

THE PEAR BLOSSOM MIS-ADVENTURE

CHAPTER ONE

This is a true story about a rock and roll band. That band was on the roll in Dallas, in the year 2002. The guitar player in this band, and his girl friend-accomplice, were always on the rock, in the crack and on the ice. Sometimes this wayward pair led the band, with it's unwitting members, between that rock and a hard place. This is their story, told (as seen) from the outside-looking-in. Their saga began in Dallas, and I became involved when they asked me to help move them back to California. Sounds simple enough, huh? How could I have known it would become the most bizarre trip I ever embarked upon, in my whole lifetime? For the record, I am a veteran traveler, who learned long ago to keep one eye open for the "unexpected". But never before did such weird events come so close up and personal. Although I didn't realize it at the time, that trip with the guitar player and his wacky girlfriend had a strange effect on me. In retrospect, it seems like my responses to the problematic were automatic, as if the unreality sent me seeking the security of a mental shut-down. Yeah, maybe like a catatonic state?

This was not the first time I had trimmed the wings of common sense, and followed a lark all the way to California. But back then, youth was a valid excuse for fool-hardy plans. And foolish they were! It seemed to me the little adventure that occurred years ago, as a kid in junior high school, would take the cake for idiocy. But I was so wrong! Anyway, there is no real comparison, for we were just a bunch of adolescent dudes, flaunting our immature manhood. On a testosterone impulse, we decided to take off and go to Los Angeles, where the sun was bright, the surf was wild, and the girls were wilder. Of course, this egg was hatched after a weekend party! So off we went, but very soon reality tempered recklessness, and we sheepishly went back home. Nevertheless, that juvenile excursion was a tame little kitten, compared to the Pear Blossom tiger.

Now there are some good reasons why I am telling this story. For starters, writing about it allows you to share in some of those unforgettable experiences. But mostly, it makes me grateful for being “normal”, without all the drama a person can add to his life, totally lacking reason or cause. The story is my perception of what happened, and I will try to describe it so you will get the picture. It’s kind of like inviting you into my personal diary, you know. Some people think I am “different”, and no doubt that accounts for the unusual companions who have populated my life. Beginning in early childhood, and continuing into the present, life has dealt me a stream of oddball situations other people seem to never encounter. They would be great grist for the milling of some interesting movies, and this experience was one of them. Considering all the adversities surrounding that trip, the reader might ask, why remember them? To which I reply, “Why not?” Even negative memories can pull up bitter-sweet feelings, because a part of yourself has passed with them, and you can never ever return to that specific place in time. I learned to exercise patience while going through those experiences. I remember the beauty of the mountains, the landscape around me, the smell of the mountain air, and the electricity you feel in being so close to where the land ends, and water begins. I found peace in the continuity of nature, when everything else was in turmoil. It was a memorable part of the experience.

Having said all that, this story is really about Tommy and his girlfriend, so let me introduce you. Tommy was born and raised in Dallas, although for twenty fours years, he had made his home in California. He went there to visit, and liked it so well he just stayed. But life has it’s ups and downs, and according to his own choices, he eventually went down. So when he was down on his luck, and had lost everything he had gained there, he returned to Dallas. Guess he intended to gather up his thoughts, and try to glue the scattered pieces his life back together. But he had left his heart in California, and any picture would have been incomplete without it. He had longed to go back to Los Angeles ever since he had arrived in Dallas, and hung up his clothes in his mother’s closet. His mother was

a very kind and sweet little lady, who had birthed three sons. Like most mothers, her children were always welcomed back home if need be. Even though she was ill, with a slow cancer spreading throughout her body, she yet exercised some house rules. Tommy of course, did not easily conform to anybody's rules, so he blessed her with his absence at every opportunity. Usually he managed to find someplace else to park for the night. Often he stayed with an old high school buddy, where he could smoke, drink, dope and come in at an indecent hour.

Tommy looked like a younger version of Chuck Norris. Maybe it was his hairstyle and the unshaven look; he really did resemble the famous karate champ-gone-actor. In fact, often people would see him in a store and ask if he were old Chucky boy in person. Of course he was flattered by the attention, and by their mistake. He was very accomplished on the guitar, as he had begun playing at a very young age, and became quite good at it. He was also very skillful on the flute. Growing up, one of his musical idols was Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull, who was famous for his flute playing ability. Tommy had performed and toured with some fairly well-known classic bands, back in the eighties. It was just a matter of time that he would join a band at some point in Dallas. I had been actively searching for a lead guitarist, and he had been inactively waiting for a job. It seemed like a good fit, so he joined my band, the "3R1" band, as we called it.

As fate would have it, before Tommy moved from Dallas to California, he had a high school sweetheart. Her name was Lori, and they had been a red-hot item at one time. He had not seen her for over twenty five years or so, and when he returned, so did her memory. An old school friend helped him look her up on the internet, and eventually they located her. She was still living in the Dallas area, so he gave Lori a call, and their relationship began all over again. But little did he know she had been a chronic drug user for the last ten years or more. Those close to her thought she had cleaned up her act by attending rehab programs, so she appeared straight when they met again. But alas, the demons of addiction cannot be chased away so easily. After their new reunion, it was not

long before they both returned to their old habits again. I later found out the hard way that Tommy had been bound by those same devils in Los Angeles. Their mutual dependency only deepened the bond between them, while increasing the dangers. It was a double-devil deal!

It was not surprising to learn that Tommy had been a high-end user of speed drugs in Los Angeles. His abstinence was not voluntary, but was enforced when he no longer had any money to buy them. He was flat-broke, since his drug habits had managed to get him kicked out of every band that would hire him. All social groups, especially musicians, thrive on gossip, and the stories of Tommy's unpredictable escapades grew until nobody would risk hiring him. Having no money, no family, no friends and no job, he returned to Dallas. The only thing he possessed was a damaged reputation as a meth-head. But regardless of having no money, doesn't every addict seek a supplier for his substance? He was on the prowl seeking a ready source, and the easiest target would be a woman who could enable his habit. Call it luck(?) that he didn't have to look very long before such a woman appeared, whom to his delight, came equipped with both drugs and money.

I am convinced that Satan himself orchestrates some relationships, and that not every "marriage" is made in heaven. Such was the union between Tommy and Lori. She was a user, too so they had a lot in common. To make the situation worse, she was also a nurse, and had legal access to most drugs. Better yet, she could afford to buy them. But the frosting on the cake was the impending divorce from her successful husband, from which she was expecting to benefit greatly. In her, Tommy saw not only an open avenue through which he could obtain his drugs, but also his ticket back to Los Angeles. In only one week after reuniting with Lori, she was buying methadrine for both of them. "After all", they argued, "we need it to be more productive. We gotta have it for energy!" Imagine inventing a health-benefit, to justify killing your body!

The sad truth is, all addicts are masters of deception, and Tommy was certainly no exception. Sadder still is the fact that addiction always holds hands with misery, and like Tommy, in spite of her youth, good looks, education, talents and money, Lori was as miserable as any other addict. Knowing this about her, it was easy for him to paint rose-colored pictures of life on the glorious West Coast, which her drug-befogged mind readily accepted. From the very beginning of their renewed relationship, he began indoctrinating her with the gospel of high-rolling freedom, which could only be found in the Eden of California. Addicts often seek seclusion, so another lure for her was the isolation of the mountains of California, where Tommy said it was even legal to camp out, if you wanted to. He knew that first-hand, being a druggie and a vagabond. But he didn't tell her he camped out because he was broke and strung out, and the mountains were his city of refuge. By contrast, he made Dallas sound like a dull, restrictive, ugly and boring place, where life's little pleasures were illegal and expensive!

It was a long time before the band became aware of that dark side of his life. We just naively thought he wanted to come back to Dallas for awhile, visit his ailing mother, and eventually go back to California. I don't think any of us realized what a mess his life was in L.A., and he must not have even had enough to eat. True, he was thin, but unless a person is a food-addict, they usually do weigh in on the light side of the scales. Nevertheless, when a few of his Los Angeles friends saw him in Dallas, the first thing they commented on was how healthy he looked. Actually, he had gained enough weight to have built a little stomach, and his old friends were delighted. It meant he had not been doing as much speed, for this drug suppresses hunger, and excessive weight loss usually results. Coming to Dallas was a good thing for Tommy, and might even have saved his life. For sure, until he got with Lori, it gave his body a much-needed rest from the chronic drug abuse.

Now that the bones of the main characters have been fleshed out a little, maybe you are wondering how I met Tommy. By pure coincidence, he and I

seemed to have a lot of friends in common. Most of my musical buddies know that I am a serious Beatles fan, and it just happened that Tommy was, too. One day he stopped in at the bar in his mother's neighborhood. While he was having some drinks, the subject of music came up, and he began to tell his bar friends how much he admired the Beatles. It just happened that a friend of mine heard the conversation, and said, "I want you to talk to someone who admires the Beatles as much as you do, and he is also a musician." She dialed my number, and we talked about the Beatles, about music, about guitars, and everything in between.

After such a conversation about music, it just made sense to invite him to bring his guitar to one of our band practices. We agreed to get together, and see how it worked. When we finally met, the music immediately gave us a common bond, through which we were able to communicate. Oddly, our musical backgrounds, and even some of our religious experiences, had been quite similar. So there were enough commonalities to make a solid connection, and we easily became friends. For quite some time, I had been considering adding a lead guitarist to my band. Tommy was the perfect fit for the group, and was welcomed in like a brother. For the next two years he performed with the band on the weekends, and often he and I teamed up for lesser gigs as a duo.

In the beginning, Tommy really proved to be a big asset to the band. He helped provide beautiful three part harmonies, and could play all the great Beatles guitar leads. Added to that mix were his many vocal leads, and as our repertoire grew, so did the group's dependency upon his musical contributions. Four strong, good-looking male musicians will always draw a following, and the band's popularity steadily increased. But as time passed, Tommy got restless, and those old devils who were still entrapped within his very soul, began to raise their ugly heads again. It is the devils' jobs on earth to destroy whatever or whomever they can, and they were certainly working overtime on him! It seemed their poisonous tentacles were reaching out to encompass not only Tommy, but

also any and every thing he touched, including us. That being the case, when those demolition-demons tried to destroy the band, the problems he was creating could no longer be ignored.

For example, for no apparent reason at all, Tommy started missing band practices, which slowly became increasingly irritating to the other members. He just didn't show up. No phone call, no excuse, no anything: he just wasn't there! The band judged such behavior as a combination of disrespectful, inexcusable and unacceptable. It caused many round-table discussions about what to do with him. The other members of the band, Keith and John, both had day-jobs, but they always made it to practice, no matter what. They worked hard, and sometimes fought the rain and traffic to get there. But all their effort and dedication could not make up for Tommy's escalating indifference. It soon became apparent that he probably stayed zoned out, somewhere in the "great escape"; apparently not even oriented to time or space. He often disappeared for several days at a time. Missing practice was bad enough, but when he failed to show up for an important gig, and left the band hanging, it just couldn't be tolerated.

When confronted by the rest of the group, Tommy confessed to his involvement with drugs, and admitted to having a raging love affair with methamphetamines. With confession coming from his lips, the band's tentative suspicions became hard reality, and friendships began to edge closer to frustration. But even after he verbally confirmed that he had a problem, nobody really wanted to fire him from the band. However, they countered, what good is a great player if he is not going to show up half the time? In spite of all, they decided to continue working with him, if he would put forth a reasonable effort, for at least as long as the arrangement might last. It didn't last very long, since time itself has a way of resolving many issues for us. In this case, it was Tommy who announced he was leaving. We knew from day one that if he could, he would have already left Dallas and returned to California. We also knew it was just a matter of time, before he would eventually maneuver a way to do that.

It came in the summer of 2004, when Lori finally received a big settlement check from her divorce. With all that money in hand, Tommy was not about to let such an opportunity go unheeded. Chances are, he had been waiting for such a windfall for a long time, and moved in on it with all the strategy of a general on a battlefield. He had been priming this woman for two years, so it didn't take very much to persuade her to leave Dallas, and seek the Utopia of California. Their decision to move to California was the real beginning of the Pear Blossom story, and the adventure started before they even strapped on the spurs, saddled up and rode out of Dallas.

Although Tommy was euphoric about finding a way back to California, his solution was yet fraught with problems. For starters, they would need more than one vehicle for the move, since they planned to move their entire household and all its' contents, including the animals. Besides their Jeep, they needed a van and a trailer, and someone who could drive. Obviously, neither Tommy nor Lori were suitable candidates for driving such a rig. They would have been positively dangerous to themselves and everybody else on the road. It would be a long trip, and their focused attention was notoriously short. There was no way they could have handled a large van, pulling a trailer, screeching around hairpin curves, on a two-lane mountain road! So they decided they better hire somebody else to do the driving, and they would take the Jeep. Tommy was desperate to leave Dallas, and would have done anything to get Lori on the road to California. Anything - even to the extreme of sacrificing money to pay an extra driver for the van! He could be persuasive, even when she was irrational, and eventually she agreed to pay \$500.00 for a driver. But who? Birds of a feather don't always flock together, and those two birds didn't want to hire another drug-user to do their driving. Guess I must have been a natural choice. Besides that, I was probably the only person they knew who wasn't also into drugs. So they approached me with the offer. They said I would receive \$500.00 up front, and all my expenses paid, including motels and meals.

