

The Ice Dancer's Tale

by  
Susan Griffin

Here we stand suddenly at the confines of human thought, and far beyond the Polar Circle of the mind.

Maurice Maeterlinck

## Kaltelände

Up until the last two years in the second decade of the twentieth first century, very little was known about Kaltelände. Despite an interest that was sustained over at least 600 years, to have learned so little about this place, a place that we understood was not located at any great or impassable distance from Oslo (which is after all not that far from London or Paris or any major European city) is unique in the history of human curiosity. Over a long stretch of time, a number of men and women, several historians, for instance, even more explorers and anthropologists, along with one novelist, a priest and a nun traveling together, a diplomat and his retinue working with the UN, a handful of soldiers, a representative of National Geographical Society, one “travel guide” who had lost his way in a gale, all claimed to have been to this mysterious place, witnessed events there, stayed for one or two or even, in one extraordinary case, ten nights, and while observing their customs, interacted with the Kalts. Yet down to the last informant, though they all had an intensely personal response to this experience and many reported that it changed their lives, not a single person could remember anything of substance from this culture. No more than two or three words, a few moments from a supposed ritual, some gestures without any meaning attached, the barest suggestion of a custom, very little even of what was eaten or style of dress was all they could recall. The maps that many of them drew, however, presented a different kind of problem. Some were drawn within precise lines of longitude and latitude, others had indications of well known geographical features, for instance Mount Galdhøpiggen in Jotunheimen, and recorded the number of miles they had traveled NE or NW from those sites. Others were less exact but still managed to provide recognizable markers, stands of trees, for example that only grow in certain regions, so that their maps seemed useful. But in each case, no one who tried to use these maps to find Kaltelände could find anything at all. One would expect this to happen in a nomadic society (and from the requirements of ancient hunting societies, one presumed the Kalt to be so ) but the one feature that all the informants reported was that, as with many nomads, the Kalts had one central location, a permanent settlement, and it was this settlement the travelers claimed they had either discovered or stumbled across. For centuries it was presumed that these travelers had either been mistaken, incompetent, deluded or hopelessly vague. Until finally it was generally concluded that the fault did not lie with these reporters. Rather, in the same way that opinions about what is and is not true seem to take collective shifts now and then, it became clear to most of us that Kaltelände itself is elusive.

*The Cambridge World Encyclopedia of Geography and Culture.* ed James Bingham and Sarah Turnbull. Vol.V, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Cambridge, 2041)

## Chapter I

### Jumping Off Edges

and remember you can always go outside  
really really really far outside

Ani Difranco “Splinter”

Even today I awaken wondering, was it real? The story shimmers like a legend in my mind, filled with those strange yet glowing images of ice that even today, after so many years, still inhabit my dreams.

*Ice.* You may think you know this substance, but you don't. You say it is cold and hard. I would have said so once too. But I tell you now ice is a form of water and like water it moves. If this movement is slow, in the end the action is startling, even dramatic. As I was to discover, a wild heart burns at the core of the frozen North.

Though certainly I encountered this mysterious power at least once before I saw the frosty region of Kaltelünd, that legendary place which even today cannot be found on any map. Kaltelünd, that country still has a powerful hold on my mind and no wonder. It is real. It has three dimensions. It is located on the earth. But it is also a state of mind. A concept that when I was younger was hard to grasp, as it once was for most of us who came of age in a postindustrial world. No wonder then that this mysterious place would have played such a profound role in changing the way we think. But of course the ancient culture of Kaltelünde was not the only source of wisdom I was to find in the Arctic Circle. There was also the ice itself.

Anyone who devotes her life to ice-skating has to know the power of this element in her bones, even if she is not aware of what she knows. It is difficult to fully claim what has not been named. Certainly, on one fateful morning in October of the year 2012, after practically living on ice for over three decades, I became almost painfully aware of a force beyond my understanding.

Yet, as I have come to see over my seventy years on this planet, when you accept it as such, a state of unknowing can lead to new understandings. So to begin this tale about the dance everyone knows now as *The Great Turning*, the mysterious and elusive performance that helped us all awaken to the danger facing all life on earth, I will begin with what on a terrible morning was a kind of ending.

Notwithstanding my own destiny (and the fact that in the end none of our destinies whether tragic or joyous can be separated), that year there were plenty of signs of an impending danger facing the earth. Record heat waves had led to massive forest fires, droughts shrinking wheat crops in Russia, flooding where no flood had had occurred in a century, more tornadoes across the center of America than anyone had seen

before, glaciers in Greenland receding at an astonishing rate, ice disappearing in the arctic, and with that polar bears threatened with extinction, beginning with plankton, the food chain in the sea damaged beyond repair, and, as the oceans warmed, coral reefs dying. Not to speak of the massive storm that would soon be on its way toward New York City, where I lived.

But in that year, immersed as I was in the weather of my own soul, I was only vaguely aware of all this. I was possessed by a vision, day after day, chasing a shadow over the manufactured ice of a skating rink, as I tried to grasp a phantom that while beckoning to me irresistibly, continually eluded capture.

The search started at an early hour. For most of my childhood and well into my forties, I would awaken every day without fail at 5 a.m. so I could be at the rink early to stretch, warm up my limbs, and then run through a series of exercises— steps and spins, jumps and camels—before I began to craft a new dance or practice an old one. This regimen had become such a solid part of me, it was as automatic as taking a breath.

Most mornings, when our troupe was not touring, I would sling my bag packed with a fresh gym suit over my shoulder, head for the Sunrise Café on the corner of 45<sup>th</sup> and Fifth Avenue, and after a quick cup of coffee and a piece of fruit, jog west over to the ice rink at the Chelsea Pier. At that hour, I could count on the building being relatively quiet; the only others present were serious young skaters and their teachers, diligently training for competition.

I spent so much of my life on skates that the blades I wore felt like an extension of my feet, and the surface on which I skated seemed as ordinary as a wooden floor or a cement sidewalk. The grounding of all my work, this element was so familiar that I took it for granted. But, soon after I reached my forty-fifth year, six months before my day of reckoning, on a morning that began as routinely as any other, the moment I touched my blade to the ice, I felt a strange sensation, one I could neither locate nor name. As I glided toward the center of the rink, the feeling only grew stronger until I was overcome by the sense that I had entered another world, stunning, strange and yet, in some way, deeply familiar. I knew where I was. I was not hallucinating. Yet despite my grip on reality, for a distinct moment, I felt as if the ice on which I stood were growing all round me, enclosing me, as if in the belly of a great arctic beast. When I looked toward the ceiling,

though in fact I knew I was staring at the same high, steel girders I saw everyday, I had the disturbing yet intriguing impression that these were also the ribs of a creature that had swallowed me, one that was swimming, taking me somewhere I had not been before. Which, proverbially speaking, was true.

I was thrilled for an instant but also terrified and thus glad when the moment passed. I chalked it up to flashback from some late night movie I'd slept through. Though over the next month this brief experience was to prove auspicious, the first sign I had from that strange territory of the conscious universe that sends out intimations of the future.

It was in fact at the end of this practice session that spontaneously I began to dance a new piece, something I had neither notated nor planned. I was not thinking of which jumps or spins I would include or even of my next move. I was instead completely taken up with what I felt as I danced. At first it seemed to me as if I were floating sweetly above the ice, then suddenly I felt an explosion of energy, followed by the sense that my body had been broken up into an infinite number of particles that were being dispersed, all falling downward, toward the ice, when suddenly in midair, each cell, each fragment of my being became a kind of eye through which I could see, each a crystalline lens that like a diamond fractured the light into a fan of dazzling brilliance, until all these particles came together again into what seemed for a moment like stillness, but was instead, an elegant embodiment of the slowest motion you can ever imagine, a subtle but steady pace that was, at the same time, stately and grand, monumental.

When it was all over, it seemed almost as if I had awakened from a dream. But, though I could not remember any of the actual moves I had made, I knew the dance was real and that it was the most beautiful one I had ever done.

By that time in the morning a few of my colleagues had also arrived to rehearse or work with students and they had been watching me dance. Carolyn who was up in the office, a glass box in the back above the ice, whispered "My God," over the loudspeaker. Jack, not on the ice quite yet but standing at the edge, began to clap his hands and shout bravo and Carolyn asked over the loudspeaker in a stunned voice, "What was that?" before she too started clapping and hooting.

