

Chapter 2: Growing Up Ignorant of Anything Spiritual

“. . . Out of darkness,
I would make light.” *Kate Braid*

In the photograph, a woman of twenty-two is reading. It’s me, curled up in the wheelhouse of our forty-foot troller *Wyvern*, comfortable on the chestnut-coloured Naugahyde daybed. I read my way up and down the coast: I had library cards in Vancouver, Prince Rupert and Ucluelet. If we didn’t end up back in those places, I’d mail the books back. The rest of the time I made do with traded books. Every fuel scow had a couple of cardboard boxes worth. I never felt safe unless I had at least ten unread books waiting under the spare bunk.

The photograph is dark but I look happy. My face is serene. I’m half-smiling, my face raised to the camera, book splayed open on my knee. I remember that shirt; it was bright Indian cotton in checks. Madras in hot colours: pinks and blues. I’m wearing a navy cardigan and jeans. My long brown hair is braided so it’s out of my face. Above me there’s a big paper sounder and a VHF. The mahogany woodwork in the cabin shines. It should. Every trip, on the way in to sell our fish, I’d polish the paneled walls, the custom-built seats at the front of the cabin, the drawers and cupboards with Lemon Pledge. The whole boat was mahogany. No wonder it was dark.

In the photograph, the yellow curtains I sewed are tucked up out of the way; so we must have been fishing. Curtains were for the harbour so people wouldn’t be able to look in at night. I wasn’t very good at sewing, but curtains I could manage. The domesticity I made of that harsh fishing life is something that I took for granted then. Now it seems touching. My husband, my high school sweetheart, took the picture. He was not from the fishing world, nor was I. We jumped in from a sense of adventure and a desire to own a boat. He was the only child of well-to-do stocks-and-bonds people. My background was artistic middle class. I was the eldest of four

children. My father, a former director of the Vancouver Art Gallery and my mom, an English teacher, were divorced. My dad was a recovering alcoholic. My middle sister had been a drug addict. Going fishing was a great way for me to leave trying circumstances behind. I left home when I was sixteen and had just graduated from high school; I'd skipped a couple of grades.

Thirty years later, I launched two new books, a book of poetry and a novel at the Bar None Café in Courtenay. My audience was all friends that night. I'd finished my reading and was wandering about from table to table, spending five minutes with each group. People were eating desserts, drinking coffee and tea. Music was playing in the background, something soft and folky. I stopped to visit with an ex-fisher who now ran whale watching tours. He was a nice guy. I had a soft spot for him. He was short and dark and reminded me physically of my husband Jamie.

The ex-fisher said, "I like the parts about fishing you read." We were leaning forward over the blue-patterned oilcloth on the table to hear one another. His breath smelled pleasantly of coffee. He said, "When I met you, you were sixteen. I've never seen two people so much in love. You guys had just taken that trip up the coast in some little runabout. You couldn't stop talking about it."

The *so much in love* remark threw me ass over teakettle. In the softly-lit café, I felt like I was tumbling end over end. I'd known this man, a friend of a friend, for three years. I had no idea he'd known me when I was sixteen. And for him to confirm what I hadn't said to myself in years, but had once been an identifying mantra!

"Where did you meet me?" I asked.

"There was a house on Macdonald and Stephens. At a party there."

The Stephens street house. That's where the anarchists hung out, where SDS (the radical Students for a Democratic Society) speakers from the States stayed when they spoke in Vancouver. The one party I was there, huge speakers were playing the new Beatles album. I saw Jamie and I like a photograph; me flicking my hair, leaning back against his chest. His arms had been tight around my waist. There had been no furniture. We had sat on the hardwood floor. We had talked about our adventures. Who else had been there? A drug dealer whom I hated, instantly, when I found out what he did, and a blazingly good-looking longhair.

In the café, I wondered, was I making this up? I looked at the ex-fisher's face. He was very masculine-looking; clean-shaven, dark hair with a bald spot. He was maybe fifty. There was a recklessness there, a sense of banked fire. I was not surprised when my friend had told me this guy never lacked for women friends. "You weren't a fisherman then, were you?"