In 2004 I was still single, adventurous and available, but most of all I was sober and sane enough to drive their van. I had been selling advertising as a day-time supplement to my night-time business, but at that moment business was slow. I remember thinking it might be an excellent opportunity to just get away for a couple of weeks. I had been to California several times, but was never there long enough to enjoy the beaches and mountains. Tommy promised we would get to really see the sites, maybe go camping, or even visit Hollywood and do a little jamming with some musicians that he knew there. As only a con artist can do, he baited the hook quite generously, then dangled it before my eyes. I wasn't really hungry, but once I tasted the bait, it got my attention. After all, I reasoned, what could I miss here in two weeks, that I couldn't make up for later? With the promise of \$500.00 in cash, all expenses paid, a paid-in-advance one-way return ticket to Dallas via American Airlines, and the lure of good times ahead, I couldn't turn down the proposal. Besides that, I had grown to feel a genuine affection for Tommy and Lori, and feared for their safety. For them, the journey required a third party. I had only one stipulation: when we arrived in California, they promised Lori's nine cats would be kenneled. So the deal was made, the date was set, and the money settled down very comfortably in my erstwhile empty pocket.

The plan was the three of us would be going, but as it happened, there would be four. When I told my musical buddy, Ken, about the trip, he wanted to go with us. Ken was from Edgewood, Texas, which was a small town with the microscopic population of three hundred three. It is a tiny little hamlet in east Texas, and he had lived there without incident or excitement for almost forty boring years. He had recently recorded a nice CD of his original music, and I was sure he could imagine himself in Hollywood, singing and being discovered by some famous producer. What a dreamer! Nevertheless, he asked if he could go, if he paid his own way. He would just tag along, as it were, and enjoy the sites. Hopefully he would make some music contacts there, and maybe even meet a

star, or two. He had never been west before, at least not that far, and he really got excited about California. The other two agreed he could come, as long as he paid his own way. After thinking about the long drive alone, all the way to Los Angeles, I was glad he was going, and was grateful for his company. Besides that, Ken gave me a feeling of security, because like myself, he was not a drug user. I could count on him to remain rational and/or helpful, if we encountered a problem. And their problems were already out-weighting my concern. If Ken had decided not to go, then I was prepared to refund their money, and say goodbye.

In the midst of all that preparation, the band had three more performances to honor, for which Tommy did manage to show up. After that, we would begin “living on L.A. time”. The last band performance would be the big one; the grand finale. Many relatives were invited to hear Tommy perform, and to say goodbye to the departing couple. I guess you could call this last performance a going away party for them. So the gig went well, and we closed out the two-year partnership, on a “happy note”, more or less. The following week was supposed to have allowed everyone enough time to prepare for leaving. We were scheduled to be on the road by Friday night, at 6:00pm. But a lot had to be done before everything would be ready to roll, and time was of the essence. Later I asked myself, what was I thinking?! I should never have expected such a smooth transition, considering their lifestyle. If it was difficult for Tommy to get to band practice, which was just across town, then how could he be expected to have all his ducks in a row for a trip as lengthy and as involved as getting to Los Angeles? And with the inclusion of Lori into the mix, double the above!

CHAPTER TWO

Unfortunately, as with all addicted people, organizational skills are not their strong points. As a result, loose ends were left dangling everywhere, and nothing seemed to be coming together with any semblance of sanity. To complicate already chaotic matters, Tommy and Lori had been snorting methadrine, and between the two of them, travel plans were slowly deteriorating into what would become a living nightmare. The drug methadrine (speed), makes one very paranoid, to say the least. After awhile, consistent usage begins to create a type of serious paranoid psychosis. The person will often hallucinate, and hear things that are not there, like mysterious voices. Lori was in that stage, and was experiencing an acute and irrational paranoia. Naturally, Tommy wasn't far behind her! Without warning, I got stuck right in the middle of all their craziness. I had gone to their home on Wednesday, to help them box things up and load the trailer. But they were lost in their own wild jungle, and couldn't find their way out of it until Thursday night.

Lori had lost touch with reality, and in her paranoia, she essentially made a false police report. She thought someone had broken into their mobile home, and stolen components out of the two rifles they had in cases. It was a wonder the police didn't arrest her. The drug played havoc with her mind, inducing suspicions about everything and everybody. She was convinced there was foul play somewhere. So instead of helping to pack things up, she bounced off the walls in a panic, ripping things apart, and looking for evidence. One night she completely took Tommy's guitar amp apart, suspecting that someone had put a microphone in it to spy on her. She also tore into the motor of the Jeep they were going to drive to L.A., because she thought someone had bugged the car, or had somehow mounted a spy camera. Her mechanical "work" fixed the Jeep alright, and it never did operate properly after that. She even confessed that her reason for going to California was to run from those in Dallas who were trying to kill her. All those wild ideas had sprung from an imagination gone crazy, and were the by-product of that horrible drug. Tommy could not convince her that no one, especially her

ex-husband, was trying to set her up, or frame her, or kill her, or whatever else her abused brain might be hatching.

Meanwhile, I was squarely in the middle of all this confusion, and was trying to motivate them to get things loaded, so the house could be cleaned out. As might be expected, my pleas fell upon deaf ears, and it was obvious they were not going to be ready by Friday night. It was beginning to appear there would be no trip at all, if they didn't straighten up their act. With the supreme indifference that only a drunk or a druggie can exhibit, they seemed to be oblivious to everything except their own hallucinations. I could easily envision them fighting, but locked into their own separate, private bubbles. Thus they continued to run around in paranoid circles, and argue the time away. During the few moments when Tommy wasn't engaged in battle, we had managed to move everything out, and by Thursday night all that was left was just some odds and ends of bathroom stuff. It would have only taken an hour or so to finish moving it, but their drug-induced behaviors needlessly devoured two more days.

I could not believe this was happening even before the trip, and could just imagine how the rest of the trip was going to turn out. It was not looking good at all! You would have thought the events of Wednesday and Thursday would have been enough for me to back out, but I hung in there. For a fact, shock can allow a person to "detach" from a situation, so maybe my detachment kept me tolerant. I realized they were just too dysfunctional for me to pull out at the last moment. It would have made things even more difficult, and caused more delay. Besides, if I hadn't driven the van, one of them surely would have, and it would have been far too risky for others on the road. For some unknown reason, their dependency made me feel responsible, and I just couldn't let them drive that big van in their condition. Also, I didn't want us to part as enemies, so I stuck to the deal we had made, even though they didn't honor it. Anyway, after I had helped all that I could, I left them with the van and the trailer, and went back to my house.

There was no way we were going to leave Friday night as scheduled, so we agreed they would meet Ken and I at my house Saturday, stay there Saturday night, and leave early Sunday morning. Of course, Ken didn't know the plans had changed, and was driving to Dallas early Friday afternoon from Edgewood, to be ready to leave by 6:00pm Friday night. He was quite disappointed to learn we were not leaving until Sunday morning. The unexpected delay did not exactly make him a happy camper, but he had no choice other than to accept my explanations. Tommy and Lori were supposed to show up sometime around 10:00pm or so, and I had prepared a place for them to sleep in the guest room. Ken and I retired fairly early, so we would be relaxed and feel good for the long trip coming up Sunday. But I slept with the restlessness of anticipation, and around 12:00 midnight, the silence awakened me. It seemed the house was eerily quiet; and in fact, it was way too quiet.

I groggily thought I better get up to see if they had perhaps come in, and had gone to bed without waking us. But their bed had not been touched, and I suddenly realized Tommy and Lori were nowhere around. By this time, Ken had gotten up too, and he was more than a little aggravated with the whole thing, and rightfully so. After all, he was not making any money on this trip, but rather it would cost him. He had left Edgewood in plenty of time Friday afternoon to navigate the heavy traffic between there and Dallas, so he would not make them late for leaving. He had not figured the extra days delay into his trip, and was already teetering just this side of angry. And now this! "Where in the hell were they, anyway?", he demanded. Something had to be done! He emphatically informed me if they did not show up by Sunday morning, and we were not on the road by 8:00am, then he was canceling out, and going back to Edgewood. I agreed with him, and stated if he wasn't going, then I wouldn't either.

The situation had degenerated from disappointing to dysfunctional. It was already midnight, and we had both been rattled out of our sleep by anxiety. I was wondering and worrying, but I surely could not express those fears to Ken. On

the contrary, it fell to my lot to keep him calm. In the meantime, he was wringing his hands and gnashing his teeth, pacing, griping, cursing and threatening. But here was the topper: the trip was planned, the bags were packed, we were ready to go, and Tommy and Lori were either literally missing, or royally ignoring us! I didn't know whether to be angry or worried, since drug addicts often play tragic games. Where were they? After many calls, I finally contacted them on their cell phone, and informed them we had had enough of their fiddle-farting around! By this time I was as angry and disgusted as Ken. If they were not at my house by 8:am Sunday morning, they would lose both of their traveling companions.

Apparently they were both loosely hanging by slender threads, but such a threat conveniently injected a little more fear into their already scrambled minds. Even in their drugged-up state, they knew they would have never made it to California if they went alone. Somebody had to be the care-taker, for they were way too irresponsible to travel so far, with so much cash, driving a Jeep, and a van with a trailer and nine cats! So they stated they understood, and promised to be at my house by 8:00 in the morning. However, I had learned by then their promises did not mean very much, and was still apprehensive about the outcome. But the one thing I was sure of was that Ken would go back to Edgewood, if they did not get there as promised.

In an odd way, I was hoping that maybe they would not show up, for even I had lost a lot of enthusiasm for the trip. Regardless, in a half-hearted effort to salvage the plans, I left the front door open so they could come in, if and when they arrived. With something akin to a sailor's intuition, I knew beforehand this ship was about to embark upon stormy seas, and could potentially sink. But oddly, I persevered with the plans. Nevertheless, as hour followed hour, and they didn't show, I was beginning to enjoy a feeling of profound relief, thinking now I could cancel out. Regrettably, the feeling was short-lived. Day was dawning, and from the window of my front door I saw the dim outlines of their trailer, their van, and their Jeep, with nine traveling cats, parked in front of my house. Nerv-

ousness made my mouth as dry as sandpaper, and I wondered what in the world was going on with those people? Were they sleeping in the Jeep? When did they arrive, and how long had they been there? A thousand rebukes crowded my mind, and threatened to jump out of my mouth. But no! I had to harshly discipline myself - I had to keep my cool! If I had lost it, then the whole situation would have gotten out of control.

It was getting close to 7:00 am Sunday morning, and they were on my front porch talking. I startled them when I opened the door. They must have been standing out-of-view of my window. Instead of unleashing my pent-up aggravation, I inquired, (as nicely as I could), “Did you guys just drive up or what?”, and they replied, “Yes, we have been up all night.” More truthfully, they had been “up” for the last three days, because meth makes a person more jittery than a priest dating a prostitute! There was no way they could have forced their bodies to lie down for any length of time, much less slept. How miserable was that?! Not surprisingly, they were acting very weird, and Lori was still talking about people spying on her! Such nonsense was the last thing I wanted to hear, especially coming from a brain so saturated with drugs I could imagine it looked like cottage cheese. And I surely did not want Ken to hear all their inane talk, so he could get started again! I would have had to placate the devil in three different directions, i.e. Tommy, Lori and Ken!

Alas! It was too late, for apparently the talking woke up Ken. I had wanted to spare him, (and myself), the side-show, because I knew I could never explain it. As luck would have it, before I had a chance to detour him, he was outside witnessing all that was going on. And of course none of it made any sense to Ken. After all, he complained, the only thing he had wanted to do was ride shotgun into California! And now look: he had gotten himself mixed up with some real loony-tunes! I never understood why Ken did not tell Tommy and Lori what he thought about them, instead of telling me. He made a big production out of wanting out of there, if things didn't change fast, yet he stayed. So between

Tommy and Lori arguing, Ken griping and threatening to cancel, and a Jeep-full of cats meowing their aggravation, I just wanted to lock the door and leave them all outside, and let them fight it out among themselves! Nevertheless, I felt as if I was rooted to the ground, and waited to see what would happen. Nobody could really blame Ken for being angry, for Tommy and Lori were dysfunctional enough to make a preacher cuss. But they had made it to my house before 8:00am, as agreed. That sort of “locked” the deal into place, and left me no room to maneuver my way out.

