, Ansil has become his favorite guide when he visits Bimini.

“It was a beautiful day, with birds flying overhead, the tide trickling by, snappers running under the mangrove roots and a stingray burying and reburying itself in the sand. Ansil told me Dr. King looked around at all of that and said, ‘There’s so much life here ... so much life all around us. How can people see all this life and yet not believe in the existence of God?’”

“So, on the phone Ansil told me,” You know, Melanie, no offense against John, but I wonder if my fishing might be as spiritual his sermons?”

John laughed. “Ansil is a good man. Being spiritual, but not religious, is certainly better than not being spiritual at all. Tell him that the next time he takes me fishing, I’ll just sit and soak in God’s beauty and he can do the preaching.”

Graceful and Sad – Susan: The Bahamas - April, 1968

About twenty minutes after we left St. Paul's, John pulled off the road onto a sandy track. In the distance, a line of rocks jutted out to the sea, waves crashing, white plumes sprouting and sinking. The road led into a wind-blown peninsula dotted with trees, half of which looked dead. Mounds of boulders led from the land into the water.

We drove into a clearing and saw a handsome young man with jet black skin walking to a rusty old Ford.

"Antonius," Melanie called, "here are some people I'd like you to meet."

He waved and threw his backpack and some tools into the trunk, approaching us with a brilliant smile. He exchanged a half hug with John and a warmer one with Melanie, as she turned to make the introductions.

"This is Antonius Roberts," she said, "a good friend and perhaps the best young artist in our country."

"You flatter me, Melanie. My achievements are actually quite modest."

"But your dreams are glorious and your sculptures are wonderful," said John with a tight smile.

"Do you have a few minutes to tell our friends about your Clifton Pier project?" Melanie asked. This is Donna and Susan from the United States."

"Let me see" he responded, looking at his watch and then at Melanie and John. "I have a half hour before I need to drive to Nassau for a PLP meeting. Please come with me." He smiled at Donna and me, then led us on a trail to a bluff that sheltered a small bay.

The wind was warm and salty, as we looked down on the rubble of a small settlement, four barn-size building and some smaller ones closer to the sea. The line of stones we had seen from the road jutted from the shore.

"This is where thousands of Africans first landed in the New World," Antonius said as he pointed. "Those stones are all that is left of Clifton Pier." The white spouts we had seen from the road shot up with muted roars. "And that is what is left of the slave prison," gesturing to the larger ruins in back.

"Emancipation came earlier to the Bahamas than your country," Melanie said, "but freed or not, they could never return to their homes in Africa."

"And that is why Antonius is here," John said, pointing to the right. The hill climbed to the tip of the peninsula, where a thin African woman wearing robes and a headdress leaned mournfully towards the sea ...towards her home.

"Come," Antonius said as he walked toward her. As we got closer I realized it wasn't a woman. It was a heartbreaking sculpture carved from a tree trunk that was still rooted to the

ground. Antonius pointed out a second sculpture nearby that was almost completed. She also leaned across the sea towards Africa with an anguished mix of grace and longing.

“It is my hope that someday this will be a sacred space with dozens of spirits,” Antonius said. “Each wishes for her past but is rooted in the present as she prays for the future.”

“Can you imagine?” Melanie said softly, looking back at the ruins. “They each had friends and families, just like us. But they were captured like animals and thrown into the bellies of the slave ships. Stacked like wood in shelves that were two feet high. Over eleven million people could never go home.”

I knew about slavery as a historical fact. Now I felt the fear in my stomach and an aching in my heart. People did this to other people?

“Husbands were separated from their wives and mothers from their children,” she paused. “Any man who objected was whipped - or worse. The prettiest girls were raped over and over again,” she said looking at Donna and me.

“It happened every day. Every day to thousands of people for nearly one hundred years,” she said looking toward the ruins.

Tears were streaming down Donna’s face as she faced John and Melanie. “So where was your God when all of that was happening?” She took a deep breath to still an angry sob. “When women were being raped and their children were taken away to be sold?”

“I’ve been asked a similar question many times,” Melanie said. “I usually say, even Christ got crucified, so we cannot expect a life free from suffering, or even a happy ending. But I believe that God’s love is in the people who comfort you when you suffer, hold you when you mourn and fight with you for better days.”

“But how can you forgive people or someone that has harmed you? Someone who has ruined your life?” I asked.

“Forgiveness, like religion, is a dangerous medicine. Too little will harm. Too much can hurt if you don’t balance acceptance with assertiveness, strength and justice. So I try to forgive the people who have harmed me, my family and my people. But, it’s easier for me to forgive when I am strong enough to seek justice.”

“That’s why the three of us,” said John, looking at Melanie and Antonius, “are fighting for those better day by supporting the PLP, so someday blacks and whites and men and women will be equal,” John said.

“And we hope for a time when the riches, that God has given all of us, will not be held in the hands of a greedy few,” Melanie added.

They were fighting for better lives for everyone, while I was campaigning for Homecoming Queen. Jesus, no wonder my roommates hate me. I felt tears come to my eyes.

“Thank you for this day,” I said, “and showing me things I’ve never imagined.”

Donna turned away and faced the sea, as graceful and as sad as the women that Antonius had carved.

Mostly, we were quiet on the drive back to Nassau. My head was spinning. Should I look for Harry by the hotel pool tonight? For what? To tell him I'm not really the kind of girl I obviously am? Can I get something to keep me from getting pregnant? But what could I buy and where could I buy it in Nassau?

John and Melanie dropped us off near my hotel with warm good-byes. We promised to tell people about their work and send donations and supplies. A cool breeze from the sea promised a lovely evening.

Donna and I walked through a little park bursting with flowers and boarded by palms to a pier side cafe across from my hotel. We sat down as the sun was touching the horizon, a pink glow tinting the small boats bobbing in the bay and the fisherman on the dock, scraping conch from their shells.

"So, I guess Paradise just got turned upside down, huh?" Donna said.

"I think I just got turned upside down. What an intense afternoon." I glanced at the drink menu. "I think I need at least one Bahama Mama to process it."

"Can I take your order, please?" asked the waiter.

Donna looked at the drink menu. "We'd like two Bahama Mamas, served with a fist please."

He raised his eyebrows, "Pardon me?"

"Oh, please ignore my friend," I said. "She's had a rough afternoon."

I was trying very hard not to laugh. "And a platter of conch fritters to share, with a side of suffering."

Our giggles became belly laughs, and each stupid joke we made set us off again.

"I don't think I've ever had such an unusual afternoon," Donna said.

"Yeah, so much of it was totally new to me. Like what John said about income inequality. Do you think our wealth, and enjoying this artificial paradise, is really sinful," I asked, gesturing around us, "when there are so many starving children on this island?"

