

FRIENDSHIP



A story about love, hope and music.

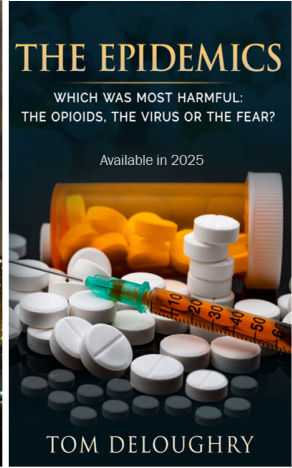
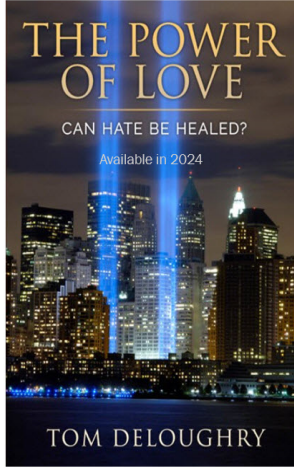
Book one of the Friendship Trilogy

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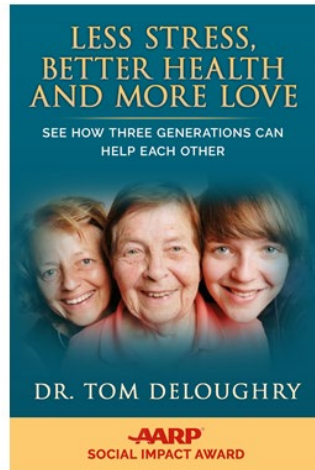
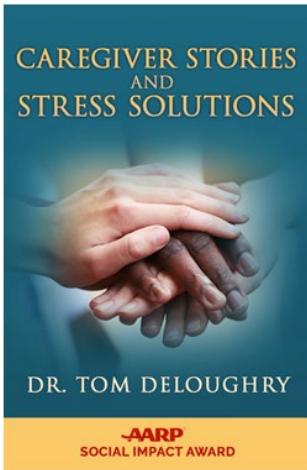
TOM DELOUGHRY

THE FRIENDSHIP TRILOGY

FOUR MUSICIANS MEET IN THE SIXTIES... ARE STUNNED BY TERRORISM... THEN FIGHT THE FEAR EPIDEMIC.



The Trilogy was inspired by two earlier books, honored by AARP's Social Impact Award as “a simple mind-body-spirit program for seniors, adults and teens of any faith, or no faith.”



True stories about caregiving that empower three generations.

VISIT WWW.FRIENDSHIPTRILOGY.COM TO LEARN MORE

- Hear songs Donna and Susan performed with *Friendship*
- Get discussion resources for book clubs and faith groups
 - Get sneak peeks and publication updates

Dedication and Copyright

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

And to Tom and Loretta DeLoughry,
who were my best teachers when my life was beginning...
and, again, when their lives were ending.

Tom DeLoughry

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Tom DeLoughry and his wife, Kathy, played music for over forty years in a group very similar to the Trilogys Friendship. He directed drug abuse and adolescent services in child psychiatry at Buffalo Children's Hospital, and also directed wellness and disease management for Independent Health, a large managed care organization.

He served as a clinical assistant professor of public health and a research assistant professor of family medicine at the State University of New York at Buffalo, where he earned his doctorate in health education and behavior.

During a three-year sabbatical when he directed a Franciscan retreat center, he convened a coalition of social workers, nurses and physicians that included Christian, Jewish and Muslim clergy. They collaborated on creating a simple mind-body-spirit program for seniors, adults and teens of any faith or no faith that was funded by the Niagara County Department for Aging. Their program, and a related book of stories and strategies, was honored by *AARP's Social Impact Award*.

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2001

VANISHED



Susan

Buffalo, September 10, 2001

My kitchen was a mess, the drop cloths tripping me as I rushed to answer the phone.

It was Donna, sobbing. "Susan, they convicted me."

"Oh, Donna, I'm so sorry," I said, a twist of rage 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, clutching the phone to my ear. "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 should have been there to support you," I said, looking at the half-painted green wall. I put my brush down on the edge of the can. "I'm so sorry."

For over thirty years, we had shared secrets and played a steady stream of concerts with Ed and Paul. Last week, I visited her in Yonkers as she prepared to face a jury of her fellow ministers who would decide her fate. But I had been pressured by my husband to return home.

When her sobs slowed to sniffles, I said, "The way I see it, your only crime is you followed the Golden Rule instead of church rules. You treated others the way you want to be treated. I'm proud of you."

"I don't know what to do," Donna said, just above a whisper.

"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 your courage has been so widely publicized; I think the church will vote to change the rules."

"My courage or my stupidity?" she said. "Look at the lives I've ruined. The people I loved the most! And so much hate mail, I stopped reading it." She paused. "No more fighting. I'm done."

The storm had surfaced last May. Her good intentions were drowned by a sex scandal that had splashed her picture onto newspapers and television. Friends turned away.

"Who wouldn't be exhausted by what you're going through?" I said. "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, I was shocked, then sickened as I watched the horror of the Twin Towers tumbling on television, smoke streaming through the brilliant blue sky.

Should we have warned the authorities about Malik's hateful rants from al Qaeda? His sister was sick about them when she showed us. But shouldn't our government have already known what we did?

Donna's train had left Yonkers an hour before the first plane flew into the North Tower. I was sure she was safe, heading north up the Hudson River to Buffalo. She had no reason to be in Manhattan, thirty miles south of where the ministers voted to defrock her.

But she never got off the train when it pulled into the Buffalo station at 3:01 PM.

Donna, a 55-year-old ex-minister, had vanished.

2016

THE REHEARSAL



Susan

Buffalo, August 20, 2016

Fifteen years later, Friendship, our folk music group, was invited to perform in a concert to observe the anniversary of the terror attack. Donna's granddaughter, Alice, would be singing with Ed, Paul and me.

When Alice came to our first rehearsal, I rubbed my eyes and looked again. At 27, she looked exactly like her grandmother did when I first met Donna in 1968. It was on spring break in the Bahamas. Donna had been sitting in the back of a jeep waiting for a tour to begin, her blond ponytail bouncing as she laughed with the guide.

Alice's hair, a textured bob, was shorter than Donna's. But otherwise, they were identical. I blinked back my tears as I welcomed her with a hug.

She was a skilled guitarist who had been listening to Friendship records since she was a little girl, so she easily covered Donna's parts. Toward the end of the evening, as we rehearsed 'Light One Candle,' Alice lifted her chin and smiled at me as she held a high note, just like Donna always did. Her brown eyes sparkled under her blonde bangs, her joy contagious. For a moment, I was a young woman again, sharing a microphone with my best friend, our guitars pulsing together, singing with all our hearts to awaken more love.

As Ed poured some wine after the rehearsal, Alice said, "I adored grandma. But I was only twelve when she disappeared, and I never understood what happened. Was she at the World Trade Center that day?"

I had little to tell her. In the weeks after the terror attack, I took a half-dozen trips to Yonkers and Manhattan, looking for her. Nearly

3000 people vanished on September 11th. Even now, more than a thousand, like Donna, were still missing with no trace of their remains.

As I talked with Alice, I had trouble remembering much about that day other than a few horrifying images. So the week before the concert, I asked Ed to come with me to visit the September 11th Memorial Museum at the World Trade Center in New York.

THE MUSEUM



Susan

The World Trade Center, New York City, September 9th, 2016

My hand was slippery with sweat on the museum's handrail as Ed and I stepped onto the escalator, sliding down beside two girders that were the battered remnants of the Twin Towers. I leaned on my cane, steadying myself against the movement and the memories as we sank through the Manhattan bedrock to the Memorial Museum, seven stories below where the Towers once soared.

The second escalator descended to the vast cavern of Memorial Hall. 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 awful day.

