

arms wide open

a midwife's journey

patricia harman



By the Author of *The Blue Cotton Gown*

Arms Wide Open

A Midwife's Journey

Patricia Harman

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To my best friend, Tom, and to all those idealists who believe there is a better way

Midwife—to be with women at childbirth and throughout life

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Arms Wide Open: A Midwife's Journey is based on journals I kept for many years. The events were recorded in detail, but there are gaps, and I painted in those gaps to the best of my recollection. All the characters, except my husband, Tom Harman, have been disguised, to protect their privacy. The patients described are composites, based on real people.

Arms Wide Open is not just for those interested in midwifery or feminism. It's for anyone, of any gender, young or old, who cares about the earth and social justice. We each have our own song. This is mine and I sing it for you.

PRELUDE

All the way down Route 119, past Gandeeville, Snake Hollow, and Wolf Run, I'm thinking about the baby that died.

I wasn't there, didn't even know the family. It happened a few days ago, with another midwife, at a homebirth in Hardy County, on summer solstice, the longest day of the year.

Word on the informal West Virginia midwives' hotline is that the baby's shoulders got stuck, a grave emergency. The midwife, Jade, tried everything, all the maneuvers she'd studied in textbooks and the special tricks she'd learned from other practitioners, but nothing worked. They rushed, by ambulance, to the nearest hospital thirty miles away, with the baby's blue head sticking out of the mother, but it was too late. Of course it was too late.

Homebirth midwives in West Virginia are legal, but just barely, and there's no doubt the state coroner's office will investigate. Jade is afraid. We are all afraid.

We whip around another corner and I lose my supper out the side window. *Who do I think I am taking on this kind of responsibility? Why am I risking my life to get to a homebirth of people I hardly know? What am I doing in this Ford station wagon being whipped back and forth as we careen through the night?*

I awake sick with grief, my heart pounding. I'm lying on a pillow-padded king-size bed with floral sheets. A man I hardly recognize sleeps next to me. This is Tom, I remind myself: my husband of thirty-three years, a person whose body and mind are as familiar to me as my own. I prop myself up on an elbow, inspecting his broad shoulders, smooth face, straight nose and full lips, his short silver hair, in the silver moonlight. One hairy leg sticks out of the covers. One arm, with the wide hand and sensitive surgeon's fingers, circles his pillow. It's 3:45, summer solstice morning.

When I rise and pull on my long white terry robe, I stand for a moment, getting my bearings, then open the bedroom door that squeaks and pad across the carpeted living room. Outside the tall corner windows, the trees dance in the dark. Once I called myself Trillium Stone. That was my pen name when I lived in rural communes, wrote for our political rag, *The Wild Currents*, taught the first natural-childbirth classes, and started doing homebirths.

Now I'm a nurse-midwife with short graying hair, who no longer delivers babies, living with an ob-gyn in this lakefront home, so far from where I ever thought I would live, so far from where I ever *wanted* to live. I search the photographs on the piano of my three handsome sons, now men. Do I wake? Do I sleep?

OK, my life has been a wild ride, I'll admit it, but the image of this hippie chick lurching through the night, on her way to a homebirth, with only a thick copy of *Varney's Midwifery* as a guide, disturbs me. What did she think she was doing? Where did she get the balls?

On the highest shelf in the back of our clothes closet, a stack of journals gathers dust. For seventeen years I carried them in a backpack from commune to commune.

They've moved with me across the country three times, through midwifery school, Tom's medical school and his ob-gyn residency. I can't get the diaries out of my mind, a mute witness to my life . . .

I slip back through the bedroom. Tom snores on. By the dim closet light, I find a stepladder and struggle to bring down the shabby container. The journals have been closed for twenty-five years; pages stick together and smell faintly of mold.

I'm on a mission now, trying to understand, but I'm surprised to find that I started each entry with only the day and the month, no year. This is going to take a while. It seems I never expected anyone would want to reconstruct my life, not even me. I'm an archaeologist digging through my own past.

With narrowed eyes, I flip through notebook after notebook, daring that flower child to show her face. When the alarm goes off, Tom, dressed in blue scrubs for the OR, finds me asleep in the white canvas chair, with a red journal open, over my heart.