"You're talking to the wrong girl if you want an opinion on sinfulness," Donna said with a twisted smile. "I still think religion is a curse, even when it sucks in well-meaning people like John and Melanie to do its bidding. But it was sickening to be swarmed by all those kids, begging, when a hundred yards away we could look up and see a millionaire's mansion that he hardly ever uses."

"Yeah," I agreed, "so much of what they said made me think. Although part of me would like to just push it away and forget it."

Donna sat back and loosened her pony tail, using her fingers to fluff her hair around her cheeks. I hadn't really noticed how pretty she was, but in the setting sun she had high

cheekbones and innocent good looks, like Tuesday Weld when she played Thalia Menninger in the “Many Loves of Dobie Gillis.”

“So,” I said, let’s talk about your plans to move to Buffalo. Will you be leaving a boyfriend behind?”

Her lips tightened into a frown and she looked away. Then turned back to me and said, “I guess this is as good a time as any to tell you. I don’t have a boyfriend. I’m a lesbian.”

Oh no. What’s an appropriate response to *that*? “So, how is that for you?”

“Mostly shitty, I suppose.” She paused as the waiter brought our drinks. “Mostly shitty with some moments, or even months, of happiness. I have a girlfriend but she’s going to grad school in California this fall. I’m going to miss her.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That has to be so painful. Being separated from someone you love.”

“Has that happened to you?” she asked.

“Well, maybe, but I guess not really. I’ve been missing my boyfriend this week, but I think I’m a ‘leave ‘em before they can hurt you’ kind of girl. I’ve had two or three serious boyfriends, depending on how you count, and I’ve always been the one to break it off first.”

Donna nodded, and we both sipped our drinks. “It must have been hard,” I said, “to have decided that you and your girlfriend would go separate ways.”

“She wanted me to go with her and do my grad work in California. But our situation is very complicated, so it’s Buffalo for me and Stanford for her.”

“Well, I was going to say that I’d help you find a boyfriend when you come to Buffalo. But would it be more appropriate to say I’ll help you find a girlfriend?”

Donna’s eyebrows shot up and her eyes widened. “Wow, you are very kind,” she said as a little smile surfaced on her lips. “That’s a nice offer, but aren’t you freaked out by me being a homosexual?”

“A year ago, I’m pretty sure the answer would be ‘yes’,” I said. “But last semester, I had this psychology professor who offered us extra credit if we participated in an encounter group with the Mattachine Society. Have you ever heard of them?”

“No.”

“It’s a gay rights group that supports not only homosexuals, but bisexuals and people who are transgendered. I think it’s a national organization.

“Anyhow, I decided to go because I have a cousin who’s attracted to men. He told me last year, but his parents don’t know. He’s a great guy and I thought maybe I could learn something to help him. Plus, I had blown my psych mid-term, so I hoped the extra points might turn my C into a B.”

The waiter arrived with Bahama Mamas, an orange liquid with a reddish, glow served with a straw in a tall glass topped with a little umbrella. I sucked down nearly a quarter of it before I looked up. Donna had put a serious dent in hers, too.

"Umm, that is good," I said.

"I agree. Let's ask the waiter for another round when he comes back." She took another long sip. "So tell me about this meeting."

"Well, the morning was pretty normal. Two people gave talks on being gay and whether or not it's really a choice, and then there was a general discussion. It wasn't so bad, but the afternoon was awful."

"What happened?"

"I had lunch with one of their members, a student like me who also wanted to be a teacher, an attractive girl with dark brown eyes and pretty hair. I liked her. But after lunch, the whole tone of the meeting changed from an information exchange to a seduction scene."

"What do you mean?"

"We were all in a room with a plush carpet and lots of pillows. First, we were organized into pairs, one straight and one gay person. The task we were assigned was to describe to our partners how we would make love to them."

"No! Really? How ...intrusive."

"For sure. I was flabbergasted and wanted to leave. But my professor was there with a stupid grin on his face, and my partner was the girl I was with. I felt frozen to the pillow I was sitting on, and then it was too late to leave."

"Oh my God. What an awful position to put you in!"

"Exactly. Well, my partner started by telling me how she would be gentle if I wanted her to be gentle, or strong if I wanted her to be strong. And then she described, pretty vividly, how she would kiss me, undress me and so on.

"Mentally, I was going nuts! I'm thinking 'what if I start getting aroused? My whole life could change today!' But luckily, for me, my body didn't react, other than sweaty palms and, I think, a lot of blushing. Then, when it was my turn to say how I would make love to her, I started by talking about kissing and unbuttoning her blouse. And then my mind went blank and I had to stop."

"How outrageous that your professor put you in that situation. Did you report him?"

"No. But at least I learned that I'm not gay. No offense. I don't think there's anything wrong with it, and have no idea how hard it actually is, but it seems like such a burden to be saddled with."

"It is. And, the worst thing is that I don't think it's ever going to get better. For example, you don't just 'come out' once, tell everybody you're gay and that's that. Instead, it never ends. Every time you meet someone new who asks about your boyfriend, or what you did last weekend, you have to decide whether you're going to come out – over and over. I've developed a bit of a thick skin, so it's not as difficult as it used to be. But most acquaintances never really become friends because I know I make them uncomfortable."

"Well, thanks to my idiot professor and the Mattachine Society, it really doesn't matter to me that you're a lesbian.

"But I did admire your boldness today with John and Melanie," I continued. "I could use more of that in my life. Plus, you're a great guitar player and it would be fun to get together and do some music."

And it would be good to start over with a new friend who doesn't know I was a Homecoming Queen.

"So I propose a toast," I said, lifting up my glass. "To Buffalo and Folk Music!"

"And adventures in the world of chicken wings!" she responded, as we clinked glasses and laughed.

Inescapable – Susan: The Bahamas - April, 1968

The first stars were faint over the ocean when Donna and I said goodbye. We exchanged addresses and phone numbers and promised to meet in Buffalo in September.

I walked alone through the hotel courtyard on the way back to my room. Where was Harry? What a fool I was last night.

Red blossoms glowed deep purple in the flicker from the tiki torches. Coconut trees arched dimly overhead, stars blinking on and off through their palms. A soft breeze carried the faint sound of steel drums and a sweet, salty fragrance.

On each side of the pool a subdued group was huddled, heads bent towards transistor radios. There was a grimness that had no place in paradise.

A boy turned away and shouted, “God damn it!” as he threw his plastic beer glass against a wall.

I went to a girl, holding the radio next to him, tears running down her cheeks, and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis about an hour ago,” she said with tears in her eyes.

My knees went weak and I sank down on one of the pool chairs.

I thought about the slaves and a hundred years of heartbreak at Clifton Pier.

Did John, Melanie and her uncle know yet? They were his friends!

I remembered a fist of strength and a cross of forgiveness... the bright eyes in the dark faces of the children who sang to us.

Was hope nothing more than bullshit packaged inside a catchy tune?

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“The radio said he was shot at a motel in Memphis. No more than that. The local station seems to only broadcast news on the hour, so we’ll have to wait.

