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### Lower Shad Road

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# **LOWER SHAD ROAD**

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Mentor: Linsey Abrams

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“Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts of the City College of The City University of New York.”

# PART 1

## PROLOGUE

New York City 1980

Matt smiled. "What are you, like seventeen?" he asked.

"No! I'm nineteen!" I tried to shove him. But as usual he yielded, coming around and pushing me again.

"That's cool," he said, while I hit the wall. "Now I can buy you a beer after class."

I acted like I didn't hear him, continuing with push-hands and then *I* tried to push *him*, and once again he went back softly from my touch, turning and bending like water around a rock. It was futile.

"You're so soft," I said.

He shook his head and grinned.

"Not always." Hair, sandy-colored strands brushed across his eyes.

"Most of the time it's..." He looked down. "...uh... I better not say it..."

Here comes something cheesy, I thought.

"It's the opposite of soft," he said.

I puffed out a laugh and shoved him against the wall.

He came back. "Ha! Lucky shot!"

Suddenly my father's head appeared from behind Matt's left shoulder.

"Serena, Master Ming wants you," Dad said.

We dropped our hands to our sides. We backed away from each other and I turned to the front of the room and saw Master Ming still sitting on his cushion. Normally he would call out my name and I would be in front of him in a near instant. I stood there for a second or two, still holding onto a little of Matt's laugh. The smile faded from my face. Matt bowed and walked across the room toward Rechter.

"What does he want?" I quietly asked my father.

"He wants to wish you happy birthday," Dad said.

Matt and Rechter started heading toward the dressing room.

"Oh." That's a new one. I never imagined the master wishing anybody anything. And wasn't birthdays a part of that "ego-mind" thing he talked about? That 'mind' that warps our perceptions and makes us think we're wonderful? Master Ming said that the ego-mind attaches itself to material things and desires, perceptions of ourselves and blocks the spirit body from enlightened experience.

Maybe he was going to test me, like the ancient masters tested their monks. I was still adjusting to the unusual ways a Zen Buddhist master teaches his student. I walked slowly toward him with my father following behind me.

We stopped and bowed. Master Ming looked up. "You are nineteen today, Serena." He smiled and squinted as if from a bright light. "Happy Birthday."

“Thank you,” I said, bowing slightly.

My dad made a move toward the dressing room. “Wait, DeContenza!”

“Yes, sir.” Dad stopped.

“I still have your permission?”

“Yes, sir,” my father said. He looked at me briefly then slid behind the divider.

“Come closer,” the master said.

I obeyed and took two steps toward him. He was looking up at me now.

“Your father said I could give you a birthday kiss.”

Okay, that’s weird, said a voice inside me. But then I stopped myself. I remember reading in one of Dad’s books on Zen that there were no rules in Buddhist practice, no rules the master and his student abided by. There was that story of a monk who got enlightened while stumbling upon his master taking a crap in the woods. His master’s words, “Shit stick!” did it for him, brought him instantly to Nirvana.

“Of course if it makes you uptight...” the master said. I had seen this switch before when he dealt with the other members. For weeks he had been cold and distant to me. But today he waived all that and he was now the warm and friendly grandfather. I was thinking about how everyone wanted to be near him, craved his touch, they were honored when he used them to demonstrate push-hands, always sprinting for a spot in front of him before his Sunday sermons. Practically the entire class except me was getting

energized now. His energy was money or food for the malnourished. Maybe this was his birthday present to me.

“Well?” he asked.

“...Ok.”

I heard the men changing behind the divider. I heard Matt’s voice, then his laugh. I saw many feet under the wooden dividers, large and wide smaller and narrow. They moved and stepped and I wondered which pair was Matt’s.

“Come here, then.” I moved closer and sat down on my knees before him. He leaned in close and pressed his lips against mine. They were cold and wet. I heard the dividers slide open, heard Rechter’s low voice, followed by Matt’s cheerful one. Then silence.

Master Ming was parting my lips with his tongue and rolling his tongue around the roof and base of my mouth, sliding around my teeth, then nipping slightly a part of my lip. I pulled away and felt a burning all over, like the inside of my mouth. The vibrations in my mouth spread to a pounding in my face, into my brain and all over my body.

Men continued emerging from the dressing room.

The master looked at me. “Very good,” he said.

The men were holding their ghees and cushions and walking out, single file.

At nineteen I could count on one hand how many people I had kissed.

Some had on suits, some construction gear, some looked like they had been painting all day.

I was a beginner, the youngest member of the class. It must have been a lesson, a koan to a rooky monk from his master.

We were standing now. Master Ming stepped in closer. His eyes looked jolly, drunken, beaming.

Leaning his round cheek into to mine, he said, "Don't let anyone kiss you unless they can make you feel that way."

He slid into the dressing room, against the tide of the other exiting men, who moved aside to let him enter more easily.

I got outside onto the sidewalk. The sky was dark blue. The lights from cars, stores, windows and the street lamps were bright and random. My father and his car were gone. I watched Matt and Rechter, already in Rechter's truck, pull away from the curb. As they drove past me, Matt's eyes looked straight ahead, following the traffic all the way up Eighth Avenue.

That week I received the loan for NYU. As planned, I gave the extra grand to Master Ming and started back with energizing sessions. By the following Sunday Master Ming didn't call my name to come up. Instead, while we sat in the beginning of class, before the Tai chi lesson, he came down the sitting line and touched the top of my head, lifting up some of my hair with his finger and I followed behind him to the polished root bench.

After he stopped energizing me, he brought his face down, pressed his lips against mine and added the same tongue rolling and mouth acrobatics, he did

on my birthday. I felt the same strange sensations. My mouth was pulsating and the vibrations rattled around in my face and then spread out into my brain and body like the ripples getting wider and wider until they hit the shore. I derived no pleasurable feeling from them, like what I had felt from boys at my college, or even with boys I had played spin the bottle with in high school. But there was no denying Master Ming's power.

He patted the space below my navel and said, "Very good." I lifted my body up from the bench, placed my feet back down on the floor again and before I got up to walk back to my cushion in the line up, he said into my ear, in a low voice, "Don't let anyone kiss you unless they can make you feel this way."

I walked back through the center of the two rows, along the backs of my classmates, past Matt's straight back, and disheveled hair and I felt something deflate inside. I kept walking until I got to the end and didn't remember exactly how or when I had sat back down on my cushion.

From then on the kisses were included during the energizing. And after each time Master Ming reminded me, "Don't let anyone kiss you unless...."



## ONE

1962-1967

We were all born in Staten Island, my mother, father, my brother and my sister and I.

By the time my parents were nineteen, they had two babies, first me then Theo. My grandfather let us stay in one of his two family houses, a few yards from a major artery on the island called Clove Road. My dad worked in a grocery store. Not one day went by when he didn't feel the pressure of feeding his family. Yet at nineteen they were both still children themselves.

This pressure made my dad move fast. By the time Jenny came, he was working at an advertising agency in Manhattan and he bought property in a development-complex in Manalapan Township, New Jersey.

I was in first grade when we moved from Staten Island into the brand new four-bedroom colonial that was surrounded by a  $\frac{1}{4}$  acre of land. Half of the property was bulldozed and clear-cut. Grass seedlings were lifting out of the clay-colored dirt that would one day be a thick green lawn. In the center of our front yard, about fifty feet from our black door with the brass knocker, there was a small-untouched island of oak trees and maples. Dad would landscape that spot and every inch of the property and have an in-ground pool built, after my sister could walk. My parents were both twenty-four in 1967, when we drove to our new home in our brand new orange station wagon.

Dad had already been to five continents to shoot his commercials and still ads, so he was design savvy. The interior of our house had a black and white theme, similar to the colors of the harlequin Great Dane puppy he brought home one day. The living room was sparsely decorated with modern Italian furniture, a couple of white wool shaggy rugs, black leather love seats, with a framed poster of all four heads of the Beatles line up. There was a white shiny plastic bookcase that spanned the largest wall, that was filled up with a fish tank of black guppies and a gray striped angel fish, Rizzoli art books, my father's extensive record collection and some flea market antiques, like a plaster bust of an anonymous man he called Sven Berg.

On the lowest shelf in the corner near the zebra skin from London, next to the red and gold Webster's Dictionary was where my parents kept their high school yearbooks. Sometimes we'd open my mother's book, look for my father's headshot among the hundreds of other black and white heads and there'd he be, smiling a bewildered smile between his two big ears, with his shiny dark hair slicked back. Under his skinny black tie and over his white button down shirt were the tiny words, "We're going to get married."

My father made the long monotonous commute into Manhattan every day. In his green MG, whether he was idling in traffic or flooring it on the Turnpike, he'd rack up fifteen to twenty hours a week. My brother, sister and I only saw him on the weekends. He'd play his albums, Miles Davis or the White Album, Tapestry, De'ja vu, Blonde on Blonde or Ladies of the Canyon. Sometimes he'd sing in his off key voice. But when the music didn't play

throughout the house, he would be in the kitchen talking to my mother about what assholes the clients were for rejecting some of the best print ad and commercials he and his partner had ever created or pitched.

The good work that he had done, had gotten produced in many locations around the globe and as long as we knew when they'd be aired that night, we would watch his commercials on TV in our den, all together, on the brown couch below the shelf that held his Cleo's, Andy awards, his creations, his slogans, his dialogue right there on the TV.

My brother and sister and I didn't know it was the threat of rejection that trailed him like a shadow, into each room he entered and it shaded our weekends and holidays, when we didn't need it to, because the office would call on the weekends, with the news of a possible loss of an account, making him go back to work on a Saturday and Sunday and so the shadow, or "the vacuum" of failure was what motivated him to do great work.

Something in that in between part of his job where he got stuff made and the failing to win the client over, did something to him, the part between the rejection and the reward, whatever it was, it changed him each year, each agency he'd move to. I could see it in his eyes sometimes. It was like those commercials we'd see as kids where they'd show you first, a look of pleasure on a drug addict's face and then they'd cut to an egg cracked over a skillet or the zombie looking actor after he took a hit off a joint, followed by discordant, distorted strums of an electric guitar echoing into the fading screen that goes black.

But our green shuttered house, the lawn with the multiple sprinklers set up, raining upward, the weeded tree island, shrubs Dad pruned and watered under the windows, all of it was Dad's refuge. It had to be splendid and unlike the agency on the other side of the river, in the next state, there wasn't anyone there to say what was wrong with it. Interior/Exterior, Dad kept busy beautifying it. He had only two days a week. So, he didn't stop moving. We studied him from the top of the staircase, as we held our dog, at the parties they'd have, the fluted wine glasses and white tulips in crystal Italian vases or behind the screen doors that led to the patio he was building dressed in his French bathing suit. He sometimes hummed but mostly he cursed. We'd keep our distance or play nearby, watching him lay the brick for the front walkway. Either cheerful or miserable, it all depended on the "client."

When he came in for Sunday dinner, sitting with us at the round table, we'd either be told that he had gorgeous kids, the most beautiful family in the neighborhood, or that my brother and I were lazy pigs, Lard Ass was my brother's name, Royal Whiner was mine. My brother and I were driving our mother to the mental institution. We were spoiled brats and had better be nicer to our little sister, Pinky (short for Pink Princess).

Dad hadn't a clue what we did in school; how well my brother played during Little League practice or how lately he'd be sitting out during the games. My grandfather (mom's dad) used to take Theo to practice. Dad definitely didn't know how at my fifth grade choir recital we had sung that song from his Joni Mitchel album, "Both Sides Now." He wasn't there when

my sister, giggling, ran outside naked in the snow while Sam ran circles around her to protect her from going into the street. Dad definitely didn't know how many times while he went on business trips to shoot a commercial, Mom took us to Burger King and McDonalds (new convenient places to get dinner) and how her silence in the car extended into our bedtimes and into the morning walk out to the bus stop and into the weekends.

One time when he was away, she made an attempt to help a neighbor with a children's hospital fund raiser, making dolls out of her padded bras and when she was frustrated with the result, she began ripping them apart, scattering the pieces all over the brown shag rug in the master bedroom, crying. It was the first time we saw her lose it.

Dad's return from long trips, were especially tense; potent anger sucked the air out of the house. Dad insisted that my mother's unhappiness was my brother's and my fault. We did this to her. More success brought on more travel and more travel brought on more tense homecomings, mom's withdrawal and Dad's continuing to blame us, my brother and me. Over this claim, they were in agreement. My mother never protested.

Jet lagged and wound up from three weeks in Brazil; he hit me across the face once because I had accidentally broken an Italian lamp he had done an ad for. The design of the lamp was cool because it had a dome shape so when you carefully turned the top of it, it reflected the phases of the moon, as it

made its way around the earth. I dented the dome. I made it ugly and ugly wasn't supposed to be in our house.

There were holes in the walls going up the staircase and mom told us that it was Sam who had done it. But we knew they were Dad's punches and she knew we knew. Violence had to find a refuge also. The lamp incident opened the gates to me. Just a couple more times, because I was a pain in the ass, a brat, a klutz and sometimes I embarrassed him. I was Dad's antagonist because, as he told me, I reminded him of him.

I sought comfort from Sam, our dog. He'd come to my room when I lay crying face first, nudge my hand, sit and wait and let out a long exhale. He was our big loving brother, and a friend to all the kids in the neighborhood. For Dad, Sam was an animal, a unique rare breed of Great Dane with beautiful patterns of grey, black and brown. He cost \$500.00 and his parents were show dogs. Knowing this you would think Dad would've been more careful.

That first summer we went to Lake George, Sam couldn't have been more than a year old. This was when it started. "Let's get him to swim," Dad said. He hoisted Sam off a rock into the deep lake and laughing while Sam, whined and splashed in the cold water, lashing at the rocky shoreline with his paws. With his toes splayed at the edge of a large boulder, he tried pulling himself up, panting. His feet bled.. My sister, brother and I stood at the edge, pleading with Dad to jump in and lift Sam out. He was too big and heavy for us to help.

Finally, Dad reached down, grabbed Sam's ankles and hoisted him back onto the ground.

I remember how the other people fishing nearby, glanced up from their reel, their eyes casting us into the freak basket, probably making a mental note to not come back to the same spot the following day.

Violence had to find a refuge. At home similar things happened. Dad threw Sam off the diving board. He slammed Sam's nose with his belt when he wet the floor. And when Sam started to chew the doorknob and managed to open the door and escape, he ran around the neighborhood with a pony and German Shepard from the farm across the street. For that stunt, Dad slapped a chain against Sam's legs.

When a car finally hit him, I hated myself for not being strong enough to keep him from wanting to leave home. I chickened out telling my father how I really felt about his abuse of Sam. Was this because Dad was the one providing us with a home and food and was it because he was the one that seemed to make Mom happier? I was eight. I couldn't forgive my father even when he cried along with us, even though I knew he was a man, too young to have three kids, a man who couldn't figure out how to be happy himself, anymore than he could figure out how to keep still, be patient with us and accept the life he'd landed. After Sam died I think even Dad knew something had to change.

Not long after, two of Dad's New York photographer friends brought him to a downtown Karate dojo on 14<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It was a block from the meat district, a popular hub for transvestites and prostitutes. I would come here later so many times I'd have the setting memorized even when the characters looked different.

There was a small park across from the dojo, surrounded by a cast iron fence, that enclosed a few trees and a semi circle of stone benches where the bums congregated and the junkies lay like corpses. This part of New York in the 70's was especially filthy. The air and sidewalks reeked of decay, a concoction of stale booze and urine. The dojo was located at the epicenter of where the "freaks" (as Dad called them) resided. They yelled, sang, stumbled on the cobblestone, begged for change, begged for food along 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

The contrast inside the dojo was great. Like entering a chapel, the hush, near silence and as its inhabitants could testify, this was the place where lives were changed. In 1971 my dad's life was no exception. It all started the day he entered the building, a move that shifted forever the break in the unsteady earth, the fault line that our lives had already been built upon.

He had come to the class to observe and possibly join. And by the time Joe DeContenza stepped back onto the street, after being inside the Karate dojo for two hours, he knew he could transform himself. The night must have been warm, when he walked toward 13<sup>th</sup> Street where his car had been parked, and slid onto the leather drivers seat of his bronze BMW and making a diagonal, across 8<sup>th</sup> Ave, then turning left, heading west on 14<sup>th</sup> Street, in



the direction of the West side highway, the route that would take him back to New Jersey, back home to us. But first he drove through and around the wretched part of humanity, in the meat district, feeling every hit of the bumper against the cobblestone, every jab of the drivers seat hurl into his spine. But instead of cursing, he was smiling. He turned on WBGO and Miles Davis, was on it, playing "My Favorite Things. Dad looked out onto the rocking Hudson River, at the large orange sun bobbing in the water, on the other side of the river the lights of New Jersey were just beginning to twinkle. For the first time in a long time, he got as close to feeling happy again.

It was a Friday. So when Dad got home that night we were still up and he described the dojo to us, its twenty-foot ceiling, the cracked orange floor, and the silence, as the class did Karate forms called The Flower, The Snake, The Crane, Leopard and Tiger. He described the master. Ming. A stocky Korean man, with iron rod posture and feet solidly planted in the ground, like the roots of an ancient tree. He told us how before the end of class the people there got into two rows and sat facing the walls, on cushions and at the end how some of them did Tai Chi, a slow motion version of the Karate forms. My father told us that after the class had ended, he had hesitated to speak with the master, watched him glide past him, across the floor, then got up the courage to run to him just as the man was about to exit the studio.

"Excuse me, Sir?" My dad had imitated the bow he had seen others give the master earlier. The master stopped, waited for my father to speak. When Dad didn't, he said, "Speak."

“Sir. Do you guys break bricks here?”

“No. We break bodies.”

“Then,” said Dad to all of us. “He was gone, just like that.”

Theo, seven at the time, who had seen every Bruce Lee movie, asked,

“How old do you have to be to take Karate, Dad?”

## TWO

1970

I noticed it when I was eight. I had developed an acute instinct or you might say, psychic ability, a sense of something coming. I think it had to do with keeping track of the climate in our house when Dad was there on the weekends, the frenzied nervous tension in the air, the heavy, foggy feeling when Dad was on a business trip for weeks and Mom got depressed. I started having dreams about people and places I didn't recognize. I'd dreamt once about laying in a hammock by an ocean, the leaves of a palm tree waving above my eyes. This was when Dad was away shooting a Pan Am commercial in Mexico. He hadn't taken us to Mexico yet. It was like while I was sleeping, I paid him a visit.

My stomach became the wisest part of my body, an automatic funnel for gathering knowledge of the emotional condition of my family, a barometer for my sister's fears, my brother's quiet withdrawal, naturally-my father's rage and my mother's despondency and frustration. It seemed she was always frustrated. Women were out there working and earning a living, finding out who they were, becoming somebody. And here she was with a no pay job she never planned on having. The food she placed in front of us, I had little appetite for. Meat made me gag. I especially hated Sunday dinners.

As a result of this psychic skill or maybe along side of it, I began to believe in magical invisible communications, that there were signs in nature that were messages from something bigger and higher than my parents and

me and these messages would travel in the air and as long as I saw them or believed in their existence, they could instruct me and protect me, even point me in the right direction. All it took was paying closer attention.

After Sam had died whenever I saw a feathery white milkweed floating like a tiny fairy in the air, I would grab it and whisper into my fist, a wish, always the same wish, that, "Please bring Sam back." I'd release my hand, blow on it and set it free, and the floating seed that held my longing would bring it to where something or someone was listening.

Much of this magic resided and could be called upon on our front lawn. For my sister and brother and I, the lawn in the front was our private island, where our friends could come visit. All the cookie-cut development houses around us, the smooth asphalt road that wound through the monotonous neighborhood, the white cement sidewalk where an occasional neon red and yellow big wheel was parked, a Dawn Doll or a bouncy ball left behind, was beyond the moat that surrounded our little island.

Under the tall oak trees, leafless from devouring gypsy moths, the season before and the fortress of holly that surrounded our house by several yards in the front, where the grass was a thick green carpet, in the summer it was sprinkled with dandelions and clover until it got cut, every two weeks. We would gallop across it, barefoot to hail down the bra-less ice cream lady. We'd lie on the grass, sucking on our sky-blue ice pops. The blue liquid dripped off our chins and into the grass. Sam used to lay down with us in the

grass and let us lean our backs into his side, a warm body, and pillow room for all three of our heads and even a neighborhood friend or two.

Warm weekend days I napped on the lawn. I felt safe and as long as I believed it, wished it, the invisible world promised to protect me.

One particular spring day on the lawn felt different. I lay by myself, on my back, facing the blue sky and as I sunk into a dream, I felt as if someone crawled into it. He was wide and bulky, maybe forty, older than my dad at the time. He had a moon face, very dark straight hair, and eyes: small and narrow. He was standing about three feet away from me, under a tree. Green leaves fluttered around his face. A swollen gelatinous liquid surrounded him like an airless vacuum. He wore a green tunic shirt. It felt like he had been staring at me for a while, waiting for me to wake up and when I opened my eyes in the dream, he began moving his hands and fingers in front of his chest. For some reason I couldn't look into his eyes. The pull they had on mine felt physically painful.

I woke up in a twisted position on the grass, the grey sky close. I felt a chill in the air and a creepy taste in my mouth. It came from the pit of my stomach. Something had entered my body and had x-rayed the inside of it with its eyes. It had seen me naked, had touched my budding breasts, and understood other secrets about me that I didn't know about yet. I was ten and for this unnamed source of my shame, I never told anyone.

I didn't want to remember him but for a long time I wondered who he was and what had brought him to me.

### THREE

1970-1972

Months went by and we got glimpses of what my father was involved in after he'd spend his long days in his office, with his partner Kleinman. Lately trying to come up with reasons to buy a Volvo, and listing the different pleasurable moments they had while drinking Cuttysark Vodka. He was coming home much later, now that he had joined Karate. And often he'd come home with bruised fingers and hands and sometimes his wrist would be bandaged, blood oozing from the side. Other times he'd limp into the kitchen from the garage, where he'd park the car. While landing his kick on The Irishman's knee, he had cracked his toe. Hernandez had nailed him in the hamstring. He'd argue with my mother. "No! I'm not quitting." He hadn't felt this good in a long time. Once a black eye and cut nose another time (after his second "seminar" in which he was tested for his green belt) my mother drove him to the ER for a broken rib. That's the day we weren't allowed to make him laugh.

It wasn't until he showed us a black and white photo of his teacher, did my brother and I understand my father's obsession. The photo showed a man, short but muscular with straight black hair, small, narrow eyes and a wide face. He sits on a bench, legs apart, and his back straight. He looks into the camera with a stern and, "nothing gets to me" expression. A larger man standing about seven feet to his left is holding an eight-foot metal pole, with

one leg bent, the other straight. His body is leaning in the direction of his teacher. He pushes the pole into the center of the “nothing gets to me” man’s solar plexus. Above them on the paneled wall behind, in large metal letters spells out PERFECTION.