For several seconds, I was silent, frozen in a kind of trance until I answered, “I don’t know,” throwing up my hands, then shrugging my shoulders melodramatically as a gesture to emphasize my point. I was not being modest. The beauty of the dance was like a magnet, the power undeniable. I had been thrilled by ice dances before, performances that I did or designed or others that I had simply witnessed but this one was in a class by itself. Yet, in what would soon come to seem like a cruel joke, I had no idea how I had done it. I had not choreographed the dance or planned any of the moves. It was as if the ice had come through my feet and moved me.

From that day on, this dance took hold of me with a force I could neither deny nor shake. My spirit was possessed, and as my tale will reveal, I am not using a metaphor. For weeks, I could think of nothing else. Of course I questioned all the witnesses, pressing them for details, but though they all testified to the beauty, none of them could remember a single move. We all agreed that the dance contained the mood of many of our most popular dances, some I had performed when I was young, and others that I had created for our repertoire. “Reindeer” and “Drum Beats,” for example, came to mind, as did “Waves,” the dance I first envisioned as a teenager on the Northern California coast (where I sought healing from my first fall), “raven” of course and “My City Was Gone,” even “Honey Bee,” “Machine,” and “Bloom.” But this dance was both different from and more than all of these, in a way that none of us could explain. Though in the end we did give this elusive performance a name: we called it “The Disappearing Dance.”

Over and over I tried to recreate it. Yet, despite every effort, I was never able to remember anything of what I did, not a single jump or move. That first day, all that day, after the first series of failed attempts, I cancelled all my rehearsals, the lessons I was supposed to give, my whole schedule, so I could try out various moves and approaches. I did not stop to eat or drink. I only went home at midnight because at midnight our contract required us to vacate the building. Yet once there, though I was exhausted, I could not rest. Tossing and turning, eventually sleepless, I was like a creature captivated in an invisible cage, a cage made of irresistible longing. It was not glory I was after, but something else, something I glimpsed during the dance—the fleeting feeling that everything made sense, as all the elements in my life appeared to fall into a crystalline

order. But this was an order that, like dance itself, seemed to seduce and elude me, all at the same time.

Every day for several weeks, I would arrive before dawn and begin my attempts again, racing through rehearsals during the day and then from early afternoon until midnight, repeat my trials, always without success. Obsessed, half mad, I steadily descended into a hell of my own making. With so little sleep and almost no food, I began to resemble a character out of some gothic romance, gaunt, trembling and pale. After pleading with me to consider moderation and return to a somewhat more normal life, and then asking over and over for just an hour to talk with me, Jimmy, my partner, finally left. "I'll be back," he said. He might as well have said, "I just need some space." I did not believe I would see him again. Yet, though I was crushed, not even his departure could stop me. It seemed to me as if I had been born to create this dance.

So I could spend even more time in my vain pursuit, I found a way to get into the rink before any of the maintenance staff arrived. A strategy, as I was soon to learn, that was dangerous, since one morning very early when I was the only one in the building and in the midst of a jump I collapsed and fell spread eagle on the ice. When I tried to get up I found that even with the greatest effort I could not even raise my head. I was calm for a while, thinking that sooner than later someone on the staff would show up to rescue me. Calm that is until I heard the wind outside and began to fear that since a violent storm was supposed to hit landfall that evening, they had decided to close the rink that day.

Still, in the interest of hope, I comforted myself with conjectures. Surely someone had to drop by to make certain the building was secure against the battering winds that were expected, I told myself. And wouldn't they want to power down the place? But in the meantime, shivering uncontrollably, miserable with the damp cold that seemed as if it were seeping into my bones, I began to feel as if I were on the verge of turning into ice myself.

Though it was an ominous sign, I was not thinking clearly enough and even grateful that, after what seemed like an interminable period of suffering, I began to feel warm again. I even tried to unbutton my jacket. Though I had learned years before that this was an advanced stage in hypothermia, the condition in which the body succumbs to

cold and often dies of it, I was so fatigued from weeks of little sleep that I was grateful for the rest. Vaguely aware of the growing danger, I tried occasionally to wake myself up, but every time I did, I would soon drift back into an even deeper sleep, a sleep that was not empty however but instead filled with memories of how I came to be where I was that day, beginning with how I became an ice skater in the first place.

From the bare facts of my early childhood, no one would have suspected that I had any destiny with ice. I have never liked being cold. I was born in Southern California, in Los Angeles, where for most of the year, the average temperature, at least in those days, hovered between 65 and 105 degrees. I spent a great deal of my first two years at the beach, learning to swim before I could walk. My father was often gone, but he was reliable, returning to us like clockwork after a week or so, until I was almost five. I adored him. Full of fun, cheerful, often laughing, he would come home laden with gifts, stay for a stretch and then go off again in his Volkswagen van, adorned on the side with a remarkably vivid rainbow. With his leather pants and long hair he looked like a rock musician, though he could only play a few songs on his guitar.

Still, everyone who knew him found him charming, even my mother's parents. That charm combined with his frequent absences tugged mightily on my childish heart. Whenever he was gone on one of his business trips, I would hold a photograph of him in my hands as I fell asleep.

But several months before I turned five, he left one day and did not come back. Whenever I asked where he was, my mother would tell me the story of how they met, until finally, I just asked her to tell the same story again. In the beginning she would describe him, his dancing brown eyes, his warm laugh, the guitar he carried everywhere. She talked about how they met at Woodstock on the day before the first concert began and fell in love the next day. As I got older and could understand such things, she told me how they sought shelter from the rain in a makeshift tent and wound up in each other's arms, surrounded by mud and music. How Ravi Shankar started playing while they made love. When afterward they came out of the tent he was still playing and they sat there together in the rain, drenched and mesmerized, happily swaying to the hypnotic raga that traveled over the wide field and up the hill they occupied, right into their ears. A couple

of years later I learned that I had been conceived in that tent. Only when I was old enough to understand such things did I realize that it was not because I loved to play in the waves but because of this that she always called me her “magic little water baby.” She knew that was the moment for sure she said, because though she went to great pains to conceal it from her friends, she was actually a virgin. And because she and Sitar—that was what, using the name of Shankar’s instrument, we always called him—did not get together again until a month after the concert. Hours after I was conceived, he had drifted back into the crowd, vanished like a mysterious stranger with no roots, no baggage, no address.

That eventually he showed up in her life again was a testament to my father’s intense if unreliable passion for my mother. He told her he had had another “lady”—that was the “in” word then and he had had to attend to her. When two days later he went back to the tent, it had vanished and so had my mother. He tried to locate her without any success, he told her, and had nearly given up when one day he saw her face in a picture of the crowds at Woodstock, published in Life magazine. From time to time over the years, I have studied that picture. Even though because it was black and white, you don’t see the extraordinary, strawberry blond color of my mother’s hair, the photographer has captured the light in her blue eyes, the even features which always made her seem so trustworthy, and the confidently natural quality of her smile.

He called the editor, and following a series of leads, eventually found the photographer, an amateur who happened to know someone who knew my mother. Only days after that he purchased his van, spent a weekend painting it in psychedelic colors, replete with a rainbow on one side, and then headed West.

My mother was very happy to see him. In the stories she would tell me, she did not weep over him so much as dream of his return. Long before positive imagery became fashionable, she would lie on her bed in her room in her parent’s small farmhouse and fantasize his return. She called around, asking among all her friends who were at Woodstock if they knew a tall, lanky man with a long face and long, silky black hair to match, olive skin and green eyes but no one did. Still this did not stop her from imagining their reunion. And then one day he materialized, walking right out of her wishful vision through the living room door. She spent only one more night at home, she said. The next

morning, after her father went to work first to the orchard and then to the field, as soon as her mother left for town to do errands, she wrote them a note, packed all her belongings and moved into Sitar's van.

They drove to various places on the California coast, living a deliriously happy if cramped life. It was after they had driven the coast near Big Sur, that she began to suspect someone else might be coming into their life. She had been carsick, not normal for her, but not all that unusual either given all the curves along Highway 1 in that area. She was not alarmed until the next morning her carsickness seemed to get worse. She often said she was glad he didn't know she was pregnant before that moment because if he found out she would never have known if he came to her out of love or from a sense of duty. He was happy when her test came back positive, she always said, almost "jumping for joy." *Then why didn't he stay?* I wanted to ask, but I couldn't bring myself to say the words. They raced off to Reno where they wouldn't have to wait for a license to marry. So I would be legitimate, my mother said, though she always put it in a more dignified way.