He shook his head. "My dad repaired radios in Alert Bay." Apparently Jamie and I had talked about fishing. Was this man really saying that we'd put the idea to go fishing into his head? He'd been a successful troller with a boat much bigger than ours.

Well, whether this guy was the longhair I was remembering or not, he'd been at the Stevens street house, and had teased back a conversation I'd totally forgotten. Out slid my question, irresistible as reaching for chocolate. "How did you know Jamie and I were so much in love?" I was angry at myself for asking.

"You two were so enthusiastic," the ex-fisher said. "About the coast. With each other." He smiled and I saw wistfulness, transparent and unmistakable as a ghost hanging in the air. This was the connection I'd felt between us, then. He was warming his hands at that old fire: *so in love*.

Fall in love with the coast! Explore quiet waterways, where you and your boat are the only visible human presence. See black bears up close, wolves, porpoises, killer whales who'll spook your fish away. Take a trip up fjords where mountains rise straight from the sea. On many of the mountains are icefields and glaciers. Super Natural British Columbia! See hundreds of purple sea stars glommed onto reefs higher than your head as your boat edges through a narrow iodine-smelling channel at low tide. Be the first to discover uncharted rocks! Watch for jellyfish, the two inch variety, clear as thought, in the dark waters of your anchorage. See hummingbirds hundreds of miles from the nearest apparent flower, zipping noisily by hundred foot firs.

It was on a trip in the fourteen-foot runabout, owned by Jamie's parents, that we had realized we wanted to come back to the harbours and islands we were passing, and keep exploring. Hence the fishboat, bought when I was eighteen and Jamie was twenty-one. I had a bit of money left over from winning a car, and he had some saved. In those days fishboats were very cheap. The idea was a fishboat would pay for itself. Our first boat, the *Frankie B.*, was an old rotten thirty-two foot troller. Jamie and I bought the boat at Christmas, and when our university term finished in April, began to fix her. We worked on the boat for four months solid before she was ready to go to sea. Jamie had completed third year; he'd been taking honors Philosophy. I had finished one year of general arts. It was the early seventies. Longhairs roamed the coast, "looking for land." The two of us looked like hippies—our hair was long too—but our quest was different.

In retrospect, I am struck by the fact that in our fishing and the handling of our first boat we made no really serious blunders. The *Frankie B.*'s crotchety gas engine quit a few times when we were out fishing, but somehow or other, Jamie managed to coax it back to life long enough

for us to get back into harbour and get it fixed. I had a huge respect for him: as far as I was concerned he could do anything. He'd gone from being a student to a fisherman without a pause and what he didn't know, he taught himself. When we needed new poles, he went and negotiated for two trees at a nearby farm. He cut them down, stripped the bark off, attached all the rigging to it correctly, and had the shipyard haul them up. And it was like that with the whole boat.

I had grown up with a father who had many strengths, but few practical. I derived enormous pleasure from the fact that Jamie was so capable. He could fix a toilet or clean a carburettor; things worked when he finished with them.

I remember two tall trees on the Twin Islands as we ran into Cortez harbour to sell. In the evening, they'd be black against a lemon sky. I'd never known anything so beautiful. When we pitched the salmon from our checkers onto the deck of the fish scow, they hit with a hollow sliding thud. The scow smelled of salmon and ice. I grew to appreciate that flat smack of fish smell up my nose; it was clean, somehow. We delivered morning and evening so the salmon were very fresh. *Remember*, I kept telling myself. Remember the slightly sick smell of bleach as I scrubbed the checkers, hosed off my boots, crusted with fish scales. The scent of Dettol disinfectant as I rinsed out the orange rubber gloves every night and then popped them inside out, finger by finger to dry, pegged on a line above the sink. I liked learning the quick trick of how to do that like a pro.

I remember the sun like hot honey on my shoulders. The thrill of being on the water, which even after seven years, never wore off. My nose peeling and peeling, a red triangle. Sun creams then weren't much use; not like what's available now. I felt such a sense of peace out fishing with the sea and mountains layer upon layer. We often fished Desolation Sound, which

despite the name, is considered one of the most beautiful cruising spots on the whole southern coast. I didn't know that then.

