

*To Weep . . .*

*To Laugh . . .*

*To Grieve . . .*

*To Dance . . .*

*...And the Whippoorwill Sang by Micki Peluso*

*Excerpt*

## ~ One ~

**August 23, 1981**

The doctors stride into the emergency waiting room, nodding curtly to neighbors and friends, indicating that they want them to leave. The door swishes shut, entombing me with these harbingers of death, who sit in a semi-circle about ten feet from me--as if getting too close might somehow contaminate them. They introduce themselves, one by one, but their names wash over me unheard. It is the looks on their faces that I will always remember.

"I'm sorry," one of them says, "there's nothing we can do."

The room begins to close me in.

"You may as well let us disconnect the life support machines," another one adds. "The spinal cord is completely severed."

"No," I say, my voice sounding calm and detached--someone else's voice. "No, I want the machines connected."

"Mrs. Peluso, why don't you come with us now and look at the x-rays," says the third doctor, sitting closest to the door.

The room seems to grow dimmer and dimmer and the faces of these men who choose to mandate life and death are a blur.

"I don't want to see the x-rays. I want to see my child."

They flinch slightly at the cold fear inflecting my voice, then shake their heads in agreement. Glancing furtively at each other, they rise in unison and leave. People slowly filter back into the room, and someone places a jacket over my shoulders to stop the uncontrollable shivering. Finally, a nurse comes to lead me to my child.

When I reach the cubicle in the emergency room and pull back the gray curtain, I lose all remaining sense of reality. This cannot be the child who had run out my front door only an hour ago, too excited to give me a kiss goodbye, calling out, "Bye, Mom." What I am seeing is some stranger, bloodied and swollen beyond comprehension, fighting for life within a mass of human destruction; shattered jaw, broken nose, missing teeth. My tears mingle with the blood that slowly trickles down an alien face that does not even vaguely resemble my child.

"Please God," I pray. "I'll do anything you want if you just fix all this."

An orderly comes and wheels the gurney into the elevator and up to the Intensive Care Unit; and I follow.

Someone contacts my husband and he calls the hospital. I try not to scare him, but he knows me too well, and is driving the five hour trip back from New Jersey in apprehensive terror. Two of my children are with me; numbed into a silence they seem incapable of breaking. Shock, maybe, but I can barely console them. My thoughts are linked with the one in the room next to us. Ten-year-old Nicole is with a neighbor, and the other two cannot be located.

I feel so cold and so alone--like being in a dream where something terrible is about to happen which I can avoid if I run; run fast away from it. Instead, I drift in slow motion as my senses struggle to obey my mind to hurry, to escape from here, back to the safety of a time that now seems an eternity away.

## *~ Two ~*

**February 11, 1959**

The office of the Justice of the Peace had barely enough room for all of us to stand. If I fainted I would have had little chance of hitting the floor, which was cluttered with old furniture and a huge desk overflowing with legal paraphernalia. But I wouldn't faint. The prospect of eloping to Elkton, Maryland at the questionable age of seventeen, was an adventure I found both exciting and more than a little frightening.

What would my mother say? Probably "congratulations," since it was her idea to remarry in a double ceremony. The bizarreness of a double elopement with my own mother wouldn't occur to me until years later.

My husband-to-be, eighteen years old, looking sixteen, turned to me, a smile lighting up his handsome, dark face; beaming reassurance that I didn't share. I never stopped to wonder whether he felt as confident as he looked; such was his personal power and charisma, or maybe love really is blind. He reached for my hand and squeezed it.

"Are you sure you want to go through with this?" he had asked the night before, as we sat nervously preparing to spend the night in the back seat of my mother's Buick, in the vacant parking lot of the A&P, waiting for the courthouse to open.

"Do you think we should?" I had answered, well past the point of decision-making, and not wanting to take responsibility for something as enormous as this.

"All I know is that if we don't get married tomorrow, your mother will take you out of school and drag you off to Florida with that gigolo she's marrying."

"Be quiet, my mom and Sal will hear you."

He turned on the seat to face me, taking both my hands in his. His face was deeply shadowed, highlighted only by the parking lot lights, but I could still see the intense shine in his olive brown eyes.

“You are the epitome of my life's dreams, and the only hope in my future.” He had a sincere flair for poetic rhetoric, which both amused and moved me. I had to drop my eyes, unable to bear the raw emotion reflected in his.

