

LIVING THE DREAM

By Janice Cotton

In 1959, I was 16 and living in Junction City, Kansas, when I discovered a book of poems titled Coney Island of the Mind by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The poems were unlike anything I had ever read and they made me curious about the beatniks in San Francisco. I would picture myself sitting in a North Beach coffee house, dressed in black, smoking a cigarette and listening to Ferlinghetti read his poems. Nineteen fifty-nine was also the year when my father burned my copy of On The Road by Jack Kerouac before I could read it. After thumbing through it, he called the book “trash”, but he would not tell me why. Of course, being a teenager, an incident like this just made me more curious.

Since I had been deprived of any information about the dark side of the movement, I was left with the illusion that beatniks were intellectuals who celebrated non-conformity and spontaneous creativity, drank coffee, wrote poetry and listened to jazz. This sounded cool, but I wasn't non-conformist enough to become the only beatnik in town; so I just filed the idea away as something to do when I was on my own.

The idea of moving to San Francisco was way on the back burner until after I graduated from the University of Kansas and had been on my own for about a year in Kansas City. The dream resurfaced when I realized that I was bored with my job and my boyfriend, my best friends were married, and I needed a change.

I arrived in San Francisco at night driving an old Chevrolet with all my worldly possessions, including my black turtleneck sweater and my book of poems by Ferlinghetti. I was tired and didn't pay any attention to the neighborhood. I had rented the apartment sight unseen from a friend of a friend before I left Kansas City. When I opened my window the next morning, I thought “Toto, we're not in Kansas any more”. The people on the street looked very strange with the girls in long skirts with bright colors and the men in ragged jeans, tie-dyed T shirts, and beards. This was 1966, the summer before the “summer of love” and either word of the hippy movement had not reached Kansas City, or I hadn't been paying attention. The law student I was sub-renting the apartment from had told me to ask the girl in the apartment next door if I had any questions. My first question was, “What's going on outside?” That's how I learned about hippies and that my apartment was in the heart of the Haight-Ashbury district.

Naturally, the first thing I did after coming to San Francisco was go to North Beach, but I had arrived too late. Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and their friends were nowhere to be found. The two big clubs, the hungry i and the Purple Onion, were both closed; and Carol Doda's topless bar was packed. The few coffee houses I could find were almost empty and nobody was reading poetry or playing jazz. The main reason I had come to San Francisco no longer existed. It was time to update my San Francisco dream.

It appeared that whatever was left of the beat movement had morphed into the hippy movement. As long as I was living in the midst of hippies, I decided that I might as well join them on a part-time basis. I went to a store on Haight Street and traded in my black turtleneck sweater and my black beret for a hippie outfit that I could wear to peace demonstrations, free concerts, spontaneous “happenings”, and the laundromat without being stared at.

I soon discovered that some of the underlying counter-culture ideas from the beatnik era had transferred to the hippies (anti-materialism, challenging authority, world peace, etc.) but there were major differences between the hippies in my neighborhood and the beatniks in my old dream. The hippies seemed to be much younger and more inclined to dance half-naked in Golden Gate Park than to sit in dark coffee houses reading poetry. Also, they were listening to loud rock music instead of jazz. I think my first exposure to Janis Joplin was at a free concert in the Park, and I was not impressed. My favorites from that era were Joan Baez, Bob Dylan, and Buffy St Marie.

The hippies on my street were friendly. They knew that I was working because I came home in the evening dressed in my work attire. I received offers of free drugs and free love if they could crash in my apartment and eat my food. I declined the offers. I'm all for world peace, love, and harmony, but communal living that involved supporting other people who were perfectly capable of working and supporting themselves did not appeal. Soon after I arrived, someone having a bad trip on LSD jumped off the roof of the building next door, so I wanted nothing to do with psychedelic drugs. For a short time it was fun to be on the fringe of the hippy community, but I could tell that I would never really belong. It was time to update my San Francisco dream again.

Much to my amazement, I found a group of people that I enjoyed being with at work. I had been a claims authorizer for the Social Security Administration in Kansas City and had transferred to the same job in San Francisco where the working conditions were very different. During my pre-employment interview in Kansas City, I was asked many personal questions about my boyfriend, the friends I shared an apartment with, whether I drank, when I planned to get married and have children, etc. I was also warned that Federal employees were held to the highest moral standards and could be fired at any time for conduct unbecoming a Federal employee. I was lucky to get the claims authorizer job because it paid more than the glorified secretary position that I previously held at Hallmark Cards' headquarters. However, I wasn't enjoying it. In Kansas City most of the people I worked with were much older, and I had very little in common with them.

In San Francisco it was a much younger work force. I actually found my co-workers to be more interesting than the hippies I met in the Haight-Ashbury. My first day on the job, the young women next to me introduced herself and told me that she was married but separated from her husband. They might get back together again; but in the meantime she was living with one of her former college professors. I asked her if she was worried about being fired for conduct unbecoming a Federal employee. In reply, she just laughed. Many of the younger people at work were Cal graduates who had heeded President Kennedy's call to "Ask what you can do for your Country." They were more interested in having a job that benefited society than in making money. Also, they liked living in Berkeley and several pursued passions such as painting, stained glass, and theater in their free time.

Then there was the cute guy several desks away who kept glancing at me. Finally he asked me out. We had a great time exploring The City together. He was almost as new to San Francisco as I was, but he knew how to get around because he had been stationed on Treasure Island while in the Navy. We were married three months after we met at Glide Memorial Methodist Church by Cecil Williams, the rather flamboyant young minister who would become one of the leaders of

the civil rights movement. We moved to a flat in North Beach and loved the Italian neighborhood. I even got to meet Ferlinghetti in the City Lights Book Store that he owned.

What did I learn from my experiences? I learned that the future will not match your illusions. However, if you take a risk and follow your dreams, they may lead you to a future that is better than you imagined.