a dangerous sweetness

love and war

Mali Klein

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 1-899077-16-2

Previously published as A Future Beyond the Sun (ISBN 1-899077-04-9)

acknowledgements

Designed by Ann Paganuzzi

Photo montages: Seb Stroud-Klein

Wedding pictures, cover and title page 2: Sue Feast, Photographer

Thank you, the 'support' team:
Nick and Gudrun;
Lóa and Birgir for lifetimes in Iceland;
Mike and Gillian Holmes for the love;
Di and Stanley Pollard for love, laughter and the 'safe house';
Don Dennis for never doubting and introducing us to Mac computers.

Thank you, Sasha and Sophie Young, for Lacoste.

Thank you, Debbie Stamp, for being there with me in Vietnam.

Mettacittena

So with a Boundless Heart should we cherish all living Beings,
Spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths,
Outwards and unbounded, free from hatred and ill-will...

Karaniyamettasutta,
The Buddha's Discourse on Loving-kindness

introduction

This book would never have been written without my beloved wife, Mali. I lived it, she wrote it, and it became her story too. These are my memories. This is how I remember times, people, events and the effect they had on my personal perceptions and development, not necessarily how others involved saw them at the time. No two people see the same picture in exactly the same way and I have tried to be fair and accurate in my remembering, giving praise where it is due and seeing the inevitable sorrow as only in passing.

Dedicated to my teachers Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho,

And to Felix, Gabriel and Gudrun for allowing me to run away with their mother.

Mettacittena,

For me this has been a labor of love beginning in a bus station on the west coast of Iceland, taking shape in the Greek Islands and ending two years later in Provence.

Our story, our passion – for life; for each other; for clarity of mind and heart; for understanding of what it takes to be a combat veteran trying to survive PTSD; for justice.

Facing death, we fought for our rights of choice and decision. We won.

There are no shadows in the Clear Light.

Go well, my love,

contents

1 a voice in my head

I told him: 'Ajahn, there's only one way to describe you. You're dangerous. A sweetness like so many of the monks, but dangerous. A dangerous sweetness.'

That was before I knew I was attracted to him, before he knew he was attracted to me. The exacting, charismatic, always tanned Ajahn Ānando with the dent in the back of his head, born in Buffalo, NY, Abbot of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery, never convinced me. Equally I thought I was too firmly conditioned in the Vinaya, the Thervadan discipline, to fall in love with a monk. They were, after all, completely dysfunctional in a normal life, which is probably why most of them ordained. That was my view, observing them in their daily struggle to combine their meditation practice with the practicalities of the on-going building work necessary to maintain a Victorian country house in the heart of rural southern England.

The Marine, the Vietnam veteran, piqued my interest. I had grown up just a few miles away in a family of veterans of two world wars. On both counts I was on familiar ground but I didn't know it then. That came later when I overheard Greg and my mother talking about their experiences, about the bombing and the sound of gunfire, about their reactions and the panic attacks that lasted long after. I realized they were talking about the same war, different times, different places but the same trauma, the same fear.

He told me I had beautiful eyes, this man, this monk, this Marine who became my beloved in the splendor of the Indian summer of his life. Grudgingly following a persistent summons from some other dimension, I first saw him the day the Berlin Wall came down, November 9th 1989, when I drove myself to the monastery in time to contribute to the morning meal.

I had been a late starter applying for a driving license. It didn't help that a voice in my head started nagging just a couple of weeks before I was scheduled to take my test.

'When you've passed the test you will go to Chithurst.'

'Why? What on earth do I have to go there for?'

'When you have passed your test you will go to Chithurst.'

I had already failed once. This time around I had the benefit of training under an advanced driving instructor before I checked in at the test centre on November 1st, two months before my thirty-ninth birthday. Even so I only

just avoided making the most of an opportunity to kill a cyclist. Convinced I had failed again, I consoled myself as I drove back to the centre, thinking: *Oh well, at least I won't have to go to Chithurst now.*

I was speechless when the examiner told me I had passed.

'But you watch it, young lady!' he growled as he handed over the certificate. Apparently it was the way I had *not* killed the cyclist that put me on the podium.

'You will go to Chithurst,' said the voice.

'I don't want to go to Chithurst.'

'You will go to Chithurst.'

I asked myself: 'Why should I listen to this? It's got me into enough trouble before. Do I need more?'

After a week of procrastination that was actually becoming guilt, I found myself standing in the monastery kitchen watching the monks walking past the table while the lay people filled their bowls, my mind reeling with the peculiar power that charged the whole atmosphere. I didn't really notice the abbot as an individual then, even though he was at the head of the line and seated in front of the golden Buddha-rupa in the *sala* (shrine room) for the meal.

I'm not bowing to a statue, I thought, kneeling upright on the polished wooden floor, rigidly obstinate while the others touched the boards with their foreheads. *I'm not bowing to a man either.*

Later I realized that a major source of the power lay within the abbot himself. It emanated from him so that I only had to put my nose inside the door to be able to tell whether he was in the building or not. Much later I realized that he was mostly unconscious of the effect he had on the community and in that alone, coupled with his natural charm and the position he was in, he was dangerous.

I left the monks to their winter retreat. I had known about the monastery from the time the house was bought for the community ten years before in the summer of 1979. I had also known that it wasn't the time for me to go there, not then. Now I had made the connection. My curiosity had been provoked. The voice knew the wisdom of silence. Any hint of what lay in store for me and the Vietnam veteran abbot would have been too huge, too crazy, too terrifying to contemplate. I would never have gone back.

Spring came to the English countryside, the time of daffodils and primroses and clear white sunlight streaming through the bare branches in the woodlands. Time to return to Chithurst. I wanted to develop my meditation

practice, to get behind the glamour and trappings of the Thai tradition and find out what the community was really all about. To that end I decided to volunteer to work in the grounds once a week on Wednesday afternoons, mostly in the *sīma* garden where the ordinations took place every summer.

I didn't speak to Ānando until after I had been going to evening meditation for some weeks. He was standing alone in the hallway in a shaft of reflected light from the stairwell, watching me drag some heavy bags out of my car and in through the door.

What is this? I thought, as I came under the scrutiny of that peculiar, almost reptilian stillness barely broken by the slow turning of his head. His eyes, accentuated by the lack of eyebrows, appeared slightly hooded, veiled; no one could close their eyes quite like Ajahn Ānando. That a lot of it was down to his limited field of vision wasn't generally known and certainly not to me.

One of the original group of four monks selected to bring the Thai Theravadan Forest tradition to the West in the summer of 1977, he was always impeccably robed and shaven. Even the initially startling dent from the bullet wound was centrally placed on the back of his small, well-shaped head. With his neat, slightly pointed ears and cat-like grace of movement honed and polished by years of Tai Chi, he looked somehow off-worldly and in possession of an exotic unreality that was more in accordance with the ceremonial of the high priest than a Buddhist monk.

He possessed an exceptional ability to see to the heart of a situation but his lack of self worth could cloud his judgment and he often confused his natural ability to listen with feelings of personal inadequacy. Fearing failure when called upon for teaching or advice, he habitually kept his own comments to a minimum, thereby setting up the perfect conditions of space and silence where people could find the answers to their questions for themselves. He had earned a lot of gratitude over the years and was completely unaware of it. People found him inspiring, intriguing, infuriating, often attractive, sometimes intimidating. Many loved him. Others were completely unmoved by him.

He was too far over the top for me. He wasn't my first preceptor and not what I was looking for in a spiritual teacher. Coming in from the rain one damp April afternoon spent weeding the *sīma* garden, I reported to the office and found Ānando and one of the junior monks going through the mail.

The abbot took one look at my streaming hair and drawled, 'You're wet.'

I answered instinctively as I would to any man given that kind of comment in that kind of tone. 'When you've got hair, it shows, Ajahn.'

What was I saying? There was an intimacy in that exchange that I could tell he was unaware of but I lived in the real world. Shocked at myself, I decided that it would be a lot better for my practice to avoid him, which I managed to do successfully for the next eighteen months.

Yet within a few weeks of observing the body language and the not always considerate interaction between the members in the community, I had caught on to the pain and the alone-ness of the battle-scarred veteran behind the robe. I knew that I would support Ānando if ever the need arose. But it was mostly an unconscious decision at the time.

I carried on working in the monastery garden all summer, carefully dressed in my baggiest trousers and least revealing shirts that only usually saw daylight in the stable yard on the land where I was employed and lived. Having ensured that my clothes were completely forgettable and with not a trace of perfume anywhere upon me, I made a consistent effort to play down any attraction I might retain in looks or behavior as inappropriate to time and place. I drew the line at mascara. I had been wearing it since I was eleven years old and saw no reason to stop.

I attended evening meditation regularly, enjoying being part of the Sangha, the Pāli word for the monastic community, and as I began to get to know the monks and the nuns, I felt I had found a place of peace and refuge in Chithurst. In many ways it reminded me of the happiest times of my childhood, visiting my grandparents who had lived barely three miles away in Fyning, in the next village. The garden looked out onto the South Downs, the same line of smooth green hills snaking against the skyline that I had seen standing by the front door of their little cottage.

meltdown

The peace shattered in the summer of 1991 at a time when the world was dealing with the aftermath of the preliminary engagement in Iraq and the Marine Corps had entered the theater of war in the first major conflict since Vietnam. The zealous, often bullish, energy that sustained the early years of the monastic Order in the West had evolved into a period of uncertainty followed by what has been most accurately described as 'melt-down' triggered by the inevitable culture clash of eastern principles and western ideals.

In 1967 the high casualty rate sustained by Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines during Operation Union 1 was generally attributed to the

incompetence of the commanding officer. Twenty-four years later U.S. Marine retiree Gregory Klein was once more in a situation where the aptitude of the superior officers had been called into question. This time he found himself in the firing line.

The unstable atmosphere ignited a violent reaction in the war veteran abbot, kindling dark thoughts of despair and self-destruction. When one of the senior monks, who he had counted on as a particular friend, and two of the nuns decided to disrobe his sense of duty and honor compelled him to take on the full burden of responsibility, at the same time feeling betrayed, intensely isolated and overwhelmed by grief. Already seriously underweight, he lost over nine pounds during those bitter days.

Being forced to officiate at the disrobing of the two nuns, a job normally reserved for Ajahn Sumedho, the senior incumbent of the Order, had a devastating effect on him.

'The feeling of failure was all-consuming and I didn't know what to do with myself. I had never disrobed anyone before, only anagarikas (novices). I so wanted to distance myself from it all, but now I had to be directly involved and so painfully in the departure of a senior nun. Unwittingly I had become the instrument of her disrobing. Someone had to do it, but it caught at my emotions. There was still a need to endure and my sense of duty compelled me to carry on, but it was no longer a question of if I was going to leave the monastery but when. Somewhere along the line we had failed one another.'

It was the quality of his courage and uncomplaining dignity in the face of criticism and blame that triggered my resolve to support him and finally opened the channel of communication between us. Except there was nothing that I or Mike and Gillian Holmes, two long-serving, trusted lay people, could do that would ensure against the gradual, unavoidably fatal erosion of his natural pride and faith in the monastic discipline during that difficult period. He acknowledged our effort and was always grateful that we did our best to help him.

'They gave me an empathic and emotional support that I would never get from the monks and the burden lifted a little from my shoulders. I could allow myself to see that there were several, equally responsible players in the game and not just me, although we all knew that the buck stopped with me. There was still some hope that I could legitimately carry on in my practice.'

We built on that hope, continuing to support and encourage him, doing everything we could to keep him in the Order. Chithurst without Ānando was unthinkable but we couldn't get him to re-engage. He was distracted by grief and any ability he had to think clearly and rationally seemed to have

vanished. As the monastery ship drifted rudderless on a dark ocean with no guiding hand at the wheel, I began to fear the worst for the Marine. I became desperately afraid that he would follow in the boot prints of too many veterans and take his own life. He would tell me later that I had intuited his state of mind correctly. He came perilously close to suicide during those difficult days.

The day after Christmas I wrote him a letter, putting into words through seven pages what I thought he was feeling. I wrote about fear, obsession, the effects and consequences of disempowerment and isolation; I wrote about suicide. He didn't share it with one of the other monks as he should have done with any kind of communication from a laywoman, however trustworthy. Instead he stayed up until three in the morning writing a reply. In his view at last there was someone who understood what was going on with him: '*Someone who has the uncanny ability to explain me to me.*' He was back on track and ready to take on the responsibilities of running the winter retreat, while I had unwittingly set myself up for attraction. It was not my intention. It happened.

A strong insight into the possibility of his approaching death in the early hours of the morning of January 16th 1992 brought up his unresolved fear of dying. He had no idea exactly when or how he would die, his only reference was a past and ferocious experience of death. He could teach about it from the acceptable Theravadan viewpoint but his reality was no sterile, intellectual observation. The Marine knew about pain. He knew what bullets did to bodies, how life clings to shattered flesh. He knew what death looked like, what it smells like, what it sounds like. Sometime over that cold January night he decided that of all the people he knew, I was the one he wanted at his bedside in the hour of his passing.

I was in the office at the monastery later that same morning when he took the call from Thailand announcing the death of Ajahn Chah, his beloved teacher whose practice had inspired the founding of the community in the West. It was not unexpected. He had been comatose for ten years, cared for at Wat Pah Pong monastery by the monks. I had no idea of what had been decided for me during the night. All I knew was that the meaning of the call was painfully clear. I moved to leave. Ānando waved me to stay where I was, sitting on the floor between the open door and the filing cabinet. *All things are subject to change.* I could see only disintegration. The threads of everything put into place to try and keep him in the community were snapping irretrievably apart. Something had been lost, never to return.

I was trained as a spiritual healer and counselor and my services had been in demand. One-to-one therapy sessions involving a woman and an ordained

Buddhist monk, particularly the abbot of the monastery, were out of the question. There must be no physical contact and no eye contact. All offerings were accepted on a receiving cloth and taken up by the monk only after the woman had withdrawn to a respectful distance. Even so the Buddha hadn't anticipated the advent of the Sony Walkman. There was no rule in the monastic code to stop us exchanging cassette tapes.

He told me about Vietnam, about the rage and the aftermath, slipping the tapes into my car when no one else was around. I answered his questions about my experiences of death and dying as honestly and accurately as I could. Some of his other questions were completely out of context. He wanted a lot of detail about the cost of living in the lay life and how money worked these days. Why would a monk want to know about my utility bills? I still didn't get it. As my preceptor he was aware that I was intending to be divorced that year. That confidential information coupled with my proven ability to plan, organize and carry out orders, that I had nursing training and knew about PTSD, had made me supremely attractive to the wounded Marine.

By the end of the winter retreat he had decided that the idea of leaving with me was a very appealing proposition that would certainly facilitate his integration back into the lay life. In a tape on the last day of February he told me that he didn't want to be a Buddhist monk anymore, he wanted to live with me and through that relationship find out what love was really all about. I had a fortnight to get over the shock while he went to Thailand for Ajahn Chah's funeral.

divorce

Getting over the shock was easier said than done. He wasn't the first person I had helped in a desperate situation. Had he told me that he wanted to leave and asked if I would drive him to the airport, I would have done so at whatever time of day or night. I would have made sure he had clothes, money and food and waved him good-bye with regret for the community and for the loss of someone I had come to regard as a friend but no further attachment.

Nothing in my planning for getting out of an unfortunate marriage had included a romantic liaison with the abbot of Chithurst Buddhist Monastery. Under that impressive facade it was obvious to me that he was both the monk and the Marine, emotionally demanding, volatile, passionate, vulnerable, and brain damaged. I suspected he suffered absence seizures and he had

dropped a comment about being blind in one of the early tapes. What exactly did he mean by that? How much more was he affected by the head wound?

Caution, self-preservation told me not to inflict any fantasy of mine on what could be a life with Greg Klein. He could change his mind any time and he had to be given every chance to do so. I didn't want to live the rest of my life in the shadow of his remorse and regret. His leaving had to be his own choice. Until then, for my own sake as much as his, I would do my best not to persuade or create any situation that would influence his decision. Meanwhile I started reading up on epilepsy.

How he intended to leave was another matter. Ajahn Sumedho had decided that as from the beginning of the *vassa* (annual, three-month, summer 'Rains' retreat starting at the July full moon) Ānando would renounce his position as abbot and leave Chithurst. He was expected to take up residence at Amaravati, the Buddhist Centre northwest of London in Hertfordshire where he would be under his superior officer's watchful eye.

The Marine had been demoted and he wasn't interested in an honorable discharge. His friend's disrobing had become a drawn out, bitterly painful process leaving its mark on everyone involved. He wanted a swift, clean break.

'I'm just going to walk out.'

I knew where he was coming from but I doubted it was the best option. There is nothing random about the monastic form. Rather it embodies an age-old beauty and quality that inspires the sense of refuge and spaciousness for the ordained and lay community alike. *I take Refuge in Buddha, Dhamma* (the teaching), *Sangha* (the community of monastics). A monk ordains, he practices, he continues or he leaves enriched, theoretically.

In Thai culture, where it is traditional for men to spend a period of time in a monastery, disrobing is no big deal. Respect centers on what the robe represents rather than the shortcomings of the fragile being wearing it. Some years later when I visited Wat Pah Nanachat, the monastery where Ānando had spent the last two years of his time in Thailand, the lay people were delightful, showing no resentment, not judgmental, the women demanding to see the wedding pictures, the head man of the village taking me into the forest to admire the monkeys. In 1992 when the tradition was still relatively newly translated into the predominantly Christian western culture, the idea that any of the Sangha superstars should want to leave had become invested with the stigma of the unfrocked priest.

I protested: 'Without saying anything to anyone? Just like that?'

'Yes.' He was very clear in his intention. 'I decided fifteen years ago when I came to London that nothing would persuade me to disrobe in the traditional way if the system had pushed me so far that all I wanted to do was get out. In that case it was no longer worthy of respect and the ritual of leaving would be unimportant. I'll need you to drive the getaway car.'

I had no objections to driving the car but the ritual formality of his leaving was important to me. I couldn't live intimately with an ordained monk. I investigated. It seemed that the procedure didn't have to be carried out within the monastery precincts. Where needs must it was possible we could perform a shortened version of the procedure ourselves with me as his witness. The question was where to do it and when?

Ironically or comically, however I chose to look at it, Greg Klein, brought up in a conservative, Catholic American family, had reservations about being seen to run off with a married woman. Like it or not that was exactly what he was doing. He wanted me to get the divorce proceedings under way. I didn't want to be the woman in the Ānando scandal until I was satisfied with the arrangements for my family. It would be my second divorce. I had two sons, Felix, aged twenty, Gabriel, eighteen, and Gudrun, my sixteen-year-old daughter. I was still good friends with their father and I knew he would be supportive but how would it be for our children with their mother's name on too many lips and few of them with favor? Tentatively, unless Greg changed his mind about leaving, October at the end of the *vassa* was the first practical date that came to mind.

What we were supposed to live on afterwards I had no idea. I presumed him penniless in compliance with the monastic code and I was absolutely not willing for him to accept handouts from his wealthy lay supporters. We would make our own way in the world and, if all else failed, we would explore the perfect opportunity to put living on *prana* into practice, something Ānando had been romancing about, but never achieved, during his monastic career.

It came as a shock when he told me he had a VA pension. Born and brought up in England, I had no idea what the VA was other than a word in a Bruce Springsteen song. Rumor tripped off too many careless tongues when all was done but, contrary to the buzz on the bush telegraph, there was no sensational half million dollars stashed in an American bank making interest for whenever Ānando should decide to disrobe.

His entry into the monastery in 1972 coincided with a period when his parents found themselves in very difficult financial circumstances. His father had been fired from his job only months before he was due to retire. Offering them the pension was the perfect solution for the would-be alms mendicant who must renounce all worldly goods. Since his father's death and his mother's

remarriage he had been getting her to use the pension to contribute to various projects at Chithurst, including the impending hike across France to the branch monastery at Kandersteg in Switzerland. Originally planned as his pilgrimage back into the community, it was destined to become the symbolic and literal walk away.

He left Chithurst on the day of the spring equinox accompanied by two junior monks and a novice. The next eleven weeks were hell according to the emotional stability of the man in the robe walking across France. My personal problems had to go on the backburner. One of us had to stay calm and rational, but the whole business was killing me just the same. The Marine was gung ho, glad to be on the road. The monk alternated between clarity and anguish as he agonized over his decision to leave, reflected in the on-going compilation of close-written pages crammed into envelops every few days and mailed to me care of the 'safe house'. His grief at the outcome of events the previous autumn had barely lessened over the months that followed.

'There was one hard moment as I knelt before Ajahn Chah's coffin but even in Thailand I felt alienated and set apart from the community. I had some very special and wonderful memories from my early years in the Forest Sangha and so much that I would always be grateful for but maybe as Greg I could be more honest with myself. As Ānando there was always the form to observe, appearances to keep up, feelings and emotions constantly suppressed, rarely transcended. Over the years I had built a very convincing facade that I had grown so tired of having to maintain.

But what would life be like without the monastic form? Was there form to the lay life or was it truly nothing but 'endless wandering'? Would there be enough security and stability for me? Was it possible to find contentment outside the community? As Greg I had never known it; as Ānando I had known a small degree of it early on in the practice. Could it be possible that a relationship with Mali would finally bring me peace of mind and heart? She was well versed in the monastic protocol, which had to be an advantage, but would it be enough to understand my needs, my doubts? Would she respect my fear and the frailty of my position as I sought to project myself as an individual in a world that was very different from the one I had known?'

By the beginning of May it was evident he wouldn't make it until October. He had lost faith in himself as Ajahn Ānando and the confidence to continue living as a monk. Having made a definite decision to go on June 12th he called his mother to arrange the money and tell her he wouldn't be alone when he left. Predictably she asked if he was leaving the monastery because of me.

He answered truthfully: 'No, I decided to leave months ago.'

It was different story when she enquired after my marital status.

'She's a widow. Her husband died in a car crash.'

When he called to tell me what he had done I was absolutely aghast.

'Why couldn't you tell her the truth?'

'Because she is very conservative and I want her to meet you first before she forms an opinion of you.'

'How on earth can I meet her, knowing she thinks that? She's bound to ask me questions, women do, you know. What then? I'm not going to lie to her!'

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. When she sees how happy I am with you, I know she'll love you for it.'

'I hope you're right! How could you do this to me?'

The truth was we hardly knew each other. As he said it was like an arranged marriage except that he was doing all the arranging and I was going along with it. Why? I had been planning to go to Iceland, a country that was a second home for me. I was learning the language, I had work lined up and I had already bought my ticket. Luckily it was exchangeable. I wasn't 'in love' with Greg then. I could relate to him with love even though there were times when there was no escaping the feeling of being used, not just by him but also, however indirectly, by the whole monastic community.

Fortunately there was no doubting the instinctive friendship and trust between us that, given the chance, could become something more. But all the while he was an ordained Buddhist monk it would be something I would acknowledge and observe rather than commit opening my heart to. He desperately wanted to love me because it would make life so much easier for him if he did. As with any arranged marriage only time would tell. All we had to go on was an unrelenting sense of urgency driven by a gut feeling that somehow everything would be okay.

He stopped shaving his head and arranged a lift to Kandersteg. I talked divorce with my lawyer, changed dollars into UK pounds, bought camping equipment and his clothes, ordered air tickets, typed his resignation letter to Ajahn Sumedho and arranged for a courier riding a big bike to deliver it. Too close to the wire everything had to be revised again. D-day was set for Saturday, June 6th, forty-eight years since the Normandy landings and exactly twenty-six years since nineteen-year-old Radio Telegraph Operator (RTO) Lance Corporal Gregory Klein landed in Da Nang. That the dates coincided wasn't intentional. It happened.

I spent the night of June 5th with Mike and Gillian, arranging how they would break the news to the Sangha. Gillian drove me to the airport early

the next morning. The plane climbed up over the patchworked-in-green Sussex countryside, crossed the narrow stretch of glittering sea and headed southeast over France for Berne in Switzerland. I focused, putting aside the pain. *Practice. All things rise and pass away. Stay present. Be with it. Nothing is certain beyond this moment*. Whatever was in store for me and the Vietnam veteran monk, I was on my way to embrace it.

clouds together

Greg called soon after I arrived at Hotel Fleur de Lys in Gryères, a little medieval town on a hill in French-speaking Switzerland. He was anxious, sitting on an acute adrenaline rush.

'Is everything all right?' he asked. 'Is the room okay? Did you have a good journey?'

'Everything is fine. We're in room ten, it's wonderful and there's a huge bathtub. Your letter is due for delivery at seven o'clock tomorrow morning and I've threatened to sue the courier if he messes up.'

'Is the car okay?'

'The car is perfect, a little dark grey Corsa, just right for sitting in the shadows in the middle of the night.'

'Just take care not to park it in the pile of cow manure that has been dumped at the end of the drive. I noticed it this afternoon when we came in and I don't want to have to walk through that.'

'I'll do my best, don't worry. I'll be leaving here around nine forty-five while there's still enough light to see the turning to Jaunpass. There's not much of a moon at the moment but the weather has cleared. What it will be like in the mountains, I don't know.'

'You will drive carefully won't you? I don't want anything to happen to you now, not after all this.'

I laughed. 'It won't and I will. I'll be there by eleven-thirty and I'll just sit and wait until you come out.'

He had tea with the other monks and excused himself early to rest and read while I shopped for bread and juice and chocolate and apples. He wouldn't have eaten since the morning meal and might be hungry by midnight. I set up my little travelling shrine on the table at the end of the bed and prepared the flowers, candles and incense. Fortunately the room wasn't fitted with smoke detectors.

I unpacked his clothes and hung them in the wardrobe. Typically I had remembered everything I had purchased for him and forgotten most of my own things. I had the clothes on my back plus one change, and of course the camera. Old art students never die, I never went anywhere without it. I put my favorite musky shower gel in the bathroom, inspected the towels and the toiletries and turned back the bed. The honeymoon suite was ready and waiting, and the unlikely bride in need of a good meal before she took on the night drive over Jaunpass.

I'd driven the escape route the week before with Gudrun. It covered mostly good, well-maintained roads through villages and farmland and a couple of small towns. The tricky part climbed high over the mountain pass where it was unlit for most of the way and hemmed in by tall, dark conifers. Where the late winter avalanches had taken it down to a single lane, only a few snow poles roped off the sheer drop guaranteed to take no prisoners. I would be never more grateful to my advanced driving instructor than I was that night, gunning the little car through a black tunnel that no one else was crazy enough to drive at that hour, all my senses on super-alert watching out for falling rocks, no space for error.

I was on schedule and punching air in relief, 'Yes!' when at last I took the turning to Kandersteg and began the slow, zigzag ascent up the side of the mountain to the town. The Marine was taking another shower and putting on his navy blue escape uniform, a sweatshirt easily concealed under a regulation brown monastic sweater and pants that wouldn't show under a sabong with the legs rolled up. I had delivered it when he played hooky for an afternoon with Gudrun and I walking around a French town, delighting in the anonymity of the lay life.

'For the first time in twenty years nobody's looking at me,' he said happily.

Ānando in public had been impossible to ignore. People saw him walking towards them, they turned and looked after him when he passed, saw the dent and the scar on the back of his head and carried on looking long enough for his self-consciousness to burn.

'It wouldn't have been such a big deal if my head had been normal.'

The monastery was unusually crowded with lay people that weekend. There was a meditation retreat in progress and the possibility of someone being downstairs or sitting up late wanting to talk was fairly high. But nothing was going to stop him now. He checked his watch. 23.20 hours. Time to go.

Taking a flashlight, his razor and the Swiss army knife that had been a faithful companion for years, he lowered his pack silently over the balcony to the

ground below. He hung a *Do not disturb until the meal* notice on the door, left his sandals on the floor beside it and tiptoed downstairs to the *sala* to pay his final respects. Bowing three times before the Buddha-rupa, he felt the iron grip of anxiety loosen and release. He was on course for leaving and he had no regrets. Confident that everything was going to be all right, he slipped out of the back door into the night.

Midway down the driveway at the end of the avenue of trees he stopped to strip off the sweater and the sabong and stuff them into the pack, ready to mail back to the monastery when he could get to a post office. He couldn't see the car in the shadow of the farm buildings but he knew I was there. He could feel me waiting for him, parked well clear of the manure heap as instructed, lights out, engine silent.

I saw the signal flash twice before the silhouette of his head and shoulders with the pack over his arm emerged from the shadows. The door opened and suddenly he was there beside me, taking immediate possession of my hand. The silence came alive with his excitement, his breathing as he settled into the seat. The clock on the dashboard read 23.33.

'Let's go,' he said.

I edged the car forward driving slowly without lights until we were safely under the railway bridge, then out on to the main road and away from Kandersteg retracing the route back to Gryères. Sometime in the early hours I was woken up by the pressure of his arms holding me so tightly as he slept as if he were afraid I would be gone when he woke up in the morning.

why we are

Who was this person who had launched himself so precipitately into my life? Who had entrusted me with his return to the 'endless wandering' where success or failure very much depends on the people you choose to wander with? In Buddhism it is taught that we are all the product of our individual conditioning that in turn influences how we approach and react to each of our life experiences.

Greg Klein may have spent his life kicking against the influence of his Catholic upbringing but it was still strong within him. Stronger still the depth and effect of his Marine Corps conditioning, imprinted in his late teens and further stamped into his psyche by his experience of war, could never be truly alleviated no matter how many layers of Buddhist monastic discipline and refinement he had since wholeheartedly heaped upon it.

On the other side of the Atlantic my generation grew up in post-war Britain with parents who had all been affected, some more than others, either by their military service or their lives as civilians surviving night after night of bombing raids in the wreck of burned and shattered buildings, picking up the pieces of what had been people they had known as loved ones, workmates, friends or neighbors. My little mother's panic attacks were legendary and could last for days.

The Marine was confident that I was exactly what he needed: 'I knew without any doubt that when the darkness descended, when I was a war victim again and in hell, she was going to be there too. Here was one person I could cry with, without shame or embarrassment. I needed to cry and with her to love and comfort me, it would be all right. My life was going to be a bit like a roller coaster for a while. Hold me tight, here we go.'

There was no plate covering the cavity in his skull, just a layer of scar tissue between his brain and the outside world. Scary. A preliminary healing session revealed a peculiar, large, dark green-colored energy mass behind the gunshot wound, spread towards the left side of his head from the centre and moving inwards. He refused to consider having a brain scan but admitted that he thought the field of vision defect had grown larger in the previous two or three years.

'I can still see what I'm able to see well enough.'

'Show me what you can see. How does it work?'

He raised a hand and made a horizontal line across his face leveled at the tip of his nose. 'I can see everything above my fingers, like I can see the upper half of you, but I can't see your legs unless I move my head.'

'Do you get headaches?'

'I used to, occasionally, but nothing in the last few months. I feel perfectly well in myself, especially since last night and this afternoon.'

Turning to me, touching me, entwined on the floor, pulling the quilt and pillows off the bed, clothes scattered over the carpet.

I could relate to making love with the Marine but Ānando hadn't been left behind with the robe. As Greg had pointed out I was well versed in a monastic protocol that could encourage what he described as 'a snarling aversion to women.' I had been involved with the community long enough to have seen it in action, not directed towards me and never from Ānando. Nevertheless I recognized it as a possible factor in his monastic conditioning that I might be called upon to deal with.

The monk had already made his presence felt at breakfast that first morning. Bubbling in uninhibited delight Greg escorted me to the dining room wearing

a gold earring on his left ear, a pale cream and green silk shirt, green socks to match and a pair of stonewashed Levis that fitted him perfectly. He ordered croissants and toast, hot milk for me, hot chocolate for him. He looked at the cutlery, hesitating before he picked up the knife, embarrassed when he saw me watching him.

'Don't forget I've been using a spoon for the last twenty years.'

When I offered him the butter and the jam he only just stopped himself from making the gesture of acceptance. We laughed, but it didn't preclude Ānando from wincing when I made the knife scrape across the plate cutting my bread.

'What's the matter?' I asked, surprised to see that never-to-be-forgotten, inscrutable look and the tone of the reply.

'The sound of the knife on the plate, it offends me.'

'I'm sorry, I didn't realize. I don't usually crash through my food.'

It was Greg who smiled apologetically across the table. 'I've had twenty years of eating without touching the sides of the bowl with the spoon. Old habits die hard, it seems.'

'It's not such a bad habit. I promise I'll try not to do it again.'

'Do you mind?' He seemed to need reassurance.

'No, really I don't,' I said.

It was just the beginning of what started out as a confusing, fascinating, sometimes infuriating three, even four-way relationship riding the roller coaster of our conditioning into our story of love and war and the consequences of both. Governments lead us into war; love is down to personal choice.

You have to dare to love. Especially when you are older and you've had time to find out what love is not. It takes courage to let down the final barriers and truly open your heart to someone, to risk rejection, criticism, even mockery when you are at your most vulnerable and exposed. In my case to dare to trust, respect and admire another person enough to let him into the secret, sacred heart space that had been consciously and exclusively mine since early childhood and no one had ever come near to.

Ajahn Chah's teaching about learning to respond from the heart rather than the head had translated with the Sangha to the West as a more cerebral exercise that inevitably connected anything concerning the heart with emotional attachment, meaning trouble. Combat veteran Ajahn Ānando's need to teach *Metta bhavana*, the practice of Loving-kindness, was never understood by his contemporaries and he was continually frustrated by

the paucity in the Theravadan framework to adequately accommodate and express it. He came out of the monastery exhausted on every level and desperate simply to be cared for and to rest, but with a clear image of what he hoped a real relationship with me would become.

'For this relationship to work you have to be in my blood, my bone-marrow, in my very cells and in the deep recesses of my mind. I want you to know me and through the power of that knowing, my intuition tells me that the healing and melding of my heart and mind will be accomplished. In return you can have me, complete with my fear and vision, smiles and tears, laughter and sorrow, power and weakness, ignorance and knowledge, love and hate, courage and paranoia, my simplicity and complexity, clarity and dullness, passion and indifference.

In all that my *intention*, the key word, is only to bring you light, power, magic, holding you in trust and respect, each seeing the other as a manifestation of the Divine. I only want to make you happy, to care for you and look after you, to be the strong one for you as no other has ever been before. I have to trust that you believe in me and that I have been worth this hell of waiting for.'

In response I decided to set out to be certain of him without question from the beginning, not because of an excess of virtue or naiveté, but rather as a practice, a commitment equal to the extremity of my conduct in helping him to leave the monastery. Likewise I was aware that a large part of this trust was built around his years as a monk and that these early weeks were critical in our relating to one another. If there was anything worth working on, I was determined to do my best with it. At the same time if either of us found our situation unworkable or fundamentally unsatisfactory I wanted to part sooner rather than later before the pain became too lasting or too deep.

Neither of us was prepared for what this relationship would demand of us. We were two, very strong, passionate personalities who were about to discover they were profoundly compatible.

commitment

When did we fall irretrievably, irreversibly, so completely in love? Sometime over those first two days when we had nothing more challenging than the luxury of the hotel to deal with. When that look came between us, that moment of eye contact that went on and on and we moved to follow it, investigating, wondering, reaching out, coming closer, daring to love.

Then we were on the road, looking for campsites. It soon became clear that Greg had forgotten how to laugh at himself, which left me wondering how my teasing, slightly sacrilegious sense of humor would go down. Accordingly I kept a firm clamp on my mouth until habit got the better of me, answering one of his more pompous pronouncements with his full name accented with a quirky twist in tone ending in a squeak.

'Gregory, please!'

Several, endless seconds frozen. I waited for the axe to fall. Then he was laughing. Soon he was calling me 'Nutt' after a Burmese goddess, or so he said, and his 'golden witch' who most of the time seemed to know what he was going to say before he said it, while I was saluting orders with a prompt, if faintly ironical, 'Yes, Sir!'

'You are so good for me,' he said. 'I never realized you were so funny.'

He readily admitted he could hardly bear any comment or gesture that might suggest personal criticism. As he pointed out his self-esteem had been so low for so long, he had no reserves, and he dreaded infirmity in old age. *Old age, sickness and death.* In Buddhism, they are the three outward symbols of mortality that he had reflected upon and taught about for so many years, and still feared. His worst nightmare was to be old, white-haired and blind, coupled with a deeply ingrained fear of going insane. In his view dying was a better alternative. But he had last looked into the face of death surrounded by the screaming wounded on the battlefield and he still reacted strongly to the smell of his own blood. He did not associate dying with the state of peace.

'That is why I'm here,' he said. 'You have to help me.'

A wavering moment of uncertainty: *Why? How?*

We were finding we had so much in common: a deeply committed passion for the planet, thankfully similar tastes in literature and music – rock and baroque, although I had yet to convert him to Bruce Springsteen – vegetarian food that was simple, nutritious and basically raw, and big, fast motorbikes. We discovered interrelated views on religion and politics, not that either of us were overly interested in the latter, and refreshingly mutual ideas on what was peace and what was pleasure. He could skate, I couldn't. I could ride horses, he couldn't. We vowed to teach each other some day when there was more time, when we were less obsessed with each other. Would it ever happen?

I asked him: 'Tell me truly, do you have any regret at leaving the monastery? Have you felt any remorse? Do you feel any remorse?'

He closed his eyes, Ānando in jeans sat silent and still, carefully considering before he answered.

'No, I have no regret whatsoever at leaving. I have never for one moment regretted the time I spent in the monastery. Certainly I don't feel it was a waste of time. I'm sorry for any pain my method of leaving may have caused but then there was no other way as things were. I have no desire to be a monk again. It would have been very different if I had no sense of purpose, if I didn't think we had a purpose. But I feel that we have something to do together in this world, you and I, and I want to find out what it is.'

What purpose? The voice in my head stayed silent.

'Promise you will tell me if you change your mind?' I said.

'I couldn't help but tell you,' he replied.

Morning and evening meditation went to the winds in the interests of making love but I did remember to set out the little shrine at the back of the tent every time we set up camp. We prepared our simple meals together, cutting bread, cheese and vegetables, laying the plates and cups out on the grass, making the practice of offering the other the first spoonful of food from the plate.

He prayed: 'Holy Ones, bless us, keep us safe, protect us and guide us, keep us healthy (with a suggestive grin), continue to open our hearts to each other in love and devotion, and to all Beings, *Sadhu* (so be it).'

He wanted us to have rings as a token of our commitment to one another. His would be worn on the third finger of his right hand. Mine had to go on the marriage finger. It was one of those potentially difficult moments when any hesitation on my part would blight his newly blossoming self-respect.

'Do you mind?' he asked.

'Not if it comes from you.'

Absorbed as we were in the drama of Ānando, we had given no attention to what was going on with my situation. The volcanoes in Iceland are all female. They stay dormant as long as it takes for the magma chamber to fill and then they erupt, something I could always relate to. It soon became clear that my taking care not to criticize Greg didn't impose a similar restraint on Ānando when one of his reflections on tooth care turned a beautiful morning beside a river into a fight, triggering my first cathartic eruption of tears.

He announced: 'I want you to floss your teeth every day.'

'I don't do it on principle. You know that, we've talked about it before.'

'Well, I want you to begin.'

'But it's disgusting! I have never forgotten watching you flossing in public after a meal! How can that be virtuous conduct in a monk? It's like picking your nose, something you only do on the toilet if you have to.'

‘I want you to always be beautiful and you won’t be beautiful if your teeth fall out.’

‘They won’t fall out! I clean them very well twice a day and if they do I’ll have a mouthful of crowns!’

‘That’s something else I don’t agree with,’ he said loftily. ‘I’ve been watching how you clean your teeth and you don’t do it properly. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it for some days.’

I turned on him, indignant, defensive, demanding, ‘What do you mean? I went to the hygienist only a month before I came here and he said my teeth were in a very clean condition. What are you talking about?’

‘I don’t agree. I don’t approve of your method.’

‘What do you know about ‘method’?’

‘My brother-in-law is a dentist and I’ve talked to him at length about it.’

I shouted: ‘What the hell does he know about my teeth?’

Ānando looked down his nose. ‘You know very well what I mean and please do not use colorful language. It offends me and degrades you.’

Already proven under fire, I stood my ground. I wasn’t into blindly following orders no matter who they came from.

‘No, I don’t know what you mean! Your teeth are the only teeth I have ever seen in a human being that resemble a horse, all worn away and flat on the top. And how dare you be sitting on your ‘objections’ to me and not saying so at the time? That’s degrading, degrading to you and completely dishonest. This relationship is either straight down the line or it doesn’t exist!’

He stared at me, genuinely amazed. ‘How have we managed to go from a simple request about dental hygiene to an ultimatum in a few minutes?’

Light the touch paper and stand back. I had lived on the edge of hell for his sake for days, weeks and months of misery. The volcano erupted.

‘Look at your method! Five minutes ago we were making love and then you start talking teeth! Gregory Klein, flowers in one hand and a rock in the other! I always said you were the master of bad timing! If you have any criticism, don’t sit on it! Come on out with it and don’t nit-pick! I wouldn’t dream of doing that to you, damn you!’

The tears burst, cascaded, poured off my face and my chin, completely out of control. Through the blur I was vaguely aware of him sat beside me, holding the cup that he had picked up ready to make tea, looking so lost with little lines of worry and perplexity where his eyebrows were growing back. Uncertain what to do next he touched my cheek.

‘I love you,’ he said softly. ‘I can’t bear to see you cry.’

He wanted me to say something, anything to bring us back together again, but the eruption was in full flood. I was locked into a convulsion of sobbing I had no control over.

‘Mali? Speak to me?’

I couldn’t. The words wouldn’t come.

Ānando took over. ‘Mali! Make the tea!’

Two years of Sangha conditioning moved me. I picked up the pot. The water shook and spilled.

He pleaded: ‘Mali, please believe me, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you would react so strongly. I never meant to hurt you.”

I believed him. Neither of us had been prepared for such a storm, and over dental floss? I wiped what was left of my face and washed out my mouth with the remains of the water.

From somewhere I found a smile. ‘I’m sorry too.’

‘You do have beautiful eyes,’ he said.

I shook my head, sniffing. ‘Hardly, as they are now.’

‘Even as they are now, beautiful blue and wet with tears.’

I took a length of floss with me to the Ladies Room that evening. That night, for the first time, he started grinding his teeth again as he slept. He woke seconds later to warm kisses, the best way I could think of stopping him.

A culture clash over what and what not to wear sunbathing set off the second eruption. I had been as good as naked on European beaches for most of my adult life, nothing out of the ordinary on my side of the ocean. American Greg Klein was still very much in touch with his puritan heritage on this one. He stripped down to his underwear without a second thought. I was getting down to panties and nothing else when a hand came down on my arm before I got beyond my sweater.

Another Ānando proclamation: ‘No woman with me takes her clothes off in public.’

Suddenly, unexpectedly, he was so much like my father. Not a good idea.

I protested: ‘How else am I to promote this tan you are always going on about? I can’t see you sitting on a beach in a shirt!’

‘I repeat, you will not take your clothes off in public while you are with me.’

Pure magma boiled at the point of rupture. Red-hot rage twisted my hands, bunching them into fists, savagely recalling my personal vow to me about

the freedom I had so longed for, been so close to and since so heedlessly abandoned. Ānando sat motionless beside me, becoming Greg again as swiftly as he saw the anger pass.

'You came very near, didn't you?' he said.

I growled resentfully, refusing to apologize. 'Yes, you're not the only one with a temper, Gregory Klein! My lower self sees you as completely unreasonable and dictatorial. At the same time my higher self tells me your monastic training dictates that it is neither appropriate nor necessary for me to take my clothes off where other men may see me. Thus speaks higher self, damn it!'

'Thank you.'

'But I won't go around veiled like a Muslim! I'm not a nun!'

Laughing, he gathered me up to be soothed and softened in his arms. 'You are definitely not a nun! We will make sure we always find secluded places where we can take our clothes off, I promise.'

He called the shots and most of the time it was okay, but it was left to me to come up with the idea that we adapt the Vinaya for our Sangha of Two when we woke one morning to the sound of rain pattering on the flysheet and decided to stay in bed.

'We could begin with the five precepts and go on from there,' he agreed, curled around me in the big, double sleeping bag. 'But not too many rules and they must all be negotiable.'

I wanted more clarity. In my experience where rules were concerned black and white worked, grey offered a lot of potential for problems.

'So what exactly is it to be, beloved Ajahn?'

He considered a moment or two. 'Fundamentally it's all down to good conduct, I suppose, an awareness of grace and refinement in how we express ourselves in our relationship and to other people, mindfulness.'

'Mindfulness of relating, I like that,' I nodded. 'It's also very useful that we are both conditioned not to make full eye contact with others of the opposite sex.'

He agreed wholeheartedly. 'Indeed yes! It reassures me as well because jealousy is still a problem with me. I love you so much it scares me and jealousy doesn't help. You will have to help me, and be patient with me.'

'I will do my best, my Lord.'

He laughed. 'You have to call me that in front of my mother.'

ice and fire

I took him with me to Iceland, where the elements are passionately alive and every breath an inhalation of raw intensity that cuts through the psyche like a knife. There was no concession for indifference on this unstable chunk of volcanic rock perched at the top of the world. It was impossible to travel there and leave unchanged.

That was before tourism took the upper hand in the Icelandic economy, when the airport was still new and not crowded, and a swim in the Blue Lagoon cost the same as the public pools. That precious time before the glaciers started melting, when the walkways in the wild places were sheep tracks, when there was plenty of space in the campsites and the idea of building five-star hotels was a national joke.

I wanted him to share the magic of this wild country where my heart sang, to test the depth of this relationship where the golden witch had the advantage surrounded by her sisters cradling their vats of endless fire under glowing icecaps in the midnight sun. We had five weeks on the road in an unforgiving territory, at the end of which either I would be waving him goodbye at the airport or following him onto the plane.

The island chose to greet us covered in a layer of thick, dark cloud. Lóa was waiting in her usual place behind the glass screen at the airport. We had been 'adopted sisters' since 1981 and it was important that her female relatives should be with men who were 'of a good family' which meant no drunkenness, no divorces, and they must be honest and employed. Greg stood up to her on-the-spot appraisal and passed the first test. When she found out he was four years older than me, he was perfect.

Volcanoes talk to one another. They feed from the same source and occasionally conspire to play havoc with the world's weather. The gas cloud from a cataclysmic eruption in the Philippines the year before had dropped global temperatures by one degree. Not much to get excited about where we'd flown in from but sufficient to give the ice giants the satisfaction of pelting the car with a midsummer snowstorm as we crossed the mountains to Thingvellir where Lóa and her husband Birgir were building a summerhouse near the south-western shore of the lake.

'Greg, I promise you faithfully, this is not usual,' I said.

I had invited him to the Land of the Midnight Sun but all it had to offer was a generous helping of midnight cloud unmoved by the cold, persistent keening of the wind. The Marine assessed the situation, got the fire going

and taught me how to get a lot of gear into a very tight space while we made the most of the next two days in a neighboring summerhouse to acclimatize and re-organize our packs.

We had bus tickets to take us in one direction around the island. Lóa put us on the road, dropping us off at a campsite south of Hekla volcano, who teased us with a glimpse of her snow-streaked, black majesty before the rain came down and put an end to any desire for hiking. We went to the pool instead where the last of my dreadful secrets came to light.

Greg was a dolphin in water. I couldn't swim. Worse, I had fear bordering on paranoia of being out of my depth. I stalled by getting us into the hot pots but no one can soak forever and the Marine couldn't wait to sample the large, deep, almost deserted pool. I was making a dismal show of floating at the shallow end when he surfaced beside me, all radiance and demanding I follow him down to the far end.

'I'm fine here,' I said.

'But Mali, you've hardly moved. You're not even half way down the length of the pool.'

Oh, help!

'Gregory, I'm slightly nervous out of my depth.'

