Memoir: An Examination of a Renegade Genre from the Inside Out

A Thesis

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Part One

Coastal Lives: A Memoir

by

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PROLOGUE

I imagine him sometimes, on that day his hand hovered over the telephone. *So nervous*, he said, months later, *my heart jumping all over*. Was he rocking in that squeaky office chair of his? He would have been smoking, definitely. Maybe he glanced out his ocean-facing window, looked for a Cape Islander boat, a bright bit of moving colour to carry away his anxious thoughts. I see him turning away from the window one last time, squaring his shoulders to the desk. He stretches out his hand and again, pulls it back. Then a deep breath and his fingers are on the keypad. He presses in a number he has already memorized. In several hard heartbeats his phone call travels 4000 miles from the village of D'Escousse, Cape Breton Island, and rings another phone in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia. It was 11:00 p.m. AST, 7:00 p.m. PST time. Or maybe a few minutes past the hour.

"Hello?" I said – and instantly changed my life forever.

"Hello," he said – and did the same.

CHAPTER 1: WINTER DAYS IN HALIFAX

7 January 2011, Halifax, NS, 10:00 a.m.

The rhododendron bush in the front yard is getting whiter by the moment. Its narrow oval leaves are drooping from the cold and are snow-sprinkled as though with fluffy sea salt. There are two yew bushes that flank our front door; the one on the left, which I can see from my work room window, is even whiter than the rhododendron leaves. The fat flakes stick to its broad, slightly rounded top more easily. An evergreen cauliflower, that's what it looks like to me.

Above the yard, oddly, is the street my husband Don and I live on, Armshore Drive. We are sub-road, a feature that did not appeal to us when we first saw the house five years ago. We still dislike being looked down on by passers-by. The backyard of our house, which faces the Northwest Arm, more than makes up for what my husband terms our "risible" front yard. We are urban waterfront, a feature we adore and never, ever expected to experience in our lives together. There is no steel-blue water to look out onto today; our top of the Arm froze over shore to shore yesterday. Now, the snow has covered over the sheen of ice with its own dull blanket. At an edge of the city, where we are, the world is a soft and peaceful place. The city keeps on humming, though, unperturbed by regular winter weather. The streets are clear, the offices and shops all open. I can buy a bottle of good wine, a pepper of any hue or a still-warm baguette – all in ten minutes from our home. I can also fill a prescription, re-new a driver's licence, see the latest independent or Hollywood film, go to an art gallery, a community theatre or a Chinese restaurant for dim-sum – also in ten minutes. All this makes a city girl's heart hum.

I don't even mind about the snow. Here in Halifax it doesn't frighten me the way it did when I first moved from Vancouver to rural Cape Breton in 1997. There I used to feel so claustrophobic when the blizzards rolled in day after day in the winter. During these times, driving became A Bad Idea, and the snow piled high enough that even walking my dog, Leo, a whippet, was a Major Production of

Short Duration. The dog didn't so much walk as swim through the drifts, his stick legs translucent with the cold and his thin body covered in a fleecy coat he hated and tried to rub off. He was game, I was grumpy. I was also deeply shocked by the cold, especially when it dipped below minus 20 degrees Celsius. *We're a long way from home, Leo*, I'd say, a pseudo-echo of Dorothy's line in *The Wizard of Oz*. Some days there was no point in going anywhere. At 38 years old, I had never experienced being housebound due to weather. Some mornings I'd open the curtains in our bedroom and start crying.

"Are you all right?" my startled soon-to-be husband asked the first time this happened, in November 1997.

"The snow," I choked out. "It's still here."

And he, a Maritimer by choice and passion but like me, a west coaster by raising, understood. "Ah you poor mutt," he said, using a favourite term of affection, "you thought it would melt overnight, be gone by the morning – didn't you?"

I nodded miserably. To me, it felt as though the world had disappeared. How did one navigate with no green to guide them?

No green to guide me. My beloved Pacific coast world was extravagantly green and lush. The rain forest had been my home since I was four years old, and moved to Vancouver from Ottawa with my mother and father and three older siblings, in 1963. My father, an arts showman and visionary, had accepted the position of director of the Vancouver Art Gallery. My mother, perhaps one of the most consistent intellectuals I've ever known, was farther from her books than she felt comfortable being, with the full-time care of four children, but very much game for the move. All of us settled into Vancouver life as though Ontario were a hazy dream. Life became salt-water swimming and picnicking on city beaches, camping on the North Shore mountains and at Tofino and Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island, Chinatown feasts on Sunday evening and bicycling down to Southlands or "*The Flats*," a term my older sister Karin and I breathed as though exhaling magic particles into the air.

Of all improbabilities, Southlands, located in the southwestern corner of the city, minutes from where we lived, was horse land. Over a thousand horses lived on this flat and muddy land, about 100 acres in total. The area was also significantly below sea-level, with deep ditches on all its roads. Its southern-most boundary ran alongside the Fraser River, which along with the life-teeming river delta itself, was another fascinating and fundamental aspect to Vancouver life.

A tough, polluted, fish-and boat-filled river, the Fraser was the colour of pea soup in summer and steel in the winter. Karin and I dreamed of riding our very own horses along the riverside trails that led on into the University of British Columbia's "Endowment Lands," or the protected, forested acres that still surround the university. In early years we had to content ourselves with the occasional, expensive ride on shaggy ponies at the for-hire stables. We kept on dreaming, certain we could will a horse into our lives. Once we'd inhaled the complex and sharp smells of a barn – hay, straw, manure, animal sweat, lime, liniments and leather – we claimed them more as home than any other four-walled structure. Going to The Flats at dawn on a summer morning was an excitement we could only just endure, like every Christmas morning and birthday we'd ever known, arriving on the same rosy-skied day. Belly-hungry and soul-sated, we bicycled home, our legs latticed with bright green grass from cut summer lawns. We listened with one ear as our mother asked us to towel off the grass before stepping in the house. We washed before breakfast, but we mostly couldn't wait till our hands, clothes and hair reeked of the barn world again.

9 January 2011, Halifax, NS, 9:00 a.m.

This is exactly the sort of winter morning that used to alarm me so much: in just a few short hours the world has become a uniformly white place. The poor rhododendron is now squashed low with the weight of the snow and the yews are coated over, even on the sides. The snow here, as my stepson Mark Patrick once pointed out to me, generally comes down horizontally, or in a wind-crossed pattern that rivals lace for complexity. He had nothing but contempt for the more pedestrian brand of snow he lives with now, in Medicine Hat, Alberta. There the snow only comes down like a curtain, he says. Very dull and predictable.

Neither adjective could ever be applied to Nova Scotia weather. What's that expression Maritimers are so fond of? "Don't like the weather? Wait a minute or walk a mile!" Of course that would be true for weather in Atlantic Canada, overall. Hurricanes, gales, blizzards, torrential, tropically warm rains, freezing rain, humidity high enough to leaden limbs and make the exteriors of toilet tanks weep determined rivers and refrigerators rust – Atlantic Canada gets it all and in no particular pattern or cycle. And Maritimers for certain, love the drama, diversion and even threat of their often wild weather. They love their weather, period.

Overall, the woman from the Pacific Rain Forest loves it too. I am not so keen on the power-outs or icy highways. But any Maritimer might say that. To themselves, if no one else. And amongst themselves, with great gusto, if the need to weather-vent came upon them. As a CFA (Come-From-Away), I try not whinge too much. Don't want to give us a bad name. In truth, I think of myself as a Maritimer now, anyway – which feels very odd some days. How could it be otherwise, though? It's been a decade and a half of Maritime-immersion. I love my adopted homeland and I've had the biggest Maritime fan of all, my husband Don, show me all that's best and beautiful about the region.

Don might have been raised in BC, but no one remembers that. He's been a Maritimer for so

long they always claim him as one of their own, proudly, too. Of course his heart will always be in Cape Breton, no matter where else we live. Cape Breton isn't a piece of geography. It's a State of the Spirit, complex and compelling.

This is what I have come to know in the past fifteen years.

CHAPTER 2: THE FIRST PHONE CALL

April 1996, 7:02 p.m. PST, Vancouver, BC

"Hi, Marjorie, it's Silver Donald Cameron calling from Cape Breton."

Of course! I nearly recognized his voice, but it's been quite a while since we last communicated and that was by letter, I think. He has a mellow and warm voice; I enjoyed listening to it when I did my interview with him in April 1994. My God that was a long interview, too. We just couldn't seem to stop talking – even long after he'd answered all my questions for the profile I was writing for *Trek*, the University of British Columbia's alumni magazine. He was in BC on a book tour and was being profiled because he was a distinguished alumnus. I, a freelance writer and another UBC alum, had been given the assignment by the magazine's editor, who thought I'd enjoy meeting "this dynamic and versatile writer, who besides that, is a really nice guy."

I did. We met at a cafe in Kitsilano, on the west side of the city. The sun was surprisingly warm for a spring morning in Vancouver and the Japanese cherry trees were in full pink and celestial bloom. We sat outside, drinking coffee, both glad the other smoked cigarettes. I was 104 pounds, wore a short gold skirt with a short-sleeved gold and black blouse. He was trim, wore a navy blue Tilley jacket, had a big moustache and wavy silver hair. Dark brown eyes, lit with humour and intelligence. Nice memories, all.

"Well hi, Don, how are you?" I know enough now not to call him Silver or even Silver Don, as many in his home province do, to indicate their respect. Silver Donald is his *nom de plume*; he took on the Cape Breton-style nickname in the 1980s, to separate himself from the numerous other Donald

Camerons in his Scottish-rich region and across the country. Don is what friends and family call him. I consider myself a friend now, though that might be a bit presumptuous.

The line is silent. He hasn't answered my question, *How are you?* Did he hear me? Still no response, though he's clearing his throat now. *Uh oh* – pay attention, something's going on here. His voice sounds funny – strangled up and wounded. Bad news for sure. Oh no, this is really bad. His wife, he has lost his wife to cancer. Just two weeks ago, on Easter weekend. What do I say?

"I am so sorry. You told me such lovely stories about your wife – about your life in Cape Breton and all your sailing adventures together. I thought I'd get to meet Lulu."

He'd said, that day of the interview: "If you're ever down our way, please come by. We'd love to see you. I think you and Lulu would really hit it off." It was a genuine invitation, I was sure then, and am sure now. Everything he'd told me about Cape Bretoners – and his wife was a Cape Bretoner – indicated lovely open natures and welcoming ways. It would have been wonderful to visit the region and to know one person there, and then his family, to make things a bit easier for a first-timer to the Maritimes.

Lulu. I'd never heard a man speak so warmly and respectfully about his wife – and that, if I remember right, at the fifteen-year-married mark. Made my guts ache, when I compared his open admiration and love to how I was being treated by my lover at the time. Only the day before, I'd actually put my hands over my ears and started humming when he spoke down to me from his customary, callous heights. If his appalling words fell on deaf ears – well then, I could tell myself the words hadn't occurred and my self-respect would be intact. To whit: I didn't have to depart the scene just yet. A wobbly and evasive strategy, but the best I could come up with at the time.

In contrast, I'd walked away from Don that day, thinking, "Damn it, if there's one man that kind and loving out there, then there has to be two – I'll just have to find the other one." I'd even laughingly

told myself that Don might have a brother – and perhaps he was available! The thought was a brief one. I am thirty seven. Don is 59. That's a 22-year age-gap.

Even a younger brother would be too old for me.

I am glad you called, I hear myself saying to Silver Donald Cameron of D'Escousse. Where *is* this, anyway? He has said it is a village – how quaint! – with a population of 250 people, on an island, off another island, off the peninsular province of Nova Scotia. I've never been east of Montreal, and I can't hold all this geography in my mind. Note to self: find Cape Breton in an atlas; work from there. I can't imagine living in a place so small you need an atlas to find it. Not for love nor money. Besides, I love this west coast of mine far too much to ever live somewhere else.

As I remember, Don spoke the same way about the Maritimes; he may have been raised on the west coast but he when he left at age 27, he really left – he doesn't miss it at all. We are lucky, Don and I, to know where our hearts' homes are.

Astonishingly, we have talked for over an hour. For the last ten minutes, his voice has been going flatter and softer. He's heartbroken and tired, from all the demands and tasks a death brings to a family, that's obvious – but it's also past midnight his time. Time to wrap up.

"I'd like to send you a couple of my books – would you like that?" He sounds shy, as though I might actually say no to such a kind suggestion. Books from an author of his stature? Yes, please!

"Oh thank you! I'd love that. Perhaps the one about the fisherman's strike that you mentioned – Everett something?"

"**The Education of Everett Richardson**. Yeah, with your expertise in fisheries, I think you'd like that. I'll send on a book of personal essays, too – there are some hard ones in there, like the essay about your sister Karin. That's so great you won for that one."

The win he's referring to is a National Magazine Award in 1994. I hadn't bragged about that, even though a part of me still can't believe it – he had brought up the subject and we'd talked about it at length, mostly about the writerly aspects of making family tragedy into readable, worthwhile prose. In this case, my essay, through a complicated set of circumstances, had ultimately been published in *Saturday Night* magazine as a companion piece with another essay written by my oldest sister, writer and poet Zoë Landale. The two of us had written about a third sibling, our sister Karin Simmins. The oddest part about all this was that neither Zoë nor I knew the other was writing about Karin at the same time– and this after almost 20 years had passed since her death. Don had actually heard the interview my oldest sister Zoë and I had done for CBC Radio, the week before the win; it was just prior to the same week I had met him, so he had warmly wished me all good luck in the competition and had then written me a brief note when the win transpired. The note was a classy touch, I'd thought at the time.

"I haven't read the piece," he is saying. He laughs: "Hard to get a copy of *Saturday Night* or much else where I live! Could you send me a copy? It's about a sister of yours – right? Her name is – ?"

"– was, her name was Karin."

I will send him my essay on Karin, the one everyone wants to read. I'll send him another one too, one that I wrote *for* her, not *about* her.

Trips From There to Here, Vancouver, BC, 1993.

When I think about Karin, I remember bacon and marmalade sandwiches and chocolate milk, the kind that comes out of the carton thick and sweet. And fried pork chops and baked potatoes with sour cream, her favourite dinner, back in the days when she was allowed to eat with us. I don't remember who banished her from the dinner table or when, but I remember why.

Throwing up. Anything that went down when she was stoned came flying back up within minutes. We tolerated this vomiting, even accommodated it: we always made sure she had the outside chair in our kitchen nook. That way, when she felt sick, she could run to the bathroom without tripping all over us. Sometimes she wasn't fast enough to make it to the bathroom. The back door would smash open and we'd hear food splatter onto the cement walkway below the veranda. We kept a garden hose coiled at the side of the house.

First memories of my sister always come with the sound of raised voices and the feeling of dread in my stomach. I used to run to the bathroom upstairs, the farthest corner away from the noise. I'd turn on the tap and hum as I brushed my teeth, trying to block out the yells from downstairs. I knew she wouldn't hurt me – I was too young to have anything she wanted – but she hurt the others with a bewildering and relentless accuracy. I couldn't stand watching the fights and I couldn't prevent them, so I created my own territory with her, the safest one I could think of: sister as shadow. I decided to be friends with her, to move beside her, where I could keep her in my peripheral vision.

Karin went through a magician phase; maybe sorceress is a better word. She used to put on performances in her incense-sweet bedroom in the basement. She had special clothes for these occasions, harem pants and gauzy scarfs that she wrapped around her red-gold hair. Sometimes she would make things disappear and other times she'd open cupboard doors just by looking at them. A

neighbour who watched one of these shows couldn't resist trying to destroy Karin's illusions.

“Look,” she said, “she's using a string to pull the door open! I can see it, can't you?”

Karin's eyes searched the darkened room, looking for mine. Speak up. Guard the magic.

“Mrs. Williams, you're wrong. There's no string. This is real magic.” I glared at her. The show concluded to loud applause.

Cats loved Karin, loved the way she rubbed their wet noses and hypnotized them with soft words and fishy treats. Some days I felt like a cat, gut-happy and mind-stroked with gentle words and promises. As long as I protected her – accepted her choices and rules – the anger never came my way. I didn't know how else to protect myself.

We used to play horses out in the back yard. We'd take our horse collection – plastic and china figures – and set up a farm in the rock garden. Usually we chose the spot where the water faucet was hidden by a low, thick azalea bush. There were flat rocks beneath the faucet. When it rained, or when the faucet was left on a steady drip, the rocks held a shallow pool of water. We called this the pond and took the horses to swim there. I could play for hours, but Karin eventually got bored and the game would end with a ritualistic drowning of the horses. Hands that had moments earlier created bridles out of elastic bands and gently braided manes and tails would now seize the small animals and shove their heads under the water, making them gurgle and scream. I could sense the mood change, could see impatience in the movement of her fingers – but the vibrancy of her imagination was irresistible. In the garden of our make-believe world, death was a temporary condition; I knew I would play with her again the next day, when the sorceress pulled us up from the chill waters to start a new game.

Karin's eyes were dark blue, with a silver star around the iris. She plucked her eyebrows thin and wore heavy eyeliner. Pale skin, with a few freckles scattered over a finely shaped nose. Her stride was short, almost bouncy. In nearly all of her photographs she has her head tilted to one side – her

expression a strange blend of coyness and misery.

I don't remember when her blue eye started going grey every day. Around the same time she started taking her meals in the TV room. It was a relief to eat quiet dinners; I even started enjoying spaghetti again. But I was uneasy with the separation – and disliked cutting her off from the rest of the family. The non-offenders would exchange news of the day, pass the butter, salt and pepper around the table, and I'd be worrying if she wanted more food, or if she'd nodded out over her plate. As soon as I could I'd join her in the den. We'd watch TV together, sprawled out on the couch, me leaning on her side with a pillow underneath my elbow. Her cigarette ash would burn longer and longer and without thinking I'd reach over and bump her arm over the ashtray.

"Karin, watch your smoke."

We started to find burn holes everywhere. The couch, the pillowcases, the bed sheets. She always seemed to wake up just before the smoke turned to flames.

Karin kept her methadone bottles in the refrigerator. She lined them up tidily, on the right-hand side of the door, nestled in with the Velveeta cheese. The methadone was mixed with orange juice, which masked the bitter taste a little bit. Karin told me never to touch them. But I did. I was curious about those white-capped bottles, even jealous of their daily importance. After everyone was asleep I'd sneak down to the kitchen and pull a bottle out. Sometimes I'd just smell the stuff, and wonder what she felt like when she drank it. One night I took a tiny slurp, then, terrified she'd know I had tried it, I filled the missing half-inch with water and ran back to bed. I lay awake a long time, wondering when I'd get smashed. I fell asleep with a trace of orange-sweet drug juice on my lips.

The year we bought Coqeyn, I recorded the event in my journal: "Over the weekend we bought a horse. He is an Arabian and Karin and I are going to look after it." Every twelve-year-old girl's dream come true. A living, breathing horse, to ride and love.

Coqeyn scared me. Mostly because I was sure we'd lose him, the moment our reflection in his purple-brown eye became steady. Vet bills, board bills, and my mother teaching day school and night school to provide for us. I'd watch Mum disappear into her bedroom for a twenty-minute rest before dinner and hate the horse for filling the house with dragging steps and exhaustion. But Coqeyn was going to save the day: he was going to make Karin permanently straight and functioning. Like magic.

Karin's all-time straight record in seven years was three months. Straight from heroin and barbiturates. She drank the methadone every day, although at one point she weaned herself down to a quarter of a bottle, selling the other three-quarters to buy things for the horse. The endless supply of methadone came from the Narcotic Addiction Foundation, on Broadway at Oak, where we went each day after school. On the bus down there Karin would drink Coke, to fill her bladder for the sample she had to give to the doctors. Some days her bladder wouldn't cooperate. She'd park herself by the water fountain in the foundation's foyer and drink until the twinge in her gut felt certain.

“Okay, I'm ready.” I'd watch her disappear into the bathroom, followed by a woman in a white lab coat. Minutes later, she'd return, smiling and giggling, jerking her thumb at the full sample bottle carried by the nurse: “Success!” Then she'd line up with the other junkies to get her methadone for the week. They always made her drink a cup of methadone before she left. She'd throw back her head, toss the liquid down, and make a major production of swallowing it. Actually, she didn't swallow any, but kept it in her mouth until we left the building from the back entrance. If I felt like teasing her, I'd poke her in the ribs, trying to make her laugh and spit the liquid out of her chipmunk cheeks. She'd shake her head, look furious, but I knew it was like the horses in the pond – no permanent damage done.

In the lane behind the foundation she'd take out one of her bottles and spit the methadone into it. She spat it out fast, discreet; you'd think she was stopping to cough and delicately wipe her mouth. We'd walk another half-block and sell the topped-up bottle to the first junkie with cash.

Karin loved Coqeyn as much as she loved smack. We groomed our horse, one on either side, until our arms ached. We read horse magazines and made plans to truck Coqeyn into the Interior, where we could go for long rides into the mountains. He would be an endurance horse, a jumper, a hunter – he was going to do it all and we were going to have a roomful of ribbons and trophies to gloat over. We took riding lessons, sold methadone, and bought expensive tack. Summer 1972: Jethro Tull (*Thick as a Brick*), paisley T-shirts, Export "A" cigarettes, and the barn, every day, all day.

There were triumphs in those years. The first time we won a ribbon at a recognized show I cried so hard I could hardly see where I was going as I ran over the bumpy hog-fuel to meet Karin coming out of the ring.

"It's only a sixth place, Marjorie," she protested as I grabbed onto her gloved hand and squeezed it hard.

"But a ribbon, Karin! A rosette!"

She dismounted, leaned against Coqeyn's sweat-darkened shoulder. "Next time we'll do better."

Doing better. The words throbbed under our skins as the boundaries between us blurred. Doing better this week, only lied once about no bombers in the house. Found a rainbow assortment in her jewellery box, flushed them down the toilet. Doing better, though, no clouds in her eyes for three days. Relax, play the twin game: Levi jeans, blue ski jackets, black boots, velvet hunt caps, long hair in braids. Walk close, shoulders touching, steps synchronized. No-one can tell us apart. You protect me and I'll protect you.

These periods – the quiet, symbiotic ones – vanished. One week we were inseparable; the next I was a Siamese twin, slowly ripping my body away from hers. We all tried to keep out of her way, to hide from the cruel taunts, the thievery, the broken dishes. My brother hid by going out with his friends; he spent nearly all his time at parties or in bars and pool halls. I used to ask him, as he was leaving,

where he was going. The fringes on his leather jacket would swing as he shrugged his shoulders. “Out,” he'd say, “going out.” The door would slam behind him and I'd be left standing in the hallway, wondering where I could go. In six more months I would seek out all of Geoffrey's haunts and claim them as my own, but before then I spent many evenings walking around the back lanes behind our house.

Sometimes she'd still be up when I returned.

“Where have you been? I'm making a milk shake, would you like some?” Maybe she felt guilty or ashamed; maybe she just wanted to keep me on her side. I'd watch her pour the milk shake and accept the glass timidly. We'd go to the TV room and before I had a sip from my glass I'd wait, knowing she'd either spill hers or demand the rest of mine.

Her eyes and her moods were dead giveaways. Easy to know when she was high. When she got really affectionate, I knew it would be a back-lane night.

“Oh, Marjorie, I feel so good today. I'm so glad we're friends, aren't you? I love you, little sister, I love you so much.” Words like those coiled every muscle in my body for flight. Karin's love always careened into anger.

Eventually even the horse wasn't safe. When Karin started coming to the barn stoned, I knew that I had to complete my separation from her. If I didn't, I'd find myself explaining not just a broken dish, or a missing wallet, but a death.

The final break came. I was in the feed room, mixing up a steaming bran mash. Karin burst in the door, eyes as wide as they could be when she was that high. Her face was white and sweaty, her words so slurred that at first I couldn't make out what she was saying.

“Come quick. It's in his stall, the cigarette, right by the door, I can't find it, hurry, hurry – come!”

He's gonna burn. He's gonna rear up in a box of flames and cook like a pig in a bonfire. Fear for Coqeyn made my heart lurch, but stronger than the fear was the pattern of hiding Karin's mistakes. No-one would know what had happened, not if I moved quickly. I wanted to hit that pasty, out-of-focus face, but I just told her to get a wheelbarrow and start shovelling out the stall. I led Coqeyn out, tied him to a post. Stepped back inside the stall and glanced back over my shoulder to see who could see me. No-one around. I tipped over the three-foot-high water bucket in the corner where she said she'd dropped the cigarette. All this time Karin was babbling and weaving, getting in my way. My hands, sticky with warm molasses, shook so much I could barely hold the shovel.

"Get out of my way. Get the fuck out of here." New and raw words I hurled at her, words that had nothing to do with the cigarette and a lot to do with the twin feeling its air supply being choked off. Breathe, little sister, breathe hard and fast.

Her expression was terrifying – dead straight and stoned to the limit. Of all her unusual abilities, this was the one that frightened me most. While anyone else would have fallen flat with the amount of chemicals she pumped into her body, small Karin staggered on, even casting aside, for a few minutes, the total effect of the drugs she had taken. "Thought I was a goner, sister/brother dear?" she'd sneer at Geoffrey and me, when we'd crouch beside her, deciding whether or not to call an ambulance. "Not yet, motherfuckers."

I concentrated on cleaning out the stall. By now I wasn't even scared about the cigarette. More was coming. Every hair standing up on my arms was preparing me for it.

When I came back from soaking the chips with water I found Karin tightening the girth on Coqeyn's saddle. The bridle was already on.

"What are you doing?" I kept my voice low and prayed she couldn't hear the pleading note beneath it. "Gonna ride in the ring." As she spoke she lost her balance and caught at the bridle to steady

herself. Coqeyn, jabbed in the mouth from this motion, threw up his head and took several quick steps backwards.

“Stand still, you bastard.” She kneed him hard under the girth.

“Stop it!” I was shouting now, didn't care who heard me. “Leave him alone.”

“Why? This bother you?” she asked, eyes for one instant clear and sober. “Watch, it gets better.”

She took the bridle in both hands and jerked it down with all her weight. I could feel that iron cut down as though the bit were in my own mouth. I sucked in cold night air and howled. Coqeyn lunged, I lunged, Karin laughed. I pushed her down onto the tarmac and felt her rise up against my arms strong as a tidal wave. Fluid strength, like water all around us, and me twisting, kicking, punching to keep my head from going under.

I lost the fight. And I never walked shoulder to shoulder with Karin again.

That autumn I started grade nine. School was something that passed between hours of wondering whether Karin had died that day. Her eyes looked like grey cauliflowers now, with hardly any colour in them at all. She overdosed so many times that I got used to seeing her face blue. I distanced myself from my hands when they slapped the breath into her. She hurt herself, horribly, when she was stoned – gashes, bruises – but I didn't help her any more. I ate my meals in the kitchen with the rest of the family and afterwards I retreated to my room.

One morning I came downstairs and found her passed out, with her eyes open, in the chair beside the front door. I stepped close to her, to see if she was breathing. It was a quarter to nine; if I didn't hurry, I'd be late for school. I couldn't bring myself to touch her. I imagined that she was a corpse that would suddenly reach out and crush my body into the deathland behind those unblinking eyes. Geoffrey walked into the hall, saw me staring at her slumped figure.

“She alive?”

“I can't tell, I think so. Wouldn't her eyes be closed if she was dead?”

“Maybe, don't know. Let's get out of here.”

We walked up Dunbar Street towards the bus loop. Geoffrey's strides were long and fast; I took two for each one of his. Suddenly aware of our mismatched steps, he slowed down, until our shoulders brushed together. He reached into his jacket pocket and took out a Bar Six chocolate bar.

“Want some?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Karin died a year later, in a room at the Blue Boy hotel. On Christmas Day. Unlike the china and plastic horses, she would stay dead.

I didn't ride for about eight years. Barns, with their cold cement floors and draughty corridors, felt like tombs. The smell of molasses made me sick. And when I saw young women with long hair and blue ski jackets walking close together, I'd stretch out my arms and feel oceans of empty air on either side of my body.

My hair is short now. I wear a purple and black Gore-Tex jacket when I ride in the rain. Black leather chaps, too; Karin would have loved them. Since my sister died, I have travelled in Europe, Canada, the United States, and the West Indies. I have lived on boats, in downtown high-rises. I went to university and worked, as a waitress, a driver, an editor. Men, for days and daze, and two, loved unconditionally. I kissed/kiss them, remembering Karin's precise explanation of the perfect kiss.

Last year I even dated a brother of one of her lovers. I met him, in one of those small-world situations, and wanted to be near him, because his brother had loved Karin. A tall and strange order to fill, and he only five feet eight inches, with a mind more focused on gains than losses.

“Yeah,” he said, “Kevin did heroin, but he's been clean for years. Your sister didn't make it, eh?”

“Where was your brother when Karin died?” (First date, the Holiday Inn on Broadway, him figuring out my income-tax return, me scanning his face for one flicker of shared memory.)

“I don't know. Maybe they weren't friends any more. Besides, drugs weren't really a problem for Kevin. He hasn't used in years. He's married now, has a kid, and works as an actor – very talented. Why are you so hung up on the past?”

“He wasn't at her memorial service.” (Only saw Lana, ward-of-the-state Lana, crying and gibbering with fear because Karin was the smart one and why were her ashes in an urn when all the dummies were still living?)

“Really? I wouldn't know. Now listen, do you want to get some money back – or a lot of money back?”

I wanted to sleep beside him, reach out for a dream fragment of his brother, my sister. I wanted to remember, for a moment, soft rubber tied around my fourteen-year-old arm and the sharp press of an empty needle against a blue, untravelled vein. Karin? Where do I stick this thing? Right in the vein? Or beside it, or under it, or in any part of my arm that is willing? Does the needle have to have heroin in it, or will water from the basement sink give me a rush?

Couldn't do it – needles belonged to Karin. I watched her, though, and tied her arm when I couldn't stand her bad moods any more. She wore a lingering perfume called Omar's Delight, which she bought from a store on 4th Avenue. She smelled sweet, as I leaned close to watch her perfect aim with the needle.

For Karin Francesa Simmins

Escape of the Smallest Angel, Vancouver, BC, 1995.

My mother and I decorated our Christmas tree last night. We had nearly finished – the boughs were crowded with birds, bulbs and lights – when Mum turned to me with a broken ornament in her hands.

"We don't need this one, do we?" she asked, her hands cupped around a small silver globe with an angel inside.

"Yes!" I hurried across the room and took the decoration from my mother's outstretched hands. "That one has to go up." I placed it on a branch near the top of the tree, then stepped back, to make sure the angel could be seen through the shimmering strands of icicles. Visible and secure, the angel spun gently within its cage. Then I answered the question in my mother's eyes.

"Don't you remember the story of the smallest angel?"

Christmas morning, 1964. Dad and Mum still asleep, and me waking my brother and two sisters in the pre-dawn darkness. We sit cross-legged on my oldest sister's bed and open our bulging stockings. Candy canes, chocolates, small gifts wrapped in bright tissue paper and at the toe of the stocking, as always, a Mandarin orange, thin-skinned and sweet. The basement stairs creak as we make our way up to the living room, where the lights of the tree cast blurred reflections on a rain-streaked window. The room is cold – no heat on yet – but we are warm in our cotton pyjamas and wool socks. We circle around the tree and begin poking and shaking the piles of gifts underneath it. We have an hour to go before we can wake our parents. Zoe goes back to bed. Geoffrey goes to the kitchen to find some breakfast. Karin and I stay by the tree.

“Can you tell me a Christmas story?"

Karin nods, her waist-long hair streaked with red and gold from the lights above our heads. I

want to reach out and touch those shining waves, but the story has begun, I must be quiet and still. Karin points to a branch on the tree where three angels are placed. One holds a lantern, one holds a songbook and one is encased in a silver cage.

“In the time of never and always, there were three angels who lived in the land of mortals. They were sisters and longed to go to their true home, the place of clouds and music. Each day they asked the king of angels when they could return home and each day the king answered them: `Not until the smallest angel can fly free, then you will all be free.'

"But the smallest angel lived in a cage that did not have a door. Her sisters could not free her, no matter how hard they tried to break the silver walls. The smallest angel cried and cried. She shook the bars of her cage and tried to squeeze through the narrow spaces, but she could not escape. She and her sisters never returned to the place of clouds and music."

Karin reaches out to the shining ornament and gently pushes the cage so it rocks on the branch. Suspended on a string, the angel sways back and forth within its narrow world. Beside her, the two sisters are motionless. But I can hear the melody of the harp and the high keen of angel voices on a dark Christmas morning.

I do not say anything when Karin gets up to find another Mandarin orange. I sit under the glowing lights and feel the sharp fragrance of Douglas Fir press against my nose. The smallest angel floats down from her branch and slips into the sleeve of my pyjamas. Down we go to the basement, where the tool cupboard is jammed with nails, screwdrivers and hammers.

An hour later the heat registers in the living room are blasting up warm air and the floor is covered with scrunched paper and ribbon. Books, clothes and toys are scattered throughout the room. At the moment my teeth settle onto a bite of cinnamon toast, my brother asks the question I had prayed no one would ask.

"Who broke the angel's cage?"

Silence, while everyone looks to the branch where the smallest angel hangs. Sure enough, the cage enclosing the angel is broken, although the angel herself is unharmed and twirls within her imperfect casing. A gust of heat comes up the wall and turns the ornament toward the window, hiding the jagged opening from our eyes.

"Maybe the dog got it," I suggest. Accusing faces focus on our German Shepherd puppy, Lorenzo, who is busily chewing a scrap of wood from the fireplace. Feeling the weight of our attention he stops, and cocks his head to one side, a worried expression in his eyes. Oh, no, I think, this isn't right, either.

"Maybe it just fell down by itself," I say. "Besides, it doesn't matter if the cage is broken, the angel looks fine." I take another bite of toast, wishing I could hear the sound of angel voices now, to guide my inexpert lies.

Karin glances at me. She is smiling and trying not to laugh. Her eyes turn up to the smallest angel.

"I agree, she looks fine. Who cares if the cage is broken?"

Christmas, 1993. The smallest angel and her sisters are together on our tree. A short visit back to the land of mortals, from the time of never and always.

CHAPTER 3: THE SECOND PHONE CALL

April 1996, 8:30 p.m. PST, Vancouver, BC

I am embarrassed to the tips of all my extremities, can feel what must be my hair follicles blushing – and am enjoying every squirming moment. Don has said so many kind things about my essay on my sister Karin that I've lost track of the thank you's I've said back to him. He also just *gets it* – gets the passion and pain of family love, gets its hopeless, helpless forms, and gets Karin's vast, permanent effect on all our lives. *Her death was only the beginning of a new way of living with her.*

"Thank you," I say one last time firmly and deliberately. "It means so much to me to have a writer as distinguished as you are understand what I was trying to say."

"No," he corrects me, "what you *did* say – no trying about it! It's a fabulous story. Small wonder you got a national magazine award for it. You are very obviously not just a fisheries reporter. Though I think it's great you do that!"

I could never tell you why I am a fisheries reporter....I don't think I could, anyway....

Don has four national magazine wins to his credit; I know that from the research I did on him for the profile. It's all a bit intimidating to think about sometimes. There doesn't appear to be any sort of writing he hasn't done and done well. I am only five years into this writing business. I am primarily a freelance commercial and sport fisheries reporter; as such, I don't exactly garner a lot of attention and praise from literary circles. He's right, though, I do write first-person essays and work hard to be known for more than for what I term "straight," as in straight-ahead, rule-bound journalism. *The Vancouver Sun* has been regularly publishing my essays for years. I missed having "Escape of the Smallest Angel," the second essay I sent Don, published by a matter of days. I'd sent it in to *The Saturday Review's*

editor, Max Wyman, just a bit too late for a Christmas-time publication. Every freelance writer in Vancouver fights to get in Wyman's "magazine," a weekend insert published in *The Vancouver Sun.* Dad knew Wyman in post-Vancouver Art Gallery years, when Dad worked as a freelancer arts reviewer for Vancouver's other daily, *The Province.* Wyman told me that when he saw my surname on the first essay I sent in, he said to himself, *Simmins? Richard Simmins' daughter?* I like to think curiousity made Wyman decide to read the essay and thereafter, the writing did what it was supposed to do.

"So, you haven't published 'Escape of the Smallest Angel' yet – is that what you said?" asks Don.

"No, I missed the Christmas deadline by a day, that's what Max Wyman told me."

"Oh you'll sell it for sure next year. Doesn't have to be for a Christmas issue, either, I don't think." He pauses, then says wonderingly, "She really was a sorceress, wasn't she?"

He understands, I think, that I miss that. I miss magic in my life. Once upon a time, Karin's magic didn't hurt people. That's the only kind of magic I am interested in. Creative not destructive.

"Would you send me some more of your essays?" Don asks. "I'd really enjoy that. What about the Valentine's Day essay – that sounded hilarious."

My stomach flip-flops with nerves at the request. I am silent a moment, one thought tumbling fast to the next: *Oh God, I can't send the love-lorn ones – can I? Does this nice man need to know right away about my personal failures? Writers, we share the most intimate details with a faceless world – but hold back face to face – or even writer to writer sometimes.* I take a deep breath. *I'll chance it. He's seems kind. God knows he wasn't born yesterday.* I answer: "Sure, I can do that. I'll pop some in the mail tomorrow."

I am 37 years old and I have been mostly single for seven years. I hate almost every aspect of being single. For me this has meant dreadfully painful mis-matches, loneliness and above all fear, that my deep longing for children will ultimately and perversely lead to a childless life. *No, that won't happen*. I need my own family as much as I need air. I spent a decade with one man – a commercial fisherman I literally loved on sight when he ran down the beach in the Queen Charlotte Islands to meet me, and five passionate and disturbing years with another man, who turned out to be a mirage. The worst kind of magic, that one; nothing was indeed as it first seemed. More than anything, I find being single confusing and completely at odds with my two-is-better nature. How can I possibly be alone – after all the heartfelt investments of a decade and a half? I've made mistakes, plenty. But I've always known how to love. This life of mine is already entirely different than anything I imagined as a girl. If the trend continues, I can't imagine what Fate has up her sleeve for me.

Ah Fate – I am so tired of being alone. Can’t you send me someone to love?

CHAPTER 4: SINGLE IN THE 1990S

Looking for Heart, Vancouver, BC, 1994.

"Now, *you* I could make love to," says a radiant voice somewhere near my right shoulder. Before I turn I have already guessed at the age, temperament and alcohol consumption of the speaker. The guesses send immediate waves of reassurance along the surface of my skin: young, cheerful, half-cut but not about to fall over. Harmless.

I take two steps to the left, then look up to the ship-to-shore grin of a boy-faced man dressed in denim and flannel. Rude replies dance on the underside of my tongue, but the word that does find the air surprises both of us.

"Pipsqueak."

The top half of his over-six-foot frame bends over in laughter. "I'm not a pipsqueak," he protests when he straightens up again, "and besides, I'm told that women like the aggressive approach."

The bar's busy tonight, especially down this end, where the pool tables are ringed by players and observers. Down the other end, the band plays on gamely, despite an empty dance floor and the competing clash of Friday night voices. An undemanding second set, only an hour away from midnight enthusiasm and hoarse commands for "Bob Seger, rock' n' roll!" For now, mournful wisps of a Roy Orbison tune curl around clinking glasses and the steady ring from the cash register. I place a loonie on the edge of the closest pool table, and decide to ignore Pipsqueak.

The first time I came here by myself I was so nervous I made a bee-line for the bathroom and didn't emerge for ten minutes. I looked for courage in the bathroom mirror, found wide eyes instead. The reflection spoke to me.

“Rough and tough bar – what do you think you're doing, arriving on your own?”

Want to relax, shoot some pool.

“But why here?”

Close to the ocean, close to home. Small. A 'Cheers' clone, where everyone seems to know everyone else. Like the talk too, of fish, lumber, working long days and more of those days to come, but we'll get by.

“You should have a guy friend with you, or a girlfriend.”

Don't want to be with either tonight. Enjoy my own company. What's wrong with that?

“So why are you so keyed up?”

Good question.

I held my clammy hands under a jet of warm water. Tense, release. As my fingers moved, the heat seemed to spread up my arms and into my shoulders. No fear then, only a growing certainty that in this place, or wherever else I might choose to go alone, my intuition and good sense would keep me safe. No matter what the situation, I decided, the right words and right actions would come to me. I dried my hands and walked back out to the bar with my head high and back straight.

And who says faith isn't rewarded? Met my first “spare brother” that night three years ago. Tall, short, shy or lively, I can now spot spare brother from a mile away. Something about an easiness to the set of chin, line of jaw, cross of arms. A gentle spacing between shoulder blades. Sharp-eyed panthers, they'd step between me and trouble in a moment. I've never had to ask for this intervention. But I could. No price for protection, either.

There are “spare sisters” in here, too. Stories shared of where we've been and where we're going: histories, dreams, strategies. Their energy and sassiness spills on to me – makes our toes tap and hands circle in the air. So many separate journeys, different choices made. Comfort in the sharing.

Pipsqueak is telling me his name. My mind refuses to register it, as I've already christened him satisfactorily and thought the conversation was finished. Apparently not. The word “aggressive” passes my ears again.

“Who told you women like aggressive men?”

“My friend.”

“Guy or a woman?”

“Guy.”

“Well, he's wrong. Dead wrong.” Memory-touch of water on my hands, the washing away of imagined threat, a renewal of belief in self-care. An acceptance of danger in this world; a rejection of its power over me. Firm conviction that men and women want to get along, need one another as friends, lovers and providers of emotional sanctuary. Brothers and sisters, who keep no tally of favors offered or received.

A moment of quiet while Pip debates a final point in favor of an aggressive stance.

“Well,” he says finally, “it works for my friend.”

“Is it working for you?”

“Not really...: He looks dejected and tired, but if it's my turn to be a spare sister, then I'm going to see it through to the end.

“What do you believe?”

“Money, women want guys with money.”

Where do these ideas come from? Did a woman actually say this to him? Or was it the dreaded “friend” again? This perception, in my experience, is so far off-base that I don't know what to say. Disturbing to hear from such a young man. Got to change the focus somehow. Just one or two sentences that he might remember tomorrow morning, foggy head and all.

“Trust me, it's not money, it's heart. Women want guys with big hearts. Got to go now, my loonie's up.” No answer to this, only a shrug of shoulders and solo hiccup. One last thing to say to him.

“Hey, Pip, you're not driving, are you?” He shakes his head. As I move away he reaches out and tugs on the sleeve of my shirt.

“You really are good looking,” he says, “for someone your age.”

Can't hit a brother, can I?

Eyes of a Stranger, Vancouver, BC, Valentine's Day, 1993.

I tell my friends I am a novice at the Convent of the Immaculate Conception – the code phrase for being single in the '90s. I have not taken my final vows, but on some days the words ring sweet in my ears. In the midst of contemplating a life of chastity and virtue, however, a good friend sets me up on a blind date.

"Do you know this man?" I ask, a bit nervous and a lot curious.

"Not exactly," she says brightly. "But I'm told he's very nice."

"Nice," I echo, "something like a digestive biscuit, to be taken with tea?"

"Come on," she says. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

My sense of adventure ran screaming to the convent doors when the last man I dated extolled the virtues of the Walton Family and the joys of spiritual sex. I thought he was joking, until he explained that kissing was reserved for the celebration of the 25th wedding anniversaries and that single beds prevented divorce. These sentiments were followed by the incomprehensible statement that he wished to father four children. I wished him luck – and fled.

I remind my friend of this episode.

"Lightning never strikes twice," she giggles. "This man is totally different. He's as close to your check list as we've seen in a long time."

"I'm listening."

"Over 30 and under 50."

"Uh huh. What else?"

“Never married. No dependents. Intelligent. Works hard. Oh, yeah, and get this, he even writes.”

“He writes? What kind of stuff?”

“Don't know. You'll have to find out.”

“So how do you know him?”

“Friend of a friend.”

“And of course the friend is reliable and isn't trying to set up her third-cousin-twice-removed-who-has-the-social-graces-of-a-toad?”

“Oh, ye of little faith...”

Saturday night arrives. I have changed my clothes six times and still feel as though I'm wearing the wrong thing, which at this point is warm, all black and comfortable. I sit in the overstuffed chair in my living room, gripping my journal and blowing smoke rings.

Oh God, cigarettes. He'll be a non-smoker from Hell who turns on his heel when I ask for a light. Before we've even exchanged astrological signs, he'll tell me he exited his 10-year relationship because she was a puffer.

The doorbell rings. My dog flies to the door. I consider, briefly, allowing the dog to jump up and cover this stranger in white hairs and sloppy canine kisses. No, I think, hauling on Leo's collar, I will be nice...and demure... and witty … and charming .. the man won't believe his good luck.

The blind date is tall, dark-haired, has lovely bright eyes and is dressed in an immaculate navy blue suit. I realize, the moment I open the door, that I am totally under-dressed and am not speaking any language known to humankind – blatherspeak, disguised as I'm-normal-hope-you-are-please-come-in. He seems to understand the drift of my babble. Yes, he has stepped into the house and now sits down on the couch. The dog, despite my best efforts, is using him as a trampoline. Have I shaken his hand yet?

No, I haven't. Perhaps I should before I ask him if he likes dogs/horses/cats/croissants on Sunday morning.

During those first awkward moments of meeting, I see my house through the stranger's eyes. Stereo, records, books, guitars, paintings, a foot-high pile of newspapers set by the fireplaces, animal toys strewn on the carpet. I am fully dressed and yet I feel bare, set against the intimate environment of my home. I walk to the hall closet, pull out my coat. Time to leave.

We're in his car now, heading out to a nearby restaurant for an after-dinner drink. The conversation is proceeding, if not flowing; he asks questions about my work, I ask questions about his. It is determined that I am a writer and that he sells Saturns, the “safest car on the road.” In this same car we drive to the village of Steveston. By the time we walk to the restaurant door, my feet are soaked from the slushy remnants of last weekend's snowstorm. Not only do I feel too casually dressed, I also wish I'd worn waterproof boots. Carry on.

And then the moment I'd been dreading: “Will that be smoking or non-smoking?”

I say nothing, uncertain if this question will begin or finish the evening. The silence extends, until the waiter makes an executive decision.

