

*In 1970, Christie joined a New Age commune in rural Arizona to help create a better society. Join the friends at Bella Vida as they try to change the rules of modern society, only to face the repercussions when middle age sets in.*

## **Everything We Thought We Knew**

By Carolyn Niethammer

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The background of the image shows two women standing on a grassy hill, looking out over a valley at sunset. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm, golden glow over the landscape. The sky is a mix of blue and orange. The women are seen from behind, and their long hair is illuminated by the sunset light. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

# Everything We Thought We Knew

*Carolyn Niehanauer*

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# Chapter One

April's House, Pasadena, California

Spring 2001

From the time she was seven, April had a feeling there was something unusual surrounding her birth. An exchange of looks between her parents, a barely perceptible shrug, the lift of an eyebrow whenever the subject arose. Although the indications were subtle, over the years they added up.

What she knew was that she was born in the spring of 1971 on an old dude ranch-turned-commune in rural Arizona when her parents, Tommy and Sunshine, and their close friend Christie were in their alternative lifestyle, hippie phase. They had called the place Bella Vida, or Beautiful Life, for their hope of building a healthy, peaceful community. It hadn't worked out exactly as planned and it disbanded after a few years.

Whenever Tommy and Sunshine hosted friends from their commune era, they all reminisced openly and at length about war protests, drugs, their youthful sex lives, and even the law-breaking of some of the residents. Hard to believe the now-upstanding parents and citizens had ever been so young and reckless. It was clear they enjoyed reliving their more adventurous days.

At the age of thirty and expecting her first child, April found herself with a growing curiosity about the day she was born and why there was always this avoidance of the subject overlaid with a whiff of secrecy.

With her husband, Jason, gone on a business trip and the impending arrival that afternoon of her mother and Aunt Christie to help paint the baby's room, it was the perfect opportunity to finally demand the explanation she sought. Previously something had always held her back, a fear of the answer, possible unsavory bits lurking in the story,

maybe something she really didn't want to learn. Today, the push to know was overcoming the fear.

When the sounds of voices and laughter followed the slamming of a car door, April went out to greet her mother and aunt as they unloaded rollers, brushes, and three gallons of pale-yellow paint. How amazing that after more than thirty years of friendship, Sunshine and Christie, now in their fifties, still had so much to say to each other. It was the women's close friendship rather than a blood relationship that led to her calling her mother's friend Aunt Christie, not simply Christie.

After the kisses and hugs, the women smoothed out drop cloths and got right to work. At the end of two hours they had nearly finished painting and were touching up missed spots.

Now, April thought. Ask them. Now when we are all relaxed and laughing. So easy, but years of the old anxiety started her stomach churning. Get them talking. Slide in. Start with the easy stuff. She was tired of the mystery. She wanted the whole story.

April took a deep breath. "You know, Aunt Christie, Mom and Dad told me how they ended up at Bella Vida. I never learned how you got there."

Sunshine and Christie exchanged The Look, sending a message they alone could decode.

Sunshine shrugged. "Why the sudden interest in ancient history?"

"Oh, being pregnant and all. I'm thinking of my own beginnings. And Aunt Christie was there."

Christie stopped painting for a minute. "My arrival at Bella Vida wasn't exactly a soft landing."

"That's for sure," Sunshine said. "I was afraid you were going to get back in your minibus and drive away before we got things straightened out."

"Weren't you married to Uncle Dan at that time?" April asked. "Did he go to Bella Vida with you?"

Christie said nothing, staring into space like she was watching a movie. Then The Look between her and Sunshine. April had watched them communicate this way for years. “No, Dan didn’t go with me,” Christie said. “I went alone. And that ended up making a big difference. For all of us.”

April sighed. “I’m listening.”

Sunshine put her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. “There are parts of this story that you’ll wish you hadn’t heard. We were young and idealistic. We thought we could remake the culture.”

Christie sighed. “We made decisions that we thought were right at the time. We thought America had lost its way, so we decided to invent a new society. Part of that was trying out new ways of interacting with each other. We were so committed. Still, we also made some bad choices.”

