

Her Slice of the Pie

[I wrote the preceding story in response to a movie character I saw in a minor B-movie. Perhaps the fact that Christine Lahti (an actress I admire) played a part in it contributed to the inspiration for my character, Margarita Hernandez. The character in the movie gave so much, both physically and emotionally, yet acted unfailingly generously and graciously. This little story is my version of what could have happened to that character, had her fictional life been different. To me, Rita will always look like Miss Lahti.

I also dedicate this story to a very special lady who, at the time I wrote this story, came to the end of her spiritual odyssey. My heart rejoiced as I saw our Lord use my wife, Marilyn, as his instrument, to work in her life. Jennifer, our prayer is that he guide your gentle spirit and mold you into Jesus' likeness!

I've included a listing of the Four Spiritual Laws, since they play a part in my fictional account. Please take time to read them, and if they point out a need in your life, simply pray the prayer at the end. It's the sincere desire of Marilyn and my hearts that you find what Ryan, Rita and Lise found.

One more thing. This story is what I call "adult" Christian fiction. What do I mean by that? In it, I'll cover scenes and material not usually found in the usual Christian fare, written primarily for young adult readers. Don't worry; though. Some of the material is more frank, but it doesn't travel into the territory most novels today traverse. – T. H. Pine]

∞ 1 ∞

Margarita Rosa Hernandez stepped from the shower and caught a glance of herself in the mirror. She pulled the towel off the hook and used it to wipe away some of the steam haze. She stood back; shoulders squared and studied the figure displayed there. "Not bad for a woman almost forty," she said to herself, as she appraised her assets. Though time had rearranged the figure she possessed at twenty, she still possessed a firm and lean figure, testament to the regimen of exercise and diet she so scrupulously adhered to. Her breasts, though situated a little lower on her chest, still retained most of their youthful firmness. Her stomach didn't have the flatness it had in her twenties, but, even with its slight bulge, still looked good. She twisted around to study her bottom. Not bad. She always considered it one of her best assets—prominent and well rounded.

As 'Rita' toweled herself dry, she cast a glance at the king-sized bed in her room but no one had rumbled the covers on the other side last night. Charlie had left just yesterday to carry on with his life and with his young girlfriend, with whom he had just reunited. Rita did not begrudge him this. Instead, she gently let him go, encouraging him to cherish this girl, to keep her happy. Rita saw this as her role in life.

When she had first met Charlie, he answered her ad to rent the available room in her house. A good-looking twenty-two year-old, shy, a little awkward and a little odd, in that he obsessed over numbers. In fact, he had applied for a job in the San Diego area with a firm of analysts. This did not put Rita off at all. She liked the slightly off-center ones. They possessed an innocence that she found intensely stimulating.

Slowly and systematically, Rita had lured Charlie into her bed—thus beginning his sexual education. Under her tutelage, he had matured from a shy, clumsy young man to a self-assured man-of-the-world; from a fumbling klutz around women, to a sensitive and skillful lover. When she said goodbye to Charlie, she equated it to a graduation ceremony. He had attended her "school of life-experience" and left, qualified to make his way in the world of women, as Rita's legacy to him. The satisfaction he brought to her in the realm of sexual satisfaction had been all the tuition he needed to pay. She made no bones about that. A hot-blooded Latino woman with needs and desires, she took her pleasure where she found it—in the form of her beautiful, young lovers.

Rita's thoughts slowly grew more melancholy. It had grown increasingly difficult to say goodbye to her young lovers without the pang in her heart growing more intense. She came from a large family with five sisters, who unwittingly, but constantly bombarded her with the presence of their children. So she kept her distance, something that hurt her mother, but she grew tired of the endless stories about their day-to-day lives, the painful procession of pictures and the urging of her sisters to hold all of her nieces and nephews. She truly loved the children, and they her, but it had become harder to be with them without the ache in her heart starting up. Simply put, though she'd never admit it, she wanted this for herself, yet it seemed more and more remote as she approached forty. When but a girl, she had wanted to "live life," as she put it. Not one to have children chain her down while still in her teens, like her sisters had been, she felt she should drink the wine of life while still young, and vibrant, and beautiful.

Then why am I standing here, alone in my bedroom? she thought. *Why is there no one here with me, to cherish me and comfort me?* These were not thoughts she often allowed. Most of the time, she managed to push them to the back of her mind, but they lurked there like hollow-eyed, sunken-cheeked waifs, sad reminders of the realities of life, testament to her choices.

Not one to feel sorry for herself, Rita walked, without getting dressed, to Charlie's room, to prepare it for a new tenant. She enjoyed doing housework in the nude; it felt deliciously sensual. Sometimes she would spend an entire day unclothed, reveling in the sinful pleasure it brought her. When she felt *really* bold, she'd go out on her back patio and eat meals in the altogether, uncaring of what the neighbors might think if they happened to see her. So far, it had not happened—her bold resolve as yet untested.

Done by lunchtime, she left to treat herself to lunch at her favorite restaurant, depositing the **ROOM FOR RENT** sign in the window on her way out. Yesterday, she had called in the ad to the local paper. As Rita left her house, the homeless lady who collected bottles passed by. She had been here since Rita owned the house and they had gotten to the point where they gave each other a greeting. Sometimes Rita would give her a dollar or two, which the woman gratefully received. More contact than that, Rita did not want. In her honest moments, she had to admit that the woman reminded her of what she could become with just a slight adjustment of circumstances. The woman's presence brought those pathetic waifs of reality too close for comfort.

"Hi, Rita!" The woman spoke airily, as if not homeless at all.

Normally, Rita admired the woman's pluckiness. Today, however, it irritated her.

"Hi," Rita said sulkily, waving her hand, as if to dismiss the woman from her presence and hurried off to the restaurant. The disappointed woman looked sadly at her as she left.

