

## ❧ THE BEGINNING ❧

*Les Rochers Nocturnes, December 5, '04*

*The heart is an adventurer...*

*-Osbo*

I'm walking down the winding back road into the village. Snow is heaped on either side and covers the ground about the houses. Most of these dwellings are ancient—wood darkened by centuries and carved with fanciful designs; tidier than God, with wood stacked in perfect precision close under the eaves. I watch my step on the steep stretch just before I come into the level main street—I've got a basket over my arm and adjust my balance. The pavement is deep in slush and puddles. I turn right towards the train station. Here black-wood antiquity is punctuated by shiny modern shop windows displaying sporting gear: ski boots, puffy jackets. The cheese shop sends interesting ripples of ripe smell when I pass its cold glass door. A winter breeze moves over snowdrifts and eddies in under my shawl. Between buildings are fields of snow, breathing deliciously icy air at me. The sky is patchily grey on cold blue. A faraway sun shines without warmth.

I know this street as well as any other in my much-traveled life—I've been staying in a chalet at the edge of town most of the past nine months, and before that, yearly for holidays (usually working ones) for about eighteen years. The only place I know better is a walled garden in Poona, India.

I'm nearly at the tiny *Gare*. There's the restaurant across the street with a chalkboard outside announcing *perche grille* and *patates frites*. The main road widens here and an occasional car goes by. When I look up from navigating the melty ice I see a wide hill with dark forest against the white snow; split down the middle by the ski-lift cable. That's to the left of me—to the right a taller mountain rises more steeply, thousands of feet...and on level after level of it, like parallel universes in the same vertical space, are the small private worlds of distant chalets, each with its protective stand of trees until the highest ones—these are far above the valley—are treeless, bared to the storms. And even higher up, nearly to the top of the long ridge, are horizontal lines—obviously man-made—avalanche barriers. An odd civilizing touch to the wild.

I swing right around and enjoy the familiar wave of...recognition? Mystery? that always goes through me when I gaze at the peculiar geographic feature I call the Goddess-bowl. In shadow now, this deep natural amphitheatre with its half-kilometer-wide entrance from the

valley looks like it's been hollowed out with an ice cream scoop from the blackness of the sheer massif which lifts above it to 3,000 meters. Frozen waterfalls cling to the rock wall; a bit of white rims the top—a hint only of the Rocheres Nocturnes glacier covering the whole plateau up there. On either side of the Goddess-bowl are classic Alpine meadows and forests, peaks and canyons.

In winter and spring this view is cozily padded with snow except on the cliff-face; in fall the rock is dark beyond forests turning in places red and gold and brown where deciduous trees mix amongst the stands of pine. Then a delightful spookiness runs like goblins through my evening walks and I come home with pocketsful of fat rosehips and scribbled poems...In summer one sees dark rock leaping with living waterfalls, green slopes to the right, timbered steepness to the left. And in summer too silent *parapunters* drift under vibrantly-colored curves of fabric—they've come running off the edge of the steepest ridge way up behind the chalet where I live and they rise and wheel like birds...and then float down, down...one after the other, like characters in a strange medieval painting. They land with a stagger on a field, run a bit, the long flow of orange or hot lime or deep-sea blue coming along behind them like a royal train.

This is my adopted valley; my happenstance. I love to hike on summer mornings, before the afternoon storms rise up from the peaks and flicker and growl. I love to sit in high meadows on a folded Indian *lungi* and meditate, receiving the light that mountains give, and their breezes on my face, against my closed eyelids...and then, when it feels like time, walk back home with a lifted heart. And now it's winter and I love this too. I revel in the bright verve the cold brings to me.

I'm turning left into a small parking lot, up wide concrete steps and down the open corridor to the right under the overhanging roof; and here's the platform, with one or two bundled-up travelers standing on it. I sit on a slatted wooden bench and pull my black shawl tighter about me.

I've dressed carefully but not warmly enough, seduced by the sunshine which had come through the chalet windows. I've got on an old favorite cotton dance jumpsuit in a red faded down to calm tomato soup; my waist is curvily defined with a wide black elastic belt. A warm black faux fur hat frames my face with fluffy elegance and black gloves with red braid come to my elbows under the rolled-up sleeves of the suit. My black clogs keep me off the wet pavement but don't provide much insulation. They look good with the baggy be-zipped jumpsuit though! The shawl is thick and soft but inadequate; I grabbed it at the last moment when I couldn't decide which jacket looked best—the long black velvet one lined with flannel or the swoopy velvet opera coat? But I'm vain and the jumpsuit is so flattering to my figure—my derriere, I know, looks like a tomato'd peach in it—my waist so small—and so I chose for flattery and am shivering for it! But I don't mind. It's all in good fun.

