

Chapter 3: Pain Questionnaire

“It has yet to be proven that intelligence has any survival value.”

Arthur C. Clarke

In which our heroine is transformed.

Jamie and I had just had our biggest season, our seventh of commercial fishing. One Friday in October, we were out at Port Hawk, where Jamie and I lived in a two-bedroom cottage on my in-law’s hobby farm. Port Hawk is a speck on the map forty miles outside Vancouver. I’d been in the city, clothes shopping all day with my mother and sister. We’d had tremendous fun and I was delighted with my transformation. Six months of the year I wore long underwear and blood-spattered jeans. That evening I looked smart: I was wearing new shoes, dress pants, and a wonderful angora sweater in shades of blue and violet.

I perched for a moment on the arm of the old wine-coloured couch in our living room. It was cosy. There was the couch, two beige armchairs lent to us by my mother-in-law, and the real glory of the room, an antique teak chest from China with dragons carved into it. I polished that chest every week; the room smelled faintly of lemon oil and wood smoke from the stove in the kitchen. Framed silkscreen prints and my great-grandmother’s watercolours hung on the living room walls. I was chatting animatedly to Jamie: “. . . Gaddy’s is better than 10th Avenue. I’ll never go anywh. . .”

Jamie sat across from me in one of the beige chairs, legs crossed, the newspaper on his lap. He’d lowered it to talk. He was wearing jeans and his favourite red flannel shirt. The shirt was my favourite, too, I thought he looked handsome in it, solidly-muscled and dependable, with his full dark beard and moustache. Probably after a while he’d shave off the beard—he couldn’t

stand getting fish scales in it during herring season—but he'd grow it again when we went salmon fishing in the spring. The moustache always stayed.

In mid-word, an enormous pain came shooting up my back and opened me as though I were a can of peaches. I heaved myself up, tears wetting my face—what the hell? I was wearing new shoes, perhaps it had something to do with that. The pain was so severe I staggered backward. I found myself holding onto the white-painted frame of the study door for support.

“What’s the matter?” Jamie said. His voice was calm but he moved out of his chair so fast it was like I blinked and suddenly he was there, standing beside me holding out a hand.

I reached out to him. His hand, hard with calluses, was warm. “My back. It’s— I don’t understand. Jesus—”

I was twenty-four.

When Jamie and I stood in the hallway on Monday, getting our shoes on, I said again, “Please can I have the car?” Jamie was going to Simon Fraser University, where he was working on a science degree, and I was going to our mutual doctor in Vancouver.

“No. We’ve been over this. There’s no other way for me to get home,” Jamie said, eyebrows drawing together. “You’ve spent the weekend in bed. You’ve had lots of rest. And you have busses to take you where you need to go. I don’t.” He made the conclusion sound absolutely elementary.

“I guess I’ll manage.” I didn’t have the oomph to argue anymore. The hurt wasn’t as ferocious as it had been but it took all my energy to deal with the pain.

I look at myself standing in the small linoleum-floored hallway at Port Hawk that morning and sigh. How could I acquiesce so tamely? But I had no conception of what I was

letting myself in for. Nothing had prepared me for finding myself in a situation that was physically too tough for me to handle. I felt incredibly capable, a woman who could cope with any kind of gale force winds or rough seas—we fished Hecate Straits, that’s one of the worst spots in the world for weather. So said the meteorologists up in Prince Rupert where my mother had been stationed during WW2.

When Jamie and I had anchored on the Horseshoe and rolled our guts out while the other trollers went into harbour, I thought, this’ll show those sexist fishermen. Women can take weather. We fished sou’ east thirty-five one time, actually quite productively, though the gear becomes almost impossible to work with when it’s blowing so hard. Only one other boat stayed out, the old dun-coloured *Essie T*, and he finally pulled his gear. At that point, we could follow with honour. I was delighted to run into the guy on the floats in Rupert. “Jeez, I never fished weather like that, before, huh,” he said in his up-and-down Norwegian accent. “I couldn’t go in because you weren’t, hey, and then it joost got too rough.”

That’ll teach you, I thought. Women can take anything.

I represented Women quite a lot in those days.

