

CHAPTER THREE

The Unraveling by Judith Ingram

Upon our arrival at our new home in Roseville, California, it was a dream come true. My mother wouldn't tell us where we were going, even though we begged her to share the exciting news. She wanted it to be a surprise, and it was the biggest surprise of my life. The only thing I knew was they had bought a real house, and I was going to have my own bedroom ... though my two brothers were going to have to share one, and they were not thrilled about that.

As my dad drove into our new neighborhood, down beautiful street-lined rows of nicely landscaped homes, my heart began to race with anticipation. And when we pulled into the driveway of our new home, my heart was pounding with excitement. It felt like a gift from heaven. As soon as my dad opened the front door, I dashed in running from room to room looking for my bedroom. The moment I found it I was in a state of awe. The bedrooms were already chosen and set up, as was the rest of house, and I knew which was my room because it was so pretty. There was so much to absorb and I absorbed it all, inside and out. Tears of joy flowed as my heart was overwhelmed with a happiness I thought would never be.

It didn't take long before I was outside kicking my shoes off to feel the freshly mowed thick carpet of lush green grass on my bare feet. The front yard was delightful as I danced around the small shady tree growing in the center of the lawn. The scent of the flowers planted along the front and sides of the house gave such beauty and a lovely aroma mingled among various kinds of shrubby. The backyard, however, was barren dirt in which dad later had an in-ground swimming pool built and planted flowers, shrubs, and a small patch of grass along the back fence. The fence enclosed the backyard from both sides of the neighbors and it separated us from the Jr. High just behind our house. That's where Rusty and Johnny attended while my school was a little farther away. Yes, I was in heaven, but heaven didn't last long.

I entered the fifth grade toward the middle of the school year. I remember I was shy and felt invisible for the longest time. I tried to be nice and make friends but ended up keeping to myself. Then one day I was noticed, and became the target of the bullies. I was teased and made jokes of for the clothes I wore, which were, I admit, no more than secondhand outdated attire. They poked at me with hurtful comments about my hairdo, my funny shoes, and other mean things. Then of course, there were the potbelly jokes. I had never spoke back to anyone as I had not the nerve to do so ... until I did.

I became hardened and withdrawn, avoiding them as much as possible. I suppose it bothered them to no end that I ignored their bullying, and no doubt they felt my despise by the expressions on my face. It wasn't only the girls who mocked and laughed at me ... the boys found fun in it as well. My offensive expressions, whenever they provoked me, seemed to make them even meaner, as if they were hoping I would cry or something. One girl in particular seemed determine to harass me, to break me down, so all her fans would laugh, but I never did cry.

This girl, Becky, was an overweight boisterous bully who decided to take things to the next level. It wasn't enough that she targeted me at school, she started stalking me after school while I walked home. Her and her groupie friends would lurk closely behind me as I walked faster and faster in a

rush to get home safely. Her daily insults seemed more to impress her friends with how tough she was, as their laughter felt like razorblades cutting into my soul. I always tried to ignore her, though one day at school I got so mad I raised my voice and called her a “mean fat ass.” The insult was something she had been waiting for as it gave her reason to call me out. With all her friends around I couldn’t back down. It would have been humiliating to refuse her test of courage. I knew she could take me, but I boldly accepted her challenge and hoped for the best. I felt it would be better to lose than to be labeled a chicken.

The news of the fight seemed to be the talk of the school, but it never seemed to reach the ears of the teachers, I suppose. For days before the fight, some kids had fun poking at me with comments saying I was going to get my butt kicked. The fight was supposed to take place after school the following Friday, and for several days I contemplated not going. The echoes of being laughed at drove my ambition to prove I wasn’t afraid of a bully, even though it meant getting beat up. That Friday after school she was already waiting at the place where the fight would commence, and when I arrived there was already a whole crowd of kids waiting with excitement to watch her kick my butt. Many seemed surprised that I had showed up but once I arrived, they started chanting, “fight, fight, fight” over and over like blood thirsty animals.

Becky first bolted toward me and swung her fist into my face, grabbing my hair and flinging me to the ground. She jumped on top of me while I curled into a ball ... before she stopped hitting me. When she got up, she said to the crowd, “What a dumb ass.” The crowd laughed and everyone walked away. The laughter was utterly humiliating ... I couldn’t get out of there quick enough. I wasn’t crying ... at least not in front of them. My mom helped clean me up, telling me that’s what I get for being so foolish. But after that, there were fewer and fewer jokes until no more, and Becky left me alone ... never bothering me again. She won, and that elevated her status. I never could figure out why she was obsessed over me, other than I wouldn’t worship her.

Things didn’t get off to a very good start in my new surroundings and they did not get any better with time. I felt a bit sad that when fifth grade ended, I had not one friend to hang out with for summer break – and all summer I dreaded returning to school for the sixth. By then, I hated school. I just never felt I fit in. I never could find a self-image, nor become conceded as so many were, or act better than others. It seemed most kids were phony and I just didn’t feel connected. There were many loners, as I, but we all remained loners. I had no problem being a loner.

Just a month into summer break a new family had moved in next store. They had a daughter just a couple of years older than me, and she was quite friendly. Her name was Carol. Carol was shorter than me and slightly heavy-set with the most well-developed breasts I had ever seen, and she was not a bit shy about showing them off. We became friends and started having sleep overs. I was so happy to finally have a friend. Sometimes she stayed the night at my house, and sometimes I stayed at hers. For weeks we did all kinds of things together. We went shopping, took walks, went to the movies, and spent a lot of time at the community swimming pool. On our sleep overs we slept in the same bed. She had a queen size that was more comfortable than my twin. We did snuggle together as sisters would, I thought. At least that is how I felt about it. I had always wanted a sister and Carol came to feel that close to me. But Carol felt another way.

One night, while she was sleeping over at my house, she totally stunned me by making sexual advances. At first, I didn't know how to react when she tried to kiss me. All I could do was turn my head, letting her know I didn't want to kiss her. She began to gently stroke my hair, and started to rub my arm while taking hold of my hand and bring it to her breast. "Just rub them," she said. I pulled my hand away and said no. She kept pestering me, trying to touch between my legs, until I firmly insisted that she stop! We went to sleep and woke in the morning both feeling uncomfortable.

I didn't reach out to Carol after that, and she didn't reach out to me as well. Our friendship instantly dissolved. After school was back in session, she was going to the Jr. High behind our house, and so was Johnny. Rusty had advanced to High School. Carol, of course, knew Johnny, but she never showed any interest in him, until then. Then she started warming up to him until one day there she was in our living room, making out with him. Johnny had never had a girlfriend before, and although he didn't consider her one, she surely did. I never figured out what her game was but she started hanging around all the time, until one day she wasn't. Johnny told me he got rid her because she was disgusting, but he wouldn't go into any details. But you should have seen the look on his face. He did admit, though, that she turned him off on girls to the point he later found that he was more comfortable with boys. This is when he knew he was gay. Whatever Carol had done, it apparently was so appalling he lost all desire for the female sex – or perhaps they always were.

From then on, Johnny and I had nothing to do with her. That summer, right after Carol and I had stopped hanging out, my mom had decided that rather than me sitting around doing nothing for the rest of the summer I should start attending a youth group at her Church, which she had been attending Sunday services but hadn't insisted on us kids going. I thought I'd give it a try and I tried to make it fun, but after a while I got bored and quit going. I never did click with any of those kids who seemed to enjoy gossiping and making jokes about other kids, as well as sneaking off to roam around downtown streets a few blocks away, when they thought they could get away with it. It seemed that groupies were everywhere.

When I entered the sixth grade, most of the bullies had gone on to Jr. High. Weeks into it, I still had no friends. The leftover bullies started in on harassing me again, as if to make their stand in status. Somewhat subtle at first, then not, cruel comments started in about my flat chest. Jokes began to circulate, and many times I clearly heard snickers and giggles echo down the walkways when I passed by. Most of the others girls had developing breasts and wore bras. After much insistence I did manage to get my mom to buy me a training bra, just so my nipples didn't stick out on my flat chest. I also tried to wear loose clothing to try and hide the embarrassing fact. But even after that, the looks and laughter continued. The boys got in on the fun pointing at me and would stand staring at my flat chest snickering. It felt so mean, and I remember going home many times in tears crying about it.

My mother got tired of hearing me say I hated being flat, asking why the other girls had breasts and not me, as I felt defective. That is when I learned she herself was flat chested while showing me her padded bra. I was stunned and confused to discover the truth about female breasts, and she told me I may never have them. The thought horrified me as I was coming into puberty.

One morning while getting ready for school, she brought some socks into my room and told me to stuff them in my training bra. I was rebellious to her insistence and tried to argue against it, yelling, "Everyone will know and laugh at me more." "They won't notice," she demanded, "they're not that big," as she stuffed them in, with a firm order that I leave them in there ... telling me she was tired of my whining about it. I feared her more than the kids at school ... but as I walked out the door, I knew I should have disobeyed her and taken them out ... but I didn't. I couldn't face the lie I would have to tell her, when she would ask me about it.

