

UNSCREWED!

The Education of Annie



C. DESCRY

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...the Education of Annie

by

C. Descry

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**YOU'LL LOVE ANNIE—YOU CAN'T PRETEND YOU'RE
NOT LIKE HER**

A mother's point of view, first of it's kind...

***EXPLORES THE TRAUMATIC INTERFACE
BETWEEN PARENTS AND SCHOOLS***

**An amazing insight into parental choice and
the Charter School movement**

Norman Eck, Ph.D. NABSD

A WOMAN'S DICHOTOMY BETWEEN MIND AND BODY

**A SUCCESS STORY THAT WILL GIVE YOU INSIGHTS
AS YOU WRITE YOUR OWN**

**A NARRATIVE WELL TOLD. A WOMAN OF OUR
TIMES**

Screwed!

The process that twists one to succor Society

...anon. 10,000 B.C.E

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This is a work of fiction. Names and descriptions of humans and events are fictitious conglomerations created by the author. No connection to any baby-boomers living or dead is intended or implied except for Annie Martin-Bemer, who came to life in this novel and now lives. References to public and private agencies and to orders and assemblies of people for government, religious, educational or other means are purely fictitious realities.

Descry, C.

Unscrewed! The Education of Annie

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New Woman

Caught alone
in between
unknown territory
bridges burned
no one...
Me inside

First of my kind
and the last
Dropping anchor
my life
Holding the bottom
drifting
Going nowhere

Body and mind
NO
mind body!
I am one
in charge
for what I want
I need

AM-B

FOREWORD

It's very special, our meeting like this. You selected this book—probably because a friend recommended it. Up until this moment we have never met, and of course you know nothing about me. I may never meet you or know your mind, but soon we'll be linked by common experiences and vital issues that affect our lives.

As my confidant, I'll speak as if I've always shared my innermost secrets with you. I'll be candid; share honestly what I learned.

Annie Martin-Berner

Chapter 1

THE NURSE, her uniform—cotton, wrinkled, faded blue-green—hanging loosely on her lank body, padded across the hospital room, shoe soles flapping against the cold vinyl as she heel-toed, announcing herself. Mother saw her crossing, knew why she headed to the window. I heard her weak, frustrated protest. The nurse heard it, but went on, seized the cords and pulled until the blinds let only thin cracks of afternoon sunshine into the room.

All Mom had left was warm sunlight, and now that was gone. She gave up, prepared to die, ignoring me because her business with me was finished. They brought her here to die. She came willingly, knowing they would call me, and I would come. I arrived just before noon, in time for her to vent years of pent-up anger. That done, she was alone, no daughter, no sunlight. Her breathing slowed, became raspy. The nurse gave me a contemptuous look, and left the room, walking, toe-heel; quietly.

I watched her die. Maybe she went fast and the rest was just her autonomic system shutting down. I stayed at her side, talking quietly until I was sure she was gone. I'd heard the last thing to go is hearing. I had so much to tell her. I had to explain she was wrong. It didn't matter to her. It mattered to me.

If I had been—If I was—as horrible a daughter as she believed—mean, ill spirited, hateful, selfish.... Her charges hooked me, but I couldn't let them damage me. I may have done a lot wrong, I'm sure of that, but I had to, to save myself. Does that make sense? Can I justify what I did to get separate from her, to break the chain of misinformation and fear she passed on to me? Could I have done it differently? Was what I did hateful and evil? You'll have to judge.

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What I did, I did without malice. I did it to become a woman of my time. I had to ignore her messages, her advice and counsel. I sided with Dad. I had to, his values didn't conflict with mine. I couldn't let her parent me any longer. I loved her, I told her often, but she wouldn't accept words over deeds. She died hating me. That's how confused and screwed-up she was.

I'm haunted by the thought I might grow to detest Katie, my own daughter, as Mom loathed me. I'm angry with Katie. I can't forgive what she did. She went against all I taught her. She discounts everything I say. Still, I won't hate her.... Katie, if you ever read this you'll know who I really am. So will you, my confidant. We're so much alike.

I grew up believing others were okay, I wasn't. I was flawed. Those closest to me had inaccurate, harmful information. Misinformation screwed me down tight. I was a two-dimensional creature leading a shallow and meaningless life. A scared, lonely person facing perplexing issues. I needed a mentor, someone who had fought through life's battles and could give straight information. I had no one to turn to. I'm talking about over forty years of searching.

I'm forty-eight now. I've a hard time dealing with the fact I'm a middle-aged baby-boomer. I'm a grandmother, preparing myself for the next forty years. I have to do a lot of things over, but I've tried hard to learn the essentials of *Me*.

Mother's rejection was her problem, not mine. I have to accept that. Sometimes it's impossible to change another person. It wasn't my job, my responsibility. She had her life and things she had to overcome. I believe each of us is here to work on problems unsolved in past lives. I don't think she solved hers. Just because she's my mother, doesn't mean she was right about me. She did what she

did. It hurt, but I don't *own* her feelings or perceptions. You'll see why I know that.

What I want most to share with you is the part of my life that should now be coming to an end. The part I once believed my whole purpose, my reason for being. I imagined parenthood before I married. I imagined life revolved around being a parent. Then, married, the climaxing pulsation of my cervix pulled sperm deep inside me where one penetrated my egg and started another life. Pregnant at twenty-six! I began a journey so complex and filled with angst and joy, pain and separation, it did become my reason for being for over a quarter of a century.

Before motherhood, I imagined the type of parent I'd be. As a pre-pubescent and then pubescent girl, I had visions of sweetness in pink or blue, warm cuddly fulfillment and grace. Perhaps my fantasy was nature's way of urging me into parenthood. I'd been sheltered from reality—totally unprepared when I conceived. Well, it wasn't just that. I wasn't prepared for marriage either, no way!

My skills for working through the human dynamics of male-female bonding barely existed. The only model I had was my one-sided relationship with my father. I was unprepared for the reality—the physical and mental demands made by others. I listened to women talking about their men and thought it would be great to be needed and so involved. I never imagined my body as a vessel used to nurture others, numbed to its own desires; empty and lacking desire.

Such feelings are states of mind. The process of growing is to learn how to cultivate emotions and set the body in motion. Perhaps, if you've learned it as well, you understand. Back in those days I didn't understand. Suddenly, my private body with its most intimate parts

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belonged to others. My body, not my mind. I separated into two parts.

The ability to hide in my mind saved me embarrassment and torment as I lay on my back, face shielded from their acts by a green sheet. They spread my legs and hooked my feet into stirrups, exposing intimate, delicate, secret parts to everyone in the room. It wasn't decent or acceptable. The man inserted metal instruments into me and probed me with his fingers as if I were a cow. I found a place in my head to hide from the offensiveness of it.

What had been my body became a factory. Beauty and symmetry of breast and belly which had once given me a comfort of worth, were now expanding and stretching as my body became an incubator with engorged pugs designed to issue provender.

I was alone. Oh, I know what you're thinking. I had a husband. *We* had become parents. Well, Danny thought in terms of *we*. He thought *we* were going through this thing together; love would join us and carry us through. But no! That's not the way it happened. It wasn't about him. It was the total invasion of my body, the use of me. Sure, I know that's the way it is. The woman carries the child. But, scared and alone, I suffered an invasion of my being. Joy? Shared experience? It wasn't there.

We did have love. "Love," I say. What we had is not anything like we developed later—the reasons we chose to be together to share our few years on earth. I needed compliance and economic support, little else.

What did he need? I didn't know. I feared his needs and felt obligated to provide what I assumed he wanted. I thought I understood his desire for my body, his excitement at seeing me naked, his curiosity and his hormonally driven body and mind. He was a normal young male, nothing wrong with that. Nothing unexpected or weird. I believed nature forced his path, certain that so driven he would

reproduce. My effect on him? An erection and the driving force to ejaculate. To him, that was love—or so I concluded with limited insight.

It turned out I was only partly right about Danny. Although empathic at that age, my ability to identify with, and understand another person's situation, feelings, and motives were limited. In time, thank God, I went beyond myself and got to know him.

In those years Dan loved my sex and, yes, he loved a little of me. He couldn't love more because I was yet unformed. I didn't know who I was either. It's remarkable we found reasons to stay together.

We had a short period when we played at marriage and enjoyed being a couple. We ate out, took short trips and met with friends. I became pregnant and everything changed.

If I were a man and the young thing I was attracted to changed in so many ways, I'd start running and not stop until I got out of the relationship. I wanted to run too, but my body was full of something I couldn't run from.

And so my pregnancy, which others described as, "The most beautiful experience in life," wasn't beautiful at all. It assaulted us on all fronts. We suffered through it. Somehow our marriage survived. The night my factory forced the baby out, my indignity and suffering eased in wet gore. I lay there and watched them hand the baby to Danny. I didn't feel relief, although everyone talked as if I should. I felt pinned-down, trapped, never to be myself again. And I was right. That's the way it was for a long time.

I watched Danny's face as he handed the baby to me. He felt it too. Forever changed, obligated. The end of youth and... sure, I experienced a glimmer of joy. The kid was healthy, had all his fingers and toes. As he cried, I responded instinctively and placed him on my belly. I

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touched his cheek and he took the nipple of my distended breast.

Something happened. Something constricted within me. My mind hadn't bonded, my body knew. I relaxed for the first time in at least six months. The terrible angst ended, in part, anyway. I looked at my husband and saw relief on his face. We were on a new path together, this strange boy I didn't really know—was supposed to be in love with—and the two parts of me.

Before the birth, I decided to stay home with the baby until my company leave was up. Then, I planned to escape from home, go to the office and reenter the adult work environment of banter, copy machines, computers, staff meetings and exciting projects. At the office, I could be *Me!* Trapped at home, I believed I'd have no identity other than as a milk manufactory, diaper changer, cook and house cleaner.

As a wife, I'd also have to take care of Dan. I was expected to do things for him—wait on him, clean up after him—and pretend to be interested in *him*. I wasn't his maid, and let him know in no uncertain terms that he was responsible for his own maintenance. I wanted to touch him and to be touched by him at times, but nothing in my head connected with my body. Sex was a duty I performed, an act for the actor in me. If I did what I felt like doing, nothing physical, he became remote and angry.

When we left the hospital, the last thing the doctor said rattled around in my mind. "Kids, you and Dan should avoid having intercourse for at least three weeks."

His words completely baffled me. My body, damaged beyond imagination, was sore and, intercourse? I had no feelings even suggesting sex. How could Dan look at me and want to touch me? Then I understood what the Doctor said. His message was for Dan. He meant, keep off her,

man! She'll be disturbed beyond measure if you try to have sex with her.

I'd never let anyone invade me again. Love? It brought pain and disfigurement. Well, it did bring us little Bobbie. My heart filled with emotion of a completely different kind, my first knowledge of true love. The love I had before—for my parents and Dan—was dependent love. This new emotion became a way of loving which would change my life. It had its problems, but, well, that's why I'm sharing this with you. You'll see how awkwardly I dealt with it.

Chapter 2

LOOKING BACK I'm amazed I got through my first pregnancy. I wonder if it's the same for all women? Do other cultures teach girls what to expect? Was I too innocent? Too naïve? Do some cultures separate love and sex and teach their progeny about each? I don't think so. Women have to go through indignity and violation, and out of that comes growth. Why? I don't know, except maybe it's the way we get acquainted with the animal part of us.

Dan went through hell too. He tried with all his power to understand what was happening. He wanted to be part of the pregnancy and the birthing; to be connected to Bobbie as I was. Pushed aside and discounted, he couldn't be me—but he wanted to know what I experienced, what I felt. He felt cheated he couldn't nurse the baby. He cried silently within himself because the baby screamed for me every time he held him. The baby wanted milk, not me, but Danny didn't understand. He couldn't find a way to connect with the baby, and that increased his anxiety and feelings of worthlessness. The baby rejected him, and so did I. He had a head full of wonderful expectations about fatherhood, and none came true.

A few years later with the birth of our second child, I understood more about a father's needs, and most important, mine. Back then, neither of us could separate our physical feelings from our emotional needs. We were young and immature, totally unprepared. On the animal level we bred and I birthed. The ontological, human being side of me was skewed. It wasn't until I was in my forties that I learned to let the animal out to play in a body I controlled. A body where the emotional, and spiritual, took pleasure.

I hated missing work—until my six-month maternity leave ended and I went back. I lasted eight months. I was a professional, doing professional things, on a career path leading to a six-figure salary and the promise of lots of respect. I was on the fast track to...?

Bobbie taught me about direction. Because of my son, I realized the up ladder led down. Success would end my personal freedom. I'd give up my independence and a sizable part of my identity for a company that believed in employee loyalty, but felt little obligation to employees.

As a parent, I bought into the idea that Bobbie was my total responsibility. That included his education and preparation for life. A little over a year into parenthood, and I had a job looming before me with more challenges than I ever would have in my professional career.

When I quit my job, I feared we'd be unable to make the mortgage payment, buy food, or have any money left over for things we wanted. Strangely, we had almost as much money when I didn't work. With two good incomes, more than half of everything we earned went to the governments in taxes. I quit. Our deductions were figured against Dan's income. His take home pay was almost what both paychecks had provided. We laughed over the regressive tax system; but it helped us. I assumed the duties a responsible mother must perform. The lists of parental obligations grew daily, even as I ignored our marital relationship.

Dan shouldered the weight of fatherhood, hunched his shoulders and assumed his responsibility. He worked longer hours, probably because he got little pleasure from being home. He brought in enough money to support us.

Occasionally Dan and I talked. To be honest, I talked, Dan listened. He learned to be agreeable, neutral and not get too close or I'd shut him down. I ignored his input and his needs. He was on his own, it wasn't my job to take care

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of him. If he went to the doctor and got a drug to kill libido, I'd have celebrated.

I tried to stifle every natural urge and emotion he had. My sexuality was shut down—numb. I became a good mother, not a healthy woman or a good wife. It was my way or no way. A growing stack of porno magazines near the desk in his little office had gross pictures in them I couldn't accept. "Why denigrate woman that way? Why put those photographs in a magazine? Why would anybody look at them? What's wrong with you Dan?" I was angry and I let him know about it. He sat looking at me as if I were an alien. I told him he was an animal.

I complained we didn't have friends. Dan nodded, and said he played handball with some guys during lunch break. When we married, our high school and college friends faded away. Bobbie came along and those without kids found friends who could talk about subjects other than diapers, and who didn't eat the mauled food left on their kid's plate.

I told Danny about special programs for children—courses offered to increase their intelligence—and a swimming program for toddlers at the local pool. I described them, he responded, "How much will they cost? I mean, I can do some extra overtime and make a little more money."

That's what our few exchanges were like; the way I wanted our relationship to be. He had his tiny space and I had everything else. He owed me. He got me pregnant and then I had to suffer the pain and do the work. It wasn't fair. Men should pay. Even if he got up in the middle of the night to help Bobbie, he had to bring him to me to nurse. I lost either way.

My mom agreed, and in fact, most older women I knew were adamant in their anger toward men, "Worthless bums who always want sex and then get off easy while we women suffer."

I thought, "I'm lucky because I have Mom as a source of information." But I came to learn she was full of misinformation and bias. We had long talks about raising a baby and marriage. I told her about not needing sex and being quite happy without it. She understood and confided we were alike in that way. Her warning though, probably saved my marriage. She told me men were basically animals and that unlike women, God had created them so they had to have sex.

"If you don't let him make love to you every so often he'll leave you for another woman."

I was too dense in those days to wonder why another woman would want him for sex.

"You just lay there and pretend to enjoy it. That worked with your father all these years, and finally, thank God, he's outgrowing that dirty stuff."

Dear old Mom. A representation of a culture that ended when birth control pills freed women. To her, morality is based on fear. She was a virgin the day she married because she feared getting pregnant, not because she had values and a personal code. She didn't lie or steal for fear of getting caught, not because she would lose self-respect by those misdeeds. God watched her and would punish her, so she was good. What would she have done if she knew she wouldn't get caught? It never happened, because she was inculcated with fear. Fear was in her with her mother's milk.

Mom thought herself religious. Terrorized by our Church, she was afraid not to believe. Her soul suffered from that disgusting abuse. She never found spirituality.

Mom tried to be a great mother, but she was damaged by the forces that formed her. She was never able to know herself. She never connected with me. Her messages were contaminated with fear and anger. I believe she reflected the values of the last generation of Western women forced into denial and human bondage by their gender. Women

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alienated from their daughters—my generation. Learning that scared me. I had no guarantee I'd do any better.

Mother's messages play as tapes in my head, invalid, inapplicable to my time. I learned to discount her perceptions, her codes, mores and superstitions—especially her religion—and weigh her advice carefully. It took me more than twenty years to build-in a crap detector. It will take my lifetime to fully praise and honor her for every quality she developed in spite of the way she was abused. I don't think she really hated me.

Chapter 3

MY PROBLEM WITH MY BODY—the body which betrayed me and forced pain, humiliation and abuse on me—eased. Time healed the raw synaptic connections in my brain. Thank the stars we can't recall pain. Normal feelings returned. I accepted them because they were warm and comfortable.

One day as I changed Bobbie, he had an erection. I can't recall my exact reaction, but I realized I had given life to a male! And I knew without doubt I wanted my son to have a wonderful life, get married someday and have Sex. How could I come to grips with that? All I avoided with Dan, I wanted for my son.

Not many months after that enlightenment I stopped taking the pill and began thinking of ways to be with Dan. He was so totally amazed my desire had returned—that I loved him again—his whole demeanor changed. He came home earlier, fixed things around the house, and spent time playing with our two-year-old son. That's the first time we came together as a family.

We talked for hours one night after making love. For the first time Dan explained what sex meant to him. I was raised with the belief that, "Wham. Bam. Thank you Ma'am," is the male creed. I learned something else about love between men and women, and what "making love" really meant to Dan.

For the first time, I sensed his pain and confusion and knew his needs went way beyond sexual release. I learned he wanted me to nurture him spiritually as well as physically. My reaction? I had enough angst of my own. I was unwilling—afraid—to take on any of his anxiety and depression. In spite of my limitations, that began my awareness of him. I tried to observe and listen as he

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complained—to be aware of the problems he was trying to overcome; the way he interfaced with his world.

One summer morning I lay in bed eating soda crackers and praying my morning sickness would pass. I watched Bobbie tear a page out of one of the expensive children's books I had purchased for him. I almost jumped out of bed and grabbed him, but I saw how focused he was on the tear and the process of tearing. I stopped myself and watched him. He wasn't destroying a book, he was learning how to tear—perhaps experiencing his power over things. That's good, necessary even, but... I had failed. I hadn't taught him to respect books. I hadn't...! A cold fear gripped my heart. If I failed to teach him, then he would fail in life. If I screwed-up, he would suffer. From conversations with other mothers in our pre-school, I suspected Bobbie lagged far behind in his development. Some of his peers were already toilet trained. He couldn't even master his aim.

One evening Dan commented we were finally making friends. I agreed, and both of us felt relieved. The preschool had work days. Parents were required to spend time cleaning, fixing and organizing the school's buildings and equipment. On workdays we met other parents and soon, as we discussed our kids—compared and practiced one-upmanship would be an honest way to describe it—we were inviting them to our house or visiting theirs.

Dan met and got along with the fathers. My bonding with the women tied us into the community and gave us a base of friends. There were other mothers who, like me, had given up careers and traded their professions for motherhood. As we sorted and matched our lifestyles, likes, dislikes and social values, a group of us came to be more than casual friends. We formed a pack. If we weren't volunteering in the school or fund raising, we met for lunch

or attended art shows, cultural programs and other community events. The camaraderie we shared filled the void left by quitting our jobs and professions. We had a few hours of adult time together each week, and telephone contacts which saved our sanity in a life focused upon toddlers and tots.

Dan had friends at work. Some single, some married, and some divorced. Because of the loss of male identity, and homophobia, none felt comfortable with, or took the opportunity to develop, male-to-male relationships.

The husbands of my new friends and Dan, were thrown together when we women got together. They sorted a little and assumed they were friends. In time, some of them bonded. It was hard to tell since they were there at their wives' whims. They talked sports, or sometimes investments. But the men I knew never talked about their personal problems or unfulfilled needs.

For my gang, we pretended nothing was off limits. We discussed every aspect of life and parenthood—well, we had great discussions, but didn't share innermost angst. We presented ourselves in the best light possible, always careful to hide our fears and weaknesses. We were friends, cursory confidantes, pretending we were okay inside, just troubled by minor day-to-day problems. The men? They seemed to rattle through empty corridors, almost totally alone and isolated. Except for me, Dan had no true friend, not even his father. That scared me.

As I tried to imagine the life Bobbie would have, a whole new tragedy came into view. I had been so caught up bemoaning my fate as a woman I hadn't considered what it must be like to be a man. I had been taught if women could take what men had, we would achieve nirvana.

I imagined Bobbie would grow up and have a life like Dan's. A cold stab of fear pierced my heart. Dan was young, vital, handsome—very smart—but trapped in a

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world of dog-eat-dog competitiveness. His job provided no nurturing, no caring mentor, no support. He was judged by how much money he brought into the company. He could lose everything he worked for and be humiliated by an economic downturn or at the whim of any superior who didn't like him or who had an in-law who wanted his job. His security—what he knew was the family's security—hung by a thread. Dangling by his wits, he was trapped. He imagined a new house or a sports car would make it all worthwhile, but had come to believe nothing would make things better. Someday he would lose his competitive edge, or grow old and be cast aside. He put money away and invested to prepare for that day. Not for himself, but for us—especially if he died. Except for some creative things he did on the job and took personal pleasure from, his world seemed bleak. He worked away his life, never daring to admit that his job was meaningless. I didn't want Bobbie to fall into a trap like Dan's. I didn't know what to do to change his destiny.

Once, man the hunter could bring home the meat of his labor and receive the accolades of others. When Dan came home he had learned to ask me how my day had gone. He knew to take out the garbage, clean up after the kid, and feel guilty I had to prepare dinner because we couldn't afford to go out. At home, the only place he might find the touching and tenderness he desperately needed, he reached for me too often. I pushed him away, and back into isolation. He started drinking then as a way to blow his mind and ease the pain.

Chapter 4

WE WOMEN FOUND TONS of books about human growth and development. We each read selected works and reported back to the group.

Carla researched some false pedagogues who coordinated mental growth with physical changes. She had trouble keeping a straight face as she reported that according to them, if a kid got his first molar, he should be at a designated place in his mental development.

“All you have to do to know if your kid is progressing well is measure his bones, look at his teeth, or check her cranial size.”

She challenged us to evaluate our own children before we discounted these wise philosophers. It didn't take long to check and find as many discrepancies in the theory as children tested.

Our pre-school teacher, who had attended teacher's college, pointed out that medical science hadn't found any direct correlation between tooth and brain development. At certain ages the average kid got teeth and at about those same times mental processes continued to evolve to more complex levels.

“Shucks,” Carla said, “wouldn't it have been easy? If a kid didn't get a tooth, he'd flunk, but we'd know the reason why.”

Sandi reported that she had read donnish educators of dubious merit who preached the dangers of toilet training, or advocated the use of psychic power to enhance language development.

“Some advise that we destroy creativity by teaching. They advocate letting the kids exist in a fairy world until they're too old to control. They argue that teaching anything can be damaging, and imply humans are

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connected to a universal database they can tap for knowledge and understanding.”

Nancy reported that, according to her research, one of the vital educational insights some nuts in teachers’ guise offer, is the observation that kids ask questions only to hear their own voices.

“They really don’t want to know the answers, Ladies. They talk to hear their voices, that’s all.”

I was stunned. Bobbie started asking “Why?” as soon as he learned to form simple sentences. He wanted me to explain things in a way that made sense to him.

Carla summed up the research by reporting that follow-up studies on kids warped by these philosophies or kept in fairyland show they’re damaged by *not* having parts of their minds stimulated at an early age. Most are unable to keep up with other children academically, and many lack self control and self-direction. That did it. We rejected whole philosophies.

We focused our energy on our kids, fearful that if left alone they would crash and burn and all hopes for a bright future would be lost.

We read to our darlings, played music, persuaded them to run around playing fairies, adopted Waldorf, Montessori, and traditional school philosophies, and worried ourselves sick because none gave indications of being presidential material. Every time we got together, we discussed some important educational approach. We tried to decide what to do about phonetic approaches versus whole language, rods versus numbers for arithmetic, and sexual stereotyping caused by parents forcing girls to play with dolls and boys with trucks.

When we noted that the girls seemed drawn toward dolls and costumes, we did our best to re-direct them so they would wear cowboy outfits and get dirty. When several girls did, we acknowledged they were tomboys. Most of the moms said they had been tomboys at that age,

and at heart still were. I doubted they were really tomboys. I was, and I had the scars on my knees to prove it. Funny, we never had the boys wear dresses, fix their hair and stay clean. I'm glad we didn't, but why is it okay to force another sex role on girls, but not on boys?

