

BACK:
SOLEMN
RHYTHM

LOIS
LEARDI



CHAPTER ONE

It is a truism that he said I have heft to my words, and that did not come by way of an easiness to me though it did anyway from the time I was a girl, on the page but not out loud.

He said it in the stairwell at the Columbia University graduate school of the arts.

He had weight there, big professor there he was a tall strapping guy with ginger hair and oh so famous that I did not think he bore credence much because he moved in phony circles.

The other famous lady, the Christian mystic novelist, she said it too when she took me out for lunch and then we stood in the subway and a zillion glossy magazines had her face on the cover behind her in racks rows and rows of that magazine with her face and she said after lunch I was a very fine writer who would go far and she told me the name of a monastery in Connecticut.

I was being a silent misfit of a student like a special ed charity student but I was winning all the awards and stuff and no one would talk to me but the famous authors who came to teach us and there were famous students and kids of famous students and they were very full of themselves and had money to burn and drugs to burn before they wrote their stuff. They had smart outfits and I was just the damn charity case who kept winning the awards and all.

And I was living in the woods then in the north and no apartment in New York City, only a day-tripper with an old car

and milk money. I wrote with the pencil and a loose-leaf notebook and that was a crime evidently.

And the rich lady that sent me there she was a very cultured lady who played fine piano who had studied at Julliard and she paid for it all.

The kids at Columbia were on up in their years but they were all still kids to me, overgrown kids.

When I lived in a commune in the Catskills I got raped regularly by the leader every day and he was a bad man to me but I was very very sick in the mental department and he said it was all to make me well only that was not a truism one bit.

I had hallucinations up the ass all right.

So the professor in the stairwell said he was having a party at his apartment and would I attend, and so I did and I went to the bathroom and he had Valium in his medicine cabinet.

The social worker said on top of the schizophrenia you have PTSD. She said you were severely neglected as a child and severely abused in the institution. I went to the behaviorism group with the notebooks and the homework and I went to the mindfulness group with the just sitting and neither one worked out so they said I could quit and just go to one on one. The social worker asked questions about on a scale of 1 through 10 did you feel this, and this and such and she marked them on a blotter, but I don't know 1 through 10 about anything, I only glazed on over to numb mostly through the most-li-ness of my living. She said I was emotionally surviving.

Well, I was surviving, I guess.

That old bastard in the Catskills he made me call him Granny and he was old and stinking. He came here from Taos or some damn rich people desert, and he said he was a pastor, but the commune was a primal scream place and he made me go out there on the mat and scream bloody murder, and this I will say as a truth, there is no primal scream. There is no such thing because it is bottomless as hell itself, and you never get there. And he led those people on acid trips and made us rise at the crack of dawn to do yoga postures and the women all naked in puppy piles and he was doing them everyone. But I was his number one girl. Only I cracked up way too hard for him to handle and he moved on to other girls, and women and open marriage types of women, and then one of the men committed suicide but that didn't sober the randy old coot. I hated him. I loved him also and that's the way it is with being raped. It was for me. He kept promising it was the cure, except I only got darker and dimmer and stupid with it.

It was the social worker who said it was rape. I didn't know that at the time.

I keep thinking I ought to have known that and run away.

But I just didn't put that together in my head.

I was innocent. I worked a short time in a group home and I saw the people so innocent and accepting of all kinds of hardship and I was not much different I would let people dump all kinds of trips on me and I was like a doormat that way as if not intelligent one bit.

I landed in the hospital. I was burning cigarette butts out into the inside of my arms. I had huge welts.

I had hallucinations up the ass.

In the hospital I could rock all day in the hallway and go crazy whenever it came over me. The voices, oh the voices. Violent. Four-points and restraints and the rest of the time catatonic.

It was so painful that I didn't know it was painful. I would just rock in the hallway.

It was always more about the guitar than writing anyway only I thought I needed to make a choice because I was good at both and I chose the writing over the guitar and that killed me for a long time until I got a guitar back. When I had to choose between my two loves it was an overwhelming decision and I hated that and it made me crazy to be a young person. And then the disease came on anyhow in my poor head.

I really can play. The guy who runs the guitar shop says I am one of the best blues players to come in his shop ever.

It takes a lifetime of hugging a guitar to get that good and I know it because my hands are all bent and beat up with that.

I think guitar makes me well in the head better than writing but I am not sure.

And I went with the writing as far as the proper schooling on account of that rich lady who sent me there and it was a long trip from being a high school drop out to having a master degree from the Columbia school of the arts where I spent my time in a tizzy and a fog but it was a whirlwind of praise too and I was in over my head but landing all those awards and money and parties in famous apartments where people kept liquor in the living room and Valium in the bathroom.

I saw people snort things off coffee tables and then sit in a corner and try to write. It just seemed a bit pretentious to me altogether.

Before I got sicker than sick, I used to go to an old barn up in the country from where I lived in the woods and they had the folk music there and it was dark and dim and smokey and the music was firewater enough for me. It ran all up my spine the fiddle bands and banjo clarity and lyrics deep of folksingers and the way I always went into a back room and asked and begged players of the guitar to teach me this to teach me that and that's where I learned to bend notes and pick like nobody's business and then it all turned to blues because that was where I was at, bluer than blue. There was a cow pasture across the street, and I would hitch up on the railing there and practice out in the air all night.