“I think the lady would like smoking, sir,” he says and leads us to a window table overlooking the Fraser. At last, I feel comfortable: no matter into which unknown territory we stray, I can always touch home in the familiar sight of fishing boats and the river.

And the territory is not so unusual. We talk about writing, commercial fishing, university, family, politics and hobbies. And then, when my second Spanish coffee and his second glass of wine arrive, we become a little braver, and discuss the people who affected our lives most.

But the sentences are short, the explanations ludicrous: without the trust, there cannot be detail. And for some reason, this woman does not trust this man and vice versa. We become edgy and every few minutes, one of us fires a direct shot – but the deflections are agile, grudgingly admired by the archer-of-the-moment.

Why are you this, why am I that, while the lights on the water shine and the music from the 12-string guitar blends with evasions and half-truths.

Most of all I am confused that the man sitting across the table from me is not someone I knew well or love. He's nice, I'm nice, but we are not known to one another, nor will we be, despite the efforts of mutual friends. When I look up to his face I expect to see the blue eyes that I loved for five years or the tawny gold eyes I loved for nine – and instead I see a stranger who is equally surprised to see a woman with green eyes looking at him.

Midnight. He drives me home and we exchange “goodnight” and “nice to meet you.” I consider shaking his hand again, but it's not necessary: this is our first and last meeting.

In the morning, there is the phone call to make to my friend, who is happily anticipating good news – or at the very least, a good story.

“Not a kindred spirit?” she asks, when I try to explain how the only reflection of light I saw was on the waters of the Fraser.

“No. Not this time. So it goes.”

Back to quiet thoughts and the rhythm of writing. I light a candle, put on a record and call my dog to join me on the chair. I am warm and comfortable. I am also smiling and thinking that the convent's not so bad a place – at this point in time.

One day a door will swing open, and I'll see a face I know well and eyes I love, long before I stretch out a hand in greeting. I'll be wearing the right clothes, the right shoes and the cigarettes will be discarded, along with the rest of my worry beads. As for the stranger, his heart is full of river songs, and he has just decided that green eyes are irresistible.

Meeting the Challenge, Vancouver, BC, 1995.

I was hoping he'd wait, at least for a few minutes, but no such luck. I have only enough time to close my eyes against the splash of jade waters as my friend dives from the wharf into the lake. Eyes open again, I see an expression of smiling challenge rise above the surface. Can't very well stand here, a vertical testament to cowardice...

The water is an icy club against my heart. The blow spreads along the length of my body leaving me gasping with shock of cold, stun of movement. Head up now, arms a blurred circle of water – cut to wharf – edge. Ladder, climb, wood under my feet again. I feel electric, jubilant. Been a while, it seems, since this rounded, physical connection to the elements.

After the swim we sit on opposite sides of the picnic table set above the lake shore. The sun is warm, if not hot and there is no immediate need to change into dry clothes. From my purse I find a brush and pull it squeakily through my dripping hair.

Suddenly shy, I wonder if my non-waterproof mascara has left me looking like a raccoon. A recreational hazard that hardly matters and yet I dab a towel edge under my eyes, take a self-absorbed moment to think about the short time I have known this man.

We met several months ago, in a business context. Worked together for two days, exchanged phone numbers, said we'd keep in contact. Similar life experiences, mutual acquaintances, easy conversation – the term “stranger” never seemed to enter into the equation. The word “friend” did, before I knew his surname. Which is why I called him, out of the blue yesterday morning, saying I had to see green today.

“You know how it is,” I laughed over the telephone from my home in Richmond to his home

near Squamish. “Sometimes you just have to get away from the concrete. Need the green of forest all around. So, you free for a picnic?”

Despite the laughter, there's an edge to my voice I'm hoping he can't hear. I need the comfort of a vibrant coastal world and I also need platonic, emotionally undemanding company.

“Sure, come on up.”

“Oh, one other thing. Got a dog. Very cute, not hairy.” He does like dogs, doesn't he? Can't go anywhere without my canine sidekick.

“Great, bring him along.”

Of course he likes dogs, wouldn't be a “kindred spirit” if he didn't. I explain the cliched but functional term to him as we drive up the winding road from his house towards mountain-sheltered D'Arcy. Polite silence from the passenger seat as he considers and then rejects my term.

“It's not one I'd use,” he says. “I'd just call it 'like-minded' people.”

“But you knew I'd call, didn't you?”

“Yeah, when the time was right.”

The time is right – and a bit fragile – and he knows it. The response is unfailingly kind and gentle, as I guessed it would be.

“So,” he says, “the situation didn't work out the way you expected. How do you feel about that?”

Feel. The word drops my defenses, eliminates small talk. Hands tight on the wheel, eyes steady on the curving highway, I answer. “Not good. As though I've been in a car accident.”

Honestly didn't think I would speak about this. Thought I could stay quiet, numb or perhaps joke

about the “many-splendored” thing called romance. Such a relief to know that subterfuge and deflection are not necessary. It's been a tough week; from what I can sense, this guy's had a few of those in his time, too.

Halfway to D'Arcy, but hungry now, ready for lunch. We stop beside a narrow, fast-flowing river to eat our picnic. In the present moment again, our psyches lightened by the sharing of food and stories of ocean, travel and family.

Much talk of family.

The references to his children are frequent and affectionate. Adults now, the daughter and son have created lives their father is comfortable watching unfold, has respect for. My friend goes beyond a simple listing of work and life choices and underscores their ability to commit – to goals, ideals and people. I watch the shadings in his eyes and realize he is committed too; a marriage dissolved, but a family sphere only re-defined, strengthened.

Onto the lake. Day to evening, evening to darkness. In Pemberton, another meal enjoyed. Bounty before us, we speak of other hungers, the ones that food and drink do not relieve.

“Do you believe in God?” At 35, I can say the word easily, feel no embarrassment at my reliance on prayer.

“No.” His tone is matter-of-fact, unequivocal.

“But what do you do, when the tidal waves come along?”

“Write. Think it out. Move on.”

We exchange an amused look, mutual incomprehension a point of interest, not conflict. Many paths to the shores of serenity, what counts is the arrival.

Tired now, and many miles to go, before I sleep. Perhaps he wouldn't mind...

“Do you think I could...?”

“I have a fold-out couch in the living room.”

“Would it be okay, if...?”

“The dog can sleep with you.”

In the morning I awake early. Before our first cup of coffee I am already thinking about story deadlines and how good it will feel to sit in front of my computer, focused and intent. I thank my friend for his hospitality and open the door to my car for the dog to jump in the back seat.

“Stay in touch,” I say.

He smiles, “I will.”

The waters of Howe Sound are brilliant under the full sun. The car seems to drive itself as my mind busily turns over the diverse topics of conversation my friend and I covered during my visit: books, writing, work, self-care and meeting the challenge of emotional upheavals. Our coping mechanisms, as it turned out, were dissimilar: one called on reason, the other on spirit.

No matter, we're both prepared to take icy dives and rise up with challenge in our eyes.

CHAPTER 5: LONG DISTANCE FRIENDSHIP

May 1996, Vancouver, BC.

It's 7:00 p.m. – he's phoned the last two nights at this time, it might be Don. I pick up the phone, skip the greeting and take a chance it's him. “You can't have the essays yet!” I laugh. “I just mailed them today!” *Please, let it be him, I love talking to him so much.*

“No,” says Don, “I just wanted to know how your interview with the UFAWU guy went today. You said you were a bit nervous about it.”

D. B., at the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union – oh yes, I was right to be a little on edge about that. Hard to get a word in edgewise with that man, not to mention that he answers, at length, every question you haven't asked him. At least he's gender-blind, which doesn't happen often in the commercial or sport fishing worlds. Union-brother and all that. So yeah, it went all right in the end and I got what I needed to meet my deadline for *Fishermen's News* in Seattle, Washington, this coming Friday. The pay's lousy but I love being their monthly Canadian correspondent. Usually get a nice lay-out too.

I tell Don all this and he tells me his writerly news. We are only just starting to talk more about personal matters.

“How are you feeling these days?” I ask.

Sometimes he can talk about this, sometimes not. Sometimes he sounds so weary and heartsick I have to ask him, gently, to speak up, because his voice drops below discernible pitch. And sometimes, even often, his voice is lit by love and longing. That's when he's telling me Lulu stories.

“The love doesn't go anywhere, does it?” I say. “Just because she's gone, doesn't mean the love

is any less intense – it's probably more intense. But it's as though the love has no home anymore. You're holding onto it, it's yours by right, and yet you don't know what to do with it anymore, where to put it. You've got the sun, but no sky to put it in." Death or a break-up, I think, you never know what to do with the leftover love.

He begins to respond, then his voice breaks. He is weeping. The sound goes straight to my own tattered heart. The tawdry ending to my latest romantic mistake is only one month old. The man was close to perfect on my check-list – near my age, shared interests, fun to hike, fish and adventure with – and none of it meant anything when we became lovers. That itself was a chilly endeavor, followed by worse. I've had trouble knowing when to cut my losses, with both friends and sweethearts, preferring to believe the best of people. I've also been known to engage in "magical" or false thinking, the sort that is harmful, as it keeps cold but true reality at arm's length. This was surely true in this case.

I envy Don his pure, guiltless heartbreak. I've never lost a sweetheart to an implacable Fate. Mostly the reasons are more complicated and convoluted – though there's certainly been stubborn naivety and poor judgment, on my part. Or indifference, now and again, on someone's part. But I don't know – *burned to death or drowned* – does one sort of loss really hurt more than another? I know self-forgiveness has to figure in here somewhere, I just have trouble finding it some days.

"We should say good night for now," I suggest to Don. He had cried only briefly, then resolutely talked of other more neutral subjects. I like his resiliency, the calm he's able find after his storms. It is I who feels anything but resilient this evening. Sometimes my own heartache is all I can manage. "Maybe we can talk later in the week?"

I wonder how self-forgiveness would feel – not just imaginings or glimpses of it, but living it, every day?

CHAPTER 6: THE FORMING YEARS

11 January 2011, Halifax, NS.

My life is so civilized and peaceful there are days I could weep with gratitude. The life I have created with my husband over the past 15 years allows me to write freelance articles and personal letters, teach memoir writing, read, cook the meals we like to eat, play a little music now and then, travel internationally and within Canada and spend time with family and friends, far-flung and near-by. We loved our dog Leo, aka "*the Whippet*," and we love our new little companion, MacTavish the Shetland Sheepdog, or Sheltie. Leo was a gentleman, never cross or argumentative. MacTavish, or Tavish, as we often call him, is a stronger cup of tea. This matters not one iota. I call him the "bad biker boyfriend" because we love him extravagantly and unstoppably, bossy traits, barking and all. There is no way we have discovered to be immune to his extreme beauty and shocking intelligence. Despite his natural reserve, poor creature, we maul him constantly. We are rewarded with brief but intense shows of affection. MacTavish has only been in our lives for five years. We are a work in progress, we three.

My life is also charmed, rich in blessings. I love and I am loved. I enjoy and I am enjoyed. I am safe from all psychic harms or physical discomforts. Don thinks I am the funniest person he's ever met; this is ridiculously important to me. On March 14, 2011, we will celebrate our 13th wedding anniversary. I can still miss him when he is in the next room. We exchanged over 800 emails before we shared our first kiss, along with countless phone calls and regular mail communications. We still email one another every day of our lives.

Four years into our life in the city, other precious bits are falling into place as well. To my intense joy, I am on the verge of having horses in my life again on a regular basis. I knew Halifax would come through for me! Hammonds Plains Road – aka, suburban horse land. Not as ritzy or diverse as

Southlands – no hunt clubs or polo fields, no hacking trails along a river and through the deep woods – but horse land for sure, complete with private barns for family horse owners, schooling barns that offer boarding facilities, lessons, monthly leases and small horse shows, and right in this same neighbourhood, a top-notch tack store run by an astute business woman.

The world of horses keeps changing and changing – methods, philosophies, tack, clothing, boots, even the horses themselves, various breeds coming in and out of style and general availability – and I have changed too. I am a long way from fit, and a longer way from the 104 pounds I weighed when I met Don. Neither reality aids riding, but I am working to change both, as best I can. All in good time. I am now two lessons to the better of being unfit. After 10 mostly horseless years in Cape Breton, the time is *now* to get my riding seat back.

Luck has guided me to a great schooling barn and the perfect instructor for my circumstances. She's in her 40s, I think, and I'm 52, but our riding backgrounds are similar. I understand her riding experiences and motivations and she understands mine; I also see a bit of my Mum in her, in her devotion to a nine-year-old daughter who lives only to ride, only to breathe in all the assertive smells of a barn. Unlike my mother, who only rode as a child and teenager, my instructor still rides and competes.

My impossibly generous and loving mother...she kept waiting for me to outgrow my need and love for horses – and she never seemed to understand what it took to go back to the barn, after we lost Karin. Maybe she did, and thought it was further folly. I felt like a child, shamed and tentative when she expressed her disapproval of my re-connection to the horse world in my 20s. When I kept on riding into my 30s, she was nonplussed.

"Going to the barn!" I'd crow, breeches tight, field boots shined and long hair in a swinging pony tail.

Mum would purse her lips and shake her head. I could hear the silent question clear as a symphony: *Nothing better to do?* and her own answer: *You're too old for this*.

As with most of the family, I struggled so hard with depression – she did too, it's in the journals she left behind, from teenage years on – and knew in my bones that horses kept me moving, kept me sane. I didn't really want to say that to my mother – the keeping sane part. She'd had enough of craziness during the interminable Karin years. Before that it was the dramatic and showy departure of her husband that made her a stick-figure in her clothes and too poor to buy ones that fit. Every cent she earned went to looking after her four children and paying the mortgage on the big beautiful house on Vancouver's southwest side. That she was first able to do this driving a cab at night – "I have too much education," she explained, "no one wants to hire me as a clerk or a secretary – I won't stay, they think" – was a miracle, duly aided by taking on a second mortgage.

In time she would take a "fifth-year-Ed" degree to add onto her honours philosophy and English BA from the University of Toronto. Next to her adventurous, travel-filled time in the Air Force ("Sgt. Atkinson"), her 20-odd years of teaching high school were among the happiest of her life.

But not those early years. Along with the shrunken body came a depression and despair so heavy it tore at all our hearts to witness. Never a word of complaint, just the silent screaming rage we all knew vibrated within her, and the gut-twisting feeling of inadequacy in all of us children that we Couldn't Make it Right.

How could we? We were eight, ten, thirteen and fifteen when Richard Beaufort Simmins began his adulterous affair with Marguerite P. "Vancouver Art Gallery Director Fired; Leaves Wife and Four Children for Adulterous Affair" - maybe the newspaper headlines didn't announce exactly that, but all the chattering, bourgeois families around us did. We Five, Mum and her four children, not my father or his *married* lover (even after 14 years with my father, she never did leave her husband), were looked

upon as social lepers. We all lost friends when it happened, and my mother always maintained that she was “dropped like a hot potato” by all their associates at the gallery and even most of their personal and artist friends.

Divorce in the late 1960s was a terrible, morally degenerate disease, That Was Not Done By Decent Families. “Oh,” said a dear friend of mine from kindergarten on, “my parents would *never* get divorced.” To her and her family's credit, they remained loyal to us. To my credit, I did not remind her of her statement when her parents did indeed divorce, not so many years later. But we were among the first “broken” families.

An alcoholic at that time, Dad always claimed that Marguerite P. “saved his life.” This she did, he said, by allowing him to love himself for the first time in his life. I don't know how she did that, exactly, but I do know, we all did, that she refused to be with him until he quit drinking. His sobriety came after a “nervous breakdown,” as they termed a collapse in those days, and with the lifelong aid of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Dad and Marguerite P. had a passionate and tumultuous relationship for 14 years. Marguerite never divorced or even “left” her husband and three teenage children, though she and Dad lived together on and off, in different cities, during this time. Dad asked her numerous times to marry him. She refused every time. At the cusp of the 1980s he decided to ask one more time, yet again telling her how important is was to him to marry “the love of his life.” She refused. He left her, without a backward glance. Within weeks, maybe months she became ill with stomach cancer. He refused to even visit her in the hospital and she died, I presume, with her family around her. “She adored me,” said Dad, shrugging his shoulders, “but loved her husband and family, too.” She had also been raised poor, and had a terror of being poor again, he explained. Who knew how she'd come out of a divorce, in terms of finances.

Divorce, fourteen ultimate and tattered years later, Was Not Done in Her Family.

Dad knew I and everyone in his family hated Marguerite P.'s guts. He also knew he'd laid down the rules for our adult father/daughter relationship *à la* Alcoholics Anonymous and I'd reluctantly agreed to them. We spoke of the past, therefore, only briefly and lived forgiveness as best we could. I knew how he had lacerated himself for his past decisions and I watched in wonder as he moved past self-loathing to a place of self-acceptance and peace. "I am a beautiful, ugly man," he'd say, shrugging again. "I do the best I can."

I think he was a lucky man, too. We none of us ever stopped loving him – Barbara Atkinson Simmins and we children from that union – though our hearts were confused and wary for many years.

Exit Marguerite, enter Karin Weiss. When blonde-haired, blue-eyed 32-year-old Karin Weiss entered the Ottawa bookstore Dad owned late in 1980, she was a woman "on a mission," as we used to say when I was a teenager. She wanted to be married and she wanted to have children. Karin thought a man like Dad, who she found attractive, intelligent and excellent, amusing company, might be just the sort of man with whom she'd choose to share a life and start a family.

Karin? We three adult children asked in horrified wonder. Is her name truly *Karin? Children*, we repeated stonily. You want more *children*? At age 55?

Apparently.

It was a long story, of course – there was a marriage and children and another 14-year relationship.

So much to explain to Don, in the beginning. Which was why it seemed easier to *show* Don some of the stories about my parents, with my essays, than to tell him.

Of Dad and Dandelions, Ottawa, ON, 1996

I lie face down in a yard of long grass and dandelions. The sun is warm on my back and grass blades tickle my nose. Despite the heat, the ground is slightly damp; I smell the earth beneath me and wonder briefly if it is nearly as rich as the delta lands where I live, thousands of miles from this place. I feel relaxed; I could almost fall asleep this way. Just need to stretch out that left arm a little bit –

"Very still," comes the request from three metres above on the veranda. And then, several shutter-clicks later, "OK, think I got it." I shrug and shake to my feet, bits of grass stuck to my hands, my jeans spotted with circles of yellow from the press of the flowers. A quick climb over the neighbor's fence and I am back, sitting at the picnic table outside my father's house.

"You'll like that one," says my photographer father, his camera in constant, creative use in the past few years. "Trust me."

I do trust him. Of the three rolls of film developed in the past week, there were only a few photos I didn't much like. Not bad, technically speaking; they simply showed 32-year-old me looking more sombre than usual. "No teeth" shots, Dad calls them. The dandelion pose was fun. If it works out, it will match the dominant tone of my visit thus far.

"More coffee?"

He shakes his hard; we've had two already and it's almost time to start supper, a stir-fry tonight. We will work side by side in the kitchen, washing and sliding vegetables purchased at the farmer's market earlier this afternoon. Red bell peppers, snow peas, carrots, broccoli, celery – a mix of color as vibrant as the green and gold in the yard next to us.

It's been two years since we've seen each other. Dad has already informed me that I haven't aged,

and I am trying to figure out why he looks younger than he did the last time I came to Ottawa. Considering the upheavals in both our lives in the past year, we should both be looking decidedly worse for wear.

Dad's not the only one taking photos. I am busy recording mental images of a family who in a month – when his wife, my stepmother, leaves to set up a home on her own – will no longer be together. The atmosphere in the house is curiously calm, even affectionate; I sense no bitterness, hear no words of anger or recrimination. Still, change is coming and I am uneasy, especially for my two half sisters, Jessica, 13, and Fiona, 9.

I remember two things about being nine: it was the year my math phobia began and the time when I finally accepted my father's permanent absence from the family home. It had been a year since he'd left, but the lack of a formal parting had confused me: father present, father gone – really gone. After a while he came back for a visit, but that was equally confusing: Christmas celebrations awkward and surreal; the silent clamor of unmet needs and desires; the glowering, judgmental eyes of my older siblings. In the end I saw his departure as a void, colorless and deep.

Unlike people, voids cannot be hurt. Resentment and anger do not affect them. Hate the void, love the father: child's logic, off-centre and comforting. It served me well for some years, but it never took away the dread of goodbyes.

"We're in good shape, aren't we?"

His question pulls me back to a late afternoon of lilac-scented breeze and weakening sun. I look across the table to his age-creased, smiling face. His observation is truthful, not voiced in false bravado. He is in good shape – body, mind and spirit – and so am I.

We have talked about the challenges that lie ahead. In the past week, I have scrutinized Jessica's and Fiona's faces as closely as I now do our father's. I have seen ripples of sadness but, overall, an

understanding that they are loved. They know, from their parents' actions and words, that these feelings will not change. What will change is that they will have two homes, each headed by a parent who will provide care and attention. A void of unity, but not of any one individual. As for their grown-up siblings, Zoë, Geoffrey and me, the future will prove our commitment to the girls.

We rise from the table to begin supper chores. I think, but do not say, how much I like sharing these activities with him: enjoyment of the mundane, taken too early from the years we lived together. Tidy the house, set the table, light the candles. Life-sustaining trivia, my older sister calls it. Dad and I move smoothly around the kitchen. Another photo, tucked into the mind's album.

After supper, a reversal of the initial process: table cleared, dishes stacked and washed, kitchen tidied. The candles on the dining room table, however, remain lit. Time for Yahtzee. Dad and I have played this dice game for as long as I can remember. A generally mindless diversion, it serves, in our case, a time-honored purpose. As soon as the dice start rattling in the shaker cup, conversation kicks into high gear. The exchanges have a peculiar, long-established pattern, beginning in the far past and then settling into the present. Decades-old relationships are invariably the starting point. We speak of people of whom we ave a shared picture. In recent years, there hasn't often been the opportunity to meet, face-to-face, new players on the stage. But sooner or later our talk comes around to the present.

“What about the fellow...?” His question straggles off as he considers whether to stick with a high roll or try once more for a higher one. Triumphant, he rolls a six, asks again about a man he's never met and now never will meet. The discussion is brief: over, gone and mostly done with. It's the “mostly” part that Dad is concerned about. I surprise myself by keeping my own counsel on the subject. Surprised, because my father is a direct man who elicits direct answers, and I am too often accommodating when I want to stand firm. I am not ready to share particulars at this time; I will when I have a better sense of resolution. I roll a Yahtzee – five identical dice – and we call it a night.

The next morning I awake to the hum of a motor. The neighbor's yard has become a short-cropped, flower-free lawn. Unlike yesterday, when hundreds of small, glowing suns caught the eye, the yard is now quite ordinary. I point; Dad turns with the gesture and looks back at me with a smile. Catch the moment, swim toward the color. Could be gone sooner than you think.

At the airport I sip root beer from a plastic cup. Ten minutes before my flight is called, I am detached enough to be partway home already. Will there be one pay-cheque or two waiting for me? And what about the dog, will he sulk for a day, or will a few hugs and biscuits claim his heart again?

When my flight is called the familiar tension begins. I know it is no longer necessary to feel this fear. If only he could reverse the order of our greetings: welcome me with goodbyes, leave me with hellos. Above all, assure me there will be a next time. I want to believe this in my bones.

His arms are tight around me and words that have taken over 25 years to believe are offered to the air: “We'll see each other again.” His tone is certain, with a top note of surprise as though he, too, believes this for the first time. A wash of color fills the void. This is no lie offered for a child's comfort; it is truth, bright as the gold of a dandelion. I will see my father again. Eyes tender, hearts easy, we part with hellos.

Writing the Distances Away, Vancouver, BC, 1992.

A letter arrives from my father this morning. It has travelled from Ottawa to Richmond in a square white envelope, addressed in a script fine enough to adorn a medieval scroll. I tuck the letter in my shirt pocket, pour myself a cup of coffee and return to my workroom, where the computer hums and an autumn sun casts long shadows on to my desk.

I will open the letter in an hour or so, when I have folded down all the corners of my impatience: letters are to be savored, before and after the contents are known.

Most people would rather have a root canal performed than write a letter. I've never understood why. For my family, letter writing is a need and a pleasure; during the year, hundreds of letters will cross between Ottawa, Calgary, Ladner, Richmond and York, England. I will receive over 100 from my father alone. The post office loves the Simmins family.

It is not only the process of writing and sharing our lives that we enjoy, it is also the selection of materials and pens. Some of us choose thick bond paper and fountain pens; others choose gold-flecked rice paper and fine-tipped ball points. Themes and interests within each of our lives are reflected in stationery patterns and cards: horses, blue herons, Japanese art, fish boats, pressed flowers, architecture, gardens. Envelopes are multi-hued, and often closed with red sealing wax and gold-inked stamps. One page short or 10 pages long, the letters are read and carefully collected in boxes, desks and journals.

“But so many! What do you write about?” asked a Vancouver friend of mine not long ago. “It would get to the point where you'd have to discuss the grocery list.”

As a matter of fact, we do discuss food: “Went to the Byward Market this afternoon. Bought a basket of ripe field tomatoes – perfect for frying with a bit of sugar – and an armload of vegetables,

most of them still sprinkled with the black earth of the Ottawa Valley...” “The wharf at Steveston was crazy-busy today. Couldn't resist the prawns, piled high in tubs of ice. Took two pounds. I'll cook them in butter, add a squeeze of lime and serve with curried rice and papaya...” “Nothing like Alberta beef. Joan and I are expecting 40 guests for dinner tonight. We'll barbecue a roast, loaded with fresh-ground pepper and slivers of garlic...” “I didn't plant as big a garden as usual this year, but there's still plenty of vegetables to take us through the fall. The carrots are small and sweet, just the way Jocelyn loves them...”

We discuss other types of nourishment as well: books, movies, theatre, our work – and the people with whom we share a home and a daily existence. If we didn't detail these thoughts, I would not know, for example, that my 1-month-old nephew prefers to look up at the world, bold and inquiring; “...he is firmly determined not to be put on his stomach, and will instantly flip over on his back, whenever we move him.” Nor would my brother know, for a heart-on-paper-certainty, that his child is welcomed and loved by all his family, months before they will hold the baby in their arms. Not so long from now, the letters will begin to arrive addressed to my nephew. This nurturing word-flow is part of his heritage.

Letters provide a continuity in our long-distance relationships that phone calls and infrequent visits cannot match. It is the process of living that is most important – instead of simply being told something has occurred, we are privy to the anticipation and after-effects of significant events. Triumphs are recognized with exclamation marks and underlined phrases; sorrows are described in untidy, unpunctuated paragraphs. We read, absorb and respond.

As with conversations, the words not spoken in letters are as revealing as the ones that are. We note the absence of certain names and adjectives and look beneath the words for the more subtle clues to mood and outlook. We do not question the level of intimacy offered, nor do we draw back when

support is requested. With each letter mailed, we offer one-on-one attention and inclusion.

And there's the key: inclusion. Wherever we go or whatever we are doing, we try to step outside our own perspective and draw in the person we are thinking of that day. If something tastes superb, feels right or sounds exquisite – I take a pen and share the moment; it increases my enjoyment double-fold.

Living so far apart, we could easily lose the rhythm of our laughter and affection, but we resist this loss, with every postcard and each sheet of paper that passes through our hands.

Letters are songs. Our voices rise clear and steady over the miles.

For Mum – The House with Many Doors – Halifax, NS, 2010.

Vancouver, 1968.

People are always leaving. There are many doors inside our house and three doors leading out of our house. People move from room to room, upstairs and down, then to the basement rooms, slamming doors behind them. There are bells tied to the curtain rod on the back door. The bells jangle when the door is slammed shut. The front door is heavy. My brother uses it the most. My Mum and sisters don't slam that one. They prefer the lighter doors. You don't have to be angry to slam a door. You might just want to be heard for some reason. Everyone in the house slams doors. Or just shuts them hard. It's how we talk right now.

I step through one of the five doorways leading into the kitchen. The room is empty and cold. I could go back upstairs, get a sweater. But I don't want to wake Mum. Sometimes she has a mid-morning nap on Saturdays. Once she was sleeping so hard I couldn't even shake her awake. That scared me. No more Valium, she says now. Now she wakes easily again. I stood in the doorway of her room before I came downstairs. Face to the wall, she turned over, said, “Hello, little love,” then rolled back to the wall again. She looks funny in that small bed in my brother's old room.

Which reminds me. I slip through two doors into my parents' old bedroom. The double bed is made up tidily and there are books in the shelf of the headboard. The books are boring. I've checked them many times. But there are things on the bureau that interest me. 711 Eau de Parfum. A paisley ascot. One cuff-link. Parent stuff. Beyond these, a bottle I can just reach.

Aqua-Velva aftershave. The turquoise liquid makes the centre of me go soft with colour-happiness. Could be mermaid water. The bottle is almost full. He will return for it. And for us, of course.

My red-haired sister, five years older than me, scorns me for this idea. “You really think he's coming back, don't you?” she asked last week, when she caught me smelling the aftershave. She shook her head: “Stupid.” She melted away.

My red-haired sister can appear out of nowhere; she doesn't even need doors. She has a hunger to hurt, like a nasty cat with sharp claws. She scratches Mum, mostly. Mum pretends it doesn't hurt. We all look away, because it hurts everyone, but we don't know what to do. Fourteen years old and she frightens all of us. That's the reason the mermaid water helps. Just for a moment of softness inside. I think my red-haired sister misses Dad, even though she says she hates him. It feels like she hates all of us.

She is staying at a friend's house this weekend. I am glad.

My blonde-haired sister, seven years older than me, isn't here very much these days. Dad left last year, when the snowdrops came up in the garden. My blonde-haired sister's face is like a whole garden of flowers, since she met her boyfriend, also last year. But she is furious at Dad too.

I think I'll watch some TV. “Idiot box,” my parents call it. But Mum enjoys it more than Dad ever did. On Friday nights we all watch TV together. We have “Friday night treats,” a phrase Mum made up. TGIF, she says on a Friday night – thank God it's Friday. We pass around bowls of Jube-Jubes and Bridge Mix and pieces of Burnt Almond chocolate bars. We aren't allowed Coke during the week, but we drink it on Friday night. Everyone seems lighter, happier on a Friday night.

I look up from *Captain Kangaroo* to see my mother. Hungry?” she asks. I had Tang and toast, and tell her this. I even remembered to put the glass and plate in the sink, and didn't leave it here on the table in front of me in the family room. She hates it when we eat in here, and make a mess. My brother is 12 and I am 9; we don't do much housework. Mum used to do it throughout the day, along with the ironing, grocery shopping and meal making. Now she drives a cab and can't keep up with the housework or the gardening. This distresses her. She loves order and tidiness.

“We had maids growing up,” she says sometimes. My sisters, brother and I find it hard to picture this. Maids are for rich people. Not for people with second mortgages and cars that need repair.

We had a home in London, Ontario and a cottage on the lake, in Bayfield, she explains, eyes distant with happy memories. Why I didn't even know how to cook, she'd tell us with pride, until after the Air Force, when I went to university. Her roommates teased her into the kitchen, she said.

My father's new girlfriend - “Daddy's *whore*,” says my red-haired sister – is a very good cook, our father tells us. This knowledge hurts me.

It is too quiet in the kitchen. I look over my shoulder from my spot on the couch. Mum is standing in the centre of the room. Her shoulders are rising up and down. It looks like she is laughing.

Sadness and anger. With Mum, it's hard to pry those two feelings apart. Sometimes I think she's just sad and then I see the shimmer of rage in her eyes. Mostly I see fatigue. I feel bad. Our lives feel so heavy sometimes. I can't find the right things to do, to make Mum feel better.

I stand in the doorway. Everything is still around us, except for a boiling kettle on the stove. Mum hasn't had her tea yet. This hurts me too. Too much sadness, even before her first cup of sugared, black tea. Of the five purple doors, four are closed. All that dark colour set against white. Somehow it seems like the room is pushing in. It's hard to breathe in this cold place.

“I am going to pack us a bag,” she says. “We are going away.”

Now I really can't breathe. My brother. He's downstairs sleeping. If he wakes up and we are gone, maybe he'll go too. He isn't mean like my red-haired sister and he's here most of the time. We laugh together, listen to records. He's teaching me how to play poker. I can't lose him too.

“I'll write a note for your brother. He'll be fine for a day.”

I open my mouth and a spiral of distress comes out. A cat, her tail stepped on.

“Stop it. It's only today and part of tomorrow.” She is moving briskly now, talking to herself. “Write a note, put it by his place at the table; don't forget a book, need a book, sweaters too...”

Vancouver is a pearl today. From a cold kitchen we step out to a mild, blossom-scented world. The clouds are gold-rimmed and tumbling on a northwest wind, the sky behind a light-shot blue. The navy blue ocean has curled white tips on it, like the boiled icing you put on an angel food cake. We drive alongside English Bay. Saturday morning and the downtown streets are busy. Sailboats skim by the Planetarium. Farther out in the harbour there are orange-bottomed freighters. Yellow and red popcorn stands are set one block apart all along Pacific Avenue. My breakfast has worn off and the scent of buttery popped corn makes my stomach grumble. I wonder when we'll stop, where we are going to spend the night.

The Cove Motel is on Denman Street. The beach is two minutes away. Our room has two beds, a sitting room and a kitchenette. Mum has brought food from home. For lunch we have soda crackers, cheddar cheese, and fruit and sultana cookies. Mum has her tea, I have a Coke. It's not Friday. But I have a Coke. It's warm but good. The room is warm too. The table where we eat lunch is set beneath two big windows. We watch the lacy curtains pull back and forth with the wind from the open window. We are silent, watching the material breathe so easily. In time, our own breaths match the rhythm.

We go to the beach. The harbour has even more sailboats in it now. We walk at the ocean's edge and squeal when the waves touch the toes of our shoes. Turning, we stop at a popcorn vendor's and buy a bag of popcorn. The paper bag is slick with butter, the popcorn, spilling over the top, is hot and delicious.

Back at our room we take off our wet shoes and socks. Mum is pleased that she remembered our slippers. We change into cozy clothes and book-end the couch, our stories in hand. We read in silence.

I could tell her. I could tell her that Dad is coming back. That she won't have to drive a taxi anymore, and we won't have to have another family share the house this autumn, so Mum can train to be a teacher. I can't make my blonde-haired sister come home more often, and none of us are safe from my red-haired sister's claws. My brother likes to laugh, but mostly, he's as angry and sad as Mum. He

really misses Dad. I guess I can't fix that, either. I don't even know when, exactly, Dad is coming back. All the same, I should tell her: *We're going to be all right, Mum.*

I start to speak and then look up at my mother's intent reading face. Not just intent but soft. I haven't seen peace on my mother's face in many months.

She looks up, finds my studying eyes, smiles.

"I am going to teach you a game. It's called honeymoon bridge."

Out come the cards and score-pad. I am not good at the game but I like it. It's a grown-up game, like poker, but it's also our game, Mum's and mine. *Trump. Singleton. Bluffing. Suits*. *Void.* All these fun new words and ideas. I like to watch her hands when she shuffles and deals the cards. Her movements are tidy. Calm, somehow, too.

We play until dark, eat a peanut butter and banana sandwich, and prepare to sleep in separate beds. I thought we'd share a bed."I love you," she says, smiling, "but you kick and thrash in your sleep."

The next morning she is awake before I am and rises quickly. Yesterday is far away. Today is already heavy on her shoulders. She makes tea, packs away the cards and our belongings.

"Your brother," she says - the thin sound of her voice scares me - "I must phone him." She calls my brother. He was worried, Mum tells me, hanging up the receiver. He wants us to come home. We hurry around the room, straightening bed covers and washing and drying our dishes. When we leave, there is nothing to say we were ever in the room.

What in the name of God was I thinking, I hear her mutter.

I am glad we're going home. I need to hear a few slamming doors. People do leave our house, but they come back home too. My blonde-haired sister will be home today, and we'll all have supper together; sometimes she and I sing *Frere Jacques* in rounds when we dry the supper dishes. My red-haired sister still won't be back until tomorrow. My brother won't be sad or mad today, he'll be glad we are back.

Sometimes I think that Dad may not come back. He doesn't really like that cravat on the bureau, and I guess he can buy more aftershave. *Replaceable.* Things. People. I hadn't thought of that before. My stomach returns to its usual twisted place. Then I look at Mum. Even worried, her face isn't as tight as it was yesterday. She touches my cheek.

“We'll be all right, little love,” she says. We drive to the house with many doors. We enter through the back door and bring the sound of bells with us.

CHAPTER 7: BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR

June 1996 – Vancouver, BC

Dear God: Please send me someone to love. *Be careful what you ask for, lest the gods should* –

I can't do this. I just can't. I didn't understand that he *liked* me – not until the last few weeks, when he's made that focus clear. Don wants to be my lover – and that's not where I saw this relationship going. I mean give me a break – his oldest "child," a son who lives in Ottawa, is two years younger than I am. Twenty-two years is just too much of an age gap. I don't want an affair. I want a long-term, loving relationship. Marriage. With someone close to my age.

On the other hand, there was 25 years between my father and my stepmother, Karin Weiss. Yes, they've separated now – there aren't any guarantees in life – but I saw a lot of joy in those various Ottawa households over the years. It is Dad who says, whenever a whiff of criticism comes near Karin, "Fourteen years of peace, that's what Karin gave me, fourteen years of peace." It doesn't matter how we adult children view the matter – nor should it. But loyalty to Dad aside, even we can see the most obvious truth. Dad adores Karin, she loved him with all her heart for many years, and the marriage produced two beautiful daughters, Jessica and Fiona. Their break-up is hard to watch and learn about, but it's one of the more civil and kind ones I've seen. Not many spouses announce their affair *before* they commence it. Didn't hurt Dad any less, but it was an honest and brave confession of intent on Karin's part.

Now that I think about it, that last relationship of mine was hideously hurtful – and that man was the "perfect" age for me, two and a half years older, same age as my wonderful brother, who he never did get to meet. So there goes the age compatibility theory, right out the door –

No, this is crazy. Don has five children – three biological children and two adopted – and no interest in having any more. And I don't want to live anywhere but Vancouver! I love my life here, if not my love life. I can't compromise on everything, can I?

I can't believe I am even thinking these things. I am embarrassed. Who the hell says Silver Donald Cameron would ever want to marry me? Where the hell did that conceited thought come from?

Why does he have to be so wonderful to talk to?

I told Don about those early conversations with Dad, how I hovered on the edge of freelancing for so long. I was reluctant, even post-B.A., to bid adieu to the steady and abundant cash of my waitressing jobs. These were also post-commercial fishing years, I explained, post-break-up with the fisherman I spent nearly a decade with and jilted one month before we were to be married.

Jilted? A month before you married? That must have been terribly hard on everyone, said Don.

Can we talk about that another time? I asked him. My mind had gone to the whitest shade of blank. All I can hear is the music from that awful time in my life: *Soul like Lucifer, black and cold like a piece of lead, Misguided Angel, love you till I'm dead,* sang Margo Timmins from Cowboy Junkies… Don't choose the lesser man, I'd said to myself – fool, fool.

I'm sorry – what was I –

Your Dad, prompted Don. You were talking about your Dad and how you finally started freelancing.

Right, yes, thanks. Ummm, well – my Dad was a former freelance arts journalist himself. He was so sure I could be a freelancer. Much surer than I was. I'd ask him, Dad, what would I write about?

And he'd ask, What do you know about, what do you love? Then I knew – it hit me like a bolt out of the literal blue: *Fish, I know a lot about fish.*

I told Don all this and he just kept asking more questions – because the journalist in him knew it wasn't the whole story. Sure, I knew about fish from the years of working as a deckhand and yes, and I revered the five wild salmon species the way only a west coaster can, salmon being a religion in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. I loved the whole vast ocean world and all its creatures from Orcas and Dall porpoises to orange and purple sea stars, bull kelp and the tiniest krill. He understood all of that and how the fisheries could be an obvious choice for me to start freelancing about.

There's something else here though, he said. I can hear it in your voice.

Then I won't speak, I thought. I would count, silently. It's what I do when I get scared. (– *one, two, three, four* –)

Hello? said Don. Marjorie, are you still there?

(- *five, six seven* -) The essays (– *eight, nine, ten* -) sometimes I write them for my fisherman. I write them (– *eleven, twelve, thirteen* –) hoping he'll see them.

So now he knows that many of the essays or articles are intended for my fisherman's eyes, understands the coded language of love and regret in many of the pieces. Sometimes I'd write "service articles" so my fisherman could have useful marine information, I explained. Sometimes I'd write humour pieces and hope he found them funny. God I missed laughing with him. Sometimes I'd see something that made me think of him so sharply, I could pass out from longing. So I'd write about it, to ease the feelings.

I was in it this far, so I carried on: Almost all of my personal essays are coded for someone, I said, whether or not they're still in my life. For those who aren't, it's a way of saying the things you didn't have the opportunity or guts to say to them when you were together. Like a second chance to get it right, even if they never read the essay – which of course I would never know anyway. But I like to imagine they do read the essays and maybe feel a bit of regret and longing themselves. Regardless, I've

said what I needed to say, to move on with my life, inch by inch. Don knows *all* this now – and he still likes me, doesn't think I am daft. In fact, as I said a moment ago, he thinks I am…*quite all right*, really.

(– *one, two, three, four* –)

"When I saw you walking along Broadway Street to the café, that first time we met," he said, the last time we spoke, "I couldn't believe my eyes. I'd been told that *Trek Magazine* was sending one of its best writers to interview me, that she was also a commercial fisheries reporter. I figured you'd be a Viking lady, four axe handles across the backside and biceps bulging. And there you were a pretty blonde woman in a short shirt and high heels. And you know how much fun we had talking that day." He started laughing, obviously having fun on this day, too. "I told my wife, when I got home to Cape Breton from the trip, 'I will never be unfaithful to you, but if I were going to be, it might have been last weekend in Vancouver.'"

Flattered but appalled, I asked: What did Lulu say?

"Oh she laughed," he said. "She thought it was very funny."

Are you sure? I asked. Seems an unusual response. One could even say evolved. *Quite beyond my cavewoman ways,* I thought to myself.

"Yes," chuckled Don. "She was evolved in that way – not jealous or possessive. But she also knew she had nothing to worry about, ever. I was a very happy man." His voice stayed steady throughout this conversation. I even heard him smiling. Sometimes happy memories are just – happy. And sometimes the sad ones can pull us back to happy, as they pass on by. I know just which essays to send him next.

I don't want to be hurt again. He needs to know that.

Jocelyn and the Merry-Go-Round-Horse, Vancouver, BC, 1992.

"You'll like this one," says my six-year-old niece confidently. She hands me a thin volume from the stack of books on the wicker table near to us. I rifle the pages, immediately drawn to the brilliant-hued illustrations. Yes, this one suits us both: flying horses, a beckoning universe and a little girl who creates magic. Jocelyn and I snuggle up at one end of the deep-cushioned living-room couch and begin to read.

"Once upon a time..." I read slowly, enjoying the warmth of my sister's house and the patter of rain on the windows behind us. Heads bent, bodies close, Jocelyn and I soar into midnight skies with Melanie and the merry-go-round horse. Our hands grasp the wind-tangled mane, our eyes shine with the reflection of countless stars. If we wanted, we could reach out and touch the moon and its edges would be as soft as a cotton quilt. Sky-travellers, safe on the back of a kind and happy creature who has traded wood and circles for the love of adventure in a child's smile. I smile, too, and think about Rory, the horse that I ride once a week, down along the banks of the Fraser River.

Rory had been standing in the rain for an hour when I went by the barn to see him today. His heavy winter coat was streaked with wetness and the hair on his neck and shoulders was curled and matted. I called to him and watched him consider the muddy path from his end of the paddock to where I stood, apple in hand. I rocked the apple in my palm. Rory whickered, swished his tail and ambled over. This horse is so big that I cannot touch the top of his back unless I stand on tiptoe; I can only touch his ears when he drops his head and submits to gentle pulls on their tear-drop shapes. There are days when I wish I could strike down the fences that border his life, set him free from the schedules of humans, but if he were wild, the small gift of an apple would not draw him close to me.

Last year I saw wild horses for the first time, in Alberta. Above their heads, a blue bowl of prairie sky; beneath their hooves, long grass and wildflowers. A thick-necked stallion stood a short distance from the herd. His dark, alert eyes did not move from the two human shapes on the edge of his world. One small move from us produced three small moves from the herd.

It was summer; the horses were fat and their coats shone from a rich diet of barley and clover. In winter, my friend said, when the snow piles high on the plains, you can count every rib on the horses' sides. That's when the native people, on whose land these horses graze, bring in bales of hay to keep them from starving. Some die anyway. But by the time the spring chinooks blow in, warm and constant, many foals are nestled close to the mares' sides. When it rains, or when the wind blows strong enough to buckle thin legs, the foals are nudged together and encircled by the bodies of the adult horses. Windsong blends with the howl of coyotes in the surrounding hills.

“Soon it would be morning. Melanie and the merry-go-round horse began the long journey down from the heavens. In another moment the sun would rise and Melanie would be back in her bed, about to begin a new day...” As we near the end of the story, I am aware of Jocelyn's slow, deep breathing and the heaviness of her head against my shoulder. She is not asleep – but very close. I pitch my voice low and read the last paragraph.

“But the merry-go-round horse could not return to the circle of horses at the carnival. He was no longer a wooden beast without movement, without feelings; he could not go back to his life before the magic. Melanie slipped off his back and ran across the ground to her house. She did not look or wave goodbye. She left the merry-go-round horse alone in the field, the steady rain mixing with his tears.”

No. I must have missed something. There must be another page. Jocelyn is sitting up now and looking at me, hazel eyes full of concern. She knows the story well; she is not surprised by the ending. But she has heard my voice falter and senses that I have stopped breathing to prevent the tears from

falling. She expects her aunt to say something adult and soothing, to pull back from the sodden field where a wingless pony stands alone.

“S'okay Joss, I just thought...” That the merry-go-round horse would be cherished. That no one with the cloak of magic on their shoulders could reject the gift of loyalty. That love didn't have a time limit or disappear when the dagger in Orion's belt faded. That trust meant the exchange of care and protection. That a coyote's howl could not break the ranks of unity.

“...that the story would have a different ending.”

Jocelyn hugs me fiercely. “Mommy cried too, when she read it. Don't be sad. It's all right.”