The 13:10 is due soon. I get up and go into the small waiting room where heat comes from shiny metal grates under benches on three sides. More people sit here, and on the fourth side is the ticket window where from time to time I practice my French on the wrinkled, not unkindly ticketmaster when I want to go down the canyon to one or the

other of the cities along the shore of Lac Lemman.

I'm fidgety with some degree of excitement yet am serene too. I don't feel specially invested in the anticipated arrival...and I'm so happy in these days and months, a drifting, healing, unfolding joy in being alive. It was not quite a year ago I was in India pitching headlong (precisely) towards death, and was rescued, and resurrected, and redeemed. I was successfully delivered, in emergency surgery, of a benign but cytotoxic, life-threatening, egg-sized meningioma (a tumor curiously resembling a uterine fibroid in chemistry) from the dura of my left frontal lobe—all by surprise, the day after Christmas. And so after a grey three years of puzzlement and half-buried illness I'd snapped back to life with a joyful immediacy, suddenly able to dream again, to weep. And I did weep, with joy—a seeping from my bruised eyes that continued for weeks...catching up; so grateful, so amazed. And I could suddenly hear music. All these things had been denied me during that bewildering interval shot through with periodic seizures I did not know how to name. I'd been wandering leftward into obstacles and falling down, I'd been groaning with pain in the night and unconscious of it, lying in my own urine and vomit in the midst of a forty-eight-hour seizure, until my neighbor heard me and called the nurse at the meditation Commune where I lived. And then it all just happened, the skull peeled back, the garbage bag removed, the bliss, bliss, of unburdening; and maybe almost more than anything, the astonishing perception that I was loved: so many people came to my aid and prayed and meditated for me during the 6 ½-hour surgery, so many sent love and even money, so much buoying support flowed towards me. I had not known, I'd been so alone, I'd thought life was now a strange grey ageing I was required to traverse, bereft of my former luck and brightness. So I'd trusted and I'd gone with it...but after the wonderful baring-of-my-brain-to-the-air occurred I smiled full-wide, grinned like a fool for months. My being glowed out my skin. And now...the ongoing redemption seems composed of space, peace, light—the light of this valley in the snow; the light over the volcano'd island of Maui last spring; the sunburst of visiting my mother in Oregon and reconnecting thus with my navel, my body-birth; hugging her fragile-bodied, strong-spirited old self who is so different than I am yet so connected to me. The light of being at peace with intrinsic homelessness and financial destitution; the glowing beauty of my own heart rising like a sun and making inexplicable peace wherever it shines in me. The light of Sitting every morning in my upstairs wooden room with its small window, now that it's too cold to sit outside...wrapped in a shawl, and watching the Interior *be* and move and dwell and rise. Of conversing with and listening to my special angels, whatever they might be. The light of feeling like a dancer partnered by existence only—an intangible; but I'm being swooped and bended, whispered to and twirled—and there seems nothing for me to learn but how to surrender and let go into those invisible arms.

I go outside again and sit on the same bench as before. The basket's a big rattan one covered with a cloth napkin; I set it beside me. Now the blue train is pulling in on the narrow tracks, the clatter amplified by the overhanging roof. I stand as the door to the first car opens and a sturdy-looking young man of medium height makes his way down the high silver steps. He's got a woolen cap pulled down over his domed head, large round eyes look-

ing up bashfully; he's seen me too. He's wearing jeans, a hiking jacket over a woolly sweater; I see his shoulders are thick and strong. "What a nice-looking young college boy!" I think. I'm quite, quite indifferent to whether he's here or no...but if he's here, I'm going to be a good hostess. I've brought fresh homemade bread, a wedge of mountain cheese, an apple, with a knife and a small plate.

The boy turns and drags a large duffel and a backpack out the door of the train and hoists their straps onto his shoulder. I come towards him smiling and he introduces himself: "I'm Neil!" and he laughs very shyly indeed; but strength is clear in all his movements, and there's a cleanliness about him which kind of puzzles me. Where do they raise people this... *simple?* That's my underlying feeling, though it will take time before it becomes a thought.

