

Roommates

By Karolynn Pargo

Photo - Numbers

Honorable Mention - Short Story

The name placard next to the door of the apartment across the hallway said "Brown, Jones, Smith, Williams". Ours said "Bobaltz, DeButts, Rondinella, Snethkamp". Despite our less than typical names, we were in many ways typical college students; finally starting to realize we do not know everything and probably never will. All of us had bloomed in college with good grades in majors that chosen as freshmen, still pleased and excited us.

We were strangers two years ago when we met while moving onto the same floor of the old dorm. By chatting through endless games of Hearts and Euchre, we acknowledged the fears and joys we shared in the journey of adjusting to college life and living away from home for the first time. It seemed inevitable that we would share our first apartment together. We chose Huron Hills, a new complex just off campus with a beautiful view of the Huron River.

Christine Bobaltz came from hardy German stock in northeast Michigan. She was so devotedly Lutheran it should have been tattooed on her forehead. Her morals were conservative. "Pristine Christine" we teased her.

She was not beautiful, but her sweet glowing innocence gave the impression of beauty. Although she could be talked into a beer or two, all the other vices were repulsive to her. There was nothing more important to her than to be a virgin bride. The three of us rolled our eyes, but she was resolute. Chris would be the perfect Kindergarten teacher.

I was the DeButts part of the nameplate; Karolynn DeButts to be specific. My paternal grandfather's ethnic origin was unknown, thus we never discovered the nationality of "DeButts", but since it spurred many jabs and jibes, my family decided to just accept it, and actually enjoy it. My childhood in the beautiful City of Cadillac was Disney perfect. Both my Dad and Grandad were preachers of some renown and I had privilege that was unseen by myself as a child. My family was not wealthy and could not have afforded college had I not been granted a full ride academic scholarship to Eastern. My plan was to get my degree in secondary education and return to teach at Cadillac Senior High School.

Virginia Rondinella was an Italian from New Jersey. She even had the accent and, according to her, a set of parents who were traditionally Italian in language and customs.

Ginny's face was dominated by a very large nose and framed by long wild hair that appeared to be plotting a takeover of the planet. She was one year ahead of us and already devoted to her future career in occupational theory. The age gap seemed greater because she was more mature in her wardrobe and mannerisms. Ginny had a hearty laugh but did not giggle. Her moral compass was defined and secure. She did not date, but loved to drink, dance and party down. She was not the best scholar of the group but none of us doubted her wisdom.

Mary Snethkamp was the daughter of the owner of a series of car dealerships in southeast Michigan. She was the only of us from a family of financial security which served us well since none of us could afford a car and Mary had a shiny brand-new blue Barracuda. Mary had polio as a child that left her with a minor limp made more noticeable because she walked with hard determination. Everything about Mary oozed with determination. I met her at age 18, but I am certain she always knew what she wanted and never doubted her own decisions. While we were living at the dorm, she became engaged to this great guy before he left for Viet Nam serving in the Navy. She was majoring in finance and management and had all the natural talents of compassion and foresight to be a great CEO.

The four of us created a mosaic of typical college girls ready to explode into adult life capable of excelling in our chosen careers. However, in the months before we moved into the apartment, each one of us was hit with the largest crisis of our life; mountains we were not equipped to overcome.

For over a year Chris had been dating this guy that she adored but the rest of us considered unworthy of her. He promised to be her husband, and therefore she need not wait for the wedding night. He finally pressured her into having sex with him, and then he promptly said "You were the toughest virgin I had to conquer. Thanks, I'll be on my way now". She was crushed. Her faith in her judgement of mankind was gone. Her sense of self-worth was gone. Her moral code was smashed. She was an unforgivable sinner. Every day was a struggle just to breathe. I arrived at Huron Hills and started the semester a few weeks late because I had to sign the papers surrendering my beautiful eight-pound new born baby boy to adoption. I assumed the grief would fade as I immersed myself back in my studies. I was wrong. Every day was a struggle just to breathe.

Over the summer Ginny found someone she wanted to date. To her surprise, it was a girl. Ginny tried to fight her natural urges, but then accepted them as a part of her true self. Her parents were not so accepting and told her she would be allowed back in the family when she rejected this life style choice. To add salt to the wound, her girlfriend moved on to another lover and Ginny felt adrift alone with her own confused emotions. Every day was a struggle just to breathe.

A month before the move in day, Mary's fiancé was killed in the war and his body was lost at sea. Mary could not believe that he was gone. There was no sense of closure for her. Her grief and disbelief were visible on her face and in her less determined stride. Everyday was a struggle just to breathe.

The first day we were together at Huron Hills there were tears and hugs without any direct discussion of the events that had taken away our innocence, our youth, our very breath. We were four radically change girls that looked into each other's eyes with a depth of compassion that we would not be able to find elsewhere. In time, we each opened our hearts to convey the details of our devastation, but in truth we discussed it very little and only in bits and spurts. We treated the apartment as a sacred place to have our sorrow wrapped in a quiet blanket of mutual love and support.

Months passed filled with our studies, and lots of Euchre. The idle chatting and teasing eventually turned to spontaneous fits of laughter that soothed our wounds. We even threw a few parties that were fun but not as wild as in the past. The school year came to an end. Three of us agreed upon a new roommate to join us at Huron Hills for the next year.

At Ginny's graduation party we were filled with a mixture of gratitude for what we had meant to each other and a sense of loss that this perfect foursome had come to an end. After we finished helping Ginny pack, we formed our traditional Huron Hills huddle; four girls in a circle, arms around each

other's shoulders, foreheads touching in the middle. We were quiet, tears slowly rolling. Ginny said, "Well, here we go off into the future. We will always remember that we gave each other strength just by being in the same room. Our bond will continue to give us strength even after years of separation, perhaps for the rest of our lives. We gave each other the support to stand. We gave each other air. We gave each other the courage to breathe."

Fifty years have passed. I have had many difficult times with problems that seemed unbearable. I have often found myself struggling to breathe and no strength to continue for another day. But I would think back to that year in the apartment at Huron Hills and of the wisdom of Ginny's parting words. Yes, I still feel the strength of the support from my roommates and I believe I always will.