

Laughter Calls Me

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Catherine Brown

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LAUGHTER CALLS ME

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*To my children
Without whom
Laughter never would have called*



Acknowledgments

I first want to thank David Dombrowski, my editor and publisher, for believing in this book. And a special thanks to the district attorney of our fair community—though I cannot mention your name, you deserve recognition for believing the kids and devoting your life to justice. To the LAPD and former FBI Special Agent Roger Young, thank you for being there for so many children. I also cannot leave out my deep gratitude to my mother and dad—your love and support carried us through. And above all thank you to my children who gave me permission to tell our story and a special hug and thank you to Ben for your support and encouragement. It meant more to me than you can know.

Some of the names and places in this story have been changed in order to protect the innocent.

All of the facts in this story have been verified with police reports, trial transcripts, psychiatric reports and other documents.

Warning

Parts of this account are not suitable for children. We have allowed the author freedom in her story (with some restraint), as we know there are still people in the world today who think these things do not happen. This is a story that testifies of the truth with the hope that bringing light into darkness will dispel the darkness.

An Important Note From The Publisher

Laughter Calls Me is a true account. It covers a fifteen year span of time, from a young girl's search for truth during the hippie revolution of the '60s and '70s to a world so deviant and shocking you may have trouble reading some parts. But it is a rare book because in the midst of this tragic story is a growing thread of hope and joy.

As you read through this novel-like story, you will be taken into the author's search, and you will feel with her the fears and frustrations of searching for truth in a world full of falsehood and danger. But the book does not end with her discovery of truth but delves into the pursuing years as the author is struck with the cruelest of blows and a second discovery that could potentially destroy her and her children.

For a moment, as you are carried from her first discovery to the next, you may wonder if you have not indeed begun to read a second book until you realize her initial discovery is the foundation for what lies ahead. This change of flow may be likened to a mighty stream suddenly bursting upon a large boulder, reorienting itself on another path. In that stream the water preceding the boulder is what pushes on and keeps the stream flowing.

In this young woman's quest and through the devastating results of her own miscalculations, she also finds the wonder and joy in motherhood to the bravest children of all. We will peer out with her from her window as she watches her children laughing and playing. She is reminded that even through the darkest times, God is with us, and we can walk in joy with Him, not because of the darkness and evil that happens to us, but because He has gone before us preparing the way; it is sometimes through the greatest pain that the greatest joy is birthed. Let us go now to where her search begins and where it ultimately leads her...

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Laughter Calls Me

Laughter calls me to its side,
I really don't know why.
It's dark and cold outside;
Nothing has gone right,
Everything is wrong.
Isn't it what I see that really matters?

My children dance and giggle and play.
Life whispers to them, "Let's go."
Willingly they follow.
They don't know that we are poor,
That life is hard.
To them, I am their queen,
They are my princes and princesses.
Laughter calls me to its side.
I really wonder why.

Spring is coming,
Winter never lasts forever.
I watch the children, through the open window,
Beckoning me—
"Come mama and play, the sun is shining."
I dry my tears,
And run to meet their outstretched arms...
Running through the fields of daisies in my mind;
That's good enough for me.
Laughter calls me to its side
Now, I know why.

Catherine Brown

Imagine There's No God

“Hey man, try this.” A classmate handed me a funny looking cigarette. “It will make you feel better than you ever have before.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Hey man, it’s weed, you know, marijuana.” I ran excitedly over to my friend’s house and showed her the odd smelling cigarette. We snuck down to the creek’s edge, making sure no one was around then shared what was to change our lives instantly. I was fifteen years old and knew somehow I had crossed a line. There was no turning back.

Almost overnight, I changed from a shy, top-grade student to a longhaired, barefoot hippie. When I was high, it seemed like the whole universe opened before me, and as I began experimenting with heavier drugs, I really believed they were leading me closer and closer to truth.

The year was 1970, and a revolution of young people tore at the very foundation of our country. Boldly denouncing the conventional lifestyles we had known as children, we grew our hair long, put on beads, flowers, holey jeans and funky dresses, and dropped out of society as we perceived it. Hunting zealously for some other meaning to life, we vehemently condemned government, materialism and capitalism.

I first sensed an emptiness in my heart at the age of ten.

Often, I sat alone in a secluded corner of our suburban backyard and gazed into the California sky, searching for some sign from outer space.

