

Chapter 12

The Green Room

“Honey,” Mom said. “The workshop will be life changing for you. It will also be the hardest thing you have ever done.”

I tried to imagine something that hard but couldn't conjure it and reasoned that they were making it sound worse than it really was. I mean, how hard could one week be? Even if this was *soul recovery* as the workshop advertised and as weird as it sounded, there were a lot worse places to be than South Beach in Miami. Besides, I could use the distraction. I was still grasping to reconcile Dad's death the week before. I didn't know how to feel about it. I honestly wasn't sad. More like absent. Further, mom's recent trip to the oncologist indicated her cancer had metastasized to her brain. The “if” of her dying was now a “when.” They told her she had six months max.

“Rick,” mom's friend Gordon said, his voice calling my attention like a dozer back blading gravel. “Remember one thing -- don't give up.”

“Jesus, Gordon,” I said. “You're like the umpteenth person to tell me that. What is it you all aren't saying? Is this some kind of cult camp?”

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“No, it’s not a cult camp,” he smirked. “But it is different. You’re going to... experience some things,” he said, inserting the pause carefully as if setting the mystic reference on a mantle to be observed but not handled. The intensity in his gaze communicated volumes. There was so much more he was not saying.

“Yeah, Okay. I got it Gordon. See it through. Don’t leave early.”

While I had talked myself into going in spite of the subtle warnings, Teresa was far from persuaded. She wouldn’t admit it but the workshop frightened her. It not only sounded weird, she didn’t trust it. She didn’t trust me.

At the outset the argument was easy. The cost was alone reason enough to dismiss it. Then Mom said she’d pay, indicating she wanted to come along. Teresa latched onto it as her next objection.

“She shouldn’t be traveling in her condition,” Teresa said.

We argued the point for several days and Teresa’s rationale mystified me. I mean really – mom was dying of cancer and the argument is she shouldn’t travel because of what? Mom might not survive it? The argument went back and forth until the doctor weighed in, indicating the airlines wouldn’t let her fly in her condition. It put an end to the debate, though it felt no less perverse as thought it bitterly ironic that at the end of someone’s life when of all times they have earned the right to exercise their choices, they are stripped of them.

While Teresa appeared somewhat appeased having sustained her the last objection, I was still going and it did not sit well with her. And there were my own doubts as well as I had heard anecdotal stories from Mom and others about prior PIP retreats.

They seemed to take the excesses of the family camp experiences we had back in the '70's with the Bellevue Eastside Unitarian Church to a whole new level.

“There will be a lot of people there just like you, Rick. Don't worry, you'll be in good company,” Gordon had assured me, explaining the workshop groups were usually large, drawing people from all parts of North and South America. I clung to his advice the entire trip from Portland to Miami. When I finally arrived at the house however, I began to realize Gordon's assurances lasted about as long as the fish shaped in-flight snacks during the five-hour plus plane ride in coach.

It started with the cabby shaking me down for a bigger tip. Pulling my bags out of the trunk, he stood expectantly between the bags and me with his hand out after I paid the full fare. Opening my wallet I dropped the last two dollars it contained and held it out open to show him it was empty. He was unappreciative, scowling at the limp currency in his hand and muttering something in Spanish that I would have bet the farm was not a glad tiding wishing me a happy stay in Mi-jami. The aging Caprice drove off in a cloud of blue smoke as I contemplated the pile of dead palm tree fronds. Welcome to South Beach.

The residential street was quiet, as was the house I was standing in front of, absent of any welcome sign or indication I was in the correct location other than the hand painted address tiles set into the stucco'd exterior telling me this was the right place. I walked to the front door and pressed the doorbell button and waited in the shade of a banana tree. As silence ensued, doubts began replacing the excitement I had been conjuring for the last couple of weeks. Things were too quiet. I doubled checked the house numbers and then after ringing the doorbell one more time, I sat on my bag and

leaned against the house resigning to wait in the humid air for someone to eventually answer the door. The door finally opened about ten minutes later revealing a young woman with intense features. Her face framed with dark short hair and darker eyes, she wore a guarded expression as she greeted me in Spanish. Motioning to leave my bags in the entry, I followed her to the rear of the house and onto a covered patio where two other people were seated, one reading and the other writing in a journal.

“Bernardo llegara muy pronto. Por favor espara aqui,” the greeter said as she slipped into the house, sliding the glass door shut behind her. Moving to the closest unoccupied wicker chair, I sat down and inspected the others more closely. Neither looked up to acknowledge my arrival, but kept their heads down in what they were doing. They looked nothing like me.

To my left was an older woman. Silver haired, she bore a pale complexion and was expressionless as she read her book. To my right was a younger male who was writing in a journal. His jaw flexed while he wrote, the only noise coming from the dark ink stabs he made on the page. He did not acknowledge my presence as well. Resigned to keep my own company, I doodled in a writing pad while glancing at my watch every few minutes. The boredom was finally broken when the patio door opened and a tall man with a bushy mane of curly hair and a modest beard stepped through it.

“Good afternoon,” he said in a heavy Spanish accent as he took a seat across from us. The wicker chair creaked loudly as he leaned back, crossing his legs. “I am Bernardo.”

Wearing a t-shirt, khaki shorts and sandals, I was struck with the impression this was going to be far from casual.

“I will be guiding this workshop for the coming week,” he continued as I realized he was a shoe-in for Heston’s Moses in the *The Ten Commandments*. An imposing figure, Bernardo stood over six-four and had piercing blue eyes that seemed to read thoughts. He spoke awhile longer about the workshop and a few details about the hotel accommodations when he turned to me directly.

“So, your father died before you left?” he said.

“Yeah, three days ago.”

“The ultimate *fuck you*,” he said with a smile.

I wasn’t sure how to respond. Was I supposed to laugh or just agree? It didn’t take me long to realize Bernardo smiled at a lot of things, though not because he thought them funny.

“Huh-yeah,” I said with a forced laugh while I wondered what the hell Dad had to do with anything.

Bernardo turned his attention back to explaining the workshop for the next hour, grabbing my attention with his closing comments.

“Your comfort will be challenged over the coming week,” he said smiling again.

“Of course, this is not you that is complaining, but your negative emotional child. As you will soon learn,” he added, reading the question from all of us about what the fuck a negative emotional child is.

“And you are expected to follow the rules. One, don’t be late. Two, you will do service work every day.”

“What kind of service work?” I asked.

“Three, you will have dancing every day on the beach,” he continued ignoring my question. “And then you will write. A lot. Did you each bring a notebook?”

I nodded affirmatively, gripping the \$1.99 spiral notebook in my hand. You’d think for the thousands Mom doled out, they could at least give me a goddamn notebook.