Why didn’t I ask Jamie to take the day off, to cut his classes for the morning to drive me to the doctor’s? It never occurred to me then to even float it as a possibility. This said a lot about both of us. Maybe it was a reaction against the perceived bourgeois attitude of my mother-in-law, who, we felt, fussed too much and worried about what others thought. Instead of the big wedding she would have planned, we’d arranged a civil ceremony on our own with just two witnesses. We were the couple who, after the ceremony, had decided the absolute best thing was

for Jamie to go to his diesel maintenance class that night. Why we were so against the idea of a celebration and a honeymoon now seems ridiculous—how seventies—but at the time, it made us feel like advanced thinkers. We were self-righteous. Marriage was part of life, so, well, we'd got on with it. Possibly not even realizing I could ask Jamie to drive me to the doctor's was part of the same ethos. It didn't occur to me that there are situations in life where it was reasonable and fair to ask for help. That day with the back pain with one of them. I'd asked three times for the car: that for me was begging to be helped. As far as I was concerned, Jamie was saying what he'd said by his actions before: I was made of strong stuff and I'd deal with the situation just fine. Meanwhile, he was busy.

Dizzy.

The past is a vortex sometimes. It can suck you back and spin you until you're you forget what you were even trying to make sense of. Does it help to come out with a his and her judgement: Jamie was self-centered, and I was so under the guy's thumb I couldn't see an alternative? For two supposedly smart people, the behaviour doesn't reflect it.

At the bus stop in Burnaby where he turned up the mountain, Jamie pulled in to the curb. I felt the familiar crinkly texture of his beard against my face, the firm pressure of his lips. He smelled of mint toothpaste. I levered myself out of the car one limb at a time.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow from your mother's," Jamie said.

I nodded, chunked the door shut.

He spun the old grey Volvo around in a turn; I could see his hand wave. I watched the car disappear up the mountain.

That morning I was wearing the tan trench coat I'd bought on my last Friday's shopping expedition. It was perfect for the weather, which was golden-hazy. But the pain in my back made me feel like I was going to throw up. This bussing idea was a bad one.

Although in this instance I knew Jamie was wrong, I trusted him utterly. We spent half the year at sea alone with one another, accompanied by the comforting rumble of the big diesel in our fishboat, the murmur of voices on the VHF. We slept in a single bed, arms around one another. When I turned over, he did too.

When you're on a boat, one person has to be the skipper. There were times of danger when our lives depended on doing exactly the right thing. If I wanted to stand around and argue, we could both end up dead or injured. As much as possible we made all our decisions together—the *Should we stay here and fish or run somewhere else* ones—but if Jamie told me to do something, he knew more about boats and engines than I did, and I trusted he had a good reason. I did it.

So we argued about the car and I lost, but it didn't threaten my belief about the nature of our relationship. I lived in a love story.

Jamie and I had met at a poetry reading at the University of British Columbia on February 14; neither of us ever had trouble remembering our anniversary. It was Valentine's, meant to be, right? I was fifteen. That summer, my mother sent me back to my aunt Anne's cottage in Ontario. It was on a lake a mile out of the town of Rousseau, down an unmarked dirt road. Anne's father had built it. The building itself was small, darkish; it had a wonderful cottagey smell of wood and old smoke. What I remember most clearly is the boat house, the *slap slap* of

water magnified inside it, the two canoes inside. The smell of lake water, fresh and pure when we'd come down first thing in the morning to swim; sun golden but not yet hot. The taste of tiny sweet wild strawberries in the fields. Self-sown sweet williams ran wild, their formal and intricate patternings of burgundy, white and pink incongruously mediaeval, and yet altogether delightful in the cottage setting of long unmown grass, trees, and near the lake, big granite outcroppings. The flowers smelled heavenly, of cloves and spice.

Back in BC, Jamie wrote me poignant love letters full of imagery and ticking clocks that said my name. I revelled in the letters and vowed to keep them forever. I read the collected works of Agatha Christie and swam in the lake, and then one morning when I was reading on the rocks overlooking the lake, I became aware of a sudden electric silence: my aunt and youngest cousin had been talking and they'd stopped mid-sentence. I lifted my eyes, and there, staring at me intently, was my true love in jeans and cowboy boots, waiting for me to acknowledge him. He looked hot and dirty.