Be that as it may, there was no time for regrets, for another problem had cropped up. Lori loved cats, and she had nine of them, all living with her and Tommy in their small mobile home. She had five adult cats and four kittens, and she was not about to get rid of any them, so the cats were going to California, too. They were in the Jeep with them, leaving absolutely no room for anything else. The cages were very large, and used up a lot of space. They were standing in front of my house, and Lori wanted to take the cats out of the Jeep, so they could eat and go potty. But things are never quite that simple for those two, and when they got the metal cages out onto on the grass across the street, one of the bigger cats got away. But before he made his great escape, Lori got a good clawing. She started loudly screaming and crying, worried the cat was going to be lost, and they would not be able to catch it. Ken grabbed the big cat before it got too far away, and he was also rewarded with a few scratches for souvenirs. All this happened in my quiet neighborhood, before 8:00am, on a Sunday morning. We were lucky the police were not called!

After the cats had their food, and scratched in the litter under the cages, things quieted down somewhat. In the brief space of inactivity, Lori suddenly decided that she wanted to take a shower, but the house was already locked up, and I told her I didn't have the key to get back in. Whether she believed it or not was irrelevant, because Tommy and I both knew from times past, that a quick shower for her would have stretched into a three hour ordeal. If we were ever going to

get on the road, I simply could not let her into the house. That ended the “peaceful” Sunday morning! Of course she was furious, and began calling me a jerk. She started the bawling again, because she wanted to shower and put her make up on.

The stress-thermometer was in the red-hot zone, and frankly I was fed up with the whole damn drug thing! Lori was still talking about someone spying on her, which just irritated me further, to no end. Man! She needed a sharp reality-check, and I needed to vent. So I zeroed in on her weak spot, and blurted, “Look! Nobody is spying on you! This is all in your imagination, due to that stupid drug you have been taking!” That made her all the more furious, and it looked as though the California trip was not going to happen, at least not for Ken and myself. But Ken, the dark horse, suddenly stopped all the screaming by screaming louder than anyone else. He yelled, “We are all Christians are we not? So let’s pray, and ask God to help us get on the road”. That did calm things down, at least for the moment. The false sense of serenity must have inspired Ken to go on the trip after all, in spite of the two-day, six-hour delay. Guess he really wanted to see California.

CHAPTER THREE

The day was wearing on, it was already 11:00am, and we still had not left Dallas. Against all legalities, as well as decorum, Lori went around to the back patio, and proceeded to help herself to my water hose, with which she showered. My house wasn't benefited with a privacy fence, so the patio was open to view. Now I lived in a respectable, conservative, family-oriented neighborhood. Can you imagine the couple across the alley looking up from their Sunday coffee cup, and seeing a naked woman taking a shower with a water hose? If anyone had witnessed her public ablutions, they must have either enjoyed it, or ignored it, because nobody called the police. How lucky can you get? She was also supplied with a hand-held mirror, and obviously put on her make up. Like I said, it was a three-hour ordeal, even in the back yard. It was 2:00 pm. by the time she finished, and we finally got on the road!

And the summer sun was hot. The heat came up from the pavement below, where it was trapped in the concrete and asphalt. It also broiled down on us from above, penetrating the metal and the glass of the van. The air conditioner only blew hot air, like a blast from a furnace. Even the vents were useless in such intense heat. I was not looking forward to crossing the desert, in the middle of summer with no air conditioning! That was not part of the deal. About a hundred miles out of Dallas, we stopped at a service station, and I informed Tommy there was no air conditioning in the blue van. He nonchalantly replied, "Oh, I was sure we had that fixed back in Dallas." But I knew that if they couldn't even stick to their own schedule, there was no way they had included an unscheduled task, like checking out the A/C in the van. Ken complained for the next two thousand miles, and he never quit complaining. True, it was hot, and the humidity was terrible, but there were no options. We just had to deal with it. I had brought along a small squirt bottle, and used it during the entire trip to keep cooled down. Ken, on the other hand, just suffered the hellish heat that only a July in Texas can produce. I offered to share my squirt bottle, but Ken declined because he thought the mist was a bit too annoying. You just can't please some people.

In spite of everything, I was in for the long haul, and thus tried to find humor in pretty much everything. The first stop was a Motel Six, and Lori paid for two rooms. One was for Ken and I, and the other for Tommy and herself, along with her nine cats. Getting all those cats out of the car, and into the motel room was a side-show, all by itself! Once the cats were in, they were let out of the steel cages and allowed to roam free. The kittens ran all over their motel room, jumping from one bed to the other, climbing the curtains and whatever else they could do. The older cats just sat staring, obviously in a state of shock from miles of riding in the jeep, and being in strange environments. Worse yet, whenever we stopped, Tommy and Lori loudly argued over who's responsibility it was to take care of the cats. I reasoned that if we could hear them carrying on, probably everybody else in the motel also heard them. By then, I'm sure the cats were totally traumatized, and tried to escape at every opportunity.

Ken and I were up around 7:00am, but Tommy and Lori slept until around 11:00am. Of course the long wait was unnerving, and Ken complained that we needed to be on the road earlier. He thought we could make better time on the road in the early morning hours, and travel when it was not so hot. His complaints were not acknowledged at all. Although he was right, there was nothing I could do except wait for them to get up and around. But they were always sluggish from the medication and alcohol from the night before. They didn't get the cats rounded up until around 2:00pm, and without fail, one of the cats would come up missing, and the search was on. While everyone was searching for the cat, Lori was having a fit thinking they would never find it. The search was always confined to the motel room, for they were certain the cats didn't run out the door. Invariably they were right, for a cat was always discovered lodged somewhere in the box springs of the bed. I always helped to look for the lost cat, but Ken distanced himself from the frenetic activity. He just paced the floor in the adjoining room, impatiently smoking and muttering curses. After the lost cat was found, Lori spent more time putting on her makeup.

Eventually we were actually on the road again, cats, cages and all. When we stopped to eat and gas up, Ken and I filled up the one gallon water container with ice and more water. And even though they enjoyed the luxury of air conditioning, we felt fortunate to be in two separate vehicles. There was no telling what went on in their Jeep, and we were glad not to have to witness it! Before we actually got out of Texas, Lori started her paranoid game again. She always thought someone was out to get her, and was even getting suspicious of Tommy. She fantasized that maybe her ex-husband had been paying him, (for two years?), to spy on her. But druggies are not necessarily dummies. By then, Tommy also knew how to play those crazy mind games, so he played along with her. He even convinced her that maybe “they” had put a hit on him, too, and were trying to track him down, whoever “they” were. He suggested that maybe he should get off the road and take a bus, and go onto California by himself.

Just when I was thinking that both of them were completely off their rocker, Tommy privately informed me he was only telling her that to get her mind off the stupid conspiracy theory. Apparently he either convinced her, or scared her into thinking he was leaving, so she settled down. She surely didn’t want him to leave her and go to California by himself. Finally we all got back on the road again, headed to new Mexico from Texas. The trip through Texas lasted around four days, which was a ridiculously long time. Ken remarked, “I can’t believe it took us four days to get out of Texas!” It was getting hotter and more miserable with every mile, and Ken was not overloaded with adaptability or patience. There were not very many quiet moments in the van, because he kept cursing Lori, behind her back. He cursed loudly in the van, about her being so crazy for bringing nine cats, and for suspecting people were out to get her! I just said nothing. I didn’t have to complain, because Ken complained enough for both of us, and enough to last the entire trip, and then some. I wondered at times who was the biggest pain in the butt: Ken or Lori?

At the end of the long, wearisome day, we stopped in new Mexico at another Motel Six, just to repeat the cat experience. At least one kitten always got lost, but was always found in the box springs of the bed. Once they were absolutely convinced that one of the small kittens had gotten out of their room. During this experience Lori was crying and arguing with Tommy, blaming him for leaving the motel door open. That time it escalated until their screaming finally caused such a commotion somebody had to intervene. I went to their room and attempted to diffuse the bomb with logic. I said, "That cat must be in here somewhere, if you're sure it didn't leave the room!" My forcefulness brought them back (somewhat) to a sense of reality, which they had evidently forgotten in their fight about the cat. Instead of focusing their energy on finding the lost cat, they expended it cursing and screaming at each other. No wonder the cats tried to hide! I boldly declared, "And we will find it!" I began turning over the beds, to check under the box springs. As I bent over, I saw the lost kitten in a lower shelf under the dresser. Thank God! The screaming stopped, for awhile anyway. Apparently Lori was exhausted from the ordeal of losing and finding the kitten, fighting with Tommy, and taking too many drugs. After that, she calmed down enough to go to sleep. Whew! Silence is indeed golden!

Check out time was always at 11:00am, but it was always around 1:30 or 2:00pm in the afternoon before they were ready to get back on the road. I was a little surprised that Lori did not have to pay for another night, but she was not required to, and that was a good thing. We all gassed up the vehicles, and refreshed the water supply as usual, and then hit the road going through New Mexico. Everyone was hungry after riding a few hundred miles, so we stopped at a Mexican restaurant. While we were there, Lori decided to call a friend of her brother's, whom she had never met. She had only heard of her through her brother. The call was made while we were ordering the food, and Tommy was wondering what in the world she was up to that time. After she had contacted the so-called friend, she decided that we should all go see her and spend the night there,

wherever “there” was. Tommy was furious about it, because it was getting dark and he didn’t know exactly how to get to the girl’s place. It was about one hundred miles out of the way, and if that was not aggravation enough, it was beginning to rain.

If they were going to make such a detour, Ken and I were determined to let those two continue the trip by themselves. The detour would have added an extra 200 miles, and would cause further delays. It was bad enough the unnecessary late-day starts made driving at night mandatory, in order to cover any miles. But in spite of the daytime heat, night-driving was not part of the plan, and carried a different element of danger than daytime travel. This development further justified the decision to part company, and meet them later in California. Besides that, we had no desire to follow a couple of mind-altered addicts down lonely, unfamiliar desert highways at midnight. I had noticed that of the two, Lori seemed to suffer more effects from the drugs than did Tommy. Perhaps it was because he had built up more resistance to them in past usage, or maybe she was just a heavier user. Whatever the reason, Tommy sometimes appeared to have more wits about him than did Lori, so he was not at all enthusiastic about a two hundred-mile detour. He made it very clear to her that such a goose-chase would be completely insane, and he did not want to do it.

The fight was on again, but Ken and I didn’t wish to stick around to see who would win. Instead, we decided to investigate the motels and restaurants in the area, and walked across the street to the nearest one. Not only did it give us a needed reprieve from their fighting, we also wanted to check it out. There was a chance we would have to stay and wait for them to get back from visiting with her unknown acquaintance. This time luck was on our side, and after much anger and arguing between Tommy and Lori, she suddenly decided that maybe it was too far out of the way after all, and maybe they should not go. Good decision! So we all went to the Mexican restaurant instead, where I loaded up on the carbs.

After everyone finished with supper, we stuck together and were back on the road again; still driving through New Mexico.

We arrived in Arizona the next day, and laid over in Flagstaff. Of course, Ken and I knew the routine by now, and it never varied. They endlessly repeated what they always went through when stopping at a motel. Cats, cursing, craziness, paranoia, accusations, screaming, and so on. It was surely not a Sunday picnic! Now during the stays in the motels where we had two rooms, Ken smoked so much it filled the room with a horrible cloud of thick toxic air. That guy smoked at least sixty cigarettes per day, one after another. Hardly anything is more obnoxious to a non-smoker than second hand smoke, so his habit was very bothersome to me. In fact, I had to put a wet wash cloth under my nose every night and every morning, just to be able to continue breathing! I went to sleep and awakened to the smell of heavy cigarette smoke. It was so bad I developed a smoker's cough without having to smoke. Needless to say, all my obvious dislike for his abominable habit was conveniently ignored, and he very contentedly puffed away unhindered and non-stop!

Flagstaff is a very nice place to visit. Outside the motel room there was the welcome smell of pine in the cool morning air, and purple mountains ringed the entire city. Those particular moments almost made the trip worth it, for they were postcard-picture perfect, and quite enjoyable. We stayed on Texas time the entire trip, even though Arizona was one hour behind Texas, and L.A. was two hours behind. When the morning arrived Ken and I were up early, as always. To our great surprise, Tommy and Lori were also up. But regardless of how one's watch was set, they just couldn't manage to get out of the motel room before 1:00 pm. I believe it had to do with the cats again. Should I say more? We finally headed out, and traveled through Arizona. Some people like the desert, but all I saw was miles and miles of cactus, rocks and sand. And it was hot! When we left Flagstaff, we neglected to refresh the water supply, and didn't they fill up on gas. As was usually the case, Tommy and Lori tempted fate, and just figured there

was enough to last until the next stop. It was a risky conclusion, and should have been avoided. As it turned out, we found ourselves with little water, even less gas, in a stalled van with a trailer, right in the middle of the Arizona desert!

The van was getting more and more sluggish, as it snaked it's way up the high steep grades. Some of the grades were five thousand feet or more above sea level. The van was moving slower and slower as we inched up one high grade after another. We were supposed to be traveling together, but Tommy and Lori were out of sight most of the time, being in a smaller vehicle, minus the heavy trailer. He would speed way ahead of us, and pull over and wait on the shoulder of the highway until we caught up to them. Then he would take off again when he saw us coming. He played that game continually for the entire journey to California. Such antics did nothing to comfort my growing anxiety about the possibility of a mechanical breakdown. Soon my worst fears were realized, for the van coughed and sputtered, then completely stopped running. It just sat down, like a circus elephant on a stool. I guess the steep grades, the loaded trailer and the pull of gravity were just too much for it. I drove it to the shoulder of the road, and parked off the highway. The Dynamic Duo was nowhere in sight.

