



Singing Magic



Lucretia E Pretorius

Singing Magic

Memoir of a Girl Who Thought
Singing Was Life

Lucretia E. Pretorius



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for Nic

*“Still, by God’s grace, there surges within me
singing magic.”*

— Agamemnon, by Aeschylus

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Preface

Reminiscent of the spare, lyrical voice of Isak Dinesen ("I had a farm in Africa . . ."), *Singing Magic* is the painfully frank while poignant memoir of a girl raised in the farmlands of Ontario and French Canada in the 1940s and 1950s, who then moved to South Africa in the late 1960s and witnessed the tumultuous dismantling of apartheid. Throughout are rich descriptions of people and places in rural Canada and remote regions in South Africa. ("You'll eat dust,' my friend predicted. . . . She knew I hadn't the slightest idea of what lay ahead.")

The child with the beautiful voice finally found the lyrics to the wild, gypsy music that possessed her, in the strong, pitch-perfect lines of this strangely compelling book.

WHEN I GROW UP

It's warm here in front of the fireplace. Fire's burning yellow and orange. More logs are stacked beside the fireplace. We're sitting quietly, my father in his big chair, Bible on his lap. It's closed now. After dinner there's always Bible Reading and prayer. Family Altar, he calls it. Mommy is in her chair across from him, my little brothers sitting on the thick reddish rug between them. I'm six and feeling big on my own little wooden chair. Nobody's talking. We're listening to the fire. It's hissing. Logs are cracking and spitting. I'm staring deep into the flames. I see pictures in the yellow fire: goblins dancing in the forest, elves, fairies with bright wings like butterflies but long and thin. When the fire burns low and orange and the logs are turning into grey chunks of ashes, I see knights in shining armour riding towards a castle on a hill in the setting sun.

"Don't be so intense."

My father's voice, each word slow and sharp, like a slap. I look up. He's staring at me in a way I haven't seen before. His eyes are narrow, his thin lips tight with corners turning down. Suddenly I'm cold. I try to make myself smaller. *Does he hate me? Why? I'm only thinking.* I don't say anything. *He doesn't like my thoughts then. He can read them on my face, I guess.*

Mommy doesn't say anything. *Does she think I'm too in-*

tense? What's the matter with that anyway? Is there something wrong with me?

I'll have to hide my face from people when I think and dream.

Standing outside my mother's bedroom door, I hear music. I open the door. Sunlight fills the room. The radio is playing music that wouldn't be heard if my father were around. My mother's face is shining. That music enters into me. She sees my face.

"Orchestra," she says.

Singing and violins! Then a voice like violins soars over the orchestra. I stop breathing. That voice rising, falling, pulls me with it. Something in me opens up and bursts.

When the singing ends, I can breathe again.

"What kind of music is that?"

"Opera."

"What do you call a person who sings that?"

"An opera singer."

"When I grow up I'm going to be an opera singer."

The aria I'd been listening to was probably Puccini's "Vissi d'arte." Tosca, a diva in the story, was singing of her vision to live for her art. She ends the aria by exclaiming: that her dreams should end "*Così* — Like this!"

I was a singer, with dreams like hers.

Wanting to sing the arias, I got to live the libretto of an opera.

A singing stream runs through my years. When it encountered obstacles, it went underground, transposing into poetry and stories.

“Eloise! Eloise! Eloise!”

His voice came in through the little window over the sink. It was impatient, demanding, calling my mother’s name. I pictured him on the street two floors below, shouting.

Standing beside her where she leaned against the sink, I looked up at her face. She was crying, saying something to appease him. My beautiful singing Mommy – he was making her cry.

“He’s a [],” I thought. The missing word wasn’t yet in my vocabulary, but the shape of the space for it was imprinted in my mind. Years later, like a puzzle completed at last, I found the word. It was “bastard.”

I wasn’t yet three, but I remember.

He wasn’t even angry at my mother. That was the way he treated her most of the time. She cried often. When I was bigger I learned that his work was to tell people about Jesus. “For God so loved the world ...” and things like that. I learned the

word “Preacher.” That was my father. Missionaries got mentioned. Every day we learned about “Bible” and “saying your prayers”. “Being good” meant that I had to obey Daddy and Mommy. Then Jesus would love me, except I couldn’t see Jesus.

The scene was Toronto, Canada, in the early years of World War Two. The apartment in the slums was directly over a Rescue Mission for drunks and prostitutes. Outside there was a grey street, grey walls: everything was ugly. Inside where we lived there was half-light. The only window was over the kitchen sink. The floors were linoleum, with carpets in some places. But the shadowy rooms held rich colours from carpets and paintings: rose reds, burgundy, old gold. Silver objects gleamed on the sideboard. I don’t remember the downstairs area where my father preached every day and my mother sang hymns and gospel songs, but they tell me I was there with them.

She was a concert singer before she married. Now she sang only Christian songs. I remember her bursting out with a snatch of beautiful singing, then my father’s voice, stern, “Is that one of the songs of Zion?” She was quiet after that.

They’d met at Bible School and married the day after graduation, just days before the outbreak of the war.

She’d been disappointed in love and got disillusioned with

life as a concert singer in Miami, where she grew up. Deciding to “give her life to the Lord,” she went to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. My father was smitten by her singing on hearing it over the college radio station. He tracked her down, found her face and nature as lovely as her voice, decided to make her his wife.

Harold was a fiery young preacher from Montreal, of Plymouth Brethren stock. The Brethren’s religious and moral attitudes were fierce, like the Puritans of earlier days. It can’t be a coincidence that his family surname, Martin, means “warlike.” That one word sums up my father’s character. He embraced the evangelical movement with fervour of a born fundamentalist.

My parents’ marriage was broadcast over the same radio station that had brought them together. They were successful and popular, I’m told, he as a charismatic preacher, she for her radiant singing voice. Wedding gifts poured in, cash gifts, which they used to satisfy their love of beauty. At auction sales, they bought paintings and carpets that had been hastily exported to Canada to escape the bombings of the war in Europe. These were being sold at crazily low prices, though still high for this young couple. Mom told me the auctioneer had a soft spot for the earnest young preacher and his pretty wife and he’d grant their even crazily lower bid for paintings and a couple of carpets. Bless that man for the legacy he made possible for us.

Mom also told me that when they had to make a choice between buying a washing machine for their first baby (me) and a painting, they decided on the painting and Mom washed my diapers by hand.

The war derailed my father's plans to be a missionary in China. The Rescue Mission was his first step towards an alternative. Then he enlisted as a chaplain in the Royal Canadian Air Force and got posted to a training base in Saskatchewan, thousands of miles away in the prairies.

What I remember is that he was "gone away to War" and we were now living in our own house that had windows in every room. Outside, there was grass, called a lawn (new word for me), and trees. Up and down each side of the street, Woodlawn Avenue, tall trees shaded two-story red brick houses with leaded windows near the front door. These houses, late-Victorian in style, had a modest charm. Yet I recall a dark interior despite the windows. The central hallway with the wooden staircase to upstairs had a high ceiling. The stairwell was lit by a stained glass window giving jewel-coloured half-light. Against the walls, large oil paintings in rich colours – more and larger than I remember from our earlier home. So, even in the semi-darkness of the interior, there was beauty when there was enough light to see it. Sixteen months younger than me, Wycliffe seemed unaware of this beauty. He was always scared.

Scared of the dark, scared of wardrobes and cupboards and whatever might be under his bed. I was constantly walking with him, holding his hand, speaking soothingly, “It’s all right. Don’t be afraid.”

Whenever a man in uniform appeared at the front door, Wycliffe would ask, “Are you my daddy?” Nearly everybody wore some kind of blue uniform: the postman and the milkman who came every day, the policeman on the block who stopped by to inquire after our wellbeing, and of course, Daddy when he came home in his blue uniform of the Royal Canadian Air Force. Even I had to look carefully at the face of the uniformed man at the door to be sure.

A succession of maids looked after us and did the house-keeping. I resented them (*You’re not my mommy*), behaving like a brat to show my displeasure at them being in my mommy’s place. Wycliffe and I would be taken to visit her at her bedside where we were told to be as quiet as mice. She’d talk to us and tell us stories for a while, then the maid would take us away again. I didn’t understand why they said she was tired when she stayed in bed all day.

Nobody explained things to me, like she had toxæmia and legs made useless by thrombo-phlebitis and she wasn’t expected ever to walk again.

WAR

The Big Kind Lady pointed under the trees. “And these are called pansies. See their little faces? These are my children.”

Her voice was low and different from other people's. The lady's name was different too. Mrs Bjorkmann (York-man, it sounded to my ears). Up to now I'd heard only the usual Canadian names such as Smith, Jones, Martin. This lady didn't act like other people either. She treated me as a friend. She didn't talk to me as though I was stupid just because I was little.

I was five years old. Most of the time, I was alone. I thought a lot. So many things I didn't understand. Words that nobody explained. There were only big people around and I was small, so I didn't matter. Mommy was sick in bed. I couldn't ask her any questions. Maids looked after us and they just told me to be quiet. I had to understand things all by myself.

“Foreign.” What did that mean? “Europe.” That must be a place. “War.” What was War? Where was it? Sometimes I heard visiting grownups talking quietly. It seemed to be about people being killed but that didn't make sense. Bugs and caterpillars got killed if you squashed them with your foot, but people were too big for that. I'd come closer to hear what they were saying. They stopped talking when they saw me coming. I no-

ticed they looked upset. Their voices sounded worried. It was always when they talked about War. Somebody pointed at an airplane the size of a toy high in the sky over our house and said it had people in it. That had something to do with War, I gathered, and Air Force and Daddy. Impossible. My Daddy was big. That tiny airplane couldn't hold people unless somebody waved a magic wand over them and turned them into the size of flies to fit inside, then un-magicked them when the plane came down out of the sky. It seemed to be a game that big people played. But why didn't Daddy come home from War like I came home from Kindergarten every day?

The Big Kind Lady looked different from other ladies I saw. Her grey hair made a thick braid that looked like a crown around her head. She walked outside wearing a big apron that covered her entire front down to her shoes. Other ladies wore a little apron, but only in the kitchen. Her flat, strong shoes looked just right among her garden paths. Her face was square, too. Kind. I thought it beautiful. She lived all alone except for her flowers. She loved them very much. Of course they weren't her real children. But did she have real children in Europe, that place far away where her voice came from?

We walked outside the little house where my friend lived. This was in the neighbour's back yard. Here, Mrs Bjorkmann's garden covered the bare earth with flowers of many colours.

Little paths lay between rows of green leaves and flowers all mixed up together.

Around a corner, out of sight of her main garden, we came to a high, red-brick wall. I had to tilt my head way far back to see the top. Up this wall, almost covering it, grew bright green vines with heart-shaped leaves. Big blue flowers just like saucers lifted their faces out of the green. They were exactly the same colour as the sky. "Heavenly Blue," my friend explained. "Morning Glories, Heavenly Blue." Then she raised blue eyes to where the glories met the sky. There was a look in them I didn't understand.

The Big Kind Lady's voice became cheerful again. "Come, I have a present for you." Another, happy-looking, part of the garden was filled with bright red and pink flowers. Some grew out of clay pots the same colour as the brick wall behind us. She picked up a pot with a greeny-brown stick in it and a few small leaves attached. She gave it to me. "For you to grow in your garden. Geranium. Soon it will make flowers like these."

I took it to the garden behind our house, way far back where nobody ever came. Here weeds and vines made it hard to walk. I chose a sunny spot where the crowding plants gave some space. I set down the present my friend had given me. My mind still full of Morning Glories, I thought the stick in the clay pot was part of that beautiful sight and believed that soon

there'd be a glory of blue growing straight up to the sky. Heavenly Blue.

Every day I went to look at my Morning Glory.

The brown stick grew longer, a few more leaves appeared, but still no sign of flowers. My friend said I must be patient (another new word) and "wait until it was time."

Sometimes I watched the children on the street. They were bigger than me, noisy and rough. I stayed away from them.

One day I saw strange men in the neighbourhood. They were swinging long knives at the end of curved wooden rods. Where they passed, the summer's long grass lay in golden sheets on the ground.

A boy's loud voice smashed my daydream, "Did you see The Man With the Scythe?"

Chest bursting with fear, I ran as fast as I could to the garden to find my flower.

There it lay, with flattened weeds and vines, cut to the ground. I bent over my broken flower and sobbed.

As I cried, I saw in my mind's eye other flowers. Children in Europe. The Big Kind Lady's real children too.

I knew then why my friend was always sad, and why Mommy cried when she spoke of War.

Those other flowers. The Man With the Scythe was walk-

ing among them, cutting them down.

STORIES FOR MAYBE

Some of the stories that follow are addressed to Maybe, the small grandchild who “may be born” (but ultimately wasn’t). I imagine my Maybe grandchild asking about “life in the olden days” when Grandma was her age. It’s fun to climb down from my pinnacle and put myself beside the little child here. I want to set the record straight in advance: I wasn’t just a dreamer but sometimes a brat who managed to get away with it.

Then the imagined listener is about eight, a year or two older than I was when discovering the wonders of Outside in Canada.

Another listener I have in mind too: someone who didn’t grow up where I did and doesn’t know what it’s like to play outside in the snow, listen to wolves, or walk home in a blizzard.

And sometimes I just want to tell a story to myself because I love remembering winter nights.

CHERRIES

Winter in the city wasn't any fun. That's where we lived before we moved out to the country.

There was a war in Europe and my father was away, preaching to the men who flew the airplanes. My mother was sick in bed for a long time, too. When it was time for me to go to Kindergarten, an older girl named Isabel was supposed to hold my hand as we walked along the street. I didn't like her.

One night there was a big snowfall. The next morning walking to Kindergarten, I thought the snow looked beautiful. All soft and white. I picked up a handful and ate it. Isabel smacked my hand. "Not supposed to eat snow," she snapped. She said it was dirty. Well, maybe it was. Melted snow, especially from the city, does look like dirty water. But I didn't believe her. Thought she was acting just like a grownup, spoiling all my fun.

I never mentioned that story about Isabel to my mother. I didn't think she'd like her either if she knew her.

Mommy wasn't like other grownups. She understood that it was important to have fun. For instance, who ever heard of a mother letting you draw on the walls with crayons? Mine did. The rest of the house was lovely and tidy, but one wall was all mine to draw on. That was the one against my bed. During af-

ternoon nap time I could admire my masterpieces from close up, planning more. If I stood up on my bed, I could make giant pictures reaching nearly up to the ceiling. They weren't like the huge oil paintings that lined the stairway, but they were a satisfying start. It was a good feeling, being a Great Artist

A few days after Isabel had smacked me for eating snow, there was another big snowfall. It was Saturday morning and Mommy was strong enough to get dressed and walk around a bit. She came outside, looked at all the beautiful new snow my brother and I were about to play in and said, "Wait. Don't mess it."

She went inside, then came out again carrying the good tray from the sideboard in the dining room. It held the crystal bowl she used for desserts on Sunday, her biggest and loveliest silver serving spoon, three small crystal bowls with silver teaspoons, and a bottle of expensive Maraschino cherries that she'd probably been saving to decorate a special dessert when Daddy came home again. She knelt down in the soft snow.

Very slowly, carefully, she drew the big silver spoon through the snow, scooping it into the crystal bowl. Opening the bottle of glossy red cherries, she poured them all over the snow in the bowl. The clear red syrup ran into the snow, staining it pink. The cherries shone in it like rubies. Nobody said a word. It was too beautiful for talk.

Carefully, then, she served each of us a portion into our own dish. We ate the sweet cold dessert with silver spoons, slowly. We smiled.

I thought about Isabel. She wasn't so smart after all.

BEING HORRIBLE

Living in the city, all I really wanted to do was hide in the back garden and pretend I was a fairy. But if I had to be around other people, I wanted to be very, very wicked.

It began with mealtimes. I hated sitting around the dining room table, doing what the grownups did. Why should I eat just because they thought it was a good idea? And finish all that horrible stuff on my plate? I was lucky though, I could throw up whenever I wanted to. It made a terrible mess on the tablecloth. I just had to give the first warning sound “Huph” and suddenly I didn't have to eat any more.

There was a swimming tank my father had made before going away to war. It was big, made of wood, painted green and lined with zinc. When it was filled up with water from the hose, boys and girls from the neighbourhood would come to play. If they approached the water carefully in case it was cold (it was usually freezing), I'd splash them. It was fun to make them run away. And if the girls didn't run fast enough, I'd also pull the ribbons out of their hair.

Because Mommy was sick in bed for a long time, there had to be a maid to look after us. We had lots of them, one after the other, because I enjoyed making them run away too. They'd just pack their bags and leave. They actually cried and pointed

at me when they stood at the door. That's when I'd put on my cute face.

At Kindergarten I'd kick over the houses the other children had built of blocks. Up and down the aisles I walked, smashing everything, taking care to do it in a very orderly fashion. Then Miss Boyd would gently take me to a far corner and give me an entire box of blocks all for myself. Long after the children had gone outside for recess I'd still be building my own huge, high castle. One day she gave me the starring role in the Christmas play, to sing the part of the Announcing Angel ("You sing like an angel, my dear"), with a big gold star on my forehead. Then I decided that it was alright to be around people sometimes, but only when I was being a Great Singer.

Always I tried to understand things. I wondered "Why?" about everything. In those days most grownups didn't think a child's questions were important. So I tried out everything I could for myself.

Anything new also had to be tasted. If I was a bit worried it might kill me, I tried it on a little brother. I didn't realise that killing little brothers was bad, and there seemed to be so many of them anyway. Wycliffe agreed to taste soap. In fact, he liked it even better than ice cream for awhile. Maybe that was a good idea for him when you consider the kind of words he used later on when he got big. (Children who used bad words got their

mouth “washed out with soap.”) So when I found a furry caterpillar, it was Tyndale's turn. He was still in his playpen and he probably thought I was a nice big sister. He opened his pretty mouth when I offered the caterpillar. By now it was curled up in a fuzzy little ball. He chewed it and swallowed it. I waited to see if he would die. He didn't, so I knew I could use him again for another experiment. It was getting hard to persuade Wycliffe. The last experiment was the one with the cherries.

I got them from Trent, the boy next door. He was pale, with watery blue eyes, and he always wore a silly little hat. Anybody could see that he was too dumb to be any fun. But one day, sticking his face up against the wire fence, he asked, “Wanna see my rabbits?” Of course I wanted to see his rabbits. I climbed over the fence. Under two spreading trees in his backyard, there were the rabbit hutches. Those rabbits looked as silly and stupid as Trent, so I began to wonder instead about the trees. “What kind are they?” Cherry trees, he said.

Cherries! Under the trees lay small brown things like marbles. They looked disappointing. Then I remembered that tinned fruit or anything that was a bit old didn't look much like the fresh kind, so I decided to give these old cherries a try.

No. Nothing there to remind me of those wonderful Maraschino cherries in the bottle. But Tyndale hadn't been outside the day Mommy poured them over the snow, and he

wouldn't expect as much of cherries as I did. I brought two back for Tyndale. Standing in his playpen, he raised trusting brown eyes to mine, opened his mouth. And spat them out.

After that, he started running away from home. Even though he could hardly walk, he'd lift the latch of his playpen and the backyard gate, then make his way down to the street corner where the friendly policeman would see him and bring him back. The policeman scolded my mother. Nobody guessed it was probably my fault the tiny little boy was running away from home.

I began to worry about how easy it was to be horrible. Being a little girl with curly hair and innocent eyes, I just had to give a big cute smile and nobody could believe it was possible.

GETTING EDUCATED

Another thing that grownups usually mess up is children's time. They call it “going to school” or “getting educated.” Maybe they're so mad at having to work at jobs all day they can't bear the idea of all the fun kids are having. They get back at them by sending them to school. “It's for your own good,” they say. So children don't have to wait until they're grown up to be bored and miserable, I suppose.

I managed to wriggle out of their plans for a long time.

My secret war against grownups began shortly after I was out of nappies and learning how to talk. It occurred to me that most of them had ganged up on us in a plot to make us seem even dumber than we were just because we were little. For instance: a child who had just learned how to talk properly and sound like a grownup wouldn't be praised for this achievement. Oh no. But if a little kid said “Oo - ee - nithe man” instead of “You're a nice man,” someone was bound to gush, “Ooh, isn't he cute!” And the little fool, praised for being dumb, would be pleased with himself and continue like that until he was almost old enough to ride a bicycle.

I didn't make silly mistakes like that, and I was sure that the Plotters Against Little Children were secretly furious that I didn't. In revenge, they'd worked out a trick to catch me, but

I'd figured it out and was very proud of myself.

They hadn't bargained on my sense of logic. Words beginning with the "th" sound were often mispronounced by little children: think, thing and thumb would become fink, fing and fumb. Here is where grownups thought they could fool me: they would say FINGER.

Carefully I hid the glee on my face when I realized what they were up to, and I pronounced the word correctly.

My little brother didn't understand though, and I hated the thought of them laughing at him. We little ones had to stand together.

"Wycliffe," I taught him carefully, "you must always be sure to say the words properly: think, thing, thumb. THINGER. You have one THUMB and four THINGERS on each hand."

The Plotters had been outsmarted at their own game, I laughed to myself, and they were too embarrassed to say anything.

The next stage in my secret war against grownups came when I had to start at Real School.

That happened after we moved out to the country and I was learning wonderful things about fields, barns, snowbanks, ditches — millions of things.

One day I found myself sitting beside a strange girl, the

two of us sharing a wooden desk carved with lots of inky names. This was in a large room full of children staring at a skinny lady called Teacher. There was a big ugly black thing behind her called a blackboard.

I also learned a new word: Rules. Teacher told us a whole lot of things that didn't make any sense and said they were Rules. Somebody else told me to do something stupid like stand in a line and not talk. When I asked why, the answer came: Rules. School was clearly no place to learn anything intelligent.

The schoolhouse had two rooms: the big one where I was supposed to be with all those strange children of different sizes, and the small one behind where a handful of people nearly big enough to drive a tractor had lessons from somebody so important that I never even saw her. All the children from the farms came here, somebody said. Why did I have to come there, I wondered. Somebody said the Law said I had to. My mind went as blank and as black as that awful blackboard.

Recess-time came and everybody opened lunch-pails. I opened my pretty new one. Amazing! Inside, right on top, there was a tray filled with cookies and other dessert-type things. From the bottom compartment rose the smell of sandwiches wrapped in waxed paper. Yuck! Screwing up my nose in disgust, I allowed that there was one good thing about school: you

could start eating with the dessert, and if you were too full when that was finished you could leave the rest. Not like meal-times at home where dessert came at the end, only if you'd eaten the awful vegetables and all the Healthy Food.

Seeing most of the children in the schoolyard going to line up in two rows in front of two little box-like houses over to one side, I joined out of curiosity. Somebody shoved me out of line and told me to get in the one for girls. Mystified, I waited until the door opened and a girl came out, letting me go in.

The smell made me start to throw up. The wooden bench with the black hole in it was where it came from. My head going around in circles, I ran out. I kept on running, right to the end of the schoolyard and sat down on the ground.

Teacher was standing outside holding a bell, swinging it as hard as she could. All the children ran up to her, stood in two lines and filed into the schoolhouse. I walked slowly across the yard, legs still shaking from that horrible place I would never go to again. Everybody was now inside, but Teacher waited until I came up to her and then she went inside the schoolhouse after me.

When it came time for the long lunch hour, everybody streamed outside and began playing games, screaming and shoving.

I surveyed the schoolyard. It was long and narrow. The

schoolhouse, the pump over the well where children could get a drink of water, and the two outhouses were at one end. Here all the children crowded together for their games. A few scattered children wandered out into the empty middle area of what was really just a field. The far end of the field, where the wire fence showed the boundary of the school grounds, was very far away. That's where I headed, as fast as I could run. Then I sat down on the ground. The yellow grass was tall because it was the end of summer, and nobody could see me when I sat down.

After a while there was the far-away sound of the school bell being rung. Rule: I had to go in now. As slowly as I could manage, I walked across the field. It took a long time. Teacher stood outside and waited for me. A long time. She couldn't say anything because I was small, my legs were short and of course, I got very tired walking across the field. There were lots of Rules, but not one said children weren't allowed to go the end of the field, and not one said children had to run back when the bell was rung. Teacher gave me a funny look when I passed in front of her.

The next day I began my routine. As soon as recess began, I started running. Since recess lasted only about ten minutes, I got only halfway across the field before the bell was rung. Then I started back, dragging my feet. When lunch-time came, I started running and made it to the end of the field and sat

down in the long grass against the fence. Only when the bell rang did I stand up and start walking back as slowly as possible. Teacher always stood there until I arrived back, but she didn't look at me.

After one noon-hour as I approached her slowly, I felt a little bit sorry for her because I knew she was supposed to be teaching a lot of children. She was probably worried about all the time being wasted. Looking up into her face I enquired, "Why are you standing here waiting for me?" Surely she could see that my legs were going to bring me sooner or later into the schoolhouse.

"Because the Law says I have to," she said. Her jaws were clenched.

That's when I decided that the Law was stupid too, just like Rules. I carried on staying out of school as long as possible.

Some time later I realized that I hadn't been to the schoolhouse for quite a while, but dismissed the thought the way you try to forget a bad dream and pretend it hadn't happened.

Then I overheard my mother talking with my aunt. They didn't know I was nearby and could hear.

"Nervous." I heard Mommy's voice. Murmur from aunt. "Highly-strung." Worried voices.

What on earth did those words mean, and were they talking about somebody?

Looking up at the telephone wires quivering in the air above the house, I thought they looked highly-strung. But they sounded lovely when the wind passed through them and made sounds like singing.

So what was the matter with being highly-strung?

I didn't have to go to school for years.

IN A BARE HALL

Once my mother took me alone with her to a concert in the nearby town, Orillia, in what was probably the town hall, a bleak venue of uncovered wood floors, walls and seats. It was draughty and cold. We were sitting near the front. On the bare wooden stage stood a man holding a violin. He lifted up his violin, wood that shone honey gold, and began to play. The singing from that violin made me want to cry. On and on he played, filling the hall with his sound. It belonged with that music I'd heard on the radio.

Enthralled by the music, I watched his movements. My seat felt harder and harder. I wanted to go to sleep but didn't want to miss any of this music. It was way past my bedtime and I was only seven. I began to worry about him.

“Mommy, doesn't he get tired?”

“No. He loves what he is doing.”

Another time I was alone with her in that bare hall on the hard seats, one evening a few months later. We were sitting close to the front again. This time I saw a curtain hiding everything behind it. When it opened, there were people dressed in clothing from long ago, out of the stories my mother read to us. There was a man with a very big nose who was good and kind

but everyone treated him badly because he looked so different. Cyrano de Bergerac, I registered his name, never gave in to pressure to act like everyone else, mean. Finally there was a sword fight. His attacker cheated and ran him through when they were supposed to be resting. As the big man died, his armour and sword clattering to the floor, he asserted his triumph, "But my plume is still white."

These words bored through me like that sword into the man. I cried.

IN WOODS

I'm escaping to the woods. It's a long walk across the field behind our house towards the patch of trees far away. My legs are short, it takes a long time to get there. Prickly grasses scratch my legs and burrs get stuck in my socks. Daisies and other flowers, blue and orangey-red, and mauve, are filled with bees and other bugs that whirr and chip and sometimes sing. Beneath my feet, the ground is grainy, sandy, filled with small stones that glint with pretty colours in the sun. A rise in the ground makes my legs tired. On the other side there's a ditch to jump over. It doesn't have water in it any more. In spring it's too wide for me to cross without getting wet. Next a barbed wire fence, broken-down and rusty, where the bones of a sheep are caught, pieces of its coat still attached, all dirty and sandy. Carefully I climb between the strands. Now there's an open band of grass, then a thick band of brush. It's hard to force my way through, but on the other side, suddenly I'm there. In the woods.

Trees are tall, their trunks smooth to high up in the sky where their light-green leaves flutter in the sunlight. Down below, the ground is open, covered with brown leaves and occasional ferns. I look for the place I found before, my favourite place. It's away from the scary part of the woods where the

trees are dark, prickly, and lots of fallen branches block my way. Maybe there are witches hanging around or goblins or bad-tempered animals, watching to see if I'll get stuck in those branches. But I stay away, circling left and south to where the sun comes through and the trees are friendly. There's a special place here which you can't see from anywhere else. I found it by surprise before and it's hard to find again until I almost fall into it.

This is a hollow, a bit smaller than my bedroom, made by the roots of tall trees in a kind of circle. All around the edge are ferns of a special kind. They have three branches and a fragrance that changes with the colour. When I break one off just below the branching, turn it over and put it on my head like a hat, then I become a fairy of the woods with a crown on my head. In summer my fairy hat is fresh green. In fall it's golden-brown.

The middle of this circle makes a dip, almost like a bed. It's thickly padded with old leaves that smell smoky-sweet when I lie on them, crushing them, looking up at the sky through the treetops. I lie perfectly still, listening. Faint sounds emerge: leaves creaking under me, tiny sounds from the small bushes and ferns nearby. Small birds and insects flit in and out of the sunlight and shadows. Now I can see, nearly against my face, little red berries at one end of heart-shaped leaves grow-

ing out of moss at the base of nearby tree roots. This moss has different colours and textures, greens and yellow-brown.

My body sinks heavier into the bed of leaves. I stop trying to look and listen. Somehow I'm beginning to see and hear instead. I want to become part of the leaves, the ground, the roots of these trees. Don't want to be Me any more but part of these welcoming leaves, earth and trees. Quiet, open, absorbing their life. I feel at home.

The trees are aware, like people or animals, but gentler. They seem to be quietly talking among themselves and with the plants at their feet. Everything around me has this kind of life which they keep secret from people. I'm glad the leaves, earth and trees let me be with them awhile. I stop thinking, becoming part of them.

After a while the leaves rustle high up in the treetops, shadows start to form and I get cold. I get up and quietly leave. But I can always go back.

All my life, I can still go back there when I want to.

ORIGINAL SIN

My father and mother had met at Bible School and they agreed on one thing: they must do the Lord's work. After the war, they moved us out of the city to a place where my father made a start on his plans. Here too he could raise his children as he saw fit, untouched by "the World, the Flesh and the Devil" — a favourite expression of his.

So there we were, out in the country, nearest neighbours about two miles way. Open grasslands with woods or small forests around; the nearest town far away and the big city of Toronto two hundred miles away. Names like Dane Hill Acres and the Snow Belt were used. It was true Northland, with lakes that can't be counted and almost endless forests starting up not far from us. In summer it looked like the prairies or highveld in South Africa, but with the dark place of the woods nearby. In winter, which was most of the time, it looked like Russia or Scandinavia.

Our house stood on a low hill overlooking miles of winter. It was made all of wood, the roof had a steep pitch to shed the snow, and the house was painted white with green shutters. Only Bible-approved things were allowed inside. No radio programmes except for the news, stories for children, and the kind of music people listen to on Sundays. Television, videos and

computers hadn't been thought of in those days. CD's hadn't been invented either and the records we listened to were big and black, thick as plates. They turned quickly and played favourite tunes from the classics. Ours usually played "Missionary Stories for Little Children." Also "Bozo the Clown" taking us to Circus Town, with funny songs about animals. Evenings we sat in front of the fire that burned huge logs of wood from the pile kept in our woodshed. Every night Daddy read another story from the Bible, we'd all kneel down and pray out loud, and then we could do other things. Mommy read to us from storybooks. Later on I could read for myself, all about fairies, gnomes and magic. After a while I wanted adventure stories too. Pirates were the best. I tried to explain them to my brothers.

It felt as though I had millions of little brothers, all dumb. Wycliffe was only a bit younger but it felt like a lot, Tyndale had just learned to walk, and Calvin was just a baby. (Wesley was only born a long time later.) But Wycliffe at least was teachable.

Outside in the snow, we played Pirates. It was a game I'd made up.

After the wind had blown a few days, the snow drifted into wonderful shapes. Where the bigger snowdrifts came together like waves, they formed long narrow places that looked like

boats, pointed at each end, scooped out in the middle. We pretended they were ships meeting on the open sea. Pirate ships, of course. I would say to Wycliffe, “Okay, you're captain of that ship and I'm captain of this ship. We're going to have a war.”

We made snowballs and piled big heaps of them in the front end of our ships. These were our ammunition, like cannon balls. When I had a big pile in my ship, I'd call, “Okay, now we're going to fight.” We'd throw all our cannonballs at each other, and if nobody got killed (got a snowball in the face), the hand-to-hand combat began. That usually meant Wycliffe had to try to board my ship, and I had to beat off the attack. In fact, whoever could break down the sides of the other's boat (or sharp-edged snowdrift) first was the winner.

Wycliffe was small but furious. My being bigger wasn't enough. I needed help. Ah — words!

Of course, I figured, pirates boarding a ship by force didn't ask politely, “Gentlemen, may we come aboard?” No, they must have shouted and screamed, said terrible things. What sort of things? Well, I didn't know any terrible things to say. (The fairy tales and missionary stories weren't any help.) So I had to make up some.

I knew it was bad to say something dirty. The only word I knew that might be dirty sometimes was about what we did in the bathroom, but it wasn't nearly bad enough. So I made up

another one. It was nasty.

Then I remembered that Moses had said we mustn't speak about God in a bad way. A little bit worried, I made up a word that would make God mad.

But, I thought carefully, there has to be a word that you use for Special Occasions. When the fight between the boarding parties is at its worst, for instance. A word that combines the dirtiness of the first one and the wickedness of the second one. A really terrible one.

The word I figured out for this one was SO terrible, I was afraid when I thought of it.

So there we were, pirates in the snow, screaming awful things at each other. But I'd only taught Wycliffe the first two bad words.

When the fight was at its fiercest and I thought I might lose, I'd think of the third word, The Big One. Looking around at the sky, I'd check for any clouds that might be hiding God and the lightning he'd use to strike me dead.

If the sky was clear, I'd say It. Very softly. Just in case he could hear.

I don't remember if I won after that. It didn't seem so important.

I was more scared of God. And the fact that I'd been very bad, all by myself, with nobody to teach me.

It was only after I grew up that I realized God understood and liked me anyway.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

On winter nights I walked out into the white fields of driven snow that seemed to be the whole world. The small wooden house on the hill — my house — didn't really belong there. Only the wide spaces of snow, and the long dark lines of bush against the sky that showed where the fields ended and the woods began. Over there against the sky in the north, the woods looked huge and black when it began to get dark outside. That's when I liked best to be outside. On a winter night.

Even though it was very cold I didn't mind. There were wonderful things to see outside, especially after the wind had stopped and the night was still. In the soft blackness overhead, the stars shone bright and hard, and the snow-covered ground would glow like a ghost. Sometimes, though, I could hardly see the stars because of an even brighter light in the northern sky. The first time I saw this I thought the woods must be on fire. Then I realised that a forest fire was impossible in winter.

Northern Lights, the grownups said, and couldn't explain.

They looked like flames, but icy cold, shooting up from the black edge of the sky and curving up to almost above my head. Blue, white and green sheets of frozen light moved, blended, separated, flickered and stabbed — changing, always changing. The night was so cold and still I could hear the air crackling,

and hissing from the Northern Lights.

I could also hear Wycliffe starting to cry. He was afraid of the dark and his hands hurt from the cold.

Usually we weren't allowed to be outside at night. But if our parents were away, the maid who looked after us didn't want children in the house until supper time. In winter, it began to get dark at three o'clock in the afternoon and was pitch black by four. So even though it was really night, it was still called afternoon. And there was a long time to wait until it was time to go inside.

I preferred to be outside anyway. How could anybody stay inside when the northern sky was gleaming and flashing like that? Like great angels' wings stabbing up and down between earth and heaven?

But Margaret always let my little brother come inside if he asked. Then I was all alone, and that was the best time of all. I could go over to the grove of pine trees, far from the lights of the house. That's where I might find wolves.

It never occurred to me to be afraid of wolves. When other people stood still and listened to their thin voices far away north and a little to the right of the woods, their faces showed fear. And if we heard them yapping quite close by, some grownup would say, "Never mind. Wolves are afraid of people." Then they quickly brought the children into the house.

I'd stand still and listen. People called those sounds "howls" and hated them. I found them musical, beautiful as the Northern Lights.

Trudging a new path through the deep snow, I'd go over to where the tall pines stood and kept each other company. They kept me company too.

I strained my eyes to see into the dark shade under the pine trees where the light from the sky couldn't reach the snow. Maybe there would be a slim, low, darker shadow. A wolf. He and I would be friends. We were the same. Both of us were afraid of people and didn't like houses. But we loved winter nights, Northern Lights, woods, and being alone. And lifting our voices in a wild song that got thin and lost in the far Outside.

If the Northern Lights were shining, the wind would not be singing softly in the tops of the pine trees. The pines would be standing still, holding their breath too, listening to the high, fine sounds of the Lights. The wind that was my friend was also still for the Lights.

Years later, when I learned about the Universe, that great space where worlds and stars stretch farther and farther into blackness, light and cold, I merely nodded and said to myself, "I understand. The Northern Lights." And then, "Strange that they say the Universe is silent. It isn't. It sings. A high, thin,

humming sound.”

Like when the wind is quiet in the pines, holding its breath
before the glory in the northern sky.

WINTER

The Northern Lights left traces on the windows. When brittle sunlight returned with morning, I sat at my small desk in front of the study windows and strained to see through the frost on the panes. Back-lighted by the brightness outside, the fairy ferns and forests that covered each pane from the bottom upwards drew my eyes away from the ugly exercise book I was supposed to be filling with Arithmetic.

We were being schooled at home. Lesson time was from ten o'clock in the morning until noon. Most of that time I spent staring at the window, watching the magic jungle of frost feathers disappearing as the morning wore on. Wycliffe dawdled at his desk identical to mine, alongside. There were no words to express the despair we both felt. The frost was melting: would there be anything at all left of the wonders Outside by the time we were allowed out?

Desperately, I put some sort of answer at the top of each division problem and noted with disgust how its innards trailed down slantwise across the page. Ten of them, two and a half pages in the pulp notebook with blue lines that always disappeared when I erased and left a dirty smudge. Finally, with relief, some Social Studies with a short insipid story about a little boy named How Ting and his little sister who lived in China,

Far Across the Sea. What a silly way to explain the location of China: much more sensible just to say that if you dug deep enough in the lawn in front of the house, you'd meet How Ting and his sister, also with shovels, digging to discover Canada.

One of us worked while the other watched the kitchen clock. Like sentry duty. Something terrible would happen if the long black minute hand approached twelve, actually touched the dot and went on a further couple of dots when nobody was watching. Something wonderful outside might disappear in those black minutes, so recklessly wasted. So we took turns watching.

I pondered yet another stupidity of grownups: that they could call minutes “short” when they always meant agonies, eternities of waiting. Hours were nothing at all. They disappeared like milk I drank from a glass. I knew when the glass was full and that it was suddenly empty after a few brief seconds. Afternoons disappeared like that. And those were called hours? And hours were supposed to be longer than minutes? Grownups! Even the clock showed it was the other way around: the minute hand was far longer than the hour hand.

“Hey, Crick!”

Startled, I followed Wycliffe's eyes to the clock. The long minute hand had just a little more than two dots to pass, then it would touch the top one. Wycliffe had long since cleared his

desk. Hardly taking my eyes from the minute hand, I closed books and pushed pencil, eraser and books helter-skelter into the single drawer in front of my chest. Stillness was complete. Each of us was holding our breath.

Excruciatingly slowly, the minute hand reached that magical point precisely between the one and the two of twelve. The evil spell lifted, we sprang from our chairs to the back door in a single movement.

Conspiratorial silence was broken. Squabbling and shoving, each tried to force the other away from the best position at the back door for getting dressed to go outside. Being taller and stronger, I usually won the first contest: getting down from the peg my leggings, still damp from snow ground into them from the last time outside and then melted in the warmth of the house. Sitting on the floor in the best position at the back door, beside the place where everyone's boots were lined up to shed the snow in their crevices and leak frigid little puddles on the floor all winter long, we wrestled on our leggings. When the wet cuffs around the ankles were pulled over my shoes and those horribly clammy, cold leggings touched my bare skin, goose bumps popped up all over my legs. (These only went away after I got outside and stopped noticing them.) Big thick wool socks to cover our shoes and the lower parts of the wet leggings, then boots pulled on over the big socks and fastened

tightly. Those oversized rubber boots with the fleece lining (usually still wet too) made a funny clumping sound as I stumped across the kitchen floor to the black iron coal stove. This had a rail in front where all winter long, wet mittens and heavy lined winter jackets called parkas hung to dry. (Outside, the snow was dry, but after coming into a warm house all the snow collected on the outside clothes melted; winter clothes took hours to get dry in front of the stove.) Children always needed help with the rest of dressing for outside. First the inner set of mittens were tucked under the cuffs of a thick sweater, then on came the parka. Somebody fastened it up front, then pinned the outer mittens onto the parka cuffs. Lastly, the hood of the parka was pulled over the head and the fur ruff around its edge that protected one's face from the cold was tightened by tying a drawstring tightly under the chin.

And then I stood around impatiently waiting for Wycliffe to get finished before both of us could go outside.

The double set of doors, the inside door and the storm door, would be opened only once to allow children through. The Arctic blast that invaded the room off the kitchen where we did our lessons, where everybody came in and out of the house and where outside clothing was kept - that icy wind swept right into the kitchen and chilled the whole of downstairs and was the reason why the outside door got opened one

time only.

Finally, both children ready, the inner door was unlocked, the ice-jammed bolt on the outer door pulled to one side, and the storm door wrenched open. Below-zero frozen air straight from the North Pole slashed into our lungs, and we were Outside.

Tobogganing down Mount Sinai was thrilling. Never mind the trip was brief and we usually fell off at the bottom. That was because the steep side of Mount Sinai went almost straight down and when the toboggan struck level ground the abrupt change in angle would make it tip over. The challenge was to see how fast and how far we could go before plunging into a snowdrift. The only worry was landing face-first in the snow. An inexperienced fall could get that soft powdery stuff rammed down my neck. There it stayed in the warm space between clothing and skin, melting in torturing cold drizzles down my chest.

There was also a gentle slope to Mount Sinai. We walked up that side, towing the toboggan. It took about ten steps from the bottom to the top where we launched ourselves for another hurtling trip down.

One side of Mount Sinai was actually an overhanging cliff where the wind hollowed out a cave in the snow at the bottom. Panting and laughing, the two of us rested in its shelter, taking

care not to bump our heads against its ceiling of stone-hard cinders. Mount Sinai had apparently begun as an ordinary ash heap long ago, but I took care not to think about that. We never played on it in summer. Then its three sloping sides were covered with long field grass and we were afraid to go near it. When winter covered those three sides with snow and snowdrifts partially concealed the dark cave, we forgot our superstitious dread of the Mountain, sliding and pushing each other down its sides with joyous disrespect.

Hunched in the cave, we planned what to do next.

"I know. Let's play Boats."

"No. Drifts aren't big enough."

"Build a house?"

"Need big drifts, stupid." Pause. "And there's no use making a fort, because the snow isn't packing." The last few days had been still and extremely cold, so the snow was too powdery to make snowballs, essential to any fort because of the mandatory war that followed. "Let's go to the woods."

Wycliffe's stubborn silence was answer enough. It was a long trudge through the snow to the woods, but that wasn't the reason for his refusal. He was afraid of those dark woods in summer; in winter, even more so because of the wolves he was certain prowled there. I'd gladly have gone alone, but winter was when one needed company, either of trees or a brother.

Out in the middle of the fields separating the house from the woods, there were no trees, only empty plains stretching far away on every side. When snow lay thick on the ground, a child's short legs tired quickly and the journey seemed to last an eternity before you arrived at the edge of the woods.

"We could make the other kind of house," suggested Wycliffe hopefully. He meant selecting an unmarked expanse of snow-covered field nearby and tracing out the floor plan of a great mansion by leaving footprints in appropriate-sized rectangles. When we had completed one, perhaps two such houses, there was really nothing more we could do. We couldn't live in them without leaving more footprints, which eventually spoiled the effect of the elaborate outlines we'd made.

"No. Let's go and tease the chickens."

"What if Margaret finds out?" The maid would tell Mommy and Daddy.

"We'll just say Tyndale did it." Tyndale was much younger than Wycliffe and useless for games. It wasn't just that he was small. He didn't want to play with us anyway. Furthermore, he broke Wycliffe's toy cars and tore my books without getting spanked for it (I would have been), so it was only fair that he should get the blame for this if Margaret did find out. He might not be punished for the chickens, but we surely would be because we were older and supposed to know better.

What fun it was to dig out clods of snow, throwing size, and lob them into the warm, fetid interior of the chicken house. The hens sat on their nests in long rows against the walls. They looked so comfortable, smug and unbearably stupid. Seeing them scatter, flapping their wings and cackling with outrage was just the lift I needed now and then. I only hoped they wouldn't make so much noise that somebody would come and investigate, expecting a fox had broken in. If the hens merely stopped laying for a day, Margaret would suspect someone had been teasing the chickens, but she couldn't prove it. I knew I could look innocent and impudent enough that she wouldn't dare accuse us to Mommy and Daddy. In fact, it was also a lot of fun to tease Margaret!

The two of us made our way back to the house, carefully avoiding walking near the big barn with the hayloft above and the apartment at the back. There, in two heated rooms converted to offices, our mother and father worked most afternoons until dinner time. Sometimes they went away on a trip, Daddy preaching, Mommy singing in the services. Then we were able to refine our torments for Margaret, and three to five days passed very slowly for everybody. But now the lighted rectangles reflected on the snow showed that our parents were deep in their work and not likely to be aware of what was happening at the chicken house, and at our house. To be on the

safe side though, Wycliffe and I walked a long detour back through the snow. No need to leave tell-tale footprints leading directly from the chicken house to our house.

The cedars that grew against the foundations of the house, reaching almost to the window sills, looked gloomy in the darkening afternoon. They looked so depressing I really hated them, but they did serve two useful purposes. The snowdrifts stopped short at the cedars, leaving a hollow space below and behind them where we could stand and keep warm if it was getting dark and the wind was starting to blow.

Huddled behind the cedars at the back of the house, near the door that would eventually open, I listened to the wind from the north start moaning across the fields. I loved the sound. It was like the way the wolves sounded. Beside me, Wycliffe shivered. He was scared and cold. But I knew more than he did. I'd learned how to relax and let the cold seep through my skin deep into my body until I felt like part of the Outside, like one of the black trees that stood out against the snow, or a snowdrift that curled up in a little tongue nearby.

Now, though, we wanted laughter. The cedars that sheltered children from the wind also kept adults inside the house from seeing anyone outside who might be hiding in their shadows, underneath the windows. On the front, south side of the house it was especially dark - there was no spotlight to turn on

there. So, leaving our snug place beside the back door on the north side, we went around to the front. Keeping well in the shadows, we dug out clumps of snow and lobbed them against the lighted window panes.

Margaret, peering outside, was always alarmed not to see the cause of the strange thumping sounds. In a few minutes, she would open the back door and call us to come in. By that time we'd have returned from the front and be standing in our usual spot among the cedars at the back. She would see us coming out of there, looking patient and innocent.

Margaret still believed in ghosts.

In the night, the wind would start to howl.

In my tiny bedroom just off the living room, I woke up as the wind's voice gathered strength and its body beat against the corners of the wooden house like an animal trying to break it down.

The house was all in darkness, except where the last of the embers on the open hearth glowed and died away. From my bed I could see through the open door into the living room. Also within view was the dark aperture in the wall beside the fireplace where the stairs penetrated the insides of the little house and made their right-angled turn to the upper storey. Those dark stairs, flanked on both sides for their entire length

by built-in knotty pine cupboards where Mommy kept blankets and pillows and linens, were the logical place for ghosts, if there were any. The bedroom where my parents slept, and the other one where the boys did, was far away from where I lay in my room on the ground floor. Nobody would hear me upstairs if I called. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying not to see where the stairs began, not even the last embers winking out in the fireplace.

Blankets tightly drawn up around my ears, I listened to the wind.

It didn't really want to break the house down. It was just pretending.

It was enjoying singing and shouting and crying loudly, now that anyone who would criticize it was asleep.

I listened to the different modulations of its voice, its singing. Its voice was wonderful: sometimes deep and throaty, then tender and crooning, then high and keening. The sequence of voices was fascinating. It seemed to be telling a story, in its own language that I almost understood.

I listened; in my heart told the wind that I loved it, and went to sleep.

In the morning when I awoke, I knew.

This was one of those wonderful times when a blizzard

struck. If I was very fortunate, it might even last three days. From the sound of the wind, it was going to.