“Excellent,” he continued. “As for the service work Ricky, you will be working around the house. You will start by cleaning the back yard. When you are complete I will drive you to the hotel. You are responsible for your own meals. The room has a kitchen and there is a market close to the hotel. Do you have any questions?”

The three of us shook our heads meekly, looking to each other to see if anyone else was brave enough to ask question. None coming, he continued.

“You have an assignment for this evening. You will write five hundred negative traits of your mother.”

“Negative traits?” The silver haired woman asked, speaking for the first time with an Irish brogue. Her voice unfolded in soft lilts, making her sound knowing and wise. I liked her already.

“That is what I said,” Bernardo snapped. *Jeez, what a prick.* He trained his gaze on her for a long uncomfortable moment then continued.

“A trait is a behavior or an attitude. Some are positive, some negative. I want you to list the negative traits of your mother. Five hundred of them. Do you understand?”

The woman and I responded with bobble head nods, not daring the conversation any further. Bernardo turned to the other man, speaking rapidly in Spanish. Though I had grown up speaking occasional Spanish in casual conversation with Mom, I couldn’t understand what they were saying.

“Excellent,” he said, reverting back to English with a smile. “Now begin your service work.” He left us to ourselves and the yard work. As the sliding glass door thudded shut, I turned to the others.

“I’m Rick,” I said holding out my hand.

“Ruth,” she responded, breaking into a smile. Her face changed, lightening as the sober expression disappeared. “I know your mother, Alicia.”

“You do?” I said, surprised. “Where from?”

“I met her through Gordon and Louisa. I’m Gordon’s bookkeeper.”

“How did you meet her?”

“At a meditation. She is a wonderful woman. I am so sorry to hear she is not doing well.”

“Gianni,” the man said through a thick accent, holding out his hand.

“Where are you from?” I asked, grasping his hand firmly.

“Chile.”

“You’ve come a long way,” I said.

“I sorry?” he said haltingly, “I no understand English good.”

“That’s o-k-a-y,” I reassured him, annunciating slowly and with more volume, instantly recalling Dad when he spoke to foreigners. He would immediately adopt an accent and speak slowly as if they could suddenly understand his slow, faux-accented English. It used to drive me crazy when Dad would do this.

“Y-o-u a-r-e d-o-i-n-g f-i-n-e,” I said to Gianni slowly, detecting the hint of Spanish accent in my voice. Turning my attention to the yard, I fetched a rake lying on the ground and began fighting it through a deep tangled patch of grass.

“What should we do?” Ruth asked, looking very uncomfortable. I don’t think she had seen yard work in a long time.

“I don’t really know. I guess do anything that looks like work,” I said half laughing at the situation. Yard work was the last thing I thought I’d be doing in Miami. Gianni followed our lead and we soon worked up a sweat in the warm afternoon.

Bernardo retrieved us late in the day to take us to the hotel. We were hot, tired and grimy. Fearing the worst, the hotel was a pleasant surprise. Located on the water a few blocks north of South Beach, we had an ocean front view from a large suite.

“Be back at the house at seven tonight,” he said, leaving us to settle in. “Remember, don’t be late.”

After unpacking and getting cleaned up, we ventured out to check our surroundings. At once I was struck with how foreign South Beach was. With the exception of the occasional Hasidic Jew walking by in black Fedora and curls, I would have thought I was back in Caracas. Spanish was the predominant language, with a dabble of Spanglish and Creole in the mix. Gianni became our guide and negotiator.

Finding a small corner grocery store adjacent to the hotel, we stocked up on food and essentials. Scanning the shelves for coffee, I came across a brand that brought Venezuela back instantly.

“Bustelo!” I shouted, drawing the attention of the shopkeeper at the register.

“What?” Ruth asked.

“Café Bustelo,” I repeated, reaching to the upper shelf for the golden can with red letters. “It’s Spanish espresso. I can remember buying this for my dad when we lived in Venezuela.” I dropped the can into my basket with the bananas, mangoes and Cheerios.

“I don’t drink coffee,” Ruth said, her voice flat of emotion as she walked past me.

We walked back to the hotel room in silence and dove into the homework Bernardo had assigned, writing five hundred traits. Damn. I was challenged to come up with just ten! Every time I thought about Mom, her face materialized in my mind, sick and hurting. How the hell was I supposed to come up with negative traits? It felt like I was kicking her when she was down.

“Imagine her when you were thirteen,” Ruth suggested. “You remember that age don’t you? All snotty like and hating everything about your parents?”

I recalled the memories, re-imagining mom through pubescent eyes...

Embarrassing

Unorganized

Sloppy

Ethnic

Scared

It was working! I wrote on...

Different

Analytical

Unsympathetic

Neurotic

Untactful

Verbose

Uncompromising

Loud

Depressed

* * *

“You must remove the paint,” Bernardo rumbled, pointing at the floor. The floor to the converted garage was painted a deep shade of green. Judging from the uneven surface, the paint covered several layers. My eyes ran along the edge of the room, following it around until I met back with my feet standing on the concrete step leading from the house. It was about 250 square feet by my estimation.

“What tools do we have?” I asked, setting down my writing pad. I’d had a good night of sleep and was feeling energetic, having made it to 134 traits the night before when I hit the wall and began repeating myself, each sounding like regurgitations of the former with clever prefixes attached. It felt like cheating so I called it a night.

“This,” Bernardo replied, pointing at a can of paint stripper and a used margarine tub holding a chisel and a butter knife. Someone had attempted to strip a corner of the concrete stop Bernardo was standing on. They hadn’t gotten very far. I kneeled to inspect more closely, running my fingers over the porous surface. The concrete had absorbed the paint like a sponge. This is going to be a bitch I thought, already feeling the ache in my back.

Green fingerprints decorated the can like a school art project. Someone had been hard at work without much success and the acrid chemical smell still hung in the air.

“That’s what they were using to remove the paint?” I asked incredulously. Ruth’s expression went from sober to pained as she slumped in a chair against the wall.

Bernardo smiled, barked a few words to Gianni in Spanish and left. The three of us stood dumbly looking at each other and then the expanse of green floor.

“This will take weeks to remove,” I said.

“My knees won’t take the strain,” Ruth added.

“We go?” Gianni asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, resigning myself to the monumental effort. “Ruth, you spread the chemical on the floor. Gianni and I can start stripping once the paint has softened.”

Gianni looked at me, the confusion evident on his face. “Trabajo ahora,” I instructed.

“Ahh, si, si,” he responded.

“Rock, paper, scissors for the chisel?” I asked Gianni, miming the action. He watched my hands for a moment and then the understanding spread across his face.