We walk companionably through slush and melt, ice and snow-crunch, to his hotel at the edge of the village, direction Massif. The sun is already descending, the pines give off cold as we pass. His room is all wood, it smells good, there's a balcony looking towards the Goddess-bowl's textured rock perhaps five kilometers distant. I look out the window and glimpse a noisy stream running half under ice across the lane.

We sit in the cozy room and I spread out his snack and he eats warm dense multi-grained sourdough bread and cheese. We talk of his journey, and how it is for him being out of the U.S. for the first time (not counting one trip to Vancouver). And once he raises his big eyes and says earnestly, "You're much prettier than your picture!" And I wonder—*Is this true? Well—maybe he sees my profile!—which I don't usually see*—and inane things like that. I think, *hmmm, so my being so much older than he is—doesn't perhaps intrude?* I observe that with his hat off his seal-dark hair lies close to his strong, rounded head. I like a rounded-head man—a shape that makes me want to bend down over him where he sits and press my nose into his neck-back and inhale him. If he's a man who smells right...But I'm not expecting anything from this one. There are two other men writing steadily to me, men of more generous years, properly grey, next to whom I might look pert and youthful. Who might adore me in a courtly manner, and be delighted by my exotic history, and be ready to give steadiness and even adventure in return. One of whom is a ballroom dancer.

I give Neil a couple of Bill Bryson travel books to read and leave him to rest. He's just flown across half the United States, then the Atlantic, from Springfield, Missouri to Geneva, and then gotten right onto the big train to Aigle; then connected, by running laden across the cobbled square, to the little one to Les Rochers Nocturnes, where it waits in a row of similar mountain-bound trains. He'll want to *subside* a bit!

It's full dark when he manages, following my directions, to find the chalet, across the village and up a winding street to where the buildings have thinned and there are just a few mountain houses on large lots under tall trees. I'd asked him if he'd like to go to a concert tonight and he'd said he would, and so we walk down to the station again and take the train one stop to the next village, Les Jeannettes, which is just a church, built in the fifteenth century, and an inn and maybe a half dozen houses. We troop in to the stone church and take our seats in a pew, looking about us at the many people attendant, the lofty ceiling, the beams like an upturned ship's skeleton. Just before the music begins a beautiful black

woman enters with her Swiss husband and child; they chat with people and room is made for them in a pew. I'm glad the Family of Man gets more representation thus—otherwise it's just the so-white choir and the locals, the former now opening their mouths as one, launching into Gospel in an earnest, pale-faced way, then singing Christmas carols, well sometimes, badly others...stilted and well-meaning in unfamiliar English. It's great fun, being in this almost-warm sanctuary with its high arches and ornate altar, the stained glass windows; the *event* of it all. Neil next to me is staunch in his rough grey sweater. So now the Family of Man includes a square white boy from the Midwest.

A land stranger to me than far India. Much stranger indeed.

When we come out later, happy and well-entertained, into the snow, we pause in the churchyard to watch a brown tiger cat balance on a two-by-four, part of the structure of a life-sized *crèche*. I put my mittened hand out and the cat extends his nose towards it, forgets where he is, slips, and manages to hook his elbows over the beam and climb up again, pretending that he's not embarrassed. "Oh, sweet kitty!" I gush, and pet his grave striped head. *I'd be much more interested in taking him home with me, think I, than the young man, if it came to that—which of course it won't.*

We walk home, two kilometres along an empty road beside a wide and garrulous stream. The woods are dark and thick next to the water, and to our right up the steep hill. Snowlight makes the way easy, snow underfoot makes an agreeable crunch. It's a lighthearted trek—I love walking at night, when the absence of sun somehow makes everything effortless, and I feel I could just go on and on. The young man escorts me to the chalet and then goes off into the night to his hotel.

And so we spend a very pleasant week, hiking daily for hours on the snowy roads up into the hills, talking. At least—I talk; and he listens attentively, and laughs a great deal at what I say, his head thrown back, a goodly sound coming out, as if he's surprised, and half-enchanted...an ingenuous sort of laugh. We go a new direction each day, I with my hiking poles, he declining same. We stump through snow up into the Goddess-bowl, which is as rewarding in deep snow as in summer, it's hushy and wide, the white cover thick. I know the ground beneath is rocky and complicated, so we go carefully; yet the snow is a cushion too and we manage to get quite far into the uptilted circle walking as if in a featherbed. He takes pictures of me and I of him; this is a tourist trip for him as well as a girlfriend-seeking expedition; and he wants to document. When I click the digital at him he poses like men often do in photos: standing unsmiling, serious and plain and stiff, face on to the camera.

