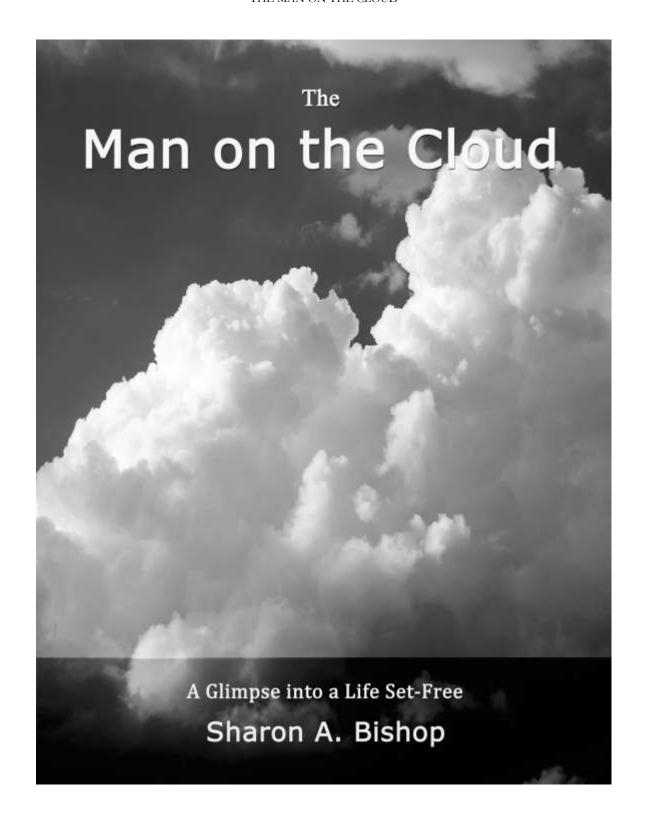


A Glimpse into a Life Set-Free Sharon A. Bishop



#### The Man on the Cloud

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Cover design by Sharon A. Bishop

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotes are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Because "God" is a generic title that people use for any deity, in this book I will use YAH. YAH is a shortened form of YHWH, the name of Almighty God the Creator. YAH is found in the Hebrew Bible over 40 times. The name YAH is also found in the construct word "hallelu-yah." In English the construct is hallelu-jah.

The events and conversations in this book have been set down to the best of the author's ability. Names and some locations were changed or omitted to protect the privacy of individuals and their families.

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I dedicate this book to the Great Love of my life, Messiah Yehoshua, the son of God, otherwise known as Jesus Christ.

He has always been there to lift me up when I have fallen. And I have fallen a lot. He is my Rock, Savior, Hope, Healer and so much more. If not for Him, I do not know where I would be.

Thank You for rescuing me.

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# Chapter 1

# From Pillar to Post

I am a born in the 50's baby boomer. Of course, there were no laptops, IPads, or cell phones in the 50's. Instead, it was a time of childhood adventures. A time of block parties, catching lightning bugs in jars just for the fun of it and playing outside until dark with no fears of street gangs, rapes, murders or drive-bys. And this was in a black community, well, Negro, or colored as we were referred to back then. And in the late 50's early 60's, it was also a time for television and big screen movies.

There was no profanity or perversion on TV. Just nice white all American families like Leave it to Beaver, My Three Sons, Father Knows Best and the Donna Reed Show. Models of good clean family living. They even portrayed mom and dad sleeping in separate beds, like on the I Love Lucy Show. Yes, without a doubt, in my formative years television was one of my favorite past times. I would watch and dream that one-day we would have a nice house with a white picket fence and all the amenities that went along with it.

Wait, let me back up, and start from the beginning.

As the story goes, I was a happy baby. I use to laugh and play by myself for hours. Then shortly after the adorable baby period, I morphed into a cute kid with chubby cheeks and long pigtails that the adults loved to pinch and pull.

I was three when my mother and I moved to Norfolk Virginia, and while there, my sister was born.

However, before my sister was one, my mother left me in Virginia with my great aunt and uncle, and she moved back to Cleveland with my baby sister. Then after some time, I was shipped back to Cleveland. However, not very long after I returned, my mother left me in Cleveland while she and my little sister went back to Virginia for a while. And with

my mother out of the picture, I was shuffled around from my paternal grandparents to my great Aunt Bea's house.

Except for my grandfather, I hated staying at my father's parents' house. On the one hand, my grandfather was the sweetest, kindness person I'd ever met. He always had time for me. The one feature of his that stood out most to me were his long thick bushy eyebrows. When I think back, in a way, he resembled President Harry Truman. Funny, when I was little I didn't care that he was a white man. All I knew for certain, he loved me. And he showed me in a hundred little ways.

His wife, my grandmother, on the other hand, didn't have much to say to me. I can't recall a time when she didn't have drooping jowls and intimidating eyes. And she always looked at me with a scowl. For years, I didn't understand why she showed so much love for my cousin, who was only a year older, and so much disdain for me. But as it turns out, she was, what we called, color struck. My cousin's complexion is a few shades lighter than mine. It also didn't help that her baby boy married my mother without her approval. And as a result, when it came to me, she'd always imply mama's baby, daddy's maybe; even though everyone said I looked just like my father.

While I was staying with my grandparents, I was sexually molested by some older female cousins; but I was too afraid to tell anyone for fear I'd get in trouble. I thought for sure my grandmother would blame me.

#### Almost Five

I was happy when my mother came back. Although it seems that not long after her return, I ended up in the hospital. I went from a sore throat to my tonsils and adenoids having to be removed.

I remember my mother taking me to this big building called a hospital. Inside the hospital, there was a funny smell, and all the people there were white. I remember the doctor bending down and explaining to me what would happen. I didn't understand and I didn't really care. I just wanted my mother to take me home. But that didn't happen. Instead, they put a gown on me and rolled me into a cold room with a lot of shiny silver things that resembled kitchen utensils. And even though I knew my mother was on the

other side of the door, I felt all alone and afraid. All the people in the room were dressed in white with masks on their faces. Then they put this rubber thing that had a weird smell on my face. And in spite of myself, I felt myself going to sleep.

When I woke up, I was in another room. And it seemed like I was in that room for a while. Then finally, I was allowed to get dressed. I thought that now I would get to go home. I remember the doctor bending down to speak to me again. He asked me to say something. But when I opened my mouth, there was nothing but blood. Something had gone wrong and I wouldn't be able to go home.

Next, I remember them putting me in a large room with a lot of baby cribs. In spite of my tears of protest, they put me in one of those baby cribs, even though I was almost five. I heard the doctor tell my mother that I would have to stay in the hospital for a few days. I thought my mother would stay with me, but soon after, she left. And I was alone.

There weren't many kids in the other cribs, at least as far as I could see, but occasionally, I would hear one of them scream or cry. And I thought that someone was hurting them and maybe they'd come and hurt me too. But at night, as I lay in the crib staring out through the bars, I cried and cried, but no one came.

At first, my mother would visit and stay for a little while; but after a couple of days her visits seemed to grow shorter. At least it seemed that way to me. And I wondered what I had done wrong.

And when I was finally able to go home, I went back to my paternal grandparents' home instead. The first face I remember seeing was my father's mother staring down at me with disgust. So I made sure not to say or do anything to make her mad at me. At least I found comfort with my grandfather.

Then after a few days, I went from my grandparents to my Aunt Bea's to live.

From my point of view, my great Aunt Bea was a forever-old person. When I was five, she was close to sixty. She had mischievous dark eyes with large bags under them. And from my vantage point, she was really tall.

Aunt Bea was once a well-known black dancer. The newspaper headlines, she had stashed away in photo albums, revealed her stage name was Bea Foot. She hobnobbed with the likes of Diana Washington and other black celebrities in her day. I would also later learn that it was Aunt Bea who raised my mother.

As I got older, I had to stay with Aunt Bea every day after school because my mother had to work. While there, I often felt like a servant. I had to pick up after her. And my other duties as assigned included picking her toes, scratching her head, and letting her cheat me in card games.

And boy, could she spin a tale! By the time she was through, I was terrified! Especially the tales she told about men. They were rapists, murderers, pedophiles and the like. They were also uncaring, unloving, and untrustworthy monsters. Not to mention for her proof text, she would read to me from the likes of such magazines as National Enquire. And she would remind me time and again that she had been raped. I was so indoctrinated on the evils of men that on my way to elementary school, I would cross the street just about every time a man came towards me or spoke to me.

I use to envy my sister. Her babysitters were an older couple who loved her and treated her like a precious doll, while I was stuck with Aunt Bea.

### The Best Part of My Day

When I was around seven, I couldn't wait to get to school, because there was a teacher there that I loved to see. I had a handsome male teacher, with dark curly locks. The girls in my class envied me because I got to stay and clap erasures for him after school. But he wasn't the one I wanted to see, it was his fiancée. She was also a teacher at the school. After classes were dismissed for the day, she always came to my classroom. To me she was the prettiest lady I'd ever seen. She had a cute little pug nose and smiling eyes. Her shoulder length hair was always styled and her clothing fit the times. And the second I saw her at the door I was overjoyed! On occasion, they would greet each other with a quick kiss. Then after their greeting, she would usual turn her attention to me. She always had something kind to say and she never seemed to mind my being there. She was always nice to me and she made me smile. She never stayed long, but it was still the best part of my day.

Years later, it dawned on me that except for her mustache, she looked a lot like my mother.

### The Bulldagger

It was also right around this time that my mother, sister, and I moved in with Aunt Bea and Uncle Oscar, Aunt Bea's husband. There were a lot of connected apartment buildings right off 100 Street in Cleveland at the time. We stayed in one and in the next building down was a real nice girl who occasionally came by to say "Hi." She was a teenager, but she always made time for me.

Sad to say, she was brutally raped. And as told by Aunt Bea, the rapist tied up her father and brother and made them watch while he raped her. She was never the same after that. And before long, my friend and her family moved.

A few years later, she stopped by to say "Hi" to the family and I almost didn't recognize her. She dressed and looked like a man. But when she smiled, I could still see that sweet teenage girl. But after she left, they called her a bulldagger. I didn't understand what that meant, but I got the impression it wasn't a good thing.

# A Long Time Coming

I recall another terrible thing that happened while we lived in those apartments. Our next-door neighbor was a nice man. He lived alone with his huge German shepherd. Luckily, the dog was really friendly and I was never afraid of him. Then after not seeing our neighbor for a few days, we started noticing this awful smell coming from his apartment. We thought he was out of town and had left garbage lying around. Then someone noticed that it looked like someone had broken in. So the police were called to come and check it out. When the police got there, they stayed in his apartment for a long time. And later even more came.

I heard the adults talking about what happened to him. It seems someone broke into his apartment and stabbed him to death. They found his dog inside with him.

#### THE MAN ON THE CLOUD

Apparently, the dog had gotten so hungry that it started eating our neighbor. I was terrified by what I heard. But that was nothing compared to what I saw.

About an hour later, the coroner's truck came to pick up the body. The adults told me not to look but I felt compelled to do so. I wanted to see. I couldn't imagine anything like that happening in real life and to someone I knew. So I waited inside our apartment until I heard them open his door. And there stretched out on a gurney, in a see through plastic body bag, was what was left of my neighbor. It looked like his body had started melting in the summer heat and parts of his body was missing. I stood there traumatized by what I saw. And in the background I heard Sam Cooke singing "it's been a long time coming, but I know a change gone come, oh yes it will." For years, every time I heard that song I cried and I would see flashbacks of my neighbor being carried out.

# Chapter 2

# Growing Up

### Man on the Cloud

With the start of the 60's there was a major culture shift from black and white to color television shows, from the songs of the 50s to the Beatles. It was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, Woodstock, drugs, and rock-in-roll. What's more, I got to experience a little of it on American Bandstand. It was also around this time that life began to change for me too. When I was eight or so, a number of unusual things started taking place.

It all began the day that I saw what appeared to be a man walking on a cloud. I couldn't tell you either what happened before or after what I saw; however, what took place is still vivid in my mind after all these years.

On that day, my stepfather Tom was driving, my mother was on the passenger side while my sister Tina and I sat in the back seat.

It was a bright beautiful day! The sky was a deep blue, with towering cumulus clouds rising high into the sky. Of course, at that time, I just referred to them as big fluffy clouds. I enjoyed entertaining myself by imagining various birds and animals in the cloud formations. However, that day I saw something quite different.

As we drove up an incline, I looked out the front window and saw a beautiful cloud that looked more like a great mountain. On the right side, closer to the base, was a path that appeared to be going up along the side of the mountain, and on this path, there was a man. He appeared to be dressed in something long. However, because of the distance between us, I couldn't make out exactly what he was wearing or what he looked like. As he walked upward along the path, he stopped and turned in my direction. Then he extended his right arm and it appeared he was beckoning with his arm for someone to come. And I wondered who it could be! Then finally, as I watched him, I got the impression that perhaps he was beckoning to me; but how could that be! Even at that

age, I knew none of this made sense; yet it seemed so real! I turned my gaze away for just a second to get my mother's attention. I wanted her to see what I saw. And I said something like "ma look!" But by the time I looked back, the man was gone and the mountain was just a cloud again. My mother thought I wanted her to look at the cloud; so she said something like "yes that's pretty." I settled back in my seat again, and didn't say a word about what I saw, or thought I saw. I didn't want to be laughed at. As we continued down the road, I went over in my head what I thought I saw. And I promised myself that I would always remember that I really did see the man on the cloud.

For years, I kept this and many other things to myself. But I still wondered what it all meant. It wasn't until I was an adult that I finally told a handful of people that I knew, including my mother. And one of them told me that chances are that was the day the Lord called me.

That was my first experience, but it would not be my last.

#### Believed In God

I can't recall a time in my life when I didn't believe in the reality of God. It wasn't that I constantly pursued Him; I just felt, even as a child, that I always belonged to Him. As a child, my mother always saw to it that we attended Sunday school every week. And on occasion, my mother liked to retell how when I was three, I would put my bottle in a brown paper bag like the winos, and drink it during church service. Yes, for whatever reason, I was still drinking from a bottle at three.

Thinking back, one of my fondest memories was getting my own Bible when I was around eight or nine. It was my own special treasure. I proudly carried my little blue Bible to Sunday school every week. It had a blue zipper cover with beautiful pictures inside. I wrote my name in the section marked as "Presented To." I loved my Bible and I took good care of it. And after all these years, though it's now tattered and the zipper no longer zips, I still display my little Blue Bible in one of my bookcases.

When I was nine, I remember going to see the blockbuster movie "King of kings." And for reasons I still don't understand, that movie had a profound effect on me.

Dressed in my Sunday best, I recall going to see the movie with some of my older cousins after church services. It was a special treat to go see the movies on the big screen. The theater was packed! However, when the lights were dimmed, my eyes were glued to the screen.

I was engrossed by everything I heard and saw. And I was fine until the scène when the actor was crucified. In that moment, all those Sunday school lessons seemed to melt away. I was mortified by what I saw on the screen. Jesus nailed to the cross. It was too much for me and I started crying uncontrollably. Rationally, I knew that was just an actor playing a part; yet, I also knew in my heart that Christ did in fact die on a cross. I was convinced of it!

By the time we left the theater, I was still bawling my eyes out. My cousins tried to calm me down and reassure me that it was only a movie. Yet it upset me even more that they weren't crying too. And in spite of my tears, I tried to explain to them that Christ did die on a cross. Why was I so convinced of this I don't know? Maybe it was all those Sunday school lessons after all; or maybe it was because I was certain that somehow I belonged to the man who died on a cross.

### Staying With My Father

At least once a year, I was packed up and shipped over to my father's house. Usually it was around summer break.

My father was a good-looking man. Light caramel colored complexion, keen nose, full lips, and "good hair," as the black folks used to say. Everyone called him Tony. Even my mother assumed his middle name was Anthony, although as it turns out, he didn't have a middle name. He just thought Tony was a good fit for him. His given name was Sherman.

I can't speak on how faithful he was to my mother during their short marriage, or to his second wife. But I saw firsthand how the ladies flocked to him. Single or married, they came running at Tony's beck and call. In the morning, before he left for work, he would always point out what snacks were in the house, remind me not to let anyone in except for the various neighbor ladies and he'd be out the door. By noon, one of his lady friends would stop by to make my lunch and clean the dishes after. Even though I was young, I knew they were just making nice with me to win points with my father. And I thought they were silly. A couple of the married neighbor ladies would also stop by. Same story.

However, when he wasn't working, I got a chance to spend time with him. I'd go with him to his league bowling games. It was one of his favorite pastimes. On other occasions, he'd take me by his favorite hangouts, and introduce me to his buddies. He would introduce me as his little lady. And while he had a beer or two, I entertained myself on the Arcade games. I always had a fun time!

My father's favorite sport of all was baseball. And he played on a summer league. Sometimes he'd take me to watch him play. It was a little boring but I loved being there with him. I knew he wanted a son, so he could teach him to play. So it was important to me that I learn to play. Moreover, I must admit, I rather liked the time he spent with me playing catch. Then one summer, something changed.

When I went to visit my father, he accidently left some pictures on the end table, in the living room. After he headed to work, I went through my routine with snacks and television and then my attention turned to the stack of pictures on the table. So of course, I decided to look through them. I wish I never had. The pictures showed partially clad women. And I thought they were gross and I wondered why he would have such pictures. Then I thought that maybe Aunt Bea was right about all men. I put the pictures right back where I found them and didn't say a word.

That night it was his turn to host his club members. When they came over, they all headed down to his man cave in the basement while I stayed upstairs and watched television. A little later my father came upstairs, got the pictures on the end table, and headed back downstairs. And it wasn't long before I heard him and all his friends laughing. So I eased down to the basement door to listen and I heard them laughing and saying terrible things about the women in the pictures. For some reason that made me feel awful. Then I heard Aunt Bea's words playing over and over in my head, "you can never trust men."

Shortly after that, I started locking my bedroom door when I was at my father's house. He seemed hurt that I would do such a thing. When he asked me why, I told him that I really didn't know him very well. I could see the hurt on his face, but now I no longer trusted him. All I could think was "yep, Aunt Bea was right."

#### Stuck At Home

My mother told me she and I were close until I was about four. She never seemed to make the connection that our mother, daughter happy days ended right around the time my sister came into the world and my parents divorced. Oh well, I suppose it was great while it lasted. Sad to say, I don't recall any of it. Nevertheless, something of my first four years must be locked deep in my memory because I idolized my mother. She was the most important person in my young world and I craved my mother's attention.

Don't get me wrong, she was affectionate with hugs and kisses, but I always sensed a void between us. I just didn't understand what was wrong. And I hoped it was just my imagination. However, no matter how well I did at school or excelled in other things, she always played it down and praised my sister. So I'd tell myself that maybe my little sister got all of the attention because she was so pretty. An even though it seemed logical to me, it still hurt.

Overall, I have no complains. We were clothed, fed and we lived in a nice apartment. My mother worked a lot and when she wasn't working, she enjoyed league bowling and hanging out with her friends. But who could blame her? She was a pretty young woman stuck with two kids. So at the age of about ten, as the oldest, the responsibilities fell on me to watch out for my sister and take care of things around the house.

As a result, I didn't get much of an opportunity to go out and play like the other kids. So consequently, I didn't have any real friends or social life. Still, she was my mother and I tried my best to please her. Therefore, when she told me to stay in the house when she was out, I obeyed her.

Tina called me Miss Goodie two shoes and I guess she was right.

#### Wilma

Of all my mother's friends, I really liked Wilma. She was always nice and attentive to me. I felt safe around her and I hoped she would always be my mother's friend.

I recall one evening when Wilma came over she came into my room. Thinking I was asleep, she started gently stroking my hair. I enjoyed the attention, so I didn't let on to her that I was awake. Quietly, just above a whisper she said that she wished she had a little girl like me. And I so wanted to tell her that I wished it too.

Then one day, for no apparent reason, my mother told me Wilma liked women. But I didn't understand what she meant. Since she was my mother's friend, it seemed reasonable to me that she liked women and I assumed my mother liked her too. In spite of this, my mother said she told her she wasn't that way. "What way?" I wondered. Then my mother said that Wilma was a lesbian. I didn't understand what that meant and I didn't care. All I cared about was when Wilma was around, I felt special. Even so, my mother decided it was best that Wilma not come by any more. And when she stopped coming over, I felt a void in my life, as if I'd lost my only friend.

### Snowball

Watching my sister was a joke. She never did anything I asked her to do and my mother never demanded that she do so. And as a result, she would go out and play anytime she liked. Then whenever I told her, I was going to tell ma, she would threaten to tell a lie on me. And on more than one occasion, she followed through on her threat and I was unjustly punished. Plus no matter what I'd say, my mother always took Tina's side. I was always wrong and Tina was always right. As a result, I felt I had no choice but to let her do whatever she wanted. Well, at least it was peaceful in the house when Tina was outside. So after school, I did my homework, read my books, and watched my favorite TV shows. Then one day Snow came into my life!

I believe Snowball came into our lives when I was around ten or eleven. I'm not sure how she came. And my mother doesn't recall. It just seems that one day she was there. Snowball or Snow, as I liked to call her, seemed different from most cats – sometimes a little spooky. The entire family agreed on that. In fact, it got to the point my mother thought Snowball was a reincarnation of her mother. I know, strange, but so was Snow.

She was extraordinary! Snow would stay away for months but anytime I felt really down, Snow would show up at the back door. Funny thing, we lived in a third floor apartment. Still, Snow would be there whenever I needed her. Then once I was better, she would leave again.

I remember this one time, I was sick with a bad cold. My mother and stepfather Tom had made plans to take us out; but since I was sick, Tina and the two of them left me home alone.

Anyway, I was resting in bed when I heard a soft female voice call my name. Repeatedly I heard "Sharon, Sharon." First, it seemed the voice was calling me from the first floor landing. So I got up and looked out of my bedroom window but saw no one. The back of the apartment building was in the shape of a U with my bedroom facing into the U. So I could look down onto the back steps that came up to each landing. Then I heard the voice again! It was getting closer but I still saw no one on the stairs. Then the voice was on our landing. So I got up and went into the kitchen. Finally, I heard the voice at the back door. I looked out and saw no one. But again, I heard my name so I opened the backdoor and when I looked down there was Snow. I wasn't surprised and I didn't think it was particularly strange. She always came when I needed her most.

She would literally come and sit at the foot of my bed when I said, "Snow, I need to talk to you." She would sit on my bed and watch me while I told her all my successes and woes. Then, as usual, once I was better, Snow would leave again.

The last time Snow came, I was angry about something going on with the family and I took it out on her. I was so upset I tried to hit her with a broom. Even when she ran under my bed, I tried to hit her with it. After that, she left and never came back.

Snow was my best friend and I tried to hurt her. And I had to come to terms with the fact that because I tried to hurt her, I lost my best friend. For that, I will always be sorry. All these years later, I miss her still.

I've had a few pet cats over the years. And I suppose I was searching for one like Snow. But of course, there would never be a cat like her again. She was strangely special. I probably would have written it all off as a kid's imagination; but my family thought she was strangely special too. Who knows, maybe she really wasn't a cat after all.

#### The Girl Next Door

When I was around thirteen, we got new neighbors across the hall from us. I thought the next-door neighbor's daughter was really pretty and nice. And even though she was a couple years older than I was, I hoped we could be friends. So, on occasion, I'd knock on their door to say hello or once in a while, I'd walk to the store with her.

It felt great having a friend right next door. Until one day, she told me to stop following her around. She didn't like women like that. "Like what?" I thought to myself. Then she asked me, rather nastily, if I was a lesbian or something. There was that word again! And I still didn't understand what it meant. I just knew that when she looked at me, it was with hatred, as if I'd done something disgusting. At the time, I had no idea what it might be. So I stopped hanging around her, or speaking to her for that matter. Yet, I wanted to know why she hated me. But I was too ashamed to ask her.

#### Free To Be Me

By the time I was fourteen a major part of my summers were spent on summer jobs, so there was no time for learning social skills. Even when mother's friends' invited us over, I was always volunteered to wash the dishes and clean up while the other kids got to have fun. So the only fun time for me was at school.

School was the best time of my life! I could be myself around my peers. We had things in common and I loved playing sports. My life at home was limited and I felt stuck in a box; but at school, I could soar and people thought I was special because I was an honor student.

The honor students had more privileges in school but with five majors, we were always swamped with homework. When the last bell rang on Friday afternoons, all the other kids got to head off and have fun while we were loaded down with books. When I first started Junior High, it took a little time for me to get accustomed to it. But that was okay. I was in my element. Besides, like I said, it was the best time of my life! My Junior High years were great! I loved my classes, my classmates and I excelled in sports. I am a short 5'4" but I could shoot a basketball with the best of them.

By the tenth grade, I had already chosen my career path. I wanted to be a doctor. Well, to be more precise, I wanted to be an obstetrician. That was my goal and I worked hard towards fulfilling it. I was even required to take Latin classes and I did very well thanks to my teacher. I was supposed to receive more than one scholarship, so I'd be set for college. And Without a doubt, Case Western Reserve University was at the top of my list of college choices.

But it always seemed that just when something good was about to come my way something bad always came to take its place.

# *My 16<sup>th</sup> Birthday Party*

Just before I turned 16, my mother decided to throw me a sixteenth birthday party. Trouble was I really didn't have any friends except the two white girls in my class and I knew they wouldn't come. Even if they wanted to their parents wouldn't allow it.

Amy's parents were nice though. But I remember going over to Connie's home with Amy. We were greeted outside the door by Connie's father who kept screaming that he didn't want any niggers in his house. It took me a few minutes to catch on then I realized he was talking about me. But I wasn't a nigger. The rage in his eyes convinced me that I might be in danger if I said anything so I backed away. By that time, Connie's mom came outside. She looked sorry for me but didn't say a word. So did Connie and Amy. Connie also looked ashamed that her father acted like that. But no one moved towards me. So I left on my own to catch a bus back home.