“Yes, I know,” he said enthusiastically.

“Para este,” I said holding up the chisel.

“Okay.”

“Bueno. Uno, dos, tres,” I said as we pounded our palms and made our choices. I chose rock while Gianni chose paper. He wrapped my fist with his hand and we laughed as I handed him the chisel. Ruth began spreading the stripper, instantly filling the green

room with the acrid odor. It was overpowering, making our eyes water as she slathered the thick gel onto the floor. She stood up a few minutes later, tears running down her eyes.

“I need fresh air,” she said as she walked outside.

Gianni and I traded resigned expressions, knelt down and went to work.

* * *

Our second afternoon chiseling paint in the green room was interrupted by a trip to the beach. Midway through the day Bernardo came to the green room and instructed us to come with him.

“What about the floor?” I said, having just spread a layer of stripper on a patch of concrete we had been working on all morning without much progress.

“Leave it,” he said.

We headed through town in silence and parked near the boardwalk. Following him over the hot sand, I was struck with an urge to bolt for the water. The thought evaporated when Bernardo turned to face us, as if he’d read my mind.

“You are here to dance,” he commanded.

Whether still lightheaded from the stripper fumes, or just giddy from being out in the sun, I replied without thinking. “Dance?” I said sarcastically. “Why?”

Damn my mouth. Bernardo stared at me, holding court with the silence as a sly smile formed on his lips.

“You are going to learn how to move and breathe. You are all walking as if there is a board up your ass.” He punctuated the *s*, white teeth bared. I looked away from his glare, taking in the beach surroundings. Though it was a weekday, the boardwalk was busy with foot traffic and the beach scattered with sunbathers.

Out here? In front of everyone? I thought to myself. Prudence prevailed this time and I didn't ask. I was outside after all -- the ocean breeze billowing my shirt behind me while the warm sand slipped between my toes with every step. Though uncertain about the public dancing, we were on Miami Beach after all. More importantly, we weren't in the green room.

Bernardo turned, venturing further onto the expanse of ashtray sand. Walking single file behind him, we headed for a young woman kneeling over a boom box radio.

“This is Gloriana,” Bernardo introduced as she looked up and turned to face us standing. She had the lithe figure of a dancer -- the arch of her back indicating hours in front of a mirror practicing on a dance bar. Extending her hand to greet me, I studied her arm. It was long and lean, the fine hair on her forearm a translucent velvety peach fuzz. Her hand was cool as I looked at her face, catching a glimpse of pale green eyes peeking through her hair wrapping and unwrapping itself in the warm wind. She gathered her hair, exposing a freckled cheek and a large smile.

“Hello Rick. It is very nice to meet you,” she said with a heavy accent, sliding the tips of her fingers over mine and she pulled her hand away. I stood frozen in the hot sand, holding my hand out to the wind. She smiled coyly at Gianni, equally possessed by the introduction, and then turned to a smirking Ruth. Gianni raised his eyebrow to me and I returned it with a grin. This wasn't going to be so bad after all.

“Gloriana will be your dance instructor for the week,” Bernardo said. “You are expected to follow her instructions. She will be updating me daily on your progress.”

Progress? The enchantment disappeared instantly. Bernardo headed back to the hotel leaving the four of us staring at each other as the wind strafed our faces.

“First, you are going to learn to breathe,” Gloriana said, breaking the silence. “Plant your soles firmly on the sand, bend your knees and inhale while lifting onto the balls of your feet.” She demonstrated the action, placing her feet shoulder width apart and rising up on her toes as she inhaled quickly. The outline of her lean frame could be seen beneath the peasant cotton top and skirt, made translucent by the backdrop of the afternoon sun. She had the broad shoulders of a swimmer, her back narrowing to a small waist, rounding over a shapely butt. It was a nice ass. I looked up and she was looking at me, unmoved by my distraction.

“You must exhale through your mouth in a chant as you drop your heels to the earth quickly.” She demonstrated the action, this time closing her eyes and lifting her pointed chin slightly, exposing her full face to the sun. Gloriana drew in a large breath while raising up on the balls of her feet and then dropped, her frame shuddering as her heels thudded against the sand. At the moment of impact, she exhaled loudly making a “who” sound. She repeated the action several times and then opened her eyes.

“Do you see how to do it?” she said.

We nodded affirmatively as I looked to see if anyone was watching. A couple of moms were pushing strollers briskly on the board walk, ponytails bouncing as they chattered, but they didn’t seem to notice our demonstration. Just then I heard a whistle from behind and spun toward the sound. A group of teenage boys was gathered about

fifty yards away, throwing a football between them. The pungent smell of weed reached us they passed they joint. Gloriana had caught their attention and one of them was mimicking her mantra as the others laughed and pointed, catcalling in Spanish. Another kid grabbed his crotch and began dry humping the miming boy from behind.

“Good, let’s try together,” Gloriana instructed, unfazed by the attention. We stood in line, feet planted firmly and started the breathing action while thumping our heels against the hot sand. At first, it felt like trying to pat my head and rub my abdomen at the same time and the intonations from the four of us sounded like a worn Chinese funeral march. I started giggling and Gianni sputtered into a laugh while Ruth obediently kept to the routine. Gloriana maintained the rhythm however, spying us with one green eye as she kept her face angled to the sun. Soon the giggles faded and we fell into a rhythm together, in synch with each other as we pounded the sand. Closing my eyes, my thoughts and sensations peaked and ebbed as I drew into myself with the repetition of the mantra. My exhale became singular – separate, as if coming from someplace else though it resonated through my head, punctuated by the impact on the beach.

“Rick.”

“Rick!” the distant female voice called again. As I opened my eyes, Gloriana was standing in front of me, smiling. I stopped the mantra and stood quietly, though the vibration was still resounding firmly in my core.

“You went deep?” she asked, her eyebrow cocked with curiosity.

“Yeah. Wow. I felt like I was almost sleeping.” I looked around, now aware of the sights and sounds of the beach. No one was looking at us, as if we had not even existed. As if what we were doing was no more, or no less crazy than the rest of humanity on

Miami Beach. Just another day on the beach. I turned to Ruth and Gianni and they were rubbing their eyes, also wearing the startled look of re-entry.

“We will meet here tomorrow, same time,” she said as she picked up her radio and headed back to the boardwalk. I stared at her slender ankles as I fell in behind her. Gracefully placing one foot in front of the other, she scarcely left an imprint, her toes scraping a moraine into the depression left by the ball of her foot. We walked back to the hotel in silence.

