

# Chapter 1

## A Day in the Desert

On this April morning of 2003, in the high desert, I expected the beginning of summer's crushing heat. Instead, as I trudge the quarter-mile from Dukkha House, the women's dormitory, my hair whips around my head from the cold wind, and above me loom great piles of darkening cloud. I look out across the open stretch of Copper Mountain Mesa, a terrain sparse with creosote and desert sage, dotted with modest houses, part of the Mojave Desert of California. Ruth Denison's meditation center, Dhamma Dena, spreads out in one-story buildings and house trailers, their wood, stucco, stone and painted metal blending into the vast monotonous landscape.

I am here once again to sit and talk with Ruth, to learn her history, travel with her the road that led through sites both physical and mental to this destination.

Outside the gate to Las Vegas house, where Ruth now lives, I find cacti planted in gleaming white toilet bowls, sprouting magnificent cherry-red blossoms, and stop to admire the gorgeous petals of these briefly blooming flowers. I open the gate of the chain link fence, walk up the sandy driveway, and go in the back door of the green-shingled one-story house. The previous owner had installed the fence and wire security door. Ruth has so little fear that for most of the period this center has existed, doors were never locked, and most of them still aren't.

The fence was useful, however, during the five-and-a-half years of her husband Henry's dying, when he lived here and was guarded by fierce dachshunds, eager to take a chunk out of your ankle when you came to visit him. Many times I trembled at the gate, menaced by scrabbling growling little wiener dogs, as I called for someone to come out and hold them back so that I could go in and sit with Henry.

This morning no such guardians attack me. Ruth's latest dachsies are too old and tired to leap into watchdog mode.

Through the closed porch I go, and into the dark narrow kitchen, calling "Hello, I'm here!"

Ruth stands in the living room talking to Dhammapala, the woman returned from Burma who will stay here for a time. Dhammapala gives me her brilliant smile while Ruth goes on instructing her. "Yah, while I am gone for the night, dahling, you stay here in my house. That will be nice for you, hmm? Later I show you how to feed the coyotes, and the rabbits, and the roadrunners."

"I can sleep in my van," Dhammapala offers.

Ruth objects. "No, dahling, you sleep in here so you can take care of the doggies."

She turns to point them out, curled on a large round pillow between the dining room and the living room. Tara, shaggy and gray-whiskered, sleeps. Nelli Belli Delli, a beautiful caramel-colored shorthair with a delicate pointed snout, looks up at us anxiously. She is a purebred who had been used for breeding—kept in a small cage all her life, impregnated regularly, giving birth and nursing, until she reached the end of her usefulness and would have been sold for vivisection had she not had the extraordinary good fortune of being rescued by Ruth Denison.

Dhammapala, wearing a floppy sun hat, comes to squat and pet the dogs.

I have taken my usual place at the dining room table and begin unpacking tape recorder, microphone and clipboard.

“Yes, dahling, you get settled there,” Ruth directs. And sending me a piercing glance, “Did you have breakfast?”

I assure her that I did.

Ruth is a small, erect, wiry woman wearing black pants and top, her upper body swathed in a bright red coat-sweater. On her head rests one of her hats—this one like a white cotton muffin, pouchy above, and with a narrow brim, beneath which brown-blond curls rest on her forehead and over her ears. (As unusual as it is for an 80-year-old to have brown hair, Ruth has proof that this trait runs in her family. A framed photo on the wall shows her with her *Mutti*; it was taken in Germany when her mother was in her nineties and still had light-brown hair.)

“Now, dahling, I want you to sweep the porch.” This to Dhammapala, who crouches next to the dogs. “And then will you go tell Jim to fix that back door? It is *dangling* on its hinges!”

Ruth moves quickly past the table where I sit, and something catches her eye. She lifts a letter from a stack of leaflets and mailers. “You see what they are doing to the environment, dahling? On the whole I think it is better for women to have more leading positions in government, hmm? But with this Gale Norton!” She slaps the letter with a flat hand, and brandishes it at me, “With her we have not a good thing! Oh, you wouldn’t *believe* what she is doing!” She hands me the letter.

While I read the latest account of what Norton, President Bush's Secretary of the Interior, has done, Ruth ushers Dhammapala out the door and finds her a broom.

