

# **DOING THE DISHES**

## **Refracting Personal History Through the Lens of Daily Ritual**



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## **Introduction**

Ever since I can remember, our family had a dishwasher. I never did understand why. To me, dishwashers were one more useless invention designed to make work for my poor mother.

I can still see her standing in front of the sink, rinsing the dishes, bending over to carefully place them parallel between the rubberized metal forms, rearranging them so that they all fit, making sure the silverware goes in with the sharp points pointed upward, retrieving the bottle caps and other small things that regularly fall to the bottom, opening the cupboard door beneath the sink to reach down even further for the glossy box in the right hand corner, opening the spout, carefully pouring the granulated soap into the two little containers on the inside of the dishwasher door — the soap always seems to spill over, and the granules stick to the fingers — closing the second container, closing the door, turning the circular crank one lurch to the right.

The dishwasher starts its mechanical procedure. First the weird chugging noise — what is going on in there? — then the water spraying inside. The dishwasher warms the kitchen too much in summer. It is hard to talk on the phone when the dishwasher is going, and it takes forever to finish. We are warned to turn it off before it starts the drying cycle, as that takes so much electricity and is unnecessary, the dishes will dry anyway.

Then the job of bending over to take them out of the dishwasher and put them away. Sometimes the silverware is stuck in the little rubberized holes in the bottom of their deep oblong container. Sometimes little chunks of granulated soap are stuck to some of the dishes, sometimes a glass or a bowl is turned over, full of murky water.

Once in a while the dishwasher malfunctions, spilling soapy water all over the tiled kitchen floor.

Doing the dishes. One of the tasks to which, as we four older girls started getting older, we were assigned, two at a time (one for actually washing the dishes, another for clearing the table and wiping off the table and counters), a day or two per week.

The dishwasher I remember best was built into our new custom made suburban L-shaped house in the late '50s. We moved in the summer before my sophomore year in high school. That same model of dishwasher is still being built into new tract homes. The one my lover owns, for example. And when I see him bending over to put the dishes in, rearranging them to fit, bending over even further to get the glossy box out of the right hand corner under his kitchen sink, and so on, I am reminded of my mother and my childhood; I loop back from now to then and wonder my God has nothing changed? I didn't like dishwashers then, and I don't like them now.

On the other hand, I do like doing the dishes. Plunging my hands in hot soapy water. Having someone hand me the dishes one by one, all the while talking, to scrub and rinse and stack in the dish rack to the side of the sink. There is a feeling of satisfaction as I watch the counters gradually clear, and the dishrack gradually fill with gleaming, steamy plates and cups. I am plunged into the daily, into a human ritual I have been doing forever, and which, ever since I was seven years old, has been associated with the achievement of long range goals.

Daddy, Daddy, please? Please let me have a horse? Please! Over and over again, the same refrain. I am obsessed. I cannot stop. Like approximately 50% of little girls everywhere, I live and breathe horses.

Riding behind my friend Mitzi on her horse. Playing horses with her in the mud, creating small paddocks and barns and forests to ride through. We fight for the privilege of being the horse, down on all fours, shown in the ring, alert, head up, hind legs stretched out behind.

Alone, sitting on my bed, drawing pad in my lap, frustrated; I am trying to learn how to draw my ideal horse — to get the muzzle just right, showing its delicacy, refinement; to get the eyes just right, my god they are so beautiful, clear liquid pools, warming me, melting me, seeing through to my soul . . .

Crawling around on the floor, or out in the back yard, littlest sister or brother on my back; I am every inch the horse, a proud, free, magnificent Arabian horse, tail flagging in the breeze, small delicate triangular head high, ears nervously twitching, responding to the slightest perturbation in the breeze.

The deep orange of carrots, the leafy forest green of hay, the brilliant spring green of grass, the golden smoothness of oats — anything horses eat makes my mouth water. I want a horse so bad I can taste it.

I begin to collect cigar boxes, gathered from the house of a neighborhood friend whose father smokes cigars. There is a contest I can enter if I save a hundred boxes.

Clutching the latest box, I run home and lurch to a stop in the living room, breathless. Daddy, Daddy, look at this! I cry, so insistently that he actually hears me and puts his newspaper aside.

Look at this, I shout excitedly, showing him the picture of the Kentucky race horse on the side of the box, the one I am going to win if I can just get enough boxes to enter the contest.

Normally, I am terrified of my busy doctor father with the sudden unpredictable temper. Whenever he is home the house feels stilted, stifled. We can't run around and shout, we aren't supposed to fight, we are supposed to be quiet, so he can rest.

I am afraid of him, usually avoid him, but my passion for horses is stronger than my fear. So I keep on begging, no matter how often he refuses. I want that horse, I need that horse, I must have that horse; my very life depends on it.

Finally, after I don't know how long — I must have worn him down, something of my desperate need must have penetrated even his chronic and preoccupied exhaustion — finally he says to me: "Okay Ann, you do the dishes for one full year — all of them, with no help from anyone else, and without anyone reminding you — and you can have that horse."

I am overjoyed. Cannot believe my good fortune. The prospects of doing the dishes for a family of ten for a whole year do not daunt me in the least. I don't care how long it takes. Don't care what I have to do to get it. All I know is the horse I have coveted ever since Mitzi got hers will soon be mine.

Immediately, I sit down and make a calendar with 365 boxes in it. At the end of each day's dishes I mark off one of the boxes. 364 days to go; 285; 123; 79 . . .

That was in May of my eighth year on earth. By June of the following year I had earned my horse.

And that is how I came to associate doing the dishes with long-range plans.

Nearly 39 years have passed since that fiercely determined time. Thirty nine years of doing the dishes. Doing the dishes in sinks of many different kinds, within many different types of kitchens. Indeed, to describe the long list of the various places I have done the dishes, is to tell the story of my life. A peripatetic life, during which I have gathered much and left much behind.

I have done the dishes in a big fancy kitchens equipped with butcher block island counters and Jenn Aire stoves. I have done them in a one room cabin where I had to haul my water in buckets. I have done the dishes with one partner after another in a commune where the schedule dictated who did the dishes with whom, and when. I have done them in other, more anarchistic communes where dishes stacked up in the sink until some sucker couldn't stand it anymore and did them.

During the late '60s and early '70s, doing the dishes loomed out of the context of daily life as a highly charged symbolic focus for the changing relations between men and women. I was deeply involved with this early phase of the feminist movement, and, like many other women, I carried a lot of judgments around concerning just who was supposed to be doing the dishes.

In the '80s doing the dishes has receded into the background of things again, rejoining those daily rituals that we enact over and over without thinking. Though its years in the public eye were, thankfully, brief, the emotional charge it once carried remains, though in muted form. Here and there and everywhere are women who, at certain points in their lives, make doing the dishes an embattled part of their ongoing power struggle with men.

Times have changed. The question who does the dishes has been replaced by more urgent and drastic issues, for example abortion, where the question becomes, who owns one's own body?

Over the past several months I have had a series of dreams which included the act of doing the dishes. Intuitively, I realize that this act in the dream, for me, is symbolic of those long term goals with which I identified from the time I was seven years old.

My task now, what I am fiercely determined to understand, is what this goal represents specifically, in my dreams now. For though I know the symbolism, I do not know the exact nature of the present goal to which the symbol refers.

Childhood goals are easy, clear, definite; some object in the outside world that will, once possessed, help one grow.

The goals of a 47-year-old woman who, all her life, has been fiercely determined to attain and learn from them, will at this point be necessarily more subtle, interior, difficult to discern and understand.

To discover the exact nature of the current goal, I am drawn to return to my memories of doing the dishes down through the years. Perhaps this way of approaching the symbolism of the dream will present me, in the end, with clues I need to understand what is propelling me now.

## **Chapter One**

September, 1961

The beginning of my sophomore year in college, I have just transferred to Catholic University in Washington, D.C. Another goal, reached, after one full year of begging. I wanted to "go back east," away from barren western deserts, towards the tree-covered lands of intellectuals and culture.

And I wanted to be nearer my high school boyfriend, Dick, now at Yale.

My father has agreed to let me go back east, on the condition that I transfer to another Catholic college, and live with my Uncle Karl, also the head of a big Catholic family of ten.

I tell the “Kreilkamps East” that I want to do the dishes every night. Everybody is amazed. And grateful, of course. My cousins vie for who will do them with me, since my presence adds a note of levity to this otherwise somber household.

Tonight, there are three of us in the big old kitchen doing dishes. Me, Maria, my age, and also a student at Catholic U., and 12-year-old Ben. Ben has put Pete Seeger on the record player. I have never heard “folk music” before. We sing along merrily as we do the dishes.

Ben puts another record on. The voice is awful, nasal, grating. But the lyrics make me stop, listen more closely. I am amazed. Whatever this weird looking young man is singing seems to be coming from deep within myself. Bob Dylan. I am being introduced to the ‘60s in 1961.

At some point during our merry nightly chore I break a glass — usually by dropping it on the floor. Oh never mind, says Aunt Saide, none of our glasses match anyway, and they are all old.

After several month of “accidentally” breaking glasses during the self-appointed nightly task of doing the dishes, the contradiction between who I am pretending to be and something inside me which is not that, is becoming apparent. I try to become more careful. Apologize more and more profusely.

Whenever I am alone with Aunt Sadie I feel uncomfortable. Feel her judgments. Feel she disapproves of me, of my relationship with Dick, who sometimes visits on weekends.

## **Chapter Two**

### **June, 1964**

I am sitting in the bedroom of our tiny apartment with son Sean, one month old. He is nursing. Keeps breaking away, to cry. I am seething, furious: my

husband has taken over the kitchen and the living room and banished us to the bedroom.

Patrick has turned the kitchen into a darkroom, so that he can develop photos of his models for the brochure he is preparing for graduate school applications in architecture. It is impossible to close the kitchen off from the living room, so he has darkened both rooms. In order to go to the bathroom I must ask his permission.

This goes on for weeks. Doing the dishes periodically amid trays of chemicals. The darkroom odor lingers, penetrates my nose, my clothes, my soul. I will never forgive him for the way he curtly appropriates whatever he wants for his own use. For the way he ignores my needs. For his supreme self-centeredness.

My friends don't like him. Think he brags too much. They wish I had married Dick.

I am afraid of my husband the way I was afraid of my father. Only between now and then something has changed. If the horse was my ticket to emotional freedom, now I seem to have forgotten that I have any rights whatsoever. I am 21 years old.

## **Chapter Three**

**September, 1965**

I am standing at the stainless steel sink of the kitchen at Peabody Terrace, brand new Harvard graduate student housing. Turning around, I am once again astonished at our great good fortune. The view from the kitchen's picture window shows the entire Boston skyline, with the Charles River winding below. We are at the very top of this award-winning high rise building, on the 20<sup>th</sup> floor, in a brand new apartment with two bedrooms. One for us, one for Sean and the new baby, due in three months.

Sitting on top of the world. Our future rolling out in front of us. Harvard. Success. Reputation. Fame.



I am alone most of the time here. I don't mind. I am grateful. And when Patrick does come home I have to keep Sean quiet, so he can work at the enormous drafting table he has set up in the living room.

I spend my time fixing meals, doing dishes and other housework, collecting recipes, reading women's magazines, pushing the stroller through Harvard Square. Jealous of the students of privilege passing casually by in their levis and green book bags; trying to not let my distaste for my husband show; furious at him for my again pregnant condition.

At night, I dream of Dick.

## **Chapter Four**

**November, 1967**

Evening. The children finally asleep. Sitting at the kitchen table trying to study. I am in my second year of graduate school, Boston University, aiming for a doctorate in philosophy.

I am feeling content. The dishes are done. The washing machine, also in the kitchen, is on, filled with Colin's diapers. The children's long low table, covered in washable yellow plastic, littered with blocks and lego toys, two small wicker chairs tucked underneath, fills the wall under the big windows. Sean's wonderful water colors are plastered all over the refrigerator and walls. A cheerful room.

I like this kitchen, this apartment. Five rooms. Patrick even has his own study. But he doesn't spend much time there. Sits in the living room on the chaise lounge watching T.V. I have cleverly set up the fan so that its white noise covers the canned laughter, the urgent voices of newscasters listing body counts from Vietnam.

I am content. My life is in control. Have made my peace with the marriage. Have found myself within it, so that it no longer takes all my time and attention. Working for my doctorate helps me gain and keep this personal space open. It feels a lot like the time I sat down to make the calendar to get

the horse. My life seemed impossible until that moment. Seemed like a prison, from which there was no escape.

Once I set my goal, I am no longer swamped by circumstances. No matter what he does or says, no matter how critical he becomes — of the way I fix my hair, of my clothes, of my talent as a cook — I inhabit this space within which I am impervious to him.

