

Visitors

Christine pulled her favorite gray sweater over her head and onto her long supple arms, looked out onto the side pasture and shivered a bit at the cold rain that was falling. Her Indian heritage gave her a special empathy with the thirsty land and the rain that watered it. The steady beat on the roof reminded her that she needed to order some special items for Paul's Thanksgiving benefit concert. "My pickup needs gas too" she thought and "oh, yes, I must stop at the McGovern's to drop off the potatoes and get milk."

The rivulets of rain wriggled their way down the window glass and onto the sill as Christine watched. "What a long day ahead." she thought as she pulled on her blue jeans and slipped into her boots. The old floor complained with creaks at even her light frame. Well varnished wood steps led down to the kitchen where "fixins" for breakfast waited. There were fresh eggs from the hens and honey from the bees and just enough delicious McGovern's milk for a bowl of home-made bread and peaches that would, with two sunny-side-up eggs, be her breakfast. Christine ate as silently as her prayer had been to thank God for the food and for her hard but rewarding work close to the earth and to ask God for the safe return of her husband, Tim, who would not return from Mexico for another week. A tear, then two, slid into the corner of her mouth and made the peaches salty. "How very much I miss you, Tim." She breathed in a low voice and stood up to clear the sturdy wooden table.

She was standing, dishes in hand, when a roughly loud knock on the door jolted her back into the present. A man and a woman, wet through in their thin coats from the rain, looked back at her as the door swung open. Only then did she notice the gun pointed at her and the desperate expression on the man's face. Twenty four years of compassionate hard work on the farm stood her well at this critical moment and she said "Come in. You folks need to dry out and get warm."

"Just a minute lady. Can't you see that we have a gun? All we want is your money. Give us all you have in the house and we will leave." he said.

"You are in no shape to go anywhere. Sit by the fire and I will get some towels. Are you hungry?"

"Y-yes we are very hungry, haven't had any thing to eat for two days. We thought we could wait out the rain in the woods but it was so cold." said the woman, who, up to then, had been silent.

"Quiet!" said the man "We only want your money. Where is it?"

Oh, yes, here are the towels. We really don't keep any money around." Said Christine as she reached for the pint mason jar on the warming shelf of the wood stove "We do a lot of bartering and don't need much money. I think there is about fifty seven dollars in here

and you are welcome to it.” As she spoke Christine was fixing scrambled eggs with fresh tomatoes and left over summer squash. She got the bread and butter from the pantry and set two white plates on the table.

“Would you put some knives and forks on the table, they are in the drawer in the table. And...goodness, still in those wet coats... please hang them over there where they will dry.” Christine said to the woman, pointing to “shaker” pegs in a neat row on the wall. “The water for tea will be ready in a moment. It’s very good with honey. But, please, don’t wait for it. Take as much as you want of everything. Eat. I have some wild blackberry jam in the “frige.” Christine returned with the jam. “Here, help yourself.”

There was silence in the room except for the sounds of eating and the snap and crack of the fire for a few moments as the uninvited guests ate and warmed themselves. The room smelled of fresh food, pine from the wood warming by the stove and wet wool. “I don’t think you need the gun in our house. Would you please put it away?” Christine said.

The man looked at Christine and then down at his gun. “I don’t even have any bullets for it.” He said and slid it into his pocket. “I haven’t eaten anything in some time and nothing this good in a very long time. Why are you being so kind to us?”

“And why weren’t you afraid of the gun?” added the woman.

“I know” said Christine, “that people do desperate things that they normally wouldn’t do when they are cold, hungry and homeless and you seemed to be all of those.

"But what of the gun? Weren't you afraid of the danger?" asked the woman.

"No, because I also know that God walks with us every moment of every day. The only danger that I see is that I will not use all the love and strength that I have and all the love and strength that comes from God to feed His sheep. Only then do I feel that I am in any danger."

"Would you like some more peaches?" asked Christine.

"Ellen, the woman asks if you want more peaches." said the man.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, please. I was thinking about what you said just now. I have never heard of that way of looking to God for help. Do you do it often?" Ellen asked.

Christine smiled a broad loving smile and said "Only as often as I breathe."

"I am guessing that the two of you did not get any sleep in the woods last night. Would you like to try to sleep now?" Christine asked.

The man cast a fearful glance at Christine and then at Ellen. "Are you trying to trick us into sleeping to call to police?" he said.

"No, I can't do that to you." said Christine. "But if you prefer, Ellen can sleep while you stay awake and watch."

"Ok." he said, as he looked around for a place from which to watch.

