



Unraveled

by Sharon K. Souza

Excerpt courtesy of www.sharonksouza.com

One

I lost my faith at twenty-four. Well, that isn't true. I didn't lose it. I left it. In a small village in Moldova, right there amongst the sunflowers. Just took it off like a vesture discarded. Not outgrown. Discarded. It left me feeling exposed, I'll admit, but I figure if God isn't capable of protecting the weakest among us, I'd rather work for someone else. Oh sure, he makes it plain that pure and undefiled religion is caring for the widows and orphans, as if it's my job and not his. And that was the thing, he let us down in the worst way. So I tipped my hat and shook the dust off my feet.

Which left me instantly unemployed half a world away from home. No one ever said I was farsighted. They did, on occasion, say I was rash.

After high school I earned my AA at Modesto JC, because the commute from where I lived in Linden, California, was easier than driving to Sacramento in rush hour. And if you ask me, one JC's as good as another. Sure, Delta College in Stockton was closer than Modesto, but that was too close to home. I wanted to feel to some degree I was going off to college, even if I came back home every afternoon.

I chose a community college instead of a four-year institution because, quite frankly, I had no earthly idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. I knew one thing for sure. I did not want to spend the whole of my adult working life in the family business, on the family compound, though that's exactly where I ended up after tucking my Associate in Arts certificate in between the pages of the family Bible. That's where we keep our important papers. Most everything pertaining to me can be found in the pages of the Gospel of John. Which is exactly where you'd expect to find my sister Johnnie, but no, I'm the firstborn, so I got first choice, and I chose John.

To understand this little quirk among our oh-so-many family quirks, we have to go back to my grandparents on my mother's side, krystal and blue karma, the original flower children of the San Joaquin Valley. As you might have guessed, those were not their given names. Mam was actually born Georgeanne Cattano, and Opa was christened Gary Ray Shunk.

They met at a commune in Santa Cruz the summer of '65. My mother was born the following spring on the floor of their flower power VW bus. They named their baby girl celestial bliss. No way do I want to know the source of their inspiration. They call her Celie and so do I, because I love the sound of it.

Mam and Opa took their new names the day they united themselves in togetherness, as a symbol of the new life they were creating. They exchanged love beads, rechristened themselves krystal blue karma, meant to always be said together, for as long as they were together, which was never intended to be forever.

But then the Jesus Movement came along. Mam and Opa went braless and barefoot, respectively, to the first church they found, sat on the floor in front of the first row, and grew up in God. They traded in their love beads for a marriage license, and went back to Shunk to make the whole thing legal, but they kept krystal and blue as their first names, and that's how they've been known ever since.

Celie married Michael Winters, my dad, at eighteen, had me, Aria Sage Winters, at nineteen, and my sister, Johanna Anise, at twenty-one. Celie loves classical music and Dad loves to cook. I bet you'd never have guessed.

The Shunk-Winters compound is one hundred twenty acres of prime farmland in Linden, California—and we're talking the filet mignon of farmland—only because Opa had the foresight of Superman or the inspiration of God, depending in whom you believe, to buy it in exponential increments, starting with ten acres in 1972, on which he planted orchards and more orchards of almonds, walnuts and pistachios. Mam, the one vegetarian holdout in our family, hates when I refer to our land as filet mignon, but the Shunk-Winters orchards are the best and most beautiful in the whole valley, maybe all of California. Anyone who knows anything about living off the land will tell you.

In the center of that one hundred twenty acres are four five-acre parcels, all connected like squares on a granny quilt. Mam and Opa's home is built on one square, the home Johnnie and I grew up in, where Celie and Dad still live, is another. The third belongs to Johnnie. She and Matt already have their plans drawn for a two-story Colonial. They'll break ground next spring, six months before their wedding.

I adore Matt, who was my first honest-to-goodness boyfriend, and I'd have been the one marrying him if it weren't for his name. Not that there's anything intrinsically wrong with the name Matthew Farmer. It's nice and balanced. And so is he. But one day during World History class my sophomore year of high school, instead of taking notes on Mr. Gates' lecture, I filled an entire sheet of purple college-ruled binder paper writing Aria Farmer. I wrote it with a back slant, a forward slant, no slant, printed, in cursive, in my finest calligraphy. Aria Farmer, Aria Farmer. Aria Farmer. And then, at the bottom of the page I found I had written, "Well, are he?" And there went the magic. I knew I couldn't go through life with that question on everyone's lips. Johnnie Farmer is no better, to be sure, especially since Johnnie's a political science major and plans to run for office one day. They'd do well to take her name instead of his if you ask me. But no one has.

The fourth square of the compound, of course, is mine, and I'd like nothing better than to drop the stitch that connects us and let the whole thing unravel. Don't get me wrong. I love my family, but I need my space. My forebears were at Woodstock, you know? It doesn't get any freer than that.