April bit her lip. Did she really want to hear all this? Should what they had to tell remain hidden? And how did that relate to her birth? Despite their caution, she knew she had to press the subject, to find out what they had been holding back. She drew in a breath. “I’ve waited long enough.”

“Most of the answer you’re looking for is Christie’s to tell,” Sunshine said.

“We’d better all sit down and get something to drink.” Christie tapped down the lid of a half-full paint can and headed for the kitchen. “I’ll bring some iced tea. This will take a while.”

And so Christie began the tale April had waited to hear.

## Chapter Two

Los Angeles, February 1970

Christie's House

At twenty-five, when most people my age were settling down, I chose to strip my life of everything familiar. It was a combination of the Los Angeles smog, the political unrest wracking the country, and Dan's plans to tour Europe with his band that propelled me to take a chance on moving to Bella Vida. Early one morning I went out to our apartment balcony. To the west, behind the neighbor's palm trees stretched a yellowish-brown haze, like a blanket on the city, obscuring the mountains. It had been that way for days and newscasts were urging people to avoid outdoor exercise.

Hearing Dan behind me, I turned. "It's an ugly day again," I said. "It's going to kill us. That polluted air."

"You should be happy that we'll be able to escape it when we go on tour," Dan said. "Maybe it's not so bad over there."

"The tour. This means you're going to Europe? For sure?"

"Babe, we always were going for sure. And I'm expecting you to come too. It'll be fun."

"Explain to me again why you've got to go so far away. You've had plenty of gigs here. Great ones. You opened for the Grateful Dead last week, for goodness' sake."

"It may sound overly ambitious to you, but I want the Grateful Dead to open for *us*," Dan said. "This tour—it's what I hoped could happen for us. All those nights practicing, crammed in a basement between the water heater and the furnace. Years when a twenty-five-cent box of Kraft macaroni and cheese was dinner, and a quart of cheap beer was a luxury. For us it's the dream, *the* dream, the chance of a lifetime. I thought you were with me on that."

“I am with you on it. For you. What would I do? Stay in the hotel room alone every night? Or I could stand on the side of the stage looking silly while shaking a tambourine off beat. Both options are awful.”

Dan came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “I want us to experience this together and I’d feel terrible leaving you here alone. If you won’t come with me, do you want to go stay with your parents?”

“To my parents? Absolutely not. I don’t want to stay here either. I want to get away from L.A. Remember when we were back at the Human Be-In at Golden Gate Park? Everybody was so hopeful. I can still hear the guy who opened it. ‘Welcome to the first manifestation of The Brave New World. Love will replace hate and racism, peace will replace war. We’ll clean up the environment.’ Nothing has changed. Here in L.A., it’s the same old world.”

Dan snorted. “Maybe worse.”

“More pollution, more boys we went to school with coming home from Vietnam in coffins, not to mention all the dead Vietnamese. The pigs beating up peaceful protesters in Chicago. And worst of all now that they shot Bobby Kennedy, we’re going to have Nixon for a president. I’m totally bummed out about it.”

Dan was shaking his head while he helped himself to a bowl of granola, strawberries, and yogurt. “That’s quite a speech. I get it. What I don’t get is how come you’re all of a sudden so riled up.”

I pointed to a pile of tabloid newspapers on the coffee table. “Last night while you were gone, I started reading all this stuff that piled up.” I riffled through the papers. “*The L.A. Free Press*, *The Berkeley Barb*. All these people fighting for what they believe will save the world. I’ve been standing outside looking in and now I’m feeling this urge to really get involved.” I continued pointing out articles to him.



“What if everything we thought we knew is wrong?” I asked Dan. “When we graduated from college, we thought we were clear on how things worked. Most of these rules we follow and call civilization originated centuries ago. We’re in a twentieth-century world living by tenth-century rules.”

“Where is this leading?” Dan asked.

