

Rainbow in the Rearview

A memoir

“Often secrets are not revealed in words, they lie concealed in the silence between the words or in the depth of what is unsayable between two people.”

—John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

Chapter One

California 1971

We parked on the street in front of the huge circular driveway. An apparent mansion, 85 St. Elmo Way, perched at the top of the hill in San Francisco’s upscale neighborhood of St. Francis Wood. Phil and I were there because after several months of meeting with Dr. Needleman, one of the senior Gurdjieff teachers, we had been invited to meet and have lunch with Lord Pentland.

All I knew about John Pentland, known by his proper title, Lord Pentland, was that he was an elderly Scotsman, who had given up his place in the House of Lords to live in New York and oversee the Gurdjieff Work in America after Gurdjieff died in 1949. He was sixty-five years old with hundreds, possibly thousands, of students. I was twenty-nine with a perpetually dissatisfied husband, who couldn’t seem to stick with anything for long, and two young children, five and seven.

I noticed my heart kept up a heavy thud as we walked along the curve of the drive toward the house. Several people were kneeling or sitting on the center circle of grass, apparently weeding. It seemed strange that they didn’t look up as we passed because I felt that they were watching us, but not wanting to

look as though they were. The house had a huge metal scaffolding that stretched across the front of it, where four young men were scraping the stucco with wire brushes. They didn't look down or appear to notice us either. I could hear someone raking and the whine of a saw coming from around the back of the house. We climbed the flight of steps and stood uncertainly in front of the massive carved wooden door. There didn't seem to be a bell. And it wasn't clear that knocking would have any affect.

Phil and I had moved to California two years earlier because he said we needed to make a new start. I had never had any interest in living in California. It was full of too many unknowns, hippies, drugs, and lay-about, but I had married him, and my job—as I saw it—was to raise our children and follow him wherever he wanted to go.

We continued to stand there, Phil indecisive, clearly pondering what to do. One of the men on the scaffolding finally appeared to notice us and said, “Just go on in.”

It definitely didn't look like the kind of house anyone would just walk in to, but Phil pulled open the heavy door and I stepped inside. We entered a huge foyer with four sets of double glass doors that opened onto a patio beyond. An unsmiling man, standing just inside the front door stared at us without saying anything. I smiled uncertainly as I stood there then not knowing what to do, then when no one said anything, turned to watch three women washing the glass panes in slow motion. I smelled vinegar and the fainter scent of cooked onions, a trace of coffee. An ornate oriental rug covered most of the reddish floor tiles. A woman sat a solitary desk on the far side of the large room, which appeared to have no other furniture. She sorted through a stack of papers and didn't look up when we entered.

I could hear kitchen sounds—not voices, but quiet clattering and the occasional sound of water—off to the left. Through the glass doors, looking past the washer women, I saw a man in blue-jeans sweeping the patio, but oh—so—slowly, and a woman in a long, hippy-style skirt and

tall boots was cleaning out the small central fountain. It was like walking into a movie screening, but one that was running at the wrong speed and with the sound turned low.

Phil's voice seemed very loud when he finally said, "We've come to have lunch with Lord Pentland."

The unsmiling doorman immediately gestured for us to go back outside. He pointed to a narrow set of stairs off to the left. "You'll need to go over there. His room is on the left at the top of those stairs."

As we walked back down the big central staircase and across the driveway to the other set of stairs, thoughts of all that had happened to bring us to this place on this day flashed through my memory. Ostensibly Phil had wanted to make a new start, but really, he was searching for the meaning of life, and ultimately God. He had a degree in Economics from Yale, and it was a job in San Francisco at the Department of Housing and Urban Development that gave him an excuse to move, but when the job at HUD turned out to be a disappointment, after a few months Phil abandoned it, and took up the search full time. He had been haunting bookstores, and taking workshops, always looking for truth. And I had gone along. By then, we had tried Psychosynthesis, Gestalt therapy, LSD, pot—lots of pot for me—Tai Chi in Washington Square Park at dawn with the drunks and the rats, and other things, too many to list. Eventually Phil ended up in a class at San Francisco State where he met Dr. Needleman, who told him about the Work, as it was called. Even though I was interested in the spiritual search—it may have been the main reason I had wanted to marry him—for me, taking care of our children, the house, and making endless meals left little time for my own search.

