

# Powdered Sugar on Bare Skin

*by* Jerry Ratch

I arrived at 2:00 a.m. California time, taking the red-eye flight from Chicago to save on money. I had to take a cab all the way out to my son's so-called "trailer park" in the high desert country outside of Riverside because my son Harris had already left for his new job in Florida. All I had with me were two suitcases — two suitcases! That, in truth, was what my seventy-two years had boiled down to, after these low-rent thieves were finished ransacking my old apartment back in Chicago. I remember I was just sick when I saw what they'd done to my place. For all practical purposes, I'd been effectively stripped bare, though this was nothing compared to what I was about to encounter when I got out to California. I'd always had peculiar visions of what it might be like to live out your days in a trailer park.

But I have to say, it was during that long, quiet taxicab ride out from Los Angeles in the middle of the night, in a totally strange part of the country I had never been in, that I felt most alone and scared. Not scared in a safety sense like when the apartment was broken into, but scared in an existence sense. Not all things, I realized, followed the path of logic, and life did not always take the familiar turns one was used to taking on the way to the grocery store. How was I going to make it alone, I worried, in such a different location without friends, without either my son or my husband, who had passed away two years ago?

It was only about 45° F. which, of course, was better than Chicago in February, but somehow I was expecting to step into a balmy climate.

"Oh, it gets pretty damn cold here at night," the cab driver offered. "This is high desert country where you're going, but the

days warm up. Still, it's only February. Wait till May. You'll be baking like a roast turkey up there."

I didn't answer this man. After endless, brightly-lit freeways, we drove along a completely deserted highway. My apprehension mounted at where he was bringing me, while I thought back on the long but relatively uneventful road my life had already taken.

In the days following the burglary back in Chicago, I remembered going through a whole jungle of turmoil and emotions — from rage to depression, to a feeling of violation. Now everything I had left to my name fit neatly into two weathered brown suitcases, which I had to borrow, no less, from a friend across the hall, because the thieves had efficiently used my own suitcases to haul away my things. They had even politely waved good-bye to someone at the front door of my building, carting away my bulging suitcases as if they were heading off to college. In less than two years time since my husband Nathan passed away, life had been turned completely upside down; then with the break-in, things had gone from bad to worse.

Finally I had phoned my son Harris who was living out in California. I hated to bother him with my problems since he himself was always going in and out of one teetering business after another, but in truth I was pretty desperate. Whatever else might happen, I knew for certain I didn't want to end up in a retirement home with no familiar faces left around me. I guess my phone call must have sounded pretty hysterical though. I remember distinctly blurting out on his message machine that all the thieves had left me was a starched white blouse, my square-toe patent leather shoes, and some dresses. And of course my ragged leopard coat. I understood no one would want that rag.

When he returned my call, I tried making it seem less desperate. "I don't know why they didn't take my dresses," I told Harris. "My coat maybe I can understand, but my dresses? I guess none of the thieves were wearing a size fourteen short!"

"Mom, this is *perfect* timing," he responded to my surprise. "I just got an offer from a guy down in Florida to start a chain of liquor stores in Tallahassee. He has the capital, and I'll manage the stores in exchange for a good share in the profits. I'm moving down there at the end of the week, so you can move right into my trailer. This is perfect, just perfect! I really hated the thought of having to rent or sell the trailer just now. And this is such an idyllic place. It'll be half the cost of your apartment! This is a very safe trailer park with a guard at the entrance. This is great, Mom! You'll feel *safe* here."

He had emphasized the word '*safe*,' and I said: "I don't know, Harris." But the truth is I was ready to move, because safe was exactly what I was not feeling in Chicago anymore. My disappointment was that Harris would not be there, and I would truly be starting over alone. Still, I felt it was my only chance for survival since, adding to everything else, a note had arrived from the landlord announcing not only the latest rent increase, but a bill for me to pay as well, for the door that the thieves had bashed in. "Okay," I'd said finally. "Sure, Harris. There's really not much tying me down in this old town anyway. What the heck! I think I'm just going to call it a day here. Sure, I'll come."

At last the cab driver pulled off at a small exit, and we skirted the main highway along a deserted stretch that went over a low bridge next to a bluff. Then we turned and wound our way along a pitch black dirt road until we pulled up to at a tall gate with a guard sitting in a booth, seemingly out in the middle of nowhere.

