

Chasing the Unknown

By Penny Randell

I had just turned 18 when I scored a role in the cast of a dinner theatre located in a prestigious area of downtown Fort Worth, Texas. Thankfully, my audition captured the attention of the director and he hired me on the spot. After three weeks of rehearsals, recognizing my dreams had come true, I was ready to perform for a live audience.

The first night on stage, as I was struggling to concentrate 100 percent, I noticed a young black girl waiting on tables just in front of the stage. Truly taken, I lost a beat of my dialogue, for I had never been so close to a black person in all of my life. After the evening had come to an end, I went out front where the girl was clearing tables, approached her and asked for her name. She replied, "Sarah. Can I help you?"

"No, I was just wondering about you. Have you worked here long? I wondered how you ended up here at this dinner theatre." After gazing into her eyes, it came to me: If she could sing, she should audition, for she was strikingly pretty, and early on I noticed her natural, unbridled movements to the music. And so I continued, careful to offer utmost respect, saying, "You must come for auditions some day; you will love the director."

She was terribly shy and barely gave me eye contact as she spoke, "No, I honestly wouldn't ever consider that. I just accepted this job three weeks ago when my mother found an ad in the newspaper for a waitperson. Because I love music and this place has plenty of it, I put in an application. I am blessed to have this job."

We stood there and spoke for several minutes before she informed me that she had many tables to clear and that she must get back to work. Without another word, I backed away and merely stated that I would be seeing her again. Weeks passed and I never failed to go out after each performance and greet her. I was totally taken by this young girl and actually wanted to befriend her, even though she remained standoffish with me.

After carefully relaying this information to my parents, it was made more than clear that my family did not know or want to know any black people. In other words, I was forbidden to make friends with any blacks if I wanted to remain on the good side of my family. My father, a deacon at our church, was most bothered with my news and in return made it clear that I was to distance myself from this new prospect and mind my own business. They were both quite descriptive when informing me about how blacks lived, and said I was never to speak to the girl again.

Maybe I was 18 and an adult, but my parents had held me tight since my birth. Adhering to higher standards, laced with adventure, was my personal style, and I had a penchant for chasing the unknown. On the other hand, disregard of family standards was not at all to my advantage. Indeed, I still lived at their residence and I had every intention on keeping the peace. However, I was not into giving up the girl and I still wanted to be her friend.

Back at the theatre I continued to visit with Sarah, inch by inch breaking down her dense state of shyness. She confessed that she knew few white folks and didn't trust a one of us. Asking why,

she simply recited words that made little sense to me. Somehow this girl developed a mindset of fear and she was well-vested in her convictions. “Whites think they are superior to us blacks and that’s just how it is,” she said. “My mother works for a white lady, cleaning her house. The woman treats my mom poorly and there’s nothing she can do about it.”

“That’s awful! Why does she continue to work for her? Can’t she find another job?”

“Well, it took her four months to find this one. I doubt she would do any better anyway.”

That particular conversation lasted for at least five minutes and then Sarah was back to work. I was relentless in my efforts to know her and was available should she ever reach out to me. As it turned out, Sarah did come around and we eventually declared a day for me to meet her mom at her house. She passed me the invitation one evening after I finished work. I was taken by the note, for it was quite official in appearance. The directions to her home were printed on the reverse side. The inscription displayed beautiful penmanship and simply requested my company for said date.

We had waited almost two weeks before the meeting took place. Linking up on like days off was challenging, as Sarah often worked when I didn’t. When the day of the visit did roll around I stopped at a food market along the way and grabbed a box of cookies. My parents were bullish on etiquette and had pumped me full of rhyme and reason as to how and why these rules should be applied. Turning up with empty hands was a confirmed no-no. In fact, I was just hoping my small gift would put me more at ease. Basically, I was scared and prayed heartily that I knew what I was doing.

Finding the residence was dead easy and I was there in no time. Nonetheless, I had never been to this area of the city, but I knew these were “the projects” where only black people lived. If my parents were right, I would be taken at gunpoint, raped and threatened into forever silence. On the other hand, I would simply park and look for signs given to me in the invitation, choosing self-will and ignorance to triumph over fear. Scarcely stepping onto the grass that outlined the designated property, I was approached by an elderly black man who asked, “Excuse me miss, can I help you? Are you lost?”