There was nothing we could do but sit there in the hot van, and pray that it would speedily dawn upon Tommy that we were not dragging up the rear. We tried repeatedly to start it up again, but the motor was stubborn, and would not budge. It acted as if the heat had welded together all the moving parts. We thought it might help if the motor cooled down a bit, but the desert temperature prevented anything from cooling down. We had foolishly trusted our very lives to a heap of steel and a bucket of bolts! And it had betrayed us! What could we do? I knew that anger, frustration, playing the blame-game, fear and all the other negative thoughts would make matters even worse, and use up needed energy. We had to conserve our physical strength in confidence and quietness, for we had no idea when or how we would be rescued.

CHAPTER FOUR

The heat was absolutely diabolic, like a breath from hell! Realizing our predicament, the thought crossed my mind that nothing is worth this kind of torment. The temperature must have been around 110, (or more), scorching degrees. I was miserably hot, and the excessive sweating was depleting body fluids fast. Heat stroke was a real concern, for without fluids and medical assistance, there would have been virtually no way to reverse the condition. Even if we had left the hot van to move to the shade of the rocks, rattlesnakes and scorpions would have been an added threat. The situation was getting desperate, and the water jug was almost empty. How I regretted leaving the safety of my home in Dallas. How often had I gone to my kitchen sink, turned the faucet, and heard the sound of running water! I remembered Lori taking a shower on the patio, and envied the memory of all that cool, clear running water. What would I give now, broiling under the Arizona sun, to be back in my own humble home! We take for granted so many everyday things, (and people), and when they are no longer available, it always comes as a shocking revelation.

It was getting hotter, if that was possible. In fact, so hot I could hardly breathe in the thin high-altitude air. Panic began to creep up my leg like a serpent, and tried to wrap itself around my guts. My tongue felt as thick as a baseball bat, and my skin felt clammy. I began to experience heart palpitations, which intensified the mental images of rescuers finding our dehydrated bodies on the mountaintop. And Ken's complaining was not helping matters at all - it only frustrated the situation further. When it comes down to living or dying, we are all alone in the universe, and I actually thought I might die. I was afraid. I didn't want to die! Especially when the sequence of events could have been avoided. It was all a mistake! I didn't want to draw my last breath stranded on a mountaintop in the desert, melting in the heat, and dying of thirst! Worse than that, I didn't want the negative, pessimistic Ken to be my last comfort on earth, as I was leaving this planet!

Tommy and Lori were far ahead and had to back track when they finally figured out something had gone wrong. When we didn't emerge from the horizon, they returned to see what was wrong. They found us stranded on the side of the freeway, sitting inside the dead van. In their altered state of mind, probably neither of them realized the seriousness of our situation. They were traveling in an air-conditioned vehicle, and didn't feel the brunt of prolonged exposure to the heat. The only thing to do was to leave us there, and go to the next town, which was several hundred miles away, to call a tow truck. So they took off to get help. We were stuck with the van, as there was no room in the Jeep because of the nine cats. Besides that, we couldn't leave their loaded trailer unattended; not even on a mountain highway. So there we were, staring at the heat rising from the steaming desert floor. Just sitting and waiting. As the hours passed and the sun reached it's zenith, things were even more critical than before. What were we waiting for? Just waiting to die? If only the van would start! Nothing would induce it to start, but Ken wouldn't give up, and kept trying over and over. It would start for just a minute or two, then die again. Each time it would started, we inched our way up the high grade a few feet. Then it would die again. The battery could not sustain the repeated effort to start the motor, and after a few tries, the van would not start at all. The battery had lost it's charge.

So there we were: almost out of water, in the desert heat, and worst of all, the van would not start - not even for thirty seconds. Tommy and Lori were long gone up the highway, allegedly looking for help. The thought occurred to me that our lives depended upon a couple of scatter-brained, drug-altered people, who could not focus beyond their next "fix". Even if they found help, there was no telling how long it would take, or if they would remember where they left us. My eyes grew tired from staring at the roadway, diligently watching for their return. It was indescribably hot, like the heat from a forest fire. The hours ticked away, without a sign of a rescue party! We baked in that oven of the van for a long

time, thinking how close we had been to not going on this trip, and wishing we had never met Tommy or Lori.

I am not sure exactly how Ken assessed his future, or if he realized that we were sitting on the edge of eternity. I told him, “If there was ever a time to pray my friend, that would be right now”. Evidently Ken was as scared as I was, so we began to pray that the van would start. We asked that God would let us survive this ordeal, and not let us die in the middle of the Arizona desert. And we promised to give Him the glory. After the most sincere prayer I ever prayed in my life, Ken tried to start the van again, and miracle of miracles, it started! We were ecstatic, and began to thank God for answered prayer! We really could not believe the van had started, and it ran as though it never had a problem. We began to climb the high grades with no sweat, and the broken down old van began to display the strength of a lion as it roared over one grade after another. In fact, for the remainder of the journey, there was never another problem with that van. It continued to run smoother and faster than it ever did, and carried us to safety. We asked and we received, and God preserved us. All I know is the prayer was answered, and I can testify to the truth of the above account. We have only God to thank for sparing our lives, and He does get the glory!

Ken had taken over some of the driving at that point, which gave me a much needed break, and relieved him of boredom. We proceeded to drive gratefully and safely down the mountain, into a little obscure town in Arizona. As we rolled into the first service station, lo and behold, we found none other than Tommy and Lori. They were sitting comfortably in their Jeep, (or as comfortable as you can get with nine cats in a car!), sipping on cold icy drinks, waiting for help to arrive. Guess they must have thought they were hallucinating again when they saw the blue van they had left disabled on the mountain, gliding into the space beside them. Ken and I had really been through an ordeal, and it was at least partly their fault. If not for the grace of God, we could have died before they returned with assistance! We were justified in feeling angry, and were still mi-

serably hot, but at the same time we were happy to be alive. So we put aside the anger. We had just felt the Hand of God, and for a long time we basked in gratitude for having a running van.

Since the van had literally miraculously repaired itself, Lori decided to cancel the call for help, and just move onward to California. After we had gassed up and drank our fill, we replenished the cold water supply and headed out westward once more, toward the land of the ever-shining sun. At first Tommy was not so anxious to leave us in his dust, but his shortened attention-span soon forgot how close we had come to disaster. He began to repeat his usual pattern of speeding way ahead, and then waiting on the shoulder of the road for us to play catch up. I found this behavior not only annoying, but truly appalling! Some people just never seem to learn! But Tommy was not the only one whose gratitude quickly turned into attitude. After experiencing a move from heaven itself, Ken had resumed vocalizing his bitter complaints, edged in vengeance and disgust! Talk about disgusting: he smoked like he would never smoke another cigarette again. Between the billowing smoke, the oppressive heat, and my spray bottle mist, I could hardly breathe. However, an inner sense of duty kept me focused, and I determined to “ride” this one out, all the way to California.

The blue van gobbled up mile after boring mile, and yet the ribbon of road loomed constantly before us. The only diversions for a driver were the occasional bumps, dips, curves and turns, which were always punctuated by a warning sign. I actually began to look forward to seeing another road sign, for at least it broke the monotony of the highway. An added plus was that it gave me an opportunity to insert a change-of-subject into Ken’s incessant complaining. Very often my contributions to companionship consisted of remarks like, “Wow! We are only thirty miles from the Painted Desert!” Or, “There must be road-work ahead. Did you see that sign back there?” Or even, “There is a truck stop five miles ahead. Wonder if they are ready to stop?” Sometimes, when Ken took a break from griping, we tried to ignore the heat by playing songwriting games. We took turns

coming up with the next lyric line that would rhyme with the previous one. I'm afraid we did not write a masterpiece, or even a top-forty hit, but it did help to alleviate the situation, somewhat.

Another diversion was picture-taking, and gratefully we had the foresight to pack our cameras. Thus we captured loads of memories along the way. One of my treasured rewards from the trip was the scenery, which was at times breath taking. Even a desert can be beautiful and interesting, for no two rock formations are ever exactly alike, and the colors of the landscape change with the movement of the sun. The more intense the light was, the more intense the colors became. Beautiful! There was a peacefulness in knowing I had escaped from the cities, and was momentarily absorbed into the stillness of the wilderness. I felt such peace in the early morning hours, just before nature awoke to the dawn. In the quietness, even the lonely howl of a distant coyote evoked a response way down in my soul. Standing alone in the wind, aiming my camera down steep cliffs into hollow canyons, I realized how small man really is. Yet, The Scriptures say he is supposed to have dominion over the whole creation. What an awesome thought! It occurred to me that a man who has climbed the inner mountains of his own soul has already taken control of the outer obstacles. But alas, few they are, and far between, who have scaled such heights!

We continued to proceed without further incident through the State of Arizona. Onward we pushed, in the relentless quest for California. Finally, after two thousand miles of sweat, threats and tears, we saw that most welcomed sign, which stated, "ENTERING CALIFORNIA". Naturally we felt a sense of accomplishment, because we had made it! From the outset, the cards had been stacked against Ken and me. But in spite of the ordeal, we were crossing the State line, and achieving our goal. It was a time for celebration! At the border, Tommy and Lori were just ahead of us, and he was driving the Jeep. But a few miles later, he must have had another case of the lead-foot, because he lost us by speeding way too far ahead. Since we really didn't know where we were going, it was impor-

tant to keep in contact with them. The cell phones became the only point of contact, and we tried to call them and find out where they were. No answer! That was a most frustrating development, which could have potentially been very expensive. Driving a van and pulling a loaded trailer always uses lots of gasoline. And I was not prepared to drive aimlessly around California, and feed gas into that hog!

We wisely decided to exit off the highway, and wait at a service station. As unpleasant as the thought might have been, we had to acknowledge that we were lost again. The irresponsible Tommy and Lori were nowhere in sight, and could not be reached. Sitting idly and without direction, we passed the time twiddling, smoking, complaining, cussing and discussing the unbelievable antics of our fellow-travelers! During the interminable wait at the station, we continued to try to call them. Finally Tommy answered, and once more he had to back-track to where he had dropped us off the map. I'm afraid I couldn't call our little reunion a happy reunion, because believe me, no one was happy at the moment! Ken had never before told Tommy how angry he was, and he used that opportunity to let him know how he felt about the whole affair! Even though Tommy and Lori might have justly deserved his complaints, telling them about it did not help matters. I really didn't blame Ken for being so upset, but as the old saying goes, when the rabbit has jumped, it's too late to run back to the hole. It's just got to keep on running. And we just had to keep on running. Like the rabbit, we had also gone too far to turn back.

We managed to calm tempers down, and follow them back onto the highway, headed to Van Nuys. Tommy was most familiar with that area, and wanted to find a motel and a bed for the night. We followed as closely behind them as we could, but he was speeding like crazy. Ken was driving, trying to keep up, and practically screaming the whole time, and complaining that Tommy was driving too fast. It was true, of course, but his complaints never really ceased the entire time that he followed them. The heavy trailer we were pulling made it

even more difficult and dangerous to weave in and out of the Los Angeles traffic. Ken was beside himself, nursing a murderous anger, to state it mildly. It was getting dark and everyone was frazzled. We all needed a shower and some food, so we decided to look for the nearest accommodations. In Sunland, California we found a motel, but it appeared to be located in a very bad neighborhood. The motel was grungy looking, with peeling paint, and decorated with bars on the windows. Nothing felt safe about that place; it was like something you would see in a movie. A horror movie! All of a sudden, a gang of hoodlums popped out from nowhere, and were intent upon taking somebody apart.

I politely but firmly let Tommy know that I did not feel safe staying there, and breathed a sigh of gratitude when he said that Lori felt the same. We continued to go down the road a bit, and found another hotel, but it was still in the ghetto-like neighborhood. It was not exactly the Ritz, but at least there were no bars on the windows. How encouraging! Tommy and Lori decided it would be alright to stay for the night. So the big move began again, with the cats and Lori's excessive luggage. Tommy complained that she did not need all that stuff for just a one night stay. He told her to "Keep it simple! We are here for one night only." That rang the starting-bell for the fight, and after round one, Tommy was as mad as hell itself. We saw him take off walking down some dark, lonely street, threatening not to come back. Lori was threatening to take her jeep, her luggage, her cats, and her money, and also leave. We knew that even if Tommy did not return, he had done what he wanted to do, which was to get back to California. Mission accomplished. Maybe he thought he didn't need her anymore. Who knew? Anyway, he walked, and Lori squawked!

