



Alice Rogoff

## Sixty-five Steps

The early morning on Haight Street was quiet. Most of the stores and cafes had not opened yet. In front of McDonald's, Leslie tried to tiptoe past three sleeping men on the sidewalk but caught her foot on one. "Girl, what are you doing?" he said, to which she answered, "Trip, slip? Underground earth." She wrote poetry but this wasn't the way she usually spoke.

Why are there three? she wondered. What does it mean?

The gnarled man shook his head and closed his eyes. Leslie wandered on past the Whole Foods parking lot, past Cha Cha Cha, the Jamaican restaurant. She paused before Amoeba Records.

She tiptoed along the street very softly, her toes and heels hardly touching the sidewalk.

It had been a week since she left where she lived near Haight Street. She remembered a tea set and a book. It did not seem to matter anymore.

She stopped in front of a book store window. She caught her reflection in the glass. "I need a comb, a tomb," she says, "no, not a tomb." It was Valentine's Day. The window of the bookstore was filled with paper hearts. Her face looked tired in the window, reflected in between the paper hearts and books with red covers.

"Hearts and art," she said.

She was hungry now.

The Donut Shop was open. It looked safe.

The Donut Shop opened at six am with Brenda behind the counter. Old and fat but still trucking. Brenda.

Leslie had two hundred dollars in her purse. The money was for her tuition for City College, but the woman in the registration office would not take it. Leslie tried to explain in multiples of five. "I don't understand you," the registrar had said.

The three small Formica tables in The Donut Shop were empty.

"Can I help you?" Brenda said.

Leslie scanned the row of brown and pink donuts.

"One chocolate heart," she said.

It was almost a heart. A lopsided chocolate donut.

"Hearts, parts, tarts," Leslie spoke quickly.

"We don't have tarts. Maybe down the street at the Posh Bagel. Do you always talk like this?"

"If I speak fast enough it is like sixteenth notes. I can sing sixteenth notes."

Leslie took out a five dollar bill. Leslie's money was all in five dollar bills. Anything bigger would be dangerous. That seemed rational to Leslie. Practical. She always prided herself on being practical. She knew enough to use her money little by little. She remembered that from her Dad. When she was ten, he had given her five dollars to buy lunch.

The Donut Shop wouldn't cost as much as the Blue Front Deli or Coffee for the People. She'd taken the money for her City College classes with her when she left her roommates without having any place to go.

"Can I have a glass of water?" Leslie asked Brenda.

"You okay, girl?" said Brenda.

It wasn't unusual for kids on Haight Street to be strange on purpose.

"Thank you," Leslie said, but she felt uncomfortable. She noticed the glass of water had three ice cubes in it.

"It was just a poem," she said. "I write poems."

"Oh yeah, people do that a lot here."

"Can I come back tomorrow?" Leslie said. It would be good place to get breakfast.

"Sure." Brenda looked her over. She didn't look like your average street kid. Maybe she'd even seen her at the bus stop with books.

It was not a poem Leslie whispered to herself, and I don't have a home. But I'm not going to those other restaurants. They might catch me.

Powdered sugar drifted off her donut and onto the floor.

“What’s your name?” Brenda asked the third day the young woman came in for a “heart.”

“Leslie.”

Outside on Haight Street, Leslie looked down at her hands. She had not been prepared for the cold nights. She felt like she was growing webs in between her fingers like a duck. Sleeping on a bench hurt her back. She needed fingers to play music, though her guitar was where? Back in where she used to live. She had left so quickly. She could hear John and Christine talking about her. They were saying call 911. Or call a doctor. She had a little room in their flat. She had books and a guitar and her grandmother’s quilt. The quilt would have made living outdoors better. She glanced at *The Chronicle*’s headline “New Cold Front Blowing in from Alaska” and said “Alaska, igloos, Eskimos, icy, polar air.” She stopped suddenly and shouted I MUST STOP THAT.

The cold startled her at first. It was an especially cold winter in San Francisco with the frigid air coming in from the north. She had scoured cans for a blanket, then went to the second-hand store, and was lucky to find a thick one. Her fingers were turning icy. That was troubling, as she played the guitar. Wandering the urban streets at night did not seem to be the answer. Passing heroin addicts shooting up was not good. One man had rolled by in his wheelchair and told her to be careful. One woman said to her, “I can see your aura. It was yellow, now it’s blue.”

