

I was in shock. I walked into the house, quietly closing the door behind me. Thank God, Maria was the only one home. She was in the family room ironing and watching TV in Spanish.

I yelled, "Hola!" Heard, "Hola, Laura" back to me, as I hurried down the hall to my room.

I flopped on my bed, buried my face in my pillow and just sobbed. I felt so dirty. I ran into the bathroom and took a shower. I scrubbed and scrubbed; I just could not get him off me. Brushed my teeth over and over. Rinsed my mouth out a dozen times, gargled with salt water. Looked at myself in the mirror.

What could I do? I could tell my mom I would stop going to my camp job at TARS (Teens Aid the Retarded) early, since she could not drive me the last week. But she knew how much I loved it and she would want to know why. I could beg her to let me take the bus, but she would insist I ride with Uncle Davis, and remind me it was just for one more week of camp.

Six more days, and I will be dead. I thought of the crazy stories I had heard about guys like Uncle Davis. They want more and more from you and then they end up cutting you into

pieces dumping what is left of you in the county refuse... I was working myself into a panic. I thought of my best friend Trish.

What would she do? She would tell her mom and go to the police. She would have jumped out of the car and gone running down the highway screaming, naked if necessary. Oh well, too late for that. And the mom bit? Trish's mom was not mine. Mine thought Uncle Davis was the greatest man on earth.

And the police? For a moment, I considered that. They might be willing to follow in an unmarked car maybe and see what he was forcing me to do. If they even believed me, I would never get to work at the TARS camp again, I thought, since he is in charge.

And he would just tell them mine were the silly fantasies of an adolescent girl.

---...--------

Summer ended. I started eighth grade, without any of my friends from my old neighborhood. The neighborhood we had moved to two months ago was in a different district across town. Loneliness set in. I told myself I did not care. I had been telling myself I did not care ever since the ugly seven days at the end of the summer. I was in a mean and fighting place, withdrawn, isolated. Struggling to accept the consequences of being the self-made loser I had become. I wallowed in self-pity. Most days, I set my jaw.

I told myself, "No matter."

One day I swallowed an entire bottle of pills from my mother's medicine cabinet.

POSTSCRIPT TO INNOCENCE

In the hospital, I met my new psychiatrist. Dr. Fagan. He was mean and unfriendly. The last person I would have chosen to spend any time with, had I any choice in the matter. I continued to see Dr. Fagan, monthly, after I was released. Our first session outside of the hospital was long and dreary. He asked maybe two questions, which I answered. Then, no more. We both had nothing to say. And that was it. We sat in heavy, disturbing silence.

Who would break it first? I thought.

Maybe Dr. Fagan would like to take a ride with Uncle Davis for seven days in a row.

---...---...---

Since I was following her rules, my mom started letting me stay almost every Friday overnight at best my friend Trish's house, in the old neighborhood. Trish's big brother always had pot, and sometimes he shared with us. One night, Trish and I tagged along with him to a concert in the park. I recognized one of the band members as Richard. Our families were members of the same Unitarian Fellowship. He was my babysitter, Pookie's little brother, whom I had not seen in years. His mother, Peggy and my mother were close friends, ever since we had first moved to El Paso when I was only four years old.

Watching Richard intently, I remembered the day he got his first drum set. I had been at his house, since Pookie was babysitting me that Saturday afternoon. I was amazed at how good he had become.

A few weeks after the concert in the park, I was headed home from another wonderful overnight at Trish's, late Saturday afternoon. Since no one answered the phone at home, I

walked down the hill to Stanton Street to catch the city bus. It was not uncommon. I had not started hitchhiking, yet.

I was examining a scuff on my platform shoe, lifting my bell bottom a little to see it better, bending over. My hair fell and covered my face, so I reached and pulled it back behind my ear. Caught the eye of someone staring intently at me not five feet away. I gasped and jumped. Then I saw who it was.

“Richard.”

“I know you, don't I?” He asked.

“You don't remember me, do you?” I laughed.

I could tell he was struggling to place me but could not.

“No. I'm sorry. I really don't.” He told me, with a smile.

His voice was so soft and so gentle. I just melted. Darned those butterflies. I would will them away.

“I'm Laura King. Lane's daughter. My mom and yours are good friends. From the Fellowship. Your sister, Pookie, used to babysit me, at your house.”