CHAPTER FIVE

Perhaps the fighting between Tommy and Lori was part of the real tie-that-binds, for their arguments did not seem to bother them nearly as much as it bothered us. We felt the pressure of their daily dissension, but were stuck in the middle of all their craziness. Actually, the pressure was not their aberrational behavior as much as it was their irresponsibility toward us, as well as toward everything else. Ken had come along because he had wanted to, but I was here because they had baited me into a contract. They were at least responsible for seeing to it that we stayed alive, and got safely back to Dallas. We were strangers in a strange land, and had no idea where we were in California, or where we were going. Furthermore, we were tired and hungry, and they had the money. My room and meals were to have been included in the contract, but refereeing their fights was not part of the deal. Whatever happened between Tommy and Lori did not really concern me, and I personally didn't care if they never got back together. But I was concerned about Ken and myself, and thought Tommy should come back and stay with the situation, at least until it was resolved. Also, I felt an indirect liability toward Ken, because he had come along based upon my description of the trip.

So once again I called Tommy on his cell phone, to beg him into returning to the hotel. Besides that, where else could he go? Like I said, Lori had all the money! He reluctantly came back, and Lori reluctantly settled down. All that time we had not gone into the rooms, but had sat outside in the van. They had rented a room downstairs, and had rented an upper room for us. When I opened the door to the room, I nearly fainted! Roaches were crawling all over the walls, and when I turned on the light, they immediately scampered into corners and crevices to hide. Even though it was what I should have expected, it was still a shock when my fears became a disgusting reality. Tommy was still getting stuff out of the Jeep for Lori. When he came in him, I was hanging over the stair-rail, waiting for him. I asked, "Did you know this place has roaches?!" He was appar-

ently still mad, because he did not even answer me. Instead, he just waved his hand as if to say, “Please don’t even start. Just go to sleep and deal with it.” I got the message, and realized it would be a hopeless battle to even try to get them to relocate to a better place. Especially at this time.

And what do you suppose Ken was doing all that time? Exhibiting his usual displeasure, of course. Some people never develop the ability to accept things they cannot change, and evidently he was one of them. He was tired, too, but not too tired to let me know that it was all my fault he was even there in the first place. The way he told it made it sound like I had held a gun to his head and made him go. Ken knew that he himself had opted to take the trip, but he just couldn’t admit to any responsibility for his own decision. I thought to myself, “No wonder he is not married! Who could put up with his grouchiness for the rest of their life?” Or his smoking either, for that matter. But I had just experienced one hellacious day, and didn’t need any more stress. However, the last thing I wanted to do was crawl between the sheets on that bed, so I drug out my sleeping bags instead. I laid down, clothes and all, and covered myself with another bag. Ken finally shut up, and turned the lights off. I must have dozed, but something crawling in my hair jerked me back to consciousness, and I jumped straight up. I was immediately wide awake. I bent my head forward and brushed my hands through my hair. To my horror, I saw the little critter (roach!) fall to the dirty carpet and crawl away.

Disgust washed over me, and I thought I was going to throw up. But like a trooper, I controlled myself, laid back down on my sleeping bag, and tried to go back to sleep. After that, it seemed like I could feel bugs all over me, but I knew it was my imagination. Or was it? Just as I drifted off to dreamland, I was awakened again by something crawling over my left eye brow. I immediately got up and swatted the critter off of my forehead. That did it! There was no more sleeping for me, and I desperately wished for the morning to come. Considering all we had been through, it was odd that I never really let discouragement take hold of

me, until that night in the Roach Hotel. I had been able to withstand the heat of the desert, the incessant fighting, the unscheduled change of plans, the breakdown of the van, the abandonment on the mountain, Ken's constant complaining and smoking, the problems caused by nine cats, and many other issues, but being attacked by a herd of roaches was over the top! In other words, the straw broke. It was just too much, and I was getting very depressed. If the neighborhood had not been so dangerous, I would have slept in the van.

The light at the end of the tunnel came with the light of dawn. I could hardly wait to check out of the Roach Hotel, and double-checked all my belongings to make sure we didn't carry any hitch-hikers! The date was July 22, 2004, and at 1:00pm we arrived at the Voyager Hotel in Van Nuys, California. The hotel was located on Sepulveda Blvd., not far from Sunland California, thirty miles south of Los Angeles. Ken and I waited in the van while Lori went into the office to pay for a week's stay in advance. Not for two rooms, but one. Yes you heard me right, one room for all four of us! Now if we had thought the journey was rough before, it was nothing compared to what was coming. Ken had said repeatedly while we were traveling that "the worst is yet to come". How encouraging, huh? But he was right, for invariably just when we thought it couldn't get any worse, then something would top the last experience. Well staying in the same room with Tommy and Lori and nine cats was the topmost-topper for sure. It couldn't get any worse! Welcome to hell!

As we had already experienced, the Voyager Hotel looked better from the outside than it did on the inside. But it was far better than the hotel with the roaches, and evidently had a few more house rules. As you passed the desk in the lobby, there was a sign right up front and personal, that plainly stated **NO PETS ALLOWED!**. Lori had nine black cats: four adult cats and five very playful kittens. Tommy warned her that he could smell trouble before it started. I don't think it took a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Regardless, that didn't stop Lori from bringing her animals into the building. After parking in the back, they

began to take suitcases out of the trailer and van. The cages for the cats were also brought in and put in a corner of the room. I wanted to know what happened to the agreement to kennel the cats when they arrived in Los Angeles? Apparently that was no longer an option, because Lori had spent more than \$1,000.00 at the Indian shops in new Mexico. By the time we got to California, she was unable to afford the kennel.

Ken was seeing red, and by that time his mouth was programmed into non-stop bitching. Granted, he made some good arguments, but it was not doing any good to continually voice them. He said he would have returned to Dallas, but an early departure would have canceled the discount on his ticket, which he had obtained through a travel agency. And he couldn't afford to lose any more money. Like Lori, he had already spent most of the money he had allocated for the trip at those Indian shops back in New Mexico. Of course they were buying things too, and witnessed him shell out his dollars for souvenirs. Ironically, Even though they were guilty of exactly the same foolish spending, they had little compassion for Ken's depleted financial state. Talk about the pot calling the kettle "blackie"! Progressively, his lack of money began to be his main complaint, as if someone else had coerced him into buying a bunch of needless trinkets. He had one week of vacation left, but as far as he was concerned, another twenty minutes was too long. I encouraged him to wait it out, and try to enjoy as much of California as he could while he was there.

Night fell, and all thirteen of us, counting the cats, settled in for the night. Now you would think that anyone who houses nine cats would know that cats are nocturnal creatures, and they roam all night long. Therefore, any normal-thinking person would have put the cats in the cages at night, so everyone could sleep without aggravation. But we were not dealing with normality here, as you have gathered by now. Consequently, the cats were allowed to explore all over the already over-crowded room. Imagine the scenario: we are talking about one room, one bath room, two beds, four adults, suit cases everywhere, cages everywhere,

smelly litter-boxes everywhere, and cats literally everywhere! No wonder much of the time Ken stood outside and smoked like a chimney where the fire had been smothered by news papers. He paced back and fourth like a crazy man, or like someone waiting for a loved one to come out of the emergency room, fearful the doctor was going to give him a bad report. The whole thing was nuttier than I could have envisioned!

And how was I doing? I was enduring the fighting between Tommy and Lori. I was busy pulling cat claws out of my clothing and skin. I choked on the cigarette smoke from three people, who took no breaks between their smokes. My nose was assaulted with the obnoxious odors from one bathroom, several litter boxes, and tons of cat hair. My ears had been pummeled by Ken's ceaseless griping, Lori's screams and Tommy's cussing. I later discovered we were staying in a hotel that was known for it's sleazy prostitution and drug dealing. So we were right at home with all the rest of the crazies in society. But after all, I was in California, the land of sun and fun! So I guess other than all of the above, I was having a good time!

Later that night Ken and I went to Denny's restaurant in the van, to have a bite to eat, while Tommy and Lori slept off the effects of the alcohol they had consumed that day. As we sat in Denny's waiting for our order, we both pondered the possibilities of leaving earlier than scheduled, but somehow we always decided to hang around just one more day. As strange as it might sound, adversity has a way of "growing" on a person. Sometimes it even exerts a repelling sort of attraction, one in which you hate what you're seeing, but seem powerless to stop watching. Know what I mean? You just have to stick around and see how the drama unfolds. Maybe we had sub-consciously grown so acclimated to their irrational behavior, it began to look normal. For sure, the shock factor was long gone, for nothing they did surprised us anymore. For whatever reason compelled us, we stayed.

We returned to the Voyager Hotel after having supper, to retire for the night. Tommy and Lori were actually sleeping, which was a blessing. People who use meth drugs don't sleep very much, and if they couldn't sleep, then we surely wouldn't get to sleep, either. For starters, I had to adjust my thinking to even sleep in the same bed with Ken, and with their bed right next to ours, it was almost too much to handle. Such a situation would not have been quite as repulsive in the 1970's, when crowds of young people intentionally gathered in groups, for the express purpose of living communally together. They would have thought nothing of four people in two beds, in one room. But this was a different time, in a different day, with a different social mind-set, and I was light-years older. I just had to deal with us all sharing one communal room together.

When we finally got into bed, out came the kitten squad. They loved to jump on Ken's back, as he was laying on his stomach. This made him as mad as a hornet. Each time a kitten landed on his back, it dug its claws in, and stuck like velcro! He unceremoniously reached around behind him, pulled it off like a leech, and threw it across the room. Cats can fall off a ten-story building, and land unharmed on their feet. Obviously he never hurt them, because they always came back for more. Of course Lori never saw him do this, or she would have gotten really upset. I had to work hard not to laugh at this scenario, because the more humor I found in it, the madder Ken would become. And the madder he was, the harder it was for me not to laugh, especially when the kitten squad just sent in more troops throughout the night. The reason they were not bothering me was because I had spent a little time alone with the kitten squad and the older cats earlier that day. It was my supreme pleasure to introduce each one to my famous blue squirt bottle. If they even thought about coming close to me, they got a drink of water, whether they wanted it or not. It was a harmless way to train them not jump on me. And it was effective.

CHAPTER SIX

It was Friday, July 23, and the adventures never stopped. Tommy and Lori wanted some down time from all the travel, and decided to do a day camp-out in the mountains. I should have learned by that time that with them nothing ever transpired as planned, but nevertheless, I went along. Ken was going to stay at the hotel with the cats and kitten squad, (as if he hadn't had enough), but that was his way of getting some down time by himself. Guess he just wanted to rest in the room and watch TV. I believe he would have done anything to get a break away from Lori. It had boiled to the point that she could not stand the sight of him, and the feeling was mutual. They had become mortal enemies. She heard him complain that he felt they owed him some money for getting the van started, when we got stuck in the Arizona desert. As I recall it, we prayed and God Almighty fixed it. But poor, miserable, negative Ken not only chain-smoked, he also chain-complained. Even with their often-distorted perceptions, Lori and Tommy wanted away from him as much as he wanted away from them. So we would allegedly take a day trip into the mountains, and leave Ken there.

But first Lori wanted to pick up something to smoke besides cigarettes, so they went to Tommy's friend, whose name was Indian Dave. She spent \$400.00 for some pot, which only worsened the situation even more. Their judgment of things was impaired to begin with, but after the pot party they were really impaired! I noticed they were getting tired quicker, and their stamina level was definitely not as strong. I did not want to engage in anything that would effect the control of my faculties, so I declined the invitation to participate. I never knew when I would need all my skills, to survive a surprise attack from Lori. There was no telling what chaos she might conjure up next. We actually made it to the mountains, and spent seven hours there, just sitting and playing the guitar, and soaking in the beautiful sights. We took pictures of the flower-strewn mountain

pathways, and enjoyed the rugged peace of nature. Tommy was also drinking hard liquor, and smoking more than cigarettes.

The day wore on, and soon it was time to get back to Van Nuys. We headed out, and turned off the mountain road to get back onto the main street. Tommy was speeding through a construction area, and he cut off two people driving beside him. Just as I was thinking, "This is not good!", a cop came speeding up behind us, with lights and siren, just a blaring. Because of the siren, I thought the cop was hurrying to a wreck or some serious crime scene. In Dallas, cops did not put on their sirens for traffic violations, but only for emergencies. I was in the back seat wishing I was with the cats, or anywhere but here. I was expecting this would be the worst experience yet. But I was wrong, for the worst was yet to come. The cop came up to the drivers side, so Tommy rolled his window down. The cop asked for his license and registration, and Tommy stupidly offered, "Sir, I do not have any form of ID". The cop replied, "Son, if you do not show me some form of ID, you are going to jail." Then he told him to get out of the car.

Lori was in the front seat crying, and freaking out completely. She was shaking and fumbling through the stuff in the glove compartment, looking for some form of ID for Tommy. I said to her, "If you keep up this crying and carrying on so, we will all be in trouble". They had open liquor containers, and a huge bag of pot. This was really making me very nervous. Most things could be laughed about up to now, but this was some serious stuff. To my surprise, Tommy was getting back into the Jeep, and was back on the road. Incredulous, I asked, "How in the world did you get out of that one?" Tommy said, "I told you before, that California cops are very lenient when it comes to small stuff." I was just stunned by it all, thinking that drinking and driving with open containers, being stoned, and running people off the road, is not what I would call petty! If Tommy had been arrested, he would have deserved it. But as it turned out he wasn't, and for purely selfish reasons, I was very grateful.