Later at twelve, I began wondering if a God had created mankind and if we had a reason for being here on this planet. On Saturday afternoons, I hopped on my red bicycle and headed for the rolling foothills that surrounded our town. Spending hours wading through the creeks, tossing rocks and catching frogs, I'd then lay on top of the grassy hills and watch the cloud-filled sky. I was fascinated with its apparent eternity.

At fourteen, I met some kids at school who were Mormons and started attending their church, thinking, *perhaps they have the answer to this void I feel*. However, after six months of early morning seminary about a man named Joseph who saw angels and visions, I felt disappointed and unfulfilled.

Thus I began my fifteenth year, feeling lost and confused. My mom and dad didn't know what to do when they saw their daughter changing. My outrageous clothing matched with long, stringy hair became a major sore spot between us. My grades plummeted as I lost interest in the *unimportant* things of life. When my friends changed from clean-cut, well-behaved kids to long-haired, starry-eyed ones, my parents became terrified.

One night, after my exasperated father told me to stop hanging around my new pals or else, I climbed out my bedroom window, taking only the clothes on my back. Without looking back, I took off running—destination unknown.

The following afternoon, somewhere between San Francisco and Reno, Nevada, the police pulled up beside me as I stood hitchhiking on the side of a bustling California highway. "Can I please see your I.D.?" the officer requested.

"I don't have any," I stated truthfully.

"How old are you?" he questioned, looking at me intently.

"Eighteen," I lied.

"Well then, it's illegal for you to walk around without identification." I murmured something about never hearing of that law before and wondered if I could possibly look older than my

fifteen years. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Mary,” I lied again.

“Mary what?” he questioned. My not-so-well-thought-out intention was to say Mary Taylor, an actual family ancestor of ours, but instead I stumbled, saying,

“Mary Tyler.”

“Oh, and I suppose you’re going to say Mary Tyler Moore next,” he laughed. I stood dumbfounded for having said such a brainless thing. From then on it was all downhill. The officer transported me to the nearest juvenile hall, a detestable and grim place. As another officer led me through a drab-green day room past the female *residents*, fifty pairs of hard, angry eyes pierced me. Adorned with heavy eyeliner and ratted hair, they appeared to be unbreakable in spirit. I couldn’t help wonder what tragedies had befallen them. How had they become so lifeless yet so full of living rage? Were they scared? They didn’t act it.

At the prospect of spending countless days there, I gave the officer my name and phone number. Mom and Dad arrived a few hours later, relieved their runaway girl hadn’t been murdered and thrown to the side of some highway. They threw their arms around me then took me home.

Though drugs obliterated my interest in school, I graduated in 1972. A few days after graduation, when caps and gowns had barely been put away, I zealously announced my new plans—“I’m moving to Canada to live off the land.” Reading Brad Angier’s book, *How to Live in the Woods on Pennies a Day*, proved just the inspiration I needed. With an old, second-hand army backpack loaded to the brim with essential items, I bought a Greyhound bus ticket to Vancouver, B.C., Canada, the town of my birth and the first eight years of my life.



My grandparents met me at the bus depot in Vancouver and took me to their stucco, cottage-style house on the outskirts of the city. Granny was an English woman, who served tea with cream and sugar each evening along with delicate homemade pastries. She was a tall, delightful woman whose contagious laugh permeated off the walls of her home, making everyone around her happy—the children most of all.

Grandad was a true Welshman, quiet and soft-spoken. He had been employed with Vancouver's city hospital for over thirty years as their painter. Day after day, he went from one end of the building to the other, meticulously painting the snow-white walls over and over. He often fished in the ocean and brought home large salmon for granny to can, which she did carefully and successfully. Lunches in the summer consisted of salmon on homemade white bread, creamy butter and cups of hot steaming tea, made only as an English grandmother can do.

Maybe I loved my grandparents so much because they saw the good in everything and everyone. "You're a good girl, honey," Granny said as they reluctantly drove me to the old northbound highway. No matter what crazy, youthful ideas her hippie grandchildren conjured up, she always told us how wonderful we were and without a doubt knew we would turn out *just fine*.

Now standing alone on a highway that led to the Alberta Peace



The highway in British Columbia I was traveling on

River country, my heart beat fast with anticipation, and yes, with fear. I held out my shaky hand, extended my thumb, and could think of nothing else at that moment but the risks involved in hitchhiking. A girl all alone, heading into the wilds of North America, surely becomes prey to all kinds of peril.