I didn't never want to perform, only emote deeply and articulate in those blues all that I was feeling and that was after the damn Catskills or maybe before I don't know, such is the fog and blurred lines of life. I was younger and it blurs up all right.

I say when you got a passion you ought not go contrary to it, but they said I was a good writer, a prodigy that ought to bend my mind to the task of being great so the philanthropist she did send me there to that university and the other one did award me money and ask me to a big publisher's cocktail party only when I got there and went up to her she must have thought I was the help because I introduced myself by name and she said could you get me a drink from the bar? And she was a bit sloshed already.

The social worker, I told her that when I lived in that commune if I'd had my guitar there I probably would have not got raped and all that because I would have had salvation of music and she said, do you know that makes no sense? Then I doubted my own thinking process, yes.

It didn't make sense though even though they took away my guitar at the hospital and I was forlorn there too and I think I could have got better with it.

It made me okay in high school, that guitar because I would sit in the hallway all the day and play instead of going to any classes because I could not learn anything but English and Art. Nobody cared anyhow, as I was dim witted with what was to come already, so they left me alone and passed me along in grades, but it was special ed in the basement with the overhead pipes running water and sweating and I read the New York Times and played guitar all day and then I walked away from high school before my four years were up.

That was during Vietnam and everybody was either a hawk or dove and the teachers were all fried anyway and too hepped up to care about the likes of me because the school was a political hotbed.

I wore water buffaloes on my feet and a flannel shirt and love beads about my neck.

That professor at Columbia when I think of it I think maybe he thought I wanted to get in his pants, but that was his ego talking because I didn't.

I liked the Christian mystic lady we were on the same page yes because all I ever really wanted to be was a nun in a

cloistered convent but later in life they would not let me in on account of my diagnosis of schizophrenia.

I loved Christ the minute I heard of him which was about five or six years of age.

I loved God. I love God yet.

The world doesn't like to hear that because there are too many crazy interpretations so I don't tell anybody.

She told me of the monastery in Connecticut, and I went there one time and it was a barn with some celebrities but it was very beautiful in a rustic and ritzy kind of way. It was liberal and the homily was deep and luscious not like what you hear in most all the churches I ever went to where they seem to talk a lot of hate and non-inclusivity.

The social worker said there's a good Mass at the VA even though it's all mostly men but by then I was losing hold of the church and just contemplating and reading scripture on my own me and God. I'd been burned too many times by priests and what they were saying and doing. It's a message of shame.

I used to like the folk Mass of the 60's. I played guitar and it was lovely back then.

When the writing got published I said to myself I will never whore my guitar the way they whored my writing.

That's why I keep it private and don't go running round with my guitar, no sir, that would be parading myself in naked emotion and that I will not do since I did that in the novel and caught hell for it by going insane, what, between the book signings and the radio people and the TV people and all the

reviews and the requests for interviews and the royalties and I ran away into the dark intimacy of craziness I did.

And one of the social workers said I bet I could get you to play for me. And I said no. And she never has. They try to trick you up into stuff sometimes but I don't buy it no more. I don't trust nobody there that way. I just go along and say I'm fine.

And the friars came from the monastery and taught us after school and I learned about Jesus and I wanted thick sandals and a long brown robe with wooden beads down the side and they got us ready for First Communion. And the mother had a fight with my seven-year-old self because I thought I should receive my First Holy Communion in my ragged overalls and bare feet and she thought I had to wear the dress and veil she'd saved up the money on and we had a huge tiff and in the end she won. I had to wear all that itchy stuff instead of the stuff of a poor sinner in need of mercy. I knew that already.

And we made a record album of Jesus songs in the 60's and I played on that with some people and we were all anonymous on the liner notes and that was right good and proper and fine with me.

You have no rights when they hand you the patient's bill of rights. You know you don't because by then you are so glazed over that you couldn't read the thing if you wanted to. You're all busted up in the head and they can do anything they want with you and you don't even have the wherewithal to care.

If you get violent they ship you off to a worse place.

It was because these other patients they wanted to order a pizza up on the ward and they pooled their cash and they said

to me are you in, and I said no I didn't want any pizza and when I wasn't looking they took ten dollars my last money out of the desk drawer in my room and I went nuts and had to go in the rubber room where I pounded around violent. Then the big shrink came and said we're transferring you. Then I went all clinging to his coat and begging not to be sent there but he said you have to go. Then the nurse I liked said what happened to you, and I told her about the money being stole, and she said why didn't you speak up?, and I hated to snitch so I clamped down in my mouth. And the ambulance came and they put me in handcuffs and foot shackles and rolled me down the hall and I was so embarrassed and terrified and I saw his face the guy who stole my money and he was snickering but I could tell also ashamed. And they took me over the bridge to the big county house. And they handcuffed me to a bed over there three days.

In another hospital one time they brought in a hippie and he had a sitar and sat in the hallway with it and I thought if he could have his sitar how come they won't let me have my guitar. But in a couple hours they took his music away from him too and I saw him doing the Thorazine shuffle in the hall as bereft as I was.