"Well, I'm glad you knew how to get up here so easily," I said, relieved.

"Heck, everyone in L.A. knows where this place is," the cabby said with a grin. He actually winked at me as he pulled my two suitcases out of the trunk. I wasn't sure why he was winking, but I was certainly glad there was a guard and large gate at this remote trailer park. Having been born and raised in Chicago, it suddenly occurred to me that maybe there were wild animals out

here in the high desert. And who knows where this strange man might have been taking me?

The guard was expecting me, thanks to Harris having left instructions, and he drove me in a golf cart past several lanes of trailers and mobile homes until we stopped at Harris'. It was too dark for me to see much except some large boulders and a few low scrubby-looking trees along the side of the road. He put my two suitcases into the trailer and rode off with a whirl into the darkness.

The suitcases pretty much took up the entire floor space. The trailer was tiny and reminded me of an old boat we had rented one summer on Lake Michigan. All of the appliances were midget-size and built into the walls. A table was latched up onto the wall between the stove and sink, with a miniature ironing board hooked to the underside of the table. I looked around for the bed, and it took me several minutes to realize that the narrow green plastic sofa pulled out to become the bed. The room was so narrow that both the bed and the table could not be extended simultaneously. You either slept or you ate, not both. I opened the minuscule refrigerator and found a carton of milk with an expired date, one brown egg, and a six pack of beer.

The tiny room smelled of stale cigarette smoke, which surprised me, because I didn't know Harris smoked. I opened the two little windows and went outside to let the place air out. At first I could see nothing, it was so dark, but gradually as I became accustomed to it, I realized there were a million stars in the sky, and they appeared to be so low I could almost reach up and touch them.

This was a sight you never saw in Chicago unless you went way out into the suburbs, and even then, there was barely a star. It also seemed deathly quiet up here without the roar of traffic, or cars honking, or fire sirens off in the distance. For a city girl this was quite a culture shock. I had never camped out in my entire life. Suddenly, I heard what sounded like a hoarse rooster crowing, or a dog howling. It was really a combination of both. It was definitely the sound of some wild animal I had never heard before, and I quickly jumped back into the trailer and locked the door.

I didn't really sleep that night, though I think I dozed off for a few minutes on the green couch. When I awoke the sun was starting to come up, and I decided to take a shower, only to find that the pint-size bathroom had been partially converted into a little closet. There was a toilet, thank goodness, which I had used in the dark during the night, but the shower stall, I now realized, had a small three-drawer dresser in it, and a rope with three hangers stretching from the shower spigot to a hook on the opposite side. I began to wonder if Harris had actually lived here. He had always been so clean. As a teenager he had often showered twice in one day. I tried to maneuver the dresser out of the stall, but it was a tight fit and wouldn't come out. This was not how I expected to start my first day in my new home. Harris hadn't told me how small the place was.

I had gone from owning a quaint two bedroom home in a nice neighborhood, to a small one bedroom apartment, and finally to this — a miniature trailer with no shower. This was not how I had envisioned I would be living at the age of seventy-two. I wanted a vegetable garden, a bed with a flowered spread, and lace curtains. I wanted to play Bingo with my lady friends and bake cookies for the neighborhood children. I wanted Nathan and Harris to be coming home for dinner. This was not what I had hoped and bargained for. I could feel the tears forming in the corner of my eyes, and I would have probably sat crying for the rest of the day if I hadn't noticed something go past the window.

At first I thought maybe I was dreaming, or hallucinating from the lack of sleep and a high altitude. I peered out of the small window and thought I saw a man walking stark naked along a path maybe twenty feet from my trailer. He walked briskly into a one story cinder block building that looked like a small prison.

I quickly drew the curtains and scrunched down low on the couch. Maybe I had imagined the whole thing. My heart was pounding, and I could feel myself sweating although it couldn't have been more than 50° F. outside. I decided the only way to know for sure was to wait and see if the man came out of the building. I put

my face between the folds of the curtain and opened it only wide enough to let one eye peer out through a sliver. The curtain smelled of cigarettes and dust. My knees began to hurt from kneeling on the springs of the couch, but it was the only way I could look out of the window without being seen. In about ten minutes the man came out and quickly disappeared down the path between two other trailers.