"No day shall ever erase you," I murmured as we sank lower.

"How could we ever forget her?" Ed said. He towered over me, still lean and handsome despite wrinkles under a messy shock of silver hair. "Even now, I ache. But I still wonder if it was suicide," poking at the hole in my heart for the thousandth time.

I'd have slapped him if I hadn't heard it so many times before. Ed's strong point was honesty, but I always wished it was sensitivity. If Donna had killed herself, wasn't it my fault for not being at the trial to support her?

"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 media coverage, the friends who turned on her. If it were me, I'd have at least thought about jumping off a bridge."

The guilt started to drain me, but I forced myself to choose something else. "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 four 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 question our priorities by saying terrorism has caused nearly 4000 American deaths over the past twelve years, compared to 33,000 deaths from opioid addiction just last year? As an American Studies professor, I know you keep track of that stuff. But don't you think it's going to get you into trouble if Trump gets elected and you decide to go for another grant?"

"I think all of us are already in trouble because people make decisions based on their fears rather than the facts," Ed said, quoting from his preface. "And our national policies place profits over people."

He took my elbow to steady me as the escalator reached the bottom. A jolt shot down my leg as I stepped off, but my physical therapist says I'm doing well for a 69-year-old lady with a recent hip replacement.

For the next 20 minutes, we barely spoke as we relived the nightmare, the twisted steel, the videos and the crushed fire truck, a reminder of the 343 firefighters who died.

“And, here, ladies and gentlemen, is what has come to be called the ‘9/11 Bible,’” the tour guide said. “It was found fused to a steel girder when the rubble of the Twin Towers was being removed.



“What is most remarkable,” he continued, “is that a page from the New Testament is clearly legible. You can see Jesus’s 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. A bubble of grief started in my stomach, grew in my chest, and exploded as 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 to steady 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 words embedded in the molten metal. “Ed, do you remember? We gave her a New Testament with Christ’s words written in red on the day she was ordained. And ‘turn the other cheek’ was one of her favorite sayings.”

“God knows there were always plenty of people for her to forgive,” he said, frowning.

He put his arm around me, and we both stared at it.

“It looks like the one she read,” Ed said. He bent to get a closer look.

"Yes," I said. "We gave her just the New Testament so it wouldn't be bulky."

He bent over, his nose just inches from the glass case as he stared at it. "And we ordered a custom purse with a little compartment so she could take it everywhere. But, Susan, there must be tens of thousands of this exact same Bible. What are the odds that this one is hers?" He paused, straightening up. "And how did it get *here*?"

In my heart, I knew it was hers. But the message? "Turn the other cheek"? Forgive the terrorists who had killed my best friend that day? It made me sick.

THE MEMORIAL CONCERT



Susan

Grand Island, NY, September 12th, 2016

Four days later, my hip hurt and my heart ached as I closed my guitar case, taking care to avoid the microphone and speaker wires that snaked through the grass around my feet. The concert was over, and we were gathering our things from backstage at the edge of a meadow before it sloped down to the Niagara River. The afternoon sun had pierced the clouds, spotlighting a blaze of early autumn over on the Canadian shore.

Every September since the 80s, the Lodge, an eclectic spiritual community of peace activists and recovering hippies on Grand Island, had sponsored an outdoor concert on the Niagara River. Donna, Ed, Paul and I – known collectively as Friendship – had headlined more than a dozen of them. This afternoon’s concert had been billed as “The 15th Commemoration of the 9/11 Attacks.” The day Donna disappeared. The day fear became an epidemic.

A low drone in the distance had grown into the intrusive growl of twin outboard motors, powering the white and green U.S. Border Patrol boat heading upriver from Niagara Falls to Buffalo. It turned slightly, heading towards a raft of about a hundred canvasbacks ducks drifting slowly toward the Falls, five miles downstream. They were the first contingent of over a hundred thousand birds that wintered here each year, drawn by the current that kept the river from freezing.

The boat sped towards them, forcing them to flap furiously and take off. Swarming awkwardly towards the clouds that hung over the border, they looked like the flying monkeys that protected the Wicked Witch in Oz.

At our final rehearsal two days ago, I started to tell Alice about the Bible we found and its message of forgiveness. But before I could begin, nausea filled my belly. I excused myself and fled to the bathroom. How could I tell her what I didn't understand?

The night before our concert I had a dream. It was vivid, like actually watching September 11th unfold through Donna's eyes. The early train she took to Manhattan, the meeting, and the horror. The sounds and the pain. Then, the unexpected love and indescribable beauty.

It was too awful and too fantastic. Was it a message from Donna? Or just a side effect from the Tylenol PM I took to help me sleep?

Alice, still flushed from the applause we had just received, came over and stood next to me at the table behind the stage, sliding her setlist under the strings of her guitar. "Susan, that was amazing. It was such an honor to sing with the three of you and do my grandma's parts. Thank you for including me!"

I felt myself sway and held onto the table for support. "Alice, you were great," I said, pausing for a deep breath. "But some of those songs were very disorienting for me. It was like time-traveling. You looked and sounded so much like your grandma that it was like being on stage with her forty-five years ago."

I reached out and we hugged, both of us with tears in our eyes. I said, "Thank you for the chance to feel young again, and remember – no, feel - what those songs meant to us."

"I wish I could learn more about Grandma," Alice said, holding my hand in both of hers, "but I have to catch my plane."

She continued talking as she turned to the table to gather her things. "Plus, I have to get back to work. Our agency will be creating three more ads for the battleground states: Trump vs. Hillary. And I'm the producer on two of them."

"Congratulations," I said. "That sounds like a big step in your career."

“Yes,” she smiled. “It’s a big responsibility, but politics fascinates me. If our candidate wins, there’s a chance I’ll be invited to be on the White House communications team.”

She snapped the last latches on her guitar case, put her bag on top and looked at me. “Susan, before I say goodbye, I’m wondering if I could ask you a favor. Could you write down some stories about you and my grandma? I would love to read anything about your friendship or your music; even if it was just a couple of pages. I’d like to give it to my little girl when she gets older. I want Emma to know about her great-grandma. How loving she was. And how brave.”

I turned away to stare at the river, blinking back my tears.

In the old days, after all the concert equipment was packed in our vans, we’d take a couple of boats across the Niagara up to the Black Creek Tavern and enjoy some Canadian beer on their patio. We’d laugh about our mistakes, like me playing ‘air guitar’ when I forgot the chords. But we knew the audience rarely noticed our blunders with four vocals, three guitars and an electric piano to distract them. After another round or two, we’d take a slow cruise back to our vans, drifting with the ducks, savoring the sunset and each other.

If we did that today, we would be stopped by the Border Patrol, and our boats could be confiscated for crossing the border without permission.

Now, staring at the river, I couldn’t respond. It was too much. Today’s music had ripped the scab off my grief and stirred up my guilt.

I shook my head, no.

“Are you sure?” Alice asked, smiling. “Even if it was just a bit of your story, I would really treasure it.”

I hesitated. How could anyone shrink all those years of happiness and heartbreak into a few pages?

“My mother said you found a lot of Grandma’s old journals when you were cleaning out her apartment,” she continued. “I know you were best friends, but maybe some of them could help you remember what she was thinking?”

Alice’s eyes twinkled with hope as she tilted her head and lifted her eyebrows, waiting for my answer.

I remembered Donna giving me that look when she was nudging me to be a little braver than I really am. I took a deep breath, then said, “I’ll try.”

The next morning, I brewed some coffee and opened my laptop on the kitchen table. At first, my heart soared on memories of our music.

But as I began to type the dedication, my gut clenched with regret. How much of what happened was my fault... or Donna’s?

TO ALICE:

MAY YOU CREATE A BETTER WORLD THAN WE DID.

As I watched the Twin Towers tumble on television that day, I thought Donna was on a train, on her way to Buffalo to see me.

