

CHAPTER 18

WELCOME TO THE PINK HOUSE

If something had just been mysteriously released into the atmosphere above the old tower in Hubbard Park, then something else was settling into the trapped, muggy, early fall air inside a second floor Loomis Street apartment, one that suddenly seemed an awful lot smaller with all our stuff strewn around. No doubt I thought it was just dust—the weeks following our arrival settling into months, the romance of our welcome sheen fading into quiet routine. That quiet, to me, felt almost peaceful, particularly in the wake of this thing with my parents. After that high-stakes flurry of drama—filled my quota for years to come, thank you very much—I just wanted to lean back, relax, coast a little.

Not much chance of that though, not in the Pink House...*Did you forget your Holy Smoke-filled Proclamation of Transparency, my friend?... “Honesty in relationship,” right?...That’s what you said you wanted, wasn’t it?...Full disclosure...baring it all... Openly expressing your feelings...Sure worked well with your parents, didn’t it?...let that honesty “work its magic” all over them... Well done, Mr. Dragon Slayer...took down those treacherous foes with one push of a button...Congratulations...So much for that home front, huh?...But...what about this home front, the “real” home front... “Imagine friendships like that...Imagine even a marriage like that”...your words again, pal...A little on the hypocritical side to be avoiding those “thats,” wouldn’t you say?...Right here...in this house the color of a baby girl’s nursery...a little closer to home?... A little too close to home, perhaps?...*

I was avoiding it, or at least trying to. But it was too close to home, right in our living room, our shared mudroom and porch, in my face every time I turned around, it seemed. The Pink House was hardly the place to avoid feelings, or intimacy, or anything else, for that matter. Living with three adult women with a seemingly endless supply of feelings and the need to process them was simply way beyond what I thought I had bargained for. And that pretty much describes the way I saw it at the time, as if my part of the bargain of living there did not include partaking in that ongoing process-fest. I took the chauvinistic high road, it seems, though certainly without any stated acknowledgement of that to any of my housemates...*All this processing is just a “female” thing...And man, it goes on and on... What did we tell you about agreeing to live here?...Big mistake...And you, with a fragile, even tenuous relationship with your wife right now...Not a good choice at all... What you needed instead was a quiet little cabin outside of town...a little space for the two of you to patch things up, get it back to where it used to be...This pink house is just going to make it worse...Sue’s already feeding on this feeling frenzy...Look out, mister...You’re in trouble now...and don’t say we didn’t warn you...*

I was in trouble, yes, but only because I'd twisted it all upside down in my mind. The demon had me, and he knew it... *This is not who you are... Never have been nor will you ever be a "social" person... YOU NEED YOUR SPACE... Nothing wrong with that, mind you... Some people are just born that way... just what it is... the cards you were dealt... And no amount of "divine love" or any number of retreat breakthroughs will ever cure you of that ill... Certainly hasn't worked so far, has it?... Happy as a clam, are you, in this fishbowl with all your new fish-buddies?... Nothing you should be "sharing" about that, is there?... For example, the way it annoys you when Sue leaves the door open to the rest of the house... No, that's just an insignificant trifle, right?... No need to put that out there... Somebody might get the wrong impression... think you're uncomfortable in this stiflingly over-social environment... You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?... Besides, the last thing you need is one more thing to process with Sue... as if she doesn't come up with enough on her own... You can only take so much of this, right?... Close enough already to overload... But you're doing just fine, under the circumstances, right?...*

I wasn't doing fine, not at all. Getting more and more uncomfortable by the day, with seemingly no way to make it better... *Look, here's the only thing you can do to survive around here... Create some space for yourself... absolutely of necessity... If you don't, you're going to lose it altogether...*

So that's what I did, found subtle—or perhaps, not so subtle—ways to keep my distance. I'd get Sammie out of the house as often as possible for "outside adventures," veiled my ulterior motive in the guise of availing Sue with quiet time to work. I strategically located my keyboard in the upstairs bedroom, as far away from high-traffic areas as possible, colored that with the notion that it was best for all concerned—after all, who wants to listen to a novice misplaying the same chords over and over? That gave me a kind of outpost, safe haven to escape to whenever the space-need took hold of me. And its veil was complicated, to say the least. You see, Sue was well aware of the pathological battleground I'd created for myself around the issue of music. Knowing that, she was all for encouraging me to re-enter that fray, regularly, to simply have fun in that territory of passion-gone-awry. That encouragement was entirely genuine—after all, I never would have purchased that way-too-expensive and arguably frivolous piece of musical equipment had it not been for her whole-hearted endorsement and support, not to mention her willingness to tolerate high-frequency piano miscues. But I can see now how the demon had his hand in that as well, almost overhearing his pitch to that band of gypsy sprites about it... *Ah... Perfect... What could be better than the opportunity to use that old passion turf against him again, against both of them, in fact... Not only do we get an encore nose-rubbing about his talent-less-ness, but we get to use that keyboard as*

distancing device...And...even better...what a great setup for his wife...I want to be there the first time she calls him on it...