This time I was sure what I had seen. He was a fat man, probably close to my age, and balding, with short stocky legs. I had never seen a naked man in my life, other than Nathan, and Harris, of course, when he was a young boy. My first instinct was to call the police, or maybe the guard at the gate. Still, I felt foolish saying there was a naked man streaking past my trailer. Harris had told me this place was safe. He had emphasized the word: *'safe.'*

Next thing, I started imagining the worst scenario of all. What kind of place had gates and a guard, was high up in the mountains away from civilization, and allowed naked men to run around? I remembered as a child walking with my mother past a large brick-walled building in Chicago and my mother pointing to it saying, "This is an asylum. People who shouldn't be out on the streets are locked up in here. It's like a prison for the insane."

I never thought about that building again until I was in high school and my class baked cookies for Easter to take to the patients in the asylum. We went there on a field trip, though we were specifically told not to speak to anyone there or make eye contact. The guard took our class around to various parts of the asylum which stretched over a two square block area. The sections were divided according to the severity of the patients' condition. The less severe ones were allowed to live in small units that all faced a communal garden. We saw them sitting on benches reading magazines and playing cards. It seemed like a pretty ordinary scene in any park until we saw a naked man run across the carefully manicured lawn with two attendants in full chase. For some reason that scene always stayed in my mind, and came back now to haunt me.

I decided to watch from behind the curtains, and within a few minutes another man, this one slightly younger, and wearing only sandals and glasses, went into the same cinder block building. I watched for over two hours, completely mesmerized by the absurdity of it all, and saw a total of eleven men and three women come and go from that building. All of them were without clothes.

It seemed to be some kind of communal shower, I finally figured out, when I saw the women wringing their hair as they walked along the path. The men for the most part were older, much like myself, and seemed to be overweight, with sagging skin and beer bellies. Two of the three women were also quite fleshy with breasts hanging down, and thick thighs that rubbed together when they walked. The third woman was quite the opposite, with small pointed breasts and long skinny legs. I wondered how long they had all been there.

I felt hurt and angry that Harris would put me in a place like this. I had enough money to fly back to Chicago, but not enough to rent an apartment and buy new furniture. I wasn't sure how to escape from this place either. How would I get past the guard, I asked myself, or even get down to the gate with two suitcases? It had been so dark driving up here, I had no idea which way was out. And what if I came face to face with a naked person on my way out? What would I say?

There was a phone in the trailer, but I wasn't sure who to call. Which one of my friends back in Chicago could help get me out? Who among them would even believe this? They would probably think I'd been drinking myself silly. None had ever been to California, and most were living on social security, the same as me. And what if the calls were being screened by the guards?

By now it was close to noon, and the sun was bright. I heard a rumbling sound coming from the opposite side of my trailer, and after peering through the curtain I saw three young men on a bulldozer starting to carve out an area for another trailer pad up the road from mine. Luckily these men were fully clothed in jeans and tee-shirts, so I dashed outside to flag them down. The bulldozer

came to a stop within a few yards of my trailer, and I shouted up to them, "Can you give me a ride into town? Please, please, I need to get out of here!"

The three stared down at me without saying a word. I ran back inside and came out with my purse. I held up a crisp twenty dollar bill to them. "Please, I beg you, can you give me a ride out of here?" I waved towards the road.

"Habla Español?" one asked.

"No, no. You don't speak any English?" I looked from one face to the next. They all shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads. Then the bulldozer started up with a puff of blue smoke and continued jerkily down the road.

I realized that I must have looked like a crazy person to these construction workers. I was still wearing the same skirt and blouse I had flown in and slept in. My white shirt was wrinkled and dirty from rubbing against the dusty curtains, and was half pulled out at the waist. My long gray hair, that I always wore in a bun at the nape of my neck, was falling out with loose strands and bobby pins hanging from one side. Also, I was getting to be enormously hungry now and decided I had to stop and look through the cupboards to see what Harris had left for me. When I opened the first cabinet, propped against a can of Campbell's tomato soup, there was a sealed envelope addressed: "To Mom."