FROM THE RED JOURNAL

LITTLE CABIN IN THE NORTH WOODS

1971–1972

Fall

CHAPTER 1

Home

“Keep up,” Stacy yells into a bitter wind, turning to wait for me. “This kid is getting heavy.” In the dim light, I can just see his face, his narrow nose, his long eyelashes, his brown beard and brown hair, a dark Scot with a square jaw and the back of an ox. He has the baby carrier on his back and a heavy canvas backpack loaded with supplies on his front. I try to pick up my pace, but I, too, am carrying a large knapsack of provisions, and though I’m sturdy and big boned, I’m not as strong as my lover.

The swamp is damp with second-growth cedars that lean close like old women. We squish along the narrow path until we come to the creek and find it flooded. To get home, we must cross on unstable logs. Stacy goes first with one-year-old Mica. I trudge behind, after finding a long stick to balance myself. One wrong move and I’ll tumble into the water.

The trip to Duluth was a disappointment. We’d hiked out of the homestead and then hitched into town, but three out of four friends we went to see were in Minneapolis at a war resisters’ meeting. I sigh into the dark.

Sometimes I’m tired of this difficult life, living without electricity, running water, indoor plumbing, or a vehicle, but it’s my choice. No one is forcing me to live in a two-room log cabin, on a remote farm, a mile from the nearest dirt road, ten miles from the closest store.

We traverse the big meadow where we have our garden and wind through the balsam grove, along the path to the smaller clearing. In the fading light, our two-story log house, taller than it is wide, looms over us. As always when we come up to it through the trees, its solid bulk surprises me. We built this cabin, overlooking the Lester River, with our own hands. It is ours and we are home.

Repentance

Rain, rain, a snare drum on the roof. All morning it rains and we work inside, chinking. Once, this hundred-year-old Finnish log house sat rotting on our friend Jason’s Christmas tree farm. Last summer we deconstructed it, hauled it ten miles over dirt roads on a borrowed logging truck, planed the old surface down to new wood, built a foundation, and reassembled the timbers like Lincoln Logs. It was grueling, hot work, with mosquitoes buzzing over our heads, but I loved it . . .

Mica crawls on the floor in his corduroy coveralls, plays in the wood chips. When he starts to fuss, I stop chinking and nurse him. Stacy has gone upstairs to take a nap. That’s one thing I appreciate about living here. You can sleep when you want to, work when you want to, make love when you want to. No time clocks. No boss constantly watching over you.

From my perch on the window seat, I gaze out the window. The Lester River, sixty

feet down the grassy slope, is up to its banks. White foam floats on the water. Wildflowers encircle us, goldenrod and deep purple aster. A flock of yellow finch swoops down on the blossoms, looking for seeds. Except for this clearing and the five-acre meadow where we garden, uninhabited forest surrounds us for miles.

One year old, Mica pulls my long braids while he nurses. I caress his fine white cobweb hair. This is the first time Stacy and I have lived alone as a couple, and it isn't something we aspired to. When we bought this land two summers ago and still lived at Chester Creek House, an urban commune, our friends seemed interested in establishing a rural outpost. So far it's just us. I'm not sure I mind; I feel safer out in the woods. There's less risk I'll run into Johan, less chance I'll shatter the delicate balance of my nuclear family, crack it open like a blue robin's egg.

It wasn't supposed to happen. I never meant it to happen. The whole beautiful, sordid business is a paragraph in someone else's life.

We were living at the Draft Counseling Center in Duluth, on Third Street, helping conscientious objectors and hiding the occasional draft evader on his way to Canada. This was after we left Freefolk, a small commune near Bemidji, Minnesota. Stacy was taking welding classes at the vocational school and I was four months pregnant, on purpose, with our baby.

While Stacy was at class during the day, Johan Sorensen and I talked about peace and the revolution. He gave me shoulder rubs and then back rubs. Then my neck . . . I never hid that we were sexually involved. I was single, though the seed of new life grew inside me.

Stacy and I didn't believe in marriage . . . Still, my unfaithfulness wounded him, cut him deep. I try not to think about it. It's better with just the three of us here.

When Mica was born, everything changed. My sacrifice on the altar of birth burned some of the selfishness out of me. I was a mother now and even I couldn't handle three males in my life.