After two short rides, which took me an insignificant fifty miles, a suave, city man in a Lincoln Continental pulled over and offered me a ride. We rode along for hours, stopping only for food, coffee and gasoline. By three in the afternoon, we were high up in the mountains and my *chauffeur* started drinking. As he finished his second beer, his already fast driving shifted to erratic racing, and I thought for sure we would drive right over the edge of the steep, unrailed cliffs. Eventually, the windy road straightened out, and I breathed a long sigh of relief. *Ah*, I thought, resting my head against the window, *maybe this hitchhiking isn't going to be so bad after all*. I was a strong-willed girl and hated to think I couldn't do something just because I was female.

As dusk approached, and without any warning at all, this guy, who by then had guzzled several beers, reached over and grabbed me. I screamed and slapped his hand away.

"Hey what's the problem?" he laughed. "Don't you want to have a little fun? After all, what are you doing out here hitchhiking alone if you aren't looking for a good time?"

"Stop this car, and let me out right now!" I ordered. I could hear a tremble in my voice and hoped *he* could not. Mumbling under his breath angry words I could not understand, he slammed on his brakes while I grabbed my heavy pack and jumped out of the car. He peeled out, leaving me alone on a deserted, mountain road hundreds of miles from anyone. With darkness imminent, I sat down on a rock and cried. *All of my big ideas—here it is, my first day and all that matters now is home*. I was hungry, cold and frightened. Suddenly all I wanted was to be home where it was safe. *If I am going to do this living-in-the-woods thing, I'm going to have to get a job and buy a car*. That night, I slept in some bushes by the side of the road and in the morning walked to the nearest town, caught a bus and went back to California. My short-

lived plan to live off the land came to a screeching halt.

Once home, I found an apartment near the city of Oakland and a job as a nurse's aide in a convalescent hospital. Through a college newspaper I found a girl named Julie who needed a roommate. Right away she moved in with me. We each worked during the weekdays and got high on the weekends. Julie had a steady boyfriend, but I went from one failed relationship to another.

Sometimes I smoked pot, but mostly I dropped LSD. For me, psychedelic drugs had become an integral part of my life, offering an escape from the turmoil within, the turmoil I couldn't seem to ignore any other way.

I believed LSD reached into the untouched realms of my mind. During acid trips, I sensed there was a God and thought by getting high I might actually see Him.

One night, Julie and I went to a party we'd been invited to. The event was in a gigantic, ominous-looking old house with large windows and shades pulled tightly closed. When we arrived, many people we'd never seen before were heading into an underground root cellar. Once inside the cellar, I struggled to see as dimly lit strobe lights flickered multi-colored beams in every direction. The smoke was so thick breathing became difficult. A rowdy band played songs by the Rolling Stones, and the large room was packed. After we'd been there a few minutes, Julie came up to me and handed me four, little blue tablets. "Here," she said smiling. "Take these." I popped them all in my mouth, swallowing hard. As I started to feel the effects of the drug, not even knowing what it was, an obnoxious boy asked me to dance.

"No thanks," I said. He grabbed my arm anyway and began tugging me to the dance floor. As I pulled back, a voice came from behind.

"Leave her alone." It was Julie, to the rescue. She was laughing and having a great time. At that moment, I wished I was more like her—free and outgoing. Instead, I was shy and insecure.

As Julie made her way back into the crowd, I realized the little blue tablets I took were very potent. Soon, the room began to sway as my feet teetered unsteadily. The band played a song, some-

thing about a stupid girl, and I wondered if they were singing about me. Paranoid thoughts filled my head as it became harder to breathe. Julie introduced me to an old East Indian man whose long, black hair hid most of his brown, wrinkled face and whose smile revealed stained, misshapen teeth. *Some kind of happy guru*, I guessed. They laughed while heading for the dance floor.

I worked my way through the crowd of moving, colorful people and climbed the rickety, wooden stairs that led outdoors. Motion and color were intensified; even the music did not sound like music anymore, just loud, vulgar shouting. A lot of commotion was going on outside as a rowdy group of Harley Davidson bikers arrived on the scene. Someone said something about a fight. Minutes later, three police cars showed up, and I didn't doubt there was going to be trouble.

