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Disclaimer A: This novel is fiction, and is written from my perspective. While there are certainly factual elements based on my own life, this is not intended to be a statement for or against any particular person, group or belief. If you are easily offended or feel your faith is threatened by those who hold different beliefs, please do not read this story!

CHAPTER ONE/BACKGROUND

I was intent, rather, on exploring my own beliefs and hopes and dreams, and yes, even my fears and failings in a medium that was relatively solitary and quiet.

I was writing just to write.

I was thinking just to think.

I was giving myself a space and a time, apart from a daily life where the care of others was the centerpiece.

I was a parent but the last fledgling needed me less and less.

I was a teacher looking for work in a political and economic climate that made looking for work in any field difficult, and looking for work as a teacher in my geographic circle more so.

I was teaching more than not, on school days, as teachers with their own classrooms needed to take time off. I was learning a different set of skills that way: how to focus on the needs of up to 180 very different human beings, often in subjects I hadn't studied in depth since I was the age of the students; how to identify the students who had issues at home that made just being in school the goal – before I chided them for not getting work done; how to step up and push students who were giving up on themselves before they had a chance to explore what they could accomplish; and how to do these things on gut feelings first, and document supporting evidence as I went along. A classroom teacher often has some communication before a student enters the classroom, has some time to ask questions and learn names before trying to teach complex ideas. A substitute has to walk in and get started immediately, with authority and assurance.

I loved it! It was exhausting to be in a different environment nearly every day, with students I didn't know (though by the time my story begins I was becoming a regular fixture in some classrooms and schools). I learned so much every day, that I would come home exhausted physically and mentally. I slept early on days I taught, and woke before my alarm on days I was scheduled to teach.

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I was recovering from years of physical inactivity due to an injury, and dealing with the clutter and mess that had built up. I was able to dig, to walk, to weed, to stand, to play again. I cleaned in fits and starts, leaving some tasks to the more able-bodied members of the family. I kept my cane nearby just in case, and crutches at the ready, but used them rarely and sometimes forgot the pain that had become ever-constant in certain joints.

I was beginning to reconnect with friends and family after years of relative silence as I attended graduate school (and dealt with my health issues). I had barely had time for reading, for visiting with friends during school-related events, and for indulging briefly each day in a lingering, hot shower. I began to think about making phone calls to scattered friends, to think about visiting local friends for a cup of tea and conversation. And I began making those visits, slowly re-establishing a network that I had ignored far too long.

I admit I spent hours with a glowing screen reading news, professional literature and playing word games. Hours that mostly likely would have passed more profitably had I spent them asleep. But the exhaustion of mind and body couldn't overcome the excitement I was experiencing to be active again, to be teaching and working and making a difference in the world again.

And yet, I remained frustrated that I was showing so little personal growth, so little interest in things that I had loved to do and had developed some skill in. I was determined to turn my patterns of life around. To re-invent myself yet again, from a fretful partial-invalid into a productive, competent, relaxed person.

Art, or rather making blobs on paper, is something I do to connect with my inner self. I wanted to do that and explore my deepest desires more deeply – but to do that would have required a massive cleaning effort far beyond my physical abilities and time. Though I longed to pull out my brushes and canvases, to carve blocks for printing, to cut paper into intricate patterns, to experiment with color, light, texture and shape, I remained stuck and my workbench was a gathering place for “later” tasks.

Music, singing and playing various instruments, was a pleasant pastime as well, but I was long out of practice and wanted to be creating something durable, something I could go back and explore and refine later with a record of progress.

And so I turned to writing.

I don't think of myself as a writer except in limited circumstances, though I know I write well and can make my point understood. I dabble with writing, dipping my toe in here and there to experiment with poetry, essay, novel, short story and

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correspondence. I am not a consistent correspondent, my letters have always been written in fits and starts, and have a hard edge to them as if I were uncomfortable communicating in writing what could be so easily conveyed over a cup of tea. Now that my beloved grandmothers are gone, my correspondence has withered like the twisted limbs of the mulberry that languishes in my garden...