And in a moment, with Jocelyn's soft arms around my neck, it is all right. Tonight I am the magic horse, carrying Jocelyn into her cosy bedroom, where the nightlight glows and the shelves are crowded with books and toys.

I tuck her under the pastel-colored quilt, kiss her and ask the question repeated every week since she was able to talk: “And how long shall I keep you?”

We chime the answer: “*For a million, trillion years – beyond forever*.”

It is to this place I will take the merry-go-round horse. I will greet him with pockets full of fruit, and trace the star on his forehead with loving hands.

For F.V. Fan Isle and Her Skipper.

Sea Songs and Moonlight on the Water – Pender Harbour, BC, 1993

"We have a wonderful view," says the restaurant owner, crossing the room to open the curtains on the western-facing wall. "You can see right to the end of the bay and beyond. To the ocean. I think you'll like it."

Jo-Ann and I follow, menus in hand.

At five o'clock in the afternoon, it's too early for dinner but not too early to consider whether or not to eat here later. The view may clinch the deal.

It's taken us a year to get here. Not to the restaurant, but to a place where three days belong to two old friends with a need for sea songs and moonlight on the water.

I forget how many times we've had to cancel this trip- don't want to think about it, either. We decided, when we left Vancouver yesterday, that all mention of work and finances was forbidden. What we want, in this place of forests and tides, is the time to slow our thoughts, and share them as we choose.

In the long sweep of harbour behind the curtains I see only one thing. For a few accelerated heartbeats my eyesight becomes impossibly keen. Hundreds of feet away from the troller, my vision records every detail of her classic West Coast style. Poles high, cabin low, the name painted sharp blue on a white stern.

"Fan Isle." The words are raven sounds, raw and uneven. They fly from my mouth, flutter against the glass pane. I turn to Jo-Ann, repeat the words, point out the window. "Don't you see her?"

Jo-Ann says something – I just can't hear her. But I can hear the tone of understanding and that's

all that matters. She knows I'm going to bolt, that I must get away from these four walls, out and down to the wharf. Quickly, before the boat casts off and disappears into autumn sky and darkening waters.

The sun not quite set and the air already a chill wrap around neck, face and hands. Jogging down the steep paved road to the water I hear the steady smack of Jo-Ann's rubber-soled footsteps behind me.

A moment more and we'll be....

The cabin door is closed, the decks bare. Rubber bumpers squeak against the wooden lip of the dock. No lights, or music or crackle from a VHF radio. Sitting high in the water, too: an empty hold, cleaned of fish and ice. Season's over.

I prepare myself for the worst – and it's not necessary: the vessel looks as good from close up as she did from far away. Tidy, clean and well-maintained. Decks could use an oiling but other than that, not bad. No, excellent.

I loved her best. Never hit really rough weather with her and wouldn't have worried if I had. Comfortable, a good sea boat, with that indefinable quality the fishermen call “fishy,” as though the catch came aboard of its own volition, preferred the frigid confines of her belly to the wider toss of current and wave. When the boat sold, I couldn't transfer my allegiance to the bigger, more expensive vessel that took her place – a stubborn gift a loyalty, in return for the gift of safety she had provided.

“Of all the boats in the fleet to see...up here in the middle of nowhere. She looks so good.” I swipe at my cheeks with the back of my wrist, shake my hair into my face. “It's okay, we can go now.”

Feather graze of hand touches my arm. “Take as long as you want,” Jo-Ann says, “we're in no rush.”

By the time we leave, every scupper space and davit curve is memorized again.

Later, when hunger comes, the hillside restaurant seems too high up from the bay. Instead we choose the waterside pub, which faces the harbour for pleasure vessels. Sleek, high-masted yachts in front of us as we sip cold chablis and eat hot prawns and scallops, lemon squeezed over them.

The dozen or so lights on the float fingers come alight. Round, blue-tinged orbs, larger than the scattering of star shining high above them. Larger and brighter still, the harvest moon, its valleys and craters etched dark on a golden surface. “Almost perfect,” I say.

“Only one thing missing,” says Jo-Ann.

“Ready to go?”

Four layers of clothing on now, making our way back down the tar-split road beside the commercial wharf. My guitar case is heavy, bumps my right leg, Jo-Ann's left leg, as we search for a place to align our shapes with the night shadows.

“Has to look west,” I say. To watch the coppered ebb tide flowing.

“Has to be just right,” says Jo-Ann. To enfold the rippling notes of music.

We reach the end of the road, circle back. Got to be here somewhere. A blue heron rises from the roof of a tool shed set midway on the float. It faces west, is tall enough to mute sound from the houses behind us. Bracing our backs against its frame we look directly across at my “fishy” friend.

“*Blue Moon* first?” I ask. Jo-Ann nods. My hands are stiff. I shake them, stir up the circulation, then press the tips to the strings. Can't strum with a pick, have to use my thumb – soft, keep it soft. For a gathering of three, the sea songs carry gently on the tide.

CHAPTER 8: LEAP OF FAITH

12 January 2011, Halifax, NS, 10:00 a.m.

I've always cherished Don's unflappability. He may get owly now and again, to use an east coast expression for being irritable, but unlike me, he doesn't go from zero to panic in a couple of heartbeats. Uncertain childhoods can do that to you. I don't know if I've seen Don actually panicked – a very good thing to say about a skipper and a husband. He also isn't given to moral indignation or lofty righteousness. If he were, I don't think we could have joined our lives. Like my Dad once said, Don pretty much thinks people do the best they can, with the self-awareness and wisdom they have at any particular time. If I didn't believe that too, I would never have achieved any self-forgiveness. It took me a long time to understand that self-forgiveness isn't a luxury, it's a necessity. Without it, you are a self-pitying, self-absorbed shell.

Don has never once thrown it in my face that I left a fiancé only weeks before we were to be married. Nor has he judged the reasons I did this. I left to be with another man, a Misguided Angel. That relationship almost obliterated my understanding of the twin birthrights of independent joy and self-respect. But I was going to Make It Right, Make It Work, however maimed I became in the process. If not, how could I live with the pain of leaving my fisherman? His sins, in retrospect, were venal not mortal – but his belligerently resistant ways were so terribly hard for me to understand and tolerate. Ten years of no's will wear down any woman, no matter how patient and optimistic. When the reluctant yes came, it was, as my mother intuited immediately, "Too little too late." After I left him, of course, his angel-halo shone brighter with each passing year. In the end, I didn't know who he was, angel or regular man. I still don't know.

After nine years together, there are layers and layers of memories. Of these, three remain sharp: his big smile as he ran down the beach to meet me for the first time and to carry my heavy guitar case; the calloused, strong hands that killed fish with an exquisite economy; a skin that smelled faintly like fruit, set just beyond reach. I have not the smallest notion how he remembers me.

As far as I know, my fisherman never knew why I left. Like any cheating spouse, I didn't want him to know I'd cheated and then chosen someone else over him. I thought keeping quiet was the most honourable thing to do. I desperately didn't want to hurt or shame him for a single minute, let alone a lifetime. My own shame was crippling, made eating almost impossible for at least five years. For all I know, it was more painful for him for the break-up to be so inexplicable. God knows he lost weight after I left too.

I never loved him more than the day I left him. The love was so big it was like tripping up a mountain, with a huge backpack on, never getting near the top. How did a Misguided Angel compete with that? I don't know. The physical bond was intense, yes. But the connection went far beyond physicality on some days. I'd never blurred psyches with someone like that, before or since. It was intoxicating and addicting. It was also deeply negative and harmful. Above all the Misguided Angel said *Believe*, as the fisherman never had, and *I believed*, as I never had.

My worst sin of this lifetime was refusing to share a meal with my fisherman the last time I came to visit him in our apartment, which I had left months before. He offered me a supper of chicken stew. He'd cooked it a *a la* fisherman, in a pressure cooker. It smelled rich and wonderful. Every cell in my body told me that I wasn't fit to sit down with him and break bread. Every cell in his body radiated the need for me to stay, to do just that. I told him I had to go and gently pulled the apartment door closed behind me. Outside the door I doubled over holding my gut. Wicked, it was wicked to deny him that one small request. But I could not do it, could not be near all that sorrowing gentleness without

doing something savage. I don't even know what that means, really. I'd felt so diminished by him over the years, so disrespected and patronized. To realize that those feelings didn't matter, that I'd always love him, if only for those killing hands, was one of the most defeating moments of my life. *It didn't matter that I'd said no, at last. He still won.*

You always want these huge life moments to make perfect sense later on. But if life is a series of "later on's" as we age, then "perfect sense" must change over the years too. The sense I have now, imperfect though it may be, is that the courage to love is incremental, uniquely new each time it graces our lives, but built on the foundation of other, earlier loves. These can be romantic loves, familial loves or the loves we share with friends or animal companions. Frightened or not, there are moments our hearts are capable of making huge leaps of faith. Hearts need to do this, or they wither and life goes monochrome. But without the history that goes before these leaps, without the love, loss and fury of those other times, there wouldn't be the ability to leap yet again….just a little higher. Each incarnation of love will disappoint and hurt us at some point; like the scorpion, love's nature is to wound. The flip side of love is joy, though. It's a package deal.

Did I actually "lose," then, all those years ago? Or did I instead gain the chance to love again, with greater kindnesses given and taken, when I answered the phone in April, 1996, and said hello to Don?

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,

And the wisdom to know the difference.

The AA Serenity Prayer, which Dad repeated often over a lifetime, as do I, though I am not a member of AA. The prayer works for all, I believe, if you can live, not merely recite, the words.

Serenity. Courage. Wisdom. And forgiveness, of every sort. It is through this lens I do my best to look backward and live forward.

CHAPTER 9: THE PFO (PLEASE FUCK OFF) LETTER

June 1996, Vancouver, BC.

So if I can't do this – have a romantic relationship with Silver Donald Cameron – then how do we go on from here? We've been talking almost every evening for nearly two months. We've mailed one another countless essays and books. Now we're on this new thing called email and sending one another at least two messages a day electronically – not that I am very good at that process yet. Why does he have to bring sex into all this? Why do *we* have to bring sex into all this?

Because he likes you. Because you like him too. Because it's what happens when attraction and trust and enjoyment and laughter walk hand and hand into the same room. But we're not in the same room! He's in Cape Breton and I am in Vancouver. He's a widower with a hamburger heart and I am only just functioning after that last brutal round in the ring called love. I don't want to do this – and there isn't even an actual *place* to do this! Here I am, an adult "child" of 37 living with my retired school teacher mother, doing my damndest to make more money as a freelance writer. Ah gee, Mum, do you think we could borrow the house for a day or two so we can have a little privacy….joking, joking, dear God I *am* joking and dear God *no,* I can't bear these indignities – makes me all squirmy and frantic just thinking about it. A hotel room would be icy and bizarre. So that takes care of my end of the country. As for his end, I am not flying 4000 miles to a place I don't know at all, to a man I don't know, not really, just for sex. If we ever get to that point, it will damn well be on home turf for me, if it means a literal patch of west coast dirt or sand.

I have an article deadline. I just want to go to the barn and go for a hack on Kaber, my sweet-faced half-Arabian gelding. Maybe I can do that now, and work on the article this evening.

Anything to put off the inevitable.

Do I really have to write this dear and lovely man another PFO letter? What would I say this time, anyway?

June 1996, Isle Madame, Cape Breton.

Dear Marjorie

Your email was waiting for me when I logged online this morning. I could tell you I am surprised by its contents, but I am not. You've been circling around to this for some days.

"An interesting and distinguished man," you say, "with whom it has been a privilege to converse and share the stories of our lives." I would happily lose some of this loftiness for the opportunity of closer times with you. However, I respect your decision and won't ask again for us to meet face to face. If you do change your mind – *as you did once before* – I am one phone call or email away. I can be on a plane with one day's notice.

You say that, among other things, you are uneasy with my having contacted you so early after the loss of Lulu. It is important to me that you understand why I did this. From earlier comments you'd made, I knew you were single. For all I knew, that status could have changed at any time. I didn't want to hesitate and lose you – *all for the sake of some misplaced sense of bourgeois propriety*.

I think you are wrong, by the way, if such a word can be politely used to describe this final change of course you've decided on. I think we could have an astonishing time together as lovers and even, possibly, an astonishing life together. We are both people of the water; I can imagine so easily the different seas we could sail over, on my sailboat, Silversark. We could even sail to the Bahamas, as I told you I've always wanted to do. You always told me you envisioned more adventures in an already adventurous life. You also said you were tired of looking for love, wanted, instead, for someone to "drop from the sky."

Marjorie, I am that which dropped from the sky.

We will meet in person again sometime, I am sure. It won't be as I had envisioned the meeting,

but I'll look forward to it all the same. I've enjoyed every moment of our talks and shared writings these past weeks. You are a lovely, blithe spirit and gifted writer. Keep on writing and keep on loving. You will be cherished again.

With respect and affection,

Don

June 1996, Vancouver, BC

Dear Don

You have respectfully done exactly what I asked you to do – gently back off – so why do I feel *utterly bereft*? I knew I depended on the regularity and warmth of our correspondence, but I really didn't understand how much. My days are quiet and cool again, not lit with the liveliness and warmth of your messages and phone calls. Even going to the barn to be with Kaber doesn't make me as quite happy as it did even a week ago, when I could look forward to telling you all about my river-side rambles. I have so much to tell you about Kaber-boy shenanigans this week!

There was also another essay I wanted to share with you, about another horse I used to ride, an Appaloosa named Boo. I've been staring at the fax machine for an hour, wishing I could send it to you. But what have I gone and done? I've said no phone calls and no writing exchanges for a bit, so we can reclaim our regular lives again.

Why did I say this? What is so special about our regular, solitary lives? No one makes me laugh like you do – except maybe my siblings and you haven't met them yet! You should meet my older brother and sister. They would enjoy you! So would my little sisters, my niece. You should meet all my family. I should meet yours. They sound like wonderful, warm people. We should eat sockeye salmon together, not just talk about it. I want you to come to my barn and see Kaber. I want to walk those river-side trails with you. Not so long from now, the blackberry bushes along the trails will be heavy with fruit. We can pick a bucket and eat them, sitting on big rocks at the river's edge, watching the tugs and barges go by.

Do you think we could do some of these things? And oh my God you haven't even met Leo yet. You haven't spent time with a whippet, a true and wondrous whippet – you poor man! You do not know

– I mean you truly do not know, because it must be experienced – what joy a whippet creates, just by breathing.

Maybe we could talk and write just a little bit more…before we got together? Do you think that would be all right?

Misplaced sense of bourgeois propriety – a bit brutal, perhaps, but I understand.

I can't stand it. I am sending you the essay on Boo. He was cared for by two sisters – just like Karin and I cared for Coqeyn. They never lost their way, though. That was important for me to see – can you understand? I guess I still believe in magic – it's my fatal flaw. But I think you do, too. Who wants a life with no shivers and shimmers?

Maybe we could we talk later in the day?

With affection,

Marjorie

CHAPTER 10: A MATTER OF TRUST

Guarding the Skyline, Vancouver, BC, 1992.

A friend of mine moved to the country two weeks ago. For the past year, he and I have spent nearly every Sunday afternoon together. We have shared wild weather and wilder moods and I will miss his good company. But "Boo" the Appaloosa has something now which I never knew he needed, never guessed he longed for, never imagined was as necessary to his health as clean water and a warm bran mash: an unobscured skyline.

Boo and I are probably the same age. I am 32 and he has been 25 for some years now. I think of him as a seasoned warrior, a kind-hearted "packer" who never caused me a moment of alarm or discomfort in the entire year I rode him. I trusted him, completely, the way I used to trust my Arab/Welsh pony, Coqeyn, who I owned when I was a teenager. When I started leasing Boo, owned by two sisters, Tash and Letsa, I told myself not to get too attached. I am old enough to know how wrenching final goodbyes to animals can be. And you never know when those goodbyes will come along. I would love my roany, spotted Boo so much, and no more.

We would walk, he and I, for many hours on our Sunday rendezvous. Usually we went up into the UBC Endowment Lands; occasionally, when the weather was warm, as far down as Foreshore Beach, across the harbour from downtown Vancouver.

Boo loved going to the beach. His energy and endurance were amazing. He'd fly over logs as though he were on a hunt and his flat-out gallop over the firm sands used to make me feel as though we were co-pilots, breaking the sound barrier. He could go forever, it seemed; it was me, legs shaking and face streaked with wind-tears and ocean spray, who would rein him back to a slower gait. No horse I ever knew galloped as big and bold as Boo did. His strides demolished the distances.

Boo arrived at his new home on a cold November afternoon. Perhaps he thought he was being trucked to a show - in early years, he had showed Open Jumper and Prix St. Georges-level dressage – or perhaps he knew, with each bumpy mile from Southlands to Langley, that his life was mysteriously changing. Whatever he sensed, he stepped down from the big commercial truck in his usual calm way. Looking quietly around him, he saw a house, a barn and a four-acre field framed on three sides by other fields.

At first it didn't seem so strange or out of the ordinary to him. He and the three other horses he'd trucked out with did all the regular things horses do when they realize they have lots of room to move out: gallop, buck, bicker and graze. After a half-hour or so they settled down to concentrate on the grass. All except Boo, that is. Boo took himself to the farthest corner of the field, planted his hooves perfectly square and stood motionless. He fixed his eyes on the western horizon and didn't move – for two hours. Once in a long while, his head would turn; for five or ten minutes he would contemplate the southern horizon, then back to the west. He stood giraffe-tall, ears pricked. Every muscle in his body guarded the beauty of a winter skyline.

Boo did not want to come into the barn at feeding time. The sky glowed orange and mauve, night had sharpened the air – and still he hadn't moved. It was as though he'd kept the landscape from moving through the force of will held in his steady gaze. Maybe he thought that if he moved, the expanse of ground and sky would shrink, and he'd be back at Southlands, surrounded by paddocks, houses and cars. Fifteen years of living on "The Flats." A decade and a half without a 360-degree view of the world.

I led him into the barn in near-darkness. The electricity in the barn had not been connected yet – there were no lights – and so he hesitated at the door of his stall, unable to see if the ground was level. One hoof went out tentatively. I bumped my shoulder against his: "S'okay, Boo, in you go."

Maybe it was the way he trusted me when I asked him to step into his new stall, even though his cataracts make it impossible for him to see much anymore. Maybe it was a sudden memory of him rounding the corner of a forest path, seeing a fallen Douglas fir ahead and with one word from me, transforming into an airborne locomotive. Maybe it was the sound of his dull old teeth working so hard on his grain. Or maybe it was the alert expression on his face as he turned away from his food and watched me walk out of the barn to my car. All I knew was that I couldn't see either. *I said I'd love you this much and no more.*

"Come out whenever you want," said Letsa warmly.

"Ride as often as you want," said a smiling Tash. "His eyesight's fine in the day."

Two kind and close sisters, with a love of animals that bound them closer yet.

I nodded, though I wasn't sure what I actually said. With luck, I said thank you. I'll say it again, just in case: Thank you. Someone just said "See you soon," so I'll say that too. Great new place, I added, congratulations on your new home. The horses will be so happy here – all that glorious, wide-open space.

As I drove away, the image in my mind of a tall, shaggy Appaloosa guarding the skyline stayed with me. *That sky won't go anywhere. Trust me*. The way I trusted you.

July 1996, Vancouver, BC

I am so confused, and so wary of trusting. I don't think I can do this. Maybe being alone is easier.

CHAPTER 11: THE RENDEZVOUS

August 1996, Vancouver, BC.

What else could I do? He said he was going to drive out to the coast in a Winnebago, put up a sign on our front lawn that read: "Marjorie won't go out with me; Marjorie is being mean," and leave it there for all the neighbours in the townhouse complex to read, day after endless day – until I did go out with him. It would be easy to say he was kidding – but I really don't think he was. If I've learned anything since that first phone call back in April, it's that Silver Donald Cameron is a cheerful but cussedly stubborn man – who will not, absolutely will not take no for an answer.

And I am glad! This is it, no more shilly-shallying around. After six months of talking, letters, sharing our writings and over 800 emails, Silver Donald Cameron and Marjorie Simmins are going on a face-to-face date! He'll be here in a couple of days – so much to do first! We are going to stay down at his family's cottage in Point Roberts, Washington. Point Roberts, can you imagine! That's where my friends and I went all the time I was a teenager, to dance at The Breakers nightclub. The music was fantastic, live bands and big names from all over the U.S. Nowdays, I go to The Reef tavern with my girlfriends to play pool on Sunday afternoons. I wonder if Don plays pool? I hope so.

I love rustic and weird Point Roberts. It's like a fingertip of the United States, surrounded entirely by Canada. When they drew the 49th parallel, they just lopped off the very tip of The Point and declared it was American land. The school kids have to be bussed back through Canada and then back into the States again, at the Peace Arch border crossing, just to go to school each day. More than anything, The Point is Canadian summer-cottage country. It should be a part of Canada, for heaven's sake. Instead it's stuck off by itself, with Canada to its north and Washington State proper across the Salish Sea to the south. Americans and Canadians call Point Roberts "Dog-Patch USA." It's one of the

poorest parts of America, with almost everyone on assistance during the winter and not enough jobs to go around even in the summer. Well of course, it's in complete isolation from the rest of the country. There are some hockey-player mansions now, over by the yacht club, but in general, people live modestly. And no industry, of any sort, though there used to be fish canneries there. That's why it's so peaceful to drive to on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

Anyway, turns out Don's parents bought a place down there in the 40s. Don's youngest brother Ken owns the cottage now. What a perfect place for a first visit. Quiet, green, away from prying eyes and eager ears. All those pretty paths through the woods and the endless tidal flats at Boundary Bay for Leo to run on –

Oh dear. How do I explain that the dog sleeps with me every night? Does he really like dogs – or did he just say that to make polite noises? I am not going anywhere without Leo. No way. If things go strange for any reason, me and my mutt will just hop in my trusty Celica and drive away –

(– o*ne, two, three; three, two, one –)*

I'm not scared – I'm just very nervous and keyed up. I wish both families didn't know every detail of this story! But there's no way to hide it after all this time. My oldest sister Zoe actually sent Don an email saying that the whole Simmins family was in favour of a rendezvous between Don and me. All the grown-ups, anyway. I haven't told my little sisters and my niece much in the way of detail; that can come later, if at all. Heaven knows how this is all going to pan out.

(– *five, six, seven; seven, six, five* –)

August 1996, 9:30 a.m. The Cameron Family Cottage, Point Roberts, Washington State

I brought lots of groceries, of course; that's who I am, someone who likes to cook for other people. My whole family is like that, except poor Mum, who got really tired cooking for all of us for so many years. My oldest sister pitched in for a while and then my brother Geoffrey and I did a fair bit of the cooking through our high school years. Mum loved that! She loves it now, that I do all the cooking for us at home. Least I can do, for the love and sanctuary she's given me.

Mum, I am scared. I said I wasn't but I am. I don't know what to do next – this is all so intimate and overwhelming –

Don enjoyed his breakfast – which wasn't fancy, only bacon and eggs and toast, with good thick-cut marmalade and a bowl of local raspberries. He's started right in on the dishes, which is nice. That's the rule in our family: whoever cooks doesn't have to clean up. So I am glad he's good with that. I was delighted to see him come off the plane with live lobsters in hand. We cooked them last night, for our first evening together here at the cottage. I had no clue how to actually eat a whole lobster; I've done this maybe once in my life and that was years ago. Don found some nutcrackers and sharp skinny knives and one way or another, watching how he did it, I managed to get the meat out of the shell. It was delicious. *Hope you enjoy your first taste of the Maritimes*, he smiled, and we toasted another glass of wine.

All right, I drank too much wine and tequila – Dutch courage and all that – and that's partly why I feel so off-kilter. But that's only part of it. So much time being theoretical lovers…and now we are real lovers. Do I look different? I feel different. Really different. Good different. Like spending the night in a curling tropical wave; everything turquoise and rushing and warm all around us. We should have stayed in the wave, not come out to this morning-cold kitchen with polite queries for salt and pepper, please, and would you like more coffee?

(– eleven, twelve, thirteen; fourteen, fifteen, sixteen –)

"I am feeling a bit funny…" I say to Don.

"Really?" says Don. "Tell me about it." He has just dried his hands on a tea towel and has retrieved his half-full coffee cup from the counter. He settles himself in the white wicker chair by the French doors, which look out to the front yard. He is dressed in summer cottons, dappled by sunlight. I like looking at him.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I don't want to spoil things. I just feel very vulnerable and on edge."

Don takes a sip of his coffee. "What can we do about that?"

What can *we* do about that? Is that what he said – *we*? What a novel concept. I don't know what to say. Oh God, you silly girl, don't start crying.

I clear my throat. "Uh, well, I guess I just have one way of doing these things. When I feel funny I like to be outside…in the sun…with Leo – preferably by the water. Could we do that?" My heart is pounding. If he doesn't want to do this, I'll have to go anyway –

He is laughing! Why?

"That dog is hilarious! He was right under the covers on your side of the bed last night. Is that where he usually sleeps?"

I nod, rapidly.

Don looks around the kitchen. "He's had his breakfast but he's not – is that where he is now?"

I nod again.

"He'd stay there all day, wouldn't he?"

“He’s a whippet,” I say, willing him to understand a breed he knows nothing about, “a sighthound. Two speeds, stop and go.” We are both laughing now.

“All right,” says Don, “then let’s see him go.” He is picking up his camera from the counter by the telephone. “Boundary Bay it is, State-side.”

My heart is hurting with happiness. It hurts just a bit more when I glance outside and see a sun-bright summer morning against an aqua sky. “Watch this,” I say. “Leeeee-oh! Let’s go for a walk!”

Ker-thump. Four tidy whippet paws land together on the floor in the bedroom. *Whappety-whap*. Two ears are shaken vigorously. *Clickety-clickety-clickety*. Many claw tips, which should have been clipped last week, or even the week before, are rapidly tapping against the linoleum floors. We turn to see a tan and white hound come trotting into the kitchen. His eyes are the darkest of browns, backlit by humour and life-joy. He looks like a small deer. He stretches long and low, his way of “putting on his hat” to go outside. The movements are also similar to an athlete warming up.

I feel a shiver of excitement. Don has never seen a whippet run. Pound for pound, whippets are the fastest animal on earth. This will be just as fun for me to watch. Even though I’ve seen Leo run flat-out hundreds of times, I’ll see it again today for the first time, through Don’s eyes. With luck it will be low-tide at the beach. Nothing Leo loves more than caroming through tidals pools, water pluming out on either side of him. We’ll take a tennis racket to smack a ball for Leo to retrieve. That will really get him flying. I can’t wait to see Don’s reaction to all that speed, grace and beauty.

I pocket my car keys and perch my sunglasses on my head. Don and Leo go out the door. Pausing to find my purse, I watch them saunter companionably towards my Toyota Celica. A man and a hound, walking at the same easy pace, breathing the same soft summer air. I have the strangest feeling that I am watching my forever world in a single, sunlit moment.

CHAPTER 12: FOREVER WORLDS

The Days of Three Forever. Hampton, Virginia, April 2006.

SDC:

Seven in the morning, and I cradle 38 pounds of whippet in my left arm as I carefully climb from the boat to the dock. I have lifted Leo on and off the boat more than 1200 times since he and Marjorie and I sailed from Cape Breton in July, 2004. We have sailed 4500 miles together.

He has had a terrible night, his breath trembling, his heartbeat chaotic, his frail body unable to lie in comfort. I carry him a few steps, and he gives a little twist. Put me down, he is saying, I want to walk. I carefully set him on his feet, and he trots jauntily up the wharf - ears up, head high, a dog on a mission.

He jumps down the two wooden steps to the grass, does his business, and then stands very still, eyes narrowed, sniffing the air, orienting himself in the new day. Ah, yes. Bird-song, and the smell of fish. I'm in Hampton, Virginia. I have friends in these shoreside townhouses. Fine.

He turns back toward the dock. At the steps, he halts. Help me, he is saying, I can't manage this. He is two months short of his fifteenth birthday, and he has arthritis, congestive heart disease, fatty tumours, cataracts and hearing loss. He is not the light-hearted, speeding bullet of a dog that he was when I met him, a decade ago.

I lift him, and carry him down the dock to the boat. And this time he doesn't object.

MLS:

The small house in Fort Langley, BC had a river of baby whippets flowing through it. There were three, four, no, five of them falling off couches and tumbling together on the carpeted floors. There were so many plump puppy limbs tangled together, I couldn't tell one animal from another.

“Jocelyn,” I whispered to my five-year-old niece, who stood in quivering delight by my side, “how will we ever choose the right one?” It was 1991, I was 32 years old, and had never had my very own dog. My heart thudded. This was a *forever choice*.

Thump, kersmack, thump. It sounded as though someone had vigorously rolled a five-pound bag of potatoes down the staircase that led to the living room. Instead we turned to see a sixth puppy careening around a corner toward us. His body, like the others, was short-backed and ended in a wind-milling tail. Unlike the others, this one had a pronounced black mask on his white face. He hurled his tan and white body onto the puppy pile of his siblings.

“That's Bandit,” laughed the woman into whose home we had come. She was a full-time equestrian judge and a part-time breeder of dogs. “Just his kennel name, but I couldn't call him anything else with a mask like that, could I?”

Perhaps not, but I could. I wanted my dog to live up to his name, not settle down to it. I didn't want a thieving dog, no matter how cute the name. I wanted a dog who would be a co-adventurer, with a heart as big and brave as a –

– lion. Leonine. *Leo*. That's what I'd call him.

Bandit streaked by us. Jocelyn and I locked eyes. *Yes*.

From that day on, there was never any reason for me to be apart from Leo. Two weeks earlier, I'd quit a salaried job and begun working at home as a freelance writer. When I worked at my computer,

Leo snoozed on a near-by couch. When I drove hither and yon to do interviews or take photos, Leo came with me, and waited in the car.

When the work day was done, we'd hightail it to the many paths and parks alongside the Fraser River, or to the lowlands of Vancouver's Southlands, where I rode horses and Leo revelled in being a barn-hound. On weekends we'd hike the North Shore mountain trails or drive to Whistler Mountain. I'd pack a picnic for us – sandwiches for me, canned food for him – and we'd find a pretty water-side spot to have our lunch along the way.

His mask had faded. But his mercury-glinting eyes were still thickly outlined with black, like a kohl-eyed Egyptian of long ago. *Friends share*, said those expressive eyes. I wasn't very good at being strict.

"All right, all right. Egg salad or chicken?"

Once I took him bushwacking near Pender Harbour, north of Vancouver. No trail, only a thick lattice-work of sword-ferns and the high star-bursts of uprooted dead-fall. Leo threw himself at these immense, felled Douglas firs. If not for their sodden, crumbling sides, he would have scrambled up and jumped clear. He submitted to my help – a gut-wrenching heave over the top – though not before I could prevent numerous, ill-fated leaps of his own. When the day was over, I cried to see his bloodied belly.

Leo thought the steaks that night were just fine.

And so we worked, lived and played in Richmond, BC, a contented duo surrounded by family and friends. There was no reason to change *anything*, unless the change suited us both very well.

"A whippet?" asked a wonderful man I'd just begun corresponding and talking with in 1996. "I've never seen a whippet. What are they like?"

Where did I start? And how to say, love me, love my....

“They're like a greyhound, except smaller,” I answered inadequately. “They're so....” Long pause.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Well, they're so whole-hearted about everything. Everything you can do, is just more fun with a whippet. They love the world so much, they make you love it more, too.” I closed my eyes and saw Leo as I'd seen him earlier that day, on the beach: “When you see him run, your heart hurts. It's that beautiful.”

I didn't tell him, then, how soft a whippet's ears are – like a chamois cloth – and how sadness can be banished by holding a whippet close. These discoveries came to him later.

When Don and I married in 1998, Leo had spring flowers interwoven in his collar. He and many other dogs belonging to friends thronged into the church's courtyard after the wedding. Leo found us for a brief, reassuring moment, then whirled away back in the crowd.

The days of three forever had begun.

SDC:

Nine in the morning, and two gentle, kind women are aboard the boat - a veterinarian and her assistant, recommended by friends. For the first time ever, Leo did not jump out of the berth to greet his visitors. He is utterly spent, too weary to stand. The vet confirms what we already knew. His vital signs are very feeble.

But he comes sharply alert when Marjorie produces four strips of bacon. We take turns breaking them up and feeding them to him - a feast of bacon, the most bacon he has ever seen. He wolfs it down eagerly.

I pick him up and stretch him out on a towel on the galley table. He raises his head in momentary consternation, but lies down when we ask him to. I hold his head, gazing into his eyes, telling him how he is loved. Marjorie wraps her arms around his body, muttering Thank you, Thank you, over and over. The vet lifts his foreleg and slips a needle into a vein.

Nothing happens. His eyes don't flicker, his body doesn't twitch. He just lies there, with his eyes half-open. The vet slips a hand under his leg.

"*He's gone," she says. The two women leave us with the mortal remains of our gallant companion. The days of weeping begin.*

Nine-thirty in the morning. I lift Leo from the table. The vet positions his limp neck across my shoulder. His head hangs down my back. He does not feel like Leo at all. Blinded by tears, I carry him up the wharf for the second time this morning.

And for the very last time, ever.

Anything but blue. September, 1996, Vancouver, BC

(I taught myself to play this on my 12-string guitar. And was thrilled when Don played it for me on the piano.)

Blue Moon

By Lorenz Hart & Richard Rodgers

Introduction chords: C-Am-F-G-C-Am-F-G

C Am F G C Am F

Blue moon, you saw me standin' alone

G C Am F

Without a dream in my heart,

G C Am F G

without a love of my own

C Am F G C Am F

Blue moon, you knew just what I was there for

G C Am F

You heard me sayin' a prayer for

G C Am F G

Someone I really could care for

F (hold) G (hold) C(hold)

And then there suddenly appeared before me

F (hold) G (hold) C (hold)

The only one my arms will hold

G (hold) F (hold) C (hold)

I heard somebody whisper "please adore me"

G (hold) A (hold) D (hold)

And when I looked, the moon had turned to gold

Blue moon, now I'm no longer alone

Without a dream in my heart

Without a love of my own

CHAPTER 13: MY FIRST TRIP TO THE MARITIMES

D'Escousse, Cape Breton, October, 1996.

"I wouldn't be you for all the rice in China!" laughs one of Don's friends, a woman for whom the word petite is too bulky to be of any use as a descriptor. Four-foot-eleven-inch, 100-pound Denise Saulnier is seated at the kitchen table in Don's Cape Breton home, along with her husband Greg and a lot of other people whose names I can't remember. The statement is directed at me – and she isn't the only person at the party to find it amusing. Don was just out of ear-shot for it and carries on his separate conversation with one of Lulu's brothers – of which there are an astonishing seven in existence, along with two sisters. Three brothers are in attendance this evening.

I have already been vetted out by Mama Terrio, a woman even tinier than Denise. I wasn't in the village more than a few hours before "Mimi" came by to ask me to accompany her on a walk. It wasn't a query; more of a polite command, with only one answer expected. I stopped my supper preparations, grabbed my coat and did my best to keep up to Mimi's rapid-fire walk as we charged up the hill out of the centre of the village of D'Escousse, where Don has lived since 1971. Mimi dictated the pace of the walk and then direction of the conversation, when we came to be seated on a bench at the top of the hill. She asked me a few questions about what I did for a living, and how Don and I had met.

Niceties aside, she got to the literal heart of the matter. Did I understand that this "noble" man was exhausted and heart-broken? Subtext: Were my intentions honourable? Did I know how hard a battle Lulu had fought against the breast cancer, and how no one really expected to lose her, least of all Don? Subtext: He's still heart-broken, not ready for love. Had I met Lulu's son Mark Patrick yet – the son Don had adopted when they married 17 years ago? Subtext: Did I understand how hard it was for him, to have lost his adoring mother and for his father to be seeing someone new, only six months later?

I said yes many times. Yes, Mrs. Terrio, I do know and understand these things to the best of my ability, and according to the short time I've known him. Mimi did not seem completely reassured, but she did seem relieved. She'd "done her part," as a British-born war-bride would, no hesitating or beating around the bush. With Lulu gone, her mother was understandably protective of her son-in-law and grandson. Strange women, who dropped out of strange western skies onto Terrio territory, needed to be told their presence was….noted.

Lulu – Mary Louise Terrio-Cameron, 46 years old when she died. Ten years older than me. I can't count how many times I've heard her name spoken this visit, or how many stories about her people have told me, Don most of all. It is as though they and he are compelled to tell me, want to see me nod with great animation, entreat them to tell *just one more*. All of this gives them another chance to breathe her name, to bring to auditory life one who can't be summoned to sight. They love the stories, loved the woman, want to share details of that life and love. It's overwhelming, exhausting – and understandable. There are days I actually feel guilty she died. Or guilty, rather, that I am here and she is not. Other days I just wish I could have one piece of Don that didn't belong heart and soul to Lulu. Maybe I will, maybe I won't. Time will tell. *Lulu's shadow is long. I hope it won't darken my life.*

I wish I'd had an advocate of my own the day that Mimi took me for a walk and a talk. Ha, maybe she'll take me on, if we end up friends. No, impossible, on both counts. About as likely as being true friends with Denise Saulnier. I really like her – love her quick wit and rapid-fire mind – but she was one of Lulu's good friends. I wouldn't blame her if she never felt truly comfortable around me. Too bad. I'd love to learn more about Acadians too. Maybe she can tell me a bit about that, anyway.

Were my intentions honourable? Jesus wept, as my Dad would say.

Mimi is only one of seemingly countless people who want to protect Donny, Don, Silver Don,

Silver Donald Cameron and Mr. Cameron. The large Terrio family and their families, other friends and neighbours on Isle Madame and around Cape Breton, Maritimers at large, Atlantic Canadians at larger, other Canadians, readers of his books – so many people know about the loss of Lulu and express their sympathy and concern. This isn't even counting his own big Cameron family, spread across the country, many of whom call him Donald. I've met his friendly younger brother, Ken, but that's all. He was warm and watchful. Which is what you'd want to see a sibling be, when a newcomer edges nearer the family camp fire.

Doesn't anyone want to protect me? Not on this turf, anyway.

"I wouldn't be you for all the rice in China," says Denise again, thinking I hadn't heard. "Do you understand?" She swirls a hand out in front of her, indicating the assembly and quite possibly the larger world, for all I know.

Yes, I understand. I have to deal with all these people and more. Some I'll have to reassure about my *honourable intentions.* Isn't this a little backwards?

I can't do this. Too many judging and curious eyes. And too many Terrios. If we start in earnest, Don and I, it will be on my home ground again. There, Don only has to deal with my small family – and them, only occasionally. My friends, too, but they are excited, can't wait to meet him. I don't know when he'll meet Dad and the girls, in Ontario. Maybe on a lay-over, on one of the trips out west.

All in good time. And if it is to be.

CHAPTER 14: EARLY DAYS TOGETHER

3 February 2011, Halifax, NS

We've been so lucky, Don and I, to have lived in so many special places over the years: on the east coast, Isle Madame, Cape Breton and Halifax; on the west coast, Gibson's Landing, Point Roberts, WA, Richmond and Steveston.

We started out living together for the very first time in Gibson's Landing, BC, just north of Vancouver on the Sunshine Coast. Like Point Roberts, Gibson's Landing was another childhood haunt for Don. He loved its immense Douglas firs, long pebbled beaches and quaint, original town centre on the waterfront, near the ferry terminal to the city. I'd spent time in Sechelt, further north, and in Pender Harbour and Powell River, further north again, but had only ever passed through Gibson's, not stayed. In the spring of 1997, Don and I had four odd and lovely months there, renting the home of a speechwriter friend of mine.

Odd: Don's mourning of Lulu was intense and debilitating. Some days he'd get up mid-morning, have coffee and cereal and return to bed to sleep again. *The Whippet* – for so he was often called, with deep affection – would rise with us and then return to bed with Don. Sometimes I did the same, sometimes I had article deadlines to meet and would go to my computer. Other days I drove to Vancouver, for a day of copyediting at one of several magazines I worked for. Don had quit his position as dean at the University of Cape Breton College at the end of 1996; he, too, worked at assorted freelance jobs, but wasn't taking on much at that time. In addition to a heavy heart, Don was also recovering from a long bout with Graves' Disease. He and Lulu had been ill at the same time, which had made their lives a double nightmare.

Our days were mostly our own that spring. Don's nineteen-year-old son Mark was living in Alberta, working intermittently in the oil patch like so many other displaced "Caper" kids. In retrospect, I understand how upset Mark was with his Dad for starting a relationship with me so soon after his mother's death. Brooding, self-absorbed and angry, Mark was a typical teenager even before his mother's death and he stayed unhappy for a long time. Nonetheless, in those first few years after Lulu's death, he still needed more of his father's time than he got – without a stranger in their midst. It just didn't work out that way. I hope Mark knows how grateful his Dad was and is, for Mark's support and love in the first days and weeks after Lulu's passing. Don loved this period of intense closeness between them. Again like most young people, Mark took some years to settle down and find himself, which he has done wonderfully well now, in a secure career and married to lovely Alberta woman. Happiness breeds happiness. We all enjoy our time together now.

To me, when I first appeared on the Cape Breton scene for my first visit eight months after the loss of his mother, Mark was pleasant and open – astonishingly so, I thought, and had the wit to tell him at the time and later. He may not have wanted me in their lives, and was later unkind to his father for this, but he was never unkind to me.

All the same, that first spring living together with Don, teenage boys were not on my immediate list of preoccupations. There on the west coast I had more than enough to cope with – Don's fragile emotional and physical health; keeping steady with all my freelance jobs, most of which took a ferry ride to get to; reassuring my family and friends that all was well, despite our relative isolation and almost complete isolation from them; tending my own healing heart; and growing into a new romantic relationship, unlike any I'd had before.

Lovely: that tropical wave kept curling, tumbling us in the warmest of waters, over and over like tiny sea creatures, weightless, eyes looking up through filtered layers of lemon and aqua. We made

love constantly, ate whatever pleased us, took turns curling around a compliant, soft-coated whippet, went on daily walks in the emerald rainforest, beach-combed, played pool at the local pub, hiked the Skookumchuk Trail to the Reversing Rapids, found East Coast patriots in the tiny town of Egmont and snuggled by the woodstove in the evenings, drinking wine and talking about the brilliant and the banal, never sated in our subject range.

We also laughed – more than even we noticed.

"So tell me," asked my oldest sister Zoe, a month into my Gibson's sojourn with Don, "are you enjoying living with Don?" Zoe was ringing me from Courtenay, on Vancouver Island, where she lived with her husband Garney and daughter Jocelyn. I'd been writing regular letters to our Dad, as I always, but hadn't been as good with my siblings. She was dead curious for news.

"Zoe," I said, voice pitched low because Don was napping, "we are having so much fun. He thinks I am the funniest woman alive –"

"– because you are," she interrupted, laughing herself.

"– and we laugh our fool heads off at almost everything we say. Goofy idiots, really, but who cares? It suits us."

"So all this is working out well – I don't have to worry about you?" Geoffrey said the same thing last week. In this part of the country, there are people who worry about *me* – it's kind of nice. Nice to have older siblings, who pleasantly fuss about my welfare. I do the same with them, so it evens out. We are, understandably, a worry-prone family.

"Well," I said, "there is one thing that isn't quite right." It's actually been bothering me right now, as we've been talking and laughing. "It's my stomach – there's something quite weird going on.

My guts just ache, like too many sit-ups or someone's punched me – honestly, it hurts like hell, I can't imagine what –"

"Marjorie! I think I know what's wrong!" She was laughing in that childlike, uncontrollable way she has sometimes, a way that slays me with affection.

"Ow," I said, mid-laugh. "This is exactly what I am talking about, my guts really hur –"

"It's from laughing!" she howls. "You've actually pulled a gut from laughing." She was right – I had.

Later that day, Zoe related this conversation to her daughter Jocelyn, age 12. "Mum," said Jocelyn, "Marjorie is going to marry that man, I just know it."

CHAPTER 15: MY FIRST SUMMER IN THE MARITIMES

9 February 2011, Halifax, NS

The summer of 1997 was spectacular. Day after day of sun, warm and occasionally hot temperatures, a little rain overnight and clear skies by dawn.

"Are the Maritimes always like this?" I asked, wide-eyed, ready to believe. Some things don't change.

"Oh yes," said Don. "Every year." He smiled. Then elaborately winked.

We sailed locally in Lennox Passage and a little further from home, in the Bras d'Or Lakes. We sailed on our own – Don, Leo and I – and "in company," with Denise Saulnier and Greg Silver, who sailed their catboat, Queen Celeste. Greg and Denise had moved from Halifax to D'Escousse in 1996, though they'd known Don and Lulu, initially in a business context, for 10 years before that.

Against the odds, my friendship with Denise had taken off like a polo pony nicked by a spur. I loved her brilliant mind and multi-dimensional sense of humour. Witty, goofy, teasing or mimicking – her humour was marvelously fun to be around. She also *knew stuff* – on the broadest scale of anyone I'd ever known, aside from Don. If we went to a country auction, Denise *knew stuff* about what we were looking at, knew how much we should bid on an item or when we shouldn't bother. Denise knew *endless stuff* about her own Acadian people and their history, a subject I knew nil about before moving to Cape Breton. It was all so fresh and fascinating to me, especially when she told stories, *de famille*, *parmi ses amis*, which she did so entertainingly.

Denise also *knew stuff* about music – she played the guitar, mandolin, fiddle and piano, all beautifully, to make you cry – and she *knew stuff*, as a graphic designer, about colour and design and

the vast worlds of print making, painting, fabric art, furniture, costumes, porcelain and pottery art and all their individual histories. Finally, as a communicator, Denise has few rivals. When Denise zings a phrase, *c'est parfait, ça*. Sometimes people just go quiet, blink in the rapid-fire words with obvious pleasure, then laugh as an intellectual release. I'd always had and have brainy friends. But Acadienne Denise was so entirely different from anyone I knew on the West Coast. She was so *amusante, polyvalantes, incisif et, tiens…Denise, un original*.

Greg and Denise ran a graphic design company. Like Don and I, they worked from home, which was a short walk up the road from our house. Once the four of us began to spend time together, we were almost completely content in each other's company. My jealous, cavewoman's heart stopped wondering if Lulu and Don had had more fun with Greg and Denise than we did – and simply counted my blessings they were in my life. My transition to country life would have been so much harder without their accepting, loving hearts – maybe even impossible. There were days the four of us together was like a perfect little symphony of laughter and sharing.