That didn't happen, however. To my knowledge, Sue never did call me on that, though I'm certain she was aware of it. But it didn't change the fact that I was unwittingly allowing that keyboard, potential doorway into more of the real me, to be used as means of keeping me away from relationship with others, which, of course, was also a way of keeping me away from the real me. Somehow I'd allowed myself to be buffaloes into believing otherwise, but that's what it was.

It's painful to consider this now, to know that I got taken out in that way, and not just by the keyboard. What it all came down to, once again, was the issue of vulnerability, and my compulsive need to manage it. It was scary, too scary, it seems, vulnerability with a capital V. Not too scary for the *mountain man* though—I can almost hear him hollering...*Hell ya!... we got all kinds of Vulnerability here... we got intimacy... and honesty in relationship... Yup, it's all here... Vulnerability in hundred acre plots... we're growing it, cultivating it right here in the heart of town... You're standing in the middle of it now... Take a good look around... There's your wife... there's Christa... all your new friends... They just want to get to know you, that's all... They love you, man... They just want you to let them in...*

And that's why it's so painful, because I knew that even then, longed for it myself, yet couldn't, or wouldn't respond. For example, Christa reached out to me on several occasions—a kind of open invitation of her heart. She knew enough not to push it, and didn't, was very patient and accommodating of my apparent need for boundaries and space—for example, I don't ever recall her just “dropping in” at our apartment, always telephoned first, even though she was no more than ten steps away.

But I could feel that reaching out, her open invitation, and that alone created conflict in me. You see, I liked Christa, was strangely drawn to her, almost against my better judgment. Certainly against the judgment of Mr. Judgment...*Hey...keep your distance here...not somewhere you want to go... Christa, after all, is the NOE ringleader... the group person... the community organizer...unlike Marc in that way... the one who is into all this touchy-feely shit...Be careful, be wary...She's not to be trusted...She just wants to get inside your head...expose you...then break you...*

Sad to say, I bought into this, at least in part. Enough to keep me guarded, at arm's length away, or more. And yet, when we did sit down together, however rarely that was, the feeling was so entirely unlike what that mind-generated projection would have had me believe. I clearly recall sitting on the bright red couch, in her freshly renovated living

room, light twinkling through the stained glass section of the entryway window, talking openly with her about my struggles, all of them—social issues, shyness, intimacy with Sue, vulnerability, trust, even the fear of letting her, Christa, in. Had I been self-consciously aware of what I was spilling out, amidst gushes of tears, I'd have been mortified, but I wasn't. Instead then, it felt okay—better than okay, much better. Christa wasn't judging me, and I knew that. In fact, I could tell she wasn't hearing anything she didn't already know. And in that moment, there was something phenomenally beautiful, entirely satiating about it—knowing Christa was seeing me in that way, raw and exposed. I wasn't afraid then—no urge to run, or hide. Nothing left to hide, it seems. Relief then, and breaths, deep breaths not unlike those I'd experienced after pushing the button on my childhood memories. I didn't want to leave. We sat there for a long time, saying nothing. And I wasn't even uncomfortable with that—the unfilled space. I'd never felt that supported before, and in the company of that genuine support, I couldn't help but open up to it. It was tender, and gentle, and I loved it.