I had never been called a nigger before; at least not to my face. But that's not what upset me the most. Once again I'd felt the sting of rejection for just being me. It seemed no matter how smart I was I would never be good enough.

Anyway, I tried to talk my mother out of the party but she insisted. The night of my party there was a snowstorm. Only my father and my much older cousin Sheila showed up. They seemed to have a good time; but I felt so small, insignificant, and alone.

For years, my mother reminded me that she tried to throw me a party but I didn't have any friends. I often wondered if she ever noticed how bad she made me feel when she brought it up.

### The Big Let Down

The late 60's brought riots to Cleveland and one started at my school. Actually, the surrounding schools brought the riot to Collinwood High School's front door. And as a result, the school season ended early.

Near the end of the next school year, there were rumors going around that groups of students, at Collinwood, were plotting a bogus riot so that classes would be cut short again. Instead, something unexpected happened. The surrounding schools found out and marched on Collinwood. It was no longer a fake riot and things quickly got out of hand. A few students were injured. And because of this, my mother thought it best to take me out of Collinwood. So that summer we packed up for our move to East Cleveland.

When the new school year started, I discovered Shaw High didn't have an honors program. To top it off, I was too far ahead of their eleventh grade curriculum. So they skipped me a year and placed me in regular classes. I asked if that would have any bearing on my scholarships and my mother and I were assured it would not.

But try as I may, I could not adjust to the new school. Everything seemed drab and the classes were boring. And I longed to be back with my schoolmates at Collinwood. We had been together since our first day in Junior High. I had nothing in common with my classmates at Shaw. I was an outsider and I didn't care to fit in. Still, it looked like my mother had us move just to keep me safe and I couldn't fault her for that.

#### THE MAN ON THE CLOUD

But three months before graduation, I found out that I had been lied to about my scholarships. With graduation right around the corner, their story changed. Now the school claimed I was no longer eligible for the scholarships because "it just wouldn't be fair to the other students."

But the fact was, over the course of one summer the community had gone from predominately all white to black. As a result, there was only a hand full of white kids still left at Shaw High School. So the only remaining white male in my graduating class was given the lion's share of all the scholarships; including mine.

I wanted to fight for what was mine, but there was no one to stand with me. So with one lie my dream of becoming a doctor was shattered. Of course, my parents hadn't set aside a penny towards my college tuition. Like me, they thought the scholarships were in the bag.

So the last few months before graduation, when I should have been floating on cloud nine and having fun, I was despondent and my grades plummeted. I got to graduate a year early, but the price was high.

# Chapter 3

# The Great Escape

After graduation, I managed to get a job at Forest City Hospital as a telephone operator. I was scheduled to work the night shift, which was exactly what I needed. That shift allowed me to work and attend my morning classes at Cleveland State University. What's more, the job enabled me to pay for the classes and the location gave me easy access to the bus.

Still it seldom left my mind that if I had received the scholarships; I wouldn't be going through all these changes. I felt like a total looser and depression wouldn't leave me alone. Even so, no one seemed to notice.

Since I worked in the evenings and didn't' have a car, my mother graciously decided to take me to work. In the mornings, I would take the bus to my classes. Then one evening, on my way to work, my mother stared at me like she wanted to hurt me. And I didn't have a clue why. I just knew when she got like that it was best to say as few words to her as possible. But it didn't take long to find out what it was all about. This time the brow beating was about her boyfriend Frankenberry.

A few years earlier, after one to many fights, my mother finally divorced Tom. Of course, not long after that, the men started sniffing around. Tina and I liked one particular guy. He was handsome and nice to us. But ma settled on this strange looking guy. Tina and I called him Frankenberry. He was a tall, thin, light-skinned black man with a big fro; and in our opinion, he resembled Frankenstein.

When he came over ma acted like a little puppy. She always ran around the apartment making sure his every need was met, constantly gushing, and grinning as she scurried along. Then one day after witnessing that disgusting scene play out one to many times, I made a promise to myself that I would never be like her. I would never fall all over myself for a man.

As a result, what she was saying hurt me to my core. And for good measure, she said that no one could honestly despise Frankenberry like I claimed too. But nothing was said about my sister feeling the same way. She hated him too! But her name never came up. All of this was directed at me. I wanted to scream and cry at the same time. But I sat silently with my head down. We had reached our crossroad. I'd had enough.

That evening, my cousin Reagan called to let out some steam. She was downhearted too. We both decided that night that it was time to get away from our parents. And since the switchboard was quiet, we made our getaway plans.

At first, we came up with three possible locations. Then after giving it some thought, we decided on San Francisco. After all Bobby Bishop, a friend of the family and not a relative was stationed out there. I had never been to California, and neither had Reagan. But be that as it may, at that moment anywhere looked better to me than Cleveland; a dead end job and sleep deprivation. Besides, I had to get away from my mother. After all she'd said to me, I was certain that she wanted me out of her place immediately.

Reagan was ready to go that week, but I couldn't. I was still only seventeen. I had to wait for my eighteenth birthday before I could legally escape.

When I got home, I informed my mother, who informed my father, that in three weeks, on my eighteenth birthday, I was moving to San Francisco. Of course, she didn't believe me. Even when I started gathering my things and packing my bags in advance, she thought I was just bluffing. I felt like if she really knew me at all, she would have known this was no bluff.

On my eighteenth birthday, Reagan and I stood in line at the airport terminal ready to board. Our parents, including my father, were there trying to talk us out of it. Then right before boarding, they took me over to a machine to get insurance. You know, just in case something was to happen. And I thought, "How creepy." My father saw the look on my face and tried to explain why that was necessary. But of course, it was already too late for an explanation. In my mind, it said they didn't care about me. That insurance meant more to them than the fact that their now eighteen-year-old daughter was heading off to a place 2,500 miles away, with less than \$200.00 in her pocket. Oh well, Happy Birthday to me!

# Chapter 4

# San Francisco

After our excruciatingly long flight to San Francisco, by way of Dallas Texas, we finally landed at the San Francisco International Airport. We'd made it! But that was where our well thought out plan ended. We hadn't a clue where we would stay once we got to downtown San Francisco. Together we only had \$190.00; however, we figured that would be enough to get a hotel room for a few nights - but not much else. Once we got our luggage, it didn't take a minute for a taxi to pull up. And when we told the driver our destination, he then tried to give us a little advice. He told us that it wasn't safe for us to stay in the Tender Loin district. And I will say he did his best to warn us about that area. But he looked like a shady character and he was trying a little too hard to talk us out of it. So we thought he was trying to trick us. Next, he tried to change our minds by offering a few nearby alternatives. But instead of thinking he was being nice, we thought he was trying to set us up. Then just before we got downtown the cabbie recommended an inexpensive hotel on a side street not far from the Tender Loin area. But instead, we had him drop us off at a cheap hotel on this busy street with lots of lights and people. He gave one last shot at trying to talk us out of it; but we were certain we knew best. But it didn't take long before we discovered that we should have listened.

The moment we stepped inside the place, we knew we were out of our league. But on our budget, it would have to do. The room wasn't clean, everything was old and grungy, and it had an odd smell. And worse of all, we had to walk down the hall to use the bathroom. It was definitely creepy; but we had no choice but to make the best of it. Besides, it was dark out though the sky was lit up with a thousand lights. The night was alive with the sounds of music and people laughing and talking. So we decided to go outside even though it was dark and we didn't have a clue where we were.

When we got back to our room, we discovered some of our things were missing! Shaken and afraid, Reagan and I clung to each other! We didn't know what to do! I desperately

wanted to call home; but quickly thought better of it. There would be no sleeping that night.

# A Different World

By early morning, we were out of there! We walked a few blocks with what was left of our belongings trying to find a new place to stay that we could afford. After huffing and puffing up a hill for a while, we came to a building across from a Chinese restaurant. It looked as good a place as any, so we went in. And as it turns out, they had a room available on the second floor and the price was right, so we took it. Our room was small with twin beds; but at least it had a bathroom and it faced the street.

The people we saw in the building acted a little strange but they seemed friendly enough. We also met our next-door neighbors. They were two guys that lived together. We supposed their situation was like ours. But boy were we wrong. They came over and introduced themselves. One of them was interested in our clothes. Now that was strange; but we played along. They said they'd watch out for us since we were so young. We felt relatively safe around them and we thought that was nice of them. Still we were glad they didn't stay long. After that, we went across the street to the Chinese restaurant, got an order of fried rice for dinner, and settled in our room for the night.

Just as I was dozing off, I heard someone screaming over and over again, "Say you love me! Say you love me!" Next, they were in the hall fighting. It was our neighbors! Then they were back in their room slamming into everything! We were so scared; we hunkered down together on the other side of the beds! The noise was so loud we thought they'd burst through the door or maybe even the paper-thin walls any minute! It seemed like the "Say you love me" would never stop! Then finally, it quieted down. By next morning, they were both as friendly as when we first met them. Later another neighbor told us not to mind them. It was like a mating ritual or something. That was our first introduction to gay men. In fact, just about everyone in the building turned out to be a gay man. I told one of them that we didn't have people like them in Cleveland. At that, he cracked up laughing. Still, while we were there, the guys in the building all watched out for us.

Reagan got a job the next day, after we arrived, and I got one the day after. By San Francisco standards, we wouldn't be making much; but at least we didn't have to call home for money.

Before long, things started to settle down a little. Both Reagan and I worked not far from the place we were staying. Of course, in order to get to work we had to walk up and down a few San Francisco hills and back again. We were surprised how quickly we were starting to get in shape. Well I suppose it didn't hurt that we only ate one meal a day in order to conserve what little money we had until we got our first paycheck. And since we conveniently lived across the street from a Chinese restaurant, we always ordered a large fried rice and split it. It doesn't sound like much but it always managed to fill us up.

It felt nicely strange walking around in the middle of winter in a sweater. It was also strange seeing blue birds on Christmas trees and watching everyone throw confetti out of the windows downtown for the New Year. But just when we hoped we'd seen it all, we got another unexpected surprise.

I was already in our room when Reagan burst in screaming, "It's a man, it's a man!" I had no idea what she was talking about! Then after a few minutes, she calmed down enough to tell me that the nice old lady that lived in the building fell on the elevator and when she hit the floor, her skirt flew up exposing her, his, penis! The nice old lady was a man!

That was it for us! Way too much strange for two teenage girls from Cleveland! So the next day we started looking for a new place to stay. Considering the place we were staying in, we were surprised to find places that would not rent to us because they thought we were lesbians. Less surprising were the places that wouldn't rent to us because we were black. Of course, no one would ever admit to the latter but there was little doubt. Whether good or bad once people heard my voice over the phone they always assumed I was white. After all, for years I went to a predominately all white school. Even my own family picked on me for sounding white. So I would call the places and ask if they had a vacancy. On the phone, they were always so nice and many times I was told that they did have a vacancy and if I liked it I could move in immediately and Reagan would not be an issue. But in the five or ten minutes it took for us to walk there, all we'd hear was there were no vacancies. There was nothing we could do about it so we

just kept looking. Then finally we came across a place that would accept us and we immediately took it. Lucky for us we would be getting our first paychecks so we would be able to afford the rent. And wouldn't you know it; right across the street was a Chinese restaurant!

### Just Like Family

A few weeks after we moved into our new place Reagan announced that she was moving out. There was a guy on her job she really liked and she was moving in with him. My mouth almost hit the floor. Did she forget we were in this together? I couldn't afford the place on my pay alone, which meant I'd have to go back to Cleveland! But she didn't care. Her mind was made up. So what if it meant I'd have to go back. Obviously, that was not her problem. I was crushed by her callousness, but lesson learned.

In the short time, I'd been on the job I managed to make friends with one of my co-workers. Well, actually she made friends with me. Her name was Jamie and she was the nicest person I'd ever met. She was a few years older than me and she had a boyfriend, a two year old daughter named Mary and everything. And she was easy to talk to. So I told her my dilemma. And amazingly, she said that her sister was moving out and that she needed a new roommate. If I was interested, she'd love for me to move in. I thought about it for a second and said yes! It beat going back to Cleveland in defeat. And not too long after that, I gathered what little I had and moved out. Reagan and I had nothing to say to each other.

I felt totally at ease around Jamie. And when she introduced me to her friends, she always referred to me as Pooh, like in Winnie the Pooh. That was her nickname for me. She said I was her little Pooh bear and that was just fine by me. And she always told people that I was her baby's aunt. Of course that was always a head turner considering both she and the baby were white with blond hair and blue eyes. But to her that meant nothing. On our escapades, she always had my back. And she always treated me like family. And as strange as it might seem, I felt closer to her than I did to anyone in my own family.

Being around her was always fun. And over the next few months, we had a blast! A couple of times we even worked a while on a job; than after taking a trip down the coastline, if we liked where we ended up, we called our jobs, quit, and got new jobs in our new location.

# Palo Alto Swingers

I recall this one swanky place we moved to in Palo Alto. The apartment complex had two buildings parallel to each other. One building was for younger adults and the other for the older folks. When we first moved in, we noticed people in our building gathering on their balconies with drinks and snacks in hand for what we didn't know. But we soon found out. Once everyone had settled down on the balconies an older couple in the other building opened everything up so we could see inside their apartment. Then they proceeded to have sex from one room to the other. I was shocked and intrigued all at the same time. Later we were told they did this at least once a week. They loved everyone watching them. Call me a prude, but to me, it was just another level of strangeness. But then the strangeness got scary.

# Beware of Witches

While in Palo Alto, we came across people on the job that were into witchcraft and such. There was this one girl that I worked with who took an interest in me because of a gift I believed the Lord had given me. Sometimes I just seemed to know things about people. Even people I didn't know. The first time I recall it happening was when I was around nine or so. I knew one of my aunts was pregnant and going to have twins before anyone in the family, including my aunt. How it worked, I didn't know. And it didn't work all the time. Sometimes it was cool to have. Other times it was scary. But it intrigued this girl at work. All of a sudden, she acted like we were the best of friends. Then she started telling me about tarot cards. And from there she tried to get me to read these huge books on witchcraft and spells. But I had no interest in anything like that. I thought the books were creepy and I couldn't bring myself to read them.

Then one day she invited me to her church for services. And naïve me said okay. When I got there, luckily the door was open. When I looked in it wasn't so much what I saw but what I felt that unnerved me. This definitely wasn't a Christian church. I felt I was being warned not to go in so I didn't cross the threshold. For some reason, I felt like I might end up a sacrifice. Why that thought crossed my mind I do not know. Though I believed I was being protected I also felt it was up to me to choose which way I'd go. I left there, almost running, and never looked back.

#### Back to San Francisco

Jamie and I moved back closer to San Francisco. And we both ended up getting a job downtown. Of course, it helped that her boyfriend was a supervisor there. It was a collection agency and while there, I got to meet a famous celebrity. Actually, working in downtown San Francisco was like a dream come true. I would often see celebrities in stores; restaurants, walking down the street or filming a movie or TV show. Once, on lunch break, I even saw them filming a porn flick in broad daylight. What can I say; that was San Francisco in the 70s.

At the outset, I was told there was a group of people I was never to call. We could harass the average Joe as much as we liked; but never call anyone they classified as rich and famous. But being new, I forgot and called one. He ended up calling me all kinds of white this that and the other, and threatened to get me fired to boot When I told him I was black he called me liar. So I made a deal with him. If he came in and saw that I was black, he would pay his bill. If I wasn't he was off the hook. Of course, he was off the hook anyway because he was rich and famous; but he didn't know that. When we hung up, I thought that was the end of that. But he took me up on the bet and came into the office. He was sure he would recognize the voice of the person on the phone and get them in a heap of trouble. But when he saw that the white voice was connected to a black person, he laughed and paid his bill as promised. Once he calmed down, he seemed like a nice person. He and his entourage laughed and talked with me for a few minutes and then they left. If he had complained, it would have been a different story. Instead, I got to meet someone famous and see him pay his bill at the same time. That time I got lucky and it paid off.

## A Close Encounter of the Wrong Kind

For a while, I hung out with Bobby Bishop, the family friend from Cleveland. He could be a lot of fun and it was nice to be around someone from back home. But after a while, he wanted to take it to the next level and I wasn't really interested. Still he kept trying to pursue me. He wanted sex. I just wanted someone to hang out with. He tried every trick he could come up with to get into my pants. Until finally he scared me off.

To my horror, when I was nine I started my menstrual. Of course, my mother had to announce it to the world, including everyone at the corner store, where an older boy I liked worked part-time. I felt so ashamed. After that, I tried to avoid going into that store for fear of seeing him. And of course, my mother didn't appreciate my telling her that she had embarrassed me. So instead of having a mother daughter talk about the birds and the bees she handed me a book and said since I was so smart I should go and read the book.

Problem was, the book had no pictures, and I didn't have a frame of reference. As a result, I didn't have the slightest idea what it was talking about. I didn't have the foggiest idea what a penis looked like until years later when my junior high school class went to the museum. And there before my eyes was a life size statue of a naked man. I must say I was intrigued; but I still couldn't imagine where it would go. At least it didn't look that big.

So when Bobby pulled out his you know what I freaked out! It didn't look anything like what I saw on the statue! It was huge and there was no way my mind could wrap around where that thing was supposed to go! I just knew that it wasn't going to go anywhere near me! After that, I avoided Bobby like the plague.

# All Good Things

Jamie and I moved again to a place in Daly City. I really liked our apartment and the location wasn't bad even though our neighbors were bikers. Anyway, when you walked in you were in the living room. And straight back was the kitchen. There was a door on the left that went to Jamie's bedroom. And she had her own bathroom. There was another door on the right, from the living room, that led to my bedroom and I also had my own

bathroom. The only difference, Jamie's bathroom had a tub and mine had a walk-in shower that I loved. We really had a great time there. And our biker neighbors were really nice. Then one-day Jamie came home and announced she was pregnant. I thought she would be happy but she said she decided to have an abortion. There were no plan parenthoods and the like back then. Just illegal places women went to or they attempted an abortion on their own. I tried to talk her out of it but she wasn't hearing me. And nothing else was said about it.

Then one day after rushing home from work, I made a beeline straight to my bathroom! And since it was my bathroom, I didn't bother to turn on a light or anything. But when I sat down on the toilet seat, I felt this mushy stuff all over my rear end. For a second I thought something was wrong with me. So I jumped up and turned on the light to see what it was. And to my horror, there was blood and pieces of this pink stuff everywhere; on the toilet seat, on the floor and a trail leading into the shower. The scene made me sick to my stomach. But I still wasn't certain what I had walked into.

When Jamie came home, she told me what had happened. She had given herself something to induce an abortion. But instead of using her bathroom, she used mine. I could tell she was looking for sympathy but I had none to give her. I had sat on pieces of her aborted baby! I wouldn't be able to wash myself clean enough to get this out of my mind! It didn't make sense to me why she used my bathroom to destroy her baby. She said she couldn't get in her tub, so she used the shower to clean herself up.

After that, I wanted to get as far away from her and the memory of that atrocity as soon as possible. I called my cousin Regan and almost pleaded with her to let me stay at her place for a few days. But instead she said she and her fiancé had recently moved out of their high-rise apartment and I could stay there until the end of the month. I took her up on that and moved out immediately.

#### Choices

It wasn't long before I found out that Regan's fiancé's brother also needed a temporary place to stay. So we would be roommates for a minute. The place was nice and it was still furnished. And since there were two bedrooms, with locks, he took one and I took the

other. Luckily, I knew him. In fact, we had gone out on a couple of dates. He was definitely not my type, not that I had a type, but he seemed okay. At eighteen, I was still a virgin and after the run in with Bobby, I had no intentions of giving this guy the wrong idea. Still it didn't take long before he made a move. I tried to explain, in a nice way, that I wasn't interested but he wasn't trying to hear that. At night, he'd try my bedroom door but I always kept it locked.

I don't recall the exact floor but the apartment was really high up there. And even though the living room balcony was separate from the bedroom, I still locked the balcony door too. Surely, he wouldn't be stupid enough to jump from the living room balcony just to get to me; but for some reason he just seemed the type that might try. And sure enough, he did! And when he jumped, tried the balcony door, and found it was locked, he begged me to let him in. After all, he could fall to his death trying to get back to the other balcony. But there was no way I was going to let him in! So I told him he should have thought about that sooner. He'd have to get back the same way he came.

The next morning while I was sitting in the kitchen eating my breakfast he crept up behind me and pointed a gun to my head. And he told me that he was going to blow my brains out if I didn't have sex with him. In that moment, I had no fear. But I could feel rage welling up inside of me. I told him to go ahead and pull the trigger. That would be the only way he could have sex with me. I didn't even turn my head because I figured it was a done deal. But nothing happened. Instead, he put down the gun and started to cry. Next thing I knew I picked up the gun and started to pull the trigger, but I couldn't kill him. I wanted to, but I couldn't do it. I gathered up my things and left.

Later I called Reagan and asked again if I could stay with her and her fiancé for a day or two. After a long silence, she half-heartedly said sure. But that didn't last long. The next day, while they were at work, I prepared a thank you dinner for the two of them. However, when Reagan got home and saw what I'd done she was furious! She accused me of trying to seduce her fiancé. She said that if anyone was going to prepare a meal for him it would be her. And with that, she threw me out. I found out later that she only cooked burgers and fries for him on the regular because that's what she loves to eat. But at the time, I didn't know that. In any case, I was back on the street.

Jamie had moved back with her parents and though I knew they would make room for me, I wouldn't make that call. So as much as I hated doing so, I called my mother and

asked her for a temporary loan so I could get my own place. She said she would telegraph the money right away, but instead, she had a one-way airplane ticket waiting for me at the airport. I felt she had tricked me but I had no other options except maybe living on the streets and I couldn't bring myself to do that. So reluctantly, I boarded the plane to Cleveland. The only things I had with me were the clothes on my back and a suitcase filled with the expensive chess set Jamie bought for me.

Once we landed in Cleveland and just as I was about to disembark I looked out and saw my mother and my sister. All I know is when I saw them I cried bitter tears. Tina told me later that when ma saw me crying she thought I was happy to be home. But Tina said she told her she was wrong. I hated being back. And she was so right.

#### Don't Know What You've Got

After I got back, I never tried to contact Jamie again. In my mind, what would be the point? However, after two or three years had gone by I got a call on my job. It was Jamie! How she managed to track me down, I'll never know. Anyway, she told me she had been diagnosed with leukemia and didn't have long to live. She said she was throwing herself a going away party. Now that was Jamie. She wanted me to come and she would pay for my flight. Selfishly I told her I would not come just to see her die. And that was the last time I ever heard from her.

There's an old song by Joni Mitchell that says, "Don't it always seem to go that you don't know what you've got till it's gone." Like Snowball, there has never been another in my life like Jamie. She will always have a special place in my heart.

# Chapter 5

## All Grown Up

### Sex Anyone

I was raised to believe that marriage came before sex. So if I ever wanted children, I'd have to get married first. So as a young teen, I would imagine getting married, having a baby and my husband either worked as a long distance trucker or was killed in a war. I know, dark, but at the time, it was my best-case scenario.

In spite of this, shortly after my nineteenth birthday, I decided to give in and have sex. Among the females I knew, I was the last holdout. So I figured why not. Besides, somewhere along the way, I decided I didn't want to get married. It was far too chancy. I had been kicked around enough by my stepfather. And I'd heard enough horror stories to know that you really don't know what you get until you say I do. So why take a chance and maybe end up with a psychopath.

Don't get me wrong, this was a major step for me! Hence, I gave it a lot of thought. I wanted to be prepared, so I read up on it. What can I say? I always liked to be prepared. I didn't want any surprises. As a result, since Bobby was out of the military and back in town, I decided to give it a go with him. I'd already seen his surprise, and though I was still uncertain, I supposed he'd be the same as any. Finally, one weekend I gave him the green light.

We looked around for a hotel, but since it was the weekend, all were either booked up or out of our price range. There was only one left that we could afford. Of course, as it turns out it was only two blocks away from home. That would be risky. But it was a little exciting too. Yet after all the hype, it was such a letdown. It was nothing like they told me it would be. I just wanted to go home, but Bobby went to sleep. Swell.

## First Apartment

By the time I was twenty, I moved into my own apartment in East Cleveland. It was only an efficiency apartment, but I loved it! It was on the eleventh floor and I had a fantastic view of the city. For a while, the only furniture I possessed was a blowup mattress, a lamp, and a thirteen-inch TV.

Still, it didn't take long before I furnished the place and had my first get-together. And not to long after that a group of guys, mainly my brother-in-law's friends, came over and we'd play chess. At first, it fascinated them that a female could beat them at chess. But they soon got over it.

I learned to play when I was about fifteen. Our landlord, at that time, owned a tax preparation business that was conveniently located right around the corner from where I lived. He knew I was good at math so he offered me a job as a tax preparer during tax season. The only rule, don't tell anyone my age.

There were times when we were swamped with customers. Then at other times, we sat around doing nothing. As it turns out, one of the workers was a chess master and often, during the lulls, he'd break out his chessboard. I would sit and watch him while he played both sides of the board. Then one day he called me over to his desk and said he'd teach me how to play. It took a while for me to pick up on the strategy, but when I did, I actually beat him on rare occasions. Well, maybe I did or maybe he was just being nice. In any case, I fell in love with the game.

Chess isn't a game of chance. It's one mind against another. What's more, in that arena, I could face any man on an even playing field. I couldn't beat him in a physical fight but in chess, I could pulverize him, and I took pleasure in doing so. After a while, the guys in the club would set games up with other chess players they knew. It turned out that most men couldn't pass up the chance to teach a woman, who dared to think she could play a man's game, a lesson.

The con was simple. I'd lose a game or two until the challengers were primed, then the guys in the club started talking bets. After the money was on the table, I'd beat the pants off my opponents. The guys liked the money; I just liked to win. The fun continued for a while until one guy caught on and tried to knock me out. That day, I was grateful my friends were there to protect me.