I gently lay my sleeping baby down on the window seat, touch the little brown birthmark near his ear, tuck a blanket around him, and study the yellow-poplar log walls. The Finnish pioneer who originally built this dwelling fit the timbers so tight you can't see daylight, but still wind whistles through. If we don't finish chinking by snowfall, we'll have to move back to town. I stand and maneuver another piece of firewood into the cookstove.

The rain stops and as the low sun slants golden under the clouds, Stacy clomps down the stairs. I see first, in the shaft of light that comes in from the window, his narrow bare feet and then his jeans and finally his whole, powerful, shirtless body.

Here is a man who loves work and music and movement and sex. Here is a man who would walk through fire to halt injustice or save a child. He leans forward and peers out the window, where each drop of water at the end of each balsam needle reflects the fading day. "Want to go out for a walk?" he asks.

The fire crackles in the woodstove. How could I want anything more?

Alone

Three days of intermittent cold rain and then the low, flat gray clouds move on. The sky is clear, but by afternoon the light fades. Already we've had a hard frost. Stacy sits on the stairs, tying his boots. He's on his way out to our mailbox at the end of Dahl Road.

"Wait just a second; I want you to take my letter for Colin." As I rummage around in the tin box where we keep the stamps, I glance at our money jar on the same shelf. Almost empty.

"Do you really want to walk all that way? It'll be night soon. You could wait until morning."

"No, I'm up for a hike. I need the exercise." Stacy shuts the heavy oak door behind him and I can hear the Big Ben alarm clock ticking upstairs.

All day we've been chinking, slow and tedious work. Outside there's more chinking to do and more tasks. The window over the kitchen table is still covered with plastic. We need to dig a pit for the root crops and get in more firewood before snow. Winter comes early in the North Woods.

I stare out the corner window at the darkening day. Weathermen bombings, the Manson murders, and Ronald Reagan's announcement, as the governor of California, "If it takes a bloodbath, let's get it over with," have eroded hippie popularity.

Everywhere there is craziness with drugs and cops and demonstrations gone bad. In the Victorian house on Haight Street in San Francisco, where I lived after I dropped out of Lewis & Clark College, there was a jar of peyote buttons on the mantel and strangers shooting up in the kitchen. We could see that our utopian dream was turning into a nightmare and left early to build the new world elsewhere.

A few years ago, people waved at us when we strolled down the street; found us interesting, exotic birds blown in from some other continent. Long-haired hippie women with flowers behind their ears smiled on the cover of *Time*.

The last time Stacy and I hitched to town, car after car passed us by, the drivers averting their eyes. It's not just my paranoia. Many despise us. Like a covey of Amish in a casino, we hippies stand out. Our dress, our speech, and our values set us apart. This is the country we were born in, but we are strangers in a strange land.

I don't like Stacy going out alone after dark.

I let out my air and get on with my work. While he's gone, I'll wash diapers. This is not my favorite chore, but we aren't going to Duluth for another week and it's my turn. I'm in luck. Before he left, my companion hauled two buckets of water up from the river.

First I pour the water in a big tin pan on the cookstove. While it heats, I rinse the soiled nappies in cold. When the water is hot, I scrub them with homemade soap, rinse twice, and two hours later they hang on a rope across the kitchen. Mica is asleep upstairs in his little bed and I stand on the porch, listening for Stacy. He's been gone a long time. Dogs bark in the distance.

"Whoo. Whoo," I yell into the blackness. "Whoo. Whoo."

Stacy has no lantern, and along the trail that stretches between our home and the mailbox there are roots you can trip on, rocks you could crack your head open on, and a treacherous swamp to cross.

"Whoo. Whoo," I call again, but there's only the roar of the river. The quarter moon

rises; just a faint glow on the horizon but the Lester reflects the circle of light. A great horned owl, a quarter mile downriver, picks up the call. *Hoo-hoo hoooooo hoo-hoo*. I picture his round eyes piercing the gloom.

Then “Whoooo,” very faint. At first when I hear it, I think the owl mocks me, but from faraway in the swamp, Stacy’s voice comes again. “Whoo. Whoo.”

CHAPTER 2

Peace

“Aren’t you worried?” I yell down. “Winter’s almost here. Aren’t you worried about the cold?”

