

UNEXPECTED LIFE JOURNEYS

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Preface

If you were to take time to look back at your own life journey, I am sure that, in retrospect, you would see the experiences or opportunities that confronted you. The question that you might ask is “Did I miss the opportunity that was before me? Did my life change because of my experience? Should I have taken the other path?”

In these eleven short stories of adventure, risk, love, danger, personal challenge, tragedy and redemption, you may take the journey with the story teller.

There is a common thread through out. Each story had a major theme. Each journey taken by the characters reveals a sharp diversion from the path that each had planned.

Prologue

The stories unfold as two friends are gathered informally in a neighborhood park. They’ve just been reunited after decades. Events intervene, resulting in two more adults and a youngster becoming entwined in their meetings. The group is rounded out when three friends are invited to join the group.

The Principal Characters.

Barney

Ten years prior.

“Poor Barney. I am sorry to leave you alone, dear.”

Marie was unable to speak loudly and was whispering in his ear. The bullet had ripped through her left arm, ripping the artery open and tearing through muscle adjoining her larynx and esophagus and then shattering her right shoulder.

The loss of blood had been rapid until Barney had been able to rip off his shirt and stuff it into the wounds to block the flow from the artery. His actions were too late. Life was ebbing away even as the emergency personnel tried their best

Totally conscious, lucid, but aware that she was about to die, Marie was holding on to her life for a few minutes longer only so that she could say these last words of good bye to the love of her life “I love you, Barney and thank you.” then struggling and gasping for air she finally ended with “for loving me.”

Barney wondered if she had heard him stammer “Thank you, lover girl.” Her face was a blur through the tears that flowed from his eyes, his hands gripping hers until the medic gently removed them saying “Sorry, sir.”

This was to have been their last exploratory trip outside the states. Marie had insisted on revisiting the Pyramids before a leisurely trip through the Greek islands. She loved adventure and shrugged off risks ensuring from travel in troubled areas. After all, she and Barney had survived in the midst of the Hungarian Revolution and the Revolution by the army in Greece.

At the outset of this trip, she told Barney. "The Egyptian government has a strong grip on the small disorganized groups calling for change. We'll be safe."

Barney had lingered a bit in the shop while Marie had preceded him to the outdoors. The sudden explosion of powerful rapid gunfire registered as danger to his love. He dashed out the door, his eyes searching for Marie, unable to see her in the chaos of the crowds either running or dropping flat to avoid flying bullets.

He finally saw her blue scarf sort of peeking out from beneath the body of an Egyptian woman lying atop Marie. He had to move the woman's body in order to reach Marie.

He sized up the situation and began stripping off his shirt, No time for tears. All the lessons he had learned in the presence of death during the war came into play He was ordering someone to call emergency while he pressed his shirt into the holes, hoping to stem the flow of life from the love of his life.

It was only beside the emergency vehicle that he found himself sobbing without pause, knowing that his actions had come too late. Her grip was slowly easing as she tried to hold on. He had lowered his ears to her lips that were moving hearing those words that would stay with him forever "thank you for loving me."

The next few days had been filled with hours of waiting for the release of her body while the authorities continued their investigation. Further delays occurred as he applied for permission to take her ashes home with him

Thirteen days after the attack his flight landed at Kennedy in New York. It was months before his grief subsided enough to allow him to start picking up his life again.

Paul

1997

It seemed impossible that she was gone. They both had been in pretty good health. Paul's mind went back to a couple of days before she died. As they had many times during the spring months, he and Becky had taken a ride to the countryside to see new delicate blossoms on the almond trees that set a tone of beauty to the fields with the light green of the undergrowth to set them off. One residential yard had daffodils and budding forsythia bursting in bright yellow, growing up in front of an old gray fence. The hills were still deep green, lush from the good spring rains.

Paul tried to stay occupied so that his sorrow might slowly evaporate but there was no help for it. He poured himself a drink and plopped down in the den and let his mind review the events of that day a week ago.

His Becky was here one moment and gone the next, the stroke taking her life without a hint of warning. She had kissed him lightly on the cheek as a thank you for the excursion and was hanging their jackets while he was preparing the wine and snacks. He hardly heard the sound of her voice in pain but it was enough for him to ask, "What did you say, honey?"

No response. He walked down the hallway to find her slumped atop the jackets still in her grasp. Putting his fingers to her carotids he knew she had fled this life for some other. He began first aid procedures but knew that he would not have any chance.

He remembered clearly his calm actions. He lifted her and placed her on the couch in the den, called the Neptune society who promised to call the coroner's office and handle all the details. The pastor at the church made himself available at Paul's convenience. When the phone calls were completed, he sat in his rocker, letting pain sink in, followed by sobs that only he could hear.

He had thought that it was strange the way life surprised you. Their worries were about whether Becky's HIV would lead to that slow and painful way of death called Aids.

He was seeing again the scene during their last trip to South Africa working with Doctor without Borders. Becky spotted this very tall-injured field worker staggering into camp. Without care for self and contrary to their own rules, she ran forward to keep the man from stumbling to the ground. The blood from his wound splattered over Becky. One act of kindness, driven by compassion turned into a dreaded disease and an ever concern that things could get worse.

He wondered if the ending should be seen as a blessing even in the midst of his sorrow.

Laura

This Morning

She sat on her stool, palette in her left hand and brush in her right. Nothing impelled her to make that first stroke. "I'm not in the mood to continue that winter landscape. It's such a lovely day."

She lay down the palette and brush, stood to relax her body. She walked to the window and let her eyes take in the beauty of Mother Nature. The leaves on the trees were now the gray green of late summer and early autumn. The multitude of buds on the Debutante camellia hinted of gorgeous white blooms in the offing. A humming bird was gorging on the sugar water hanging from the branch of the Japanese maple twenty feet from her window.

Anyone seeing her would look with admiration at her long, tanned legs, emerging from soft curve of her hips and moved his eyes upward to take in the grace and beauty that was Laura Ryan.

Laura wore her beauty with no self-consciousness, even though she had been the subject of many a male's serious pursuit. She moved with grace. One might think she was floating as she moved to the kitchen for a glass of lemonade.

A close look at her eyes or even her mouth might yield a deeper understanding of this courageous woman who had already seen more of pain and death than most of us see in a lifetime.

The sight of the pale blue and cloudless sky reminded her of the countryside near Chingmai, Thailand "Was it only seven years ago? It seems so long ago that I watched the surgeon peel away the damaged flesh from a patient on the first day of my work at the leprosy hospital. "

She smiled to herself as she recalled some of the words of the poem that her friend and tutor, Nurse Ann, had sent to her last week.

She had known the joy of service as well as the heartache of love and separation in the years since.

Life had changed since Jake came into her life, offering a new love and a hope for her future, both missing since the failure of her first marriage.

She had surprised herself when she, so early in their relationship, could not help from falling in love with this warm loving man. He was a complete opposite of Phil, her ex and Peter's father, who had not wanted anything to do with his son.

She was thrilled to see how rapidly Peter had fallen for Jake and even accidentally called him dad before she and Jake had run off to Reno for the wedding and a loving weekend.

She remembered the excitement in Peter's voice when she told him that she and Jake were to be married.

She turned from the window, went to the stove and poured a cup of coffee, then walked into the den, switched on her computer. For a full minute she was lost in thought and just stared at the screen.

Then she did something she hadn't done for ages. She opened her photo folder to the pictures of that long stay in Thailand,

"Perhaps I can get back to doing some serious painting instead of wasting my time on pretty landscapes."

She searched through the files until she found the series of photos of the first lepers with whom she worked in Chinghai, shortly after graduation. From Harvard.

"I'm sure I can do this now." She chose a picture she had taken of the surgeon paring away some of the dead flesh from the foot of a teenage victim. She had in mind a painting of the pain in the eyes of the surgeon as he peered above his half mask. To her, it seemed like a look of empathy, suffering with the pain of the youth he was trying to help.

As she waited for the printer to create the image, she said to herself. “Thank you God for the gift of Jake who has replaced darkness with light.

Jake

Six Weeks Ago

At the emergency room of the clinic on the Eastside of town, Jake was busy stitching up the index finger on the left hand of the six year old, brought in by his mom who was trying, without success, to get him to quit crying.

Jake looked into the eyes of the mother while he said, “Tomas, its okay to cry when it hurts. Crying usually makes the hurt lessen.”

One of the hallmarks of Jake’s practice was putting patients at ease. No patient or even those accompanying the patient, were exempt from tension and worry when they entered emergency rooms.

He knew that he had a sense of empathy with most of the victims that came into his cubicle. There were times when he felt like he was inside the patient’s skin.

He was also particularly good at diverting his young patients with magic tricks, jokes or stories. Finding out that the boy’s injury came during a sand lot ball game, he asked, “Do you like to play baseball, Tomas?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you throw right handed?”

“Yes, sir.

“How do you bat?”

“Left handed.”

“What position do you play?”

Tomas beamed “I am the pitcher, the best pitcher on our team.

“What’s your best pitch?”

“Slider.”

“Great. Lucky you cut your left hand. It won’t be too long before you play again.”

“How long?”

“With this bandage off, you can play some next week although you will not be at your best catching the ball.”

“That’s okay,” he said, smiling.

The boy had forgotten his pain, having been caught up in the conversation with his doctor. He responded eagerly to a series of questions from Jake.

Just before he had completed the bandaging, Jake heard the sound of two sirens. That meant two ambulances arriving simultaneously and that spelled trouble, probably a major accident.

He would not let himself be distracted from the patient at hand. When Jake had finished, he asked Tomas to wait a moment while he went into his office to retrieve something.

He handed the boy a baseball and asked “Would you like to show me how you grip the ball for a slider.”

Tomas grinned and took the ball placing his finger just as he would if he were on the mound. The without asking he demonstrated the grips for a fastball and a changeup.

“Thanks, Tomas. Now, don’t forget to have your mom change the bandage tomorrow.” He put out his hand for a handshake and then put his arm around Tomas as he handed him over to his mom.

After both the boy and mom had thanked and headed for the exit, Jake heard the boy saying. “That hardly hurt at all, mama. I liked him.”

The intercom was calling “Doctor Barker. Code blue. Room three, stat.” He missed hearing the nurse’s aide say to her friend “What a fine doctor and what a good looking hunk”

He smiled inwardly when he heard her friend responding “Dream on, baby. He’s a confirmed bachelor, Get in line behind four nurses and two women doctors who have been eying him for months.”

He smiled inwardly. “If they only knew that Laura and I were married last weekend.”

Book 1. An Unlikely Meeting

The door of the apartment was smashed making a god-awful crashing sound. Before I could get out of bed, two KGB agents in black overcoats, guns drawn, were standing over the bed. Marie was sitting up, covering her breasts with the sheet. “Stay,” shouted one of the agents. “What is the name of the young man you met in the alley earlier this evening?”

“I didn’t meet anyone,” I protested vehemently.

“Don’t lie. I saw you.”

“No, sir. You are mistaken.”

“We never make mistakes. Get your robe on. We go to the office.”

“Just as I started to rise with the gun poked into my ribs, I awoke with a jerk, sweat coming out of every pore of my body.

It was one helluva nightmare, Paul.”

The early autumn day was bright after yesterday’s first surprise rainfall of the season. The playground yard was drying in the sun so that a few brave moms were bringing their young ones out for air, several mothers wiping down the benches and one who was wiping down the swing set seats.

Some toddlers impatiently were trying to get on the swings, wet or not, but skillfully out maneuvered by their moms.

A young couple, probably teenagers, jogged by, water from their heels making rooster tails behind them. Three middle-aged women were doing a fast walk, no doubt their daily morning exercise deferred until after the rain.

Two very senior male friends were staring at the chessboard in the roofed in area of the City Park and playground, apparently more interested in conversation than playing chess Barney had just told Paul of his bad dream.

“Hell, Barney. Your time in Hungary was over fifty years ago.”

“Yes, but several times a year that nightmare recurs. As far as I remembered I never had anything close to that experience. I admit I used to worry about the KGB being aware of our conversations with the students in the months before the revolution”

“Were you with the CIA at the time?”

“No. I was working in the State Department, technically under orders to avoid any connection to anti soviet groups I had been assigned, however, to work with our intelligence section, which meant close relationship with CIA agents serving with us.”

“It was no accident that Marie and I sought out students who were eager to be rid of Soviet domination. Their biggest

gripe was the strict control of curriculum, limiting the broadening of their knowledge. Furthermore their inability to exchange ideas and information with sources outside of their nation was stifling the education process.”

“Having been granted the privilege of using the university library, gave us access to the campus and the student groups. Our first contacts occurred at a coffee shop near campus. Once we were recognized as Americans, we were invited to join a group of six around a large table near the back door of the café.”

“The students were eager to speak with Americans, to test their own skills with the language and to learn the idioms we used. The girls were interested in fashions and pressed Marie with all kinds of questions. She eventually had some magazines sent over from the states so that the girls could see for themselves the current fashions. The boys, on the other hand, questioned me about political and athletic news.”

“After establishing trust by the students, we offered to help them in any way but not as a part of rebellion against the government, no matter how much we would have liked to do so.”

“We finally arrived at a mutually agreeable arrangement. They kept up apprised of efforts or actions being planned by the revolutionary groups. In exchange, we found books on subjects of interest to the students and imported them in

our official mail bags that were not subject to inspection by the Hungarian government.”

“I took responsibility to take the books to the library, handing them over only to one student library assistant who was part of our group. If our role were ever discovered, I hate to think of the consequences I had dreams and nightmares through all our stay.”

Paul said “I have a dream once in while that is a replica of my experience flying over Saipan during the war. My gunner is yelling, “Jump, Jump”. Smoke is filling the cockpit, bullets are pounding the fuselage. The nose drops and the plane are headed downward. Sweat breaks out on my forehead. Life pictures flashed by.”

“I felt like I was headed to the pits of hell but suddenly the white canopy is holding me in its arms, until I awaken, twisted in the white sheets of my bed.”

“The feeling of relief is enormous as I, too, lies in my own damp bed, finding Becky embracing me and planting kisses over my cheeks and lips “It’s only a dream, dear.”

The two sat in silence for a few minutes, reflecting privately on their war experiences.

Barney, well built, large shoulders and arms with bulging biceps, sleeves rolled up to his shoulder, was rubbing his slightly whiskered strong jaw with his left hand while he fiddled with a pawn in the other.

For some reason the sound of the children playing nearby took him back to the war years, specifically near Lake Como where his OSS unit was hiding in a barn during the daylight hours. That one morning, just as he had dozed off, he had been awakened with the sound of children doing preschool chores; gathering eggs in the chicken coop less than thirty feet from the loft where he and his buddies had settled down two hours ago. He imagined he could hear the boy yelling “tre” and the girl “duo”

The picture was so clear in his mind that it might have been this very morning. The sounds and voices that morning long ago had been a welcome contrast to the scene the previous night in which seven German soldiers and two of his allies had been killed during their raid on a German ammo dump.

His friend, Paul, was bending his lean torso over the table, presumably looking at the pieces on the board. He looked up, saying, “Barney, you’re day dreaming.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess I was.”

“Care to talk about it?”

“The sound of those children shuttled my mind back to a morning in Italy. The kids were getting ready for school while we hiding in a loft nearby. Suddenly a few moments into that reverie I was asking myself about the children in Germany who would not see their fathers again, the fathers

we had killed the night before during a raid on a small ammo dump. The Germans we killed were veterans, some of whom had to be fathers of children they would never see again”.

“Barney, your sensitivity is phenomenal, even after sixty plus years.”

He could feel his throat tightening and choking a bit before he responded, “Strange isn’t it? In the midst of war, it was not a question I ever raised, at least not in my memory.”

The two sat in silence, not moved to restart a chess game.

Paul broke the silence. “Life has been kind to us, Barney. Whoever would have guessed that seventy-five years from the first day we met, that we would retire in the same neighborhood, twenty five hundred miles from where we started? That we have managed not to get permanently separated and then to be together in one place is like a gift from heaven.

Barney said “I couldn’t believe my eyes when I heard your voice talking to the clerk at the checkout stand that Monday, a month ago. I hurried over and sure enough it was you and then to find out we live only six blocks from each other. The people were clapping by the time we finished embracing, both of us shedding tears of joy. What a moment.”

He laughed, “After our individual journeys that took twists and sharp unexpected turns, life has dealt us this great gift. Speaking of gifts, that comment reminds me of a verse from a poem that Miss Williams made me recite in ninth grade English. You remember sharp featured grumpy Miss Williams?”