'But I'll be with you.'

'Actually I'm a bit nervous now in case the water is already too deep.'

'Of course it isn't,' said the Marine, and dived.

A fraction of a second later he grabbed both my ankles and pulled them down to touch the bottom. He was right. I was not out of my depth but the shock made me lose balance and go under, momentarily completely out of control and out of my mind. I fought for the surface, grabbing for anything I could lay my hands on until my fingers closed around his arm. I dug in my nails just in case he tried the same trick again.

He lifted me up and took me to the side rail where I clung like a damp and desperate mouse. The water dripping from my hair into my eyes mingled with my tears. My teeth were chattering so hard I couldn't speak. I was weeping and shivering, feeling utterly lost and completely stupid.

'Mali! Mali, baby!'

That look of amazement. He was stroking my hair back from my face, so concerned. It wasn't his fault. The Marine understood fear, none better. It was just that he'd never had reason to associate it with me, until now.

'I had no idea you were so frightened. I only meant to show you where the bottom was. Why didn't you tell me?'

‘B-because I-I didn’t want to-to be such an idiot and if I-I was, I-I only wanted me to know. And that’s b-bad enough!’

‘But you can float. Can you move in the water? Do you know the strokes?’

‘No, not properly and when I do try to do them I don’t seem to go anywhere unless I do backstroke. I can just about manage that.’

‘Would it help if I took you to the deep end? If you held on to me?’

No, it most definitely would not!

‘I don’t know,’ I said lamely.

He asked: ‘Do you trust me, Mali?’

I sobbed: ‘I have to, don’t I? It’s in the Vinaya.’

Mercifully he chose not to play drill instructor.

‘Come on, Mali-Mali,’ he said gently. ‘Let me help you. Hold onto the rail and let me see how you kick.”

I managed several half-hearted attempts and then several stronger ones as shame and temper got the upper hand. After a kiss and some minor adjustments to my feet and knees he left me to practice at the side of the pool. There was no mention of the deep end again.

The weather improved as we headed east for the campground under the vast Vatnajökull ice cap at Skaftafell. Both of us born at the transcendental times when night and day are one, Greg at sunset and me precisely at the point of sunrise, neither of us thrived without the sun. As it rose over the gleaming splendor of the glacier, we were laughing and playing, breathing in great gulps of air that went to our heads like champagne. The shadows of scandal and divorce were a thousand miles of cold, rolling ocean away and impotent before this dizzily exhilarating joy at being alive and free and together.

We started out early next morning to hike the longest trail wearing shorts and tee shirts, stopping to inscribe huge hearts in the snow patches in the shadows among the stunted trees, listening in wonder at the distant booming echoing from somewhere far above us as the ice giants hurled another chunk of the glacier down to the sea. They ordered us into our rain gear for the afternoon, breathing clouds of chilled white mist before the sun gleamed again into a long golden evening.

The flashlight remained redundant in the top of Greg’s pack. It had been hard for him to envisage the freedom of travelling in a land where night means that the sun crawls along the northern horizon for two hours and never completely sets. We slept when we were tired, curled around each other smothered in sweaters, while the cold creeping down from the glacier

stalked the campground and the spirit of fire, so close beneath us, sang in our dreams. Even as my sisters were on my side, mighty Grímsvötn, Bárðarbunga, Öræfajökull, working to pry out the secrets of his jealousy that I might know them and decide.

It was raining in Höfn when the bus left us to scramble for a place in a campsite that was appreciably smaller than the one we had just left. With barely room to walk between the tents, we left our wet gear to drip under the fly sheet and settled down to sleep wearing too many clothes and acutely aware of every breath in every tent around us. Feeling uncomfortable and exposed I was mostly interested in sleep and silence but Greg needed to talk. I composed myself to listen, completely unprepared for what was to come.

He said: 'I want to tell you that any doubts I had about you, about your relating to me, are completely gone.'

'Thank you, I'm very glad to hear it.'

'Yes, and I can forgive you.'

'Forgive me? For what?'

'For your past, for the relationships you had before.'

In tone and context he was once more the Ajahn sat before the Buddha-rupa, granting absolution to the novice who had just been seen stealing cheese. Something nudged at the edge of my memory, a previously unfathomable comment in that almost unbearable diary of pain supposedly written as the series of 'love-letters' I had picked up regularly from the safe house. I knew he'd been hanging onto something but I was too tired to go through it right then.

I answered: 'I don't understand what you are talking about and whatever it is, I don't want to talk about it either here or now. If there is anything more to be said we'll say it in the morning.'

He was quite happy having found his own peace with whatever had been on his mind but it had the opposite effect on me. I fell asleep with it uppermost in my mind and woke with it screaming loudly in the middle of my head. The bus came early, leaving no time to talk until we were standing at the bus stop, huddled beside a wall out of the wind.

I asked: 'Did I understand you correctly last night? You have forgiven me for my previous relationships?'

'Yes. It's a great relief to me that I have been able to do so.'

I stared at him in disbelief. 'You have forgiven me for my relatively non-sensational past? Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

I took a deep breath. 'So how does that compare with yours, so gloriously embellished with prostitutes and one-night stands? I can't even begin to match it! I didn't do drugs and I never went with even a tenth as many men as you did women! You have forgiven me because I wasn't a forty-one-year-old virgin when I came to your bed? Tell me, what use would I have been to you then, Gregory Klein? It was only my compassion and experience that helped you in those first days and you know it!'

He nodded. 'I agree, but my jealousy can't bear to think of you having been with anyone but me.'

Magma rising. Above us, under the glacier, my sisters inclined their great heads.

'I don't believe what I'm hearing! What on earth gives you the edge on purity?'

Ānando at his most condescending: 'I think my twenty years of practice may have something to do with it.'

Outrage!

'Twenty years of suppression! How can you be so arrogant? In all that time you never transcended your sexual energy and well you know it!'

In that moment I had to leave him. I had to get away from him. I wanted him out of my air space and the Vinaya could go to the winds. For once I didn't care if I was rude to him.

'I'm going to the post office with the letters. I'll be back in ten minutes.'

'But the bus will be leaving soon.'

'Not for another quarter of an hour! Make them wait for me!'

I could feel him watching me as I walked up the road. Anger and hurt fought an overwhelming misery at being apart from him. It was ridiculous! He was just a few yards down the road and I was already missing him. I could hardly bear to admit it to myself.

When I came back, there he was standing by the bus, the packs at his feet ready for loading, those little lines of anxiety between his brows that he had unconsciously designed to melt me. Greg had eyebrows, Ānando did not and the difference was beginning to show. I walked straight past him and into the bus, trying to hang on to something of justifiable fury and failing entirely.

'I can only say I must really love you,' I said crossly as he sat down beside me.

'I'm so glad you do. Don't ever forget or send me away. Do you forgive me?'

'How can I not?' I said, as two arms encircled me and a cheek came to rest on my shoulder. 'Sometimes, Gregory, you amaze me! You are a beast! You have such a unique capacity to be completely unreasonable!'

‘But you have to admit I’m cute and that you love me. Don’t you?’

Exasperation!

‘For my sins I’m realizing I totally adore you and sometimes I really don’t know why.’

‘Don’t ever stop.’

‘I’ll love you forever although I can’t think what good it will do me.’

‘It’ll get you an endless supply of sugar-free gum.’

‘I don’t chew gum, thank you.’

The value and the importance of what this monk, this Marine had made such a hopelessly clumsy, unskillful mess of telling me was that he had reached the desired state of quiet knowing about our relationship. He had absolutely no more doubts about me, or the value of my intention towards him. He could still question his own worthiness but his mind was completely free from doubt about us now. In less than a month he had made love with me, laughed with me, cried with me, played with me and he was completely certain of me. It was no longer a question of belief. He knew I was his and it was important for him to be able to tell me so, to confirm it with me.

Which meant he must be mine. I had never been into ownership in relating, not even with the children. Did I own Ānando?

No! And I don’t want to.

But Gregory, his name accented with a lilt, the one with the soft, dark eyebrows designed to melt me, who made love with me on the moss among the fire giants in a lava field, he could be mine and maybe that kind of ownership wasn’t such a burden after all.

flóki’s wood

I took him to the West Fjords, to Flókalundur in remote Vatnsfjörður where the scattering of summerhouses was tastefully set among the little birch trees and did nothing to diminish the magic. To this day I am drawn there, I don’t know why. Perhaps some memory from another life and time compels me to take the ferry to Brjánslækur, shadows my footsteps hiking the dirt road where the narrow tongue of sea laps between towering, somber cliffs, where old, craggy-faced trolls go about their business and humankind is nothing more than a swarm of pesky little bugs to be swatted aside as they pass.

We camped overnight in Stykkishólmur waiting for the ferry and the gods were with us. For that one glorious night they banished the wind, parted the clouds, ordered the sea mirror-calm and golden and set the midnight sun glowing in all its glory over the profile of my favorite mountain chiseled square against the distant skyline. Caught up in the magic we walked around the harbor and through the little fishing town, stopping to watch a soccer game in full swing near the campground. A tractor was rowing up the hay in a field at a distant farm.

Greg turned to me, his face alight with wonder. 'Mali, it's amazing! It's eleven-thirty! It's supposed to be almost midnight and even the little kids are still outside. I've never seen anything like it before in my life!'

Lóa had introduced me to Flókalundur when she was manager of the small, single storey summer hotel established half way along the western shore in Vatnsfjörður. There was no designated campground, not then, and we pitched the tent on a little lawn across the road from the hotel where the river came tumbling down from the mountains and spilled into the sea. There was one other tent that didn't appear to be occupied.

Money was tight and the hotel restaurant not cheap. We had enough for one good meal. Before then we must climb my mountain and build a new cairn. The air was heady with the perfume of wild thyme and the scent of the birch trees that crawled over the rocks and crevices, stunted by long winters under the crushing weight of layer upon layer of frozen snow. I led him up the sheep track. Ravens tracked us, black, winged shadows calling 'caak, caak'. Golden Plover, the Lóa, piped her high, shrill note, running over the moss to distract us from her nest as we reached the plateau at the top.

I dismantled the old cairn, tumbling the heavier stones down into the gorge and throwing the others as far as I could into the sun and the wind while Greg sat comfortably meditating on a cushion of grey-green-moss proving that it was possible to get an allover tan in Iceland. He opened his eyes to see me pick up the camera.

'Oh no, you don't,' he said.

I pleaded, pouting kisses, at my most beguiling. 'Oh, please? This is one of my favorite places in the world and you look wonderful and terribly discreet. It helps to be able to sit in the full lotus position at times like this. Be brave, Gregory.'

'But no one, absolutely no one is allowed to see this picture. Do you understand? Can I have it in writing?'

'Later,' I said, pressing the shutter before he had time to change his mind.

He built the new cairn, higher and more slender like a *stupa* in Thailand. We consecrated it with kisses and chanting, and left it to the mercy of the wind and the weather. Years later Lóa climbed the mountain and told me it was still there.

It was too early to eat when we came down. Greg took off his boots and started limbering up on the lawn in front of the tent.

'This is a perfect place for Tai Chi,' he said. 'Come on, I'll start teaching you the form.'

I changed into leggings and came dancing barefoot out of the tent to join him on the grass. We began the warm-up exercises but after the first three movements I was boogying a revved up imitation and humming in time to the beat.

Ānando called me to attention. 'Come on! Are you intending to do Tai Chi, or what?'

Ānando stood over me as I dropped to my knees before him, putting my forehead to the ground three times in gently mocking remorse. It became one of his favorite stories, repeated more times than I can remember because, unknown to me, a young hiker had just appeared beside the river, his jaw dropping when he saw me bow and everything about his body language saying, 'Where did you get a woman like that? I want one!'

For some reason we started talking marriage, not such a dismal subject even for me when discussed over a prolonged soak in a hot pool beside the sea at the top of the world. We lay comfortably submerged up to our chins, watching the blue light outlining our fingers and feet where the sun lit the water, splashing each other, making bubbles with the shampoo. He brought up the subject, along with his particular brand of self-doubt.

'But do I deserve you? Am I worthy of you? Do I deserve such happiness?'

The monastic doubting mind, how it voiced a crippling list of uncertainties whenever the possibility of anything approaching fulfillment might be lined up for him. Would he ever be free of it?

I remembered that it was Leap Year. Putting my palms together in anjali, I floated towards him, coming to a stop sitting on a rock. If this didn't convince him, nothing would.

'Beloved you,' I began, as tenderly as I knew how. 'Gregory Klein, I would be honored if you would be my husband, if you would take me as your wife. To love you and to cherish you, to respect you and to adore you, in sickness and in health, be we disgustingly rich or horribly poor, to walk with you in all the ways of the world, my dear love, until the blue winds of spirit release us into light. Gregory, would you do me the honor of marrying me some day?'

The tears of happiness glistening on his cheeks said all he needed to say. He accepted formally nevertheless.

'Yes, Mali, I will gladly marry you. I will be honored to have you as my wife. My wife,' he repeated, his proprietary nature instantly satisfied.

Two long-standing, failed relationships with barely a breath in between had left me nursing a profound aversion to the word 'wife' but it didn't sound so bad coming from him. There was a good chance I might even get to like being Mrs. Mali Klein but not yet. Until then I would be Mali with no other name except by law in Passport Control and in the grimness of the divorce court.

We left Flókalundur, stood hand in hand on the deck of the ferryboat, watching the fjord and the mountains recede into the record of our time together. My sisters were calling and it was I who must be tested.

snow mountain

Legendary, magical Snæfellsjökull, glowing under her glacier at the western tip of the Snæfellsness peninsula, had turned me away twice before. She had sent me off soaked to the skin in unrelenting rain the first time and close to lost in driving snow the second. Still I heard her calling. This time we would be welcomed on condition we chant our homage at her summit where the plugs project like twin horns four thousand, seven hundred feet into the sky on a glacier twice the size than it is now. They say her ice will be melted away and all her secrets exposed by 2030. When glaciers melt, magma rises. We greedy little bugs will rue the day. Shame on us all.

Neither Greg nor I had any formal rock climbing training. That we had no ice-climbing equipment ever occurred to us, nor did we consider hiring a guide. We had good boots and we were following one of my 'feelings', a sense of urgency that Greg was happy to go along with. If it led us to the top of the 'snow mountain under the glacier' so be it. We camped in Ólafsvík on the north side of the peninsula, waiting for the prophesied cloudless day.

The sky cleared on the third morning. As previously arranged, one of Lóa's cousins collected us early from the campground and drove us to the foot of the mountain. He warned us to keep more or less to a straight line up the eastern face and not to veer too far to the south where deep and potentially dangerous crevasses had opened up in the ice.

Of course the Marine had to be carrying a pack in his eternal quest to keep up his physical fitness. This time he had the rain gear, the cooking stove and tea bags as well as the usual bread, cheese and chocolate.

‘We might be glad of a hot drink when we get to the top,’ he said.

‘Gregory, you’re almost British! All we need now are folding chairs and a parasol and we are complete for tea at the summit.’

‘I’ll leave you to carry the dog,’ an obliquely rude reference to JBJ, the little stuffed toy St. Bernard he had bought me in Switzerland, who was peeking out of my shoulder bag as usual.

There was no one else around. We were the only people on the mountain that morning and it was easy going at first. Unlike her sisters closer to the plume of fire rising from the core, whose glaciers resembled coarse, frozen tarmac, Snæfellsjökull was covered in clean, hard-packed snow, dazzlingly white and impossible to look at without eye protection. Half way up we were hot and glad to stow our gloves and scarves in the pack. Looking ahead to the summit where the snow was fresh and likely to be deeper, the climb was about to get much more precipitous.

As the going got harder, from out of nowhere a cloud appeared and sat exactly on the summit, smothering us in an ominous cold silence. We struggled through the snow, aware that the mountain had us cut off with absolutely no connection with the outside world. We stopped and put on the rain gear. I was nervous. Had Jón said there were crevasses this high? One of the many things Greg and I had in common was the concept of freezing to death on a glacier as an attractive idea but I didn’t feel ready for it just then. With a final push we came to the first of the great horns, the Marine climbing merrily to the top. Like he always said, he’d been born on snow. Not I, following more warily behind.

‘Come on, Mali!’ he shouted. ‘We made it!’

I peered over his shoulder. We were standing on a knife-edge of ice that fell away steeply into nothingness under the mist. A crawling terror crept up my spine. I shook convulsively, dizzy and desperate for something to hold on to.

‘Greg, I need to get down from here! Just a little way, please?’

‘Why? We’re at the top. Come on, help me make the tea.’

He started pulling the gear out of the pack.

I insisted: ‘Please, not here! I can’t see anything and I can’t stand on this ridge.’

The Marine didn’t hear me.

‘What’s the matter with you?’ he asked, without a care in the world. ‘What’s the problem?’

‘I told you I had vertigo once, didn’t I? Well, it’s just come back. Please can we go down?’

He still didn't get it. 'We are perfectly safe here. Trust me.'

'Please, Gregory! I'm frightened!'

He tried reasoning with me. 'Mali, come here. Sit down beside me and help me get the tea.'

'I can't!' I was nearly screaming.

Once more Ānando took over. 'Mali! Make the tea!'

The Ajahn demanded and my monastery conditioning complied. I collapsed onto my knees, crawled across the snow to the pack. He lit the stove and got the water boiling while I sniveled over the bread and the chocolate disgusted with myself. I had always been cool and pretty much together and there I was, at last on top of my dream mountain, being absolutely pathetic. Okay, I'd never tried to keep up with a U.S. Marine before but that was no excuse in my eyes.

'I hate myself for being such a drip.'

'Mali, this is a drip-free zone! Do you hear me?'

I heard. After ten minutes and a mug of hot tea, I had to admit that it was possible to almost relax on an ice ridge that glistened like a great aquamarine jewel under my fingers when the snow was brushed aside. We lit some incense and chanted our thanks loudly to the mountain and all beings.

A few steps down took us back into brilliant sunshine. The Marine promptly took off running and sliding down the ice, leaving me a long way behind and still perilously close to the top.

I yelled: 'Hey! Wait for me!'

He started back. 'Come on then! Run!'

'I don't know how! I am not used to snow! I am mostly here in the summertime!'

Would he always make me feel so inadequate?

'Watch me!' He went skimming over the snow as though he was on skates. 'Come on, Mali! Try it!'

I took a few steps, feeling even more stupid and self-critical with him analyzing every move I made.

'You go on,' I shouted. 'I'll meet you at the bottom!'

I stood alone on the snow mountain at the critical point in this time of trial. I must face my fear and get beyond this new and disturbing reliance on Ānando to call me out of my crises. I must be strong, for myself and for him. The heady, intoxicating love that was expanding our universe with

every nanosecond passing between us mustn't make me careless. I must not abandon responsibility. That was not what I was about. It was not what we were about.

Focus. Breathe. Be with it, flow with it. Practice.

Mindfully, I took the first step, sliding my right foot forward with the weight towards the inside of my boot. I took the second step. I was still upright, still in control. I took the third step and another, right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot until I could trust the impetus of movement and run. A couple of minutes more and I was right behind him, very pleased with myself when he turned round and jumped in astonishment to see me so close.

'So you can do it!' he exclaimed.

'I just needed some time to work it out for myself,' I said nonchalantly. 'It's how I learn. I'm doing the same with the swimming. If you've noticed, every day I go in just a little deeper and then make myself turn onto my back and float as soon as I feel the fear coming back.'

He grinned, taking my hand. 'Yes, I have noticed and I am very proud of you, beloved. Now come on, run with me to the bottom.'

Once more my sisters were satisfied. We came down from mighty, magical Snæfellsjökull, laughing and shouting, skidding off the ice onto the lava clasped in a breathless kiss.

cloud man

We turned our faces from the wild places and took the bus back to Reykjavík, packing away the hiking gear and reconnecting with our town outfits. Our Vinaya was evolving practically as well as spiritually as it ordered our lives. Greg looked after the money, the food, correspondence, travel arrangements; my 'witch's nose' as he called it determined where and when we travelled and where we stayed.

We made a deal. As we were going to be looking at each other twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week until the end of time and beyond, we vowed each to be responsible of the other's appearance. I was brilliant at buying clothes for him but hated buying them for myself, giving him free rein to act out his fantasies as to how his future wife should look and smell, effectively validating a visit to the perfume counter in every airport. In return the ex-horsewoman would get out the grooming kit on a regular basis to clip, pluck and manicure him to perfection.

'What have I done to deserve this?' he said, absorbed in pure sensual pleasure.

'Just had the good sense to fall in love with me,' I answered. 'If humanity were to be categorized in the same way as we do horses then most men would be gelded, but not you. You would definitely have gone to stud on the strength of your legs alone. I have never seen such wonderful ankles.'

He protested: 'Mali, please! Some of the things you say amaze me!'

'Gregory, has anyone in your family had cancer?'

'No, not as far as I know. Why?'

'I don't know. I've just been noticing the glands slightly swollen under your chin and some of the little marks on your skin.'

'Oh, I've always had those. They are nothing to worry about.'

'But maybe we should take more care of them when we go to Greece?'

'I don't think it's necessary. I've never had any trouble with the sun. As you can see, I tan very easily.'

'Yes, it's disgusting. You are the only person I know who can tan in the rain in Iceland.'

I allowed him to persuade me. He was ecstatically happy, apparently superbly healthy and we had all the possibilities of a beautiful future together. Why then did something in me expect to find him unconscious on the floor? He said he had had no reoccurrence of the epileptic symptoms, so why was I afraid? And what did I fear?

A Native American elder from California had spent some time in Reykjavík over the previous winter, teaching and running a sweat lodge. That he was a gifted healer I had no doubt after a private session followed by a full moon sweat when I visited in January. As soon as Lóa told us that Cloud Man was back, there was no question, we had to do a sweat with him.

The fear returned, confirmed as I made the introductions. I saw the Indian start and for one swift second his black eyes favor Greg with an astute, exacting look, at once compassionate and deeply concerned.

I thought: *He knows there's something wrong with him.*

As the chanting began I felt a hand groping for mine to be held tightly through each of the four rounds. The fourth and last was an ordeal of four long sessions sat around the fire pit filled with a dozen hot volcanic rocks belching steam. I thought I would have no lungs left but I was determined not to be defeated. Willfulness, stubbornness, nothing noble kept me at it and when the doorway was thrown open at the end, only Cloud Man and Greg and I were still sitting upright.

'You two sure must be fit,' observed our leader.

An arm came round me as we were walking back to the cars.

He said: 'I was so proud of you in there. Did you mind me walking away and ignoring you in the beginning when we were building the fire?'

I hadn't taken it personally. 'Why did you do it?'

'Can you believe I was jealous of the Indian?'

My turn to be amazed: 'Whatever for?'

'Because he had met you before without me. I know it's ridiculous but I can't help it. I'm sorry.'

'Do you still feel jealous now?'

'No. It's all gone. I was sitting in there listening to you chanting and thinking I'm so glad she's with me.'

I smiled. 'And I was sitting in there, feeling you calm and strong beside me, not moving once and thinking exactly the same thing, I'm so glad he's with me.'

We were tired and tender with each other, enjoying having the house to ourselves while Lóa and Birgir were working, spending most of an afternoon spread out in the TV room watching a movie about the troubles in Northern Ireland. My choice, it started violently and carried on in the same vein. It wasn't long before Greg was trembling uncontrollably with perspiration pouring down his face and dripping from his hands.

'Shall we turn it off?' I asked.

'No, no, it's fine, it's all right,' he insisted, watching the screen intently. 'This often happens. It's all right.'

I let the movie run on, holding him in my arms, cradling his head. It seemed to push all his 'red alert' buttons; the violence of war, Catholicism, the celibate priest, the terrorist who had blown up a busload of children but whose heart was filled with music. As the credits went up, I turned off the TV and led him back into our room. We curled up on the couch together, holding each other tightly. I smoothed his damp hair and kissed the moisture from his forehead.

'I should take a shower,' he said. 'Do I stink?'

'What of?'

'Fear. It usually makes the perspiration very acrid.'

I snuffled around his neck. 'No, you don't stink, really you don't.'

'Oh, I need you, Mali,' he cried. 'Do you know how much I need you? Need this, need you holding me, helping me, loving me? I need you always beside me, to grow old with me. I want us to be married as soon as the divorce is through and then we'll go visit my family and I can introduce them to my wife, my beloved wife.'

It was the first time either of us had mentioned marriage since the hot pool in the West Fjords.

I asked: 'Is that it then?'

'What do you mean?'

'Have you just proposed to me?'

He looked up from my middle where he had buried his head and smiled.

'I suppose I have. Wait a minute!'

In a single, fluid movement he was off the couch and down on his knees on the floor in front of me, bowing slowly three times.

'Mali-beloved-Mali (written with hyphens because he blurred all three words into one name), will you marry me? Please?'

Putting my hands together in anjali, I inclined my head and accepted with equal grace. 'Indeed, kind sir, beloved husband-to-be, I shall be delighted to marry you.'

He bowed three times more and held out both hands to me. Before I went into his arms to seal this most precious of promises with the longest and sweetest of kisses, I slipped the ring from his right hand onto the third finger of his left.

'It's time, don't you think?'

'Yes, it's time,' he agreed.

Two days later I followed him on to the plane. But Ānando wasn't done with me yet.

agios ioannis

The Greek Islands bake in August, their mountains and fields a bleached yellow mass of shriveled stalks and dry, spiky vegetation set in a deep, lapis-blue sea. We took the ferry to Limnos, the butterfly-shaped island in the North Aegean, docking at the quay in Mirina a few minutes before midnight just before the floodlights around the castle went out. In the warm, ink-black Mediterranean night it was impossible to see what kind of an island it was. Greg wanted to go further south but I wanted to stay.

'I've got one of my good feelings about this place, Gregory.'

It meant an uncomfortable, mostly sleepless night crammed into a corner on the beach followed by a grueling wait under a pitiless sun following my nose onto the one daily bus to Kaspakas and thence a short ride hitched on the back of a motorcycle to the beach at Agios Ioannis (*ai-yos yann-is*). We found ourselves in a large, sheltered and relatively shallow bay where the sand dipped gently out to the depths.

Limnos had yet to be swamped by the rest of Europe, although the signs were beginning to appear in the shape of the occasional concrete skeleton of a prospective hotel or guesthouse. Otherwise the island was much as most of the others had been thirty or forty years before. There were very few tourists and they were ninety-five percent Greek. A surprising number of them spoke English with a broad Australian accent having emigrated when work became scarce after the Second World War. They were back for the summer vacation, staying in the little cottages built on the plots of land their families had farmed for generations.

The beach was mostly deserted apart from the taverna at one end of the stretch of sand and a large, hand-painted 'NO CAMPING' sign in English stuck up out of the dunes in front of the cottages at the other. While we were deciding what to do, one of the residents introduced himself and took an immediate liking to us. Not only could we camp rent-free on the beach for as long as we wanted but we could draw water for washing from the well in his brother's garden and eat as many tomatoes and peppers his family could persuade us to accept.

Following a critical review of our financial situation, we decided to stay for a month. Water and food were the only outlay and the latter was simple enough; we lived on crusty Greek rye bread and salads made up of peanuts and tomatoes, nectarines, apples, carrots and red peppers smothered in lashings of olive oil and washed down with mineral water

purchased every few days in big plastic bottles from the taverna.

Only the Meltemi wind gave me cause for insecurity in our surroundings. It came with alarming regularity just after the quarter moon days, blowing hard for a full forty-eight hours, whipping around the tent and beating relentlessly at the flysheet. Passing ships anchored themselves in the bay while we got down to some serious building work on our living quarters, shoveling quantities of sand under the ground sheet to improve our sleeping arrangements and fortifying the foundations with rocks until it looked as though we were camping on a primitive hill fort.

On the third morning, when breakfast was finished and our first swim of the day was done, I set up the shrine on the beach.

He had begged me: 'Mali, don't let me throw the baby out with the bath water. It's in me to reject the practice as a natural reaction, in anger, but I don't want to do that. Help me keep all that was good of Ānando alive.'

'You did promise we could meditate together every day once you had played enough,' I reminded him.

'Will I ever have played enough, I wonder?' he said, eyeing my preparations with a distinct lack of enthusiasm.

'I sat meditation every morning long before I went to the monastery and I need it. It settles me for the day. I always feel I have forgotten something if I don't do it.'

He gave in. 'All right then. Do we have to chant?'

'Just something short and simple because I like it and you can take the bell for the end.'

We sat facing one another, smothered in sun cream, ready for the hour of sustained passivity in that uncompromising heat. When the bell chimed at the end of the session I was left with a renewed sense of balance and ease that would carry me through whatever the day had to offer.

'You're right, I needed that too,' he said as we completed our three bows to the shrine. 'Thank you, beautiful woman, for reminding me.'

He bowed again, this time to me. I replied in turn, making the three bows that from then on became an established conclusion to our daily ritual, an outward symbol of our mutual respect and devotion. In all of our time together, no matter what manifested, there would never be a day when one did not feel able to bow to the other.

I loved it that other women looked at him with lust in their eyes when we walked around the town. It was a completely different story when he caught men looking at me in the same way.

'I can feel murderous just thinking about it!'

His jealousy was never rational. There were times when he could hardly bear himself for behaving as he did, when a single thoughtless comment would provoke an afternoon of discussion and tears. I soon learned that I was allowed to talk about the difficulties and disappointments in my life and some of the funny things that happened with the children, but seemingly absurd things like the crushes I had had on good-looking boys when I was in my early teens were never allowed to be mentioned, along with the relatively few happier aspects of my past experience of human love.

He, however, felt free to talk in great detail about as many of his past girlfriends and liaisons, however brief, that he could possibly remember. It was terribly one-sided but I had grown up alongside my father's paranoid jealousy and had made a conscious decision as an eleven-year-old never to let this most destructive of emotions, rooted in self-hatred, dominate either my life or that of any others because of me.

'Mali, I'm really worried at how possessive I am of you,' he said. 'I shouldn't be this way. I shouldn't be like this.'

'Why are you letting it worry you?'

'Because it's so painful! It hurts me and it hurts you. I can't bear to hurt you but it seems I can't let it go.'

I told him: 'The answer is simple. Possess me then.'

Above all I was profoundly aware of the sweetness and the intensity of joy within this man to whom I would dedicate my life. It was important to him that he was the only person in the world who could take care of me. There was always a hand held out ready for mine, always toothpaste on my brush, the first spoonful of food offered at the start of every meal. No matter how hot the day he was careful to be modest and correct, always wearing a tee shirt in what we termed public places, which in our minds excluded our stretch of beach.

'Don't waste a single moment of this,' the voice told me. 'Every second is precious and perfect just as it is.'

I would feel my senses flaring into life. The smell of the sea and the heat rising on the sand, the sound of the waves sucking over the stones at the water's edge, the taste of the nectarine juices on my tongue and trickling down my chin, and the softness of the warm lips that put them there.

He confessed himself amazed at how in tune we were. 'I can be thinking about something and within minutes you are either talking about it or doing it.'

‘Love may have something to do with it,’ I observed.

‘Yes, I know, but I also know that it’s more than that. It is a very humbling and at times powerfully illuminating experience to love and live with a woman who is so attuned to me that there is no place to hide, even if I wanted to. It certainly keeps me very honest.’

It could do no less for me. Whatever the day held for us, I was always aware of a continuous, breathless excitement in anticipation of the coming night. After the evening meal was cleared away we sat on the sand, taking turns reading aloud Kazantzakis’ ‘Last Temptation’ until the sun was far down in the west and the bats were swooping around our heads. Then, arms around each other, we laid the book aside and watched as the bloody shadows of the heat of the day faded into the shifting, myriad shimmering of the sea and the sky slowly blossomed with stars.

Desire flared into consciousness. We stood at the edge of the water seeing who could spit the toothpaste out the furthest between kisses, touching each other softly in passing as we prepared for the night. There was a wild, haunting music to this passion, this melding. We could do no less than respond.

Such was the magic of the nights on Agios Ioannis. The days were something else.

desert

Some people go to the desert with a shaman for their spiritual training. I went to an island in the Aegean with Ajahn Ānando. He wasn’t perfect and never claimed to be. Yet it was all that he lived for and seeing me as an extension of himself, I had to be flawless. It was as though in achieving my perfection he could more easily attain his own. It could be tough.

Chithurst was the training monastery for the junior monks and Ānando their sometime terrifying taskmaster as he took it upon himself to combine the least verbally profane elements of the drill instructor with the wisdom of the Divine. In that month he put me through the most intense novitiate training he could program, designed more for a monk than a nun.

On one hand he was reasonable, courageous and compassionate. Softly spoken and invariably polite, he never complained and with his example of quiet dignity before me I met my spiritual and emotional crises head on. Unintentionally he was often the catalyst, triggering anxiety reactions I didn’t know I had when a single word or a gesture could explode something

more from my subconscious. It was mostly connected with the backwash of old fear as well as the inescapable anger and resentment related to the divorce.

On the other hand he was very critical of how I sat, walked and behaved in general, not unkindly but I seemed to be in need of a meticulous re-schooling in preparation for becoming his wife. Ninety percent of the people I had previously known were no longer to be a part of my life and he preferred that they were not discussed. My wardrobe had already been vetted and the belongings he was remotely uncomfortable with discarded. I must wear no jewelry other than the ring he had given me. I was allowed to keep the rough-cut emerald that I wore on a chain around my neck only because I had purchased a similar, larger stone for him to be set as he wished when we could afford it.

My looks were judged ninety-nine percent perfect. The problem was a small sebaceous cyst that was barely noticeable on my face and didn't show up in pictures. In vain I pointed out that I had asked to have it removed and had been told that the resulting scar would be worse than the blemish. Not good enough for Ānando. It was listed as a necessary repair that must be carried out before I met his family, along with the replacement of a worryingly cracked front crown, which I put down purely to the enthusiasm of his lovemaking.

My accent was perfect; there were no complaints about that, although my predilection for colorful language however mild had to be eliminated.

'You will not say 'hell' in front of my mother. You will not say 'damn' in front of my mother,' he intoned, his mouth set a reproving line as only Ānando could fashion.

To my lasting amusement both words had recurred during his *desanas* (public talks) and I had them on tape to prove it. But while that kind of rhetoric was beyond reproach for the abbot in the *sala*, it was not to cross the Atlantic on the lips of his wife. I was beginning to wonder what on earth these people, his family, could be like.

Despite himself, he found some of my more ironical observations on life and people intensely funny, especially when it concerned a little monster called Vassily by his loudly, besotted father. Rechristened 'Vaseline' with a growl by me, the ghastly child roared up and down in front of our territory for an hour every day, fortunately not while we were meditating. The Ajahn never failed to be amused by my capacity for outrageous remarks concerning Vaseline's general wellbeing but the laughter would often be followed by a lecture on judgmentalism and self-criticism. He was prepared to enjoy my humor in

private but it definitely had to be curbed in public, along with any comments he considered to be too revealing about our relationship, which covered most of them.

One morning after meditation, when a single innocent remark on my part had provoked a complicated lecture on conduct, I answered him in the most infuriating way I knew.

'Greg, I don't know what the fuck you're talking about!'

One little four-letter word that he had routinely converted into every possible part of speech prior to entering the monastery, given twenty years contrition had come to represent everything he despised about Greg Klein and the Marine. And I knew it. With that elegant and entirely mindful gesture at the Vinaya I turned and walked into the sea.

Ten minutes more I was cold and crying (with rage, not fear), standing with my back towards him, arms folded, the waves slapping against my chest, determined to stay there all day if necessary until he came to get me. Both of us equally obstinate, this was one battle I was going to win. I was prepared to die of exposure, get washed away or eaten by sharks rather than give in. It seemed like an age before I heard the familiar splashing behind me.

'Mali? Mali, come back with me.'

'What for?'

'Because you're cold and we have to talk.'

'What about? Colorful language? I absolutely refuse to apologize and you can be as angry as you like! I don't care at all!'

'I'm not angry now.'

'Lucky me!'

'Come with me, Mali.'

I was picked up, carried out of the sea and set down beside the tent. He began gently rubbing me down with a towel.

'You know why we have the Vinaya but I think I appreciate your use of that word and what motivated it. Am I too hard on you? You have to tell me.'

Ānando got the long overdue tirade, in spades. There was no one around, I could shout as long and loud as I wanted to. So of course I did.

'Yes, sometimes you are! I have completely abandoned my previous life. I didn't like it anyway but now I don't know when I will next see my children and all my escape routes are gone. I can't just pick up the phone and talk to my friends. I can't bury myself in my books or a computer when I feel badly.

I can't go wandering off alone to get myself together when I need to. Damn it, I can't even fill my face with chocolate! There is nowhere and no one to turn to, only you!'

He was wise enough not to interrupt.

I continued: 'Okay, that's how it should be but I'm not a junior monk! I was respected in my own right before I scandalized everyone I ever knew by running off with you! I was not sitting under a stone, leading a life of shame over the past twenty years while you sat on your pinnacle contemplating your navel. You say you fell in love with me for myself? So why do I have to be totally taken to pieces and remade? What is it that you want? Blood?'

I grabbed up the vegetable knife and thrust it out to him.

'Then have it! Take the knife to me! It's all I have left. You're not perfect so don't wish your self-hatred on me, Ajahn! Who insisted on re-establishing the meditation practice? Me! Who is the guardian of your sexual self-respect? Me! I would never dream of dissecting you as you do me!'

He stood completely still, patiently watching me ranting, his eyes never leaving my face. At the next pause for breath he gently liberated the knife from my fingers and put it back beside the tent.

'Mali, I don't dissect you.'

'Damn it, you do! I will have some personality left! I have to have something left of my own. I am a woman! I don't want a home as I used to have but I still need the basics, like-like a cup and a plate and a sharp knife to prepare the vegetables and one or two rags on my back!'

'Don't I make you feel like a woman?'

'At night I am woman divine but during the day I become a half-inch anagarika (novice) trailing in the wake of the Ajahn (teacher) who is determined never to be pleased.'

'Oh, Mali, that's not true. You do exaggerate.'

'Well, that's how it seems to me!'

'But I love you. I'm trying to give you a different kind of freedom. Can't you see that?'

'Yes, but don't *you* see that you are just carrying on life where you left off, except that now you have your woman in your bed and no one is shocked if you choose to live practically naked on a beach in Greece. Were you perfect in two months?'

'Indeed not.'

'Then why must I be?'

‘I want you to be flawless.’

I glared: ‘Just as you yourself are flawless?’

‘Let’s go to bed.’

‘We can’t! You know it’s too hot in that stupid tent.’

He was getting that look around the eyebrows again. I didn’t want to melt! Not yet anyway.

‘Let’s swim then,’ he said.

I held out. ‘So that you can criticize my kicks?’

‘So that I can hold you and kiss you and make love to you in the sea.’

The eruption was done, subsiding, over. I sighed, ‘Gregory, why are you so mean to me?’

‘I don’t intend to be.’

‘Why do you do these things to me?’

‘Because I’m not enlightened.’

‘And if you were, you wouldn’t need me?’

‘Presumably.’

‘What a dreadful predicament.’

‘But I love you. I love you, my Mali-Mali.’

‘But you abuse me!’

‘Only because I love you.’

‘So I’m doomed to a lifetime of exquisite abuse. Is that it?’

‘I’ll make sure it’s always exquisite abuse, I promise you.’

Prudently, mindfully, the Ajahn downscaled my training schedule but he couldn’t stop the inevitable kickback from the divorce taking up my attention as the days went on and still no news from the lawyer. Even when a marriage is obviously a mistake and you’re best out of it, there are always the recriminations to lay aside, the feelings of failure and lack of self-respect. It never comes easy.

I reflected aloud: ‘Poor little second-hand rose. No, third hand now! All used up and put out at the back of the junk shop waiting for the Ajahn to dust her down and set her in the sun.’

‘Mali, you will never say that about yourself again. You are the most original and exciting woman I have ever met, and the most courageous.’

The importance, the enormity of the compliment was completely lost on me at that moment.

'So how come you told your mother I was a widow?'

'You know why. I don't trust her Catholic conditioning, that's all. It's my problem, not yours and I'm not going into it again.'

'I still think you're ashamed of me.'

I was determined to think the worst of whatever he said and he knew it.

'Time for a swim,' he said, in that no-nonsense tone designed to pull the plug on this conversation once and for all. 'Come, woman!'

'You're changing the subject, again!'

'You bet I am. I never have been ashamed of you, not in the least. I wouldn't be here with you now if I was. Right now you're determined to think badly of yourself and I'm equally determined not to let you.'

'But...'

I was launched out to sea on the end of a strong and inflexible arm. 'Mali, I don't want to hear one more word of it!'

Afterwards I lay under the shelter, too lazy to towel myself dry, watching him plow through the waves freestyle, changing to butterfly, to 'pump up his pectorals' as he said. He stood up and shook the water out of his ears, laughing and waving when he saw me watching and throwing himself backwards with a great splash.

I thought: *He's a heart breaker. He can't help it. I suppose I am too in my own way. How will he break my heart?*

The voice was gently reproving: 'No, Mali, he breaks no one's heart. They choose to break their hearts over him, as you will break yours.'

He came walking slowly out of the sea, glistening all over, tanned, superbly muscled, glowing with love and good health, and almost up to that much-dreaded twenty pounds extra in weight that I had been campaigning for. I got up to fetch his towel and help him dry off. Such a smile of greeting and a warm sea-kiss. In a single look the gentle, all-encompassing tenderness of his heart freely given into my keeping.

I know he won't be unfaithful to me, and he won't leave me. So how will I break my heart?

The voice left me to work it out for myself, echoing the recollection of a long-ago conversation in my mind. I was sitting with my fellow counselors during one of our monthly Sunday meetings, talking about the value of personal experience when dealing with clients. I remembered laughing and saying that I had only to be a sorrowing widow to be complete, so much had been crammed into my forty years.

So that's it, is it? My heart will break when you die on me? But please not yet. Give me five years, ten years, twenty. Maybe it won't be so bad if we are older, when we have had time together. But even then, I know it will break my heart.

I filed the recollection and the fear that followed it. *Practice. It has nothing to do with the now*; this wonderful, perfect, immediate now, choosing to lose myself in the laughter as he threw himself down on my mat and I fought for re-possession.

'Sacred space, Gregory!'

'Your space is my space and mine is yours. It's a deal, Mali-Mali! Are you feeling better now?'

'Yes.'

'Good! I'll give you a healing session when you're showered.'

'Gregory?'

'Yes?'

'You're never allowed to die on me. Do you understand?'

'Don't worry, I won't. What brought that up?'

'I was contemplating immortality.'

Into the fourth week on Limnos, I picked up an unexpected bonus at the post office. The divorce had been approved and Decree Nisi declared. I walked around the town in a daze of relief. There was only the formality of six weeks and a day to observe before Decree Absolute and freedom.

That night we ate at the taverna to celebrate. I wore the only formal dress I possessed, a faded denim skirt and a turquoise top. With my new bronze-colored, Mary Magdalene sandals shining on my feet, I felt like a queen. We dined on mouth-wateringly deep-fried zucchini and pasta, fruit and creamy yoghurt for dessert, stealing from each other's plates, laughing, giggling, that infectious kind of loving that spreads a smile all around.

At last replete and deliciously contented, we paddled the shoreline back to the tent to conclude the celebration in the best and most appropriate way we knew.

wine dark sea

I had accused him of just carrying on life where he had left off after leaving the monastery, while I struggled to adjust to the demands the relationship was putting upon me. It wasn't true. I had gone to the desert with Ānando and he had gone with me. After twenty years living in the tight framework

of celibate monastic conditioning, the intensity of our attunement and the shock of it was every bit as challenging for him to assimilate. We were in unknown territory that obliterated any preconceived notion or fantasy around what we had thought relationships were about. Equally vulnerable in this relentless process of being torn open and remade, we were each the broken half of the other seeking wholeness.

As always love won out. The sea took us up and washed away the pain. Night enfolded us and reconfirmed the trust between us. We left Agios Ioannis enriched, sailing a gentle twenty-four hours on the ferry over Homer's wine-dark sea to the mainland, sunbathing on the top deck until the blue twilight stole over the water and we slept under the stars.

I didn't connect with the reflection in the mirror in the hotel room in Athens. I had never seen my skin so deeply, allover tanned, having won the battle over beachwear, or my hair so sun-bleached. Who was this woman with intensely blue eyes staring back at me? She looked as lost as I felt, transplanted into the shabby, dimly lit interior with the roar of traffic and people shouting ringing in her ears.

We spent two abortive days trying to arrange our wedding only to discover that the complications involved in marrying secretly in Greece far outweighed our romantic expectations. I had a beautiful green, hand-woven dress, purchased for the princely sum of fifteen dollars, and nowhere to wear it unless we got married in our official area of residence in England. Greg was okay with it. He was only interested in confirming our commitment in the eyes of the law and the world as soon as the divorce was finalized, which was any time after October 6th.

I wailed in despair. 'Oh no, not Petersfield Register Office!'

It was a grim venue in the Town Hall that had been my private nightmare throughout my years of consent, added to which my mother's house where we would be staying was only a few miles from Chithurst. If the monastery had a nose we would be getting married right under it, and how the hot wave of unskillful gossip and judgmentalism was rolling on. Spilling out into the far-flung lay community to wash up in the most unexpected corners of the planet, at its height I assumed the aspect of a twenty-five-year-old, voluptuous, blonde Icelander. How could the unfortunate abbot resist?

He said: 'That's how they see it. They have every right to their opinion but it's their stuff, not yours and not mine. We are all subject to our individual conditioning. As the Buddha said, '*I have no quarrel with the world, it is the world that quarrels with me.*' You only hurt yourself by holding on to it, Mali, by allowing it to have the power to affect you. Let it go.'

Easy to say, not so easy to do, but I was learning.

Undecided, we left the city and returned to our mother, the sea. Only to have our leisurely tour of the southern islands cut short when the cracked piece of my crown broke off and fell into my hand. Another twenty-four hours watching the islands passing by got the pieces glued together by an English-speaking dentist in Rhodes Town and saw us settled in an ultra-modern studio apartment on the southeast coast of the island. It was near enough to Lindos for shopping and buses and far enough from the town to be outside the tourist zone.

The beaches were cramped sand strips covered in parasols but an afternoon scouting high among the rocks discovered a secluded patch of virgin sand that was perfect for sunbathing 'au naturel'. It was also quiet enough for morning meditation, when the sun came rising out of a blue-silver sea into a cloudless sky as we set up the shrine. The downside was that the only way to swim involved jumping off a rock into thirty feet of water that quickly fell away to depths of fifty feet and beyond. The Marine was in his element but it took all my courage and faith in my newly acquired skills to follow him.

Gillian obligingly negotiated our wedding plans, patiently enduring a nightmare of calls connected through the antiquated and overloaded Rhodian telephone system before a marriage by special license was arranged for 09.30 hours, Thursday, October 29th in Petersfield Register Office, thankfully no longer in the Town Hall. She booked us a studio session with a local photographer for the wedding pictures and volunteered her house and her skills as a cake maker for the party afterwards.

The enthusiasm of the groom-to-be knew no bounds as he slipped an emerald engagement ring on my finger, to match my dress, and selected some beautiful bronze and abalone shell earrings to complement my sandals.

He said: 'I feel a love and sense of commitment towards you that I have never felt towards anyone before. Our physical and spiritual attunement seem to make marriage a worthwhile reality, a perfect opportunity to find out what we are here for together.'

We decided to write our own wedding vows. As usual I played secretary, sitting at the table, pen poised.

'How shall we begin?'

'Your proposal to me in the hot pot comes most immediately to mind,' he said. 'Something along those lines.'

I began to write, repeating the words as they appeared on the page:

I bow to you Gregory/Mali as my lawful, wedded husband/wife,
In true devotion of spirit;
To love you and cherish you,
To honor and...