Not halfway through lunch, as Rita once again pondered the events of her life, her beeper went off. She left her table and went to the pay phone to call her answering service. A young man named Ryan wanted to see the room. Rita had always been specific about that. She only let the room to single young men, usually university types, who all had the potential to become lovers. This posed somewhat of a problem, what with the way things were in the world these days, but Rita had managed to rent the room to a succession of young men with hardly a break. She took down Ryan's number, to call him when she finished lunch. Buoyed by the call, the anticipation of a potential new lover lifted her somewhat from the funk she had been in all day. She finished lunch in a much better mood.

∞@∞

Ryan turned out to be a fine looking young man. Tall and blonde, he had a self-possessed manner that appealed immensely to Rita. She looked forward to getting to know Ryan better. Negotiations for the room went fine, until a sticking point arose. Although Rita had a bath attached

to her bedroom, she told her potential renters that she had only the one bathroom in the hall and that she would have to share it with them. It proved an effective way to begin a romance. She would tie up the bathroom continually and when the young man in question reached the end of his rope, she'd invite him to come on in and use the bathroom while she used the shower. She would ask for the soap on the sink and conveniently let the curtain fall open when her prospective lover handed it to her. She chuckled when she thought of the reactions that maneuver generated. More often than not, he'd join her and she'd become his latest inamorata. It didn't matter if he had a girlfriend—she could still teach him much. Ryan proved different, however.

"I'm sorry Ms. Hernandez, but I can't rent the room under these circumstances."

"Excuse me? How long have you been looking for a room?"

"For a week-and-a-half."

"It's not easy to find one, is it?"

"No ma'am."

"Then, what's the problem? We can work things out."

"I'm not at all comfortable with sharing a bathroom with a woman."

Rita began to feel uncomfortable about this young man. "Are you kidding? This is the eighties."

"That may be the case, but I'll have to pass on the room." Ryan turned to leave.

Rita did not want to give up on this potential young lover. His appeal had skyrocketed the moment he stood his ground; she would not give up without a fight. "What's the matter? Are you scared of little ol' me?"

"No ma'am. It's just that I have a fiancée and, because of my commitment to her, I won't put myself in a compromising situation. Even if I didn't, my commitment to the Lord wouldn't allow it."

"The Lord? Are you one of those Jesus freaks?"

"I don't consider myself a 'Jesus Freak.' I have Jesus as my Savior. I'm a born-again believer."

Usually so easy with men, Rita, for once, sat speechless. This young man seemed to her to be another kind of person altogether. Men weren't usually this difficult to influence, especially *single* men. Show them a little flesh, some strategic body parts, let them know you're available and they fell into the sack when the time came. What should she do? Should she let him go, or confess to the deception and let him know she had a bathroom of her own in order to keep him in her house? She had to admit a powerful attraction to him—a man who knew his mind!

Rita opted for a third alternative. "I'd like to hear more about this Jesus you so obviously honor with your life. Could we have a cup of coffee and talk?"

Ryan seemed cautious. "As much as I'd love to tell you more about Jesus, I'm not sure that would be a good idea."

"Why? What's wrong with coffee? You do drink coffee, don't you; or is that against your religion?" For a second Rita thought she had pushed too hard and that the young man would leave.

"All right. I'll have coffee with you, but I'm not promising I'll rent the room."

∞@∞

Rita didn't like the way the conversation had been going. For the past hour, she had heard more about Jesus than she had ever heard in her life—or ever *wanted* to hear. Though not a devout Catholic, she nevertheless thought she knew a fair amount from her childhood indoctrination, but this young man seemed to know more about Jesus and the New Testament than the *priests* did. At first she asked questions, but stopped when they led her deeper into Ryan's religious world.

Normally, she would have shut him down, but she found herself in a quandary. She had endured more than her fill of religious talk from Ryan, but, at the same time, did not want to let him off the hook. Finally, she thought she would try to bring him back to the rental of the room.

“Ryan, this is all quite interesting, but I need to know if you’ll reconsider renting the room.”

Ryan looked directly at her, his eyebrows knit into the beginning of a frown. Then he surprised her by smiling. “Oh, I see.” He closed his Bible and gathered his effects. “No, I’m afraid not, Ms. Hernandez. I’ve enjoyed talking with you though.” He reached into his backpack and brought out a small booklet. “I’d like you to take this and read it sometime. Don’t toss it, okay? Just put it aside for later.”

Crestfallen, Rita took the booklet. She caught the title as she put it into her purse. *The Four Spiritual Laws* spelled out in bold letters. She sighed as she closed her purse.

Ryan took a few dollars from his wallet and put them on the table. “This ought to cover the cost of the coffee. Thanks for taking the time to listen. I’ve gotta run. I need to keep apartment hunting.” With that, he spun on his heel and hurried off.

“Ryan ...” Rita called, but he didn’t hear and left the coffee shop, ringing the bell on the door as he left.

∞ 2 ∞

A week passed and Rita had been unable to rent the room to any young, college age men. Desperate for income, she finally rented it to a college coed, a short, somewhat hostile looking brunette named Lisa Cairns. She had cut her spiky hair very close, in the current trend, coloring it purple in places. She also dressed very “Goth.”

The funk she descended into when Charlie left had stayed with Rita and she felt confident her conversation with Ryan had intensified it. Rita wondered what she had seen in him in the first place and wrote him off as a hopeless prude. Yet, her thoughts turned to him often each day. She wondered if and where he had found an apartment.

∞ @ ∞

Things came to a head for Rita one morning at her apartment. On her way out, she met Lisa coming in. Rita nodded as they passed in the hall. Before she reached the door, Lisa called after her.