I thought she was safe.

1968

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 blonde 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 a sea of people who were leaving a political rally near the Straw Market. Their black faces were lit by grins as they greeted each other with “Hey, man, PLP all the way!” the slogan for the success of the Progressive Liberal Party in next week’s Bahamian election.

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.

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

“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 often attracted the most guys, but Anne was usually the girl who took one home.

Even though I knew I was prettier, Anne seemed happier. She had the knack of making people laugh, often at themselves, whether they were guys or girls. I didn’t trust the guys that approached me. I knew what they were interested in, and it wasn’t my personality.

Earlier in the evening, the second bar we visited had a beautiful grove of coconut trees behind it. The trunks were wrapped with little lights that went up into branches, casting a soft glow under the palms and on the tables and chairs below. The local band was doing a decent cover of the Beach Boys’ *Good Vibrations*, a perfect song for a pretty setting. But despite the lovely night, the flutter in my stomach wouldn’t go away. It was almost always there, whenever I was around people.

Anne led the way to the bar. She 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 same old routine, even if he was a quarterback on the University of Buffalo’s football team.

So, I had planned this as a girls-only last blast before we graduated. A lot of seniors I knew were getting engaged. Did I really want to settle down with Dave? I needed to feel free before I could decide.

Anne ordered a beer, and I ordered a pina colada at the tiki bar. Next to us was a small clearing choked with dancers.

“Anne, do you think I’m overdressed?” I shouted over the music, looking down at my sleeveless blue silk blouse and my linen shorts. Most of the girls, including Anne, were dressed in sloppy t-shirts and cut-off jeans.

“Your majesty,” she said with a huge grin, “I always think you’re overdressed. But the tramps of the world have lower standards than campus royalty.”

The girls at our house were always teasing me about being elected Homecoming Queen.

“Oh, Anne, you’re certainly not a tramp,” I said, although maybe she was.

“Are you sure?” She raised her eyebrows and then her glass in a toast, “Party on, your highness.” Then, she turned to dance alone into the middle of the crowd, grinning at everyone and waving her drink in time with the music.

I swiveled on the barstool, turning my back to the dancers, my mind drawn back to when I was first stung by that word.

“Susan, you’re acting like a tramp!” It was my father’s voice from years ago, turning my horrible night into something worse. “You’re only 16, and this is the second time you’ve gotten home after one in the morning. 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 just because he was a basketball star and the senior class president who chose me, a sophomore. I loved him because he had always been 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 started to pull at my panties. “Stop, please stop!”

“I love you, Susan,” he said, nuzzling my neck and hurting my breasts as I squirmed under him. He unbuckled his belt. For weeks, I’d imagined making love with him on our wedding night, but nothing 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 stab of pain between my legs as he entered. It got worse as he moved inside me, but ten seconds later, he pushed really hard and stopped with a satisfied groan.

I laid crying against his chest. He was quiet, his fingers moving slowly through my hair.

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

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

A half-hour later, as Richie sped away, I quietly opened the front door. My parents were standing there, waiting to call me names.

“Nobody is going to respect you if you keep acting like a tramp,” my father said, pulling the belt on his blue bathrobe over his big belly as he paced 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 that night, 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. The room had 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 always made popcorn or some other snack before the show. My mother usually stayed upstairs, too busy to be with us.

The stories about the fights and feuds of a handsome older man and his three grown sons in Colorado during the 1800s 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 the 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 big enough to protect me, but low enough that my parents and my friends could see how perfect I was becoming. My room and my outfits looked like pictures from magazines. I smiled at everyone and agreed with them until the mean in me burst out and turned a conversation into a fight.

Almost a year after Richie raped me, I came downstairs from my bedroom to show my mother a picture I found with decorations I liked for my seventeenth birthday party. She was on the phone with a friend saying, "Well, in one more year, Susan will be going away to college. To tell you the truth, she's such a handful; neither Joe nor I can wait."

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

Actually, when Anne and the girls teased me about being the Homecoming Queen, they were playing to my strength because being elected was the single greatest accomplishment of my life. It was my favorite memory to soothe me when I was 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. I had to fill out a four-page application form, like applying to college all over again. Plus...

“Hi, would you like to dance?” someone shouted in my left ear, interrupting my memories.

I flinched, turned on the barstool, and saw a tall, dark-haired guy standing close, smiling at me. The band was blaring “Born to be Wild.”

“Dance?” I yelled back, “Do you like this song?” buying time while I scanned the crowd for Anne.

“One of my favorites.”

“Me, too, but honestly, my feet hurt. I like how these sandals look,” I said, sticking out my feet to show him, “but now they’re giving me blisters.”

“They’re very nice.” He moved closer so he could talk in my ear without shouting. If it weren’t for his crooked nose, he would have been very handsome. “Can I buy you a drink?”

“No, thanks. I just started this one, but we can talk. I’m waiting for my girlfriend to exhaust herself on the dance floor. Where do you go to school?”

“I go to Ohio State. I’m a physics major on a baseball scholarship.” And then he started a monologue: How he was recruited, his batting average, why playing shortstop is better than playing second base and way too much more.

Did he think I was interviewing him for an athletic award instead of a date? We wouldn’t be flying home for three more days, and I didn’t want to spend every waking moment with Anne. I’d be happy to find a guy to go to the beach with.

Why is it that most guys think that the conversation should be about them and whatever stupid sport they play? At least Dave listens, although his attention sometimes wanders, and he doesn’t ask good follow-up questions when I’m explaining something.

I let Mr. Baseball buy me another pina colada, figuring I had earned it. Finally, I saw Anne dancing in my direction, now with a reddish colored drink in her hand.

“I’m ready to go, are you?” I asked her.

“Sure,” she said, as I waved goodbye to Mr. Sports Talker.

We exited onto Bay Street, which was still buzzing. “How about if we walk back toward our hotel,” I suggested, “and stop at the first place where we don’t have to yell to be heard?”

“Okay,” she said.

As we were crossing one of the bigger streets, I saw a man on the corner passing out flyers. He was old, maybe in his forties, but very fit with ruddy skin and a great head of sandy hair.

I took a flyer to be polite, glancing at the big, bold letters that said: “FREE: See the Real Bahamas.” But 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 inside the well-known symbol for the feminine or Venus: a circle with a cross dangling below it. It was 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 streetlight 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 percent 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 extended a warm and calloused hand. “And you are?”

“I’m Susan,” I said as we shook hands “I’m on Spring 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 thirty feet down the block in front of an establishment where students were clustered on the sidewalk. She waved for me to join her, then pointed at the doorway of what apparently would be our next stop. I smiled and raised my hand to signal “just one minute” before I turned back to the missionary.

“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. How strong were those pina coladas?

“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.”

“Well, thank you,” I said, folding the flyer and putting it in my pocket as I started to walk away. “I’ll check with my girlfriend and let you know.”

Now, after an hour of watching Anne dance with an assortment of guys in the Conch Café, we were standing out in the street, Anne with her thumb out, smiling at each pair of headlights that approached us.

“I can’t wait to get back to the hotel,” I said, standing next to her. “My feet hurt, but maybe we should find a taxi instead of hitchhiking?”

She ignored me. On the sidewalk, one boy vomited 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 although the Bahamas is only ten percent white, next week’s election is the first time that the Negro candidates in 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,” Anne said, 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 lyrical West Indies accent.

THE INSPECTOR



Susan

Nassau - The Bahamas, April 4th, 1968

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 an even better-looking older brother. His smile gleamed, and his skin was as 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. How stoned was she?

“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!” he said as he jerked 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, the musk and jasmine stronger.

“And then I’ll ask, ‘Tell me, have you ever felt electricity?’” My heart was hammering so hard I could hear the blood rushing in 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, disappearing 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 shadowy courtyard seemed deserted except for 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.” He backed out of the parking space.