“Vaguely.”

“She was determined to expose us to culture in spite of our resistance. Most of that poem has stuck in mind after having to remember it line by line. The poet was that homey Edgar Guest. Do you remember when the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette published some of his poems weekly? Let’s see if I can remember the first verse

Life is a gift to be used every day

Not to be smothered or hidden away

It’s not a thing to be stored in a chest

(I don’t remember the next line}

It isn’t a joy to be sipped now and then

And then put back in a dark place again

“Wow, I am impressed, Barney. I had no idea. You never betrayed your interest in poetry at any time we were together.”

“I guess it never came up. No matter where I traveled, if it were possible, I had a book of poetry with me. I can remember trying to create poetry in my mind during dark nights of silence while hiding from the enemy in Italy during the big war

Barney rose to head for the restroom area.

Laura and Jake were strolling along the path in the Willow Glen community park.

They were holding hands, Laura giggling for no apparent reason at all, while scanning the profile of Jake’s head. Anyone could see that they were in the first blush of a love affair.

She said to Jake “I love the way you and Peter have become so close. It seems to me that it was that way long before we were married, probably from the first day you met.”

Young Pete was running ahead, bouncing his rubber ball. He lost control and started chasing the ball as children will do. The ball was picking up speed as it stayed on the path. Jake broke off his handhold of Laura’s and began to jog to catch up with Peter.

Up ahead of Peter, about fifty feet, was a curve in the path. Rounding the curve was a teenager on a mountain bike, hell bent for leather.

The cyclist had ignored the warning sign of no bicycle riding in the park. Laura gasped as she realized that the cyclist was headed for Peter, who was unaware of the peril of the collision. Jake yelled “Peter, lookout.” As he started to dash forward, he knew that he would not be in time. His experience as an emergency physician was alerting him to the probabilities of the result of what he was about to witness.

An elderly gentleman walking nearby heard Jake yell saw the pending crash and ran to scoop up Peter just as the cyclist swerved to avoid the crash. The bicycle skidded, sending the young man hurtling across the grass lawn that bordered the path.

The gentleman handed the crying Peter into the arms of Jake and headed toward the down cyclist to see if he was injured. Fortunately neither the young man nor his bicycle suffered any serious damage. Skinned elbow and a bleeding scrape on his left knee were the only traces of the incident.

The young man was more concerned about Peter than he was about himself. He escaped the hold of the older man and ran to Jake and Laura, who was now holding the sobbing Peter. Ignoring the parents he spoke directly to Peter.” I am so sorry, that could have been very bad and I might have hurt you badly. Please forgive me.”

Peter and his folks were taken back by the sincerity of the young man. Laura immediately thanked him and insisted

on a look by Jake. “Please let my husband examines you. He is an emergency room physician.”

Embarrassed as he was, the youngster agreed and ten minutes later was on his way telling Jake that he would never again ride his bike in the park.

Jake looked around for the man who had saved Peter from disaster. He saw him seated at a bench nearby talking with a friend who seemed to be about the same age.

Jake spoke to Peter who was now in Jake’s arms. Peter scrambled down and ran over to thank the man.

“Thank you for saving my life, Mister.”

“You’re welcome but I hardly think you would have lost your life.”

“Thank you, anyhow. My name is Peter. What’s yours?”

“I’m Barney and this is Paul.” Peter shook hands with both men.

Laura and Jake finally caught up with Peter, Laura saying “Peter, have you thanked the gentleman?”

Ignoring her question, Peter said. “Mom, Dad, this is Mister Barney and his friend Mister Paul.”

The men shook hands while Laura acknowledged the introduction with a big smile. Paul said “Barney and I were

about to pause for a sip of coffee. Please join us. The thermos has more than we can drink all afternoon. I have a soda for young Peter, if that is okay with you.”

Laura looked to Jake who nodded. “We would be pleased to join you for a few minutes.”

The few minutes turned into a few hours as the four exchanged introductory stories. At one point Paul took Peter to the swings, thrilling Peter with some very strong pushes sending him high into the ether.

When the ice cream vendor came by, Barney treated the whole group to Popsicles.

Jake looked at his watch. “Sorry, fellows. We have to leave. I am on duty at Emergency for the evening shift. This being Sunday, our busiest day of the week, I dare not be late.”

Laura rose and called to Peter who was chatting with one of the other moms nearby. “This has been surprising and wonderful meeting. I hope we do this again.”

Jake asked “Do the two of you do this often?”

Barney grinned “Every day. We have just met recently after years apart. We grew and went to school together in the 1930’s and occasionally touched base.”

Jake, getting a nod from Laura, said “I’m off next Wednesday. Perhaps we can get together then.”

Their new friends nodded affirmatively.

During the walk home, Peter, in his very adult manner, said “Mom, those two gentlemen were especially nice. Do you think they would mind if I called the Uncle Paul and Uncle Barney?” What do you think, dad?

Jake was sensing an inner pleasure with the idea of Peter calling him dad a few days before his marriage to Laura; although he and Peter had hit it off from the day of their first meeting.” “I’m sure that they will agree.”

Book 2. Center Stage in War Time

Laura was clearing away the coffee cups a half hour into their next meeting. She heard Peter ask “Mister Paul, would you please push me on the swings and teach me how to swing myself?”

Paul grinned “With pleasure, young Peter, but how about you call me uncle instead of mister?”

“I’d like that. I asked my dad if he thought it was okay to call you uncle. Okay. Let’s go.”

Barney started to help Laura while Jake perused the magazine of the New York Times’ weekend issue.

Laura asked Barney “What do the two of you talk about mostly?”

“We’ve been swapping stories, centered mostly on events that crated a shift in the path we thought we were traveling. In fact, this week we have been telling stories of how the big war, that is WWII, changed the course of our travels.”

Laura said “Barney I’ve never heard anyone’s personal story about life in the military during war time. I know service men usually do not talk about their experiences with civilians but perhaps you could make an exception.”

Barney considered her request for a long minute then nodded. “Okay. I was about to tell Paul a story that includes some of the dark side as well the bright side of war. Why don’t we wait for him to return and Peter is off playing elsewhere. Some of this might well be the wrong thing for him to hear.”

Paul sent Peter off to play with some other kids while he poured himself a cup of water. Barney explained Laura’s request to which Paul agreed.

Barney began. “As the war clouds started to darken, I started some research into military opportunities other than infantry, which was the destiny of Penn ROTC graduates like me. I made some inquiries into army and navy intelligence organizations but never submitted any applications. Four weeks after Pearl Harbor on a Sunday evening,

“This is a call from the State department and extremely urgent. If anyone is with you, please ask the person to step out for a few minutes and call this number ASAP.”

“I’m alone.”

After a somewhat veiled conversation with the party on the phone, I accepted a date to meet at the Adelphia hotel at ten o’clock the next morning. I never did find out why I had to be alone and miss my chance with Marianne.

You can probably guess that I was being recruited by the OSS, who, in some way, had knowledge of everything I had done or left undone from the time I was twelve. I was excited about serving in intelligence and agreed that I could take two more European history classes during my final semester. By doing so I would not be subject to a call to active duty until I received my degree.

Silly to think about it now, but I had no real idea of the work of the OSS.

Three days after graduation I reported to a special office in Washington D.C. in order to meet Mr. Donovan and others.

After a two- day general orientation, I was sent to a private military base for training. Every facet of my training was intense, twelve to fourteen hours a day, six days a week. I had gymnastics, several contact sports, courses in logic, French and Italian, southern European history and geography, military science, including training in firearms of various sorts and some other things.

“Paul, I wrote you my last letter before shipping out in late November, boarded a ship for South Hampton for more training and prepping for my mission.”

Laura poured a little more coffee as Barney stopped for a moment.

“My first inkling of the dangers ahead came as my physical training continued along with a course in hand to

hand combat taught by British commandos, using their weapons of choice. I chose one of their special knives, one with a five-inch blade, as my protector. Along with strengthening our body and muscles we were taught how to deliver fatal blows to every vulnerable area of the body with redeveloped hands and forearms.

Evenings were spent with intense study of pictures and maps of the area where each of us were to be assigned.

When my supervisor thought I was ready, after three days of special intense orientation, I was parachuted into Italy in the dark of night in the Lake Como region, joining two other agents. I was holding the rank of a first lieutenant while my associates were captains, not that we wore our insignia for anyone to see.

Without going into detail, I was assigned to work with an Italian underground group, doing whatever to disrupt and interfere with enemy operations. We recruited civilians, many of them women, in small communities for single jobs and moved on in order to raid enemy arsenals, food supplies, and blow up troop and supply trains.

Living day and night in a tight knit group can be quite educational. The core cadre was made up of eleven Italians and three of us from OSS. My two associates were second generation Americans of southern Italian extraction, in fact, one Sicilian.

It wasn't long before I discovered that five of the natives were communist or communist leaning, working with us because they believed they could use us to serve their long-term ends. The others were indeed patriots resenting what had happened to their country under Mussolini. None of their differences got in the way of any action but the political arguments were vehement in camp when they were sure that no enemy was near."

Barney paused to gather his thoughts, causing Laura to ask, "We are going to hear more, aren't we?"

"Yes. I was just trying to figure out how to tell the next part." He paused again and then went on. "I would not have predicted that I was capable of killing another human being but I did. It is hardest to forget the first time."

"Some recruited locals and we were raiding a small military arsenal in order to blow it up with TNT. We were able to take almost every sentry as our prisoner before the explosion. One of sentries escaped the grip of one of our gang and was about to yell. I heard a loud harsh whisper "Barney" I understood his meaning. Being the closest, it was my job to silence the enemy.

Its one thing to shoot at an enemy with a rifle, without his eyes staring at you, but it is something else to look directly at your enemy as you take his life. In this case there was no time for thinking. My training took over automatically, my commando knife moving swiftly."

“In spite of my personal trauma, I stayed cool through the whole operation but once back in our camp, I could not stop throwing up as a reaction to what I had done. I expected some ribbing from the others but as I found out, later, many of them had gone through the same experience after their first killing.”

Paul, in order to change direction, asked, “What happened to the German prisoners?”

“I was afraid you might ask that. Up to then I hadn’t asked, but surmised that they were killed out of my sight. Underground groups had no place to keep them and no allied bases were nearby I always figured that our native allies took an occasional prisoner just to appease the OSS officers. Temporarily. After that incident we no longer took prisoners.”

“I stayed in the field for fourteen months before being pulled out and returned to England, learning to sleep on the hard ground or on beds of twigs. There had been days without a chance to wash one’s hands or face. There were days with downpours and little shelter to help stay dry, but we always had decent food, not always hot, most of it due to courtesy of the area residents. At times I felt more like a field animal than a human being, to put it gently.

I had two more face-to-face confrontations in which knives came into play and sorry to say I found it necessary to take other lives.”

“My chief duty back in England was to select the personnel for specific missions, making sure they were ready emotionally so that their survival was reasonably assured.

My duty station was in a London suburb, on the edge of a tight little community whose citizens were very welcoming to U.S. military personnel, which was not always the case. That was understandable, given the arrogance of some of our men.

Evenings, having a warm beer with some of the locals, were a special treat. I learned a great deal about life in the small towns and villages of England. There were tales of fishing in the streams nearby, stories of heroism of some villager, no longer living. .

The oldest of my new extended family was Billy Jones. He would often separate me from the others and tell me of life in their village before the war. “Everyone knew everyone else and their business. There were no secrets. I remember the feud between the Harrisons and the James, finally ending when the teenage James girl married the youngest Harrison just a week before he was off to the front.”

He told me why Smutty never smiled and why Andy Jones put on a brave act. I felt like they had taken me into their bosom. As it turned out, they had indeed.

One evening, Smutty, invited me home for light meal. It was that evening I found the root of his sadness during that dinner I met his youngest daughter, a young, recent widow, whose husband had been shot down over France.

During the meal she was polite but did not enter into any conversation, then excused herself early. Two nights later he brought his daughter to the pub, taking a small table. He waved me over when I entered a bit later. I think she resented her dad insisting that she come to the pub, but she responded to some inquiries I made about life in these small communities.

She asked me if I was free to tell her about my assignment, which I did to a very limited extent. When she had spent a reasonable time with us, she asked her dad to be excused. I gathered up the courage to ask if I might walk her home.

During the walk home I told her about life in the states before the war. She suddenly perked up and asked more questions. We sat on the front stoop and talked for an hour before she sent me on my way.

Two evenings later she came to the pub again and gave me an invitational smile when I entered.

We were the only two persons in our age group in that small community. Everyone accepted the two lonely singles coming to the pub and to the local community dance

on Saturday nights. It wasn't long before we were taking walks in the moonlight under the shade of trees that bridged the small lanes.

Looking back now I can see that the whole community gave us the room and privacy that might encourage a romance for their special daughter who had her life dream shattered.

Within three weeks I was head over heels in love but tried hard not to let it show. Marie was obviously grieving but appreciated and maybe needed male company. I was the only other adult near her age, the other young women moving to and working in London or in the military while the young men were in the service.

Like two lonely souls, needing to learn from each other, we told each other stories from our past. It is not surprising that a sense of intimacy builds when life stories and dreams are shared between lonely people. That was certainly our case. We seemed simply to drift into a that special man and woman relationship

It felt so comfortable to have her meeting me at the train after a tense day at the office. I relaxed as we strolled either to the pub or some days to her family home for dinner. Friendship grew and soon there were other feelings creeping in.

I remember our first kiss. We were sitting under the large tree in the back yard; the moon was the deep gold of a

rising moon on the horizon. I was holding her hand as she was talking of her young years in the village. We were both laughing when she finished telling me about her first kiss as a young teenager. In her excitement she turned toward me and my arms were suddenly embracing her and our lips were seeking out each other's. We clung to each other with lips locked until we needed air.

Breathlessly Marie whispered. "That was beautiful, Barney. I have been waiting for this moment because for days I have sensed your desire matching mine."

She wrapped her arms around my neck finding my lips with hers and totally melting her body into mine.

The very next night, after our opening embrace, she took my hand and led me to a special private place.

On that evening, sitting on the side of rippling creek underneath the glow of moonlight, she shared with me her feelings when she received the notice from the war office with a catch in her voice and then a minute of silence.

She went on "I had shed all my tears through the days of waiting for some word, hoping that it was that he had been captured, while knowing in my heart that he was dead. I ran out into the fields in the dark and shouted at God for leaving me without my love. It took months to come to terms and I want you to know you have been part of my returning to health. Thank you, Barney."

It was only then that I could talk with her about the buried feelings I carried deep, the feelings about killing that occasionally rose to the surface that drove me into temporary funks.

She whispered “Dear Barney, in my self-pity I have only seen you as a pathway to my own health not noticing your pain. I am so sorry. Please forgive me. ”

She embraced me, taking me to her bosom late into the night. We found a way to lock onto each other’s lips sending our messages of passion to each other.

She took me by the hand, leading me to a private place in the hayloft of a barn along the road out of the small community.

She taught me the art of lovemaking in the loft of that barn not far from her folk’s home. There was no other choice for secret lovers in that small community. One of the great memories I have of Marie was her gentle way of leading and teaching me as I literally trembled, bare-assed naked on the blanket in that hay loft. All the dreams I had of what it would be like were pale in comparison to the love I knew that first night.

The second evening I said, “Marie, aren’t you concerned that someone may walk in on us.”

She giggled “Not likely, Barney. In a tight community like this, everyone knows what’s going on. They are all in cahoots, giving us the space we need and hoping

that a hot romance will lead to something more. They have loved me for all these years and now you. We two are the subjects of their concern and love.”

Marie’s feelings for me deepened over the weeks. One evening after a visit to the loft, we strolled back to the center of town, took a seat on a bench. I slipped to my knees “Marie please do me the honor of saying yes. I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

With tears of joy streaming down her cheeks, she smiled and nodded a yes, pulling me to stand so that she could wrap her arms about me, her head on my chest saying the words I wanted to hear. “I love you. I had not believed it was possible to find love again.”

It took some time to convince my superiors but I finally got permission to wed Marie, if I promised to wait until I completed a short mission into France, two weeks hence.”

Laura, at this point was sure that Barney had come to the end. In a storybook when loves wins out then the book ends.

“There is more, Barney, isn’t there?”

“Yes, dear one.” After a brief pause to whet his whistle, he went on with his story.

“We were a group of three, carrying twenty five thousand dollars in gold bullion for a special French resistance group in the Provence area. It should have been a cakewalk. We were to make a night landing, hand off the package to our friends when they had been identified and take off. We were not even expecting to turn off the engines. It was to be that quick.