It’s raining again and the roof leaks like a sieve. Every two hours, I empty the containers under the eaves and quickly replace them. Only the west side, where we sleep, is dry. Because of the wind, we can’t make repairs.

The swollen Lester River surges past our cabin. We can’t get close to the swimming hole or anywhere near the small island where the old pine tree stands. Biting the inside of my lower lip, I watch the raging water from the upstairs window and wonder at what we’re doing, trying to live on this eighty-acre subsistence farm, growing our own food, building our dwelling out of recycled materials, living as lightly on the earth as possible. Are we going too far?

Then I clatter down the stairs in my jeans and heavy boots. “Aren’t you concerned about the weather, Stacy?”

“Nah, there’ll be some good days to work outside yet. There’s not much left to do and we’ll finish sometime. Think about it. The old couple I met at the end of Dahl Road made it through winter in the old days.” Stacy refers to the Olsens, our closest neighbors, the people he visited the night he was away so long.

He mixes another batch of the caulking material and hands me a trowel. Fingers of cold reach into the room and this is still October. *What will it be like by December?* I shake that thought away.

Stacy has his own steady rhythm. He works calmly at one pace, then when up against it, works harder, but I have a sense of urgency and don’t like leaving things to the last minute. Slap, I squish on the putty. Whoosh, I smooth the cookie-dough-like substance into the crevice.

Paul and Silas bound in jail . . . That’s Stacy singing an old freedom song. *Had no money for to go their bail.* Music has always been important to me. I can trace my life story by the soundtrack playing in the back of my mind. *Keep your eyes on the prize, hold on . . .*

All afternoon, we sing as we work. We take turns entertaining the baby and emptying the buckets of water and the rain keeps pounding. My wrists are sore and my arms aching but I’m not stopping until Stacy does.

“Quitting time,” Stacy finally announces, picking up Mica and throwing him up to the ceiling. I cringe; the baby’s head comes so close to a beam. *Why do men do such things? I can’t remember ever seeing a woman toss a baby, certainly not a mother.* Little Mica laughs uproariously and I see why Stacy thinks it’s so fun.

In the fading light, my friend washes our tools in the bucket. I warm up our bean soup and muffins and light the lamp. Tonight, as is our custom before eating, we make a circle with our hands, even the baby. As we do, I imagine we’re holding hands with all the nonviolent revolutionaries we’ve known. I look around at the unfinished walls,

the piles of clothes, tools, and building supplies, and shake my head. Stacy's probably right. I worry too much.

Warmth from the cookstove, rain on our roof, the three of us safe in our little log cabin. In the glow of the kerosene lamp, Stacy's eyes are moist. I feel the same way. "Peace," Stacy whispers, and we sing our Johnny Appleseed song. *The Lord's been good to me, and so I thank the Lord, for giving me the things I need: the sun and the rain and the apple tree. The Lord's been good to me . . .*

Thou Shalt Not

"Have you heard from Colin?"

Aaron, our friend from Chester Creek House, pulls an extra wooden chair up to the kitchen table. He's a tall guy with dark wild curly hair and a toothy smile that makes you grin even if you aren't in the mood. He showed up this morning saying he was just on a hike, but he must have sensed how desperately we needed him. We've spent all afternoon, under the Minnesota blue sky, nailing down new roofing paper.

Fortunately Mica can sleep through anything and took a long nap while we worked. Forty feet up, as the men walked back and forth on the peaked roof, I crawled on my hands and knees, scared shitless but determined to keep up with them.

"Have you heard from Colin lately?" I repeat.

"He just got out of jail in Hartford after the demonstration at the nuclear submarine base. Bad scene. Fasted without food and water for two weeks." Aaron's mouth tightens and he fiddles with his spoon. I watch his long fingers flip the cutlery back and forth.

"When he was finally taken to court he'd lost twenty pounds. It's only his jailers that kept him alive. They forced water down his throat with a tube every day." The man we speak of is our mutual friend, a full-time activist from the Committee for Non-Violent Action in Connecticut.