We hugged, not the stiff, get-this-over-with-as-quickly-as-possible version that had become my trademark, rather a deep embrace that appropriately honored the moment. Up the stairs then, and up again to the keyboard—Sue and Sammie were out somewhere—I sat down to the lyrics and chords of Tom Waits' 'Ol' 55':

*Well, my time went so quickly, I went lickety-splitly
Out to my ol' fifty-five
As I pulled away slowly feelin' so holy
God knows I was feelin' alive*

*And now the sun's comin' up
I'm ridin' with Lady Luck
Freeway cars and trucks
Stars beginning to fade
And I lead the parade
Just a wishin' I'd stayed a little longer
Lord, don't you know, the feelin's gettin' stronger*

*Six in the mornin' gave me no warnin'
I had to be on my way.
Now the cars are all passin' me, trucks are all flashin' me
I'm headed home from your place*

*And now the sun's comin' up
I'm ridin' with Lady Luck*

*Freeway cars and trucks
Stars beginning to fade
And I lead the parade
Just a wishin' I'd stayed a little longer
Lord, don't you know the feelin's gettin' stronger*

I had been trying to learn to play and sing along to that old favorite—not very successfully, I might add. Fingers frequently balking at the chord changes, I somehow navigated them cleanly enough then to be able to feel my way into the lyrics, perhaps for the first time ever.

When I was a young kid—four or five years old—our family car was an old '55 Chevy, spit-shined navy blue. It was huge, big as a house, or at least that's how it felt to me. Back in those pre-seatbelt days, I'd crawl all over it, both back and front seats—you could stretch out just about anywhere and not feel cramped. The presence of that car in Waits' song always elbowed that memory in me, my dad at the wheel, a young boy's innocence stretching out on a long trip, curling up in an open lap when he was just too tired to fight it anymore.

I hadn't curled up in Christa's lap, but that's how it felt to me—that safe, that warm. And tired, too tired to fight it anymore. Early fifties then, pushing fifty-five myself, my days were “lickety-splitly” disappearing; I wanted to slow them down, ease that frenetic pace. That time I'd just spent with Christa was like that—slowed way down, spacious, almost timeless. And “God knows, I *was* feeling alive,” “feelin' so holy,” “riding with Lady Luck,” leading my own parade down Main Street toward somebody I was longing to become.

But, just as the character in the song “pulled away slowly” from the woman who'd somehow touched him, and, it seems to me, even loved him, so did I. And it wasn't long before the feeling of “wishin' I'd stayed a little longer” was being questioned, together with questions about exactly which “feelin's getting' stronger”—the feelings toward Christa and what had just taken place, or the feelings against her and what should never have happened. It wasn't an immediate shift, not at all—I was still basking in that spacious warmth, but a dark seed had been planted... *Well, well... wasn't that something, huh?... You and Christa... all snug as a bug... warm and tender... and honest and open... and feeling okay with that... Let's just give it a few days... then we'll revisit this little soiree... see how you feel about it then...*

He was right, of course. As time elapsed the questions and concerns multiplied...*Do you think it was a good idea to be open with Christa about intimacy with Sue?...They're friends, you know, and friends share everything, don't they?...And this is such a small town...What if she shares some of those other secrets with another friend or two...Do you want the whole town knowing you in that way...seeing your dirty laundry?...*

It went on and on and on, and the more it did the more terrified I became. Such was the moment of opportunity right there. I should have knocked on Christa's door at that point, acknowledged that fear, asked for her support in standing in it. She would have done it, gladly, lovingly. As many times as I wanted, needed. It would have put me right back in that spacious warmth, with an ally, a strong shoulder to lean on. Instead I turned away, avoided Christa, hid, went into isolation—at least as much as it was possible in that environment. That isolation, physical or otherwise, was hardly the answer to the questions on that exponentially growing list. Rather it was the projection nesting ground for that fear, what to do with it rather than feel it, face it, with Christa's help.

Such a golden opportunity missed, rebuffed. I know now that I could not have had a more capable ally, friend, than Christa. Had I turned toward her then, had I been somehow moved to actually let her in, then stood with her support in my fear, it's not inconceivable that some or all of the tragic events that followed not long after—in particular, the breakup of my marriage with Sue—could have been circumvented. Christa has many gifts, but high among them is the extraordinary, entirely un-teachable capability to stand in the breach with someone the way she did with me, however briefly. I still can't get over just how safe I felt in that space with her. And there was nothing about her demeanor that even hinted in any way of it's-going-to-be-alright-now. She didn't attempt to fix anything—just held that space in the only genuine way it could be held, with a wide-open and Divine-trusting heart.

That's the same tender and loving heart she brought into co-leadership with Marc in the North of Eden community—the gift that has given life to the shape of that extraordinary collection of individuals, the gift that supports its growth. Christa's love is gentle, softly nurturing, yet undeniably fierce, uncompromising, unflinching. She is no less committed to strict obedience to her one true inner voice than is Marc, and we, the fortunate folks who populate the community she directs and cares so much about, are the beneficiaries of her immense presence.