He's proving to be a gentleman. A few times I start to slip on ice or a slope and he catches me expertly and lifts me onto my feet again; he wears the backpack with our lunch unless I insist sometimes to carry it. (I like the feel of the weight.) He doesn't make the slightest move towards my person otherwise, and of this I'm glad—not the merest flicker of *intention* seems to be there, yet he's present and happy. I've not known so very many gentlemen.

The things he tells me about his life make no real sense to me—I know nothing of pickup trucks and steady jobs. He tells me what he does for work but it's like the wind passing and I don't retain it. Something...well, all I know is, he goes to work each day, has

only a week's holiday now, and told his boss he's turning off his cell phone—emphatically. He tells me about his vehicles. (Some men online post photos of themselves with these beloved objects in the background, or the foreground even, the red car and the truck and the other car, and he had sent one of this type. Cars are so much noise to me, I don't know their names; but I just felt this was better than if they were pictures of dogs. Cars, I felt, are at least useful, even if I wish trains were still the order of the day.)

He tells me of the rolling Ozark mountains—hills, really—and the many lakes there and of a childhood he says had no trauma; a thing that as a therapist I cannot believe of anybody. Well, his father worked hard and struggled and everything worked out and Neil did have some asthma and had to be hospitalized...and was an Irish child in a German area, so there he sometimes felt himself an outsider. But otherwise...in his sparse-worded way he presents a solid front of normality—the *least* normal thing I can imagine. Camping, swimming, eating peanut butter cookies, fishing with his dad—and once, hunting and killing a deer. “I didn't enjoy it very much,” he says; so I assume this alien-to-me subject is disposed of.

Very different from my own upbringing in Southern California, at the time when orange groves were just coming down and tract houses were just going up, and the snow-capped mountains were becoming obscured by smog. Though we camped too, in the Mojave Desert with its dry cold winds and fragrant uplands smelling of juniper and star-cold emptiness; in the Sweetwater Mountains all piney and woodsily satisfying and musical with streams. But there the resemblance ends—my family was large, impoverished, over-I.Q.'d and underpractical, a loose aggregate of bookish misfits under the ignoring if benign non-gaze of a scientist father who lived for his equations; and a screaming, exhausted, often laughing, always literary mother; radicals, poets and useless slopers and dreamers and loomers, four brothers'-worth of them. There was added, after a bit, a grim, determined and beauteous little sister; and then an adventurous toddling little brother. Ornithopters flew through the smoky living room where a friend's motorbike lay in pieces and detritus washed about our oblivious ankles in a flotsam-jetsam tide. A good launching pad for a roamer—a good place to leave.

But I don't say all this, just snippets; and really Neil doesn't say much. I just kind of bubble with anything that comes into my head. “Do you hike much there?” I ask curiously. “Um...” (he says ‘um’ a lot)—“actually I never do lately. This is the first time I'm hiking in years. But I'm really enjoying it!” However he seems very fit.

(I sort of, at this point, block out the not-hiking part as I simply can't imagine a life which doesn't include walking out to meet the Nature-Gods daily, to see what they're up to. Unless I'm in an airplane, in which case it's just a different sort of meeting?) He gets to hear about my wild life—hitchhiking across America at seventeen, getting invited into a movie as a dancing extra and being taken to Europe; my wonderful joyous decades in India, my travels for work from New Zealand to Norway, Japan to Switzerland. He says with weighted earnestness, “Your life is...the freedom most people only dream about. You are completely free!”

I tell him of the surgery in Poona (he says, on hearing of serendipities attendant in my rescue, “What an *elegant story*, Madhuri!”—and I find it a fine comment) and how so much in my life changed after that. I’d stopped my intensely demanding work as a psychic and metaphysical healer and become a wandering nothing-much, poet maybe; and enjoyer of my daily clothes gathered here and there on my travels! In fact, I tell him, I’m at work on a book of unserious poems to these—*The Garment District of the Mind*.

