

LEAVING

You...

FOR ME

ALEX NICOLLET
DELON

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Disclaimer:

As in any first-person account, the events in this book are from a single perspective, the author's. Though she has wished for psychic abilities umpteen times, she didn't receive them; therefore, the minds and memories of others were not accessible and cannot be fairly represented in this story of her journey. With respect for the privacy of others, she has changed names, a few locations, occupations, and descriptions, but the impact and essence of events is as she remembers them.

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I dedicate this book to my mother and to the generations of strong women who came before her. Their resilience has given me the courage to write this book and the guts to publish it. Here's to you, ladies.

“You must learn from the mistakes of others. You can’t possibly live long enough to make them all yourself.”

— G R O U C H O M A R X

I thought he was just a comedian, not to be taken seriously...

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PROLOGUE

Ever wonder why we do what we do? Particularly, why we stay in an unhappy, unhealthy relationship far longer than we should? We can say we are stubborn; don't like to give up; take commitment seriously. We can even write it off to the fear of change, fear of being alone, lack of self-esteem, the kids, the dog, or stupidity. And any or all of the above may apply. Those are things we think about, wrestle with, reason through. But when is enough too much?

I wish the decision to leave my husband had been like a blow-out in my driver's side tire. Sudden. Air-bag at impact. Instead, the stains and strains accumulated over decades, until the weight of one more lie spun me off balance and over the edge. The straw and the camel became a cliché because that's how it works. There is generally a final thing.

My stumbles, tumbles, and triumphs after leaving an over forty-year marriage haven't all been on the clear road to recovery. I've taken side trips, had flings, dated, danced, laughed, cried and come to realize there is more to love than surviving it.

The chapters that follow are gritty, raw and explicit. Not to shock or titillate you, but if I broke blind dates or first nights or the jolt of venturing out on your own to you gently, it would lack honesty for those of you who will identify with me. And too many of you will.

Along this journey I've come to realize though I was more vulnerable than I believed, I was stronger than I ever imagined.

I've also learned that I'm not alone.

Neither are you.

Over the Edge



I didn't lose my husband of forty-seven years. I know right where I left him, and why. I don't have to remind myself to breathe anymore. Finally. That took a while, as did my new smile. But I like it. It's genuine.

I had a lot to contend with when I left Brad. He was livid. Friends and family were baffled, and I was broken. The last time I'd been single, I was seventeen. Brad was an 18-year-old freshman in college, a track star I fell in love with the summer before my senior year. He was only the second boy I'd ever dated.

I was amazed he asked me out on a second date after he met my dad. When Brad picked me up my father's eyes bored down like the barrels of the shotgun I knew was on the closet shelf. I wanted to wilt into the woodwork.

"Nice to meet you, sir," Brad said respectfully as he reached to shake my dad's hand. I think Brad became my hero that instant when he strangely bonded with my father. I had no idea what a defining moment this was in more ways than one.

There was also no way for me to know that when Brad picked me up that night for our first date, his college girlfriend was on vacation with her family and *I* was the other woman that would one day break her heart. I didn't find out they were still having sex in the back seat of his car six months later *until* six months later. We hadn't said I love you or made a commitment at that point, he pointed out, so it wasn't like he was cheat-

ing. He hadn't lied; he just hadn't told me about her. It was that simple.

Not to me.

I told him I never wanted to see him again. Didn't answer the phone for three days. Didn't intend to. But my father got pissed. He liked Brad by then, a lot. My mom did, too.

"Since you weren't even going steady, how could he be cheating on you?" my dad asked. I wanted to know how my father echoed Brad. When my mother shrugged an assent, I didn't recognize it as the moment she passed on her shit-sweeping broom. The one she used to sweep my dad's shit under the rug and move on. I didn't know there was such a thing. The broom, I mean. Or why she wielded it, or how deft she'd become at handling it.

It's a skill that takes grooming as much as practice. Programming. Idealization. Naiveté. Gullibility. Being in love. Blinded by love and the mother of them all: intermittent reinforcement; one of the most powerful tools of manipulation in existence. The demonstration of this phenomenon that lurks in our back brain, behind reason involves a rat. A real four-legged, hungry one.

