

“But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.”

1 Corinthians 2:9 KJV

1 Youth

La Grange county

It was a sunny spring day and recess was in full swing at Lander's Schoolhouse. The boys had run off to the softball field for a game while most of the girls were absorbed in conversation. That day, Doreen's best friend and fellow second-grader, Janet, stayed home from school as she was not feeling well. The inviting warmth of the sun coupled with her abundant energy; Doreen had to climb that tree. She was not in the mood to chat about housekeeping with the sedentary flock of girls sitting in a circle on the grass. Not only were they all older than she, but they were boring.

The bell rang summoning its students back to the white wooden, pitch-roofed building. Doreen scuttled from the branch to the tree trunk and shimmied down—tearing her dress on the way.

Eight-year-old, lanky, Harley Yoder was hurrying back from the playing field when he caught wind of the verbal assault on the pretty Shultz girl. When Miriam saw the ripped tunic, she had jumped at the opportunity to ridicule Doreen's appearance. Harley shook his head in sadness over the spectacle. Their parents would have been ashamed of such immodest and bold behavior on the part of both girls.

"Doreen, you looked like monkey in de tree. Now, you look like landloper! (Bum)" Miriam scoffed.

Doreen's chin puckered as she prepared to cry. "I do neit look like vagabond! (Bum) You lie!"

Harley understood Doreen's desire to climb trees more than Miriam's quest to berate, so he stood up for Doreen. "Miriam, do not make mijn vriendin upsit! (my girlfriend upset)" Harley ordered possessively and put his arm around Doreen. Everything changed in that moment; Miriam saw Harley as a man who had no problem putting someone in their place and Doreen saw her hero. She couldn't wait to tell Janet about the sweet thing Harley did, that made her feel so good.

Janet listened to her best friend recount her school day strife and was dismayed by Doreen's excitement over Harley. She knew, based on what her older siblings had casually mentioned that Miriam had a crush on Harley. The situation was precarious. In Janet's mind, there did not exist a more formidable opponent than Miriam Miller. For eight years old, she was a broad-shouldered, bossy girl who was good with a needle and could run faster than anyone. Practically the entire community saw her speed away from a stray dog, like an Olympian.

For the next ten years, Janet saw her position in Doreen's life as that of a referee and coach. She interceded many times when Miriam was around and coached Doreen toward any boy that wasn't Harley Yoder. Janet was a peacekeeper—so much so, she left Indiana with Doreen.

Lagrange county years later.

When Doreen mentioned leaving Lagrange, Janet saw it as the perfect solution for the love triangle involving Harley, Miriam and Doreen. With Doreen gone, Miriam and Harley would make things official and Doreen would just have to deal with it. Janet would help her through it.

“Mam and Pa, I have made my decision, I would like to live among the English for my Rumspringa,” Doreen informed her shocked parents. “Janet Holmes wants to go also; she is talking wit her parents dis nacht as well.”

Pa set his tin coffee cup down on the smooth, maple wood trestle table he built, and then he faced his only child, Doreen. Thoughtfully, he petted his long coarse brown beard. “Doreen, your mam and I trust you and we know you have been tinkering about dis for two jaar, now. We will allow you to go. We ask dat you write to us regularly daughter, we look forward to your return.”

Although Mam and Pa had been born in America, their German Amish Sect, which had descended from the Rhineland in Germany, was still powerfully traditional. There was no more to be said. They had raised Doreen in their beliefs and now as Amish tradition held the time had come for Doreen to be free to decide her future.

“Doreen, we vill miss you terribly and we vill bidden (pray) for your decision for Jesus,” Mam said from her rocker, her head bowed, and the needlework on her lap long forgotten. Mam’s face did not convey the fear gripping her heart while she listened to her beautiful daughter talk about leaving.

A spunky and witty child, Doreen’s curves had matured along with her independence. Her entire world was the Amish sect of Lagrange County, Indiana. She was bidding it farewell—for a season—to sample life on the outside of her community where no one spoke Dutch—only English.

Collectively, Janet and Doreen had five hundred dollars between them as Pa paid for a taxi to take the girls thirty miles to a bus station. They were about to officially begin Rumspringa before deciding whether to settle down into the Amish faith and culture for the rest of their lives. To Pa’s credit, he didn’t even ask where Janet and Doreen were going—he might have fought to keep them in Lagrange County if he had known the truth.

The girls decided on a destination while standing in line for a bus ticket. To see the world of the English, they chose to begin in a big city and Chicago, Illinois—two and a half hours away—qualified. Once in Chicago, where there were trains headed every which way, the girls would decide on a town to live in for a year.

People stared, of course. Two beautiful, seventeen-year-old girls in gray and blue discreet, plain cotton dresses drew attention. Their sweet young faces were framed in white prayer kapps and visible under black travel bonnets. They turned heads. Ankle length dresses covered their knee high black socks in thick-soled black, hand-made shoes. Doreen and Janet soon learned all the English stared.

The Chicago bus station seemed like another planet to the wide-eyed farm girls. They clutched their heavy quilted travelling bags and made their way past the massive twenty track platform. Then it was their turn to stare. The high arched, lit ceiling and marble flooring of the great hall captured their attention as they stood appreciating the magnificence of Chicago’s Union Station.

After locating a bathroom and enjoying the faucets with no handles, they visited an eclectic gift shop. While Doreen and Janet examined books, magazines, trinkets, and snacks; a movie playing overhead on a flat screen TV caught their attention. A handsome blond man with dimples was flirting with a lovely blue-eyed woman with silky blonde hair. When the striking couple

kissed, the girls were mesmerized—such passion and kissing! They marveled at the on-screen display; the likes of which they had never seen before. Doreen and Janet had never seen two people kiss; not even their parents.

