

Adventures  
of a  
Wannabe Hippie

*a novella*

Catherine B. Fitzgerald

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To the heart of the seeker

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## PROLOGUE

I smile every time my screen door slams. It's a relic of another era, with a floppy frame of weathered wood, too-loose screening, and a skinny coiled spring that takes its time deciding to close. Eventually, though, it slams. And every time it slams, I think of—Iowa. I almost said I think of home, but you can't really call home someplace you didn't grow up, can you? Except in a way I did. Anyway, I'll just say I think of Iowa.

On my first real paying job, one of the librarians I worked for became a good friend. In the manner of the teenager I was then, I would talk to her about whatever was on my mind. One day she said to me, "You're looking for something—and I hope you find it."

This is the story of a search I didn't know I was on, for something I didn't know existed.

# I 1970

# CHAPTER ONE

Some of the details have faded in my memory, but I will never forget how I felt when I got off the bus from Chicago after hours of riding past cornfields and stopping at one little prairie town after another. I was expecting Dan and his friends from the commune, but no one met the bus. It was a gorgeous spring day—Memorial Day, in fact—and while I was waiting I got to watch part of the parade. I love parades, even not-very-big ones. I remember the excitement of the day—the marching bands, the waving flags, the cheering people (I missed the solemn part), the anticipation of my new life in the country. The incompatibility of town and commune didn't strike me until much later. That day it all ran together in my mind, and my heart was dancing with excitement.

I must have been quite a sight, although if anyone was looking at me I didn't notice. But there I was, in my homemade cotton peasant skirt and blouse, lugging an old suitcase and a rolled-up sleeping bag—all my worldly possessions except for a few sentimental treasures that I'd stored in my sister's basement with her little girl's outgrown toys and baby furniture.

One of the men from the commune—not Dan, though—finally showed. He picked me out in the crowd, no problem. I'd never met this guy, but I had no problem picking him out either. His hair was long and kind of matted. He was shirtless and had a dark tan and a very manly smell—aging sweat laced with pot and manure. I found out later his name was Greg. He greeted me with a grunt and a jerk of his head toward a side street. Bye-bye, parade! I grabbed my luggage and fell in behind him, until we got to an old station wagon that looked like it had spent the night in a junkyard.

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In a few minutes we had left the town and run out of pavement. It was a long, dusty drive and a bit unnerving—the floor of the station wagon was rotted out and had holes clear through. So mostly what I remember is the cornfields going by beside us and the dirt road going by underneath. There were houses along the way, and barns, but I didn't much notice them at the time. I didn't dare ask how far we had to go. I doubt Greg could have heard me anyway—the muffler was rotted out too, and it was a very noisy ride.

The drive seemed to last forever. Just when I could hardly stand the wait, the most remarkable house came into view. It was deserted and desolate: two stories, all brick, on a tall foundation—a perfect, solitary cube made stately by its nakedness. No porch, no outbuildings, no bushes, just one old dead tree out back. There were two tall, narrow windows on either side of the front door, and matching ones all around on both floors, broken out years ago. It must have been splendid in its day—the kind of house that would have belonged to the local doctor or a prominent politician. I turned and stared back at it as long as I could see it. I even forgot for a few moments where we were going.

Suddenly Greg made a hard right, and we began bouncing down a long and lumpy driveway—if that's what you call two ruts through the weeds—heading toward some buildings in a grove of trees.

Greg pulled up between the house and the barn, turning off the engine and letting the station wagon lurch to a stop. He had disappeared behind the barn long before I wrestled my luggage out of the car. No one was around. I stood still, staring at the barn, trying to puzzle out what to do next. Suddenly I heard a screen door swing open behind me and then slam shut. I jumped and turned around. A short, sturdy-looking young woman bounded down the steps. She looked to be a bit younger than me. She was browned from the sun, a little plump, and she was wearing a broad smile.



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“Hi,” she said. “I’m Susie. You must be Dan’s friend.”

