Chapter Four

As with the story about Larry, I am visiting the whole of the eighties-long arc prior to my leaving Ann Arbor so that the two underlying themes of that period might be clear before I return to sketch in the events along the way. Here then is the story about Jean as I wrote it more than twenty years ago. In 1989, not long after I arrived in Ganeshpuri, India to spend a year in the mother ashram of Siddha Yoga, I woke up out of a deep sleep in my dormitory room. Suddenly sleep itself seemed completely out of the question. What went through my mind several times was the insistent phrase, "I have to write." I had been kindly given a key to the ashram library, and without giving it much thought, I got dressed and walked some distance from my room to the library. What then seemed to flow effortlessly and nonstop was the beginning of the story about Jean/Sharada’s death that year. I wrote for an hour or so and then, sensing it was time to stop, I returned to my bed. The next night and the night after that I again woke up around one o’clock in the morning and went up to the library to write. Finally, the whole uncanny event came to an end. I have not changed more than a couple of words in the text that emerged from those three nights.

Quietmind

I was about halfway into the flight to Detroit before I was aware of her presence. I was watching the cottony soft clouds below us when I realized I was not alone.

This was supposed to be one of those emotionally perilous trips. As I left, people wished me well with a special urgency. It was to be the first time back in our sweet little house since just after Jean died. I had stayed in Ann Arbor long enough to settle some matters, including selling the house, but I had left before the final closing. And I had been living in Gurumayi’s South Fallsburg ashram for six weeks when the doctoral exam of one of my students pulled me back to the University.
Would reentering the old house and garden set loose a torrent of bitter, desperate tears? Would picking up Nishka and feeling her soft, fluffy neck fur again be the trigger for some larger collapse? These and the dozens of other obvious questions became inoperative, irrelevant because when she joined me on that flight, everything changed.

I refer to her as She now, but at first I might have only used the name that seemed apt from the very start: Quietmind. I was joined by Quietmind. I was overcome by Quietmind. There was no question of saying that "my" mind had become quiet. This was not my mind. It was hers, or Her, so to speak.

In that radically altered framework "I" seemed only to be the one that, for brief, ecstatic intervals, registered, "This yoga works! It really works!" Even these flashes of delight could sustain themselves only for a second, and then, unmistakably, there again was Quietmind.

It was a presence. It seemed other than me, and its lingering was so sensuously fulfilling that very quickly I began to think in terms of She. In another of those briefly allotted bursts of thought, I knew that she had been with me from the moment I left the ashram to go to the Newark airport. Somewhere thirty thousand feet over Pennsylvania I realized that I had not had an angular, disruptive thought for hours. There was instead the most perfect stillness, an alertness that flowed smoothly and without a snag around this or that object in the world of sight and sound. I had taken care of all the details of driving, parking, and boarding the plane, evidently. But all this was done in a state I quickly came to call Quietmind. Sometimes it seems more accurate to attribute this state to some deeper layer of my own being, but something is lost in that labeling, and for the weeks that followed I referred to Quietmind as She. I drafted love poems to Quietmind.
She had slipped unnoticed into the car as I climbed up the driveway out of the ashram. She absorbed my mind in wordless conversation, in a thought-free communing and enjoyment of all the noises, breezes, and sights of the journey. I drove to the airport and boarded the plane in a state of open-eyed wonder. We did that. Me and Quietmind. It was a time of perfect contentment, and only when it dawned on me what a rare moment I was living through did any of it seem anything but ordinary.

When Quietmind and I had landed at Detroit Metro the fun turned into hilarity-mode. It was pouring buckets. The friend with the Volvo was nowhere in sight. The jumble of gigantic suitcases, the drivers being whistled on before they could crane to locate their arriving relatives, and the soaked through socks and shoes - it was all a kaleidoscope carnival of stillness and chaos. And soon enough, well, several hours later actually, there was the ride to Ann Arbor with its warm, complex conversation with Steve. I tried briefly to suggest that something else was happening, inside me. But words kept leading off in hopelessly wrong directions. And even that frustration was not a matter for much thought.

Finally, there was our old house. We had unquestionably arrived at the correct address. And that was definitely Nishka, but I felt no particular urge to pick her up. I seemed to be floating. The floor had a spongy feel to it.

I did seem to move faster through some parts of the house. I could sense that some deep-lying dynamo of emotion would be stirred into primary action a bit more over here than over there. But something far more fascinating commanded my attention. It was Quietmind.

Everything was delightful. Nothing was merely bland or without meaning. But some lifelong habit of mind, born perhaps of hunger or fear, had dropped away, leaving things simple, attractive, and available. The suddenly missing habits of mind were like the 5:00 A.M. train that
wakes you up only when it fails to come by. What was missing was the insistent pressure of unnecessary thoughts and feelings.

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Sometimes, during that last winter's glide out of this lifetime, Jean would wake up from her late afternoon lap murmuring a Sanskrit word, "samprapnoti." At first our game was that when I repeated the word to her, she would laugh a teasing, almost coquettish laugh. "Samprapnoti," she would repeat, "Do you know about that?" As if to say, do you know my secret? These were moments of such tenderness. The full burden of mobilizing her bony frame and negotiating the broncho-dilators, pills, and the oxygen cord sustaining her fragile existence was temporarily forestalled. We were just lying on the bed, and she was murmuring her secret word, samprapnoti.

Sometimes it sounded like the name of a secret lover, offered up partly as confession and partly just for the pleasure of remembrance. But it soon became clearer what it meant. We both knew it came from the Guru Gita, and a little research on her part yielded the word "attainment." That was the secret being confessed and remembered with such a languid, sensuous pleasure: her attainment. Undistracted for the moment by the physical struggle just to breathe and move around, she lay there absorbed in her attainment. There was, in her teasing laugh, a hint of embarrassment at claiming the full magnitude of the inner changes that constituted her attainment.