That was the place where all my books got ripped to shreds when I was out of the dormitory and all the nurses ganged up on me and wanted me to go to group and tell what happened and I said no. They must have been stupid to think I'd risk the kind of retaliation that would happen when they weren't looking. All that being a psychiatric nurse and they still didn't know about infights like that?

And I was living in the woods all that time. I had a shack back by the reservoir, in a meadow, and I wrote all about that place in a novella called *The Last Afternoon of the Revolution* about a woman a lot like me but not me one bit.

That shack was maybe the best place I ever lived because I felt so safe there all tucked up in the woods up the dirt road and no one knew about me when I was going to Columbia and all that only the paddy wagon found me there a few times, especially I remember when I slit my head open banging it and the blood was everywhere in great pools. It was the psychiatrist on the phone when I said I wanted to smack my head and he said, well, smack it into a pillow at least, and I did that but my head hit the edge of the bedframe by mistake and it gashed so wide open, well. All over the place. They took me away then and in the ambulance they said, “she’s going into shock”, but I wasn’t, I was just going elsewhere, knowing what was coming.

Anyhow I’ve always lived in the woods all my life. When I was a little girl we all lived up a dirt road in a cement house the father built and I was hardly ever in it on account of the forests that grew right up to the outside walls because children were best put out to air and that meant except to sleep. There was a gigantic pool table in the cellar back by the furnace and the cement floor had been poured and then the pool table brought in and the whole house built with the pool table inside. It was a genuine pool hall table and the father was a gambler.

I don’t know how to live anywhere else but in woods.

The social worker says I was a feral child suffering abandonment and neglect and most likely malnourishment of every sort. I lived on berries and wild scallion and sucked tree

bark to get the sap. I only put on the dress to go to the school and didn't know a word they were talking about there anyway but I liked when she read stories and sang folksongs and the rest of what the teacher said I guess went through me like wind in the trees of all that was real and true.

After I heard the stories I started to write my own and already at nine years I won the national children's award in writing and got famous there in the grammar school and had to get up on the stage with the damn PTA lady to shove her tits in my face to pin on the gold piece and I wanted to jump down and run and hide and go puke because of the wild fuss they were raging with about me. It was a story about wanting to be invisible and they were all doing the opposite to me.

Prodigy.

They shaved my head when they stitched it up, a big bald patch and that's when I started shaving off all the rest and I shaved my head many years and wore old raggedy flannel shirts and people used to say in the coffeehouse, "What can I get you, sir?", so after a while I didn't bother to correct them.

But that shack was the most private and best place I ever lived. No heat though and I kept burning up the wick on the kerosene heater and it would go to fire over and over, yes. One time I built a front step just to get up and into the place but the next day the cement all crumbled and fell out like a piece of half-eaten cake.

I kept rabbits in a pen there but the fox got them one night.

It's a good novella. I wrote it back when I lived there. It's not the novel that got me all famous and published at Columbia though. That one was the big deal.

And the kind woman at the hospital asked me, “how do you feel about your life?” and I glazed over numb and didn’t know anything about that answer. There was a great pressure in me then. I felt myself sink into the land of no feeling because she wanted a snappy answer, a bullet of emotion and I was so swamped with the legion of them that they all criss-crossed in my head and I couldn’t say any which one that ailed me.

It felt like a game of chicken, to come up with an emotion and risk the demons. I didn’t answer because I couldn’t. That question cost me. I went far away into the territory of catatonia. I pressed my head to the cold enamel of the bathroom sink and went very still and they had to pry me off and give me a shot so I wouldn’t blow.

The mother used to say to us kids: “You can’t hurt my feelings because I don’t have any.”

In the occupational therapy room I drew sketches of the demon over and over like a pure obsession ’til they took away the pencil and paper and said I had to stop.

They let me use the typewriter in the corner and I started to write the novel that made me famous while I was in the OT room. They used to let us wash our hair in the big basin in there and I also made leather belts and cigarette holders and the sun came in the windows there and the lady there was kind to me, even if she asked that question about feelings. I didn’t hate her for it because she was so tender.

I did not know how I felt about my life, no. It was maybe like a bumper car track. You go along for a few seconds and then bam, bam and sparks fly and your neck gets wrenched around all tense and on guard for the next bam.

I got the first guitar when I was eleven. There had been an old wreck of a guitar in the cellar with four strings on it where it wanted six, and I used to just hold it like a girl would hold a doll. I have no idea where it came from but I held it down there by the furnace by the pool table and I don't know how or why but the father agreed I could have one for my own and that was a cheap but good new gut string that came from someplace and smelled of fresh varnish and I began to fiddle all around with it for what sounded right and good and that was the start of my love life.

I picked about for the folksongs I had learned in the school and I hummed or sang them and it all began to fall together and in junior high school I didn't care to neck with boys or take tokes in the bathroom or drink liquor I only was on fire for guitar and for God.

When I was in sixth grade the social worker found out about me somehow I don't know how but he was a good man and had me come to his office. He had a big reel to reel tape machine and made tapes of me talking. He got me to tell him about wanting to be a nun because he got me to trust him. Then he got me to say some things about life at home and I did until one day he said he was going to have to send a letter to the house if he could continue with our talks, and oh, oh how I begged him not to, Lord. But he did and the letter was there one day on my coming into the house and how the father ripped into me yelling "you don't tell the family stuff to no damn body!" and beating me and grabbing me round the throat and the mother panicking that he would strangle me so she threw a vase at the back of his head, that passive mother

and I didn't know she had it in her, and the father saying "it started with that goddamn guitar!" and I didn't know what that meant but I was terrified and not allowed to see the kind man anymore nor talk to him about my ways of thinking and feeling.