Of course, I knew something as obvious as that would be highly noticed, and though I wore a sweater and tried to stay covered up to hide the sock lumps, it surely was noticed. The stares at my breast as people walked by, or I walked by, were almost enough to make me run and hide, but I tried to be strong. The giggles and whispers were tormenting, and I had never felt as embarrassed as that day, yet, I pretended that they didn't bother me. During lunch I was walking alone across the playground to sit and eat at my quiet spot by the park. There was a group of boys playing basketball, which two of them were in my class. When they saw me coming towards them, they all huddled together and were talking. Then, I heard one of the boys - not in my class - shout, "Hey," as he came running towards me. I kept walking, then stopped as he approached. With a curious expression upon my face, I wondered what he wanted, and quickly found out when he suddenly reached out and grabbed both lumps and squeezed. He pulled the socks out just slightly and let go as they sprung back into place across my chest. It happened so fast and he was already running back to his friends shouting, "They're fake, they're fake," and all the boys laughed and laughed as I ran away in humiliation.

My face must have turned every shade of red as I dashed into the girl's bathroom and pulled those socks out. That terrible stunt was a joke on me for the longest time. I went home that day so full of anger at my mom that I screamed at her the moment I entered the house, as she laid on the couch watching TV - a place I usually found her most of the time. The words, "I hate you!" could not be contained while I ran past her to my bedroom, slamming the door. I heard her speak out, "Well at least you won't be crying about it anymore." And, I never cried about it again. I also never shared personal things with her again.

That was the last time I ever listened to her ill-advised ideas. Growing up under her rule had caused me much emotional pain. Typically, I had no say in what clothes I wanted to wear, and because of that, it made me prime target for being laughed at. I had to wear a lot of outdated, hand-me-downs, and grandmas home sewn dresses ... never anything in current fashion. I was told we couldn't afford to buy new clothes, and with the horribly goofy haircuts she gave me, along with my timid demeanor of shame because of it, I stood out like a sore thumb. It wasn't until I reached Jr. High that I argued, reasoned, fought for my independence to let me wear what I wanted. I was not going to be the laughing stalk of Jr. High! I also won the right to fix my own hair, but my dad refused to let me wear makeup ... and he sternly warned me 'not to' with that 'killer look' I knew of him so well. He meant it!

Having finally made it out of elementary school, I was enthusiastic about going to Jr. High. By then, both Rusty and Johnny would be attending High School. I also felt nervous about it, but I tried not to think of it during that three-month summer break. Something more exciting was happening. That was the summer my dad made good on his word and the in-ground pool was built.

It was exciting watching the whole process, which took weeks. When it was completed, it was so beautiful. Suddenly, a few neighbor kids started warming up to me when they saw we had a pool. They weren't shy about asking to go swimming. I thought they might turn out to be friends, but all they really wanted was our pool. I finally quit inviting them. Rusty spent a lot of time in the pool, and he had lots of friends over. Johnny didn't seem that interested, and I lost interest in time myself. My dad, however, spent most of his free time either in the pool, sunbathing, or gardening every moment he could. In the winter time he mostly sat around reading or watching TV, but whatever he was doing he always had a cigarette hanging from his mouth. But I really didn't see him that much. He seemed to be at work a lot. By then he had become the Foreman at the railroad yard.

That summer was mostly uneventful, as if I had slept on through it. Then, school was about to start. Mom let me order clothes from the Montgomery Wards catalog. It was fun picking out what I wanted, up to a certain amount. I was very excited, feeling like this was going to be a fresh start for me. The really nice part was the school being directly behind our house ... no more long walks in the rain.

Seventh grade, however, turned out to be my worst nightmare. The changing of classrooms for every subject and the hustle and bustle of crowded hallways crammed with bodies pushing through to get to their next class was challenging for me. The ear-piercing ramblings of the enormous horde vibrating throughout the cafeteria was intimidating, as was the countless lockers lining the hallway, with ear piercing jolts echoed by the slamming of metal hitting metal. But the worst of it was the endless heaps of homework that was usually unfinished. The stress of it all was too difficult for me to fully grasp. I slipped so far behind everyone else and I just couldn't keep up. It was decided by the teachers that I should go into the special needs class, which gathered in the library in a small back room. In that class I was placed with the misfits and the slow kids. It felt like the eyes of everyone was looking at me as if I was one of the dumb ones, all except those in my new classroom. I received a lot of positive support in that class, and I learned to toughen up to the darting eyes of judgement outside of that room. At least inside that room no one thought they were better than anyone else. We were all equal.

The kids in my new class helped me learn how to ignore those kinds of mean kids, and I started to feel happy to go to school for the first time. I felt very comfortable in my new classroom, and when I connected with a girl named Rosie, I had found a friendship that was God sent. Rosie remained one of my closest friends for decades until we lost touch sometime in around our early thirties. Rosie was not a very smart student and she'd be the first to admit it, but she was sharp in other ways. She always told me I was too smart to be in that class and predicted I probably wouldn't be there the next year – while knowing she would be - and she was correct.

I discovered that I wasn't in the slow class because I wasn't smart ... it was because I didn't know how to adjust to the system. I was totally lost, disorganized, and wishing I could run away most of the time, but I found my comfort zone in that small library classroom, and it did give me the kind of stability I needed to advance into a normal 8th grade routine that following year.

Rosie was a big girl, slightly overweight and a bit boisterous, but not as heavy as Becky was, who was on campus in the eighth grade, and occasionally I had to see her ugly face. Rosie wasn't very

attractive but her beauty shined through a heart of gold ... once she let you in there. She was also very spoiled, raised nearly as an only child, though she did have a much older brother who was already off to a faraway college campus. I never did meet him, though she showed me pictures. Rosie came late in her parent's life and they were much older than my own parents. She had so much more than I ever dreamed of having, but I wasn't envious of her. Rosie was happy to share her things with me and often gave me little gifts of jewelry or scarves that she never wore. She enjoyed watching me marvel at all the beautiful things she possessed, things that didn't mean as much to her as our friendship.

Her bedroom white rattan furniture was my every wish with a beautiful pink and white flowered canopy bed with matching nightstands. The besides the dresser and a three mirrored makeup vanity with matching chair, there were pretty things everywhere. Her room also had French doors going into the back garden with a fountain and a fish pond, lots of large overgrown plants and bushes and trees and pretty flowers. I just loved going to Rosie's house. Over time we became best friends and she was my only friend, but I wasn't hers ... though she spent more time with me.

Rosie convinced me to join the seventh grade Music class where I learned how to play the clarinet. She had tried several different instruments and could never find a good fit. Rosie seemed to make friends quite easily, and the few of us from class would walk around the school yard together. Then she started to like a boy named David, who was in regular 8th grade classes, but she was too afraid to talk to him. She told me he lived in her neighborhood and had seen him several times at the park. She was totally infatuated with him and she begged me to ask him if he would go with her to the upcoming school dance, in which I felt foolishly uncomfortable abiding. Her never-ending pleas drove me to surrender to her request. One day I finally saw David walking alone, as he was usually with a few friends, and so I approached him. When I delivered the message, he laughed like it was a ludicrous joke, and then he replied, "I'd rather go with you." His eyes smiled with a look of half joking, and I smiled back with a surprised and embarrassing reaction, then quickly walked away - red-faced I imagine.

I couldn't tell Rosie the truth and hurt her feelings so I fibbed and said he had other plans. She said she figured so. I know it hurt her feelings because she stopped talking about him and if she saw him coming toward her, she would start taking to me pretending to ignore him, but his and my eyes always seem to catch one another's. One day Rosie noticed the way he looked at me and made mention of it. I swore to her that I had no interest in him and assured her I never would.

The day my mom opened my bedroom door to tell me a boy named David was calling, was the day of my betrayal. David somehow got my phone number. I was practically frozen at his voice, but he did most all the talking. He apologized about Rosie, expressing his insensitivity, but admitted he did like me, and wondered if we could meet sometime. I had slightly hesitated, feeling almost shameful of the thought of betraying Rosie, but of unsound mind I agreed ... and we set a time and place.

He seemed very nice, was super cute, and showed much interest in me. I was shy, quiet, and nervous when we first met, but we found a lot to chatter about, including not letting anyone know about our meeting - especially Rosie. We had met secretly several times thereafter. At school, when the coast was clear, I'd see him wink at me real cool like and I felt special. The last time I

secretly met with him was when he attempted to kiss me. I had never kissed a boy before but when he stuck his tongue in my mouth it felt so awful that I pushed him away in disgust. My reaction was highly displeasing to him and he never called again – nor did I ever see another wink. I could not tell Rosie the truth then, but decades later I confessed my betrayal, and by then it really didn't matter – we had a good laugh.

