

floatingclouds says:

December 25, 2012 at 10:49 pm

My story...

Although I purchased a copy of Rag Theater when it first came out; I was not able to look through it for years. I would glance at it, and find it too emotionally painful to go on. I could not look at those faces looking back out it me, those once very familiar faces. They were my friends, and that had been my life. I reacted the same way with Telegraph Ave. Once I got off the street for good, I could not return for more than 20 years. Even when I resided in Berkeley, I avoided Telegraph and the memories that lingered there. There were ghosts everywhere, including my own youthful footprints, that made my heart feel sad.

It is difficult to articulate the range of powerful emotions that Rag Theater provoked and still provokes in me. Like many others have mentioned on this blog: it was the best of times, and it was the worst of times. In some ways, I think, I suffer/ed from survivors guilt and PTSD. I truly came out a survivor in the end, and many others did not. Some of my street kid friends, I ran into many years later, degenerate and crazed in the Tenderloin, their beauty and youth ravaged. And one, who I will call 'B.', and who I loved dearly, is now serving life in prison. Yet another young man; oh-so-beautiful, so gentle and hopeful, a talented artist, was committed to Napa State Hospital, drugged on thorazine, and released, still in his teens, in far worse shape than before he was committed by Berkeley authorities, simply because he had been tripping on LSD and acting funny.

We were a family, we street kids, unaware of how truly vulnerable we were, cocky and thinking we were street smart, forming our own mini-families. B. (now in prison) was the ultimate father figure, and I was the mama because of my great panhandling abilities, boldness, and courage and youthful good looks. Where did my innate courage come from, where did my street skills come from? Surely, I don't know. I was not raised that way or equipped to make the leap from a working class home in West Virginia, sheltered and naïve, to the rough life of a street urchin during that turbulent era.

I began my journey by questioning the racism inherent in my community, questioning the war in Viet Nam, questioning the values and ethics of my parents and teachers and community at large; causing me to become disenfranchised, othered and shunned and ultimately disgraced, silenced and punished for my inquisitiveness and emerging self-actualization and formulation of my own ethics.

One day, I just stepped out the front door of my WVA home and simply vanished, merging into the underground railroad of vagabond youth: searching for ourselves, for acceptance and unconditional love and substitute family and utopian dreams. Thumbing my way all over the US, I eventually landed in Berkeley; during a massive and terrifying anti-war rally and quickly taking up residence at Sproul Plaza student union area, and Telegraph Ave. Pan handling, and crash pads, standing in long lines and eating at the free churches, eventually taking LSD so I could stay awake all night, protecting myself from the predators that only came out at night to prey on the young and unsuspecting. A young girl trying to sleep in a crash pad, always had to preform survival sex. Always. So the answer was to stay awake all night, and sleep in the day on the couches in the student union, until 'they' removed the couches (to put an end to this), then sleeping behind bushes, in secret places on campus.

There was a time that I could name many people in this book. I have since forgotten many of the names, but the faces are etched in my memory and heart forever. Frankie and her dog Jeremy, who we called Marble Cake, was a part of my life. She had an abusive junkie boyfriend and was dazed and terrified and practically mute when I knew her. B. and I would go to La Fiesta restaurant, to eat off the plates left behind by diners and not yet bussed\_ yes, we ate unfinished food left on plates by paying customers\_ and would scrape some food off to bring to Frankie, as she would not come in with us. The owners were aware of us and turned a blind eye. The Fish and Chips at night had bagged food waiting, free leftovers from the grills, at 11PM, closing time\_ and I would retrieve this food for myself and my little doggie Magpie. Everyone knew Magpie. And after awhile, I learned to be a little more cunning. Having so many street kids, my own little street family dependent on me, was very demanding. I would pan handle, and then walk way down to Adronicos, which was then the Park and Shop, buy a banana, a tangerine and yoghurt, and hide behind the dumpster to eat in peace and privacy, so I wouldn't have to share everything with others less capable of taking care of themselves. And so I managed to preserve my health as best I could. A boy gave me a harmonica, and Magpie and I would walk to Wholly Foods on Shattuck and Ashby, and I would play the harmonica, badly, with Maggie tied to my ankle, and raise funds to go inside to buy some food for the day. And there was the older Jewish man in the plaid Pendleton jacket. I knew he was Jewish because of the button he wore pinned to his jacket that read: Jewish Power. He would meet up with me and Maggie every day at 5 PM, by the juniper bush in the concrete planter in the front of Sproul Plaza by the student union steps, the bush is still there by the way, but much larger. He would give me 2 dollars and a can of dog food for Maggie and say the same thing every day: "Call Your Mother." He said. "Call your mother". And I would walk down to Codys Books where Frankie was waiting with Jeremy and share the dog food with my Maggie and her Jeremy.

Sometimes Groovy let me sleep in his place at night. He and his girlfriend had a room in a house with a large iron-stead bed, the mattress had no sheets and was filthy. The room had no light, old rotten food everywhere, and lots of roaches, lots of roaches. But he ran the streets at night and slept in the day, so sometimes my boyfriend and I would crash at Groovy's at night, in his place.