I'm very sensitive; too much comes in. One time a psychiatrist drew a circle on a piece of paper and he left gaps all the way round the circle where he drew arrows pointing inward. He said that was me. He said my sense of boundary was broken, porous, and that I had no filter mechanism to keep out stimuli that came like mad flashes, all into me. And I believe he had that dead on.

He said when I numb out it's self-protection because I simply cannot stop everything that comes pouring in and I hit overwhelm and shut down.

I feel too much.

I can't say it with the mother, that my feelings can't get hurt because I have none. I think my feelings get hurt all the time, and they get sad and scared and angry and crazed, these feelings in me that I have so much trouble to express.

I think I could connect more to my feelings back before the demons first came, but I am not sure of that either.

I don't remember ever not being fucked up, but I didn't know it, I thought that was the norm, to be so deeply troubled, but then when the teachers and social workers saw in me so early I realize now that I wasn't a right kid to begin with, and I wasn't in a right environment to begin with also. I just thought everybody's house was like what I was living. I mean, when I was very little I knew I didn't feel quite right but I was so alone

in the forest so young and I loved the solitude and swish of the trees and the pack of the snows and even the fear of when I saw a snake or when I sat on a rock for hours on end and found I could say things without words to God. I thought then it was good to be left all alone so God could come watch over me.

I didn't know kids were supposed to be loved by humans. I didn't know of hugs and talk and stuff. I didn't know I wasn't having that and that kids were, and I had no guile or disappointment in me one whit over all that.

I didn't talk, I didn't play, I didn't jump rope and have friends and all that, no, I wandered down to the stream back beyond the playground at the school and watched the water when they let us out at noontime.

The mother didn't seem to make much of school. I have some old report cards from kindergarten and some early grades and they were all signed in a hurried hand and I don't think they were read because they all said not such good things, or maybe the mother didn't think the things about me were of any importance. I couldn't learn arithmetic, I couldn't tie a shoe or share a toy or talk. They said stuff like that. The mother was not in any way alarmed. I guess she knew her quiet strange little girl from way afar inside her own self. I guess she knew the mess of us weren't normal anyhow.

Language deteriorates at points.

And so do I.

Sometimes I am very articulate and then it fails me. I wrote a lot of books. After the famous one, I wrote 5 novels and I burned them all. I was cutting my teeth on them, and they were lousy. Then I started writing and publishing books again and I

liked them for once and then I went back into silence and here I am.

I kept my virginity until that old guy took it. I was into my twenties and I was celibate for God out of my great love for the life of solitude and contemplation. I also knew about the demon then; I had seen him in the trees and windows and places of shadow and I had heard him threatening to murder and destroy me and I had started bashing my head against tree bark already, but I was hanging on, just holding it together, until that man in the Catskills, where I went in the hope of help, broke into the most vulnerable area and caused the whole well of insanity to weep and wail.

The New Age is a hell pit.

Crystals and auras and psychic chakra kundalini vegetarian tripping do not make a body clean or well, not any more than self-help does. If a person is bound to rip up, they are going to rip up, no matter what any guru tells you.

"She decompensates." That was a word I heard at the hospital. All I knew was that I would break up into a billion particles all streaming outward and it was existential terror at its worst. It was sweating and petrified and beyond what people even think queasy is.

Gone. Language-less. Unable. To identify. Not anything human anymore.

Demonic realms of hell.

CHAPTER TWO

I used to wish it wasn't so that I was so twisted. I wanted so to be left alone by it to be free for God to worship pure and free. Maybe God loves the broken and twisted maybe they are the ones who can perceive Him best. I read of them in the scriptures, oh, the whores and drunks and outcasts and outlaws and blind and the ones I love, the ones possessed by demons.

One time a friar at the monastery told me "I believe your trouble is a demon." That scared me when he said that but it was consolation as well. No psychiatrist would ever be so bold as to say and here this simple old man said it in a whispered tone of love and what I knew was compassion. I never found out if he had the right diagnosis but I knew he was seeing me and that hasn't happened much in my life, that a person truly saw me.

I would go there to the centering prayer and take my seat in the circle and get taken up into God and all the group was full of kind people seeking God and that was the best time because it was different from church. At Mass I went to receive the Eucharist almost in a swoon, but the whole rest of it was disturbing to me. If only they could have just shut up about the rest. It was so much Old Testament preaching and I felt like we ought to be living as New Testament people, Christians, not don't and should but real resurrection folk.

God taught me in the forest.

The animals used to come to me and I never understood that and didn't tell anybody about it but the deer would so often come lick the salt sweat off the back of my hand and I don't

think anybody would believe that. If a person sits still long enough the little blind moles will run over her feet and a bird will light on her shoulder or a butterfly and the squirrel will take an acorn out her palm and yes a deer will rub a soft nose and lap up sweat off her hand.

I didn't know that was special until later in life when I talked to a hunter and he thought that was a lie and ridiculous. I didn't tell nobody after that.