The wind no longer had that human-animal sound I'd heard in the night. It no longer had personality. Or source, or direction. It had become an all-pervasive roar. It was grey and all around us, like the snow-filled sky that was no longer "up" but on top of us. It came from the Arctic and took possession of the land and made it its own. Arctic. I felt that more than half of the world had died and was buried. That wind did it. It seized the prone land underneath its protection of snow five feet thick and tore at it. Roaring, it tore down sky over the land until there was no longer any distinction between land and sky, no space in between. From underneath where it was supposed to be lying, snow whipped up into the air. From above where there was supposed to be sky, snow-filled clouds smothered the land and spewed out limitless amounts of more snow. From between, where one was supposed to walk and see earth and sky, sheets of snow slashed through the wastes.

There was no more down, up, in between, or direction. Only grey-white roaring.

This was now North.

Yet the North was kind to those who lived in it and loved it.

The North wind wrapped snow blankets high around the

little wooden house, great drifts of them, right up to its eye-brows.

And sang it to sleep.

HEART – A HISTORY

She gave it to me with the words, “You will know what to do with it.” I nodded, waiting.

“You must write about her. You understand,” she added.

Do I dare, I wondered, letting the fragile object rest in my hands.

Finest strands of china woven like a basket form an exquisite little bowl, perfectly shaped into a heart. Tiny pink china roses, creamy yellow marguerites, little blue forget-me-nots and tender green leaves garland the rim.

When I was a child, my mother received this bowl as a gift from her maid. Margaret had worked as a dishwasher and domestic in Orillia, a small town way out in Canada's rural Ontario, before coming to work for my parents. In the nineteen forties it was still common for women to hire themselves out to do the heavy chores in other people's homes. So Margaret Woolford came to be the live-in maid in our home, far out of town among the farms.

My mother, recovered from the toxaemia, had more work than she could cope with in helping my father start his new evangelical organization. She'd birthed her children with great difficulty. Already we were three. When Margaret was taken into service, I was six, eldest of the growing family. From time

to time, other children were placed in my parents' temporary care. Hired hands were engaged to work the extensive grounds. These men also needed three cooked meals a day.

Margaret's body was strong but her mind was not. Often she didn't understand or remember the instructions given to her. To her employers she seemed slow and stupid. Feeling lonely and not valued, Margaret would sing out loud as she worked. Methodist hymns, always out of tune, usually "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." I think he was her only friend. Apparently with no family of her own, she became devoted to us children and my mother.

"I love you," she'd tell Wycliffe and me as she tucked us into bed, after making sure we'd brushed our teeth and hearing us say our prayers. When our parents were away from home or working late in their office, she cared for us like a mother. I liked being enveloped by her large hug, enjoying the warmth of her soft, protruding tummy and bosom. Sometimes her blue eyes would fill with tears as she stroked my hair and whispered to me that she loved me best of all, even more than my little brothers. I thought it was because they were noisy and messed the house she tried to clean. I also wondered if she wished she had a child of her own. Not much chance of that, though. She was too old to get married, not at all pretty, and she was fat. Her curling dark hair and round white face were oily. A smell

like grey dishwater surrounded her. But her gentle mouth always widened into a smile when she looked at one of us. Never a cross or ugly word came from it.

“I love you,” she'd tell my mother as she washed blackened pots in the sink while my mother cooked for everybody on the big coal stove. My mother, aristocratic and beautiful, appeared to have nothing in common with the woman working next to her. She was devoted to my father and his vision, but she was usually exhausted and discouraged, with no time or energy for friends. She seemed to have no other family either. At times, my mother cried as she worked.

Margaret often cried, but nobody paid attention.

We children liked the special attention she gave us when our parents were away. Then we were allowed to come into her room next to the laundry room and look at the pretty pictures she collected. These were miniatures of flower-decorated Bible texts and mottoes like “God is Love,” many as small as postage stamps. What money she had was spent on buying these and gospel tracts which she put into envelopes and sent to people she didn't know. She believed she was doing a form of missionary work. Because I liked teasing her and Wycliffe could be unruly, she devised a system of rewards for good behaviour: each of us received a miniature notebook into which we could paste the little pictures of flowered texts. Sitting either side of her on

the small iron bedstead typical of servants' quarters in Victorian homes, we'd select our pictures at the end of the day, very pleased with ourselves that despite the day's misdeeds she'd forgiven us and allowed us some rewards. We were careful to keep our misbehaviour within bounds so as not to miss out on the evening ritual, choosing more pictures for our special books to show our parents upon their return that we had been GOOD little children.

One pleasure there was in my mother's hard life: being able to look at beautiful things in her home. Her bone-china cups and saucers and fine porcelain vases, hand-painted with old-fashioned flowers, gave her special delight. She taught Margaret how to handle them carefully and worked with her while dusting in the living room where they were displayed. One day as they worked together like this, there was a crash. Margaret had accidentally knocked over one of my mother's favourites. It was broken beyond repair or recognition. For a moment both were too stunned to speak. Trying to speak through her wild weeping, Margaret promised to replace it. My mother was careful not to say a word but her expression clearly retorted, "How?"

For her next day off Margaret arranged transport to town. Upon her return, she put a little box, gift-wrapped, into my mother's hands. Inside was this delicate Irish porcelain basket.

It must have cost a month's wages, at least. My mother didn't know what to say. This astonishing piece took its place among the other ornaments. The incident was never referred to again.

After some years, Margaret cried less often. Or maybe we didn't see. The expanding Work took up more of my parents' attention and energy. My mother bore another child. The burden of her office work increased. The Work came to require more space. We moved to an enormous property in a remote area of neighbouring Quebec. Here everyone's load became heavier. My mother bore her last child, more children came into foster care in our home, more staff members had to be cooked for, more administrative and office work had to be done. Family life was submerged in The Work, controlled by my father. Often, now, my mother cried.

Nobody took notice of Margaret as she laboured, cleaning two houses now. She seemed to disappear, as though drowned.

I was nearly a teenager immersed in my own preoccupations when a new part-time cleaning lady was added to the domestic staff, Mrs S of the mean eyes and deeply turned-down mouth. Disturbed by her aura of bitterness, I avoided being in the same room with her. Not long afterwards, I learned, she decided to make Margaret's life more unhappy by pointing out to her that she wasn't appreciated. (With Margaret out of the way, Mrs S probably figured she would be employed full time

in her place.) Demoralised, Margaret tried to discuss this with my mother, even telling her she was leaving. My mother didn't take this seriously and returned to the office with its piles of work that threatened to engulf her.

Nobody noticed when Margaret left. Only later were we aware, with disbelief, that Margaret wasn't there any more.

The Work went on. The toll on our family increased.

I married, moved far away; my brothers scattered. My mother's health broke. My father got tired and The Work declined. My mother told me that she tried to trace Margaret in Orillia, where she must have returned, to tell her she was sorry. She couldn't find her.

When my father died, he was filled with remorse for his failure to be loving.

Alone then, free to follow her own thoughts before she died, my mother pondered her life and each one that was part of hers. "Memory is the punishment," she observed.

She gave me this bowl that I might tell the story. An expiation.

Heart-shaped, it is all that remains. Like all that was left of the Steadfast Tin Soldier, unloved but loving, after he was consumed in the fire.

I handle it gently, remembering.

Fragile, it can easily break. Hearts do that.

COMING HOME FROM SCHOOL

Winter became a different kind of adventure after we moved away from the house on the hill where you could hear the wolves at night.

Now we lived in the province where nearly everybody spoke French and lived in the country as farmers. For miles and miles you could drive down narrow roads and there would be only pasture lands and woods, as far as you could see. Off in the distance, a few cows, a house or two, a barn, that's all. Sometimes a little river rushed past, you could hardly see the water because of big grey rocks and boulders that crowded it.

Once in a while you'd come to a tiny village where little houses with steep roofs hunched right up to the edge of the road and tight against each other for company. They looked like pictures in a fairytale book until you got close and saw that they needed paint and looked poor. In the middle of every village there would be a big stone church with a high thin steeple and a cross on top. In front of the church stood a large statue of the Virgin Mary or a saint or, sometimes, Jesus with his arms opened wide. The village people were proud of their beautiful church and didn't worry about their houses needing paint.

People who spoke English lived all together in a couple of towns and leafy suburbs on one side of the city of Montreal.

They usually had big houses set in square lawns, and didn't worry too much about their churches, which never had a cross on top or a statue out front.

People who spoke English didn't often meet people who spoke French, because the English stayed in their towns and the French stayed in their country. If they did meet, the English usually spoke English to the French, but slowly and a little loudly. The French spoke to them in English, only slowly and with a few mistakes, yet still their speaking sounded half like singing.

One thing everybody was careful not to talk about was religion. If you spoke English, you were supposed to be Protestant. If you spoke French, you were supposed to be Catholic. To make sure nothing changed, everybody agreed that English-speaking children should go to their Protestant schools, and French-speaking children should go to their Catholic schools. This meant that you'd find Protestant schools in town, and Catholic schools in the country villages. All very neat and convenient, the same for hundreds of years.

My father wanted to change all that.

He believed that the French needed saving from being Catholic (Roman Catholic!) and that the English needed saving from being Protestant (wishy-washy). His mission was to turn people into Real Christians. With people of both sides firmly

believing they were already Christians, he set out to re-educate everyone he could reach, starting with children. The authorities on both sides saw this as a threat to the natural order of things. My father wasn't popular.

My father, or the organization he ran, had bought a large property out in the countryside, among the French-speaking people, but within driving distance of English-speakers in the nearby towns of Ste Anne de Bellevue and others on the island of Montreal stretching all the way to the city. He called this property, nearly 300 acres large, "Wildwood." This was a good name, for it was mostly woods.

It lay at the end of a finger of land sticking out into the water - a network of rivers, a lake where some of them flowed into each other, a jumble of islands strewn all over the place, with waterways and channels everywhere you looked. The entire area, for many miles around, had very few people living there. It was very difficult to go anywhere unless you were going by boat. Even then, boats could be used only half the year since the lake, smaller rivers and channels froze over in winter.

A long road from the nearest village, Vaudreuil (vo-DROY), ran through farmlands to the edge of this remote sort of kingdom. Here, during the two and a half warm months of the year, my father held summer camps where children and teenagers, both English- and French-speaking, were enrolled

for the school holidays. The great attraction was the miles of rocky coastline and, in a sheltered cove, a sandy beach perfect for swimming and boating. Ponies and a chestnut horse grazed in the meadows on the edge of the woods. Parents were eager to send their children to this wonderful place.

For most of the year, this huge isolated area was nearly empty of people. It was a lonely place for the children who lived there, far away from school.

Mid-winter was a good time to be at school. The three months of Deep Winter - January, February, March – were so dark and freezing that I didn't often want to venture outside in search of the company of my trees in the woods or along the lakeshore. At school, there was comfort in the crowding of children in the heated aisles and classrooms. I found it very tiring, though, being constantly surrounded by people.

Every three weeks or so, relief would come.

From my seat in class, smack in the middle of the room, I kept watch on the row of windows to our left, waiting for the overcast sky to darken further. The town children never noticed, but I'd observe the clouds thickening just before noon. Through tightly-sealed glass panes, the changing atmosphere came into the room, heavy. From somewhere far away a humming sound began. I knew it was the sound of an approaching

blizzard and prepared myself for the announcement over the intercom: All children living in the Dorion-Vaudreuil area must report immediately to their bus which would be leaving in ten minutes. Excitedly we'd pack our books and get dressed to go outside. Because we lived farthest away from the school, children on our bus would be leaving more than two hours before everyone else did. The school had to deliver us home before the storm struck.

Once on the bus, all the children sat quietly. There were none of the usual squabbles and fights. We sensed the risk now in coming home from school. Driving past the houses on the outskirts of town we saw how, already, thick snow was blanket-ing their solid shapes and smoothing out the square spaces around them. Wind was whipping sheets of snow across the bare streets. This was just a foretaste of the mighty storm bearing down upon us.

As the last traces of town and school rules were left behind, the bus driver, Monsieur Bissonnette, began to look grim-faced. He was heading into a wildness and the over-riding rules of Winter. His cargo of children had to be delivered to their bus stops before the blizzard arrived in full force and blocked all the roads with snowdrifts six feet high. Many miles lay ahead.

Across the first massive steel bridge spanning one arm of

the St. Lawrence river (deep-water ships usually sat in the locks below, awaiting passage to the wider reaches of the river farther on). Off the giant Island of Montreal, onto a highway running for miles across a dismal island covered in scrub. Already the wind keened through the weedy-looking bare trees sprouting all over that unhealthy place. The windows on the right side of the school bus rattled in the north wind as we moved westward. Our breath condensed into fog in the frozen air and clouded the windows. Nobody felt like removing a mitten to do finger writing on the panes. Nobody talked any more. We listened to the straining of the engine as the bus pushed on into the wind and swirling snow.

Across another massive steel bridge spanning another arm of the St. Lawrence (it was turbulent here, there were rapids where many boats and people had come to grief on the rocks). Finally onto the mainland, into the little town of Dorion and our first stop.

Now I felt safer, although the dark sky pushed lower and the distant roar of the wind was eerily muffled among the closed-up shops and little houses standing close together. The first batch of children let out of the bus scuttled off into the thick grey curtains of the storm. The streets, empty of cars and people, were rapidly filling up with snow as Monsieur Bissonnette drove slowly through. I sensed his relief each time he

brought the bus to a stop, pulled the lever to open the door on his right and let out a few more of his charges into the darkening gloom, to make the rest of their way to their homes somewhere out there.

Out of Dorion into open country again, snowdrifts now formed barricades across the narrow road. These lay like wedge-shaped boats, thicker on the north side of the road where the frozen lake came right up to the edge. This was actually the great sweep of a bay, a widening in the jumble of rivers, islands, channels and lakes where few people lived. Now the rattling metal box of a school bus was icy cold inside. The handful of children left their scattered positions and sat together in a tight group. The engine of the bus whined as it bulldozed through the drifts on their thin, leeward end farthest from the expanse of bay where the wind shrieked across.

Finally into the tiny village of Vaudreuil where, I noted with anxiety, even the tall thin spire of the three-hundred year-old church founded by Jesuit missionaries could no longer be seen in the roaring blackness. It was still only about 3 o'clock in the afternoon but might as well have been midnight in Siberia. With a deep sigh, Monsieur Bissonnette brought the bus to a standstill on the deserted main street, not even attempting to reach the usual bus stop at a little cafe around the corner. Opening the door, he waited for the last of the children to file

down the aisle and down the steps into the storm, muffled as it was by closely-packed houses. Looking at me in the face, as the eldest and leader of the little band of children (siblings, and foster children living with us) who somehow still had to get home over miles of road now impassable by car, he said something in French, guttural and indistinct, which meant, I knew, "Go well, children." It sounded like a prayer.

One last time the engine whined as he turned the bus around and drove back towards the little town we had left. I was nine or ten years old the first time this happened, when I paused to muster my courage and look down the road that led out of the village, heading due north into the full-blown blizzard. Behind me stood the smaller children I had to lead home.

"Come on," I called, and started walking. Nikki, Wycliffe, Tyndale, Billy and Robert followed in single file. Longingly I studied the little houses on our left, their outlines blurred by thick snow that kept falling, but their windows glowing invitingly with the warm lights behind them. Like a child in a fairy tale, I fantasized that somebody behind one of those jewel panes would see the dark shapes of children plodding past in the storm and open the front door to invite us inside. But we didn't know these people, they were French, and our home lay miles out of their village. These people and my family had no contact.

Out of the village we trudged, I breaking a path through the thick snow in the street (up to my knees) and the drifts (up to my hips) at their shallow end furthest from the lakeshore on our right again. The smaller children followed. I never wondered how they felt. My only thought was: “Walk. Home. Just push on through the snow. Never mind the wind in your face. Don't think of the darkness. Or the cold. Make sure they follow.”

On into the howling blackness and deepening snow on the road, past the last of the houses on our left. Now the blizzard tore unhindered across open expanses of frozen lake and frozen fields and the disappearing road in between. Wind roaring. Face burning from freezing snow whipped against it; ducking my head so the fur ruff of my parka could shelter it a bit. “Don't get tired. You're the eldest. You must bring us home.” Roar. “Don't stop.” Roar. Bells. Roar. Small bells.

“Bells?”

Yes. Bells. Roaring. Little bells again. Roaring; tinkling bells. “Horse bells.” Bells you hear on the harness of horses pulling a sleigh. Darkness, bells, glow of a lantern ahead, dark shape of two horses in front of me, a deep voice calling out of the roaring blackness. Suddenly, there were the lantern and the two huge horses towering above me. “*Allo! Mes enfants!*” Behind the horses shaking the bells on their harness, the high

curving front of a sleigh. A man in front, one hand holding the lantern up high, long reins in his other mittened hand. "Hello! Children!"

The others struggled up to surround me as I looked up at the smiling man in the sleigh. A neighbour, owner of a farm halfway between home and the village, I recognized him. Monsieur Paul Pilon. "*Embarquez, mes enfants!*" Climb in, my children! Get on board!

Wordlessly, we clambered up. There on the broad flat bed of the wooden sleigh was a thick covering of straw. Soft. We sank gratefully into it. Two dark piles of something lay in the back corners. With a laugh that showed strong white teeth in his weathered face, Monsieur Pilon forgave us our ignorance and opened them up to reveal huge dark-brown bearskin blankets. He arranged the bearskins, their long fur stiff and pungent, skin-side down on top of us to protect us from the cutting wind. Only our heads stuck out, and we snuggled down into the comforting straw, suddenly warm. "*Eh bien,*" all ready now? Yes. He smiled again at the sight of his charges, now smiling too, gazing up at the yellow lantern light swaying in the wind.

Bells jingled again as he turned the horses around in the road and set off homeward. Past his farm, past all the other farms, away from the lakeshore, into the woods. Long through the woods, towards our home at the end of the road on the

point of land reaching far out into the frozen lake. We smiled, watching thick yellow light bobbing with the lantern on its stand to the right of the driver guiding the horses home. Sleigh bells, cheery magic. Wind a distant roar. Bearskin warmth and sleigh bells made us sleepy.

Several years later, as a teenager and rebelliously in love with one of the young French men of the village, I learned with amazement of the dislike the villagers had for my father who challenged their traditions. Even more incredulously, I learned that same Monsieur Paul Pilon had endured the wrath of the community for his kindness to the children of their enemy. Being a farmer who lived some distance out of the village and therefore not so vulnerable to the pressures of local politics, he stoutly maintained his right to act as he saw fit.

“But what did he say to them?” I asked my sweetheart in French.

Réjean replied with a smile that curled up the corners of his mouth. “*Il a dit, 'Ils ne sont que les enfants!'*”

“They were only children,” he said.

MADemoiselle

Leaning over the piano keys, she pencilled in *chatoyant* at the top of my sheet music. I just looked at her. Mademoiselle Aubut forgave my limited grasp of French. “Your fingers should move so, like when you stroke a cat.” The Moonlight Sonata was to be played with a certain sound. Not knowing the word in English, she demonstrated on the piano. A shimmering sound filled the room.

The parlour of *la famille Aubut* was stuffed with spindly furniture, frayed embroideries and dried flowers. A sombre room, suitable for dead people, I thought when arriving for my first piano lesson. I was eleven. Mademoiselle caught me staring at a silver-framed photograph that dominated the small room. “*Papa*,” she said of the stern face with aquiline features. Her late father, she explained, “*il a écrit ‘O Canada, terre de nos aïeux.’*” The pride in her voice was unmistakable. It was he, or an ancestor of his, I understood, who had written the words which we knew in translation as the national anthem of Canada. “Land of our forefathers.” I wondered how *Maman*, who reigned out of sight behind a curtain, felt about children of their English-speaking conquerors invading her home now for piano lessons. Sometimes I sensed her presence just behind that thick curtain in the doorway behind us that led to the rest

of the house.

My own mother was interested in *la famille Aubut*, having learned about them from neighbours before engaging Mademoiselle as piano teacher. She told me that *Papa* of the silver-framed photograph had built with his own hands the little wooden house standing next to the original Catholic church of the town. Even by French-Canadian standards, *la famille Aubut* was exceptionally devout: they went to mass two or three times a day, every day. Having no son to give to their beloved Church, the oldest daughter had taken a Vocation as a nun. Submerged in an Order far away from home, *Soeur Thérèse* rarely saw her family. The youngest daughter was a concert pianist of renown. But Françoise, passionate and beautiful, had contracted a disastrous marriage. Here my mother's informants, protecting one of their own from scrutiny by *les Anglais*, declined to say any more.

That left Rachel, the middle daughter, to support her widowed mother and herself. (The French pronounce her name musically, Rah-SHELL.)

Mademoiselle Rachel Aubut was undersized and far too thin. To me she looked dried up, old as a century. She was probably only thirty-five when I started piano lessons, but in the nineteen-fifties and unmarried, that was considered old. Her expression looked perpetually worried. A tiny scrap of hat

(formal, black) was carefully positioned atop her carefully coiffed hair. Looking closer, one could see the scalp showing white underneath her thin hair (reddish-black and dyed). She was never seen without that hat. It was as much a part of her as the pencilled line of eyebrows and white-powdered cheeks with a dot of rouge that looked like fever.

She it was who had to ensure that the coal stove in the heart of the little house was kept burning through the winter.

Winters are bitter in Québec. Long and very cold.

Through the centre of the town ran the railway tracks. A double line of them bridged the St. Lawrence River on the east, from Montreal, and stretched infinitely westward to the plains, thousands of miles away.

The little wooden church and the Aubut's little wooden house faced onto the tracks across from where the station stood. Here the small town had begun. Its life crisscrossed the railway tracks by car and foot. The sound of warning hoots, then rushing by of trains reverberated through the Aubut's parlour and my first piano lessons.

One day in that stuffy parlour, something unexpected happened and I laughed out loud. Startled, Mademoiselle joined the mirth. Her tinkling laugh brought a flush of pink to her white cheeks. "Why," I thought surprised, "she might have been a girl herself, once upon a time."

From behind the curtained doorway came a warning crash of pot on iron stove.

She caught her breath, glanced fearfully towards the door. The heavy curtain twitched, then was still.

In a whisper, Mademoiselle hurried to the end of the lesson. Her face utterly drained of colour, she continued to cast frightened glances over her right shoulder to that curtain.

Soon afterwards she regretfully informed my mother she could no longer give piano lessons from her home. *Maman*, it was understood, had spoken.

From then on, Mademoiselle had to walk to where her pupils lived.

Far away, a silhouette against the long, straight roads to the edge of town like a vista in Leningrad, her tiny figure could be seen, walking. Out to the new extensions of town where her English-speaking pupils lived in their new houses, she walked. Once when my mother was driving us home from school, we spotted somebody far distant who looked like her, but we couldn't believe it possible she would be walking that far. Approaching from behind in our heated car, stick-like legs appeared beneath a worn, rough muskrat coat whose hairs were falling out. Then we saw the tiny black hat. *Non merci*, she politely declined the offer of a lift.

Winter and summer, she always wore that hat.

She wore that hat every Saturday morning while she gave piano lessons to each of us in turn. There were five of us. By the time I, the eldest child, went away to university, Wesley, the youngest, had begun. Early every Saturday my mother fetched Mademoiselle from her house in town and drove her to our home, out in the woods, in time for half-past eight in the morning. She took her back at one o'clock.

Half-way through the morning, my mother would carry in a tea tray for Mademoiselle, insisting that she pause, drink tea and eat. Reluctantly, she allowed herself to be persuaded. When she thought we might not notice, she gave furtive, fearful glances over her shoulder. (Could *Maman* be watching?) Still in position at the keyboard - she refused to sit more comfortably, she drank cup after cup of hot sweet tea and ate the sandwiches my mother pressed upon her. Guiltily. (Would *Maman* disapprove?) She ate hungrily, my mother pointed out to me, and took great care that the sandwiches she made were nourishing, tempting and plentiful.

Once during the long drive from town to our place, Mademoiselle confided to my mother that "best of all" she loved to come into our home.

"Such riches," she'd breathe on entering the expansive upper storey room that served us for living, dining and making music.

Gorgeous colours reigned: honey-coloured pine-wood walls hung with oil paintings set in gilded frames, polished brass and silver gleamed over deep-toned rose- and russet-coloured Persian carpets. In winter, a great log fire burned in the field-stone fireplace. Everything was warm in that big room that overlooked, from tree-top height, the vastness of our wild woods and lake.

Our home was a visual distillation of both my parents' tastes and differing backgrounds. My father, born to the northern expanses of Canada and an outdoors adventurer at heart, needed space. So the home that he designed had big rooms. On the other hand, my mother, born of aristocratic families in the hot South, needed colour and warmth. Our living room gave evidence of both. My mother's kitchen, indeed, showed how strong was her need to counteract the usual winter grimness of the land in which she lived. This room, which logistics should have doomed to darkness, was transformed by paint into a light-yellow fantasy of Spring. At one end this was illuminated by a scene, an enlarged photograph, back-lit, showing a vista of sunny daffodils under budding elm trees. Set into the wall and framed like a window, same size and shape as the one real window of the kitchen, it counteracted the kitchen window's usual view, in shades of grey, of northern wilderness in winter.

From where she sat at the baby grand piano, Mademoi-

selle could see through the plate-glass window on her left to the broad expanse of lake, frozen half the year, and distant woods.

Outside, Winter waited.

A dedicated teacher, nothing deterred Mademoiselle. Not Wycliffe, who interrogated her on her bank balance and why she wasn't married. Gifted, he could shortcut the tedium of learning to read music — he could play by ear, with passion. Not Tyndale, who brought a green snake in a jar to piano lesson and set it down beside the music rack, inches from her face. (She carefully ignored it.) He had no need to learn to read — he improvised with ease, brilliantly. Nor enigmatic Calvin, who somehow finagled other lessons, trumpet first, then violin — yet conjured music from the keys most beautifully. Only I, less gifted, had no choice but try to read what the masters wrote. Beethoven, Brahms. They expressed the feelings I didn't know I had.

I became her favourite pupil.

To an invited audience, she presented me as her most promising piano student. “Miss Recital,” she declared. I wore a rustling blue gown, taffeta, altered to fit my near-teen frame. (My mother had worn this before her marriage, during her concert singing years.) Nervousness, I was horrified to find, caused my fingers to perspire. They slid off the piano keys.

Then Mademoiselle arranged that I should meet her sis-

ters.

I stood still while the youngest, the legendary Françoise, played the organ for me, filling a cathedral with her thrilling music. "I taught her first, you know," glowed Mademoiselle.

I played, then, for her reverend elder sister, *Soeur Thérèse*, piano teacher of renown. "*Oui*," she bent to me her sweet, calm face, framed in white and black. "Yes."

All this, I felt, was happening far away from me.

One day during piano lesson, Miss Rachel (she wanted me now to call her this) was demonstrating a fine point of performance. "You will be doing this," she spoke excitedly. Alarmed, I asked her to explain. But of course, I was going to be a concert pianist. "No," I must have shouted, "I'm going to be an opera singer!"

She went white. She searched my eyes, then dropped her face. Her little body sagged. Her spirit seemed to leave.

I never saw it back again.

Yes, she went on giving lessons.

Through wind and rain and freezing winter cold, she walked. Down vistas like in Leningrad. Blue-white and desolate.

She saw us children grow up and move away, my parents migrate to my mother's warm South. She saw me married, holding my own baby. Just before I went, far away to a very

different South, she came to say goodbye. The small pink coverlet she gave to keep my baby warm, the note, I have them still. “*Avec beaucoup de respect.*”

Most respectfully, Rachel Aubut.

Who would have thought she'd die. But, my mother wrote, she did. Walking back from a piano lesson.

She walked across the railway tracks. In front of her own house. A train came.

“She knew the trains so very well. You'd think she'd know ...”

Ah yes.

It was November though.

In the North, another Winter coming.

GYPSY

“There’s a story that gypsies love to tell: When your love wears golden earrings ...”

A gypsy song starts with these words. From the time I first heard it, I vowed to wear golden earrings. Long skirts and long hair too. (I kept my promise.) I’d look like a gypsy and sing their songs until I was an opera singer.

If opera wasn’t possible, then I’d join a gypsy caravan. I pictured a life spent moving through the countryside, not bound by houses or towns, camping at night on the edge of woods. Beautiful women wearing golden earrings and swirling red skirts, singing wonderful songs around the camp fire, exulting in the freedom of a life outdoors. Carmen, of the opera, was of course a gypsy and I’ve always wanted to sing this role. The word “carmen” is Latin for “song.” I was certain that violins played when gypsies sang.

Their music pulls the heart out of me. Hungarian, Spanish, Slovakian, Russian. Gypsy music, *czardas*. I hear my name called by violins from distant hills. There’s a *czardas* (by Montei) that sounds my name in it. And “Zigeunerweisen” (Sarasate) sings it too, but in a lower pitch. Picturing autumn leaves, red trees on distant hills, with wind starting up, one phrase in these pieces repeatedly calls out my

name, “Lu-cre-ee-tia” and I want to rise and follow. “There is something in the autumn that is native to my blood, Touch of manner, hint of mood, and my heart is like a rhyme With the scarlet of the maples keeping time when ... from every hill of flame She calls and calls each vagabond by name.” (Bliss Carman)

Everyone knew I was a gypsy at heart. I made sure they did. Never did I imagine that Gypsy would become real in my ordinary world, but it did when I was thirteen.

Television came to Canada about 1953. It was still a novelty in our home at Wildwood. Saturday evenings were special because there was uninterrupted programming. Everyone was fixed in front of the TV to enjoy the wonders of this newfangled entertainment. Most wondrous of all was a programme called “Gypsy.” It went on for months and featured a guitarist who presented his instrument as a woman’s body which he caressed to bring out the music. Then followed thrilling gypsy music: laments, dances, *czardas* — maybe the program was called “Czardas.” The merest glimpse of this on the screen, fragments of the intoxicating music affected me like a drug on an addict.

Everyone was allowed to watch this except me. My father had decreed that I must bathe the baby at exactly that time of the week, seven o’clock to seven-thirty on Saturday evening. My mother said nothing.

“Please, half an hour earlier or later,” I begged and cried.

“No.”

“Please, the same time on Friday or Sunday night?”

“No.”

Therefore, at 7 o'clock every Saturday evening, I knelt beside the bathtub and bathed my baby brother. Wesley was a darling little boy. I can still see the little body upright in the bath, his enchanting smile and warm brown eyes looking up at me. As I soaped the washcloth and applied it, trying to hear something of the music far away, tears poured down my face. He would gaze up into my eyes, his normal delight in being alive turning to concern as he saw those tears. Warm brown eyes showed compassion. Chubby hand reached up to my face and tried to wipe away the tears. They only increased as I realised what he was trying to do.

Whenever possible, I'd escape from places contaminated by people. Outside crouched the living woods. Some areas I'd selected as my favourites. Lucretia's woods, my brothers called them. I didn't allow trespassing, guarding their perimeters fiercely with threats to beat up any brother who came in and messed them up. I could see where branches and leaves had been disturbed. Pretending that certain obvious places were my favourites, I allowed them try their mischief where I could easi-

ly see and deal with them. Thrown off the scent, they never suspected the existence of particular places that really mattered to me. That way they remained secret.

Night. It's late spring or early summer. From the patch of woods known as Lucretia's Woods, someone young, like a white birch tree, moves unwillingly towards the building where people are sleeping. The building is supposedly home, but to the night walker it feels like an alien place. Between the woods and this destination, there's an oval of lawn like a park, dotted with elm and hickory trees in full green leaf. Moonlight. In the shadows under the trees on the lawn, the tree-person sees a gathering of Beings similar to herself, but they're dark and wraithlike. They own the place, I realise. They're circling sedately and gracefully in a ritual dance around their prince. He's dark and slender like a hickory tree, young, and older than the woods; god of the woods.

I, the observer, realise the pale tree-person is myself, and continue in this detached manner, simultaneously watching and participating.

Approaching this sacred gathering, I'm aware this meeting was supposed to happen. The circle of dark beings opens up for me, the light one, to enter. I walk up to the dark god. He stands quietly, accepting me. I'm at ease. Light and dark, we

stand together as friends. Equals. The surrounding Beings know this. We like each other, understand instinctively. He and I and the others, together we move in a ceremonial dance that affirms our kinship.

When I leave them and walk away towards those alien things called buildings where my body sleeps, I remember where I belong.

THE STONE

In a curving mound of earth and rocks left by a retreating glacier stands a great stone. It rests in the middle of the inside edge of the curve, facing the Northern Lights and sunset. Protruding above the little valley below, it cannot be seen from behind. You have to be walking in the woods very close to it to see it, then it surprises by its massive presence.

A hardwood forest grows around it. Oak, elm, hickory and maples drop gold and russet leaves at its feet just before winter. After winter, starry-faced trillium cover the brown woodland floor with so much white it almost looks like snow, while overhead, new leaves unfurling in bare branches make pale green lace. The grey stone overlooks all of this.

From the dirt road that winds behind and below the curving ridge, the grey stone cannot be seen. Its presence isn't even suspected by those who drive or stroll past. You have to be walking deep in the woods on the other side and come very close to see it. Especially in summer when heavy green leaves conceal it until you're almost touching it. Then it surprises you by just being there.

The stone gets visitors in spring, summer and autumn, not just of chipmunks and the occasional fox that rustles faintly through the undergrowth, leaving no visible trace of their path

to the stone. Another visitor also rustles faintly through the approach to the stone, trying to leave no trace. The place of the stone must remain a secret.

Throughout the many months of winter, nobody visits the stone but the occasional chickadee. The little furry creatures are sleeping, the fox makes his tracks on the edge of the woods, and the other visitor is wary of making her big human tracks so obvious in the snow that others might discover the way to the stone.

Winter is when she's loneliest, when she doesn't dare go to the stone.

Only the great stone itself knows it is there, sovereign over its domain of ever-changing forest and seasons passing through. The solitary girl also knew, but no one else, she was certain. She herself had come upon it by surprise while exploring a part of the woods where no one ever went. Its presence arrested her.

Approaching reverently, she dropped to her knees alongside. The spirit presence spoke to her. She responded by loving it, laying the flat of her hand against its grainy sides to say so. Surprised again at the sense of Being emanating from it, she laid her cheek against its face. It answered her. Then she wrapped her arms around a protruding shoulder, calling it Friend.

Time passed. The girl's flat chest grew soft mounds. She felt love's touch, awakening passion. Each time love went away, she waited for a chance to escape people's eyes. Walking a circuitous route through the woods, making sure no curious person was following, she returned to her stone. Again and again she drew near to its grey mass projecting from the moraine. Sometimes there were fleshy, fragrant dogtooth violets and white-faced trillium garlanding its approaches when she came. If Spring had passed, the approaches to her stone were clothed with deep yellow-green mosses and feathery fine ferns alongside. Then she took care not to hurt the fragile loveliness. Sitting on the ground an arm's length from her friend, she silently let her sorrow flow to the stone who absorbed it. In autumn, the season of her heart, the time when she'd been born, she needed her friend the most. Then the blooms and ferns were spent; the kindly trees softened the approaches to the stone with fragrant, yielding golden-brown leaves on the ground. Sitting close to her friend, viewing together the kingdom of gracious trees, each in its appointed place, her particular ache was quieted.

One day the torrent of hurt wouldn't be quelled. Face against the stone, arms around its side, its reassuring presence wasn't enough. Crying audibly, she climbed up onto its slanting side, the one that commanded respect from all these trees, and

pressed her breast to its firm strength. Arms outstretched, she embraced it like a lover, sobbing until she grew quiet. Stone received her grief. Then she knew it loved her. Healed, she walked back to life among people, leaving her silent lover on the moraine.

Time passed. The stone did not change, but the girl did, into a woman. Distance came between them. She could no longer return to be close to her stone.

The woman was growing old, though she knew her stone wouldn't change. Seasons had passed over her, their alternating chill and warmth fissuring her strong heart like cracks in stone.

"What is it," asked one who loved her, "what is it now that hurts you so, that you do not have peace?"

Hesitating, holding back tears, she explained. That living in an alien land, she'd had to make herself strong. Almost like a stone.

"Hasn't my own strength become the stone where my heart kneels down?"

"Pray? My heart is like a stone. How shall I find God?"

Then she recounted her secret of the stone.

He bowed his head and pondered quietly. Raising eyes as

clear as sky to her, he asked, “Wasn’t God in that stone?”

AVEC RESPECT

She was terrifying. Even those who liked her said so.

Ramrod straight at the intersection of the school corridors, the sight of her on duty ensured no shoving in the rows and no talking. "Watch it. There's Miss Revel," was the only whispering. As the pupils filed past en route to their classrooms they dropped their heads to avoid her flinty eyes. If they caught yours, they seemed to bore into your soul and you felt she saw crimes there that you didn't even know about.

Once in the classroom, everyone was aware of one period that loomed over the school day: French period. In Quebec schools this subject joined the 3 R's as being compulsory every day from Grade Four to matric. Miss Revel taught French. She did it with a thoroughness, an unrelenting attention to detail, that was awesome. Her oral drills on the rules of verb formation and grammar were a highly effective form of brainwashing. Today, decades later and in a country where I haven't heard French for years, I can still hear her voice rasping "-e, -es, -e, -ons, -ez, -ent." Endings for the Present tense. Her pupils were programmed to chant these and other exercises like a litany the instant she barked the signal: the first word of a series. Miss Revel had no use for molly-coddling in education.

Neither would she tolerate sloppy work. "Dashed lazy

cusses!" I can hear her raging. No one ever failed to do the homework for French class. It didn't even enter anyone's head. This was unthinkable. Once only, a boy (I remember where he sat, right in the middle of the class) had NOT done his French homework. He was new to the school - must have been. "You WHAT?" Oliver Twist asking for "more" got a less frightening response. We froze. My heart contracts at the memory. What happened after that I don't know. He was never seen there again.

If she was in a good mood, her granite expression had fewer sharp edges than usual and ten minutes before the end of French period she would suddenly bark, "*Un!*" That was the signal for an oral game of counting that rocketed along the rows, starting from the pupil at whom she nodded her head. "*Deux*" he had to flash back, "*Trois*" had to follow in an instant from the one behind, and so on until any number was reached containing a seven or multiple thereof, which had to be replaced by the word "Buzz." Any hesitation in response, any failure to substitute "Buzz" where required, any incorrect formation of a number ("*Trente-et-un, Trente-DEUX ...*") and her curt nod would indicate: You're OUT. Sit down. Soon only a handful of the most adept were struggling through the seventies. "*Buzz-et-un, Buzz-deux, ... Buzz-BUZZ*" (that was seventy-seven). Watching her eyes from where I sat after falling out

during the thirties, safe because all her attention was focused upon the remaining participants, I saw them glinting with pleasure. Only then did she come close to a smile — about once in three, four months.

She wore, year in and year out, the same severe grey suits. One iron-grey, one grey pinstripe, and sometimes (oh, awful day), grey with a fine green stripe which indicated that her mood barometer had dropped to Grim. When she entered the classroom wearing that suit, we hardly breathed for fright. We learned French.

Nobody was ever heard to say that he or she enjoyed French.

Not, at least, until the year I broke a bunch of non-school rules. I fell in love with a Frenchman (“Not Done” by English-speaking Canadians in those years) of working class background (“Not Done” by my family), and he was twenty-four years old. I was fourteen, looked like sixteen, and was bored by the childish sameness of all the boys considered suitable. When my parents discovered that we’d been meeting secretly, even kissing, the sky fell in. To prevent a diplomatic incident in the French community which might result from their termination of my goings-on, my shocked parents enlisted the assistance of the French teacher. Miss Revel, I learned, was asked to accompany them on the formal visit they paid to this young man and

his family. She was able to explain things, in French, in the friendly but firm manner required so there would be no unfortunate misunderstanding.

A day or so later, my mother told me of their action and the role played by Miss Revel. Now the earth fell out from under me. The dreaded Miss Revel must think me terribly wicked. How could I ever face her at school again? “Not so,” soothed my mother. “Why, when we approached her for help and told her what you had been doing, she just exclaimed, ‘But that’s youth!’ She didn’t condemn you at all.”

Broken-hearted and utterly humiliated, I hardly dared raise my eyes to Miss Revel the following Monday morning in class. But eventually I had to in order to return her standard greeting of “*Bonjour, la class.*” Her eyes searched the classroom until they found mine. Warm, grey, they spoke to me: “It’s alright, child. I understand. Also, I respect you.” Her face was soft, for everyone to see and wonder at, and only me to understand.

From then on, I learned French. I loved it. I tried to be absolutely perfect, to make it my wings. In this happy state, I realised that her formidable discipline was designed to help us with more than just learning French. Miss Revel was trying to equip us with habits that would enable us to produce excellence.

As we got older, she occasionally threw a searching question out to the class. It was intended to shake up the safe and conformist attitudes shared by the class, and Our Class of people. One of my quick answers drew from her the challenge that my own thinking appeared strongly non-conformist. In fact, I might even be rebellious. I tried to pass off the demure reply that I, as a minister's daughter, could hardly be THAT, but she would have none of it.

"They're the worst," she retorted.

"How can you say that?"

"I AM one." Her eyes flashed, then smiled again their understanding to me.

So that's why she hadn't been fooled by my Goody-goody image. How, though, had I always known that her image as an Avenging Angel was equally inaccurate?

Looking again at the ageing photograph in the album that spanned my childhood and adolescent years, I study the neatly coifed grey hair, the carefully controlled expression. She retired in the year I started matric and our yearbook paid her special honour. Underneath her photograph on the frontispiece, dated 1956, stand the words: "*Dédié avec respect à Mlle. Grace E. Revel.*" Dedicated with respect to Miss Grace E. Revel.

Gradually another memory emerges, an incident forgotten until now, from the time when I was only nine years old.

I was new to the school - to any school, really. Our home was too far away from town for me to attend school earlier, so I'd been taught at home by correspondence course. Recently moved to Quebec province, I encountered a different curriculum. Everything was new and terrifying. In addition to the academic demands, there were social pressures that came as a shock, the unfamiliar regimentation of a school environment. Rigid with tension, I lived on the edge of tears.

I picture the occurrence now as though the child involved were somebody else.

One noon-hour when the weather was too harsh for the children to play outside, everyone was directed to the large basement play area where a film was being shown. It was in black-and-white, an opera, of all things, and the children were bored. Sitting on the floor, they shoved and talked out loud. The squawking sound of the distorted music could scarcely be heard above the din, so this child wormed her way forward, closer to the screen. She was enthralled. It was Verdi's *Otello*.

Never in her carefully controlled and circumscribed nine years had she heard such music. The singing, the drama, the pathos. Something was filling up inside her and about to burst.

Suddenly the school bell jangled. End of noon-hour. The children rose to go. *Otello* had left, in a murderous rage, and

now Desdemona was sobbing in her bedroom. The children lined up at the door and pushed their way upstairs, supervised by the gimlet eyes of Miss Revel.

Alone, the child stayed glued to the floor, facing the screen, while the astonishing music sounded more clearly with the noisy children gone. She cast a frightened look at Miss Revel silhouetted in the doorway. "She can throw me to the lions — later," she considered desperately, "but first, this." Desdemona was weeping and singing something about a willow. Tears overflowed and streamed down the child's face.

By some miracle, the music continued, the big boy who ran the projector evidently authorized by the stern figure standing at the door. A long time elapsed. Desdemona died and Otello raved, the music came to an end of its own accord. The projector stopped and a bright light went on. Stiffly, the little girl uncrossed her legs, got up from the floor, wiped her face and worriedly entered the doorway.

The school's strictest teacher held her post still, watching over one child enslaved by the music. The big boy in matric had missed two classes, the Head teacher had missed instructing two classes, about seventy-five pupils in all. But as the new girl raised swollen eyes to the teacher's face, she thought she saw the glimmer of a smile. In her eyes, respect.

The meaning of this sequence of memories continued to elude me.

One day my friend, Jonathan of the special insight, phoned. He'd just read the story. Excitement in his voice, he pointed out that the most important part was the earliest memory, recounted last. "It explains all the rest that followed!

"She'd been watching you all along. Right from the beginning."

NO

“If you can’t, Teach.”

My father had a low opinion of teachers. Domineering in a Victorian manner, his pronouncements allowed for no questioning. We lived far from school, it was a long drive to the school bus stop – last one on that route, and if we arrived too late for the bus, he drove us to school when he was ready. Arriving late to school, we were humiliated by the unfavourable attention from our teachers. I, as the eldest and spokesperson for my younger brothers, tried to point this out to him. Inflexible, he maintained that we were his children, therefore he could act as he saw fit. We had to do our homework in spare time at school or on the bus trip home. “I’m paying these people to teach you. If they can’t teach you during the time they have you at school, you’re not going to do their work for them at home. You have responsibilities at home.” Teachers were failures, he declared. They couldn’t do real work, so they dropped into this easy job lasting only a few hours a day - and all those holidays!

These were the late forties, the fifties, in rural and semi-urban Canada. An extreme form of political correctness was practised in those years. Especially if he was a fundamentalist Christian, a patriarchal bully was too dangerous to confront.

My father would thunder, "I am a minister of the Gospel" like brandishing a war club. Nobody risked a head-on with him. He shouted down or out-maneuvred any opposition. Even government agencies - local, provincial, national - came off second best when challenging the way he ran his affairs. He won two court cases that I know of.

People avoided him (the usual option) or tried by indirect means to give him trouble (local authorities, some individuals). A few quietly waited out their term of subjection to his will and made their escape when they could. Only two chose to submit to him, defended his behaviour: my mother who continued long after she had other options, and his eldest son, the crown prince. My four brothers were younger than me. As the eldest, I had to take lots of responsibility, but as a girl, I didn't count for much except to be useful.

His low opinion of teachers was benign compared to the way he referred to the other traditionally female occupations of those years. "A-Nurse-emptying-bedpans" was always hyphenated. "StupidSecretary" was one word. Not even the chance of a hyphen. Other options for women apparently didn't exist except for the expected "Get-married-and-have-children" which equalled "Permanent-housewife-and-slave-to-husband." Most girls I knew got married around the age of twenty. Becoming an "Old Maid" was considered a disgrace. I felt safe from his

scorn because I didn't want any of those jobs, and I certainly didn't intend to "Get-married-and-have-children" until my late thirties, early forties, after I was well established in my career. Of course, I was going to be an opera singer.

My mother had got disillusioned in her singing career, gone to Bible School, met my father and married him the day after graduation. So, in my father's eyes, being a professional musician didn't count. This was only a stop-gap until the unhappy lady could find a husband, presumably one like him. I had my reservations: nothing in my mother's marriage to make me want to get married at all. And all those horror stories she told me about giving birth to children — oh, no! If I absolutely had to get married, I'd postpone it as long as possible, by which time I'd have bargaining power and not be subject to the whims of a domineering husband. Oh yes, I was romantic, always falling in love, but I'd read that gifted women could have men-friends, lovers, while living the life they chose. I thought my mother had made a very bad choice in throwing away her independence and a life of singing to marry — a preacher, of all things — but of course didn't say so. I felt sorry for her. Obviously she didn't love singing as much as I did. Maybe concert singing was a bit dilettante compared to being an opera singer — now *that* was an absorbing life. Passion was an asset in that profession (I was accused of being too intense). Romance —

boyfriends and all the rest — made me into a kind of slave, but singing lifted me to places where nothing else mattered and I felt truly myself. No, I didn't want to get married.

Everyone assumed I'd make a career of singing. The kids at school tormented me for spouting the "Christian convictions" my father had drilled into me (my brothers wisely kept their mouths shut), but when I sang, they admired me. Even the teachers who resented me for the trouble my father caused, encouraged my singing. Others think back to their first communion as a milestone in their growing up, I think of my first concert at age thirteen. The school auditorium was packed, I sang "Danny Boy" and from then on I was known as "The Singer ." My father didn't attend, he was busy, but my mother did. Nothing was said at home. The next year, for a Christmas concert, I was informed me I was to be the featured soloist. At the end, I was to sing the Schubert setting of "Ave Maria". Elated, I told my father. *Now he'll praise me.*

"That amounts to worship of Mary. It's heathen. No," he said.

That was the end of it. My mother said nothing. We didn't go to the concert. The year after that, my high school was preparing the musical *Oklahoma* and I was cast as the heroine, singing the lead soprano role. *I'm safe now, no 'idolatry', just good clean country fun.*

“There’s dancing in it.” (That was “a sin.”)

“But Dad, it’s only square-dancing!” Even he knew from television that people only held hands and a boy briefly had his arm around a girl’s waist as he twirled her on to the next person.

“No,” he said. My mother said nothing. We didn’t go to the musical.

