



SCOTT HESS

# Among The Lillies

D'ARCY FALLON

**More** than a hundred of us lived at the Lighthouse Ranch, a former Coast Guard station turned Christian commune in Loleta, California. Loleta is a little dairy town nestled in the hills about a dozen miles from Eureka, which, in comparison to tiny Loleta, seemed as rough and trash-talking as a stevedore on payday. The ranch was perched on a steep bluff above the gray Pacific, and its namesake, an old lighthouse, towered over an ambitious garden of red-veined Swiss chard, stringy rhubarb, mottled pumpkins, and revved-up zucchini. A plot of land at the edge of the world, a garden where seeds took root and flourished in a coma of fog and rain — this was my home.

Many days I lay in my bunk listening to the waves crashing on the beach and the *splat-splat-splat* of rain on the sidewalk outside the women's dorm. Clouds over the ocean. Wind in the twisted cypress. If I closed my eyes, I could hear mold growing. The ground was a humid sponge that never dried out but kept decomposing underfoot. The windowpanes by my bed sprouted hairline fractures of dark green. Even clean cotton sheets fresh from the dryer quickly assumed the sweet-sour fragrance of curdled milk.

Listening to the steady rain, I wondered if it was raining on my parents' house near San Francisco. Just turned nineteen, I was in a tight cocoon, bound by worship and work. Time was ticking by, cycling through season after season. In 1973 — my second summer at the ranch — Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in a tennis match billed as "The Battle of the Sexes," the space probe took television pictures of Jupiter and transmitted them back to Earth, and women in consciousness-raising groups clambered up on tables with plastic speculums and mirrors, hoping to get a glimpse of their own inner space. Meanwhile, I drifted in a fugue of isolation; no newspapers or radios alerted me to the world outside. I might as well have been living on an atoll in the Pacific.

I had come to the ranch by accident. A directionless teenager, I was thumbing my way down the California coast when a ranch resident picked me up and invited me to dinner. After a meal of chard-and-barley soup, I sat with Sister Carole on the bluff and listened as she told me how much Jesus loved me.

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*Some of the names of people in "Among the Lillies" have been changed to protect their privacy.*

It was a story I'd heard many times before, not only throughout my Catholic upbringing, but also from high-school friends who had become Bible thumpers. The Jesus Movement was big in the early seventies, spawning en masse baptisms in the Pacific and altar calls in football stadiums. But Sister Carole gave the familiar sin-and-salvation story a new twist. She played her guitar and rocked back and forth, her voice ringing out sweet and clear and high. Then she recited from the Song of Songs:

My lover has gone down to his  
garden,  
to the beds of spices,  
to browse in the gardens  
and to gather lilies.  
I am my lover's and my lover is mine;  
he browses among the lilies. (6:2-3)

It was hot stuff. "Wow," I said. I immediately felt foolish. "Jesus is my lover," Carole said matter-of-factly.

I swallowed hard. It was difficult to imagine Jesus as anyone's lover. I couldn't reconcile the glassy-eyed, androgynous-looking man I'd seen in paintings with the lusty, flower-gathering shepherd of the Song of Songs.

"God's love is intense," Carole said. "God loves you very much." She idly strummed a few chords. "Do you know that? Do you know how much you're loved? God has brought you to this place. It's no accident that you're here."

"It's all karma, right?"

"No, you've done nothing to earn this, not in this life or another. This is about grace. Jesus wants to be one with you. All you have to do is ask Him into your heart. Will you do that? Will you pray with me?"

I suppressed the urge to giggle. Jesus: A sexy savior. A heavenly husband. A rescuing Romeo. A weird mix of Billy Graham and a Harlequin romance.

Carole clasped her hands and prayed, "Jesus, I know you're here. I know you love this woman. Please show her that you're real."

As Carole prayed, my mind swam with thoughts: *I'm so tired. This is bizarre. What if it's true? Is Jesus really the way? Is God my boyfriend? Oh, please. People will laugh. I can't take this seriously. But I want to believe. I don't care what people think. Shit, I'm exhausted. Why not give it a whirl? Am I a sinner? Did God really bring me to this point? Can a single prayer redeem a person?*

As if she could read my mind, Carole took my hands, cradling them gently like Faberge eggs, and prayed again: "Come into her heart, Lord!"

