

## SHARON LEDER

### *IN SISTERHOOD*

The last time I saw my sister Rachel, in a flowered moo-moo, love beads and blonde braids, she was behind the wheel of the Red Squirrel, waving good-bye to me from Gate 40, the Port Authority. She was eighteen.

A year later, 1974, I knew Rachel was still in trouble, when she called me from the Church of Perfect Planetary Peace in Portland, Oregon. She was quitting the church. She was disillusioned with Mark, the church's spiritual leader, and would no longer be driving the Red Squirrel, their cross-country bus.

I was twenty-six, living in a commune with five other women in a dilapidated but stately brownstone on East Fourth, around the corner from the Men's Shelter and the Hell's Angels. I was getting a divorce from a marriage gone bad, working days as a waitress on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, nights as a graduate assistant teaching English Composition at City College. Reading *Sisterhood Is Powerful* and *The Dialectics of Sex*, I began questioning religion too, but in a different way than my sister. If women weren't to be kept down, maybe traditional religions needed a complete overhaul.

Over the phone, Rachel told me she had been sleeping with Mark and hoped to become Mrs. Mark, the mother, so-to-speak, of the church community. "Before I discovered the church was a front for drug-trafficking," she said, "I learned that Mark was promiscuous. I wasn't jealous, Sara. I just couldn't accept his not making me Wife Number One; you know, to lead the church with him. There's nothing for me in Portland anymore."

How had Rachel become so screwed up? How could Mark, a Jesus look-alike who shook my hand feebly at Port Authority, have bewitched my intelligent, resourceful sister? She was born into the same cultural Judaism as me. Why in hell's name did she mix herself up with a fake guru, a drug-pushing womanizer? Why didn't she follow Kabbalah, if she wanted a more spiritual connection? Utterly torn, I felt a knee-jerk response to save Rachel from ruin,

an angry need to challenge her low self-esteem and male dependency, and a self-protective urge not to complicate my already hanging-on-a-limb life.

At City College, my PhD dissertation advisor expected to see my Chapter One in a month. A bald spot had already appeared from stress on my brown-haired head. How would I meet my deadline with a loose kid sister on my hands? Minding Rachel and sticking to my writing would be difficult, I thought, yet she could benefit from the order my commune afforded, the routines.

"We have room," I finally said, "but we also have rules. We rotate cleaning and shopping, we have weekly house meetings, and we're all in psychotherapy. The system would be good for you."

"I don't need a shrink," she blurted. "Waive the dumb therapy requirement."

"Can't," I said. "Take it or leave it. Plus we chip in for rent and groceries."

"No problem there," Rachel chirped. "I have a waitressing job lined up a few blocks from your commune."

"Huh," I managed. "How did that happen?"

"Mark's connections. He considers me one of his wives and set me up with the owner of the Dolly Deli."

In no time, Rachel attached herself romantically to Bernie, the deli owner, a greasy man approaching middle age, trying to make the Dolly Deli compete with the famous Second Avenue Deli, two blocks away. Rachel became a favorite with the regulars, the one she talked about the most being Major Bill, a former military man in his sixties whose diabetes was wearing his body down. She earned great tips and soon moved out of the commune into her own apartment. I could hardly believe how swiftly she was putting the broken pieces of her life together. Maybe, I thought, I can focus on my writing again.

But one night, before Rachel moved out, she sat me down in the kitchen, after the others had gone to bed. Outside, I heard homeless men shuffling towards the shelter.

"Sara, give me one reason to continue living," she said.

I sat there dumbfounded, frightened. Rachel had been making so much progress, I had no idea she was depressed.

"See, you can't," she said. "That's why I'm leaving the commune."

I looked at Rachel's pale face, her sandy hair and full lips. I had that sinking sense of failure and guilt I used to have when I babysat for her and couldn't stop her crying.

Now I said to her, "I can only give you the reason I have for living. I can't