“No sir, I know where I am and I THINK I know where I’m going.” At that, I shared the written directions and he pointed out the group of appropriate buildings that included the apartment I was in search of. I thanked him; he nodded and walked away. As I approached the establishment I took a deep breath, said an abbreviated prayer, and turned the antique latch. The halls were dark and no one was about. I accessed the sign that listed apartment numbers just inside the door and proceeded to the second floor.

Along the way a prominent aroma seemed to swallow me, I couldn’t identify it, yet I wasn’t so bothered. What did bother me was the shouting broadcast from inside various rooms as I silently slipped by. What had I done? What if a white person wasn’t wanted there? I admit I was ever so leery someone would reach out and grab me. Thankfully, my ascent to the second floor went unnoticed and I was in front of the appropriate door within seconds. I knocked. Before the door opened Sarah’s voice greeted me asking, “Penny, is that you?” My positive response led to the

door's opening and a beaming smile from this charming young girl greeted me. "Come in and make yourself comfortable," she said.

Upon entering the apartment, I began to capture the confidence I had when at work. As she shut the door I was asked to take a seat in the room directly in front of me. It was bright, bathed in the afternoon sunlight that gleamed from the window facing the street below. "What a lovely room you have here," was my first response, as I took a seat on a brown, cloth-covered couch; the only place to sit in the whole room. "Your home is nice and it smells good in here."

"Yes, it smells good because we use house spray. Our neighbors all seem to eat the same thing and the halls reek of greens and corn. My mom and I don't like it and try to keep our home smelling of flowers. Thanks for noticing, Penny"

Just then an older woman entered and walked directly toward me. As she outreached her hand I stood and said, "Hello, you must be Sarah's mother."

"Yes I am. Please call me Evelyn," she replied while gripping my hand. Remembering the box of cookies I was clutching, I released my handshake and held the cookies out to her. Taking them from me she said, "Oh, my gosh, thank you so much! Here, sit and let's talk. Sarah, would you fetch some drinks?"

"Yes Mama. Penny, would you like a cup of tea?"

"Sure. That will go well with the cookies," I said.

While Sarah was in the kitchen Evelyn and I set the course for an educational and rousing conversation. I first asked about their apartment and if the two of them lived there alone. Evelyn took this opportunity to recite Sarah's history, telling about her absent father and her runaway sister. The father had taken to the road years ago when Sarah was three and no one had heard from him since. At age 15 the sister ran off with a neighborhood boy and only contacted her mother when she was desperate for money. At this time only Sarah and her mom lived in the apartment.

A bit of time passed and the young girl returned with a platter containing three tea cups, a pitcher, sugar and milk. After the cups were filled and the cookies were placed on a plate she sat next to her mom on the couch and joined in the conversation. "So, Penny have you ever visited this side of town? Have you ever been to the projects? What do you think?"

"No, I have never been here. Odd that I have grown up in Fort Worth and didn't know about these apartments."

Sarah returned my confession by saying, "These are not apartments. They are projects that were specifically built for poor black people. There's no one living here that isn't black. We have been here since 1962, almost 14 years now."

"Do you like it here? Do you have a car? How do you get to the theatre?" I pressed on.

“No! I hate it here, but this is all Mama and I can afford. If my sister Shawndalynn comes back she can help with the rent. After my dad left this was all we could afford,” said Sarah.

“That’s right,” chimed in Evelyn, “After my husband left we were forced to move in here. It’s not a good place to be, but this is all we can do. At least we have two bedrooms so that Sarah and I can have our privacy.”

“Where did you live before this?” I asked.

Evelyn answered saying, “We had a two-room apartment near a white section of town. I can’t say the neighbors liked us very much, but it was our home. Back then I had a special job and we could afford it, but when my husband left I had to quit. I really liked the white lady I worked for. She treated me with respect.”

We continued to discuss certain issues, including my background. At one point Sarah confided in her mom and said, “Penny has never known a black person before and that is why she is here.” Her mom wasn’t surprised, yet was more than curious as to how this friendship came to be. When asked, I answered and was brutally honest. I explained my parent’s position on the matter and said, “My sister and I have never been introduced to a black person. That has always been forbidden. And, as a matter of fact, I’ve never even had the opportunity to meet a black.”