Stacy shakes his head. We've all been in jail for a few days, or a few weeks. Some of my draft-resister friends have been incarcerated for years. Stacy, Johan, Aaron, and Colin are only free now because they drew high numbers in the draft lottery. Whether a guy gets a 30 or a 300 can mean the difference between living free and protesting the war, leaving friends and family for Canada, fighting in the jungles of Vietnam, or going to prison as a draft resister.

We all admire Colin's commitment but frown on his extremism, fearing someday he'll die from one of his water fasts . . . or be beaten to death by frustrated guards. I listen as the men discuss the state of the peace movement. Far away from the napalm and death, the war in Vietnam still defines us.

The men's conversation veers to an analysis of Nixon's five-point peace plan and the latest riot at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. A professor was killed in an explosion targeting a research facility aligned with the Defense Department.

"Guys, I'm beat. I'm gonna crash. There's a pile of quilts on the floor by the heater stove or you can sleep with us in the big bed, Aaron." I give him a one-armed hug and lean over to kiss Stacy, who pats me on the butt.

Upstairs, Mica plays with my long loose chestnut hair as he nurses. It saddens me when I hear of Students for a Democratic Society's violent demonstrations. Stacy and I are both against the war for moral reasons, but he has always been more politically sophisticated. My pacifism is simple. I learned it in Sunday school. *Thou shalt not kill.* You can die for the cause and some have, but you don't kill. Pretty simple.

In the window's reflection over the bed, I see my image as an Andrew Wyeth painting, *Farm Woman, Nursing*. I'm not beautiful; in fact as I look at myself I have many complaints, but when I've desired a man, I've usually slept with him. I study my face, unlined, my soft white breasts in the golden lamplight. Colin was the only man who made it clear he wasn't interested. I was in love with him once, maybe still am.

Downstairs the soundtrack to our life starts up again, Stacy on the Autoharp and Aaron on the harmonica. *They're rolling out the guns again, hurroo, hurroo. They're rolling out the guns again . . .* The moonlight streams metallic through the window at the head of the bed, and their song goes up through the rafters, out the patched roof.

But they'll never take our sons again . . . Becoming a mother has changed me; life always seemed precious, but even more so after I gave birth.

No, they never will take our sons again. Johnny I'm swearing to you.

MICA

I look over at Mica lying next to me and touch the little brown birthmark by his right ear. The night I went into labor, I was two weeks past my due date and we'd returned home late from a meeting on alternative lifestyles at the university. I went straight upstairs with an aching back, but had hardly gotten into bed when my water broke. We were living in Duluth, at the Draft Counseling Center, with our friends Ernie and Darla and their three-year-old twins.

"Guess what?" I rolled over and nudged Stacy. "It's started."

We lay holding hands and timed contractions until dawn, then crowded into Ernie's old Chevy and took Route 61 along the north shore to Two Harbors Hospital, the only facility within 150 miles that would let the father be in the delivery room. The sky was turning pink and Lake Superior reflected the sunrise. White seagulls cut the air and I wasn't afraid.

There's an old wives' tale that if your mother had a fast labor you will, too, but I'm sorry to say, in my case the old wives were off. My mom had me in two hours with hardly a pain, but my baby was sunny-side up, facing the pubic bone instead of the sacrum, a position that causes slow dilatation and constant back pain.

By 10:00 a.m. I was five centimeters, and Stacy joked that I might have the baby by noon. Then progress slowed. The nurses wouldn't let me walk, so I threw off my blue hospital gown and swayed on the bed, on my hands and knees, naked. Shocked, they stopped coming into the room.

Stacy rubbed my lower back for hours and timed the contractions while I did the *hee-hee's* and *hoo-hoo's* we'd learned at the Lamaze class in Minneapolis. He was my rock, keeping me centered, suggesting changes of position. Whenever I'd get off track, he'd help me relax.

For hours I stared out the hospital room window across a wide expanse of snow. I saw the light change; the shadows lengthen then turn to dusk. Nothing moved except an occasional car on the road a mile away. I was grateful even for that, any distraction, something to take my mind off the grinding pressure in my sacrum.

There were five pine trees in the field and one of them, if you looked at it right, had a face. The woman I saw there gave me strength. *You can do it!* she would say as I stared at her through contractions. *You can do it. Just take the contractions one at a time.*

By ten at night I had the urge to push and was taken into the delivery room, a green-tiled space dominated by a gleaming silver instrument table and a stainless steel platform with stirrups. I wasn't strapped down like in most hospitals, but I was still flat on my back. Stacy supported my shoulders. If he wasn't touching me, I panicked.

