

S E A N E C O R N

REVOLUTION
OF THE **SOUL**

AWAKEN TO LOVE THROUGH RAW TRUTH,
RADICAL HEALING, AND CONSCIOUS ACTION

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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1

FINDING GOD IN HEAVEN

MY FIRST LESSONS in spirituality and yoga had nothing to do with a mat, but everything to do with waking up. They included angels, seeing God, and being in Heaven. But, believe me, not the way you may think.

A few weeks after graduating high school in my hometown of Pompton Lakes, New Jersey, I packed up and made my way to New York City's East Village, the place I would call home for the next eight years. The East Village in the '80s was dirty, dangerous, and phenomenally exciting for a curious mind and a free spirit like mine. It was eclectic and alive with young punks, old Eastern European immigrants, innovative artists, gang members, squatters, and homeless people living in tents in Tompkins Square Park. I lived on Avenue B, between 12th and 13th Streets. Drugs, like heroin and crack, were sold in the bodega below me, but believe it or not, I always felt safe. It was common knowledge to live where the drugs were sold because that's not where they were used. Buyers had to go a block or two away to use so they wouldn't draw attention to the dealer. Dealers didn't want any trouble with the residents either, so they'd make an effort to learn our names and keep an eye out on the neighborhood.

In the eight years I lived in New York City, I worked as a coat check, hostess, waitress, bartender, and doorperson in well-known nightclubs, including MK, Grolier

Club, Tunnel, Cat Club, Limelight, Paradise, and Peggy Sue's, and in gay clubs like Shescape, Heaven, and the Clit Club. I earned a great living and made wonderful friends, many of whom I still have today. Odds are if you were partying in NYC in the mid '80s to early '90s, I probably helped you get drunk, stoned, or laid!

Let's start in Heaven where I met Billy, the man who would become my dearest angel.

Heaven was an all-male gay sex club located in the rectory of an old church that served as a famous nightclub known as Limelight, where I worked tending bar. On any given night, I'd pull up on my motorcycle, a 1970 650cc Triumph, wearing a silver vinyl miniskirt; a vintage red, white, and blue leather jacket; and go-go boots, with my hair dyed blue-black, piled high in a bouffant tucked tightly under my helmet. I'd saunter into the club, punch in, and head to the disco, where I was stationed most evenings.

The disco was the heart of the club, and all night long, I could feel the pulse of the bass in my body as I served drinks for tips to young people with fluorescent mohawks or Madonna scarves tied up in their hair, their arms festooned with tattoos and adorned with rubber bracelets. Mostly I'd get an extra dollar or two per drink, but sometimes I'd score, and someone would slide me a small folded triangle of waxed paper filled with a line of cocaine. I would do a bump by sprinkling some on the back of my hand and snorting it without missing a beat. High above me in cages, drag queens and transgender women danced and teased the crowd below. Most nights I worked until 4 a.m., the sound pounding in my ears long after I left. I'd head out to Angelica's or the Warsaw diner for breakfast with my friends before sliding into bed at 7 a.m., hoping to get a little sleep as the coke still coursed through my system.

One night the beer tap got jammed, so I left my station at the bar and went looking for my manager, who I was told had been last seen heading out the doors toward the back of the club. Just through those doors was a steep climb of steps and on the wall an old brass plate that said "rectory," a visible reminder that this was once an active church. I grinned to myself as I started up the stairs. We're all going to hell.

I could hear dance music getting louder the closer I got to the top landing where red velvet ropes, attached to two brass stanchions, blocked my entrance. It was obvious there was a party going on, so I unhooked the rope and peeked inside. The party was wild, boisterous, and loud. I could see a large crowd of people dancing and was surprised. How could I have not known about this? Excited, I started through the doorway, but

before I got my foot over the threshold, an arm reached out and blocked me. A large male bouncer I didn't recognize was staring back at me. He was wearing black leather pants, a leather vest, and a police-like cap and nothing else. His very hairy chest glistened with sweat. His nipples were pierced and connected together with a silver chain. Another thicker chain that hung straight down his chest disappeared into his leather pants.

"Oh, hey," I said, startled by his sudden presence, "I work here. I'm Seane. I'm looking for Rick."

"Don't care. You can't come in. No women allowed."

"What are you talking about? I work here!" I snuck another glance inside. The club was indeed filled with men, dancing and kissing, and some were even naked. A jolt of excitement moved through my body.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"You're in Heaven."

"Heaven?"

"It's a sex club. Now get out of here!" he said as he gently shoved me back toward the stairs.

Later that night, I saw my manager and asked him what that was all about. "Only men?" I said, "And they're allowed to have sex? Who cleans up afterward? There was penis everywhere!"

He just laughed and rolled his eyes.