He stayed with us for nearly five years. In the pictures from my first and second birthday he is there with his long hair in a ponytail, flashing a broad grin while he urged me to blow out my candles. One shot from my third birthday is a blur of motion, but you can just make out his willowy frame spinning me around so fast my hair was streaming. In a shot taken shortly after my fourth birthday I am on his shoulders, my head thrown back in laughter. The images I have preserved in my mind from that time are from those pictures. Though I have memories in my body too, how he would grab me by the hands and twirl me around him with a movement so free and graceful it felt like we were flying. How he would put on me his back and run around the room whinnying, then suddenly flip me over his head and send me downward in a slow, artful arc so I would find myself standing on his feet, when he began to skip us both out of the house, across the lawn and down the street, accompanied with a medley of whoops and birdcalls and verses from one of the songs of which he knew every word of the lyrics, "Yellow Submarine." Though I was born athletic, my father gave me a crucial component of my future: dance.

But in the photographs from my next birthday, he's gone. You can feel the empty space in the circle of faces around the three candles. My mother found it hard to believe

at first. There had been no signs, no symptoms. They were still in love. They had only minor lovers' quarrels that never went anywhere except into bed to make up. He did not seem to have any trouble providing for us. He bought a small tract house, from the trust fund he had inherited, he said, and put the deed in my mother's name. The real estate agent was astonished when he offered cash but he told her it had to be that way since he did not want his family, whom he described as a stodgy, old clan from the Eastern seaboard, to track him down. He would visit his family from time to time, he told my mother, and write but he never told them his address nor did he give their address to my mother. It was for this reason, my mother thought, that he gave her cash for household expenses. She was the only one with a bank account.

Every once in a while he'd take off for longer than a few days. *Business*, he always said, though what business was never quite clear. Something to do with gardening, my mother said, a friend's farm he had invested in, in Mendocino, and he had to drive up there or to San Francisco for meetings. Sometimes he'd be gone for a week, sometimes two, once even for a month, but he would always send postcards and he always came back, his van filled with toys for me and clothes and various other treats, earrings, roses for my mother. Then one day, he took off with less warning than usual. This time there were no postcards. And it was not just one month, but several until my mother finally allowed herself to worry that maybe he was not coming back at all.

Slowly, she and I receded into a cocoon, woven from absence and a growing grief. We would spend hours curled up together on the couch taking refuge in soap operas and game shows. Almost every night, after she read me a story, she would stretch out beside me in my little bed and hold me fast as I fell asleep. More often than not, when I would wake later in the night, I would crawl into her bed. I could sense something was wrong—today I'd call it depression. Though she did not remain in this somnolent state for very long. After two more months, her sorrow transformed itself into anxiety. Now, when I went to look for her in the middle of the night, I would find her at the kitchen table adding numbers.

She had reason enough to worry, but finally, just as we were, in my mother's words, *down to our last dollar*, an envelope with no return address arrived with a

cashier's check for \$3,000, enough money in those days to sustain us for at least 2 months.

Whether from relief or a renewed hope that Sitar might return, Louesa's mood began to brighten. Slowly we emerged from our cocoon. No longer curling up together for hours during the day on the couch, we began to explore the world together. We visited my grandparents' farm on the outskirts of the Valley, where we picked fruit, and I climbed trees. We spent an afternoon choosing fabric and patterns for matching yellow dresses at a big store just over the hills in West Los Angeles. We would drive through Griffith Park sometimes stopping at the Merry-go-round, sometimes at the pony rides, sometime in the fern grove where we strolled, often pretending we were forest creature, elves or fairies.

I remember one trip we took, with particular clarity, partly because it was to be the last of such forays for what seemed to me, at that age, a long time. Louesa, who was up early, woke me with pancakes, fairly singing, "Get up sleepy head." As soon as she had me at the table, she announced, "It's going to be hot today. So I packed a lunch. How would you like to go to 'Roy Rogers'?" Though this was not exactly a rhetorical question, she knew what my answer would be. I had been longing to go to the beach and this was my favorite one.

"It's high time we took a vacation from ourselves!" she laughed as we followed the winding road through Topanga Canyon up and over the mountain and toward the ocean.

The sound of the waves, the blue beach blanket Louesa had batiked herself, our ample lunch replete with a pie she had made from my grandparent's peaches, the warm sun flooding our faces, cooled just enough by a sea breeze, the rides I took in the buoyant waves just after they broke made it seem as if the cloud that had been hanging over our lives had lifted.

I had that lovely feeling one gets after a day of sunlight and sea, indescribably fresh and clean, even when you are covered with sand. Louesa was slow as she packed us up to leave, not from depression this time, but from the sense of quietness the day had revived in her. A couple that had picnicked near us earlier in the day, and given us cherries in exchange for two pieces of pie, told Louesa they had bought them from a

stand on a side road that went back into the mountain. Since my grandparents did not have cherry trees, Louesa thought she would try to find this place before we headed home.

The road itself was delightful. Like old California, Louesa said, “how it was before you were born.” There were rolling hills and horses in corrals and sheep in fields. Then as the road climbed a bit, and as we began to drive alongside a rock hard surface, next to a steep incline, we came upon it, parked right there in a turnout, just where you might stand to see the view.

The van had obviously been there for quite some time. My mother parked in the turnout, then hesitated. Suddenly the mood we shared that had seemed so carefree turned desolate. I started calling out, “Daddy, Daddy.” Which made Louesa want to cry, she told me later, but she didn’t weep, not then. Somehow during these harrowing days, my mother with her big breasts, flowery dresses and soft heart, had developed a steel spine. She saw right away that the van had no plates. Recognizing the rainbow, now badly faded, that Sitar had painted on the driver’s side, she made me stay in the car, in case, she told me much later, he had left a jacket or any thing behind that might give me hope or even worse, if there were something frightening inside. But the van was stripped clean. Even from the outside, it looked in every way abandoned, dusty, windows open, uncared for, like the carcass of a dead animal.

“Where is he? Where is he?” I cried when she came back to our car.

“Not there,” she said. ”No one is there. No one has been there for a long time.”

For a fleeting moment I was tempted to be angry at my mother, as if yelling at her would bring Sitar back. But she looked utterly confused in a way I had not seen before, and strange for her, at sea. In fact, stunned by what we had found, she had no idea what to think or do.

The sky, which had been a lovely turquoise color all day, was pale now, almost white and the sun was coming into my eyes at a harsh, nearly blinding angle. Assaulted by a rising feeling of nausea, I kept my eyes on the center of the winding road, following the broken white line as if my life depended on it.

We drove home in silence. Instead of bring us together the grief we shared seemed to separate us. I could see various thoughts crossing Louesa’s face. But she did

not share them with me. Years later I learned that, once she had put me to bed, where, despite my agitation, I fell asleep from exhaustion almost immediately, she made a call to the state police. She followed up with calls every day, always when I was asleep or playing in the yard, so that she would not frighten me. But in the end all her efforts eventuated only in the van being hauled away. They knew nothing about the owner and without plates, they could not trace the vehicle, they told her, adding that they suspected it had never been properly registered. For two more weeks, she was worried. Though she told me none of her darker thoughts, she was afraid that something terrible had happened to Sitar. But then another check came, dated a week after the day we had found the van.

She was relieved, but, almost immediately, her anxiety turned into a bitter sense of betrayal. It was then that my mother knew Sitar had not been telling her the whole truth. Something in her changed at that moment, I thought forever. The wild spirit she shared with Sitar seemed to die within her. In a sense on that day, not only did I lose Sitar, but a side of my mother I loved too.

Louesa had always had a practical side, but now, except for the times when she would tell me stories about Woodstock, she seemed almost averse to anything frivolous or edgy. No wonder then that though I had been an outgoing, playful child, I began to retreat into shyness. Whenever we went out, I would cling to my mother for dear life, reluctant to meet new people or explore new worlds. We never spoke of Sitar's absence, and this created an odd distance between us. Yet after all was said and done, we still had our own world, and as small as it was, it was sweet. We did everything together, cooking, eating, playing, sewing. Besides the many matching dresses she made for us and despite the perennial warm weather we enjoyed, Louesa knitted us two red woolen caps for the few weeks of winter chill in the early mornings we would face.

But though Louesa did her best to make me feel safe and loved, I was enduring a private winter. A persistent feeling of loss had begun to cloud the climate of my inner mood. I remember the feeling well. I felt like a ghost of myself, as if all the vibrant energy that had once so animated my body had drained away. I had more than one nightmare where I found myself running away from shadowy monsters who emerged from Sitar's deteriorating van, still standing in what I remembered as the bleak and forbidding atmosphere of that turnout, the sheer cliffs symbolic now of impossibility, the

lovely canyon turned into a site of devastation, like an abandoned battlefield or a city battered by a powerful storm. These alternated with dreams in which to my delight Sitar appeared at breakfast, acting as if he had never been away. But the moment I woke from these dreams, I was flooded with disappointment. A letdown that once I was out of bed became a sense of never-ending bleakness. Exhausted by pointless hopes, I settled into a frozen state of numbness.