I even tell him my rebirth dream, as I called it, when three nights after surgery I began to dream again, after such a long hiatus! I was so happy to have my dreams back! This renaissance-harbinger was about shopping: *It is night, and I am regarding rich velvety purple sweaters in a nameless store, and swirled face-creams in milk glass jars in the mysterious soft-lit domain of an impassive black goddess in an eggshell bias-cut satin gown; I touch green rugs with dancing men woven into them. No noise attends this mercantile adventure, full of a mysterious sensuousness; no item carries a label—there is just silent joy in beauty, all under a huge spreading pine like the ones in the Himalayan foothills.* When I awoke I knew my mission in life was to live, to explore beauty in whatever way appeared to me, to love clothes and flesh and trees and the silent power of color. To revel in the bounty of life—textures, petted silks, kissable cats, the smell of that tall tree casting its fragrant needles on the sidewalk.

He does not respond to this—what can a man say when confronted with eggshell satin dreams—but he nods with a listening glow.

The chalet I’m living in had been offered by my dear friend Chantal for my recuperation—a very lengthy one, I am so happy to say—for while my body feels great my aura needs knitting yet this time longer...I can see it, I watch it as I meditate, and it wants the longest, most luxurious of convalescences. It wants to sew itself up again in its *own* way, not that of anyone else...its own time. And so it shall. I have to vacate by Christmas Eve when Chantal’s family comes for the holidays, but that will have given me three-quarters of a year here in heaven. (Minus, that is, a month I spent with another world-class girlfriend, Beyonda, in a madcap tour of Tuscany, Salzburg, and Lugano, in an old car crammed to the roof with our stuff, my feet out the passenger window as we tootled through the San Bernardino Pass with funky music playing, admiring the wildflowers like yellow butter spread on the meadows.) My plan is to then take the train down to Tuscany (with my brother Rudra—of whom more soon) to stay with Beyonda again.

Poona...my Indian home. You might be wondering about it. But how to speak of something so huge and yet so intimate? So...endless, so precious? The meditation community I’d lived in since I was twenty-one; where my ghosts were expunged, where I explored love in its many faces, guises, dances...where I worked, and sat in the glow of light cast by a brilliant enlightened being...How to speak of this? Grace, peace; terror as I met yet another layer of my onion of conditioning and karma. We have so many techniques there for meeting oneself—therapies of astonishing variety, meditations ditto. Then, grace and joy again, but bigger...and dancing, always dancing. I gave it everything I had and more and it gave me

back a millionfold, I was not separate from that place, there was no 'me' and 'it'. And then, over a period of recent years, my body and my unconscious began prodding me that it was time to leave that mellifluous womb (in that now-polluted country) and go into the world. I resisted! So much! But the cues became more and more insistent and dramatic and...here I am. I do feel private about all this, as I said—one person's meditation master is not necessarily another person's cup of tea—and I have an inherent distaste for interfering with anyone, or, horrors, *pushing* anything at all. I would prefer, rather, to just mention all this in passing. And you will find many quotes from him, that Enlightened Astonishment, Osho; throughout. (I love this one: *The Master is a swimming pool where you can learn how to swim. Once you have learned, all the oceans are yours.*) Let your exploration be your own...I describe mine, but that's all. The curious can always search further.

I tell Neil that I no longer see my life in terms of choices. The delight and the challenge are in being carried on who-knows-what winds, lying in the arms of let-go; the divinity of being in the only possible river, floating on my back, not knowing what's around the next turn. This goo-ga state is not for everyone, perhaps, but I'm finally admitting it is for me. Listening for what to surrender to is my meditation.

In the evenings we go to one of the pricey (everything in Switzerland is pricey) places in the village. This is lots of fun. I get to dress up in something black with sparkly earrings and impress him with my restaurant French. We have hot spiced wine, and tasty heavy food: lots of creamy buttery potatoes, and that local *perche grille*, and even delectable apple-tart, a departure for me! He pays without the slightest flinching—I watch his face carefully, for in my world women pay their own way and sometimes even the man's. (We're that empowered, yet still utterly woman.) Then he escorts me back up the hill to the chalet and leaves me at the door.

