

Introduction

2012

Lois looked out of the living room window and smiled nervously to herself. *It was certainly nice of Jimmy to send me a plane ticket; don't think I'd like to go out to Wisconsin on a Greyhound bus, getting to Boston will be hard enough. Told him I could do it all the way; do almost anything to finally see my granddaughters – pictures aren't good enough.*

She let the curtain fall back in place and reassured herself on the way into the kitchen. *Hope the car service will ring the door bell; I was so nervous, made an excuse about children making too much noise.*

Taking the glass out of the drainer Lois let the water run slowly, took a few sips, quickly rinsed the glass, putting it down in the sink. She hurried back to the window and resumed her vigil.

It was a month ago that she told her friend Sybil that she was moving to Cudahy. Sybil went, "Huh, what's a Cudahy?" And her answer, "Well that's where my son and two granddaughters live, in Wisconsin.

And then Sybil sniffy, questioning about my daughter-in-law, "Did she die or something?"

Lois couldn't remember her name at that moment. Later she reminded herself that it's Victoria. All she could say was, "Jimmy always writes and tells me how much in love they are."

Once again running into the kitchen to check the clock above the stove, Lois's eyes anchored longingly on the table. She ran quickly back to the front window telling herself it was still early. *They promised to pick me up by 10:15 A.M., said it would be time enough.*

She recalled making love with Abel on the kitchen table, laughing when he whispered in her ear, "That's why the pioneers made them out of oak." *Thought I had love then not sure now. Abel sure liked it but with my skinny bottom it wasn't all that much fun. He was always joking about the drippings, "Sweetie, we can save on mayo," never cared that I found it crude. Suppose it was love since I went back with him to his mom in Wisconsin staying in her attic. Colin and Kathy born there. They never said much, imagine it must have been hard on them, running after Professor Fringle. Taking Stephen's kid Jimmy along too. I didn't abandoned them. Couldn't have done such a bad job; Colin used to call me on my birthday or about that time of the year anyhow.*

Lois walked over to the coat closet, opened it and peered intently at her reflection in the mirror. *Don't look all that bad in spite of being so tired. Should be able to sleep a lot at Jimmy's, doubt there's much to do in Cudahy. I'll go out again; maybe get lucky. It's never too late to find love.*

Sitting down on the couch she took a doily from the arm and put it in her purse. *Don't know why Dottie liked these so much, insisting I take four when I came back here to New England. Always remind me of handkerchiefs – I'll take one along just in case. Had some good years together with Dottie – but I don't think it could have been love – no, not love.*

Just then she heard a car horn and rushed to the window. She ran down the stairs and up to the driver's window.

"You're here to take me to the Greyhound station?" The driver nodded and Lois asked, "I've a bag at the top of the stairs, perhaps you can help me?"

An hour into the flight she noticed cumulus clouds below the plane. They reminded her of the pillows in Stephen's apartment fifty years ago. She woke from her nap on the approach into General Billy Mitchell Airport in Milwaukee and took a small mirror out of her purse, deciding to reapply lipstick. Looking at her image, she convinced herself that she was not a bad looking woman. *Why maybe there's still hope for me to find love.*

The flight and landing were rough. Lois stood up to collect her carry-on from the overhead compartment. *Life's been like this flight: fast and full of bumps.*

Lois

1964

In Lois's baby book there was a picture of her standing with her hand reaching out. "Lois, 2nd BD, 1947," was printed on the back. Two pages later an index card proclaims her first full sentence: "I want it!" There was no date. She frequently repeated this demand and when she was asked what it was she wanted, she would stamp her foot and say, "I don't know but I *want* it!"

Six months shy of becoming a teenager she decided "it" had something to do with boys and took to preening herself in the morning before leaving for school. Her brown hair was long by the time she was a sophomore in high school. She'd toss it over her shoulder, walking down the hall, arm in arm with the third baseman on the high school team. Lois thought she was close to finding "it."

At sixteen she decided that her "it" was most likely to be found in the communes sprouting up all over New England and not in her two-horse Ohio town. The supermarket tabloids more than hinted how *Love* and *Marijuana* were the two tablets of this new religion. She started biting her nails in anticipation of running off and then realized that her fingertips "were pretty damned ugly." She vowed to grow them out, telling herself she'd be ready for New England once she mastered the art of shaping and painting.

In February of her senior year she concluded, "Nothing is very interesting so why stick around? Boring. Hey, just look at my fingers now!" She mulled this observation over for two days and repeated it to her mother at breakfast. If her mother was listening, she never bothered to comment.