One year into my stint as the family business office manager, following my graduation from Modesto JC, inspiration hit like a tsunami. I wanted to be a missionary. In a far, faraway place. So off I went to Bethany College in Santa Cruz. Accidentally, the Shunk family had come full circle.

Ten days after graduating with a major in English and a minor in Missions, I was on a plane for Moldova.

“Window seat. Yes!”

I slide my carry-on into the overhead compartment, and myself into the third seat in my row, which is—dang!—right over the wing. What is it they say about the wing? Is it the best or the worst place to sit? I have a fifty-fifty chance of getting the answer right, and a ninety-five percent chance of getting it wrong. That’s how the odds work with me. Regardless, it certainly interferes with the view. But, hey, what can you do? I fasten my seatbelt, turn the air on full speed, and pull out my iPod.

Saying goodbye at the security checkpoint was hard for Dad, harder still for Celie. Not so much for me. I’m the adventurer of the family, the one who’d have sailed with Columbus toward that questionable edge on the way to the New World. Anything that would take me away from the compound. Celie fingered the chopped ends of my hair, then hugged and kissed me one more time. Her own blond hair, which, in my life, had always been short and funky, was now loads longer than mine. I smiled, she smiled, but I saw in her eyes that the changes taking place in her little girl’s life were more than about a haircut, and couldn’t we please just turn back the clock?

But it was hardest of all for Johnnie. Oddly enough, my sister and I are the closest of friends. We’re seventeen months apart, which hasn’t mattered since Johnnie started junior high. The longest we’d ever been apart, before college, was seven days when I went to summer camp while she stayed home with tonsillitis. Now here I was flying halfway around the world on a one-year missions assignment. She was brave, for Johnnie, when she bid me farewell, but her eyes did glisten. They’re normally blue-gray like Celie’s, but whenever she cries they turn to sapphire. No one would believe she isn’t wearing tinted contact lenses, when she cries.

I admit, when I hugged her goodbye I had to swallow a lump the size of the bagel I passed up at the airport Starbucks, and didn't get to say what I wanted to say. So instead I said, "See ya," like I always do, though the pitch of my voice was a good octave higher than normal. Then I handed over my passport to the lady in uniform, hoping I didn't look like a terrorist. Because I certainly didn't look like me. The image thrown back from every reflective surface I'd passed the past day and a half still caused me to catch my breath and stop for a second look. My hair, the one feature that had defined me most of my life, was all but gone. Until a day and a half ago I had Pantene-commercial hair. Long, lustrous, perfect. It's the one thing I don't mind being vain about because here's the thing: acquiring it was completely out of my control. I thank Celie, Dad and God, not necessarily in that order.

When I walked into Snippits, the salon I've been going to forever, sat down at Tana's station, saying, "Off with her hair!" Tana looked at me as if I were the Queen of Hearts, and brought a hand to her neck in defense.

"Off with it?" she said.

"Like this." I handed her a photo I'd Googled of a closely-sheared Winona Ryder taken at the Oscars a few years ago.

Tana dropped into the empty chair beside me and gaped at the photo. She'd been keeping the split ends at bay since I was old enough to care, and took as much pride in my hair as I did. "Like this?"

"I won't have time for deep conditioning in Moldova."

"Oh, but there's this new—"

"Off with it."

She stood and paced behind her station. "What if we—"

"No." I sounded bold as the Queen of Hearts even though my insides were quaking.

"Well, then we could—"

"No. Just do it. It'll grow back."

She shook her head. "You'll never grow it back, not like this. I can give you the stats. At your age once it's gone, it's gone."

At my age? I snatched the photo of Winona out of her hand and studied it. "I can live with this," I said at last. "Assuming I don't beat the odds." Which it was most unlikely I would.

“For a wedding?” Tana said.

“I’m not getting married, I’m going to the mission field.”

“You’re not getting married today, or anytime soon perhaps. But you will get married eventually, Ree, and you won’t want to look like the head of a Greek philosopher on your wedding day. Trust me, I know about these things.”

“There are extensions.”

“And to what would we attach them?”

“I’m going short, not hairless.”

Tana stopped pacing and stood behind my chair, her violet eyes catching mine in the mirror, imploring me. “I don’t know if I can do it.”

I huffed out a breath. “Tana. I’m not asking for assisted suicide. Now come on.”

“I just don’t think I can.”

“Then have Will make the first cut. You know how long he’s wanted to get his hands on my hair.”

Will’s head appeared around the column that separated his station from Tana’s. “Did I hear my name?”

“And everything else, I’m sure.”

He smiled, winked. “I’m your man, Aria.”

“Oh yeah? What would Tad say to that?”

Will raised his left hand and wiggled his fingers. “It’s not like he’s given me a ring or anything.”

“That wasn’t legal here before it was legal before it wasn’t legal again. But it’s never been legal in God’s universe.”

“Now, doll, don’t get preachy on me. Again.”

“Okay, well here’s the deal.” I held up a tantalizing strand of hair. “I’ll let you make the first cut, but the next time Opa comes in for a trim you have to give him your undivided attention for fifteen minutes.” No one could share the love of Christ like Opa, without an ounce of condemnation. Because once upon a time that’s exactly how blue karma needed it.