I was thrilled to be away from my sister, who by then was messing around with heroin. There were no ambulances, no frantic phone calls to come and rescue my sister. There was no phone, period. There were no newspapers with news of how the world was falling apart. Instead I had my own home to travel around in, our stripy marmalade cat who had accompanied us fishing, and a partner who would kiss me on my bare shoulder when we stood together in the cockpit, who in passing, would trail a hand across my back when I was working over the oil stove. I loved the crisp logical way Jamie's mind worked, how we could talk and talk and always find the other fresh and interesting. We laughed, too, until our stomachs ached.

So what if we didn't actually have a toilet on the boat and had to use a bucket? So what if in hot weather I cooked meals on a Coleman camp stove that I set up on the hatch cover outside? So what if when I was steering the boat from inside, following the orange *tick tick* of our Raytheon sounder, my feet hung down above an unshielded gas engine which radiated heat up, no mean consideration on a blistering summer day? *Remember you are happy*, I instructed myself.

Somewhere in the Gulf of Georgia Eden, competition slid in. We wanted to be *real* fishermen, not just pretend ones. After two years with the *Frankie B.*, we traded our boat in on a bigger one, *Wyvern*. We headed north, where the real fish were. Every season we made more money. We married. So when I see photographs of myself from fishing years, there is a definite swagger. A sense of, as my dad put it, "If other people hadn't done as well as you, they weren't trying." I thought I was pretty damn good: hey, I didn't think it, I *knew* it down at gut level.

Oh, and the fur coat.

I haven't mentioned that this younger self was intensely feminine. I didn't look at other men but I noticed that guys often became a bit silly in my presence. Then it struck me then as odd, as I dressed the part of a fisherman assiduously, with rubber boots and raingear. When I was working, I pulled my hair back into sensible braids, and I wore no makeup. There was that side of myself, but I liked to shuck the long johns for something more feminine when I got the chance. I thought it perfectly normal to take a fur coat fishing, so when Jamie and I came in from a trip, sell our fish and cleaned up, I could go out for dinner looking nice. There was, after all, twelve whole inches of room in the hanging cupboard on the boat, room for one dressy outfit for me, a sports jacket and grey flannels for Jamie, and my fur coat, which was regrettably bulky. A person needed a coat, I couldn't go out for dinner in a fish-stinky floater jacket. I laugh now at the blonde muskrat coat, but it was a talisman for the younger me, a tangible I could reach out and smooth. Fur kept me connected to the high art of being female.

Living in a masculine environment, I had so many passes made at me I became cautious about being alone with fishermen. Our core group of fishing buddies was fine. We gathered on someone's boat on a harbor day behind Bonilla Island when it was blowing sou'east thirty-five. The cabin smelled of hot rum mix: nutmeg, cinnamon, butter with an underwaft of diesel from the warm stove. On the stove a kettle steamed. We drank hot rum or beer and told one another stories about hot gear and bad weather. And we smoked cigarettes. Everyone did then, rollies from a can or Player's. Only the hard-core guys smoked Export A. The cabin got blue-hazy with smoke. The Dutch door at the back of the cabin was open; there was a constant cool flow of air.

Jamie usually rested his hand on my leg or arm. I expected this constant touch in front of the other guys; it was a possessive thing. It was like watching all the skippers stampede for the

steering seat in the wheelhouse. Positioning: who was alpha male? Even within our core group of friends, I'd hear the guys say things like, "Women can't talk on the phone, it's their voices, you know, they don't carry. But Zoë's okay." But I was never the example of Women Can that I tried so hard to be, just an anomaly.

I loved our friends, though it never would have occurred to me to call it that then.