There's a ton of clinical evidence of this paradox that offers insight into why victims of physical or emotional abuse not only stay, but crave attention from their abuser. Love, need, even defend them when they've gone too far. It's a club I belonged to because I made a mistake. I didn't recognize emotional manipulation or know that it's emotional abuse. The dynamic applies to work, love, parent and child relationships. Bastards can even use the principle to train their dog. Arf.

After I finally left Brad, I was on a quest. Had to figure out why I'd stayed so long or hoped to hell Betty Ford had a "Believers in Love" wing at one of her addiction clinics. I wasn't going back to him, didn't want to check in with Betty, voluntarily or not, when I stumbled across an article about a lab experiment that took Pavlov's dogs, the bell and classical conditioning to the next level. Casinos pay millions for studies on the psychology of what they refer to as a 'variable reward schedule' that engrains desired behavior, which becomes hard to extinguish.

I hope you're ready for the rat and my revelation.

An understanding of the Skinner box made sense to me. It's a simple apparatus where a rat presses a lever to get a morsel of food. If the rat gets food every time it experiences no insecurity in this base need, it's free to play on the treadmill and interact with others. It is self-assured, emotionally stable.

When the rat presses the lever and only gets a morsel every once in a while, it gradually becomes obsessed with pressing the lever. Eventually, it won't leave it to play or interact with others. It gets depressed. In the most horrid experiments the rat is left to try-try-try until it eventually dies from exhaustion, dehydration, and starvation if too few morsels were dispensed. Gruesome but true. The same principle applies to us and our base needs, whether male or female, to succeed or fail, to be accepted or rejected, to love and be loved.

The attachment isn't to the lever, but to the mind manipulation (I was nice here and didn't say "mind fuck" but that's what it is). And this is exactly what can happen in a relationship between a narcissist or any manipulative person, and an inherently trusting person who can rapidly progress into a codependent and not realize it. This paradox of intermittent reinforcement as it relates to relationships gave insight into how the need for attachment, for being loved, becomes the lever.

The willingness; the need that drives us to sweep the shit under the rug, look the other way, swallow our pride, and choke on broken promises rather than abandon or be abandoned by our relationship isn't where we begin; it's a consequence of adaptation. The rat, the morsel, and the lever isn't logical. It is how we can become conditioned, just like that whiskered creature with its tiny paws becomes obsessed, beyond reason, with the lever.

The one controlling the morsels has a learning curve, too. On a conscious or unconscious level, they're after a desired behavior, reaction or tolerance. They want what they want when they want it. Therefore, they're compelled to discover what makes us laugh or cry, what frightens or makes us happy and, above all, what makes us vulnerable.

As I tried to reconstruct how the dysfunctional-unbalanced relationship I'd fought so hard to keep had evolved, I again became embroiled in my last year of high school in the Sixties. The Genesis of our relationship.

My business teacher had to stop teaching when she was three months along because an obvious pregnancy was a bad influence. No lie. Girls weren't allowed to wear pants or slacks to school, only dresses or skirts, and they had to be knee-length. I went to Coronado, a public high school in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Abortion was illegal, birth control pills needed a parent's consent, therefore a confession. To know for sure if you were pregnant involved the anguish of waiting six weeks after your missed period and the death of a rabbit. Literally. Besides all that, my sister had gotten pregnant when she was in high school. Was required to drop out. Graduated via a G.E.D. She garnered a 'reputation' and parents of her friends no longer wanted her around. Since she was an incredible mother from day one, it was a travesty, but the reality of the times while I was dating Brad. I chose virginity over the trials my sister endured.

"I don't want her," Brad told me, referring to his back-seat fling. "I want you. Want to marry you. Want you to be the mother of my children. I had a weak moment. It won't happen again."

Coming up next is your first glimpse of metaphorical me. Think of this scenario as the blending of the perfect margarita. The base ingredient is freshly-squeezed lime juice.

Pucker-me-up sour.

The infidelity.