When I was a teenager I would haul my manual typewriter deep down in the woods and write cross-legged on the forest floor. I would word-sketch everything all round me and those were good times. I liked making language and I wasn't yet as crazy as I was going to get later so I was just a kind of softly sad loner of a kid in love with words. I would play with them all around the page, syllables and sounds. One time the professor at Columbia said the most beautiful word in the English language (for sound), is: murmur. I liked when he said that. It revealed something about him, and it was delightful to consider the sound of murmur, both.

I remember the speaking in tongues at the old prayer meetings and that was such a joy to listen to.

Sometimes when I go to the Hudson and close my eyes and listen to the river it is like hearing that old speaking in tongues religion of me being young and half-assed sane.

I miss when I was kind of put together.

One time in the junior high school we had to give a speech out loud and I stood up and talked about Woody Guthrie and later when I turned a corner in the hall by the lockers I heard a boy mimic me, screwing up his voice and saying: "...and THAT

was Woody Guthrie", and then laughing and I got all red with shame like I was a huge joke. In that same class we were told to bring in our favorite song and the girls brought in records like BABY LOVE and shit on the radio, bubblegum music, and I brought in Dylan's SUBTERRANEAN HOMESICK BLUES and the teacher made the class listen to it twice and he made a big deal and I got my pocketbook thrown into the boy's bathroom and couldn't go retrieve it so I never saw it again.

In the gym class the old battle-axe made us line up according to height, and I ran down and stood at the end thinking I was tall, and she said, "you, get up here in front, don't you know you're the shortest girl here?" and everyone laughed and there I was, number one in line and I'd thought all my life I was tall and I was embarrassed and shocked by my own misperception.

They will tell you that you are real smart, but I don't think I was. If I was smart I would be running in those circles of intellectual people but all I ever did was run away from that. I sat in roundtables and critique sessions and all sorts of salons and shit, and everybody always thought I was so wise and weighty but I think it was always just so much articulate wind. I could find the essence, and bring out the knap of it, in most any writer. I knew what to look for, because I looked for the soul of everyone underneath whatever language they were using and I could see the raw emotion deep down under there and I think/thought everybody lives out of that space but people say that's not so and I don't believe them. We want to be loved. Maybe we write because we want to be loved.

Do I?

I'm not always so sure. Love is so inadequate. The bottom of the bottom is the root of longing and we don't reach it. I mean, you can be grateful for the crumbs that fall your way. Maybe I survive that way.

Only God can tap the root of longing for love is my experience.

I read WALDEN way too early in life, and also that great little Russian pilgrim that everyone was talking about at that time. I guess I was thirteen. Over my head and stunning, both. I finished them in the woods and then I sang this:

Would you like to swing on a star
Carry moonbeams home in a jar
And be better off than you are
You could be swingin' on a star

That was a good day because something had cemented in me. I knew I was going to go beyond.

When you blend the heavy and the happy you generate a good living.

I said: I will be a writer in those days beyond me now.

I didn't write for a long time though. I played guitar and it rang all through the woods with traditional ballads and desperate delta blues, the music of people I was not but knew kinesthetically just the same, I was mountain folk and old Black and I was not a short little first generation Italian girl steeped in a dark culture and landed on a bright shore where nobody could pronounce my name and expectations ran low,

superstitions ran high, and the sad little house was full of lace and incense and the sad promise of school was WASP in the way of a round hole and me the square peg.

What I didn't know at thirteen was that in seven more years I would see a demon in a window and know immediately that he knew my name.

He would go on to seduce me into the worst most horrid sickness beyond what I could ever have imagined could happen to a human.

I was looking at fame as a kid, as a prodigy, and developing swagger and intensity and rebellion of the sort that happens on a page, maybe also in bearing and mannerisms where people look twice and say whoa. I may not have fully known the power of myself, but whatever it was, that demon he took it all away in a sweep, what I was building he tore down in a fragmented shatter of crash and burn all right.

When a demon comes, you flinch.

You may have thought you were smart, but when a demon comes you lose all your flint faced bravado and you cringe like a little girl watching a smack come in slow motion and right before the strike, oh, you cower down in a nano second. It's beyond scary, beyond terrifying; there is a sickening moment before your whole being brightens with the bruise that will swell and take on a life of its own, purple and greenish and many veined. Then you live sick with it, decade after decade defeated exhausted crazed.

You come to not know yourself anymore.

Such violence has been done to you that you live recoiled.
Intelligence is no match.

And the mother said that we were all forceps babies and that I was born while the father was out hunting and at the stroke of noon the convent bells were ringing by the hospital down by the river the one that's not there anymore and he took down a doe and there is a picture of him resting in the autumn leaves with the thing and always there were guns in the house yes and none of us nursed at the breast on account of the mother so skinny oh ever so skinny and tall and leggy like a model and leggy like the goats we kept behind the house and drank the milk because the grandmother believed it was good for rheumatism. Thick milk with hairs floating in it and I hated that but weren't the goats pretty the brown one and the gray one and the father shot stray cats that came out of the woods with a pistol and by accident or on purpose shot mine. And I was born by the river and swam in the river down by the train depot and laid pennies on the track and when the train went by in the night I slept on the old cedar hope chest and the windowpanes rattled to hell and the heat whistled in the pipes for the hot water and the train whistled too and in the gloom of the dining room where I slept the father's mud caked work boots looked like monsters with the rawhide laces all curling up like antennae. And the grandmother wore a copper bracelet for the arthritis and the mother smoked Pall Mall's.