"Jamie!" I jumped to my feet, knocking over my folding chair in my haste to hug him. "What. . .? I didn't know you were coming."

"I wanted it to be a surprise in case I didn't make it all the way."

Talking to Jamie and hugging him and getting completely lost in his eyes, I had forgotten my aunt and cousin who were open-mouthed, watching me run into the arms of what to them, was a strange man.

Gently, Jamie disentangled himself from me. "Maybe you'd like to introduce me?"

Fizzing with excitement, I did so. Jamie stood beside me, legs a little apart, and proceeded to be gravely charming to Aunt Anne. The two of them, it turned out, had a common

interest in the writings of R.D. Laing. Completely melted that Jamie had come three thousand miles to be with me, I fetched another lawn chair.

Later that day Jamie said, “I knew you were unhappy when you got on that plane.” He kissed my neck. “So I thought I’d come and find you. But I didn’t want to say anything in case I didn’t make it. Your mother wasn’t the best pleased, but she agreed not to tell you I was on my way.”

“How could you tell I was unhappy?” I asked.

He snorted. “By the set of your shoulders. You have this way of squaring them when you’re miserable.”

Jamie had never hitchhiked in his life before—he had his mother’s Jaguar to drive when he needed a car, or his father’s Buick— but he’d stuck out his thumb and hitchhiked from BC to Ontario to be with me. It grew into a great romantic family legend, his sudden appearance at a hard-to-find cottage down an unmarked road and across a meadow.

Fisherman=tough.

I look back now and wince at the romantic stupidity, the stoicism of my younger self in the trench coat making my way to a doctor’s appointment. I flinched with each step, held onto walls for support, onto the backs of benches. *Take a cab*, I say now. *Call your mother for help, phone a friend*. But my mother was at school, where she taught English and Family Studies, and none of my friends had cars. I never once thought of a taxi, though it’s possible I had cash for one. I was a commercial fisher, by God. I was tough. I could take anything.

I did not have words for the slow and painful progress I made between my bus transfers. I had blocks to walk. Twice downtown, men asked, “Is there anything I can do to help?” If a

woman had asked, I would have said yes, eagerly, but I would accept nothing from a strange man.

If strangers could see how difficult it was for me to walk, what had Jamie noted that morning when he'd dropped me off at the base of Burnaby mountain?

I shook my head at the men who offered to help. The pain and *Not very far now*, and *You're doing great, come on, just a bit further, you're okay*, absorbed me totally. It was as though I rolled from one self-contained moment to another, an egg, an egg with eyes recording bus advertisements, grey pavement, a male face with a shock of black hair which bent over and went away. My next stop wasn't far, really, three blocks at the longest.

My doctor was in Vancouver, a dried grey mushroom of a man who was supposed to be extremely competent. He didn't know what the problem was, and didn't give me so much as a painkiller for it. "Make an appointment to come back next week," he said. After I left his office and struggled half a block to the bus stop, I went to sit down on the bench while I waited. Pain shot white-hot through my back. I stood up again hastily. Perhaps I made some kind of noise; I remember a tidy silver-haired lady who was also waiting for the bus putting her head to one side and looking at me curiously.

The pain in my back didn't go away. One week, three weeks, a month. I couldn't drive the way I used to. Vancouver, an hour away from our place in the country, become too far for me to travel. I found a new doctor whose office was ten minutes away. This was Dixon-Warren.

How long have you had this pain?

"My back bothered me a lot the last summer I fished. It didn't get really bad until this autumn." Sitting in the plastic chair for the first time in Dr. Dixon-Warren's office—we hadn't yet

got to the examining table stage—I shifted, sat up straighter. The plastic made a faint sighing noise. There was no way I could get comfortable. A nice man, this doctor. English. Wavy hair, a worried-looking man with beige pants, a white lab coat over top. The office smelled of industrial cleaner, like a veterinarian’s, only toned down.

Has this ever happened before?