Unfortunately our host group was late, requiring us to wait the maximum fifteen minutes. Nine minutes into the wait a scout troop of four German soldiers appeared and surrounded us. We escaped with our lives because of the arrival of our resistance hosts, who with no hesitation engaged the enemy, killing all of them

We handed over the gold but found ourselves stranded because a stray bullet found its way into the wrong part of our engine.

We were taken to the group hideout for the night but found out we were on our own to get out of the area. The local groups helped us to move three times to other havens while we tried in short bursts of radio communications with our London base to set up an escape plan. A plan was finally concocted whereby we were to be air lifted on a dark night forty kilometers from our present location. The date was set for six days hence. Unfortunately there were no known havens on that stretch of territory.

With some drinking water but little food, the three of us began our trek. The first night we walked about nine

kilometers, then slept in a hedgerow during the daylight hours. The next night we traveled over fourteen kilometers but fortunately found a deserted old shed in which to sleep and rest. The rain came down in sheets for two hours during that day.

The next evening because of the overcast we started earlier and covered all but two kilometers of our trek. In our exuberance we got a little sloppy and were suddenly taken by surprise when a male voice called out “Bon matin.”

Three sets of hands moved toward their weapons while I responded and took a chance saying that we were Americans. He got all excited and welcomed us, hoping we could join him in ‘petit dejeuner’

It turned out that he lived alone, a widower and hated the Boche.’ After a big breakfast, we were able to bathe and sleep on firm but comfortable beds. When he came in from the fields that evening, we were able to converse even though our French was less than fluent. He was hungry for news of the war since he had no way to communicate with neighbors and his radio having been seized by the Germans.

About an hour after we turned in for the night, we heard a German patrol unit drive up. The old man was out of his bed and quick to move outside to greet them. We lay still, hardly breathing, armed with pistols and knives.

The old man offered them coffee, gladly accepted by the Germans who said nicely “Danke.” We could hear one

of them walking around the house. I could sense my body tightening up and the grip on my pistol stronger. It seemed I hadn't even let out a breath until all was clear.

From the tone of their voices I figured they were telling fun stories, maybe even dirty stories. About a half hour later came the good sound. "Danke." The engine turned over and caught and off they went. The sighs of relief were definitely audible.

Except for that, it was almost like a rest stop in the middle of a war until he hid us in his wagon and rode us to the rendezvous spot at 0100. The pickup and landing went as planned.

Just recently I was looking through Marie's journal. And read the following: "While Barney didn't exactly say so, I thought this was a two or three day trip. This is day five and I'm worried. Anything can go wrong in airplanes. No one knows better than I.

I promised myself not to fall in love with anyone who flew airplanes."

The next entry. "I wonder if God is listening to my prayer. He can't be cruel enough to take two loved ones away from me."

The next entry. "I'm getting desperate. I don't even know who to call and since we aren't married, I may never know."

“The next evening at 1800 hours, I looked out the kitchen window watching Barney walk up the lane. I went flying out the door, jumping into his arms, tears flowing from both of our eyes as we stay interlocked for minutes, neither wanting to let go even for a moment.”

Laura, who was holding her breath, said, “Wow, what a story filled with thrills, danger and love.”

“There was a happy ending ten days later in the small church that was filled with locals and a few of my associates. The most difficult time for us was the months of separation after I was returned to the states waiting for the end of hostilities and Marie to come to me as my English bride.

Paul said. “That has to be one of grittiest sidetracks in history.

“You’ll love this footnote. Looking at another page in Marie’s journal I read “While we thank our folks for the room in their home, I find it a bit stifling so tonight I am taking Barney down to the loft for some wild sex”. They all roared.

Peter who had been listening intently, interrupted with “now that Barney is done telling his story, can we play ball?”

They adjourned with laughter on their lips to the lawn for a game of toss and catch.

Book 3. Love Takes Root in the Rain

Laura had promised to pack a picnic lunch for their gathering on the following Saturday. While she was enjoying the last drop of coffee, Barney began clearing the table and packing the basket.

Barney turned to Laura and asked her “how long have you two lovebirds been married? It seems to me that you act like newlyweds. Am I right?”

Laura took on the question, giving Barney a huge smile. “You are too damned perceptive, dear sir. We’ve been married for just a few weeks. Peter is my son from a previous marriage.” She leaned over and planted a sweet kiss on her husband’s lips.

Paul joined in. “That has the makings of sweet love story. Barney, how about being you’re charming self and getting Laura to tell us the tale of this romance.”

After a bit of coaxing from Barney, Laura and Jake recounted their first meeting.

“One Monday morning, I walked Peter to kindergarten for the morning session as usual. Upon my return, I drove to the jogging trail in the park, alongside Los Gatos creek, parked and started out on my two mile combination walk-run.

Rain had been predicted to start about noon. I guessed that I would be in plenty of time to finish before the rain started.

Three mornings a week I was there with two special hand-weights which I pumped to keep my upper body in shape along with my legs and lower body.

A hundred yards into the run, my mind was dealing with what had been a recurring subject. I had discovered that these morning runs were therapeutic. Often I found myself solving some problem that had arisen, arriving home later and working out the details.

Sometimes the subject roiling about seemed too complex to find a solution in a morning's run.

Such was the case that morning. I couldn't shake the thought that I had been feeling a loneliness creeping in. During the last several years, concentrating on my love for Peter and dealing with his needs had kept my mind and body occupied. I also found relief from boredom or loneliness when I held that brush and palette in front of an easel.

Suddenly I discovered that I needed more adult company. Perhaps I had been avoiding adult company. Earlier I know I was avoiding my women friends who believed it was their duty to find a man for me.

The few times I had accepted a dinner date with a male, I got the impression that my date couldn't wait to get past dinner and get me into bed.

I wasn't looking for romance but I would love more time with one or more adults in order to exchange ideas solve some world problems and even find someone to listen to my feelings.

Deep in thought I had not realized that a light rain began to fall just at the point when I was farthest from her car. I decided to speed up a bit, meaning I would be running most of the mile of the return leg. I had never run that distance without switching to a walk.

I was really puffing when I arrived in the parking lot; I leaned over into a deep bow, hoping that would help me catch my breath. The rain was a steady and heavy downfall. Soaked to the skin, I was planning on shedding my t-shirt and bra and slip into the extra sweatshirt I kept in the back seat.

I started to pull off the soaked t-shirt. Whoops. Standing just to the left of my car was this athletic male body, stripped to the waist, toweling down this blond matted chest that tapered down to his narrow waist. “

My hands were in an upward motion, about to strip of the shirt. I paused for a moment as I felt a blush rising from my throat to the cheeks. I couldn't turn away from the sight of his body, even knowing that I should not be gaping.

He grinned, saying, “Wet morning.”

I asked myself “Is he grinning because he caught my staring or is it because my wet t-shirt was hugging my body like a second skin, I knew I might as well have been naked?”

I turned quickly, unlocked the car and pulled out a towel to cover myself, murmured a “Yes it is” and with my back to him began toweling my face and upper body.

“Nice car. I’ve often wondered who belonged to that sleek silver Porsche which seems to arrive while I am on my run. Hi. My name is Jake.”

I knew I had to pull myself together before turning; else my knees would buckle at the sight of this Adonis.

“Good morning. I’m Laura.” I slipped the towel onto the leather seat and moved into the car. Rolling down the window I said, “I don’t want to be rude but I’m cold and wet.”

He moved closer to the car, ignoring the downpour. “Do you run daily?”

“No, just three times a week.”

I half wished he would turn around while I shed my wet shirt and slipped into the sweat shirt, but I wanted this conversation to go on.

“I do, too, on Mondays Wednesdays and Fridays.”

Feeling a little safer with a door between us I flashed a devastating smile. “Me too.”

“ I don’t see a ring on that left hand and am wondering if you would feel free to run together Wednesday about nine fifteen? I hope I am not being too bold.”

“Not a good idea for a woman alone on a trail given the situation these days. I don’t know you.”

“I would like to change that, if you would let me. May I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Sorry, I need to get home to change before I catch a cold.”

“I’m not ready to give up. How about later today?”

I admit that I loved his gentle persistence but immediately my mind jumped back to those last days with my ex, Phil.

I hoped he did not notice that I could feel my heart doing a little dance and that strange stirring in my breast.

I tried to analyze the meaning of this but knew I had to answer him before he decided that I was cutting him off.

For the next few minutes, I forgot how cold I was. .“Maybe I should turn him off, but he seems nice”.

Instead, I asked “do you live in or near the Willow Glen area of the city?”

“Yep.”

“All right. Bring two Starbucks coffees to the Willow Street Park at the covered area with the tables. Make mine decaf. I’m sure you can find me about one thirty.”

“It’s a date.”

“No, it’s just coffee.” We both laughed as she started up and took off.

Jake cut in. “I was hoping she meant it and would be there when I showed up with the coffee. Even as I looked at this beautiful body, every curve and nook exposed, I was taken with this stranger, her face just a bit flushed as she responded to my persistence.

It was beyond the male hormones responding to this beautiful body. The word that formed on my lips was ‘nice’.

I was sure that she thought me brazen, unable to take my eyes away or even blink.

She was not only beautiful but exuded a quiet charm. During those few minutes I sensed that I had never met a woman to whom I responded as I did to Laura ever before.”

Barney pressed her. “What else was going on inside?”

Laura shyly admitted to the group about her feelings. “MY mind was whirling on the drive home. “What a hunk? I can’t believe the reaction I had. I haven’t had a thought about sleeping with a man for ages and certainly didn’t think it would start this way with a stranger in the park. “

“Right in the midst of that thought a picture of Phil popped into my mind. He too was tall, athletic and handsome. My mind said “Put on the brakes, Laura girl.”

She hesitated and Jake continued the story, describing the meeting in the park. “I was surprised when Laura introduced me to her son Peter, whom I found to be much wiser and better spoken than any four years old I ever met at the clinic.

Per was soon off playing with some other youngsters under the watchful eye of one of the mothers.

Laura led me out for a walk across the park. I asked “How much do you need to know for me to earn than run in the park?”

“Quite a lot, I think. You can start by broadening the description of “doctor” and how you happen to be at the clinic.”

“ I actually trained as a surgeon but decided that immediate aid in any sort of emergency was where I was most comfortable. I found that out early. Right after passing my boards, I volunteered for “Doctors without Borders”. The group I was in had a fine surgeon, in fact a fine team. When the internist got ill and had to return home, I volunteered to assume his role and knew I had found my niche within the first week.

We were in Laos where no peace seems to be in sight. As you would imagine, the days were long and the

conditions primitive. I learned more in those few months there than during my years in med school. That is only a slight overstatement. I also had a chance to practice some surgery.”

“When I returned, one of my teammates, who grew up in San Jose, suggested that we two explore possibilities in this area. Both of us are on the staff at the clinic.”

“I’m thirty seven, never been married. I grew up in Ohio, graduated from Case-Western Reserve, studied medicine at Pitt and finished a residency at Jefferson in Philadelphia”.

“I grew up as the youngest in a big family with some nieces almost as old as I am.

Being the youngest, I must tell you, I was spoiled rotten by both parents but life taught me some lessons that straightened me out.

I enjoy golf; watch some other sports when I am bored. The local symphony does a credible job as does the opera company, once in a while. The rep theatre is excellent.

Now, do I get to know a bit about you? That stranger thing works both ways.”

With a laugh Laura said. “Touché. Married, recently divorced, mother of a great boy, graduate of Vassar, speak several languages. I love serious and pop music, dancing, theater and my newly adopted family. I am an only child,

parents living but constantly on the road in the business world.”

Jake with a grin said “I think I know enough to run in the park with you.”

“You sound a little too eager. You know next to nothing of me. I might very well be “Lady Bluebeard.”

“Do you shave like he did?”

“Why of course not.” Then she laughed at his joke. “I shave my legs occasionally. That was cute. You got me there.”

Jake laughed “Any other things I should know before I risk being alone with you?”

“I’m not overly religious but I am a believer and belong to a great congregation. I think of myself as a serious mother and a striving artist. That doesn’t leave much room for frivolity. I’ve overheard people refer to me a cool’.

”In today’ culture that sounds like a compliment.”

“I think it was used in the old fashion sense.”

“I have a feeling that you’re cool in the modern sense and I am hoping you find me safe enough for a jog on the trail.

Laura retorted. “You sound safe enough but maybe I can frighten you enough to give it up. Wednesday?”

“May I pick you up?”

Laura giggled. “You’ve already done a good job at that.

Paul and Barney clapped at the end of that story Paul said “We thank you. Your story is much lighter than the ones we tell. I’ll try a story when we see you on Saturday.

Book 4. Exploring the Unknown

Laura had promised to pack a picnic lunch for their gathering on the following Saturday. While she was enjoying the last slice of cake and drop of coffee, Barney began clearing the table and packing the basket.

Paul said “I had been promising Barney a story of some of my wanderings after the war. You look in the mood so here goes.

“Due to some good luck, an inheritance from my grandfather and some astute investing by my Becky, she and I had been able to spend time in adventure, service and travel. Since Laura said it was my time to tell a story, I thought this might be appropriate.

At a special clinic in San Francisco after three months of tests and trials Becky and I discovered that we were unable to have children, the problem being mine.

It was Becky who kept me from going into depression. As far back as I could remember, I had expected to be a father and a grandfather. It is so difficult to come against a wall that says.” Sorry, your dream ends here.”

Back in our apartment she sat on my lap. “Honey, there are other options. When we are ready, we can adopt as many children as we want.

We have been so focused on making a baby that our intimate relations have become work instead of fun. Right now we can start having sex for fun again.”

She had this marvelous spirit that kept us buoyed for a lifetime. It had been an unexpected and tough time when providence took her from this earth before me.

Since we had our inheritances I was not feeling any great pressure to go to work. We spent days walking the hills of the city, dining in many of the famous eating establishments of the city and discussing plans for our future.

Deciding to indulge ourselves, we decided not to buy property that would tie us down. That meant no pets either.

Finally we both went to work in the business world so we could have enough funds and time to vacation in adventurous places. That meant we would not be using up our capital.

When we both were well ensconced in our positions so that we were more needed by our employers that we needed the job, then we negotiated longer vacation periods to indulge our desires.

We made loads of friends and partied all over the bay area, although our favorite spot was the top of the Mark Hopkins Hotel dining room. I don't think anyone would have called us alcoholics but we sure consumed more liquor than was good for us.

The clique of whom we were apart, lived the same way wherever we traveled, be it the Big Island in Hawaii, Acapulco or Nice.

It is interesting to look back to note that while being childless seemed to others to be only a disappointment turned out to provide our lives with opportunity.

One weekend while staying at a small hotel in Mendocino, we strolled on the beach then settled down on a blanket with our lunch basket and beers. Becky took the can of beer that I opened and moved it toward her lips. “What the hell are we doing, Paul? I quit drinking right now.” She poured out the beer into the sand.

I put my can back into the bag and took her hand in mine. She pulled me to lie down with her. “We ought to be doing something more positive with our lives than having a string of parties.”

“Sounds like you have been giving this some thought.”

“Just the last few days. “

“Anything emerging?”

“Let’s take our booze money, leave our friends behind and take a trip to some less explored area of the world and see what’s out there.”

“I’m willing to give it a try. But what do we tell our friends with whom we have already booked two trips.”

“They won’t even miss us. Anyway, friends are the wrong term. They simply people who enjoy our company as long as we booze it up and are willing to go where they want to party.”

I had not even thought about that. Life had been fun.

A month later, we were able to take ten days visiting cities and villages in Guatemala and Nicaragua where our eyes were opened.

In Guatemala we spent a lot of time in the rural areas to see if the government was helpful where the poorest people lived.

We did some research prior to departing. While poverty is clearly a national problem in Guatemala, poverty rates are significantly higher in the ‘poverty belt’ of the western plateau and the northern region

Poverty across Guatemala is reflected, for example, in primary school enrolment. The country has an overall enrolment rate of less than 30 per cent, but in the urban centers it is over 40 per cent, compared to 25 per cent in rural areas. In Quiché and Alta Verapaz, two of the poorest areas, the enrolment rate is just 20 per cent, while it is 60 per cent in Guatemala City, the capital.

Based on our findings we decided to spend most of time on the western plateau.

A combination of social and environmental challenges compounds the problems of poverty. As far as we could determine, although Guatemala is a multi-ethnic country, indigenous groups were excluded from its social, economic and political mainstream.