I stood in the middle of the driveway away from the fast growing mob. Suddenly, to my surprise, I saw Julie walking away from the root cellar towards the street. She was laughing and waving good-bye to me. Flanked on each side of her strode two men I'd never seen before, and walking behind the three of them glided the happy guru. They rounded the corner and disappeared into the darkness. I raced down the long, gravel driveway and stood on the edge of the road, looking but seeing no one. *Maybe those guys have taken her against her will*, I thought. *She could be in danger. I have to find her, have to help her.*

So, into the darkness I ran, running through the city to find my friend, who I was sure had just been kidnapped. Walking and sometimes running for what seemed like hours, still high from the drug, I wondered why the effects were lasting so long. As I passed people on the street, they seemed to be staring at me, almost incredulously. *What's wrong with these people? Why are they staring? Surely, they aren't in on this too!* Running down the street, I became more concerned about escaping the people than about finding Julie. Fear, anxiety, dread, paranoia—the feelings none of us talked about when we were straight, but they were very real.

Hoping to escape the gawking stares of these *hostile* strangers, I found my way to a side street in which dim streetlights softly dis-

played quaint, little shops and stores. In the daytime this place, no doubt, pervaded with bustling activity but now sat empty. *Those people, why were they staring? Is it my hair, my clothes?* I stopped to catch my reflection in one of the shop windows and gasped in horror at what I saw. It wasn't I but an old withered woman . . . dressed like me! Her face was wrinkled like a raisin, and she was bent over as if in agony. *This, this isn't me*, I frantically told myself. Touching my face with cold, sweating hands, all I could feel were deep creases and furrows. *My God, something terrible is happening. I'm turning into an old woman.* I began running, afraid to look any longer.

Distraught, I tried finding my way back to our apartment but to no avail. I was lost and had no idea where I was. I had heard stories of those who took drugs laced with poisons, and they never came off the high; they just went totally crazy, never returning to normal. My mind drifted to the image of a longhaired man I had seen in a hospital once. He was about twenty-five, and as he sat on a couch, his eyes stared with a blank look. I searched for some sign of life, some hint of acknowledgment. Except for the inhaling, exhaling movements of his chest, he showed no indication of life. They said he'd taken LSD one day and had been like that ever since.

Running down the barely lit street, looking more like a savage animal than a young girl, my eyes were wild with fear, my hair loose and damp with sweat. I noticed something going on down the street. Cautiously, I approached and saw two police officers searching the premises of a yard. Their silhouettes stood out under the dim street lights. "Can you help me?" I cried out. They walked towards me and called out,

"What's wrong?"

"I think my roommate has been kidnapped from this party."

"Where's the party?" one of them asked as they now stood in front of me. My lips closed tightly, certain their intentions were to raid the party and arrest everyone. "We can't help unless you tell us," the officer spoke in a stern voice. I began to panic, not wanting them to leave. I was afraid by now I would end up like that guy in the hospital. As they turned to go, I cried out, "I think I'm having a bad

trip.” Stopping and turning, they gazed intently at me. Their voices softened, “I think it would be a good idea if we took you up to the hospital.” It didn’t take much to convince me to go along. Not sure whether I was overdosing or not, they rushed me to the nearest hospital.

At the hospital, a doctor put me on overnight watch. As I sat alone in a small white room, a nurse brought a glass of orange stuff and coaxed me to drink it. While my heart raced erratically, and my mind still fought the effects of the powerful hallucinogen I’d taken, I refused to drink the nurse’s *potion*. My imagination soared as I pictured this drink to be a poisonous substance, she the evil plotting villain.

I sat in a corner of the room curled up in a tight ball and placed an invisible shield between me and the rest of the world—not talking, not daring to look at anyone. Perspiration seeped from my body’s pores, and the odor I smelled seemed that of death. *Gotta get out of here before it’s too late*. While my mind raced with thoughts of escape, I looked up and saw a girl sitting across the room. “Hi,” she said in a soft, friendly tone. Her strawberry blonde hair glistened with health and vitality, unlike my own which was matted and tangled. Her name was Susan, she said, and she was a medical student working late on a report. Her voice soothed me, and I felt she could be trusted. Within minutes, this soft-spoken girl won my confidences then handed me the glass of orange drink. Reluctantly, I took it from her hand and consumed it. Soon, I fell asleep on a couch in the white room. When I woke up in the early morning hours Susan was gone, and the real world claimed me once again.