The boys didn't respond well to redirection. Bobbie turned the Barbie Doll I gave him into a bulldozer and leveled the doll house. We mothers had bought into the belief nurtured by the Women's Movement that boys and girls are the same—equal in every way. Ovaries and testicles are the same. The only differences are that the kids with handles are boys and the ones without, girls.

Sandi informed us, "The 'women-afraid-of-being-women' who lead the movement claim it's what we do to little girls that makes them desire to be feminine. They know for a fact war exists because we make our little boys play with guns."

We good and well-meaning women had tried to stop sexism and create a generation of children that were—you know, as I think back—a unisex culture. Luckily, nature is stronger than our misdirected perceptions. The kids remained boys or girls with a complimentary mixture of each sex in each kid.

We mothers had to learn a lot. Girls, according to the stuff we were reading, are deprived of an equal education and a future as equals or superiors to males, because the schools favor boys. I favored my son, but I didn't see that as a threat to Barb's daughter or Sally's or—any of the girls. The girls in our preschool moved through the programs faster than the boys. If anything was wrong, it was that the boys were more trouble, further behind in development, and required more of the teacher's attention. The teacher knew that and had parents in the classrooms helping girls and boys move at their own speed. So, if the girls developed faster—and they do—and are able to talk

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and express themselves at an earlier age, read earlier, grasp writing and almost everything before the boys, how are they damaged?

I watched the classroom dynamics as the kids, four-year-olds, came in and selected activities. The boys headed toward the boxes that held play stuff and took out dinosaurs, trucks and assorted building materials. They weren't cooperative, and had little desire to play together. They found what they wanted to play with, staked out a territory and started playing.

The girls came in, spent time socializing with each other as they paired to dig out dolls and dishes, art stuff and costume clothing. No one coached, punished or rewarded them. They did it on their own. According to the books we read, they were already damaged and forced into a life not as valuable or exciting as that of males.

At lunch, we mothers decided we had been misled by a very confused minority's defective perception of what it meant to be a woman.

I asked the group, "Did I avoid science classes because of teacher prejudice? Am I in an inferior position because boys cheated me out of my due in a male-dominated society?"

Everyone wanted to talk at once. None of us felt deprived because of men. We concluded we made choices based upon our own innermost feelings—our femininity—not because of male inhumanity toward females.

Sandi commented that there were some male attitudes that affected us, starting with a male God, who made us last and forced us to serve, compliant and passive.

Everyone nodded agreement, but none of us were willing to take that issue on. In the end, we decided our femininity makes us special. It's the way we're supposed to be.

It seemed impossible boys, my own special son, developed so slowly. What are they doing in their safe little territories as they play with plastic dinosaurs? Girls are social, cooperative, curious and obviously developing rapidly. Bobbie was content to spread Barbie's legs and use her like a bulldozer. Did anybody who preached that boys and girls are the same ever watch them? Did they ever have a child? How could this nonsense be given credibility in our society?

My biggest worry was what Bobbie did with his time. I suspected that behind his facade, wheels were turning and he was developing. He eventually caught up and passed others by—mostly girls whom he could never compete with in those early years. But the developmental lag I observed wasn't okay with me or the teachers. He was prodded constantly by adults with expectations that didn't match his mental readiness, as were other boys in his age group.

The most unfair thing, and it lasted through the school years, was that due to unrealistic expectations, Bobbie was forced to compete with—his progress measured against—girls his age who were obviously developing at a different rate. He couldn't compete. I feel this asinine way of grouping kids according to chronological age is wrong. There is nothing as unequal as the equal treatment of unequals. Well, as the parent of a boy and a girl, I can tell you age-grouping is the most damaging, most discriminatory thing, done to my children.

Chapter 5

MY SECOND EXPERIENCE with an invaded body resulted in the addition of a daughter to our family. The pregnancy was hard. I was sick for six months. My body sagged and bloated, stretched and changed as before, but this time I knew I could get parts of it back into shape. My back hurt, Bobbie demanded more attention, and Dan avoided me, and not without cause. I went through periods of physical desire and revulsion. He had to guess my mood and appease me. The old anger came back. He had it so easy. Damn him!

I don't know what happened, maybe the kid reached over and yanked my tubes. After I delivered I got two great pieces of news. The baby girl was normal and healthy, and, I wouldn't be able to have any more. I didn't have to worry about getting pregnant, 'cause I couldn't anymore. What a relief—or was it? Was I still a woman?

Having a two-and-a-half-year-old boy and a baby girl to care for cooled my social activities. Early-on, the baby wasn't a problem. I needed only diapers, a bassinet with a handle, and a bra with snap flaps. Of course Bobbie required a rope and tie-downs. He got into everything, mostly trouble. I'd heard of the "terrible two's," but never thought I'd fear my own kid.

Dan tried to help. Bobbie wanted to be with me, not his father. Though weaned almost a year, he thought of me as a survival package. My two men played together, but the minute I got out of sight, no matter how much fun they were having, Bobbie blew-off his old man and came squealing for me. Dan would sit on the floor where they had been playing, rejected, dejected and then mentally, he ejected. A few drinks seemed to get him over it, and he got over things much easier as time went on.

Raising a little girl was so different than raising a boy that I marvel I survived Bobbie. Katie was cuddly, quiet, a nice passive-adaptive child. She loved her “Dada,” tolerated having her eyes dug at and her face scratched by her brother, and drew love and tenderness from everyone. By two, she pretended to read to Bobbie. Eight months later, she *was* reading to him. He looked at the pictures, totally uninterested in the writing. We spent a fortune on the best preschool education possible and after two years he seemed to be a happy retard in a world of his own. It made me angry. He stayed a baby when he should have been a man. The teachers said he was quite normal. I thought that a nice way of telling us his brain had been replaced by a wind-up toy.

After reading this you probably think our life was a drag. Well, compared to what? We lived in the present, tolerating, accepting and getting through each day. What mattered was the future. We had our lists of things we were going to do *when*. And *when* came occasionally as we got new furniture, a new used car, took a week long vacation, or moved into a new house. Most of “when” was nebulous. We imagined something wonderful and fun lay ahead. Maybe a trip to Europe? Maybe...? We didn’t know. We needed the future to get through the present.

Dan worked his life away planning for *when*. I cleaned up barf or lay awake at night worrying about Bobbie’s lack of academic achievement, imagining a time when he would take hold. Believing we were working toward something wonderful kept me going. At times, I knew with certainty that this *is* life, and that if I wasn’t tuned-in and happy now, I never would be.

The realization that this is “it,” is not easy to deal with. We’re told one should live each day as if it were the last. Others tell us this is the first day of the rest of our lives. Gad! I remember thinking of my days and my

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relationships—weighing my existence. I'll sketch-out a typical day so you'll understand how my life progressed.

The damned alarm went off. We woke before light. Dan was sleeping close—too close! I knew what he wanted. I jumped out of bed before he could continue. Two kids in the shower with me. Then hair to do and bodies to dress in a contumacious—don't you just love that word—process which left me angry, the kids resentful, and clothes strewn around like a hurricane had passed. Then, as I stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes, Dan came up behind me and gave me a hug to let me know my rejection was accepted, if not forgiven.

We got the kids fed—Dan had to fend for himself. That was one way, every day, I could make the point I wasn't his slave. Besides, I knew no matter how I treated him, fifteen minutes of “good” sex and he would forgive me and we'd pretend to start over.

Bitchy kids, especially Katie in the morning, pushed tenderness and love behind proficiency. Dan left. He couldn't drop the kids because his office lay in the opposite direction. No problem, I had to talk to Bobbie's first grade teacher and then get back to Katie's preschool to help with a play they were working on.

I belted the kids into their car seats, donned my taxi-driver's hat and started out. At the pre-school, Katie was out of the car and off to meet her friends without a hug or a backward glance.

I went into the public elementary school with Bobbie. His teacher grimaced as two mothers in line before me did what I planned to do. It was my turn, I saw the look on her face and changed my approach.

“Miss Uptight, would it help if I came in and volunteered? I could listen to kids read or...?”

Her face turned white as her blood drained into her fear. She was winging it, not sure what she was doing or

why. The last thing she needed was a judgmental parent in her classroom watching her screw-up.

“Oh no! Really, it’s against school policy—at least in the first part of the year. Thank you, but No!”

I tried to express my concerns about the fact Bobbie only brought Xeroxed worksheets home. She had turned away to avoid another mother.

Bobbie saw me leaving, came over and glommed onto my dress. I said something like, “Come on young man, the other kids will think you’re a mommy’s boy. Let go!” He did. I left.

Other mothers whose second child was in preschool were arriving as I drove into the lot and parked. We pros had seen one child through the program, observed several teachers as they passed through, and now were self-appointed experts on preschool education. We sat on the board of governors, made decisions about staffing and operations, organized work days and fund raisers, and generally thought of ourselves as the school.

The sweet young thing we hired was fresh out of Montessori training and anxious to demonstrate her understanding of Maria’s magic. She had her thick Montessori notebooks containing everything she would ever need to know or do. She knew everything except which page she was on. We were there to help her—well, we pretended to be. We were really there because there was no place we’d rather be.

Being the parent of a girl this time, I saw the school in a completely different light. Little boys were draining the teacher’s energy and disrupting the school. Katie and the other girls were really into the play. They selected clothing and old hats from the trunks and helped each other dress for their parts. They cruised around the room trailing gossamer rags and carrying stage props. The boys watched, sometimes extending a foot to try to trip a passing actress. Sometimes they joined the girls and let

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themselves be draped with material or painted with watercolors. Most of the time they obviously didn't get it. They weren't aware or couldn't care there is a script to follow, a play to perform. The girls reacted to the boy's obvious ignorance by trying to kick them out, using feet as necessary. Then they pleaded for adult intervention and we came to the rescue of this vital educational experience.

The boys, under our powerful thumbs, cooperated and played their parts. It was clear to me they understood more than we had given them credit for and that their actions bore some indications of contempt for women who selected dumb activities. I knew, because I had gone through this with Bobbie. Other mothers with daughters sneered and radiated disdain for the little monsters who wouldn't adapt and learn.

After, we helped clean up then left "to do" lunch. Over the meal, we dissected the teacher, and held up our video cameras with their two-by-two screens to look at tape footage we had taken of the play. I was amazed at the hostility others felt towards the boys.

Sarah transferred her anger to her husband and his brothers. "Men are the same way at family reunions," she vented. "They see me doing all the hard work to put a great dinner on the table, but they go out and play football until the meal is cold. We women take all the responsibility for building a family and they could care less."

"It's true." Carla complained, her face turning red with anger. "If it weren't for us, there would be no family life. I didn't realize how men are until I saw those awful little boys trying to screw up the play."

"It's just that the boys...." I was going to insert my observations as a mother of a boy, then decided not to.

After that, we gave our studied insights into the latest community scandal. All of this made us feel vital and involved.

Lunch progressed past 1:30 and we had barely warmed-up. We lingered because we didn't want to go home and be alone. Finally, we broke up and drifted to our cars. A trip to the grocery or the pharmacy, and it would be time to collect the little darlings and shuttle them to piano lessons and gymnastics. Then, Daddy—I mean Dan—would come home. He expected me to be there, the dutiful wife.

My day wasn't over. After the supper routine the kids were readied for bed, read to and escorted to snooze land. Then, Dan and I pretended we would have time to discuss finances and make plans. He was mellow, agreeable and comfortable as he read to Katie while I read to Bobbie. They didn't like the same books. When they were asleep, I found things to do in the kitchen and Dan went into our bedroom and turned on the news. I found lots to do, delayed as long as I could, and by the time I got to the bedroom Dan was zonked, TV bleeper in hand. I smiled. I'd made it through another day.

That's the pattern women in my group followed. Exceptions were the evenings we took the kids to Burger King or went to somebody's house for a potluck, usually on Friday or Saturday night. Sundays were different. I had to scrub and dress the kids and drop them off at Sunday School while I attended the service. Dan wouldn't go to church anymore so he worked on the car or went to play golf. He had all the fun.

Why did I attend church? I think because I had nothing to do while the kids were in Sunday School. The services were interesting, but the sermons never connected with me. Or should I say, "I with them?" I surmised my life and experiences were alien to the church. The Pastor was nice, but made no room in his messages for the day-to-day problems I needed help with. There were lots of suggestions; what we should be doing, thinking and ashamed of. None supported mothers like me who

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suspected down deep that God would rather be working on the car or playing golf.

Religious faith is a lot about preparing for life after death. I assumed that at thirty or forty, maybe even later, I'd want to prepare to meet my maker although he hadn't won my confidence. I had a sneaking suspicion the men who created our religion were really more enamored with other men than women. During my religious phase in college, I decided many of those men had strong aversions to women. Didn't they have mothers? What was wrong with them?

Jesus wasn't like that. At least I didn't think so. He liked women. A lot of what we know about him came from the perceptions of a woman: Mary Magdalena. Of course men have tried to make her into a prostitute, and discount her role as Jesus' main love and disciple. The man we worship comes to us through her eyes. She was the only one who knew and could report that God had him killed to save us from our sins, and that he had risen bodily into heaven. A powerful woman! I can tolerate Christianity, knowing her role.

Anyway, church and I didn't connect. The kids needed it. The biblical stories they heard at Sunday School presented models of morality and ethical behavior. Katie liked Sunday School. Bobbie mouthed the words as they sang, and then spent his time drawing pictures of planes with the markers they gave him to keep him busy. He brought home coloring book pages of religious scenes covered with airplanes shooting at each other. I'm not sure what he got out of it. He went, was confirmed, and is, of course, saved.

Chapter 6

BECAUSE OF MY determination to get a quality education for my children, I became immersed in what became one of the most powerful and defining issues of my life. Public education became my window into the way things worked. My involvement was the first—and last—time I let myself feel passion and blinding excitement for a cause.

What I learned shaped the way I came to comprehend and deal with life, politics and government. It shaped the way I gave back to my community; my citizenship. It also explains why I don't have faith in the system and can never get involved on that level again.

Like so many women, educational issues—fighting for a quality education for my children—became my direct interface with governmental and political systems. I'm certain my perspectives and conclusions reflect what most involved parents have also come to believe. I'll summarize the whole process of discovery and frustration. Without this knowledge of my experiences, you could never understand me.

As I became involved in the complexities of public education, I operated from a base of ignorance. I had to improve myself. I had to know the game before I could be effective playing it. That wasn't strange. All of us mothers made similar decisions at the time our kids entered school full-time. We went along happy as bees, then zap!, our kids were removed from us by the public school. That's why we decided to go back to college to learn how the game is played. Education and schools became the focus of our lives. We rubbed energy off each other and went around professing parents could not turn their children over to the state to be educated. Education was our parental

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responsibility and we had to take charge of our children's schooling. Powerful logic. We were motivated.

Sadly, the more we learned, the more we realized that some, in fact too many, of the educators we turned our children over to are unmotivated, submissive people who teach because they "love kids" almost as much as they love status, job security and vacations. They have no professional standards. The worst of them could be part-time clerks at a discount store, there is no difference in the way they approach the profession.

There *are* highly professional, competent teachers. We called them "Master Teachers," because they saw the whole program—how the subjects fit together with life. They understand the necessity of knowing as much as possible about each child. They aren't threatened by parents or critique. They stay focused on each child's needs. I wouldn't imply there aren't master teachers in our schools. There are more of them than low pay and difficult working conditions merit.

As we got to know and respect these outstanding professionals, we learned they're continually thwarted by other teachers and the administration. They're considered trouble makers and driven out. One of our professors noted we could learn more about our public schools and educational programs from those teachers than we could learn from those who stayed in.

When we—I didn't say I, because my group was cohesive and we were sharing what we learned—had each spent more than a year studying how learning takes place, we passed the level of pedagogical training achieved by most teachers.

In the process, we learned something quite distressing. We came to understand that many teachers' colleges attracted low achievers—youngsters of mediocre ability who seek easy academic programs, middle-class status, and job security. Because these enrollees have weak

study habits and are not the best and brightest, the curriculum is watered-down and academic standards lowered.

Even if the colleges wanted to raise standards and produce a different caliber of graduate, they couldn't because highly trained teachers are rejected in schools where passive-adaptive conformity is a sought-after trait.

Susan, Jimmy's mom, had just completed student teaching and was about to graduate from the teacher's college at the U. She told us student teachers who are too well trained—knew too much and wanted to teach in a child-centered way—do not get through student teaching. Few districts want them. Excited, motivated young professionals, passionate about education, make the duds supervising them look bad. For that crime, they're weeded-out of the profession.

We had long suspected it, but now we knew many public schools have a teacher selection process designed to maintain the self-serving status-quo.

That selection process also determines the quality of administrators. Obviously, an administrator who shakes things up will damage the status-quo. One of the main considerations for selecting new administrators is that they can "work within the system." Any "oil on troubled waters" type person is hired over a "change agent," especially if they can maintain discipline and keep the buildings looking good.

When hiring principals, it's important none be hired who can expose the superintendent's lack of educational leadership. There's a history in our district of not hiring experienced administrators. That keeps the super in power.

So, who is responsible for quality education? The classroom teacher. If the teacher fails, nothing else

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matters. A parent who picks her kid's teachers is almost certain to get him or her a good education.

We wanted to know who is responsible for the overall program direction, for coordination, and for the support of the teachers? The superintendent? No. The super gets out of the noose of responsibility by appointing a deputy or passing the responsibility along to principals.

In our district, a deputy is in charge of curriculum and instruction. Is she responsible? Do we go to her to get help for our kids if the teacher fails or there are glitches in the curriculum? Is that where accountability lies? No. We learned the deputy works through committees. Those "study groups" make recommendations to her, but she has the last word. But, not really. She *could* make a recommendation to the super. The super *could* take it to the board.

What really happens is a good deputy keeps the committees going, and can always prove she is in the process of doing whatever needs to be done. Of course, as one committee reaches its conclusion, another is formed to study their recommendations. In that way, they are always on top of things, but no change has to occur. They never make moves they're accountable for. So, who is responsible?

We citizens elected a school board. Do board members help change the curriculum and the way teachers deliver the program to kids? Does the board help kids by requiring competency and child-centered education? No. Those are not board functions. That's why they hired the super and her deputy. How could we be so naïve?

"The PTSA is your avenue for input." an administrator told us. "Get involved in the PTSA and you will have access."

My friend and fellow concerned parent, Glenda Smallwood, was an officer of the local Parent Teacher

Student Association. Over the last two years I had listened while she vented her frustration with the organization. Still, maybe an effective PTSA could help....

“Glenda, can we be effective as parents through the PTSA?”

“What do you mean, effective? You mean help with the curriculum? Help get rid of burned-out teachers? Help kids? Or do you mean have cookie sales and raise money for special projects? Or help organize the science fair and the library book sale? You know, safe, non-intrusive activities?”

“I mean help vitalize the educational program. Make the schools student-centered. Demand quality education for kids.”

After she stopped laughing, Glenda took my hand.

“Annie darling, the problem with the PTSA is that the ‘T’ and the ‘S’ are not involved, but the ‘A’ is, as in administration. It should be called the AGRP—Administrator’s Group for Redirecting Parents. Or the PBSO—The Parent’s Bake Sales Organization. The format, as I have known it, is administrator dominated—even the national organization puts out guidelines forbidding members from getting involved in the ‘running of the schools.’ It’s a way to burn up parent energy and keep parents out of the educators’ way.”

Who did we turn to, the Principal? She hired many of the teachers, tolerated a disjointed curriculum, and was responsible for many of the problems. Change and confrontation were not her goals. She was looking forward to fifteen quiet years and then retirement. She wouldn’t fight for kids.

Was there any access to the system? Any way to get involved and be effective in bringing about change? Any way to demand curriculum continuity, higher standards, passionate teaching, trained professionals who put children first?

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The answer was clear. In a typical public school district like ours, access was blocked. There seemed no way to make schools vital short of destroying the petrified system and rebuilding.

Chapter 7

EVER HEAR OF HELICOPTER PARENTS? You know, they hover over their kids. That's what the incompetent teachers called us; their typical attack against anyone threatening their positions.

A school board member told us there were legitimate reasons for keeping parents out of the schools. To a degree we agreed with his explanation.

He said, the reason schools can't allow input or access except through the PTSA cookie sale club, or other neutralized, innocuous, administrator-controlled organizations is there are "kooks" out there. "Evil anarchists, fundamentalists and fanatics who want to take control of our public schools and use them to teach their particular brand of division and hate."

That's probably true. We could relate stories about folks we met who have a direct line to truth and know what's best for everyone else. Individuals ready to lie, cheat and even kill to get their God's messages across. But... We wanted a way for parents without kooky agendas to help the schools. We queried the administration and board.

"What if we guarantee up-front to help vitalize our school curriculum so there is continuity from year-to-year, grade-to-grade, course-to-course? And what if we offer to help plan workshops and in other ways provide assistance? We will help those charged with the education of our children become familiar with current brain research, and the concept of knowing each child and customizing learning experiences. We help the district develop an effective way to evaluate teachers? What if...?"

You would have thought we threatened to take administrators hostage and burn sacred buildings. The entire board met in executive session to deal with this new

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threat. They came up with a plan. In the regular board meeting, two administrators, and two teachers well coached by the superintendent, went before the school board. The teachers actually generated tears. Groveling on their bellies as teachers do, sobbing, they pleaded with the board to protect them from us—a group of parents who were trying to tell *professional* teachers how to teach. And, horror of horrors, we parents were disrupting the entire educational program. Bad, bad parents. Naughty! Naughty!

Dedicated teachers had sacrificed—actually prostituted themselves upon the altar of education—and we awful parents implied they weren't doing the job God had chosen them to do. We had to be stopped. The Board existed to protect employees from accountability. It had to act now.

It did!

We were informed we had to get permission to meet and that the super had to approve our agendas. We must have approval from the super to contact anyone in the school. We had to have the super's okay before we could write articles or introduce anything she didn't like.

Several of our elected school board members said they didn't agree, but their hands were tied because of the law. Actually, their hands were tied and their lips sealed by their political and social agendas. Kids? Who said anything about kids? Our response? Disgust. They had no right. They couldn't deprive us of our rights, but they did. Governmental monopolies have that kind of power.

We continued to study and learn about education as it could be. Most of us through our education courses had come into contact with, or read works by, exciting educational leaders. As a result, we kept boiling down the information we had about making our public schools better. What it came down to is this:

We wouldn't have the support of parents.

A large number of parents don't mind turning their kids over to the state to educate. They're content to turn their kids over and never know what happens to them. If there are problems with their kid and they have to leave work to come to school, they resent the fact the school involved them. Educating their kids is the state's responsibility.

Parents who did want to be involved in their children's education, who did understand their responsibility, didn't have the time away from their jobs. They worked the same hours as school was in session. Evenings, exhausted parents couldn't focus on kid's lives, homework and life's problems.

"Ladies," Carla summarized, "The schools provide baby-sitting. Both parents work, it isn't an option. They're trapped by an enslaving economic system and unapproachable public institutions with fat budgets used to crank-out PR which implies the schools are right, parents and kids the problem. Few working parents go against that barrage of misinformation. If they do, they meet hostility and resentment from the professionals." We nodded agreement.

Of the large numbers of single parents, most are moms. They care, but have no options. They're trapped. Attending a meeting requires a super-human effort. Serving on a study committee or taking time to learn about quality schools is impossible for them.

The Principal at Bobby and Katie's school did the best job summing up our position.

"You mothers have nothing else to do. You don't work. You think too much. You're critical of the job we do, so you cause a lot of trouble."

Guilty on all counts!

"Annie," Sarah observed, "we're a minority going against a system which most parents have to accept, good or bad. We're parents concerned about our kids on a level

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that's decidedly middle to upper class. That sounds snobbish. It's not meant to be. It's a fact."

I nodded. Wealthy, powerful families run interference for their kids. They fight to get them into the right schools and they spend a great deal of effort insuring their child has every opportunity to develop well. They know which public schools are doing the job, and they move their children to private schools at the first signs of mediocrity.

Oh I know. There's a stereotype of rich people who get rid of their progeny by sending them to boarding schools. Probably some truth to that. But most educated, decidedly upper-class parents want quality education for their kids. Usually that means removing them from the public schools.

Chapter 8

WHILE FIGHTING to get some perspective on my kid's education, life went on. The day-to-day ate years. We lived, loved and knew no better. Dad—I mean Dan! I guess I call him “Dad” because the kids do—brought home more money which we spent on things we must have needed. Our affluence reflected in the stuff stored in the garage and basement. The more space we filled with junk, the more affluent we were. Then, I got a call from Dad—my real Dad. He wanted to meet for lunch.