'I quite like the idea of you obeying me,' he said.

I raised an eyebrow. 'Don't I already?'

'Yes, but I'd like it in writing.'

'So that I have to declare it before all witnesses?'

'Yes.'

'Beast! Then you'll have to swear to protect me.'

He nodded equably. 'That's all right.'

I continued writing:

To honor you and to obey/protect you,
In truth, reverence and fidelity,
In whatever circumstances the Holy Ones ordain for our life together.
In joy let it be, beloved husband/wife,
Beyond the blue winds of spirit releasing your soul into light;
With these rings I offer you freely and without limit the flame in my heart,
Let my freedom be forever your love,
Sadhu.

'How does that sound?' I asked.

'*Sadhu*,' he replied.

We had plans to return to the islands for the winter. Limnos was too far north and could be under snow in January. A local agent offered us a rental in a little studio in an olive grove just outside Lardos, a few miles south of where we were staying. The problem was we needed cash to pay the full four months' rent in advance and the regular flow of monthly paychecks from the VA had yet to adapt to our change of circumstance.

Greg frowned. 'What shall we do about it? Do you have any suggestions?'

I shrugged. 'You have a life insurance. Do you need it? I certainly have no ambition to become rich on your death. You're not allowed to die on me, ever, and I'm not staying around here if you do. You've taught me not only to live with you but that I can't live without you. It'll be a quick bottle of pills and here I come, Gregory.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes, I have no desire to be a widow, not even a wealthy one. There's one more thing,' I added. 'I've always wanted to make it to a silver wedding

anniversary. Twenty-five years with one person always seemed like an important achievement and it always grieved me that I was unlikely to make it as things were.'

He raised his glass of fruit juice to me. 'Mali, I will happily promise you twenty-five years.'

It was a wonderful idea. He wasn't so convinced about another we had been discussing since Iceland, a project to write his life story. We already had the title.

'You mean, *you* have the title,' he pointed out.

I refused to be put off. 'It has to be 'Dangerous Sweetness', Gregory. Nothing else works.'

'Do you think anyone will be at all interested in it?' he said doubtfully.

'It doesn't have to be published but I think it would be a useful practice for you to sit down and evaluate what you have done with your life.'

'Maybe.'

It was left to the Marine to remind us of our mission on a day when the Greek postal system was out for a six-week strike and the mail was at a standstill. Hearing there had been a delivery to the main post office, we caught the early bus to Rhodes Town and joined the queue.

Greeks don't have the ability to hang around in line quietly for hours under a hot sun. There was a lot of scuffling and raised voices. Elderly ladies used their elbows and glared at anyone likely to object while we waited for the lone employee to sort herself out. After two hours when even Greg's formidable patience was wearing thin, a large young man pushed directly in front of us on the pretext of knowing one of the phalanx of Greek matrons who were our immediate neighbors.

Greg leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder.

'Excuse me, this is a queue,' he said quietly.

Something in his tone and the look on his face made me take a lot of notice. He was standing too finely balanced on the balls of his feet, his hands held loosely to his sides, all of which amounted to being prepared for violence unless I was very much mistaken.

'It's okay, I knowa, I knowa. I'm in a hurry, please,' said the intruder, patting him placatingly on the arm.

The Marine replied, using that same, very quiet tone. 'This is a queue. It begins outside the door.'

Alarmed, I whispered in his ear. 'Greg! Twenty years of practice!'

The tension snapped, slipped away.

'It's okay, just relax,' he said, putting me to one side.

We stepped demurely back one place in the line. When our turn came at the window there was nothing in the slot labeled K. We went back outside into the sun.

I said: 'Gregory, I would not like you to hit me. Promise you'll never hit me?'

'There's no need to promise. It will never happen.'

'You don't know how grateful I am to hear that.'

'What's the problem?'

'I would crumple like tinfoil, that's what's the problem! Were you going to hit that guy in there?'

He dismissed the idea immediately. 'No, of course not.'

'Well, I'm not convinced.'

'Mali, you must curb this tendency to exaggerate.'

'This time I don't think it's me who's exaggerating.'

contract of bliss

It happened that Olympic Airways neglected to include our names on the passenger list for the flights from Ródos to London. Which meant there were no newspaper reporters waiting to jump out of the crowd with their cameras when we met Gillian at the airport. They were as unimaginative as I said they would be and missed us completely.

'What have you done with him?' she asked as we went to the car, Greg just out of earshot, loading the packs onto a cart, plowing it through the crowd in front of us.

'What do you mean?'

'He looks wonderful, quite apart from the tan. At least ten years younger and a good two inches taller!'

'Only loved him. What else could I do?'

My mother didn't recognize her already adored son-in-law-to-be when he went running into the kitchen for a kiss, convinced for one horrible moment that the reporters had finally come to lay siege to the house. Fortunately she didn't have time to get to the buckets of cold water she had ready to throw at them.

Five days later, on a clear, frosty, autumn morning, we were up early and getting into our wedding gear. Purchased in Greece, my entire outfit cost twenty-two dollars; his came closer to two hundred as we toured the shops in England. He took the teasing without as much as a twinge of a bad conscience while he shaved and supervised my choice of perfume and nail polish.

I had none of the misgivings that had accompanied my previous pre-nuptial experiences. Just one crazy, gulping moment while we were waiting with our six guests outside the marriage room.

I thought: *I'm marrying Ajahn Ānando!*

I looked up at this man taking a firm hold on my arm. Gregory Klein, the one with the eyebrows, the one who sent the love shivers rushing up my spine, he had a grin splitting his face from ear to ear. I matched it, took my place in front of the Registrar and promised to obey my husband for the world to hear.

'My wife, my wife,' he would say over and over, stroking my hair, confident of an instant, glowing response.

We visited our lady photographer, had a great time posing for pictures and went on to Mike and Gillian's house for our wedding lunch. Later she took my bouquet of white lilies to place at the feet of the Buddha in the *sīma* garden.

So we entered into our contract of bliss on a beautiful day that ended in a smart hotel in London on a specially reduced rate for our two-day honeymoon. We went to the opera, saw 'Don Giovanni' at the Coliseum, changed my passport according to my newly married status, ate expensive breakfasts, ordered cheaper dinners.

I shook uncontrollably for the entire flight to Baltimore. Once we cleared Immigration I had a couple of hours and a short flight to Hampton, Virginia, to get myself together. Greg knew it was nothing to do with meeting his family. The truth was that I had known for years that something awful was going to happen in America, whether on a large or a small scale I wasn't sure, and I was afraid to go there. It was as simple as that.

'It could be nonsense, my witch's nose playing overtime, but I don't think I want to live there.'

'I've never wanted to live there,' he said, adding, 'but it might be different now that I have you.'

'Then it would have to be somewhere dramatic and wonderful in a little house like our studio in Ródos but by itself in the mountains or the desert. That might be all right,' I said doubtfully.

'In that case I would probably have to teach you to shoot. I doubt that we could live in a place like that in America without a gun.'

'That settles it then. We are not living in America.'

My husband had totally forbidden me from having any private conversations with his family effectively tying my hands, or more accurately my tongue, for the entire visit. I was still adamantly refusing to lie about my previous marital status so silence would have to serve and if anything awkward came up, Greg would have to deal with it himself.

'Our private life is our own affair, Mali. I have always been far more reticent than you in sharing all. My family doesn't know everything there is to know about me and I want you to respect that while we are visiting.'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And don't go into any great detail about how you brought up your children.'

'Why? My children have survived remarkably well. They're not ashamed of me.'

'Mali, once again I repeat I am not ashamed of you, but your rather liberal methods may appear unorthodox to my mother.'

'My children never lacked discipline.'

'You know what I mean.'

Did I know what he meant?

'Yes, Sir!' I said, nonetheless.

He stroked my hair, my cheek, wheedling a little. 'Don't be upset with me, Mali-Mali. It's only for one week.'

'And the sooner it's over the better, it seems.'

'Don't worry, baby.'

I sighed: 'The things I do for love. Will you always be getting me into trouble?'

'Mali, it's very simple. If they're not prepared to accept you, they won't see me. You're my wife, the most important person in my life and they have to understand that too.'

'But look how you're making us begin,' I objected.

'It'll be all right,' he said, his eternal answer to everything.

An eager husband with an ear-to-ear grin took me to bed that first night, more ardent than usual in his lovemaking if that were possible. Before everything became too distracting for words, I stopped him for several seconds.

'Gregory, do I detect an element of male victory here?'

He laughed. 'So tell me.'

'That for the first time in your life you can make love to a woman under your mother's roof and there's nothing she can do or say about it?'

'You're absolutely right.'

I survived the week, enjoying the warm weather and the fall colors, continually surprised at how differently his family saw him and reacted to him. But then they had never lived on a day-to-day basis with Ajahn Ānando. They had no way of measuring how twenty years of Buddhist monastic conditioning, fifteen of them in the public eye, had remolded their wild child-Vietnam veteran into something more.

'You don't know me,' he said to Jean, his mother, one day.

'You're right, I don't,' she replied.

It seemed to be true. My husband, who kept careful daily accounts of our finances and who had been known around the planet as a master of neatness and economy of movement, appeared to be considered careless with money and clumsy in the house in America. He managed to negotiate a full driving license in four days, saying nothing about epilepsy and passing the sight tests, which astonished me. Then we drove to Langley Air Base with the marriage certificate to get me fixed up with an ID card.

I asked the sergeant: 'What does SP next to my name stand for?'

'SP is for spouse, ma'am,' he replied.

Our visit coincided with Veteran's Day. The ceremonies were on TV and I wanted to watch. I barely got a chance to get comfy on the couch before the Marine said,

'You don't need to see any of that stuff, Mali.'

He bundled me into the car and drove to Virginia Beach for the day. We stayed out until evening, walking hand in hand by the sea. The ceremonies were over by the time we got back. Nevertheless he was quite happy to share his collection of pictures and newspaper cuttings from Parris Island and Vietnam, encouraging me to parcel them up, together with his Marine Corps badges and Purple Heart medal, ready to take home to Europe.

Our perennial problem with money had raised its head over misunderstandings in communication between Greece and America and we left with it unresolved. It became even more important to cash in the life insurance policy. As the plane lifted off, my husband held me tight and smiled.

'That wasn't so bad, was it?' he asked.

'No, except that every night I had progressively less sleep. Apart from tension everything was fine.'

All irony was lost on him at that moment.

'How did you like my mother?'

'Well, I can love her but I couldn't live with her. We have very different cultural backgrounds and values. Do you know she seriously asked me if I had considered having you tested before I married you?'

'I don't believe it! Why?'

'Because of your colorful past, my dear,' I answered, laughing.

'How did you respond?'

'I told her that as it has been twenty years and you didn't seem to be showing signs of anything untoward, I thought it was worth the risk.'

He roared with laughter. 'Oh dear, isn't she funny? She still hasn't forgiven me. Mali, I promise you will never have to live with her. I've spent years just visiting, nothing's going to change.'

'I'm glad because I think I understand now what you meant when you once said you thought America brought out the worst in you.'

He was curious. 'Why? What do you mean?'

'Your energy is so strange here, very restless and odd. It might even be difficult for me to like you all of the time if we lived here permanently.'

He was quick to assure me. 'Don't worry. I have no desire to spend the rest of my life in America. We won't live anywhere that you're not completely at ease with. I have learned to have great respect for your 'nose' and if you're okay, I'm okay. Like everything else, it's as simple as that.'

this delightful dance

Marriage completed us. We were Greg and Mali Klein, and more than husband and wife we were comrades in arms, welded back to back on the battlefield of this incarnation together.

We had a winter of peace and tranquility in our little house in the olive grove. Lardos was only twenty minutes walk away for the post office and shopping that included the addition of large cans of cheap dog food when we found ourselves feeding two howling cats who naturally assumed they were a scheduled part of our tenancy. Ten minutes in the opposite direction the beach was a large expanse of white sand with great cliffs at the southern end and a sea frothing white waves when the wind came roaring from the east and the north, milky calm when the wind blew gently from the desert far to the south.

The weather was much colder than we had expected. In all we had only fourteen days of rain all winter but for most of December and into the first week in January it was not unusual to see an early morning frost glistening under the olive trees, rimed white on the bushes by the side of the road while we shivered and ran up and down to stay warm until we got a lift into Rhodes Town.

It was far too cold for swimming. We lasted less than thirty seconds in the water and came out screaming after our first attempt. My husband was determined to buy us wet suits. I wanted to save the money for a cultural weekend in Cairo for Christmas, except this was one instance where healthy bodies must take precedence over healthy minds in Gregory Klein's view. I found myself being zipped into a 'shortie' wet suit that I only wore once, giving up in mostly non-verbal disgust when it failed to prevent that first freezing rush of water getting in under the collar and running down my back.

We got to know many of the local people but we didn't socialize, preferring just to be together, enjoying this delightful dance as my husband loved to call it. Waking, sleeping, talking, silent, we were completely present, in the moment, on every level in constant communication.

'Oh, my Mali, you have my heart,' he would whisper, holding me, loving me, drifting into sleep.

How many times every day did we say 'I love you', waking up at night just enough to murmur it again and fall back into sleep? The last words on our lips as we closed our eyes, the first to gentle us awake as we rose softly before the sun to continue our meditation practice.

Marriage was another level of ordination for us both where Ānando, no longer the taskmaster and I no longer the novice, blessed us with his grace. He had chosen the Buddhist monastic life as a workable alternative to an early suicide, which he had foreseen as the most probable outcome of his experience of war. The *metta* practice gave him focus, sustained him through the torment of recurring flashbacks, gave him refuge when the waves of anger and fear threatened to carry him away on their flood.

Misunderstood, the Four Sublime States may be confused with emotional conditions but they are more than that. *Metta-bhavana*, the initiator, the practice of Loving-kindness, radiating unconditional love for all beings, opening the heart to *Karuna*, the practice of Compassion for others' frailties; to *Mudita*, the practice of Empathic Joy at another's well-being, devoid of anger and envy; to *Upekka*, the practice of Serenity, at one with the moment, dissuading the mind from unhelpful anticipation and fear for the future. The corner stone to the *Bodhicitta* practice in Mahayana Buddhism, through constant attention to their assimilation into the life-practice the Four Sublime States may manifest as aspects of grace, the precursor to enlightenment.

Ānando supervised my flashbacks from the divorce every morning as a regular part of our meditation. I started out doggedly unwilling to use *metta* in this particular context. As the meditation neared completion he would begin:

Bring to mind someone you hurt ... ... using their name, say, 'Please forgive me'... ...

Bring to mind someone who hurt you ... ... using their name, say, 'I forgive you'... ...

Using your own name, say, 'I forgive you'... ...

Using your own name, say, 'You are forgiven'... ...

Using your own name, say, 'I love you.'

For weeks I resisted, watching irritation rising, felt my jaw tightening, but following the meditation nevertheless until at last the anger and the resentment didn't matter any more. The memories could rise and I would watch them pass away leaving no shade of pain in their wake.

Living and meditating in that quiet place day after day, my mind became increasingly finely tuned. I developed an acute awareness of the sound of

silence, and the sounds within the silence, as we sat in our pre-dawn serenity, the candle flickering before the Buddha-rupa, the sensuous aroma of our favorite 'Emerald' incense wafting around the room.

My husband insisted on sitting directly in front of me with our knees touching, holding both my hands, concentrating our practice on the heart centre. Thus focused, the quality and depth of our attunement engendered a continuous flow of energy, left hand receiving, right hand conducting, palm-to-palm, heartbeat-to-heartbeat until we were immersed in a cocoon of light. Then not to be seduced by it but to keep our minds steady, seeking clarity, each aware of the other while retaining our individuality.

Occasionally I felt a kiss brush my lips, sending my mind rocketing into inappropriate distraction.

'Gregory! Don't kiss me when I'm meditating!'

'Sorry, for a moment I couldn't help myself.' It was always more of a grin than an apology.

'Really!'

Our Full Moon *puja* was conducted either at home or more often in the church at the local Orthodox monastery. We always concluded with a repeat of our wedding vows as a gesture of the continuation of our mutual love and respect. No one objected to our Pāli chanting and we were always careful to leave an offering in the box before we left.

It was equally an appropriate opportunity to discuss our progress and to formally ask forgiveness of each other for any thought, word or deed that had caused misunderstanding or pain.

'My meditation practice seems to be focused mainly on *samadhi* these days,' said my husband happily.

'Mine's getting there,' I replied.

'And the *metta* practice?' asked Ānando.

'It's coming along. What about you? Have you noticed any of the old anger coming up from last year?'

He shook his head. 'No, not any more. It was time I left. It was the right thing to do. I know it hasn't been easy for you with the divorce but for me it's been like one, long, delightful holiday since I left the monastery.'

I asked: 'When can we go back to the Sangha, Gregory?'

'In about five years when I feel I've done enough to prove that I can survive in the lay life.'

'Must it be so long? I miss the nuns.'

‘I know monks. They can be very critical and condescending. Don’t forget I’ve been there.’

‘Don’t you miss it at all?’

‘No, I can’t say that I do, or indeed ever have done. I have never regretted leaving the monastery and I know that a lot of it has to be because I had the wisdom to leave with you, my Mali-Mali. The four M’s in my life,’ he said, smiling, touching my hair.

‘What do you mean?’

‘My mother, the Marines, the Monastery and Mali. Beautiful woman, you have saved my spirit. But I have never felt my time as a monk was wasted.’

I agreed wholeheartedly. ‘Absolutely not! It’s made you into a wonderfully sensitive husband.’

‘Thank you.’ He bowed. ‘Any anger I had towards Ajahn Sumedho is long gone. I’ve done a great deal of forgiveness meditation towards him although I never once doubted his good intention. As I said in my last letter, I see my anger as a result of my own lack of wisdom. But if he had come on to me as he did to the other monk who left, there is a very good chance that I would have lost it completely, hit him and put a book, preferably from the Pāli Canon, through the window. That is something I may have regretted for the rest of my life. U.S. Marine Corps conditioning dies hard and unfortunately Scorpions don’t easily forget. We would have parted with a great wall of pain between us which for my part is not there.’

‘There are many paths to enlightenment,’ I reflected. ‘It is a delusion to think or to say otherwise.’

He nodded. ‘I agree. I never felt that I had renounced all hope of enlightenment by leaving. Like you I am inclined to think there is more than one path. But when you use the word ‘enlightenment’ why do you think it is so difficult to realize?’

‘I believe...’

Ānando interrupted, irritated. ‘No, it has nothing to do with belief. I am interested only in what you know to be true.’

I checked myself, apologized. ‘Sorry, wrong speech.’ I took a deep breath. ‘Maybe it’s because we make our lives so complicated that we expect our ultimate truth to be complicated. We would probably be disappointed if it was not. We romance about simplicity, we say that enlightenment is always only a breath away, while we remain caught up in our convoluted world where true simplicity has no place. How simple was your life as a monk?’

‘In the beginning I should say it was pretty simple,’ he replied, ‘but not so in the end, especially in a position of leadership in a western Sangha. My standard of living has certainly dropped since I left!’

He laughed. I picked up on the point and pressed it home.

‘Exactly! Now you have to budget and pay the bills with no adoring lay people offering the abbot the best of everything. You must admit that you did have quite a lot of material possessions for a homeless alms mendicant.’

‘I suppose I did.’ He smiled. ‘I never really thought of it at the time. One thing certainly does surprise me; I am amazed at how quiet my mind can be now. Much more so that it ever was at Chithurst.’

‘Why do you think that is?’

‘My life is much simpler now. I don’t have to be anything for anyone, only you and you know me as well as I know me, probably better. I don’t have to prove anything to you. Well, only to myself concerning you, I suppose. We are so fortunate in that we don’t have to work and that we have been given this time to be together with no other obligation than to learn each other, to be here for one another.’

I agreed. ‘Yes, I am truly grateful for the VA and the pay check but I wish it could have been earned in some other way than your being shot in the head. A part of me would almost rather have us grubbing in some boring job and only being together evenings and weekends like other people, rather than having you with part of your skull missing.’

‘Yes, I often wonder what will come of it,’ he pondered. ‘I have been extraordinarily lucky so far but for how much longer?’

I watched the nameless fear arising in my mind, hand in hand with anxiety, its demon collaborator.

‘Why? Do you feel ill at all?’ I asked. ‘Are your eyes okay?’

‘Oh, I’m fine, but I know me. One day I’m going to be so sick that you will have to do absolutely everything for me. You are my wife and I will expect nothing less.’

He looked around our charming little room, at the three shuttered windows looking out over the olive trees, the shrine in the old fireplace, the dark-stained, exposed wooden beams supporting the slatted bamboo ceiling.

‘This life seems almost too perfect somehow,’ he said. ‘It’s like a beautiful bubble, huge and shining with a rainbow of colors that could burst at any moment.’

‘Gregory, why do you say such things?’ I cried. ‘It’s almost as though you are willing something to happen.’

'I'm not, not at all. It's just that I don't know what I've done to deserve you.'

Exasperation!

I growled: 'Once more the monastic doubting mind! Why shouldn't you be good enough for all this? By whose standards are you judging? Why shouldn't you deserve it?'

'I don't know,' he said helplessly. 'I just never feel worthy. I never feel good enough.'

'Well, take it from me that you are,' stated his wife, as emphatically as she knew how. 'We've loved each other for centuries of lifetimes and we'll go on for centuries more. We're not restricted to one life and one time, so why don't you just shut up and relax and enjoy what we have now?'

Radiance!

'You're right!' he exclaimed. 'You're absolutely right!'

So I was.

What is time?

How do we measure a lifetime in relation to the continuity of all things?

Dare we measure it?

making it real

The Marine made himself mine when he invited me into his war. We had been back on Ródos for just two weeks and I was having problems letting go of a particularly negative mind state lingering on after the divorce. One night I was restless, angry, missing my children, unable to settle down to sleep. Greg switched on the lamp, saw my right hand bunched into a fist and offered himself as a punching bag.

He lay back against the pillows, systematically locked the muscles across his stomach and chest and with nothing more than a look invited me to hit him as hard as I knew how. I'd never seen anyone do that before. I'd never hit anyone like that before.

I hesitated.

He nodded. 'Go on, it's okay.'

I hit him and went on hitting him until that harsh, physical anger was all gone out of me. When it was over he gathered me into his arms and let me cry, loving me, soothing me.

'Did I hurt you?' I sobbed.

‘Not at all, baby.’

I checked him over, conscience-stricken. I hadn’t made a mark. He would carry no scars because of me. He had more than enough already.

He started by giving some thought as to how to help his British wife relate to the US military. Now it’s second nature to me to go on base, update my ID card and shop, but not then. He had to make it real for me. Boot camp at Parris Island was a lot more than a set of pictures of a black-browed young guy with no hair, but the pictures helped, as did the Vietnam movies in circulation at the time.

‘You’ve seen ‘Platoon’?’ he said.

‘Of course, lots of times.’

‘And ‘Full Metal Jacket’?’

I nodded.

‘Those are the two that come nearest to my experience, but only the first half of ‘Full Metal Jacket’ at Parris Island. They had a real drill instructor on set for that. No one else could have acted it as well as he did. The rest of the movie was just fantasy.’

‘Were the drill instructors really like that?’ I asked.

‘Oh, yeah.’

‘Did you know you might end up in Vietnam when you enlisted?’

‘I knew it was a possibility.’ He shrugged. ‘It was part of the job. It’s what we trained for.’

‘Why the Marines?’

He looked me in the eyes, that level, appraising expression. I matched it, pen ready, a block of paper and the laptop lined up on the table.

Trusting me, he began: ‘I was eighteen years old and getting into a lot of fights. There was so much I wanted to do but my life seemed so useless and senseless. At best I had been averaging three days a week in school and the situation at home was terrible. I was moody and difficult, my parents were very unhappy with me and I was unhappy with them. It didn’t take much to make me lose my temper. I had girls but sex was only a temporary satisfaction. Some days I’d go out looking for a fight just to get off on the adrenaline rush.

I was due to graduate that summer but I wasn't prepared to work for it. I got called to the Principal's office and told that either my parents had to come to the school to talk about my truancy and my grades, or I had to quit. I went home and told my parents that I'd decided to quit.

More than anything I needed to get out of Buffalo but I didn't know how. I didn't have any money and after I'd had to leave a dance because a guy at the bar was waiting for me with a gun, I knew there would be nothing but trouble if I hung around. I couldn't be answerable to my mother for the rest of my life.

My sister Karen had gone into the Marines after college and Bobby, my brother, was doing well in the Coastguards. Why not the military for me? I would be paid, taken care of and I might learn something. I didn't want to wait to get drafted. The Marines were the elite. They were tough and I wanted to be the best of the best. My parents didn't have any real objections to me going except that they were concerned that I hadn't bothered with my education. If I messed up in the military, what did I have left?

I signed up for the minimum three years, May 28th, 1965. The physical and IQ test didn't amount to much. As long as I could walk and chew gum I was in. I remember walking home that afternoon and thinking that I had just done something that was going to affect me for the rest of my life.'

It wasn't easy for Greg to open up to this side of himself. It was hard to get past Ānando and his twenty years of monastic conditioning. But the young Marine needed a voice and he needed someone he could trust to shut up and listen to what he had to say. Ānando was okay with it once he could relate to the whole thing as a confession, as long as the colorful language that was second nature to the Marine was not reproduced. Even so he was terribly unforgiving of himself and intensely self-critical. We got into bed for the worst bits. It was easier for him to talk safe within my heartbeat, while I scribbled on the pad with my free hand.

'Have you no compassion for youth and ignorance?' I asked more than once after a particularly bitter dictation.

'Yes, there is that,' he agreed, 'but I always expected more of myself. I didn't see myself in the same way as others chose to see me. No one ever knew me and I didn't know myself. You are the only person I have ever fully opened up to.'

'How was it when you left Buffalo that first time?'

'I was excited. It was my first time on a plane. I took a book that I thought I should read, a pen, an address book and my wallet. Nothing else. It

was good to be finally going, still in one piece and clean, but a part of me was wondering what I was doing and if I was going to make it.'

He grinned, shamefaced. 'I went to a bar to wait for the bus to the base and tried hustling a woman one last time before boot camp. She was nothing to look at and probably old enough to be my mother but she was a woman.'

'And did she?' I asked, grinning back.

He shook his head. 'No, she left me horny and disappointed in the parking lot, telling me to wait a couple of minutes while she collected something she'd forgotten back in the bar. It was a good ten minutes before I realized what she'd done.'

'And then the bus came.'

'Yeah.'

parris island

'I stepped off the bus into a nightmare, where 'scumbags' was the kindest word the DI's ever used for us. There was no time to talk to anyone and even when we were supposed to be writing home or studying the manuals, we were under orders to maintain silence. In case we got any ideas about running away, they told us elaborate stories about the swamps surrounding the base and the guards on duty everywhere. Anyone who didn't have the balls to be a Marine would be disgraced and sent home dressed up in a clown suit of odd clothes.

Nothing could be done well enough or fast enough. Questions were answered in a high-pitched shout three inches from our faces. Everything we'd bought with us had to be crammed into boxes and sent back home. One guy came wearing an old T-shirt and jeans and just threw them away. Our heads were shaved, we were given shots for everything and examined by a psychiatrist. My interview lasted all of thirty seconds. I walked into the room, he checked my name, asked if I thought I would make it and when I said I hoped so, dismissed me and called the next in line.

The corporal issuing the uniforms turned out to be a guy called Gary Hammel who had lived next door when I was a kid.

'Are you Greg Klein?' he asked.

'Yes, Sir!'

'You don't have to say that to me.'

One of the DI's saw us talking. Sergeant DeStephano was an ex-boxer, not very tall, about five-eight, weighing around one hundred and forty pounds. He had piercing blue eyes scowling under heavy black brows.

'So you know that corporal, do you, Private?'

'Yeah, I knew him when I was a child.'

He screamed: 'I ain't one of your goddamn friends! Private, you either answer me, 'Yes, Sir,' or 'No, Sir!'

'Yes, Sir!'

They got us up at five in the morning, crashing an empty garbage can down the middle of the squad bay. We stood to attention at the end of the racks, holding out our sheets while they went up and down the lines checking if anyone was a bed-wetter, using their fists.

'I told you to stand at attention! Do you know what attention is, Private? Not eyeballing around, Private!'

'Who are you looking at? You like me, Private? You got the hots for me Private?'

'If I want you to move, I'll tell you to move. Otherwise you freeze!'

Not even God himself could please them when they wanted to find something wrong with the racks. There had to be exactly fifteen inches from the head of the mattress to the lower edge of the double fold of sheet and blanket, which had to be tucked in tight enough for the sergeant to make a quarter bounce if he wanted to check it. I slept under the cover once a week the night before laundry change. The rest of the time I curled up on top of the blanket a little way down from the sheet to avoid marking it or creasing it. Even the pillow had to be wrinkle free. I slept on one side and kept the other for inspection. I never got criticized for my rack.

We were marched everywhere, drilled for an hour on the parade deck before class, drilled for another hour afterwards. They kept us doing pushups and bends and thrusts until the floor around us was running with sweat. We took courses on the Military Code of Conduct and watched Marine propaganda movies. We practiced drown-proofing, hand-to-hand combat techniques, how to kill silently using our hands or a knife, some very elementary karate moves and how to club people to death with our rifles. We were there to be worked to exhaustion, brutalized, humiliated, whatever it took to get us fit for graduation.

I started out in shock and then I began to enjoy myself. I'd messed up in school. I wasn't about to mess up in the Marines. By the second week the

DI's were watching me closely. Next day they announced that I was to be the guide and sent me to get the banner. Four others were chosen as squad leaders.

They were concerned that I wasn't getting enough mail, which was supposed to be good for morale. I hadn't admitted that one member of my family was a lot closer than anyone realized.

I was cleaning my rifle one evening when DeStephano was on duty.

He called out: 'Private Klein, do you have any sisters?'

I jumped to attention.

'Yes, Sir! Two, Sir!'

'You have two sisters. Is one of them named Karen?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And is she a lieutenant?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And is she a lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And is she a lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps, stationed here in Parris Island?'

'Yes, Sir!'

'And why the hell didn't you tell us, Private?'

'Aah, no excuse, Sir!'

An infected blister on my right foot put me in sick bay for a couple of days during the third week. Sergeant Meadows brought me my gear and my orders, which were to sit up at attention at all times reading my manual and not waste time sleeping. He only caught me napping once.

I was left alone the first day back in squad bay to soak my foot in a bucket of hot water and Epsom salts. When he came to check on me, I was standing in front of the mirror next to my rack with my foot in the bucket and my rifle over my shoulder practicing the Manual of Arms.

'Carry on, Private,' he said.'

Ānando took over the narrative briefly: 'I got my first experience of being in authority when I was put in charge of the platoon during our week doing mess duty, helping the cooks and cleaning the mess hall after the meals. I could tell someone to do something and I didn't have to negotiate. It had to be done, like it or not. Even then I could see how addictive it could become, the change from being completely subjugated to becoming empowered. They say, 'absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Years later I could understand that completely.'

His wife asked: 'Was that the only time you were put in charge in the Marines?'

'No. I was squad leader in charge of three fire teams when I was at Camp Lejeune for advanced training, and I was class honcho in charge of my section at comm. school in San Diego.'

'But you liked being in charge at that time?'

'Yeah. I was very fit. I could do everything that they wanted me to do and I knew that if I could keep it together at boot camp I was in with a good chance of graduating with the dress blues. There could be only one 'outstanding man' and the DI's were watching the five of us, the four squad leaders, and myself very closely.

One afternoon they threw buckets of sand and grit all over the squad bay, onto the racks, into the footlockers and kicked it around the floor. The five of us were called to the front.

'Okay, you are supposed to be leaders. Organize the clean up. You got fifteen minutes.'

The sergeants turned away and I started screaming orders, at the squad leaders, at the whole platoon, for most of the ten minutes that it took to get the place clean again. I was amazed at myself. I hadn't realized that I could be capable of behaving like that. If the other guys were resentful, they never made it obvious.'

'Did you get the dress blues?'

He shook his head. 'No. I blew it on the last obstacle course. There was a fifty-foot tower with three ropes suspended over a muddy pond. I was really keen to do it and didn't pay enough attention to the instruction. When it came to my turn on the rope I'd managed the first two moves easily before I realized that I didn't know how to use my hands for the final turn. I was the only one to fall into the pond. I was so pissed off with myself.

I was still angry the next time we were ordered to line up the footlockers. My rack was near to the top of the line, so I could see whether it was straight or not. After the third time putting them away and lining them up again, there was one that was still a long way out and it was always the same one. I walked down the line and pushed it straight.

'Why is it always yours?' I said, and smacked the guy so hard in the face his glasses flew off and fell onto the rack. The sergeant said nothing except that he still wasn't satisfied with the line. I waited for the guy to invite me to the shower that night but he thought better of it.

I graduated August 11th with Military Occupation Specialty (M.O.S.) number 2500, which DeStephano scornfully said would take me into communications

after advanced training. For him the only number worth having was 0300, the infantry number. As he turned out the lights that night, for the first and only time he said,

'Goodnight Marines.'

It was such a hit. I smiled into the darkness. I was one of the elite, gung ho, dedicated, faithful, unstoppable. I never thought I might die for America. That wasn't what the Marines were about for me.

marine

I did my two weeks at Camp Lejeune and got my orders to report for training at the Communication-Electronics School Battalion in San Diego, California. Before that I had leave to go back to Buffalo for a week. My parents were pleased I had done well but I had no sense of being connected there any more. It didn't help when I met a girl that I knew outside a bar and all she could do was to stare at my head and say,

'What happened to your hair?'

Being the same rank as everyone else at comm. school and having to give them orders soon became a thankless task. Getting the guys out of bed in the morning was a drag. Some days I put the lights on and said nothing, other days I played drill instructor banging a garbage can lid on the lockers and yelling at them to get up. Sometimes the only way to move them was to pull them out of the rack onto the floor. There were always the birds that needed to be told every move. One guy stayed drunk and snoring until I poured water over him.

We marched and did monkey drill for sport. There was a lot more freedom but there wasn't the physical outlet that we'd had in boot camp. I bought a Yamaha 250 motorcycle from one of the guys who had just graduated and was shipping out to Vietnam. When class finished at three in the afternoon I rode out to Mission Beach and the Strip, looking to pick up a girl but it never happened. The only guys with short hair were in the military. Girls didn't want to know guys who were only around for a short time, didn't have much money and were only interested in one thing, like me.

Instead I sent ardent love letters to one of my old girlfriends back in Buffalo and took the 'Tijuana special' over the border in Mexico. The town was squalid and dirty. I never knew quite what I was drinking in the bars. The girls looked good in the half light but most of them were in their twenties or early thirties, all make up and cheap perfume, some with their hair bleached out ugly, rusty

blonde. We paid five dollars for five minutes on top of them in the grubby little cubicles in the back room. There was no time to take off any clothes.'

My husband looked at me sideways. 'We'd been told that Eleanor Roosevelt once described Marines as overworked, underpaid, over-sexed teenage killers. It gave us a certain macho image that we felt obliged to live up to, I guess,' he finished ruefully.

I wrote it all down. It wasn't in me to be shocked. He was a Marine, girls happened, paid for or not. There was the same grin on my face, the same look of love in my eyes as I waited for him to go on.

'Tell me about the course,' I said.

'At first I was worried that I might not pass. We had to be able to copy a minimum of thirty words a minute using international code to graduate, as well as practicing with the voice-operated radios we would use in Vietnam. Some of the guys would suddenly have a breakthrough and be able to interpret the characters at a higher speed. One was really good. I didn't need to be first in the class but I didn't want to fail. The only way to learn was to keep listening to the tapes, over and over, and practicing. I went to extra classes in the evenings. After about ten days, I found that I was making fewer mistakes and it seemed to be getting easier.

The breakthrough came in a dream. I was in bed with a beautiful woman. I couldn't see her face, only her lips. She leaned across me to tell me she loved me and as she opened her mouth, the words came out in code. I woke up laughing and I was well above thirty words a minute when we graduated. I got promoted to Lance Corporal and my M.O.S. number changed to 2533, meaning that I had been trained as an international code operator with top-secret clearance.

I made thirty dollars on the bike. I'd thrashed it but I hadn't dumped it. It sold a couple of hours after I put the ad on the board. Then I had ten days leave back in Buffalo. I was very fit, weighing over one hundred and seventy pounds, although my younger sister Joyce couldn't believe it when she caught me smoking in the kitchen.

'What are you smoking for?' she demanded.

'Why not? Everyone else does,' I replied, meaning that my dad and Bobby did.

'But you don't look right!'

I reported to Camp Pendleton for staging, supposedly to get combat-ready for Vietnam. We did weapons training, threw grenades, learned a bit about camouflage. We practiced jungle warfare and guerrilla tactics, how to deal with an enemy that was largely unseen. We played John Wayne with a clip full of ammunition, walking in single file down a trail, shooting at life-sized,

pop-up targets that sprang up among the trees and bushes. Although from what I'd heard, the VC didn't make a habit of standing up at roadsides ready to be shot.

Going out on maneuvers was more like playing cowboys and Indians. We were given brief, survival-type instructions, told how to tell north and south without a compass, and taught some elementary map-reading before being turned loose to reach a given point while avoiding several groups of older Marines who represented the enemy. No one was armed, it was a bright sunny day, and a group of us just walked down the road to the checkpoint. We spent the afternoon smoking and relaxing in the sun, while the others did whatever they were supposed to do to outwit the enemy. None of it prepared us for the real thing.'

He cuddled up to me, looking over my shoulder at what I had written.

'And that was it?' I asked, after a kiss. 'Barely a year of preparation and then straight on to Vietnam?'

He nodded. 'I was lucky. It was a lot more than most other guys got.'

Despite himself and what he would come to feel about the war, despite what I felt about the war, he had talked me through the training into the pride. I was glad he was one of the Leathernecks, glad he was good at it, and so was he. Understanding the training, I understood the consequences. *Because of that, this is.*

I don't blame the Marine Corps for what happened to my husband, and subsequently to me. Neither did he. It happened. It's the way things are.


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spectre of war

Our first Christmas together was magical. It was a case of either allowing myself to be overwhelmed by a sense of loss at not being able to contact my children as I wanted to, or making the effort to appreciate exactly what was going on for me right then. The effort was the wiser choice made even better by a well-timed call to the boys a week before and made fun by hiring a car for the three days of the holiday.

We decorated the house and made a tree out of a pine branch propped over the Buddha-rupa. The shrine was piled up with parcels we had collected for each other. Greg was like a cute little kid, so excited he could hardly wait to give me his gifts. Another gold bracelet went around my wrist and a new chain was hung round my neck. A hot water bottle was laid at my feet accompanied by a generous helping of American cool guy scorn for such weakness until he realized how nice it was and then I was forced to share. I gave him music tapes, a warm sweater, freshly ground coffee and chocolate, both luxuries in our life now.

We flooded our little house with sound, opera, baroque and Mozart, changing to rock when my concentration at the computer was no longer a priority. The 'Unchained Melody' had been our song from the beginning and we would be singing and dancing so slowly, so close. Other times we boogied to Bryan Adams and Bruce Springsteen, around the room and out of the door onto the little terrace under the olive trees.

In the evening as soon as dinner was cleared away we made up a huge bed on the floor with blankets and quilts, snuggling into it usually by eight o'clock ready for me to read aloud Mary Stewart's 'Merlin' Trilogy, followed by all six books of 'Dune'. We kept the 'The Lord of Rings' in reserve to take us through the worst of Vietnam.

I couldn't resist asking, 'What did you do for Christmas when you were in the Marines, Gregory?'

He gave me that sideways look. 'I kept twenty dollars to spend the night with the youngest and prettiest girl I could find in Tijuana as my Christmas present to me.'

I laughed. 'And when you were in Vietnam?'

'My Uncle George sent a plastic tree kit and a spray can of snow and I got a care box from home. I sprayed 'Merry Xmas' in snow on the poncho that partitioned our sleeping quarters from the radio section in the

bunker, put the tree up on the table between our racks and Rosie and I got well and truly drunk on a bottle of Scotch.'

'Who was Rosie?'

'Rosenberg, the company radio operator, call sign, 'Delta'. I was on the battalion frequency, call sign, 'Cottage Delta.' We were both armed with a Colt 45 semiautomatic pistol and a K-bar. We carried PRC-25, 'Prick Twenty-Five' radios in the field.'

So it was we summoned the spectre of war into our tranquility.

We prepared for it, discussing the key points walking on the beach, shopping in Lardos, on the bus back from Rhodes Town, deciding what he wanted to include, what could be put aside. Vietnam needed our complete attention and the gods conspired to wreck my ankle mid-January just to be sure of it.

On crutches for six weeks and with nothing else to do but write, I felt unusually disempowered as my husband took over all the chores. Mornings, I sat at the computer typing up the previous days' notes while he swept and cooked and cleaned, and took care of the laundry. Afternoons were spent outside on the terrace in the sun, continuing the narrative until the light started fading and we took the notes back into the house and carried on into the evening.

'Walking off the plane that first day in Da Nang was like walking into a hot, damp blanket. The heat was so oppressive. We were put on a truck to the mess hall to get some food. As I was stacking my empty tray, I recognized the guy standing beside me. Bonetti had gone straight into staging from Camp Lejeune. He'd been eight months in the field.

I asked him, 'Hey, man, how's it been? Have you seen much action?'

A weary half-smile crossed his face. 'Enough.' He didn't elaborate, just said, 'Remember, keep your ass down.'

A truck took me and seven other guys to report to First Battalion, Fifth Marines under Lieutenant Colonel Coffman, Hill 54 Combat Base, north of the Chu Lai airfield just off Highway One. The First Sergeant was a big, burly guy from Alabama. He was in his late fifties, grey-haired, tattooed; he could have seen service in Korea, maybe even World War Two.

Relaxed and easy, he drawled, 'Come on in, boys, I been waitin' for y'all. Put your orders right down here and let me have a look at 'em.'

He told us where we were, in case we didn't know, and where we had to go and who to report to. Most of the guys were going to Charlie Company. I was the only one going to comm.

'Lance Corporal Klein, you report to Sergeant Muller. You got that name now? Let me hear you say it.'

'Sergeant Muller, Sir!'

He had one piece of advice. 'Boys, there are a hundred types of snakes in this here country. Ninety-nine of 'em are one-step snakes. You take one step and you're dead, and the other one eats you whole.'

Sergeant Muller from Arkansas was another one that didn't want to be retired. He had been an E5 sergeant for years, always fair and willing to listen. He got hit a couple of months later the first time I went out in the field. Up to then what the Nam was really all about would only sink in by degrees until I'd been under fire and seen people killed, until I saw what bullets and booby traps and grenades did to bodies.

I didn't get to see the grunts in their combat gear until the second week when we got a Zulu message from a recon team saying they were being overrun and needed all the help they could get. Minutes later, the choppers were landing and Charlie Company was loading. There was a kind of a cold hardness about them, in their eyes, in the way they walked. Three came past me speaking Spanish, obviously buddies. They looked like they'd been in a street gang, wearing big, bulky flack jackets, bayonets on their belts, grenades hooked into their top pockets. One guy carried an M60 machine gun. He had crossed bandoliers of bullets across his chest. The others had two extra bandoliers around their waists as well as their own M14 rifles and ammunition. Alpha Company was sent in two hours later. We never heard what happened to the guys in recon.

what bullets do to bodies

The monsoon season started. Drenching wet sheets of rain turned the roads into rivers, exploded on the tin roof of the comm bunker. We had to keep the radio turned up to maximum. Even then it was almost impossible to hear.

Word went round that a battalion-sized operation was happening, Operation Colorado. Muller confirmed we would be going out in a few days. He didn't say where to or for how long. I was strong, capable and new, which qualified me to carry one of the big radios used for air support. The harness was old, badly designed and impossible to sit comfortably on my back. The canteen

belt didn't ride well with the radio and the pack, so I wedged it between them leaving the two canteens hanging either side, hoping it would be okay.

The choppers landed us late afternoon in a terraced rice paddy close to the top of a hill. We were knee deep in water, running in line and holding on to our helmets against the backwash of air from the rotating blades. I thought I heard the canteens go but I didn't stop to look until one of the sergeants picked them up and threw them at me.

'Strap them on properly, you stupid asshole!'

We set up a defense spread out along the ridge of the hill. As we watched a man appeared wearing a cloth tied around his waist and carrying a hoe in his hand. At first I didn't understand why one of the grunts fired at him. He was obviously unarmed. Then I picked up on the wave of excitement spreading along the ridge. More shots followed as he ducked and ran into the cover of the trees.

The first day was dreadful. I hadn't realized that we were actually going to walk and without stopping until we got to wherever the CO decided to set up for the night. I was carrying seventy pounds weight on my back in 120° of heat and sweating so much my utilities were soaked and dripping. A long climb uphill towards the end of the afternoon had me wondering if I was going to make it. My shoulders were rubbed raw from the radio harness. My water was finished. I couldn't drink enough, it was just pouring out of me as fast as it went in. I was almost bent double under the weight, so hot I just wanted to stop and fall flat on my face and never get up again. But I knew if I did I would hate myself and be terrified next time we came out. I got to the top of the hill.

A couple of days later, soaked in a deluge of rain, we walked into an ambush. Alpha Company started firing at some people running away from the large farmhouse bordering the paddy fields to our left. There was a little, white house like a gingerbread house to the right. Seconds later Charlie Company took a burst of heavy automatic fire, intense, red and orange tracer rounds. Alpha advanced, firing exploded all around us. One of the grunts searched a grass hut kicking down the walls.

Suddenly it all stopped. One of the officers screamed at us to get down. There was some sporadic firing, then a series of deafening explosions ending in a shower of shrapnel just short of where we'd been standing. The letter companies were in contact for the rest of the afternoon, fighting with minimum air support because of the rain.

The Command group set up for the night in the farmhouse. I put my gear down beside a haystack, pulled out some hay to make a bed and went have

a look at the trench between the farmhouse and the road where the ambush had been set up. Three VC were lying there dead, tied to the gun, covered in flies. They'd panicked as Alpha started firing and given away their position by opening up on Charlie Company instead of waiting for us in the Command group. I saw what bullets do to bodies and looked away. By morning they would be stinking.

I took second radio watch until midnight. One of the grunts was asleep on my hay bed when I got back, Hispanic, probably Charlie Company. I was sorely tempted to kick him out but he was bigger than me and he had an automatic rifle. I made myself comfortable with more hay on the other side of the stack and was soon asleep.

Two explosions, one after the other, bolted me upright. Something hit me across the bridge of my nose as I dove for a nearby hole. A flare went up. There was heavy automatic firing. I had blood running down my face. It didn't hurt much. I knew it wasn't too bad.

When the firing ceased I crawled round what was left of the haystack. There were holes in the ground where the mortars had exploded. The guy who had taken my place hadn't moved. His rifle was where he had left it; his head and his right shoulder and arm were gone. The CO and the officers were okay. Muller was dead, hit by an incoming round fired through the bamboo wall of the farmhouse. I crawled back to my bed with my hand on my rifle.

The choppers came in soon after dawn. I helped load Muller's body and felt my heart close. I helped clear the body from out of the hay, carried it in a poncho, laid it down where the others were being stacked. The stench of blood and guts. I tried not to look. I didn't want to remember. I picked up his rifle, threw my semi-automatic into the chopper with the bodies. I figured I needed all the firepower I could get.

We were on the move again by late morning walking past an old woman who had appeared out of the jungle and was standing where the little white house had been. She was calling to us, wailing and lamenting over the pile of ash that had been her home. One of the grunts had torched it.'

delta company

He paced the room, absorbed in memory, freezing the frame on images that stood out from the reel recording the operations in the field. Understand the training, understand the consequences. The sorrow of war. He made it real for me, mirroring the grief of my parents and grandparents.