I tore open the letter and out fell a hundred dollar bill. The note read:

"Dear Mom,

By now you probably know this is a nudist camp. I would have told you over the phone, but I know you would never have come. I promised Dad I would always take care of you when he was gone. I am sorry I couldn't give you a beautiful house to live in. This is all I have. It's really not a bad place. The people are very nice, and there are many activities. It's pretty quiet during the week, as only about sixty people live here full time, but it gets lively on the weekends when everyone from L.A. and San Diego comes. I'll call you when I



get settled in Tallahassee. I hope the \$100 will help you spruce up the place.

Love, Harris.

Ps. Sorry the shower doesn't work. The community one is very close to the trailer. You can see it out the window."

I didn't know if I should laugh or cry. I was relieved that this wasn't an asylum, but I was shocked that it was a nudist colony! I never knew Harris was a nudist. There were probably a lot of things I didn't know about him, I realized. Still, it was hard for me to believe that people actually chose this type of lifestyle voluntarily, but I wasn't a nudist and couldn't imagine becoming one. I wondered how long I could hold out before anyone realized I was not one of them. Would I have to go before a Board and explain that I wasn't a nudist? Would they just kick me out?

As I was pondering these questions, there was a knock on the trailer door and I heard a high pitched voice calling, "Yoo Hoo, Yoo Hoo, Harris told me you were coming. I'm Louise from trailer #6. I brought you a welcome tray."

I looked cautiously through the part in the curtains and saw a woman who had to be somewhere in her mid-eighties. She was standing on my little porch completely naked and holding a plate wrapped in tin foil. Her head bobbed up and down as she patiently waited for me to open the door. I debated what to do, but felt trapped. She knew I was here, so finally I opened the door. She came right in and handed me the plate.

"Hi, I'm Louise. You must be Regina. Harris told me all about you. He asked me to look after you till you got settled in. Let's have some cookies, dear."

She uncovered the tin foil plate, and there was a heaping pile of cookies covered with powdered sugar. She sat down on the couch and motioned for me to sit on the folding chair across from her. When she took a bite from a cookie, powdered sugar fell all over her wrinkled breasts and onto her stomach. I had never eaten with a

naked person before, and as I bit into a cookie, the powder fell all over my navy blue skirt.

"Oh, you better take that skirt off before you ruin it with all this sugar," she said.

"I ... I... didn't know this was a nudist colony!" I blurted out.

She laughed. "We don't call this a colony. That makes it sound like we're ants. This is a nudist camp. My! So, Harris didn't tell you?"

"No, he didn't tell me. I would never have come. I can't take my clothes off."

"Why not?" She looked surprised.

"Why not? Well ... well ... I don't want people staring at me, and in front of men! I don't have a beautiful figure anymore. I lost that years ago. It's just not right." I didn't know what else to say.

"Well, you're in luck, dear," Louise chuckled, "because a cold front is moving in tonight, and we're supposed to have storms for the next week or two. Maybe you'll feel differently after you're here awhile."

"You mean you don't walk around naked when it's stormy?" I asked.

"No, we're nudists, we're not stupid," she laughed. "You'll get used to it. Most of us don't have beautiful bodies anymore. Many of us never did!" she whispered.

Her head bobbed back and forth as she spoke. She had short white curls in a perm around her head and warm brown eyes. Her face and body were pleated with lines of age and sun. Louise stayed for almost two hours. We talked, we laughed. She told me about her past growing up in Cleveland, and how helpful Harris always was to her. The most interesting part was that she had moved into the camp at the age of seventy-two, my own age! By the end of her visit I had almost forgotten that Louise was naked.

That night I prayed for stormy cold weather, and my prayers were answered. Each night after that I prayed for the same, and again and again it rained. I thanked God for the bad weather so

I wouldn't have to go outside in the nude. But the awful truth was, it rained for fifteen days straight and the camp flooded. I felt incredibly guilty that I was the cause of such a disaster. My trailer wasn't affected because I was up on a ridge, but all the low-lying trailers had to be evacuated.

I met the other sixty permanent residents because we all had to pitch in and help in the crisis. I carried people's dishes and bedding to higher ground in the clubhouse where they had to sleep for weeks until their places dried out. Then we stood ankle deep in the mud, as I helped hose out the trailers, and in the process I got to know many of the people. We were all equal when our clothes were on, and I made several friends. I was one of them when we were dressed, and I dreaded the day when the sun would come out and they would realize that I was not a nudist.