Saturday, July 24. I was counting the days until I would return to Dallas. After a fairly good night's sleep, Ken and I were up having our usual cup of coffee. Of course Ken had his usual cup of coffee with his usual pack of cigarettes. Even though it was hot during the day, we sat around by the pool, mainly to escape from the room. It would have been refreshing to swim, but there was a sign hanging above the pool wall that read, "SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK: THE WATER IN THIS POOL HAS DANGEROUS CHEMICALS THAT COULD CAUSE CANCER." Oh, this is just great we thought. We couldn't even swim if we had wanted to. That kind of stuff just went with the territory. Ken had met a lady in Memphis Tennessee, who happened to live in Fresno, California. She invited him to visit her, if he was ever in California. So he called her up and told her that he and a friend (me) wanted to get away for awhile. She told him that she had a daughter who lived in Huntington, not too far away from Van Nuys. She and her mother were going to stay there for a couple of days, and we were more than welcome to join them.

Naturally Ken jumped on that really fast, and made arrangements for us to be picked up. Later in the afternoon, his friend Carol came and picked us both up. Tommy and Lori were delighted to have some time alone in the hotel room together, so they certainly didn't mind. When Carol arrived, we loaded up her car with some overnight luggage, and off we went to Huntington. She was a very outspoken lady, who had a sense of pride about her. She let you know that she thought very highly of herself. In fact, I sensed she had a very critical spirit, to say the least. Ken wanted to go to Huntington, which worked out very well. Carol's daughter Leah just happened to be there with some friends, so we could all meet for lunch. Now before Carol had arrived, Ken had told me that she was a very generous lady, who wanted to make everything they did together her treat. Money was absolutely not a problem with this lady. When he met her a year ago, she had financed his new album project, and gave a donation of over \$5,000.00 to him, to help pay for the recording.

All along I had some money reserved for emergencies, but I wisely kept that little secret to myself. I had enough to fly back, and to take a taxi to get to the airport, if I had to. But I never did let anyone know this. Ken had spent all his money very foolishly, and would have spent mine as well. So I pretended to be almost as broke as he was. Besides, Tommy and Lori had an agreement with me, that they would pay all my expenses. They were supposed to finance my necessities, the entire time that I stayed in California. Therefore, it was right and fitting that they live up to their promises. Actually, I felt that I had earned every cent they paid me. Not very many people would have put up with so much craziness, and most would have walked away after the stranded van episode.

When we got to Huntington, we went to the beach. Little did we know that the surfing champions were practicing for the annual surfing competition, which was coming up the following weekend. It was scheduled to be aired on national television. The beach was full of college age kids, all dressed in the latest beach fashion of the day. Most of the guys were wearing long knee shorts and expensive t-shirts. While Carol went into a fast food restaurant to use the ladies room, Ken got his head scarf out and put it on, and began to admire himself in the rear view mirror. He made the comment to me that this head scarf made him look sexy, and the girls loved it. I always told him just the opposite, that it made him look like a low class biker, leaning to the red neck side of the scales. But Ken never really accepted my opinion about the scarf, and just thought I didn't know what he was talking about.

When Carol came out of the restaurant and got back into the car, the first thing she said when she saw that head scarf was, "That looks like crap", and as we were driving down the highway next to the beach, she grabbed it and threw it out the window. My stomach was hurting from laughing so hard. This was definitely one of the highlights of the trip. His precious scarf lay spread on the hot sidewalk by the beach. I looked back as we were driving away, to see his scarf lying there, and people ignoring it or just stepping right on it. It got smaller and

smaller as we drove away, and I kept my eyes on it until I could no longer see it. That scarf had a long history. Ken sometimes wore it in concert, or on stage, and we never failed to argue over the darn thing. I just felt that it was not helping his image at all. But nobody likes criticism, even when it is offered constructively. The only thing I really regretted about the trip to Los Angeles was that I didn't take a picture of Ken's special headscarf! I would have had the picture blown up and put into a large frame, and hung it right in my living room! That was certainly the most amusing thing that happened on the trip.

As we walked around the beach, I noticed the swim suit I was wearing was a bit out of date. For sure it was not with the fashion of the beach, or the "in crowd" present that day. Nobody was wearing anything close to it. The cut offs Ken had on were very short, and were equally as out of style as my swimsuit. We must have looked like a pair of Texas dorks! So we went into the nearest shop that sold beach clothing, and bought new swim suits. I bought pretty much what others were wearing: roomy, below-the-knee tan shorts, with side pockets. Then I blended in with the others. But not Ken! He bought a swim suit that looked for all the world like a pair of men's underwear. And I don't mean boxer shorts – I mean the brief kind! His swimsuit consisted of a tight, bikini-type pair of little shorts. The last time I had seen anything like that was on the Olympic swimmers! I was surprised the shop even sold anything that funky looking, but they did, and Ken bought them!

Most unfortunately, Ken never listened to me, and Carol was no where around to help him decide what to buy. She was still in the shop next door, and had she been with him, she would have not allowed him to purchase them. When Ken came out of the dressing room in that short swimsuit, I could not believe my eyes! It reminded me of Randy Quaid, in the movie Christmas Vacation, when he appeared on the diving board, with Speedo's on, and a beer in one hand. Chevy Chase's just shook his head and couldn't believe his eyes, either. Ken coming out of the dressing room that day was as funny as Randy Quaid's appearance in

Speedo's on the diving board. I'm afraid I roared with laughter then, and still do, every time I envision him standing in that shop!

After we walked awhile around the beach area, we met with Carol's daughter, Leah, and her friends for lunch. There was a cafe on the beach, where we enjoyed a sandwich, drinks, and couple of hours worth of conversation. Leah was a medical student, very polite and very beautiful. She had a house in Cypress, California, close to Huntington, so she had invited us to come and stay the night. We could hardly believe our good luck, and graciously accepted the invitation. Leah also had her seventy-five year old grandmother staying with her, and like her daughter Carol, she too was a very opinionated lady. Apparently she thought people from Texas were quite amusing. She made the comment that she liked to hear me talk. It was the Texas accent that she found different from those in California, and she enjoyed listening to it. However, she said Ken was confused, because he had a Canadian accent mixed with a smudge of Texas drawl. Indeed he was born in Canada, but moved to Texas when he was twelve years old. Guess you could call him a TexaCan!

We went to a nice restaurant, and celebrated Carol's mother's birthday. Each of us had a few to drink and a lot of laughs, and her mother really enjoyed herself. Everyone made her feel very special. After dinner we all went back to Leah's house, and were outside talking when the subject of aerobics and running came up. Ken said that he was a fast runner in school, and Leah, who was presently running every morning, said that she would race him. I added my two cents in and said I would join in on the race as well. "I'll bet I can beat you all," I bragged. We were just being silly, like little kids, daring each other to do something crazy. Carol positioned herself about fifty yards away, and said when she put her arm down, that was when to start running. So Ken, Leah and I all got ready at the starting line, and when Carol's arm went down, we took off like a bullet. Ken was ahead and I was following close behind, when all of a sudden my leg went out from under me. It was as if someone had just cut it smooth off! I

went crashing down, toward the hard black cement. But I had the presence of mind to break the fall by rolling my entire body over. I used my arms and elbows to protect my face and head.

When I tried to get up, I discovered I had absolutely no use of my right leg. I had badly torn some of the muscles in the back of my upper right leg. The pain was excruciating; enough to bring tears to my eyes. I tried not to let them show, but the pain far out-weighed my pride. After I had struggled to my feet, Ken and Carol helped me back to Leah's house. They placed me on the couch, on my back. The injury had caused some internal bleeding, which made the outside of my leg turn black and purple. They all stated it was the worst looking injury they had ever seen, which was comforting indeed! My leg was black and purple from my ankle to my buttocks, and both elbows were bleeding. Because Carol and Leah were in the medical profession, they knew to put ice on the fresh bruises and cuts. When they ran out of ice, they put frozen pop suckles on my swollen wounds. Later I learned I had pulled a hamstring, which was a pretty serious injury. It required about a year to heal. Ken was snickering under his breath, and was singing, "Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall, and Humpty Dumpty had a great fall." I found no humor in it at all, but later I did look back and laugh at the foolishness of it.

It began to get late, so everyone went into his or her room and shut the door and went to sleep. Ken was in a sleeping bag on the living room floor, just snoring away. But I couldn't sleep because I was in too much pain, and was worried that I was not going to be able to put weight on my leg in the morning. I clasped my hands together, and began to do some serious praying. I had really developed an appreciation for two working legs, and felt compassion for those who went through life having just one. When the morning came I was relieved to be able to put weight on my injured leg. I might have had to walk with a limp, but none the less, I could walk. It time for Ken and I to regretfully return to Van

Nuys, to the Voyager Hotel. We thanked Carol and Leah for their hospitality, and for including us in their birthday celebration. We said our goodbyes and left.

When we arrived at the hotel we found Tommy and Lori asleep in the room. The cats were running wild. Maybe they were hungry. We opened the door, and as soon as they saw my squirt bottle, they immediately scattered to different parts of the room and went into hiding. It always amazed me how fast they could disappear. It was as though there were no cats at all. And as long as I kept my squirt bottle near, it stayed that way.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day was Monday, the 26th of July; and everyone was preparing to go on a day camp to Hungry Mountain. When we all got what we needed for the short trip, we took off. It took about an hour to get up to the top of that mountain. Round and round we went, ever climbing, on the path that led up to the top. Finally we were up eight thousand feet above sea level. We parked under a huge tree, where there was lots of shade. It looked like a good place to unload the lawn chairs. So we set up the chairs, along with three guitars. Of course Tommy had to have his whisky, and Lori needed her smoke. My leg was swollen, and was a lovely multi-colored pallet of black and purple. I was not about to try to walk down those mountain paths, so I stayed at the camping spot while the others took a nice stroll. The paths led to the edge of the mountain, where they could look out and see the other mountain tops. It was a beautiful sight no doubt, but I was relieved that neither Tommy nor Lori lost their balance and fell off the mountain.

Hungry Mountain was a beautiful mountain, but how did it get such a strange name? When I returned to Dallas, I asked some friends who had been to California if they had ever heard of Hungry Mountain. No one had ever heard of that mountain, and I wondered if Tommy didn't name it himself. It might have been one of the mountains he camped upon, when he was down and out. I remembered the surprise of his California friends, when they saw him in Dallas, and noticed his weight gain. It verified for me that he had gone through many a hungry spell when he lived in California. Was that why he called it Hungry Mountain? I almost felt sorry for him. After they had come back from their walk on the paths, Lori strolled down by some big rocks and decided to sit on one. She leaned back, thinking there was some support behind her. But there wasn't, and she just fell backwards, and got stuck between two very large rocks. There was a thorn bush growing between those rocks, directly beneath her back. She was helpless as she laid there folded up, with those thorns sticking into her. She was

stuck in between those rocks, and could not lift herself from that position to get up. All she could do was scream for help.

I was relaxing at the camp, and we were all playing guitars, when we heard her horrible screaming. I could immediately tell that something was wrong, but I could not run to her rescue due to my leg injury. Ken just stood there and ignored it, and no doubt he was secretly gloating over her predicament. It took Tommy's befogged mind a few minutes to realize it could be a serious call for help. He took off running, and finally helped her to get up. Her back was bleeding from the thorns, and her skin was bruised from the hard rocks. Of course, that negative incident put a damper on the little party, so it was decided we might as well leave. After returning to the Voyager Hotel, everyone was pretty much frazzled. That is, everyone except Lori, who was still high on speed, and couldn't sleep. She banged around in the kitchen, with music from a CD player blaring loudly. Ken could take no more of that racket, as he laid on his stomach, trying to sleep. Finally he raised up on the bed, and screamed at Lori, "Would you please shut up, and go to bed!" Well this didn't go over very well with Lori, and it only increased her anger and hatred towards Ken. She was being very inconsiderate at 3: am, and really deserved for someone to yell at her. But Ken was already walking on thin ice as it was, and now the ice had broken. The coldness was quite apparent between Ken and Lori, and in fact they spoke very few words to each other. Tommy and Lori wanted to get rid of him, and abandonment was not out of the question. Ken must surely have felt the heat of their hatred, but remarkably, he did nothing to placate them.

Tuesday the 27th of July, dawned upon a restless and impulsive Lori, who apparently made an overnight decision to go to the beach. Perhaps she had never seen a beach, or maybe our Huntington experience sparked a fire of excitement in her otherwise inactivated brain. Tommy finally said he would take her, but it was a very reluctant agreement. More like a distasteful chore he could not manipulate his way out of doing. He put forth every imaginable reason for not going,

but perhaps the lamest was that he was “not a beach person”, but was a mountain-type of guy. In spite of everything, Lori always managed to come out the winner in every argument, if you could say anybody had won. I deemed anyone a loser who wasted his potential, and that assessment included them both. Nevertheless we all got into the jeep, and (thank God!), left the cats in the room. We initially planned to go to the beach in Los Angeles, but Tommy said Malibu was a much better one. The Malibu beach was a good forty miles or more away, and was rarely as crowded as the others were. So Malibu it was, and off we went.