“Pardon me, but could I talk to you?”

Rita turned. “Excuse me?”

Lisa approached her, smiling shyly, her gaze averted. She extended her hand. “Hi.”

Rita took her hand. “Hello, Miss Cairns.” Lise had a firm grip and made no indication of releasing Rita’s hand.

“Please, call me Lise. I couldn’t help but notice that you’ve been in the dumps for the past few days. Is it a breakup?”

The woman’s perception, as much as her boldness, shocked Rita. “Well, yes; not that it’s any of your business.”

“Look, I’m not trying to be nosy. I just thought you might like to talk about it. I’m a good listener. Maybe some time, you know ...?” Lise let the thought trail off.

Rita let her guard down somewhat. “Thank you for your concern. Perhaps sometime we could.”

“Well, I’m not particularly busy at the moment.”

The woman's directness put Rita off and something tickled at the back of her mind regarding her manner. Nevertheless, she relented. "Tell you what. I'm just going out to drop off some dry cleaning." She held up the bag she carried. "You can come with me if you like and we can talk on the way. Okay?"

"Sure."

In the car, they both sat silent for a few minutes. Rita had to admit that the woman knew how to keep her own counsel. Perhaps she could be the ear Rita needed. If Lise could notice her mood, maybe she looked worse off than she thought.

"So, is it *that* obvious I need someone to talk to?"

"Well, I'm sensitive to that sort of thing."

"Oh? Is that so?"

"I just know how it can be, okay? I'm just trying to help. If you don't want to talk, that's fine. Forget I asked."

Rita found herself of two minds. On one hand, she didn't want to offend the woman. On the other hand, the woman's direct manner, and the mental twinge she detected, got to her. She decided to talk.

"I broke up with a lover about a week ago; a student renter likes you. I guess I haven't gotten past it yet."

"Do you have a lot of short-term lovers?"

That directness again! "Well, I guess. These young men generally move on to younger women." Embarrassed, Rita smiled at Lise.

"Why are they all so young?"

"I guess I like my men young; more exciting."

"Have you considered a long term relationship with an older man?"

Rita paused to think and realized she hadn't. She had simply gotten into the habit of taking young lovers. "No, I suppose not." She surprised herself at her candidness with this woman.

"Perhaps you have a fear of commitment. You set yourself up so you don't have to live with anyone long-term."

At that moment, they arrived at the dry cleaners. Rita looked over at her diminutive passenger. Dressed in a black strap tee, no bra, highlighting her prominent nipples, baggy, black trousers and black, combat boots, with her purple-streaked hair, nose "clip" and eyebrow stud, the young woman looked like a refugee from a Fangoria convention.

"Perhaps you're right," she said, as she exited the car.

On the way back from the cleaner's, Rita broke the silence once again. "So, you think I can't commit?"

"I'm only *suggesting*. I'm not judging you."

"I didn't say you were. I'm just slightly put off by your directness."

"That's the way I am, I guess."

"Why is that? Your manner sets off something in the back of my mind, as if your demeanor doesn't square with what you appear to be ... and say."

"Hmmm; that's interesting. You're the first person to point that out to me so clearly."

"Well, I suppose I'm sensitive to things like that. It's probably why I'm such a good teacher to my lovers."

"Maybe what you're picking up is the fact that I find myself attracted to *you*."

Rita looked at her passenger when her comment sunk in. "Did you just say you're *attracted* to me?"

“Yes, I am.”

“You...you’re a *lesbian*?”

Lise nodded. Having dropped her bombshell, she watched Rita’s reaction. Surprisingly, Rita remained outwardly calm. Instead of shock, or anger, Rita felt saddened by the news. Now she knew *why* the twinge at the back of her mind occurred. *So, is this what I’ve come to? Have I become so undesirable to men that my propositions only come from lesbian women?* She had thought that Lise might just be the person she needed to talk to. Now, she found herself disappointed—yet again.

“Does it bother you that I’m a lesbian?” Lise asked.

Rita glanced over at her. “I don’t know what to think. I thought that perhaps you could offer me some good advice. Now, I’m just confused.”

“I see. You think because I’m a confessed lesbian, I have no good advice about *men* to offer you.”

Rita felt trapped. “I-I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m at a pretty vulnerable point in my life right about now.” *How “California” that sounds!*

“I’m not coming on to you, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Though I wouldn’t mind if we started up a relationship, I’m here if you just want to talk; that’s all. The rest is up to you.”

They passed the rest of the trip home in silence. Rita’s mind spun, as she mulled over her thoughts in concentric circles. Lise’s confession hit her hard. Had this chance meeting with Lise been more than just chance? *Am I destined to have an affair with her? Is that why I can’t maintain any long-term male relationships? Would it be so bad, really?*

On the short drive back to the house, Rita recalled some of the men in her life, at the same time amazed by the clarity of her recollections. Lise, to her credit, did not once interrupt her musings. When they arrived at the house, Rita turned off the ignition and sat staring out the windshield, her hand still on the key. Lise opened the door and got out of the car. She closed the door and looked back in.

“I’m sorry if I offended you; I only tried to help. Let me know if you want to talk again sometime. I’ve been told I’m a good listener.”

Lise walked to the house. Rita sat in the car watching Lise go. Her new tenant looked so small and so forlorn going down the walk; Rita felt a pang of pity for her.

I wonder if she’s as miserable as I am, she thought.

∞ 3 ∞

Rita lay in her bed, listening to the hiss of the shower. She smiled in anticipation of the arrival of her lover. At long last, Ryan would come to her bed and make love to her, just as she had hoped. She lay there in a dreamy state until the shower stopped. In a few moments, she felt the vibrations as Ryan slipped into the bed next to her. She felt his arm go around her and looked up into his face, but it turned out not to be Ryan’s face; the face belonged to Lise!