“I want to be part of trying to invent a new society. Toss out all the old rules and start fresh. Maybe some of the old ways will stay, maybe something else would work better.”

“So you’ll leave here? The lease on this place is up soon anyhow.”

“Remember when Tommy came to see you last year and asked you to donate to that commune he and his friends were starting?”

“Tommy—from fourth grade. He was always the squarest kid in the class. Last person I’d figure to become a hippie with hair to his shoulders, wearing a beaded headband and living in a commune.”

“I remember what he said, because it sounded really groovy. They found an old guest ranch, in Arizona. Really run down. The owner hadn’t done a thing to fix it up in years. When the guy died the place went on the market. There is a creek and some springs nearby.”

“This place has a name?”

“Something really hokey. What was it? Springville!”

“You’re making that up.”

“I think it’s on the map. The ranch is called Bella Vida.”

“This apartment isn’t exactly luxurious,” Dan said, his hand sweeping around the room. “But it does have all the modern conveniences. Sure you’re going to like living in a primitive cabin?”

“I don’t think they’re all that primitive. Tommy said that they have electricity and indoor bathrooms. It was considered luxurious in its day. Movie stars used to go there when dude ranches were a big deal.”

Dan shrugged. “Movie stars you can have here in L.A.”

“Anyway, there’s something else. It’s time for me to get into doing my own thing. I’ve watched some of these other band dudes. Their chicks are really into the Mrs. Rock Star trip. That’s not me.”

“I can’t believe you don’t want to come with us. You could visit museums. Since art history was your thing, I’d think you’d jump at the chance. Old Masters, Impressionists.”

“I saw most of that during my junior summer abroad. I loved it, but frankly, my art history degree is a waste. I’m working in a crappy poster shop. My customers think a photo of two kittens curled up together is art. Maybe being in the commune will give me time to find something better for me.”

“O.K., I get it,” Dan said. “Write Tommy a letter and see what’s up at the commune.”

“Really? You think I should?”

“You need to find out if you’d be welcome.”

“You talked your band into giving him your combined share of the gate from that Santa Monica concert to help buy the property. I’d better be welcome.”

Three weeks later, I was waiting when Dan arrived home from the warehouse where he and the other members of Hexagon were putting in 18-hour days refining songs, getting ready for the tour.

“I got a letter from Tommy today. He said I should come. He and his old lady, Sunshine, really like it there. They say it’s like a family.”

“I’ve always loved your independent streak. You do realize that life in a commune takes a lot of compromising. And this place – Spring City ....”

“Springville.”

“It’s really in the middle of nowhere,” Dan said. “How are we going to get you there? The band is flying out from the airport here.”

“I was thinking of driving the VW bus. You won’t need it to lug your instruments around.”

Dan laughed. “It’s pretty old—geez, it should be in a museum. Maybe we could get it fixed up. New tires. It’s been with us since the beginning. The damn thing is like a member of the band.”

“Since I’m going to have to take lots of stuff with me, driving the bus is the best I can come up with.” Part of me felt excited and fully engaged in my plan and that’s what I projected to Dan. But lurking below my outward confidence was the worry that issues I didn’t understand might make this a seriously bad idea.

The next morning Dan reminded me that his manager, Sid, was coming over to iron out some final details of the tour, and he wanted me to meet him. Through talks on the phone, I had a mental image of a rotund man with Mediterranean coloring. Instead I opened the door to someone who looked more like Robert Redford. I led him into the living room where Dan joined us.

“So you are going to stay here,” Sid said to me. “That’s a good idea.”

“Dan doesn’t think so.”

“Here’s the deal – even if the fans get that Dan’s married, if they don’t see you, they can still have their fantasy.”

“Which is?”

“That he could be theirs. Sure helps sell those albums,” Sid said. I cringed. This was the part of the rock star game I most disliked.

Among the arrangements Sid wanted to discuss was an appointment for a photo shoot for the band for some new event posters he planned to send to the European promoter who was handling things on his end.