“Karen and I heard him preach just a month ago,” said the boy who had thrown the beer, his face twisted between anger and grief. He put his arm around Karen, who twisted the dial to turn off the radio.

“You heard him preach? What was he like?” asked a boy wearing a Virginia sweatshirt.

“Wonderful... Inspiring.” The corner of Karen’s mouth trembled in a fleeting smile. “It was Bill’s idea to go,” she said, looking at him. They sat down slowly, like old people, on the lounge next to me.

They looked at each other, and then at the Virginia boy and me. We nudged our chairs closer to Karen and Bill, comforting, wondering. Little flickers of light flashed through the pain in their eyes.

“We made a special trip,” Bill said, “to hear him preach at his home church in Atlanta. I remember that Dr. King said that ‘most of us will never achieve our dreams but ‘God will be pleased that you are trying.’”

Try. Try to do what? Didn’t this prove it was hopeless?

“It was almost like he knew that this would happen,” Karen muttered.

A silence hung over us. The mourners on the other side of the pool bowed their heads toward each other. Praying?

Then Bill spoke again, “My brother, Pete, was one of the Freedom Riders when the whole civil rights thing was starting to pick up steam. He got arrested in Birmingham during a demonstration led by Dr. King.”

“He knew Dr. King?” asked the Virginia boy, pulling a chair closer.

“No,” Bill said. “He only saw him from a distance during the demonstration. Pete was locked up overnight in a cell that was packed with demonstrators, but they kept Dr. King by himself in a different part of the jail for a week.”

Bill continued, “The whole thing is clear in my mind because, when Pete got home, he showed me Dr. King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. I was in eighth grade, and it was the first ‘grown-up’ conversation I’d ever had with him.”

Bill’s round freckled face brightened as he remembered. It was easy to imagine a boy, barely a teen, absorbing his brother’s words, flattered they were talking like friends.

“I memorized Pete’s favorite part from that letter.” Bill continued. “*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*”

“I’m not sure I understand,” said the Virginia boy.

“...an inescapable network of mutuality,” Bill repeated “...a single garment of destiny.”

“I think it means all of us, all people, are joined as one,” Karen said, “like a family. Whether we ignore the ties or draw strength from them, we’re linked together for better or worse.”

I wrestled with it, far from home, huddled with three strangers. Could caring for others really make me happier than just caring about myself?

“It was a game changer for me,” Bill said. “I started to see that the Civil Rights movement wasn’t about helping *others* find freedom and justice... It was about living in a deeper reality where we *are* all connected.”

... *Because all men are brothers*, remembering what we heard a few hours ago. Maybe the songs *are* true? Maybe we *are* all connected, even if I haven’t paid attention?

But connected by what? ...by love? ... or by God, whatever we call Him? ...or Her?

Maybe the rest of it: ...our skin color, our looks, our nationalities ...maybe *that* was the superficial bullshit ...and love or connectedness was what really mattered?

But even if I believed it, what difference could one person make?

"Is Pete still involved in Civil Rights?" I asked.

For a moment, he hung his head and I thought he wouldn't answer. "No. He went to Vietnam as an Army medic because he was a conscientious objector who couldn't avoid the draft. Six months ago, he stepped on a land mine and was blown to bits."

"I'm so sorry," I said, wishing I had never asked.

"But his commander wrote us a letter about Pete," Bill said, "saying that he saved over 50 lives in the ten months he was there in that a goddamn, stupid unnecessary war."

My heart ached for all of them: Bill and Pete; the singers who had been so hopeful; the beggars who had been so needy; and the slaves who had suffered more than I could know, hopelessly longing to return home.

For a while we were silent.

"Pete is my hero, and I wanted to see Dr. King as a way of paying tribute to my brother. And maybe carry on his cause. Now that Dr. King is dead it seems even more important to be part of the struggle."

Raise our fists in strength and accept our suffering? Was this really best way for the world? For me?

Karen moved closer to Bill on the lounge chair, and rested her head on his shoulder.

Across the pool I saw Harry and his friend walking toward the lobby, sharing rum from a brown paper bag. I leaned back so he wouldn't see me if he glanced our way.

As they passed the other group of mourners, his friend leaned over and whispered something in his ear. Harry snickered, patting his buddy on the back. With a subdued shout, his southern drawl carried across the pool, "Party on, bro!"

They both laughed.

I felt my stomach flip. I had slept with that bigot? I stood up and ran to my room, knowing I'd never make it before I threw up.

Three days later, when I got off the plane in Buffalo, it was easy to pick out Dave because he towered over everyone with his bushy brown hair, blue eyes and lopsided smile. Although it was too dressy for an airport, I was wearing my blue silk blouse because I knew he liked it.

Would he be able to tell just looking at me that I had been unfaithful?

"Welcome home! How was it?" Dave said as he hugged me. I let my hands linger, feeling his strong muscles under his soft sweater.

“Lovely beaches with too many kids who somehow managed to stay drunk around the clock,” I answered.

Oh no. Don't start by telling him about all the parties.

“And Anne was such a brat,” I said switching gears, “I’ll never travel with her again. I’m glad she’s staying another extra day so I didn’t have to fly home with her.”

“Too bad,” said Dave, relieving me of my carry-on bag.

“But I met a missionary who gave us a tour of a Bahamian school and I got a lot of reading done,” I said, accentuating my wholesomeness with a sweet smile.

He put his arm around me and kept it there as we walked down the airport concourse to get my suitcase. “You look amazing,” he said. If the best looking athlete in our school thought I was amazing, maybe I really was – instead of a slutty girl who slept with a stranger when she was drunk and lonely.

It was fun weaving a web of flirtation and seduction when I first met him. But for the past year when I asked to him jump, he’d not only ask how high, but he’d keep jumping until I told him to stop. But now I'd do anything to go back to what we had. If he turned against me, I wouldn't have anyone.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

“Of course,” I said, snuggling closer.

My eyes popped open as we walked by a newsstand. All the newspapers showed pictures of dark smoke rising over the Capitol Building in Washington.

“Oh my God, Dave, is Washington on fire?” I asked. “I heard there were riots after Dr. King was killed, but I’ve really been cut off from the news.”

“It’s been terrible, Susan,” he said. “They think they got the guy that shot King, but there’s been riots in dozens of cities, including Washington. The Army and the National Guard has been called up to stop the looting.”

“Oh, no,” I said.

“I totally support what Dr. King was trying to do. But what’s happening now?” He shook his head slowly. “You don’t make a country better by burning it.”

“Well, wouldn’t you be angry if you were a Negro?” I retorted. “Their hope has been crushed!”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Martin Luther King was always quoting the Bible, so why aren’t more people praying, instead of looting.”

“Life is so unfair for most Negroes,” I said. “I saw it in the Bahamas and I saw it when I did my student teaching last year in the inner city.