There were times when I didn't like what I was hearing. It could take a full forty-eight hours of mostly silent assimilation, watching my mind, allowing the emotions to rise and pass away, until I was ready to type with equanimity. *Practice. Be with it. You know what to do.* Meanwhile I took more notes, willing my heart to stay open.

Greg knew what I was going through. He didn't interfere. If it were possible he loved me more for being gutsy enough to take it, for not judging, for not loving him any the less. Even so I could feel the scars in my heart. They weren't mine but I made them mine. It's what love has to do with it.

He took time to explain how the operations worked: 'All the time I was in Vietnam I lived under ten-minute standby, which meant we had to be ready to leave within ten minutes of getting a call. The company was made up of three platoons and the command group, supported by mortars, engineers, air cover, even dogs, depending where we were going and what we expected to encounter.

There were three to five men in a fire team, three fire teams to a squad, three squads in a platoon. The Command group usually walked just behind the first platoon; the bodyguard, followed by the skipper and the senior NCO; Rosenberg, the company radio operator on the same frequency as the platoons; me, the battalion radio operator connected with the comm. bunker on the hill and responsible for all the radios in the company; the second bodyguard at the rear. The other two platoons were behind us, maybe one flanking.

We went out two, three times a month, usually for a week, sometimes just three or four days, sometimes ten or fifteen, expecting to be re-supplied every three days. Basically we went out looking for trouble, but ninety-percent of the time trouble found us with ambushes and snipers.

We had a good skipper, Captain Carty, in his late thirties and an excellent field Marine, not charismatic but he knew what he was doing. He didn't fraternize with the enlisted men but he inspired a lot of confidence as a leader. He smoked a lot and drank endless cups of coffee. Each time we went out, he drew the route we had taken on the map with a black marker pen and sent it home to his wife.

Field operations were mostly boring, always exhausting. We stank of sweat and mosquito repellent. There were big, black leeches in the paddies that stuck to our boots as we walked. Sometimes we went without water for hours, hot, sweating, so thirsty until we came to a stream or a well in a village. Salt tablets were issued but we rarely bothered to carry them. I took anti-malaria tablets once a week on the hill but never bothered with them in the field.

Sometimes we started late in the afternoon and walked for most of the night. Most often we took an early morning chopper to the starting point, frequently landing under fire and then walking all day until we found somewhere defensible for the night. A perimeter would be set up in a rough circle around the Command group, sometimes set with trip flares and claymores. The watches lasted three hours each. On a good night we might get four hours of unbroken sleep.

Radio watch was split between Rosie and me and the two bodyguards. Some of the grunts took over as well. I got so that I could fall asleep stood up leaning against a tree with the handset hung on my shoulder strap close to my ear. The Prick Twenty-five was half the weight of the radio I had carried on my first operation and I took nothing extra in my pack except a spare pair of socks. I mostly carried my jacket so that it would stay dry and I could cover up at night if I needed to.'

I asked: 'Why did you burn the villages?'

'I never saw a village deliberately torched, not while I was there. It usually happened as a by-product of a firefight. The tracer rounds were red hot. They caught in the grass roofs and set them on fire. Then the whole village would be in flames in minutes.'

'What about the people?'

'They were all hidden in the jungle. Sometimes the VC would booby-trap places with explosives or grenades and trip wires, occasionally with poisonous snakes. Once I had fifteen inches of green viper rearing up at me with its mouth wide open spraying two jets of milky white poison before I took its head off with a knife.'

One incident stood out with a poignancy that touched us both. Delta Company was in the highlands northwest of Hill 54. They had been walking for three days and were waiting to be re-supplied when a message came that the chopper couldn't make it until the next day.

'That was a long morning. We had only one meal and we were short on temper, cigarettes and coffee as we came over a ridge and walked down into a large valley. Cattle were grazing the upper slopes; the lower levels were terraced and farmed around a small village. We could see the people hurrying away as we approached, carrying bundles and kids into the jungle. I remember thinking that we were supposed to be there to pacify the country and yet there they were, running from us as though we were all murderers and rapists. There was no resistance. We walked on through the village. We didn't touch anything or torch it.

The next, much larger community was still inhabited and so far completely untouched by the war. It was one of the wealthiest villages that I had seen in the Nam, big houses and the main road wide and well maintained. There were some yellow flags and streamers hanging from poles to our left. The first platoon was ordered to check it out. We followed them into a white-walled enclosure surrounding several ornate buildings. The largest had a tiled roof with wind chimes hanging from the eaves and a polished wooden veranda at the front. The doors were carved and painted. Several young Vietnamese men, with shaven heads and wearing saffron robes, were standing in front of them.

I came up the steps behind the skipper. As one of the grunts started to go in through the doors, a young man stepped forward and put up his hand. We all stopped in surprise. The grunt's face hardened. Too tired and pissed off to negotiate, he swung his rifle into the gook's chest. For a few moments it was like the world stood still, watching, waiting until the guy stood aside to let us in, saying something in Vietnamese and pointing to our feet. None of us knew what he was talking about.

Inside it was cool and quiet, dimly lit by two windows at the back with the shadowy figure of some statue between them. The wooden floor gleamed as though it had been polished many times. One of them knew enough English to understand when the skipper ordered the flags taken down in case they were signal flags. We reformed and walked out of the village. There was no sniper fire and we left the place untouched. It was just an incident. Nothing significant. We weren't there to think and it didn't occur to me to wonder who the young guys were or what they were about.'

a beautiful country

Five crazy days out of the war zone, spending every dollar he possessed on R&R in Hong Kong, gave him time to think. He didn't want to be back in Vietnam. He was beginning to resent America's involvement in the war and having to be a part of it himself.

'No one told us that Vietnam would be such a beautiful country. The mountains and the rice paddies could be almost breathtaking on days when we weren't climbing one or splashing through endless miles of the other. Sometimes on mornings when I was awake enough to notice, the jungle looked almost enchanted. It was so lush and green, all the trees and trailing vines shimmering in shafts of golden sunlight.

There was no pollution, no street lights and the stars were huge and brilliant in the night sky. I felt so insignificant standing watch in my little perimeter, in my little war. I was certainly participating in it and I definitely wasn't a pacifist, but what were we doing there? A couple of my buddies from home had been drafted and I was praying to God they wouldn't be sent to the Nam. It was bad enough having to worry about staying alive myself without having them on my mind as well.

It was the little things I missed most like a glassful of cold milk for breakfast and a dry cigarette with some place dry to smoke it. Some place where I could put it out in front of me and not have to worry about some goddamn sniper trying to put it out for me with a round. Some days I would have given just about anything to be back home, even in dead Buffalo.

I had so much restless, reckless energy and I was beginning to think I was bullet proof. There had been so many close calls but I always lucked out. One time we walked into sniper fire near a village next to a river. Some of the grass roofs started burning as we returned fire. The skipper grabbed my radio, calling for artillery. We were facing one another, eighteen inches apart, when a single round skimmed between us, hitting the front of his helmet and spinning it right round. We both hit the ground. More sniper rounds went over our heads.

Then I saw movement, a body, someone standing up about fifteen feet away. I pulled out my 45. It was a big, heavy pistol, shooting big, heavy rounds and I wasn't going to miss. But something stopped me when I saw grey hair, when I saw it was an old woman with nothing in her hands.

A voice in my mind said, 'Aw, screw it. Blow her away.'

If she'd had anything in her hands, even a bamboo stick, I would have killed her.

She saw me and screamed. I let her take off into the bush.'

Ānando said: 'I can't tell you how relieved I am I didn't shoot her. What a thing to have to live with.'

'Did you ever kill anyone at close range like that?'

'No. I was always with the officers. If I had been out with the grunts I might have seen some things but it never happened. So much had been made out of how well trained we were and how well prepared we'd been, but I only found out about combat by being in it. I had seen so many people die. I'd seen guys mutilating bodies, even some of the Command group when they were bored and angry. I'd seen bodies burned, getting blown away, but I didn't think it would happen to me. I wrote to my family saying that I was thinking of going to college or university in Hong Kong or Australia when I was finished in the Marines.'


TERRY
IRISTM

the best cup of coffee

'I was about fifty days short, forty-nine and a wake-up as we said. The army had been moving up from the south ready to take over from the Marines around Chu Lai. We were ordered to pack up for relocation. Before that the whole battalion was due out on Operation Union 1 in the Que Son Valley, four kilometers north of Que Son.

I went through my gear and threw out my cold weather uniforms. Captain Carty had been promoted. His replacement was a dumb First Lieutenant who couldn't read maps. We had a new gunnery sergeant and a new second in command, another lieutenant who had got married straight out of Officer Candidate School and come on out to the Nam. The new M16 rifles were trouble. They jammed too often. Too much time had to be wasted clearing the chamber.

We flew out mid-morning May 1st, had our first contact with a battalion of North Vietnamese Army regulars (NVA) the next day. Jets screaming over our heads. Automatic fire cracking. Artillery fire exploding through the jungle. Every time the enemy stopped and set up an ambush we mauled them, kicked their asses, killing a lot, not taking many casualties ourselves, until they pulled back, leaving their dead and wounded behind them.

We saw the heaviest action, May 10th. The firefight went on all day. By evening we had the area secured and got set up on a small, bomb-scarred hill, watching the jets napalm the valley below.

Lieutenant General Walt flew in the next day. Our officers started wagging their tails and took him to look at the kills. I focused on his RTO who looked like he had just stepped out of a Leatherneck magazine. He even had polished boots. I hadn't shaved in ten days. My trousers were a year old, my boots had seen six months sweat and my helmet had probably sat on three other heads before it got to mine.

Grubby, sweaty, experienced, I walked around him. 'How'd you get this job, kid? Your daddy a senator or something? What frequency are you on, man?'

I pulled him over backwards so I could read the numbers on top of his radio, wrote them down on my trouser leg because it was secret.

Friday May 12th: We had the NVA cornered at the end of a valley. We were waiting until dawn to go in for the kill. I slept in a small bomb crater on the side of a hill. It wasn't deep but it was enough to give some protection until I got kicked awake to take the last watch. I rolled over on my back, looking

into a moonless sky glittering with enormous stars, so tired I couldn't clear my head. I needed coffee.

Using myself and my jacket as a light shield, I lit a lump of C4 explosive and crouched over it, boiling a canteen cup full of water, mixing six packs of coffee and twelve each of sugar and powdered milk. There was no traffic. The radio was quiet. I lay back in the crater with my boots stuck out over one side and my head over the other like I was lying in a lounge chair, looking up at the stars with the best cup of coffee and a cigarette that tasted so good.

Soon after dawn Delta took the point. We walked through the battalion command group to take up position. I saw the captain standing by the path, left the line without breaking stride.

'Sir!'

He turned around, made eye contact.

'Get me the hell out of this company! That asshole of a lieutenant is gonna get me killed!'

He looked, didn't answer. I was back in the line, walking on.

We walked all day with no contact, the first and second platoons out front, the third behind us. The NVA had moved forward during the night and set up an ambush in front of a village. They were waiting for us hidden in the jungle on our right and in a trench about two hundred yards across the rice paddies to the left. The point man was about to enter the village when all hell broke loose, intense incoming fire, green, pink, orange, red tracer rounds lit up like a Christmas tree. They massacred the first platoon.

And the goddamn lieutenant stalled. He dropped back down the line and took cover in some bushes. The gunny was down a hole. There was some sporadic return fire but no clear shot at the trench. I was pissed off because I knew what we should be doing and it wasn't happening.

I asked Rosenberg what had happened to the platoons.

He grimaced, gave me the headset. 'Listen to this.'

The radioman had been hit. He was screaming: 'Help me! They're coming to kill me! Please, please help me!'

He kept keying the handset so we couldn't send back to him.

A spotter plane came in flying low over our heads. For some reason the air support team was behind the third platoon. Between them and our command group was a gap in the line, a no man's land under heavy automatic fire that no one wanted to cross. I changed frequencies and got hold of the plane. He could see the trench line, asked if I could mark our position? I needed green

or yellow smoke grenades but I didn't have any. I told him to wait while I tried to get some.

I dumped the radio with my gear and my helmet beside it and ran across the gap, telling the first guy in the line I needed smoke and needed it now! I saw the new lieutenant dead, shot through the chest, as I ran back.

Still under fire and the smoke grenades taking too long to appear, I called up the spotter plane again. He suggested marking our position with red smoke, the target marker for the jets. I agreed.

As I changed frequencies another battalion commander, who was near to us, came on the line asking for the lieutenant. By this time he was playing with an M39 grenade launcher, trying to rig up the sights to put one in the trench. It fell short by about a hundred yards.

I yelled that the battalion commander wanted to speak to him.

He shouted: 'You take care of it!'

I identified myself. 'This is Delta Two-Eight. Delta Six is playing John Wayne and refuses to come to the radio.'

'Where are you? What are your co-ordinates?'

'I don't know. I don't have a map. Wait a minute.'

The lieutenant wouldn't give me his. The gunny didn't have one. I ran back to the radio but they had changed frequencies. No one had told me Delta had been chopped from 1st to 3rd Battalion that morning and I didn't have their frequency.

I went back to air support. The spotter plane had been trying to contact me.

'Are you too close for two hundred and fifty pound bombs?'

'What else you got?'

'Rockets.'

'Let's have the rockets. Leave the bombs.'

The red smoke drops right next to us. Everyone's wondering what the hell's going on. We get this F-8 coming in on a bombing run at four hundred knots. He circles, comes right for us and I'm thinking: *Oh my God, I hope we got this one right!*

He hits the trench. A second jet screams over, hits it again. The firing dies down for a few moments, starts up again.

That's when Rosenberg got shot.

He's squirming on the ground, holding his ankle, swearing a blue streak. I squat down beside him. It's not serious. Looks like the bullet missed the bone.

I tell him, 'Hey man, you got a million dollar wound! You're going home.'

I stand up, my knees are nearly straightened. I get hit.

There's a moment: *What happened?*

Then my mind explodes. There's a screaming like a chainsaw going crazy in the back of my head. Pain so intense it doesn't matter. Lucky I wasn't wearing the helmet.

Rosie told me what happened when we caught up again in Japan.

'You kinda jerked, then very controlled, almost gracefully, fell down on your knees and onto your side.'

I hear people calling for the corpsman. You can't treat head wounds in the field. You can't do much of anything.

I'm dying. That's evident early on. The pain doesn't register any more. My eyesight is going. I'm dying, just dying. Periods of unconsciousness getting longer. Sometimes a wave of pain brings me back with a start and a cry. Then it fades again.

I remember feeling cold and putting my hand into my jacket pocket. My fingers were up to the knuckles in warm, sticky liquid. Blood. The smell of my own blood.

I hear a corpsman come up and Roberts asking what he could do for me.

'Not much. I've got no more bandages left and I can't give him any drugs because it's a head wound.'

'Don't let me die, Bob. Please don't let me die.'

'Don't worry, buddy. You'll be all right.'

Fading. Colder. Sounds of firing.

'We're going to move you, buddy. There's a medevac coming in. We're going to put you on it.'

They put me at the corner of the LZ. The chopper comes down on a flashlight. I hear a splattering sound as the blades hit the banana trees and then a loud clump as the wheel almost lands on top of me. I'm so close they just pick me up and put me straight on the deck. I crawl in on my hands and knees until my head hits the far side. I collapse in a ball, listening to them loading the rest of the wounded, waiting for take-off.

The motor increases to high revs. The chopper starts lifting. A burst of automatic fire and a round comes through the side, hits me with a red-hot sledgehammer in the middle of my back, knocks me up onto my knees. I hear myself screaming. I put my hands together in prayer. This is it. Somewhere in my mind I hear the Joan Baez song, 'It's all over now, Baby Blue.' I fall over

and everything goes black.

Jolted back into consciousness as the chopper landed, I heard the gunny shouting, 'Take this guy first! He got hit again!'

I knew he was talking about me.

it's all over now

I woke up screaming as they shaved my head, screaming as they pushed a catheter into me, vaguely aware of sheets tucked in tightly around me. I'm blind. There's no light. Only pain.

Another stretcher, another bed. Everything's black. I don't want to be blind.

A voice asks: 'Can you see this?'

I can faintly make out a light being shone in my eyes but for some reason I say, 'No.'

The voice says: 'You may never see again.'

'Thanks a lot, man.'

I'm crying. The feeling of tears on my face. Another stretcher. Jet engines roaring. The feeling of sunlight on my face. People talking. They are going to carry me again. I know they are going to drop me.

I cry out: 'Please don't drop me! Don't drop me!'

The stretcher slips, they catch me. A voice sighs with relief. Pain.

Someone is holding my hand. A warm, friendly voice: 'Do you want to talk? Would you like Communion?'

I need to talk. I need to hear him answering me. My fingers grope outwards until I feel his arm. I pull him closer to me.

'I don't want to die! I don't want to be blind!'

His name is Father Muselli. He tries to reassure me but he can't stop the pain.

Another stretcher, another bed. Perfume.

A soft voice: 'Do you need anything? Is there anything I can do for you?'

She can't stop the pain. The pillows are so hard. There's nowhere to put my head without pain. I can't go home like this. I can't be blind. Better to be dead than go home blind. I'm crying. The feeling of tears soaking into the pillow.

A harsh, demanding voice: 'What're you crying for? You're still alive, aren't you?'

I whisper: 'Shut up, man.'

I turn my face away. But the words stay with me and I stay conscious. I can't escape the pain.

What are you crying for? You're still alive, aren't you?

I am alive. It occurs to me I'm just feeling sorry for myself. I'm alive and I can get well. I will get well. For a few moments a tingling of heat and energy takes over from the pain. I'm not going to be blind. I'm going to be well. The energy surges. I feel it flooding through my body.

When I woke again, maybe next morning, I could make out vague shapes around me, the white blur of a water jug on the table next to my bed, the pale shape of a curtain. There was still pain but I found I could begin to move a little bit. I tried lifting my head; the effort collapsed me back into unconsciousness. Every time I woke, the shapes took on more color, more detail. I was walking out of a dark place into the sun.

A warm, happy voice woke me up asking would I mind if she changed the bedding? While she was pulling the sheets and tucking them in, she said, 'Why is there always blood in your bed?'

'I got shot in the back, didn't I?'

'You what?'

'I got shot in the back.'

'Where?'

I roll over.

She took one look. 'Oh, my God!'

She called the doctor. He ordered a stretcher. Twenty minutes later I was in the operating room asking what he was going to do to me.

He said it was pretty straightforward. My back was laid open in two places at waist level from the bullet and a piece of shrapnel. I'd been incredibly lucky because they had both just missed my spine. He put in plenty of local anesthetic and started cleaning out the wounds. The piece of shrapnel clattered into the bowl.

I asked: 'Can I have that?'

'No, sorry. We don't allow it.'

'Hey, come on, man. I've carried it around for almost two weeks. Don't I have a right to it?'

He laughed. When he started stitching me up the pain was so intense I couldn't take it.

I heard him say, 'This isn't working. I'm going to give you a general

anesthetic.'

A needle prick. Nothing. I woke up blissed out of my mind on morphine. It didn't last long enough.

I began to get better so quickly the nurses were calling me one of the miracles. The other was the guy in the bed next to me. He had been blown apart by a booby trap a month after he was decorated for bravery. He had wounds all over his body, he was fragile but mobile, and so pleased to be alive. Until he slipped in the shower and cracked the back of his head. He came back to the ward almost completely paralyzed. I don't think he ever realized how much saying what he did, when he did, had helped me. I wish I could have done the same for him.

By the end of the month I was reading all my mail, I was up and about and dreaming of making mad, passionate love with one of the nurses. She was very pretty, got a lot of attention from everyone but she wasn't interested in me.

'Come back in five years when your hair's grown,' she said, looking at the fuzz of dark stubble on my head.

So she was only teasing but I was crushed. It had hurt almost more than anything when I woke up and found I didn't have any hair. I couldn't bear to think that I looked strange or unattractive. The first guy to say anything about it when I got home was going to have his neck broken.

Rosenberg came hopping into my ward on crutches. It was great to see him. He had been picked up the day after me, following the same route; the field hospital in Da Nang, hospital ship 'Hope', the Philippines, Japan. He had a million dollar wound, not much pain and nothing broken.

He filled me in on what had happened after I got shot, how another company came up to attack the trench line and to help to recover the bodies. He told me how the chopper had almost crushed me as it landed about four hours after we had been hit. Ninety percent of Delta Company was either dead or wounded by the end of that day. They were saying the lieutenant would be relieved of his command.

There were several other guys from Delta in the hospital. I met one of the grunts from the second platoon in the canteen. Native American, he had been hit early on, shot through the eye. The round had glanced off the surface of the eyeball, destroying it and taking out a little chip of cheekbone. He and a buddy, who had been hit in the head, had lain together under the trees, covered in blood and playing dead when the gooks came by.

He told me that the platoon had been hit at point blank range. They had walked right into it, hadn't stood a chance. Several of the M16s had

jammed, his included, as they tried to return fire. Luckily one of the squad leaders had a rifle barrel cleaning tube and he was going backwards and forwards among the guys in his squad clearing the barrels as they were jamming.

The pain was getting less every day but my head couldn't be touched. Standing under a shower felt like drums banging in my brain when the water hit my head. I had been lucky. The bullet had creased the back of my head, smashing the bone but not the brain. The surgeons had been able to trim up the hole, remove all the bone fragments and stitch up my scalp, leaving me with a four-inch scar over a dent the size of a small fist in the back of my head. There was too much swelling to fit a metal plate. A helmet wouldn't have stopped the round. The shattered pieces would have gone into my brain and I would be dead.

I had a five-inch scar on my back to the left of my spine where the round had sliced through me, and a two-inch scar exactly opposite on the right of my spine where the shrapnel had lodged. Again I'd lucked out. Nothing vital was damaged. I was put on regular medication that the nurses warned me I must not miss as I might have a relapse of some kind, possibly epilepsy. But there was something wrong with my eyes. The ball would just drop out of my field of vision playing ping-pong. I worried it would get worse. I didn't want to be sent to another hospital back home.

I never got a picture of myself with a General. I was in the recreation room when he came to present my Purple Heart and Stars. I had been told early that morning and forgot all about it, came back in the evening to a blast from one of the corpsmen. He demanded to know where I'd been? Hadn't I been told? Didn't I know how important it was? Didn't I realize that Generals were important and busy people? Etc, etc, etc.

I was a little bit sorry I'd missed it. I opened the purple box, looked at the purple medal. It was surprisingly heavy, my souvenir from Vietnam.

My tour of duty had lasted a year almost to the day when I flew out in a plane full of wounded, some in wheelchairs, some on crutches, most of us able to walk. We landed in California just as it was getting light, directed off the plane into a darkened cafeteria. We were only a few steps inside the door when all the lights went on and an army of waitresses appeared under a large sign hung across the wall: 'WELCOME HEROES.' It was unreal.

We sat down four to a table. The waitresses came up.

'What would you like?'

'What can we have?' I said.

‘Almost anything.’

‘Lobster?’

She smiled. ‘Not for breakfast.’

‘Steak and eggs?’

‘How would you like them?’

‘Rare and over easy, and plenty of coffee to follow.’

Another plane to New York City, a bus to St. Albans Naval Hospital, Long Island, back to Buffalo for the weekend. I was one of the first back from Vietnam in Western New York State. That was when we came home to a hero’s welcome and the reporters wanted to write nice things about us in the papers. My parents invited our neighbors and all my friends who hadn’t been drafted to a party to welcome me home. I’d been warned not to drink by the doctors so I spent the evening on juice or Coke, but it didn’t matter. I was alive. I had such enthusiasm for life. Everything and everyone looked new and so beautiful.

I was forever being tested but it wasn’t until the day before I was transferred to the hospital in Buffalo that I was told that I had serum hepatitis, probably from a dirty needle in Da Nang, and worms from drinking untreated water in the field.

My field of vision tests showed a significant gap in the lower central area in both eyes that couldn’t be expected to get any better. Surprisingly, the quality of what was left of my eyesight had actually improved, rated twenty/twenty vision. As time went on, I would learn to use my eyes in a different way, training myself always to make a point of looking instead of glancing down so that I missed very little. They said it would get worse as I got older or if I got damaged somehow. The same went for my back.

A specialist from Texas told me that from a medical and physiological point of view I didn’t need a plate in my head. The only ones available would need to be replaced once every six years and as far as he was concerned my hair would soon grow and cover the hole.

He said: ‘Just watch out for niggers with ice-picks.’

stoned

Greg had looked into the face of death and been returned to survive the consequences. As he said, Vietnam sent home a time bomb of black, brooding anger on a short fuse that he had very little control over. It was a

new and disturbing experience to be haunted by a deep depression he would never admit to, and the fear. Any incident, however small, could escalate into violence, particularly when he was drinking. When he was sleeping alone he advised people to call rather than shake him awake.

'There was only a void with no comfort in it. No sense of belonging, no joy, no peace. I hated being frightened. It didn't fit in with how I saw myself or how I wanted to present myself to the world. I wanted to be strong and capable, aggressive, a fighter, and it didn't fit at all to be frightened.

And by what? That was part of the problem. There was no specific object for the fear that haunted me day in, day out, and probably made worse because there was nothing definite to be frightened of. I couldn't say I had been in a terrible road accident and because of that there was fear. Okay, I suppose I had had some traumatic experiences. I had seen some things, but for me that wasn't enough. I was aware of those influences but it was this nebulous state of dis-ease, this anxiety, that was the problem.'

Dope offered him an escape into an alternative mind-state where the anger and the fear could be suppressed into a part of his consciousness that he didn't want to look into. He liked the effect and the culture that had grown up around it, exploring the senses and sensual pleasures, food, sex, touching, kissing.

'Before I went to Vietnam I didn't know anyone who did dope. When I came back eighteen months later I didn't know anyone who didn't. I'd smoked grass a couple of times in the Nam but I wasn't comfortable with it then. I had too many responsibilities. It only became a big part of my life after I got back.

Drugs dropped barriers. Guys hugged each other. You don't fight when you're stoned. Dope made me stop and notice minutiae. A sunset could be arrestingly, hauntingly beautiful. I could be mesmerized by the intricate patterns of a flower or a leaf, or the texture of a carpet that I had just fallen onto. Sound waves became a physical experience; I could see music going right through me. It was as though after lifetimes of accepting Pandora's box as a receptacle of evil, it had been handed over to us to pry open and discover that it was full of wonderful toys to play with. The only monsters were in our own minds.

Acid was a very different experience. Walls melted in a sudden wash of vibrant pulsating color, as though the room was breathing with me. Music became color. I could feel it vibrating and merging into my consciousness, so that my body became the instrument, became sound and rhythm. I never had a bad trip and I began to feel that my mind had a certain power. I seemed

to be able to plug into a different dimension that accessed some form of psychic ability. People could be really thrown when I responded to what they were thinking when nothing had been said. It was as though I could get inside their heads.

When the need arose, I found I could step back away from the rush and plug into what was considered normal, everyday reality. I could be tripping my brains out and still drive, prepare food, deal with people who were straight, or at least more straight than I was.

At first I did it mainly at weekends so that I was straight for university, but as time went on, studying became more erratic. I was doing acid two or three times a week and mescaline when I could get it, just drifting along, not knowing what was real and what was due only to the effect of the drugs. I started drinking again at parties but I didn't like the taste of booze. I preferred the alternative hit.'

He added: 'I'm so glad you don't drink wine.'

I looked up from my note taking. 'Why?'

Ānando in confessional mode: 'Because when I was watching Lóa filling her glass back in Iceland in the summer, I found myself thinking I could really get into that. I could almost taste it on my tongue. It would have only been one more step to dope or cocaine.'

My turn to be totally amazed: 'Are you serious?'

'Yes. I can still see it in myself, after all these years.'

'Well, all the while you're with me I guarantee you will never get a chance to test it out!'

'For which I am truly grateful, believe me.'

He continued: 'I found out what Vietnam was really all about, what I had been involved in, soon after I started full time at the university in Buffalo. Up until then I had been riding on a cloud of euphoric idealism about the war, choosing to see it as a necessary evil having believed the media propaganda. I was still wearing my Marine Corps ring and when anyone asked me about my experiences I was deliberately vague, dwelling on the better side rather than anything else, although I wasn't suggesting that anyone should join up. I didn't give any details about being hit.

I was sitting in the basement bar in the Students Union having some coffee, when one of the girls leaned forward and said, 'Were you really in the Marines?'

'Why do you ask that?'

She pointed to my right hand. 'Because of your ring.'

‘Yes, I was,’ I said.

‘Were you in Vietnam?’

‘Yes, I was.’

All the surrounding conversation stopped. All eyes turned on me. One of the guys took over the interrogation, one of the older students.

‘Did we hear that correctly? You were in Vietnam?’

‘Yes.’ I was wary now, not willing to say more.

It soon became obvious that he had studied the war and its political ramifications in some detail. He started out playing sympathetic, drawing me out, wanting to know when did I go? Where had I been? Once he had me speaking more freely, he started openly questioning my motives, challenging my reasons for having been there. At one point he became very aggressive, forcing me to try answering questions that I had never considered before, letting everyone know how ill informed and ignorant I was.

I got slaughtered in the ensuing debate. He showed me that my only knowledge of America’s involvement in Vietnam was based on the vague clichés that the system had spewed out into the media and he made it very clear that he had no intention of being drafted. He was doing a PHD to avoid it, which he saw as a superior and intelligent move rather than allowing himself to be exploited by the government. He made me look naive and stupid. On an intellectual level I had some things to learn.

He looked at his watch. ‘I’ve got to go, I have another a class.’

He turned abruptly and walked out of the bar. Just walked out. No one said anything. I felt like a helpless fool, pissed off, so embarrassed and angry with myself because I realized I really didn’t know why I’d been involved in Vietnam.

I’d finished classes for the day. Instead of going home, I went straight to the library, sat down at one of the desks and started researching. As I read through the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, it dawned on me that most of what he was saying was right. There it was, verified by the articles I was reading. I remember looking up from the magazines and books that were spread all over the table realizing that I had almost died for America and I had no idea what America was!

‘Fuuuckkkk!’

How could I have believed in that garbage? All that save-America bullshit! The government had used me and abused me, and for what? What kind of a life was I in for now because of Vietnam? Unknowingly I had prostituted myself to something that was terrible!

Rage!

I had been violated! Jesus Christ, they'd raped me! I wanted blood.

In the next few weeks I read everything I could get my hands on about Vietnam. I followed the media coverage of the war and offered my services as a journalist for the university paper. This sham that we called America was a nebulous unknown that I had grown up completely accepting. Not any more.

We marched for peace in DC but there wasn't any peace in me and not much in most of the others around me. Demonstrations turned violent when the police were called in. The shootings at Kent State sparked off anti-war demonstrations across the whole country.

My father had been talking about it with some of the guys at the bar. They decided that the National Guard was justified in what they had done. After all they had only been defending themselves.

'Wouldn't you have shot at them?' he said.

'They were unarmed.'

'But they were being harassed by a mob of students. They were outnumbered.'

I stepped in front of him, looked him in the eyes.

'Do you know what I could do to you with an M14 rifle?'

I was determined to go to Europe for the summer. Buffalo was so ugly and dreary. Cloudy, wet and cold, with piles of dirty snow and road salt lining the thruway, it had long passed its peak as an industrial city. Companies were closing down. Factories were left standing empty. The river was so polluted that it had been officially classed as a fire hazard. There were so many beautiful places in the world. Why did I have to live there?

I decided to make a conscious effort to be happy. Not many people did that. I bought a bike in England, a gleaming chrome and metallic purple Triumph Daytona 500cc, and rode it down to Nice. The French Riviera appealed to the romantic in me. There was always something to do and I liked being around European students. They seemed to have a sophistication that most Americans lacked, myself included. I got a job caretaking an estate on Cap Ferrat with an apartment as part of the deal, enrolled at the university and stayed for the winter. That was when I started tripping alone.

Pain pushed me into it every time, anger at myself, frustration, disappointment over a girl. It always involved some degree of ritual. I would buy a bottle of juice and a bottle of mineral water, a few munchies and set up my room with the bed pulled out facing the big picture window that looked out over the cherry orchard. The bike was hidden in the shed and the

wooden shutters on the window facing out over the courtyard would be closed. To all intents and purposes I was not at home.

I lay on the bed, riding with the drug. The window became a movie screen, melting in and out of focus, soaking up my inner projections, imaging an emotive reality on my fear, anger, hate, sometimes love. I was discovering that my mind could be so interesting, something new to explore and to delve into so that the fascination of what was going on within me took a compelling precedence over what might be happening outside.

I found I could use the drug to get a different perspective on a problem so that it ceased to be a problem. I could see it from other angles, another point of view, until what had been so immovably important flowed into an easy detachment and loosened its grip on my mind.

Two books provided the turning point, the first setting the scene for the other. '*Journey to the East*', by Hermann Hesse, was nothing to do with the East. Essentially it was concerned with an inward, spiritual journey, but the title as well as the subject fascinated me.

'*The Way of Zen*', by Alan Watts, gave words to something I realized I already knew about, that I had always known about. But how? Where had I learnt these things before and when? Enlightenment was only a moment away. It was not selective. It could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime if the conditions were right. The subject of sin was glaring in its absence and spontaneity took on a reverential quality that had me seeing myself as calculating and manipulative by comparison.

I spent days trying to be spontaneous with predictable results. But at last there might be hope and even a direction for me. My sister Joyce was getting married in July, I had to be back in America for that. Then I would return to Europe and take the hippie trail overland to India and Japan.'

He travelled with Sherry, a long-time girlfriend from Buffalo, meeting up in Nice, taking in Venice, Athens and Crete in the Greek Islands, where they got their first taste of India before sailing to Istanbul, the gateway to the East.

'We met this American guy who had been living on the island for some time in a little place by the sea. He had studied the sitar under one of the great Indian masters who had been recommended to him by Ravi Shankar. There were Indian carpets on the floor, tapestries and pictures of his guru and his music teacher on the walls, a fragrant incense burning.

He made us some chai, preparing the water and the spices, which we were to sip from large bowls of worked tin. Then he picked up the sitar. While he was tuning it he explained that there were particular ragas, melodies for different times of the day. He would play us the raga for the evening.

The discordant twanging transformed into an ethereal cascade of sound pouring with exquisite skill from his fingers on the strings. I had never heard anything so beautiful. Through the open door the sea shone like silver in the pale evening light and a soft breeze carried the sound of the waves blending with the river of melody flowing all around me. I was straight and yet it resonated through me like a drug.'

I asked: 'What happened to your Marine Corps ring?'

'I left it in France on Cap Ferrat. I walked into the orchard and slipped it onto a branch of one of the cherry trees, positioning it so that it wouldn't be easily shaken off in the wind. Maybe someone found it. I like to think it got slowly absorbed as the tree grew around it.'

that nagging feeling

Gabriel came to stay with us for the last week in February, his first flight alone, flying through a thunderstorm. Such happiness to know he was close, in the next-door studio, joining us sleepy and tousled for breakfast in the morning. Greg was deeply sensitive to his new responsibilities as a stepfather, something he often talked about and looked forward to developing in the years ahead.

I teased him: 'Maybe old age won't be so bad when you're a grandfather.'

The look on his face was priceless.

A few days later, coming home from Rhodes Town laden with parcels, laughing and talking, pointing out the wild flowers that were coming up everywhere in the warmth of the spring sunshine, as we were in sight of the house he suddenly lost control of his bladder.

He was very distressed and confused. 'I don't know what's happening.'

'Come on, it happens to everyone at some time or another,' I said, handing him a clean pair of jeans with a kiss and having the others washed and out on the line in five minutes.

'I'm so grateful for your attitude towards me in this,' he said. 'I know it means nothing but I couldn't bear to be incontinent when I'm old. I remember wetting the bed once in a hotel when I was a child and my parents having to pay for a new mattress before we left. They didn't make anything of it but I was so ashamed.'

'Gregory, I've done six and a half years of continuous nappy changing with the babies and I've nursed. One pair of jeans is nothing in comparison. Forget it, beloved you. It's not a problem.'

It didn't happen again and we made no reference to it, except for a nagging feeling that wouldn't go away. There was something more going on in him that I couldn't understand and couldn't find a reason for. Since mid-February as we were finishing the Vietnam chapters, I had been noticing his face beginning to change. Sometimes I saw a look in his eyes that had never been there before, a hollow weariness, and an almost grey bloom to his skin if that could be possible in someone so tanned.

His breathing had changed as well. Whereas I had always been able to time my breathing with his to go to sleep, now he was breathing considerably

faster and more shallowly than I when he lay down to rest. In the mornings when he lay holding me and talking to me before we got up for meditation, the vein in the middle of his forehead would be noticeably prominent. It disappeared as soon as he got up and I didn't make anything of it. He never complained of any pain. Nevertheless there were so many times when I found myself thinking: *What's making pressure in your head?*

At least once every week I asked, 'Gregory, are your eyes okay? Can you still see as well?'

'Yes, I'm fine. What's worrying you?'

'Nothing, I don't think. I just want to be sure, that's all.'

We were planning a six-week visit to the States in the summer. Gabriel was invited for our month of travelling East Coast to West Coast in the USA. I absolutely refused to carry on deceiving my mother-in-law about my previous marital status. Divorce was no sin in my eyes. Certainly it was no misdemeanor in Buddhism. I wrote to her before we left Ródos.

We moved north back to Limnos on April 1st, staying in one of the summer cottages at Agios Ioannis. It was appreciably colder and the sun shone fitfully between clouds heavy with rain. But the almond trees were in blossom and the mountains were green and covered in flowers.

Kaspakas and Agios Ioannis were as near to a home for us as anywhere we had ever been. It was a quiet, uncomplicated agrarian community. The land was well tended, the animals well looked after. Every morning the men rode down from the village on their donkeys, horses or mules, trotting past our house to their land around Kalogeros, working the farms that had been in their families for generations. On calm days we heard the chugging of the little boats putting out from the harbor to fish through the evening and into the night, their lights twinkling far out to the horizon all around the bay.

When we walked to the village, everyone was kind to us, calling out 'Kalimera' or 'Yasus', asking how we were doing. There was always someone willing to give us a lift into Mirina. Soon we couldn't walk down the main street without hearing, 'Hey, Gregorio! Kalimera!' called from the shop doorways or one of the tavernas. They could never say my name but one served for both.

Once we climbed up to the hill shrine above Kalogeros. We found the door left open, oil and donkey droppings on the floor, a layer of dust on the holy pictures, everything dirty and long neglected.

'We must come up here again and clean this before we leave,' I said.

A strong military presence on the island served as a reminder of the close proximity of Turkey, the ancient enemy. Every time we passed the barracks on our way to the hot springs at Therma, Greg would point out all the World

War Two and Vietnam era equipment still in use in the Greek Army. Even the aircraft that occasionally flew fast and low over Agios Ioannis brought back the memories. The occasional burst of gunfire would have him starting up from whatever he was doing to check it out.

He said: 'Do you realize we have been together continually, twenty-four hours a day for almost a year now, Mali? We blend like milk and honey, a continual melding. It never ceases to amaze me how the feeling grows, deepens, expands. It never lessens. If I can only do something about your pain, everything will be perfect.'

The hot water bottle was spending most of its active life on my back. I had been diagnosed with kidney stones the day before we left Ródos but the pain was unusual. However dulled with drugs, it was almost continual and spread out all over my upper back.

I was mortified when it became impossible for me to carry my shoulder bag and JBJ was resigned to a life guarding the shrine. Greg practiced healing on me, kinesiology, massage. By May 1st we had to admit that a visit to the hospital in Mirina might be a good idea. A man operating an ultra-sound scanner in a half-constructed building in the middle of the town confirmed my right kidney clear but showed us evidence of what he thought could be stones in my left kidney.

More water, more anti-spasm pills. For almost two weeks I was better. We topped up our tans between clouds and the occasional shower of rain, ate lunch most days on the beach. The night of May 12th we celebrated my returning health making wild music with a glorious, crazy abandonment, falling into deep and blissful sleep at the end of it, curled around each other, content.

I was dreaming. A knife was being stabbed into my back, punching through my skin and tearing out again, in, out, in, out. I could hear myself screaming.

'Mali! Mali-baby! Speak to me! Speak to me!'

Greg was shaking me, forcing me out of sleep.

'What's the matter? What's happening?' I murmured, still dreaming. The knife was still there, stabbing in, out, in, out. 'Oh, my back hurts.'

'Mali, you were groaning aloud in your sleep.'

'I thought someone was stabbing me. It feels as though they still are.'

'That settles it,' he said. 'We are going to the hospital in the morning and there is no negotiation. When my wife is in pain even in her dreams, something has got to be done.'

'But I'm not going back to England. I don't want to leave here until we have to.'

‘Don’t worry, we’ll get something sorted out here even if we have to go down to the base on Crete to do it.’

The hospital staff were getting to know us. Greg was instructed to prepare me for a kidney X-ray the following week.

Before that summer came back to Limnos. It was as though someone had flicked a switch overnight. The sky cleared completely. The sea was silken smooth. Incense burning on the shrine curled through shafts of golden sunlight streaming in through the windows during morning meditation. We ate lunch every day on the beach and stayed there long into the afternoon.

anointed

Another source of concern manifested to keep us on our toes. One morning, as Greg got out of bed to make his customary three bows to the shrine, he suddenly put both hands to his head.

‘Oh! I have a headache!’

A second later it had passed. When it recurred at the same time the next morning he immediately did a headstand against the wall.

‘This always works,’ he said.

Apparently it did, although maybe he was a little more dizzy than usual when he stood upright. Next morning he was fine. The grey look in his face that had become habitual could so easily be put down to his continual worry and concern about me.

‘I’m so frightened I’m going to lose you. This pain in your back worries me. You’re so precious to me. I couldn’t bear anything to happen to you.’

He wouldn’t let me out of his sight for one moment, not even to go to the post office while he was making boring telephone calls about the computer.

‘Mali, we have the Vinaya,’ he said. ‘You did promise to obey me.’

‘But it’s only around the corner. I’ll be five minutes.’

‘Mali! Please!’ ordered Ānando.

It was ridiculous. I stamped up the steps, slammed through the doors and flung myself down in a chair outside the telephone booth. I could hear him laughing quietly as he came in behind me. We were both laughing about it when we left.

‘I’m sorry, Mali. It’s just my paranoia,’ he said. ‘I’m so worried about you.’

‘I was hardly going to die just walking to the next street.’

'I know, but you must understand.'

A radiologist, a pathologist and two doctors muttered over my x-rays and decided they had no idea what they were looking at.

'You must go to a big hospital in Athens. We cannot do anything for you here.'

My husband held my hand very tightly as we walked into the town.

He said: 'Shall we buy a big bike and drive it off a cliff someplace?'

'Messy. Tough on whoever has to identify us. Pills are easier.'

'A bike's got more style.'

All discussions pertinent to my health were kept to a minimum during the week when Gillian came to stay. Except that it was impossible to hide the results of the back spasms that ripped through me every time I tried to swim. On her last day we hired a Jeep to take her on a grand tour of the island. Sat bolt upright in a hard, narrow seat being jolted over miles of unmade-up dirt tracks put my back once more into spasm.

I said nothing until Greg started gunning the Jeep round and round in a tight circle on an open salt flat for no obvious reason, smashing Gillian and I from side to side in our seats.

I screamed: 'Greg! You're hurting me! Please stop! Please!'

All I got in return was a sideways look as he put his foot down harder on the accelerator. It was so strange and so out of character. I carried on screaming until he came to a stop.

He said: 'But I have to play, Mali.'

Gillian wisely kept silent. She took my x-rays back to England and got in touch with the doctor. We were booked to follow five days later. The next morning Greg had a flash of head pain as soon as he got up. A single spasm. Nothing more.

Reluctantly we started packing, wondering if we would be returning in August as we planned. I wanted the days to be longer, the nights never to end. I couldn't bear the thought of leaving our paradise of peace and sea and profound intimacy.

I woke up with one of my 'feelings' just after first light two days before we had to leave.

'Gregory! Beloved and wonderful husband, wake up!'

He came out of sleep, immediately concerned.

'What's up? Do you have any pain?'

'No, I've been dreaming about the little church on the mountain. We have to go and clean it.'

‘What now?’

’As soon as we’ve finished breakfast after meditation.’

‘Will you be all right climbing all the way up there?’

‘Yes. I’ll take painkillers before we go. My sense of urgency says we have to do it.’

He never argued with that.

There is something very beautiful in the ritual act of cleansing a holy place. We opened the door and all the windows, filling the little sanctuary with sunlight and sweet air. Greg found an old broom and began sweeping the litter off the floor while I mopped up the residue of dust and oil that was spilt down one wall and onto the floor. The icons and paintings grew color and form again with careful cleaning while I searched outside on the mountain for some of the little purple flowers that dried intact to leave on the altar for an offering.

We discovered a supply of candles and incense in one of the cupboards. I started the charcoal fizzling and spluttering and dropped two large chunks of incense into the burner in front of the altar. As I stepped back my head knocked against something that swung forward and poured a cool, thick, sticky liquid creeping around the roots of my hair, down the back of my neck and onto my clothes. I went rigid.

‘Gregory, what is it? What’s happening?’

‘You’ve walked into one of the hanging lamps, that’s all. I had no idea they still had oil in them,’ he said.

He tried mopping me up with a Kleenex. In doing so he knocked into another lamp and the same thing happened to him. Anointed, we lit the candles and more incense, chanting everything we knew for the good of ourselves and all beings.

He closed the door, bolting it carefully as we left.

‘I wonder when it will be cleaned again?’ he said.

We spent all of our last day sunbathing and swimming and trying not to think about England and my kidney. In the evening we walked to Kalogeros to watch the sunset bathing the sea in golden light.

I said: ‘We will be back, beloved.’

‘I hope so. There’s just this feeling. What does your nose say about it?’

‘Ambivalent, neither one way nor the other.’

‘Well, at least it doesn’t say never again.’

‘No, it doesn’t say that. But although I don’t have to worry so much about

your family now, I'm not happy about this summer in America, and I can't see next winter. There's a kind of blank darkness over it, which bothers me. It's odd.'

A kiss, tenderness, our best smiles. We would not be sad. *Practice. Nothing is certain beyond this moment.* Only this joy that is ours together.

I had one last photograph to take to finish off the film in the camera.

'Come on, Gregory, take off that tee shirt. I want something beautiful in the foreground while I take a picture of the moon over your head.'

The light was fading from the sky. Night shadows came gathering in the valley under the mountain. We went home and to bed to enjoy the last night of absolute peace and unbroken sleep either of us would know in this life again.

V.a.

We had two dreadful nights apart while I was hospitalized for tests. My kidneys were fine. It was strongly recommended that I get some therapy to treat the inward curvature of my spine, which looked good from the outside but did nothing for my currently painful, muscular-skeletal condition.

My husband was relieved beyond words. 'We'll get you fixed up in no time and you can take it easy in America. I'm so glad it was nothing more serious.'

'It would have been a waste of a good bike, wouldn't it?'

'It would indeed.'

We had a family dinner in an English pub with Felix and Gabriel and Gudrun to celebrate the first anniversary of the great escape. Nothing like as dramatic as the events of June 6th the year before but Greg always enjoyed the few times when he could say 'have whatever you want' when the menu came round.

We swam at the local pool every morning after meditation as part of my therapy. Greg got back into Tai Chi. I watched him from the window as he practiced on the lawn outside my mother's house, only missing a move once, still as graceful as ever. Not quite so perfectly balanced on the full turn.

That nagging feeling. It hadn't been left behind in Greece. I had to admit I was nervous when he was driving. He seemed to be having trouble judging distance. More than once we came perilously close to the inside edge of the road on corners. Added to which there had been a couple of incidents when

he had been unusually aggressive when meeting new people, particularly women. Enough for me to talk to him about it later in the privacy of the car. He couldn't understand it.