I didn’t stare at the photo long. There was no emotion in his face and his eyes look right at me, or more accurately, right into me. It was strange to imagine him as a living, breathing person. Yet, even as my father placed the photo on the coffee table and I, at the other end of the living room, could still see his small black eyes, my brother repeats his statement about joining Karate someday. He was nine and I was ten and as I watched him pick up the photo from the table and study my father’s teacher in it, I knew I would stick be sticking with ballet.

On the weekends my father repeated things he’s heard this man say, things like “rely on your self,” “be in time”, “being time.” Dad began to wear a tee- shirt he bought from the master. It was a brown shirt with white Chinese characters written across the chest. Translation: Dream. Master Ming said that most of our waking life we are dreaming. When will we wake up? “Wake up, DeContenza!” he screamed at my dad one night. Dad saw this man more often than he saw any of us. He listened to the man’s words and recited them to us. He practiced 4-5 days a week. And the holes in the walls were patched and painted over.

In the early morning hours on Saturday and Sunday, Dad practiced karate on the lawn in the warm months and during the rainy times and cold months he practiced his sparring skills inside. He caught us coming out of the TV room, turning a corner, at the top of the stairs, throwing punches and kicks. We tried to block our faces from his pelting fists, cutting hands, snap kicks and round house punches, half making contact, half the time just missing us. It became an annoying game that got painful, one in which my mother eventually had to plead with him to stop, when one of us got hurt.

We watched the animal forms he practiced. Ancient Kung Fu forms from China. Fluid movements that seemed to tell a story and reflect the creature they'd "mimic." Each move was a defense that could act as an offensive move as well. He slithered his arm, fingers together, dipped down, his body following to the ground and up. This was Snake. Tight fingers gathered into a pointed bunch, the shape of a beak and snap out like in Crane. Fingers bend into a claw grabbing the jugular. That was Tiger. I loved the choreography, the one move building upon the next, each precise and full of purpose and incite, direct. Each form distilled the essence and captured the power of the creature, the animal the form was named after. The spirit of the animal entered Dad's body.

The spring before I entered middle school and before my father got his black belt, we moved to northern New Jersey, cutting my dad's commute in half and allowing him to come home for dinner once in a while.



It wasn't easy adjusting to the new school in Northern New Jersey. Most of the girls in my class liked lip-gloss and boys. I befriended the only girl besides me who wasn't interested in those useless preoccupations. She was tall with braces and had straight blond hair that dipped down over her left eye. Kaia showed me the plays she was reading: *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Cherry Orchard* and we went to her house after school to act them out. For my brother with his love of sports, the adjustment was effortless. Street hockey and skate boarding became his religion with the neighborhood kids. My sister met sweet, innocent first-graders with overbites like herself. My mother joined the neighborhood-acting group.

For my father there were big changes at his advertising company. He was promoted and in charge of junior art directors on a new account for a car rental company called Hertz. My father, the creative guy was very agitated with the new position, which has too much leadership and administrative work. He was still on the Volvo account, still had to fly to Sweden twice a year. And then another account came in that got him excited: chicken breasts, legs, thighs, and wings. "The owner Frank looks like a chicken! It's perfect!"

But two weeks later he came home defeated. Frank Purdue doesn't want to dress up like a chicken. Frank was dating one of the account executive's secretaries at their agency and he played tennis with her and they played doubles with the account executive and his girlfriend. Frank considered himself a catch in the bachelor department. And he wanted the rep to stay and grow in that way. Dad hated that in-house screwing.

He missed about three weeks of Karate to prepare a presentation of four commercials and five print ads for Frank and his business heads. Because the campaign was worth about twenty million for the company, Dad worked weekends with his boss, a crazy but brilliant creative head who fifteen years later became OJ Simpson's best man at the marriage to OJ's second wife Nicole. He was a blunt, nasty, 5-foot four-inch, alpha-male. He impregnated Dad with impatient, belligerent arrogance and (though I wouldn't have known at the time) without a doubt, laid down lines of coke on his glass office table while they pulled all-nighters. If Dad couldn't write those brilliant commercials, he'd be an incompetent, impotent, dried up has-been. And yet this was the game my father had been playing since I was five. His winnings in his bosses' companies will put my brother, sister and me through private high schools and later on pay for my four years at the most expensive college on the east coast.

Meanwhile I disliked what turning thirteen had done to my body. I disliked my breasts. I hid them. They weren't supposed to be doing that yet. If there had been a hint that I was unlovable earlier, it had become a tangible fact now. And yet my body was doing the opposite. Instead of remaining invisible, my hips were becoming round; my breasts were pushing to the front, like two annoying show-offs. I became harder to hide. And I got creative in ways to make myself invisible and invented a way to make myself look ugly. Because my appearance didn't match who I was, or who the grownups, like my parents' friends said I was, "a classic beauty," I worked at

hiding it. I studied the mirror as I tied my long brown hair, parted in the middle and at the base of my neck, behind my ears, so they would stick out. The blousy shirts, buttoned up to my neck were perfect hiding places. My mother returned the dresses she bought me at Bloomingdales. Skirts and tights were saved for my sister.

My dad came home for dinner one Friday night. I remember it was spaghetti and meatballs with grandmother's marinara sauce, the tomatoes picked from my aunt and uncle's farm in southern New Jersey. We sat around the white table and my sister and brother kept swerving the chairs into the round edge and Dad snapped at them. "Stop ruining the table! Do you know what this table set is worth? There's another one in the Museum of Modern Art.

Theo and Jennie gulped down the dinner and ran outside to play with their friends in the neighborhood. Dad hadn't said much before that. Occasionally, he had caught my eye while lifting his head up from his pasta bowl and then again, when he took a long gulp of his glass of red wine. My mother was sullen. With her head facing down at the table, she began to clean up the plates, stacking the bowls and silverware. I got up to help her. But he told me to finish the meal my mother had made.

"But Theo and Jenny didn't finish there..."

"Stay, sit down. I want to talk to you," he said. I chewed my meatball but couldn't swallow it. His eyes were blood shot when he asked me, "Why do you dress that way?"

When I didn't answer him, he said, "I asked you a question, Serena. Why do you dress like that?"

I chewed and tried to swallow again. As if by swallowing my food, my father would stop, sip his wine and relax.

"Why are you wearing your shirt like that, buttoned at your neck? Why do you pull your hair back like that? Why don't you wear your hair down?"

"I..." With the half eaten meatball still in my mouth, I felt sick and got up to leave. Dad leapt out of his chair, reached across the table and tore open the collar of my shirt. As I turned, he pulled out the elastic from my hair, some of it landed on the skin of my chest. "You should wear it like that!" he yells.

I shoved open the French doors and make a run for the staircase. He lunged up after me, towards the bathroom, where I dove, so he couldn't slam down on me.

"You got some nerve looking like that around here! No daughter of mine is going to be ugly!" he yelled.

Dad spent most of his daytime hours devising beautiful, attractive images to seduce people to part with their money, spend their life energy, in that all- American activity of buying things. Beautiful things. Even chickens could be beautiful things. Also it was public knowledge that Joe DeContenza had a beautiful family. This pain- in- the ass child was not going to wreck that.

At the top of the stairs, Joe lunged towards the burgundy tiled guest bathroom door and pushed it, as I pressed my entire, thirteen year old -body against it. The door flung open, I hurled myself toward the tub and with his palm, Joe DeContenza pinned me down so that my solar plexus and stomach dug into the porcelain side. He pulled at my clothes and I felt the cold air on my bare skin then a flash of pain slammed down on my ass. The shape of his hand pulsated even after he had lifted it away. It was that branding of his hate that knocked the air out of me. "Don't lay there!" he yelled.

"Leave me alone!" I screamed, pulling away.

"Don't you dare!" He yanked me up and slapped me across the face. I saw a piece of this in the mirror, the side of my face pulling away. He let go of my arm, mumbled something incoherent, and trampled down the steps, leaving the door open. I pulled up my pants and gripped my torn shirt at my neck and I was in my room, lying on my bed shaking. I couldn't cry at first. I avoided the bathroom all night, until I couldn't hold it. Hours later I looked in the mirror hanging in my closet door, the street -light reflected on a face that looked back: red and monster-like puffy. Hideous. You lose, Joe. I win.

## FOUR

1974

My friends made me take a hit from a joint at the town golf course, one Friday night. I told them that it wasn't pot because I smelled it before, they were tricking me, I said. But by the end of the night I realized it was a smell I had smelled as long as I could remember, emanating from my parents' bedroom and from the living room, when my parents had friends over, or from their parties. It was what explained the tiny white pipe my dad had kept on his dresser, as well as the little leaf glued to the collage my parents friends made as a going away present when we moved out of New Jersey.

I found out that my brother was getting high. I couldn't remember which one of us had the idea of raiding my parents' closet. But one day my brother and I found a thinly rolled up joint in one of dad's black blazers. Not long after that we were stealing Dad's stash in a large plastic bag on a shelf of his closet. As we got trashed off his pot on the weekends, Dad went to karate more often. He got his black belt and began to learn Tai Chi. He spoke to us about "breathing down." He showed us how Bamboo breathing was done, taking a deep breath and exhaling long, bringing the end of the exhale into his belly, so it swelled out, a quick inhale, then another long exhale, until all the air was eliminated from his lungs. His face turned red; his eyes bulged out like his belly. The sight was comical enough and we laughed every time he did it. But he was serious.

My mother decided she wanted to try acting. After acting in a few town plays, she began to study in the city with a man named Claude from The New School. Dad was now meditating on a black cushion in the living room. He had gotten a square flat cushion and round cushion for both he and my mother. On the weekends they sat together, whenever my dad could convince my mother to do it with him. They stopped watching National Geographic in the den with my sister, my brother and I on Sunday nights. He went to daylong meditations that were held on the Saturday before each “seminar” when the whole Karate school participated in sparring matches and form demonstrations, in order to be promoted to the next level, or the next belt.

Whether it was from all the nagging he did or whether she worried she’d never see him, like when we lived in Manalapan, my mother soon joined Dad on Sunday mornings where they both learn Tai Chi from Master Ming. Then on Tuesdays when my mother was already going to her acting class, she began to stop off at the Master Ming’s studio to get “energized.” I over heard Dad say to her, “Master Ming said, it will make our marriage better.”

## FIVE

1974

One cold winter morning my brother and I went with my parents to their Sunday Tai Chi class. My sister stayed behind at a friend's house. It's a hop over the GW Bridge and a half hour down the West Side highway. But my dad would crucify us if we made him late. So, in Dad's BMW we illegally raced out of our small Jersey town, and sped down the West side highway as fast as an ambulance toward a hospital. From the car window I watched the ice shards float in the Hudson River, looking like giant frosted flakes. They cracked and split open in the churning ice water. It must have been in the single digits outside.

Dad made a left onto 14<sup>th</sup> street. He navigated the car through the cobblestones, careful not to bump into the occasional drunk or prostitute who shivered and hobbled across the wide street. Under meat factory overhangs, the homeless or as they were called "bums" back then, were huddling around barrels of burning cardboard and scrap wood.

Dad found a space next to a small park across from the dojo on 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue. There were bodies on the benches, wrapped in newspapers, paper bags and plastic. A deep cold entered me. We got out of the car, followed dad and crossed the street. I couldn't feel my nose. The frigid temperature was a sinking reminder that my breasts were under my loose shirt because they pinched and stung from the cold air.



We stopped at a narrow wooden door, next to a bank. Dad grabbed the door handle that looked like a noon-chuck and yanked the thick door open. After wedging ourselves through, our eyes adjusted to the dark vestibule. Below the staircase in front of us, at the top of the landing was a wide orange door.

Climbing up, our down jackets swished and the low hissing sound behind the orange door grew louder. At the landing there were about twenty pairs of shoes and boots lined up with different degrees of caked mud on the heels and toes. Dad took his shoes off, set them on the floor and whispered for us to do the same.

He opened the door. The hissing sound roared now like a giant waterfall. Overhead the heating pipes knocked. My father with his ghee tucked under his arm, brought his fists together and bowed to the black and silver PERFECTION sign on the opposite paneled wall. It was the same perfection sign that was in the photograph he had brought home three years before with Master Ming calmly sitting on a bench as a pole was being pushed into his solar plexus. My father moved down to the left side of the room. I imitated his movements and heard my mother whisper behind my brother and me. "You guys go over to the right and sit by the radiators."

Theo and I stepped into the warm room and headed for the wall of windows where below a long shelf covered the line of radiators. The sounds of the street were completely drowned out. When we would come back in the warmer months, the neighborhood would fill the studio, the cars, the drunks,

the transvestites, junkies and hookers (their conversations and arguments, songs and whispers could be heard what felt like inches away.)

Theo and I sat down along the steaming radiators next to the women's dressing room, a long blue curtain draped on a pole, 3 pairs of legs were showing underneath. The students with their white ghees and some with black belts do Tai Chi, followed behind a very tall lean man my father's age (a black belt with 3 red stripes on his belt). They all moved slowly in unison, in front of a slightly warped mirror, silently, as if they were at the bottom of the ocean, brushing away invisible seaweed and schools of fish with their hands.

In the corner of the room, separate from this group, there was another man doing the same form. His ghee was yellow and had brown stains on the sleeves and pants. His black belt was tattered and grayer than black. The five stripes on the side of the belt were more pink than red and were unraveled like threads. He had greasy brown hair that clung to his temples and neck. There was a clumsy intensity to the way he moved his flexible body. His face was vacant but intense at the same time. As if in a trance, he moved to a rhythm, that was exclusively his own. Each move slid into the next with a meandering but keen purpose.

Only in his expression did he remind me of the little man from the book dad brought home from his class one night. A thin leather-bound book with black and white photographs of the Tai Chi postures featuring Master Ming's teacher. Chen Meng Ching had a great reputation in Chinatown. If you asked anyone serious in the Marshall Arts that you studied with a disciple of Chen

Meng Ching and they would raise their eyebrows and nod their head to you in a reverential way. He was the teacher to learn from in Tai Chi and Push Hands. It was known that at seventy years old, he could throw a man twice his size (he was 4 ft. 3 inches tall) across the room with a small shove. He had a long gray beard that came to a point below his chest. His hair pulled back in a braid, reached the base of his spine. Each photograph featured him doing one of the thirty-two moves, with the titles of each, printed in Chinese characters beneath the photograph: "Grasp the birds tail," "Cloud hands," "Carry the tiger up the mountain."

My father had explained to us that Tai Chi was the grandfather of Karate. Though it was done in slow motion, the moves were all designed for both offensive and defensive fighting. My father had showed us how cloud hands blocked a punch and pushed your opponent away after smashing his temple with the boney back of your bent hand. Carry the tiger up the mountain could lift and push away a flying kick at the same time a shove with the side of your hand upwards, smashing your opponent's crotch. With speed the form could damage. The slow moving, deep breath and stretching part of Tai Chi was for restoring and rejuvenating your vital organs. You would practice breathing very deeply and exhaling long, moving as slowly and relaxingly as if you were moving through water. If done correctly, you could achieve "soft power," power that instead of using your muscle strength, you used instinct and mindfulness, wisdom from deep inside yourself that made you fully understand the motivations of your opponent before he struck. You

could use your opponent's power and energy to counter and overpower him. You used less energy of your own and instead co-opted your opponent's to win the fight or attack. It was all about yielding, surrendering, emptying, to be full. Soft power could be as powerful as the force of unleashed water.

The man with the grey belt and yellow ghee must have had this soft power. He moved with fluidity and flexibility. He dipped his arm down, then his body crouching with one knee all the way to the floor the other leg straight and parallel to the ground, like a half split. He practiced in the corner where the sunlight was strongest. His clear blue eyes seemed to be looking inward instead of outside himself, or maybe it was both. Whatever it was seeing, he was in his own world, yet he didn't look like he was day-dreaming or thinking. It was more like he was feeling and responding to the air around him, as he moved. The unique way he did the form, so unlike the others in the room, made me feel like I was witnessing something too personal, too intimate. It was like staring at someone naked. Before I looked away, I could see a light around him, a shimmering liquid dripping from his body, radiating from his arms and hands, as he kept moving. Maybe it was just the sun.

My brother had been watching him too. "I bet that's Rivers," he whispered. Then I remembered it was the guy Dad mentioned a lot, the guy Dad had said, "Never washes his ghee. But, this guy Rivers has "IT."

The rustle of someone moving in thick clothing, interrupted the steady steam from the radiators, as a short woman with waist long strawberry blond hair approached the black belt, who was leading the Tai Chi form. Her

white ghee was clean and crisp and the black belt she had on was tied tightly around her small waist. It had two bright red stripes at the edge of it. She bowed to the man and he turned and bowed to the group and left for the brown and green belts, which were lined up at the wall by the silver Perfection sign. They were doing stick hands with each other. I recognized it from dad doing it at home with Theo. Sets of people face to face, moving their hands together above their chest, rotating them together, as if mirroring each other, touching their hands and rotating them from side to side.

This back belt, which I later learned was Cora the astrologer who had read my parents astrological charts, began to lead the group in the Tai Chi form. Her face, like many of the others, was devoid of expression. There was intensity in her grey eyes, but it was less “not from this world,” like Rivers. She performed the moves with more swagger, less intensity. She was precise but I couldn’t imagine her doing any damage to anyone there.

Master Ming was at the other end of the long room. He sat on his bench, his back perfectly straight, legs apart, face straight ahead, never moving until an hour and a half went by and the door opened again. A thin dark haired man in jeans and a dark green down jacket, carrying his shoes in one hand, bowed at the Perfection sign, entered the room and walked towards the large tree trunk bench by the Master’s seat. The Master got up from his desk; walked over to the long bench the man had sat on near the dressing room and he straddled it. The man did the same, straddling the bench so he could face Master Ming straight on. The master held his hand out to the man and

the man placed something small on the master's palm. For about a minute they both faced each other, silently without moving a muscle, until Master Ming blinked, got off the bench, as the man then lay down on its smooth polished surface, supine, looking up at the tall ceiling that was at least twenty-five feet from the floor. The master kneeled on the floor behind the bench and faced the class and the windows to the street, what was below the windows, Theo and I. He placed his hands on the man's body, one hand on the chest, the other over the man's navel.

Minutes later the man was out the door again. Master Ming got up from the long bench, walked to his desk, wrote something in a notebook and then with a short wooden stick, struck a small bell that sat on a dark satin pillow on a shelf nearby. Immediately everyone scampered quickly around the perimeters of the room, grabbing their black cushions along side the walls of the studio. Just as quickly they placed their small round cushion either on the hard floor or on a larger flat rectangular cushion. They formed two long lines, starting from the master's cushions in the center, to the wall of the radiators and glass windows that led to the street. The span must have been at least 40 feet long. The black belts were closest to the master's cushion. After the people had finished placing their cushions down, they stood in two lines facing each other. The Master stood in between the lines at the head, in front of his cushions. He held up two wood blocks and looked out directly across towards the windows. He was looking directly at Theo and I, still sitting in

front to the radiators, watching everyone standing and pressing their hands together, heads bent over like they were praying.

“Line Up!” he roared, then gestured towards us. “DeContenza!”

Way up at the front of the line my father’s head peaked out into the wide space that divided both rows. He glared at us and pointed to the back of the line. Theo and I shot for the row closest to us, the one that faced the mirror where the people had just done Tai Chi. Standing at the end of the line with our backs to the mirror, like the people besides us, we held our hands in prayer and waited. We didn’t have cushions. We’d have to sit on the hard floor. The Master clapped the two blocks together 2 times. The people with their hands in prayer, bowed, and then turned away from each other either facing the wall or the mirror. Theo and I followed a beat after them, mimicking what ever they did. We sat down and faced the mirror. I could see Theo watching me. When he caught my eye, he cracked up and I couldn’t hold back a snort.

“Silence!!” roared Master Ming. I jumped as if a bolt of electricity had shot up right through me. I felt frozen for a few moments. Theo looked pale. We remained sitting as still as we could. The bell rang, as people shifted in their places. The sound dissipated and rang again, then dissipated. The people closest to us, the white and green belts, took their time before finally keeping still. The black belts didn’t budge. The final third ring vibrated more violently in the air. Through the mirror I saw my parent’s backs sitting side by side in the middle of the line that faced the wall.

It was very uncomfortable sitting with my knees bent on the hard floor, and my mind grumbling about why I had to go to the land of the zombies today. Theo sat on his heels and he shifted a few times. After an already agonizing five minutes, I heard someone walking in the middle of the lines and a shadow drifted across the mirror as I was looking at the floor. Dad had told us to look about three feet ahead of us, eyes cast down, when he gave us a lesson in meditating. My eyes darted up and there was Master Ming behind me on the other side, walking along his students who were facing the dark paneled wall.

He stopped behind one of the Tai Chi women and stood there for a few seconds, then lightly touched the top of the woman's head with his right hand. A few strands of her light brown hair stood up. The woman lifted her hands in prayer, bowed at her cushion and got up and slowly and quietly followed the Master. She was back to her cushion a few minutes later. Master Ming did the same to a few others that sat behind us or on the same line, but up further, closer to his cushion.

When the bell rang twenty minutes later Theo and I were the last to get up. We could see the white belts and green belts smirking at us, or maybe they were really feeling sorry for us. It hurt so much, I couldn't tell. We struggled to straighten our stiff legs. Theo's left leg had fallen asleep so he grimaced as he held his hands together, leaning on the leg that was awake. The clappers snapped twice, we bowed toward the center and limped towards the radiators. The white, green and brown belts moved on the



periphery, while the rest of the class did the Tai Chi form following behind the one leading them: Rivers. Several people fell out of sync with his rhythm.

Master Ming called out, "DeContenza!" And Theo and I watched as my parents broke from the large Tai Chi group and approached Ming's cushion by his desk. They sat motionless in front of him as he, on his cushion stared first into father's eyes and then into my mother's. About a minute later they were laying down, side by side, hand in hand as Ming placed his hands on each of their chests.

A few months later, we were formally introduced to Master Ming. Only after that meeting did my brother come back as a non-student a few times after, before he joined Karate in 1979, getting gym credits from his private high school in New Jersey. After I started going to a private high school in Manhattan and needed a ride back to New Jersey with one of my parents, I would meet my dad at the dojo a few times and wait outside in the vestibule. After a play rehearsal or a ballet class, I would take the A train downtown. Sometimes I would look through the crack in the door while they practiced. I'd watch my brother and father sparring with each other and sit on the steps, silently rooting my brother on. The men and women in the room would grunt or let out a yell that sounded like an exaggerated belch or gag. It made me sick to watch my brother get kicked or pounded into a corner by any of the others, but it hurt me especially when my father made hard contact with him and my brother, red faced and wincing, refused to cry.