“Most of those sweet little boys and girls live in homes where they couldn’t afford books, and it’s much worse at the mission school I just visited. Beautiful children who didn’t have anything close to the opportunities that we’ve had!”

“But isn’t life unfair for lots of people? Is rioting justified whenever life deals you a bad hand?” he asked.

“I’d riot too,” I insisted, “if the one man who was leading us to a better life had been killed by racists who just wanted somebody to look down on.”

“Oh Susan, you can’t mean that,” he said with the calm assurance of a man who knew his thoughts were better and deeper than mine.

My shoulders stiffened and I looked away. Despite his sweetness, in some ways Dave was very much a typical male.

“I don’t think this country is going to be changed by violence,” he said. “What we need is more respect and responsibility.”

I thought back to the clenched fists empowered by a crucifix, and said “What we need is anger that’s tempered by love.”

Dave’s expression changed from annoyed to surprised. I knew there were holes in his argument, but didn’t want to spend my homecoming arguing about politics – especially until I was sure our relationship was back on an even keel.

“So, how’s your baseball team doing?” I said, changing the subject to one of Dave’s favorite topics. He’s planning to become a coach, so he takes sports very seriously.

“Terrible. We lost last night and it was my fault. I made a lot of errors.”

Hmm. Wrong topic. So I shifted subjects again. “I’m looking forward to a quiet weekend all alone with you.”

His face softened into a smile. That did it.

“Would you mind stopping at my house, so I can pick up a couple of things?”

All my housemates were out when I got there. I was glad because I wasn’t even remotely ready to talk to any of them about anything. I ran quickly upstairs to my room to keep Dave from waiting.

The first thing I did was open my top draw to fetch my little gray bag with my birth control pills and headache remedies. Because Anne had rushed me as we were leaving for the airport, I had forgotten it.

I opened the birth control packet and counted. Just as I had remembered, there were nine pills left. I knew the last seven pills each month were duds to keep me in the habit of taking a pill each day. So, I had only missed two of the important pills. I must still be protected.

But to make doubly sure I was safe, I opened a new birth control packet and swallowed the first two pills. Then I grabbed some silky things that Dave liked, plus my learning theories textbook, before I hurried back downstairs to his car.

I had spent most of my weekends at his off campus apartment since we returned to school last fall. As usual, it was so neat that even the shelves in the refrigerator were organized. The smell of polish and cleansers were evidence that he had fussed.

He opened a bottle of wine for me and a can of Iroquois beer for himself. I kissed him and took my wine into the bedroom to unpack and change. I slipped on my sexiest nightgown with a matching silk robe.

Before our argument, I had foolishly confessed to Anne that our sex life was a little bland. The girls at our house had a book we passed around with dozens of very arousing sexual drawings. Unfortunately, Dave and I hadn't gotten past page four, so it was time to try out something new.

"I brought you a souvenir," I told him, carrying a small red-ribboned box as I entered the living room. It was a relief to see his face light up, like he was about to get a million dollars. "It's Gumbay, a men's cologne made in the Bahamas. I thought this would smell delicious on you."

Actually, Gumbay was the Inspector's cologne, with that appealing mix of jasmine and musk. I found some on my last day when I was shopping by myself for souvenirs.

After he unwrapped it, I drew Dave down to the couch, opened the cologne and put a little on my finger. I gently caressed his neck with it as I kissed his cheek and his lips. Then, I opened the two bottom buttons of his shirt, put a little more Gumbay on my fingers and rubbed it in a circle around his belly button. He began to moan even before I pulled down his zipper. He still was mine.

The next morning, his side of the bed was empty when I woke up. I heard soft music coming from the living room.

Last night we had set a new relationship record by making love three times. It was four exquisite hours of deeper pleasure than I had ever known. I stretched lazily, and tried to remember if I had ever woken up naked before.

I tied the sash on my little green robe, loving how the soft silk felt on my breasts as I joined him on the couch. His face glowed as I snuggled under his arm and put my head on his shoulder.

"Wow!" he said. "Last night was the best night of my entire life. What got into you? You were incredible!"

"See what happens when I miss you?" I said, brushing my lips across the bottom of his ear and nuzzling his neck. He still smelled like the Inspector.

"Susan, I don't ever want to be apart from you again."

He walked across the room, opened his desk drawer and returned with a small velvet box.

My heart sunk. Most of the seniors I knew were getting engaged to their steadies that spring. Would I be next? Marriage would be a new start for the nicer me, but was I ready for it?

"Susan, I love you and missed you more than I could ever have imagined. Will you be my wife?" The diamond ring sparkled as he opened the box.

"Oh David," I said, hugging him tight so he couldn't see my face.

I thought, I'm here nearly naked with his sperm from last night still caked inside my legs. If I say 'no' what does that make me?

I looked over his shoulder at his clean, well-organized apartment. I knew he would be a loyal husband, a good father and a great provider. And, if we were engaged, I could move in right now, avoiding Anne and my so-called friends.

I had made a terrible mistake with Harry, but it was time to settle down.

"Oh, David." I said as my eyes filled with tears, "I'd be proud to be your wife."

We'd have such a beautiful wedding.

***Finding the Holy Land* - Edward: Greece and Israel - July, 1968**

In the summer of 1968 I combined a spiritual quest with a secret mission so I could save on airfare from Athens to Tel Aviv.

My friend, Mike, and I were relaxing in the sun at a sidewalk café. The Acropolis gleamed high on a hill in the distance.

Valerie and Vivian, the two English girls who had been our companions since Munich, were huddled over a copy of “Europe on Five Dollars a Day.” They were making a list of what we should do in Athens.

The rusty Volkswagen van that Mike and I bought two weeks earlier in Frankfort was parked at the curb. Mike and I split the \$400 purchase price and the driving. Our passengers kicked in for the gas.

Our hope was to sell it in Paris at the end of the summer before flying back for our final year of graduate school: counseling psychology for me and business administration for Mike.

“It says here that 'the Sound and Light Show at the Acropolis shouldn't be missed',” said Vivian sliding her guidebook toward me.

“And it seems very affordable,” Valerie said looking at Mike with a teasing smile, half hidden by her swirl of red hair.

Mike took pride in being notoriously cheap.

“Sounds good to me!” he exclaimed. “And if we go to a local bank, we'll get the best exchange rate for our traveler's checks. Plus, I've read they have incredible deals on leather goods in Athens, if you're willing to bargain.”

“Which I'm sure, you are very good at,” laughed Valerie as she slipped her arm around the back of Mike's chair.

I was trying to decide whether another glass of retsina would make me happier or sleepier when a couple approached our table.

“Are any of you interested in a trip to the Holy Land?” asked the man. His German accent didn't go with his hooked nose and dark olive skin. The short woman who stood touching his arm had sparkling blue eyes and more short blond curls than I had ever seen.

“No, we're going to the Islands,” said Mike.