“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 about a dozen students were hanging out in the hotel courtyard. I thought it might help to soak my feet, so I took off my shoes and sat at the edge of the pool.

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.

“Hi, I’m Peter. Would you like a beer?”

I turned to see a very fit, very cute guy in cutoff jeans. I loved the twinkle in his eye, his high cheekbones, and his soft Southern drawl.

“Maybe half of one,” I smiled. “I’m Susan.” I got up and followed him to a poolside table set against a darkened grove of palms, noticing the odd rolling steps he took. Another drunk?

As we sat, I checked the blister on my heel.

“That looks nasty,” he said.

“Yes, but it feels so much better now that my shoe is off.”

“Good. I’m afraid the beer is a little warm.” He pushed a can towards me from a few that remained of a six-pack. “So, what do you like best about the Bahamas so far, Susan?” he asked.

How nice. A question that required my opinion. Maybe he wasn’t drunk.

“There’s a lot that I like,” I said. “The beaches, the palm trees, the color of the water. What about you?”

“I like the lovely accents and the great smiles from almost every local I’ve met. And I like meeting other students and hearing their dreams.”

“Dreams?”

“You know, like the future they want,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of my hobby. When I was a little kid, my parents took my brother and me on a trip to the southwest. In every little shop, my mom asked to see a ‘dream catcher.’

“Well, I was maybe eight at the time, and I didn’t know she was talking about a decoration that hangs in the window. I thought she was talking about a person, like dream catching was somebody’s job, maybe some sort of medicine man.”

I smiled and nodded for him to continue.

“It stayed with me,” he added, “and now I find it’s a good way to make friends.”

“So, what are your dreams?” I asked.

“Good question,” he said as we both laughed.

“I’m a quick learner.”

He looked up at the stars shining between the palms. “Well, my dad’s a local politician who runs a poultry farm. I know I don’t want to do *that*. Too much work and too much time away from home.” He took a sip from his beer, then looked at me.

“Instead, maybe I’ll become a psychologist, if I can get a scholarship for grad school. Or be a teacher if I can’t. Avoid the war and marry a pretty lady,” he drawled, smiling as he nodded at me. “And I’d like to have kids and live in a nice house in a peaceful world where I could have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches every day for lunch.”

I laughed, “Would that be with or without milk?”

“With, of course. I like to toast just the bread and the peanut butter to bring out the full peanuteness, and then add the cold black raspberry jelly just before my first bite.”

“All of a sudden, I’m hungry,” I said.

“Me too. There’s something that looks like a clam shack in the park by the wharf. How about we finish these beers and then check it out?”

“Excellent.”

“So, Susan, what are your dreams?” He sat back, relaxing.

The energy was returning to my body. I took a slow swig of the warm beer. I should probably switch to water, but this was the best I’d felt all day, maybe the whole vacation.

“I’m going to be a teacher.”

“Really?” He leaned toward me like he was interested. “Why?”

“I’ve always liked school, and I like children. Someday, I’d like to have a family, and it would be great to have long summer vacations with my own kids.”

“Agreed. You know, my sister teaches seventh grade in kind of a rough neighborhood, and I’m amazed at some of the stories she tells me. She says her secret to keeping order in the classroom is just to love

them. And she tries to shape their studies, so they have success experiences.

“She sounds wonderful.”

“I think she might be. That’s why I’m wondering if maybe I should be a teacher instead of a psychologist. I mean, who’s more likely to help you: a counselor you meet with for an hour a week in an artificial situation? Or someone that’s with you thirty hours a week and coaches you to succeed in real life?”

“I guess I’d vote for the teacher.”

“Yeah, me too. So, tell me more about your dreams.”

I didn’t tell him that one of my dreams was to have a romantic walk on the beach with a handsome man. Maybe him?

“No war. Men having more respect for women. Equal opportunities for all races.”

“Yeah, I want equal opportunities for everyone, too. But the Freedom Riders just made things worse.”

What? I felt a stab of fear. Was he a racist? “Weren’t the Freedom Riders groups of black and white college students who tried to desegregate the busses in the South? I thought they were helping Negroes.”

“That was their dream. But how they went about it was all wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think of the Vietnamese,” he explained. “They want a better life for their families. But is the best way to accomplish that to have a squad of US troops barge into their village and tell everyone what to do?”

“I never thought of it like that,” I said. So, he had a problem with the method, not the goal of civil rights? Interesting.

“But it’s too nice a night to talk about that stuff. Are you going to be OK, walking to the clam shack?”

How nice that he would ask. “I think so. I’ll just leave my shoes here and get them later.”

The cool concrete felt good on the bottom of my feet, and so did the soft grass when we crossed Bay Street and entered the park that bordered the harbor. As we walked away from the streetlights, I thought it was a good time to let him know I was spoken for.

“My boyfriend joined the Reserve Officers Training Corps – he calls it ‘ROT-C’ - to avoid combat. They promised that he will get a deferment for a couple of years after college to get his Master’s degree. We’re hoping that maybe the war will be over by then. Are you worried about the draft?” I asked.

“No. I have a 4-F deferment. I fell out of a tree when I was twelve, and it was a really bad break. After the surgery, my left leg was two inches shorter than the other one. So, the army doesn’t want me.”

So that’s why he walks funny. I’m glad he’s not drunk.

“Some of my friends made the same choice as your boyfriend. It’s a tough decision.” He paused, then added, “but I do know he’s one lucky guy to have you as his girlfriend.”

“Well, thank you, kind sir.”

“Do you think he would mind if I held your hand while we walk?”

“Not if you promise to keep me safe,” I smiled, holding my hand out to him.

“I will, ma’am. I most certainly will.” I loved his soft accent. Maybe this would be my romantic evening?

The clam shack was closed, so we walked onto the jetty and sat on a bench to watch the moon rise.

He sat with his arm on the back of the bench, two or three fingers gently rubbing my shoulder. The moon rose from the water in front of us, the soft colored lights of downtown glowed on our left, a bonfire on Paradise Island blazed in the distance to our right.

We sat quietly. “This is beautiful,” I said.

“So are you.” He leaned to kiss me softly, then pulled his head back and smiled.

He kissed me again, and this time I kissed him back, enjoying the shelter of his arms against the cool breeze from the bay.

After a few minutes, his hand slipped down from my cheek, caressed my throat and then my breast through the silky blouse. A thrill of pleasure ran through me. Should I stop him?

I took his hand away from my breast and rubbed it against my cheek. "I have a boyfriend, remember?" I kissed his cheek and leaned back into his shoulder.

"Maybe we should go back?" he suggested.

"I think so, yes." We kissed sweetly when we stood. He smelled like beer and Old Spice.

We walked through the park to the hotel, our arms around each other. I looked at the dark hill rising behind the town. Where was the Inspector's home with the great view of the stars and the harbor? Were he and Anne having sex right now? My heart beat faster and my body grew warm as I imagined it.

I stopped and turned Peter toward me. At first, I kissed him softly, then deeply, pulling him close and touching the back of his neck. My body wanted his. Should I?

His room at the hotel was near mine, and we were holding hands as we approached.

"Here's my room," I said. "Do you want to come in?"

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

I touched his face and kissed him as his hands roamed my body. What a sweet man, the dream catcher.

He got on top, and surges of pleasure spread all over as he moved inside me. Then I saw the stars, too.

ALONE



Susan

Nassau, The Bahamas, April 4, 1968

I got a glimpse of Peter's back as he snuck out sometime during the night. Wasn't he going to say goodbye?

Then, a sudden bolt of fear hit me. My birth control!

We were late for the plane when we were leaving, and Anne had rushed me out, so I never packed my pills. As we flew down, I did the math. There were eight or nine pills left in the packet. The last seven were duds to keep me in the habit of taking a daily pill. So, if I missed just one or two out of the twenty-eight that mattered, I should be okay even if the unexpected happened. I drifted back to sleep, remembering how the dream catcher had kissed me.