That presence used to intimidate me, at least that's how it struck me during my brief tenure at the Pink House. She was able to see me, really see me, and not just because I somehow found the courage on that specific occasion to bare it all to her. No, she saw me, knew me, regardless of what I was willing to actually commit to words. That scared

me, at times still does. Recently Christa was the leader of a retreat group I was part of. That same fear came up for me as we settled into the first morning—I knew it would. When it was my turn to speak, I acknowledged it, she smiled, we moved on. Four days later, leaving the mountain, feeling into the depths of that raw and invigorating experience, I remember saying to myself, “That was the scariest and safest space I’ve ever been in.”

That’s what Christa and Marc’s North of Eden community offers to all of us—the oxymoron of all oxymorons, perhaps. The opportunity to face into our greatest fears in a safe, nurturing, loving environment. The same gift that Christa offered me, it seems, at the Pink House more than five years ago now. A gift that was only partly opened, then returned.

—conflict of some sort with someone (Sue, Christa, Amy, any number of NOE people who were over so often it felt like there were two dozen occupants of that house). Which meant processing, endless, to the nth degree, misunderstandings, reactions, the teeniest tiniest things to sit down and talk about, to work through. It's not that I didn't appreciate the benefits of that processing. The working through *did* work—that was undeniable. Different times I recall, for example, sitting in Christa's living room, talking openly with her about something, anything. Frequently I'd break down, tears flowing, unchecked, but it was okay—I felt safe, accepted, supported, loved. Christa was Sue's close friend, yet I could feel her reaching out to me as well. And in those moments I couldn't help but respond. I wanted to reach back, and more often than not did.

Something in me didn't quite get that, as if it couldn't be possible for her for example, the coffee shop, Capitol Grounds, with one of my new friends, Peter Burmeister, for example, feeling something shift, something open up between us...a deeper level of intimacy—the very thing I'd been so afraid of.

That part was fresh, even exciting. But it was also exhausting, or so my demon wanted me to believe...*Damn...this stuff goes on, and on, and on...Every time somebody farts the whole community hear about it?...Good luck trying to keep a secret around here...And what about the one you're trying to hide, Mr. Recluse...how's your grumpiness doing these days...You all well and good with this communal living thing?...Happy as a clam are you, in this fishbowl with all your new buddies?...Nothing you should be sharing around that, is there?...For example, the way it annoys you when Sue leaves the door open to the rest of the house...No, that's just an insignificant trifle, right?...No need to put that out there...Somebody might get the wrong impression...think you're uncomfortable in this stiflingly over-social environment...You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?...Besides, the last thing you need is one more thing to process with Sue...as if she doesn't come up with enough on her own...You can only take so much of this, right?...Close enough already to overload...You're doing just fine, under the circumstances, right?...*

I wasn't doing fine, not at all. Getting more and more uncomfortable by the day

as did this Linda Pastan sonnet that I had all my students memorize and individually recite in front of their classes:

THE IMPERFECT PARADISE

*If God had stopped work after the fifth day,
With Eden full of vegetables and fruits,
If oak and lilac held exclusive sway
Over a kingdom made of stems and roots,
If landscape were the genius of creation
And neither man nor serpent played a role
And God must look to wind for lamentation
And not to picture postcards of the soul.
Would he have rested on his bank of cloud
With nothing in the universe to lose,
Or would he hunger for a human crowd?
Which would a wise and just creator choose:
The green hosannas of a budding leaf
Or the strict contract between love and grief?*

I loved this poem, still do. It reminds me a little of Wright's *Lying in a Hammock at Willy Duffy's Farm in Pine Island Minnesota*, the way the final lines of both blatantly foist themselves upon the reader. Considering them together now, *I have wasted my life* and *Or the strict contract between love and grief?*, there's even a curious personal significance in how they relate to one another. I see clearly how all my years of wasted life came as a result of refusing to honor, for that matter to even acknowledge the existence of, the "strict contract between love and grief." It always surprised me just how quickly those teenagers were able to grasp both the gist and gravity of that "contract." What had eluded me for fifty-plus years seemed not confusing in the least to those open-hearted kids. I'd catch strange looks on their faces, as if to say... *Well of course we get it,*

Mr. Murray...you can't have love without grief...we understand that...if you're not willing to feel into the depths of pain, your capacity to feel love will be severely restricted...

Truth is, I hadn't ventured very far into that pain myself, but it was coming...

