

## Chapter 5

# *A Good Man*

*"Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." —Vaclav Havel*

This cross-country trip was different from the others. We had gone by plane, car, bus, and now train. It was a relief to be gliding along with the conductor taking control of my life. I didn't have to worry, or think, or plan... just relax and enjoy the ride. The snacks we brought helped sustain us but food was completely unnecessary. The excitement of our trip, the joy of being together, and the new friends we were making, were much more important. The train took us places that had long ago been forgotten with the coming of the highways and advent of the car. This was a view of America few people have the privilege to see and I was filming it all.

We arrived at Grand Central Station in New York City at 5 pm. Rush Hour. The pace was frenzied. Thousands of people running in every direction. The porters were busy. After several trips back to the baggage platform, I finally collected our meager possessions into the middle of the immense lobby: One bike, two large boxes, three suitcases, our carry-ons, and a guitar. Here we sat on the wooden suitcase that my Uncle Gary had built, like an island in the middle of a river of people. We waited for the chaos to subside. At 6:30, we finally flagged down a porter with a cart to help us to the train that would take us to downtown Milford. Through another long journey, Amber was a trooper. I carried her, exhausted and sleeping, to the train. We were nearly there.

Our apartment was small, but it was *ours*. After nearly a year, we had our first home. We called it "Our Castle." It was on

the second floor of a three-family house. Below us lived the Murray's—Ann, Danny, and their three kids, Andrea, Tara, and little Danny. Amber quickly became friends with all of them. Tara was like the sister she never had. It was wonderful to finally settle down, make a home, and be a family even if was only Amber and me.

I was on welfare for eight months and desperately wanted to get off... to find a way to use my skills, my dedication, and my willingness to work hard to make a better life for us. I took a bus to downtown Milford where I walked from one end of the Green to the other putting applications in wherever they would take them. I scoured the newspapers for a nearby job. Since Harry had not sent the money for my car, our only transportation was my bike. Winter was just around the corner and panic was beginning to set in. I needed to find a safe, warm, and secure means of transportation.

Finally, I landed a job at Waterbury Lock, a factory that manufactured locks and their various components. Jan paid for one month of Amber's daycare so I could get a start. Between my job, the \$15 a week I made cleaning Jan and George's house, and the \$25 a week in child support, I could afford to buy food, pay my rent, and have a little left over for fun. We would take the bus to the mall, or get an ice cream cone, or walk to the local pizza parlor and get one "to go." It was a minimal life on its face, but a grand, exciting, treasured life in my heart. I cherished the simple routine that became our life.

During the week, I'd drop her at Sarah's daycare, take the bus to work and home again, get on my bike and ride to get her by 5:30. We'd sing and weave our way through the streets filled with neighbors we waved to every day, but as the months passed and winter approached, the cold weather drove them indoors. The streets became silent and snow was beginning to cover the ground. I'd try my best to steer through it, but it was difficult and dangerous. As I rode past the little strip mall, I could see our reflection in the windows of the buildings: Amber bundled up, huddling behind my back to shield herself from the frozen wind, her big, blue eyes peeking out to see the view; me: Cold but determined and wishing I was home already. It was another scene

from that movie I kept seeing in my mind; one that I was determined to change. "A car," I thought, "I have to get a car and get out of this weather." I needed the money that Harry had promised to buy my car. I'd rush home from work to check the mail, hoping to find his check and his promise fulfilled. I found nothing.

Home at last, I'd fill the bathtub across the hall, put Amber in with her toys, and start to prepare dinner. I'd leave both doors open so we could talk and she could tell me about her day. She was two and a half now, and life was so exciting! "Mom! Guess what? I made a new friend today! And we played in the sand box! And ate lunch together! And we got to paint! And..." I smiled. She gave me *so* much joy. "Tell me more." "Well, Miss Sarah pushed me on the swings and took us to the beach to feed the seagulls and..." I let her play in the tub for quite a while. When she was done, we'd eat our dinner, usually macaroni and cheese, or hot dogs, or soup. Cleaning the dishes together was a special treat. She'd drag the kitchen chair over to the sink to stand on. I'd wash, she'd rinse, we let them drip-dry. I had a collection of children's books and tapes, and we'd read or play house, or she would play with Tara, who lived downstairs. All the while, the camera was rolling. I needed to capture every moment.