By the time the bell rang inside and they all ran to get their cushions to sit in front of the master, I'd brush the tears away and turn from the door and face the yin yang sign above the door that led to the street. I'd try to slow down my breath, sit up straight on the top step and breathe deeply like them.

But this was after we officially met the master, after karate took up the space that skate boarding had been for my brother and after some seeds had been planted for me that would bring me back to this place and keep me there for years.

**SIX**

1978

At 11AM on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in May, with the exception of my sister, we climbed into Dad's BMW, crossed the George Washington bridge and headed north on the Henry Hudson Parkway. Jenny had figured out a way to get out of the trip up to Westchester to see Master Ming's new property, this "celebration" of the closing of the twenty acres of woods he bought with the donations he received from the people he "healed" and from his students. Most of these donations were from the "energizing" hands on healing he did.

It was warm and sunny on the Merit Parkway, a two-lane highway leading up to Connecticut. The property the master had bought was in New York State, on the border of a southern Connecticut town

"Here it is," Dad said, turning down the exit ramp. "Stamford, Exit 34. 1934 was the year, Master Ming was born."

We drove up a windy two-lane road. The woods along side it, were dense and green, occasionally broken up by a restored 1700's house behind an ancient stone-wall. The closest houses were the smaller, older ones. The newer homes were larger and more rectangular and sat further back from the road. A few had gated driveways. Forests and fields, stonewalls and fences separated one home from the next. This landscape was not like our neighborhood in New Jersey, where a "big" lawn was considered twenty

steps from the front door to the sidewalk and where we could watch our neighbor's TV from our den window.

Dad sped up the twisting country road and told us to look out for a golf course across from two broken pillars to our right. Theo spotted them and we made the turn onto Lower Shad Road, a bumpy, narrow dirt road, keeping our eyes peeled for the eighteen-foot boulder, the next landmark, marking the entrance to the master's new property.

After about two miles, as soon as the road swerved left, I saw up ahead, a small stone Buddha sitting on the top of a large boulder, jutting slightly out into the road. Dad slowed down. On another huge bolder to the right, there was a group of small flat stones, stacked one on top of the other. It was hard to say why, but as we got closer, that glimpse of human touch in the middle of the dense woods, made me suddenly feel sick.

"Here we are," my father said.

We turned into the narrow dirt driveway and continued slowly. The car dipped and bumped, beneath the tall pines. I rolled the window down and their fragrance filled the car, which soothed my stomach. My father was falling in love with the place. "These pines must be at least two hundred years old," he said. "That stone wall had to have been built by the Indians that used to live here."

Up ahead was a small flat clearing filled with cars. Dad parked the BMW next to a blue pick up truck with Connecticut plates. About fifteen of the vehicles had Connecticut plates.

Master Ming taught a Tai Chi and Karate class on Thursdays at the Westport YMCA. There were a few Connecticut die-hards that came down to New York City early on Sundays. These were the ones Dad had said had, “soft power.” The two times I had been to the class, they made an impression on me, reminding me of walking dead people, lily-white dead people. The students of the New York school had grittier, urban, multi-colored look, a cast of all sizes and shapes. The Connecticut crew looked like they were decedents of the Red Coats, sustaining the tradition and rule of not making eye contact with their classmates. Their eyes were all aglow and magnetically linked to Master Ming. Rarely did they speak after class, outside on the street, when we were heading for our cars.

From what I could see, from the two times I had been the New York studio, almost all of them were being energized, the hands on “healing” the master did to raise money for the Zendo property and now for the meditation building he wanted to build. Their cushions were for the most part, ragged and dirty, like Rivers’ (who by now had mysteriously left the dojo) which made me conclude that in their world the more plain or beat up your clothes and possessions were, the more serious you were in your “practice.”

Dad said the “soft” were the most dedicated.

Perhaps the soft ones thought their cars were soft too because most all of them were dented, or missing a bumper. I scanned the parking lot and saw a brown convertible Camaro with a torn roof, two rusted out Volkswagen beetles, one a faded red, the gray one looked like it had once been blue, an old

1950's truck, dug out of a truck grave yard or bayou swamp. A half painted rusted old station wagon. The ones, who were soft, did not care much about appearances.

We followed Dad, leaving the BMW unlocked. The smell of smoke mixed with the cool mud at the edge of the path, and the sound of someone chopping wood brought us further into that world I had only had a glimpse of at the top of the New York Dojo stairs, where I had seen the dirty boots parked. A man's whistle echoed off a small pond, its surface sparkled through the trees further up on our left. We walked in that direction, on a path of dead pine needles, shaded by the pine trees themselves and by hemlocks and maples growing alongside. As the woods got thicker, the path narrowed. Burrs caught onto my skirt and sweater. Dad pointed toward a steep hill, sprinkled with bits of sunlight, the long grass rustling, smaller and fewer trees scattered on top and we continued in single file. Mom asked, "Joey, are you sure you know where you're going?" Dad just said, "Watch out for the branches."

The hill got steeper and harder to navigate in my sneakers and the pissed off feeling I had felt in the car earlier, for my dad dragging us up here, and making me miss a rehearsal for my high school play, came back. I could feel my mother's impatience too. She sighed at each treacherous spot, sticker bushes pulled on her powder blue sweater and she tripped on a few exposed tree roots.

Each time I slipped on a rock or root, I let out an explosive breath. I was worried that I would damage a toe and suffer through my toe class for weeks. Though I was never an athlete, my legs were strong from going to ballet class five days a week. But I wasn't used to the rugged terrain and it killed me to feel this clumsy. My brother-the pot-head-skate boarder let out a few low toned curses.

Dad turned around. "Quit the moaning," he said.

"I just saw a snake," my brother said, stopping in his tracks.

"What!" I said bumping into him.

"So? Move out of his way, what's the problem?"

"Dad, I can't...."

"Joey! What's the matter?"

"We raised a couple of sheltered brats, Carol. That's what's the matter."

"Dad...."

"Move."

Sheltered brats, spoiled privileged private school kids. My brother and I wouldn't have given a shit if someone else had said it to our faces. We liked who we were at that time. Something about the way Dad had said it though, always managed to deplete us.

Finally we got to a tall grassy spot, a wide enough ridge under a few more pines. We continued to walk toward the smoke nearer to a wider clearing, a plateau at the midway point of the steep mountain that kept going

on and up toward some more mossy boulders, and scraggly pines. I turned around and looked in the direction from where we came and saw how steep the hill was. Farther below to our right, the dark green tops of the tall pines were swaying from a strong breeze. A breeze that had picked up and I could feel more in the open air. Below, where our car was parked, a bit of the pond shimmered nervously under the sun and beyond that, a sliver of the road along the golf course, twisted toward the main road. Twisted like my stomach, how I wished I were on that road again, heading home. I was not looking forward to being formally introduced to Master Ming. Hearing about him on a daily basis was enough.

The camp -fire we had smelled from the parking lot was to the right of us now. It was built on a wide flat area, a circular clearing of rocks and stumps. About five people were sitting on the stumps, with their backs straight, legs open, feet firmly planted not unlike the posture of Master Ming in the Dojo. A woman in her fifties with curly salt and pepper hair and big brown cocker spaniel eyes was stirring a large pot on the fire. She had a large ring on her middle finger that looked like the tip of a silver mallet. It looked like a weapon she might have used. Maybe it was hollow inside, enough room to store a sip-full of poison. A few younger and middle-aged people were standing nearby, their postures straight, and their faces devoid of emotion.

Funny, because this was supposed to be a celebration and no one was smiling. And the attire: muddy work boots, jeans and army pants that were ripped at the ankles, sweat shirts that were stained and faded. At first I felt



repulsed and then embarrassed by their appearance. I was sixteen and in the throes of wanting to look cool like my upper Westside classmates. After two years of private school, I had embraced the New York City snob in me.

It was clear that these people had taken a break from some heavy, sweaty, dirty work. So what was so bad about that? It was only dirt.

It was something in their eyes that made me uneasy. They never looked at each other, or at my parents, my brother or me. If I had looked deeper into my repulsion I might have articulated that they were freakish, lost souls, lacking a sense of dignity. The only thing that might've seemed slightly dignified about them was their posture and their lack in the blabber department. Not a word, not even a whisper. Their identity seemed to be hinged on their silence. Stubborn and resolute. And it pissed me off almost as much as the car-ride up there.

Why was it so important to be quiet? I was in a school that fostered self-expression. I was starring in a play that had been written by a classmate and I had two long monologues that I had to memorize and that I had practiced every night. My classes were filled with fellow students talking about what they understood from "The Communist Manifesto" or "The Biography of Mother Jones", or an Op-Ed piece from The New York Times that week, or Steve Post's show on BAI when my dad and I would listen to him on our way into Manhattan. I didn't get this mute behavior and the longer I stood there the more I felt like *I* was the freak.

When I looked over at my brother, he glanced back at me with no expression on his face, lifted his shoulders slightly, as if to say, "When in Rome..." Then he turned and walked to the sunnier part of the hill, climbed onto a mossy boulder, closed his eyes and lifted his face towards the sun.

That's when a man and woman wearing blue and red bandanas around their necks, matching faded jean jackets and timberland boots, approached my father, mother and I. They were each carrying a bundle of chopped wood. The woman's bundle seemed larger than the man's.

"Hello, DeContenza. Hello Carol," they nearly said in unison. My Dad introduced me. I recognized them from one of the Sunday classes I had been to with Theo. Ruth and Rueben Lesser. Ruth had the more hard features of the two. Her brown eyes were set deep under her protruding forehead, dark circles carved into the skin below. She must have been in her late twenties, but still had a severe case of acne. The pimples painfully clustered around the nostrils of her long pointy nose.

Dad would have accused me of being sheltered again if he had seen how startled I was by her looks. Ruth had a harsh, in your face, patronizing attitude when she approached my dad; I had never seen anyone be like that with him before. I was almost impressed by it. The way she spoke to my father magnified her witch-like face. She glanced at me then back at my dad. She seemed to scream out, "Beauty is on the inside and because I am diligent in my practice with Master Ming, I am the real beauty here."

Her husband Reuben had more delicate features. He had a smaller nose and longer eyelashes. When they had walked down the hill towards us he had followed behind Ruth, like a dutiful Japanese wife. They were about the same height, had similar builds, lean and medium boned, looking more like fraternal twins than a married couple. I remember how they did the Tai-Chi form at class, side by side, their rhythm and style identical to one another.

Dad introduced me to Ruth first, than to Reuben. And in return they instantaneously twitched the corners of their mouths, upwards, in unison. Reuben's eyes lingered longer on mine than Ruth's had, a nanosecond longer. There was no genuine smile in their greeting, nothing that could be read in their eyes. Ruth's shifted away the second she looked into mine.

Strangely though, they seemed to demand respect.

They showed a condescending attitude while speaking to my father about where the monastery was going to be built, how they were hiring dousers to find the well, the exact place where the main source of water would be. Ruth said that Master Ming picked this land because there were a lot of natural springs on the property. There was a lot of work to be done in preparation for the construction of the monastery and they welcomed any help Dad and Mom could pitch in and do. The Connecticut school would be working there three-four days a week, she said. "Bring the whole family to work here," she said. "Reuben and I are here every day." We found out later that they had sold their house in Fairfield, Connecticut, donated the money to the master and were now the caretakers of the master's property. They were

there year round, residing in the corner of the parking lot, in a small trailer hidden behind the dirt pile, piled high up with rocks, dead brush and branches they had cleared for the parking lot.

After the couple turned from us, walked to the group by the fire and dumped their pile of wood nearby, Dad called Theo over and urged us to walk over to the group. Still no one was talking to each other. The master was standing by a pretty woman in her thirties with bouncy Dorothy Hammel styled hair. Her name was Winnie. I remembered her from the Sunday class also. Reuben had told us that Winnie's three kids were running around the hill somewhere. Theo and I glanced up at the mossy boulders and didn't see them.

The Master was about five yards away, yet didn't seem to notice us there, standing beyond the periphery of his group. Maybe he was ignoring us. I stared at his flip-flops, thick black rubber soles with rainbow stripes in the center, blue canvas strap around his thick brown toes. His feet were thick and spread over the soles, roots growing over a rock. He wore faded jeans like the others. His weren't ripped though. They had been hemmed meticulously at the bottom of ankles, according to his short legs. I hadn't seen him in a long time and he seemed unrecognizable from the photo dad had showed us when he first joined in 1970. The Master had expanded, inflated even. He was rounder. His belly pushed out his loose paisley shirt over his pants. Instead of the dark black hair, a dash of salt and pepper stubble sprouted out of a mostly shiny scalp. Ruth took a few steps up to him, bowed

and said something in a low voice. He looked up at our family. "DeContenza!" he said, waving us to come over.

In an instant we were in front of him. My mother bowed. My father bowed. My father introduced my brother and then me. Master Ming looked my brother over. His eyes shrunk back to size as he glanced over at me, then widened again as he looked back at my brother. "DeContenza, you have a very handsome son," he said, "He has something great."

"Thank you," my father said, with a slight bow.

"A shining sun," the master added, chuckling under his breath, beaming at his pun.

My dad turned to my brother. Theo looked about as stunned as the freaks that surrounded us. Or maybe he was just looking like Theo does when he's surprised, a cool statue, suddenly turned alive and feeling naked. It was hard to tell because my brother was the complete opposite of me; he had the perfect poker face. I wore my giant size emotions on the outside. When I'd try and get rid of my depressed feelings, increasingly felt as my high school years were coming to a close, by drawing self-portraits in the room my father kept all his plants, in front of a mirror, Theo would come in and snicker, "What's the matter, Serena? Depressed again?" Golden Boy, I'd think, at least I'm an artist that knows how to suffer.

I looked away, in the direction of the pond and the road below. I felt self-conscious as I waited to see what Master Ming would say about me. But the more I waited the more a familiar lousy feeling spread inside me again,

here on the grassy ledge, as we all stood in front of Master Ming. I had worn nice clothes for the occasion. A pink skirt with black pocket dots and my white and green Adidas sneakers. Dad had told us to look nice. Yet, my brother was wearing a wrinkled black Pink Floyd t-shirt and army pants that were tattered at the bottom from the asphalt driveway. His hair was dirty blond, cut in a shaggy layered, what is now called a “classic rock star” look. He was your average popular suburban fifteen-year old. The school theatre crowd I went to parties with was not considered “unpopular” or geeky. But even I couldn’t deny that it was Theo who was going to amount to great things. Everything my brother did, he did better than everyone else, even on the first try. He was the one to win the stuffed animals at carnival games. The first time he skied he mastered the diamond trails and flew over the moguls effortlessly. He could draw, play guitar, sing, make super eight movies, and befriend all the seniors in high school. He was the golden boy, smart agile, athletic, creative and good looking, beautiful inside and out.

Master Ming knew this. After he said, “Your son has something great, DeContenza,” he cast a momentary glance at me, moved to the right of us and headed toward the fire, maneuvering deftly over the rocks like an old mountain goat.

I watched his wide back and felt like he had confirmed everything for me. Master Ming knew the second he saw me that I didn’t have IT. He acknowledged the mask I wore. I was concealing the truth; he had seen this

because he had the ability to see into you. Naturally he saw nothing inside me, or maybe worse, he saw something detestable.

I had realized this for a long time even and it was obvious I had been trying hard to dodge that fact. I had played the leading female in the school play and I had performed in school dance recitals, I had taken drawing lessons at The Arts Students League (the same place where Master Ming had gone) and I had even managed to pull off getting a few A's on my report card. All this activity was just to keep up the appearance of being something other than mediocre. When it came down to it, I was a fake, because I couldn't be the real thing. I didn't have soft power, or the IT that many artists and masters, brothers and Buddhists had already come here with. You just either had it or you didn't.

I didn't like Master Ming. But if I was never confused about why my father bowed deeply to him, and my mother believed him to be so "wise and all knowing," I wasn't confused now. By telling my parents that Theo shined, something that I had always sensed they had both believed about him, it was like the master had confirmed their feelings and also installed a spot-light on me, as if trying to melt the layers away until my ugly core was visible. Master Ming could see the absolute truth about me because he had a power that was equivalent to X-ray vision. I was a shadow on the sunny steep ledge and now all I wanted was to get the hell out of there.

Mom couldn't get rid of her proud mother smile. She had watched Theo bow to the master and walk back to the boulder in the sun, he had been

called down from by Dad. Soon after, Dad and Mom moved closer to the fire and started talking to Winnie. Her three children were gathered by her side now, a boy and two girls, all around the same age as my sister and Theo, and all blond. Master Ming was testing the stew that the oldest, cocker spaniel-eyed member had been stirring. After dipping the ladle into the soup he lifted it up to Winnie's youngest girl to try. She sipped it carefully. She nodded her blond head, he smiled and patted the top of it and said, "Kate says it's good. So, we can all mangia now!" The little girl beamed. The master smiled. Then something miraculous happened: all of the members laughed.

I watched all these people as if it was I that was in a trance. Like a light switch turned on in them everyone seemed contented in his or her own little piece of air. I felt like I was looking into a secret, better world that I couldn't belong to. And this feeling was familiar. Why could I never shine like my brother? Why did I get depressed for no reason? Were some people in the world just born to be shadows?

"Cast of characters, right?" said a deep voice behind me.

I turned around and looked up. He was about my age, maybe a year older, seventeen. The first thing I noticed about him was his unevenly cut dirty blond hair and how one of his grey-green eyes looked clear into mine a bit more than the other had. Where as Ruth startled me because she was hard to look at, this young smooth face startled me especially since it didn't seem to match up with the deep voice that came out of it. I was trying to understand his words that were now echoing in my head.



“We’re all misfits here,” he said, like he was confessing something. But with on second glance there was something in his innocent and lovely face that struck me as pathetic. I felt an instant pity and I took a few steps to the side, twisted my body to search the hill for my family. I couldn’t see them anymore.

“Your DeContenza’s daughter, right?” he asked. I nodded.

“I’m Matt,” he said. A smile and his eyes stayed on mine.

“Serena. It’s nice to meet you, Matt.”

I realized I had been shivering for a long time around the time I met the master and now was the first time I noticed it. I was gripping the ground with my sneakers, locking my knees and at the same time feeling a tightly wound ball unraveling inside my chest, a fist unclenching as if his voice had pierced it with elephant tranquilizer, that stuff that pot was sometimes laced with. I couldn’t feel my sneakers below my wobbly knees. I clung to anything I could, trying to bring my ballet teacher into my mind, remembering something Maestro had said just the other day when we were doing pique’ turns. “Never lift eyes off spot. If you’re not strong, you are not ready enough. Take eyes off spot, you collapse and do the dance of a drunk.” My ballet teacher was talking about balancing on my toes. “True dancer never shows effort.”

“You okay?” Matt asked. He grabbed my elbow. From the way he held it firmly, I could tell it took a lot for him to do that. I was more dizzy and confused because of how deep it hit something inside me, something

dangerous and sweet at the same time. There was no way I was going to let him think that I was his conquered possession. What? Where did that come from? I focused on the hole in his sweater. I reminded myself about the way his left eye seemed to penetrate deeper into my eyes, than his right one. Freak! I stumbled back, he let go and somehow I didn't fall down. I looked at him quickly.

“Nice save,” he said, smiling.

I was stupid. He was just being friendly, cheerful. The way he was reaching out and the ridiculous way I responded to his friendliness was like an innocent mocking of my snobby attitude towards everyone there. This made me feel even worse. I glanced at the hole in his navy blue sweater; the sweater seemed too small for him and too tight for his muscular shoulders and arms. He was not like anyone I had met at high school. It was strange, but it seemed like I had met him when I was a little kid somewhere maybe on a vacation or a visit to a distant relative's house.

All I gathered was that Matt stood out from these strange, inhospitable people where, except for Winnie's kids, he was the youngest member. Among even members of my own family he stood out and the cool guys from my high school who wore their hair long and in front of their averted eyes, and would slouch against the walls in the hallway at school when they spoke to me, not with the straight posture of Matt who was the same age them. And realizing all this in a rush, I felt something crush inside me. It scared me and I began to frantically search for reasons to dislike him.

“Why are your clothes full of dirt?” I heard the bitchiness the second it left my mouth.

Matt laughed. He was so freaking genuine. His eyes left mine, it seemed for the first time. “Work practice. We’ve been working since 7 this morning. Clearing brush down below. It rained last night. The mud’s everywhere down there by the pond.” He turned and looked me over.

“This place isn’t where you want to wear nice clothes. I work in construction. I don’t even own nice clothes. Well. Maybe this one paisley shirt I bought. Must’ve been from 1965. Got it from the Salvation Army.”

But I could see my parents’ faces looking up towards me now and they were telling me something, waving me towards them, saying we had to go now. Once they caught my eye and I nodded I was coming, they turned and walked down the hill.

“Well. See you next time,” Matt said.

“I doubt it. I don’t belong to the New York karate school,” I said. I squinted a smile and left him on the mound above the path that led down to the parking lot, amazed how easy it was to avoid eye contact with this young man, who seemed kind, cute and a little sad behind his green eyes and crooked hair cut. So, in the world outside this one, the one he saw me a part of, he was indeed a misfit. And I was just the same in my world as he was in his and just as much a misfit in his.

## SEVEN

1978-1979

My mother's birthday fell on a Sunday. When she and Dad came back from Tai Chi class, she showed me the present Master Ming had given her. It was a small red seed- pod the size of a half dollar, with a picture of an elephant scratched into the coffee colored skin. My mother opened it carefully, holding the two halves in each palm. Inside each half was a smaller bean pod, carved into an elephant. She separated the head of each of the elephants from their body and told me to hold out my hand. She then emptied the contents of the elephants' head into my palm, sprinkling three tiny apple seeds, dyed red and carved into even smaller, miniscule elephants. The Math: two large elephants and three smaller ones.

"See. Five. Like the five of us," she said.

I looked down at my hand. Five elephants lined up on the life- line of my palm.

My mother beamed. She said, "The master said to me, 'Carol, you are the great matriarch of your family.'"

I didn't know what a matriarch was. "It's a female head of the household," she said. "But it's more than that. She holds a very powerful role. He said that I am the only reason why our family is so strong."

My mother seemed so pleased with her self. I couldn't break it to her, nor would I ever break it to her, that this time the master got it wrong. This

family was the opposite of strong. The majority of us spent a lot of time inebriated, two of which so often enough (Dad and Theo) that it was effecting their cognitive abilities. Dad had lost his wallet four times that year. My brother's highest grade was a C for skateboarding at the un-fail-able high school called "The School for Open Education," where it was common knowledge that the teachers got high with the students. Years after the school closed it, news got out that the male principle had sex with an under age student, a boy I had once played spin the bottle with.