“Once when I was seventeen and I had a fall I was laid up for a couple of days.” I liked Dr. Dixon-Warren’s name; it made me think of cottages with drifts of clove-scented pinks and aromatic lavenders, clumps of Regale lilies. My English grandmother, Minnie, had me sew a colourful garden like that when I was six to practice embroidery. I hadn’t done a very good job.

I was going to Dixon-Warren because my in-laws did. They said he was a good, thorough doctor. He was kind. He had brown eyes and his forehead was lined.

Do you have the pain all the time?

“Yes. Sometimes it’s worse than others. I can’t walk more than a block at the most. I can’t sit longer than a couple of hours—like seeing a movie is really difficult.” That was fisherman shorthand for almost impossible.

I never knew how far I could go before the pain in my back became overwhelming. When it did, I’d walk slower and slower; fifty feet stretched out interminably. I’d been caught a number of times. I’d park the car on a crowded street to get to a medical appointment or a store, and think the distance would be okay for me to walk. It would turn out to be further than I’d thought. Then, knowing I’d made a bad mistake, and I was still a long way away from my car, I had somehow to get back to it. I’d bite my lip and inch along, exhorting myself fiercely not to

cry, it would be disgraceful. If I absolutely had to weep from the pain I could wait until I got to the car, right? But not on a city street, not with people watching.

Have you ever been free of it?

“Not since it got really bad last October.”

Even when I kept still I hurt. Pain defined me. I breathed it, could hardly eat because of it. Pain outlined me in broad black brushstrokes. I was stripped down to that one primitive defining aspect. Turning over in bed became an action which hurt so much it woke me up. No more flinging myself over in sleep under the puffy down duvet in our bedroom at Port Hawk where we always slept with the window wide, the air pouring in cool and smelling of pasture grass and cottonwoods. No. I had to curl my hand around the edge of the mattress and lever myself over, inch by inch. Sometimes it could take five minutes to get turned. Both sides hurt but my right side was much worse. Often I couldn't sleep on it at all; I'd have to alternate between my left side and lying on my back, which I had previously never done. When I woke up at night to try to find some easier position, I would not allow myself to whimper when I moved. I couldn't control my breathing, though, which would get all ragged as I ran up against those sharp edges of pain. Sometimes I would hold my breath in an effort to stay quiet. Who I thought I was fooling, I don't know. Jamie was often woken by my struggles to turn over; I could tell by the change in his breathing. But it seemed more dignified to keep the pain internal.

Is the pain still there when you wake up?

“I get a bit stiff but that wears off. It's better. Then the more I move around during the day the worse it gets.”

I learned the hard way. Over and over I found out my new limitations. It was like my life had just shrunk with the speed of light. I lived in a room whose boundaries I could only feel, not see. I couldn't work in my garden. I had to forget about the idea of doing a fall clean-up. The gloriosa daisies lay where they fell in a pile of brown frost-rotted stems. The pretty burgundy and pink dahlias had to take their chances; I couldn't get out there with a shovel on one of those lazy golden late fall days, dig them and up-end them to drain before I put them away for the winter. I had tried. Just tottering down the basement steps to fetch the shovel almost did me in. I came up with the shovel in my hand and stood there looking at my garden, trying not to cry with pain. If I lifted my foot and drove it down hard on the rolled top of the shovel, it'd hurt more than I could bear. I held on to the concrete edges of the stairwell, eased my way back down the five steps to the basement.

I was used to spending quiet afternoons down in the basement racking wine, cleaning equipment, making notes on recipes in my red plastic notebook with the reek of sulphite stinging my nose, the familiar muddy smell of lees that I drained off into the sink. But when I bent to lift a five gallon carboy, I couldn't move it onto a chair anymore. It was like it weighed five times what it had before.

I limped up the basement stairs, up the front steps into the house. "Jamie?"

"Uh?" He was reading in the living room.

"Could you lift up the carboy of Cabernet Sauvignon for me so I can rack it?"

Jamie put down his copy of *Western Fisherman*. "Why don't you?"

"I can't. I'm sorry." I looked down at the burgundy carpet. As usual, it needed vacuuming. I should not have bought that colour; it showed every strand of cat hair.

“Look, I’m busy. How about if you really need it, I’ll do it in a while.” He sounded strained.

