

Chapter 4

Coast to Coast

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts." —Winston Churchill

From that moment, I knew we would part, but I was worried about how I would make it on my own. Just to be sure about my decision, I went to see a counselor. "Patti, how much of your time do you spend being unhappy and miserable? If your waking hours are 100%, what percent do you spend in misery, and what percent reasonably happy?" I never thought about my life in that way before. I paused to evaluate it. I knew I spent a great deal of my time feeling bad. "I guess 90% feeling bad, and the rest feeling pretty good. Usually, the good thoughts come when I imagine our life without Michael." I listened to myself speak. There was no other way.

We lived in the country and quite a distance from civilization. Michael kept the car, since he had to get to work, and agreed to buy me a used car so I could get to the store. He packed his clothes, took Tara, and went to stay with his brother. Alone and isolated, I was scared to death. But, strangely enough, for the first time in years, I began to feel alive. With some effort, my fear could easily turn to excitement. I felt peaceful, unsure, confident, afraid. It was a mixture of feelings and emotions.

Two weeks went by without so much as a word from Michael. Though I knew he was angry at me, I thought he would want to see Amber. I called him to see if he wanted to see her and to find out about the car. "I bought you a Rambler. I'll come by tomorrow and leave it in the driveway." For \$100, it was clean but eaten away by rust. You could see the road through the floor if

you lifted the back mats. Regardless, I was thrilled to have wheels. This was our ticket to freedom!

It was December and winter was quickly approaching. I needed to find a way to support us. "What do I know? How can I earn money? Dishwasher... waitress... factory worker?" I scoured my past for a talent, a skill, a way to support us. I remembered my "lessons" with my old boyfriend, Jim Adams, and his friend, Gary O'Gara. On our dates, while they worked at making signs or painting, I learned. Early in November, I read about an upcoming art show to be held at the local armory. Eager for my big break into the art world, I decided to rent a booth. For the next three weeks, I worked feverishly day and night, preparing my paintings and sketches to sell at the show.

Finally, the weekend was here. I asked Michael to take Amber overnight Friday and Saturday. In the morning, I loaded down the Rambler—inside and out—tying the displays to the roof with rope. I set off down the road with a solid sense of hope and optimism, listening to Bing Crosby sing "White Christmas." The thermometer read "20 degrees," the countryside was covered with snow; cows were huddled together to brace themselves from the cold. "Oh, yes, winter is here!" Undaunted, I drove to the armory. "I'll sell nearly every painting... I'll be rich! Then I can give Amber everything I never had: A nice home, lots of room and freedom, plenty of shoes and clothes, maybe even a dog."

The weekend was long and got longer each time someone passed by my display with barely a glance. I created a game with myself to keep my spirits from sinking. "Oh, they'll be back, once they see the other paintings... He just wants to look around first... They're just looking today, they'll be back tomorrow to buy..." I'd try to catch their eye, hoping to connect, perhaps telepathically beg them to buy, but they wouldn't even look. Just before the close of the show on Sunday, a man bought a sketch for \$10. I slowly packed everything up, all the while trying my best to think positive. "That's O.K., all artists struggle in the beginning. You have to pay your dues before you get discovered. Maybe another show in another city another time." I picked myself up, dusted myself off, and tried to talk myself out of failure.

It was dark now and a fierce winter storm made the drive home black, windy, freezing and cold. The wind and ice whipped up through the back floor mats and the displays pounded on the roof. I stopped often to re-tie them and then resume my slow crawl to my safe haven, my home. I thought about giving up, freezing to death, crashing the car into a pole, pulling over and waiting for someone to rescue me. And then I thought of Amber. She needed me. Too weary to cry, I drove on. It was one of the darkest times of my life. I felt incredibly desperate... alone... defeated... ready to relinquish my strength to whoever came along. "I don't think I can make it," I cried out loud. Somehow, I did. Someone was pulling me through the night, moving me forward, inch-by-painful-inch.

Exhausted, but driving myself to go on, I carried my artwork and displays up the steps to our second-floor apartment, and repeated this until the car was unloaded. My mind said, "Collapse." My body refused. Robot-like, I got back into the car... back into the storm... and drove the fifteen miles through the winding country roads to get Amber. It was nearly midnight and she was sound asleep. I wrapped her in blankets, put her in the car seat, and gathered the strength and courage to go home. I wanted this night to end.