My sister was so petrified of getting older that she woke up with night terrors. And though, as much as it wasn't exactly weak, the pact I had made with my best friend Carrie that we would lose our virginity "no matter what" before we entered our first year of college wasn't exactly built on a strong sense of moral preservation. We had five months left and we were scrambling. In the beginning of my junior year, I had given my phone number to a thirty-five- year old man I had befriended in my life drawing class at the Arts Students League, in the hopes of fulfilling my side of the pact before the end of senior year.

And you Mom, I wanted to say, have been depressed since the fall when I started applying to college. I still hear you sobbing in your bedroom, when you think I'm not home yet, saying you're a failure, have no sense of purpose, repeating the same things you used to say when we were younger.

Master Ming was right about something though. Out of all of us, my mother was the most composed in public and he wanted to make sure she

knew this. Composure counted for a lot in the world, I suppose he was trying to tell her. Revealing your emotions to the world was a sign of weakness.

But I wished I could feel my mother's composure all the time. Jealousy and envy, was in her bones that seeped into me. I didn't want to acknowledge this, but she made it so obvious. I felt ashamed, guilty, angry with her, all this wrapped into a tight ball, was what I felt when she had taken me to look at two colleges the year before. Her sighs would sink into me, when we pulled into a college parking lot; the repetition of her narrative of how much she had always wanted to go to college and how having babies had prevented her. If there had been a megaphone attached to her brain, "You started it," would have blared out every time she followed behind me, her first child, the ball and chain, born when she herself was a child wanting to go to college, followed me into each of the college's admissions building.

The long drive home was naturally silent. I'd sit next to her, imagining myself on the campus we had just seen, minus her shadow and feel excited and then guilty because it meant that I'd be happy without them all. I couldn't talk to mom about how excited I was either, because that would elicit an additional layer of silence between us, something thick that would last into weeks. I decided after the two college interviews with her, I'd go along with friends and their parents on the rest of the college visits.

One day shortly after one of those college trips, I came home to find Mom sobbing in the guest bathroom next to the kitchen. I pleaded with her to open the door and when she finally did, she let me comfort her and listened

while I told her that she was doing something important in her life by being a mother. And it was important to me and Theo and Jenny. She told me that being a mom wasn't what she had ever wanted to do. She wanted to go to college, make a career, maybe act or write plays. I told her that she was still young, (thirty-five) and we were getting older and she could do all that because she was so talented and smart. I put my arm around her and patted her thick brown hair, as she leaned into me and wiped the tears from her eyes.

Before I left for school the next day I wrote her a list of all the things I was thankful that she had done for me. The last thing on the list was for "simply being a mom." Then after crossing it out, I told her I was thankful that she was brilliant, and how she would go to college someday. I placed it on her pillow before leaving the house. That night she ran into my room, with my letter, sobbing to me that I was right, I was so right about her. She thanked me and for the first time I heard her say I was so smart

If there was one thing my father hated, it was Mom being depressed. Dad would act like one of his limbs was damaged and hobble around irritated that he couldn't function to his full capacity because of it. He blamed my brother and me for driving our mother crazy, that old narrative, now replaced with how we were making my mother "age before his eyes." The acting classes were supposed to help with that. He made her take Tai Chi on Wednesday nights, hoping that would make her better, snap her out of her

glaring despondency. He paid for more energizing sessions with Master Ming, she was meeting with him three times a week instead of twice.

But what cured her finally was after she took my advice, after I suggested that she go to my ballet class at the Ansonia Hotel, on Broadway and 74<sup>th</sup> Street, where I was getting gym credits for my high school. There were old and young people there, some older than herself. I loved my teacher, Maestro, a handsome Hungarian man in his seventies, a former dancer for the Royal Dance Company in Russia. I was the youngest in the class and received a lot of love and attention because of it. I knew he would love my mother as much as he loved me.

Whether it was Master Ming's gift of healing or the nurturing environment of Maestro's ballet class, it worked. By the spring our house was lighter. I could breathe. My sister's nightmares seemed to go away. After a conference with my brother's principle, my brother's grades went up. And Dad stayed dad except there was no longer anything to blame us for. I felt a burden lift from me even though the man from my sketch class never called me and quit midway into the session. I could once again focus my energy on doing well on my AP Biology exam and practicing my lines for the senior play. I had a leading part.

Since all the other kids in it had a parent in the business as they say, I felt the pressure. The boy playing my son was the son of the actor who played the cop in "Dog Day Afternoon." my daughter was in reality the daughter of a famous Hollywood director who directed "Bonnie and Clyde"



and guy who played my husband was the son of a famous Broadway and screenwriter, most known for the film "Rosemary's Baby." I had a nightmare about the last shot of the blackened bassinette where the baby is crying, Mia Farrow approaches the bassinette and looks down into it and jerks back, clamping her hand to her mouth, her eyes widening. The smiling friend, Ruth Gordon, her husband, who was played by John Cassavettes, who took care and comforted Rosemary, (a very young Mia Farrow,) were especially frightening because in the beginning, they had seemed so caring and concerned for her.

The writer of the horror film and the rest of my co-actors talented parents, would all be coming to the production of an original student play and I had to shine. With good grades, and my acceptance letter to my future college already received, all I had to do was practice my lines so I could give the best performance of my life.

But before that, while I was still in rehearsal with the play, in early June I did a friend a favor and agreed to dance with her in a Limon style-performance at my high school. I had done a decent job with the moves, even though I was unfamiliar with dancing modern. Mom hadn't come because she was taking her acting class in the Village.

After the performance I took the downtown A train and waited for her in the stairwell of her acting class, like I did when I waited for my father and brother at the dojo. I could hear voices of a man and a woman doing a scene from "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." When I pushed the door slightly open, so I could

watch, it squeaked. Thirty seconds later, a thin young man opened the door, smiled and guided me inside the small studio. My mother was sitting in a fold out chair against the wall with the others, about 5 men and women. They all seemed younger than she. But maybe it was just that she was my mother. After the scene, they all applauded and the man and woman sat in front of the man behind the desk to hear his assessment. The man was gentle but straight with them and the actors seemed more grateful than hurt. After he was done my mother introduced me to all of her classmates and to Claude her teacher, the man behind the desk.

They were all very sweet to me, told my mother how beautiful I was and complimented my dress, which was a ballet pink organza vintage 40's dress, I had picked out for the dance performance. I had on my tights under the sheer dress. The thin man who had answered the door said, "Standing in front of the light right now, I can see you have a lithe dancer's body."

"Thanks," I said. My mother laughed.

The next stop was uptown to 14<sup>th</sup> Street, the Tai Chi and Karate class. I hadn't been there in a few years and hadn't seen Master Ming since that time on the hill of his property in Westchester the year before.

It was about 5 PM and the students hadn't arrived for class yet. The late afternoon sun poured out of the wall of windows to our right, making the room even more orange than it was. The Master was sitting with his back to us, at his desk. He was wearing a white tee- shirt and jeans, not the usual yoga pants and tunic top he wore for class. He looked up from his desk as my

mother and I walked into the center of the room. She bowed and said, "Do you remember my daughter, Serena, Master Ming?"

"How could I forget," he said, looking me up and down, "She is a young woman now." He gestured my mother to come towards the bench, as he started to walk toward it, then stopped. Turning around, he looked at me then at my mother. "You like your daughter to join you for energizing?"

My mother looked at me. "Okay?"

No freaking way, I wanted to say. I'd rather sit on the park bench with the bums. My mother waited, raised her eyebrows. She had been happy these past few weeks, my family was happier. Less shit from Dad. And all it took for that to change was for me to say no, no-way, politely and we'd be back to the silent treatments and her crying. My heart sank on top of my twisted stomach. "Okay," I got out.

I sat on my knees next to her as she and Master Ming sat directly in front of each other and stared into each other's eyes. Then came the moment when I had to do the same. And just as I had imagined when I looked into his eyes, I felt like his were seeing right into me. My body felt naked and my mind turned and reeled like a kaleidoscope. Many thoughts and images appeared, churned, and then popped like bubbles in my head. Angry thoughts about my mother, weird, confused feelings about my father. Why did mom seem jealous of me when I showed dad my drawings from sketch class and when he told me I was as good as Van Gogh? Thoughts that I had felt glimpses of and dismissed and covered and pushed away because they were

too uncomfortable, too abnormal. And no one had heard or seen them the way that I did until now.

Master Ming saw them all whirling inside me, the contents of a burst pillow- case, emptying out into a wind- storm. His eyes were all over me; I saw two pairs, then four, then one again. Finally, he blinked and motioned for us both to lie down on the floor next to him, my mother's hand in mine. Once we lay on the floor he placed each of his hands on our chest. I noticed that the first two fingers of his left hand, he placed on me were chopped off at the knuckle, no fingertips on two fingers. I lay next to my mom for about five minutes, which seemed like an hour, my heart thumping fast against his thick fingers. The insidious feelings persisted within me, waves of fear and outrage.

Finally, he said, "Ok," and patted my stomach. We got up and I bowed to him after my mother did. He followed us toward the door. The sun was shining a little lower in the sky through the wall of windows that faced 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. I could feel it on my face and my legs, though I felt cold and shivered a little. My mother and I turned to look at the Perfection sign and made our bows. Master Ming stood a few yards away, following me with his eyes.

"You have a beautiful daughter, Carol," he told my mother.

My mother thanked him. "Serena..."

"Thank you," I said. I dropped my hands in front of my lap and crossed my legs. I took a step back, closer to my mother.

“My pleasure,” he smiled, eyes squinting, a layer of sweat gleaming on his round cheeks. He tilted his body forward, from the waist and came back up again, never taking his eyes off me, even when we took our bow at the Perfection sign before the door closed behind.

We got into the car and drove to the Lincoln Tunnel. My mother handed the toll collector the money.

We were in the tunnel when she asked, “How do you feel?”

“Okay,” I lied.

She couldn’t tell. She had no idea that I felt like I had been found out, secrets had been lifted out of me, like Ming had taken a metal detector and sucked them out to inspect them, analyzed their weight and measurement to the proportion of what is publically deemed as “normal” and discovered that they were not at all normal. My counselor at the college would certainly think so. They were perverse, dark, sinister and evil.

By the time we were outside the Lincoln tunnel, I was quietly sobbing. My mother kept asking me what was the matter. She didn’t seem surprised when she asked. She smiled when she handed me a tissue. But a week later at the Paramus Mall, she and I were looking for a dress for the graduation ceremony and she told me that she had told Master Ming how I had cried in the car after being energized for the first time, she said that he was impressed, saying that he had begun to melt the block of ice.

I thought: Nope. Never again.

In the last few weeks of senior year, I'd hop on the 1 train down to 74<sup>th</sup> Street to my ballet class and there I would see my mother leaving the dressing room, already changed into her leotard and toe shoes before class. Maestro fell in love with her, announcing to the class that his favorite dancers were Polish, like her, and all the Polish dancers he had danced with, danced with the most passion. I was now known as Carol's daughter and with Chopin playing from the speakers, Maestro would enjoy putting us side by side to do a combination across the room. Up on my toes next to my mother on her toes, I began to feel as if the Polish dancer was passionately competing with me. But then I'd feel like I was crazy to even consider that thought entering my brain, but it did. Why would a mother compete with her daughter?

For the first time since I started in Maestro's class, he grew impatient with me. I wasn't growing as a dancer and I was making the "same idiot mistakes all over again." I would leave with my mother, in the car driving back home, wondering how did it happen that I felt worse than better from a ballet class that had once been my therapy, making me feel light and beautiful, deep inside.

By the end of the week, on the last performance of the high school play I starred in, the night when all the "famous people" were sitting in the audience, I spaced out and dropped about five pages from the script. My classmate, who played my son, and who later became a well known actor in the 90's, looked at me like he wanted to both strangle and comfort me at the same time.

I blew up, I blew it, I fucked up, and brought the whole cast, director and writer down with me. Back stage during intermission my co-stars had to walk with me around the basement to help me get back into character. Character, I said, I don't know who I am. Who am I? Serena, they all said. Serena, who's playing Matthew's mom, Linda. "I'm Serena. I'm Linda who is really Serena," I repeated over and over in my head as I said the rest of my lines and the curtain closed.

And it didn't stop there. As graduation came near, since the senior grade had voted me to be the master of ceremonies for graduation, I had to write a speech. For the first time in my life I suffered from writers block. After enough whining about it, my father agreed to help me write it.

From the podium, I stammered as I tried to make it seem as if the speech in front of me was a speech I wrote and memorized. I couldn't block out the voice that told me that I was no good. The leading roles in the high school plays that had gotten me this gig in the first place, led me to destroy a friend's play and compromised another friend's acting performance. And there is no excuse except for the fact of who I was and who I had always been since I was little and I was thinking all this as I spoke to the audience of mothers, fathers, siblings, caregivers and extended families of the graduates behind me. I got the speech done and it didn't end because for the rest of the ceremony I mispronounced my fellow classmates names when I introduced them for their speeches. I forgot to announce one of the teachers who was going to give the final speech, the one about the black and white keys on a

piano creating melody and harmony together, celebrating our schools diversity, the gym and karate teacher, who had known Master Ming from a Chinatown martial arts school. Telling my mother at the front entrance to my high school that, "He's the guy that used to wear metal weights in his heels. Strange cat." And my mother said, acting as if it was she who had been insulted, "He's not strange at all. He's a healer."

I sat in the front row in my graduation dress, not understanding why my grandmother kept motioning her hands together, until later on she explained to me that she was trying to get me to close my legs. My introductions were over. My classmates were accepting their diplomas.

Stumbling onto the stage to accept mine, a stage I had danced and acted on for two years, I felt I had fallen off a high, shiny place. A quick slip, with nothing left behind. I wasn't feeling my feet when my hand took the diploma. I looked out in the direction of the yellow cinderblock wall in the back of the auditorium, the baby blue horizontal stripe painted on it, above the heads of the audience, my family, my friends' families and friends. The future lay ahead, spread flat to the ground.



**EIGHT**

1979

The tears started when we got to the entrance of my college. So much for Mom's composure in public. She wouldn't stop even in front of my new roommate and her parents, while she helped my dad and I carry my boxes and coffee maker, typewriter and blankets into our dorm room the first day of freshman week. A couple of weeks later at a parent/teacher outdoor cocktail event, she stood surrounded by professors and the parents of other freshmen in the beautiful English garden of the president of the college, with my dad, next to my don (advisor) and literary professor and sniffled and dabbed the cocktail napkin to her eyes, wiping melted mascara off her cheeks, while my teacher leaned down to her and explained that I was a brilliant young woman, had a mind of great gifts and needed therapy.

Most of the therapy sessions with the psychologist at the health center, was spent talking about the young man that I had sex with for the first time, who had first dumped a freshman who lived down my hallway, to go out with me and then while we were together, slept with his old girlfriend and confessed to me that it was because she liked it when he tied her up to his bedpost. I got very little sleep those first four months and one morning I told my roommate, while looking in the mirror that the person inside of it definitely wasn't me.

Then one night I lost it. I couldn't move my fingers to type and the words that I had just typed I couldn't understand. Letters swam around the paper,

stick figures with no meaning. It was a cold, stormy winter that year and a bunch of harsh stuff had happened to some friends I had. One killed herself, another who tried to, wandered around campus with bandages around her wrists, the girl above me had been practicing devil worship after living her young life as an orthodox Jew and another was still holed up in her room for two weeks, after getting an abortion. I managed to call my mother from the hallway phone and she came about forty minutes later and we walked around the wooded pathways in back of the tutor style houses that were dorms and classrooms. This time it was my turn to cry and her to turn to listen. My mother had her composure back. We sat on a large flat rock in back of the library. She told me that what had helped her in times like these was the Sunday Tai-Chi class.

A month later at about 7AM on a Sunday, my Dad picked me up at the college entrance. It was one of the coldest days that winter. I was tired because the night before, I had fooled around with a guy in the drama department whose kisses were almost as rough as what he did with his hand between my legs. In the morning the pain went from dull to piercing and it wasn't going away. An insistent reminder of the mistake I made with him.

Dad took the FDR into Manhattan this time. The Dojo was so warm when I walked in and sat by the women's dressing room. For a long time I waited as my father was speaking with Master Ming. After Dad got back from the stick hands line, the master called my name. I walked to him. "Hurry Up!" He said, gently this time.

I ran the three yards toward him as he was sitting at his desk. He faced the windows over the street. He asked me, "How do you feel?"

I told him I felt okay.

"Then why do you have a pain right there," he pointed to my crouch.

Wow. I thought. The pain increased while I stood in front of him. It was like a silent scream.

"I don't know..." I said, quietly.

"Your boyfriend's got bad vibes," he said. "None of my business. But if you're serious about getting better, he has to go."

Well, I had him on that one, I thought. Russ was not my boyfriend. I knew just by the way he kissed me that he'd never be my boyfriend and I did not go to his dorm room when he asked me to earlier in the evening when we fooled around in my room. But how did the master know about my pain?

Master Ming turned, rang the bell and got up and walked to the middle of the classroom for the Tai chi lesson. Two other women had come to class for the first time. We stood behind him and silently he taught us the first three moves. We stood in front of the mirror, our legs hip distance apart, knees slightly bent, hands by our sides. Slowly we followed Master Ming as he let his arms lift up slowly very limp and relaxed towards his chest and down again. He told us to breathe in deeply from the stomach, "Like the way a baby breathes" as we lifted our arms and slowly breathed out long, as we let them float down. We followed two more moves, pivoting slowly on our heels, then

lifting the right foot and taking one step to the right, letting our arms follow our relaxed body.

Others from the class started to break away from what they were doing stood behind us repeating the same three moves that we were doing over and over again, behind the master. I picked the movements up quickly because my father had taught me the form a few times during the summer on a beach in Long Island.

Practicing the form behind Master Ming was a very different experience than I had while practicing it with Dad. It felt very peaceful and relaxed in the Zendo. It was probably the first time I had felt that way ever in that space. My mind slowed down, my face felt relaxed. I felt like I was floating in water, but the air was light and clean. For the first time when I heard the master's words (not my father's) say keep your breath below your chest, relax your whole body, I could do it and in that simple instruction, I felt something rise from inside me and radiate out. It was a peaceful feeling, I felt at home in my body for what felt like a long time. I hadn't felt so inside my body, rather than my head, since I had done ballet with out mom around. And after the lesson was over I noticed that the pain I had walked in there with was gone. While my father was changing in the dressing room, the master called me again to his desk. "How do you feel now?" he asked.

"The pain is gone," I said.

"I know," he said. "So, how do you feel?"

"Good," I said.

“Very good.” He looked at the window with a slight smile in his eyes.

“Okay, “ he said, waving me away.

Each time I went to class and got back to campus, I felt more at peace. My mind slowed down so that I was able to, while walking onto campus, see the life inside the leafless trees, slow and invisible but present and breathing. The cold air had life in it too. After five Sundays of Tai-Chi, I quit smoking and had my sense of smell and taste back. I was less distracted and could focus more on writing my essays and poetry and my drawings. My sleep was restful and my dreams were vivid again.

One morning in class Master Ming called my father to him, they spoke for a long time and thus the class ended past noon. Some people left before the sitting, which always brought the class to a close. As we drove back to my college Dad was quiet. He only spoke when I was about to get out of the car, at the entrance to the school.

“Serena, the master wanted me to tell you something,” he said. He tugged on his beard.

“What?” I asked.

“He did your chart. Your mom gave him your time of birth and he did a detailed chart for you.”

“That’s cool,” I said.

“Well,” Dad continued. “The thing is, he saw in your chart that you are extremely sensitive.”

I laughed, “Stating the obvious there.”

“Well, the thing is, Serena...” Dad turned and looked at me. “Let me put it this way. Master Ming said that with a chart like that, she should sit in the mountains for seven years.”

I felt like laughing for a second then stopped. Seven years of meditating on the top of a mountain. I assessed my father’s serious face as he told me the master’s message to me, remembered that class ended late and realized that maybe the conversation might have been linked to my mini-nervous breakdown, the paralysis in my hands and head and mom calming down as we walked the campus pathways. I looked at my father and I realized that if I didn’t do what the master was suggesting it was possible that another breakdown would follow. He was preventing my debilitation. It was his job as a master to do this. I felt very grateful to Master Ming then. Someone was protecting me. I’d have to pass on the seven years in the mountains though.

“Dad,” I said, “I don’t want to sit in the mountains for seven years. I want to finish college. Could you tell Master Ming that and see what he says?”

“Well. That was discussed and he said that you should get your chart done by Cora and that you start getting energized immediately, go up to the work practice on Saturdays and come to the one day sessions.”

A week later, after my weekly therapy session at the campus health building, I took a cab to the train station and then from Grand Central took the A train to Canal Street for the astrology reading.

Cora lived in a huge loft on the noisiest part of Canal Street. Besides being an astrologer she was an artist. After I walked up the four flights of creaky and warped steps, she greeted me in front of her doorway and right when we got inside, to the right of us stood a huge case of miniature clay skinny human bodies, stick figure like in different poses, that she told me she had sculpted. Her loft was her living and working space. She pointed to a painting she did of her mother, an expressionistic child-like painting with mostly brown, black, red and pink tones. It looked like a woman was eating a small pink object. "Mom eating her baby. Jung is a big influence on my work."

By the time we sat down at her large oak table, Cora, who had always been very stern and serious at class with my brother and I, was smiling warmly and cheerfully offering me tea, pushing a plate of cookies in front of me and waiting until I got comfortable in the ornately carved chair. She sat across with papers in front of her, they looked like maps or geometry configurations, when in fact they were my natal and transit astrological charts, drawings of a pie, cut into twelve equal parts (houses) with various unfamiliar symbols and numbers inside and outside the pie. My name was at the top of the page, along with my birthdate, time I was born and the location of birth. Staten Island, New York.

"Serena," she said, "First let me say that you are EXTREMELY sensitive."

"Dad and I were talking about that the other day."

“It’s a gift, your sensitivity. You can feel what others are feeling. You’re a little psychic too.”

“Psychic,” I said. Then I remembered something that had happened this past summer. “Does it count if you have a dream and the next day it comes true?”

“Yes. It depends. Why? Did that happen to you?”

“Over the summer I had a dream that a famous person in government had died. When I woke up I thought it was the president. But it wasn’t. Then later, when I was on the subway, someone was reading the paper and on the front page it said Rockefeller Dead. I remembered and realized I had dreamt it.”

Cora smiled widely, showing her teeth like she was about to laugh, but she didn’t. She shook her head and looked down at the chart. “That’s being psychic. Yes!”

She put her finger on one point on the chart and then another point directly opposite. “This is your sun, in Pisces and this is your rising sign, Aquarius. Aquarius is also very psychic. But what really makes you ultra sensitive is your moon in Pisces. Moon is how you feel about yourself. Aquarius is how others see you, your public self. Your sun is who you truly are. So, with Pisces in both moon and sun, you are what you feel. Which can be a double edged sword.”