We sat in the restaurant, more than the table between us. As he perused the menu I studied him, mentally pretending I was meeting him for the first time. Who is he? What's he like? What does he get out of life? I felt a cold chill as I realized I didn't know him—I honestly couldn't answer those questions.

“I'll order for you, Pumpkin.”

He always had. And to him I was Pumpkin. The waiter held his pad, scribbling code as Dad ordered. I studied father's face. Who is this man?

“I wanted to tell you something, you first, before anyone else knows.”

I nodded. It had always been that way. He always considered me first. We had a special relationship.

“You know your mother and I..., well, we haven't exactly been in love for a long time. You and your brother are grown now. Kenny finishes college this spring. We kept the home together while you kids needed it. Now we go our separate ways.” He studied my face to note any reaction, winked, and continued. “I've found someone who wants me. You'll meet her in time.” He gave me one of his big loving smiles. “Annie. Pumpkin, I'm happy for the first time in..., well, in a long, long time. Understand?” He reached over and put his big heavy hand on mine.

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“You’re going to divorce Mom?” I had a feeling like I had won something. Then I realized he wasn’t mine anymore.

“My lawyer filed the papers this morning.”

I thought, “What will Mother do?” but quickly discounted her. I didn’t care how she felt, she wasn’t on my side. The thought passed and I stared at him, trying to imagine him with another woman. “Daddy, do I know her?”

“No. She’s someone I’ve known for several years. If it helps, we’ve been in love for a long time. This isn’t some male-menopause thing. I’m fifty-six. You understand there’s no relationship with your mom? I mean, she doesn’t want me, she only depends on me. You know. In fact you told me that once.”

“I remember.” I thought for a few moments. “Daddy, what will you do? Where will you live? What...?” I tried to imagine him in a new life, but I didn’t know enough about him to create a vision.

“She has family in Colorado. I’ll take early retirement and we’ll move there. You can bring Bobbie and Katie and come visit..., even if Dan has to work.” He was a tad competitive with Dan.

As we ate, I studied him. He had always been my friend, someone I counted on. No matter what, I could always get him to see things from my point of view. He was my advocate against mother. I could ask him for almost anything and even if he said “no,” I could get around him, get him to say “yes.” I loved him dearly.

As I finished my Reuben, realization hit me. How can I love someone I don’t know? What’s going on? What’s wrong with me?

We parted with a “pumpkin-squashing” hug as usual, my Dad and I. He went “home” to break the news to Mom. I drove home and sat in the car thinking, trying to remember. Who is he? Had I ever even tried to see him as

a separate human being? To know him as I would get to know a stranger? What did he get out of life?

All the years.... I had used him! Used my little-girl charm to finagle and manipulate him to get what I wanted. But I never cared that he had problems, that he hurt or needed or.... I never fathomed the pain he must have felt as Mom belittled him and implied he was simply someone she had to tolerate because he brought home money. I felt great whenever Mom rejected him. That made him mine. I had won the competition for him, especially after mother stopped letting sex bring him close to her. I remember that time in their relationship and my thinking I had won him from her. What a stupid, selfish child I had been. I wondered, was I normal?

The meeting with Dad was one of those breakthrough events that changed me. I got in touch with not knowing Dad, that was a major shock, and I became aware I couldn't remember much about my childhood. I spent the rest of the day trying to get in touch with memories. Who read to me? Who nurtured me when I was sick? Who punished me? Did Mom and Dad fight? How did I feel when Kenny was born? What was I like in preschool? What was I like when I was Katie's age? The questions bombarded my mind, but I couldn't remember. My whole childhood—well, except for a few flashes of events—was lost.

What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I remember the most formative years of my life? Would Bobbie and Katie remember me? Dan? The things we taught them? The conversations we had? The.... Why had I forgotten—repressed—childhood memories? Did something awful happen? Was I abused? Were my parents too busy to care for me?

I got photographs and studied them, that helped. I asked Mom what I was like. She told me I was the ideal baby, "So cute, loving and nice in those days," then she

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got angry and said she couldn't remember anything that would be a clue as to why I turned out the way I did. That threw me. Was I such an objectionable person as an adult? What did she see in me that caused her to be angry and distant? Should I ignore her comment? As usual, I had to get past her jabs and go on doing what I knew was right for me.

My childhood memories are lost, stored where I can't access them. There's a void I can't fill. I've tried. I considered Freudian Analysis and something called Re-Parenting. From what I read, those long drawn-out, expensive processes wouldn't work for me. I checked. Bobbie and Katie have the same lapses of memory. What's the value of the love, the experiences we shared, all we did for them, if they can't access their formative years? Does it matter what we do?

Bobbie wasn't into sports. That seemed acceptable until I realized that without sports he had no easy way to relate to other boys. In sports activities it's okay for boys to team-up, have physical contact, and experience camaraderie. Bobbie liked being alone. He had friends over, but their bonding wasn't like I thought it could be, should be. What about the Huck Finn in him? What about the dreams I imagined boys have? You know, Hardy Boys' type of adventures, or dreams of being a frontiersman, or a kid who built a raft and went down the river? Bobbie played computer games, read books now, and seemed comfortable alone and house-bound. My heart ached for him. I didn't know what to do. What is a boy? Why wasn't Bobbie having a great boyhood?

Katie was a social animal. Into sports and slumber parties, she put on plays, and engaged in the ugly, awful, catty behavior of our sex. And like me when I was a girl, she had her dad wrapped around her little finger. I wasn't the final word on anything. Whatever I ruled could be

overthrown by Dan after she manipulated him and used him. If I protested, she got him to ignore me and they had their secret way of doing whatever she wanted in spite of my objections. After realizing what my relationship with my dad had been like, I understood Katie's relationship with Dan. That didn't make it easier to stomach.

Bobbie was interested in his dad, but totally dependent upon me. When Dan dominated Bobbie's thoughts, it was because Bobbie feared him. It was kinda like Bobbie thought of Dan as the male grizzly bear who attacks and eats male cubs. Bobbie competed with his dad for my affection. He wasn't as openly manipulative and smoozie as Katie, but I knew he imagined he would grow up, push Dan out, and marry me.

I was confused about my relationship with Bobbie. I always treated him like a man. If he skinned his knee I told him to be strong and not cry. When he was weak, I said, "Act like a man!" I gave him raves and hugs the night he killed a spider and rescued me. I read stories by James Fenimore Cooper to him at night, hoping the *Leather Stocking Tales* would help him understand what being a man meant. I thought Cooper's depiction of men tortured at the post, eyelids cut away, never crying out, would help him somehow. He thought the stories "gross."

The worst part was wanting to nurture him, be close to him, even though it was wrong. Nothing's worse than a mother's boy. I had to push him away, into the isolation and loneliness of masculine segregation. I couldn't let him get too close to me. I feared I'd contaminate him and make him hate women.

Our Pastor said if a son saw his mother naked and became sexually aroused, he'd become a homosexual. A mother had to be careful raising a son because she could damage him. Oh Oedipus, Jocasta loved you, but is love wrong?

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My muddled thinking was the result of contaminated, inaccurate, awful messages I accepted as valid. There are cultures where the boy must reject his mother and move in with the men at thirteen. I felt there was a reason for that.

My parental obligations kept me engaged in Bobbie's education. Doc Berger, an educator whose philosophy we discussed often, had written: "You can not teach a child well whom you do not know well." I knew more about Bobbie than anyone, so why didn't his teachers plumb me for information about him? Why didn't they have intake procedures for every class to provide them with information about his strengths and weaknesses, his learning style? Didn't they know he would bloom in the right environment? Didn't they know that by going back over areas he had mastered he became bored and shut down? Or that jumping ahead and not bringing him along, destroyed his confidence and made him feel like a failure?

Didn't they know? No, they didn't, and they didn't intend to find out. According to his sixth grade teacher, who summed up the school's philosophy, "Bob has to learn to adapt to the system. If he has special needs, he should overcome them so he can function in our society." You think I'm kidding? That's the message sent on many occasions.

I spent a lot of time helping Bobbie get through the system with his curiosity, motivation and dignity intact. A lot more time than I spent helping Katie. Because I favored boys over girls? No. I thought a lot about that. It was because the system seemed to work better for girls than boys. Boys are usually behind, out-of-step and needy. Intelligent boys act out and refuse to be—I'll use the expression because it's what's really at the bottom of this: Emasculated!

The schools are designed for passive-adaptive, easy to control kids. Many girls get "theirs" by being adaptive and

often submissive. Most boys don't get their needs met that way. The schools ignore boys' needs and learning styles.

My group talked about the "boy dynamic" and asked questions we couldn't answer. Who knew about boys? Our husbands didn't. Really, they seemed as confused about boys as we were. Boys raised by women had learned to accept women's explanations for things. Where could we go to find out more about boys' needs?

"Real Boys' Voices" Tommy's mother, Jane, who owned and ran a local bookstore, announced. "It's a book. Guy by the name of William Pollack. Dynamite!"

A week later our whole perception base changed. Actually, we mothers-of-boys snuck around feeling guilty and damnably stupid. Our expletives were indicators of the book's effectiveness:

"Of course! My God, what have I been doing!"

"If I had only known."

"You know, men should read this too. Don't they care?"

"We've got to let the teachers know. We've got to stop what's happening."

"Annie, why are you crying?"

Chapter 9

WE MET, DISCUSSED *Real Boys' Voices*, and some of us got our husbands to read the book. The most amazing thing—our men reacted with sadness, acknowledged their acceptance of the information, but were unsure what to do. There was plenty of data about boys and mothers, but little about boys and fathers. It became clear that even the experts had little knowledge about a father's role in raising boys. I came to understand that because male roles are not clear in today's culture, no one is sure of what boys need in the way of fathering. Maybe tribes where the wife's brother raised her boys had a better way of dealing with this dynamic? I had to accept the fact Bobby wouldn't get sound information about his masculinity because he didn't have a positive role model. As a woman, I passed my perceptions of what a man should be, and that's what Bobbie had to go by.

The book exposed a deeply imbedded sadness in our men. Their machismo hid innermost feelings. I expected it to touch their anger—all of us did. We found resignation and dejection. We tried, but couldn't connect with them to work together and change the way we dealt with our sons. You can't connect to an undeveloped or damaged part.

It was up to us. We mothers of boys had to take action. The first thing we did was stop pushing our boys away. That, even if we had done nothing else, changed lives. We had permission to mother our males until such time as they naturally broke away. Fantastic! The change in our boys was measurable. I felt free to love Bobbie unconditionally.

Sally's mom, Jessie, made a presentation to our group shortly after we began our studies of boys. Her presentation was about girls. We moms of girls listened, stunned, as she read selections from the book, *Reviving Ophelia, Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, by Mary

Bray Pipher. As we had when we became aware of real boys, we looked about through eyes filled with tears. It's obvious our culture is not in tune with the needs of children. Our knowledge of the human experience is in its dawn.

The books connected. For the first time we found names for things we had experienced. Names we could use to describe what we observed. Ways of explaining the dynamics of masculinity and femininity to ourselves and to others. The books forced us to re-examine our relationships with our sons and daughters. We felt shame and cursed our past ignorance. We dreamed about creating a school environment which would nurture and support girls and boys.

We had very positive and helpful information about boys and girls for teachers. Of course, no information we had—no form of enlightenment—was admissible in our district. We talked to teachers we knew and several read the books. They liked the information, but stated clearly they couldn't introduce something that would require changes in the schools. We asked why. What we learned about our schools may be an isolated case, but maybe not. You judge!

Women control our elementary and middle schools—even two of the three high schools. The principals are female, the majority of the teachers are female, and even our super and deputy super are women. A majority of the school board members are women. Our schools clearly reflect women's values and decidedly non-male perspectives. There are a few male teachers, but most have to be submissive passengers on the ship sailing through a woman's world. Most strong males had long ago been driven up into administration, into athletics, or out of education completely. In the elementary schools a man is in real danger of losing everything, even his freedom. A

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woman can hug and nurture kids. A man who “touches” will be accused of being a pervert and child molester. Few men are crazy enough to risk teaching in elementary schools.

In our district, the women who control things—those with positions of power who set the course of the school—do not have children of their own. Having never raised children—never having had parental responsibilities—they know little of a mother’s fears or concerns or responsibility. What they do is fill the gaps in their own lives by serving other people’s children.

As I got to know about those in control, I became aware they saw the school and the curricula in terms of the years of their own lives. Children’s needs didn’t drive the system, their personal needs took precedence. If they allowed change, they introduced it over a period of time, regardless of the numbers of children damaged because the change wasn’t in place when needed. I got in touch with that mentality the day the educational leaders had a question and answer session.

Question: “Ms. Taut, we have the lowest scores in the county on the eighth grade Stanford math tests. Our kids are not getting what they need. What are you doing about it?”

Answer: “Annie, I’m so glad you’ve given me the opportunity to explain what we’re doing for our students in the math area. I have already formed a study group chaired by our math coordinator. They have come up with a five year plan for improving math instruction. I can guarantee you that even before the five years have passed, our test scores will meet or exceed those of other county schools.”

Question: “But Ms. Taut! What about my son? He needs the math now, in eighth grade. He’ll be out of high school in five years!”

Answer: “I don’t understand. We’re doing the best we can. Our teachers aren’t paid for these extra committee duties. We don’t have the funds to bring in experts or send our teachers to workshops. We have a wonderful school board, and I want you to understand they are supporting me on this!

“No matter what we do, some parents will complain. Are there any other questions? And please, you may ask questions, but don’t attack me!”

Question: “Ms. Taut, a group of us would like to gather and present information to the board and teachers. We realize that funds are short, we would like to do work not now being done and save the district time and money. Is that acceptable?”

Answer: “Of course it’s acceptable. In fact, we already have standing committees that do just that. We’ve set their agendas and they’re doing as you suggest. I would be glad to put your names on the waiting lists and have the Deputy Superintendent call you if there are openings. Please understand the board has approved these committees and charged them with specific tasks. You will work within our professionally set guidelines to make the contributions we desire.”

My pack met at my house after the question and answer session. I vented my frustration. “It’s always a no-win situation. The losers are the children. The institutions are skewed to serve employees. Parents are denied access. Accountability is impossible because those who control the system use every power—and our tax dollars—to avoid evaluation.”

The others nodded and agreed, but concluded there was nothing we could do about it because those in charge, The State Department of Education, run by professionals recruited from the districts, refused to enforce the accountability statutes the Legislature passed. They made certain the system they functioned so well in wouldn’t

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change. It was worse than a standoff. At least in a standoff there's the possibility someone will shoot; something will happen.

I was also concerned because many of the key players were women. I felt shame and blame, and had fierce thoughts about members of my own sex. Raised believing this is a male-dominated society—men screwed things up—I became aware if women are in charge they're likely to opt for the status quo; against the interests of children.

For the average wage-slave there are no other options. They must accept the schools as they are. We decided to explore our options. I wish I could report that we found solutions. We found MOSS—more of the same stuff. But at the time, I believed our group could be effective creating positive outcomes for our kids.

As an educated, experienced parent, I took a hard look and saw one missing element: accountability. I saw a system so encased in protective wraps—which had so carefully selected its own kind—that most parents have no way of voting against it. No Legislature can pass laws that will be adhered to, and few kids get out with the education they deserve. If we were wealthy, we could pull our kids out and place them in private or parochial school. That would be a way to vote against our district. I shopped around for private schools, but was unable to verify the private school myth of excellence except in a few cases. Dan and I couldn't afford those prep schools.

Leaders all over the country called for competition, advocating parental choice. They talked about ways new public schools could be created: accountable public schools. Schools that remained open only as long as they met the identified and measurable needs of children.

As I gathered information about these new approaches for a report to my group, hope surged through me. Words stricken from the vocabulary of public educators came to

fore: Competition, merit, accountability, parental input.... Honestly, those words and concepts were music to my heart. Perhaps that's why I can't explain *Me* unless I explain how my involvement in educational issues and the strong passion I felt, changed and shaped my life—helped me get unscrewed.

I gave my report, pointing out the power and benefits of the movement. It was the first time our pack understood the theory behind charter schools. Our understanding was timely, as new leaders in our state had mustered Legislative support. The Legislature agreed to fund a few test charter schools.

The powerful thing was, we believed we had an option. For the first time our kids would benefit from changes we helped make. We would create our own charter school for boys and girls and moms and dads: for families. We'd build an accountable school where the bottom line is what happens *for* kids, not *to* kids. Where employees, professionals, are held accountable to measurable standards. Where children are well known by their teachers and cherished. A school where the wolf is near the door, and employees know if they fail the children the school will be closed.

We started driving to the Capitol and attending charter school meetings. A powerful right-wing group working through a not-for-profit institute hosted the meetings and published the necessary materials. Key state senators and members of the House led discussions. The new State Superintendent for Public Instruction, an elected position, was working to clear the way for charter schools. Those of us, parents and teachers, who had the will to do the work, define the school, present our plan to the State Board of Education, meet the standards, could make it happen.

We were thrilled, yet cautious. Many people who wanted charter schools wanted total parental choice. They

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went so far as to propose the state give parents money as vouchers they could spend where they wanted. As we listened it became obvious they had an agenda that would create anarchy.

This group never talked about the good things public schools provide. To them, district schools were bad and had to be destroyed. Everything done in the past had to be wiped out. We had to start over and do things their way. Even I, disenchanted with our local schools, wasn't willing to destroy the good to change the bad.

We wanted access and accountability. We believed that, if held accountable to well-defined standards, elected boards and educators would produce for children, or be removed.

Through our group we had access to educators who could measure performance and insure accountability. We didn't have to invent the wheel. Effective evaluation methods had been developed, tried, tested and known for many decades.

At one meeting we were shocked by the comments from radical elements of the conservative right-wing who had crazy ideas about natural selection, white supremacy, and believed all government is evil. We wanted assurance the charter school movement was not a way to destroy district schools or to let kooks do whatever they wanted with public money.

We forced the agenda and asked for guarantees by the Legislators and State Department of Education people that charter schools would be a method of making all public schools accountable through effective evaluation.

We got very specific guarantees. To receive a charter, a group had to have a well-defined educational program in compliance with the state's statutes on curricula and essential skills. In addition, the chartering group must comply with other state statutes and Federal laws. The charter school had to have measurable results—measured

against established norms—so the state could come in, evaluate, and close the school if it didn't do as it contracted to do. We cheered. We were so naïve, we believed them. We dared let passion dominate our dreams.

In time, we progressed through planning and began “writing” the school. We saw the Charter as a contract, binding upon us, and binding upon the state. The document was enforceable. We had to deliver as written. The state had to evaluate us and hold us to our agreement. It was a typical compact, the same type used every day by every business and government in the real world. It was a “Deliver the program according to the written specs, on the dates as specified, or you won't get paid,” type of agreement. We loved it. I've never talked to anyone who doesn't believe this tried-and-true method is the key to evaluation in education.

My life changed upon those guarantees. I felt grounded for the first time. The energy, money and precious hours it took to write and open our school was easily justified. I experienced passion as a powerful motivator; as a source of energy. We designed a school that served children well. And, we had the politician's guarantee that we would be held to specific performance as contracted. At the time we didn't know they couldn't, wouldn't, had no idea how to, keep their word. I believed in our system of government and the competence of those who hold high positions.

Our energy was selfless. My ken expanded and for the first time ever, I had something important to give. I believed the future of America was bright.

Chapter 10

DAN USUALLY CAME HOME a little late, and with a buzz on. I admit he was easier to deal with. He hummed around, ate, watched TV and fell asleep. His relationship with Bobbie, now a seventh-grader, was pleasant. They had father-son chats, ran errands together, and seemed to enjoy each other's company. Occasionally, Dan got angry and chewed Bobbie up one side and down the other. Usually, because Bobbie screwed something up—like plugging the heavy-duty laser printer into the power back-up and blowing the whole system, or not cleaning his room, or “not minding your mother.”

Dan's relationship with Katie, who was “Miss Nasty-Testy” to me, was sweet and always permissive. He got angry with her if she dressed or wore makeup “like a prostitute,” or if he thought she was hanging with the drug crowd. There was no way he could imagine her exploring male anatomy or spreading her legs; a subject never mentioned between them. That was another weight I bore.

Katie came into the living room wearing a mini-skirt which confirmed that her legs didn't go all the way up. Dan started to go ballistic until she gave him her, “Now Daddy, you don't understand.” line and convinced him it was the style and she would be an outcast if she didn't dress like, well you know, “Rad!”

I argued it wasn't the style. Dan ignored me. Katie gave me a smirking, “he doesn't care what you say.” look.

If I disciplined her, she listened and usually did as I asked, but not without ugly back talk. She spent her time convincing Dan I was the creature from hell.

Since Katie was born, she had been easy to parent. Bobbie had consumed our energy and haunted our dreams. Now, Bobbie was easy, and we were paying for those sweet years when Katie was our darling. Oh I know,

it was hormones. I can't think of anything worse than puberty. It should be a universal cuss word.

Dan asked me one night, as Katie ran to her room screaming vulgar accusations, slamming the door in anger, "Honey, couldn't we give her a shot to ease her pain? Isn't there a way to stop her testing of every hateful and bitter emotion it's possible to direct against us?"

I prayed that medical science would find a shot. Girls could be vaccinated and... and we had it easy. I can relate horror stories about the evil some of our friend's pubescent darlings subjected them to. But then, maybe even the next day, everything between Katie and me was sweetness and light and Bobbie was the perfect house pet.

Actually, the little birds were just following nature and wanted out of the nest. Well, anger is a great way for parents to get separate, too. The problem was, neither intended to leave. They knew a good nest when they had it. It would be years before we could push them out.

Dan and I had time together if they were out. Sometimes we explored sexual satisfaction, which I found myself desiring once in a while. We discovered we liked one another. When we had privacy our strange noises didn't bring the children pounding on our bedroom door. Life was sweet, for a day or two, at least once a month. The parent pangs were easing. Most of our work was done. It was too late to change them. We had had our shot when they were malleable. Now, they were almost beyond us.

I've gotten a little ahead of the story.

Chapter 11

IN THE DAYS when I was adamant about assuming responsibility for our children's education, I joined with others of similar mind to design and open a model school. Not just "a school," but a totally accountable, educational program built from the kids' needs up. Even now, as I recall the excitement and commitment of those days, and the pure passion I shared with the members of the Design Team, the great feelings come back. We were primed and ready to rally resources and start fresh. For years we had gone about griping, sniping and hyping what was wrong. A window of opportunity opened and we crafted our dream.

It took over a year and thousands of hours of work. Our product was a creation parents and master teachers had heretofore only been able to dream about. We brought forth a school based first upon knowing and meeting each child's needs, then parent's needs, then family needs. Then, on up until we met some, but due to facility and budget restraints, not all, of the state's educational standards for each discipline.

We identified the knowledge and experiences children needed to master in each unit of study, program and grade. We clearly described those requirements, delineated ways to measure achievement, and refused to pass a child along until she demonstrated mastery of at least eighty-five percent of the information.

When the school was written, we sent it out for critique by respected educators around the country. We got back rave reviews, and letters expressing wonder that, "We had it right." Many from the local community, including some of the teachers we respected, told us we had created a model for future schools. We felt great. All we had to do was get the contract with the state accepted, get the charter, hire staff and get the board working. We did!

You want to know if dreams really do come true? If our idealism paid off? If we were able to be effective for kids? If I found a way to be vital and involved? If I found a way to serve my community and my country?

I failed—we failed. Totally! We had visualized effective governance, and we had imagined the professionalism and competence of Master Teachers who would focus upon children's needs and not their own. Because of our naïveté in those two areas, and the breaking of political promises, our work was for naught.

Our charter school depended upon parents who did more than care, and teachers who knew how the whole curriculum melded together—teachers who would always put kids first. And the school required a governing board focused upon children's needs, not adult social and political agendas. Boy did we screw up!

So what happened? We created a governmental system for our charter school where teachers were involved in running the school. Given that power, the teachers used it to do away with key parts of the charter they didn't like. In a few months they had re-arranged the program so they didn't have to meet with parents or teach subjects they didn't like to teach. They also did away with specific performance accountability. Governing board parents went along because they liked the teachers, their kids were happy, and because they were told, "Those who designed the school have unrealistic expectations."

On top of that, as if our idealism about teachers and school management wasn't curse enough, the politicians at the state level did a one-hundred-eighty degree turn. They bought into the radical vision of hundreds of disconnected, isolated public schools, fed with public money, generally unaccountable to the state for anything they did to kids.

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The State Board for Charter Schools created educational anarchy fed by hands dipping deep into the public's pocket. As a result, the state would not enforce our contract and the teachers got away with their disruption of the programs. By its third year, the school, which could have been a model for change through specific performance and effective evaluation, lay gutted and dead.