Anne woke me around eight as she walked in with red-rimmed eyes, wearing a very 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!" She stretched with a satisfied smile.

I was annoyed she had woken me up, 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 head ached for aspirin, but I didn't want her to know I had a hangover. And I certainly didn't want her to know about Peter.

"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 back to sleep.

"Listen, Susan, we have to talk." Her voice was coming from the foot of my bed, so I had to open my eyes. "You often have this look or a tone, like you're judging me or something."

"Anne, I'm not judging you," I lied. It was hard not to, especially when I was staring at her bleached blonde hair and little pig eyes. 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 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 and not suspect anything about Peter. Maybe he and I could go to the beach today?

Anne shook her head and muttered something I couldn't hear. I may have made a mistake last night, but for me, it was a one-time slip-up. 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 Peter's underpants, tighty-whities, peeking out from under my bedspread on the floor. Oh shit. It was dark when he left. Why didn't he look for them ...or at least say goodbye?

"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.

"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.

My mind froze with fear. What if Dave found out?

A few minutes later, Anne walked out of the bathroom in a steamy cloud of bath oils, tightening her robe as she got something from her suitcase, ignoring 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 a tramp just like the rest of us. Why can't you just be honest and stop bragging?"

Tramp? I felt the 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 and picked up a magazine, crushing and twisting it as she turned to blast 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 lie there and listen while someone finally tells you the truth about yourself."

I cringed, pulling the covers up to my chin.

"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 liked 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? I stared at her like she was speaking in a foreign language. I was barely breathing.

"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."

"The girls don't know much about football, but we know he must be a real dumbass to keep jumping through your hoops. Dumbass Dave and Stuck-up Susan: the most comical 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. 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 for Bloody Marys with some kids from NYU." The door opened and closed, and I was alone.

I 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. Blackness drew me down into the nightmare that now was my life.

"Housekeeping!" then the tap-tap-tap of her key on my door woke me up.

"No!" I barely croaked through my sore throat. "No! louder this time, "we don't need you."

I lay still, trying to slip back into the blackness, but "*Hey, Jude. Don't make it bad. Take a sad song and make it better,*" a new Beatles song was seeping in from somewhere. Nobody could 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 Peter? 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 for the rest of his life, 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 Others 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. If I wore sunglasses, 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. No sign of Peter. Some students burst into laughter as I entered the lobby on my way to the street. At me? Because I was wearing my sunglasses inside? Because Anne had told them about me?

I forced myself not to run.

I pushed through the door and plunged into the soupy heat, salty air and traffic noise. Pastor John was standing next to a dusty Jeep, laughing with a beautiful Negro, the vibrant reds and golds of her sleeveless 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, apparently, I was wrong about a lot of things. How cruel of Anne to attack me. She'd be sorry.

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 by.

“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, her bright headscarf matching the dress that flowed modestly to her ankles. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Susan.” Her smile seemed real, her hand was warm, and I loved the lilt of her accent. I felt my shoulders relax. Maybe this would be okay.

A girl with lively brown 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?”

“It’s great if you like snow, the Buffalo Bills, and chicken wings,” I said.

“Well, the snow and the football sounds like fun, but chicken wings?” Donna wrinkled her nose.

“Yeah, most people from out of town are surprised that they’re featured 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 in a deep fryer, rolled them in hot sauce, and then served them with some leftover celery and blue cheese dip. Now they’re a hit all over town. But I doubt they’ll catch on anywhere 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 America throws out their chicken wings, I am guessing that Buffalo must be a very soulful place?” She winked at me with a warm smile.

“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 dark wood carvings. But I barely noticed the sights or heard the happy chatter between Donna and Melanie. My life was a mess. And what if I got pregnant?

We sped out of Nassau. A turquoise sea dotted with low islands was to our right. Tall palms created a canopy to shield us from 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. It was nothing but dirt roads and dusty shacks 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. Not one story had a happy ending.

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.” She looked at each of us.

Donna wrinkled her forehead. “Well, I guess I’d better tell you now that I don’t really believe in God or religion. 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 bounced over a stream that had eroded the road.

A blush crept up Donna’s neck, looking like a bad sunburn. “I’m sorry,” she said, hunching a bit toward Melanie. “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.

Below us, 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 were a silver 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 to big stakes 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 and waved 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 punish them for being bad. Or was hell something we created with our stupid choices? Either way, here I was in the middle of it.

A pale blue school bus with a lavender roof and rust sprouting up from its wheels was parked next to us. The same graphic that had startled me last night stretched across its side. It pulsed with power from the raised black fist implanted in the center of the circle and the strong black arm that formed the upright part of the cross. The crosspiece was a thick black branch wrapped with red, bloody thorns.

Was it some kind of call to action, with the clout coming from Christ? Or a rundown training camp for revolutionaries? I wished I had just stayed in my room. Why hadn't Peter even said good-bye last night? Before he snuck out, he had been so wonderful.

"Wow," said Donna, bouncing out of the Jeep. "That's amazing art." Her brown eyes sparkled as she stepped toward the bus. She 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, delight shining in her eyes. “Andrew, the oldest, is always 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, her eyes following them. “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 the 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 have been rehearsing for the spring concert. Would you like to sing for them?”

Soon we were sitting with Melanie and John on benches beneath a leafy gazebo looking toward the sea, as about two dozen students assembled in front of us. I took off my sunglasses. So what if my eyes were 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 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 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 Coca-Cola tee shirt.

"We are twins," Michael announced, his chest puffed with pride

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

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

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

The youngest students stood in front, with the tallest behind. As a girl played the opening chords, I recognized *Because All Men Are Brothers* from a 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.

They were singing from someplace so deep in their hearts that I could feel their love, connecting us.

Marcus and Michael began the next verse in clear high voices that blended as one:

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 thing looked to them? So hopeful? Caring about each other? About everyone?

When it came to *my* friends, the main thing I cared about is whether they liked my outfits.

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

Next, Melanie said they would do an African dance. But someone had misplaced the drum, so she sent some students running across the parched courtyard to look for it.

"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 laughed, her dark face shining as if Donna had just told a good joke.

"Well, I guess some of us do," she said. "He preached at our church on Bimini about four years ago. And my Uncle Ansil took him fishing just three days ago."

TOO MUCH CAN KILL



Susan

St. Paul's School, The Bahamas, April 4, 1968

“**R**eally? Did Dr. King ever visit here?” I asked, looking around at the shabby buildings.

“No,” Melanie said, “He’s never been to our school. When Dr. King visits, 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. He preached at our church to practice his message for the awards ceremony in Oslo.”

“That’s amazing!” said Donna. “What is he like?”

“Well, my Uncle Ansil has been his fishing guide, so he really knows him better than we do. A few years ago, he took Dr. King to Bonefish Flats. It’s a beautiful place with glorious birds and snappers lazing under the mangrove roots. He told me that Dr. King said, “There’s so much life all around us, so much life! How can people see all this life and not believe in the existence of God?”

Melanie laughed. “Of course, since then, Ansil uses Dr. King’s quote to try to convince John that his fishing is as sacred as John’s preaching. But John disagrees.”

It looked like John was annoyed and ready to respond, but I wanted to hear more about Dr. King, so I asked, “Did you get to talk with him when he preached at your church?”

John blinked, maybe clearing his head about Ansil, before he responded. “Yes, I was surprised that such a famous man was actually interested in our opinions. I think we may have been the last people to hear him before he went to the Nobel ceremony in Oslo. His message

from our pulpit was ‘Nonviolence is a powerful moral force when it’s built on a love which rejects revenge.’”

Rejects revenge? But if I didn’t get back at Anne, what would stop her from attacking me again?