Everyone knows hindsight always brings things into a sharper focus, which means that sometimes we are embarrassed by our own memories. In retrospect, I can just imagine that to impartial passer-bys, the four of us must have appeared to be an odd assortment of mixed nuts. There was Tommy, who was artistic, talented, unpredictable, irresponsible and addicted. His attitude was more easy-come, easy-go than the rest of us. It seemed his primary goal was to be able to drink and dope his life away, without interference. On the other hand, Lori was whiny, assertive, high-strung, and totally unreasonable, and she really knew how to rattle Tommy’s cage! He largely ignored many of her antics, but she could always manage to push him over the edge. The result was constant dissension. Ken lived in his own miserable bubble, where he suffered from chronic grouch-itis. Like Tommy and Lori, he too lived for the moment. None of the three were far-thinking individuals, and they had more in common than they admitted. The main difference between them was that except for the chain-smoking, Ken didn’t “medicate” his misery, as did the other two. As for myself, aside from the music-factor, there were no ties to any of them. To maintain my own sanity, I mentally detached from them, and studied them like a scientist would a specimen.

By simple observation, I had learned how to cope with Lori, and could anticipate her needs. One of her major issues was that she could not go anywhere without taking along excessive and unnecessary baggage. Besides convenience,

knowing her material assets were safely within reach probably helped mollify the drug-induced insecurities. Tommy never realized the fact, and suffered from the ignorance of it. Therefore, when we arrived at the Malibu beach, Tommy and Ken jumped out of the Jeep, and took off walking. Of course Lori was infuriated by their lack of concern, so even though I could hardly walk on my lame leg, I intentionally hung around to help her. She began to complain that Tommy was selfish, and was making me carry all the heavy stuff by myself, which was true. I had both hands full, and there were still things to carry. We finally managed to get the Jeep unloaded, and settled down on the beach. Lori rewarded me for my assistance with some professional advice. She had been a nurse, so she told me to lie on my stomach on the beach, with my injured leg exposed to the sun. The heat from the sun would help my body re-absorb the blood and fluids which had collected internally around the torn ligament. I was grateful for the advice, and did just that.

As might have been expected, after Lori had put everything she wanted by her blanket on the beach, she decided it was too cool to lay out there, so she and Tommy took everything back to the Jeep. They thought it was more comfortable to sit in the café area and have a drink. So they found a table in front, facing the beach, and stuffed themselves on their liquid lunch: alcohol. The anti-social Ken was also basking in the Pacific sun, sitting by himself on the wall that surrounded the small café. About two hours had passed, and it was time to leave. We all packed up what was left, got back into the Jeep, and drove back to headquarters at the Voyager Hotel. Tommy and Lori were languishing in the effects of the alcohol, and wanted to just mellow out at the hotel and get some rest. I really had no desire to go dancing, with my bum leg and all, and Ken had no money, so everyone stayed in for the night. We hung around the pool most of the time, and talked to other people who were staying there.

We mainly talked to a girl named Keiba. She was African-American, and had her three children with her. They were staying there while she was having a

new house built. She was also deceived by the outside appearance of the hotel, and thought it would be a safe place for herself and the children. But she soon discovered it was a breeding ground for sleazy prostitution and drug dealing, which is always accompanied by violence. Speaking of drug dealers, there was one speed freak who also hung around the pool. He could not conceal his drug-behavior, which publicly emerged in familiar symptoms. We learned later that he was the dealer who sold Lori her little bag of goodies. The guy had tattoos from his neck to his ankles, and could not stay still, even if his life depended on it. Every time he saw us, he could not stop staring, which we thought was quite strange. We didn't look like addicts, and we certainly didn't look prosperous. It even crossed our minds that maybe he had developed a fixation, (God forbid!), on one or both us. However, the puzzle was solved later, when we learned he thought we were narcotics agents. What a laugh! We were staying in the same room of that hotel with two of the most addicted drug users in America! Of course Lori never bothered to introduce us to him.

The next day was July the 28th and the time we had allocated for the trip would soon come to an end. Lori and Tommy had left to look for a more permanent place to live, while we stayed with the cats in the hotel room. I was relaxing(?) on the bed, with my leg elevated, watching Ken nervously pace the short length of the room. Back and forth he went, from wall to wall, desperately smoking one cigarette after another. All his life he had heard about the famous Hollywood Walk of Fame, and he didn't want to leave California without seeing it. I wanted to go as well, but the pain in my leg was aching. Between my leg hurting, my enforced inactivity, the cigarette smoke, the nine cats and Ken's complaining, I was getting very irritated. I just couldn't take a minute more of his complaining. I finally decided that my leg was going to hurt anyway, whether I stayed or went. With that rationale, and a tremendous exercise in self-control, I got up. My leg immediately screamed at me to sit back down, but I was determined to master it.

We boarded a bus to the metro train station, and from there, went into downtown Hollywood. I proceeded to accompany Ken, limping the entire time. I thought indulging him on that little excursion might shut him up. I should have known by then that nothing would make Ken shut up! Be that as it may, we finally arrived at the Walk of Fame, and apart from my limping, I trudged forth as if nothing was wrong. Walk! Ha! What a joke - I could hardly drag myself down the Walk of Pain. Had the Hollywood producers known it, they would have presented me with an Academy Award for that performance! Nevertheless, I did enjoy seeing the various stars of artists I had long admired. One in particular was Steve Miller's star, of the Steve Miller Band. It was quite personal for me, because for four years I was a drummer in his brother Jimmy Miller's band. Just about every entertainer had a star, and I remember standing on my "good" leg, and putting my foot into the footprint of Arnold Schwarzenegger, while Ken took a picture. It was a perfect fit.

Hollywood was interesting, but eventually we ran out of "free" things to do. Ken had no money in his pockets, and I was not willing to spend mine for entertainment. We had been in the Hollywood area for at least six hours, and by that time it was late afternoon. There was nothing left to do but to head back to the hotel. Besides that, my leg was really hurting, and I needed to lie down and take the weight off of it. But wouldn't you know, just before we got there, I received an unexpected call from Lori. She asked if we could stay away for awhile longer, so that she and Tommy could have some time alone. I was absolutely outraged! It was bad enough they did not honor their contract by providing us with a separate room, but to lock us out of theirs was inexcusable! We had already been away for seven hours or so, and they had been out too. But they could have stayed in the room and had "alone time" all day. How much more down time did those two need, anyway?

Ken was completely beside himself when I told him what she had said. I was equally mad about the situation. It really irked me to think that she had

smuggled all those cats into the room, but she locked us out, even though we had no place else to go. It was not like we were in our hometown. We had neither money nor friends, and the area where the hotel was located was not the safest place to be in Los Angeles. But it was the only area we were half-way familiar with. So what were we supposed to do while they did whatever they were doing? We had no other recourse but to go some place where we could hang out without being arrested for loitering. We went to a Denny's coffee shop, and sat in a booth for awhile. When we had given them enough "down time", we returned back to the hotel room. Tommy and Lori were sleeping like nobody's business, and didn't even know we had come in. Apparently it would not have made any difference if we had been there or not!

But I was too tired to even care what their reasons might have been. I was almost as grateful to get into that bed as I was the day we prayed, and the van started. I had walked on my leg all day, and I could tell by the intensity of the pain that I might have damaged it even further. When I took my pants off to get into bed, I saw my leg. It had turned more black and purple than ever before, and it was swollen three times bigger than the other leg. This totally freaked me out, and I jumped right in the middle of Lori and Tommy, and tried to wake them up. I really believed I might die, or at least have to amputate my leg! The sight of it sent me into a state of shock, and panic enveloped me like an overcoat. I started yelling, "Look at my leg! Just look at my leg!" I probably thought it was about to fall off, and frankly, I was scared. I wanted Lori to see it, because she was a nurse and knew what to do, but she didn't wake up. Tommy finally opened his eyes and looked at it, and was immediately full of great concern for my well-being. With all the wisdom of a drunk, he advised, "Ah it's just a bruise, it will go away." Thanks a lot!

On the other hand, Ken was genuinely concerned, and didn't know how to help, or what to think. He couldn't believe his eyes. He agreed it was nasty, and offered, "Yeah that's really bad. I've never in my life seen an injury like that be-

fore.” Of course that was comforting and encouraging! I tried to sleep that night, but with little success. The pain in my leg was unbearable, and when morning came, Tommy took me to the hospital so a doctor could look at it. The doctor confirmed it was definitely a hamstring. I had also torn many tendons in my leg, and there was really nothing he could do, but to help relieve the pain. He gave me a prescription for pain meds, and wrapped my leg with two Ace bandages. They also gave me pain pills, and sent me back to the hotel. In a way, this injury created a better relationship between Lori and I. She felt her advice was needed, and I was willing to do exactly what she said to do to help the leg heal faster. But Ken was becoming more of a problem to Tommy and Lori. I am not sure why he thought they owed him anything, because after all, he was not exactly their invited guest. And he obviously had a great dislike for Lori.

Regardless, Ken tried to make them feel guilty for not giving him money. And they were not about to help him anymore, for they knew that he spent money like water, buying junk. Not that they didn't, but he was not in a position to be expecting anything at this point. Especially after all the complaining and talking behind their backs that he was doing. Ken finally had one of the girls in the hotel, Keiba, give him a ride to the airport in Long Beach. I kept telling him that because his ticket was purchased in advance, he would lose his discount, and also be penalized \$100.00. But Ken kept saying the people at the airport would understand his situation, and not charge him more. Well, of course he was wrong. When he arrived at the Long Beach airport two days earlier than he was supposed to, they did charge him more. He didn't have the extra money, so he called his good friend Carol, and she wired him the extra money. Now as Ken was going through the baggage check, they discovered he had a pair of wire cutters in one of his bags. That warranted a strip search, which was exactly what they did. Off go the clothes, and on go the hands, to search for anything else that might be against the law. How humiliating! I could just imagine his protests and complaints! The wire cutters were for his guitar strings, but that didn't matter to the

officials. The law was the law, and that was final. But he was finally admitted onto the plane, and went back to Dallas. That was the last we saw of him.

Ken's departure had a profound effect on the rest of us. We actually enjoyed more peace and quiet than we had known since the trip began. Now that a major source of aggravation (Ken) was removed, the contention had eased, at least for the moment anyway. Tomorrow, of course, would be yet another story. It came early in the morning, with a phone call from the manager. He had heard that Lori was keeping a lot of cats in the room. The Mexican clean up ladies thought Lori was practicing some form of black magic, because many of the cats were black. To add to the mystery, she had put blankets over the windows, to keep anyone from seeing inside the hotel room. But the cats managed to keep pulling them down, allowing anyone to see inside if they wanted to. Apparently somebody did, and reported her to the manager. Yes, she was kenneling nine cats in one room, and the hotel rules were no animals, period!

The manager was livid, and told Lori she had to leave. She was being kicked out, and was given three hours to leave. She had already paid the rent for the week, and it was only Monday. She was paid until Thursday, but the manager was not going to refund her money for those days. Tommy was furious, and went to have a talk with the manager. Whatever he said to him surely didn't help, but in fact made matters worse. Apparently he had screamed at and threatened the man, so the manager called the cops. Then Lori went up front to talk to the manager, and as he was talking to her he grabbed the keys that were dangling from her hand. When he grabbed for them, he accidentally scratched her. She was beside herself with anger, and started screaming at the top of her lungs. The cops came, and while they were up at the front desk trying to get a handle on things, Tommy took off across the street. I think he might have had a warrant from an old traffic ticket, and didn't want to be there when the cops came.

Now there I was, using a stick for a cane, and limping from the pulled ham-string. I was trying to get everything into the van, while attempting to keep

the door to the room open. Before Lori made the manager mad, she had given him the keys, and he wasn't about to give them back, not even so she could move out. It was like living in a bad dream (nightmare!) from which I could not awaken. That ordeal went on for at least three hours. While I was loading everything by myself, Lori was crying loudly, and threatening to stab the manager with a knife. She wanted to do something to get him back for accidentally scratching her hand. In the midst of all that commotion, another set of cops were busting two guys for stealing a car, parked right next to Tommy's blue van. The cops had them against the police car in hand cuffs, but every now and then they turned to see what Lori was screaming about.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Tommy finally came back to help get things loaded into the van, so we could go.... where? We didn't really know. Somehow they had escaped being arrested, and we were finally on the highway, leaving behind the saga of the Voyager Hotel. Although we had just been kicked out of the room, and literally had no place to go, Tommy decided we should go to a musicians jam that his friend was having. It was in the area, so off we went, cats and all, to his friend's jam session to play music. Real smart, huh?! I was not able to drive the van, so Lori had to drive the Jeep, and Tommy drove the van. I could not put my leg in a bent position, so driving for me was out of the question. Lori was so high on pills her driving was very dangerous. She was having a hard time keeping up with his driving, in all that crazy California traffic. But by some miracle, we finally arrived at his friend's house. It was starting to get dark by that time, and Tommy was wanting to get his guitars out of the van. Naturally, they were packed on the bottom, so everything on top had to come out for him to get to his guitars. It was very tiring.

