



Diana Dean, "The Gypsies," 48" x 32", Oil on Canvas, 1993.

Margaret, Ken.

BY CANDIS GRAHAM

Don't let the limitations that you experience today influence what you may experience tomorrow. All things are possible, and heaven is always listening.

—Caroline Myers

I am driving through the Glebe when Ken Rockburn asks, "Has this book changed your life?" He's interviewing a writer about her first book. Much to my disappointment, the writer says no.

No? No! She's written a book and it hasn't changed her life? Isn't talking to Ken a change? Did she wander around the country giving radio interviews before her book was published?

I hate to turn off the radio. Ken is hot tonight and I want to see what else he'll ask. But I don't want to be late for my Tai Chi class. I park on Strathcona, grab my black Chinese slippers, and lock the 4x4. As I am locking the door, I see myself sitting across from Ken.

"Has this book changed your life?"

I know this is radio and no one can see me, except Ken and the technician on the other side of the glass, but I am feeling snazzy just the same. I'm wearing a new-to-me silk shirt in a delicious raspberry red and I have a saucy short haircut and a sparkly black earring in my left ear. "Oh, yes," I reply, fingering the earring, "this book has changed my life. No question about it. First," I speak thoughtfully into the microphone, "writing it has allowed me to face my fear of travelling and, while I still have moments of

anxiety, mostly I am calm and hopeful. I no longer become irritable when I have to line up for a train or a plane." I smile at Ken, astonished at how relaxed I feel. I am totally absorbed in his question and completely present in this moment. "And you know what else?"

He waits, smiling.

I glance at the beautiful book in my hands. "Writing this novel allowed me to explore the sort of love I want in my life. And no one was more surprised than I when the love I created in my novel actually appeared in my life. It took time, of course. It wasn't instantaneous. Some people can make things hap-

pen in an instant but I'm rather slow. It took a few years." I swallow. Does that sound airy-fairy? I don't care. I'm speaking the truth and I don't give a damn what anybody thinks. Sometimes I'm able to manifest what I want in my life by writing about it. For a long time I thought it was arbitrary. I didn't understand that the Universe has her own schedule. When I wrote about a character moving from an apartment into a house, because I desperately wanted to live in a house, I thought it should happen right away. It took nearly five years to make that one come true.

The CBC radio studio is on the top floor of the Chateau Laurier and when I glance at the window, I have a rooftop view of the Byward Market. I love this gorgeous city. Unfortunately we have horribly humid summers and unbearably cold winters. Ah, well, nothing is perfect. (I know, I know, the spiritual point of view is that Everything Is Perfect.)

I am waiting for his next question. I rest my right hand over my sternum, enjoying the feel of silk beneath my palm. I look at Ken, smiling, determined to ignore the pressure of speaking into a microphone, determined to be myself.

"Some people can make things happen in an instant?"

"Sure." I nod. "Not me. Not yet." I rub the sparkly black earring with the soft part of my thumb. "It's not something people always do consciously, either. I didn't write about fear of travelling or the worst of intimate relationships because I wanted to change my life. The changes were just a wonderful side effect of writing about what I felt like writing about."

A car horn honks, yanking me back to Bank Street. I glance at the black shoes in my hand and turn toward the Taoist Tai Chi Society's house. I hate it when people do that, honk for no good reason. Listen people, the car horn is intended for emergencies, not to express displeasure with how someone else drives.

In actual fact, over the last few years, my novel has been rejected by a variety of publishers—small, medium, large—and I am often discouraged. Why is it rejected over and over? Because it isn't an interesting story? Because it's not well-written? Do straight publishers have trouble with the lesbian stuff? Then what do the lesbian publishers have trouble with?

I walk into the Tai Chi house and sit on the wooden bench. I have done this since I was a small child, day-dreamed. It's as natural to me as breathing. Mostly I do

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Rosemary, and Me

it when I am walking and just before I go to sleep at night. Small wonder those are two of my favourite activities. I make myself look up and smile at the Tai Chi teacher. We are both shy, which makes for a whole lot of awkward energy when we are near each other. I step out of my street shoes and slip on my black shoes.

I have approached most of the publishers in this country about my novel. It's enough to make me lose faith in myself as a writer. Sometimes I console myself and boost my spirits by remembering the experiences of other writers. It took ten years for Madeleine L'Engle to find a publisher for her wonderful inventive story, *A Wrinkle In Time*. Then there was the publisher who told Rudyard Kipling he didn't know how to use the English language. There are countless stories of well-known and well-loved writers who struggled for years to get their manuscripts into print. (Not that I think I am a Kipling or a L'Engle, but, still....)