“Are you sure? The ticket is very cheap,”

“How cheap?” I asked, gesturing for them to sit.

“Only \$60 dollars, maybe less,” he said, “but you'll need to do us a favor.”

Ahrm explained that he and Machda had planned to visit their friend in Jerusalem, but couldn't travel due to “complications.” All I would need to do was to deliver a message.

Mike interrupted to ask Ahrm about the best shopping spots in Athens. While he answered, I considered the possibilities.

I had no schedule to follow as long as I made it back to Buffalo in September for my final year of grad school.

The English girls were headed to India to meet their boyfriends, Barry and George in New Delhi. Then the four of them would journey to the ashram of a guru they said was “even better” than the one the Beatles had visited.

Mike and I had planned to go to the Greek Island with the girls. Then we’d say good-bye, return to Athens, and take our van on the overnight ferry from Patras to Italy. We’d meander up the Italian boot with stops in Naples, Rome and Florence before selling the van in Paris.

Mike had a good thing going with Valerie. But I had disappointed Vivian.

A few nights ago we had camped on the Vardar River in Yugoslavia, just a day’s drive from the Greek border. Vivian and I were under the stars in the sleeping bag we had been sharing since we crossed the Alps a week ago. Valerie and Mike had the privacy of the van.

After we had been intimate, Vivian rolled away toward the fire and lay very still. The glow from the flames created a halo of highlights in her long brown hair.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She turned to look at me in the half light of the rising moon. “When Barry and I make love he likes to...” She paused, and then flicked her tongue in and out of her mouth. “I like it, too,” she whispered, averting her eyes.

I knew what she meant, but my arms and legs had just turned to wood.

Despite having sex with many girls, I was confused about the female anatomy. And I was too embarrassed to ask exactly what I should do, and where I should do it “down there.”

“I’m glad you’re with me now,” I said lamely, rubbing her back.

She was trapped in my arms and I was trapped in my personality.

After a pause she looked up at the stars and whispered, “It’s been a brilliant trip, hasn’t it?”

She was a lovely girl being kind to an uptight guy. I felt her sigh and a few minutes later she was asleep.

Ahrm bought us a round of drinks while Mike questioned him about the best bargains in Athens.

“Never buy anything within two blocks of the Plaka,” Ahrm said. “All the tourists flock there to see the ruins that were the center of ancient Athens. The best deals are the shops further to the south, away from the big hotels and the famous sites.”

“So, tell me about this message,” I asked as the drinks were brought to our table.

“It’s very simple,” he replied. He focused his deep brown eyes on me, as Machda leaned closer to him. Her face was so angelic; it was hard not to stare.

“We’ll give you directions to find our friend who has a tea room in the old city of Jerusalem.” His voice was quieter now. “Just tell him that Ahrm and Machda send their love, and that the birds will fly in October.”

Now, according to every spy movie I had ever seen, “birds flying in October” had to be a code for something sinister. But, I figured, it couldn’t be a very dangerous, or successful - plot if they trusted a random twenty-two-year-old graduate student to deliver their secret message.

The world felt safe that summer. The slaughter of the Israeli athletes in Munich was years away and the rash of airplane hijackings had not yet begun. If asked, I would have said a “terrorist” was a two-year old who needed a nap.

We agreed on \$50 dollars for a round-trip ticket to Tel Aviv.

I wanted to have a spiritual experience in the Holy Land. I hadn’t been to church for years and there was a hole in my heart, since my faith had been shattered.

I imagined I might find it in a beam of light on a dusty road to Damascus, or in the sacred silence of a holy place. Besides, I thought it would be fun to meet a real Arab.

Two days later I walked through the Jerusalem’s Damascus Gate into another world.

The streets of the Old City – barely wider than a Buffalo sidewalk – were worn brown blocks crowded by stone walls that sheltered shops and homes.

Women hid behind veils, haggling in gibberish with men in flowing robes and headgear. Overhead racks of clothes and brassware formed makeshift tunnels that blocked views of the hot, blue sky. Arched alleys ran off at random angles with stalls clogging every passageway.

Now I knew what “foreign” meant. I smiled, my heart beating happily, thrilled that I had the nerve to be here on my own. I reached in my pocket for the map Ahrm had drawn for me, pulled my backpack straps a bit tighter and walked into the labyrinth.

I found Abdul wiping cups behind the counter in his tea room. “I come from Athens and I bring the love of Ahrm and Machda,” I said, enjoying the awkward sound of the sentence.

“Ah, Ahrm and Machda!” Abdul beamed, approaching me with outstretched arms. He engulfed me in his white robe with the sweet and sour smell of sandalwood and sweat.

After I told him what the birds planned to do in October, he declared that I was his honored guest.

We climbed a rough ladder to a low loft overflowing with pillows that overlooked the tea bar. He showed me an old record player with a stack of 45s next to it.

“You will be our music jockey, yes?” he asked with a heavy accent, as he handed a record to me. I smiled back at him.

For the rest of the evening I played songs I couldn't understand. Some had haunting whirling melodies that I could hum or harmonize with by the third verse. I wished I had brought my guitar so I could sing them some American folk music, but I had left it in our van back in Athens.

Below me, the men laughed and argued in a language I supposed was Arabic. Abdul often smiled and waved up at me.

His assistant kept me well supplied with tiny glasses of a light yellow tea that smelled like hibiscus, plus a round flatbread that was new to me. It was served with a sweet crumbly paste that might have been from some kind of nut.

My favorite drink was akra, a cloudy white liquor served in small glasses. It tasted like licorice.

After my second, I stretched with pleasure and relaxed on the pillows. So this was Jerusalem.

My spiritual quest began the next morning. I left the hostel without a guidebook, confident I would recognize Mt. Calvary from seeing the movies I had seen. I walked the narrow stone road atop the wall of the Old City, looking to my left for a naked hill with three crosses. I didn't really expect that the middle cross would be lit with a single beam of sunlight, but maybe...

I saw nothing I recognized. To my right were the domed roofs, crosses and minarets of the Old City. Outside the wall was an ugly mix of modern buildings perched on parched hills.

After about ten minutes I came upon a thin priest in brown Franciscan robes talking with a young man by the rampart wall. His brown beard looked much better than the one I was trying to grow. The monk was giving him directions in French.

I didn't know French, but I knew Franciscans, so I said, "Excuse me, I'm looking for Mt. Calvary. Do you know where it is?"

The young man responded in English.

"Oh, it's over there," pointing inside the Old City to my right. "The walls have been destroyed and rebuilt a number of times since Christ died," he explained.

He switched to French to thank the monk who backed away after blessing us both with the sign of the cross.

"Each time Jerusalem was destroyed," he continued, "the Old City grew a little larger and now Mt. Calvary is inside the wall."

"You sound like an American," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Buffalo."

"Really? Me, too!" I said surprised. "I live on Ashland."