The phone woke me up, ringing incessantly until Gianni answered it. I rolled over and stretched while I listened to Gianni speak in rapid fire Spanish. Disoriented, I wasn't sure whether it was morning or night. Rolling over to the see bed clock, it read 6:30 pm. I rolled onto my back, staring at the dark ceiling. I had slept for three hours, as if it had been an entire night.

“Bernardo phone,” Gianni said as he poked his head into my room. “We must come.”

Rolling out of bed, my stomach grumbled, reminding me it had been a long stretch since lunch. I grabbed a banana and a handful of nuts as we headed out into the humid Florida night.

* * *

I woke to the sound of the pounding surf and a child's squeal of laughter. Stumbling out of bed while rubbing my eyes, I glanced at the clock trying to recall when we had returned last night. It was late -- almost midnight as we had been in session with

Bernardo until at least ten pm, then we went to dinner. The red fuzzy digits on the clock finally sharpened into view -- 9:18 AM.

“Shit! We are late,” I said out loud. Gianni was snoring loudly on the hide-a-bed.

“Gianni, get up!” I yelled as I rapped on Ruth’s door. “Let’s get going,” I shouted, running into the bathroom to brush my teeth. Stumbling into the sidewalk ten minutes later, the Miami sun was glaring and intrusive, feeling more like an interrogation light than a tropical sun. We hurried along the well-worn route to Bernardo’ house in silence.

“Whatever you do,” I recalled Gordon counseling me before I had left for Miami. “Do not be late. You don’t want to see that side of Bernardo.”

Ruth was falling behind as Gianni and I pushed ahead, daring to cross oncoming traffic, not willing to wait for the signal. Standing on the far side of the main thoroughfare, Ruth was caught on the near side and stopped, not daring the traffic and waiting for the walk light to change.

“Hold up Gianni,” I said impatiently. The cross signal turned white and Ruth limped over to us.

“This is bullshit,” she clipped. “Why are we hurrying?”

“Because we are going to get our asses chewed,” I said.

“Yeah, well we are already forty five minutes late. A few more minutes is not going to change the outcome.”

We shared a grim smile and continued to Bernardo’ house. The heat was beginning to rise, gluing my clothes to my skin. Unbuttoning my shirt all the way, I pulled the shirttail out as I held my arms up, cooling myself as we calmly walked the rest of the way to the house, resigned to the consequences waiting for us. We let ourselves in

after no one answered our repeated knocks and headed to the back patio, waiting in uncomfortable silence. After a few minutes the glass door slid open and Rosa, the South American domestic appeared, speaking to Gianni. Though I couldn't understand, judging from her body language and the tone of voice -- it wasn't good. She wouldn't make eye contact with us and kept glancing back at the house.

“What's going on?” I finally asked.

He looked at me with a confused expression. “What is happening Gianni?” I asked again, clearly annunciating.

“Ahh, si, si. Bernardo no happy,” he said, suddenly grave. “Rosa say work green room ahora.”

“For how long?” I asked. Ruth slumped into the patio chair behind her, as if a puppeteer had let go of the strings. Her eyes became moist and red as her jaw trembled.

“Vamos,” Rosa said, motioning us into the house.

“I can't do this,” Ruth groaned, hiding behind her fingers splayed across her forehead.

“Ruth, come,” Gianni said, motioning with his hands. “Bernardo upset. You must come.” He grabbed her hands and pulled her off the patio chair. We marched sullenly to the garage, the pungent chemical smell greeting us as we entered the green room.

“Bernardo hablará con usted más tarde,” Rosa said as she closed the door.

Ruth sat on the edge of the concrete step, her arms folded over her knees and head buried between them.

“Let's get going,” I said, getting down on my hands and knees, slathering stripper on large patches of green paint. Gianni sat in the corner watching me in silence as I

worked my way out from the wall in a hopscotch pattern, doing my best to avoid the bubbling paint. I wasn't entirely successful though, losing track of the edge and occasionally planting a knee in the stripper. No matter how quickly I wiped the stripper off my skin, the burning would last long after I wiped it off. Completing the corner, we watched the floor in silence as the chemical ate at the green surface. Large bubbles formed like a tortilla on a hot iron skillet, bringing back memories of Carlotta, the ancient Mexican domestic with the long black braid my parents had hired to live with us for a year. My sisters and I would sit at the kitchen bar, transfixed by her gnarled hands working the dough as we chewed on tortillas hot off the skillet, dripping with butter.

"I think it's ready," I said, standing while flexing the stiffness out of my hands. The green bubbles emitted noxious vapors as they burst, distorting the far wall like a heat mirage.

"I'll do it," Ruth said emphatically as she stood, grabbing the chisel out of Gianni's hand.

"Are you sure?" I said. "What about your knees?"

"Screw my knees," she said as she kneeled gingerly and began scraping.

"Jesus, Mary and Joseph," she muttered.

I laughed while Gianni looked at me for translation.

"Ruth is not happy but she will work," I said.

"Ahh, okay. Thank you Ruth."

We went to work, taking shifts with the butter knife and occasional breaks outside to clear our heads. Near noon we were all slowing down. It was hot in the green room --

sweat dripped off our brows as we worked at the corners and crevices with the crude instruments.

“When are we going to break for lunch?” Ruth finally asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think we should wait for Bernardo first.” Not willing to protest, we kept working. By early afternoon however, our stomachs were groaning and our progress slowed to a feeble pace. The stripper had begun to mix with the sweat on our skin, seeping into the creases on my wrists and behind my knees, stinging like nettles. Doing my best to wipe with a clean rag, I only managed to spread it further onto untouched skin.

“We eat, now,” Gianni said, pulling off his gloves in frustration.

“No, tenemos que esperar,” I said.

“Ricky, this is ridiculous,” Ruth said. “He may not show up all day!”

“I know. I just think we need to wait. If we leave and he shows up, he’s really going to be pissed,” I said.

“Screw him then,” Ruth said.

“You say that now!” I laughed.

Just then the door from the house burst open and Bernardo walked in, catching all of us off guard.

“Ahh, the lazy St. Patrick’s,” he boomed, much too loudly for the small stinking room. I thought for a moment, not making the connection. The Green Room. Ruth. *But I’m Puerto Rican...*

“Did you all have a good night sleep?” he said.

No one dared answer.

“You were late this morning,” he said, turning to me. “Why?”

“Uh, uh. B-because we got back to the hotel late from the evening session. We all slept through the alarm clocks,” I said.

“I was up later than you,” he snorted, “and I was up at 4:30 this morning for prayers. What is *your* problem?”

“I dunno.”

“We were tired,” Ruth suddenly chimed in.

Shit. Why did she have to speak up? Her comment was blood in the water.

“YOU WERE TIRED,” Bernardo repeated. He laughed and turned to Rosa saying something unintelligible, though Gianni scowled when he did.