“But why Sarah, and why are you here?” Evelyn inquired.

I reiterated the story from the first night at the playhouse and the first time I noticed Sarah, merely adding that I found her daughter to be charming. This part of the conversation lasted a good while. Evelyn was consumed with getting answers to her questions and led the investigation. She wanted to know **why** my parents had kept me from blacks and **why** they hated them so much. This was the first time I ever tried to explain such, and the answers didn’t come easy. In the end I simply said, “Perhaps they are afraid. My mother is from Detroit and my dad is from Ohio. Up there it’s not as peaceful as down here. I think they haven’t ever had a chance to know a black.”

Sarah added, “What about church?”

“Nope, not there either. I mean, Sarah you are the first black person I’ve ever spoken to, and Evelyn I am most thankful. Your daughter is a true sweetheart.”

The rest of our exchange was educational. Evelyn jumped at the chance to give me some black history concerning Ft. Worth. She began at the beginning, reciting clauses from the Emancipation Proclamation, stories about blacks and the Civil War, and on from there. She accessed colorful, descriptive words that outlined what the city was like while she was growing up. Indeed, there were folks that had been slaves, but few. This city, which has always been known as, “Where the West Begins,” somehow attracted only Southerners and many that were too poor to own land and with no need for servants. She continued depicting the nature of those that lived there and how unusually peaceful most folks were.

I learned that after 1865 the door opened to a few black entrepreneurs and there were actual black people running businesses. It was 1882 when the first black elementary school was erected, and black neighborhoods began to take shape. After World War II, shanties and project apartments like Evelyn's shot up. Still, the black people in such places were encouraged to stay in their neighborhoods and not to mix with whites. No, neither Evelyn nor Sarah had a car and both were dependent on the bus. The good news was that segregation was over and they weren't forced to sit at the back of the bus. Evelyn spoke of her hero, Rosa Parks and remembered sitting at the rear a few years earlier. In addition, restrooms and water fountains were now open to all. And surprisingly, the Star-Telegram newspaper had hired a black reporter.

In total, the three of us were together over two hours. Needless to say, my mind was heavy upon leaving, and all I could do was imagine how one might go about bridging the divide between black and white. It's easy to recall that afternoon and the emotional and lost mindset left within. Why? In truth, that mindset has remained indelible through all my passing years, while the evil, nonsensical divide persists. What can I do? Well, first of all, I don't ignore it. Secondly, many years after meeting Sarah I purposely placed myself in an all-black society in which I became the minority. If nothing else, I have made effort to walk in their shoes and in doing so, I have a smattering of reality going for me. Yes, I'm white and that's that, but I have lived in their world and earnestly understand their culture, mannerisms, and even convictions.

The drive home was a welcomed respite from what I had just experienced. My usual habit of singing with the radio was ignored, as I just tried to relive every moment. Evelyn's words were soft and gentle, yet beneath it all I could feel her anger. When describing her current employer, she almost cried and she made every effort to change the subject. Apparently, she was treated poorly and hated going there on a daily basis. Sarah, on the other hand, loved working at the theatre and she confessed it was her best job ever. When I asked about her future she said her current job and wages were the best she had ever received in life.

That night at dinner with my parents I said little. My desire to include them was powerful, but knowing how they felt, little could be said. I wondered what Sarah and her mom were eating and if they had enough. I wondered about all the folks in the projects, their income, and most of all...their happiness. Remembering the phrase, "We are to keep our distance from whites," particularly ate at me. If that's true, then how did Sarah score a job in a white dinner theatre? Little of all this made sense and I was teetering on guilt when my mother asked why I was so quiet. "I just have a lot on my mind, Mommy," was my excuse. Still, she continued to question me until I asked to be excused from the table. That night didn't bring much sleep. I felt victimized and ashamed.

My relationship with my new-found friend was short-lived. About a month after my visit, Sarah was let go from the dinner theatre. I wasn't there when it happened and was told about it when I got to work that same afternoon. She apparently had a disagreement with her immediate boss and he fired her. The waitstaff was pretty close-lipped over the whole incident and I could not gather any particulars. Needless to say, I all but cried that day. How could this happen? She loved her job and was so proud of it.