“Oh.” He thought for a minute. “You look different.”

I laughed, “I hope so!” I blurted out, “I just saw you couple weeks ago at that concert they had in the park.”

He smiled, "You were there."

I nodded. "You were really good. I mean I was just thinking about how I was there the day you got your drums. It's amazing how much better you are!"

I felt my face flushing, thinking what a dumb thing to say!

He smiled, said, "Going to jam, want to come over?"

I was shocked. "No, I have to go home right now. But can I come another day?"

Richard smiled at me again. "Every Saturday afternoon. Come anytime."

The bus had arrived.

I waved as he walked away, and shouted, "Maybe next Saturday, then?" Hoping I did not sound too wistful.

The following Friday night, excited, Trish and I called and left a message for Richard. Midmorning, Saturday, in his big brown Ford Econoline Van, Richard stopped and beeped for us in front of Trish's house. Less than a mile away, we pulled up to the house I had spent so many Saturdays at, for years. Peggy Jerome watched Trish and I come in.

"Well, hello, Laura, what a pleasant surprise!"

I was embarrassed. I gave Peggy a hug, exchanging pleasantries. Very tricky situation, for a moment I am concerned, sure that Peggy will say something to my mother, since I had not included her in my plans. But I did not dwell on this problem for long. I was caught up

in the excitement of the music. I could hear the feedback from electric guitars being tuned as Richard escorted us to the converted garage sound room. I found a spot close to the drums and dropped, cross legged upon a fat red cushion. I looked around, surprised to find familiar faces. Trish and I were not the only audience. These guys I had known but not seen much of, for years, all from the Fellowship. They were each at least five years my senior. Four were jamming. Their fame resounded in the ears of beholders that day. But success was on its way.

They were good. In fact, they were superb. I was enthralled from the very first jam session I sat in, on the very first day. I was awestruck. I did not want to move. I did not want to go anywhere, nor do anything other than what I was doing at that moment. I wanted to be there forever. Upon which, I would ask for eternity all over again, so I could stay there in the moment, immersed in the music.

I watched them play, jam, change, stop on a dime, in the center, as if on cue, go back, go over, do over, play, and on, and on, and on. It was magic. Pure magic. Even the disharmony was harmony. They were all four on cue. When they were off, they knew it. Immediately, as if by silent cadence, and immediately they would stop. On cue again, signaled by Richard's drum, "Thunk." Sometimes they would have words for each other. A discussion. Do this. No, this. How about, this. Agreement. Harmony. Magic. I was right there, in the center of it. Invisible, but right there. Oh, my God, I was entirely immersed. I wanted to scream out loud, for joy.

Every Saturday, for eternity, lasting the entirety of the next two months, Trish and I were there in Richard's garage. Then one Saturday afternoon as I was dropped off the

customary two blocks away from my house, my mother is waiting for me on the sidewalk. I can see she is not happy with me. I step down from the van.

“Ugh,” I groan, and wave Richard off.

My mother is full of questions, for which I have no answers. I do not want to tell her the truth and I do not want to lie. I say nothing. After lying to her this long, what can I do? Where do I begin? My silence infuriates her. By the time we are home, she announces I will be staying there. No more Trish, no more Saturdays in the Jerome garage (Peggy must have told her), no more lies.

She adds, “No more smoking pot either, young lady.”

I walked into my bedroom and saw it had been tossed. I conclude she found my pot.

I hear my mother from the hallway, “And clean up your room for God’s sake!”

At dinner, she declares, “I will decide the rest of your consequences once you decide to tell me the truth.”

My mother and I navigate the halls in silence for days. One evening she announces she has decided it will be in my best interest to see Dr. Fagan again, until further notice.

---...-----

Formerly, in my episodes with Dr. Fagan on a regular basis, not much ever transpired. I had never seen him while I was under the influence of marijuana or hashish, for instance, because I did not like it very much. Back then, I had only tried it twice, and just was not

interested in trying it again. Lately I had come to like both substances and associated them with very pleasant events. In light of my present circumstances, in particular, I had taken to smoking pot every day.

I attended all my sessions with Dr. Fagan, now, under the influence. He never asked me if I was high. The differences in me must have been blatantly clear. No more silence. I had a lot to say. I was no longer the little girl who was too intimidated, back when he did nothing to bridge that gap. Under the influence of marijuana, I had courage and the gift of gab.