The same cycle was to return to me at other times in my life. But these storms usually had a silver lining. On this occasion, if before Sitar left I dwelled more in my body than my mind, seeking the thrills of movement, learning to explore and conquer space, now I began to develop a greater inner life. Compelled by absence, I began to wonder at the fact of existence. A powerful change was occurring within me, albeit moving at a glacial pace. My dreams slowly changed as I began now to wander our neighborhood looking for Sitar. And though sometimes I would still find an empty van, a broken guitar, or a dark void emitting howling winds that made me cry out with fear, I was also pushing the perimeters of the world as I knew it farther and farther out, speeding past our neighborhood, over the hills, to the beach and over the ocean, even up to the stars, bravely searching everywhere for the intangible meaning I had once felt in my life.

Yet outwardly, I no longer had the adventurous spirit that once drove me to run as soon as I could walk. In response to loss, even very young children will decide to reject the world. Louesa tried to coax me out of my shell. I can still remember the bright, warm day when she drove us into Griffith Park. She had packed my favorite food, tuna fish sandwiches, carrots, raisins, Oreo cookies. We ate our lunch at a table in Fern Grove and then she announced with all the enthusiasm she could muster,

“Let’s go for a pony ride.”

Knowing I would have to ride on the pony without Louesa, I shook my head. And I suppose too that I sensed Louesa’s enthusiasm was not entirely real. She was making a very good but not entirely convincing effort to lift the sadness that had enveloped us both.

“Come on,” she said, “Just give it try.”

I shook my head again violently and shut my eyes.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said, “Let’s make a deal. I’ll drive us there and if you don’t want to ride, that’s okay.”

I was happy enough on the winding road as we passed groves of pines, peering through the branches to see if I might find a bear, an elf or even Robin Hood, and this must have given Louesa a good measure of hope that she might jog me out of my self-imposed imprisonment.

And, in fact, after she pulled into a parking space, I was about to leave the car if only out of habit, when suddenly I balked. The sight of a dozen children standing in line had stopped me in my tracks. When a little girl with bright green ribbons tied on her brown braids looked my way, I jumped back into the car and slumping down below the window, hid. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of shame, a feeling I know now is common among children who have been abandoned by a parent, as if they had been rejected for some fatal flaw that would be immediately evident to others.

Louesa patiently tried to get me to sit up. She pointed out that my favorite pony was there, the brown one with white spots they called “Sugar,” she said she thought the girl with braids who looked at me seemed nice and that she probably wanted a playmate.

“Let’s see who gets there first,” she challenged me.

But I was unyielding. Nothing she said or did could have worked. Finally, she fell silent. And then she put her face in her hands and began to cry.

“Mommy, Mommy,” I cried myself, trying to put my arms around her.

Soon we were both weeping, until through my tears I managed to promise, “Mommy, I’ll ride the pony, I promise, I’ll ride.”

“No, no, she said through tears, “I know you really don’t want to.”

The tone of defeat in my mother’s voice, a woman who was usually so strong, gave me a shock, disturbing me far more than her tears. But that was when a small miracle occurred within me. Suddenly sensing my mother was in treacherous waters, the will power I had had before Sitar left us returned to me. Before I even decided to do anything I found myself leaving the car; I came around to the driver’s side, grabbed Louesa by the hand and yanked her toward the pony rides.

My back stiffened as I saw that the little girl with braids, who was sitting on a pony, kept her eyes glued to us. Turning my back on her, I waited for Louesa to buy me a ticket before we approached the corral. If only because I would not be able to hide myself from the curiosity of other children I was dreading the ride. But then, as if by the

intervention of a benevolent spirit, I was saved. As the ponies made their rounds, one of them refused to go past me. It was Sugar!

Whether because she recognized me or from that instinct for sorrow and inclination to compassion so many animals have, she wanted me to ride on her back. The attendant, a slim and athletic teenage girl with a blond ponytail, laughed.

“She really likes *you!*” she said.

Suddenly I was redeemed. No longer a crybaby or a shameful half-orphan, I became a star, a chosen one in the equestrian world, ruled by hooves and manes, trots and gallops, and mysteriously delicate equine moods.

I rode around in a circle several times, still going when the girl with the braids, who waved at me as she left, was long gone. When I was pulled off the saddle, Sugar turned her head to me. Peering into her brown eyes at that moment, I felt I was swimming in love. A feeling I remembered for a long time.

And along with that, what continued, even at times in an unspoken way, was something new between my mother and me. Though my shyness remained, we had been brave together, traveling into the country of grief side by side, and in the process forging a deep bond from our mutual sorrow.

For a brief period Louesa’s laid-back, playful charms returned. But this reprieve was to be short, a blessed island in time. Soon another side of her soul took over: the steely spine and resolve, a resolve that I inherited from her, surfaced. She had to find a way for us both to survive. We owned the house and those mysterious checks kept coming. But could she depend on this income forever? Remembering the big handful of cash Sitar had used to buy our house, she called the real estate agent and asked how she might learn the trade.

Once she had determined a course of action, Louesa moved at a lightning pace, moving even faster it seemed than I could run in my dreams, attending night classes, studying the laws and procedures she would need to know, going to local Open Houses, while my grandparents, whom I had known since I was born, made me dinner and put me to bed. A minor crisis occurred in our lives after she found a position at a prestigious agency when she realized she would have to find childcare for me. Five years old by then, I had just started kindergarten. Since I was still reluctant to be separated from her,

Louesa had stayed in class with me for the first three days. Finally, though the prospect had us both in tears, on the fourth day, my teacher, Mrs. Siegel, made her leave. After that, unable or unwilling to make friends, I began to cling to Mrs. Siegel. Because I “adjusted” so slowly, she advised my mother against sending me to after school care.

After trying a series of baby sitters, all of whom reported I hid in my room and cried most of the time that they were there, Louesa considered going on welfare. That was when my grandparents volunteered to take care of me. Spending afternoons on their farm, I was allowed to climb trees or pick fruit in the orchard, wander the land, sometimes following my grandpa as he worked in the fields with his hired hands, hanging out with my grandma while she cooked or kept house, or playing with the animals they had, a kitten, three grown cats, a dog, and a horse. Their farm, just over the hill, twenty minutes from our tract house, seemed as if it belonged to another world, a world that, though I did not understand it at such a young age, was passing.

In a large oak tree nearer to the house, my grandpa built me a tree house. From up there I had the feeling I could see everything—the road, the corral where we kept the horse, the orchard, the barn, the hills beyond. I could watch squirrels jump from branch to branch, and birds as they flew across the sky, from one tree to another or down into the fields, while they searched, as my grandpa explained, for worms. I loved the relative silence up there, nothing but the breeze blowing in the branches or bird songs, to interrupt my thoughts, whatever they were. In this quiet place I know I pondered the same unanswerable questions about life and death that many small children do.

Perhaps it is because they share this interest that the very old and the very young often get along so well. I will never forget the evening my grandpa climbed up into the tree house with me so that we might watch the sun go down and the first stars appear in the sky together. As I look back on it, that was probably the first conversation I ever had regarding the unfathomable nature of things.

“What do you think those stars are?” my grandfather asked me.

“They’re like the sun burning very hot, only far way,” I said repeating a lesson I had just learned in Kindergarten.

“Yes, Gigi,” he said, “That’s true. But I still wonder, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I said solemnly, knowing he understood me, “Yes, I do.”

Now looking back over seventy years, I marvel at how many turns a life takes, and that in my life all of them seem to have lead to one adventure. Had my mother not fallen in love with Sitar I would not have been born. Had Sitar not left my mother, she would not have turned to real estate and thus never met Bill, and then, paradoxically, (and isn't this the way life always is anyway?) I might never have become a skater, neither found myself in Kaltelünd, created the dance called The Great Turning, nor witnessed how the minds of so many can be shifted in an instant, in which case, I would not have had this tale to tell.

Soon after that conversation with my grandfather my dreams took a turn for the better. I would still wander but now I was riding through the night sky, often on Sugar's back, using the stars to navigate, my sense of loss tempered this time by a growing feeling of awe. And though I was still shy and clinging to my mother, the life we shared was improving in other ways too.

