

Sex, Drugs & The Tao Te Ching

by Marlan Warren

Chapter 1 from the novel: *Rowing on a Corner*

I found out he had died twenty years after the fact. It was his mother who told me when I called his old home number in Florida. The home he was raised in. It took some online detective work which had taken years before I realized that according to the "records" I found, Ed Clark was back living with his mother.

"He died of AIDS," Mrs. Clark told me in her Southern Fried Accent, her voice breaking. We cried together. She explained it was a blood transfusion gave it to him.

Ah, I thought. So she never learned the truth. Good. Maybe that's good.

Ed and I met in Tallahassee, Fla. during Fall quarter at Florida State University, 1970. I was in my sophomore year. In a very short time at college, I'd acquired much knowledge on what was "wrong" with me. The year before had elicited hectic changes as I careened through my theater major--starting college the summer after I finished high school.

The Theater Department was dog-eat-dog. The level of sophistication among the actors and teachers was at such a caliber you would have thought we were in New York City and not in a smallish college town.

My first roommate Debbie was a hippie chick who became a major activist with Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) before the summer was over. My second roomie Gloria was "in theater," like me. She was a hot number who urged me to lose weight and my virginity. Somewhere in an old album I have a picture of Gloria in full glamour regalia pressed against an oak, saying: "How about a picture of me screwing a tree?"

Gloria bet me that she could lose her virginity first, and she told everyone we met. One older guy said with a sly humorous smile, "I could arrange for it to happen at the same time."

I dyed my dishwater brown hair almost black and shed pounds because Gloria claimed that pudginess was my "safety margin" so I wouldn't get hit on by guys. My new "look" ended up attracting a handsome actor ten years my senior who was about to be married. It also attracted a drop-dead gorgeous bisexual young man. His interest confused and distressed me. I confided in a friend:

"He-he's a QUEER!"

This will give you some idea of the darkness from whence I came.

I found his attention flattering but was unable to piece together an understanding of his sexuality. Bottom line: I didn't quite believe his compliments and desire to hang out, and eventually, he stopped calling. Looking back, I realize now that his openness and affection paved the way for my receptivity to bisexual Ed, who would show up the following year.

At the start of my sophomore year, I was hanging out in my dorm room with my third roommate Merle when Diane called from the downstairs lobby and asked if I'd like to go get stoned in the woods with her and a couple guys. I said sure. One of them turned out to be Ed.

First, a few things about Diane:

Diane counted herself as a member of the counter-voice to all the mod artsy 60s folks who ranted about sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. That was the voice of the Radical Political Movement made up of anti-Vietnam War protesters and hip leftist students.

We met through a mutual friend, Betsy. It was Betsy's birthday and I brought a coconut cake that I made to her room. Diane happened to be there with some grass, so she stuffed towels under the door and lit up a joint. We got stoned and ate the whole cake.

Betsy kept saying how great the cake was. I said that I was surprised because most people don't like coconut. She said, "I don't. But this is really good!"

During the rap session that ensued, Diane reacted to my naivete. When I said I never heard of Phil Ochs, her brown eyes got huge: "Never heard of PHIL OCHS?" And later: "Marlan...Did you just say 'COLORED PEOPLE'?"

Diane was Jewish and dowdy in a hip kind of way with shaggy brown waist-length hair, Army-Navy clothes, thick glasses and big lips. I was intimidated by her knowledge which amounted to sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll...as long as it was "Politically Correct."

That sophomore year, I would visit Diane's room and pick her brain on those PC topics. I felt she knew something about life that I did not. And whatever it was made her a member of a very elite club.

Diane invited me to join a Women's Liberation "rap group" in her dorm room one day. One girl told about how she lost her virginity when her date raped her. My eyes were opening to the darker side of sex and women and men. In the elevator one day, I encountered my dorm neighbor who told me that she'd just had an illegal abortion. She was looking pale and wiped out. "After it was over, I would have gotten off that table and kissed that doctor's feet if I'd had the strength," she said.

Pretty soon I was spending more time hanging around the Socialist Party tables at the Student Union. Boys my age were coming back from Vietnam in body bags. I saw the film *Easy Rider* and took it as Radical Gospel. I tried to copy the easy chic of hippie/yippie women like Jane Fonda.

But I was actually feeling worse about Life.

The Theater Department was still there but I wasn't getting roles anymore. I was forced to do tech stuff which I sucked at. Gloria no longer spoke to me since we had a falling out. My new roommate Merle was studying to be a social worker and she was in love with a young man who was a music major and possibly bisexual. So we spent a lot of time talking about that. **One night, Merle tried logic:**

"So women love men. And men love men. Because...men are great, I guess."

Anyway. Back to Diane. And Ed.

One cold afternoon in January, my room buzzer buzzed and it was Diane. Asking if I'd like to go get stoned with some friends of hers. I go downstairs. There she is with two guys around my age--maybe a couple years older. One of them has dark hair and wire frame glasses over sharp blue eyes. He's seated at the piano in the lobby playing what sounds like classical music.

I asked what he was playing. And he said, "I just like to play around on the piano. Making up stuff." He never had a lesson.

Was I smitten then? Intrigued. Definitely.

We headed out to the woods. Maybe it was in his car. Tallahassee had awesome wooded areas far away from civilization (probably full of condos now). And sinkholes that behaved as lakes even though they had no bottom. The terrain boasts red "Georgia" clay (since it is basically "Southern Georgia.") and gets seasons (no snow but the FSU fountain would freeze over every winter).

The tall skinny blonde guy with us is a little goofy. He seems to know Ed pretty well and he's the one who presents us with the joint and gets it started from hand to hand. We stroll through the autumnal woods with its pretty leaves and crisp air, and during those moments I'm keenly aware that this is something I'll remember for the rest of my life.

Ed lights up a cigarette after the grass and the other guy starts saying, "Do it. Do it, man. Do that thing." And that's when it happens.

Cigarette in hand for gesturing and with a teasing smile, Ed begins to speak softly in a kind of verse. The words aim to provoke food for thought. What he says sinks into me with its obvious Truth and Mystery. I've never heard anyone speak like this, and yet I feel that I've always contemplated its meaning.

He weaves a bit forward and back to emphasize certain words. Almost acting out the prose. Pausing intermittently to let the dude nod and say, "Yeah, yeah...okay. I think I get it. But wait..."

The verses goes something like:

He who stands on his tiptoes does not stand firm.

He who stretches his legs does not easily walk.

*He who displays himself does not shine.
He who asserts his own views is not distinguished...
The softest thing overcomes the hardest.
That which has no existence can enter where there
is no opening.
Advantage belongs to doing nothing. With a purpose.*

He finishes. I am smitten.

You see I had no idea he was quoting from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. I thought he was making it up, but I still would have fallen hard because of this one thing that happened when we got back in the car.

The Dude asked Ed: "What about Love, Man?"

Ed shrugged. "Love is just acceptance."

Words that would change my life forever.

End of Chapter 1.