So here I will introduce my brother Rudra, as one evening I introduce him to Neil. Rudra is in residence just now in the large apartment on the ground floor, with its French doors onto a terrace and now-snowy lawn. He's here from England for a visit, and he's been helping me edit yet another book, about a Himalayan motorbike adventure (I'm forever writing books and then not knowing what to do with them.) He's a greatly-loved brother: grave and dark-browed, dapper and slim as a Mayfair gent, (though he only trims his rebel's hair and beard for special occasions, with, then, heart-touching attention to detail.) He's a philosopher/maverick through and through, with the deep enchanting voice of the best sort of radio announcer. He came to India to care for me after my operation, bringing me meals from the cafeteria with faithful regularity, and we had a wonderful time declaiming poetry and discussing *everything* (at one point I asked him to tell me the *entire story of every romance he'd ever had in his life*, and he complied—it was pretty much as hair-raising as my own history in that department, so I felt even less alone!) laughing at the same peculiar phrasings in Anglo-Indian books, reveling in our circumstance.

He keeps late hours laboring at his computer—a thin, somewhat desiccated figure in his 60's, stooped over the bright rectangle—and rises after noon, so I don't see him much just now. But I take Neil in to the big warm room with its red curtains and Rudra clicks a pic-

ture of us, I in dinner-going finery, Neil smiling this time, sweetly accepting the challenge of all the newness. And Rudra tells me next day that Neil seems all right to him—a thing he would not say without honest deliberation; I take it in though my own judgment is still in complete and unhurried suspension.

One evening I invite Neil in after dinner for dancing. I will dance at any opportunity and I'm constantly wishing there were more of them—for I love moving to music in company, not just by myself. Since my surgery this longing has become an even more pure passion. Hence in my ad on Antopia, the excellent dating site for people with herpes (I'd gotten mine in sleazy circumstances at age twenty in San Francisco and it has decorated my life with angst ever since) I'd added the two conditions, as a note after the poem: any man interested had to dance, and had to come to Switzerland to meet me. I figured this would separate the men from the boys—as the site itself already tends to do, attracting, I like to hope, men with slightly elevated honesty and humility.

Now, in our correspondence Neil had said something about dancing, but in my mind I still had him mixed up with another man who'd been writing to me—there were so many—who was a whiz at the Texas Two-Step, which I like. Chattily I'd responded to all the men, deftly getting rid of the truck drivers, dog lovers, really bad writers (I would have liked to get rid of the bad spellers but this would have left nobody except a few Canadians, and anyway I was in indulgent mood) and so on; and just kept a running few. These tended to shift and change with the weeks and I often forgot who was who, once mistaking two Brits for one another and sending one, who'd said he only wrote to one woman at a time, a long discussion about his Maine Coon cat; when it was the other one's cat entirely. Strange confusions ensued, about which the non-cat man was admirably diplomatic (I think he just answered "...*interesting*...") and then he vanished from my screen.

(I'd thought a Brit might be nice as I don't particularly want to live in the States—so *narrowing* to be stuck in the country of one's conditioning, I think—but the site is populated with Americans, as Europeans tend not to think herpes is a big deal. "It has been around since ancient Greece," a Swiss doctor friend told me. Most people carry it in some form or another. But I certainly don't want to *give* it to anyone! Again!

Excessive Googling tires me, so I stay with Antopia: an essay into Green Singles had quickly turned me into an unwilling Herpes Information Site! Amazing the ignorance out there about this sporadic, gnarly blistery crusty itchy irritating ailment—"I thought herpes was something only teenagers could get," and the like. I quickly went back to Antopia.)

In any case I'm not in the mood to fret or worry overmuch about what might or might not be to come. Quite simply, I am possessed of a warm knowing that I am a woman of great value...and would be a good addition to the right man's life. Meditation has scrubbed me inside and out; I'm versed in vibrant secrets about the metaphysical world; such a lot of traversing of the pitfalls of being a human female are behind me; I bring *joie d' vivre*, and carry my own inner tool kit for meeting the inevitable difficulties. I've got so little baggage: no kids, not a *sou* either to weight my pack, ha ha—just a lot of clothes and shoes. No bad habits except a fussy regard to healthy ones; few particular sorrows. So much experience as