'It must be my American conditioning coming out again. They have always been socially more forceful than the British,' he said, with a wry smile.

I wasn't so inclined to agree. His wayward behavior transposed itself to watching TV. He was getting too involved with whatever he was seeing, unable shake off the emotions it aroused for a long time afterwards. I wondered if the epilepsy was about to recur. I didn't feel happy about how the screen flickering seemed to be affecting him, so much so that I invoked the Vinaya and called a ban on evening viewing in favor of late walks around the fields and the lanes to exercise my back before bed.

For some reason that I have never forgotten it was in the evening of June 16th that he first admitted that he was getting worried about himself.

'Why? In what way?' I asked.

'I don't know except that I feel spacey. Not quite in my body, not quite connected. And I can't walk in a straight line. Look!'

He tried walking down the centerline on the deserted road to demonstrate, stumbling continually to the left in his effort to concentrate. I was very concerned.

'Can you see well enough?'

'Yes, I think so, but sunlight is beginning to bother me. I'm getting tired if it's too bright.'

The alarm bells went off, clanging loud in my head.

'Gregory, what do you think is the matter? You know you and you've had plenty of experience of head wounds. What do you think?'

'I don't feel that it's anything badly wrong. It's not a constant feeling and I am quite well for the rest of the time.'

'Could it be anything to do with stress from having to look after me for so long?'

He shrugged. 'It's not unlikely,' adding with a grin, 'maybe I'm just tired and needing a holiday.'

'Do you think you should see a doctor?'

'No, no! I'm not that bad.'

Early the next morning he had a few flash pains in his head as we got up, nothing more. We went to London for the day, shopping and visiting Sophie. She had been one of the senior nuns at the monastery until she had disrobed

the previous year to nurse her mother who was dying of cancer. Sasha was much weakened by her illness but still beautiful, very positive and bright when we went to her room to say hello. In the course of conversation the subject of where we were planning to spend the next winter came up.

'There's the house in the south of France,' she said. 'Go there. We won't be needing it then. Just pay enough to cover the bills.'

We thanked her and said we would bear it in mind. She died peacefully at home less than a week later.

Greg spent all the following day in bed asleep but he seemed well enough when he got up in the early evening. Of course nothing stopped our lovemaking.

'Gregory, I do believe that if an earthquake occurred while we making love, we would simply think it was the cosmos concurring with our ecstasy. We would carry on regardless even if the house was falling down around our ears!'

'Mali, did you feel the earth move just then?'

He was fine all through the flight to America, insisting on carrying all the hand luggage and absorbed in the in-flight movies for most of the hours in the air from London. Next morning he woke up with sharp pains in his head that continued intermittently throughout the day, sending him almost to his knees as the spasms gripped their iron fingers into his brain.

'Oh Mali, I don't know what's going on. Hold me, help me, baby,' he said, staggering forward, trying to hold his head and hold onto me at the same time.

Two days later, using me as a support because he could no longer walk steadily alone, I got my first introduction to the VA at the hospital in Hampton.

The receptionist kept her eyes on the computer screen. 'Do you qualify?'

'Yes, I'm rated a hundred percent disabled,' he said quietly. He always hated admitting it.

She looked up. 'Do you have your card?'

'What card?'

'You should have a purple card.'

'I don't have any card. I live abroad.'

'That doesn't stop you having a card. Give me your name and social security number and I'll check it out.'

She went back to the screen. Her fingers flew over the keyboard.

'Yes, you're a hundred percent. We'll get you a card. Sit down until you hear your name called and a doctor will see you.'

We waited another two hours, Greg lying on the floor with his head in my lap. *Practice. Don't think. Just to be with the situation and see what comes up.* Always the practice. What better time to remember it than now?

The doctor told us that there were sixty reasons why my husband could be having head pains and gave us some painkiller.

'Come back in a couple of days if you're no better.'

Greg took the pills and went straight to bed as soon as we got back to the house. He was asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. I felt uneasy, intensely alone. What was going on? What was happening to us? He was hardly aware of me when I got into bed beside him. For the first time I went to sleep without a kiss.

We were back in the VA on Monday morning, again all day Wednesday until a neurologist could be found to authorize a CAT scan, which clearly showed an accumulation of fluid in the brain. Cause unknown.

'Can you drive to Richmond right now? You need an MRI scan and you'll have to be admitted to have it.'

It was four-thirty in the afternoon. We hadn't eaten all day.

I asked: 'Is there time for us to eat and pack some things?'

'Yes, I should think so. What time do you think you'll be leaving?'

'Around six-thirty, seven o'clock?'

'I'll notify Admissions that you'll be there around nine, nine-thirty.'

I had my first experience of driving an automatic car on an American highway. Two hours to Richmond. Still not convinced that he was about to become an in-patient, Greg insisted on finding a room in a motel for the night before we went to the hospital. He paid the bill in advance and inspected the room in case I should have to come back alone. He was so careful of me even though by now it was obvious he was very sick.

The Hunter Holmes Maguire Veteran's Hospital was a big modern hospital in the suburbs of Richmond, Virginia. Without a national healthcare network, I didn't know what the rest of America did when they were sick but no one was more grateful than I for the VA then. Like all institutions it has its critics but I'm not one of them. When I left him just after midnight in Ward 2C, he was wearing a pair of hospital issue pajamas, still not sure what was going on, very conscious of the wheelchair parked beside his bed.

I sobbed my way out of the hospital, feeling very much abandoned in a big American city and terrified. Greg had given me all of our money to look after

and I hardly knew what to do with it. I felt alien and completely lost. There was no point thinking about the morning. I had to concentrate on surviving the night.

The motel was standard American issue, slightly seedy, just off a huge boulevard covered in billboards and lights. Greg called minutes after I had locked myself into the room. Unable to sleep, I lay on the edge of the huge double bed that smelled of countless strangers, trying to plan for the worst so that I could be pleasantly relieved when I found myself driving him back to Hampton in a few days time.

I was back beside him by six-thirty, waiting to see what the day would bring.

'Ma'am, do you know about the hospitality house?' said the ward secretary as I was walking past the nurse's station.

'No. What is it?'

'It's run by the veterans for the wives to stay in while their husbands are in the hospital. It's about five minutes drive around the perimeter and costs five dollars a night. Do you want me to find out if they have a vacancy for you?'

It was a gift from the heavens. 'Yes! Yes, please! Please do!'

'I'll let you know,' she said.

I wheeled my husband to the MRI scanner midmorning. By lunchtime I had met Jim who allocated me a bed and somewhere safe to store my bag in the hospitality house.

'Just one more thing, ma'am,' he said, as he was leaving. 'Always tell the officer on duty when you are about to leave the hospital late at night and he will see you to your car. Drive straight to the house and keep the car doors locked. Don't attempt to walk it, even in daylight. Can't be too sure, ma'am.'

My heart sank. What kind of a place was this?

charles

We were asleep, curled up on the bed together, when the doctor brought a witness to oversee him giving us the result of the scan.

'You gotta brain tumor. If we don't operate you're gonna die. When we do operate you got four possibilities, blindness, paralysis, coma or death.'

Doctor John's parents had immigrated to America from Greece before he was born. It made for a certain cultural familiarity between us, except that he was only two days into his final year of residency in neurosurgery. He had a lot of responsibilities and most probably we were the last people he needed

to meet right then. We sat very still, saying nothing, both of us looking at him steadily. Somewhere in the depths of my being a silent scream formed a single word.

'No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!'

Like bees buzzing among the flowers on a bright June day or cicadas humming on a hot August night, that word became consistent within my state of being. From then on whatever I was doing would be always against the background of this muted, agonized scream.

In a matter of fractions of seconds I watched fear flooding through me and in its wake, practice. *Be with it. Watch it. Don't give in to the fear. Nothing is certain beyond this moment. There are endless possibilities. Not all brain tumors are fatal.*

Neither of us had moved a muscle. Blindness, paralysis, coma or death. Not a lot to choose from. One thing I knew for sure, he was not going to die on me without an almighty fight. We had too much going for us. No matter what happened we would fight it all the way.

How do people take a death sentence? We didn't cry, not then. It was hard to grasp the reality of it all. What do you do when a stranger walks into your life and tells you you're going to die? When all your bright dreams fall misbegotten into the Void?

I heard myself asking, 'So what happens next?'

'You'll be scheduled for surgery next week, probably Tuesday, so that we can take a look and see what kind of a tumor you got there. Until we know that we can't say for sure what we're gonna do with it. We'll get another scan to see how much of a vascular system it has set up.'

'Why?'

'Because the more blood it has in it the more chance of cerebral hemorrhage when we cut into it.'

'Where is it?'

'On the cerebellum at the back.'

'Behind the gunshot wound?'

'Yes.'

'Will you shave off all his hair?'

'Usually we do.'

Greg broke his silence. 'Oh no!'

I pleaded: 'He had his head shaved for twenty years. Couldn't you just shave off the bits you need and leave the rest? Please?'

'We can try. I'll be in again in a couple of days with the consent forms for you to sign. It might be a good idea if you think about making a living will so that it's clear what you want if things get tough in surgery.'

He left us looking at each other. Just looking at each other.

'Well,' said my husband.

'Yes,' I said.

'A brain tumor. Funny, I never thought it would happen to me.'

'It has to be called Charles.'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

'Then Charles it is.'

'He's not going to beat us. I refuse to let him beat us. I'm not living without you. I can't!'

My husband held me. Closely. Quietly. *Don't give in to the fear. Trust. You know what to do.* The nurse came in with his first dose of steroid medication.

'You had better make some calls,' he said eventually. 'Tell my mother I'm okay. She doesn't have to come immediately. I want to get this sorted out while there's just the two of us. I don't want the family to be worried.'

'Shall I telephone Chithurst?'

'If you want to.'

'I want to.'

'Go ahead then.'

England was on GMT, five hours ahead. The monks would be in the *sala* for evening puja. I left a message on the answer machine.

'Hello, this is Mali Klein calling from America. Greg is in hospital. He has a brain tumor. Please chant for us. Pray for us.'

I went to find Doctor John.

'Is there any possibility that everything could be all right and we'll be walking out of here in a couple of weeks?' I asked.

He was non-committal. 'Difficult to say until we know what type of tumor it is.'

'Do you have any idea what it is?'

He hardly knew how to look at me. He'd seen the scans. I hadn't. He knew how big that thing was in the back of my husband's head.

He lied. 'No.'

‘How long has it been there?’

‘Maybe three to four years, maybe longer.’

‘But even if you can take it away there’s going to be a long convalescence?’

‘Yes, I should think so.’

Tom came in just after four, introduced himself as the head nurse until midnight. A little over an hour later he was back. He had read the MRI report. He had seen beings like Charles before. He spoke to us quietly in his soft, Southern accent.

‘I want to tell you that I have spoken to the night superintendent and recommended that your husband’s condition is much improved by your being here, Mrs. Klein. It means you can stay all night. But,‘ he bought his face closer to mine, ‘you have to ask my permission first.’

I laughed. ‘I’m asking. Please can I stay?’

‘Sure thing. Go right on down to the reception desk in Emergency where you first came in and sign on.’

I couldn’t get there fast enough. Back in the room I made up an improvised bed for myself on two chairs but no one noticed if I wasn’t in it when they came in.

I thought: *They’re doing this because we’re young and they think he’s going to die. Please don’t die, beloved. Please don’t die.*

The phone started ringing the next day. Everybody worried. It was so good to be able to talk to the monks again after a year of silence. They were my friends too and I had missed them. We paid another visit to the scanner. Bill, the social worker, took us under his wing. Greg made a living will, negating all life support systems, leaving it to me to make the final decision.

‘I’d rather be dead than a vegetable, my Mali. I don’t want to do that either to you or to me.’

‘I know. I know what to do.’

‘Yes, I know you do.’

I was trying so desperately hard not to cry. ‘Got a history of it after my father, haven’t I?’

‘I know you’ll do what’s best for me.’

‘Even if it breaks my heart? Isn’t that so, Gregory Klein?’

‘Oh, I love you,’ he said, stroking my hair.

‘I love you too. Damn it, you’re my husband! You can’t die on me! You can’t! I’ve only had you for a year! We’ve only been married eight months! If you die, I’ll have nothing, absolutely nothing! Please!’

The dam burst. Mercifully we were alone. Sobbing, shaking, both our faces wet. It had to happen sometime. It was the only time we really let go until much later.

Tacitly I knew that part of the deal that was allowing me to stay in the hospital meant that I had to behave myself. No hysterics, stay calm, cool, and above all useful. There's too much going on in a neurosurgery unit. *Practice. Don't give in to the fear.*

When we could speak again, he said, 'I want to go some place quiet just with you when this is all over. Then either get completely well or die in peace. I know you will be able to look after me.'

'I've never nursed a brain tumor alone.'

'It will be all right. You're my wife and I only want you helping me, no one else. Remember I've been a monk for twenty years and used to my privacy,' he added.

strangers in a strange land

We had been ambushed. Cancer had crept up on us and attacked in the dark hour before dawn. Greg and Mali Klein were back to back on a battlefield in unknown territory, facing an arsenal of life-threatening surgery, lethal radiation beams and killer chemicals. It was up to us whether it was going to be a massacre or a fight.

Who trains for a cancer diagnosis before it happens? No one. Certainly it had never occurred to us. With all our collective life experience neither of us had added cancer to the equation of consequence as a result of Vietnam. Who knows how long the tumor had been content to be an insignificant bud of mutant cells born of the trauma of war until karma called and it began to blossom?

John had estimated four years. Ānando had been unusually sick with pain in his head and back on the day of the tenth anniversary of the founding of the monastery at Chithurst in 1989. I had answered the summoning, the call, or whatever it was, three months later. Who knows what forces order such things? It happened.

We had crossed the canyon between those who have never experienced cancer on a personal, deeply emotional level and those who have. Strangers were invading our private space and ordering our lives around a schedule of appointments we didn't want to keep. They were doing their job. We were trying to survive it.

'Don't worry, it's okay,' they tell us. 'We have everything under control.'

Except that it wasn't okay. It's not okay! Those moments of shock and then everything starting to happen around us. No time to say, 'hey, wait a minute, let us get our heads around this,' before the cancer machine rolls into action. Needles, tubes, medication. More needles. More medication. We are a discussion at the nurses' station. I hear it before they notice me passing by.

Our situation was obviously dreadful. I had so many questions. I got plenty of answers when I pushed for them, but it was 1993. There was no Internet to search through, no websites to consult, no handy blogs to refer to. There was no time to find a library and read up on brain tumors. We had to go with what there was and trust. *Practice. Stay present, be mindful. Don't give in to the fear.*

Cancer was only part of the problem. Everyone was so kind to us, doing everything they could to make things as easy for us as possible. But we had been set down in an intensely Christian part of the world. Culturally and in terms of religious practice we found ourselves in a vacuum. Greg still retained some ethnic familiarity but I had to adjust too fast in a culture and society that was, at that time, the most alien I had ever encountered.

On the subtlest of all levels there is not yet a common language between the Old World and the New. Some quite ordinary words can have a completely opposite interpretation in conversation, depending which side of the Atlantic you happen to be on. I was too deeply in shock to be able to help myself with the social difficulties that inevitably arose interacting with Greg's family. More than once we scandalized one another in conversation and we were too polite to sort it out.

Above all I wasn't prepared for my standard, south-of-England accent to be difficult to understand. Jean's husband John, who was a retired miner from West Virginia, perfectly summed it up: 'I caint understand a word that gal says.'

Touché. I couldn't understand him either. It was only now that I realized exactly how my husband's years away had remolded him into a European both in character and outlook. His up-state New York slang had been steadily toned down over his five years in Thailand, to vanish almost completely with fifteen years of English mannerisms and language quirks added to his unique blend of US/Thai acculturation.

I began to think of America as the 'land of the five-star-lie, French fried with a choice of toppings'. Amid the affluence, I had never seen such poverty. A drive through the poor, black areas of the city dropped the jaw of the country child from the south of England. I saw people living in houses where

the windows and doors were falling out, roofs falling in. The old Greek farmers with their donkeys and their sheep were far better off than many of these people. I had spent the winter listening to American propaganda on VOA Europe, hearing how Uncle Sam was sending millions of dollars to Somalia and Russia, but what about his own back yard?

It seemed that without the VA most of the veterans who were sick would be on the street. Not many had wives and families to visit them in the hospital. The pharmacy was permanently barricaded behind several inches of bulletproof glass. Late at night when I went to sign on in the main hallway the police would be bringing in the drunks to sober up. The Vietnam veterans were unmistakable. A lost generation of middle-aged men with that haunted, hollow look in their faces, their poignant body language. Others with an air of hopelessness that was devastatingly unfamiliar. All of it compounding the intensity of my own trauma as I tried to assimilate the reality of what was happening to my husband.

It was like having a raw nerve operated on without anesthetic.

'Semper Fi!' shouted a young Marine in an elevator. He knew Greg had been one of the Leathernecks. 'Keep the Faith!'

I almost saluted.

The hospital staff were predominantly black and so friendly. Who could be sweeter than Nurse Effi? Some of them had wonderful names and I was fascinated by their variety of hairstyles, so much more exotic and imaginative than their paler sisters. Even with my fading Greek tan I felt like a limp washout by comparison.

My hour in the hospitality house was always a pleasure when I went back to change and take a shower every morning. The girls would be sat around the kitchen table drinking coffee when I came in.

'Hi Mali, how're you doing?'

'I'm fine. How are you?

Robbie was waiting to see if her husband was going to be permanently paralyzed. Ruby's husband was scheduled for open-heart surgery. Mary had all her money stolen as she slept in the corridor outside the operating room, waiting for her husband to come out of surgery. Diane's first husband had beaten and crippled her. She was bankrupt because her medical insurance hadn't been sufficient to cover the cost of the surgery necessary to repair her knees. She was forty-six years old and only able to have the medication to treat her high blood pressure while her doctor could keep her in free samples.

I met few people in Virginia who weren't actively practicing one form of Christianity or another, but hadn't Jesus preached compassion for all the poor, the meek, the sick? Or was the Savior more selective in America?

There was always a collection of wheelchairs gathered around an early cigarette outside the hospital when I went back.

'Hey, baby, I love that smile!'

'Good morning,' I said.

'Hey, you gotta accent!'

I countered: 'No, you've got the accent!'

The day before surgery I wheeled Greg out of the air-conditioned atmosphere of the hospital building into the suffocating heat and humidity of the Virginian summer. We found the perfect place for our chanting in the shade of an enormous tree. I gave him a blanket to sit on while I set up the shrine and lit the incense. He had no pain and was enjoying the high that comes at the beginning of the steroid treatment.

We began the chanting. Tears began to fall. Poignant memories of all that we had and all we could soon lose danced between us. What were we doing here? Why did it have to be this way?

I said: 'Why, Gregory? Why a brain tumor?'

'Obviously I needed it and therefore you needed it too.'

'I didn't need it. I don't need it. I need you.'

'I need you too,' he whispered, through tears. 'Don't ever leave me.'

'How could I possibly? You're my husband.'

'But I might become permanently disabled from the operation. I don't want to tie you to anything you can't handle. It would be kinder to divorce you.'

I cried: 'How can you say that? Don't you remember our wedding vows? 'My lawful wedded husband, in truth, reverence and fidelity, in whatever circumstances the Holy Ones ordain for our life together.' And that includes brain tumors. You can't just put me aside like shrugging off an old coat. What would you do without me?'

'Die. I couldn't bear it.'

'Neither could I. Do you want my suicide on your conscience through countless lives?'

He smiled, in spite of himself, in the face of it all. 'No, indeed I do not. Don't look so worried. Like you say, this is our brain tumor but I hope that whatever happens won't be too hard on you.'

Later Tom came in with the medication as I was helping Greg get ready for bed.

He said, significantly: 'No one is coming into this room again until after midnight.'

I shut the door behind him, jammed a chair under the handle just to be sure. My husband was waiting for me with a smile and our favorite cologne sprayed over his chest.

i.c.u.

He made it through surgery. He was alive and he still knew me, this man in a green gown linked by tubes and cables to the machines surrounding his bed, whispering, 'I love you, I love you, I love you.' Smiling up at me through tears and slightly swollen eyes, taking my hand, doing his best to kiss it through the oxygen mask, rumpling his other hand through my hair.

Doctor John's career was safe, for the moment at least. I had threatened to sue if he got carried away with the knife. Not exactly polite British behavior, but then I wasn't so much British any more.

We had six days in the intensive care unit. So many people were praying for us, in the monasteries and in every church connected with anyone who knew us or had met us in the hospital. Such kindness. I camped in the waiting room, sleeping on a mat under the telephone on the wall, waging a silent running battle with the cleaners who turned on the TV every time they came by, only for me to climb on a chair and turn it off as soon as they were gone.

'As Mr. Klein appears to perform better with his wife at his side', I was called in as often as possible while Greg hovered between life and death during those first thirty-six hours. Not daring to flinch, I was with him when the tube was pulled out of the back of his head. My face was a frozen mask when the catheter was removed.

Hour after hour John would come in with his questions.

'Greg! What day is it? What month is it? What year is it?'

With persuasion the inert form on the bed would rouse himself enough to answer with a variety of random guesses that had nothing to do with July 7th 1993. The day would be the nineteenth or the twenty-third. The month was continually September. The year went backwards from 1992 to 1973, stabilizing for several hours on 1967 which I thought was significant. When it got to September 1942 it was absurd.

‘Gregory, you weren’t even born then,’ I said.

‘Wasn’t I?’

John said: ‘Okay Greg, tell me again. I want to know what day it is, what month it is, what year it is.’

‘Right here, right now.’

John looked at me. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘It’s a skilful use of Buddhist jargon meaning that he doesn’t know, he doesn’t care and basically he’s pissed off with you for continually asking.’

Greg was grinning like the Cheshire cat in Wonderland.

John was not amused.

‘Well, he’s got to get it right soon,’ he said grimly.

‘Maybe you’re asking the wrong questions,’ I said.

As soon as he was gone I leaned over my husband, who lay serenely unperturbed by the ceaseless ticking and whining of the machinery.

‘Gregory! Wake up! You’re not doing so well in your exams. You can’t get the date right, let alone write the essay.’

‘That’s okay.’

‘Not for Doctor John it isn’t. Tell me, what color was my dress when we got married?’

‘Green.’

‘Where did we buy it?’

‘Athens.’

‘And what color were my shoes?’

‘Sort of gold.’

‘Where did we buy them?’

‘Limnos.’

Trick question: ‘What color was your shirt?’

‘It was – let me see – it was blue and green and purple.’

‘Perfect! Where did we buy it?’

‘Marks and Spencer’s.’

‘Now chant me two blessings.’

‘Two?’

‘Yes, and loud enough so that I can hear every word!’

Not a single error. He was word perfect. At last I knew for sure that my husband was not going to die on me right then. The next job was to get

him functioning properly, eating, defecating, everything associated with the process of recovery and staying alive. I had to find something to stimulate him back into life.

Initially it had to be something simple and basic that he would do instinctively for himself. He went back to sleep while I searched through the packages on the cart and came up with the perfect solution; lemon flavored glycerin swabs on sticks that could double as tooth brushes.

Putting one in his right hand and holding it up to his mouth, I shouted in his ear,

'Gregory! Clean your teeth! Now!'

He twisted the stick between his fingers, slowly put the swab into his mouth. Very slowly he moved the swab backwards and forwards over his front teeth, opened his mouth to clean the ones at the back. I was so proud of him.

John came back to tell me that the path lab report determined Charles to be a grade four *glioblastoma multiforme*, the most malignant of all brain tumors and the most impossible to treat. Radiation might put it into a few months of remission at best.

Greg's case was unusual in that this type of tumor was mostly found at the front of the brain, only rarely at the back on the cerebellum. It meant that his movement, balance and posture would be permanently affected, causing him to be ataxic, a new word in our dictionary that we would find written all over his medical records. As the brain stem came under increasing pressure he would experience possible complications involving his breathing, heart rate and ability to talk, eat, hear and see. The good news was that, despite all this, he had every chance of retaining mental clarity.

'What's the prognosis?' I asked finally.

'It's hard to say in that position.'

Any hope was better than none at all. 'So you don't know then. Prognosis unknown. One thing I do know is that my husband is a very unusual man, he has lived a very unusual life and you can be certain that he won't do a brain tumor in anything less than an unusual way. I'll tell him what you have said if you don't mind.'

I did my best to tell him as simply and concisely as I knew how. He was too tired and weak to take the full implications on board. As far as he was concerned, he was alive, I was with him, he was going to get well and we would be going back to Greece as we planned after radiation. He squeezed my hand.

‘Mali, here I am feeling like death, looking like death and probably smelling like it too. I look up and all I see are two, big blue eyes looking down at me, so full of love. I’m going to be okay, baby. I promise you I’m going to be okay.’

Jean and Joyce went back to Hampton. Karen and Bob and his wife, Donna, took over supporting us. It was strange to meet the rest of my American family in front of the electric doors leading to ICU, people I would love and need so much in the years ahead.

They stayed with me during the second operation, this time only a four and a half hour wait while Greg had a shunt fitted into his head to drain the fluid from his brain. We were back in our room in Ward 2C later that afternoon. When the anesthetic had worn off sufficiently to allow him to sit propped up, I found my scissors and cut off the rest of his hair.

I had been prepared to see Ānando again but instead I was looking at the wounded Marine. Ten days of steroid medication had begun to very slightly puff up his face, so that many of the fine lines had disappeared. With the hint of swelling still under his eyes he looked exactly like the young Marine pictured on the front page of the Buffalo Evening Post in June 1967.

It was difficult to tell how much the surgery would affect him long term, only that I noticed an almost imperceptible change in the tone of his voice. At least he had no pain. Another CAT scan showed the shunt in place and working. Follow-up treatment would involve six weeks of radiotherapy. We would be spared chemotherapy. It wasn’t an option for Charles.

We began discussing where we would go when we left the hospital, where he would have the treatment. The others were going back to Hampton. I asked them to find out if we could rent a house there while Greg was convalescent. I had seen one that might be suitable, standing empty several doors down from Jean’s house. It would be far enough away for us to maintain some degree of normality in our life but near enough for her to visit and for the loan of her car during radiation. They promised to check it out.

tell me about thailand

The epilepsy returned. Greg had been hospitalized for a petit mal seizure in the spring of 1968. He had since learned to manage the condition without medication. This time he had a full grand mal seizure. Lucky I was there. John was with us seconds after I called.

My husband came round as we were taking him for another scan, raising my hand to his lips as he came fully back into consciousness. The scan showed

that the shunt had moved a little during the seizure. He was scheduled for surgery again the following Monday to have it repositioned. A twice-daily dose of phenytoin was added to his medication schedule. He was not pleased.

'That stuff makes your teeth fall out.'

'You have to be on it for some years before that's likely to happen,' said the nurse.

His recent memory remained terribly disjointed. He couldn't remember one day from the next, except that he was depressed at the recurrence of the epilepsy and the prospect of another week in the hospital. It was a contagious state of mind that nibbled at the edges of my own brittle facade. After two weeks on a diet based mainly on breakfast cereal, added to sleepless nights and overwhelming fear, I was as good a candidate for gloom as he was.

I went shopping in the Base Exchange in the central hallway of the hospital, came back to the room with a yellow legal pad, pens and a folder.

'Gregory, I have another idea.'

'What is it this time?'

'If we sit here just looking at each other we'll go crazy. I have some paper and a pen so why don't you carry on dictating your story to me?'

He frowned. 'I don't think I can.'

'Try it. Tell me about Thailand, how you got into meditation practice.'

He closed his eyes, silent for some time as he reached out beyond the cancer nightmare, flexing his fragile concentration, seeking clarity. Relieved to find the core of memory still in place.

'I started meditating before I got to Thailand,' he said.

'Where?'

'When I was in India staying at the ashram with Guru Maharaji at the Divine Light Mission.'

He hesitated.

I prompted: 'Go on.'

'I had a couple of insights that blew my mind. I was meditating alone in my room and suddenly realized that once desire was seen for what it truly was, it would simply fade away. If I ceased to grasp at what I thought were my needs, they would cease to have any power over me. Food, sex, drugs, boredom, anger, pain, they only became dominant if I let them. Nothing was permanent. It was the nature of all things to come and go, including desire. I had only to patiently watch it in my mind, not follow it and in time it would melt away.

Two days later the working of the Law of Karma became crystal clear to me. I was not separate from my actions. If I were generous and compassionate towards people, it would always come back to me. In the same way, selfishness and deceit always rebounded on the source.'

He opened his eyes, looked at me, smiling. 'I was completely straight and two feet off the ground, I was so blissed out.'

We grinned at each other. His far memory was intact. Ānando was not lost. All that was needed was for me to ask the right questions.

'Why did you choose Buddhism?'

'Bahkti Yoga was too close to Christianity for me. I'd had enough of priests. The Buddha didn't have a guru and the Buddhist path of practice didn't ask me to surrender myself to another human being as a manifestation of the Divine. Guru Maharaji was the most unusual fourteen-year-old boy I had ever met. He was right when he said that drugs were not the path of blessings but he wasn't my guru. I knew I needed a teacher of some kind but not from that tradition.'

'What made you decide to go to Thailand?'

'I had been sitting on a letter from the VA that needed a call from Delhi to sort out. I had to report for a final medical examination to ensure my benefit. The nearest US base was in Bangkok.'

'What happened to Sherry?'

'I told her I was thinking of going into a monastery while we were trekking in Nepal. When we got to Delhi I bought her a ticket for a flight back to the States, kissed her goodbye and carried on to Thailand.'

When John came in later to check on his patient, he found me sitting cross-legged on the bed, scribbling as fast as I could to keep up with the dictation. I already knew most of the stories from our walks in Greece but there had never been time to write them down while we were concentrating on the Marine Corps and Vietnam. Hour after hour, my beloved lay in that big American hospital with his eyes closed, recalling his early years as a monk in Thailand while I filled up one pad and started another.

a good place to practice

'Someone told me there were two hundred bar girls in Pattaya, about an hour south of Bangkok. I had no one to answer to but myself but I was bored and so tired of my life as it was. Theravadan Buddhism is supported almost exclusively throughout Thailand and after a night alone in one of the hotels, I went to stay in the local Wat, the Thai word for monastery.

I was still wearing my white cotton Indian clothes. My hair had been trimmed shorter, although it was still long by most people's standards. Experience in the ashram in India had taught me the protocol. Even so I felt clumsy and uncertain of myself around the graceful Thai culture. I spent two weeks at the Wat with the monks but after a couple of days I was bored there too.

In accordance with Thai tradition, most of them had only ordained for the three months of the *vassa* from the July to the October full moon. They were supposed to re-emerge into the world again as more mature, more marriageable individuals, but as far as I could see they were only there to eat and sleep and help build a pavilion that was needed for a ceremony due to be held at the end of the retreat. There was no sign of any meditation practice and I wasn't impressed with the abbot. He was a bit of a bandit, too eager to have me use my ID card to buy beer that I was sure I caught him drinking one afternoon.

Perhaps he was more impressed with me and my diligence, although it took him a few days to work out what was behind the twice-daily thumping that came from the kuti (hut) where I was quartered as I fired my pillow at the resident mosquitoes before I sat down to meditate. After two baffling weeks of trying to find a way across the language barrier to answer my questions, he took me to visit Ajahn Chi at Wat Kow Chalok outside Bangkok where the monastic rule was kept more strictly. The Ajahn was on retreat and unavailable but there was a visiting western monk who I could talk to. There were no more than twenty or thirty of them in the country at the time so I counted myself fortunate to be able to meet him then.

Ajahn Sumedho was standing on the veranda outside his kuti as we approached. My first impression was of big teeth, a bigger smile and almost raucous laughter. He was very real and unpretentious.

I asked him: 'Is this a good place to practice?'

He answered: 'Yes, I think so.'

I visited three times more over the next two weeks. We talked away the days, sometimes far into the small hours of the night drinking copious cups

of strong, sweet coffee. I was fascinated by the flood of new images and ideas he was giving me, and by the monk himself. He was only twelve years older but in many ways we were a generation apart. The freedom of the sixties seemed to have passed him by. More than once my jaw dropped at something he said. He didn't seem able to communicate easily with women and his preoccupation with being already in his mid-thirties was incongruous compared with most of what he had to say. But I wasn't there to compare the differences in our personalities. He had access to something I wanted in my life and he could show me how to achieve it.

There was a certain monastic etiquette to be followed, not actually articulated but obviously inferred. His few possessions were his alone. I couldn't just wander around his kuti picking things up and putting them down again. Anything consumable always had to be offered to him with the exception of tooth woods and water. If I had touched it, he couldn't eat it until I had offered it to him again, which could be extremely annoying if it was already his own food or medicine.

I found this out one night when he left me with two hours to kill while he was summoned away for the *Patimokka*, the twice-monthly confession followed by the recitation of the monastic rule, compulsory for all practicing monks. He left me with a copy of the chanting translated into English but it was about as interesting as reading a telephone book. I was a lot more curious about how a monk actually lived and what he chose to surround himself with.

A simple shrine decorated with flowers, incense and candles stood against the west wall so that the Buddha-rupa should be facing east. The bed was a rice mat unrolled on the floor with a small, kapok-stuffed pillow. Some bottles obscurely labeled in Thai caught my attention. A sniff at the contents suggested they were mainly medicinal. I put them back but he must have realized that I had been poking about because almost the first thing he asked when he returned was if I had moved anything. Embarrassed, I had to re-offer the jars, kneeling within a forearm's reach of him as protocol demanded, to ensure that he received it.

I went back to Bangkok to sort out my visa and to complete my final medical examination. Then, with the largest jar of Maxwell House coffee I could find on base and some candy that I hoped he would like, I returned to Wat Kow Chalok to formally request he accept me as his disciple. My head was shaved for the third time in my life that same day.'

'Just like when you went into the Marines.'

Greg opened his eyes, smiling. 'Yes. There were some similarities, I must admit, except I didn't have a dent in my head the first time.'

‘And you didn’t have to cram your stuff into a box and send it back home, and no one was shouting.’

‘No. I had been giving things away since I first arrived in Thailand. All I had left was a flashlight, a travel clock, a razor, soap, my toothbrush and a small, plastic recorder that I had carried with me from Europe. I played it one last time that night before I gave it away. I wasn’t allowed to keep any deodorant and cologne was forbidden. I just had to pray I wouldn’t stink.’

‘What was it like to lose your eyebrows as well?’

He answered frankly. ‘The whole experience was weird. I felt very vulnerable and exposed. In Thailand hair is considered to be as dirty as excrement. I was supposed to be reflecting on the lack of purity of the body while the novice did the job, but I was more anxious than anything else. Ten minutes later my hair and eyebrows were in the garbage pit. When I got back to my kuti I lit some candles and found a mirror.’

‘What did you see?’

‘A tanned face with two pale, half-moon shapes over the eyes, framed by a bald, white scalp. It didn’t look anything like me. I couldn’t relate to it at all. I went through the Pāli recitation for taking the eight precepts a couple of times more before I went to bed. As a samanera (novice) I would promise not to kill any living thing, not to steal, to undertake a vow of chastity, not to lie and to avoid intoxicants of all kinds. Food would be eaten only once a day, sometime after dawn and before noon. I could no longer indulge in music, singing, dancing, or any kind of recreational entertainment. Over-indulgence in sleep was also forbidden unless I became seriously ill.

Early next morning, October 4th 1972, I was dressed in a white, wrap-around sabong secured with a woven cotton belt and a white angsa, a rectangular piece of cloth that barely covered my chest. I was given a pair of leather sandals and a bag to be carried over my left shoulder. Then Ajahn Sumedho took me to Wat Kow Wung to meet my preceptor.

It was a long, hot drive, at first lurching and bumping down the track from the Wat, then three hours on the road through the traffic in Bangkok with the sun beating painfully on the dent in the back of my head through the rear window. Fortunately the car was air-conditioned and a minor scratch with a passing lorry only delayed us for another hour, which didn’t do anything for my nerves. I was in a state of acute anxiety by the time we arrived.’

‘Would you have been so anxious before Vietnam?’

‘No, I don’t think so. My preceptor was an elderly, high-ranking monk. He gave me such a beautiful look of compassion and understanding as I began to stutter out the Pāli. My heart was pounding in my chest. I was shaking.

As I raised my hands together in anjali, the traditional gesture of respect, I felt the sweat running between my palms. But I managed to request all eight precepts with only one brief hesitation and change my robes, fastening the brown sabong over the white one without losing both in the process.'

'Why did they call you Santi? Wasn't it more usual to keep your own name until ordination?'

'The Thai novices had already given it to me because they found the 'gr' sound in Greg impossible to say. Santi was an auspicious name meaning 'peace'. Driving back to Wat Kow Chalok was a very different experience. I felt I was coming home, still rather precariously dressed without buttons or zips to hold my robes together, but with an unusual and, for me, novel feeling of self-respect. At last I had done something purposeful with my life.

A phrase from a book I had read in India came to mind: '*What would the Wise think of what you are about to do?*'

I thought they might approve this time.

samanera santi

Within a few days Ajahn Sumedho was gone, leaving me out in the cold with a group of Thai monks who couldn't speak any English and who were only nominally sympathetic to my needs. I inherited his kuti, expecting him to be back any day. It took a week of waiting before it dawned on me that from now on I had to make it on my own.

In those early days I was terrified of walking unarmed and in sandals where I knew there might be snakes. I wore my robes wrapped so tightly around me there was only just enough room to breathe, in case they fell off in front of the village girls when I went out on alms round. At least my sexual energy gave me no trouble. I felt burnt out on sex and didn't let my mind get involved with women. I recognized a genuine fear that one day I might meet a woman who would be impossible to resist, but the more I meditated the less sex I wanted. For me celibacy was something I had decided on when I was practicing in India before I became a monk. Of course I never saw any western women.

Language was the biggest obstacle. The monks were very kind to me but I suffered from the lack of instruction and desperately needed encouragement. Ajahn Chi was basically uncommunicative and not interested in teaching. Through a senior monk he told me, 'Watch me. Do as I do.' But he was never around to watch.

A western nun had given me permission to use her kuti while she was travelling in India. The walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling, most of them in English. With nothing else to do, I indulged myself and read, sometimes for eight hours a day, often by candlelight after evening chanting.

More than anything I wanted the ultimate buzz, to get beyond greed, hatred and delusion and get enlightened. With no one around to teach me otherwise, I allowed my essentially medieval, Catholic conditioning to translate what I was reading into an unnecessary abuse of my mind and body in an attempt to fast track the spiritual path.

Primarily a goal-oriented, born-again Buddhist, I became judgmental and critical of myself and increasingly pissed off with my fellow monks. I was diligent, keeping to the discipline, getting up at three in the morning to be ready for morning chanting by four. At the best of times only two or three of them ever bothered to appear. One morning they all curled up together and went to sleep in a brown heap in the corner of the *sala*. I sat bolt upright in righteous indignation, watching my mind going through various scenarios all centered on getting up and kicking them awake. At the end of the hour I concluded the chanting alone in a very loud voice to make sure they woke up in time to see me bow and walk out.

There were days when I wandered around the monastery singing Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix songs. I would deliberately leave the chanting book in the kuti and refuse to sweep up. At the mealtime I filled my bowl with so much food that I could hardly move by the time I had finished eating it. By five-thirty in the evening I would be ravenous again, eating toothpaste or drinking water to take the edge off the hunger while I tried to distract my energy into cleaning, sweeping paths, more reading. I knew I was being a pain. I didn't want to cause trouble but I was so unhappy. The culture differences seemed hopelessly irreconcilable although I never seriously considered leaving.

Letters to America were written when I felt righteous and inspired. I had written to my parents saying basically, 'this is what I am doing. Either you accept it or you forget it. If you chose to forget it, then forget it for the rest of our lives.'

My father would always have problems with me being a Buddhist monk. He became more resigned than accepting. My mother was relatively philosophical about it. She had been disappointed with me as a Catholic and hoped I would be a better Buddhist. My sisters and brother didn't understand what I was doing but if I was happy doing it, then it was fine by them.

My buddy Mike took a couple of years to come to terms with my preaching by post. I could almost hear him screaming back at me when he wrote: 'So

what if everyone became a monk and no one got married and had children? What then?' He could never see Buddhism as some wonderful dope that I wanted to share with him.

Going to Bangkok for my visa at the end of November put me back into contact with Ajahn Sumedho. He was staying in one of the royal monasteries in the suburbs and gave me a surprisingly cool reception. His manner was friendly but aloof. It was so unexpected and not part of the deal as far as I was concerned, but then he was drawing from more than seven years of experience and I had all of two months. I had overlooked the fact that he didn't want to be a teacher and I think he resented my projections.

I was angry and resentful until I allowed myself to see that he had his own life to live and baby-sitting me was not a priority. In his view, and quite rightly, I could take care of myself although there were times when I seriously doubted it.

After a couple of days he made time for me to talk and suggested that I go northeast to the monastery near Ubon to stay with Ajahn Chah, a teacher who was well known for his ability to communicate the discipline to western monks. Ajahn Chi was delighted to let me go and arranged for the monastery to pay my train ticket. Two weeks later I arrived at Wat Pah Pong early in the morning while most of the monks were out on alms round. I was taken to meet Ajahn Chah as the meal was being served.'

ajahn chah

My husband congratulated me on my astute choice of therapy to get him back into gear.

'This is very good for me, you know. It stimulates me and reminds me that I still have a brain, not only a tumor.'

It was good for both of us. We could lay aside the misery of the hospital and focus on that which was precious in our lives, walking hand in hand along the newly swept forest path to meet Ajahn Chah.

'I only fell truly in love twice in my life, the second time with my wife, but years before that with this big, chubby, round-faced monk who chose not to notice my approach until I was practically on top of him. He looked up with the same kind of a snort that a young water buffalo makes when something

unexpected happens, then asked me through the monk who had volunteered to translate, where I had come from and what I wanted. I met his direct, kindly look and all my anxiety vanished. He gave an impression of strength and solidity, a no-nonsense fearlessness. I knew he would be my teacher.

For the next ten days he took me everywhere with him, not to judge but to watch me, to find out what made this latest western disciple tick. I had bought several classical Theravadan texts translated into English from Wat Kow Chalok. When I started asking questions about the *Visutti Magha*, a wordy and obtuse meditation manual, he decided I was hung up on books. I was ordered not to read anymore until he gave me permission.

'It's better to study your mind and your heart than read books.'

Generally speaking I began to enjoy myself. I was young and healthy and didn't have many of the usual problems that western monks experienced. My digestive system thrived on sticky rice and I found it easier to work with the Thai's than most of the others did. Ajahn Chah expected his disciples to die to all previously held values and cherishings. He demanded my complete commitment to him as a teacher and would be satisfied with nothing less. Mentally, it was an awesome prospect but that was how I understood it then.'

I interrupted: 'He sounds like a drill instructor.'

Greg nodded: 'He wasn't into compromise and he wasn't into being a nice guy. There was a real hardness about him, a harshness that puzzled me sometimes, and he wasn't afraid of making people angry with him. He used to say that I had 'soldier' energy, abrupt, hard, at times overwhelming. Every so often he turned me loose, more than anything to see what I would do.

Once we were all involved in digging a new well. I took one look at what was going on and thought, '*this will take forever.*' At the rate we were going, we would still be at it by midnight. So I started running, working so fast that everyone else had to do the same to keep up with me. We did everything we were theoretically not supposed to do. The work was fun. We had races. When Ajahn Chah came to see how we were getting on we were dripping but finished in record time. He knew who had initiated it.

'Thĥār,' he said, meaning soldier.

It took me about three years to calm down, the same length of time before he finally relented and let me read again. It wasn't long before I had learned to trust him completely.

Sometimes I hated him, particularly on long *Wan Phra* nights [the weekly all-night meditation sitting coinciding with the quarter phases of the moon] when he had been talking for hours and the cold coming up through the polished stone floor of the *sala* locked the cramp into my legs and knees.

Once he talked continuously for seven and a half hours. When I understood Lao enough to realize that often he was only talking for the sake of talking, I hated him even more. He would repeat the same stories maybe three times over in one night, laughing in the same way at the same jokes until I wanted to scream.

As far as he was concerned it was all part of the training to teach us patience. After a night like that, morning meditation would be a joke with almost everyone horizontal except him. He seemed to have access to an extra source of energy that took him beyond the need for sleep.'

Greg smiled, wrapped up in the memories. A nurse came in, checked his vital signs, left us in peace again. His eyes were bright. He was ready to go on.

I prompted: 'Who taught you Thai etiquette?'

'That was Ajahn Chah's personal assistant, Samanera Wate. He sent us away for six months at the start of the hot season in the spring of 1973 to stay at Wat Suan KÎwy, a small branch monastery a few hours south of Ubon. The villagers were very glad to have me there. They considered it a great honor to support a western monk.

Wate was less impressed. He set about schooling me from the first day. Every move I made, every step I took, how I made my bows, the way I ate, how I held the spoon, how I used it in my bowl, the way I moved my hand if I wanted to cough or sneeze, everything came under his unnerving scrutiny.

How many times a day would I hear, 'Oh Santi, that's not beautiful! Do it this way!'

More often than not he ended up screaming at me for something I had done or not done, or failed to understand.

While I was willing to accept his terms it was fine, but conversation could never be casual because my Thai was so bad that he often found it easier to ignore me. As the language barrier gradually broke down and I needed him less, he became increasingly intolerant of me. When I was articulate enough to argue my case, it was clear to him that I could be a formidable personality able to draw on a background of experience that was beyond his understanding.

He was clearly intimidated by my education, which I played on at my most patronizing. Nonetheless over that six months he dramatically transformed my whole demeanor, turning the ex-U.S. Marine, ex-street gang member, into a very dignified Thai novice who could have been sent to the royal palace to eat with the king and not disgrace himself.'

'Did it ever happen?' I asked. 'Did you ever eat with the king?'

‘No. I met other members of the royal family but never the king. Wate had other, more subtle ways of punishment. Like many of the monks, sweets and sweet food had become almost an obsession with me. It’s the only sensual ‘hit’ you get. One day a big pot of sweet rice was being served at the meal. Ajahn Dang set the precedent by helping himself to two huge ladlefuls before he passed it on. When it got to Wate, he put two equally huge ladlefuls into his own bowl but instead of passing it to me, he stood up and personally served me one ladleful and similarly to everyone below me down the line. I was so angry I couldn’t eat. I left the food and went outside to calm down, determined to put one over on him.

After hours of walking meditation, I came up with a recipe for a food parcel and sent it to my mother: one part brown sugar, one part maple syrup, one part instant coffee and one part honey. It would be very sweet, very brown and very ugly, hopefully enough to fool Wate into not wanting to taste it. Mixed together it came in a plastic tub weighing about four pounds that had to be delivered by one of the villagers. I gave him some American candy as payment for his trouble. Wate took one look and accepted it was nothing more than home-made medicine.’

He laughed. ‘It kept me buzzing for almost two weeks until the rains came and the *vassa* began.’

I offered him juice. He sipped at the straw.

‘The monsoon had a much gentler, more sustaining quality than the hot season. In meditation I could be acutely aware of the land absorbing and feeding on the life force in the deluge. I decided to keep the thirteen ascetic practices for the *vassa*, starting with a week of fasting and keeping the ‘sitter’s practice’, sleeping sat propped up against the wall of the kuti.

My mind broke on the fifth day. I lay on the floor moaning and groaning in a hell of mental and physical agony, fantasizing, almost hallucinating about sweets and food.

Ajahn Dang was angry with me for insisting on carrying on with the fast, but I was determined to drag myself through another two days of torment, too weak to keep the sitter’s practice and hovering on the edge of total insanity. The second week was noticeably less traumatic. My body adjusted surprisingly quickly to sitting up to sleep every night and functioning on one bowl of rice every day.’