This is the first long range goal, my first really challenging goal since the horse. And I'm pulling it off! There's a big Irish family next door that supplies me with babysitters. I get out of the house every afternoon for classes.

But how to explain that odd experience the other night, when I was standing at the big deep old porcelain sink doing the dishes as usual . . . and all of a sudden I grabbed on, had to grab on for dear life in order to keep from falling? All of a sudden my awareness swooshed out, jetted out with great force and seeming direction, into space. Abruptly, with no warning, totally unexpected. I shot out like a rocket, to somewhere else, some other space or dimension, strange and indescribable, totally alien to my life here in this apartment, this city of Cambridge, with these children, this husband.

How do I make sense of that weird experience? How do I prevent it from happening again? How do I explore it further?

## **Chapter Five**

### **January, 1968**

We are in Boston at a dinner party with other architects and their wives. I have slipped into the kitchen to do the dishes. Love the feel of hot water on my cold hands. Love the sensual feeling of the water, how its heat brings me back down into my body. Glad my hostess has left her apron out so that I can cover my good dress. It's harder to do the dishes when I have to think about standing back far enough so that my clothes don't get wet.

The vehement cacophony of male voices in the next room hurts my ears, even from this distance. Arguing about theater, opera, architecture, politics; talking about student deferments, cities being burned.

I doubt anybody has noticed my absence. The men certainly don't, they are too wrapped up in their conversation. The women probably don't either, as each of them seems to be off in her own world, pretending to listen to the men, but really just waiting for them to finish so her husband will take her home.

Love being right here, in front of this sink. My feet planted wide on the floor, my hands warmed in the water. I am drawn to the hot wet heat. It makes me feel safe, somehow, secure. Feel more real here in the kitchen than in there. Don't have to keep my mask on when I'm doing dishes. Don't have to smile, observe the forms, think, reply. Can just do the dishes, one after another, some require scrubbing, some don't.

Another woman wanders in, offers to take over. I decline. Offers to dry the dishes, then. O.K. Half grudgingly, half gratefully, I admit her into my solitude. We begin to talk. We can talk differently in here than out there. Our voices are low, murmuring, personal. We talk about our children, our husbands' work, our plans.

I don't talk about what I am studying. No one would understand it. There is no one, except my teacher, to whom I can even approach the subjects which fascinate me: the exact nature of the relation between thought and language; the development of Sean's visual perception as viewed through his drawings, which I have carefully kept and dated; how the body and the mind are related to one another, whether or not the mind is confined to the brain . . .

These questions preoccupy me. I am filled with them and others like them. Have a hard time being a mother, being truly present for my children. Can I talk about this to the woman now handing me dirty dishes? No. She seems happy. Seems like her children are her life.

I envy her. I think her beneath me.

## **Chapter Six**

## **September, 1969**

Dinnertime. Sitting at our kitchen table in a real dining room in our new apartment in Brookline. The kitchen too small to eat in. Don't like the kitchen. Don't like the standard metal cupboards, the anonymous feel to it. Don't like doing the dishes here, don't like doing all the housework, my God shouldn't he do some of this daily stuff too? I work as hard as he does, having to study continuously, take exams, write papers — only to come home and be confronted with the whole overwhelming mess that two young children continually make, their constant needs, their fights, their unhappiness.

I want him to start sharing the housework, but every time I bring the subject up he says, O.K., I'll do the housework and you go out and find a job. This shuts me up. I am terrified of the world outside. Cannot conceive of myself in a regular job. Try to keep my complaints to myself.

I hate him. Can't stand the sight of him.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **July, 1970**

Scrawled above the scruffy old double doors leading into the huge old restaurant kitchen, these words from Fritz Perls: "This is the first day of the rest of your life."

Each time I walk through the doors I see those words, and shake my head in wonder: I am no longer the scared little girl who hid out in marriage. I have changed. And the changes inside me have set in motion a series of events so new as to seem unreal. I feel like an actress, just pretending to be this newly liberated female, doing my own thing, hanging out with others as much as I want, then going off to write in my journal about what is happening and how I feel about it, inside.

I am standing at the huge old double sink with a man, someone I don't know well, but who has been partnered with me for this meal. That's the rule we've devised at our weekly community meetings. Two people on each

dinner, both to make it and to wash up afterwards; one, a woman (presumably the expert), and the other a man (her apprentice). I am washing, he is drying. This particular man seems nice enough, doesn't seem to resent the task. Indeed, treats it as a sort of novelty. I'll bet! When was the last time he did the dishes? Some of the men are more testy, they balk, don't like it one bit, still think doing the dishes is beneath them.

We are part of an experimental summer commune in Manomet, Massachusetts. Occupying a huge old hotel sitting atop a cliff, above a long private ocean beach. The "Hotel Idlewild." A fitting name, as we are both idle and wild — at least according to our uptight suspicious neighbors.

On any given early morning, I see at least one person sprawled at one of the long kitchen tables, coffee in hand, looking exhausted, but transfigured. As if he has just come back from a journey to an exotic foreign land. Filled with the wonder of what has been seen, he is back among us now, and, like Plato's enlightened one who must go back into the cave where his fellows sit watching shadows on the wall, our traveller too finds it difficult to talk, to express the mysteries to which he has been privy.

Our bedraggled wanderer has just returned from a trip — on acid, or mescaline, or peyote. The rest of us are respectful, knowing ourselves how it feels to have gone so far out as to have participated in a reality entirely other than the normal one.

There is a giant steel grill on which we fry eggs and French toast. People wander in and out. Kids and dogs and watermelon seeds and the constant presence of sand underfoot. No matter how many times the kitchen is swept, this sand keeps drifting in. Flies buzz the left over scraps sitting on paper plates on the long tables. The entire scene seems always on the verge of chaos.

## **Chapter Eight**

**July, 1971**

Doing the dish at the same sink, one summer later, this time with my lover, Tracy. I love to do dishes with him, love to do everything with him, am obsessed with him. Made sure he was down on the community calendar as

my partner in this task. Want to be with him always. Want to do dishes with him 'til death do us part.

I brush aside the slight but nagging feeling — he protects me yes, and I need it, I love it, but he also patronizes me, not just in doing the dishes with me — Tracy is another one who treats it as a novelty, I can tell he thinks of himself as a good sport — but in other ways too. He reminds me of my father. Same upright moral attitude. Same judgments. Same wall I am determined to break through.

## **Chapter Nine**

**July, 1972**

Another summer on the Manomet beach. This time in a cottage with three others, two women and a man. I am looking good, feeling good. Have recovered from the despair of last winter, wanting Tracy so bad I could taste it, furious at him, at my father, at life which seemed so unfair. Spring brought me back from the dead. That and Terrence, who visits on weekends, and who told me, on first meeting back in April, “Your eyes spit fire.”

Long blond hair flowing down my back. Body taut, firm, tanned. My outer appearance more and more reflects this marvelous new sense of freedom in my life.

I stand at the kitchen sink rinsing out the giant wok we use to cook all our meals. Got to be careful not to get soap on it.

Another vegetarian meal, prepared by my housemates, all of whom are more advanced in this area than I. This is my first vegetarian summer, and I am amazed at how much lighter and better I feel not eating meat.

I feel so good, really good, even smug. I am the only female in this house to have a boyfriend. Know I'm the most desirable female here, and flaunt it. Wear long romantic dresses to the dinner table. Run on the beach daily in my black bikini . . .

And in the afternoons I work on the final typing job for my doctoral dissertation, in preparation for my orals in late August. Then on to

California, where I have landed a plum teaching job in an experimental college.

Sitting on top of the world. Nothing can stop me now. Another long term goal, achieved.

My two little boys wander in to the kitchen, both whining, clutching at my long romantic dress. They beg me to go to the beach with them.

“Oh, all right,” I sigh, impatient with their needs. “I’ll come to the beach with you.” After all, they won’t be here much longer. Only this week in July, and in the fall they will live with their father for the entire school year. At least that way they can remain in the same school, be with the friends they’ve always known.

The sad, scared looks on their faces . . . I can’t stand it . . . hate to look at them, to see the way they look at me . . .

Chronically tensed against my own feelings, I dry my hands and follow them to the beach.

I am 29 years old.

## **Chapter Ten**

### **April, 1973**

Standing at the sink of a large L-shaped suburban house in San Rafael California. Outside, eucalyptus trees sway in the wind. Doing dishes with my lover, Bob, another teacher in this highly experimental college. We hardly notice our task, so manic is our analysis of the president’s sudden shocking announcement that the next meeting of the New College Board of Trustees is not going to be open to the public.

A secret meeting! They’re going to hold a secret meeting! The one thing they said they’d never do! The one thing everybody around here agrees means death to a truly experimental college! Why? What is going on? What don’t they want us to know about?

The television drones on in the next room. A bunch of students are over, glued to the Watergate hearings.

I bend over the sink, my body trying to curl up in a ball. Feel like I've just been kicked in the solar plexus. A deep dark sense of foreboding floods my interior.

One of the students who lives in the house with us wanders in. We ask him anxiously, what does he know about what's going on? John happens to be the one student member on the Board of Trustees. Normally unusually open and loving, John seems evasive. I search his eyes and face for clues, while he mouths reassurances. Don't worry about it, he says, putting his arm around me, they just need to feel they are doing a good job, they want to be able to say whatever they want to each other, without feeling constrained by the presence of others.

Bob and I both snort, suspicious. Our bodies are tensed, unnaturally alert, as if for flight.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **December, 1973**

Standing at the kitchen sink of another communal house in San Rafael. I live in the basement, appearing upstairs only for meals.

I have told them that I will do all the dishes. This way I can discharge any lingering feeling of obligation to these people for their kindness. And I can do it without thinking, just do it, get it over with and go back downstairs.

Doing the dishes listlessly, not paying much attention to them or my appearance or anyone else in the room. They are all trying to be helpful, these former students of mine, but there's nothing they can do. Three months ago I was fired. They said I was "too experimental" for this experimental college.

Bob was fired, too. He's using his anger to write a book about it. I'm just drifting down into depression.



## **Chapter Twelve**

**May, 1974**

Several miles east of Mendocino. A shady wooden lodge in the middle of a forest. I live here with a dozen others, all of us in transition from whatever we were to whatever we will be next. None of us have any idea who that is. We are all more or less spaced out, feeling like outcasts from the world we knew before. People who have nowhere to go, no function in the so-called “real” world. This lodge, we laugh ruefully, is our “halfway house.”

I am standing at the kitchen sink, doing the dishes with Sarah, whose doctor husband left her and his busy practice to dress in a clown suit and wander the streets of Mendocino. Sarah is in love with Spencer, a gnomish little man, probably alcoholic, whose bible is the Urantia book. Spencer plays the old upright piano in the dark living room spontaneously, without knowing how to read music, and he is embarking on a quixotic campaign to become governor of California.

I am in love with Spencer too, but I don't tell Sarah that. Instead, as she hands me the dirty dishes, I draw her out, want to gain her trust, know whether or not Spencer is responding to her. Too bad, I commiserate with her, that Spencer doesn't seem to even notice her.

Spencer doesn't notice me either. That doesn't stop either of us from our secret fantasy love. Or me from using my feminine wiles to compete with this good woman for a man who is hardly worth it.

## **Chapter Thirteen**

**October, 1974**

Five months have gone by. I am standing at the kitchen sink of a modest suburban house in my old home town in Idaho. This house sits two blocks from the big L-shaped one my parents built. Two blocks in the other direction sits the big one Dick's parents built, at around the same time.

And out the back window of this house, a view of the high school we both attended.

I am peeling carrots and potatoes, looking out the window in front of the sink, watching for him to come home from work. It is the day after our marriage, a story-book surprise wedding which we held here, at our home, and during which both sets of parents wept for joy and in relief. Dick and Ann back together again. Finally, a dream come true. They never should have left each other in the first place. Thank God we don't have to worry about them anymore.

I hear his little slate green Fiat before it appears in the window. The excitement I feel, and have felt, ever since I was thirteen years old, each time I catch another glimpse of this man, my love, my true love forever, seizes me now.

One glimpse of his face in the car window and my body shudders to a quick sharp tender reminder of the thrust of his entering me, tonight, tomorrow night. All other nights of my life. I am eternally astonished and immensely grateful for our great good fortune to have found each other again, after twelve long years. Yes. Yes. To be finally in each others' arms forever.

His large beautiful body uncoils from the tiny sedan. He sees me in the window. He grins. That wonderful flash of unusually fine and even white teeth which I remember from high school, the high school of which the lawns roll on forever in back of this house, the high school halls we strolled within, hand in hand, fourteen years ago! I remember. I remember. And in remembering I feel myself circling back, coming back home, to our home town, to Dick, to myself, to our original plan for our common life. How did we go so off track? What angel guided us so gently back again?