This situation was exacerbated by Guatemala's complex topography. The rugged terrain and lack of roads have kept rural communities remote from the rest of the country, and centuries of isolation and neglect have resulted in chronic poverty.

The terrain also presents challenges to farming. High mountains and dense forests provide little agricultural space, and farming takes place predominantly on steep slopes. With few reliable water sources, farmers must rely on rainfall to irrigate crops.

We had hired a guard/guide, a strapping six footer, wide shoulders, apparently handy with a gun and knowledgeable of the terrain, He had been born in a village in the poor northern region of the country. He was recommended to us by a missionary who had been resident in Guatemala for ten years.

Miguel had left home at age ten and worked his way to Guatemala City, the capital. There he soon was part of a thieving group of youngsters, under the tutelage of the local "Fagin".

At age thirteen it was more than thievery. He had learned to handle guns and knives and was now operating

alone outside the gangs in the city. His mistake came when he tried to rob a high class restaurant at closing time, falling into a trap set by the local police.

When they discovered his papers and found out he was only a young teenager, they called Father Jessie, who had spent all his time trying to recruit and reform some of the very young who were being recruited into gangs organized by the local "Fagins".

Unless you are a reader of the great Charles Dickens you may not recognize this name. Fagin is a fictional character in Dickens' novel, *Oliver Twist*. Born in London; Fagin is described as "grotesque" to look at. He is the leader of a group of children whom he teaches to make their livings by pick pocketing and other criminal activities in exchange for a roof over their heads.

Miguel recruited work and now, seven years later, he was the most sought after guide for the Norte Americano tourists.

We rented a jeep and headed west. It seemed that for each ten miles deeper into the poverty belt, the living conditions got worse. Within thirty miles, we no longer had even a dirt road, but Miguel had traveled these areas often and took us from one remote village to another.

It was a wonder that any tradesman could travel here. I asked Miguel how they managed to find clothing to which

he replied. “Sometimes peddlers bring used clothing from the larger villages or cities and barter for whatever food stuffs the villagers grow.

“Sometimes Father organizes some volunteers with me as guide, to bring clothing and medicines to the various villagers. It is very important to have a strong guide because of bandits.”

”Bandits in this poor area of the country?

“Oh, yes. Most are of them are young men who grew up in poverty and have no jobs available. They travel in small packs but fortunately have no guns. Armed guides, like me, protect the peddlers who travel from village to village.

“How about school for the children?”

“Most families see no advantage, especially for the older kids. They are needed to work the fields or do the hunting or fishing if the village is nearby a stream. Some of the families that are better off and want something more for their kids will send them off to the larger villages or cities to live with friends or families near the public schools.”

In the few villages we were able to visit, the only source of water in a village was one deep well. All the water for a family had to be carried to their homes, which were not much more than hovels. We did notice that the properties outside the building were neat and clean.

Miguel said. “In dry seasons, the water is rationed and is often brackish, but the families boil the water and I have never heard of death caused by lack of water. The rural people do not live as long as people do in the capital, probably because of the minimal amount of food value available to them.”

We only spent two days in Nicaragua. Although the situation is a little different in Nicaragua, the plight of the poor is the same.

Having a firsthand look at the poverty there with a bit of relief being offered by a handful of missionaries from churches in the States had a deep effect on both of us.

A great sadness for us was coming to understand how several major corporations were making fortunes off the backs of the poor underpaid native laborers.

On the flight back from Nicaragua, Becky said to me “Paul, sometimes it is difficult to see the paradoxes in life.”

“What brought that on, honey?”

“I was just thinking about being a part of a country that is democratic but is steeped in capitalism, which makes for great possibilities for many. Yet, there is the cruel side to capitalism. For instance, there are the large corporations which make great profits off the backs of the poor in these Central American countries.” She was about to explain but suddenly her voice broke and tears eased out from behind her lashes.

The conversations that Becky and I had during those hot stifling nights in Central America and the subsequent conversation before the flight ended, caused us to look carefully at the road we had been traveling.

Instead of becoming an entrepreneur, as had been my vocational dream and Becky who only wanted to be a loving wife and mother, we became world travelers with worldwide interests and a purpose.

Talk about major shifts. This was big. The first years of our travels allowed us to see conditions as they existed in various other countries and being most moved by the problems in some of the developing countries. We saw the poverty and filth of Calcutta, the spread of disease in several African nations. It was despairing to see the lack of infrastructure in Haiti, a country that sees some major disruption in its struggles usually twice in each generation.”

“Paul, what impact did that have for the two of you, seeing the poverty in poor countries?

“That’s a good question. Several things were happened. We began increasing our pledges to the Presbyterian Church mission program after meeting a few church fraternal workers in several places around the world. Almost all were focused on service to help the less fortunate in addition to whatever other duties were their assignment.

Becky began keeping a journal, which she used as the basis for several articles for the denominational magazine

and some letters to the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Mostly we were now planning trips during which we could spend time trying to help in some way.”

“What kind of things?”

“An example would be digging a well in the back country of the Sudan; another would be Becky spending weeks helping a teacher in a class learning English as a second language in Israel on a kibbutz.”

By the time we reached the age of forty, we were both well off enough to retire, partially because of inheritances we received as only children in our respective families. My dad had recouped his losses in the years since the depression, providing funds for the cases in which we became involved.

Becky, who worked at the Pacific stock exchange took a real interest in handling our investments and together, with our broker, grew our accounts. I had no prior inkling as to her interest or skills. At the time I received my inheritance from my grandparents, the market was in a down swing.

I wanted to invest in interest bearing paper, like bonds. She worked on me to take the risk and we ended up investing in certain new high tech firms. Of course, we made out like bandits. We also invested in a new type of firm that was later dubbed “Venture Capitalism.”

We were in position to take long trips now that we were retired. I am always amazed at the way your life can change if you are open. I am not what one might call a religious man but I do believe that if you are open to being led, marvelous opportunities open up. Prior to the time of our retirement we were vacationing during our travels with an emphasis on observing and helping those in need.

Our first long trip upon retiring was to Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, which in earlier years were the one nation, India.

We were in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh when terrible storms hit all three nations, Bangladesh taking the worst beating. That country is prone to flooding, sitting on the Ganges Delta with many other streams flowing into the Bay of Bengal.

The flooding waters took out roads and bridges as the storm raged. With limited or no infrastructure, thousands and thousands were made homeless. Food and potable water, the basics of life were practically nonexistent, resulting in serious medical problems and a heavy death toll.

Within a few days, all kinds of emergency aid materials and food began arriving and piling up on the docks, unable to get to the remote areas and other cities because of the failed infrastructure. We felt so helpless, just imagining what was happening to those thousands who could use what we saw stranded here.

I happened to stroll over to a remote area of the docks where I discovered a small miracle happening under a small banner that said Church World Service. Small packages with medical shots, vials of some other medications, bottles of clean water and cellophane packs of dried food were being loaded into a myriad of small craft such as canoes powered by small motors, canoes and rowboats with paddles and some medium sized motor launches, moving rapidly away with their loads while others were waiting in line for the loading of life giving supplies.

There were even roughly built rafts with two men with long poles made from tree saplings or long branches.

It was not long before we were both helping to load. I have never sweat like that at any times including the time when I was downed behind enemy lines in the South Pacific.

We worked for three days, dead tired each night from using muscles that had no preparation for the task.

In times of crises countless numbers of persons show up to help in any way they can. One can find business men stripped of their jackets but still in business clothes handling crates of material or picking up pieces of crates that break up during unpacking.

Not all are there to perform a humanitarian function. Becky found herself trapped in the midst of such a gang. We had become separated as the crates were being moved around for opening and disgorging the contents.

I was sitting on a crate resting and being engaged by a local policeman in conversation who was eager to practice his English with a westerner. His eyes kept roaming we talked. He was saying “There are many thieves among the workers. My job is to look for them.”

At that point in the conversation we both heard a loud scream. Actually it was a shriek but for me there was no question. That was Becky’s voice.

Ben, the policeman, was up and dashing in the direction of the scream, blowing his whistle, two long and one short blast. Later he told me it was a signal to his team the approximate location of the call for help.

I was close behind. We reached one of the smaller temporary piers where a motorized canoe was being untied from the post while a ragged and beaded young man was trying to start the motor.

The one holding Becky lost his grip on her mouth and out came another shriek. Her elbows were jabbing into the captor’s ribs.

I was more than ten years distant when two other police appeared from might and sped past me.

I kept running toward my Becky although those three were ahead of me. The thief holding Becky let go and dove into the water, disappearing under the water while he seemed to be heading toward a group of outboards that were moored, awaiting their turn to come in for loading.

Ben's teammates jumped aboard and roughly pushed both other thieves down on to the bottom of the canoe and handcuffed them. Ben gently put out his hand for Becky while I broke into a smile of relief.

Moments later, she was in my arms sobbing and then laughing with joy. "Oh, Paul, I was so dammed scared."

Ben came by to take her statement while I held her hand. The essence of her report was." A gentleman working alongside of me whispered. "These three look like thieves not workers. We better leave. He turned to walk away but I had two more packages to remove from the crate.

In that minute, the thief that got away, grabbed and tried to cover my mouth. His companion was pulling out a dirty looking rag that was apparently going to be my gag. When I screamed, the hand was back over my mouth and the other started to untie the boat. That was when I saw the policeman and my husband on your heels."

The incident did not stop Becky. After a drink and lunch, she dragged me back to the piers to work the afternoon.

I later had chance to converse with the CWS (Church World Service) leader who explained that CWS had cadres of relief workers stationed around the world ready to organize other helpers in the time of crises.

This team happened to be stationed in Dhaka because of its vulnerability to floods. Each of the cadre

members were employed in some other jobs but were on CWS payroll from the beginning to the end of the relief duty. They also had funds to pay other helpers. I was impressed.

We decided to learn more about this special organization, a cooperative of eight protestant denominations, established primarily for the purpose of emergency world relief.

Although loosely related to the Presbyterian Church, I took pride that my church was part of this service to suffering humans around the globe. Someday I will tell you about their cooperative service with

Other denominations during the Vietnam War.”

“From that point on, our travels took on a new dimension. We were going to places for a reason, deciding to spend large chunks of time with organizations like “Doctors Without Borders as well as Church World Service, most, but not all, of our service in Africa during those years. We felt that we had been called to this special vocation, a long way from any dreams or plans either of us had up to that point.

We took one year serving in a Presbyterian program called Volunteers in Mission in the Sudan, torn apart by civil war and unrest. We both were teaching English as a second language for nine months after a two month orientation program.”

Few people are granted the opportunity or perhaps some are, but never have the courage to give of them wholly to someone else's desperate need. We were fortunate in that way and reaped personal rewards beyond measure. Some other time I will be happy to tell you more of my wanderings, but enough for now.

Laura poured some lemonade. "I too was lucky, Paul, having the chance to serve in Thailand."

"Yes and your service with the Aids victims in San Francisco."

"I agree. That, too. I look forward to the continuing saga of Paul and Becky. By the way I thought I saw you walking out of the Safeway the other day with a lovely looking woman. Was I right or see things?"

Paul smiled "You were not imagining. In fact, her name is Joyce and we were headed to meet Barney and his Lois. We picnicked at Alum Rock Park, may be our last for the season."

Laura grinned. "We would love to meet your lady friends. Are they available on some occasion to join us? How about a barbecue at our place this weekend?"

Paul looked toward Barney and got an affirmative nod. "We'll talk with the ladies and let you know."

Book 5. Journey of Distress and Fulfillment

Paul with his new friend, Joyce, and Barney, with his friend, Lois, arrived together at three on Saturday afternoon. Laura smiled to herself as she watched them come up the walkway. She had guessed that Joyce would be tall and athletic and she was, looking like a retired star tennis player. Her guess about Lois was also right on. Three inches shorter than Barney, slender and wearing a big smile.

Both women looked like they were in their sixties but knowing the ages of Paul and Barney, she put their ages closer to their seventies. “Lord, I would like to look like that when I am seventy.

Wine, beer, scotch and soft drinks were on the trolley. After introductions, the guests slipped into their swim gear since the temperature was an even 78 degrees.

Forty minutes later, the six of them were settled into easy chairs, drinks in hand and watching Peter and two friends playing in the shallow end of the pool.

Barney said “Lois and Joyce have decided to apply for membership in our Willow Street Park Story Swapping group:

Before he could continue, Laura laughed and said “I move for an affirmative vote for acceptance with one proviso.

Paul, with a question mark on his face, asked “What kind of provision?”

“They pass the initiation test with their own story of a way that a shift moved them off the path that each had planned to travel.”

Three male voices in unison were shouting “Hear, hear.”

Laura with a grin on her face turned toward the women “The snacks are in the kitchen. Why don’t the two of you decide who will go first and take time to gather your thoughts. Jake and I will bring out the snacks and Barney can refill our glasses. Is that a deal?”

Everyone nodded and proceeded with their assignments. Ten minutes later Laura was saying “The business before us is an application from Lois for admission to this bunch of rowdies. Lois, you have the floor but you may speak from your seat. If you want to change your mind after seeing their behavior, I wouldn’t blame you.

Lois let out a hearty laugh. “Their behavior makes them more attractive”

Barney interrupted “I think a brief introduction is in order. Los and Joyce share adjoining apartments just a few blocks away. Lois is a retired professor of anthropology at San Jose State and a mother. Joyce is a retired high school

teacher, also a mother. I'm hoping that their stories give me a lot more insight into their lives."

After that glowing introduction glowing report from Barney, Lois said "I hope my application is approved."

"Has Barney explained the process?"

"Yep He reminded me that false modesty was to be shunned." She started in.

"It took me five years to graduate Magna com laude with a double major, history and cultural anthropology I applied and was accepted into the doctoral program at Berkeley, world renowned for its staff and work in folklore and anthropology.

My studies included two summers at University College, London and field trips to Southeast Asia. At age twenty-seven, my doctorate in hand, I had a strong reputation and was being considered for positions at Berkeley, London and by two international corporations based in Asia.

What is the saying? Life is what happens when you have a plan. The love of my life, Jim Nettle waited four years until I received my doctorate. We were married that evening and intentionally conceived our son, Alec. We wanted to have our child while we were still young.

I went to work at Cal. Berkeley. Life was wonderful. We had the child we always wanted and both of us were employed doing what we loved, with bright futures

Just after Alec's first birthday, we realized that he had a serious hearing defect. I won't go into details, except to say we were in crisis. Alec needed a full time parent and guardian to lead him through the treacherous waters of life made more difficult with his handicap.

Jim had an excellent job in high tech here in the valley that provided financial security. After hours of deliberation, I decided that I was the right one who could be Alec's companion, a fulltime job.

I resigned over protests from a dozen leading figures in the field.

There are so many crazy things that go through your mind when a goal is within your grasp and is suddenly taken away. It was heart breaking but our son meant the world to Jim and me.

This story is mainly about my career but I must tell you that the first nine years of Alec's life was a miraculous sidetrack from my plans. The personal rewards overshadowed all thoughts of loss, especially those first few years. My heart was warmed by Alec's responsiveness and Jim loving tender ministrations to both of us. No mother or wife could ask for more.

Jim and I immediately took lessons to learn sign language. I recalled a young friend who took a few classes with me. I remember her using sign language to help another student who was having serious hearing problems.

I called her at her home in Fremont and got an enthusiastic response to work with us. The first sessions were difficult, especially for me. Having been a quick study in almost any subject, I suddenly found myself totally inept. Maria's patience helped me get past that hurdle.

I remember many sweet moments of working with Alec but what struck me the deepest was the day that Alec made the sign of his first word which was "Daddy".

Many months later, I had just walked into the dining room while Jim was cutting up some food for Alec's dinner. Neither was aware of my presence but I broke into tears when I saw Alec signing to Jim "I love mommy."

Another delight was discovering that before he was five, he had learned to read our lips, making things a bit easier with the confines of our home.

Unfortunately, I also remember the hundreds of times as he grew older, when he pouted or got angry when he failed to communicate with Jim or me. You probably can hear the catch in my voice as I recall an incident when he was five.

He had been telling me about a story he had read. Suddenly his mind went blank His inability to finish the tale sent him into a tantrum. He stormed around the room, shed tears and finally fled to his room.

A half hour later, I knocked gently on his door and stepped in. Lying on his bed, he sat up and opened his arms to invite me in. We embraced in silence for minutes.

He eventually pulled away and signed “I thought I was crazy. I couldn’t remember the end of the story.”