As the only female in the group, I was in a prime spot to learn all about men. They saw me as just one of the guys so they let their hair down. Then when they spilled their guts, I sat quietly and took it all in. Of course, their words seldom left my apartment. But regrettably, I started thinking less of them and I felt sorry for the women in their lives.

### What's wrong with me?

Bobby and I were still on again, off again. In our last go round, I found out that he was living with me at night and another woman during the day. That bit of information came from one of his closest friends, who just happened to like me. So, I had his friend take me over to the woman's apartment so I could confirm it. When she came to the door, I introduced myself. She naturally assumed I was with Bobby's friend. And I said nothing to the contrary.

When Bobby saw me, his jaw hit the floor. I could tell that he thought I was going to act up and ruin everything for him. But I never said a word. I'm not one of those women that will fight another woman over a man. Besides, she had no idea what kind of a man she was living with. Heck, I didn't know either until that day.

Anyway, we all laughed and talked for a while. Even though Bobby's friend still looked like he hoped I would say something. Then, at her suggestion, all four of us went out clubbing that night. And again, we laughed and had a good time. But when she excused herself and headed for the ladies room, the laughing stopped. I let both of them know exactly how I felt and that it would be best if I never saw either of them again. When she returned our merry making continued; but the guys seemed a little nervous over how calm I was. Oh well.

A few days passed when Bobby decided to pay me a visit. The guys in the club were over. We were all playing chess and having fun. I was on the floor, playing on the large carpet chess set, with the five-inch pieces, that Jamie had given me.

I don't recall how Bobby got in; but in he came yelling, swearing, and demanding that everyone get out of "his" apartment. And just from that, little did I know that one of the most frightening experiences in my life was about to take place.

The door and Bobby were behind me. I calmly got up from the floor without turning in his direction. It scared me because I didn't know why I'd gotten up or what I was about to do. I could hear Bobby shouting behind me; but I kept walking toward the kitchen. I couldn't speak and I couldn't stop myself. I went to the top cupboard drawer in the kitchen, where I kept the silverware, and pulled out the twelve-inch carving knife. Now I was terrified! In my head, I pleaded with God to help me, to stop me! I felt like a person possessed; like a bystander inside myself! I had no control over my actions! Then I walked calmly over to Bobby, who was still ranting near the front door. His back was to me. I pleaded repeatedly in my head for help! And as I did so, I raised the knife at Bobby's back! Just as the knife started coming down a hand grabbed my arm and stopped me! It was my brother-in-law. By the grace of God, the blade stopped just inches from Bobby's back. Bobby suddenly turned around and saw the knife in my hand. And I saw the fear in his eyes. Then he left without saying another word.

I was only a second away from killing Bobby! But YAH stopped me! He saved Bobby from certain death and me from a lifetime in prison or worse – of that I am certain. I am still so very grateful that YAH heard my plea and stopped me from murdering someone.

As bizarre as it may seem, even to me, Bobby and I dated again after that. The last time I spoke to Bobby, he is still going strong. Thank you my Lord and my God!

## Chapter 6

## Lana

A month or two after my twentieth birthday, I received the letter I'd been waiting for. I was selected for a position with the Social Security Administration. Training classes would be held on the west side of Cleveland. This meant long bus rides to and from work since I didn't have a car. But I was still overjoyed! I gave notice at my job and waited anxiously for training to start.

Before we were assigned to a permanent office, we would first have to go through months of job specific training. And it was there that I first met Lana.

The first day we had to stand and say a little about ourselves. I was really nervous but managed somehow to get through it. Finally, it got around to Lana. My first impression of her - she didn't look very friendly. On the other hand, she was very attractive and she had dark captivating brown eyes. Her medium brown hair was styled in a soft curly fro. But she puzzled me. I just couldn't figure out her ethnicity. She looked white, or maybe Hispanic, but she sounded black. I decided that maybe she was white trying to act black. Later, I was surprised to find out that she was almost six years older than I was. She sure didn't look it.

I wasn't accustomed to being the first to speak or make introductions; so for the first few days, I sat and ate lunch alone, which was really okay by me. Then one day, Lana walked over to my table and introduced herself. She seemed nice enough and she had a pleasant smile on her face. Yet something about her made me feel a little uneasy. When I didn't have much to say she looked at me like she could whip my behind. Then she turned and walked away.

I knew immediately that I didn't handle that very well. Yet, be that as it may, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that it was important that I stay away from her. And even though I tried to brush it off as just paranoia on my part, the feeling wouldn't go away.

On occasion, I would catch her staring at me, which of course didn't help matters. Of course, her smile was oh so friendly. So I'd smile in return and we'd speak briefly in class. Still, I tried to avoid her as much as possible outside of the classroom. Then one day it happened.

A month or two into training and I still didn't have a car, so I had to take the bus home. And just as I settled into my seat, I saw her get on the bus. This was a first. I never saw her on my bus before. And for some reason, I got nervous! The bus was getting crowded, so I hoped someone would sit in the seat next to me before she made her way to the back where I was. Of course, no one did. So I lowered my head and pretended to read my book, hoping she wouldn't notice me. Then, when I glanced up her eyes locked onto mine and I felt like a trapped animal. I quickly looked down again, but it was too late, she settled in next to me. Then, as the bus pulled off, she started to speak. So I had to look up and acknowledge her presence. After that, she struck up a conversation, and I was pleasantly surprised how easy she was to talk to! She seemed so friendly! It seemed that inaudible voice inside my head was wrong! Or maybe it was just my imagination after all.

By the time we'd gotten to her stop, a lot of my guard had dropped. She had been friendly and talkative. And I had discovered we had a lot in common. We even liked the same music! I also found out that she was the mother of three and that she and her two-year-old daughter's father were having serious problems.

It wasn't long after that she invited me over after work and I accepted. That day we walked to her house together. Then as we got closer to her house, she saw her baby's father's car parked in the driveway. Though she remained friendly and talkative while we walked together; by the time we reached her front door her attitude change! And only seconds passed before they were in a knock down drag out fight.

Someone must have called the police because just as she attempted to stab him with a knife, they rushed in through the front door! One of the cops grabbed the knife and lifted her off the floor! Then the police started to haul her off to jail until she blurted out that he tried to burn her breast with a cigarette. When they saw the burn holes in her blouse, they let her go. Then the police stayed just long enough to gather some information. And as they were leaving, she was told she could file an official statement at the precinct if she liked. With that said, they left with the baby's father in tow.

On another occasion, she called me for help. Her baby's father had beaten her. So I accompanied her to the doctor's office and then to the police station. I was shocked how the police treated her! In fact after witnessing all of the changes they put her through, I now understood why victims of rape and abuse didn't come forward. Anyway, that day sealed our friendship, and before too long, we were the best of friends.

She listened to me and she laughed with me. We even enjoyed watching the sunsets over Lake Erie while we listened to Elton John and drank our Boones Farm apple wine. She made me feel special and when she looked at me, I melted inside. Then one day she said she wanted us to be together. Her words frightened and excited me all at the same time. I wasn't sure exactly what she meant; but when she kissed me, I couldn't wait to find out. By late spring of my twentieth year, I was addicted to this woman. And any fears or doubts I had were gone.

By summer, I was on a constant high! I was finally in love and someone loved me. Finally I knew what a lesbian was. But at the same time, I didn't want to be a lesbian. Everyone would hate me. But Pandora's Box had been opened and now my desire for this woman could not be ignored. She was real, tangible, and beautiful and she wanted me! So at the age of twenty, I had my first lesbian experience.

I left my apartment and chess club behind and moved in with this woman and her three kids to my family's horror.

When I was young, parents saw me as the perfect child. I was quiet and obedient. Boy did that image change! I started drinking, smoking, and partying with reckless abandon. I was so enamored with her that I did anything she wanted me to do and I do mean anything. My family couldn't understand what had happened to me. My quiet, studious life had been turned upside down. But they didn't ask for details and I didn't volunteer any.

By fall, most everyone at work noticed how "really close" we had become. I didn't care. I was on cloud nine! Then she started backing off. And I started worrying if she found someone else she wanted to be with.

By winter, she informed me that she and the baby's father were getting back together. My heart was broken and rejection rushed in like a flood. In my mind, I had given everything up for her. From there it didn't take long before the rejection proved to be more than I could take.

Then a couple of weeks before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, I had a nervous collapse. I was told by my physician the next step would be a total breakdown. I was an emotional wreck. Even the lights on the Christmas tree made me feel like I was slipping further from reality. And not too long after, I reached for the tranquilizers.

After the first pill, I found myself sitting on the floor afraid to move until it was time to take the next. Then after a few days on the pills, I could barely function. But thankfully, there was still enough fight left in me to say that's it. I had had enough. So I got up off the floor, flushed the pills down the toilet, and reached for the bottle of Rum.

It didn't take long before alcohol became my best friend. I could depend on it to lift me up to ground level. At least I could function again. Then one night, well after midnight, and after a lot to much to drink; I found myself sitting at the kitchen window crying out to God for help. I didn't care if the neighbors heard me. Once again, I felt lost and alone. The life I was leading went against everything I was raised to believe. And on top of that, I ignored the warnings. I didn't listen! I was a failure! Still, I pleaded for help and forgiveness at the top of my lungs. But it seemed God was not listening. So I decided that I would rather be called a whore than a lesbian. "At least," thought my inebriated mind, "that would be far more acceptable."

Then I came to the realization that in my heart, I wasn't ready to let go of her. I couldn't stop loving her, needing her. I had to be near her no matter how badly she treated me. I was like an addict. I would wait for the next time that she'd come to me with what I thought was love and affection. But till then, I would just have to put up with whatever crumbs she gave me.

By early morning, my eyes were almost swollen shut from crying. When she saw me, I thought she would hold and comfort me. She didn't.

Nothing more was said about that night. And not to long after, the baby's father moved in with us. I lived with them for a little while longer; but our relationship was never the same. Still, for years after that, she gave me just enough attention to keep me tied to her.

# Chapter 7

## Extremes

## Drunk on I90

The New Year found Bobby and me back together again. And not too long after that, I made another major change. I was now the proud owner of a new 1974 Pontiac Firebird. It was blue with a white roof and white interior. As things go, long before I ever thought about getting a car, I figured it didn't make sense to get a driver's license if I didn't have a car. So as a result, I drove my first car off the lot without one.

That night, in my new ride, I went out with the regulars from the office to celebrate. I drank a combination of celebratory drinks, from rum and coke to schnapps and tequila. Then sometime in the wee hours of the morning, I decided to head home. And since we partied on the West side, the fastest way for me to get home was on the I90 freeway. I do recall that someone offered to take me home, but I declined. I wanted to drive my new car. Of course, after running up on the sidewalk, in some ritzy Westside residential area, in a brand new car that I could barely handle sober, I concluded that I should have taken my friend up on his offer. And that's about the last thing I remembered.

Somewhere before the freeway, I must have blacked out; because the next thing I recall was the feeling of waking up. How long I'd been out, I don't know. I realized I wasn't home when I looked out of the windshield and saw cars everywhere! It startled me so much that I jumped up in my seat! I was on the freeway! I thought, "How did I get here?" I had a dim recollection of my attempt at getting on the freeway. But, I quickly concluded that something, like a UFO, must have dropped me down onto the freeway. I glanced down at the speedometer and was shocked to see I was doing almost seventy! And I was even in my own lane.

Once I got home, the first thing I did was check the front of the car for blood and damage. Thanks be to God, there wasn't any!

### Dora

Months had passed since our on-the-job training. As things go, Lana and I were assigned to the same office. Apart from that, it was a fun place to work. Most of the office staff was young and most everyone partied a lot. And most of us partied together after work. What's more, it was at one of these after hour work get-togethers' that I met one of the new employees named Dora. We seemed to hit it off well. Needless to say she definitely fit in with the rest of us. Then later, when the party started winding down, we exchanged numbers. Why, I don't recall, but I'll venture to say it was for future party purposes.

But after the party and back at work, it was business as usual. On the job, Dora and I rarely spoke, and since we didn't hang out with the same group, it didn't take long for me to forget her name.

Then one night, after Bobby and I left the club, we headed back to his place for our own private party. It was then, right in the middle of an intimate moment that I got an overwhelming urge to call that girl from work. I thought it strange that I would think about her, much less at that particular moment. So I tried to block it out and we went back to what we were doing.

Then it happened again! Yet this time, I felt it was urgent that I call her! I tried to ignore it, but it was persistent! Though I never heard a voice, it seemed as if someone was demanding that I call her immediately! What I felt was powerful and I believed I had to obey whatever was driving me! I had to call this girl! I could see her face, but I could not recall her name! Then I remembered that we exchanged numbers! So I grabbed my purse and emptied the contents on the floor! I frantically searched for her number! Bobby thought I was nuts! Still I searched every scrap of paper and there it was!

I wondered what I would say to her if I got her on the phone, considering it was around two o'clock in the morning.

Still I called the number and was surprised that she answered. I explained to her who I was and surprisingly she remembered. I said something like, "I needed to call to see if you were okay." She said she wasn't feeling so good. So I tried to talk her into calling a friend or see if she was up to going to the hospital on her own. Of course she said no to all my suggestions. So there was nothing left for me to do other than get up, get dressed and head over to her place – wherever that might be. She said she lived in Parma, which was far on the West side of town. Trouble was, I was on the far eastside of town, and more importantly, I hadn't a clue where she lived or how to get there. Back in the day, there was no such thing as Google maps and GPS. You either asked for directions, or you had an actual map. Where was I going to get either in the middle of the night? So I had to rely on Dora for directions to a part of town I'd never been. There were no cell phones either, so I had to write it all down. Then not long after I headed out the door.

I was still intoxicated when I got into my Firebird and headed off alone in the middle of the night, to Parma. Of course, Bobby was true to form. He was too tired to come with me. And as I drove away, I couldn't decide who was more pathetic Bobby or me for putting up with him.

I had to remind myself not to drive beyond the speed limit since I had no way of knowing where the cops might be hiding out. I went through the city streets for a few miles and then on to the freeway to get me there faster. It would still take at least another half hour. Once in Parma, it didn't help that I had to slow down to check the street names with the aid of streetlights. It was a good thing that there were almost no cars on the road. At that time, Parma was pretty much for whites only, so I knew that if I was stopped, I'd be asked a million questions at best; or taken to jail at worse for being inebriated. But amazingly, I had no problems finding her house!

The next hurdle, Dora lived on the second floor and she was too messed up to come down to let me in. But surprise number two, the downstairs door was open! I was freaking out! Here I was, a black woman, opening up a door to a house in a white neighborhood, in the middle of the night. Still, I took a chance and walked in and up a flight of stairs, quietly calling out Dora's name along the way, and hoping no one would shoot me. When I reached the top of the stairs, the upstairs apartment door was open and I cautiously walked in. There was a lamp on in what appeared to be the living room.

The rooms were small and cramped and I expected someone would jump out and grab me at any moment. Then finally, I heard a voice coming from a room off to my left. My nerves were really on edge because I didn't know if I was walking into a trap or not. Instead, there was Dora, sitting up in her bed. She looked a little high but not out of it like I imagined. I walked into her bedroom and stood by the door. It was a really small room. Her twin bed was right in front of me. From what I could see in the dim light, it appeared to be pressed up against the wall with a window behind her. There was a dresser to my right and a chair off to my left.

We talked for a few minutes while I tried to make out what the heck was going on. Then as I reached out to put my hand on her dresser to steady myself, she screamed for me to stop! There was a drug called "windowpane" on the dresser. Dora said it was LSD and if I touched it, it would be absorbed into my body. Now that really unnerved me! I snatched my hand away from the dresser and stood like a wooden soldier just inside her bedroom door!

Dora told me she had taken a mix of drugs and alcohol that night, along with the LSD. I was a big boozer but I was clueless when it came to street drugs. However, I had enough sense to know that Dora needed help. It took a minute or two but I finally convinced her to let me take her to the hospital. When she said yes, I waited while she got dressed then I helped her down the stairs to my car. This time I had to rely on Dora for instructions to get her to Parma hospital. When we got there, Dora was immediately whisked away behind closed doors.

Shortly after, the cops came and demanded that I tell them what I had given her. I had to explain to them, more than once, that I hadn't given her anything. Then finally they seemed to believe me.

I walked to the empty waiting room and took a seat along the wall. Next thing I knew I felt the warmth of the sun on my face. Then when it came to me where I was, I attempted to get up. And as I maneuvered to an upright position, three things finally registered in my head; it was morning, I was in a waiting room, and there were nothing but white faces staring at me. Talk about feeling out of place!

But once my head cleared, I got up to go and check on Dora. The medical staff was nice enough to tell me that they had pumped her stomach. They said she had overdosed. And if she hadn't come in, she may have died.

I left the hospital knowing God had saved her life! There was no doubt in my mind that something amazing had taken place! And I felt honored that YAH had used me to help Dora.

That made me think that if something this amazing was real so was the Man I saw on the cloud.

### Rob Green

At one point, I even got engaged. It was the normal acceptable thing to do - or so I thought. A month or two earlier, I started dating a guy named Rob Green. I met him in some bar. He wasn't bad looking and from the looks of his body, he liked to work out.

We dated, off and on, for a few months. I thought he was in to me because he always had someone tail me. His strange little crew was easy to spot. And though I thought it odd, I decided to ignore the red flag.

For me, he was just something to do to get back at Lana - nothing more, nothing less. Then one day he asked me to marry him, and I said okay. Then not too long after the official engagement, he raped me.

I woke up to searing pain in my rectum. I was on my stomach and he had me pinned down. I screamed, hoping he would stop; instead, he pushed my head into the pillow to muffle my screams, and held it there even when I fought for air. When it was over, he smirked and said he thought I'd like it. I tried to hold myself together because I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing just how scared I was. He kept talking, but I couldn't focus on what he was saying. My only thought was how to get away from him.

In a day or two, when he was certain I wasn't going to report the rape; he decided to demean me even more by announcing that he was having sex with another woman and there was nothing I could do about it.

I never reported the rape because I was afraid of what he'd do to me and I didn't trust the cops to help me. Besides, at the time, I was too ashamed to admit that I had gotten myself in that mess in the first place. I knew I didn't care about him. I didn't love him. And truth be told, I didn't even like him. I felt it served me right for trying to be someone I wasn't, and trying to get back at someone who couldn't care less. I had gotten myself into this fix and I desperately needed a way out. At least it brought me back to my senses. Then it dawned on me that I had a legitimate reason to end the engagement. Or so I hoped.

Right before we were engaged, I told him that I was certain that he wouldn't be faithful to me. I expected that he would cheat and I didn't care if he did. Of course, he assured me that he wasn't like that. And because he assured me that he would remain faithful, even though I'd given him an out, I told him that if I found out otherwise, the engagement would be off. And he agreed.

Soon after his smug admission, he left for a few hours. And strange as it might seem, instead of gathering my things and getting out, I just sat and waited for him to return. Then finally, I heard him coming up the stairs to the second floor entrance that led right into the kitchen. For some reason, I was surprisingly calm. Come what may, I wanted this to end. Just as he reached the second floor landing, I told him I was breaking off the engagement and I gave my reasons why. I thought he'd put his fist through my face. Instead, he stood at the entrance to my only escape route staring at me with tears running down his face. He was saying something to me; but it didn't register. Without another word, I took off the engagement ring; placed it on the kitchen table, gingerly walked by him, then down the stairs, and out the door. The hair stood up on the back of my neck but I never looked back. Lesson learned.

## Chapter 8

## A New Beginning

The old adage, "it's not what you know but who you know" had proved itself true. Right around the time I met Rob, one of my mother's friends, whose husband was an Air Traffic Controller, told me that the Federal Aviation Administration was giving a Controller test in a few weeks, and if interested I should apply. He gave me a few pointers on what to expect on the test and I prepared. I also told Lana and Dora about the test.

The day we took the test for the job, we were still hung-over from the previous night. So it was a big surprise when we found out that not only did we all pass, the three of us were also selected!

In less than a month, after I walked away from Rob, I received notice that I had to report to someone at the Chicago DuPage Airport. I had never heard of the place before. But this was my new start, and it was right on time. Rob was definitely in my rear view mirror and I never saw or heard from him again.

Lana and Dora, on the other hand, were assigned to a location in Cleveland. And for a minute, I was jealous that they got to stay in Cleveland while I was shipping out, so to speak, to an unknown, at least by me, location. Then I remembered Rob and I quickly got over it.

Then after a few months of familiarization training at our locations, we met up again at the Oklahoma City Academy for the first real phase of our training. The job was great, even though training was a challenge. But personal time was a blast! The three of us were roommates. During the day, we attended classes and in the evening, most of our class and a few of the instructors partied together.

Then after passing the first phase of training, I was sent to my first permanent location. But the thought of living alone in a little town didn't appeal to me at all. Being

#### THE MAN ON THE CLOUD

in Chicago DuPage was one thing. But now I was expected to put down roots in some little Mayberry town. Now that was a bit too much to ask. So instead, I moved to a little college town near Toledo, and commuted. Now once again I found myself away from home and everyone I'd known. So I got a kitten to keep me company. But it didn't take long before Sebastian, the kitten, and me to hit the freeway back to Cleveland for a visit. Like one of the old songs by Kenny Loggins, I thought those I loved and cared about would celebrate me home. However, for the most part, I was wrong.

I soon discovered that some of those, that I thought I knew, envied me because of the prestige of the job and the money I would be making. While others labeled me as uppity and set out to put me in my place. With them, I had to accept that I would never be good enough. I wasn't black enough, thin enough, or pretty enough. And now, because of a job title, I apparently wasn't humble enough.

Who knows, perhaps there was a little truth in what they said. I was proud of being one of the first black female Air Traffic Controllers. And it was true, when I drank; I was confident and felt I could succeed at anything. They would never know that without the alcohol, I felt like a nothing again. Though I imagined they would be happy if that were the case.

## Chapter 9

### Let Them Go

For four years, I hid in my bi-sexual closet and as promised, I dated guys. Well, actually, I dated more than my fair share and the lucky ones got to take me home for the night. And there was no way anyone could label me as prejudice because I slept with everything from African to German and a few shades in between. But sadly enough, except for one time, I never got anything out of it. Not that I really cared because the one thing that I secretly longed for just didn't seem to be in the cards for me. In the back of my mind, I always wondered why I never got pregnant.

So I continued dating men who in the sober light of day meant nothing to me. And yet, I was more than a little curious why I never met a man who had more than sex on his mind. Then finally, an older white gentleman, who was a neighbor of mine, took the time to explain the facts of life to me. Instead of pouncing on me like all the others, he treated me like a daughter, and for that, he will always have a special place in my heart.

### Toledo

One day I decided to drive up to Toledo to take in a movie. However, by the time I got there I found I had just missed the start of the movie. So I decided to wait for it to start again. In the interim, I decided to wait it out at a nice bar and grill a couple doors down from the theater. So I went in, ordered a drink, and took it over to one of the arcade games.

Not long after, I noticed this nice looking white guy come into the bar and grill. And not long after that he walked over to me and struck up and conversation. My drink was in plain sight on the top of the arcade game. I knew the drill so I watched him too. We chatted while I played then he asked me to come sit with him at the bar. He seemed friendly enough. I checked my watch to make sure I wouldn't miss the start of the movie

while we continued to talk.

The next thing I remember, he was driving my car and we were heading south on the freeway. I wondered why I felt so high and out of it because I only had the one drink.

Next thing I knew we were having sex on my bed. It seemed like time kept jumping. I didn't recall getting home and I didn't recall when we left, but left we did. We were back in my car and he was driving again. I was really tired and I could hardly stay awake. It was wintertime and it had begun to snow. Next thing I recall we were back in Toledo; but I had no idea where we were. It was a cold night and the streets were now covered with snow.

Then I recall him asking if I wanted to go into the motel with him and I must have said no because the next thing I heard was a voice calling from a distance, "Miss, Miss are you okay!" Then I heard a pounding on something. This went on and on until eventually I woke up and realized I wasn't dreaming. I was on the passenger side of my car and there was an old man pounding on the window. From his expression, he must have thought the worst had happened to me. Then as the fog started lifting from my head I heard him say, "Are you all right, are you all right?" And when I was finally coherent enough to speak, I told the old man that I was okay. And with that, he walked away. At least I think that's what he did. It still took me a few minutes to get myself together.

Then I sort of recalled the man who drove me there going into the motel but I didn't know for sure. Furthermore, I wasn't sure if I could even recall what he looked like if he was standing right in front of me. But thank God, my car keys were in the ignition! Next I checked my wallet. My money was gone! However, I sort of recalled stashing it under the couch at my apartment. Then it registered that I was really cold. I got on the driver's side and had to ask directions to get back to the freeway.

When I walked through the door, I still couldn't remember any details. But one thing I was certain of; he must have managed to put something in my drink. That was the only explanation. But it wasn't until I saw my unmade bed that I knew that it wasn't all a dream. I pulled the filthy sheets off my bed! Then I remembered that my money was missing from my wallet! I ran and checked under the couch for the money I thought I hurriedly placed there! But there was nothing. I searched over and over again but there was nothing.

I felt so ashamed and I was almost hysterical, and all I could think to do was call my mother. Even if she yelled at me, I didn't care. I just needed to hear her voice. I thought she would let me have it; but instead, she comforted me over the phone and within hours she and my stepfather, not Tom, drove up and stayed with me for a couple of days.

A few months later, as I was packing to move, I saw my stash of money! It was under the couch after all!

For years, I didn't classify what happened to me as rape, but rape it was. Yet at the time, I thought I must have deserved what happened to me. I didn't. I went to Toledo to see a movie, nothing more nothing less. I thought I watched my drink to make sure no one put anything in it; but apparently, he outsmarted me. Still, I am so grateful that I was able to walk away. The outcome could have been far worse.

### The Last Man

After what happened to me you would think I would have learned a valuable lesson - but I didn't. I still drank, partied, and did whatever I had a mind to do to my own shame.