Angry, we sat in a charter schools meeting in the Capitol, with bitterness growing in our hearts. We were devastated as the State Board for Charter Schools threw out the idea of specific performance contracts with measurable results. They decided parents would be the judges of whether a charter school is good or not. If you don't believe me, I understand. Not even politicians could be that ignorant, but ours were. They agreed to pretend that accountability exists when parents, learning after the fact, via results from tests that weren't even designed yet, that their children are irreparably damaged, will take their children out of a school, thus voting against the school. That is now our state's version of school accountability. It's already creating a devastating mess. But of course, without appropriate feedback from effective evaluation, few know how much damage has been done to children.

Carla, as passionate as I about our mission, summed up the new state policy at our next design team meeting. "The ignorant rascals have decided to test the kids in two disciplines to determine if a school works." She clasped and unclasped her hands, grimacing. "Well, that is *if* sometime in the future they can agree on the content of the tests. They'll publish the results. *If* parents learn their children have been damaged, and enough parents take their kids out of the school to stress it financially, they'll put the charter school on probation or something." She didn't try to hide her contempt or anger. "They call that the 'rule of the marketplace.' The bastards have side-stepped their

responsibility. They've left parents responsible for salvaging their child's education after the damage has been done. Damn them!"

Nancy was seething acrimony. "It's a 'full speed ahead, damn the children' approach. They're using the children's futures to lubricate the stake being driven into America's heart. They're damaging kids, destroying the credibility of educators, discrediting the parental choice movement, and," she paused to make certain we would get her point, "it may destroy the system that built One America: Comprehensive schools. Come on, let's organize and expose the bastards!"

Sandi, who prided herself on bringing reason to every conversation, stood up. "I think the notion that the state can test kids and the after-the-fact-evaluation will create a public reaction to force changes in the school's administration, teaching staff, teaching methods, curricula and programs, is ludicrous. But that's now our state policy. Accountability is dead, they made sure of that. We're beaten. Ladies, the game's over. We lost."

We had to accept the fact that no politician dared hold the charter schools—any public schools—to specific performance contracts. Accurate evaluation would result in feedback which would require change. Change is a direct threat to those who seek the status-quo; most people holding positions of power.

Of course, as our design team discussed and cussed, like any program with its tentacles firmly implanted in the public trough, the charter school movement goes on. In our state there are now more charter schools than district schools. And of course, no one on the state level has a way of finding out what's happening.

I don't want to imply charter schools are totally unaccountable. The state demands financial bookkeeping so dollars can't be abused. In our state you can abuse a

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child—a child’s education—but not a dollar. You can quote me on that.

Carla reported, “The most disastrous effect of the parental choice movement is the damage being done to the public district schools that are trying to evaluate effectively. Schools that serve children and families well. They’re getting wiped out as funds are cut and their comprehensive programs destroyed.” We nodded and urged her to go on.

“Education in our state is obstructed and thousands upon thousands of kids suffer ignorance. No one can project what it will cost to repair the system. Of course,” she said sadly, “there is parental choice. We’re free to move to another state or country.”

Design Team meeting adjourned. Forever.

What I learned that really concerns me—why was I so blind I didn’t see it. How had I spent so much time trying to create something that wouldn’t have worked anyway—is that even our model charter school couldn’t have delivered a comprehensive educational program. At its best, it could have been a model used for improving the district schools, and that at the kids’ expense. Why? Because we couldn’t come close to matching the district school’s offerings. From art to sports, from music to science and computer labs, the district schools have—had—the resources, the buildings and the philosophy of comprehensive education. No charters, even the ones whose students may pass the state’s limited tests, have those assets.

As we, and other parents who bought into the parental choice myths learned, our children need the variety and resources of the district schools. I preach now, when the subject comes up and I can take to my soapbox, that millions upon millions of dollars are being spent on charter schools that can not—should not—replicate what is already in place. If they spent that money to force accountability upon the district schools—even to enforce

the legislation and statutes in existence, our state would now lead the nation in education.

Talk about burning bridges ahead of students...!

Aha! The confessions of an aberrant parent. All good deeds *are* punished. What I learned, is each parent must take care of her own. Run interference, milk the system for all it's worth. Get what your kid needs and forget the rest. Parents who don't do that are condemned to have children who.... Well, you know.

It hurts. Knowing what could be. Dreaming as I did, putting my heart and soul into it and failing. Failing for reasons that should never be allowed to get in the way, but are in the way because a fluke in our system defeats leaders who could make a difference. My pain manifested itself through self-chastisement, the "shoulda's" and "coulda's" and "what if's." The anger and contempt for state leaders who led without knowing where they are going. The failure of educational leaders who are supposed to speak out for kids—fight for kids—and wouldn't. The society. The economic system. The....

As bad as it was, there were good aspects. We learned to take care of our own. The problem is, what kind of a world will they have to fight their way through if so many deprived and damaged peers clutter the populace?

My attempt to create great schools for my kids—all kids—was a disaster. I always believed we learn from our mistakes. What did I just say? "*I always believed?*" Why? Who gave me my sense of moral outrage; these concepts of ethical behavior I believe universal? The sense of law and justice I assume is out there? Where did the misinformation come from?

You know, a lot of it came from TV!

Chapter 12

I WOULD LIKE TO BELIEVE my success is based upon good parenting, strong religious training, and good schooling. In reality, I'm a product of screwed-up parenting, religious training that didn't hit the mark, and schools that sucked. I'd love to give credit to those in my life who formed me into the person I am.... But!

I'm not proud of this, it's embarrassing, or should be. Truth be known, the place I got most of my values was sitting in front of the tube.

When I think about it, I didn't learn patriotism from my American history classes. I accepted what patriotism is as I watched TV. Mostly from old WW II movies with John Wayne. I had to watch because my father loved them. And, I will never be able to comprehend the full impact of Lassie. I just know I accepted that dog's values as my own.

As I went into this new phase of introspection, I came to understand that TV and movie scripts always have a moral message. There's a good-guy-bad-guy plot. We're taught from an early age there are lots of bad guys out there, and the good guys—we good guys—always win.

I wrestled with my anger at the failure of our charter school. Based upon my programming, it was natural for me to conclude that those who screwed the dream are the bad guys. I wanted them to suffer the consequences of their misdeeds. The bad guys always got theirs. How come the only penalty for a politician's stupidity is the possibility of being promoted to a higher level of incompetence, dropped by her party or not reelected? How could a teacher charged with the futures of children put his personal comforts and interests ahead of theirs? How could parents who served on a school board let children be damaged while they fought for status, power and the status quo?

The knowledge that these bad guys could hurt so many kids and get away with it, tore at me. What's going on? What's the world really about? Even deeper within me was the fear of not being capable of preparing Bobbie and Katie for the real world.

Remember the "I'm okay, you're okay" breakthrough? I was very young at the time, and it was mixed into the woman's movement and the great stuff about Transactional Analysis. Older kids protested a corrupt government whose mendacious leader swore, "I am not a crook." The full impact of the war in Southeast Asia was becoming known.

I formulated my values at the edge of those times, just as the "equal and opposite" reaction started to make the '70s reject the '60s. There were so many bad guys on both sides that many believed America was doomed, if not already in the toilet. We hadn't learned Carter's honesty was real, or that Regan, who could act the part of an honest guy, could circle the wagons, open the country's coffers to his cronies, allow guys like North to run rampant, and yet re-instill American pride. A confusing time to grow up, and I was a product of confusion!

In bed, my pillow hugged against my breasts, I feigned sleep to fend off Dan's timid inquiries. He slept now, breathing heavily, close but far enough away. My mind raced as I processed and re-processed the failure of the charter school.

There are bad people, mentally sick people, evil people. I'd seen convicted killers interviewed on TV and they were scary. However, I never met such a person and I didn't know anyone who had. The people I met, even the smucks, thought themselves good. They are—well, except for their propensity to rationalize—honest and fair. It was rationalization that made them do things they shouldn't do.

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I knew a lot about rationalization—the ability to devise self-satisfying but incorrect reasons for one’s behavior. I did it all the time. Did that make me one of the bad guys?

Yeah, it did. At least in situations where I did things I wanted others punished for doing.

Self-satisfaction blinded the teacher who cheated kids; thwarted his higher and more godly callings. He didn’t deal with the fact that he hurt others, thereby betraying the values he professed. How did I know? Because I was uncomfortably in touch with my own ability to fool myself.

I hate nights like that. After, I avoid thinking what I got in touch with. Somehow, thinking or no, I changed. Once I became aware of what I did, I caught myself and tried not to rationalize—or at least know when I was—and not to believe my own bullshit.

I was aware that what I did was based upon internal dialogue used to twist the facts to fit the outcome I wanted. As I analyzed my decision making processes, I saw myself as manipulative and dishonest. I wanted to talk to someone who could give me straight feedback. Was I self-serving? After asking probing questions—feeling my closest friends out—I realized none could help me because they weren’t privy to my internal dialogue. It was an awful time. I was still alone. I felt dirty inside, as when I lied or cheated.

That frustration opened major passage in my life. I opened myself, searching, reading, praying, and processing. One Sunday, as the Pastor’s words flowed around me as usual, something happened. His words seemed directed at me, a special message:

“Whenever you have internal doubts and fears—when you are searching for clarity of thought and action—there is but one rule you must follow: Know thyself, to your own self be true.”

I knew then, suddenly like sunlight shooting from the edge of a cloud, that I had the information I needed to

keep from being manipulative or dishonest; to make decisions based upon sound information. With that breakthrough the emotional pain went away. I had experienced a major passage.

My job was clear. It was my responsibility to help Bobbie and Katie work through complicated moral and ethical issues. To give them information about the importance of being true to one's self, and help them understand the applications of that concept to their way of thinking and being.

Parenting became something more than creating good schools and fighting over mini-skirts. As I gained from experience, I saw a bigger picture. Parenting is really about creating solid, self-disciplined, self-directed, thoughtfully moral children. Not an easy task.

Chapter 13

BY AGE THIRTY-FIVE, I was lifting the lid of ignorance covering my myopic world. I began to get enlightenment through a crack opened by study and experience. I became acutely aware I was the product of misinformation, or no information. Yet I had these kids, a husband, a life, and I had to know enough to be effective. The search for self-knowledge provided the tools I needed to help others and myself. At twenty-five, I had been dangerous.... Now?

Kahlil Gibran taught that my children are not my children, they are arrows shot from the bow of the present into the future. He said parents are as two columns holding up the same roof. I accepted it then, I believe it now.

I held up the roof and examined my bow and aim. I looked for the other column. It was there, but too short to hold up the roof without me crouching down, shorting myself. This amazing process of soul-searching, maturation, helped me understand *Me*.

But what of Dan? Had he gone through a similar maturation process? If so, had I missed it? He seemed frozen in place emotionally. He was good at his work, successful as we equate dollars to success; happy, if having to numb one's mind to get through time is happiness. He was strong, a macho male with the toys that went with the image. He could communicate pain and grief when bombed, but chose not to "get deep" if sober. He knew the tricks of block-and-parry that kept conversations—his part at least—from getting sticky. Dan was in denial.

Great concept, denial. It could mean dissent, but in his case it meant refusal. He'd rejected the parts of himself that required feeling. When he had strong feelings and desires, like about sex, he learned to expect and accept rejection. He prepared for rejection before he started, and

therefore kept some of his self-respect and dignity intact when it happened.

It wasn't only his need for loving contact that taught him to expect rejection. Every day at work he was subjected to threats against the one thing he believed he existed to do, provide for his family. The threats were subtle, like the consequences of not making a quota, closing a deal, or increasing profits. When he did fail, his employer and peers scorned him. He knew the pain, he knew the futility, and he put up with it because he had an obligation. Bobbie, Katie and I were that obligation.

As I began to understand why the other column was not holding up the roof, I knew in my heart he couldn't grow until his reason for being changed. Unless and until he could have a life with meaning—a reason for going on not measured by success as a provider—he would stay squashed.

I considered leaving him and finding an older man who had worked through that stuff. I really did. I started looking around. I observed some very attractive older guys who seemed to have it together. My mind raced with the thrill of it. Why invest a lot of angst in a man who couldn't get it together? I could find someone exciting who would not only hold up his part, but help me. I needed support. I needed...? I was getting older...! I could take control and get a life.... I rationalized... but couldn't get away with it anymore.

I loved Danny. I liked him and thought him my best friend, although I only knew best-friend closeness with my buddies, the gals who hung with me.

Sandra, Timmy's mom, listened to me expound and commented, "Annie, it seems to me you're really raising three children." That hit home. What was my responsibility to Dan? What *is* expected of a wife? What's expected of a human being, one person to another? The lid came up a little. I realized it wasn't parenting Dan needed. It was a

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true friend and confidant who loved away the pain and helped him get what he needed.

Something clicked, ran through my brain looking for an old piece of knowledge, associated with a memory I had stored as a young mother experiencing selfless love for the first time. I felt a greater love. I was ready to reach out and share Dan's pain and his journey. With the new wisdom, I believed I could help him, because I thought I knew the way.

Ever learn the business rule that says never give someone something they didn't ask for? Makes real sense. The same rule is true of counseling and teaching, or it should be. If someone isn't ready, what you lay before him makes no difference. If one is truly a good friend and counselor, one knows where the person is in relation to seeking answers. Instead, we self-appointed helpers run around telling the answers to people who haven't asked the questions. Then we wonder why the "pearls laid before swine," are ignored and we end up thinking less of the other person.

I did that. I started near the end and talked information at Dan until I decided he was never going to grow up.

For some reason, as I got more and more frustrated, I turned to him one night right after I had considered life without him, and asked, "Dan, what direction do you see us going? I mean you and me, and our future? Will you do anything to help me plan?"

He smiled and gave my hand a squeeze. "Annie, I thought you had it all planned."

I shook my head, bracing for a fight. "No, not really. I don't know how you feel or what you want."

"What I want?" Color spread to his face. He was getting angry. "Suddenly that matters?" His voice had an edge to it. I could tell he had been holding a lot in. Things he was about to jab me with.

“Dan, I don’t know unless you tell me.”

“Really? You know I pretty much do what I have to. I’ve done a good job at that. Hell, I’m a good provider and you have security and all the things I promised.”

My mind raced. When had he promised? Our marriage vows? Something I made him say? I almost asked, then realization clued me it was a promise made to himself and others.

“Dan, you’re great! You’ve done everything a man could do—everything and more than we needed.”

“You know Annie, that part of my life is almost over. The kids are going to be gone in a few years. As much as I love them and love being a family together, I think a lot about the future.” He drifted, introspective as he appeared to recall his thinking.

“Annie, I have so many dreams. There are so many things I gave....” I could tell he almost said “gave up.” “I... I put off so I could focus on building a career and being someone—you know, someone you and the kids and my parents could be proud of and depend on.”

I had the good sense to keep shut and listen.

“Inside me is the spirit of the dead boy who existed before. I mean, before I had to do the things necessary to, well, what they call ‘be a man.’ Whole parts of me got stifled.”

“You chose what you thought you had to do. Why complain?”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. College. Work. It wasn’t bad. The problem is, it was for others. I bought into it. I let parts of me go. I accepted things because I thought I had to, not because I believed in them. Know what I mean, Annie? They cut out the child in me at the time it most needed to grow and develop.”

“Who?” I hadn’t missed that he had switched to blaming “they.”

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“The people who.... You know, my Mom and Dad. Teachers. You too, a little.”

“What? Told you you couldn’t be happy? Be yourself? Don’t lay that on me. I never told you that.”

“Really! It’s just like with Bobbie. We still harp at him, tell him how to be, what’s expected, how he should feel or not feel! We tell him not to be what he is, a boy.”

Zap! That connected. I had decided Dan didn’t know what a boy was.

“Dan, I’m a woman. I don’t know about boys, that’s *your* job.” I had learned a lot about boys, but I wanted to draw out his insights.

He stared at me. Glowered would be a better word.

“It should be, but it’s not. It doesn’t work that way. It’s like religion. The way it works the child gets religion from his mother. It’s also like, well, everything. A boy’s values, expected ways of being, even ways of relating, comes from women. That’s not an attack on you, that’s the way it is. That’s the way I got my direction, from my poor mother. Dad was there, he tried to have a—what he called a ‘man-to-man relationship’ with me, like I try to have with Bobbie. But you know, as a boy I competed with my dad for Mother’s time. My dad got through to me occasionally, but not often.

“Annie, I didn’t appreciate Dad until he was gone. Then I knew I did things for his approval. It’s like he’s my judge, kinda like God! My mom set him up that way. Women set fathers up that way. Dad was the one we did things to please. Dad was the one who meted punishment. I mean, father-son relationships are that way. ‘My father which art in heaven,’ is God my father judging me as Dad did, dads do. I serve in that role for Bobbie and, I guess, Katie? I don’t know about Katie.”

He paused, considering what he had said.

“Dads aren’t their son’s buddies, best friends, playmates, not even teachers or advisors. They’re not, you

know. At least not until the kid is grown, and most aren't then.

"Annie, I want you to know that more than anything I plan to be there, man-to-man as his friend and mentor when he's grown. At this stage, I'm here as the role model society expects—and as someone for him to be curious about."

"He needs you now, too. He needs his father to nurture him and teach him what it is to be a man."

"I believe that, I do. But not in the way you mean. I can't go against society and the way this womans' world defines a man. If I did, well, he'd really have a hard time."

Dan went in to the kitchen to make a snack. He turned our heavy talk into a light banter about the kids not caring what we did anyway. That signaled he was through discussing issues. He turned on the TV and focused on CNN. It was a male way of getting separate. He was just like Bobbie.

Chapter 14

I BEGAN TO WONDER if Dan gave only part of himself to our marriage and family. Did he reserve the greatest part of himself for others? I didn't know. Were we a compartmentalized part of his life? Did he isolate us in a separate cubicle, do his duty to us, while experiencing another more meaningful life? I worried the question until I decided I knew everything about him. Of course I didn't. I saw him—his life—through my filters. I jumped to a simplistic conclusion based upon my own values. I assumed he wanted everything I wanted.

Home and family were the reasons I existed. I lived my dream and fulfilled my needs. I decided Dan felt the same way, taking it for granted he would do the same things, be the same way, even if I weren't involved. If I left him? If I died? I believed Dan would do exactly as I did. He could cook, clean, nurture, help the kids with schoolwork.... He'd carry on.

Yet I couldn't still the nagging question in the back of my mind: Is there a part of Dan I don't know? What would he change if he were in charge? What would he do? I decided to ask him. I probed to see if there was another compartment, another Dan.

No use to discuss the trouble I had getting Dan to a place where I could probe. With him—maybe most men—you don't just blurt out that kind of question and hope for dialogue. I got us talking about neutral things. Then, in my most non-threatening manner, I asked him how he would raise the kids if I died and he was alone. He asked why I wanted to know. I assured him I wasn't trying to tell him anything. I convinced him I wasn't dying.

"Sometimes I make decisions without you knowing about them. I wonder what you...? I value your insights."

That worked. He shrugged and looked sheepishly at me. I was in.

“Not much different, I guess. I seldom disagree with your decisions. I trust your judgment.”

“And with Bobbie? Am I making the decisions about him you would make?”

“I think you are. You discuss them with your friends who have boys. You get their input and check things out.”

“So what you’ve said about the dead boy inside you? What’s that about?”

“Nothing you or I can change. We know in reality we can’t let that part of a boy out. It must be contained.”

“My God, that sounds awful!”

“It probably is, but.... Annie, what’s the scariest thing you can imagine happening with Bobbie? I mean other than injury, illness, stuff like that.”

I didn’t have an immediate answer.

“You know the wild, out-of-control energy when boys get together in a gang and go crazy?”

I nodded. Boy energy could be scary. In a gang there’s no judgment, no self-control. Boys tear along leaving a path of destruction and....

“I know what you’re describing.”

“We can’t have that. We see it every day and we know we can’t allow it. Intellectually, we know it’s wild and free energy. It can be the Huck Finn or the Spirit of Freedom, but we can’t deal with it. Unharnessed boy energy is counter to our society. So, we try to channel it into Cub Scouts or sports. Mostly, we sit down hard on boys to contain and stifle their natural behavior.”

“You’re right, we do. I know that. I thought if men were in charge they wouldn’t be so stifling.”

“Maybe not, in a perfect world. But to survive in this society we have to make certain the wild boy inside each man is dead. Oh, we let little parts survive, sometimes we call those parts the ‘natural child.’ Toys are okay. Some

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sports are acceptable. Even the faked violence of TV wrestling is becoming acceptable as an outlet. Mostly, we confine them and put them in harness as young men. The military draft once worked great for that. The services took boys and made them men. But long before, the schools and parents had ground off the rough edges.”

“They did that to you?”

“Of course. And I help do it to Bobbie. I’m his father. It’s one of the parts of parenthood I hate. I have to help hold him down while they cut him. And I do it because I know the alternative for him is maybe prison or at the least, being a misfit—an outsider.”

I didn’t want to deal with his pain. I directed the conversation back to me, my probe. “So you wouldn’t change anything? You’d do what I do?”

“Well, maybe. I suppose so but....”

He got a dreamy look in his eyes I’d never seen before. A part of him seemed to break through. A thoughtful, intellectual part I assumed he applied to his work.

“I think I’d take the kids and spend a year or so on a wild stretch of beach where they would run and play and be wild and free without threatening anybody. We’d talk over campfires and build forts. We’d learn to sail a raft we built out of driftwood. We would stand with our feet in the surf and face a storm.... Learn the stars. No school! No structure except nature’s....” His eyes watered and he seemed to slump down, back into his harness.

“And Katie? You think she’d like that?”

“I don’t know. I imagine so—well, probably not. I don’t understand Katie. She’s a little girl and yet she has so many of the traits I dislike in women. Now don’t get me wrong, I love her. What I’m reacting to is her manipulative, sneaky way of getting what she wants. I understand it, but...? It’s the most denigrating feeling when its done to you. No, she would miss her friends. Her girl gang isn’t dangerous like a boy gang can be. It’s like all internal stuff

between them, not acting out against others, inanimate objects or the world. Girls are so different. Different harness, I guess.”

“I think she would love a year to just be a kid. Oh, at first she might fight it, be afraid of losing friends. But then.... It would be wonderful for her.”

“It makes me wonder, Annie. Do you think there was ever a time kids were free to be kids? I don’t remember ever hearing about a society like that. Girls were married at puberty. Boys were controlled as soon as they could hunt, follow the men into the fields, or go to war. What we’re talking about is like Rousseau’s premise that man is corrupted by society. If children were ever free to be what nature intended, that time is lost. Society has corrupted man. It’s necessary for our survival.”

Chapter 15

I EXPERIENCED SO MUCH in those years. What comes through to me is the territoriality I felt regarding the children. Dan once characterized young mothers, me, as “tigresses defending their young.” That described me. I knew from day one I was in charge of everything to do with raising kids and home. I never accepted interference.

Dan knew there was no way to have real input in those years. In our group, some husbands felt so closed out they took off. Divorce was prevalent during the first years of parenthood. It can’t be fun married to a tigress.

As far as I could tell, children didn’t strengthen a marriage. At least not the ones I knew. If a marriage survived, it was because of a solid relationship prior to children; the obligations, family and social pressures, and economics.

As the kids were growing up, I’d get a twinge of guilt because I wasn’t involving Dan. I’d draw him in, hear his point-of-view, and then discount it. He withdrew even further. Then I blamed him for not doing more. That’s called “damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” That kind of game is no-win, and I engaged in it.

After Dan explained about the dead boy inside him, I feared the boy in Bobbie was almost dead. We had done our jobs. He was confronted, literally at every turn, redirected and told to “Knock it off! Be a man!”

I sensed, as had happened to me, the free and natural parts of Katie were also being thwarted. What parts? The natural parts which require endless uncounted unaccountable hours of time to just be. Nowhere in our family life or schools was such time possible. Play had become a dirty word. Time to play had been removed so future workers wouldn’t be distracted from their tasks.

I had probed Dan's inner mysteries and discovered a place I also wanted to go. On the Internet I found a Web site devoted to Family Travel Learning. You'll love it. Try: www.familytravellearning.com. It blew me away. There are hundreds of families traveling and home-schooling. There are families who have taken their kids out of the system, left their jobs or taken a leave of absence, to learn together, experientially. I found every conceivable curriculum guide, teaching manual and test. There are support systems for those who home-school. There are reports from parents who travel-school which tell about every aspect of their choice, including selecting a means of travel, costs and destinations. I read on, noting my head and heart were working together and a frustration I felt for years was easing.

"Danny, can the dead boy inside you be resurrected?" We were in bed watching Biography on A & E. I hoped he'd be open to me.

"In my dreams, he's not really dead.... Why?"

"Can dreams come true? I mean what if I told you I shared those dreams?"