One evening, my mother had friends over including Richard's mother, Peggy. They were planning a Fellowship Dinner. I was surprised when I thought I heard Peggy's voice. I looked out my bedroom window to see that, certainly enough, her blue Buick was parked in front. Curious, I snuck down the hall to eavesdrop. I could safely listen, out of view, because they were seated in the living room, and acoustics were good. I heard my mother's tone of voice. The one she uses when she has secrets to tell, and particularly juicy gossip.

I cannot believe what I hear, "Dr. Fagan diagnoses her schizophrenic."

Two gasps, audible intakes of breath.

"He says she is an active drug addict. She is beyond my control. She needs to be institutionalized. Or she will get hurt. She will hurt herself or hurt someone else."

My mind is racing. I have not hurt myself or anyone else in months! How dare he call me a drug addict?



I hear Peggy saying, "You aren't really going to send her away, are you Lane? Do you really think that is necessary?"

"Well, I can't control her!" Then my mother adds, "Look I know it is hard to understand. I accept this is what I must do. OR she will GET WORSE!"

I cannot make out any exchange of words since they have dropped their volume. I can only imagine my mother's guests are as shocked as I am.

Then the final blow, as I hear my mother say, "Dr. Fagan has a place, potentially by September. It is a good place. All children her age, with similar problems. A hospital, where they can give her the help she needs, around the clock."

I breathe. My heart is beating fast. I am thinking, "I don't have much time to get out of here." This is so horrible. Me schizophrenic? You have got to be kidding! Me stoned, yes.

"What an idiot!" I say to myself, referring to Dr. Fagan.

It dawns on me, maybe he is not the idiot. I am! How stupid of me to go to sessions stoned!

A week later. I wake up with courage and tell myself, today is the day. I grabbed a couple of things together and tied them, along with all the money I had; climbed out the window as fast and quietly as I could.

Ran down the next block and over. Made a big circle, before doubling back to make sure no one saw me leave. I headed up the hill on the only feeder trail adjacent to the main road.

Here is where I was worried. I tried to look like anyone but a runaway in a bathing suit top and blue jeans, about to stick her thumb out for a ride. Crossed over the four-lanes of Alabama Street and stuck out my thumb. Walked almost all the way to McKelligon Canyon.

Two fellas picked me up. Young guy, likely twenty-four, twenty-five and his father or grandfather sixty-five, seventy. Small truck, smaller cab. They wanted me to sit in the middle. Not good. Got in against my better judgement. Simultaneous with the slammed cab door, I realize they are drunk. Polluted. Reeked of alcohol. Asked me if I want to go with them to McKelligon Canyon. Told them no, I did not have time today, thank you very much, in my sweetest voice. They wanted to know if I was sure. Told them I was sure. The driver moved into the right-hand turn lane, for the canyon road. I started screaming. I was not in the mood.

“Let me out of here right now!” Lots of obscenities.

It probably was not about them or the possible danger as much as something again happening against my will. I flipped out. They became extremely apologetic, happy to let me out of their vehicle.

Pulled over and insisted I get out of their truck, in fact. “We don’t want any trouble.”

There I stood, back on the side of the road. Not two miles from home, but on my way, my head a lot clearer.

I was headed for the runaway shelter. Since finding out about my mother’s plans to send me away I made my own backup plan. In my heart of hearts, I yearned to stay with Richard,

especially, and Trish. I fantasized about Trish's parents, picturing them telling me they would take me in. In real life, I knew they would not take such a risk to let me live with them. That, and my belief my mother would immediately go there to find me. But she would never expect me to do anything sensible like go to a shelter.

If the shelter was full, Aliviane drug treatment facility for teens was right next door. I knew I was not a drug addict, but they did not know that. Two uneventful rides, and a couple of blocks walk, I was standing in front of the shelter.

They deceive you at the shelters. They tell you they will not notify your parents where you are. If you give them your phone number, they will use it to simply let them know you are alive and well and safe. But they will not, under any circumstance, tell them where you are. That is a lie. They admit it later. After it is too late, of course.