“Look,” he said to Dan, “I want your hair over your shoulders. I want a golden veil. I want you to be every girl’s dream ... handsome,

exotic, unlike the schmuck sitting next to her in history class, but not too dangerous.”

Dan rolled his eyes.

“Christie, help him with it tomorrow – you know what to do. Crème rinse, whatever you got, babe. Dan, be at the photo studio by three. I’ll talk to the others.”

The next few months passed quickly, and then it was time to get serious about the move. My cousin Katie came over on her day off to help begin packing. She and I were sorting through glassware, deciding what to keep and what to set aside for the thrift store.

“Tell me again where you’re going?” Katie asked. “I’m not sure I got it last time. What are your plans—what are you going to do with yourself?”

“Maybe that’s what I’ll have time to find out. What did I think I was going to do with an art history degree...waltz into a job at Sotheby’s?”

“You’ve been busy.”

“Let’s see ... we moved to L.A., I was Hexagon’s booking agent for a while, then the job at the poster shop where I mistakenly thought I was going to deal with art.” I recall giving a snort at my own naiveté. “This is Dan’s big dream, and I’m so thrilled for him. But while he’s busy with the tour, it will be a perfect time for me to focus on myself for a few months. I’ll have a chance to figure out what’s next in a place where people are there to find a new way of life. To do it all better.”

Then Katie brought up the subject I had been relegating to the back of my mind.

“So what about the groupies?” she asked, wrapping a wedding present goblet in newspaper. “Aren’t they part of the tour experience?”

I shrugged, unwilling to share her concerns.

“If I had a husband like Dan, I would not let him out of my sight for more than a day. He’s gorgeous. He’s as close to famous as those girls are ever going to see. They want him.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve got him.”

“Think about these chicks. They’re eighteen, perky little tits. No nagging. Nothing but adoration. Hot and wet.”

“Are you trying to make me miserable?”

“No, I want you to be realistic. He’ll be gone for months – that’s a long time without sex. Have you talked about it? You want me to wrap up this fondue pot?”

“What can I say? He will tear my heart out if he screws other women? He should know that.” I took the pot and the electric element and put them in the give-away box. “I never did grok the whole fondue thing.”

“Well, what if it was a one-night stand? What if it was a one-hour stand in, say, London? The next night he’s on to Amsterdam, never to see her again?”

“And I’d never know...?”

“Nope. But it wouldn’t mean more than a handshake or a hug. In, out, gone. Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am.”

“I don’t have an answer.”

“Last time I was here for a party I met that new drummer – what’s his name? Yura!” Katie said, opening another package of tissue paper. “He’s going to be screwing his way across Europe, and he’ll be an influence. It’s going to happen. I don’t want you to be blindsided and devastated.”

“What Dan and I have is special.” I taped up a filled box and stacked it atop a group of boxes near the door.

By the first week in May, the movers had emptied out the house with the furniture and most of the boxes stored in a locker. The bus was packed with my clothing, a few basic household items, and a foam pad we'd used for camping.

Dan had decided to accompany me across the desert as far as Phoenix, then fly to New York to join the rest of the band to continue to London. That would mean I would have a three-hour drive from Phoenix to Springville alone.

We started out at dawn driving down the coast toward San Diego, then turned east toward the California-Arizona border on Interstate 8.

As the traffic thinned, Dan and I finally had our first chance to talk in days. What with the moving and the band squeezing in extra practices, life had been hectic.

"We haven't had a chance to get to the details about the money you'll need." Dan stretched his arm across the seatback, rubbing my shoulder. The open window blew in hot air.

"You said you wanted three hundred bucks. Instead, I've got you four hundred to start," he said. "It's in tens and twenties. You'll have to kick in for food and electricity I imagine. And gas. It should last a couple of months. When you get there, stash most of it in a private place. Probably not a good idea to let anybody onto how much you've got, or they'll consider it communal property. You should pay your share, but don't become Miss Moneybags. Blend in and be one of the gang."

"And when that runs out?"