CHAPTER THREE

When we made the record album of Jesus songs I had friends. We were the Catholic rebels. We had a house church going at homes of different people and we crowded in and were charismatics back then when I was in the high school. We were teenagers and old folks and families and well off and poor and well dressed and hippie dressed and it was all a jumble and made no difference and there were many love affairs and I fell in love with a boy at fourteen and he was nineteen and all grown up and I did love that boy so and when I necked with him by the brown leaved pond he smelled of oily hair and nicotine and reefer and old flannel and the water was still and metallic smelling at the pond down in the leaves where we necked and we did not make love only kissed so passionately and he did not press me for sex and his tongue was grained like a cat's lick. I wore the knee-high moccasins and the short skirt of fake suede and the tee shirt in the warmth of autumn by that pond in the woods and he would come by the school on a motorcycle and all the girls glaring at him for being old and out of school and I was doing a dangerous thing, that's what was written on their faces, but they did not know me anyhow and I didn't care a whit for them anyhow. And time blurred down to endless, how I loved him, and then, back behind a store amid the cast-off refrigerator and washer boxes all in a tumble he and I necking, and didn't the father come round in his pick-up truck and jump out with a baseball bat, shoving me in the door and I don't want to ever say what he did to that boy/man. And I knew depression.

Far later in life I did hear that the boy died of an overdose of heroin. I didn't know he was on drugs the whole time. I didn't know when I smelled reefer that it was reefer I was smelling.

When I was seven years old I smashed my fist through the storm door in a fit of absolute rage and ripped my arm down to the bone and the mother had to take me for the stitches and she fainted in the hospital and they had to take care of her first, then me. They gave me a lollipop and told me to look at the wall, and both were green.

In the school I threw a chair through the plate glass of the classroom window and had to go to the principal and sit with that old man in the wheelchair and he didn't say a word to me and later they changed the name of the elementary school to his name so he must have been a great principal only he didn't say a word to me all that long afternoon. That was in the school I won the writing award in at nine years.

I broke pencils over the arithmetic and gnawed on crayons and white glue and brown glue.

And I met that boy at the monastery where we played in the band at the folk Mass and he had a little tin mouth harp and I fell in love. He lived down the road from the monastery in an old farmhouse with an ex-priest and his woman and all the friars were very sad about that priest and his situation of having fallen in love with a woman and left them. The boy/man had been raised in the foster care and had nowhere to go not being eighteen anymore so they gave him a room as the house was big and falling apart.

When I lived in the shack in the woods it was after the time in the Catskills and I was a slut there, having been broken in for slut-hood by that monstrous old guy.

And I was a slut in places across the river a lot too, over on that other dark side of the river where I went to see that psychiatrist four times a week and didn't I just bust up his joint on several occasions, kicking in his door to the waiting room, breaking a fancy lamp one other time and him wrestling me to the floor with one strong arm and calling for the paddy wagon with the other hand, some four or five times I went from his office to the bin.

I used to walk up the backside of a mountain when I lived in the shed and there were many copperheads all over the rocks and I would skirt them in silent awe and reverence and admire the sheer power of them to kill a crazy woman like me.

And when you are young and don't know a demon is in your future you think you are just sad and you don't know that that sadness is really premonition.

It's a vague uneasiness gathering steam but at the time you only believe you are an angry rebel and a shamefaced misfit.

I thought all that time as a kid that I was a bad wrong kid. I thought something was missing but I thought it was missing me on account of me not what all was around me. I think that way yet sometimes in the nature of feeling abandoned and the social worker says that is/was neglect. Me I thought I simply could never engage the mother because I was horrid and then it became that about everybody. I plain did not know there was a

demon, is a demon, maybe was a demon, who knows about the next in my future?

Is it over?

You never really know.

So when they say psychosis you don't know if it comes round again like it did all those damn decades like wave after wave of smacks sharp and brutal and oh how they did hurt. It seems I would get one foot out of the quagmire and then bam. Always the hospital, always the paddy wagon. So when they say institutionalized you go home but keep eating all your food with a spoon only.

And I had a really bad luck guitar back when I was living in the shack in the woods. It was a small bodied Guild, very costly, and I never could grow on it or make strides of progress in playing, and one day I took the fucking thing to the music shop and swapped it for a very inferior guitar and got completely taken for a ride that way, but that little crappy guitar made me stretch more than the Guild had ever done, yet all the while I wonder if it wasn't me and not the guitar all along, me being so sick and unable and the crappy guitar medicinal to me that way, like maybe a small turning point in the illness, not the guitars. I only know I got swindled but built a nice rapport with the guy in the music shop and we had good vibes for many years and I asked his life story one time and he told me a very fine history of a very ardent and zealous player and that was him, and I liked him ever so for being honest and wanting a thing so much in his life that it hurt to get it. And one day he said, "I believe you'll surpass me one day in your playing.", and wasn't that an honor to hear. He made me feel

important, like I could really become a big player and that he respected me as such. I was happy to hand him that Guild. It hadn't brought me any good. The heap of garbage I took home taught me to play better than that fancy number ever could have. I spent hours a day in joy, the joy of hard work.