She did have a secret lover, and, as I would later discover on the airplane trip home, so did I. It was the same beloved: Quietmind.

I would return from teaching or from the store and find her sitting motionless, absorbed in the garden just outside the window. She would share the news about which birds had come to the feeder, which bush was now in bloom, or whether Speedy the Squirrel had made his mad dash
across the telephone line. But the narrative was only part of the message. It was, above all, the peaceful sufficiency of life that she would share.

Every morning the Guru Gita, or least a half or a third of it. Every evening the chanting tapes, the same two or three with Gurumayi. And a few moments of meditation. A scaled down version of the pattern of our lives for the fourteen years since we had met Baba, but it was no less powerful, sweet, and sustaining.

It seems that to die is to come apart. The body goes one way, Quietmind another, and I haven't figured out what becomes of all those thoughts and recorded experiences in our mind. It is the first two terms of this disassembly that I learned about.

In the hospital room there was that moment of utter inactivity. Her hands and cheeks had changed from cool to cold. There was no remnant of the periodic, gasping strain for air. And even as something in me was turning away, as if to thwart a seductive but forbidden fascination with death and its forms, I registered how gentle and innocent this body looked. To me it seemed like a marble statue of a sleeping bird, head all tucked around into the neck, totally at ease. But she was simply not there. That was just her former home. As she might well have put it, it was the shell without its fiddler crab inside.

If I found her anywhere, in those weeks after I left the house and lived in the ashram, it was while walking through the woods. The familiar pleasure of appreciating the mountain laurel in bloom or the flash of a yellow bird was undiminished, but it created the obvious reminder that no one was there to confirm and amplify the delight. I thought at first that I was weeping out of sadness because she wasn't by my side, but that notion never squared with the persistent exhilaration I felt while walking along through the woods and over the familiar little bridge. I knew those gentle tears well. They always signaled for me the arrival of what I sometimes called
the great truth and sometimes the great beauty. They expressed my great relief that nothing had
changed since I last fell into such a welcome and moving state, a state that says, nothing could
ever diminish the supply of truth and love. And life is still filled to the brim with beauty.

And what lies at the very heart of this great truth and great beauty is Quietmind.

When I flew back to Ann Arbor in mid-summer and reentered the house, I was wondering if Jean
would be there, somewhere, somehow. But she wasn't there. She had slipped into the car as I left
South Fallsburg. The presence of Quietmind was itself more "her" than any physical attribute.
And, in the same way, Quietmind was more "me" than any feature or thought or item of my
personal history.

The body in the hospital bed, the house full of possessions and reminders, and finally the ashes,
they were like having someone come to your door and say, "Hello, Uncle, it's me, your long lost
nephew," when from the first moment you know he's an impostor. The body and the house were
empty shells, residues.

At Gurumayi's suggestion, we took the urn full of ashes to the rose garden by Baba's statue.
Three of Jean's favorite students were in Ganeshpuri at that time, and Girija, the head of the Ann
Arbor Ashram when we were first getting involved in Siddha Yoga, and Swami Anantananda, an
old friend. We gathered in the morning's misty light. We spread the ashes among the dozens and
dozens of rose bushes. But these ashes merely announced the end of a cycle. Some tool that had
been checked out for a specific purpose was now being returned and checked back in, to the
fertile earth. The deepest shaft of meaning was struck not by the spreading out of the ashes, nor
by the later assembly to share a little orange juice and coffee cake, but by the moment when
Gurumayi emerged from her gazebo in the upper gardens. It was in her gliding, effortless walk.
It was in her pausing to stop time completely, to nod and smile, to give blessings to the whole event. And, in that moment out of time, Gurumayi was giving perfect expression to Quietmind.

The body returns to ashes, and Quietmind is forever.

The more I thought about the epiphany of the airplane ride and the experience of Quietmind, the more I realized that this moment was a continuation of many moments in my past. Only the naming had changed.

I recalled the first day I met Baba. He was sitting not ten feet away on a low couch. I was sitting on the floor along with forty or so others. It seemed to me later, in retrospect, that right at the start of his talk on the mind he gave an abrupt shake of his head as he looked at me, or maybe it was something about his eyes. I left the realm of the listener. I left the realm of one who was feeling this or thinking that. I sank slowly into a layer of my own being that was as still as the deepest forest. As soft and fragrant as the feathery pine needle floor. As breathless as a prolonged moment of awe. It was my first real introduction to what I would later call Quietmind. It was a glimpse of what would come again, and it confirmed for me the irresistible promise of the Siddha Path.

And then there was the time when Jean and I climbed the stairs of our big old house and reentered our bedroom for the first time after Gurumayi had ended her three day visit to Ann Arbor. She and a few others had lived in our house, and we had lived elsewhere. We didn't know what to expect, nor could we have. The air in the room was crystalline. The light was silvery, polarized in a sideways direction, as if the room were intersecting the tip of the most sacred mountain, Mount Kailas. Or Heaven. We sat on the carpet by our bed and were both immediately pulled into an unearthly state of purity and silence. No thought. We had entered the abode of Quietmind.
We came later to think of that moment as Gurumayi’s gift to us. It was another flash of light on the path she had completely traversed. And as such it is inseparable for me from the note she left for us on the bed. Quietmind will always be linked for me to that expression of a love so limitless that all I could ever hope to do would be to grow large enough to contain and nurture it faithfully. The link between Quietmind and the Guru’s love is part of the mystery of that moment. The impersonal, polarized, silvery light is inseparable from the tender, irrevocable expression of love. The mountain top and the tropical ocean. Quietmind and the contented heart.

The stillness of Quietmind never obscures, in fact only strengthens the throb of joy.