Music festivals were held every year for the entire area west of Montreal. Our high school, as the largest, hosted these. Professional musicians adjudicated. Every year I won the prize for the best soprano. This became so commonplace that the question wasn’t “Who’s going to win,” but “Who’ll be second?” Lucretia was, of course, always going to win, in each category: opera, lieder and traditional. My mother coached me. My father didn’t object (no sin involved). He didn’t attend the final concerts. Nothing was said at home about my winning. I expected, though, that my father understood he had a singer for a daughter and when the time came, he’d make the appropriate decision. Those were the years when minors, especially female minors, had no say in their destiny as decreed by a father whose mindset came from a hundred years earlier.

One day in my final year of high school, I was helping him in his office, a series of rooms in the building where our family lived and my father spent most of his time. Helping him there

was one of my routine chores. I was always nervous when alone with him like this: he had a brooding silence that boded badly for me. I always tried to conceal my thoughts, but he'd ask disturbing questions and I didn't know how to give evasive answers.

His words came out of the blue. "What are we going to do with you?"

I looked at him questioningly.

"You're almost finished high school. I have to get you trained for something."

"But Daddy, I'm going to be an opera singer."

"What do you mean?"

"That means: when I'm finished, then I go to conservatory and study music to become an opera singer."

"No," he said.

Reeling, I listened while he dictated my fate.

"I have four sons to educate. You are going to get married and have children. If anything happens after that, you'll have to go to work and support yourself. I'll send you to be trained – as a teacher, a nurse or a secretary."

Holding onto the side of a desk to keep from falling over, I tried not to black out while his words came back to me: "If you can't, Teach. A-Nurse-emptying-bedpans. StupidSecretary,"

I couldn't speak. *Gee, thanks, Dad. So that's all I'm worth.*

Nothing.

He looked at me. An answer was required instantly.

My mind whirled. *I throw up at the sight of bodily fluids or gore. I'd die in an office. Omigosh — that you're-by-definition-a-failure Teaching. But at least there I could use my imagination.*

“Teach.”

His face cleared. “I’ll send you for teacher training, the best there is. A five-year degree course condensed into four.”

After that there’d be two more years of teaching practice before my certification was made final. I was sixteen, would be seventeen when the college and university year began. Four years plus two meant six years in all, while my peers at conservatory would have a six-year head start on me! But by that time I’d be well over twenty-one and allowed to make my own decisions. Then I’d get back to my singing and try to catch up with my career.

I said nothing to my mother. Days, years later, she still said nothing.

Starting teacher’s college a few months later, I discovered that my father’s reputation hadn’t followed me here. Living at home, I drove myself to classes and was always on time. I kept my mouth shut about those “Christian convictions” I wasn’t so

sure of anyway. I made friends easily and some of them are still friends fifty years later. The propaganda, as I saw it, about how to teach bored me but the intellectual vistas opening up were exciting. One day still in the autumn of the year, when I'd barely started, my mother showed me a newspaper advert: a singing competition for young people from the whole of eastern Canada. She encouraged me to enter and coached me in the techniques of singing in the three different genres required: opera, art song, traditional.

Without hesitation I chose "Habanera" from *Carmen* – dramatic, gutsy; she chose (a silly song, I thought) "The Lass with the Delicate Air" which showed I could sing high, light coloratura; she selected the French *chanson* (traditional) about a maiden and her shepherd which I found boring, but I did enjoy singing in French.

The day came. My mother dropped me off at a theatre in the centre of Montreal where the competition was being held. She had errands to do for my father and would return later. Alone in the foyer, I surveyed the scores of young women competing for the prize in the soprano section, accompanied by their mothers fussing over them. They looked scared to death. "Fools," I thought, "why are you doing this if you don't enjoy it?"

My turn came. The auditorium was huge and dark, empty

except for three people sitting second row from front. The adjudicators.

The bare stage held a huge black concert grand piano with a man seated ready to play the music I'd brought. Somebody explained to me that the three adjudicators represented, 1) the head of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2) the head of a conservatory in Quebec, 3) the head of a *conservatoire* in Paris.

"Yummy," I thought, and announced my three choices to the three shadows in the void in front. One of the shadows stood up, the head of the *conservatoire*, I realised. "*Mais, mademoiselle, dans mon pays, cette aria est pour un mezzo-soprano. Je vois qu'ici vous chantez comme soprano.*"

That tactful gentleman from Paris was reminding me that Carmen was a mezzo-soprano role and here I was registered as a contestant in the soprano section. I replied that I could sing it in any key he wished, did he want me to sing it higher? "*Continuez, mademoiselle.*" As I wished, I understood, so I sang it in the mezzo key of the original. I was surprising them, that was fun, but singing this particular song was the most fun of all.

Sang the next, boring high coloratura song. It went off well. "*Merci, mademoiselle.*" What, didn't they want the next song? "*Non, merci. Cette assez.*"

Back home, my story of the afternoon got no comment. My teacher training continued as though nothing had happened.

A few weeks later, a letter arrived for me. I opened it and read that I had won a scholarship to the Quebec Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art: this was for four years full-time study. Elated, I showed the letter to my mother. She didn't look excited. *What, and you even trained me!*

"Go show it to your father." Unsmiling. *Had I done something wrong?*

I took it into the living room where my father sat behind his newspaper. He read the letter, unsmiling, and passed it back to me without a word.

"Daddy, you're always saying you can't afford to educate all your children. Now you don't have to pay for me. All you have to do is feed and clothe me for four years while I have this free tuition. Then I'll be over twenty-one and on my own."

"No," he said.

HE WANTS TO MARRY YOU

“He wants to marry you.”

Oh really? What a silly idea. I’d only known him a few weeks. I’d brought this young man home from university and my father was clearly upset. I was nineteen, Ernest (not his real name) was 27, not a boy whom my father could intimidate. I’d been tasting freedom for the first time in my life. Up to now I’d lived at home.

The first two years of teacher training were finished. “My college daughter,” I heard my father murmur as he took photos of me – cap, gown, diploma. That’s when I realised the diploma I didn’t want was for him. The third and fourth years of my degree course were at the Montreal campus of McGill University, too far away to commute from home daily. Five glorious days of the week I lived in the women’s residence on campus. Week-ends my father insisted I come home, taking the train on Saturday morning and returning to residence on Sunday evening. I had my own room on the first floor up from the ground floor. Its tall sash window overlooked the grey stone elegance of Sherbrooke Street and the statue of Queen Victoria enthroned on the steps of the Royal Victoria College - we called it RVC. Students joked that the queen would remain seated until one of “her” girls left the residence still a virgin at the end of her stay.

The Res was guarded by that queen's standards: no males allowed past the people on duty in the glassed-in security booth just inside the front door. (There was no other door that we knew of.) An intercom from the guard booth communicated with each girl's room. Only visitors confirmed to be expected, or parents, were allowed to wait inside, no farther than the entrance hall, for the girl to meet them downstairs. Other visitors had to wait outside next to the imposing queen. By prior arrangement only, approved guests of the girls could be entertained in the formal lounge off the entrance hall for Afternoon Tea one day a week, I think it was a Thursday. I remember the shock on my father's face when he was told he could not come up to my room. ("But I'm paying for this," I could read on his face. Actually, I was: he'd arranged that I get a student loan for these last two years, payable by me within a set time after I started working.) My first taste of freedom was, therefore, the fact that he could not get to me or my room when I got past the front hall of RVC.

My mom sat in the armchair of my room in Res looking around her with a wistful air. Was this her first taste of freedom since her time at the Moody Bible Institute where she'd met and married my father? She'd still had her dreams. Now she had my father. I could see she envied me.

Looking out that tall window at the beautiful cityscape, I

visualised my singing career, travelling to other cities and countries – just as soon as this nuisance Teaching interruption was over with.

Now I could attend concerts anywhere in Montreal at affordable student rates; view art exhibitions at our university library and elsewhere in the city that changed weekly; explore antique shops, old book shops and interesting side streets populated by immigrants from western and central Europe. The Hungarian Revolution had just ended and Montreal enjoyed an influx of gorgeous people with Magyar features, long-legged girls with thigh-high boots (unknown until then) and gypsy music pouring out of cafes. The lectures I attended, the books I read on English Literature and History – my majors for teaching high school; French Literature (I was already fluent in French), Latin (continued from high school), seminars on the history of Western thought, and optional subjects like Anthropology and Philosophy – these explorations of mind and imagination thrilled me. I had congenial friends, some continuing from college (Ann and Marianne) and some new ones. We met in each other's rooms at RVC for coffee and good conversation - not about boys (as in high school) or teaching prospects (as at college) but travel, unusual careers, different cultures and the meaning of life. Best of all, my father allowed me to start singing lessons: half an hour a week with a teacher from the

music school at McGill. RVC allocated me a practise room in the basement of the Res. Here, a row of sound-proofed cubicles, with a piano in each, allowed girls registered with the music school to practise for a fixed time on a roster basis. I never missed a chance to practise. On top of all the other joys, I felt most alive when singing.

One afternoon I paused in the foyer of the university library to examine a display of mediaeval manuscripts. One student opposite me kept trying to catch my eye. I ignored him. He came over and asked me a question. Annoyed, I looked up and asked what he wanted. Had I attended so-and-so a concert on a certain night and ... et cetera? How did he know that, I demanded. He'd sat six rows behind me, then followed me back to the Res. Oh. He looked at me in a way I'd not seen before. His accent was different too, did he come from somewhere else? Yes, he came from South Africa. Oh. His name was Ernest and could we have a cup of coffee together (the usual student-meets-student introduction). Not now, I was busy. He persisted. I agreed for the following afternoon at a local coffee shop, not intending to really go. Told my friends back at Res. They were horrified I was passing up a chance to meet a guy who was "a serious type." To shut them up, I agreed to go.

I found him interesting. Certainly not a boy, but a man

with experience of work and travel, and his plan to return to South Africa when he'd finished his doctorate in geology (one year done, two or three years to go). I told him about my plans: that the teaching course wasn't my idea but something to be got over with before starting my career as an opera singer. We hadn't had enough time, he said when I got up to go, could he take me out to dinner this evening? Why not, I thought, I'd never been out to dinner at a real restaurant, so this would be a new experience. I'd never yet gone on a date, my father hadn't allowed it – all that sin: movies, dancing, holding hands-which-led-to-kissing-and-before-you knew-it-the-the-girl-was-going-to-have-a-baby. My friends teased me when I reported this development.

He took me to a little French restaurant with a candle on the table, ordered a German white wine and insisted I have a sip (I wondered if I'd go to hell but decided probably not), and a violinist serenaded us with gypsy music. He told me about his travels in Europe. I told him about the woods I escaped to, the waters where I canoed in silence. He invited me out again. I went. Thought my parents would be pleased I was going out with such a respectable person. I left out the bit about the wine. That's when my father said I should bring him home for lunch on a Saturday afternoon - the usual kind we had in the kitchen: soup, cheese and crackers. My mother was charmed, my father

unhappy.

I was courted. Started to fall in love, but that was no reason to change my plans. One day I received a message that I must report to the office of the Matron of RVC, a woman whom we all regarded with dread. Mrs Strang ("Strangulation," I'd dubbed her without ever setting eyes on her). At the appointed hour, I sat in her wood-panelled office lined with bookshelves, facing her across a broad walnut desk. She looked as formidable as her reputation. I shrank into my upright wooden chair. For a long minute she appraised me in silence then said without preamble, "Your father came to see me."

I started in terror, must have blanched, mind went blank. When I could focus again, the rigid lines of her face had softened. She offered me some water. No thank you. Continuing in a voice whose sharp edge was gone, she said he'd come to tell her she must withdraw all my leave privileges - the hours we were allowed out of Res in the evenings: we'd sign out at the door on leaving, sign in upon our return by the appointed time. My father told her I was seeing a young man and he wanted this stopped. *Ah, so he is still saying No.* Mrs Strang told me that after he'd phoned to make an appointment with her, she had drawn my file and made further enquiries with the academic authorities. She'd found that I hadn't broken any of the

rules, in fact I'd been an exemplary resident – I was astonished to hear that my room was shown to important visitors while I was out during the day because it was always neat and beautiful; the academic authorities reported that my assignments were always in on time and my marks were good. She'd told this to my father when he came to see her. "I'd done my homework," a touch of pride in her voice. Then, she said, she told him that running this college was *her* responsibility. Part of a girl's education was to learn the social skills appropriate for a young woman and to this end an enlightened freedom was needed. She paused, looking at the frightened girl in front of her, then continued. In her opinion, she told my father, his daughter needed this freedom more than anyone she had ever come across. Therefore, as long as I was in *her* college and continued to abide by its rules, I would continue to have all the leave privileges I was entitled to. She trusted he understood and the interview was now over.

Mrs Strang became my hero, I stopped using the nickname I'd created and informed everybody that she was a wonderful person. She was not my father's hero. That weekend I experienced his fury. He informed me that he had seen the Matron, he didn't elaborate (I didn't tell him about her interview with me) and she would not cooperate with him. Therefore, if I continued to see this young man, he would take me out of the

university immediately and send me to a Bible School near Chicago, thousands of miles away in the American Midwest. I kept quiet. *Oh, so you're not really interested in me getting this teaching qualification – you just want to keep on saying No.* The next time I saw Ernest, I relayed the ultimatum. “Tell your father that if he does this, I’ll drive out there every month and the day you turn twenty-one I’ll marry you, with or without his consent.” Unlike most students at the time, Ernest had a car and could do this.

If my father implemented his threat and Ernest retaliated with his, I’d end up without the teaching qualification I hadn’t wanted in the first place, and no way to support myself while I tried to get on with voice training for my opera career. I’d be another casualty of Bible School like my mother who’d settled for “Married-and-have-children.” On the other hand, I now knew that if I gave in to my father’s command to stop seeing Ernest, his demands would never end. He would always be saying No to whatever I wanted. It was time to stop allowing this. I made my decision. Now I was determined to get my teaching qualification so I’d no longer be financially dependent on my father. Presumably I’d never be financially dependent on my husband if I chose to marry. Now I needed to finish my qualification — so I could get on with *my* plan for my life.

That weekend I told my father what Ernest had vowed. He

went pale but said nothing. I knew my father wouldn't accept this but couldn't guess his next move. Back in Res the next week, I found out. He'd decided to ascertain if I was opposing his will and still going out with Ernest. If so, then he could implement his threat. It was my friends at Res who saved me. Every evening of the week, my father would phone after seven o'clock when girls had to sign out if they were leaving Res. The phone call came through to one of two pay phones side by side on our floor. The girl on evening duty at the pay phone, or whoever was passing by, would take the call and either summon the one called for or, in my case, explain to the caller why she couldn't be found. Apparently I had an entire floor of friends eager to help (Ann and Marianne had relayed this to everybody else). Every evening, if I was going out – obviously I couldn't be out every night, I had to work for a degree and only Monday to Friday for everything - I'd inform the person on duty. Those girls were marvellously inventive with the stories they thought up to tell the stern male voice calling for me. Sometimes he called up to three times in an evening. They'd suggest a story when I consulted them beforehand. This would be posted in a note on the wall of each phone booth so no matter who the caller or the recipient, the stories were consistent for that evening. These inventions included me doing some research at the in-house Res library (no phone) or being in the

laundry room (no phone). Naturally the Res authorities would not divulge any information. On weekends, when I went home, my father would remark darkly that he'd been unable to reach me some evenings when he'd called. My surprised look wasn't the innocence I tried to project but amazement at the unfailing support of all these friends. This way I managed my third and fourth years in residence at McGill University, earning a Bachelor of Education degree and freedom to make my own choices.

Now I was free to run into trouble. Yes, I was in love and yes, planning for my singing career, but now I understood that my profound fear of my father, from earliest childhood equated with the Will of God, could possibly cripple me in progressing towards my goal. I saw Ernest as an ally. He was the first person I'd known who'd opposed my father and not run away. I reasoned that if I married Ernest, I'd have support in resisting my father's domination, even at the cost of moving far away from my land, the woods and waters that I loved. As his wife, I could enjoy love and emotional support in training for my singing career. For this, I would happily support him too.

In my fourth year, I said yes to marrying Ernest. I was still only twenty and of course didn't yet dare inform my parents of this commitment. He gave me a silver ring that I wore on my left hand but removed when I went home on weekends. We became lovers. Now Ernest knew he could be sure of me. He be-

came difficult, indifferent, even hurtful.

Bewildered, I asked for a coffee shop date with one of his flatmates, a gentle soul whom I liked and trusted. He agreed that Ernest was difficult. “That’s just how he is.” I accepted this verdict, remembering that my mother had married someone difficult. Maybe that’s just how marriage is, I concluded.

I could cope with Ernest and still continue with my plans for a singing career — after getting away from my father. I could definitely not cope with my father.

One day, though, after some weeks of hurtful behaviour, I confronted Ernest in the chemistry lab where he was working and threw the silver ring down on the floor in front of him. So in character with Carmen of the opera. I’d just come from a voice lesson. That singing reminded me of who I am, and what I do not want to be. Went back to Res, satisfied that my life was back on track.

The following evening a huge bouquet of flowers awaited me at the entrance to RVC. The message read, “Thanks for the memories.” The words of an old song that I loved. I succumbed.

SEEING

“Please don't rake the leaves just yet. They're beautiful.”

Pale, lemon-yellow, pumpkin-coloured, they lie scattered on the grass.

My gentle husband complies, forgoing his vision of a tidy lawn, granting me my memories. Among them, again, a vision of the little girl who taught me how to see.

Autumn in this part of the world comes quietly. Not so in Canada: there it approaches like music heard from a distance. The changing colours of the trees announce it arriving with woodwind voices in September, full orchestra with trumpets in October.

The woods were my home in childhood and youth. The trees, my friends. I loved them most of all in September, October. I watched, in November, all their glorious-painted leaves fall dying to the ground. In December, bare-limbed trees stood shivering in the wind and I was sad.

I made a story for the trees and for myself, calling it a Legend of the Fall.

Long ago when the world was new, the trees were still green when winter came and the North Wind roared down, stripping them of every leaf.

Sorrowing to lose their lovely leaves, they consoled themselves by watching for the sun. Sometimes during the long white winter they could see, just before it set, traces of the gorgeous autumn gold, red and purple sunsets of a few months earlier.

Finally, the Great Spirit, who understood his creatures, granted the trees a special gift before their months of deprivation.

Before their leaves must fall, he decreed, they could wear the singing sunset colours of the sky.

One black day, I started Grown-up Life. Officially.

Walking on cement into a suburb of the city, I wondered how I would escape.

Street blocks formed grids. Trim houses lined up behind unnatural green rectangles, bounded by fences. Grey metal garbage cans stood sentinel at every gate. It was September. With constricting heart, I entered school to start a life sentence as a teacher.

Timetables, punctuality, routines; walls, rows and rules. Unable to abide these myself, I was not successful in enforcing them. Thirty-two neat children wearing similar expressions watched me politely. Secretly mocking, I guessed. They appeared to feel at ease.

All except for one, sitting right in the middle of the class. Barbara was anarchic. Her hair was untidy, her expressions unguarded, and she was noisy. They egged her on as class clown, but the children didn't respect her. Barbara knew this too. Furthermore, her books were a mess and she was failing.

Art Period came again one afternoon in October. Glancing out the window at some tame trees in the schoolyard that dared to show their colours, I instructed, "Paint the Leaves in Fall." The children bent over, quickly filling up the white sheets. Thick poster paints flowed into each other, smudging edges, making shades of mud. Only Barbara remained engrossed, head unmoving over her work, unaware that I had come up quietly behind her. She was carefully positioning the last dots of colour.

I stood spellbound. The white paper had been transformed to a green rectangle. Clear, grass green. In the centre, a grey metal garbage can, bashed and dented in the middle. Typical of any old garbage can, its lid askew, on any suburban lawn.

Bulging out over the top, the contents poured down onto the perfect grass. Autumn leaves. Sunset colours turned to fire, caught in rubies, garnets, topaz, gold, cascading down. The grey tin spilled its jewels onto an emerald velvet cloth.

Barbara had painted her own portrait. Against the preening sameness all around her, she stood out like a battered

garbage can. But she was filled with treasure.

“Barbara, you're an artist,” I breathed, my vision blurring so I scarcely saw her lift her shining face to mine. Loudly, then, for all the class to hear, “Barbara, you're an ARTIST.” Reverently I carried her picture to the front of the room and announced to the children that a genius sat among them. I explained the remarkable originality of her vision. Then while they sat, hushed, I walked to the back, cleared a large open space in the middle of the bulletin board, and mounted Barbara's picture in the centre. “This will stay here for the rest of the year,” I decreed. “To inspire you.”

Barbara's transformation was instant. She sat tall, her face suddenly pretty. The unkempt look of hair and clothes was gone, smoothed by a departing fairy who'd lifted the bewitchment. Walking out the door at recess time, Barbara's movements were coordinated.

With Barbara as their example, the class developed a unique group personality.

I couldn't teach Arithmetic, they learned to read all by themselves, I think, but they became the champion singers of the school. They revelled in telling stories and dramatizing everything. They wrote poetry.

In the staff room I heard my colleagues mutter they would have to teach these children next year the things they seemed

not to be learning this year - the serious business of school. I felt I was a failure.

By December, Barbara's marks were well above average.

One morning, as winter darkness settled in, Barbara brought her assignment to my desk to be checked. I had asked them to write a poem. There, in her neatly rounded script, I read:

I heard a bird sing
In dark of December,
A beautiful thing
And sweet to remember.

“We are closer to Spring
Than we were in September,”
I heard a bird sing
In dark of December.

Silently, I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes too. There was no need for further praise from the class. But at recess time, I took her poem to the staff room.

“There,” I presented it proudly to the head teacher as vindication of my unorthodox teaching methods. “See what this child has written.”

As she read it, the corners of her mouth pressed down. She turned her eyes on me, pityingly. "She didn't write this herself. She copied it out of a book." (Later, she produced an anthology of poetry and showed me where it stood.)

I held my peace, not so sure I was a failure after all. Did the child have to have composed it herself to be shown a poet? Hadn't she seen the beauty, heard the music? Made it her own?

End-of-year examinations for this class in the Real Work of School were set, supervised and marked by the head teacher. Personally.

The class average was good, no one failed, and Barbara passed at the top of the class.

With time, the head teacher allowed, I might yet learn how to teach.

Instead, I left for the other side of the world. Here I am expected to be odd.

I live in my suburban garden, a rectangle filled up with trees. I don't like it tidy. It must wear a scattering of leaves.

I delight in autumn that is soft, soothing after summer's scorching heat. Light shines clear through pale leaves.

I remember seeing jewels tumbling over velvet.

BARTERED BRIDE

Six months after the flowers, I turned twenty-one and began teaching.

One month later Ernest and I became officially engaged, with marriage planned for the following year when I'd be twenty-two.

Living at home non-stop, with no respite of Res, I was back to the status of a child even though I was working full-time, paying room and board. In my first year of teaching I paid off my student loan (it was part bursary). My mother instructed me to buy good quality bed linens, blankets, towels and kitchen ware.

The marriage was my mother's party. I had no say in anything but the groom and the flowers I carried – red roses paid for by the groom. I was glad to wear her wedding dress, classic and beautiful. Of course the ceremony was arranged and performed by my father. I just tried to get the day over with. Afterwards all would be well and I would soon be leaving for South Africa.

I expected to be supporting Ernest for about a year after our marriage. His bursary and earnings were running out, he said, but his thesis would soon be finished. This was a pattern with lots of married graduate students – one year, at the most

two, of living on the wife's earnings, then they moved on to their new life for which the man had become highly qualified. I assumed that we'd rent a small flat near the university, like everybody else did, and looked forward to this as finally an experience of grown-up freedom.

I hadn't reckoned on two clever men, each making me the pawn in a game he played. The moves appeared one by one in successive pronouncements. I was trapped. Felt like Smetana's *Bartered Bride*.

It started as our marriage approached with my father telling Ernest and me there was no need for us to spend all that money for an apartment in Montreal. We could live rent-free in the guest cottage of Wildwood, where I'd grown up. This cottage was on the edge of the woods, about a hundred yards from the house where my parents lived and the office where my father ran his organisation. The only payment my father wanted from Ernest was that he agree to become a figure-head (so-called treasurer) on the triumvirate of the Board that ran his organisation, described as religious and charitable. He was of course president and my mother the silent partner, vice-president. To my dismay, Ernest found this an offer he couldn't refuse. I consoled myself that this would last only a year.

An intercom was installed between my parents' home and the cottage. At any time of the day or evening, it would buzz

and my father's voice would summon me to come to their house. There he'd give orders as though I were a child who'd never left home, or he'd deliver reprimands about my marriage. One winter evening after our dinner, less than three months after our marriage, my father summoned me by buzzer to come to their house – alone. There, in the living room with my mother sitting beside him, he ordered me to divorce Ernest. There was some or other habit he didn't like. "But you married us, saying this was a holy commitment forever!" My mother said nothing. I left in tears. My husband said nothing.

As part of the research for his thesis, he did geological mapping for the provincial government in the far north of Quebec, getting paid for the reports he submitted. His earnings were put aside for his own purposes. He controlled our finances and didn't discuss them with me. It was assumed I should go on supporting the two of us by whatever means I could.

Towards the end of our first year of marriage and my second year of teaching, Ernest told me I couldn't sign a contract for another year of teaching because he expected to finish his thesis within a few months. This would bring the time he'd have spent on it at five years, a year or two longer than his peers who'd already moved on. But he emphasised that he was doing an especially fine piece of research, and quality takes

time. While he finished, I should accept the offer my father had made that I work for him in his office.

Already I was an “If you can’t, Teach”. Now I was to become a “StupidSecretary”.

This arrangement suited my father perfectly. It eased his preparations for moving away. Wildwood had been sold to a developer. He was down-scaling his activities in Quebec to merely an office, and retiring to Miami where my mother had grown up. Because of recent bad publicity, he wanted someone he knew he could trust to manage the office and routines of his organisation during the transition.

The remuneration was exorbitant. I was embarrassed, felt it was wrong. It included all our living expenses, plus a generous cash salary, and hefty discounts on the purchase of any vehicle or equipment. Ernest promptly bought a Chev truck with camper mounted on top and lots of fishing and camping equipment.

In September of that year, instead of starting my third year teaching, Ernest took us on holiday through most of the USA and up into British Columbia. The organisation’s credit card paid for our driving expenses. This was mostly an extended fishing trip to all the famous sites in the USA. My husband became absorbed in cultivating his expertise in aspects of fishing different from what he’d known in South Africa.

We returned after three months when the first snow was falling.

I took over my father's office, aware that I now owed it to him to work long hours and take responsibility for everything during his absence. My husband stayed at home to write his thesis, spending more and more time reading about fishing, taking lessons in fly-tying and practising his new skills.

The first salvos in an on-going battle for my health began.

In January the following year doctors found two very large tumours on my uterus. For the surgery, I was in cancer ward. The lady beside me died, the other two had malignancies. I was found to be clear but, the gynaecologist emphasised, if I ever wanted to have a child I must try immediately because now the chances of conception were poor. Tumours were bound to return and any birth would have to be by caesarean section.

We'd planned to start a family only after my husband had returned to South Africa. I dearly wanted my husband's baby. She was born two years and three months later.

The months of pregnancy were the happiest I'd known. For the first time in my life I felt beautiful and so profoundly at peace that my husband's increasing coldness didn't matter.

When I held my baby in my arms, a rush of ferocious tenderness transformed me from a girl-woman to a tigress in defence of her young. Everyone agreed she was the most beautiful

baby they'd ever seen. On this score, I thought everyone was right.

SELF MEDICATION

I selected an unused office at the far end of the echoing house where I wouldn't be found easily. The brown bottle in my hand held eighteen painkillers. I wanted them to kill me too. The glass of water I'd brought was full. Quickly gulping them down two at a time, I'd just emptied the bottle when I sank into a horrible blackness.

Surfacing chaotically into semi-consciousness, I heard myself retching and the voice of my husband phoning poison control. "Oh, so she'll be alright then." He put the phone down, turned to me with scorn and said something about "mentally unstable," then left the room. Next time, I knew, I'd have to be sure I did the job properly.

For three years now I'd been working in my father's office. My husband seemed to make little progress on his thesis. It was embarrassingly obvious even to my father that Ernest was spending most of his time pursuing his interests in fishing.

The previous year, we'd moved from the cottage into a small town four miles away. Here my father had bought a large house to serve as transitional headquarters. The ground floor was converted to a chapel and reception area in front. At the back were a kitchen, bed-sitting room and bathroom for our use, and a separate study for my husband. The remodelled

basement held offices and a large area to house the printing press and other equipment needed for the organisation, which relied on mass mailings requesting donations from thousands of Christians in Canada and the USA. A full-time secretary, file clerk and occasional helpers on a part-time basis augmented my own role as manager and deputy for my father when he was away. The upstairs or bedroom floor served as quarters for my father on his infrequent visits, his guests and occasional staff members. Most of the time my husband and I were alone in this building, especially after the secretary and file clerk quit in the wake of worsening public opinion about my father and his activities.

In addition to my work in the office, I was helping my husband as he turned the first draft of his writing into the kind of English needed for a Ph.D. thesis. Although he spoke it well, English wasn't his first language. He needed help to write it clearly, and I was trained to do this. He also needed a typist. I taught myself to do touch-typing. Evenings after making dinner, I worked with him to understand exactly what he meant by what he'd written so far, edited and then typed it. It was late in the evening or early morning before we got into bed. I had to be in the office by nine o'clock the next morning when the phone would start ringing.

This routine didn't change when the baby came. We'd

wake her up half way during the evening (about ten o'clock) to play with her. She was adorable as she sleepily enjoyed this attention, then she'd sleep straight through until seven o'clock the next morning.

Singing, my plans ...these thoughts came as memories from another life or a dream, just before dropping off to sleep. I was exhausted and stressed with pressures of work and sorrow about an increasingly moody husband. I just had to endure, I told myself. SOMETIME my husband would finish. We'd move to South Africa, he'd feel at ease in the career he'd worked for and I'd resume singing: train and sing as a married woman. My husband would be as supportive of me as I'd been of him. This had been our understanding from the beginning. I could endure. Joy would come.

I was becoming more exhausted and disheartened. My husband's attitude towards me was getting worse and he'd apparently lost interest in finishing his thesis. Fishing-related activities took up much of his daylight hours. Now he was telling me he wanted to be a professional student, like his friend whose wife was a career secretary and didn't want children. But when I'd agreed to marry him, it was with a different understanding. Now he'd apparently changed his mind and he refused to discuss it with me.

My father had now permanently joined my mother in Mi-

ami (she'd left years earlier), making only brief trips back. Apart from some weekends spent camping and fishing in nearby Vermont, New Hampshire and northern New York, I had no life but unremitting office work, which I'd always loathed. I remembered my fear when I was sixteen and being forced into a "woman's job" that I'd die in an office. Now my dreams were gone, my father had got what he wanted and the husband I loved was treating me with disrespect. If I were no longer there, I believed, he'd easily get somebody else to care for my baby (already other ladies were responding to his smiles). My baby, only a year old, was too young to remember her mother so she wouldn't even miss me.

I couldn't see any way out of this blackness. No end in sight.

I thought of the tablets prescribed for pain after my surgery. This pain was far worse.

I decided to endure.

Since a life without love or joy would be intolerable, I would rely on myself. If I couldn't be loved for myself but only for how useful I could be, then I would learn to value myself. If my dreams of singing had to die, I would celebrate beauty in other ways.

I began to write, defiantly beginning with an appreciation

of myself:

Autumn-brown hair in the wind,
you challenge with your hazel eyes
anyone to love you:
your Indian summer softness,
your Northern loneliness
and winter strength.

After this affirmation, I began to write about my feelings and experiences. No one else's approval was needed. I created for an audience of one. Collecting my poems and beginnings of prose, a secret joy gathered inside.

Sometimes I'd drive back to the woods where I'd grown up and visit my friend, the stone. Leaning against its lichen-covered side, I'd absorb its quiet strength. One day I returned for the last time. I cried, said goodbye, and thank you. Soon I was to leave for the other side of the world. I'd miss my stone.

LEAVING

The apparent impasse about my husband completing his thesis was getting on my father's nerves. The cost of maintaining us for the work I did couldn't be justified any more. The transitional office in Quebec was no longer needed. My father's energy now focused on his new purchase in the USA: a castle in the Thousand Islands of the St Lawrence River, on the border between the USA and Canada (New York state and Ontario). Accessible only by boat, Dark Island could be used only during the summer months after the ice on the river had dispersed. We were invited for a weekend, taking our one year-old baby. I tried to hide the fact that I was unimpressed. My mother still had to clean and cook for everybody with little or no help. He was king of the castle, and nobody could get away once they were on the island. Anybody without private (boat) transport was trapped. All so familiar, recalling my growing up years, isolated at Wildwood.

One day my father took me aside. Dropping his authoritarian manner, he spoke to me in confidence.

"Look, your husband isn't getting anywhere with his thesis. I've been to see his professor at McGill. He said Ernest has done more than enough for a Ph.D. All he has to do is take a part of it, make a beginning and an ending, and that's enough

for a thesis. He can take his oral exam and get his degree.

“He probably needs an incentive to change his ways. I have an idea.

“He’s so interested in fishing, maybe if he experiences the kind of fishing he’d enjoyed in South Africa, he’ll feel like going back home again. He can get on with his life and you can with yours.

“Support me in this. If your mother and I invite him to be a guest at our home in Miami Beach and invite him to go on charter boats into the Gulf of Mexico, he might start thinking in a different way. We’ll pay for it ...”

“Yes,” I agreed with my father immediately. “That’s worth a try.”

The conspiracy worked. We visited my parents at their home in Miami Beach, all expenses paid, including the charter boats for fishing. I pretended innocence, and we enjoyed a happy Christmas. My brothers came to visit. Lots of pictures were taken, including one of my eighteen month-old baby receiving the gift of a brown teddy bear that she has treasured ever since.

Driving back on the two- to three-day journey to Quebec, Ernest said out of the blue,

“You know, I’ve just had an idea. If I take one part of my thesis, add a beginning and an end ...”

“Oh, what a good idea.”

“Yes, and if I do this before April, I’ll be in time for the external examination. I could get my degree and leave in June.”

“Wonderful.”

In the following months I quietly absorbed some amazing information from Ernest.

He’d been in Canada for ten years now so he qualified for citizenship and a Canadian passport, valued in those years when South Africa was becoming a pariah state. When he returned to South Africa, it would be as a highly qualified immigrant. That government had a policy of paying the fare of such people, their dependants and the cost of shipping their household goods. This included the Chev truck and camper, with all his fishing, hunting and other equipment packed into it.

This was all so neat, the timing perfect. I marvelled at it all but said nothing.

By June, he had a Ph.D. from McGill, a Canadian passport and the South African government was paying all the costs of moving. He had a Canadian wife and baby.

My last months in Canada, preparing to go, I went around numb, looking at land and trees with eyes that said, “I love you. I won’t forget,” and wrote the poem “Secret” which starts,

I am saying goodbye to all my trees
smokey grey in the March woods ...

One day in June, just before my baby's second birthday, my parents came to see us off at Montreal airport. They tried to be brave. I somehow managed not to cry when the call came for boarding and we kissed one another goodbye.

Some years later my father reproached me for being unfeeling.

"You walked away and didn't look back."

I couldn't tell him that if I did, I'd be ruined.

I did tell him that as we climbed up the steps into the plane, I stopped on the top one, unable to make the final step inside. I froze, then burst into huge sobbing. For a minute or two I held up the procession of people trying to board the plane while everyone could hear me crying.

Finally my husband pushed me from behind and I was in.

IVANKA

Even after all these years, the strange little bowl will not rest easily in my home. Its barbaric splendor of colours in burgundy, black and gold portrays a ring of yellow-brown men. Fierce. In their midst, improbably, a naked woman: white, sensual, lovely. Vulnerable.

I think again of the singer.

“Ivanka,” she enunciated proudly when I enquired her name. She had been referred to merely as Velimir's wife.

Velimir was the cook that summer for a party of geologists exploring a vast area in the Chibougamou region, far in the northern bush country of Quebec. Base camp was near the village of St. Felicien, about twelve hours' drive from Montreal. The men would be away from home for five months, so the two graduate students who headed the team arranged for their wives to visit them. Berthille and I would drive north together one weekend a month. As an afterthought, they said I must bring Velimir's wife. “She doesn't speak much English.”

I picked her up on the sidewalk outside a row of tenements in Montreal filled with recent immigrants from Europe.

Startled to see that she was middle-aged, Berthille courteously vacated the front seat of the Volkswagen beetle and sat in

the back, giving the older woman more space in the passenger seat beside me.

“Ivanka Vlajin,” she repeated emphatically when I asked her name again. All further attempts at conversation got single-syllable replies. Yes. No.

Berthille, squeezed in at the back, was a shy girl, not given to spontaneous chatter. Ivanka's heavy face, brooding but handsome, stared straight ahead.

“This is going to be a lo-ng trip,” I told myself as I steered the car away from the lowlands of Montreal, heading north into the Laurentians. Our journey of hundreds of miles was to take us through those rolling mountains, then out the other side into flat country covered with dense forests as far as the eye could see. The tree belt gave way to a gently undulating wilderness where only scrub spruce could grow, and this was packed so tightly that strangers who ventured a few feet off the highway instantly got lost.

Driving non-stop, we would arrive about midnight. The car had no radio.

Unconsciously, I began to sing to myself. Folk songs, ballads - I knew hundreds of songs.

After a while I sensed my two passengers were relaxed and listening with pleasure. I sang louder so they could follow the words and the story they told.

Abruptly, Ivanka turned to me.

“Now I sing for you a song,” she announced.

An electrifying voice filled the little car.

*Drugoga ljubiš, a meni si draga
Za poljupce tvoje dobila si blaga
Bog neka ti plati vedro
Sto si srce moje va-ra-la.*

It was the voice of a gypsy, a *tzigane*. Rich, impassioned, thrilling; now dancing like a violin through the refrain:

*Nisam bio nikad ja
Pijanica lola bekrija
Lutam po noci, trazim pomoći
Srcu svom.*

Throbbing, like a cello again, she repeated,

Drugoga ljubiš, a meni si draga ...

Then back to the hurtling dance-rhythm of the second refrain:

*Gde si sinoč kunjala
I gde si se sinoč skitala
Sinoč otisla, danas si došla
Pi-ja-na.*

The violin voice ended, weeping.

A last time the cello voice vibrated, dark.

Drugoga ljubiš ...

Silence shivered in the car.

Our friendship was cemented.

“Where did you get that song, Ivanka?”

She told how it was traditional in her village, in Serbia. Called “Dranker” (her pronunciation of “Drunkard?”), it expresses the desperation of a man whose wife's unfaithfulness drives him to drink and to madness.

“Will you give me that song, Ivanka?” She did, later, patiently dictating and explaining every word.

(Ten years afterwards, on the other side and opposite end of the world, I happened into a butcher shop where the foreign language spoken between the two men behind the counter

sounded oddly familiar.

“Are you Serbian?” I enquired. Startled, they nodded. Ignoring the customers inside and passing outside the open door, I burst into a full-throated rendition of “Dranker”.

“When you were in my country?” demanded the older man. “You sound like Serbian.” I told him of Ivanka Vlajin, and named her name.)

Ivanka continued to sing. Sensual songs with strong rhythms, wonderful melodies. It didn't matter that we couldn't understand a word. So expressive they were that we hardly needed her to explain.

She paused, then sang three songs in succession that were subtly different. Haunting, with elements of raw passion.

“Ivanka,” I exclaimed, suddenly certain, “those were your songs. You made those songs.”

Yes, she nodded.

Then she told us of her childhood and youth in Serbia. A tale that progressed from tragedy to horror. Her mother had died when she was an infant. She'd never seen her mother's face or known a mother's love. Her earliest memories were of her father's new wife beating her, making her care for the other children and the household. As a little girl she was sent out to work as an unpaid labourer on other farms. Exploited and

abused, she was finally old enough to marry the handsome, red-cheeked suitor she'd met at a fair.

Once married, the treatment she received from her husband was, if anything, worse. She longed for a child on whom she could lavish the love she'd never received, but the unmentionably horrible abuse from her husband made her sterile. Finally she ran away. She ended up in Trieste. It was wartime, and there were opportunities for people trained as cooks. She attached herself to a cooking school where she met Velimir, who was obtaining his qualification there. They were married.

“Are you happy, Ivanka?”

“He doesn't beat me,” she replied simply.

She sang again.

On into the darkening afternoon we drove. Out of the mountains, onto the plains, into the scrublands and the dusk. We could just make out the low undulations of the new wilderness when the headlights had to be switched on for the drive of several hours ahead.

Still Ivanka sang.

Now I knew where all the gypsy singers had got their songs. From her. She was the embodiment, the Source, the Spirit of Song.

Incarnate, the Goddess sat beside me. In my heart, I wor-

shipped.

It was midnight when we arrived.

Once at our destination, Ivanka was ignored by the men. She seemed to disappear.

While the men were out exploring and mapping all day long, Ivanka's weak-faced husband made dainty (and ridiculous, I thought) pastries for desert. She took over his usual work preparing vast, delicious dinners for when the men returned.

After she was done, Velimir having disappeared a long time earlier, there were hours yet before the men were expected back. Berthille would occupy herself elsewhere, and I sought Ivanka's company.

In private, she was comic and fascinating, her speech often earthy and outrageous. Pleasures of the flesh were “peetzie meatzie” – piece-y of meat-y, pronounced with a fruity laugh. She provided intriguing insights and practical guidelines for a wife. Noticing that I was inept at ironing my husband's shirts, she told me that in her village everyone could see how much a wife loved her husband by how well his shirts were ironed. The men preened in competition with each other for the most perfectly-ironed white shirt. She taught me how: Ironing a Long-sleeved Shirt as an Art Form.

She shared with me some of her secrets. How to create magic with breads, for instance. My favourite: something like a pizza but in a class of its own. Stupendous. When treated to this the men, who considered themselves gourmets, were awed. One day she showed me something even more remarkable. This was a whole new genre that reminded one of pizza but was sweet. Called potiza, this was a Russian empress of a dessert. Combining elements of French brioche, German stollen, strudel and English fruit tart, it made them all insipid by comparison.

That summer passed, and the following one in the same way.

Towards the end of the second summer, Ivanka asked most urgently that I should visit her one day in her flat.

I knew I'd be unsettled by the poverty I was sure to find. But one morning, I did go.

It was even sadder than I'd thought.

Upright in her chair, Ivanka sat, waiting for some word of praise. Judging by her tension, I knew she feared there couldn't be. A compliment for her home was required from me. This would mean acceptance — of her.

Desperately I cast my eyes around the shabby room.

In the cheap, imitation fruitwood cabinet fronted with

glass panes and filled with garish souvenirs, there glowed a small bowl.

“Ivanka, why - this is beautiful,” I heard myself enthuse.

Too late, I realised what I had done.

“Take it,” she commanded.

She held it briefly. Then put it into my hands. I did not dare say a word.

That was the last time we met. The circumstances bringing us together had now run their course.

Four years later, my husband and I about to move to another continent, we paid a visit to old friends and enquired after everyone we knew.

Velimir, we learned, had just opened his own shop in Montreal. A café-cum-nightclub.

I went.

Behind the counter, Velimir, now visibly decayed, presided. His smile curled up to the young men hovering around him.

“Where's Ivanka,” I demanded.

“Back there.” He indicated with his thumb a doorway behind him, curtained off.

A patron explained to me that she washed the dishes. I insisted I must see her. It took a while. Finally she shuffled out.

The face, the form — these were all the same. But she stared at me blank-eyed, barely acknowledging my greeting. She didn't know who I was. Or who she was. Then she retreated behind the curtain. She looked frightened.

I looked at Velimir. He smiled.

Another patron whispered to me that she had attacked him with a knife. That she had been put into a psychiatric hospital. That she had been given electric shock treatment.

Velimir smiled at the young men hovering closer. He was different too. He looked victorious.

That was thirty years ago.

Last night I watched a film dating from those years. To suit someone's convenience, this was easily arranged, someone else signed a document declaring that a woman was insane. She was locked away. Destroyed. Only the carcass moved.

This morning I pick up the little bowl again. It is strangely beautiful. Why does it disturb me so?

Now I see the ring of glaring men appears to be converging on that solitary woman. Her only defense would be to sing.

But would they listen?

I kiss the bowl and say her name.

FOREIGN

It was the quality of light that struck me when I stepped out of the plane. This was June 1968. One day and two nights ago, I'd left in moist golden summer light. In Johannesburg, winter on the highveld, the light was sharp and white. Used to keeping my eyes wide open in the filtered light of Canada, here I couldn't.

I listened. Felt the warmth of the people I met.

"More, tannie," greeted a twelve year-old boy on a bicycle as he went by. "Good morning, Auntie." He was showing me the customary courtesy of my husband's people, Afrikaners. I'd taught myself the basics of their language before leaving Canada and could already speak at the level of a three or four year-old.

We were staying with Ernest's sister in Pretoria. His parents had met us at the airport and taken us there before returning to their home two days drive away.

His sister and her husband welcomed us as guests in their home while Ernest tried to find a job. This was a great generosity: she was the mother of three children, caring for everybody on her husband's meagre salary as a junior civil servant. Their home was small. They gave up their own bedroom to accommodate us and our toddler. Their financial sacrifice was

matched by the toll on their family life. We stayed in their home for five months.

After some weeks, his parents invited us to visit at their farm on the coast of northern Zululand - a sub-tropical region of what was then called Natal. Driving there and staying for some weeks, I began to encounter unvarnished Africa. It amazed me, and much of the time it scared me. Then we returned to his sister in Pretoria.

There was so much to tell my parents. I wanted to phone them but couldn't. In those years you had to book an overseas call three days beforehand from a fixed address like a home or office where the monthly account was sure to be paid. Overseas calls, besides being difficult to arrange, were notoriously expensive, and we didn't have the money. Instead, I wrote frequent long letters to my parents trying to convey the flavour of my new experiences, leaving out anything that might worry them. These letters would take about two weeks to arrive by airmail. If my parents replied quickly, there was another two weeks. A circle of communication took about a month if I was lucky with the flights, but five to six weeks was usual. I felt isolated.

Ernest contacted old friends, taking me to meet them. Their response to him was ecstatic, to me was ambiguous. I felt the underlying suspicion of Afrikaners during those years to-

wards *die Engelse* (the English) if they got too close. (Like marrying into the family?) I was still learning about their experience of *die Engelse*. Ernest's beautiful *Ouma* was eighteen when taken to the concentration camp. "*Jy is ook my kleinkind* (You too are my grandchild)" she assured me and meant it, but the younger generations found these family memories difficult to live with. I couldn't blame them, but it made me feel very lonely.

It was after one visit to his friends that I had my first cultural shock. This occurred soon after our arrival. I'd felt free to participate in the conversation, adding what I thought about the subject. As we drove away, Ernest was clearly angry. I asked why. "You're not supposed to talk." Apparently, in those circles at least, women weren't supposed to say anything intelligent-sounding in mixed company, certainly not when the gathering was mostly men. We were expected to just show a pretty face and smile to the men, then retire to the kitchen to talk about children, cooking and the maids. And serve them with endless cups of coffee and tea, of course. Amazing, I thought, he got to know me in Canada as an outspoken person; he and his university friends had valued this.

South African, especially Afrikaner, attitudes towards authority astounded me. They worshipped it, feared it, admired it, but everyone was in awe of it, accepting apparently without

question any dictum of church, state or the local ladies club president no matter how irrational or even harmful it might be. I knew when to keep my mouth shut, but later there were times when I'd challenge the common expressions "*jy mag nie ...*, you *must* not ..., you're *not supposed* to ..., you're *not allowed* to" This spurred me to accentuate my otherness, looking and behaving somewhat differently from other people. Of course my Canadian accent was noticed every time I opened my mouth (it still is), so I didn't have to do much to emphasise the point.

Most people I met confused me being Canadian with American (the USA was viewed with awe in those years), and I was considered a trophy wife. This made me very uncomfortable. I did, however, discover a new freedom: nobody expected me to conform to any mould. "What can you expect of a foreigner" was the underlying assumption. That suited me. I could establish my own identity. When anyone, usually well-meaning, tried to influence me to change my usual manner, I felt free to accept or reject their advice (without comment, of course).

This being the mid-sixties, people assumed I'd express an opinion on the racial policies of South Africa. The sweeping criticisms I'd encountered in North America seemed to me only partly informed, with no regard for African historical and social

realities. I came to this country knowing I had lots to learn and this would take time.