I was so focused on the task of finding help for such problems, so that within two months, I became quite expert on the subject of hearing loss in children, using all the research skills I had learned as a doctoral student. I spent hours and hours researching, using a variety of communication methods. You need to remember that this was before the Internet or email.

I began to gather a community of parents of children with similar hearing problems. We were able to marshal other friends and organizations to raise funds for research while some of us did our own research and contributed that knowledge to our research centers.

After the first two years, I began to find a little time to devote to Jim and my love of anthropology again. I had been relieved of some responsibility in the hearing project. There

were others with experience and expertise in the field who took over the work that I started, including the fund raising.

I still spent a few hours a day on the project, when not present to Alec. Most evenings, with the love and support of Jim, I was able to devote to anthropology correspondence with colleagues across the world or studying special research papers provided to me from Cal. I eventually returned part time to the university staff.

We finally were in position to hire a part time nanny whose love for Alec almost equaled mine. I was able to spend more time at the university and some time writing a book, loosely based on my doctoral thesis, cultural development on the Malaysian Peninsula.

I received an offer to work for the Republic of Singapore, but, of course, could not do that. Alec was only nine in Nineteen Seventy One. .

Several things came together within the next twelve months. The Internet was maturing and something called Electronic Mail came into use. Because of some major changes in the staff I was offered a full professorship in the Anthropology Department at San Jose State. Within three months of my appointment, Jim was elected to the vice presidency of his company. It took ten years traveling a circuitous route to get back on track.”

Some time we can talk about difficulties in regard to curing deafness, but as of now it is sufficient to say that my life is richer because of the route I traveled.”

Jake turned to Lois. “There are so many details which I would like to hear at some time but tell me just a bit more of your family life as Alec grew past age five.”

“You can imagine that, in order to talk with each other, we had to find the means. Otherwise communicating love is limited. By the time Alec was five we were expert signers, that is users of sign language. As I said earlier, Alec was reading our lips; we encouraged playmates and had to convince parents to let us teach their children at least the rudiments of sign language. Almost all those parents later thanked us for introducing them to this special experience.”

There is so much more I want to learn from you, Lois, but that will have to wait.” With a chuckle in his voice, Jake said, “I move acceptance of the application.” Chairs were scraping as the others rose to greet Lois.

When they were seated and fresh coffee was poured, Paul said “I would like to suggest we ask Lois to answer some questions but I notice that Jake is getting ready to leave for the clinic. One thing is obvious. With addition of Lois and Joyce we will have enough stories for a book which means, Laura, you should be taking notes.”

“Paul, remember the day you asked me about continuing in journalism, I mentioned maybe biographies. Well I will let you in on my secret. Most afternoons, prior to dinner, while Peter is playing his games, I have been compiling notes from our afternoon sessions. Not sure what I had in mind, I knew that a journal might be of help,” She giggled. “Perhaps, one day, the loves of my life will free me to start a book.”

Jake said “Sorry, to interrupt. I have to have a talk with Peter and then dash off.”

After he departed, Lois said “Laura, don’t put it off. Peter here will support you and observing Jake, I would guess there is nothing he wouldn’t do for you.”

“Maybe you’re right. I have been thinking of doing a story, the base of which might be fictional autobiography of part of a life journey enhanced with the journeys that you my friends have provided.”

Joyce said , “Go for it. Laura. I would be delighted to help with some editing.”

“I guess with your support I don’t have an excuse.”

Barney put his arms around Lois. He figured she needed a little comfort. He knew from personal experience that relating such an autobiographical story could be therapeutic but also very draining. Relating the story must

have taken her back to those difficult days and he thought she might enjoy a break.

Paul raised his voice to get their attention. “Laura says she is ready to put out our supper but needs a little help. I also would suggest we delay any questions for Lois until Jake can participate. I know Jake is off on Monday. If Lois is available, perhaps we can get our questions answered then. How does that sound?”

Everyone was nodding and offering to help Laura prepare the food or set the table.

The six of them and Peter gathered at noon since Peter was in pre-school on Monday morning. Barney and Lois took responsibility for providing lunch and had been the first to arrive with a cargo of tacos, burritos and iced tea.

The questions for Lois were delayed until everyone had their food and drink in hand. Lois handled each question with as complete a response as possible.

“One of life’s surprises is that way we have new opportunities when we are blindsided, as long as we are willing to recognize the options that lie ahead of us.

First, came that whole new group of friends, growing into a support community because of a common concern. The drive and love of so many gathered together is like beholding a view of heaven.

Another is to see the miracle happening daily in the responses from Alec and the effect on Jim and me. I can't imagine any family where love is deeper or more prevalent than it was in our household. In fact, once that Jim and I were totally in tune, our intimate relationships resumed like during those first years of our love affair."

"Did those early years seem to affect Jim's career development?"

"I have to admit that my focus was so much on Alec that I paid little attention to that side of Jim. I can only presume that he faced his demons and conquered them. His strength was always there for the two of us."

'How about your health considering the hours you put into the project, tending to Alec and then pursuing your vocation?'

"Honestly, I never flagged, although I have no idea why. I did lose about twenty pounds over a period of six months but managed with Jim's urging to get back on track."

Jake said, "Tell us about a little about specific obstacles arising in interfamily communication."

"Our experiences were both strained and hilarious as we mixed up signs. As I said the other day, I remember Alec's frustrations when trying to tell us something and not finding the signs to do it. He threw things, slammed his fists into the

wall and often ran out of the room. It demanded a lot of patience and here again I credit Jim. He truly was our anchor and compass.

Many a night, I fell asleep in his embrace as the tears dried after sharing with him the frustrations of the day all of you must know what I am talking about, that comfort that comes from a loving partner during the sharing of a bad experience.

One of the cute side stories is about Jim coming home with an off color story and insisting on using sign language that evening in bed to tell me the story, his little way of asking for intimacy.”

The most poignant question was from Jake.

“You mentioned Alec’s neighborhood children accepting and accommodating him as much as possible, but—“

Lois intercepted the question and finished it for Jake. “How about experiences outside the neighborhood?” her voice choked and she paused in order to get control.

“Sweet children, who face situations which they do not understand, act from fear. They can be mean and many actually bully their target, whether that youngster is a cripple, blind or deaf.

Although Jim and I tried to prepare Alec as he approached his sixth birthday. I even invited a few new kids his age that would be around the church on Sunday mornings.

I had met another mom whose child was Alec's age and who suffered from significant hearing loss but not quite as seriously as Alec.

She told me that she and her husband alternated attending worship because they had one experience in which their son was bullied to the extent he would not ever come to church. She told me that he also said it was no fun being the only one who had to watch his mom's hand signals during the worship." At that, Lois totally choked and reached for a hankie to wipe away the tears.

After a bit, she said "I can't stand bullies, no matter what age. A few days after my conversation with that mother, I was watering some flowers in the front garden. Alec was playing next door with his friend, James.

Suddenly I heard a couple of strange voices yelling "Dummy, Dummy." I looked up to see Alec running toward me, with two strange boys stalking him and shouting at Peter.

I started toward them. The two boys turned around and started to run, still shouting at Alec. I took him in my arms, sat down on the lawn and wept with him.

In a hoarse whisper she said to the group.” If you don’t mind I would like to end the story here.””

Barney, wiping his own tears, stood and began to offer refills of iced tea.

Joyce put her arms around Lois and everyone else joined in a group hug.

Book 6 an Innocent on Madison Avenue

Joyce asked “Would it help if I moved into my story?”

Paul suggested “How about a break. Maybe a walk would help. I’d like to take Peter to the swing set.”

Joyce joined him while the other two couples set off in two different directions.

When Peter joined some of the other children under the watchful eye of another mother, Joyce began “I guess that age eighteen or nineteen is a transitional stage for many. For some, like me, it was the time of matriculation to college. I entered Columbia University in the New York in September nineteen fifty eight.

As you see now, I was tall, short body, long legs, aware that I had a nice shape and was attractive to boys, if high school was any indicator. Away from home and all the restrictions of my youth, I was looking forward to the parties, the proms and some deeper relationships with members of the opposite sex. All this was in addition to completing my studies, since I was really a serious student and wanted to prove to my parents that this was a good investment.

In the larger world, major events were taking place but of little significant importance to me. I remember that the Dalai Lama had to flee Tibet, a couple of Americans were killed in Vietnam, signs of things to come, and Castro came into power. The one event that was big for me was “The Day the Music Died”, the death of Buddy Holly in a plane crash. Along with a million other young people I was crushed.

Two less dramatic things occurred that were important to me Panty Hose was introduced that year and the Mini skirt was unleashed into the women’s fashion world. I may have been the first coed to appear on campus in panty hose and a mini that barely covered my fanny and private place.

The reaction was phenomenal including admiring and lascivious leers from some men and admiration from others. From the girls it was the same. Envy, disdain and admiration with questions about where could one find these things.

Unbeknown to me, there was a photographer from the Times on campus. His photos were interesting enough to the editors to write a brief story along with two provocative shots of those long legs and my fanny almost revealing all to the world.

Within the next three days I had two phone calls and three persons seeking me out on campus for interviews. They were representatives of ad agencies and modeling agencies ready to sign me on. I was delirious and dazzled and confused enough to call my dad.

He asked “Are you sure you want to do this? You may find it to be hard work and probably interfere with your school work.”

“I really would unless you have a serious objection.”

“You are now a young woman embarking on the river of life where you will encounter smooth sailing and occasional roiling waters. Honey, this is your decision like many others that you will be facing in the months and years ahead.”

“I really want to do it but I need your advice regarding which agency.”

“Give me twenty four hours and I may have a suggestion.”

“A week later I was contracted to a well know modeling agency. The following weeks were undoubtedly the hardest working weeks of my life. I refused to quit school while the demands for modeling classes and actual photo shoots had to be executed immediately. The ad agencies wanted the right poses for the next issues of their clients ads.

I turned in for a few hours’ sleep mostly after midnight and rose by six in the morning, seven days a week. I waited with bated breath for the first magazine publications to see pictures of my gorgeous legs in Technicolor, on display for the world to see. It was absolutely brain and ego blowing.”

Laura asked, “Since you obviously could not keep up that pace, how did you manage your life?”

Taking a sip of cold coffee, Joyce answered.

“Summer vacation gave me breathing space since I had no classes. But suddenly new demands were being made by one of the ad agencies. For whatever reason, someone had decided that I had photogenic shoulders, arms and hands. There was another rash of demands for photo shoots.

The modeling agency, for financial reasons, decided that I needed more public exposure. I was suddenly being seen at famous eating spots with handsome models and often with good-looking celebrities from stage and screen.

This latter group made life difficult. I think that, without exception, each of these male celebrities did everything possible to get me into bed, a sort of badge of honor, I only guessed or maybe it was simply to meet their own urges. It was awful.

There were more traumas ahead. One evening after dinner with a leading lady of one the top Broadway shows, she invited me to her apartment for coffee and dessert.

There was no coffee to perk. She had excused herself for a few minutes. I poked around the kitchenette for the coffee pot with no luck. I looked into the refrigerator which was completely bare.

I was interrupted with the whisper of movement behind me. The next moment, her arms were snaking around my body as her lips were searching for that special spot on my throat below my left ear.

I froze for a moment and my mind was whirling with options. I had not signed up for this. I wanted to scream, turn and take a swing. I thought about daddy's comments about roiling waters. I knew I had to remain calm and find my way to a safe landing.

I gently disengaged her arms and moved my head to put distance between her lips and my throat. Mustering my voice to sound mature, I said. "Sorry I am strictly hetero."

She moved away. "I thought that might be the case but gave it a shot anyway. Please excuse me."

I spent nights trying to get to sleep after these episodes. Like every maturing young woman I wanted to have a good sexual experience but certainly not under these circumstances. Besides I was a practicing Roman Catholic dealing with all the issues of my training and the current teachings of the church.

I went home one weekend in spite of the protests of my manager who had arranged a date with a very famous screen star. The agent used every technique at his disposal to make me keep that date.

The agency manager loaded me with guilt of being selfish. He threatened me with clauses in the contract. When I wouldn't give in, he cursed me. I was so nervous that I could not drive home to New Hampshire.

My folks met me at the train, hugging their sobbing daughter and settling her into bed for a fourteen-hour recuperation. After a steaming shower on Saturday morning, I slipped on an old favorite robe, a little ragged around the hems, but one that made me know I was home and safe.

The three of us sat around the kitchen table for almost three hours, mom and dad listening for a half hour as I vented about my feelings of being used and treated as a product instead of human being. My mother kept pouring tea, her remedy for any emotional upset.

When I was ready to take a breath and quit the ranting, Daddy asked me if I had thought about any options.

“I don't think I have any options under my contract.”

“Do you want to consider other options?”

“If only I could, I would.”

“What would you like to do?”

“Resume my studies full time.”

“Have you thought about some specific goal?”

“Well, no, but it won’t be all about boys, parties and proms. I haven’t thought beyond that.”

“How can mom and I help?”

“If there is a way to amend my contract, I would like to do what is right for the agency but on a less demanding schedule. If possible I would even like to be let out of the contract.”

“Well, I am only a country lawyer but my old college buddy is a partner in a prestigious city firm. Why don’t I set up an appointment for you?”

“He reached for my hand and pulled me onto his lap like the way he did when I was daddy’s little girl and was enveloped in those strong arms with happy tears freely flowing down my cheeks and dampening his shirt.”

A little later, I took his hand leading him to the living room. Looking around I asked, “Something’s missing. What is it?”

Mom, who was following said “No magazines. We thought all those ads would only increase your upset.” I hugged her.

“If you want to get some of them and talk, I’d be delighted. I am feeling much better and we haven’t once done this. I have never really given you a chance to comment or express your feelings.”

That's all right, dear. I am so proud of you"

She went to the closet where she had stacked more than a hundred glossy magazines. She said, "The only criticism I had was that in the first months, no photo showed your lovely face. It was--, pardon the expression, ass and tits"

I burst into laughter, as did dad. I had never heard my mom use, what I would call, a crude expression. We spent more than an hour reviewing photos, some of which I had no memory of shooting.

My older sis and family came for dinner, giving me a chance to renew our wonderful relationship and an opportunity to know my young niece.

After mass and brunch, my folks put me on the only southbound train for the long ride back to the city.

To make this long story short, my lawyer negotiated changes so that I could go back to school full time without the pressure of daily shoots and public relations appearances. The ad agencies made the most of that last summer. I carried out the preset assignments through September 26th and was given the option to make a weekend shoot in the future, if it fitted my schedule. I did a few until the Christmas season shoots were complete by the end of October and bid farewell to my associates and employers at the Halloween party."

Paul said, “Joyce, they probably would like to know what followed, at least in general.”

“I revamped my focus on study and ended up getting my teaching credential but that is another story. The question I have is whether my application is accepted.”

Laura gave her a hug and Peter, who had just walked up, joined in the hug. “I guess action speaks louder than words.”

Joyce asked young Peter “Would you like to walk me to the car so we can bring back some soda and cookies for the gang?” Without a word, he took her hand and started for the parking lot.

While Joyce was pouring out the sodas, Peter was distributing the cookies. After all had been served, Peter said, “Thank you, Miss Joyce. This is delicious but my mom says that soda is too sugary to be healthful. I enjoy it anyway.” He was unaware of all the smiles that surrounded him.

Lois asked Joyce. “Would you take a few minutes and tell us how you got back on track and how, if at all, the diversion affected your future?”

“Sure. I stayed at Columbia, majoring in history and world cultures. I took a position teaching middle school in downtown Newark in Jersey. It was a challenge and after a five year stint, I decided to go elsewhere.

I believe I had a modicum of success with the young adolescent girls, particularly after one of students brought some copies of “Cosmopolitan” a magazine which featured my poses and identity during the latter part of my career.

That incident led to an extracurricular program where I helped the girls learn to walk properly, find the kind of clothing that showed them off at their best. Every one of the dresses, skirts and blouses came from second stores and church rummage sales.

By the way, it was here that I met the love of my life that had been born and raised in Keene. He was two years older than I and finishing a seven year stint as a school administrator in Newark.

The rest became history. We were married in my home parish, settled down in Keene, and had two daughters. I occasionally subbed at the middle school and volunteered to work with young girls needy or well-to-do.”

Jake stood to thank her, announced “I need to head for home and change for work and I need a ride, honey.”

Laura took Peter’s hand, saying “I have much to do at home so we’ll drive you and stay on. “ See you guys, tomorrow, sorry, no, the day after. Tomorrow is easel and canvas day. My psyche is chastising me for ignoring my calling.

