



An excerpt from

Earliest 'Us'

First written and copyrighted 2007 by Dolly Berthelot, now part of the young love portion of her soon to be published book *Imperfect Love, Reluctant Caretaker's Candid Memoir--end of life mysteries, struggles, choices, and passages.*

Neither Ron Berthelot nor I ever joined the Peace Corps, but it did help to bring us together.

He was merely a casual acquaintance at Southeastern Louisiana College, a Kappa Tau fraternity brother to my Alpha Omicron Pi sorority. Neither of us seemed to fit standard Greek stereotypes. Occasionally we chatted, sitting with other KDTs and AOPis in the student union. In spring of 1966, shortly before I graduated, I went to meet with a visiting Peace Corps recruiter and was surprised to find Ronnie also there, like me, exploring possibilities. Afterwards we talked briefly of our mutual desire to travel, to explore and even live in different cultures, and to somehow have a positive impact on the world. None of this was typical fraternity-sorority chatter, at least not in our limited Southeast Louisiana world.

Though this encounter enhanced my friendly interest in Ron Berthelot, my romantic focus that year had been on a very different Ron, Ronnie Mire of New Orleans, whom I adored, and still dated occasionally. Ronnie Berthelot and I would become closer as—

not by choice--I saw less and less of the more elusive and problematic Ronnie Mire.

Eventually, my poem, "The Rock and the Wind," would contrast the two young men that came to divide my heart. The copy is long lost. Only the last line lingers: "One is the rock, the rock is real. The other's the wind, the wind I *feel*." Ultimately, I chose "the rock."

Though that unexpected Peace Corp meeting was an influence, my casual acquaintance with Ron Berthelot really shifted gears the warm June day we ran into each other while I was on work break from my staff writing job at the Hammond *Daily Star*, which I would soon edit. Sauntering toward the bank, he was a roughly attractive, dark, slender, brutishly hairy guy, dressed, as he often was then, in cut-off blue jeans, plain white tee shirt, and thick sandals, prickly five-o'clock shadow evident at mid-day.

Having just graduated, I was sharing a simple, cheap little old wood house with several friends: Gail Koptish, my 4-year dorm roommate and best friend from college; Margaret Eastman, a new *Daily News* transplant from Denver and a Texas Tech journalism student who became the key friend of my young to mid adulthood; and also sweet Phyllis Perrin, almost deaf and yet magically a great SLC majorette; and briefly, Mademoiselle Evans who'd been my exuberant French teacher from Aix En Provence. We called our small golden yellow clapboard rental home on Merry Avenue "The Marigold House." I'm not sure now if actual marigolds grew there, or we simply imagined them, as we imagined so much else during this period of life barely beginning.

On that humid summer day when I bumped into Ronnie Berthelot on the main Hammond business street, I spontaneously invited him over to the Marigold House. Margaret cooked one of her few specialties, shepherd pie or shrimp Newberg. Margaret was our chief cook. The rest of us made salad and washed dishes. We ate and chatted as a group at the kitchen table—nothing formal or romantic.

...On that first visit, after the group conversation, Ron and I continued talking, just talking, till 4 a.m. We found we were both concerned about and opposed to the War in Viet Nam and both despised racism and discrimination—positions that were NOT common among most locals at that time.

We were also both born and reared Catholics and had emphatically left the faith. The topic I remember most clearly was--of all subjects for a strange sort of "first date"--a review of the Ten Commandments! A critique, really, as we discussed the logic of each mandate, and concurred that, for the most part, possibly beyond the first two, the Ten Commandments made good sociological sense, offered a reasonable structure for humans to live together. We cared deeply about ethics. But we touted the Commandments for the purpose of a better world--not for a heavenly reward.

Although neither of us had yet even heard of Unitarians, our discourse predicted that we would feel at home in that theologically open, socially concerned, "free thinkers" religion—as we did, starting nearly two decades later.

As for love and marriage, we established immediately that we were both ambivalent about the very institution of marriage, stood firmly for gender egalitarianism, and certainly rejected the prevailing norms of woman in the kitchen, man at work...

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