I did not give up the phone number right away. No one asked for it. There were bed shortages at both places, so I did the dance. Spent a couple nights in the shelter, waiting for an opening in treatment. I was the only teen proxy in treatment. I was also the only girl. It was particularly interesting to me. I had never seen anything like it. I loved the experience. Approximately a week at Aliviane before someone interviewed me. She insisted I provide a phone number. The next day I was in a group session, with everyone else. A heroin addict was speaking in a manner so honest; I was hanging on to every word.

A counselor, standing in the doorway, called my name, "Laura?"

The guy sitting next to me nudged me, "Hey Laura," I follow his finger, pointing to the door. Behind the liar counselor's shoulder, I can see my mother's tear-stained face, swollen red eyes, smiling, jeering at me. I feel the elevator drop deep inside my belly.

I look out the backseat window. A sunny day I was not going to enjoy the rest of. I was afraid I would probably miss more than a few. We pulled up in front of Thomason General.

"Uh oh." I know of this place.

"You better pull a rabbit out of your hat, Laura," I tell myself on the ride up to the top floor. If you are not insane when you get there, you are insane by the time you leave.

---...---...---

One overcast afternoon, I am in a miserable medicated stupor. Down in the dumps. Have not brushed anything in I do not know how long. Been crying off and on for as long as I can remember. An attendant I have not seen before startles me, as he steps into the room.

"What do you want?" I ask him.

"I've come to cheer you up," he smiles wide.

Something about his voice, his ingenuine smile, his mannerisms, or maybe I was just too far out of touch with reality. I see Uncle Davis standing there. I am alone in this room with Uncle Davis. I jump off the bed, my feet hit the ground and I catch myself against the wall before the velocity can take me to the ground.

"No, you're not!" I scream at him.

POSTSCRIPT TO INNOCENCE

I am mad. I am full of rage. No one is taking anything from me today. I want to kick him in the face, but I am scared, running as fast as I can. I am out in the hall screaming at the top of my lungs which is nothing on this ward.

I run up to the nurse's station and yell at them, "Help!"

One of the nurses takes a lazy glance at me. I remember from seventh-grade P.E. class in Self-Defense, you are supposed to yell "fire!" I fix my stare at the nurse and take in two lungs-full of air.

Yell at the top of my volume, "Fire!" And again, "Fire!"

The nurses are out of their seats now and headed toward me, so I run in the opposite direction down the hall, screaming, "Fire! Fire!"

By the time they catch up with me, and sedate me, I am too exhausted to care.

---...---...---

Late August, Big Spring State Hospital in Texas is hot. The locusts are busy all day, and well into the early dusk evening hours, when the crickets take over. Big Spring is even uglier than El Paso. Two shades of brown. The only shade of green is mesquite. The cactus is colorless.

The buildings are lifeless drab green and brown. They blend so perfectly into the background that you would miss them if you blinked an eye. Meant perhaps to camouflage, in hopes for a night-time low flying airplane to take the hospital compound out of its

misery. A miserable place indeed. I cannot imagine a more miserable place for locking up teenagers.

Admittedly, I had just visited two facilities, both unpleasant in their own unique way, neither originated to house teenagers. Big Spring State Hospital, however, had an entire ward devoted for the housing of wayward teenagers.

A few days after my arrival, I am playing cards with three boys in the day room. My chance to find out if there was any possible means of escape from this place. My spades card game partner Kurt looks me directly in the eyes and asks me if I am serious. I look back, hold his gaze, and tell him I am.

“Okay,” he says, “The only time, and I mean the ONLY time you can do it is on Sunday morning when we are walking to Arts and Crafts.”

The guy next to me slaps me on the arm, a real little guy, whose head barely reaches above the card table, “Because it’s clear across the hospital,” he whispers.

Kurt turns the score sheet over. Starts drawing boxes, with his pencil.

He is describing the layout, “There are three buildings, you have walk in direct line with this one here or you will miss the overflow pipe.”

He goes on to explain the pipe runs under the freeway, through the dry creek bed, which is not always dry.

“Any other way you have to climb through barbed wire and razor wire. If you get into the pipe fast enough, the guard in the shack won’t see you. Sunday, the guard doesn’t watch so well anyway.”

I ask him how he knows all this.

He says, “Well why’d you ask me anyway? I have tried it before. But after the last time I figured I really didn’t have any place better to be. So, here, I stay.”

I commiserate, nod my head.

He asks, “What about you? You have someplace better to be?”