He gets out of the car and, seeing my face framed in the kitchen window, my eyes burning with the intensity of memory, he grins. That familiar grin. Large, generous, white. But now I see it differently. He is grinning in triumph. As if to say, ah, yes, now I've got you. At last now I've got you now.

He is walking by the window on the way to the front door, still grinning. Suddenly my mood shifts. I am seized with a convulsive shudder, something

has taken me over, sending me reeling, a fear so large and overwhelming that I have to clutch the sink or I will fall to the ground, faint.

As he opens the door I rush through the kitchen into the living room. My unconscious has me in its grip, I am no longer myself, I am a wild stormy night, a force of nature so powerful that even he, my big beautiful new husband, is shoved backwards by my fists they are pounding on his chest uncontrollably. Tears of love, of agony, of frustration, tears of rage, stream down my face.

Oh my God, here I am again. Married. Married! He looked at me like he owned me. We have been taken over by the social forces around us. The ones that dominate this smug little town, crushing all true individuality. I have married my true love. I have married him! I am no longer myself, free, but his wife.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

### **March, 1979**

I have just finished the twice-weekly ritual of bread making. Four heavy little brown loaves, so full of raisins and seeds and nuts and bran that one piece is a whole meal! I place two of them on the counter near the back door. The first two people to enter, get them. Simmering on the stove, the perpetual pot of soup, free for the taking.

I love this rambling little house my doctor lover bought for me. "Munchkin House" we call it. And I see it not just as my house, but our house, everybody's house. A house open to community. What my doctor lover has given me, I must give back.

Standing at the sink, washing the grease out of the big silver bread bowl, I reflect on the magic of my life. How grateful I am that Dick and I were able to work things out to the point where, despite our great love, we both could honor my even greater need for freedom. And where I, without reserve, could then encourage his getting together with a good friend of mine, marrying her, and leaving town.

And how perfect the set up here! A real laboratory for this experiment in utopia. My bedroom, bathroom and study all in one wing, set off from the rest of the place. Above the kitchen sink, a funky circle cut out of the plaster wall reveals morning light streaming into the tiny breakfast room beyond. Down the hall, my friend Brenda teaches in her studio, a large room with its own outside entrance. The three potters' wheels and homemade kiln out back are brand new. Again, thanks to my lover. Whatever I ask for, he provides.

Downstairs, the production offices of "OpenSpace," a nonprofit community tabloid magazine designed to open up the space within this smug little town, and the surrounding countryside. I want to give something back to my hometown before I leave for places unknown. Want to realize my dream of an ideal world, or at least of a real community — in which everyone feels free to express him or herself fully, openly, without fear.

We gather for editorial meetings at the round table in the living room. Six to eight of us usually, reading what has been submitted, deciding the flow of the pages, which artists need to be called, assigning each other production tasks.

The night before we go to press I write the editorial, encouraging others to submit their essays, ideas, poetry, drawings; showing how the theme for this issue was not decided, but discovered — by looking over what has been submitted, and finding the commonality, that which links our various individual expressions together — our "common sense": the sensing which we all have in common . . . People think me poetic. But what I see is real.

At night, I dream of a vast cloud hovering over the town, enclosing the dreams of people sleeping down below, fusing them together, forging that mystic body of Christ, sacred community of souls — both source of and latest form for one mind, one soul, one vast heart beating through us all.

By day, I see the same in the pages of OpenSpace, the various poems and drawings and articles so divergent and quirky, revealing so many different levels of education, of literacy, of style and talent, of heart, of psychological and other kinds of understanding . . . Squinting my eyes, I allow myself to lose focus, opening to receive, through peripheral vision, that familiar dizzying sensing of the field of energy in which all these expressions co-exist, in which all their authors co-exist, suspended, subtly supporting and

blending with one another, creating and sustaining and opening further that vast yawning space of the spirit surging through us all . . .

I don't speak of my visions of open space to any but the inner circle of OpenSpace people. And even with them, I find it hard to describe the glory . . .

I don't need to speak at all. The magazine shows its own value. This utopian experiment seems to be working. We have been lauded by the local radio talk show, the local newspaper. The mailbox is full. People call, or drop over. We are discovering a well of eccentricity — and even of true originality — in this high desert town.

Who would have realized the sheer number and diversity of the real individualists somehow surviving in this community where social and economic life is dominated by organized religion? All these “oddballs” hiding in their closets for years, dreaming of a more open world from behind closed doors. And now, with hardly any prodding, they are not only coming out, they are rejoicing to find each other.

One day we are sitting working in the living room and a pickup truck backs up to the door off the breakfast nook. An old farmer gets out, opens up the back, and drags two fifty pound sacks of beans out and into the kitchen pantry. “For the soup,” he says, grinning.

We don't get paid for our services on the magazine, and yet we all keep doing it. The unusual sense of community this project generates is priceless. Most amazing of all: the actual production costs seem to work magically. There is always exactly enough money donated to put out the next issue. No more, and no less.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

### **March, 1980**

One year later, I no longer make the bread or do the dishes. Karen does all that. She arrived on the Munchkin House doorstep having driven straight here from Cambridge, and doesn't know what's next. I am glad to see her,

after so long. Glad to shelter a member of my original women's group from the late '60s.

I offer Karen this deal: you do all the cooking and the housework and buy all the food and you can turn the upstairs attic into a little apartment for yourself. She agrees to it. I've got myself a wife!

Sometimes I joke with her, call her that. She doesn't like it one bit; doesn't like it any better than I did, with Dick.

I am not doing the dishes, I am not engaged in any of the usual daily rituals. I am treating myself, and being treated by others, as a special case, an exception, due to the great success of the continuing OpenSpace experiment, and my status as its visionary founder.

I feel special, superior to the others. See myself as their teacher, leader; glory in being the center of their attention. How they listen carefully to what I say, keying off my moods, looking to me for guidance!

I feel isolated, lonely. Am gradually and insidiously losing my center — without realizing it. No longer do I move from within the core of my being, that deep inner resourcefulness which created and sustained the beginnings of this wonderful and magical experiment. More and more, I seem to be living on the surface, catching reflections, trying to live up to images others have of me.

I am entering a long dark night of the soul. My vast stubbornness, that same quality which enabled me, from an unusually early age, to make long range goals and stick to them, is now showing its dark face. And not for the first time — although I don't realize this, either.

Because I am so fixed and so unconscious in my habits, the lesson the first time around was delivered with a mighty blow to pride: I got fired. And since I failed to pick up on the deeper meaning of that time, the attitudes in me which made the firing necessary, I am now preparing myself, again unconsciously, to repeat the lesson, by receiving an even more devastating blow the second time around.

In both cases, the clues are there all along, subtle hints, signs which, were I to pay attention to them, and correct my course accordingly, I could avoid

the coming disaster. Unfortunately, I am too stubborn, too proud and unyielding in my dogmatic idealism, to pick up on them.

I refuse to acknowledge the intuitive flashes, streaking through the blackness; they light up the night, brilliant! For a single second all is illumined — and then nothing, nothing. Thank God for nothing. Don't want to know. Don't want to see. Don't want to change. Don't want to have to admit . . .

Don't want these flashes — of my one year as a college teacher. How, then too, I was lauded in the beginning, for my vision — of each student as a unique individual, and the entire school as a sacred community — only to gradually begin to feel this same sense of eerie isolation from those whom I had informed of that vision, and who now insist I live up to the trust they place in me. To see our full potential. To see it for them. To be responsible for them.

A sense of exhaustion creeps in. From hanging on to their image of me. From having to watch myself, so that I continue to be who they want me to be. Have to keep myself in line, be strict, don't let them see who I really am. If only they knew. If only they could see inside their shining leader this burnt out, lifeless shell . . .

No, no, don't think about that; just keep going. Keep on doing what you're doing, get another issue out, keep on opening up space . . . Show this smug little community that it can open up to a larger sense of itself. (All well and good. But are you allowing the space within *you* to open? Eh? Are you even acknowledging what lives within you, how constricted it feels, how much it wants to burst out, to just say oh to hell with you all just leave me alone!)

The flashing again, this time quick, cutting questions, comments. No! Push it away! It's not there. It never happened.

Don't think, just do.

No longer move from within the depths of myself. Can't seem to get down there. Get caught up in the little things. Every little thing bothers me. Restless. Scattered. Longing. Longing for love. My intimate relationship with the doctor is over, though his financial support continues.

Irritable. Bored. Now what? What next?

I begin to attract men to myself, strangers. Each time, after one date, or two, I sense he's alcoholic. Throw him out. Look for another.

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **September, 1980**

Six months later. Doing the dishes at a tiny plastic sink in a 20-foot trailer in a trailer park deep in the dark heart of a tangled old eucalyptus forest fifty miles south of Bakersfield, California.

Washing out the stained mismatched chipped cups, the flimsy dented aluminum plates. Feel weird. Numb. Feel like I dropped off the world and landed in hell.

How embarrassing! If my followers could only see their shining leader now! Going off with Phil was the last thing they expected. He looks so scruffy, so down and out.

I'm the only one who really knows him, knows his potential. Pisses me off that they can't see it. I can just see them, shaking their heads in dismay, worried about me, judging me . . . To hell with them! I'll show them!

This is a weird place. Scruffy people. Paranoid. Some of them, including Phil, think the forest is haunted, that there's some black evil force out there. Twice now, I've seen police cruise slowly through the park, stop at a trailer, knock on the door, go inside, and then minutes later re-emerge, leading someone, head down and handcuffed, out to the patrol car. Phil wanted to come here. Why? Why does he like it here?

Today I am alone again, thank God. Phil in the hospital again. The usual. Liver trouble, bleeding ulcers, esophageal varicosities. The doctor tells me he's alcoholic, but I don't believe him.

My father told me he was alcoholic, too. He was the doctor on call in the emergency room several times in Idaho when Phil was brought in. My father doesn't like him at all. Says he doesn't trust him. Says Phil lies. Says he



tried to order him around, acted like he knew better what he needed than the doctor!

Dad's so controlling and judgmental! Serves him right to be faced with someone as strong as Phil.

Phil is not alcoholic. He says he isn't, and I believe him.

He says he isn't. Says so in that weird casual way of his . . . weird . . . the way he says it makes me want to ask him again! To make sure . . . Can I really believe him? (Of course I can! Why wouldn't I?) Looking for clues in his behavior, in the way his body acts — like at dinner last night when, once again, I got up the nerve to ask him the question. Had to wait until I was feeling strong, sure of myself. Had to wait until I could act like the question was no big deal. Don't want him to think I'm prying, or that I don't trust him!

But the way he answered was weird. "Me, an alkie?" he drawled, glancing up at me, grinning, casually flicking the ash off his Camel cigarette. Pausing, still grinning, he considered his cigarette, rolling it between his fingers, as if harboring a secret joke, and then laughed, that funny mirthless laugh with his head cocked to one side and his shoulders going up and down.

I want to ask him again. Always want to ask him again . . . want a connection with him . . . want him to be there. But it's hard. Weird. How can I know he's telling the truth? I hate to ask, in case he isn't. Sometimes I do feel strong enough to pretend to be as casual as he seems to be . . . And then I can ask it, just slip it out, no big deal. But usually I just can't seem to get the words out, even though it's the only thing on my mind, can't think of anything else. Want to know. Want to be able to trust him. Want to establish that, at least. So that maybe we can go on.

But the words, they stick in my throat. Because I never know how he's going to act. Sometimes he's casual, off hand, like last night. Other times, especially lately, he's been getting mean, furious. And I can't ever tell from how he is before I ask, who he will be in response. It's as if there's no connection between who he seems to be one moment, and what he will do next.

Ooooh, I shouldn't ask. Just don't ask. Can't blame him for getting mad at me. I should trust him. Why don't I trust him? I've no reason not to trust him! I've never even seen him take a drink! Anytime someone offers him one he refuses! Isn't that proof enough? So why do I keep bringing it up? Need to stop talking about this. Don't want to upset him more.

Yesterday morning when he stumbled out of the trailer for his first cigarette of the day the dog must have been in the way. He kicked him. I guess he must have kicked him, though I didn't see it, because the dog started to whimper, and scuttled under the table. And when Phil gets mad his ulcer starts acting up. Got to prevent him from getting mad. Set up this place differently so he can move more smoothly through it. Make it easier on him.

Ambulance picked him up yesterday afternoon. He had been throwing up in the tiny bathroom. Wouldn't let me see. Came out looking haunted, drawn, like the blood had been drawn out of him, his usual jaundiced complexion underlined a chalky grey.