The next evening when I arrived at work, I noticed the schedule no longer had the letter "D" next to my name, letting me know I was working in the disco. Instead, there was an "H." I had a new job.

I entered Heaven before the music started. Without people, it didn't have the same mystique as the night before. It smelled like stale beer, cheap air freshener, and a certain "something else." The disco itself was small, with a long bar running down the sidewall, which was lined with framed pictures of naked men in bondage. I was the only cisgender woman allowed to enter the club. I was told to serve drinks behind the bar and stay there, unless I had to pee. Then I'd have to leave the club and go downstairs to Limelight and use the one there. I was dying to know what the hell went on in that bathroom that they didn't want me to see or, worse, interrupt!

There were two bright red doors off the main dance floor. In front of each one was a large vat of condoms that the Gay Men's Health Crisis nonprofit delivered

each evening, hoping to encourage the men to play safe. Those doors led to back rooms, painted black and lit with purple lighting, where guys would go and have sex. Once the club opened, those doors were off-limits to me. A couple of times I went back there after hours, when the lights were still on, but no patrons were around. I got to see evidence of strange and diverse sexual practices I didn't fully understand. There were glory holes and cat o' nine tails and chains on the walls and a lot of used condoms discarded on the floor. That's when I figured out that the "something else" was a mixture of body odor, ass, and semen. Like most everything, you get used to it.

Heaven was a perfect place to work for a young woman like me. The men who came there loved me but showed no interest in me sexually; in fact, they were often watchful, amused, and protective . . . especially Billy.

Billy was around fifty-eight when I first met him—tall and very dark skinned, with thick hair graying at the temples. He was born in Ohio and raised a Baptist, like his family had been for generations, and he'd married the only woman he'd ever had sex with. They had four children, whom he cherished, and many grandchildren, whom he'd never met. He never met them because, before they were born, he shared a secret he had held for a long time. Billy was gay. Being gay in his small-town Ohio community was not acceptable, nor could it be tolerated; as a result, he was ostracized by his church and rejected by his family. Billy left Ohio and moved to New York City so he could live out the rest of his life in his truth. He loved and missed his family, but also understood that they could never reconcile his need to express his homosexuality with their need for him to be a "proper" Christian man, father, and husband.

Billy could be lonely and melancholy at times, but also charming, funny, and so openhearted. He often wore tight red-leather pants, a white tank top, black-leather half gloves, and a silver necklace that had a circle with a triangle in it—the symbol for recovery. He had been sober for many years, was deeply committed to the 12-step program, and talked about it often.

Billy adored me. He would hug and kiss me hello and often show up just to see what I was wearing. He got such a kick out of my style and would sweetly tease me about my hair or makeup choices. The only time he would get serious with me was when we discussed my drinking and drug use.

I didn't think my drug use was a big deal; I certainly didn't do more than most of my friends, but I guess I did start using pretty young. I smoked my first cigarette at eight, began drinking and smoking pot at thirteen, and started doing mescaline and coke at fifteen. I enjoyed drugs . . . a lot. Thankfully, in spite of my best efforts, I never became addicted. But nonetheless, I was definitely open to exploring pretty much any substance I had access to—and working in nightclubs, living next to drug dealers, and dating guys who did drugs gave me plenty of opportunities to indulge.

Most nights Billy and I talked across the bar while I poured drinks: Sex on the Beach, Long Island Ice Teas, Jägermeister, shot after shot of tequila. Sometimes someone would come along and chat Billy up, and he'd wink knowingly at me and disappear into the back room, only to reemerge with a smile on his face and a story to tell. After a while, though, I noticed he went into the rooms less and less often. He seemed to prefer sitting at the bar, nursing tonic water on ice, watching the crowd, seeing friends, and talking to me.

Then, for about three weeks, Billy didn't show up at all. I was worried, but I had no way of contacting him—I didn't have his phone number, nor did I have a clue where he lived. I asked a couple of the men at the club; no one seemed to know where he was or what was up. Or, if they did, they weren't saying.



Finally, one evening Billy walks into the club. From what I can tell through the smoke and dim lights, his body looks thinner, almost frail. We make eye contact, and he smiles, waves, and crosses the dance floor toward the bar. I am so relieved to see him that I practically leap over the bar to throw my arms around him. As I do, I notice visible, open sores on his neck and shoulders, dark and scabby. He has one on his cheek, another near his eye. I instinctively pull away.

“Billy, what the hell's on your neck?”

Billy puts his hand to his shoulder, touching one of the sores, and says quietly, “They are symptomatic of my disease.”

“What disease?” My heart is beating fast, afraid of the answer.

“AIDS,” he says, never once taking his eyes off mine. “I have AIDS.”