Sarah and her mom didn't have a telephone, so the only way to contact her was in person. A few days passed before I decided to go to the projects and find my friend. The following morning, I was up early, making excuses as to where I was going. Eventually I just said I was going to the Junior College to grab an application for classes. My mom was satisfied with my plans and I was out of the house by 9:00. I made it to the projects in less than 30 minutes. That travel time was extra fast, for we lived in the country outside the city limits and the projects were located on the other side of downtown. Fortunately, I was much more relaxed than the time before and I even sang with the radio on the way. I pulled into a parking space, got out, and headed for Sarah's apartment. Once inside I climbed the stairs and went directly to their door. I knocked, but there was no answer. About that time, the lady in the next apartment opened her door and shouted to me without stepping out, "What do you want?"

"I am here to see Sarah and Evelyn."

"They don't stay here anymore. They cleared out a week ago or so."

"Where did they go? Do they live here in the projects?"

"How would I know? Besides what do you want with them?" At this, she stepped out from behind the dense, wooden door.

Taking a step back I replied, "They are friends of mine. Evelyn works for a lady as a maid. Would you possibly know who she is, or where I can find her?"

"Look, I didn't really know them that much. Them two were always working. The young girl did get fired from her job. At least I know that. As for Evelyn...well, she works six days a week from dawn to dusk. That's why I never see her. But, what's a white girl like you doing here? Are you by yourself?"

"I worked at the playhouse with Sarah and we are friends. I met her mom about a month ago when I came here for a visit."

"Huh, well I've never seen a white girl around these parts and you better be careful if you're alone. Us blacks don't take kindly to white folk snooping around our homes."

We continued our conversation for another five minutes when the lady dismissed me saying, "Good luck finding them. I'm sorry I can't help." She stepped back from her doorway and shut the door. Alone and frazzled, I turned and headed down the stairs. Once reaching my car I decided to continue my search and place an ad in the building's entrance. Luckily, I had paper and pencil with me. Sticking it on the wall was another issue. So, I ran down to the local five-and-dime and purchased some thumb tacks, returned to the projects and placed the note where all could see.

Now, I was asking for trouble at this point, for I left my parent's phone number. What if there were prank calls; what if they found out I lied and I had a black friend? What had I done?

That night at dinner I ‘stole the floor’ for a brief moment and informed my mother, father, and sister that I had a friend from the theatre that may be calling. I went on to say they had moved and I lost their number. My mother was on it pronto asking, “Who is this friend and does she still work at the playhouse?”

“No, she left because of her husband’s job and that’s why I’m looking for her.”

Satisfied with my response, she, as the rest of the family, went back to eating. Later that night, while lying awake in my bed, I fought the pangs of guilt from lying, as well as the sad notion Sarah was gone forever. Truth is, I didn’t sleep at all and vowed to keep looking for my friend. The only good news to report was there were no prank calls. But then again, no one called. Unable to let it go, I did search endlessly for someone, anyone who might have a clue as to what happened. Obviously, they lost their home because Sarah lost her job, but they didn’t just vanish. Even the theatre was of no help and wouldn’t even tell me why she was let go.

Easily adhering to the roll of an investigator, I continued down this slippery slope, unwilling to accept defeat. After two days passing, I finally spoke with the manager of the projects. He, too, had no information and I was eventually at a cul-de-sac and had to relinquish my hold. Days passed before hearing anything from the projects. Then it happened. My mother answered the phone one evening and voice on the other end asked to talk to me. Refusing to simply hand the telephone to me, she engaged in conversation and finally discovered where the call was coming from. “No, you cannot talk to my daughter. Don’t call here again!” Enraged, she hung up the phone and turned to me for an explanation.

Confession came easily. I gave in a hundred percent and spewed the entire story. Perhaps I believed if I ‘fessed up’ I’d receive a lighter sentence, but that was not the case. After reciting the story, I asked for leniency and guaranteed it was all an act of curiosity, and even love. But, as it happened, I was torn and a birthing of natural compassion hit me like a ton of bricks. Instead of asking for forgiveness, I solicited love and understanding. In the end I resorted to begging, asking for help to find my friend. I was rejected and it changed the course of my life forever.