I managed to get the old truck going, followed behind the ambulance into town. God what he's been through! Black Beret. Killed people with his bare hands. Knows so much the government still takes care of him, many years later. What does he know? Why won't he tell me?

Thank God for VA hospitals. Seven units of blood this time. The usual progression: ambulance to emergency room to intensive care.

The doctor. How I hate him! He found me in the canteen and escorted me to his office. Sat me down and told me Phil was alcoholic. No he's not! I insisted. Yes, he is! He shot back, tears in his eyes. "Don't you know alcoholics are pathological liars? I know, because my own father was one."

Boy, I showed that doctor. Keeping my dignity intact, I just got up and walked out of the room.

I dry the dishes and put them away. Glad for this little daily routine. For having my hands in hot water. Wiping off the tiny counters. Cleaning the place up. Helps anchor me to reality.

Reality? What reality? This is reality?

I don't belong here. Can't believe how I got here. Got to get out of here. But no, no, can't leave Phil like this. He's too sick, needs me too much. I can help him. I can save him, if he'll just listen to what I say, take me seriously.

(I can't leave. What if he hunts me down, finds me later?)

Go out for my daily walk with the dog, into the haunted forest. Weird, my jaw seems to be seizing up. Like, I can't open my mouth very far before it hurts.

Hurts when I try to talk. But I can still think! Think about Phil. If only he would change his attitudes, his values. If only he would open up to me, follow my guidance! I know I could help him. Make him better. Stop the bleeding.

And I know it's worth it, no matter how hard. For once in a while there is confirmation. Once in a while I get jolted . . . a swift clear sense . . . of his soul, his essence, flashing out through his eyes like a beacon! But then as swiftly as it arrives it disappears, gone out like a light; and there he is again, across from me, glancing covertly out of those shifty dead eyes they don't look at me, they look everywhere but into my own.

But his soul did flash out for that one second! For that one shining moment Phil was himself, the sacred fullness of the man he could have become, the man he could still be, if only . . . if only . . . I know I can help him recover his true being, I just know I can! That holy spirit inside him; so long denied, so utterly lost to him that he doesn't even know it's gone.

The poor man. How he must suffer. Got to help him. Make him better.

He isn't alcoholic. He can't be. If he were I'd have figured it out by now. I've never even seen him take a drink.

Got to get out of here.

Can't leave him.

Want to scream.

Can't scream.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

**November, 1981**

I do the dishes here, every night. Lots of them. In the sink, piled high, the cereal bowls, coffee cups, milk and juice glasses from this morning's breakfast, last night's bedtime snacks. Littering the counters, the crumbs, little plates, and half full glasses from teenage after school snacks. Balanced precariously on top of everything else, the dirty dinner dishes. Dirty pots and pans stacked on the stove.

I do them all. Every night. It's the least I can do to thank Dick and his new wife Judy and her three children for sheltering me during this time when I am totally exhausted, unnerved by the events of the past year, and utterly devoid of financial or other resources of any kind.

Except for the car. Thank God for the car. My escape vehicle. Bought it just a few days before that final night when Phil came home drunk at 1 A.M. Finally showed me who he was. Finally let me know. His eyes were glittery, the way they were the first night we met, back at our 20<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, one year ago. That night when our classmates were dressed in their finest and Phil had sauntered in wearing a dirty teeshirt and faded levis. "Just came down from the South Hills where I have a little mining claim," he had drawled. Seemed so casual, so unlike the others impressing each other with how successful their lives had become.

Phil was different. Always had been different. Back in high school he had been the romantic and surly James Dean figure, leader of the hoods. I didn't know him back then, of course. I was one of the intellectuals, an elitist, Dick's girl friend, "girl friend of the student body president."

Dick knows Phil though. I discovered this only recently, first from Phil and now from Dick. The two are ancient enemies, their mutual hostility stemming from the day Phil made Dick look like a fool.

I have only a vague memory of that event. A memory joggled loose by Phil describing the scene to me. The way he told it to me — with such relish! Twenty years later, and he is still basking in that old high school victory.

I remember sitting there on bleachers in the choir room next to Dick. It was an historic occasion, the very first trial held for a student offense. As the new student body president, Dick had set up this “student court,” and Phil was the first offender, being publically tried for smoking a cigarette in the boy’s john.

I don’t remember the details. All I remember is swirling confusion, a sickening sense of embarrassment — for Dick, as Phil, acting in his own defense, turned the whole event into a hilarious comedy, cleverly and effectively bringing to a quick end Dick’s new fascist institution.

Weird. Their last names. Phil Lowman! Dick High! So perfectly descriptive of their characters! My life as a soap opera. I’ve been with the highest and the lowest, the best and the worst, of my entire high school class. Feel like a dumb unwitting pawn in some kind of deadly ancient drama that has nothing to do with me.

Dick says he was horrified when he heard I had gone off with Phil. Feared for my life. I do not scoff now at his attitude. Nor at my other friends who were so worried. Nor at the doctor, even my father . . . One might say I’ve been humbled. Brought to my knees. Frankly, I’m grateful to just be alive.

That last night, that night he came home drunk at one in the morning. Drunk. Finally let me see him as he really was. I remember waking up suddenly to a loud voice within me, coming through clear as a bell. “Center yourself,” it commanded. “You have one minute.”

Time slowed to a crawl. Like a series of gongs, inexorable, inevitable, I distinctly heard first, the truck door slam, then the outside door slam, the inside door slam . . . Heard him walking slowly across the living room floor, towards the bedroom. The door handle turning . . . his shadowy figure outlined from behind in light.

By the time he sat down on the side of the bed I was sitting up, utterly alert and calm, ready for anything.

How can I describe the next four hours? Phil and I locked in mortal combat, all of it taking place on the psychic plane. He was drunk, mean, menacing, his eyes glittery. Those same glittery eyes I was so drawn to at our high

school reunion. Wondering what made them that way. Fascinating. What did they remind me of? Couldn't leave him until I found out.

My goal was to leave the house, get out of there that very night. His goal was to keep me with him, and he pulled out all of his guns to do it. Literally. All the big shot guns he normally kept in the bedroom closet. He brought them out one by one and sat there at the dining room table caressing them, one after another, staring at me. Finally he was meeting my eyes. Not to connect with me but to take control.

And I, in order not to be controlled by his stare, had to create and enter and hold open a psychic space that was more powerful than his efforts to control me.

He was staring at me. His staring triggered something in me. Reaching deep into myself, I discovered a limitless energy. Bringing this energy forward, my eyes found his, locked in, began to stare him down.

Now, in late 1989, I can say that those early morning hours in September of 1981 were when my life began. Were when I finally began to take responsibility for my life — though I didn't know it then. It would be several more years before I would begin to see the patterns in things, the rhythms, the punctuation; before I would begin to isolate certain events as crucial timing devices in the gradual revelation of my soul's trajectory.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

### **Late November, 1981**

Sitting at the kitchen table after finishing the dishes. Once again the place is clean. One more day done. The teenagers off somewhere. Dick and Judy both upstairs. Blessed silence! Solitude! This is the first time since my arrival that the kitchen has been empty in the evening. What a gift! I can sit right here, write in my journal and sip a cup of tea.

This household is crowded, so full the only private place I can make for myself is the upstairs bathroom. At night I unroll my sleeping bag in there, my head resting two feet from the toilet bowl. But at least I can close the door. Got to have a little privacy. Got to sort through my life.

Drove over from Idaho to Wyoming over a month ago. Managed to find the car we just bought. Phil had hidden it from me just before he was admitted to the hospital again. Now he's the one who will have to deal with the old truck!

Didn't have any trouble finding the car. Knew it would be in the garage of the only friend he had in Idaho. Had to talk the friend into giving me the key. Embarrassing. But nothing compared to what I've been through this past year with that monster, that fiend.

So here I am. Not only was I unable to save Phil, but I was the one who, in the end, needed to be saved. Had to get away. Knew that on some level a couple of months ago. Was biding my time, slowly saving money from the part-time job I took. The man is crazy. The man is sociopathic. Beyond redemption. And dangerous. Scary. Finally have to admit that. Admit my fear of him.

So, though, on a conscious level, I wanted to save him, on an unconscious level, I was afraid of him, his latent violence. Of the two, which was the stronger motivation? And what is the psychological link between them? How do I understand myself well enough so that I never do that again?

Still can't believe how I could have put myself in that situation in the first place! From shining heroine of OpenSpace, to being dragged down to hell by the devil himself.

Finally escaped the house at 5 A.M. that morning. Hid out at a new friend's house for three days. When I heard Phil was again hospitalized I found the car and drove over here. God, I hope he stays sick for awhile. (Why doesn't he just go ahead and die? Leave me alone?) Hope he doesn't think to look for me here!

Sitting here, absorbed, obsessively going over and over the events which brought me to this place on earth, this point in time. Want to understand. Want to learn. For God's sake, don't want to ever be here again!

Suddenly, a knock at the back door. Reach over from where I am sitting to open it. Stand up to see who's out there. A small, stocky man, smiling beatifically, round head covered with a knitted blue cap. He removes the cap

and bows. You must be Ann! He exclaims, joyously. I'm George Vlastos, and I owe you money!

It is true. Years before I had done some astrological work through the mail for one "George Vlastos" whom I had never met. And he had never paid me. Over the years I had nursed a grudge against this man, seeing him as archetype of the creative artist who, wrongly, considers himself above mundane responsibilities. Now he tells me he had not asked for the work himself, and he had assumed the person who had asked for it had paid me.

Over the years, he continues, still smiling beatifically, I heard and felt strange — even hostile! — vibrations coming from this woman I had never met . . . As he says this he reaches into his pocket and hands me forty dollars.

Well, come in! I exclaim, my previous grudge against him disappearing in the face of such disarming honesty. In his presence my obsessive ruminations over Phil have also disappeared. In only a few minutes he has startled me into aliveness. I am utterly captivated by this man, his huge expressive energy, the light twinkling merrily through his big brown eyes.

## **Chapter Nineteen**

### **December, 1981**

I stand at the kitchen sink in sweat stiffened pajamas, disheveled, utterly spent. Sunlight streams through the window. The light hurts my eyes. Haven't combed my hair in weeks. Haven't been outside. Haven't seen a soul. Lost all track of time. Mired in some kind of personal hell, my entire life congealing in upon me, suffocating.

Can barely hold myself up. Exhausted. Reality has collapsed into the black hole of my body. The throbbing pain in my jaw so overwhelming I cannot sleep. Night after night, day after day, I lie in an endless stupor of exhaustion shot through with piercing stabs of agony.

Slowly I turn the faucet on, hold up my cup to fill it. Turn the faucet off. Each movement I make is deliberate; takes great effort. Each movement



seems suspended in time, unconnected to anything else, mired in a thick, stifling void.

Drink. For God's sakes, drink. Got to get something down. Even if you can't eat at least don't get dehydrated.

Walk slowly back into the darkened bedroom. Shaky. Fall back into the bed. Maybe this time I can sleep. Oh God, let me sleep.

At least lie here. Try to rest.

Dimly, I sense my gratitude to George, for leaving me his house during his absence. Appreciation flutters, swells feebly in my chest. Originating somewhere beneath the stupor, this feeling flickers into life and thrusts up, momentarily, to push aside both the stupor and the pain.

On my God, what if I had gotten sick at Dick's house, with all those people there! No matter how bad this is, at least I'm alone. I can be sick, alone, in peace.

Amazing. Just when I needed so desperately to be alone, I found myself alone. And only then did my jaw begin to ache again, aching now so much it blots out the entire world.

As if my body knew when it was safe to let down, take off the armor which sheathed me for so long, and reveal its wounding. As if my body knows, truly knows . . .

Oh God, the pain . . . overwhelming . . . blots out everything else. There is nothing else. Nothing but piercing stabs of pain, lightning stabbing the night. All the foolish hopes and plans and victories and defeats of my entire life — mere ashes in my mouth. Gritty. Gagging. Grit my teeth, grind them. Jaws grinding into the void.

If I weren't in so much pain I'd be dead.

I'd rather be dead than in this much pain.

Despair. Darkness. Falling further, deeper into the dark night of the soul. Drifting off again, pain dulled by slow lazy circling down, down, down . . .

up, up – loosened from gravity’s pull there is no orientation just this mindless aimless spiraling, spiraling . . . As if my body knows exactly how much I can take, administers a mild soporific to get me through . . . Lost in never-never land. Swaying swirling through the clouds . . .

Slowly, once again I come to . . . aah, here I am again, lying immobile in George’s darkened bedroom, the way I have been for — what has it been — two weeks? Will it ever end?