All except one man. It had been the beginning of the season, April. We'd been fishing on *Wyvern* in Hecate Strait. Our poles were down and the stabilizers out. We'd rigged two blue polypropylene safety lines between the poles and the davits to stop us from falling overboard if a big wave threw us off-balance; these would stay in place for the two weeks we were out. I was in the stern pulling gear. The weather was nasty: it was blowing sou'east close to twenty-five knots. Rain drove against the sea so hard it pockmarked the waves. The occasional wave slopped green over the deck. It was really cold with the snow level on the mainland mountains at two hundred feet; this was back when we'd still been able to see the mountains. Visibility had since gone down to about a mile. The sky was grey and the water was grey with big streaks of white from breaking waves. The world had shrunk to the curve of bulwarks, deck and wheelhouse in front of me; the big paper sounder mounted in a grey-painted plywood box above the checkers, where we landed the fish.

When we were going with the wind, it was hard to slow the boat down enough to troll but it at least the wind blew the diesel stink from the exhaust away. Two other boats were fishing the same spot, plunging up and down the grey waves: the *Valour 1*, an ancient forty-six troller owned by a sort-of fishing buddy, the friend of someone we really liked, and a smaller troller I wasn't familiar with. I was bundled up layers of long underwear, sweaters, a floater jacket and rain gear. Rain spattered noisily against my hood. I was wearing so much clothing, it was hard to

move but I was warm and dry. I was happy. It was good to be getting out early and getting all the kinks out of our system: this year we were really going to make money!

I pulled in a spring salmon of about ten pounds, conked it on the head with the gaff, reversed the gaff and dehooked it into the checkers in one swift motion. The fish had that really strong spring reek; I sometimes thought I could tell the different species of by smell alone. Halibut was very different: musky and dripping with slime.

Jamie went into the cabin to re-tie a flasher. The VHF speaker mounted at the back of the cabin crackled. “*Wyvern*, this is *Valour 1*.”

“*Valour 1*, *Wyvern*,” Jamie came back. “Hey, I see you got a *real* deckhand this year,” the owner of the *Valour 1* said.

I looked up from the lines and shook my fist in its wet white cotton glove at the speaker. Asshole. I did more work than his current deckhand by a factor of two.

“Same as usual,” Jamie said.

“No shit? You’re telling me that’s not a guy I’m seeing in the cockpit? It looks way too big to be . . .”

. . . me, bulked up to stay warm.

I never had a conversation with that man again even though a bunch of us might get together for a dinner or a beer. The rest of our buddies accepted me.

On harbour days, we had long meaningful talks about generators and landmarks and tacks. This was before the days of political correctness: we were all fishermen, never mind the gender neutral *fisher*. We told stories all afternoon, through a roast beef dinner. I don’t know if I ever had a dinner on a fishboat that wasn’t roast beef. It was always prime rib, and because the stoves’ small firebox didn’t get that hot, the meat always came out grayish, never rich and

browned. Outside, the gale that had caused us to take a harbour day in the first place was jingling the trolling bells, slapping tag lines against the aluminum fishing poles. There was a constant *clink clink clink*. Sometimes the boat would heel sharply; the force of the wind hitting was a *blam!* like a giant fist. Usually there were eight people. At the most ten. Trollers didn't have huge cabins. All of us fishermen and our friends' deckhands were packed in tight around a central table. Almost always I was the only female. Back then, there were so few women fishing I knew all of them by name, from the Swiftsure Bank in the south to Dixon Entrance in the north. Going fishing made me realize how much I loved the company of women, and longed for it. Guys never talked about family or relationships.

On a fishboat, the bench or wrap-around nook seating was always made of Naughahyde, the better to wipe stray fish blood and scales off. The lights were twelve volt, so the wheelhouse was dim. In the most Spartan of the boats, there would be bare lightbulbs. In ones that had pretensions to class, like *Wyvern*, there were yacht lights. The stories went on into the night. Understatement was a big part of the storytelling. To be cool, you had to have composure. Then you could make a statement like, "Yeah, it was a little rough that trip. We broke every dish on the boat." The thing was, the stories had to be true. I absorbed this like a good-girl sponge. Fishermen were tough. Well, I would be tougher still. I had to be, to be accepted or even tolerated by the guys.