“Make it ten minutes and we have a deal. I think I can hold out that long.”

“Fifteen or I cut it myself.” I reached for Tana’s scissors to make good on my threat.

“Okay! Fifteen, but not one second more.”

“Deal.” I stuck out my hand and we shook, as I made a mental note to have Opa come in for a trim tomorrow. Strike while the curling iron is sizzling hot, I always say.

Will moved behind my chair and tied a plastic zebra-print drape around my neck. He lifted the scissors in one hand and a strand of my hair in the other. The smile on his face was ghoulish.

“Wait!” I cried. “Wait. Turn me around, away from the mirror. And make it count, Will. The point of no return.”

Tana closed her eyes like shutters on the world, as Will swiveled my chair one hundred eighty degrees. “You got it,” he said. I heard the scissors slice through the strand, then Tana gasped as Will held up a two-foot long hank of hair thick as a willow branch. “There you are, doll. Your point of no return.”

I watched as the hair fell in a heap on the floor. “Fifteen minutes,” I whimpered.

“Not a second more.”

Thirty minutes later, with a mangled mane of hair at my feet, Tana turned me back to the mirror. I swallowed, or tried to.

“Is it right?” There was a quaver in her voice.

It was exactly right. I blinked and blinked, and somehow managed to keep the tears from filling my eyes.

“It’ll grow back,” Tana said, though neither of us was convinced of it.

“I want a streak the color of Johnnie’s hair right here.” I indicated a spot just to the right of my barely-there bangs.

“What a sweet idea. So you can take your baby sister with you.”

I pointed to the back of the shop. “Go. Mix.” As soon as she was out of sight I pulled a laundered towel out of her drawer and blotted my eyes. By the time she came back with the color mixed and ready to streak on my hair I was hanging onto my self control, but only by a hair.

The controlled rumble of the Boeing 777 fills the cabin as a full load of passengers waits for take-off. I tighten my seatbelt, dump a packet of Airborne into my Avian and give it a good shake.

“Where ya headed?”

I turn toward the questioner in the seat beside me, the bottle just inches from my mouth. “Bucharest,” I say, because no one seems to have heard of Moldova. At least they’re in the same neighborhood. The woman could be a cousin, if not a sister, to Mam. She has the same spiky hair—sort of like mine now—the same wide mouth, the same sagging earlobes from the weight of her shoulder-length earrings. I can actually hear them tinkle when she moves her head, over the noise of the engine, no less. Mam would love them.

“Bucharest. Well.” She seems impressed. “I’m only going to Queens.”

I sit up straighter, thinking she might be an assignment the Lord has placed in my path. Someone who needs to hear the gospel message I’m traveling over seven thousand miles to share. Why not start now? Or, she might be a guardian angel. I mean, who better to bring along than Mam? I think about the lectures I heard in Bible class about the soul winning that takes place on airplanes, clear my throat, and am about to say, “Yes, I’m going to teach English to eastern European children, using the Bible as a text.” That should open the door. But while I’m donning my best missionary face, the woman slips on a Lone Ranger mask, tucks a travel pillow around her neck, and doesn’t so much as twitch a finger all the way to New York.

The businessman in the aisle seat keeps his eyes on his laptop and does his best to look busy—though I really think he’s playing Spider Solitaire—but it’s tough to talk around a passenger asleep in the middle seat anyway. Especially one who whiffle-snores. So, I work the crossword puzzle in the flight magazine the first hour, thinking what good fortune it was to have an early morning flight, if for no other reason than finding the puzzle unworked. I stick a four-dollar postage-stamp of a pillow between my head and the window and try to nap for the next hour, giving me a terrible crick in the neck. Then, till we land in New York, I browse through *Destination Bucharest*, the book Opa gave me just as I left the compound, because he couldn’t find a *Destination Moldova*.

Okay, so it's not really a compound. It's a picture postcard of a setting, especially during the summer when all you can see forever are the treetops melding into a huge expanse of powder blue sky, uninterrupted with anything except Mt. Diablo off to the west, rising up like a perky breast on the surface of the world. I know, the analogy would be better suited for a mountain named Mt. Diabla, but you get the idea. And all around the granny squares are a mélange of non-nut-bearing trees, two, three, even four times older than I am, shading our little nucleus from the hot sun that's so good for the nuts. And I don't mean the human variety. And, oh, the sunsets, so resplendent with color they're as much pain to the eye as they are pleasure.

A hard-slanting rain is falling when we land in New York. Not that it matters. With only a three-and-a-half-hour layover, I'm not going anywhere. Not that I wouldn't like to. It's my first time in New York, but can you really say "in New York" from the confines of an airport?

I head for the nearest Starbucks, knowing I'm about to leave the land of designer coffee far behind. I want one more *venti*, lite, caramel Frappuccino for the road. With extra whip.