

Winter 1961

Church camp had been in session for several days and the mountain snowfall surrounding Thousand Pines had increased significantly and was beginning to cause concern. Taking a short walk before breakfast, I felt the lining of my shoes drenched from the ever-present moisture.

A veil of light had draped itself over the snow banks along the outside of our cabin. The morning was unbelievably cold. In fact, I'd thought temperatures that low were downright illegal in California, but I guess word hadn't yet reached these mountains. My breath traced a path through the windy air and icicles along the underside of the roof were releasing trickles of freezing water into the bucket someone had placed beneath, for who knows what reason, as cold water dripping into snow didn't seem to require any sort of interception or collection. I figured that if the brains that ran church camps were capable of rational logic they would have real jobs.

As most people in California (the southern part of the state at least) I hadn't the slightest idea what kind of clothing to take into the mountains in the middle of winter. This day was scheduled to be our last, with the plan being to head for the more temperate climate of the greater Los Angeles area right after lunch. The active partnership of the weather gods would be needed to materialize that intention and if we couldn't rope in their support, we would be staying in that winter wonderland another day and night. Personally, I wasn't bothered as to how the day played out. In fact, I wanted the isolation and expanse of the mountains and some extra time to get my head organized and to bring some sort of order into my life in general.

Walking down a trail, I noticed the snow was covered in a blue light reflected from the branches of a nearby fallen pine tree. Although God had been the main subject of the seemingly endless discussion groups that were the main fare of this "spiritual" retreat, I had taken little part in the bull sessions, my mind being firmly fixed on my girlfriend, Bonnie. Bonnie's physical softness, beauty, and tenderness were a far more important trinity than any speculations about the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, all of whom had done very well for themselves and the universe long before I was born and would continue keeping the cosmic lid on long after I bid adieu to this world.

To me there was something magic about Bonnie, her every movement transfixed me. I loved the way her black hair fell in gentle piles over her shoulders, a wonderful contrast to her creamy skin. Try as I might, I couldn't get her out of my mind that weekend, and I did not try very hard or for very long. Wasn't God's whole point in creating these kinds of landscapes to bring forth longings for that one special person? God understood. After all, I'd been taught all my life that He was a man.

Believe it or not, I was the youth pastor at our church, which might be something like putting the pyromaniac in charge of the dynamite, but even Christians like to live dangerously. To add some sort of insult to injury, I was also one of the weekend's camp counselors and it really wouldn't have mattered how many young souls slid into sin that weekend, I would still have been fixated on Bonnie. I expect I even would have eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil

if she'd requested it. Anyway, I think you get the picture that my mind was on worldlier pursuits that weekend than that of chasing God round and round the theological mulberry bush.

Let me say that the reason Bonnie seemed so close was that she was close; she was there.

After the previous evening's typically embarrassing community sing, she and I had broken away from the group for a walk in the cold night air, always a libido builder. The clear mountain sky was alive with twinkling stars and a yellow full moon. As we walked, I slipped my hand into the rear pocket of her jeans, appreciating the curve of her hip as she walked, which had the inevitable effect of turning myself further away from the Lord but somehow closer to His command, "Be fruitful and multiply." Being with her was far more real, far more important to me, than any of the unimportant twaddle we had kicked back and forth in the "meaningful" spiritual discussions. All I wanted at that moment was to be here with her forever.

The morning after blues would have to wait though, as upon my return to the cabin I found everyone awake and ready for breakfast. The warm fire raging within the safe confines of the cabin's stove felt great and I did the usual rub-hands-blow-on-hands-extend-hands-to-fire shtick that had been practiced since caveman days.

The general conversation centered on the worsening weather conditions and whether or not it would be safe to attempt a descent of the mountain that day or even anytime in the foreseeable future. The sky was darkening by the minute and fresh snow began to cover the frozen mountain passes.

As I left the cabin to meet Bonnie, I let everyone know that 9:00 was the deadline for arrival at the mess hall for another rousing session of prayer, singing, and what everyone was most interested in, breakfast.

The women's cabins were situated at the furthest possible point from the men's, undoubtedly to prevent anyone from falling into the sin of ungodly handholding. On my way, the snowfall really increased its intensity and I knew I had to get a move on before the women's cabins were rendered inaccessible. The wind picked up pockets of snow and spun them around in the air as whirlpools, small white tornadoes swirling their way through the pine forest.

The freezing rain had now turned to sleet, the sharp ice crystals fighting it out with the snow for supremacy of the mountain skies. There was so much weather going on all around me that navigation was impossible. Finally, I had to admit I was lost in the driving sheets of white with not the slightest idea where I was heading nor which way I had come. A furious blast of wind nearly knocked me to the ground just as I heard a voice calling my name.

I cried out a response in what I felt was the general direction of the sound I had heard, then saw a ghostly form beginning to materialize out of the snow. It was Bonnie. I reached out for her hand, making contact simultaneously with the snapping off of a large branch from one of the pine trees. It hit the ground with a reverberating thud and I am pleased to be able to report that if a tree falls in a forest and someone is there, it makes a sound. What becomes of the sound if no one is there is a quandary I'll leave to the Zen masters. I was just very glad to have heard

anything recognizable in that situation. I certainly heard Bonnie's startled scream ricocheting through the canyons.

I hugged her firmly, trying to reassure her as much as myself, then we continued our sojourn towards the mess hall. Her sense of direction seemed better suited to the wilds than mine and we finally reached our destination. It was with a sense of relief that we pushed through the glass and wood doors and entered the room filled with people and waves of heat streaming from the fire pit in the center of the room.