I couldn’t help but smile. There we were at the root of what would become Ajahn Ānando, the painfully thin Abbot of Chithurst building the dry-stone walls at the entrance to the monastery hyped up on a six-week fast.

‘Did you really never want to leave in those early days?’ I asked him.

‘There were times I gave in to an all-consuming loneliness, a desolation of spirit while I struggled with the language and the cultural isolation. I made quite a ritual around bringing out my wallet and laying out the few photographs I had kept from my former life to remind me who I had been and what I had looked like. It never occurred to me to disrobe and I didn’t want to go back to being that other person again, but the pictures reassured me somehow that the world still existed some place out there beyond all that rain.’

worst imaginings

There was no rain to soften that cancer-summer in Richmond, Virginia, no life force feeding on a deluge, not while we were there. Only a stale, air-conditioned atmosphere behind sealed windows barely relieved by the hot, humid blast that called itself fresh air whenever I went outdoors.

The oncology unit was a completely different experience from the rest of the hospital. I pushed my wounded Marine into a quiet world of softly muted pink with pictures on the walls and a smiling, extra-caring receptionist. If we hadn’t already considered the sum of the implications of cancer, this tastefully sweetened atmosphere detonated it in our faces with a bang. We were there to talk radiation and the possibility of a course of stereotactic treatment at the end of the first six weeks of therapy. As we would be based in Hampton it was decided that the preliminary treatment would be arranged from there and we would come back to Richmond to apply for the rest.

We held hands tightly all the way back to the ward, leaving the stretcher to weave erratically through the corridors as the full horror of the reality of our situation began piercing even Greg’s armor-plated optimism. I had been carefully hoarding our holiday money, hoping against hope that we would still be able to spend it on something wonderful. That afternoon a hundred dollars went on a bargain CD/tape player that had been wrongly priced in the Base Exchange in the Mall.

His face lit up when I opened the box on the bed and gave him the tapes I had bought. Choice had been very limited but I had found a ‘Best of Motown’ tape that had some of the good songs from the sixties that I thought he might like. Our fragile enthusiasm turned to tears at the first line of the first

song. 'Baby, I need your lovin', got to have all your lovin', sang The Four Tops while we held each other and wept. All the brightness, the essence of Greg and Mali Klein, would it ever come back?

The nightmare had only just begun. News about the house came from Hampton. We couldn't rent it; we had to buy it, our worst imagining.

'Oh no!' said Greg.

I objected: 'We can't afford to buy a house. Can't we rent one? There must be some others. I can't believe there aren't.'

Apparently not and we wouldn't need any extra money to buy it if we used Greg's GI loan that neither of us had ever heard of. When we wanted to leave the loan would theoretically pass on to another GI. It sounded too easy to me. But the deal was already negotiated. All I had to do was to give our consent and Jean and Karen could go into the house and start cleaning.

What could be done? We were stuck in the hospital miles away from Hampton and the realtor. I knew all about buying houses in England but nothing about the formalities of purchase in America except that it had to be very different. With a third operation facing us in as many weeks there was no time for me to do anything about it personally and I was too exhausted to know where to begin. I only knew that Greg staying alive depended on me getting him out of the hospital, which left no option other than to reluctantly consent.

It was our practice to consciously give difficult situations into *metta*, to defuse problems with loving-kindness rather than add to them with a fearful, anxiety response. That didn't mean that we allowed ourselves to be bullied and this was no time to be passive. Both Ajahn Chah and Ānando could be hard and uncompromising. So could I. It was my war now. I was Mali Klein with every legal and moral right to nurse my husband and defend him. He gave the orders and I had ferocity in spades for carrying them out. It was time for *Thħār*, soldier energy. Metta would have to wait for a while.

When I could I stamped. Buying a house was an absolute betrayal of our principles and personal values. It went against everything we were about. Greg had spent his adult life leaving America. I had been years under vow never to buy a house again. What were we doing getting into this situation now?

He came out of anesthetic hearing two nurses and I discussing the color and splendor of his legs as we put him on a stretcher for an MRI scan.

He groaned: 'Women!'

He didn't recover from this operation, complaining of increasing pain that by the second morning had him moaning aloud and holding his head. A worried Doctor John came into the room.

'What's happening to him?' I asked anxiously.

'I don't know. The MRI was okay.'

'What could be happening?'

'It could be the tumor. They get angry when they're cut. I'll get him a big dose of steroid and see if we can get another scan right away.'

For the second time in seven days I helped load him into the scanner, holding onto the bags that were dripping a steroid and saline solution into his arm so fast that it was burning his vein.

John came and sat with me while the scanner was in operation.

'What exactly could be happening to the tumor?' I said.

'It could be getting away from us.'

'So how long would we have then?'

'Two weeks.'

We were supposed to be going back to Hampton the next day.

I thought: *I'm not ready for this.*

I asked: 'And if the steroid works?'

'It will reduce the inflammation and the pressure and he will be okay.'

I asked a dreaded question: 'What else does steroid do?'

'It swells up the face, gives a voracious appetite and puts unnecessary weight on the torso. It wastes the muscles of the arms and legs, causes stomach ulcers and rots the pancreas. High doses can also account for behavioral problems and it's addictive. Reduce it too quickly and he could experience withdrawal symptoms.'

My poor, beloved fitness fanatic, the solution was everything he had always feared.

John added: 'The next few months are going to be tough on you, Mali.'

'I can take it. I'm his wife, that's what I'm here for,' I said, wearing my best brave face.

I asked the most dreaded question: 'With a tumor like this, how long have we got?'

'Maybe a year with radiation, if you're lucky.'

He went to check the scan. I sat in the corner of the waiting area perched on the arm of a chair, repeating my new mantra over and over: 'Please let the steroid work. Please let the steroid work. Please let the steroid work. Please let the steroid work.'

The telephone was ringing in the corridor as we came back to the ward.

I picked it up and spoke to Gillian, our self-appointed news relay to the Sangha, telling her what had happened.

'When will you know if the steroid is working?' she asked.

'I don't know, maybe later today. He's having two large intravenous doses now and then he's on forty milligrams a day instead of eight.'

'You will let me know, won't you?'

'Yes.'

John was being generous in his estimation. The nurses were more inclined to give us six months. The word 'hospice' rather than 'home' floated into the conversation more than once when moving him was being considered. A word that meant sanctuary to so many people ignited the silent scream into an instant, white-hot rage in me.

'No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!'

The hospice system is the answer for many people who are terminally sick. For some it is not, and my husband was one of them. He had travelled all his life and nothing would make him die quicker than shutting him away somewhere, no matter how beautiful the place was. Our hospice was the world and he wasn't going to be shut away to die. It was not what he wanted and I wouldn't let it happen.

I talked to John. 'How soon can we get out of here?'

'You can go the day after tomorrow if he stabilizes.'

'Can you arrange it for me please? He's going to die anyway if we stay here. I can look after him better at home.'

'I'll see what I can do.'

By the afternoon we had our miracle. The pain was gone. Greg was sitting up and talking. He had no idea what had happened. It was left to me to tell him.

'Gregory Klein, do you realize what you have done today?'

'No. Tell me.'

'You have frightened us all out of our wits once again. What's more you have almost succeeded in personally cancelling the ordination at Chithurst.'

'What do you mean?'

'Ajahn Sumedho was so concerned you might die before he had a chance to see you that he was prepared to drop everything to come straight over here, which would have effectively put paid to the ordination next Sunday.'

Greg had the grace to be astounded. 'He was prepared to do that?'

'Yes, of course he was. Everyone in the monastery is so worried about you. They have been chanting themselves silly for you, don't you understand?'

‘Maybe I’d better talk to him,’ he said contritely.

I agreed. ‘Yes, maybe you should. How are you feeling now?’

‘Fine.’

‘Well enough to sit in a wheelchair?’

‘I think so.’

‘Okay, I will go and call Amaravati. When they hear your voice they will know for sure that you are still alive.’

John arranged for us to travel to the Hampton VA by ambulance on Friday, July 23rd. Joyce’s telephone campaign got us booked into Riverside Cancer Unit for radiation, only twenty minutes drive from the house. We left the hospital with a bag bulging with medication and a wheelchair, the mobile contribution to the furniture in the house we were dreading moving into.

John came to see us as the paramedics were lifting Greg onto the stretcher.

‘Mali, can he walk?’ he asked.

‘Of course he can.’ I knew perfectly well he could not.

It was up to me to get back our happiness. That was never going to happen in a hospital. We had the wheelchair and I was determined to drag him bodily into the car when we got to Hampton. So we had a brain tumor. We had always had it; climbing the snow mountain under the glacier, cuddling close when he proposed to me. It swam with us in the wine dark sea, posed for pictures on our wedding day. We were happy then. We would be again.

lethal rays

The house was a non-descript, single-storied, standard American wooden structure passed through by a procession of previous owners who had left none of the little touches to show that it had ever been loved. Surrounded by huge trees that cut out all the light, it stood on a small, sterile plot covered in newly clipped, coarse grass. Inside it smelled of carpet shampoo and cleaning chemicals overlaying the stale odor of too many cigarettes that only a wrecking ball could ever get rid of.

Between us, Karen and I half-lifted, half-dragged Greg out of the car and up the steps into the kitchen. Completely exhausted he went straight to bed while I set up the shrine and toured this new, unwanted space. Jean and Karen had wisely interpreted our needs: minimum furniture, a big bed on the floor in the main bedroom, loaning us just enough linen and kitchenware. Nothing in excess.

We were accustomed to our silence. I turned off the large, very noisy air-conditioning unit rattling the dining room wall, opened the windows and turned on the fans. My lungs were used to breathing ozone-charged, clean air under wide-open Mediterranean skies. Three stifling, air-conditioned weeks in Richmond had left me with a racking cough and no time to be sick. The phone was connected. I pulled the plug out of the socket in the wall. We were desperately in need of our peace and space, desperately in need of time to recover and reorganize, our version of R&R. Everyone else's needs had to come a long way second to that.

Among the cards and letters waiting for us was a packet of 'Chithurst' incense. I pounced on it with relief, lit several sticks and waved them into every corner of the house to bring even just a hint of the familiar peace of the *sala* into the bewildering chaos that was our life right then.

Greg called out: 'Mali! Where are you? I need to go to the bathroom!'

I walked into the bedroom to lay the last stick of incense on the shrine.

'Hello, beloved, did you sleep well? Do you like the shrine?' I asked.

'Yes, it's fine. Will you help me please?'

'Gregory, I'm not going to attempt to stand you up on my own so you will have to crawl like I did on Ródos last winter when I hurt my ankle. Do you remember all those lectures you gave me about right brain, left brain co-ordination?'

'No.'

As I was talking I was maneuvering him to the edge of the mattress and rolling him onto his side ready for the lift.

'Well, here's your chance to practice what you preach, even if you don't remember it. It's the only way I can think of moving you until you are stronger on your legs.'

I heaved him up onto his knees. With my hands on his shoulders to steady him, he crawled forward, instantly mobile.

'I don't want my family to see I'm like this,' he said.

'It's only your mother and your sisters.'

'It doesn't matter. I don't want them to see this. You're my wife, I don't mind you helping me but no one else.'

He insisted on making love to me twice that first night. Afterwards I lay crushed beneath the weight he could no longer support for himself, the tears pouring silently into my ears, spilling out down my neck and onto the pillow. The grieving process had already begun.

The house was a problem from the minute the realtor moved in with her pens and her mountain of paperwork. I didn't like her body language. She wouldn't make eye contact and something in her look and tone of voice had me instantly on my guard. She got treated to the icy, pruned down to minimally polite version of my classy British accent.

'Have you both read everything I left you, Mali?' she asked.

'Of course not! When would we have had the time?' I said, indicating Greg who was not much more than semi-conscious, sitting on the floor against the wall propped up with pillows because I couldn't trust him not to fall out of a chair.

'We don't want to buy this house. We don't want a house. There are plenty around here empty and available for rental but we are told that you leave us no option.'

'Well, you have agreed to purchase,' she said primly.

'We did not agree to purchase,' I replied.

Greg opened his eyes. 'It is something I have avoided all my life.'

It had been agreed in our absence that she should work both for the vendor and us. It soon became obvious that the arrangement was not to our advantage. She made it clear that she intended to take care of the vendor first and then mop up as best as she might for us afterwards. Far from costing us nothing the deal ate up every penny we had. Our brand of Buddhism doesn't do debts and the mortgage company wanted three thousand dollars more.

The steel jaws of the American realty trap were closing over us. My head ached continually. Three hours of unbroken sleep each night was a luxury. There weren't many days when I didn't get up feeling like I needed to vomit.

Jean made over some money she had saved out of Greg's pension to take care of the bills. We blessed Karen for being able to stay on during the six weeks of the radiation treatment. We sat in the back of the car, most of the time Greg laying down with his head on a pillow on my knees, Karen laughing, talking, cheering us up as she negotiated the roads and the miles of commercial boulevards. Once we sat out a tornado together in a parking lot while the rain pounded down on the roof of the car so hard we could hardly hear ourselves speak.

As Greg often said afterwards, 'Karen was the best thing that came out of that summer.'

Cancer is not content unless it rules your life and Charles was a powerful and demanding parasite that almost bled us dry in those early days. It took

almost all of Greg's available energy simply to function. What little that was left manifested as a mixture of innocence and aggression, the child and the man. More of the child presented itself to his family, the pseudo-dependence and the sweetness, playing the poor, hard-done-by invalid deprived by his wife of the junk foods the steroid medication made him crave so that his mother would make them for him instead.

I got some of the sweetness but mostly the man, afraid, enraged at the possibility of the loss of his strength, his vitality, dependant only because he had to be. When the contrast in his behavior became so extreme that I couldn't bear it any longer, he would smash his fist repeatedly into whatever was nearest, his face with those desperate, slightly swollen eyes jammed into mine, his mouth a twist of bitterness screaming,

'I'm sick! I'm sick! I'm sick!'

Forty milligrams of steroid a day was already producing the predicted side effects. His face was beginning to show signs of the infamous 'moon' shape as it filled out around the eyes and the cheeks. His arms and legs had already lost shape and muscle tone, his chest was no longer as broad. He rarely ate a meal without some discomfort.

At the same time he was always hungry. He left the hospital craving salads. Two days later nothing would satisfy him except pizza and French fries. It became a major source of conflict, which we tried to keep within the relative privacy of our own domain. Not so easy when your mother-in-law lives a few doors down the road and you can't be sure how much the neighbors can overhear through thin wooden walls. When the day came when he could look critically at himself in the mirror I didn't want him to see a bloated, ugly parody of what he had once been.

Fortunately he had not lost his sense of humor or the ability to laugh at himself. Many times he related with delight how he had made me stop in front of a cookie stall in the mall one afternoon while we were shopping.

'Mali, can I have a cookie?' he asked, indicating a mouth-watering, giant chocolate chip cookie.

'No, Gregory, have an apple.'

'Mali! Please!'

'You're not going to turn into a fat slob. I'm sorry, but no, Gregory,' I replied, pushing the wheelchair firmly on.

'You're merciless!'

'I love you.'

No matter how early we had to be at the hospital our day always began with morning meditation. I lit the candles and the incense and led the chanting while Greg lay in bed, hands held in anjali and doing his best to stay awake for at least the first ten minutes of the sitting. The last twenty minutes were given over to a full healing session. I worked on him as he dozed, invoking the Medicine Buddha, the Holy Ones, all wise and kindly Beings, doing all that I could to clear the shock and the deeper wounding from his body, mind and heart.

We were encouraged when after a week he could pull himself upright and walk with me supporting him. We moved into the dining room for meals. It was tempting to continue feeding him but as that only helped me, I put all his food into big bowls on a tray to minimize spillage. When he was well enough to totter around the house by himself, I kept resolutely to whatever I was doing, willing myself not to interfere unless I had to.

Our oncologist at the Hampton VA hospital was quietly spoken, very laid back. He gave me his home number to call any time I was worried about anything and stopped mentioning the word 'hospice' when Greg laughed and told him to check out my body language; arms folded obstinately against my chest, legs crossed in a tight angry knot, feet only not quite tapping the floor in fury.

The radiologist was another professional who didn't know how to look us in the eyes after he saw the scans. However he was open to persuasion to translate the images for me, pointing out the initial damage from the bullet wound and indicating how the tumor was pushing the brain stem to one side, putting it under increasing pressure. I was shocked when I saw exactly how much of my husband's head was already allocated to Charles.

'However did he manage to go for so long with a thing like that in his head and not show more symptoms?' I asked.

Unaware of my husband's history, he replied: 'I don't know. I can only say he must be a highly disciplined man.'

He called us into one of the side rooms before we left.

'I have to tell you both that radiation rarely cures this type of tumor. It may shrink it but they invariably grow back again.'

'I'm not going to have the treatment,' announced the patient when we were back at the house.

'But you must! It's the only thing that will buy us time to find the miracle.'

'I won't have it. I'll have acupuncture instead. I won't be a guinea pig.'

'Gregory, until there is a definitive cure for cancer everyone who has it is a

guinea pig,' I said desperately. 'With the best of intention I have never heard of an acupuncturist who has successfully dealt with a tumor like we've got.'

He was adamant. 'I don't want it, I tell you. I don't want to lose my hair.'

I pleaded: 'You won't lose all of it, only at the sides and it will grow back again. Please have the radiation, if only for me. It's the only thing that will shut the tumor down for long enough while we look for something else. I don't want to lose you. I love you. Please, please!'

Seeing my husband pinned to a bed by the mask clipped over his face and the flickering magnetic interference on the computer screen as the rays got to work was like watching something out of 'Star Trek'.

I told him: 'Gregory, you must stop talking about the Spanish Inquisition when you're in there. I don't think it helps the treatment if you go in with a negative attitude.'

'I guess you're right. Maybe I should give the machine a name and practice *metta* towards it. How about that?'

'Then it has to be a female name, one that you can develop a deeply meaningful relationship with. You have my permission, just this once.'

We called her Layla. She exhausted him but after the ninth treatment, he was showing so much improvement that I was given permission to try reducing the steroid medication very slowly down to twenty-four milligrams. One morning during the third week he woke up with a dusting of hair on his pillow. Three days later the back and sides of his head were completely bare.

Sometimes, on the good days, he looked at himself in the mirror and then at me, saying, 'I don't know how you can love me but I am so glad that you do.'

'You're my husband. I can't help it. I suppose I should be used to you abusing me by now.'

'I'd rather you didn't have to be. I want to get off the steroid.'

'You will, when you're better. It will be all right, you'll see.'

'Oh Mali, I hope so. I do hope so. I'm sorry it had to be this way. When I'm well you won't have to worry about anything again. I'll take care of it all as I used to.'

'I know you will.'

On one of our more difficult days after he had finally fallen asleep, I stood in the living room looking out of the window, claustrophobic, self-pitying, straining to see a patch of open sky through the forest of branches smothering the view. I was wishing for the thousandth time that the house

would blow up and take us with it, when a man came walking down the street pushing his profoundly handicapped little daughter in a specially adapted wheelchair.

I watched them pass the house, disappear behind the bushes in the yard next door, reflecting: '*No matter how bad everything is, there is always someone worse off than us.*'

That child would never know the freedom we had known and might know again. She might never know our kind of loving. We had so much to be grateful for. There were always the moments of tenderness. There was still the laughter. He could still appreciate my teasing and sometimes outrageous remarks.

'It's not time for me to die yet,' he said. 'There's still so much I want to do and I want more time with you.'

My poor beloved, he struggled so hard to get well for me.

key word

Greg was quite happy to delegate the cancer war to his wife, giving me the field while he sat back and relaxed in the wheelchair grinning from ear to ear. The doctors got used to it, even admired it. Armed with a big, grateful smile deployed at appropriate intervals, I made sure we got a lot done in a short time, leaving space for a few minutes socializing before the consultation was over.

It turned out to be the best strategy to win everyone over to our side, eventually even the realtor after she was heard to say, 'if you want to frighten someone to death, put Mali on the phone.' While it impressed my Marine, I did own some feelings of remorse towards her, particularly when I saw she was truly terrified of me. But I couldn't let anyone bully us into doing something we didn't want to do. No one was going to bully us. Absolutely no one.

As Layla worked on shrinking the tumor and the good days got longer, we were able to pick up his story again. The keyword was Ānando, calling on his monastic conditioning to focus his attention once more on the practice and how it evolved for him in those early days in Thailand. He lay propped up in bed with me cuddled beside him, a pen and another of our collection of yellow legal pads ready to hand.

'Tell me about your ordination, how you came to be Ānando.'

‘Let me see.’ He closed his eyes.

‘I had been in Thailand for more than a year and a half and I was in no hurry to give up what freedom I had as a novice. Then the hot season started and I was told that I would be invited to ordain with five other Thai novices in June. I had two months to prepare for it and to worry about it.

The six of us were split into two groups of three to learn the chanting and the ritual of the ordination ceremony. Physically I was the eldest and by tradition I should be the first to ordain, but one of the others couldn’t stand the idea of being second to a westerner. So the monk in charge of us allowed himself to be persuaded to make me the first of the second group.

I already had the basic robes. All I needed was a sangati, the outer robe, which a senior monk made up for me so fast one afternoon that I never learned how to do it for myself. The two groups met almost every afternoon to practice the chanting with our two acharias, the monks who would act for us at the ordination by formally requesting permission to proceed at each stage of the ceremony. Afterwards I would go out alone with the chanting book, doing walking meditation for another hour or two to try to cram it all into my head.

My state of dread was not helped by the heat or the effect it had on Ajahn Chah that summer. We could only be certain of the routine during the *vassa*. Before then it was subject to any inspiration or eccentricity he might come up with.’

He paused. Fearing a break in the narrative, I prompted: ‘Like what?’

‘For instance, he always came to the eating hall for the meal, always eating more than we did. Then for some reason he took to locking us in when he had finished, leaving us to meditate for an hour broiling under the tin roof. I could only concentrate on sitting straight and not falling over, praying that the monk in charge of the bell would be awake enough to ring it when the hour was up. He rarely was.

Sometimes the lay people would be invited to look in on us and watch us nodding all over the place while Ajahn Chah entertained them with stories of how we were doing. This went on for over two weeks and then stopped as abruptly as it started. He was the boss and he was making sure that we all appreciated it.

3 key word

A few weeks before the ordination date, I asked him if I could have another name.

'You don't like Santi?' he said. 'You want a name that's traditional, appropriate for time and place?'

'Yes.'

He sent me off to borrow a book from one of the preceptors. I went through the list of names and definitions with Winn, one of the other novices. As I had been born on a Sunday, the name had to begin with A or Ā. I liked Anigho. It meant 'wisdom' in Pāli, but Winn said it was too close in translation to 'nigger' in Thai. He preferred Ānando, the name of the Buddha's personal assistant meaning 'bliss'. He thought it was a much more auspicious name. Ajahn Chah thought so too.

'Do you think you can live up to it?' he asked.

'I'll try,' I said.

He only had difficulty remembering it for a week before it stuck. Then I was ready for the ceremony.'

I asked, softly: 'Do you remember the date, beloved?'

He thought for a moment. 'It was June 3rd 1974. We had to go to the main monastery at Warin, seventeen kilometers away to do it. Fear kept me awake all the previous night during *Wan Phra*. When it came to the closing stages of the ceremony where I would have to chant alone to request my formal admittance into the Sangha, I was shaking so badly that my acharias decided to omit that part and carry on with the concluding stanzas. Ajahn Chah was very surprised when we got back to Wat Pah Pong and he was told what they had done, demanding to know why. The reason that I suffered so much from stage fright didn't stop a momentarily disturbing expression crossing his face as he looked at me. It had the effect of making me doubt for the rest of my monastic life whether my ordination was ever truly valid.'

He frowned. I cuddled closer. He stroked my hair, looked down at me.

'I never stopped loving him, you know. He had this magnificent, intense look like he was looking right into my heart, and a quality of selflessness and a capacity to give that was truly extraordinary to be around. No matter how much he had to do, he always found time for someone in need. Most important of all for me, he had the rare ability to understand the western propensity for self-hatred, something almost unheard of in an eastern teacher. I was honored by his attention and by being allowed to share in this truly wise and remarkable Being.'

ānando

We were back on track, returning to Thailand for short periods most days. I set up the computer in the back room, ordered a new printer and began weaving the manuscript together while Greg slept off the effects of the radiation. I had the results ready to read aloud to him when he woke up, noting the changes he wanted made, inserting any extra text he thought should be included.

'Ordination brought about an immediate and dramatic change in my lifestyle. As a novice I had learned how to serve. Venerable Ānando had to learn to be waited upon and seldom by anyone who was as efficient as I thought I had been. I'd had the 'making drinks' procedure down to a fine art. I could boil water in record time even in a monsoon downpour. Now I had to watch and wait in enforced patience while the less competent got into conversation rather than remembering to light the fire.

Most importantly I had to learn to relinquish control. In the beginning I found it difficult to have people bowing to me but, as Ajahn Sumedho later pointed out, it was nothing personal. They were bowing to what I represented. It could be quite a strong reflection to have someone coming up and bowing to me just at the moment when I was allowing my mind to indulge in greed or hatred or some other defilement. The mental discipline that is essential to the monastic life is all encompassing and such a timely and gracious reminder of failure would bring up all the guilt and remorse that was always just below the surface.

In some ways the western monks, brought up predominantly Christian or Jewish, had the cards stacked against them. We had to learn to accept that in Buddhism we were not guilty until proven innocent. There was no Original Sin to stain our conception and it was a relief to find that it was still possible to pray, not to any particular god or Being, but just to pray. We were not reflections of our parents and we couldn't blame them for our failings. It was quite something to have to overcome our deep conditioning and appreciate that each of us was born with his unique karmic configuration, with personalities in our own right. We were responsible for our own individual lives and what we made of them.

Twice monthly, on the new and full moon days, I had to join the other monks chanting the *Patimokka*, the two hundred and twenty-seven rules of the monastic discipline. It took almost an hour to chant and for the western monks an average of three to four months to memorize. Confession was a very different experience without the extremes of emotion associated with the Catholic ritual. The absence of the concepts of heaven and hell and the lack of punishment by prayer casts a completely different light over the act of contrition.

There were seven categories of infringement that were talked over with a senior monk, usually of our own choosing, but there were no resulting penances unless the rules had obviously been broken in a key sense. Any monk confessing to a major offence would have to be interrogated by his seniors before undertaking a prescribed period of isolation within the community until twenty monks were available together to hear his confession and re-establish his status in the Sangha.

I spent the next *vassa* near the Cambodian border in a small monastery with Ajahn Kuhn and a novice. We often heard gunfire. Ajahn Kuhn's conviction that I was a likely target because I was American did not add to his peace of mind, even though the jet squadrons were leaving Thailand around this time, finally pulling out of the Vietnam war. I watched them roaring away into the distance, relieved that at last there might be an end to a pointless conflict that was becoming increasingly remote to me.

An extraordinary mind state of absolute quietness, the elusive 'peace of mind' that had been my grail for years, came upon me and I didn't know what to do with it. I woke up to it and fell asleep with it, living my days in a luminosity of calm and quiet that had no concept of time, only a vast and attractive emptiness. I was so used to mental stimulation, thinking, analyzing, assessing, and now suddenly there was nothing.

Had I been with someone who spoke English I might have been able to find out what was going on in me but there was little chance of instruction from Ajahn Kuhn. He was capable but very detached. Something in his mannerisms suggested he could be intimidated by me so I thought it best not to say anything.

The quietness went on for more than a week. I knew enough to appreciate that this was a very desirable state to be in and that I should make an effort to consciously maintain it. But I felt I had to do something to get a perspective on it. Doing walking meditation one evening alone in the *sala*, I stopped and shouted into the Void:

'Okay, who is it then?'

The answer came echoing back, huge and infinite.

Who?

Insight: In the moments of the mind going back to its source, the personality dies and everything it has identified with no longer exists.

The trouble was I was getting bored with this day after day of non-existence. Under instruction I might have been able to make positive use of the mind state, maybe even entering the 'absorptions', the ultra-fine states of consciousness that were counted among the blessings of the Holy life and which, according to the scriptures, were supposed to have discernible and long-lasting effects.

Instead I deliberately started thinking. One or two drops of water in a pool don't make much of a ripple but there is no tranquility at the foot of a waterfall. It took an effort in the beginning but thought has an accumulative effect, a rapidly gathering momentum. I watched the perfect peace and stillness shattering in the roar of my habitually thinking mind.'

His wife asked: 'Did you regret breaking that mind state?'

'No. Like I said, I didn't know what to do with it.'

'Did you trust it?'

'Probably not. I was still keeping some of the ascetic practices, mainly the sitter's practice because there had been no good reason to stop once I got used to it. The Thai monks saw it as something exalted and gave me a lot of respect. The exception was Ajahn Chah who saw it for what it really was, just an ego trip. He put a stop to it for good when the community next came together for the May full moon Wesak festival, celebrating the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha.

nanachat

In 1975 there were twenty-six thousand Buddhist monasteries in Thailand catering for more than three hundred thousand monks, including fifty foreign (*farang*) monastics who could turn out to be more of a liability than an asset in the community. They had different needs. Many preferred to eat vegetarian food. They couldn't digest sticky rice and there were always the language and cultural problems.

Some of the Thai Ajahns did everything they could to make them as comfortable as possible; others found them critical, arrogant and generally a pain in the neck. More than once there were disputes and it made sense to

set about centralizing the western contingent in one monastery. Accordingly Ajahn Sumedho was invited to establish Wat Pah Nanachat, the first international Forest monastery, only forty minutes walk from Wat Pah Pong and Ajahn Chah.

I decided I had been out in the boonies with Thai monks for long enough. Ajahn Sumedho had no objections to me joining the community but the final word rested with Ajahn Chah. Foolishly I thought I needed an elaborate reason instead of the honest one, namely that I wanted to be with Ajahn Sumedho in a more culturally familiar atmosphere.

My first interview with Ajahn Chah was a mess.

He asked: 'Why do you want to go?'

'To help build the monastery.'

'It's already built.'

He got up and left me kneeling in the middle of the floor.

At midnight he found me kneeling in the dust waiting to catch him as he left the assembly hall.

'What do you want?'

'Please can I go to Wat Pah Nanachat?'

'Why do you want to go?'

'To practice.'

'You can practice here,' he said, stepping past me.

One of the Thai Ajahns agreed to intercede for me, suggesting I tell the whole truth. The problem was that I had heard they were having coffee more than once a week and I couldn't bring myself to admit that.

Ajahn Chah launched into a diatribe in Lao over our heads as we knelt in front of him. It's a funky language sounding more aggressive than it really is. At the end I bowed and left, thinking he had been talking about people who followed their own desires without considering what motivated them.

I was amazed when the Thai Ajahn told me: 'In spite of what you think, Ajahn Chah said you could go.'

The western monks were getting ready to leave. I went with them to pay respects.

Ajahn Chah looked at me. 'Where are you going?'

'To Wat Pah Nanachat.'

'Why?'

'To live with Ajahn Sumedho.'

‘Aaah,’ he said. ‘So now we get the truth, huh?’

Despite his conviction that all westerners suffered from ‘diarrhea mouth’, the monastery became remarkably quiet surprisingly quickly once we were all settled in. He didn’t understand that when we hadn’t been together for months at a time, there was a lot of catching up to do that didn’t allow for the Middle Way of being ‘cool’ and ‘low key’. Laughter was supposed to be soft and seldom heard but we were more demonstrative than Thai people and our humor louder. He would say things like ‘westerners couldn’t shut up if their lives depended on it,’ and ‘all they do is talk,’ and we had ‘stupid feet’ because we were always hitting our feet on roots or stones in the forest and getting cuts and bruises that took a long time to heal in the tropics.

He didn’t say so at the time but he was very pleased to be sending us to live in a monastery that had been built on an old charnel ground where we would have to take part in the cremations that were still carried out there. The villagers were convinced the place was haunted and he wanted us to get a first hand experience of ghosts. Nothing ever materialized to me. I only found the atmosphere uncomfortable in two of the kutis and along one of the meditation paths.

There were twelve of us living there for the first *vassa*, mainly British and American with English as our first language. The villagers saw it as a great honor to have us there and supported us extremely well. We had coffee more than once a week and no one objected to us using dental floss. From the Thai perspective the idea of monks flicking old food out of their mouths after the meal was gauche. It didn’t matter that they thought nothing of blackening their teeth chewing beetle nut and filling the spittoons with dark red phlegm.

The ambience in the monastery often depended on Ajahn Sumedho’s temperament. As a first time abbot of course he had a lot to learn. Inevitably he had limitations and we had to learn to accept them. For me personally, one of his outstanding qualities was that whenever he was on the line, he usually responded wisely and came up with the right answers. As Ajahn Chah said, he learned quickly and never made the same mistake twice. I didn’t have the love for Ajahn Sumedho that I had for Ajahn Chah but I needed to be devoted to him as my teacher.

At that stage in my practice my dedication was aimed primarily towards the teacher rather than what was being taught. I could demonstrate my devotion by giving his legs a nightly massage to ease the pain from an old foot injury and it gave me a chance to talk regularly with him. There were often times when I doubted if he ever really heard me. Our relationship was always a boat that was easily rocked by any lack of wisdom or insensitivity on either part.

I got my talking done in the first month or so at Nanachat. Generally I felt at ease with my fellow monks and didn't feel I had to seek out friendship. Dhurandharo was maybe the nearest who came to being a friend in those early days. At the beginning of the *vassa* I asked Ajahn Sumedho if I could maintain silence for the whole of the three months. In practice verbal exchange should be seen as an opportunity to teach or instruct. In excess it is an indulgence to be discouraged. At the time neither of us knew that silence was against the discipline, forbidden by the Buddha who wanted his disciples to teach.

Most of the monks chose to play my game, trying to phrase their questions so that they could be answered by a simple yes or no. Except Ajahn Sumedho who got very pissed off when a silent look was not the answer he wanted to a question. In some ways it was the best ascetic practice I had ever done. Until then I had never realized how much of my energy was dissipated through idle chatter. It taught me how sensitive I was to the demands and obligations involved with living in such unavoidably close association with my peers.

On several occasions when my actions were completely misinterpreted, I had no recourse to my usual policy of going out of my way to explain myself. Silence forced me to stay with my hurt feelings and watch the pain. Eventually in the last weeks I made a practice of it by deliberately aggravating Dhurandharo's moodiness towards me so that I could investigate my reactions to his anger. It was fairly one-sided because I had already decided not to let it hurt me but by the end of the three months I had the pain of peer group pressure more into perspective. I could be more detached in my interaction within the community.

Two years later I was thrown out of the nest too soon to spend my fourth *vassa* in London, invited to be one of the three monks accompanying Ajahn Sumedho in response to an invitation from the English Sangha Trust to bring the Theravadan Forest monastic tradition to the West.

I asked Ajahn Sumedho if there was anything particular I should have with me.

'Bring some long underwear,' he said.

My heart sank. Immigration was interesting at Gatwick Airport. The officer leafed through my passport, asked the routine question: 'How long do you intend to stay here?'

'Indefinitely.'

She raised her eyes, looked me over. 'How much money are you carrying?'

I handed her the letter from the trust. 'None. I'm not allowed to carry any.'

'Wait here,' she said.

She made a call, came back and waved me through. It was seven o'clock in the evening of July 7th 1977. For anyone who believed in the power of seven it had to be an auspicious day.'

There we left him to be greeted by a layman in the Arrivals Hall at London Gatwick as Gillian would greet us once again at London Heathrow in just a few more weeks.

it doesn't end here

A chance remark at a family dinner over the Labor Day weekend showed us how far his Catholic mother was prepared to go to keep her much loved son at her side. As Jean outlined the plans she had made for his living and his dying, with dawning horror we realized what we were getting into. We went back to the house feeling bruised and dejected.

Greg was exhausted. 'Come to bed, Mali-Mali. We'll talk about it in the morning.'

He was soon asleep but not I. It was still unbearably hot at night and the ceaseless droning from the fan was not conducive to peace, particularly on a night like this. I lay wide-awake staring up at the shadows on the ceiling, watching all my pent-up grief rage into focus.

Magma rising. The silent, agonized scream forming a single word:

'No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!'

Our time was precious. Every moment must be savored. I was more than willing to live with the vagaries of the brain tumor but in our own way and in our own time. No one was going to bully us into doing anything we didn't want to do. I looked at the clock. It was just after four in the morning in Virginia, nine o'clock in England. My mother would never sleep again if she heard what I needed to say. Gillian might still be at home. Satisfied that Greg was deeply asleep, I slid out of the bed, pausing for a moment to listen to his breathing before I closed the door quietly behind me.

Huddled in a chair in the kitchen, on hyper alert for the slightest movement in the bedroom, I talked for as long as I needed and to hell with the bill, blaming myself bitterly for failing us, for allowing us to get into this mess. There was nothing I wanted Gillian to do or say to help me. I only needed her to have the kindness to listen.

Well, at least now maybe I can sleep, I thought as I crept back towards the bedroom and almost fell over two, thin brown legs sticking out from behind the boiler cupboard. Mortally wounded, my Marine had managed to get out

of bed, open the door, crawl into the living room and prop himself up against the wall without making a sound just a few feet away from where I had been sitting. He could have come up behind me and cut my throat and I would never have heard him coming.

Obviously he had heard everything I said. I was so angry I almost spat at him.

I shouted: 'What are you doing here? How did you open the door? How dare you listen to me!'

He was very calm. 'I had to hear what you really thought about us staying here. I knew you would never tell me directly. It was the only way.'

I carried on shouting. 'I was just letting off two months worth of steam, that's all, and for once that's my business. We're committed to this house now and I'm going to make the best of it. You won't have to hear anything like that again.'

He looked up at me. 'Mali, what makes you think I am prepared to stay here?'

'Well, aren't you? You've never said otherwise.'

'Mali, I'm not staying here. I wound up in Vietnam to get away from America. I'm not about to come back now.'

I couldn't quite trust what I was hearing. 'You mean you've intended leaving all along?'

'Of course I have. We're getting out of here as soon as the treatment is finished. It's my life, our life, we're talking about and it doesn't end here.'

'But I thought you wanted your family to be with you if you died.'

He was very reasonable, taking time to carefully explain the obvious as he would to a child.

'Mali, I've told you before. I don't want to die but if that's the way it has to be, I only want you with me, no one else. I made my mind up to that while I was still a monk. Nothing's changed. My family know I love them but it's my natural inclination to worry about them when I'm with them, and I don't need that if I'm dying.'

An image of the black-robed priest, the Last Rites and a Catholic Wake came to mind. Not for Ajahn Ānando. That was not what he wanted and I was hired to make sure it never happened. I knelt down beside him, taking his hand, kissing his fingers, loving him.

'As an Ajahn you have lived, as an Ajahn you will die. Is that it?' I asked.

'How does an Ajahn die, Mali?'

'With dignity and grace as he lived, Gregory. Do you mean I can start packing?'

He smiled. 'Yes, of course you can.'

I gestured around the living room where the first grey light of this new, precious day was stealing in through the windows. 'What about the house?'

'What about the house? I'm not going to close the deal. It's as simple as that. Buying this place was never our idea from the beginning.'

'Where shall we go?'

'Where do you want to go?'

'Not to England. Somewhere in Europe.' The perfect solution flashed into my mind. 'Hey, how about the house in France? The one Sasha told us about? We could speak French and have sunshine and be near enough to civilization in case you need doctors.'

'Yes, we could do that. I'll write to Sophie after breakfast. Until then will you please come back to bed?'

After eight miserable weeks I lay down with my husband again, no more the invalid. I snuggled into his arms. Me and my Gregory, we were going home. After a late breakfast he sat at the table and wrote the letter, his hand steady, needing no help while I washed the dishes.

'Read this for me, please, and tell me if I've made any spelling mistakes,' he said.

I took the pen. 'Only two and they are easily changed.'

He sealed the envelope and handed it to me. 'Get it in the mail box right away.'

I sent for a large canvas carryall at the same time, as big as his pack but fitted with wheels.

'What do you want that for?' he asked, eyeing the catalogue dubiously.

'Things have changed, Gregory. You can't carry a full pack any more and I certainly can't. This will be much easier to drag around airports and we're going to have to think very seriously about transport in Europe.'

'We are not buying a car,' he said flatly. 'They're too much of a liability.'

'Then how do you suggest we travel to France? How are we going to do simple things like shopping with only me to carry the bags as well as helping you?'

'I don't want a car. It's as bad as having a house.'

'I don't agree. For us a car means freedom and without that we're sunk.'

It was an argument we would chase around over the next couple of days until he had to give in.

'As you have obviously made up your mind, what sort of car are you thinking of?' he asked.

'Only a little one but it's got to be tough and feel like it has four wheels cornering. I'd like a two-door Volkswagen that's not more than two years old. We don't want it breaking down on us. It has to have a 1.1 liter engine for economy, preferably a dark color, grey or black, and it can't cost more than five thousand pounds because that's all we have left from the money Jean gave us.'

He grinned, looked smug. 'Okay, but there's one thing that's absolutely non-negotiable. It has to be a left-hand drive if we are going to France. I refuse to buy an English car.'

He thought he had me there, knowing that left-hand drive cars were almost nonexistent in England. I filed the case as half concluded. We had a far more pressing problem to deal with.

Not closing the deal on the house was not as simple as Greg thought it would be. All hell let loose when the realtor knew what was going on. Mr. Klein went to bed on a maximum dose of painkiller while his wife handled the calls. Any talk of suing and thousands of dollars came up against an implacable wall culturally resistant to the menace of litigation. There was no way we were going to be threatened to save this woman's career. She had been too anxious to off-load a house that had been on her books for more than a year and we couldn't afford to be gracious.

After a week of calls and arguing that sent the phone bill soaring, we settled on the Middle Way out of the mess. The deal would be closed as agreed and we would make the house over to the realtor on the same day, giving her power of attorney to sell on.

I told her: 'You can have one month's mortgage payment and that's all you're going to get. If you haven't sold the house by then you can pay the next installment yourself. You won't get another dollar out of us ever again and neither are we going to pay you to sell it.'

Ironically the monthly mortgage payment would be less than we had been paying for rent.

Greg took his Will to the bank to have it notarized. It was very simple, leaving what few possessions we shared exclusively to me, requesting that his ashes be interred at Chithurst and stating clearly that I was to notify no one of his dying until after his death had taken place. I knew the last clause would probably be the source of more difficulty than just a few headaches but he was my husband and I had promised to obey him for all the world to hear.

Sophie wrote back saying we could have the house in France all winter. Another letter came in the same mail from one of the lay supporters in

England with a newspaper article about a new drug called Temozolomide which was reported to be having an astonishing success in reducing brain tumors. Best of all it was being currently tested in a hospital only forty-five minutes drive from my mother's house and in the area of jurisdiction accessible to our doctor in England.

During the final week of radiation, Greg had become increasingly unwell having more headaches and very little appetite. We went back to Richmond for a follow-up MRI scan which showed some lessening in the overall mass compared to the original size of the tumor but not as much as we had hoped for. It was still too large for the consultant to consider the stereotactic treatment.

Greg had never wanted to see the scans until then. He was not encouraged when he saw the reality of what we were up against. We told the doctor about the news item from England and how we were sure we qualified for it.

'It sounds like your best chance,' he said. 'I was trained in London. They're sometimes five or ten years ahead of America on drug availability and there's nothing more we can do for you. Get back there as quickly as you can. There's nothing left for you here.'

Jean took it very well. Greg had been packing up and leaving for most of his life. But we needed a break before then, that elusive week away together that we had never had. He wanted to show me something that was beautiful in America before we left.

We hired a car from the base and drove to the Blue Ridge Mountains where the air was clear and the trees edged with the first tinges of the red and gold of the fall. After the sweltering heat of the coastlands, it was wonderful to be shivering in the mornings and to have to wear sweaters. Our room looked west over the Shenandoah Valley and I made a bed for us on the floor beside the window so that we could fall asleep watching the stars. Greg still needed his early morning painkiller and the wheelchair came with us to the Skyline Caverns but that was the only time we took it out of the car. Otherwise he was fine, insisting on walking everywhere with me as a prop and happily buying me a toy black bear to go with JBJ when I was disappointed at the picnic grounds because we didn't see any real ones.

We spent the weekend in Buffalo, touring Niagara Falls with his childhood friend Mike, returning to Shenandoah for one last peaceful night before going back to Hampton to pack up the house and sign off at the hospital.

Our oncologist had ordered a new, lightweight and highly maneuverable wheelchair that came apart for travelling, a huge supply of medication and arranged for us to take Greg's scans and medical records.

He shook hands with his patient, saying, 'You'll be okay. You've got Ralph Nader there looking out for you.'

My best interrogation glare: 'Who's that?'

They roared with laughter. Obviously another American in-joke and totally lost on me. Twenty years later I looked it up and realized it was a compliment.

hall of shrines

On a dull October day, England would have been depressing before Charles but I sat in the back of Gillian's car looking at the fields and the expanse of open, if clouded, sky with uncharacteristic fondness and relief.

'It's not so bad this time.'

Greg and Gillian exchanged looks.

'I don't believe it! Did you hear that?' he said.

'Considering all the things she used to say,' added Gillian.

'Obviously nothing's permanent, Gregory, including my dogmatic attitude when contemplating the Dismal Isles of Avalon. It doesn't mean that I shall suddenly discover an abiding love for being damp, however, so don't get excited.'

He had spent the whole of the six hours in the air deeply engrossed in continual in-flight movies while I organized food and plenty of liquids and persuaded the cabin staff to cope with our extra hand luggage. When we arrived at the house we found my mother had gone to great trouble to make the little room at the back perfect for us. Next morning Greg woke up relaxed and completely free of pain.

Three days later a mechanic from a garage less than twenty miles away called to say he had precisely the car we had talked about in America. Recently imported from France, Amelia was a dark metallic grey, left-hand drive, two-door Volkswagen Polo Peppermint. She was eighteen months old with a surprisingly zappy 1.1 liter engine under the hood and only costing four and a half thousand pounds, which left enough for the road tax and insurance. I was so proud of my husband when he insisted on checking all over the car before we bought it, getting very carefully down on his knees to look underneath.

'She's our car, Gregory. I absolutely know it,' I said.

'Yes, I agree. It's just what we need.'

Before we checked in at the hospital in Southampton I read all the medical records aloud to Greg, including the scan reports and the summaries from each operation. Not light reading but we had to be sure that we knew as much as everyone else did about Charles.

We met our new oncologist whose eyes only slightly widened when he saw the MRI scans. He ordered another. This time the report noted the

presence of 'a metallic artifact due to the previous gunshot wound' in my husband's brain that hadn't been mentioned before. The doctor told us that Temozolomide was taken orally, twice daily for five days once every month and was generally very well tolerated. Some patients felt nauseous for the first evening.

Greg could begin the treatment whenever he wanted to, except that we would have to report to the hospital for each course of treatment. We couldn't just pick up a six-month supply and disappear with it into the blue yonder. However if the treatment was successful we could start reducing the steroid medication.

'Okay, we'll commute,' I said. 'We'll do one week in England and three weeks in France alternately all winter.'

So far it was the only hope anyone was prepared to offer us. We went home to talk about it.

'However tolerable it is, it is still chemotherapy and I don't like western medicine,' said my husband.

Neither did I but if it came down to a choice between the steroid or Temozolomide, it made sense to choose whichever had the least implacable side effects. The positive case for the chemotherapy was that if the tumor could be reduced by twenty or thirty percent, he would probably be able to walk again without assistance. Without the steroid his face would go back to normal and he could start exercising again.