That summer, between seventh and eighth grade, was filled with adventure when my parents let me spend part of it in Lake Tahoe with Rosie and her parents. They had an amazing cabin right on the lake at Kings Beach. I felt like I grew up a lot that summer. Both of her parents were teachers and her mother was always very supportive in encouraging my learning abilities – as if she saw real potential in me. Rosie was the apple in her mother's eye and just about anything she wanted she got. Sometimes she had to beg though, like when she wanted to bleach her hair blond. Her mother took us to the store and bought a bottle of peroxide, she was going to help her do it right. My hair was a dirty blond and her mother said it would be so pretty a shade lighter and so I too went along with it.

I was shocked afterward. My hair was nearly white!! Something went terribly wrong. My first thought was, "My dad's gonna kill me!" Sure enough, when I got home from that Tahoe vacation my dad was furious and I was grounded for a long time. My brothers laughed their butts off. I was so embarrassed for anyone to see me so my mom bought some hair dye which helped until I grew it out. I also kept chopping it off until all that hair was no more ... and I never did such a crazy thing again.

Lake Tahoe is where I discovered and learned about crawdads. Rosie didn't prepare me about those spooky critters, and she admitted she didn't warn me because she wanted to see my reaction, in which she laughed like crazy. We were jumping off the dock and swimming back to shore, stepping across the large rocks underneath the water when I felt something touch my foot and I yelped loudly. Rosie was standing on the dock watching me when I felt something pinch my foot and I screamed again in fright. In a panic my screams grew louder while trying to run across the rocks to the shore. Rosie's mom came running toward us hollering "Are you alright?" Rosie, who was rolling in laughter yelled back, "Yeah, Judy found the crawdads."

I wasn't going to go back in the water in fear of those scary creatures, but Rosie convinced me they wouldn't hurt me. She insisted I put a pair of goggles on and take a look under the water, thinking I would see how harmless they were, but instead when I saw the bizarre looking things, I became evermore frightful, refusing to go back in the lake. Rosie said they live in the rocks and showed me the ladder on the dock, letting me know it was safe to use that. So, I did go back in the water but I never went near those rocks. It's a story Rosie had laughed about for decades, never failing to remind me - to the point I can almost hear the faint echoes of her laughter, "Judy and the crawdads."

Rosie was adventurous, nearly fearless, and most surely wildly crazy at times. Although she too had been bullied and teased all of her life, having been called a fatso, a pig, a retard, and other demeaning words, she seemed to find a way to deal with it. But her way was kind of negative, the kind of hardness I nearly succumbed to. She didn't take any crap from anyone and could stand her own ground. It was not easy for anyone to break through that wall to find the warm soul that had

turned to cold stone, but I found her heart and together we did so many fun things, funny things, not cruel or harmful things, but sometimes goofy things ... that we had got in trouble for.

I remember so clearly that Saturday morning when we were at her house talking about Mrs. Johnson, the Vice Principle. Rosie didn't like her at all because she was mean to some of the kids in our class – mainly the misfits who were unfairly blamed for causing trouble. Rosie said she wanted to do something funny to her but she wouldn't tell me what it was. She got the phone book and looked up her number. I kept asking what she was going to do. "You'll see," she said. Then she went to the sink and took a huge mouthful of water, leaving the faucet running while dialing the number, and when the Mrs. Johnson answered, "Hello," Rosie started to gargle like she was drowning and trying to cry out for help. Mrs. Johnson realized immediately it was a prank call and hung up.

Come Monday morning Rosie was telling some of the other kids what she had done, and everyone was laughing. The next day Rosie and I got called into the principal's office and was confronted with our prank phone call, in which we both flatly denied with lying eyes. Finally, Mr. Blair dragged the truth out of us, and although I didn't do it, I got in as much trouble for being a part of the unacceptable act, as well as for lying about it. My mom was called in and I was expelled, as was Rosie. I thought for sure my dad was going to whip me, but he didn't. He had only laid a hand on me a few times since we left Lakeport, but the fear was never far.

Summer break went by very fast and I was once again facing the return to school. It turned out better than I feared. A bit slow at first, I found my way through the eighth grade pushing through the crowds, dashing from class to class, dealing with all the chatter, and keeping up with my school work. Rosie even convinced me to sign up for choir and then we could spend time together in class – it was about the only time I saw her at school. We had a lot of fun singing, going on the bus to other places and performing. During that year we only had occasional weekend sleep overs – nothing like our time together in the seventh grade, or over that past summer break. As it came to be, she didn't want to stay at my house and neither did I ... it was a lot more fun at hers.

Most of the time I had to walk to her house, which was across town on the other side of the freeway, and sometimes my mom took me ... though that wasn't too often. Roseville was considered to have old side and the new side. Rosie lived on the old side where houses were built decades ago, although some modern businesses eventually came in like a Strip Mall and even a Jack In The Box right off the freeway ramp. Old town is where we usually hung out, though we spent much time at the park which was close to her house. Old town had a Main Street with an old movie theater. I had gone there many times. The new side was filled with newer housing tracks, and apartment buildings, as well as gas stations and a Denny's Restaurant. Other than that, there was an Elementary, Jr. High, and High School on the new side, though the old side had an Elementary and a High School. I only met Rosie because the Jr. High – that was located right behind our house – was the only one in the entire town, which meant Rosie had to take a bus.

I can't count how many times I walked that mile-long journey through blocks and blocks of homes, across busy streets to the freeway overpass and all the way around the shopping mall past a few rows of older homes to reach her front door. But if she were to remember how many times she walked to my house, it wouldn't be that many. It was a journey I had taken for nearly two years,

but when summer break came after eighth grade Graduation, her parents spent most of the summer in Lake Tahoe at their King's Beach cabin, taking Rosie and her cousin Shawna with them. When she returned, she was busy a lot, and I already felt the distance growing between us. I dreaded that we lived on separate sides of town. It meant she had to go to the old High School while I had to go to the new High School. I had to face the reality that we would eventually drift apart, and we did off and on for decades to come.

That summer between Jr. High and High School, while Rosie was away, I met a girl a year younger than myself while taking a walk down at the park. I saw her sitting with a younger boy whom I assumed was her brother. I often went to the park that was situated between the Elementary and Jr. High school. I walked out to my favorite shade tree where I would watch the other kids play touch football. I noticed the boy looked over and was staring at me. I smiled at him and he jumped up and ran over to introduce himself. He was about two years younger than I, but he appeared so much more mature. He said his name was Danny, and he pointed to his sister saying she was Sandy. Sandy was looking over at us with a questionable expression that looked bewildered on what the heck Danny was doing. He seemed eager for us to meet and asked me over to where they were sitting under another towering tree. I was kind of shy at first, but we all hit it off so great that we started hanging out together.

Sandy lived on the other side of the elementary school, where homes were more spread out, and there was undeveloped and developed land across the road, with a horse boarding operation directly across from her house. The distance to her house was far closer than Rosie's house, and I had rarely been to that area before, until then. The trips along the creek had a path going straight to her fenced backyard, and that's the path that her and I mostly used. Danny came along with us many times when we would all meet up and hang out for hours. Our favorite place was the park. Sandy hadn't met anyone since they moved to Roseville and would be starting the 7th grade at the Jr. High. She told me she had been kept back a year and had to redo the fourth grade. Danny was going into the sixth grade, and seemed more developed than most boys his age.

Sandy was a lot more seasoned in life than I. She shared many of her personal experiences from New Mexico, where she was raised, and where they had recently come from. When she told me her mother was a high paid prostitute, I didn't know what that was. To her it didn't seem like a big deal ... she said her mom made a lot of money having sex with men. I had met her mother a few times. She was very beautiful and sophisticated. Sandy looked much like her mother, except her blond hair was long and in a ponytail. They both had the most captivating cobalt blue eyes I'd ever seen.

Sandy had a set of drums in their living room and sometimes she would play them for me. She was so crazy for 'The Monkeys' and tried to play their songs while listening to their albums. She also had their posters all over her bedroom walls. I tried to play the drums too but it felt awkward, yet I banged away and we laughed as we made up funny songs.

That summer my mom remarked that we were inseparable, and it did feel that way. We spent just about every available minute together, and we did some pretty crazy fun stuff. Besides 'The Monkeys' nut she was, Sandy was also a total horse nut. I hadn't been around them much but I did love horses. She told me she'd been sneaking across the road to the boarding stable in the middle

of the night to ride bareback on different horses. I thought she was really crazy, but then she convinced me it was safe ... and it was a lot of fun ... until it wasn't.

Her bravery had encouraged to me to take the risk, so one afternoon we made a plan for that night. While my family slept, I ran off to play. Earlier that evening I had removed my bedroom window screen so I could crawl out and slip away. In the morning I would put it back before ever being noticed. Once I got away with it, I was able to try it again and again. It was usually around midnight when I slipped out, and the spooky part was going alone in the dark to her house. I would run as fast I could along the street sidewalks where there was lighting because I wasn't brave enough to take the shorter path along the creek in the darkness. The other spooky part was taking a flashlight and going into the stalls to walk a horse out and bridle it up, without getting caught. It was amazing that we never did.

Sandy knew which horses were good and which ones to avoid – she had already tried most of them. It was so much fun riding bareback, doubled up, and trotting all around the fenced pasture. I'd let her ride alone while I watched because she loved to fly as fast as she could. I was always too scared. When we were finished having our fun, Sandy would put the horse back in its stall and she would run with me half way home and then run back to her house. I ran the rest of the way as quick as I could go.