It made sense but I felt confused. In fact I felt like I was floating off the chair. It was the same feeling I had when I was in the dojo doing Tai Chi in



front of the master. Except I felt more grounded behind him, following and learning the moves.

“It can be useful to know what others are feeling because you can help them and can also prepare yourself for what they will do. In terms of fighting, I’m like that also. I can sense and anticipate my opponent’s moves, so I can protect myself. And I can counter attack, if I have to.”

“So. That’s really good. What’s the other side of the sword?”

“Your sensitivity is so great that you can lose yourself. You’re a sponge. You feel everything and every one around you, absorbing their problems, their emotions, to the point that you feel like you’re going crazy.”

I knew that Dad hadn’t told Cora about my nervous breakdown. At least I thought he didn’t. It was crazy how Cora seemed to know a lot about me just by looking at some calculations from planets.

“You need to feel like your feet are on the ground. You have no earth in your chart. Earth can ground you. Neptune rules Pisces, which is the god of illusion and delusion, addiction. Because you are so creative, you need to ground yourself in the physical, do what ever you can to stay in your body, not inside your head. That is why Tai Chi is SO important for you. Master Ming’s environment is the place you can stay grounded and grow.”

I looked over at the mother eating her offspring and felt dizzy, spaced out.

“How do you feel when you leave the studio?”

“The Karate school?”

Cora nodded, her large grey eyes looking deep into mine.

“Good,” I said. “Like myself.”

“Good. That’s your Pisces intuition working. You know.”

“Know what?”

“It’s the right place for you to grow. That place will save you, Serena.

With a chart like this,” she looked down at the symbols and pie and moved her hand over it a few times like a magician. “You need Master Ming and that class. I would even suggest getting energized at least two or three times a week. Energizing saved me.”

“Are you a Pisces too?”

Cora laughed loudly. “No! Can’t you tell? I’m a Gemini. But I have Capricorn moon. So, things come down heavy on me. Class helped me deal with the hard stuff.”

What ever she was talking about, the way her voice dipped down and lowered in almost a whisper told me the hard stuff might have almost done her in, in some kind of psychological way, and Master Ming and the karate school had gotten her through it. This I understood loud and clear. I started thinking about the young women at school I knew who didn’t have the opportunity I had, to save their sanity, which fell and may never get the chance to make themselves healthy again, or at least be provided with the tools to keep their sanity intact. Yeah. I understood the feeling of being lucky and having your life saved.

On the train back to college, everything seemed clear. Honing the tools to make me internally strong, breathing down, meditating, Tai-Chi and now energizing would help me not let the outside world rip me up. It would keep me strong for the rest of my life. While others thought it was through getting straight A's and getting a good job after college that made you successful, I realized that as an artist, it wasn't the case for me. And maybe even those people who believed in the external success, they would wake up and not know who they were, where they were, how they got there, kind of how I felt that night in the dorm room. I wasn't going to let that ever happen to me again, no matter how damn sensitive I was and the only way I could do it was to keep going to class and practicing hard.

Cora confirmed all that when she read my chart. My "tendencies" and "gifts" were explained in mathematical formulas, having to do with the configuration of the planets on the day and moment of my birth. Everything she told me I recognized about myself. And she gave me a way to work with what I had. Stay in class, get energized, meditate and go to work practice on Saturdays. I didn't need anymore proof. I had a plan, a direction, and a map. I had never felt this solid and definitive about what I needed to do.

When I entered my room I saw everything in it and around me as if for the first time, my books, my drawing pad filled with sketches of my friends, reading their poetry and stories, my crayon drawings on paper bags a silk screen I had done in the winter right before I fell, my typewriter with a poem

not yet completed. Everything was alive, filled with purpose, promises of good work to come.

Later before bed, when I sat down to meditate in front of my window, I promised myself that I would stay on course and that life would get better. I'd do the work, what ever it took to not lose it again.

## NINE

November 1979

WBGO was always on when I rode with Dad. This Sunday morning they were playing different renditions of 'Round Midnight. Miles Davis followed Theolonius Monk. I was glad for the lack of conversation. Hung over from a dance party the night before, "No Satisfaction" was still ringing in my ears and the predominately female crowd singing it was still knocking in my brain. It was early November, cold and snowing and we were headed to Tai chi class again.

I leaned my head against the cold window and tried to focus my attention on the icy lace covering on the side view mirror, the trumpet and the bumpy road. But then Dad turned off the music.

"Master Ming asked me when you're going to weekend work practice."

"Can you turn up the heat?" I asked.

"Did you hear what I said?" Dad asked above the pot- holes.

"Yeah, Dad." I turned the button all the way to the right.

"This is the second time he's asked me."

I wanted to turn the music back on. Dad turned the wipers on. I watched as they chopped the snow into a thick slush. Some water rivulets snaked upwards, along the curve of the surface.

"What exactly do they do up there?"

“Clear cut around the property, cut down trees, chop wood. It’s Zen tradition. That’s what they do at the monastery Master Ming practiced at upstate. In Japan, the ancient monks in Zen monasteries did work practice.”

“They work outside when it’s snowing?”

“Yes.” Dad looked at me, then back at the road. “You’ll wear your ski jacket.”

“I’ve never cut trees be...”

“They’ll probably have you stacking split logs.”

“Right.”

“And the energizing,” Dad said. “I’ll give him a check today.”

“I feel better now,” I said, “I don’t need it.”

“Yes. You need it. Especially you. It’s all part of the practice.”

A shock wave shot through me from the thought about the last time.

“You said you don’t feel anything from it,” I said.

“That’s because I don’t. He says I’m a hard nut to crack. But your mother felt something. And all the soft ones feel something.”

“I don’t want to do it, Dad.” The vein above his right temple was pulsing.

“Not now.”

“Well. Then. When? Because I don’t feel like paying a mental institution, if you really want to know.”

“Jeezzuus...” I turned back to the window. Outside the car it looked like pieces of ripped up paper were twisting and falling from the sky.

“I don’t think you realize how worried your mother was when she got back from seeing you that night...” He swallowed and lowered his voice. “After you had that episode. We don’t need something like that happening in our family. Are you listening?”

I nodded and tapped my nose against the cold window.

“We found the solution,” Dad’s voice said. “Master Ming can help you.” He turned his head from the road to look at me.

“It’s obvious you’re not getting better on your own. You were in therapy when it happened.” He faced the road. “You’re starting next week.”

I didn’t want to be having this conversation. The clanking of Dad’s key chain on the steering column is all I wanted to focus on now. I looked down at the blue plastic key pedant with the gold letters spelling out the words: LIVE LONG AND PROSPER EVERSFRING.

“I’m going to give him the check today,” Dad said.

“Did Master Ming tell you that?”

“Tell me what?”

“Did he make you tell me that I have to start energizing sessions next week?”

“He warned me to not wait too long. He doesn’t *make* anybody do anything.”

Another pot -hole and the key chain banged and clanked again. This side of the pendant read RELY ON YOURSELF.

Before I had joined the class, the master had given the pendant out to all his students.

“Master Ming is evolved, Serena. He’s the only person I trust that truly knows right from wrong. It’s because of his practice. He’s enlightened. He’s been sitting in the mountains and practicing Zen for years now. Zen is the way, not psychology.”

We arrived at the Dojo a little later than usual. Most of the students were there, already changed into their white ghees, some in tee shirts and in off white yoga pants. Some were lined up along the paneled wall doing stick hands and push hands. Some were doing the Tai Chi form. I quickly joined the two other women, Carmen and Judith, who had been learning the Tai chi form with me, in front of the wall of mirrors, nearest to the energizing bench.

Master Ming was sitting at his desk, where at his feet the “soft ones” were gathered. They were mostly the people from the Connecticut school, the people I remember from the celebration on the mountain at Evergreen property a couple of springs ago. There was Reuben and Ruth, Winnie, that woman with the three kids, a black belt with curly brown hair and thick black rimmed glasses, named Foretti, Matt, the guy who spoke to me on the mountain top and there were two others whose names I couldn’t recall. The master handed Foretti a book and he kept it in his hands for a few seconds, then passed it to Ruth, then she to Reuben, until each had a chance of holding it for a few seconds, without opening it or even looking at the cover.



Carmen and Judith and I were repeating the five moves we had memorized. I heard the master ask the seated group, "What did you feel?"

Each of them placed a hand on a part of their body, either their head, chest, stomach or groin and murmured something I couldn't hear. "See? You don't even have to read what's on the cover to know whether you should read the book or not," he said. "Very good!" He motioned for them to leave him. They all bowed and he rose from his bench, then walked over to his energizing bench, straddled it, and called out my name.

I stood at the bench. "Sit," he said.

I continued to stand, confused. I thought Dad had said *next week*.

Looking straight ahead Master Ming said louder, "Sit down, Serena."

I straddled the bench and faced him.

He widened his eyes and stared into my mine. I looked back at him, my heart thumping in my ears and then the beat quietly slowed down and I realized that I didn't feel the fear I had last year, when I had gotten energized with Mom. As I stared I noticed that the master's face seemed to change. He looked kinder; his face turned soft like a woman's face, an old Asian woman who was administering some medicine to me, the afflicted.

He blinked and said, "Lay down."

I lay down with my back on the long bench. He placed one hand on my chest, the other on my stomach, over my navel. I looked up at the ceiling, at the pipes and the cracks on the plaster wall high above us. The space from the floor to the ceiling was at least fifty feet. The dojo was above an old bank

that was still in operation. A century ago, the large room we practiced in may have been a storage space, like where a barn stores hay bales, where the bank had stored mortgages, loans, gold bars and stacks and stacks of money.

But then my mind stopped clicking and I felt my breathing slow down. I closed my eyes and felt a pulling upward from inside my body; it was like the opposite of gravity. I felt like under the thin membrane that was my skin, there was water and the water was rising up. And then who ever was me, the "I" was inside a large wave. And the wave was rushing in and over my head and body, and I felt like I was tumbling backwards. Then it stopped suddenly, like the yank of a car brake. The master patted my navel with his hand and said, "Very good." I opened my eyes to the ceiling. He asked me how I felt.

"I'm not sure."

"Oh," he looked away, shifted his body, as if to get up.

"It was like being in the ocean."

His face reappeared. "Ocean?" This time his eyes were twinkling.

I sat up. It was good to feel my feet against the smooth floor again.

"Yeah. Except it was like I was underwater and there were these giant waves pulling me under and I was tumbling back." I said. As I was talking, I felt exhausted. Like I had just completed a long jog and every part of me was limp, drained from full expenditure.

"Like ocean waves?" He asked.

"I think so. "

“I don’t want to hear about your thinking. I’m only concerned with what you are feeling.”

I nodded. “Ok.”

“So, you felt like you were in the ocean and waves were washing over you.”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?” he asked.

I scanned my body, first my eyes. He was gazing into them as if knowing something I didn’t and waiting for me to let him know I understood. My ears heard the cars outside, the occasional horn blare popping out of the muffled sounds outside the wall of windows. My skin felt the texture of the air, every breeze brushed over my arms, like the soft strokes of a soothing hand. The mint gum, clicking in the master’s mouth, added to the enigmatic moment like a punctuation mark or an echo of a short whistle.

I felt different than when I had entered the room earlier. But the feeling was familiar. The clutter was mopped off my brain, dust from my lungs was cleared away and a layer of grime from my skin was wiped clean. The feeling was from a long time ago.

“I feel like myself.”

“You feel like yourself.”

“I feel like me again.”

“Yes. Good,” he said pointing at my belly. “You’re here, now. This is your true self. Don’t forget the feeling.”

He was right. I nodded my head in gratitude. "I won't."

I continued with energizing twice a week. Wednesday evenings, I'd arrived at six before the Tai Chi class and then Sunday morning, during class. Wednesday afternoon I'd come in on the train, meet my psychotherapist on 96<sup>th</sup> and Park and take the subway down to 14<sup>th</sup> Street. Although my therapist played a role in my "help" or "recovery," it was not through her sessions that I began to feel less fragile.

In the earlier part of fall, a few days after my "mini nervous breakdown," and before I started Tai chi class, the college psychologist had recommended Dr. Lucy Collins, telling me, "She's a little bit of a Freudian, but most of the girls here have had good results with her." My Freudian therapist was a tall, blond woman with thick glasses and a square face that matched her square body. When I met her every Wednesday, she always wore a plaid skirt, white socks and loafers. I wore my thrift store 40's dresses and black cloth Chinese Mary-Jane's and we looked the cliché parts of patient and psychologist, a precursor to a John Hughes film. The sullen, pale and depressed teen-ager with long dark hair in her eyes sitting in the shade under the indifferent gaze of a waspy, big-boned woman, who believes she is an authority of what it feels to be human, ever since she got an Ivy League degree in Psychology.

About a month into Tai chi I felt a mixture of sympathy and frustration during my sessions with her. I couldn't hear her voice. She seemed to mumble her responses.

She sat on the other side of the low-lit room. I sat in a satin upholstered arm- chair and next to me there was a small antique wooden table with a huge box of tissues that I never used.

About the third week into energizing I felt obligated to tell her what I had been doing with the master. I described the sensations I was experiencing in those first few weeks of energizing sessions and Tai-chi class. I had begun feeling like I could see with a crystal clear -vision; almost clear enough to see light pulsating in the air, little tiny energy vibrations in the evening light, auras over people's bodies, while I did the Tai chi form. I told her about Matt and how he had a beautiful blue light hovering above his shoulders that moved along with his long arms, while he did the form. I felt like my hearing was better (though I was still unable to hear her responses). I told her that during Tai chi and after energizing sessions, my thoughts disappeared. I didn't feel anxious anymore and I experienced everything in front of me and around me, through my senses. Every experience came without me filtering it. My mind wasn't rushing to make sense of everything. It shut up. I told her, "I figured out that it's my thinking that debilitates me." She pinched her lips together. It was hard to tell if she was reacting to what I just said, because her thick glasses covered her eyebrows and cheeks.

I had told her I had begun meditating more during the week, sometimes coming back to my dorm room before a class and sitting for twenty minutes between classes. I said, ever since I had been getting energized I had been experiencing things with less of my thinking brain, but closer to what (as the master called it) my energy body.

“I don’t feel like I’ll go crazy anymore. “

Her eyes had lifted from her watch and she said, “It must be very comforting to get all this attention from these men.”

“What?” I remember asking her, always “what?”

She began to repeat what she had very audibly said this time. I interrupted her.

“I heard it. I just don’t understand what you mean,” I said.

“It sounds like you’re very excited at having all these men around you. There’s your father in the class with you and this older man putting his hands on your body for ten minutes twice a week.” She was more than audible. She was louder.

“What do you mean, by ‘exciting?’”

She gestured to the small blue clock on her end table. “We’re out of time. We can talk about this next week,” She got up, walked to the door, opened it and stood there stiffly, the light from the hallway reflected off her glasses as she faced the opposite wall. A small middle-aged woman with glittery jewelry walked hesitantly into the room, as I shuffled out.

The whole way down on the A train, I couldn't get her words out of my head. Incriminating words. Was she even listening to what I was saying? Why would I be "excited"? Excited, like turned on? That was seriously twisted. But why did she mention it? Then I felt angry that she had destroyed that non-thinking reality I had been able to slide into ever since I had been getting energized. I was back to click-clicking away, going over my every move and every word. Why? Why couldn't I get her voice and face out of my head?

The master had his hands on my chest and navel when he said in the middle of energizing, "I feel harsh pain here." And he lightly tapped his hand on my crotch. "You have very bad vibe today."

"I just saw someone before I came here and she got me upset."

"Who?"

"My therapist."

"You see a therapist?"

"Yes. She made a comment about the energizing and Tai chi, like it was bad for me or something."

"Do you see her before you come here?"

"Yes."

"No wonder," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"She got terrible vibe. I'm sucking it all out of you."

"I'm sorry," I said, mortified.

“I’m sucking her vibe since you started. Imagine how’d you feel if I didn’t have to do that.”

I could hear students already arriving for the karate class. I made a move to get up. “Basta, “ he said. “Wait.”

He looked directly down at me. His round face hovering like a moon.

“You’re going to have to chose between me or her if you want to get better. No point in wasting your father’s money for energizing if you keep going to her. But, of course, it’s up to you.”

The next day I called my therapist from the hallway phone at my dorm and told her I had to cancel my sessions with her, and she told me that she didn’t think that was a good idea. She added that I was in a very vulnerable place in the therapy at the moment and she continued to talk about my fragile state, my being open to other influencing forces that might not be safe for me, etc. As she spoke, I realized that she had said more to me now than she had ever said to me for the nine times I had seen her. Anger rose up into my throat. I was angry that my dad had paid for sessions where she was inaudible.

I said it again, “It’s my decision. I don’t want to continue at this time.”

She said, “My professional advice to you is that you continue...”

“Honestly, I couldn’t even hear you.”



“We can talk about that again. Your problem with understanding my words.” (We actually did have a session where I revealed this to her. What a waste of money that was, I had thought even then.)

“You mumble.”

“We can talk about that at the next session.”

“No. I’m not coming back. This is what I want to do,” I said.

Out of politeness, I waited.

It was when she said, “I realize you are feeling very gratified by the attention of these two older men in your life...” that I let the receiver fall to the carpeted floor and bounce from the spirally wire in the hallway. Even as I ran back to my room, and while she kept talking inside the receiver, believing that I was at the other end of it, her voice was louder and more distinct than most of those times when I sat in her room, fifteen feet from her chair. So unbelievably obvious, I thought. What an ego. God forbid she loses some business. You’re not going to get one penny more of my father’s money, bitch.

**TEN**

1980

Earlier on in the semester in my printmaking class, we had drawing exercises that focused on composition, shading, light source and awareness of negative space, the space around the objects in the composition. After Tai-chi class and after energizing, that space around objects, energy around matter, that negative space had more resonance, like pauses and the silence in music.

On the subway back to Grand Central from Wednesday classes, after being energized, I could see around each person and each object, a space charged with pulsing energy. Some people had light around their shoulders and above their heads and then others seemed to have a void or vacuum in the same locations, as if they were pulling energy into themselves. It wasn't so much that I could see with my eyes, the complete visual picture. It was just *there*. Tiny pin -prick bursts of light popped in and out. The simple otherwise mundane moments during the day, took on excitement. I didn't think I would ever feel lonely or isolated anymore since I was immersed in so much buzzing life, even alone in my room.

One cold night at Grand Central Terminal, as I waited for the train back to college, I stood on the top of the smooth marble stairs of the main room and watched how a mylar balloon floated up to the green dome above us, rising up to the galaxy. I felt like I was that balloon, lifting away from

everything earthly or heavy, but having the ability to see everything down below. It lasted all night the high I was on, a high that seemed to have no side effects.

Fluidity of motion in the line. An intuitive sense of color. The mystery behind the layout of the elements in the composition. Some affirmation my printmaking teacher was giving to me now, as he described my new work to the class. Uchima had an honest face that used to turn bored, when he got to me, after making his rounds around the studio. Earlier in the year he had stopped by my table, with my sketches for etchings and wood- cuts and wouldn't say much about my silk screens. The last silk-screen, the one before I went crazy, "Doris in October" (the tribute to my friend who committed suicide); he stated the obvious: "Bleak."

But this time he stayed longer next to me. As I cut lightly with the exacto blade into the plastic layer sheet for the silk screen, he looked at the sketch of the design I was cutting.

"Very nice!" He said. "Nice composition! What happened to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind," he said, slightly nervous. "You have gotten looser in your designs. I like that you're not careful anymore."

"Thanks,"

"Just don't lose the edginess you used to have."

"Edginess?"

“That discontented feeling, in the lines. Before, all of it didn’t work with the other elements in the composition. But here, I see harmony, flow that I didn’t see before. This is good. But the edginess is a part of your signature. It’s honest. It has an authentic perspective. Don’t lose that. Beauty isn’t about being pretty or perfect.”

He had seen the first few pages of my sketchpad, drawn in early autumn. They were filled with dismembered body parts, a large head filled with wisp-like cartoon heads screaming and mocking each other, a flat desert striped with mole hills tunneling across the barren wasteland, screens dropped from the sky with shadows of contorted bodies projected onto them. Now a month later, my sketch -pad filled up with eyes shaped like doves, horses inside womb like shapes, galloping and pushing at the edges, trying to burst out. Peaceful round faces that smiled and winked inside pyramids.

And this sketch was of something I had found recently. Walking back from the train station from Tai Chi one night, I found a child’s glove on a sidewalk outside the campus. Each finger had a little face at the tip, with yarn for hair and a tiny pom- pom nose. The tininess, the fragile hand that it had once enclosed and the five smiling faces that had been abandoned by that little hand, this is what I wanted to do a silk screen of. I kept the colorful glove and drew it in drawing class, over and over and drew a round cross-legged Buddha-like man trying on the glove, lifting it in the air and smiling ecstatically.

Uchima said, "Again, great flowing lines. I love the circular movements of the composition. But don't veer towards the saccharin. Sweeteners are just as bad in art as they are ingested into our bodies." He pointed to the Buddha face. "Why the smile?"

"I don't know. He's happy. The faces on the glove are like his children."

"Oh. Okay," said Professor Uchima. "Yes. I see the sinister element now. He's like a puppeteer. Very good!" He chuckled as he walked over to the next person.

What was wrong with expressing simple "joy?" I thought. Why does everything have to be negative? It was like my therapist. She saw something negative in everything I relayed to her.

At lunch in the cafeteria, I told my friends about how much Uchima had read into my composition and how much I was just trying to capture joy and innocence. I told them I was trying to focus more on the positive things in life, the beauty around us. I told them about the auras around my Tai-chi classmates and told them how Matt's aura was white.

In Liz's dorm room I told her, "Now this is going to sound really weird but the day I started Tai Chi, I looked at Matt do the form for just an instant. And I got this feeling, and heard this voice in my head tell me that he was going to be my husband or at least someone I was going to have a long relationship with. It felt like I was in the future with him and I knew his body and the way he thinks and he knew mine as well."

"Wow. Cool," Liz said. "Do you like him?"

“I don’t know,” I said, “Yeah I guess I do. It’s more like this pull I feel. Like we’re magnets. But then I also felt this fear and sadness right after.”

“Maybe you’re worried he’s got a girlfriend,” Liz said.

Wednesday came and I was on the energizing bench with Master Ming. He patted my navel, I rose and he placed a small smooth stone in my hand. I looked down to inspect it and saw small crystals in the shape of a little fountain inside swirls of brown and red colorations. I remembered the touchstones he had given to my parents while they had been energized. My mother still had hers. It was pink when she held it. It turned grey when she left it on her bureau.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t lose it,” he said.