Maybe when you work at a thing like I worked the guitar, that's medicine, like being a little girl and working all the morning to soap up the runners of a beat up old battle torn Flexible Flyer sled and then running it all down through the forest navigating the woods at a high rate of speed, the sparks shooting off the rocks, the snow flailing up in your nose, you screaming that steering cross-bar to its limit around every trunk in sight, and you are hepped all in your bones with flight, and that is how you are living, and learning to live, and when you trudge on up at dark you are a better little girl with proud square shoulders and not so downtrodden as when you left.

And you trudge up the neck of a guitar in the same way and then you are flying and I don't care what the social worker said about it not making sense because it is medicine and if I'd had that medicine in the Catskills close by to me I would not have got trapped for a year being raped to hell and back.

CHAPTER FOUR

So I get these emotions, and they are: needy + abandoned + angry. They roil around in me all old and new and rather fantastic in the way of wounds that a person bears with astonishment. I greet them with a kind of sickening amazement, like the affront of dying or being injured and watching it happen in that oh no kind of wonder. I don't always see it coming. What the social worker calls 'trauma triggers' are to me wondrous things in their power to shock and immobilize. It's like taking a bullet and being caught in all the vague mystery of that happening. The slow sad seepage of living.

The father was fond of shooting rats at the dump. He would take us kids and while he popped rats we would scurry over the junkyard finding all sorts of contraptions for imaginary use. The rust and the metal and the busted-up glass all had a tang to it and we could hurl clumps of broken-down stuff to our heart's content and the father was the sharpshooter we had to stay clear of. It was the Saturday morning entertainment.

I guess I was the revolutionary of that family. I guess it was a shame.

Yeah, I was going to be the intellectual writer, come up and out from a world of—well.

I wasn't supposed to be the scandal of mental illness, the crazy woman out of the lot of them.

I wasn't supposed to shave my head and go stand at open mic and read poems that pushed the walls back, me, trembling

away, but getting it done, me, moving people that way, and wasn't I the darling of downtown?

The world has lots of manholes, though. It's not a very safe place to walk.

And it's always upon me to remember that great barn up the line where I used to go hear the music. Oh, the people I heard — fiddle bands and folk singers of that time when I was somewhat half sane at least and I was so on fire for it, all that music of that time. I would sit alone and drink coffee and write and make drawings of who was on the small stage, and they were brave people, to show their talent and their joy laid right on out there for everyone in the room to see. They gave me courage to play, to approach playing. I would write of them and sketch them all and one time one of the singers came down and said, "are you writing a review?" and I blushed up and muttered no. I was there so often they might have thought me to be someone important, but I was just a lonesome kid who played with all my might and didn't know my own power or intensity. It was a profound time, trying, trying and worrying the strings, becoming who I was meant to be on the neck of a guitar. And now that place has gone to a big fancy supper club with famous acts and I couldn't afford to even walk in the door and they sold out big time, all right, and I don't want nothing to do with them, but, back in the day, when we were all just poor and on fire, I loved that old barn dearly. I loved my own sanity as much.

I think if I could just get back there. It's over, though. That time.

But I can say this, that when you get shuffling up the blues all gone and lonesome you know who you are, all right. Blues are bad, they make you feel all bad and low and mean, and when I am in there, shuffling along, blues are the very best drug.

I can only do that alone and for myself. I don't perform blues and I don't publish blues, I just live them alone in my soul, and if the writing isn't like that, too, then I know it ain't succeeding.

And that time when I was learning all I could learn about playing back then, well, I was training myself for the day when I would really begin to dig for the emotionality of blues, so that I could stop learning and start growing, with blues in my toolbox for what was ailing and howling inside me.

I guess I miss that time of being wide eyed with it all, but this is yet better, to be able to talk out of a guitar with all I got.

People were kind to me along the way, showing me this, showing me that, writing out stuff for me to remember on the neck, how things fell together in patterns and then shot out of the box of what was not supposed to work but did. I studied the hands of most every player I saw and I made note of what was clean and good or blurred and doggone, and I came to recognize where I could go that they weren't going, so as not to grow up to be a copycat. I composed in my head when I didn't have a guitar in my arms, and I composed and taped things on a cassette recorder, and mostly I just burned up whole chunks of psychotic thoughts on that thing, on that old long ago guitar that was supposed to be a lousy one, and I remembered the father shouting "it's all because of that damn guitar!", and I played out of that because he had it dead wrong, that father,

not knowing how very mistaken he was. Sure, if I'd been left with that guitar hours and days on end, who knows if a demon would have showed up at all? But they say that's wishful and crazed thinking. I don't know. I think a lot of guys went crazy on guitar, so maybe they are right and me not quite with it in the head.

Just a girl with a guitar.

In a shack, being a slut at times, living the hermit-monk's life the rest of the time, keeping my head down and going to Columbia to be a fine and fancy writer.

Under the radar, off the grid, they say things like that and I guess I am obscure even though they did want to make me famous.