I hitchhiked back to our apartment and upon entering the kitchen saw Julie. “Where in the world have you been?” she asked.

“I thought something happened to you. Where did you go last night?” I queried.

“Catherine, I was at the party until early this morning; I looked everywhere and couldn’t find you.” I told her all that had happened and how I had seen her escorted away by the strange fellows and the guru. I soon realized I had hallucinated the whole nightmare. There

had been no kidnapping nor had I turned into an old lady. It had all been an illusion, drawn up from the recesses of my drug-loaded mind.

After that night, I realized that unless something changed in my life, I would probably be dead before I turned twenty. As I heard the beckonings of Nature calling me out of the city once more, I decided to make another attempt to leave. This time I would make a cross-country trip. "I'm not coming back till I find the answers to life," I told my mother one day while visiting. It was as though I expected these answers to fall out of the sky in a neat little package, and all I needed to do was find the right spot to stand.

A gripping fear tried to surface at the prospect of being left alone on some highway in the middle of America. The images of my Canadian venture were still painfully vivid. Nevertheless, I spoke nothing of these thoughts. Instead, I pulled out my old army backpack and carefully stuffed it with all I would need. Along with an old Bible my grandmother had given me, went extra clothes, a blanket and an old sleeping bag. On side pouches I threw in soap, toothpaste, brushes, writing paper, a can opener and matches. There wasn't much to it. I wore no makeup, never curled my hair and certainly didn't have to worry about getting a run in my nylons. What remained in the apartment would go to the Salvation Army's bountiful heap of unwanted treasures.

I kissed my mother good-bye; she hugged me and held on tightly, hoping I would suddenly change my plans. I had a feeling this would be the last time I would live in California. We moved from the mountainous, tree-covered province of British Columbia a month before my eighth birthday. Now, eleven years later I was leaving California—this time something told me it would be for good.

I hitchhiked during the day and slept in a sleeping bag under the stars at night. Though apprehensive about hitchhiking alone, I would not allow myself to succumb to fear. My desperation to find truth and peace prevailed over any such feelings.

One day, shortly after I began my trip, a man who spoke little English picked me up. I no sooner sat my pack on the floor of his weather beaten van when he spurted out, "Hey, I geeve you hundrud

dollars; you go to motel weeth me.” He smiled broadly while patting the wallet in his pocket as if to surely entice me.

Oh great, I thought as I eyed this stranger. “Ah, no thanks. I’m not into that. Please, stop!” My heart pounded with anger and with fear. Hesitantly, he pulled off to the shoulder. I got out and took off walking at a fast, steady pace hearing only the scruffing sounds my boots made as they brushed against the gravel shoulder. Throughout that entire day not one decent human being stopped. As night fell, I made my way down the streets of El Paso, Texas, feeling lonely and surely looking bedraggled. My pack weighed heavy on my shoulders and back while my feet felt like they were going to fall off.

That night I slept in a Greyhound bus station, slouched in a corner of the woman’s restroom with my backpack propped up against me. Tossing fitfully, I woke up often and pondered my situation. I could see no realistic way to get across the country, as long as I looked like a potential *good time* to every scoundrel that crossed my path. As I analyzed the problem, it dawned on me—I would have to avoid looking so available. *There’s only one way to accomplish that*, I told myself.

In the morning, after a cup of bitter tasting coffee and a day-old donut, I headed for the nearest thrift store. For ten dollars I bought a floppy leather hat and a man’s brown leather coat that came down to my knees. I buttoned up the coat, tied back my long hair and stuck on the floppy hat. The hat covered a good portion of my fair-skinned face. As I stared into a cracked mirror, I smiled at the image that could easily be mistaken for a guy, at least from a distance I hoped. I left the store satisfied and headed back to the highway

Up until then, catching rides had not been a problem. But as I sat on the freeway on-ramp under the warm, October, Texas sun, cigarette in one hand and harmonica in the other playing *Oh Susanna*, two hours passed and still no ride. People looked at the young hippie kid standing on the side of the road. Some waved, but didn’t dare stop. Little kids giggled, staring wide-eyed while parents just shook their heads then looked the other way.

Finally, a car pulled over. A young longhaired fellow no older than myself offered me a ride. I tossed my pack in his car and jumped in.