As we got to the driveway, the car sputtered, then died. It was symbolic of my spirit that cold winter night. I coasted the final ten feet to my parking place. Sheltering Amber from the wind and snow, I carried her up the stairs. She was limp and heavy with sleep. Halfway up, the phone rang. I dashed to my room, gently laid her on the bed, and grabbed it.

"Hello?" "Hi, honey, how're you doing?" It was my mother. A flood of tears came pouring out. I felt drained and trying to stop them took my last bit of strength before I was empty. I surrendered. Between sobs, I told her what happened. "Don't worry, it'll be alright. Why don't you pack your things and come back to California? You can live with us." Her voice was so soothing... so familiar... so comforting. I forgot my painful childhood and resurrected my "perfect parents" on the spot.

Although I was sad to leave my life: Michael, my home, the Bristol's, and my magical walks with Amber, I knew we could not

survive living out in the country with a car that was unreliable. I needed to count on transportation to carry us through this crisis and into a life that would sustain us. Monday morning, I called Michael at work and told him that Amber and I were moving to California. Of course he was shocked, but he didn't beg me to stay... didn't ask about Amber. I needed his help. "Will you store some of my things, sell my car and send me the money, and take us to the train station in Hartford?" Silently, I begged him, then waited in anguish for his answer. "Yes."

I was grateful and regretful that we couldn't—not *wouldn't*—work everything out. We were two very different people on two divergent paths moving in opposite directions towards goals that each of us held dear. I wanted peace, true love, acceptance, and harmony, with my home as my oasis; Michael wanted something different. Not sure of what that was, I was willing to let it go without ever knowing. Although I could understand his anger towards me for leaving him, but I could not understand his indifference towards Amber. I could never understand how he could say he loved me and yet do everything possible to make my life difficult; watching with delight as I suffered. "Is *this* love?" In my heart, I knew it was not.

I packed everything I valued into a 2'x2'x4' box: All of our movies, photos, documents, and lifelong treasures. I also packed my opaque projector to help me launch my art career once we got settled. I was certain that my life in California would be easier than this. As we drove away, I turned around, one last time, to see my home and my hope for a perfect life with Michael disappear. "Gone," I thought as the house disappeared around the bend. "Finally gone." I felt sadness at what I left behind and anticipation at the thought of the adventure that lay ahead for Amber and I. My plan was to take the train from Hartford to New York City, the Long Island Railroad to my sister, Kathy's, house, stay two days to visit, take a train back to The City, then board a Greyhound bus for the three day trip to California.

Leaving Michael was easier than I had imagined; walking away from the hope of a family was not. Amber and I checked our bags then walked over and hugged Michael. I wanted to feel a twinge... a possibility... a need... a hope. I felt his body, but not his

soul. We looked down at Amber. Jumping up and down with glee, she gave him a quick hug and kiss, then we boarded the train.

We found our seats and looked out to find Michael in the crowd. My thoughts rattled on: "I can't believe I'm doing this... It's done... Am I doing the right thing?... It's wrong to stay... Should I get off now, run into his arms, and beg his forgiveness?" A jolt from the train transformed my thoughts. We were moving. "Yes, we're moving forward with our life." Amber was talking nonstop and waved joyfully at her father. As our eyes met, I could see he had his doubts, too. And then he was lost in the crowd, which shriveled, then disappeared into the wintery background.

I sat back and sighed as I watched the buildings and streets... watched this phase of my life roll by until everything became a blur of color and movement. Beside me, Amber was babbling, "Mommy! Look at that big building... There's the conductor, can I give him our tickets?... How big is the train?... Can we walk around?... When are we gonna get to Auntie Kathy's?" I thought, "My God, she's so adaptable, so innocent. She just rolls with the punches... goes with the flow. I wish I was like that."

After our visit with Kathy, we returned to The City to catch our bus. We arrived at the Port Authority just in time, bought our tickets, and ran downstairs to the departure gate. I could see our bus in the distance pulling out of the station. My mind and body drained, I sat down on my bags and cried. Amber put her arm around me. "Don't worry, Mom. I'll take care of ya. It's alright we can get the next bus." I looked up to see my reason for living. "You're right, Amber. Let's find a locker to put our bags in and go explore New York."

After dinner, we caught the next bus. We set up our seats, our home for the next few days, then turned our attention to the world outside. As our bus rounded the onramp to the highway, we admired the view. It looked like a ride in Disneyland. The sun was setting behind the skyline of New York. A blaze of orange and red and yellow, it lit up the sky like a glorious backdrop; the silhouettes of buildings cradled the lights within and twinkled in random harmony. The City was slipping into darkness and the