Sometimes I tell myself that everything has a time. When it is time, my novel will be published. I tell myself not to worry about running out of publishers to approach. When it's my time, a publisher will appear—someone who believes in my manuscript and works with a talented editor and produces beautiful-looking books and distributes them world-wide.

While trying to have faith, I look for signs and seek guidance from the Universe. Sometimes, I have found guidance in the unlikely places.

Saturday Night arrived at my house the same day I received a rejection letter from the Assistant Editor at McClelland & Stewart Inc. ("We read the manuscript with interest and enjoyment, but ultimately have some reservations about our ability to publish the novel successfully. It doesn't seem quite right for our list.") I read the rejection letter twice, aware of a pain somewhere beneath my heart. I stared at the letter for quite a while before I decided to sit down and open the pages of *Saturday Night*—to distract myself from the pain. In a matter of moments I was reading an excerpt from *The Red Shoes*, Rosemary Sullivan's book about Margaret Atwood.

In the Centennial summer of 1967, the legendary Canadian publisher Jack McClelland read a *Toronto Star* article celebrating a brilliant young Canadian writer who'd won the Governor General's award with her first book of poetry, *The Circle Game*. He

had actually dictated a long, flattering letter to Margaret Atwood asking to see the unpublished novel she'd mentioned to the reporter when, "struck by a terrible thought," he hurried to check the McClelland and Stewart files. Sure enough, his firm had been "seeing" the novel for nearly two years. As soon as he'd located it in the slush pile McClelland called Margaret with profuse apologies and suggested lunch. Over lunch he said her novel needed revisions but deserved to be read. And so *The Edible Woman*—issued by M&S in Canada in September, 1969—became Margaret's first published novel.

Surely this means something, that the rejection letter from M&S arrives on the same day I read Rosemary's words. Surely it is a message from the Universe: *Don't give up*. Of course it could be an entirely different message: *Forget about M&S until you win the Governor General's award. And there's not much chance of that so why don't you just give up*. But I prefer to think the message is: *Keep trying, keep believing, and never give up*.

It's absolutely true, what I imagined myself saying to Ken Rockburn. Writing has changed my life. The first change I noticed was to my shy self. I have struggled with shyness all my life. People terrify me. I dread seeing someone I know on the street because I'm never sure if I should say hello or pretend I don't see her. What if I say hello and she doesn't hear me and keeps walking? What if I say hello and she stops and expects me to keep talking? I'm just no good at casual conversation.

I am in the midst of "Parting Wild Horse's Mane" when I realize the rest of my Tai Chi class has moved on to "Left Grasp Bird's Tail." That's what I get for not staying present. I rearrange my body, hurriedly, into the next move, "Step Up to Grasp Bird's Tail," and glance down to make sure my left slipper is at a 45-degree angle and the right is pointed straight ahead.

That change to my shy self started when I was invited to read one of my stories in public. I listened to the invitation, my throat aching, my heart racing, and my initial response was a

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loud and definite *No*. "I'm a writer, not a performer," I explained. "Thank you anyway."

Later that day I confided my fears to another writer. She accepted my decision not to read and told me Jane Rule never reads from her work in public. My friend wrote poetry as well as short-fiction, and she had performed with a comedy troupe in Newfoundland. She knew people who'd been on television. She was *friends* with people who'd been on television. She said, casually, "I vomit before every performance."

I went off by myself and thought about the invitation to read and my fear. My throat was still aching but now there was a quiet voice muttering: *Try it. What's the harm?* A few hours later I said, "I will take this opportunity to read in public, thank you very much." But, I assured my terrified self, I won't do it more than once if reading in public means vomiting.

Okay. What will I read? I closed the door to my room and read every one of my stories. The decision was easy. A story called "Tea For Thirteen," about a woman who gives a tea party for her friends and a witch arrives. It felt like a story that was meant to be read aloud, although it wasn't written with that in mind. I opened the window and stared at the grass and trees for a while. Then I picked up my red felt-tip pen and started revising. The next afternoon, bent over a borrowed IBM Selectric typewriter, I typed the

revised version.

I went back to my writer friend and asked for advice on how to read in public.

"Read slowly," she said. "People tend to rush. And look at the audience. Make eye contact."

I thanked her and returned to the IBM Selectric. I had done another revision. Retyping every page was such a nuisance, but I can't help myself: I have a tendency to revise over and over until the manuscript is nearly perfect. (I know, I know, the spiritual point of view is that Everything is Perfect just as it is).

I was vaguely nervous. An hour before the reading I became seriously nervous. I avoided talking to anyone, because I felt like saying rude things for no good reason. Why had I agreed to do this? It was a mistake, a horrible mistake. I walked aimlessly in and out of the room, willing people to leave me alone. Much to my relief, I didn't vomit.