Not too long after Toledo, I ended up in another bar with yet another man. This time it was the owner of the bar. And of course, I'd had a lot to much to drink. After the bar closed we had sex on the bar pool table. It didn't take long. Then he wanted me to go home with him for some after-hours fun at his place. And I thought, "Sure why not." But the phone rang in his office and he excused himself to go and take the call. Because there was no one in the bar except the two of us, I could hear him speaking to someone.. Then I looked around the empty bar and realized I didn't know the name of the bar or the name of the guy. Even if he told me, I was too drunk to remember. Then the shame of what I had just done and the shame of what I'd been doing came down on me like a ton of bricks. The only thing I knew, I had to get out of there before he came back out. So I left without saying a word. He was the last man I ever had sex with.

### Just For Show

Two or three years down the road, another guy asked me to marry him. And I believe he would have gone that far just to get me in the sack. But by 1979, though I still dated guys, I no longer had sex with them.

Anyway, though I sincerely enjoyed his company, he was no more than a movie prop so no one would suspect that I was seeing a woman. Then one day he got so frustrated he blurted out that if he got me in bed, just once, we'd be even. In his mind sex equaled power. And it all stimmed from the fact that I made a lot more money than he did and as a result he felt inferior. As it turns out, in his mind, having sex would somehow give him power over me and we'd be even. I thought that was so twisted and immediately I thought about Rob. Then I told him that if having sex with me was what it took for him to feel like a man, he would never feel like a man again.

But that was just the half of it! Come to find out, he left his home state, where he had a great paying job, to avoid paying child support. What would any woman, in her right mind, want with someone who won't take care of his own kids? If he'd rather leave the state, his family, and his job just to end up sweeping floors in a nursing home, what did that say about his character? If he'd rather run to avoid taking care of his own, how could I trust him to take care of me? End of story!

# Chapter 10

## Church Lady?

### Milwaukee

To my shame, I was having an affair with a married woman. But at the time, I thought little of the fact that she was married to one of my chess buddies.

Then one day she informed me that they were planning to move out of town. What's more, she seemed over joyed about it. Nor did it escape my attention that she didn't seem to care that she'd be leaving me behind.

I was stunned by her news, and instantly feelings of rejection tried to grab hold of me. But I didn't fall apart in front of her. For once, instead of caving in to my feelings, I fought back. I put in a request for a transfer and I didn't really care where. All that mattered was I wouldn't be left behind.

A few weeks later, after giving it some thought I almost cancelled my request. But then I received notice that my transfer had gone through. I was selected for Milwaukee Mitchell Airport. It was a shallow victory because I really didn't want to move on. To one degree or another, the place had sort of grown on me. Well, actually I didn't want to leave my girlfriend. Then I was reminded that she and her hubby had plans and they didn't include me. So that nailed it for me. Me leaving first beat being the one left behind.

When I first drove up to Milwaukee, I was stunned by the beauty of the countryside, with its rich black soil and many lakes! There was just one problem; I had no one to share this with. I didn't know a soul there. It would definitely be a new start - again.

Unfortunately, I was still tethered to the past. My monthly phone bill ran in the hundreds of dollars each month. I, and the married woman I left behind, talked on the phone for hours. I loved her and missed her and she said she felt the same about me.

I even wrote a letter to my mother to let her know that I finally had someone who loved me and that someone just happened to be a woman. Yes, I thought that before; but this would be news to my mother. Needless to say, she still knew nothing about Lana. I knew the letter would upset her but oh well! It was far more important for me to let her know that someone loved me than it was for her to find out that I was a lesbian.

Anyway, my phone affair lasted for months. And even though I hoped she'd leave her husband and follow me she wouldn't come and now I'm so thankful that she didn't!

I lived in a well-to-do area near the airport and I loved my job and my co-workers. We all hung out and had a great time; but I desperately wanted someone to share it all with. I tried finding the nightspots, but it was difficult because I didn't know anyone outside of the job and I wasn't about to tell them what kind of clubs I was looking for. So I dated a guy or two and peeked out of my closet in hopes of finding a lesbian club. With the guys, it was strictly date, no sex. I was through with that. Even so, when it came to looking for women, I was to chicken to stick my neck out to far.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't have the nerve to come on to women. The two relationships I'd had with women had been long term, and they approached me. And yes, the married woman came on to me.

There were others who approached me over the years but they were usually to butch, which scared me off. Still on rare occasions there were a few who waited for me to come on to them but either they weren't my type or fear of rejection kept me at bay. By the time I got to Milwaukee, I was just waking up to the fact that there were such things as lesbian bars. Even so, as far as I knew, most were still in the closet back in the early 80s. But I ventured out a couple times and when I walked into the bars and saw nothing but white faces looking back at me I quickly made haste out of there. Even though I had dated a few white men for some reason, I wasn't interested in dating white women. So after that I played it safe. I'd either hit the straight clubs or stay home and watch TV.

### The Worldwide Church of God

Then one day, while flipping through the TV channels, I heard this old white TV preacher say something about the Sabbath. So I backed it up to hear what he had to say and I'm

glad I did! Surprisingly, his message grabbed my attention. I really liked what he had to say. So I started watching his program every week, if I wasn't scheduled to work. The man's name was Herbert W. Armstrong, and he was the head of the Worldwide Church of God.

In spite of all the drinking, partying and fornication, I still liked to read my Bible on occasion. And as a result of what I read, I believed in the Sabbath. And though I considered myself a Christian, I didn't know of any Christians who believed in and kept the Sabbath. This guy was the first!

When I was much younger, I considered becoming a Jew so I could keep the Sabbath, but they don't believe in Christ so that was out. Until I saw Mr. Armstrong, I kept the Sabbath to myself. Well, I didn't keep the Sabbath; I just kept my belief in it to myself. Now, for the first time in years, I was looking forward to going back to church. Before long, I took the next step and called their number to see if they had a branch in Milwaukee.

However, once I took that first step, I found it wasn't easy getting my foot in the door. First, an assistant pastor came over to check me out. And with all his questions, I felt like I was on a job interview. Then finally, I told him that I wanted to be baptized. However, I got the impression that I wasn't quite up to their standards. Drinking alcohol, in moderation, was acceptable. However, celebrating Easter, Christmas, and Halloween was out of the question. And wouldn't you know it, just the day before, I had put up a table sized Christmas tree. So, I didn't make a good first impression. Needless to say, he scheduled me for another visit.

Once I got the green light, I started attending. It didn't take long for me to see that there was an obvious distinction made between the blacks in the congregation and the whites. Only whites were in Church leadership and the white members were more than a little standoffish. The black members, on the other hand, were very welcoming, so of course, I gravitated to them.

Though I attended regularly and followed their protocols, I was never given the green light for baptism. At the time, I leaned toward prejudice on their part as the best explanation for it. But looking back, I knew in my heart, I wasn't ready for such a

commitment. I was still enjoying my life my way. I was still a two pack a day cigarette smoking, drink till I dropped, still in the closet lesbian, trying to pass as a church lady.

## Wrong Is Wrong

I truly enjoyed my church family and my co-workers were a lot of fun, both on and off the job! And though we had many good times together, I just couldn't adjust to the loneliness that I'd brought on myself. I felt like such a phony. Yet, I wasn't secure enough in myself to expose myself to anyone. Therefore, I became all things to all people until I couldn't take it anymore.

Soon after my married girlfriend and her family settled in to their new location, I started making long trips just to be with her. I longed for the intimacy, more than anything else. As long as I was with her, I could be me. Then one day, out of the clear blue, my heart conceded to the fact that it was wrong of me to be with this married woman. So I disappeared from her life because I could no longer bare the guilt of my actions. Don't get me wrong, in my mind it had nothing to do with me wanting to be with her! The problem was the fact that she was married. Though I really didn't give a flip about her husband, the Bible frowns on such things. And because of what I'd read in the Bible, I truly believed it was wrong for married people to cheat and for others to be with them.

### Moving On

So after that, I stayed in Milwaukee and made the best of things. In fact, I was there during the Air Traffic Controller strike. It was a trying time. Yet it kept me busy and my mind off myself. Besides, there were controllers I knew that after they were fired, could only get jobs at McDonalds. And far worse, there were others that ended up committing suicide.

By the times things finally settled down, I decided to leave. I wanted to get closer to home. So I looked for an opening near Cleveland and put in my transfer. The closest available opening was an airport in Youngstown, Ohio. It was still about an hour's drive from Cleveland, but at least it would get me closer to home.

But then I found out that Lana worked at the Youngstown airport. It seemed I just couldn't escape her! However, I was happy to hear that she worked in the flight service station. And since I would be working in the tower there would be very little reason for us to see each other. Besides, the feelings I once had for her were long gone. So I hoped.

Finally came the day for me to leave and I almost changed my mind! In spite of my misgivings early on, I'd grown to love my church family and my co-workers. They were the best! Even one of my supervisors who was honest enough to say when I first got there, that he didn't like blacks and didn't think I'd make it, ended up giving me a big hug. Though his manner was gruff at times, after my first couple of months on the job, he turned into one of my greatest supporters. And truth be told, I respected him a lot. Every one of them was a character and they would always be special to me.

Right before leaving town for the last time, I stopped into an upscale bar in downtown Milwaukee. And while sitting at the bar, with drink in hand, an attractive older white woman came and sat next to me. It didn't take long before she introduced herself. And as it turns out, she was a well-known bureaucrat in Milwaukee.

Then after another drink or two, she invited me to her home. She hoped we could get together. Well, I never would have guest! The lady was a lesbian, and she was hitting on me! I almost burst out laughing. But it wasn't directed at her. I was just amazed at the timing. Even though she wasn't my type, for months I'd hoped to make a female connection and just minutes before leaving town, up pops the judge! I explained to her that I was just about to leave town and I wished I'd met her before. She seemed both genuinely flattered and more than a little disappointed. I smiled, told her it was nice meeting her and I left. And in my mind, I felt like I'd just escaped some kind of spiritual trap. But my God got me out of there before I did something else I would end up regretting.

## Youngstown

For most of the first year, I commuted from Cleveland to Youngstown, which was extremely trying because I worked swing shifts. Still, the drive to and from wasn't that bad. But the winter months, with the slippery snow covered freeways and back roads finally got the best of me. So to calm my frayed nerves, I decided to find a place closer to the Youngstown airport.

But I wasn't at all happy with the choices. Youngstown was still a distance from the airport. There were no shopping centers or much else close to the airport. So I reached out to Lana for help regarding the area. When I asked her about the little community by the Airport, she informed me that it was really nice! Then she did a ten-minute adlib commercial on her apartment complex, which was near the airport; and she let me know there were vacancies. Next, she invited me to stop by one day after work and check them out. I really didn't want to move to the boondocks or too close to her for that matter; but still I thanked her for the offer. Then again, after checking out the Youngstown area, I finally took her up on her offer and stopped by.

It had been years since I'd seen the kids. The oldest two were almost grown-ups and the baby girl was now a sweet teenager. We laughed, caught up, and reminisced for hours. And since everything went well, I decided to put in an application. However, as things go, I ended up in a cozy one bedroom across the hall from Lana and her family. Go figure!

### New Church Home

Shortly after I moved in, I started attending the Worldwide Church of God branch in Youngstown. I was stunned when I found out that Lana had started attending services there a few months earlier. I recalled mentioning the church to her right before I left Milwaukee. But at the time, she didn't give me the impression that she'd ever heard of it. Well, that certainly changed! Now I ask you, what were the odds of that? Still, I was happy to hear she was going.

I must say, everyone at the church was friendly and welcoming! So it didn't take very long for me to settle in there. Still, the key question for me was would they baptize me.

And they responded with a resounding "of course!" But first, they had to counsel me. And I thought, "Here I go again!" Except this time counseling started right away and the pastor was easy going. And unlike Milwaukee, it wasn't a long drawn out process.

While counseling for baptism, the pastor asked if I had any sins that I wanted to confess. So I owned up to my cigarette habit. After all, the pastor already knew I smoked. Although from the look on his face I knew he was waiting for me to continue. When I didn't, he gave me the oddest look, but he didn't press me for more. Instead, he said something like "the Holy Spirit will convict you of your sins." After that, he gave me a date for the baptism and soon after, he left. Talk about a piece of cake!

Then on the day I was to be baptized, I ran around my apartment looking for my half pack of cigarettes while I got dressed. I couldn't find them anywhere! So I bummed a few from Lana as we drove to church. She was going to be baptized too. So we smoked on the way to service and after service on the way to the baptismal pool.

Finally, on December 31, 1983, I was baptized. And after I was completely submerged in water, they laid hands on me and said a prayer. I really expected tongues of fire to come down, but they told me that wasn't for the church today. However, the Holy Spirit would be my helper.

One thing I am certain of, once I was baptized it seems I was given a love for the Word of God. Even though I understood little of what I read, I enjoyed reading the Word. One of my favorite books is the Book of Isaiah. And even though I didn't understand a word it said somehow I knew it was very important. And I felt really close to Yehoshua when I read the last half of Isaiah.

But in retrospect, I really didn't have a clue what I was doing. I'd been in church for years and I didn't recall if anyone had ever explained to me that I had to count the cost. And if they did, I still didn't know what it meant. And yes, I heard them when they said that I would have to give up my bad habits. Still be that as it may, what did repentance mean? Except for the cigarettes, I wasn't about to tell anyone that I was a lush with a strong attraction to certain women. Or admit to anything else for that matter.

Don't get me wrong, I truly believed in God and Christ, but at the time, my focus was elsewhere. My main concern was if I wasn't baptized in time, I'd be left behind when the church got raptured away. It took years before I admitted to myself that counting the cost, repentance, and all the rest of it just wasn't on my list of things to do at the time.

Well, as things go, when I got back to the apartment I found the half pack of cigarettes tucked nicely between the cushions of the sofa. I picked up the pack and stared at the cigarettes, but I didn't care to light one up. At first, I thought that maybe it was the excitement of the day or fear of something bad happening if I did. However, I didn't want a cigarette the next day, or the next. I was in the habit of smoking two packs a day, so I found it interesting that I didn't want one at all. Then I concluded that maybe it was just a case of mind over matter, or the fear of God. I just didn't know for sure.

There were times in the past that I stopped smoking. Once, for about three months, and another time I struggled through six months. Yet I always started back again. And each time I started back, I smoked even more. Though once I was baptized, I've never smoked again.

Some may agree with my earlier assumption that it's simply mind over matter, although now I'm certain that's not the case. For months after I was baptized, there were times that I'd bum a cigarette from someone; yet, just before lighting it, I'd smell cigarette smoke wafting my way from who knows where and I'd either cough or feel sick. So after that happened a few times, I was convinced that the Holy Spirit had indeed stopped me from smoking. Still I drank like a fish. In fact, when Lana and I left the baptismal ceremony we got in the car and celebrated with a fifth of Brandy we had stashed in the car. Well, the church had no taboo against drinking!

#### Maria & Montreal

I loved the entire congregation in Youngstown! It didn't matter if you were black, white, or other; we were truly one big family. I attended all the functions, including the sock hops; hayrides, and summer picnics, and I loved every minute of it! And before long, I was invited to their homes. I truly felt loved and accepted by everyone. Well, I mean because I'm black. Other than the basics, the rest of me was still in the closet. And lucky for me, I didn't have to worry about Lana letting the cat out of the bag.

Then in 1984, I got the chance to take my dream trip to Jerusalem. I had enough tithe money for the five star accommodations! And to top it off, another church member wanted to go too! There was just one problem. I was afraid to fly.

It all started back in the winter of my nineteenth year. In fact, just a few months before I met Lana. I was still getting adjusted to being back in Cleveland when my mother introduced me to one of her co-workers named Maria. For some reason, my mother thought Maria and I had a lot in common. And she was right. Though she was a few years older, I enjoyed her company. We would go to the various museums, take in a symphony, or just go see a movie. I never thought I'd ever have a black friend that liked the things I did. She was easy going and before too long, she became like a big sister to me.

Not long after we started hanging out together, she asked if I'd like to go with her to Montreal. She wanted to visit some friends. While there, we would take in some of the sights. Of course, I said yes! I would finally get the chance to practice the French I learned in school!

Once there, we had a wonderful time! Then to soon, it was time to head home. We boarded our plane for the return trip to Cleveland and within minutes, we were airborne. The fasten seatbelt sign went off and we settled back in our seats for the long ride. Soon after, the flight attendants started passing out beverages and snacks. Maria had the window seat but on occasion, I'd glance out of it as we flew over Lake Erie. But then I settled back and started reading my book. Then all of a sudden, the plane jolted! And I hoped it was just turbulence! Next the noise from the engines sounded strange! I looked over at Maria but she said nothing. Then the plane went into a nosedive that was so steep the flight attendants and their carts flew through the cabin! The man directly behind me threw up and it went right over my head! I watched in quiet horror as people and baggage went flying everywhere. Now I was so glad that I listened to Maria when she told me not to unbuckle my belt! All I could hear were the screams of the passengers and the whining of the engines as we continued losing altitude! I looked at Maria again and she calmly said, "There is nothing we can do." Her calmness quieted my mind a little. So I sat quietly, watched the scene play out before me, and waited for the inevitable! Then praise be to God, the plane started leveling off! Somehow, someone in the cockpit managed to right the plane before we slammed into Lake Erie!

When we were finally safe on the ground, I watched while those around me tried to gather themselves and their belongings together. Then the cockpit door opened and the pilot walked out to make an announcement. His face was still flushed and his blue eyes sparkled through the tears that filled his eyes. And just as he started to speak, we all applauded him! There was nothing more that needed to be said.

Through it all, I was able to remain calm because Maria remained calm. But then when our turn came to disembark, my legs started shaking, when my feet hit the pavement, my knees buckled, I fell to the ground, and I cried like a baby.

As an air traffic controller, I was entitled to eight free trips a year. In spite of this, there was one stipulation, I would have to ride behind the pilot, and I just could not bring myself to do it. Over the years, there were less than half a dozen times that I had to take a flight and at least twice, I almost jump out of my skin while begging them to let me off the plane. My nerves were so frayed the flight attendants would ply me with alcohol; but I couldn't get a buzz, much less calm down.

If I wanted to get to Israel, I would have to endure an eleven-hour plane ride. And that just didn't seem doable. So for months before the trip I prayed long and hard about it and finally I came to a decision that with God's help, I could do it.

Then finally, the day arrived for us to leave. The airplane was filled with Worldwide Church of God members from all over the US. It would be a long flight; but I imagined all of us were looking forward to spending a fun filled week in the Holy Land for the Feast of Tabernacles. Then for some of us, a second week would be spent hitting the tourist spots in Egypt. I was really looking forward to it all. And I felt great until I looked out of the window and realized that our plane was taxiing into position for takeoff. At that moment I felt fear creeping up on me and for a few seconds I struggled not to lose it. But when I started to pray, I was able to calm down. Then soon after we lifted off the ground, the plane made a sharp bank and I found myself staring out of the window and straight down at the ocean right beneath me. Still, I was okay. Praise God! I was okay!

#### Jordan

Landing in Amman Jordan was a new kind of scary. As we stepped off the plane we were greeted by Jordanian military. And their drawn weapons quickly reminded us that we were now on foreign soil. If that wasn't enough of a reality check, we were told to hand over our passports. Then we were told we'd have them returned to us after a late night dinner.

The dinner was after midnight; but jet lag and all we were all present. And as promised, they gave us back our passports. And by morning we boarded our buses for our trip to Israel. We were told by our tour guide not to take pictures. Then he explained that if we did so, especially as we drove near Mount Nebo, we could be shot.

And the closer we got to the Israeli border the more checkpoints there were. Over and over again, we were stopped and the buses checked. And while they came through the aisle, with their rifles in hand, I sat looking down afraid that even eye contact might set them off.

Then at the last checkpoint, a couple of male passengers were told to get off one of the buses. Then the buses just drove away without them. Later we were told they were standing in the aisle because their bus was crowded. And just for that the military made them get off the bus. Then finally we crossed the Jordan River into Israel and all breathed a sigh of relief.

### Jerusalem

From a tourist's perspective, our stay in Israel was definitely five stars. The accommodations were excellent! The food was magnificent! And our tour guide was the best! Instead of just taking in the normal tourist attractions in Jerusalem we got to go on a trip as far north as Capernaum where we visited the ancient ruins, including a small synagogue that was supposedly built during the time of Christ. While there, I was filled with awe and wonder knowing that Christ may have stood on the very spot I was standing while He watched the fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee. And on the way back to Jerusalem we drove by the valley of Megiddo where the Bible tells us the last Great War will take place. And along the way we drove by tels or mounds that looked like hills

but underneath were unexcavated towns and villages from the past. Then before heading back up the mountain to Jerusalem we stopped in Jericho for a late lunch.

And later that week we drove down to the Dead Sea. Then from the Mount of Olives, I got to view the ancient city of Jerusalem, the city of David, and the Temple Mount. And of course, during our time there we went to Bethlehem and other ancient sites.

During that week, we walked the crowded narrow streets and shopped in the old city of Jerusalem. And we went to the Jordan River where many people still get baptized. We visited the western wall and were allowed to enter the Al-Aqsa mosque on the temple mount.

But the one thing that stood out to me more than anything else was how close I felt to YAH. I literally felt like I could reach up to heaven and touch the sky and YAH was there looking down on us. It was a feeling I've never had before or since.

But the fighter jets overhead on their way to Lebanon; the constant reminder of soldiers, with rifles, on top of buildings and on city buses, and the major hassle we had trying to exchange their currency for American Dollars once it was time for us to leave, brought me back down to earth.

And as the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles came to an end, we packed up and prepared for our trip down to Egypt. But because it was the rainy season, floodwaters rushing down the mountain blocked our route and we didn't get the chance to go. Still, I can't complain. The trip was still a dream come true.

### *Tornado*

Thanks be to YAH, during those years in Youngstown more wonderful and unexplained, things took place in my life. So much so, that I was convinced that Yehoshua was watching out for me.

For instance, May 31, 1985 started out a beautiful sunny day. It was both my mother's birthday and Lana's. And I was looking forward to an enjoyable day off from work. Maybe I'd head up to Cleveland and visit my mother or go on a picnic with Lana

and her kids. Then I happened to glance out of the balcony door and I noticed that it was quickly getting dark. The winds picked up rapidly and I could see debris starting to fly everywhere. So I stepped out onto the balcony to check the weather conditions. The sky quickly turned from blue, to thick gray, to a funky green. And for whatever reason, I looked straight up. And what I saw was terrifying! There was a huge round thing circling right over my head! Then my mind went blank. I didn't understand what it could be! Then it crossed my mind that it might be an alien spacecraft! Then all of a sudden, Lana appeared at my balcony door. The fear on her face frightened me even more! She screamed at me to get off the balcony! We had to get out of there now! I turned to her, pointed up, and shouted as loud as I could above the noise of the wind, "What is that, what is that?" And she screamed back, "You know what it is!" She grabbed me and we headed through my living room and out the door. But before we could get to safety, the storm had already moved east. We would learn later that devastation lay just west of us. A half-mile wide tornado had torn through the Niles Ohio area. It began its 47-mile path of destruction in Portage County, swept through Newton Falls, and then its path came directly at us. But just before it reached us, the funnel cloud lifted off the ground and literally passed overhead - my head. Then while we were running for cover, the tornado touched down again just east of us.

Later, one of our church sisters, who lived east of us, told us how she heard the sound of a train heading towards her home. But YAH spared her home and family. However, there were homes damaged or destroyed on either side of her. But by the grace of God, we were spared. Almighty God saved our lives that day!

## Father Help Us

A few months later, the son and grandchildren of two of our senior church members were murdered in New York. Before the family moved to New York they had been a part of the Youngstown church family for years. Everyone knew them. And of course after they relocated they would all come back and visit with grandma and grandpa in Youngstown.

A couple weeks earlier, their youngest son had gone to New York to visit his brother and his family. They told us that he was supposed to come back home but had asked to stay a little longer and they agreed to it. That decision would later haunt them.

I don't know all the circumstances that led up to the murders. But from what we were told, when the older son returned home he found his wife, brother and two young daughters brutally murdered. And their bodies were arranged to make it appear as if they were watching the television.

The Smiths had all the victims brought back to Youngstown for burial. But for some reason, they decided to have services for the wife and children at one location and their son at another.

A group of us went in one car to attend the first funeral service. It was so sad seeing the babies in their little coffins. The youngest child had been shot in her rectum, so there was no outward show that something horrific had happened. The wife wore a wig to cover the gun shot to her head. It was hard to believe that only a few weeks earlier they had all been in town laughing, talking, and making plans for their future.

We didn't stay very long because we had to make our way across town to the second service for the son. Because it was mid-winter, it would be getting dark soon.

As we drove along, the car hit black ice and started spinning out of control! The driver could do nothing. There was a large billboard sign straight ahead of us and the car was heading right for it! Everyone in the car was silent, bracing for the impact! Then suddenly I screamed out "Father help us!" And in that instant that very instant, the car stopped! Then everyone turned and looked at me, but no one said a word. From their expressions, I got the impression that I had said something wrong. Still I spoke up and reminded them that the Word says:

"And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Acts 2:21)

But no one said a word.

I didn't ask them at the time, but to this day, I wonder why they all looked at me as if I had said something wrong. Still in spite of that, my faith was strengthened that day because I believed YAH heard my prayer and rescued us.

But as usual for me, afterward, I managed to mess things up. Not long after this, I did something I would deeply regret.

#### The Two Sisters

In spite of my gut feeling, I listened to two older ladies in the Youngstown congregation who just happen to be sisters. They were two mousy looking ladies and seldom did they have much to say. In any case, they had been church members for years. And I was quick to listen to those who had been brethren for some time. I assumed they had a closer relationship with the Lord. Yes, after all the years I'd been in church, I was still gullible. And since they were long standing Christians, I foolishly believed they knew what they were talking about. But boy was I wrong.