Greg sighed. 'I wish there was some natural remedy that I could feel confident to try. There are so many special diets and cures and I don't feel like trying any of them. But there is one thing we have to do. I want to go to Cyprus and try to see that healer we read about in the book we were sent from the monastery. It means a lot to me, Mali.'

I bowed. 'Your wish is my command, my Lord. Shall we go for our wedding anniversary and your birthday?'

'Yes, that's a good idea. I'll tell the doctor that we'll start the chemotherapy when we come back, and Mali, when I can run I can drive that car!'

'You're on!'

I tried to do all the shopping and the chores while he was safely in bed but it was intensely lonely driving around by myself.

I suppose this is what it will be like if he dies, I thought. *Except that he won't be waiting for me when I get back.*

After a morning behind the wheel with tears dripping off the end of my nose, I left the shopping in the car, marched into the house and straight upstairs

into the bedroom. A big smile and a twinkling eye peeked at me over the edge of the quilt.

'Gregory, I've decided I hate having to do things without you so I'm going to write all morning as I used to and take you with me when I go out.'

He groaned. 'You mean I have to come to the supermarket?'

'Yes. There is no negotiation.'

'I hate shopping.'

'So do I. We'll go and hate it together."

We saw Gillian usually once or twice a week and occasionally one or two others but no more. In his weakened and disabled state Greg had no energy left for an image and he refused to see anyone he felt might still expect something of him.

'Mali, I'm sick and I don't want to have to be anything for anyone any more. If I don't want to see people I won't and that's all there is to it,' he said. 'If I thought about all the things I can't do now and may never be able to do again, I would go mad, so I'm not going to think about them.'

We walked around the lanes on dry days, enjoying the scents of autumn and the colors of the trees. My mother kept him supplied with her best soups for lunch while I exercised my culinary skills to their uttermost to keep him in tasty and nutritious food at dinnertime. Two days before we flew to Cyprus a huge bunch of roses appeared on the table in our room, twenty-four white roses and one red one.

'Happy Anniversary in advance, Mali-baby,' he said. 'There's a rose for each of the years I promised you. Next year you'll have twenty-three white roses and two red ones and so on until we get to twenty-five years and then you can have a whole bunch of red ones.'

They were beautiful but every petal tolled countless tears as the scream raged on in the depths of my being every waking moment, echoing through every night of fear. It ran before me as I took my solitary walks on the beach in Cyprus while he slept in the studio in the mornings. It filled all my imagining, curled its darkness around my heart watching the sunset over the sea while he slept again for another hour in the evening before dinner.

The island smelled like Ródos and Limnos, that seductive, unforgettable tang of hot rock and fragrant bushes spread out under the sun, but it was not so beautiful, at least not where we were. The British had been too long in occupation. Our mother, the sea, was not so clear and clean. Good beaches with a view and no people were few and far between. The only one that could have been perfect overlooked an oil refinery.

We booked a table and a special vegetarian meal at the five-star hotel next to our studio for our anniversary. We arrived wearing our wedding clothes, me in my green dress, my husband in his silk shirt and dark trousers that still fitted perfectly despite the high steroid dose.

'I wish I still had all of my hair,' he whispered.

I whispered back. 'Who cares? You've still got the top and the sides.'

We never saw the healer. Several of the local people did their best to contact him for us. Eventually we gave up on trying to call and went to his house in Nicosia, only to find it closed.

That night I had a very vivid and powerful dream. An elderly man with very dark eyes came to me explaining that there was nothing he could do personally for Greg but karmically it was very important that he soon meet with Ajahn Sumedho to heal the breach between them.

He introduced the 'Korean woman.' She wore a black sarong and a short-sleeved white top very similar to the Thai lay supporters at the monastery. She bowed and smiled, stepped over to where Greg lay sleeping and made three cuts in his head with a large, sharp knife, one at the back and two on the left side. She massaged the wounds between her hands, pressing until a pale, bloodstained jelly oozed out of each one, which she wiped away with a clean white cloth. Finally she closed the cuts with her fingers, squeezing them together until no mark remained to be seen.

The old man spoke again. 'She has relieved the pressure. We can do no more but that will help.'

Greg was not so disappointed when I told him about the dream. We had three days left before we were due at the airport. I proposed sailing to Egypt on a cruise we had seen advertised.

'Everyone should see the mask of Tutankhamen before they die, Gregory,' said I, sagely.

'Do we have the money?' he asked.

'Yes, just. Do you think you can make it?'

'Why not? As long as I don't have to go everywhere in the wheelchair.'

We sailed to Port Said the following evening, dining with the ship's doctor who had us upgraded from our cheap berth below decks to one of the best cabins on the upper deck at no extra charge. Early next morning we were sat in the best seats at the front of the bus for the two-hour drive into Cairo.

Going into the pyramid was the bravest, craziest thing Greg ever did with the brain tumor. He crouched down low behind me with both hands tucked into the waistband of my jeans for support as we scrambled, bent almost double,

into the darkness of the narrow, unlit passageway. It terminated in a musty chamber with an empty, stone sarcophagus and an old man yelling, 'Come on, English! Come on, German!' to encourage the never-ending parade of tourists to keep moving. When he lifted his skirts and started fanning us because he thought Greg looked faint, my husband turned me firmly back into the passage.

'Let's get out of here right now!'

In the babble of Cairo Museum a single moment of perfect stillness stopped me in my tracks. Following our young guide into the Hall of Shrines, he paused to point out the carved image of the goddess, her wings outspread to protect the dead king.

'See the wings,' he said. 'They represent eternal life.'

There is no death, only rebirth, moment by moment.

I leaned over the back of the wheelchair, folding my arms around my beloved, allowing the sweet peacefulness of the shift in consciousness, the release into a cool spaciousness of attentiveness and grace. Charles could do his worst but he could never destroy us.

The problem was I had been at war for so long it was a habit. I meditated listening for the enemy breaking down the door. It didn't have any particular face or a name. It wasn't necessarily human. I'd been on red alert so long I had forgotten how to stop and simply breathe.

Practice. You know what to do. No one would catch me unarmed but I would take time to step back into the moments of stillness, listening for the birdsong on our cancer battlefield.

special tea

We returned to England to be told that Temozolomide had been temporarily withdrawn from circulation. The only other option available was a course of two treatments of a similar drug administered intravenously and with no comparable record of success. Oral therapy with a partial success rate would always be preferable to being hooked up to an IV without a lot of hope. We were staring into the Void again.

Early next morning, November 5th, traditionally 'Gunpowder, Treason and Plot' day in England, in contrast to the usual pile of mail just two bulky envelops dropped through the letterbox. Both addressed to us, they were from entirely unrelated people and contained identical copies of articles

about a Native American herbal formula that had apparently been proven successful either in alleviating the symptoms of cancer or curing it completely in some cases.

Greg had had so many healers and healing techniques recommended to him that he had shelved them all on the grounds that too much of a good thing did him no good at all. Considering our situation I wasn't so easily persuaded to bin the information this time.

'What about this Essiac formula, Gregory? Do you think it's some kind of a sign, both articles appearing together like this and today of all days?'

'What do you think?'

'Well, it looks simple enough. There are only four ingredients and according to the article it has had results.'

'Let me read it again,' he said.

'Shall I make some calls and see about finding the herbs?'

'Yes, you could do that.'

Locating a supply of *Rumex acetosella*, the Sheep sorrel herb, turned out to be the only problem. At that time it was not available for sale anywhere in the UK, which was strange because I knew that it grew as a weed all over the country. That I only had to walk out of the door to see established colonies of it growing in my mother's garden never occurred to me. Eventually a friend in California tracked down a pound of dried Sheep sorrel leaves that one of the nuns offered to carry in her alms bowl when she flew back to England the first week of December.

Meantime Greg decided to have one treatment of the chemotherapy, if only to find out what he didn't want while we were waiting for the Essiac ingredients to appear. Truth to tell I was glad because I was becoming increasingly concerned about his condition. He had stabilized on twenty-four milligrams of steroid daily without pain but he was getting sleepier, more lethargic, less steady on his feet. Was he shutting down on me already? At this rate the worst case scenario would be realized and he'd be gone by Christmas. The old Medicine Man's tea offered all there was left of hope.

He took his single dose of chemotherapy on Veteran's Day. It took an hour to drip into his vein and he vomited almost all of that night. There was no way he would be doing it again. But three days later we all noticed that he was very much better, brighter, laughing and going out for walks again without having to be almost pushed out of the door first. He refused to believe that it had anything to do with the chemotherapy but it didn't matter. All we needed was enough time to find the Essiac. The wheelchair went back into the cupboard and I booked tickets for the New Year celebrations in Iceland.

Ajahn Sumedho had invited us to visit Amaravati, offering us accommodation in the house that was usually reserved for parents and similar guests so that we wouldn't have to be on public view and the Sangha could meet us in comfort and privacy. Greg had held out against going for weeks.

'Why are you being so difficult, Gregory?' I asked, mildly exasperated.

'Because I'm sick and I don't want people to see me like this.'

'But this is the Sangha and they love you. Why should they be anything less than kindly towards you? What about practice, Gregory?'

He glared, growling: 'What about practice, Ajahn!'

I decided for us. 'You can say what you like, we're going. You'll enjoy it once we're there. Besides I want to see the nuns. I'm going to call and find out the best day to go.'

I heard him muttering but he was so much better that I decided it had to be now or never. Five minutes later our visit was arranged for three days, from Thursday to the following Sunday.

'The diary says that it's Thanksgiving Day which has to be auspicious,' I said.

My husband's eyes narrowed, the glare at its most menacing through gleaming slits.

'I'll go on one condition, that you take a tape recorder with you when you visit the nuns. I don't trust you all together.'

'Not in a million years, Gregory!'

It was a great success. Greg was very well, seeming to draw energy from the compassionate contact with his spiritual family again. There was one particularly poignant moment as he sat cross-legged on the couch, once more the Ajahn holding court to the circle of monks and nuns gathered around him.

'There's one thing I want to say to you. Remember always to be yourselves. Don't get caught up in being anything other than who you really are.'

We took the traditional offering of flowers, incense and candles for Ajahn Sumedho to formally request his forgiveness for any pain we may have caused him personally, not because we were obliged to do it but because we wanted to. Our elegantly planned ceremony designed to last a gracious ten minutes became a unsynchronized muddle stretched over two days when we gave Ajahn Sumedho the offering on the first day and had to call him back for the forgiveness part on the second day. There were smiles all round but it was taken in the spirit in which it was meant. We visited Chithurst a week later and Greg's dearest wish came true when we had tea together with the nuns in their cottage without the need for a tape recorder.

No one ever forgot the atmosphere of pure paranoia that took custody of my little mother's house the day I made up my first batch of Essiac tea, December 7th 1993. The instructions were confused at best and there were too many inconsistencies in the reporting. But like so many others I didn't have the luxury of time either for skepticism or to shop around looking for the best quality herbs. My husband's life was at stake. I had to keep an open mind and go with what was available. Presumably Essiac had worked for some people at some time in the not too distant past. I could only trust and pray it would work for us. There wasn't anything else.

Within a week Greg was showing a profound all-round improvement. He rarely slept through the morning and the pupils of his eyes, unequal in size since the first operation in July, returned to normal. He had no more discomfort eating and he was able to read again, covering not just one or two pages at a time but whole books. His walking was much improved. He could manage alone for up to twenty minutes without my arm to steady him. Paradoxically it was this improvement that caused our one serious fight.

tiara

We had been away for a weekend to visit friends and to shop for Christmas at the US base at Lakenheath. I had been noticing the occasional steroid pill appearing on a chair or on the floor, but I thought I must have dropped them out of the supply that I always carried around in my jeans pocket. We were driving back and just about to pull on to the motorway when I remembered Greg was due for his lunchtime medication. I stopped in a lay-by and took the bottle out of my bag.

He put up a hand and shook his head. 'I don't need them.'

'What do you mean? You always have them now. Didn't we agree not to start reducing the steroid again until after Iceland, to give the Essiac a chance to work first?'

'Yes, but I have started reducing them myself.'

'What!'

'I knew you wouldn't agree so I did it myself.'

'But I'm responsible for you! Supposing you had a relapse, how would I know how much steroid you're taking? It could be critical! How much are you taking now?'

'I'm down to twenty milligrams a day. I'm counting them very carefully,' he said, trying to reassure me.

‘In how many days?’

‘I think it’s three.’

Before we left Richmond, knowing I was about to assume the full nursing care of my husband, Doctor John had taken it upon himself to augment my fledgling knowledge of the effects of high doses of steroid medication in graphic detail. I hadn’t forgotten a single word, or the images of the most extreme effects on the veterans being cared for behind closed doors in another part of the hospital.

‘Don’t you remember that steroid has to be reduced very gradually?’ I shouted. ‘Don’t you remember what happened when we reduced it too fast in Virginia? You were sick and the pain came back!’

I was shaking with rage, gripping the steering wheel with both hands because I couldn’t trust myself not to hit him.

‘How could you do this to me? How could you be so sly? How could you deceive me? This makes a complete mockery of everything about our relationship!’

He tried placation. ‘Mali, relax. Don’t take it so personally.’

Poor choice of words.

Eruption!

I screamed at him, thumping my fists down on the steering wheel.

‘Don’t take it personally? How can I ever trust you again? As if there isn’t enough to fear in this bloody business! What have you been doing with the pills I’ve been giving you?’

‘I palmed them and threw them away.’

‘Yes, on chairs and on the floor! I hate you! I absolutely hate you for this!’

Months of living on fear and exhaustion put me beyond rationality at that moment, beyond grace. Without a second thought I smacked him hard across the side of his face. He grabbed my hands. I scratched him, leaving long, bloody gashes all over his fingers and wrists. He held on tightly, in fear of me and for me, while I struggled and screamed. At the first pause for breath he countered with sweet reason but I could tell by his voice that he had been badly frightened.

‘Mali, I am very sorry for the lie. You must believe me, please, Mali,’ he said.

I didn’t want to hear him. I screamed at him for the next three hours until we pulled into the driveway at my mother’s house. Always the master of facade, he greeted her as though we were just returned from a pleasant afternoon taking tea at the seaside. I was in no mood to act. I left him sat on the couch talking calmly to my sister while my mother followed me into the kitchen.

‘What are all those scratches on Greg’s hands?’ she asked nervously.

‘I did them.’ I told her why.

She was horrified. ‘But he could have made himself ill again!’

‘Exactly! Fortunately there don’t seem to be any bad effects so far, save on me.’

As always, we were friends again when we got into bed, cuddling close, remorseful, reflecting on our thoughts and actions of the day before turning to love and sleep.

He promised me faithfully, ‘Mali, I will never deceive you again. For a moment back there I was really frightened. I had no idea you were so strong. But you have to admit that I’ve been fine these last few days and you did say we could try reducing it soon.’

‘Yes, in January, Gregory! Okay, compromise. Let’s go down to eighteen milligrams and stay that way for three weeks. Note the emphasis on three weeks. If you’re still well after that we’ll try taking it down again when we’re in France.’

‘It’s a deal. Do you still love me?’

‘Of course I love you! Why do you think I got so upset? I’m terrified of losing you, absolutely terrified!’

The tears were prickling. I let them fall.

He held me tightly, whispering, ‘I know, I’m sorry. You won’t lose me, I promise you.’

I hadn’t told him but I was terrified of how the combination of the tumor and the steroid medication would affect him long-term. In England the dose maxed out at twenty-four milligrams daily. In the VA it could go up a hundred milligrams a day. I couldn’t let any of those dreadful side effects happen to him. Pray the Medicine Man’s Essiac would grant us the Middle Way through this mess.

I had to be out early the next morning for a back treatment, leaving him in bed to sleep off the storms of yesterday.

‘Promise me you won’t get up?’ I said. ‘I don’t want to come back and find you in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. And don’t go sending my mother out to buy me flowers as a peace offering. It will take a tiara at least to let you get away with this one!’

I got back to see my mother grinning and Greg fully dressed, beaming his way down the stairs. Before I had time to open my mouth, he sang, ‘Da-de-dah!’ the next best thing to a fanfare of trumpets, leaned over the banister and dropped a crown made out of Christmas wrapping paper on my head.

'You came back too soon,' said he, gaily. 'I was just coming down to ask Mom for some colored pens to make jewels.'

He was impossible. What could be done with such a man?

'I suppose you're showered and shaved?' I said, from under my crown, reaching up for a kiss.

'Yes, all that and I haven't fallen down.'

'Obviously not. Are you well enough to come to Petersfield to make the reservation for the ferry to France?'

'Absolutely!'

He kept on getting better every day. While we were at Amaravati he had asked Ajahn Sumedho for permission to have his ashes interred at Chithurst beside his favorite oak tree next to the entrance to the monastery. The subject of a gravestone came up soon after. We visited a local funeral director. Greg's unsteadiness when walking offered some proof of our sincerity but the somberly polite assistant was clearly unused to dealing with living clients, especially when one didn't look like she was about to die in the immediate future.

My husband chose a simple, polished black stone, directing that the inscription should read *Greg and Mali Klein, Mettacittena*, the Pāli word meaning 'a heart full of Loving-kindness'. Birth and death dates were irrelevant and he refused to mention Ānando to ensure that there would never be an excuse to turn the site into any form of shrine, which he felt would be extremely inappropriate to practice.

He got the traditional English Christmas he so wanted, celebrating with my mother and sister and Felix, Gabriel and Gudrun around a tree covered in lights, plenty of presents, puddings and pies, logs burning bright in the fireplace. We took a supply of Essiac with us to Iceland and saw in the New Year with an unprecedented glass of champagne and an hour of fireworks igniting the sky against a spectacular display of the Northern Lights.

The day before we left Lóa drove us to the Blue Lagoon to celebrate my birthday. I reminded him he was not supposed to dive with a shunt in his head. He promptly forgot and did it any way, blissfully happy to be independent and mobile, showing some of his old panache as he swam about in the warm, milky-blue water, stopping only to sing 'Happy Birthday' to me before he vanished into the steam again.

In the brief four hours of sun allocated to that white, midwinter day, while my sisters were sleeping and I, battle-weary, was almost at the point of daring myself to hope, glimpses of clear blue sky through the hot vapor swirling all

around us bought up memories of our dancing days of unequivocal delight. Our yesterdays of summer, of sand and sea and nectarines and love. It was hard to believe that the lava all around us was covered in snow.

some place quiet

Greg should have been exhausted after two days driving to Provence but he was so happy to be back on the road, retracing the same route he took the first time he rode from England to the South of France.

This time it was winter but the light over the vineyards under wide-open skies was magical. Instead of the bike he had a car and a wife more than willing to gun it down the Autoroute du Soleil at a steady one hundred and thirty kilometers an hour. He wasn't wearing sexy, brown suede leathers that fitted him like a glove but he could still get into a cool pair of jeans and we had a huge stash of drugs in the back. So what if close inspection suggested we might have had a couple of problems with a brain tumor? That was last year in another time and another place. It had nothing to do with this wonderful, exhilarating, so-good-to-be-free now.

The house was on the outskirts of Lacoste, one of the hill villages in the Luberon, a ridge of low mountains dominating the heart of Provence. It was home the minute we stepped through the door, all on one, easily accessible level and greeting us with a warmth and spaciousness reminiscent of Sasha's beautiful spirit pervading every room. What was to become our exclusive corner was immediately obvious when we saw the little bedroom just inside the front door. It had a big, south-facing window, a huge farmhouse-style oak table against one wall for my desk and a bookcase with a conveniently empty top shelf for the shrine.

I went around the house opening the shutters, checking the radiators, stowing the bottles of Essiac in the fridge. There was a second bedroom for guests on our level and a third with a sitting area in the basement. The kitchen looked out over the valley and the bathroom was a delight. There was a huge tub and a seemingly limitless supply of hot water. We would soak together for an hour every morning between meditation and breakfast. What better way to start the day?

Greg sat on the floor in our room busily unpacking the bags exactly as he used to do. I left him to arrange the clothes in the wardrobe while I set up an elaborate shrine, surrounding the Buddha-rupa with colored candles and pictures, offering some incense in gratitude for a safe journey and a

delightful refuge at the end of it. Our beautiful Marrakesh bowls and plates, a gift for our first wedding anniversary from my mother, took their places on the dresser in the kitchen. The computer and printer were set up on the desk and we were home for the winter and the spring.

After seven months of being public property we were back in the routine we loved the most, being together with no distractions and with all the time in the world only for each other. No appointments, no telephone calls, no doctors. Just us, and meditation, music, laughter, talking, silence, making love. It was so good to be as noisy as we liked in bed. With his renewed vitality elements of our actively crazy passion for each other crept in again. He could still send the love shivers rushing up my back. We made love every night, meditated every morning and spent the days basking in the afterglow of our unique, eternal attunement.

Even in January, Provence is a gourmet's paradise for vegetarians who are prepared to feed themselves. We drove to Apt, the nearest town, to investigate the local supermarket, filling the cart with bags of sumptuous vegetables and fruit. We bought nutty, walnut bread for breakfast, moist, black-olive bread for lunch, delicious rounds of Brie cheese and slabs of Emmental, huge mushrooms and packets of our favorite green pasta with a couple of bottles of cheap white wine to cook it in. Greg sat at the kitchen table grating cheese, grinning as he watched me tipping the bottle liberally into the pan.

I laughed. 'Who said anything about only using water?'

We agreed that the plates had a greater chance of extended life if I always did the dishes but he didn't want to sit around and be waited on. He got into a quiet, tuneless whistling as he went about the house, working his list of regular chores, perfectly content. He checked the bins in the kitchen and the bathroom every day, bagging up the rubbish, vacuumed and tidied the living room once a week. He helped chop and mix the vegetables for salads and stir-fries. He made sure the cassette player was continually supplied with sound and whenever he could get into the garden he picked up the pegs that were always popping off the washing lines over the balcony.

The only time we came near to blows was when his whistling threatened to take him down the winding stairs to the basement to inspect the central heating system without me behind him. I could never be persuaded that he might not fall and damage his head even at his least ataxic.

The nights were cold. I opened the shutters in the morning to see the sun rising over a fume of mist and frost stretching across the orchards and vineyards in the valley to the roofs and spires of Bonnieux five kilometers

away to the east. The mist quickly burned away and the afternoons were often warm enough for us to eat lunch sitting outside on the balcony wearing shorts and tee shirts. Greg was tanned in a week.

'Gregory, you don't look in the least like a cancer victim with that tan,' I observed.

'I don't feel like one except if I try to run, and of course there are all those pills.'

'But you only have them twice a day now. It's not so bad.'

'I agree.'

He was so well that the likelihood of our seeing a second wedding anniversary did not seem as remote a possibility as it had done two months before. He had passed the six-month prognosis. Easter was the next target and then the family party planned for July at Joyce's cottage on Lake Erie.

He said: 'I'm going to do my best to make it but who knows what may happen? I feel that I have done all that I can for my family. I have said good-bye to them if that's how it must be. Either I will get well or I will die. There's no other way. But, Mali, I want to start reducing the steroid again.'

'I'll take it down by two milligrams and see how you are.'

We walked for an hour or so every afternoon, mostly keeping to the roads and the main tracks until one memorable afternoon when we went exploring and got hopelessly lost. After some abortive wandering about and arguing, we found a good path leading more or less in the right direction back towards Lacoste. We were doing well until it came to a temporary halt at a stream.

'Stand back, I'm going to jump it,' declared the recuperating Marine, pushing me to one side and bracing himself.

'Hey! Wait a minute! How can someone as uncoordinated as you jump a stream?'

'Just relax,' he said, and took off. The landing was a shambling mess of arms and legs with me a second behind him and yelling as I grabbed at his jacket in a hopeless attempt to stop him falling down. We were covered in mud and leaves. I had a wet foot. He was laughing. I was furious and laughing all at once.

'Gregory, you terrify me!'

'But we made it across, didn't we?' he said, attempting to atone for his sins by brushing me down.

'Yes, but look at us! I refuse to come this way again, ever!'

He agreed. 'Maybe it would be better to find another way next time.'

'Absolutely!'

Some days we wandered around the village following the narrow cobbled streets up to the Marquis De Sade's ruined chateau that stood out like an old, broken tooth against the surrounding hills. It was not a romantic ruin, no elegantly tumbling turrets or intricately traced stonework, just four square stone walls with gaping window holes looking out over the most amazing view. With the afternoon sun slanting low over the rooftops touching a last golden glow to the summit of distant, snowy Mont Ventoux, we turned for home to drink hot spicy tea curled up on the couch in the living room before adjourning to the kitchen to make dinner.

We had taken back our happiness. Maybe the music wasn't quite so wild but the melody was just as haunting. There was no one around to burden us with their views and opinions, their needs, their projections on how we should be and what we should be doing about the stash of drugs in the pantry. There was still the laughter, huddled close together giggling at the kitchen table, stealing from each other's plates, our kind of loving that spread a smile everywhere we went.

Heart-healed under the bright Mediterranean sun, our beautiful shrine set up at the end of the bed, our minds turned once more to *metta* practice and who better to teach me than the master-practitioner, Ānando?

metta bhavana

'I was still a novice the first time I consciously took refuge in the *metta* practice during my first *vassa* with Ajahn Dang at Wat Suan KÎwy. It came about through desperation, when I could no longer cope with my intense hatred for a lovely, harmless old woman I encountered every morning on alms round.

Metta bhavana may be one of the Four Sublime States but it is not recognized as one of the wisdom factors in conventional Theravadan practice where it is inclined to be frowned upon, viewed as just the sugar coating on the pill, even superficial. Very few teachers bothered to teach it, certainly not Ajahn Chah, nor Ajahn Dang or Ajahn Sumedho. But I noticed first in myself and then in the majority of the people who came to talk to me when I was living in the West, that self-hatred was the underlying cause of most of our problems. Classically *metta bhavana* meditation was the antidote.

'*Metta*' means non-contention, non-harming, love in its strongest sense. '*Bhavana*' means to practice, or mental discipline. In meditation practice *metta bhavana* promotes the cultivation of a loving and forgiving attitude towards negative mind states, the cause of ill will. It is not an antidote to pain, no blissed-out tippy-toe through the tulips loving all beings. Rather *metta* practice encourages insight into pain for what it is and, through grace, letting it go.

Initially, and contrary to our hopes and expectations of what we are setting out to do, we encounter every negative mind state within us that obstructs the free flow of loving-kindness. *Bring to mind someone you hurt... bring to mind someone who hurt you.* Instead of radiance we find ourselves facing our anger, our deeply rooted hatreds, our fear. Unfortunately the resulting frustration is a necessary part of the process.

Ajahn Chah pointed out that it is not until we see the pain of our attachments that we are willing to let them go.

It's not until we open up to the pain within us that we going to be able to recognize it for what it is and let it go.

Wat Suan KÎwy translates literally as 'the Forest Monastery of the Banana Garden'. For some reason the villagers always chopped the banana trees back before they fruited, except for this one old woman who must have had a banana orchard. Every day she knelt in the dust with her bowl of rice and six bananas, which she distributed with touching reverence into the first six bowls, leaving only a handful of sticky rice for me and the other novice.

Eyes averted, wearing my best monk face of compassionate non-attachment, no matter how she bowed and smiled and made anjali, my mind went into orbit. Why were there always only six bananas? Did she have something against me? If she was trying to torture me, she was certainly succeeding.

Some days I could really prepare myself for it, sitting calmly through morning meditation and gratefully accepting the rice. Other days I was prepared to kill her. All too frequently my meditation focused on a macabre melodrama of hatred where I chopped her body up with a machete and burned the pieces, one by one, all because of a banana or the lack of it.

Practicing *metta*, I intentionally brought her to mind and tried to surround her with thoughts of loving-kindness. It was far from easy in the beginning because my rational mind would kick in threatening any possibility of serenity. I had to make a conscious effort to do it. I couldn't just sit and wait for a significant change in my attitude to happen. I had to work through a lot of old conditioning, but I found it was accumulative. The more I practiced, the easier it became.

I was so grateful I didn't shoot the old woman in Vietnam. I could experience an agony of cold horror just thinking about it. A young German guy I had wanted to kill in Afghanistan gave me a much greater opportunity for indulging in misery.

Everything about this guy had suggested evil to me. He was over loud from the beginning and took an obscene delight in killing the chickens for our Christmas dinner. He came back with the blood still dripping from his knife and then consummated the insult to my sensitivity by trying to hustle Sherry while we were waiting for the meal to be cooked.

I watched him tear through the food with one eye on the pistol he had slapped down on the table in front of his plate. The world would be a better place without him. I knew where I would kill him, and how. There was a darkened alcove on the stairway to his room where I would hide and garrote him before he could get to his gun.

Fortunately I never got the chance to carry it out. Sherry freaked and insisted we got out of the country fast when I admitted what I had in mind. But it didn't stop me hating him.

Watching the images the memories evoked through meditation practice, a bitchy, complaining side of my nature that I was unfamiliar with came up alongside the anger and resentment. I still hated him and more so for making me see how capable I was of committing cold, calculated murder.

Predictably at first I resisted the memories and the emotions I had invested them with, which only empowered them until I worked on something positive to rid myself of the torment before it drove me insane.

The only way I could think of was to sit facing my shrine and bring his image to mind as I had last seen him in Hurat, seeing his face clearly looking down at me from above the Buddha-rupa. Very carefully and heartfully I bowed to him, asking for forgiveness for my stupidity, my anger, my judgmental behavior. As I did it, I felt something break between us. The bubble of evil I had come to associate with him finally burst. At last I could see him for what he was, just a screwed-up guy who was fundamentally okay.

Tears came to my eyes. I felt the healing power of forgiveness soften my heart, dissolving and transcending all the painfully suppressed emotion and guilt. I had chosen to take the memories personally, to cling to them and build on the negative mind state, instead of seeing them for what they really were, transient, not truly me or mine, impersonal. If I met him again, I wouldn't trust him enough to turn my back on him but the hatred and the anger were gone.'

Worst Vassa

We picked up his story where we had left off in what seemed like an age ago in Virginia, watching him walk through the airport preparing to take up residence in England for the rest of his monastic career.

He had let go the memories of the hospital and the weeks at the house in Hampton the minute we got on the plane. It was more difficult for me because I had to be continually on watch for the slightest change in his condition. Every morning when breakfast was over and the chores were done he got himself happily settled on the couch with a book, keeping an eye on me while I caught up with the previous days' dictation on the computer in our room across the hallway.

Every now and then, missing having me close, he would call out,

'Mali, what have you got for me?'

'Wait just a little while longer, beloved, and then I will come and read it to you.'

When the pages were printed, I cuddled up to read to him. It was our practice always to read the manuscript aloud so that he could hear how it read and suggest alterations and additions. His memory of his time as a monk was still excellent, his mind lively and alert. He could still reason and discuss the teaching with me.

'The English Sangha Trust had been formed some years before, primarily to provide support for a Theravadan monastic community in the West. Personally I was very impressed with George Sharp, the chairman of the trust, when I first met him at Wat Pah Nanachat. He was the only western lay person I had met up to that time who seemed to understand the spirit behind the monastic discipline, what it was really all about. Sometimes I think he understood it better then some of the monks.

When Ajahn Sumedho invited me to join him at the Trust-owned house in London, my immediate reaction was fear. The idea of trying to practice in a western country brought up all my feelings of inadequacy and lack of confidence. He took care to reassure me, commenting,

'We're just going there to practice. We're not going there to do anything special. If a monastic community happens, fine. If it doesn't, that's fine too.'

He was in favor of travelling around England to look for a replacement property more suitable to the establishment of a Forest monastery. It was an idea that Ajahn Chah immediately vetoed, preferring to stay with what we had and see how it went.

For all the good intention that went into the project, when I first arrived at 131/133 Havistock Hill, two typically north London town houses that had been donated to the trust some years before, I could see why Ajahn Sumedho wanted to move. The place was grotty, to coin an English word, and very different from what we had been used to. Number 133 was rented out as bed-sit accommodation to provide an income to support us. Number 131, or the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara as it was now called, had been arranged to accommodate the *sala* and two novices to look after us.

The monks' living quarters were in a separate unit in the back yard. Ajahn Sumedho, Dhurandharo and I shared the main building comprising three small rooms, aptly called 'cells'. Anatto lived in a garden shed that had been made over into a kuti.

I looked around my dark and ugly room in slow despair, certain that if I had to spend any time in there I would go crazy. The only source of heat was an oil-filled electric radiator turned to the lowest setting that had to be left on even in July. The cheap, fake wood-grain wallpaper had to go, soon obliterated under shades of soft bamboo and green, the only paint I could find in the house that went well with the cork-tiled floor. Nothing could be done about the door. It was the solitary source of natural light, made of opaque yellow glass from floor to ceiling that cast a dull amber glow over everything inside. There was no hope of any privacy when the light was on at night until I made some old robes into curtains to shut out the gloom.

Supported by a small lay community, mostly English with a smattering of Thai and Sri Lankan people, we carried on the monastic routine as well as we could within the confines of suburban London. Morning chanting began at five o'clock followed by tea at six-thirty and then out on alms round around Hampstead and on to the heath. Occasionally we came back with food in our bowls. More often we had to endure the guys from the 'squat' up the road yelling 'Hare Krishna' as we walked by. But London was a fairly cosmopolitan city at the time. No one gave us any real trouble.

The meal was generally served around ten in the morning. Most of the food had to be bought in from the local supermarket by the novice in charge of the kitchen. We were hardly gourmet in our tastes but having been so carefully fed for years by the villagers in Thailand it was a new and potentially

alarming experience to be at the mercy of an English novice's whims and theories concerning our dietary needs. The rest of the day would be spent reading, sleeping, or walking until tea at five o'clock, finishing with evening chanting at seven-thirty when most of the lay people appeared.

Right from the beginning I found living in London depressing, boring and claustrophobic. What summer there had been fizzled out like a damp squib within a few weeks of our arrival, forcing us to start wearing sweaters and tee shirts under our robes as the weather got progressively colder, damper and wet. By the time Ajahn Chah went back to Thailand, it felt like he had abandoned us to a *vassa* centered on the contemplation of despair.

I felt particularly isolated. Ajahn Sumedho was fully occupied as the senior incumbent of the Vihara. Dhurandharo was moody and difficult, making it obvious he preferred to spend time around Ajahn Sumedho rather than me, and I would never seek out Anatto who always seemed happiest in his own company. Maybe it was easier for him than the rest of us. He had been born in England and was used to living in an English city.

The lay people were very kind and did all they could to help us but I soon recognized a new and more subtle kind of cultural loneliness, different to what I had experienced during the early days in Thailand. I was often teased about my up-state New York accent that would take a few more years to soften and, inevitably, I came up against misunderstandings in the use of what I had assumed was a common language.

Being surrounded by western women unaware of our monastic rule didn't help. I only had to walk down the road to see smart city girls wearing makeup and perfume, sometimes disconcertingly similar to girls I had dated back in Buffalo. It took a lot of getting used to. Meantime my practice descended into a chaos of extremes ranging from absolute desolation to almost psychedelic states of bliss that left me wondering if I was going insane.

In this state of total confusion walking alms round alone one morning, I was about to cross the road near Hampstead tube station when I saw the most incredibly beautiful blonde woman walking towards me. I fell instantly in love. My head was full of her and her perfume as she went past. I saw myself running after her right there and then and asking her to marry me. The fantasy had me lost for a few seconds of rose-colored bliss before a sharp cosmic slap brought me back to earth with a bang.

A young Thai woman had appeared out of nowhere and was kneeling down on the pavement in front of me to offer her sandwiches before she hurried off to work. It was the first and only time anyone ever gave me food like that in London and for it to happen right then was astonishing, even uncanny. I

had never felt less worthy of an offering. I walked down the Finchley Road thinking I had better get my act together and quick. But the confusion and the depression continued, showing no sign of respite.

Towards the end of another grey, drizzling day at the end of October, Ajahn Sumedho and I were in the tea room together. The *vassa* was almost over. We had been talking about it when he stood up to look out of the window. Reflecting, watching the endless line of traffic going up and down Havistock Hill, he said,

'This has been the worst *vassa* of my life.'

It was the last thing I needed to hear. Any trace of inspiration I had left seemed to vanish, along with all hope of enduring. He recognized the mind state for what it was and went out to his cell to meditate on it and resolve it. When he came back an hour later it was no longer important to him. While I had stayed exactly where he'd left me, a brown lump of misery hunched over in the corner, desperate to go back to Thailand.

I had gone well beyond the point of trying to resurrect anything positive in meditation when Dhurandharo came out from under his rain cloud to ask how I was doing. Nothing prepared him for the answer.

'Oh, fuck! I had more fun in Vietnam! At least there you could get drunk or stoned. Here you can't even do that!'

He scuttled off to tell Ajahn Sumedho and suddenly I was the centre of what seemed to be an almost obsequiously lavish amount of attention. I had always admired Ajahn Sumedho for the strength and sincerity of his practice, but months of depression had left me defensive, arrogant and hurt. I wasn't used to this 'buddy, buddy' business from him and I wasn't convinced that he wasn't being nice just to keep me in the Order.

On the other hand, if he had come down on me and been critical, I would have walked out. I only needed to go to the nearest hotel and telephone my parents for some money. The occasional doubt over the validity of my ordination, that I wasn't really a monk, could still arise in my mind. It would make the act of leaving so much easier.

My formal request for permission to go back to Thailand was refused. The trustees were doing their best to find a property outside London. I allowed myself to be persuaded to stay. Although Ajahn Chah had instructed us to complete a full year at the Hampstead Vihara, the hunt for an alternative became serious long before the time was up.

cittaviveka

I first saw what would become Wat Pah Cittaviveka, Chithurst Forest Monastery, (*chita-viv-áyka*; '*the mind of non-attachment*') on a grey February day in 1979 when I headed a team of lay people doing some preliminary work prior to completing the purchase.

It was a semi-derelict, stone-built Victorian house in the heart of the West Sussex countryside, surrounded by twenty-five acres of dilapidated land set on a south-facing slope with a wide-open view across the valley to the green hills of the South Downs. We were cold and wet for most of the time we were there and I had to be shipped back to Hampstead in a raging fever with influenza, but I didn't mind. I was so excited at the prospect of getting out of London and getting into a serious work project.

Ajahn Chah travelled from Thailand to accompany us when we took up official residence on June 22nd. Several other monks and novices joined us and more came soon afterwards. In those early days the novices were both brown-robed samaneras and white-robed anagarikas, but the resulting confusion between the samaneras and the monks made it easier in Western society if we kept all the novices as anagarikas in white for two years until they were invited to ordain.

Structurally the exterior stonework of the house was mostly in good repair but the roof and the windows needed a lot of attention. The interior was in the latter stages of rampaging dry rot that would take several years and a lot of money to rectify. The rooms were stacked with rubbish and the electrical wiring was of a hazardous pre-war vintage. The kitchen had a sink but no plumbing. It was easier to do the cooking in a mess tent outside in the garden. There was only one cold tap and one toilet in working order and no heating anywhere in the house. When it was cold in winter the previous owners had gone to Petersfield, the nearest town, sitting for hours in the library to get warm.

We set up the Buddha-rupa and the shrine in the smaller of the two main rooms. The other, that would eventually become the *sala*, had gaping holes in the floor and a huge hole where the ceiling had fallen in over the bay window. Fortunately the bedrooms were habitable and mercifully the weather would stay warm the whole summer.

Within days a BBC film crew arrived to shoot 'The Buddha Comes to Sussex.' We were barely settled in and only just beginning to comprehend the enormity of the task ahead of us. Not the best time to be on show on film

but it gave everyone in the community, including our neighbors and the local clergy, a chance to air their views. After some initial opposition, on the whole the local reaction to us was encouraging once it was made clear that we wouldn't be going up and down the road singing and jangling prayer bells, and that the volume of traffic in Chithurst Lane was unlikely to warrant any reconstruction to the road.

I was very reluctant to be filmed, shaking and in an acute state of anxiety every time a camera came near me. The producer wanted me to talk about my experiences in Vietnam but the interview was a hopeless disaster of stage fright and American slang that didn't make the final cut, although I did manage to bless Doris, the monastery cat, without shaking. When the local priests were interviewed I hid behind Ajahn Chah so I would only have to do the translating, leaving him to take care of the answers.

A few women who wanted to become nuns came to stay, which put Ajahn Sumedho in a quandary. While he didn't want to deny them the opportunity to ordain, he had never trained women before and didn't know what to provide for them. For once there was no precedent from Thailand to follow. His thinking was very masculine oriented and once he had made up his mind to accept the responsibility, they had to conform to the monk's code of discipline and demeanor. Eventually they became ten-precept nuns in dark brown robes but until then they had to remain anagarikās in white under the eight precepts for four more years.

For a while they did all the cooking and that seemed to be their lot. Most of the time they were accepting of it and able to work with it. At other times the inequality made it the worst possible situation they could be in. The monks responded in various ways to having women around. Most were content to leave it up to Ajahn Sumedho and to adapt their practice around his decisions. As far as I was concerned, if women wanted to become nuns they had every right to do so. At the same time I doubted if we could cater for their particular needs with the set up as it was.

The problem was partially solved when they moved into a nearby cottage bordering the one hundred and twenty acres of forestland that had recently been donated to the trust. In all we had everything we wanted to develop a Forest monastery in a beautiful setting with enough adjoining land to provide timber for fuel and plenty of space to build the kutis necessary for solitary retreat.

There was no alternative but to accept that taking charge of the repair work had to be my practice. Sleeping sitting up at night for much of the time was a vain attempt to remind myself that I was a monk and not just a builder

as I literally ran up and down and around the monastery, too caught up in the work for mindfulness or reflection. Ajahn Sumedho was the only one of us who seemed to be able to keep his practice going. I admired his ability to keep it all in perspective and in the light of the teaching, but his vague impracticality when it came to building projects could infuriate me and leave me feeling completely hopeless.

It would be two years before I left my worries and concerns about the work on the doorstep of the monastery to spend the three months of the vassa on retreat in a gypsy tent in the forest. I watched sleepiness and restlessness in the beginning but once I had established a routine, I began to enjoy the peace of the woodlands and life in the tent.

Most of everything came up in meditation during that retreat. One night I sat through a howling storm of wind and rain, breathing in the forces of the elements as the trees came crashing down onto the forest floor around me, fascinated by the awareness that one could come down on me at any moment. Another evening I was meditating under a tree when a shot rang out and a bullet pinged through the branches over my head. Vietnam exploded once more into my consciousness and I sat for hours into the night replaying the images and the emotions brought up by the memories. When I looked down at my hands I saw they were trembling.

Inevitably lust took up a couple of days of reflection. I had got my act together around western women since the Thai girl had offered me her sandwiches on the Finchley Road. All I wanted was to live and die in purity as a monk with whatever was left of my sexual energy finally transcended. This time a photograph I had seen of the newly married Princess Diana, blonde, blue-eyed and shy, brought up a vision of the archetypal female in my practice.

The training around sexuality was quite specific and masturbation was not an option. Night emissions were not an offence unless a monk set himself up for it by putting something between his legs before he went to sleep or touching himself when roused. I lay in the tent going through the whole spectrum of feelings of wanting, needing, desiring, giving, struggling with the knowledge that I would probably never kiss a woman again and never have the chance to experience the intimacy of a real relationship that was more than just sex.

I allowed the mind state to run its course and then consciously gave up the pain. There was a certain satisfaction, even arrogance, in watching it fade from consciousness. I thought I had won and took pride in my mental control being greater than my physical needs.

not great communicators

Working on the roof took up most of the summer of 1982. It had to be completely rebuilt and I was up on the scaffolding when a call came from my mother telling me my father was dying. He had been sick with emphysema for the past ten years but still I was very shocked.

I got an air ticket that day and was on my way within hours. His condition stabilized sufficiently during the week I was with him to lessen our immediate concern. I couldn't stay longer because the *vassa* had begun when a monk can only leave the precincts of the monastery under exceptional circumstances and then for no longer than seven days. Bobby and Karen were able to stay and help my mother so I returned to England on the understanding that I would return the minute he showed signs of further deterioration.

I had been back barely two weeks when she called to tell me he was comatose and asking me to come at once. No matter how I thought I had prepared for it, I wasn't prepared for it. I found myself suddenly and deeply in shock. The meal had just finished and Ajahn Sumedho was still in the *sala* when I announced that I would be leaving directly. I don't know what I was expecting him to say but I was horrified when he didn't give me his blessing and let me go. Instead he told me to wait, adding that if my father were already comatose it wouldn't matter when I went.

My mind exploded in anger and resentment. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I sat down, shaking, upset, feeling the perspiration breaking out all over me and running down into my robes. I kept asking myself what could I learn from this? The money was there for my ticket, what was the problem?

My mind kept saying: *Wait a minute. Your father only dies once. You've got to be there.*

But Ajahn Sumedho was adamant, insisting I stay one day longer.

There was nothing for it but to go back outside and up onto the roof. Anger made me reckless. I chose the most difficult work I could find, replacing the flushing on one of the tallest chimneys, balanced precariously on top of the ladder so that I could use both hands. Ajahn Sumedho may have had second thoughts about me because he came out and stood beneath where I was working. I ignored him. When I got to America my father was dead.

It took me a while to recover from his death. I was impressed by the power of the practice so that my mind was extremely quiet when I saw him for the last time. I was still very upset that I hadn't been with him when he died.

My brother and sister had taken care of the funeral arrangements and my mother had plenty of support from her church as well as the family. But as his son I should have been there.

I knew he had never really accepted me as a monk. He had never really understood what I was doing, although in his left-handed way he had said not long before he died that if any of us got to heaven I would probably be the first, which I took as a compliment. We were not great communicators but we tried and I felt pretty good about our relationship in the end. If I had been with him at the last I would have been truly satisfied with how we had parted.

It was Ajahn Sumedho's attitude that I found so hard to understand and to forgive. I was away for exactly one week and came back to England physically and emotionally shattered, so much so that I completely forgot to pay my formal respects to him on my return. It was nine-thirty in the morning when I arrived at Chithurst. I was so tired that all I wanted to do was to have some gruel and catch up on some desperately needed sleep.

Two hours later he sent a visiting Sri Lankan family to wake me up. They had asked to see me without realizing what was going on and were very embarrassed that Ajahn Sumedho had told them where to find me when I explained what had happened. I went back to sleep and it was well into the afternoon before I went to see him and invite him out for a walk. Communication with him wasn't always easy but I needed to re-establish myself with him as my teacher. Even so I couldn't talk about the problem that lay between us. The wound was too raw, the pain too deep. It took another five years for me to be able to talk to him about it and to forgive him, by which time he had long forgotten it.

It was hard to direct my mind back into the work and my practice. I felt lost. I didn't want to be at Chithurst and I didn't want to be anywhere else either, which was an unusual state of mind for me. Dhurandharo took it upon himself to try to console me when we played hooky from evening chanting and went walking in the woods one night. He let me talk for a while and then made the mistake of putting an arm around me. How dared he be so damned patronizing? In a rush of white, hot anger I turned on him, hands balled into fists ready to smack him.

'Get your fucking hands off me!'

Poor Dhurandharo, the few times I almost lost it, it had to be in front of him. He stepped back in shock. I carried on walking. He couldn't have been more apologetic but wisely gave me space to be angry, resentful and upset, just listening until I had cleared some of the misery out of my system.

More went a couple of days later when I was supervising the hoisting of a big RSJ into place in the *sala*. I was under a lot of pressure to get it right and in situations like that I became very dictatorial. I knew how it had to be done but unfortunately I was working with Mukaro, who knew a lot about some things but not much about building. He had always been able to wind me up like few others had ever done and he didn't like being told what to do. I had neither the time nor the patience to play games with his ego. When he flatly refused to cooperate I boiled over.

'Come on, you asshole! Let's go outside and sort this out!'