Then one afternoon Phil came home and announced that he'd found "the real thing." He'd found so many *real* things that I couldn't summon up much enthusiasm for his latest find.

In my heart I had given up on finding anything meaningful beyond the reality of the daily life I was living.

But this time Phil said he had found a group of people in San Francisco who were studying the ideas of the Armenian mystic, G.I. Gurdjieff. He presented me with a hardbound copy of *In Search of the Miraculous* by P.D. Ouspensky, a thick book full of charts and diagrams and far too many words. The book was dense. It was heavy, physically and in its content.

I devoured that book in three days. I immediately recognized that it was what I had always longed for—without knowing. It was a door opening into a world I had never even imagined could exist. In college at Skidmore, majoring philosophy and religion, I had not been exactly sure what I was looking for, but I did know that I never found it. *In Search of the Miraculous* seemed like it held answers to questions I had not even known enough to ask. And now we were apparently being given the opportunity to join this Work.

When we reached the top of the narrow set of stairs the doorman had indicated, Phil knocked on the plain wooden door. It could have used a fresh coat of paint. An older man with white hair, who introduced himself as Mr. Wright, opened the door and we walked into the room. It was plain, positively monk-like, compared to the extravagance of the main house and grounds with its circular driveway and enormous oak trees. This room had probably been added on as a care-taker's residence for whoever had built the original house. There was a single bed with a plain beige spread against one wall, a desk that had clearly been shoved to one side to make room for the table that had been set for five in the middle of the room. In spite of the extreme simplicity it felt like stepping into a cathedral.

Lord Pentland appeared to glide across the room to meet us. He was over six feet tall and so thin it seemed like I could see his bones through the covering of skin. He smiled in welcome, but the general impression I had was of intense seriousness underneath the surface. Without any hint of transitional small

talk he invited us to sit at the table. He introduced us to the other man, who I presumed was like us, there for the first time, a prospective student.

The food was served by two women who looked older than I was. They came and went soundlessly from his room through its only door, the same one we had come in. They served things I'd never eaten before and would never think to eat—first an unidentifiable spicy brown soup, followed by mangoes with figs in some kind of yogurt dressing that was slimy and sweet. Then they brought in smoked Salmon with sliced endive on crackers.

Lord Pentland asked a few questions, but mostly he talked. I don't remember a word he said, not because I wasn't trying to listen, but because I was totally absorbed in *how* he spoke, and *how* he moved his hands as he ate. I had read about *self-remembering* and *presence* in Ouspensky's book, *In Search of the Miraculous*, but the words had little resonance when I had no practical experience to connect them. But watching Lord Pentland I understood. He appeared to be fully present in each moment, whether he was speaking or listening or simply transferring food from his plate to his mouth. His *presence* had a substance. The meal was like a ceremony. The whole time I had the impression that he was watching and observing, not the surface of things, but that he was seeing deeply into my core. I would have said my *soul* if I'd had any idea what that was. I had never experienced being seen like that before. It wasn't invasive in any way, but more like standing in the fullness of the sun where nothing remained concealed.

I had worn old clothes to the lunch, my at-home blue-jeans and frayed turtleneck because I hadn't wanted to *dress up* or present myself in any way that I didn't feel was truly *me*. In his presence I was immediately aware of how totally unimportant our clothes were. Both *old* and *dressed up* were completely irrelevant. I didn't know what was going on there, but it was very clear that it had nothing to do with the surface of things.

I thought we had been invited for lunch with Lord Pentland to see whether we would be interested

in joining this Work. What I understood almost immediately was that this lunch was an opportunity for Lord Pentland to see who we were and decide if we were acceptable.

At the end of the lunch he took a box of See's chocolates from his desk drawer. He held the box out to each of us as we stood by the door ready to leave. He watched us closely as we chose and continued to watch as we ate them. I was always on a diet and considered not taking one, but then did, and nibbled at it, making it last as long as possible. Phil popped a whole caramel into his mouth at once and chewed audibly. Mr. Wright, who was already carrying a lot of extra weight, and was clearly one of the teachers, took two and ate them both at once. He appeared not to notice the look he received from Lord Pentland. The other man refused the candy without offering a reason.

Lord Pentland smiled and said in his impeccable English accent to the room in general, "Don't you find it so interesting that people come to me because they say they want the Work, but the first thing I offer, they refuse?"