One day the sisters invited me over to their home. And from the moment I came in until the second I left, I felt ill at ease. I found it a little unsettling that they were even weirder in their own home. In fact, they looked more like two witches than two spinsters. But be that as it may, I tried to ignore it. As I looked around, I noticed that what little they had appeared to be old and not well kept. Of course, if I had bothered to take all of that into consideration beforehand, I would not have been so quick to do what they said.

At some point in our conversation, they said something like since we follow God He owes us wealth and such. And we can demand that He do what we say. Just hearing those words made my skin crawl. Don't ask me why I listened to them but they told me to pray, right then, and demand what I wanted from God. And even though everything about it seemed wrong, I did what they said. I trusted in what they said more than what I believed. More importantly, what I knew the Bible said. Even as the words came out of my mouth, I knew I was terribly wrong for saying them.

Of course, I cannot say with any certainty that what I was about to experience was a result of my hateful words. However, all I can say is, it served me right. It was too late to take back those words. Yet if I really understood about repentance, I would have. Still, I

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learned a valuable lesson, or two. I learned not to listen to everyone. I also learned that maybe that gut feeling I had was a warning from YAH. If I just used a smidge of common sense, I would have known from looking at them and their surroundings that they didn't know what they were talking about. Or maybe they did and I fell into their trap. I know that sounds a little paranoid but who knows.

# Chapter 11

# **Ups and Downs**

### What Goes Up Must Come Down

For eight years, I was respected and admired as an Air Traffic Controller. However, that would soon come to a screeching halt.

It was normal when someone changed facilities that they had to check out at the new. So I had to check out at the Youngstown Airport. I had already checked out as a ground controller with no problems. I had even worked both ground and local control on my own. However, in spite of this, I still wasn't officially checked out. And until I was, my job was on the line.

At that time, Controller jobs were all on a pass/fail basis. Therefore, at any point of training you fail to check out, you're out. In my case, since I checked out at other facilities, I would probably get reassigned. However, it never entered my mind that I wouldn't check out. In fact, I already considered it a done deal. My mind was already on my next goal of heading back to the FAA Academy for radar training.

Management already knew I was a Sabbath keeper and up until then it worked out fine, for the most part. Then one day my supervisor took me aside and said he'd check me out on local if I would work just one Saturday. He wanted me to compromise my beliefs for the job. He told me to my face, "You're already a double jeopardy minority" and they did not intend to add on religion. In other words, they would sign off on a black female, but not a black female Sabbath keeper. But if I agreed to work just one Saturday, management would check me off and I'd be on my way to Oklahoma City. I thanked him for the offer and politely told him no. I wouldn't compromise.

Lana had the same problem in the flight service station; however, she decided that quitting was her best option. And I respected her decision; but I refused to quit. I had worked too hard to throw it all away without a fight.

Instead of them out right firing me, they checked to see if my position in Milwaukee was still open. It wasn't. Besides, I didn't want to go back. Then I was offered a demotion to the fight service station where Lana was stationed. I would be her replacement. What's more, I took it knowing that somehow it would be in the government's best interest.

I remained at the tower for a while and everything went on as before; but I knew my days there were numbered. And just before I was transferred, the crew threw me a party, gave me gifts, and wished me well. Wow! I never knew being fired could be so pleasant and chummy.

On the flip side, when I got to the flight service station, I felt a chill when I walked through the door. The facility was small and the station chief black. They had indeed covered their bases against a grievance.

Lana had already quit, so I was the only female. The guys liked long weekends off, so we all had to work swing shifts, which meant I would be scheduled to work Saturdays. The chief stayed out of it and let the crew handle me.

At first, I used all my vacation leave to get off on Saturdays; however, the chief finally intervened and stopped me. I submitted leave requests asking if I could come in immediately after sunset Saturday, when Sabbath was over, and work the remainder of my shift. I got a resounding "NO" each time. I tried swapping shifts, but of course, there were no takers. I went to the union but the rep. was a good friend of the chief. This went on for a few months.

Predictably, I ended up in arbitration with a Judas for a union representative. The process was long, tedious, and costly. And sad to say, I finally had to call it quits. I was broke. There was no more money to fight with. It took almost a year and a half; but in the end, the government won, and I was officially terminated.

Miss young, black, female, Sabbath keeper, was out on the street with no money and nowhere to go. Well, that wasn't exactly true. I could always run back to Cleveland and my mother. But that defeat, I was not ready to face.

#### Moved In With Lana

Since Lana quit she was able to get another government job that didn't require her to work on Saturday. Well, as they say, hindsight is always 20/20. However, at the time, I didn't want to quit my job.

Lana told me I could move into her son's bedroom for a while and knowing, once again, that this was the wrong thing to do, I took her up on her offer. However, as it turns out, it would have been far less painful if I had moved back to Cleveland.

From Lana's perspective, maybe she was sorry she offered to let me stay. Seeing that I didn't have anything to bring to the table at the time, I hope I would have understood if she changed her mind.

But from my point of view, Lana was now in her element. She was totally in control. This left me on the receiving end of any verbal abuse she wished to hurl in my direction. And with every verbal attack, I was broken a little more. What's more, even at church, the one place I felt any peace; if I was speaking to someone, she would interrupt and take over the conversation. Of course everyone noticed, but nothing was said. At least, not in my presence. Then after a while, I got to the point where I would just hang my head and walk away. I had no more fight in me. But as bad as it was, that wasn't the worse.

I hadn't found a job. It went without saying that no one was looking to hire a terminated Air Traffic Controller. So I was left with no viable options but one. I had to file for welfare assistance. Well, two options, but I still wasn't ready to face my mother. She was upset with me for loosing "our" job. So welfare it had to be.

I never imagined, in my worst-case scenario, that I would ever end up on welfare. My once oversized ego would never have fathomed that it was possible for me to fall so far. I was now counted in the ranks of those I had once talked about. Now I was truly broken. Yet there was one thing that allowed me to save a little face. Because I did not have kids, welfare required that I work for the assistance. And that worked for me. The other upside to it, I could pay Lana, buy my own food, and get from under her thumb.

I tried getting my own place; but I didn't receive enough assistance to afford a place I considered livable. There was one nice apartment complex I hoped I could get into, but I got the same story. Then one of the managers offered a suggestion. He told me that if I

got pregnant, I would qualify for more government assistance and then I would be eligible to move in. I was speechless! For the first time I could see how the government had it rigged to keep people on welfare. I told the apartment agent no thanks. At least by this time I was paying my own way.

Then something wonderfully unexpected happened. I received a letter stating that I had been accepted and given a full scholarship to Trumbull county business school. How did that happen? I never even heard of the school much less applied. I mentioned it at church just in case someone there had submitted the paper work on my behalf; but no one ever admitted that they'd done this for me. In fact, I never did find out how that all came about. Still, I was thankful for it.

Now I could get the necessary skills to get a decent job! I had no doubts that my Lord Yehoshua had made this possible! I was ecstatic! But shortly after I started attending classes, there was a counter move. I received a letter from Welfare informing me that my food stamps would stop if I decided to take the scholarship. How did they know so quickly?

I felt like a trap had been set. Still, though things were tough at Lana's, I chose the scholarship. God had given me this opportunity to learn a skill so I could get back on my feet and I wasn't about to throw it away. Hopefully welfare wouldn't stop the food stamps before I found a part time job. I told Lana what was going on and she said I could stay. Therefore, with a glad heart, I went to school. And since I loved math I took on accounting courses.

And just when I thought I could see light at the end of the tunnel, I got a call from one of my uncles telling me to get back to Cleveland. My father was very sick. But this time, instead of going just for a visit, I packed my bags and moved back to Cleveland. It was time.

I had only been at Trumbull business school for six months; but the training was enough to land me a job in accounts payable when I got back to Cleveland. The pay wasn't that great, but it was a new beginning and I was thankful.

I also started attending the Cleveland branch of the Worldwide Church of God. The congregation was rigid and formal; and as a result, it didn't take long for me to realize

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just how much I missed my Youngstown church family. Even though many of us stayed in touch for a while, it never was the same.

As for Lana, some years later I heard she was transferred to Cleveland. Since she was back in Cleveland, I thought perhaps we could go to lunch. So we did. However, after that, I rarely saw her since we live on opposite sides of town. Then some time later she came to mind, since she and my mother have the same birthday. So, I decided to call and wish her a happy birthday. By that time, I hadn't spoken to her for a few years and I had long stopped attending the Worldwide Church of God. Regrettably, I had forgotten that they don't celebrate birthdays. So when I called she let me have it! She tore into me like a rabid dog. And if I'm not mistaken, after her rant she hung up on me. Finally, after years and years of abuse, I'd had enough. From then on, I've gladly been no contact with her. So much for that drama.

# Chapter 12

# To Everything, There Is a Season

# My Father

It wasn't long after starting the new job and settling in at church that I got another call from my uncle. My Father was in the hospital. So now, I had to get up the nerve to go and see him.

For far too long we remained distant. As his child, I thought he should take the first steps to come and see me. However, he felt that I should first come to see him. Both of us were too stubborn to budge. But for what it's worth, I suppose you could say he won. And so I drove over to Cleveland Clinic.

When I walked into his room, he greeted me with a big smile. He was happy to see me. And truth be told, I was happy to see him too. In no time we settled into a nice long conversation. Later, when the doctor came in, I found out the severity of his condition. My father had cancer. To be exact, he had stage 4-lung cancer that had metastasized throughout his body.

My father said he wasn't aware of his condition until the cancer spread to his leg. He said the pain in his leg grew progressively worse over a period of six weeks. In fact, it had gotten so bad that he had to sleep on his recliner. It was in the quiet of the night his thoughts plagued him and sleep often refused to come. He knew something was wrong and it took those six weeks for him to come to grips with it. Then, he went to see a doctor.

His dad and brother both died from cancer and now he knew he had cancer too. Still, he smiled and tried to remain optimistic. And the doctor said they were hopeful that he could be helped. They said he would have at least six more months. I was hoping for more. The doctor said he would remain in the hospital for a few more days than he could go home.

Every day I went to see him. And sometimes I would stay overnight, sleeping on two chairs along the wall by the window. In the morning, I would go home to change and maybe go to work. Then this one afternoon I told him I'd be back shortly. I just had a few things to take care of. When I left, he was sitting up in his hospital bed. We'd just had a good conversation and we had started making plans for his return home. However, when I walked out of his room, I didn't know that would be the last time I'd see him smile, hear his voice, and see his eyes full of life.

When I returned, my father was unconscious. There was no one in the room with him. Then shortly after I arrived, a nurse came in and explained what had happened.

Later I found out his mother brought his sister Helen in for a visit. He had expressly told his mother not to bring Helen to the hospital. He and Helen had a long-standing feud going and his mother knew it. At one time, they were very close, but after this incident, and no one ever said what that incident was, they were no longer on speaking terms. So of course Ms. Bishop, the name I called my grandmother, did what she thought was best and disregarded his wishes.

When my father saw Helen, he got enraged with his mother and sister. And his extreme agitation caused one of his ribs to snap. Because his ribs were so porous from the cancer, they could not repair the damage. What's more, any attempt they made would probably result in more ribs breaking. All they could do now was keep him as comfortable as possible. As a result, they had him on an extremely high level of morphine. Still when I looked down into his face, I saw that in spite of the morphine, he was in agonizing pain.

The broken rib was causing internal damage and there was nothing the doctors and nurses could do. He was dying little by little before my eyes. I watched for him to take his next breath and each breath took so long to come.

I wanted a chance to start over. I needed more time to get to know this man – my father.

I spoke to him in the quiet of his hospital room, hoping he could hear me. I asked him for forgiveness for not being a better daughter. For wasting so much precious time that would never come again. There would never be another opportunity to hear him laugh out loud, to know his likes and dislikes or to know the depths of his heart. Those days were gone and we had too few memories to link together. Whether good or bad, this man was my father and now I could admit my love for him.

I stood there and watched the sweat pour out of his body. The aids came in often to move him from side to side. Their explanations as to why they were doing it made no sense to me! In fact, it seemed to me that these people, who had laughed and joked with him just a few hours earlier, were now purposely hastening the inevitable. Then another aid would come in and change his gown. But in minutes, it would be soaking wet with sweat.

Like the night before, I tried to sleep in a chair next to the window; but I couldn't rest. I would pace the room and then I'd stand over him and try not to cry.

Then around midnight his girlfriend, who previously lied and said she was his wife, came in. I asked her if she wouldn't mind if I went home for a little while to stretch out and get a little rest. I needed to get away. I had to get away.

When I got home, I went upstairs to my room and tried to take it easy before heading back. But thankfully, I quickly drifted off to sleep. I don't know how much time passed; but I awoke with severe pain in my legs! As I went to grab my calves, I knew in that moment that my father had died. Then in seconds, the phone rang and the voice on the other end confirmed what I already knew. He was gone. I looked over at the clock and it was a little after five in the morning. I got up, got dressed, and headed back to the hospital.

His hair was disheveled and his mouth was open and slightly crooked with the look of excruciating pain still etched on his face. I continued to stare at him, hoping he'd move, but he was still now.

I don't recall if I called Aunt Gloria, or if it was his girlfriend. In any case, it seemed like forever before she got there.

When Aunt Glo arrived, she spent some time over her baby brother. Finally, she sat down next to me and we talked for a while. About what I don't remember. I was too busy trying to hold myself together in front of her. After a while, we both looked over at my father. Then Aunt Glo shouted, "Just look at my brother!" His mouth had closed! The look of agony was gone! He looked like a young man again! And there was even a smile on his face! If Aunt Glo hadn't been there, I wouldn't have believed what I saw! It was amazing!

Then Aunt Glo left me and I was alone with him again.

I don't know how long I stood there looking at him when the door opened and I heard the sounds of laughter coming into the room. I looked up to see two nurses. They asked me to leave while they got him ready. I couldn't understand how these people could be laughing and talking and my father was laying there dead! Even so, I walked just outside his room and waited while they prepared his body. Then I watched as they took him out. It was done. He was gone at the age of 56.

That Sunday we buried my father. It was Father's Day.

#### What's the Point?

After a week or two, I finally tried to get back to work, but my brain was in a fog, and I just couldn't focus. My attitude wasn't the best either. My boss was great during it all. Although I knew, I was letting him down. Though I tried, I just couldn't get myself together. So, I quit.

For weeks after my father's death, I would go to his gravesite. I would just stand there and look out over the cemetery. The quiet gave me time to think about things. But why I kept going back I don't know. Maybe I was trying to let go. Or maybe I was trying to hold on and make sense of it all. I just don't know. All I knew was I needed to be there. I didn't believe the essence that was my father was in the ground, nor did I believe he was in heaven looking down on me. I just needed to be there.

#### The Tumor

Later that year, I was informed that I had a large tumor in my uterus. And I was afraid I was about to meet the same fate as my father.

It was so large that at times, it blocked my bladder so I couldn't urinate. That's why I finally gave in and went to the hospital emergency for help. Of course they wanted to rush me into surgery. But once they found out I had no insurance, surgery was no longer an option. So instead, they decided on a "little procedure" that would be a lot less costly.

That little procedure was called a Urethral Dilation; and had I known what they were planning to do to me, I would have left that hospital running! After I walked into the operating room, I was strapped to a table. I should have had a clue something bad was about to happen when the nurse bent down and whispered in my ear, "I'm sorry." Then the doctor told her to reposition the table. And with a look of shame, she obediently adjusted the table so my head was facing near the floor. Then without gloves, facemask, or local anesthetic for that matter, the "doctor" proceeded to snip away at my urethra. And my screams didn't deter him one bit. When he was finished, he walked out leaving me crying, shaking, humiliated and in lots of pain.

If that wasn't bad enough, they would not release me from the hospital until I defecated. But it seemed I was having a little problem on that end too. Once again, in order to save the hospital a little money, instead of giving me an enema I was given a warm cup of prune juice. Lucky for me that did the trick. So by the second day, and in spite of the degradation, I was released from the hospital. I was now able to urinate but the tumor was still there.

At that point the tumor took second place to the fear of going through something worse; so for over a year I procrastinated. I tried to pretend all was well until my condition got worse. So afraid or not, something had to be done and soon. Then another problem came up. Due to the size of the tumor, the physicians I'd spoken to didn't want to take my case. So, once again, my mother recommended her doctor to me.

Her doctor had earlier turned me down because I had no insurance. But since I was now gainfully employed, with health insurance, she would be more than happy to operate. And since it appeared my options were limited, a date for the surgery was set.

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Except with each passing day, my fears got worse. Not to mention that I was depressed all the time. In fact, it was as if a dark veil would come over me. Then, without warning, I had my first anxiety attack and I felt like I was going to die.

I prayed, though I still wasn't certain how effective my prayers were. I was painfully aware that after all my years in church and all my years of Bible study, the best I could do was quote the scriptures on faith. Yet when it came right down to it, I obviously had none. I was in a black place, with no light and no hope. And I couldn't see a way out. To top it off, my mother's words rang over and over in my head, "You are supposed to be a Christian; so where is your faith?"

By the last week before surgery, I believed that if I went ahead with it, I wouldn't live to see another day. Of course I kept that to myself. I was afraid my family would ridicule me for my lack of faith. So, on the morning of the surgery, I prepared to meet my fate. Then, just minutes before we left the house for the hospital the phone rang. It was the doctor's office. The surgery had been cancelled! Why? I didn't know and I didn't care! All I knew that in spite of me, Christ had come through for me again! The darkness lifted from my soul! But the anxiety would remain.

# Chapter 13

# The Path of Least Resistance

# Brandy

Another year or two after the almost surgery and with the tumor still in tack, I decided to go back to school. I considered it a step in the right direction. If I wanted a new career, school was the answer. I just wasn't sure which direction to head. I really enjoyed the accounting classes at Trumbull Business College; yet I didn't want to be an Accountant. So, I scratched that off my short list of career possibilities.

As a teen, I made a little cash doing portraits; as a result, I thought computer design might be fun. So I took a couple classes then lost interest. Then finally, I decided on computer programming. It also looked like fun and I was up for the challenge.

Since I needed cash for living expenses, I worked as a Temp through the various agencies. But I still could not afford to get my own place. So I stayed with my mother and paid her rent. And no, that was not the best idea I ever had. Even so, I was grateful for an option.

Then I did something I didn't think I would ever do. I looked in the phone book for locations of gay bars in my area. I was tired of being alone. It was time for me to face that after a year in a Homosexuals Anonymous group I was still attracted to women. To be honest, I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Although once I made that first move and came out of the proverbial closet, I felt great! And it wasn't long after that I met Brandy.

I first saw her at a Lesbian Club Dance. She caught my attention right away and I watched her all evening; but I never got the nerve to approach her. Then as chance would have it, I saw her again at the Annual Lesbian Variety Show. She was one of the performers. And boy was I impressed! She was striking, with her long 5 foot 10 frame. And she could really sing! All I had to do was figure out a way to meet her. Then as

chance would have it, I just happened to be talking to a friend of hers when she came over.

When I first saw her at the Club Dance with her friends, I thought she was one of those quiet types. However, I was glad to see I was wrong. She had a great sense of humor and we chatted on as if we'd known each other for years. Then just before the Variety Show ended, we exchanged numbers and I left. Of course, I thought that was that. Then a couple days later, she called and invited me to a party. And I accepted!

Shortly after that, we started dating. But she told me she wanted to take it slow because she had gotten burned before. And that was okay by me.

It had been years since I'd been with anyone. And I told Brandy as much. I also wanted to be upfront with her about something else. So I told her I was a Christian and I didn't know if we could ever be in a physical relationship. She said she understood and felt the same. So for three months we dated, but no more. After that, we were ready to take it to the next level. And knowing the problems I was having with my mother, she asked me to move in with her and her eight-year-old daughter. And I gratefully accepted!

Brandy was a breath of fresh air! For the first time that I could remember, I was happy! And for almost nine years, we were inseparable. I finally had someone special with whom I could share my life. And I had no doubts that she loved me, because she accepted me for who I was baggage and all.

Because of her height, most tried to label Brandy as the male in our relationship, but that wasn't the case. We weren't the stereotypical lesbians. In other words, we didn't classify ourselves as dyke, butch, stud, or femme. We were just two women who happened to love each other.

Though it wasn't legal at the time, Brandy even wanted us to get married. However, for me, that was out of the question. I know it sounds hypocritical and maybe it was; but, in spite of it all, I considered myself a Christian. In my mind, I was not about to compound my sins any further with a same sex marriage.

#### Who Am I?

For a long time I wasn't certain if I was in fact a lesbian because there was only a certain type of woman that attracted me. For me it was more than looks and sex. I wanted the complete package. Someone with depth, who loves life and laughter. Who enjoys the outdoors and the beauty of a sunset. Someone who is thoughtful and kind. Someone I could snuggle on the couch with while we watched television. Someone to hold and share the ups and downs of life with. Whose shoulder is there if I need it. And of course, I would gladly do the same. Most people that I know always equate lesbianism with sex; but for me, it was all the above and more. With Lana, it started that way, but with Brandy, it never left.

On the other hand, for me, being with a man was just something to do and even then, I had to be drunk to do it. And with men, I always experienced a void; no depth, no beauty and no real substance. They expected me to fulfill all their needs; yet they gave little, if anything, in return. They were an experiment for me to see if they were capable of more; but the experiment always failed.

To be perfectly honest, at the time, I had come to think of myself not as a woman or a man. Well, let me rephrase that. I had no problem accepting that I am female. After all, all my pieces parts say that I am. It's just that in my mind, I could not relate. I thought of most women as weak, needy, and gullible. But on the flip side, I despised men. Except for a handful of exceptions, they were liars, deceivers, manipulators, and abusers. And though I couldn't admit to it at that time, I also feared men because of their size, strength, and the joy they seem to get abusing women because they have the advantage.

There is no doubt in my mind that the fear began with Aunt Bea's stories; however, it didn't take long before they became a reality. My stepfather would occasionally get all dressed and powdered up for a night out with his friends. Fortunately, there were times when that night out turned into days. And I loved it, because than we had peace until he came back again. But when I heard him coming in the door I'd tense up.

I recall one day when he came home. We heard him singing my mother's name as he ascended three flights of stairs to our apartment. All he sang was, "Jeanie, Jeanie, Jeanie." And at that, we all tensed up and tried to prepare ourselves for what was to come. When I saw that big smile on his face, I could tell he was drunk. And as soon as he

came through the door, the screams and allegations started. Then they were followed by him slapping my mother around. My little sister and I would jump in and attack him the best way we could. He'd knock us around, but most of the abuse landed on ma.

I never understood why she married him in the first place. She worked at least two jobs just to maintain the household. What did she need him for? I tried to make sense of it, but I just couldn't wrap my head around it. But my stepfather turned out to be just the first of many close encounters of the wrong kind I would have with men.

Over time, I learned just how abusive men could be. Yes, on more than one occasion my stepfather pushed me around; but that was nothing compared to some events later in my life. On more than one occasion men have threatened my life. I've been shot at, at close range, and Almighty God spared my life. I was raped, more than once, by different men. I've been mentally and emotionally abused; lied to, cheated on, and dismissed as not good enough by others. And I know of women, and some close to me, who were abused and victimized in like manner, if not worse.

But as a lesbian, in the world of women, I didn't feel as powerless. And except for physical strength, I felt I was as good as or better than most men I'd ever met. I was smart. I had made it in a career field previously held, for the most part, only by white men. I was great in sports. I could demolish guys in chess. I could fix my car and I was handy around the house. Yet, for all my supposed strength, I couldn't always keep back the darkness that tried to engulf me. And it was then that I'd hold even tighter to Brandy.

But there were days when I felt like such a fraud. On those days, I'd question myself as to why I always ran to Brandy and seldom to the God who had always been there for me. Why was my flesh justifying my actions while my heart was convicting me of sin? I felt like I was tearing myself in two! But I kept all of this to myself.

### Surgery

Two years into our relationship, I finally made peace with the fact that I still needed the operation. I had no choice. The tumor had grown so large I was starting to have trouble breathing, and it was affecting my right kidney. And as a direct result, I ended up with lymphedema in my right leg. But once again, I had no health insurance.

When I first moved in with Brandy and her daughter, she had a tenant living on the first floor of her two family house. But once they moved, Brandy decided she didn't want to rent to anyone else. So not long after, I asked if I could move downstairs and pay her rent. That way we could be close and yet not smother each other. And it was also good for appearances.

So when I wasn't upstairs with Brandy I slept downstairs in the back bedroom off the kitchen and we used the master bedroom as our tee shirt shop.

Though our little shop was lucrative, I still couldn't afford health insurance. As a result, I had to get a real job.

This time it didn't take long before I was gainfully employed. Then after a month or two on the job, I informed my supervisor that I needed time off to have surgery and she said no problem. I would be gone for six weeks, which was about as long as I'd been employed with the company. And thankfully I would still get paid.

This time, I prayed to YAH for direction and I asked the congregation to pray for me. I still wasn't sure He would answer my prayers if I asked him directly; but I was confident He would answer theirs.

Not too long after, I was given the name of a well-respected surgeon. When I met him, I felt calm and confident that all would go well. I was told the surgery would take about four hours. I was also told that because the tumor was so large they would have to make an incision from my naval down in order to get it out. More importantly I learned that the tumor probably started when I was a teen and as a result I couldn't get pregnant. At least now I had an explanation.

When the day arrived, I got up before daybreak because the surgery was scheduled first thing in the morning. And wouldn't you know it, my cat Gabby's eight kittens eyes were finally open. So as I tried to get ready the kittens stayed right up under me. They'd constantly meow and try to climb up my legs. At first I thought it was adorable but that quickly changed to a "what if" in my head. What if their actions were a sign that something bad was going to happen! Though unnerved by that thought, I tried to put it out of my head before I had a full-blown panic attack! Then finally it was time to go.