“You will work the rest of the day in the room. Dance is cancelled.”

“What about lunch?” I asked.

“Later,” Bernardo said as he turned and left the room.

“Sshhit!” I said emphatically, throwing the butter knife across the room. “This is bullshit.”

Ruth dropped into a chair against the wall, looking like she was going to cry.

Gianni stood in the doorway to the alley.

“We eat? Yes?” Gianni asked mimicking feeding himself.

“No,” I said while retrieving the butter knife and kneeling back down on the concrete floor. I began scraping with the dull edge of the knife, fuming in my frustration and pangs of hunger. A few minutes later, Rosa quietly opened the door, checking behind her as if making sure no one was watching. She held out a clenched fist and turned it over, opening her fingers to reveal the small pile of almonds in her palm.

“Comer,” she whispered.

She divvied the nuts into our hands out as she held a finger to her lips and we munched in silence as the door quietly closed. Feeling a small but palpable surge of energy, we worked for several more hours, continuing to trade the tools in shifts. Surprisingly, our energy level kept up as we made steady progress until midday when our stomachs began reminding us what time it was. Then I slipped on a section of bubbling paint, landing on my ass as it made a splatting sound while spraying globules of green foaming chemical in a circular blast pattern. We were laughing wildly when Bernardo walked in.

“I see you are hard at work,” he said sarcastically. I looked at other two and launched into another round of giggles as Bernardo stood silently.

“Are you done amusing yourselves?” he finally asked with a piercing blue stare. I nodded, not daring to say more.

“You all stink. Go clean yourselves and eat.” Be back by 6:00 and don’t be late this time. Do you understand?”

“We won’t be late,” I assured and we quickly cleaned up.

“Let’s get the hell out of here,” Ruth said as we walked out into residential the street. It was late in the day, the sun having already dipped below the horizon and the glow of orange was retreating. The surge of energy we felt after finishing the long day in the green room didn’t last. I was tired, hungry and I did stink. Trudging toward the hotel row on South Beach, we quickened our pace as we caught the smell of food from the row of restaurants.

“How about this one?” I said, pointing at a fast food burger place belching noisy groups of teenagers from the entrance. The inside of the restaurant was brightly lit and packed with people.

“I can’t eat greasy food,” Ruth said. “My system can’t take it.”

“Okay, what do you suggest?” I said, snapping back.

“How about that?” She pointed at the small glass storefront of a restaurant a few doors down the street.

“Fine, whatever. The glass door on the restaurant was covered in foreign script that I didn’t recognize until I noticed the Star of David at the top of the door. Peering inside, the small waiting area was also packed, but with families and older people dressed nicely. I hesitated for a moment, glancing down at my dirty shorts and flip flops, and then over at Ruth and Gianni who were equally soiled. The door opened and we were immediately hit by a tsunami of food smells, which beckoned us into the restaurant. There were two lines, one for people waiting for a table and another shorter line by the cash register for take out.

I stepped forward eagerly as the couple in front of us grabbed their meals and walked out the door. The cashier was busy helping a waitress deliver plates to a table so we gazed lustily at the food through the glass top of the food case. The cashier returned to the front counter, placing a stack of foam takeout cartons next to us.

“Excuse me,” a man said as he pushed between us and gathered the food under his arms.

“Can we order?” I asked the cashier. She paused to look us over and then turned back to the service window, loading up with more steaming dishes.

“What the...hey?” I said out loud in protest. No one behind the counter responded and the cashier busied herself delivering food amongst the tables. I tried flagging her down on her return trip to the kitchen yet she walked on by like we weren’t even there. My patience was non-existent by now the flush of anger rose rapidly up my neck, pricking the back of my head.

“What the fuck is her problem?” I said not too quietly, garnering a few stern stares from the table closest to the cashier.

“Is problem?” Gianni asked, eyes wide and round trying to understand the situation.

“Let’s go, Ricky. We can eat somewhere else,” Ruth pleaded.

“Yes, problem. She won’t serve us. *Excuse me!*” I said loudly.

This time she walked right by us, her face stonily impassive. A *The Stepford Wives* fembot if there ever was one.

“Fuck this,” I said, storming out of the restaurant into the Miami night. The door swung open violently behind my push, the bells on top of the door jangling off key. Ruth and Gianni scurried after as I marched up the main drag toward a brightly lit fast food place. Walking in the entrance, the flickering glow of the fluorescents cast a sterile light into the lobby. I caught my reflection on the inside glass wall and paused to inspect my pale skin glowing in the reflection. I was awash in rejection amongst the electric activity of the humid night. *What the hell am I doing here? Why am I putting myself through this?*

We walked home in silence as we inhaled our food along the way, the hunger pains in my stomach replaced by bloating brought on by eating the greasy food too fast.

We arrived at the hotel spent, each of us taking long turns in the shower and heading straight to bed. I set the clock early this time.

* * *

“You have finished your traits?” Bernardo asked. We were standing on the beach soaking in the early morning sun after receiving the message to meet him there. We were relieved not to have to face the green room for the third day in a row.

“Yes,” I said energetically, “of the mother and the father.” Ruth and Gianni nodded in unison.

“And you have identified which traits you have adopted?” he said, again receiving immediate acknowledgement. Something then caught Bernardo’s attention and he looked beyond us as a small grin appeared on his face, framed by his Moses beard. Turning around, we watched a shapely and tanned woman in a bikini walk by us about a hundred feet away. She had the attention of everyone around her and she knew it. Gesturing dramatically, she laid out her grass mat and radio and then turned toward the water peeling off her top, revealing a pair of deeply breasts without a hint of tan lines. Picking up a small bottle from her bag, she squeezed out a measure of the contents into the palm of her other hand, wiped her hands together and then began massaging it into her shoulder and breasts.

“Nice tits,” Bernardo said turning back to us. Gino and I turned to each other, exchanging lusty smiles while Ruth trained her attention to the passersby on the boardwalk.

“You are now ready to rid yourself of your parents,” Bernardo continued emphatically, drawing our attention back to him. Ruth and I shared a puzzled look while Bernardo repeated to Gianni in Spanish.

“Ricky, come kneel in front of me,” he instructed. I walked over and knelt by him wondering where this was going. Bernardo then drew a round circle in the sand in front of me.

“This is your mother Ricky. Talk to her.”

“What do I say?”

“How do you feel about the negative traits you adopted from her?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? What do you mean you don’t know!”

“I don’t know,” I said defensively.

“Is that how you respond when someone does something to you that you do not like? ‘I don’t know’” he mimicked. I laughed nervously. Bernardo wasn’t smiling.

“Ricky, have you ever been robbed?”