Louesa was very good at selling houses. She was a beautiful woman, with long and curly, strawberry blond hair and the large blue eyes she passed on to me. But unlike me, who shared a lanky build with my father, she had a rounded body that, at least in the guarded years after Sitar left us, made her appear to be more sensual than perhaps she was. The warmth and care she showed to her clients was genuine but so was her resolve in negotiations and the clarity she showed when faced with almost any contract. She was not easily fooled. Before my father left for good, given all the vaporous explanations he had given her for his comings and goings, she must have indulged in a large measure of self-deception. But self-deception, if ever you wake up from it, can be a teacher of sad but necessary lessons in scrutiny.

In the same year that I turned five, we moved to a new house in an upscale neighborhood in Thousand Oaks, filled with one-storey ranch houses just like ours, all fronted by ample, sloping green lawns. On one side of our doorway there was a hibiscus plant with lush pink flowers, and on the other side bougainvillea trailed its way up a lattice. I told myself Sitar would like those flowers whenever he returned, which secretly I still told myself he was going to do one day.

Our living room could best be described as friendly Swedish modern, reasonably fashionable, but above all comfortable. We had a shag rug, ever popular in those days, with red and orange swirls of yarn. The twin couches flanking our red brick fireplace were both made of soft brown leather, puffed and rounded like over weight but happy people. A bar with high wooden chairs separated the living room from our kitchen where a crowd of copper pans hung from the ceiling.

The atmosphere was inviting but also neat and orderly, reflecting the orderliness of my mother's mind, a characteristic she developed after Sitar fell so precipitously out of our lives. Much of the memorabilia of Woodstock that had adorned our old living room was stored in the garage now, though my mother still played our album of Ravi Shankar occasionally. By the time I turned six, a slightly balding, tall and husky man in a shirt and tie began to show up in the pictures taken at my party. In the first years, he stands a bit to the back, as if he is not entirely certain he belongs but is glad to be there anyway. Bill was that way with me until the day he died, loyal, kind, present, helpful, and yet always hanging back when it came time to give out credit, as if always apologizing that he wasn't my real father.

This hesitancy could have undermined his authority with me but it had the opposite effect. In his absence, Sitar slowly became my idol. If Bill had tried to usurp that throne, I would never have accepted him. Instead what he did was to build me up, gently praising my childish accomplishments, and then all my athletic achievements, asking my opinion on decisions big and small, even soliciting my opinions on the news of the day. Slowly and solely by kindness and encouragement, he weaned me from my longing for a wayward parent.

You would never have known from his gentle manners at home that Bill was a major mogul in the real estate market, the head of the very successful real estate agency where my mother worked. That was how they met. One year after Louesa sold her 6<sup>th</sup> house in three months, he took her out for dinner to celebrate. She told me later that he was everything Sitar was not and that was a large part of his appeal for her. "He would never have fit into the Woodstock scene," she said, laughing.

It took a while before they married. Meanwhile, we went on weekends together, a few times to Palm Springs, and once to Rosarita beach just south of the Mexican border. I was happy there mostly because we stayed in hotels with pools, so that I could swim all day. But one winter, during Christmas break, Louesa told me that instead of following the sun, we were going to go to someplace where there would be snow on the ground. They wanted to take me to Lake Arrowhead, where Bill was developing a series of condos.

I have always been a bit willful by nature, a tendency Louesa, in her efforts to make up for the loss of my father, tolerated perhaps a bit too much. So anticipating a tearful rebellion on my part, Bill had carefully constructed a tour package designed to appeal to a small child. We couldn't swim, he said, it would be too cold. But we could play in the snow, build a snowman, and perhaps go down a hill in a sled. What finally won me over, however, was the promise that we would visit Santa's Village and ride in his sled pulled by reindeer.

Louesa had read me "The Night Before Christmas" every Christmas since I was one year old. Of course, I had never seen a real reindeer. In my mind they were not only exotic animals but otherworldly. So the idea that we were actually going to see and perhaps even touch a reindeer suggested to me that we were planning to enter a fairy tale world, a land where everything is covered with sugar and shimmering with light. The thought that we might actually fly through the night sky crossed my mind. I half expected to be suspended soon somewhere near the moon, a process which both thrilled and perhaps, to some slight degree I would never admit, even frightened me.

But those fears were dispelled by the vivid dream I had the night before we left for Arrowhead. One of three that I was to have over the nights that followed, I have never forgotten it. In so many ways, it prefigured my journey to that land of wonder and wisdom, where I was to receive lessons so crucial to the dance I would fashion more than four decades later, The Great Turning. I could not even have guessed this then, of course, yet even in those early days, beyond the enchantment any child would feel with the marvels I encountered—the stuff that feeds the souls of children—there was something about each dream that called up in me the sense that I was being offered a world full of meaning, that, even if I could not put into words, I could feel in my body. Indeed over

time, it would be from these dreams that I began to feel I had a specific role to play in the service of life on earth.

In the first dream, I found myself standing on a hill covered with snow when one reindeer, imposingly large, even monumental, appeared. I would have been afraid except for his very big, soft brown eyes, compassionate eyes that reminded me of Sugar. His huge antlers, which might have been threatening, were covered with what looked like fur. The way his tenderness combined with magnificence made me trust and, at the same time, revere him. As I looked into his eyes, he approached me to ask, in a deep but still very clear voice, “Are you a brave little girl?” Remembering how Sitar would tell me I was brave, every time I learned to somersault or walk on a ledge, I nodded my head vigorously. “Tell me,” the reindeer demanded. “Say the words.” To which I sucked in my breath and shouted, “I am brave.”

“Alright,” the reindeer, said, “Then follow me.”

I was overjoyed, a joy that soon turned into ecstasy, my first experience of the feelings reindeers are well- known to induce in Kaltelünde, (a state of mind that the People of the Ice call *vuiagnusajv*.) Suddenly everything around me seemed to glow with a profound beauty and I felt embraced with a seemingly endless, powerful love.

The giant reindeer led me to an enormous sled, gloriously outfitted, with reins embroidered in red thread and blankets made of reindeer fur. Inside, I found another little girl with black hair and green eyes. She clapped her hands with joy to see me and then suddenly without warning we took off, pulled by a team of reindeer. Soon we were flying among the stars, and then suddenly swooping down over snowy fields, iced over lakes and huge formations made of ice, which only later did I learn to call glaciers, feelings which might have been overwhelming to such a young child, except that I was sharing them with another little girl, the first and, at the time, best friend I ever had. She sang a song to me as we flew through the sky, a simple song that reassured me even as it seemed to teach me how to be brave. Learning quickly, I began to sing it with her, trilling, humming, making lovely harmonies.

While we giggled and gasped together, I found myself hoping this journey would never end. But just as the sleigh was landing, Louesa woke me to prepare for our trip. I stayed in bed for a few moments, humming and singing, yet try as I might, I could

remember neither the words nor the melody of our song, until Louesa pulled the covers down.

“Come on,” she said, coaxing me out of bed, “We want to beat the traffic.”

Then noticing my reluctance, she said, “You want to see the snow, don’t you. And the reindeer?”

Even Louesa must have been surprised at how quickly I jumped out of bed then. The sun was barely up but we had a lot to do before we could leave. To an impatient six-year-old, the pace seemed very slow. Louesa insisted I eat a good breakfast, which, since she had been raised on a farm, always meant fresh eggs, often supplied by my grandparents. Then I had to shower, dress in several layers, make my bed, help her pack provisions, carrot sticks, fruit, chips, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to tide me over until lunch, donuts, canteens filled with water, a thermos of coffee. On our way out of town Bill stopped at the agency to pick up another set of keys. Even before we hit the hills that divided the Valley from LA, I was asking where the snow was.

“Not yet, not yet,” Louesa said as slowly we made our way through the San Fernando Valley, heading East and South.

Once we were on our way into the country, I grew calmer. As the city thinned and then disappeared I stared out the window. It was the same feeling I always had when we drove to my grandparent’s farm, as rows of recently built, boxlike houses would give way to farm houses, or old Spanish haciendas, surrounded by orchards and fields, an occasional group of cows, and those wonderful corrals enclosing horses. But now we were headed in another direction.

A half hour past Glendale, the last place that still looked like Los Angeles, Bill stopped at an outlying gas station. He wanted to make sure our tank was full and then seeing white patches in the distance ahead, he asked the attendant to put on the chains he had been carrying in the trunk. We were at the edge of the High Mojave Desert.

Still too young to have a firm grasp of geography, I asked,  
“Are we still in America?”

We had not driven that far but the dramatic change in the landscape made it feel like we had.

Louesa and Bill tried not to laugh and then they did their best to explain to me why my question was so funny.

“We’re still in America, sweetheart,” Louesa said, leaning over the seat, “In fact, we’re still in California. But we’re heading into a desert, that’s why it seems new to you.”

