

The Vagrant

1964, Kaiserslautern American High School in Germany, and as I recall, we had just received our report cards. Shirley Findlay, good friend and fellow classmate, fearful of the response she would get from her father regarding some unfavorable grades in a few of her classes, decides she needs to get away from home rather than take the punishment she is sure to get. Being her "good friend" and somewhat of a sucker for adventure, (besides being extremely naïve), I volunteer to help her out by going with her. After all, she can't speak German, doesn't know her way around the country and has no friends outside of the Americans on the military base....but I do.

We take off early in the day, directly from school. It is drizzling outside...cold and unfriendly. We have very little money on us and only what we carry in our handbags. (Now I wonder what turnip truck did we just fall off of?) It is my brilliant idea to hitchhike to Hamburg...to the very famous Star Club where Ray and his band are currently playing. Surely we will find a place to stay there. Shirley, very thankful she doesn't have to go it alone, accepts my dubious advice.

Both Shirley's and my father's positions in the military dealt with classified information. I am just referring to this as it will be an important factor later on in this narrative.

Shirley and I hitchhiked to the Autobahn (freeway) and had no problem getting rides with a variety of commuters. We decided that it would be unwise to let people know where we were headed because it would be too easy to track us once it was discovered we had left school, so we told everyone we were heading towards Berlin. Each time we found a new ride we made up more of this elaborate story of how we had connections there. Our fare givers were kind enough to provide us with a snack and drink here and there so we were not left to starve along the way. Did anyone believe our tall tale? I have no idea, but they seemed to all go along with it and no one inquired beyond what we told them.

It was getting dark outside, the rain began to come down heavier and it was really ice cold by now. Our nice drivers had all gone home...disappeared in their friendly apartments, sitting at well stocked dinner tables with family or friends...tucked in to beautifully warm feather beds, reading good books or watching television. About 80 kilometers from Hamburg we were given a lift by a couple of truckers with ulterior motives.... "Hop in", they said. "You can sit on the bunk beds in the back behind the seats." The two truckers grinned and winked at each other. "We will take you to the next rest stop...rest for a while and then take you on in to Hamburg." Shirley and I were well aware of what they had planned. After another 40 kilometers, the rest stop came into view. Our traveling companions pulled in and feigned exhaustion. Really heavy rain now...almost sleet. "Oh good," I say in German to the driver, "Shirley and I need to use the bathroom. So glad we are stopping here for a while before we drive on in to Hamburg." The truckers let us out and point towards the ladies room. Out of the truck, Shirley and I run towards the Autobahn and flag down another oncoming truck. He doesn't stop. We run down the side of the highway and take cover amongst some brush. A few moments later we see the truck we had just left behind shooting down the road. So much for needing a rest.

We trudge down the Autobahn, soaked to the skin...this adventure has lost its appeal for me. I am wishing I was at home, watching television, drinking milk and eating some of Mom's chocolate chip cookies. A small vegetable truck stops for us, the driver, a young, friendly fellow says he will take us right to the Star Club. Shirley and I are relieved...not long and we will be out of this ill weather and seated in the club where the Beatles and many other famous bands entertain their fans with welcome and familiar music.

We get to Hamburg shortly before 11 PM. Shirley's thin and curly hair is ringed around her face. The friendly truck driver drops us off at the door of the Star Club. A big sign on the front confirms that this is the place. We walk in and are promptly told there is a cover charge. Shirley and I pool our finances and come up with enough to get in the door. We get in and walk towards the stage of this relatively large club...the band is on break....I look for familiar faces. No Ray, no one from his group is seated close to the front...the equipment on the stage is unfamiliar. Did we come all this way for nothing?

A tall younger man walks toward us. He must have seen some anxiety in our faces..we look drenched and tired. He introduces himself as the stage manager. I ask him about Ray and the Ebony's. Are they still booked here? "No." he says "They left several nights ago."

My hopes of having somewhere to stay are dashed. I look hopefully at Shirley but she says in a quiet, pleading voice "I can't go home, my father will kill me." The stage manager tells us where he believes Ray's band may have gone. In the morning he will give us directions to where he thinks they have their gig.

"You are American?" he asks. We nod and ask if he knows where we could possibly stay the night. "You can come with me to a club that is open after I am done here. It is where all the musicians and other performers go after hours." He buys us each a coca cola and tells us to wait for him.

Shirley and I sip on our drinks. We watch the dancers on the floor sway to the music.

Sleepy and hungry, we are not interested in dancing with the occasional late night clubber. We wait for the stage manager of the Star Club to fetch us.

It is after 2 PM. The stage manager leads us to his car and tells us we are somewhere on the Reeperbahn...the notorious red light district in Hamburg. The name Reeperbahn is derived from a Low German (Plattdeutsch) word meaning "rope-makers way"...or "rope walk". This is where ropes were produced during the 17th and 18th century for the nearby harbor area.