“I won’t.” I got up and bowed to him.

He put his hands together and nodded slightly. “By the way,” he said, “You have one more left.” He turned and walked back to his desk.

One more energizing session left and no money to pay for the next series. I knew that Dad couldn’t give me the grand for energizing because they needed the money for Mom’s new dance studio. Maestro had encouraged Mom to open a studio in the basement of our house. “Do it before some idiot opens one,” he had said. Mom would teach the classes. Mom would finally earn money. But money that had been saved was being poured into the renovation and construction.

I was thinking about all this as I crossed the dojo to get to the corner by the windows. I was looking down at the stone Master Ming gave me, which was why; as I was walking past the perfection sign I bumped into Matt. “Whoa!” Matt said, while I said, “Oh! Sorry!” The few students that were there, looked up in our direction. I could see Master Ming turn from his desk to look at us.

“My fault,” Matt said.

“I wasn’t looking at where I was going. It was me,” I said.

“I was watching you and was curious what you were going to do,” Matt said.

“So, you let me bump into you.”

“It’s possible,” Matt said watching me. I was more amused than confused. He had a way of paying attention to me while seeming to not pay attention to me. To seem cool, disinterested and mildly curious. I admired this. It made me feel safe around him.

“Right,” I said, “But. Do you mind if I ask you...?”

“Matt!” Master Ming called out. We turned and saw Master Ming sitting on the energizing bench, waiting for Matt to come to him.

After that class, I dreamt about Matt almost every night that week.

Master Ming had told me to keep track of my dreams while I was being energized. After the “stare” part of the session, I would sometimes tell him what I had dreamt that week. After the third dream about Matt- Matt had

kissed me in the dream- I told Master Ming about it at my next energizing session.

“Do you like Matt?” he asked me.

Heat rushed to my face. “I don’t know. I feel something, I guess. He seems like a good person.”

Master Ming put a stick of gum in his mouth and chewed.

“Matt’s more than a good person.”

He continued chewing and stared into my eyes.

“Matt practices hard. He’s very dedicated. He goes to work practice every week. He gets energized three times a week.”

Matt obviously was getting paid well at his construction job. Energizing was a lot of money.

“Yeah. I know,” I said.

He continued to chew, “How would you know?”

He could tell I was startled.

“You don’t come to work practice even though you’ve been invited many times.”

“I’ve had a lot of....”

“You can make excuses. I don’t care. You’re either dedicated to your practice or not. You either want to evolve or you don’t.”

“I’m going to....”

“Matt does everything it takes to evolve into an enlightened being. He has a good attitude. He still has a ways to go. But he’s almost ripe. Which



means he's far beyond you in his practice." Master Ming blinked and stared into my eyes. It was shorter than usual. "Lay down."

The energizing was shorter also. I didn't feel as much as I usually did. I didn't feel anything except a little anxious, if I got right down to it. He didn't say, "Very good," like he always said after patting me on the navel. And he left off doing that as well. He must have left the stone on me when he rose because when I got up it hit and clattered on the floor.

The following week Master Ming didn't ask me, "Anything?" After the session he said, "This is your last," handed me the stone back, got up and walked to his desk.

He must have expected me to sign up for another energizing session and was trying to tell me that my "attitude" was bad, because I didn't have a check handy. Maybe he thought that now that I was better, I didn't care enough about growing in my practice. But I did. I just didn't feel like asking Dad for more money. I didn't like asking him for the BMW either.

I felt that if I practiced hard, went to Tai Chi class, went to work practice every weekend, I could grow. I was still feeling peaceful, focused from the Tai chi classes. But then one Sunday morning as I was doing the form by the back windows nearest to Eighth Avenue, Candy approached me and told me to follow her to the corner of the room. We sat down and she told me that she was a Pisces also.

"We Pisces are really sensitive. We're like sponges..."

"Yeah. I got my chart done by Cora. I know," I said.

Candy looked taken aback. She glanced back in the direction of Master Ming, who was sitting on his bench at his desk, looking in the direction of the windows. "Just listen for a minute. Don't talk," she said.

"Okay," I said. I never could get used to the lack of politeness from the practitioners of Everspring.

"You're a really nice girl, Serena," Candy said, "I don't want you to think that I'm telling you you're a bad person."

"Okay. But I know I'm a good person."

"Please!" She touched my wrist. Her hand was smooth and surprisingly warm.

"You interrupt a lot," she said.

"Sorry."

"You're a nice person. You just have very bad vibes."

"Oh my god," I said. The sting of tears brimming in my eyes surprised even me.

"But I sit like three times a day. I go to every class..."

"Don't talk. What did I just tell you?" Candy said, her big blue eyes rolled around in her head. She was a pretty woman, reminded me of an old forties movie star, quirky personality and all. "Shh. I know, I see you, I hear. I see you in class. I also feel you. You have really bad vibes."

"So, does that mean I should quit? Am I like killing all of you or something?"

“No,” Candy managed a smile. “You should get energized again. I get energized three times a week.”

“I would love to do that again. But I don’t have the money to. And my Dad can’t lend it to me.”

Candy looked confused. She studied the floor, her long brown hair fell in front of her eyes and she tried to breathe deeply. She exhaled a long breath, and at the end of it she looked up, placed her long hand on my wrist. “You must beg, borrow and steal for your practice, for your growth, Serena,” she said. “I did.”

“Candy!” The master yelled from across the room. It was impressive how Candy, a large woman, managed to leap up and run across the room as quickly as she did, sliding on her knees in front of the master. I had heard that she had been a tap dancer once and sung back up for Meat loaf. She was a woman of many talents.

Now when I meditated in my dorm room, the noises outside distracted me. I felt swallowed up by the “bad vibes” on the campus, in my classrooms. I wore a bright yellow down vest, to “bounce the bad vibes off and keep my own energy in,” something Candy had recommended. I avoided the cafeteria, going to the small health food bar and bringing my dinner back into my room. I managed to do well at my classes, but I started to avoid one class where the professor seemed to have a very bad vibe. The teacher was generous. She gave me a C- at the end of the marking period.

My college had terrible vibes. I would have to get a loan first before transferring out. If I borrowed more than I needed for college, on that loan, it could be my ticket to getting energized again. I was playing the waiting game now.

I was glad I didn't have to ask Dad for more money. But Dad lent me his BMW to drive up to the monastery the following Saturday.

Of course I got lost, missed the turn off for Lower Shad Road and arrived late. It had snowed the night before. I got out of the car and looked around the parking lot and as sickened as I was to be late, the clear blue sky of mid morning and the white frosting on the giant pines made remember why I was here. I heard women squealing, smelled smoke near the pond. People were laughing. As I walked closer I saw three naked women running from a tee-pee with smoke pouring out of the hole at the top.

"DeConstenza!" a man's voice called from behind me. It was Reuben. He was walking down the berm from the direction of where he and Ruth's trailer was.

"Did you bring your bathing suit?" he asked me.

"No..I.." The girls leaped out of the tee-pee again, squealing.

"Neither did they," he said.

"What are they doing?"

"Taking a sauna. Just like the Indians did before prayer and sacred ritual."

“Why?”

“Master Ming wants us to purify ourselves before we start work practice. The men went earlier.”

“I forgot my bathing suit.” I was fighting the regret I had for coming here, for not staying lost on the labyrinth-like roads of Connecticut. Reuben was a “soft-one” which meant he would be able to feel that I was forming a “bad” attitude about being there. I didn’t want these people seeing me naked. I didn’t want to roll around in the snow.

“Well. If you’re being energized, you don’t have to go in the sauna today,” he said, moving up in the direction of the tee-pee with his pile of logs. He let out a short whistle. “Ruth!”

A flap lifted out from the side of the tee-pee. The angular body of Ruth emerged from the sauna, naked, red and sweaty. She put her steaming feet in her pair of work boots and walked over to Reuben and I. He placed the wood in her arms.

“You coming in?” she asked me.

I shook my head.

She said, “Okay,” in a tone that indicated that I’d be sorry.

She bowed to her husband and then walked back into the tee-pee.

“Follow me,” Reuben said. I walked behind him; up the steep hill to the open space I recognized from the last time I had been there two springs ago. The fire pit was still there, surrounded by small boulder. “Gather some of that wood over there and I’ll start the fire,” Reuben said. I walked gingerly around

the rocks, picking up split logs from the rocky terrain. I climbed up a boulder along a cliff and grabbed a few more pieces of kindling and saw from that spot, far below me, Master Ming's stubble head shining in the sunlight. In that instant, I tripped and a log, rolled down the cliff onto the next plateau, and kept rolling several feet in the direction of the master. I wanted to yell out, "Watch out! Heads up!" But I couldn't. I froze, knowing that Master Ming would know it was me that made it happen. But then who else would it have been? There was no one above him except Reuben and me. Reuben yelled but it was too late.

"AHHHHHWWWHH!!" Master Ming was sitting on a rock massaging his bare foot. I was behind a small pine tree, looking down in his direction. "Who the FUCK did that? He yelled to Reuben.

"DeContenza's kid is here," Reuben said. "She slipped on something. Should I get you a bandage, sir?"

"No!" said the master. It wasn't until later in the practice did I know that Master Ming wore his flip-flops outside of his dojo, all year long.

The Master didn't say a word to me all day. When work practice was over, I had gathered split wood, like dad had predicted, we sat around the fire pit drinking from a water jug, while the master energized almost everyone there. Rechter came back in his ancient convertible MG with a case of Budweiser. He didn't live very far from the property. He was a large man with duct taped glasses and hair that stuck out in all directions. I think he was the guy who had followed the master from a Zendo in the Catskills. This

was where the master had had his enlightened experience called kensho. Rechter had been a monk there at the time.

As usual there was little talk. Master Ming wanted to know how the sauna felt, whether it was hot enough. "It's a waste of time if the tee-pee doesn't keep the heat in," he said. His girl friend, Pamela sat next to the master and listened to the others as they praised the sauna. She was a pretty and petit woman with smooth white skin and platinum blond hair. She was the neatest of all the practioners there. She wore a red bandana around her neck and her jeans were as tidy as the master's. She was the seamstress for Everspring, designing and sewing the master's tunics and making the cushions for him and the members.

After everyone finished praising the sauna and what a difference it had made to there work practice that day, Pamela finally said she wished it been hotter. "I thought I was going to get frostbite rolling around the snow like that," she told the master.

Candy was especially enthusiastic. She said it was almost as good as sitting. As Reuben spoke about ways to perfect the structure, I saw that she was staring at me. Did she think I had a bad vibe because I didn't participate in the "purification" of the sauna?

I wondered when I could leave. The work practice was fine. Being outside in the fresh air, doing physical labor that I had never done before. I had been to class for over a month now, had seen these people twice a week and yet I felt like I was among strangers. No one said a word to me. These

people were so much more dedicated than me. I knew they could feel my nervousness. But it was hard to focus on my breathing and relax. I had thought I was dedicated. I sat almost three times a day at school. I had sat last night and early this morning, so that I'd have a "better vibe" for today. I still wasn't adequate enough in their presence. They were mirroring back to me, how much more I needed to practice. I was a new animal; a new scent they hadn't smelled before and they were adjusting to it.

The entire time, I had thought Master Ming was mad at me until he did something curious. Just before dinner, as we gathered around the fire pit, he told Matt to go up to the top of the mountain and chop some wood and bring it down for the fire. Matt ran to the side of the mountain that went up and began to climb the same boulder I had been on earlier, when the log had rolled down on the master. "Matt!" the master called. When Matt climbed back down, ran back to us, his eyes wide, cheeks red and slightly out of breath, Master Ming gestured to me.

"Take DeContenza's daughter with you."

"It's Serena," I said, when we got to the top, standing on the plateau of the mountain, a flat, lunar like surface. A whistle, like a toy plane spiraling down to earth, pierced the darkening sky. "Red tailed hawk," Matt said. He picked up the ax, with his left hand and with his other hand, set a log up on a large stump. "I know your name," he said. "Last time we spoke was when the property was bought." He lifted the ax up and with one shot, split the log in



two perfectly even sides. After a few minutes a pile as high as his shins lay next to him. "Do you want to try?"

It was embarrassing how heavy the ax felt. Matt had lifted it like it was a plastic whiffle ball bat. He set the log up and positioned my arms so that I was raising it from above my head. "Easy," he said, jumping away. Then crash went the ax, down on the log, the log that had only been dented.

"That one was wet," said Matt. It wasn't, I knew it. "Here, try this one."

He showed me again how my body needed to be positioned for the full impact. My right leg had to be forward a little more. My hips needed to be straight. I had to place my hands wide enough on the long handle of the ax to make a better impact when it landed. His hands felt warm on my shoulder and wrist. This time the log split in two, but slightly attached at the bottom.

"You got it now," Matt said.

When we got down to the fire, there were many looks our way. People were smiling mischievously. As Matt fed the fire with the logs we cut, Ruth jabbed him in the ribs and whispered into his ear. He looked embarrassed by what she had said. There was no more beer left. The laughing seemed unwarranted. People kept looking at the master as if to see what he'd finally say. But he didn't say a thing. Instead he looked at me steadily behind his glasses. The slightest hint of a smile lit his face.

That night I dreamt that I was on the shore of a raging river. On the other side was Matt. He was standing with his ax looking up stream as several logs came rolling down past us in the waves. I walked to the edge and tried to step

on one so that I could get closer to Matt. He put his hand up to me, as if in warning to stop and I cried out, "Why?" and woke myself up.

## PART 2

### PROLOGUE

1993

“Don’t go without saying good bye, “ I said to Derek’s wide back. He was in the bedroom, crouched down, throwing his scripts, books and boxing gear all in one large cardboard box. I wondered how he would fit it in the back of his small Honda Civic. I held back the question.

“Don’t worry,” he said, turning to look up at me. I was standing in the doorway to our bedroom, soon to be just mine. “Do me a favor. Don’t let them make you hang out after class.”

“Are you crazy?”

“And if he starts in on one of his long-ass monologues, just look like you’ve got to make the most humongous dump of your life and leave. How much more shit can he spew at you at this point?”

“Right. Absolutely,” I said. I blinked to get rid of the stinging in my eyes, before the tears came. I’d miss the way Derek talked about Ming. He had him nailed. I did too, but I couldn’t let myself feel the full range of anger at the way the master treated me. Anger was bad vibes. Laughing at him was another story. Derek was the only one I could do that with when it came to Ming and his “head honchos”. It lightened the load. Derek thought I was

tougher than I was. Now that he was leaving, the tough exterior I put on for class would break down. I couldn't admit to Derek that it was him that kept me sane up there.

"So, on Saturday I'll come into the city and help you unpack and set up the apartment."

"Sure," he said.

"And I'll see you in class on Monday, right?" I asked.

"Nope." He stood up. He had on his Salvation Army shorts. They were the kind that Matt used to wear. He had on a gray tee shirt with the face of Sid Vicious faded on the chest, a smirking ghost. It was stained and ripped like Matt's tee shirts. Derek was bulkier than Matt. But he was leaving me also. History was repeating itself. At least I knew where Derek was going. At least he wasn't pulling the disappearing act, like Matt.

"Why aren't you going to class?"

"I'm not going anymore," he said.

"You're quitting?"

"Why are you surprised? I've only been talking about it for the past two months," Derek said. "You're the only reason why I've stayed this long."

My throat tightened. "You said you weren't going to quit karate. You said you just weren't going to go to work practice or sesshins anymore."

"Correct. And after I told you that, you said it would be better if we lived separately. What's the point, if we aren't together anymore?"

“Who said we weren’t together anymore?” I asked. I hated the hopeless tone of my voice the instant I uttered it. He had a point. He had the more logical mind. What was that big fight about anyway? The city was just an hour away from here. I didn’t want to give him up and yet I knew this would happen as soon as I had told him we would do better to live separately. Why did I ask him to leave?

I didn’t want any more fights. I had enough battles going on. But the thought of losing him felt worse, like being left alone at the bottom of a well without a ladder. Matt was leaving me again.

Now he was telling me, “I told you how I feel about you. I feel like I met someone I’d like to spend the rest of my life with. But I can’t do long distant relationships. If you stay at Everspring, you might as well be living on Uranus.” He chuckled at his own joke. “There’s something wrong with you wanting to stay at that prison under the reign of that egomaniac.”

“I’m just there to have a place to practice. I ignore him.”

“Practicing? All he does is talk now. Boring. It’s boring. And when he’s not talking to the entire class, he’s berating you and gossiping about other people. What’s the point anymore? The last time I was up there to practice Karate my legs were falling asleep standing in one place.”

“I know. God.”

“There is no god. Leave that place, tonight and don’t go back. Move out of here. Come live with me in New York. We can practice together. There’s a park near the apartment.”

“I can’t, Derek. I get a lot out of practicing there. I’ve been there a lot longer than you.”

“I know, I know. Thirteen years. Yada, yada, yada. It’s time to get the fuck out of that lunatic asylum,” he said.

I gripped back my tears because I knew how much he hated when I cried and I also didn’t want to look vulnerable in class. Ming would derive great satisfaction, thinking he caused it.

Derek checked his watch.

“Well, if you’re that much of a chicken shit, and you still think you’re going to make it to class, good luck. You’ll have to sprint up the fucking mountain now,” he said. “You can do it,” he said looking over my body. “Hand me that masking tape over there.” He pointed to the roll at my feet.

“Shit!” I said. I threw him the roll of tape, grabbed my bag and cushion, and yelled from outside the door, “Wait for me, Derek.”

“Yeah, whatever,” came Derek’s distracted voice.

I made it to class a few minutes late. The master wasn’t in the Zendo yet and everyone was either doing Tai chi, or one of the Karate forms. The row of diehards was doing push hands. I figured I better get in that row, before the Master came in. Foretti said, “Change,” people bowed to one another and I stepped up to Tom, we bowed and proceeded with push hands. I wanted to tell Tom about Derek going back to New York. They had gotten as close as

you could get to being friends up here, after he coached Derek during the Golden Gloves last winter.

Tom was six foot seven, a few inches taller than Derek. Outside of class he was confident and talkative. In class he always looked bewildered, or maybe it was fear. I myself had mastered a neutral expression. When the master got angry, I'd breathe down and continue to stare a little in front of me, down on the swirling cement of the Zendo floor and count my breath until the room got silent. I heard every word, felt every ounce of hate, and after it was done, I walked back to the place I was in before he gave his spiel and tried to calm my shaking legs and forget what I had just heard.

The sound of the door to the master's room opening then slamming closed, made my legs wobbly. Tom pushed me against the cement hard, not meaning to hurt me, but it did. The pain in the back of my head made me tear up.

"You okay?" he asked. Bewilderment turned to guilt.

"Not your fault," I said, "I just spaced out there for a second."

The master entered the Zendo. I felt his eyes on me for an instant. I could feel it every time now. That frozen feeling, a radioactive laser beam glaring at me. I couldn't completely admit this to myself yet but I knew it, his ability to energize the room with warmth, bright, healing energy was gone. He knew I realized this about him. He exuded hate now. He knew he had lost something. He knew I knew other truths about him.

He came up to Tom and me and told Tom to step aside. He threw me against the wall a few times and then stopped.

“Hard as usual,” he said. He kept his hand on my back and patted me. It was as if he trying to show everyone that as much as Serena sucked, he was glad she was there practicing. Normally, he wouldn’t go near me for push hands because doing push hands with him was like free energizing according to everyone in that room. I hadn’t gotten energized in months. Why would I? Yet, I wanted so much to trust him, to let me be. Even though I took Karate and sparred with a lot of vindictive men and women, I never gravitated toward conflict willingly. I wasn’t a masochist. If he could just lay off disparaging me and let me come here and practice, everything would be okay.

Master Ming called Winnie over. I heard her discuss some class demonstration and how she was going to ask some of the members to be a part of it this weekend. Master Ming said, “Just make an announcement. Ask Serena.”

Winnie proceeded to tell everyone in the class that there was this demo class she was planning at her continuing education class at the JCC. It was for a Tai chi class for elderly people. She asked us to come and help her with the demo. First she asked Candy and of course right away Candy said, “Yes!” Then she looked at me and I thought to myself, I was going to help Derek unpack in his apartment that day. I should really consult him. At the same time I knew that this was an opportunity that could lead to that peaceful



practice I could have here. "I'm not sure. I'll have to check. I think I have plans," I told her.

Right away Master Ming chimed in. "Don't even ask her anymore. She always has plans. Opportunities come her way and she says, 'fuck you' to them." He looked in my direction, while I was doing push hands with Tom and said, "Your life is going down the tubes. You have the will to fail."

He walked from one end of the push hands line to the other. I could feel my breathing rise and noticed that Master Ming's breath was rapid, compared to his usual relaxed state. He was angry, livid, insulted. And yet he was still a "Master" of Zen standing in his imperial, nautilus shaped zendo.

The grey concrete room turned to ice. No one was looking at me, but it was as if they each were holding parts of me inside their heads and this process was making me feel colder and colder. My knees shook and I had to stop my teeth from chattering. I said to Tom, "You can look at me. It's not like I'm going to turn you to stone." Tom pretended not to hear me. I tried hard not to let Ming's words get deep inside. I focused on my breathing and tried hard to ignore him as he continued. I wasn't reacting enough. I wasn't angry or crying. I wasn't outraged as much as he wanted me to be.

Then he began to talk about my parents, how my whole family was rude. I could see out of the corner of my eyes, a few heads bobbing up and down, agreeing with what he said about my father (who was still a student of his) and how Dad never amounted to anything in his career because he didn't practice hard and he blew opportunities by being rude to the right people

like a few celebrities he had in his commercials. Remember how Bob Hope didn't like the way DeContenza had treated him? Why didn't George Burns ever do anything for DeConstenza after that commercial he did with him? And then he started in on my mother, who left ten years ago and who apparently made it hard for my father to practice. Following that it was my brother, who left five years ago and how Theo blew off his talent by moving to San Francisco where the energy was terrible.

It worked. We were dismissed at 6:30PM. I changed in the dressing room as quickly as I could. Next to me Bonnie was changing into her clothes. She looked in my eyes, sympathetically. She was the only one who ever did that besides Pamela. What good did it do her?

I wanted so much to scream and cry right there. But I only said, glancing up at her, under my breath, "He can put me down all he wants. But don't put my family down."

I ran down the mountain to the parking lot, dodging in and out of everyone else, who descended slowly, holding their cushions tight against their hearts. Their pace was like a public announcement of what a great attitude they had. They wanted to show how dedicated they were; they weren't in a hurry to get the hell out, like me and my bad attitude and my will to fail. Their steps followed other slow steps over the gravel of the long road down to the parking lot. Oh, how disappointed they were to have class be over so soon.

Horse vomit.

