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Foreword

Coming out of my office in the church one morning, I bumped into Doreen who was leaving a twelve-step meeting. In those days, there were sixty such groups that met weekly in this section of the church. Therefore, it was usual that I would say hello to some of the people who were about to pass my office each day. But one day, something unique, inspiring, Spirit-led, random or coincidental happened. There was a spark, and I introduced myself to this woman who was leaving the meeting. Although that was now 15 years ago, I recall where I was and where she was. Not all the conversation is remembered other than the gist. I wanted her to know that our church is a welcoming place, that the God of inclusion is alive, present, and engaging. Right off Doreen indicated that in her experience churches have been exclusive, judgmental, and even condemning of people who are part of the GLBT community. I said forthrightly, “we are open to all, to everyone regardless of their sexual orientation.”

Doreen and I stood in the hallway talking for a long time about the hurt and pain she and her partner Lisa endured when they were stripped of the privilege to teach the Bible in their church community because of their sexuality. I saw no contradiction in being Christian and gay and I hoped that in helping them speak their truth, their own convictions were affirmed. In fact, while there was a huge wall between the 12-step meetings and the church sanctuary itself, I was sensing that at least here, right then, Doreen was willing to take the risk to see if indeed the congregation would welcome her and Lisa.

It was their courage, their spunk, their willingness to open the wound of exclusion just to see if the balm of our church’s faith could help and heal. As a result of their God-based live-out-loud faith, they became members of our church community that was led to the process of becoming an Open and Affirming church.

Through their stepping out on their faith in the Christ who welcomes and affirms all, that local church plunged into the discernment process of how their Christian witness would declare the power of inclusion. Thank you, Doreen and Lisa, for being led by the Holy Spirit in your courageous, loving actions. You were vanguards of helping at least that one church embrace the truth of the gospel of Jesus.

Rev. Alan Johnson – Author, Encounters at the Counter

Chapter One

Hall & Oates was blaring on the radio of our eleven-year-old 1972 brown Corolla fastback. Lydia was behind the wheel and ready to admit that we were lost. She rolled down her window, hoping to spot a passerby to get directions. Her short, cropped blond hair blew in the cool night breeze. Little Carol and her Irish curly-haired girlfriend, Maureen, huddled in the back seat under Carol's black woolen cape, swigging Tango out of a brown paper bag. I reached over the passenger seat and grabbed the bottle from Maureen.

"Hey, you guys, don't hog it all," I said.

"Aw, c'mon, Doreen. That's all we got till we get to the bar," Maureen said.

"You've always got a stash. Pass it up."

Maureen clutched the paper bag tighter.

"I need more than you — I'm a lot taller."

Nobody could drink as much as Maureen, and she never drank unless there was enough to get stoned. She'd go directly from straight to passed out, so you would never know she was wasted until it was too late. Little Carol was always there to clean up her mess and carry her home. God help anybody who got in Carol's way. Her Sicilian temper made up for her size.

My girlfriend, Lydia, was a UPS driver and most often had a pretty good sense of direction, but not tonight. The four of us had left New York City an hour earlier and were drinking kamikaze shots before we hit the road. I thought the farther we were from the city, the farther I was from myself.

That morning, I had been jolted out of sleep by the telephone. "Who'd be calling so early on a Saturday morning?" I thought.

I pulled the pillow over my head, counting the rings until the machine could pick up. One, two, three, four ... click. "Hi, Reenie. This is your cousin Ann" I straddled Lydia's unconscious body, lying next to me, and reached for the receiver. The water bed swooshed and rolled. Lydia still didn't move.

Ann never called unless it was my birthday or a major event. We were never close. Secretly, I thought she was jealous all these years because her mother, my Aunt Hazel (whom I called Tazel for short), had raised me as her own since I was two years old. Ann had just gotten married when Tazel replaced my mother.

"Hi ... Ann It's me I'm here."

"I'm calling to tell you that your Aunt Hazel is no longer in remission. You might want to come and see her. She's going to die."

"Die! But I thought She was OK for so long"

“I don’t believe it. I can’t believe it. You can’t plan dying. She’ll be fine,” I told myself. Disbelieving, I wrote the words that Ann recited: Calvary Hospital, 1740 Eastchester Road, Bronx.

“I’ll come when I can get up there. She’ll be there for a while ... right?”

“What’s going on? Your aunt?” Lydia asked.

“I have to go see her. Can you take me tomorrow?”

“How about we go shopping? Get some new clothes. I heard there’s a new band at this club in Nyack. Getting out of the city will be good for you.”

Lydia would have been driving all night in the woods of Rockland County if we didn’t find somebody soon to point the way. Parallels, a gay bar that catered mostly to women on Saturday nights, was somewhere on Route 9W in Nyack.

It was a still, autumn night that was unusually warm for late November. A thick fog haloed the country streetlights, making the pavement slick and even the straightest hair turn wavy. At last, a lone, dark figure appeared out of the mist walking toward us. We pulled over to ask directions. “Hey, mister. Can you tell me how to get to 9W in Nyack?” I asked.

The white-haired old man with sunken cheeks leaned into the window and filled our car with his smoky breath. His finger shook as he pointed down the road. He said, “You see that road? You take that road till you can’t take it anymore.” We all laughed and sped away, imitating him in our own old man’s voice.

This is where the road began ...

My Aunt Hazel and Uncle Ted had raised me since I was two years old. We all lived together in a rented two-family yellow house with red trim windows on Edison Place, a dirt road off Main Street in Port Chester, New York.

March 18, 1953, was my sister Donna’s fourth birthday. Daddy’s older sisters — Hazel, Marion, Elizabeth, and Violet — were having a birthday party for Donna that came to an end after the alarming ring of the Edison Bell telephone.