“Hey man,” he said. “I thought you were a guy.”

Ab-ha, I smiled slightly. *It worked!* And it did. From then on, most of the people who picked me up thought I was some young hippie boy until after they stopped, and most of the time their intentions proved honorable. Those looking for a loose hippie chick to *have a good time with* didn’t even blink an eye as they passed. It never occurred to me an unseen power greater than myself might be protecting me, watching my every move.

I traveled into the Northeastern states and ended up spending a couple days in Montreal, Quebec visiting a cousin I hadn’t seen in years. She and her common-law husband were self-proclaimed communists. They preached a simple philosophy: there is no god, government is corrupt, and socialism is the only way for people to properly co-exist. As I left their quaint antique-filled house and hiked down the cobblestone streets of Montreal’s Old Town, my ears were pierced with the lyrics of John, Paul, George and Ringo—*Imagine there’s no heaven*. (And maybe no god?) Looking up at the blue sky, my heart ran fast towards the beat of a distant drum.

As my sore feet touched Alabama soil, a fellow hitchhiker I met said we should hop a train. What was routine stuff for a veteran traveler such as he though, was sheer terror for me. As we raced along side of the slow moving locomotive, I felt like this was true initiation into life on the road. Scared, but not admitting it, that my legs were going to be pulled under the train ripping my body in two, I ran like the dickens, grabbed onto the moving boxcar while my *friend* pulled me to safety. As I breathed a sigh of relief, I sat down looking out at the passing scenery.

We rode fifty miles, slowly careening past some of the poorest dwellings I had ever seen. The old, rusty tracks bore their intruding way through backyards, only a short distance from the wooden porches of houses that appeared to be barely more than cardboard shacks. Little black children played barefoot in the rock-filled dirt

they called yards. We waved and smiled until they timidly waved back. I had been in the slums of some of America's largest cities but had not seen anything equal to this. Moms with their thick, coarse hair tied back in bandanas hung up their wash on thin, ragged lines. A look of silent longing pierced through their eyes of sorrow. They knew *they'd* never get out of this place. Maybe their dreams were for their children or maybe their children's children but certainly not for them.

Throughout the warm, breezy fall and into the cold, frosty winter, I covered thirty-nine states. In late December, I heard about a labor camp in Houston, Texas and decided to get a job for a week. More than once, people warned me Houston could be a dangerous city for a girl alone, and getting stuck on the streets when night fell could prove detrimental. So when I hit the city limits and dusk was quickly approaching, I made my way to the downtown bus depot. These had been safe havens several times already, and a cold wind rushing through the city left me with no desire to be outside.

That night, I curled up in a corner of the women's restroom, my boots and pack by my side. I pulled my thin blanket over my shoulders as I sat on the hard floor and leaned up against the wall. Soon I dozed off and dreamt of golden flowers dancing in the wind. In the middle of the night, a sharp, obtruding voice awakened me, "Wake up girl. Wake up!" Yawning while straightening up, my eyes focused on the face of a police officer. He glared with dark, sharp eyes. "You can't sleep here. You gotta leave."

"I can't do that," I pleaded. "It's the middle of the night." He looked at me for a moment as if in deep, serious thought, his bulky form blocking the doorway.

"I'll tell you what," he started, his voice changing to a gooey kind of sweetness. "I get off at six in the morning. You come to my place with me then, and I'll let you stay here the rest of the night."

Realizing this officer of the law was propositioning me, I denounced his vileness with cold defined words, "No way man. I'll leave!" I retorted hastily.

“Suit yourself,” he said shrugging his shoulders as he turned to leave. “Be out of here in twenty minutes.” Knowing this was a bad state of affairs, I now regretted having come into the big city at all. Slowly I rose to my feet, picked up my boots and pack, then headed into the semi-crowded lobby. Even at two in the morning this large metropolis depot was filled with people milling around.

As I sat down on one of the lobby chairs facing the front doors, I spotted the officer. He was conversing with three rough-looking characters who stood just inside the main entrance doors. Horrified, I watched all four men eyeing me intently as they huddled together in obvious conspiracy. It didn’t take much to figure out they were up to no good. Without using much imagination, I knew as soon as I walked out of those doors trouble would be awaiting me!