He sat up, pulling two pillows behind him for support against the head board. "I always imagined something happened to the tomboy in you.... It was there when I first knew you, then I saw it in Katie, but she's losing it too. I loved that part a lot. I guess growing up requires the death of boys and tomboys...."

"Only I don't like to call that part of me a tomboy, as if it's not part of being a woman. Know what I mean?"

"Sure. It's part of us, male or female doesn't matter. It's the natural part where our creativity and imagination come from. It hurts a lot to know it's gone—that we've grown old and lost our youth."

"Danny, I don't think it has to be that way. We have to decide we want to nurture those parts in ourselves and

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that we can't let society kill them in Katie or Bobbie. We have to do something about it."

"Sure, and we'll win the lottery."

"What if we did? Would we take a year or so and just wander around with a trailer, calling the seaside or the big cities—anywhere—our home?"

"I would in a minute. Even the thought of it sends energy surging through me."

"I found a site on the Web. There are hundreds of families who decided to travel-school. They lease their homes, put their jobs on hold, buy an RV and take off. They move with the seasons, wintering in the south and.... Danny, if we want it we can do it, can't we?"

"Honey, in my life there has never been anything I want more. You know the beach I told you about where the kids could run and play and be close to nature without external structure? That's my dream for retirement. Well, it was. You're saying you would be willing to do it now? Now with the kids? Now as a family?"

Dan hadn't cried since his father died. He sat, braced up by pillows, shoulders hunched, tears running down his face. He looked at me, our eyes met and we laughed, a kind of happy release of joy that comes from deep within the core of lost selves. I cried too.

"It wasn't just the boy in me I thought was dead. I feared I was dead too. I've been a dead man for a long time. Did you know?"

Chapter 16

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG. We had plans... plans held in sealed places we chose to open now, not when we retired. Every question was answered by families who submitted their adventures to the Internet site. The economics of freedom loomed as our problem.

Dan had years of tenure in his job. He imagined they would fire him for even suggesting he take a year off. As it turned out, his boss caught Dan's dream and helped him redefine his job in a way which allowed Dan to work and communicate via the Internet. He would take a cut in pay. He'd serve as a consultant and project controller, only he wouldn't fly a desk. It didn't matter where he was physically, as long as he made himself available at pre-arranged times and did his work.

We leased the house, cashed some stocks, and sold junk from our garage. Danny's sports car went, along with some precious stuff I hadn't used or unpacked in over five years. We began searching for a used RV. We settled on a crew cab pickup truck and a fifth wheel trailer. The rig was almost forty-six feet long and scared the hell out of us the first time we pulled it down the street. After some practice we could both drive, back, unhitch and set-up like pros.

Our new home was a home. The kids had their private bunk beds and space. The bathroom provided privacy and a nice shower over a four-foot tub. The kitchen was complete with microwave, stove and oven, refrigerator and freezer, storage and adequate counter space. Dan and I had a queen size bed at the head of the trailer and some privacy behind a partial wall and a curtain. We found a sticker the previous owner had left under the bed. *If this rig's a rocking, don't come a knocking.* We laughed over it, but thought it a little extreme for a family home.

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We had satellite TV, stereo CD and tape player, a computer complete with scanner and printer, and.... You laugh. We were going out for a year, maybe more. We weren't going camping. We truly had a home we took with us. Our whole rig cost less than thirty thousand dollars. The truck accounted for most of the expense. Good used trailers are not expensive.

We set a budget which had to include everything: food, gas, insurance, maintenance, clothing, fees, tickets to movies and events, subway fares in big cities, and nightly RV Park fees. After corresponding with other families who were on the road, we settled on a budget of one hundred dollars a day. Dan did some figuring and announced that we were spending over one hundred dollars a day at home.

Actually, we averaged seventy-eight dollars a day on the road. Our average cost for a quality RV Park was twenty-eight dollars. On the road, the truck ate gas at the rate of forty dollars per driving day, which we limited to four or five hours or less. We traveled one or two days each week. Our biggest expenses were admissions to museums and special exhibits, aquariums and parks. Taking four bikes saved a lot of money, and wear and tear on the truck. We had a folding boat with motor and fishing gear. We had everything we needed, including the kids.

When Dan and I made the decision to travel, we staged a dinner conversation that first hooked, and then excited, the kids. All of us were fired-up. Dan asked Katie if she wanted to take off for a year and travel. I don't think the reality of separation from her friends hit her at first. She gave us an unequivocal "yes." Bobbie didn't hesitate either. We talked about the consequences of being gone a year. School was an unknown. The worst thing that could happen was they would have to repeat the year. I told them other families had returned and had no problem getting into their age-grade.

Katie began to deal with the reality of separation from her friends. After discussing the problem, I mentioned that she could be in almost daily contact via e-mail. She could even exchange pictures taken with digital cameras. That eased her social angst. We assigned part of our travel plans and agenda to Katie and part to Bobbie. They went to work planning our direction and what we should see. I'd never seen our children so motivated.

I worried about the damage we would do to our kids' education. What about math? Could Dan and I teach them and keep them up? What about music? Bobbie was in the middle school band. Would it be possible for him to practice on the road? English and language arts seemed easy. We would have the kids keep journals and do reports. We would read and discuss books as a family. History would be learned as we visited museums and sites. At the time, I had no idea how much they would learn that's not in the canned curricula of schools. Had I known, I wouldn't have spend another minute worrying about their education.

We'd been on the road for over a week and were relaxing and adapting to the new life-style. The kids were out exploring a river bank near our RV Park. Dan and I sat under the awning, sipping lemonade and "relapsing," as he liked to call it. I felt the heat of his stare and turned to meet his eyes. He had a silly grin on his face and nodded slowly.

"Annie, would you believe today is the first time ever I've felt like part of the family?"

A week before his words would have send a chill down my spine and I'd have become defensive. I grew up feeling isolated and alone. Thing happened to me, against me, things not of my choice. I had friends, but outside of that circle I couldn't connect with society. I was a wife, yet I felt obligated to meet expectations. I was a mother, but most of the joy of parenthood was cloaked by fear of failing. Out

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here, I was getting in touch with all those feelings. I knew exactly how he felt.

“Would you believe I feel the same way? Danny, that’s because we’re not connected to a place or to people. We’re out here free, adrift. And it’s the first time we’ve been a functioning family—I mean together. It’s probably like our grandparents felt out on their farms. You know, back when they were all for one, one for all. Back in the days families worked together to make things go. When kids were needed to help the family survive. Maybe even before kids were taken away by the schools and educated outside the family.”

“Or if they went to school, it was a neighborhood one-room schoolhouse geared to the needs of the community—to families.”

“And here we are, experiencing what only a few generations ago everybody experienced. Ma, Pa and the kids living and learning and being together through the days of their lives.” I paused, tingling with the realization of what was happening for us. “Danny, the kids haven’t known you as you really are. I don’t think I ever knew you very well either. This past week I’ve learned more about you than in all the years we’ve been together.”

“We were never a team with common goals and common experiences,” he said. “We were people living together, trying to have a life together, but we were disconnected. What kind of society—what stupid form of economic system—deprives people of family. You know, Annie, we’ll have to pay for creating a system that denies the essence of family. It’s just a fluke we found it. Think of the families that never have, and never will. Think of their kids, how lonely and isolated they are.”

We found ourselves that year. Every day we experienced something new and challenging. We four explorers came to know an America totally unlike the one

we envisioned before our voyage. We thought of ourselves as land sailors, finding exotic ports, exploring the nature of the land and its people. Our learning accelerated at a rate that couldn't be measured by any test. There was depth to our learning which gave us insights beyond anything a canned curriculum could provide. The disciplines were no longer isolated classrooms where science is taught next door to math and English is down the hall from history. In our found world, the disciplines melded together, inseparable and meaningful, because they're interrelated.

"Annie," Dan said late one night as we watched the swell break in shimmering waves on a Florida beach. "All the men I know are stuck in meaningless obligations and unrewarding relationships. We're loners wandering the empty halls of corporate structures, blowing hot air into each other's ears and exchanging money for it. We spend our lives doing meaningless things like stamping paid on invoices or selling used cars. Or like me, fighting to survive on a battlefield that really doesn't exist, in a world removed from nature and the qualities that make life worthwhile. What a strange time to live."

He turned to me, embarrassed, acknowledging his distaste for emotional outbursts.

"Sorry Annie. I didn't mean to go on like that. But, my God, how can I ever go back?"

Chapter 17

MY INSIDES HAD CHURNED since I was old enough to take hold of my life and start being responsible. Not just my gut, my mind—my whole center—had been boiling and writhing in frustration and pain. One early morning before dawn, I awoke and lay flat-out on the hard RV mattress. My body seemed separate from my mind. My thoughts were a probe I could direct anywhere I wished. My body, thick and unimportant—at least that's the best word I know to describe how cement-like it felt. Something was missing and I experienced a tremble of fear as I realized something was gone—something had been lost.

I probed the space around me and then my body. It was as if a cacophony of stimuli, loud discordant noise, had been shut off. The bombardment that had kept me contained and under the shelter of protective veils all my life, had stopped. Then, for the first time, I came to know my center. I knew peace. I didn't hurt emotionally or physically. I wasn't under assault from my frustrations and fears.

A cool ocean-breeze blew across my body. I came back to it, and there was no discord. I became keenly aware I'd evolved to a new level of existence. I found *Me*, a delicate flower that had grown, was trying to bloom, in spite of the discordant hell I had been suffering. Laughter bubbled from my heart and purified me. Danny woke and turned. He touched my face, running the palm of his hand up and across my temple over my hair. He grunted, mumbled something about energy, and went back to his dreams.

As I lay there, alone with *Me*, I feared the bombardment would return. Dawn came. The sun rose out of the tree-line and its yellow light hit the trailer's metal sides making them pop with little expansive expressions. I

heard Bobbie stir and then his feet hit the floor. He disappeared behind the bathroom door. A minute later he came out, saw me and made a bee-line for our bed. I felt a twinge of fear that somehow his presence would bring the discord back. Instead, I filled with the pure joy of my son and held him as I had never been able to hold him before. I knew then, the confusion and roiling emotions were gone. I had found the center of my being.

From my new vantage point I watched as each of my loved ones found their centers. It took Danny the longest time, almost half the year. One day he was different. His facial muscles communicated a bright charisma. His body flowed, rather than jerked. His voice had an easy edge to it that told us he was content and happy. I saw a boy emerge from his prison and go out to play. He laid puns upon us like the petals of giant stinky weeds. He laughed at junior high school humor that only weeks before made him huff and vent his chagrin as if it had been an assault.

“Annie, do you know what?”

He didn’t wait for me to say “what.”

“There’s a lot I can do. I can make a living—not sell all my time. Look what I’ve done already. I have a lot to offer and I don’t have to sell my life to someone else. I can work to live, not live to work. I’ve heard it all my life, now it makes sense.”

“We can do a lot together if we want. I’d like that.”

“Gives the commercial a new meaning doesn’t it?”

I didn’t have a clue what he was referring to.

“You know. ‘Don’t leave home without it.’ The ‘it’ is you. We do life together.”

I understood. Perhaps now you know what I meant by junior high humor.

Then, just as our lives centered and our family bonded, it was over. The year passed. The calendar had a box

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around an August date and a note scribbled in pencil, "School begins."

We didn't want to come home. We didn't want to stop traveling. We didn't want to move out of our wonderful trailer. We didn't want to, but of course we did. We had to, I guess, although I'll never be sure.

The trailer sat in our yard as a reminder of something past. Then Dan put it into storage. We planned to sell it, but it was our getaway machine and we had to know it was there, waiting, just in case reality wasn't real.

The best thing for me about returning home were my friends. The gang or "pack," as we like to call ourselves, were as warm and comforting as friends can be. I basked in their love and quickly made the transition back to reality.

Dan had no "pack" to welcome him back and help him. Within days he saw his family and his role as part of the family torn away from him. The school claimed the kids and structured their time. His job pulled him away for nine or more hours each day. I had my friends to lunch with and enjoy. He had me, no one else. His shoulders slumped again. The exciting charisma that had glowed from his face began to fade. He put his weight into the harness, closed his soul and pulled. The weight of meaningless toil and separation squashed the boy inside him. He thought a lot about death and dying. He was back, the all American male!

Chapter 18

“RUN FOR THE SCHOOL BOARD!” Carla urged. “Do something positive to help our kids!” The others agreed. “Annie, you have so much to offer. There are two other openings. If we put together a slate of candidates who really focus on kids, we can change things.”

I agreed to run, “if.” If I could be effective and not waste my time. That “if” saved me untold suffering and frustration.

Petitions were passed around. I was a candidate. Other wheels began to turn. The School Board Association offered a training workshop for prospective school board members. I knew from past experiences the association and the administrator’s union are in bed together—even housed in the same building. It’s the School Board and Administrators versus children, parents and teachers. The teachers have a union of sorts. But a large number of teachers are so unprofessional and weak of character they won’t support other teachers or, when it comes down to it, the children they profess to love.

I knew that going in, but I never suspected those who controlled our schools had the ability to circumvent the process of representative governance.

I went to the workshops run by the School Board Association. They had well-prepared materials, a slick presentation. They gave out information about laws, organizational structures, and model boards. Permeating the information was a strong message: “Although you’re an elected representative of the people, you may not represent the people. Your job is,” and this is their definition, not the law as they implied, “to hire competent professionals, support them and stay out of their way.”

This message was followed by suggestions of what school board members could do. Things like approving budgets and contracts. We were given lists of the things

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they could not do. Of course these items were put together by the administrators who didn't want to be accountable to their employers. I learned the board must govern by consensus. A difference of opinion on the board was not allowed. The full power of the Association would be directed against any individual who tried to follow her platform and represent the people who elected her.

Once again, the problems with American education boiled down to effective evaluation—accountability—and the extreme measures taken by those in power to avoid it.

My first question of board members attending the workshop was:

“Why don't you do something? Children are obviously being damaged by inaction and lack of leadership.”

From each I got the same answers:

“I've tried to represent those who elected me. I tried to carry out my platform. I was singled-out, battered, abused and threatened so I gave up.”

“If the superintendent has a small group on the board who support her, then the only way consensus can be reached is by appeasing the group and supporting the superintendent.”

They begged me not to be too critical. They excused their actions by claiming they weren't professional educators and thus could have little input into such a “complicated profession.” In addition, the associations brought unbelievable pressure to bear upon them if they deviated, including threatening legal action.

I knew these powerful groups had direct access to the press. Each of us could recall how the papers used their power to embarrass and denigrate board members who tried to do the job they were elected to perform. I learned that “the power of the press” is really the power of the individuals who own the newspapers. They're vested individuals who believe wealth and power make them superior. They side with management, denigrate

employees, and have never in recorded time taken the side of children.

“A strong teachers’ union, associated with parents, would make a difference,” several board members told us in confidence. “But that can’t happen because there are too many self-serving teachers entrenched in the institutions. Their lack of professional ethics—concern for children—renders unions impotent.”

The State Legislature decided anything would be better than the existing system. They concluded that nothing short of destruction would change the public schools. They jumped to the opposite extreme, charter schools were formed, and they threatened to go to a voucher system.

“Annie,” a master teacher from our district told me, “not one Superintendent of Schools came up with a plan to effectively evaluate their schools. Not one fought for kids, teachers or comprehensive education. Not one elected school board member had the insight or the guts to stand up and protest the false conclusion that existing public schools couldn’t be evaluated effectively. The administrator’s union and the School Board Association are that powerful. Powerful enough to muzzle leadership that could lead us out of the mess. I’m getting out of teaching. Things won’t change in my lifetime.”

No, I didn’t stand for election. Nor, when those who supported me learned the truth, did anyone want me to. Those elected had agendas that ranged from political ladder-climbing to hate-filled religious convictions. None shouldered their responsibility to children, parents, and master teachers. The status-quo was maintained.

Gad! Sorry, I just had to get it off my chest. I want so badly to believe in our American system of representative democracy. Well, the ideal is there, but the will of the people is circumvented. At least my will was.

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I accepted the fact that my children would not benefit from anything I did to bring accountability to the system. I didn't give up. I put my energy into doing for the kids and families I knew. Like so many others, I'm ready to give my all if ever a leader emerges who has a clear plan for holding public school employees accountable. So far, no leaders have emerged, and even the education president is unwilling to confront the issue of educational accountability.

The good news is that miles away in another community we found a school district with a tradition of, and a commitment to, quality education. Although battered and under stress from lack of state funding and the tangled mess of the anarchy of charter schools, the district's comprehensive education program was intact. Projections indicated the district would be brought down—damaged beyond repair—within a few years if the state didn't make funding comprehensive schools a priority. For our kids, the district would survive long enough for them to get in, get what they needed, and get on with their lives.

We found parents who carpooled. I drove mornings and pick-up two times a week. A father who worked in the community brought those kids home who stayed for athletics and after school activities. We kept our home and the kids didn't seem to mind three hours driving time each day.

Those of us who could, found good schools for our kids. Those forced by economics or employment to stay behind, worked to supplement and enrich the education their children received. As Sandi so aptly put it, "We're caught in a horrible manifestation of a cultural lag." I fear America won't survive the demise of comprehensive education. I learned that the comprehensive school is the single identifiable factor that created "One America," coast

to coast, north to south. One country with common language, history, ethics and values. My studies taught me that *One America* was the result of planned intent. It wasn't an accident.

Well, while I rejected politics, and Dan re-adjusted to a Man's world, Bobbie was in that workable wonderplace: BCS—Before cars and sex. Katie began experiencing puberty, and there were some good days.

Dan became, once again, the guy who came home tired, tried to engage, gave up and drifted away in front of the TV. My heart went out to him, but no matter how hard we looked for a solution, none was found. We talked about hitting the road again, but the school experiences were too good to ignore. Bobbie had courses that challenged him. Courses we couldn't provide through home schooling. Music, theater, debate, advanced math, challenging literature classes, foreign language, computer programming, science labs....

Because of sports, Katie was absorbed into a social clique. Happily in the swing of things, she was responsible and her academic achievements impressive. The kids were getting what they needed at this time in their lives. Dan and I put our lives on hold. We decided to work toward the day the empty nest syndrome would set us free. That mistake almost defeated the gains we made during our free year.

The force that brought us back to our own lives and needs was creativity. Creativity stems from the child within. There was enough of the boy left in Dan to force him back on a course that was meaningful and fun. I struggled with the question about what I'd do with the rest of my life, but the child in me was resistant to anything that might invade my space. Dan made his move for sanity and threatened my status quo. My reaction wasn't one I'm proud of.

Chapter 19

DAN CAME HOME LATE one afternoon and stood in the kitchen staring at me as I prepared a salad. I sensed his presence and tried to brace for some shocking announcement or an attack. I felt tired; used. I didn't have energy to take on more problems or shoulder more responsibility. It was that time of the month and that time of day.

"Remember you said we could do it together?" His voice energized with a questioning lilt that told me how hard he wanted to connect.

"Remember? I'm not sure...?"

"That we could work together to survive economically—to be in charge of our own time?"

I felt the grunge peel back as my mind jumped ahead. He was about to make a major decision, or he had made it and was prepping me for the news.

"When we were traveling? We thought we didn't have to come home and fall back into the old ruts? Is that what you're referring to?"

"Exactly! I talked to old man Anderson today. I told him I wanted to go back to the contract we had last year. He suggested I'd do better if I formed my own company and consulted for several firms. He said he could keep me busy most of the time and he'd help me contact others. He said he knew I'd make a change and he was glad I asked for his help."

"You thought he'd be angry and blast you. Why do you think he's been so supportive?"

"He wants to do the same thing, but on his level it's more difficult. Maybe he thinks I'll hire him someday. If I'm trapped, he's a prisoner. Everybody's looking for a way out."

“Where would you work? Would you work here in the basement office?”

“That’s what I thought. And you can work with me...? I mean, if you want. That way I won’t have to hire anyone.”

He was so excited, the happiest I had seen him since we returned from our year. I felt a clamp tightening around my chest. I’d have my present work, it wouldn’t go away. Then I’d be his secretary, his bookkeeper. He would be my boss.

“I don’t know, Dan. It might be difficult working for you—together. Are you sure it would work?”

I hoped he would hear my intended message, hesitate and rethink his plan. He gave me a doubting look, seemed to be calculating, and smiled.

“Work for me? What about the two of us building something together? What about an equal partnership like we had on the road?”

“Sure, but you know the business and I don’t. That automatically puts you in the superior position. The skills I bring to the business are secretarial and bookkeeping skills....”

“No! Believe me, I know you well enough to know you learn fast and you can learn to do everything I do and maybe do it better. Plus, two of the businesses Anderson said he’d connect me with are run by women. You would interface with them perfectly. Together we can share the load and create something better than we have now.”

“I’ll need to think about that. Dan, I like the idea and I support you. Give me some time. Let’s talk again after I finish here and get dinner over with. Okay?” We had developed new ways of relating when we lived in a small trailer. But this was different.

I sliced tomatoes and diced a white onion. At the bottom of my cycle, crying felt good. Everything in the world looked oppressive and dismal. Dan would be in my territory all day and night. We would be trapped in the

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house with no private space. I was relieved as he left home in the morning. I felt angst when he returned. Weekends, he interfered with my kitchen, my way of dealing with the kids, and he often left messes I had to clean up, especially if he did repair projects around the house.

I confess. I liked it when he was gone. Over the years I developed systems and patterns he didn't interfere with. I had my territory. He had his. Now he was going to be in my face every hour of every day. What did I get out of that? I couldn't think of anything. He would monitor me and make me accountable for my time. If I wanted to go to lunch with the gals or...? He would know everything I did. I'd have to account for every dollar I spent and.... I leaned closer to the onion and diced. Tears flowed. I hoped no one would suspect they were for me.

On the road, it had been okay to go shopping and discuss prices and meals. It was okay for him to put a meal together or make an experimental Dagwood sandwich with Bobbie. That was different. We weren't in *my* house, the one place in the world I was responsible for, my territory. He had announced he intended to invade my world. Okay, so he was unhappy and trying to do something about it. Great! But I *had* taken care of myself. I *had* made friends and a life for myself I enjoyed. So why did I have to give up my freedom just so he could.... I sobbed. Katie made a pass through the kitchen, checking on dinner.

"Onion's strong. Better get out of here until it clears out!"

"Geeze Mom, you're supposed to cut them under running water. You should get out of here too. You look like you've been to a funeral."

"Look at this basement, Dan. It's dark and dank and.... Honestly honey, I wouldn't feel good about you being trapped down here all day. It wouldn't be good for you, or

me.” I’d found a way to discourage his use of the house that he couldn’t interpret as lack of support.

“I.... I guess you’re right. The ceiling is only seven feet high. It’s damp and clammy.”

“Danny, you must have light and air and....” He turned toward me, grinning.

“The garage. It wouldn’t take long to finish the inside and make an office. I could insulate and hang drywall. We can paint. The big window over the workbench looks out on the backyard. Let’s go look.”

At least the garage wasn’t attached to the house. He could go to work. I could come out and help him. As low as I felt, the victory gave me energy. He was charged and invigorated. I knew he wanted to celebrate. Parts of me responded to his boyish enthusiasm. Luckily, I had a biological reason not to celebrate the way he wanted.

Within weeks, Danny’s energy created not only an office, but new consultation clients. Our projected income would be half again better than we expected. That money would take care of our major roadblock to becoming self-employed; medical insurance.

Of the impediments we faced, health insurance became the hardest to deal with. Medical insurance companies wanted four or five thousand dollars per employee, per year. In addition, each employee would have a deductible of a thousand dollars or more each calendar year. At a minimum, the business would have to pay eleven thousand dollars a year for medical coverage. Any way we looked at it, it seemed impossible.

The operators of the insurance companies built extravagant new buildings, and gave new Mercedes to their officers to augment their seven and eight figure salaries. They spent millions of our health dollars lobbying and bribing our elected representatives. It’s the American way.

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We searched, and finally found a HMO that, while it cost more per month, provided some benefits and charged a smaller deductible. We had to bite-the-bullet and enroll.

Another hindrance to a business is government. Somehow, after meeting the state and Federal demands, we were supposed to do business. More energy and angst went into dealing with government than into building the company. A business Dan and I thought we could run together, actually required another part-time person to do the government paperwork, and an accounting firm which specialized in keeping up with government filing dates and regs.

Fighting to survive in spite of insurance companies and the governments, brought us closer. We had common enemies. We tightened our belts. Although the volume of business grew, the rate of return from our investment did not. We increased our workload to stay even. We made enough to survive, in a time when most new businesses failed.

I mentioned that the force that brought us back to our own lives and needs is creativity. As I've revealed, I had to be led kicking and screaming to mine. I perceived Dan's needs as threats to my own. We had a pattern in our marriage. If Dan was charged-up and happy, I felt threatened. If I was happy? I really don't think my happiness threatened Dan. He usually supported me.