"Write to Sid or call him. He'll send you a money order. The upfront costs of the trip have been huge. The bass even needed its own airline seat. Later the receipts from the tour will be coming in so there will be plenty for whatever you need."

"Sid seems a little slick."

“It’s L.A. And it’s show biz. We’re lucky he took us on. Sid’s the reason we’ve got this tour. He’s got the contacts. You’ve got his address and phone number.”

“How will I hear from you?”

“I’ll write. The first four stops of the tour are totally set so far. Sid will know where we are. He’s still negotiating.”

“You won’t call? I can’t imagine not hearing your voice for months.”

“I talked to Sid about it,” Dan said. “Here’s the deal. To call you from Europe, I’d have to call the operator and wait my turn for a transatlantic line to open up. It could take hours. It’s not like I’m going to be in an office where I can sit around waiting for a call back.”

“What if I need to get in touch with you?”

“Call Sid and find out the hotel where we are and send a telegram. It’s Europe, not the moon.”

The realization finally hit me that Dan would soon be on the other side of the planet. And I was heading off to the unknown. Was there even a phone at Bella Vida? My blood pounded in my temples. “I know it was my decision,” I confessed, “Now it seems like we’re spinning off into separate lives.”

“It’s temporary,” Dan said, patting my knee. “And anytime you change your mind, you could catch up with us in Europe.”

In Phoenix, we found a motel near the airport. We were settling in, and I was in the bathroom brushing my teeth when Dan called out, “There’s something I forgot to tell you.”

I came out, my toothbrush still in my mouth.

“I put a few extra traveler’s checks for you in the bus. I sold one of my guitars to finance the trip and there was a little extra money for an absolute emergency fund for you. It’s in an envelope under the lining of the glove box. I want you to sort of forget about it – absolutely do

not tell anyone. And if you don't need it, we'll use it for something fun as soon as I get back – a celebration.”

He told me to forget about it, and I did.

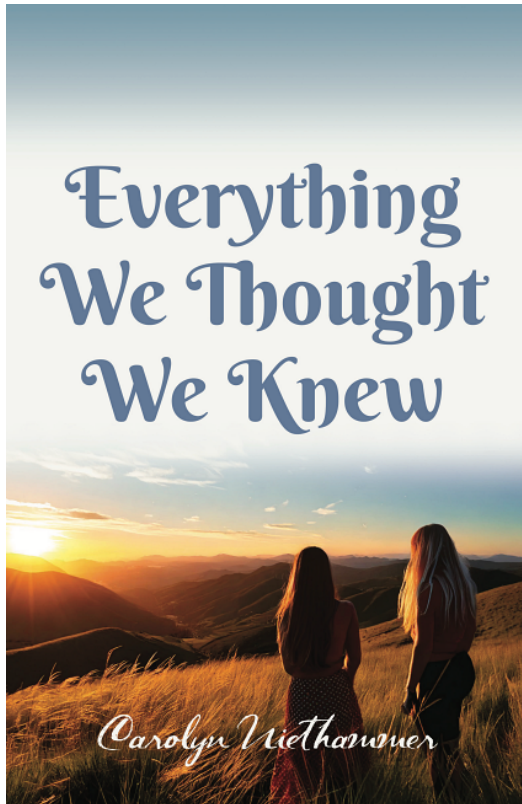
Fifteen minutes later, we were in the too-soft motel bed. Despite being exhausted from the long drive, the knowledge that we would be separated for months lent a desperate passion to our lovemaking. My emotion was so intense I thought my heart would break. When we finished, I collapsed, sobbing on Dan's chest.

Dan patted my back. “You'll be with me on the trip. I wrote every love song for you and every time I sing them, they're for you.”

Dan's flight left around noon. I walked him to the gate, and we exchanged one last kiss. Dan handed his ticket to the gate attendant and turned for a last wave. I took a mental snapshot: Dan wearing denim bellbottoms, a black T-shirt, and clogs. His wavy hair loose over his shoulders. Then with a spring in his step, he was gone.

I stayed at the windows and watched his plane climb into the sky until it banked over the terminal.





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