For years, my recurring nightmare would be that I had piled the boat up on the rocks and all the other fishermen would be laughing. When I was fishing, I was aware the fleet was watching, the guys just waiting for The Woman On The Boat to make a mistake. I felt a lot of pressure, a lot of stares. Fishermen were and are a critical bunch. But I took a Power Squadron course in navigation. I learned how to read charts. I never put a boat on the rocks—the BC coast

abounds in rocks, some charted, many not—and I never fell asleep at the wheel. It's surprising how many fishers do.

Wake up, little Susie.

I look at the photograph and go well, no wonder guys made passes at this woman even when she wore long johns. Here, the twenty-four-year-old in a bikini sits on a green towel. Her face is turned from the camera. Her brown hair, streaked with blonde, hangs past the bikini top almost to her waist. Her bare thigh is thin, though the arm and shoulder seen by the camera are well-developed. Her right knee is raised; her right arm touches her foot, echoing the slant of the leg. Her left leg is crooked beneath her as if she were doing a half lotus. She's looking out toward Desolation Sound from the front deck of her mother-in-law's place on Savary Island, a hundred miles north of Vancouver. It's sunny. The tide is out. Water and sky and the mountains in front of her are all blue. The planes of reference are all horizontal; flat surfaces extend way beyond the edges of the photograph. Two red geraniums in pots frame her on the deck.

Looking at the photograph, I can see I was ready to take a fall. With twenty-twenty hindsight, I see that young woman with the nice flat stomach and a wicked sense of sarcasm has a definite air of *I can do anything*. Her hair shines with youth. I go, *Honey, you think you're really something, don't you?* I had not yet learned I had any limits. I was five foot three and weighed a hundred and twenty-three pounds.

I had no idea there was anything other than the world I saw, heard, smelled, the world of success and competition, that advertising presents to us: *here, want a shiny car, a country kitchen with brass pots hanging on the walls*. Spirituality? If someone brought up the word, in my ignorance, I would have made polite noises, while inwardly condemning them as idiots. I did

know that churches were negligible. They were what my mom and my parents' friends used to go to and then stopped. Even people of that generation recognized churches' futility and out-datedness.

Weight and mass.

The last year I fished, my father-in-law calculated how many pounds of fish I'd lifted. Trollers bring in a premium product; it's so expensive you can't buy troll fish in Canada. Troll salmon goes to Japan, to Europe, and the big springs go to New York for lox. With all the lines it's an old-fashioned method of fishing, highly labour intensive. A troller handles each piece, each fish, many times. First it's lifted in to the boat. Within minutes it's lifted up to the cleaning trough to be gutted. Then the fish are double-washed, which means coming back later with the water hose and scouring the backbone for any remaining seepage of blood. Then each piece is lifted up and dropped into the ice hold. Finally, the troller's deckhand descends into the hold and lifts each fish again to stack it in neat rows and pack ice into the belly cavity.

The last year I fished, we caught around thirty-two thousand pounds. Theoretically, I pulled half the lines, but in actual practise it came out to less than that, as Jamie would go through all the gear while I was cooking and doing other chores. So to be conservative, let's say I actually landed closer to a quarter of those. That's eight thousand pounds. As the deckhand, I was responsible for all the cleaning. That's thirty-two thousand pounds I lifted to the trough, plus the eight I landed. Forty thousand. Then I did the double-washing. Another thirty-two thousand to bring the total to seventy-two. Then each fish had to be lifted into the hold. That thirty-two thousand again, plus seventy-two thousand equals a hundred and four. Then I picked up each fish

up to be iced. That brings the total poundage I lifted in six months up to a hundred and thirty-six thousand pounds.

Not bad for a woman who wasn't remotely athletic.

"Probably you could have got away with that much lifting if you were bigger," the physio at the hospital told me.

In your journal:

1.) Briefly write down three problems you are currently dealing with. You know what hurts, what in your life is out of sync. What hurts for you right now could be a nasty medical problem you're dealing with, a relationship problem, or maybe you have financial problems. All disharmonies, when you look at them closely, are premised on lack: lack of love, lack of health, lack of a place to live, a job, etc. Spiritual ideas, used simply as a recipe, can work amazing transformations in any situation. Let's even be bold and say these ideas bring healing.

Why writing? It organizes your thoughts. The journal gives you something tangible to refer back to.