“Yeah, once. On Christmas eve. They stole everything under the tree.”

“How did you feel?”

“Angry.”

“Angry?” he mimicked in the nasally tone. “Or, ANGRY!” he shouted. The topless sunbather looked up from her magazine, glancing at us and then returned to her reading.

“Yes, angry,” I said in a raised voice.

“How angry?” Bernardo challenged.

“FUCKING ANGRY!” I shouted.

“Now maybe I will believe you,” Bernardo said smiling. “Now, tell you mother,” he said pointing at the circle in the sand like Yule Brenner issuing a commandment. I closed my eyes, my mind immediately locking on her disease-ridden face. Puffy from the Tamoxifen, her eyes were tired and her baldhead had a grayish tinge to it.

“TELL HER!” Bernardo shouted.

Reaching deep, I pushed away the immediate image of her and went back in time. Back to when I remembered her differently – when I was embarrassed and angered by her. Embarrassed by her ethnicity, by her accent, her goofy way of dressing and her strange foods. When she made me whole wheat sandwiches for school lunch when everyone else got Wonder bread. When she made me wear her pointy Keds tennis shoes to kindergarten when I couldn’t find mine. When she made arroz con pollo for the school potluck, receiving strange looks from the other kids because it looked and smelled different. Back to when I first found out the cancer had returned and learned that she would not outlive it this time.

The sensation welled in my abdomen and then moved upward into my chest as it began to burn. Reaching my throat, the tears squeezed out as my hands formed into fists. I pummeled the circle in the sand as the scream escaped my lips – haunting and exalted.

I cried as I pounded mercilessly, carried into another dimension where concern for what others thought did not exist. I floated in the inky black, unaware of any sensation save for the thunder of white noise in my head. Soon I became aware of the cool, wet sand against my cheek and the thunder and thump of the surf. I released the clumps of sand from my clenched fists, my palms pebbly with relief. I squinted against the bright

morning sun as the scene around me brought me back to the present. Three faces stared down at me, two with concern and one with acknowledgment.

“How do you feel Ricky?” Bernardo asked gently.

“Spent.”

“Yes,” he said, pausing. “Wade into the ocean. Clean yourself.”

Bernardo began instructing Gianni in Spanish while I walked down to the water, immersing myself in the foaming Atlantic Ocean, feeling the salty touch on my skin as it scrubbed away the last vestiges of uncertainty of why I was here. Returning to the group, Bernardo continued the instruction.

“You see how it is done?” he said to Ruth. “Like Ricky, do not hold back.”

Ruth turned to me, her expression subtly pleading. I gave her a subtle nod and smile.

“Go on, Ruth. You will be glad you did.”

* * *

Mid-morning on the fourth day the can of stripper ran dry. Informing Rosa, we held onto thin hopes of being done with the Green Room as she fetched Bernardo.

“Is it complete?” he asked as he entered the room, catching us off guard.

“Complete?” I asked dumbly.

“Yes, that is English, Ricky. I said complete. Is it complete?”

“We finished the can of stripper,” Ruth said.

“STOP PLAYING GAMES,” Bernardo boomed, his eyes shooting sparks. “Is it complete?”

“No.”

“There is a paint store down the street. Purchase more stripper and finish the work,” he commanded.

Tempting fate, I protested. “What’s the point? At the rate we are going with these tools we won’t finish before we leave.”

Bernardo froze in his tracks as Ruth and Gianni stared at me with disbelief. Rosa looked away as if not bearing to see what came next. He turned and looked at me passively with a Mona Lisa smile. “You are not an obedient student, Ricky.”

“But Bernardo, I don’t see how we are going to finish the room before we leave.”

“That is not what I have asked you to do,” he replied.

“I don’t understand.”

“Ricky, the question is, *is your work complete?*”

My work? About to ask, I thought better and deferred the question while looking around the room. “I suppose not,” I finally said, acknowledging there is more I could do, whether we finished the room or not.

“Then do your work. ¿Economía y eficiencia, entienden?”

“*Si, Bernardo,*” Gianni responded.

“Go to the store and do not ask me again until you are complete,” Bernardo instructed. “Ruth,” he called out to her and she began making a beeline to the door. “You stay behind and recycle your traits. You have a lot of shit to get out of your system.” Recycling was his term for reading through the negative traits we had written on the first

night, and then reading through the list of “anti-dotes” – a positive trait that balanced out the negative trait. It was incredibly boring. Ruth turned back, glowering as Gianni and I exited, doing our best to not appear too happy with the hall pass.

We took our time walking to the paint store. I practiced my Spanish with Gianni, amazed at how much was coming back in the few days we had been there. Not just words, but whole phrases. Entering the hardware store, we carefully examined the rows of paint chips along the wall until we found the shelf of chemicals. Selecting the nuclear strength product, we waited in the checkout line when something caught my eye.

“I’ll be right back,” I said to Gianni, handing him the large metal can.

“¿Que?”

“*Un memento*,” I said over my shoulder as I walked across the store to the far wall. I stood in front of the display, licking my lips as I stared at the array of implements. There was every imaginable instrument contrived to remove paint. Hefting a few in my hand, I selected three of the most expensive scrapers – gleaming steel tongues with sharpened edges and large rubber handles that fit perfectly in the hand.

“*Mira*,” I said to Gianni, placing them onto the checkout counter. He picked up, rolling it his hand as he inspected both sides and smiled broadly.

“Yes, Ricky. Is good!”

Again taking our time on the return trip, practicing Spanish and English, we found Ruth busy reading in her notebook as we arrived back at the Green Room.

“Back so soon?” she said with sarcasm. “I was enjoying the break.”

“Not to worry Ruth,” I said. “Look.” I handed her a scraper, expecting her to share my enthusiasm for the new tool. She looked at it flatly and handed it back.

“Am I supposed to be excited?” she said.

“It’s going to make our work much easier,” I explained.

“It’s still work.”

“E’ffing Irish,” I said under my breath as I handed a scraper to Gianni.

“*Como?*” he said.

“*No se,*” I said, shrugging my shoulders. We dove back into stripping the green paint and to my satisfaction, the scrapers worked fabulously. Even Ruth was admitted it was much easier. We stripped paint energetically, making twice the progress we had with the butter knife and chisel. Our mood continued through the end of the day, walking back to the hotel laughing and people watching. We had one more full day of work, with the following day our last and we were going home. As thoughts of Teresa and the kids came to me, I was instantly nostalgic and tears flooded my eyes as the images of their faces filled my vision. I missed them a lot.

The next day went by quickly, making exponential progress in the green room. Toward the end of the day, Bernardo appeared as we were taking a break.