As we were getting stuff out of the van, Lori was trying to find a place in the backyard to put her cats. She got mad at Tommy because he was not helping her, even though he and I were busy trying to get his instruments out of the van. It had been a long day, and he suddenly became overwhelmed with anger. They were screaming at each other out in the street, but the neighbors were watching from behind closed doors. They probably had one hand on the telephone, ready to dial 9-1-1, if necessary. Tommy and Lori both had a habit of running out, whenever the heat got turned up too high. That time it was his turn, so he jumped into the Jeep and took off. Lori was livid, as she watched him drive off. I just stood by the unloaded van, in pain, scratching my head and wondering what to do next. We were there visiting his friends, so neither Lori nor I knew any of the people. In our position as strangers, we didn't know what to do, so we just waited

for Tommy to come back. I breathed a silent prayer of gratitude that Ken was not there. Things were already bad enough, but had he been waiting in limbo, (again!), he would have most certainly injected more venom into the situation.

I don't know if Tommy's friends ever really understood what had happened between him and Lori, but they were nice, and quite hospitable toward us. Apparently it didn't disrupt them very much; they just went on with their plans to have a cook-out and a jam. Time crawled by, and Tommy finally returned. I have always wondered where he went when he left Lori in such angry outbursts. He offered no explanations, and I surely didn't ask any questions. We got his guitars out, and reloaded the van. Lori was more settled then, but still mad. The cook-out was in the back yard, where there was also a music room. The jam would be held in that room; probably for the sake of the neighbors. After having a bite to eat, we went inside the jam room and played a little music with his friends. It was not fun, and we were both fried, to say the least. Nevertheless, it would have been insulting not to play a little music with them. Lori had conjured up a friendship while we were there, and was able to give away one of her cats. That cat was lucky to have been adopted into a good home.

It was close to 3:00am, and we had to move on. But move to where? Believe it or not, the money that Lori had received from her divorce was already mostly gone! Between the two of them, they had managed to go through several thousand dollars in just a few short weeks. Their circumstances were the mute testimony of their devastating drug habits. It pained me to see how drugs could drain every ounce of life and sanity from it's victims, but I was powerless to stop the destruction. Tommy had managed to return to his beloved California, but now there was no place to turn. The van was the only accommodation available, and it did not come equipped with a bathroom. To add to the disillusionment, it was full of their personal belongings, as well as all their household stuff. Of course Lori and Tommy had taken full advantage of the free booze, and were both fairly drunk from the party. Lori was driving the Jeep, and I was riding with

Tommy in the van. My leg was throbbing, so I propped it up on the dash board, to keep it from hurting more than it was already.

We hit the highway and drove for miles, all the time keeping an eye on Lori, via the rear-view mirrors. She was not a good driver even when she was not so drugged up, but that night she was saturated, and her driving was terribly erratic. It seemed just a matter of time until she would plow into something or someone. I kept telling Tommy to pull over and just let her sleep it off, but a parked Jeep and a soused, sleeping woman with eight cats would have surely attracted unwanted attention from the cops. We had no options other than to get out of the city. So we kept going, but had no real destination. One side effect of my pain medication was that it made me unusually sleepy. For as long as I could, I fought the urge to drift off into the foggy arms of dreamland. I don't remember actually going to sleep, but I do remember waking up. We were between two huge mountains, and the Jeep was in front of us. Lori was trying to sleep, with her eight cats in the back in cages. I awoke feeling like I was dreaming, and Tommy was throwing stuff out of the van so he could make a bed for himself to sleep. I had to keep my leg up on the dash board, and had been napping in the front seat. Everything moved in the dream-like state of slow motion, sort of like an out-of-body experience. I was not sure where I was, or even if I was awake or asleep. It was so bizarre! Maybe I just never recovered from the initial shock I experienced way back in Dallas, before we even left. Anyway, Tommy finally created a bed for himself in the back of the van, and crashed.

After about two hours of sleep, Lori came to the van screaming that she was hungry, and wanted to go get something to eat. Eat? Where? We were far removed from the city, and miles from anything that resembled civilization. But the illogical and distorted perceptions caused by drugs makes people do things they would never do in a sober state of mind. As unthinkable as it was, Lori got so upset she just took off in the Jeep. Guess it was her turn to run. I finally got Tommy up to see what was going on, and he became furious that she had left.

Not to mention she had grabbed the van keys before she left, leaving us stranded on the side of the road. What was worse, she did not have a clue where she was, or where she was going. This was her first trip to California, and she was as lost as a goose! Worse yet, she was drugged up, pillied up and liquored up. Two hours of sleep did not kill the chemicals that were still running around in her bloodstream, beating against her brain, and causing such havoc! But all those considerations still did not stop her from roaring off into the wild blue yonder, leaving us to live or die, whichever came first.

So there I was: trying to forget about the pain in my leg, and the pain of this whole ordeal. Tommy was obviously asleep in the back of the van, as if he hadn't a care in the world. But to tell the truth, there was nothing else to do except sleep. The silence between the two huge mountains was deafening, and added to my anxiety. But the starlight streaming in through the windows gradually relaxed me, somewhat. I was grateful that the pain meds dulled the edge of reality. Sleep slowly encroached upon my senses, like the ocean sneaks up on the shore. But suddenly I was rudely jolted back into the moment. I distinctly heard the sound of feet running across the top of the van! Who, or what, was out there, in the middle of the night, in that remote place? The flight or fight syndrome kicked in, and I felt my tired body tense up. My heart was beating a hole in my chest! I had heard there were mountain lions in remote areas of California, and they came down and roamed the valleys at night. It was not a comforting thought. Oh no! The window on the driver's side was half-way down. I struggled to scoot across the seat to get to the window, fearing that whatever was out there would come in through the window and attack me. And the fight would be between me and "it", for Tommy was still sawing logs on his bed of rags, in the back of the van.

As I inched my way to the window, a head popped in screaming, "I want to leave, and you need to take me!" I was not expecting that at all, and almost suffered a coronary arrest, right there in the California wilderness! It was Lori,

who had driven up behind the van, after her attempt to go get something to eat had failed. She was back, and she was mad as hell itself. In her drunken, pilled-up state, she must have climbed on top of the van. It was a wonder she didn't fall off and break her neck! All her carrying on would have wakened the dead, and I guess in a way it did. Tommy opened one blood-shot eye and muttered, "What the hell is going on?!" When he realized that Lori had come back, anger gave him a boost of energy, and he was up in a flash. After much yelling and screaming, he finally convinced her to wait until the sun came up to get back on the road. Reluctantly, she got into her car, and the exhaustion of the past twenty-four hours must have taken over. Gratefully, she fell asleep. With the light of day, we took off back to Van Nuys to get something to eat. I was still in a lot of pain and still could not drive, so Lori followed behind the van.

Calculating the time frame, I reckoned that Ken must be back home in Edgewood by then, and was unwinding from the whole experience. Lucky Ken! He was safely home while I was still wondering what adventures might next befall the traveling trio. Two of the three indiscriminately broke the laws left and right, and danced perpetually on the edge of arrest. If their luck ran out, what would happen to the eight cats, the Jeep, the van, Tommy's guitars, and all the rest of their possessions? But that was just speculation on my part, although it could have become a harsh reality. Lori might have been thinking along the same lines, as she wisely decided (for once!) to unload the contents of the trailer into a mini-storage. Then they could return the trailer back to the rental company, and get rid of it. It would save a lot of gas, and would make getting around on the freeways much easier. So the search began to find an affordable place to dump everything. Finally, we located a place and began the job of transporting their belongings to the storage building. With her usual lack of common sensibilities, Lori wanted everything moved to the third floor, even though first-floor units were available. This was an all day ordeal, and I worked as hard as Tommy did, even with my injured leg. But at last the task was over. Whew! I was literally

exhausted: spirit, soul and body. We returned the trailer to the nearest rental facility, and I was able to breathe a long sigh of relief. The journey for me was almost over. I just wanted the Pear Blossom adventure to come to an end, so I could go back to my normal, mundane, and above all ordinary, life in Dallas.

With the business of the day behind us, we went to a local park to discuss the plans for the next step. Lori whispered to Tommy that she wanted more drugs, and of course he knew exactly where to get them. They asked me to watch the cats, while they went to go do “something important”. But I knew the routine, and was not about to accommodate them any further. I had fulfilled my part of the contract, and had helped them get moved to California. In spite of all the setbacks, and all the near-disasters that had occurred, I knew I had taken care of them and their possessions as best I could, and my job was over. There was nothing more I could do, and now it was time for me to leave. To my surprise, they begged me to stay, but after much persuasion, they took me to Long Beach, and dropped me off in front of the Holiday Inn. We shook hands, and with a hug and a “good luck”, we parted ways. I was glad to leave them as friends, and not enemies. As the familiar van drove off into the distance, I knew a tiny part of me would always be with them. I prayed that God would be merciful to them!

I went into the hotel, and with the emergency money I had saved, rented a room for the night. After a wonderful hot shower, I indulged myself in a big, fat, juicy, well-deserved steak. That night I enjoyed the first restful night I had experienced since I had left Dallas. The next morning I flew back to Dallas, and the Dallas skyline had never looked as beautiful to me as it did that day. As the plane touched down on the Texas soil, I wondered what they were doing, and what would happen to them. Even though I had physically left the crazy Pear Blossom adventure in California, I knew it would never really leave me. Whatever the future might hold for Tommy, Lori, Ken and myself, the journey had become a part of us, and would be forever filed away in the annals of our memory. All experiences continue to unwind down the pathways of time, for every action creates a

result, which generates another action, and so the chain is formed. It will therefore always be a part of the lives of all who were involved. What did I learn from the experience? My patience had been tested beyond the limits of endurance. But patience refines the soul, and keeps one striving toward perfection. I had learned that no matter who we are, or what our credentials might be, we are basically all the same. Everybody seeks Utopia, but like the mountain pathways we had wandered, there are many and various roads leading to it. Our adventure was like the rocky Pear Blossom road we had discovered together, that had spiraled upward, round and round the mountain, until it finally reached the summit. We could have taken a wider and smoother road, but it might have been laden with pitfalls farther down the line. Anybody is therefore subject to get off on the wrong road. So how can one of us judge another?

Although the journey was fraught with aggravations and obstacles beyond belief, I would not trade the experience for anything. Destiny dictated that my life would cross the paths of those three souls, and I know it was not accidental. This story was actually written in honor of their lives, for in many ways they exemplified the good, the bad and the ugly in all of us. Tommy was the epitome of the musician whose talents and opportunities exposed him to the wild side of life, where he became entrapped in his own importance. He felt invulnerable, and spurred by an inflated confidence, dared to explore the dangerous world of drugs and alcohol. He thought he could rope the tiger. The last time I heard from Tommy, he was still in California, and was still playing music whenever he could. I did not ask about the drugs. I didn't really want to know.

Ken, on the other hand, was also a talented musician, but he suffered from a lack of confidence. He was more like that person whose talents outweigh his opportunities. A lack of confidence always creates failures, and failures create frustrations. He eventually became disenchanted with music and everything else, and could only express his misery in constant complaints. Unfortunately, he made no musical contacts in California, and I don't know if anything ever hap-

pened with his CD. He returned to his hometown in Edgewood, Texas. We still talk occasionally. As far as I know, he has remained unmarried.

Lori was the diva of dysfunctionality on the stage of life! She had once been an intelligent, educated, successful professional, who had earned a degree in nursing. She had a husband, a career, a family, and a home. By all appearances, she had everything anyone might desire. But too often the material, outer things do not validate a person's inner quest for meaning in their life, and they take side-roads into destruction. If Lori could have written a line in this book, what would she have said to those who worship at the altar of drugs and alcohol? I believe she would plead, "Learn from my mistakes! Choose life!" I think she might have said, "Whatever you make a god in this life, will eventually bring you to your knees!" I believe if her story would help just one person, she would want it told. The Pear Blossom Adventure was a part of all our lives, but it focused heavily upon Lori, for without her, there would have been no adventure.

EPILOGUE

Two years after our trip to California, I was shattered by the news that Lori had taken an overdose of drugs, and died. Visions of her flashed through my mind, and I could see her walking on the mountains, with the California sun bouncing off her hair. Her memory was forever etched in mind: Lori, driving wildly behind the van, Lori with her cats, Lori ever-seeking, never finding, and now, finally sleeping. My soul cried out, "God! Why?!" I will never forget her, and I pray she has finally reached the top of her mountain. Lori has crossed over into another dimension, where there is love, and light, and forgiveness and freedom. I pray the orphaned child had found her home. The Pear Blossom Adventure is long behind her, but perhaps her real adventure has now begun.