Christine opened the couch to make room for the two in the living room and went to get two comforters from the hall closet. The large one was from her grandmother, Rising Moon, and the other was from a neighbor's auction a mile down the road.

"My name is Christine, but you may call me by my nickname, Chris. May I call you by your first names?" she said to the visitors.

"Yes, since you already know my wife's name is Ellen, you may as well know my name is Mike." he said.

Ellen lay down on the couch and hardly had time to say "Thank you Chris." when her eyes closed and she was asleep. Mike sat on the empty side of the couch and looked from his hands to his still damp shoes. His eyes heavy, he soon slumped and then collapsed

next to Ellen. Christine covered them with the large comforter and thought how peaceful they looked in each other's arms.

Christine sighed and wished very much for Tim.

It was late afternoon and colder with a hint of snow in the sky when Ellen awoke and came into the circle of light cast by the bulb in the kitchen.

"I would like to know more about what you said before I went to sleep." said Ellen

"When did you first learn to lean on God like that?"

Christine leaned, chin in hand, on one elbow on the table, looked at the open and honest face that met hers and thought back and back. "I think it was the storm of '79 when the snow was deep and driven by high winds." she said "Our barn was an old one then and was leaning and moving in the wind. We were terrified that the barn would collapse onto all the animals. We went to the barn and got down on our knees and I prayed to God that the wind would abate. The more I prayed that the wind would go away the harder it seemed to blow."

"What on earth could you do?" asked Ellen.

"I got up thinking that God had not heard me when my gaze fell on a large pole that we were saving for a yard light. I said 'Tim, we can brace the barn with the pole!' Using the tractor hoist to lift it, we managed to lash it into place as a cross brace from the floor to the beam of the roof. We stayed in the barn all night with the frightened animals and I had a lot of time to think about the marvelous and unexpected ways in which God loves and helps us. I was praying for the wind to end and that was not what God had in mind. Nevertheless, He kept us safe. The experience also gave us the push we needed to replace the barn."

"I have often wished" said Ellen "that I could pray to God for him to take all my troubles away and give me an easy life. Though I am only 26, it seems I have seen only hard times. Perhaps God is waiting to give me something better than an easy life ..." her words came from somewhere deep inside and Christine saw her again, as if for the first time.

"Would you like to stay here a while and work for us?" Christine could feel the words forming in her mouth, but it was God speaking through her heart and she knew it was going to be ok.

"Oh, could we? That would be more than wonderful." Ellen said and reached out to take the hands that offered her haven.

Jesus' words "Feed my lambs." echoed in her mind.

"Feed my sheep." ...

"Feed my sheep."

Chapter Two

The depth of love and warmth that Christine had felt from Tim, and for Tim, when they enjoyed a lingering hug at the airport, still sent warm tingly feelings through her even though the reunion was now three weeks ago.

She remembered the happy moment when Tim had said, with such moving compassion, yes, he agreed to offer Ellen and Mike shelter for the winter and longer if they needed it.

She remembered hearing the heartbreaking stories of hardship that the two new friends had told since they arrived, how Ellen had come to her one afternoon and said,

"I enjoy and admire your two children. Paul with his music. Some of the songs he sings on those home-made CDs are so moving I can't help from crying. ... He is a university senior now?"

“Yes, Not long till he graduates.” Christine said as she thought of all the years of growing up, of Paul’s growing into a young man and beginning to understand the beauty and power of tenderness and love. “He will be home for Thanksgiving on Saturday.”

“I had a baby boy a year ago and I loved him with all my heart. I guess we were too poor to have a baby right. We named him Allen. When he was six months old he got sick and we did the best we could to keep him warm and I nursed him all I could, but he stopped eating and had a such a fever he was hot to touch. We were afraid, very afraid. We had not sought help because we had no money and were eating at a soup kitchen and living on the street. There was nothing else to do so we went to the hospital and asked if they could help us. They took our baby Allen in, but it was only a few hours and he was dead.” Ellen said brokenly through her sobs and tears. “I loved him so much I cry whenever I think of him.”

“I’m sorry, so sorry.” Christine said and took both of Ellen’s hands in hers and held them.

“I tend to blame myself for not doing anything sooner and I blame Mike for our being so poor. He has a good high school education so I thought he might find a job of some sort, but the only jobs they offered were farm picking and weeding. I think it was because of our homelessness with no address or phone number that was at least part of the problem. Mike said he was better than that kind of farm work and would not take the jobs. The

whole system makes me angry and sad at the same time and Mike could have taken a job don't you think?"