I pushed and I pushed until the veins stood out on my neck like an Amazon warrior and my face turned blue, but nothing moved. Two hours later Dr. Leppink, our peacenik physician, arrived and told the nurses I was pushing too early. I was only eight centimeters. That's when I lost it and took the Demerol.

It wasn't pleasant, but sometimes you just have to choose, medication or insanity, and I'll admit, it relaxed me while we waited for my cervix to withdraw. My disorientation from the medication was worse for Stacy than me. I couldn't keep my eyes open and was incoherent. The combination of no sleep for two days and the drug made me hallucinate. It took another ninety minutes, but finally my cervix was fully dilated.

When at last they took me back to the delivery room, feeling the baby move down spontaneously gave me hope. Getting sugar water in my IV gave me strength. In the end, forceps and a large mediolateral episiotomy were necessary, but it didn't matter.

Birth always alters you. It's a learning experience, and what Stacy and I came to understand is that no matter how many classes you go to, how much you practice relaxation, how many books you read, or how many prayers you put out into the universe, childbirth is beyond your control, a force of nature, like a tornado, a blizzard, or an earthquake.

As Dr. Leppink pulled and I pushed, the baby shifted.

"Look down," the nurses said. "See your baby being born."

I could feel each part of his body slip out. His head. His shoulders and feet. Then, flop, a wet life on my stomach. This I didn't expect. Babies were usually dangled in midair to drain mucus, spanked, and given to the nurses.

Mica, our son, let out a cry and flung his trembling arms wide. *A baby all wrinkled and tired! Our baby.* Stacy is crying. I am crying. We're exhausted. We're elated.

We made this new being out of our imperfect love; gave life to him from our common belief in a universe that says yes.

CHAPTER 3

Shadow

“So, are you up for it?” Stacy looks out the window. “The teach-in isn’t for three days, but we could go to town early.”

The sun is just rising and, as it warms, the mist lifts off the golden water. A cardinal sits like a drop of blood on the curved cedar tree. I inspect our provisions on the shelves under the kitchen counter, jars that once contained beans, wheat berries, cornmeal, and powdered milk. It’s been weeks since we’ve been to the city or seen anyone but each other. The food containers are mostly empty, but our money jar’s empty too.

“Maybe you could get work at the docks. We’re low on supplies, plus I want to make some posters for my introductory childbirth class and put them up in the library.”

Fine snow blows like sand as we cross the fallen elm that serves as our bridge over the Lester. Stacy, wearing a heavy hooded parka, carries Mica on his back in the baby carrier, first through the woods and then across Jacobsen’s pasture to the Jean Duluth Road. We pass shallow pools of marshland surrounded by cattails that harbor mallards and mergansers. They rise as we pass.

“Hi, ducks. Better hurry south. Winter’s here.” I pull my rainbow scarf tighter, lean into the wind, and review my mental list of what we’ll buy in town. Whole-wheat berries to grind into flour, pinto beans and cheese from the natural foods co-op. But we also need nails. Maybe we can borrow some money from Aaron.

Amazingly, as soon as we stick out our thumbs, we’re in luck. A beat-up blue pickup pulls over. “It’s a cold one,” the driver grumbles, leaning over and throwing open the passenger door. I’m assaulted by my childhood smells, cigarettes and beer, but settle myself in the middle of the front seat with Mica in my lap.

“So,” says the old guy, dressed in gray coveralls with a green John Deere cap, “what you fellas doing way out here?” I realize that with my braids tucked inside my hood, a wind-burned face, and no makeup, he thinks I’m a man. “Name’s Tollefson,” he bites out. His face is a wrinkled road map and he has one large dark mole, shaped like Lake Superior, under his eye.

“I’m Stacy Woodrow and this is Patsy, and Mica, our boy.” Stacy doesn’t call me his wife, but implies it, letting the man know I’m a girl. The driver gives me a quick once-over, adjusting to my femaleness, and pulls back on the road. “Whatcha doing way out here?” he asks again.