I liked her instantly. She grabbed my suitcase and took me inside to show me around. “I’ll take you to your room,” she said. There were three more-or-less rectangles marked out with duct tape on the well-aged wood floor in the living room, and diagonal lines of tape marking a pathway. Two of the rectangles were piled high with bedding and odds and ends—a guitar, some books, a weary-looking houseplant. Susie plunked my suitcase down in the empty rectangle. “Welcome home!” she said, and giggled. Her eyes went to my skirt. “Bring any jeans along?” she asked casually. I stammered something and took the hint. The skirt went into the darkest corner of my suitcase until I could sneak it out with the trash. God bless Susie for clueing me in.

I met the rest of them when they came in from the garden. I was about to greet Dan enthusiastically, like the old buddy I thought he was, but when he didn’t meet my eyes I thought better of it. They were all hot, grumpy, and silent. “Don’t take it personal,” Susie whispered to me.

For a couple of days, I mostly watched and listened and tried to stay out of the way. In retrospect, that was a really good plan. I found out that Greg and Joan lived in one bedroom, Susie and Rob in the other. Dan, Pete, and Dave shared the parlor, and the living room was for the women—Laura and Betty and me.

Maximum occupancy of the house was 10. Joan saw to that. She had bought the place, cash. If we needed anything major, she paid for it. She was the one who had laid out the spaces in the living room, and she was the one who laid down the law. “What Joan says, goes,” said Susie. Nobody liked her much (except Greg), but you had to hand it to her for holding the place together. Two years is a long time for 10 or so people to live in one house without a catastrophic fight.

I guess the house was kind of crummy-looking, but for me it was love at first sight. It reminded me of the old houses

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my Southern relatives lived in when I was a kid. I couldn't get enough of the creaky floors and bare light bulbs, the faintly musty smell coupled with the scent of years of ashes from the wood stove. From the very beginning, it was home to me.

The big kitchen still had the original linoleum floor, full of bumps and rips. In front of the sink there were two foot-shaped holes where the linoleum was worn through to the sub-floor. Over by the windows stood a rectangular table surrounded by rickety chairs. The tabletop was enameled metal, with bouquets of pink flowers painted in the corners. Under the kitchen was a root cellar that doubled as a tornado shelter (fortunately, we never needed to use it for that). It also had shelves for jars of canned food. The kitchen floor shook when you walked across the middle, like it might collapse and dump you on top of a mound of carrots or canned vegetables. For the first few days, I walked around the edges of the room when I needed to get to the other side, until I got used to the shaky feeling.

There was no real plumbing. The pump handle was straight above the well, at the kitchen sink. All we had in the way of running water was what we pumped by hand into the sink. If you wanted a bath in the summer, you could carry water out to an old trough in the yard. Some modest soul had rigged a fence and a clothesline with sheets tied over it. Bathing in the yard was fun—the first time or two. After that, you tended to get creative. The women got very adept at sponge baths behind the sheets. The men mostly didn't bother to bathe, except when they had the chance to jump into the old swimming hole on the way to town. In the winter, you could haul a small galvanized tub inside and take a bath in the kitchen—but that was a lot less privacy and a lot more work: drag the tub in, heat some water on the wood stove, fill the tub with hot and cold water (hoping for at least lukewarm), empty the tub a bucket at a time, drag the tub out. There wasn't much bathing going on in the summer, and even less in the winter.

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I came to like the outhouses. They did smell, but at least you had some privacy. In winter, nobody would want to linger there, though. The second outhouse was Joan's one nod to the population density. The men had gotten mad at having to wait for the women all the time. So they had designated a group of bushes in the yard for their own use. Excellent street theater. The bushes were not very far from the kitchen window, and the smell finally grossed everybody out. Joan gave the men money for lumber, and they dug a second outhouse out back, next to the old one. Both outhouses were technically unisex, but the women did try to keep the new one empty just in case a man came along. The men had built the thing, after all.

That summer, we'd get up at first light to start doing chores. It sure beat working in the heat of the day. So even if we'd been up smoking weed until the wee hours, we'd take a nap and get up at dawn so we wouldn't have to work outside past midday. Sometimes it was hard to pull yourself out of bed with so little sleep, but I came to look forward to rising with the sun. The freshness of the air, the chirping of the birds awakening, the smell of the earth slightly damp from the dew, the soft and growing light as night gave way to day—I could hardly believe what I'd been missing all my life. A few years later, when Cat Stevens popularized the old hymn "Morning Has Broken," I sang it by the hour, remembering those exquisite dawns in the garden. At the time, though, I kept my delight to myself. Not everyone feels the same way about mornings.