Brandy drove me to the hospital. And though I was still nervous, I wasn't petrified. It was still dark outside, but the darkness didn't try to engulf me. Having Brandy with me kept me calm. And she stayed right by my side until they wheeled me into the operating room. It felt so good not having to go through this alone.

Later I was told that about an hour after Brandy and my family settled in for the four-hours the doctor had anticipated, he came out to speak to them, and they feared the worse. But all had gone well! I was in the recovery room. However, I had to stay in recovery for longer than normal because I didn't react well to the anesthesia. And for the rest of the day I was still pretty much out of it from the morphine.

I can vaguely recall momentary flashes of faces and a word or two, but that's about it. By morning, in spite of the long incision from my naval down I was in no pain. And though a little hesitant, I asked them to take me off the morphine and I settled for Extra Strength Tylenol instead. All things considered, I felt good! I was ready to go home. But of course I had to stay for a few days. However, a day or two later I was told that I had a low-grade fever. And as it turns out, they had forgotten to give me the prescribed antibiotics after surgery. But I am thankful to YAH that I didn't get any worse. They tried to get me to stay in the hospital until the fever was gone but I opted out of there before they forgot something else.

Finally, the ordeal that I feared the most and for so long was over.

# Outed Myself

Once mended, I headed back to church. However, in the six weeks or so that I was gone, things there had changed, and not for the better. The headquarters office announced that the new leadership was taking the church in a new direction. Some core beliefs were about to change. And everyone was stunned by this news. What's more, it looked like a mutiny was at hand. Many said they would leave if they changed Mr. Armstrong's teachings. Still, quite a few looked forward to the changes.

In short order, the Worldwide Church of God started crumbling from within. Then over the next few months, things got progressively worse. And eventually there was a church split. So I prayed for guidance, chose sides, and continued attending.

To top it all off, I decided I didn't want to continue living a double life. So at last, I found the courage to tell the pastor that I was a lesbian. He said he'd stop by my home for a consultation.

A few days later, he and an associate pastor did just that. I explained everything and hoped the "man of God" would give me guidance. Then I waited for his words of wisdom. But all he seemed interested in was my tithing and whether I had any issues with church leadership. I said no and waited. But nothing further was said on the subject of my being a lesbian. It seemed once he was assured I was a loyal member he was satisfied. Next, he handed me a book titled "Long Road to Love – A True Story of Hope for the Homosexual"; spoke a little on God's guidance, grace, and love and said he'd see me next Sabbath. With that said they packed up and left.

I was speechless! I had finally outed myself to the church and hoped for guidance. Instead, I was left with nothing but a book to read! Not long after that, I stopped attending church altogether.

For the twelve years I remained with the Worldwide Church of God, I was a faithful tither; I sang in the choir, attended all the functions, said the right things, wore my dresses, and tried hard not to look at women the wrong way. And in return, I gained three church families that were dear to me and some wonderful memories.

However, once I left the safety of the church, I plunged head long into the gay lifestyle. I was enchanted by the pulsating music, the clubs, the parties, and the people. So for about two years, with Brandy by my side, I embraced it all!

# Chapter 14

### Whose Am I?

# Quality Time with the Lord

An amazing thing began to take place! I started spending quality time with the Lord and in His word. At first, it was just a little time in prayer and Bible study each day. But soon my desire to do so began to grow.

I believed I needed to be isolated at that time so I would stop looking to people and start looking to the Lord. I knew I had to learn to believe and trust in Yehoshua for myself, so I studied His Word on my own. Still it wasn't always easy. And I will admit that I had hoped Brandy would have shown some interest, but she didn't. So there were times, even with Brandy there that I felt separated.

Then one day it was as if the Lord took my hand. He pointed me to Psalm 27 and told me He'd be my parent, to wait on Him and be of good courage. He taught me what faith is and that life and death are in the power of the tongue in order for me to stop speaking death over my life and start-speaking life. He showed me that He is the Anointed One. And He let me know that He is my healer, my sustainer, my teacher, and that He is more than enough. Then I learned about my roots of rejection and that the Lord would give me His beauty for my ashes.

I would like to say that I was a quick learner but I'd be lying. There were still many times when I'd take one-step forward and at a minimum two back. But in spite of me, He never gave up on me.

Then some days, I found myself spending hours studying the Word. I especially enjoyed studying during the quiet hours of the morning. There were times I actually felt like the Lord was teaching and guiding me through His Word. During the summer months, I would sit on the back porch during the morning hours and while I studied, I

would talk to Yehoshua. Those were special times for me. There was one particular time that really holds a place in my heart.

I recall one morning; it was much too chilly for me to study on the porch. So, I stayed in and opened the front door so I could look out through the glass door. In spite of the chill in the air it was a beautiful morning! The sky was blue and from my vantage point, there were few clouds in the sky.

I moved my little table and chair over by the opened door and started reading from the book of Genesis. I was in the chapter about Noah and the flood. Then Genesis went on to say that YAH made a covenant with Noah and all living creatures. He said He would never cover the entire earth again with a flood. And as His sign, He would place His bow in the sky to remind Him of the covenant. As I was speaking to the Lord about how wonderful that day must have been for Noah and his family, especially seeing the rainbow. I looked out of the glass door and there in the clear blue sky was a rainbow! It was a WOW moment for me because I felt like the Lord placed it there just for me to see.

# God Has Not Given Us a Spirit of Fear

Yet in spite of all the wonderful time spent with the Lord in prayer and study, I was still struggling with other issues. For one, my anxiety attacks were getting worse. They would come at any time — on the bus, in the car, alone or in a crowd, it didn't matter. They always started the same. First a feeling of dread washed over me, like something bad was about to happen. I would break out in sweats and I'd have trouble breathing. And then I'd feel trapped and want to run. In real time, the attacks didn't last that long; but in my mind they lasted an eternity.

So finally, I got up the nerve to go and see a psychologist. But I only went twice before convincing myself it was a big waste of both time and money. Truth is I didn't want to admit how ashamed I felt going there. After all my prayers, Bible studies, and encounters with my Lord I still ran to a psychologist instead of the God I claimed to believe in. And once again, I felt like such a fake.

Then one day while watching one of my favorite television ministers, I heard him say a child of God need not be fearful. Then he quoted from the Bible, "For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind." (2 timothy 1:7).

Then he advised his audience to repeat what he said and apply this truth in their lives regardless to their circumstances.

I tell you, I held onto those words like a rope to a drowning man. And the next time I had an attack I spoke those words out loud, over and over again, until the attack stopped. I didn't care who heard or what they thought of me. Finally a few weeks later I noticed that the attacks didn't seem to come as often or last as long. Then at some point I noticed that it had been a while since I'd had an anxiety attack. Praise YAH! The attacks had stopped! I was free! I hoped. Now I had to work on not worrying that they might come back.

# Right on Time

I was still employed with the company that was nice enough to let me take off for my surgery. In fact it was my mother who told me about the job. She retired early from the government and had been working there herself for a few months. Then once I was hired, my mother and I decided it was best if they didn't know we were related. And wouldn't you know it; I was placed in my mother's department.

Everyone saw us drive in together in the morning and leave together at night. But during the workday we kept our distance and said little to each other. We thought we had it all together. But we didn't know that we were the talk of the office. Then one day, months later, our supervisor finally asked my mother and she told her that I was her daughter. Ma told me later her jaw dropped. She said she would have never guested that since my mother was so young looking. So instead she assumed that we were lesbians trying to keep our little secret. But once the cat was out of the bag, management moved me to a different department. Go figure!

Still, for the most part I got along with everyone in the new department. But the job itself was boring. I loved a challenge and the new position just wasn't it. So I started a job search. And though FAA fired me, I still went online and applied for a couple federal job openings in Cleveland. I knew it was wishful thinking. And it would be a long shot if

they would even consider me for employment. Still I went ahead and applied to the IRS and DFAS.

When notified, I went down to the Federal building to take the required tests for the jobs. And after a few weeks I heard from the IRS that I scored high on the test, but they didn't consider me for the position. I must admit, I was a little disappointed but at least I still had a job.

Weeks passed and I didn't hear a word from DFAS. And I thought, "Oh well, at least it was worth a try." So I settled into my new department at work, and forgot about DFAS.

Then one day at work I was confronted by a loud black woman. She was notorious for being a pain in the rear with everyone. And even though I overlooked it, it didn't take long before management had me come to the office. Then once behind closed doors they revealed their agenda. They wanted to get rid of this woman. She had worked there for years and she was a troublemaker. So they wanted to use me to get her fired. Oh, of course, they didn't say that to me, but it was obvious. As the saying goes, this wasn't my first rodeo. So I heard them out. Then I politely said that they knew she was a troublemaker long before I started working for the company. So why did they want to use me as a Judas to get to her. I already knew the answer, but I wanted to hear what they had to say. So after their smiles, charm and attempts to manipulate me into doing their bidding I told them no. I would not allow them to use me. Needless to say, that didn't go over well at all. From that day forward, I was on the manager's hit list. Now there were two black females she wanted out.

It didn't take long before my supervisor started giving me a hard time. Then they became extremely demanding; but I kept my mouth shut and did my job. This was just another chess game to me and I refused to let them win.

And for weeks they were relentless. Then one day the manager called me on my desk phone with some made up story. She said a few extremely unprofessional things to me at which point I told her not to talk to me in that manner. Yes, she had gotten to me and since she was on the phone no one could hear what she was saying. Yet because I dared to talk back to her she wanted me fired immediately.

I was upset because of the unfairness of it all. I tried to explain what happened to my supervisor but she wasn't about to take my side. She actually told me that she and the manager were close friends. In fact the manager was a leader at her church. So even if she believed me she wouldn't go against her friend. So that was that.

When I left her office I was really upset. I started quietly praying as I walked back to desk for the last time. It just wasn't fair and I needed Christ's help. And when I got back to my desk the phone rang. I thought it was the manager again calling to gloat. But it was someone from DFAS. They were calling to see if I was still interested in the position I had applied for. At first I thought it was a joke. Then I wondered how they got my desk number of all things. I tried to recall if I had put it on the application. And with more questions playing around in my head, I finally told the lady on the phone "yes!"

I was amazed! And I shouted for joy! After months of not hearing from DFAS, at the exact time I was being fired I get this call! Right after I prayed and asked for help in the midst of it all, I get a job offer! This could no way be a coincidence! Just when they thought they'd won and I was defeated, they heard me shouting for joy! I went back and informed my supervisor that I just received a job offer. So whether they fired me or not, I quit!

# Stopped Drinking

On occasion, I would jokingly tell others that I started drinking when I was nineteen and woke up when I was thirty-five. Sad to say, it wasn't far from the truth. Actually, I was closer to forty. And wow did time fly! Well, no. Actually, time was lost and many memories with it, and I was still none the wiser.

I wasn't much of a bar hopper. I preferred to drink behind closed doors and I was proud of the fact that I was able to maintain a normal façade. Besides there was no denying the fact that when I drank, I was a lot more confident. Besides, just about everyone I knew did the same thing; so drinking excessively wasn't a big deal to me. Then one day it finally dawned on me that I couldn't sincerely study God's word and drink too. It would have to be one or the other. But I still wasn't ready to stop straddling the fence.

Then one day I remember waking up on the couch, still hung-over from the previous night. It was time for study but I could hardly keep my eyes open. I really wanted to

sleep. But I also wanted to study. YAH had given me a desire to know His Word and it was wonderful to me. So once again, I felt so ashamed of myself. So much so that I said something like, "Lord, I love studying your Word; but I can't study when I'm drunk. I'm so tired of being drunk."

So there it was. I had finally made my choice. The words weren't fancy; but I meant them from my heart. Then after that morning, I forgot about it and went on doing my thing. As usual, I would buy another bottle and have at it. A bottle didn't last long around me. By then, I had switched from Bacardi Rum to Absolute Vodka. It tasted great with cranberry juice.

Then one day after making a drink, I decided I really didn't want it, so I poured it out. And I didn't think much of it. Then I noticed some time later that even though I was still drinking, I was also pouring out a lot of alcohol. This was strange to me. I couldn't understand why I waited until after I made the drink just to change my mind and pour it out. Then at some point I got to the place that I didn't want to drink at all. My desire for alcohol was gone! Just like that! Well, at least it seemed like it was just like that. Still the bottom line for me was after years of heavy duty drinking, my urge to drink was gone! And I didn't experience any of the withdrawals I'd heard so much about.

I truly believe that when I chose the Word of God over the alcohol, Yehoshua took away my desire for it. I also believe He enabled me to stop over a period of time to give my body time to heal and adjust.

I knew others who labeled themselves as alcoholics; but I refused to do so. And after some time, I had a drink just to prove to myself what I believed was true. And yes, it was a lot scary, but either Yehoshua had delivered me or not. And praise God, I no longer had a desire to keep drinking. So I got to the place where I might have a drink on special occasions, and they were few and far between, but I didn't press it. To be perfectly honest, I was afraid that if I took advantage of this gift of deliverance that I had been given I might find myself in worse shape than before.

This was yet another reason why I believed the Holy Spirit was with me. There is no way I could have done this on my own.

And with each incredible experience, I loved Yehoshua more and more. Almighty God and Yehoshua (Jesus Christ) were no longer just names in the Bible. When I looked back over my life, I could now see that Yehoshua had always watched over and protected me. And yes, I had gotten myself into some bad situations, but He always made a way for me to get out of them. And now that I was sober, I realized that things could have been much worse. For the first time in my life, I knew I truly had someone I could always depend on. I did belong to Him after all. And with that realization, I felt more at ease.

This was not something I would have ever learned in a Wednesday night Bible Study or weekly service. Hey, I'm not knocking those things. They have their place. But they could never have brought me to the wonderful place I now found myself in. This whole thing was life changing for me.

For many years I couldn't relate to an invisible God who seemed to care more for some and not others. I related YAH to my natural father who made me feel less than because I wasn't male. I also got that same impression when I read the Bible. If I doubted my own father's love for me, how could I trust an invisible God to care about me? But I was wrong.

As time passed, I could see changes in myself and so could others. I wasn't so rough around the edges anymore. I was learning to forgive and move on. Don't get me wrong, it wasn't exactly a piece of cake, but over time it has gotten easier.

I can recall an argument I had with my mother. I was furious! She can push my buttons like no other. And after the argument, I resolved to stay away from her as much as possible. I'd had enough - again. It was then, without hearing an audible voice that I believe Yehoshua spoke to me and said, "She did the best she could. She couldn't give you any more than she had been given." And somehow I knew that to be true. After all, I had been in Aunt Bea's care too. And from that day I began to see my mother with different eyes and a more understanding heart.

# A Tug Of War

Each lesson brought new insight and revelation and I hungered for more! But I sure wasn't ready for the next one.

It started with a single verse in the Bible from the book of Proverbs:

"There is a way which seems right to a man, But in the end it leads to death." (Proverb 14:12, WEB)

I thought about it for a minute, didn't think it applied to me, so I kept reading. But there it was again. The exact wording was repeated in Proverbs 16:25! This time I really took notice; but I still didn't make a connection.

Then one day while reading in 1 Corinthians, I stumbled upon this:

"Or don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don't be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor extortioners, will inherit the Kingdom of God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-10, WEB)

For some reason, my head couldn't wrap around what I'd just read. So I read it again. However, nothing made sense. It was like a fog rested over my brain and I couldn't comprehend the words. I actually said out loud, "what does this mean?" Then suddenly, I felt an anxiety attack trying to creep up on me! I was stuck in this place and I couldn't get beyond it. I prayed for understanding, yet something inside of me didn't want to deal with this. So I had to put the Word down for a while.

As soon as the fog began to lift, I went back to 1 Corinthians 6 and read it over and over again until my mind finally grasped what it was saying. Then, I got indignant! Of course I would inherit the kingdom of God! After all I was a Christian!

Next, I tried to reason it away! I looked up every word in *the Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* in hopes of quieting this inner terror; but I found no peace.

So I put the Bible down again! I needed time to think about this! Then I changed my mind! I wanted to know the truth and I was sure the truth would exonerate me! So I started back in the Old Testament. I read Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 where it said,

"Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination." (KJV)

and

"If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them." (KJV)

I also read Deuteronomy 22:5 where it states,

"The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the LORD thy God." (KJV)

And of course, I read all the scripture verses pertaining to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Then about half way through my search, I decided that everything I'd read had to do with the men. Except for putting on men's clothing; I didn't see anything that pertained to lesbians. It looked like I was home free! But I had declared victory too soon.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness;

"Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them." (Romans 1:18-32, KJV)

I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me! I was none of those things! I had been in a loving committed relationship, with the same woman, for almost nine years! It didn't make since to me why it was so evil! I wasn't evil! Yet, as much as I wanted to pretend I never read any of it, something inside of me would not allow me to ignore this.

I needed vindication so I dug deeper into the Word of God. So I read the books of Peter, James, Jude, and John. But there was no getting around it. If I accepted the Bible as the inspired Word of God, there would be no exoneration for me.

And for a while, it seemed like every time I opened my Bible it would fall open to 1 Corinthians 6:9-10. It was always in my face! Still I prayed and I pleaded! And at one point I even tried to make a deal with YAH. I'd serve Him the rest of my life; but I still wanted my life my way. Then I came upon the following:

"If then you were raised together with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated on the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things that are above, not on the things that are on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, our life, is revealed, then you will also be revealed with him in glory. Put to death therefore your members which are on the earth: sexual immorality, uncleanness, depraved passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry; for which things' sake the wrath of God comes on the children of disobedience." (Colossians 3:1-6, WEB)

I felt like I was losing it! I was in a tug of war between what I wanted and what I believed.

To show how desperate I was, at one point I even tried to convince myself that all those wonderful things that happened to me were just coincidences. Besides maybe Yehoshua's love wasn't as real as I thought. But even I couldn't sink that low.

Of course, I knew Christ loved me! Time and time again He'd shown me how much! Besides saving me from plunging a twelve-inch blade into the back of a guy I once dated; He also kept me from shooting another guy I thought had given me an STD. I waited outside his apartment, but he didn't come home that night. Turns out, the nurse at the hospital gave me wrong information. And on more than one occasion, He saved me from being killed. For instance, there was the time I drove 147 miles per hour just because the speedometer said the car would do 160. And yes, hundreds of times He saved me, and everyone who crossed my path, when I drove drunk. And these are just some of the highlights. Just a short list of all He has done for me and brought me through. And for my life and for His mercy I was truly grateful. But what my flesh needed I believed He could not possibly provide. I wanted someone I could hold at night. I needed someone who could tell me they loved me.

At the time, I was too self-centered to realize what I was saying. Not only was I counting His love and mercy a small thing; I who had been rejected most of my life was rejecting the One who truly loves me. Then one day He got my attention in an amazing way!

#### A Close Encounter

I normally enjoyed reading at my desk during lunch break. And this day I was the only one left in my department during lunch. This was fantastic! It meant I could read in peace and quiet, with no interruptions.

I had just started reading from the book of Ephesians when I experienced some type of heat source approaching me from behind. I turned to see what it was, and I felt this warmth surround me. It actually felt like I was being hugged, but there was no one there! I was instantly caught up in the moment and forgot where I was! Then I felt this intense feeling of love surge through me! It was so powerful! Tears of joy fell from my eyes! I had never felt such love in my life! And no, it wasn't a hot flash. I know it sounds completely

insane; but it was real! And I wanted that moment to last forever! But then whatever or whoever it was left me. Yet it was in that moment that I knew in my heart that I had just experienced the love of Christ up close and personal! I had said I wanted someone to hold me; and I had gotten more than I could have ever hoped for or imagined. Christ was willing to do even this for me.

I didn't know it at the time, but that experience would change the course of my life! For the first time, I was willing to give up everything and everyone; even the woman I loved, for Yehoshua.

I was on cloud nine the rest of the workday! And when I got home I went to my bedroom, dropped to my knees and prayed. Then finally, on my knees I asked the Lord for help. I couldn't change my life. I still wanted my life, and my love, my way. But if being a lesbian was out of the question, I prayed His will be done. I would trust Him to change me and make me clean. After that prayer and knowing all He'd done for me in the past; I knew once I stood up my life would never be the same again.

Then as I walked out of my bedroom and into the kitchen, I saw Brandy coming downstairs. She stared at me with pain in her eyes and said, "You're going to leave me." "How did she know?" I thought to myself. But all I could say was "yes."

#### **Deliverance**

A few days after my close encounter a very strange thing took place. This particular night I was almost asleep on the couch in my living room. I was resting on my back when suddenly my body forcibly lifted up off the couch and I hit the floor on my stomach! I couldn't imagine how that happened! All I knew at that moment was fear! I tried hard to come up with an explanation for what happened; and at the same time I tried to pretend it didn't happen at all. I lifted myself up and got back on the couch in the same position I was in before. And a few minutes later, it happened again! It didn't dawn on me at the time that I might have a demonic presence attacking me. Or maybe I didn't want to believe it out of fear. All I knew for certain, what just happened to me wasn't natural.

The next day I was still unnerved by what happened. So I asked Brandy if I could come upstairs and sleep on her reclining chair. I didn't want to be alone again if something should happen. She said no problem and I was grateful for her kindness. But that night I was afraid to go to sleep. I stayed awake for some time waiting to see if anything would happen. And when it didn't, I started to relax. Then as I was drifting off to sleep, it happened again! It felt like I was being snatched out of the recliner and I hit the floor. The noise woke Brandy. I tried to explain to her what was happening to me; but I really wasn't certain myself. So for the next two nights I stayed upstairs with Brandy and slept on her recliner because I was still too afraid to be alone. Still I tried my best to play it off like it was all just my imagination. But what happened next left me wondering if I was losing my mind.

This time, I was alone in my living room when all of a sudden I felt something cold all around me. I tried to figure what could be causing it. It wasn't cold in the house just a minute before. I checked the thermostat to make sure the temperature hadn't dropped. But there had been no change. Next thing I knew it felt like this cold was trying to enter my body! I was terrified and I started screaming for it to get away from me! Then it felt like I was being attacked from more than one side and when that happened I totally lost it!

Brandy ran downstairs to see what was wrong! And when I looked over at her, she looked helpless and afraid! I knew she didn't know what was happening to me! But neither did I. Then I thought that maybe I was having a nervous breakdown! I begged Brandy to call my mother! When my mother got on the phone, I screamed that I was being attacked! She seemed a little perturbed with me and said she didn't know what she could do, especially over the phone. But I just needed to hear her voice. And with Brandy there and my mother on the phone, I eventually calmed down. Actually, it was more like I was exhausted. After my mother hung up Brandy stayed with me for a while. And I was grateful for her concern. I didn't want to be alone. But after that night, I didn't experience anything like that again.

Some years later, I was told by a pastor in deliverance ministry that it appears that I had been delivered from at least one demonic spirit; and that later they were trying to reenter my body. I was also told that homosexual spirits are cold. And though I cannot say if any of that is true; I do know that the attacks, by whatever unseen force it was, never came back.

# Those People

I had stopped going out to clubs and parties with Brandy. However I told her weeks before the attacks that I would go with her to the Variety Show. And it seemed like the right thing to do since I first met her at the Annual Variety Show those many years before. It was a major event and all our friends would be there. So I decided that just this once would be okay.

Once there it was like old times. And I had to admit that the entertainment was really good. Then after the Variety show was over, we filed out behind a number of people and headed to the area that would host the after party. The huge dining hall was already filling up but our friends held a place for us at their table. Usually once we settle in and started laughing and talking, I liked looking around to see who was there and if I could spot the new comers. But this time when I looked around the crowded room sadness came over me and I felt sorry for "those people." Now that was weird thing to think because I had been one of "those people" for years! Then I had a deep desire to tell them about Christ. But I didn't know what to say or how to say it. Then it dawned on me. Although I laughed and carried on with Brandy and our friends I knew in my heart that I didn't belong with them any longer.

### The Tests Begin

It seemed the more I pressed into the things of YAH the harder I was attacked. Though at least this time it wasn't supernatural.

A couple of my co-workers and one of the managers were gay. And over the years I'd occasionally see them at various clubs and socials. In fact, the manager was noted, in certain circles, for his lavish after five parties. To get invited to one was considered a big deal. But as far as I knew, they never told anyone I was a lesbian. However, when I told a couple of them that I would no longer be going to any of the socials and why things rapidly changed.

Overnight the word was out that I was a lesbian. From there it didn't take long before many I had known and worked with for years started avoiding me. Now I was laughed at and talked about. And some of their remarks were malicious. It was a real

trial for me for over a year, but I had to go through it. The Lord gave me 1 Peter 4:3-4, which says,

"For we have spent enough of our past time doing the desire of the Gentiles, and having walked in lewdness, lusts, drunken binges, orgies, carousings, and abominable idolatries. They think it is strange that you don't run with them into the same excess of riot, blaspheming:" (WEB)

That passage spoke truth to the places inside of me that hurt the most and wanted to lash out. And I really needed that to get me through. I also remembered the Lord's example.

"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed." (1 Peter 2:21-24, KJV)

"Blessed are you when people reproach you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely, for my sake." (Matthew 5:11, WEB)

So for once in my life; I kept quiet and allowed the storm to pass. Now looking back, I can see it was all good and necessary yet at the time, it was really painful. But I didn't know that another storm would soon be coming my way.

# Replaced

That day when I prayed and sincerely gave myself to Yehoshua, I asked Him for three things. For one, I asked for an apartment of my own far away from my current living arrangement. I also prayed that He would open the door for Brandy to get a job and three that He would get her attention off of me. And He answered my prayer in ways I would have never imagined.

For almost nine years, Brandy and I were inseparable. She and her daughter Tracy were welcomed as a part of my family. I also went to all Brandy's family gatherings but they only seemed to know me as just her friend. Or so I thought.

Then many years later when Brandy's brother died, at the funeral her family told me to come sit with them. Even though Brandy and I had long parted ways, they still considered me family. And although this happened years ago, it still means a lot to me.