On either side of the street are restaurants, night clubs, discos and bars. Strip clubs, sex shops, brothels, Even a sex museum is located here. Nearby, we see the Operettenhaus, a well known musical theater as well as other famous clubs and Cabarets. Women of all ages walk this strip intent upon selling that which has been sold for centuries.

He stops the car and takes us down the Herbertstrasse, a short side street where barely dressed prostitutes sit behind store windows waiting for customers. Some are there with props such as whips, masks, handcuffs...signs in the windows tell us what specialty is offered behind the glass.

Back in the car we drive a bit further until he parks on a side street. Most clubs are closed by now he tells us, but this one stays open for the people who work in the district. There is no sign outside indicating it is a club. It looks dark inside. He knocks on the door and a sliding window opens at the top. He says something to the peering eyes from the inside and the door swings open for a second and closes quickly behind us. It smells like all bars and clubs smell,.... musty with an odor of spilled beer and other drink, smoke and a hint of vomit. We are led down a darkened hallway and through another door. Once inside we see it looks like any other club, tables and chairs with patrons seated around drinking, talking, smoking and laughing, a bar at one end of the room, waitresses rushing about with glasses in their hands.

The stage manager, Shirley and I sit at a table where several others are already seated. We are introduced as friends visiting from America. A round of drinks are ordered...Shirley and I drink coca cola. It is served as it frequently is in Germany, without ice. We are not sure of what to expect in this place. I look around and begin to see faces I recognize...bands I have seen before. A band from Holland, the singer waves at me as he knows he has seen me somewhere before too,

The Rattles are next to us at a table. They are a popular German group with quite a few hits found on every juke box,

Pete Best is sitting on one side of the room with some of his band members.

The stage manager points out Astrid Kirchherr, photographer and girlfriend of Stuart Sutcliffe, bass player for the Beatles who tragically died in 1962. She is chatting with what looks like a transvestite at the bar.

I search out the ladies room. It is downstairs in a subfloor. I hear the music from the juke box upstairs. Diana Ross and the Supremes are singing "Baby, baby, baby, Baby don't you leave me. Oh don't leave me, all by myself". The 1964 hit is played over and over on the jukebox by Astrid.

Back upstairs, after gaining a second wind, I join in the conversations going on around me. Sometime during the night, an older man walks in and sits at our table. He offers us a cigarette. "Don't smoke", we assure him. He then pulls out a pouch with an assortment of pills. Some in the club come up to him and hand him cash for which he provides them with (we assumed) drugs. I make a mental note of how he looks and of the clothes he wears. He has a lovely gold ring with a beautiful black stone on his right hand. He has a mustache and a beard. Everyone seems to know him, some buy from him, others do not. After a while he moves to another table further back in the club. It is daylight outside and the stage manager says it is time to leave.

Shirley and I slip on our jackets and are relieved to walk out into the fresh air. He will escort us to the Autobahn, he says, and send us on our way in the right direction. I think it

is unusual that he is not driving us. Maybe the highway is close by? We walk down an alleyway and reach a street we had been on before.

Suddenly, the stage manager stops and looks at me apologetically, "I think you may need more assistance than I am able to give you" he says. "Let's go in here. We can ask what would be the easiest route for you." I look up at the entrance of the building he is referring to and see the sign "POLIZEI Davidwache", the well known police station in the district of St. Pauli on the Reeperbahn. Had not a couple of police officers just exited the building and headed towards us I would have grabbed Shirley and started running...but, under the circumstances, I know our chances of getting away are slim and so allow the Star Club stage manager to address the policemen. They look at all of us suspiciously. Shirley, realizing what is about to happen, reaches in her handbag and pulls out a vial of tablets and downs them all in one gulp. Before the police are even aware of what has happened, she proceeds to take out a bottle of liquid from her bag...thick, creamy light colored stuff. She drinks it all.

"What was that?" I ask as I pull the bottle out of her hand. "Liquid make-up?" I read on the label. Does she think that will do her in?

The two officers grapple for the bottle and Shirley begins to scream. I try to explain to the police that Shirley has just taken a handful of unknown pills and swallowed them down with the bottle of liquid make-up. The stage manager is led inside the station with us and before I know it, Shirley is whisked away to the closest hospital.

I get questioned by the local "sheriff's" and tell them what they want to know. "Yes, we are the two girls being searched for by the whole of American military police in Germany." (Oh my god!) "No, we were not abducted, we just decided to leave home for personal reasons." (that sounds convincing). I pass on all the details about the older man in the after hours club, the one who appeared to be selling drugs, I thought. My interviewer is very interested in that information and takes down all I say.

The man from the Star Club is explaining to the police, seated at another desk, that he was concerned we would find only trouble "out there" and he is convinced that we are rather naïve and innocent young girls...runaways in fact. He is hoping to prevent something terrible from happening to us, etc. After giving his statement he looks at me and waves good bye. I wave back a bit miffed but knowing that he only has our best interests in mind. I am booked, charged with vagrancy (no money in my pocket).