Of course I had grown up in a desert and so had Louesa, though, as I was to learn when I was far older, the ecology of both Thousand Oaks and Reseda had been altered by irrigation. Even so, the dry ground and chaparral seemed somewhat familiar. But not the open expanse of space I saw now and not, as I was excited to observe on the side of the road ahead, the Joshua trees, whose thick branches ended in round knobby shapes.

“Look,” I shouted, recognizing the forms that were silhouetted against the blue winter sky. I had seen shapes like this in my dream. “Reindeer antlers!” I exclaimed.

Louesa and Bill laughed again. But this did not stop me, for the duration of our vacation, from referring to these desert plants as Reindeer Trees.

Is it because my life was to take a momentous turn at Lake Arrowhead that every detail of that journey is still vivid in my mind?

My dream from the previous night had left me wide open to whatever we encountered, as if I were still on a fantastic adventure, the marvels of existence rolling out before my eyes. Looking back, I realize that I was being introduced to something I had only experienced in a very subtle way before. The San Fernando Valley, as in Los Angeles, is so temperate that the slight variations known as seasons there are known to escape the notice of visitors. Now as I traveled through a desert and then a snow-covered landscape within just over an hour, I was encountering, as if for the first time, an essential feature of the planet we share, the way that weather shapes the earth.

We stopped for lunch in Apple Valley, which even then still had a few apple trees left, growing at the edge of town. The town itself, in those years, still held romantic traces of the Old West. And all this mingled in my child’s mind, the wild west, the high desert, the way I had been carried by reindeer through the night sky, the snow, which as we drove, grew thicker and thicker, covering the land now, the Joshua trees, and soon, as the road climbed up into the San Bernardino mountains, pine trees, whose needles formed sparkling icicles, which, under the bright sunlight, created fragments of illumination, like stars.

After we had traveled some distance on the “rim of the world highway,” the Joshua trees disappeared and pine trees started to dot and then cover the terrain. Staring down past the steep slope beside the road into rolling hills covered with snow, I whispered the words *rim of the world* over and over to myself as if somehow I might conjure the magic the name suggested. Was this landscape, descending like a song toward lower and lower notes, at the edge of the whole world? Primed by my dream, I was ready to be filled with wonder that day, and perhaps this is why I was so enchanted, even before we came out of a turn, to catch my first glimpse of the icy lake, framed by snowy trees and hills, deep blue and viewed from that height, majestically calm.

But, of course there was this too, making my young eyes grow wide. Having been born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, this was the first time I had actually seen snow, the first time I had witnessed the way the world can be transformed, covered with what looked to my eyes like fairy dust as it caught and reflected light.

Yet though I had already seen so many glorious sights that day, I was still more than eager to see the reindeer. As often happens with children who run headlong into one excitement after another, wearing themselves out in the process, my appetite for marvels seemed insatiable. Though I know now there was another element in my desire. Something I felt but could not name. An invisible force pushing me in a purposeful direction.

“When are we going to Santa’s Village?” I called out as we headed toward town.

“Not just yet,” Louesa said. “We have to buy supplies, get into the cabin, turn on the heat.”

I tagged behind, while Louesa shopped and Bill lugged groceries and firewood, then sat in the back seat as Bill went into the rental agency to retrieve our keys. Though I was impatient, I was also charmed by the town that, with its timbered buildings, looked like a village in a fairy tale.

Of course as inevitably must happen at least once in a while to every child’s ardent expectations, my hope of seeing the reindeer that day came to nothing. After packing in supplies, Louesa began cooking dinner and Bill laid a fire.

“We’ll go tomorrow,” he said, adding kindly, “Santa will be having dinner now too. “

Indeed I did visit reindeer that night but only after I fell asleep, which in fact occurred just moments after I had finished eating the macaroni and cheese that Louesa, knowing it was my favorite, so wisely fed me.

Bill must have carried me into bed, but in my dream it was a very tall reindeer, wearing a beautiful red coat, embroidered with red and green thread, and walking on his hind legs, who carried me to his sled. As with the first dream with the reindeer, this was different from those I usually had, in which familiar objects, places or people changed shapes, embodying the desires, the ghosts and gorgons that inhabited my psyche. During these new dreams, I had the uncanny feeling that the animals and people I encountered and the places I visited were real. The little girl was there again. We were glad to see each other. Over the years, I would come to count on her friendship. While along with me she grew older, our companionship continued. These dreams, which I was to have throughout my childhood, did not appear every night or even regularly but only occasionally and in clusters. They seemed to come to me just before I was to make an important choice, both for myself and, as it would turn out, for the earth.

As it would turn out, though of course I knew nothing about this then, a little girl halfway around the globe was having similar dreams in which I would appear. She was used to dreaming of reindeer and night skies, but her new friend with strawberry blond hair was a mystery to her. She was delighted to have a playmate on her night journeys across the sky but who was I and where did I come from? In her fifth year she met me in three dreams, as I met her in the sixth year of my life, in three dreams too.

In my second dream, we rose once more high in the sky but this time we watched the sunrise. The sky was almost alarmingly beautiful as it turned pink and then pale blue. We sped around the curving earth before we descended, hovering for several minutes over a snow-covered field dotted with a herd of reindeer. It was a magnificent sight. Icy mountains towering above that sloped gently to a valley, the deer, patches of white fur in their coats indistinguishable from the snow that had fallen on them, seemed so much a part of the land, it was as if instead of standing on it, they were an aspect of it, a moving part. Though you could feel the mountains move too, or rather see the course of how they

moved in the shapes the ice and snow had assumed. To my great delight, the sled moved closer to the field then and landed not far from the edge of the herd. The little girl got out of the sled and, beckoning to me to follow her, approached one of the reindeer to stroke her fur. Then whispering some words I did not understand into the reindeer's ear, she took my hand and placed it on the reindeer's neck. We could see our breath making white puffs in the air, yet despite the chill around us, the reindeer was warm and not only in a physical way. Once more I felt the ecstatic state of mind, that I learned only later is called *vuiagnusajv*, and saw a glowing beauty everywhere, this time accompanied by the astonishing warmth that radiated from the reindeer's body, animal, sweet, and intimate.

As reluctantly I lifted my hand from the reindeer's back, I looked back suddenly at my friend who had stretched out her hands and begun to glide over the snow. It was the most exquisite dance I had ever seen, one she must have sensed I wanted to do myself because almost immediately she nodded to me to join her, and I was just about to do that when I woke to the smell of oatmeal and the sound of Louesa's voice.

"Breakfast is ready Gigi, and then we're going to see Santa!"

During breakfast I tried to tell my mother about my dreams.

"Oh you went in Santa's sled?" she asked.

"No it was the reindeer's sled," I corrected her, "A big reindeer in a red coat."

"Oh that sounds nice," she said.

"And then we were in a big herd and I got to touch one of the reindeer."

"Well. You'll get to touch a *real* reindeer today," she said and then asked, "What are you going to tell Santa you want for Christmas?" She was hoping no doubt she had already fulfilled this wish with one of the packages she had sequestered in the trunk of our car. But I had no answers for her. I was too fixated on the prospect of seeing and touching a reindeer again to think of anything else.

With giant candy canes in front and a series of peaked roofs over it, the main building through which we entered Santa's Village resembled a cross between a Swiss chalet and a giant gingerbread house. I was distracted from my purpose for a moment by the candy kitchen where they were handing out what they called sugar plums, a treat

described in *The Night Before Christmas* that I had never tasted. In fact they were really only lollipops but the taste of sugar abated my initial disappointment.

Through all of this I stayed close to Louesa, only letting go of her hand to get my lollipop. But once outside, we found a wooden gnome marking “The North Pole.” And there a sign pointed to a pink colored sleigh, which I was excited to see was indeed drawn by real reindeer. Full of excitement, I broke free of my habitual fear, surprising Louesa and even myself, by letting go her hand so that I could run up to the reindeer. The driver motioned me back. But Bill picked me up and approaching the reindeer, held my hand for an instant as I stroked the animal’s fur.

Though I did not get the same extraordinary feeling from touching this reindeer that I had gotten in my dream, I was happy. It was as if I had greeted a treasured friend. Afterward, I stood as close as the driver would let me, hoping this reindeer would turn, as the other one had, and look at me. But it did not. That was when, almost against my will, I realized how different this reindeer was from the ones I met in my dreams. What was it? This was a smaller animal, the velvet on its horns darker. But that was not what bothered me. Instead something that has no name was missing, perhaps you might call it *wildness*, the quality that animals have when they are allowed to roam, as I was to learn years later, the People of Ice allow their herds, and even their draught animals, to do. How majestic they had looked, free, and intelligent in a way I could feel, immersed and at the same time aware of all that surrounded them in the snowy field.