“But isn’t Dr. King’s message the exception?” Donna asked. “What about all the wars that religion has caused? All the harm it has done?”

Melanie responded, “You are right to raise that question. Religion is a dangerous medicine. Too little can harm, but too much can kill.”

Donna looked at her, puzzled.

“All religions encourage people to love each other, especially within their own faith,” Melanie said. “Many have provided health care, charity and education for millions. Of course, too little of that goodness harms everyone.

‘But some religious groups think that their way is the only way. They pay more attention to judging others rather than loving them. These sects have tortured or murdered countless numbers of good people as heretics, infidels or sinners. And millions have been killed in religious wars. They are often started by cynical leaders for economic or political reasons, but religion is used to motivate their armies.’”

“Well, I know about the ‘too much judgment’ part,” Donna said, frowning as she looked out to sea. “Like the smelly little priests who ask way too many questions, then pile on the penance for things that aren’t even your fault.”

She turned to me, and I nodded. Maybe we have a lot in common?

I thought back to when Richie raped me. The day after was a Saturday. I woke up still sore and so sick to my stomach that I threw up. I was pretty sure that morning sickness didn’t start so soon, but what if I *was* pregnant?

My girlfriends and I had planned to meet for lunch. Then we were going to go to see *Alfie* starring Michael Caine because we all had a

crush on him. But my mother made me cancel my plans, insisting instead that I go with her to Confession that afternoon.

The Confessional was dark and smelled like aftershave and the Vitalis hair tonic my father used. I knelt, my face less than a foot from the screen where a lacy wood carving obscured my vision. I could barely see the shape of the priest's head.

I began by reciting the typical stuff: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned, my last confession was one month ago."

Usually, I estimated the number of my venial sins, the little ones that only made a small smudge on your soul. I'd choose a number that would be enough to make me seem sincere, but not so big that the priest would think I was a real sinner.

"I lied to my parents two times and got angry with my girlfriends three times."

"Anything else?"

My heart was pounding. Sex was definitely a mortal sin, the kind that would turn your soul black and send you to hell. The only way to get rid of it was to seek forgiveness from a priest. If I didn't confess what happened, then took Communion with my parents on Sunday, my mortal sin would become a sacrilege. That guaranteed I would burn in the most painful part of hell for all eternity.

I never doubted any of it.

My palms were sweaty, clasped together as I whispered to the priest, "Last night, my boyfriend forced himself on me, and we had sex."

"How many times?" he asked.

"Once."

The shape of his head changed, and I could smell coffee on his breath.

"That's all?"

"Yes."

A pause, then, "Did you enjoy any part of it?"

What? Couldn't he hear me through the wooden screen? Doesn't he know what 'forced himself on me' means?

"No," I whispered.

A pause. His head hadn't moved. Was he trying to look through and see me?

I leaned backward.

"For your penance, say ten 'Hail Marys' and one 'Our Father' a day for two weeks. Now go in peace and sin no more."

And 'sin no more?' Sure, it was a mistake to go into the back seat with Richie, but how does being raped against my will make *me* a sinner? I didn't want to have sex. I tried to stop him!

Too bad I couldn't slip the priest a piece of paper with Richie's name and phone number. He was the one that needed to confess.

If my Mom hadn't been so religious, maybe I just could have talked with her and cried. I didn't need Jesus to forgive me. I needed my mother to hug me ...to help me ...to love me. To tell me I wasn't a tramp.

If I had gone to lunch with my two best friends, maybe they could have helped me. I could have warned them about Richie. Then maybe the whole thing would have been easier to forget.

My memories were interrupted by the thumping of a conga drum. I turned to see two lively boys approaching, competing to pound out a rhythm as they approached.

Melanie got up and stood to the side of the assembled students, her bright smile beaming at the three of us. "Dear Ladies and Gentle Man. It is my great pleasure to introduce the 'St. Paul's Tribal Dancers!'

Donna, John, and I clapped, smiling at them and each other.

"Traditional African dance," Melanie explained, "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 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 strength.

Soon Donna, Melanie, and I were singing along with the girls, our heads bobbing and feet moving, creating little dust clouds in front of 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, and then suddenly stopped. The dancers froze.

The drum resumed with a slower beat, the chanting and the guitar softer now. The boys and girls sang in unison, their eyes on the heavens, their hands moving from their hearts to embrace the universe, their steps merging 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 parents 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 smiled at me 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 our dreams. My chest swelled with a pleasure I couldn't name. At that moment, facing the worst beach I've ever seen, St. Paul's felt like paradise.

Melanie and John jumped to their feet, applauding along with the students. "Please. Sing 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 native Bahamians 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 great. 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 for everyone if we just stayed little, huh?” Donna said with a sour laugh. “Would you like to 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.”

Donna grinned and flashed another thumbs-up.

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

After we got in, John backed up the Jeep, then turned towards the gate. The children stood at the edges of the courtyard, waving and chanting, laughing as they exaggerated their wildest dance moves. A terrible day had turned into a beautiful afternoon.

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

“They are our greatest gift,” Melanie responded, sharing smiles with all of them.

GRACEFUL AND SAD



Susan

Clifton Pier, the Bahamas, April 4, 1968

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, and battered wooden boats were 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!" Their eyes lit up when they recognized the driver.

"Pastor John! Miss Melanie!" they shouted. John stopped, and Melanie gave each child a 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.

As we started again, John pointed to the rusted shell of a stripped-down car, a playground for a little gang of toddlers. "Some families eke out a living from the sea, but transporting their catch to Nassau is always a problem."

Every few minutes, we'd pass through a forest of palms, masking mansions perched up on the hill with big windows and splendid balconies. Some had a shiny motorboat tied to a dock. Others had sleek sailboats anchored offshore.

"I suppose those little houses with the wooden boats look picturesque from those patios," Donna said, looking up at them. "It makes me furious that some people can live in luxury, while others have to suffer and scrimp. How can they sleep at night?"

“I met a man who said that the gap between the rich and the poor is a measure of a society’s sinfulness,” John said. “That’s why we’re supporting the PLP in this election. So the gifts that God gave all of us won’t be held in the hands of a greedy few.”

John slowed the Jeep and pulled onto a sandy track that led into a grove of palm trees. In the distance a line of stones jutted out into the sea, the white plumes of waves sprouting from them in the late afternoon sun. We parked in a small clearing. The breeze, rich with salt, was cooler now.

Melanie led us on a trail that meandered up through some sea grapes and scraggly trees to a bluff that sheltered the bay. Below was the rubble of a settlement: four barn-sized buildings away from the beach and some smaller ones closer to the sea. An uneven pile of stones jutted maybe a hundred feet out from the shore.

“This is where thousands of Africans first landed in the New World,” Melanie said as she pointed. “Those rocks are all that is left of Clifton Pier.” Spray surged up from the stones with a muted roar. “And that is what is left of the slave prison,” she gestured to the larger ruins further back from the beach.

The sadness that softened her coal-black face added a weight to her words. “Emancipation came earlier to the Bahamas than your country,” Melanie said, “but freed or not, these people could never return to their homes in Africa.”

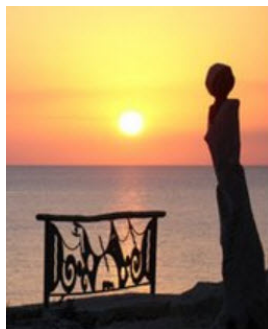
“How awful,” I said, knowing it was a lame response. How could my words express something I could barely imagine?

“I have visited this place many times since I was a little girl,” Melanie said. “But recently, my interest has been rekindled by something I want to show you.”

We followed her up a sandy path to the tip of the peninsula. Near the edge of the cliff, a thin African woman wearing robes and a headdress leaned mournfully towards the sea ...towards her home.

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—a sculpture of a woman who could never return home, no matter how hard she yearned.