I went back to the basement. It was ridiculous to have to ask for help. The Cabernet was in a 4.2 litre glass carboy. Four gallons at ten pounds a gallon was only forty pounds, plus the point two which didn’t count for much. I’d done this hundreds of times before. I bent my knees as the phsyios had shown me, crouched, put a hand beneath the cool smooth glass edge of the carboy and tilted. *You can do this*. Wait. I grabbed the bamboo stool I used for gardening. I could pretty well roll the carboy up that twelve inches. Yes. I got the carboy to the stool. Then I tried the lift twirl from the stool to the chair. That’d give me enough height I could rack the wine. Pain zapped my right sacro-iliac like a lightning strike. Oh shit shit shit: I couldn’t get the carboy up that last twelve inches. Back it went to the stool, almost topping over as I slammed it down crooked. I straightened myself, straightened the carboy, breathed hard, put a hand over my mouth. I wanted to heave. I went upstairs and lay down.

It was a couple of days before I made it back to the basement to rack the wine. And that’s how it went. Either I did it myself, and paid, or I annoyed the hell out of Jamie by asking.

Does the pain wake you from sleep?

“Not until I try to turn over.”

Paying meant I went to bed in tears. And it didn’t seem to matter if I stayed there a day or three, my back didn’t get much better. So after a month or maybe two I just got up and did what I normally did, only about twenty percent of the speed I used to. Which meant I got very little done in a day, but there was something, always something I was working on.

I rented crutches and forced myself, grimly, to swing out to the end of our driveway, some two hundred yards, every day. That's what it was all about, wasn't it, mind over matter?

"Great stuff," Jamie said, smiling. "That's the spirit."

Dr. Dixon-Warren sent me for physiotherapy at the local hospital. I called the traction assembly "the rack." After a couple of months, Dixon-Warren cut the traction; it was just too painful. Ultrasound, a cool blob of jelly, the slow circling of the metal head back and forth on my sore sacro-iliac joint, and hot packs, took its place.

I was starting to learn medical jargon. It was my sacro-iliac joints that bothered me, the right one especially. "SI joints," the physio called them. And the pain that ran all the way down my leg and detoured into my ankle followed a nerve pathway.

When the pain is away, do you feel quite well?

"The pain is almost always there. No. I'm tired and I feel sick from the pain."

I lived from doctor's appointment to doctor's appointment. Dixon-Warren referred me to a number of eminent doctors and waiting for appointments seemed to take forever. Under my controlled facade, makeup perfect, clothes nice, no one understood how terrified I was. Why wasn't I able to walk anymore? Because I couldn't really, not more than a block or so at the absolute outside. I measured my steps around the house; each ten feet cost me. Sitting had become excruciating.

It shouldn't have been happening. I was young. I was in good health otherwise. Surely the next specialist my GP sent me to would diagnose what was wrong and fix it. I saw myself as a piece of machinery, damaged, but eager to get on with the job. My life was measured out in three week increments to my next medical appointment. I wanted so badly to get on with things.

What is the pain like: a toothache, a bad bruise, a knife?

When it was really bad, a knife. I had never had a toothache, but when I did, years later, the pain was also familiar to me.

How bad is the pain when it's at its worst?

"I feel like I'm going to throw up." Twice, driving into Vancouver on the freeway, I reached a dangerous state: the pain was so bad it took my breath away. I couldn't think or react to traffic properly. And when I took another painkiller, or two, after twenty minutes there was an arctic gelidness to the air. Cars transformed into monstrous metal creatures gliding in front of me. They were slow; they had eyes. I saw perfectly well but I was no longer capable of making a judgment: was there enough room for me to turn left before those cars arrived at the intersection? And I waited, knowing I hadn't a clue as to how quickly those eyes were moving. I thought, *Never again. I had no idea. This must be worse than driving drunk.*

Does drinking seem to make it worse?

"I don't think so. I don't know."