The realities of Africa cannot begin to be comprehended until one has experienced them first-hand. As I began to learn, I was shaken. I had to focus on not being overwhelmed. Life in Canada was uncomplicated, safe, I saw from my new perspective. But how was I to conduct myself? There were many, and bewildering, sets of instructions on how to act with people who weren't white – lots of categories of those people, too. I soon decided: "This is ridiculous. These are just people. I'll treat everyone with the same courtesy. I can't go wrong with that."

My husband was expecting to walk into a high-paying job in a mining company in Johannesburg. It didn't work out that way. He'd been away too long. He was "over-qualified" for the positions available, he told me. Disheartened, he looked further a-field. He accepted a position in South West Africa (now Namibia) as an exploration geologist for a tiny company where there seemed to be prospects for advancement.

We drove out to Namibia in November 1968.

WHERE THE GRASS TURNS WHITE

“You’ll eat dust,” my friend predicted. That was her way of warning me about the difficult journey I intended to make. She knew I hadn't the slightest idea of what lay ahead.

I

Fresh from the woods and lakes of Canada, their moisture still in my skin, I was twenty-eight and knew I had lots to learn about this new land.

Driving away from the Cape of Good Hope, I'd watched lush green vineyards and gracious homesteads shaded by great old trees disappear behind us.

My husband had recently returned to South Africa, his home, after years in Canada where he had acquired a degree, a wife and child. He had been offered a job mapping the geology of what was then known as South West Africa.

Now it was November, start of the hottest season. The farther north we drove, the hotter it became. The landscape got drier, barren. Not a tree in sight. White light reflected off the hard bleached surfaces that should have been earth. Hardly a sign of human habitation.

Once in a while, many miles apart, I glimpsed a tin-roofed

farmhouse standing alone in the empty land. Sheep farmers, my husband explained. I wondered if the farmer had a wife and children. How did she feel with only a tin roof between her and that pitiless sun, no tree or shrub anywhere in sight? When I saw a farmhouse with some shelter of green nylon shade cloth spanned against one wall, or even over the roof as well (this would have been expensive), I cried. Secretly, though.

Nobody should see how that moved me. Crying would be seen as weakness. This was not a land for weak people. I didn't want to be misunderstood: I did not lack courage. Rather, I felt sorry for the farmer's wife who wanted so much to have some kind, cool shade in her life. But compassion might have been misunderstood. No room for softness here.

Arriving at a bare rented house in Windhoek, I began trying to make a home.

On the edge of town, the house faced open country stretching far away west towards a line of mountains, blue in the distance. The garden, as I understood the word, comprised succulents and one gnarled thorn tree in a rockery at the front door. I was pleased to see the small patch of green they called a front lawn was studded with tiny yellow flowers. Pretty, I thought. Only after walking barefoot on it did the local name for these plants make sense to me. The Afrikaans word meant "little devils." These were thorns. The entire lawn was a carpet

of pretty yellow-flowering thorns.

I made home inside the house. Covered the windows with curtains that filtered the intense sun, kept them drawn by day. Lined the living room walls with bookshelves improvised from bricks and boards. Hung my one good painting over the shelves. Made arrangements of succulents and dried branches, Japanese-style, in lieu of flowers in vases. Played the hi-fi for hours on end while washing clothes by hand in the bathtub, perspiration streaming off my body, and trying to iron them in heat that blinded me.

My two year-old child spent her days in the playroom I'd created in her big bedroom. The neighbours' children, frequent visitors, were enthralled at this unconventional room that looked like nothing they'd ever seen and didn't have to be kept tidy. It featured a doll's house they could walk into (devised from an ancient walk-in steamer trunk, painted white, up-ended so it even had a pitched roof). This was equipped with tot-sized rocking chair and table, wall-shelves for doll's china tea set and kitchen articles, and pictures from fairy tales on its walls. Beds and a highchair for dolls, and their baby carriage ("pram," a new word for me) extended its furnishings out into the centre of the room. Construction toys, artist's materials and children's books filled up the rest of the space - generally all over the floor. In one corner of this room stood my child's bed.

Here she entertained her guests. I'd glimpse them huddled together, "reading" books and whispering secrets, sometimes jumping up and down on the bed (a treat they weren't allowed in their own rooms at home). I didn't interfere.

My husband explored the vastness all around, as he'd been contracted to do.

The African mid-summer heat intensified, tightening my skin. I turned up the music louder. It brought to mind the cool, lovely land I'd left behind. Neighbours said they knew when I was sad: they'd hear the voice of Al Jolson singing, very loud and clear, the nostalgic songs I always listened to at year's end.

Christmas and New Year were upon us. The main street of Windhoek, Kaiserstrasse, was transformed with coloured lights festooned overhead and garlanding the lampposts. Shop windows beckoned with enchanting displays in the best European tradition. Entering the local version of a department store, I heard the intercom filling the air with carols ("O Little Town of Bethlehem," and so on), songs about a white Christmas, plus some really irritating stuff annually inflicted on the public using the season as an excuse. Shocked, I stood still for a moment, then realized tears were pouring down my face. I fled. Stayed away from that shop and others like it until February came and it was safe.

Despite being only the size of a small town, Windhoek was

in fact a little city, an authentic metropolis - a meeting point for people from many parts of Europe, especially Germany, Israel and France. The earlier name for this former colony had been German South West Africa and here was its hub. Around this island in the desert that surrounded it for hundreds of miles, there was nothing but stones and scrub bushes, a few isolated settlements. Difficult to reach by road, the isolation was compounded by the fact that radio and telephone links were weak. Television hadn't yet been introduced. Each person arriving in this oasis was an injection of new life. The locals didn't rest until they'd discovered what I could contribute to this community. What skills had I brought? What gifts did I have? What were my interests? No detail escaped their relentless inquiry. They treated me as someone who was valued, as was each person in that isolated bastion of European culture. I succumbed.

I was persuaded to join the Library, the Lecture Society (addressing everything including History, Anthropology, Medicine and more); to attend a course on Ikebana (the Art of Japanese Flower Arranging) - this notion had annoyed me at first but my friend with the improbable name of Bubbles convinced me that I'd benefit, and I did. I joined the Choral Society, then in final stages of rehearsal of the operetta *Im Weissen Rossel* (*The White Horse Inn*). A role was found for me in this production which was being performed in English, German, French

and Afrikaans, according to the mother tongue of the one in the role. In daily life, people here used all four languages anyway. Upon hearing me audition, the Israeli conductor exclaimed, “Ah, at last I have the soprano I need!” For years he'd wanted to produce the opera *La Bohème*. I was scheduled to sing the lead, a dream I'd cherished for years, as soon as this operetta was finished.

One friend I met at the Lecture Society, a stunningly beautiful young advocate, brought me home to meet her father.

A retired senior advocate, Israel Goldblatt was a philosopher and historian, in the final stages of writing the *History of South West Africa from the beginning of the nineteenth century* (published by Juta in 1971). He and I had an instant affinity for one another, spending hours together as equals and friends. He looked very old, gnome-like, until he smiled, then he looked elfin. His enormous brown eyes fascinated me. They contained worlds. Widowed for years, and tiny in body, he was the most majestic personality I've ever known. He introduced me to the writings of C. G. Jung; we discussed poetry, history, philosophy. He called me Ariel (Spirit of the Air). We roamed centuries together. After I left, we corresponded, visited. His last letter was from Haifa. He'd moved to Israel at the age of eighty so his bones could rest with those of his fathers. I sense his presence even now, behind the stars, behind my eyes.

He acknowledged my voice — my singing writing voice.

II

I began to discover new spaces.

These were other countries of the spirit, distinctly different from those of North America - especially the French Canada I'd loved and left behind, or the European culture of this desert enclave that I revelled in, feeling I'd returned to my ancestral roots.

At my own back door appeared brown-skinned women needing work. While the European-oriented centre of the town was making me welcome, in the outskirts the women of Africa discussed the newcomer: this white woman was outrageous. Against all local custom, she cleaned her own house, did her own washing and ironing. She was threatening their existence, withholding work that belonged to one of them by right. They streamed to the back door, demanding that job.

At first bemused, then angry, I expostulated: "This is *my* house, *my* life, *my* work. I'll act as I see fit. It's none of your business. Now go away and leave me alone."

They didn't agree or leave me alone. The tide of women lapped at that back door, unrelenting, every hour of every day, wearing me down. They were all shades of nutmeg and choco-

late; all sorts of shapes in various costumes or rags. Their expressions ranged from searching to desperate. Teenagers to grandmothers, they came. Asking, pleading, arguing, insisting; in variations of Afrikaans, German, *Baster-taal*, Owambi and gesture.

I got tired but stood my ground more stubbornly.

One morning a remarkable square-faced woman with loop earrings and somewhat gypsy look was there. Referring pointedly to how carefully she put away the jewellery her madams left on their dressing table, her eyes probed mine as she spoke. She gave me the creeps. At my emphatic “No,” her deep-set eyes glittered. She hissed at me, threatening, that if she couldn’t have the job, no-one else could have it either. “Tell everyone *Elizabeth* said so.” It sounded like a witch’s curse.

The next day when I answered the knock at my back door, I followed my “No” with a flippant, “And anyway, Elizabeth said the job belonged to her.” The woman’s face showed sudden fright. She fled.

Nobody came for days. My friends said she probably was indeed a witch and the locals were afraid of witches.

Four days later there came a quiet knock at my door. Opening, I saw a young-old face on slender body wearing the costume of an early nineteenth-century Victorian woman. I recognized the dress from what I’d seen in marketplaces, on

the street. This was a full skirt down to the feet, cinched at the tiny waist; fitted bodice with high neck (one could visualise a cameo at the throat); long tight sleeves to the wrists and puffed shoulders. Above this towered a unique headpiece of the same printed cotton material. Learned from the missionaries, this was the traditional garb of the Herero women from a northern part of the territory. Fine-boned and fastidious, Herero were the traditional aristocracy. They considered all other mortals beneath them, said my friends, and the women were too proud to do any work for white people other than ironing. This they did to perfection.

“Angelica,” my visitor announced herself without preamble. Come to do my ironing. The name Elizabeth meant nothing to her. I took her on immediately. I hated ironing.

From then on, no-one else appeared at my back door.

A dignified, gentle presence in my house, she stood erect and watched impassively as I knelt perspiring on the floor at the bathtub, washing my husband's safari suits, my child's clothes, my dresses and our bed sheets. When I'd finished, she ironed them. Perfectly.

When we moved away half a year later, both of us cried and she gave me a photo of herself which I still treasure.

III

My journeys outward now began.

Word came that I was to join my husband at his base camp hundreds of miles north, at the farthest end of neighbouring Botswana - deep into (then) relatively unknown Africa.

I was to fly there. A bush pilot was engaged for the job. The mosquito-like three-seater plane rose up out of the bowl of mountains encircling Windhoek and I saw that the oasis we lived in was a plateau, high above the surrounding desert. That's why the town was cool enough for light-skinned people like me to live in permanently. We couldn't have sustained the intense heat at lower altitudes. The mountains reared up around us as we circled higher. They were bare black rocks, sharp-toothed at their summits, uncomfortably close to the little craft. The space in the cabin was smaller than inside a little car. Sitting on my lap and peering out at the pinnacles - almost, it seemed, we could reach out and touch them, my child declared, "I want to go home." The pilot didn't hear.

Hours later we set down on a bleached salt pan used as an impromptu landing field. A Land Rover took us some miles farther over the plain. In the distance a knot of tents appeared in the wasteland, looking like a scene from the Old Testament of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This was our destination.

I was shown to a little tent for myself and my child.

At day's end the men came in from their explorations, bearded, hot, exhausted.

Nightfall, and we sat on the sand around a fire of brushwood with a great black iron pot steaming over it. The stars shone impossibly sharp and close in the soft black sky. Utter darkness surrounded us up to the circle of firelight. No sound except sometimes a jackal's cry, thin and far away. A soft "Mmff" in the distance roused someone to mutter, "Lion," but I didn't believe it. Everyone knows that lions roar.

The black men who tended the pot and the small group of tents asked courteously if I wanted stew from the pot. Goat's meat, someone warned. Of course I wanted it. Tough and tasting strongly wild, flavoured with local herbs, it was delicious and I'd eat it again today. My husband and I slept on the ground inside the two-man tent, our child between us.

Next morning someone remarked on the fresh lion spoor all around our tent. I didn't react, feeling myself in a kind of limbo.

After my return flight to Windhoek, my friend who knew about journeys enquired, "And the scorpions?" No, I hadn't known about scorpions in the sand, a greater peril to me and my child than investigating lions.

Sometime later there was another journey, this time to the

Okavango Swamps, in the territory where three countries came together: South-West Africa, Angola, Botswana. My child was pleased to be invited to stay with neighbours whose children were her playmates.

Again I sat in a tiny plane while the bush pilot flew me north to join my husband. Upon arrival at the remote camp, the pilot was greeted like a hero: finding a place to land a small plane there was regarded as a feat of skill and daring which few would attempt. Land was said to appear and disappear unpredictably in this bewildering world of swamps, dense bush, islands and waterways where you could get lost in five minutes. People and supplies would arrive by motorboat.

On one of the few high-rising and stable islands, a permanent camp had been constructed of wooden poles and rushes. This cluster of huts and shelters attracted wealthy big-game hunters from America and adventurers from over the world. The *boma* at the centre, a thatched roof open on all sides, was the focus of activity. Here was the dining area. It was dominated by a long outside bar where men congregated from early morning, drinking, trading improbable stories, bragging about their heavy-duty firearms and what they'd killed. This went on all day and late into the night. Women seldom came here, I gathered, and those that did were tough.

I stayed quietly out of the way, reading and writing letters

all day, mostly in the reed hut that was my room. In retrospect, I don't know what my geologist husband was doing there unless he was taking a holiday for fishing. I saw him only after nightfall when the crowd around the bar thickened and we waited for dinner. We ate at one of a dozen picnic tables under the *boma* with only a low reed fence between us and the black wilderness. Hissing lanterns made pools of yellow light. The big game heroes' hunting rifles lay spread among beer glasses, bottles everywhere. Their confident laughter, the heads and horns of their trophies mounted above us, convinced me that nothing from the dark bush around would break into that circle.

One day someone asked if I wanted to be taken onto the river in a dugout canoe. Of course I said yes.

Sitting alone in the front of the canoe, I could see it had recently been carved (literally dug out) from the log of a large tree. The slender black man standing at the back expertly poled his *goragora* out into the maze of tributaries of the Okavango delta. The heavy craft lay low in the water. Looking down over the edge, I could see through the flowing water, clear as glass. Beneath us, grasses and weeds bent in the current. Fish moved slowly, undisturbed by our passing overhead. Weaving our way among low reed-choked islands, I wondered at the bright birds darting in and out, nearly within arms reach of where I

sat. Their nests hung in pouches suspended over the water. Crocodiles concealed themselves along the banks and drifted like half-glimpsed logs on the open water. I was glad to be temporarily out of reach of snakes (though they too swam in the water, someone assured me later). I saw hippopotamus half-submerged in the water, not far from the canoe. Only later did I learn one could have come up underneath or beside our little craft and demolished it with one snap of its giant maw, or overturned us into that river of crocodiles.

I felt far away from all of this.

IV

One day word came that I was to join my husband where he was working now, far to the south-west of Windhoek. This was in a desert on the edge of the Namib dunes, said to be the oldest desert in the world. I was to drive there myself, following verbal instructions from a man of the town.

“You’ll eat dust,” my friend said in a veiled warning about this journey. She’d grown up in this harsh country and knew it would be an ordeal even for those who were used to it. This was no place for weak people.

This was such a remote area that roads existed for only part of the way and there were no maps. I was to drive there in

our little Chev pick-up truck whose gear-lock could shift to four-wheel drive if it got stuck in sand. There had recently been rains. River beds which were normally dry and used as reliable roads would now be flooded.

“Remember,” emphasized my informant, “you’ll travel for hours along a road that’ll finally disappear. There’ll be only two wheel tracks in the dust. You may not always see them. But keep driving straight on until it’s time to turn west towards the coast.”

“How will I know?”

“You’ll see by the grass. It will change.”

Grass. In this arid land? Yes. Occasionally, about once in four to seven years, sudden rains swept over a place for a few hours. Dry watercourses turned into rivers that ran for a couple of days then disappeared into the sand. Grass would spring up, only to shrivel and die within a few weeks. Then it stood dry, pale-blond like sun-bleached hair.

At the end of a full day’s driving, there’d be still farther to go. My informant said that a mountain range would become visible in the west. Only one road ran through it. I would have to find it. When I did, the first stage of my journey would be finished. This would be about nightfall. Somewhere along that road, just entering the mountain range, I’d be met by a farmer. He’d drive ahead and guide me to where I’d rendezvous with

my husband. Then my husband would set out in his vehicle, I'd follow in mine for the final stage of my journey to where he was camped. It would be late at night and there was no road.

I questioned further, needing to learn more about the exact place where I should make that crucial change of direction towards the mountains. I had to be in line with the start of the only road through.

“Where the grass turns white, turn right.”

“Okay,” I agreed. I'd never seen white grass.

He warned me, oh yes, of the difficulties ahead. Later, I was thankful for every detail he'd included. Had I really understood the implications of what he told me? No, certainly not. If I had, would I have undertaken this journey? Yes, but not with the joy I had at the beginning.

At four o'clock in the morning while it was still dark, I strapped my little girl into the baby seat beside me and set off. Driving due south from Windhoek, I later headed southwest towards the desert and the sea. Supplies of extra petrol and water were carried in the back of the truck. The groups of buildings, settlements, I occasionally found between the enormous distances were sometimes inhabited, sometimes abandoned. They didn't all have a petrol station anyway. Even if one appeared and the place wasn't deserted, it didn't necessarily have

petrol in stock. But I tried every one I saw. Using my strong arms to move the ancient hand-operated pumps, I had to physically push the petrol up from the underground storage tank into the truck, to top up whenever possible. The same procedure was needed to replenish the water to keep the truck's engine cool and sustain us in that terrific heat. It was mid-summer - it seemed always to be mid-summer. The Chev truck and we inside it needed lots of water. The sun fried or baked everything in sight. I drove with cloths over the side and rear windows to shield us from its direct rays. Secured into her car seat, my gentle-natured little passenger accepted whatever necessity was imposed upon her. She sat quietly, dozing with the bouncing motion of the truck and the pervasive heat.

On and on into the day I drove. Past empty settlements. Across flat bare landscapes of dust and stones, scrub bushes, dry grass. Dust sifted into the cab despite closed windows.

The roads that did exist were just dirt tracks, sometimes only traces of wheels in the dust. After a while, even these disappeared. No road signs or place names anywhere. Navigating the featureless land, I relied on the occasional landmark to ensure we were still going in the right direction. Negotiating the truck over open country, I needed to maneuver the vehicle out of dry sand traps. Arriving at rivers without bridges (none of them had bridges because they were normally dry and used as

roadbeds), I found they were now running in full spate. There'd been rain here a few days earlier. Now I had to detour to find a way across flooded rivers. I drove beside them for long distances to find fording places, hoping these hadn't been washed away too. All this water would vanish into the sand in a day or two, but I needed to get across now, and avoid getting the engine swamped by plunging the truck into a ford that might turn out to be too deep. With no help, alone, I had to get us safely to the end.

The journey unfolded with a dreamlike quality. Like a vision or template for the years ahead. Recollecting it now, I think I did it in an altered state of consciousness.

Only the end was perfectly clear. Only at the end did my observing and feeling states come together.

Dazed by the sun, I hardly noticed the passage of hundreds of miles and all those hours. The monotony of the scenery hypnotized me. Dry grass. Stones. Barren flatness all around. Colourless. Finally no more trace of wheel tracks in the dust. The pervasive dust gritted in my teeth. I did indeed "eat dust," as predicted. Thank goodness my little passenger was sleeping. Now I couldn't be sure I was still on the right track but went on in a kind of trance. "Keep going." Dry grass.

Stones. Distances. Heat shimmers. Glare. Dry grass. Flatness. Grass. Grass, white grass. White grass – white grass – “turns white!” I regained awareness just in time to jerk the steering wheel right.

“Where the grass turns white, turn right.”

My wristwatch registered four o’clock in the afternoon. I’d been driving for twelve hours.

Heading now due west, straight into the late afternoon sun, mid-summer on the edge of a desert, the red glare blinded me. No hope of spotting landmarks or roads. This information hadn’t been available anyway. Just keep going towards that line of sharp-edged blue mountains, I told myself. No longer seeing sparse bits of dry thorn bush on the gravel flats, I kept on going across featureless, trackless wasteland. My child awakened. I gave her water and soothing words. Now the sun was sinking in a fiery ball behind those jagged mountains. I wondered if this journey would ever end and why I’d agreed to it. But I couldn’t go back, only on. All that belonged to my known world was gone and I was journeying back in time, in history. Prehistory. Journeying somewhere far inside me.

Spotting what looked like a larger-than-usual thorn bush, I slowed down to investigate. My vision suddenly focused on the forms of two tiny humans ahead where I intended to drive.

In a scene older than Abraham, these desert dwellers stood silhouetted in the setting sun, altar-fire red behind the mountains. Dust-covered, hardly as tall as up to my collar-bone, they were yellow-brown as the dust from which they emerged. What was that old association of humans and dust, I wondered, unable to recall it at the moment.

A man and a woman, they stood together, watching me. She had a baby on her back and one at her breast. Heart-shaped faces, delicate bones, wide gentle eyes, and wearing rags. Those thorn sticks I'd seen were their shelter, their hut. They were smiling.

I was too. Opening my window, I asked directions. The mixture of Afrikaans and German I tried was useless. Gestures worked. Asking if the mountains ahead were where I needed to be going, I used gestures: myself, go ahead, to other people like myself (here pointing to my sunburned face and forearms), yes – do I carry on in this direction? Not feeling at all strange at the apparent differences in our appearance, I was aware instead of our relatedness and human warmth. “Oh yes,” their faces responded with animation, “the direction of the mountains straight ahead is where you must go.” Still smiling with a sweetness straight out of Paradise, they pointed the way ahead (“back into time,” I sensed), sending their goodness and kindness of spirit with me. Looking in my rear-view mirror, I'd dri-

ven barely five car lengths before they and their brushwood shelter vanished into the yellow-brown dust of the earth. “Dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return,” whispered the ancient words inside.

Driving into gathering night, I wondered how I’d find the road at the edge of those approaching mountains. If I aimed for the lowest cleft in the outline against the sky, there might be a pass that ran through. Surely the road would run through there, I reasoned. I was right. Found the road easily. Turning onto this road, I continued for mile after mile. A farmer was supposed to meet me. Farming in this arid land? All that was possible was sheep. So far I hadn’t seen any living creature except those gentle yellow people. Would a farmer appear? The guide promised for the next phase of my journey?

After an hour or so in darkness along this road which now began winding upwards, my headlights picked up a truck by the side of the road. A man stood beside it. I pulled to a stop. He was middle-aged and his weathered face looked surprised at the sight of me. I saw myself through his eyes: a young woman with long fair hair in a ponytail, smiling and wearing lipstick. And a child with her, hardly more than a baby! His expression darkened in anger. “This is no land for weaklings,” was written all over his face. “This is for strong men, not silly girls.” Spotting the licence plate showing the Chev truck was

from Johannesburg (“Sodom and Gomorrah,” in the opinion of the locals), he looked disgusted. My Canadian accent (interpreted by him as American, “the great Satanic influence”) didn’t help either.

I knew I was in trouble, but was secretly amused too. Presumably the status of my husband, his honoured guest, didn’t extend to me. Probably he was sorry he’d agreed to guide this foreigner to his farm. Possibly he was going to avenge his pride by making things difficult. Certainly I wasn’t going to be intimidated by him.

Without a word, he got into his four-wheel drive and sped off in a cloud of dust.

He did his best to lose me. Everyone knows how hard it is to follow a vehicle in the dark with thick dust in its wake. This obscured sight of the tail lights, so all you saw was a dust cloud against dark landscape. At night it looked like all the other shadows. You couldn’t see if the vehicle ahead had turned off the road onto a side track. This road twisted. I had to judge if he’d only gone around a corner or had turned off to one side, if he was far away in a straight stretch or if I’d run into the back of him just a few yards ahead in the dust cloud. If I followed at a safe distance, I could easily be lost as he might at some point turn off and be far down a different track, and I’d have seen nothing through the dust and hairpin bends. Sometimes I

speeded up to be sure I was still behind him, and saw tail lights only a car length ahead as I jammed on brakes to avoid ramming into the back of his vehicle, hoping my truck wouldn't skid off the road as I did so. Forty years later, writing this account, my hands still perspire at the memory.

Fear didn't occur to me then. Only a fierce determination not let him lose me. My child was awake now, wide-eyed, silent. I concentrated on following those tail lights when they disappeared in the dust or around a corner, and judging the nearness of the dust cloud. The possibility of driving off the road in this dark and dust and high speed was real. There were sharp turns, and sheer drops on my left side. Thankfully I was driving on the right side, but at this speed, misjudging when a curve was about to happen and its configuration, I could plunge down a bank in the darkness. I had to guess whether to accelerate or suddenly brake. Our lives depended on which of opposite responses I chose. He was determined to lose me. If I dropped off a mountain side while trying to keep up, it would just prove his point that dumb blondes had no business driving in this country.

I had no intention of either getting lost or driving off a cliff.

Suddenly, rounding another sharp corner, I spotted tail lights ahead of me, standing still. He'd stopped! Swerving to

avoid a collision, I skidded to a stop. He'd got out of his truck. Judging by his stance, he was worried: if he'd succeeded and I'd got lost or killed, what would he tell my husband? His face now looked amazed as I pulled up. I put on a look of nonchalance. He said, subdued now, there was only twenty minutes to go to the farm. We'd been driving for an hour and a half. I didn't smile. He resumed driving. Slowly. He did need to pretend to be reliable and kind when presenting me to my husband.

As we drove through the gates to the farm, my husband strode out to meet us. In the glare of headlights, my husband acknowledged the fact of our safe arrival. Taking advantage of a brief distraction on the part of the farmer, I pulled my husband aside and whispered that this mad had tried to lose me and nearly got us killed. He appeared not to hear, never referred to it afterwards. He thanked the farmer for the excellent dinner his wife had served, shook hands with him and got into his Land Rover. I was to follow in the Chev truck with my sleeping child.

It was now ten o'clock at night. Still another hour to go.

I tasted dust in my mouth. A familiar taste now.

He drove ahead slowly and I followed. The terrain smoothed out in the darkness.

Coming to a halt deep in the night, I felt the mass of a gi-

ant sand dune as high as a hill. At its base, a tiny shack. Nothing else. A prospector's cabin from many years ago, my husband said as we unloaded the supplies I'd brought. We carried our sleeping child inside onto a narrow cot in the one room.

Then we sat outside on the porch of the shack against the massive dune, with others rising in waves around it. This was the edge of the Namib. Ancient desert.

By day these dunes were ochre-red; at night, black presences from the beginning of the world. They absorbed any sound. But there was nothing to make a sound. Only the hissing of our gas lamp on a small wooden table against the wall.

We watched a little gecko climb with suction-cupped feet into the patch of light on the wall. Moths attracted to the light flitted within reach of its tongue. We watched it stalk the moths. He asked if I'd had a good trip. I said the rivers were in flood. He didn't know there'd been rain in the north and looked surprised that I'd forded swollen rivers. Avoiding getting stuck in sand traps, that was to be expected. I didn't speak of anything else. Neither did he.

This was not a land for weak people. No room for softness.

Towering silence all around us. Silence inside. Only the stars, impossibly clear and sharp in the blackness, seemed to be alive, apart from the gecko and his moths.

Leaving at early morning in the Land Rover, my husband would explore all day. In the shade of the porch, my child entertained herself quietly with a few toys, crayons and books. I read, wrote, absorbed the limitless silences. We'd nap in the heat of the day. After supper cooked on the gas burner for his return, we sat in a small patch of lamp light, watching the gecko stalking moths.

Seven days I lived at the foot of those huge dunes. Their hues and shadows changed with the sun's passage overhead and reappearance of the stars.

At the end of the journey, here I was at some kind of centre. "Here I am." But where is this?

Solitude. Vastness.

Dust and sun and grass all gone, the early morning moisture too. Deep quietness inside. A small lizard stalking moths. Looming dunes. Stars like Abraham saw.

I recognized this.

RULE NUMBER ONE

A South African expression of those years stated, “When you drive out to South West, you’re crying. When you leave there, you’re crying.”

I was crying. We were en route back to the Transvaal. He’d left the job after seven months. No future in it, he said. He was heading back to the home of his sister.

“Please,” I begged him, “please don’t do this. It’s not fair on her.” (It also wasn’t fair on me or our child but didn’t say so.)

“It isn’t even necessary. We have money now. You’ve earned a good salary all these months. We can live in our camper.” (In the USA we’d done this for months at a time.) “We can stay in a caravan park while you look for another job.” (The camper part came off the bed of the truck and served as a mobile home.)

His face was set. I was getting nowhere. Realising he’d want to share his experiences with his sister, I begged again, “Please, let’s not stay there more than two weeks. We can sleep in the camper. You can find a caravan park near Johannesburg” (where the jobs were) “and then we go there.

“Two weeks, at the most. Please. Promise me.”

Reluctantly, he promised.

Three months later we were still there. Our camper was parked in the front yard and we slept in it, but we were still living with her family: eating, bathing, doing laundry; using their utilities, taking up their space and their privacy. Of course we had little privacy of our own and no self-respect that I could ascertain. His sister showed her resentment of the situation by treating me as an enemy in her house. I didn't blame her, but it hurt. Her brother was regarded as a hero.

Ernest was looking for work again. One evening in mid-winter, it was August, he was regaling her and her husband at dinner table with explanations of his day, job-hunting in Johannesburg. There seemed to be some promising developments with one company. He was speaking to them in Afrikaans, ignoring me completely. I couldn't follow what he was telling them. I asked him to translate but he refused. His sister made an angry retort casting a slur on my motive for learning Afrikaans. I was still no wiser about his plans for our future. I waited until we went to the camper. After settling our little child to sleep behind a curtain, I confronted my husband.

"I'm entitled to know about your plans. This is my future too. I've worked just as hard as you ..."

"Shut up," he shouted.

"I won't. I've earned the right to speak."

"Shut up."

“I won’t.”

[This passage has been redacted on the advice of my editor. It is a scene of violence and horror. It does not need to be put into words.]

I was upright, still facing him.

INTO PLACE

We stayed on a further two months.

Another visit to my in-laws' farm in northern Zululand gave us a break. Two days driving through highveld, then down the escarpment to the lowveld, up the coast – in the subtropics now – to the St Lucia estuary. Even in winter it was hot and humid. Right next to the estuary, pink with flamingos and teeming with crocodiles, *Pappie* raised pineapples.

My mother-in-law believed it was my fault her adored son had stayed away for ten years. Now she was treating me with hatred. I couldn't escape outside. I'm terrified of snakes and the area crawled with them – they were even in the trees. Enormous pythons caught and swallowed buck and people – whole. But when he was free, my gentle father-in-law would sit on the stoep, telling my little girl and me stories of Africa. His warm brown eyes glowed as he looked at us and drew on his unlit pipe. I loved him.

The two-day drive back to Pretoria was a relief, despite going back to a place where it was obvious even to Ernest that we'd overstayed our welcome.

Five months after arriving back from Namibia, Ernest moved us to a caravan park outside Johannesburg. It was a short drive into the city. He started his new job at the head of-

fice of a mining company.

One month, six weeks, of peace under willow trees in their new spring leaf, with thick grass under foot and few other people around, soothed me and restored some calm to my little girl. She was now three years old. The past months had been confusing and unhappy for her too. She'd seen from the dominant adults around that her mother counted for nothing, and her older cousins had bossed her around in the usual way of children. She was often in tears and I could do nothing about it. I too was often in tears. Now I could sit with her on the grass under the trees and tell her stories. When she played quietly by herself, I read, wrote letters or just daydreamed. At about six in the evening her father would return to dinner I'd prepared on the little gas stove in the camper.

Weekends we went house-hunting. This showed up more differences between us: our tastes. I longed for a traditional old house with big trees around. He wanted a new, modern place with open space around. In November 1969 we moved into a light-filled modern house.

At last I had a place I could call mine. For nearly six years in Canada, I'd lived temporarily in first one place and then another. I'd lived in southern Africa for a year and a half as a transient or as a guest in someone else's home. "I don't ever want to leave here," I said to myself as I set about making this

house into a place where I could feel at home. Starting with the paintings and books I'd brought from Canada, I added natural materials readily available: grasses in pots, driftwood I'd collected, beautiful stones, cane furniture and African grass mats bought for next to nothing by the roadside. Out in the garden, Ernest and I discovered a shared interest: he wanted a fine-looking lawn with flowers and shrubs, I wanted lots of trees. His scientific approach and my innate sense of what to do resulted in a park-like garden growing up within a few years.

My little girl played with our new pets, puppies and kittens, and with the neighbours' children; played in the growing thickets where, I explained, the fairies were bound to live; played in her cheerfully messy room and listened to the stories I read to her. I made friends with the neighbours and improved my Afrikaans (the English-speaking ones were too hostile towards Afrikaners for me to want to spend much time with them). My darling Afrikaans friend and neighbour, Ludi, taught me the mores of living among traditionally-minded South Africans and how to cook like they did – deliciously. Already expert in baking bread from my days in Quebec, I studied the books of Elizabeth David to learn how to cook like the provincial French – all to please my husband whose chief delight, when not fishing, was gastronomy. The budget was limited. My cooking time began at four o'clock in the afternoon if

not earlier, for dinner to be ready by six, though he might not arrive home until seven or seven-thirty or later.

A year after moving into the house, everything was in order: the house, the garden; my child was settled with her friends around her; I'd worked out a routine and made some friends without getting caught in the social traps of ladies' tea parties and club meetings.

Now I was ready to get on with the real business of my life. I phoned a friend and asked if she knew of a good voice teacher. "Yes," said Cecile, "I have a friend, Annie Tack."

I started singing lessons with Annie.

After my husband left for work in the morning, I did the housework, practised singing for at least an hour (the discipline I'd learned with piano lessons served me well), did shopping, went to rehearsals (if any), then started dinner. When my husband got home in the evening, everything was as it was supposed to be.

ADVENT

Five days until Christmas. Alone in the house, I stared out the kitchen window, seeing nothing and trying not to think. The darkness of the highveld night had settled inside me as well.

My husband would not be coming home for Christmas. Neither, he'd decreed, would any of the other men. Tomorrow, the message had it, he'd arrive briefly to pick up more supplies and return the same day to the men in the veld. They would all be working over Christmas.

Numbed, I went through the motions of baking the cookies traditional to my family at Christmas time. Over there on the other side of the world, it was cold, the snow lay deep, and families were coming together in celebration of the visitation of Love.

Would those labouring men out in the thorny veld appreciate the meaning of these cookies I was baking to send them? Did they even want them? But what else was there for me to do except enact, alone, the rituals embedded in me?

I concentrated, reliving: snow, early-descending white nights, sleigh bells, coloured lights, smells of pine trees and baking in warm houses, the old carols ... No, don't think of those, I mustn't cry, I checked myself, pressing out the last of

the oatmeal cookies ready for the oven, turning to wash the bowls before starting a different batch.

Three of us had always done this together: my mother, my grandmother who usually stayed with us over Christmas, and myself as a little girl or lengthening teenager. These were the recipes Grandma had taught to Mommy and me. These smells in the house meant for everyone in our big family one thing: Christmas. In the kitchen, three generations of women worked companionably together, laughing ...

Washing the baking bowls, my back to the baking table, I started in surprise. Shrugging away the hands that tickled me from behind, I continued my reverie.

Yes, Grandma was wonderful company, especially when no men or boys were about. Her mouth looked deceptively mild, but the area around her blue eyes changed subtly when the three of us were alone together. Cheekbones, temples and outer corners of her eyes turned upwards, laughing ...

Forearms in dishwater, I started again, shrugged off the tickle from behind and carried on, deep in thought about the qualities of my enigmatic grandmother.

For all her gentleness, Grandma had a finely-honed sense of what was appropriate, and on occasion she could amaze with her unflinching stand when aroused. Remember the time when she tongue-lashed So-and-So for his rudeness to our mother?

That was a seismic event. It took a whole day before anyone could resume laughing ...

Arms still in dishwater, I jumped again at a tickle from behind and spun around to confront my tormentor.

Who?

There was the table in my empty kitchen, all covered with the beginnings of shortbread. There was the house with only my small daughter in it, and she was asleep in the bedroom down the hall. But no, there was a Being in the room, here with me at the kitchen table. A laughing, gentle Presence with steel in her spine and mirth in her eyes, chuckling at having successfully repeated the old joke.

Why, Grandma *always* sneaked up from behind and tickled me while I was washing dishes. She had a special way of tickling me that nobody else knew about or had ever approximated. She took a special delight in her granddaughter's jump and mock-crossness afterwards.

And here she was now, laughing.

I laughed out loud. "Grandma, you *came*. You came to visit me for Christmas. You're the first one to visit me here. Thank you."

Now, in companionable silence and quiet mirth, we rolled out shortbread. Using the cookie cutters I'd used as a child, we cut it into the traditional stars and hearts, arranged these on

the baking sheets, rotated them in and out of the oven onto cooling racks.

Hours passed. The kitchen was warm and alive with our happiness. It had been years since we'd last done this together, long before Grandma died just as her great-granddaughter was being born. There was so much for us to share, so much laughing ...

Finally I washed the last of the baking sheets, not tickled any more because the element of surprise was gone. Grandma played her joke only when her presence in the room wasn't suspected. Together we packed away the last of the shortbread into tins, ready to be taken out to the veld tomorrow.

It was time to go to sleep. I walked to the kitchen door, put my hand on the light switch and turned to my visitor, who too was preparing to leave. "Goodnight, Grandma. And thank you again for coming to keep me company."

One last smile passed between us. I turned off the light.

She comes back every year, the Angel of Christmas Past.

CRAZY

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you mean?”

“You don’t belong here.”

My questioner, a balding man in his fifties, looked defeated, old for his age. We were side by side in a bookkeeping class on the second floor of a shabby inner-city building of Johannesburg. This was one of many small commercial colleges that mushroomed in the mid-seventies. I was also learning shorthand and refreshing my typing, trying to hide my despair. This man’s pertinent question stirred something awake in me.

“No, I’m a singer.”

I’d recently been offered an ensemble part in Mozart’s *Die Entführung aus dem Seraglio*, produced by the country’s foremost opera company.

Professor Q, its head and chief conductor of the orchestra, led the panel of eight who were auditioning the hopefuls. Students of the private opera school I’d joined had all sung their piece. Not one of them had received an offer. I was the last to audition. The whole time I sang my presentation aria, the professor was talking in such a loud voice to his colleagues on either side that I had to force myself to project over his distracting noise. At the end, he made me the offer in a contemptuous

manner. When I emerged from the hall, the other students were listening at the door. “What did he say?” I told them.

“Wow. What did you say?”

“No.”

“What! Why?”

“He was rude.”

They said I was crazy. I didn’t explain why I couldn’t stomach any more rudeness.

I’d worked hard for such an opportunity, starting with voice lessons from a remarkable teacher. Dr. Annie Tack, who’d grown up in the Netherlands, had developed a technique which combined aspects of German *lieder* with those of Italian *bel canto*. When I met her in January 1971, telling her that I wanted to sing opera, she replied in her characteristic blend of Dutch and Afrikaans, “No. Opera bores me. I’ll teach you to sing Mozart. If you can sing Mozart, then you can sing anything.” Her discipline was formidable, extending to my character and attitude to life. A concert singer herself, organist in the most influential church in the city, she trained choirs and ensembles, was a college lecturer in music and a gifted composer for voice, especially cantatas, where she composed some solos designed for my voice. She created and brought to my attention opportunities to perform and expand my experience. She en-

couraged me to develop all aspects of singing, from *lieder* to folk songs, maintaining I had a special gift for traditional songs (“*Jy het so ‘n menslike stem*” — difficult to translate accurately but meaning a warm voice that moves people.) Annie became my most enduring friend, my very best friend.

From the time I started voice training with Annie, singing was the focus of my life.

Now that I was singing, I felt completely alive. Opportunities were everywhere and I said yes to all of them. Starting with those women’s club meetings I’d avoided attending as one of the flock, other functions followed, business and cultural. Before these meetings and functions embarked upon the main purpose of their gathering, it was customary to start with some entertainment. I sang programmes designed to charm and intrigue. These incorporated well-known songs from opera and music from the shows, “golden oldies” or popular songs from the twenties and thirties, traditional folk songs from around the world and Afrikaans songs for the usually Afrikaans-speaking audience.

I loved introducing songs in other languages, especially French songs, to my audience, translating them first so they could enjoy the story or mood as the song unfolded. (My favourites were “*La Marie*,” a folk song from Quebec and earlier, France, and “*Le roi a fait battre tambour*,” traditional from

the Renaissance period in France – both of them tell a touching story with an enchanting melody that lends itself to dramatic changes.) Singing is a communication of story or mood to the audience. The hearers must understand exactly what is being sung so they can enjoy the experience they've gone to such trouble to attend. French songs worked especially well for Afrikaans audiences because the French words translate perfectly into that language – the cadences and moods of both languages are strikingly similar. The same can't be said for French into English.

A recurrent problem caused me to develop a new specialty. Competent pianists often weren't available to accompany me or the piano was out of tune and nobody cared, not even the inept pianist on offer. Therefore, before committing myself to sing, I first ascertained the quality of the backing. If it was inadequate, the performance was doomed from the start. If I had any doubts, I'd sing *a capella* (unaccompanied), putting together a programme of songs with a strong melody line. They could stand on their own, not needing accompaniment. These were usually traditional or old folk songs, but not always. Linking these with a sentence or two of narrative, or poetry read aloud by Cecile, it was possible to give enjoyment to an audience without the risk of being let down by somebody else. Singing utterly alone became a specialty. I enjoyed a reputation for

someone who reliably delivered a good performance, and kept myself ready to sing at a moment's notice, if asked, for an audience of two people or three hundred. There was always a song in my head for this purpose. All my waking hours were lived as a singer, no matter what else I was doing.

Opera was my goal. Variety concerts seemed to be half-way stations. For these I'd sing operatic arias and songs from the shows - pianists somehow materialised. Guest solos or duets for special events at churches followed. These were usually excerpts from oratorios and cantatas – with expert organists. This disciplined context was closer to my goal.

A notice appeared of an opera school, associated with the country's largest opera company, being started in Pretoria (in those years a drive of one and a half hours from the town where I lived near Johannesburg). I applied. I enjoyed the audition, learned unofficially I was the best candidate so far, and wasn't surprised to be invited for an interview with the administrator of the new school. The supercilious gentleman received me from his throne - a newly-fashionable rocking chair in a stylishly bare room. I told him my practical problems: living so far away, a pre-school child whom I took everywhere with me but could definitely not leave with neighbours more than two or three times a week. Advertisements declared that lecture times were flexible: could it be arranged that I need drive there only

two or three times a week? (I was counting on my husband being home evenings to care for her during evening rehearsals.) “*Mevrou, ons sal dit vir U moontlik maak.*” (Madame, we will make it possible for you.) When the schedule arrived in the post, there was one class a day every day of the week. I didn’t enrol.

At home, there were changes. Ernest was increasingly moody when he came home. My child was having temper tantrums as soon as he left for work. He didn’t conceal the fact that he didn’t like me any more. My child mirrored his attitude. His verbal abuse was copied by my child. When she spoke rudely to me in front of him, he passed her a chocolate and called her by his pet name. So a pattern was set for the rest of her life.

It was reinforced when I made the mistake of enrolling her in an Afrikaans-language school, reputedly able to offer better quality education than the English-medium school farther away. My intention was for her to feel fully at home in South Africa. Obviously she’d become literate in English because of my influence and my books. I wanted her to have all possible advantages, not realising that cultural and social influences would be ganging up against me. Naturally, she’d try to conform. There was no mitigating influence from my family, half a world away. My parents did their best: they wrote, phoned, vis-

ited us, paid for her and me to visit them in the USA, sent pretty clothes for her and for me (they could see the effects of budget restrictions on me). But to my child they were merely symbols of fabulous “other” people who loved her unreservedly. They were too far away to influence her life or attitudes.

It had been my decision to marry, have a baby and move far away. Now I was paying for it.

I tried to lose myself in the joy of singing. That worked by day, although my child’s displeasure and rages had a dampening effect. After she’d gone to bed and couldn’t see, the assaults began again. I cried quietly, not awaken her or aggravate him further. The next morning, the results were obvious. My bruised face was camouflaged with thick makeup, a head scarf and dark glasses. I stayed away from people. There was no one I could turn to, no one who felt it was important if a husband abused his wife. That was often the norm. We were supposed to keep our mouth shut, smile and carry on.

Friends from earlier years would visit sometimes and ask, when my husband was out of earshot, “What’s the matter with Ernest?”

“I don’t know. I thought you could tell me.” In hindsight, I think he was depressed, but ordinary people didn’t know about this condition in those days.

One evening my husband was in a different mood and in-

vited me to sit with him for a chat. He confided that he was unhappy in the profession he was in and wanted to change. He intended to study to become a dentist. He'd made inquiries at the university and they were willing to accept him as a student. I'd have to go back to work to earn the money to support him (and us, and our child, and pay for our home) and he figured the fastest way for me to earn money was to learn to become a bookkeeper or an accountant. I'd have to take a course in bookkeeping ...

Stunned, I agreed to do it. So that's how I'd arrived at this tatty little so-called college on the second floor of a seedy building in mid-Johannesburg next to a balding man who looked at me in disbelief when I'd summarised in about five sentences the state of affairs now.

"Are you crazy?"

I thought about this. He was right. I *was* crazy.

MY WAY

I informed my husband that I was not going to become a bookkeeper so he could change careers now. I'd worked long and hard enough to help him. He must carry on with the profession he'd chosen.

He went white. Accused me of letting him down. I had nothing to add.

The marriage went downhill rapidly. The assaults increased. I became afraid.

I looked for help from the minister of his church - that powerful organisation that backed the repressive government of the day. Ernest was nominally a member but he didn't attend more than absolutely required (say, four times a year). I went every Sunday after bringing my child - she'd asked to attend the Sunday school of her Afrikaans classmates. I donated my services for the church's fundraising events, as a singer at its functions, so I was a familiar face and voice to this dominee. That worthy hypocrite insisted that I first undergo a catechism class. I didn't. Later he confronted me angrily after I'd just sung to raise money for his church: why wasn't I at his catechism class? I walked away without a word.

I looked for help from our family doctor as he bandaged my bleeding face and repaired my torn hand. Would he testify

in court about the injuries he was treating? “How do I know these injuries happened as you said they did?”

I looked for help from the police. They refused to intervene in “domestic affairs.” Finally I got to a powerful inspector who, I hoped, might listen. He just tried to seduce me. I walked away in a rage.

There was no one else to help. My parents were too far away. Besides I was too embarrassed to admit that everything had gone horribly wrong, just as my father had said it might, in the years when he was trying to stop me dating Ernest.

When I told my doctor that I felt like taking my own life, he expostulated, “But that’s not normal!” He did refer me to a psychologist who assured me I wasn’t crazy and was indeed a worthwhile person.

My friend’s husband, John, referred me to a lawyer in case I needed one, a man of integrity and probably willing to wait a long time for me to pay him.

By now, the frightening times had spun out of control. If I stayed with Ernest, my life was in danger, the psychologist and lawyer agreed, and I had to act very carefully. In those years, the laws of this patriarchal society were stacked against women. We had as few rights as those in rigid Islamic societies.

Secretly, I made preparations to leave my husband. I had no money and nowhere to go.

Finding a job as a secretary, I lasted a month before collapsing with a nervous breakdown. At least I had a month's salary put away. Then I got an undemanding, low-paying job as a shop assistant. My father sent an early birthday gift of a lot of money. Had he sensed something? This paid the deposit on a bachelor flat nearby, in a new building one block away from the house I was leaving, on the same street.

Though she didn't realise it, my nine year-old child needed this move too. For several years, the dreams she told me had shown increasing stress. Her crayon drawings were often a jagged confusion of black and brown. I worried about her: was I supposed to stay in the marriage for her sake despite the damage to me?

One morning after I'd cried all night in the guest bedroom, quietly so no one could hear, I opened the door to the kitchen where my German Shepherd puppy had spent the night. He was always well-behaved and neat, using the newspapers in one corner, but this morning the mess was appalling. From a floor covered with his vomit and diarrhoea, he gazed at me with stricken eyes, "What happened?"