As we ate, the camp's supervisor announced that our leaving was to be delayed for at least one and possibly two days. The group expressed its concern with a rather well orchestrated gasp. We were told our parents were being notified. In the meantime, we would all sit tightly in our present location and wait for better weather.

I, of course, was pleased to have additional time with Bonnie and my own thoughts. I warmed myself up with a cup of coffee and began to relax as the course of the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours had been decided. Further adding to my sense of contentment was the mid-term exam scheduled for Monday for which I was unprepared. Nature had handed me a perfect excuse for missing the test. My scholastic performance had been less than stellar and my grades were suitably unimpressive. This was to be expected with my concentration so frequently affected by visions and the physical toll exacted upon me by the seizures. The superfluity of schoolwork, however, was beginning to find some balance with the sobering realization that I had to complete my education if I were to have any chance of a future. Even I couldn't conjure up a fantasy world where employers paid wages for visions and seizures.

Camp food, no matter how non-epicurean it might be, always seems to have a special taste. This morning's offerings were eggs, hashed brown potatoes, toast, cereal, and the usual morning meal accouterments. When the food was gone, we sang some more uninspiring songs and headed for our morning discussion groups. Church always seemed very long on talk and extremely short on meaningful action, but I perhaps am not the first person ever to have noticed this.

As luck would have it, Bonnie and I were assigned to the same group so I was able to bask in the sunlight of her presence that cold morning while feigning deep concern over the manifold troubles plaguing the African mission field.

As morning progressed, so did the snowfall. Late morning break time found Bonnie and I outside enjoying the harshly inclement weather that young love turned into a fairytale landscape. Pulsating passion aside, the events of the early morning caused us to exercise prudence and remain in close proximity to the mess hall, an A-frame structure equipped with picture windows on both sides, permitting a panoramic view of the surroundings. Two stories tall, it not only provided meals but also living quarters for ten campers at a time.

Even with all of the weather and having Bonnie with me, I found my thoughts drifting off into a consideration of several seizure-less months during which the visions had become non-existent. My cogitation was brought to a sudden halt by a kiss from Bonnie. I was startled but did not

allow that to cause me to skip a beat in returning the kiss and enveloping her in a hug. I felt myself in snowy heaven.

Our relationship had begun the previous year, when Bonnie unloaded her then boyfriend and started dating me. The other boy was tall, handsome, an outstanding student. I really had no idea what she saw in me, perhaps something I had overlooked in my own makeup. Bonnie never told me why she and the other boy had broken up nor was I really interested. I was just thrilled to be with her and did not want to look a miracle in the mouth.

We had known each other earlier, as choir mates and friends. Her wonderful voice won her most of the solo parts in the church music programs. It was during a rehearsal that I worked up the courage to ask her out, to which she replied with kind politeness that she was seeing someone with whom she was "very involved," whatever that meant in a Christian context. That she was in a serious relationship was not surprising; I'd have been very surprised, or suspicious, if she were not.

It was several months later, taking a break from the Easter oratorio we had been rehearsing, that she interrupted our discussion of her phrasing of the solo by placing her hand on my leg. Her touch was gentle and was a major bridging of the gulf of isolation between myself and the world, but at the time I did not read into it anything more than friendship. That notwithstanding, the conversation continued without my conscious participation. My lips were moving but what words came from them I had no idea. I was too wrapped up in the moment, lost in the feel of her touch.

Later, at a church beach party that summer, I saw Bonnie had not been escorted by her boyfriend. I took a walk down by the shoreline to ponder what all this might mean. Even though he wasn't there I still experienced anger and jealousy and felt alone and lost, self-centered enough to believe all of this might have something to do with me. I was a far cry from Casanova, having broken up no relationships and garnering no reputation as a Don Juan. But still, we all tend to think the universe revolves around us, especially during youth, so my thoughts were hardly a major deviation from the norm of teenaged angst.

The pockets of illumination created by the fires scattered throughout the night created an ambience all their own. In the distance were the lights of the city and the sliver of a first quarter moon provided additional light for the party and painted a nice picture on the canvass of the ocean.

The waves were crashing against the dark stones of the breakwater, adding an aural dimension to the vivid visual impact of the scene. I sat down, enjoying the coolness of the sand, and looked out to the dark horizon, paying careful attention to the presence I felt coming up behind me. With not the slightest symptom of a seizure coming on, I could be fairly certain there was a flesh and blood mortal very close to me and it turned out to be exactly who I wanted it to be, Bonnie.

I could just make out the contours of her body and windblown hair, perched above me atop a sandy mound.

“Would you like some company?” she asked, as though I would have refused. Of course, I answered in the affirmative.

She walked down towards me and I could see the white shorts against her tanned flesh. She looked like a goddess, the night goddess of the beach, and I was her most humble servant.

We began with small talk, not that I cared. All I wanted was her near me. Then, suddenly she began to cry. I wanted to enquire as to what was wrong, but something told me to keep my peace and let her tears play themselves out.

She then regaled me with a several hours-long discourse on her break up with her boyfriend. She provided me far more information than I wanted or needed to know, but I played the part of good listener and let her pour her heart out, which she did long into the night. This was the birth of our relationship and I was in love with her from that night on.

Back in the present, we frolicked in the snow until time for lunch, rejoining the others to eat and close out the day’s agenda.

We did not actually return to Los Angeles until late Tuesday, a long weekend and for me one of the best I had ever had. It had been a very special time, filled with love and mercifully devoid of seizures, visions, and things that go bump in the night.

I had actually felt normal and that felt good.