I nod my head, again. Keep the details to myself. When make it out of here, I do not want anyone to track me down. Ever again.

It is Sunday. I am nervous and determined. At the designated building on the way to Arts and Crafts, I separated myself from the group. As Kurt predicted, my attempt was unsuccessful. I did not go directly enough from the building to the obscured entrance to the tunnel. Instead, I passed it. Looked for it. When they caught me, I saw my mistake. I had only missed it by thirty feet.

As the security officers escorted me to seclusion, I was planning my next escape. Thinking I would just need a little more time. If I separated from the group on the way back from Arts and Crafts rather than on the way in, I speculated I would have maybe fifteen more minutes. “Next time,” I told myself, “Next Sunday.”

I spent the next forty-eight hours in a padded cell, injected with sedation.

Back in the day room, the boys were waiting for me.

“My girlfriend’s back.” Kurt announces, with open arms.

I smile, shake my head. “Not for long, Mr. Kurt,” I whisper as I take my seat.

Played cards all day, for days. Saturday morning, I am thinking about Sunday, distracted from the game.

Kurt disturbed my reverie, “I’m going with you, Miss dare devil, got places to go, things to do. I’ll make sure you get there.”

“No way,” I looked at him. “I’m going all the way to El Paso.”

Kurt spreads his arms, smiling at me, “All the more reason for me to help you get there. Already told you I’ve got nowhere else to be.”

Sunday morning. Reluctantly, I tell Kurt he can go with me if he really wants to.

He smiles and winks at me, “Planning on it.”

On cue we broke away from the group returning from Arts and Crafts. Made it without any problems to the opening of the tunnel and through to the other side. Stayed down in the dry creek bed, walking in silence.

I finally ask him, “Did we really make it?”



Kurt looks back, and slowly nods his head. I follow his gaze. The hospital has almost completely faded from view.

I breathe a huge sigh of relief, "How far is the road?"

"This way," he shouts, already climbing the embankment.

We both stick out our thumbs, headed for El Paso. We see the patrol car headed in the opposite direction. We both look back. In slow motion, we watch it turn around. As the siren sounds and the lights come up, my heart sinks. I will not be headed for El Paso today, after all.

Forty-eight hours later, I step out of seclusion. The counselor hands me clean green garb hospital pants and shirt.

"My clothes?" I ask her. "In a few days," she says, walking away.

My mistake was letting Kurt come with me, I think. Maybe I need to call Richard, or Peggy. Maybe they will help me when I tell them how horrible this place is.

Saturday afternoon, the getaway plan is confirmed. Sunday morning, my stomach is twisted in a thousand knots. Peggy and her boyfriend, Rick, were coming to get me. Sunday lunch seems to last forever. The iced tea is excruciatingly sweet.

The doors are unlocked, for us to walk to Arts and Crafts. I stepped out into the blast of hot dry, desert Big Spring Texas ugly air. Smells like freedom to me today. Kurt and I smile wide at each other as we head out in front of the rest. Take the little detour and double

back, now we are jogging in front of the administration building. It could not have been more perfectly orchestrated. Peggy's big blue Buick, driven by Rick pulls up the circular drive just as we came around the east side of the building.

I turn to Kurt to thank him, and he yells after me, "I hope I never see you again, girlfriend!"

I look back and seem him standing there, great big smile on his face, and he turns back to catch up with everyone else. The back door of the Buick swings open. Car barely stops long enough for me to jump in before Rick speeds up. We pass the unmanned guard shack and turn right onto the highway. I start hooting and hollering, tears running down my face.

"Today," I whisper, "Today is the day, I'll make it to El Paso."

It was nightfall as we arrived in El Paso. It was the strangest feeling coming home. Less than a month, it felt like a year. I was sneaking back, in darkness. All very clandestine. Driving down the hill to Richard's house, I was back in the old neighborhood, which I had not thought much about, since moving away years before. Even in the recent months spent in the Jerome garage I had not paid attention to anything outside of my infatuation for him and the incredible music. But tonight, I was nostalgically nursing my memories. Back before I was ever in trouble. Long before anyone had dared to steal my innocence.

My reprieve would not last long. But on that August Sunday night in 1973, I was safe again, and secure, in the presence of people who cared about me, whom I trusted could protect me. For one night, I could let their vigilance cover me. I could let my guard down. I slept more soundly than I had in a long time.