I knew deep down I had to work on my negative reaction to him, but I didn't understand my reactions. Gradually, I came to realize that every time he got what he needed I perceived it as a threat or an invasion of my territory. One evening, as I sat back in an introspective mood, I became aware I had interpreted everything, even pregnancy, as an invasion of *Me*. I asked myself, is my marriage an invasion? If not, what should I be doing to create the marriage I believe in?

The answer to the question didn't come easily. A part of me was unwilling to let him in. If he had a need, I felt threatened. If he was happy, I tightened up. My reaction to his needs was to reject them even if I wanted the same thing. That was most obvious regarding sex. To him, sex is a celebration. To me, any advanced planning or expectation ruins the whole thing. When, and this happened very seldom, I was the initiator, we had a wild and exciting time. But if he made the moves, I tensed up and felt used. I interpreted our relationship as an invasion of my private space. If he got in, I had to be the one in control. If he had needs, even if ill, I couldn't get outside my defenses to nurture him. A pre-dawn revelation shook me to the core. Love is invasive.

There are those who say a battle is won the instant one knows what it's about. I learned what I was fighting to overcome, but not how to end the war.

Dan's energy—his pushing me to become the contact for his new clients—unleashed my creativity and appealed to my natural child. Building the business was good for us. We were energized, while aware our new life didn't involve the kids.

The kids spent a lot of time away. Their days were long and they were tired when they got home. Dan took the lead. His positive outlook got through to them and we planned weekend movies, camping trips and attendance at their school events. He encouraged them to invite a friend over, and soon our family became the center of youth activities. I gave up my role as the sole orchestrator of events. I had carried the load alone. Now I had a partner.

I did a lot of the secretarial and bookkeeping work for the new business. I didn't mind. I got excited about meeting others, analyzing their business needs, and preparing a plan for them. The work was challenging and the only boss I had was me. Dan gave me the room I

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needed. If he balked at something I wanted to do, we discussed the outcomes, compromised until we both felt comfortable, and went on. It was a nice adult-to-adult way of working. If he did invade my space, I expressed my feelings. He accepted me as a partner and friend.

I began to see the Dan his boss and customers saw. The guy my friends spoke of so highly. He was what the business world calls a, "Hale fellow, well met." He was a "self-starter" and a "go-getter." Direct and firm, he came across as "a man well ahead of his game." Fun language. Every profession seems to have a language of its own. He was my teacher and, most important, on my side. My friend. I trusted him. It became easy to talk with him, agree or disagree and be on an equal footing. I knew how much I loved him. I started wondering why he loved me?

I wouldn't have loved me. Why did he? If it was for my body, well, it was changing fast. I thought my upper legs and thighs were starting to resemble stockings stuffed with those Styrofoam peanuts used to pack fragile items for shipping. My hair was thinning, except on my upper lip where it suddenly seemed to flourish. My breasts—well, they were headed south. As my face filled out, I lost the cute look everybody used to kid me about. My butt was expanding faster than a cumulus cloud, or so I thought. If I was good in bed, it wasn't because I fantasized and had a trip of my own. Nor because I really worked my body, or his, either. I imagined myself as chunk of meat with hang-ups. If Danny didn't see me that way it meant he was able to fantasize. I guessed I was about as much fun in bed as one of those blow-up dolls they sell in sex magazines. How could he love me?

He did, no question about that. He saw me in some other light. I wondered if I'd ever meet the woman he loved. What did he see in me?

Chapter 20

TUESDAY NIGHT, and our regular pack meeting was underway. Susan began expounding upon something she had read in one of the woman's magazines picked up at the supermarket check-out counter. I was enjoying a sidebar conversation with Jane about a lecture series she had attended. I heard Susan say, "...She was so dumb she thought hygiene was a greeting." That caught my attention. Susan enjoyed relating the story. Her face glowed red, she silently clapped her hands as she spoke.

"Have you watched TV commercials lately? Nothing is private or in good taste anymore. Why don't men rebel? They have to sit there and watch commercials about things we didn't even talk to our doctors about when I was a girl. And ladies, what about those new advertisements for drugs? First, I don't know why they're telling us about them. Only a doctor can prescribe them. And then they list the side effects."

Susan ran in high gear now. She continued, having won everyone's attention.

"Caution, this drug can cause bouts of diarrhea, stomach cramping, headaches, dry vagina, erectile dysfunction, damaged semen, rectal bleeding, vomiting, tissue leakage, unpleasant odor, and dizziness when standing. Ladies, what has happened? How have we let those bastards get away with it? Can't we do something to gentrify society again?"

While we laughed along, we acknowledged it was true. TV and even trusted magazines like *Readers Digest*, which once set a high standard, are full of descriptions about bodily functions and products to alter them. Nothing is private. Most of the ads are directed toward women; promoting women's products. I'm embarrassed when I watch the ads. I wonder what effect the ads have on

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Bobbie. If I were a young male, I'd be grossed out by their scare tactics about yeast infections and every other female ailment. I'd never want to touch a woman. It made me angry. Somehow, there's a message being given by the companies. The message is: Caution, women are dirty and riddled with afflictions.

I became an advocate for a gentler America. The ads produced for the liberation of women were actually attempts to put fear into us about being dirty unless we bought a personal deodorant, pill or product. I became self-conscious and increasingly embarrassed. My self-image suffered. Their ads target women like me at our weakest point. I noticed when the ads come on, Bobbie or Dan, whichever had the bleeper, start channel surfing until the commercial ended.

My physical self-image grew poorer. I assumed it to be age. I held my gut in, and tried to ignore what I felt. Yet, my world opened up as I became more involved in the business, so different than the work I had done before. I could be my own person. If I wanted to have lunch with one of my friends, I scheduled it. If the lunch ran over a couple of hours, so what. If I had an idea about generating new business, I pursued it. Sometimes I talked it over with Dan. Other times I just set out on my own. The people filling my life were business types with values roughly similar to my own.

Time passed. Bobbie graduated from high school. Katie had two years to go. Parenting had changed from caring for dependents to supporting young adults and trying to give guidance.

Dan loved being self-employed. He worked harder, got out and around more, and seemed to thrive on his freedom. Our time together was spent discussing business. The pressure I felt from Dan for intimacy eased, and often wasn't present at all. Things were going so well,

there seemed to be no need for him to make love. I was relieved.

I felt great about what I did, but, as I mentioned, I didn't feel good about myself physically. Harnessed and dressed, with well-applied makeup, I looked attractive. I got positive feedback from my clients. Inside I was scared. My body was betraying me. As I look back, my fears weren't justified. I was aging, but I hadn't let myself go. Because I thought I wasn't attractive, I was vulnerable.

Georgia Beal, one of my female clients, was a trim and energetic athlete. She played tennis every morning before coming to work. She belonged to a gym where she worked out at least three times a week. She dressed like one of the fashion models on the cover of a business magazine for women. We worked on a complicated project which required hours of planning. Working at her home one Saturday afternoon, she threw the papers she had been editing onto the table.

"We need a break."

Soon I relaxed, a gin and tonic in my hand, munching some little deli crackers. Georgia smiled at me.

"Annie, we have to get more done today. But right now, let's relax and, I know. The hot tub's a perfect temperature. Let's soak away the weary and then we can get back to work fresh."

"It sounds great to me. I don't have a suit."

"Of course not. I have big fluffy towels." She led me through her bedroom to the attached sunroom. "Here's a towel, put your clothes on the wicker bench there!" She peeled off her clothes, folded them and placed them carefully on the bench. Then she turned. She had an all-over tan. Her sleek body was trim with pear-shaped breasts that stood out from her hard athlete's body like sugar dollops on a cake.

I got my body unwrapped and folded my clothes. I heard her remove the hot tub cover and release a little

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gasp as she slid into the hot water. I walked over and stood at the edge, bent to feel how hot the water was, and stepped down. She sat watching me. I felt a tingle as I realized she was studying my body. I slid into the water with a little gasp of my own.

“You’re very beautiful.” Her observation made me feel good. A woman knew. A woman was the best judge of another woman’s body.

“My body is hard Annie, and.... I often wish it was soft and pliant like yours.”

I should have been embarrassed, but chose to feel good.

“You work so hard Annie. You don’t take care of yourself, do you! You hold your shoulders tight like a boxer. Here, swing around and let me massage your neck muscles. The hot water will relax them. Turn your back to me and sit on the lower step!”

There was no doubt in my mind she wanted to do more than rub my back. We had been friends for almost three years. It seemed natural to turn and let her rub my sore shoulders. I acknowledged she was a lesbian. I wasn’t, but there was no harm in this gentle way of relating. The fact she found me attractive energized me.

Her hands kneaded the bands of pain in my back. Her thumbs found lumps. She applied pressure and I could visualize the poison flow away, released. For a moment the toxins made me feel sick to my stomach. That passed and I relaxed against her touch.

She worked down my back, and then like silk, slid her hands around my sides and brought them up as cradles for my breasts. I heard her sigh. She put her lips against the back of my neck and I could feel her breath. She kneaded my nipples, increased the squeezing pressure of her hands and tightened her caresses into a hug that forced my breasts against my rib cage. I felt her firm breasts pressing into my back.

“Is this good?” She whispered.

“Of course. It feels wonderful. Thank you. But Georgia, it’s different for you. For me it’s warm and tender. It’s not sexual. I hope you know what I mean.”

“Okay Annie, it doesn’t have to be sexual. It’s important we help each other relax and enjoy who we are. For me it’s as natural as two friends can be. Would you rub my back?”

She revealed things about herself, and, about me.

“I could make love to you and be very happy. You have the mature and lush beauty of a woman in her prime. I have long known you aren’t like me, but Annie, as two friends we can share tenderness. There’s nothing wrong with being here together. I imagine in other times women cared for each other in this way.”

Should I feel guilty or dirty? I didn’t. I wouldn’t let her touch me anywhere else or kiss me, that would have been uncomfortable and awkward. “Maybe women together once.... You’re probably right. I wish, for your sake I felt something, you know, like I feel with a man. I mean, because I do like you. But I feel, well, like this isn’t natural.”

We got out of the hot tub, showered, made sandwiches and returned to work. I kept thinking I should feel guilty, but I felt good. In a way, I wished I could be her lover, but then I knew deep down I wasn’t wired that way. Womanly tenderness was one thing, a sexual relationship quite another. I left aware of a lot more about myself. Strangely, for the first time in years I felt comfortable with my body, and knew just how much I needed a man, Dan!

Dan remained friendly and supportive, yet he seemed preoccupied. I mentioned he was comfortable with our limited sexual relationship. I assumed he was—as mother had so indecorously said about my father—“growing out of that dirty stuff.” I recoiled at the “dirty” idea, but accepted that men lost some of the strong sexual drive that made them so hard to live with. Boy, was I wrong!

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“Annie,” Dan began the day after Bobby’s graduation, “we work well together, in a business way, I mean. I know over the years we haven’t exactly been..., well, you know, compatible when it came to living together. I’ve come to accept the fact that you’re not really attracted to me. We probably married too early—we did all right—we created a home for the kids. Now Bobby’s off to college and Katie’s doing well in high school. They’re getting their lives together. You’ve put up with a lot from me. It’s time for us to find happiness... each of us with someone we love who loves us back. I know you feel that way. I’ve known it for a long time. Your messages have been direct and clear, and I respect you for that. Now that we can go our separate ways, can we maintain the business and work together as friends?”

My immediate reaction was confusion and acceptance. Things really wouldn’t change much—my life would be easier. I couldn’t grasp the full meaning of his decision. I needed time to think things through.... I felt strange, relieved, as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders—and yet—I had lost something I wanted, something I needed.

Days later I was still replaying his words over and over in my mind. *I was direct and clear? I had sent messages?* After a lot of thought and soul-searching, I accepted the fact that what I sent could be interpreted as messages, but they weren’t, really. Or were they?

I thought I must be in love with Dan. Real love, not the attraction that first brought us together. The year we traveled as a family, my love had grown. As we worked together building the business, it matured. I had.... I recalled the meeting with my father the day he told me he was leaving Mom. He suffered through their relationship until his obligations to us kids were met, and then left her. I

wondered if he gave her a chance to make things right? I couldn't imagine how she felt, but I assumed she was relieved. I don't think she loved Dad. I don't think she loved anybody.

Was Danny giving me a chance? He said he wanted our friendship to continue, if not our marital relationship. Why didn't he know I really loved him? Didn't he know I was changing?

I never blew up. I didn't cry. Stunned as if pole-axed, I was so confused all I could do was process.... If he was wrong about us—but he wasn't. We hadn't had a healthy marriage. I depended on him for...? I was like Mom. I had chosen the same way of relating to my husband. I decided to wait and see what happened. Maybe Dan was right, I should find happiness with someone who suited me.

Dan moved out, never blaming, never angry, always supportive and friendly, always concerned that we work together in our consulting business and remain friends.

In the garage office one morning I got up my courage and asked him what he thought had gone wrong with our marriage. He got tears in his eyes, and looked down.

"Annie, we were so young. We both came from families where there was no fire, no passion. We didn't even know about passion. We never learned about romance either. Any time we were in a romantic setting, it became awkward and you got turned off. For years I didn't know romance and passion are the cement that hold lovers together. We never were lovers. Probably because the chemistry between us is wrong."

I couldn't hold back my tears. "I'd like to try again, I do love you. Is there a...?" I turned away, sobbing inside, daring to hope.

"Annie. Our affection is real. But it's a love between friends who know and respect one another. That can remain, if we're careful not to kill it. But now in our lives, my life, I need the other parts..., and I've found them. I've

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found someone with the right chemistry. You'll find someone too. It would be..., well, it would be a sin to live your life and not find a love with burning passion, hunger and.... Annie, you *will* find the right person. Believe me, he's out there and when you connect, your life will be complete." He paused and then reluctantly, continued.

"Annie, I learned years ago that nothing I did could reach you. That's not your fault. It's just the way it is; our chemistry. I stayed bitter for a long time, you knew that."

He found someone else! Anger exploded in me like meteoroid swarms, overcoming my deep sorrow. Hate filled me like boiling magma. My mind burned with..., I pictured her in a dozen different guises. What a cheat, what a liar! She pretended to want him—she wanted to steal my husband! We had sworn to love and honor each other till death. She...! I'd find her and gouge her eyes out! We had sworn before God! I'd get them both!

With hatred and anger I cried and vented the deep sadness of failure. Hatred fed anger and created a powerful force for separation. Whoever she was, I envied her. Whoever I was...? I pitied myself and sank down to the depths of despair. I'd been searching for answers to *Me* all my life. Too late I learned I was threatened by intimacy.

Dealing with Dan's rejection got me in touch with things vital for my survival. Analyzing my journey through the complexities of our relationship forced me to get in touch with my needs, my self. I was connecting. I was coming to know, understand, and accept my body. I began to crave the spiritual side of lovemaking. I decided that, more than anything, I needed intimacy to nurture myself. The problem was, as I was getting in touch with my needs I didn't have a partner to help me.

An overheard comment opened my mind. A woman noted an offer from her husband like “I’ll take out the garbage,” was more of a sexual turn-on than getting her own needs met. It was some consolation to know there are women out there even more screwed-up than I’ve ever been. Somehow, we women have to get the message across that sex and loving are integral parts of our female sanity and well-being.

Men have up-front and urgent sexual drives. Most have learned how to relieve stress by taking care of their body and spiritual needs through contact. But now I knew for certain that sex and sexuality are not reserved for males. Men and women—human beings—need to nurture the physical and spiritual parts of themselves or they aren’t healthy.

The mistake I made was defining sex as a male thing women had to go along with. As a result, I ignored my basic needs. My healthy body was always willing, that should have told me something, but screwed-up messages in my mind blocked me from getting what I needed.

A woman so removed from her own needs she confuses her husband’s willingness to take out the garbage with tender, loving, nurturing sex, is so far out of it.... Well, she’ll probably mess her life up as Mom and I did before she learns to connect her whole being and take joy from herself.

I wondered if these problems are middle-class syndromes. Am I a reflection of a particular segment of society? Are all women in our time filled with false information about sexuality, their bodies? Couldn’t I blame society or someone other than myself?

Katie made comments that got to me. “My generation doesn’t have to live for men like yours does, Mom. We can be all we can be and do things because we need to for ourselves. You’re so wrong when it comes to men. You’ll never understand what it is to be a woman.”

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I fear I'm as different from Katie's generation as I am from Mother's; caught in between their generations like someone who is part of evolution, but not yet evolved.

The kids accepted the fact Dan and I worked together, were friends, but didn't live together. Dan took Katie to lunch and explained he had found someone else. I had lunch with Bobbie and learned that from his perspective his problems were pressing, mine were not.

The best part? I met men. The back side of that—maybe I should say the down side of that—was most of the men had hang-ups I couldn't deal with. I decided fantasy and handwork would keep me healthy.

Then, I got a call from Sandy Genoa, a businessman in a nearby town. He needed help analyzing a planned expansion. His voice cut through to me, and I anxiously awaited our Friday meeting. I drove over, imagining the man behind the voice and letting randy thoughts titillate me. It was fun.

I spent an hour reading through his business plan and his plan for expansion. I red-flagged several key points and waited for him to get off the phone so we could go over them.

I hadn't expected the man he turned out to be. His appearance didn't fit his powerful and commanding voice. He had average looks, mild manners, and wasn't in good physical shape. He didn't wear a wedding ring. He had the rumpled look of a bachelor. He sucked a breath mint and offered me one. We got right down to work and an hour passed before either of us took a break. By that time, he had put his hand on my arm as he made a point and I placed my hand on his to make one of my own. I liked him.

"I'm sorry Annie, it's way past five and I've kept you too long."

“No. We needed the time to get the bugs worked out. Besides, my kids are at college and my time’s my own. I’ll catch a bite and drive back, don’t worry.”

If a woman ever gave a man a better opening, I’d like to study her approach.

“Your husband? I thought you two ran the company?”

“Ex... Well almost. We work together, but we decided not to live together. We’ve different needs.”

“Sounds interesting—hard actually. My ex calls me if she needs something, but it’s not because she cares about me. We parted friends. My attorney thought we were very civilized. But you see your ex every day?”

“Not a problem. I do my work, he does his. We’re friends—he has a life of his own.”

“And you? Do you have a life of...? Oh my God! I’m sorry. I’m talking to you like I would my sister. Don’t answer! Forgive me. Listen, I’m hungry and damned if I like eating alone. Will you join me for a bite before you make the long drive?”

“Okay brother. And Sandy, it’s okay to talk to me like a sister. I’d rather that than play word games and not get to know you.”

I remember the evening so well. We took his car, a little Miata convertible. I sat, my knees turned toward him. He had a cowlick I had an urge to smooth down. Maybe he stimulated the grooming instinct in me?

I recalled documentary programs I had seen on TV where primates engaged in mutual grooming. Humans do too, and I missed it a lot. One program featured Baboons. The male groomed the female, sometimes for weeks before she would let him screw her. I thought about Dan and me.

As Sandy drove, we chatted about the difference between our towns. My thoughts ran wild. I liked the fact he was easy and comfortable. I sensed he was as lonely and horny as I.

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You're surprised? Look at it from my perspective. If those feelings and attractions hadn't been there and been strong, then I'd have been wasting my time. I wasn't interested in having another brother. I knew my psyche now, and if I couldn't meet my physical needs my whole center veered off. I don't mean intercourse. I mean the magic of visiting, touching, grooming and cuddling, and sure, orgasm and then penetration if it came naturally. But first, there had to be chemistry.

He had been a professor before he quit teaching and started his own business. His ex-wife, now remarried, was a school teacher. Two kids were both out of college and off on their own. His mother and father were dead. He lived alone in a large old country house which had been in the family since the thirties. He loved the outdoors and ponds. Since his marriage had gone sour, he read everything he could find on marriage, and the psychology of relationships. He said some of the best information is in the women's magazines he found at the check-out stand at the supermarket. I told him about Susan's hygiene comments and he laughed one of the warmest and happiest chortling laughs I ever heard. And that happened before the waitress served desert.

There was a little bar attached to the café. We went in for a nightcap. I started talking and gave him a nutshell peek at my life as I wanted him to know it. I found him attractive and tried to get him interested in me. It worked. He shared more of his life's story. In less than two hours, we felt like we had grown up together. Then he broke it off, telling me I had to get home.

"Annie, you're the most exciting woman I've met. You're too good to be true. I wouldn't miss the opportunity to be your friend for anything in this world. And do you know what?"

I didn't.

“If we got together tonight we’ll regret it. Go home. Let’s dream about each other and.... Damn! You know I have to go to Seattle to present the expansion plan to my cousin the capitalist. I’ll be gone for at least a....”

“And you know you need me there, right? Okay, business is business. Get me on the plane and....”

“You’re right girl. I couldn’t concentrate knowing what I know about you and being miles away. Four o’clock tomorrow! Airport’s nearer you. I’ll meet you there. I’ll call when I get your ticket confirmed.”

He drove me back to my car, gave me a peck on the cheek, and drove off. Wow! There were enough chemicals churning around in my body to take away wrinkles and add a year to my life.

Chapter 21

THE PLANE LANDED AT Sea-Tak, spewing water like a storm within a storm. We grabbed our carry-on bags and fought our way out. As we left the terminal, the sky was Seattle gray. People moved under umbrellas; toad stools from Fantasia. Sandy steered me with one hand, hailing a taxi with his other. I took in deep breaths and marveled at the taste and smell of the moisture-laden air.

The taxi windows steamed over and only the driver saw where we were going. Somehow, after crawling along a super highway, we turned off into what I assumed was the business district. In a few blocks, ousted from the taxi, we found ourselves under an arched canvas canopy at the entrance to an older hotel with water-stained granite outside and moldering carpet and drapes inside. Sandy left me standing in the middle of the ornate lobby while he checked in. He came back and handed me a key card.

“Your room, Ma’am.”

I took the card and tried to imagine what it meant. Was he old fashioned? Was he a gentleman protecting my reputation? I followed him to the elevator, an apprentice learning from the master.

The rooms weren’t a suite with connecting doors, as I had imaged. Mine was three doors away. He opened my room, handed me the card, and said we would meet after he made some calls and went over a few things. His departing smile was warm and promising.

I opened the drapes and looked out into a gray cloud. I could see the glow from the street and pairs of taillights on a line of cars like a train in the fog. I pulled back the heavy quilted bedspread, kicked off my shoes and flopped on the bed. I was in a place I had always wanted to visit, starting a new adventure with a man I hardly knew. Wow! I was finally getting on with my life.

As I lay passing time and waiting for Sandy's call, I connected with another time in my life. The time Danny and I were first getting together. "Getting it on," would be a better way to describe it. Raw energy—sexual energy—coursed through my body as it had then. I was.... Damn! This whole thing was mental. It had been that way with Danny, and it was that way now as I anticipated Sandy. My mind triggered the way I felt. This newness, this excitement, was a mental state. My body responded to my thoughts.

I had always known, on a subconscious level, it worked that way. I had intentionally avoided it—denied it. This randy excitement could have always been mine to enjoy with Dan. It would have opened doors in our relationship—in my own enjoyment that would have...? Why hadn't I? I had to know why I had blocked these amazing feelings.

The phone rang. Sandy would meet me in the lobby in five minutes.

Business is business. Well, It was. Sandy's whole expansion plan depended upon financing from a venture capital group run by his cousin Angelo. He explained he wanted me to "act" as a consultant, not a friend. I was to explain parts of the plan I worked on, and be an observer. "Don't let him know we're friends," he warned again as we got out of the taxi and entered a rain-blackened old building with a grocery and pawn shop on the street level.

The meeting went well. Sandy's cousin looked a lot like him and had the same type of commanding voice. He also looked down the front of my dress every time I leaned forward to point something out on the plan before us. He clenched an unlit cigar between his yellow teeth and smelled like *Old Smegma* after shave. I wondered if he wondered why I wore a filmy black uplift bra. Of course. He thought it was for him.

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We left. It had taken an hour to get Angelo to commit the funds and state his terms. Every time he started to balk at some point, I leaned forward and got his mind on rounder figures. He pinched my butt as we left, gave me a wink and nodded like I understood he would call me. Sandy hadn't missed a move. He smiled like the ogre Shrek as we entered the elevator.

"Hungry?"

I was starving.

We asked the taxi driver to recommend a small place with atmosphere and good food. He dropped us in front of a walk-down café hidden under a dim neon sign. Romeo's Italian. The type of place lovers seek. I let my mind numb with pleasure, and felt hot all over.

Sandy handed me a piece of garlic toast.

"Lady, you steered Angelo through the deal and I'm grateful. I don't think he would have helped me if it weren't for you. Thanks!"

"What a creep! Sandy, do you really need his money? Your business is sound. You could go to a bank."