Who cares? It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. There is nothing left. I am surrendered into nothingness.

Lying here the same . . . but . . . but different. Not sure, but perhaps . . . yes, something inside me has subtly altered. Am no longer the same person who drifted off the last time. Something inside me feels different . . . Feel energy . . . starting to move. The life force catching hold, a gentle quickening . . .

Want to see George again! Want to see his merry laughing face!

At first, with him, I felt strange. His presence so full, so delightful, brilliant! He calls forth a different attitude from deep within me. One long forgotten. Learning how to move again, unplanned, unexpected. Surprise! Throwing up my hands, throwing back my head, throat vibrating, cracking into actual laughter. Face splitting into smiles, destroying the long stern set of my jaw, loosening muscles, bones grown stiff from holding myself upright, righteous, uptight . . .

How utterly unlike Phil is George. Moving from the inside of himself out into the world. Giving of himself, his love of life, his huge protean creativity . . . Want to become like George. Want to discover that part of myself that is truly happy and creative.

I think of George and I feel life begin to move within me. Small, momentary, hesitant, tiny surges of vitality — for the first time, the first time in years, the first time ever?

But then, the contrast! Lying here in the dim light, Phil’s face still looms before me. Those glittery eyes, those eyes that fascinated me, drew me to them, kept me there . . .

Aha, another motivation surfaces. Beneath the desire to save, beneath the fear, was this fascination, the extraordinary magnetism of that intensely powerful glitter . . .

Mind swimming back into the past. Falling further through time, back to the wet California winter after I had been fired. Living in the basement, the same darkness. The frozen despair I was feeling then, so unlike now. Now, despair is palpable, real, the horror of a raw stabbing pain. Then, it had been numbness, denial . . .

I hated myself. Hated what had happened to me. Hated what I had become. Felt guilty for who I was, the failure of my life. Couldn't tolerate the pain of feeling my entire life as a waste.

Couldn't afford to feel the pain then. Wasn't strong enough to take either the pain of my life or the truth about it. All I could do was stay in my head, make up lies.

I projected those aspects of myself that I feared and hated onto others. It was their fault. They did that to me. They were mean, bad, cruel, crazy. I am the good girl, the one who knows the truth, and for that was victimized, scapegoated, by a president too chicken to stand up to his own trustees.

So I thought. So, in a reflex effort to survive what had happened to me I twisted truth into its opposite, flipping self-hatred into self-glorification.

One night I had a dream. A very vivid dream. The most numinous dream of my life.

I dreamed that I was riding my horse again, heading towards the rising sun. Suddenly Goldie wanted to go home again, she wanted to turn and go back the way she had come. Reluctantly, I gave her her head.

We came to a thick stone wall, higher than my head while sitting upon her. Directly in front of me, an open iron gate. To the left of the gate, a huge wolf, the Guardian of the Gate. The wolf's eyes were glittery, glittery and yellow. A baleful evil yellow.

In the midst of recalling this dream I see Phil's eyes. Staring at me the way they did that last night. Yellow eyes. Yellow and glittery. Not the whites of

his eyes, but the actual iris. Yellow. Possessed. As if an evil spirit had taken him over. I am reminded of something he said once, how “the devil took me, bounced me off the wall like a ball.”

Those eyes the night we met. Glittery. The glitter so bright I didn’t notice the weird yellow. The glitter a feverish flashing that aped true aliveness. I was searching for aliveness, and I got glitter instead. Glitter which soon transformed into its opposite, the darkening of the light, as I was catapulted into the hell of “life” with Phil.

I was so busy justifying why I was there — was determined to heal his body, change his mind, save his soul — that I didn’t notice Phil was the wolf, in sheep’s clothing, of course, sick, in a seemingly weakened condition, needing my help. The perfect hook! I was so identified with my specialness as a mental and spiritual guide — helping people, knowing their paths better than they did . . . no wonder his particular psychosis triggered my own, dovetailed with it perfectly.

In the dream my horse wanted to go home again. Home was somewhere on the other side of the gate. But in order to go home I had to pass by the wolf. Had to stare him down. Had to dare to stare into those glittery yellow eyes. To immobilize him. To turn him to stone.

I had awakened sweating, terrified, from this dream, the figure of the wolf looming large, numinous, haunting.

Over the following months the dream stayed with me, skittering in and out of consciousness. I could not forget it. What did it mean to go home again?

Five months later, I was back in my old home town, married to my high school boyfriend.

This sudden shocking turn in my destiny had the same uncanny feel to it as did the dream. I had come home, to my home town, to my true love. Naturally I assumed the meaning of the dream was fulfilled.

But the wolf, of course, was still waiting at the gate. And I, as Little Red Riding Hood, still naïve, still believing in my mission as savior of souls, was destined one day to meet him, up close, face to face. Eyes riveted, one of us was to stare the other down.

## **Chapter Twenty**

**Late December, 1981**

Standing at the kitchen sink of a lovely little A-frame on a mountain, staring out the window while scooping tiny bites of mint chocolate chip Haagen Das ice cream directly out of the pint container. Outside, howling wind swirls thickening snow into oblivion. Inside, New Yorker magazines stacked in the polished wicker basket by the fireplace; hot tube and Jacuzzi bubbling, steaming on the sun porch; enormous white fluffy down comforter floating on the king size bed. It is Christmastime, and I am housesitting.

I feel naked, raw, newborn. The sickness of my soul has been seared away through long running fever and piercing pain.

I am thinking how extraordinary it is that I have just discovered Jonathan Schell's masterpiece, *The Fate of the Earth*, as serialized in the New Yorker. How extraordinary that I have just been granted new life at the exact time Schell has documented our collective fear of nuclear death.

Finally. The time has come. Schell's disclosure throws down the gauntlet. No longer do we have to pretend that nothing is wrong. No longer do I have to keep my fear of nuclear death secret, a secret festering within me since childhood. "From the time you were three years old," my mother never tires of telling me, "you refused to be touched . . . you were silent, but I could tell you were thinking all the time."

All the time thinking. Thinking about death. About the whole world suddenly blinking out in one unimaginably cataclysmic explosion.

Somehow, in my three-year-old brain there was already implanted the idea that the world would end in my lifetime. I was Chicken Little and someday the sky would fall in. It could be tonight, it could be tomorrow, it could be in three more years, or five. So there's no sense taking plans seriously. No sense getting excited about anything. Underneath everything we think and do crouches that yawning black hole, its massive devouring gravity sucking everything up, compressing it to nothing.

For me, no matter what was happening in my daily life, this secret horror undermined it. Given the cloud mushrooming over everything, doing the dishes for that one whole year was an extraordinary act of faith. The world wouldn't end before I got that horse. I wouldn't let it. For that one year my personal will was stronger than our collective death wish.

Later, even when astride Goldie, running free through fields of gold, I couldn't forget for more than a few minutes at a time. Nuclear extinction was the larger perspective, a context so inevitably universal and terrible that all foreground considerations were like dots on a screen, blinking in and out at random, all of them cancelled by the vastness of the inexhaustible void.

Secretly, I knew: my personal life, our common life, standing precariously above that secret certainty, that terrible insecurity, is a lie. In a bleak inversion of purpose, of meaning, I knew that, literally, nothing counts but this fire in the end.

For nearly four decades I expected hell on earth, looked for it, around every corner. As each new year renewed Earth's orbit around the sun, I was more surprised than the year before. Just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean it won't soon. Indeed, the longer we continue, the more certain our destruction in the very near future.

Finally, I did land in a kind of hell, though not the one I had bargained for. In a karmic bargain to the death, I shook hands with Phil, the devil himself.

Now, having only barely recovered from the fallout from that experience, I was reading the inside thoughts of a man whose profound despair concerning the Fate of Earth was matched only by his heartfelt compassion for both the planet herself and all creatures living upon her.

Intuitively, I knew that Schell's unblinking willingness to face up to our common fate, his courage in directing his attention unswervingly to what lay ahead for us all, was the key. His awesome and moving disclosure of what, underneath, we dreaded as an absolute certainty, but on a conscious level, had so numbed ourselves to the terror it evoked that we could not feel at all — was the most significant human achievement of this century. The New Yorker's decision to publish Schell's confession turned the tide. Made it possible, and — as we learned how to become more and more accepting of our buried terror and rage — utterly urgent and necessary that we redirect

human energy from what had been, until now, the inexorable march to apocalypse.

Schell's lucid description of the seemingly inevitability of the forces herding us, like lemmings, toward the sea of mass death was also, paradoxically, a prescription for a different kind of future. By facing up to what was really going on, worldwide, by truly embracing our common secret despair, we could erase its power over us. Could replace it with grace, the intervention of something more than human, divinity shining from within.

Needless to say, I was ecstatic. Spent those two weeks on the mountain on top of the world, surveying my kingdom, preparing to devote my life to this suddenly legitimate business of saving the world. It was time. And I was ready to help us take off the blinders, to offer my contribution to our common recovery from the amnesia afflicting the vast majority of humanity since Hiroshima.

Five months later, in May of 1982, an estimated one million people marched for peace in the streets of New York City.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

### **November, 1983**

The kitchen is small, dark, and grimy. The floor is sticky. The refrigerator full of moldy leftovers. Huge sticky jars of peanut butter and grape jelly stand open on the counter, sitting on and surrounded by crumbs, inviting flies. In summer, flies buzz everywhere, their eggs hidden in the curves of logs of the cabin walls.

Every time I enter the kitchen I feel depressed. How grimy it is, no matter how often it is cleaned. Also feel oddly dizzy in here, and no wonder. The floor slants in one direction, the ceiling, in another.

This kitchen is the original room of the fairly large cabin known as the Simpson House, recently renamed Heartland House. For many years a hippie enclave in Jackson, this resort town in the mountains of western Wyoming, the cabin also contains five tiny dark bedrooms off the narrow

hall, and a fairly large and comfortable living room with woodstove and couches.

Only peace activists live here now. A few months go the last holdover from the Simpson House days left, a skinny long haired freak who just walked out into the coming winter with his backpack on his back.

I am washing the mountains of dishes that have stacked up in here. Staring out through the window at the logs of the cabin next door. Secretly resentful that I'm the one to finally end up doing them. The job is taking forever, and no one is volunteering to help.

Awaiting a phone call from an artist who we hope will agree to illustrate the cover for next month's issue of Heartland, the tabloid magazine I founded for networking peace activists in the rocky mountain region. And I am worried, as usual, about the money. Whether we'll have the money to put out the next issue. And I'm upset with another peace organization over in Cheyenne for ignoring Heartland, in its survey of what is going on in the region.

I'm relieved that Kate has finally decided to resign from the staff of the magazine. Her energy was so paranoid! As if she had looked nuclear death in the face for so long, had documented the mind-numbing facts of it with such relentless passionate intensity, that she finally lost it, became as destructive as what she was raging against.

I also wonder about Pamela. So insecure and needy, covering it up with bravado, an increasingly shrill dogmatism! Our meetings getting more and more contentious; we are a bunch of prima donnas all expecting to be the center of attention, miffed when our individual ideas are not pushed through.

Next week I have to go out on the road again, braving windy snowy icy roads of high deserts and mountain passes in the same car I used to escape from Phil. No front wheel drive. What's infinitely worse, two months ago the reverse gear gave out, and I have no money to get it fixed. Can only go forwards. Can make no mistakes. Can only park where I don't have to back up to get out. Can't miss any turns. Scares the hell out of me.

Interesting metaphor. Feels like I can only go forward in my life from here on, also. That I cannot afford mistakes. I'm forty years old, and my body is



talking to me, warning me, insisting I change my habits. But I can't do it now. Too much work to do. This is more important. There is nothing more important than working for peace on earth.

Got to keep going. Got to keep seeding Heartland into the isolated small towns all over the deep west region. Usually a couple of lonely activists in each town. Glad to see me. Glad to find out what's going on elsewhere. Want me to help them activate others where they live.

Infuriating! Most people still so stupid, so ignorant of what we are all facing! They don't want to stop their materialistic, bourgeoisie lifestyles for even one minute to help turn the tide, change the fate of the planet.

Most of them look at me like I'm crazy. Rebuff my asking for money, turn the other way when they see me coming. Their eyes glaze over when I list types of missiles and count them, for both sides. 50,000! Can you believe! Or when I talk about the half-life of plutonium, 24,000 years! It's unimaginable toxicity, the fact that one pound of it, if distributed equally to the lungs of everyone on Earth, would kill us all!