Once outside the gate, in my car, driving back to my cottage with the man I didn't want to lose leaving that night, I cried. I hated every pathetic sob, as I did it. I hated that I let Master Ming bring me to this wrecked state on the last night with Derek.

By the time I got back I knew what I had to do. I parked the car, yelled Derek's name outside on the stone walkway and when opened the screen door and he stood in the doorway; I wrapped my arms around his waist and put my head in his chest. "Stay," I said. "I'm taking your advice. I'm not going back there. I'm quitting. You were right.

"Of course I was right," he said, tapping his chin on the top of my head.

"I owe you my life. Thank god for you, Derek."

He let me cry in his shirt.

"I told you, Serena," he said. "There is no god."

## ONE

April 1981

Master Ming was doing Zazen, meditating on his black velvet cushion. We sat in a semi circle around him and waited for him to speak. I could feel the energy expanding within the room, inflating like a humongous balloon with all of us floating inside of it.

“Hey man! Spare some change?” A man outside yelled from the street. A muffled voice followed and then the loud voice came again, “Thank you, sir. God bless you.”

The door below us slammed shut, sending a shudder through our cushions. Moments later the dojo door opened.

With out lifting his eyes from the floor, the master yelled, “You’re late Serubie!”

Nylon sweat pants swished towards us.

“Hurry up!” Swifter swishing got closer.

Serubie was the thin dark haired man who had been coming forever to be energized, every Sunday. I remember him from when I was a kid with my brother visiting the dojo for the first time. He came on other days, as far as I could tell, because I saw him leaving the dojo whenever I came in for the Wednesday evening Tai Chi class. Dad and Stewart referred to Serubie as Spock, the character from Star Trek. He looked like the actor Leonard Nemo,

straight black hair and neatly trimmed side burns, neutral expression. Even his ears were slightly pointed. On Wednesdays he'd enter in his business suit, coming straight from his job at Paine Webber. He was their in house astrologer, calculating trends and swings in the market. This probably explained why he could afford energizing four times a week (\$1,7000.00 a month), an amount that only perplexed me until I found out the significance of the number seventeen. Seventeen was the day the Master was born, like exit 17 off the New England Thruway, the exit for the Connecticut class he taught on Thursdays. The year 1934 was the year he was born. Exit 34 off the Merit Parkway was the exit you got off when traveling to the Monastery from New York City.

"Right here!" The master pointed to the space in front of him, at which Serubie circled around us, bowed to the Master, bent his knees and unrolled his body to the floor, like a carpet. Master Ming took Serubie's stone and placed his hands on the man's chest and belly. "If you didn't stop to give that guy money, you might've made it here in time."

"Anyone can give me some spare change?" the voice outside said again.

"He's still asking for a hand out. You guys got to stop giving these bums your money! You think you're do-gooders, when you're killing them, encouraging their will to fail." He looked three feet ahead of him on the floor, seeming to focus all his energy on Serubie. After about fifteen seconds he lifted his eyes and leaned forward as if to survey for the first time, his gathering.

“I have to leave soon to go to Stamford hospital,” he said. “Stewart, Cora, DeContenza, you guys hold down the fort, teach the next two Tai-chi moves to the newbies. Cora and DeContenza you stay after and work with the lower belts and lock up the studio.” Up front and center the black belts he addressed nodded their heads. Cora bowed. I knew Dad was unhappy about the extra time he’d have to put in, Sunday his only day off. After Tai-chi, time was devoted to his garden.

Master Ming said, “I have to go up there and energize Edie. She’s in the hospital. She had an accident Thursday night.”

Someone gasped behind me. Edie was one of the first students of Master Ming’s. Unlike Serubie, she was at the property 3-4 times a week and went to every sesshin. Dad had told me once that more than Reuben and Ruth, Edie’s donation to Everspring was large. I remember her that spring day at the property, stirring the pot above the fire pit, her thick silver ring glinting in the midday sun. It was on her middle finger and if she had put her hand in a fist and slammed it into someone’s temple it would have given him or her brain damage. One of the few at mastering push-hands, she was probably the only person from the Connecticut group who smiled when you approached her.

Sitting there silently, you could tell everyone was thinking the same thing: What kind of accident? Was Edie going to be okay? Master Ming wouldn’t tell us yet. It was a lesson we needed to learn from. Everything was. So, he started to explain the process of energy transference. How we are all

recipients to the energy around us. Depending on our nature, some of us were more sensitive to it than others. Depending upon our practice, we could get more badly effected by bad energy than others. He reminded us of the process of his energizing. How he sucks the bad energy from our energy body and our own pure being emerges and he infuses it with his positive and enlightened energy.

He said, "That is why some of us right here can experience ecstatic feelings, orgasmic feelings during and after energizing sessions." He said that Edie experienced this many times. When her husband didn't believe her, it jeopardized her practice. He said that once Edie decided what was most important to her she divorced her husband. "They were married thirty years. Shows you how dedicated she is", he said.

But Edie had some faults, as we all had. "When you see me yell at her, this is because I care about her practice. I want her to grow," he said. "Last Thursday in the Westport class Rhysonov, an old student of mine from the New York school came to visit. He was thrown out about five years ago because he had terrible vibes, destroyed some of my best students. He begged me to let him stay back then."

The master mimed someone snorting cocaine. "He liked the white stuff too much and I told him only if he cleaned up his act, would I let him come back. Well, he doesn't snort that shit anymore. I let him come in and practice with the Westport class last week. He was doing push hands with some of you here. Rector, how was his vibe?"

“Bad, sir,” said Rector, shaking his head.

“Casey?” asked the master.

Casey, Rector’s girlfriend, a tall, heavy- set woman in her twenties, gagged and barely audible, said, “Horrible”.

“I don’t have to ask all of you who were there. But would you agree it was one of the worst vibes you’ve been around?” He looked at Foretti, sitting to his right. “Foretti?”

Foretti nodded and said, “Sir, I came home that night and the next day Hope was throwing up.”

Master Ming smirked. “Are you sure she’s not pregnant again?” he said, laughing. Some of the others laughed nervously along with him.

His face grew stern. “Vibes so bad, they make you puke. That’s why Rhysonov got kicked out.” He stopped. He looked down at Serubie. “Why so bad today?” Serubie lifted his head to speak. “Shut up. I don’t want to know,” Master Ming said. He looked out at us again. “Y’see? You’re looking at someone who gives a man another chance, who’s willing to heal you, help you grow,” he continued. “I was energizing Rhysonov over the phone for five months and let him come that night. Try it out.” He looked around the room. “But because Edie is in the hospital, because I don’t want anything like this happening to anymore of you, I’m not letting that shit bag back now.”

Master Ming’s eyes looked at the floor and he sat very still. The room grew bright and I could feel the people around me sitting up straighter. He was energizing the room again. Their thoughts of Rhysonov must have been



polluting it and he was getting rid of the bad energy. After a few moments he panned our faces. He stopped at Winnie, who sat closest to him, to his right, "You were at the hospital this morning. How is Edie?"

"No change, sir. She's still in a coma," Winnie said. Her lack of emotion was always striking. No nonsense, fully obedient, just the facts- Winnie with the Masters degree from Stanford University and the three beautiful kids in Westport, Connecticut. She was the one who located the property for the monastery.

I was sitting next to Carmen and Judith and I could feel their reactions. At the word 'coma', Judith had gasped, Carmen put her hand over her mouth. They were holding hands as the master spoke. I felt scared. What happened to Edie? Like an empty slide projector my brain frantically clicked and searched for an image that held the answer.

Master Ming yelled, "Don't react! You increase the bad vibe in the room." He looked down again, the room brightened and he lifted up his eyes.

He continued, "During push hands I said, 'Change!' I don't know how many times! But like some of you, Edie's problem is she doesn't listen! She daydreams! She did push hands with that dumb ass for two hours!"

His eyes hit the floor again and he sat very still. This time the room did not brighten. Clouds from outside darkened the room.

"Spare some change!" the man outside said again.

A few of the new people inside the class coughed and shifted on their cushions. They were feeling the pain in their legs most likely.

“Edie gets lazy in her practice. She’s lying unconscious in a hospital bed and if she’s lucky yours truly is going to have reverse whatever damage there is. You see why you should listen to me? Do you see how destructive some people’s vibes are?”

The white belt in the back raised her hand. “Sir, can someone with bad vibes put someone in a coma?”

Master Ming looked at the pretty woman sternly at first, his face softened and with a gentler tone, he told the story of how Edie had gone home that night from class and as she was turning into her driveway (she rented a house with Rector, Casey, Pamela and Matt), she wasn’t paying attention and didn’t see the car speeding towards her. It crashed into her driver’s side, totaling the car and leaving Edie unconscious with severe head and shoulder injuries.

“In answer to your question, Lisa, bad vibes can do bad things to you if your practice is weak. It was a bad combination. Rhysonov has got the worst kind of vibe and Edie has a lazy mind and now it’s a mind that’s been asleep for three days. Hopefully, I can wake her up. Do you understand, Lisa?”

“Um. Not really,” Lisa said.

I could feel everyone brace them self for Master Ming to rail into her. But instead he said, “I’m glad you are honest, Lisa. This means you have a good attitude. Ruth, explain this to Lisa.”

Ruth was sitting left of the master. She put her hands together and bowed to him and said loudly, “Rhysonov’s vibe was so bad and Edie didn’t

listen to Master Ming's warning about changing partners during push hands. She absorbed his bad vibe and by the time class was over, and she was driving home, she was so full of Rhysonov's vibe that she was disconnected with her body-mind, she wasn't aware of the car coming toward her drivers side."

Master Ming asked Lisa if she understood now.

"Yes. I think so. Thank you," Lisa's voice rang out.

The sermon ended. Master Ming, Winnie, Ruth and Reuben left. Serubie followed behind. Stewart taught Carmen, Judith and I another section of the Tai Chi form. Dad worked with the white belts on the flower form.

Toward the end of class, during the meditation sitting, the phone at the master's desk rang. Stewart, who sat in the master's place, answered it. "Yes sir, yes sir, I'll tell them, sir," he said. After hanging up the phone he rang the bell for us to get up. Dad led the Tai chi form. Stewart called Katherine over and spoke to her in low tones, near the men's dressing room. When the form was over, Stewart rang the bell and announced that the master had just called.

"After fifteen minutes of energizing Edie," he said, "She came out of the coma and is able to talk. He wants a few of you to come up and visit her. Car pool, he said." Most everyone smiled, separated, and walked in opposite directions to the changing rooms.

Stewart called Candy over. They spoke for a few seconds and she scampered towards the line to the women's dressing room. "Master Ming wants me to collect a donation for Edie," she said. After we changed, Katherine, a few others and myself gave her \$10.00 to \$20.00 each. I walked out of class and waited for my father on the street, who after I explained why I didn't have any more cash on me, lent me a ten.

I had just said good-bye to him, he was heading for his car and I was just about to head towards the subway, when Candy approached me and said the master wanted us to visit Edie.

"I don't have my dad's car today," I said.

"We're car pooling with Matt," she said, which sent a giddy terror through my system.

Suddenly Carmen and Judith were at our side, standing next to the fire hydrant, smiling mischievously like two best friends from fifth grade.

A Volkswagen bug, the color of faded jeans, pulled up to the curb. It pattered and spat, while Matt's tan and muscular arm lightly thumped up and down along the open window.

"There he is!" cried Carmen. It was the first time I heard her voice speak so audibly.

I looked at Matt's face and he looked at mine. His normally pale complexion changed to crimson.

Judith, looking radiant in her Calvin Klein jeans and her black silky hair, sauntered to the drivers side and said, "Hey, sexy. Can you give us a lift?"

The traffic light had changed and it was a rush to get in. Candy beat Carmen for shot-gun. She flung the passenger door wide into the stream of traffic and plopped heavily onto the seat. It made a loud squeak and crack before she slammed the door.

Matt winced. "Easy. Her carriage is mighty rusty."

He pulled the back of his seat forward, leaning it against his back. He reached over the emergency break and took a hammer and carpentry holster off the back seat and placed it gently onto the floor. Judith told me to sit in the middle on the hump because I was the thinnest. I could see Matt's face in the mirror and watched his muscular forearm shift gears the entire ride up, which ended up being an hour because of traffic. I felt the electric current between Carmen and Judith. They were smiling and on the verge of cracking up because of how dreamy it was to be outside the dojo and in such proximity to Matt the cutest guy in the class.

Like everything, when it came to Everspring, there were no rules to which you were magnetized by. Thirty-something women having a crush on an eighteen year old "man," what was the problem in that? Sure, Judith was still married. And Matt was not an ordinary teenager.

I was young and naïve to the tricks we played on ourselves and on others. At the time I was grateful to Everspring that I was being exposed to different kinds of people who made different choices. I came from a very comfortable world. There were other ways you could live your life. You could get a laborer job at a construction company out of high school instead of

going to college. You could practice Zen and Tai Chi and discover your internal spiritual self while still writing college papers on Colonialism or Plato's aesthetic theory of art. You could be married and still lust after somebody a decade younger than you. You could be a giggling middle-aged woman behaving like a silly little girl because you're two inches away from a cute teenager. And why not? Who was I to judge? "If you don't mind your own business and judge people, it means you don't want to grow or change," the master would say. "You're too scared to look closely at yourself. You create your reality."

The two women glanced over me, at each other and smiled, trying to hold it in. I thought of that Dylan song, "But I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now." Everspring had a way of stopping time or reversing it. Age didn't exist. I guess you could say that agelessness was what happened when you were in a state of non-thinking, or Nirvana.

We got to Stamford. I timed it on the Beetle's dashboard clock. The hospital was exactly seventeen minutes from exit 34.

We got out of the elevator and walked toward the intensive care unit and were ushered down a hallway by Reuben.

"Hurry, before the head nurse sees you guys," he said. "We're all not supposed to be in her room at once."

Eddie's head was bandaged and dark bruises surrounded her droopy eyes and mouth. The master sat in a chair, by her side, under the IV stand. It

was still attached to her arm. Master Ming had one hand on her chest, the other on the crown of her head, where her black and grey curly hair sprouted behind the bandages. Winnie silent, watched calmly from the other side of the hospital bed. Reuben began talking about the design for the monastery. He unrolled a small blue print of his design and placed it on the bed in front of Edie. It was a drawing of a building that was shaped like a nautilus. He put his finger on a tiny square. "That's your room, Edie", he and Ruth said together.

Edie's eyes blinked, she opened her mouth to speak, then as if changing her mind or forgetting what she was about to say, she snapped it shut again.

On the car ride up to the hospital, Matt had assured us that Edie was from tough New England stock like him, and she would bounce right back. Not only was she hearty, but also the master energized her for free and he would make sure she'd fully recover. When Carmen asked why she got energized for free, Matt told us that when Edie got divorced a few years ago, she had given all the money from the sale of her New Canaan estate to Master Ming. Master Ming promised Edie free energizing for the rest of her life and said she could live at the monastery once it was built.

"New Canaan is prime real estate," Matt said.

But with the weeks that followed, it was clear that it would take a long time for Edie to recover. A month later she came back to Sunday class and while I was doing push hands with her, our hands moving and following one

another, I could feel her day -dreaming and spacing out. Normally, Edie was great at push-hands. Besides demonstrating with her, the master would pair her up with each of the large black belts and she'd inevitably slam each one into the wall. Master Ming liked to show her off to the entire beginner Tai chi students and seasoned but "hard" black belts. She had that "soft power" that could feel your vulnerable, unyielding body and effortlessly counter-attack your forward motion. As you made an attempt to push her, she'd slam you against the wall with one solid thrust of her hands. I had learned a lot about push hands from her. And now, after the accident, there was a dramatic change in her ability. I was easily able to counter her attempts, destabilizing her by pushing her against the wall, before she could even move me. Following each shove, she'd come back into place, looking sheepishly at me, as if she'd been awakened from a nap and as if to say, "You got me!"

One Sunday class, I noticed that each time the master said, "Change!" no one seemed to pair up with Edie and I ended up always doing push hands with her. Were they avoiding her? I did push hands with her the entire twenty minutes. I found myself after a while day -dreaming while I faced her, our wrists and hands connected and swiveling our bodies to and fro. She no longer challenged me and I grew tired and felt lazy.

Following class we car -pooled up to the property for work practice. I drove a couple of new Tai chi members from New York. When we got there, Edie having arrived earlier, was sitting in a cleared cut area under some trees, by the pond. This was the place where we would later gather for dinner



and drink libation (beer). She sat under a lean to, covered by mosquito netting. Edie was not allowed to work until she was “back to normal.”

The work practice that day involved loading the logs off Rechter’s truck and stacking them in a wooded area. With Matt in the passenger side, Casey was driving the truck up the ruddy path, where a few of us stood. We waited for she and Matt to throw the logs off into a gully in front of us, and then we’d lift them up and take them to the clearing in the woods further away, where Ruth, Reuben, Foretti and Candy stacked them.

The master in his flip-flops stood on a nearby boulder and yelled at us, poking his finger a few times on his gold watch, saying what the hell is the matter with you lazy asses, we only had a half hour left and we hadn’t even gotten half the tree cut, let alone stacked. As the truck got closer I could barely hear his calls and directions. The old muffler rattled loudly, mini explosions emitted from the cracked tail pipe and the chain saws growled and whined further up the mountain.

I searched the gully for a log.

“Aim lower, Casey!” I heard a male voice yell, then scream, “Heads up, Serena!”

I looked up and saw Casey throwing a log right at me and suddenly I felt it crash into my head, my brain banged and flipped horizontally, the log reverberated in my head, like it had lodged itself there. I staggered and fell to my knees in the gully. I watched the air alternate between shadows and flashes. And then I was sitting on a rusty lawn chair, under the mosquito

netting, blinking out of the pain in my eyes onto the light glittering off the pond in front of me. Edie was sitting in a chair nearby, smiling again; sheepish, like a guilty beggar.

Behind me a low voice mumbled, "She was doing push hands with Edie in class today, for a long time." It sounded like Rechter, Casey's man.

"I blame this on Rhysonov," someone else said.

I lifted my hands to speak. But I didn't know if I was dreaming or not. Then it got dark.

"Did you hear me? Have someone look at this when you get home. You might need stitches." It was Master Ming talking to me. His hands were on top of my head. I could feel the energy warming the rip under my hair. Someone was wiping the side of my face and neck with a damp cloth. I shivered. I felt drunk. My body was limp.

"I don't think she can drive home," Pamela's voice said.

"Wait until I finish," the master said.

"Her pupils are dilated," said Pamela.

An upside down Master Ming's face appeared.

"Someone should call DeContenza," Pamela said.

"Who can drive DeContenza's car and bring her back home?" he asked.

"Put your hand down, Matt!" said Reuben.

"He's had his eyes on that BMW since DeConstenza started coming to Tai Chi class Sunday," Ruth said.

"That's not the only thing he's had his eyes on," said Reuben.

“Casey? What about you?” Winnie called out.

“I have a paper route early in the morning,” Casey called back.

“Don’t you think somebody should call DeContenza, now?” Pamela asked.

Then Master Ming’s voice said loud over my head, “You guys got the phone hooked up yet?”

“Yep,” Reuben said. He leaned in and asked me for my parents’ phone number and ran back to the parking lot and up the berm to the trailer.

Master Ming lifted his hands from my head and grabbed the towel Pamela was handing him. As he wiped his hands, Pamela bent down and peeked into my face. Did she actually feel worried? “Pamela!” he said, throwing the towel back at her. She caught it with two hands. It was covered in blood.

It was Matt who ended up driving me half way to New Jersey, at the exit off the Cross County Parkway, very close to where my college was. If it hadn’t been summer, he could have dropped me off at my dorm, parked the car in the lot and my dad could’ve come up later to get the car. But it was July and I was staying with my parents in New Jersey for the summer.

“Okay,” Matt said, as we turned out of the Monastery driveway, “They told me to talk to you to keep you from falling asleep. So no matter how boring my story is you got to promise me you won’t do it?”

“Do what?” I asked.

“Fall asleep! I mean, don’t fall asleep!”

Matt drove my father's car fast on the twisted Merit Parkway.

"Did you know that the guy who designed this road killed himself?"

"No, I didn't know that," I said. I winced. The pain at the top of my head seeped deeper into my face.

"Yeah. The first year it was opened, about fifteen people died in car crashes riding on this thing. I mean he designed it to feel like a windy country road. But it's a parkway. Y'know what I mean? His intention was good. But the execution made people die. No pun intended."

"Wow."

"Now if they were all driving this car, maybe some of them wouldn't have crashed. She handles great." He looked down at me. "Falling asleep? Shit. I better keep talking."

So he told me that he had been adopted when he was about six weeks old. He had lived most of his life in Norwalk, Connecticut. His father was a Lutheran pastor in a church about five minutes from where he had lived. His parents had adopted his older brother Bob when Bob was fourteen, and this brother had been a troubled foster kid in and out of juvenile prison, but now working in construction. He got Matt his first construction job. Matt also had an older step-sister named Liz, who worked as a car mechanic in Bridgeport. She taught Matt a lot about re-hauling engines and tuning up his Volkswagen. His brother (the biological son of his parents) was just ten months younger than Matt. Nate. "He just started college. The only kid with a brain," said Matt.

His mother became pregnant right after they adopted Matt. “My parents used to say I was such a good baby, I helped them make a miracle.”

We made it to the exit at the Cross County parkway and waited for my father to arrive. I watched Matt’s profile gazing out at the highway in front of us and felt more awake than sleepy. My mother and father pulled up behind us. “We made it and you didn’t fall asleep, despite my boring biography,” he said.

My father approached my side, reached in and tilted my head towards him. “Holy shit!” He got in the drivers seat and Matt sat in the back. “How the hell did that happen?”

“She got in the line of fire,” Matt said.

“What does that mean?”

“Someone was throwing a log from the truck and I got right under it.”

“Who the hell threw a log at your head?”

“I kept warning her to throw them lower,” Matt said.

“Who?”

No one answered.

“Who threw a log at my daughter’s head?”

“Casey,” Matt said.

“But it was really my fault for not looking....”

“You were looking,” Matt said under his breath.

“That freak is a klutz,” Dad said.

“It was my fault, Dad. Master Ming even said it was.”

“Casey *is* a klutz, sir,” Matt said. “Very clumsy. I know. I live with her.”

We dropped Matt off at the Yonkers train station. He came over to the passenger side and I thanked him. He patted my shoulder. “Feel better, kid,” he said. I watched him saunter toward the train platform in his muddy army pants and the tattered grey tee-shirt that even from this distance from the car, I could still smell the scent of sweat, dirt and pine cones, a smell that would someday become painfully hard to forget.