Leslie’s parents had gone away some place. Their old address was in her room. But, would they lock her up, too?

Her housemates John and Christine were angry at her. They wanted to take her to a doctor. She could hear them talking in the hall of the apartment. That was when she left. She put a journal in her knapsack. She said goodbye to the flat’s cat. She felt guilty leaving the cat, though it was not hers.

Of course, she would figure this out soon. But after a few days, this new life almost seemed normal. The way words came out now, it was a code. Maybe the code would help her.

More and more signs told people not to sit in front of stores.

As the day turned grayer, she saw a policeman talking to a man with a bloody face lying on the sidewalk. Then a medic came in a red wagon and carried the man away.

The new parklet allowed her to sit on a bench in front of the flower store. She had on jeans that were not very dirty and a nice wool sweater. She did not look much different than the hundreds of people hanging out on Haight Street. No one would know that she did not belong there except John and Christine if they saw her. So, she had to go.

“I really do not want to put Leslie in General Hospital’s Psych ward, but every day, she gets stranger,” said John.

She had seen words on the wall in the shadows near her lamp. She began spelling the words for John. But, he would not believe her. John was going to call the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic.

“I don’t think she understands the rent anymore. She gives me a five dollar bill to pay for the month. I know she’s smart. What’s wrong with her?” John said to Christine.

“If she’s not hurting herself or anyone else,” Christine said.

“She’s started writing on the walls.”

“She’s taking poetry classes.”

“She says the trees are beginning to talk.”

Now, that her roommates were against her, she needed to leave.

She was not homeless. She was “in between.”

In the meantime, she needed to stay away from John and Christine.

She’d always been a plodder. A hard worker. She continued to look at life the same way. Even if there were words jumbling above her in the clouds.

“I can’t go back,” she said to herself. “It’s not safe.”

She had a postcard from her mother in her sweater pocket. There was a picture of a bridge over a stream. She didn’t know where the stream was. She began to cry.

A policeman stopped her.

“Are you alright?”

She would have to tell him something.

“My grandmother died,” she said. Maybe it was true.

He looked at her face – young girl, about eighteen, pretty blue eyes, freckles, her hair sort of reddish pushed into a woolen cap.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and walked on.

“A quarter for food?” a boy said.

She found change in her pocket and gave it to him, their hands briefly touching.

It looked like she could walk on the bridge or maybe she had once.

Why was she so confused? It would go away soon.

John and Christine tried to find her parent’s address. They only found lists of words under her pillow.

It was now two weeks since Leslie had been living outside and had left her warm room near the park’s panhandle. She knew places in Golden Gate Park where she could go. Behind a meadow, with huge trees overlooking a pond—the swampy reeds and large gnarly roots protecting her from a rider passing by on a horse.

Living like this had made her a little like a cat burglar in sneaking into the shadows. When she'd been younger and shyer, without anyone to eat lunch with, she'd hide in the hallways of her high school in the stairwells. She now sought out similar hiding places. She knew she had to be careful so men would not molest her. Middle school had been horrible with boys trying to touch her breasts. "Be careful, be careful," she told herself.

What was it that she used to do when she'd come to San Francisco? Look for signs for places to live. Talk to a landlord? She had been lucky to find a room in a three-bedroom flat.

When she was young she took walks in her town's nearby woods. She felt like she was back there again when she walked around the pond in Golden Gate Park.

She passed people with their dogs. The dogs had to be on leash there. Further along a trail was a flock of chickens and a rooster someone had left there. She slipped down a little incline into what might have been a raccoon's den and closed her eyes and pulled leaves over her until the sun rose.

But John and Chris lived nearby. She didn't want them to find her.

She got on the 43 bus in the back with her student pass. The 43 bus went from Haight Street to City College on Ocean Avenue. The bus chugged up Monterey Heights—the route overlooking the ocean. It seemed like she was supposed to go back to school. But it was now weeks since classes had started. She seemed to have lost track of time. She was missing her poetry and music classes. Her teachers might even miss her. She had helped Miss Aron, Wendy, work on the literary magazine. She'd been in a guitar ensemble with Miss Schwartz, Myra. The ensemble was scheduled to play for Seniors. She loved both classes.