Book 7. Vietnam 1972

There was a special guest at the gathering this morning. Jake had introduced George, his co-worker at the clinic, now the head surgeon

Laura poured coffee for all and told George that today was a special story day. “Paul will tell us about a trip to Vietnam with his Becky during the war. Peter, you can stay or play on your trike.”

“I want to listen for a while.”

Paul started in “I don’t think I told you previously but Becky, using her journal notes, wrote articles that were published in three denominational magazines and also in the New York Times Sunday magazine. The first was the story of Church World Service in Bangladesh and the other the story of little Joey in the Philippines.

Well, I guess, on the basis of that, the chief executive of CWS sent me a letter inviting the two of us to visit and write up our version of a special mission that was taking place in Vietnam. I placed a phone call to find out some details. After all, going into a war torn country was something to be considered very carefully.

With all the details in hand, I presented the idea to Becky during pillow talk time that evening. She was always

most vulnerable to one of my sales pitches at that particular moment.

This time she needed no sales talk. Being Becky, she was ripe to respond to some humanitarian mission, especially if adventure was included. We were headed for a trip to see the work of Vietnam Christian Service, a combined effort of Mennonite World Service, Lutheran World Service and Church World Service.

We left Kennedy airport, flying to Tokyo for a three day layover, then to Manila and arriving at Saigon, as it was known then. We arrived on February twelfth, very weary.

The VCS coordinator met us outside of the customs offices and insisted on a thirty-six hour rest period

While we had been in a number of unfriendly places, this experience was scarier, at least for me. I believe that Becky found it exciting and moved without fear.

About ten that first evening at our hotel room I thought I heard thunder as a sign of a coming rainstorm. “Boom, Wham”. Ten seconds later a repeat and in a few second the exact repeat.

I panicked, not sure what to do. I looked for Becky, calmly staring out the window trying to determine the source.

The rumble continued at regular ten second intervals. Becky turned and seeing the pallor on my face started to laugh which alerting me to the fact that it was artillery.

I then remembered the comment from our host telling us that for two hours each evening, night after night the enemy, located some seventy miles or more from Saigon, put on the nightly show.

It took some getting used to, even if the source was many miles away.

We were scheduled for two important visits. Thirty-five miles down country, VCS had one of its five locations in active zones. The camp offered food, medical aid and any service within its power to villagers or any combatants.

In the previous two-year period they had offered service to allied forces, Vietcong and even North Vietnamese soldiers.

Becky sat up front in the cab and I in the back with two Viet soldiers and bags of materiel. It was a large ten-wheeler, with two large signs on either side and one on the roof, painted 'VCS in Vietnamese, French and English.'

We moved slowly over rough terrain, mud splattering up behind the truck. It had poured rain early that morning

I was nervous on the ride through the countryside, having heard stories about how the Vietcong moved stealthily through the countryside. We had no military

escort, only well marked vehicles with large signs saying “VCS”. The U. S. military had offered escorts but the policy was clear. VCS was an independent Christian witness in the midst of war.

Despite our fears, we were rewarded for our willingness to come. I found out later that my hosts were totally confident that the VCS sign on both sides of the vehicle would keep us safe as it had for two years prior.

It was deeply moving to sit at a fireside in the dark hours right in the middle of a combat zone, hearing tales of nearby fighting, injured soldiers or civilians hobbling into camp, looking for aid and succor. We were told that no a single injury or death to any of the workers had occurred during the two years of their service in this camp or in any of the other four camps.

I presume that story was told to reduce the level of my fear and I am sure it was true, but my gut was roiling.

The area surrounding the camp was often overrun within days by one of the three militant groups taking the territory temporarily I remember my doubts during that first night when a battle broke out nearby. It was close enough to hear the splat of bullets as well as the plops and explosion of the grenades.

Our instructions were clear. “Lie on you is got, crawl if you move about, but, in no case, are you to wander outside.”

It was Becky who was unfazed, accepting the dangers as just another fact of life.

On the second morning, just after the battle that kept me awake for hours, we had the privilege to help Ann and Stu, members of the permanent team. We bandaged two villagers while our volunteer medical student treated two South Vietnamese soldiers with serious lower body wounds. The blood and wounds were not a problem. We had seen worse in our time.

The pressure came during times when the local area was under siege. The staff had to make certain to complete medical repairs quickly so that an enemy force overtaking the area would not catch the injured still in camp.

I remember one incident when two Vietcong soldiers were bandaged and hustled out of the compound just an hour before a dozen South Viet soldiers appeared looking for stragglers.

I spent those entire times braving it out while wanting to hide under my cot each time. In times like this, one's mind says stay calm because two years of experience, tells you that the soldiers are careful about not hurting anyone in camp. Never the less, the reaction of fear is hard to overcome.

One specific day will forever be etched in my mind. At 0516 three Vietcong walked into camp carrying a fellow

soldier. Based on my judgment of the respect shown by the three, the victim must have been their leader.

The extent of the injury was not reparable by our staff but I watched them clean three wounds and apply medication to reduce the possibility of infection. The youngest of the three kept urging, almost threatening the staff to hurry. Finally, given the signal by Eddie, one of the medics, they rushed off.

Twenty minutes later I walked two of our troops, dead tired, thirsty and hungry. I led them to a mat, poured a mug of tea and a mug of coffee. The corporal said they had been chasing a group of Vietcong all night and finally caught up with half of a squad. "We missed their leader and three others, but I think we wounded their leader." He didn't ask for information but looked carefully at me, hoping, I guess, that some reaction or expression might give him a clue. I think I played my poker face correctly. Forty-five minutes later they were gone.

The primary water supply for the compound was a sump that stored rain water and a hand pump that I remembered seeing in old western movies. This was supplemented by paying some of the village men to hand carry pails of water from the small pond outside the village.

The third day there I sat down and sketched out a rough flume that could carry the water to the village and then extended to the compound. The sketch was a poor example of the great aqueducts of Rome but practical.

The camp director grinned saying “Why the hell did it take you two years to get here.”

Several weeks later we received a snapshot of the flume with water flowing to the compound and a note of thanks from the director and the village headman.

We spent five days with those heroic but unassuming young people who were committed to offering their service to anyone in need. All sides of the conflict welcomed their service and the workers never differentiated among those in need, whether it is medical service, feeding the hungry or offering a place to rest. I saw them as true believers and followers of Jesus, who showed and taught us to love our enemies as ourselves.

I must admit that while I would not have missed this experience for anything, I felt a sense of relief when we arrived back from the front. A day of rest was available upon our return to Saigon before the last two days of our mission.

I spent the two days crawling through the back streets, and even what I would call alleys, seeing the way VCS was serving the refugees from the north that had no sound place to lay their heads without the aid offered by VCS.

Refugees from the north streamed into Saigon with faith in the military might of America that democracy offered a better life than life under the communist regime of

the north. The big problem was not being sure if the refugees were for real or only infiltrators.

Becky spent several sessions with a Red Cross group and some Mennonite missionaries trying to devise a program to move some of the refugees to rural areas south of Saigon. We never did hear if the planning was effective or not.

Becky had an entirely different but unique experience. Escorted by a beautiful young widow she spent the afternoons visiting in a maternity hospital. Thousands of young mothers who were expecting a child were trying to sell off their new arrivals to adoption overseas. VCS had paid counselors in the maternity wards working with expectant mothers. Assuming the posture that a newborn has a better chance in life being raised within its birth family, VCS was offering financial aid when that was the root cause for adoption.

I spent two hours with Becky and Lon during the second afternoon. Lon said the story I heard was the most frequent story she heard.

Even as Lon was interpreting I could feel the woman's pain. With tears running down her cheek she was saying. "I got pregnant during my husband's furlough eight months ago. We already have four children; the expense is so great that we cannot afford another child on the meager pay our soldiers receive.

My husband wanted me to have the baby taken from my body when I first wrote him, but the stories of many women who went to the secret places were terrible. Some died. Others suffered major sicknesses. I have four children and a husband to live for. I could not risk someone in a back street killing of my baby.”

She was unable to finish as the sobs and tears took over.

There were no organizations such as Planned Parenthood and VCS was theologically in no position to support abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. For me, those two hours were more gut wrenching than the five days we spent down country.

We flew to Manila, spending two days at the International Hotel in Manila. That first night was terribly difficult for Becky. She wept in my arms and then clung to me during the entire night. That was not the Becky I had known. I always thought of her as strong as well as sensitive but we all know that regardless of our strengths there lurks some vulnerability in all of us.

It was only in the bright sunshine of the following morning that she reverted to her old self, a teasing and loving wife.

It was rare but she never shared with me what went through her mind as she clung to me all those hours. I

guessed that like me she must have been thinking about the children we never had.

Our flight to San Francisco was a long flight that started in the early evening in heavy rains in advance of an approaching typhoon. We were soaked by the time we left the field bus and boarded the plane.

The flight crew helped us to towel down and change clothes after we were air borne.

During the course of the long flight, most of us stretched our legs by walking up and down the aisle. To my surprise, near the rear of the plane I saw six young American women tending babies on seats next to each of the adults. These were six of the babies born in that same hospital now headed for a home in the states, courtesy of a service provided by a church related organization in, the northwest.

Although Becky had taken that walk earlier, she never mentioned whether or not she visited with one of the adoptee escorts.

It is interesting to speculate how many such adoptions have occurred in the ensuing years from Vietnam, Korea, Iron Curtain countries, et cetera.”

George, Jake’s colleague, had been moved deeply by Paul’s story and thanked him. He turned to Jake “I should have accepted your first invitation to attend. Any chances I can come back?”

Laura looked around the group and saw approval in their nods.” We would love to have you but there is an initiation ritual.”

He laughed. “Do I have to walk barefoot over hot coals? I might have some trouble”

Laura giggled. “Almost that bad. All our stories are about how life introduced a change in the path that we had planned to travel. Are you willing?”

“I’d be would be willing to try but I don’t think of anything off hand that would match that story. When does this happen?”

“Either the next time or the time after that.”

“Okay. I’m willing.”

BOOK 8. RESCUED

The morning of George's test for being accepted into the group was drizzly, rare for this time of the year. Jake arranged for a morning gathering since Peter would not be present at this hour. They found a corner table under the roofed area.

George began. "Jake and I discussed the general content ahead of time because I wasn't certain about presenting some of the content matter. I've had a number of incidents that helped guide some of my choices, but this was major.

Jake said that among forgiving and understanding adults, I could feel safe enough to share this rather deeply personal matter."

He received a nod of agreement from the group and began.

"The incident, while not pleasant, did make a big difference in the way I would see life and find direction.

I know for a certainty that my actions were stupid but this mistake affected me more than any other later in life.

Up to that point, I was typical of many teenagers; out for fun with no thought about the direction my life would take.

I was a pretty spoiled kid, usually getting anything I asked for. It was obvious to me later that my mother never

wanted me to grow up. She had even refused to cut my ‘beautiful curly’ hair when I started school until I refused to attend because of the teasing from other boys was so maddening.

I went into a tantrum. It was that victory that opened my eyes. My dad told me later that I learned early in life that the smallest tantrum would get me anything I wanted from my mom.

Among my selfish victories was getting my own car before any of my buddies. I had a nice used Chrysler convertible, getting the car at the end of my junior year.

Of course, I became popular, piling in a couple of boys and our girlfriends. We swooped off to the beach for moonlight swimming parties that included all the things that nice kids ought not be doing – drinking beer, heavy petting and on occasion, unsafe sex. We were lucky that none of the girls got pregnant.

Some of the girls may have been on the pill, but I know for a fact that two of them were not.

It was a wild summer in which I was besieged by good looking girls and by guys who wanted to double date so they could get the girl friends in the back seat of my convertible. I obliged them.

Either my folks never heard the stories or, if they did, they chose not to discuss the subject with me. I never worried because I was sure in my mind that if I got into

trouble, dad would bail me out. He might not want to but I knew mother would pressure him.

One of my dad's close friends, a sort of adopted uncle, came to my room one evening after being a guest at dinner.

The conversation went something like this.

“Got a minute, George?”

“Sure. Have a seat, Uncle Bill.”

He sat and said “I hear some stories floating around town. You are quite popular with the kids. I hear.”

Feeling a little proud I agreed.

“I hear you are really very popular with the girls.”

More than a little puffed up I pretended a little humility. “I guess so.”

“Are you using any protection?”

It took me a moment to get the point before I blushed. I realized there was no use trying to buffalo him. “No. I'm embarrassed to ask Mr. J. who owns the pharmacy since that is the only way to buy them, at least so I hear.”

“I see. Do you think it is better not to be embarrassed than to protect a date from getting pregnant or even diseased?”

I began to get angry. “How can I pass a disease when I am not diseased?”

“Since you seem to be dating a variety of girls, according to what I hear, one of them may be infected and pass it on to you. Sometimes it takes a long time before the infections are discovered.”

“Wow. I never heard of that.”

“Let’s pass on that for a bit. How will you feel if you get Anne pregnant? I hear you date her quite often but not exclusively.”

“Wow. Where do you hear all these stories about me? I am not dating anyone else at the moment.”

“We oldsters occasionally talk about the younger generation. You were not the only subject, but I focused on you since you are the son of one of my best friends. ”

“I hear you loud and clear, but I don’t know if I have the courage to ask Mr. J., who has known me all his life. What will he think?”

“I can assure you that he will be pleased since he knows all these stories and watched a number of generations of youth go through these experiences, some resulting in endings that were not agreeable.”

That night I found it hard to get to sleep. My mind traveled back over the earlier weeks, wondering if any of the three girls might have been diseased.

I thought I had better get to the town library and do some research so I might I know if I were infected and if so what

would I do? How could I face my folks? What about one of my friends being infected?

We were all friends and from nice families, but it is possible that one of the gang may have strayed beyond the bounds of our gang.

I took that conversation seriously with great trepidation. Doing the research scared the daylight out of me.

Screwing up my courage with a fistful of doubts, I went to Mr. J. at the drug store and asked for a package of condoms. He didn't bat an eyelash as he reached behind the counter for the package.

Recently I had begun dating only one of the gang, Annie. She and I had sex at least twice a week. I was sure she would be pleased that we would be protected against a chance of pregnancy.

The following weekend in the back of Brown's barn she surprised me and got very upset when I began to open the package.

We had been into heavy petting she asked "What are you doing. Hurry up. I need you now."

I kept unwrapping the package. She sat up to see what I was doing and gaped. We don't need that, George. In fact I don't want you that way. It's going to be unsatisfactory, feel artificial."

It took some time for me to convince her but when we lay back afterwards, she said. “Not again, George,”

That was the last time we dated although we saw each other when the gang was gathered. I began to play the field again and was delighted to find that the girls were pleased to know we would be protected.

Just after school started, about six weeks later Annie joined me on the walk home. She looked a little pale and hesitantly stammered. “George, I’m pregnant and I think it is your baby.”

I was shocked and very upset. I couldn’t believe she became pregnant the one time that I had used protection. Yet, as she explained, the timeline according to her doctor, it seemed apparent that this was the case.

I went to see Uncle Bill before I talked with my parents.

“It’s very unlikely, George, although not impossible. Condoms are not fool proof. Have you asked her if she had intercourse with anyone else after your evening together?”

“She said that she and a friend, Foxy, fooled around the next night. She says he withdrew long before his climax because she had come early.”

“That is no guarantee, George. We need to explore this a bit.”

Uncle Bill helped me face my parents that same evening. I could see the disappointment on the faces of mom and dad. After a lot of discussion we all agreed that we needed to meet with Anne and her parents. Together, we would work out a solution.

During the meeting Uncle Bill kept his eye on Anne and listened carefully to everything she said. It was almost an hour after we started that he had some questions for Anne. At first, her mother began objecting to having a stranger ask intimate questions of her daughter, but her dad suggested that he continue.

At that point, Anne admitted “It’s possible that a little of Foxy dripped before he was clear. He had been reluctant to quit.”

Her dad asked “Anne, why didn’t you say that was possible at the outset?”

“Well, if I were going to have a baby, I wanted it to be Georges not Foxy’s. I wouldn’t mind being married to George”.

“We can talk about that later. In the meantime, why don’t you and George go into the den where you can apologize to him while I apologize to his family?”

In the privacy of the den Anne began to sob and apologize.” I am so sorry, George.” She broke down and began a series of uncontrollable sobs. When she was able to continue she said. “George, I am so sorry. I was so mad

after that night that I went out of my way to seduce Foxy who had a hard time agreeing, aware of the relationship you and I had. The fact is that he wanted to withdraw but I forced him to take me all the way. I must have wanted to use him to get back at you. What I told our folks earlier was a white lie.”