Just before Christmas, my sister Kathy was awarded a settlement from an accident. She bought me a light blue Volkswagen station wagon. I was thrilled. She had recently separated from her husband and asked me if I wanted to move in with her and her two kids, Courtney and Raymond. I jumped at the chance to establish a loving, close, family relationship with my sister. There had always been tension between us. She seemed to constantly be watching me, judging me, and condemning me, without giving me a chance to defend myself. Perhaps I was wrong. I needed to try.

I packed our possessions into the station wagon and we were off to the condo she rented in Ansonia. Two days later, while I was unpacking, I passed by the upstairs window and saw the neighborhood kids teasing Courtney about her unkempt hair. She was crying. I could see myself, my own childhood and the

taunting by my classmates, as I watched Courtney cry and look for someone to rescue her.

I brought her into the bathroom, cleaned her up, shampooed, then started to trim her hair. No matter what, Kathy did not cut her children's hair. I was halfway through when she walked in, shrieked at the sight of me cutting Courtney's hair, and went crazy. She threw all that we owned down the stairs and into the snow. "Get out!" she screamed, "*Get OUT!!!*" For three days, we slept in the car in the parking lot outside Kathy's apartment, with newspapers on the windows for privacy, wondering where to go and who to turn to.

I called my Aunt Anne and Uncle Bill. They lived near my parent's hometown of Paterson, New Jersey, and agreed to take us in. Once again, I packed up. I was getting quite good at packing. "How can I make a living doing this? I could work for a moving company." I tried to see the bright side. "It might be nice to live where my parents grew up. Maybe I can understand them better; maybe it will help me to resolve my childhood... to find some peace and forgiveness."

MY CHILDHOOD. It loomed in the background like a monster. I'd spent a good deal of time thinking about it, trying to explain, maybe justify it. I was so different from my parents or hoped I was at least. In my wildest imagination, I couldn't see myself treating Amber the way I was treated. From the beginning, I *wanted* her. I *really* enjoyed her company. My love for her was so intense it was almost too good to be true. It was love in its purest and most profound form. I tried to convince myself, "I *do* deserve to be happy... I *do* deserve to find love... to know its beauty, joy, and caress."

Each time the thought of leaving her... of dying, came into my mind, I shuddered, then pushed it out. It wouldn't go away. "I just *know* I'm going to die before she's six, but I'm scared to leave her, God. Who will take care of her?" There was no one in our life that I could count on to raise her with the same open-hearted love that we shared. Sometimes, when I was alone at night, the panic would nearly consume me. I dared not let it out. "If I tell anyone, it will happen."

I tried, but couldn't shake this feeling of doom... this vision of a day when we would part... when we would say, "Goodbye." As time went on, I would see flashes of our future, revelations of what was to come. I could leave my body at will and hover over my life, looking down. I'd note the time of day, the lighting, the expression on her face and mine, the remarkable things she would say. It was almost as though I was freezing time... like I was directing a movie or seeing the present as part of the future. "But how can I know?" I was scaring myself and had no one to turn to but God.

Months earlier, I'd met Alan, a friend of Nancy's, at a party. We were growing closer but I suspected our backgrounds would eventually come between us. I was a divorced, Catholic, single mother; he was a Jewish student earning his business degree. Family ties were strong—perhaps stronger than our love—and were hovering on the edge of our relationship, threatening to pull us apart.

He came down from Connecticut to visit. After dinner, we wanted to be alone. Aunt Anne agreed to watch Amber while we went out. We bought a bottle of wine, went into the woods, laid down a blanket, and started drinking and talking. The more I drank, the more my inhibitions—my walls—came down. And then "it" slipped out. At first it was a phrase, then a sentence, then a thought. I drank to drown "it." All to no avail. I was speaking and I couldn't control my words. I told him *everything*. I couldn't stop crying and I couldn't stop talking. Between the tears and sobs, I confessed my fear of my future with Amber. Shortly, it would end. "Will you take care of her when I die? Please, Alan." Of course he said, "Yes." He comforted me as best he could well into the morning. In spite of my drunkenness, I knew I'd let "it" out and I was afraid I'd tempted fate or exposed a secret so deep... so profound and real, that I set the wheels in motion to make it come true.

Living with Aunt Anne and Uncle Bill was good, even though it was a bit cramped. My job at Van Vlaanderen Machine Company, a printing press manufacturer, was going well. I started as a clerk, then worked my way up to middle management. Amber went to St. Joseph's Preschool. We were happily settling