No wonder they can't hear me. There is no way the mind can comprehend, much less contemplate, what I have to say. And sometimes I think saying it makes it worse. That when we really face up to what has been going on since World War II, when we really see the full and continuously growing enormity of the hair-trigger, computer guided world-wide nuclear infrastructure, we either become ravaged by it, or else, in order to survive what we see, shut down even deeper inside. There is nothing we can do. It is already too late. Even I think that, sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if my own desperate attempts to get people to wake up is just a distraction from what I know to be true, a deep deep sense of utter hopelessness, a despair so total that there is no light at the end of this tunnel into oblivion.

Even here, in this beautiful little mountain valley, where people do appreciate the earth more than in cities, the jocks are so into their various sports and Patagonias that they refuse to acknowledge larger issues. "I came here to get away from all that," they say, irritably. How can they not think about it? How can they act as if it doesn't matter?

Reminds me of when I was a kid, suffering under that secret terror which I knew, could not be broached with others. Nothing has changed except that

I've become the fool for speaking up — and for thinking Schell's essays would really turn the tide.

Exhausted. Sick and tired of it all. But can't stop now. How can I stop when this is the time when we must wake up? If we don't do it now, it'll be too late. If it isn't too late already.

Don't feel good. Feel chronically angry, frustrated, depleted. Have to flog myself to get going each morning.

Oh good, the phone. Hope it's the call I've been waiting for.

## **Chapter Twenty-Two**

### **March, 1984**

Just need one pan, to boil water for tea. Hardly any dishes to wash, thank God. Except for my cup. Once in a while I do need to rinse out my cup. And a knife. I need the knife. To cut slices of cheese. To butter bread. Have to force myself to eat. Half an apple. A carrot. A handful of raisins.

Exhausted. Inert.

All day long I sit alone, in front of the fire, staring into it, dulled eyes sucked into the oblivion of bright hot heat.

All the fire gone out of me. No life left. The fire inside now outside, where I can look at it, recognize it, understand it?

Feel cold, so cold. The fire heats, warms, feels good. Can't get enough, can't get close enough. Jump up, stand next to it, legs spread wide, hands spread out over it, swaying back and forth.

Sit here in front of the fire hunched over, rocking back and forth. Rocking the trance of primal motion.

Can't get warm enough, no matter how hot the fire. Want to fill the hollowness inside; to feel my whole being inside the fire, consumed by it. As

if somehow, contact with this tiny confined conflagration will both sear me of my sins and eventually, reactivate my energy.

Not that I'll ever be an activist again. "Peace activist"! Sure! Fat chance! I was a violent peace activist. So caught up in furious rage against those who would rage against others that I didn't recognize myself as prime example of what must change. So identified with the content of the message I was trying to force others to understand that I was not sensitive to my own violence against them. Peace activist, ha! Let me say these words, say them again and again, say them this time with meaning: let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Sitting here alone for three months now. Gone from the world. Depleted. All the fire inside transferred to the little black box squatting before me, its heavy iron door open to my eyes, humming with combustion, radiating heat.

The fire sucks memories from my bones, draws them out like strings. I see the events of my life stretching from the present back into the deep deep past as inevitable chains of cause and effect, all stemming from one original cause that brilliant white flash of world destruction which both terrified and magnetized me as a child. I imprinted on it. Chewed it up into tiny brilliant flashes of rage energizing muscles, tendons, bones, nerves . . .

All my life I've run on nervous energy, fired by fear of violence. All my life I've been violent, violently against violence. All my life all I see is war and threats of war. I've been afraid of that which I most expected, and drew it to me, made it mine. Made myself into my own image of what I most fear and hate. I am the violence of which I speak against so scathingly. I am the one who pushes the button to trigger the holocaust.

Hot golden flames envelop blackening wood to glowing red coals firing tiny blue gold orange flames spreading alighting brilliant rooms in hell. Hissing me forth. Calling my eyes to enter them. To become one, be done. Gone. Gone out like a light.

My eyes flit in and out of hell's glowing chambers. My eyes are magnetized by the light, the light, light of the darkest night. Fanatic's eyes: they would kill to preserve what they "love."

As a wild animal slinks off into the woods to lick its wounds, so did I slink off to allow the fire to lick the wounds of violence within myself. Curled up, hunched in my little chair in front of the little fire. Rapt in silent solitude, wintry winds howling outside. Fire was my intimate partner. Lost in internal reflections, mind looping back through memory, images stirring thought.

Voice breaks through harshly into the silence, its raspy whispers startling — “Yes!” . . . “Oh no!” . . . “My God it’s true!” — and the fire hisses back.

The fire was my lover. I could not leave the fire, could not take my eyes off the fire, could not get enough of the fire, wanted to be warmed by it, comforted. We were one, the fire and I, caught up in mutual alchemizing penetrating searing the dross of what had become my wooden being. I stopped the world that desolate winter, consumed by flames. I stopped the world and I got off.

I began that vigil on New Years Eve, 1984, with fear in my heart. 1984. The year we had all been dreading. Orwell’s year.

I stared into the fire, and I kept a fresh cut red rose blooming beside me during that long winter of 1984, replacing it with another every few days, as my offering to the eventual replenishment of Life on Earth.

As the days began to grow longer, snow melting off and ground thawing; as life within the soil began to swell and thrust up tiny green shoots, I too began to feel life begin to stir within.

One early morning, I awoke to the sound of birds celebrating the dawn. This was not unusual; since childhood I have preferred this time of awakening. On this particular morning, however, I had the strange experience of actually being consciously aware of the process of moving from deep sleep to wakefulness.

Suddenly, at one particular point still deep within the sleeping state, but moving quickly to the surface, my awareness was arrested, steadied, there. I experienced my being as a point of light buried within the thick wall that had become my body. So thick was the wall, that I could only barely hear the birds on the other side of it. It was as if I was hearing them from a long way off, though I knew they were just outside.

This discovery shocked me profoundly. Its meaning slowly and ponderously vibrated from deep inside out through what had become the dense compression of my material being. I realized: so dense was the wall of my body, that I could not even experience what had been, since childhood, the deep inner joy of my body resonating instantly and with abandon to the harmonic vibration of birdsong.

This experience made a lasting impression. My body as having constructed from its own substance a thick wall separating consciousness from body's original capacity to sensitively attune to the natural world. That morning I made a solemn vow: I will work to dissolve the wall; eventually my body will be purified and detoxified to such an extent that it will vibrate like the skin of a drum, to again receive the singing of birds resounding inside me.

Speaking now, in late 1989, little did I know, back then, how long and slow and profound this process is proving to be; that it has, in fact, transformed the whole of my life. Now I can say: only as I learn to listen to the subtle whispers of what my body tells me, do I truly attune to health, to love, to Life on Earth.

Back then, as April unfolded, I sighed with relief to detect the first faint perfume of spring ruffling the breezes. I sensed that perhaps, after all, since the human race had made it through the winter of 1984, despite our collective fear of it, we might actually be beginning again. That something perhaps had changed. That we might yet save the planet. And what had seemed equally impossible until the alchemy of those months sitting mesmerized in front of the fire, that I might even save my own soul.

## **Chapter Twenty-Three**

### **October, 1984**

The designer kitchen spreads out lavishly at one end of the spacious, high ceilinged log room with picture windows on two sides, overlooking the rushing river. I am standing at the sink, washing the few dishes the two of us have used for lunch. Trying to do them, carefully, quietly. Rod is in the bedroom, napping. Asleep, I hope. Don't want to awaken him.

Here for two weeks now, helping him to recuperate from kidney surgery. Still reeling with the shock of this latest sudden and enormous change in my life — and puzzled. Want to understand. Had no idea, when I met him, that he would be hospitalized and in critical condition only one week later. Had no idea, when I met him, that I was about to enter into another intense process with a very sick man.

Though the resemblance is uncanny, I must remember the two situations are, in reality, utterly unlike. Phil was a bad man. Rod is a good man, a spiritual man. Indeed, this relationship the first in my entire life which is foremost, of the spirit. I sense in our union the possibility of that which I have always longed for, what has haunted me, a true communion of souls. A meeting of the finest in us both.

He's sick now, weak. Can't do anything for himself. Thank God I'm here to help him! And he's still suffering, sensitive soul that he is, from a particularly devastating divorce. I can help him here too, let him know what a fine person he is, how it was meant to be; how, even if he can't see it now, his divorce is not a failure but a new beginning, a brand new lease on life.

Inspire him into full aliveness! Guide him in uncovering the beauty of his original nature! So he can truly become the partner I long for. So we can live out the dream of a perfect union, the true communion that has haunted both of us, all our lives.

We were introduced to each other for the first time last January. Both of us were panelists, in a public discussion on peace. Him as a concerned citizen, me as an activist. My swan song as an activist. Our rapport was instant. During that evening we functioned as subliminal partners, we agree now, though it would be nine more months before he would be able to end his long and troubled marriage.

And now, now! What great good fortune to have landed here, in this wonderful house, with this good man, after the searing solitude of winter, the vow to heal myself in spring. I prayed for life on earth, and I asked that my own life begin again. And it has! With an abundance greater than I ever dreamed.

The birds are calling me, calling me. Calling me to paradise.

## **Chapter Twenty-Four**

**October, 1986**

Oh good, the water is finally boiling. I can do the dishes now. Arising from the big easy chair sitting regally in the center of this one-room cabin, I walk the few feet to the kitchen counter, where I remove the kettle from the wood cook stove and pour steaming water into one of two big, stainless steel bowls. I use the other one to wash my body.

The daily rituals of ablution are simple, exacting, and comforting. Grab two buckets, one in each hand, walk over to my landlady's house, fill them from the spigot outside. Two one-gallon buckets. All I need for an entire day's supply of water! Outhouse is out back.

The daily ritual of using this primitive method to do the dishes, to sponge my body, has become profoundly satisfying. Ground me into the here and now. Right here. Right now. All the excess of my life gradually eliminating, contracting me to essence.

All my life, projecting self out into the world, then living as if I were out there, inside those projections. Basking, sometimes, in the glamour of illusion. Disappointed, more often, when what does come to pass was not what I had "in mind." Jerked around like a marionette on strings by the ephemeral phantoms of ideas. Ideas which come from "on high" and have no connection to the rest of me, my body, the slow ebb and flow of feelings that I cannot conceptualize and which, therefore, I prefer not to notice.

The quickness of my mind, it runs away with me; it runs away from me, the rest of me. The split between the two, body and mind, widens as time goes on. The denial of the expression of feeling becomes so profound, finally, that compression forces feelings to implode, producing abnormal situations which sooner or later, I will have to become aware of, acknowledge and work through — or manifest chronic debilitating disease.

All my life, ignoring my body, what it has to teach me, not only about itself, but about its links to the larger world, Earth herself, of which it is an aspect. My body, my personal portion of Earth! My body as primary earth, for me.

As Earth is a body, so am I. For both of them, the Laws of Nature hold. To attune to my body is, automatically, to be in tune with Earth. In this respect we are one, synchronized.

And Earth herself, in her living context, as a heavenly body! My body lives upon a heavenly body. I link to the heavens, not by putting my head in the clouds, but by sinking down, into the dark rich soil of personal experience, the way my body actually feels, at this moment, right here, right now.

My time with Rod taught me that. Slammed me right into my feelings. Wrenched me wide open. Exposed the ancient wound.

What goes up must come down. Our view of relationship, of ourselves as soul mates was so utopian, so exalted, that it could only pop, like a balloon.

Together, we yearned for an ideal world, and saw, in each other, the lover of our dreams. Neither of us wanted to notice the pock marks, the quirks, the various ghosts we had dragged with us from the past, specific signposts of our separate personal histories which had carved us into the unique individuals we had become.

We didn't want to be individuals; we wanted to forget our separate selves and drown in an infinite sea of compassion. We were so wrapped up in our projection of perfection that we refused to incorporate the definitive actuality of the world we were in fact living in, and which was begging us to slow down, to accommodate something other than the vision we were reaching for.

Together, we used our relationship to escape the world, its muted cries, its anxious suffering. Together, we lifted into the clouds so high that we could no longer tell what was real, what not; so high that there was nothing to hold on to, no way to distinguish this from that. We were drifting, disoriented, lost in space, lost in confusion. Finally, we lost contact altogether, and I fell, hurtled howling through space, to crash horribly, splattering all over the ground.

The end of that affair was the beginning of my allowing myself to truly experience my own emotional pain. In crashing to the ground, I finally connected with my emotional body. With the pain that body had been



holding. The abyss of abandonment. I “lost my head,” with him, and fell into the black hole of personal anguish which did not actually begin with Rod but long, long before.

That was several years ago. For the first time I didn’t just pick myself up and go on, as if nothing had happened. Didn’t just slink off into the wilderness until I felt good again, and then forget my time out there.