Anyway, not to long after that prayer things began to change. I knew it would take about a year for me to get my finances together to move. So I asked Brandy if I could continue living on the first floor and she said yes.

We still did a few things together but with each passing day, I could feel the distance growing between us. Then one evening when I was settling in for the night there was a knock at the side door. I went out into the adjoining side entrance that led upstairs. It was a woman to see Brandy. At that hour? Then my mind came to one conclusion and my heart hit the floor. I had been replaced.

Still, I held it together. And even though the woman looked a little nervous, I had no intentions of making a scene. I smiled and was as cordial as I could be, under the circumstances. Then I called up to Brandy, to let her know that there was someone at the door for her. I don't recall if she came down or not. All I remember is quietly closing my door and crying like a baby. In the morning I looked to see if the unknown woman's car was still there. It was.

I knew this too was a necessary pain. I needed every tie broken so that my heart wouldn't betray me into coming back. Still it didn't hurt any less. Yet in spite of my tears I knew that Yehoshua had answered my prayer.

### More Answered Prayer

For the last two years or so of our relationship, I was the only one holding down a job. No matter what I said, Brandy didn't seem interested in getting a job. When I started working again, I hoped she would keep our t-shirt business going, but that didn't work out. Now, I was concerned that once I stopped paying rent, she and Tracy would not have

enough to make ends meet. She could once again rent the down stairs; but in the past she had trouble with her tenants and as a result, she was adamant that once I moved, she had no intentions of renting too anyone else. But I didn't need to worry because YAH was about to fulfill another part of my prayer.

A few months earlier, Brandy started receiving assistance for her daughter, who has a special need. And as a result, Brandy was also given a small amount for herself. Then later that year, the law changed and the government cut off her part of the assistance, which forced her to look for a job. And it didn't take long before she had one. I was amazed!

As for the apartment, my credit was in shambles. I hadn't been the most reliable person when it came to paying bills on time. So I didn't think anyone would let me have an apartment. In the past, when it came to credit I relied on Brandy. She didn't always work but she had the best credit of anyone I had ever known. So I was on my own. Yet once again, when it looked like it was no way possible, my God had already opened the door.

For some reason, I thought the Indian Hills apartments would be a nice place to live. They are on the North side of Cleveland closer to Lake Erie. I wanted somewhere nice and quiet to live. And I thought what better place than a Seniors Community. Trouble was, my age. I was only in my 40's. Even so, I called and was told that they had just started letting people in their 40's into the complex. I kid you not! Of course, I would have to wait until I had all the money for the moving expenses. But after that, I knew when it came time to move, I would have more than enough money.

But there was one more thing I didn't consider in my prayer- I needed a car. I got to work on the bus and now I wouldn't have automatic access to Brandy's car.

But as it turns out, Brandy was getting rid of her old car and was getting a newer model. So when she got her new car, I asked if she would sell the older car to me and she didn't hesitate! It was a great little car and still in good condition. And I know she could have gotten a lot more for the car, but she sold it to me for just \$200.

Yehoshua had given me everything I'd prayed for and then some.

# Chapter 15

# Back To Church

While I was still living downstairs from Brandy, I had a longing to get back to church. It had been over two years since I stopped attending church services and I missed the fellowship. I started praying and asking YAH to let me know what I should do. To direct me to the church He wanted me to attend. I prayed for a Spirit filled church home where I could learn and grow in the truth and knowledge of YAH. But wasn't I already doing that? Looking back, I can see now that I wanted to go back to church and I wanted YAH to co-sign on it.

So I visited a few churches but none were to my liking. Then a young lady that I worked with told me about her church. And of course she gave me all the usual church hype folks give you about their pastor and congregation. And I listened to her rave on, but didn't give it much thought. Still she gave me the address and I filed it away. Then one day, I believed the Lord put it in my heart that my co-worker's church was where He wanted me to be. Well, let's just say I assumed that it was YAH.

But at the time I came to that conclusion based on one of my dreams. In the dream, I saw a small congregation of people. I didn't know if it was my co-worker's church or not but I decided to visit just in case this might be the place in the dream. Brandy said she'd like to go too.

When we got to the location there was no church. It was supposed to be across the street from a strip mall; but the only thing there was a radio station. And just as we started to leave, I saw a car or two pull into the lot. They definitely looked like the Sunday go to meeting type. So I asked them if they knew of this church. They said sure, it was right through the door in front of me. But that was the entrance to the radio station! Then instead of going up the steps, they headed down into the basement. If Brandy hadn't gone with me, I might have changed my mind and left. But since there were two of us I took a chance and headed downstairs with the ladies.

When we got to the bottom of the stairs, to the left was a small church setup with about thirty or forty chairs. There was also a keyboard and a podium up front. This had the makings of a storefront church without the store. I never thought I'd end up in a place like this. It was a definite first for me.

Brandy and I sat down in a couple of seats on the left. And to the left of us was a short hallway with what looked to be at least one small room off the left and another on the right.

Then kids of all ages started filing into this makeshift sanctuary from the room on the left. Then in walked a light-skinned man from the room on the right. He was nice looking, short but nicely dressed. Turns out, he was the pastor.

Then after the regular church program of songs, announcements and such, the pastor got up to speak. From what I recall, it was a surprisingly good message. Good enough at least to make me want to come back.

At the end of the service, an older lady named Massingale greeted us. She was very sweet and encouraging. Aside from her, and a handful of others the rest of the congregants walked by without saying a word. Then after our chat with Mrs. Massingale, we walked to the front and waited to speak to the pastor and his wife. Then when it was our turn they looked up at Brandy and were all smiles and pleasant. But when the pastor saw me, the smile immediately left his face. Instead, I was greeted with a cold hostile glare. But it couldn't have been anything I said, because I hadn't said anything. Furthermore as far as I knew, I never saw him before in my life! Though for a second I thought I peeked something about him. But it wouldn't justify such a sharp change on his part. Then I tried to write it off as just my imagination. However, imagination or not, I was offended! Still, with a smile on my face I tried not to let it show.

#### Back To the Little Church

Hurt or not, the next Sunday, I decided to head back to the church in the basement. This time Brandy didn't want to go, so I was on my own.

The sermon was so good that at the end when the pastor called for people to come up, I went. And I cried all the way, because I didn't know if I was doing a terrible thing. I didn't know if by walking up there I was denying or offending the Holy Spirit. He'd done so much for me over the years. And Yehoshua was with me, this I was certain. Yet I still felt like I had to go up.

When I walked up to the pastor, he lifted his hands towards mine. I put my hands in his and closed my eyes. This was yet another first for me. In the World Wide Church of God, we didn't do such things. Then I suddenly felt like I was slowly floating backward. And I was amazed that I wasn't afraid that I'd fall and hurt myself. So later I was surprised when my co-worker told me that I didn't float back like I thought. Instead, she said it looked like I had been shot out of a canon. One thing I do know for certain; when I reach the floor I started shaking uncontrollably. I thought that I must be doing this on purpose but I couldn't make myself stop.

While all of that was going on, it entered my mind that I was shaking uncontrollably; while sprawled out on the floor, in a basement no less, surrounded by strangers. And the only person I knew there was the girl from work.

Next thing I knew, there were two ladies down on the floor with me. One was Mrs. Massingale. Then the other lady said she could feel electrical power all over me. I didn't know if this was just church talk or not; but whatever was happening to me went on for some time.

Then finally, I was able to sit up on the floor but I felt high, like I was really intoxicated. Then in the midst of all of this I remembered a dream I had a day or two before. In the dream I saw a disembodied hand reaching out towards me. It was then that I spoke, but not to those around me. I was speaking directly to God. And I said I wasn't going to give up. I needed God's help! I didn't know what to expect, I just wanted the Holy Spirit! So I closed my eyes and prayed. And as I prayed, I saw the hand from my dream. Then I felt a smack against my forehead! And because he was the only one standing near me when I opened my eyes, I thought it was the pastor who had touched me. Yet some time later, when I asked, I was told no one had touched me on my forehead.

Finally, I was able to get up off the floor. But I was still shaking. Then the two women that were on the floor with me and the pastor gathered around me for reasons I didn't understand at the time. Later I found out that they were waiting for me to speak in tongues. That way they would know for certain that I had received the Holy Spirit. But I didn't say a word. So after waiting a while everyone gathered up their things and we left.

The first few days after my experience in the church I felt surreal. I couldn't put into words how I felt or what was happening to me. I prayed and asked the Lord to help me understand the strange thing that had come over me. Then finally, about a week later, the answer came to me. It was peace. For the first time in my life, I had peace.

Then a few days after that, I started having dreams about all the sinful things I'd done and how, except for the grace of God, I could have ended up. I often woke from these dreams with a start, shaking, sweating, and thanking God for saving me all those times. I was, and I still am, truly grateful.

### Can I Start Again

After that experience, I was at that church whenever the doors opened. And after some time, the pastor announced that they would hold a baptismal service at a nearby church. He asked if anyone wanted to be baptized and I told him I did.

Even though I was previously baptized, I felt like I had made a mockery of it. At the time of my first baptism, my motives were wrong and my heart was not truly turned to the Lord in spite of all He had done for me. Now I was sober and a lot more humble. Now I knew what it meant to repent. In fact, it took years for me to come to the realization that I wasn't delivered from a sin until I repented or turned from it. When I repented of smoking, though it was halfhearted, I was delivered. I was delivered from alcohol when I earnestly prayed and chose YAH over the alcohol. And even though I wanted to remain a lesbian, once I accepted YAH's will for my life, and finally turned to Him He delivered me.

As long as I held on to my sins, nursed them, loved and cherished them YAH allowed me too. He never forced me to submit to His will. And I am grateful that he

didn't give up on me. Instead He loved me, watched over me, and gave me time to come around to the truth.

Yet in my heart, I believe that if I'd chosen to remain a lesbian; especially in the late 90s when homosexuality was starting to be accepted, my heart would have remained closed to Him. And as a result, I would have chosen my will over His. It's scary to think that I may have turned my back on Him forever.

Over the years, I also learned that it's one thing to tell someone you love them and quite another to show them how much you love them. Yehoshua had shown me in more ways than I can count how much He loves me. On the other hand, I only told Him how much I loved Him when He did something for me. There are times when I think about how I could have missed my opportunity to get to know the One who truly loves me. And just think it was the getting to know Yehoshua that made me want to change.

Anyway, at that time, I had been free from lesbianism for almost five years. I was on a different path and I was content. I had no doubt that I always belonged to Yehoshua and that He'd been with me all my life and the Holy Spirit was indeed my helper. But the Word of YAH says there is something I must do - repent and be baptized. It took me twenty plus years, from my first baptism, to get the picture. Now it was time to be baptized in earnest.

When the day came, I was excited. I thought about all Yehoshua had done for me over the years. My Lord had delivered me from cigarettes, alcohol, fornication, lesbianism and so much more. And He had given me love, humility, hope, and peace. And though I was still working on things like patience and forgiveness, at least this time, I was truly working on them.

So, when I went down into the water and it surrounded me, I felt like a baby in the womb, safe and loved. And when I came up out of the water, I felt clean and whole.

#### Lessons to Learn

Over a year and a half had passed since my experience down in the basement of that church. I rarely missed a Wednesday night Bible Study, Sunday service, or special event. The pastor even made me the church treasurer, though he still didn't have much to say to me.

I've read a few books by individuals coming out of same sex attractions. As a rule, they all have such wonderful things to say about their church leadership. How loving and caring they are. How they might not have made it except for their support and encouragement. But sad to say, that was not my case.

For the most part, the congregation did greet me with open arms after I gave my testimony. Yet the pastor and his wife remained distant, like a ten-foot pole was purposely placed between us. That is of course until they needed me to do something. And for a long time I wondered why they were still so cold and distant with me while they cozied up to the other church leaders and spent time with them. Perhaps the best answer was that I just didn't qualify for the click. Whatever the case, I forged ahead believing this was what the Lord wanted me to do.

For most of my life I'd felt like a misfit, an alien in a foreign land. A part of, but yet distant from. However, on my part, it wasn't from a lack of trying to fit in. It just didn't seem to work out for me on a regular basis. But when it came to them, I felt no need to indulge myself in a pity party. It didn't take long before I came to the realization that in their case, there were lessons for me to learn.

For one, I needed to stop being so needy and craving the approval of others. I use to feel down thinking that if I ever needed a support group there would be no one there. But as I grew I determined that if I had to stand-alone then so be it. Then I finally came to the realization that I am not alone. My Heavenly Father, Yeshua, and the Holy Spirit are always with me to support and guide me. And you can't get any better than that! To my God belongs all my praise and gratitude!

Still I couldn't help but wonder why the distance.

#### Brunch and Conversation

As for the congregation, most of them who knew I was formerly a lesbian preferred that I didn't mention it. I could tell that it made them feel uncomfortable. Besides, it was old

news. I was now good ole sister Sharon. While on the one hand, they enjoyed discussing their lives and the things they've done, whether good or bad. So why couldn't I do the same. It appeared no one wanted to know me – warts and all.

One church sister's motto was "fake it till you feel it." But that's the last thing I wanted to do. Been there, done that. I didn't want to live a lie any longer. To my way of thinking, to dismiss the last 20 plus years of my life was the same as dismissing me. As a result, I did what came natural for me. I was friendly, a good listener and I performed for them. But I kept myself locked away in my shell. And if anyone cared to know anything about me I'd say things that wouldn't ruffle them. I would even talk about the guys I dated years before. After all, everyone could relate to that. Then one day something occurred that brought joy to my heart.

Once a month, the church singles would meet over another single's home, after church service, for brunch and conversation. Each month a different single hosted the brunch and everyone else pitched in for the food. Finally, it came my turn to host the brunch. I tried to put it out of my mind but as the day approached, I got more and more apprehensive.

For years, after I sobered up, I was afraid to have a get-together at my place because I was afraid no one would come. Usually not too many showed up for the singles brunches. However, for reasons that I still don't understand, people who had never attended a singles brunch before came to my home the day I was hosting the event. In fact, just about every single showed up! My two-bedroom apartment was packed! Even when I ran out of chairs, they grabbed a spot on the floor. We hadn't planned for so many, so we thought we'd run out of food, but we had more than enough.

It was such a joyful surprise! I didn't know why, but it seemed people liked me after all! Well, at least good ole sister Sharon, the people pleaser.

# Chapter 16

### The Unexpected

### Car Accident

Why is it when things are looking up something always comes along to bring you back to your senses?

This one afternoon, while on my way to take my cousin Bel home from work, we stopped at a red light on Buckeye Avenue behind an older model white van. Then without any warning, my car was hit from behind. Whatever it was hit us so hard it drove us into the back of the van in front of us. I tried to turn to see what happened but was stopped by the pain in my left shoulder. However, if it had not been for the safety belt stopping me, my injuries could have been much worse. Then after checking on Bel, I got out of the car to see what happened.

As it turns out, the driver of the car behind me, a young white guy was having so much fun in his car with his buddy he never saw the stop light. Or that cars were stopped at the light for that matter. Needless to say, he hit us at full speed.

We pulled over and waited for the police to come. But the driver of the van kept going. Then after a while, when it appeared that the cops were a no show, we got out of our cars and exchanged insurance information. Then just when we started to leave, the cops finally arrived.

They spoke to the guy for a few minutes; but didn't bother giving him a ticket. Finally they came over to me but didn't allow me to say much. They said I would have to go to the police station to file a police report. And with that they left.

Bel and I were both ticked off. It was obvious to us what had just taken place; but there was nothing we could do about it. Though still drivable, my car was a wreck. And unless this guy's insurance came through, I wouldn't be able to afford the repairs. I would soon be back on the bus again. Still, I was glad Bel and I weren't seriously hurt.

When I got home, I called the guy's insurance company. But they didn't have a record of the accident. Then they informed me that there was nothing they could do if he didn't file a claim with them. So I waited until the next day and called again. And I got the same answer. Then after trying again and again I finally hired an attorney to help me.

The deal was the attorney would get a percentage of the settlement, which was fine by me. Whatever I got would be more than I had. But after a while, he said nothing was coming of it. Then one day I got a call from him stating that he would no longer represent me. He gave me the impression that I said something to offend him. However, I didn't recall doing such a thing and he didn't go into any detail. Chances are, he just wanted out. It appeared my attorney and my case were a done deal and I didn't pursue either any further. Story of my life I suppose.

#### Wait On the Lord

Later that year, I moved to Indian Hills! It was everything I wanted and then some! I had a two bedroom on the sixth floor with a view facing downtown and Lake Erie. And on the Fourth of July I could watch fireworks from at least a half dozen locations. My elderly neighbors were friendly and it was just like I liked it, peaceful and quiet.

I was back on the bus. But I couldn't complain. At least from my apartment it was a straight shot to my job. Still I prayed for a car knowing full well that I couldn't afford to buy a new one. Besides, my credit still wasn't the greatest; though I was now making an effort to improve it.

A few more months passed and I was still praying for a way to get a car. Then I noticed that on occasion, when I opened my Bible, there was Psalm 27, one of my favorites, so I'd read the entire passage, which ended with,

"Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD." (Psalm 27:14, KJV)

I was clueless as to what I was supposed to get from that other than to be patient; which was one gift of the Spirit I still didn't have. And finally, I asked the Lord, "What is it that I am to wait on?" It didn't seem like I was going to get an answer.

Then one day, while walking to the bus stop from my apartment, I was stopped by a Jehovah Witness. She wanted me to buy the latest Watchtower. And even though I told her I wasn't interested, she wouldn't give up. Then she pulled out the Watchtower and there on the cover was "Wait on the Lord." I burst out laughing! The woman thought I was laughing at her. But all I could say was "Okay Lord, I understand. Whatever it is, I will wait on You."

Later, when I got home, I threw my mail up on the shelf in the dining room. I was, and still am, notorious for not opening my mail for weeks at a time. I figure, who wants to see bills. Anyway, the phone rang. Though I preferred they leave a message, this day I felt generous; so I picked it up, and the caller immediately said my name. And I thought, "It's a bill collector." Then the caller said, "We have been looking for you for months." "What is this concerning," I asked. It was the insurance company of the guy who hit me. She than told me they had sent me a \$2,500 check; but they didn't know if I received it since I had moved. Boy was I glad I answered the phone!

I rummaged through the stack of mail on the shelf and there it was! I opened it and there was the \$2,500 check! Wow! Now I knew what I was supposed to wait on! I had written off any hopes of getting anything; yet my Lord had not forgotten! All along He was working this out for me! Plus there was an added cherry on top. Since my former attorney decided he would no longer represent me, I didn't owe him a dime. Talk about amazed! I held, in my hand, a \$2,500 check for a \$200 car! All I can say is "Wait on the Lord!"

#### It's a Miracle

One day I was in the kitchen getting ready to fix myself a cup of tea. The water was boiling and the tea bag was in my cup. All I had to do was get the hot water into the cup; but somehow I managed to spill the open pot of scalding hot water on myself. The water landed mainly on my right breast. It hurt so bad I started screaming! I was scared! What

should I do! Then all of a sudden I shouted out "No!" And I stopped screaming. And this passage from the Book of James immediately came to mind.

"Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him." (James 5:14-15, KJV)

I got my anointing oil, went into the bathroom, pulled off my top, and looked at my already red blistering breast. I poured some oil into my hand, put my hand on my breast, and prayed for myself. The pain stopped. I was calm. I put another top on and did nothing else about it that day.

The next morning, uncertain what I was about to see, I took off my top to check my breast and was amazed! The blistered skin had already shriveled up and turned brown. Except for one small slightly red area by breast was normal. It was healed! And I praised God! That Sunday, I could hardly wait to give my testimony at church!

### In His Image

In September of that year, I attended an In His Image Seminar for those with same sex attractions. The first one I attended, the previous year, was very helpful and many of my questions were answered. And in this second seminar, even more questions were answered. But a greater truth became clear to me.

During the seminar, pastors and teachers gave speeches and held classes on the whys of homosexuality and other sexual issues. And like AA, they explained that with God's help you could overcome your addiction. But one response really got my attention. A question was asked by an anonymous person who said he kept falling back into the lifestyle. Then one of the pastors responded that it was okay to fall back as long as he was working toward overcoming. Then another man stood and asked how long it normally took to overcome a sexual addiction. And one of the speakers said it varies. Then he went onto say, "It normally took upwards of seven years." And right then an alarm went off in my spirit! The words my pastor said just a week or two before the seminar came to mind. "You don't need a 12 step program, you need the Holy Spirit." Finally, at that moment, I

knew the reality of that truth. The doubts I had before had all vanished! I now knew with assurance, peace and a knowledge that passes all understanding that I've been washed and made clean by the blood of Yehoshua. All that I was had passed away! Hallelujah!

And since YAH is no respecter of persons, what He did for me He will do for anyone. The Word of God says:

"... Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call." (Acts 2:38-39, KJV)

### My Ever Present Help

I had been in the Former Spouse Department for over eight years. Everyone else had come and gone and I was the last of the original group. Don't get me wrong, I really enjoyed my job. I just wanted a change. And no matter how many department transfer requests I put in, they were always denied. And when I asked why, I was told they wouldn't let me go because of my expertise in that department. So I felt trapped. Then YAH opened a door for me.

It was unusual how it all came about. I was told there were three openings in Systems for Testers. Then later I learned that the positions were meant for some programmers they had to let go. But obviously, no one had bothered to tell them. And as a result, the job openings were posted. Then a friend of mine in the IT department told me to apply for the job.

At first, I wavered. Did I really want to leave my department? Did I stand a chance of getting into the department I dreamed about for years? Even though I had gone back to school for programming, I still lacked any on the job experience. However, I decided not to allow my doubts and fears stop me. Of course it didn't hurt that I knew at least one person in the IT department who would put in a good word for me. So I went ahead and applied for the position. Then I made it through the interview. And finally, I was told that two others and I had been selected. Except not long after settling into my new job I realized that maybe I was more than a little over my head.

The three of us had only been given general instructions on what to do. And though we could always ask the lead tester for help, it wasn't always easy tracking her down. Don't get me wrong, she was great and always willing to help, but sorry to say, even with her help, I had no idea what was expected of me. In all my years as a Federal employee this was the first time I didn't receive formal training, and I was lost.

Then after a couple of weeks or so, I was given my first project to complete. I was told to write up scenarios based on the requirements that were handed to me. Scenarios? Requirements? I was clueless! I asked the lead tester for help but I didn't grasp what she was telling me.

A week went by and then two and I had nothing. Then the department manager had me come back to her office. And she asked me for the scenarios even though she knew I didn't have any. Still, I told her what she already knew. I didn't have them because I didn't know exactly how to proceed. And with that she flew off the handle, which she did on occasion. Then she told me that if I didn't have the scenarios on her desk first thing Monday, she'd have to look for someone else to fill my position. Needless to say, I was certain that was her plan in the first place.

I went back to my desk and continued looking through the old projects hoping something would finally click; but I still couldn't figure out what I was supposed to do. So I took the requirements home with me thinking a change of scene was maybe all that was needed. But I was still confused.

I took the requirements; a pen, and a notepad to my couch, folded my legs with all the info in front of me and I prayed to YAH for help because I didn't know what to do. I explained how I felt about what was going on at work and the lack of training. And when I was finished praying, I sat there on my couch and stared down at the requirements. Then all of a sudden, it was like a light came on! The requirements were starting to make sense to me. So I started writing down what I thought were the scenarios. Then knowledge started pouring into my head faster and faster! It felt like a program was being downloaded. So I got up from the couch and headed back to my computer because the information was coming to fast for me to write down! Then in no time, the scenarios were complete! And I knew without a doubt that YAH had answered my prayer and quickly! Come that Monday, I'd see what my manager had to say.

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And sure enough on Monday, she marched me back to her office and demanded to see the scenarios. Then I pulled them out and asked her, "is this what you're looking for?" She looked through the scenarios and her month literally dropped. She was speechless. And she just stared at me. Then she wanted to know how I did them. So I told her that the Lord gave me the understanding to do them. I don't think she believed me, but after the next project and the next, she was convinced.

# Chapter 17

# The Twilight Zone

I had just spent the last ten minutes or so kneeling down next to a row of file cabinets. I was in the process of filing the last couple of microfiche when I looked up and saw this woman going by. And all I could think was "WOW!" She was the kind of woman I used to be attracted too - pretty yet with a slight boyish look about her. I had never seen her before and I wanted to find out who she was!

Yet by the time I put the last microfiche back in the drawer and stood up she was gone. I went around the entire 17<sup>th</sup> floor and by the elevators looking for her; but she had vanished! After that, I was too excited to work! I spent the rest of the workday thinking about this woman.

On the way home, she filled my thoughts! And when I got home and entered my apartment, I was still worked up! But by the time I got to my bedroom door it hit me like a ton of bricks that something was wrong with me. And I was convinced that I had backslidden in my heart. That shook me to my core and I was afraid.

What was going on with me? I left Brandy, stopped associating with our friends; and moved across town just to separate myself from my past. Plus I was certain that I was set free from lesbianism. Wasn't I?

In just seconds the giddiness that I had before was replaced with fear and shame. Maybe I hadn't been delivered after all.

I crumbled to the floor sobbing and I cried out to God for help and forgiveness! I was afraid He would leave me! I needed to know I was still His! And suddenly, while crumbled and sobbing on the floor, I felt that same warmth engulf me again like it had that day on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor. I wasn't alone! He didn't leave me and I was so grateful!

I talked to Him honestly about how I was feeling about the woman I saw and I asked for help. I didn't understand what had triggered such a reaction in me. And why part of me wanted to see her again and the rest of me never wanted to see her again at the same time.

At work, I tried to put her out of my head. I was still afraid I'd see her and that feeling I had for her would come rushing back.

Weeks past and I didn't lay eyes on her. And with each passing day I felt more like myself. Then one day, as I was heading to the elevators, there she was getting off. She was laughing and talking to someone. I knew it was her, but for some reason she didn't look quite the same. Something about her had changed and I couldn't put my finger on it. Still I was glad to see the excitement I initially had for her was gone. At least I hoped so. But I had no idea at the time that it would take years to get her truly out of my system.