I must have had a particularly pensive look on my face because, after we were pulled around the village to visit various sites constructed to charm children, a chapel, a water wheel that powered a toy factory, a wishing well, a violin maker’s cottage, Louesa asked me what I liked best about Santa’s Village.

“The reindeer,” I said, without hesitation.

“But my reindeer were different. They were bigger. And they had grey fur on their antlers. And some of them could fly.”

I watched as Louesa smiled at Bill and then kissed me.

“That was in your dream?” she asked.

“Yes, but it was *real!*” I said.

“Yes, darling, sometimes dreams *seem* real, don’t they.”

I was disheartened by her words. For the first time in my life, I felt I had to choose between what I knew to be true and what my mother believed.

In order to preserve the seamless intimacy I had always had with Louesa, I was tempted to bury my own experience, even from myself. But try as I might to relinquish my vision, I could not. The magnificent reindeer stayed in my mind. In some private place in my soul, I held on to what had I seen with a powerful ferocity.

And from that moment on, I stopped telling Louesa, or anyone else, about my dreams.

What happened next would turn out to be the second step in a subtle but still painful alienation between Louesa and me. As we were walking to our car, Louesa realized she had left her sweater in the gift shop and went back to retrieve it. That was when, as we stood in the parking lot waiting for her to return, Bill ran into a friend, a man he had met in his efforts to connect with members of the community at Lake Arrowhead. Leo, a graying short, stocky man, looked more like Santa Claus than the actor installed in the Village. After Bill introduced me, Leo asked what we planned to do for the rest of the week.

“I don’t know,” Bill said, “Go cut our tree I guess and then build some snow men,” he said winking at me.

“Well, let me know if you want to skate,” he said and then hunkering down, looked me in the eyes and asked, his voice husky with an accent I had never heard before, “Have you ever ice skated?”

I shook my head.

“Do you know what that is?” he asked

Not knowing whether I knew or not, I must have looked perplexed, but this did not faze Leo at all.

“It’s like this!” he exclaimed, and then suddenly this short stocky man began to move in an astonishingly elegant way, gliding over the icy pavement, just like I had seen my friend do in my dream.

Surprising Bill with my sudden enthusiasm, I began to jump up and down. Albeit in a comical way, Leo's movement resembled the dance I had seen my little friend do in my dream!

"Oh you like that, do you?" Leo said, chucking me under the chin.

I nodded eagerly.

"Well, if you want to learn how to do this, I'll be happy to teach you."

"Can I? Can I Bill, please, please," I called, tugging at his coat.

"Really?" Bill said, directing his question discreetly over my head to Leo.

"Really," Leo answered. "I would love to give her some lessons. I have not taught a child this young in years. You know I'm retiring now."

Then he kneeled down and spoke directly to me, "It would be a pleasure."

Out of habit, I pulled back for a moment. But in his gruff way, Leo could be charming, especially when he was trying to appeal to a six year old.

"Want to glide," he slid his feet over the surface of the parking lot again. "And spin around?" He raised his hands over this head and spun on one foot. "And jump?" he jumped, turning in the air, landing on the other foot.

He was truly graceful but since he was also stout and graying, I couldn't help laughing at the contrast. Leo was not offended. A realistic man, he was not vain about his age. Winking at me he called out, "See you tomorrow," and then leaping side to side from foot to foot like a dancer, moved toward his car.

That night I had my third dream. The same reindeer came for me, this time leaping, not unlike Leo. Arriving from the night sky and bursting through my window, he had no sled this time but instead motioned for me to get on his back. As soon as we were aloft I could see another reindeer flying beside us, one that carried my little dark-haired friend. I was holding tight on the reins until, like any child, showing off her prowess, my friend raised her hands and laughed. So I did the same. I was frightened when she stood on the reindeer's back but she encouraged to me to try it and so, captivated by her playful spirit, I stood up too, and if at first I was a bit shaky soon I was thrilled to be able to keep my balance even as we swooped and dived, speeding around the earth.

Then slowly as we passed over the glaciers we had seen the night before, we began to descend toward the vast surface at the top. I searched the horizon in every direction, yet I could not see where this plain began or where it ended. It was the closest experience of infinity I have ever had. When my friend got off her reindeer's back, she began to slide on the ice, much the way she had the night before, and the way Leo had too. I followed suit and in a short time, as I got my legs, we were racing side by side, until suddenly she stopped to execute a spin, which immediately I did too. It was an astonishing feeling. Though clearly I was moving, what I felt was stillness, or rather that I was the still point in the middle of a spinning world, a blur of white and blue punctuated by an occasional pool of blackness surrounding me. When at last the spinning stopped, my friend did something else that surprised me. She jumped high into the air and after floating for what seemed like a long time spun around three times before she landed. I was surprised even more when I found myself doing the same, jumping up, held by the air, and then in a pace that seemed almost contemplative, turning around several times, I was amazed to see glowing green lights in the night sky that seemed to be dancing with me. Immediately after I landed, on one foot just like Leo had, the reindeer came for us again, and we took a slow ride above the surface of the ice field once more. It was then that I saw more clearly the black pools that had formed here and there, dotting the otherwise blue and white landscape.

Only years later would I learn that such dark pools actually exist in the Arctic Circle. As Mr. Bream, my beloved middle school science teacher would explain to our class one day, the dark circles of a material, called kryptonite, are formed from deposits of pollution from coal burning or the exhaust given off by diesel engines blowing in the wind from distant places. Though I did not know yet that addressing these ominous circles would eventually be part of the most important work of my life, I became a passionate fan of Mr. Bream and his science classes.

Now, as I tell the tale, I can see how everything eventually came together, and like lights strung along a path, led to the dance known as the Great Turning. Though that was not how I experienced it at the time. Rather, instead of appearing as chapters in a longer story that was still unfolding, each dream, each coincidence, each revelation

seemed distinct and surprising. Though all of these inexplicable experiences had one thing in common: they all seemed to awaken within me a deep reservoir of longing and, I can think of no other word, conviction.

When Bill told Louesa about Leo's offer to teach me to skate, she worried that, as had happened so many times before, at the last minute I would be too overcome by shyness to go. Most shy children want to explore the world. A host of desires for adventures dwell within them. But these desires battle with the fear and reticence that live there too. It was probably such a conflict that made me seem less enthusiastic than I really was. Yet, the little friend I had met in my dreams had taught me something new. Courage. Just before we left the house, clad as we were in matching red winter jackets and red mittens, Louesa looked in my eyes and asked, "Are you sure you want to do this, Gigi?"

I nodded.

"And you understand I can't go on the ice with you?"

Never very athletic, Louesa did not know how to skate and she did not want to learn.

I nodded again, this time more forcefully.

"Okay," she said, adding, no doubt to reassure me, as we closed the door and headed to our car, "I'll be there at the sidelines every minute."

Set outside in Blue Jay, the rink at Lake Arrowhead was a popular place. It was an outdoor rink with no walls. All around the ice you could see pine trees rising up on slopes covered with snow. Christmas red from the many earmuffs, watch caps, scarves and mittens just like ours that the recreational skaters sported stood out against the glaring white surface. Then all of sudden the music that was being piped in, Judy Garland singing "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," stopped and a bell rang, before a voice on the loudspeaker announced that the public session was closing. That was when most of the skaters in red, some families with small children, some teenage boys seeing how fast they could go around, moved toward the exit, leaving only a few skaters, mostly girls in pastel colored tights and short skirts, and some boys in blue or silver or black

tights, at the center of the rink. A handful of grown men and women talked with each other at the edges. Suddenly I recognized Bill's friend, Leo, who as I could see now, even through the layers of clothing he wore, had a powerful build. He waved at us from an entrance to the rink.

With Louesa trailing behind us, he fit me into a pair of rented skates and then carefully took my hand and helped me onto the ice. "Come," he said, and holding me around the waist, helped me to take a few strokes.

Then depositing me back at the edge, he did a few strokes himself, showing me how to bend over my knee and into the forward motion.

"Okay, your turn, I'll hold your hand," he said.

I looked apprehensively back at my mother, but nevertheless, compelled by the lovely sensation of gliding, I took two or three strokes without falling before the teacher, whose name was Leo, guided me back to the railing again.

"Good, very good, Georgia," he said. "Do you want to learn more?"