"Bank? With my record? I hate it, but Angelo and his group are my only hope."

"I didn't know." I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I changed the subject. "Sandy, are we through with business?"

He smiled a knowing smile. I assumed he was thankful I hadn't pursued his comment about his record.

"I have to re-write the stuff he wanted changed and get it back to him. Other than that, we have Seattle and time and adventures before us."

"I'll drink to that," I raised my wine glass and held it where he could click his against it.

"Where do you want to go when we leave here? How about the needle? We could go over to the Pike Street Market. Even at this hour, and on rainy days like this, there's always something going on."

"I don't know where we are. Can we walk in the rain and, you know, get to the market?"

"We'd need umbrellas. The street vendors usually have them. Sure, it's maybe ten blocks to the market area. You sure you want to walk?" Did he think I was kidding? "I really do. Do you mind?"

He looked down and then back up at a point somewhere behind me.

"Well.... In fact, I've never done something silly like walk in the rain. You're sure?"

I nodded.

"Okay, that's the way it is then. You ready?"

The exchange made me feel uncomfortable. I didn't know him, and he didn't like my romantic notion of walking the streets of Seattle in the rain. "Well," I thought, "maybe he's afraid of getting mugged or something." I let it pass.

We made it about three blocks. It rained so hard and the puddles were so deep, our shoes were soaked. His pants and my legs got wet to the knees. We waited fifteen minutes for a cab, shivering and shaking in the damp cold. Without consulting me, he told the cabbie to take us to the hotel. Then he sat back, obviously pissed, and explained that the hotel had a great little bar where we could warm-up, dry off, and be cozy. Something had changed, something about his demeanor.

Romance and passion. My mind kept stimulating my body with thoughts about..., well, you know, all the play and fun that goes into a relationship. In the bar, with Nat King Cole records playing and fog cutters in mugs, we sat close, talking. At that time, I didn't know that to him we were having intercourse. You know, from the Latin, *intercursus*, a running between. Actually, I learned that for him, it was a running away.

He talked and talked. I was fascinated by his knowledge of human sexuality and interaction. He really

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had studied. As he discoursed it became obvious he was still hooked on his ex-wife. Every example he gave was connected to a problem he had with her. He had prepared his arguments and observations for her, hoping that at some future time he could win her back. He was using our conversation as way of working out his strategy. Then he began getting into me—my mind and mannerisms that is, as seen through his own problems and needs.

“Annie, you’re fighting to become a whole woman. I like that. Would you like to know how I see you? What attracts me to you?”

I should have said No! but who can resist feedback from a member of the opposite sex?

“Sure Sandy, but don’t be too critical.” I laughed. A little behind-the-napkin hangman’s laugh. He smiled his kindest, warmest, most intimate smile and began.

“Annie, in the history of humans in this world, there has never been a woman like you!” he paused, reached over, put his hand on mine and gave me a smiling wink, “there never could have been. You are the first of a whole new breed of women. Always before and up until now, women were chattel, owned by forces they could not control. A woman was trapped in a body whose function was procreation. She was dependent upon others because child bearing made her vulnerable. She was enslaved by males because she was dependent. Only an old woman was free to be as she wanted, but as such she was past the time of love, passion and romance. And life spans were much shorter, there was less time.”

I must have nodded that I understood or agreed, because he smiled and went on. Was he talking about me or rehearsing for an imagined encounter with his ex?

“Lady, you are inventing and discovering and chartering a new course. Before this time, no woman could explore her needs and learn about herself as you should be doing. If they tried, it drove them insane. I’ve read

women authors from the past. In their writing one can see the parts are there, they weren't allowed to connect them. The old romantic ideas about men and women together are jaded and unreal. They read like the fantasy of our time reads, exploring beyond what is. Do you agree?"

"You mean...? Sandy, I agree." I decided it easier to agree than engage.

"It's true. You've been born into a time when you can choose not to let your body sentence you to inferior status. You can choose not to be a slave of a man in a man's world. Better, you can pass on the knowledge you've gained about being a woman, that is, if you know?"

"I'm learning...."

"You are! It's a fascinating process. My ex wouldn't make the shift. Many women accept the limitations of the past. From what you've told me and what I observe, you're not like her, you're seeking your center. You're becoming aware you have a complex animal-spiritual make-up which can bring you health and joy and, perhaps even more than men experience. As a woman you are both male and female. You can explore both sides and take the best from each."

He quit talking and stared at his mug, held tightly in two hairy hands. I'd expected a revelation into myself. Some new information about who and what I was. Instead, he had stated the obvious. I almost urged him to continue. Then I realized he had laid his whole proposition before me, expecting me to marvel at his genius. I was disappointed and a little angry. "Is that all there is to him?" I thought.

He looked up and tried to communicate he was a wise professor enlightening a student. I smiled sheepishly, and decided I had to pee. I needed a break.

Mind over matter. Nothing like a cold seat and white washroom tile to cool one's ardor. The wonderful bubble of sexuality I had been floating on burst. There was a man

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out there as interesting to me now as a bag of mumbles. I did the womanly thing and went back to the table with a headache.

“Sandy, I’ve had a reaction to something I ate. I have a splitting headache. Sorry, but can we call it a night?”

He seemed prepared for that outcome. It was part of his game, another rehearsal for the day he would win back his wife.

“Of course! I feel kinda rocky myself. I’ll see you to your room.”

We walked out, arm-in-arm, relating for all to see like two people who cared about each other. We knew how to put on a front. His facade was better practiced than mine. I was glad about that. I had strong feelings, but for someone else. I wondered where Dan was. Then I did have a headache.

The next morning, on the way back home, Sandy told me how much he admired my business acumen. We decided to work together in business and be friends.

Something was wrong with me! Good ol’ Annie, just one of the boys! Business as usual.

Chapter 22

I UNLOCKED THE DOOR and let myself in to a large, cold, loveless house next to a garage office. Coming home was about as fun as.... I checked the answering machine. Five calls. Maybe some of the gals wanted to get together. I hesitated. I didn't push the button. Better to anticipate the calls and save them for later when it was dark, lonely and awful to be alone.

With two TV's tuned to CNN voices, and the lights on, I fed myself and went through the mail. I got a card from Susan, who had left her husband to travel in Italy. There was a long letter from Marta, bemoaning the fact Charlie was having an affair with another man and her mother-in-law was coming for an extended visit to straighten things out. I wasn't the only middle age woman with a screwed-up and lonely life. But why? We were bright, attractive women. Maybe we should have married each other and said to hell with men.

It was time. I sat on the stool next to the counter and pushed the button on the answering machine. It rewound and bleeped. Message one, a hang up. Message two, Katie, obviously crying, "I'll call back Mother." Message three. Katie again. "Mom, call me! It's important!" Message four, a hang up. Message five, Dan. "That Benson job? Well, they want you *and* me. Will you call Bob and tell him we're on it!"

"Katie? Hi. It's late. I just got your message. What's the matter, sweetie?"

I had thought my days of parenting were over. Katie had gone to school in another state. She was in the middle of her sophomore year, earned good grades, and qualified

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for the volleyball team. She pledged a sorority and..., she fell in love. That was natural, except now she had a two month commitment to a love child. She was terrified.

“Mom, the reason I’m calling is..., well, you know!”

I didn’t and was afraid to guess.

“Tell me honey.”

“This is my body. No one has the right to tell me what to do with it. Right Mom?”

“I think that’s right.” Then it hit me. She was telling me she planned to abort the child!

“So it’s my choice, right Mom?”

I did some fast thinking. “Yes, it is, Katie!” I said in a committed voice. “It’s a choice you make based upon all the options.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Her voice had a snotty edge to it, breaking with fear and anger.

“It means that as a woman you study the options and make the decision. You’ve called me. That shows you’re going about this in the right way. Katie, you have time. Remember that! You have time to look at your options from every angle and then make a decision you can live with.”

“You’re saying I shouldn’t have the abor...?”

“I said nothing of the kind! I said you’re doing the right thing by taking time, talking to me and others, and then making the decision. Either way, you know you have our support.”

She didn’t answer for a long minute. I sensed her resistance to taking responsibility. She hoped I’d support her and take part of the problem on my shoulders. If I told her “no,” then she could argue and pass guilt and responsibility on to me. If I said “yes,” she could rationalize I forced her to have an abortion. I wouldn’t play the game. She was pissed!

“You never did understand, Mom! You never were there when I needed you.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. I don’t think its true. In fact, I support you fully. The only thing I ask is that you get the facts and make a decision you can live with. I can’t make the decision for you. I trust you and know you will make the right decision.”

Another long pause. “If I have the baby...? Jerry is only a Junior. If we drop out of school, our futures are..., well, you know. And besides, I’m not sure I want to marry Jerry. He’s nice, but I don’t think he’s ready.”

“I hear you.”

“And Mom, if I have the baby...? I would have to move back home and...? Would you and Dad support us while we finish school and get started?”

I almost collapsed. Her best option for not having an abortion was me. I’d pay for her stupidity. Birth control was the most significant advancement for women in the history of the world, and she had chosen not to use it. She had control over her body—choice—and she failed to protect herself. Now we all paid.

“That’s an option we can talk about.” What else could I say?

“And if I have the abortion? Isn’t that better? I mean it solves everything. A few minutes in a doctor’s office and all of us are back where we were two months ago. Isn’t that true?”

I believed in choice. I believed in a woman’s right to choose. Great! But now, my beliefs were being tested. I got in touch with what I really believed. I always assumed a woman would choose not to get pregnant. Abortion was an option in the case of rape or incest.

“Katie, the only thing that won’t be like it was two months ago is you. You will have killed a baby to make your life easier. Can you live with that?”

She sobbed, terribly sad. My heart was breaking. I’d have done anything—taken the baby and raised it as my own—anything to save her pain. She asked me if she

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should tell Dan. I assured her we should get together right away and that we would be there for her. She said “Thanks Ma!” and hung up. My whole body quaked.

A woman’s right to choose had resulted in my daughter choosing not to protect herself from pregnancy. As a result, she had four options. She and Jerry could marry, have the baby and try to continue with their lives. Jerry was immature; a nineteen year old boy. He didn’t have a clue, didn’t really love Katie, but would do the right thing. Katie feared their marriage wouldn’t work, but she was willing to give it a chance. That option would require both sets of parents support them until they finished school and got on their feet.

A second option? She could move back home, have the child and we could help care for it. I’d be a built-in baby sitter while she finished school. Then? She would be a single mother with a kid—not what young men with potential are looking for.

The third option was to abort the child, get Katie counseling, and hope that what...? She would ever forget what she had done? What a way to grow up!

A last option was to have the baby and put it out for adoption. I didn’t like that choice. We would know that a member of our family was out there, rejected by us. That knowledge and guilt would haunt us.

Katie made the decision. We supported her. We met with his parents, Jerry and Katie, Dan and I, and decided to rent a house for them near campus. We planned to support them until Jerry and Katie could work. We would share the costs of child care while both finished school. None of us believed the marriage would work, but a two-parent family seemed better than Katie on her own. Besides, I rationalized, a divorced mother is more

respectable and has better chances of finding a man than an unmarried woman with a child.

Dan raged in a state of shock through the whole two week process. Katie was lost to him and, no matter what he wanted, off into the world on her own—well, not economically, but in every other way. I saw his sadness and let it mix with my own. Our parenting—schools, music, art lessons and sports—what had it meant? Neither of us knew. We hadn't planned on being grandparents. Not this way, at this time.

There was one question I could never ask, yet I desperately needed an answer. Why hadn't Katie assumed responsibility for her own body? She was a modern woman. She had the information.

I wanted to ask Katie, but couldn't think how without sounding like an accusing mother. Then one day as Katie and Bobbie were visiting in the living room and I stood in the kitchen waiting for a pot to boil, I overheard Bobbie ask her, "What were you thinking about? Why did you let yourself get knocked-up?" (His words, not mine.)

"I guess I never experienced love before. I was sure I'd lose Jer. I knew what I was doing, I wanted his baby!"

The water and I boiled. Thank God I never asked her. I'd have come apart and probably killed her on the spot.

Dan and I spent most of our time together. We won the big contract with a local electronics company Dan had been courting. To get it, we had to meet with them and convince their team we would make Electrasok our number one priority. For the first time we could pay ourselves adequate salaries.

Dan spent hours at the house on the days Katie, Jerry and the baby visited. Jerry struggled to be an eager husband and father. He tried to be a man; be responsible. He reminded me of Dan when we first married and found

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Bobbie in the hamper. He would do what had to be done, as Dan had.

There were so many things I wanted to explain to Katie about relationships. She discounted everything I said, and wrote me off. I couldn't find a way to share what I learned with her—not then, maybe not until now. I hope if she reads this she'll know I wrote it in part for her.

It was difficult to explain Dan's and my relationship. We seemed to do everything married couples do. To some members of my pack our marriage was not unlike their own. The difference was that at the end of whatever we were doing, work or family, Dan left and went to another woman.

"Oh Annie, I don't know how you managed it. You have the best of both worlds. We envy you." Sarah told me one evening as we left the pack meeting. "I wish I could have Stanley around for family and friendship and then send him packing. You don't even have to feed him or do his laundry. That's perfect!"

I smiled at her. So, she and Stanley are estranged. Dan's and my arrangement is an accomplishment?

That night, I tried to get in touch with the way I really felt about our separation. Did I have the best of two worlds? I liked working with Dan. I liked having him around to help with family matters. I had that, and no pressure from him. But I wasn't like that now, I had changed. I needed him for me. I needed a complete relationship. I decided to talk to Dan about it.

"Annie," Dan replied, turning on his stool in front of the light table, "You have things the way you always wanted. You're free to go or do or be anything you want. You're not tied to me, you owe me nothing. I know this is what you always wanted and you have it. I like to think I cared enough about you to let you be free. So why mess it up?"

That threw me. Was this really what I wanted? It may have seemed so, but no. It wasn't what I wanted..., or was it?

"Dan, this is not what I always wanted. In fact, when I'm honest with myself, I have to admit I don't know what I wanted. I wanted what I thought best for me.... No, that's not right! I thought everyone else used me, you, the kids—everybody! So I spent my energy trying to protect myself from invasion. It was a dumb thing to do, but that's the way I was for years."

"I guess I knew that, it makes sense. I guess you know I didn't like being treated like an invader. The chemistry is wrong or it wouldn't have happened."

I had to think about that. Chemistry? What did chemistry have to do with it?

"Dan, I don't understand. What does chemistry have to do with it?"

"Annie, think back! Nothing I did could turn you on. I was impotent where you're concerned."

"Impotent? Never! You never were..., ever! I would remember."

"I mean powerless, ineffective. That's the chemistry I'm referring to. No matter what I did, how I loved, I couldn't turn you on..., well, most of the time. How many hundreds of times I wanted to be alone and together with you, cuddle you, share love with you. All you would talk about was needing to go to the market or clean the refrigerator. You'd break off and make a phone call or start some project, or you'd roll over and go to sleep. You always put those stupid meaningless activities in front of being with me.

"Physically and emotionally, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't excite you. That was awful! Can you imagine how you would feel if a man were repulsed by you and nothing you could do would turn him on? And if every loving move you made is countered by someone preoccupied with mundane things? Someone who gives scrubbing the floor

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the same priority as cuddling and loving her husband? That's how I knew. There is no chemistry!"

I was so stunned I couldn't reply. He smiled over at me.

"Annie, I couldn't be put down again. This arrangement is working. We're friends and.... I almost made a total break and got out of your life. But being a wimp, I came up with this plan. We're both much happier."

He got off the stool and went over to the coffee maker.

"Say Annie, did you see the check we received from your friend Sandy's company? You sure did a great job for him, even though you think he's a jerk."

My head spun. He was signaling that it was time to get back to work. I wanted to be confused, hurt. I wanted to argue and win. The problem was, I knew he was right. I had been that way. I feared I still was. Was it normal? Was that the difference between women and men? And something else dug into me like a spur. He came up with this plan? He planned this arrangement? I couldn't grasp the full significance of what he said, but I had to know how his plan ended. That SOB!

We helped Bobbie transfer to an Ivy League school his junior year. He made the move and we wrote the checks. We were willing to invest more money in his education than I made, working all year. Why? Because we were convinced that if he ran in those circles he would have better opportunities.

As parents, we couldn't deny him access to the rich and powerful. He had made the grades and gotten accepted. He was serious about law and majored in history because a counselor has advised him that undergraduate background would open the doors to law school. He wasn't sure about law, or politics—anything yet. He just wanted to be prepared. We were so proud of him.

Of course, we didn't understand what it's like to break into the fraternal cliques and social coteries of an Ivy

League school. Many of Bobbie's fellows traced their friendships back to prep schools. They were there because they had the social pedigrees and family names that commanded deference, if not respect. They were also there to make certain no one from the unwashed masses would tarnish the great reputation of the school or water down the significance of their attendance.

According to Bobbie, many of the professors and teaching assistants felt he had no right to be there. They wore the school's status on their sleeves and had contempt for "people like him." He had a friendly and helpful counselor who tried to help him integrate into his class, but not "their" class. He was shunned, made fun of, singled-out, and told he was only there as a token. His life changed. He was no longer the happy, curious kid who innocently bit into the world. A kid who stopped to smell the flowers. He survived six months and became so depressed he decided to end it all. His last cry for help was a call to Dan. Dan rushed to Hanover, and loaded Bobbie and his things into the rental car. Instead of coming home, they headed for New York and a week of tours, shows, and eating.

Bobbie lost self-confidence. He was sad and confused. He had wasted a semester and a wad of money. He reluctantly re-enrolled in the state university and connected with a group of other grudge-holding young people. Pre-law students, focused on stamping out the class/caste system in America. He joined a movement connected with other groups all over the land. They fed off each other's experiences and shared tales of rejection. Bobbie changed into a motivated student preparing for battle. Each time he talked about Ivy league schools and the ruling class, I felt raw hatred within him. I tried to talk to him and cool his anger and hate. "Mom," he said, "they think they're royalty. They want to take the American dream—the promise of America—away from us. They'll pay for that!"

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I grew sick with worry. I had prayed for his motivation, but not this kind. Dan and I vented our grief and decided he would cool in time. There was nothing we could do, or was there?

“Let’s send him to Europe this summer,” Dan suggested. “He’ll get a broader perspective, learn how real class systems work, and he’ll modify his behavior.”

We gave Bobbie a European trip and prayed for results. It was the right move, with the wrong outcome. He returned more convinced than ever a class system is undermining the American Dream. He was making his list. That fall, he became involved in politics. “That’s where you face them head-on,” he announced. My precious son had turned into a bitter man, bent upon battles he could never win.

After Danny’s birth, Katie lost interest in school and didn’t finish the year. She said she planned to continue her education sometime, but for now she could work part time at Wal-Mart. She liked her job and felt it perfect for her. During the year following Danny’s birth, I reminded her of the work she had done to get courses that challenged her and good grades. I lauded everything she accomplished.

“That’s was then, Mother! I’m grown up now with a family and responsibility. Besides,” she added in her snotty way, “that was for you! I did all that to keep you off my back!”

I lay in bed at night wondering what the time, money and worry spent getting her an education was really worth. I decided her education would increase her enjoyment of life, only not just yet. It would take longer than any one of us imagined. Katie announced she was expecting again.

“It’s the timing, Mother! Danny shouldn’t be an only child.”

Chapter 23

I WAS ENJOYING LIFE and beginning to accept middle-age. Then zap! I put down the latest women's magazine and started worrying about osteoporosis, estrogen and menopause. The promised afflictions hit me hard, an assault on what remained of my self-confidence and dreams. I recall the exact day and time my "end" came around to block my "new beginning." That day I found myself straddling the top of the hill and starting to fall down the other side. Age. Middle age. Old age. Damn! Why now? My life was finally coming together just as I was getting comfortable with me, my body, my life. The messages I read said I must prepare for the decline and fall. I'd be a wrinkle in time!

Exercise, supplements and vitamins became the subject of every conversation. I pinched more than an inch. I looked in the mirror for a hump on my dowager's back. I bought wrinkle cream and special jells that would help me keep my skin, hair and looks. I went to the doctors and had tests that probed and pinched, squeezed and scraped, invaded, and televised parts of my body which had never before seen light. The reports trickled back to me. I was okay, for now. My relief was tempered by the fear that "for now" was yesterday. And today? A lump, cyst, polyp or spongy bone might be forming. I knew I had to prepare myself to be the victim of my body's degeneration. I had to watch as my remains slipped into old age. It was awful! It was the one mid-life crisis that wouldn't go away. All someone had to say was "menopause," and I felt hot, like I was losing my mind.

My worst enemy was the bathroom mirror. I decided it was the fluorescent light. The man at ACE Hardware sold me a tube which "Is softer and compliments true skin colors." I carried it home like a found treasure, certain my

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image would change. The light was softer and kinder. But even in that light, a dismal face stared back at me as if someone from the future peered out to see what had been. The little girl inside me winced. I had to learn about make-up and ways of hiding skin.

It took longer to get ready each morning. I had to schedule make-up stops during the day, and I had to cream it off at night so my head didn't slip off the pillow. Crying, sweating, rain and scratching were things young girls enjoyed. Dancing cheek-to-cheek was risky, not that I had many opportunities. Oh, and my dry cleaning bills. That stuff seemed to get on my clothes and only they knew how to get it out.

Even though I stayed thirty-nine for almost five years, I aged. I decided my youth had passed. I did the best I could to look good and plunged ahead into life, as if I had a choice. Then one day—actually it was a Saturday morning and I had just stepped out of a long steamy shower—my investment in the fluorescent tube paid off. I dried off and stood naked in front of the mirror. I caught a glimpse of a woman without lipstick or any make-up. A woman with a nice body. A person pleasantly Rubenesque, with natural beauty complimented by a peppering of gray hairs. An attractive woman, puddling boobs and all. I didn't know the woman, but as I turned to go she left with me.

I got my hair arranged as I liked it, comfortable and loose. I patted my face dry and let the wrinkles crinkle as I smiled. I dressed in a loose fitting shirt, one Bobbie had left for me to wash, and slacks with a smart cut and tapered legs. I found the sash my niece Marilyn had given me for Christmas, and tied it in place. In flats, my breasts firm custard quivering inside my shirt, I ventured a quick look in the full length closet mirror. Maybe a touch of lipstick—just a blush of rouge.

The Annie reflected there was the *Me* that had been lost. Still, I had no confidence. I called Barb and asked her

to go to lunch with me. Barb was the sharpest critic I knew. If she liked what I had done—or rather what I hadn't done—then I'd change my image.

Barb got out of her car as I came out of the house to meet her. I wanted to make a grand entry, exiting the house and gracefully flowing down the steps. It worked. Barb let out a whistle and gave me an-arms-holding-me-at-distance-so-she-could-see-me hug.

"Damn girl, you ain't cast in cement anymore!"

She let me go and did a stiff-legged walk around me.

"Honey Babe! You don't need an uplift harness when you've got natural movement like this! Where were you keeping this charm? If this is the new you, you better be prepared for lots of fun!"

What an ego builder! She grabbed my arm, promising to take me to lunch and show me off. She warned me men would think I was the main course. She got the message across. This natural look was the Annie I wanted to be.

I learned to walk differently, talk slowly, and enjoy the benefits of an ovarian assist: estrogen and progesterone, chemicals once suppressed by my mind. They came out to play in my unconstrained body. I had a surge of energy that made me creative and adventuresome. I blasted into friendships, sure of myself and comfortable with my gifts. Men turned their heads and I didn't react by worrying about the child-stretched plumpness of my tummy. I was a woman, and damn proud of it!

Well, damn proud, but not getting what I needed. I explained my desperation to Glenda, hoping she would give me help sorting things out. She knew exactly what I should do. It made sense.

"Annie, you've been asking me for help for years. You've been after me—anyone—to tell you what to do. You don't need my half-baked advice, I'm as screwed up as you are. Admit you need help. See a professional. Find

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a shrink and get some straight adult-to-adult! I go to this perfectly wonderful woman who's been through it, she's lived it. I'll call her and make an appointment for you."

I expected Doctor Ruth. I met M.E. Decker, Ph.D., an imposing dishwater blond about five feet ten, one hundred seventy pounds. Somewhat attractive, she dressed in a casual way that complimented her almost waist-less body. Married three times, she had five kids whose ages ranged from six to twenty-five. Her office wall was covered with framed certificates suggesting she spent most of her life in classes and workshops.

I didn't think I'd like her. My reservations centered around her lack of attractiveness to men. Our first meeting didn't go as I thought it should. She got vitals from me and sent me for a complete physical and lipids work-up. I asked about lipids, she explained in more detail than I could digest that she needed information about my "...Organic compounds, including the fats, oils, waxes, sterols, and triglycerides, that are insoluble in water but soluble in common organic solvents, are oily to the touch, and together with carbohydrates and proteins constitute the principal structural material of living cells." Well, I asked.