Thanks be to God I never wanted to have sex with her, though I did find her sexually attractive. Still I was afraid of getting physically close to her. Though odd as it might seem, I honestly felt I loved her from the moment I laid eyes on her. Why, I didn't know. And though I realized that the connection I felt just wasn't normal; for the longest, I could not put my finger on what it was. Then I had an AHA moment!

One day she said something that really got me angry and I called her Lana. After that I caught myself calling her Lana a few too many times. Then it all made sense! In so many ways she reminded me of Lana and it wasn't just her looks. However I'd soon discover she was in a league of her own.

Since we worked in different departments, I didn't see her on a daily basis. Then a small group of us started a prayer group and she was a part of it. And to be perfectly honest, I was happy to have a reason to be around her. Then when the testers and IT moved to another building I got to see her even more.

Anyway, at the time, I was also in a ministry dealing with homosexual issues. Then one day I was asked to record my testimony with someone from one of the Christian radio stations. So I did. And I was told it would be broadcast at some future date, which was fine with me.

I really don't believe in coincidences but in this case who knows. One day I rode with Ashley to one of the fast food restaurants for lunch. And wouldn't you know it; while we were riding along, she turned her radio on to the Christian station that just so happened to be playing my testimony. It caught me by surprise. It was the first time I'd heard it. But I didn't say anything about it. Yet to my surprise, Ashley knew it was me and she was rather matter of fact about it. Then she said that it was the second time she'd heard it that day. Now what are the odds of that? Then she said nothing else about it, no questions, no comments, nothing.

Before that day, I had told no one in our prayer group that I was a former lesbian. But after that, I made it a point to tell them as soon as possible. I'd rather people hear it from me than from someone else.

As time went on, I could not get a handle on our relationship. Or maybe I just couldn't get a handle on her. When she and her husband broke up, for some reason she latched on to me for help, even though I was the only one in our prayer ground who had not been married. Still, I tried to console her whenever she called. And that turned into a lot of time spent talking to her on the phone.

From there we started hanging out, going to dinner and maybe an occasional movie. I found myself really enjoying my time with her. And when we weren't together, we still spent hours on the phone talking about any and everything. Well, she usually did most of the talking; but that was fine by me. Then as quickly as our non-love affair began, it abruptly ended. She stopped calling. We stopped hanging out. She never said why and I wouldn't ask. And when we were at work she ignored me or acted like she didn't want to be bothered most of the time.

Yet once, when I was really sick, she insisted that I come stay with her until I was better. I thought that was really nice of her. And since I didn't want to be alone I took her up on her offer. And while I was there, she took good care of me. Then once I got back to work, she was distant again.

Then after a few weeks went by she would call like nothing ever happened. And once again, she was sweet and kind to me. We'd hang out; go to dinner, go fishing, golfing or whatever. And this became a regular thing with her. And worse still, I was so needy I went along with it. Each time, like a junky, I found myself waiting for her to call. I felt

like a toy she'd take out of the cupboard when she wanted to play. Then she put me away again when she was tired of me. Yet, the time away from her was agonizing for me.

Then there were times she'd hug me out of the blue and other times when she wouldn't even sit next to me. We'd go to a movie and later she'd deny ever going. Then at some point, she'd talk to me about the movie just to turn around and deny she'd even seen the movie. She'd make my head spin with all the confusion. Then one day I got so sick of it I told her that I thought she had a mental disorder. Yet she acted as if I never said a word.

One of our prayer group members, who I considered a dear friend, told me that I should avoid her. She told me Ashley really wasn't my friend. But she didn't go into any detail and I didn't ask for any. What's more, I ignored her advice. By then I was too needy and pathetic to let her go. Even when I found out she was talking about me behind my back.

Sadly, over the years our relationship continued like this until one day I was the one who walk away. I had gotten to the place where I could only take so much of her before I backed off. Still, after months, or even a year or two away from her, after just one call from her I would always befriend her again. And let me remind you that we never had a physical relationship. Not once! It was all a mental and emotional challenge; and I was on the verge of defeat.

She wasn't the first, but out of everyone I'd ever known, she made me feel, or fear, that I was losing parts of myself. And over the course of time, issues so painful and buried so deep in my psyche started rising to the top. However, thanks be to Almighty God; the confusion and emotional struggles during the course of that strange relationship brought to light deep wounds in me that I didn't know existed. For one, rejection was still a monster in my closet and it wasn't alone.

In retrospect, I now know that most of it wasn't really about her, or because of her. Perhaps it was just time for me to deal with all the hurt and fear I'd stuffed over the years; and she was just the means to that end. Besides, I had to remind myself that I went looking for her, not the other way around.

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Still, in spite of the grief I felt, time and time again, I can now say it was a blessing. Now, with God's help, I believe the monsters are gone. And as for Ashley, I believe I am now free. Oh, once in a while she will still text - because I blocked her from calling.

Then one day, a few months ago, she texted me and asked for me to pray for her. She was very sick. And one of her daughters confirmed it. And of course I am praying for her. But I have no desire to look back. Still, I wish her well.

## Chapter 18

# You Have Stayed Long Enough

The little church in the basement had moved up in the world. We now had a church building of our own in a great location. But after six years things started falling apart. Up until then, I was good enough to be the church treasurer and on the board of trustees. And on occasion, they allowed me to teach adult classes. I also did a number of other things; like ushering, the tape ministry, and the monthly newsletter. And I never charged them for anything. But as time went on, it became obvious that I just wasn't a good fit. We definitely weren't on the same page. And sometimes, I wondered if we were even in the same Book. Then all of this came to a head when the deaconess convinced the pastor to call a meeting of all the church leaders.

At the meeting, the pastor announced from that point forward all leaders had to be at all church events – I was. All had to go with him when he was invited to speak at other churches – I did. And all had to follow the church's beliefs and doctrines, with no deviation, in spite of what we believed. He wanted us on one accord. With that I paused. Knowing the other church leaders were chummy with him and his wife and followed his dictates without question; I knew those remarks were directed to me. I was, so to speak, the odd man out.

They didn't believe in Saturday Sabbath – I did. They taught Sunday school from little booklets instead of teaching from the Bible. And the booklets were slanted to their prior denominational beliefs, even though they advertised the church as non-denominational. They believed in all the Christmas, Easter trappings - I didn't. Still, to each his own. And though I tried to keep my opinions and beliefs to myself, there were times when I just couldn't compromise. Bottom line, I just wasn't a good fit. And even though for the longest I believed the Lord wanted me there for some reason; once again, I was seriously having my doubts about that.

I sincerely considered what the pastor said; but I knew that I could not compromise. So in order to stay true to my beliefs, I informed pastor that I would be stepping down from all ministries; including my position as treasurer and member of the Board of trustees. I tried to let him know that I understood his position, but I would not compromise mine. And I thought he would understand. But he didn't. And from the look on his face, it appears this was not the outcome he anticipated. I don't believe he thought I would ever do such a thing.

Later, I heard that pastor gave me to a friend of his that was starting a new church. At one time that would have crushed me. However, after seven years there, I now had a thick skin. So I politely told him, he didn't bring me there and I wasn't his to give away. He seemed shocked that I knew, but he had nothing to say.

Then one Sunday, out of the clear blue, the pastor announced that he wanted each of the church members to come forward and proclaim their loyalty to him. I was stunned! At first, I wasn't sure what to do. My loyalty is to Almighty God and Yehoshua not some man. And though I respected the pastor this time, in my opinion, he had gone too far. When my turn came, I stood before the congregation and proclaimed that I would follow him as he followed Christ. And under the circumstances, I thought that was the best I could say. But even with that, I felt I had compromised and it left a bad taste in my mouth.

After that, I was convinced that the Lord didn't send me there, I sent myself. Still I forged ahead. After all, for the most part, the sermons were good, I loved the members, and I did learn a thing or two over the years. Most importantly, I learned not to depend on anyone for my relationship with God the Father and Yehoshua. Even if they did teach some Biblical truths on some level, their limitations, their doctrines, traditions, and protocols would get in the way. Without prayer and personal Bible study time, I would never grow beyond their ceiling.

I recall a time when I asked the pastor why were all the Sunday school and Wednesday night Bible studies only geared toward new beginners. Why were we always on milk and never transitioning and growing in our understanding of the Word. His reply, we always have new people and our studies should be geared toward them. So I asked why not a beginners class and an intermediate class? But with that, I might as well have been talking to the walls.

But by my eighth year there, I'd had enough. It was the same ole same and I was ready to go. But I was still hung up on the "what if." What if the Lord did indeed send me there? If so, I couldn't just walk away – right?

So I prayed and asked Yehoshua what He wanted me to do. I was tired of going around the same mountain with them year after year. Even so, I tried to keep in mind that Caleb and Joshua had to remain in the wilderness with Israel, for forty years, though they did nothing wrong.

But I had to do something! So since I was no longer in ministry; I decided it was a good time to go visit other churches. And even though I liked the ones I visited, they still didn't seem like a good fit for me.

Then one Sunday, during the sermon, I heard the deacon, who was giving the sermon, say, "You have dwelt long enough at this mountain!" My ears perked up and my mouth fell open! Did I just hear what I thought I heard? Then I shouted for joy – I was free!

When I got home, I checked my Bible to see if I could find that quote and sure enough, it was in Deuteronomy 1:6:

"The LORD our God spake unto us in Horeb, saying, Ye have dwelt long enough in this mount:" (KJV)

Still I asked the Lord for confirmation; just in case it was wishful thinking on my part. Soon after it seems I got my confirmation.

The deaconess and the "first lady" gave me a hard time about something I don't even recall. Whatever it was, it was my last straw. It was time for me to go. Yet instead of telling the pastor I was leaving for good, I wrote him a letter and requested a Sabbatical. I explained to him briefly what transpired with his wife and the deaconess and told him I needed to get away. I'm sure he was ready to shout for joy himself, but he kept his composure and said he agreed and that was that.

I honestly thought a sabbatical for a few months and maybe I would return. But I never looked back. Oh, I did go back for funerals and I think once for an event, but no hard feelings and no regrets. Well, I do have one regret. I never announced to the

congregation that I was leaving. I later found out there were some who were upset with me for that. And for that, I am sorry. Either it was callousness on my part or I didn't think I'd be missed. In either case, I was wrong. I did briefly reconnect with a few and I kept in touch for a while, but soon it was all in the pass.

It didn't take long before I started attending another church. And for a short time my mother attended service with me. It was a much larger congregation and my mother seemed to like it a lot. Then surprise, surprise; I spotted one of the church elders and a handful of members from my last church. Obviously, I wasn't the only one who decided to jump ship!

The church leaders, where I was now attending, were bubbly and the congregation was friendly; but there was no depth and not much Word. Then again, if I wanted motivation, I was in the right place. But it didn't take long before they started pushing all the new attendees to join. All the newbies got a one-on-one with the head pastor for a little chitchat. But for some unknown reason I was put off by it.

Then not to long after, I received a revelation that I should not join that or any other church. After years of being a "member" of various congregations, the Lord gave me understanding that joining a church was no different from joining a club. Once again, I would be required to pay my dues (tithes) and attend as required. It was expected that my loyalties would be to that club and that club only. But I came to see that it's man's way of doing things not YAH's.

If I am truly a part of Yehoshua, than everyone else who is a part of Yehoshua is a member of the same family. In Yehoshua, there are no divisions. According to the Word of God, Yehoshua has called us to be one in Him. Those who belong to Yehoshua should have all things in common. Still, I attended for a while because my mother enjoyed going with me. What can I say; it was nice having something in common with her for a change. But when she lost interest after a couple months, I dropped that place like a hot potato.

### Chapter 19

## Forgiveness

Some time ago, I watched a video that focused on letting go of the pass and forgiveness. And over the years, I've tried my best to do just that. Can't say I always succeed, but I try. I was convinced that in order for me to move ahead, I needed to make sure all the old baggage was gone, or as much as possible.

Years ago, I heard of individuals making a list of all those they needed to forgive. Then after forgiving everyone on the list they burned it as a gesture that all was forgiven. So I thought I'd give that a try. I wrote a list of every one who had hurt me, mistreated me, thought less of me, and made me feel like I was never good enough. Then it came to me that I needed to add my name to the list. Then after forgiving and praying for all those on the list, including me, I burned it. And I would like to say that did it, but I'd be lying.

It took realizing that some on the list were already deceased. And I didn't know if others were still above ground or not. So it only made sense to let it go, to let them go and move forward. It was only hurting me. And as far as those still left on the list, Christ said to:

"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven." (Matthew 5:44-45a, KJV)

For years, I thought that would be impossible; but when I tried it, I found that it works. I couldn't bless and still hold unforgiveness in my heart. Of course, it doesn't say that I have to continue to be a doormat for them. With some, I still had to walk away and with others, I had to set boundaries.

Still the hardest person to forgive has been myself. For me that's been a constant challenge. I want to serve my Lord without any ghosts in the closet and free myself from all the guilt and shame I brought on myself. Am I now perfect? Not even close! Yet knowing YAH has allowed me to repent when I fall short and He forgives me, has been a blessing.

### Missing You

It was about two weeks before her birthday that I received a text from Brandy. After being so close for so long it was sometimes hard to accept just how distant we'd become. We went from finishing each other's sentences to just playing *Words with Friends* online. At first, Brandy would occasionally meet me for lunch but it didn't take long before she chose not to see me at all. I could occasionally see the anger on her face but not as much as the pain in her eyes. She felt like I had abandoned her and stopped loving her; and looking back, I suppose she was right. I didn't handle things well. I remember early on she came by my apartment and something that I don't even recall saying gave her hope that I still loved her and that maybe I would return. She hugged me for the longest and she looked so happy. Then I had to tell her that yes, I still loved her but there would be no return. And even though she had moved on with someone else, the hurt from what I'd just said was written all over her face and her smile faded away. I was guilty of doing to her what others had done to me. I abandoned her. It wasn't my intention for us to end up this way by I guess there could be no other way.

When I saw her at her brother's funeral, she was in so much emotional pain, I reached out and hugged her, and we sat together for a while. A woman that I assumed was her girlfriend made a quick entry and a speedier exit. Couldn't she see how crushed Brandy was? But it seemed Brandy was too numb to notice. After that, I tried to keep more in touch without crossing any boundaries.

Then in 2016, I noticed that she started sending me pictures of herself and her family when she was young. It was nice sharing her memories but it also felt strange. Out of place. I felt like I was being prepared for something but I didn't want to know.

Then in March 2017, I received her text around 10P.M. on Saturday. She was in the hospital. I asked her if she wanted me to come, though I knew she did. So I got dressed and headed over to the hospital. When I saw her, she was sitting up in bed with a blank look on her face. I bent to kiss her on her cheek but she told me no. Her response bothered me, but I couldn't let it ruin the visit. Then she told me to sit a few feet away from her and I did. Then she told me I should put on a mask and I wanted to know why. But before I could say something, a nurse came into her room. Brandy wasn't doing well at all. She had the flu but she also had a large blood clot on her lung. It seems weeks earlier she'd fallen down the stairs, which resulted in a blood clot on her leg that traveled to her lung. So the hospital had her on intravenous warfarin. But she didn't complain. And I tried not to let on how worried I was. And it wasn't a good sign that the hospital was allowing me stay well after visiting hours. But stay I did. After a while, the ice broke and we laughed and talked about old times. Finally, I packed up to leave and told her that Lord willing; I would see her later in the day. But she asked if I would stay at her home with her daughter. Of course, I said sure. It felt strange being back in her home again. She had moved downstairs where I used to live and the upstairs was now vacant. I stayed with Tracy all day and taped Brandy's shows for her.

The next day, someone came to take care of Tracy so I made my way over to the hospital. But like my father years ago, Brandy was no longer sitting up in bed. She was now in ICU with tubes running everywhere. And the one they had going into her stomach was filled with blood. Brandy was unconscious now and there was little hope of her pulling through. From what I could see, the hospital had screwed up. I stayed for a while but when I was told her cousin would have to make the decision to remove life support, I ran out crying. Even then, he was on his way to her room. I tried talking to him but I suppose I wasn't very coherent. By next morning, Brandy was gone. I was told she died sometime before they removed her breathing tub. I cried uncontrollably but I had no one interested enough to lend me a shoulder to cry on. My mother and sister didn't care at all that she had died. And no one else that I now knew knew her. At least at her funeral I saw a couple of old faces that we use to know and party with and we briefly spoke and moved on.

I suppose this is one of those things that will always nag at my heart. What could I have said or done without compromising who I had become? I just don't know.

# Chapter 20

## Let There Be Light

I would like to be able to say that when bad things happen I don't dwell on them. I am able to bounce back knowing Yehoshua is with me. That is what I would like to say. But truth is I have good days and bad days when darkness tries to engulf me.

I am sure many would agree that 2020 was a year of sadness and darkness. For me, my sister Tina died of a severe brain injury worsened by nursing home neglect. And her only son, my nephew, died early Thanksgiving morning. And the year ended with me finding out a childhood friend and a former co-worker died while in different nursing homes. To my knowledge, their deaths had nothing to do with the supposed pandemic. So it was definitely a year of grief and darkness for me.

Yet I am definitely a child of light. When the day is filled with light, I am upbeat and full of energy. However, when the days are gloomy, I still have to work at not being down and unmotivated. One morning recently, something ordinary reminded me that without Yehoshua I would still be in darkness and despair.

Around 3:30 am, I woke up because of a thought or dream. I can't recall exactly what it was about but at the time, it unnerved me enough to wake me from my sleep. So I sat up and stared into the darkness. Then finally, as my eyes adjusted, I tried to take in the sights and sounds. But there wasn't much of either. There was stillness all around me, a surreal quiet. There wasn't even the sound of a car outside.

Subdued light from the street lamps shone through the vertical blinds, creating streaks of light on the ceiling. There was just enough light in the room so I could see, but not clearly or distinctly. I looked around me and there was nothing but grayness. There were no colors, no beauty, only shades of gray, and black. Even the air felt thicker and the darkness heavier in some way. I wanted the morning to come quickly. Then to get my mind off the darkness I started thinking about the light. Then I started to imagine that as the sun rose in the morning, the shades of gray would disappear. The colors would be

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faint at first but as the sun continued to rise, the colors would become vibrant and the objects would be clear to see. And once again, by the grace of Almighty God, my eyes would see not only the beauty that surrounded me but also those things that could have caused me to stumble and fall in the darkness.

As I looked around in the darkness, I was reminded that Yehoshua is my light and in YAH, there is no darkness. A Bible passage came to mind:

"Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." (Isaiah 60:1-3, KJV)

That thought brought peace and joy to my heart. And with that, I lay back down and went right to sleep.

I love my heavenly Father and I am grateful for all the beauty and truth He reveals including those things that will cause me to stumble, or worse.

I am so grateful! Thank You Father! Thank You Glorious Savior Yehoshua (Jesus)!

## Chapter 21

### Lessons Learned

It doesn't seem that long ago that I was in the world, doing any and everything I saw fit to do. I've slept with nameless strangers just because I could, and I never considered the consequences. I've been to countless concerts, clubs, parties, hangouts, gay bars, straight bars and even an orgy or two. I've been so drunk that I had to check my car to make sure I didn't kill someone who may have been unlucky enough to cross my path.

At times, I've felt a part of two worlds and an alien in both. My life has been a roller coaster, full of highs and lows. Yet, at the same time, there were events in my life that let me know early on that Yehoshua is real and that He has helped me all my life. Though I failed, and turned my back on Him many times and in many ways, He's never left me. He's enabled me to learn some hard lessons and He's seen me through them all.

### No Longer a Lesbian

It's been over twenty-five years since my liberation from lesbianism. I use to wonder why I became a lesbian. Did it really begin with my first encounter with Lana? Or did it start when I was sexually molested by some of my female cousins when I was little. Maybe it was the "Bulldagger" who was brutally raped. Or perhaps the day when I heard my father say he didn't want a girl. Did it start because I had a crush on a female teacher in elementary school or was it because one of my mother's friends, who was a lesbian, wished she had a little girl like me? Or how about because the older girl next door to us use to call me a lesbian because I thought she was pretty and wanted to hang around her because I was desperate for a friend. Or maybe I was just born that way. But after studying the Word of God, I now reject that possibility. I now know YAH would not have made me something He despises.

And though I asked why years ago, I finally stopped asking. Whatever the reason or

reasons were, it's in the past. Truth is, I didn't stop being a lesbian because I wanted to be straight. I no longer wanted to be a lesbian because the Lover of my soul said no. And I came to want Him more than my sexual preference and lifestyle. And because I finally chose Him, He changed me. And I am grateful.

### My Life Has Changed

In the years since I received God's Holy Spirit, my life has drastically changed. I'm not talking religion, going to church, or thinking myself more righteous than those who still do all of the above. I'm talking peace; real peace, security, and love that I never knew existed. What I was always looking for in others but could never find.

God the Father and Yehoshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) took me, Sharon Bishop, with all my faults, insecurities, promiscuities, phobias, et al, and cleaned me up by the blood of Yehoshua and made me whole.

In John 3: 6-8 it says,

"That which is born of the flesh is flesh. That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Don't marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don't know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."." (WEB)

At that time, I didn't understand what that meant but now I do. Well, at least to the extent that I can at this time. It really is being born again. The Lord said in Ezekiel 36:25-27 that He will clean us from all our filthiness. He will take the heart of stone out and give us a new heart and a new spirit. He will put His Spirit within us and cause us to walk in His ways. When this happens, you begin to see things differently. You desire to do the will of YAH, to love Him and love your neighbor as yourself.

God is no longer some mystical being out in heaven somewhere. He is now with me. And He enables me to see beyond the tangible. Believe me, it's one thing to hear about God and quite another to encounter Him for yourself. To know Yehoshua is real and with me. That I belong to Him. I'm not alone. Even when things seem to look bad, it's all

working together for my good. I now understand that He provides everything for me, not just in the natural, but in the spirit as well.

Because of Him, I was able to retire from a great paying government job that I never thought in a million years I would ever have. I have a full pension that provides for all my physical needs; and it's far more than I ever would have imagined.

But there is much more for me to be thankful for. I no longer have that big empty void inside that I use to fill up with people; sex, alcohol, and endless nothing to hold back the fear and pain of loneliness and rejection. I now have a relationship with a real God and Savior who really love me. It says in Matthew 13:44:

"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found, and hid. In his joy, he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field." (WEB)

God the Father, Yehoshua the Messiah and the Holy Spirit are my treasure. Once you experience the true and living God, you want more of Him. And the beauty of it is, the more you seek Him, the more of Himself He gives to you. And to top it all off, God the Father, Yehoshua and the Holy Spirit guide me from within. Sad to say, there are times I'm still hard of hearing.

However, I would be less than honest to make the claim that everything is a bed of roses. That's not the case. This is not yet the kingdom of God. However, once you are born again, the Holy Spirit will guide you into truth and the Lord gives you the strength to overcome every obstacle that tries to defeat you.

For years, Yehoshua tried to get my attention and I continually turned by back to Him because I wanted my life, my way. So in reality, I kept rejecting God's call to me and His will for me. I really thought I'd be giving up everything that gave my life meaning. I held on tight to the fake because I couldn't comprehend what was real.

However, over the years, I've had to let go of people, places, and things in order to move forward in the ways of God. And I don't regret any of it. Do I still have free will? Yes. Am I perfect? No. Could I choose to return to the life I once had? Sure, but why would I. It would be the height of insanity to turn my back on such love.

For instance, I don't watch television programs that promote butts, boobs, and homosexual sex scenes. I know that I am a delivered child of God; however, my flesh isn't. I've learned to never say never. Things I never thought I'd do I've done. Far too many to my shame and regret.

#### The bible tells me:

"Don't love the world, neither the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the Father's love isn't in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, isn't the Father's, but is the world's. The world is passing away with its lusts, but he who does God's will remains forever." (1 John 2:15-17, WEB)

I believe this. As a result, I try hard to avoid anything that is meant to drive me away from my heavenly Father. Like the Pied Piper, music; movies, television, and porn are enticing individuals away from what they are meant to be. I, for one, don't plan to be one of the casualties.

I can run to God as a child runs into the arms of a loving parent, trusting Him to love, nurture and protect me. Better yet, I can cling to Him like my life depends on it, because it does. Every time I talk to Christ from my heart, I now know He listens. Every time I hurt, He comforts and heals. I still have good days and not so good days like everyone else; but now I know I'm not alone. And the good days have far exceeded the bad. He said He'd never leave me nor forsake me and He hasn't.

Do I have any regrets? Yes. For one, I'm sorry it took me so long to let go of the darkness and come to the light. I am so grateful that He didn't give up on me.

Recently I heard an old song that I used to play over and over again. It's a song by England Dan and John Ford Coley titled "Love is the Answer." In the song they cry out, "Light of the word, shine on me, Love is the answer. Shine on us all, set us free, Love is the answer." I would listen to this song, looking for answers as to why I'm here and in the end where I would be going. I wanted the light of Almighty God to shine on me because I always felt I was in a dark place with no foreseeable way out. To the world, I appeared strong and sure of myself. But in the secret place of my heart, I felt alone and afraid. Always afraid. I believed only the love of God could set me free and yet I felt unworthy of

#### THE MAN ON THE CLOUD

His love. And now, these many years later, when I listen to this song and think back to where I was, who I was, and how empty I felt at the time, I am now so very grateful that the Lord did shine on me and He has set me free!

Over the years, I've often wondered if the man I saw walking on the cloud was Yehoshua. And though I can't be certain, I do lean to the prospect that it was. And if so, the next time He comes, it won't just be to a little girl gazing at Him through the window of a car. Next time, every eye will see Him.

"Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, including those who pierced him. All the tribes of the earth will mourn over him. Even so, Amen." (Revelation 1:7, WEB)