"I live on Norwood!!" he replied. "My name is Ron," he said, extending his hand for a shake.

I was astonished. Six thousand miles from home, I meet a guy who literally lives around the corner.

Ron became my guide because he had a guidebook and I was clueless. First, we visited the shrine that claimed to be the spot where Mary, the Blessed Mother, was assumed into heaven.

A calm light filtered into a large room decorated with frescoes depicting events from Mary's life. We were alone except for a middle aged woman speaking softly in Italian to her elderly mother, plus a fat man in a black robe. His baldness was accentuated by a clump of dark greasy hair draped across the top of his shiny dome.

The fat monk eyed us suspiciously from his seat near the door as we walked towards a fresco, showing a frightened Mary listening to the Angel Gabriel explain that she would soon become the mother of God. He still had his eye on us as we viewed another fresco in which Mary was being greeted by her visibly pregnant cousin, Elizabeth.

Behind the little altar was a painting of the Assumption. It showed Mary with a mysterious Mona Lisa-ish smile looking up to see her Son waiting for her on a cloud. I liked how His light lit up the brilliant blue of her robe.

The room was cool but the monk was sweating. As I glanced at him, he moved his hand closer to the donation box on his table next to a sign that said "Please give" in six languages.

"Do you think this is where it really happened?" I asked Ron.

"Perhaps," he said with a strange little smile that echoed Mary's in the painting.

"But how would they know that *this* is the exact spot?" I asked.

"Tradition ...and faith," he whispered, looking up to the painting.

Faith? I thought about how my own faith had been ruined by the Catholic schools my parents had scrimped to afford.

I had totally believed all the miracle stories ...the healings ...raising the deadthe apparition at Lourdes. That is, I believed until Father Scanlon, my freshman theology instructor at Buffalo's leading Catholic College, told the class: "And of course, Moses really didn't part the Red Sea with his staff like you've seen in the movies.

"What really happened," he said brushing some chalk from his cassock, "is that the tide went out and the tide came in. The Israelites were protected by God, but it was the timing of His natural wonders that saved them, not Moses and his magic staff."

My jaw dropped as the jolt jarred my faith. Up until that moment, I had not doubted *anything* I had been taught. The miracle stories - like the parting of the Red Sea, Christ's curing the lepers, the apparitions at Lourdes - were proof to me of God's power. I accepted them wholeheartedly along with the reality of hell and my mortal sins that would send me there.

The shock, sitting in that classroom and learning my faith was founded on fables, was like when I was seven and my older sister said, "Eddie, you dope. Don't you know it's not Santa

Claus? It's Mom and Dad!" I had never doubted anything about Santa's magic, nor had I doubted Moses' miracles.

Both revelations changed my world. If Santa wasn't real, maybe there was no magic. If miracles weren't real, maybe there was no God.

If God wasn't real, maybe religion really *was* just the opiate of the people. Crowd control to assure conformity. Demagoguery in the name of donations.

Over the following months at college, a lot clicked into place. And none of it was comforting. A religious ruse had damned me to doubt myself, sapping my spontaneity. I imitated my father's friendly manners, the key to his success as a salesman, but I was always guarded about the real me, the sinner.

I had been a very good kid who honored his parents. I was too afraid of girls not to treat them well. I served on the altar most Sundays and kept my distance from the occasional creepy priest. I studied hard, did well in high school, was elected to the student council and earned four varsity letters in cross country and track.

But I grew up believing that I was a sinful shit because the priests and the nuns told me that masturbation was a mortal sin that would condemn me to hell. Christ suffered and died for *my* sins, because I couldn't keep my hands out of my underpants. The only time I was in a state of grace was the few hours between my weekly Saturday afternoon Confession and when I was alone that night with my dirty thoughts.

My mother was a short Irish Catholic with piercing blue eyes and a big nose. "Eddie," she said as we got into our car after Mass one Sunday, "What's wrong? I couldn't stand the way you kept sighing when you were behind me on the Communion line, like you were going to a funeral or something."

"Oh, I'm just tired, Mom," I lied. I could never tell her the truth. When I walked up communion rail each Sunday, I believed that I was headed to something far worse than a funeral. Each step took me closer to a more excruciating part of hell, because receiving Holy Communion with a mortal sin on your soul was a sacrilege, the worst imaginable offense against God. But how could I tell my mother I needed to skip Communion because I had committed a mortal sin, or sometimes a couple of them, since yesterday afternoon's Confession?

My faith and my fears now seemed foolish, and I thought Catholicism might be a dangerous cult. But I still hungered for God. Maybe the English girls were right and I should go to India and check out their guru. Or maybe there was something here in the Holy Land could help me.

Ron glowed at each sacred spots we visited, a peacefulness beaming from his calm eyes and serene smile. I glowered, increasingly annoyed with the claims I heard, aimed more at selling souvenirs than soothing my spirit.

Here was a piece of the true Cross, viewable for a mandatory donation. And here was where Veronica comforted Christ and was rewarded with His picture on her veil, available at reasonable price if you were willing to bargain.

"Ron, thanks for showing me around, but I think I might get more out of being here if I did it as a solo pilgrimage," I said. It was mid-afternoon and we were eating at an Arab cafe, bare wooden tables pushed close together, whirling music like last night's playing in the background. We could see the tour guides through the window, waving colored flags high over their heads, so their groups could find them in the crowded passages.

"Of course," Ron said, "chatting about Buffalo is a distraction from what we've come to see. Why don't we exchange phone numbers and, maybe connect in the fall and compare notes?"

"Sure," I agreed knowing I would never call. His saintliness annoyed me. Or maybe I was jealous that he was having a soulful experience in places that felt sour to me.

I hated the Holy City. After we said good-bye, as I neared the church built over the site of the Crucifixion, hunched under the weight of my backpack, vendors called to me: "Hey, buddy! You from New York? Greenwich Village? Want some good hash? Come with me. A free smoke!"

Or: "Here, mister, have a nice drink to relax. Want to meet some pretty girls? Very nice!! You will like them!"

I had enjoyed all of the above between Amsterdam and Athens, but my mission here was different.

I was in search of the sacred. And I couldn't find it.

I thought maybe Ron's glow had been from some hash he wasn't sharing. But that didn't explain the church ladies in the Holy Sepulcher who prayed in a half-dozen languages, then fell to their knees and sobbed. All around me people were having mystical experiences. I was merely mystified.

It's only six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. I hitchhiked there the next day and was dropped off about two miles outside of town.

I was shocked. The land of milk and honey looked like it was recovering from a nuclear blast. Big stones, ugly shrubs and shoddy souvenir shops dotted the landscape as I walked toward the birthplace of Christ.

The Star of Bethlehem sold cheap rosaries and cold sodas. I sat outside on my pack, resting in the shade and looking at Manger Square on the hill across the valley. Tour buses rumbled past a sad-looking donkey.