## TWO

July 1981

I had participated in one- day sesshins at the dojo on Saturdays. We'd make two sitting lines down the studio, from the men's dressing room to the wall of windows. From 9AM until 7PM, we'd sit on our cushions for one -hour intervals; take bathroom breaks and one lunch break. Bathroom breaks were done while getting off the walking Zazen line, between sittings. A lot of people attended the one-day sesshins, from both the Westport school and the New York studio. Not everyone could sit still the entire time, for most it was painful, for some it was transcendental. And by midday, the beginners and some those who had been with Master Ming for a few years, would breathe hard and practically whimper on their cushions.

By the time I did my third one -day sesshin I could breathe through the pain and get into a peaceful state in my sitting. I could sit without thinking too much and sometimes there would be moments where my thoughts disappeared followed by a happy feeling that would fill me up like a sweet warm liquid. This was the transcendence the Zen books talked about. Sometimes I'd experience the feeling that my body had an expandable layer, a retractable shell and my spirit was floating inside it, flowing to the rhythm of my breath.

These one-day sesshins would always finish with a final sitting at dusk. The lights were usually off and when we got up, unless it was in the summer,

the Tai chi students and the black belts would do the Tai chi form in the dark. That final activity, after sitting all day, felt blissful. My body was graceful, moving through warm soothing water. Most everyone had an aura over his or her shoulders and heads. I would look down at my arms that radiated a turquoise blue light and I'd paint the air with my hands.

Afterwards, I would sleep so deeply that when I woke up I'd forget where I was and what day it was. It was hard to put into words, that state of beginning, waking up, the moment before I realized where I was. It was as if, between sleep and being awake, I had discovered whatever I truly was, right before stepping back into who ever I was at the time, the player before putting on her costume, her character. This might have been what Master Ming meant by the spirit body or state of "selflessness."

What ever it was, it made me sit more. It made me feel like I had control to change myself, to metamorphosis into something better, clearer, stronger. I looked forward to those sesshins every couple of months. I envied the others who could attend the weekend sesshins at Pinebrook house every two months. I wasn't allowed to go yet because I hadn't attended the Japanese Zendo sesshin in the Catskills, the place where the Master Ming had practiced many times and gotten enlightened at. Everyone that attended the weekend sesshins at Pinebrook house had gone to Dai Bozatzu Zendo at least once.

As the monastery was being planned and designed by Reuben (he was an architect), the master told everyone they would have to start preparing for the weeklong sesshins he would hold there someday. Once the building



would be completed, without a doubt we would all want to be at that first sesshin, he said. "You don't want to be the one left out."

The prerequisite for a weeklong at Everspring and in order to be invited to that first sesshin was you had to participate in five weeklong sesshins at the Japanese monastery, Dai Bozatsu Zendo. Rechter had been a monk there for five years, before he left and followed Master Ming. That was where he had met Master Ming. Rivers had an enlightened experience there too. But as of two years ago, Rivers was no longer coming to class. The master said Rivers had wanted to stay in class after getting enlightened, even though Master Ming encouraged him to form his own school. That was the tradition of masters to their enlightened students.

My father finally went to Dai Bozatsu Zendo that September. Eight other members went for the week with him. Matt had gone, Foretti, Judith, Candy, Winnie, Ruth and others. The studio in New York was empty of the die-hards, the dedicated, and the soft. When dad came back he told me, "It was hard work. Painful. But if you think Master Ming has got something, you should see Yoni Roshi."

My dad told me about how it went in his first Dokason, the private meeting with the Roshi. It was the second night, during the last evening sitting. He had been waiting a long time in the Dharma hall, waiting for the woman who went before him to come back after her meeting. It seemed as though she had been there for at least an hour. He was sitting in half lotus, on the verge of physical agony, when the bell finally rang and he staggered up,

limped down the corridor, past the woman and entered the master's room. He bowed to Yoni Roshi, who sat on his cushion, facing the doorway where my father stood. He walked closer to the Roshi who sat in his cream colored robe. My father bowed again and sat down on his knees before the master.

My father became suddenly dumbstruck by the sight he saw. He stared at the violet light arching around the Roshi. "I must have looked shocked. Because he asked me, 'What? Is it this?' Then he picked up a stick, and traced a circle around himself, exactly where the purple light was," Dad said. "I'm telling you he's the real thing."

About a month later, Dad went to a weekend sesshin at Everspring. They held weekend sesshins at Pinebrook house, a house that Matt, Rechter, Edie, Casey and Pamela rented. It was five minutes from the property and sometimes on rainy Saturdays we'd leave work practice and take shelter there.

These sesshins were two nights and two days.

When Dad came home he said that in one of Master Ming's sermons he announced to everyone that, "Even though she's the newest member, Serena is the most sensitive out of all of you."

I remember when he told dad this exact thing about me less than a year before and said I should sit in the mountains. Being sensitive had a negative connotation back then. But this time, the way Dad relayed it, the announcement to all his seasoned students, Master Ming was paying me a big compliment. Being the most "sensitive" was a revered ability that meant I

was already spiritually evolved. He was telling them that with all their practice they still didn't have what I had, and I had just started. It meant pure and unadulterated. It meant close as you could get to the Bodhisattva mind that everyone was working to attain. But I wasn't that stupid to think that I "had it". Sensitive meant of course that I needed to practice to develop what I could do with my sensitivity, not let anyone pollute my natural ability and not let anyone use it up. *"Don't let anyone do that unless they can make you feel this way."*

Again, I was reminded of the weight of my "gift".

The day came when it was my last energizing session, at least until I could dig up the funds for a new session. The loan money had run out. I told Master Ming that I was going to the weekend sesshin at the upstate Japanese Zendo. I wanted him to know that I had a good attitude despite not having the money to continue his energizing sessions. He was unimpressed. "About time," he said. He told me that three others were going and maybe I could car pool. These others were Carmen, Larry DePaulo and his wife Andrea.

Both Larry and his wife got energized a few times a week. He was a green belt and she had joined Tai chi after he joined. They had been going to work practice and weren't the most inspiring of people. During work practice it was pretty obvious that his wife hadn't done a day of outdoor work in her life. But it wasn't that so much as how annoyed she gets by the end of it. She didn't like getting dirty and looked like she was going to kill Larry when they got home. And Larry took every opportunity he could, while the master

wasn't around to lean on his hoe or shovel and start up a conversation with whoever was working next to him. Despite all the energizing sesshins (he had inherited some money) their attitude in class and work practice was shabby.

Carmen met me on a Friday at around 4:30 PM in front of the Dojo. It took us five hours to get to Mt. Tremper the turn off for the Japanese monastery. After driving down a smooth country road, we turned off onto a narrow dirt road, until we reached a bamboo gate with a wooden plaque hanging from it. There were Japanese characters and an arrow pointing left, burned into the wood. Carmen got out and opened the gate and we continued down a grey gravelly road, along side a pond lined with white water lilies. The sound of peepers and frogs and the smell of pond muck and skunk cabbage filled the open window of the passenger side. It was dusk and a pale orange light was disappearing behind the black water.

After driving over a small wooden bridge we saw the dark sprawling Monastery building, flat and rectangular, with a slight pitch in the roof of dark brown tiles. The windows that faced the pond looked dark inside. The grey light from the water flickered on their surface. A cliff grew up along the back wall and extended towards us and as it tapered down, was the parking lot. When we got to small door on the lower ground level of the building, we peered inside the small window. The door opened and a tall bald man in a brown robe stood there. He was one of the monks. The darkening light of

dusk made his face hard to decipher. Before we entered, he placed a clip-board under his arm, lifted his hands in prayer, bowed and instructed us to remove our shoes and put them on the shelf in the closet straight ahead. Immediately we were hit with the heavy air of incense combined with the mold that followed us out of the closet.

The whole time we were with him, which wasn't more than ten minutes, he never made eye contact with either of us. He said in a low voice, "Follow." And we followed him up the steps, into a dark corridor, which had an even thicker prevalence of incense. The second we took a step or two further in, my stomach knotted up. There was something lurking behind the smell. I had breathed in Master Ming's incense at the day-long sesshins and always found the smell pleasant and uplifting.

We made our way down another dark corridor. If it had not been for that one night light at the bottom edge of the wall, I would not have been able to see where I was going, behind the black shadow with the shiny scalp. He stopped, turned and after he asked us, we gave him our names. He then marked something on his clip-board and told us where our rooms were. Mine was at the top end of the corridor, just one room next to the large room we did morning service in the next day, the Dharma hall it was called. The incense we had been breathing in was most potent by my room. Carmen's room was in the center of the corridor. She stayed next to me as I began to open my door. She looked into my eyes, with a frightened expression and

opened her mouth and just before she managed to tell me something, the monk said, "Refrain from talking or eye contact from here on in."

I nodded to her, closed the door behind me, and noticed that there was no lock and no light in the room. I rolled out my sleeping bag on the ground and looked out the window. Except for a small light under eave of the window frame, it was black outside. No stars, because of the clouds. The air from the windowpane was cold and damp. I switched on my flashlight and reached for the tooth- brush from my bag. I exited my room to find the bathroom.

As I walked down the hallway, a silhouette of a large figure came closer and closer. He was wider than the other monk, blocking out most of the low light from the hallway. And just as he got about two feet from me, I realized it was Larry. Relieved and embarrassed that I had felt scared of him, I smiled. He scowled and looked down at the floor, squeezing his back against the wall and moved around me. He pushed open the door to the men's room.

I pushed the door to the ladies bathroom and brushed my teeth. I was half waiting for Carmen to come in. I watched my face in the mirror and felt so cold. The bathroom smelled of disinfectant, a tinge of urine hiding somewhere, the work of a half -assed cleaning job. I must have missed her.

As I walked back to my room, I saw a few large figures passing back and forth in the Dharma room at the end of the corridor. I got closer and saw a lit candle on an altar, under a golden Buddha statue. Light tinny bell sounds rang what seemed like in random patterns. I heard a low humming sound

and as I got closer the humming turned to more of a guttural, moaning animal sound.

I was two feet from the doorway and realized that they it was male voices, speaking rapidly in monotone. Standing at my door I watched several bald men, monks in dark brown robes, chanting and gliding around the room, circling around the perimeter, like the way we walked around the dojo after sittings, except these guys were fast. A low bell sounded, bells like jingle bells, followed. The men stopped. One came out into the hallway and shooed me away. I felt jolted by his touch. It vibrated on my arm and I when I lay down in my sleeping bag it was still there, like an animal burrowing into me. Finally, the sounds outside my door seemed to end for the time being and I fell into a fitful sleep.

It was hard to say when it was and what it was that made me terrified of this place. I woke up from a looming gong at 4:00 in the morning. It was the gong signaling morning service. We had fifteen minutes to get ready and be in the Zendo. My room filled with pre-dawn light, turning from black to dark blue as the birds outside chattered loudly. I grabbed a robe hanging from a hook on the door. I left my room and saw the women scrambling to the bathroom. All of them had on the same drab brown robe.

Carmen tapped me on the shoulder and I followed her into the Zendo. I found our names on the wall in the places we were to be meditating in. She would not be sitting next to me. We brought our cushions and placed them down at our allotted spots, then got back into the human stream, following

the others in morning chant. I didn't know the words, so I let my voice find the rhythm and uhhh,ahhed my way with the other voices who recited the Japanese words. We followed one behind the other in a very narrow corridor surrounding the perimeter of the zendo. Around and around we went, faster and faster as the chanting sped up. I hadn't gotten much sleep because I had been cold and kept waking up from the monks chanting outside my room. Or was I just dreaming that they were still out there?

A bell sounded and the line slowed down to a slow pace and we each made it into the zendo and sat at our seats, facing out at the center, into the wide gulf that divided the two long lines. Another set of bells and I followed along carefully. Depending upon which Jisha started down the line first, the Jisha holding the pot of green tea or the Jisha holding the pot of coffee, you'd reach down, grab your cup and lift it up in front of you. I watched how others had handled this task and did as they did, raising my palm up, when I wanted the Jisha to stop pouring, holding the cup in front of my chest until everyone had been served and the clappers had been clapped twice. We'd bow slightly with our cups in front of us and when the last clapper sounded we would drink our coffee or tea. The rituals throughout the day, kept me from going crazy. I had to be grateful for that.

The monks here were pale and droopy-eyed. I'd catch them staring at me during chanting, coffee and tea service, morning service and evening Dokason. One guy was really out of it. He had terrible posture, he sat hunched



over and sleepy, bobbing his head as we sat and waited for the Roshi to enter the Zendo. He was the only one I wasn't scared of.

Oddly, the Roshi did not participate in morning coffee and tea service. He entered after it we had finished drinking, put our cup back down on our napkin and waited for the bell signaling the diamond sutra chant to begin. I did not look up when Yoni Roshi entered. It was forbidden to do so. I could hear him enter. I shot a quick peak out of my right eyeball. Just a flash told me that his robe was layered. A pearl colored satin the final outer layer, lifting to his chin, above his shoulders, concealing his neck. I could see the shape of his tiny well-formed feet under his white socks that were inside bamboo-heeled flip-flops. He stopped at the end of the entrance and I heard the rustle of his fabric when he bowed. Then as he made his way down the center aisle between our lines, his flip-flops made a slow, dramatic and steady, click, click, and click against the polished wooden floor. After he finished settling on his cushion, a clapper outside the dojo made a clatter of hollow sound, wood against wood, starting loud and fast and petering to slow and dull. It was a pattern that reminded me of a wood-pecker or the echoes on top of a mountain, echoes of wood hitting wood, hitting wood. The sound made me feel a dread I remember feeling about a year ago in my dorm room, after hearing the chairs above me sliding against the floor. This was before my mother came and told me what would save me was Tai chi, Zen meditation.

There was a woman who sat in a chair next to me. My father had told me about the chair-sitters. There were two at the sesshin he had gone to there. He had been disgusted in the guy next to him who moved throughout the week during every sitting. "What do you want, a couch?" my father had wanted to yell.

My neighbor distracted me like Dad's had done to him. She kept sighing and moving her foot. The man to my right nodded off the whole day. It didn't help when the monk came around with the Keisaku stick. Twice the man put his hands together to signal the monk to strike him with the stick and the monk only lightly tapped his shoulders. When Master Ming struck the die-hards and seasoned practitioners of Evergreen, with the Keisaku sticks Rechter made for him, he'd slam into their backs hard.

Morning service was even more unbearable, because even though I kept my eyes downcast, I still had the audible access of the other seemingly lost souls that were there. When the chants got louder and louder, some people sounded like they were screaming, wailing. It was the opposite sound of determination or joy.

The monk that sat across from me, and tapped the drum in his lap, looked like he was on heroin. His eyes rolled back into his head and with his free hand, he picked his nose while his other hand continued to pat the drum. I tried to think it was funny. But by the second day, it made me ill.

The sangha, the people who looked like they had come there before, seemed to me to be "faking it." Once out of the Zendo and off their cushions,

their walks down the hall and during work practice, they had the appearance that they were experiencing something profound in their practice. This was especially true of the women and female monks. After they emerged from the Dokasan room, where they met Yoni Roshi for private consultation, they put on a blissful face and walked in slow motion back to the zendo. It was all a great show.

Contrast to the image of bliss, the atmosphere in the Zendo was thick with anguish and despair. If this had been a cartoon, there wouldn't be enough space for all the speech bubbles above the heads floating over the writhing bodies. People couldn't bear their thoughts. I felt my own speech bubbles crushing me. I went over in my head, how the women in my poetry class looked at me like I was weird, how my sister's face looked disappointed when I spoke to my father and mother about Tai chi class. And how in my last conversation with my brother after his first semester at San Francisco Art Institute, he was telling me that he was coming home next semester because he was tired of the Moonies trying to recruit him.

I was among the Moonies, I thought. I'm one of them. Though I forced myself to keep awake and not cough and shift constantly like them. We were all in pain. I felt it too. Mental and physical anguish. By day two, as I did work practice along side of two spaced out women, we worked slowly, lost inside our thinking mind. This was proof we were not in our mindful nature while meditating on our cushion and not mindful while performing our tasks.

The memory of all I had experienced in class, during the day-long sesshins and in energizing sessions with Master Ming helped me struggle to change this. I tried to look for Carmen to see how she was doing, but her face didn't tell me. Larry and Andrea avoided me. They looked stern and serious. Perhaps they had figured out a way to maintain their practice from Everspring. I sure blew everything I had gained there and this thought tortured me.

For whatever reason these people seemed to believe that what ever they were doing in their practice must have been close to achieving Nirvana. This wasn't Nirvana. This was hell.

So what the hell was I doing there? I kept thinking. My last night there was the last night that we could go to Dokason. I hadn't gone to the other time. At Dokason you could bring your questions and problems or experiences you were having to the Roshi. It was the second day. The day you could receive his guidance to go further in your practice. But if all these people had such bad practice, how could Yoni Roshi guide me? I dreaded Dokason.

Evening came and I didn't want to go. Master Ming had told all of us that Dokasan was mandatory. If we didn't go, we' be wasting our time "up there." I also knew if I didn't go I would surely at best; get the silent treatment from him and his top students for weeks.

After coffee and tea service, I went to the Dharma hall with the others, sat in a line, near the windows along the wall and waited for the bell to ring

from the end of the corridor, the bell from the Dokason room where the Roshi rang it. This was to signify his meeting with the person before me was over and it was my turn to rise and walk down for turn meeting with him. As I waited, I was terrified, praying that the girl who had gone ahead of me would stay in there as long as she could. She had already been there for twenty-five minutes. Dokason was never supposed to be more than ten.

There were so many people waiting after me. I kept thinking, I can't even feel my breathing body. He'll know. He'll know I'm not in a mindful place in my practice. Since he's a great master, Master Ming's master, he could tell this and who knows what he would say or do about it. Would he tell Master Ming? Master Ming would be furious at me. I had lost everything. Why did he send us here? I wanted to trust Master Ming's guidance and believe I had come to this place for a good reason.

The bell shattered the air. The monk whispered, "Get up!" I rose and walked down the dark hall with the greenish night -light glowing at my feet.

After bowing to the Roshi, at the doorway, and then after bowing at the space in front of him, I sat in half lotus; he asked me, "How is it going?"

I was shaking inside my robe. I managed to get out that I had to work harder in my practice, that I was in my thinking mind.

"Thhh inking mind? What is this thhh inking mind?" he asked.

"Uhh. Umm." I didn't expect him to ask me a question.

"Eee xactly," he said. Then he sat very still. I didn't feel the room expand or change or light up. I didn't see that violet aura that Dad told me about.

“So.” I looked at his face. It took effort for him to lift his thick eyelids up. He looked tired.

“Just. Do. Zaaa Zzen.” He brought his hands together, bowed, picked up the bell and shook it.

That’s it? I thought. I got up, bowed and made it to the door and bowed again. I couldn’t even remember how I got back to my place in the Zendo. As I sat, it felt as though I had been spared something.

That night in my room, in my sleeping bag, I looked up at the ceiling and said, “Help.”

I dreamt that I was at the ballet barre. While I practiced, a woman was speaking to me. She looked like my mother, taller, slim and she had shoulder length hair. But the way this woman spoke she was clearly not my mother. When I woke up, I turned my flash light on and wrote in my journal what she had said: “Thoughts and fears will fall and drift past like leaves on a stream. They ride on the surface like your reflection. Don’t catch them on the mud and rocks. Time and practice will show the right way, opening up to clear water.”

At the lunch, during the breaks and after work practice was over (I was in charge of cleaning the bathrooms), I went back to my room and practiced my ballet barre exercises. Soon I felt back inside my body, able to focus on my breathing when we sat to do Zazen. I was still thinking but I was not following through with each one. I held onto the bird song outside and the current of wind moving the leaves outside. The bough of the maple tipped

into my vision and I watched the way it made a shadow on the wall and floor whenever the wind came.

I let the coughs and shifting and restlessness in the room around me drift by. I didn't mind it. And a glow inside grew, a kind of happy, grateful feeling and as we walked the corridors before the evening sitting, the auras appeared around a few of the people. In the morning, before morning chants, the air filled with tiny lights bouncing off the walls, little sparks appearing and disappearing, auras and shininess everywhere. I was myself again, inside my body, but it was like my spirit was shining out of me and I was connecting to something above the anguish and awfulness I had felt earlier at this place, within these people. I had risen out of it and felt new and clean. I remembered why I had started practicing in the first place. I figured out a way to transcend myself, and my experience.

We drove back to the city. Most of the time, I listened to Carmen talk. I had never seen her so talkative. She didn't talk about the Roshi or the Japanese Zendo. Only that everyone's vibe was terrible and the Roshi looked sick, like he was dying. After that she told me that she was a graphic designer, designed the Lord and Taylor logo and that Judith was a journalist and was going to work on a television show.

"What's her husband like?" I asked.

"The actor? He's also an acting teacher. I never met him. And I probably never will. They're getting a divorce." The way she relayed the news made me think Judith had wanted it.

We entered the dojo vestibule. As soon as I walked in I saw Larry and his angry wife sitting on the staircase above me. Instantly I felt a harsh pain in my chest and it wouldn't leave the entire time I sat there in front of them, Carmen a few steps below me. Class was still going on. They were sparring. We could hear the yells and felt the floor vibrate on the walls next to the steps we sat on.

Soon the karate students exited the orange door on the landing. We stood up, moved aside and let them pass. My dad wasn't among them. After about five people left, we entered the room one at a time, bowing at the Perfection sign and sitting against the wall by the bench and mirror. The master was sitting at his desk with his back to us. He turned around and called out, "DePaulo!"

DePaulo leaped up.

"Bring the wife," the master said.

I still felt the pain in my chest. I had felt it as soon as I saw the couple and I wondered if one of them had been injured. It was burning inside and tight and constricted my breathing. They spoke for about five minutes. They looked upset. The master just listened. He didn't say a word to them, just motioned them to stare at him and lay down on the floor side by side. He energized them. The pain in my chest started to lesson.

They left the studio, almost in a huff. Something had happened up there to them. The master called out my name. I walked to him, bowed and sat down in half lotus.



“Well?”

“It was intense. It was hard at first. But it was good,” I said.

The master just stared. He didn’t believe me.

Finally, he asked, “How was Dokason? How was the Roshi?”

“I saw him once. He told me to ‘just do Zazen.’”

“Well, did you do as he said?”

“Yes. I think I did.”

Still the master looked annoyed. As if I had walked in with terrible vibe.

Then I realized that he must have felt my chest pain.

“Did something happen to DePaulo or his wife? Is everything okay?” I asked him.

“Nothing happened. Why do you say that?”

“I just felt this harsh pain when I opened the door to the dojo and saw them sitting there.”

“You didn’t feel the pain before that?”

“No. Not until I saw them. Is everything alright?”

“I just told you everything is fine,” he asked. His eyes twinkled.

“Okay, so nobody is hurt. It was just their vibes that I felt.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling slightly. “I would kiss you right now. But there are people still in the room.” He laughed and shook his head. “Very good, kiddo. Very good.”