She left early in May of 1963. She didn't think she would graduate anyhow. She stuffed everything she thought she'd need in her brother's duffle bag: underwear, jeans, sweatshirts, socks and another pair of old sneakers. A small case with her beauty aids was on top. It took her three days to hitchhike to Boston. Two more rides brought her to Lewiston, Maine, and Bates College. It wasn't difficult to get a lift out to a nearby commune. Her nails survived.

Whitey Weed, grown on the sunny slopes of the White Mountain, became her toke of first choice. She had no doubt that she had found her second "it." As for love, each of her infatuations fizzled out after a few weeks. She drifted back and forth from Maine to New Hampshire for almost a year.

In April of 1964 Lois stood outside a feed store 10 miles north of Bangor, Maine, with a sign pinned to her duffle saying, "Will work for room and bord." A pickup truck stopped and the young woman on the passenger side rolled down her window and said they were from commune *ONE*. "It's spring – we can always use another pair of hands in our organic gardens to help with the weeding."

She replied, "Sure, why not."

Thirty minutes later she was introduced to a senior member of the commune. He put his coffee mug down and rattled off their rules. Lois agreed, joking that she would be willing to sign her name in blood if they would slaughter a chicken for her. "Chicken soup, I could help make that."

She was rebuked. "If you *had* listened, you would have heard that we are a vegetarian commune. We keep chickens only for their eggs."

Lois tried to focus. "I'd be more than willing to work if I could crash for a couple days." On the second day, she quipped to the woman with whom she was working, "I was really hoping to work for weed and didn't realize that the work *was* weeding."

The older woman laughed. "You may have wandered into the wrong commune, honey."

Three days later as she was washing up, a young woman whispered to her that their mechanic, a guy named Abel, could help her find some weed. “Just be cool about it. Most of the members here are pretty tight-assed about pot.”

The next time Abel was there to make repairs he was invited to stay for supper. At dinner Lois asked Kathy about the new man at the dinner table. “Oh, that’s Abel. He’s good with his hands, can fix just about anything and seems to know something about farming. Must come from growing up in Wisconsin. Most of us here are from New York City or Boston. He does the rounds of the communes or comes when called.”

Lois said, “Oh.” After dinner she asked Abel if she could borrow a smoke. He smiled. “Got to go out on the porch to smoke.” She found out he lived in town over a dry goods store.

Ten days later the commune’s tractor didn’t make it out of the barn and Lois heard Abel was coming the next morning. She managed to greet him with a cup of coffee and asked if he would mind if she watched him work. As they walked over to the barn, he sipped the coffee and chuckled. “It’s funny. Most of these communes out here are pretty straight-laced – want to keep on the right side of the law. So, you’d like to ‘work for weed?’ Do you know how to cook and clean?”

Lois smiled and wasn’t surprised someone had told Abel about her remark. She answered, “I can get by. But I’ve other talents.”

Abel flicked the ashes from his cigarette. “So, Lois, where’re you from?”

“I’ve kind of forgotten. I didn’t think it matters, does it?”

“Nope. Message I hear on these communes is yesterday and tomorrow is not where it’s at. Just the now counts, ‘BE HERE NOW,’ spelled out all in capitals. It’s not as if there’s a choice to be anywhere else. So, I just go around fixing things. You’d think I was a tinker, some kind of gypsy.”

They walked up to the old tractor in the barn. Abel started it and listened for a while as it coughed like a heavy smoker stalling ten seconds later. He restarted it and it stalled again.

“These city people think these things should run forever. They never bother changing the oil and checking wires. Old ones like this need even more tender loving care. Me, I’ve got old bones. Young body, old bones – that’s why I live in town. Indoor plumbing, central heat, and dry sheets are nice. A guy can get used to it. What about you?”

Lois thought for a while. Abel was not unattractive. He had a nice angular face and his body was lean, maybe an inch over six feet. His hair and eyes were not much to look at, but after all, she was liberated.

“Yeah. Everything here feels damp. And woo-wee, their two-holers really stink. Who cares if they’re marked ‘Men’ and ‘Women!’ Least they could do is have a latch inside. I think they’re taking this communal thing at least one step too far. Maybe it’s time for me to move on. Last year I thought this was where it’s at but then I at least had smokes or something.

“I better get out to the field with the rest of them. They’re still feeding me but I heard they give everyone a three-week trial. ‘See if we like you and you us.’ What’s to like? Damp toilet paper and splintery seats? I don’t think so.”