I was 25 months old and know only what Aunt Hazel and Donna remember about that day.

A year later, my Aunt Hazel told me this:

“It was wintertime and the furnace went out. Your daddy was at work, so Faith, your mother, went down to the cellar to stoke the furnace with coal like your daddy does. Her belly was big with the baby coming soon. She tripped and fell on her way down. The cellar steps were steep. That’s probably how the baby died. She didn’t tell the doctor or go to the hospital until she thought she was having labor pains a week or so later. That poor girl ... she was only 33. You would have had a brother. They say the baby poisoned her blood system. ... Her heart was broke from losin’ that baby. I think that’s what killed her.”

My mom had had a baby boy ten years earlier. Aunt Hazel told me that she lost custody of him because she had fallen in love with her first husband's best friend who was my Dad. She gave birth to that baby at home alone on the living room couch. Tazel said my mom was a good seamstress, and although her sewing room was a mess of pins, spools of thread, and pieces of cloth, she could always find any little thing whenever she needed it.

I'm glad I was only two years old and can't remember that day at Donna's birthday party when the telephone rang and Tazel burst out crying when my daddy told her that my mommy had died. I was protected by my infancy from the pain my sister had to bear that day, her fourth birthday: not understanding why everyone started to cry at her party and why her mommy couldn't be there; and when she found out our mommy would never come home again.

Daddy's four sisters closed in quickly to try to fill the empty place left by the loss of our mother.

It was not long after supper, about a year later, that my whole family was gathered in our big, yellow kitchen.

The black iron, wood-burning stove gave us heat and cooked our food. Every day, Daddy put some pieces of wood under the heavy black lid on the stove, crumpled up a piece of yesterday's news, scratched a wooden match, and got a fire going.

As always, Nana shared her tea with me, drinking out of a dainty chipped English teacup. I loved to sit on her lap, watch her sip her tea, and wait quietly for her to share a piece of her golden brown, buttered toast that she dunked in her tea just for me.

I sat in the corner of the yellow kitchen on Nana's bony lap, and everything and everyone else seemed so far away. Uncle Ted and Uncle Bert leaned against the large white porcelain sink while Tazel and Aunt Marion sat in the wooden chairs next to the icebox near the back door. Uncle Frank pulled up a chair for Aunt Violet to sit at the brown and red-trimmed metal table with Nana and me. Little Uncle Henry and his portly wife, Aunt Elizabeth, crowded into the kitchen in front of the black iron stove.

Daddy walked in with Donna trailing behind him and holding his hand. Two brown striped suitcases were open on Nana's bed just outside the kitchen door. Golden Ballantine beer cans and half-filled foamy glasses were scattered everywhere. There was lots of talking and laughing, and then it got quiet for a moment until my daddy yelled, "No, God damn it."

It was hard to just be there with Nana and that tea and toast. They were all talking at the same time, yelling louder and louder. Then my dad yelled the loudest, and everything stopped.

All my aunts and uncles had their eyes on Daddy.

“None of you can afford to take Donna and Reenie together ... and I can't afford it either. I don't want to split 'em up. I'm gonna give them to the Catholic Charities. The nuns can take care of them.”

“What were nuns? Why were they all yelling? Why was Daddy so mad?” I thought.

Uncle Frank got up from the kitchen stool next to Aunt Violet and said, “I'm going to take Reenie outside.”

He lifted me off my nana's lap and carried me out into the dark night to the backyard behind the kitchen. Uncle Bert had made our barn-like garage into a repair shop, where he fixed TVs and all kinds of electric gadgets. The building carved a black edge into the starry sky on top of the hill, and I hoped Uncle Frank was taking us up there to explore. The loud voices behind us faded as we walked up the long, sloping hill. “Lightning bugs!” I said.

“Shush, Reenie. We have to be quiet,” he whispered. Then he scooped me up to lay me down on the grass. He loosened the tie around his thick neck. The ground was cool and wet. He lay down next to me. He was so close that I felt his round belly press against me. His heavy breath stunk of the big, fat cigars he smoked.

He reached down and opened the zipper below his belt and pushed my hand inside. The zipper scraped my wrist. His round belly was wet and hairy. He pushed my hand farther down until I felt this smooth, fat thing. He said, “His name is St. Peter. You have to hold it and just rub it. This is what God wants, and it is very, very special for you and me alone, and nobody else can ever know, because it is just between you, me, and God. You have to promise, Reenie. You have to keep it a secret.”

I didn't understand, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do. He pushed and pulled my hand, rubbing against that fat thing. “It's hurting me, Unka Frank,” I said.

He wouldn't stop. I closed my eyes tight to make it go away. I felt like I was choking, like there was no air. I couldn't even swallow. Everything felt so big, and I was so small. I couldn't move. Then something wet and sticky came out of that thing, and he let go of my hand. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped my gooey hand and then the thing he called St. Peter.

“You can't tell anyone what we did. This is very special and just between us. This is what God wants. Do you understand what I'm saying? You can't tell anyone.”

When he took me back through the kitchen door, everything was different from when we had left. My daddy was walking away through the living room toward the front door. Donna was holding his hand, almost running to keep up. Aunt Violet was following, yelling something at them. Uncle Frank hurried away and left me standing alone. There was more yelling. I got scared and began to cry, “Daddy, Daddy!”

I ran to follow them out the door. Tazel and Aunt Marion grabbed me and held me back from running after my daddy. I screamed and I cried, “Daddy, please don't go! Where are you going, Daddy?”

Aunt Hazel and Aunt Marion held me down in my nana's bed, pressed between the two of them, crushed in their bosoms. They tried to keep me quiet, to hold me, to control me, to

calm me. I fought so hard to get loose to run after my daddy, but it was useless. I couldn't get out from under them. He was gone, and I cried myself to sleep in their arms.