And always the Hudson River, like snapshots, snapping along in my head, Columbia, the Catskills, the old barn-full of music, the shooting of the rats, the guitar, the hot water pipes whistling above my head, a collage of the river, all of it. A girl, a teenage Jesus freak, a woman gone crazy, the river speaking in tongues, wild tongues, the wistful old river snatching it all like so much flotsam, rolling down and back, the river that flows both ways, that one. I stand and hear conversations of ancient history, Dutch tongue, Italian tongue, American tongue, Native tongue. So far I have lived a life that ain't so damn bad, on account of the convent bells, the train roar, the flattened pennies of childhood. My body is in the river, out of the river, gazing to the other shore of the river, clamoring about on Pete Seeger's sailboat, throwing pots in Garrison, writing novels in Peekskill, being insane in Valhalla, buying a bad luck guitar in

Ossining. I had a mother, I had a father, I had siblings, and I remained here on the river's banks like a sentry at dusk and dawn. I've watched out from the willows and the highlands, over diamond waters and screeching ice floes, I've dove from cliffs and felt her silk like a fine lady's lingerie, and I've listened to her gossip in a million washed up bits of debris. She is a fine river to know. I believe she knows me right well. There is a blue sort of smokiness to her that evokes the tone my soul has taken in living, a dense heat of intensity and intelligence that hems me in for all its raw nature, for I am as yet unformed, stuck somewhere between educated and primitive, just as I am meant to be, I suppose. Obscure as this river town, I remain hardly tapped. They said there was potential, they also said a hopeless sort of mental trouble. I scratched up the walls as far as I could, is what I think. I'm not discontent, though I am sad for it.

I might take a turn now, I figure the reader has my drift at this point, no need to keep rambling with more. There is a shift in the air.

Sometimes I'm hanging between sanity and insanity, and that's not such a bad place to be. If a person wants to come to terms with living, perhaps the space between crazy and right headed is best. It might tend to make a body obscurely radical, hidden and yet shining, but such is the stuff of prophets, the ones who can see the naked emperor. When I am between far gone and clear minded, I see truth and lies just fine. If I set out to impress in this damn world, I tip the balance every time. It's when I want to appear cool that I am indeed uncool.

But that's too essayistic. You can see what I mean plain enough out of your own vision.

When I run into you, I am always running into you—because I travel at a certain speed. Sometimes I downright smack into you.

You never quite get in though. This is a one woman show going on, all right.

Society has not meant much to me. There is something rather cut-throat and cheap about interaction. Well, maybe I mean life in the loony bin, and life in a family of origin, and life among writers. Somewhere, away from that, perhaps there is an intimate conversation I've been waiting to have. I just don't know where the you of it is. It's as if you have always eluded me, for I seem to have walked only mean streets. I've had more intense talks with certain trees than humans. I've had days on end of talk with demons, enough to last. Shame made a recluse of me. Stigma did that. You don't much trust yourself under the fire of ridicule and suspicion. You learn to keep your head down, your face to the ground. I learned that. You come up disliking confrontation the way some people crave it. You don't holler, you don't carry on. A shrug in the blast of it is all you can rouse yourself to. The world seems to be a blasting nightmare, and you retreat, arms about the skull, and you find the marginal places of the inarticulate and the feeble. You are comfortable there. You are a social retard among other social retards and outcasts. You bury your self-esteem. You kiss good bye to big dreams. In time you grow fearful. It's a shaking in public that you craft yourself to avoid. You turn inward, bending up your collar the way you bend up the strings on a blues piece, gone and wasted that way. And you feel yourself a

waste. And it hurts plenty, but no way are you going to reveal that, not knowing you are already transparent on account of all that has gone down. You just don't realize that the people around you saw, and reeled back, and now cannot let you off that hook of the label that has dogged you from before you ever had a chance. So you creep off into the gloom, lonesome, but without a single working muscle to reach out with. Demons do that. And me, I wish it wasn't so, but that's how it's been written in my book.

There is a certain primal anxiety there, in me. Its refrain is like this: "No one is coming!" I hear that voice clear.

A girl stands in the forest, just a small little girl, vulnerable, helpless as a little scrap of a child, and she is knowing that no one is coming to deliver her, feed her, talk in words to her, hug her, rather, she is knowing as a child knows that she has failed to engage, that she is bad, wrong, ugly, unwanted, and off-putting in a way she did not manufacture. It's just the damn nature of her, and so she grows up scared, rebellious, enraged, hungry, ready to lash out, ready to crawl in the dirt and hide, ready to be a mental patient, ready to live out the destiny of no one is coming.

It makes me sad, and perhaps at one time bitter, though bitterness is not becoming, so I dashed that baby on a rock, and here I stand in the forest, and it's blaringly familiar. It's the only secure place in this world, the only soothing spot to be in anymore. The world is manholes and smoke and whistles, the world is convent bells and guitar riffs and the world is tree and river and stone, and I am turned to numb stone. Jesus did say,

if you shut up this girl, the very stones will cry out!, and this is my truth, and the truth of this page. I'm yelling in a whisper here. Look at me. Come running. If that had once happened, I might not be in the fix I'm in.

Anti-social.

Maladjusted.

And the brother would spread his hands and say, "We do the best we can."

YEAH, I DID THE BEST I COULD.

Out,
Lois.