I didn't fit in too well, although I tried. Fortunately, I knew how to smoke weed. That was about all we got into in the way of dope. It was relatively cheap and relatively available. Not that everything was about weed. Joan was strict about having the chores done well and on time.

At that time, when women's lib was sweeping the country, it struck me as very odd how feminist the place wasn't. Matriarchal yes, feminist no. The women cooked, did dishes, cleaned the house—not that it ever got particularly clean. They

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took care of the chickens and did more than their share of gardening and canning in the fall. The men kept the machines running—the old station wagon, the even older tractor, Rob’s VW bug, the power tools. They went to town when we needed something, dealt with the inevitable problems that came up, and laid in the wood for winter, which was a major project. And they took care of the two dairy cows. Milking was a social event for the men, and for their buddies from other communes who sometimes came to hang around the barn with them in the evening. We used the surplus milk, butter, and curd cheese for barter with communes that didn’t keep cows, and we sold some butter at the hole-in-the-wall hippie health food store two towns away. Of course, the men didn’t make the cheese or churn the butter—Betty did.

The place was so un-feminist that when I was working around the house, I felt like I should be wearing a long skirt and tying my hair up in a kerchief. “So what gives with this hausfrau stuff?” I asked Susie one day in the garden. She gave me a look. “You’ll find out eventually,” she said and went back to weeding.

Laura was one of my bunkmates—or floormates, I should say. I didn’t much relate to her except to give her a wide berth. She was older than me but only by a few years—Joan was the only one over 30. Laura was tall, strong—also quiet, aloof, sort of angry. She seemed to take up a lot of space when she walked. I felt really uncomfortable around her.

One day I went back to the house to get something from my spot in the living room. It was midmorning, when everyone was usually outside working. I surprised Laura as she was changing her jeans. She turned away quickly. All I remember is the glare in her eyes and the long, ropy scar on her leg, still slightly pink. Whatever I had gone in there for I forgot right away. I muttered “Excuse me” and all but ran out the door.

A couple of days later I cornered Susie at the far end of

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the garden and made her tell me about Laura's scar. It was a long story and pretty grisly, although Susie insisted she was sparing me the worst. Turns out that Laura liked heavy work, and she used to be on the firewood crew with the men. One morning she was using the chain saw to cut a log into lengths for the wood stove, and she hit a nail that was embedded in the wood. The chain broke and cut her leg—badly. “You could see the bone,” Susie said, shuddering. “There was so much blood we had to throw out most of her clothes. It was awful—she was screaming and crying. . . . I still hear her screams in my dreams sometimes.” Susie got Pete to drive her and Laura to the hospital. They kept Laura there for a week, to be sure she didn't get some terrible infection.

Just talking about it, Susie turned pale and almost cried. I didn't see the problem. “You saved her life, Susie! That's wonderful!” But Susie shook her head. It was actually a real mess. Joan was mad as a hornet when Pete drove Susie home that night. Joan had two main goals in life: keeping us solvent and keeping us under the radar. “You want to bring the fuzz out here?” she kept yelling at Susie. The men had already gone out into the distant fields to hide anything that could be incriminating.

The fuzz didn't come, Laura moved back to her space in the living room, the men brought the stash back inside—but it was weeks before Joan would speak to Susie again. Susie told me Joan had always had a rule not to relate to people in town, but Susie hadn't thought that included not taking someone to the hospital who might die if you didn't. It was a wrenching experience for Susie, and it gave everybody quite a scare. As a result Joan banned the women from working with machines or power tools.

It wasn't fair, really—anybody can run into a nail with a chain saw—and Joan's new rule hit the women hard. The men liked it, though. It kept the women out of their turf. And besides, with all pretense of equal work gone, they didn't have to

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worry about being tapped for cooking or cleaning or doing dishes. They were super-nice to Laura and Susie after that—which didn't make up for the women's anger about being banned from the interesting stuff. I wasn't angry, just a little sad that some of the sense of adventure had been taken out of everybody. I guess that's what happens in life.