therapist and therapee, combining to make me very open to the *human* in us all. I love to laugh out loud, and I'm decorative to boot! Not classically gorgeous: Though my oval face has a nice clear skin, I've a slight, wonky overbite, my nose has a little jog in the bridge, the left side of my jaw is just hinting at the softness which will one day become a sag. My big-enough river-green eyes look faded under my black, emphatic brows unless I use mascara (which I do.) My mouth is medium-sized with those overhauled, rather asymmetric teeth and is, apparently, expressive (someone once told me "You talk with your *whole body!*") I'm sort of classic-petite-woman-with-long-brown-hair, except for those imperfections that I've wasted plenty of energy deploring, of course. But now I *feel* beautiful, so who cares? (Oh, yes, I forget—I've got this interesting scar from the top of my left ear to the top of my right eyebrow, behind the hairline; the brown satin surgeon with his gleaming power-aura had said in his booming lilt that it would be a pity to cut my hair, so only a four-inch swath was shaved, and it's grown back into a short wide sticky-up fringe, like grass returning over an embattled road. The bone beneath will be forever bumpy in places. The scar feels to me like a smile, like something that belongs to me. The hairstyle even, strangely, makes sense, like something an experimental Dutch person might have come up with. It leaves my face open while I still have my wavy length.)

After a certain age one is just so delighted with what one still has blooming about one, that could so easily have gone to hooey...one forgets to mourn one's lacks. And, somehow, the competition so fierce in youth has died down, both inside and out. One becomes one's own star, shining bright...And, like the happiest of aboriginals, I decorate myself well, my hands applying my artistry delightedly about my person. (Once in 1974 I sat in front of the Master and told him that I love to dress up, that I want to be beautiful, and that I'm worried this is not spiritual. He looked at me for a moment—right into me, it felt—seeing who *this* person was, no other... and then he said, "Mmmm, Madhuri? Be beautiful. To be ugly is a violence to people!" Isn't that great? I love it!) A calm, open-ended sort of equanimity is what I feel, and there's just no wavering—I know a man will come along and that he will be good. This much is given. *Who* is another matter—this I have no inkling of at all.

The chalet is three stories high, traditional wood-built of course, and with many rooms—Chantal designed it for large family gatherings and for meditation groups. It is empty of frippery, it's just warm gold wooden walls and white wool carpet, the main room goes the width of the house and has red built-in couches and two huge white chairs. That's both living and dining-room; there's a long oval table at one end, and a fireplace at the other. Now I put a lamp on low, an Al Green CD goes on the turntable, and Neil and I slow-dance. It's the first time I've felt his arms about me, and they feel strong and simple and good; warm, supportive, but there's no sense he's actually trying to *do* anything to me—swarm me, lead me, pull me—and I like this. He holds me yet leaves me be. He's 5'10" to my 5'4", a good height for a comfortable hug. And...he dances like a white man, shifting from foot to foot, embarrassed, inexpert, but he's here and he's sweet, and as I said I'll take any opportunity to dance. So we sway in an exploratory way, and sometimes hit a bit of a groove, and then fall out of it again. And I put on wilder music and dance more or less

alone, shaking and leaping as we India-philes are wont to do... while he shifts from foot to foot out of time with his face screwed up, and then again I come up close and dance with him. In a slow song I put my forehead to his, so our third eyes are touching. We sway this way for awhile. The snow has stopped falling, neighbors are not too near; all is silent save the crooning song. Outside the night is black and the mountains are deep and rock is rock and beastly cold. It's warm in here and Neil is strong as trees, staunch as houses. The third-eye contact...well, this is interesting! Juicy things flash back and forth, tunnels open up and swallow us. A big well of darkness lives in our foreheads, all creaming with light like aurora borealis, moving always, made of mystery and nameless pulsing.

Now we go back to classic position, my head on his shoulder this time, against the rough knit of his sweater; hand raised in his clasp. The song ends.

"I don't know what happened there," says Neil with a duck of his bashful head. His eyes are wide. "Nothing I ever felt before."

"What did it feel like?"

"Dunno. Can't say exactly. But—the best way I can put it is—if you'd asked me to go outside in back of the house and bring you back a cup of snow, I'da done it."

Over the next few days he helps me mail boxes (of my wardrobe, mostly) to Italy; this involves much dragging of the wheeled shopping-trolley all strapped with the parcels down the road to the post office, his watching of same while I scurry back to the chalet for a forgotten phone number for the endless forms. And then he also offers with alacrity to buy me a new soup-kettle when I forget the house's one on the electric stove and the bottom turns to a shiny puddle of metal all over the element. (I'd not had to cook for thirty years, and am out of practice.) So we go pot-shopping together at the general store and bring a strong-bottomed one home in a big square box. And we keep hiking. One sunny day, far up the mountain behind the house, we stop to sit side by side on a brown-grassed slope beside the road with our lunch before us on a cloth. And Neil reaches over and places a warm hand on my bent knee. And I feel nothing of lust in his touch—only solidity, and a certain courageous deference. And that is all.