I stood there for a moment stunned. For the first time in over a year, the somber feeling that had wrapped its way around my heart ever since we found Sitar's abandoned van seemed to have vanished altogether.

"Yes," I said, and even if a bit of my shyness had returned, with a joy that was detectable.

Glancing briefly at my mother from time to time, I learned to glide one foot forward and then the next. After an hour, I forgot to look to the side of the rink to see if she were still there. That was when she came to ask if the lesson was over.

"Do you want to stop now, Gigi, or learn more?" Leo asked.

"Learn more," I said, my head down, afraid even then I was being disloyal to Louesa.

I tried to hide how happy I was when Leo whispered in Louesa's ear, "Give us another hour."

"Is it okay if I go out for a bit?" she asked us both.

He nodded and I waved not even turning my head back to see her leave.

I had fallen in love. Of course the gliding must have reminded me not only of my dream but of Sitar. Though I was not thinking about him in any conscious way. It took all

my concentration to learn to move on the ice. Clumsy at first, very soon I could feel how the edge of my blade against the surface propelled my movement in one direction or another. Long before my teacher suggested to me that I could, I stopped holding onto the half wall at the edge and soon I was sailing, first in the outer circle of learners and stumblers, and then in the inner circle where the fastest skaters make their rounds.

In the third hour Leo asked me if I wanted to learn fancier moves. He pointed to the center of the rink.

I had seen the figure skaters out of the corner of my eyes but paid no attention; circling with one leg extended, jumping and turning around in the air, they seemed like magical creatures. I was already leaning toward them when Leo put his hand at my back and glided me through the streaming circles of skaters into the enchanted realm where the figure skaters practice their art.

He let me watch for a while. I was transfixed by one skater, a girl in a rose-colored tutu, who began to spin so fast she made a pink blur on the ice. Uncannily I felt I knew what she was feeling. It was what I had done in my dream! The last of the three dreams that seemed to be predicting my life now.

Years later I was to ask Elke Timar, the shaman who was my guide into Kaltelünde, “How do you explain this?”

“Did you dream about me?” Clearly the little girl who had ridden on the back of a reindeer through the night sky and then skated on an ice field with me had been her.

“Maybe,” she said, then added in her lilting voice, the syllables, *La, Lu, La*, half spoken, half sung, as if to let me know there are some mysteries she wouldn’t divulge and others that were beyond even her. As I was to learn, this singing speech expressed an attitude central to the People of the Ice, a culture that acknowledges uncertainty and the existence of wisdom beyond human comprehension in so many ways.

“Why was I chosen?” I asked.

Again Elke’s eyes danced. And she laughed.

But then unexpectedly, perhaps because she had a philosophical turn of mind, she offered a possible explanation.

“I think it must be something like pollination. A seed flies through the wind, looking for fertile ground.”

“And I was that ground,” I said.

“Yes,” she answered, looking at me with that penetrating gaze I found unnerving and irresistible all at once.

For a while, Leo watched as I watched the young dancer begin one spin, gather speed, slow down, come to a crisp end with her hand in the air and then start the process over again. He was not wasting time but gauging my interest. Finally he said, “You really want to do that, don’t you?”

I nodded. I knew better than to tell him I had already done it in a dream.

“Okay,” he said. “Then let’s get serious.”

Wasting no time, he began to introduce me to a new vocabulary.

“See that?” he gestured toward a skater who had jumped and turned twice before landing. “It’s called a Double Sal Chow. Would you like to learn to do that?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice strengthened a striking confidence that was new to me. I had no doubt that this was what I wanted. Since the dreams I had had over the nights before, I could feel a powerful resolve grow in me: one way or another I was determined to learn to skate and spin and jump, in a word, to *dance* on the ice.

He laughed, patting me on the back, “Horosho,” he said, a Russian word whose literal meaning I did know, though I got the gist of it from his enthusiasm.

“Okay, some day you can do it. But not right away. You’ll have to learn a few other things first. Remember you have to learn to walk before you can run.”

Leo was full of such sayings. He had about him the air of a world that had already passed, except to him it was still alive and well. And as I was to find out, his antiquated mannerisms fit well into the world of ice skating, which in the early seventies seemed frozen in time, untouched by modern trends, a culture where men were men and girls stayed girls well into their twenties.

I did not tell Leo then that I had started running just two weeks after I took my first steps. Sitar encouraged me in that direction, taking my hand and running me with

him across the grass. But even he was astonished by how soon I let go his hand and continued running on my own.

“Now these moves will be easy for *you*,” he said, as he led me back to the edge of the rink. “But don’t hold your nose at it.”

What did he mean by that I wondered?

“Do them over and over until you get it just right because everything you learn from now on depends on how well you learn to do this.”

“Sure,” I said.

“Okay, he said, his Russian accent barely detectable, “Let’s just see if you can skate backwards.”

I could see in his eyes that he half expected me to balk. To tell him I couldn’t imagine doing that. But I didn’t. I just laughed and bent in the middle, pushing myself back a bit.

“Heroshol,” he said again, laughing himself with a mixture of surprise and satisfaction that was to become more and more familiar to me. In an instant he had his hand on my back and then on my shoulders, putting me in the right position, as he guided me to the wall.

“Put your hands here,” he said, placing them on the wall, and then deftly he measured the width of hips and showing the distance to me with his hands, told me to put my legs just that far apart, so that my feet would be right under my hips.

“Now,” he said, “Before you push off I want you to feel the blade, and where it touches the ice. “

“Yes,” I said, not telling him that I’d already been feeling how my blade angled with the ice.

“Now this is fundamental,” he said. “*Fundamental.*”

Though I didn’t know what that word meant, I got the sense that he was telling me he was about to say something important.

“Everything, *everything* those skaters do in the middle, all those fancy moves and jumps depend on how your blade is placed on the ice. Get it?”

By this time I would have agreed to anything he said. It was not just what he was saying but the way he delivered his opinions that I liked. No one had ever spoken to me

with such authority before. It was not limits I wanted. Though Sitar and my mother, aficionados of Dr Spock and *Summerhill*, were hardly ever stern with me, I was a well-behaved child. What I responded to, I realize now, was the seriousness that from the beginning, Leo lavished on my childish efforts.

“Your blade can angle to the right or to the left or flat but you must always, always be in control of that.”

He lifted his leg and bent his knee to show me the flat and the right and left edges of his own blade.

“Okay,” I said with what must have looked to him like great earnestness.

He smiled for a moment, and then leaned down, and said quietly, “I’m going to tell you something, that I don’t say every day.”

I waited.

“You’re *special*,” he said.

Then he stood up and raised his voice a bit. “But even special people have to work hard,” he said. “You willing?”

I nodded.

“Okay, when you push off, to do a swizzle, you want to bend your knees, use the inside of both your blades, and put your feet closer together and turn your toes in. Got it?”

When he demonstrated a swizzle I laughed again. Then he stood up, mocking affront, and gesturing dramatically toward the center of the rink, crossed his arms and waited.

I pushed myself back and found to my immediate delight that I could propel myself across the ice in a singsong, giddy weave.

“Go wherever you want,” he called out, as he skated forward beside me, “I’m watching.”

We proceeded around the rink, Leo watching carefully, noting the way I seemed to master the curves even backwards with ease, until we got back to where we had begun.

“*Horosh!*” he fairly shouted. “*Ochen Horosho!*”

And then, as he saw the quizzical look on my face added, “Good, Gigi! That’s what I am saying to you, *Very, very good!*”

Leo's praise made me unaccountably happy. I could tell that the feeling he expressed was genuine. But there was something else that gave me a kind of giddy joy that day, something I could not yet define, a feeling that was not in him but in me. I had only been enthusiastic about ice skating for two days since the dream I had had the nights before. But my enthusiasm for skating and for reindeer too seemed like just the tip of the iceberg, only the visible signs of a fierce desire taking shape deep within me, a longing to be sure but a longing that was also an answer, a gift in itself, a powerful desire, as I would describe it now, to create a dazzlingly beautiful dance, a dance as beautiful as the snowy fields and glaciers and green lights I had seen in my dreams.

Yet in order to fulfill this desire, I would need a good measure of ferocity. Because, as is always the case with such large ambitions, there would be hindrances. When Louesa came to fetch me, I was not eager to leave with her. Had not Leo been tired and the rink closing I could have gone on for hours. I was so taken with ice skating, that on the way back to our cabin I chattered on to Louesa about every aspect of my lesson, every twirl and jump I had seen, everything Leo told me I might learn, speaking with such non-stop enthusiasm, I barely noticed that, all along the drive, through snowy banks, and along the side of the gleaming lake, my mother was oddly silent.