“We live about two miles back, on the Lester. Bought eighty acres and built a cabin by the river.” I let Stacy do the talking, happy just to be warm and out of the wind. Hitchhiking always makes me wary.

Mica pulls at my coat, wanting to nurse, but embarrassed in such close proximity to Mr. Tollefson, I distract him by playing patty-cake. The radio’s tuned to the news and I

catch a report that the Khmer Rouge attacked an airport in South Vietnam, but the driver impatiently reaches over and turns the sound off.

“I remember the family that used to own your place, the Lindquists.” Tollefson rubs his grizzled white whiskers. “They lost their eighty acres to taxes four years ago. Weren’t too happy about the state repossessing it. Farm had been in the family for generations. They had to move into Duluth. That how you got the place? Foreclosure from the county?”

Stacy answers yes, not saying more.

I frown. I’d never thought about who owned our land before, just assumed someone died or maybe flew south, like a migrating bird, to avoid the harsh winters. The thousand dollars we paid for the property was what we had left after Stacy gave his grandmother’s inheritance away.

“When the rich die and give their money to their children, they just perpetuate the class system,” Stacy had explained to me as he wrote checks to the ACLU, the American Friends Service Committee, and the War Resisters League. The ethics of inheritance had never occurred to me. In my family, we’d be lucky to get enough for the burial.

Mica falls asleep against my chest. The rough sound of the motor reverberates in the cold. Our driver works his jaw back and forth like a saw and drums on the steering wheel with his weathered hands. I’m not sure if he resents us for buying the Lindquists’ farm or just doesn’t have anything else to say. Twenty minutes later, we pull up in front of the brick post office in downtown Duluth.

“Thanks, we really appreciate the lift.” That’s Stacy.

“Yeah, thanks,” I chime in.

As we stride down the sidewalk toward Chester Creek House, I glance over my shoulder. Tollefson hasn’t moved, and I turn back and wave. The man seems friendly enough. He picked us up when many people wouldn’t. But he doesn’t wave back.

Chester Creek House

Whitewashed stone walls. A worn red oriental carpet. Mattress on the floor with an Indian-print cotton spread. I’m in our room in the basement of Chester Creek House, folding clean diapers.

The cold light from one tiny window up near the ceiling illuminates Mica, who’s playing with wood blocks at my side. On the wall hangs a picture I drew after Mica’s birth, showing how I felt after twenty-four hours of constant back labor and three hours of pushing: a wet noodle, but powerful too.

When Mica finally was born, even though the doctor had to help at the end, I felt I could do anything, move a two-ton truck with my bare hands, lift a mountain, part the waters of Lake Superior. In the drawing, which is done in pastels on a large sheet of stiff white paper, Stacy stands guard at the end of the bed, saying, “Push!” On his chest is an H, for My Hero.

It was his strength that got me through the long labor. Women often say they couldn’t have done it without their support people. I know now that’s true. The pain would suck you down under the earth. People who love you are your anchor to life.

“Shit!” The front door of the three-story Victorian communal house bangs open and male voices echo from the front hall. “My hands are freezing.”

It’s Stacy, Aaron, and Jim, a pale, quiet, ponytailed refugee from the Kent State massacre, where the Guardsmen fired sixty-seven rounds into the crowd and four students were killed, one paralyzed, and eight others wounded. For three days they’ve worked unloading cargo ships while I hung around Chester Creek House.

“Hey,” I call out, hurrying upstairs with Mica on my hip. “How’d it go?”

The men are pulling off their boots and combing the frost from their beards and mustaches. “We were lucky; another ship came in from the Soviet Union,” Stacy tells me. “It might be the last.” They’re tired and cold, but have cash in their pockets.

Duluth, at the westernmost end of Lake Superior, is linked, via the Great Lakes and the Saint Lawrence Seaway, to the Atlantic Ocean, over twenty-three hundred miles away. Like any seaport, it’s a great place to get day labor . . . I’d try it myself, but they don’t hire women.

The smell of garlic and cheese fills the house, and it’s already dark as we seat ourselves around the long dining table. The Benders, Terry, Joan, and their three kids, have made vegetarian lasagna, tossed salad, and homemade bread for all thirteen of us. Courtney, a pensive, dark-eyed librarian, serves us from the end of the table.