"Don't I know you?" a man on the bus with a white ponytail asked.

It was Buford from the Sacred Grounds Cafe poetry reading series. Leslie appeared to be speaking to herself.

"Are you Leslie? Are you going to City College?"

"Yes. I have classes there. In poetry and music. I can play scales backwards and forwards."

"I wish I could do that."

"It's not hard. The letters—the notes—they relate to one another."

"In major and minor?"

"And minors are young and dig in the ground."

"Yes, very true," said Buford. "Well, see you Leslie," he said, leaving the bus.

"I didn't get a C," she said.

She got off the 43 on Monterey Boulevard, and got on the 23 bus to ride towards the ocean, the sea.

She ran on the sand, watching the high waves hit the beach.  
“I’ll go back to school. Everything will be alright.”

Leslie’s teachers, Myra Schwartz and Wendy Aron, met for lunch at Java Ocean on Ocean Avenue. Across the street was the Outer Mission Ingleside City Mental health clinic.

“One of my students who said she’d take my class didn’t sign up this time,” Myra, the music teacher said.

“Maybe she transferred,” said Wendy, a poet. “Some of my students who are better off or get scholarships, study guitar in Spain or Mexico.”

Leslie was tired. She had been taking the 43 bus back and forth from Haight Street to Ocean Avenue throughout the night. The bus was cold but not as cold as outside. In the darkness, the passing lights stood out, glowing for a moment, then gone, mingling with the fog. Climbing up Monterey Heights in the morning, she finally could see the ocean again off to the West. Her head rested on the window. How sweet to live in one of those big houses – some of them look like castles. She had lived in a house with a family once. But now, that seemed like a fairy tale, too.

At 10:45 am, she wandered through the campus. The students were hurrying to get to 11 am classes. A tall lanky woman walked by and called her name. It was her poetry teacher Wendy. “Leslie, have you been ill? I haven’t seen you for several weeks.”

The voice startled Leslie and she began walking quickly away from Wendy to where she knew there was a restroom with a shower. It was in the building where her guitar class met. She could hear the notes down the hall. She locked the door and washed her underwear and blouse in the sink. I certainly have enough sense to keep clean she thought, though she smelled like moss. She curled up on the floor and began to fall asleep. The notes from the guitars entered her dreams. Someone jiggled the door handle, then they took the elevator to the upstairs rest room.

When Leslie awoke it was the next day. Her feet and legs were starting to ache.

She walked around the Sunnyside Park. The prettiest bushes had been cut down to prevent homeless people from sleeping there. She found the Kwik and Convenient store. Ramen only cost a dollar fifty but one needed hot water to eat it. The park had a restroom with hot water. Maybe that would turn the noodles soft and edible. The store also had bananas and oranges and hard boiled eggs.

“Eggs, legs,” she said to the man at the counter. He looked perplexed. But she gave him the right amount.

“I caught a glimpse of Leslie near the music building and tried to talk to her,” said Wendy to Myra, “but she looked like she was afraid of me. I wish I could find out what’s going on. She shouted something like changes five, poems six, tombs eight, arts, seven, tarts, four. She writes poetry but I don’t think that was a poem.”

“Do you have her e-mail or cell phone number?” said Myra.

“The home e-mail doesn’t work.” Wendy said.

“Perhaps, she stopped paying for it,” said Myra. “Or she just doesn’t like machines anymore. She used to point out the birds and flowers to me when she was on her way to the bus. When I have time, I’ll try and call her.”

Myra could hear a phone ringing in the back of the classroom. She followed the sound to a pink phone with a leather cover. *Leslie must have left it there. If I turn it in maybe she’ll look for it.* She e-mailed to the City College student address, and waited two days but didn’t get anything back.

Sometimes, she felt like she saw or heard someone, but when she turned around there was no one there.

Myra had gotten to know all her guitar students in the ensemble. So when one was missing it was obvious. Leslie was the one who sat in the back of the room, quiet but still a discernible presence. Some of the students took the class for fun and did the play for credit. But Leslie was always there at test time and played her pieces well. She even had shyly at first sung songs that she had written.