When I was a little girl, my mother taught me a child’s bedtime prayer. For many years, I repeated it each night before drifting off to sleep, almost superstitiously, afraid if I didn’t say it something bad might happen to me. Then at eight years old, it seemed silly and unnecessary so I stopped. Prayer was as foreign to me as the ocean is to the desert. Yet now with my life in unmistakable danger I began, “God, if You’re there, please help me. Please God, do something to help me.”

As I tied the thick, yellow-striped laces of my brown boots, I paused from time to time hoping to stall for a few extra minutes. Visions of being jumped on and dragged to some dark, foreboding alley rushed through my head.

A voice interrupted my wide-eyed thoughts of rape and murder. “Hey man, what’s happening?” Startled, I looked up into the gentle eyes of a young black kid. I hadn’t seen him earlier in the depot; he was just suddenly standing over me. Feeling an urgency to tell him about the incident in the making, I explained how I suspected plans of foul play. “Yah, I know that cop,” he said. “He’s got a bad reputation,” he whispered, intentionally lowering his voice. “Hold on a minute.” And at that, this young kid, no older than I and about half the size of the officer, walked boldly over to the four men, said something briefly then returned to my side. He laid a hand

on my shoulder then spoke softly, "Look, that cop is not going to bother you anymore. You can sleep here all night." He smiled as I looked up with relief and gratitude. "Oh and by the way, there's a little church on the corner. Why don't you come down in the morning and have some breakfast." Then he was gone. As quick as he had appeared he went away, and I never saw that boy again. I slept in the chair until dawn's early hours. The officer never came near me again.

I didn't stop at the church for breakfast and in fact forgot about the prayer. I didn't forget what happened though, knowing somehow my life had been spared.

A week later, I stood on the side of the highway in Arkansas, heading for a counter-culture farm community in Tennessee. The cold, north December winds whipped past my sun-tanned face as my long blonde hair blew loosely. The wind had already blown off my floppy, disguise hat, and I carried it at my side. A small blue pickup pulled over and was now honking. Embarrassed that I hadn't even seen it stop, I grabbed my pack, ran over and opened the door. "How far ya' going mister?"

"About twenty miles. You gettin' in or not?" he said with slight irritation.

"Yah, thanks for stopping." I hopped in and mentioned how the wind was picking up.

"Yep," he answered. I tried making small conversation as I often did. The man, who looked to be in his forties, kept his eyes straight ahead, avoiding eye contact. In fact, he had made no eye contact with me before I got in, a self-imposed rule I had made for survival on the road.

"Hey listen," he began. "I've got to get some air in a couple of my tires. I'm going to have to pull off for a few minutes." We had only gone a short distance when he turned off the interstate then headed for a small town running alongside the freeway.

"Would you mind letting me off here?" I asked. "You can pick me up on your way back through. I have this thing about never leaving the interstate," I lied. Something wasn't right, and a very bad feeling settled over me.

He continued to look straight ahead as he answered with smooth, slithering words. “Don’t worry. You can trust me. This won’t take long.” We had already driven through the small Midwestern town and now began driving down a road which led further and further from the main road. It was clear to me now—he wasn’t getting air for his tires. Suddenly, he turned onto a dirt road and picked up speed. Up ahead a mile or less lay a large, ominous section of dense forest. Only one thing was on my mind now—I had to get out of his truck. I yelled for him to stop, but he ignored my pleas.

Oh God, I prayed, once again calling out to an unknown deity. *Help me*. “Stop this truck,” I yelled frantically. “And let me out!”

“Hey I told you, you can trust me; don’t worry,” he said with heightened intensity. His foot pressed further down on the gas pedal.

“Mister, you stop this truck NOW or I’m jumping out.” At that, I opened the door and snatched my pack. Although he was clipping along at a good forty miles an hour, I knew my chances for survival were better this way than going into that forest with him. As I opened the door with every intention of jumping, he slammed on the brakes.

“Okay, okay, I’ll take you back to the freeway.” I leapt out of the pickup and took off running back to the main road. His plans foiled, whatever they might have been, the man sped off towards the forested area leaving a trail of dust and fumes behind. I never stopped running until I reached the so-called safety of the freeway. Tears stung my eyes as I wondered what in the world I was doing in the middle of the country, traveling alone, nearly having gotten myself raped or killed.

Frustrated and distressed, I held up my thumb and headed in the opposite direction of the farm in Tennessee. Christmas was coming in a couple weeks. I was going home.