I could no longer distract myself from what I was feeling. My center of gravity had shifted. I was no longer a mind that had a body. Now my mind was in my body, deep down inside it. Mind was caught inside the tight thrumming cage of the solar plexus. Mind was holding the labored beating of a heart so walled off from the rest of me — so constricted, so isolated, when its exaltation lies in connection! — that this poor heart felt like it was, literally, breaking in two.

I surrendered. I gave myself up to the actuality of the present moment, and that moment was, simply, pain. Allowing the pain to be there, to take me over, to become one with it. To hurtle me backwards in time, to when I was nine months old, and my father wrenched himself away from my mother and myself, for the agony of World War II. When my mother also abandoned me, emotionally, so beside herself was she with the anxiety of wondering whether he would ever return.

“Orphan Annie,” I call the tiny child who was suddenly kicked, terrified, with no warning and no way to comprehend, into the frozen void. Suddenly pulled off the breast and weaned to a cup. Suddenly left alone to cry for long hours in the middle of the afternoon, in the dark dead of night. Suddenly. My father overseas and my mother a million miles away.

Orphan Annie. I hold her close to my heart. Comfort her. Sway her back and forth in the womb of primal motion. I feel a tenderness towards this child within me, a tenderness that I have never been able to feel for anyone, even my own poor children from whom I am still estranged — I left them as small boys; now they are in their early twenties! — and with whom I have had no contact for six long years.

Spiralling down into the long dark tunnel with no light at the end of it. Surrendering to the unrelenting agony, years upon years of stored anguish over the unnatural wrenching from my own children.

The pain sinks me into the earth, contracts me to a tense, dense, gravid condition. Pain penetrates my entire being, takes me over. Overwhelming darkness . . . feel suffocated, sucked into vacuum. The sheer terror of asphyxiation. The utterly mindless panic of being so contracted, so compressed, that there is no room for that primal and ultimate exchange of energy between self and the world.

The pain of feeling unable to breathe in the past is so acute I automatically hold my breath in the present. Hold it until I begin to turn blue in the face . . .

Consciously and deliberately, I begin to breathe into the point of most pain, no matter how much more pain it causes me to do this. Consciously and deliberately, I intend the circling of air to begin to gently massage that dense mass. The pain is resistant, unrelenting, a huge leaden stone crushing my chest.

Continue breathing consciously, more and more deeply. Allow the pain to be there. Honor it. Be one with the pain, one with the breathing.

Gradually penetrating pain with the breath. Oxygenating pain to the point where it finally begins to vibrate, to breathe on its own. Consciously breathing into the pain, in and out, in and out, the rhythm of this repeating movement setting up a momentum which entrains that which surrounds it.

Gradually the motion of the molecules in vibration continues to speed up, swelling into fullness, admitting light. Ancient wounds, when fully acknowledged and allowed; ancient agony, when its depth and mystery and wisdom is truly honored, gradually expands to open up space within it, a channel for the wind to whistle through on its way from one end of the universe to the other.

Opening up space precisely within the greatest suffering. Moving through suffering, to open new space, pure potency, primal chaos, rich womb from which creation is born.

Suffering transforms into sacrifice. The sacrifice of extreme density is an opening, a door to the beyond. A sacred initiation, accomplished through

mutation: instinct itself transforms as I consciously and deliberately move into that from which, formerly, I had instinctively recoiled, so terrified was I of feeling the pain I did not want to admit was there.

Sacrifice consecrates into rejoicing, it floods my being and expands in all directions to join with Earth, we are one, one being, refracting into billions of tiny cells each with its own specialized integrity, all organized into larger, more complex units, moving and swaying as different points in one swelling subsiding oceanic tide.

The rhythmic vibrating fullness of my being is earth being is our being radiating out in all directions into the heavens. The heavens are singing. The heavens sing the song of birds, the heavens sing the glory of God.

Death, followed by resurrection. Death, and prior to resurrection, three days of lying, lifeless, in the tomb.

The self that had denied my own emotional pain had died, and I was now lying in the tomb, dead. I had entered upon a process which would take time. Which required trust. Which called for patience, understanding, and total acceptance of the slowness, the reluctance of ancient wounds to heal. Months upon months of centering in the solar plexus and heart, the terrible compression there.

Meanwhile, during this time, I noticed that the coming November full moon would be occurring on the precise point in the zodiac at which the Moon was located during the moment of my birth, 23° Taurus. As an astrologer, I was interested in this phenomenon, what it would mean, for me.

I circled the date, and awaited it, fascinated. I assumed it would somehow resonate with the emotional work I was doing now, since the Moon, astrologically, is symbolic of subconscious memories, mother and child, the deeply emotional female nature.

Perhaps some kind of catharsis, or illumination? Would this full moon herald the climax and subsequent release of old pain?

November 19, two days after the full moon. I receive a letter from my mother containing news of my children. One of them had written to her. The first news in six years!

That night my menstrual period arrived. And with it, I noticed that a hard and stony old lump, deep within the left side of my groin, had softened and enlarged. The next day the lump was larger still, and painful. Over the following days it continued to grow, meanwhile gradually rising from deep within to just beneath the skin.

At this point the lump, originally about the size of my little fingernail, had ballooned to the size of a ping pong ball. Extremely painful. I could barely walk. Over the next 24 hours it changed shape, to become like a cone — or a volcano. At this point I began twice daily soaks in Epsom salt baths, covering the area afterwards with healing clay, to draw out whatever was in there.

One day more, and the lump-turned-carbuncle began to weep. My internal time bomb turned volcano erupted, but very slowly and gradually, taking another four or five days to completely flush out.

My mood, during this entire time, was ecstatic. I knew intuitively that this clearing from deep within the left (female) side of the groin (sexual) area of my body was the climax I had been looking for. That I had stored emotional pain in this lump from the time of my childbearing years.

For several years previous to the time of its enlargement and surfacing I had known intuitively that this worrisome little lump would someday turn cancerous if I didn't release it. I had made a conscious intention, given my body the instruction, to do just that. I intended that at the point when I was emotionally ready for it, this release would take place.

And here was the event I had long anticipated, without knowing exactly how it would manifest, concurring with the full moon exactly upon my Moon! And synchronous with the time of receiving news about my children! What another might have perceived as a horrible thing happening to his or her body I perceived as a victory, knowing with every fiber of my being that the clearing of this small dense poisoned pocket of congealed energy was the beginning of emotional liberation.

Exactly one year to the day after this catharsis I was in Boston with my mother, preparing to visit first, the father of my children, and finally, those long lost children themselves.

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

**November 1987**

The three of us are sitting in Patrick's little kitchen at the same teak table we ate upon during our marriage of long ago. Mother and I together on one side, Patrick across from her. I wonder which of the many nicks in its oiled surface were made by me, by the boys when they were small.

Both the table and the kitchen counters have been cleared off, the seemingly haphazard stacks of books and papers now piled elsewhere in this cluttered little house. Clearly, Patrick has prepared to receive us.

Mother and I have brought a bottle of wine, cheese and crackers. The three of us are busying ourselves with opening the wine, arranging the cheese and crackers on a plate. Embarrassed. Can't look at each other in the eye. How to proceed? The air feels thick, pregnant with coiled energy.

Patrick and my mother are obviously nervous. I may look nervous, too, on the surface; underneath, however, I am in an altered state, having come fully prepared for this occasion.

Switch to three months earlier. Midnight, August 18, 1987. Harmonic Convergence. I am in a large ceremonial space with 50 others, all of us spinning, like dervishes. All of a sudden I hear a voice from deep within my being, booming loud and clear.

"You are to finish your personal karma by the end of the year!"

"What?"

The message is repeated, as loudly as before.

"No! NO!" I know exactly what the voice is referring to. I refuse to do it. I will not go back and see Patrick. That awful man! Poisoning my children against me all this time!

Over the following weeks I gradually grow used to the idea, and when my mother agrees to accompany me, I discover an actual gladness inside, relief that the long held hostility between us is about to move.

Not that I know how to move it. Indeed, I have no idea. All I know is this is what I have to do now. That if I am willing, then somehow an opening will be created for the occasion.

I call up an old friend who still lives near Boston, and with whom I shared much in our mutual childrearing days. Joyfully Nancy agrees to serve as go-between for this momentous occasion. She contacts my older son Sean, invites him to dinner, and tells him of my desire. He agrees to serve as go-between with his father, arranging the meeting with me. Sean and Patrick have not been in contact with Colin for a year, and so, on impulse, one weekend they hop in Sean's little sports car and drive to Washington D.C., to find him.

Meanwhile, I have given the problem of how-to-be-with-Patrick to my unconscious mind. Told it that if it wants me to do this, it had better let me know how. I busy myself with other affairs, pausing once in a while to bring the subject up to consciousness. Gradually, during this process, I notice a subtle sea change taking place internally. Instead of hating Patrick as usual, I find myself feeling him, feeling inside him, who he is and was, what he has been going through.

I begin to feel his vulnerability, his hurt, his pain. Feel him as a small child, only five years old when his father died and his mother handed him over to a housekeeper while she went to work.

As I began to touch into my own tender child the year before, so now I am feeling Patrick's child, his own trauma of abandonment. He and I are one in our pain. Since both of us were harboring the secret suffering of childhood when we married, we unconsciously caused our own children to experience the same suffering of abandonment.

As the one who left the impossible situation of our marriage, I took all the blame. I felt guilty, and Patrick made sure that I did. My leaving him triggered his old pain, and he reacted in blaming anger, to cover up the original hurt.

That anger is still there, 20 years later, and by now it has hardened his face into cement. I look across at him. I think back to how he greeted us this afternoon — his genuine joy in seeing my mother again, the formal frozen stiffness as he then turned his head to look at me. “Hello, Ann,” he said slowly, teeth clinched, voice dripping with scorn.

But it doesn’t matter how he greeted me. Or that his body was stiff with pride as I tried to hug him. Intuitively, I knew this would happen. I knew the entire scenario, how it would take place, and told my mother so, on the way down here in the rented car.

“He is going to spill out all the rage and anger he has had towards me over all these years,” I said to her. I am simply going to sit there while he does this, and not defend myself. You don’t have to say a thing. Your role is simply to sit there too, as witness.”

She didn’t understand, and she was scared and acutely uncomfortable at the prospect of this meeting; but, dear woman! — she had agreed to come. And now here we were, hurtling in a rental car towards my rendezvous with destiny.

The cheese and crackers are arranged. The wine opened and poured. Awkward silence . . .

Suddenly my mouth opens and slowly, full of feeling, the words roll out. “Patrick, we are here to talk about whatever you need to talk about.”

Permission has been given. The floodgate opens. The venom pours out, at first slowly, hesitantly, then rising to repeating crescendos. Hurtling insults, how awful a mother I have been, how he and the boys suffered so. Hour upon hour of this. I sit there. My mother sits there. I am not defended against him. I am there for him. I receive his rage and neutralize it, release the residue into the atmosphere.

Each time he pauses, to catch his breath before the next onslaught, my mouth opens again, and my voice delivers to him something for which I am truly grateful. “I am really glad you were able to give the kids discipline, when I could not.” Or: “The house you designed for my parents was wonderful, its spaces changed the family dynamic!”

Each time I do this he sputters, cannot believe his ears. Each time I repeat it, to make sure he hears.

The detailing of my sins goes on and on. Endless. Interspersed with my loving comments. At one point he gives me a great teaching. I have suddenly gripped his forearm with my hand, startling him into stopping the tirade. I have just said to him, in a low, intense voice, almost a whisper. “Patrick, we’ve got to get over this!”

At this he turns and sees me for the first time, the glaze in his eyes dispersing to reveal his soul. For that one long and holy moment in the entire history of our relationship his soul reaches out to mine and he says, in a voice as low and slow as my own: “Ann, you can’t go too fast.”

The space opened by that moment then quickly shut down. His venom was not yet spent. For another hour he droned on, though the energy in him was obviously dissipating.

Finally, at the close of four full hours, Mother stood up, said that was enough, that she couldn’t take anymore.

As we left, I hugged him again, and this time, even though his voice was still berating me, I felt his body clinging to mine.

The frozen emotional wasteland had warmed up. Our bodies had begun to vibrate, together. The deed was done.

I walked out of that house exultant. My mother was devastated. I spent the hour’s return to Boston helping her re-interpret what had happened, and thanking her for being there.

Subsequent meetings with both Patrick and our children, after that fierce initiation, became more and more relaxed, all of us glad the wall had been torn down.

Colin has since moved to live near me in Wyoming. We get together once in a while. Sean calls and comes to visit. Patrick and I talk on the phone about our kids, how they are coming along.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**March, 1989**

The four of us are sitting at the round oak table in the suburban dining room. My lover, his two children, and me. He has fixed us this Sunday dinner, and is justly proud.