“Well my St. Patrick’s. There is no more work to be done?” he said.

Sharing a nervous look amongst us to see who would respond, Ruth spoke. “We are taking a well earned break, Bernardo. We have made great progress as you can see.”

Bernardo scanned the floor with an uninterested look on his face. “But is it complete?” he said.

Gianni, Ruth and I shared another look between us and then I spoke. “Yes, it is, Bernardo. It is complete,” I said with conviction.

“Good!” he said. “Go back to the hotel and get cleaned up. Do your recycling and wait in your room for us so don’t go anywhere.”

By eight we were ready in the hotel room, scrubbed, fed, and waiting expectantly. There was a restful acknowledgment between us as we laughed and joked about what we would tell our family and friends about the workshop. I thought about the conversations I would have with Teresa and each one ended with an uncomfortable question mark. An understanding never quite fulfilled.

Eventually the conversation amongst us ran out and we became restless, checking our watches more frequently until finally, at nine thirty I asked Gianni to call over to Bernardo’s house. “Why is it okay for *him* to be late?” I vented. Gianni called but no one answered the phone. A stretch of time passed until heavy footsteps could be heard outside the door.

“St. Patricks!” Bernardo trumpeted as the door flew open and he entered the room. “You are ready?” he asked while we all stood reflexively. “Good, you are finally starting to listen. Sit down and I will explain the work for tonight.” He paused while we sat down and then began to explain. “You will be working with Sophia. She will perform a healing with each of you.”

“What kind of healing?” Ruth asked.

“A Shamanic healing. Sophia will search your astral plan for blockages.”

“Astral plane?” I asked.

“Yes, Ricky. It is your parallel state of existence, however most of you are blind to it. Our modern world does not accept easily what it cannot see or explain – you Americans are especially blind. Too busy doing to notice what is going on.”

“I’m Irish,” Ruth said with a laugh.

“Yes you are, a St. Patrick!” Bernardo said with a smile. This time it was a real smile and we laughed along with him. “You have the Celtic blood Ruth, a culture rich with respect for the multi-dimensions of our existence. In spite of what the church has tried to remove.”

Ruth nodded in understanding.

“Ricky, you have your mother’s genetics fortunately,” he said turning to me. “She is very aware. Learn from her while she is still with us.” He kept his eyes on me for a long moment. There was understanding in his eyes.

“Each of you will be called individually to the room upstairs. You will do exactly as Sophia says. Do not ask her questions or touch her. Do you understand?”

We nodded affirmatively.

“Excellent, let us begin,” Bernardo said as he stood up and led Ruth out of the room. “Recycle while you wait Ricky!” Bernardo called back into the room just as I was reaching for the TV remote. Damn it! I opened my notebook and began reading through the traits and anti-dotes.

About forty-five minutes later, the door opened and Ruth entered looking rested and serene.

“Your turn, Ricky,” she said.

I stood on the entry threshold of the room above ours in the hotel and peered into the darkened doorway and stepped through it. A lone candle burned in the middle of a

table at the center of the room. Aside it was a high standing padded bench table and beyond it in the gray shadows was a figure seated beside it.

“Please come in and close the door behind you,” the heavily accented female voice said.

As I closed the door the candlelight reached the far corners of the room. I recognized Sophia now, the soft light flickering against her long black hair and Latin facial features.

“Lay down on your back, Ricky,” she motioned to the padded bench. Close your eyes and relax. It is important you remain still and clear your mind. You may feel like sleeping, though if you can keep from falling asleep that is best. And do not touch me while I am performing the work. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” I replied in a whisper as I lay down on my back and closed my eyes.

At first it was quiet save for the sound of the waves crashing on the beach, and I attempted to clear the thoughts from my mind. Scenes from the week began flashing into my mind. The green room. Dancing on the beach. The walks to and from the hotel. It had been a long week and yet – *I found it satisfying*. Ha. I was surprised at the realization. I actually found the week gratifying. It had been tough, no doubt about that. Bernardo was a son-of-a-bitch, yet I admired him. He didn’t give a shit what people thought. It was more than admiration though – it was envy. I envied his strength.

“Ricky, clear your mind,” Sophia said.

“Sorry,” I said as I focused on my breathing.

I could sense motion, so close at times I could feel the heat from her moving around my body. I cracked an eyelid and could make out her arms in the candlelight.

They were waving over me, at times a few feet and at others, so close she was grazing the hair on my arms and legs, the follicles contracting and standing the hair straight up. My sensitivity was heightened, suddenly aware of the slightest motion. She held something in one of her hands that looked like a feather but it was too dark to tell.

“Close your eyes, Ricky.”

Smiling to myself I closed my eyes and wondered how she could tell I was watching. Focusing on my breathing again, I forced my mind to let go of the thoughts as they appeared, melting away as if sand castles in an advancing tide. I lost sense of time and the sensation of the bench dissipated, now feeling like I was suspended. My body felt separate, as if a suit of clothes hanging beside me and I was without form and drawn deeper inside myself toward a shapeless center. Purple orbs repeatedly enveloped me and I thought of Mom. Warmth spread through my center and I felt at complete peace.

“Ricky. Wake up. You are finished. You may return to your room. Please tell Gianni to come.” I sat up wondering what time it was, wondering if I had fallen asleep after all. I walked out of the room and down the stairs slowly. Details were now very distinct to me. The brushed relief of the stuccoed walls. The sparkling grains of sand on the steps, the smell of the ocean – sulfuric and pungent. A gecko spied me from the top of the wall. It darted onto the ceiling, defying gravity as it watched me guardedly.

I headed straight to bed when I returned to our room and woke the next morning, refreshed and thankful. Mainly because of the thought of seeing Teresa and the kids again which brought an immediate smile. We packed in silence and headed to Bernardo’s house, suitcases in tow and observed the routine of South Beach in the morning. Rapid Spanish could be heard between the food delivery drivers and the shopkeepers and we

walked by, while Hassidic families huddled stoically at the bus stops, curled locks under black fedoras and white shirts gleaming brightly.

Arriving at the house, we deposited our bags and waited in a side room, adjacent to the patio where we had started in six days before. Viewing the patio through the sliding glass door, I imagined viewing the three of us sitting there, uncomfortable and unknowing. As if a museum diorama juxtaposed against where we sat now, full of gratitude and knowing. I mused if I knew then what I know now how the week would go, for all that I learned would I have willingly agreed to participate in it? Save for Mom's wish, it would have been a coin flip.

"Good morning St. Patrick's! Your final day!" Bernardo announced loudly as Sophia followed him into the room and took a seat beside him. "You will complete your final exercise this morning. That is, if you are willing," he said with a lift of the chin, scanning our faces. "Not everyone does. They make it all the way to the last day, only to fail. Some that you know," he said with a pause, causing us to wonder whom it might have been.