“I know you're right. It's just so scary.” My nerves were frayed from the long wait and my voice hoarse from the effort of whispering. There was so much I had to say, so many questions to ask. My doubts and fears battled against the intense love I felt for this man/boy and the conflicting emotions tearing at me left me speechless.

The moon had set over the A&P before we finally relaxed and nestled into each other's arms. Butch moved my hair away from the nape of my neck and kissed me behind the ear.

“It'll be all right,” he'd said. “I promise I'll always try to make you happy.”

The tension had drained from my body as I lay against his. He seemed so strong, so much stronger than me, and so safe. A small voice inside me countered, *maybe it won't be all right and if it isn't, remember that this was your choice*. I surrendered to the strong male scent of him, melted into the warmth of his body and nothing else mattered.

My mother planned on moving to Florida soon after we all returned to Easton, taking Sal and my younger brothers with her. Stevie, at twelve years old, would not mind the move, nor would Billy, who was only ten. Their lives had been so traumatized by the messy divorce that moving to a new life could only be a welcome change. My mother would be relieved to leave me in Pennsylvania, a married woman no longer her responsibility.

The Justice of the Peace pronounced us man and wife; all four of us, and my life on that bright and cold February morning took a turn that would forever alter whatever course was set in another direction. I walked out of the courthouse, blinded by the dazzling sunlight of a brilliant day, as a different person . . . a married woman.

Our elopement had to be kept secret, because I was graduating high school in June and in 1959, school officials frowned on married students. If a girl became pregnant she was automatically expelled from school. The education system was strictly totalitarian and rules were not made to be broken and rarely bent to fit the needs of individual students. Butch's parents could not be told due to the real fear that they would have the marriage annulled.

We had taken on the mantle of lifetime commitment, but had no place to live together, no full time jobs and no real future. My attic bedroom became our honeymoon suite, with the sounds of my brothers horsing around and Sal's hearty belly laughs wafting up through the walls.

“Doesn't that guy ever shut up?” Butch complained, as he perched on the edge of the narrow daybed where I had slept for the last four of my seventeen years. I sat on the other side of the bed, busily fluffing up my two pillows and picking imaginary lint off the quilted comforter overflowing with stuffed animals. Butch kept glancing over at me, expecting me to do something. I kept fidgeting, wondering how I would tell him that we couldn't make love.

“Since I didn't get to carry you over the threshold, do I at least get a kiss?” He looked so young and so dreadfully hopeful. I slid over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“We um, what I mean is . . . well it's just that we can't do this tonight. I have my um . . .” My cheeks flamed red as I struggled for the words.

“Oh. Oh, I know. I get it. No, no, it's okay. We don't have to do this tonight. We can wait. We have our whole lives to make love.” He put his arms around me and we snuggled under the soft blankets, both of us uttering a barely audible sigh of relief. All at once we were the best friends of a few days ago as we giggled over the absurd imagery of short, fat Sal making love to the statuesque beauty that was my mother. Much later, Butch left for his own home as if nothing unusual had happened that day.

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During the following weeks, I helped my mother pack for her trip south. Sal spent most of his time on Long Island, where he was from originally; doing whatever it was he did. Business, he always said, expecting that statement to satisfy everyone's curiosity. My mother never seemed to notice that Sal's life was about as open as the gates to Sing Sing. She hadn't known him very long before she married him, but he had sweetened the sour taste of the divorce and made her happy.

After they left for Florida, I felt a twinge of abandonment. I had never been separated from my family before and it caused an unsettling sensation in my stomach. My father lived in the next town, not ten minutes from me, but when my mother divorced him, he broke all contact with his children, as did all the members of his family. I didn't miss him. He was often cruel and I bore a lump on the side of my once-broken nose as proof of it. He was my mother's second husband and had adopted me at the age of five. He treated me exactly the way he treated his own sons--harsh and uncaring much of the time. I took comfort in the fact that he wasn't my real father. Still, I felt truly orphaned, with no one to call my own, except my new husband. After my mother left, I moved into the spare attic bedroom of my boss's married daughter, who worked with me at her parent's pizza parlor. I tried not to notice that I had spent most of my life sleeping in attics that were freezing in the winter and stifling in the summer.