"I don't know. It depends on your history and your heart and I don't like to judge. At least not until I know a lot more about both of you. I want to hear more, but we need to put some supper on the table now. Will you help me?" Christine said.

"Yes, of course. What should I do?"

Saturday came and went and Paul's presence in the house was a warmth for everyone. Paul and his sister, Wendy, could sing with Paul's guitar in all the ways from sunshine on your heart to the blues to break it. Their music filled the house and the hearts in it whether it was just Paul's full clear whistling, Wendy humming to get some riff just right or a couch concert just for the six of them. Love and thanksgiving were in the air as that special day approached.

Late on the night before Thanksgiving when the house was very quiet, Ellen got up to get some water from the kitchen. In the light from the small lamp by the couch she saw Paul looking at the palm of his hand. How curious, she thought, and sat down by him and asked what he was doing.

“I learned some about palm reading in school and I am trying to figure out my hand lines, but they don’t seem to make any sense. Here, give me your hand and I will try to figure out your lines.”

When Paul took her hand, it was like an electrical current passed from him to her and back to him again. It was too intense a feeling to feel alone and she closed her fingers against his hand in a way that Paul had never yet experienced. He took her hand and kissed it with all the tenderness he knew.

“Hold me, Paul, just for a moment. Please.” Ellen whispered.

Paul did, in a way that was all tenderness and inexperience at once and Ellen responded with all her sorrow poured out in love. Her feelings of passion leapt, Phoenix like, from the ashes of her despair and the time before Paul asked with his lips if he could kiss her seemed like forever. The many minutes after were much too short. Eternity would have been too short.

Paul’s heart was taken, taken on delightfully thrilling and soul restoring passage, in the few short days of Thanksgiving break, from persevering hope to passionate understanding and tender vows of lasting love. A journey that has taken others months or years. Their lives were a living warmth that could be felt, in spite of their secrecy, by

others whose lives knew love. Their love was radiant and tearful, full of joy in song and work.

Mike was not quick to see it and labored on in his chores.

“I can’t bear to see you off at the train station.” Ellen’s words came slowly between sobs

“Can I hold you for the last time, until we meet again, here at home?”

At a loss for words, Paul nodded and pulled her to him. He kissed her hair and her ear and her cheek and her lips and he cried. He cried because he was leaving. He cried because knew this love might not progress to permanence. He cried because this love could not now deepen and mature. But still, he loved her, immensely.

Chapter Three

The change in Ellen was as though God’s hand had smoothed the frown from her face and the sadness from her soul. Her relationship with Mike was softer and sometimes happy, though never full of gladness as it should have been. It also troubled Ellen that, for all their love, there seemed to be a barrier, in the passion of their feelings, beyond which Paul was not willing to go. She had made herself desirable and alluring and Paul was as delighted as anyone could be. Yet he never took her beyond that point. She wanted him all. “The only person who could know the answer” Ellen thought, “was Christine.”

“May I talk to you about Paul for a few minutes?” Ellen’s voice trembled a bit and she thought her courage would fail her.

“Yes, of course.” Said Christine. “What’s troubling you?”

“I know that I can’t hide the love that Paul and I share from you, Christine, but, no matter what I do, my invitations to make love are very lovingly and tenderly refused. He said we should save it for later when we can love fully. But, I need it now. Why should we wait?”

“Even though there is a law against lovemaking outside of marriage, toothless and disused as it may be, Jesus gave us a higher law of love.” Said Christine, “Do you love Paul?”

“With all my heart. With all of me and that is what makes it so hard.” answered Ellen.

“Do you love him enough to delight in waiting?”

Ellen’s words were a long time in coming. She hesitated and then said, “That seems so impossibly contrary. How could it be?”

“Whenever I come to a place in life that I just don’t understand, I go to the bible and look to Jesus to find the answer.” said Christine as she pulled her chair closer to Ellen. “Help me to understand your love for Paul.”

“Is your desire to pull him to you and into you and feel his warmth all along you and entangle your limbs and your lives?”

“Oh, yes. Chris, I want it so much. I want to give him my breasts and kiss him till our minds melt and we think each other’s thoughts and our hearts beat together as if they were one heart.”

“And do you want to sing a love song for two to the world to tell them of all the joy and wonderful feelings that you have been given?”

“Yes, yes, how beautiful, how wonderful that would be. This secrecy that hides our love is so ...I just hate it. But, Chris, you knew of this kind of love before you asked me of my feelings. Is this how your love for Tim is?”

“My love for Tim started this way. I was elated. I was swept beyond the best of my dreams. It was so intense and just got better and better. And when it seemed that more wasn’t possible it started getting richer and deeper. Over the years the richness and depth and power increased until he knew all of me and I all of him. I would form a question for

Tim in my mind and I was confident I knew most of his answer before I asked him.