My best experience in Bethlehem was eating my first pita bread sandwich at a small restaurant near the edge of town. My worst was trying to pray in the underground chapel at the place where God became man.

Here, too, emotion ran high. But the wailing soundtrack of the pilgrims seemed more fit for a funeral than the most amazing place in the universe. I didn't get it.

After the novelty of the adventure wore off, I was dead inside. Numb. Alone. Empty. If I couldn't find Christ here, where could I? Maybe Christianity was just a myth without any magic? I had spent my teen years tortured by guilt. Maybe I should just walk away and skip the spirituality.

I fled the holiest parts of the land, taking a bus to Tel Aviv three days before my flight back to Athens.

There were no sites I wanted to see, no one I wanted to meet, and nothing I wanted to do. The dirty window in my cheap room looked out on a kitchen across the alley.

Tel Aviv has beautiful boulevards and a boardwalk along the beach. I enjoyed my walks despite a threatening shadow from the Israeli reservists who casually carried their weapons as they rode buses, browsed in bookstores and relaxed in parks.

Each day, as I strolled without a purpose, a song from the film, "A Man and A Woman" kept going through my head. It's a simple tune with the same phrase playing over and over - first a little slow, then a little fast and then a final long note.

Years later, I learned that meditation is any technique that stops your thoughts of past guilt and future fears by bringing you back to the present moment. So I guess that song was my meditation chant and the three days in Tel Aviv was my first retreat. The little tune kept me in the richness of the present moment, as I walked along the sea and rested in the parks.

The first glimpse of God came toward the end of the second day. I was sitting at sidewalk café on a broad boulevard across from a park with palm trees and flowers. A young man and an attractive woman were walking towards me holding hands. But my mind got twisted by their matching Army uniforms, the automatic weapons slung over their backs.

Then, suddenly, a warm brilliant light from the vivid glow they shared.

As they passed, I saw the glow was everywhere. Brightness. Warmth. Beauty. Comfort. Love. LOVE.around an old lady talking to fat man with a mustache ...surrounding the palm trees ...connecting the flowers in a pot on the sidewalk. The Love of God connected me with everyone and everything in the universe.

Peace, love and oneness reigned in the middle of a modern city. It was extremely odd and amazingly wonderful. I was deeply stunned and very satisfied.

The vision lasted less than fifteen seconds. I heard no words, but I experienced a glimmer of God. And I knew the Creator, the Comforter and the Spirit were always there, just beyond my troubled mind.

"Thank you," I prayed.

Before I visited Tel Aviv, I believed that God only lived in ancient places and sacred tabernacles. Now I knew that God was always everywhere, and I could find the Holy Land without going anywhere at all.

My Best Friend - Donna: Buffalo - September, 1968

Bailey is my best friend. His looks don't bother me, either the pushed-in nose or the rubbery jowls. But I would have thought twice about opening my heart if I knew he snored when he slept and slobbered when he drank.

I guess I should have done some research about Boston Bulldogs before I took him home two years ago. But who knew I would fall in love when I walked into that pet shop?

It's the first Saturday of the fall semester, a perfect day for Bailey and me to explore our new neighborhood, sandwiched between Main Street and the Buffalo Zoo. So far, I like my Social Work professors and the little apartment I've rented on a quiet street.

"Look at this old house, Bailey," I said, "and that one with all the carvings on the porch. Isn't it beautiful?"

Bailey waddles more when he is happy and he was in full waddle this morning, so I know he likes the neighborhood, too.

On the corner, a couple of blocks away, the angles of one very modern home clashed with the graciousness of its neighbors. This, I had read, was the famous Prairie Home, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. Too bad it's kind of run down. I wonder what it's like inside?

A tunnel of trees shaded us from the bright September sun. In a few weeks it would be a blaze of reds and scarlets, very different than what Alania would be seeing in California.

My chest ached and I almost forgot to breathe when I thought of her. She decided that, since we were taking separate paths, it might be best if we didn't contact each other for at least six months. Was it because I had chosen Buffalo over her, even though she knew why Buffalo was so important to me?

I called Susan this morning. A lot has happened in the last five months. She's gotten married and started a teaching job. Her big news is that she's expecting a baby because she and her husband wanted to start a family before he goes into the Army and, probably, to Vietnam. She invited me to dinner next week to meet him, and said I should bring my guitar.

I envy all the love in her life.

I want a life of love, even if I'm wired differently than most girls. I knew for sure when I was thirteen. That's when I got a crush on Ann Margret, watching her sing *How Lovely to be a Woman* while she playfully changed outfits at the beginning of *Bye Bye Birdie*.

I was in the second row of the balcony at Radio City Music Hall on a trip to New York City with my church youth group. The glowing chandeliers, the gilded carvings and thirty-six dancing Rocketts were beyond anything I expected.

Then the movie started, I saw Ann Margret, and my hormones surged. I spent the rest of the movie imagining what might happen if she ever slept over at my house. I knew they were dirty, sinful thoughts, but I couldn't stop them.

That night I shared a hotel room, two double beds and a window on 46th Street, with three other girls who kept talking about the movie and whether they would rather marry Conrad Birdie or Bobby Rydell. But when they asked me, I flushed with fear and couldn't answer. I wanted to marry Ann Margret.

It's a glorious day made for walking. But my steps get slower on each block as we approach Main Street, like there's a strong wind pushing me back. Then I see it: Sisters Hospital at the corner of Main and Kensington, 10 red brick stories with the maternity unit on the eighth floor.

It's September 10th. A beautiful day for my son's sixth birthday.

Would he look like me? Or look like that sleazy bastard with the ice blue eyes and the sweaty steel hands who raped me? For the past week, I've looked for a resemblance in every little boy I've seen.

My father died in a car accident when I was eleven, a nightmare that never ended for my mother and me. I ached for him and I guess she did too. Moving to a crummy apartment in the middle of Syracuse made it worse.

She met Bill when I was 14 and he moved in when I was 15. I mostly ignored him when he was sober, but hated him when he was drunk. He'd say "you're growing up, girlie" like it was a compliment when he looked at my breasts.

One night, when my mother was away helping my aunt after her surgery, Bill came into my room, reeking of beer. "It's time to grow up, girl," he said as he sat down on my bed, gently touching my face with his cold sweaty hands. Black stubble masked the jut of his jaw.

I turned away and told him I was sleepy, then yelled as he grabbed my shoulder and pushed me onto my back "Don't. Don't! Stop!!" I shouted as he straddled me. "Help!" hoping Mrs. Antonucci next door would hear.

He clamped his hand on my mouth, pinching my nose, cutting off my air. "Listen, girlie. You be quiet or you're going to get hurt. If you say anything, I'll tell your mother you're a little bitch whose been seducing me with those big blue eyes."

I struggled hard, pushing and scratching, but couldn't stop him.