A light went on inside. "If it's doing this to my dog, what's it doing to my child?"

She was devoted to her father, and he to her. It was important that she remain in the same neighbourhood. Living in the

flat with me, she could continue to walk to school with her friends. Afternoons and weekends, she could walk over to be with her father.

My lawyer advised me on the procedure and timing of my moves to ensure I didn't fall foul of the law. I explained to Ernest that I needed some space between us, some time to "find myself" – a popular expression in those years. This gave room for the assumption that I was an immature person who needed to grow up. I was bound to see the error of my ways and return. I secretly cherished the hope that he would miss me, see the error of his ways and say or show that he loved me.

So, after six years, I left the house I'd never wanted to leave. I had a door I could shut and bolt. I cried myself to sleep every night. But I was taking charge of my own life.

SMILING LADY

Smiling at the lying sky

One thing I was good at. “Smiley,” the kids at school had nicknamed me, making me an outsider. Later the neighbours called me “*Madame Sourire*”, meaning it kindly. Even now, far from French Canada, Smiling Lady was still how the neighbours saw me.

Pretending not to notice
the blackness behind

Leaving behind the stars of the North Pole, flying down the length of the Dark Continent, the plane bored through a double night unbroken by any light. Emerging into the white glare of a highveld winter morning, I dropped my eyes. Smiled at everybody.

Under this white sky, gentle dreams were obliterated. Clenching my heart against destruction, I carried my head high.

Singing to deny
fear of the dark inside

Ten to eleven in the morning. Five to eleven in the morning. Could it really be that, in all that effort to endure, only five minutes had passed? Eleven o'clock. I concentrated on the next manageable goal, five past eleven. The neighbours smiled, hearing me singing.

I found relief, then, on my knees. Praying didn't help, but gardening did: hands in the earth, planting trees, coaxing soft green lives to grow.

Sometimes black hands skilled with growing things worked alongside, their owner's spirit in companionable silence with mine. "*Muhle mhlaba*," he'd say. Beautiful earth. His love for it was palpable. Quietly, together we delighted in kneading it to release its magic. Then he would go back to the mining compound and the other contract workers from Mozambique, to labour underground for another week.

Sometimes I would walk away from all the houses to the edge of the ridge, where hills dropped down and long grass shimmered under the sun. It looked like blonde hair. Leaning against a solitary, gnarled tree, I'd feel the presences of timeless beings stirring from beneath. Beautiful earth.

Back among walls one day, forty-eight endurances after eleven o'clock, I stood alone, watering my growing things. Not

daring to look up at that smiling sky that lied, concealing its empty blackness. This proud heart burst.

“Is there anybody there?” it shrieked to the black above.

“I AM,” cracked a lightening voice from the black. Like thunder, the reverberation shook me. There was no cloud in the sky.

Astonished, I was comforted.

Walking among the orderly houses, I searched their windows and tried to imagine the lives of the women behind them. My neighbours appeared content. Would I prefer to be like them, I asked myself. No, I realised. I'd choose the pain, the cost of being my different self.

But how to bear it? Back in my garden, I stood hosepipe in hand, considering the pain, and asked the sky from where it had answered me before,

“Do you know?”

“Know,” echoed gently. Silly question, but acceptable. Slightly embarrassed and a bit amused, I lowered my head. And was comforted.

Months went by. The five-minute spans that measured the ordeals lengthened imperceptibly. The darkness behind the sky held meaning now. The darkness in my spirit congealed into

form. I could see, but it frightened me.

Once more I positioned myself in the garden, watering hose in hand. Raising my face to the sky, I asked,

“But, do you care?”

For reply there was no word or echo, only a sight. A great cross that filled the sky. Someone's arms outstretched across it, embracing the whole earth.

Lowering my eyes, I felt the healing tears behind.

Hands alongside in the earth, I asked my companion about his family in Mozambique. Amos warmed to the reply. A few words of Fanagalo, derived mostly from Zulu, a language foreign to both of us, and expressive gestures augmented our intuitive communication with each other. He explained, laughing gently, longingly, that his wife was not tall like he was. "*Yena konna lo short one*," indicating his chest height. And the children? He showed the heights and ages of his young son and little girl.

And your family, he asked. Where do you come from? Somehow I explained. My parents, everyone, so far away. Near the North Pole. Two nights flying time, no day in between.

And you yourself, he continued earnestly, perceiving me alone. A lady trying to smile. Searching my green-brown eyes with his dark-brown ones, he asked,

"*Miesies, wena ...*" and hesitated briefly, Lady, you ...
"*Wena TANDO lo Afrika?*"

Do you LOVE Africa?

Startled, I burst out, "*Ja, mina tando lo Afrika.*"

Yes, I love Africa.

His eyes shot full of tears. He turned his face away.

There was no need for us to speak again.

Not even on the day when he helped me move some furniture out of the house, to a single room not far away. Wordlessly, he set down the African grinding stone I'd grown to love.

The room's large windows opened onto hills that dropped away to the north. Sunlight shone on wild grass that looked like hair.

I didn't have to smile any more.

— *excerpt from "Spring Morning" by LEP*

TOMMY

The wounds from my divorce still raw, I was also depressed and angry. A friend suggested that I apply at a special school nearby where there was a class that needed a teacher. "What? Me teach weird kids who dribble and can't think?" I'd always pictured myself in glamour roles. Then I thought, "Why not?"

The first morning in the staff room, somebody said, "Uh oh, you're getting Johnny's class." That meant, apparently, the class that Johnny belonged to and terrorized. "And there's Tommy, too," added another in a low voice, hoping I wouldn't hear. Contrary to expectations, my spirits rose. I was intrigued. They warned me kindly not to be frightened at the first sight of Johnny's face. Or of Tommy.

There they sat, about eighteen children, momentarily stilled at the appearance of two of us in the doorway.

From his place as self-appointed keeper of the door, Johnny rose and stumbled over to me with the air of a Mongol warlord. His handsome, fierce face was broken off abruptly down below: most of his nose, lips and chin were missing. Swaying on high-heeled boots, he stood at exactly my height. Pushing his missing nose right up to mine, he searched my eyes. I held his eyes, not daring to drop my own. Then, appar-

ently satisfied for the time being, he turned away with a “Hmph” and allowed me inside. Johnny had no speech.

At his desk in the back corner, Itzen bounced up and down, uttering small shrieks. He was apparently autistic, among other things. Pretty dark-haired Cassie smiled bashfully in the front row. Over against the window, blonde Theresa with the poetic face turned from dreaming out towards the sky, gave a ghost of a smile, and retreated to her sky.

Then I saw Tommy. Behind Theresa, he too was flaxen-haired and engrossed in study of the sky. He turned his face towards me. I remember the jolt.

His face appeared as though viewed through moving water, features wavering where they should be firmly in place. His face had not finished formation at the time of his birth eleven years earlier, but had stopped at the stage where it belonged to a dolphin. His eyes were separated by a protuberance so large that only one eye could be seen at a time.

The rest of him completed this impression. Shaped like a torpedo, he was missing one arm and one leg. The prosthesis for the missing leg leaned, improbably, against the back wall.

Realising that I was studying him, Tommy began bobbing his head and humming loudly in a clear, sweet treble voice. I learned that he always did this when distressed.

Sensing the panic in his fragmented melody-making, I for-

got my own and walked over to him. Taking his face between my hands, I steadied his head and tried to search his eyes. His skin was waxen, water-lily white. The tender mouth trembled.

His eyes. Blue skies reflected in clear water, with birdsong all about.

“Tommy,” I was to tell him later during the many times I held his face like this, “you’re beautiful.”

“No,” he wept. “No.” And the head-bobbing wild singing would start again.

“Keep them busy. Preferably constructively,” was the implied mandate. These were the mystery children whose disabilities and potential for development had baffled everyone so far. Johnny, the class activist, provided me with clear guidelines for starting. Already notorious as the “bad boy” of the school, he was constantly inspecting what anybody was up to. With ferocious glares and hoarse grunts, he appeared to be demanding an explanation or accounting of some kind. But Johnny had no more hearing than a stone, and just as little sensation in the front part of his face. The story went that as a small child, incomprehensible and wild, he was locked in a garage for long periods. There, he rubbed his unfeeling face against the cement floor. Rubbed part of it away. Even now, he had the disconcerting habit of snipping at his nose with a pair of scissors, without apparently noticing the blood.

Johnny lashed out at everybody - children, teachers, even the principal. For no apparent reason, he smashed anything within reach. No way had yet been found to control or stop him. Johnny raged.

Tommy was his favourite target. Oddly, Tommy was the only one he appeared to care about, as though he felt especially protective towards him. Yet Tommy was utterly defenceless when Johnny made one of his sudden attacks. Tommy cried, heartbroken, each time. Only Johnny couldn't hear.

How to break this cycle of violence? I searched Johnny's eyes for an answer. They were an inferno of fury. Little white flames flickered over their surface. "For someone to be *that* angry," I reasoned, "there has to be a lot of intelligence. He must be frustrated beyond my imagining." His demands and displeasures he could demonstrate, but he could convey nothing of his thoughts and feelings. Similarly, the thoughts and feelings of others were to him unknown, incomprehensible. There could be no mutual sharing as human beings. Johnny's true humanity was locked away.

Body language, signs to convey feelings, abstract thoughts, so he could express the most basic ideas to us in that room and understand these from us – that's what was needed. Together, Johnny and I worked out meaningful gestures acceptable to him. Together we taught these to the other children.

I love you.

I'm sorry.

It's okay.

What's that/Why?

It's lovely.

I don't like it.

That's funny.

Johnny kept inventing new gestures; each day there were more ideas he recognized and insisted on being able to convey. His most usual gesture was the one for “What's that/Why?” With his new-found tools of communication, he insisted on understanding his world. Tommy, too, revelled in the breakthrough with Johnny. Their attachment to each other grew, while Johnny's violence subsided daily.

One day while helping Tommy at his desk, as usual, Johnny suddenly dealt Tommy a terrible blow across the face. Tommy collapsed in pain and heartbreak. I strode over to Johnny who stood erect, eyes flaming, challenging me. Deliberately, while staring into his eyes, I dealt Johnny a mighty slap across the face. And waited. Shocked, he watched my eyes filling up with tears. His own then filled up with tears. He lurched forward, wrapped his arms around my neck and sobbed.

From that moment, Johnny was released. He understood

how much he was loved, and what was required of him.

Our class project then became Tommy.

The grief of parents of such special children cannot be fathomed. A few cannot show love. Perhaps they themselves had never experienced unconditional love. Perhaps they feel ashamed. On winter mornings when mothers wearing coats waited in heated cars for the school bus to pick up their warmly-dressed children, Tommy would be found alone, sitting on the ground, blue with cold, wearing only a T-shirt and cotton shorts. At vacation time, the family drove away to the sea, leaving Tommy behind with the maid. Aware that he wasn't valued, Tommy was so profoundly unhappy that he couldn't bring himself to try and learn anything at school. Instead he slumped in his chair, stared at the sky and sang off-key. Despair made him unreachable.

Since "being able to read and write" seemed to be what was needed to gain some appreciation of him at home, I set out to make it appear that he had this potential. Every day for a couple of months, while I helped the children with exercises in pre-writing skills, I gave special help to Tommy, subtly guiding his hand. His results looked good. The exercise books were sent home with the reports at the end of term.

At the end of the first vacation, Tommy came into the classroom singing joyously. I waited until everyone was listen-

ing, then asked,

“Tommy, did they see your report and your book?”

“Yes!” His singing got louder.

“Do they like the marks you got?”

“Yes!” Singing increased in volume.

“Do they think you're a clever kid, now?”

“Ye-es!” And Tommy was far away in a rhapsody of singing. Eyes shining, his head remained steady, and the melody was true.

Tommy thrived. He learned with delight everything I tried to teach. He and Johnny became inseparable friends and favourite people at the little school. Even out on the playground, Johnny helped Tommy, and Tommy filled the air with his pure singing.

My own healing had begun. The following year I was teaching children much younger, but Tommy came to visit me every day in the classroom nearby.

Then I was gone.

About seven years later, I returned to the school on an official visit. Johnny had meanwhile been found testable and transferred to a school for the deaf where he was free to grow. He was, said the new principal, happy.

“Where's Tommy?”

“Down there in Room 6, the old room. He couldn't go any further, you know.”

At the door, in Johnny's old place, Tommy sat, head down. Quietly I knelt beside him and waited. He looked just the same as when I'd seen him on that first day.

Slowly he raised his head and his eyes met mine. With a gaze direct and unflinching, he demanded,

“Where are *you* now?”

Haltingly, with a deepening sense that I'd betrayed him, I explained that I'm now married. That I have a husband who loves me. That he works far away and I have to be with him. That it's too far for me to come to school and see him any more.

“Oh.”

He gave me a long, keen look, then dropped his head. Sank back into a slump and began to sing. Tunelessly. Head bobbing.

I hurried straight back to the principal's office and recounted this exchange. She refused point-blank to believe me.

“Tommy,” she declared, “couldn't have spoken with such intelligence. He couldn't have shown such awareness.”

IMAGES

Four years pass in a blur after leaving my husband. Four years of surprises that return in memory like flickering images of a black-and-white home movie.

I see myself, a young woman with intent expression, trying to earn a living, keep predators at bay. There's no mercy for a wife who leaves her husband. All but two of my women friends disappear. Do they think I'll lure their husbands away? But nearly all the men I know, husbands of my erstwhile friends, do make advances. Horrified, I avoid them. Other men, spotting a bare ring finger, see me as prey. The neighbours' children shun me. Their parents don't approve.

New people, men and women, gravitate to me. Later I find most of them just want to get their hands on me or the money they think I'll get - sometimes both. I don't trust people anymore. A social life is dangerous. Needing a steady income to support myself and my child, hoping to earn respect as well, I immerse myself in work. Overwork helps dull the pain.

Sometimes the flickering images emerge in full colour, as though they're still happening. Like the visits of Ernest to me in my flat. This is basically a single room facing north-west across

open country, away from the scene of recent memories, pointing back to where I'd come from: trees, Northern Lights, winter nights and the force in me demanding freedom. The man I'd loved so passionately now visits, cold-eyed. I hoped he'd remember that he'd loved me, tell me that he still did, that he misses me. But no. He speaks banalities. His face a mask. On leaving, he doesn't attempt a hug or even touch my hand.

My attorney keeps telling me that Ernest is fighting the divorce. Fiercely.

One evening Ernest mentions, seemingly in passing, that our family doctor has been wondering if I'm trying to poison him.

"What!"

Yes, the attacks he's been having, going nearly into shock. (I recall them. They're terrible and, yes, when I'd last seen them, they were getting worse. Long before I left him, both of us knew the triggers to such an attack. It was easy to set off another one.)

"How?" I exclaim in disbelief.

"By poisoning my food. You still have a key to the house." (He'd insisted I keep one so our child could get in any time she wanted to. I never went in.)

"But I'm not cooking for you, so how?"

"The food in my refrigerator.

“But,” he adds with a strange look on his face, “I know you, you wouldn’t do a thing like that.”

I say nothing. Then he gets up. At the door, we don’t even say goodbye.

The next morning I phone the doctor who’s been a friend to both of us.

“What do you think of this story?”

“I’m taking it seriously.”

Angered now, I growl, “I’m going to get to the bottom of this.”

“I think we are at the bottom of it.”

I put the phone down.

I consider my position. South Africa is a police state. I’m an alien with no one to help. Any minute I expect a knock on the door by police who could detain me indefinitely without trial. I phone my lawyer. He’s worried now and poised for action if I’m suddenly arrested. He gives me his home number to keep on my person. I must call immediately, no matter what time of day or night, in case of emergency. Without saying why, I alert a colleague to phone my lawyer if I fail to appear at work one morning.

Of course I have to go back to teaching. My father’s dictum is being fulfilled. Before getting a teaching job, I work as a shop

assistant.

Now I'm running out of money to support myself and my child. Interim child support will take months to become available. From one day to the next, I'm not sure there'll be food in the refrigerator when she comes home from school. One day, two hours before she's due to return and look for her usual cheese and milk, the refrigerator is still empty. Desperate, I decide to ask our doctor for a loan. (The same man I'm not speaking to any more.) On his last visit two years earlier, my father told me he'd spoken to this man, promising to reimburse him if I needed help. En route to his office and my humiliation, I stop to collect my mail. There's one envelope: in it a cheque for twenty-five rand - a lot in those days. A year ago I'd made a trial programme as TV presenter for the broadcasting corporation, never dreaming there'd be payment. Taking this to the nearby convenience shop, my friend Maria from Cyprus accepts it in exchange for milk, cheese and fruit. There's money left over. Minutes after returning to the flat and stocking the refrigerator, my child comes home. Opens the refrigerator door.

Not far away, at a school for severely mentally handicapped children, there's a vacancy. I start in the new school year, January 1976. My Canadian teaching qualifications (the

best, as my father had ensured) count for nothing until the bureaucrats of my host country are satisfied that their requirements have been met. This could take years to arrange - type-written letters, carbon copies, bulky photocopies of documents, and airmail – expensive, time-consuming and beyond my means to cope with on my own. Meanwhile I'm paid the same pittance as the Zulu women who scrub the floors and live in shacks. (In time, I find a second teaching job for afternoons and evenings.)

I have eighteen special children in my care. Now, instead of “*Si, mi chiamano Mimi*” (They call me Mimi) from *La Bohème*, I'm singing “*Ek's 'n dapper muis ...*” (I'm a big brave mouse, watch me stomping through the house, and there's nothing that I'm scared of... besides a cat... and strange noises in the night... and... and...) I'm acting out the various roles of this hilarious piece with voice and movements. The children grin, then I persuade them to join me in making the funny noises called for. Soon they're participating in singing games and the way is cleared for other learning. Their eyes brighten. Mine do too, I notice, catching my reflection in a mirror or window. I'm smiling without realising it.

Suddenly there's news. Government is taking over the school. I'm summoned to the principal's office. Two stern-faced men from the governing body sit behind the desk. One is

the spokesman. There'll be changes. Staff cuts. I'll have to go. "Why me?" I was the last to be hired. First to go. Besides, I'm not officially qualified, am I. "No papers in your file." Surely they know I'm still trying to get them? I don't argue. The decision has been made. "But what about my children?" — my voice breaks. The spokesman hesitates. He has a child in the school, but not in my class. "I'm sorry."

Now I'm divorced — after almost a year of trying. Still I have no money. Now I have no job.

A colleague refers me to a high school for girls in Johannesburg needing a temporary teacher of Latin and French for the last term. A private school, they accept my qualifications at face value (no government red tape), so I'm paid a professional salary for every day that I work. Here I enjoy making the one "dead" language and the other "foreign" language come alive, especially for those young people who lack confidence.

It's a long drive into the city to the school. It's a long walk down the halls between classrooms. I shouldn't feel this tired. The weight in my lower abdomen feels like bricks. My weakness is worsening. I find a new doctor. He's kind. He knows I can't pay much. I tell him my history of tumours, query cancer? with surgery every couple of years. After examination, he's

sober.

“You need surgery immediately.”

“I can’t go for surgery now. I have to work!”

He frowns. “When can you go?”

“After the last day of school, the 4th December.”

“This will involve a hysterectomy, and a specialist...”

“But I can’t afford a specialist!”

There’s a pause. He smiles. “I have an idea. I’ll officially do the surgery, but I’ll get a friend of mine who’s a specialist to be on hand ‘observing.’ That way you’ll just have to pay my fee.”

Six weeks until school closes. Every few days I report to a nursing sister for injections of Vitamin B. Somehow I get to the last day. I deposit my cheque. The next day, I check myself into the local government hospital. I’ve bought a flowering pot plant in a lovely pottery holder to put on my bedside table. My child has started the Christmas holiday with her father. Soon she’ll be flying overseas to visit my parents in USA.

I will myself not to wake up from the anaesthetic.

But I do. *I’m a porous husk suspended in a river. The current moving through my body deposits particles of life, more with every second. “River of the water of life,” like something out of the Bible I don’t believe in any more.* No pain. Not that day, not the next. Day three, I get up. My body feels light.

Down a long hall to the bathroom to wash my hair. Is this walking? It feels like floating. Decide I'm going home – now. Not waiting for a doctor. I check myself out of hospital and leave.

Back in my doctor's office, he's pleased at my recovery. He smiles at his memory of the surgery. "When we opened you up and the specialist saw the mess inside, he was amazed. 'How did this woman keep going?'"

SPECIAL PEOPLE

The special school where I'd become attached to "my children" invited me back. Someone with proven ability to work with brain-injured children was needed for a newly-opened section for three to six year-olds. Salary payable by the governing body, no bureaucrats involved. Choosing to work with the most challenging children - those apparently hopeless ones who needed to "come alive," Maureen and Audrey had persuaded the governing body to establish this Special Unit. They welcomed me onto the team.

Maureen had not been trained as a teacher, but she had a Downs Syndrome son, plus massive energy, imagination and compassion. She was a natural teacher and I learned more about teaching from her than during my four years Bachelor of Education course in Canada. Both of us deferred to Audrey, a nursing sister now retired and devoted to "our babies." Darling Nancy (a big warm Zulu mommy) and wonderful Lydia (an intense Xhosa lady) were essential members of the team. Their wisdom and patience sustained Maureen, Audrey and me.

Despite their chronological age, "our babies" had a so-called IQ estimated at 35 or less. A six year-old might be functioning at the level of a baby who couldn't yet sit up. Maybe she could sit up, but she might not talk. Maybe he was starting to

walk, but he couldn't communicate. Each one functioned at a developmental level of less than two years old. Of the three "classes," I had the most advanced children, those who could sit up on the floor (carpet) unaided. The other children in our Special Unit couldn't even do that. Maureen and Audrey focused on them.

We set to work. Together, we worked out a routine of movement and music. We called it a Stimulation Programme.

The movement part was organised by Maureen who'd read about an experimental programme for brain-injured children being developed in Pennsylvania. These were remedial exercises called "Patterning," designed to stimulate crawling movements – that crucial part of development that our children had missed, thereby hampering further developments in walking and speech - which are linked. These exercises required intensive physical labour. On an exercise table, two adults had to move a child's limbs in the correct pattern for a certain amount of time so the undamaged parts of the brain would ignite and remember what it was supposed to be doing. After some time, the brain would often react and the child would start to respond, first involuntarily, then willingly. That was a major hump overcome for the child.

The music part was my own intuition. Music therapy was a new approach still being discussed by the experts, but I could

find only vague references in the available literature. I was given freedom to explore the possibilities.

We worked in a purpose-built bungalow on a quiet side of the main playground. A special bathroom was fitted for tiny children, with tiny toilets to help them get used to the idea of progressing out of nappies, and tiny washbasins for teaching them how to wash their hands. Three large rooms opened into each other, ensuring a free flow of sight, sound and movement. This helped in stimulating the children and providing us with mutual support. Together, the five of us worked to the point of exhaustion every day, loving every minute of it, each other and our children. The progress they made surprised everybody.

These bright rooms filled with music and movement were happy places to be. Visitors often remarked that they got cheered up just coming here. Our Special Unit became the showpiece of the school and a model of progressive education for government officials who came to observe our methods. Within a couple of years we were presenting demonstration classes for leaders in education, and I was asked to write a paper on my use of music.

I developed my own form of music therapy. Improvising on the piano – I'd insisted on having one in my classroom, I played honky-tonk versions of little kids' songs (Afrikaans and English), making up words or adapting them to my purpose.

Crucial to this method was that I'd assign to each child his "own song," incorporating his or her name into the words. Then I'd start by playing the music and asking, "Whose song is this?" A shy little person would wriggle happily or grin or (later) exclaim with an attempt to say her own name, or say "*Myne* – Mine!" Every child had a turn to be star of the show. This worked wonders for self-confidence, each responding as he was able. (Later, when teaching autistic children, an adaptation of this technique was useful.) Every morning I'd stretch out these sessions for as long as possible. When my children were starting to stand up, I'd sing action songs like "I am a great big bouncing ball....," encouraging them to join me in jumping up and down like this ball. They'd smile and start to move. Start to vocalise something like words. Try to sing. Join the impromptu singing game with me and then the child next to them. They learned to communicate through these games.

After the stimulus of exercise and singing games, all of our children got to listen to music. I discovered that tape recordings of certain kinds of instrumental music (usually Mozart and Bach) would calm and gently stimulate them. Best of all were Mozart's *Symphony number 40*, his *Clarinet quintet* and *Oboe quartet*, and Bach played on guitar. The Mozart quintet especially: the violins just had to start their introduction before the entry of a clarinet, and the magic began. Emotional turbu-

lence subsided. Near-chaos would dissolve in peace as that quintet progressed. At the end, the children would be nearly asleep but in a state of alert calm.

All the activities of my classroom could be seen and heard by the other children. My colleagues could use these as additional stimuli for the children they were working with. They in turn observed my children and made helpful suggestions. Our teamwork ran beautifully, smoothly, with mutual affection and support for one another. A favourite cameo illustrates:

At the end of one morning when we were, as usual, exhausted by our efforts, little Suzie's mother came to fetch her from my classroom. I liked this young woman especially, but today she trailed clouds. Picking up her fairy-like child, she launched into a screaming diatribe. She was disappointed – she'd expected Suzie to make more progress than this. What was I doing? Wasting her time, that's what. Then, child on hip, she stormed off to her car. I was too shocked to speak. Everyone stood frozen. When she was out of earshot, Nancy moved closer to me, smiled and pronounced, "Funny place. Funny people." Then all five of us laughed until the tears came and we weren't tired any more. (A year later this young mother apologised and gave me a lovely piece of pottery she'd made, but of course I'd forgiven her instantly. In her position, who wouldn't be desperate?)

Dressed in a denim skirt, I spent most of my time on the floor, holding children in my arms and playing with them. In time they'd emerge from their cocoon of apathy, start moving around and playing with each other. When they'd learned to be mischievous and naughty, they were "too smart" for my group and promoted to the next level. The dear little people in my care are still vivid in memory, their names calling up faces and smiles: Chips, Lenie, Hendrik, Karin ...as in this fragment I came across years ago (was it called "Child Faces"?)

*I wonder where they go ... faces ... that come and smile
and stay awhile*

And pass like little flakes of snow.

The Johannesburg-based psychologist who'd helped me survive my divorce had a satellite practice in the town where I taught. Some of his clients were children and young people with emotional disturbances, and he wanted a remedial teacher. Pleased at this opportunity, I accepted his offer.

An hour after finishing work at the training centre, I'd begin my second job. As the number of clients increased, soon I was working through the afternoon to early evening, and Saturday morning. I enjoyed each of these interesting people.

Soberly I introduced myself to the children as "Mugwump" and addressed each child by a pet name I made up on the spot

for him or her. “Woozle” was one such name: it suited that little boy and made him feel secure. One furious eleven year-old was determined not to smile. I pretended to be hard of hearing when Charlotte gave me her name and insisted, with a straight face, on calling her “Chocolate.” After trying several times to correct me, she gave a shrewd glance at my eyes and broke into a grin, accepting the name. With most of them needing reading practise, I used A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* books as “text-books,” pretending to be very serious as I changed into a silly voice to read aloud the zany passages. Making up droll tunes to go with the Pooh “hums” or songs, my reading them aloud as songs made the children smile. Naturally, when it was their turn to read, they too had to use a special voice for each character. Trying to achieve this, they forgot they hated reading. The older ones, of course, got a different approach.

The venue for this teaching was the middle room of a little box house the psychologist had bought for this practice. The front spaces were for reception and the room in which he consulted two days a week. A door off the reception area led to the middle room, windowless, which I transformed into a fantasy of outdoors in autumn: dry grasses, tall bamboo, a round tumbleweed hung from the ceiling light, scenes of autumn leaves on the walls.

A door on the far side of the teaching room led to a jumble of rooms at the back: a self-contained flat that included two bedrooms, a kitchen, bathroom and living room, with its own back door entrance. A live-in caretaker was needed. Did I want to move in there?

I considered carefully. My bright one-room flat, with a private nook for my daughter, had been a welcome relief at first. But after a year and a half, I realised another deep need: earth under my feet. Living high off the ground, I began to feel like a bird in a cage. I'd brought with me two large clay pots holding *Nandina domestica* (Sacred Japanese bamboo) – beautiful tree-like shrubs. One stood at my window, one at the door. A tiny azalea in a bowl on my desk looked like a miniature tree, a bonsai. But these weren't enough. I needed growing things around me rooted in the earth – trees, grass, natural flowers like the nasturtiums brightening a dry patch at the entrance to my block of flats. (I'd persuaded the caretaker that it was a good idea for me to pick them, they'd bloom more freely, so I often had some on my desk.)

It took all my courage, but I decided to go. The back rooms of the house were cramped and dark. The grounds behind were a mess. Before moving in, I removed some interior walls and painted the rest a creamy yellow, with white gloss trim. Outside, I cleared the mess and planted trees – a cluster of white

birch trees surrounded by Chinese maples, calling this group of saplings my “great Canadian forest.” Daisies and colourful nasturtiums were soon tumbling around my back door.

My pre-teen child had her own large bedroom with new white furniture, curtains and linens in the colours she liked. I drove her to and from school and the homes of her friends. Weekends and holidays she visited her father.

My two jobs used up my energy and imagination from early morning to early evening and Saturday mornings. I joined the nearby Anglican church, attracted by the liturgy and tradition of fine music, and sang in the choir. Weekend afternoons I spent gardening.

Inside, I created a home that satisfied me.

My antique inlaid desk and carved chest, my trousseau (kitchenware and linens) and beautiful things (books, paintings, china) – all brought from Canada, were a good start. A chair bought by my parents and my piano, supplemented by a single bed and bookcase from Ernest’s house, made up the rest. I didn’t even have a table.

Looking for essential furniture, I saw that cheap pine cost the same as lovely old pieces found in a warehouse in Johannesburg, filled with soon-to-be antiques from England. I thought these dilapidated pieces gorgeous; restoration was included in the purchase price; post-dated cheques were accept-

ed. I bought some beautiful items, affordable because they weren't yet fashionable. They're now very covetable.

Evenings I closed the curtains, lit candles and played the piano for hours on end, with no fear of disturbing neighbours on the other side of communal walls. Surrounded by lovely old furniture, paintings (mostly watercolours by unknown artists) and soft lighting from old lamps illuminating my books, I found peace. I even found I could read books again.

IT STARTED WITH A WEDDING

Bridesmaid at a wedding? And sing a solo too, please?

This took me by surprise. But I liked the family, they'd been kind to me, so I complied. The song I sang was one my mother taught me, a Latvian Spiritual, unaccompanied. I felt pretty that evening.

A charming man invited me to dance. Our movements blended effortlessly. His overtures began.

"Your wife won't be impressed."

"She's dead."

"A likely story, new one on me."

Mid-movement, he stopped, expostulated, "I can show you the death certificate!"

That's how I started going out with P.

We enjoyed each other's company. He was considerate and generous. A senior bank executive, he undertook the correspondence needed for the education authorities to recognize my Canadian teaching qualifications. After months of effort, he succeeded. Now I could command an appropriate salary.

Still recovering from the emotional scars of his wife's suicide, now he relaxed enough to play guitar again, a talent he'd neglected for years. While he played, I'd sing. He introduced me to his friends, one of whom led a dance band. I was invited

to sing with them on gigs. This was fun! My repertoire now included some songs popular in the seventies (“Your Spanish Eyes” ...) and from the shows (“Don’t Cry for Me, Argentina” ...).

After about a year, I realised that P wanted the freedoms of being a bachelor. We ended our special relationship amicably, remaining very good friends. How important this friendship was became apparent shortly afterwards.

The news of Ernest struck me like a thunderbolt.

He was about to marry. My child delivered the news. His girlfriend, the one whom the whole town knew about before I did, when I was still married to him, was the one he’d chosen. She’d now divorced her husband. My hopes that he’d realise he loved me, show that he missed me, had been doomed from the start, but I didn’t know this when I left him.

My child delivered the second blow immediately. She didn’t want to live with me any more. She wanted to live with her father, his new wife and her three children.

I understood her attraction to “an instant family,” but not the mounting hostility she’d been showing me. Stunned, I said nothing. I let her go.

Her father fetched her. He looked victorious. She left without a word or backward glance.

On the morning of the wedding, a Saturday early in December, I made coffee in my sunny kitchen and admired again the exquisite little azalea on the table by the window. Given to me years earlier by Ernest, I loved this plant – she was usually in flower with delicate pink blossoms. Then I taught my remedial classes for the morning. Promptly at one o'clock, my friend P, who was concerned about the effects on me of this news, picked me up. Driving to the Johannesburg zoo, he took me on a long walk to release some of my tension. After a snack of some cheerful junk food en route back to my place, he dropped me in time to meet his date for the evening. I went straight to my living room. (*Only on Sunday morning did I see, upon entering my kitchen, that my azalea was black. Yes, black. All her leaves hung limp and black. Mind whirling, I put her outside in a sheltered place, expecting that my eyes were deceiving me. The next day she'd be her normal lovely self. The next day, Monday morning, the leaves were crisp and black. She was more than dead. She looked blasted by atomic radiation.*)

The wedding day wasn't yet over. It was a beautiful day, early summer, four o'clock in the afternoon, but I closed all the curtains, lit the candles and played the piano - my evening routine. My Otto Bach, an upright piano bought second-hand with earnings from my singing and my parents' help, got me through evenings, weekends and holidays - the times when I

couldn't forget my pain in hard work.

While my mind was reading the music and guiding my fingers, my imagination was freed from the stress of thinking, free to venture elsewhere.

The question arose as though asked by someone beside me.

Lucretia, what do you want out of life now?

I couldn't reply, so the voice continued.

You've always wanted to be an opera singer. That dream's smashed now. Impossible. You took marriage as a second option. That dream's smashed too. So what do you have left? Pause.

A lot of years ahead and all you have is merely some money. Sure, money can't buy happiness, but it can buy something that helps. Another pause.

Why save this money for your old age when your young age has nothing to show for it?

Now I could reply.

"Okay, I'll try to buy some happiness with this money."

What kind of happiness can you buy?

"Only thing I can think of is a grand piano. I've always wanted to own a proper grand piano."

I traded in my Otto Bach and bought a grand piano - a mahogany brown beauty, Boudoir-size (G3, to be technical, meaning half-way between a Baby grand and a Concert grand). It was far too big for my small living room, so I raised the wing to make it reach up to the ceiling too. I had to walk around this piano to move from the kitchen to my bedroom. Now my living room had floor space for only two chairs and a bookshelf. Just the right proportions: music and books to fill up my living.

Evenings, after my second job was over and I'd had some bread, cheese, salad and wine for supper, I'd sit at my grand piano for three to four hours, thundering out Brahms's "Rhapsody in G minor," dreaming through Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," remembering Mademoiselle Aubut who taught me when I was a teenager and certain I'd become an opera singer. I explored new music. With the instrument singing under my hands, my feelings were released from the straitjacket where I kept them so they couldn't sabotage my attempts at survival.

Together with this music, the voice of my real self could emerge again.

Alright Lucretia, what do you want now – something else that money can buy? Pause. You've always wanted to spend time in Europe, especially Italy and France. Do it now. Spend

the six months you'd longed for since you were a teenager, the minimum time to really immerse yourself in your spiritual home.

I said yes.

My survival voice chimed in.

But what happens while I'm gone for six months or more to the lovely old furniture, paintings, china and books I've managed to gather around me? They'll be stolen within weeks (the national pastime appeared to be theft out of houses left unattended more than a few hours).

"Okay, so I put them into storage."

Then I pictured myself returning to this sad life where all I did was work, where nobody loved me and apparently never would, and flinched at the prospect.

Go back to Canada. You love the land. That will be enough. Join a convent in Quebec, a teaching order. This will give you the human contact and commitment you need.

"Okay," I decided. "While I'm soaking up Europe — Italy and France — into my soul, my stuff can just as well be in storage in a container en route to Montreal. I'll go back via my parents in Miami. They'll love me and not try to get anything out of me. I need some love. Then I'll return to Quebec and carry on with my life."

This was a winter evening, July, half-way through the school year.

I phoned my parents, told them my plans, leaving out the part about returning to Quebec. I informed the principal of the training centre that I'd be resigning at the end of the school year, early in December. I told my daughter I was leaving. She made no response, seeming not to care.

Then I had one of my "Wisdom Dreams." When I awoke the next morning, I understood she was hiding her feelings. She wanted to escape from where she was living. I arranged to take her out for dinner that same evening. At a fast-food outlet, I sat her down to a chicken dinner and waited until she'd finished. As she put down her fork, I announced, "My child, I'm taking you back with me." Her response electrified me. This is what she wanted.

I informed her father of my plan, assuring him my parents would pay for her to fly back every Christmas to visit him, until I was working and paying for this myself. A week later he phoned.

"I've been speaking to my lawyer. You may not take the child with you."

My mind de-railed. I wanted to kill him.

During the divorce hearing which Ernest hadn't attended,

I wasn't allowed to give the real reasons for these proceedings. Afterwards, I'd paid a high price for the silence that suited everyone else. It wasn't only heartbreaking, it wasn't fair and now I'd had too much.

I saw the future unreeling in black-and-white images on a film. I'm driving to his house, ringing the doorbell. As soon as he appears, I shoot him twice in the chest. Then I'm driving to the police station on the next street over, walking into the charge office, putting the pistol down on the counter and saying, "I did it. I don't care if I spend the rest of my life in prison."

And what effect will this have on your child? asked the other voice.

"No, I can't do this to her, but how to stop myself?"

I phoned my friend P. Told him what I was planning to do unless someone stopped me. Please, would he come?

It was mid-afternoon, he was a senior official at the bank, a forty-five minute drive away. In thirty minutes he was standing at my door, hand outstretched, eyes concerned and smiling, "You can give it to me." I passed him my pistol.

Now I understood the term "crime of passion." Given the right mix of hellish elements, anyone could succumb. Without my friend P, I'd have been one of those "criminals."

No option but to endure. Didn't know what I'd do about

leaving my child, but another idea was brewing, a risky one. I tried not to think about it. (Realised later it wouldn't have worked, but I was desperate then, no longer rational.)

Months before the departure date, I bought my one-way ticket, hid it in my bureau drawer. I arranged with an international removals company the date they'd come and pack my things for shipping in a container to Canada. I had buyers for the furniture I wasn't going to take, and for my car. My piano, of course, was going with me.

Nothing on earth is going to stop me from going back. Secure in this promise to myself and the plans in place, I bided my time. Informed my friends I was leaving in December.

Someone whom I hadn't seen for a long time invited me to a party, a *braai* (barbeque). Very reluctantly, I accepted.

MEETING

A huge oak tree shaded the large gathering. I knew most of these people.

My hostess, Cecile, and her husband John were renowned for their hospitality. An interesting mix of journalists, artists, intellectuals and others gathered under this tree in summer, around their long dining table in winter. I'd been a frequent guest in earlier years. Invariably there'd be passionate discussions of social and political issues, mostly in Afrikaans. From the start, I'd been determined to understand and participate. Listening, I identified key words, concepts, then raised my own questions – in Afrikaans, of course. This, and trying to read the Afrikaans newspapers specialising in political discourse, had developed my grasp of the language.

She and I had presented programmes together - she read poetry and I sang. Since having to stop singing, I hardly ever saw these friends now. It seemed a long time since I'd last been to their place.

I observed one man from a distance. My hostess had introduced him briefly as her brother.

Her brother? I'd known the family for years. Father was a retired senior magistrate, a formidable personage, magisterial in his interactions. Her two sisters and their husbands, strong

people too; other relatives, their children. A brother? Would this be the person referred to briefly when only family were present, conversation in a lull (I'd be hardly noticed, sitting quietly among them), and a voice would ask softly in Afrikaans, "Have you heard from Boeta in the Cape?" (This province was so far away that for most practical purposes it could have been another country.) The reply was usually a sad, "No." When I gave the matter any thought, I assumed the family was protecting some painful secret about its "own" from scrutiny by outsiders. Was there a problem, some incurable sickness or disgrace?

"Boeta" was a familial term for "brother". Now here he was.

My hostess introduced me to more people I didn't know, especially (and she made a point of this) a lean man with an expression that matched. He was professor at a nearby university in a field relevant to my profession as teacher.

Ugh, dried-up old stick, I said to myself and turned away.

Jezebel, I read in his eyes as he took in my gold loop earrings, hair tinted a fiery red to warn men off, and turned away.

Mutual loathing at first sight.

(Years later I learned she'd concocted this occasion to introduce me to this bachelor, hoping he might interest me and I'd change my mind about leaving South Africa. As an af-

terthought, she'd invited her brother, staying at the naval mess in Pretoria. He'd been there for five months now and must be lonely, a thousand miles from his home in the Cape.)

Hoping I could make my getaway soon, I surveyed the forty or so people under the tree.

On the far side, I could just make out this brother looking very sad. *Depressed?* He was passing some writings around (*his own writing?*) for others to read. *Oh no. Definitely not getting in line to read those. That big sad ole' bear - I don't want to know his troubles. Men have no heart anyway, so they can't possibly get hurt.* Already I was angry with him.

Now he was standing in front of me, a tall man, trying to engage me in conversation. I tried to get rid of him with one-syllable replies. Yes. No. Then I realised he was framing his questions so this wouldn't work, forcing me to reply with a paragraph.

Partway through my third paragraph, I decided, *Oh no, I'm not going to be polite to people I don't want to talk to. I don't have to. I can be rude if I want.*

But you were brought up to be polite to people.

"It doesn't matter. I won't ever see them again," I retorted out loud.

"What do you mean?" asked the man in front of me.

"I'm going back to Canada."

“No, you’re not going back to Canada.”

A red-hot fury flashed through me. Yet again some man was assuming he knew what was good for me! My right foot wanted, with all its might, to kick his left shin. But true to my lady-like upbringing, I didn’t kick him. Instead I spun around, called my daughter, and left the gathering without even saying goodbye and thank you to my hostess. Yes, being rude to men was my new rule, and I didn’t worry about collateral damage.

Ten days later, at two-twenty in the afternoon, I was deep in remedial teaching when the phone rang. Everyone still in contact with me knew they must not phone partway into these hour-long sessions: parents were paying for this time I spent on their troubled children. I was immediately irritated.

The voice on the other end, a man sounding hesitant, identified himself as Cecile’s brother. Now my annoyance escalated by several notches: he was the one who’d so angered me at the braai. I told him I was busy, call back after seven o’clock. He did.

“How did you get my telephone number?” I demanded.

“My sister.”

Of course.

He invited me to accompany him to the naval Spring Ball. Held annually in Pretoria in those years, this was a prime event

in the social calendar. Anybody in her right mind would jump at the chance. I wanted him to go away.

The best way to get rid of him would be to set ten impossible conditions, like the ten tasks from the fairy tales or the opera *Turandot*. If the hero fails at one of these, he gets beheaded.

I set him ten conditions. If he managed to achieve the first five (these were reasonable to difficult), the following ones (unreasonable to impossible) would finish him off completely. Figured I was safe. He accepted the challenge graciously and hung up. I thought that was the end of him.

Five days later, in the evening, at an acceptable time for someone to phone me, he called to report he'd accomplished the first five, was now working on numbers six and seven. I wondered at his gentleness. *This is a remarkable man. Anybody else would be nasty, or gone altogether — and with good reason.* My curiosity piqued, I decided to help with the following two tasks and waived the rest.

He phoned again, inviting me to lunch the following Sunday at the naval mess, together with his sister and her husband. "It must be difficult for you to think of spending an evening with a stranger in another town," he pointed out. It would be easier for me if I knew him a bit better first. He'd arranged that Cecile and John drive me to Pretoria for the four of us to lunch

together, five days before the ball.

During lunch, they exchanged family news in a way that included me. But halfway through the first course, when it seemed I wasn't listening, Cecile quietly asked her brother in Afrikaans if he had "heard anything from the Cape." His reply was equally soft, "She says she isn't coming."

"Oh, Boeta, I'm so sorry."

Both of them dipped their heads towards their soup, but not fast enough to hide the tears that sprang to their eyes.

Now I understood. *His wife of many years is refusing to come and join him in this new posting of his career. He has a right to be full of grief — a sad old bear. This is the only appropriate response.* I respected him.

On the appointed Friday afternoon, in the parking area behind the training centre, all of us teachers were unlocking our cars to start the weekend. My colleagues worried about me, I knew. They cared about the sad times I'd had. Now I could give them something to smile about.

Tossing my books into the back of my car, I remarked cheerfully, "Now I'm on my way to the Naval Ball in Pretoria."

Their eyes widened at this social coup. And they knew there was no man in my life. Then I added in reply to the unvoiced questions,

“Oh, it’s with some naval officer. I don’t care about the man, but the dancing should be fun.”

And off I headed to Pretoria, ball gown in the back of the car and a small suitcase. I’d be staying overnight in the Naval Mess. A colleague of my host had been posted to South West Africa for a while. He’d arranged with her that I use her room for the night. I knew I’d be safe from surprise predatory behaviour (*what happened after he’d had a few drinks?*) since I wasn’t relying on him to drive me anywhere, and the room being lent to me would have a door that locked.

To drive from the city of Johannesburg to Pretoria (really just a town in those days) was via circuitous roads, confusing for someone unfamiliar with the way. A direct highway, now a superhighway, had yet to be constructed. The route into Pretoria and to the Naval Mess was still unclear to me despite careful instructions from my host.

At the entry, instead of turning right into the centre of town, I turned left, only discovering my mistake after many minutes of driving farther and farther away into the countryside. It took some time before I could find a safe place to turn around. Backtracking the way I’d come, I now encountered rush hour traffic and only approached the select suburb, site of the Naval Mess, a full forty-five minutes late.

Even with my don’t-care attitude, I was embarrassed at

being so spectacularly late. Speeding down a tree-lined boulevard in the area that ought to be the right one, I spotted a man in white standing upright at the curb. *Uh oh, maybe a naval uniform (summer "whites"). Maybe I'm near the Mess.* Slowed down, backed up. There he was, waiting for me. Standing at attention like the naval officer he was, awaiting an honoured guest.

Smiling, he greeted me and directed me into the secure parking area behind the Mess. Escorted me to the room I was to occupy. It turned out to be a small suite, lovely. His spirit was courteous, gentle. I was embarrassed at my earlier bitchiness and inappropriate lateness. Now I wanted to show him I knew better and appreciated his gentlemanly behaviour.

Yes, there was time for me to rest, wash and change into my dancing dress before the formal reception line. Here naval members and their partners would be presented to the Admiral and other dignitaries before going into the hall for the dinner dance. Nic would come to the room to fetch me at seven o'clock.

I changed into an enchanting ball gown my Mom had sent me: it was in rainbow colours of sunrise that beautifully offset my skin and hair. Little or no jewellery was needed except for my usual gold earrings, but I was still fastening a gold bracelet and struggling with the clasp, when a shadow appeared outside

the frosted glass door. *Oh no, he's ten minutes early!* The shadow waited. I was listening to the radio and the seven o'clock news was about to begin. Precisely at the stroke of seven, the shadow raised his hand and knocked on the door. Demoralised, I opened. Couldn't yet get the clasp fastened (my fingers had turned to jelly) and prettily asked for his help. *Show him I'm feminine after all.* Then he presented me with a box. *Oh no, probably a gaudy corsage of stiff chrysanthemums that will ruin this soft dress.* Opening it, I found an exquisite orchid of a pale jade green that perfectly complemented the colours of my dress and my hair.

At dinner, we enjoyed each other's company so much that we were late in joining the others on the dance floor. By this time we were so at ease with each other that we decided simultaneously to go back to our rooms and put on more comfortable shoes for dancing. We did, sharing a sense of mischief at our disregard for "what was expected."

But it was the conversation that drew me to him. I felt as though I'd known him all my life. He reminded me of my brother Wycliffe (I was closest to Wyc and Nic reminded me of him). I felt we'd grown up in similar families. I understood the dynamics. We had the same values. We discovered we liked each other enormously. The foundation for trust was already there.

The dance was ending. As a courtesy, Nic invited me to his room for coffee. *Oh no, now he'll drop the mask and make a pass. This will be scary. He's a big man, how will I fight him off?* In his "cabin," so-called according to naval tradition, I saw that he had a suite of rooms as befitting his status as the most senior living-in member of the Mess. His sitting room was tastefully furnished in the style of an Edwardian gentleman, with dignified prints of ancient sailing ships mounted over the fireplace and old brass, naval memorabilia. One wall held bookshelves full of books which he evidently read. His space was tidy, gracious, the kind of place where I felt at home.