I am told that our parents have been frantic and that Shirley will be back with me in a couple of hours...they take all my personal belongings and lock me in a cell (usually frequented by "real criminals" according to the policeman who fingerprints me). He says we are being held for our own good.

In the cell, alone, I sit on a wooden bench and see the various scribbles on the walls. Hateful things, words written by individuals who object to authority. Despicable words

that promote violence and pain. I look around me and realize that this is not where I want to be. Quietly, at first, I begin to hum a song saying the words silently in my mind.....

"There's nothing you can do that can't be done.

Nothing you can sing that can't be sung.

Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game

I t's easy.

There's nothing you can make that can't be made.

No one you can save that can't be saved.

Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you

in time - I t's easy."

Music always makes me feel better no matter what. I smile and sing out loud.

"All you need is love, all you need is love,

All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

Love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love, love.

All you need is love, all you need is love,

All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

There's nothing you can know that isn't known.

Nothing you can see that isn't shown.

Nowhere you can be that isn't where you're meant to be.

I t's easy.

All you need is love, all you need is love,

All you need is love, love, love is all you need.

All you need is love (all together now)

All you need is love (everybody)

All you need is love, love, love is all you need."

By the end of the song, Shirley is brought in to join me and we are told that we will soon be taken to a youth detention center until our parents fetch us.

Shirley looks poorly. She has had her stomach pumped and feels as if she has been through the wringer. She is frightened and distraught...knowing that she will have to face the music

with her dad after all. I try my best to encourage her. We sing Beatle's songs...and we finally do get cheered up. Even the policemen seemed cheered by our singing...one joins us, singing harmonies.

It seems hours later (we have sung all the while and are now beginning to fall on the policemen's nerves) we are placed in a police van and taken to a home for "wayward girls".

By late afternoon we are seated in a large room with a number of young girls, several of them pregnant, tattooed, some rough looking, all of them have the same dark and used expressions in their faces. They ask us all sorts of questions, curious about us...we are not out of the same mold as they. One girl tells us she is pregnant from the policeman who arrested her. Several say they are alcoholics and most are runaways....have lived on the streets, been abused by fathers, uncles even mothers. Shirley and I are a novelty for them. We are Americans for one thing, and we are not really troubled girls...just somewhat "in trouble" right now. We come from good homes, have parents who care for us, have been educated in good schools and have traveled to parts of the world they have never even heard of.

Evening, we eat together and work with the other girls cleaning up after ourselves. We are told that our parents are on the way and that we will be notified as soon as they arrive. Shirley and I talk very little to one another. We are tired and on edge...we know we have stepped out of bounds and we don't know what lies before us. Words run through my head:

It won't be long yeah, yeah, yeah

It won't be long yeah, yeah, yeah

It won't be long yeah

Aroused during the night by one of the house "mothers", we dress quickly and are led to the front lounge where my mother and father and Shirley's father stand waiting for us. I am so happy to see my parents and forget completely that I can expect some stern words. In my happiness to be with loved ones, I forget see how Shirley is received by her father. She later tells me that she was given harsh punishment and detention when she arrived home.

As for me, I went to the school dance the next day and had fun dancing with my football player friend Zeke. My parents were as happy to see me as I was them and outside of a deserved scolding, I received no further punishment.

More transpired days later as we had to be questioned by the military as to why we had said we were going to Berlin. It took quite a bit of explaining to convince the CID(Criminal Investigation Command: the United States Army's principal law enforcement agency responsible for the conduct of criminal investigations) that we had no evil intent and were only trying to throw everyone off our trail. Judging by the questions they were asking, we were successful in, at least, that.

She's Leaving Home – The Beatles

Wednesday morning at five o'clock as the day begins
Silently closing her bedroom door
Leaving the note that she hoped would say more
She goes downstairs to the kitchen clutching her handkerchief
Quietly turning the back door key
Stepping outside she is free

She (we gave her most of our lives)
is leaving (sacrificed most of our lives)
home (we gave her everything money could buy)
She's leaving home after living alone for
so many years (bye bye)

Father snores as his wife gets into her dressing gown
Picks up the letter that's lying there
Standing alone at the top of the stairs
She breaks down and cries to her husband
Daddy our baby's gone
Why would she treat us so thoughtlessly
How could she do this to me

She (We never thought of ourselves)
is leaving (never a thought for ourselves)
home (we struggled hard all our lives to get by)
She's leaving home after living alone for
so many years (bye bye)

Friday morning at nine o'clock she is far away
Waiting to keep the appointment she made
Meeting a man from the motor trade

She (what did we do that was wrong)
is having (we didn't know it was wrong)
fun (fun is the one thing that money can't buy)
Something inside that was always denied for
so many years (bye bye)
She's leaving home (bye bye)