1998 Kampala, Uganda, East Africa

It was September and I had been living in Africa for more than a year. This came as no surprise to anyone who truly knew me, for I had an outspoken passion for Africa and had waited until I was in my thirties to get there. The year prior I was a university student in Anchorage, Alaska where I was pursuing a degree in biology. My church was active in the support of a Presbyterian mission in Kampala, Uganda. Somehow the minister of that mission talked my church into flying him and his wife to my hometown, as he was in search of teachers for his establishment. After three meetings with the couple, I agreed to tackle the assignment and move to Kampala. However, I did have a year to think it over. I was a junior at the time and needed that year to complete my degree.

The year was behind us in no time and before I knew it we were boarding the United jet that would begin our trek to Africa. I say “we” because I was traveling with my 11-year-old son who was in grade 5. The pros and cons of such an adventure had been meticulously studied and measured. In

the end, I saw it as an alluring offer to live where I had dreamed of all my life. My son was beyond joy and excitement and we both believed in what we were about to do. In fact, we somehow comprehended that we were led to the continent that would offer rewarding adventure and intense happiness. No doubt, I was drawn to black people and I longed to know the difference, if any, between us and them. Having the opportunity to actually know blacks and teach their children was beyond fetching.

The lesson I learned years earlier with Sarah had impacted me to the core. I never heard from her or about her since the day my mother took the tell-tale phone call. Nor had I ever received the chance to befriend a black since Sarah. While at the university I did meet a few, but never like Sarah. Those that were of color hung with their own and nobody ever seemed to cross over. There weren't even any black professors. True, Alaska was cold and not a place blacks often frequented, but still, there were precious few if any.

Grounds for moving to Africa were fostered with true conviction. Most of all, it was my eternal dream from childhood to live on the continent and discover in person what those who weren't born white were up against. When conversing with the Ugandan minister, I was confident he had answers and I believed he could teach me what was up with black versus white. I confessed to this man that I had known few blacks and my family was dead set against my moving to Africa. He comforted me and assured me that I would be safe and ever so happy at the mission.

That sounded pretty good to me. Life in Alaska had been stressful and I needed a break. After a four-year-marriage, I was forced into single motherhood. Fortunately, I was strong enough to handle whatever came my way and only cared about my precious son, Peyton. I had done well at school and graduated cum laude. But, now it was time to move on and make something out of my life. Africa was there for the taking and I was in.

On arrival in Entebbe, the Ugandan town that maintained the international airport, Peyton and I were smothered by the minister, his wife, and many church members who came to welcome us. We had never seen such a crowd and were taken by the kindness we received. After all the greetings, we were ushered to the minister's car where we loaded up our four duffle bags from home. The drive to Kampala was alluring and our excitement kept us reeling. We made the 35 kilometers in about an hour before stopping at a bank for me to exchange dollars for shillings. It was there that the bank teller tried to cheat me by short-changing me by thirty American dollars. It was the minister's wife who caught him and shamed him into a somber apology. "You must be very careful here in Africa," she said, "As we warned you, many are desperate here."

That was a statement soon verified by the obvious. On the way to the mission I witnessed poverty that made me want to weep. The streets were flowing with contaminated water that was often used as a toilet. Children were wrapped in rags and chickens were roaming in the streets. Not that I wasn't well-informed, for I had researched Uganda from bottom to top. I met with people who had lived there and read pretty much anything I got my hands on. I knew about the indigence, the malaria, and the basic struggle with day-to-day existence. But, seeing is like no other sense. I was taken aback and in effort to lessen the blow, I made a silent and earnest commitment to help the Ugandan people no matter where they lived.

The following days were filled with truly kind folks who wanted to see that Peyton and I were comfortable. Our living quarters were tolerable, especially when compared to the poverty-stricken area of dread. We were totally in the care of the church members for the first four days before being allowed out on our own. When we did go out we walked at least 12 miles before we took our chances on a matatu. This transport vehicle is a minivan that is licensed to carry 14, but more like 20 people are usually stuffed inside. Upon boarding we were told to sit at the very back of the van. Yes sir, just as it once was in America, so it was there, but in reverse. Both Peyton and I got a kick out of it all and had a good laugh as we celebrated our minority.