On a muggy late-August afternoon, about a week before kindergarten began, Sue and Sammie on the porch steps, I pulled out of the driveway in a new white Toyota with all my belongings in the trunk. I didn't cry. The only feeling that I had any access to at all was relief. It was a clean break; Sue and I were finished, that seemed clear to both of us. This would be better—a new teaching job, a new town in a different state (central Maine), a brand new start to a new life. No more conflict, no more anger...done, all of it.

From that numbed-out place, there wasn't much more to it than that. Even the voices in my head had little to say, save the occasional barb...*Well, well...So much for paradise, huh?* The demon had me right where he wanted me—wallowing in shame. There was no need to gloat. He just wanted acknowledgement that I was wrong, that I was mistaken, that the miracle of my so-called *new life* was all some vacuous mirage, an illusion, just a dream.

At that point, from that perspective, I had no idea what was real or otherwise. I didn't want to think about it, and I sure didn't want to feel into it. Shell-shocked was the state, I suppose—confused, baffled. What happened to my paradise? It certainly felt real to me at the time, as though I could have snapped a photo of it, framed it, placed it on the mantle, stared at it blissfully for days on end. And it seems that's exactly what I did. I held it in my hand, counted and carefully saved it. And ultimately squandered it. Before I knew how flat-footed I was, it was gone. Before I knew that I'd stopped growing, and Sue hadn't, and that our marriage needed, insisted upon growth from both partners, it was too late. Before I knew that the inaccessibility to my passion (as evidenced by the dream with my passion-cop father) was causing me to lash out in reaction to Sue's burgeoning accessibility to hers, I was lost in anger and blame and already halfway out the door.

So, for all the growth and development the Dreamwork had facilitated to that point, I was still caught in the throes of an inner battle over what to do with my fear of the unknown. In this particular example, that fear found a temporary place to land in Shakespeare, and Sue bore the brunt of my unwillingness to see that for what it was—an outward projection of anger as a means of avoiding that fear.

What would have happened had I been willing to feel that fear? Hard to say, but clearly there was a missed opportunity to explore that inside. It's also clear to me now that, even though I was apparently quite comfortable with the intellectual concept of that "strict contract between love and grief," as evidenced by my willingness to consider it in depth with a roomful of students, I was entirely unaware of my own resistance to stretching myself along that same continuum.

As it turned out though, I had no choice. In central Maine, grief was all around me. Or rather, right inside me. I couldn't escape the pain that simply wouldn't leave me alone. Being apart, five-and-a-half hours worth, from my daughter was excruciating beyond anything I'd ever before experienced. I'd go to sleep with that ache in my gut, wake up with the same thing. Friday was the only day of the week to live for, the day I'd charge down the school steps, jump in my car and head west on Rte. 2 toward her. In the same two-story motel every weekend, Sunday afternoons were the worst—east again on Rte. 2, alone. I still feel reminders of that almost every Sunday afternoon, that hole in my heart, sobbing and trying to keep the car on the road at the same time.

As much as I tried to stuff my weekdays and nights with teaching work, I still had too much time on my hands. And to some degree, that became my saving grace. Because every time I lifted my focus from school prep work or grading student essays I'd feel this wave of pain flush through me. And there was nothing I could do to avoid it. The demon, of course, wanted to keep me confined to limited quarters—either stewing in anger or sulking in shame. But I couldn't stay in either of those places for long. The voice in my head that pined...*How could Sue have done this to you?...* had only a temporary hook to it. Yes, I wanted to blame her, hang it all on her, but in some strange way that seemed almost irrelevant. In effect, that anger couldn't compete with the pain, gave way to it over and over. I was simply too devastated, too broken.

Recently I heard a friend say that, in order for her to genuinely feel the presence of the Divine in her life, she has to feel the depths of her own broken-heartedness. That's exactly where I was, no doubt—broken-hearted in that kind of extreme way. And in that sense, it was more than just longing for the presence of my daughter. Yes, her absence was what drew me inward, the outer-world situation that tore at my heart. But even then I was vaguely aware of the "size of the cloth" of that the sorrow, that it was obviously

more than just that. I sorrowed for all my unlived life, the pain and regret of it. A deep, deep sadness that was curiously void of self-judgment and shame. As if that somehow didn't matter then, not in that place where all was lost. Because in that lost-ness there was no confusion, no clutching for understanding, no busyness of the mind. Simply a kind of acknowledgement that I was there, with nothing to say, nothing to cling to, not even hope.