For a long time, I went to the Berkeley Free Church, facilitated by Richard York, an Episcopal Priest, for a sandwich and a crash pad for the night. Sadly, almost always, these crash pads turned out to be sexually exploitative set-ups. Not because of Richard York, but because many of the people who signed on to volunteer sleeping space in their homes were not on the up and up apparently. Exhausted, I would fall asleep in the spare room and spare bed offered by a Berkeley or Oakland citizen, only to be jumped upon in the middle of the night, expected to provide sex. The alternative to this, was to leave, to go back out into the cold night\_which I often did\_leaving a stranger's house, in the middle of the night, far from campus, having to find my way back to familiar ground, alone, scared, tired and cold\_always cold.

I had a lot of sweet boyfriends who worried about me. Some of them sold their bodies themselves, so they could take better care of me, get me food, soap, shampoo even candy bars by selling their bodies to men who preyed on boys. Some became 'kept', and when their 'keeper' was gone, I would visit them, in their comfy abodes.

I hitch hiked everywhere. Everywhere. Sometimes all the way to Big Sur, or over to San Francisco, even to a rock festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan and back again.

And in the book is also Iggy, my good friend the entire time I was on the street. He eventually grew his gorgeous, shiny dark brown hair way past his waist. He got a real job at Bongo Burger, and last I saw him, he had clean clothes and was moving towards a different life. If Iggy reads this, I hope you are well. I remember you and Ira so well.

Then B. discovered an empty house near Oregon St. and Telegraph. We went after dark. He wrapped his t-shirt around his hand and punched in a pane of door glass and opened the door. Our family of runaways moved in. We set up housekeeping. We found couches and mattresses put out curbside for refuse pickup, and we carried them down the street to our home after dark. We had no light and showered in freezing cold water. But, we had our own house. One night I was out walking Maggie, and as I approached the house, a young woman, a CAL student approached me. "I know you live there." She said. "I have been watching all of you and feel terrible about you. The house was busted while you were gone. The cops came and took everyone away. Don't go back there." And so my little family had been carted off to juvie and my possessions were gone. Later there was an article about this crash-pad in the Berkeley Gazette, the local Berkeley now defunct newspaper. They had gone through my backpack and printed in the paper a letter I had written to my mom, but never mailed. I have the news article with the letter, I found it on microfiche at Berkeley Public Library. I will scan it some time and share it here.

I kept my long wavy black hair clean and shiny. There was a shower in the girls rest room near Harmon gym on campus. I washed with dispenser soap and dried off as best I could with rough brown paper towels; all-the-while beautiful, young clean, college girls would be touching-up their mascara and chattering with their friends by the bathroom mirrors and I felt myself receding, disappearing behind a veil, confused by the dominant norm and culture of my own peers and fearing I may never find my way back to mainstream society if I so chose.

There are so many stories to tell, but I will stop here. What saved my life were 2 young men: one who lived on the Ave for years, a runaway from New Jersey and a young man who dropped out of college to go to California, both who were residing on an infamous back-to-the-land commune in Western Sonoma County. I had seen them many times before. They often gave me food stamps or food or money while I was panhandling. One day, they grabbed me and Maggie: "You are going to die out here on the street. We can not allow it. You are coming with us. You will be loved and cared for at (the commune)." I did not want to go. It seemed impossible to me that I could survive in a rural and rustic area, without places to panhandle, dumpsters to dive in, free church meals, other street kids. Plus, I loved my street kid family. I cannot ever explain the level of precarious closeness and devotion we had for each other. I loved these kids with all my heart and have never forgotten them. But, off to the commune Maggie and I went, where we indeed were welcomed and loved, and moved on to another faze of our adventure...

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After my long self imposed absence from Telegraph, once my own son (conceived on the commune) was a student at Berkeley High School, for a number of years I did a pilgrimage to the 2400 block of Telegraph. Looking and remembering, and silently praising and mourning the youth that I knew and loved, and my own vulnerable time there. Then proceeding down Telegraph to the old crash pad that had been busted that fateful night, when life veered for so many of my dearly beloveds, but I was somehow saved and protected. How? Why? And every year, I lay a bouquet of daisies on the steps of that house, and a card with a note of remembrance and thanks. A little annual Telegraph ritual: memorializing and celebrating my survival, and mourning the loss of innocence.

I kept a journal while living on the streets, a little notebook that fit in my pocket. It kept me from feeling so alone and frightened and helped me to clarify my thoughts. I have no idea how, but I managed to save the journal all of these years later. Here is one post dated Dec 3rd, 1970: "...I just don't want to live on the streets anymore. It was great at first, I thought I was so free. But now I get kind of a hollow sinking feeling when I think of it: the loneliness and emptiness, the cold, the hunger\_the constant worry and hassle of finding a place to crash for the night. All I want is a little room, my own quiet, warm, clean little room. Where\_to sleep in, think in, cry in, read in\_whatever I want 'in'. And I can help out other people who need a place to stay. This would mean getting a job. I've got to somehow get this together."

Thank you, Nacio, for sharing our story through these powerful images. I hope that sharing my own words here helps people see that we were very real people, from different walks of life, with different overall outcomes. We had hope and love and tenacity and youth and longing and sorrow too. All we really wanted was to be accepted and loved. My photos do not appear anywhere in these images, but I was there, in the shadows. So Nacio and dear readers: As we kids used to say when we parted ways: "See you on the street."