I managed to ride just once that summer, with a young neighbour who had horses, but mostly it was a boat year, as was the following summer.

Other than a brief summer sailing course as a young teenager, the first boat experiences I'd ever had were on commercial vessels – trollers, to be exact. The artisans of the fleet, they are called, because they catch what they intend to catch, one tidy and lethal hook after another. By-catch is negligible. So I still loved the sound of big commercial diesel engines and thought boat time mostly meant getting from A to B in a timely manner. One was supposed to make money, after all.

Sailing was all about silent passage over the water – maybe some *jekoosh, jekoosh* against the hull– at whichever speed the wind dictated. Slowly but surely I was getting used to "the flappy things" – jumbo, main, jib, fisherman, mule, spinnaker, all sorts of names to memorize – but I couldn't

comprehend the choice of no engine. Don was proud Silversark didn't have an engine. You have to be a damn good sailor to sail without one. But even good sailors can be stuck a quarter mile from a wharf – for hours – on a windless day. I was not fit company the day this happened to us, just outside of St. Peter's. Out on the water we stayed, out on deck we stayed – no wheelhouse on Silversark – the rain steady on our heads, a thunder and lightening storm in full swing all around us. Our only movement was lateral as we tacked back and forth, back and forth, across the narrow, sandy channel. Don remained cheerful, a sign of good things to come.

But an engine in Silversark ("Silver's Ark") was several years off, as was a new motor-sailor boat, Magnus, which would take us on to far-off adventures in tropical waters. For those first two summers sailing together we stayed on home turf for Don, and new turf (surf, actually) for me. One frustrating day aside, I was a contented new sailor, dazzled at the beauty of the Bras d'Or Lakes, an inland sea, I learned. Black-back gulls, petrels, bald eagles, herons – I loved seeing all the different birds wheel, dart and plummet and grew to appreciate the quiet that permitted me to hear them, too. The lake waters were silky and warm for swimming and Silversark is a cosy, beautifully finished boat. It doesn't have standing headroom, as the design was intended for offshore sailing. It does have a wide and comfortable V-berth, an inviting galley table and a well-designed, workable galley.

I stood in the galley one early evening that first summer in D'Escousse. We were at anchor in a green and gold cove, just Don, Leo and me. My shoulders were hunched down and my head was lowered; even at five feet two inches, I couldn't stand upright either. I might have been peeling a potato. More likely, it being a warm summer evening, I was making a salad. I was preparing a meal of some sort. Yes, there was a glass of wine near-by – but no, I hadn't had much to drink. It was one of those rare moments of complete contentment that come to a life. If I was slicing a tomato or a bunch of green onions, then I could have done that forever. The air was soft and the cabin had its own indefinable smell – a mix, maybe, of sun-tan lotion, salt-air and water, warmed teak and a lavender hand-soap by the sink.

No music on the tape deck, no short-wave radio on for a weather forecast. The boat was dipping and creaking as wooden boats do, but so gently and only now and then. My feet were bare, spread apart for balance on the wooden sole. My face was warm and rosy from a day in the sun. I rarely feel pretty, but I was pretty in that moment, even beautiful. Looking into the small mirror above the sink I saw sun-bleached hair, jade-blue eyes and a mouth that had been kissed into puffiness.

I heard my Mum's voice, the day I came home from that first visit with Don in Point Roberts: "You've been well-loved," she said smiling, and stroked my hair tenderly – *oh how Barbara my mother had loved Richard, my father, and cherished her time with him*. I dipped my head in embarrassment at my mother's words, but did not deny them. I smiled, thinking about the memory – and then felt a kiss on my cheek. Like a bird feather just touching the skin. My hand went to my cheek, which tingled.

"Don?" He was nowhere to be seen. I heard a series of creaks. He was still on deck, from the sounds of it coming back to the cockpit from the bow.

"Don?" I asked again, softer this time, knowing he had nothing to do with this kiss. My hand was still on my cheek. "That you?"

It wasn't Don. It wasn't Mum, either. I've always known it was Lulu, saying goodbye to her guy and her boat – and saying hello to me. I think my feet were planted right where hers had been, so many times; it was just so easy for her to touch me. I also think it was her way of saying thank you. Everyone had been so worried about Don after he lost Lulu. Mark thought he was going to lose both parents, Don in short order after his mother. The kiss said It's all right now, isn't it? I don't have to worry about him anymore, do I? All I could manage was a nod. Then many little nods in succession, seen only by her. My cheek felt different all that evening.

My 73-year-old father had already jokingly given 59-year-old Don his blessing to marry me. I always figured I'd had a blessing of another sort.

CHAPTER 16: GETTING MARRIED

Wedding Invitation

If I gave you my ocean…

…I'd give you mine.

Along with my love

Returned in kind.

Then we should marry.

Splendid notion.

You and me and a world of oceans.

Marjorie Lorraine Simmins and Silver Donald Cameron

invite you to join them

on the occasion of their wedding

on Saturday, March 14, 1998

at 11:30 a.m., at the Unitarian Church

949 West 49th Avenue, Vancouver BC.

A lunch reception in the adjacent church hall

will follow the ceremony.

A Cape Breton kitchen racket will follow this summer.

RSVP Mrs. Barbara Simmins; (604) 272-4455

Chaplain Geoffrey Simmins:

“Donald and Marjorie, I invite you now to join hands as you repeat your vows. The hand offered by each of you is an extension of self, just as is your mutual love. Cherish the touch, for you touch not only your own but also another life. Be sensitive to its pulse. Seek always to understand and respect its rhythm.

“Please repeat after me, your vows:

“In the presence of this company, I, Donald, take you, Marjorie, to be my wife,

“In the presence of this company, I, Marjorie, take you, Donald, to be my husband,

“to have and to hold,

from this day forward,

and forsaking all others,

for better, for worse,

for richer, for poorer,

in sickness and in health,

in sorrow and in joy,

in reflection and in laughter,

to work and to share,

to grow and adventure,

to love and to cherish,

for as long as we both shall live.

“Donald/Marjorie, repeat after me: With this ring I wed you, with my body I honour you, with my soul I sing with you, through all the days of our lives.

“Now you will feel no rain, for each of you will be shelter for the other

Now you will feel no cold, for each of you will be warmth for the other,

Now you are two persons, but there is only one life before you.”

Wedding Poem for Marjorie & Don

by Zoë Landale

Walking down to Heart's Desire beach in the afternoon
you think about iris, the blue of them deep
enough to catch the heart. Fleur-de-lis
of petals, heraldic in a wedding bouquet.

The beach is on two coasts. It has many names.
Fraser River with its glide of tugs and chip barges, outrageously blue
water piled by summer westerly into peaks;
broom, gold and vital, blooming all along the wild lands.

Pondville with its clean fine sand, almost tropical,
the Labrador current sliding gelid offshore. The saltmarsh
where once in winter a brown muskrat furiously swam
beneath a quarter inch of glass.

Whatever shore you take the dog to,
he finds a stick way too big for him and picks it up.
This is the locus of the world, one fawn and white whippet
trotting, a silver log in his mouth.

Walking down to Heart's Desire beach in the afternoon

you clatter with shells of words

left over from the day's work.

You are glad of a companion

who understands the way words curve

and rattle, translucent with a mother-of-pearl gleam.

A companion who makes you laugh so hard

your stomach gets sore.

A person who understands the value of candles,

how during the dark hours

your house must be sprinkled with star points,

the flames blessing every corner with flicker and glow.

Walking down to Heart's Desire beach in the afternoon

you have lots of time to think about dinner.

The greenness of broccoli, how oranges are punctuation,

periods magnified; the tang of them in salad.

There are many things you are grateful for:

the moment last summer between beaches,

sailboat slicing along in silence,

where you were so happy you could hardly speak.

When you come in the door now, you can call out

Hello! I'm home,

and there will be an answer.

Always an answer.

And the smell of curries, roast chicken,

vinaigrettes, lemon meringue pie

and chocolate chip cookies

are home, and a hand that reaches out in warmth

is home, and you are always home now

no matter what coast you are on

the blue of water reminding you of iris

and the words that bind you two

For better for worse, for richer for poorer

in sickness and in health for as long as we both shall live:

these are flames you take with you in daylight

walking down to Heart's Desire beach in the afternoon.

8 February 2011, Halifax, NS

I wouldn't be the first or last bride to say it, but truly, our wedding day was perfect. Rainy Vancouver? Not that day. The sun was full-on and the Japanese cherry blooms, azaleas and forsythia were in early, vigorous bloom in the church gardens and courtyard. A friendly neighbour kitty was the first guest to arrive in the church; a blessing from the animal world, in my view. She was ushered out only because of the numerous canine guests who would assemble in the courtyard later on.

The church pianist, as requested, played Handel; Water Music, of course, for the aqua wave that curled and tumbled onto two coasts now. Family and friends joined us from across the country. Don's oldest friend from high school and his wife drove up from California, with a box of wine as a much-enjoyed wedding gift. A beloved friend of Don's, the brilliant Paul Fougere, had flown in from Halifax to do our flowers – the church and table arrangements, a bouquet, the boutonnieres and corsages – and make the gorgeous cake. A professional stylist, Paul also arranged my hair, cut Don's hair – and coloured Mark's hair, which was, when he arrived in from Alberta, a nasty shade of orange. By the time Paul had Mark spruced up, people asked if he'd given up on the Oil Patch and started modeling. Tall, dark-haired, with bright hazel eyes, Mark was our handsome best man. Beside him, stood Don's younger brother David. Brother Ken, the youngest Cameron brother, would be the reception MC. Standing with me, were my oldest sister Zoe and her daughter Jocelyn. Don and Jocelyn have been fast friends since the day they met. Once they became friends, the time before that seemed indistinct, hard to remember. I knew something about that.

The Unitarian Church was a big part of our lives in those days. My mother not only attended church each Sunday but worked throughout the year with a team of other senior women on the church's monster once-a-year thrift sale. The event was popular with Vancouverites and a big money-maker for

the church. I'd been to the thrift sale many times and had even helped Mum out a very small bit, one year. I was thus comfortable in this particular Unitarian Church, which is modern and airy, with adjoining buildings that are lower scale and equally pleasant. There is an Asian sensibility to the overall design of church, courtyard and gardens.

My brother Geoffrey, an architectural historian who teaches at the University of Calgary, is also a deeply spiritual man; at the time of our wedding, he had just become a Unitarian chaplain. With the ink still drying on his chaplain's papers, he was just able to perform the wedding ceremony for Don and me. I have rarely been happier in this life than looking up at the brother I love to bits to hear the vows I was to repeat, and then looking at the man I love to bits, to repeat those vows. I was so glad I wasn't married by a stranger. Besides, if your big brother tells you to do something – pay attention, it's serious! None of this stopped me from beaming throughout the ceremony, buoyed beyond description by the rightness and brightness of the moment. Nor from laughing outright when I kissed Don – and discovered *by jeez*, he'd been into the rum already. Dutch courage has its uses!

After the ceremony we gathered in the courtyard for people hugs, dog hugs, chatter and photos. Leo wore a collar of flowers and knew, somehow, he was Top Dog that day. The other dogs belonged to my girlfriends, almost all of whom have one or more dogs each. I loved hearing the barks and yips of all the special dogs in our lives and I love having wedding photos with English pointers, a pug, two whippets, a Schipperke and a golden Labrador retriever. Our wedding photos show pink and gold floral profusions as background, and a bare-armed bride. It wasn't actually warm enough for that bit of bravado, but my dress was sleeveless and I only wore the short cape I bought to go with it before the ceremony, not afterwards. My ever-generous mother paid for the elegant Jessica McClintock dress and cape. We picked them out together, at a small and romantic wedding-dress store on 10th Avenue near Sasamat. I surprised myself by choosing a traditional dress. One look at the white on white floral pattern, the fitted bodice and flowing skirt and I was pretty sure all the other practical choices were no

longer in the running. When Mum gasped when I stepped out of the change room in it, I knew for certain.

The reception was held in the church hall. The smoked salmon lasagna was divine, as were the numerous salads, breads and wedding cake. There were the usual toasts and some unusual toasts. Don's beloved 85-year-old Aunt Ethel gave a splendid toast to the groom and my brother-in-law Garney, Zoe's husband, did a fine and funny job toasting me. I toasted the entire gathering. When I began to toast my mother, my family and my friends, I wasn't sure if I could keep speaking. I paused for the longest time – nor would I look up from the page in my hand – and then I carried on. When I finally did look up, I saw every one of my girlfriends crying and Mum "destroyed," as a Brit would say. Good thing I didn't look up! Twelve-year-old Jocelyn performed "The Toast to Absent Friends" from **The Wind and the Willows** and did a brilliant job of it. We were all convinced she'd go on to have a career in the theatre. I was in awe, actually, that such a young girl could do such a clever thing. Don flat-out loved the performance and was the first to shoot to his feet to start the clapping when she finished.

As I say, perfect. By 4:00 we were on our own and drove down to Granville Island. We had changed into casual but dressy clothes and at 5:00, boarded a boat for a supper cruise around Vancouver Harbour and Burrard Inlet. Beyond several bites of lunch and a sip or two of wine – I was so elevated emotionally, I feared I would trip and fall if I drank at all; food was similarly impossible to ingest – I hadn't eaten all day. We fell upon the buffet and bottle of rich red wine. At 9:00 we disembarked and drove to another one of our heart's homes, the house we rented in Point Roberts, WA, for three springs in a row. That year, I called it the "honeymoon cottage." The day after the wedding it would be the site of a rocking party, with almost everyone from the previous day in attendance. We even had our own Cape Breton fiddler, Greg Silver, who had flown out from D'Escousse. Denise, to my extreme sadness, was unable to come to the wedding.

The morning after the party, a letter from my Aunt Susette in York, England, arrived at the post office. Susette was my father's only sister. She was a psychiatric nurse by profession, a hedonist and enthusiast by nature, and a creative, brainy and affectionate woman. Although her childhood was gothic in its torments, we young Simmins often called Susette the "sanest Simmins in generations." She loved well and she lived well.

March 1998

My very dear Marjorie and Don

So many good, warm and positive thoughts do I send to you both. Somehow I don't feel that I've left any of the fairy godmothers out – not even the awfully earnest ones.

I lay in bed this morning thinking of all the gifts that marriage bestows – love, laughter, understanding, peace, freedom to be, the ability to see beyond that which is ordinary in each other; oh on and on it went.

We human beings are an interesting lot, and we re so wonderfully different from all the other animals, and so much more exciting. You two, in choosing each other, have already opened so many new doors, explored new lanes and listened to each other. And the lovely thing is that these things will never stop. I, and my partner Beryl have been together for 40 years, and every single day there is something new to see, and new roads to walk down which didn't seem to be there yesterday. I wish for you what I have had for myself, that inexpressible joy of complete togetherness.

I wish I had been able to find you wedding presents. Being an English medieval city, York doesn't cater to the esoteric. I'm sorry it's money – but the best I can do. God bless you both and I love you. Susette

“It is quite possible for us to have thirty years together,” I said to Don, passing him the letter. “Forty might be stretching it.” I giggled, the idea of a 101-year-old Don and an 79-year-old Marjorie not having much appeal to a “young” bride of 39. And good lord, The Whippet would be 45!

“Thirty sounds fine,” he smiled, “but only if we do it as well as Susette and Beryl.”

“I wish they could marry.”

“You never know. There may come a time when British law will permit them to.”

“Hard to imagine. But wouldn’t it be great?”

(In 2004, civil unions became legal in Britain for gay and lesbian partners. Susette and Beryl married that year. Susette’s Canadian family sent flowers and champagne to the reception. We were thrilled. Susette, bless her, was overwhelmed with joy, as was Beryl. We lost our Susette in 2007. But we still have her words, and her great faith in enduring love. We continue to write letters to Beryl.)

CHAPTER 17: SETTLING INTO MY MARITIME LIFE

9 February 2011, Halifax, NS

If I needed a reminder I hadn't married an invisible Mr. Smith, it came in the form of an article in *Frank Magazine*, the Atlantic issue, July 14, 1998. I was also reminded that Lulu would always be a part of my life, not just Don's – and, that I was a first-time-married but *third* wife. We had been home from BC since May and had had our "kitchen racket party" – for 200 people – the first week of July.

"Silver Donald Takes Another Wife; Confident Author Passes on Viagra," blared one of its headlines on the cover page. Inside the article, the "journalist" had much to say:

"This past Saturday was a big day in D'Escousse: friends of Silver Donald Cameron gathered at his home for a party to meet his new wife. The noted author was married out West to **Marjorie Simmins**, a **BC** magazine writer, in March. Marjorie is in her 40s; Silver Don, also known as an avid sailor and unofficial ambassador for the **Bras d'Or Lakes**, is a remarkable 61 (and certainly doesn't need any Viagra yet – **ed**.)

"The ceremony took place nearly two years after the tragic death of Silver Donald's second wife, **Lulu Terrio-Cameron.**

"He and Marjorie met several years ago when she interviewed him about one of his books. They hooked up again a year ago. She was a house guest at his home in the fishing village of D'Escousse last summer and has already proved her own writing credentials locally by penning pieces for **The Herald** (an outsider's experience at a **Cape Breton** bingo hall, etc., etc.).

"Silver Donald and Marjorie plan to winter on the West Coast and summer in Cape Breton. The

author first discovered Isle Madame during the fisheries strike in the early 70s and purchased his home at D'Escousse in 1982, from an aged widower.

"When he arrived in the 70s, the **BC** native had just finished prof'ing duties at the **UNB**. He arrived initially with his first wife, **Ann Cameron.**

"During **Lulu Keating's** recent TV special on **Ada McCallum**, Silver Donald said he used the services of one of the famous Halifax madam's girls to help get a speedy divorce from Ann. Both parties had agreed to take this route (in 1971, when divorce laws were still in the dark ages). Tasteful pictures were taken to prove adultery. "The author's second wife, Lulu, was the daughter of **Mimi** and the late **Arthur Terrio**, D'Escousse natives. While Silver Donald and Lulu had no children of their own, she had a son, **Mark Patrick**, who was conceived during her studies in Scandinavia. Mark Patrick, 20, is currently in Red Deer.

"Although Lulu was given a Catholic send-off from **St. Hyacinth's RC** church, I understand it was pretty much by invitation only. One resident compared the service to the one that lamented **Princess Diana**, given the tributes and speeches she received.

"Silver Donald said his wedding was attended by writers, editors and other literati. His friends on this coast include such literary luminaries as **Farley Mowat**, who summers near St. Peter's and **Parker Barss Donham**, the Laird of **Boularderie**.

"The marriage has certainly turned a happier page in his life, says Silver Don, explaining the last several years were "a very long miserable period" because of Lulu's battle with cancer. He was also ill (but is now fully recovered). During this period Silver Don was also very busy in his capacity as a dean at **UCCB**.

"Not surprisingly, all this angst meant his 27-foot sailboat was much neglected. He hopes to get it ship-shape and resume his voyages this season.

"Silver Don's new book – his 15th – is **The Living Beach (MacMillan Canada**: $32.95)."

They'd noticed the bingo essay, I'd noted with relief. That was good. I didn't want to slack off with the writing; I'd worked too long and too hard for that. I wasn't Marjorie Cameron – unless it made a little old village lady happy to call me so. Then it was lovely, an honour. But in regular life, I was Marjorie Simmins, freelance writer and journalist. It was enough of a challenge to take on a new homeland. I was determined not to lose my voice – and who I was at a cellular level – in the process.

The *Frank Magazine* article didn't perturb either of us. It only made us laugh. I was grateful they'd spelled my unusual surname name right; that was thanks to Don actually taking the call from the reporter, to make sure they got some facts correct, unlike their usual botch jobs at *Frank*. Even the teasing parts of the "article" were all right. I told Don that it did his reputation no harm to have fictitiously declined Viagra: *They know you for the Stud Muffin you are*, I laughed.

What did perturb me, earlier on and throughout that year, was Don's insistence that he was going to write a book about Lulu. It would focus on their lives together, he said – but mostly her life, the one that was so unfairly cut short. There needed to be a record, he continued, of all her high-spirited adventures, all the odds she had beaten –if not the last, mortal one – to live the very finest sort of life, full of challenge and satisfaction. He would mention the book idea every few months. He mentioned it before we married, he elaborated on it after we married.

I was shocked at how resistant I felt about Don writing the book. Selfishly, I knew it would mean that I would live more closely with Lulu than I even had already and continued to do. Don's grief about Lulu's loss was never far away. I wanted to see him heal more, not think about every sad event of the two-year battle against cancer that she'd lost. That *they'd* lost. I knew that.

But I was a newly-wed. I wanted to keep my happiness all to myself.

I started to wonder about the kiss on the boat. *Sometimes things are not as they seem.*

We both kept writing. It was a time of discovery and learning. Most of all, as Susette had hoped for us, it was a time of "inexpressible joy of complete togetherness." I actually felt I had two lovers, Don and Cape Breton, both vying for the lion's share of my affections. Added to this happiness was the emotional security I derived from our west-coast spring-time sojourns, five years running. The Pacific-coast world I was inexpressibly relieved to see, wasn't going anywhere in my absence. I settled into my Maritime life, all eyes and ears.

Bingo Night, D'Escousse, NS, 1998.

"What color dabber do you want?" asks the woman working the cash register adjacent the inner doors of the community hall. She steps sideways to reveal the shelf behind her, with its tidy rows of colored markers. Green, purple, red, blue, they're all nice rich colors. Then I see a particular favorite.

"Hot pink, please." She is halfway to the shelf when another voice halts her progress.

"Not pink. She'll take a red one, please." Surprised, I turn to my new friend, from whom the correction has come. What's the matter with….?

"Pink is two dollars," she explains, "red is only one." Oh, I see. Sort of. Saving money I understand, but for some mysterious reason, pink ink is more expensive than the other colored inks. Drat, we're not even in the hall yet, and already my ignorance is showing.

It's funny though, I feel as though I should know how to do this, if only by virtue of birthplace. I am, as my mother has told me often and with pride, an eighth generation Canadian. And yet, at 38 years old, I have missed out on a quintessential Canadian experience: BINGO. Tapping my fingers on the counter I wait for the cashier to give me change from my twenty dollar-bill, borrowed earlier in the day from a neighbor. Change received, I move aside so my friend can buy her cards.

As I wait I scan the crowd around us and see the familiar face of a woman who owns a local store. I call hello and wave. The response is immediate, unprefaced by any sort of greeting.

"You're a bingo player?" Her tone is both shocked and pleased. I pause for just a moment, trying to interpret the voice shadings. Maybe she figures people from the West Coast have never even heard of the game. Maybe she's just glad to see me out at a community event. Either way, she's smiling bright as a Cape Breton hillside in the autumn.

“You bet I am, first time, too,” I answer.

The right answer apparently, as it's greeted by a loud whoop of laughter.

“First time lucky, you'll see,” she says. “Have fun.”

Her prediction triggers a belated and startling thought: my odds for winning are as good as anyone else's here. Who knows, I could be returning that borrowed twenty by night's end; peeled from a nice plump wad in my jeans pocket.

Markers in hand, my friend and I enter the stadium-sized hall. As my friend had warned me, the air is a theatre curtain of cigarette smoke. As I'd told her, it doesn't bother me, because I smoke too.

We work our way down a long row of tables, buying a sheet of numbers from the volunteers sitting at each one. A loonie here, a twoonie there, by the end of the row I've spent $10 and have 18 playing sheets; from the front door to here, that's a $13-lay-out.

More than a video, less than a night at the movies.

Not that there's a movie theatre around here. Yet another reason I'm in the hall tonight. When in Rome – or in this case, the village of D'Escousse on Isle Madame, Nova Scotia – enjoy local offerings. I may be a city girl from far-off Vancouver, but I know enough to lay the turf green side up.

Through the crowded room we weave, finding a table to sit at on the perimeter of the room. There are no open doors and the air is thick and hot. It's loud too, with near to 500 people gathered for the evening's activities. I glance at my watch. Ten minutes to go. Slowly the conversation begins to dwindle: the atmosphere feels pre-Indy, all eyes waiting for a checkered flag to drop.

Except there are no flags, only welcoming words of the night's host, his voice magnified by a microphone. I turn in my chair to see where he is seated. There he is behind us, stationed high above the crowd at a table on the stage. The Keeper of Numbers. The Bestower of Luck. Looks young enough,

but if he's like everyone else around here, he's probably been a bingo buff since...what's that expression I heard last week?

Oh yeah, since Christ wore gumboots.

And God indeed, if my family heard me say that, they'd collapse laughing. She's gone native. No, I haven't. Couldn't, if I tried for the rest of my days. May as well have "from away," another local expression, tattooed on my forehead. Which doesn't mean I haven't been welcomed on the East Coast, or that I can't enjoy – and use, with my give-away bland accent – the original turns of phrase that swirl around me.

D'Escousse is home, after all, for six months of this year, and will be, for many half-years to come. I'd like to fit in, as best I can. And fully enjoy myself along the way.

"Ready to play?"

I nod briskly at my friend, then realize that no. I'm not ready. I don't even know which page we're playing first – and what's everyone doing with their markers?

"Give me your sheets," says my friend. "I'll put them in order."

Swish, swish, swish, the job's done. "Now shake your marker, then dab it, like this." Thump, thump, thump, the tip of her marker meets paper, and is now primed and ready to go. I copy her motions precisely, and childlike, am tempted to ask for praise when fat, ink-soaked circles appear on the thin paper. Fortunately, there's no opportunity, as my friend is already explaining something else.

"The centre squares are free."

She points to and then quickly marks the blank centre squares inside each of the six larger box shapes on my first sheet of paper. This seems straightforward enough until I glance around me at the other players' sheets: why do theirs all have nine boxes and mine only has six?

“G 60,” says the host.

OK, the question will have to come later. Along with solving the mystery of over-prices pink markers. Time to pay attention: B, I, N, G – stop, down, no G 60s. In any of the six boxes. Not a propitious beginning.

“N 34”. Got it, in three boxes.

My friend reaches over and dabs two squares on my sheet with her blue marker.

“B 5”, she says, “there and there.”

B 5? When did the host say that?

“Watch the screen,” she explains my friend, pointing to the wall ahead of us. Sure enough, there's a big TV screen that shows the balls before the host reads the numbers on them. A second television is set up behind us. Dab, pause, dab at least I no longer need my friend's help. And next time, I'll be fast enough to monitor a sheet with nine boxes.

But six is fine for now.

A groundswell of sound – not quite conversation, more dense that mumbles – has begun. Must be almost time.

“Bingo!”

Two lines, in any direction, have been completed. The winner sits not far from us, her hand raised to catch the host's attention. A moment later, the serial number on her sheet has been matched up with the computer's record of its numbers – another screen I hadn't noticed, despite the red neon lights – and her win is confirmed. A volunteer jogs through the crowd to hand over the cash prize.

By the third game I am totally relaxed, even nonchalant in attitude and movement. Eyes, ears and hands work in unison, like driving a car.

“You're marking well,” says my friend. Student and teacher beam at one another, well content with progress made.

“And you're set for any two line, you know that, don't you?”

Set for any two lines? Doesn't that mean...

“Get ready to call.”

I glance up from the last number I need to win to hear that same number called: a moment of hubris and I'd forgotten to watch the screens. Sloppy on the curve of the road, but I'm in the straightaway now.

“BINGO!”

Snap, snap, snap, snap, snap.

Five twenty dollar bills appear on the table beside my right elbow. And I can't stop laughing, with delight and disbelief. A first-time player, a one in 500 chance to come up lucky.

“I won! A hundred bucks! Hey, this is the easiest loot I've ever made. What a great game.” I leave the bills on the table, admiring the modest-sized green stack for a full minute before folding it away in the pocket of my jeans. At which point, stillness all around me. I manage to remember my manners. But again, I'm slow off the mark. I listen, abashed, as a trio of voices passes by my good intentions.

“A hundred dollars, that's great.”

“Good for you.”

“Glad you're having fun.”

Pleasure mingles with winner-guilt as my friend and the other players at our table generously

extend their congratulations. I've no way of knowing for certain, but I'd guess there aren't a lot of spare twenties lining the pockets around me. And I'd feel a bit happier in this winning, if they knew the same was actually true for me.

"You know what? I borrowed a twenty to come here tonight. Damn, now I have to return it."

Eight faces crease into easy smiles, and one belly laugh triggers the laughter of all. A real bingo, with my timing right at last.

By night's end my take-home hasn't increased, but I've learned all the different patterns to win: two lines any way, cross and T-shapes, full card and more. I've also learned that the pink ink, unlike the other colored inks, is fluorescent – apparently more expensive to produce. Along with 500 other pairs of hands. I've applauded the winning of $4,000 "Cookie Jar," which according to the gasps and squeals of the recipient, was sweet indeed. A wonderful evening, but I'm tired now – my eyes especially – and ready to go home. My friend and I exit a side door of the hall and walk together under a richly starred country sky. My home, happily, is minutes away.

"Are you going to play next week?" My friend is an avid player, goes to three games each week. She wasn't a winner tonight, but is obviously pleased that I was, and may even now consider me a full-fledged convert to the game. Once a month anyway. More than that and my eyes will go buggy from the long parade of numbers. But less than that and the odds will keep me a one-hit wonder. Remember the turf, two-coast girl: green side up.

"I'll phone you soon. Count on it."

Home Ports, D'Escousse, NS, 1998.

"Watch the road, you're swerving." At 10 at night after a day that began in Ontario and ended in Nova Scotia, I was not, in May of this year, the most cheerful company ever to grace a passenger seat.

"I am not swerving," said the beaming driver. "I'm dancing. A jig. Can't you tell?"

Well no, can't say I'd figured that one out. Saw dance-like movements – the twist and stretch of shoulders and the rhythmic bounce of a knee – but thought that was more connected to a long day of travel than dancing to a happy CD of the soul. And besides, we weren't actually at the end of our trip yet, so what exactly was it we were celebrating?

"We're on the island!" And this time there was no mistaking his enthusiastic if seat-restricted motions as dance, or his obvious pleasure when we crossed the causeway from Cape Breton to Isle Madame. There is only one island in this world that so captivates this man with whom I share my life. And only one village, towards which we drove that night, which for him meets all the complex needs of mind, heart and spirit. I stifled a weary sigh: it was definitely not the moment to say I missed, already, the sky-sweeping red cedars and Douglas firs of the province I grew up in. Or my family, many of whom were now 4,000 miles away. "Nearly home," I managed instead to say brightly. Which in truth did not help matters much, in terms of evoking a less conflicted state of consciousness. In the past two years, since the earliest days of our co-adventuring, the word "home" has become so elastic and complex, I sometimes feel I could claim a new definition for it with each day that passes.

Try as I may, I cannot anymore limit the meaning of home to a single idea, or contain it within a single walled space. In the long term, I know this will be a blessing, to feel loved and welcomed on two coasts, and at various family oases in between. In the short term, I consider the definitions of home as they come to me, testing their firmness like the careful press of a hiker's boot on an unfamiliar path.

And familiarity does seem to be a key to feeling at home. That, and predictability and psychic comfort, within the places we rest at, during our annual travels across the country. At my sister's Vancouver Island home, the surrounding garden offers a year-round abundance of flowers and vegetables. Her kitchen presents different fragrances throughout the day: sweet cinnamon in the morning, baking bread by noon and the hunger-producing tang of garlic come evening. My husband and I are welcome, even feted, in the bright interiors of my sister's house. During the day we beach-comb or hike through sun-dappled forest trails, where green is a scent, a texture, a rainbow gradation of light to dark. In the evening, candlelight glows in the living room; we gather around it on soft cushions and store, deep within us, the rhythm and cadence of family voices.

My mother's voice is low-pitched, though it rises with pleasure when we visit her at her suburban Vancouver home. On the kitchen table, a stack of library books waiting to be devoured; in the living room, the coffee table is strewn with magazines and atlases. “One more chapter,” her four children would plead with her at bedtime, “read us just one more.” And each night, a pause, a smile and the ritual words, “One more” - then all voices chimed together - “and that's absolutely the last.” The home of books began early, remains an essential joy for all of us.

The company of my brother is another home, days of then and days of now centred in liking, edged by laughter. In teenage years, out came the playing cards – endless games of speed, crib and poker – and on went the tea kettle – oceans of Earl Grey, poured into thick lipped Chinatown mugs. Not much conversation as we played, not much required. Stability of presence – warm, accepting – was the need that was met. And is met still, with visits, phone calls and letters.

Letters from my father too; hundreds in a single year, they detail his busy and creative life in Ottawa. We shared a family home for only eight years. But he has spent the past 31 years helping me to establish and keep a spiritual home. “God grant me the serenity to accept the thing I cannot change, the

courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference – try to live this, it helps in tough times," my father said time and time again. I tried, and it did, also time and again. I was 20 before I knew the mantra came from Alcoholics Anonymous. At 39, I still repeat the Serenity Prayer and other AA wisdoms my father has shared with me, whenever times get "tough." His God – who has supported my father's sobriety for over 30 years, and mine – who has aided me whenever called on – appear to live in the same house. But my father gave me the street map to get there.

"Are you missing home?" My husband's voice pulled me back into the present moment, though with so many thoughts layered one on the other, I wasn't quite sure how to answer his question. Still quiet, I reached out a hand to his wrist. Warm skin, steady pulse and the face that smiled at me the light and the laughter of all my days: home each day, every day. A moment later, from behind us in the car, came a tired whimper. I twisted in my seat and placed a hand on top of my dog's silky head. Long walks on the beaches of the Atlantic and Pacific, in the company of the bravest, most generous of canine hearts: the whippet creates home too.

A mile later, when the tall blue house by the water's edge appeared on our left, my heart said "home" long before hand's touch or body's shelter. In we stepped, to our wonderful, once-upon-a-sea-captain's house in D'Escousse, on Isle Madame. Another place of contentment, this one ringed by silver oaks. These trees sweep the sky too. Four months away, I had forgotten that. But it takes time for the landscapes of new homes to imprint themselves in memory and to affect the spirit.

It may take time for landscapes to settle beneath the skin, but not seascapes, if you're coastal-raised. When I look out the window of my work room to Lennox Passage, I do not see the trollers, seiners and gillnetters of the West Coast commercial fishing fleet I know so well. But I do see brightly painted Cape Islanders and the long, low hulls of Northumberland Strait vessels. I like the capable look of these boasts, would love to crew aboard them for a day of fishing. Smells of diesel, coffee and fish:

working boats are a homescape no matter where I live. I watch their steady progress over choppy waters, and search, on some days, for home port lettering on their sterns.

Coastal Lives, Boundary Bay, BC, 2000

Don: The paddles bite the water, the fat yellow kayaks slide forward in the April sunlight. It feels good to be on the water again, watching Marjorie patrolling the flat beach at Boundary Bay, BC with Leo, the whippet. The kayaks float in three inches of water, but our 13-year-old niece Jocelyn has run aground, and she giggles, paddling backward to free herself.

I grew up here on the West Coast; my parents lie in a cedar-rimmed cemetery two miles away. But the Maritimes have been my home for 30 years and, truthfully, I would never have come back but for Marjorie, to whom the West Coast is as essential as air to a bird. *You couldn't leave the Maritimes,* she said, early in our courtship. *You wrap your village around you like a cloak. And I couldn't leave the West Coast.* Then don't, I said. Just add the East Coast.

Marjorie: *Just add the East Coast, he said. I hardly knew where it was. Born in Ottawa, raised in Vancouver, my idea of "east" stretched only to Montreal. Yet the home this man described lay 1000 miles beyond Quebec, on a 42.5-square-kilometre island. Isle Madame, population 4300, at the southeast corner of Cape Breton Island.*

Look at them out there, laughing together, my mischievous girl and my boy-hearted husband. I take a mental photograph of the two of them in this Pacific world. Tomorrow we go home to Nova Scotia; today I store images of my beloved West Coast. If I could, I'd fit Jocelyn into my suitcase. She'd come, too. She loved her visit to the Maritimes last summer. Even tells my sister, "Mum, we have to move to Nova Scotia."

Don: We migrate between oceans: three seasons in Nova Scotia, winters in BC. I have learned to love Pacific things again: the towers of downtown Vancouver spiking upward against the snow-sugared mountains, the pink flowering of plum and cherry, the flat channel-seamed delta of the Fraser River, the sense of the Orient lying out beyond the ocean horizon.

Despite its occasional storms, this coast seems dreamy, soft, almost absent-minded. Sailboats here carry tall rigs, light sails and reliable engines, sharing the sounds and fjords with the seine boats I grew up with -- white-painted and varnished, snub-nosed, at once muscular and stylish. Out here "fish" means the flashing, leaping varieties of Pacific salmon: chinook, pink, sockeye, coho. At home it means the deep-feeding, slow-moving cod.

The Atlantic coast is hard, blustery, tangy with iodine. Marjorie found the Maritimes more foreign than Europe.

Marjorie: "*Tell me when to panic," I said as we drove for the first time towards his home in the village of D'Escousse, population 250. The road was abundantly lined with silver oaks and apple trees, but the second-and third-growth evergreens behind these looked to me like baby Christmas trees. Most houses were tall rectangles, many with flat roofs. No glass-flecked Vancouver stucco here: houses were either wood-shingled or vinyl-sided. Colours ranged from white to sage green and barn red; facades were either utterly plain or softened by decorative shutters and ornate fretwork — "carpenter's lace."*

The grounds were plain, too. Few were studded by trees or bushes, and fences were blue-moon rare. Instead I saw clotheslines propped up by poles, the clothes ordered precisely along them from large to small, like colourful handkerchiefs in the breeze.

"*All right, time to panic." We'd already passed through several villages — and I couldn't tell when we left one and entered another. Nonetheless, three and a half hours from Halifax, we had reached D'Escousse, an ancient French word for "a stopping place."*

And so we stopped. Another tall house, Wedgewood blue with a flat roof. Grateful to reach journey's end, I walked into a spacious and beautifully-restored home that had its first incarnation over 100 years ago, when the very first trains were pulling into Vancouver. Isle Madame itself has been home to Europeans for almost 300 years.

For me, Maritime history has catapulted out of books and into the land of now, my life. I see this history in the enormous, elaborate Victorian homes of Annapolis Royal, and hear it in the lilting accents of my neighbours. "Yiss, yiss," said one the other day, "Well, dat man's right owly. And why? Life's too short t' be mean." Many of them speak Acadian French, which relies mostly on the familiar "tu" form of address. "What's this about privacy?" laughs a friend. "We're Acadians."

Visitors are frequent, and mostly unannounced, and doors are never bolted. "If you lock up," say neighbours, "how would we get in?" So in they come, sometimes for a cup of tea, often to bring a small gift — a loaf of bread, still warm from the oven, or a bag of "lobster goo," hideously stinky broken shells to fertilize the garden. "How are you today?" asks the city girl, nervously patting her yet-uncombed hair. Invariably, cheerfully: "Oh good, dear, good. You?"

Don: When we first lived together in BC, I felt abandoned. Marjorie locked the doors, and only couriers came to the house. Marjorie, I said, what's the matter with people here? Don't they like each other?

But the difference is partly rural-urban, not merely east-west. I had almost forgotten the pleasures of the city. In Vancouver, we go to the symphony, see first-run films in real theatres, eat superbly in what seem like a million cosmopolitan restaurants. The city means easy access to great libraries, zoos and aquariums, live theatre, a dram of Laphroaig on a sun-dappled deck beside a downtown marina.

Marjorie loves food; me, I always thought of it as fuel. But on Valentine's Day she organized a feast. We went to the farmer's market and the seafood shops on Granville Island and came home with live oysters and fresh shrimp, crusty Italian bread, crisp raddichio and yellow peppers and red onions — and a succulent, operatic German chocolate dessert. Marjorie feasts us in D'Escousse, too, but she drives 30 miles to pick through a far skimpier array of ingredients.

In my youth Granville Island was an industrial district. I drove a truck down there to pick up galvanized metal for a heating company. Now it's a chic oasis of boutiques, boats, food shops, theatres, bookstores and galleries. One gallery is devoted to the bold art of British Columbia's 200 native bands. There I bought Marjorie a ring to mark our happy first year of marriage. It was made by Derek Wilson, of the Haisla tribal nation, an elegant engraving of a gold hummingbird on silver.

Marjorie: *I didn't know that Nova Scotia has just one aboriginal nation, the Mi'kmaq, with whom I shared tea and talk last July at the annual Ste. Anne's Mission celebration on the Bras d'Or Lakes. In BC, the various First Nations people I've schooled and worked with all seemed to share a common genetic gift: humour as richly contoured as the west coast itself. The Mi'kmaq are like that, too. But I didn't know of their long-standing commitment to the Roman Catholic church, a result of 500 years of European contact. I want to learn how Mi'kmaq traditional spirituality meshes with Christianity.*

I'd also never heard the term "kitchen racket" until I came to Cape Breton. Last summer we had our very own kitchen racket to celebrate our marriage, a party that brought more than 200 guests to our home. Fifty pounds of mussels, bowls of pickled herring or "Solomon Gundy." The skin of an Irish bodhran drum warmed against the steady strike of palm and fist; its Celtic heartbeat blended with guitar, piano and a full chorus of voice. Three days passed before the final guests left. The freezer bulged with party offerings, fed us for weeks afterwards. Never in my life have I experienced so much sustained good will and merriment. Or had so many willing hands to help with a clean-up.

Don: Free again, Jocelyn paddles by. When she visited us last summer, I organized a tour to places new to both Marjorie and Jocelyn – to the golden beaches of Prince Edward Island, and to a friend's homestead in the Island woods where the loudest sound was the drumming whir of hummingbirds in the hollyhocks and morning glory. We prowled Charlottetown, bought ice cream at the original Cows outlet, saw *Anne of Green Gables* at the Confederation Centre.

We crossed the 13-km Confederation Bridge and drove on to Bouctouche, NB, home of the tycoon K.C. Irving and the Acadian novelist Antonine Maillet, whose works inspired a theme park on pilings out in the sluggish river. We went to the salty old German town of Lunenburg, a World Heritage site, all curlicues and gargoyles, where the Folk Harbour Festival gave Jocelyn a taste of East Coast music. We breakfasted on a balcony overlooking Lunenburg's waterfront with its fish plants, warehouses and schooners, and photographed Jocelyn aboard *Bluenose II.*

Marjorie: *When I think of Jocelyn's visit, I remember the natural way she moved aboard* ***Silversark****, our red-sailed, black-hulled cutter, which resembles a saucy pirate vessel. No less saucy and confident was Jocelyn, when we went for an overnight sail through the island-peppered waters of Lennox Passage. Sailing came to her as if by osmosis. "That's my west coast marine girl," I thought proudly. I'd have given a lot for her mother, a former commercial fisherman, to have seen her daughter's sure, soft tread on deck.*

Or to have heard her explosion of giggles when we saw a yellow and red highway sign advertising "McLobster" sandwiches. "St -- stop the car!" she sputtered, "I have to take a photo." She has the photo, but we didn't try the sandwich.

I miss that girl.

Don: I know some things that Marjorie misses: the fishing ports of Steveston and Ladner, the sea-girdled campus of the University of British Columbia, where both of us have studied and worked. She

misses the taste of sushi and golden battered prawns, the smell of the horse barns in Southlands, the riverside trails where she rode and walked Leo. Above all she misses her easy visits with friends and family, just as I miss my own Vancouver family — and, increasingly, Marjorie's as well.

I love the East Coast — its water-dappled landscapes, its architecture, its music, its savory language, its general snugness. I marvel at its casual assimilation of its dark and bloody history, and revel in the intimate web of family and place which cradles its people so that they are never truly at home anywhere else. After three decades, I am like that myself.

Yet though the flowering branches of my life are Atlantic, its roots are Pacific. Vancouver is a spectacular kaleidoscope, with its pagodas and minarets and geodesic domes, its log booms and exotic restaurants, its freighters clustered in the outer harbour, its sprawling air of sybaritic luxury. But beneath that kaleidoscopic splendour, Vancouver is a disconcertingly ductile place, so young and volatile that it is always becoming something else. Nova Scotia, after 400 years, has condensed into something stable and unique, deeply rooted in the Old World and yet ineluctably situated in the New.

Marjorie: *Marriage came with one lover, two lives. And yet they balance each other, these coasts -- old and new, city and village. I smile at the man in the kayak, laughing again with the girl. For us, home is always salt water, and one another.*

Let It Snow, Let it Snow, Let it Snow – D'Escousse, Nova Scotia, 2003

It must be something in the water. Or perhaps mothers' milk. Maybe it's genetic. Then again, it could be nature and nurture. Only a double-whammy like that could explain the unrelenting cheeriness of Cape Bretoners on the subject of weather. Even during this winter, the one that won't quit, won't moderate, won't release its icy stranglehold on most of Canada, I have never heard so many ringing tributes to the wisdom and generousity of Mother Nature. Think I exaggerate? Here's a sampling, from the past year or so on Isle Madame.

Neighbour One, as I trudge by him on the village road in February, the wind so biting my face has lost all feeling: "Beautiful day! Milder than yesterday, for sure." He has three fewer layers of clothing on than I do, and his arms are outstretched to encompass the apparently boundless beauty of the winter world around us. The four-foot hedges of snow along the edge of the road are blackening from the exhaust of cars, the dirty snow underfoot has ice beneath it. There's a dirty looking sky above us, too, both in colour and probable intent.

"Daffodils," I reply wearily. "There are daffodils blooming on the west coast right now."

"I saw that on the TV news last night," he laughs, "thought of you. But hey, you know what, that's not so good."

Not so good? Must be a relative concept, more so than I understood. What could be bad about soft, honey-scented air and a landscape royally rich with colour?

Neighbour One is still beaming, reveals the obvious with a wink: "Lawns, they'll be mowing their lawns about now. We don't have to."

Well silly, ungrateful me. Thank all the Powers That Be that we don't have to breathe in the

fresh, invigorating scent of newly-mown grass. That would be depressing. The mere thought has my spirits deflated and my feet dragging dejectedly toward home. But wait, Neighbour One has more to add.

"And no bugs! We won't get bugs for months! Those poor guys out west."