It was a large room and soon filled with people.

When it was my turn, I tried not to rush. "It started off innocently enough, as things often do. Every nine months or so I get the urge to have some friends over. There's nothing profound about the nine months. It has nothing to do with birth or rebirth or gestation. It just works out that way, that's all." I was trembling from head to toe. Even my voice was trembling. Could people tell? "I figured I'd found the perfect solution when I came up with the idea of a tea party. Consider the advantages. Fifteen minutes of preparation is all it takes, 20- at the most."

They laughed. They thought it was funny!

"A tea party is a womanly thing. Imagine sitting graciously with a tea cup in one hand (although I use mugs), and a sandwich in the other hand and a dainty napkin across the lap. It brings to mind ladies having cozy conversations, don't you think? Not that my friends are ladies."

They laughed again.

At the end, they clapped and clapped. Then the reading was over, thank heaven, and people were milling around, chatting of this and that. I wanted to flee, or at least to sit down. Still, I was hooked. I wanted to do this again. Soon.

A girl, she was ten or eleven, came up to me and said, "BOOBOO!"

I jumped.

"I'm a witch!" She laughed and laughed.

Someone brought a child to the reading? I smiled. "Are you?"

"No," she admitted. "That's my grandmother." She pointed at a woman standing nearby.

I smiled at the woman. Her granddaughter skipped over to her.

I am still shy, but not quite so shy and not quite so fearful of people. I almost enjoy reading in public although I always feel like saying rude things for no good reason beforehand and I often find myself muttering: *Why*



Diana Dean, "The Painter's Sister," 54" x 42", Oil on Canvas, 1998.

did I agree to do this? It's a terrible, terrible, mistake. And when people laugh during the reading, I always feel like kissing them, every single one.

I smile into the far distance and wrap my right hand around my left thumb and bow low. Then I mouth *thank you* to my Tai Chi teacher and turn to leave.

Ahhhhhhh, the writing life. It's filled with great joy and awful despair and enormous possibilities and repeated rejections. It's easy to focus on the rejections. I receive letters from editors and publishers that dismiss my writing. (I also receive letters that accept my writing, but it's the rejections I pay close attention to.) But listen: I wouldn't trade my life for anything else in this world. Writing is filled with lessons for life.

If he ever asks me, I know what I'll say. "Ken, writing has changed my life. Over and over again."

Candis Graham is obsessed with creative non-fiction these days. This piece is from a manuscript of essays titled, Leaning Into My Spirit: A Writer's Journey, which only a few publishers have rejected so far.

SUSAN SWAN

Today I had a Sapphic Moment

Today I had a Sapphic moment,
on the terrace in Molivos.
I was watering my geraniums
the sun slamming my head
like a golden fiend.
O friend, this gardener was suffering!
but the running hose wet my feet
and soon I gave in and watered myself
until my skin was drenched and shining
like the earth under my feet
from where my azaleas sprung.
And like them,
I, too, was growing in the garden—
a long, oddish plant,
tall for a woman
but not so big, after all.
The lemon tree on my terrace
is twice as tall
and leafier too
with many more arms than I can stretch up
in thanks
to the opalescent skies of Greece.

—*Eagles' Nest, Molivos, July 1998*

Fiction by Susan Swan has been published in ten countries. Her last novel, The Wives of Bath, has been made into a film that will be released later this year.

MARIANNE MATTE

Cinco de Mayo

Sous mes yeux s'évapore la pointe de l'aube
Je suis un livre ouvert
Une conteuse des Mille et une nuits
Un à un je défais mes lourds boulets
J'écoute mes sources intérieures, le chant de
mon ruisseau
Je suis un jardin merveilleux
Semé de tant de graines de mille d'origines
Je suis une rive sauvage
Prête à éclore à la caresse du soleil, à la rosée
du matin
Je dispose ma bouche au sourire du rayon
Les oiseaux m'adorent, et comme eux
Je ne me préoccupe guère de demain
Par ce soir rose d'été
J'adapte cette prose sous la volée
d'hirondelles rêveuses
Je suis un matin délicat qui gravite aussi
gaiement
Que la fraîcheur de l'enfant
L'heure de ma moisson délicieuse est venue
J'adore la seconde de l'envol
Les découvertes d'immenses petites choses
Aussi diverses que les grains de sable
Je suis une larme de joie
Une herbe rousse au creux de l'arbre
Depuis l'avortement digne de ma mort
Dans mes yeux de mai j'ai semé
Des particules d'amour infini
Et l'éclosion de mon âme odorante
Embaume tout ce qui m'entoure
Et comme un rayon d'aurore boréale

Marianne Matte is from Lac St-Jean.