Doreen casually removed her bonnet and ran her fingers through her wavy locks until her hair was free and full around her shoulders. “Janet, doss dis look acceptable?”

“Niet,” Janet answered laughing while removing her own bonnet, “but it’s our choice, is it niet?” Of course, unrestrained hair was frowned upon in their home community, but they weren’t in Lagrange County anymore. They giggled and continued watching the love story on the television.

To the amusement of the kind older woman at the register, the girls stood stalk still for the next hour and a half as they enjoyed the movie. When it ended, they selected a package of gum and a map of the United States, and approached the counter to pay.

The clerk eyeballed them and smiled. Mrs. Jerette had owned and operated the Union Station gift shop for twenty years. Until those two naïve girls with sparkling eyes appeared in her shop, she thought she had seen it all.

“So, you like Sweet Home Alabama?” she asked them. “It’s one of my favorite movies; I play it once a week in here. I wish I knew a man like Jake!”

Doreen blushed. “Ja, we just discovered dis movie, dank je,” she responded enjoying the feel of her free hair. Doreen hoped she resembled Jake’s girlfriend, Melanie, in the movie.

“You like Alabama?” Janet asked the clerk.

“Oh, yes! Alabama is beautiful. I have relatives there. Good luck, girls,” Mrs. Jerette offered. “It’s a madhouse out there.” She nodded her head toward the train station concourse.

Huddled in a corner, Janet and Doreen tried to avoid the hurrying throng of people walking every which way through the terminal. Janet asked, “Doreen, what do you tink about Alabama?”

“It doss seem like a nice place. Should we go dere?”

“Ja!” Janet said excitedly. She imagined thousands of sandy-haired, blue-eyed men waiting to kiss her, just like the man in the movie.

Consulting their map, they decided to spend Rumspringa in Mobile, Alabama, where they could also see the ocean.

France, years ago.

Gerard Bontrouver and his wife, Isabelle, lived an elegant lifestyle from the profits of Gerard’s family’s rubber and plastics manufacturing company, ENCO, in Orange, France. For Gerard, work was a forty-minute commute in one direction and the ocean was thirty minutes in the opposite direction. They enjoyed a lavish social life as Isabelle’s favorite activity was hosting the best parties at their two-story, five thousand square foot, Mediterranean home in Avignon, France.

The consummate businessman, Gerard assembled a team to investigate the potential of opening a site in the United States. Gerard and Isabelle both desired to live near the ocean.

“Keep us close to the beach or Isabelle won’t forgive me,” he told them.

In a matter of months, the business analysts had carefully worked all the demographics, marketing, and financials. Presenting Gerard and the board with their findings, the team concluded Mobile, Alabama was the ideal place to open a plant.

Isabelle was anxious about living so far from her parents, but she soon learned their American lifestyle would be incomparable. When Gerard showed her pictures of the seven thousand square foot French renaissance style home with an expansive view of the ocean, she was fully on board with the move to America.

With ENCO Rubber and Plastics up and running, and Isabelle happily planning parties, the Bontrouver life could not have been sweeter.

Everything was wonderful for the transplanted couple until the phone call from Isabelle's doctor. Oncologist, Dr. Haffener called to inform her of the tumor in her breast. The following two years were an endless stream of doctor appointments, as well as chemotherapy and radiation. During this trying time, a devastated Isabelle watched the last strands of her hair fall out. She withdrew from Gerard, who then poured himself into the mushrooming company. They were as strangers in their home, with Gerard eating alone in his office and Isabelle never leaving her bed.

"Isabelle," he urged, tapping softly on her bedroom door, "please come and join me for a cognac on the upper balcony?"

"No, I don't feel well, Gerard, you go," she rejected him meekly.

Gerard felt the only thing calling out to his abandoned heart was the ocean.

He spotted Amon, the cook, about to leave the kitchen with a biscuit and warm milk for Isabelle. "Amon, if Mrs. Bontrouver asks, I have gone for a walk to the beach," Gerard informed their faithful servant.

"Yes, sir, it's a mighty chilly evening sir, you might take a jacket and an umbrella," Amon drawled.

"This will do," Gerard said, donning his red sailing jacket and favorite wide brimmed Australian outback hat; a gift from an ENCO customer from down under. Deep in thought, he shoved his hands comfortably into his pockets and strolled toward The Anchor Bay Sports lounge.

During the last few years, Gerard had suffered sleepless nights, with no relief in sight for the pain in his heart. When insomnia would strike, he sought the ocean from the covered balcony of their stucco mansion on Manor Boulevard. Soothed by the crashing waves and fine mist in his face, Gerard would cover himself in a woolen blanket and smoke fine Nicaraguan cigars until fatigue overtook him.

"There will be no need for the balcony this night," Gerard mumbled, upon discovering Anchor Bay Sports Lounge was hopping with activity. A three-man guitar band played eighties hits for a small crowd while mounted televisions offered an endless stream of international sports. A dart competition was just getting underway, which freed up some tables and chairs along a wall of windows overlooking Anchor Beach.

With a magnificent crack of lightening, all of Anchor beach lit up like Christmas and the skies opened. Gerard knew he had the best seat in the house as he watched the two beautiful young women run toward him in the rain.

End of Sample Chapter. Visit : <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/returned-to-me-helen-bea-kirk/1128589519?ean=2940155241638>