One night she wanted me to ride alone so I could get the feeling she got flying through the pasture. I was very nervous about that, especially since it was my first time on a different horse. The one we had been riding had left the stable so Sandy picked out another. We had ridden it around together for a long time, and he seemed fine, so I decided to be brave.

There was a full moon that night with a clear sky and with the street lights it didn't seem so dark. The horse started to walk and then trotted a bit, then I gave it a little kick to make him run and he took off flying. I was hanging onto his mane with one hand while pulling the reins back with the other, trying to get him to slow down. My legs were clamped tightly, hanging on for life. When I saw the barb wired fence ahead, that the horse was heading straight for, I tried to pull harder to stop him, without success. My heart was pounding with such fright that I nearly jumped off, but then, all of a sudden, he came to an instant halt just a few feet from the running into the fence. In that moment, my body flew through the air and smashed into the ground so hard I wailed in a shrilling scream. The horse took off running back to the stable.

I tried not to cry too loud so as not to draw attention, but it hurt really badly. Sandy dashed to help me, and she got me over the fence and told me to go home. I walked home crippled up and climbed back through my bedroom window, quietly making my way to the bathroom to clean up. I had bleeding scrapes and dirty clothes I had to hide. After a week or so, when I was healed enough, I attempted to continue with our occasional midnight adventures. I became less fearful, gaining increased confidence on the horses, but that all came to a harsh end one startling night.

My dad had awakened while I was gone, and he must have peeked into my room to know I was missing. I don't know how long he waited for me to return but when he heard the sound of my arrival outside my bedroom window, he rushed out the front door to catch me in the act. When I saw the fire in his deadbolt glare, my breath ceased for a long pause, taking notice of what he held

in his hand ... the whipping belt. I hung my head down and walked through the front door into the living room. First, he ordered me to tell him where I had been before unleashing his wrath upon me. My screams of torture from the belt had woken everyone, as I stood paralyzed in the corner taking the hits. When he had finished, I stood there weeping, while he went back to bed. I sniffled there for a while, crouched to the floor, before going to my room, where I pulled the covers over my head and cried in pain ... soaking my pillow with tears. In that moment I felt more hatred for him than perhaps all the other times he had whipped me.

Thankfully, it was my last belt whipping. I had seen enough, knew enough that kids my age weren't getting belt whipped ... if many ever did. One day I went to my dad and told him that all the other kids my age would get grounded for punishment, expressing how I felt I was too old for spankings. I asked him if we could do that instead. He looked intrigued at how grown up I was, and agreed I was too. From then on, I was grounded when punished, but I wasn't grounded that often, and truthfully, I hated being grounded more than the belt.

It was toward the latter part of summer when Rosie returned home from Lake Tahoe. Her and I couldn't wait to have a sleep over and share all our stories. I had talked a lot about Rosie to Sandy during that summer and she really wanted to meet her, and I couldn't wait to tell Rosie all about her. During my first sleep over with Rosie, I bubbled over sharing my fun and crazy stories that Sandy and I had, and Rosie seemed happy for me. She told me about the blast she had at King's Beach, saying she met some cute boys at the dance hall, admitting they were more interested in her cousin than her. Both Rosie and Sandy said they would like to meet, but that never happened.

I felt the distance growing between Rosie and me throughout the rest of the summer. We both were more than aware that soon we would be taking different directions. She had already started spending more time with her cousin at that point, whom would be attending her High School. Shawna was a year older than Rosie and was very popular. Rosie had found a new group to hang with, some from Jr. High. I only had Sandy ... but Sandy didn't only have me.

A few weeks after Rosie returned, Sandy started acting different. I wondered if she was mad at me for spending time with Rosie. There was just something not quite right in her voice when I called her that next Saturday morning to make plans, as we both often did. I was left confused at how she just blew me off with an excuse to hang up, saying she was busy right then and would call me back, but she didn't call me back, and she didn't call me back at all.

It was two days later when I called her again. No one answered. Later, I tried again and she answered, but was unable to talk, though she didn't say why. Same thing the next day, she was just leaving with her mom to go shopping, "I'll call you later," she kept saying, and didn't. There was always something, and then I didn't call her either. I waited for her to come to me, but after a week, I was sick inside. Then for several days I tried to call her again with no answer. I finally went to her house, but no one was home. I began to get worried because I couldn't reach Danny either. Finally, I became so concerned I decided to go back to her house again and leave a note on the door, in case no one was there. To my surprise Danny answered the door, and he told me she was out shopping with their mom. I asked him why she was ignoring me but he brushed it off by simply stating he'd make sure she called, acting as though he knew nothing.

Sandy did call me that evening, and I was desperate to know what was going on. She tried to explain how busy things were, now that school was about to start. She said we'd get together soon, attempting to ease my concerns. The tone of her voice was very different though, a bit of a chill, and rather superficial as to leave me feeling a pit inside my gut.

I remember hanging up the phone while my eyes filled with tears. For days my eyes were filled with tears and my mom thought I was being silly. I felt a pain inside I had never felt, thinking she had dumped me and I couldn't understand why. Why? Why? Why? I kept asking myself. I had to know what was really going on. Something was off, something was wrong, something had to be fixed.

A couple of days later, I just couldn't stand it anymore. I knew what I had to do, I had to confront her face to face. I headed down to the creek to walk the back path to her house. I walked and talked to myself, mumbling the words I would say, reaching deep inside to find the courage to confront her. I even stopped for a moment to sit and think in solitude among nature, to calm my racing heart filled with distress over the matter.

When I came around the last bend, I saw a chestnut horse with a white star between his big brown eyes, and as I drew closer, I saw he had four white socks. I noticed immediately he was tied to the back of Sandy's fence. I was stunned at first, and then I was very curious. I approached the horse slowly, looking around to see if anyone was there. The horse appeared to be alone. After I pet him for a moment, gazing into his warm, kind eyes, I peeked over the fence. I didn't see anyone so I hopped over and went straight to the sliding glass patio door ... as I always did, and knocked hard. A moment later I saw Sandy running toward the door with a look of panic in her eyes - a face of guilt was my first thought - as if she'd been caught doing something she shouldn't - and she certainly was.

Moments later, as Sandy opened the door, I saw a boy approaching behind her. He had a sly grin while he stood there staring at me. I instantly felt embarrassed. Sandy stepped outside and told him to wait there. She closed the door and sat down on the porch. I sat down beside her, asking what was going on. She looked into my eyes with such sincerity and asked me to forgive her, admitting that she had been avoiding me to spend time with John. "Not so much John," she said, but the opportunity to ride his horse, Socks, every day. She leaned on my understanding, reminding me of her horse craziness. She admitted that she didn't have the courage to tell me, and that she had planned on telling me sometime because she wanted me to join them. She said it would be so much fun if we could ride together.

I put my hurt aside and accepted her invitation. She hollered for John to come out and then introduced us, telling him she invited me to come along, and he was totally cool with that. John was several years older than both Sandy and me. His striking auburn-red hair and dark brown eyes, freckled face and super cute appeal, was hard not to notice. In his western attire, cowboy boots, hat and spurs he really was a cowgirl's dream, even if Sandy said she only wanted to ride his horse.

The three of us headed for the park, with Socks in tow. Sandy rambled on telling me how they met a couple of weeks earlier down at the park. She boasted on how nice he was to let her ride his horse, while he just watched. I tried to act mature and pleasant about the situation, but I didn't say

much, and it felt rather uncomfortable. Once we arrived at the park, John untied a blanket from the saddle and spread it out on the grass under an oak tree while Sandy and I took a ride, doubled up. Even though it was amazing, and we were laughing like crazy galloping all around, I told her I had to get home. I really couldn't get out there fast enough. On the way home I felt sad. I knew things would never be the same again.

Sandy called me that evening to apologize again. Perhaps she sensed my sadness. She said John was really nice, and a gentleman, but didn't feel anything for him. They were just friends, and she wanted us to all be friends. She said John was coming over the next Saturday, so we made a plan to meet down by the creek in a nearby open field. She said her, Danny, and John would be there. I was very happy Danny would be coming, I knew it would make me feel more comfortable. As I walked along the creek, across the long stretch of tall golden grass to where they were waiting, Sandy was riding Socks around while John laid perched up against a tree looking relaxed and mellow, while chatting with Danny. He stood up as I approached and made a comment about how crazy Sandy was about Socks. Danny and I comment back in agreement, saying she was a real horse nut. We sat silent for a bit and then Sandy came riding up with a big happy smile. She hopped off and said to get on. I hesitated until John said, "Sure, go for it," and Danny started nudging me.