They're the same in summer. Neighbour Two, early last July, on a chilly, teeming morning not fit for ducks, the two of us arriving at the grocery store door at the same time: "I can't believe how lucky we are." She looks beatific. Perturbing, when I look as though the unicorn and I missed passage on The Ark. I swipe back several strands of wet, tangled hair and repeat the most confusing word of her pronouncement: "Lucky?"

Rapid nods and a sweeping hand to the pewter sky above us. "I haven't had to water my garden in over a month! Why it's practically self-caring with all this lovely rain. Everything smells so clean and delicious. And the wells are topped right up, no worries there, either. Summer rains, they're practically romantic, aren't they?"

Other than a dazed "Uh huh," there is no suitable response. You can't very well speak out against romance, can you?

Neighbour Three, a cousin of Neighbour Two and with her on that day, has the last word. Upbeat, of course – these two are related, after all. And born and raised in This Weather-Demented Region.

"And you know what else," she trills, "I haven't seen an ear-wig in days. Just too cold for them to flourish."

For me too, I nearly wail. But I bite my churlish tongue.

A frigid summer week later, Neighbour Four is standing in line in front of me at the local post

office. He is speaking not to me but to a male friend, who has already collected his mail. The friend stands near to him, yet Neighbour Three's voice is stage-bold, the tone conspiratorial, more than a little bit smug. "Ahh, these cool summer nights – they work to our advantage," says he. Now there's an interesting phrasing, I think, I wonder what exactly he –

– "We can sleep well at night, and our wives want to snuggle...." I depart the post office hastily, to the sound of happy guffaws.

Neighbour Four, when the dog-days of last summer arrived; not a second of wind, only a stone curtain of heat and mugginess: "You gotta love this! Just like the Tropics – 'cept we didn't have to travel anywhere, the heat came to us! Cheap vacation or what?" He dives back into the weirdly tepid harbour waters. Hugging a furnace might be more refreshing.

Three summers ago, and the tail-end of a hurricane slams through our village of D'Escousse. Some boats drag their moorings toward the open Atlantic, bound for Ireland. Others tear free of their moorings, bounce merrily over gargantuan waves toward rocky harbour shores. The wharf is an angry animal, that lurches, heaves and bucks. Our family sailboat appears to be safe on her mooring. But the other vessels will need to be retrieved. It's all I can do to stay on my feet, as I sway and stagger against the buffeting of curiously warm winds.

Neighbours One through Dozens are much more nimble-footed; they appear, in fact, to be dancing on that same mobile wharf. Cries of "Rock'n'roll!" and "Let 'er rip!" rise above nature's shrieking orchestra. Quick shouted conferences ascertain that no one has died or been injured, so spirits soar as heaven-high as the winds. Several skippers have fired up the engines on their Cape Island vessels; soon they'll be rounding up stray boats like cowboys roping steers on the range. Male bodies are flying off the wharf, their departures punctuated by Tarzan bellows. Ker-thump, their rubber boots land squarely on broad decks. Arms are held aloft like Olympic gymnasts awaiting a judge's scoring.

An exhausting day concludes late in the afternoon. The wind has eased to melodic gusts. Neighbours One through Dozens head home to hot toddies and supper: “Holy whistlin’, that was a jeezly good blow....”

You know, I love good weather as much as anyone else. It’s the any-weather-is-worth-celebrating part I haven’t mastered yet. However Cape Bretoners have come by this strange but laudable attitude, I now see it as an art. Takes considerable mental and spiritual agility to see the rainbow before it emerges from behind the clouds.

All the same, glad we don’t get tornados around here. They’d close the schools and hold a three-day picnic, with live music and a lobster boil. Woe betide the Neighbour who mentions her house has blown away....

Fabric Ballet, D'Escousse, Nova Scotia, 2003

Dancing colours: every week I see them – under clear skies or clouds or even in light rain or snow – in every shade and shape imaginable. Sometimes static, sometimes manic, occasionally moving in deliciously slowed motion. It's been seven years since I moved to the country and first encountered this classic art form. It's time I stopped depending on my dryer and learned to create my own fabric ballet. I know just the woman who can help me.

It's Monday morning, the day I begin learning "Outdoor Clotheslines." I am the sole student in the class that my friend and neighbour, Denise Saulnier, will teach. She is an umpteenth-generation Nova Scotian, born and raised on the "French Shore" between Yarmouth and Digby. I am a transplanted Vancouverite. Today we both live in the village of D'Escousse, on Ilse Madame, in Cape Breton.

It all began with a conversation over tea. Shyly, I shared my secret longing with my new Acadian friend. "Oh, sure," she said at first, "go ahead, use your clothesline." She paused, then added: "And if I were you, I wouldn't even worry about the laundry police."

Laundry police?

"Just kidding," she laughed. "Sort of. Besides, it's quite possible that the rules aren't as strict on Isle Madame as they are where I grew up."

Rules?

My friend chattered on, then stopped at the sight of my woebegone face. "It's all that colour and movement that gets to you, isn't it?" she said. "And the symmetry of the line, right?"

I nodded, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"You haven't done this before, have you?"

Well yes, in a way. We did have an outdoor clothesline where I grew up at 43rd Avenue and Dunbar Street on the southwest side of Vancouver. I dimly remember sandy bathing suits and beach towels strung out on it – but not everyday clothes. Those languished down in our basement. I explained how the ropes squared the area around the washing machine. Inside, it felt as though you were in a tent, and finding your way out through the folds could be a challenge.

"Indoor clotheslines?" Her furrowed brow suggested that such a method defeated the overall purpose. Outdoor fresh and all that. She was right. Technically clean, the clothes often continued to exude a vague whiff of *eau de cellar.*

*"*I have no idea," I said. "And it wasn't just my family. Hardly anyone I knew used an outdoor clothesline when I was a kid. You just never saw one." Out of West Coast loyalty, I omitted the other, more likely explanation for Vancouver's dearth of outdoor clotheslines – the rains do come.

"Listen, I would try the outdoor clothesline," I said, "if I knew those damn rules you were talking about."

"Monday morning, first thing," she replied.

So here we are. No birds are singing; no birds are even awake. Regulation one: all laundry must be on the line by 10:00 a.m. Otherwise, "Well, *sloven* is a word that I've heard used," says Denise.

We are in the laundry room on the second floor of the seaside house that my husband and I live in. To reach the clothesline, all I have to do is open a window; it stretches from the house to a tree a full 50 feet away. As we did in my childhood, I have a capacious wicker basket into which I've piled the clean washing. And I've remembered my friend's stern reminder, too, that kitchen linens (dish cloths, tea towels, napkins and tablecloths) must be washed separately from personal articles (bath towels and face cloths).

I start with socks and underwear. These, as with all other items, must proceed from light to dark and from small to large. Denise takes me to task for my profligate use of clothes-pegs (no gale blows this morning, after all) and I learn to space the pegs regularly, not merely when I feel a creative urge to snap one on the line.

As instructed, I fold each piece of laundry over the line, pull it taut and peg it and, within each category, spread out the most pleasing colour gradations. The toes on the socks must be pointed in the same direction. Jeans and pants must be pegged at the waistbands, shirt at their tails (to fasten them at their shoulders is to leave unsightly tweak marks: not good form). Light items, such as sheets and pillowcases, go on the line last; quickly dried, they can be retrieved first.

By mid-morning I've met my objective and created my own fabric ballet. I am content. There is only one other question on my mind: "Who are the laundry police?"

"Family," says Denise. "When your surname matches the name of the place you live in, good luck avoiding the family laundry police. Neighbours, too. It's a village thing."

I try to imagine a Simminsville. In Canada, with the spelling of our surname, Simminsville would be a metropolis of 12 or so, pulled together from a 4000-mile radius. Not much of a police force. I stick with the general concept of villages, a complex reality I am slowly coming to understand.

"So the village makes the rules?"

"No, those seem to be universal across the Maritimes. Take a look around you, you'll see. By the way, great job for your first time. Next thing you know, we'll be sewing quilts, baking bread…." She starts to laugh at her own joke until she catches the eager look on my face.

"No way, Marjorie."

I've had a good day. The folded laundry smells wonderful – and I haven't heard a single siren. But can I share two small secrets? Between you and me? My arm is sore…from all the heave-hoeing on the clothesline…and I still love my… dryer.

Learning Cape Bretonese, D'Escousse, NS, 2003.

Learning a second language is never easy. Learning a first language for the second time is even stranger. Or so it seems to me, an English-speaker from the West Coast, slowing gaining proficiency in "Cape Bretonese"...

"Hey, Phoebe, take it easy, you'll have a coronary!"

The dog and I are out walking in the village on a hand-burning morning in January, and have stopped to tease a friend as she furiously shovels snow left and right along the short pathway from her house to the road. Phoebe is definitely energetic. And talkative.

"Lord liftin'," she pants, "shovellin's hard work. This old-style winter's making me right owly-leastways, this morning." She pauses for one raggedy breath, quirks an eyebrow. "Hadda crowd home last night, went wide open – didn't keep you'se up, did we?"

"No, didn't hear a thing."

"Good, dear, good. Thought you mighta heard my cousin, Seamus. Looked to get right savage wild, he did."

"What do you mean? Did he start a fight?"

Phoebe's extended family can be... expressive in their emotional range.

"Only with himself, if you know what I mean. Tee-tot'ly-ossified. Told him to fill his boots, and Lord love him, didn't he just. I meant the chowder, not the rum. He's not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but he's some sweet when he's sober. And the way he was drug up, it's no wonder his head's not screwed down tight. What a sin."

“That bad, was it?” I had a fairly turbulent childhood myself. Not always easy to overcome with any measure of grace.

“Honest to God,” says Phoebe emphatically. “My uncle – rest in peace all the same – kept those kids busy as a flea on a hot shovel. And my aunt – rest in peace, she was drug up just as bad – used to go like 90, and always mad as a wet hen, too. All them kids ended up a pickle short of a jar, just from the racket 'round them.”

“But Phoebe, that's awful.”

Family. We all have one or three members we've wanted to set loose in an oar-less dinghy – on a strong current to the open ocean. At least for a week or two.

“Don't you worry on Seamus. He's got us now. And lucky us, we got him!” She rolls her eyes in mock exasperation, then glances back at the house and laughs. “Yiss, yiss, yiss, gotta take care of your family!”

She's back to shovelling now. The dog and I walk on, awkwardly, all extremities numb with cold by now. Phoebe's final words have a sunny resonance, though. At least, if I understood all that! If I did, then cancel the dinghy order. Phoebe has the better idea. No worries about that stout heart of hers, either.

Looking Like Kehoe, D'Escousse, NS, 2003.

"Member number, please." I am at our island food co-op, and the cashier's fingers are poised over the keys on the cash register. I stop the transfer of items from cart to counter and oh happy day, the number comes to me without hesitation.

The cashier's eyes are now fixed on the name read-out at the top of the register. She stares long and hard at the names glowing there, mine and my husband's.

"Wrong number," she says.

"No, it's right," I say, smiling. "That's us." From her expression of disbelief, you'd think I was claiming to be the Queen of Sheba. She nonetheless begins sliding the items across the scanner. Just a few groceries today. We'll be tallied up soon and then I can take one impatient dog, waiting in the car, to the beach for a walk. Ah, that'll be grand.

"Forty-three sixty-eight," says the cashier. She is still looking at me suspiciously, though her tone is pleasant. I hand over the exact change – everything is going right today – and wait for her to give me the receipt. As she does her eyes suddenly brighten. Puzzle solved, says the expression.

"You're one of the Kehoe girls, aren't you?"

Oh boy, here we go again.

"No," I say firmly. "I am not."

Now she's wide-eyed and defiant in pose, one hand on her hip, head on a tilt; "Are you sure?"

Maybe I should just give up and join the clan. This must be the twentieth time in the past two years I've said no to a question like this. Mind you, I've never had someone disbelieve me – or at least express the disbelief.

The query reverberates in the air. I guess I have to say something. I have a a feeling she won't let me leave if I don't.

“I have three sisters, two live in Ottawa, one in B.C. We are not Kehoes, by birth, marriage or chance. The Kehoes are a lovely family, but not mine.” As I walk away I see the cashier still shaking her head; No need to lie, I can almost hear her say.

A brutal easterly wind slams against the shores of the beach where the dog and I go next. Heedless, our hound trots along happily; I walk on a slant, shoulders hunched up to block the wind from my bare neck. My thoughts are active: Mostly I think about the complexities of being a west coast transplant, and my apparent resemblance to one of the longest-established families on Isle Madame.

Years beyond counting, since the first Irish Kehoes came to the island and settled in greatest numbers in an area called Rocky Bay. Some of my forebears – Simminses, Beauforts, O'Flahertys, Atkinsons and Glasses, the only names I remember – settled in Ontario in the early 19th century. Your basic early-Canadian Anglo grouping of Irish, Scot and English. Who never came near the Maritimes. Or so the family stories went.

Out of nowhere, I think about the movie Six Degrees of Separation, which maintained all the world's people could find someone they knew in common, in no more than six circles of acquaintanceship and circumstance.

However, they would not necessarily share blood ties.

Growing up in B.C., I would periodically try to lay claim to one or another of my ancestral groups. One month I'd be keen to align myself with the British (usually after reading an Enid Blyton novel, where the kids all had adventures and were always eating weird and wonderful stuff), and the next month it would be Irish (so tragically romantic and didn't they have the most beautiful hunter horses?).

“You're no more British or Irish than you're Yugoslavian,” my father would say to me bluntly. He'd add, after noting my disappointment, “You're seventh-generation Canadian. Be proud of that.”

I was an adult before I fully understood that his passion for Canada came in large part from a deep-seated loathing of the British class system, under which our family apparently suffered. He also, plainly and vocally, loved what he perceived as the physical hardiness and spiritual generosity of Canada's peoples, both First Nation and immigrant. The fact that I may or may not have resembled my paternal great-grandmother Charlotte Pringle O'Flaherty (just a wee bit Irish), was not of the slightest interest to him, and thus not to the child that was me. Now I don't know what to think or feel about the subject.

The bitter wind has not let up, and oblivious dog or no, we're going home now. Even Canadian-born, there are limits to my hardiness.

“It happened again,” I call up the stairs to my husband's office. Footsteps come down the hall, then, from the top of the stairs, “What happened?”

“I'm a Kehoe again.”

“Hang on, I'll be right down.” My husband finds these stories terribly amusing. But this one has him doubled up.

“No, no,” he gasps between bouts of laughter, “you've got it all wrong. Don't you remember what my old Kehoe buddy said? It's not that you look like them, it's that somewhere along the line, a very prolific Simmins passed through Rocky Bay!”

You know, this day has gone thoroughly pear-shaped. I'm still frozen from my beach walk, thoroughly confused in mind and spirit, and a reputed liar. To top it off, my husband now intimates that my possible connection to an island family may be from the wrong side of the blanket.

“No,” I say eloquently. Long pause, then: “We're not going there.”

“All right,” says my husband, momentarily sober again, “then you explain it.” I can't. So instead, I argue.

“I'm not tall.” I think jealously of the tall Kehoe women I've met. You don't need much imagination for the word Viking to come to mind.

“Neither are all of them. There's a shorter branch of the family – just like you.”

“I don't dance till I drop.” The women and men dance like cast members of Riverdance.

“Well, you're out of shape at the moment.”

Darn, that one backfired. Try again. I return to the basic premise: “But how is it I look like them, exactly? I don't see it.”

“Listen, it's not an exact sort of thing. It's more of a gestalt, or general similarity. Fair hair and the coloring for sure. Celtic coloring definitely. Or a strain of, anyway.”

“So why can't I be Black Irish? You know, with blue-black hair, milk-white skin and violet eyes. I'd claim that in a heartbeat.”

“Happily, you are what you are.” He's laughing again. “Which suits me fine. Me darlin' girl, I've always thought the Kehoe women brightened the landscape.”

It is time, possibly, for a fit of Irish temper. Perhaps a flat-out gale.

CHAPTER 18: OF CHILDREN AND MAKING IT RIGHT

16 February 2011, Halifax, NS

As of tomorrow, I will be 52 years old. There doesn't seem to be a single thing one can say about aging that hasn't been said ad nauseam. All the same, I am as startled as anyone else to have tipped into my 50s. I am no longer, as my friend Denise also wryly says of herself, "one of the smooth ones." I try to ignore aging the way my mother did, as though it were a noisy housefly to be batted aside, and try to make it as irrelevant as my father did, a man who never actually grew old in outlook or responsiveness, but did, as my oldest sister said, "wear out." I am hoping that my genetic legacy will make me live every moment of my life as committedly as they did.

Genetic legacy. On my sad days, I tell myself that I was too stupid to propagate – an activity those with even the lowest IQs manage, along with those from every other range of intelligence. On my angry days, I list off the barriers to procreation and produce an impressive list of why not's – beginning and ending with I didn't want to be a mother on my own, without a partner, dead broke and struggling. I'd been a child pretty much on my own, with both parents overwhelmed by life events and choices, and I wasn't in a hurry to relive those feelings of isolation and desolation from the other side.

Right, add coward to the list.

On my wondering days, I know that I *think too much* and imagined scenarios that might never have occurred. I have seen so much hurt in the relations between parent and child, so many wretched strains and betrayals. I have seen these generally, not just in my own personal spheres.

Oddly, one of the more obvious possibilities to explain my childlessness really wasn't a factor: my sister Karin was mentally ill, but I never believed in my bones I'd see her dark blue eyes again, in

the face of my own child. There are times that come and go in a life and then perhaps hover, threatening to return. Others you just know are truly gone. *I'd done my time with mad shadows.*

On my calm days I remember my deep appreciation of calm – and quiet, order and predictability. This is not the world of children. Every calm day I have is like the very first, ever: I explore the parameters with a wondering, grateful heart.

These then are the reasons I think on, when I awake some mornings with a confused heart. *Where in god's name are my children, the family of my own making?* My children were the stuff of endless hours of imaginings, their names all chosen, listed in the back of my journals from age 15 on. Countless dreams, too. I even felt I knew their foibles and fancies, long before actualization. The girl would love horses and dogs, the boy not as much. He preferred birds, camping and any pastime on the water. The youngest danced through the world, had trouble with numbers and linear logic. All would love each other and be small, solid worlds to each other, knowing the incalculable gift of siblinghood. All would sing well and unlike me, a self-taught guitarist, would learn to read and even write music. They would play instruments of every sort – and play them well. They would be safe, loved, delighted in, by two adults who lived adult lives of moderate tedium and contentment. And I would teach them, as Mum taught me, about *Roy G. Biv.*

Do you see that rainbow, Mum asked me, when I was very young, the only child not in school yet. She pointed to the southwest, and a bright-dark sky over the mouth of the Fraser River. *Oh*, I breathed in answer, my gaze aligned with hers, *oh yes I see it*. She smiled. *Can you tell me the names of the colours in the rainbow?* I was lost in the deep pleasure of the place where green meets blue in the rainbow arc, did not answer her. *There's an easy way to remember the colours*, she said, *Roy G. Biv*. I didn't understand and stayed quiet. I thought Roy G. Biv was a man I hadn't met, but would, and he would explain the rainbow to me, as my mother apparently could not. She stroked my thick, wavy hair

off from my face, stroked away the questions in my eyes, said with a smile, *roygbiv is a way to remember red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet – and there's your rainbow, every colour in it*.

Roy G. Biv, I said, syllables molasses-slow, for I never saw the mnemonic any other way, *it's funny!* Mum's eyes widened – she suddenly saw the name too, I am sure – and she laughed with me. *It is funny – but it works!* Her laugh stopped and her face became eager: *Do you know why I wanted you children? Because I wanted to show you the world – all it wonders and beauties. I feel so lucky I can do this.* She looked so happy, was so happy, there was no doubt, in that extended moment of colour and companionship. *Will you remember roygbiv? she asked and laughed a brook-pretty laugh.*

Yes, I will.

Sometimes I think about a cartoon in *The New Yorker* I cut out once. A woman sits bolt up in bed in her New York penthouse, husband at her side: *Damn it, George, I knew I forgot something – children.* And for me, in spite of two decades of wheeling and dealing and crying and raging – in the end time contracts and it's only one argument and one answer and one reality. *Damn it, no children.*

Right, then, that's over.

But what do you mean I have no family? – that's not who I am. How can I live this life configuration that makes no sense to me?

Make these voices stop, I beg you.

Mostly I just couldn't Make It Right, couldn't make the complexities of building a family come together in a package I could accept.

If there had been one hopeful beginning, with even the most meager underpinnings of joy, however temporary – then perhaps I would have a family of my own. Without a glimpse of rainbow, I was paralyzed, could not look up and over to a future with cleared skies.

You couldn't make it perfect, suggests my husband, with deep sympathy and understanding of the woman he married. No one can, but you thought it was an option.

Yes, I truly did.

Don says I am hard on myself – harder than most people are on themselves, especially when it comes to the major decisions I've made in my life. You keep wanting to re-write them, he says, give them better endings. Can't a decision just be a decision – made in the very best faith and knowledge at the time? Can't you ease up on yourself just a little?

I have, I tell him, even defensively some days. *I am much better now than when I met you. Why I am a regular little self-cheerleader now – Miss Cheerywinky!*

He laughs at the nickname I gave myself for when I am grumpy, but won't be deflected. You are better, he says, and you know it. Better all the time, too. MacTavish and I know these things. We've taken note. You don't even kick and thrash in your sleep any more. Or talk in your sleep. Quite civilized, really.

He makes me smile. He makes me see myself as I am, not as I was. This is the air I need to breathe now. Life can't be re-written. Only new chapters bring change, new chances to Make It Right in the moment, not in retrospect. I still have trouble living with imperfections of any sort, but *not as much.*

Self-forgiveness is a curious creature. It darts in and out of hedgerows whippet-fast and tires me out some days. Other days I run as fast as it does, tackle it right at the ankles: *Gotcha*.

Yet other days I remember my Dad's eyes shining with excitement, even in the last hard year of his life*: Marjorie, believe me, the best is yet to come*.

I believe he is right.

CHAPTER 19: CONTENTMENT

18 February 2011, Halifax, NS, 8:45 a.m. (Email)

Dear Don

It shocks me how much I dislike you being gone. Such a lovely birthday day and evening with you, and then, poor man, you are up and gone so early this morning on the trip to Toronto. I felt sad eating my breakfast alone at the dining room table, itself still festive with flowers, candles and a pretty tablecloth. I'll return to it in a moment, to write some thank you notes for birthday gifts.

Thank you, dear Don, for all the wonderful presents in the past few days. My flame-tipped roses are still fresh and surprisingly fragrant for a winter-time bouquet. I love the card with the little girl hugging her horse and I love the barn coat! Imagine, I can fit a size small again! I'm already into the Sheltie stationery and I am embarrassingly happy with the Sheltie night-light! The donation to The Coming Home Society feels so right and so good. Makes me feel I've touched my west coast world and maybe, if we are lucky, the life of a Coast Salish woman who wants to come home again, to heal and grow strong again.

Add to all this the feast we had last night...and I could cry for all the cherishing. You are my best gift of any season, any time. I think it's hilarious that between the cocktails and appetizers and the lobster main course, we slipped away to have a nap - is this our life lately, or what! I am tired today, too, though hope to have at least the morning at the computer writing.

We'll have the champagne when you're home again. Have an excellent week of business and family time. Give my love to *toute la gang Chez Cameron(s)* and take lots for yourself. MacTavish and I miss you already. We will both be properly groomed when you return, I in for a hair-cut today, and MacT to Sharon's scissors sometime next week.

Love and hugs,

M & M

25 February 2011, Halifax, NS, 9:30 a.m.

Don will be home around midnight. He left our truck at the airport so I don't have to pick him up. My night vision is pretty much shot – though oddly, I still don't need reading glasses. I avoid driving at night as much as I can. It's not too bad on city roads, because they are well-lit. It's the long, black highways I find frightening to navigate. I have no depth perception and "lose" the road at every inky bend. Headlights seem to pierce right through my skull via my tender middle-aged eyeballs. I have glasses that help with light-sensitivity, but only modestly so. I am grateful to Don for getting home on his own steam. MacTavish and I will be glad to be a family trio again. We all do best, I think, when we are together. Being together also makes these dark winter days easier to manage.

I am tired of snow and ice – even though this winter didn't really start in earnest until January. I've been a Maritimer long enough to know that a short winter seems to makes spring come faster. The problem is, the Vancouver-raised girl will always look for spring flowers earlier than she has any business doing so, on this coast at any rate. Adding to my impatience is the fact that I also planted lots of new bulbs this year. I can't wait to see the new tulips, daffodils and narcissus, in the front and back garden. Being a Maritimer means being more patient in the wait for spring. Translation: *all in good time, don't whinge.*

I am glad for the years I spent as a deckhand on my fisherman's troller, and for the later years writing about the commercial fishing industry. If anything taught me not to whinge, it was being around fishermen. Their work is heavy, dangerous, bloody and unending. This makes a person *want* to complain, as unendingly. Instead, if you're smart enough, you focus on the other side of the fishing life, the one of privilege and extreme beauty. It is all around you.

Roy G. Biv, again: double-rainbows at dawn, their vivid colours set against a gold and pink northern sky. Dall porpoises playing at the bow of the vessel, wake-bubbles created on their long noses

and skimming back along their shiny black and white bodies. The lingering, homey smell of bacon, eggs and toast in the cabin, on a filthy-skied rainy morning. Each time you step back in the cabin from the deck, you feel safe, nurtured. The oil stove is always warm, you can make more coffee or toast if you want. The seas you've traveled over are more shades of grey, green and blue than you knew existed; you never tire of the waves' frilled edges. You make stacks of sandwiches, find the treat cookies under the galley berth and under the deck hatch, the last of the fresh fruit, now bruised but no matter. Ginger ales all around. The food is inhaled, the skipper never even leaves the cockpit. For most of the day.

Later, much later, standing thigh-deep in pink salmon on starboard side of the deck, laughing at the absurdity of not being able to move to my cleaning trough, not being able to move, at all. Deckhand Two, on the port side, has made it to his cleaning trough, sings a victory song. Singing is helpful. Both of us know at midnight, the day is long from over. The deck lights are an eerie green-white in the darkness of a Pacific night; the fish blood smells metallic, is the only scent in the world, now. My hands and feet are freezing and my face is going numb. None of it matters. We're making a good dollar for an honest day's work. I kill as fast and as kindly as I can; it's not something I ever wanted to do, but there is satisfaction in competence. Salmon are delicious. I can kill for this taste, this money. Apart from waitressing, it will be the only good money I ever make, in my lifetime. I think somehow I knew that, as I sang along with Deckhand Two. Behind us, in the cockpit pens, my fisherman is also cleaning fish. His hands are a blur.

Later, latest yet, those same two muscular arms lift me off my feet and carry me into the cabin. My knees buckle as my fisherman pulls off my wet boots and tugs off my blood-streaked rain gear. "Can you manage the rest?" he smiles, patting my jeans. I nod, too tired to speak. "You and Gordie did well," he says, his own face grey with fatigue beneath the wind-burn. "You especially. It was a big day.

We dressed over 800 pinks and sockeye." He nods at the only stateroom, where I sleep in solitary splendour; the men sleep in the fo'c's'le below. "I wish I could sleep with you – but it's not right, not with someone else aboard – do you understand?'

You and Gordie did well – you especially. I nod at him with happy eyes. And yes, I understand. There will be other nights.

There were. I am glad for that.

26 February 2011, Halifax, NS

People do leave, and do come home. It makes my heart pound sometimes. I just love that second part.

I was holding MacTavish against my chest in bed last night when I heard Don's footsteps on the walkway by the side door to the house. Tavish was off like a shot, sounding his full-on alarm bark. "S'okay, Tav, it's just Don," I said uselessly, getting up myself. *It's Don, it's Don, let me see him –*

He looked fatigued but was cheerful and palpably glad to be home. "It was a great trip," he said several times, between bear hugs to me and smaller hugs to MacTavish, "but busy, lots going on." This is Don-speak for a trip that would have most people on their knees whimpering for clemency. I come from family of workers, all my friends are hard workers too. I've had exasperating and dysfunctional boyfriends, but never a lazy one. I've even flattered myself in this regard. But I mostly think I didn't really comprehend the term, *work*, until I met Don. When he decides to focus and *produce*, he is an awesome force. That he does this almost every day of his life is hard to explain to people. Questions such as How's Don, what's he up to these days? are difficult to answer succinctly. Ah, do you mean his books, or his newspaper column or his real estate businesses or his new Green Interview initiative or his latest round of speeches or his new novel or his corporate writing projects or – gulp – his business and sailing plans for the future?

Mostly what I have observed with wonder are his twin abilities of divergent and convergent thought. I am queen of the divergent thinkers – you want ideas, lots of them, on anything and everything? I am your girl – but it's only been since knowing Don that I've understood more about the functions of convergent thinking. *Bear down on the point,* as my father used to say. Ideas are indeed wonderful – but they must be *implemented or enacted* for greatest exposure and effect. This is how books come to be published, not merely dreamed about or stuck at a first draft. This is how small

businesses actually give back, don't just sound good, in discussions, or look good on the drawing board. This is how boats are built, and boats are sailed. This is how dreams about sailing 6000 miles to the Bahamas and back actually occur for….

….a man, a woman….and the bravest whippet in all the land.

Welcome home, I said. *We've missed you*. The "we" looks a little different, feels so much the same, for…

….a man, a woman….and a brilliant Shetland Sheep dog, yet to be tested on a long voyage.

Essay written for Don's mother, who I never met. Written while cruising on our sailboat to the Bahamas, 2005.

Prairie Dreamscape

"While you're on your hind legs prancing," says my husband, smiling widely and extending his empty coffee mug in my general (sitting) direction across the galley table from him.

Before I have a chance to inquire about what surely must be a newly broken ankle, he's already retrieved the coffee thermos from its safe spot in the galley sink and is filling both our mugs.

"I haven't used that expression in years," he says, still smiling, though gently now, memories warming his eyes. "Pretty silly, isn't it?"

"No," I say. "I like it. Most of us just say, 'While you're up …?' and leave it at that. Hind legs prancing is more fun. Your Mum, right?"

"Who else?"

It's true, my husband's mother, whom I never met, seemed to have a revolving and plentiful supply of amusing expressions. Her three sons still use many of them.

"We'll do our little best."

"Time to call it half a day."

"Well, I'll love you and leave you."

"That's why I'm so much fun to be with."

And my three favourites: “You crazy fool, you'll kill us all” (about bad driver); “Let joy be unconfined” (said with heavy irony); and, “We must do with things as things will do with us” (expressing calm amidst confusion).

I wish I could have seen the look on her face as she offered up these cheery or florid sayings, though I almost can when I look at the face of her eldest son, my husband, as the side of his mouth twitches with a suppressed laugh and his eyes shine with right-there-ness of enjoying his mother's voice and peppery delivery.

They disagreed, and often, he tells me, about how to live life the best one could. But I know from photographs how similar their smiles were and how warmly they exchanged these smiles. Lack of love was not an issue. As for the rest, they both “did their little best” to respect one another's choices. Every turn of phrase shared with me is the most evocative and immediate way I will ever come to know my husband's mother.

Like all of us, she was an adult for many more years than a child. And yet my most enjoyable imaginings of her are as a child and were given to me after my first visit to Manitoba, three autumns ago. It was there, just outside of the small town of Treherne, that my husband's mother grew up. She was the second oldest of eight children. They were farm children, hardworking and kept relentlessly busy by parents who were more so.

Over them all, sun like clarified butter shone from a blue bowl of prairie sky. As vivid were stretching acres of golden grain, swaying in the breezes. Smaller flower and vegetable gardens were tended by nimble young fingers. Chickens and cows were fed, eggs and milk retrieved. Horses were groomed, harnessed and worked, and in stolen moments, I like to think, ridden bareback, their summer coasts glossy and hot against bare child legs.

It is impossible to think of large families and farms and not think of food. From the screen door

leading to the kitchen, there must have come the hunger-stirring smells of baking bread, meat stews, applesauce with nutmeg, the tart tang of pickles and the simmering, ruby richness of jams. At the supper table, prayers for health, of gratitude, for rain and sun as needed and God willing, amen. Let the wheat harvest be bountiful this year. Now sit straight and elbows off the table, thank you.

In the winter, the vast flat world turned white and frigid. Slim boys and girls became rounded by many layers of clothing. Head were haloed by steam; prairie dragons, each hard breath pouring more smoke into the air. As though charmed, the children were drawn to the shining, wickedly pointed icicles that hung from the house eaves. The taller boys broke off the narrower icicles, placed them one by one in the ring of mittened palms. All the children sucked and crunched on the dripping bounty until their mouths and tongues were numb. Then to school. On the way home, the children walked even faster, with hopeful thoughts of cocoa or steaming chicken broth awaiting them at home.

These are the things I think of, when I imagine my husband's mother's growing-up years in Manitoba.

The autumn my husband and I visited Treherne, the praire-scape shone a dappled gold and green. I soon learned that clusters of graceful elms announced homesteads.

“There it is,” said my husband. And there indeed it was, the white clapboard house I'd seen in photo albums, its immediate perimeter shaded by elms and hazel trees. The house even had a name, Hazeldell, and was still a family home, occupied by a distant cousin of my husband.

The photos I'd seen were wedding photos. My husband's mother married a Prairie man, though they met on the west coast of Canada and would later return there. As I remembered the photos, he wore a well-tailored suit, his expression lit by pride. She was petite, and her figure trim. The dress was feminine but not fussy, and a pretty shawl added a sweet, old-fashioned touch. Her long hair was worn as a Scandinavian woman might, in sleek braids around her head. All around the pair were family.

There are bands of shadow on some of the beaming faces. A sunny day then, which made skin warm, eyes narrow and the air fragrant with blooms.

I've been so lost in my meandering thoughts of long ago, that when I look up, I am startled to see the world beyond our cabin windows dipping and rising. No house this, though our boat has been home for over six months. We are a long was from Treherne. From Canada for that matter. Even from the North American mainland.

“Time to climb the wooden hill,” says my husband, yawning. Another saying of his mother's, but I can't remember what this one means. I lift an eyebrow.

“You know, wooden hill,” he repeats. “The staircase to the second floor, where people sleep at night.” He waggles his eyebrows back at me, points a finger toward the boat's overheard. He looks so goofy I can't resist playing the straight guy.

“I think it's too cold to sleep on the deck.” Wouldn't that be comfortable. I pause, still straight-faced, trying to remember yet one more of his mother's expressions. It comes to me on the downside of a giggle; “But have it your own foolish way, if you must.”

We will, of course, kip down below in the V-berth, warm but closed off from the stars. If I could choose, I'd ask for a dreamscape of cobalt prairie sky, filled with tumbling cumulus clouds. Perhaps I'd see a young girl with her hair in braids, tied with ribbons, sitting in the shade of an elm, a book in her lap. More likely she's working in the garden or in the kitchen, spooning blackberry jam into Mason jars. Maybe she's resting too, under a talc-soft cotton quilt that she and her sisters pieced together. She could be dreaming of becoming a teacher, a wife, and a mother. Tonight, Miss Hazel Robertson is simply a young girl in a family of 10, listening to the last of the cricket song through the open bedroom window.

28 February 2011, Halifax, NS, 9:00 a.m.

A pleasant weekend and so good for we three – Don, Tav and me – to be together again, after Don's week in Toronto. Saturday morning dawned brilliantly sunny, with a new layering of feathery snow atop previous snowfalls. I shoveled our walkways and stairs before breakfast, searching, and failing to find, a word or words to describe the smell of snow. Two days later, on another sunny morning, I have decided that snow does not have a smell, only sensations of cold in the nose and on the face that seem that they should be smells.

There are no ambiguities to snow as a visual entity. Nor do there seem to be finite expressions of it. Sun-lit snow offers tiny gems to the eyes. The colours are pin-prick small, shine in iridescent blankets over yards, park lands, hillsides. Swirling snowflakes are small starred universes, set free from the sky. Fluffy snow demands to be scooped up and marveled at, each thumb-brush revealing ancient, lacy mysteries.

You see? No two snowflakes are the same – isn't that a miracle?

Mum? Is that you?

Her words are not my first memory of the world. But snow might be.

940 Riverside Drive, Ottawa, Ontario – I am so bundled up I can barely see. The hood of my snowsuit covers my head and is tugged down over my forehead. A woolen scarf is wrapped once around my neck, once over my mouth, then tied to one side on my shoulder. In terms of skin that meets the frigid air, it would be my nose and eyelids and nothing else. I am two or perhaps three years old. Likely three, as I am able to stumble along unaided and I quiver with the intent to travel further forward. I want to go to - *the world out there, in the glittering snow*. I stand on the big wrap-around

porch of our river-side home, at the top of many stairs down to the yard. I am aware of nothing but snow-desire. Snow with colour-glints like the crystal candle holders on our dining room table, when the sun strikes their sharply cut angles: royal blue, turquoise, tangerine, yellow and green. Snow that I will put in my mouth, throw in the air. Snow that I will form into clumped together shapes of almost-balls. Snow that will make my wool mittens soggy and hands numb almost immediately.

All this I want, desperately, inchoately, standing at the top of the stairway looking down on rainbow sprinkles in the snow. Siblings or parents may be near me, must be near me – but I do not sense them or want them. I step down to the first stair –

– and seem to be over my head in snow. Did I slide down to the deeper snow at the bottom of the staircase? Was the snow on that first stair so deep I got lost? Did I just slip and land on my own bottom on that first stair? I think I am laughing. I know that caring arms have scooped me up. As I am pulled up I see more rainbows, caught in the line of icicles along the roof edge. I reach out with eager hands, snow forgotten, to the closest icicle. *Oh please!* There is a tiny sun is captured within the icy dagger. If I suck the icicle – will it be cold or hot?

A winter day in Ottawa, fifty years ago.

I have a companion memory to this one, from the same period – perhaps even the same winter. I visit the memory like a friend who always has a kind word at hand and makes the perfect cup of tea.

A low winter sun in the Ottawa Valley shines slantwise on a black and white world. The snow is packed smooth and firm on the country laneway but is impassable in the fields that bracket it. Beyond these, on the perimeter of all that can be known by a three-year-old, are Dutch elms and birches, tall black sticks that fringe the open country acres.

“Are we ready?” Dad’s question is exhaled in a puff of cold-smoke; a real cigarette adds to the smoke-wisps around him. His voice is excited. He loves adventures.

“Almost, Richard, give me a moment.” Mum must be “counting her chicks” – all four children are aboard the horse-drawn wagon, though our bodies are mostly obscured under piles of wool blankets. Minutes before, we’d been running, hollering and playing in the snow, nicely toasty from the exertion. Now we are stationary, silent and freezing cold. Mum tugs a blanket here, a blanket there, to cover us better, turns to Dad, says, “Yes, we’re ready.” Dad helps her into the wagon. She comes straight to me, which is what I expect and want. I am the youngest.

“Cold?”

In answer I hold out my arms. “Wait,” she smiles and settles herself cross-wise in the wagon, back against one wooden side. She lifts me with one arm and with the other, opens her fur coat and tucks me on her lap. She closes the heavy beaver-fur coat tightly around us. The instant heat from our two bodies touching is exactly what I needed. The cold is so intense it isn’t a feature of the world, it is the world, hard and implacable. Now that I am not focused on it as much, the world is friendly and of great interest again. The smell of the two draft horses – sharpish sweat, exhalations of grain-breath – makes me want to be nearer to them, place my hands on anything furry I can reach. I can smell the leather of their harness too, honeyed by saddle-soap. One of the horses whinnies, stomps an impatient hoof. A shiver of bells rises in the air. For some reason this breaks a tension of sorts, makes all of us laugh. We are excited too.

“Are we ready?” This time it is the driver of the wagon, the man who owns the sleigh-ride business. Dad sits beside him, in the front seat. Dad turns behind to us, Mum nods and six voices shout: “Yes!”

The horses surge forward over a broad ribbon of white, the sound of bells marking each step.

A winter day in the Ottawa Valley, five decades ago.

CHAPTER 20: CITY LIFE; COASTAL LIVES

1 March 2011, Halifax, NS

I started painting the kitchen yesterday. I have one task finished, three coats of white paint on the Douglas fir window frames above the sink. The difference to the room, with even this small bit of painting done, is remarkable. The room is much brighter.

Which is the major point of this exercise: *Let there be light!*

August, 2006. We step into the kitchen at 24 Armshore Drive for the first time, with our real estate agent.

"Don," I say, looking up at the one and only light in the room, "the woman does not cook." Strangely, it has turned out that Don knows the couple who are selling the house; they are not close friends, but not mere acquaintances, either.

"She may or may not," he replies, "but she is an artist – a painter – and a fine one."

"And the husband?" All the men in my family cook. But I do the cooking in my life with Don. Every meal.

"An economist."

"How do you suppose they chop anything in here?" I ask. *Aside from their fingers, off from their hands.* "Or wash dishes? It's dark as a boot." This time we both look above us to the single bulb in the centre of the room. "I can't imagine," says Don, shaking his head.

He has shaken his head at any number of odd features to the house. But his eyes gleamed at ocean-side setting – and the mooring, small boat shop and wharf that come with the house. Mine did too: a million-dollar setting in the city – for two writers? Can we do this? With the suite in the

basement to rent out, to cover the high taxes and a small part of the mortgage, yes, Don tells me.

All the same, if we buy the house, it will take every nickel we have, with a hefty mortgage remaining. Urban waterfront does not come cheaply. We have not sold our primary residence in Cape Breton and it may take time to do this. Regardless, there will be no extra money for renovations. It is either take it, or leave it. That means old bathrooms, old appliances and the "*new* kitchen renovation, done in the 1980s." The kitchen hasn't changed much since the year it was built and Don was born: 1937.

"You know that strange light fixture in the upstairs spare bedroom?" I ask Don.

"The one with three adjustable bulbs?" He knew where I was going with this.

"Would that – "

"Yes, it would help a bit."

It did. As did the first re-painting I did, which changed the plum on the pseudo-wainscoting to light yellow and added cream to the walls. I did not paint the Douglas fir trim in the room, of which there was a good deal, or the maple cabinets. I wanted time to think about what I could do, and what we could afford to have done, for further upgrades to the room. Don affixed a spot light on a nail over the sink and with these tiny improvements, four years have passed. *There is nothing so permanent*, says a British friend of ours, *as a temporary solution that works*. And so our kitchen lighting is the same, as is the fact that our big blue house in Cape Breton has *still* not sold. Ditto the large mortgage and modest incomes.

We still can't renovate the kitchen.

And then last week we did something impulsive: we purchased a new refrigerator at the Sears Bargain Basement. We had gone in to look at recliner chairs – and so, of course, left with refrigerator-

lust. And why not? The new one has …an icemaker! (Would you like cubes or crushed ice?) It's a brand-new Whirpool! It is well-designed, so you don't have to stick most of your body into it, to find a particular item, while bashing your head on the way out. It is quite the sexiest appliance in our kitchen and we can't wait for it to be delivered, tomorrow.

Despite all the excitement over the fridge, the kitchen is still dark. Still hoping to change this on the cheap, I have many discussions with Denise, including ones about overall design. "I have 1930s Craftsman-style cupboards?" I repeated. "Art-deco hinges? Use William Morris-style fabric for the new curtains, to echo the 30s again? Overall, we can 'freshen' the reno done in the 80s, but can't push into the 2000s because the work would be too extensive and expensive? Decide on a 'policy plan'? So we don't overspend? A colour palette, to carry with me to every store when I am purchasing kitchen items? Oh my, so much to remember!"

In the end we decide that the only cheap fix available to me is painting. And I can paint, for sure. This time the wainscoting will be white and the walls a brighter yellow. With new paint and a new white refrigerator, the kitchen will look wonderfully fresh. Can't wait!

The house on Armshore was built in the 1930s; the houses Don and I grew up in in Vancouver were also built in the 1930s. We both laughed when we counted up the doors in the kitchen: five! Our growing up homes both had five doors into the kitchen too – we never expected to live with that feature again!

Don is, as we realized with great amusement early on, "the boy next door." There might have been 22 years of age difference between us – he married his first wife the year I was born – but we did grow up in the same city and strangely, on the same street, twenty blocks apart. Don lived at 23rd Avenue and Dunbar Street, and I lived at 43rd Avenue and Dunbar Street. I love that we know Vancouver intimately and differently, from our own decades there. We have talked endlessly about this,

sharing our impressions and details of our time in the city's history. I also enjoy that we've kept up with the city and all its huge changes in the past decade, with our five over-winters there, and our many visits. There have been moments when I felt a stranger in my home town. That has been unsettling – even unpleasant, shading on frightening. But I've pushed through those moments, did whatever observing and cataloguing I needed to do, to bring myself up-to-date with changes to Vancouver and its sprawling suburbs, some of which, like the historic fishing villages of Ladner and Steveston, I love as much as the city itself.

Some days I don't know who I am anymore – and most days it doesn't distress me, either. I am a Maritimer – *with all my heart* – when it suits me to be one, and I am a west coaster from that first scent of bull kelp and the softer salt air of the Pacific Ocean.

Oh you are so lucky, said a Cape Breton friend of mine once, when I told her I was sad to leave the west coast from our latest sojourn there. *You are lucky because you are loved wherever you go, and wherever you go you love.*

Sandra Delorey is right: I am lucky.

I just need a small lottery now, to bring this kitchen into the 21st century – could my luck cover that?

CHAPTER 21: ANNIVERSARY

14 March 2011, Halifax, NS

Thirteen years ago today…. It was a grand wedding….it is a grand life….

Today has been a regular work day around here, but tonight we are going out to one of the best restaurants in the city, Fiasco. There will be no Weight Watchers' fixation tonight! We have both lost 15 pounds since October 2 and are feeling very happy about that. Don is almost at his "goal weight." I have another 15 pounds to go, I hope. But no progress towards this tonight! Only pure debauched pleasure! Bring it on!

On this special anniversary day I had a special email from my riding instructor, Heidi M., to make my mood even lighter.

Hi Marjorie,

10:00 on Wed for a lesson sounds great - I will see you then. Yes, you are looking much stronger in the tack and now that it is spring you may have the bug to ride a little more so you will notice big improvements. See you Wednesday.

Thanks,

Heidi

….*much stronger in the tack*….an unusual phrasing, one I've never heard before – but I'll take it!