Our second meeting went better. She got me talking about "why I was here," and listened. She may have taped my rambling recital. She didn't take notes. She didn't clear her throat, nod or ahem. She listened until I ran out of ways to describe why I needed help. Then she smiled at me and began.

"Annie, your tests show you're physically in great shape. You don't have chemical imbalances. Your needs are not physical. We can assume you're here to work through problems caused by the way you perceive things."

I nodded. "Doctor, I didn't think my problems were physical. It's good to know I'm healthy."

"Annie, my work generally focuses in two areas. Women who can't get what they need because the men in

their lives do not react to them in the ways they desire. I don't think you fall within that group. It sounds as if you're in the other group. Women who are physically healthy and lead challenging lives, but block themselves from getting what they need. You use words frequently that give me insights. Let me list the words and then let's see how it goes. Okay?"

"You mean words like anger and frustration?"

"No. I mean 'invasion, intrusion, privacy, my space, my body, my needs, open up, violation, annoyance, my rights, obligations, and against my will...' just to list a few of the expressions and feelings you used just now to describe why you are here."

I turned and looked at her. Amazing! I had used those words.

"And Annie, I also tagged some other things. Let me add these words. 'His obligation, take care of me, be there for me, I depend upon him, I expect, security, and a solid foundation.' You used 'his obligation' four times." She stopped listing and waited for me to digest.

"I know I felt invaded. I've been in touch with that for a long time."

She didn't say anything.

"I don't get what the other words mean. They all sound okay to me."

"Are you looking for a man, possibly a replacement father to take care of you?"

That threw me. "No! Of course not." I felt anger rise inside me. I glared at her. She didn't even know me and she was already jumping to conclusions.

"What happens when you're asked to take care of someone else's needs?"

I directed my anger at her. Then it hit me. "Oh my God! That's an invasion."

"And the circle closes." She got up and went over to her desk. "Annie, how about working on these things

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you've identified today and, let's see, next week? Same day and time?"

She was showing me out. I wasn't ready to let her go. My thoughts were hazy. "But..., but shouldn't we write the words down?"

"No need to. You've connected! You won't forget."

Outside in the cold wind, I looked at my watch. Forty-eight minutes since I had pranced in there expecting...? What had I expected? I thought about it. Then I knew. I got what I had hoped to get. I wasn't certain I liked it or her. She had invaded parts of me.... Damn her! She had...? My thoughts focused. I smiled. She was good. Glenda was right, she was very good!

Chapter 24

WONDERFUL! I had a new image. Life was challenging and getting to be fun. I had kids, friends, my own shrink—but I was sleeping alone. I was married to a man who loved me and appreciated our family. He went to another woman and I didn't feel jealous, I felt relieved. No one would believe that!

I loved Dan—was dependent on him—even though he was one of the invaders I protected myself from. Denying my own needs, I wasn't able to focus on his. I couldn't be intimate with him. I wouldn't nurture and take care of him.

I had options. Perhaps the most logical; make a clean break with Dan and get on with my life. No business partnership. No more family contact than absolutely necessary. I pondered that solution and didn't like it. A thought raised its ugly head. What I *wouldn't* give was the issue. If I broke with him and got into another relationship, wouldn't I be the same? Wouldn't I screw things up the same way?

My other option was to change myself. I couldn't make the decision to break or not break from Dan, until I knew more about me. A week passed. I anxiously went up the steps and entered Doctor Decker's office.

“Annie, how long have you been keeping score?”

Her question seemed to come out of the blue. “What?” What did she mean?

“You keep score, right? Let me use this example. It's just an example, not an accusation, okay? If you have sex, and the next night he wants to have sex again, you pull out your scorecard and note you've already done your duty. Right? Then you feel justified not giving in to him. You have a way of limiting what you give. What do you make of that?”

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I wanted to slam my fist on the arm of the chair and tell her she was way off track. I clenched my fist and.... I did keep score. I kept track of what I gave and resented any demand beyond that. I thought it through a moment longer. It wasn't just Dan. I limited what I gave everybody, even the kids. I gave what I decided I could give, nothing more.... No! I gave to the point I felt invaded. Damn, that word again! Doctor Decker nodding, watched me.

"You understand, don't you. Think about this as a control issue. Are you out of control if you give without qualification or limitation?"

"You mean if I lose control of myself?"

"What happens when you lose control?"

I thought about it. I searched back through my memories.

"Doctor, I don't think I've ever lost control."

"You're probably right. Sometime when you were little you made that decision. You haven't examined the position as an adult and determined if it's valid. Let me give you some background." She had my attention. "Annie, it's usually not effective to give information. I'm telling you this because I don't want you wasting time on a Freudian analysis of your childhood. You could get side-tracked and spend years digging, processing and re-processing your past. That's not necessary. What you need to know is that children, during their formative years, come to a superficial understanding of how things work. They have few experiences and little information on which to base their conclusions. As a healthy individual matures, early decisions are modified. I think in your case, and from what I've learned from you, it was probably when you were about six, you made decisions about personal space as a way of protecting yourself. It was an attempt to control forces you thought invasive. You must modify early decisions to get what you need."

She paused and I stared at her.

“By holding yourself so tightly? What do you get out of it?”

I blurted the answer, “Nothing good, that’s for sure!”

I looked at her, searching for clues. She shook her head.

“Well, Doctor, the only good is I’m able to be me!”

“And you’re here because that’s too limiting.”

“You’re right! That *Me* has to change—open up, lose control and let life flow.”

“What are you going to do about it? It’s time for you to put your energy into what you *will* do. You have the information. The past cannot be changed, but you must come up with a plan for future relationships.”

I started to ask for more information. She put her finger to her lips and shook her head.

“Homework, Annie. That’s your assignment for the week ahead. Okay?”

Driving home, I let my thoughts flow. The little girl I had been peered out of my subconscious; first in small bits, then longer flashes, and finally, like a childhood connect-the-dot-to-dot game, formed images... my parents fighting; hiding in my room with the door shut, piles of pillows and stuffed animals protecting my space. Mom lecturing me and punishing me for not being responsible. And the way I felt when girls took my dolls from me—stole them—and I never got them back. I recalled feelings of vulnerability and the sense of powerlessness which caused me to build my protective wall and take control of every situation. As I touched my past, I knew my fears for what they were and overcame a little girl’s way of dealing with a scary world. Insights surged through me. I filled the car with my voice, “The world isn’t inexplicable. I’m not afraid. I don’t need walls to protect me from invasion.”

I enjoyed my sense of power all the way home. Then, as I walked in the door and faced the empty house, reality hit me. If I let go and gave up being in charge, I’d be putty,

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a blob without direction. I wandered around the house, scared. My inner child would never give up control, I had to take charge. But how?

In desperation, knowing I had to overcome constraints, I decided to try alcohol. I wasn't looking for a permanent crutch, I wanted to break down walls. I went to the liquor cabinet and pulled out a fifth of scotch. I'd get drunk and lose my inhibitions. That's what it was about, inhibitions. Drunk, I thought I could experience being out of control; not giving a damn.

I had problems getting the booze down. It burned, but didn't seem to affect me. The burning went away. I felt light-headed. I walked around the house, aware it was so empty. I was still in control. Then I heard a car drive up and a door slam. Out the kitchen window I saw Dan going into the garage office. What had Decker said? "The past cannot be changed. Come up with your plan for future relationships."

I felt invincible as I entered the garage. Dan was taking off his suit coat and loosening his tie. He had a stack of files on the desk in front of him, obviously preparing for a long afternoon of paperwork. He stood near the desk struggling with his tie.

"Here, let me do that for you!" I made my move, facing him and pretending to struggle with the knot. I pulled him toward me and kissed him hard, pushing my breasts into his chest and moving my right knee up gently between his legs. He was so surprised all he could say was, "Scotch?"

After, we got off the desk and went into the house to cuddle and talk. The liquor loosened my tongue. It was easy telling Dan about my shrink and therapy. I told him what I was working on and what I wanted from our relationship. He listened, nodded, smiled and gently rubbed my back as I talked.

"Annie, I didn't know all that. I guess I was wrong thinking our chemistry was off. I never suspected you

wanted me—to make love to me—like I’ve always wanted you.” He paused as if he were having second thoughts. “Honey, are you sure you want a full relationship with me? That we’re not like your Mom and Dad? Your Dad couldn’t make it with your Mom. He stopped loving her. I’ve always wanted things to work between us—you know that. I’m not him. I was wrong going off to find someone to take your place. I’m sorry. I should have stuck with you and helped you work through all this. But, are you sure you’re not like your Mom?”

Was I like my Mom? No! Absolutely not. But he perceived me that way. Of course. To him I had Mother’s hang-ups.

“No honey, I’m *Me*. I feel sorry for Mom—what she lost. I know what she did, how she was. I’m not like her and I don’t want my life to turn out like hers.”

“I had to know. I thought you two were the same when it came to men. I’m glad I was wrong, but you seemed to, well, you know.”

“Oh Danny, honey, I understand why you thought that. Maybe it was true at one time, but not now. I had to work through a lot of stuff—some of it related to Mother. I had to do it alone, there was nothing you could have done. I’ve made a major breakthrough. Can you trust me? Will you come back as my lover and husband? I need you. I love you, you big nut.”

We took a long, hot shower. As we dried off, he cooled and began to apologize again. I didn’t want him to feel guilty—then I thought he was telling me he had to go home.

“I just need time to try to understand all this. It’s not what you think, Annie.”

“What do you mean ‘it’s not what I think?’”

“I mean if you think I have someone else, that’s been over for some time.”

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I said something intelligent like, “What? What’s ‘some time’?”

He shrugged and didn’t answer.

“You mean you aren’t in love with someone else? What’s her name, Jeannie?”

“In love? Only with you. Do you have any more scotch?”

He took a big slug and sat eyeing me. I suspected he was planning something, a test?

“Let’s go back to bed, Annie!”

My first reaction? Excitement—then angst. I had just—we had just—I had given.... He smiled, took a sip and waited. I tore up the scorecard and made the leap, letting excitement rule. I stood, grabbed his hand and led the way into our new relationship. The feelings I had were scary. One minute, playful, free and willing. The next, used and invaded. The alcohol had worn off. I stood spiritually and physically naked on the battlefield, no place to hide, no weapons to use. I had to fight a monster a little girl created to shut herself off from perceived intrusions. While my body opened, my mind tried to close the door. I struggled to separate myself from the battle—to stand back and observe. I had to decide once and for all which part of me would win.

I chose playfulness and romance, openness and freedom. It wasn’t sex, it was nurturing, love and mutual support. Those passions won me over.

I was still the aggressor when he rolled over and let me know he’d had enough. Ha!

The change in our relationship was becoming everything I wanted it to be. At our next session, I told Doctor Decker what happened. She laughed.

“Of course! When the man is the instigator, the aggressor—if he’s the one in the relationship that makes all the moves—he fears rejection. He fears he’s never

going to get what he needs. He's subject to the woman's rejection, fears it, and has to make choices. He can cajole and keep at it until she decides to go along, or he can shut down and suffer the rejection—the blow to his self image. The woman may fake it, but afterwards, he feels empty and angry because he knows she didn't want him—he couldn't excite her. He learns to avoid confrontations by finding someone who wants him. I'm describing choices made by mentally stable men. Obviously, unstable men can get tough and force sex. We call it spousal abuse, rape!"

"You mean when I made the moves...?"

Decker smiled and nodded.

"Dan didn't know how to deal with it?"

"Well, I don't know what he dealt with. But in a healthy, two-sided relationship neither partner fears rejection or the insult of not being able to excite a partner. Remember Annie when you told me about the nature film you saw about Baboons, and described your reaction to the female. You said she reminded you of you? What was it? The male groomed and petted her and made over her, right? Then, after a week or so, she let him have sex with her. Isn't that what you told me?"

"I thought, at the time, it's like Dan's and my relationship."

"Annie, what did the female get out of the relationship? Is that what you want?" She paused and let me think. "How do you think the male felt?"

I answered by shaking my head, knowing inside it was not what I wanted, and certainly not what I wanted to do to Dan.

"Annie, when you instigated a natural and nurturing act, you relieved Dan of all the frustration caused by instigation-rejection. He no longer feared he wouldn't get what he needed—that you would reject him, insult him, by not getting turned-on. Understand? Without fear motivating

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him, with a partner who shares the joy of being together, he lost the urgency and knew he could be fulfilled. That's a start, but understand it will take a lot of time and TLC before he fully trusts you."

I sat there reliving the times I had gone along. The times I had a willing body—all systems go—but my mind wouldn't let me be part of the action. The times I had been focused upon taking out the garbage instead of my pleasure and his. Would he ever learn to trust me?

"Okay Annie, more homework. I've written it out, but let me explain each part. First, I want you to determine what part Romantic Attraction plays in your life. We know romantic thoughts are linked to the release of dopamine and norepinephrine which are natural stimulants associated with infatuation and falling in love. Your job is to identify and practice thoughts that release these chemicals." She paused and stared at me, thinking through what she needed to say.

"I want you to know these are forces that can be harnessed and used for pleasure. I also want you to know there is a danger. Some people are so into the romantic, they can't find pleasure in long-term relationships. To them, if it isn't new, it isn't exciting. Be aware! You don't want that!

"Second, I want you to understand Lust. It's fueled by the release of testosterone in both sexes. It's the craving for sexual gratification. Your assignment? Know how lust works in you. What sets it off? How you deal with it? What stands in the way of enjoying this strong emotional drive? Have fun being lustful!

"Third, think of your marriage in terms of three entities—you, Dan and your relationship. Are you ready to take action to support the health of all the parts of the relationship, or do you create mental blocks that keep you from your true and natural feelings?"

Chapter 25

KATIE CAME OVER to help me prepare the Thanksgiving dinner. She bubbled with happiness. Danny was almost two years old. His sister, Connie, lay asleep in a carrier with pink trim. Katie arrived in her new Dodge Caravan, had new clothes and talked about the apartment they were moving into after Christmas. She and Jerry seemed to have all the money they needed.

The strange and unsettling thing was that after we got them married and set-up, they hadn't asked us for money. We were proud of them, happy and relieved they were successful even though we couldn't understand how they were making it without our financial help. They worked hard. Jerry was a salesman for a company that, according to him, "Made recreational stuff." He often traveled on weekends and sometimes missed classes because of emergency trips the company required him to make. Katie had quit Wal-Mart and had a job that paid well. She described it as "Canvassing students on campus for a marketing company."

Dan and I discussed our concerns about their sources of money.

"Honey," Dan said, "Jerry's parents have to be helping them out. There's no way the kids could make enough to maintain their lifestyle without help. I talked with Jerry, they're not running up credit card debt. He says they pay as they go. I don't understand how it could be this easy for them. Next time you talk to Jerry's mother, thank her—them—for helping the kids. Tell her we'll gladly pay our share."

I talked with Jerry's mother. She thanked us for being so generous and helping the kids with "New cars and everything." She told me they had financial problems since Ben changed jobs, and had been unable to help the kids.

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That's when red flags started waving. Dan and I knew Katie and Jerry were spending more money than either or both could earn in their part-time jobs. We wanted to know where they were getting it, but we didn't know how to pry into their finances without alienating them, or over-parenting. We feared they were victims of some easy credit scheme. We never suspected what was really going on. Months passed.

Dan and I melded together as we worked on our relationship. We were happy and at ease with one another. We slipped away for long business weekends in D.C., Seattle, and Denver. At least once each quarter we spent special time in the Caribbean. Together, we planned a long trip to Europe. The business provided us with intellectual challenges, and the money we needed. We only took contracts we felt challenging and worth doing. The pressure was off our lives.

As we evolved, our relationship changed. Dan shared thoughts about making our relationship work. He told me one night that what I assumed were his sexual needs weren't all physical. He said the fear of losing his sexual desire caused him the most angst. He was afraid of not being a man. He said I should understand that, and not make him feel impotent. I pointed out, thanks to what I learned from Doctor Decker, that he chose to feel, I didn't make him feel. That led to discussions about feelings he had that he thought conflicted with what I wanted.

As we sorted things out, we found we had the same fears and feelings. We could help each other if we agreed to ask for what we wanted and accept the other's response. If we shared our reasons for decisions, the pressure of rejection was off. It sounded good, but I was afraid. That may seem strange, but you have to know yourself well to know what you need. Asking is the last step in a long process of growth. Unexplained or

unreasonable rejection at that point can destroy trust, as I knew so well.

Having to get in touch with what I needed, and ask someone for it, seemed like total vulnerability, the complete loss of control. Doctor Decker got me to accept the importance of asking. I had to trust Dan—trust that he wouldn't take advantage of me or spurn me. I had been concerned that he wouldn't trust me, but it was actually the other way around. I made the effort, opened myself, and shared intimacy resulted. Best of all, we were no longer caught in the no-win game of aggressor and victim. Doctor Decker's homework assignments resulted in our making a major change in the ways we related.

Life took on a sweetness I never imagined possible. I enjoyed being older. I won my identity by confronting myself, unscrewing the too-tight places in my head, and I was damned proud of it. I was centered and ready for great adventures with a partner I loved, respected and nurtured. Dan and I were as excited about the years ahead as any two people could be. Life was full. Life was rich. Life was challenging.

We were snuggling together on the love seat in front of the TV, taking pleasure being close. It was a typical evening, we were doing unremarkable things. The wonder of it was the great sense of security and peace we felt. We were together, sharing little delights as if they were earth shaking events. What might look to some to be a closed little world, was for us a vast and exciting universe. The only enemy we had was the telephone. I had been on the phone most of the day planning a surprise birthday party for my friend Sarah. Now, every few minutes the phone rang and someone made a suggestion for the party that couldn't have waited until morning. The phone jangled again. I shook my head, refusing to answer. Dan reached across me and picked it up. I expected the call was for me,

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and waited for.... His face went blank, lost color. He physically deflated, said "Thank you officer," gave me a terrified look, his hand shaking, he dropped the phone into his lap.

It was awful news, unbelievable news about Katie and Jerry.

From that moment on, we were caught in a nightmare. One or both of us had to be at hearings, meetings with lawyers, social services, IRS audits. We had to fight to clear our names so we could remove the babies from foster care. We spent hours driving up-state to the prison where Katie was held, and down-state to visit Jerry. We lost our personal and business time, and had to explain what was happening to friends and disgruntled clients. I lost weight, dark circles grew under my eyes. Dan lost charisma and energy. Our relationship suffered, we sniped at one another.

Months passed. The hell-storm abated some, and then one morning we sat in a stuffy courtroom, waiting for decisions that would forever change lives.

Under our state's mandatory sentencing statutes our daughter and son-in-law would each spend a minimum of six and one half years in prison for dealing—buying and selling—drugs. At the time, it looked like they could each serve twenty years. The courts had no tolerance or mercy for drug dealers.

Later that same day, in a courtroom across town, another judge awarded us custody of little Danny and Connie. His last comments stung. He advised us to teach *these* children strong Christian values.

We came home, paid the baby-sitter and collapsed on our recliners, each cuddling a wiggling kid. Dan sighed. "Weren't we supposed to get together with the Jacksons? Wasn't that tonight?"

"Sarah called yesterday and canceled. Didn't want to talk. From her tone, I don't think she's my friend anymore."

“It’s the bad press, we’ve got to expect that, Annie.”

“Everybody’s afraid of the DEA guys. When they bashed down the door, searched our house and impounded our cars—well, who can blame our friends if they stay clear. I would.”

“That guy Buzzy, at the repair shop, said he’d seen the picture in the paper of us being led off in handcuffs. He asked me if I traded drugs. I explained about Katie and Jerry. He gave me a strange smile and then—you’ll never believe this Annie—he said ‘If you ever have any extra, let me know.’ I could’ve killed him.”

“Well, the paper did report we weren’t involved, got our property back and.... It makes no difference, does it? We’ll always be suspect. Guilt by association. Everybody wants to forgive Katie and make Jerry the villain. I honestly think she corrupted him. His folks are really taking it hard, we’ve got to have them over and.... I’ll bet no one comes to visit them, either.”

“Annie, we’ll make new friends,” he sighed. “Remember, you met the ladies in your pack through the preschool. You’ll make other friends—and some of the old ones will stick.”

I was getting my strength together to make dinner for us. The baby sitter had fed the kids. Dan would get them into bed. The doorbell rang. Dan gave me a “what-the-hell” look. Before he could get up, the door burst open and five ladies from my pack came in. Five husbands, each carrying a covered dish, followed obediently. We were hugged and kissed as nurturing friends let us know they understood what we were going through. Sarah Johnson and her husband led the pack.

We were in our late forties, free and ready to run with the rest of our lives. It wasn’t to be. We had two young kids to raise. We were starting over. I worried about preschool

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as Dan got back in the harness of parental responsibility. A week passed, one of the longest weeks I can remember.

Dan came in from the office, looked around at the mess, took the garbage out to the dumpster and came back in to help me clean up the living room. His shoulders sagged. He had a look on his face I hadn't seen in years. The kids grabbed him, each hugging a leg. He smiled down at them, shaking his head, staring at me.

"Annie, we screwed-up the first time. Maybe that's why we have to do this over. Say goodbye to our dreams for another twenty years! We're screwed down tight again."

I looked at our grandkids. Cold fear grip my insides. Did we create weak and unbalanced children? Should we be raising children? Or, were we being punished for things Katie did which had no connection to us? Things she knew were wrong, but she chose to do anyway.

I decided the choices Katie made reflected upon me—Dan and me—mostly me. I wanted to know where I'd gone wrong. What I'd done to create this nightmare? If I was responsible? A voice inside me denied my guilt. But...?

Dan was right, we were screwed. We were destined to go through the whole process again. I had done years of soul-searching in an attempt to know myself and be true to myself. But had I, had we, unscrewed ourselves enough to take on these children? Did we know where we had gone wrong with Katie—and Bobbie too. He wasn't the happy, well-adjusted man we attempted to create. Neither turned out as we hoped. We were guilty of....

My mind searched for an answer. Slowly, it became clear the issue of guilt wasn't important. We had young children to raise. There were things we could do. My thoughts gelled. This was a wonderful opportunity, not to correct perceived wrongs, but to experience life in a full and exciting way. I smiled as the terrible pressure went away. I reached up and cupped Dan's cheek in my palm. He was surprised, sensed I had relaxed, and leaned down

to kiss me. Our lips met, he was kissing my smile. He pulled away, curious.

“Honey, Katie made her own bed, and not because of anything we did or could have done. Her bad choices were hers alone, and I’ll have a hard time forgiving her for what she did. But, damn her, she can’t make us put our dreams on hold. Think about it!”

He nodded agreement. “I came to that same conclusion. But...”

“We have two delightful children to share life with. We’ve earned the freedom to do what we want, and sharing the next twenty years with kids will make our lives richer! We haven’t been screwed, we’ve been given a gift.”

Dan nodded as a big smile gentled his face. He gave me a hug, then another. I could feel his body relax and his energy begin to flow like youth returning.

“You’re right, Annie. I really love these kids. I can enjoy them in ways I never enjoyed Katie and Bobbie. I was too young—I was working my life away back then. It’ll be even better, just imagine. Look out, world! We’re free and ready for adventures like the year we took off in our RV.” His voice rang the strong conviction I needed to affirm my own sense of excitement.

I held him as tight as I could. The kids hugged our legs, sensing our relief. I heard music wafting through our secret place. “In fact my love, we’re both unscrewed for the first time in our lives!”

Joy filled my heart.

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**ANNIE'S LIFE AND VALUES
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BABY-BOOM GENERATION**

**EACH OF US HAS A MOUNTAIN OF
MISINFORMATION TO CONQUER**

IS THERE MAGIC IN PARENTHOOD?

**EDUCATING OUR KIDS AND
OURSELVES...
ANNIE'S GUIDE FOR SURVIVAL**

***A DELIGHTFUL INFORMATIVE
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Caption***

About the Author

DESCRY'S WORKS range from mysteries set on the Colorado Plateau and the Sea of Cortez, to serious studies of human dynamics.

"I do, I observe, I listen. I write in the most candid way possible. I research. I put as much accuracy in my novels as I can. My characters are composites. I don't expose family secrets or those of people I love, but I deal with real issues. At heart I'm a teacher."

Descry was born in Colorado and now lives in Prescott, Arizona with his wife and two sons. His background in education, archaeology, business, travel, and adventures of all kinds, comes through in his writing. Few authors have such a rich and varied experience base to draw from. He has been called a Renaissance Man, a Social Commentator, a Teacher's Teacher. He's been a thorn in the side of the educational status-quo for forty years.

Descry is currently researching a book focused on the Inupiaq Eskimos in Alaska and the dynamics of their land above the arctic circle.

The variety of his writings is evident in:

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