I mounted up on the saddle and took Socks for a short circular trot around the field, and then returned in a full run. It felt much different than riding bareback, safer and less frightful. Socks was a very smart and very gentle older horse, but I wasn't that trained and didn't feel quite brave enough to really go for it. Sandy mounted up behind me and roared "Let's ride," and Socks took off like a bullet. She had the reins in hand with her arms wrapped around me and we galloped back and forth from one end of the field to the other, and all around. It felt thrilling. When we came riding up to John, Sandy and I were laughing. John rose from the blanket and looked at us like we were silly girls. And we were silly girls.

I got more comfortable the more I rode Socks but I never was as good as Sandy, and far from the excellent rider John was. He was a real cowboy type and looking cute as ever with his shoulder length auburn hair sticking out of his cowboy hat. When he took his sunglasses off, his deep brown eyes were more than soft and dreamy, sometimes mesmerizing ... and of course he knew it. It was still hard for me to believe Sandy only wanted to ride his horse.

We had only spent a handful of times together, but time proved that indeed all Sandy wanted to do was ride socks. Sometimes we met at the park, and other times in the field. Sometimes Danny was with us and sometimes not. And sometimes poor Socks carried all three of us to faraway places ... adventures John took us on. He had been all over those parts riding Socks and knew of some private spots to take a break, have a smoke, and chat next to the running creek, where Socks would take in a long drink. John did smoke, and after a while I also started smoking, but Sandy never did. I really only did it when I was around John, although I did sneak a cigarette from my dad's pack once in a while. But I didn't like his brand that much. I started with Marlboro, John's brand, and that's the brand I smoked for most of my life, until I quit after fifty plus years later with COPD.

The more John got to know me the more he started showing interest. I felt Sandy picked up on that, but she never said anything, and I tried to pretend nothing was going on, yet it was getting harder to conceal. Then one day John showed up at my house, sitting tall upon his horse in my

driveway. Rusty had seen him and came to get me. I was surprised, and a little shy when I walked outside to see him. I didn't feel shy before, but suddenly I was shy. I didn't know how to act, really. I asked where Sandy was because I thought she might be coming. He said he didn't know where she was, he had come to see if I wanted to go for a ride.

I fidgeted a bit in nervousness. He gave me that 'please' look, "Come on," he mused, "just a little ride?" I smiled and went to ask my mom if I could go. My family all knew John by then. There were many times John and Sandy walked me home, Socks being led behind beside us. He got pretty lathered up at times from a hard day's work, toting us all around in the heat of the day. John often wore spurs on his boots because Socks, he said, was stubborn at times, but I always thought he was being mean to the old fella. I gave Socks a lot of love, he was my first true horse passion ... and the soul of the horse had forever touched my heart.

That was the beginning of our romance, and he was a smooth operator. The more I got to know him I fell under his spell. I found myself living out a fantasy. It was the first time I had ever connected to another human being on such a deep level. He swept me up and made me his sole focus. He stopped going to Sandy's, and I was afraid to tell her the truth. We talked a few times on the phone and she mentioned John hadn't been around, asking me if I had seen him – I lied. She was becoming more and more suspicious so I finally told her the truth in hopes she would be as understanding as I was, but instead we got into a huge fight. She faded out of my life until one day I got a call from her. She said she understood and hoped I was happy. She told me her family was moving back to New Mexico and wanted to write to keep in touch. It felt good to mend the wound between us – though our friendship never carried on.

I was barely 14 years old when I met John, entering my freshman year at High School. He was barely 17 years old entering his senior year at his High School. Our schools were miles apart. I didn't know much about his life except his father was full Italian and his mother full Irish. He had the Irish blood with an Italian title. I didn't even know where he lived, just not nearby. He didn't share much of his personal life. He not only smoked Marlboro cigarettes, he got high on marijuana joints, in which I eventually became a toker.

Getting high became a regular experience from then on, but nobody knew ... at least not until he introduced it to my brothers. But my parents never had a clue. John made himself quite welcome around my house. He was always very polite and gentleman like. My dad liked him, my mom liked him, Johnny liked him, but Rusty, well he tried to like him, unsuccessfully. Rusty tried to warn me about him, but my ears were deaf and my heart sealed.

The deeper my feelings grew for John, the fluttering of my heart increased every time I heard Socks trotting down the pavement, his steel shoes clicking and clacking. John often would say he rode a long way to come to see me, just to remind me how special I was. But whenever I questioned him on where he lived - and I inquired many times - he would just point and say "In a shack over there somewhere." I thought, he must be humbly ashamed.

I enjoyed our adventurous rides, exploring new ground, feeling the wild freedom of the old west, leisurely riding doubled up, my arms wrapped contentedly around John's slender waist. We'd always find a private spot to relax and to talk, that eventually led to kissing and snuggling. John

taught me how to kiss and it wasn't gross at all. He called it French kissing. I took such pleasure in my private tutoring sessions on the art of kissing, among other natural animalistic pleasures he aroused in me.

It was a struggling time for me, having been raised with a strong Christian upbringing. Every time John attempted to go a step further, I would hear my mother's words: "Boys will tell you anything to get you to have sex. They'll whisper in your ear that they love you. Don't believe them! They only want one thing ... SEX!" Her words haunted me, especially when she followed up with the reality that sex leads to babies. John was respectful toward my morality and fears, but he also was a horny boy too.

John had given me sweet and funny nicknames like jack rabbit, because I had long skinny legs. He said he loved my jack rabbit legs, and one day he appeared at our front door holding a wild jack rabbit captured by his hands on his ride over to see me. It was so cute and cuddly, absolutely adorable, and he received much affection for that gift. That night I put the bunny next to me in bed, as you would a dog or cat, and I fell asleep. When I awoke the next morning, I found the poor bunny flattened to death like a pancake. My nightgown and bedding was grossly soaked in its smashed guts. I was so horrified and shocked at such a sight, I screamed. Once I had cleaned up the whole disgusting mess, I cried in sadness. I felt terrible that I had killed the poor animal, and it was an awful feeling. John comforted me as we took the remainder of its body to a nearby burial site, where I said an emotional prayer. For days it bothered me every night I went to bed, but after a while I forgot all about it.

John and I spent every moment we could being together, which was pretty much limited to weekends, though sometimes he would surprise me after school and ride over just to spend a couple of hours. We had ridden just about every place we could go until one day we found the perfect spot to start spending our weekend time together. I looked forward to those moments we nestled in each other's arms next to the gentle flowing creek that opened up to a pool of still water, listening to birds chirping about. Socks enjoyed it too, with all the nibbles of tasty greens and a drink from the creek. It was comfortably private and peacefully quiet, the perfect spot to roll out the blanket he kept tied to the back of his saddle, which made for a nice cushion. He would spread it out under the shade tree and we'd talk for hours, or rather I talked and he mostly listened. John wasn't much of a talker, he was, however, a fascinated listener and seemed to enjoy all my ramblings.

I opened my heart and soul to him, and he devoured every morsel. He discovered all my weaknesses and strengths, all my fears and dreams. His slow and gentle touch drew me into his arms, and things advanced beyond kissing and snuggles. Once I let him touch the bare skin of my slow developing breasts, and he had worked his fingers between my legs, there was no stopping the us from exploring our sexuality, until it came to intercourse. That was the one forbidden fruit. I knew he had experienced intercourse before, as he knew I was a virgin. He respected that, and I felt safe with him to not force me or push me into having sex. He seemed content with other ways of pleasure.

Surprisingly, John pulled into our driveway one afternoon in a 1950's faded red Ford pickup truck. He said his dad bought it for him to fix up and he was quite proud of it. Until then my dad would not allow me to date – which he did not consider our horseback riding as such. Over time my dad

came to trust John, so the first time John asked if he could take me to a dinner and movie, my dad said yes. After that he let me go with him for afternoon drives and early evening outings ... soon, we were traveling all over. Sometimes Rusty and Johnny went us, but then Rusty got his own car, a rundown boat size monster ... and a fast one at that. He took me for a ride once, out to a long stretch of a straight country road that went for miles, and he hit that gas pedal to the floor. I thought he was insane, but swirling within the fear of me was a tremendous thrill. We both yelled and shouted, screaming at the top of our lungs, laughing madly, the wind whooshing through the opened windows with my hair blowing wildly across my face. It was a blast ... but my hair got caught in my pierced earring and the force of the wind ripped it so hard my ear tore the hole, making it bigger. I didn't notice the pain of it until later when it felt like a razor blade had sliced my ear. It did heal, but ever since, one earring has always been a little lower than the other.

John and I spent most of our time in that old pickup truck. Riding Socks became less and less. He would take me farther and farther away from home, along endless country roads, to nearby cities and shopping malls, where sometimes we walked around for the fun of it. I enjoyed the truck much better than riding, by then, listening to the radio, smoking and getting high. Then out of the blue one Sunday afternoon he finally asked me if I still wanted to know where he lived, and of course I replied in excitement with a big yes.