Not taking a chance though, I perched on the edge of the sofa while he prepared instant coffee. Soon afterwards he stood up and escorted me to the door, down the hall, up to the next floor and the room where I was staying. At the door, he stepped back (no attempt to push his way in) then waited outside until he heard me turn the key in the lock.

Pleasant shock. *What a gentleman!*

Found myself a tiny bit disappointed. *Doesn't he think I'm worth chasing?*

GENTLEMAN

He even hugged like a gentleman.

That came later, of course.

After the ball, he phoned. Could he take me to lunch the next weekend?

His car was in the Cape, along with everything else, so he came to my town by train. We drove out into the country to a private hotel. In this quiet place on the edge of a dam, you could walk on soft earthy paths through a small woods, then enjoy a simple, delicious meal. After our walk and lunch, we sat side by side on a terrace overlooking the water, listening to bird calls of late afternoon. We didn't need words.

The tension I'd been living with felt like a stone on my back that I could put down now. Suddenly I wanted sleep. Could I please rest my head on his shoulder for a short nap?

Of course.

For the first time in years, I relaxed. Even while dozing, I was aware of his caring, undemanding presence. Realised I could trust him. Later, he recalled his own sense of peace in a story, "*Sielsrus*" (Soul's Rest).

Phoning the next day, he sensed my disappointment at having to wait (*Such a long time!*) for another weekend, when we could be together again.

The same colleague who'd lent me her room, lent him her car. Now he could visit me after work in the afternoon and on weekends.

Late one afternoon, after a goodbye hug, he drew back, saying sadly, "But you're going away."

What? Then remembered my one-way ticket. *What a stupid idea!*

Four weeks after the Naval Ball, we quietly understood that we belonged together. Six weeks after meeting under the tree, we wanted to marry.

He phoned his wife of twenty-three years. She confirmed her earlier letter: she wasn't going to leave the Cape to join him in his new posting in Pretoria, where he'd already been for more than five months. She refused to leave her millionaire boyfriend of ten years. He could have his divorce.

She put it in writing. He took this letter to an attorney who set the formalities in motion.

I phoned my parents in Florida. "I'm not coming back after all."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to marry this man!"

Nic was standing behind me. Too excited to think straight, I must have imagined they could see him.

“Who?” That was Mom.

Dad listened, dumb-struck, on an extension.

“Cecile’s brother.”

They’d met her and the family on visits to South Africa and liked them very much. Generously, they didn’t sound disappointed at my not “coming home to them.” I would visit instead, bringing Nic to meet them.

Living with her father and his new wife, my thirteen year-old child had no idea of our courtship.

I took Nic to meet her, explaining his place in the family she knew and liked. When she heard we were going to marry, she sprang delightedly into his arms.

We’d made a commitment to each other. We needed to confirm this.

We agreed that marriage is a bond between two people which is made by them or broken by them. Legal documents (“pieces of paper”) to confirm the bond made or broken by these two people, are a necessary nuisance that follow, generally very late.

Therefore, on 8 October 1979, we stood together in my pretty kitchen and declared before God our commitment to each other. The paperwork could follow when it was ready. Then we toasted our Private Wedding ceremony with *Twee*

Jongegezellen white wine, labelling the empty bottle with the date and keeping it. Every anniversary we added to our collection of labelled bottles until we got to twenty, with prospects of more to come. We were collecting more beautiful things by that time anyway.

Nic moved in with me the same day.

We're both hurt and sad. We heal one another.

For too long we've been without any comfort. It's been so hard ...

We can keep each other going for the weeks or months it will take for the world to catch up with us.

Does it matter what people might say or think when their opinion didn't help either of us in the past?

Now we'll order our lives according to what is good for us.

The following Saturday, we took the next step. Driving to all the jewellery shops we could find, we looked for the right symbols of the bond we'd made.

I didn't want another expensive set of rings: these hadn't helped with my previous marriage. Nic couldn't wear a ring: he'd nearly lost a finger years ago when his wedding band got caught in some machinery. He'd always wanted a crucifix to wear around his neck. A crucifix was anathema to the tradi-

tional views of his people and the church he'd been brought up in — which he didn't attend out of disgust with its attitudes. Now he followed his heart. We found exactly the right crucifix. Made in Italy, it looked like a sculpture that could have been designed by El Greco. I asked the jeweller to fill it out with more gold, to an appropriate heft for the big man who would be wearing it. For myself, I chose a plain gold band, paying for both with more of the money not being kept for my old age. Nic couldn't access his salary, paid directly into a joint account managed by his (still legal) wife. So it came about that, apart from God before whom we'd made our vows, our witness was the jeweller, a Jew whose name we didn't ask.

We knew peace.

Leaving early in the morning, Nic would drive to work in Pretoria, more than an hour's drive away. I rode my bicycle to the training centre, returning to the house in time for remedial teaching in the afternoon. Evenings, we talked endlessly, amazed at discovering how suited we were to each other.

One Saturday morning not long after we'd started our lives together, there was a rushing sound outside. A car stopped in the dusty driveway. My colleague and dear friend, Maureen stood at the door. She was head of department where we worked with the littlest kids. It was she who'd stimulated my

interest in this new direction and seen to it that I was reinstated at the school. She'd earned the right to look over my shoulder.

Firmly she announced the reason for her visit. Addressing Nic, she said she'd come to check him out. She'd had enough of seeing Lucretia getting used and hurt by other people. She'd learned that he was even living with me! Now he had to convince her that he wasn't more of the usual bad news.

I invited her in, delighted that here was someone who cared enough about me to intervene.

Unfazed, Nic engaged her in conversation.

After a happy visit of about an hour, Maureen got up, shook his hand, pronounced him okay and yes, she would be pleased to attend our wedding.

The bureaucratic process of a formal divorce had to be endured. The courts would resume only after the end-of-year vacation.

We'd arranged to visit my parents for that Christmas. My one-way ticket, traded in, served as part payment for a return ticket for Nic and me, using the last of the nest egg that I wouldn't be keeping for my old age. My parents paid for their grandchild to accompany us.

On the plane, I was overcome with foreboding.

My intended husband needed to know more about my family, especially my father, about whom I had strongly ambivalent feelings. My daughter sat across the aisle from us, within arm's reach but not earshot of our quiet conversation. I told Nic the things that bothered me about my father, even the things I felt were awful. Wanted to spare him more nasty surprises, especially after my bad treatment of him in the beginning. When I got to the end, he raised his glass of red wine and pronounced, "I think I'll like the old man." I could have cried from relief. My in-flight menu saved from that occasion shows where I slopped my wine onto it.

Emerging from arrivals at the airport in Miami, we got separated by the crowd. Still clutching my child's hand, I couldn't hold onto Nic too and he ended up several layers of crowd behind me.

There were Mom and Dad! I ran to hug my Mom. Seconds later, I saw my Dad firmly embracing Nic. *How does he know this is the right man? My father has never in his life, as far as I know, accepted or liked anybody outside of his own blood family. He doesn't even know him!*

Later, Mom told me her experience of that meeting.

As she and Dad waited outside Arrivals, she wondered what Nic would look like. Seeing me approach with their grandchild in hand, her bewilderment increased. Which of the

men in this throng was Nic? Then, she recounted, she spotted a man somewhat behind me and thought, “Oh, wow.” *How tall he stood, his dignity, the expression on his face.* She cautioned herself, “Eloise, with your luck, this wouldn’t be him.” Then he came up from behind and took my hand – this must have been seconds before I broke away to hug her.

They adored him to the day they died. From the start, my parents took his part against mine in any dispute that might arise between us.

Upon our arrival in their home, I announced to my father that Nic and I were living together as man and wife and we intended to continue. I needn’t have worried. The guest room, a suite actually, had been prepared for us, its double bed already made up. My child was in a separate bedroom farther away. Mom says she and Dad would awaken in the mornings to the sound of my delighted laughter coming from our bedroom, ringing through the house.

“He made you laugh. You were happy. That’s all we wanted.”

DREAMER'S STORY

"You're not crazy. It's the people out there who think they don't need help who are."

Grey-eyed Minerva, I thought. This man's eyes brought to mind the Roman goddess of Wisdom, said to have grey eyes. Turning away from him, I looked out the window at the winter afternoon. My old certainties were being swept away, new fears were taking their place. I agreed to attend The Group.

Four couples plus myself and Grey Eyes made up the circle. One young woman reminded me of myself. Macho, her husband, sat with an expression of smug boredom. I found myself hating him, directing hostile remarks to him. Giving vent to my own anger for the first time, I was surprised at the new feeling of confidence.

Then came an exercise: we were rearranged into new couples. Each person had to find attractive qualities to praise about the new partner and tell the other one honestly. Grey Eyes, mischievous, paired me with Macho. Now I was surprised to find myself responding to his charm, sincerely complimenting him, glowing in his flattering attention. Afterwards, Grey Eyes gently teased me.

I pondered, then, what I'd learned. "Yes, I am susceptible. But not willing to accept the consequences. Therefore," I con-

cluded, "I shall do without."

My sanity confirmed, I decided to be pleased with myself and go on alone.

I moved into a new stark space. Now I dared to admit my own power, face my loneliness. Eventually the tears dried up. Not once did I regret my choice.

Like every desert, this one too gave tantalizing moments of beauty. One solitary Saturday afternoon in a park, I picked up a feather. It was small, soft and grey. Holding it against the light, I studied it, half-remembering something. It was the words of a song:

A feather from the mountain goose
In the highest crags by Wupperthal
Fell in my hand, and breathing there
My longing reaches out for you.
I bring this token here to you
That you may know how I love you.

Carefully I put the feather away, in a jewel box in my bedroom.

The song, the words, returned to haunt me at unexpected times.

There were encounters with beings I'd never imagined to meet: Badger, Vulture, Porcupine, Rats, Wolverine, Cobra, migrating Wolf and utterly charming Fox. After each one, the melody and its words would reassert themselves in the ensuing quietness.

Years went by. Sometimes I opened my jewel box to see if the soft small feather was still breathing.

Then I was jolted by a new presence: Pilgrim. Annoyed at being disturbed, I tried to chase him away. Pilgrim held to his own course. It ran parallel to my own dreaming. Together we went on, at peace with ourselves and with each other.

One day Pilgrim asked, "What would you do if you and I had to move to a desert place?" Thinking a bit, I replied, "First I'd create order, then I'd make it beautiful."

Pilgrim smiled, "Yes. That's why I married you."

Startled, I thought of the feather in my jewel box, but still didn't speak of it.

Pilgrim continued in his way, close beside me.

One afternoon he came in joyous from the back garden.

“Dreamer, look what I found. Here, it's for you.”

Into my hand he put a feather, small, soft and grey, then smiled into my eyes. I didn't explain why the tears came suddenly. “Show me where you found it.” He took me to the spot on the grass where the feather had lain.

I went back to my jewel box, removed the feather of promise and put in its place the one my love had given me. Returning to the back garden, I carefully laid the feather of promise on the place where my love had picked up ours. In my heart, I sang to the far-away bird.

More years passed, bringing with them illness, tiredness. Sometimes I considered sadly how I'd changed with age. The old doubts began to return: I couldn't be loved. Not now, surely.

We sat together one afternoon, quietly preparing fruit from our winter garden. Once more, I had to dare the truth.

“Would you,” I began, but he didn't let me finish.

“Yes.” Pilgrim smiled into my eyes again. “I would marry you today.” And then, “You are one of a kind.”

Not crazy, I mused. Only a Dreamer. Together with him. Pilgrims together.

— Poem “Die berggans” by Boerneef set to music by De Vil-

liers. Translation by LEP.

SIELSRUS

We stopped the car outside the house. I noted the moth-eaten hedge in front and the unassuming little house retreating behind it. *He took me at my word when I said I didn't care what a house looked like from the outside, it's the inside that counts.* But the street was lined on both sides by tall, graceful old trees (*witstinkhout* – *celtis Africanus*) that reminded me of the fountain-shaped Dutch elms I missed from Canada, and all the houses were ageing gently. On the roofed-in front stoep, I observed the old red tile flooring and the high ceiling of Victorian-era pressed steel. A solid wooden door ornamented with a beautiful stained glass window was flanked by similar windows on either side. My spirits rose. A lady opened the door in response to our ring, revealing a gracious old house, high ceilings of more pressed steel, glowing wooden floors, and a view out the back windows to a private garden that stretched far away out of sight.

“This is exactly right!” I exclaimed to Nic.

“Sir, that’s what you said when I opened for you on Thursday!” she exclaimed to Nic.

Only then did I say hello. And, we’re glad we’ve found our house.

I worked too far away to go house-hunting with him on

weekday afternoons. Having already ascertained that our tastes are identical, I'd given him *carte blanche* to choose our house without me. That's why he could make an offer during his lunch break that expired at three o'clock that afternoon. Two other interested people still had to consult their partners. Minutes before the deadline, his offer was accepted. I had to wait until Saturday afternoon, after my morning of remedial teaching, before my first glimpse of our future home.

The first truly free choice of my life was to marry Nic instead of returning to Canada. The second one followed. I could stop teaching to devote all my time and energy to the singing career I longed for. This meant we'd have to live on Nic's salary and move into defence force accommodation, as he'd used in the Cape. On the other hand, I could carry on teaching full-time, and use any extra energy for singing as an avocation. With two professional salaries, we could to pay off the bond on a house. I chose this option. Owning our own home would be good for our marriage. Somehow I'd manage to sing anyway.

Moving in after returning from visiting my parents, our spirits expanded. Here was the right setting for our new lives. "*Sielsrus*," Nic named it, referring to the "soul's rest" we'd found together that afternoon at the dam. We discovered that this lovely old house, nearly a hundred years old (antique, by local standards), had her own resident ghost. She was a shy

soul with her own favourite places and times to appear. We welcomed her presence. She seemed to be blessing us in her house.

Family, friends and colleagues filled the church on the day of our marriage, which followed the traditional Anglican ceremony. I wore my mother's creamy-white satin and lace dress – as for my first wedding. “I think this dress deserves a second chance,” I confided to Mom during our visit with her. “Yes,” she agreed, and suggested what I could substitute for the veil and bouquet usual at a first wedding - good ideas, which I used. My daughter was a supportive bridesmaid. She fastened the millions of buttons up the back of my dress and soothed me. Preparing for this wedding in the flat of my about-to-be in-laws, my hands shook so much that she had to practically dress me. Ironical: now when I knew better, I had brains enough to be scared about getting married. My husband's father whom I loved, “Pa,” the legendary magistrate, stood in for my own father, escorting me on his arm down the aisle. Nic and I exchanged our vows in Afrikaans and English, according to who was speaking. The song “*Panis Angelicus*” (César Franck) had been played on the violin for my first marriage. Now my dear friend and voice teacher, Annie, played it on the organ as a solo with such speaking intensity I could follow the words of both verses. That's when I cried.

Nic was handsome in his naval uniform, a ceremonial version of “summer whites.” His fellow officers saluted our marriage by forming a guard of honour at the exit of the church. We emerged under their crossed swords making an arch above us.

The celebration afterwards was a foretaste of the good times to come. It started in the Naval Mess where we’d first got to know each other four months earlier. The arrangement was simple: a big round table of cheese and wine, and happy company mixing around it. Too soon, our time was up. Nearly four o’clock, we were supposed to leave. “Boeta, you paid for all of this, didn’t you?” asked one of his three sisters. “Yes.” Acting in concert, they swept up the remaining cheese and wine into the big white tablecloth and carried it out the door. “We’ll continue at your place!” At the door of our house, Nic carried me over the threshold while our friend Mike thundered out Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March” on my grand piano. More wine and cheese at home, added to that from the Mess, fuelled the party for another three hours. At seven o’clock Nic’s youngest sister Polla announced that she had to go now, her son was holding a band practice at their house and she needed to be there. We weren’t ready to stop partying, so we gathered up the remaining cheese and wine to continue at her house. As Nic and I walked through her door, the band struck up its own

version of the “Wedding March” (Here Comes the Bride). Ten o’clock that evening, sitting around the table, Nic announced to me, “I don’t know about you, but I’m going home to bed.”

From the start, we entertained frequently. Pretoria’s hot summers and mild dry winters, our big garden with swimming pool at the far end and sheltered area near the house (we developed a large patio) made it easy to invite people over for a Sunday lunch *al fresco*. The custom of visitors contributing something, wine or food, meant this didn’t become a burden to the hosts.

I loved being able to create a garden according to my own vision. Nic didn’t enjoy gardening. My daughter, now in her early teens, saw him looking on with dismay while I planted yet another tree. He thought three, maybe four trees was enough. Trying to grow a Canadian forest, I considered a few hundred was about right. She gave him the only gardening lesson he needed: “*Oom, los my Ma. Sy weet van tuinmaak.* (Uncle, leave my Mom alone. She knows about gardening.)”

He supported my efforts. In the years that followed, he appreciated the emerging paradise, especially after we’d sunk a borehole that yielded abundant water for the sprinkling system and the garden flourished in that hot, dry climate. More and more roses were added, shrubs, a herb and vegetable garden.

And trees. Small maple trees - Chinese maple which seeded prolifically, and delicate Japanese maple – both with gorgeous Autumn colours, and clumps of white birches. These dense plantings matured quickly, creating the cool leafy effect of woods in Canada. Yes, I was homesick for “my trees.” Now I could feel at home under these lovely young trees. Whenever they needed pruning, I’d have to wait until Nic was out of sight before daring to lop off a branch. He’d object vehemently if he saw me apparently hurting one of our trees.

Inside, we were equals in creating a beautiful interior. Both of us loved antiques, anything old with “soul” – a history and individuality of its own. Our hobby was to frequent the shops that sold “collectibles.” Antiques were a status symbol and usually referred to highly polished fragile items costing vast amounts of money. Before marrying Nic, I’d already bought some collectibles. Unappreciated at the time, and costing as little as the cheapest mass-produced furniture, my purchase of these apparently odd items had marked me out as eccentric. After the restoration process that came with these purchases, they were appreciated by everyone else and approached the category of antiques.

Now Nic’s dowry to our marriage became apparent. He’d come away from his first marriage with only his brass naval memorabilia, books on naval history, and two wooden boxes of

tools. But he had an artist's vision and a craftsman's skill in turning his vision to reality. For example, he created several beautiful Art Nouveau-style lamps from disparate pieces found lying around musty shops. He loved wood. He saw the potential for graciousness in unlikely-looking items and was a master at restoring old wooden furniture. By the time antiques or collectibles had become fashionable in South Africa, our home was filled with collectibles-turned-antiques.

There'd been no chance to apply for a teaching position in Pretoria before we flew overseas. When we returned, one day before Nic had to report for duty, I enrolled my child in a good high school close to our new home, then set about looking for work.

Three days after the school year had begun, I opened the phone book and starting at the top of the list of schools in Pretoria, asked if there was an opening caused by a teacher not reporting for work on the first or second day of school. The third school replied that yes, they needed somebody but, here was the difficulty, this was a Special School and the affected class was of autistic children. Trying to conceal my excitement, I informed the speaker of my experience in Special Education and that I'd worked with autistic children. The obviously delighted voice at the end of the line asked me to come tomorrow.

That's how I began a fascinating six months at the best-known Special School in Pretoria.

I loved my children and they did me. After a few months, the head of that department became annoyed that they showed more apparent progress than they'd made under her sporadic attentions. She decided to make life difficult for me - my first experience of professional jealousy. I just tried to endure the increasing hostility she inculcated in my colleagues as well. Nobody would inform me of staff meetings, or deign to chat with me during morning break or in the halls. This childish behaviour made me wonder who was more mentally handicapped, the staff or the children. Becoming resigned to unhappiness for the first time in my teaching experience, I bided my time.

At one monthly tea time held jointly with the staff of the main school where this department was a semi-autonomous unit, the school psychologist sidled towards me and asked if I was happy. My response was wary. He persisted, asking if I'd consider a transfer. I asked what he meant. He'd recently attended a national conference of leaders in Special Education. A school principal had approached him to ask if he could contact me: she'd heard I was now in Pretoria, she had a small school in Pretoria. She'd heard that I was "the best in the country" and would I be willing to transfer to her school? He waited for my

reply. Keeping a straight face, I said I might think about it. He persisted, giving me a private telephone number.

So that's how I arrived at a special school where the principal, Jeannette Barnard, valued me before I'd even heard about her. When her school was taken over by the government (this was happening again!), I moved with the staff and a new principal to large modern premises on the edge of the city. Here, the school administrators valued my unconventional approach because it clearly benefited the children. They gave me the deciding voice on accepting the most difficult candidates for the school – for my own class. I always said yes. Mine was the Special Class of the Special School – exactly the challenge I wanted. I was supremely happy in my work.

In only a couple of years the education department responsible for special training honoured me with invitations to write a paper as part of their research into new methods, and to demonstrate my methods to delegates at a national congress. I was given a special merit award which carried a big cash bonus.

I'd intended to maintain my Canadian citizenship. Shortly after marrying Nic, I tried to renew my passport but the Canadian embassy refused. In the eyes of the official in the office, I'd committed some sort of crime by marrying, yet again, a South African. I was unrepentant. So she gave me a four-page double-sided document to sign to renounce my Canadian citizenship. I

went away and cried, then tore it up. But I needed a passport so I could visit my parents in USA. Nic's father, "Pa" pointed out I was free to take South African citizenship, with or without my Canadian citizenship. He expedited matters so that within a few weeks, I became a naturalised South African. Later, this citizenship proved to be an advantage. I was allowed to join permanent staff in the Department of Education with rights to a pension (previously denied to me when I was a divorced "alien.")

Soon after settling into our home, I resumed singing lessons with Annie.

On Thursday afternoons after work, I'd drive the more than an hour to her home in Johannesburg and concentrate on her lesson. Now I understood better what she was teaching me. But I needed time to practise every single day. My demanding teaching job kept me at work until well into the afternoon before I arrived home to tackle all that awaited me there. The only way I could fit in practising an hour a day was to get up at four o'clock in the morning.

Monday to Friday, I'd closet myself in the big front room farthest from the bedroom where Nic was still sleeping, but across the hallway from my daughter's bedroom. After practising until five o'clock, I'd stop, get bathed, make our breakfast

and prepare to leave home by seven o'clock. Nic and I had to report for work at seven thirty. My daughter walked to school with plenty of time to get there by eight. She still remembers her sleep being disrupted by the sounds of my vocalising, then struggling through the Mozart aria "Una voce poco fa." She retaliated by thinking up some very funny rude words as her private translation.

Annie was composing cantatas on Christmas and Easter themes to librettos by Cecile, a gifted writer. She wrote solos for some of her private students, coaching us in how to sing them. We prepared these for performance in the church where she was organist and choir mistress. These were intense experiences for us who brought her creations to life. A forceful personality, she inspired fear in some people, but everyone was in awe of her. Here's an example:

Shortly before Easter, we were rehearsing *Vier Vroue by die Kruis* (Four Women at the Cross). Some of us had attended a really exuberant party at Cecile's place the Saturday evening. I had no idea I'd enjoyed so much red wine until late the next afternoon when I surfaced to make coffee. Feeling very fragile, I was careful not to speak lest I get sick. Suddenly it dawned on me there was a dress rehearsal at the church within an hour and a half! Meeting Cecile in the choir loft, I could see she too was feeling awful. Carefully, we didn't look at each other. Annie

started playing the organ. Cecile began the narrative, using all her training to keep her voice steady. My solo was imminent. It begins with a heart-rending cry to the soldiers doing the crucifying. Annie gave me a searching look (“Ready?”), played the introductory chords. I opened my mouth, hoping I wouldn’t be sick, sent out that piercing note — a loud squawk! Annie fixed me with a look like a laser beam. I was instantly sober. She played those three chords again, keeping me impaled on that look, and I sang the phrase as it was supposed to be.

For music festivals and eisteddfods, I sang arias from the operas — especially from my favourite, *La Bohème* (Puccini) — and *lieder* (art songs), especially French impressionist composers (Duparc, Fauré), winning five gold medals and I’ve forgotten how many silver ones. Annie trained me, then accompanied me on the piano for these performances, subtly guiding from the instrument. She arranged for me to sing at other occasions where Renaissance music or sacred music was required, coaching me in the appropriate styles.

Through the church where I was a choir member, I met a delightful musician attached to the music school of the Pretoria Technikon, as it was known in those years. Mandy played and taught piano. We had a natural empathy, so she was a perfect accompanist for my singing. She arranged concerts in which I was the featured soloist: a Handel tribute at a venerable theatre

in Pretoria where I sang a succession of arias; another concert at the university itself where I sang a programme with her at the piano and a colleague (Yvon Syx), soloist on guitar. Together Mandy and I worked out a programme for a cabaret evening in the church hall where we presented songs of Edith Piaff and other French-style cabaret songs. And of course, I sang for weddings. Here I was adamant: no second-class music. Only the classics, and these had to be prayers of some kind. Since I didn't need the money these people paid, I could suggest appropriate songs and veto those I didn't approve of. If they didn't like it, they could find another singer.

As though I didn't have enough to do, Nic and I started evening classes in Public Relations, a diploma course over three years for two evenings a week. He was hoping to take early retirement from the navy. Whenever possible, he wanted to make a new start and Public Relations looked like a good place to begin. To support him, I joined in these classes. Some results were: I got trained in writing Afrikaans correctly (rounding off my years of self-instruction); I got a basis in Tswana, one of several African languages that swirled around the city where we lived – and also encountered the bizarre notions of the lecturer (“They pronounce the word this way because they're too lazy to do it another way.”) I learned how organisations co-opted financial support from businesses eager to ad-

vance their own interests. I learned that theories of communication were often an exercise in unreality. I learned to be totally disgusted. So did Nic. Partway through the second year, we resigned.

Pretoria, the capital city, had recently inaugurated its own opera house, with facilities on a par with most great centres of the world. Internationally acclaimed singers performed here together with our own wonderful singers and orchestras, backed up by outstanding local stage managers and producers. We bought season's tickets. To get to the opera was a ten minute drive from our house: a couple of miles down one street straight into town and into the underground parking lot. For ten years, every third week or so, we enjoyed world-class productions from the (nearly) best seats in the house. It was fun dressing up for the occasion — everyone dressed up then. I wore long evening gowns, Nic wore a good suit. We'd arrive early for pre-performance drinks in the foyer and gaze at all the other people doing the same thing. After absorbing the gorgeous performances on stage and the intoxicating music, we'd get home about midnight: elated, drunk on the experience — and get out the wine. It took about two hours of winding down while studying the printed programme, reliving details of the performance, before we could bring ourselves to get into bed about two o'clock in the morning.

But a cold wind was encroaching. Already, in the second year of our marriage, I felt the onset of a sinister development in my body. A secret fear took hold. I tried not to think about it.

I concealed my mounting physical problems from my husband. But one Sunday morning driving home from church, I had to confess to him what I feared. Its implications were profound, not only for me but for him. I told him of the increasing weakness I experienced, the lack of co-ordination. These were neurological problems, I knew from my background of involvement with brain-injured children. As I interpreted the signs, I was probably developing multiple sclerosis.

“What does that mean?” he asked in all innocence.

“It means: in a few years I’ll be unable to walk. I’ll become an invalid and then I’ll die.” I paused, then carried on. “This isn’t fair to you. You married me as a strong woman. You deserve better. I want to give you your freedom. I want to give you a divorce so you’ll have a chance at a better life.”

He didn’t swerve as he continued driving down the street to our home.

“My darling, if you can’t walk, then I’ll pick you up in my arms and I’ll carry you.”

SENTENCE

My body wasn't obeying me.

Doctors didn't believe me. They thought I was a bored lady who didn't have enough to do. They didn't listen when I tried to explain.

Sudden amnesia, overwhelming nausea, could strike without warning. I could no longer guarantee a good performance, so I had stop singing. My body was my instrument and it was letting me down.

By ten o'clock in the morning I'd suddenly be sick with exhaustion, so I couldn't bounce around on the floor with my special-needs "babies." One morning I realised my classroom assistant had to do all the work. I went to the principal's office and told him I'd have to go.

Being on permanent staff, I could negotiate a transfer to a teachers' college attached to the University of South Africa (UNISA). This offered further in-service training to teachers by Distance education, as it was called. Lectures were mailed to the students. Since most of the lecturers wrote in Afrikaans, translators into English were in demand. I enjoyed the intellectual stimulation. Sitting at a desk, my body could rest while I did translations - one of my informal hobbies anyway. However, this college turned out to be a bastion of ultra-conservatives

at a time when the country was in political turmoil. Isolated from my colleagues, I became unhappy.

A kind contact helped me transfer to the main education library serving the entire province. Simultaneously, I enrolled in a course on Library Science via UNISA – Distance education again, but now as a student, with lectures to digest, required reading and assignments, doing all this work in the evenings. At the library, housed in a historic building in the middle of the city, I worked “back-stage” doing the subject cataloguing for all incoming books, editing the computer records, expanding the thesaurus used by this section, and writing articles as requested. Now my brain was being stimulated to its utmost. I enjoyed this hugely. I had first choice of wonderful books that crossed my desk and read voraciously.

But my body had another agenda. No matter how careful I was to eat “the right foods” and exercise by long walks every day (which only made me feel worse), I was getting more and more debilitated. Without warning, suddenly I could hardly see or walk straight or concentrate or speak clearly (sounded drunk), or even use my right hand.

Trying not to panic, I consulted more doctors. They were unimpressed.

“But the tests we’ve done show there’s nothing organic the matter with you.”

To a man, they assumed I was hypochondriac, trying to get attention.

“Why would I want to do this? I lived for singing. I had to stop that. I love my work. I’m happily married. Why would I want to lose these? And my independence?”

Often, between ten and eleven o’clock in the morning, my husband would have to leave his office four kilometres away, drive to my office and take me home to bed. There I’d have to stay for three days at a time; later, up to a week, barely able to move or speak.

My colleagues, some friends and family, began treating me as though I were stupid. They didn’t realise that my mind and awareness were as keen as ever, under the film of disabilities that began to obscure me from their view.

I was ashamed and frightened.

All the doctors I saw were attached to the military hospital which provided the medical care my husband and I received as part of his remuneration. We had no choice of doctors and I often saw a new one every time I went. The information on patients was on the data base consulted by all my doctors. Each doctor’s assessment was first read by the next doctor before he even looked at me. One day, waiting in the hall outside yet another doctor’s office, an inexperienced clerk put my patient file in my hands. Surprised and curious, I opened it and found a

report from a doctor who I'd thought hadn't been too hostile. "Patient is eccentric ..." — a euphemism they used for unstable or hypochondriac. Ah, so now I understood why nobody was listening: each doctor was warned against me before I said a word.

Neurologists were no different. Several of them, despite authorising a brain scan, were as dismissive as their predecessors. But one day I encountered a new neurologist, a woman. She apparently didn't heed the warnings of her colleagues. She listened and apparently respected me. She informed me of her conclusion: I had multiple sclerosis. Soon I'd be blind, and within a few years I'd be dead. Meanwhile, I'd be deteriorating on all fronts. Yes, I was dying. Slowly. But she'd be there to support me.

With the shock of this diagnosis, came a relief: so here's proof that I'm not making this up.

But I'm dying! Horribly!

She wanted me to be monitored by a colleague who was making a study of the progress of this disease on individuals. I'd be a case study, helping the medical profession to learn more. I consented.

However, she was becoming a problem. She was oriented towards women and now attracted to me. Although she had a female partner, she began targeting me for her advances. I

made it clear I wasn't at all interested, though I liked her as a person. She used her position of authority to try to enforce my dependence on her. Now I was in a dilemma. I couldn't afford to consult outside doctors, so I was trapped in this military hospital system. I simply couldn't get away from her. I had no choice but to walk a fine line between her increasing demands and my own privacy. Nic was very worried, and wanted to do something. I reminded him that history had already shown no one would believe what I said, so any action he might take would only make matters worse. I must bide my time, try to keep her at arm's length, try to survive, and hope for some external proof to emerge that would support the accusations I wanted to make against her.

Her grip tightened. She was now refusing to confirm to my employers, the education department, that I was indeed sick when I stayed in bed for three to five days.

My opportunity came. I was flying to Cape Town to visit my daughter, now at university. She learned of my plans and insisted on visiting me there, cancelling a week of booked appointments with patients. Afraid to cross her openly, I agreed, but saw to it that this visit occurred in my daughter's flat, in the presence of my daughter and her flat mate. In front of these witnesses, this doctor had too much to drink and threw all caution to the winds in her interactions with me. Now I had my

proof.

The dénouement followed quickly: I laid a charge against her of unprofessional conduct. The defence force responded. I later learned that these authorities had been aware she was a problem but so far, nobody had had the courage to press charges. A board of enquiry was held. This was in effect a high-level court case held *in camera*. Military secrecy combined with medical secrecy – a formidable combination. My testimony, corroborated by Nic, was confirmed by my daughter and her friend. The Board flew to Cape Town to interview these two young women who were busy with end-of-year exams. Nobody informed us of the outcome, but we saw that within a month or two this doctor was no longer at the hospital.

However, I was still sick and getting worse. But I didn't dare go back to the hospital, fearing repercussions from that neurologist's colleagues.

With the help of my boss at the education library, I was able to retire on medical grounds. "Medically boarded," as the expression goes.

Now I could sleep most of the time. This is apparently what my body needed.

Many months later, we learned there was a new person

responsible for out-patient administration, someone whom Nic had known from his earlier years in the Cape. This man was amazed to discover that all the hospital records of previous tests and conclusions had vanished. He authorised a full assessment, from scratch. I was sent out to other specialists, and hospitalised for gruelling tests.

The results came in: it was NOT multiple sclerosis. My disabilities were caused by a combination of two factors. First, a series of strokes were diagnosed. Treatment was begun.

I improved by fifty percent. But the other half? That was still a mystery. I was still sick.

Finally, after a year of trying to see the particular neurologist who, I'd been told, was the best one available, I got an appointment with him at our hospital. He was professor of neurology at the Medical University of South Africa. This man called for a brain scan – a test which several junior neurologists had already had done on me, with no apparent results.

The day came for me to see him.

On the desk in front of him lay the printouts of the brain scan. Standing behind him I saw about six young doctors, four of them I recognised as neurologists who'd seen me and pronounced "nothing organically wrong." Carefully, as though delivering a demonstration lecture to his students – for these had all been students of his – he showed them, pointing out with

his finger that the patterns were “textbook” cases of Focal Epilepsy. He was scathing of these doctors for having failed to diagnose the obvious.

“You’re supposed to *listen* to the patient. Nine times out of ten, the patient will tell you all you need to know to make a diagnosis. Then you test to confirm the diagnosis.

“You *weren’t listening*.”

I watched them squirm. Had he planned it this way to make up to me what I’d endured at their hands? He continued raking them with his scorn.

Then he asked me questions I’d been hearing over the years.

“Have you ever been in a car accident and had whiplash?”

“No.”

“Have you ever been knocked out with a blow to your head?”

“No.”

“Have you ever had severe blows to your head?”

“No.”

I was telling the truth, as I recalled it. But I was baffled, not understanding this diagnosis, while a black horror welled up from my stomach.

“What does this mean?”

“It means you have a brain injury that’s caused ONLY by a

severe blow or blows to the head.”

“But that’s not possible.”

“Nevertheless, that is so.”

I began to cry. The memories blocked from my consciousness began to surface. I told him about the blows to my head. Twelve of them. He listened, nodding.

“But that was years ago,” I objected.

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. This typically only starts to manifest after a few years.”

“But it’s behind me! It’s not supposed to come and haunt me now!”

“I’m sorry, my dear.”

JOURNEYS

Remember who you are, I say to my reflection in the mirror. He doesn't know everything.

Preparing for this journey, I'm already tense. The doctor I'm to see will be interrogating me, entering bits of data into compartments.

He says I'm good case study material for the next few years. His subject for research is the stages of my disintegration.

They say I'm dying. Multiple sclerosis, they say. He'll be documenting the stages of my disintegration. Seven years, they say, then I'll be dead.

He's acting as though my being alive now doesn't count. He's cutting me into little pieces for his boxes. This feels like vivisection.

Now I'm resisting. The neuropsychologist isn't happy. I'm making it harder for him to get his next degree. I sense his hostility. *I may not be able to fight my destiny, but I won't let you force me into your categories.*

Last time, he'd given me a task. I was to write a story. To see if I could still think, I wonder? *Sir, I can do more than that. I can remember too.*

How can I make him understand this young woman, pas-

sionately alive, isn't just another list of items to be ticked off in a box?

Turning my eyes back to the mirror where I'm applying makeup, I continue trying to mask the signs of my exhaustion, but another view claims my attention. Behind the mirror, the window shows a garden of treetops in spring leaf. I've always looked to trees for refuge, company. Now their hypnotic movements in the breeze draw my widening pupils to other images.

A familiar trance returns, where I see myself in earlier lives. Always the same person, always Me, but appearing differently: an old woman alone at my end, a lonely lady on a hill and a spirited youth in the woods.

Weaving treetops work their enchantment. I succumb and revisit the past.

Journeying
across black space

Now I'm a lithe young boy in the greening woods, running ahead of the others. Only the sunlight keeps up, catching my fox-bright hair. It's hard to see me among the trees — my tunic's the colour of sapling bark. I run with no sound, no cracking of twigs. My feet know the earth. At night, alone, I meet the

gods of the earth. We're all the same age. Together, we dance,
my light with their shade. My father is proud and the grey-
beards nod their heads. Yes, I lead well. My swiftness gives me
joy. Shafts from my bow fly straight to the sky. Suddenly an
arrow in my back —

Journeying
across black space
carrying with me
from runner in the woods
to lady on a hill
a joy at the core

Alone, erect on my horse, I gaze across to the opposite
ridge. Along its bare top a grey northern sky reflects my mood.
That distant hill: beyond it lie the woods I played in when I was
young, away from the others, with only my thoughts for com-
pany. That's where it comes from, this joy at the core that helps
me endure. My forest-green dress heightens the colour of my
eyes, looks pleasing with my auburn hair hanging loose. What
good is it though? Given in marriage to one who never looks at
me, my lineage makes me an object of property for barter. A
lady unloved, I'll never have a child to hold. But I hold my
heart quiet, my head high.

Journeying
across black space
carrying with me
from lady on a hill
to crone in a ditch
a joy at the core
and strength to endure

This rain is cold. It hurts my skin. Lying in a ditch, I am, curled up like a baby. Cold so long I don't feel the hunger now. Pulled my shawl tight, green one like my eyes, pretty with my copper hair, they said. But shawl's soaked, hair's grey, they're all gone. Twelve children, killed by the rain that killed the potatoes. What's there to eat if potatoes are gone? Dead in the ground, all of them now. First the potatoes, then the little ones. I'm coming, my darlings. Your Mama is coming. I'll hold you again. You won't be cold and there's plenty to eat. I'll sing you a song, a merry one. You'll laugh and we'll dance and we'll hug again. Wait for me, babies, I'm coming.

Journeying
across black space
carrying with me

from crone in a ditch
to singing young woman
a joy at the core
strength to endure
and a loving

Gazing into the mirror, I see a spirit that ponders, probing behind appearances. Others would see a still-young woman in her forties trying to look pretty, wearing a grey-green dress that enhances my hazel eyes and wavy, red-gold hair.

My aloneness doesn't hurt so much now. My trees are still here. There's a joy at my core, an inner strength and a loving I can't explain.

But I cannot sing any more. The strength that launched my voice like an arrow is gone. I'll be dead in seven years? But how shall I endure living without being able to sing? That was my focus for living. When I sang, the men with grey in their hearts were warmed, children forgot to be afraid and women's sadness left them for a while. They felt my joy and gave me love.

Within me stirs the familiar spirit, the singing magic. Somehow I know this power won't die.

Journeying

across black space
carrying with me
from singing woman
to someone I can't see
a joy at the core
strength to endure
a loving
a singing magic

Back at my mirror, I see assent in the eyes. Behind the mirror, green trees nod their heads in the breeze.

Sighing, I turn away and snap shut the little bag that goes with me when I travel. Today's trip will be tiresome. How can I explain to the doctor? He might ask the names of the streets I passed by and I won't be able to say.

But I can tell where I've been alive.

Sir, if you can't listen to me telling you, here's the story you asked for.

PHOENIX

I got well. It took time and masses of rest.

No medication. I refused the ones on offer, they made me feel worse. Others I rejected outright, having seen what they did to some of the children I'd worked with.

The professor noted my improvement over the six months since I'd been retired. "Sometimes, we don't know why, a patient spontaneously recovers from this condition. It takes a few years. You may be one of them."

"What do you mean?"

"If you continue to improve at this rate, you could become free of symptoms."

"How long would that take?"

"About five to seven years."

I lived quietly.

Nic had taken optional early retirement from the navy. He "carried me," just as he'd promised years earlier. Gradually I progressed from spending nearly all day in bed to being up for longer periods, with frequent rests in between.

As I grew stronger and symptoms subsided, he was free to help other people. Expert at fixing things, he took on jobs as handyman. Soon he was in great demand as a specialist in

restoring old wooden furniture. When he bought a wood turning lathe, his natural artistry had an outlet in crafting beautiful bowls and candlesticks.

Of course I couldn't sing any more. This current had to be channelled into an equivalent medium, so I began to write the stories that appear in this memoir.

Since gardening was too strenuous, I created imaginary ones on wooden boxes, using a technique of *découpage* that I'd worked out by myself. These fantasy gardens were filled with magic - when you looked inside they were alive with fairies! Each Fairy Box was unique, very detailed and lovely, taking three or four months to complete. I always gave them as a surprise to an unsuspecting little girl, or to the little girl hidden inside a grownup. People would ask if I'd sell, or make one on commission, but no, it had to be a spontaneous gift for the person I had in mind.

My physical condition was humiliating: poor gait, lack of co-ordination (*people had often said that I moved like a dancer*), speech that was often slurred (*I sounded drunk*), sudden exhaustion that forced me to lie down for a few hours (*I was "useless."*) Handicapped. My self-esteem was destroyed.

Being around people was stressful (“*They think I’m stupid and clumsy*”) and in reaction, my mind would go blank. I avoided people.

One place where I didn’t feel too shy, though, was a gift shop in a small centre near our home. I loved to examine the unusual handmade items the owner, Lola, sourced from around the world. She herself looked exotic wearing long, soft dresses and scarves, jewellery of silver and semi-precious stones, all from her shop. She made everyone feel at ease, conveying her warmth in an aura of love and a brown-velvet speaking voice. Around her I began to relax. To my surprise, she offered me a part-time job helping her on some afternoons. I accepted, hoping I wouldn’t knock things over or be too slow at the till with the customers.

In the atmosphere of her acceptance, my confidence began to return. My horizons and tastes broadened. She taught me to use colours in ways I hadn’t considered, helped me discover my own style in dressing. Lola and I were sisters. With her, I began to laugh again, feel pretty again.

One Easter we resumed going to church, after years of avoiding politics from the pulpit. It was the liturgy and music of the Anglican church near us (very “high” it was, and beautiful) that drew us. My strength was returning. I joined the choir.

The music was demanding, the choirmaster exacting, so my sight-reading skills improved. But when I got tired or stressed, the music would go black in front of me. To cope, I'd take a sedative before choir practice. When he'd start fuming, I'd say to myself, "Oh, that's just his conducting style."

Ten years after moving into our gracious old house, the neighbourhood was changing. No longer residential and quiet, it was noisy with increasing traffic and some houses sold for businesses. By the fifteenth year, we and our neighbours realised our efforts to stop the trend were futile. We wanted to move. Other people's property got sold, but no one bought ours, despite all the praise it attracted. Finally we learned why. Many years before we'd bought, the municipality had decided to build a new road through it, but nobody had told us. Now nobody else would touch it. The authorities were in no hurry to buy from us. We were stuck. Frustrated and desperate. The traffic noise and pollution levels were unbearable.

Suddenly I learned that I had cancer.

Breast cancer. A particularly malignant and fast-growing type that would quickly spread to the other one. Both breasts had to be amputated immediately. When the doctor ("Doc Dawie") told me, his face got red and tears showed in his eyes. I put my head down on his desk and cried instantly, violently.

Lucretia, there's work to be done.

I stopped abruptly and raised my head. Took a deep breath.

“Please, won’t you tell my husband?”

He was in the waiting room. Doc Dawie brought him in, sat him down beside me. Explained. Nic held my hand tightly.

Ironical, I thought. The three attributes that I’d liked best about myself had been my singing voice, my natural quickness and my shapely breasts. The first two had been taken and now I was to lose the third.

On the night before surgery, I couldn’t sleep. About eleven o’clock I got up to go to the nurses station in the hall to ask for something (I forget what), without putting on my bathrobe. *I’m not sick yet, so why bother them to come traipsing to me. I’ll be doing it enough from tomorrow onwards. At this time of night there’s nobody else here but the night nurses, so I can go as I am. This is a ward for females only.* I was wearing my favourite of the lovely nightgowns Lola had created for me (ankle-length, concealing, except for her crochet-work which emphasised my breasts). *This is the last time you’ll be wearing this nightgown.* Approaching the nurses’ station I saw a man, clearly not a doctor, leaning against the counter chatting with the nurse on duty. He raised his head, took one look at me and his jaw dropped. *Enjoy. Tomorrow they’ll be in the rubbish*

bin.

Coming to after the surgery, I was sorry to be alive. Nothing prepared me for the horrific pain. But the emotional pain was worse. When I looked down at my ravaged, gullied chest — even now I can't bear the memory.

I am no longer a woman.

No amount of talk or fine words made any difference to my feelings about myself. Nic's loving acceptance of me as unchanged for him, helped somewhat. Lola's exquisitely feminine nighties helped too. But my despair was profound.

They didn't do me a favour by saving my life.

The doctors offered reconstructive surgery.

Oh please, yes!

It took a long time before they could start because so much tissue had had to be removed. The plastic surgeon ("Doc Danie") explained the process. It would go on for months: surgery, procedures every one or two weeks, then more surgery, more procedures. More memories to avoid. But I can't forget the concern in his kind eyes as he did each procedure and judged by looking into mine, how much pain he could subject me to before it was too much. He gave me his personal cell phone number so I could call him any time of the day or night if I feared something was going wrong. A few hours after these

sessions, the pain would escalate to such a pitch that I couldn't sleep that night, only cry. Nic held me and comforted me.

Gradually the reconstruction took shape, but to me, that chest was just an area where lots of professionals used their expertise. I didn't feel any different about myself.

One day after the last procedure had been done (under general anaesthetic) and the bandages were to be removed, Doc Danie's office was filled with people. These were other doctors and nurses who'd been helping with the process begun a year and a half ago with that traumatic surgery. Nic was there too.

Behind a curtain in the office, he removed the bandages. I didn't look – I always looked away from “there.”

“Don't you want to see?” he invited with a gesture towards a full-length mirror at one end of the cubicle.

Reluctantly I got up, holding the hospital gown around my lower body, and walked towards the mirror. This put me in full view of the group in his office. Looking in the mirror, I saw a woman naked from the waist up. Involuntarily, I pulled up the gown to cover my breasts. Happy laughter burst from the spectators. It had “taken.” *I am a woman again.*

About the time the cancer was discovered, we found a lawyer tough enough to take on the city council. On the day of

the surgery, he was in a meeting informing the bureaucrats that it was their fault his client was undergoing surgery as he spoke, implying this cancer was caused by stress – as indeed it may have been.

He forced them to buy us out immediately at the market price for other properties in that newly-valuable area.

This enabled us to buy in a quiet place far away from the outer edge of the city, where a few up-market security complexes were being constructed.

We chose a lovely spot high on a wooded slope bordering on a nature reserve. Our house, built from plan, was open inside with views up into the garden I would develop among the trees, into the woods.

The surrounding area was hilly and open, reminding me of vistas in the Cape, where I'd always wanted to be. Nic was reluctant to return to the Cape because of his bad memories. We understood the military hospital in Cape Town wasn't equipped to deal with the kind of medical problems I presented, so I was resigned to staying close to the main one in Pretoria.

Recovering my strength, I created a woodland garden filled with climbing roses. The developer was so impressed he asked me to design and develop the gardens of the complex.

That was fun. Other people asked me to design or renovate their gardens, so I started my own little garden design business called “Garden Magic.”

My mind needed stimulus too. An editor for the church magazine was needed, so I took it over, revising it completely and arranging for its production. Then I resumed teaching – but at home. Adult education.

With the change of government came a long list of other changes, among them, the use of English replacing Afrikaans as the preferred language of business and bureaucracy. Lots of professional people had to upgrade their skills in English, spoken and written. My services were in demand. Teaching adults one-on-one in my study was rewarding. I designed a course to fit each individual’s background and needs, and derived great pleasure from my clients’ varied personalities and successes.