It was actually a great ride, that last one on Friday morning. I felt like me, a real rider again! Buddy was a bit of a pain when I was tacking him up – my God he must have had people hauling on that girth over the years to make him so nippy, crabby and ready to kick with hind *and* forelegs! – but good as gold under saddle. My ankles felt stronger, my back, arms and calves felt stronger, I had "weight" in my heels, decent posture and soft hands. As I say, real. Buddy the *Quarter horse* – surprise, surprise – has a lovely lope and better yet, doesn't fade out on the corners. I think he could canter right off the edge of the horizon with no particular help from my modest leg muscles.

Despite his grumpy ways, I am getting fond of old Buddy. And he is old, too! Heidi says he's 22, and his backend isn't always the steadiest. He slipped under himself several times on Friday, which gave my neck several good jerks in the process and really hurt. I don't think his slips were caused by the footing in the indoor arena, which was not too deep and nicely raked. I must mention this to Heidi. If it's arthritis, as I suspect it may be, there's nothing she can do about it, but she should know and keep an eye on him for soundness. Ah old horses – they give and give until there's only essence of ability left.

Time to put on a party dress. Heels, too! Red.

15 March 2011, Halifax, NS

Fiasco was wonderful. Taxi dismissed, in from the frigid winter world we came, to a restaurant where candles added star-points to a ruby-walled room. Velvet curtains and white linens softened our the sound of our footsteps, muted other patrons' voices. Bold abstract art encircled the walls. Model-beautiful young women inquired, Had we been to Fiasco before? then settled us at the mahogany bar, at the end of which was set a heavy crystal vase, filled with fragrant, pink Asian lilies.

The martinis we started the evening with were pastel-pretty, diabolically thirst-quenching and exhilarating. We sipped them, studied the menu, made our choices for supper. In time, we moved to our reserved window table to eat our meals.

There is a certain mathematical precision to the taste of superbly prepared food. The numbers all add up. There are no mistakes in the additions or subtractions. If there is to be a blend of sweet and sour, then the blend is perfect. If the dish calls for garlic, mango and chili, then this blend too, is just right. First came the calamari, which presented as the happiest marriage of Italian and Chinese – two of the finest cuisines in the world, for my tastes. Then came halibut, prawns and scallops, arriving in different sauces in different guises of appetizer and main courses. All were thirty seconds underdone, for maximum flavour. Our Italian sparkling rose was dry, with a base note of smoky fruit. No, no, thank you, we wouldn't have dessert – and yet dessert "came with the meal," and so we agreed to try one spoonful of the passionfruit and white chocolate ice-cream. Mischievous fairies, darting out from behind the velvet curtains, ate the rest of the ice-cream, which melted faster than snow in fog.

Don was handsome, dressed in a new charcoal sports jacket, white shirt, tie and sky-blue fine wool vest. He was also relaxed and affectionate. I wanted to wear a dress – but could not face the notion of nylons on such a cold night, and so wore a black ensemble that if not as feminine as I wanted, was at least smart and slimming. I punctuated the black with red high heels and a red scarf. My mood was as light as Don's. We don't go out for these thoroughly extravagant evenings very often.

The only problem was the shock to our Weight Watcher's stomachs, which could barely manage the number of courses and the emphatic richness of all the food. We enjoyed ourselves very much. But won't be repeating the experience any time soon!

Minus 10 this morning. Spring recedes from reality yet again. I was going to check for snow drops in the back yard yesterday – never did, too cold for garden investigations! But flowers can't come

up in this cold, anyway. Need to turn off the Vancouver part of my brain – that hungrily needs to see colour, smell garden-growth, from March onward.

"Two more months of winter yet to go, Marjorie," said Denise cheerfully yesterday. "May as well get used to it." I won't tell her that last weekend's plus-10 temperatures made me pack up my heavier sweaters and down coats to be stored in the attic. I brought them down again earlier this week. Flowers, spring clothes – I am trying to be patient and it's not working this year.

At least I have the colour of daffodils in my kitchen now. One more blessed door to paint, and I am done. New flooring will have to wait for more funds to do, as will the addition of some new cupboards, a stove fan and microwave. What I have done has made a huge difference, though. The room is bright and so much easier to work in now. Makes me happy. Makes me, oddly, want to "celebrate," have a cigarette. Will that thought-linkage ever go away: celebrate=cigarette? Cigarettes were never the "treats" we committed smokers viewed them to be – only little death-sticks, shortening our lives with each inhalation. I still miss them, still fight the urge to smoke some days. But less and less often, thank goodness. And more and more often, I am deeply happy to be a non-smoker.

It's been over 10 years since Don quit. For me, it's been eight years, three months and fifteen days.

Or thereabouts.

Goodbye to Cigarettes, D'Escousse, NS, 2003.

"Can you hand me up the other curtain?" My husband is standing precariously on top of my desk, which is actually two doors laid out in an L-configuration, supported at the ends by file cabinets, and in the middle by a wooden frame of sorts. Under his left arm, he holds one-half of a curtain rod, onto which the first freshly laundered cotton panel has been slid; in his right hand, the other half of the rod, waiting for its mate. I am too short to manage this bit of housekeeping on my own. Apart from that, I am also far too frayed for any task requiring manual dexterity. I'll be lucky if I can remember where to place my feet to walk. *How could I have forgotten how hard this is?*

It's day nine of quitting cigarettes. Only five short months since my last try at quitting and yet until now I've managed to forget how violent the cravings for cigarettes can be. My desire to smoke is all-encompassing and amoral. I would lie, cheat, steal – fill in the blank however shockingly you please – to haul in a full, long drag of myriad poisons, tar and nicotine. At the very least, I would happily play in heavy traffic to nab just one narrow cylinder filled with tobacco. I retain only the merest shreds of integrity: I will not barter away husband, hound or house for a tailor-made cigarette. I think.

"I thought these curtains were yellow," says my innocent husband quizzically. He tugs together the two dazzling white panels, to block out the sun-glare on my computer screen, so I can work.

"They were," I sigh. "Nicotine stains. I bleached them."

"Oh," comes the wondering reply. "That's hard to believe."

No harder to believe than crashing and burning – after 80 smoke-free days this spring. The cause? Some self-generated life drama, which at the time, seemed overwhelming. A friend of mine had dared to live her own life, complete with making her own decisions, which left me feeling betrayed and marginalized. Actions thus (conveniently) rationalized, I fell on a pouch of tobacco like a hungry terrier

on a rat. Cigarettes raise the blood pressure, say all the experts. And yet on that day back in April, I clearly remember how effective the first inhalation of tobacco was: instant relief, of the heavily tranquillizing sort. I was not happy – cognitively – to experience that. I was, in fact, appalled. Beyond this, however, I was forced to make a crucial admission deep within my psyche. I retain no illusions about my addiction: I am powerless over it, and need all the help I can get to remain cigarette-free.

"How's the patch feel today?" asks my husband. He is poised at the door of my office, would like, I know, to get on with his own work day. But he never stints on his support during this difficult time for me.

"Good, as always." I'd forgotten how strong the Nicoderm patch is – the patch itself almost "burns" my skin, and makes the surrounding muscle area ache heavily – but I am once again glad for its calming effects. Unlike the last time – does the ante go up with each quitting attempt? – I am also using Nicorette gum, which I find very effective in combating sudden, severe cravings. My jaw, too, aches by the end of each day.

"And when's your first class?"

Cigarette school. More officially, the Dr. W. B. Kingston Memorial Clinic Health Project – whew! What a mouthful! – I attended before, which is again offering sessions for those wanting to quit cigarettes.

"A week from now." The program runs for 10 weeks, each Monday night, at a high school in St. Peter's. I need to hear the laughter, feel the camaraderie of those Cig School sessions again. Free-range babble and sharing, and informative, non-judgmental professionals guiding the sessions. Walk tall, everyone fails at some things, not everyone tries again. One day at a time, as the 12-step programs advise. On goes the internal chatter, as I stare, shoulders slumped, at my blank computer screen.

"So there's nothing else you…?" I turn to see him spread out his hands in a helpless gesture.

I shake my head, attempt a smile. No, nothing else I need. Only a new, non-addicted brain. Perhaps a new life history, one from which my 30-year dependence on tobacco is deleted. While you're at it, throw in some new lungs and a lottery win to cover all the money I've wasted on this stupid – *oh please, all I want is one little puff –*

Stop. Now. Must think about something positive, something significant and life-enhancing about the cig-free life.

I pick up a pen and start doodling on a small note pad. I'll make a list, see if that helps. I'll start with the very best feature of quitting last time. Uh, that would be….

The face-lift. That would be number one. It wasn't a real one, of course, that would be too scary, but as physical changes go, the difference to my post-cigarette facial skin was amazing. I could finally understand the cliché roses in her cheeks. I had those roses, for the first time since I was a teenager. There wasn't a mirror in the world I didn't pause in front of, to shamelessly stare at my new face.

"You look so pretty!" said my husband day after day. Yeah, I could stand to have that scenario again. No appreciable change at this point. But soon, I hope. If vanity can help me stay resolute, so be it.

Number two, decent callouses on my fingertips. The blues are so much a part of quitting cigarettes, that playing the blues, on my guitar, just seemed like a natural thing to do. I may have been "hurtin'" from the withdrawal process, but for once, my fingertips were not complaining. That was a treat, to play as much as I wanted, with no need to snivel about tender digits. Name of the game: hands busy, mind distracted.

Three, I had breath to sing. Breath to enjoy walking more. Breath that could be taken in deeply, with no shadings of obstruction, deep in my chest. Those had frightened me, as well they should.

Four, perspective and optimism. The two went hand in hand – and cannot, when I am smoking. You can't have perspective on an addiction overcome, and feel cheery about that, when you're still indulging. With only three months cig-sober, I am nowhere near to a full understanding of why I would tolerate self-destructive behaviour in myself. There is no need for this. Nor were there enough days of freedom, to bask in feelings of accomplishment. Only the briefest period to realize there are quieter ways to pass through this life. Smokers are coiled springs, the chemicals they inhale keeping them forever in the state of flight or fight. I don't wish to live that way anymore.

"Just use your will power," said a well-meaning friend lately, "and you'll be fine."

It's not quite that simple. When the occasional waft of tobacco comes to me when I am out and about in the wider world, it feels like a spike of desire slamming through my brain. Run, girl, run. See the girl run. Physically, I can remove myself from negative situations. Emotionally, the movements are more hesitant. This battle will be won in the realm of spirit, I believe. And pray.

I turn back to my computer screen, determined to finally start my work day. And yet as I begin typing I hear the rueful voice of another friend who quit cigarettes for four months this year, and then started again: "Never say never!" All right, I won't. But for today, I haven't smoked. And that brings a measure of contentment.

Click, click, click, the first line comes to me: "Can you hand me up that other curtain?"

CHAPTER 22: THINGS ARE NOT ALWAYS AS THEY SEEM

24 March 2011, 10:00 a.m, Halifax, NS.

Don is away in Cape Breton. He has two speaking engagements and we also needed to check on our two houses in D'Escousse. Houses do not like being left unpeopled, especially over the course of a Nova Scotian winter. The large blue house, our former primary residence, has been for sale since 2006; it is empty, pipes drained, heat off. The smaller "Morrison House," which we hope to keep as a Cape Breton summer home, is across the road from the blue house in the centre of the village; it is furnished, functional and heated. Even still, Don decided not to stay at the Morrison House this time round. Instead he is staying, by invitation of his brother-in-law, at his home, also located in D'Escousse.

Brother-in-law. No, this is not my brother, Geoffrey, though he is Don's brother-in-law, no question, as is my older sister Zoe's husband, Garney, and younger (half-) sister Jessica's husband, Mark. The brother-in-law he is staying with is one of Lulu's brothers, with whom he has a strong friendship, though he remains in contact with all of Lulu's siblings and gets on well with all of them too. He is close to some of their children, also; these young men and women call him "Uncle Don," which he is, ever and always, through marriage to Lulu.

Marriage to Lulu – it is a phrase I've heard a lot over the years. The marriage remains as real now, in some ways, as it did for the seventeen years they spent as husband and wife, from 1979 to 1996. Don still calls Lulu's mother "Mum," and Lulu's sisters and brothers remain his sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law. Lulu's son Mark, fathered by her Danish first husband, is still – of course – Don's legally adopted son. For all those who knew her, liked her or loved her, Lulu's death was *only a new way of living with her*. From the beginning, I couldn't help but see similarities in the death of my sister Karin, one of four (full) siblings, and the death of Lulu, one of nine siblings. I and sometimes my

siblings still talk about Karin. Don, Mark, Lulu's nine siblings, Lulu's mother Mimi, and occasionally some of Lulu's friends and neighbours, still talk about Lulu. Karin has been, to some degree, demonized; it's easier to live with her early death that way. Lulu has been, to some degree, beatified; it's easier to live with her early death that way. Why should I not talk about someone I loved and lost? Why shouldn't the Terrio Family talk about a member of their tribe who they loved and lost? Don't we all have the photographs, keepsakes, memories – and for some of us – the nightmares – to prove the dead once lived among us?

I dreamed about Lulu – once and once only. The dream frightened me so badly I didn't know how to live with the memory. Every time the memory recurred – on little cat feet, a cold fog all of its own – I'd have to jump up and walk it away. This I did out of the blue house, out, strangely, on the beaches Lulu had walked herself – Pondville, The Tiddle, Martinique Park – but unlike Lulu, I walked with my dog, Leo. His gentle, contented soul calmed my shaken one – every time. The calming would not happen quickly though. Before it did, I would rage at Lulu, calling her down, impossibly, from a fair sky to fight fair, too, on that beach, in that moment, eye to eye and woman to woman. Yes, I knew it was her husband, her house, her boat, her region, her island, her family and her life I'd inherited – her own mother called me her "daughter's successor" – but goddamn it, wasn't I alive and she dead? Didn't that fundamental difference count for anything? Wasn't that sure knowledge of breath in my lungs supposed to make me feel empowered – stronger, at least, than even the most vividly remembered shade of a woman? It's taken a decade to realize, yet again, *that things are not always as they seem.*

The Basement Dream

The wooden stairs to the basement are narrow and twisting. I am mid-staircase, just before the stairs take a sharp left, continue down – one, two, three, four – to the cement-floored space. It's dark. I am having trouble seeing. I have paused because the rises are steep for me and suddenly, I don't know where to place my feet. It would be so easy to trip, break a leg or an arm, even a neck. I am going to the basement to get something from the freezer for supper. I don't remember what is in the freezer. Perhaps I don't really have a freezer. Perhaps there is only cold emptiness here.

Something is holding my foot. Something is holding my ankle. Someone is muttering, voice coming from the stair beneath my feet. It's still dark and it's still cold and now I can't move that right leg at all. I can move the other foot – but then suddenly, I can't. It's as though both feet are glued to the stair. I am having trouble breathing. I can still move my arms and I swat those about. I hit the wood on either side of the staircase. It is soft, as though I have hit a body. A groan rumbles from under the stair. I drop my hands to my sides again. I am aware of pain, but I don't know whose pain it is – the flesh-walls I just hit, or my own lungs, out of which air is being pushed by the heavy darkness all around me. Fear is icicles frigid against my flesh, the tips seeking entry under the skin as a needle seeks to imbed thread. Perhaps I will be sewn to the flesh-walls, left there in the dark to breathe in tandem with the groaning undead. I feel electrically alive and consumed with will. I need to turn around somehow, climb back up the stairs. I must free my feet. I will free my feet.

Do you think you are that strong? Lulu. The words are not spoken aloud. But I hear them in each cell of my body.

Yes, yes I am that strong. These words, too, have no sound. But they smash against the flesh-walls suddenly made wood again: *bang bang bang.* Take that.

The grip on my feet loosens – this may not last. I think myself up several stairs; my body still isn't moving freely. *Let me go.*

No. Not yet.

One leg is free, the other held with a weakening hand. With my two free arms I drag myself up the last two stairs. I lie in a slanted pool of light, on a blond wood floor – on the other, closed side of the door to the basement.

It's as though I've swallowed the voice from below. *Go then,* I hear her say, as close as my own heartbeat. *Go.*

How could I go? I had just come to live there. I thought I'd have to live with her angry presence. I didn't understand, couldn't understand, then, that she wasn't angry at all. She was trying to protect me. To make me listen.

CHAPTER 23: RETROSPECT, CAPE BRETON

28 March 2011, Halifax, NS

The wind has been relentless here in Halifax this winter. The way it was so often in Cape Breton – and that could be in any season. I'd never felt a house sway in the winds before I lived in D'Escousse. And that's a solid, well-built house. The house Don bought in the late 70s may have been in near to ruinous shape, but its "bones" or beams and joists were formidable, irreplaceable in today's Maritime wood market. The Victorian-style house was first built in the late 19th century. When Don and Lulu renovated the house in the 1980s, they decided to keep all of its classic features such its original design of two off-set rectangles, the ten-foot ceilings and the exterior "gingerbread" or elaborate "knees" of carved wood decorations on the roof corners. Inside, they gutted the house. The main floor was beautifully re-done, with a modern IKEA kitchen, a fireplace that faced two rooms and hard-wood floors throughout. The upstairs…didn't quite get finished…

May, 1998

"Are you happy, dear? Are you really happy?" Dad always sounds a bit worried when he calls me these days. Oddly, now that I have moved 4000 miles from BC to Cape Breton, I am now geographically closer to my once again Ontario-based father than I have been most of my life. My Dad's fragile heart-health prevented his presence at our wedding in March; the trip out west from Ontario was just too onerous. After Don and I married, and I relocated to Cape Breton, Dad has continued to do as he has done since my early 20s: he writes and phones me weekly. He is concerned about my move from a big city I love to a country village of 250 residents, and as concerned about my writerly transition to the region. He also knows how devoted I have been to my west coast girlfriends

all my life – “Your friends,” says my sister Zoe, “they’ve always been your kids – ” and my long-standing connection to the horse world in Vancouver. I am on my own here. Thank God for my whippet Leo, and my new friends, Denise and Murielle.

“Papa,” I say, smiles all over my voice, “don’t worry, I am fine.” I tell him about my latest house projects – this week I am painting the porcelain claw-foot tub in our ensuite bathroom – forest-green tub, gold “toes” – while recovering from last week’s job of re-glazing the interior. I actually wore a professional painter’s mask when I did the re-glazing. It made no difference. I was high as a Georgia pine for 48 hours, and couldn’t slug back enough water to re-hydrate. Never again. But the tub looks brand-new.

“I got the photos,” laughs my Dad. “They’re great!” Don had taken photos of me dressed in a white Kevlar jumpsuit, the painter’s mask tight on my face, a paint brush in hand – this is the second tub I have re-finished on the second floor; the other one is royal blue with gold toes – and I had sent them along to Dad in recent letters. My father, in his latest life incarnation, is a photographer. He tells me to document my life visually, and I am doing this. After 25 years, I no longer write a daily journal. I still write letters, six or seven a week, but there is no time left over for the journal. Photos seem easier at this point. I also like having a record of the changes to the upstairs and around the house and gardens generally. I’ve been working hard.

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“How do I clean the bathroom floors?” I asked Don when I looked at the chipboard on the two bathroom floors upstairs in 1997, the first year I lived with Don in D’Escousse. How did one swab chipboard?

"Number one, you don't clean them," he answered. "Ruth does. Number two, she uses a cloth mop."

Right, Ruth S., Lulu's best friend in D'Escousse. She cleaned the house for Don and Lulu for years, cared devotedly for Lulu until she died, and still housecleaned for Don. For us. I had no clue how to deal with this. I'd never had someone scrub my toilets before. I reverted to being my mother's child, and tried to make sure things were nice and clean before Ruth arrived each Saturday. *Cleaning for the cleaning woman, as the expression goes.*

"You are missing the point – entirely," said Don. "I am trying to buy you time to write." He was right. But I was really uncomfortable with this whole set-up, which had been in place for some time.

"Ruth started helping us when Mark went to school and Lulu went back to work," said Don. He explained that Lulu started doing house renovations on the island and loved the work more than any other work she'd done. Don still owned and rented out all the houses they had renovated. I could barely keep the houses and the constant in-and out-flow of tenants straight. People came from Isle Madame…and people went, mostly out west to Fort MacMurray.

"Too many houses," I grumbled. The houses sucked up a lot of Don's time. Renovations only serve so long. Maintenance and repairs are a constant, as are whingeing and often insolvent tenants. Don was unfailingly pleasant and creatively helpful to his tenants; a "come-from-away," he was permanently grateful to have been accepted into the Isle Madame community, and he didn't care if a rent cheque took months to be paid, as long as it was paid eventually. Many never did pay, and as often left a damaged or filthy apartment behind them. Don took it all in stride.

"I ran up credit myself at Pearl's, for years," he told me, referring to the small general store owned by Ray and Pearl Le Blanc in D'Escousse. His freelance income was small and erratic in those early years on Isle Madame; he was also heart-sick, slowly re-shaping his life after his divorce from his

first wife Ann Cameron, who remained in their marital home in Fredericton, with their four children. Over 25 years later, Don's voice was still taut with sadness; the rifts that geography and other circumstances made between him and his children then, still exact a toll. One adult child remains estranged from him. I haven't figured it all out yet, where all this anger and bitterness comes from, to Don from his kids; I am not sure I will, I am not sure I should. Some families can forgive; ours did. Others can't. Hard not to have regrets, in those cases.

But Don has learned to push away regrets, circle back to gratitude.

"Ray and Pearl LeBlanc didn't care how long I ran a tab; they ran tabs for all kinds of people who needed help. That's what this place is all about, helping people when they're down and being happy we live in this great place." Don's voice is resonant and proud; you'd think he'd fathered Isle Madame as a concept and reality, all on his own.

"Houses," I said teasingly, doing some circling back of my own. "How many houses do you own at this point?"

"Oh a few," Don said airily. "Do you remember their names?"

"Sure. There's the Morrison House, the Joyce House, Charlie's House and Telile."

Telile was easy to remember. It was the commercial building across the island to the south from D'Escousse, in the village of Arichat. The building had four apartments and a main-floor commercial space for Télévision Isle Madame, or TELILE, the community television company that Don, Lulu and many others on Isle Madame had begun in the early 1990s.

"You forgot one."

Damn, he's right. It's hardly a house – more like a demolition zone. It's not in our village, either, but just up the road to the east, in the village of Poirierville –

"The Mauger House."

"Are you really serious about renovating that one?" The place gives me the creeps. One wall is pretty much open to the elements, the floors and window sills are rotten and the exterior paint hangs or curls in strips on the wood shingles. The Mauger Family themselves abandoned the house after the last family member of that generation died; photo albums remain, as do tattered curtains in the bedrooms, pots and utensils in the kitchen and a daybed in the front room. *Do not ask me about the bathroom upstairs…*

"Waterfront," said Don. "Adjoining lot, also on waterfront. Secondary building beside the house, to be developed as the buyer sees fit. Last, the original home has the prettiest gingerbread on the island, I think. Lots of aesthetic and practical reasons to renovate this house."

"Mmmm," I said. "But you told me what people around here say about it – what was it again?"

He laughed: "'Gimme a can'a gas and a match, b'y, I'll look after it for yez."

"Still want to renovate it?"

"Yup. We start this autumn."

We. It was a word Don used a lot. Sometimes it was connected to me; mostly he connected the pronoun to Lulu and Mark, and to the people he knew on Isle Madame even before they came into his life. This time he was referring to his carpenter friend Edwin DeWolf and his assistant, my new friend, Murielle Vincent. This "we" may include me too, this time, if I choose to be involved on the Mauger House renovation. I think I will.

Don's ties to this island are strong. He's lived here since 1971. He didn't meet Lulu, who lived abroad in Denmark for 10 years, until the late 70s. But he knew Lulu's mother Mimi, has been close friends with her, since his earliest days here. They are another long-standing "we." So many years of we's before we married. For both of us.

Our “we’s” are starting to blur though.

“Did I hear you say you liked curry?” Mimi had asked me several months ago. She is of Irish extraction, British, Brussels and Parisian raising, and a Canadian war bride. She knows how to make a curry, one of my favourite foods.

“Yes,” I answered. “I love them. My grandmother, my namesake, used to make them for us.”

“Right, then you and Don should come over for supper this week. I’ll make a curry. Come on Wednesday, at 5:00. Don’t be late.”

She did, we did, and we weren’t, and an unexpectedly light-hearted time was had by all. She greeted us with hugs.

Mimi has never once given me the “You’re Not Lulu” stare I’ve had aimed at me so often since I met Don. Only some of these people are actually among Lulu’s family, though for all of them, the stare is involuntary. For me, it’s like a just-pulled punch to my face, the air sucked back cold on all sides.

It was warm in Mimi’s house that night, warm with laughter and good will. Mimi was glad her “noble” son-in-law was loved again, I thought. As well, she seemed to like me too. For me it was like being with my much-loved paternal grandmother, Marjorie Minnie again. Mimi’s soft southern England vowels sounded so much like Minnie’s voice. Mimi was just as girlish and charming, too.

“Chin-chin,” toasted Mimi merrily, as we three clinked together our small glasses. The liquid was dark amber, set on ice.

“What is this lovely libation?” I giggled, a short time later. I was already a bit tiddly, though my glass was still half-full. I had already asked what chin-chin meant – “It’s a toast of course,”said Mimi, in her own circular, non-informative way – and no other explanation had followed. Perhaps I’d have better luck this time.

"A martini, of course," answered Mimi, dashing all my hopes for clarity. "What did you think?"

"But it's sweet," I said. "Can a martini be sweet?"

"Sweet or dry," said Don, "shaken or stirred, full or empty" – he set down his glass with a reluctant flourish – "they're all martinis."

Mimi was also giggling by now. "This is the Queen Mother's favourite drink," she told me. "Every evening at five, so they say."

Bloody good idea, was my thought. And it beats moonshine all to hell, was my next. I hadn't had nearly as much fun with that drink, on my first visit to D'Escousse. Too strong in effect and in flavour.

My first bite of the curry supper raised another question in my mind – but I was starting to feel silly, too inquisitive. Being unsure what meat was in the curry was just going to have to be another mystery. Didn't matter. It was delicious.

"Mmm," said Don. "Vension?"

"Yes," said Mimi. "One of the boys gave me some last autumn. Always makes a good curry."

I was 39 years old and I'd never had curried venison. Marjorie Minnie, I am certain, would have enjoyed the one Mimi made that night. We – Don and I – certainly did. Minnie and Mimi even looked a bit alike, both tiny, bright-eyed, hair fine and wavy. Minnie had died in the late 70s. I hadn't met anyone remotely like her since then. Now I had. And this one made "Mimi Martinis," my instant name for the pre-supper drinks we would have again and again, whenever we - Mimi, Don and I – would share a meal together.

We. Don, Mimi and Marjorie. It's one of the nicest we's I have in my life.

CHAPTER 24: PASSAGES

29 March 2011, Halifax, NS

Still blowing and dark enough for lights on all over the house in the daytime. Dad was certain he suffered from SADs – Seasonal Affective Disorder – and certainly suffered from depression in the darker months of the year. I often wish his life had been easier, especially those last years. His wife Karin was gone, their two daughters were traumatized by the break-up of the marriage and his health was declining fast and hard. He kept on taking photos, though. He rarely lived a non-creative day.

Dad died on November 5, 1999. Guy Fawkes' Day, said his sister, our Aunt Susette, what a perfect day for him to leave us. Now every time we see the fireworks we'll think of him! *Bastard*, said his ex-wife, our mother Barbara, he left me again. Mum, I chastened, that's an awful thing to say. But she didn't retract or excuse the comment. A part of me approved of that. Mum was always a fighter.

My own anger had disappeared or been sublimated long ago. My last words to my father were: "I love you with all my heart." The world without Dad-letters, brimming with support and immense interest in his grown-up children's doings and writings, began.

Only another writer who loved us all – Dad included – could understand how desolate the loss of that letter-world felt to my sister Zoe, our brother Geoffrey and me. The man who had exchanged over 800 emails with me before our first kiss, watched me walk to the post office across the street from our home in D'Escousse with a heart as heavy as mine. I'd come back to the house, hands empty, crying. Don, too, had received photo-cards from Dad. Don, too, knew how letters could throw star-dust over the path of a sunless day. And perhaps only Don, too, could have kept up with the full blazing output of a Simmins correspondence, mine, in the first place. Of course I had to marry him.

Six months later, on September 23, 2000, Mum died. This death was unexpected – though not in retrospect, when all the signs of heart disease were discussed, became plain to see. We grown-up children knew something was off-kilter with Mum's health, had known for some time. Mum's doctor, however, an amiable oaf, stubbornly insisted all was well. In the end it was a stroke that took Mum from us. "The angels were with your mother," said the day-nurse to a reeling and gutted Zoe, who had seen Mum alive and quite well only the evening before. "She went fast, wouldn't have known a thing."

The angels certainly smiled on me: the last thing I said to my mother, on the phone from Cape Breton to Richmond, was: "I love you." She died several days later. I had no clue I'd spoken to her for the last time. The world without mother-strength and love, vast, frigid and echoing, began. Don and I were in Vancouver in less than a day. I still don't know how we did that. This loss was different; it was in-the-bones elemental, could only be borne in reflection one blinkered moment at a time. Thought that edged out longer than that took feet to the edge of black-bottomed cliffs.

We'll be all right, little love.

How? How will we be all right? We need you. I want you and Don to spend more time together. I want you to know him better – be certain in your mother-mind that I am loved and cared for, and do this in return. That's the only reason I'd stick 4000 miles between us, Mum, you know that, right?

I don't understand – you were volunteering at a seniors' home just last week, had done for years. You weren't old, not in body nor outlook. Did you have to go?

Loved being with you. See you. We all agreed that Mum's epitaph was the most perfect we'd seen. Don particularly loved it. I particularly love him.

CHAPTER 25: THE EVENT

4 July 2011, Halifax, NS

I have considered these resuming words for….over two months now. Two months and two days, nearly to the hour – and goddamned rights I've been counting: I've never had my mobile life robbed from me before. In my thoughts I've started back to the writing with torrents of high drama and I've played with the briefest, most cryptic of descriptions. I've thought about words and images with a pounding, oversized heart. I've pushed myself far back from The Event on May 2 and I've shoved my face right back in the dirt I ate that day. I've told myself "It's all grist for the [artist's] mill," as Dad told me time and again, when I was psychically or emotionally injured. The usually helpful dictate just made me feel worse and somehow that settled into the physical realm, primarily. But fear rarely left me, and despair nibbled around my body with bloodied rats teeth.

First thought after the fall*: I am lying in a pool of blood, from head to toe, cold, lapping blood, my own, it must be –what have I done?*

Fucking horse.

I moved my toes first, then my feet, hands, arms and head. Everything seemed to work. *Thank God, I am not paralyzed*. But I still couldn't move to sit up and I still didn't understand the sensation of liquid under my body. *Is something broken?* Pressed down by the full weight of the world-air above, I lay on my right side. My legs were slightly bent, my right arm was…I am not sure, actually. I think it was under my head, the way you sometimes stick an arm under your pillow when you go to sleep. The water-blood feeling receded – then it was gone. I even felt comfortable, in a bizarre, frozen-in-time sort of way. As long as I didn't have to move or stand, I'd be fine. *Maybe I'll just lie here a while, chew on my dirt sandwich.*

Mother-fucking horse.

I am calling out, and I am embarrassed, a useless lump of hurt woman who couldn't stay on her 22-year-old schooling horse. *Help me! Help me! I need help!* I am surprised at how loud I am yelling. But I am alone in the big indoor arena and the only person who might hear me could be in the attached barn or could be well outside it, working in the other barn. What is her name again? Jen, her name's Jen. Nothing wrong with my head, apparently.

I hear her voice now. She's saying Hold on, I'll be right back. Got to get Buddy first – don't want him to trample you.

Trample me? Oh boy, hadn't thought of that. Is it a lie, then, that horses will do anything not to step on a person on the ground? That's what they told us when we were kids.

You are 52 years old now. You actually thought you could ride the way you did in your teens, 20s and 30s. Slim inside your middle-aged body, back supple and strong, hands and legs controlling twelve-hundred pounds of unpredictable creature – no matter what happened.

Fool.

No, I won't accept that. I wasn't a fool. I damn-near stayed on, too, at least at first. It was a dirty big bolt, a dirty big deke, and an endless high fall, like being shot out of a canon from the top of a cliff. All because I decided to do one last canter around the ring and two seconds into that decision, a blast of wind hit some plastic near?on?outside? the window beside us – and Buddy lost his mind. Adding to the excitement, he simultaneously remembered he was a Quarter horse, the breed that runs the fastest quarter-mile of any horse on the planet.

Even still, I truly believe I could have brought him back. I've brought back nightmare bolts on freight-train horses over the years. But that deke….it wrenched my spine even before the ground wrenched and punched everything else. Very athletic manoeuvre for an old horse.

"Buddy?" squeaked the barn owner. "Buddy dumped you?"

I didn't like Buddy's stable manners from the get-go, either – and the barn owner dismissed that too. I think she'd seen him plod around the ring with beginner riders so many times – beginners who had nonetheless gotten his tack on without being bitten or kicked - and she just forgot he was capable of independent, even dangerous thought. Maybe Buddy is "sour," the term used for schooling horses that have worked too hard for too long – and need and don't get, wide open spaces to run in. Sour horses can be angry horses.

Such a delicate emotional balance with horses: you love them at your delight and peril. As a horse friend of mine recently said: "As for horses, those pesky devils always manage to put those of us who would tame them in our place. They'll play along with us for the most part but in the end will take any opportunity to remind us and others that they are not dogs!"

No, they are not dogs – loyal, loving, biddable dogs. Though in truth all creatures can hurt us, given the right circumstances.

Buddy was only doing what horses have done since the dawn of their first day on earth: fear-based running, to ensure their survival.

You see how I am skirting around the hard stuff – talking mostly about horses, not me? I have just lived it, am still living it, can hardly bear to remember those shocking, new parameters of pain and dysfunction. What will I tell you about these past two months – that explains much, in brief?

I hate ambulances. I've only been in two – horses were the cause, both times. This time I was strapped on the full body board, with a big neck brace. My teeth chattered and I hyperventilated. They kept telling me to breathe slowly. One of the paramedics asked me if I'd like to hold his hand. *Oh yes please.* His hand was warm. I was frozen.

"You might find the morphine helpful," he suggested, some miles later, hand still in mine, as we slowly bumped down the country roads to the highway. Considering I was strapped down, I was able to

squirm a fair bit. I couldn't help it, the neckbrace brought on major feelings of claustrophobia. I also thought, somehow, I could squirm right away from the agony.

"I don't do well with drugs," I said. "They scare me."

"Do you drink wine?"

"Yes."

"You know how you feel after you've had a glass – all relaxed?"

"Yes."

"Well that's just the way the morphine will make you feel."

We went over a big bump. The world whited out into a pain blossom.

"All right. But I can't look at the needle."

I barely noticed the morphine's effects – but did find myself joking with the paramedics. I have no memory of the actual jokes.

At the hospital the doctors sent me off for x-rays. I cried out a lot as they moved me around. The world had never hurt me with every move before – or was that my own body, hurting me? No, impossible.

The nurses wheeled my gurney into a room, then lifted me onto a bed. Many drugs were proffered. A woman who can take morphine can take any pain killers – right? No, actually. Some drugs made me wretch and try to vomit – oh the pain! – some had no particular effect on pain or anything else. Finally the attending doctor was happy with her selection for me: "Here's a prescription. Take as directed." As for my malady: "You have no broken bones. You can go home now."

I couldn't walk, couldn't sit, couldn't rise to my feet or sink onto a toilet seat – but I was going home now. How on earth would I get off the bed? With help from Don, I slithered onto my knees, my arms braced against the side of the bed. Now what? Oh God the pain. I glared at the doctor.

"You have soft-tissue injuries." For the first time, she looked sympathetic: "Soft-tissue and nerve injuries are complex – and take a long time to heal. Longer than broken bones."

My husband slipped his arms under mine, raised me to my feet. "Don't forget your prescription," said the doctor, handing Don the paper. "You'll need it."

Nerve pain: I didn't know such intense pain existed. Like swallowing an acid-coated lightning bolt. Day after day.

"Hold on tight, body like a noodle." These were Don's instructions to me each and every time he lifted me from the bed. I had to wrap my arms around his neck tight and close, so he wouldn't harm his back lifting me. But my body had to be a noodle, or the muscle spasming would start up, which it did, so often, for over a month. I was terrified of the spasming – which could fling me right off the toilet seat.

"Don, show me how a normal person gets off the toilet." All I could do was sit there, trying to remember which muscle did what when, and how your body actually rose from the sitting position. Once he had lifted me onto my feet and I was leaning against the doorway, Don showed me. I sighed. "Oh, you need your back to do it, not just your legs. That's why I can't do it. I have no strength in my back." A day later, Don installed a thick rope between the two stout handles on the wall across from the toilet. "I know you can't do it now, but soon, maybe." I practiced reaching out my fingers to the rope, dreamed of pulling myself off the toilet again.

For two months: every single bit of normal in my life vanished: freelance writing, cooking, doing laundry and housework, grocery and retail shopping, wearing makeup and regular clothes, letter-writing and email, reading, dog walks, showering, turning over in bed, pulling myself into a sitting position in bed, sleeping on my preferred side, the right side. When needed, I took narcotics, and was grateful for them. We ate every meal in our bedroom; I was propped up with pillows, used the bed-tray, Don set a chair beside my side of the bed, ate with a plate on his lap. Each evening, Don would bring

me a sherry glass of wine, set it on my bedside table. Later that evening he'd clear it away, still full, or down the three sips himself. "Are you sure you want me to keep pouring you a glass?" he'd ask. "Yes, it makes me feel like a normal person." Weeks passed. Water tasted best.

Don gave and gave and gave. *"For richer for poorer, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live…."* He lived the vows we'd recited thirteen years ago – and I thanked him, literally, every time he lifted me onto my feet. Other thank you's hummed in my bones: thank you for loving me; thank you for helping me; thank you for doing things nurses do and not being bothered; thank you for being great company; for making me good meals, for eating each of those with me – for keeping a glass of ice-water ever-present on the bedside table. *Thank you* for saying I am brave. Other than I love you, You are brave is my favourite thing to hear – of all things, ever.

I have tried to be so. And keep on trying.

On the darkest day of the injury I lay on my left side in bed, the newly-purchased flat-screen television blatting at me from across the room. The skies themselves had been dark for weeks.

Put me in a sound-proof closet, let me scream and pound my fists on the walls. I can't, I just *can't* lie here another day, the why's bouncing off my skull like blunt pebbles. *I didn't do anything wrong.* Why is so much of life the aftermath of *I didn't do anything wrong* – and I still can't bear the pain?

The words from the television soak into my mind like an ink stamp pressed on a snowy envelope: *You just never know what's around the next corner.* Goosebumps rise on my arms.

Mum? How many times did I hear you say that? You always said it with a wondering voice, as though we were all born to be delighted by wonderful surprises. Sometimes a subtext hummed in the air: *don't worry, this too shall pass.* Sometimes, mostly, you said it to acknowledge the beautiful events that come to our lives. You had lot of those – and lots of other sort, too.

Yet my mother's courage humbled me – even scared me once or twice, in its drone-like intensity.

Don't go to that dark place, she commanded me at another minute by minute time in my life. *You might not come back. Think about that. Wouldn't you rather be here in this world than gone, or your freedom taken from you? You can manage this, I know you can.*

Two, four, six, eight – yes, I can manage this.

8 July 2011, Halifax, NS

My Facebook posting for the day: "Last night I galloped my childhood Arabian horse over a wide grassy plain...I lost my balance a little, he slowed - and all was gloriously well! We even took a jump or two, just for good measure!"

My thoughts for today: Holy God that was a real dream. I even found myself counting the strides between the jumps; I was also aware, in a peripheral way, of how dry and yellowed the grass was. Very reminiscent of the summer day I rode my friend Jane's horse, Daisy, in Acme, Alberta. Daisy had been three-day eventing for several years with Jane at that point (early 90s). Daisy was fit, keen and capable. Get on, said Jane, hopping off herself, take a jump or two. I didn't want to – why couldn't I just go for an easy hack? – but I never did know how to resist strong-willed Jane's "good ideas." Trust Daisy, she said, as I trotted away toward the first big fence, she knows what she's doing.

Three feet easy that jump was, with a big spread and another jump in a direct line from it, but a fair distance away. I knew without being told that honest Daisy would fly at the second one, so no chance of doing only one. What I didn't remember is that she would do both at a full gallop – that's what eventers do, gallop hard and fast over fences that do not move when hit – walls, really. Note to

self: *don't hit.* Also: get off her face, give her enough rein to get over this monster and when in doubt, grab mane. *That's what God gave horses mane for*, screamed all my instructors over the years, *so hold onto it*!

Airspace: there was a lot of it between Daisy's tidy hooves and the stacked railway ties that formed the "jump." As predicted she landed on the other side and took off like a scalded cat to the second jump. I was so incidental to that mare's existence she might have been riderless.

Or was I? There's an honoured tradition of "packers" in the horse world: kind, big-hearted horses that "pack" their riders around with great care and in perfect safety – no matter what. Packers are generous to timid or inexperienced riders, or to those who might be rusty over fences, as I was that day.

One, two, one, two – airborne! *One, two, one, two, one, two* – we're in the sky!

Way to go! yelled Jane. Looked great! I didn't tell her my heart felt twisted with fear as much as swelled with satisfaction. I uncoiled my cramped fingers from Daisy's mane and came away with a tidy clump of strands. *Sorry, Dais*…

There are few things nicer than a horse's loose, big-strided walk after a work-out. The motion is self-congratulatory in the sunniest sort of way. It's also inclusive of the rider – who may or may not have much to congratulate herself on.

But I *stayed on*, didn't interfere with Daisy's work that day….and yes, thoughts of *staying on* are cool hands on my sore back and battered right side. I am so lucky to have this memory-tape.

And all the other memory-tapes. Thank you, Daisy. Thank you, beloved Coqeyn. Thank you Boo, Kaber and Rory. Thank you all the horses of my life, with your bonfire hearts and nimble hooves – for carrying me so kindly, so safely across the years.

I will ride again – on these horses and others, I hope.

CHAPTER 26: THE CITY GIRL IN THE CITY

11 July 2011, Halifax, NS

The Canada Post strike this summer lasted over a month. Strange for me to be feeling cut off from the physical world in that time, and also cut off from my usual correspondents, primarily my friend Mimi and my brother Geoffrey. Without Don and MacTavish, it would have been a truly sunless world.

Now the letters are coming in again. One essential part of normal life (for a Simmins) has been reinstituted. The sun's back too.

The letters that pass between my older sister Zoe, my younger sisters Jessica and Fiona and I tend to be irregular. They each write warm and informative letters and I feel lucky when I am the recipient.

Geoffrey and I write letters to one another frequently, infrequently and now and again; depends on the month and what's going on in our lives. We've been writing back and forth intensely and frankly for over 30 years, essentially dating from his move to Ontario after completing high school in Vancouver. He's been in Calgary since the late 80s.

Mimi and I have more traditional rules to our correspondence: once a week, stay upbeat, include family and general news. She and I have been writing one another since my earliest years in D'Escousse, when Don and I were overwintering in BC for five winters. After that, we kept on writing when Don and I sailed to the Bahamas, and finally, when we moved to Halifax in the autumn of 2006.

It's an unusual situation, I guess – but only to an outsider looking in. Mimi and I are fair-minded people; we can also, as luck would have it, live two impossible things before breakfast. In my case, I could love Don and be friends with Mimi – and be sad that Lulu had died and been taken from both of them. Mimi had known Don since he moved to D'Escousse in 1971; they'd been friends long before

her daughter Lulu caught Don's eye in the early 80s. She just loved him more when he became her son-in-law. Unexpectedly but truly, Mimi liked me. I came to realize that when she called me her daughter's "successor," she was just being Mimi: truthful and a bit clumsy. It was accurate, wasn't it? I was Lulu's successor. So I could be friends with my husband's late wife's mother – because we liked to eat curry, drink sweet martinis and chat easily about family and friends, near and far. The fact that we both loved Don simply deepened the friendship. Part of the reason I wrote Mimi letters was to make sure she always felt close to Don. More impossible reasoning: I thought it was a dirty trick of Fate she'd lost her daughter so young and unexpectedly; if Lulu couldn't keep Mimi up to date on Don's travels and life, then I would.

Nothing odd about that, is there?

My mother used to say that there are all sorts of things we worry about – that never ultimately transpire. Her point of course was to tamp down the worrying, as it serves no purpose at all. Mum occasionally took her own advice in this regard – and mostly could not. I am Barbara's daughter.

Don never did write the book about Lulu. I'd made it clear how uncomfortable I was with the idea and I know that unease counted. I like to think that Don had already done so much to honour Lulu's memory – organized an unprecedented, multi-denominational funeral and wake for her; built and planted a memorial garden; set up a scholarship fund in her name at Cape Breton University; written the words to a love song that was then set to music and recorded; archived her photos, letters, books and some of her personal possessions for her son, Mark Patrick, to name only a few things – that he didn't need to live in the sad place of writing a biography for his late wife. Maybe it wouldn't always have been a sad place, either, says the woman who retains her cavewoman ways. Either way, I am deeply grateful I didn't have to live with that. Don's intense, long-standing grief about Lulu did settle out over the years. I am glad for that too. I'd have to be a stupid and ungrateful woman not to know how well I am loved and cherished…by Lulu's husband, Mark Patrick's Dad and Mimi's son-in-law.

Nothing odd about that, either. I came to our marriage with a past too. How could we not have had past lives? We were 39 and 61 years old when we married.

"I think you and Lulu could have been good friends," Don was fond of saying for many years. I'd nod and smile and think, perhaps, perhaps not. We always want the people we love to love each too – and it doesn't happen as often as we'd like. It's hard for me to remember how it felt to look at Don as someone else's husband. Meeting his high-spirited Acadian wife when I was simply westcoast-Marjorie might have been great, uncomplicated fun. I will never know.