My folks and I had a serious and meaningful conversation with Uncle Bill present that evening. Once I came to grips with the close call I had experienced, I did go into a funk for a brief period.

Uncle Bill and I had more talks and helped me to understand that had avoided a disaster. It very well could have been my seed if I had not listened to his advice earlier.

At first I was feeling sorry for myself. Then, the more I thought about Annie, I began to feel sympathy for her and for good reason. She suffered in a big way.

With the help of my folks and a school counselor I finally got a hold on things.

I decided to concentrate on my studies and surprised my teachers with my achievements that year. It seems that a near disaster turned me down a new path.

I never dated during the rest of the senior year until I took a good friend to the prom in May. That was only to help her save face after her date cancelled a week prior.”

It seemed that no one of us in the discussion group was willing to break the silence that followed. Finally Bernie said, “I can’t even imagine how that would affect someone as young as you were. How did it affect you? It must have changed you in some significant way.”

“No doubt about it. As I said earlier, I quit my playboy routine, committed myself to my studies, finishing third in my class.

I admit that I used my God given talent to absorb completely every course of study in my university undergraduate years and during my studies at med school.

“You said something about Anna’s suffering.”

“Yes. Anne had an abortion shortly thereafter and word got around the community, unfortunately. Most of the parents, probably frightened for some reason, prohibited their kids from being friendly with Anne. That was true for all the boys in our old gang.”

I ended up being her only friend, walking her home once in a while and spending time studying together for our math and science classes. We remained friends through our university years.

I lost track of Annie when we went to different med schools but she called me once during my residency to thank me for being her friend saying “No way would I be here without your support through all these years.”

Laura had been gripping Jake's hand and wiping her tears with a hankie in the other hand. If they would admit it, the tears either fell or were on the verge of falling from every eye in the group.

Lois stood and wrapped her arms around George. "I move to have George be one of us." The vote was unanimous.

Boo 9. A Road Less Traveled

During their next gathering the three women decided on some “chick time” and opted for a walk round the park. The three men opted to play catch with Peter and then each take a turn to see how high they could make Pete fly on the swing.

Joyce began probing gently into Laura’s earlier years. That wasn’t so unusual, especially since Laura was not resisting or avoiding the questions.

When Laura mentioned her long stay in Thailand, Lois suggested “Laura, I think the guys would like to hear that. It sounds to me like something unplanned that may have spun you into a new direction.”

Laura agreed. When they were gathered again, Lois introduced the idea to the men and in minutes Laura was center stage.

She grinned as she said “At Vassar, I was a learning alcoholic. I was a double major, spending countless hours in the library but never really planning a course of study that would lead to a career.

During my last year I had managed a part time internship with the New York Times, covering human interest stories in the greater Boston area. A week after graduation I was seated in the paper’s personnel office

seeking a chance to start a journalism career. No luck, I was not journalism major and had no serious experience. Same results when I tried the Washington papers and the Philadelphia Inquirer. I had felt so sure this was my calling.

I had become so independent that it never occurred to me to ask my dad, a nabob in high tech, for use of a little leverage on my behalf, which I am sure, would have pleased him.

Back in my apartment I was reading an article in the Times weekend issue on the subject of Aids. A paragraph mentioned the need for volunteers in some countries, among them Thailand.

Instead of going to some agency I decided to fly directly to the hospital mentioned in the article. On the plane, I suddenly thought. "This is stupid. I should have had more communication before I jaunted off on a possible wild goose chase."

By the time I changed planes in Bangkok, I was feeling foolish and a tad frightened.

I flew to Chang Mai, in northern Thailand, the location of the hospital. The next day I managed to get an interview with the medical director of McKean Hospital, telling him I was willing to volunteer for a year if there was something for which I could do or be trained.

After expressing surprise that I "just dropped in", he asked, "Would you be willing to get your first lessons

working in the leprosy wards where we are shorthanded? I assure you that this will be temporary.” I agreed. Giving me a big smile, he invited a nurse, Anna Prakob, to take me in tow.

Over lunch Anna asked, “What made you decide to volunteer here?” She couldn’t help but laugh when I told her the story.

“You are a brave and foolish young lady but I am delighted to work with you and I welcome you. We can start you out as a nurse’s aide with a two-week training program, but you need to be willing to start learning some rudimentary Thai in order to be able to communicate. There is a class at the nearby Christian school for learning Thai as a second language. There is other work possible if you do well in the first four months.”

She found a loose fitting uniform for me and started her rounds in the large ward with a dozen leprosy patients.

I wasn’t as ready as I thought I walked into a ward, smelling strongly of a myriad of medications and disinfectant. Then I surprising myself by fainting at the first sight of a disfigured patient, but I was determined. I insisted on continuing after being revived and resting for a bit.

Nevertheless I was on the verge of gagging through most of that session the most difficult to see was the disfigurement from the major operations dealing with significant parts of their bodies that had been infected with

leprosy before getting medical help. At that point some of the patients were still awaiting plastic surgery that would reconstruct much of their physical disfigurement.”

“I saw the extent of the damage as I learned to change putrid bandages, administer medications and move patients so I could change sheets. One of the thrills was learning that my first negative experience was easy to overcome. It was especially pleasing to find that I had a way with the patients, making friends with most of them in a short time, in spite of the language barrier. I loved it.”

“Johnny was a small eight years old who won my heart. He was awaiting the arrival of a prosthesis for his left leg from the knee down, I loved his spirit. He scooted around on his crutches with a bewildering speed. His greatest delight was learning math and speaking English and reading Thai. He had no regular formal learning in his remote village where his dad was now an unemployed wood carver.

Johnny was bright and a fast learner and made great progress during his five months stay at the hospital.

When he discovered I was taking a class learning to speak Thai, he decided to be my tutor, including teaching me to read from the reader he was using as a student in the hospital school. He told me stories of life in his village while he listened to my stories speaking a mixture of crude Thai, English and our own version of sign language.”

“It took me quite a while to learn to request less spicy food at the local restaurants. Less spicy meant a special order and with my limited vocabulary, I faced a formidable challenge.”

“Having studied French and Spanish earlier, languages did help. I finally became adept at learning Thai and found a personal relationship with Amy, the young woman who was our teacher.

She and I began spending evenings together, going to movies and a few community dances. I was being immersed in the culture and learning the language in a very natural way. With her help I found it easier to get the food I wanted and to buy the small necessities to make life more comfortable.”

“Seven weeks after my arrival, Johnny was adapting well to his new leg and foot. I spent more of my free time with him and even took him with me to my class at the Christian school on several occasions.

His face glowed when he saw the rooms where children did their studies during the long daylight sessions. During our walks back to the hospital I could hear the yearning for a chance to attend such a school.”

“The next two months passed by in a hurry. I had forgotten that the reason I came was to work with AIDS patients. One day Nurse Prakob said “If you are free at lunch time, we are invited to lunch with the hospital administrator

whom you have met informally.” I was free and pleased to be invited. As it turned out, this was a business lunch”.

“Miss Laura, we have a special program we are just starting that might suit your talents. You have become aware that we were originally a hospital and program dealing only with leprosy. Right?”

“Yes, I knew that before I came but I read that you were now concerned with AIDS.”

“Yes. You are right. During those earlier years we had a community program of clinics serving the poor but using the clinics as a way to discover patients infected with leprosy. Since cases of leprosy are in major decline but AIDS is the new enemy we have begun to shift our emphasis. Our Aids wards are larger than our leprosy wards now.

Because of our past experience we would like to do something similar in our clinics in order to discover infected HIV persons who need early medical assistance. We think you can be of real help in organizing this program. Interested?” Was I ever?

“With an office in the largest clinic in the center of town I was off and running, jumping in feet first. I was thrown head long into studies of HIV, reading volumes, going to classes and seminars while learning something of the situation in northern Thailand. I was particularly proud

of my work with the patients awaiting the availability of a doctor.”

“I needed to relax a little and found the cinema a great outlet. Several weeks later Amy and I invited Johnny to go to the cinema with us. Walking back to the hospital one evening, Johnny told us that he would be leaving to return to his village ten days from that day.

“Isn’t that ahead of schedule?” I asked.

“Yes, because my healing is so fast. The hospital will send a nurse in six weeks to check me out.”

“Are you eager to go back, Johnny?”

His voice was choked as he sadly said. “Not really. My mother is dead and my father works long hours. I will hardly see him.”

“Who will take care of you?”

It took him a full minute to get his voice again.

“Mostly I take care of myself. My older sister resents taking care of me. She will get married when I am fourteen but I think she wishes it were earlier, if only I were not there. I am sure she would like me to disappear.”

The next day I got an appointment with his teacher at the hospital school and found out that he was the brightest boy in class.

His teacher said, “In fact, he is the brightest child we have had here during my seven year tenure.”

“Do you think that he might qualify as a boarding student at the Christian school and if so at what grade level?”

He promised to inquire and get back to me.

That evening as I was finishing my shift, the teacher met me at my office. “There is room and Johnny will be accepted but only if there are guaranteed funds for a minimum of two years. He will be accepted at the sixth grade level. The problem is that there are very limited scholarship funds left.”

He showed me the figures as provided by the school administrator. “Oh. That is not a problem. I will arrange for the funds for the next seven years. I only need to have a semi-annual update that he is worthy of continued study, although I have no doubts.”

I was planning on having dad put up the funds and knew he would want to be satisfied that it was a worthy student”.

Johnny was beside himself when he got the news and immediately headed to my office. Through two sets of tears he said “Missy Laura. Thank you. I promise to be a top student and promising to repay you when I graduate and find work.”

I said, “Johnny, this is a scholarship, not a loan. My hope is that you will finish high school with good enough grades to earn a scholarship to the university.” We had a long cry before he left.”

“A few weeks later I had an idea to discuss with the clinic director. Liking my idea but needing to find the funds, he said he would discuss the matter with the management board. Three weeks later I was introduced to a young doctor, Ted Chai, and a lovely young nurse, Alice Proab. We were the new mobile clinic that I had proposed.”

“We traveled to villages within a thirty-mile radius of Chang Mai. Most villages had some building, either a church or a community center; open air buildings that we were able to use as a temporary clinic site.

When no such building was available we worked out of our van, which had been a gift of a Presbyterian church in Australia.”

Ted provided me with information request forms and provided intense tutoring on how to get all in the information he needed.

“My job was to register the patients and find out general information and history of their medical condition that brought them to the clinic. Meanwhile I was to see if any of the information might suggest the presence of HIV within the family. I worked hard at developing my Thai speaking skills.

I was now speaking enough Thai to put the patients and their families at ease, teasing and joking with the kids, who teased me about the way I talked. I found ways to ask discreet questions regarding illness or strange symptoms that they had seen in other family members or among their friends.”

Here is an example of what I mean. In the middle of an exit interview I’d say in Thai. “Thank you for coming to see us.”

She replies “Oh, Thank you.”

“How is the rest of your family?”

“Most of them are doing well.”

“Does that mean that someone is ill?”

“My oldest has been losing weight but he is too proud to come here.”

“Do you think he would talk with me if I stopped by?”

“Maybe.”

At the end of the day we stopped by their modest home. Although reluctant, the young man did talk with me and then allowed the doctor to examine him. Two days later, he was admitted for consultation and then for treatment.”

“We stayed in the field for three consecutive nights and four days, usually sleeping in sleeping bags in those same buildings.

We were usually treated to breakfast at the home of the headman of the village, as was their custom for thanking us for serving their community.”

We had two incidents that were more than a bit distressing. The first Friday we were in the field, we stayed late and were driving back in the dark. Ten miles west of Chang Mai our vehicle was blocked by a group of young thieves or robbers.

All three had kerchiefs covering the bottom half of the face. They wielded knives with long blades. The leader was the only one to speak, his voice sounding like a growl to me.

Ted told me to lie down, facing the ground and to say nothing. With my head facing left, I saw both of my associates doing the same as I. Up to then, I hadn't given a thought to danger but another growl made me wonder if the two of us might be raped as well as robbed.

Up to that minute in my life, I had never thought about being in physical danger. I could not see what the bandits were doing but the tone of their voices seemed menacing. At first, all the words seemed too aimed at my companions but suddenly one of them was turning my body face up. His actions were not gentle, sending warning signs to my brain. He reached down and examined my hands,

then pulled off a friendship ring that I had worn for ages. He muttered something directly in my face. I couldn't understand most of what he said but the tone suggested a kind of dislike for what he saw.

He reached down and parted my blouse, making me sure that he was about to strip off my clothes and rape me. My body tensed and I began to sob.

I was surprised when he let go of my blouse and walked away, apparently cursing. Like a flash, I realized he was simply looking to see if I had been wearing a pendant that might have been of value.

In the end we were not harmed but we were relieved of our cash, no jewelry, but all the drugs that we carried. It was frightening enough that we never ever drove in the dark again”

“The other incident was when our van was unable to start on Friday afternoon Unable to get a mechanic or tow truck until the next day; we were forced to ask the village head to house us for another night.

My life was enriched through the times I had with patients or members of their families when we exchanged stories. There is one that struck me in a special way. It was in a small village, exclusively Christian, a rarity in my experience that I discovered this when I asked Mary what was her Thai name since Mary obviously wasn't. “Miss

Laura, I was baptized with my name Mary, after the Virgin Mary.”

“I am surprised. I thought all Thais were Buddhists.”

“That may be so but this village is all Christian”

“Can you tell me how that came about?”

“My father tells the story of how my grandfather, a Buddhist, who had an operation to cure his leprosy, was resettled in this village with other families who had someone cured of leprosy. That is true of every family in one way or another.”

“The doctors were Christian as were those who ran the hospital. The families became Christian when they learned that love was the basis of the Christian religion. I understand that the money to establish the village was provided by some group of Christians in a church in the United States. In those days, families touched by leprosy could not return to their original villages because of the curse of leprosy. At least that is the story that I heard.”

“I was intrigued, again being reminded never to make assumptions. That reminds me that I promised myself to research that story about funding new villages but forgot.”

“In the first six months the doctor treated an average of 40 patients a day, four days a week. We discovered seventeen patients who we hospitalized for HIV and twenty-three for other illnesses”.

“I worked only a half-day at the office when we returned on Friday, really needing most of the weekend to relax from the tension and to sleep and rest my weary bones. My friend and I usually took in a movie and dinner on Sunday”.

“The entire experience had been invigorating, adding significantly to my understanding of another part of the word. I believe I managed to make a small contribution to the lives of a few people, but I was ready to come home”

“Eighteen months after flying out of Kennedy I landed on the same runway, a totally different Laura from the one who graduated less than two years ago.”

Paul said, “I would certainly say so. That is a very special story, Laura. I want to hear the impact of that experience on your subsequent life if you don’t mind.”

“I’ll be happy to do so but not tonight. It’s getting late. I do have a brief postscript though. The Times did publish an article I wrote on my experience, featuring, particularly, the aspect of the mobile clinic in search of HIV patients.”

“Good for you, dear.”

“I get a letter from Johnny about every three or four months. His studies are going well. In a recent conversation with my folks, mom told me that they are setting up a scholarship fund similar to the one we set up for Johnny.”

Everyone thanked Laura, arose, embraced her in a group hug and said their good byes. “See you tomorrow.”

On the way, Barney commented to Lois, “I’m eager to hear more from Laura. In fact, I want to press her tomorrow before we get back to our agenda.

Due to some complications the group did not meet again until the following Saturday. They were having one last barbecue before the weather got too cold.

They had gathered as planned for drinks and snacks at three and hoping someone would volunteer another story.

Walking back to his chaise Barney said “Peter should be well occupied for some time with his friend watching cartoons, so I want to hear more from Laura. Were you able to find some direction because of that trip??”

After pouring some lemonade for herself she said “That leg of my life journey was the transition to full maturity. I knew I was a woman with acquired skills, truly independent, confident that I would succeed at whatever field I chose to enter. I knew, however, that I had a view of a world that would not be available to many. Perhaps I could do something about that.”

“I was still determined to be a reporter. Doing some research I found that San Francisco State had a great reputation for speech and journalism with highly regarded professors. I applied and was accepted.

During the second month here, one of my new friends invited me to accompany him to visit a friend who had an advanced case of AIDS and was at San Francisco General Hospital. There I discovered a slew of patients, obviously abandoned by friends and family. They found themselves alone, desperate for friendship and most of them penniless.