My lover wolfs down his portion of baked chicken and potatoes, asking his daughter, in a perfunctory, distracted manner, about her day. She starts to answer him, but he is not there. She stops, looks at me, shrugs her shoulders, goes back to eating.

He is finished. Suddenly shoves his chair back and gets up. Approximately ten minutes after we sat down he is already done and gone. I feel vaguely uncomfortable. His action has upset me, on a subliminal level. It always does. He always does this at dinnertime when I am there. Eats in a few minutes flat and then gets up in a hurry, to start the dishes.

He rinses his plate, utensils and water glass, the pots and pans from dinner, letting them clatter loudly. Opens the dishwasher door, bends over, places the dishes in the partially filled dishwasher, rearranging to fit. My lover and my mother, filling and rearranging the same type of dishwasher, with a forty year span between them. Same type of sunny cheerful kitchen in relatively new suburban house.

Looks are deceptive The nuclear families of my childhood have exploded, fissioning into fragments, blowing forlornly in the wind. Though to all appearances we are a family, man and woman and two children in this suburban house today, the invisible lines of force that formerly connected us as families have shattered, to leave us uneasy, and trying not to show it.

Each of us hiding within a glass bell jar, insulated, isolated. Burdened with a history of broken dreams. Moving slowly through the dreamtime, in shock. Responses muted. Trying to cope. Wondering about the future. Trying not to dwell on the past. Longing for security, connectedness. Pretending everything is okay.

The sign of him bending over the dishwasher has put me into reverie. I snap back, hurry to finish eating. The kids are both doing the same. We all feel

vaguely guilty for not being done yet, and yet upset with him for making us feel like we should finish sooner.

His daughter told me, the first day I spent alone with her, that he never did the dishes when he was married to her mother. That he didn't do any of the housework. "My mother did it all. After a full day of work herself. Sometimes she was up until late at night getting everything done."

He never did the dishes when he was married, and yet he always does them when I'm there. Doesn't like me to do them. Doesn't like me in his kitchen. Now it's his kitchen. She's gone away to school and the kids are living with him for two years. He's had to learn to do the dishes, and he doesn't want any help.

His behavior is extreme. Instinctively, I feel it as a reaction to the past. Not because he feels guilty that he didn't do them before, not because he is now a reformed macho male, but because he doesn't want me taking the role of "wife" in his house. The same house they lived in as a family for ten years. He is still so traumatized by his long and difficult marriage that, two years later, he tends to see me only as "the woman," out to get him, become his "wife" and trap him, like the first one did.

I know how he feels. He feels the same way I felt, with Dick — caught in the mechanics of expected social roles. I know how it feels to be unable to see through the role to reality. To be unable to relate as one unique and utterly free being to another.

He is still so conditioned by society, including the Catholicism of his childhood, that he feels that, once a man and woman get together, either it "isn't going anywhere," or it is, into marriage. And marriage is a trap. So, I tell him, you've set it up so that you have only two choices, both of them unacceptable. Either you're free — and lonely; or you're married — and trapped.

He hears me — or I think he does. A part of him does. But most of him is still mired in guilt. Guilt for leaving the marriage, causing pain to his children.

Guilt, which masks his pain — and ultimately, his rage, his terror. The same rage and terror we all feel, when our true selves have not been allowed

expression. The same rage and terror I feel, when I look at him, and feel the wall he has set up around himself.

Guilt immobilizes him. He is stuck, stuck in stereotyped responses, stuck in even the way he moves. Walks around the world like a marionette, head down, arms barely moving, shoulders hunched, protecting his heart.

Makes me want to shake him. Shock him. Rip off the blinkers he doesn't know he is wearing, and which blind him to the extraordinary opportunity each of us has to unfold from tight little buds of possibility into the glorious expressiveness of full flowering.

His guilt makes me furious, frustrated. Know I cannot control him, change him. Phil taught me that. But since I see through what he is up against, and the pain and alienation it causes him to be there, I have a terrible time not following my desire to just sit him down, slap some sense in him.

There it is. My violence again. Violence, disguised as altruism! A violence born of my own still desperate childhood need to have someone there for me. I long to be with him, to come into a real connection with him; and he is walled off from me — and from his own children — by the unrecognized, unprocessed pain of his past.

I attempt to help him see himself, where he is now in his life — so that he can see through the past, let go of it, allow the present to fill him with the magic of infinite possibility. The sheer humming vitality of life at its prolific peak. So that he can feel me, as I am. Right here. Right now. So that we can begin the sacred journey, freely opening to the mystery within ourselves as reflected in the other.

When my “help” is not accepted, it turns, subtly or not so subtly, into an attempt to control. Is there no end to my learning this same lesson? New College. Phil. “Peace” activist. And now this new scenario.

I know how he feels. I feel his guilt, his pain. But my compassion for him clashes with my own emotional need — for him to be there for me, as my lover, as the one who would go with me into the dark heart of night, into the brilliant light of day.

I am ready for relationship in a larger sense than marriage — or what has passed as marriage in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

(“Oh yeah?” says a little voice. “If you were really ready, wouldn’t you have attracted a man who was too?”)

(“Are there any?”)

(“Oh God, don’t think that way.”)

Shake off the little voices. Yes! I am ready!

He is not.

I must accept this.

I do not accept it.

This is the dilemma. For though he is not ready for me in his mind, his body meets mine in trust and abandon. Though far apart in our manner of perceiving the world, our felt sense of the world within our bodies is the same; it calls us, magnetizes us into our more wild, primal selves, the deep and mysterious source of life within where we are and move as one.

Joined at the hip, we lean far back, the distance between our faces a measure of the chasm that, mentally, prevents us from full alignment with each other.

That same Sunday afternoon his son takes me to see his “wicciup,” a secret spot in the willows lining a stream in a meadow about six blocks from home. He has cut willow branches and heaped them overhead, to make a protective covering, the way the Indians did. Sometime next summer, he tells me, he wants to spend the night there.

I am honored that, like his sister, he is beginning to trust me with matters close to his heart.

When we return, his father is sprawled on the couch in the living room, flipping television channels. Looks bored, depressed. I go into the bedroom, to gather my things. Feel sorry for the children, their having to live with this

man who is hiding from his pain, and beneath that, his buried rage over having been denied his God-given creativity as a child.

Glad to get out of here. Glad to be out of harm's way.

## **Chapter Twenty-Seven**

### **March, 1989**

Go home to my "yurt," one of ten small round cozy dwellings sitting on sagebrush covered land directly across the valley from the majestic Grand Tetons.

Sunday night. Time to clean up. Time to do the dishes which have been piling up for several days in the stainless steel bowl. Hoist the bowl to my left shoulder, grab an empty water jug in my right hand, and walk to the bathhouse, where we yurt dwellers share kitchen and bathroom facilities. Do the dishes. Fill the jug. Walk back home.

That night I have a dream. There is a new dwelling being built for a family of four, two adults and two children. The original dwelling is an underground yurt. Many people are involved, all in a celebratory mood. They are building a huge wicciup, using nature to enclose nature. The wicciup will shelter both the entrance to the original yurt, where the children will continue to live, and a brand new white yurt being built for the adults. Inside the new yurt it feels quiet, and peaceful. There is a bed there, and a round table with two chairs.

In the dream, I am off to the side, doing the dishes. Watching the construction of all this, loving it, thinking it's a great idea, spaces within spaces, a good way to expand the space for this family. There are lots of people here, lots of dishes to do. I do them for a long time.

A good dream, I think, recalling it the next morning. The key to the working through of the difficulties in learning how to become a family in this fractured world is the responsibility of the adults, whose new white yurt symbolizes the peace and quiet of what could be. I am startled by my role in the dream. Why am I not directly involved in building the wicciup, the new yurt?

One month later, another dream. Again with the theme of doing the dishes, but this time with a diabolical twist . . .

In the second dream, I'm in the kitchen of the house we lived in when I was eight years old, the year I did the dishes to get the horse. George Vlastos is there, getting ready to leave for Greece. Phil Lowman is there too, is going with him. (Thank God, I think, though I can't imagine how George can tolerate him.)

They leave. George's car roars off. Oh no, Phil did not go with him! Here he comes, back inside. I tell him, you're not staying here. He says he can stay in a friend's house, across the street. He leaves.

I lock the front door, go downstairs to lock another door down there with an outside entrance. Notice the lock isn't very good. It's dark and spooky down there. Come back upstairs: Phil is in the kitchen! Doing his dishes in my kitchen! I am furious, and scared — especially when he brandishes a huge knife at me while he talks. I tell him he's not to stay here! I shove him aside and do his dishes myself. Don't want him doing his dishes in this sink as if he belongs here.

All the while, he's talking double talk. I ask him, where he's going to stay, he says "here" — I say "No you're not" — he says, "I mean here in this town." I say what about across the street? He says no, not there. Says he left his truck somewhere, had better go get it. Dream ends with me thinking — how can I get rid of him? I'll never get rid of him!

The fact that both dreams contain the theme of doing the dishes leads me to link them together in meaning. In both dreams, doing the dishes seems to be symbolic of something else. The way this small daily ritual activity has always been symbolic, for me, starting with doing the dishes to get the horse.

For most people, this activity is decidedly not symbolic. They do the dishes without thinking; get it over with as soon as possible! Or they procrastinate, hoping others will do them first, or waiting until the sink is so full they cannot avoid doing them. Doing the dishes is one of those small daily chores that, because it is so repetitive, is considered totally uninteresting.

There are very few people like me, who actually like to do the dishes, who ground themselves there, feet planted firmly, hands warmed in the hot water. There are fewer still who both sense and appreciate the ritual rhythm of any daily routine, how it provides continuity within a rapidly changing world.

Like most females, I've done the dishes on a nearly daily basis since I was a small child, and every day the me who stands there doing them is subtly changed from the day before. The very repetition of the act sets up a relatively constant framework within which differences can be discerned.

Usually the differences are subtle — shifts in mood, in rhythm and pace of moving. Sometimes the differences are radical — shifts in actual being, resulting in heightened or lowered awareness, these shifts then projected out to create the many and various settings within which doing the dishes has taken place.

No matter what the changes, doing the dishes has remained a symbolic constant. Now, in my 46<sup>th</sup> year as when I was eight years old, this routine daily activity, on a subconscious level, is linked to my will, to getting what I want.

As a child, it was a simple matter of setting the goal and going after it directly and with resolute determination. And the goal, invariably, was something in the outside world that I wanted to incorporate into myself.

Now, as the first dream seems to attest, the goal I envisage must be approached obliquely. I do not participate directly in building the wicciup and the yurt. Instead, I am off to the side, doing the dishes. My role is to serve from behind the scenes, not as architect or guide.

And though there is an outside goal, the uniting of these four people as family, the opening of space for them to share — the fact that this goal cannot be approached directly is indicative, I think, that the real goal here, is an internal one. Once again, I am to undergo a shift in being, this time a transformation in my way of relating to any outside goal whatsoever.

Somehow, while fully engaged in the act of desiring, I must also let go of the object of that desire. Must learn to open myself to receive what I desire, while not trying to force it to come towards me. Must express myself as I truly am, while not demanding anything from others.

The second dream shows me the shadow side of myself, the one who has not made that internal shift. The consequences of that native stubbornness, fear and conflict. The power struggle with Phil. Being afraid I'll never get rid of him. Wrestling control through pushing him aside to do his dishes.

Phil is my shadow, an outgrowth of the experience of my inner child, Orphan Annie. Her need to control is a survival tactic, born of her sense of abandonment, and the consequent desperate fear of not getting what she needs from the world.

Currently, I am still off to the side, doing the dishes. There are a lot of dishes to do. I will be doing them for a long long time.

I both wish and fear the current goal — to surrender to the universe, to fully trust the wisdom of the process I am undergoing — no matter what the outcome in the external world. To find my balance within a felt sense of my own personal cycles, and how they harmoniously interface with other, larger and smaller ones.

Doing the dishes centers me in the present time. As I surrender to the discipline of this small repeating cycle, the boundary system of the cycle effaces, to become a membrane, permeable to larger cycles within which it, and I, are centered.

The present moment is not a point, but a space, and this space expands and contracts depending upon my awareness, my capacity to discern dimensional differences.

I struggle with the Phil inside me. I struggle with my inner child's need to control the course of events. I still experience her feelings of panic, of suffocation, of abandonment.

Every day I do the dishes. Every day I plant my feet firmly on the ground and wash off the remains of today's bodily nourishment. In washing the plates, I continue to clear myself of the remains of past trauma, so that I can open further, to resonate with the singing of the birds, their announcement of yet another new dawn breaking, another day's dishes, secure framework guiding this slowly moving sea change within.