Imagine Brad as he deftly pours this lime juice into a shaker of ice. Refreshing. He told me the truth about why he hadn't shown up or called on the night in question. A healthy pour of Cointreau, the sweet-orange liqueur that comes next, is when he tells me he didn't want her. He wanted me to be his wife, the mother of his children.

The tequila comes next. It's the heady part and he didn't skimp on it. He respected that I wanted to wait for marriage, but I was so stirring, so sexual, it was hard on a man.

Sorry, I couldn't resist the pun.

His muscles flexed as ice chimed in the shaker and he skillfully poured it into a salt-rimmed glass. Did it with style. Charisma. The twist he added?

The old girlfriend he'd been with was his best friend's sister. Both still lived at home. That little tidbit was in my way, so I set it aside. Shouldn't

have. I didn't sip, I swallowed my first relationship taste of anything stronger than lemonade. I had a warm buzz as he finally wrapped me in his arms and whispered, "You're what I want. Forever."

It wasn't really tequila. It was mind fuck number one.

We were both becoming naturals; the narcissist and the codependent. We were seventeen and eighteen. Neither of us knew that we were forming relationship dynamics that would carry us through hell and back for two-score and nearly ten years of dysfunction. Family helped us along.

My mother waitressed at the Ember Glow, a local diner, and made more in tips than my dad earned in the shipping department at Motorola. They got up early for work, so my father wouldn't allow Brad to come over after 10:00 p.m. But Brad worked nights and weekends at Frank's Union 76. It was the days of full-service gas stations, where you also got your windshield washed and collected glasses or green stamps. He didn't get off until 10:00. We barely saw each other.

My graduation was on a Wednesday night. Brad got the night off and came to the family party at my house after the ceremony. At 10:30 sharp his father called our house phone. That may have been the first time I saw the flash of fury in Brad's eyes that I would come to know too well. Evidently, he didn't hit back when his father shoved him into their glass-patio door that night. The next morning Brad called to tell me he was moving out.

"Can't afford a place of my own so either we get married or I get a roommate." I didn't know then about the physical abuse Brad had survived, or the consequences we would pay for how he endured. We were young and invincible, or so I thought.

I was business student of the year and had already landed a secretarial job at Ed Post Realty. With his \$1.40 per hour and my \$275 a month it would be tight, but we could make it. Three weeks later we had our wedding reception in the same family room in which we'd celebrated my graduation.

My smile was genuine then, too. Huge and happy. I'd married the boy of my dreams who I'd known since junior high. We were ready to tackle the world together. Did we ever.

Per Brad's instructions to 'think boy', I gave birth to our first son when I was twenty, our second when I was twenty-two, our third when I was twen-

ty-three, and went from taking dictation and typing contracts to babysitting four children, as well as our own.

Those years were cloth diapers and clothes lines, a budget so tight that finding a quarter in the laundry felt like winning the lottery. We moved ten times in the first thirteen years, moves that included a rickety house on a dirt lot, ten miles from Mexicali. It made our move to a single-wide trailer that was off the ground, relatively bug-free and air-tight, rate a celebration. We played bridge on Saturday nights with friends we made in the trailer park. Had Sunday pot-lucks and picnics. If there was a time I believe we had it all, I think this would be it.

What happened? How do I account for all the years I brandished the ass end of an ostrich? I call them my dumbass years now. In retrospect, hiding from and covering up the lies made me an accomplice and a coward. Even now as I move forward, create a new life, some days regret sticks to me like flypaper, when I think of all the years that I betrayed myself.

I'm not sure when we became ballroom champions of the dance between the narcissist and the codependent. It's a gradual process. I didn't know there was such a dance, but knew the steps, turns, and twirls had begun to make me dizzy and sick to my stomach. On the surface, we looked great. He didn't bully or put me down in public which is good and bad. We looked like a happy couple, but because we did, no one understood when I finally left.

Up until then, now in our sixties, our friends and family thought we had it all: a thriving business, beautiful homes, the means to travel, and lucky that two of our sons worked in the business we'd built. But that was the façade. Underneath was a cauldron of lies and deceit with which we'd lived for decades.