“This was created by Antonius Roberts, the son of a good friend. He’s barely a teen, yet he is an old soul. He said he hopes that someday this will be a sacred space with dozens of spirits, each remembering her past while rooted in the present and hoping for the future.”



We stared at the carving, its dignity, its grace, and its pain.

“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 11 million people who could never go home.”

I knew about slavery as words in a textbook. Now, I felt fear in my stomach and an ache 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,” she said, looking at Donna and me. “Over and over again.”

My skin crawled as I tried not to imagine it.

“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. Her hands clenched at her side as she faced John and Melanie. “So where was your God when all of that was happening?” She took a deep breath to stop an angry sob. “When women were being raped and their children were taken away from them?”

“Where is God when we suffer?” Melanie said softly. “That’s a good question.”

She paused, staring at the sculpture that stood beside us.

“I believe that God’s love is in the people who comfort you when you suffer, hold you when you mourn, and work with you for a better day.” She looked tenderly at John.

He put his arm around her, his white hand a vivid contrast against her dark arm. “Even Christ got crucified, so we can’t expect to avoid pain or betrayals,” he said. “But we work together so that a good education and God’s love can guide our children through injustice towards a happier life.”

They were working for better days for everyone, while I was campaigning for Homecoming Queen. Jesus, no wonder my roommates hate me. Tears came to my eyes.

“Thank you for this day,” I said.

Donna turned away and faced the sea, as graceful and as sad as the woman the boy had carved.

A few minutes later, we walked silently together down the trail toward the Jeep. About halfway, Melanie pointed to a smaller path off to the right. “There is a place over there where we can rest for a few minutes before heading back to Nassau. Would you like to do that?”

We both said yes, and a few minutes later, the four of us were seated on two benches that were angled toward the sea and each other. The cool breeze felt good after the heat of the afternoon. For a minute, we listened to the staccato symphony of the seagulls and the distant percussion of the crashing waves.

“This is one of my favorite places to sit and seek satisfaction,” Melanie said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Seeking satisfaction’ is the ability to relax and enjoy the present moment,” Melanie said. “It’s very easy. As you sit there, just let your attention focus on your breathing. As you breathe in, just notice the

sensation of the breath coming into your body. And as you breathe out, think ‘thank you.’

“That’s it?” I asked.

“Yes,” Melanie replied. “You can do it with your eyes open or closed. You can focus your attention on anything you see or hear in the present, but remember to add ‘thank you.’ I find that doing it for only three or four breaths helps me, but sometimes I will do it longer. It is better to sit up with your back, neck and head in a straight line.”

I perched on the front of the bench, following her instructions, but Donna slouched against the backrest. Was she tired?

“Try it now for just a minute,” Melanie said. “You can focus on the present on your in-breath and be thankful on each out-breath. Or you can focus on the present for a few full in-and-out breaths, then be thankful during the next few breaths. It’s up to you”.

As soon as I closed my eyes, I started to wonder whether I’d find Peter at the hotel tonight. But I felt my shoulders relax as I reminded myself to focus on my breathing and think ‘thank you.’

I opened my eyes and as I was amazed by the marvel of the green sea grapes hanging next to me... and was thankful for the food they offered. For another breath, I was absorbed in the delicacy of some snowy flowers on a nearby bush... and was grateful for their beauty.

I was being thankful for the warmth of the sun that made all of this possible, when Melanie’s quiet voice said “How was that?”

“Beautiful,” I said.

Donna just shrugged her shoulders and looked away. She hadn’t said a word since her angry outburst, challenging Melanie to explain why God didn’t protect women and their children.

Melanie glanced at Donna, then spoke to me. “If you seek satisfaction regularly, you will be able to *solve* problems using supervision instead of *creating* them with stupid-vision.”

“Stupid-vision and super-vision?”

Melanie said, “Yes. That’s how I describe it to the students at our school, so they will remember it. It is very simple. To explain, I will ask a question. If your mind is full of anger or fear from the past, or stuck in fear about the future, what are you more likely see: the good or the bad?”

“The bad I suppose,” I answered.

“And,” Melanie said, “if you just see the bad that is around you and within you, what kind of decision are you likely to make?”

The answer was so obvious, I was reluctant to say it. I glanced at Donna, but she was looking down towards the old slave buildings.

“A bad decision,” I said.

“Now you understand stupid-vision,” she said. “Some people have it so often, they honestly believe that only the bad exists.”

I asked, “Does ‘super-vision’ mean that you can see both the good and the bad?”

Maybe seeking-satisfaction would give me an advantage over Anne and our housemates.

“Yes,” answered John. “It certainly can help you to see everything more clearly and make better decisions. But it can lead to something that is much better and deeper than that.”

He looked at Melanie and they exchanged a smile. “Shortly after I came to the Bahamas and met Melanie, and I was surprised to realize that her ‘seeking-satisfaction’ meditation was more helpful than the prayers I learned in the seminary. My old prayers had mostly had to do with *asking* God for His blessings. But now I can see that God has *already* blessed us.”

Melanie smiled and reached for John’s hand as they stood up and turned to the path that led towards the road.

By the time we got back to the Jeep, Donna had returned from wherever her thoughts had taken her and was lively again. She accepted John’s invitation to ride in front so she could take some pictures along the coastal highway on the way back to Nassau. The Bahamians drive

on the left side of the road, and I still wasn't used to the steering wheel being on the right side of the car. So, as we began to move, it was as unnerving to see Donna leaning out the 'driver's side' with a camera in front of her face.

I sat in back with Melanie, enjoying our conversation as John pointed out the sights to Donna. But I couldn't hear them because, now that we were driving at a good clip, the noise of the wind and the road muffled their words.

Thinking back on the afternoon, I wondered about John and Melanie's marriage. It was obvious that Melanie and John loved each other. But they were so different, and not just because of the racial thing. She was such a free-thinker and he seemed so conservative. So, I said, "Earlier today, when you and John were talking about religion, I got the sense that your beliefs are very different. Is that true?"

She laughed. "I believe in John's faith. But sometimes it is hard for him to believe in all of mine. I am a Christian whose faith has been enhanced by Buddhist teachings and the wisdom of Raj Yoga."

"When I was in Catholic school," I said, "I was taught it would be sinful to go to a Protestant church and that pagans would burn in hell. How can you mix religions together?" I felt a little proud of myself for asking such a pointed question. Maybe some of Donna's boldness was rubbing off on me?

"I believe that religions are like fingers that point to God. But it is important to remember to worship God, and not the fingers that point to Him... or Her," she said with a mischievous grin, looking at John as if she was hoping to tease him.

But John was driving with one hand and pointing out to sea with the other, encouraging Donna to take a picture of a lighthouse. The white tower with a red top stood splendidly on a small spit of land about a half-mile offshore, ringed by a wide ribbon of turquoise sea. Farther off, in the deep indigo ocean, a cruise ship steamed toward us.

Melanie smiled at me, a soft glow lighting her face as she continued our conversation. “But best of all, I find that the more pointers I look through, the more magnificent God becomes.”

A TOAST TO CHICKEN WINGS



Susan

Clifton Pier, the Bahamas, April 4, 1968

After John and Melanie dropped us off near my hotel with warm good-byes and our promise to stay in touch, Donna and I walked through a park bursting with flowers to a café on the water. A cool breeze from the sea hinted at a lovely evening. As we sat down and ordered, the sun touched the horizon, a pink glow tinting the boats bobbing in the bay. On the dock, a few fishermen scraped conch from their shells.

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

"Yeah," I agreed, "It was a lot to think about but, right now, I feel like I'm on overload."

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, then sat back and loosened her ponytail, 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 looked like Julie Andrews with beautiful cheekbones and innocent good looks.

"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 she turned 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 put some chips on the table. "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. It has to be so painful being separated from someone you love."

"Has that happened to you?" she asked.