As we drove along that back country road, he turned down another. Further on we passed a sign indicating we were entering Citrus Heights, the next town over. We drove further as large custom-built homes began to appear, with sprawling acres of hay fields, fancy barns, and lots of pastures with horses and cows. As we continued, I saw a grove of huge trees over lapping the road like a tunnel, and John started to slow down as I saw a small building set back slightly under the trees. I got excited and blurted out, "Is this it?" He said no, with a smirk, "That's a ranch hand pad," he chuckled. Then he sped up and slowed down again while approaching a dirt driveway with a large two-story house in the distance. "Is this it?" I exclaimed, and again he said no. I gave him a soft punch in the arm for being such a tease about it as I kept thinking he was taking me to a shack, but there were no shacks in sight, only beautiful homes that sprawled out for miles.

As we drove along the road another grove of trees was just ahead and he slowed down again. I couldn't see any homes through the thickness that lined both sides of the road. I didn't get excited, thinking he was teasing me again, but then he slowed way down and started to pull into a large circular graveled driveway with a lovely red brick ranch style home. "This isn't it," I pouted, as he pulled up behind a shiny new black Cadillac parked along the beautifully landscaped front yard. When he turned the truck off, he didn't say a word, he just stared at me waiting for a response. I didn't say anything while staring at the Cadillac ... stunned and speechless. Then he casually uttered the words, "This is it."

The look on my face was one he was hoping for ... total shock and awe ... yet, I wasn't fully convinced until I glanced over into the pasture where I saw Socks grazing contentedly. I knew then he was telling the truth. "A shack!" I mocked, punching him affectionately. He gave me that half cracked grin, as if his insides were chuckling at my sheer surprise, though he acted as if none of it impressed him. I already knew him to have a resentment and disrespect of wealth, he had expressed it so often, "that money can own a man" - in which I knew he was too rebellious to ever be held

captive by money. I finally had some kind of clue as to why he hated the rich ... he really just hated his life.

When we entered the house, his mother was standing near the door and apparently she was quite shocked herself to see me – a reaction he was hoping to receive, as well. John hadn't talked about me in all the months we had been seeing each other. Though she tried to be formally polite, I could feel her disapproval radiating through her less than warm judgmental eyes. I already knew much about her, at least from John's negative perspective. She kindly invited me in and we sat at the kitchen table. John slipped outside and left me alone with her, and her curiosity could not be contained. She started asking me lots of questions about me, my family, and how long her son had been seeing me. I knew instantly she looked down on me as a poor person with no class. It didn't take a genius to know she clearly felt I wasn't material for their family, especially for John, her favorite son, which became apparent in time. John had a younger brother and a much younger sister that weren't there that day, and neither was his dad or granny. John had told me his mother's mother, his grandma was living with them. She was only known as 'granny.'

The moment John walked back into the room his mother insisted that he give me a tour of their home. Perhaps she was wanting to intimate me, and in some ways it certainly did. His mother, the Irish woman she was, had the same strikingly auburn red hair as her son, in which not a strand was out of place, and obviously had been styled by a salon. She also had the same freckly face, and pale white skin. As John showed me around the house it was like something out of a fancy home magazine - something I had seen on TV or in movies. Everything was absolutely polished and spotless - the effort of their housekeeper. John gave me the full tour inside and out, leaving me speechless. His mother tried so hard to be dignified, as I watched John enjoying her squirming behind her forged smile. He saw it and I felt it, her judgement was quite piercing through those green eyes that kept looking me up and down with quick glances. There certainly wasn't anything glamorous about me, and I kind of felt like a ragdoll in her presence.

As we drove away, I expressed to John how she made me feel, and that's when he revealed to me why he didn't like high society snobs and fakes, which was how he portrayed his mother. He told me she was constantly trying to push the daughters of their friends in high society at him and he never could stand any of them. From that moment on, I was perceived as lower class ... and that never did change. Never!

I had already known that John despised his mother from all the awful things he had said about her. It felt extremely uncomfortable whenever I was in her presence knowing how she felt about me, therefore I kept my distance as much as possible. I wasn't then, and never was, good enough for her son. She seemed to barely tolerate me, but her son made me feel quite special, and that's all that mattered. I didn't care about the wealth of his family, though she wrongly pegged me as a 'gold digger,' which he knew not to be true, and he admired that in me. He also liked that I didn't wear makeup or desired to flaunt myself in designer labels. He adored my natural beauty inside and out.

As time passed, school was drawing to an end. As he had nearly every weekend, John came and took me for a drive. On that day he drove me to see where he attended school, which was really far away. His High School was double the size of mine. I knew he would be graduating that year

in 1968, but I was quite surprised when he asked me to his Prom. I was almost afraid to ask my dad, thinking he would say no, and to my surprise again, he said yes.

Having John in my life that first year of High School gave me strength, but I lived for the weekends. Every night we talked on the phone. He would make me feel better whenever I told him how the popular girls were such snobs to me, and the boys were even worse with their creepy stares and whispers when passing by. Once again, I was the target of those who self-elevated to act better than anyone else. John would tell me they were assholes, fools and fakes, making me feel pretty and special. There was no doubt he could get most any girl with his good looks, and he picked me. Knowing that made it easier to ignore them all.

John must have known the reaction he'd receive if he ever showed up at my school, and one day he surprised me when he did. It was Friday, and he had a half day at his school. As soon as the last bell rang, I headed out for my long walk home. Just then, I saw John waiting for me across the road in the open field, but he wasn't alone. I felt jealous seeing him sitting there tall and handsome in his well-worn saddle, dusty old cowboy hat, scuffed boots, and faded blue jeans with a flock of infatuated girls fluttering about. They were chattering away, wooing over his horse, and Socks looked quite content with all the affection. When John saw me across the road standing there staring at them, he joyfully exclaimed, "There's my girl." When they all saw me, their expressions appeared awe-struck, if not just plain shocked. The look on their faces was priceless as they all dashed away.

A few of those girls had approached me in latter days and invited me to hang out with them after that. They tried to pick and pry information to know more about this dreamy boy and me. Even the boys started to notice me in a different way, in which one spread a rumor that he had 'done it' with me – meaning he had sex with me. As this rumor began to spread, kids were whispering as I would pass by, with looks that told me they were gossiping about me. Soon thereafter I got so mad at that boy's lies I boldly confronted him in the cafeteria with a hard, loud slap across his face ... shouting, "Liar," for everyone to hear. Things changed a bit after that and no one ever bullied or teased me again, nor did they ever dare to spread rumors about me. By then, I think the entire school knew about John. I don't think those mean boys ever wanted to come face to face with him. Whenever I told John about those guys, he'd get so angry and threaten to kick their balls.

John had come to my school several more times and surprised me like that, and each time the girls would flock around. John told me one of those girls had bravely invited him to come ride with her, saying she had a horse too, and she seemed to be offering more than that. John told me girls like that are cheap, a dime a dozen, he said. I rationalized that he must have had high standards of morals and it seemed the right time for me to talk about my faith, to see how he really felt about it. It was about the only thing we had avoided talking about in our millions of conversations. He did express a sort of, kind of interest in learning what I believed, and eventually he listened to me read from the Bible from time to time. It felt more like he was just willing to go along, if it pleased me. I suppose in my heart I believed I could teach him what he had never sought to know – even though he expressed his folks were highly religious, and yet rarely attended Church.

It was approaching the end of the school year and John's graduation was coming up. But first his Senior Prom was drawing nearer. Mom took me shopping for a new dress, and she even took me

to get my hair done. When that day arrived, I was so nervous. John surprised me when he arrived to pick me up in his parent's Cadillac. He said his folks insisted he take it because they were ashamed for him to show up in his old pickup truck, and in which he informed me his folks offered to give him a new truck for his graduation gift, but he preferred "Old Red," as he called her.

John was nicely dressed, very handsome, and obviously noticed by the girls at the dance, and I was as well. I hung onto his arm tightly, feeling insecure, and frankly my new dress wasn't as fancy as most. Truthfully, I felt totally beneath everyone as I felt the stares of the other girls. It was as if they were shocked John was with someone like me. The rich have a way of doing that, I suppose. It certainly wasn't like my school at all.

The music was loud, the dance floor was packed, and everything was decked out. John asked me to dance a slow song. He seemed fairly popular with the crowd, but acted so cool about it. It hadn't been but a couple of hours when he said, "Let's blow this place," and he escorted me out. "What a joke," he ranted, "I'm so glad I'm out of this prison." As we walked slowly toward the car, hand in hand, I felt very content in his presence. With so many cute girls of his choice, he paid no attention.

When we reached the car, and got in, I thought we'd be leaving but John pulled out a bag from under the seat with a bottle of whiskey and a joint inside. I had never had hard liquor before, a sip of beer perhaps, a taste of wine, so I hesitated. John begged me to take a couple of drinks straight from the bottle. I took two tiny sips, then another and another. We rolled the windows down and toked on the joint. I was feeling really good and floaty, laughing and kissing and running my fingers through his soft shaggy red locks. John suggested we take a walk, get some fresh air, and he practically had to hold me up.