After my mother came home from Aunt Betty's, it happened twice more. Both were Thursday nights when she was at choir practice. She's leave at seven and come home after nine singing, "Halleluiah! Halleluiah!" from a Christmas cantata I used to like. I'd pray she wouldn't come into my bedroom and see me crying.

Then Bill dumped her, leaving on New Year's Day to take a better job in California. Things weren't working out, he said, and he was gone.

That week I missed my first period. It wasn't hard to hide the pregnancy under my bulky sweaters that winter, but in April my mother saw my belly.

"Donna, you've got to tell me. Whoever that boy is, I want know his name, and I want to talk to his parents." She yelled and screamed. But all I ever said was that "it was just some boy." Wouldn't the truth have been worse for both of us?

And what if, to prove my innocence, I told my mom I was only attracted to girls? Instead of banishing me to Buffalo to "protect my reputation" maybe she would have killed me, or dropped dead of shock. Who knows? I imagined a hundred possibilities, and not one had a happy ending.

I moved to Aunt Betty's in May. We didn't want to scandalize any neighbors who might see my pregnant belly, right?

Betty carted me off to meet with a smelly little priest a couple of times. He insisted that the Seal of the Confessional would assure that all my secrets would be safe with him. The second week I told him the truth, at least the part about Bill. He asked way too many questions that I didn't want to answer, then told me to say a rosary each day for my penance.

My penance!! That bastard raped me and this priest expected me to get down on my knees and apologize to God?

Now, I stood on the corner of Main Street, staring at the hospital. I was 16 when Stephen was born on the eighth floor right across the street. Bailey sat by my feet, my best friend always there to support me, as cars and buses sped by, noisy, smelly.

If God exists, I hope He or She listens to me, because I've got the perfect candidate to burn forever in the hottest fires of hell. I'd love to watch Bill's icy blue eyes explode with pain and hear him scream, louder and longer than when I delivered the little baby they wouldn't let me love. My beautiful Stephen with his tiny perfect fingers who held my hand until they took him away.

I haven't been back to Buffalo since my mother sent me here to stay with my aunt to hide my pregnancy, six and a half years ago. They both insisted that I sign the adoption papers from Catholic Charities.

I called the agency yesterday morning and gave them the details about Stephen's birth. I told them I was now a mature young woman and wanted to at least see my son, even if I couldn't get him back right away. Catholic Charities wouldn't give me any information about Stephen, but I know in my heart he is near and I refuse to stop loving him.

"Come on, Bailey. Let's go, and keep your eyes peeled for a little boy who looks like me." I tugged at this leash and wiped my tears as we turned back towards Parkside.

I wish I had a blanket with Stephen's scent to give Bailey something more to go on. But when they took him, they took away everything. Everything.

I want a life of love. But I feel like I've been born into this upside-down game where those who should love me the most, love me the least. But the way I figure it, if someone starts to shit on you, just step out of the way and let *them* clean up the mess. There's still plenty of sunshine to stand in.

Alina has been the sunshine in my life for nearly a year. She pushed hard for me to come and live with her in California, until I broke down one night, crying, telling her about the rape, how much I need to find my son.

I miss her jokes, her courage and her harmonies when I'm singing. But mostly I miss the quiet peace of lying in her arms, running my fingers through her black silky hair and touching her cheek as her love poured out through her soft brown eyes.

Maybe it's for the best. Her parents are devout Muslims from Iran and she told me that her father would kill her, literally, if he knew she was in a gay relationship.

Bailey kept stopping at every tree to investigate the smells.

"Hey, Bailey. My new friend, Susan, told me she's has been practicing her guitar. So how about if we go home, and I'll brush up by singing you a couple of tunes."

Bailey's my biggest fan, so I knew that look meant "yes."

"And don't forget to check out any little kids you see."

The Boulevard of Broken Dreams - Edward: Buffalo - Fall 1971 – 73

“Hello, Ed, this is Patrick O’Hara, Chief of Homicide for the Buffalo Police Department.

“We’re investigating the death of Patricia Saunders. I understand that she and her boyfriend, Frankie Roberts, were clients at your counseling center.”

I hesitated before answering. “Well, Mr. O’Hara, I really don’t know how to respond.” I knew his call meant that a terrible tragedy was going to get much worse.

“Everything about our clients is confidential,” I said, “so I’m not sure if I can even confirm or deny whether someone is or isn’t a client.” My hand was already sweating on the phone.

“I advise you to cut the bullshit,” O’Hara snapped. “We’re trying to decide if we should charge Frankie in Patty’s death. What you know about both of them might help us decide.

“Would you mind coming down to headquarters this afternoon to answer a couple of questions?” he asked. “Or should I send a squad car to Lee Street?”

I got Chief O’Hara’s call just after Christmas, about a year and a half after we opened the Lee Street Counseling Center. I had failed both Patty and Frankie. And another catastrophe was brewing.

We called Lee Street, the “Boulevard of Broken Dreams,” because everyone we met was disappointed about something. But the problems faced by Frankie and Patty went beyond the daily dramas of the teens, parents and others who came to us for help. And I wouldn’t learn his final lesson until years after I left Lee Street.

The Lee Street Counseling Center was in an old bar at the end of a run-down street on Buffalo’s West Side. Through funding from the New York State Office of Drug Abuse Services and the Erie County Department of Mental Health, the bar had been converted into a storefront center with a reception area in front, plus six little offices and a group room in back.

On one side was a sandwich shop with good lunchtime specials. On our other side, a tavern offered afternoon specials on shots. Both did a pretty good business.

Most afternoons we’d see a steady stream of taxis picking up ladies with grocery bags from the supermarket across the street. Taxis are a luxury in some neighborhoods. In ours it was how you went food shopping when you couldn’t afford a car.

I was the senior counselor responsible for intakes and my own caseload. I also supervised the other counselors because I had a master’s degree and they didn’t.

The oldest person on our staff was Paul, our director, who was twenty-eight. The smartest might have been Jane, an ex-junkie who was our outreach worker.

“I don’t care what you learned in school, you don’t know shit about what happens on the street,” Jane insisted.

“So tell me.” I said.

“Uh, uhhh,” she replied, pausing to light her second cigarette in my tiny office.

It was our first day and the entire staff would meet for the first time that afternoon. But Jane and I both came in early, and our first chat wasn’t going well.

“If I told you what the street is really like,” she said, "you’d just use my stories like all those case studies you’ve been reading. More knowledge in your head that interferes with what’s coming from your heart.”

I said, “It sounds like you’re angry. Tell me more.”

“Uh, uhhh” she said in a sing-song tone, like she was losing patience with a little kid.

“And don’t try using that reflective bullshit on me. I know where you’re coming from and I think it’s a pretty empty place ...and pretty damn dishonest.”

“So where do we go from here?” I asked.

Her hard brown eyes flashed with annoyance. “Where you go is up to you. I’m going to lunch,” she said, getting up.

Our first meeting was over. In one hour I would meet everybody else.

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