I'd begun to drink a lot more. Several stiff belts of rum or sherry helped the painkillers along. A synergistic effect. I'd flush with alcohol and friends joked I was looking terrific, there couldn't be much wrong with me, could there? When I couldn't sit in one of their too-soft chairs any more, I'd take over their living room sofa or lie down on the floor, depending how comfortable I felt with them, and they'd tell me how well I looked. I couldn't believe it. I was both embarrassed—couldn't they see how much pain I was in to actually ask people to move so I

could lie down?—and humiliated. I was racked with the greatest crisis of my life, and it was invisible to others.

The more disabled I became, the more stoic I felt I had to be. This is what fishermen did. It was like friends of ours who, speaking about when someone's wheelhouse window was smashed by a wave, said, "It was a mite choppy that trip." In my seven years of fishing, I'd soaked up that attitude and made it my own.

Good friends and family learned to read my face. "Your eyes are at half-mast," my sister Marjorie would say, gently touching my shoulder. "Let's go, shall we?" Marjorie with the blonde-streaked curls, a kind voice, a cigarette constantly in her hand. She was petite and had such an air of assurance about her that only people who knew her very well indeed understood how afraid she was much of the time. At the time she was living with our fishing buddy, Bill.

Does eating seem to help?

"Ah, not that I've noticed."

The pain was so omnipresent I found it hard to force much down. I was also by myself most of the week as Jamie was away at university. He'd sleep on the boat, which was tied up at a wharf in downtown Vancouver; it was closer than coming home. After a couple of nights when I went hungry because I couldn't cook dinner, I took to making little care packages of soup and stew, easy to heat up things, and stacking them in the freezer. It appalled me that I had to do this. I was a good cook. It should have been no trouble to whip up an omelette and salad for myself, or cook a steak. But there were days when hobbling to the freezer was as much as I could manage.

What can't you do when the pain is there?

“Live a normal life. Walk. Run. Sit. Clean my house. Run a lawnmower.”

Are you partially disabled? Totally?

“If it goes on like this I'm not going to be able to fish. As it is now, I'm pretty restricted. I used to lead a really active life, you know. And now doing the slightest little thing is hard. But mostly I'm still able to make supper and do the dishes. Driving is difficult. My mother-in-law has been driving me down to the bookmobile since I can't get into town to the library. And when I can drive myself, there's all that distance to walk; it's too much. I can't go shopping. Something like a supermarket is way too far for me.” I didn't complain about the pain. I was learning doctors didn't want to hear about it.

I took to shopping at Chinese corner grocery stores; tiny, expensive, but of a size I could navigate. It was as though an ordinary supermarket, one where I'd been shopping for years, had infinitely elastic walls. All of a sudden it was so big it was beyond me. I'd stand at the front of the store and look down the aisles, and it was like looking to the end of the universe, all those galaxies and nebulas and spiral arms piled up with soaps and cheeses, completely inaccessible.

“My” back problem became my world. I was completely subsumed by it. This is not uncommon. When illness or some other problem takes over to such an extent, any connection that a person may once have had with the divine, shrinks. Either God is angry or indifferent to allow such a situation. Either way, a person quite understandably doesn't want to waste time on a relationship with such an uncaring creator. It's also quite obvious that the problem is out there, in

a real material world which is out of our control. It's being laid off, a bad heart, a visa stuck in endless red tape, a poisonous child-parent relationship, post-tib tendonitis, a cat gone suddenly blind; these are all very specific, and not our fault. It's the heart's fault, the problem with multiple bureaucracies, the other person being clearly unbalanced, a doctor who can't or won't make the tendonitis better, and heaven only knows what happened to the cat.

Prayer is effective in all these situations because most of us have never learned that there isn't an out there and an in here. Thought creates form. The power of our thoughts bent on good, joined with the power of a divine Creator can produce radically positive shifts in what seem to be insoluble situations.

- 1.) With the three painful problems you previously wrote down, list the ways you know your problem would be fixed. For example, I would have said, I know my problem is fixed when I can walk as far as I want, when my back doesn't hurt, when I can go back to doing all the things I love, like fishing, like lifting heavy carboys of wine.
- 2.) If you are dealing with a challenging relationship with another individual, what would have to happen for you to know the problem was resolved? Notice how clear and definite you are about this.
- 3.) Do any of your problems have spiritual answers? One sentence is fine.