Abel laughed. “I probably wouldn’t mind being that splinter. Have you thought about what I said about cleaning and cooking? If things don’t work out for you here...well, I do get out here about once a week.”

The next day was the start of a two-day rain. Lois was coming down with a cold from running out to the palace with the crescent-moon on the door. Kathy took her aside after supper and showed her the indoor toilets in the basement.

Lois was livid. "What kind of stupid joke is that, making me go out to piss all hours of the night? Christ, you are a bunch of lame-brainers!"

Kathy laughed. "You've got to understand. We're always working outside. We'd lose lots of valuable time coming back inside, taking our boots off and still tracking mud all over the place. Just makes sense to have those 'out-backs' and it's also a good way to screen out loafers who want to move in for a free ride. You have to see things from our perspective. I mean, we really want to get back to the land, live simply."

Lois sputtered, "Yeah, Kathy, thanks. But you all can simply live off the splinters in my butt. Next time Abel comes by, I'm out of here."

Kathy nodded. "We kind of thought so. No sense waiting; I'll get Gretchen to call. We do have a phone."

Abel came out that afternoon. Lois was waiting inside the front door. As soon as his pickup came round, she was out the door. She tossed her duffle behind the seat in the cab and climbed in. Abel reached over and pulled the door shut. "It's kind of tricky if you don't get it right the first time. Best lean against me. I figure we stop for groceries first. So start thinking up your shopping list if you're planning on staying for dinner."

"Oh, I'm staying, if you like. I think some chops, potatoes and something *not* green would suit me fine. Beer or wine would make things taste even better. That commune farm has me soured on green things. Did you know they have indoor toilets they never told me about? Bastards. Thought it was some kind of joke making me go to that outdoor shitter. You know about that trick?"

"Knew since I had to fix the insider a couple of times. Probably overused given their veggie diet. Not for me to tell. Heck, they can run things their way. Keeps me busy."

They picked up groceries and a six-pack of beer. Abel opened two beers and said he would sit and watch Lois cook. "I'll be here in case you can't find something. Just don't salt things to death."

As soon as the chops were in the pan he left coming back with a joint behind his ear. Kissing Lois on the neck he lit up. "This should help in case the cooking doesn't turn out so good. Build up an appetite. And you did say, 'Work for weed.'"

Before the joint was halfway down, Lois was thinking Abel wasn't bad looking at all.

Two days later the clouds started to move out but Abel said he had nothing on until after lunch. "I don't get much chance to sleep in. Alone, it's just not fun anyhow. Now with you here..." He rolled over on his side and kissed Lois. "Your cooking ain't all that bad. We can see how you do on the cleaning this afternoon. I'll probably get some fresh chicken at one of my stops. If not, there's the store. I'll pick up the local weekly. You should check for jobs, usually lots part time. Else you'd go nuts sitting here on your hands all day. Trust me on that. There's nothing much to do here in the boonies."

Abel rolled onto his back. "Lois, you do something to a guy. I'll be damned if little Abel doesn't appear to be able again." Laughing he rolled back over on top of Lois.

Lois found part-time work waitressing weekends at the one fancy restaurant in town, tablecloths were used on Friday and Saturday nights.

Time went by quickly. Abel occasionally would help with the cleaning and cooking. Marijuana was always available and he baked two special brownies for Lois's birthday.

In mid-October his mother wrote saying she needed surgery. He called and was told the recovery would be slow. "Abel, I'm going to need live-in help for several weeks, that's what the doctor said."

Abel discussed this with Lois and they decided that they would move back to Middleton, Wisconsin, at the end of the month. His mother's operation was scheduled for November 6.

The next week Lois felt nostalgic. Leaving New England would not be easy. She told Abel, "You know, I'm sad. I know I got you now but when I came out I thought I'd find everything. Let's drive by *One* so I can remember what it looks like in the fall."

Abel scratched his chin, "Yeah, whatever." They drove by that afternoon.

He started packing and cleaning up a few days before Halloween. The better furniture he dropped it off at one of the communes as a goodbye present.

The mattress and nightstand were put in the back of the pickup. All their personal items fit in two cardboard boxes crammed down along with Lois's duffle behind the front seat. Three boxes with kitchen stuff and sundries joined Abel's tools behind the cab pressing the mattress firmly to the bed of the truck. Two tarps, secured by ropes and bungee cords, covered everything.

They must have heard "Runaround Sue" by Dion two dozen times on the radio on the drive back to Middleton.