Rita cried out as the strange dream jarred her awake. What a week she had gone through since her conversation with Lise! Normally upbeat, Rita moped around in a funk. She hardly felt like eating. She had no interest in going out. She just dragged through each day until bedtime arrived. Once in bed, she didn’t sleep. She tossed and turned all night in a fitful state of unrest, dreaming of past lovers, until the morning sun drove her out of her bed. Certain her troubles started when Ryan spoke with her, she cursed the day he answered her ad. Now, a lesbian rented her room and her life lay in shambles. Why had this happened to her?

She gathered up the sheet in front of her, brought the knot to her face and cried hot tears, dredged from her very soul.

∞@∞

A week later, Rita got an unexpected house call. At ten o'clock, on a Friday evening, her doorbell rang. Rita had been sitting dumbly before the TV, her general appearance disheveled, wearing a ratty old housecoat.

"Who is it?"

"Rita. It's me, Lise."

Although Rita recognized the voice, it had an upbeat quality to it she had not previously heard.

"Lise? You already paid the rent."

"That's not why I'm here. I need to talk with you."

"Haven't we said what we had to say?"

"Not this. Can I at least talk to you face to face?" Lise's voice sounded conciliatory.

"I don't think so. What could you possibly have to say to me? I'm not interested in a relationship with you, or to hear your advice about men. Leave me alone."

Another long silence. Just when Rita thought Lise had left, she spoke again.

"I just wanted to tell you; I found Jesus tonight. Have a good evening."

∞@∞

Rita pulled the door open. "Wait!" she cried, hoping she didn't sound too desperate.

Lise turned and Rita didn't recognize her. She had lost the purple rinse and had combed her black hair into a neat do with a part down one side, making her look boyish. She had also removed her facial piercings. A pretty, blue dress hung on her lean frame. She had what looked like a Bible in her hand. She looked like Lise's "good" sister.

"Come in," Rita said, uselessly patting her hair, suddenly conscious of her sloppy appearance.

∞@∞

They sat at Rita's kitchen table, a pot of coffee between them. Rita had an ashtray next to her, half-full of cigarette butts. She had returned to an old habit she had given up years before.

"When I talked to you the other day, I had pretty much made up my mind to do something drastic," Lise said. "I had just broken up a long-term relationship with an older woman I thought I'd be with for the rest of my life, well, *hers* anyway, but she decided to return to her ex-husband. I was devastated. That's why I needed a new apartment."

"What do you mean by drastic?" Rita asked.

"Oh, I don't know; drugs, prostitution, suicide, I was so confused."

"Oh, my God!"

Lise smiled. "Exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was walking home three nights ago, when I saw a sign in front of a small church in the area, announcing evangelistic meetings. I thought, 'what have I got to lose?' I sat there and the preacher seemed to speak directly to me! A thousand questions raced around in my mind, so, after the service, I asked some of the people from the church about them. They patiently answered them and encouraged Lise to attend some of the other meetings that week.

I attended two more and, when the pastor gave the invitation to come to Jesus tonight, I felt compelled to accept. I found myself sitting in one of the front pews, a counselor at my side, crying my eyes out over my past sins. Yet, at the same time, I felt relieved, as if Jesus had lifted a great

weight from my shoulders. On my way home, I thought of you, and felt compelled to share what happened to me, to say *something* to you.”

“You gave up being a lesbian?”

“No, I still think I’m a lesbian, but I gave it over to Jesus, like the counselor suggested and asked him to deal with it.”

“Wait a minute. You got religion, but you’re *still* a lesbian?”

“I know I’m probably not saying it right, but something like that, but I’m trusting Jesus to work it out in my life.”

“So tonight you found Jesus; hallelujah! And you couldn’t wait to tell me about it.”

Lise refused to rise to the bait. “Yes. I’m so happy now, I had to tell someone. I remembered our talk, so I knocked on your door. Oh Rita! It’s so wonderful!”

Rita had a barb ready, but she noticed there were actual tears in Lise’s eyes and it took the venom out of her response. “I’m real glad for you kid. At least one of us is happy.”

“But that’s my point. If you could just come—”

“Now, wait a minute,” Rita interrupted. “I’m glad for you, I really am, but I’m not in the market for what you’re selling.”

“I’m not selling anything. I just want you to come with me and see for yourself. Pastor Nunez says it’s like one beggar showing another beggar where to find food.”

“A Latino, huh?” Rita really drew out the tilde in the minister’s name. “Well, you can tell your Father Nuñez I’m not hungry.”

Again, Lise did not react, undaunted by Rita’s sarcasm. “He’s not a priest. He’s a born-again, gospel minister.”

Rita could see that Lise had changed; she had never seen her so animated. *Something* had gotten to her. “Look, my life may not be very good lately, but I don’t think religion is what I’m looking for right now. I’m glad it worked for you and I hope it sticks, but don’t try to twist my arm. Okay?”

Lisa looked a little crestfallen, but she looked up with tenderness in her gaze. “Okay Rita, if that’s what you want. I didn’t come here to twist your arm, as you put it, but I want you to know I’m available to talk to you anytime. Do you believe me when I say that?”

“Yeah, sure; I can see your heart’s in the right place.”

“Well, I guess I should go and try to get some sleep. I have work tomorrow. Would you mind if I prayed with you before I go?”

“Uh, I guess not.”

Lise reached across the table, took Rita’s hands in hers, bowed her head, and began praying. Shocked, Rita could only follow suit and bowed her head as well. She only heard a few of Lise’s stumbling words, for her mind raced. *What am I doing, sitting here, holding hands and praying with a woman who had admitted an attraction to me?* One part of her felt she might be going crazy. Another part of her wanted to run to the next meeting with Lise and try to find what Lise had found. It couldn’t be any worse than what she had found so far. But when the prayer ended and Lise said good night, she sat passively. As she watched her small form exit her apartment, she almost broke down and called out, begging her to show her how to get to know this Jesus. Instead, she heard the door click shut, cutting off her change of heart.