A final visit to my parents in Miami proved a turning point. My father was suffering from Parkinson’s Disease, in the final stages, and my mother was distraught. I flew over to support her and say goodbye to him. Much of the time he didn’t know me. Lying in hospital, he had to be fed. One evening as I sadly brought a spoon to his mouth, remembering the powerful and terrifying man he had been for me (*and now it has come to this*), his eyes cleared, showing he was present.

“You’re so gracious,” he murmured.

Then, with grief in his eyes and voice, he said to me very distinctly, “I blighted every life I touched.”

That’s true. How tragic for him to see this now.

I can’t lie and deny this, either.

“But we loved you, Dad.”

His eyes clouded again.

I’d told the truth. We’d wanted to love him.

That was September 1999.

In October I felt a lump in my right thigh. It grew quickly. By November the lump was visibly bigger every day. In December I showed it to a doctor who was alarmed and called in a surgeon. He was alarmed and called in another specialist who authorised specialised tests outside the hospital. Immediately, with results to be given to him immediately. Operating theatres were already closed for the Christmas vacation but he had people recalled to open one so he could do a biopsy. Two days before Christmas I learned it was cancer. Nothing related to the previous one, this was a second “primary cancer” – unusual, I’m told. This was a liposarcoma, fast-growing and highly malignant, requiring drastic surgery urgently. On the second day of January, when the main theatres re-opened with all support-

ing staff on hand, I was first on the list.

Regaining consciousness in my hospital room, I saw Nic standing at the end of my bed. I perceived that he thought I was dying.

I was, I knew that, and didn't care. But looking at him further, I saw he was preparing for a life without me. "Oh no," I decided, "I'm going to stay." So I fought to stay alive.

Later I learned from doctors that the massive loss of blood from so much tissue taken over a wide area down to the bone, and the shock to my system, could have resulted in my death.

"It will look like a shark bite," the surgeon had warned.

The pain couldn't be relieved by morphine, its derivatives or imitations. I'd become allergic to them. Physiotherapy was finally called for, with machines that sent vibrations to calm the spasms wracking my back. For the pain in my leg, I could tolerate only paracetamol, about as strong as aspirin. So I relied on self-hypnosis.

But even the team of doctors were surprised at the extent of excision required "to get all of it." When I saw the results, I expressed amazement to the surgeon.

"We don't take prisoners," he confirmed with a smile.

Still later, I learned that "people usually lose the leg."

By now, Nic was anxious to see if my (dying?) wish could

be granted. He inquired about moving to the Cape. A senior naval officer whom he respected informed him that yes, the military hospital in Cape Town could indeed cope with the kinds of problems I presented. (That same gentle man died of cancer after we'd arrived in the Cape. We went to his funeral.)

So that's how it came about that we finally moved to the Cape.

I like to joke about my two ops for cancer that removed so much of my body: "Some people will do anything to lose some weight."

Privately, I joke to myself: "Some people will do anything to get to live in the Cape."

For the new doctors encountered in the Cape, I prepared a résumé of highlights from my medical history. It's three pages long – headlines with explanations in tiny print to answer questions arising from the headlines. (There's more history not relevant to this narrative.)

Their responses on reading it include:

"You're supposed to be dead!"

"You're a living, breathing miracle."

("Yes, and I plan to go on until I'm ninety-two.")

My very favourite (I collect these gems) came from a black

surgeon in our military hospital whose face and arms show terrible scars. *Uh oh*, I feared, *he's of the generation of freedom fighters against white people like us. How did he get these scars? Looking after someone like me, is his heart really in this?* Instructed to get ready behind a white curtain, I waited tensely for him to read the document. *Would he even bother to read it carefully?* I knew it took two and a half minutes. Any less time, and it wasn't read. Exactly two and a half minutes later, he exclaimed,

“What did you do to God?!”

I burst out laughing. He came around the curtain, laughing too. We became friends. Every time we meet in the halls, I go to give him a hug.

A STEADY HAND

The old priest's hands trembled as he sat. This happened often with him now, I thought as I sat in the choir, facing him. It was Sacred Friday and the moving liturgy in memory of One who gave himself for dying was just beginning.

Carefully he lifted one shaking hand with the stronger one and placed it against the stone wall beside him. To steady it, I realized. The stone was cool and strong.

His hands had performed so many kindnesses.

I remembered their pressure on my shoulders to steady my quiet sobbing as he'd prayed for me before I went for more surgery. As my shoulders began to shake, he'd paused in his words of intercession; paused: his hands pressing into my shoulders conveyed a depth of love, of prayer, that words could not convey. This healing touch had strengthened my heart and body for the ordeal ahead. I'd always been grateful to him for giving that love, that understanding.

Now his body was failing and he was trying not to have it obvious. He reached for stone to steady him.

The kindness of his hands could be depended upon; he served, humbly.

Years ago he'd overheard his wife, older than he, tell their grown daughter that she was now very tired of the daily burden

of cooking meals. He decided to take over this task from her, and from then on he did all the cooking with cheerfulness and grace. After church he'd chat a bit, exchanging funny stories with the men, then mention that he had to hurry home now, the meat was in the oven but he still had to roast the potatoes and the children were all coming to lunch.

Observing him from my place among the other singers, loving him deeply, I considered my own husband. He too had kind hands, expressive of a gentle person who gave himself willingly. My husband, also, did most of the cooking. He too cared about his wife's tiredness. His hands were always doing kind things, helping, comforting. One day his hands, too, would tremble.

What could I give to hands that trembled? - So they need not reach out to stone to steady them?

Even as I wondered, the answer came in images from years ago, when I was only twelve or thirteen.

So strange an experience it had been, I'd not dared tell anyone in case I was again accused of having too vivid an imagination. Maybe somebody would say I'd fainted and dreamed the whole episode. I knew I hadn't but didn't dare expose myself to possible ridicule.

It took more than forty years before I'd trusted someone

enough to tell about it.

“It was a Sunday morning, my father had just started his sermon, that would take about forty-five minutes, and there'd be another half-hour before the service would be over. Mom suddenly remembered she'd forgotten to do something about the oven, the Sunday lunch would not be cooking all this time. She asked me to run over to the house and check on the oven.

“There were puddles all over the place when I ran back home, but the rain had stopped.

“The apartment where we lived was above the ground floor of offices and a double garage for the cars. We always went in by the small garage door to get to the stairway leading upstairs.

“The garage light was on, I saw when I came in. It wasn't supposed to be. The workbench between the two cars was where the switch was. I went over to turn off the light.

“Next thing I knew, I was lying on my back across the front end of the car. How I'd got there I had no idea. It was high. My feet were off the ground. I seemed to be in the air a few feet overhead, looking down at myself lying there on top of the car, looking very silly.

“I was slipping backwards into a dark woods. Then I saw I was on the edge of a dark river. It flowed past, to the left, without a ripple, without a sound. A tiny sort of canoe was in front

of me and I had to get into it. I knew I was dying and this was the crossing-over place. The little craft was flimsy as an eggshell and about the same shape, with space for only one person. It was so frail, it tipped frighteningly as I tried to get into it. I was afraid I would fall over into the dark river, so I looked for something to hold onto. No branch or rock was there for me to hold onto.

“Now I wanted a hand to steady me. A hand would also be a comfort because I felt very sad about going away. Even the hand of a stranger would help, I thought. But there was no hand, so I had to get into that little craft without any help.

“I was out on the river. The smooth river-bank disappeared. The little craft seemed to be pulled from underneath, straight over towards the other shore. If I sat very still, it wouldn’t shake or tip over. I sat quietly. The other shore came closer. It was all in darkness.

“Then I saw there was a thick black cloud like a curtain covering the edge of that shore. Coming closer, I was deeply afraid to enter that black cloud. Then I sensed the presence of a powerful love beaming out towards me from behind that curtain, a Person waiting to receive me. I came up to just an arm’s length from the edge of that cloud.

“I found myself lying across the front of the car.

“I felt stupid about being sprawled across the car like that.

It's funny, the little details I remember: my shoes were wet and I was cross that when I slid down off the car and my feet touched the floor, they landed in a puddle I'd apparently already stepped in. (Probably rainwater dripped off the car when it was driven in earlier.) Anyway, the light was off now, so I went upstairs, checked on the oven, went back to chapel and my father was still preaching. I didn't tell anybody about the funny business of me lying over the car. It was too embarrassing. And I didn't understand it."

I stopped, perplexed. My husband's expression was strange. He looked astonished.

"You didn't dream that.

"That water on the floor beside the switch - you'd been electrocuted. Of course the shock would throw you up, backwards. That's how you landed on top of the car.

"It did happen."

So the rest of it was real too: the river, the eggshell boat, the Presence behind the cloud.

That's why I'd never felt uneasy in the presence of someone who was dying. I knew the way, and there was no need to be afraid. That's why I'd been able to tell my friend dying of brain cancer, agnostic Agnes who'd wanted to trust but couldn't, that the Presence waiting to receive her really was lov-

ing. I'd held Agnes' hand strongly, transmitting my own trust and steadying her.

Looking at my friend, the old priest, I realized now what I could do for him. I could give him my hand, inwardly, to steady him as he took the steps leading down to that quiet shore. I could put out my hand and hold his trembling one.

Not the cool strength of stone, but a warm hand. That I could give.

— *for Father Peter Auret, 1998*

MADAM

The first time we heard the owl we marvelled that the woods up behind our new house should be home to them as well. Ever since moving here from a noisy part of the city, we'd revelled in the peacefulness of our quiet hillside home with its views far away on one side and on the other, virgin bush reaching down virtually to our windows. Our four cats enjoyed the new garden that merged into this woods, part of a nature reserve encompassing the upper reaches of our hill and the surrounding ridges. As far as the cats were concerned, the best part of the arrangement was that the upper wooded part of the garden was not walled in as it was lower down. Only a high steel picket fence stood between them and all the wonders of an authentic wilderness. To a cat, of course, bars like that were like pillars framing splendid gateways into adventure. And adventure they did.

All except for Kitty Cat, the eldest of our four, by now a crotchety old lady. Her arthritis had got worse with the years and now she moved stiffly, painfully, only when absolutely necessary. Even her morning toilet time had to be initiated by us lest she use the floor of the shower instead. Usually it was I who, early in the morning, picked her up from the end of our bed and put her outside in the kitchen courtyard. A loud yelp of

a miaow outside the back door signalled that she'd been out long enough. Then she would find a comfortable position away from people and sleep all day.

Her black coat was thinning, looking slightly moth-eaten, and grey hairs enlarged her small white bib. The perpetual frown and tilted-back ears gave her the fierce look of an owl. If any of our other cats approached her, he was met with a blazing glare, followed by lightening-swift spit and slap if he continued. A thoroughly bad-tempered old lady she was, but we had a special affection for Madam, as we'd come to call her. We understood why she felt she had to be so nasty.

She had escaped destruction. While still a tiny kitten, fourteen years earlier, something terrible had happened to her before she landed up in a cage at the SPCA. Other kittens in hers and adjacent cages played or looked appealingly at visitors passing by who might adopt one of them.

"But she was different," tells my husband. He'd come to find a kitten to replace my adored cat who'd been run over by a car while I was visiting my parents overseas. This little black cat sat bolt upright at the back of the cage looking defiant, her ferocious yellow eyes looking straight through him. Nobody would want to go near her. "So I chose that cat," he ended with a shy laugh, as though that explained everything. "Yes, too nasty for anybody else to want, so you did, you old softie," I

thought but didn't say out loud. And so this hissing, spitting little scrap of cat was taken out of that cage into our home.

Kitty Cat had sensed that she was on Death Row. Her fear of being in a cage never left her during the many times she had to be taken to the vet over the following years. At the sight of a cage, or a needle being brought toward her, she would go limp and collapse in a despairing heap, too terrified even to tense her muscles to resist. She melted my heart.

From the beginning, I tried to comfort this fighting, frightened little creature. Holding her very close and steadily, I tried to let her feel that she was safe. She came to believe it. As long as she could lie on my lap, or in my right arm in bed, or at least lie against my feet, she was at peace.

Her illnesses over the recent years, however, sometimes left the unspoken question in our minds. "Is it time for us to ... Should we do something to end her suffering?" But always, the unmistakable knowledge would return: she wants to live. She has always been terrified of someone deciding that now she must die. She wants to make her own decisions, especially about how and when she must die.

It became my commitment to her that I would not take away that autonomy that she'd fought for so fiercely from the beginning. No matter what, I resolved, this particular being must be allowed to dismiss her own spirit.

Now, in our new home, our old cat was learning to adjust to the different setup of house and garden. But instead of exploring the wonders outside, she was content to lie on our bed and stare out the big window next to her that gave a full view of woodland garden and adjacent wilderness. She spent her days there, sleeping most of the time and staring outside in between long sleeps. Night-time, the other cats piled onto my side of the bed too. My husband is a big man and doesn't think his love for cats should extend to sharing his side of the bed with them. I didn't mind too much squinching myself into odd positions between him and the row of four felines I loved and spoiled. Kitty Cat, at the bottom, would hiss and smack if another cat accidentally bumped her in the night. By early light I would awaken to observe all four cats lying chin on hands, figuratively speaking, gazing with rapt attention at the magical sight of pearly light and mists streaking into the garden from the east. The new bird sounds enthralled them too, especially the early morning performance. One after another, each boy cat would rise, stretch and make the short leap to nearby window sill. The garden path began outside my window, curving up and east towards the boundary with the bush. One by one, each boy cat would process up that path to the glories awaiting him beyond. Madam stayed at my feet until I put her outside the back door.

One day - that was the day after we'd first heard the owl — our bed was clear of cats and Madam was nowhere to be found inside.

“Oh good,” we thought, “she's at last decided to do some exploring now.”

Evening came, all the boys were in, but still no sign of her. Worried that she might have got sick or injured outside, my husband and I took flashlights and went up the dark garden path, calling as we flashed the beams into brush and behind rocks. All three boy cats followed us in a row, clearly worried too.

Suddenly the beam of a flashlight picked her up. There she was, promenading down the path from the edge of the bush. “So there you are, Kitty Cat! We missed you!”

Pleased, her tail held high and curled at the tip, she paraded down to the house with all of us in tow - two humans and three cats. Her face, when I saw it, held a broad smile.

Baffled, I pondered this behaviour. Had she stayed out like this to give us a scare and see what our reaction would be?

That night she slept in her usual place again, at my feet.

Next morning, hours before I'd normally have picked her up for her morning business in the back courtyard, she stood up with a start, as though called.

Stiffly she positioned herself at the edge of the bed, made a painful jump to the floor. Out she went through the open back door - no undignified window exit for her. When next I raised my eyes, there she was, marching purposefully up the garden path towards the big rock which blocked our view of the cat exit to the wilderness.

“Oh good,” I thought, “she's finally discovered the joys of being out there.”

The day passed with no further sign of Madam.

Nightfall, and all three boy cats were in; still no sign of her. Wide-eyed and wordless, we picked up our flashlights and repeated our search of the night before.

This time, I noticed, not one of the boy cats followed.

Calling and calling, probing with our beams, we searched. Nothing.

The foreboding around my heart grew. I'd been trying to forget that last night, we'd heard the owl again. A second time.

Now I couldn't not understand. In the dark, tears streaming down my face, I called gently out into the wilderness: “Goodnight, Kitty Cat. Have a good sleep now. I love you. We'll miss you.... Sleep well ...”

That night I lay awake. A soft summer night. Almost a full moon. Trees, rocks and bushes all suffused with a radiance that one could look at with delight, from inside the house or out in

the bush. No chill or discomfort of rain. Only a soft womb-like blood temperature, ideal for new-borns or for dying in. "Sleep well, Kitty Cat. You picked a beautiful night."

Mentally I tucked her in with soft leaves around her dark form, curled up in the foetal position she'd been using recently. Resting, eyes half-closed. Then sleeping.

Daylight came and we went searching, going the long way around, out into the bush. I carried a large towel just in case my night knowledge had been only night fears and she was lying somewhere, hurt maybe or bitten by a snake. Maybe she'd been waiting all this time for us to find her and carry her home. There was also a shovel, in case we didn't find her alive. She must have a soft grave, then, with leaves and pretty things over the top. But no, we found no trace of her. And yes, I cried suddenly. Hard to say goodbye.

Then I remembered: this is what she'd wanted.

She'd chosen her own time, her own place. Nobody had decided for her. This was her triumph after a lifetime of fear.

She'd even had the sweetness of trying it out on us beforehand and seeing that we'd miss her. She'd received her bouquets in person and enjoyed them. That explained the big smile on her face the previous night.

Oh, it hadn't all been entirely her own choosing. The owl

had called her name a second time, but she'd gone willingly.

All day long, and into the night, she'd lain quietly. Death would come to her gently. Softly.

DELIVERANCE

He was right to remove that painting from my piano. The unframed canvas leaning against the wall accurately portrayed my mood those times when I sat down to thunder out Brahms. All I'd ever tell my husband, even when he asked about the painting, was that it had been given to me by a pupil before we were married. Some ill-understood reluctance on my part prevented me from telling him more. The painting disturbed him, I knew that.

The occasion now was the need to find a suitable position for a heavily black-framed oil we had just bought. The melancholy autumn view of north European trees would look just right between the piano and a large chilly white winter scene from Canada.

Firmly he removed the threatening painting from its place and created an arrangement that I liked better too. Where to put that painting? It held me, fascinated and afraid. Time after time over the last twenty years I'd held it in my hands, trying to bring myself to get rid of it, but I couldn't. Now there was nowhere for it to go. An exorcism was probably needed.

"Did I ever tell you the story about that painting," I offered. He poured me a glass of wine and sat back to listen.

In those lonely, struggling years before he came, I taught

severely mentally handicapped children. After school was out in the afternoon, I augmented my meagre income by teaching children and young people as an adjunct to their therapy sessions with a clinical psychologist. Few of them had perceptual problems as the cause of their difficulties with reading and spelling. Most of them had emotional problems, some severe, which interfered with their learning basic literacy skills. The doctor, my friend, told me only what I needed to know, suggested what was needed, and trusted me to use my intuitive powers and strength of personality to find my way. The acceptance and warmth I lavished on these special people went a long way in inducing them to lower their protective barriers.

To one person I gave acceptance but not warmth.

The afternoon one tall youth, about eighteen, was introduced to me, some instinct put me on my guard. Yves, I'll call him, had veiled eyes and an air of suppressed rage.

His father, the psychologist had explained, was an influential businessman, the boy and his father "did not get along" and Yves was a problem. He also had trouble reading. I wondered if my friend was still trying to understand what was going on inside the boy, and accepted my new pupil for the late Thursday afternoon slot.

I lived alone in the back rooms of a square house by the railway line that served as a teaching venue for my afternoon

pupils (in the middle room), consulting and reception rooms for clients of the psychologist (front rooms). His main practice was in the middle of the nearby city, but every Tuesday he conducted his satellite practice here in the town. Aside from six or seven hours on that day, I was alone in the house, from one week to another.

When my pupils came, one by one, in the afternoons for individual lessons with their remedial teacher, the parents chose to sit in their car out front, listening to the radio. For fifty-five minutes at a time, I was alone with my pupil.

Yves sat himself awkwardly at the big worktable in my teaching room, and I sat beside him on his left. Calmly, firmly, I would outline the task.

He avoided my eyes, spoke only when necessary, in monosyllables.

Highly intelligent, I guessed; very sensitive too. And something was very wrong.

After a few lessons I sensed that he was becoming aroused by the presence of the attractive Mrs X beside him, obviously alone. Carefully I controlled the atmosphere. No warmth.

One afternoon he arrived in the little room holding something behind his back, and shut the door behind him. Now he just looked down at me, eyes inscrutable, saying nothing. Several long minutes he stood there watching my face, a small

smile on his face as the tension built up. I hoped he didn't know I was afraid.

Suddenly, with a triumphant sound he whisked his arms out from behind his back to show what it was he'd been hiding. My knees buckled and I reached for the back of a chair, but I faced him.

"Look," he pronounced, and produced a flat object wrapped in a brown bag. It was the painting. Relieved and ashamed of my fear, I burst out with enthusiasm,

"Yves, it's beautiful. Did you paint it?"

Yes, he acknowledged.

Possessed by the power and beauty of the picture, I involuntarily showed warmth.

"You have it," he decreed.

The lesson proceeded with me struggling to regain my sense of control and distance from him.

Meanwhile, that threatening sky he'd painted, reddish-brown clouds with blackness behind on the verge of unleashing a storm, brooded over the two of us.

These details were still forgotten when I tried to describe to my husband the kind of person who'd created that picture. "All I can remember is that I was afraid of him, but he painted a beautiful, worrying picture," I concluded.

My husband's warmth enfolded me as he got up to walk around a bit. He often did this upon learning more of the difficulty and fear I'd lived with before he came. I observed this, understanding how very much he cared. In the safety of his love around me, a door of memory opened wide.

Staring into my wine glass, I saw the terror kept hidden all those years. Out it came, and with it, the exorcism. When he returned, I continued, "Now I remember the end of the story."

A week or two later, Yves was again sitting at the worktable, door closed behind us alone in that house. As the lesson began, I felt his tension rising.

Seated at his left, I edged a bit away.

Face averted, hardly pretending to be trying to read, he began breathing heavily. His right hand moved to his trouser pocket on the side away from me, went deep inside, stayed there. Long minutes, while I focused on keeping his mind on the task I'd given. Then changing his breathing, slowly he withdrew his hand, brought something concealed in it out to the table and set it down between us. It was a knife.

A long thin blade, as long as my hand, with a handle about the same length. "A flick knife," explained my husband.

"Oh."

It lay there. He stroked the blade from stem to point with

his forefinger and looked at me with a question in his eyes.

“Beautiful,” I allowed. Same word I’d used for his painting.

I turned his eyes back to the reading.

He left the knife there, his right hand curved across the top of the book, nearly touching the handle, for the duration of the lesson. Ten minutes to five crept up on the clock in front of us. With a long sigh, he closed his fingers over the handle of the knife. Very slowly he pocketed it, rose to his feet, opened the door to the empty waiting room. I followed. Neither of us spoke.

As he opened the door to outside, we both saw a waiting car, dark, expensive, at the farthest end of the parking lot. Behind the tinted windscreen, a shadowy figure at the wheel.

I shut the door. Locked it.

The following Tuesday the doctor announced that I had a new pupil for the late Thursday afternoon slot.

“But what about Yves?”

“He won’t be coming any more.”

He was never referred to again.

A few months later the psychologist and I were in conversation about some of the realities of his profession. I was surprised to learn that once in a while one of his young clients (no

longer children) would be found to have serious behaviour problems that he couldn't help.

"What happens then?"

Wordlessly, he made a gesture that signified: "Locked up."

I was saddened to feel relief. And a sense of failure.

Had I misjudged Yves? There was the sensitivity and beauty shouting from that canvas. Was it his fault, the storm about to be let loose? He was suffering.

That's why I could never throw away the painting, as he had probably been thrown away.

Neither could that visible pain, and menace, remain any longer in my life now that I'd remembered.

As I write, a storm is building up in the southwest.

Heavy reddish-brown clouds with blackness behind threaten to bring the kind of violent rain that will tear the topsoil out of my hillside garden. There is a particularly vulnerable area that needs something to restrain the damage of the expected runoff.

I'll go plant this painting there, upright, to curb the destruction.

FAIRIES IN THE GARDEN

“It took them three days to do it. They just moved in with the bulldozers.”

The young man recounting this to my companion watched me from the corner of his eye as he told of the destruction of my house and garden. He lived in the house diagonally opposite my previous home in an area that up until a few years ago had been a leafy suburb. He knew, everyone did, that my garden had been a particularly beautiful one. Our gracious old house had stood for nearly a hundred years - a long time by local standards. A kind man and a good neighbour, he was genuinely concerned about how I would react.

Carefully, I did not.

Instead, I allowed my inner eye to slide briefly over the scene which had dislocated my mind when I'd come upon it a few weeks earlier. I'd been unable to guess where my house or even the tallest trees in my garden had stood.

Fleeing that memory, I retraced mentally the route I'd driven along the edge of my old neighbourhood that was now dead - killed to make way for multi-level office blocks, parking lots, cancerous car showroom-and-sales emporiums.

Driving down the street that had marked the west end of our block, I'd winced at the sight of one bold new office com-

plex. It was crushing into the substrata of the earth every trace of my friends' lovingly-tended garden.

A retired school principal and his wife, a retired teacher, they had lavished their skills and diligence on the fertile soil around their house on the corner so that every available surface was full to bursting with bright annuals and perennials, trees and climbers, giving colour every day of the year. Walking past their gates, you could see red, yellow and pink heavy-headed blossoms crowding the pathways and scrambling over every little fence like so many unruly schoolchildren. Outside the boundary wall, the narrow strip between sidewalk and wall enclosing their haven was generously planted with flowers that bloomed for those who walked or drove past. Swelling over the top of the wall and protecting the occupants from view and noise of the street, peach trees flourished. In summer, their thick canopy of leaves sheltered the house and flower beds from the burning African sun. Creepers clad the sides of the house, screening windows from glare and curiosity of passers-by. Soft sounds of water spraying the garden, its moisture palpable on my skin if I was walking past, the reassuring sight of Frank on his knees tending an outside patch of cheerful growth - details like this of their sanctuary on the corner of an ever-noisier intersection were comforting. In the face of encroaching menace, I was able to believe that the truly important things in

life somehow went on.

And now?

“Where have all the flowers gone?” rang an old song about devastations of war.

“Where have all the gardens gone?” resounded inside as I considered the newer, unwept destructions. “Isn't there some kind of eternal life for all the beautiful gardens that have been killed?”

They too have a soul. Paradise must accommodate them also.

“And why not?” I demanded of the unwelcome sceptic thought daring it past me. A garden has a visible growth, a developing spirit, like any other being that breathes, often for much longer. It can be conceived, brought to birth, nurtured, changed and killed, just like a person. “Why not!” I reiterated vehemently in that densely-populated inner space where I do most of my living.

It has to be so, I reasoned further. Whatever has spirit cannot die, the spirit only moves away.

The spreading city had forced my husband and me away from our own enchanted garden.

Twenty years earlier and newly married, we had moved into the lovely old house complete with a ghost. (A gentle be-

ing, we realized; the house really belonged to her.) A bare rectangle of lawn surrounded the house. Together, my husband and I planted trees.

During recurrent times of drought, we carried buckets of used household water out to those trees chosen for special care, just to keep them alive. There wasn't enough water for all of them, I had to choose which ones to neglect, which ones to try to sustain. Sickness weakened some young trees; alone, I'd go out to the ailing tree and speak softly to it, caressing its bark and leaves. "Thank you for trying so hard. I'm sorry we can't give you more water. I'm sorry you're exhausted and now you're sick. Please keep on trying. I do love you." The tree, thus comforted, always shook off its illness and grew to glorious maturity.

Storms tore off branches, snapped off tops of some young trees. My husband would carefully redirect a suitable branch to form another crown for the injured tree. Responding to this care, the tree would resume its intended beautiful shape and within a year or two there was no trace of its former maiming.

When pruning became necessary, I told each tree how sorry I was to be hurting it, explaining that, like remedial minor surgery, this would help it grow stronger and lovelier. In later years I walked among my grown-up children, as I thought of them, caressing each one and telling each how proud I was of it

for having grown up so beautiful, so courageous and strong.

When the borehole was sunk and at last there was an abundance of water to satisfy the growing trees and the luxuriant undergrowth they shaded, my joy was boundless. Looking out into my forest, as it had become, I was certain I could hear the trees singing softly in chorus as the water sprayed.

My forest had become a kind of Eden, attracting multitudes of birds not normally seen in a city. Shy, stately ibis laid claim to the farthest reaches of the back garden, not even bothering to fly away when we approached. They merely walked over to one side and continued probing the lush green turf with their long bills, digging out wriggling snacks. Year after year the same pair returned to their large, twiggy nest in the tall cypresses at the back. There they raised their young and sometimes dropped an empty speckled grey-green shell larger than a hen's egg. The fledgling ibis took their first steps in the back garden, watched by their parents who were unconcerned about the quiet presence of the humans, knowing they wouldn't be disturbed.

Closer to the house, sociable thrushes established their territory where they could watch us relaxing and eating outside under the leafy green canopy in summer. Two pairs of them set up household, each in its own area above the patio, occasionally squabbling noisily during breeding time when rivalries

sharpened. Sometimes they dropped pale speckled blue-green eggshells. My husband would find these and bring them to me, carefully, in the palm of his hand. One hot summer afternoon I watched through the kitchen window the male thrush who lived on the east side, sitting on a branch about an arm's length from my face. He tilted his face up in sheer rapture at the loveliness of the clear lime-green leaves above him with the sun shining through. He was studying the shifting of lighter and darker patches of green as a very small breeze moved among the leaves. His face was unmistakably smiling. "There," I said to myself triumphantly, "it's just as I thought. It's not only humans who appreciate this beauty. Birds do too. Why do people imagine they don't?"

When the time came that the city was encroaching too much upon our paradise, we reluctantly decided to sell it to one of those businesses that promised to maintain a park-like exterior while adapting the lovely old house for a new use. As each prospective buyer ventured out under the soft light of the forest canopy, I found myself pointing out the individual trees as though they were people, telling something of each one's particular history. I was really saying, I realized with a pang, "Please don't hurt any of my trees."

Never had we imagined we would be facing this terrible loss. We had come here intending to stay to the end of our

days, each investing the pent-up love and creativity of years of grief into this healing affirmation of our new life together. It had always pleased us when visitors exclaimed spontaneously at the atmosphere of enchantment beneath the trees. Some even ventured to say there must be fairies in the garden. Then he and I just looked at each other and smiled, exchanging the silent message, "So they can sense them too!"

Once when a friend of my teenage daughter poured scorn on that one's matter-of fact reference to fairies, my husband and I locked eyes: common purpose established.

"Oh, so you don't believe in fairies," came the challenge, "but what if we can show them to you?"

"Then I'll believe," retorted Clara, secure in the dogma that no such things exist.

"There are fairies in our garden."

"Where?" Scornful again.

"You'll see this evening."

After telephoning Clara's mother for permission to return her home a bit later than planned, our little family made preparations for a picnic supper in the garden.

It was a soft early summer evening. We spread a blanket beneath a gnarled old tangerine tree far in the back, out of sight of the house. Contentedly, we and the teenage girls chat-

ted while eating sandwiches and sipping chilled white wine. Our young visitor had long ago dismissed as absurd and forgotten the reason given for the picnic, but my daughter looked around with an air of suppressed excitement. As the last of daylight drained out the sides of the garden, all four listened while birds settled themselves twittering into the shadowed trees.

Dusk sank over us like a sheet let down softly from the sky. Birds grew quiet. Somewhere a peeper began his tiny night song. A glow-worm appeared on the rough trunk of the old tree beside us, then another, and another. Conversation stopped. The branches of the May bush began to materialize from the gloom, their soft white puffy flowers just starting to open. In spite of herself, Clara could not keep her eyes from that bush. Darkness set in. She stared. The magic came: suddenly there was a cloud of fireflies dancing over the white blooms emerging from the night. She gasped. "I see them!"

"See what?"

"The fairies! I see them! Over there," she whispered.

Three of us exchanged smiles in the darkness.

Clara went home and amazed her family by stating categorically that fairies exist. She had seen them herself.

The expanding of my own awareness entered a new phase one day while the ibis were away.

Standing near the giant cypresses at the back of the garden, I felt intelligent eyes upon me. Turning around to find my observer, I discovered a pair of large blue eyes watching from the top of the wall between our property and the neighbours. Scrutinizing further, I realized they belonged to an unusually large cat, somewhat Siamese. Unafraid, inquiringly, he seemed to be examining my inmost being. "An Old Soul," I thought, remembering the term used for some very young children in whose eyes an unexplained wisdom can be seen.

The cat and I stared, meeting one another's eyes as equals. By mutual consent, both of us then turned away. I wondered who he was.

Time passed.

The destruction of our neighbourhood now lapped like a tide at the boundary walls. The garden seemed like an ark rising above the death all around us as ever more birds fled to the sanctuary of the trees within. All around outside our walls one could see ruined buildings, smashed-down trees, blocks of broken concrete, bulldozers. Nothing green and alive was left in the rubble and scraped earth where, six months earlier, old homes and gentle gardens had been. The only place where life continued was our own garden. It was suddenly filled with refugee birds and rodents, all in confusion.

The city authorities intended, we learned with shock, to raze the entire block and build a road - a road! - through the middle of our own place. Steeling ourselves against the encroaching horror, we negotiated with the authorities about the price to be paid for delivering up our paradise for destruction.

“Thirty pieces of silver!” I concluded furiously. “Like Judas betraying Christ!”

We prepared to move away.

Far away out of town, we found a place where progress was unlikely to contaminate. It was a wild place with natural trees all around. A new house was being built for us among the trees. Finally, it was almost ready.

For many months I had stopped going out into my beloved, doomed garden. Not even daring to look at it through the windows, I tried to put up walls around my heart.

One afternoon my husband came in and announced, “There's a beautiful cat out there, but he's sick. He's hiding in the narrow place between the garage and the boundary wall where nothing can reach him.”

Disturbed, I went out to look.

There he was, large, emaciated, alternating miaowing and coughing as I looked at him. He returned my gaze. There were the same blue eyes, now narrowed and suffused with pain.

There was the same astonishing presence, awareness of himself, that had spoken to me years before while he had examined me from atop the wall.

Looking closer, I realized with a start that we had met more recently as well. The previous year, some people living down the road had engineered a cocktail party to impress the neighbours. Proudly they presented their cat to the guests — I was struck by the extraordinarily gracious personage he was. He was being offered the most expensive cat food. Now, six months later, everyone had moved away. But here was that cat! Why?

Starved and sick though his body was, his spirit suffered more. It cried aloud his loss, betrayal, bewilderment, grief. Why?

Outraged, I was hurting with him.

For ten days my husband and I took turns bringing food and water to his shelter, asking nothing of him, but speaking to him with respect and compassion. Every time we spoke to him, he replied with a miaow, then coughed miserably. What was his name, I wondered. He deserved to be addressed by name. Attaching to him a new name with associations that might be unsuitable to his strong personality, still unknown to me, was unacceptable. So I decided upon “Ikati,” an African word for “Cat.” He could bring his own meaning to his name.

We spoke of him every day, worrying. "What are we going to do about him?" my husband asked one evening. "We're due to be moving in a couple of weeks." The thought of him being abandoned yet again to the bulldozers made me shudder. But he was still keeping far out of reach in his narrow shelter, retreating fearfully still farther back whenever we approached. I asked heaven for a miracle.

One Sunday afternoon, ten days before moving day, it was my turn to feed and water our refugee. As usual, he looked me full in the eyes as he replied. Today, however, there was something more. Interrupting his eating, he miaowed with great intensity as though telling his terrible story. Great racking coughs followed this effort to communicate, then he resumed eating. This was repeated, over and over again. I waited, praying silently, "Please help him."

Abruptly, he stopped eating, hungry as he was. Painfully stepping over the debris in his hiding place, he came towards me, miaowing. Emerging into the open, he wound himself around my ankles. I bent over and carefully stroked his rough fur. He had kept himself so clean! Suddenly I heard his spirit pleading very loudly: "Pick me up and hold me. Please." I did, holding him lightly. "Put me down, please." I did. "Please pick me up again." I did. "Put me down now." I did. The third time, as I held him, he pressed himself close into my neck: "Take me

home now. Please.”

I did.

He came into our home and quietly transformed it. Already there were three cats, one German Shepherd dog and two humans. Subtly, Ikati changed the entire pattern of interactions. I marvelled at his genius as he carefully positioned himself firmly at the top of the four-footed hierarchy without dislodging anybody from his or her own established position.

After we moved into our new home and wild garden, his status was confirmed. Friedle, boss cat of the old garden, stepped back before Ikati's joyous proclamation of this indigenous wilderness as his own place. Friedle was allowed to retain all his accustomed in-house privileges - Ikati was grandly unconcerned about these, having created his own superior ones. Frail Madam cat was tolerated as a senile old bore. Ikati played with cute, spoilt Pookah cat as though this was his own little pet, and only teased him in moderation. Big dog Dolf was the only four-footed one treated as worthy of his respect and interest. The humans he considered his equals.

It was having his own garden that gave Ikati his greatest pleasure. Farther from the house, higher up the hillside, stood the natural bush, and this is where Ikati reigned. Once-proud Friedle needed Ikati's permission to ceremonially scratch the

rough trunk of any thorn tree; the other two cats had no problem since they deferred to his majesty without question. From where we sat in the outside living area or looked out through the windows, we could watch, as through framed in an amphitheatre, how Ikati explored, scratched his trees, dozed, or simply stared at the movements of birds and sunlight through the branches.

The area closer to the house was densely planted with growing beings rescued from destruction in the previous garden: lithe birch trees graceful as dancers, clumps of fairy-like *nandina*, stately arum lilies, agapanthus mounding greenly, fine-leaved groundcovers spilling over every surface. And the roses! Some had been saved from our previous home; most were old-fashioned climbers chosen for their blossoms' resemblance to those soft, cabbagey roses seen in paintings by the Dutch masters. Scrambling into thorn trees, festooning tops and sides of boundary walls, they completely covered a rose arbour – a dreamily lovely place where one could pause between the lower garden and the natural woodland higher up.

Sitting on the bench under the arbour, I'd gaze at the various kinds of beauty all around, trying not to think about the trees I'd left behind. *What had become of the birds there? And the fairies?* Ikati liked to stretch out on the bench alongside me, obviously in complete agreement that this was the loveliest

place he had ever seen. *Would there ever be fairies in this garden? Was it possible?* Once in a while he'd stretch and jump down to scratch the back of his head against the grey-green lavender bushes close by. Then he'd lift his face, delightedly sniffing the fragrant lavender flowers and leaves.

Evenings would bring the doves fluttering to their perches on branches directly above the bird bath; the ibis left their foraging grounds in the centre of Ikati's territory; thrushes, robins, finches and other woodland birds settled down for the night in all the surrounding trees. Ikati observed them all with intent blue eyes, clearly enjoying every detail of the movements and rustlings about him. He never tried to catch birds.

And when the owls called to each other in the darkest hours of the night, Ikati would raise his head from the bed and listen.

Also in the night, when I was sometimes sad and didn't want to disturb my husband, I'd allow the tears to flow, silently. Getting up from his usual place against my thigh, Ikati would come and press his face tightly against mine. For as long as I needed him, he stayed, allowing me to hug him close. When I was comforted, he'd go back again to sleep, pressed against my thigh.

One terrible day he came back from his mid-morning ex-

ploration, looking sick. Unable to eat and apparently hurting, he jumped onto his favourite chair to rest. I watched anxiously, waiting for the start of clinic hours so I could take him to the vet. When my husband arrived, Ikati jumped down to greet him. A sudden movement and Ikati was transfixed with pain: he gave a shriek that sounded human. The vet kindly diagnosed an accident that had caused internal injuries. The broken chest bone had punctured his pancreas. But we were convinced someone had kicked Ikati in the chest as he'd come up and stood before that person. Ikati was interested in people, and trusting.

Five agonizing weeks he fought to stay alive.

Sometimes when desperate for comfort, he would get up with a cry and place himself between the forepaws of his friend, the big German Shepherd, and just lie there. Dolf would gaze down at him with compassion, then raise grief-filled brown eyes to the two of us.

His suffering, the horror of it, intensified. Then one night-morning after the owls had left and Ikati had spent a restless night in my arms, he got up painfully. He tried to have a drink of water, retched, then stared at me full in the eyes. In the grey, pre-dawn light I perceived the gaunt skeleton of a cat; above it, a death's head. Its fixed gaze bored into me: "Please."

"Alright, my darling, I'll let you go."

He slept peacefully then, in my arms.

When morning came, I was surprised to see him evidently much better. Hope rising in my heart, I held him gently while my husband drove us to the vet. Wrapped in his blanket, Ikati lay back in my arms like a baby. His blue eyes, wide and peaceful again after so many weeks, gazed up at the blue sky passing above the car window. Involuntarily I realized the two blues looked the same - he was preparing to go to the one above! ("Oh no, please," I thought.)

With tears in his own eyes, the vet pleaded with me to allow Ikati to go. The cat lay relaxed, waiting, on the table between us. He understood perfectly. This was his wish.

Together my husband and I cradled Ikati in our arms while the releasing needle slid into his forearm. With one finger, the vet gently stroked Ikati's head. With the other hand he held the needle steady. Three heads bowed over the resting cat; tears rained down upon his back.

Quietly the vet left us. There was only a profound stillness, broken by an occasional sob. The heartbreaking music of Albenoni's "Adagio" was playing, music I'd always associated with the dying of Christ. Its plangent chords echoed my heart's beating, crying. What kind of planning was at work, I wondered, that Ikati should be passing into eternity with this particular music to accompany him.

Ikati's soft warm body was carried home, wrapped again in his blanket. First we laid him in a quiet sunny place outside, where he wouldn't be disturbed. His spirit needed time to say goodbye.

The following day his spirit had gone. Up in the wild garden, in the shade of his thorn trees, we prepared a grave. It was in Ikati's favourite place. Under his head I placed a branch of lavender, strewn herbs like a cover all over the blanket that held him. On his head, a palm-leaf cross from Lent. Over his body my husband prayed, with breaking voice, the liturgy.

The mound of his grave became the focus of a special place in the garden. At his head, *nandina* (my favourite) was planted — “fairy bush,” we'd always called it. Lavender (his favourite), particularly lovely ferns and perennial flowering plants covered the entire area.

Sitting on an improvised bench close by, observing how the plants apparently agreed in the rightness of their new relationships, I thought Ikati would like it too.

Now there were two places to sit: the edge of the memorial garden and the romantic bench under the roses. The other cats kept me company under the arbour, played in the undergrowth and up in the wild garden. Peace descended around us.

Sometimes while sitting in one of these two places, I'd glimpse something out of the corner of my eye. At other times,

I sensed something there, I wasn't sure what. There was a presence. (Presences?)

Sometimes there were visitors. Sitting down beside me on the bench underneath the arbour, they'd grow quiet, then say softly, "You know, I think there are fairies in this garden."

Wonderingly, I recounted this to my friend, Jonathan, husband of my now-grown daughter.

"But of course, Ma, there are fairies in this garden. You brought them with you."

AMONG MOUNTAINS

My eyes open wide. I'd forgotten the feeling after years of squinting in the glare of a white sky. This sky is soft, robin-egg blue with clouds of cotton wool pulled across it. Movement. There's always movement of air: a slight breeze, a stiff southeaster or gale-force winds. I've missed wind. My skin re-hydrates, drinking in moisture it's been losing since I left Canada. Here, within sight of the sea, I breathe deeply and feel myself expanding like one of those hard paper objects you drop into a glass of water and it fills out into the shape of a tree. Energy fills me from the inside out, my throat releases and I feel the urge to sing.

Mountains. Trees. A tapestry of olive-green Mediterranean shrubs and *fynbos* under cloudscares that rival the landscape.

Our little house overlooks False Bay, where mountains drop down to the sea. Mornings I look over at Swartkop and Simonsberg, watching how clouds form in the wind over their peaks then break away to shape our weather for the day. If you keep on going in that direction, you'll reach the Antarctic. Wilderness. I need one nearby. If not the North Pole, then this one will do. My back is to Africa where I feel alien. If I can't live in the woods of Canada (I've been away too long) or somewhere rural in Europe (France, Italy?), then here is where I

want to be.

I hardly need to garden. There's nature reserve all around us, on the mountain slopes and down into the nearby *vlei*. Around the house there's a natural *fynbos* garden. I've made an "Italian courtyard" protected from salt sea winds. We can sit outside in this enclosed space where small trees in earthenware pots, vines and shrubs create a magical forest effect.

The city is far enough away not to encroach, yet near enough if we need it. Forty minutes drive takes us to the hospital on its outskirts. Leaving our valley, we drive a ten kilometre mountain pass that winds through views of ever-changing beauty.

In time, my strength returned. I learned to walk without crutches. A dedicated therapist taught me to move almost normally.

I joined the choir of the little Anglican church on the edge of the bay. Soon I was singing solos, practising every day for an hour or so, enjoying every minute of it. Our house is too small for Nic to escape my vocalising and repetitious exercises, so I did these in the church (I had a key). Now I focused on classical church music (Bach and Mozart, among others). Sometimes there were functions where I could perform songs from the shows and cabaret. I felt there were no limits to what my voice

could do. Immersed in singing, surrounded by warmth of friends from the choir and Nic's gentle presence, I was thriving.

Mountains of a different sort appeared.

Nic was falling into a blackness of spirit he couldn't understand. From earliest days, most of his family had told him he was stupid (he'd had trouble learning to read) but his strong points went unacknowledged. After our marriage, I recognised that he was dyslexic. His intelligence and giftedness were confirmed by the fact that he was successful in his career, concealing his difficulties by concentration and hard work. He'd been reluctant to return to the Cape. Now I understood why.

These were the scenes of his disastrous first marriage. His children, living in the same area, were acting as though they'd divorced him. Now that we were living fairly nearby, it was impossible not to see this. A shadow deepened over him. Doctors diagnosed depression that had been hidden for years, emerging now in these old haunts. He was given medication and psychological counselling.

I was absorbing more and more hostility from my own child, also not far away. Music was enough to sustain me for awhile.

The pattern of hurtful behaviour from our children inten-

sified. Nic nearly succumbed to the urge to end his own life. Mercifully, he was hospitalised when the danger became acute. I needed help for my own bewilderment and grief. With a caring and intuitive psychologist, I began to heal. Lourenza encouraged me to write about experiences I'd tried to forget. In doing so, I discovered connections and maybe a purpose. My life made a coherent narrative.

But another mountain was looming. Lourenza was there to support me over the journey ahead.

One Good Friday evening, after being unaccountably sick in bed for a week, Nic was taken to hospital by ambulance. For two weeks he lay in intensive care, unconscious. A team of doctors fought to save his life. His next-of-kin were summoned. He wasn't expected to live. Diagnosis: acute septicaemia. Infection arising from an earlier shoulder replacement had lodged in the area of his knee replacement. It was out of control. He was given massive antibiotics and life support until he regained consciousness. Then he was transferred to a single room in the orthopaedic ward where he was watched day and night. Most of this time, he was in isolation, with access restricted to hospital staff wearing surgical gowns that could be disposed of as they left the room. If this infection spread to other patients in the ward, it would be lethal. The infection was raging through his

entire system, poisoning him. The surgery began: to drain the sepsis, repeatedly; to remove the compromised knee replacement; to insert steel rods into his leg, to try to save the leg so he could later get another knee replacement. Huge doses of exceptionally strong antibiotics were used but this infection was drug resistant. It would mutate and flare up again and again. Time and time again he had to go back for more surgery, all under general anaesthetic. Twenty-nine times he was taken down to theatre. He fought to stay alive. This went on for months.

Every second day I drove forty minutes, over the mountain pass, to be with him. When there was a crisis such as another operation, I went every day: the day before the op, on the day itself, and the following day. I had to put on disposable theatre garb before opening the closed door to his room. The months lengthened to a year.

Meanwhile at home, necessary alterations were underway to make it wheelchair-friendly (changes to a bathroom - non-slip tiles so he wouldn't fall, remodelling the shower), and major earthworks for a driveway so the house could be accessed by wheelchair. While all this was happening and Nic was off the scene, it was a good time to repaint the inside of the house – with all the disruption that entailed.

My stomach pains worsened (*they must just go away, I've no time for any more problems*) until one morning I collapsed.

Just before losing consciousness, I phoned my neighbour who had a key to please unlock the door, then I phoned the ambulance. Two stomach ulcers had bled for months. I spent eight days in a ward one floor up from where Nic lay alone in his room. The 14th February came and hospital staff relayed Valentine messages between us.

Nic celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday and one Christmas in hospital. Operation number twenty-seven out of twenty-nine was the one to amputate his right leg above the knee – the one used for driving a car.

After a year and a half in hospital, he came home. His perspectives were changed. He was thankful to be alive and for the blessings of every day. A prosthesis was made so he could walk short distances with crutches. His balance gone now, most of the time he moves about in a wheelchair.

On a follow-up visit to the hospital, we met in the hall the specialist who'd saved his life and guided his recovery. An intensely caring man, he stopped for a chat, beaming pleasure to see Nic in good health.

“Three times, we thought we'd lost you.”

“What did you do to me, Doc, when I was unconscious in ICU?”

“You don't want to know,” he smiled.

Now it was my turn to care for my handicapped husband. But I was exhausted and needed a break. I also felt he needed encouragement to develop the independence he was capable of.