*Yes, come in,* I echoed in my mind. I imagined a man with bedroom eyes and long brown hair, wearing sandals and a white toga, striding purposefully up the walk to my house. *Brrriiiiiinnng!* The doorbell rang. The door to my heart, glossy as a red satin Valentine, swung open. Jesus stood at the doorway, an aureole of light behind his head.

*Come on in,* I said, welcoming the Lord in my mind. I

immediately began apologizing. *The house is a mess and . . .*

Carole gave my hands a final squeeze and stopped praying. "Amen," she said, as if everything had been settled. She smiled. "Welcome to the family."

**Like** any small community fortified against outsiders, the ranch was a world unto itself, with its own unwritten rules about language, clothing, and, of course, what it meant to be "spiritual." Women were called "Sister"; men, "Brother." Difficult situations or people were considered "trials." A trial, it was understood, could also be a blessing.

We tried to love one another with a holy love. The problem — then, as now — was ego. Everybody had one. In the midst of that striving, it helped to remember that personality clashes could serve a spiritual end: all that knocking could chip away the soul's rough edges until we were as smooth as polished glass. But then again, we were people, not rocks, and some of us had a low tolerance for friction.

A stranger first coming to the ranch would see only happy chaos and warm, communal belonging. He or she would notice the women in their long dresses, the men in their sandals and overalls, the excited children in their jeans and T-shirts. The visitor might also note the archaic formality between the sexes, as well as a certain intensity of gaze and sameness of speech — the way people reflexively said, "Praise the Lord," or, "Thank you, Jesus." But these are just surface observations. It would take several months of living at the ranch to sort out who really held the power, and who wanted it. And it could take a year or more to decipher the shades of meaning behind seemingly innocent words like *soul*, *family*, and *witness*.

I was blissfully ignorant of such nuances when I first came to the ranch. What I found was a strange and intense place filled with people who seemed to burn with a genuine love for the Lord. Of course, the fact that the ranch was miles from anywhere added to its romantic cachet. The brethren didn't belong to the Rotary Club or sell appliances at Montgomery Ward; they toiled in the garden, milked cows, made yogurt, and believed in natural childbirth. The ranch was hip and fed my craving for high drama and back-to-the-land experience. And although I couldn't articulate it at the time, living in that rustic never-never land was a way of postponing adulthood.

In the Book of Luke, Jesus says: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." My hand was on the plow. I was resolute about not looking back. "I'm in the hollow of His hands," I wrote my parents on Lighthouse Ranch stationery, which depicted a neat little garden and a large building overshadowed by a cross.

The year before, in the Bay Area suburb where I'd gone to high school, I'd smoked fat joints and tiddled wine. Buzzed, I'd whirled around my bedroom in my underwear, snapping my fingers and scattin' along to Van Morrison's "Moondance." Now I stood at church services in my embroidered corduroy jumper, thermal underwear, and scuffed hiking boots. I clapped my hands and weaved from side to side like Herman Munster looped on a bottle of Blue Nun.

**I**t wasn't all singing and bliss, though. Privacy at the ranch was as rare as meat for dinner. Sometimes all that forced intimacy felt like an endurance contest. Most of the women I lived with in the sisters' dorm were not my idea of perfect roommates. Some of them I tolerated, even loved. Others were, well, trials.

Ella was my chief trial. I felt certain the Lord was using Ella to humble me and do a work in my soul. (In the language of the Lighthouse, God often "did a work" in someone.) Nobody but God — or perhaps Satan — could've placed that sister in my path so often. Whether it was kitchen duty, weeding the garden, or sorting the mail, there was Ella, earnest and upright as a cowlick. Everything about her bothered me, from the little rickracked smocks she wore over her jeans to the purple-haired troll doll she kept on the shelf in her bunk, right next to her tube of Avon hand cream. Her prized possession was a poster of a curly-haired Jesus — handsome as a rock star — praying in the Garden of Gethsemane in anticipation of his betrayal and crucifixion: "My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

Ella slept in the bunk above mine. She awoke early and often spent the first half-hour in bed praying, aloud and with feeling. "Praise you, Lord," she would say. "Bless you, Lord. Hallelujah, Jesus. Jeeeeesus."