To Rita, it sounded like a gun shooting her hopes in the head.

Rita heard the phone ring as she stood under the shower. She had kicked herself out of bed that morning and decided to go out, *anywhere*, instead of moping around the house. She supposed the conversation she had had with Lise the previous night prompted the decision. She grabbed for a towel. *Just great; the first shower I take in four days and somebody picks now to call!* She got to the phone as her answering machine began to take a message.

“Uh...Rita? It’s Charlie. I was wondering—”

Rita snatched up the receiver. “Charlie? Hi! I was in the shower. What’s up, Hon?” She hoped she sounded upbeat and not desperate.

“Well, things didn’t work out with me and Anne and I wondered if ... well ... could I see you?”

He wants to come back! Rita thought, almost whooping out loud.

∞Q∞

We just couldn’t make it work,” Charlie said, “I had my job, and she had hers, and we couldn’t seem to meet in the middle.”

Rita sat with Charlie at the very same table, in the very same restaurant where they had celebrated first becoming lovers. Charlie had picked the spot. When they had first met after the phone call, he had hugged her as though they hadn’t seen each other in years. Since then, he had barely stopped talking. At first, Rita had been elated. For the first time, one of her lovers had come back to her and it touched her heart deeply. Now, she didn’t feel so sure.

“So, who walked out on whom?”

“Well, *her* of course. Her work meant more to her than I did. Why did she have to leave the country? Artists!”

“And what about your work?” Rita began to feel disappointment.

“What about it? I have a great part-time job, I’m taking the courses I need and I’ll be able to come on full-time as soon as I graduate.”

“Did you consider going with Anne?”

“To Rome? What for? My work’s here.”

Rita felt great sadness at that moment. For the first time in her recent past, she saw things for what they were. She had been overlooking the important to teach the trivial. She sat across the table from one of her “students.” He had, under her tutelage, become a superb lover; yet, he hadn’t *a clue* about more meaningful things. She reached out to touch Charlie’s hand. Like the good student she had taught him to be, he took her hand in both of his and kissed it.

“Charlie, did it occur to you that Anne is an artist, and that is very much who she *is*, rather than what she *does*?”

“Yeah, I guess so. What’s your point?”

“She feels she *needs* to go to this school. Do you see that?”

“I suppose so. She needs more training. I see that.”

Rita knew he didn’t. For all his talent in bed, he knew very little of the deeper motivations of women. “*Do you, Charlie? In her own way Anne asked you to go with her.*”

“She did? But she never *asked* me anything.”

“Not in so many words, no.”

“You think? But I can’t go with her. I go to school here. Is this one of those eighties, man’s-job-versus-woman’s-job things? Wait ... are you saying I should have gone with her to Rome?”

Rita became downright melancholy. Charlie’s leaving; her talk with Ryan; her talks with Lise all conspired to break down her defenses. How could she be angry at Charlie for his lack of insight? How could he learn, when no one taught him? Tears began to well up in her eyes.

“Dear, dear Charlie,” she smiled at him through her tears, “*of course* she wouldn’t come out and just say it. She’s a *woman*, Charlie. She merely wanted to know that you cared for her as a person, and being an artist is what she *is* as a person. It’s not about jobs, but about the two of you, whether you and she were truly a couple.”

“I think you’re reading into this too much, Rita.”

“Am I? I’m a woman too, Charlie. Don’t you think I know a little about how a woman feels?”

“You were never like that. You *cared* about what I wanted to do.”

“And Anne didn’t?”

“She ran off, not me.”

“You ran out on me.”

“But, you *wanted* me to go. You said so. That’s why I like you so much, you say what you mean. Besides, you’re older.”

Rita knew Charlie didn’t mean anything when he said “older,” knew he meant it in the context of being more mature, but it still felt like a knife sliding between her ribs into her heart. By uttering that one word, he brought her whole life down like a house of cards. She had been living for the moment, never realizing she had been allowing the purpose of her life to slip away. How she envied her sisters! They would grow old surrounded by family, revered as mothers and grandmothers, seeing the fruits of their lives before them, knowing that they would be immortal in the generations they had spawned. She, on the other hand, would grow old and be alone, just like the street-lady who collected bottles and cans near her house. The thought crushed her down like a millstone. Before she knew it, she began sobbing, her shoulders shuddering under the weight of sadness that gripped her.

“Rita!” Charlie exclaimed, “What’s wrong?”

Rita snatched her hand away and rose from her seat. “I’m sorry Charlie.”

She turned and fled from the restaurant.

∞ 5 ∞

Rita ran from the restaurant, drove home and knocked on Lise’s apartment door, but her tenant didn’t answer. Then she remembered the church meetings. Lise had probably gone there! Rita jumped in her car and traveled all over the city of San Diego, looking for the church, only to find it well after the meetings were over; not just for the night, but forever. Tonight had been the last night! EVANGELISTIC MEETINGS ALL WEEK! the sign in front of the church taunted, the church’s lights out and doors closed at this late hour. Rita stared at every word on the sign, as if they could give her the direction she lacked.

“It figures,” Rita said to the sign. “Even God doesn’t want me anymore.”

She got into her car and drove away.

∞ @ ∞

On her way to her apartment, at about the same moment Rita stood before that sign, Lise stopped at Rita’s door. Tempted to knock, she considered the hour and turned and went to bed instead. However, the thought that she should speak to Rita had stayed with her all through that night’s service and on the way home on the bus. As she turned out the nightstand lamp, she wondered why Rita had figured so prominently in her thoughts.