Someone saw a student talking in tongues walking across the I-280 freeway. She almost got hit by the cars. The campus security was called, but Leslie disappeared before they could find her. “We should check the hospitals,” said Wendy. “General and University of California’s Langley Porter. She could be schizophrenic. There are outreach teams.”

“I wrote to her last known address,” Myra said. “They hadn’t seen her in months. They reported her to missing persons. Her parents were traveling, maybe in Scandinavia.”

People in the Haight always noticed when someone was missing. There was kind of a grapevine where you would tell one person and then another and eventually you might get an answer. Leslie used to go to the Blue Front Deli to study or write poems. Wendy knew Richard from her poetry classes, and the Haight Ashbury library poetry readings. Richard had seen her sitting on the sidewalk one morning three weeks before. But that was the last time Richard had seen Leslie.

Leslie put her hands against the café window on Ocean Avenue. The open mic was almost over. She could see a three piece band through the window. The sound of Afro-Cuban music ricocheted off the door. She found herself crying again as it began to rain. The rain and tears blended together in the reflections in the glass. The waves of water were like the music's sound waves. *If someone would only pull me by the hand maybe I could go inside.* She remembered the drummer saying once, "Leslie, sing. You have a beautiful voice." But now, the lyrics had become jumbled.

Psych holds—a danger to oneself or others.

"But Leslie, gentle and quiet, could she just disappear into the ether of San Francisco?" Wendy said. To find her in a hospital or even jail seemed possible. Or one of the City's twenty-six shelters? One can slip in between the cracks. One can fly away like the fuzz on a dandelion or become wild like a poppy. One can blend with the drops of dew. If one is alone on a bus that drives through the night passing signs that one cannot always see, only a few lights completely visible, one can disappear from one's friends who stop looking, without a lantern, or a few railings to hold onto, above a canyon, above a canyon without a railing to hold onto.

Myra walked down from the top of the hill that had Cloud Hall. She remembered walking with Leslie to the bus stop past the words on the front of Cloud Hall: The Truth Will Make You Free.

*Disappearing into a hive like a bee. Where can I find her?* Myra thought.

Leslie could feel the beat of the music through the open mic's cafe window. They say beats correspond with one's heart. She heard the word Corazon, sung by the singer. She knew it meant heart.

Leslie's cache of money was running low. She was beginning to feel feverish. She could die on the street.

Myra had played music and had sung in a chorus in the women's jail. If Leslie was violent, she might have been taken there – but so far there wasn't any record of her being in jail. She wasn't a patient at General in the regular hospital or in the psychiatric ward.

Her concern for Leslie brought back a disturbing memory for Myra. When she had gone to see a friend in General Hospital she had been sent to a locked door. She'd talked to a voice through the thick metal door and found out that her friend and a psychiatric patient had the 12.same name. To get back to the right floor, she came down the elevator with a man dressed in orange wrapped in chains with a guard. She'd been sent to the psychiatric floor by mistake with a prisoner from jail. Was Leslie going to end up there?



Leslie had a gold chain that her mother had given her. She had seen places that bought gold. She waited quietly while the man behind the counter weighed a sack of old silver forks and spoons brought in by an elderly black man. Then, her chain was laid on a velvet pad. He fingerprinted her and carefully counted out five \$100 bills. Your last name—Olsen—and address—she wrote down her last address. The room was filled with antique jewelry that people sold to pay for lingering bills. As long as she had not stolen the chain, she would be alright.

Now, she could go to a motel by the beach. Because of the C she'd heard on the bus. But, she was afraid of fires that were burning on the beach.

The fires blended with the sunset—words like sun and despair and grief and torture and glow appearing through the strings of colored light. How could any of this be happening? She ran out the door, leaving three \$100 bills on the bed. She took the 23 bus on the corner towards the end of the line, where it stopped at Cayuga Park. Her heart was beating very fast, faster than she thought a heart could beat.

The park was full of wooden statues. They were in the shape of whales, and rabbits, and a baseball player. They had been made by the gardener who had lived in the park, who also created mazes from the bushes. She had written about this park for a school paper. That was why she wasn't afraid of them. She could hide in the mazes. She found a large bird to crouch under. She hid near where the gardener had left his three cats which got fed by an elderly man. She wouldn't eat the cat's food. She found a stale donut in her knapsack and ate it quietly listening to her heartbeat, the pounding slowing down as she slipped into sleep. In the morning, the man found her by the bushes.