One day Clare, whom I loved as an adopted daughter, picked me up to go out. Just the two of us. Over lunch she mentioned she was taking an inexpensive cruise of the southern Mediterranean as a fortieth birthday present to herself. At a small extra cost, passengers could take excursions onshore at eight ports. *My dreams to see something of Europe!* Nic had visited Europe – like everyone else I knew except me – I who’d yearned for it all my life. Our nest egg could afford this, we’d have enough left.

“May I go with you?”

She gulped, and gallantly said it would be nice to have company.

That’s how the crowning experience of my life began: twelve days touching Europe.

From the ship’s railing I watched the coast of Italy slide by, then the mountains of Greece. In the Aegean, I looked for traces of the “wine dark sea” and saw them at sunset. Ulysses had plied these waters, and the Phoenicians. Walking the streets of Barcelona (*those ancient walls!*), viewing the cloisters of Majorca (*and those castles on distant hilltops*), breath-

ing the air of Athens and enjoying the people of the *Plaka* (*the Parthenon – it's real, not just pictures in a book!*), exploring the alleys of the “silent city” in Malta (*now I feel the terror of the besieged, of Ottoman sails in the east*), my spirit recognised its home. With my body, I now understood what I'd read in books. This is my heritage. Lacking such experience, I'd been restless in my core. Now I have peace. Though I haven't yet seen France or Italy, I still have those dreams.

Christmas Day, 2009: the last time I sang in church. On the day after Christmas, a letter from an official in the church arrived. The accusations he levelled against me were lies and he knew it. But that wasn't the issue, I realised. It was politics. Not national issues but an internal power play. I was the lightning rod. Stricken, I left the church I'd loved. That meant losing my friends in the choir and the singing that I'd lived for. But I'd left my traces on a CD we'd made two months earlier, singing Mozart's “*Laudate dominum.*”

To submerge my sorrow, I focused on playing piano, especially Italian songs and arias. A baritone from the choir sang as I played. Together, we created Song. Then, abruptly and without explanation, he stopped coming.

There must be some Plan at work, I decided. I would make the transition to my next stage.

I remembered a promise I'd made to myself as a teenager:

First I must sing. Then I must get some life experience.

When I cannot sing anymore, then I'll be a writer.

I didn't know what I'd write about, but I'd learn along the way.

NIGHT LISTENERS

A balmy autumn evening, dark now over the bay. Nearby sailboats and yachts rocked at their moorings, an occasional mast light surprising the eye like a star dropped out of the sky. In the velvety blackness above, the starry hosts pulsed their individual rhythms.

Around the parking area between the church and the sea below, bushes and low-growing trees moved in a breeze that heralded an incoming wind. The old church stood empty now, its last lights turned out. Departing choristers headed towards their cars. Midweek practice was over but the new mass we'd been learning sounded inside us still.

Suddenly music shattered the night quiet.

"Glory to God," rang out a glorious bass voice.

"Glory to God in the Highest," my soprano completed the arc of song.

In the darkness, other choristers murmured their assent and drove away. Friends, all of us, we were moved by the directness and beauty of this mass of St. Thomas, known as the Doubter.

Inside my car, I watched the receding taillights of the others, pondering. The bass singer, a retired priest, had the rich warm voice of an opera singer; involuntarily, my own voice

rose to the challenge of his. Amazed at our impulsive paeon of song, I wondered if anyone else had heard. The bushes between my car and the sea looked impenetrable, black. The church loomed pale, ghostly. Behind it, the little town under the mountain was settling into sleep. No, surely not, I decided. The burst of song would have gone unheard. I felt ashamed at my relief.

I studied the sky again. The firmament shifted a notch, and I knew differently.

We had indeed been heard.

There in the bushes between the parking area and the bay crouched a young woman. She had run away and was terrified to return to the house where her husband waited to assault her again. She had heard the message of the singing: maybe it was true there was a God somewhere. Maybe this God knew about her and even cared a little bit. Maybe if she went back the man wouldn't kill her and she might be able to go on a little longer.

I knew her.

Around a corner of the trees, a car sat parked in darkness, facing the sea. A woman leaned against the steering wheel,

shoulders taut. She couldn't bear to go back just yet to the one-room flat where nobody waited for her. Now she knew it was, yes, possible for a person to die of loneliness. She didn't want this to happen, not yet. The singing affirmation she'd heard might mean that God was still there somewhere. Maybe God knew, maybe even cared.

I knew that woman too.

Farther away, another car stood deep in the shadows of the empty church. Here there was no view and the windows were shut. The man alone in the car could not see or hear the sea he had loved for so many years. This enclosed space muffled the far-away sound. On the car seat beside him lay his service pistol, safety catch already off. What was the point of going on living, he wondered, when his spirit was blacker than the shade around him? From where he sat he couldn't even see the stars. The burst of singing startled him. Putting down the pistol, he wondered: Could God reach even into this darkness? Maybe he should wait.

Driving homeward, away from the bay as beautiful as Naples, so they say, I weighed up my dreams - especially my unquenched longing to sing opera, and for Italy. Then I consid-

ered the astonishing event of the song flung into the night. These words had been sung before, I recalled with a start, in the night sky a long time ago. The words that followed were “Peace on earth...”

So that story was true after all. Angels ... Perhaps the rest was true also.

Ten minutes later, I entered my home. My gentle husband of not many years looked up. “Did you have a nice choir practice?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’m glad,” he said, and returned to his book on seafaring.

EASTER LETTER TO MY BROTHERS

Every Easter season, from Sorrowing Thursday (my name for it), through Good Friday (Black Friday, I call it) and grey, lifeless Saturday, I feel the events of the sacred mysteries being repeated. The realist in me allows that I might sometimes get depressed for a few days, but I observe it happens reliably over these three days. It also happens that, after every Sad Saturday, early the following morning something occurs that causes a quickening awareness: He's risen! A joy that I can't explain wells up. After another year of being a sceptic, I believe again. Maybe it's not a coincidence that of the several settings of the mass our choir sings, my favourite is *The Mass of Saint Thomas*.

I awakened at quarter to four this morning, while it was still pitch black, night. It's autumn under the Southern Cross. I sleep with my window open to the wind from the sea and the quiet of the mountain heather (*fynbos*, it's called here at the Cape of Good Hope). The noise of cars en route to their holiday destination had abated. I'd slept badly for the third night in a row, heartbroken over hurtful words from a family member. I got up and stood at the window to look at the stars still bright over the ridge to the south. Back in bed, I was drifting off to sleep when it happened. Bird song. I recognized their voices as

those birds that inhabit the shrubbery in our garden and the *fynbos* around us. Not the usual one or two voices being joined by others, rousing to an erratic medley that disperses. No, this was a soft chorus of soprano and alto voices combining smoothly together. Then water fowl from the wetlands in the valley brought their voices in a gentle chorus, like tenor and bass parts being added to the “sky” birds. This lasted about a minute. Then silence. *He is risen. They’ve realized it first.*

Nature burst into song, they say, when he was born. And years ago people believed that if you went into a stable on Christmas Eve you’d see the animals kneeling down. Now, for one morning at least, I believed again. My tension and grief of the past days lifted.

I went to church for the choir’s last rehearsal of the morning’s Easter music, due to begin in forty-five minutes.

A strange thing happened, a misunderstanding - a most unusual occurrence in our congenial group. I took it to heart. Bewildered, trying not to cry, I lost all desire to sing. My unhappiness of the past few days returned. How would I get through this special music, with congregation and visitors anticipating something wonderful? The choir relied on my strong voice and role as intermediary between organist and singers. (When in position in the church, the choir couldn’t see the or-

ganist, but I faced the organ and relayed her signals to the choir.) Miserably, I started out of the hall to the vestibule leading into the nave of the church. The service was about to start.

My friend, the retired priest with the glorious bass voice whose beautiful singing always gives me shivers (he could have been an opera singer), was still trying to pull himself out of his chair. He was white-faced with the intractable back pain that couldn't be relieved by surgery, and the terrible drugs he had to take to endure it. He stopped me. Loving, giving, as always, he had something kind to say.

"Lucretia, last week I was listening to some CDs and I put on one of Kiri te Kanawa. Part-way through the recording I heard an introduction that I recognized. Then I realized it was 'your' "Laudate dominum." (I'd sung this masterpiece of Mozart as a solo with the choir just two Sundays ago.) "Especially at the end, when the voice comes in over the top of the choir" (it comes in almost inaudibly then swells to a thrilling crescendo together with the choir). "You sounded just like Kiri te Kanawa. And I thought: we have our own – right here."

I told him he had no idea how much I needed that right now, thanked him, and went to the rest room to cry a bit. There one of my fellow sopranos said something reassuring which helped too, then took my place just in time for the service. Was still too heartsick to sing the standard hymns (was basically "on

strike”), completely missed out in the descant I was supposed to lead (couldn’t concentrate) but the congregation didn’t realise this, only the choir did; got inspired during the beautiful mass setting of St. Thomas, and during the singing of two special anthems for communion.

Driving home after the service, I was quiet. Usually Nic and I talk animatedly about the music, from our different perspectives. One of these is distance: he sits at the front of the church; the choir is at the back. Usually I ask him if he enjoyed the music. Now I didn’t ask or care. Finally he asked me if I’d enjoyed the music and I replied curtly, No.

After hot cross buns at our table overlooking the sea, I told him about the morning’s events, starting with the bird song, through the misunderstanding during rehearsal, then my friend’s kind words.

“I’m still trying to sort through all these different feelings.”

“Now I’ll tell you MY story about this morning.

“After you left me to go practise, I was standing outside, talking to the rector while people came out from the early service. A lady who always comes to the early service said she was disappointed the choir hadn’t sung this morning. She thought it would on Easter Day.”

“Oh no,” said Father Basil, “the choir never sings at the early service.”

“Why don’t you stay and come to the 9:30 service, that’s only a 45 minute wait, you can stay out here in the sun, and then you can hear the choir sing,” suggested Nic.

“Perhaps I will,” she said.

Nic continued: after the second service, while he waited outside for me to fetch the car, parked some distance away (now he has one leg, remember, gets about on crutches, and I do the driving), he saw the same lady emerging and heading straight for him.

“Who’s the lead soprano with the beautiful voice? Is she a trained singer? She must be, to sing like that.”

Nic assured her that is the case, she is trained as a professional singer.

“She must be trained for opera. She sounds like an opera singer.”

Nic assured her she is trained for opera, and when asked where, he replied, Pretoria.

“Furthermore,” he added, “she works very hard at her singing. She spends about 8 hours a week practising here at the church.”

“How do you know that?”

“She’s my wife.”

Three beautiful things. The pattern of three was complete.

I felt a gift had been specially given to me today and I wasn't sad any more.

Thought you'd like this story, Wyc, because you used to enjoy my singing.

Wanted to write to Tyndale and Calvin, but they stay out of reach.

Thought you'd like this story, Wes, because I know you love me.

I love all of you.

ORPHEUS

First there was the bird,

I'd heard the thump at the window. Moving quickly to investigate, I'd been in time to see the little bird on its back on the ground, head arching convulsively back and forth. The little throat swelled and constricted. A Cape canary. He'd flown head first into the plate glass window, freshly cleaned two days earlier. Rushing outside to comfort him if he was badly hurt and protect him from the cat or predatory hawks overhead, I thought of Caruso, the canary my mother had when I was young. Named after the opera singer, he had delighted our family with his glorious singing. Now this hurt canary needed me.

When I reached him, his tiny frame was already still, the spirit flown. Tears filling my eyes so I scarcely saw details of his beauty, I lifted the fragile body and carried it to a place where he could lie undisturbed. His spirit needed time to get used to being out of body. Quiet was needed. Laying the feathered remains in the shelter of a shrub in a large pot, I silently spoke to him, giving him love to go with him on his way.

Christmas season, I was exhausted and unwell. Sorrowing, I tried to reconcile the dreams of my youth with the realities

that threatened to swamp me now. Had there been any value in all that idealism: those purposes to sing and to create beauty in every aspect of my life? Opera was my great love, but instead of getting to sing the music, I'd been given the plots of several operas to live. Persisting, refusing to concede defeat, I'd somehow managed to rise up and carry on singing anyway. Time after time, year after year. Apart from proving stubbornness, was this worth anything?

Why, I asked in the dark night hours as sleep refused to come.

An image or a dream emerged: A young girl who'd wanted just a quiet life in a small town as wife of the local carpenter. A peaceful family life with sons for her old age and the respect of people around her. Instead, she'd somehow become pregnant while still unmarried, her fiancé was having second thoughts and the town was buzzing. That story about an angel sounded unlikely. There was a mixture of politics and decrees, and the fiasco of the journey to Bethlehem. Thank goodness somebody found a place that sheltered donkeys and mules so she didn't have to endure final stages of labour under the open sky. A kind stranger helped with the delivery and placed the baby in a soft place out of reach of hoofs and manure - a far cry from the privacy and cleanliness of her mother's house. Afterwards, she couldn't get a decent night's sleep with all those rough men

coming to wake her at midnight to see the new baby they'd heard about. There was talk of angels again. And singing too, of all things. So she wasn't the only one with fantasies, as neighbours had implied, others too had weird experiences. Then those strange men from the east with an even more improbable tale. Afterwards, her husband woke her in the dead of night: they had to move fast, now, out of town. Out of the country! That was a desolate time: in a refugee camp while he supported the three of them with whatever odd jobs he could pick up. This experience shook her. What of her dreams? Finally in Nazareth, she got used to the unexpected. Just as well, for everything kept on going wrong until this baby who'd started all the trouble got killed, horribly, when just a young man. And yet, something else must be going on, something other-worldly. Was there perhaps some purpose that was hidden from her? Not just her imagination, hoping - angel-talk and so on, but really, truly? She kept on trying to believe there might be something more.

Lying awake, worn-out and sick, no longer young, I wondered: was there, unknown to me, a purpose moving to make meaning, beauty, out of my thwarted dreams? I dared to think again, only briefly, of my only child who still hadn't come, not even for Christmas Eve, tenderest occasion of them all. Then I put away the bundle of sad memories, tightly wrapped in

wound-up cloths, awaiting another eternity when loveliness could emerge.

The voice on the phone was urgent: I must report to hospital instantly. Doctor's orders. The routine blood test at clinic that morning registered a count that was dangerously high and the test had to be repeated immediately. No, I needn't pack clothes, I wouldn't be admitted; yes, I could drive the car myself (they knew my husband was in a wheelchair). They expected there'd been some mistake. The nurses couldn't conceal their shock at the results of the second test. Dangerous, that was understood. Immediately into bed in Ward 12, they said, and please walk carefully, be sure not to fall or bump yourself. The duty doctor will be called. Phone someone to bring what you'll need for a couple of days in hospital.

Walking into the six-bed ward I knew so well from recent stays there, a nurse introduced me to the one occupant awake. The only other one appeared to be asleep in her bed by the window. Life support equipment hung from a stand at her side, an oxygen mask covered her nose and mouth. Don't try to introduce me to her, another nurse advised, she hardly knows what's going on.

Lying on my bed across from her, against the other window, a short length of wall obstructed my view of the sleeping

lady. But I could hear. During the afternoon I read the book I'd brought, enjoying the unexpected rest, mercifully out of reach of my responsibilities while the intravenous drip delivered emergency medication into my arm. Blood plasma had been ordered by the doctors. Waiting, I listened in the quiet to my unseen neighbour groaning softly in her sleep, rhythmically, with every breath. A nurse would come in softly, check on the sleeper, then leave with sadness in every outline of face and body.

"What's the matter with that lady?"

"She's ninety-two, in heart failure, and she's in great pain."

Tears sprang to my eyes.

"Please," my spirit entreated, "please be kind to her.

"Let her go. Quietly, gently, in her sleep. Please, be with her."

Now I took up my vigil. My spirit would stay with this suffering woman, my strength supporting her, to steady her down the unfamiliar path.

"Who am I linked to," I wondered after awhile. Getting out of bed, I pulled my intravenous stand a few steps into the clear so I could see. Drawing closer, now her face was visible above and around the mask. It was lovely. High, rounded cheekbones and smooth forehead showed that once she had been beautiful. The aura that enveloped her to the depth of an arm's length all

around confirmed this: it was beautiful, harmonious. And it was concentrating.

Respectfully, I drew back. Now I was sure. I continued praying, "Please, help her, be with her," sensing all the while that I was needed.

That evening, an unexpected event took up everyone's attention. Two bags of plasma had arrived for me. As the first one emptied into my veins, there was a sudden allergic reaction. Alarmed, nurses removed the second one and monitored the patient for possible dangerous consequences. Doctors were called; antidote fed into my veins. They watched me through the night.

Sounds of knocking awakened me in the night, light shone in my eyes. Two night nurses were banging on the equipment of the suffering lady, presumably to get it going again. How can she survive this, I wondered, amazed at their inexperience. Committing both of our spirits into safe keeping, I finally got back to sleep.

Still the lady groaned as she breathed, but softer now, scarcely audible.

Morning came, she was quiet, but observed closely by the caring nursing staff.

My allergic reaction was subsiding. Now my blood count had plummeted as suddenly, inexplicably, as it had shot up the

previous day. Doctors were baffled: their interventions couldn't possibly have been the cause. The entire episode was incomprehensible. "Does this mean I can go home now?" "Not yet, we want to keep an eye on you," and they moved away to confer around the bed of the quiet lady.

I could hear nothing of what they said, their voices were low, and the only face I could see was that of the nursing sister who'd been caring for the sufferer. "She can't even swallow," she pointed out to the doctors, her face showing grief. They left the room in silence.

There was no sound from the lady.

An hour and a half later, three nurses came sadly into the room. Two wheeled out the bed with the lady in it, the other pushed the life support stand in tandem with the bed. Silence. A single nurse arrived to remove the bedside table. She looked close to tears.

"You've taken her to a single room next door, haven't you?"

She saw that I understood. "Yes, she hasn't long to go now."

"Does she have family?"

"Yes," and here her face looked even sadder, "a daughter in ..." (she named a suburb only twenty minutes' drive away) "and one in ..." (she named a country on the other side of the

world).

“Do they *know*?”

She nodded, unable to speak.

Awareness flashed through me. A voice addressed me by name: “There you are at age ninety-two. Your daughter of the same nearby suburb won’t be there either. You too will lie here, dying and alone.” Another voice also addressed me by name: “You will keep watch with this woman’s spirit even though you cannot be physically in place beside her bed.”

I maintained my vigil, sending my spirit out to the departing one who might need a steady hand at the crossing-over place. Tears stood behind my eyes. Will someone be there for me when my time comes? Will anyone love or care, or will I be abandoned too? The memory returned: what I’d noted when moving closer for a look at my neighbour. No flowers or card stood on the bedside table. She wore a blue tissue paper wrap as nightgown, the throw-away sort used to cover patients going to theatre for surgery. Yet above her bed stood notices informing of measured fluid intake and excretion. She couldn’t eat, tubes went in and out of her, she couldn’t possibly make a mess. Why wasn’t she wearing a pretty nightgown? Was she as disposable as the wrap that covered her?

These considerations haunted me as I drove home that afternoon. Over and over the questions churned in my mind.

Why was this lovely lady left to die alone? “Please,” I addressed the departing spirit as I drove, “may your journey be good, and not alone. May you be steadied as you go.”

At home, the first phone call I made was to the young woman who’d found a place in my heart as my younger daughter, the one who helped close the wound caused by absence of my first-born. All I really wanted to tell Clare was my distress at observing the fate of the quiet lady, and seeing myself in the same position at that age.

Clare didn’t let me finish. “Ma, you won’t be alone when the time comes. I will be with you, even if nobody else is. I’ll be *very much THERE*.” The intensity and warmth of this response allowed me to cry at last, as I’d needed to. I thought of Mary at the foot of the cross being given into the loving care of a young man who would from then on be a son to her.

My neighbour from across the road came to visit. Marié, a loving, spirited woman, an artist, listened intently to my account of the lady being left to die alone. Marié’s eyes filled with tears. On leaving, she suddenly had a voice for what had come to her. “That lady did not die alone. You were there. They knew that you would have the compassion to listen and care, and that your spirit would go with hers. That’s why your blood count went wrong. You were sent to be with her. She did not die alone,” Marié emphasized.

Again the releasing tears flowed. I knew that this was true. I need no longer grieve.

Shortly afterward, another friend observed, "That's why you had the allergic reaction to the plasma. To keep your blood count from dropping too low."

Ah, in being summoned to appear at the right time, I was being protected still.

Was there some purpose moving behind these events?

Watering the plants I loved, in the courtyard garden sheltered from searing sun and sea winds, a quick movement near my feet interrupted my reverie. A little lizard, startled out of his hiding place behind a pot, tried to escape the approaching spray and darted into the open. He froze at the sight of me, hosepipe in hand, looming over him. He had two options: flee through the open kitchen door beside him (Oh, please, I thought, don't go in there) or brave it past my feet to the safety of the pots behind.

Gazing at him (and he at me, I thought), my spirit gently spoke to him, "Don't be afraid. I won't harm you. Come past my feet. I'll be still. Go in peace behind those other pots." He didn't even hurry. Choosing the risky option, he passed at a relaxed little lizard pace around my feet and vanished into safety. Had he heard my thoughts?

Ancient memories of Orpheus sprang to mind: the one of the magic music, the singing magic that spoke to all living beings, humans and wild animals; even the gods of death were swayed.

Perhaps this music is not always audible.

Silent music?

Something loving, singing in the soul?

A hurt canary, then, could hear the singing inside (were we in duet?), know he wasn't passing on alone.

A dying lady, then, could feel it going with her part way on her journey.

A little lizard, scared no more, could sense the music too.

The singing: silent, penetrating.

Maybe this had been heard after all.

Maybe I was meant to sing like Orpheus.

SINGING LESSON

We finished the song together with a shiver of excitement, his baritone meeting the upward surge of my piano. These Italian songs and arias of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries stir me in a way I hadn't expected. Their controlled passion is finer than the raw emotion I'd looked for in my early singing days in the drama of grand opera. Now it is my friend who sings and I am learning the piano part, the instrumental voice of a duet.

"Isn't it wonderful that humans invented singing," he exclaimed.

Startled, I pondered this remark. I felt again my differentness from those around me. People of the South, how could they know where song came from? I grew up in the North. I know how it began.

Winter nights. Deep snow. Wind rising. Six years old and curled up in my bed, I listened to the stillness in the house. Everyone asleep in the bedrooms upstairs. Lying awake, I heard wind voice starting in the north. Low, crooning at first, it came from the frozen Arctic and began a lullaby. Drowsy now, I heard it modulate to a lament, its voice rising, keening. The voice grew louder. It wanted to tell a story, insisting on being

heard. I fell asleep then, wind singing in my dreams.

Often I was still playing outside when it grew dark. Winter nights started mid-afternoon. Around our little house, the only one in sight, empty fields stretched endlessly. Black fell down from the sky onto white snow, turning it blue. Wind voice began, softly at first. Then the magic. I imagined the scene too far away for me to see: out on the frozen plain, someone lifted her head. Wolf. She listened intently, raising her muzzle to the sky. There, the Northern Lights were dancing, drawing coloured veils against the black. Stirred by Wind's singing and the ballet in the sky, she whined. In all that cold, she had a warm heart yearning to join in. Softly, she matched her voice to his. So closely did their voices blend, I couldn't tell when Wind sang and Wolf sang. As he gained strength, she gained confidence and moved her voice apart from his, like dancing, always in harmony. Then she sang with the wind's own voice, a solo, then duet with him, but warmth in the timbre of her voice. I heard passion in their singing voices rising, falling across the land.

An older child now and lonely, I stood on the edge of a lake surrounded by woods. Facing north into the autumn wind that buffeted my face and body, I tried to sing. Wind was my only friend and Wolf my sister: why shouldn't I sing like them? Dance with my voice against the wind, reply to him, send my

song across grey waves that tried to drown it? I practised throwing my voice up in an arc against the northern sky, aiming it to the farthest shore of the lake. (Years later, I read that a singing teacher had declared it was bad to sing outside, “too hard on the voice,” and laughed.)

More autumns passed. Now I was a tall teenager filled with dreams, walking home from school. Home was in the woods beside the lake. It was a long walk from the bus stop in the village, down a country road that followed the shoreline of a bay related to my home lake. That was on my right side. On my left stretched fields of wheat for miles and miles across land worked for three hundred years by French Canadians. A low farmhouse or weathered wooden barn showed here and there, set way back from the road. I hardly ever glimpsed the people who lived there. I felt completely alone. Those fields extending far away looked just right for me to sing across. So I did, filling the wide spaces with arias from operas learned by listening to my records over and over again.

My favourite was from Puccini’s romantic opera *La Bohème*, “*Sì, mi chiamano Mimi.*” Sending this across a field one afternoon, I was startled to hear a reply - a glorious tenor voice began the Love Duet that follows. No one was in sight. I came in with Mimi’s part, he came in as Rodolpho. Together, we completed the duet. Then silence. In the distance, I saw some-

one slip out of the barn where he'd been concealed and disappear into the fields beyond.

Later, I heard talk from the village: this was the younger brother of the owner of that farm; very shy, never married. The villagers considered him eccentric; his singing in the fields proved that he was crazy. I, the unwelcome "English" girl who often sang across the fields (so people heard it after all?) was obviously crazy too.

Seasons passed, and thousands of miles when I left my Northland to start a new life in the South.

Yes, I knew where song began, but my voice needed training.

Annie was the right teacher for me. Annie, also from the North, but Europe, understood the genesis of song. Over many years, she taught me. Carefully, firmly, she guided me away from self-absorption, "expressing myself" when singing. "Your voice is an instrument like, say, a flute."

Young and passionate, I disagreed. "No," I thought, "I'm a violin with strings that throb inside a woman's shape. That's why I want to sing opera." And subtly I resisted. Annie persisted. "Yes, your voice has a warm human quality, but your singing will be better if you concentrate on being a woodwind instrument."

Back and forth our wills wrestled over the years. Deep affection grew between us. Annie had developed her technique from careful study of several traditions which she focused to a simple principle. Annie understood what the Northland taught and this underlay her teaching. “It takes imagination to grasp what I’m trying to teach you.”

Stubborn as I was, gradually I began to trust and follow, then realised my teacher had been right. In using my voice as an instrument, a woodwind, a foundation was established to support the human-violin sound. This discipline freed me from my personality. I started to make music.

Seasons passed, more and more of them. Time and time again, illness forced me to stop singing.

Time and time again, when strength comes back like re-turning Spring, I feel the old imperative to sing. Amazed I’m even trying, I stand at the piano and spread open two sheets of worn music manuscript. In these pencilled marks, now fading, Annie had sketched the fundamental steps of her technique. “If you master this, you’ll be able to go on by yourself. You have the voice. You’ll probably be able to sing until you’re seventy. Or as long as you want to.”

Starting the ritual yet again, I consider: “I’m approaching

seventy, and still I want to sing.”

I know how song began. I know how to begin again. Setting aside awareness of diminished energy, I concentrate on the lesson.

Step one. Positioning the body to receive and channel breath: the breath of life. Spirit. Wind rising. Now I am a child again, out in the snow on a winter night. Far in the north, I hear wind awakening, its low sound crooning over great spaces. The wind is eternal, inexhaustible. I need to be an instrument tilting towards wind’s voice, poised to let it enter and sweep through me.

Step two. Wolf is listening, her spirit rising to this voice. She takes it into her and sends it back in a descending scale. I’m singing with my sister Wolf. The wind, the Northland spirit, rises further and she takes the challenge, answers the ascending voice. She sends her voice back in an arch across the sky. Now we are together, wolf and wind voices rising, falling.

Step three. The wind - who says the wind is not alive! - is listening to sister Wolf. He begins to laugh and tease like when he’s melting snow in spring. His singing dances upwards in arpeggios, which Wolf returns with skill of one enjoying a

game. Wind and Wolf do mirror manoeuvres: the breath of life is limitless, the warm wolf voice is flexible, delighted. The sky fills up with singing voices rising, falling.

Step four. Alone on her wild lake, Loon has been listening. But when spring comes and Wolf is occupied with other things and Wind is doing his skipping song that melts the ice, she replies with phrases from the wind and wolf duet. Her singing soars, flamboyant, a coloratura soprano, diva of the season in an operatic aria.

“So that’s how singing started,” I thought to my friend, the baritone, who hadn’t grown up in the North.

“And that’s why you could free my singing voice,” I wrote to my friend Annie, now aged, sick and far away. “You knew how it all began.”

THREE DAYS

Hyacinth bulbs are hard to find these days. Spotting the only packet in the shop, I snatched it jubilantly. In northern countries, spring is coming. Hyacinths will emerge from black earth still chilled by snowmelt, or three in a pot on windowsills overlooking puddles and the grey remains of snowdrifts.

Where I live, autumn is ending. Winter rains will chill the air. We're starting to light heaters. Easter season is upon us. Here I need special effort to celebrate this reminder of new life. That's why I wanted hyacinths.

Friday morning, washing coffee cups and wondering why I didn't feel guilty about not going to church for the special two-hour service, I glanced up out the window. There was a cross on the hill! What? Looked again, no, three crosses in a row on the hill. Focussing now on the view, I realised those poles for the power line atop the ridge between us and the town in the neighbouring valley had been there all along. Every day for ten years I'd looked at them. Today was the first time I'd seen them differently. Good Friday, nine o'clock in the morning.

"Uh oh, here you go again," I told myself. "You're going to be living the events of Good Friday again, and the rest of the allotted three days." I've always been moved more strongly when not distracted by the goings-on in church. A life-time of

participation in the liturgy behind me, I needed now to allow the sacred mysteries undisturbed development like a negative in a photographer's darkroom. Today was going to be my own Black Friday.

Wearing my black gym outfit, I kept my appointment with Zack, the young trainer, named for a prophet I guessed, who guided me through rehabilitation exercises. Standing against a set of bars, I held onto them and stretched. ("Yes, that's how a crucified man's arms would be stretched," I mused.) The resulting pain in one arthritic shoulder, involuntary deep breathing down to the bottom of my ribs, continued these associations. Following the next set of instructions, still in this position, I twisted my trunk to the right, then left. Saying nothing to gentle Zack, I visualised another crucified man on either side and resigned myself to whatever else might follow on this day.

Back home, I avoided looking out the window at the hill. A clock chimed twelve times – next stage in the process. Now the three-hour darkness. No! I needed to do something that asserted living. The packet of hyacinth bulbs lay on the counter under that window. Now is the right time to plant the three of them in the lovely old hyacinth vases with a bulbous cup at the top. Just the size to hold one bulb over water in its base, these vases allow a hyacinth to grow on a window sill, back-lit by sun so you can watch roots growing down into water while the nub-

like protuberance of green on top grows into fleshy leaves and star-like flowers. When winter is at its dreariest, strong fragrance of hyacinth will fill our rooms. Each morning, washing coffee cups, I'll check these bulbs at the window through which I'd seen the crosses. I'll top up the water level, keeping emerging roots wet up to the rounded bottom of the bulb. Light shines beautifully through the cobalt-blue glass of each vase. It's been a good Friday.

Saturday I wakened with surprise at feeling happy. Sad Saturday, I'd always called this privately. But in my dream I'd been to where my loved ones have gone, those who've died. I was with them again: father, mother, Wycliffe; dear friends; we were joyous to be together. My family and I had forgiven one another and openly showed our love; my friends and I no longer shy to show our love. All day, sensing their presences around me, I didn't feel sad any more at the thought of my time coming to join them.

In this awareness, I applied myself to another ritual of life: preparing piles of fresh vegetables into a big pot of vegetable stew that's beautiful to look at, delicious to eat; and lamb braised in red wine, with green beans. Here was a sacrament of nurturing. My husband and I would enjoy these gifts and share with those who might come. It's been a happy Saturday.

Birds didn't sing as usual this Easter Sunday morning. In

the pre-dawn dark of the morning when New Life arose, our rains began. Life-giving rain, long-awaited by thirsty plants, dry ground. Down it poured on church-goers and holiday makers alike. Were they giving thanks for the rain?

Washing coffee cups again, I checked out the window for the crosses. All sight of them was covered by the rain. Here on the window sill, a fresh green nub on each brown bulb of hyacinth.

Snug in our living room, cats curled up in front of the fire and the blessing of rain outside the window, I sat in my big chair. Books close by, writing pad on lap, I studied my notes.

A dream or vision from months ago was haunting me, something crying to be heard. Listening, I tried to catch the words. A poem perhaps?

There was a song that mustn't die.

I began to write. It was a poem, "Dancing she came."

Poems

"Sing sorrow, sorrow: but good win out in the end."

— Agamemnon, by Aeschylus

In Woods

In woods, after winter
when wet winds blow,
walking, I kick aside November's brown oak leaves,
discover the first bloom,

Spring Beauty, rising
out of black, snow-drenched earth –
five water-coloured petals
on stem so frail you'd think
the weight of one oak leaf
would break it.

I kneel awhile, then
walk away and leave it there
among rough leaves that soon will shift
and hide it from the light.

Dew

I need quiet
as grass needs dew
every day.

It used to be prayer
my inner voice clamoured
regularly.

Quiet is better.
I can hear
the universe.

Exorcism

I answer you, faces
appearing unwelcomed
from my purgatory memories.
I do not fear you now.
Say I was awkward,
foolish, naive.
Yet I could sing more beautifully
than any of you.

I thank you now
for your tormenting
that brought a certain anger
together with the pain
and made me grow
while you stayed small.
And I can sing more beautifully
than you can understand.

Healer

He loved us.
He did not ask for thanks.
He did his work.

He grew too tired to continue.
We thanked him.
Then, they say, he died.

We love him —
do not believe
he is dead.

Though he could not heal himself
of mortality,
neither could he die.

— *for Dr. Robert Kelso*

Dialogue

Your eyes are green,
blue-grey green like the sea.
And you are like the sea,
deep and strong and unexplored.

And you have hazel eyes,
green outside, brown inside,
like the earth whose leaves and grass
cover secrets from men's eyes.

You have your moods
of calm and sometimes storm.

You have your seasons,
no single climate.

Tell me, then, how you love me.

Like the sea, my love,
deep,
unchanging
down below the waves.

You do not chide me for my words
that come as plentifully
as leaves and snow upon the earth.
You hear the things I do not say.

Awakening Early

Nothing so tenuous as birdsong
begun in the dark of the morning,
except the thread whereby
all happiness depends —
the breath of the loved one.

Autumn Leaves: My Friend is Crying

Red September
gold October
fires subside
into November.
Burned-out embers
slowly crumble,
spreading softly
into ashes.

Woman's eyes
alight with love
are not extinguished
with a blow.
Their glowing dies
reluctantly;
each day a little more
is gone.

Bright leaves fallen,
fade and darken.
Burned-out embers
slowly crumble.

So a grief
becomes complete,
spreading softly
into ashes.

Teargatherer

I try to gather up some of the tears
of others lost in their pain
into myself.
Sometimes I think I'll break.

I would not have to gather tears
if I were certain Another
went searching, finding
each wandering one.

Cancer Ward

Four to a room,
or rather, a window
that she and I and the other two
watched, before she died.

We thought the nights would never end
or black sky grow pale.
We listened to each other,
every sound important.

Some small thing it was
happened in an instant,
revealing us
as sisters.

I got up from my bed
and walked away from them,
slowly,
afraid I would forget.

Enchantment

Dreaming over a candle flame
remembering other times
I gazed into these same
blue-grey eyes, certain
that I'd never wish for any
other pair of eyes.

But apart in a quiet room
my little child lies,
not knowing, in her dreaming,
how I'm longing
for her lovely blue-grey eyes.

Wintersickness

The weight of many months of snow
lies heavy on us all.

Wind-singing lakes with pine-tree shores
and secret streams that turn tree corners
sleep imprisoned,
unaware.

The long pale grass cannot remember
swishing against my calves;
the brown dust and pebbles
of quiet roads are undisturbed.

But you hear me sigh,
and I see you are still.

The weight of many months of snow
lies heavy on us all.

Reflection on a Winter Night

Still, white
winter night.

Dark above
where light belongs.

Over the frozen sculpted snow,
borrowed light suspended.

A darkened sky, a glow on earth,
that we may not begin to doubt
the shining of a star.

Lullaby for Sadness

Cool green, kind blue,
treetops against the sky.

Cool green, quiet blue,
burning eyes drink it.

Feverish
passions
leave the war
that neither won.

But cool green,
quiet blue
remain
and win.

Within or without,
the same, cool
quiet
inherit the earth.

Through the Labyrinth

If I open my arms
and take joy, let
its imperfectness hurt me,

there is the shining thread.
Tears in my laughter
appear to be flowing
into tomorrow.

If this is foresight,
then it may be
that even my grief
will be incomplete

If I open my arms.

Where the Small Things Go

I wonder where they go,
my little child's toys.
Her busy hands have touched them,
arranging and scattering
until she went to bed.

When the house is quiet,
I kneel down and search
for all the little playthings
that seem to have gone away
where the baby years go.

Secret

I am saying goodbye to all my trees
smoky grey in the March woods.

I have been so proud, always
refusing to belong.

No one knew my real home
was oak, elm and maple wood
and white birch groves.

I am saying farewell,
but I think I will die
away from the sight of an elm tree
alone in the middle of a field.

When We Cannot Pray

There comes a time of day
or year, when
it is too late for sun
not dark enough for stars,
and every way that we can choose
is one or other shade of grey.
How can we be judged one day
if our unwilling choice
delivers us to evil
at the end.
What good was it to pray?

Flood

The rectitude
that world's end
may come by fire —
this I admire
in prophecy.

But I would rather
love God,
believing
that one day
with thunder crack
his heart will break
and drown us in his tears.

Serenity

The lid of Hell
is eggshell thin,
and we are dancing on it.

Try not to think
of breaking things.

This morning sun
warms our skin,
arousing
my native joy.

The lid of Hell
will break one day,
but not today.

Southern Cross

Unfamiliar trees,
sharpness of the light,
kindness of strangers —
to all this there is sometimes
nothing to say.

Inwardly I see still,
wondering,
how silently, darkly,
an ocean and two continents
slip away below,
without a trace to show
how I came away
or how I shall return.

The stars are not the same.
I cannot see the North Star
or the shining Dipper
that I wish on, remembering
tales of my childhood.

When I grow tired,

suspended
between two lives,
the home that I return to
is quietness.

Mother's Day Letter

We sat on the porch
holding our cups.
You had made tea.
We agreed not to cry.

Because I loved another more than you
and had to grow,
I went away and tried not to cry
for nearly a year.

Today, though, I saw you
in one who turned her face away
from showing grief.
I gave up trying
not to cry.

Desert Wind

I said goodbye to all of them,
but gathered these few faded leaves;
now the wind from a treeless land
flutters and lifts them out of my hand,
and I cannot say to them or him
why it is that I'm crying.

Gone

I cannot say I think of him,
I feel only
him walking in the fields
pulling my heart after him.

One Moment

Observing my loved one,
I am holding happiness
between my hands
as one who balances
clear tea in a beautiful cup
filled to the brim.

She

My little girl's a gypsy
who loves to wear
bracelets, necklaces
and ribbons, fluttering
curls and hands,
 sunlit eyes.

She's so small she
can fill his eyes
'til he can't see me,
and this hurts
 only a little.

New Black Shoes

Pleased that the boy next door should be here to admire
her fresh-cut hair and new black shoes,
my little girl shows off on her swing,
sparkling shoes and loose curls catching the sun.

But I wonder at
the brightness in her eyes and face.
Is that too just the morning sun?

Yesterday my baby girl (age three) wore
small white shoes.
This little girl looks four,
at least.

Daemon

Striving and surging
inside, the music
will not stop driving
feet, limbs, body
to dancing, my voice
to laughter.

They, looking on,
safe from possession
by my daemon,
imagine it joy.

If stillness comes
and suddenly tears,
it's only because
then I can hear
the words of the song
that strives and surges
inside, won't stop

Over Seas

The wind is crying
so many miles
between you and me.

Quietly I prepare for sleep
and bring you to me
with perfume.

September Visit

This Arctic-smelling wind was blowing
when I was born.
I grew up in it, numbed
almost to the core.

Each time you go away
the cold season
must be endured
longer.

When I first came to you
I had thought
to be done with winter —
I who have such need of warmth.

Eve

Hands caressing loosened hair,
gently cupping a face,
eyes delighting to be reading
love in a maiden's eyes,
deep voice resonant
with spoken tenderness —
Oh, all things end, they say,
but they don't know it all;
for who can tell a woman's grief
when hands, eyes, voice
have no more time to spare
on foolishness that made her bloom.

Old Song

How much I love him, he doesn't know.

How much I need him, he doesn't care.

Seems I've lost my way into his heart

And he doesn't know, doesn't care.

I didn't ask him to love me when he did.

Now I can't ask him to love me when he don't.

Wish I could lie down, go to sleep in the ground,

Then I wouldn't know, wouldn't care.

Resurrection

When winter comes,
bury the seed in a quiet place.
Here, a tree.

Spring enchantment,
summer shade, flame and
sorrow in the fall.

And other trees nearby.
Why should we be lonely,
ever?

Earth rooted
dreaming skyward,
I and you, and we,
God breathing through our dreams.

Spring Morning

Smiling at the lying sky,
pretending not to notice
the blackness behind —
singing to deny
fear of the dark inside.

Suddenly an urgent breeze
insists,
bending the tops of small trees,
moving secret hardness.
Rain will follow soon.

Magic

Times I go
to a hill I found
where wind caresses
long fair grass
as soft as hair,
and there is a tree
I lean against.

Spirit within
rising
knows the presence
in the tree;
that is my sisters'
hair that blows.

Lovers, sisters
I visit, then
come away,
an ancient singing
magic
stirring.

Lux, Lucis — Light

Cousin of the sun,
brighter sister of the moon
 I was,
and the stars, they envied me.

The love that moves the stars to shining
is divine, precise and cold
 infinity;
the love that flamed in me was
only human but, oh, warm.

Cousin of the sun,
brighter sister of the moon
 I was,
And some pale star remembers me.

Medusa's Mirror

Brushing my curling hair, pondering
that I should turn them all to stone,
 saw in the mirror
 the Gorgon's eyes
 sorrowing. Strength.

Monstrous.
Human once, transfigured by the gods:
it was pride they punished so. Medusa
 knew her worth,
 and I do not repent.

Vivisection

Probing the crusted wounds
drawing new blood,
observing merely
the wince and the scream,

Some
do not even allow
Nature's slow
healing.

Cypress

Self-shadowed cypress leaps defiance
at the indifferent blue-white
sky whose glare will never pierce
the kind darkness of her secret core.

Alone

The soft spring late afternoon
shimmers on streets, people
touching, living.
Invisible
I pass among them.

Flee away, ghost,
take your awakened ache
home
to your soft lights and your books.

Across a morning-bright meadow
enclosed in darker trees
I move towards those shelters
where the children are:
oblivion awhile.

Shadow, you
trace these lines
to mark where you've been
alive.

Moment at Vizcaya

"See the sunlight
on the water"

She turned and we both looked.
Then, laughing, we continued
walking, delighting
in loveliness around us.

I left again, and she may go.
Yet, laughing, we continue
walking, delighting
in loveliness around us.

"See the sunlight
on the water"

Noël

Again the joyous improbable
sound of angels
and children singing.
Listening,
we cannot hear the two apart.

Reflected in the eyes
of the simple
and the very wise,
vision of that luminous
knowledge children have.

Abashed and suddenly tender,
the tall ones stoop now
presenting gifts,
love,
homage to a little child.

After Friday

No music
in the little waves beating on the shore,
only grinding of the pebbles
bringing memories of scraping
wooden cross along the road.

Pre-dawn bird sounds
were not sweet to those
coming to the garden;
sharpness pierced
their tender hearts like nails.

Yet humble men, gentle women
marvel at the universal
singing
soaring
to the gates of Paradise,

Opened
when with sound of crushing
ponderous weight
and broadswords clattering down,

a great, grey stone

Moved aside.

Age Eleven

My daughter growing
taller, rising
bridge of nose,
breasts, hips,

Gaze searching
away from mine,
growing
more alone.

Envoi: On Parting

Without a backward glance
or word of love
she goes.

God
let her never know
crying as I have.

This Day

Thank you for this day
of sun blowing
wind shining
in Spring.

Psalm

In the night waking
because this beating heart is aching
I feel Your hand gently
cupping it to keep from breaking.

A Quiet Place

Safe here, the past hardly recalled
now in this quiet place enclosed by you,
I keep my thoughts from moving
backwards or forwards, lest they leave
the charmed circle that you make.

Curled up here, I do not speak
lest, finding where I am, any
voice should break the healing silence.
They all think I am gone, but
I'm only hiding awhile.

First Song

Today I held a child without speech
and listened to the wordless song
swelling out of her throat.
Another joined her singing
in close harmony,
 voices rising, falling.

The same song
thrills across the Northland,
Wolf song
 voices rising, falling.

Like the first song,
Wind
 voices rising, falling.

Child Faces

I

The grounds I walk on every day
are sprinkled all with children.
Their upturned faces follow me
with smiles or beseeching eyes:
Another kiss? Hold my hand?
Hug me again, please?

Each one turns to me
its own particular
loveliness.

Stirred, I remember
myself a child, walking
through fields of flowers,
pausing often to admire
a single petalled face.

Now I'm tall, treading
reverently
among child flowers.

II

Strange, lovely face.

Little girl, you cannot speak or do
anything we ask of you.
Yet, awed, we turn and look again
at perfection
 uncomprehended.

Back home in my garden,
a single rose perplexes:
her stem's too frail
to support the head.
Musing, I lift her face to mine,
viewing contours, pale waxy-pink.
We touch skin.
I smell her nearness
 breathing, "Liesel."

Who They Are

Cass and Linda stand all day
behind a counter in a shop
dispensing goods and cheerfulness.
I asked their names.
"But these are not our
real names."

Cassandra. Diana.
"We've heard they may mean
something fine. But
we don't know."

Singing Prophetess of Troy.
Radiant Goddess of the Moon.
Not know
who you are?

Kneeling inwardly
before their highnesses,
I recounted
splendours of the past,
marvelling to see

Cassandra's spirit surge awake,
Diana's fabled beauty rise.



Behind a counter in a shop,
Cassandra,
Diana,
 know.

The Angel Comes

It wasn't in the plan
that you should be dying

Now.

Run away, run
hide away,

No!

Here in a corner,
challenge it,

Fight.

But it just waits,
won't go away.

Neither can you.

The Gift

It was not a gift to keep,
this singing power
put into your hands,
polished carefully, used
joyfully.

Hands too weak to hold it well
caress it now,
softly,
loving it more dearly,
and give it back.

To a Lady Walking

Begrudging every moment,
you use your unloved strength
moving deeper into
death you choose.

Sadder you than I
with rationed hours dearly lived.
I, dying
singing, crying
tears shining
outlive you.

Job's Friends

How comfortable to observe
another's pain and know
that God in his wisdom
punishes sin
and keeps you safe.

Comforters

I

Into a room where women
knelt, cleaning floors,
I came, and my heart was down.
Softly the women exchanged a song,
hardly aware of me standing there,
never knowing it lifted me.

II

Into a room where I was working,
you came and stood beside me,
saying not a word. Then
you carried something for me.
And I heard
everything you said.

Invocation

Are you

Here in this growing
tree stone
heart that's cracked
open to warm cold
you —

Are you

There farther than planets
Here between spaces
Inside among atoms?

Are you

You or
some
Other?

Second Sight

Suddenly observing
your thighs are sagging,
yet retaining outlines of that
shapeliness that drew my eye
one day in Spring,
my throat constricts.

How tenderly you've held me.
Dearer far the sight
of you to me now,
my Autumn love.

Our Lady

The days of our years

She lived

threescore years and ten

dreaming, hoping

and if by reason of strength

enduring pain

fourscore years

in loveliness

yet their strength labour and sorrow

She lived

every day of her years.

— *for my mother*

Dancing she came

Shadow-man, dream-man
come with violin
to summon me,
recall the old imperative:

your sister, mine,
had I forgotten her?
You began to play.

Dancing she came
wraith-like, shadowy
veils swirling
round her turning
upraised arms, bracelets:
gyring from her
throbbing song, wordless
penetrating
charging me to
sing her songs.

Dulled in waking dreams
by counterfeit loves,

I'd almost lost the sound of her.

Shadow-man, play again
before she's gone too far away.
Play your music for her dance,
bring her close so I can hear

the songs she required of me
to sing for her, songs
I haven't sung.

Come, sister, dance now,
I'm listening, I'll
sing our songs.