“Patsy and I will split tomorrow. I have fifty-five dollars and we’re set for another month, but we want to chip in on the food. We put five bucks in the kitchen money jar,” Stacy announces. Though we act like it’s not important, money here, as in most communes, is a sensitive issue. As a group, we declare, “To each according to his need and from each according to his ability,” but without regular jobs, Stacy and I can’t afford to live like the rest of them.

Since last summer, when we gave up our beautiful window-lined bedroom on the second floor and moved down to the basement of this big old Victorian, our role in the community has been awkward. We don’t contribute to the rent but still crash at the house when we’re in town. Everyone says we’re welcome, but I’m concerned their generosity has a limit; that’s why I’ve been helping Leila, Aaron’s new girlfriend, paint their turreted bedroom for the last three days . . . to contribute labor instead of cash. Even before we officially moved out, these issues were a tug-of-war.

“Forget it,” says Patrick, the balding ex-priest, now a history teacher at Holy Rosary School. “You need the bread more. We’ll sponge off *you* sometime.”

That’s my cue. “We’d be happy to share the farm . . .” I flash him my innocent blue eyes and take another delicate bite of lasagna. For two years, Stacy and I have tried to get these friends to join us on the land. The group laughs uncomfortably and I join in, but my laughter’s tinged with resentment and everyone knows this. I catch Stacy’s eye. He flashes me a look to cool it.

The fact is that Stacy and I *are* ambivalent about sharing the land. We yearn for community and believe in land trusts, but don’t really want to give up control. If these people join us on the farm, even for just the short three-month growing season, they’ll bring chain saws, power lines, and vehicles, ripping our Ansel Adams wilderness apart.

Jim pushes his chair back, escaping the rough edges around the table, and slips into the living room, where he turns down the lights and tunes up his twelve-string. One by

one, eager to avoid the mealtime strain, we trail after him and slouch on sofa and chairs.

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd, Jim sings.

For the old man is a waitin' for to carry you to freedom. Follow the drinking gourd, we all join in.

Outside, the wind whips the dark cold. Our relationship with these friends is complicated.

Like yarn, we unravel and then run straight. We have to be careful with each other's feelings, but when we sing, our frayed edges mend.

Left foot, peg foot, travelin' on. Follow the drinking gourd.

From the Heart

Like actors in the musical *Hair*, when Stacy and I stride into the teach-in, friends immediately surround us. "Hey, how you doing?" "We miss you, man." "What's been happening?"

The university auditorium is almost full and I hear a young woman in the audience ask her companion, "Who's that?"

"Stacy and Patsy," the bearded man whispers. "Local war resisters, legendary hippies."

Stacy, wearing jeans and the green tweed sweater I knit him, precedes me to the folding table where the other panelists sit. I follow, tall, confident hippie chick in a long skirt, with her towheaded kid on her back, scanning the packed hall for Johan. I know he's still in Duluth, because Courtney told me he lives with a new girlfriend. I can't find Patrick or Jenny, either; or the Benders and their three kids, the other residents of Chester Creek House. Only Jim is accounted for, leaning against the back wall near the double doors in his patched bell-bottoms and faded denim work shirt. I tilt my chin hello. Aaron said he'd be late.

As the room quiets, Stacy stands and gazes across the waiting faces. Nearly every seat is filled, with college students, activists, and a few professors. A pregnant blond, her long straight hair pulled back with a silver clip, excuses herself, trying to squeeze along the row to an empty place. It's my friend Jody Innis. I smile and wave with my fingers.

Stacy waits and then begins as if we're gathered in someone's living room. "Not since the Civil War has this country been so affected by a military conflict. Every American family is impacted by the war in Southeast Asia. We've lost husbands . . . sons . . . daughters . . . nephews . . . and friends. Who here knows someone who's died in Vietnam?" Hands go up all over the auditorium. "Over forty thousand Americans have been killed already, and many who've returned suffer physical and emotional scars. Nearly *two million* Vietnamese are dead or maimed, destroyed by this war that Nixon promised to end."

When Mica begins to fuss, I throw a knit shawl over him, pull up my turtleneck, and put him to my breast. He nestles against me and I rub his fine white hair. Stacy addresses the crowd with quiet moral authority, sure of himself and his cause of peace.