People tell me now how courageous I am; what strength it took to leave Brad after forty-seven years. In truth, it was an act of desperation. My biggest regret is that I waited so long. My greatest hope is that someone out there will benefit from my mistakes and be heartened by the brilliance of life beyond a dysfunctional relationship.

So here you go: a bit more of why I stayed so long and had so far to fall. And a lot about the adventure my life has become since I embarked on my journey to begin again.

Martyr, May I?



As a culture, we re-label behaviors, trend them up. I was born on the brink of the Fifties, when the “boys will be boys” mentality swept lots of shit under rugs that covered lots of areas. My mom lifted the rug and swept the shit under it, chin high. She was Melanie from *Gone with the Wind*—the woman who stood beside her husband, Ashley, and her friend, Scarlett, Ashley’s lover emotionally, if not physically. Melanie created her own version of reality, refused to believe either had betrayed her. She protected them from social exile, and then took Ashley to bed even though she knew she couldn’t survive childbirth again. She got pregnant and bequeathed her son and husband to Scarlett’s care before dying valiantly.

I didn’t see her as a martyr. I saw her strength, and that everyone respected her.

I idealize my mother to this day. Her courage, integrity, determination to hold her family together no matter what. It was her job, and in my turn, I picked up the gauntlet. I not only saw myself through my husband’s skewed vision, I measured myself by my mom, and I never measured up.

In the Seventies, women looked for answers. Why do these men feel entitled to have fun affairs, then belittle their wife’s hurt confusion by snarling, “You need to get a life, buck up, smile, damn it! You’re becoming a real drag. I’m home, aren’t I?” Self-help books called such men “misogynists.” That was better than “cold-hearted bastards.” Mine used to add, “Just because

you're tied down with kids doesn't mean I have to be." Oh, and this one is priceless: "I never said we were equal. Guys can do things women can't. I didn't make the rules. Society did."

For me, over a decade in a strict New Testament church that clearly defined the man as head of the household and his wife as subservient added sharp lines to the playing field. Brad never went to church with me. I own that one.

I need to add that there were good things about Brad, too. The things our friends and family saw and related us to. Brad was a gentleman. Opened car doors, treated me like a lady. He is brilliant. Fought his way up from the eighteen-year-old boy I married—a boy who made a buck forty an hour—to become educated, accomplished, and financially successful. I credited his success to his extraordinary ability to motivate people. To get them to perform profitably.

But he believes he did it all alone . . . from the early years of beginning a business from scratch, setting up the office, budgeting, to having three sons, ten grandchildren, holidays memorable for homemade meals and gifts, events for friends and family. It all made him look good. Made me look lucky. Everyone respected him. Me, too. He was my hero.

I was truly happy as a wife and mom. Also, frustrated and lonely. But I had an entire bag of tools to explain that stuff away. It was labeled, *If I was better, he'd be nicer. Try. Try. Try.* I could amaze you with my ability to put on my makeup, do my hair, dress, check the mirror . . . and never once look into my own eyes. This is a trick in the codependent's stash.

It's important to reinforce that the bond with the manipulator becomes stronger in response to intermittent reinforcement; crumbs along the *love you, love you not* trail. The desire to please them becomes vital. The fear of losing them relates to survival. It is also what I knew, the world I'd lived in since I turned seventeen. My lifetime ago.

Brad's latest extramarital interest was a sales rep for one of our suppliers. He'd stopped being discrete. He invited her to work-related events at the banks or with other business associates. "I'm helping her out. She's a hard worker, smart. Deserves an opportunity to get ahead. What's your problem?"

He was dating her. He even invited her on a guy's motorcycle trip with four of his friends.

“She’s a better rider than most of the guys. Do you think I’d ask her to come if I was having an affair with her? She’s just like one of the guys. Smart, has a master’s degree, is fun to talk to. You need to go make something of yourself, to back off and get off my back.” The way he rattled from one sentence to another without taking a breath spoke volumes.

“If she goes on the trip, I can’t do this anymore. I’m done.”