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Graduation was four months away. It couldn't come soon enough for me. I worked late every night after school which stifled any motivation for arising at six a.m. and walking several blocks in the cold to catch the school bus. Being married had set me apart from school life, even though no one knew about it. The ordinary locker room chatter between girls, seemed childish to me now. After all, I was doing the things my friends snickered and whispered about. Almost. Butch and I were afraid to consummate our marriage. We were not well-versed in birth control, which, except for the packets carried in boy's wallets, but seldom used, was a taboo subject. I was busy working and going to school. Butch, having graduated the year before, was too exhausted working days as a stock boy for a men's store and nights as a busboy, for either of us to worry much about our lack of a sex life. We made time for sock hops and quarterly teen formal dances, as if we were ordinary teenagers unshackled by the bond of matrimony.

June finally rolled around and two important things happened. I graduated high school and realized I was pregnant. Passion had finally overcome fear and ignorance and while it was only one time--one time was all it took.

The graduation party was held at the Easton Hotel. I finally told my friends about the elopement and consequent pregnancy. Most of them were stupefied, yet excited by the tinge of naughtiness about it, but Jeanie, my best friend since the sixth grade, was appalled at our lack of responsibility.

"How could you do something so stupid? What about college? You've ruined your future! You know that, don't you?"

"Look Jeanie, what choice did I have? My mom would have taken me to Florida if I hadn't got married and then I'd never see Butch, you or any of my friends again."

"Don't give me that crap. We could have thought of something. Anything would have been better than what you did," she said. She stormed off to the ladies room, ignoring me throughout the rest of the party. Her intense reaction startled me. I reflected again on the reasons behind my elopement; true love or cowardice at the thought of being totally on my own? For I never would've gone with my mother. I found no answer and resented Jeanie for the twinge of shame I

felt on a night that had held the promise of fun and short term notoriety. Jeanie knew as well as I did that I couldn't afford college, although we shared the dream. Grants and student loans were not easily attainable then and my grades, which had always been high, had slipped dramatically, due to my work schedule. I wondered if it was her voice inside my mind that night in the car. She didn't speak to me for several weeks, but I suspected it was more for not telling her than for the dastardly deed itself.

Becoming pregnant moved up the problem of telling Butch's parents that we were married. We told them as gently as possible in late June. It was all we had expected and more. His parents had always liked me, at least up until that night. The fact that I wasn't Catholic, a big fact, and that Butch dared marry outside his church, condemning him to excommunication, was inconceivable to his parents.

"How could you do this to me, Ormond?" his mother wailed, sinking down into the kitchen chair, her hands covering her stricken face. No one in his family called him by his nickname, which he'd acquired in school after joining a gang of nice boys who wanted to sound tough. His father, noticeably upset, also had quite a bit to say, but most of it was angrily muttered in Italian and I wasn't anxious for the translation. After the shock wore off and the tears subsided, they offered their home to us, realizing that the act could not be undone. Being gracious people, they were willing to make the best of what they considered a deplorable situation. We were not in a position to refuse and we both knew it. Morning sickness had struck like the Black Plague and I knew my working days were numbered.

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Within the week, I moved into Butch's home and was treated like a member of the family. I shared a bedroom with his two younger sisters. Butch slept in his room with his brother. His mother, like a Crusader of God, monitored the hallways at night to make certain we didn't get together in the biblical sense. No matter what time of night I got up to use the bathroom, a compulsion brought on by the pregnancy, she was up, too. She could not accept a marriage outside the Church and told me repeatedly that my baby was illegitimate. In spite of my indignation and anger over what I believed to be religious fanaticism, much of the time I felt like a wanton sinner, a Mary Magdalene.

In order to marry her son "legitimately" I had to attend Catholic indoctrination by the priest. One of the stipulations was my promise to raise our children as Catholics. The priest who instructed me in the ways of Catholicism was young, barely out of the seminary; and I was a feisty Baptist, raised on fire and brimstone. We argued constantly, mostly over theology, but in order to marry Butch and finally get some order back into my life, I conceded my own beliefs and agreed to the dogma of the Church. The young priest, after four weeks with me, was sent to a rest home for frazzled priests; a just reward, I thought.