“Dear Lord, please bring Rita to Jesus, so she can know the joy I’ve found,” she prayed, just before her head sank into the pillow and she slept the deep, satisfying sleep of the recently redeemed.

∞@∞

Rita sat on the sand, in front of her car, hugging her knees, looking out at the ocean. She had driven around for a long time after leaving the church and had wound up here at the beach. No moon shone this night. A slight overcast hid the stars and turned the water pitch black. She could see the lights along the shore and they only served to heighten her loneliness. A slight chill in the January air caused goose bumps to rise on her arms. She wondered how cold the water would be.

She had been here for quite awhile, thinking over her life. A procession of young, male faces marched across the screen of her memory. She wondered how they were all doing, if they were happy. For a brief time, each of them had been part of her life. Now, she didn't even have any recent photographs—not even a Christmas card—nobody sent cards or photos to former lovers.

The irony of her present situation hadn't been lost on her. One of her lovers had actually chosen to reenter her life and she turned out to be the one to leave. Deep inside, she knew the real reason for that. She knew Charlie just wanted, once again, what he once had with her. Sooner or later, he would move on again—not destined to be the one, true love for her—too young and too thick skulled to realize anything else. His knowledge about the motivations of women rivaled the little she knew of quantum mechanics; that is, next to nothing.

Rita got up and walked to the surf. Her clothes sat in a neatly folded pile with her shoes on top, on her car's hood. She inhaled sharply, as the cold water lapped at her bare feet and ankles, but she just wanted to keep walking; to swim to China. The water rose to her middle, causing her to gasp, but she kept going until it reached her breasts and she pushed off.

∞@∞

Lise sat straight up in bed. She had come suddenly awake and couldn't figure out why. She listened, but didn't hear any unusual, or ominous, sounds. She lay back down and looked over at the clock radio. It read 4 a. m. Still puzzling over why she had awakened, she thought of Rita. Did her concern over Rita wake her up? Could it be God trying to tell her something? Perhaps she should pray for her landlord. She slid out of bed to her knees.

"Dear Lord," she began, as she had been taught, figuring that praying aloud would be best. "I'm asking you to help Rita if she's in trouble. Watch over her and bless her. Amen." Lise hoped her simple prayer would be good enough. She stayed on her knees offering more short prayers, until she started awake from a short nap. She crawled back into bed.

Soon, her eyes drifted shut and she fell soundly asleep again.

∞@∞

On her way out to work the next morning, Lise again felt tempted to knock on Rita's door, but she thought the better of it. She didn't want her concern for her landlord to become an obsession. She looked at her watch—much too early anyway—and walked out the front door to catch the early bus to work. Rita's phone rang behind her, but Lise didn't hear it, or she would have known of Rita's absence. After a few rings, the answering machine delivered its message and beeped.

"Hello. Ms. Hernandez, this is Ryan ... you know, the guy who looked at your apartment? I'm not calling because I changed my mind or anything, but I ... look, I feel like a fool calling like this, but you've been on my mind lately, especially the last couple of days. You don't have to call if you don't want, but I wondered if you had read the booklet I gave you, and if you wanted to talk. I hope you don't think I'm a total nutcase, but I place a great deal of credence in those times when I start to think a lot about someone. Call me if you want to talk about the booklet. Thanks, and God bless you. I'll be praying for you."

Ryan hung up the receiver at his end, wondering if he had done the right thing.

“Hey, Lise! Telephone!” Lise’s boss called into the stockroom. “One of your girlfriends wanna set up a lunch date?”

“Very funny, Jake.” Lise picked up the wall phone and pressed the flashing line. “This is Lise. How may I help you?”

“Uh, this is Detective Soames from the SDPD. Are you Lisa Cairns?”

“Yes.”

“And do you know a woman by the name of Margarita Hernandez?”

Lise’s heart lurched and her stomach dropped. “Yes. Is something wrong?”

“We found your number in Ms. Hernandez’ purse. Are you a relative or something?”

Now Lise felt sick in the pit of her stomach. “I’m her tenant. Is she ...?”

“Oh, sorry. No, she’s okay. I’m here at San Diego General’s emergency room. When can you come down?”

A flood of relief washed over Lise. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I guess so; physically, at least. Can you come down?”

“Sure. Just as soon as I let my boss know, I’ll be right over.”

“Okay, see you there.”

∞@∞

Soames met Lise in the emergency room lounge. “Before you go in to see Ms. Hernandez, we need to talk,” he said, directing Lise to one of the incongruously brightly colored, molded-plastic chairs, common to places like emergency rooms. “A jogger found her early this morning on the beach, nude, lying face down in the sand, barely breathing.”

“Why nude, Detective Soames?”

“It’s common, really, more than you would think. I guess suicides, in the state of mind they often find themselves in, feel it appropriate they meet their maker without clothes, ‘Naked came I, and all that’”

“You think she tried to kill herself?”

Soames nodded. “Classic case. A Beach Patrol unit found her car ten miles up the beach. Must have reconsidered and just made it back. Aside from exposure, she seems to be okay. She needs to get professional help, though, or next time she might just finish what she starts.”

Lise nodded her head like one of those rear-shelf car ornaments. “Thank you Detective Soames. Can I see her?”

“Sure. Go see the nurse there. I had her clothes sent here; you’ll find them in her room. When you’re ready, call me and I’ll help you get her car out of impound.” He handed Lise a card.

“Thank you so much Detective Soames. I appreciate all you’ve done.”

“Hey lady, it’s my job. I’m just glad this story didn’t end with a toe tag.”