He saw the flash of fire in my eyes and knew the next step in our dysfunctional relationship dance. After one nod, it was time for him to sweep me into a waltz, spend a weekend with me at our condo between the Coast Highway and the bluff in Encinitas, California. He knew how much I loved the ocean, watching sunsets slip beneath the edge of the world. I let that sinking sun drag a lot of baggage with it. Out of sight, out of mind. At least that was the objective.

This trip was a far cry from the first time we lived in California, when Goodyear decided to acid test Brad, the rookie. They sent him on his first assignment after college graduation, to El Centro, California. A mere ten miles from Mexicali, forty feet below sea level, it boasts a record temperature of one hundred thirty degrees. We had one car, (and that’s a long story), one rather large dog, two sons, and an audio issue with money. We pinched pennies so hard they squealed. Kept me awake many a night, yet I was happy there for nearly two years. Eventually. It took a bit of time and a shift in attitude to get there, but I did.

We’d been married five years by then. I was really good at budgeting, had to be, especially when we wouldn’t have the money I made babysitting since we moved.

I’m going to cut myself a break here. I was twenty-two, Brad twenty-three. Our first son, Andrew had just turned two. Ben was six months old and got sick the first week we arrived in El Centro. I don’t know if he ate a bug or got a bug from the water. Could have been both.

I’ll give the teacher that built the little house Brad had rented points for industry. He built the place himself, on weekends and through a sweltering summer. Maybe he figured with rental income, he could afford to get out of there one day; but during construction he scrimped in wrong places.

The house was on a dirt lot. I’m not exaggerating here. Not a blade of

grass beyond us and the irrigation ditch along the road. Dirt in El Centro isn't rich, loamy soil like Minnesota, where I lived until I was nine. If this had once been ocean bottom, and there were grains of sand, I'll bet they screamed out when the heat exploded them into a talc so fine a footstep raised a cloud of dust that Tonto would have been able to track from a mile away. When the wind blew, it seeped under the baseboards and made designs on the asphalt tile.

I still believe the water was the culprit when Ben got so sick that first week. There was a tank for AAA drinking water on the roof, but water for the faucets, bathing, dishes, and cleaning came from the six by six-foot irrigation ditch that ran along the road, siphoned through a three-inch corrugated pipe that ran behind the house. It connected to a tank, maybe five feet high by three feet wide, with a carbon filter. When they dredged the ditch every six weeks or so, bath and wash water from the faucets turned as reddish brown as the Rio Grande after runoff from a storm. It was the early Seventies, clearly before building permits and inspections were required.

The worst hit when Ben couldn't keep anything down. He was too little for that to go on too long. I called our doctor in Phoenix. He said no food at all for twenty-four hours. Ben's stomach had to rest. A spoon full of Coke three times a day to counteract the stomach acid, and see if he'll suck on a popsicle. He had to stay hydrated. After an inch of cherry Popsicle, he threw up pink. I called Brad at work and asked him to bring home a Coke from the vending machine.

Ben had twenty-two hours of stomach rest to go when I made Andrew a bowl of Campbell's vegetable soup for lunch, and I lost it. I was holding Ben. He dove for the saltine crackers I was going to crush in Andrew's soup. He cried. I cried. Andrew cried, and my mother called in the middle of all that. We've all had strange moments like that.

My mom and I took turns and timed our calls. She'd call me one week, I'd call her the next. When I answered the phone that afternoon I cried, "I want to come home."

"You are home, Alexandra. You're with your family, and it's your job to make it a home."

Amazing how a couple of sentences punched me in the gut and straight-

ened me up. *Buck up. Measure up. Get your shit together*, I told myself.

The very nice woman who lived in the farm house about a hundred yards behind us drove us to her doctor's office. After three days, Ben's system finally beat the bug, he recovered, and a little gritty water from the faucets became a trivial thing.

After six months on the dirt lot, we bought a 12 X 60 mobile home with a real air conditioner, hooked up to city water, and celebrated our new home. There was no escaping the damned talc-fine dirt, the heat, or the crickets, but we were off the ground, and the windows didn't weep dirt in a dust storm.