I do think of myself as a gardener, more so again now that I have had a full year of health to work the ground and enjoy the plants. I think of myself as a person who observes (though doesn't record on a regular basis) Nature and the interactions of the systems she orchestrates. I cherish the time I spend in the garden, carefully shepherding beneficial critters to safety, and only reluctantly eliminating non-beneficial critters. Usually I give slugs and snails a hurl into the woods with verbal encouragement to find a more natural food source than my carefully tended flowers and vegetables.

I think of myself as a gardener, though not a master of that life, as a person who can "know" in a deep way the workings of the land and skies around her.

I think of myself as an observer, a person who experiences deeply and stores those experiences for later.

I think of myself as a teacher, a person who can help others discover the beauty of learning.

I think of myself as a child of devoted parents who remain as fonts of wisdom well into my own maturity.

I think of myself as fortunate in a choice of a life partner who sees my flaws and yet stays with me as a constant guide.

I think of myself as an average, mixed-up, complicated, simple human being.

I was also, at the time this all started, resolutely non-religious, at least in the traditional meaning of religion. I had no particular antipathy toward religion, per se, but an increasing reluctance to agree with any particular set of beliefs, doctrines or practices.

In an era when secular religiosity was on the rise, when bullying on religious grounds was increasing, when politicians switched from talking about issues of substance and social good to displaying "holier than thou" credentials, I was increasingly uncomfortable participating in secular rituals.

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I realized that some part of my ancient ancestors' beliefs filtered through me on the day I understood certain social customs as idolatry. I became reluctant to handle currency with its repulsive invocation of Joseph McCarthy's god, stopped saluting secular objects or pledging allegiance to man-made things, and kept silent when those around me were loudly expressing wishes for pleasant secular observances.

I wished friends who were religiously observant pleasant holidays when I knew they were celebrating.

I continued to note family birthdays and anniversaries, though on a smaller scale.

I stopped decorating my home even for days I considered set aside, in part because I was the only person in the home who seemed to care, and in part because it was confusing to the occasional visitor.

And yet, though I had long since ceased attending any sort of religious gathering, I did not consider myself anti-religion.

I did not consider myself atheist, though at the time I did not believe in or seek to believe in any deity.

I certainly did not consider myself an agnostic, that term meaning a limbo between belief and non-belief.

I was just, and simply, non-religious.

Though I had, indeed, been brought up in and attended a particular Christian denomination I left that church behind as a young adult. As a young parent I had chosen a different, more liberal, church and for many years we made an earnest attempt to bring our children up within that church, attending every Sunday, participating in the life of the church community and encouraging others to grow.

But health issues had interfered in my attending and so it languished, and as I was already questioning some of the ways that church worked (internal politics) we drifted away permanently.

I became aware of deeper yearnings that the churches could not, did not, answer. I had been questioning some of the beliefs that were held in common by Christians, and had realized quickly that my own understanding of "the nature of things" was too often in conflict with the doctrines of established religions.

I was also becoming more and more aware of the hubris of the Christian community, and the usurpation of social and political power by a small but powerful group of

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Christians that were attempting to re-write my nation's laws to favor Christian traditions and practices and disenfranchise non-Christians, including some Christians who were of different denominations.

As a former Christian, I was appalled. More importantly, I was ashamed to be considered a Christian in a climate like that. Too many of my ancestors had been disenfranchised, sent into exile or otherwise punished for beliefs for me to want to affiliate in any way with those who would impose a single set of expectations on an entire populace.

I drifted away. I read about many religions and philosophies, knowing that there were common threads, and hoping to find a hint of TRUTH between the lines and in the silent spaces between.

Gradually, I came to think there was no such TRUTH as religious leaders have often proclaimed. But I get ahead of myself. This is the background. This is where I started, as a former member of a dominant religion, adrift though not uncomfortable in a sea of ambiguity.

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