About other, actual events I have firm opinions. That long-ago summer evening on Don's sailboat Silversark – I am certain Lulu kissed my cheek in gratitude. These non-dreaming incidents have happened to me all my life; I've never denied their validity and never will. Mum spoke to me just the other week, when the darkness crowded in on me. As for the nightmare, that was my own psyche pulling out the big guns, to help me start to think about leaving Cape Breton. I loved the region and its peoples in many ways: the Celtic music and culture, the Mi'kmaq communities and events, the powerful geography on such a small island, the quilting, country auctions, sailing in the Bras d'Or Lakes and throughout Isle Madame's surrounding archipelago, and the stunning autumn palette in the Highlands. My cherished friends: Denise and Ann, and another friend Murielle, whose life-grace and unjudging heart humble me like no other person I know.

But I was not to the country born, and never felt comfortable with its rules and realities. Mostly I missed the privacy or anonymity available in a city, and disliked how days or evenings could be stolen from you by those who came to the house and expected social time: *now*, please. I cooked hundreds of meals for hundreds of people; small parties, medium parties; endless daily lunches. I chose to do this, was not pressured by Don to do so. I thought it was what a new wife and a new community member should do. I didn't know how to draw back when I got tired and resentful. Oddly, we weren't asked out that often to other people's homes. This may have been due to our intense friendship with Greg and

Denise. Perhaps other people thought our social needs were covered in that one close relationship. Regardless, we mostly saw island people at community events.

Then I stopped writing. It didn't happen overnight and I did some good, publishable work in the early Cape Breton years. My interest was piqued by the house renovations Don did; I joined his crew on these projects. Our own house renovations took a long time to finish; we did this as money and time became available. I could only just keep up to the front, back and side gardens at our house, but I did, most years. Don did everything he could to find me a horse to ride; it just didn't work out. I made no money and felt useless and dependent. For someone who had made money since they were 16, had always had enough to get by and to occasionally help out family members or friends, it was humiliating to never have a pay day. I felt lower than dirt.

Then my thyroid died – I became "hypothyroid." I didn't know anything about the thyroid and its functions. All I knew was that I could barely crawl up the stairs after lunch for a lie-down. The "nap" would last two or three hours. I awoke exhausted. My ankles ached, my skin dried all over my body and my menstrual periods were, for the first time in my life, painful and heavy. Depression settled heavy as canvas on my back. I was bewildered and scared by the depression – and worried: is this what middle-age felt like, bleak and hopeless? Medication soon alleviated the worst of these symptoms.

And still I did not write. In eight years I'd gone from specialist (fisheries) to generalist (personal essays and articles) to silent. I'd stopped riding, and lost my father and mother, a scant six months apart. I worked on acceptance of my childless life with a volcanic heart and despite new friends, I missed my other "kids" – my childhood and university girlfriends in Vancouver. The woman in the mirror who stared back at me each morning was a stranger. I was getting close to detesting every aspect about her. The only recognizable and lovable feature to her was her dog, Leo.

"*I love the whippet and the whippet loves me, oh yes he does*," I'd sing as I walked along the rocky beach below our house. Leo would trot ahead of me, just a short ways, checking over his

shoulder every few minutes to see I was keeping up. Usually, as Zoe had written about in her wedding poem for Don and me, he carried a stick, one much too large for him. I'd smile at that beloved deer-face and in those moments of soft affection I'd permit entry to my heart of all the beauty around me: late-in-the day lilac and gold skies; the spikes of evergreens on a near-by island; the grey shadows of blue herons; the sudden white among dark stones, of a broken marble headstone, which had toppled from the graveyard above the beach. Sometimes I could make out a surname, or if incomplete, guess at it.

LeBlanc, Boudreau, Poirier, Terrio, Samson, Dewolf, Marchand, DeCoste, Petitpas, Richard – I could cite most of the region's original Acadian names now – and some of the Jersey Island, Basque and Irish ones, particular to Isle Madame: Janvrin, Levescountes, Bourinot, LeBrun, Mauger, Goyetche, Baccardax, Kehoe, Doyle and Ahearne. I had loved learning so much about Isle Madame, Cape Breton, the Maritimes and Atlantic Canada – I'd been a hungry student of life for near-on a decade – but suddenly I felt as though I were disappearing, becoming blurry around the edges. Every identifying tag in my life had changed. My mind bulged with the lives and histories of others – but I, as Silver Don's wife and a Come-From-Away westerner, was mostly one-dimensional. I had a family, but they were too far away to be of any interest to others. So while I could chat easily about the lives of literally hundreds of islanders, Mimi's nine children and all of their children included, no one asked me about my family. Ever. It somehow made me miss them even more.

Me, me, me, what about me? Why this, why that, why can't I turn off the discontented chatter-mill in my mind, even for a single day? If something didn't happen soon, I was headed for a screaming departure from the east coast and possibly my marriage.

Something did happen. Don's heart attack. July 21, 2006. About 6:30 p.m.

Nearly six years after the fact, we don't call it a heart attack anymore. After all the terror and relief (me), after all the research, testing, doctors' appointments, procedures and calmness (Don), after all the mega-watt confusion of moving to Halifax from Cape Breton mere weeks after Don ended up in

the ICU of St. Martha's in Antigonish (both), Don's heart specialist pronounced that Don had had a "heart episode." Yes, he had blockage in the right main artery; but no, not bad enough for surgery. No, blood tests did not indicate a true heart attack; yes, he'd now be on medications to prevent future "episodes" or, God forbid, a serious heart attack.

Oh you came to the city because of access to better medical care, said person after person who blinked with surprise to see Silver Donald Cameron in the city – on the "Mainland," if you please. Everyone knew his heart was in Cape Breton – *Isle Madame, particularment* – for ever and always. No, said Don forcefully, our medical care in Cape Breton is excellent. Between Antigonish and Sydney, and the occasional appointment in the city, we could have managed the situation. We came to Halifax because it was the right move for Marjorie.

Me, me, me…. It still seems like I was being so selfish, and yet what would I have done in Cape Breton if a heart attack had claimed Don's life? The Telile apartment building, the Morrison House, our big marital home – what would I have done about all these properties? Yes, I had friends. But no family anywhere close-by, and the closest large airport was three and a half hours away. I wasn't working, wasn't writing, wasn't happy, wasn't growing intellectually or emotionally and was feeling more claustrophobic and held back by the second. We still lived with Lulu's archive, for God's sake, and some of Mark Patrick's childhood possessions.

It was Don who suggested we move to the city; I had tried the suggestion in years past, and had been glared down. Intellectually, I understood that Don had a complicated business presence on the island. The apartment and house-rental businesses had taken him years to build and would take years to disassemble, when the decision to do so was made. The businesses also supported us, far more than our writing did. I also understood how deep his ties were to the island and its residents. He is never happier than when he is home on Isle Madame. Emotionally, however, I was climbing the walls for change. Regardless, I certainly wasn't going to start a campaign for moving or anything else, after the summer

we'd been through. So after all the fear of losing him, all the physical closeness and emotional connection of the post-episode days, I could barely take in what Don was saying to me: 24 Armshore Drive; it's on the water; I could live here and be happy; with income from the downstairs suite, we can just afford it. *Do you like it?*

Do I like it? Dear God I would have been thrilled with an ancient bungalow on a busy street, or an apartment somewhere near the city. Do I like this three-bedroom Georgian-style home facing the Northwest Arm at the western edge of the city I loved on sight, that first trip to the Maritimes in 1996?

Yes. Every day, in every way. Professionally and personally, I've hardly set a foot wrong since we came to live here. In June 2008, I completed a Certificate Course in Adult Education at Dalhousie University. The course was wonderfully stimulating and brushed up my rusty teaching skills. In 2009, I started teaching memoir writing to seniors (and others) again. I am freelancing regularly for publications I want to be published in. I once again feel *au courant* with urban trends and popular culture, as my Dad had once noted.

The move to the city was no Pyrrhic victory, either. It looks like our big blue house in D'Escousse will sell this summer, but with our Cape Breton foothold, the small Victorian-era Morrison House, still in our holdings, Don is content with our city home. Far best of all, Don's health is excellent. Our diet has improved, he is fit from exercise and walks and all sorts of good work has come his way, too.

CHAPTER 28: STILL HEALING

17 July 2011, Halifax, NS

My right foot is still numb and has nasty pins and needles around the edges. It makes it hard to walk or feel steady on my feet. As for getting around, I lurch more than anything, which is hard on my back. At least I don't have to use the cane any more. Patience is what I am working hardest on now. I want my regular life back – want every enjoyable speck of it back, from dog walks to hikes to long mornings in the kitchen, chopping and stirring and smacking shut the oven, fridge and cupboard doors. I do most of these things in tiny measure now – I just want more. And yet the last of the nerve injury, currently residing in the foot, will not be rushed. What was it my dear Grade III teacher Mrs. Harris used to say? "When in a hurry, take plenty of time." It's a useful platitude.

On a cheerier note, Don and I did something normal and fun just yesterday: we went to a movie matinee downtown. We saw Woody Allen's 41st (!) movie, Midnight in Paris. It was charming! We loved everything about it: the cinematography (a love song to The City of Love), the cast (anyone who's anyone, *dahling*, would sum it up), the amusing, crisp dialogue and the delicious time travel. We were also intrigued by the movie's central premise, that few people are really happy with the era in which they grew up, or perhaps even their spot in time throughout their lives. Allen has two of his main characters dazzle-eyed for the Twenties (our hero) and the turn-of-the-19th-century "Golden Age," (our heroine), though both live disaffectedly in other times. Both are certain their lives would be shimmering, pure magic, had they only been born in the "right" decade. Allen's final word on that yearning: rubbish. You have the life you have. If it isn't the way you want it to be, then change it. Our hero ultimately does just this – changes his life – and lo and behold, a new, suitable and attainable woman appears beside him. His decisiveness is instantly rewarded.

And it all rang true, for these two movie-goers.

"Do not get me started on how much I detested the 50s," Don has said to me time and again. "Conservative, racist, crappy music, sexually stifling. In a word, stultifying. The 70s were a gale of fresh air."

"Ha! The 70s were a locomotive off the tracks," I always reply. "Feminist and colour-blind in word only, warping and weird pop psychologies, crappier music, sexually hyperactive and demented. In a word, terrifying. The stolid, safe 50s would have suited me fine."

We grin at each other, quite unwilling to give our separate decades the smallest bit of slack.

And yet and of course….these decades shaped us. As we grew older, we appraised our eras' teachings and sorted out what we wanted, and discarded the rest. Overall I believe that our times in history, anyone's time in history, is only as special as the people who come and go in it, and the places you are able to call home. In this regard, Don and I are blessed. We have one another, and two set of families and friends who bring us joy. We love, as our friend Sandra Delorey said, wherever we go on the east and west coasts, and spots in between. And are loved.

That's a lot of love.

CHAPTER 29: PARTING WITH HELLO'S

18 July 2011

"Part with hello's" – I used this phrase in the essay I wrote about Dad, which was published in *Canadian Living* in 1996. For the first time in a lifetime of visits, I wasn't frightened to walk away from my father, knew I'd see him again, knew there would be more shared laughter and stories. If I'd known there were only three years left in his lifetime, I would have been frightened again. Instead I walked away from him marveling at my lack of tears, the lightness of my heart. A sweet, unforgettable moment.

I need to part with another hello – here, now, amidst these one-after-another words. There's so much more I'd love to write about here – but of course I do, that's how a writer makes sense of the world, day by day, year by year. *Marjorie*, says my advisor gently, *this is a memoir you are writing, not an autobiography.* She is right.

So why is my heart racing?

Because I need to know – this time, have I Made it Right? Have I made the story right? There were so many times, as a child, as an adult, that I could not will into being certain outcomes. There was magic all around me – in the rainbows, in the fistfuls of mane atop galloping horses, in the sailing adventures of Three Forever, in the current voices of love and the remembered voices of our ancestors, in the unexpected, middle-world touch and words of others – and yet I could not always ease the pain of those around me, or accept with grace the biggest plot twists in my own life.

You couldn't live a perfect life or perfect the lives of others – is that what you're saying? Who can? Who would want to?

That would be Don – saucy fellow, I didn't know he could hear me writing today. He's upstairs at his desk, I'm downstairs at mine. It's mid-morning and I've already emailed him a couple of times.

Is today the day? Have you finished the memoir?

I think so. But I am a little worried.

You, worried. What have you done with my real wife?

I am your real wife, the one and only Miss Cheerywinky. Seriously, I am worried that I've missed something – maybe even something important.

You have.

What do you mean?

It's the nature of a life story, or a life chapter, as a memoir is. We will always leave out something important – probably several or many importants. It doesn't matter. You're not supposed to record every sniffle or snivel. You're supposed to tell stories, carve out your own small presence in the world and share your thoughts about that world. Have you done that? Do you agree?

Yes, and yes. But Don, this is an imaginary conversation.

Does it seem that way to you?

No. But it is.

Fine, you want real, phone me. I believe it's your turn.

Sniffle or snivel, he says – honestly, just *wait* till I – where is that phone, anyway?

"Hello?" he says – his voice as saucy and warm as ever.

"Hello," I say – it's me."

List of Published Articles by Marjorie Simmins, Included in the Memoir, in Order of Appearance

1) Trips from There to Here, *Saturday Night Magazine*, 1993, p. 15.

2) Escape of the Smallest Angel, unpublished, 1995, p. 25.

3) Looking for Heart, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1994, p. 31.

4) Eyes of a Stranger, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1993, p. 35.

5) Meeting the Challenge, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1995, p. 40.

6) Of Dad and Dandelions, *Canadian Living*, 1996, p. 51.

7) Writing the Distances Away, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1992, p. 55.

8) The House with Many Doors, unpublished, 2010, p. 58 (pending publication, 2012).

9) Jocelyn and the Merry-Go-Round Horse, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1992, p. 68.

10) Sea Songs and Moonlight on the Water, *The Vancouver Sun*, 1993, p. 71.

11) Guarding the Skyline, *The Horscope*, Southlands Riding Club newsletter, 1992, p. 84.

12) The Days of Three Forever, *The Chronicle Herald*, 2006, p. 92.

13) Editorial on Silver Donald Cameron's third marriage, in *Frank Magazine*, 1998, p. 121.

14) Bingo Night, *The Chronicle Herald*, 1998, p. 125.

15) Home Ports, *The Chronicle Herald*, 1998, p. 131.

16) Coastal Lives, *Canadian Magazine*, 2000, p. 135.

17) Let it Snow, Let it Snow, *The National Post*, 2003, p. 141.

18) Fabric Ballet, *Canadian Living*, 2003, p. 145.

19) Learning Cape Bretonese, *The Chronicle Herald*, 2003, p. 148.

20) Looking Like a Kehoe, *The Chronicle Herald*, 2003, p. 150.

21) Prairie Dreamscape, *The Chronicle Herald*, 2005, p. 165.

22) Goodbye to Cigarettes, *The Chronicle Herald*, 2003, p. 181.

Part Two

Memoir: An Examination of a Renegade Genre from the Inside Out

Renegade

noun

- a person who deserts and betrays an organization, country, or set of principles: *an agent who later turns out to be a renegade*
- *archaic* a person who abandons religion; an apostate: *renegades and Deserters of Heaven, who renounce their God for the Favour of Man*
- a person who behaves in a rebelliously unconventional manner: *he was a renegade and social malcontent* (*Oxford Dictionary*, online)

Inside Out

Inside Out is the title of a memoir by Evelyn Lau (now the Poet Laureate for Vancouver, BC). I admire the memoir for the beauty of its writing and its scalding honesty about the writer's life.

Inside Out also refers to my own experience of studying memoir from the "inside" - writing my own memoir - while studying the genre on the "outside" - the larger world community of memoirists.

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Part Two

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*.

Part Two

I.0 About the Researcher – A Memoirist Studies Memoir

Overview: This section details my evolution from letter and journal writer, to freelance writer and teacher, and finally, to memoirist.

1.1 A Love of Story

Born in Ottawa, raised in Vancouver and currently living in Halifax, I am fortunate to call many places and people "home." I bring to my study of memoir a life-long love of story that began with a mother who read to her four children every night, and took them to the library every week, armed with a fat wicker laundry basket to cart home books. My mother, Barbara Simmins (*née* Atkinson), an English and philosophy major who taught high school, also taught her children how to write letters – an activity that has stayed with us and brought us deep satisfaction. After letters came hard-bound journals, introduced to me and my siblings by our father, Richard Simmins, a freelance journalist at the time.

From readings, letters and journals my siblings and I progressed onto assorted liberal arts degrees, writing and teaching careers, and for two of my siblings, books of their own. For all of us, there is always time in our lives for *story* – "an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment" (*Oxford Dictionary*, 2011) – in our letters to friends and each other; in our personal and professional writings; in the vast variety of young or mature students' life stories that we read and assess; and always, in the greedy intake of the world's writings. Whether we are reading a novel or a

memoir or a poem, each of us reads with the same open heart and curious mind our mother had when she read to us.

In our love of story, my family and I are specks of sand in the Sahara Desert. As of October 31, 2011, there were 2,200,000,000 "results" or listings for "story" on the Internet. Storytelling, says an article in *Scientific American,* "is a human universal, and common themes appear in tales throughout history and all over the world" (Hsu, 2008). Writes Conroy: "The most powerful words in English are 'tell me a story,' words that are intimately related to the complexity of history, the origins of the language, the continuity of the species, the taproot of our humanity, our singularity, and art itself" (2010, p.303).

1.2 Background in Writing and Teaching

Since 1991, I have been a freelance writer, copy editor, editor and writing teacher. I have written for Canadian and American newspapers, magazines and anthologies. For six years I covered the commercial and sport fisheries on the west coast of Canada and published many essays or short, personal stories in provincial and national magazines and newspapers, one of which, a memoir about my sister Karin Simmins, won a Gold Medal at the National Magazine Awards in 1994. At this time, I also taught memoir writing to seniors.

When I moved from Vancouver, BC to Cape Breton Island in 1997, I decided to become more of a generalist freelance writer. I wrote articles of all sorts, many pertinent to (learning about) the region, and continued to write personal essays, which were published in provincial newspapers and national magazines. Shortly after my husband and I moved to Halifax, NS in 2006, I decided to refresh my teaching skills by taking a Certificate Course in Adult Education from Dalhousie University. (I also

have a BA in English Literature from the University of British Columbia.) I thereafter resumed teaching memoir writing, this time to writers of all ages. I currently freelance articles to various magazines and teach memoir writing on a part-time basis. I also maintain a blog on memoir writing on my website, *Memoirs and More*, (www.marjoriesimmins.ca).

1.3 Coming to Memoir

I remember coming to memoir and biography as a teenager, gulping down the lives of the rich and famous, and Hollywood actors such as Lauren Bacall and Montgomery Clift. I also distinctly remember preferring memoir, naively trusting that the "I" and not "she" or "he" guaranteed a more truthful or "real" account. Decades after these first reading experiences, I write in my blog on memoir writing: "For me, a memoir can be entry to worlds I know nothing about – and I always almost find that experience exciting." Some things don't change: I still love the worlds of theatre, film and memoir.

Worldwide, memoir is prolific, evolving and defiantly varied in its forms. As evidenced by my thesis title, I have come to think of memoir as a "renegade," a genre that is rebellious and non-conforming. While generally accepted by the reading public to be truthful, circumscribed, narrative accounts of a person's life, memoirs in fact have a long history of defying conventional expectations of narrative. They can be fictionalized or fraudulent (Daniel Defoe, in both *Moll Flanders* and *Journal of the Plague Year*, 1722; *Love and Consequences*, 2009, "Margaret B. Jones"; *The Angel at the Fence*, 2008, Herman Rosenblat); they can be exceedingly long (former American President Bill Clinton's memoir, *My Life*, 2004, was 957 pages); and the narrative structure can vary to include a range of forms and formats: recipes (Wong, 2007), letters (as in the memoir written in this thesis), e-mails, journal entries, photographs, art work of all sorts, poems and more (Norman,1992).

Memoirs such as these are similar to what is called *bricolage,* or *hybrid.* The term "hybrid" is a term accredited to writer and memoirist Natalia Rachel Singer, author of *Scraping by in the Big Eighties,* 2004. Singer views hybrid memoirs as works "in which a writer presents a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward" (Kihlstrom, 2011). Bricolage is a term often used in qualitative research to mean a collage of the researcher's perception, understanding, and perspective on the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000); such collage-like creations are seen more frequently in arts-based research (Neilsen, Cole, and Knowles, 2001).

Whether hybrid, bricolage, or conventionally rendered, memoirs record our histories, our movements through life. "Memoir," writes Thomas, "is the story of how we got here from there" (preface, 2008). Fittingly, my memoir about my sister Karin was titled "Trips From There to Here".

Despite being a professional writer for 20 years (perhaps, in part, because), I had not published a book of any kind. It was something I'd expected to do earlier on – and for a variety of reasons, had not. I was beginning to wonder if I could, as I was starting to term it, "write long," in any genre. In the end, I chose memoir – memoir chose me – because it was the genre that made the most sense for a writer of my background to write. All those letters, all those journals, all the essays I'd published over the years – they all used variations of the same "voice" – my direct-to-the-reader-voice – which enabled me to be candid and personal, as though talking to a good friend, and yet conversely, somehow gave me enough artistic distance to craft a story.

I knew the stories I loved best from my years of teaching memoir writing to The Writers Discovery Group, a seniors' group in Vancouver – the stories that took me away to another time, place and outlook, and satisfied me both in form and emotional content. So with those reading memories and many others in mind, I sat down to "write long" about the last 15 years of my life – the Maritime portion of my life to date. So much had happened in this decade and a half. I (the once-upon-a-journal-

keeper) wanted to see what it all looked like, down on paper. I (the storyteller) also wanted to see how it compared and contrasted with other emotionally significant parts of my earlier life.

1.4 Coming to Research

I enrolled in a research masters in literacy education to have the opportunity to write a memoir, study memoir as a form, and reflect on its role in contemporary life. Writing memoir is a phenomenological process, requiring the writer not only to write the story of her life, but to reflect on the experience and its aftermath. I studied, therefore, the "phenomenon" of my pre- and post-memoir conditions, and how both pertained to how I had taught memoir, and would teach it, in the future. Richardson says, "I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic . . . . Writing is also a way of 'knowing'–a method of discovery and analysis" (2008).

I discovered that my imagining of the writing process was quite different from what occurred; in examining the completed memoir, I identified themes I expected to find – and some I did not. In the end I found unexpected context and company with my memoir, in how it aligned with others, both current and historical.

1.5 Coming to this Work: The Aim of this Thesis

My aim in this thesis was three-fold: to achieve a long-held goal, to write a memoir; to read and research memoir historically as a form, in particular a hybrid form to which women are drawn; and to examine the memoir I had written for the insights it would provide both on my life (its themes and patterns and motifs) and on the memoir form itself. Because the perspective is a phenomenological one, in which the researcher/writer examines experience, this inquiry required that I write and examine the writing from inside out in order to place the particular in a larger cultural context and literary tradition.

If I were to describe the questions that guided this inquiry, they would be questions not unlike those that have guided my writing during my life: What is the story here? How do I choose to write that story, and how do my choices of subject and approach, in particular, reflect aspects of the self (woman as writer) and of memoir writing at large?

My method, described in detail in Section Four, included writing the memoir, keeping a blog, doing historical, library, and personal research, and then examining the completed memoir, to see if or how it fits in generally with the longer tradition of memoirs, and secondarily, with the memoirs of women, past and present.

2.0 Review of the Literature

2.1 Memoir: Definitions

Definitions of memoir are numerous. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines memoir as "a historical account or biography written from personal knowledge," and defines memoirs (plural) as "an account written by a public figure of their life and experiences, and an essay on a learned subject." The word's origin is late 15th century (denoting a memorandum or record): from French *mémoire* (masculine), a special use of *mémoire* (feminine) 'memory'.

It should also be noted that "*mémoire"* (French) does not mean the same as the English "memoir," the former meaning a mini personal essay – not the longer account that English speakers would expect. As well and interestingly, the word "memory" comes from the same root as the word "mourn," which, says Thomas, "should tell you something" (2008, p.2).

In the *Oxford Dictionary's* definition, the example used, "she published a short memoir of her husband," can be interpreted several ways: did the author write the memoir *with* her husband (a combined effort), *for* her husband (ghost-written) or *about* her husband (biography)? Memoirs can be

written with someone ("as told to"), or for someone (Farley Mowat's *Bay of Spirits*, 2009, which details his meeting and marriage to his second wife, Claire) and about someone (Sally Armstrong's *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor*, 2008, a fictional memoir written about one of her early Canadian ancestors).

2.2 Memoir/Memoirs: The Genre and Its Cousins, Autobiography and Essay

Historically, the memoir focused on others, not the self, by contrast with the autobiography. Yagoda (2009) offers the somewhat recent example of A.E. Hotchner's 1966 *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir*. In this, Hotchner plays a bit part, and Hemingway is the headliner. This distinction between autobiography and memoir "held sway as late as 1984," writes Yagoda, "when another scholar, Richard Coe, observed that while in an autobiography 'it is the writer himself who is the centre of interest,' in a memoir, 'the writer is, as a character, essentially negative, or at least neutral'" (Yagoda, 2009, p. 2).

Although the terms are often used interchangeably now, most contemporary writers on memoir distinguish the memoir form from autobiography. Autobiography is typically taken to mean a more historical account of a life, relying more on research, dates and facts, rather than just memories, to record. It is also taken to mean a continuous, often chronological, account of an entire life, rather than a selection of episodes or events that constitute a theme.

Yagoda writes: "The one clear difference [between autobiography and memoir] is that while 'autobiography' or 'memoirs' usually cover the full span of that life, 'memoir' has been used by books that cover the entirety *or* some portion of it" (Yagoda, 2010, p.1). As for the memoir's 21st century presentation, he writes: "Attention is resolutely focused on the self, and a certain lee-way or looseness with the facts is expected" (Yagoda, 2010, p. 2). This does not encompass, continues Yagoda, "gross

liberties or outright fabrications perpetrated by James Frey [*A Million Little Pieces*, 2005] and many other recent fraudulent memoirists…." (Yagoda, 2010, p.2).

George Fetherling, editor of *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*, places memoir under the catch-all field of "life-writing." He elaborates:

> Life-writing is the general term whose specifics include autobiography (about one's public self), memoir (frequently about others but with oneself as a thread), diary (day-by-day record), and journal (a discontinuous and often more private or intense product of the same impulse to record). Many argue compellingly that life-writing today is popular because it's connected to the traditional realistic novel in which a recognizable world is created in a recognizable manner though the telling of a story. Fictional characters are flesh-and-blood figures whom their creators care about passionately, but they're essentially inventions. Memoirists or other life-writers create from actual experience but allow themselves the fiction writer's freedom of rearranging and telescoping in order to make what happened worthy of being called a tale (2001, Preface).

Also in the category of memoir is the essay, including the personal essay. The history of the essay is long, honourable and fascinating. French writer Michel Eyquem de Montaigne (1533-1592), is sometimes called the "father of the [literary] essay" (Madden, 2011). His collection, *Essais* (1580), established a new literary form. In this, "…he wrote one of the most captivating and intimate self-portraits ever given, on a par with Augustine's and Rousseau's" (Sankovitch, 2011).

The essay has had many incarnations, from New York's "New Journalism," (also the title of a collection of essays, edited by Tom Wolfe and E.W. Johnson, in 1973), practiced by the likes of Joan Didion, Truman Capote and Norman Mailer in New York, and by Canadian journalists Harry Bruce, Peter Gzowski, Christina McCall and Barbara Moon in Toronto, to its current and popular guise as the short, personal story, published in anthologies, newspapers and magazines. The essay, as a form of scholarly argument, is also taught in high schools and universities.

Essays are also a way of living a life. Writer, essayist and self-described "cripple," (she has multiple sclerosis) Nancy Mairs, finds the impetus to write and ponder all around her: "Out of the new

arrivals in our lives – the odd word stumbled upon in a difficult text, the handsome black stranger who bursts in one night through the cat door, the telephone call out of a friend's silence of years, the sudden greeting from the girl-child – we constantly make of ourselves our selves" (Mairs, 2011).

Cultural anthropologist and author Mary Catherine Bateson has written extensively about the life story and the varied forms it can take, essays among them. She, too, sees the impetus for story all around the writer, and additionally, sees story as something humans need:

> Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some renascent truth. This approach applies to all the incidents of everyday life: the phrase in the newspaper, the endearing or infuriating game of a toddler, the misunderstanding at the office. Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories (Bateson, n.d.).

Yet another distinguished writer, Virginia Woolf, prolifically used the essay to live a considered life. While known primarily for her fiction, Woolf in fact authored over 500 works of non-fiction, and spent most of her working life as a book reviewer and essayist. Of her essays in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, non-fiction pieces dating from 1904, when she was twenty-three, to 1912, the year she married Leonard Woolf, the *Library Journal* says: "These are polished works of literary journalism – shrewd, deft, inquisitive, graceful and often sparkling" (*Library Journal*, 2011). It is the term "literary journalism" that is of interest here – a reminder of the pinnacle the essay can reach, and has done, with Woolf and many others.

Beloved children's author E.B. White was also known for his elegant essays, which he often published in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*. Lehman-Haupt, a book reviewer with *The New York Times*, says he was given the lucky "break" of reviewing of White's 1977 collection of essays and writes of their timelessness:

> ... E. B. White will always be coming back into style. That's because, as he himself observes of Thoreau, he writes sentences that resist the destructiveness of time. Besides, he's an essayist's essayist. With his relaxed serendipitous technique of seeming to stumble on his subject by way of the back door, he lends you confidence that you don't really have to know much about a thing

> to write about it intelligently; you need only possess the skill to write, along with a lot of sanity. Thus, if you've got the hang of it, you can arrive at the subject of disarmament by way of Mary Martin's furniture, or at the prospects of American democracy by the route of a dachshund named Fred (Lehman-Haupt, 1977).

Light years away from the wry wit of E.B. White's essays, is the more common and rigid understanding of the essay form, as taught in high schools and universities. Goldberg acknowledges this negative perception, and adds her own opinion:

> Unfortunately, the word 'essay' usually gets a bad rap in our society. Hand your essays in by Friday. You must write a five-hundred-word essay on the American flag. As adults we hear the e-word and flee, but in truth essays are a delectable form and have the potential to be a baby memoir – fresh, alert, compact, rather perfect. They are short invitations to come along with the writer as she excavates a memory or rolls around in a nuanced thought. As the picture unfolds, the reader can be there in an organic way (Goldberg, 2007, p.278).

Other definitions of memoir, particularly of the "good" or well-written memoir come from Zinsser:

> A good memoir requires two elements – one of art, the other of craft. The first element is integrity of intention....The other element is carpentry. Good memoirs are a careful act of construction....Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With that feat of manipulation, they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone.... (Zinsser,1998, p.6)

2.3 Memoir: A Contemporary Genre

"This is the age of memoir," pronounced Zinsser. Never have personal narratives gushed so profusely from the American soil as in the closing decade of the twentieth century. Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it (1998, p.3)" Ten years later, Yagoda writes: "As ubiquitous as memoirs seem in the United States, they are – if there are degrees of ubiquity – even more so in Britain, accounting for seven of the top ten bestselling nonfiction hardcovers in both 2007 and 2008" (2009, p.3)

Birkerts (2008) claims that the appetite both for the writing and reading of memoir is growing in contemporary life. It is a form of what he calls "creative self-inquiry." He writes:

> *This really happened* is the baseline contention of the memoir, and the fascination of the work – apart from the interest we have in what is told – is in the tracking the artistic transformation of the actual via the alchemy of psychological insight, pattern recognition, and lyrical evocation into a contained saga...."(Birkerts, 2007, p.190).

Canadian writers are equally enthusiastic about memoir, publishing their own memoirs and in memoir collections (e.g. *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*, 2001). Included in this anthology are Margaret Atwood, Sylvia Fraser, Dorothy Livesay, Wayson Choy and Timothy Findley – to name only a few award-winning authors and poets. In a single week in October, 2011, two Canadian music superstars, Jann Arden (*Falling Backwards*) and Michael Buble, (*Onstage Offstage*) had memoirs on the *Globe and Mail's* bestseller's list, as did sports commentator and hockey enthusiast, Ron MacLean, with his memoir, *Cornered*.

In the proliferation of this genre, its sub-genres appear to be infinite. During the two years I kept a blog on my memoir readings (www.marjoriesimmins.ca), I noted that sub-genres can include:

-*type* (spiritual or "confessions"; war-times and Holocaust; "misery," "shockers" and "shtick lit"; related to: place, event, hobby, food, life-philosophy or animals; fraudulent; fictional; children's; writers/literary),

-*people* (sports or rock stars; Hollywood figures; politicians; relatives of successful memoirists; average Joes) and

-*forms* (serial, hybrid or mixed genre, magazine-or newspaper-length memoirs).

Of course all the sub-genres can form single entities as well: a "misery" memoir can be written by a Hollywood movie star using poetry and photographs as illustration. Any perusal of the internet reveals a near-infinity of sub-genre mixing and matching.

2.4 Memoir as Renegade: The Hybrid Memoir

I believe the memoir is a renegade genre. If memoir were a fish, it would dart past your hand when you reached out to change its course in the water – or anywhere else it traveled. It's not meant to be caught, only to swim against currents of accepted form.

I further believe that the memoir reaches its renegade apex in its hybrid form, and that the hybrid exists within all sub-genres of memoir. By hybrids, again, I mean memoirs that will not suffer any constraints of any sort: not in form, length, content or presentation.

To qualify as hybrid, the memoir must add that "something different" – photographs, sketches or maps; e-mails, letters or previously published work; recipes, boat or house plans; poetry, unusual fonts, illustrations or presentations; unusual subject matter or themes, etc. – this list, like the list of sub-genres, is long, defiantly creative and open-ended.

As I noted earlier, hybrid memoirs are similar to what is called *bricolage.* Singer views hybrid memoirs as works "in which a writer presents a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward" (Kihlstrom, 2004).

Hybrids fear no reader or critic, nor any subject. They will horrify with tales of bestiality (*Secret Life*, Michael Ryan, 1995), titillate with confessions of promiscuity (*Love Junkie, A Memoir,* Rachel Resnick, 2008), and taunt with conditional titles such as *If I Did It* (O.J. Simpson, 2007). Hybrids will also surprise and delight with unexpected form, illustration, recipes, photographs and poems.

2.5 Examples of Hybrids

Not Quite What I was Planning (2008), from *Smith Magazine*, is a memoir collection of six-word memoirs. The editors of *Smith Magazine* explain how the idea for the book came about: "Legend has it that Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. Papa came back swinging with, **'For sale: baby shoes, never worn.'** Some say he called it his best work. Others dismiss the anecdote as a literary folktale. Either way, the six-word story was born, and it's been popping around the writing world for years" (Fershleiser and Smith, 2008,introduction).

The 100-Mile-Diet: A Year of Local Eating (2007), takes the form of a two-handed play of a single year of living. The two "players," writers and freelance journalists Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon, write in the fashion of a journal, dating the entries by month as they go along, and taking turns "speaking," from chapter to chapter. The writers' styles are quite different, but uniformly good. The multi-faceted story hence succeeds, justifying their use of the hybrid-form.

Denise Chong's *The Concubine's Children* (1994) could be called an investigative hybrid – with fictionalized features. Chong, a writer and political advisor, explores her family history through research, discussions with family in Canada and China, and a visit to China to meet family members and see where the family originated. She then writes a fictionalized account of the families' lives in both China and Canada. (Another BC writer, journalist Rick Ousten, wrote a similar investigative memoir, *Finding Family*, also in 1994. His did not include fictionalized narrative – though the excellent pacing and development led it to read as a novel would. A fine memoir, then, but not a hybrid.)

From another Chinese-Canadian memoirist comes the *Wong Family Feast, Our Recipes and Stories* (2007), by Joanna Claire Wong. A Vancouver writer, filmmaker and communications strategist, Wong wrote and self-published a classic mixed-medium hybrid, which includes poems, photographs,

family stories and history, and recipes. To do this, Wong traveled to China to study Mandarin and Chinese culture and foods. Together with her parents, who had come to visit her, Wong made a "pilgrimage" to the Wong ancestral village in South China. The seeds for writing a family history were planted during this time. The fact that Wong chose to do this within the hybrid form, makes the memoir-family-history unique to this family and its times in history, both in China and the west coast of Canada. The memoir is resonantly of this family and none other.

This is perhaps what the hybrid does best: provides uniqueness in a prolific genre where a writer must work hard to go beyond commonalities, for any degree of freshness and originality.

Mentioned earlier is *The Nine Lives of Charlotte Taylor*, Armstrong's memoir of her long-ago settler-ancestor. Once again a woman writer is consumed by curiosity and compassion about a figure in her family history – and once again the hybrid memoir provides a framework for exploration. Armstrong, a journalist, author, filmmaker, teacher and former editor of *Homemaker's* magazine, then applies her formidable researching and writing skills to a detailed imagining of her ancestor's life in New Brunswick. The memoir blurs genres – historical fiction, memoir, biography – which, thanks to a forgiving renegade aspect to the genre and an experienced writer's hand, makes for an absorbing read.

On one hand, the reading public has the sometimes fraudulent, often embellished, always unpredictable and occasionally brilliant, unforgettable memoir (*Walden*, 1854, Henry David Thoreau; *Angela's Ashes*, 1996, Frank McCourt). On the other, the memoir's sub-genre, the hybrid, fights conformity and propriety even harder – to the point, perhaps, of estranging its reader (*Running with Scissors*, 2002, Augustyn Burroughs). But when sitting down to write in a renegade genre, how can the writer predict what might transpire? Conventional incarnations exist, certainly, but any scan of the bestselling lists show they are in the minority.

Regardless of the ultimate form the memoir might take, conventional or hybrid, basic premises still guide its progress onto paper. As Birkerts notes, the injunction from Socrates to "Know Thyself" underpins memoir writing (p.190). Writing a memoir is necessarily a phenomenological enterprise. In order to write a memoir, I had to draw upon my own experiences and examine them in detail. I did this for greater self-understanding, and to make the larger connections to other lives in other memoirs.

3.0 Methodology

The methodology of this thesis is phenomenological and auto-ethnographic. Its form is two-part: First, it a full-length creative work, namely, a memoir. Second, it is both an examination of the memoir and the creative process involved to produce it, and the relationship between this work and the broader genre of memoir literature itself, which in turn is examined in its historical and current forms.

Phenomenological research is particularly suited to both the writing of a memoir and a reflection upon such writing. Phenomenology is a philosophical perspective on knowing—the individual is always seen in-relation-to her experience, and, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) claims, as an embodiment of her sensory world. Examining lived experience allows me as the researcher to reflect on my life stories, write about that reflection, and come to an understanding of the forces and motifs that have given shape to my life.

Under that reflective stance, the self is a micro-culture to be studied. In this way, auto-ethnography – the study of the self as a micro-culture – is also suited to the study and the crafting of memoir. In fact, it may be claimed that auto-ethnography is simply memoir in scholarly garb (Neilsen, 2011, personal communication). Porter (2004) quotes Ellis and Bochner (2000), who describe autho-ethnography as a form of writing that 'make[s] the researcher's own experience a topic of investigation in its own right' (p. 733). An auto-ethnography allows a personal and intimate voice, rather than

seeming ‘as if [it were] written from nowhere by nobody’ (p. 734). Auto-ethnography is ‘an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural’ (p. 739); auto-ethnographers ‘ask their readers to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually’ (p. 745).

Glesne describes auto-ethnography as follows:

> Auto-ethnography begins with the self, the personal biography. Using narrative of the self, the researcher goes on to say something about the larger cultural setting and scholarly discourse, taking a sociological rather than a psychological perspective (p. 246, 2011).

As part of the auto-ethnographic approach, I examine my writing in the context of other writers of memoir: the writing forms that women writers practiced before they wrote actual memoirs (journal or diaries, letters and articles, articles done as freelance or staff journalism), and the more general appearance of the “hybrid memoir,” a sub-genre of memoir practiced by men and women memoirists. As supporting background this study draws on a range of sources: theorists and social commentators on memoir and its various historical and contemporary roles; representative memoirs across the ages; and my own engagement with memoir as a writer and reflective teacher. Finally, as I study memoir, I also necessarily draw upon my own experience and reflections on writing and teaching the form.

The work of this study involves my own narrative accounts, articles, correspondence and personal papers. Other material is taken from library sources, historical and contemporary journals, newspapers, the World Wide Web (Internet) and books. All materials used are in the public domain or part of my personal files. As a result, no interviewing was necessary or done, nor were there any human subjects for whose stories or comments I would have needed ethics approval.

4.0 Method

My method in this inquiry included reading and research (other memoirs, and books about memoir); blogging about memoir; writing a memoir; and reflecting on the completed memoir.

4.1 Reading and Research (other memoirs, and books on memoir)

The course of readings I set out for myself was unusual, perhaps, but effective: I read whatever could be possibly termed memoir, and found the books in our house library (the home of two writers), the public and university libraries, in thrift stores and on the shelves of friends' libraries. Memoirs also appeared as gifts on holidays and birthdays, and arrived very generously in the mail, sent on by west coast friends. One sharp-eyed Halifax friend found some of the best reference books I would come to use, and some of the most unusual hybrid memoirs. I treated myself with books I knew I'd enjoy, due to the subject matter (*Narrow Dog to Carcassonne*, Terry Darlington, 2005; *Horsepower: A Memoir*, Annette Israel, 2008; and *Little Horse of Iron*, Lawrence Scanlan, 2002), and re-read memoirs I cherished, for both subject matter and literary quality: *The Hungry Ocean*, Linda Greenlaw, 1999; *A Girl Named Zippy* (2001) and *She Got Up Off the Couch* (2006), Haven Kimmel; and Linden MacIntyre's *Causeway* (2009).

Beyond this, I monitored the bestselling books list in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper, and read on a weekly basis, as I always do, a variety of magazines (*Canadian Living, Zoomer, More, Halifax, The Literary Review of Canada, Walrus*), both for their mention or review of a new memoir title, or the occasional printing of a memoir essay. I also asked friends – writers and otherwise – what their favourite memoir titles were, and asked the same question of a number of academics who taught the genre.

I also, deliberately, read the occasional book of fiction, both for a change of pace (to return to memoir fresh again), and to remind myself of the differences and similarities between fiction and non-fiction, or memoir. I came to see far more of the latter, than the former. (From my memoir reading blog, February 3, 2010: "The story of our life is never an autobiography, always a novel…our memories are just another artifice," writes novelist Julian Barnes (Birnbaum, n.d.).

Supporting Barnes' statement, I also encountered fiction that was thinly disguised memoir. Novelist Donna Morrissey, whom I interviewed for a freelance article, was candid and unapologetic about the events and people in her novels, which so closely mirrored her own life. The compulsion many writers feel to write memoir – to record their life stories – is apparently and handily contained within Morrissey's fictive output.

4.2 Blogging about Memoir

In December 2008, I began a blog on memoir writing within my website, *Memoirs and More*. The site includes a good portion of my earlier and ongoing published writing, memoir essays included. The blog allowed me an opportunity to comment on memoirs I have read. It has been most useful to have a full record of all my readings, and to have this in one, accessible place.

The blog also worked as a journal of sorts. After keeping a journal for two decades (1975-1995), I hadn't kept one during my Maritime years from 1997 onward. Yagoda, too, notes the similarities between blogs and journals:

> In truth, blogs, in their free-form dailyness and openness to random details, bear a closer resemblance to journals or diaries than to memoirs, which require a certain Wordsworthian recollected-in-tranquillity element, as well as endorsement by a gatekeeping publisher (2010, p. 21).

Keeping this blog provided data for this inquiry, which includes commentary on memoir books and reference books; novels and newspaper articles; the role of letters and journals in the formation of young women writers' voices; the incidence of women writers coming to memoir from journalism (and going to journalism to write memoir), and discussion of the many sub-genres of memoir, the hybrid included.

4.3 Writing a Memoir

As mentioned earlier, I had been hoping to write a memoir for at least 10 years prior to my start in January 2010; I was keen to get writing. That said, I did not have an outline to begin work on the memoir – or, really, any idea what the first words and chapters might look like. All I had was a desire to record – and the ability to stay put in front of my computer, for long hours, apparently quiet. When the day finally arrived that I sat down to begin the memoir – I, as they say in Cape Breton, took off "like a scalded cat." I did not search for the words; each morning, day after day, they were as a gift. As my journals had once been.

The journal structure – dated, daily entries, with comment on current realities and "excursions" to past ones – was exactly what I needed. When I first started writing, I thought, *Oh this will work to get me started now; I can always change my mind about form later on.* When later on arrived, I had decided the form was still providing me with the vertebrae of the narrative. And so it continued to do, for the entirety of the memoir.

As the writing progressed, shifts to the perspective of past events became more frequent; context was needed, for current attitudes or focuses of the main "character," me, to make full sense to the reader. I had already been thinking about illustration for the memoir, wondering if I might add in

photographs at some points. *My essays*, I thought suddenly one morning, as I sat down to write the first words of the day, *I could use my essays to show, not tell*.

The essays or published works I am referring to are a part of my written archive as a freelance journalist, created in the last twenty years, and published in provincial and national newspapers and magazines across Canada. Most were published only once. One, my memoir-essay about my sister, Karin Simmins, has been published in *Saturday Night* magazine, and two different anthologies, three different times. It was also available for many years as a sample essay on an American university website, a use for which I have never granted permission.

Despite this infamy, I legally, unequivocally own the copyright to all my published works, having only ever sold one-time rights to any buyer. I was at liberty, therefore, to "re-print" my own work within the memoir. As I decided the essays did indeed work well as illustration points, I collected up a goodly number from my boxed archive in the attic and re-read them. Some made the cut, others, mostly related to fisheries, did not. (I have electronic copies of all my work, but I wanted to see the original lay-outs and illustrations used at the time of publication. I found that these original hard copies stirred my memories of the times most vividly. That in turn helped me to write about retrospective events, with a heightened sense of recall – or so I believed. Regardless, the confidence this engendered certainly helped with the steady production of the memoir.)

I soon found I was juggling three timelines: my present married life in Halifax, NS; my previous, single life in Vancouver, BC; and my earliest years in Ottawa, ON. Within these timelines, I was also using past and present tenses – and not always predictably so. The essays from the past, for example, were often written in the present tense, because it has always been my preferred tense for my essays. Within the memoir, I thought I would find the overlapping tenses confusing. Happily, I did not. It was like watching television: when I wanted one program, I simply switched over to the desired

channel. The present-life journal-like narrative spine helped greatly in this regard. When in doubt, I simply had to refer to Channel One, my current place in time. All the rest was a lovely roaming outward from this – channel surfing – though I remained one click away from the present.