The crickets are a long story for another time, but as a hint: at a given time each year, they descend on the Imperial Valley like a black cloud, render the airport runways too slick to land a plane, and shut down the airport. Huge hordes of them don't chirp; they're like gang-bangers with a boom box and electric guitar screams that sting your ears. Incessant.

In those two years, I learned to appreciate and find contentment in simple things we sometimes take for granted. I'm grateful for that. I learned to make jokes and have some remarkable stories about the adventure of living in an inferno, on a dirt lot, in an old town ten miles from the Mexican border, forty feet below sea level, without even a movie theatre. Funny how not having a theatre stands out, now. But that's enough about the first time we lived in California. A shiver runs up my spine when I realize that was over forty years ago.

This current relationship resuscitation weekend, we were in our sixties. Brad and I would drive separate cars to our condo in Encinitas. I was going to stay over to attend the La Jolla Writer's Conference. He had to get back to Phoenix for work. I assumed his single nod, before suggesting we go on a weekend getaway together meant he would uninvite his current fling. Tell her she couldn't go on the motorcycle trip and they had to end whatever it was they had going on. In retrospect, I call these "dumb shit moments".

My counselor told me they are programmed responses. Practiced. Programmed insanity.

Thankfully, lying to myself all those years isn't considered a character flaw. It should be.

CHAPTER 3

My Pal the Ostrich



I suppose I always sensed when Brad was having an affair, even though he'd deny it, tell me I was crazy, suspicious, bitter. I got good at explaining things away, looking away so I wouldn't be certain.

I'm letting you in on tricks codependents play to stay in the game, to dance the dance. The Narcissist and Codependent Doo Wop. Problem is, it gnaws on you the way a buzzard chomps on road kill that's dying. Given time, it's hard to tell what the smear on the asphalt once was. Brad had familiar habits when he was grooming or fully involved with another woman. He withdrew from me, avoided eye contact, then became chatty at the wrong times. In recent years, he guarded his phone like it was going to spring legs and sprint away. Though he'd never admit it, if he was talking to one of the boys, he couldn't hand me his phone so I could say hello to them because a text might pop up on the screen from a gal pal. He'd be less interested in sex, more interested in kink. No kissing, just multiple climaxes for me. His was always a sure and vocal occurrence.

My validation.

Sick, but there you have it.

What went through my mind? Was it a marathon and I needed to finish first, or more often? When there're no passionate kisses or being held, great sex can equal validation.

I finally began to whisper, "Don't tell me you love me. Tell me I was

good.” But never loud enough for him to hear. A salvage maneuver to keep my ego from drowning and my life from falling apart.

Am I wild? Yup. Uninhibited? More so than he is. Confident in my body? Nope, it’s the curse of a perfectionist with shitty self-esteem. His current tryst, and at least two other past ones, have been with women who never had a child, let alone three in three years. I’m not fat, but a million sit-ups wouldn’t put the snap back in the diaphragm below my belly button, the one that stretches like a rubber band when the baby stretches you out. Generally a size four, never bigger than a six, I look pretty good in clothes, but preferred to make love in the dark. Weeks before we went to Encinitas to resuscitate our relationship, I’d already scheduled a tummy tuck for the fifth of December, five weeks away. Sprucing up to meet the competition.

We had a fun weekend. Sex is our thing. Ever the over-achiever, Brad is good in bed. *We’re* good at it. I learned to like rowdy, playful, adventurous encounters, because kissing and passion are not his thing. Never were. Wine. Sex. A walk on the Oceanside Boardwalk. *We’d* be good as ever. I made a commitment to let go of my suspicions. He vowed to let go of his affair. We were going to start over.

Again. I did this with the same kind of determination I’d use to get back behind the wheel after a bad accident. It’s like that.

When our weekend was over, he went back to Phoenix and I stayed in California, writing, printing, organizing myself for the La Jolla Writer’s Conference.

The afternoon before the conference began, he called.

“Hi, Hon. I’m heading for the gym. It’s been a rough week and I don’t want you to worry if I don’t call you until later tonight. I might just have a glass of wine. Watch some TV at a sports bar.”

The call made no sense; he rarely called early. But I chipped up. “No worries. Sorry you’ve had a rough week.” My end of our bargain was to let go of suspicions and start over.