I grabbed him, pushed him in front of me out of the room. I kept jabbing at him, herding him into the garden, glad that I was wearing steel-toed safety boots because I fully intended using them. Old Walther was working in the garden. He'd been a prisoner of war in Siberia and realized exactly what was going on as soon as he saw us come out.

He started shouting, 'They're going to fight! They're going to fight!'

Dhurandharo came running to break it up but by that time I was on my knees. In the instant that Mukaro turned and squared off to me I had looked past him and thought, 'I'm not going to buy into this.' The rage evaporated. As I bowed to him, he collapsed onto his knees and burst into tears. That was the end of it. From then on I directed all my grief into the work, putting in twelve-hour days. It was safer that way.

Then one night I had a dream. It was an erotic dream. They still came to torment me from time to time except that this one was different. I didn't actually make love to the woman. Instead we had a conversation. She was laying beside me, her long, blonde hair spread out over the pillow, fair skin, blue eyes, maybe the same age as me or a little younger. So desirable. As I leaned over her I heard her say quite distinctly,

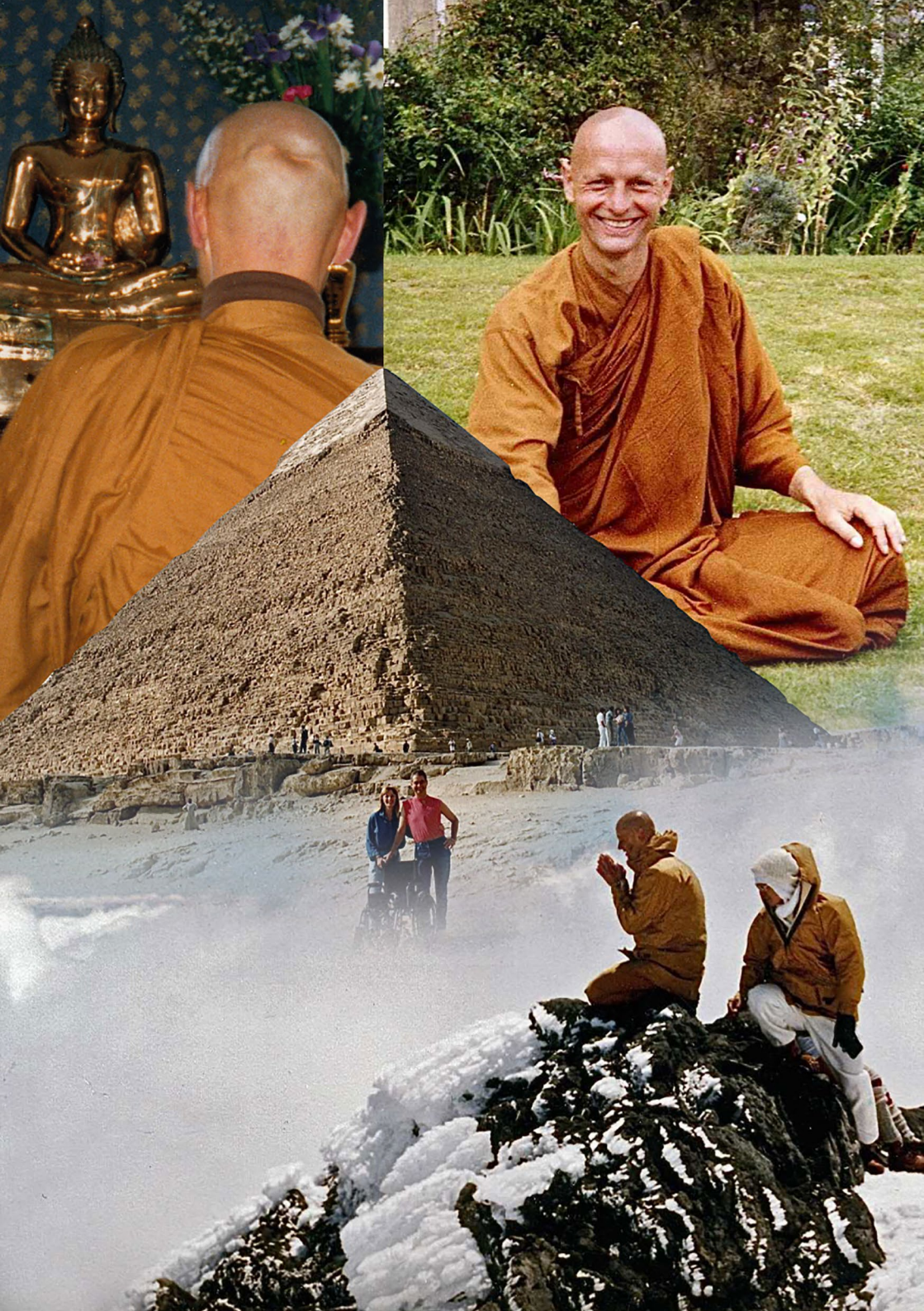
'I'm the one who's waiting for you.'

It was so vivid, so real. I woke up in shock with all the old anxiety about leaving with a woman fresh in my mind, but the dream wouldn't let go. It stayed with me for several days, haunting my meditation until I accepted that was how it was going to be. One day she would be the one who would take care of me. I didn't have to hang on to it. I didn't need to know how long I would have to wait. I just knew it would happen.

Ten years later on an island in the Aegean, she stepped out of the dream into stunning reality. She was a little older, her skin tanned, her hair a little shorter, bleached by the sun.

She said: 'I'm the one you were waiting for all those years.'

And I remembered.



abbot

Completing my tenth *vassa* since ordination got me promoted to Ajahn Ānando and sent north to Newcastle for a year to oversee the renovation of the Harnham Vihara, during which time the majority of the monks and nuns moved with Ajahn Sumedho to Amaravati in Hertfordshire. It never occurred to me to wonder who would be taking his place at Chithurst. His remark that he considered I had reached the point in my practice where I could inspire people gave me no clue. I assumed that I would be joining him and the others after I left Harnham.

I travelled back to Chithurst by train to be picked up in Petersfield by one of the anagarikas. As we were driving out of the town he said,

'So you're going to be the Abbot of Chithurst.'

It was the first I had heard of it. 'Oh yeah? Who told you that?'

'Ajahn Sumedho's been saying it.'

That old, familiar sinking feeling of anxiety knotted into the pit of my stomach. It was a responsibility I just didn't want and as much as my ego-mind enjoyed the position of authority and most of the subsequent attention, from that time on the joy went out of my practice. Anxiety stimulated an aggressive, assertive presentation of what I wanted to achieve and I got a reputation for being 'hard line' as I later heard it described.

Hospital and prison visiting became part of my regular schedule and I was often invited to speak at the local schools and colleges, which could be fun but did nothing to lighten the burden of leadership that continually underlined my feelings of inadequacy. Most of the time I didn't think I was the right person for the job.

Teaching never ceased to be a tremendous strain on my nervous energy. Since the early days in London it could reduce me to a state of pure, unadulterated fear where I would be shaking and perspiring so hard that my tee shirt would be soaked through and beads of moisture would fall out from under my finger nails. The only thing in my favor was my almost flawless Scorpion facade honed to perfection by years of the monastic rule so that unless people knew me very well, they would have no idea I was frightened.

Routine evening *desanas* (talks) after meditation were still something to be dreaded. I wasn't enlightened. I didn't know all the answers. I wasn't supremely wise. What did I have to offer that was actually worth talking about? Thinking about it in retrospect I certainly had an attitude problem,

a lot of wrong view on my leadership prospective, but consistently that was my dominant mind state at the time.

Consequently in reaction I was inclined to thumb my nose to the system. I didn't feel absolutely bound by the Vinaya, which in the position as abbot could, and eventually did, have serious ramifications. I have a deep and lasting reverence and respect for the essence of the Buddhist tradition but I didn't have a single-minded devotion literally to the letter of the discipline, which did not always make me the ideal person to be teaching the monastic code to the junior monks. There were times when my attitude caused mayhem in the community when I couldn't see why we should have to go along with the accepted norm when it wasn't necessarily the best thing to do from a holistic point of view.

Right from the outset I was open to having the monastery accessible to acceptable alternatives such as inter-faith meetings and healing. I felt that it was good for everyone in the community to come into contact with a variety of views concerning the teaching and the approach to practice. Above all I wanted them to be as aware as possible of the responsibility we all share in the survival of the quality of life on the planet. In short we should really practice what we were preaching, which wasn't always easy to demonstrate on a practical level.

I took my turn at teaching retreats once or twice a year at Amaravati. In the beginning I was very worried about the overall reaction to what I had to teach and the effect it was having in a situation as intense as a ten-day retreat. Increasingly as time went on I wasn't convinced that what we had been taught to teach really addressed the problems the retreatants brought up.

Taking the format we had inherited from the Burmese tradition I decided to teach *metta bhavana* on the ninth day. Soon it extended into the tenth day and then took over the eighth day, until for three consecutive years I taught a full ten-day *metta* retreat. It was fun for me but often cathartic for the retreatants, provoking a lot of energy, alternatively enthusiastic, blissed out or in the depths of despair. One year the kitchen helpers served chamomile tea three nights running in a vain attempt to calm everyone down and bring them back to earth.

Ajahn Sumedho was concerned that the energy was too volatile. People were getting too high. There was too much emotional stimulation. I didn't know until much later that one of the women had pointed out that if you have a good-looking monk teaching about opening your heart and learning to love everyone, including yourself, it can lead to attachment and therefore, quite rightly, to trouble in his view. After the third year he told me quite firmly

that the *metta* had to stop. The following year I taught as near to a standard Thervadan retreat as I was capable of teaching with only a very low-key allusion to *metta* as part of the scheme.

My feelings of inadequacy didn't lessen over the years. For a while I considered changing my name legally to Ānando. Whimsically I had made a point of never allowing my original name to become common knowledge. I didn't particularly like Greg Klein or most of what my mind associated him with. He was some uneasy alter ego that I had never come to terms with and preferred to ignore. I knew I enjoyed a degree of popularity with the lay people. I had many friends and acquaintances among them but naturally they could only relate to what they saw as the monk within the sanctity of the robe.

It was the same with my family and friends in America. They could only relate to what I had been and to what they thought I had become, rather than who I was. It was no one's fault. I only projected what I wanted them to see and occasionally what I thought they preferred to see.

There was never anyone I could really talk to. I was often exhausted and asked Ajahn Sumedho at least once every year to replace me. A full 'congregation' for evening chanting didn't increase my feelings of worthiness and I never trusted when respect became adulation. The 'special relationships' that were claimed were very flattering but at the same time very confusing and I had never been trained to handle them. Common sense was not always enough. Too much praise aroused my suspicions but at the same time I needed encouragement. I needed to know I was loved. I had so little love for myself.

A freak storm that turned into a hurricane brought havoc to the South of England in October 1987. We spent days with chainsaws clearing fallen trees from the lanes. I twisted my left knee as I was pulling on a tree. I felt it go but decided to ignore it. Next morning I woke up with the joint partially locked and a problem with my back where I had been wounded. Bowing and sitting in the full lotus position were impossible. The pain dragged on through November and December, lending itself as the perfect excuse to get out of teaching the winter retreat while I went to Amaravati to sit out the two months ignominiously in a chair.

Quite apart from my physical problems, I was dealing with flashbacks from the Marine Corps and Vietnam, triggered by having to fill in my financial status questionnaire from the VA. I remembered so many situations when I should have been part of a group that died, so many times when momentary decisions saved my life. I couldn't understand why I had survived or why I should have survived. Why me when so many others did not?

More than once a fellow Vietnam Veteran accused me of refusing to acknowledge the effect that the war still had on me and how much I had yet to work through. I didn't agree. Yes, I was damaged, traumatized, and probably always would be. But I was not carrying the full burden of the American conscience on my shoulders. Mine was not so much guilt at having taken part in the war, rather I was hating myself for having allowed the system to fool me into believing it had been worth fighting for. Fortunately I had no personal record of atrocity other than having been there to haunt the depths of my consciousness.

I found it humbling that I could still be overwhelmed by so much self-hatred after all the years of practice. In my more lucid moments I was surprised at the power it had over me. In my darker moments I wondered what would be the price?

At the end of the retreat I left Amaravati with Ajahn Sumedho to enjoy visiting America, New Zealand, Australia and Thailand. We always got on best when we were travelling together. As he often said: 'Have you noticed, Ānando, how the body is just moving around the world but there's no one going any place?'

A return to Chithurst was usually more like a sigh of resignation for me as I took back the burden of responsibility. But this time, seeing the magnolia trees in bloom and the daffodils nodding their yellow heads by the folly gate, it had a much more positive effect. I walked around seeing how beautiful the place was, walked through the familiar door into the familiar hallway. Nothing much had changed. Everything was just right.

I took my place on the cushion in the middle of the sitting platform in front of the Buddha-rupa in the *sala*. The monks and nuns, the anagarikas and the anagarikās came in. Smiling faces. The traditional greeting. Someone saying, 'It's nice to see you back home.'

It was nice to be back and Chithurst certainly was home. It had been a wonderful experience to travel and meet so many people. Now it was nice not to have to go any place, just to sit quietly in my kuti looking out over the hills. The birds were singing, getting ready to nest. The sun was going down. The body went around the world. No one went.'

attentiveness; reflections on death

It was only after Greg had left the monastery, when the consequences of the Vietnam war were finally taking their toll, that he began to understand how much his time at Chithurst and what he had given of himself as abbot and teacher had been beneficial. In letters, gifts, messages of goodwill so many expressed their gratitude for Ajahn Ānando and his unstinting attention and concern for them in time of need.

Had he continued to practice in Thailand where an entire society has been established around the monastic form, there would have been little need to test the boundaries of the conventional aspects of the discipline.

As he said: 'It was wonderful to be able to give myself to that which is virtuous, that I didn't have to question.'

Relocated as an inexperienced junior monk to Protestant England, where any tradition of devotion or respect for priests had been long on the wane, he was forced to adapt with little guidance to the demands of an educated, questioning, often critical lay community immersed in cultural values that were very different from those of his Catholic American origins.

To be fair to Ajahn Sumedho, also American, he had been the senior incumbent at Wat Pah Nanachat for only two years before finding himself head of the Western Sangha with new monasteries mushrooming up around him, a queue of people wanting to ordain and barely time to draw breath. Beginnings are delicate times; not everyone is destined to survive them.

On Veteran's Day, November 11th 1989, two days after the fall of the Berlin Wall when the world was daring to hope that the Cold War was finally over, Ajahn Ānando was at Amaravati teaching a two-day 'Death and Dying' retreat.

Since his unexplained bout of illness in the summer he had been noticing periods of unusual fatigue, usually in the evenings after meditation, accompanied by an uncharacteristic clumsiness and headaches. He put it down to stress and exhaustion from lack of sleep. The clumsiness was more apparent on his left side. Sometimes his left foot would drag slightly when he was walking downstairs and he would lose his sandal. His balance was affected and he had to pay more attention to how he used his left hand. As he could still see perfectly well he didn't give the symptoms a lot of thought.

They were certainly not troubling him as the retreat progressed. His endearing, sometimes irrepressible charm created an atmosphere of empathy and security for everyone taking part. He was compassionate, courteous and sensitive to their needs, careful not to have them sitting for longer than was comfortable, carrying on the question and answer sessions only as long as they wished to continue.

'Turning our attention to contemplating death in a conscious and direct way is not to be morbid but to wake up as to how we are living our lives at the present moment.

Ajahn Chah used to talk about learning to respond from the heart instead of the head. He said that if we want to understand death we must understand life.

How do we do that?

By learning to pay attention to whatever is going on around us, to be mindful, by cultivating attentiveness.

Life rarely unfolds as we want it to. A helpful change of attitude from constantly expecting something from life to one where we are willing to observe and to learn, creates the opportunity for wisdom and understanding to gradually develop, as the Buddha said, like the gentle deepening of the ocean.

If we hold onto the view that life owes us, we set ourselves up for disappointment.

If we identify with the body as being who and what we are, going through the process of aging, sickness and death is going to be an uncomfortable, threatening, even terrifying experience.

Reflecting on death reminds us not to waste life. It reminds us to deeply appreciate the value of what we have right now because we know one day it will end.

We deal with the fear of death by accepting it, by not resisting it, by practicing quietly and patiently observing it until we see it for what it truly is, just a continuation of the life process in a state of rebirth moment by moment.

To be a quiet, compassionate companion for someone who is dying, to be helping create a suitable environment where they may die, is a great blessing.

There may be a tendency to want a person to die the way we think they should die. We may have a model in mind of the right death, the best death and so we try to impose our model on someone else.

This is something we should be aware of and avoid following. If the person hasn't made their wishes clear, be attentive and have the sensitivity to do what is appropriate.

Until we are enlightened what happens at death is a mystery. That which is born dies. The body has a lifespan and dies. Leaves hang from the trees in the last stages of their lives, a gust of wind comes and they are gone.

If we want to understand death we must understand life.

Living this life, what brings us joy?

When we are aware of being vitally alive.

When we are completely present with what is happening in our lives.

When we see our lifetime as a precious opportunity not to be wasted.

When we give ourselves to something, when we are fully committed to something.

When we are involved in an act of selflessness, using the self in a way that brings comfort to others.

When we learn to respond from the heart.'

battleground

Disrobing in no way lessened Greg's practice. Relieved at last of the burden of responsibility, if anything it was enhanced because he had time and space to watch self-honesty, to value himself for who and what he truly was, Greg and Ānando as one, the healing and melding of his heart and mind accomplished in the security of our love and commitment to one another.

He was still well. We put the steroid down to a daily sixteen milligrams, then fourteen, rejoicing when we got down to twelve even if his walking was not quite so balanced. It was hardly noticeable but I found myself putting out a hand to steady him more often.

Then he fell. I had rolled out of bed careless and happy after a wonderful night, walked across the hall to the kitchen to turn on the oven to warm the bread. It took no more than thirty seconds. In that time he had stood up and crashed backwards against the radiator. Hearing him shout, I ran back to find him holding his back and writhing in pain. He hadn't hurt his head but there were angry, red marks across the scars just below his waist.

The trauma of war called out; the tumor answered. If it had been asleep before, it was awake again now.

The first indications were an occasional muddling of speech and inability to follow conversation. One morning we were in the bathtub at the steamy, bubbly stage of complete relaxation. Greg lay back with his chin level with the surface of the water looking from corner to corner around the room.

'Where is the heater in here?' he asked.

There was a huge, hot, green-colored radiator on the wall opposite. I pointed it out, looking hard at him, listening while he rambled on about different sorts of heaters in England and in America, until he lost contact with what he was trying to say.

He noticed my expression and started laughing. 'You're looking very skeptical.'

'Why is that, do you think?'

'Because my ability to articulate has gone down.' He took a breath, reflecting, 'I'm glad I wasn't like this in America after the operation. It would have been discouraging.'

We called it 'talking Russian', laughing helplessly when it got too absurd. One of the best was when he stood up and announced very solemnly, 'I'm going to fold my robe,' and proceeded to close the shutters.

He had no pain but his unsteadiness increased and his concentration wandered a little. I dared to suggest increasing the steroid back to sixteen milligrams for a few days to see if he was better. Surprisingly he agreed. In twenty-four hours he was much improved if not quite so well as he had been before.

Imperceptibly he had lost ground that, try as he might, he couldn't regain. He became increasingly restless at night, possessed of a different, more aggressive energy. We had kept the 'gnomes' as we called them under control with a mild sleeping pill since November but as the energy became more dominant, the medication became less effective.

We were expected in Switzerland to visit the monastery and Kandersteg at the end of February. I was looking forward to seeing the mountains and the snow but Greg was concerned that his occasional forgetfulness would make him appear less well to the monks than he felt he was.

'I know my conduct is deviant but I only know it from you and your reaction to me, Mali. You must help me when we're there, make sure I don't do or say anything out of context.'

Anxious that his wishes be strictly adhered to in the event of his dying, he sent a letter and a copy of his Will to his family before we left for Switzerland.

‘Will you try to call them?’ I asked.

‘No, I don’t want them to know about my lack of articulation.’

It was all so difficult.

‘I don’t want to be carted off,’ he said suddenly.

‘You won’t be, believe me. You do understand, don’t you? The only person who will do any carting is me and then only if you want it.’

He looked past me out of the window across the valley to Bonnieux.

‘It’s all right.’ he said quietly. ‘It’s all working out as I planned.’

A day came when he got up feeling wretched.

‘Do you have any pain?’ I asked anxiously.

‘No, but I feel terrible.’

He went back to bed and almost immediately sank in a deep sleep, lying very still, almost comatose for several hours before suddenly getting up and staggering to the bathroom, shutting the door hard behind him.

I knew what had happened. I had a large supply of incontinence padding hidden in a cupboard. In a few minutes I had the bed changed and the sheets washed, hung over the balcony to dry. I walked into the bathroom and knelt down on the floor in front of my husband.

‘Don’t worry, little one, beloved you, everything’s done. Would you like some lunch?’

He shook his head. ‘No, I don’t feel like it.’

I took his hands, squeezing his fingers, loving him. ‘Hey, Gregory Klein, you’ve terrified me this morning and you’ll terrify me still more if you stop eating. People do that when they go into comas. Can I make you some soup?’

‘If you want to.’

’Can I increase the steroid for three days? Just to see if you’re okay?’

‘Only for three days.’

‘And I’m going to put the Essiac up to three doses a day.’

‘All right then,’ he said, trying hard not to be disappointed. ‘Mali?’

‘Yes, my love?’

‘You have my heart.’

He had mine. I held him, cried all over him, forgetting he was sitting on the toilet and that I had gone in there to help him to stand up.

A strangely sinister, almost demonic energy gave us no peace and very little sleep that night. Our gnomes were becoming gremlins.

He whispered: ‘What is going on in me is neither right or appropriate.’

‘What can we do about it?’

‘Nothing much in the end.’

‘Do you want to go back to England?’

‘No, I want to stay here.’

It wasn’t difficult to die in Provence. In many ways the process of cremation was easier and more in keeping with our Buddhist preferences than the procedure commonly employed in England. I would be able to be involved every step of the way, preparing his body and seeing it through the formalities for immediate cremation. His ashes would be sealed hot in a double-sided urn ready to take back to Chithurst, the house that Ajahn Ānando built, as a senior monk would tell me with a smile when our paths crossed by chance while travelling a couple of years later.

We made love, me and my Gregory, for the last time the night of the spring equinox. We had dreaded it, that last time when the tumor might decide to get in the way. When it came we accepted it. No nostalgia. No tears. We smiled, tender with each other, little kisses, our special sweetness. Then we snuggled up and slept. It was okay.

spiritual friends

There could be no more denying that the tumor was sliding him slowly, inexorably downhill into death. At such a time in his practice it was essential that he retain clarity both for quality of life and for the refinement of his mind state as he approached his passing. We had the increasing dose of steroid medication to contend with, but nothing could interrupt our deep and abiding attunement, that constant communication that worked on every level between us. I knew he was working out his anger mostly in his dreams, occasionally by refusing to cooperate with me.

Necessity expanded our Sangha of Two. Gillian offered to cook for us and share our practice, which included a compulsory sunbathing session on the balcony every afternoon. Gudrun arrived two weeks later, amazed at the quality of the light and the heat of the spring sunshine, the beauty of the orchards in bloom in Provence.

She was not happy about her stepfather’s condition. ‘What’s happening here?’

‘What you think?’ I said. ‘He’s doing his best but he’s dying. He’s just dying.’

‘Do you remember what you said to me when you first told me about him?’

‘No. What did I say?’

‘I’ve never forgotten it. You said you were leaving with Ajahn Ānando and one day he was going to get sick because of the gunshot wound in his head. Whether it is sooner or later, you said, I’ll be the one to take care of him.’

Tears in my eyes. The stab of pain in my heart.

‘Oh Goo, why do all the ghastly things have to come true?’

Our luck with doctors held out. When Doctor Parraud came to visit he was friendly and kind, in no hurry to leave. Greg was encouraged when his heart rate and blood pressure were normal. The steroid was slowly increasing. I was able to tell the doctor that we were on twenty-six milligrams daily but a week later, with increasing head pains in the morning before he sat up, we were up to forty a day and holding, just.

Whenever I asked him how he was feeling I always got the same reply after a few seconds of consideration.

‘I’m feeling very well.’

‘Do you have any pain?’

‘No, not at all.’

He could still join in morning chanting, not missing a word from beginning to end. He was very amused one evening when Gillian and I got into a heated discussion about the Vinaya. It was all practice. Everything was okay just as it was, even this difficult, heartbreaking time with the cancer. We would only make things worse by choosing to see it as pain.

Except that no amount of wisdom could stop that dreadful, agonized scream nipping at my heels with every step, haunting my meditation, eclipsing my dreams. If occasionally I cursed and used colorful language Greg never rebuked me for it. However awful everything was he could always console me. Even now, when sometimes he could only speak in a whisper, he could still reach me with that same look of love, a hardly perceptible nod, sometimes just the pressure of his finger on my foot as he lay on the couch in the afternoons while I read the manuscript to him.

When it all got too much I would say, ‘Gregory?’

‘Yes?’

‘Kiss me or I’ll scream!’

He was always more than happy to oblige.

The weather changed the first week in April, the rain crashing down on the

autoroute as I drove Gudrun to the airport. She left in tears and invited herself back less than a fortnight later as I knew she would, travelling twenty-four hours on an overnight bus from London.

Mindfulness was difficult without the sun. Day after day we would wake to see the sky covered in lowering, heavy cloud, that might lighten for an hour, maybe less, before rain and hail beat against the windows, smashing into the wisteria blossom on the balcony. One afternoon a rainbow appeared over the farm in the valley and as I closed the shutters that night I saw a single star gleaming over the trees on the hill.

My fears and fantasies about my husband getting better, getting worse, crowded my mind by day. At night my few hours of sleep turned into a crazy sequence of bathroom scenes, getting him onto the toilet, getting him off. I would tell him about it in the morning. We would be laughing as I changed the bed. At least we could laugh. He could barely string six words together in conversation but he could still manage morning chanting and the blessing at the end.

He fell again, a simple roll off the couch but enough to bring on another seizure. Mercifully it lasted less than two minutes and this time the outcome was beneficial, as though something had been redirected in his brain. He was continent, brighter, talking more. Urine took a back seat in my dreams for the rest of our time with Charles, leaving only the odd flash of pain and the slowly increasing dose of steroid medication to prompt me out of any possible complacency.

The sun returned with a delight of days basking under cloudless skies after the April full moon. We needed it. There were times when the tumor exuded a dark, wayward, almost malevolent energy, as it battled the effects of the steroid medication for supremacy. I was doing my best to contain it, supporting him in his effort to retain clarity. I didn't always succeed. Exhaustion left us vulnerable. I sensed the negativity prowling the boundaries of our community, our practice. This was no time to give in.

Nick volunteered to relieve Gillian at the end of the month. He had lived at Chithurst as a layman, an anagarika and briefly as a monk before disrobing some years before. How fortunate we were and how necessary it was at that time to be surrounded by spiritual friends as the Buddha advised. There was a common bond, we all spoke the same language and most importantly in this situation, we had all been brought up one way or another by Ajahn Ānando.

We hadn't discussed the actual level of steroid medication he was taking for almost a month. It had become one of those tacit agreements, understood

but too painful to talk about while I agonized over it in my mind, muttered occasionally to Gillian and he counted the pills on his tongue before he swallowed them.

Needing advice I called our English oncologist, keeping the kitchen door closed so as not to be overheard. It was a mistake. When I went back to our room, Greg turned his face away, refusing to look to me.

'Tell me something wonderful?'

No answer.

'Do you love me, Gregory?

'No, I do not!'

Knowing exactly why he said it didn't stop the rush of hurt and pain. I burst into tears.

'Oh, Mali!' he said.

'So you can say my name! You haven't called me by name for more than a month!'

'You don't tell me. You...' he began, holding out his hand, waiting for me to put my head under it so that he could stroke my hair. I blew my nose and told him the truth about the call, about the medication, how even with the Essiac to help him, he might experience the worst effects of the drug if we went any higher.

'We've run out of ideas, beloved. Charles is winning.'

He stopped stroking my hair, leaving his hand resting lightly on my head, staring up at the ceiling.

'Do you have any more ideas?' I asked.

'No.'

'Do you want me to raise the steroid dose?'

'No.'

I held him close while he shook convulsively for several minutes.

'Beloved, don't see this illness as personal failure,' I said softly. 'You haven't failed me by getting sick. I mind, oh yes, I mind because ultimately I haven't been able to heal you, only help you to bear it and make you comfortable. But don't see it as personal failure, please.'

He turned and smiled and made to kiss me.

'Are you afraid to die?'

'No.'

'Are you afraid of losing me?'

Silence.

'I will always be your wife. Do you know why?'

He looked at me intently.

'First, and most importantly, because I love you. Secondly because a relationship with anyone else would be inappropriate and could never possibly satisfy me. I've had the best of the best. Who and what can follow that? But for heaven's sake, please don't die on me at Wesak. It will be in such poor taste.'

He started laughing.

'I couldn't live with the legend and some people will be convinced you are a saint. And no holy springs under the oak tree where the ashes are supposed to go!'

'I won't.'

He lifted both hands, running his fingers over my hair while I laughed and cried and sniveled into a Kleenex.

'I love you,' he said.

So we turned to face the guns. Touching the screen to open the window on our time together, I see we have been married exactly eighteen months to the day. Scrolling back to April 29th 1967, Delta Company are gearing up to go out on Operation Union. Two days earlier President Lyndon Baines Johnson and Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the White House, should have ordered the withdrawal of U.S. combat forces from Vietnam. It didn't happen.

What is time?

The eternal 'now'?

The constant moment?

Can it be defined?

Ajahn Ānando says that what we are experiencing is a result of all we have thought, said and done throughout our lives.

So we are. We're Greg and Mali Klein, me and my Marine, welded back to back on the final battlefield. Come on, Death! Where are you now?

all time is now

May 1st: Nick is here. Gillian is preparing to leave. On screen Delta Company are in the field. They have landed without incident. No contact with the enemy.

May 2nd: We work to clear the dark, unhelpful cancer energy from the house. We spend the morning scrubbing, cleaning, rearranging cupboards, vacuuming every speck of dust lurking in forgotten corners and under chairs. None of us thrive sitting around waiting for death.

Delta are behind the battalion command group. All around them the firefight is intense. They hear it but don't get involved.

Greg is in bed listening to all the activity, surprised when he sees me pushing the wheelchair out into the hall.

'We're changing everything,' I explain. 'After lunch we are putting you in the wheelchair and walking you to Bonnieux. There is no negotiation.'

He rolls his eyes, exasperated.

'I know you don't want to. I can hear you saying that you are too tired, too lazy, you don't want to be seen in the wheelchair, the sun is too bright, you don't want the bother.'

He nods, his face set in the 'Oh Mali!' expression I know so well.

'But you're going nevertheless, even if we have to drag you up the steps. I promise you will enjoy it once we get going.'

I dress him in his shorts and trainers. We get him safely up the steps. Nick talks to him about cars and plumbing, doing the hard work managing the wheelchair. Gudrun and I walk either side each holding a hand. We are out for two hours walking nearly to Bonnieux and back. He comes home tanned and relaxed, happy to do the same tomorrow.

May 4th: Delta are moving forward, have yet to see much action.

We go along the road getting deeply into a discussion about enlightenment. Greg listens with avid interest, joining in with a nod and a squeeze of our hands. Gudrun has finally discovered that it is all that some people live for.

'What is it then?' she asks.

We each have our own ideas. For me it can only be akin to the joy I saw my grandparents experience when they met for the first time after death. For Nick it has to be like imagining the best time he has ever had and then multiplying it a thousand, thousand fold.

We are all agreed that at every death there is a possibility of enlightenment. The discussion develops until we decide that we aren't nursing Greg who is dying, instead we are making a conscious attempt to assist him in his effort to win to enlightenment. Just a simple variation in the use of language and we notice our whole perspective becomes newly sensitized in a very positive and dynamic way.

Nick asks: 'Greg, what do you think of that?'

'Okay,' he says, quite clearly and nodding to emphasize the point.

I squeeze his hand, loving him. The brilliant red of the poppies scattered along the side of the road remind me of springtime on Limnos. Tired after a restless night, I see him nodding quietly behind his sunglasses as we turn for home. His grip on our hands is as strong as ever. The swallowing reflex is getting to be a problem.

May 5th: Delta are on point, make contact, this time protracted and involved. Jets screaming over their heads, explosions ripping through the jungle.

Today I have all the problems. Only women bleed but it's rarely convenient. I am irritable, absolutely fucked off with the brain tumor, fucked off with what it's doing to my husband, fucked off with what it's doing to me and I say so despite the Vinaya.

He squeezes my hand, understanding, loving me, slowly lifting my fingers to his lips for the softest, sweetest of kisses. How will I ever manage without him? How can I go on living without hearing his voice, without the comfort of his touch? Every night I go to sleep fantasizing that in the morning I will wake up and he will be smiling at me.

'Come, Mali, make love with me,' he'll say, and his face will be clear, he will be well and strong and all this will be a bad dream.

May 7th: Delta keep moving forward, sporadic contact, spotter planes directing a continual bombardment of artillery and airstrikes in front of them.

The last day we take him out in the wheelchair. Intracranial pressure sent spasms of pain through his head this morning before we sat him up but he still refuses extra medication. He was very sleepy over breakfast, better at lunchtime, too tired to hold his head up properly while we're walking. We turn for home early. He is much heavier to lift now.

When I give him his afternoon Essiac, the effort to swallow brings on a few spasms of pain. The doctor has prescribed some Valium drops, which Greg refuses to take. Almost completely helpless now and disabled by the tumor, his mind is still clear. He sticks by his principles, still my stubborn, wonderfully impossible husband.

He can still take his place at the table, chant the grace twice through without missing a word; smirk knowingly while he helps himself to Nick's orange juice without a second of hesitation. Why shouldn't he have some control over the drugs?

May 9th: The energy in the house is changing. It is becoming very peaceful now, softer, more wholesome, accepting the inevitable.

Cuddling close, I talk to him about his medication, just to be sure that we were both still in agreement.

'I know this may seem like a crazy question, but I feel I must ask you in accordance with your early Catholic conditioning. As we are living in a Catholic community, would you like a priest to come here to see you before you die?'

He shakes his head.

'Would you like me to tell your family how sick you are?'

Again he shakes his head.

'There's just one thing I wish you could promise me, beloved. When I die, please, please be there for me. Be waiting for me as my grandfather was for my grandmother. Let that joy be for me as well. Let me feel it as my spirit releases.'

His eyes fill with tears. He nods, turns towards me for a kiss, holding my hand very tightly.

May 10th: Delta are engaged in an intense firefight that lasts all day. Charlie Company are pinned down; Delta move to outflank the enemy position.

The pain spasms brought on by intracranial pressure were worse this morning, better when he got up and managed to eat a small breakfast. Lunch is a disaster. We put him back to bed.

Doctor Parraud visits with an English neighbor, who is a nurse. Greg is awake, bright-eyed, smiling. His blood pressure is normal, his heart still strong. The doctor confirms the onset of Cheyne-Stokes breathing.

'The prognosis is not good but it is a good way,' he says.

Faced with this entirely natural process of dying, the nurse wrestles with her professional conditioning.

'We should be setting up a drip,' she says hopelessly. 'There should be a catheter.'

I laugh. Greg has all that he can summon of that famous ear-to-ear grin splitting his face.

'Why?' I ask her.

She almost wails. ‘Because it’s what we do.’

‘But he doesn’t need it.’

‘I know!’

I sit on the bed talking with him when they are gone. He listens carefully while I go over everything that has been said and done, telling him how he will die. He nods and squeezes my hand. His eyes are as clear and bright as ever.

Gudrun made her best Miso soup, thick with carrots and leeks, for dinner. He ate it all followed by a full bowl of yoghurt to help swallow the pills.

Afterwards we sit together, the three of us around his bed until late in the evening, holding his hands while he dozes, telling stories about Ānando and Chithurst, about living on Ródos and Limnos, calling up images of the happy times, the funny times, the good times.

May 11th: He is very sleepy this morning, minimally responsive. There’s no pain. No need for medication. He manages to swallow his Essiac. His skin is very clear, his face soft and peaceful, his pulse still strong and even.

I see us standing together in front of a spiraling, multi-colored vortex of light and energy. My beloved is well, standing upright and strong, holding me close in his arms. We are waiting for when he must to pass through.

I call the monastery. We need all the chanting we can get. His eyelids flicker when he hears the first bars of the ‘Unchained Melody’ filling the room. I hold his hands, loving him, singing as we used to sing together; ‘Baby I need your Loving’, ‘Dancing in the Dark, the ‘Unchained Melody’ again. He would sing too if he could.

When the warm, early afternoon sun streams through the window, I find a tape of our favorite Pāli chanting. He makes little, almost imperceptible gestures in response to my voice and to the chanting. He knows when I tie one piece of the prayer string that the nuns have sent us from the Easter retreat at Amaravati, around his left wrist. He knows I am knotting the other around my own.

Gudrun and Nick are playing ping-pong in the basement. I can hear the flick and snap of the ball, their voices murmuring.

His breathing goes into spasm. He experiences a moment of agitation. *What’s happening?*

I begin the chanting, taking his hands in mine, holding them firmly, palm-to-palm, heartbeat-to-heartbeat, sharing all my strength, my courage and will to help him win through.

‘Come on, beloved, you can do this,’ I tell him. ‘You can do it.’

Gudrun and Nick join me. We chant a continuous round, two hours and more, supporting him through the ferocity of the spasms until the battle is over and his breathing quietens.

All around us Delta Company are set up on the side of a hill under a moonless night sky glittering with enormous stars. The RTO takes the last watch, getting himself comfortable in a bomb crater with the best cup of coffee and a cigarette that tastes so good.

We talk to him, holding his hands, feeling for the pulse that is becoming more difficult to locate. Gudrun is cradling his feet, keeping them warm, her eyes fixed on his face. She looks lost. She's only eighteen. She has never seen anyone die before, especially not someone she loves.

I remind her: 'There's nothing wrong with death. It's a natural and normal process. Do you remember all the times we sat in the stables at the farm, waiting for the foals to be born?'

'Yes,' she says.

'Don't you feel the similarity in this?'

Her eyes widen. 'Yes! It is more like waiting for a birth than a death, isn't it?'

'That's just what it is, a release from the confines of a worn out body, the final freedom.'

Outside the stars are tiny pinpoints of light glowing fitfully through the haze that comes creeping over the horizon as the day fades. The wind is rising.

I am curled around him, cuddling close, my head against his shoulder, my hair spread out over his chest.

Nick says: 'He almost seems better now, as though he is going to get well.'

At ten his breathing pauses. We look at him, at each other, relaxing as he breathes again, this time followed by a longer pause. I look at the clock. Two minutes after ten.

Hoping against hope that it is not the last, I hear myself saying, 'One more breath for me, beloved. Please, just one more breath for me.'

After an eternity it comes, his final, loving gift to his wife. One last, sighing breath as the clock ticks over to three minutes after ten. 22.03 hours in France. 05.03 hours, soon after dawn, May 12th in Vietnam.

On screen, Delta Company Radio Telegraph Operator, Corporal Gregory Howard Klein leaves the line, approaches the captain of the comm. unit.

'Sir! Get me the hell out of this company! That asshole of a lieutenant is gonna get me killed!'

It is already too late.

a future beyond the sun, and the stars

'Give gifts then for departed ones, recalling what they used to do. No weeping nor yet sorrowing nor any kind of mourning aids departed ones, whose kin remain unhelpful to them acting thus.' Adāsimeādigāthā

I was unhelpful for my departed one for ten, lost minutes where there is empty space in my memory. I remember that last breath, his final heartbeat and then nothing until I was walking across the hallway to the kitchen with the list of calls I had to make, everything I had to ask for. I know there were tears. I was dimly aware of the scream erupting, taking form just once.

'No-o-o-o-o-o-o-o!'

A strange, primeval sound. I wasn't sure if it was coming from me. It could only have come from me. I never realized how his breathing, his heartbeat had filled my sound of silence until they were no more. Until I was left to the mercy of the dreadful, overwhelming silence of my alone-ness that was not peace.

Practice. Be with it. All things rise and pass away.

With the exception of my sense of humor as we were laying him out. My capacity for outrageous remarks in desperate situations did not fail me while I got to work with my cotton plugs and cuticle stick. An impromptu *desana* on the difference in capacity between the back passage of the male and female of our species and speculation on the reasons thereof had us all temporarily helpless with hysterical laughter. When we turned him over, he was smiling too. Not so dead, not so far away.

Within the hour the weather turned to cloud and a storm of rain and screaming wind. It seemed appropriate to feel the wind battering the house, to hear the rain smashing down on the balcony while he lay cooling on the bed and I kept the watch alone in the sleeping bag on the floor beside him. Then to open the shutters in the morning and look out at the magnificent, dramatic skies that followed, the majestic, shining indigo, white and grey clouds forming and reforming, shot through with shafts of dazzling sunlight and flashes of silver and blue.

At first I rejected the silence. I was angry, afraid. Then I needed it. When the pain and the tears threatened to overwhelm me I schooled myself

to sit as we used to sit, knees touching, holding hands to meditate, clear light flowing. My hands tingle, grow hot. So he is with me again.

I hear his voice quite clearly: 'Oh, my Mali, I love you. We are one flame, one heart.'

'I love you,' I whisper into the space between the stars.

'Practice, Mali, the practice.'

For all my good intention I'd been at war so long it was a habit. So was the *metta* practice. Sometimes they work well together; other times they don't. He said I saved his spirit. He saved mine. In the words of another veteran, the poet Edward Thomas, killed in action in 1917, to his wife Helen, Greg 'gave me back myself, and the power to discriminate what I want and want it not too late.'

Even so I've had to watch a lot of anger and self-hatred because I couldn't heal his body. I could do everything else, love him more than life itself, but not that. Neither could I let go the negative mind state. Most of the time I've dealt with it reasonably well, keeping the magma chamber quiet with only the odd, hard look and occasional over-reaction to indicate its restlessness; other times it has come perilously close to eruption and I haven't.

Continuing the *metta* practice and self-forgiveness, even when I haven't wanted to, along with a sizable helping of my indestructible sense of humor have mellowed it down to a tiny pocket of fury at the core of my being. This too shall pass. Eventually, as do all things. It's how it is.

I went to the base with the death certificate, came away with URW next to my name on my new ID card.

'What does that mean?' I asked the sergeant.

'Unremarried widow, ma'am,' he replied.

It sounded dark, unforgiving. Not me. Nothing to do with me and Greg.

Within weeks of his death I found myself being strong-armed into starting a charity to make Essiac available to people like us who want more than surgery, radiation beams and chemicals to treat their cancer. Another battlefield, and of course there were all those letters from the VA.

They come at a time when all you want to do is grieve but they have to be answered. I gave them my best attention, replied to all the questions honestly and in order as they were asked. Every letter ended with the same closing comment stating in black and white that my husband's death was not service connected. Every one of my letters back concluded with the fitting response: No, my husband's death *was* service connected.

It wasn't a question of money and I wasn't asking for anything. The tumor developed on site of the gunshot wound. I was simply telling the truth. One day I got a letter telling me I had filed some legal procedure, using a word I had never heard of, that put me in line for a hearing, 08.00 hours, March 17th 1997, Washington DC.

I was two weeks back from Vietnam when I got there, two weeks back from travelling with our good friend from the California Sangha, bearing a handful of his ashes for burial in a beautiful country that was no longer a war. With no idea how we were supposed to get into Operation Union, I decided to make Hoi An our base and see what came up. We got off the bus. Half an hour later we walked into the right café and met the person predestined to volunteer himself as our guide and his brother's taxi for the ride to the hills to the north of the Que Son Valley. Ten minutes later I heard the 'Unchained Melody' playing on a radio on the other side of the street.

I had used the two years waiting for the hearing preparing my case, spending a lot of time at the Wall in DC, talking to veterans and people who advise veterans. The advisors told me I didn't have a hope. Cancer was not recognized as being service connected, and 'aliens', even those who were ostensibly human, white and British, were denied legal representation. The veterans on the other hand told me never to give up. I didn't.

Mine was one of three hearings scheduled for that March morning, St. Patrick's Day, which appealed to the vein of green blood pulsing in my Anglo-Irish ancestry. I'd flown in from London the night before, watching the amazing Hale-Bopp comet that looked like it was blazing a trail alongside the plane, escorting me every step of the way from Newark, NJ to DC.

When I checked in at the address just up the street from the White House, I found myself sitting alone in the waiting area. Three hearings, two of them with legal representation, and the 'alien' who was proposing to represent herself turned out to be the only one to show up.

I had nothing to lose. I went in there, told it like it was and I won. Three months later seven printed pages came through the mail notifying me that the Board had found my credibility 'to be without question' and 'therefore, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the Board finds that the evidence does support the appellant's underlying theory that the veteran's service-connected residuals of a gunshot wound to the head principally or contributorily led to his death.'

Yes, Mrs. Klein, cancer occurring on site of being wounded in action can lead to a veteran's service connected death. Thank you!

Once I knew Ānando...

He was a warrior with a wild side that only the monastery ever came close to taming. He was agonizingly sensitive and didn't want anyone to know. It made him a wonderful lover. It made PTSD unbearable. It manifested in him as a physical condition with clearly defined stress markers. The greater the stress levels the less articulate he became. Public speaking was always nothing less than torture for him, but the very nature of the condition meant that he couldn't talk about it with anyone. He used the practice to put it aside. When it overrode his mental control he preferred to deal with the symptoms alone. Particularly he took care to avoid being around other veterans; he couldn't trust himself not to start shaking and sweating uncontrollably purely by association.

His awareness of the limitations PTSD put on his ability to explain himself in stressful situations determined his controversial decision to forgo the customary disrobing procedure in leaving the monastery. As he pointed out in his farewell letter to Ajahn Sumedho, the events of the previous autumn at Chithurst had genuinely taken him dangerously close to suicide. He couldn't risk that again.

Seeking wholeness he wanted someone who could listen into the vastness of the universe and hear only his heartbeat, regardless of the stars in between. I listened. I heard. I was lucky to have him with me so well and happy for as long as I did. Clearly the cancer was at work years before he disrobed. For a little while at least our wild, haunting music lulled the symptoms to sleep. It gave us time to know joy, what it was to be vitally alive, to be completely present in our relationship and to give ourselves one to the other, to commit ourselves wholly to this precious opportunity of a life together that is not to be wasted.

It has taught me about love, that it is not confined to our limited perception of death and what is time. It's an idea with no scientifically provable foundation except that after all these years of love streaming down on my alone-ness I know it can be true.

He walked with me on my last birthday. It was a beautiful day of bright winter sunshine with a clear view down the narrow valley carved out by the river rising from the remains of the once mightiest of the strato-volcanoes in the Massif Central in France. I noticed he was carrying a daypack. It looked almost empty. Ever practical, I wondered why he was bothering with it.

Curious, I asked him: 'What's in the pack?'

He said: 'Everything you need for the rest of your life.'

'Is it heavy?'

Such a smile, his best smile and only for me. 'No, it's light.'

Writing this book, I listen again to the 'Vietnam' tape he made for me a quarter of a century ago when he was still in the monastery and discover a preliminary message for his trusted friend and counselor, even more relevant now. Such happiness. How I have missed his laughter, that crazy, infectious giggle. He tells me I have it too, the giggling little girl and the wise woman who became his lover and his wife. We had the robe between us then, we have death now. They are one and the same thing, only temporary.

One flame, one heart. When all other emotion has ceased only love remains.

There are no shadows in the Clear Light.

What is born dies. Practice is the constant, to be attentive, mindful, to be aware. Nothing is certain beyond this moment.

Except that I will see you again, Gregory.

Semper Fi, Marines.