That's how I knew it was ok to ask the two of you to stay without asking Tim. Now, one long look from him will just melt me into his arms and into him. He is always there to support me or kiss away my tears or make love to me as I desire it. There is peace for us in each other's arms and in our hearts. And with the power of this peaceful love we have the strength to reach out to others."

"Do you think that Jesus loved just as we do?" Christine asked.

"I've never thought about it much. Mostly, I thought he just ran away from such situations." Ellen replied.

"It says in the Bible that Jesus, known as the 'Word' before he came to earth, was made human so he could suffer just as we do and understand our pain and desire first hand. If Jesus ran away, as most people think he did, from human sexuality, there is a very large part of our humanity that he would not know about or be able to share our joy or pain."

"Have you read the part of the bible where Mary washes the feet of Jesus?" Christine asked.

Yes, but I don't remember it well." Ellen answered.

“Mary was so moved that she washed our lords feet with her tears, dried them with her hair and did not cease to kiss his feet. She then soothed his feet by rubbing them with ointment. All this, while Jesus was seeing into her heart and into her great love for him as if she were an open book. If that did not move Jesus to passionately return that love and lift her into his arms and kiss away her tears, he would have to have a heart made of cardboard or concrete. What heartbreak for him to know that he must not reach out to her at all.”

Ellen looked back at Christine in tears.

“Jesus could have said” Christine continued, “that Mary’s heart had run away with her and to forgive the embarrassment, but, he did not. He said to his seemingly unmoved companions that they were remiss in all the things she was doing and that her great love for him had saved her. Jesus smiled on her every attention to him and said she was forgiven for her many sins because of that great love for him. Jesus then went on to say that those who love little are forgiven little.”

“So Jesus waited as I do.” said Ellen. “He must have yearned to return that great love to Mary in all the ways I yearn to love Paul.”

“Yes, I’m sure he did. What a sensitive and compassionate counselor we have. What a huge forgiveness he must have for us and what a joy and a gift to come to him to share all

our love and pain and know that he felt the sadness and joy just as we do.” Christine said through her tears. “I have felt his loving arms around me so very many times.”

“I feel his love through you, Chris, and especially through Paul. ... Why did you keep silent until now about my love for Paul if you feel that deeper love should wait?”

“Because there is just too little love in this harsh world to go pouring cold water on such tenderness and beauty as there is between you and Paul. I knew, because we have talked through the years of love and how to treat a woman, that Paul would take good care of you and your heart. And I could also see you, Ellen, being brought out of the darkness that was crushing you into the light of Paul’s love. Even though it pains me to see Mike left out, I know that he has not seen in you, yet, the love that could be his.”

“I had never loved anyone very well and certainly nothing like I love Paul. I didn’t know I had such intense and wonderful feelings in me, Chris, until now. My feelings for Mike never had a chance. I was pregnant when we got married. I was lonely and we both had too much to drink one night. He took me roughly and I was crying and afraid. Any love we shared was cool at best and if you had not befriended us, I don’t know how I could have gone on.” said Ellen, “I know I should love Mike but, it just isn’t there.”

Chapter Four

Mike and Tim worked well together at keeping the farm tended, pruned and clean. His work was always careful and well done. Mike had a gift with the animals in that they trusted him and were at peace when he was near. A wounded sparrow that he had helped to heal would return and pull on his ear from his shoulder. Yet, his love did not extend to Ellen. He was a gentleman to her but lacked any passion in his actions. Tim could see it and thought it would change for the better with time so he said nothing. However it was now past Thanksgiving and there was still no real change. Christine had asked Tim to speak to Mike about Ellen and now, that there was a break in the work, he would.

“Mike, may I talk to you for a bit?”

"Sure, What's on your mind?"

"I've seen the way you take care of the animals. The way you sooth a frightened chick or caress a lamb and they love you for it. Even the horses love you. Why don't you do the same for Ellen?" asked Tim.

"She is always angry about the baby and about our being poor. ... It makes me afraid and I run away inside. I don't show it, but it makes me very sad."

"Maybe you could say you're sorry."

"But, Tim, I don't think it's my fault. It would hurt to take the blame for stuff I didn't do."

"Can you be sad, and sorry for her sadness, no matter where the blame may be?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it that way." said Mike.

"When our Lord looks on us with compassion and is grieved to feel our pain, he doesn't ask who made the pain. He was hanging on the cross and looking at the people who put him there when he said 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' Can you forgive the world, as Jesus did, and then forgive Ellen and yourself? If you are sad about it all, I think it is safe to say that Jesus has forgiven you. I think that Ellen would warm to you, if you could."