Two days later I again accompanied my friend, who spent time with his friend while I circulated among the other beds chatting, just to be present. When I paused for a drink of water, one of the attendants said “That was nice of you to visit with some of the patients. Very few have anyone who comes to visit. I am sure they were buoyed by your act of friendship.”

I continued my rounds and began asking a few questions. I found out about the little things they were lacking like a bit of chocolate or some chewing gum, extra skin lotion.

I was back in three days with a basket full of notions and sweets for my new friends.

I wrote my dad and mom to set one of their researchers to search for other hospitals that specialized in Aids care, so that they could set up special funds for the little things that the patients needed. They did a great job.

It was an important interlude in my journey. I have a decent voice so that accompanied by one of the patients with

his guitar I entertained with requests, some joyous and some deeply sad and yearning. Someone decided to call me Miss Sunshine, a wonderful compliment in that group

There were down days when someone was taken from our presence, as his life's end loomed large. There was nothing I could do on those days except be present to the aloneness of each of my friends. The experience was having its effect on me.

As you know, empathy and sympathy takes you past objectivity especially on those days when some friend's life comes to an end."

I got involved with two groups doing fund raising and got so busy I had to drop two classes but kept going to two journalism classes that semester, dropping one of those the next semester As you can see, my plans were again on hold while I followed my heart.

It seems that I had come to another Y long the path of life. I could not help but take the 'Road less traveled'.

Paul asked if she needed a break or if she was willing to finish off.

Book 10. An Unwelcome Switch

Laura decided to defer until after the barbecue was over. While they sat around finishing off their coffee, she picked up the tale of traveling the road taken.

“A very special side benefit was meeting the man I was to marry as we worked side-by-side raising funds for our cause.”

“He was handsome, beautifully built with a woman-killing smile that in fact was the death of me. I remember noticing him the first day I arrived at the fund raising office. Women were finding all kinds of excuses to talk to him, he gently responding but showing no real interest.

The word that came to mind was ‘cool’. There was an air about him that seemed to draw my attention. Up to that point, I had little interest in dating, entirely focused on my concern for my patients at the hospital. Later I was to discover that it was my apparent lack of showing interest in Phil that had him pursuing me.

At the end of our first date, I found myself drawn to him but not overwhelmed. I agreed to a second date, which, like the first, ended at the front door, although I was sorely tempted to invite him in. I was definitely warming to him. I found him to be reserved but not cold, sensitive to the needs

of patients and passionate about the fund raising. His attentiveness to what I had to say and his gracious way of treating others were very appealing.

Our third date was dinner dancing at the Fairmont Hotel, fabulous food and floating in his arms during the waltzes, twisting and turning during the swing music and that glorious feeling of his strong arms and body demanding my response during the tango. It was a dreamy evening and I was sure I was in love

I yielded my virginity to this gentle and loving man that night. We moved in together three weeks later. Being with him after a day at the hospital or school or at the AIDS office brought sunshine into a life heavy with care and concern. It was beautiful while it lasted. To me it was a relationship made in heaven, filled with caring, romance, and loving and great intimate sex.

It was when he was alerted to active duty that I pressed for marriage. While somewhat hesitant, he did agree. To my folk's disappointment we were married at city hall in a civil ceremony, followed by a brief honeymoon in Carmel. Two weeks later he was called to full time action in the Afghanistan.

His first letters were full of passion and 'I love you'. His later letters were filled with what news he could share. By the end of seven months his letters were arriving less frequently and less passionate but still newsy. The content was routine with less phrases of love and missing me.

I fretted about the lack of passion in his letters and increased the frequency of my letters as well as my expressions of love and missing him. I didn't know what else to do. I was forlorn, practically desperate but suddenly saved.

His letter read "I'm being given a furlough before shipping back for the Mideast again." I was sure our being together would reestablish our closeness.

I had gone off the pill but said nothing to him; being certain, fool that I was, and a baby would rekindle a flame that seemed to dying down.

Peter was conceived during a weekend of lovemaking at the beach, where we spent time walking in the sand, holding hands at breakfast or having wild sex, what seemed at the time to be almost desperate on my part. What appeared on the surface to have been a loving interlude must have been something less

To say he was upset when he received the news that I was pregnant, is putting it mildly. His letters were intense, accusing me of betrayal. At first, while guilt and remorse were keeping me on edge, I kept hoping time would heal our break, but apparently that was only the tip of iceberg.

As you would expect, there was more, down deep within, that I was never to find out.

His long days of facing and killing the enemy may have twisted his inner self, creating a chasm that we could

not span. The letters came less frequently and were devoid of feeling. His unit was returned three months later. Six weeks after his return, Phil moved out.

Those six weeks were hell for the both of us. Long silences filled the dining room during our evening meal. He kept arriving just in time to eat, not wanting to have an interlude of wine and snacks that had been so precious in earlier days, a time when we touched each other emotionally or spiritually. He made it clear that conversations were off limits when he retired to the living room with a novel or trade magazines.

I spent hours reading books and searching on the Internet to learn what I might do to rekindle the fire in our relationship. No matter what I tried, Phil seemed to move further away. He got furious when I suggested we might try counseling

I lay awake nights trying to figure out what I was doing or not doing, feeling sure that I was a failure. At one point he was angry that my restlessness was keeping him awake. He decided to sleep on the couch until the day he moved out

We stayed married, Phil coming by to see Peter and we ending up in bed two or three times. I, hoping that we could reconcile fully, found only disappointment. He became more distant and finally ceased pretending to care for Peter.

I did have one thing going for me. Although my folks were not at hand, they both were there for me on the phone. My dad would listen for an hour as I wept and complained. My mom flew in the day that Phil moved out, even though she could only stay three days.

As you can see my plans for being a journalist were seriously side tracked with Peter solely my responsibility. I would want you to know I have no regrets. The pain of our divorce and the loss of my way have led me to this place with Peter and two new friends.”

Barney took his handkerchief to wipe her tears. “You are still on the early part of your journey, Laura, not like us old goats. It will be interesting to see what the future holds. You have a wonderful spirit that will keep you buoyed while you find your way again.

My guess is that the scars of this experience are strengthening you for the pilgrimage ahead. With Peter and Jake in your corner life will come up roses, my sweet one.”

Barney had the last word before they adjourned. “At the next meeting we all expect to hear from Jake.

Book 11. From Tragedy to Redemption

When they were gathered at the next meeting, Paul asked “Jake, are you willing to tell us about a sudden twist early in your life journey that moved you away from your plan?”

“Since Barney’s proclamation I have been thinking about that. There have been a few incidents that have turned me around, and each time I believe, for the better.”

Paul said “Wait until I reset the recorder. By the way, gang, Joyce, who was a court stenographer, has agreed to transcribe all the stories. I am hoping that Laura, our budding biographer, might want to do something with these stories.”

“Wow. Paul, I’m willing to try something. ”

Paul said. “All set, Jake.”

“I suppose this story would be about the most significant impact on my life. There have been others like the incident that took me to Doctors without Borders or meeting Laura on a wet morning at the jogging trail.

I was a pretty spoiled teenager, being the baby in the family, usually getting anything I asked for. I had a nice used Ford convertible, the first car among my high school friends, getting the car at the end of my junior year.

Of course, I became popular, piling boys and girls and swooping off to the lake for moonlight swimming

parties that included all the things that nice kids ought not be doing – swigging beer, heavy petting and on occasion, unsafe sex. Why one of the girls never got pregnant is still a mystery to me.

I managed to minimize my drinking when I was driving, selfishly because I figured that a ticket or an accident meant losing my car. It was a wild summer in which I was besieged by good looking girls and by guys who wanted to double date so they could get their girlfriends in the back seat of my convertible.

Dad picked up some conversation in town about what was happening and had me into his office for a talk, which had little effect on my behavior. I was the big shot, figuring that I was the most popular kid in school and all of it going to my head.

Then it happened. It was Halloween, a beautiful balmy night. We were on a double date, no longer interested in trick or treat, but definitely into teenage celebration with several other cars out in lover's lane.

Three of us had more beer than was wise. I was sober enough to know that neither my friend Bud nor I should drive. My date, Clare, did not drink. I used to tease her about having fun with a bunch of drunks, sinning in more ways than one but no booze.

Clare said she would drive since she recently had passed her driving tests. Technically, she wasn't licensed to

drive passengers at night or something like that, but it seemed the best solution, considering the predicament we were in.

Clare was a bit tentative but gained confidence as we entered the city limits. She was driving a bit more slowly than necessary, making me afraid that she would draw the attention of a patrolman.

At the fourth intersection with the city limits, the light turned green just as we approached. A pickup truck came barreling from her left, swerving to his left in an attempt to miss us, brakes squealing and rubber burning.

No one was killed but we all ended up in the hospital with Clare being the only one seriously injured. The truck had struck at the left front door of our vehicle.

The first assumption of the police after interviewing the other three of us was that we were all over the legal limit for alcohol. They were speaking to each other while not realizing that the press could overhear their comments.

The story broke with the headline about drunken teenagers involved in a major accident. Although a retraction was printed the next day, pointing out that Clare, the driver, had not been drinking; most of the community was convinced by the first story.

Clare was in intensive care for three days, to which I could not be admitted since I was not family. I spent hours in the waiting room hoping for some news. Despite all the

foolishness, I was in love with Clare, as much as a high school kid can be, I guess.

When she was moved to a private room, her folks gave orders that I was not to be admitted to visit her. In fact, I had no conversation with Clare until she returned to school.

We sat in the back of our homeroom after school. “Jackson, my real name. I am so sorry to say this. I love you and am sorry that my family insists that it is your fault. They will not let me see you and I don’t want to sneak behind their backs.”

No matter what arguments I presented, she was determined to obey her parents.

I never dated during the rest of the senior year until I took a good friend to the prom in May. That was only to help her save face after her date cancelled a week prior.

Much thinking about the accident, the events leading to it and the aftereffects occupied my time in the months afterwards. It was while making decisions about college that I committed myself to medicine as a way I could serve humanity, partially as a way to atone for causing such pain to Clare.”

Sometime during the story, Laura had taken his left hand in hers and was gripping it with all her might. She knew she was shedding tears but suddenly was aware that she was sobbing.

It seemed that no one was willing to break the silence that followed. Finally Barney said, “I can’t even imagine how that would affect someone as young as you were. I presume that is why you chose surgery as a specialty.”

“Definitely. I seldom think back to that time except when it is a teenager showing up in Emergency after an auto accident. Recently, there have been too many of them.” Looking at his watch. “Time to head for the clinic.”

Before he departed. Paul got Jake to promise that he would talk about the effect of his decision to join Doctors without Borders or MSF the initials for the French name, where the organization was initiated.

The next morning Jake was ready to continue his story. He began with “It might be good to have you know a bit about MSF I seldom use the term DWD so I hope you will excuse me.”

“At its core, the purpose of humanitarian action is to save the lives and ease the suffering of people caught in acute crises, thereby restoring their ability to rebuild their lives and communities. In the countries where MSF works, one or more of the following crises is occurring or has occurred: armed conflict, epidemics, malnutrition, natural disasters, or exclusion from health care.

In numerous countries, MSF is providing medical care to people caught in war zones.

Some may have been injured by gunfire, knife or machete wounds, bombings, beatings or sexual violence. Others are cut off from medical care or denied the ability to seek the treatment they need. This could be a pregnant woman who cannot reach help to deliver her baby, or someone with a chronic condition who has no way to resupply his medicines. Conflict's consequences are manifold, and MSF has historically attempted to respond with speed, focus, and flexibility in order to deliver the necessary care to those most in need.

MSF also provides medical care to refugees and internally displaced people seeking sanctuary in camps and other temporary shelters. Today, in places such as Chad, Niger, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Sudan, MSF runs vaccination campaigns and water-and-sanitation projects, provides basic medical care through clinics and mobile clinics, builds or rehabilitates hospitals, treats malnutrition and infectious diseases, and provides mental health support. Field teams also provide shelter and basic supplies—blankets, plastic sheeting, cooking pots, and more—when people have been uprooted from their homes and have nothing to help them survive.”

Prior to our arrival in Laos, millions of minorities, primarily the Hmong had escaped the inhumane discrimination of the government of Laos.

After a series of talks with the United Nations and the Thai government, Laos agreed to repatriate the 60,000 Lao refugees living in Thailand, including several thousand Hmong people. Very few of the Lao refugees, however,

were willing to return voluntarily.^LPressure to resettle the refugees grew as the Thai government worked to close its remaining refugee camps. While some Hmong people returned to Laos voluntarily, with development assistance from United Nations, allegations of forced repatriation surfaced of those Hmong who did return to Laos, some quickly escaped back to Thailand, describing discrimination and brutal treatment at the hands of Lao authorities.

In 1993, Vue Mai, a former Hmong soldier who had been recruited by the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok to return to Laos as proof of the repatriation program's success, disappeared in Vietnam. According to the U.S. Committee for Refugees; he was arrested by Lao security forces and was never seen again.

Despite all this, there were thousands and thousands of minorities still facing discrimination in the form of no services available such as were available to the acknowledged citizenry

Many suffered from malnutrition and lack of medical care.

It was always my personal opinion that we were accepted so that the Laos government could point to their willingness to serve the needy within their borders.

After the first two weeks, it was obvious that all the most of diseases rooted in malnutrition outnumbered the cases of physical harm caused by accident or crime.

Since the caseload for the internist was twice that of the surgeon and since I was the second surgeon within the group, I was asked to be the backup to our doctor of internal medicine.

I accepted without a second thought and when the internist became ill and was forced to return home, I became his permanent replacement.

In cases of major incidents of violence, I did keep up my surgery skills, but at heart I was a clinician and a doctor of internal medicine.

There were times when after hours on end of dealing with the results of government used force to repress a gathering of minorities that I wore even more than two hats.

One evening such an incident occurred within a hundred yards of our facility. The wounded were being dragged in by their friends. At one point, three bleeding civilians were actually chased into our compound by the police who had to be stopped at our gate by our chief. He just stood there, draped in his surgical greens that were drenched in blood.

Three of the staff were on leave, putting us two doctors and a nurse short. I was doubling as an operating nurse and assistant surgeon at one point.

When the surgeon needed a break before dropping from fatigue, I stepped in to be primary surgeon, assisted only by one operating room nurse.

We were slowed down doing major surgery, since some of the operating personnel had to help clean and sterilize the room as well as the equipment.

The best description I can give you is ‘almost organized chaos.’

Furthermore, we could not release any of the patients because the police were waiting outside the gate to pick up or beat any of the “rebels” who would step outside.

I often wonder how many injured never made it to our compound because of police action.

There came a time when I knew that it was time for a change.

I had been in correspondence with the administration at Cleveland Clinic, a renowned center for medicine, hoping for a place on their staff. I hadn’t heard back to my last communication but I figured that mail service to this part of Asia was slow.

On the chance that I might not be accepted, I was in the process of beginning a letter to a friend on the staff at Mayo Clinic in Rochester Minnesota, when my close friend, George, bounced into the room.

“Have you heard from Cleveland?”

“Nope. I thought I would write to Mayo.”

“Wouldn’t you rather practice in sunny California than in those ice box areas in the Midwest?”

“I just never thought about that. What do you have in mind?”

Before I answer, let me ask. Are you sure you don't want to pursue the big bucks by joining an ongoing practice?”

“Nope. I like what I've been doing, but I need some income. That's why I was hoping to get on a decent salary at a clinic. A reasonable salary and work that I enjoy would be satisfactory.

“That's how I figured. I wrote the director of the clinic in the San Francisco Bay area. He is a close friend from our residence days. The clinic was in dire need of a surgeon and an internist.”

I guess by then I should have known. Life is what happens when your plans are interrupted by the appearance of a divide in the road ahead.

All the twists and turns led me to a run in the rain where I met a drenched beauty, named Laura, who along with Peter makes me the happiest doctor in town.

Laura rose and moved into his arms, followed closely by Peter.

Epilogue

Barney and Paul were sipping coffee after their morning chess game Paul was saying “

Barney, we are a couple of lucky old fogies, running into each other after all those years of separation.”

“Absolutely, and I can hardly believe the way these gatherings in the park took on a whole new dimension just because young Peter lost control of his ball, thus bringing Laura and Jake into our lives.”

Paul laughed. “These past months have been eye opening. As a result of our story sharing, I have come to appreciate the variety of ways that anyone might respond to what life puts before us. I was deeply moved with Laura’s story of frustration that drove her to Thailand and then a life of service and love.”

“You are so right, Paul. Looking back over those stories, I can see that almost every turn led the individual to some deeper level of service to others. I wonder what new story will show up when the others join us today.”