I made a gentleman friend named Ray whose dog I saved during the flood. In no time it seemed we became thick friends. He would do all kinds of things for me around my little trailer, which had developed a leak right over the sink. It went plink, plink, plink, all night long and was keeping me up. Ray was very handy. Whatever needed fixing, it seemed like he knew how to do it, and he wouldn't even think about it, he just took the task in hand without complaining. I began looking forward to the time I spent with Ray, and yet I knew my time of truth would soon be coming. The rains couldn't last forever.

The day came that Louise threw a party for herself to celebrate her eighty-fifth birthday. She came by my trailer the day before with a formal invitation and handed it to me. She had herself all dolled up with a new perm to her hair and gold plastic sandals. There was no way I could refuse, and I agreed to bring a dessert.

The next day the rains stopped, but fortunately it was still cool and foggy. I took out my dark-gray pleated wool skirt and ironed a fresh white blouse, and pulled my leather shoes out of their box. I made sure to look my best and took my sweet time preparing for the occasion, because a small part of me was hoping that Ray would be there. However, after we'd been inside Louise's trailer no more than

an hour, the clouds began clearing outside, and the sunshine poured right down out of the sky.

It began really heating up in the trailer, and the ten ladies and six older gentlemen started moving outside. Before I knew what was happening, people were removing their clothing. I didn't know exactly where to look or, more accurately, where not to look. My untrained eyes would land on anything and everything, trying to find a neutral spot to rest. I saw pieces of buttocks and mountainous thighs and pendulous abdomens emerging. And then right before my eyes, as someone walked past me to get a drink, went a man's penis.

The sun was beating down by now, and people were slathering sun tan lotion all over themselves. The temperature must have risen twenty degrees in half an hour as soon as the clouds dispersed. I remained sitting in my folding chair that I had pulled outside in order to join the group, and sat holding a cup of tea which had long gone cold.

I didn't dare to move. After some time I noticed people were staring at me. Here I was trying hard not to stare at them, and suddenly the tables were turned, and they were silently eyeing me. I felt the intense heat of things blooming in my face. I didn't know where to look anymore. I wanted badly to just run away, but where to go? Honestly, where would I go now?

These people knew me by my first name. Hadn't we been working side by side moving their belongings to high ground just this past week? Weren't they the very same people I'd grown fond of being around? Hadn't I felt a warm sense of community among them? So, what was different now, that I felt I should run? I decided I would not run away; I made up my mind to sit still. And that was what I did.

The sun beat down harder, and I could see the thermometer outside Louise's door climbing past 90° F. I began to pour out sweat. I could feel it dripping down the sides of my chest under my blouse, and felt a dripping sensation under my woolen skirt. My nylon stockings were starting to itch. Everybody around

me looked cool and relaxed, and now and then someone would put out a smile that would sincerely touch me.

That was when Louise did an extraordinary thing. She took me by the hand and led me back inside her trailer. She said, "The time has come, Regina." She looked at me squarely, with her head wobbling the way it did. "You can use this space to take off your things. Come on, dear, you needn't be afraid. All of us went through the same thing you're going through, it'll be okay. There was a first time for every one of us. I remember the first time Harris came here for a weekend. He had the same difficulties you're going through right now. *When in Rome!* as they say." And she shut the door.

I checked in the mirror and saw the sweat streaks on my face. I saw how terribly uncomfortable I was, and out of place here. "Nobody back in Chicago will ever see me," I told myself. I looked all around the little room. There was nowhere to hide. "Oh, to heck with it!" I said finally.

I made a bend in the road at that moment — the kind that one has to sometimes make in life. I looked at my own shape in the mirror. "If Harris could do this," I said, "then so can I!"

I peeled off my clothes and opened the door of the little bedroom, stepping into the living room without a stitch on my behind. I could hear everyone laughing and talking outside. My time had come. I tried to make myself ready the best I could. I opened the door and stepped out onto the patio, wondering what in the world they would all say. But they said nothing. No one even looked at me. Without a word Louise handed me a bottle of creamy sun tan lotion. A glorious puff of wind swept down over my entire body, something I had never felt before, ever in my life, the softness of it, and I began applying the cream to my skin.

