

Shooting Star

8/14/06

Revised 6-8-12

The highway stretched open in the pre-twilight August haze as I pushed the little blue Honda past 85, anxious to leave behind the City and its calling cards – recent memories conjured up by familiar street corners, parks, cafes, movie houses, and bars. Heading south along the lush, low, many-fingered Chesapeake watershed, I dropped my windows so the cool damp air could tousle my tangled hair and blow dry the salt-sweat on my neck.

Saturday night with “the girls” was my escape. Long-time friend Kim and her precocious young daughters lived in a small house at the edge of a steep wooded ravine where a creek pooled its way to the wide muddy Magothy River. The three girls were one unit – mother and daughters supporting each other through the aching grief, the loss of a beloved husband and father. Kim had met him 10 years earlier on her own escape to the Islands. They married, moved to the States, raised two daughters, and opened a French restaurant. He got sick when the youngest daughter was a toddler. He died a few days before Christmas, after a six-year raging battle with brain cancer.

Into their supporting embrace I too fled from grief – not from death of a spouse or parent, but the death of relationships that stacked themselves like crepes since I moved to Baltimore two years ago.

Kim and I were brought together by a shared history marked by sexual trauma, abuse, resolve, and recovery. We are artists. Storytellers. Excavators. Our work has been informed by the stories we tell ourselves, and by the emotions we mine and retrace on paper, on canvas, or in clay.

Although our palate is dominated now by more muted hues, and our hearts by the ebb and flow of emotions, we both share a rootedness from being close to the Tidewater – kindred spirits whose infectious laughter, wit, and effervescence, and irreverence keep tears at bay.

I am an orphan with no children of my own. Kim and her daughters had become my terrycloth surrogates. This particular night I spent with Kim and her 10-year old girl, as the older sister – the precocious Diva – was encamped at a friend’s for a sleepover.

Since their father’s death, the girls’ sleep habits had altered – no one slept in the same place anymore. As the youngest nestled in a new bed of cushions and blankets on the living room floor, Kim and I set up camp outdoors – cozying the expansive backyard deck with colorful pillows and puffy sleeping bags, adding candles, incense, and cheap red wine. The deck jutted over a steep wooded ravine and a creek, perched high in the canopy of old growth oak and butternut trees and twisted vines. Joined by two big lazy dogs – orphans too, with silk pink tongues and soft muzzles searching for human warmth – we were like birds building a giant nest in the treetops.

Kim and I settled in, drinking and smoking, listening to the tree frogs and bullfrogs and crickets, sharing tales of lost loves, lost husbands, lost direction ... marking our friendship of 20 years. We laughed and reminisced, strains of Andrea Bocelli arias and the sultry voice of Keren Ann, a favorite Parisian cabaret singer, filtering through the dark wooded canopy. Releasing her inhibitions, Kim wept aloud for the powerful man whose presence permeated every corner of her home – her kitchen ... their bedroom. This

infusion of the man drove her outdoors. Suddenly, her decision to camp under the stars made sense. She was running away too, from her house and its painful calling cards.

Later, as I sunk into my familiar melancholy, she began to stroke my hair. It had been a long time since anyone had done that, and my eyes soon filled with tears. There is nothing like human touch.

Eventually, we burrowed into our sleeping bags with a dog curled up next to each of us, and looked up through the tangled branches and leaves at the darkening sky.

Cygnus the Swan was visible as was Cepheus. A waxing moon obscured the Milky Way. Suddenly, I saw a bright flash across the sky – a meteor – the beginning of the *Perseids*, the annual mid-August show-stopper. The shooting star conjured earlier memories of a childhood filled with innocence and playfulness, when my fascination with heavenly bodies brought cousins and neighbors together stretched out with me on fresh-cut grass, giggling, pinching each other, our eyes straining in search of meteors and satellites in the crisp blue-black New England skies.

Those long-ago summer nights evoked a flood-tide of wonder, joy, and my most vivid memories of close connection with my own extended family – and with a larger global family.

In the early morning, I awoke to find a petite child spooned snugly against her mother, a thick tumble of blond curls amidst the blankets and furry paws and muzzles. I smiled and drifted blissfully back to sleep.

Seeing a shooting star that night on Kim's back deck returned me to where I had come from, to my real home. That "place" was not in rural New England – nor was it the many homes I had feathered along the way, alone or with a husband or a life-partner. Rather, "home" was inside my own small ribcage, my own beating heart – itself a "nest" holding love, warmth, fullness, potential, and light.

All Content © Deborah Hanson Greene