Instead, just an ever-present agony, a kind of *deja vu* right back to those endless nights in the New Mexican desert fifteen years earlier. Stranded, once again, in familiar no-man's land. And the voices harping away...*See, after all this time...nothing has changed...you've done this "therapy" thing for how long now?...and what do you have to show for it?...Let's see...well, at least you're not living in a shack at this point...central heat instead of a kerosene stove...congratulations...you've come a long way, haven't you, Mr. Dreamer?...*

It was true, those nights in Maine were painfully reminiscent of their counterparts in New Mexico. In fact, arguably even worse, because there was no absent-daughter ache in the Southwestern desert of the late eighties, early nineties. One thing was different though, and I knew it. Borrowing the demon's metaphor, in an odd way it was all about the "central heat" in Maine. That winter was bitterly cold—the pipes in my rented house froze solid on a couple of occasions—but the landlord lived next door, and he was right there whenever there was a problem. As a result, I didn't feel the burden of responsibility for the house itself; it was a huge relief. And that pretty much describes what I sensed was true in my inner house as well. Deep in my heart I knew that I wasn't alone, not really. I knew I could somehow count on my *landlord* to do whatever was necessary to take care of my *house*, even on the coldest night of the year...particularly on the coldest night of the year. Of course, that reassuring presence didn't make the winter any less severe, didn't make me any less susceptible to the harsh elements. He was just there, hanging out, waiting for me to call.

Somewhere in the midst of all this arrived the following dream:

I'm standing alone at the entrance to a large, crowded room, in what appears to be a restaurant-like setting. Confused about where I am and what I'm doing there, I slowly start to gain some recognition of familiarity with the place. It's Warwick Country Club, I realize, the Grill Room where Ernie, my former father-in-law, liked to spend time with friends. And, sure enough, I can see him now, seated and talking with three other men in a booth with his back to me, not far away. So I approach their table, very slowly, with a great deal of self-consciousness and anxiety about this inevitable face-to-face meeting. I'm worried about how he'll react to seeing me after all this time, knowing that I turned

my back on him, walked out of his life and my job with the company he owned, judged him harshly and left him stranded in a difficult business climate (his company filed bankruptcy within a year of my departure). I'm worried that he hates me, has every right to, that he'll spurn me in this public setting, maybe even spit in my face. But I still keep moving toward him. Close to the table now, sensing that someone is standing over his shoulder, Ernie turns and looks up. Recognizing me immediately, I see that ever-so-familiar, boyish grin of his begin to emerge. Eyes brightening, he stands and holds out his arms toward me, invitation of the hug that only he is capable of—powerful yet gentle. He doesn't say a word, doesn't have to. I can feel his love for me—that and that alone. And it's everything.

Ernie was so happy to see me in this dream—the prodigal son returned. I felt no judgment whatsoever from him, not the slightest twinge of “where have you been, or why did you desert me?” In that sense, it wasn't even about forgiveness. He didn't care that I'd betrayed him, he only cared that I'd come back. In the dream, I was no doubt surprised by the presence of that genuine tenderness, but felt and knew the truth of it nonetheless. There was only his unconditional love for me, nothing else.

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you should be sharing around that, is there?...For example, the way it annoys you when Sue leaves the door open to the rest of the house...No, that's just an insignificant trifle, right?...No need to put that out there...Somebody might get the wrong impression...think you're uncomfortable in this stiflingly over-social environment...You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?...Besides, the last thing you need is one more thing to process with Sue...as if she doesn't come up with enough on her own...You can only take so much of this, right?...Close enough already to overload...You're doing just fine, under the circumstances, right?...

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With Eden full of vegetables and fruits,
If oak and lilac held exclusive sway
Over a kingdom made of stems and roots,
If landscape were the genius of creation
And neither man nor serpent played a role
And God must look to wind for lamentation
And not to picture postcards of the soul.
Would he have rested on his bank of cloud*

*With nothing in the universe to lose,
Or would he hunger for a human crowd?
Which would a wise and just creator choose:
The green hosannas of a budding leaf
Or the strict contract between love and grief?*

I loved this poem, still do. It reminds me a little of Wright's *Lying in a Hammock at Willy Duffy's Farm in Pine Island Minnesota*, the way the final lines of both blatantly foist themselves upon the reader. Considering them together now, *I have wasted my life* and *Or the strict contract between love and grief?*, there's even a curious personal significance in how they relate to one another. I see clearly how all my years of wasted life came as a result of refusing to honor, for that matter to even acknowledge the existence of, the "strict contract between love and grief." It always surprised me just how quickly those teenagers were able to grasp both the gist and gravity of that "contract." What had eluded me for fifty-plus years seemed not confusing in the least to those open-hearted kids. I'd catch strange looks on their faces, as if to say... *Well of course we get it, Mr. Murray...you can't have love without grief...we understand that...if you're not willing to feel into the depths of pain, your capacity to feel love will be severely restricted...*

Truth is, I hadn't ventured very far into that pain myself, but it was coming...