Finally he tells me he'd prepared for this meeting by taking very expensive Ballroom and Country dancing lessons for many weeks; had sweated with fear at first. I'm astonished by this effort, particularly since he's obviously not a natural dancer. This lack however is only partly why I don't take him seriously as a potential mate. He really just seems too young. And then, there's that other, dancing man, planning to fly to Siena to meet me when he can get away from work...a very bad speller indeed. Ah well.

And now it's Friday and Neil is leaving for Geneva, he flies tomorrow to return to work on Monday. He sits at the dining table gazing shyly at me from those big eyes while I assemble a packet of freshly-baked banana bread for his journey. It's as if he's twisting a hat in his hands. He looks twenty-four; I'm amazed he's forty-one. Now I sit at the table too and we have Chalet Tea and he, a plate of the warm butter-banana-and-spice-smelling confection.

Neil uncharacteristically begins the conversation. "You said a few days ago that you

didn't have any choices," he states, his slim brows rising and then frowning with the considered seriousness of his words. "Well, I want you to have some.

"I'd like you to come to Springfield and visit me! We could go to the lakes, and hiking in the Mark Twain National Forest, and I'd show you my town... This here's enough money for the ticket," he says, handing me a folded wad of francs. "It's very important to me that you have the freedom to choose what to do with it. You can use it for anything you like—but I hope you'll use it to come and see me."

I'm flabbergasted. I close my eyes, catching the moment to watch what occurs in my energy with this invitation. (I'm trying, you see, to live by my Human Design—a sort of rocket science astrology/*I Ching* thing—don't laugh—it's uncanny—and for decision-making I'm supposed to observe my body's immediate response to a formal invitation, and trust it, forgetting the temptation of the mental process. In other words, ye olde 'gut feeling.' And it's amazing how difficult it can be to be true to one's own tummy! Let me say here too that HD is an excellent tool for vetting potential suitors. I've run charts for the possible contenders, and Neil passed muster—else he'd not be here.)

Well... I feel energy rising from that tummy upwards, into my heart, where it feels kind of... open. Like a very calm sort of understated fountain.

"I'd need my own bedroom," I say dubiously, "and my own bathroom."

"I've got those!" he says.

I stare at him. He has those? Except for the space and privacy of this chalet and the beleaguered-with-noise-and-way-too-much-energetic-ampage of my lucky, blessed apartment in the Commune in India—also belonging to Chantal—I'm often sleeping on futons on somebody's living room floor; folding myself in two in airplane seats; crashing in spare rooms which are also offices in tiny city apartments in Germany; sharing bathrooms with kind and slightly messy friends. Space is short! Time is always short under *this* roof till I have to find another! What kind of place does this man live in anyway? I don't exactly *believe* him even!

He's never kissed me. I remark on this. He says he'd like to, and I say I'd rather not—I don't want to start something and be tormented by its absence, in his absence. I've noticed he does smell good...not really like anything exactly; but it's a good masculine not-anything. I'm very impressed that he hasn't pushed himself

**Chalet Tea:** an invention of mine destined to become a cold-weather mainstay: Heat ¼ cup soya or almond milk. Boil water and use some to warm a big cup. Put one teabag of Bengal Spice tea and one of Rooiboos in the cup, add boiling water and the soya or almond milk and *cover the cup with a saucer* and leave to steep for at least five minutes—more won't hurt. Squeeze the teabags out on a spoon into the brew. Sip appreciatively—it's sweet and spicy and energizing; non-caffeinated but bracing. You can add sweetener but I think it's unnecessary.

on me. Men just *do*; unless you want them too badly, in which case they don't. I feel I've grown out of this sort of 'love'...brain surgery has decreed it; my time of life has decreed it: I'm fifty-two. It's all due for a big fat change, the form of which I cannot see.

And so, unkissed, he takes his packet of banana bread and goes off down the hill back the way he came, to the blue train and off down the long winding track hugging the cliff-side above the gorge; down and down into the vineyards surrounding the castle at Aigle, and at the station he'll run for the big train, full of people, speeding along the lakeside through Montreux, Lausanne, Nyon, and into bustling Geneva.