Sitting in the back of that van was the first time I have ever been able to liken myself to a black person and I welcomed it. For all the years I spent wondering what it was like to be treated different because of color, I was grateful. Maybe I wasn't black, but I was tapping into something that was bound to change my life. Not that we were discriminated against; no that was not at all the problem. We were different and we would always be set apart. It was like standing in a spotlight that you could never escape; miserable at times and ignored at others.

We spent three years in Africa before returning to America. We were accepted and taken seriously in almost every situation we placed ourselves within. Of course, money was often the instigator where we were concerned. Everyone believed we were wealthy and they often demanded a donation. We were robbed as well. The minister at the mission got his fair share, and so did others. It took some time learning to be safe, but we did it, and the theft pretty much came to an end. Oh, I harbored a fair bit of hostility at first, but the culture took me in and wooed me into loving them again.

After returning home, we first flew to Fort Worth to see my parents. While in Uganda they wrote a couple times, but I did not perceive any love. Clearly, they were worried about Peyton and wanted to find out when I was bringing him back. While sitting in front of their house I became ever so nervous. It was more than an arduous walk up the path leading to their front door. My father received me and I was invited in. Little was said before my mother entered the room. Once there she began to question me. "Why were you there so long? Who are those niggers to you? You are lucky to be alive. Do you really expect us to welcome you after where you have been?"

I began to sob a bit while working to come up with my deepest convictions saying, "Those people are some of the best I have ever known. They are gracious and kind. They accepted us as though we belonged. Please don't call them niggers. That word is forbidden."

"Hush! I don't want to hear any more, and I want you to leave. We don't want you here." At that she reached out and shoved me up against the wall. I said nothing as tears fell. My mother left the room in a huff and I was left standing there with my face in my hands.

Daddy finally spoke up at that point and said, "You two go on back to Anchorage and wait for things to settle down. You were gone a very long time and your mother can't forgive you for that."

"But Daddy, there is a very valid reason for my absence. My life has changed and the truth I found should be known. Who those people are and what they stand for is no different than us. We are all

God's children and we are all one. They loved us Daddy; they got past our color and loved us. Truly they did."

At this point Peyton was finally recognized. He, too, was sobbing and didn't know what to do. My father went to his side and gave him a hug saying, "It's alright and things will get better in time. Your grandmother is very upset and just needs to calm down. You both go now and I will talk to you once you are home." At that I ceased crying and went for my son in effort to comfort him. I squeezed hard and then turned to my father. Our hug good-bye was intense, to say the least, and it lasted several seconds. The door was then opened and the two of us slipped away.

I knew it would be long without hearing from my beloved family, but in the end the forgiveness took 11 years! It wasn't until my mom had developed Alzheimer's disease and my father felt obligated to let me know. Because of this despairing malady I was invited back into the family and forgiven. All those letters and gifts over the years were never opened, and some were even returned. That was some serious hate! However, Mother's disease meant the melting of memories and she actually forgot what happened. She lived long enough to fall in love with me and some of her last words proved it so.

Those 11 years counted for much more than hatred and separation. I first returned to the university and began work on my master's degree. Peyton bumped full-on into the life of a teen and attended public school for the first time in his life. More significantly, after years of coercion from colleagues and friends, I took on the uphill deal of writing a book. Indeed, 'Becoming African - the First 3 Years' has been written, although not sold. Refusing to budge on self-publishing, I am still searching for an appropriate venue. Focusing on those first three years, that turned out to be 22 in total, reveals adventure stories that read like fiction. Beyond this, knowing Africa without going there is pretty much impossible...unless you read my book.

In America it is readily presumed African Americans have nothing in common with black Africans. The truth behind that assumption can be found here on our own soil where thousands of black refugees intermingle with basic citizens. Fact is, some believe black is simply that...**black**. No matter the outcome of the debate, blacks are openly punished for something they have nothing to say about, and we whites stand tall and go free. That black skin enrages and repulses many. I say go live in Africa for a few months. **You** try the minority slot for a while.

But no matter what you do, live with what blacks have suffered at the hands of whites. How can one human score or count less than another? Peel back that skin... black or white, and all you get is another human being. Meanwhile, give it a chance. Who knows what could happen while chasing the unknown.