On a muggy late-August afternoon, about a week before kindergarten began, Sue and Sammie on the porch steps, I pulled out of the driveway in a new white Toyota with all my belongings in the trunk. I didn't cry. The only feeling that I had any access to at all was relief. It was a clean break; Sue and I were finished, that seemed clear to both of us. This would be better—a new teaching job, a new town in a different state (central Maine), a brand new start to a new life. No more conflict, no more anger...done, all of it.

From that numbed-out place, there wasn't much more to it than that. Even the voices in my head had little to say, save the occasional barb... *Well, well...So much for paradise, huh?* The demon had me right where he wanted me—wallowing in shame. There was no need to gloat. He just wanted acknowledgement that I was wrong, that I was mistaken, that the miracle of my so-called *new life* was all some vacuous mirage, an illusion, just a dream.

At that point, from that perspective, I had no idea what was real or otherwise. I didn't want to think about it, and I sure didn't want to feel into it. Shell-shocked was the state, I suppose—confused, baffled. What happened to my paradise? It certainly felt real to me at

the time, as though I could have snapped a photo of it, framed it, placed it on the mantle, stared at it blissfully for days on end. And it seems that's exactly what I did. I held it in my hand, counted and carefully saved it. And ultimately squandered it. Before I knew how flat-footed I was, it was gone. Before I knew that I'd stopped growing, and Sue hadn't, and that our marriage needed, insisted upon growth from both partners, it was too late. Before I knew that the inaccessibility to my passion (as evidenced by the dream with my passion-cop father) was causing me to lash out in reaction to Sue's burgeoning accessibility to hers, I was lost in anger and blame and already halfway out the door.

So, for all the growth and development the Dreamwork had facilitated to that point, I was still caught in the throes of an inner battle over what to do with my fear of the unknown. In this particular example, that fear found a temporary place to land in Shakespeare, and Sue bore the brunt of my unwillingness to see that for what it was—an outward projection of anger as a means of avoiding that fear.

What would have happened had I been willing to feel that fear? Hard to say, but clearly there was a missed opportunity to explore that inside. It's also clear to me now that, even though I was apparently quite comfortable with the intellectual concept of that "strict contract between love and grief," as evidenced by my willingness to consider it in depth with a roomful of students, I was entirely unaware of my own resistance to stretching myself along that same continuum.

As it turned out though, I had no choice. In central Maine, grief was all around me. Or rather, right inside me. I couldn't escape the pain that simply wouldn't leave me alone. Being apart, five-and-a-half hours worth, from my daughter was excruciating beyond anything I'd ever before experienced. I'd go to sleep with that ache in my gut, wake up with the same thing. Friday was the only day of the week to live for, the day I'd charge down the school steps, jump in my car and head west on Rte. 2 toward her. In the same two-story motel every weekend, Sunday afternoons were the worst—east again on Rte. 2, alone. I still feel reminders of that almost every Sunday afternoon, that hole in my heart, sobbing and trying to keep the car on the road at the same time.

As much as I tried to stuff my weekdays and nights with teaching work, I still had too much time on my hands. And to some degree, that became my saving grace. Because every time I lifted my focus from school prep work or grading student essays I'd feel this wave of pain flush through me. And there was nothing I could do to avoid it. The demon, of course, wanted to keep me confined to limited quarters—either stewing in anger or sulking in shame. But I couldn't stay in either of those places for long. The voice in my head that pined...*How could Sue have done this to you?...* had only a temporary hook to it. Yes, I wanted to blame her, hang it all on her, but in some strange way that seemed almost irrelevant. In effect, that anger couldn't compete with the pain, gave way to it over and over. I was simply too devastated, too broken.