"Well, maybe." I paused. "But I guess not really. I think I'm a 'leave them before they leave you' kind of girl. I've had two or three serious boyfriends, depending on how you count. But I've always been the one to break it off. I'm trying to figure out what to do about my current boyfriend. A lot of my friends are getting engaged, but I'm not sure if Dave is really 'the one.'"

Donna nodded, but said nothing.

"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 get my masters 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 about me being a homosexual?"

"A year ago, I'm pretty sure the answer would have been 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 just 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 midterm, so I hoped the extra points might turn my C into a B.”

“I understand,” Donna said. “The chance to bump up a grade would get my attention, too.”

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

“What happened?” Donna asked.

“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 and her sense of humor. 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 sitting on the floor of 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 had eaten lunch 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,” I said. “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, 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’m sure, 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.”

Donna said, “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 be honest – 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,” I said, “thanks to my idiot professor and the Mattachine Society, it really doesn’t matter to me that you’re a lesbian.”

“I guess I should be grateful to him.” She smiled as she took another sip.

“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 ever 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.

A NEW FRIEND



Donna

Nassau, Bahamas, April 4, 1968

After I said goodbye to Susan, I floated back to my hotel.
A new friend who wants to sing with me? Even though she knows I'm gay?

Maybe Susan could help me find Stephen?

My steps slowed and my stomach started to churn.

What would she think if she knew I'd abandoned my son in Buffalo? Who would be friends with a woman who would do that? Especially a freak like me?

Of course, they made me. My aunt and my mother forced me. But I could have fought them. I should have said no. No! NO!!

I couldn't stand all that God-talk today. If He really did exist, I would definitely hate him. What kind of evil being would make thousands and thousands of people gay, then tell His churches to condemn us as sinners?

To make it worse, there was the cross that hung in front of my classroom in eighth grade. Jesus hanging there, bloody, nearly naked with a halo of thorns pushed into his head. Dead.

Sister Teresa told us, "You should thank God that He sent his only Son to suffer and die to save you from your sins."

So, it was *my* fault that he had to suffer? But wasn't I going to go to hell anyway, even though Jesus was tortured to death? None of it seemed fair.

I used to pray and pray for God to save me from my sinful thoughts. I wore a crucifix and the Miraculous Medal. I said rosaries. Nothing worked.

When my mother realized I was pregnant, I was afraid to tell her it was her boyfriend who raped me. And the smelly little priest she insisted I go to made everything worse.

The ache in my belly returned. Sometimes it seems to me that I live in an upside-down world where those who should love me the most, love me the least. Including God.

What if Stephen really is my only chance to love and be loved without going to hell?

Well, I'm not going to shrivel in the shadows. And I'm going to ignore all those pious bastards.

The one thing I'm sure of is that I'm not going to let anyone hurt Stephen.

I know he's in Buffalo, and I'm going to find him.

THE MURDER



Susan

The Bahamas, April 4, 1968 8:00 PM

When I said goodbye to Donna, the first stars gleamed faintly over the ocean. We exchanged addresses and phone numbers and promised to meet in Buffalo in September.

I walked alone through the hotel grounds on the way back to my room. Red blossoms glowed deep purple in the light of the flickering tiki torches. Coconut trees arched dimly overhead, stars blinking through their palms.

A soft breeze carried the faint sound of steel drums and a sweet, salty fragrance. What if I ran into Peter? I was such a fool to have cheated on Dave. Maybe my father was right, and I really was a tramp.

On each side of the pool, a few students were huddled, heads bent towards transistor radios. I sensed an anger that had no place in paradise.

A boy turned and shouted, "God damn it!" throwing his plastic beer glass against the garden wall. The girl standing next to him, holding a radio, had tears running down her cheek.

I asked her, "What's wrong?"

"Martin Luther King was killed in Memphis an hour ago," she said, turning to hug the boy who had thrown the beer.

My knees went weak, and I sank down on a pool chair next to them.

How awful. Melanie! Had she heard? And her Uncle Ansil, his fishing guide? Did he know Dr. King was dead?

I remembered the bright eyes in the dark faces of the children who sang: *Because all men are brothers, wherever they may be.*

Was hope nothing more than bullshit wrapped around a catchy tune?

“How did it happen?” I asked, looking up at the couple.

“The radio said he was shot at a motel in Memphis,” the girl said, staring at the radio, now playing tinny steel-band music. “No more than that. I think the local station only broadcasts news on the hour, so we’ll have to wait.”

“Karen and I heard him preach just a month ago,” said the boy, his face twisted between anger and grief. He put his arm around her, and she turned off the radio. They sat down slowly, like old people, on the lounge next to me.

“What was he like?” I asked.

“We made a special trip,” Karen said, “to hear Dr. King preach at his home church in Atlanta, because Bill’s brother got arrested with him,” she said, holding his hand in both of hers.

“Your brother knew him?” I asked Bill.

He was silent, his head hanging down. Then slowly, he looked up at me, tears in his eyes. “My brother Alan was one of the Freedom Riders when the civil rights thing was starting. He got arrested in Birmingham during a demonstration led by Dr. King.”

Birmingham. Is that where Peter is from? I should have asked him.

“Your brother met Dr. King?” I asked again.

“No,” Bill said. “He only saw him from a distance. Alan was locked up overnight in a cell that was packed with the other demonstrators. They kept Dr. King by himself in a different part of the jail.”

He paused. “It’s clear in my mind because when Al got home, he showed me the letter Dr. King wrote from that jail. I was in eighth grade, and it was the first ‘grown-up’ conversation I’d ever had with him.”

A little smile fled on and off his lips. It was easy to imagine him as a boy, barely a teen, absorbing his brother’s words, flattered they were talking like friends, like equals.

"I memorized Al's favorite parts of that letter: 'we'll have to repent not only for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.' And that we need to be 'co-workers with God' because – whether or not we know it - we are 'all linked together in an inescapable network.'

Co-workers with God? Was that how Melanie and John saw themselves?

I was surprised to hear myself say, "Someone told me today that Dr. King said, 'Nonviolence is a powerful moral force when it's built on a love which rejects revenge.' ...But I'm not sure I really believe it now."

No one answered. Finally, I broke the silence by asking Bill, "Is your brother still involved with civil rights?" I asked.

His head sank down and he didn't answer. Karen looked at me, her face wet with tears. She slowly shook her head.

Still looking down, I could barely hear Bill when he said, "No. Alan was a conscientious objector who couldn't avoid the draft. He went to Vietnam as an Army medic."

Then he met my eyes. "Six months ago, he stepped on a landmine and was blown to bits."

I cringed as the horror washed over me. What is it like to imagine your brother being blown to bits? "I'm so sorry," I said, wishing I had never asked.

"Alan's commander wrote my parents a letter," Bill said, "saying that he saved over 50 lives in the ten months he served in that goddamn, stupid war."

My heart ached. A hundred years of horror at Clifton Pier. A great man murdered. Thousands of boys slaughtered in Vietnam. Anne's vicious attack. Didn't all this prove that everything is hopeless?

For a while we were silent. Karen rested her head on Bill's shoulder, holding his hand and slowly stroking his arm. The only sound was the wind rustling the palms.

Across the pool, I saw Peter and another guy walking toward the lobby, sharing a bottle – probably rum - from a brown paper bag. I sat up so he could see me, but he had already passed by on the other side of the pool. Should I go to him?

They stopped by the other mourners, and his friend said something to one of them. Then, in the stillness, I heard his friend say, “Really, Dr. King? When?”

I couldn’t hear the response, but as they walked away, his friend declared, “The King is dead,” more with glee than sorrow. Then Peter raised his bottle to the stars and said, “May he rest in peace!” more a mockery than a prayer.

The dream catcher. That bastard. He *was* a racist! My heart sank and my stomach flipped.

I stood and ran to my room, knowing I was going to be sick.