∞@∞

Lise entered the examining room where they put Rita. They had dimmed the lights, but she could see Rita lying on a gurney against the wall, covered by a thermal blanket. She appeared to be sleeping.

“Rita?”

Rita’s head turned and she looked at Lise. She smiled weakly and raised her hand a little. Lise hurried over and took it, pulling over one of the chairs to sit on it. Rita’s hand felt cold. Lise looked at her friend’s face, concern knitting her brows together.

“Sure made a mess of things,” Rita croaked.

“Don’t—”

Rita silenced her by raising her other hand. “Need to talk. Should have listened to you. Now, even God doesn’t want me.”

“God doesn’t ... what do you mean?” Lise could see that Rita fought exhaustion; she seemed to require a great deal of effort even to raise her eyelids.

“The door ... locked. Gone forever. Went to ... beach.”

Lise couldn’t make any sense out of Rita’s incomplete sentences. “Look. You get some sleep. I’ll get someone to help me get you in my car and I’ll take you home. Rest, now.”

Lise wondered how much Rita had heard, for she had drifted off to sleep.

∞ 7 ∞

Rita’s eyes opened slowly, as she drifted up from the enveloping blackness into consciousness, looking up at the familiar ceiling of her bedroom. She swiveled her head to the left and saw Lise lying fully clothed on the bed next to her, holding onto her hand. She wondered why Lise, or for that matter, *she* lay here in her bedroom. Then her memory asserted itself. The ocean! She didn’t drown; she must have made it to the beach after all. However, how had Lise known? Gently, she managed to disengage her hand and slipped out of bed. Her head spun for a few seconds and her body ached all over. She noticed she wore newly laundered pajamas. Had Lise done all this?

Rita stood stiffly and stumbled off to the bathroom. On the way, she noticed the message light blinking on the answering machine. First things first. She stumbled off to the bathroom. When she had finished showering, she went to the machine, turned down the volume and listened to the message. Ryan had called!

∞@∞

Lise jerked awake suddenly, a confused look on her face from the unfamiliar surroundings. In a few seconds, she remembered her location—in Rita’s apartment. One look at the bed told her that Rita had already awakened. She scanned the apartment and saw a sight she did not expect. Rita sat at the kitchen table, a small orange booklet in her hands, her face wet with tears. She got up and walked to the doorway.

“Good morning.”

Rita’s head turned her way and she smiled weakly. “Oh, hi,” she said, her voice husky.

Lise rose from her seat and walked to the table. “What’re you reading?”

“A little book Ryan gave me.”

“Ryan?”

“That’s right; you don’t know who he is. He answered my ad for the apartment before you. He didn’t take it though. He’s a Jesus person like you are now; like *us*.”

“Oh, I ...” Lise began to say, but the import of Rita’s words had just sunk in. “That’s wonderful!”

She moved around the table to hug her new sister-in-the-Lord.

∞@∞

“Hello, Ryan?” Rita said to Ryan’s answering machine. What a world, talking to one another via machines. “I got your message. Yes, I read the literature you gave me. Would you like to come over and talk? I’ve got some good news to tell you.” She hung up; smiling at what she thought would be Ryan’s reaction to her somewhat cryptic call. *That ought to get his attention.*

∞@∞

Ryan and his fiancée Kelly, Lise and Rita sat around her kitchen table. The ever-present coffeepot sat in its middle. The conversation became animated and cheerful, with many laughs and happy exclamations punctuating the dialog. They had been talking for an hour—sharing, praising and generally enthusing about their gracious God. Eventually, the table grew quiet as Rita related what took place that fateful night.

“I just disrobed, folded all my clothes neatly, and walked into the water,” Rita began. “The water felt like ice but I just wanted to end my life. I swam out a long ways, turned and saw how far from the shore I had gone, but I kept swimming out farther. I’m a strong swimmer; I made the varsity swim team in high school. I swam for quite awhile before really getting tired. That’s when the magnitude of what I wanted to do hit me. I realized my foolish notion of a romantic end meant that I would have to drown. Suddenly, I didn’t want to die; I didn’t want someone to find my bloated body on the beach. I wanted to live!

“I turned around, lined up with some lights onshore, and tried to swim back. I got so weary, it felt like my arms and legs had turned to lead. I struggled on until I did no more than flail my arms uselessly. I remember asking God not to turn his back on me, not to forget me. Then, I don’t remember a thing until I came to in the hospital emergency room. Lise tells me I had drifted ten miles from where I left my car.”

“I remember waking up in the middle of that night for no apparent reason,” Lise explained. “I prayed for Rita before going back to sleep.”

“What time was that?” Ryan asked.

“The clock on my nightstand said 4 a. m.”

Ryan’s eyebrows flew up. “Do you remember about what time it was when you were on that beach?” he asked.

“Just before getting out of the car I remember the clock on the dash read 2:30 a. m. I don’t know how long I sat there before going in.”

“It seems like the timing’s just about right.” Ryan looked at Lise. “Looks like *someone* woke you up to do some emergency praying.”

“Really?” Lise asked, her eyes wide.

“Do you expect any less from our Lord?”

“No, I guess not,” Lise answered, smiling sheepishly.

“And now I know why I couldn’t get Rita out of my thoughts. I think my phone call had been providentially timed.”

∞ 8 ∞

Rita stepped out the door of her house to face the new day. It promised to be a beautiful one. Spring usually proved to be an especially beautiful season in the San Diego area, the surrounding brown hills turned to bright green. Three months had passed since she had taken her “swim to salvation,” as she called it.

Lise no longer rented the apartment and Ryan sent a Christian friend, who needed a place while he attended school, her way to rent it. The reason Lise had let the apartment go stemmed from the fact she had become Rita’s roommate. Since they had both come to know the same Savior, at practically the same time, their friendship had blossomed into something made of iron. How ironic that they would be such close friends, when mere months before they might have been lovers.