His school was situated in an upper-class neighborhood, the fancy street lamps casted a golden aura down the sidewalk. It was a warm evening and totally quiet as I giggled in a state of drunkenness trying to not stumble. John wasn't swaying at all and seemed in perfect control as we walked along. As we got further away from the car, it was several blocks down when we came upon a vacant house and he stopped. With his arm anchored around my shoulder he tried to lure me into the backyard, but I felt that was too weird and was afraid the neighbors would think we were trying to break in. He assured me it was fine, as I hung on him feeling a head spin. I felt his hands moving all over me and it felt nice and tingly. I felt like I was melting into his arms as he led me into the backyard. Trying to be quiet, John took his coat off and laid it down on the lawn for me to sit on. He sat beside me as we snuggled and kissed. Then things got out of control.

We went from sitting to lying down and John crawled on top of me, then tried to pull my pantyhose off. I tried to resist his advances by holding tight to my dress, but he was strong and determined and I was weak and afraid to make any noise. I whispered, "No, No," but he wouldn't stop. His voice sounded different as he whispered back in a deeper and darker tone, "I'm gonna make you my woman tonight," he stated. We struggled a bit as I begged him to stop. When he got his pants partly pulled down, I could feel his firm hard-on throbbing against my body, and at that point his desire was fully unleashed.

He put one hand over my mouth and tore my pantyhose off with the other, ripping my panties down far enough to spread my legs. When he stuck his large erection between my warm thighs, I quit fighting him at that point. I felt immobilized, perhaps slightly in shock. I had a brief moment of numbness while he spit in his hand to wet himself, moving his penis around until he hit the spot, then began to insert it. I cringed and moaned in pain as it entered inside me, asking him again to stop. Tears were running down my cheeks as I pounded his back with my fists, but he kept going, saying how tight it was, how good it felt, while whispering to me to just relax.

I tried to push him off but he wouldn't ease up, and once he was all the way in, he began to ram it deeper and harder. It felt horrible. It felt shaming. Then, in one fast jerk he pulled it out as he sprayed his sperm across my belly, panting madly. His sperm felt warm, slimmy, and disgusting on my skin, and then, it was over. He reached in his pocket for his lighter, mumbling that he wanted to see that spot of virgin blood. He wanted proof he had popped my cherry - as he so ungracefully expressed it - in which he indeed discover most proudly. I was devastatingly disappointed afterward ... he was manly exhilarated.

I never imagined that I would lose my virginity in such a shocking manner, and I was afraid to tell my mom ... afraid to tell anyone. What began as a wonderful evening had ended in my greatest nightmare. I couldn't bring myself to talk to him for several days after that, even though he apologized, blaming the booze and pot. I felt such resentment toward him. John was feeling so guilty he showed up at my school in 'old red'. School days were winding down for summer break and I was feeling very sad over the whole situation. His truck was parked in the school parking lot, but he was standing outside waiting for me. Of course, he wasn't standing alone as a few girls, and even a couple of guys, were standing next to him having a conversation. I didn't want anyone to know what had happened, so I acted as normal as I could. When we got to his truck, I got in and he drove off while we both hadn't yet spoken a word. We were silent for a while before he opened up and confessed his sinful act, though he still blamed his behavior on the whiskey. He admitted he sometimes does crazy shit when he drinks, and he really seemed to regret what he did. His pitiful look was like a sorry little boy that won my acceptance to his apology. I told him he had better never do that again, in which he agreed.

I wasn't invited to his graduation, but he dodged all the parties just to come and be with me that day. Then school was out and John was coming over every day. Every day we would go somewhere to be alone. It took a few weeks of him gently easing me into trying it again. He kept talking about how making love was a gift from God. Telling me it should be a pleasure. Finally, he convinced me to explore that pleasure. Taking it slow, I felt ready to surrender, and it was amazing. He was very gentle. After that, it happened again and again in the truck, and down at the creek, and even once in my own bed when no one was home. John wasn't always prepared with condoms so he would pull out ... but unfortunately, eventually, that was going to lead to trouble.

It had been a while since I had seen Rosie, though we talked occasionally on the phone, and then one weekend we planned to have a sleep over. After that weekend at Rosie's, things had become strange with John. He started acting suspicious and paranoid, to the point that if a boy even looked at me, he'd cuss them out. At times I felt utterly embarrassed by his attitude. I began to feel suffocated by him, which started out as little arguments that turned into huge fights, until one day things eventually blew up into an angry breakup. I had reached a point where I needed space. He

became very irate the day I confronted him. Suddenly, I felt frightened by him in a way I had never felt before.

On a rare occasion John showed up on Socks. It had been a while since I had seen the horse. What started out as a pleasant ride to our special place along the creek, didn't end so special. At first, things were fine, then he tried to push himself on me, with the intent to have his way. I didn't like the forcefulness and tried to get free. He held my arms pinned to the ground so tightly it left bruises. When I finally managed to get away, I screamed at him, yelling, "I hate you!", then I ran as fast as I could. Nearing my house, I saw Rusty walking down the street. He saw me with tears flowing and asked what was wrong. When I told him about John, and how he was being mean to me, Rusty took off in search of him. Like a big brother he was going to defend his little sister ... and besides, he never liked him anyway. When Rusty returned, he looked rather satisfied as he bragged on how he threatened to kick his ass if he ever hurt me again. Rusty said they had a pushing fight before John rode off in a blaze.

I didn't see John or talk to him for a nearly three weeks, refusing his constant attempts. During that time, Johnny and I started hanging out together. One day we made a plan to take the bus to San Francisco to hang out with the hippies on Haight-Ashbury. The bay area was no stranger to us and the trip wasn't that far. On the day we planned to sneak off, that Saturday morning we told mom we were going to spend the day with friends, maybe see a movie at the downtown theater, so she wouldn't expect us home until much later. It seemed like a good cover story, and we got away with it. Dad was out of town at the time on business, and I was so excited I could hardly sleep. We both had saved our allowance to buy bus tickets for that secret trip. The bus dropped us off at the Golden Gate Park, and as we walked through, we both were in awe of what we saw. It wasn't anything like we remembered as kids. There were masses of people everywhere, loud music of all kinds wafting in the breeze, and both adults and children dancing like swans in the lush green grass. I heard guitars and flutes and drums and harmonicas. Some people were draped in hippie attire while others were freely unashamed in near nakedness.

After wandering all over the park we found a spot to smoke a joint that Johnny surprised me with. We then made our way down to Haight-Ashbury and mingled in with the crowd, wandering in and out of shops. Music was coming from all directions and we were feeling pretty stoned. It felt absolutely amazingly free. As we strolled along the sidewalks it was packed with racks of tie-dyed garments, headbands, jute belts, strings of beads, and everything you could think of in the hippie world. The scent of pot filled the air, especially around the headshops selling papers, pipes, and blown glass bongos. The aroma of incense drifted from open doors, and everyone had glassy eyes and big smiles, as did we. Some people were crashed out and sleeping peacefully along the sides of shop walls with tin cans set out for kind donations. The sound of chatter blended like a symphony as we wandered back to the park.

Back at the park, we watched young ladies floating by on a high, and some were topless with flowers in their hair. Children were running wild, half naked and ragged hair, fluttering about with painted faces like little fluorescent butterflies. Then we heard a man shout, "Hey man," and when we turned to look, we saw a stoned peddler standing before us. "Wanna buy some acid, man? Orange Sunshine, man. I'll do ya two for one." He was selling LSD and we had never attempted to try that before, but a conversation started between him and Johnny and he decided to give it a

try. I was super paranoid, but the two of them convinced me to “let go and be free.” I surrender with an unease of petrified fear. Johnny paid for the tiny orange pills and we ate them. As we walked about waiting for the unknown mystical head trip to work its magic, we sat a while and waited longer. We waited and waited until we realized the guy had taken us for the fools we were ... and honestly, I was so relieved! I wasn’t ready for anything like that and I thanked the Lord.

In a life altering way, that experience changed me. I felt like I could be truly me. Though I never did care to fit in ... knowing I would never fit in with those kids at school – underneath, it bothered me to some degree ... but in a way I tried to hide that truth. Before my trip to San Francisco, I had at least appeared normal, but after that trip, that all changed. Instead of being embarrassed to wear secondhand clothes, that became my entire attire. I didn’t want to be a fashionable mold, which I never was successful of. I wanted to be free, to express my soaring spirit, and I didn’t care what anyone thought.

I started going to school wearing all kinds of funky clothes, tie-dye shirts, long flowing hippie skirts, and baggy tops with beaded necklaces. My folks didn’t much care for my embarrassing appearance but they didn’t refuse me wearing what I wanted – but still, no makeup was allowed, which was fine with me because I no longer wanted to wear it. Makeup was fake to me, and no longer did those fake girls intimidate me.

I got lots of stares and giggles and it didn’t bother me in the least, but it wasn’t long until I was called into the office and given the dress code rules. They said my skirt was too long and sent me home to change. I took a pair of scissors and cut the length off my skirt several inches above my knees, in rebellion - knowing the code was no more than 2 inches - and returned to school. Immediately, I was called back into the office again where I argued with the Principle about how stupid it was to complain my skirt was too long, and now it’s too short. At that point, he called my mom, and she came in. I was suspended for three days, but grounded for a week.

