

Freedom: Another Word For Nothing Left to Lose

She should have entered her junior year of high school last fall. But during the summer she changed her mind. What good did it do to learn things like history, algebra, and shorthand? She wanted to be free.

So, on the urging of her pot-smoking friends, she left home. Music was her life, so she took her guitar and bongo drums with her. She got a room in a shoddy, third-class hotel and started to work singing at a lounge outside the city limits. At last, she was free.

Her parents work in a small laundry. They did everything they could to persuade her to return home. They went to see her. They prayed. They contacted her minister. But she had no intention of ever returning to that prison. Since she had a well-proportioned body, men (most of them married) gave her big tips. In return, she learned to give herself. It was fun. Exciting. Afterwards she would return to her grungy room and cry. But she was free.

Her friends were on drugs. First it was pot and speed. But that was kid stuff. It wasn't long before some of her friends introduced her to coke. And then to horse. She began to mix it with witchcraft and a little lesbianism. That was really swinging high.

Then she lost her job at the bar. She looked around for her men friends, but they had gone home to be with their wives. Her girl friends were worse off than she was. She called her parents and begged for money. They cried over the phone and pleaded with her to come home. But they refused to give her money for drugs. She slammed down the phone, cursing. She didn't need them. She was free.

Last week she came by my house but chickened out before she rang the doorbell. She left a note in the mailbox. She was leaving town. Three dudes had promised her a good singing job in New York City. Would I please go by the laundry and see her parents? Please tell them she loved them and was sorry she had caused them pain. She'd be back after she got her head on straight.

Free At Last?

I went to her hotel room. She was sitting on the side of the sagging bed. Her clothes, packed in a brown grocery bag, were near the door. A huge Janis Joplin poster leered down from the wall. An American flag, scrawled with hideous pictures of demons, was draped across the back of a chair. One corner had been dipped in blood, probably during a meeting of the witches' coven. The ashtray was filled with rancid marijuana butts. Her teeth were rotting. Her once

beautiful face was lined and haggard.

I bit my lip. This dingy, cracked-plaster hotel room was a microcosm for a whole generation of kids rebelling against authority—kids dying for reality but looking in the wrong places.

I stood in the door, looking down at her. "I feel like I'm 90," she said. "Some dude gave me the clap. I've gotta stop by the health clinic to get my V.D. shots."

She was the same age as my teenage daughter, but she talked like a burned-out street whore.

"H-h-how are my parents?" she stammered.

It was no time to mince words. "Heartbroken. They'd give their lives if you would return hom."

"Sunday's Mom's birthday," she said as though she hadn't heard me. "Would you go by and tell her I love her?" Suddenly the tears flowed profusely.

I shook my head slowly. "I'll not lie for you. If you really meant it, you'd go home and tell her yourself."

Free To Die...

She blew her nose loudly and wiped it on a corner of the filthy bedspread.

"You don't understand. Home is prison for me. They'd want me to go back to school. To church..."

Three skinny, sunken-chested dudes appeared in the hall outside the door. One had on no shirt. All had long, matted hair and scraggly beards. "Come on, chickey," one said. "New York is calling."

She gave me a pathetic look in which I saw the pleadings of an entire generation. "I've got to be free," she said.

"Like a plucked flower," I answered softly. "You're free only to die."

...Or Live?

She picked up her stuff and walked past me, following the boys down the hall. She never looked back.

That was a year ago. Last Sunday night I saw her in the back row at church. She had aged 20 years, yet beneath the thick makeup I saw something else.

During the offering she got out of her seat and started silently toward the front. A 1,000 eyes followed her slow progress. She was weeping. Two high school kids got up and walked with her. Half a dozen others joined them. By the time she reached the altar rail there were 50 kids around her—some crying, others laughing. All loving her back to God.

She was free. Free at last.