I lay on my back, staring up through the slats at the bottom of Ella's mattress. Closing my eyes, I tried to burrow back into sleep.

"Thank you, Father," Ella continued. "Oh, merciful Lord."

Once, I gently reminded her of what Jesus had to say on the subject of prayer — that you should do it in private, in your room, with the door closed. Ella countered that she was in her room, as much as a narrow, curtained bunk can be a room. She was right, but I resented her tone.

Ella was a country girl; she came from a farming community in California's Central Valley and knew how to can vegetables and make grits and gravy. She was moon-faced and stocky, with spaghetti-straight brown hair that hung down her back and a little gap between her front teeth. For such a short person, she gave off an intense vibe. A literal soul, Ella was completely lacking in irony. She was living with the unmarried women in the sisters' dorm only until her husband, Chuck, was released from the state prison at Vacaville. I didn't know what he was in prison for, but I did know that Ella was trying to honor her marriage vows and be a strong Christian witness to her husband. She hoped that when Chuck got out, they could start over, basing their new life together on Christian principles. She could barely speak a sentence without invoking his name.

"Got a letter from Chuck," Ella would say after the morning Bible study. "Oh, Jesus, give me strength." She'd sigh, thumbing through his letter, scrawled on yellow legal stationery. Ella, sotto voce, during her morning devotional: "Help me to deal with him, Lord." Or in the kitchen, chopping onions for potato soup: "Chuck hates onions." *Whack, whack.* "No, Chuck never has liked them. Chuck's a picky eater." She'd put down the knife and stare out the window at the parking lot, as if

expecting him to roar up on a Harley at any moment. "Wonder what they're serving for dinner tonight." *Whack.* "In that place."

In some ways, Ella and I were closer than two people having an affair. We saw each other in our cotton underwear, huddled together to warm our chilly backsides in front of the heater in the dorm parlor. Yet Ella evoked in me a disdain so deep that even now I barely understand it. She was simple and plain and vulnerable, completely without artifice. Why did I scorn her for that? Sometimes when the elders talked about how the Lord put difficult people in our lives in order to enlarge our hearts, I looked right at Ella.

But if the Holy Spirit was working on me, it was also working on Ella. She disapproved strongly of Gretchen, who slept across from us. Gretchen dyed her shoulder-length hair blond, did air-force strength-conditioning exercises in her pajamas, and, in true communal spirit, sometimes borrowed our clothes without asking. In another life, Gretchen had been a musician, and she still played the violin during church services. Her facial hair was so heavy that she had to shave every morning. I'd see her hunched over the bathroom sink in her baby-doll nightie, calmly running a Schick across her jaw. In the shower, she soaped her zaftig body and sang operatically: "I am nothing! Jesus reduced me to looooooove! Jesus reduced me to looooooove!" Then she would cackle.

Some days Gretchen was flying so high she couldn't stop talking. Other days she took to her bunk with vague complaints about "spiritual oppression." I liked Gretchen because she was campy and out there; she had a sense of humor and always seemed to be playing a character: consumptive Camille with PMS; madcap Heidi with a five o'clock shadow; Beverly Sills on teeth-grinding uppers. But Gretchen's mood swings grated on Ella, who was as self-contained as a baked potato. One afternoon, as I sat in the dorm parlor to rest up after lunch duty, I noticed Ella lingering by Gretchen's curtained bunk.

"Are you in there?" Ella whispered.

Gretchen's reply was subdued. "No, I'm not."

"Can I share something with you?" Ella said.

My heart always sank when people asked if they could "share something" with me. "Sharing" usually meant they were getting ready to make some cutting personal observation. The observation might be wrapped in sanctimonious language or Bible verses, but the result was always the same: a spiritual raspberry. I distrusted people who shared, and so, I suspect, did Gretchen. (This didn't stop *me* from sharing, though.)

"Please just go away," Gretchen said. "Tell me tomorrow."

*(end of excerpt)*