I was mighty mad over the whole thing but it gave me time to think about John in a way I never pondered before. I felt a deeper understanding of why John was very negative when it came to wealth, power, rules, control, his parent’s and their status in the community. I began to feel his need to deeply connect with me, because I was different than anyone he’d ever met. His entire life was built strictly around material walls, whereas my mine stood on a foundation of God’s free will. I yearned, and hungered for a spiritual connection, and I wondered if it were possible to have that with John.

When John showed up at our front door on a Sunday afternoon, bearing a handful of wild flowers, this time I didn’t hide. I stepped outside. His expression was one of insecurity and uncertainty. I thanked him for flowers and set them down on a chair outside the front door. We walked to his truck where he took my hand. We sat on the back of the bed and began to talk. He confessed he’d been under a lot of pressure at home and it had made him insane ... because he was insanely in love with me ... and as he softly tickled my side, I blushed. That was the day we made up ... the day I became deeper entangled in his web.

After we got back together, it soon became obvious that I missed my period the month before, and it still hadn’t come that month. I was very scared at that point. I turned to my Bible in prayer,

hoping God would fix my problem. I also encouraged John to let me read the Bible to him again. Perhaps the both of us could pray for help. Every day John came over we sat and read scripture. He took enjoyment in snuggling up to me, but he seldom spoke himself, just listened ... although I often wondered if his thoughts were elsewhere. On one occasion he asked me to read him what it said about marriage. Then he cleverly described that according to the Bible if we made vows, we would be married in God's eyes. He said a piece of paper is just a legal document, which really meant nothing, and he skillfully tried to convince me of such. He also pointed out, that according to the Bible, a wife is to surrender to her husband. But I was clever enough to respond to that because according to the Bible, marriage must be consummated, in which he replied, "Then we are already consummated." I affectionately punched him. He tried to convince me that it was ok for us to have sex, for in God's eyes we were married.

We didn't have a lot of these Biblical conversations, but as few as they came, they seemed to pacify me. The endeavor gave me a hopeful sense of having a spiritual relationship in the future. John seemed more knowledgeable about astrology, talking of his sign the Virgo, born in August, pointing out that it was the sign of the virgin. He said I was his virgin, his queen, because I was the lioness Leo, being born in July. I laughed at such silliness, since my teachings taught these things were not of God, and he laughed along, as well. I suppose I was blindly lured into trusting him that I didn't take such things seriously, when in truth, I should have.

Was he so devious as to deceive me? I didn't think so at the time, yet time revealed otherwise.

It was both surprising and a shock when John invited me to have dinner at his house. He said it was his mother's idea. It felt totally uncomfortable but I was treated most respectfully. I felt a bit shy, but I did dress up as nice as I could, only because I really wanted his family to like me. John's younger brother, sister, and granny were also present at the dinner. His grandmother was the nicest to me, as was his little sister – they both warmed right up to me.

His father was a quiet man, and John was named after him. Unlike my brother John, who we called Johnny, my John never was called that and he hated it if you did. I felt our table talk conversations were shallow, but polite I suppose. When dinner was set on the table, John's mother had sliced his baked potato and piled fresh dairy butter and sour cream atop. As she piled it on, she remarked that they owned a dairy business ... which I already knew. As we all sat around the table, she put a juicy rare steak on his plate and picked up the knife, as to cut it up for him. John snapped at her to let him fix his own damn dinner, in a harshly abusive tone. She tried to conceal the fire in her eyes from his aggression, but we all felt it. The tension between them was not only apparent, but accustomed to ... by everyone's reaction. His father just stared into his plate, as if that would keep things calm.

A silence cut through the room at that point. His mother started passing the dishes of food around the table, and she never tried to prepare his siblings meat and potato. His father finally sparked a conversation after sitting silent a while. "So," he cleared his throat, "John tells us your father works for the railroad." He then asked what he did there. I shared a little family information, just enough to keep it simple. His mother made comment that it must be interesting but hard work. Then his dad started talking about their dairy business, as he hinted that they hoped John would take over some of the milk routes, now that he had graduated. "Yes," I responded, "John has shown me your

dairy stores.” They had several locations and ran a milk delivery truck early in the mornings for a growing customer base. I thought it was remarkable they still used glass bottles. I was quite intrigued listening to him talk and it sounded like a wonderful opportunity for John.

As his dad continued on, we all ate and drank until we were finished. I offered to help clean up but his mother insisted I join the others in the family room. Her and granny did the deed. We sat a while in silence staring at the TV until John said we had to go. I was ready for that! I told John that I didn’t think I made much of an impression, but he didn’t care one bit. He expressed, while driving me home, how he hated how his mother treated him like a baby, and apologized for his blow up at the table. I shared that I thought it was strange, especially since he is the oldest and she didn’t try to do that for his brother or sister.

For part of that summer, John did start working for his dad on a delivery route. He was also bucking hay, so he was busy a lot. When my 15th birthday came toward the end of July, and I missed my period that month, I wasn’t too worried, hoping it was just an irregularity, but when I missed it again in August, I became deeply concerned. John had turned 18 at the end of August and by then I was over two months late. We were both scared, and not knowing what to do.

As the days passed and still no sign of my period, my fear was heightened to a state of terrified. Being young and stupid, John and I tried to cause a miscarriage. We thought of an idea that might work using Socks. So instead of driving over a few times, he rode Socks, and we went into the open fields where I could gallop hard while bouncing my body into the saddle, thumping and thumping on Socks back in hopes that would work. It didn’t. We were both growing more and more worried, getting nervous as time went on, and as time went on the day was approaching that we’d have no choice but to tell.

I became so scared that I finally confided in Johnny. I didn’t know what else to do. Johnny had promised not tell, but he did. He saw how distraught I was, petrified, and he knew the crazy things I had tried, which included having John punch my stomach hard hoping we could solve the problem. I suppose he did what any good brother would, and I couldn’t be mad at him for that. My secret had been revealed ... and it was a relief in one way and dreadful in another. I was barely a teenager and suddenly I felt like an adult. Prior to that I was just a child pretending to be one.

First came the big talk with my folks. John was present. He made his honorable intentions known ... he wanted to marry me. Then there was the big talk between my folks and his folks. John and I were present. The outcome of which his folk’s said marriage was absolutely not acceptable. John still needed their parental consent and they were not willing to give it. His parents first tried to pursue the abortion option, which wasn’t legal but they had the financial means to make that happen in a private, confidential manner. However, by the time his folks discovered their greatest fear, we discovered it was too late for that option ... I was too far along, and I praised the Lord because the thought of killing my baby was horrifying.

Then his parents wanted to send me to a private girl’s school where I could have my baby in secret, as not to tarnish their name, and thus put the baby up for adoption. Like the abortion suggestion, John and I refused to agree to that and begged them to let us marry, or we’d run away and they’d never see us again. My parents had no problem with us getting married and they even tried to

convince his folks to let us marry. My dad said he could get John a job at the railroad making good money, which was a huge disappointment to his father who wanted him to continue in the dairy business, and it was utter shame to his mother who wanted her son to marry into a wealthy, well-educated upper-class family. It was clear they had his future all planned and I was the thorn that pierced them.

As time wore on and there was no turning back, my child grew inside while I was in constant torment for my baby's future. The bond of motherhood surfaced and each night I would hold my tummy and cry, praying the Lord would not take my baby away. As I felt the life force evolving within, there was the guilt I harbored for trying to abort it.

After much talk and debate, my dad told John directly and firmly, "Either you find a way to marry her, or we'll accept your folk's adoption offer." When John told me that, I threatened again to run away, but John wasn't about to live a life on the run and he somehow got them to change their minds. They agreed to sign with no intent to participate in any manner, and that included the unborn child. Finally, I had relief and I cried tears of joy. I was going to keep my baby and get married. It felt like all the weight of months had lifted its heaviness and I could see the light again.

When summer break had ended, I started my sophomore year, but it wasn't long thereafter that the school became aware of my situation. I was taken out of my school and transferred to the Alternate School, a place for girls like me, and the misfit kids. My mom drove me daily to what really wasn't a school at all. It was a huge, cold room located at the county fairgrounds, turned into a classroom with desks situated in rows. I only went there because I wanted to continue my education, yet I quit in couple of months, at nearly at full term.

By the time I was six and half months along we finally reached that day – my wedding day. The ceremony was held at our house with a small group of my parent's friends, and my bridesmaid, Rosie, as well as John's best man. His parents, or any member of his family were not present, and I doubt they had ever whispered a word to another soul about the whole shameful affair. However, they did send a wedding gift - an entire set of stainless-steel cookware. Surprisingly, I've had most of the same pots and pans ever since, that is what's left of them from years of moving and stuff disappearing. Well, they are surely over 50 years old now, and perhaps oddly, their resilient wear and tear has been a perpetual and constant reminder of my own withholding strength, value and quality.

Indeed, it was December of 1968 when my life took a dark turn. I was 15 ... I was married ... I was a child bearing a child ... and, I thought I was in love. Oh, how the heart can be deceived when a web is cleverly weaved.