This is the late 1980s, the height of the AIDS epidemic, with around forty thousand cases reported (there are forty million today). The world has stigmatized the disease and those most affected—especially gay men. Even though I work in a gay sex club and understand that gay men are most likely to become infected, I'm still ignorant about the facts and afraid of contracting the disease myself. As a result, the minute Billy says the word "AIDS," I physically recoil. It happens so fast, and I immediately feel ashamed. I hope Billy hasn't noticed, but of course he has.

A look of hurt and resignation passes over his face as he lowers his eyes and takes a deep breath. I reach out and touch his arm. I know I'm not the first to react that way, and sadly, I won't be the last.

"I'm so sorry," I say. "I just don't . . . I can't . . . I mean, what, how . . . ?" I have no words. No way of knowing what to ask. So I stop talking and take his hands in mine.

Billy studies my face for a moment and then asks, "Do you want to understand more about my disease, Seane?"

"Of course."

Billy explains how he may have contracted it. It was either years of having unsafe sex or during the time he was sharing needles with other people. It could have been any number of moments, any number of men, he says. He goes on to explain what he thinks are the ways someone can get AIDS and the ways they can't. I ask if I could get AIDS if he sweated on me, or kissed me, or if he cried on my shoulder. He answers as many of my questions as he can and readily admits there are things he still doesn't understand. He no longer goes into the back rooms because he doesn't want to risk infecting anyone else. And anyway, he says, most of the men already know he has AIDS and want nothing to do with him in that way. I ask him if there's a cure. He shakes his head no.

Finally, my eyes filling with tears, I ask the question I have to ask, even though I already know the answer.

"Billy, what's going to happen to you?"

Billy smiles sadly, and I can see his gums. They look raw and bloody; his once-white teeth have turned to gray.

"I'm going to die."

Just like that. "I'm going to die."

“Aren’t you scared?”

“No,” he says, shaking his head, “I’m sad but not scared. Not even a little bit.”

“Why?”

“Because of my belief in God.”

God? What’s that got to do with anything?



I was born in 1966 into an interfaith household. My father was raised Catholic, but his father was Jewish. My mother grew up in a rigid Jewish household. There was a lot of resistance to my parents being together, and it mostly had to do with religion.

When my mother got pregnant at seventeen, my father’s mother offered him a Cadillac if he could convince my mother to have an abortion (when my brothers and I were young, my father would often joke that he should’ve taken the friggin’ car!). Because of all the hypocrisy they experienced in the name of religion, my parents decided to raise my brothers and me without any religion at all. We celebrated every gift-giving holiday and even sometimes put a Jewish star on top of the Christmas tree. My father said that if anyone cared to ask, we should tell them that we were agnostic. I didn’t quite understand what that meant. If there was a God, my parents would say, it was a loving God. Nonetheless, I picked up enough God-fearing from my Christian friends, their parents, and people at school to figure out that this paternal omnipresent force was watchful, judgmental, and punishing. I became afraid of this unseen entity, which loomed large in the lives of so many, and decided that if this fear and anxiety were what being in relationship with God was all about, I wasn’t having it.

At the young age of sixteen, I declared that I was an atheist.



So, when Billy says he isn’t afraid to die because of his faith in God, I recoil again.

This time, however, Billy laughs. “Seane, don’t you believe in God?”

“No, not at all.”

“Tell me why.”

I describe the anxiety I felt growing up—a low-grade buzzing, tingly and tight, under my skin—because I thought I was bad. How I used to believe that God would punish me for the choices I made. Choices that might be unconventional, wrong, or naughty. I recount how I used to panic because I was convinced that the people I loved, especially my mom, would be taken away from me if I wasn't "pure" enough—whatever that meant—in my thoughts, words, or deeds. I tell him about the rituals I used to do to stop the anxiety—the counting and touching and repeating things in even numbers—how they always made me feel better.

"But now that I'm older, I feel differently," I continue. "I reject the fantasy that there's a puppeteer controlling our actions. I don't want to believe in anything that means I must be perfect in order to be worthy of love. What kind of bullshit God would want that?" If God is all-loving, all-knowing, all-caring, and so concerned about our happiness, I want to know, then why do some people have so much and others so little? Why are people in pain? Why are they suffering? Why are they dying? Why are you dying? You? What did you ever do to deserve this suffering?

Billy lets me talk, waiting while I'm called away to pour another drink, and listening again as I explain why God doesn't exist and why we are all the better for it.

Billy says he understands why believing in God would be so difficult for me. It was once that way for him too. Then he says, "Seane, would you like to see God here? Right now?"

"Now? Here?" I say as I look around the club. "You can't be serious!"