Although I was not yet thinking about hybrid memoir in any sort of conscious manner, my subconscious must have been at work. Two years of intense readings had to be affecting my decisions in more ways than I knew or guessed. And so, as with any hybrid memoir worth its salt, I wondered what else might aid the telling of my memoir, beyond the inclusion of previously published essays.

Love story, I told myself, this memoir at its core is a love story. What souvenirs of this love story do you have, that might be included in it as well?

To indicate the beginning of the sea-change in my life I decided to include the lyrics and guitar chords for *Blue Moon*, a love song written by Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers. The song had been mentioned earlier in one of my essays, when a friend of mine, Jo-Ann, and I go to the Sunshine Coast, north of Vancouver, for a short holiday. I play my 12-string guitar, and Jo-Ann and I sing the song under a cold full moon. The mood is affectionate but melancholic. Jo-Ann and I are obviously enjoying our time together, but a reader could guess, rightly, that we are single women, "without a love" of our own. When I include the song in the memoir, the title above it is "Anything But Blue," along with the date, September 1996, which is a month after Don and I have had our week-long "date" in Point Roberts. I am very happy at this time, and I want the memoir to reflect that, in a way separate from a regular prose entry.

Among other hybrid inclusions is a poem. In the grand poetic tradition, my husband and I had asked my oldest sister Zoë Landale, an award-winning writer and poet, to write us a wedding poem, as her gift to us when we married. She was kind enough to agree, and created a poem, now framed and on display, that has given us pleasure every day of our now 14-year marriage. The poem is hung in my

home office. Neither Don and I can read it without being affected in the best sense of that word. The language is powerful and resonates with circles of love; mine for Don, Don's for me, Zoë's for both of us, and perhaps her love and hope for the highest ideals of marriage. I included the poem in the memoir, along with the wedding service my brother, Dr. Reverend Geoffrey Simmins, performed for us, and the vows Don and I exchanged.

I also included a re-print of a news feature from the Halifax edition of *Frank* magazine, which had saucily reported on our marriage. (The copyright remains with *Frank* magazine, but as they couldn't possibly make any money with reprints of old new stories, I felt no compunction about including it in my MA memoir; if the memoir is later published commercially, I will seek reprint rights from both *Frank* magazine article and the heirs to "Blue Moon".) I chose this for humour, and also to indicate various complications that came with being the new kid on the Maritime block, married to a local, well-known writer, and with marrying a man over two decades older than myself, who had been married twice before. I hoped the article would encourage empathy, make the reader wonder how they might feel, if they had been pushed unexpectedly into the public eye; I also hoped to stir curiosity, about life in a small Cape Breton village, for a west coast city girl, far from friends and family of her own. *Show, don't tell*, seemed to be working again, I hoped.

Finally, I added to the hybrid potpourri snippets of actual, word-for-word letters (my Aunt Susette, congratulating us on our marriage), remembered e-mails ("selected," from memory, from the 800-odd communications between Don and me before he travelled to Vancouver as a widower to meet me a second time), and current e-mails between us.

After my accident on the horse on May 2 of 2011 and the two-month convalescence that followed, I was yet again grateful for the journal format of my memoir when I returned to work on it. I slowly picked up the narrative, reliant on the snug and supportive parameters of the daily or near-daily

writings. While still physically impaired during the summer of 2011, I nonetheless continued to believe in Goldberg's observation:

> Writing is an athletic activity. It comes from the whole body, your knees and arms, kidneys, liver, fingers, teeth, lungs, spine – all organs and body parts leaning in with you, hovering in concentration over the page. Behind the football we see on TV, the players have put in hundreds of hours before the big game. The muscles of writing are not so visible, but they are just as powerful: determination, attention, curiosity, a passionate heart (2007, p. 1).

And hence with a lifetime of writing behind me, I was supported in my aim to finish the memoir.

4.4. Analysis

Once the memoir was written, I was in a position to look at the work, as well as the approach I had taken to write it. The process of my analysis consisted of re-reading my own memoir, examining my blog entries and other aspects of the process, considering the themes and patterns that arose in the memoir and reading others' work of memoir (and on memoir). The section that follows, From the Inside Out, describes these findings.

For me to arrive at these, however, involved a process anything but scientific or even methodical. The floor of my home office, a room of at least 12 by 15 feet, was almost entirely covered in books – paperbacks and hardcovers, of every size and colour – and computer print-outs, scribbled pages torn from small notepads, stacks of "post-its," in use and not, highlighter pens, pencils and erasers. The organized mess – the books at least were separated into piles of favourite memoirs versus reference books – was mostly clustered around my chair, so all I had to do was lean left or right and find the book I wanted.

But what did I want? Where was I actually going to start my discussion? As it turned out, what I wanted was a visual. From the stacks of books I unerringly pulled out *Women Who Write* (Bollmann,

2007), which has a stunning photograph of Virginia Woolf on the cover. *I'll review this book one more time*, I thought, though in fact I did not re-read any of it then, but did review the other and numerous photos and painting reproductions the book includes. There was a copy of a painting by Branwell Bronte, of his sisters, Anne, Emily and Charlotte. In my view, the brother has captured the searing intelligence his sisters all shared; under his paintbrush, their expressions are bold and inquisitive. *I'll remember them this way*, I thought, and not always skip past their youth, as I tend to, and think about their short and terribly hard lives. *Remember these dancing eyes*, I told myself – and above all, the evocative, enduring writings the three women produced. I realized, as I continued to turn the pages, how much I enjoyed seeing the images of women writers – memoirists, letter writers, poets, novelists, journalists – details of which (dress, accessories, venue, activity, etc.) helped me to imagine their lives more fully. Beatrix Potter (standing in a doorway, holding a sun hat; she spent so much time in her gardens, saw the first Peter Rabbit under a hedge); Simone de Beauvoir (seated at a desk, papers in hand; hair up, stylishly dressed); Mary Wollstonecraft (book in hand, eyes raised from it, expression defiant, measuring); gentle-faced Johanna Spyri (seated, letter in hand); Astrid Lindgren (hands on her typewriter keyboard; behind and around her, crammed bookshelves, objects d'art, paintings); Sidonie Gabrielle Colette (dramatic make-up on an already dramatic, foxy face, a cat curled by her arm); Agatha Christy (beaming, pearl-bedecked, dressed in an evening gown); the gorgeous, doe-eyed Marguerite Duras, one hand gloved, the other clipped onto a cigarette, sitting, drinking, at a sidewalk café in Paris – the illustrations told me much about the women's lives, circumstances and personalities.

Above all, though, I loved seeing them working with the tools of the trade around them, heads bent over their accumulating words, or, still working, taking long moments of far-gazed pause, perhaps with a fountain pen suspended over paper.

All these amazing, gifted women – bound together by a love of writing. I wasn't in their company for genius, obviously, but I was in their company for a lifetime's pursuit of words. I felt a strong sense of connection in this shared intellectual activity, long practiced and beloved by women.

"If there is anything that the wide range of women collected in this volume have in common – besides their literary talent, and secondly their gender – it's a certain bravery, or an unkillable impulse, or whatever it was that impelled them to put that first word down on paper, and then the next and the next" (Prose, foreword, p.1, in Bollmann, 2007).

A certain bravery. An unkillable impulse. To write. Over a lifetime. And sometimes, of a lifetime. Yes, that's what writing my memoir had felt like, as every other sort of writing I'd done had felt like too. Even my journals intimidated me in the very beginning – all those snowy blank pages – as had letters, before I discovered how well both forms agreed with me. As a self-taught journalist, I was thoroughly intimidated initially and even now, two decades later, I have never lost my fear of making an embarrassing error in print. But the compulsion to write overcame the fear, and facility and enjoyment replaced inability and hesitation. I did all these writings alone, as all writers must, but I was never alone in the pursuit, the compulsion. *Au contraire*. There were women writers all around me, past and present. They supported all my efforts, by blazing earlier trails, and by suggesting, by their own example, how one sort of writing might lead to numerous others. I may have followed in their footsteps unwittingly, but follow I had done.

Although I was still not aware of having made any decisions, in terms of where to focus my writing or how to analyze what I wrote, a decision had in fact been made: I wanted to join all the writerly dots of women's writing before they came to memoir. Were the linkages as common as I suspected, between letter and journal writers becoming writers of fiction, journalism and memoir? If so, how or did this affect the writing itself, in its tone and execution?

In fact, my analytic process was similar to the writing process itself. With the background of understanding the focus and preoccupations of women writers, I was alert to similar themes and patterns in my own memoir. As with writing, some motifs or issues will announce themselves (such is the nature of both reading and memory) and some require an active search for their presence. As well, as the quote attributed to E.M. Forster so wisely asks us: "How do I know what I think until I see what I say"? The process of reviewing my memoir, reading others' memoirs, responding to what were often rhizomatic thought patterns, I determined what key themes and motifs seem to be found in my work.

To quote Ngunjiri et al: some forms of auto-ethnography lean toward art whereas "others make more purposeful attempts at scientific analysis. Some scholars categorize these differences as *evocative* versus *analytical*" (2010, p. 12). Again, this process is similar to the act of writing the memoir itself.

As with all memoir (and with auto-ethnography as well), the themes I have discovered or have realized may not, to another reader, be themes apparent to them.

5.0 From the Inside Out: Insights and Findings

As I have noted, I consider memoir to be a renegade and hybrid form. Analyzing the memoir and my approach to writing it required that I approach the reflective and recursive process of analysis and mining for insight from the inside out. I looked at my own stories, examined my blog entries and other aspects of the process, and I considered themes and patterns that emerged, especially in the context of others' work (their memoirs and their writing on memoir). As a result of this recursive process and phenomenological investigation, I came to the understanding that the work revealed several aspects of memoir as form, and memoir as a personal, exploratory form of my own experience.

I found the process of 'tagging' my memoir (marking the themes and repetitions of themes) to be highly revealing. In my case, the themes included storytelling, family and animals, magic, the search for wholeness, reinvention and rejuvenation, crisis, and love and healing. Discussion of these findings about memoir follows: 5.1 Memoir as Form: A Woman's Letters; 5.2 Memoir: Fashioning a Text; and 5.3 Memoir: Themes in a Woman's Life.

5.1 Memoir as Form: A Woman's Letters

In re-reading my own memoir, I identified influences from the following forms: letter writing (epistolary); journalism, in the particular form of previously published work (memoir essays); and journal writing. Throughout my analysis both of my own memoir and those of others, I could see that my writing practices, my focus and the forms I had chosen were not unique to me.

Letters, Journals, and Journalism

By the 18th century, many European women of privilege were writing and reading. According to Bollmann: "Increasingly, the necessities of everyday living were manufactured and could be bought at the market or at shops. In more affluent urban circles, at least, women's lives were no longer dominated by such domestic duties as sewing, spinning, weaving, baking bread, cooking and making candles and soap" (2007, p.19).

Instead they were reading – and writing, in numbers:

> "As early as 1713, an essay in a short-loved London periodical, *The Guardian*, argued that *belles-lettres* – such things as essays, criticism, and literature – belonged more to the world of women than to that of men. The first reason given for this was that women 'have more spare Time upon their Hands, and lead a more Sedentary Life'" (Bollmann, 2007, p.19).

Unsurprisingly, this was a man's view from that era; writer and war-time nurse Florence Nightingale, offered a different view: "Women never have half an hour in all their lives – excepting before and after anybody is up in the house – that they can call their own, without fear of offending or of hurting someone" (Bollmann, 2007, p.22).

The vibrancy of the women's writing scene was directly linked to their reading habits, writes Bollmann:

> From the onset, the genre of the novel was linked to the emergence of a culture of reading among women. Even today the great majority of novel-readers are women….The extraordinary rise of the novel in modern times is due, according to author Henry James, to the extraordinary rise of women. James' assertion is less true of the *writing* of novels. In the 18th century, most novels were indeed written by women, but women were not the leaders in terms of quality. That state of affairs was to change with Jane Austen, who created a synthesis of the two main strands in the evolving genre of the novel" (p. 20).

The two strands of the novel to which Bollmann refers are "epistolary" – where the narrative unfolds in the form of an exchange of letters (e.g. *Clarissa*, 1747-49, by Samuel Richardson), and "humorous depiction[s] of external social reality" (e.g. *The History of Tom Jones*, *a Foundling*, 1749, by Henry Fielding). Again, Bollmann underscores the pre-Austen preponderance of epistolary novels written by women:

> In the 18th century, letter-writing was the main form by which women could express themselves on paper. In this area, they were often superior to their male correspondents, particularly when it came to describing emotions, and so it was chiefly women who established the conventions of this particular form of social culture. For many of them, moreover, the writing and exchanging of letters became a bridge leading to the writing of literature. The epistolary novel was thus by no means conjured out of thin air (p.20).

In writing my memoir, I drew upon my long history of writing letters, in particular, my recent history of writing letters (e-mails, mostly) to my now-husband, Donald Cameron. This epistolary form is not unique to my memoir: it has a long and honourable history. As well, the term "letters" has

historically been applied not only to short pieces of communication between individuals, but also to the literary accumulation of work by a writer, as in the French word for literary work, "*belles letters,*" and to literary work in general, e.g., "a woman of letters."

Memoirs can appear in letter-form only (*Memoirs in Letter Form of Horace Ronald Eddison, 1914-1919*); and along with letters (*U.S. Grant: Memoirs and Selected Letters, 1885-1886*). Other titles may not have the word memoir in them – *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, *Volume I: 1888-1912* – but are memoirs nonetheless:

> To be exact, these are the letters of Virginia Stephen, literary spinster, in her first 30 years….. They read like a drama which seesaws emotionally from the heights to the depths, from brilliance to numb boredom, for Virginia Stephen was intermittently mad, not steadily neurotic. A surprising strength of character emerges from these letters. She fights with renewed force, after each collapse, for her independence as a woman and a writer from the spreading web of family and social connections that binds her down (Moers, 1975)

In my memoir, I ultimately chose to include portions of what I'll term the "courting letters" from Don and me – from memory, not in actual form. Certain phrases from those letters were seared into memory ("I didn't want to hesitate and lose you, all for the sake of some misplaced sense of bourgeois propriety"; and, "You have respectfully done exactly what I asked you to do – gently back off – so why do I feel utterly bereft?") – his, and mine – and I was confident in using them. With other letters between us I wanted the creative (and personal) pleasure of writing again, from memory. Word-perfect accuracy was not as important to me as making a "good read," and moving the story along. Zinsser has referred to the intermingling of genre manipulations: "Unlike [memoirist] Russell Baker, heightening reality to give it the drama of fiction, [novelist] Toni Morrison uses fiction to report what was real. Both have skipped over research and landed on the truth" (1998, p.17).

Journals and diaries have an enduring history of being published as memoirs, in both fictional and non-fictional form, from Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740) and Mark Twain's obviously

fictional *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* (separate works, 1893-1905; published as one in 1998), to Evelyn Lau's first diary-as-memoir, *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* (1989).*The Diary of Anne Frank* (1952), of course, was also a memoir, though sadly unintended as such, as were the diaries or journals of Anaïs Nin (Volume I, 1966). The works of both these authors remain popular around the world. Of women diarists generally, over the ages, there are too many to possibly list. Some of the finest literary writers, too, are among these diarists – a tiny collection of which might include Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Sylvia Plath, Lucy Maud Montgomery, Susanna Moodie, Catherine Parr Trail and Katherine Mansfield.

All of these women were great letter writers as well, living as they did, in times when correspondence was a regular, sometimes even daily, part of life. As for the influence of journalism on memoir, I have already mentioned several journalists (Sally Armstrong, Denise Chong, Alisa Smith and J.B. MacKinnon), who went on to write memoir, and in the hybrid form. An example of a journalist who wrote short memoir essays first, and then wrote a longer memoir story, is writer Ian Brown with *The Globe & Mail*. Brown, an award-winning journalist, wrote *The Boy in the Moon: A Father's Search for his Disabled Son*, in 2009. He had earlier written a series of articles in the newspaper, also about his son.

During the course of my research I discovered a writer who was new to me, and with whom, as a freelance writer, I felt an instant sisterhood of sorts. Freelance journalist Milena Jesenska´, who lived from 1896 through 1944, is perhaps best-known now as the recipient of Franz Kafka's correspondence, which formed his book, *Letters to Milena* (1952). Sadly (maddeningly, to feminist scholars), her letters to him are lost. A Czech by birth, Jesenska´ first met Kafka when she shared her desire to translate his work into her mother tongue.

Her connection to Kafka aside, Jesenska´s journalistic career is notable in its own right. In her early articles on culture and society done for periodicals and weekly journals, Jesenska´ became

particularly known for her tone, which Bollmann (2007, p. 94) describes as "unpretentious and unromantic, casual and spontaneous." Jesenska´ herself believed the style of her articles was derived from letter-writing. This, says Bollmann, "placed her in the long tradition of women whose distinctive way of writing developed from the habit of correspondence" (2007, p.94) Moreover, Bollmann continues, Jesenska´ "once remarked that the only thing she could really write was love letters," and quotes her as saying, "ultimately, that is what all my articles were."

It wasn't until I finished my memoir that I came across the following musing from poet and memoirist Evelyn Lau: "Nearly all the memoirs I came across were written by women. This reminded me of Doris Lessing's observation, which I supposed could also be construed as a warning, in her autobiography *Walking in the Shade*: 'A woman writer, putting love before literature, when love lets her down, will then make literature out of love" (Lau, 2001).

Delicious as the symmetry to the above phrasing is, I think Lessing has missed the larger point. While memoirs such as *Eat, Love and Pray* by Elizabeth Gilbert (2006) illustrate a continuing need by women to chronicle their romantic (and other) heartaches, I believe many of these books are as focused on methods of effectively dealing with emotional mayhem. Thus the insanity of heartbreak transforms, eventually, to the sanity of life-enhancing choices made by Gilbert – travel, yoga, exercise, meditation and the guiltless, gustatory pleasure of consuming some of the world's finest foods. Letters and articles too, can help their composers regain serenity after periods of grief (journal-writing as well). And yes, all three – memoirs, letters and articles – can be written as love letters. But this again, I contend, is a narrow concept, if the love pertains only to one person of another. Women writers will always chronicle the courses and pitfalls of love – and beyond these, the larger lives and world of any individual, with all its complexities, characters, themes, heartbreaks and blazing joys.

Approach to the Writing: Process and Structure

Process:

The creative state I experienced while writing my memoir is by no means unique to this writer. Writers such as Goldberg, Murray, Elbow and W.O. Mitchell have advocated freewriting and freeflow for writers to develop fluency and voice. As I wrote the memoir, I found that I sat and words came, as though they had been set free – I found myself, as writers often do, in a kind of altered state. The state has been studied by psychologists extensively.

Csikszentmihalyi is best-known for his book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (1990). In an online interview, writer Elizabeth Debert shares Csikszentmihalyi's explanation of the process:

> He defined and explored the concept of 'flow'—as in 'in the flow'—as our experience of optimal fulfillment and engagement. Flow, whether in creative arts, athletic competition, engaging work, or spiritual practice, is a deep and uniquely human motivation to excel, exceed, and triumph over limitation. Csikszentmihalyi describes his life's work as the effort "to study what makes people truly happy." The emphasis here is on the word 'truly'—because to him, happiness is not simply flow nor an emotional state nor even the experience of pleasure. The happiness he points to involves the continual challenge to go beyond oneself as part of something greater than one's own self-interest (Debert, 1991-2010).

From a perspective as powerful, but darker, poet and memoirist Evelyn Lau writes:

> The writing was always larger than I was. I felt it to be a force for which I was merely a mouthpiece. My diary, in which I recorded every conversation, every ingested drug, and flailing emotion, was the shield between myself and that life, though oddly it would later be what left me open, unprotected. I remember recording my life so compulsively, forsaking sleep in order to do so, even if it was my first night's sleep in days (2001, p.4).

Writer and memoirist Grizzuti Harrison writes of the great intellectual joy she experienced during the life-story writing process:

> Sometimes, when I wrote, what was meant to be a point of departure became, to my pleased surprise, an end in itself: in such cases the starting point of my

> reflections....devoured my self (a sensation I quite like); but I am always there, in the words or in between the words. How could it be otherwise? (Grizzuti Harrison, introduction, p.ix)

Structure

The structure or overall form for my memoir related to my own years as a journal writer, though to a would-be memoirist with a blank screen in front of her, the words seemed magical and gift-like in appearance.

I began with a prologue, which in fact is a favourite memory for both Don and me, which relates the story of Don first contacting me, after he had been widowed. The prologue was not dated (I wanted it to be suspended in time), but every "entry" thereafter is dated, to help the reader on his/her reading journey. The dates also helped me to proceed in a mostly linear fashion with the writing. It is common to hang memories on the hooks of dates – anniversaries of all sorts, birthdays, life changes, etc. The structure ultimately included a main, ongoing storyline set in 2011; another storyline, in the past, which ran from 1994, the year I met Don, forward to the present; and 22 mostly published memoir essays of mine (only two were not published), written from 1992 to the present, which I used to "illustrate" points I was making in the memoir. Other new short essays, written this year and set in the far past, were stitched into the narrative as well. All of this swirled onto the computer screen, without pause or thought of dissection. As I said, it all felt like a gift. From somewhere above, below, beside and around me. Subterranean. Rhizomatic.

In writing the memoir, I found that weaving the various storylines required that I look back and forward in time and manage the stories in a way that not only made sense for the reader, but also was true to my experience. The writing challenge was to keep the audience in mind, keep them with me as I moved back and forth from coast to coast and year to year.

5.2 Memoir: Fashioning a Text

Hybrid as a Natural Form

The completion of the long memoir was satisfying on many levels for me and included an intense renewal of gratitude for overall life circumstances.

My memoir was written after a 40-year involvement with letters and journals, and a 20-year involvement with journalism. I didn't actually realize I'd written a hybrid until I was well into the process of study and analysis, nor had I ever thought of memoir specifically as a "renegade" genre. Most surprising of all, I had never thought of my sustained letter writing activities as including me in the centuries-long tradition of women letter writers who developed distinctive writing voices in the process of writing hundreds, even thousands of letters in a lifetime (this of course was true for men as well). A former journaler, I studied, with great interest, the equally long tradition of journal writing for women and men. I had always believed that the daily requirements of journaling teach new writers the discipline required for their craft to flourish. I am now convinced of it.

It is my contention that women writers historically and currently are often drawn to memoir from the earlier writing paths of letters, journals or diaries. Moreover, it is in these early and often intense writing periods of a woman's life that her voice develops and can thereafter be brought to other forms such as journalism, fiction and memoir. Today's women writers may be particularly drawn to writing the hybrid memoir – perhaps as a result of a previous writing background of letters, journals and journalism, or perhaps as a result of a growth in innovative approaches to storytelling. Mixing writing genres within the hybrid is common, and these writers, who have developed their craft, may be drawn to mixing genres for the for greatest storytelling effect.

Whether hybrid or conventionally rendered, memoirs record our histories, our movements through life. “Memoir,” writes Thomas, “is the story of how we got here from there” (p. 1, 2008). Fittingly, my memoir about my sister Karin, included in my larger memoir, was titled “Trips From There to Here” (1993).

Perhaps memoir, writing of all sorts, is all about gaining the broadest understandings of our human existence, and all the “characters,” ourselves included, who inhabit it. Margaret Atwood, in her book on writing, *Negotiating with the Dead,* writes about light, and darkness, experienced on the writing journey:

> Dante begins the *Divine Comedy…*with an account of finding himself in a dark, tangled wood, at night, having lost his way, after which the sun begins to rise. Virginia Woolf said that writing is like walking through a dark room, holding a lantern which lights up what is already in the room anyway. Margaret Laurence and others have said that it is like Jacob wrestling with his angel in the night – an act in which wounding, naming and blessing all take place at once.
>
> Obstruction, obscurity, emptiness, disorientation, twilight, blackout, often combined with a struggle or path or journey – an inability to see one's way forward, but a feeling that there was a way forward, and that the act of going forward would eventually bring about the conditions of vision – these were the common elements in many descriptions of the process of writing. I was reminded of something a medical student said to me about the interior of the human body, forty years ago: 'It's dark in there.'
>
> Possibly, then, writing has to do with the darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light.... (Atwood, 2002, introduction, p. xxiv).

Memory and Memoir: To Fashion a Text and a Life

As I wrote, I was fascinated by issues of memory and recall, and reluctant to let go of my notion of memoir as a method of safeguarding memories. There is no doubt that memoir mines story from an individual’s life – I had just never thought that it might then put the memories at risk. Writes Dillard:

> “My advice to memoir writers is to embark upon a memoir for the same reason that you would embark on any other book: to fashion a text. Don’t hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid – eschew – writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them. You can’t put together a memoir without cannibalizing your own life for parts. The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them (Zinsser, 1998, p.156).”

Early on in my writing process, I noted the following on memory by Malcolm, in my memoir blog:

> Memory is not a journalist's tool. Memory glimmers and hints, but shows nothing sharply or clearly. Memory does not narrate or render character. Memory has no regard for the reader. If an autobiography is to be even minimally readable, the autobiographer must step in and subdue what you could call memory's autism, its passion for the tedious. He must not be afraid to invent. Above all he must invent himself. Like Rousseau, who wrote (at the beginning of his novelistic *Confessions*) that 'I am not made like anyone I have ever been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence,' he must sustain, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, the illusion of his preternatural extraordinariness (Malcolm, 2010).

Memory is also oddly selective, but can be determined, ultimately, to voice the full emotional range of its stories. Writes Ker Conway:

> When I first set out to write my memoir….I found that my memory was of all the painful things. But in the process of telling that story I rediscovered so much that was beautiful about my childhood…Often there is a human tendency to obliterate happiness – to live in one's painful memories. But for me, going through my life gave me back the good things I had forgotten, and I've captured them for good. It gave me back a happy mother (in Zinsser, 1998, p. 54 & 55).

My memoir undoubtedly relates times of unhappiness, pain and confusion. But I, too, enjoyed the reliving of happy memories and a happy mother. The memoir segment about my earliest years in Ottawa, when I and my family go for a horse-drawn wagon adventure, is exactly such a happy memory. The family is still together, functional and loving, and intent on sharing special times together. My mother is no more and no less than a loving and busy wife and mother of four, with her own complex inner workings, and hopes, memories and dreams. It gave me pleasure to remember how beautiful she looked in her beaver-fur coat and how safe and happy I felt when she put me inside the coat and then wrapped her arms around me.

How memory and the creative life work together is another area of study for writers and others. States Bateson:

> The process of improvisation that goes into composing a life is compounded in the process of remembering a life, like a patchwork quilt in a watercolour painting, rumpled and evocative. Yet it is this second process, composing a life through memory as well as through day-to-day choices, that seems to me most essential to creative living. The past empowers the present, and the groping footsteps leading to this present mark the pathways to the future (1990, p. 34).

Beyond the workings of memory, Dillard, ever succinct, sees memoirs as self-creating: "The best memoirs, I think, forge their own forms. The writer of any work, and particularly of any non-fiction work, must decide two crucial points: what to put in and what to leave out." (in Zinsser, 1998, p.143). There was a further dimension to this advice, as I would discover in writing my own memoir. Yes, by all means have a plan about what you might cover and leave off in your memoir. Be prepared, however, for your life to interject its own plots twists, even as you are writing….

Life's curveballs aside, writing my own memoir was an emotionally positive and intellectually stimulating experience. In the end, it was a statement from Goldberg that neatly summed up my feelings: "We write memoir not to remember, not to cling, but to honour and let go"(Goldberg, 2007, p.297).

Finally, as for any memoirist, I had to consider the lives of others, as and after I wrote my own memoir. Human beings live their lives in context with others; memoir reveals this intermingling – all the hurts, savageries, betrayals, hatreds, wisdoms, kindnesses, generosities and loves - perhaps more vividly than any other genre. Lau, more than any other writer I can think of, puts art before comfort – others', or her own:

> The decision to write about people in one's life, and risk losing their affection or raising their ire, is hardly a simple one for most writers. Graham Greene once said that every writer has a sliver of ice lodged in his heart. When I was approached by people who

> were angst-ridden about portraying their loved ones in poetry or prose, I told them that the work should be their most important consideration, that the power of the writing should be paramount. That they should never dilute the writing with the thin milk of fear over how someone might react….I was left wondering if there was something wrong with me, though the question of whether the work or life should come first was one that many writers and artists had grappled with over the centuries (Lau, 2001, p.148)

As well, Lau's stance as a creative person isolates her, and the people in her life:

> I did not think about the people who came in and out of my sight, and who made it onto my pages, as separate from myself and the creative endeavour. They were characters, their words and gestures mine to record and use. I was astonished when I first had to work with an editor to disguise the people in my manuscript….To me, it felt like lying, like a cover-up. What was everyone so afraid of? (Lau, 2001, p.102).

In my own memoir, as with my memoir essays, I use the writing more to "visit" places and people from my past, and to explore ideas, such as our connections to animals, family and place, and our definitions of home – than to grind axes, or to do unblinking homage to the Truth God (as Lau and Lau only, of course, remembers "the truth," and as we, too, each have our own version of truth). I was not aware, as I wrote, of any need or desire to criticize any one of my family members or friends or old loves in print, or to overly manipulate stories to my own advantage. Again, I hope this is the reader's experience of my memoir.

I think again of journalist Jesenska´s statement that all her articles were "love letters," and how this rang a loud, resonant bell for me. In my memoir I write: "So now he [Don] knows that many of the essays or articles are intended for my fisherman's eyes, understands the coded language of love and regret in many of the pieces... Almost all of my personal essays are coded for someone...whether or not they're still in my life. For those who aren't, it's a way of saying the things you didn't have the opportunity or guts to say when you were together. Like a second chance to get it right, even if they never read the essay.... "

Memoir writing blog entry, December 19, 2009: "Do we write the memoirs we need to write – or the ones which were truly our lives?" This comment recalls a note by the Canadian critic Robert Fulford on narrative itself: "Narrative gives us a way to create empathy for others. But it can work in the other direction, too." Narrative, he claims, can persuade us that we "understand more than we actually do. It has ways of manipulating our consciousness" (1999, p.152).

5.3 The Memoir: The Themes in a Woman's Life

I found the process of "tagging" my memoir (marking the themes and repetitions of themes), to be highly revealing and would ask students of memoir to consider doing this, to fully comprehend the work they have fashioned. In my own memoir I found the following themes: storytelling, family and animals; magic; the search for wholeness; reinvention and rejuvenation; and crisis, love and healing.

Storytelling, Family and Animals

Pat Conroy writes, "Writing is the only way I have to explain my own life to myself" (2010, p.88). This explains the role of writing in my life, as well. Story is primary; I have used it from earliest years to make sense of myself and world and to feel empowered (e.g. my essay written for my sister Karin, *Escape of the Smallest Angel* p. 25, where I set the smallest angel free by breaking the cage). Story has also helped me to heal from and move on from shattered family relationships (*Of Dad and Dandelions*, p. 51; *Writing the Distances Away*, p. 55; *The House of Many Doors*, p. 58); and romantic failures/misadventures (*Eyes of a Stranger*, p. 35; *Looking for Heart*, p. 31; *Meeting the Challenge*, p. 40; *Sea Songs and Moonlight on the Water*, p. 71); and deaths (*Trips from There to Here*, p. 15).

Finally, story – my memoir essays, particularly - has allowed me to express the full panoply of human emotions: love, longing, regret, confusion, hurt, pride, enjoyment, delight, humour and

tenderness – to those friends, family and animals in my current life, and those in my past. I always felt especially lucky and happy to have published stories about the dogs and horses who have graced my life: *Jocelyn and the Merry-Go-Round-Horse*, p. 68; *Guarding the Skyline*, (p. 84); *The Days of Three Forever*, (p. 92) and others which were not included in this work. These three essays, in order, acknowledged Rory the Hanoverian horse, Boo the Appaloosa horse, and Leo the Wonder Whippet, my first dog as an adult, who shared five years of his life with me, and another 10 with Don and me together. I loved shining a spotlight on these cherished animals.

Magic

There were numerous guises of magic in my memoir: my personal belief in "magic," or the inexplicable, both negative and wondrous; my personal experiences of it (Lulu's kiss on my cheek; Mum's voice as I was healing from my fall); how my dreams inform and guide me (the nightmare I had about Lulu, which I later believed to be a warning, not a threat); the people I've loved who seemed magic to me (members of my family, my fisherman and others) ; the magic I've experienced in my time around animals (*Jocelyn and The Merry-Go-Round Horse*, p. 68), which functions on a quadruple level, as a love letter to my niece, and as laments for the loss of love and care in my own life, a real horse's life and the fictional merry-go-round-horse's life); and my understandings of magical thinking (an entirely different matter), seen in myself and others. (For myself, magical thinking most often meant denying the proof that someone I loved behaved badly.)

In a writing-related definition, Grizzuti Harrison, in her 1996 autobiography, writes of the magic inherent in the recollection of a life – if the writer looks beyond facts and figures:

> I am so much more interested in the improbable juxtapositions of circumstances that make up the warp and woof of natural history than I am in strictly systematizing them. I search for enchantment – for the witch and the wart, the cupboard and the shining treasure, the toad and the prince, the secret door, the golden orb, the magical forest, the

> silken rain, the riff in the silence, the improbable sudden light (Grizzuti Harrison, 1996, introduction, p.ix).

The Search for Wholeness

There is considerable unrest and fragmentation evident in my memoir. Another central theme of the memoir is the search for wholeness, particularly amidst all the change and upheaval of the past 15 years. Included in this was a late-in-life marriage, at age 39; bi-coastal lives; split loyalties regarding "home"; new landscapes and activities (*Bingo Night*, p. 125); the loss of horses and riding culture in my life; the death of both parents; the death of my/our beloved whippet, Leo (*The Days of Three Forever*, p. 92, the second essay I co-wrote and published with my husband); changing from being a writer with a "beat" (fisheries) to a generalist; taking on new writing work even while I kept on relying on my essays to help "ground" me; missing my west coast itself, and my west coast friends and family; dealing with feelings of betrayal, loss and powerlessness (most spectacularly after the fall from Buddy the horse, and my long and ongoing convalescence); the reality of finally accepting a childless life.

Coastal Lives (p. 135), the first of two essays I co-wrote and published with my husband Silver Donald Cameron, was an early "love letter" to the west coast I missed so severely in my early years living in the Maritimes. *Home Ports* (p. 131) was another. The last line in that essay, "I watch [the boats'] steady progress over choppy waters, and search, on some days, for home port lettering on their sterns," prompted several phone calls from my father: *Are you happy, dear – are you really happy?,* which I mention in the memoir. I was happy, in my marriage, but I was also, "on some days," overwhelmingly homesick and confused by my surroundings.

Reinvention and Rejuvenation

The memoir also covers a period of reinvention and rejuvenation: the move from Cape Breton to Halifax; returning to university, at both Dalhousie and Mount Saint Vincent; reviving both my freelance writing and teaching careers; the strengthening of my marriage; Don and me both losing weight and improving our overall health (this is mentioned in the "journal entry" about our wedding anniversary and going out for a rich meal that our Weight Watchers-trained appetites could hardly manage); writing the memoir; my return to the world of horses; the arrival of a new dog, MacTavish, in our lives. (Don has had the opportunity to write about MacTavish in print; I have not, yet, but know I will, at some point.)

Crisis, Love and Healing

The fall from "Buddy" the Quarterhorse is the climax of the memoir – and an unexpected one at that. Amidst the physical pain and dysfunction, the mental and emotional anguish, are bright and healing points of light: Don, who lived the vows of our marriage as was never needed before; the support of friends and family; the nearness and dearness of a Shetland Sheepdog named MacTavish, for animal comfort; Don, MacTavish and me as a single unit (shades of *The Days of Three Forever* – again); the reassuring visit from my mother, who tells me, in her own way, that I will reclaim the full parameters of my life; the truths that I prove to myself, that I will not remain broken in either body or spirit (more magic, of course, of the finest sort).

In the end, I circle back to other truths that have always supported me, made my life striated with joy and contentment. I know now, that magic never vanishes, cannot be taken from my life by any third party or any set of circumstances: it is my mind and heart that seeks and needs particular understandings and manifestations of magic, and always, eventually, finds it. Magic ebbs and flows,

and it also flies high and free, angel arms extended, when set loose from the confining cages of fear and doubt (*Escape of the Smallest Angel*, p. 25). Magic may not appear in the horse form I'd envisioned – but if it does, what sweet victory. I enjoy even the thought of that, could nibble at its edges, happily, for the longest time. Or the shortest. Magic, after all, is not predictable. I've learned that.

6.0 Afterword: Reflection on Teaching Memoir

Prior to writing a memoir, I hadn't thought about the aftermath of memoir and how it might be experienced. For myself, I feel a deep satisfaction: I can write long.

I suggest that the aftermath of memoir is as individual as the memoirs themselves – and would be fascinating to discuss in a classroom setting. Some students of memoir might find catharsis by completing a memoir (*An Italian Affair*, 2001, Laura Fraser), others satisfaction, yet others a variety of different states. Most people do have questions about their lives, do struggle with the mysteries and complexities therein. Ideally, memoirists can at least find some understanding or acceptance or even peace, within the process of writing about their lives. If they have had a particularly challenging or complex life, they may even find pride and pleasure, for "living to tell the tale." (*Living to Tell the Tale*, written in 2002, is also the title of Gabriel García Márquez's first volume of three autobiographical works.)

Yet others may feel that a form of posterity has been achieved through memoir. From Conroy:

> The subject of all writers is the terrible brightness that wards off the ineffable approach of death. I write a poem in hopes that my name will lie fresh on the tongues of language lovers a hundred years from now; I write a novel in case a poem is not enough. I create a city of fiction because I want to leave an entire considered world behind me. When I open a window in a town that I've made up in my head, I want to make a world that readers can approach in wonder. (2010, p. 320)

In my teaching of memoir, to seniors and people of all ages, I have seen a uniform intensity of desire to begin writing – and muted interest in posterity. People either burn with story, their fingertips tingling with words to get down on paper – and often, a central one, such as the death of a child, a war-time or countryside childhood – or they do not. Now, more than ever, the world of memoir belongs to anyone, of any age, who for any reason, needs to record details of their life. Goldberg writes:

> In the past, memoir was the country of old people, a looking back, a reminiscence. But now people are disclosing their lives in their twenties, writing their first memoir in their thirties and their second in their forties. This revolution in personal narrative that has unrolled across the American landscape in the last two and a half decades is the expression of a uniquely American energy: a desire to understand in the heat of living, while life is fresh, and not wait till old age – it may be too late. We are hungry and impatient now (Goldberg, 2007, p.xviii)

Now, having written a memoir, and experienced from start to finish what this means, I have more enthusiasm than ever for the endeavor, to "reach back in time to another country," which is how Goldberg defines the process of memory, and "to have an old friend visit from far away – what a delight!" which is how she describes the experience of memoir (Goldberg, 2007, p.xix). I understand this idea in a more richly textured way now.

The most surprising feature of writing memoir, for me, was the speed at which it produced itself. I have not discussed this particular issue in a classroom yet; more often, I have shared tips and strategies for producing the writing. My only advice on this subject then, is to warn the speedy memoirists of the clouded state they will be living in for some many months. In my experience, memoir, when it has a terrific need to be written, takes a backseat to no-one and nothing else. Resign yourself to a burnt soup pot or two, a neglected mate, an overgrown garden and a sad looking dog, his daily walks shortened.

I would also ask students of memoir to be bold when they consider the form of their memoir. As with any other worthwhile endeavour, they won't know what will or will not work until they push

whatever boundaries they find braced against the heels of their hands. This includes yet another hybrid form, the marriage of memoir and text. Norman, whose "textual *House of Mirrors* explores and performs autobiography in/as research through the presentation of poetry, personal stories, and theoropoetic ruminations" (back jacket cover), has written just such a bold memoir/text. She describes it thusly:

> This book is a textual House of Mirrors, inviting readers through entranceways, passages, and spaces that optimally reflect and refract the writer, the reader, the text. Though we may lose ourselves inside a carnival House of Mirrors, we still come out the other side (Norman, 2001, p. 22).

I suppose the best feature of writing my own memoir and taking that experience into a classroom with me, is that I will feel a greater sense of camaraderie and honesty with the students, both young and older. I'll know precisely how it feels to look a big blank computer screen, and then place the very first words upon it. I'll also know exactly how it feels to approach the ending of a memoir – and want to finish – well, sure – but in truth, not finish at all. Last, I can tell them that yes, a feeling of accomplishment and peace actually makes it worth writing that last sentence and placing that last period. While I had experienced all these things in my short memoir essays, the longer memoir extends and deepens these feelings. One is a date, the other a relationship. You live with the memoir, a relationship of months or even years, a lot longer than an essay. All the more reason to make sure you like the company.

7.0 Epilogue – Memoirists as Everywomen

Ottawa, ON - 1996

"Your strength as a writer stems partly from your role as an Everywoman, recording her life in print, and the way your keep *au courant* with trends and changes in popular culture," says my father, on one of my many trips to Ontario to visit with him. He sets down his coffee cup – *I am sure he must have done this, he always had a coffee cup in hand* – and smiles at me, full on: "Not to mention, we all love *The Perils of Pauline*! And that's you, Marjorie! That's you, as Pauline, tied down on the railway tracks, the train bearing down and no one to help for miles! You're twisting and fighting against the ropes on your wrists and ankles, the shriek of the train's whistle and the hot billowing steam getting closer by the moment. Will she be rescued? Will she rescue herself? Yes! Yes! She's freed herself again! She'll be all right – for another week, anyway. Tune in next week for a new, even more thrilling episode!"

"Dad, please. I am not a damsel in distress, bleating to the world – am I?" Good Lord, at 37, the pleasures of self-drama aside, the idea makes me cringe.

"Never bleating, no. But you're not scared to show your pain. That's another strength you have – you walk a line of sentimentality as sharp as any writer I can think of. One bump left or right and you'd be off the razor-blade into maudlin – but you stay on the blade, every time."

This is more like it; compliment a writer, and watch them purr – 37 or 97, the age doesn't matter. "Thank you, Papa," I say, using the teasing address I save for fond moments. "I don't find it easy, that's for certain."

"Life?" he asks. "Or writing?"

"Both." My eyes are full of laughter; it is a happy day, for both of us.

December 2011

My father died on Guy Fawkes' Day (November 5), 1999. His sister, my Aunt Susette, who lived in York, England, said: "It was fitting that Richard went out with the fireworks – all that noise, brightness and colour." It was, too, all the family agreed on that. Richard Beaufort Simmins was a showman and an arts world visionary.

He was also very astute in his observations about people generally and his children specifically. His thoughts about me being an "Everywoman" came back to me during the course of writing my memoir. I found the idea oddly comforting, as though I symbolically held hands with all the other Everywomen over the centuries, all those who wrote letters, journals and memoirs, and some, who worked as freelance journalists. A number of these women, such as Milena Jesenska´, died for their words. I was grateful for the research opportunity this work afforded, for me to learn about her. She, as I did, wrote "articles as love letters." I was astonished when I read this, and cried, wishing she had been able to write more – had not been murdered for publishing words of dissent about the politics of her time and place.

I wished she had written a memoir. (And for the record: if she had written me, I would have saved her letters for posterity.)

I thought, then, of one of the favourite memoir books I read in the past two years, *A London Child of the 1870s*, by Molly Hughes. In the memoir, the young memoirist, whose "real" or factual life could be viewed as more tragic than anything else, writes with the sunniest of hearts and outlooks. Gopnik writes in the book's preface:

> It is, I suppose, possible to see something unreal, or Quixotic, in Molly's choosing to avoid all and every truth. But no realism can encompass all that is real. Death and pain are enough pain to season any sunny memoir. If there is something evasive about her celebration, there is, in its minute detailing of a life gone already by the time she wrote it, something beautiful and permanent, too – happiness not merely recorded, but wrought, from a time and circumstances more iron and resistant than she is prepared to allow. Realism, like Parnassus, has many mansions, and a mantelpiece is as real as a

> marriage bed. The heroism of children, seeking happiness in the midst of their parents' anxieties, is a kind of heroism, too. Molly's book seems to me more painful now than it did when I first read it, but still finer as writing. Here is an ordinary life rendered truly, and joyfully, with a voice at once so self-abnegating yet so gay and funny and precise, that we are reminded, in the end, of the one truth worth remembering, that there are no ordinary lives (Gopnik, preface, p.xv, in Hughes, 2008).

Molly's memoir is Molly's memoir: a lasting story that is hers and hers alone – no matter, as Gopnik wisely notes, how a reader may puzzle at the unusual misalignment of life-fact and memoir-story. My memoir, too, is mine alone. One reader might read it and find a good bit of tragedy in it, too, and wonder how I might have been affected by this over the course of a lifetime, what kind of person had been ultimately shaped by these life events. Hard, they might think, it must have been hard at times; she must be prone to gloom. Yes, and mostly no.

Another person might read my memoir and feel great envy about my experience-rich, civilized life, my close relationships with my husband, friends and family, my deep connections to dogs and horses, and the grand adventures I have shared with all these companions; what a lucky woman, they might say. Yes, I am. Yet others might feel great curiosity or even disbelief about my experiences with "magic"; that's all right, let them disbelieve, I'll keep my magic and its star-dust all to myself.

Finally, there will be those who know for a certainty, as I do, that they are reading about a most fortunate woman. I came to marriage late, but there was my Maritime man – *Marjorie, I am that which dropped from the sky* – bravely able to love again and love fully and well. There was I, so frightened of the change he represented – and yet compelled to embrace that change and love fully in return. Then there we were, all three – Leo at first, now MacTavish – living our lives "wide open," as the Cape Bretoners say – with gusto and imagination, with more, glorious more to come, God willing. Ah but she nearly didn't walk away from that fall from the horse, whispers the final doubter, who knows if she'll ever ride again? Exactly, I respond, who does know? But don't count me out: my husband says I am brave.

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For a detailed commentary of my memoir, fiction and newspaper readings from December 2008 through December 2011, please review my memoir writing blog, which is included on my website: mls@marjoriesimmins.ca