She and Lise both attended Pastor Nunez’s Gospel Church and ranked among the most enthusiastic, active members. The congregation had come to know them as the “Hernandez sisters” and the newer members had no idea their blood relation wasn’t a biological one—they *were* blood-related through the Savior’s shed blood for their sins.

Ryan had called the other day to say he and Kelly had set a date and would she and Lise be part of the wedding? Rita expressed her heartfelt thanks for the invitation and knew that Lise would be happy to, as well.

Rita thought of Charlie. She had gotten in touch with him to apologize to him for running out that night. She told him about her salvation experience. This elicited the question, “Does that mean we can’t be lovers anymore?” Rita explained that the path of her life would be a celibate one from now on, unless she married, and urged him to get back with Anne, encouraging him to go to Rome, if necessary. His reaction proved less than enthusiastic. Oh well, Charlie was Charlie; it would be as God willed.

∞@∞

So far, Prince Charming had not visited either of their lives. As nice as that would have been, and as much as she longed for it, Rita knew it would be okay if it never happened. She had a dear, best friend in Lise, the two of them active in the child-care department of the church. Rita’s legacy would be in the lives of the children who came into her life through her efforts there. These days she spent more time praying more for Lise meeting the right man than for her own desires in that area. The sense of emptiness had gone, replaced by a calm assurance that she had become a part of God’s family and she knew in her heart that no one could take that from her.

Rita had contacted her mother and all her sisters, asked their forgiveness for her past actions and promised she’d be more faithful to visit and attend family affairs, like holidays and birthdays. She told them she wanted to get to know her nieces and nephews better. When the inevitable questions arose, she explained that they could attribute the change to her new relationship with Jesus. As Catholics, her mother and sisters initially expressed dubiousness, but Rita told them she understood and would continue to pray for them. One step at a time.

All her life she had longed for her “slice of the pie,” as she put it. Now she had access to the whole of it. Rita’s eyes began to fill as she considered how her perceived “curse” at meeting Ryan had been the instrument of her salvation. She thanked God for his working in her life and the unexpected blessings he bestowed.

∞@∞

“Hi, Rita!” the shopping-cart-lady called to her as Rita left her apartment. “Beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Hi there, Betty!” Rita called. “Hold on a sec!” Rita fished in her purse and brought out a five-dollar bill along with a small, orange booklet. “Betty, can I talk with you a minute? I have some money for you and something I want to show you.”

THE FOUR SPIRITUAL LAWS

LAW ONE: GOD LOVES YOU, AND OFFERS A WONDERFUL PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE.

God’s Love: “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

God’s Plan: (Christ speaking) “I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly” (that it might be full and meaningful) (John 10:10).

Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life? Because...

LAW TWO: MAN IS SINFUL AND SEPARATED FROM GOD. THEREFORE, HE CANNOT KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND PLAN FOR HIS LIFE.

Man Is Sinful: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

God created man to have fellowship with him; but, because of his stubborn self-will, he chose to go his own independent way and broke fellowship with God. This self-will, characterized by an attitude of active rebellion or passive indifference, is evidence of what the Bible calls sin

Man Is Separated: "For the wages of sin is death" (spiritual separation from God) (Romans 6:23).

God is holy and man is sinful. A great gulf separates the two. Man is continually trying to reach God and the abundant life through his own efforts, such as a good life, philosophy or religion. The third law explains the only way to bridge this gulf...

LAW THREE: JESUS CHRIST IS GOD'S ONLY PROVISION FOR MAN'S SIN. THROUGH HIM, YOU CAN KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE.

He Died In Our Place: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8)

He Rose from the Dead: "Christ died for our sins... He was buried ... He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures... He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred..." (I Corinthians 15:3-6).

He Is the Only Way to God: "Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me'" (John 14:6)

God has bridged the gulf, which separates us from Him by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, to die on the cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins. It is not enough just to know these three laws...

LAW FOUR: WE MUST INDIVIDUALLY RECEIVE JESUS CHRIST AS SAVIOR AND LORD; THEN WE CAN KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD'S LOVE AND PLAN FOR OUR LIVES.

We Must Receive Christ: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12).

We Receive Christ Through Faith: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

When We Receive Christ, We Experience a New Birth: (Read John 3:1-8).

Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive our sins and to make us the kind of people He wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Christ by faith, as an act of the will. The following explains how you can receive Christ...

YOU CAN RECEIVE CHRIST RIGHT NOW BY FAITH THROUGH PRAYER.

Prayer Is Talking with God

God knows your heart and is not as concerned with your words as He is with the attitude of your heart. The following is a suggested prayer:

“Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.”

Does this prayer express the desire of your heart? If it does, pray the prayer right now and Christ will come into your life, as He promised.

The Bible Promises Eternal Life to All Who Receive Christ: “And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and that this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life” (I John 5:11-13).

Thank God often that Christ is in your life and that He will never leave you. You can know, on the basis of His promise, that Christ lives in you and that you have eternal life, from the very moment you invite Him in. He will not deceive you.

DO NOT DEPEND UPON FEELINGS.

The promise of God’s Word, the Bible—not our feelings—is our authority. The Christian lives by faith (trust) in the trustworthiness of God Himself and His Word. Enjoy your new life to the fullest and be sure to worship and fellowship in a good church. God’s Word admonishes us not to forsake “the assembling of ourselves together...” (Hebrews 10:25). Several logs burn brightly together; but put one aside on the cold hearth and the fire soon goes out. So it is with your relationship to other Christians. If you do not belong to a church, take the initiative. Call the pastor of a nearby church where they honor Christ and preach His Word. Start this week and make plans to attend regularly. May God richly bless you!