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On July eleventh, an unusually hot and sultry day, we were married in the eyes of God (who apparently wasn't watching the first time). On this auspicious occasion, someone did faint. Butch went down for the count, either from the heat or the fact that this time he was "really married." The family reception was held at his parents' home, a day I spent alternately retching and smiling. Butch's relatives descended upon us in droves, all talking at the same time as they wished us well. They resembled each other to the point where I gave up trying to tell which aunt from which and married to which uncle. They were boisterous and loving, enveloping me in that love as if they had known me all my life. The air was charged with warmth and genuine caring. I thought how strange I must look to them, a tall, Scotch-Irish girl, standing five feet nine among

these shorter, compact Italians. Butch was the first person in his family to marry both outside his nationality and his religion.

After showering us with hugs and kisses, giving new meaning to the term, “kissing cousins,” family and friends got down to the important business of the day; eating. There was more food set out on the twelve-foot dining room table than I had ever seen at one time. Italian dishes of every variety, some that I couldn't even pronounce; roast beef, ham, turkey, salads, vegetables, crisp Italian bread and dessert heavy enough to weigh down the table.

“Eat! Eat!” Butch's Uncle Hubert insisted. “You're too thin. You want that baby to starve?” He put his arm around my waist and laughed when he realized that his head barely reached my shoulder.

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The day mercifully came to an end and Butch and I were more than ready to embark upon our honeymoon. We planned to drive to Florida to visit my mother and if jobs were good, maybe stay there for a while. I was uncomfortable living with my in-laws. I was pregnant and I wanted my mom. The old '52 Studebaker that we had pooled our money for was packed to the brim with all our belongings. We said goodbye, were kissed and hugged a hundred times more and set off for the 2200 mile journey, alone for the first time in our marriage--well almost alone. We were returning Judy, my family's ten-year-old dachshund that Butch's mom had taken care of when my mother left.

We started off, the three of us in the front seat, the back seat filled to capacity with all our belongings. We had hopes of driving four or five hours and then stopping at a motel and initiating our honeymoon. After three hours on the road, I noticed that the landscape looked increasingly familiar. The truth became evident. We had driven in a complete circle and were only a few miles from Butch's home. Exhausted as he was, Butch was not about to drive home and admit this to his family, so we started off again.

“How are we going to find Florida if we can't even get out of our own state?” I asked Butch, who had grown quiet.

“Don't worry, we'll find it all right,” he muttered sheepishly. He was more tired than he would admit and we ended up pulling into a motel just off #309, fifteen miles from Easton. On the inside the motel was shabby, but the bridal suite was available. At least that's what the night clerk called it. To our tired eyes it was the Waldorf Hotel. Within half an hour we'd unpacked our necessities and were snuggled beneath the cozy, well-worn comforter . . . just the two of us and Judy.

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The drive south was interesting and relatively uneventful, until we reached the border between Georgia and Florida. It was late evening and we had been traveling all day. Instead of stopping where there was civilization, Butch decided to log a few more miles while it was still light. Before we realized it, darkness fell and the winding road became treacherous, cutting through misty swampland. Dense, eerie fog rolled in like low clouds, lifting only sporadically.

“We better stop somewhere soon, before I fall asleep at the wheel,” Butch said. “I can't see more than six feet in front of me.”

A few miles down the road, we passed a small, dimly lit diner called “Ma's Place” and backed up to it.

“What do you think?” Butch asked me.

“How bad can it be?” I answered, my stomach rumbling from hunger. “It's probably family run with home-style cooking. Let's go in. We might not pass another place for hours.”

We ordered our food and while we waited, I made a hurried exit to the rest room; a glorified outhouse sitting behind the diner in the midst of dense trees and weeds. I flipped the light on as I entered, too anxious to use the facilities to notice that I wasn't alone. When I saw them, I stood motionless and screamed. I was surrounded by hundreds of large black spiders that looked like they'd stepped out of a horror movie. Butch heard my screams and came charging in like Sir Lancelot on a quest, followed by Judy, whose genes were geared for the hunt. The spiders, previously stationary, began to scatter in all directions. I screamed again and bolted out the door.

"That was really bright," I said to both my saviors, one of whom was about to get kicked if he didn't stop laughing.

"What are you so worked up about?" Butch asked, trying to keep a straight face. "They were probably only harmless Clocks. Wouldn't hurt a fly. Hmm, maybe a fly but not you."

"Is that so?" I asked. They sure looked like National Geographic photographs of black widow spiders to me."