"What is the next step?" Bernardo asked, looking at us solemnly.

"The next step?" I finally asked after long pause, Gianni nor Ruth willing to jump in.

"Yes Ricky. The next step." We shifted anxiously in our seats. We exchanged confused looks as Bernardo waited, appearing bored.

"What do you see?" he finally asked, sounding annoyed.

"A doorway," I heard myself say as soon as the image came to mind.

"Excellent," he said, gazing at me intently. "Now what?"

“We...walk through it?”

“Yes, but what must you do first?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m not supposed to know.”

“A quitter?” Sophia remarked with a roll of the eyes. “Are you quitting?”

“¡Un fatalista!” Bernardo chimed. “Come on Ricky, your mother did not pay to send you all this way just for you to give up. WHAT IS THE NEXT STEP?”

“I don’t know,” I said in frustration, holding my hands up.

“Exactly,” Bernardo said with a grin.

I looked to Gianni and then Ruth, hoping they were as confused as I was. By the looks on their faces, I was in good company.

“I don’t understand,” Ruth said.

“Surrender. Not knowing. It is what you have been resisting all week.” Bernardo answered. Sophia translated to Gianni and I watched his expression change from puzzlement to understanding.

“Remember how this feels – this state of unknowing. You will be in this place again.” He waited for a long moment, continuing, “Let us finish,” he said as he turned to Sophia and she began to speak.

“I had a vision for you, Ricky. A very powerful one,” she said. “I detected a pouch – of male deerskin.” She paused, concentrating her focus on me yet appearing as if she were looking not at me, but all of me.

“Do you know the significance of this?” Bernardo asked.

“No.”

“The male deer is a sacred symbol to healers,” Sophia explained. “The Shamans will follow the male deer into the forest because it will lead them to the plants containing healing properties.”

“Inside the pouch,” Sophia continued, “there was a turquoise stone.” She looked at me again as if surveying my thoughts. “You must ask yourself before you fall asleep tonight, ‘what is the gift?’ You must ask this once only. Do you understand?”

I nodded affirmatively.

“There is one last thing,” she said pausing. “I sensed a great energy. You are approaching a transition – a significant change. You will experience a great re-awakening that will be life changing.”

The acceleration of the 757 pressed me deeper into the leather seat as the engines whined and roared, the thrust pushing the jetliner high above the clouds. I kept my eyes closed as the vibrations and thumps confirmed the landing gear was fully stowed. I was on my way back home, and save for the foretelling from Sophia and images of the past eight days flitting in and out of my mind, I thought mostly of Teresa and the kids. My head rocked back and forth as the plane reached further into the blue and I contemplated what had eluded me the entire week and up to the last possible moment – surrender. How hard it was to step into it. And yet, as I thought about Mom and her witness of what she was going through with her cancer, the paradox of surrender struck me so suddenly that I bolted upright.

“Shit!” I exclaimed, startling the woman sitting next to me. She gathered herself and inched as far away from me as her economy class seat would allow.

The understanding was clear to me. The paradox of surrender. As Mom had been demonstrating in her suffering, she had surrendered to it. And in that surrender, she had gained freedom. A sense of power in her powerlessness over her dying body. And now I understood, in that moment at 35,000 feet what she had meant by, *I am not my body*.

I sat in the glow of the Satoric moment for the rest of the flight until I saw the bright, smiling faces of Teresa and the kids greeting me at the airport. I could see Teresa in the distance talking to Katherine as Michael and Adam played on the replica airplane. As if sensing my gaze, Teresa looked up and caught my longing gaze. I jogged toward them, zig zagging through the knot of passengers heading to baggage claim. I kissed her deeply and then looked down at the kids now wrapping themselves around my legs. I leaned over and planted a wet kiss on each of their pudgy cheeks as they giggled in my ear.

It was good to be home.

“What’s this?” Teresa asked smiling, holding my hand up to me. I stared at it for a moment, the blot of green paint on the back of my hand looking foreign and out of place.

“Ha, wow. You’ll never believe it,” I said as I wondered where to begin the story, walking toward the baggage claim with the kids skipping along, weaving in and out of the rest of the passengers happy to be home.

Overwhelmed by their energy and presence, I relished the homecoming and did not think about my insight until much later, when the routine of being back home settled in and I found myself struggling to explain to Teresa what I had experienced. I was now

facing the next test of reconciling the paradox – how to live in a recast reality with those who were not in the crucible of experience with me.

This manifested in various areas. Certainly with Teresa, but also with my friends and my business partner, the tensions in each of these relationships poking through the skin of reality like a compound fracture. “I don’t even know who you are anymore,” my business partner exclaimed with frustration one day, not being able to take my disconnected attitude anymore. I could empathize with what he was saying, yet at the same time I didn’t give a shit. I was not there to assure him anymore that the business would be alright. That was his job. I was wrestling with a bigger bear. I was trying to figure out what all that I had experienced in Miami meant, while accepting the struggle in it. I was challenged in finding my peace with the uncertainty, while those around me were freaking out. They could sense my shift and didn’t know what it meant. While I didn’t know either, I was diving head first with a spirit of discovery, and the energy that I communicated around it only further inflamed their insecurity.

This is not to say I didn’t falter. At times I deeply doubted what I was doing yet there was never a time that going back to where I had been was an option. And yet as I plodded forward I could only find resistance and frustration, especially toward Teresa in why she wouldn’t be more understanding of my journey. Further I was expecting her to make a massive shift along with me. All without the benefit of the experience I had been given to help me get there. At times my attitude toward her was utterly without compassion and forgiveness. It would be years before I eventually accepted that we would have different paths *while* in our companionship. That my frustration with her lack of understanding was as much about my continued struggle with surrender. That the

tension between my attempts to embrace surrender and her resistance and judgment, was where my learning was. That I was learning how to surrender to *that*.

Balance without tension is a myth. A tightrope walker does not make it to the other side without the force of gravity, the mass of the balancing pole counteracting the shift in weight on the tightrope, and working through the fear of falling. Only through surrendering to these inevitable laws of physics and primal instincts does the tightrope walker a sense of harmony amongst all the competing forces. As with the green room, my work had been laid out for me. In the midst of the struggle between the butter knife and the paint, between the cancer stealing Mom's life and her embracing of what was beyond, between Teresa's resistance, my inability to relate it in a compassionate way and our uncertainty of what lay ahead for us; that I would manifest peace and acceptance in all of this, making my home in the midst of these struggles, not waiting or expecting that they would conclude, but rather be transformed by them.

I was right where I needed to be.