But when I hadn’t heard from him by eight p.m., I caved. I’ve always had the passwords to his email and credit cards, but I had never invaded his privacy nor, I suppose, wanted to antagonize my peace of mind. His credit

card statements go to and are paid through the office so they can charge work related things and build travel points.

I managed to pull my head out of the sand and log onto his Visa account. At fifteen minutes before eight o'clock that evening, a charge of \$76.08 had been posted from Cafe Boa, an intimate little Bistro across the street from the Grace Inn in Phoenix. It's only five miles from home. Five hundred feet from the hotel.

At eight-thirty, he called. "Hi Hon. Hope you've had a nice day." He sounded relaxed and cheerful.

"I did. Am packed and ready to go to the conference tomorrow. How was your evening? Did you at least have a good dinner?"

"Quiet, but nice. I went to Keegan's, sat in the bar, had a glass of wine and the cheese plate. Not the best meal, but it tasted really good."

"You might want to call Visa and find out who just used your credit card at Cafe Boa."

"What the fuck! You're checking up on me? You're so goddamned suspicious! I didn't want to tell you I went to Cafe Boa because I figured you'd think I was messing around. I like the place. I was alone. I had a glass of wine, a couple of scotches and an appetizer. I don't even have an appetite these days, with all the stress from work and from you."

All in one diatribe he shoveled aggression, accusation, character assassination, blame shifting, lies and guilt. Told you he was a master.

I could go on, but I'll sum it up instead. The most expensive glass of wine on the Café Boa menu costs twelve dollars. He didn't rack up a bill of nearly eighty-dollars alone, and much later admitted it. I wished I hadn't looked at the visa bill or the menu on the internet. Catching him in a blatant lie shoved me to the very edge of that cliff where I had spent too much of our married life teetering, afraid to fall, afraid to stay put. A stealthy wind approached me from behind.

I knew he'd never leave me and split up stuff. I also believe he believed I'd never leave him. We've gathered lots of stuff since our days in El Centro. But what would happen to me if I stayed? If I just outlived his dick, I'd have lots of stuff, but not even sex to validate me.

I didn't sleep that night, either. I got busy. Focused instead on distractions.

I checked into the La Jolla Hyatt the next morning for the writer's conference. I smiled, pretended to be fine, intense, there to learn. That night, I drank most of a bottle of wine in my room. All by myself. I didn't answer my phone when he called.

Around 3:30 a.m. I sat bolt upright from a fitful sleep. The nearly full moon shone through my window like a beacon. I didn't hear a voice or have a semi-sober out of body experience. But a sentence popped into my head, and I uttered the words out loud "I'm holding myself together with barbed wire."

It was true. Doesn't sound like a revelation, but for me it was a moment of insight. I was stuck, trapped. It hurt to stand still, yet I was terrified to move, venture into the unknown.

The Saturday luncheon was an event with motivating speakers, enviably successful writers who told of their unpublished string of early attempts. The challenges of hitting the NY Time's list. In closing, the moderator took the microphone, explained that we would find a slip of paper and a pencil by our plates. In ten words or less, we were to write the opening line of a new novel. This short sentence was to establish and evoke the emotion of the main character as the novel begins.

Judges would winnow the two hundred submissions down to fifteen that would be read and collectively voted on that night at the banquet. Without hesitation, I mechanically scratched, "I'm holding myself together with barbed wire." It isn't a block buster. I don't even know why or how it won the award. Had my Fairy Godmother intervened? Perhaps ripped the trusty shit-sweeping broom out of my hands and whacked me over the head with it?

No one saw the tears on my cheeks that night as I mustered my best smile and accepted the award. Dinner was outdoors, and it was thankfully lit by Tiki Torches, crystal fireplaces, and dim lights. No one needed to know I had not won. I'd failed. Those words, that award, pushed me off the cliff into the vast unknown.

It's never one thing, but there generally is a *final thing*, the proverbial last straw. What that is, is different for all of us; but when we snap that straw, take that plunge, it is almost never a quick, clean fall. I hit snags and ledges I desperately clung to on the way down.