He put his arm around me to stop my shivering as we walked back to the diner. Our order had arrived. I noticed a huge black fly floating feet up in my milk. That was the final straw. I ran back to the car, followed by Butch, who found the fly in the milk much more horrible than the spiders in the rest room. While we were in the diner the car had filled to capacity with vicious, hungry mosquitoes, delighted by our arrival. The fog had lifted and we sped at 80 miles an hour with the windows open, but didn't lose the last of them until we crossed the border into Florida; the land of sunshine and things that go bite in the night.

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We arrived in Fort Lauderdale shortly before dawn and were welcomed enthusiastically by my mother, brothers and Sal. Judy, happy the trip was over, showed her joy at seeing my mother by peeing on her carpet. My mother was renting a rustic country home just outside Fort Lauderdale. The house stood a few hundred feet from the shore of a small lake, flanked by tall coconut palms, with lemon and orange trees right outside her kitchen windows. It was a veritable Garden of Eden, and like Eden, housed serpents; not only in the form of snakes but scorpions, black widow spiders, (curiously resembling the "Clocks" of Georgia) as well as chameleons, those strange little lizards that can change color to match their environment. The local mosquitoes made the ones who'd ridden with us seem harmless. The palmetto bugs, large, hard-shelled cousins of water bugs, two inches long and half an inch thick, could only be killed by stepping on them, causing a sickening crunch as they met their just rewards. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom.

There were many parts of Fort Lauderdale that were spectacular. Most of Florida was beautiful, the beaches taking priority in the order of loveliness. The ocean was a calm blue-green, so clear that you could see through the water. The beach sand was pure white, unmarked by the debris of constant tourism, and the breakers in the ocean hardly broke at all, cresting like the gentle waves of a mountain lake. The tall palms were majestic, even when bent nearly to the ground by sporadic summer storms that blew up from nowhere and were over almost before you got wet. But beauty notwithstanding, Florida's insect population gave me nightmares.

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Butch found a job in a nearby gas station and came home tired and reeking of motor oil, which hampered our sex life. The smell of him, which I could perceive even in another room, sent me running to the bathroom. His usually optimistic attitude was being flagged by my constant complaints, the intolerable humidity and the futility of our situation. Both my mother



and Sal worked, so I passed the days babysitting my brothers and doing light housework, very light, careful not to disturb anything with more than two legs.

My brother Billy spent his days fishing in the lake behind the house, while Stevie, who hated the sport, whiled away the hours with me, coloring with crayons, reading or playing cards. One afternoon Billy came home with a large, ugly, unusual-looking fish in his bucket. He decided to keep it as a pet and hand-fed it daily. Several days later, a neighbor walked over to the backyard and nonchalantly asked us why we were keeping a barracuda. *Oh God*, I thought to myself. *Please help me leave this jungle of poisonous bugs, lizards and man-eating fish.*

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I cried often that torrid summer, feeling sorry for myself and puffed up with righteous indignation, angered that no one understood me. No one did, myself included. My outbursts surprised even me, and while Butch was always moved by tears, his patience shortened and the tension between us grew faster than the baby inside me. I couldn't help it. I missed the Pocono Mountains rising above my hometown, the serenity of the valley, and summers that were hot but not unbearable; and most of all, familiar.

Butch and I knew that as much as we hated Florida, we were trapped. All of our traveling money was gone and Butch's job paid for food and little else. He had stringently managed to save up two hundred dollars in the hope of leaving for home, but Sal had borrowed it from him.

"How could I say no?" Butch asked, when this news infuriated me. "We're living in his house and only kicking in money for food."

"You're right, I know it," I answered, tonelessly. "It's just that I want to leave this place so bad and Sal will never pay you back."

"Don't you think I know that?"

"Keep your voice down," I warned, shifting my body in an effort to get comfortable on the double mattress lying on the floor of the sun porch that was our bedroom.

He turned his back to me and I knew the subject was closed.

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One afternoon, in my usual fit of melancholy, I decided to browse through all our wedding cards, hoping to take my mind off the weather. To my amazement, I came across several cards that we must have overlooked in our rush to be off on our honeymoon. Cards with checks and cash in them. There was more than enough money to get us back to Easton, and I could hardly wait for Butch to get home so I could surprise him with the news. Within two days we were packed, in the car and driving north on I-95, heading back to civilization.