Recently I heard a friend say that, in order for her to genuinely feel the presence of the Divine in her life, she has to feel the depths of her own broken-heartedness. That's exactly where I was, no doubt—broken-hearted in that kind of extreme way. And in that sense, it was more than just longing for the presence of my daughter. Yes, her absence was what drew me inward, the outer-world situation that tore at my heart. But even then I was vaguely aware of the “size of the cloth” of that the sorrow, that it was obviously more than just that. I sorrowed for all my un-lived life, the pain and regret of it. A deep, deep sadness that was curiously void of self-judgment and shame. As if that somehow didn't matter then, not in that place where all was lost. Because in that lost-ness there was no confusion, no clutching for understanding, no busyness of the mind. Simply a kind of acknowledgement that I was there, with nothing to say, nothing to cling to, not even hope.

Instead, just an ever-present agony, a kind of *deja vu* right back to those endless nights in the New Mexican desert fifteen years earlier. Stranded, once again, in familiar no-man's land. And the voices harping away...*See, after all this time...nothing has changed...you've done this “therapy” thing for how long now?...and what do you have to show for it?...Let's see...well, at least you're not living in a shack at this point...central heat instead of a kerosene stove...congratulations...you've come a long way, haven't you, Mr. Dreamer?...*

It was true, those nights in Maine were painfully reminiscent of their counterparts in New Mexico. In fact, arguably even worse, because there was no absent-daughter ache in the Southwestern desert of the late eighties, early nineties. One thing was different though, and I knew it. Borrowing the demon's metaphor, in an odd way it was all about the “central heat” in Maine. That winter was bitterly cold—the pipes in my rented house froze solid on a couple of occasions—but the landlord lived next door, and he was right there whenever there was a problem. As a result, I didn't feel the burden of responsibility for the house itself; it was a huge relief. And that pretty much describes what I sensed

was true in my inner house as well. Deep in my heart I knew that I wasn't alone, not really. I knew I could somehow count on my *landlord* to do whatever was necessary to take care of my *house*, even on the coldest night of the year...particularly on the coldest night of the year. Of course, that reassuring presence didn't make the winter any less severe, didn't make me any less susceptible to the harsh elements. He was just there, hanging out, waiting for me to call.

Somewhere in the midst of all this arrived the following dream:

I'm standing alone at the entrance to a large, crowded room, in what appears to be a restaurant-like setting. Confused about where I am and what I'm doing there, I slowly start to gain some recognition of familiarity with the place. It's Warwick Country Club, I realize, the Grill Room where Ernie, my former father-in-law, liked to spend time with friends. And, sure enough, I can see him now, seated and talking with three other men in a booth with his back to me, not far away. So I approach their table, very slowly, with a great deal of self-consciousness and anxiety about this inevitable face-to-face meeting. I'm worried about how he'll react to seeing me after all this time, knowing that I turned my back on him, walked out of his life and my job with the company he owned, judged him harshly and left him stranded in a difficult business climate (his company filed bankruptcy within a year of my departure). I'm worried that he hates me, has every right to, that he'll spurn me in this public setting, maybe even spit in my face. But I still keep moving toward him. Close to the table now, sensing that someone is standing over his shoulder, Ernie turns and looks up. Recognizing me immediately, I see that ever-so-familiar, boyish grin of his begin to emerge. Eyes brightening, he stands and holds out his arms toward me, invitation of the hug that only he is capable of—powerful yet gentle. He doesn't say a word, doesn't have to. I can feel his love for me—that and that alone. And it's everything.

Ernie was so happy to see me in this dream—the prodigal son returned. I felt no judgment whatsoever from him, not the slightest twinge of “where have you been, or why did you desert me?” In that sense, it wasn't even about forgiveness. He didn't care that I'd betrayed him, he only cared that I'd come back. In the dream, I was no doubt surprised by the presence of that genuine tenderness, but felt and knew the truth of it nonetheless. There was only his unconditional love for me, nothing else. In waking life—he died before I had even the slightest sense of recognition of this—it certainly could have happened that way. He was that large of a man, a being.

So yes, there was an invitation to feel the regret around that—my inability to receive love from Ernie in the outer world, and no doubt many others along the way. A painful reminder of all the love that has been offered to me in this life, love that I have distorted,

even spurned. But the message this dream-Ernie carried of Divine love was larger even than that, as if he might have said...*Yes, feel the pain of all the love you have missed out on to this point...the love you have turned away from...remorse for the hurt you have inflicted upon those who have opened to you along the way...But also, know this...that you are worthy of this Divine love I offer you now...that it is genuine...that it has always been here for you...that it will always be here for you...if you are willing to receive it*