“If you're homeless, I can take you to a shelter,” he said.

“No, I just got locked out. My Dad's coming back this morning with a key,” she said.

Coming back from where she wondered? The picture on the postcard was of a tranquil pond with a swan. Where Grandma came from?

He was nice. Maybe she should tell him the truth. Maybe she should ask for help.

“You can get juice and muffins at the Rec. Center. Are you from here?” the man said. What was here?

Here was San Francisco. She was not from here. She was from California but not “here.”

I have a brother, she thought. Somewhere in California. Except he died – he had committed suicide. But now, she saw him standing there, like the statues. But he was gone. Did he have what she had? No one knew. But she was fine. Except there had always

been the two sidedness of words. But that wasn't her poetry. It was something else. But, her teachers liked her real poetry, and one day she would teach English. Or would she? Now, what could she do? Wendy didn't tell this to many people, but she had problems when she first moved to the city. She'd gone to the public mental health clinic. It's just that her family didn't appreciate her being a poet. The counselor had told her there was nothing wrong with being a poet. That was San Francisco. A place where she could be accepted. Later, she got a degree in Creative Writing—to validate herself. But it also gave her credentials to teach. And now it was “cool” to be a poet, and she was published by a small press.

Wendy wondered, could Leslie be who she was and still have a good life? Maybe with the right medication that wouldn't hurt her? Were there other treatments like diet that could help her? I'm 14. not a counselor but maybe at least I can help find her. If I could find her family - but a policewoman had told her sometimes it's the family that's the problem.

Both Wendy and Myra had known artists with problems. Myra had known a music major in college who played beautifully. Then, twenty years later San Francisco, she saw him panhandling. He scavenged for money. As he passed her home checking the garbage can, he saw her and called out “Strings” her college nickname. He was later found dead in a homeless camp. A friend said he was schizophrenic.

Wendy knew a poet who had jumped off a roof and survived. If one has insurance one could go to a psychiatrist, or to a private hospital. If not, there was the psych ward at General Hospital, but even that didn't have enough room. And maybe people stopped looking for help, or didn't know they needed it. Then, they could disappear. Wendy noticed that the roof of the City College's health center was peeling.

Leslie's breathing was getting heavier as she kept running down Ocean Avenue. *Why did I run in the highway?* she thought. *Did I think someone would help me? Or a car would hit me? I think I wanted to go to another city, to go home. I fell on the side of the road. The students at City College were shouting, trying to help. The birds were calling out.* It was three in the morning. Leslie climbed up the stairs to imposing Cloud Hall with its two columns and a dome. Sixty-five steps to the top. She had become frailer the last month. She was starting to give up. She could see the moon and the stars above her. The hill with its stairs in the center of the City College campus was almost like a Mayan pyramid. How long had it been since Wendy had asked to meet her at the entrance to Cloud Hall with a sheaf of poems?

Myra didn't usually go for walks at night. But suddenly she was awakened by the full moon out her window. She walked down

Staples Avenue to City College's campus. She heard a slight sound coming from Cloud Hall's steps. In the silence of the night, the sound was magnified. Myra could see a distant shadow on the top of the steps. She kept going up the sixty-five steps to the top. Leslie leant against her. Myra could feel her pulse, her heart. She heard her words saying music, poems, notes, grace notes, deceptive cadences, tensions, cadences, letters and tensions, and rhythms. Myra took Leslie's hand. She would call for help when the sun rose.

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*Alice Elizabeth Rogoff is an Editor of the Haight Ashbury Literary Journal. She is a winner of the 2004 Blue Light Book Award for her poetry book Mural. Her poetry book Barge Wood is published by CC. Marimbo. She has MAs in Creative Writing and Drama from San Francisco State University. In 2013, she received an individual literary cultural equity grant from the San Francisco Arts Commission to write poems on San Francisco women labor organizers. Her fiction has been published in Black Maria and the Noe Valley Voice. She has appeared in several anthologies, including It's All Good by Manic D Press and The View from Here from Street Sheet.*