The music is blasting, and the floor pounds with the beat. A mirrored ball hangs in the center, lights bouncing off it in every direction. Men in various states of undress are dancing, grinding, and making out on the dance floor, oblivious to the intense conversation taking place between Billy and me. Surveying the scene, the last place on Earth I could imagine God to inhabit, I laugh and say, "Sure, Billy, show me God!"

Billy then points to Danny the Wonder Pony. Danny's a white guy who comes to the club most nights. He wears a cowboy hat, chaps, boots, a saddle on his back, and nothing else. For a dollar, you can climb on Danny's back and he'll trot around the dance floor while you hit him with a switch. I look over and see Danny throw his head back as some guy rides him and pulls at his hair. They're both laughing, and I hear Danny whinny like a horse. Billy smiles in Danny's direction and says, "God is right there."

Then Billy points to someone we referred to as a cross-dresser—but who, a few decades later, would likely have identified as a transgender woman. Her name is Violet. She’s about 6 foot 5 and often wears a light-blue housedress with black sensible shoes, a short gray wig topped with a small cream-colored hat, and veil that covers part of her face. She also wears white-leather kid gloves and carries a sturdy navy pocketbook. Sometimes when Violet pays for her drink, she’ll open her bag and pull money from an old gold change purse. She’ll press a silver half-dollar coin into my palm, thanking me for her drink. I save all of them. Violet dresses much like my immigrant Polish grandmother, who used to give me silver dollars when I was a little girl. I saved all of those, too. I keep them together.

Billy catches Violet’s attention, smiles, waves, and blows her a kiss. She catches it and pulls it to her heart. Then he turns to me and says, “God is right there.”

Then Billy gestures toward two men sitting across from one another at a nearby booth. They’re wearing suits and ties and arguing playfully over a pitcher of beer. They look so similar to my very straight, conservative brothers, who would never set foot in a place like Heaven. “God is right there, too.”

Billy takes his hand and places it over my heart. He then picks up my hand off the bar where it’s been resting and lays it over his own heart, keeping his hand gently pressing upon mine. We look into each other’s eyes for a long time. “Seane, God is right here,” Billy says, as we firmly press our hands against our hearts. “I’m going to tell you something right now. Something I hope you will remember your whole life . . .” And then he pauses.

“Ignore the story and see the soul. And remember to love. You will never regret it.”

He holds my gaze for another moment, then continues. “Danny, Violet, all these people here, you and me . . . it’s all a story; it’s not who we really are. We are pure love, but we think we’re something else. The truth is, we’re on a journey to awaken to what that love is, and that journey looks different for everyone. And what is this love we awaken to? It’s God, Seane. It’s inside us, and it’s what connects us to one another. Fully. We just need to wake up out of the crazy dream we’re all in and remember who we really are. Not these stories, I’ll tell you that. They are a part of our experience, but they are not who we are.” With that, Billy turns his head and looks around the room. “Not even close.” When he looks back at me, tears are in his eyes.

“Seane,” Billy says more solemnly, “we all have karma to burn and lessons to learn and all of it—every experience, every moment, no matter how strange, no matter

how dark, no matter how hard, no matter how painful, no matter how funky—is purposeful and will bring us closer to the truth of our essence, to that love. To God. That is why I am not afraid to die. AIDS is just my story; it’s not who I am. Doesn’t mean I don’t feel sad; it just means I can’t change what is. That’s life. I can learn to love better though. Not in spite of this disease but because of what it can teach me. I can change my perceptions, and in changing the way I see things, perhaps I can grow. This growth can only make me more compassionate, more forgiving, more loving, and more connected. So, was it all bad?”

Billy shakes his head slowly, a small smile on his face, and he continues. “That’s what we’re all doing, just working it out, living life, and doing the best we can. We’re remembering who we really are, and when we do, we will also remember who we are to each other. So, ignore the story and see the soul, Seane. All of us, in our own way, in our own time, are opening to love and will come home to know the God within . . . and the God within all. See the soul,” Billy presses his hand more firmly against my heart, “and you will understand what unites us. Look around you Seane.”

I turn to look back into the club. Danny’s still trotting about, Violet’s adjusting her wig, and all the people in Heaven are laughing, dancing, and living their lives, perfectly, in that moment.

“We’ll all get to the same place, but in a timeline that is unique to each being. So, take this with you: know that every person is a teacher and every experience a teaching, and that there are angels everywhere guiding us, reminding us, and helping us return home. And when we do come home—and we will—we will know ourselves, we will know each other, and we will know peace.”



Billy died about three weeks later.

Over the years, I have sat at the feet of saints and sages, I have traveled to meet beloved teachers and guides, but never have I awakened to the sweet and simple truth of seeing the God within the way I did that night, through the eyes of an angel, my angel, in a place called Heaven.