"I don't know. That is a lot of forgiving."

"I will be with you in prayer and thought. Take it one step at a time and be very gentle."

Tim said as he stood up and extended his hand to help Mike up. "Go to her, Mike. She needs you to love her."

The prayers and encouragement must have helped, for, as day by day November became December Mike did open his heart and his hurt to Ellen and Ellen to him. They could be seen hand in hand getting to know each other and the feelings that grow into real love.

Passion was longer in coming, but, like a growing plant, by degrees, it did. At God's touch, the scars in both their hearts faded. With wounds so deep, that takes time.

Chapter 5

And they studied God's word. They studied God's love in creation and the original lovers, Adam and Eve. They studied Abraham, Joseph and Pharaoh, Times and seasons, years and aeons, love and heartbreak, the gospels and the words that Jesus spoke. Their eyes were opened to God's infinite love and forgiveness, to all the ways that we can do the same because we are made "in His Image". They read in awe of God's unalterable plan to restore all the earth, and all the human family that ever lived on it, to that which Adam lost; perfect life, love and communion with each other and with God. They shared the depth of feelings that Christ came to earth to experience. They spoke of the awesome God that knows each of us so completely that He can resurrect from memory all that lived from Adam to the yet unborn. They cried with Joseph when he reunited with his family and grew to understand how this was a picture of Christ and all the saints reuniting with all those that love the Lord on the Earth and later all the world. They cried with joy that the despair and hopelessness of not understanding was behind them. They sobbed with thanks for the love of Tim and Christine that gave them so much and embraced them with deep new feelings.

With Paul's return at Christmas break came the festive music and the happy times with gifts for all. Paul could see that Ellen was living in the love of Christ and was working to kindle love in Mike and he was careful not to injure the tender leaves that were new love.

In the few times that Paul had alone with Ellen he could feel her heart come to him and every fiber of her called to him. Paul returned the love most generously with all the tenderness and compassion that he knew. They kissed and cried in each other's arms and spoke of the parting that they both knew was coming. They prayed that God would guide their hearts and their feet in the way God wanted them to go and that love would follow them all their days. Paul was delighted to receive a new Bible from Ellen as a Christmas gift. On its red leather cover was printed; "For Paul, With all the love I have through Christ. Ellen."

Spring break was mixed with joy and sad farewells as Mike and Ellen set out to their new home in the Cascade mountains of Washington state and the farm manager job that Tim had helped Mike get. It would take them a week to drive the Honda, that Tim and Christine had given them, to the west coast. The spring warmth and blooming earth urged their hearts and their feet to a journey of hope and peace. On Saturday after breakfast they had their belongings in the car and were ready to get underway.

They, Paul, Ellen, Mike, Wendy, Christine and Tim, were exchanging hugs and tears and "We'll write" and more hugs and "We will miss you." When Tim said "We have a going

away envelope for Mike and Ellen. It is from the bounty of the Lord and the four of us for all the help, joy and hope that you have given us. Please open it."

Wide eyed happy faces looked with anticipation to see what the envelope held and the joy that it would bring.

Mike carefully tore away the paper. One thousand dollars in cash and a check for three thousand more lay in his hand. "How can we ever repay you?" Ellen whispered.

"Don't think of it." Christine said, "It's a gift of love from us and from God."

The trip was a good one. Mike and Ellen prospered and loved and took the love of their new family and of God with them in all their walks of life. And they did keep in touch.

Some time later, Paul, was looking in the bible that Ellen had given him. In the seventh chapter of Luke he found a richly purple page. As he opened it, Paul's heart leapt at the sight of Ellen's fine writing. He read,

Dearest Paul,

Wherever God may place me in his earth,

Whatever time in months or years may find my beating heart,

Your tender love will find in me a haven and a sheltered place.

Whoever I may hold so dear to me or chance to meet.

Your touch upon my heart and kisses in my soul

Will haunt me with their openness and warmth.

Whenever I may need to pardon one,

Your forgiveness will control my every word.

You lifted me from ashes of despair

To love I did not know could ever be.

And should the Lord permit for us to know,

The love as man and woman both are wont to love,

I shall be yours without a backward glance

And seek within your warm embrace a welcome home.

I'll wait for you throughout this given life

And think it short if God may grant for us

The love you gave to me returning back to you.

I hold you in my warmest, softest, thought

Always and forever, my dear, sweet, love.

Till we meet again.

Ellen