I plug in the tape recorder, attach the mike, and sit waiting. Any number of events may occur to postpone beginning our interview. Jim, the temporary handyman, may arrive and need instruction about the door. The phone may ring. We may hear the squawking of the roadrunner, Ruth's favorite creature. Those of us who grew up on movie cartoons will remember the roadrunner in Warner Brothers Loony Tunes shorts. A big wacky bird with tufted head, he streaks across the ground, tail held stiffly straight up behind him, chased by Wile E. Coyote. Ruth has cultivated a relationship with a pair of roadrunners, and keeps little balls of ground meat in her refrigerator to feed them when they come. They are inordinately precious to her. The last time one arrived, when I was here, it came running into the living room through the open patio door, giving its scratchy call for food. "Ah, that is the mother," Ruth told me, "she comes for food for her babies." She fell to her knees to hold out a meatball to the visitor, who plucked it greedily. Ruth looked up at me, her face opening with the delight of a five-year-old. "*Look,*" she said, "she took it even from my fingers!"

Now she heads for the kitchen. "Shall I make you a cup of coffee, darling?"

This is Ruth Denison, one of the pioneer teachers of Buddhism in the West. Born in Germany before the Second World War, she survived bombings and strafing, privation, injury and disease. Then, in her late thirties and forties, after coming to the United States, she entered a second rigorous training: she studied with the greatest spiritual teachers of the mid-twentieth century, in India, Burma, Japan and the United

States, and emerged with the authorization to teach, conferred upon her by an esteemed Burmese Buddhist master.

Ruth brought a strongly female, body-centered approach to Buddhist practice, when this was seen as radical and subversive. She taught the very first women-only Buddhist meditation retreat, and has continued as a powerful teacher for women, as well as her many male students. She introduced sensory-awareness techniques and movement into Buddhist meditation practice, shocking the more traditional practitioners and delighting many of her female students. For thirty years she has taught extensively in the United States and Europe, and helped in the establishment of meditation centers in Canada, Germany, Massachusetts and California. As often happens with innovators, Ruth is now viewed with respect by the establishment that once marginalized her. More conventional teachers have adopted some of her practices and these have become routine in many meditation settings. For countless women and men, Ruth opened the door to spiritual practice.

Unpredictable and contradictory, she challenges her students with her ever-present love of life and boundless energy. She can act the highhanded Prussian general at one moment—ordering you around, snapping at you if you're slow or inattentive—and at the next melt your heart with her tender empathy for pain. She can plunge you down inside your deepest consciousness through her grasp of the truths of existence, then send you into spasms of annoyance by interrupting your concentration with verbal guidance. Her compassion is expressed in myriad ways, many of them subtle or hidden; her patience with neurosis and madness brings comfort and healing energy to many. No one just like Ruth Denison has ever walked the earth before.

After some initial resistance, for the task seemed daunting, I have set myself to evoke in some measure the astonishing life that Ruth Denison has led. I do this because she is a consummate teacher whose contribution deserves recognition, and because she has struck new ground in the great continuing drama of Buddhism's coming to the West. But I also honor a more personal urgency in telling Ruth's story, for it was she who set my feet upon the spiritual path some twenty-five years ago and has continued to inspire and vex me ever since. To understand my own complex relationship with this extraordinary woman, I needed to grasp her evolution through all the circumstances and choices of her life, into the mature teacher I know today. In the research and writing of this book, I encountered myself at every juncture, resisting Ruth, criticizing her, judging her, as well as opening to the teachings embedded in her life; for I have never been the compliant, adoring student. Now she is old and I am getting older, and it was crucial to me to grapple with the many paradoxes of her character and my own response to them, in order to come to understand the full range of my own spiritual path and awareness. What was it about Ruth and myself that drew me back, year after year, to sit and move and dance with her, even when I could so clearly see her faults?

For over twenty years I have been coming down here to the Mojave Desert to Ruth's meditation retreats. This last year I came not to meditate but to sit at her dining room table and encourage her to tell again the stories about her life that I've heard in the meditation hall and everywhere else at Dhamma Dena. I've learned in my years with Ruth that things often do not happen the way I think they should. In her teaching, and in her life, Ruth acts spontaneously; she is so fully committed to *this moment* that she may lose track of what she promised yesterday, or even of the prescribed schedule of events

at a retreat. At first this evoked little fits of exasperation in me—until I discovered the obvious, that it was my own mind that was causing me to suffer. Then I began to understand that this was a great teaching for me: to let go of expectations, not to hold so tightly to my own precious agenda, to break the form and stay with the interest and joy of the present moment.

Now there is sweetness in simply being with Ruth in each activity. She teaches in her daily life as much as in her formal instruction. She cares so passionately about the details of ordinary existence, and tends so lovingly to all living and non-living beings, that it feels like a stiff begrudging and holding-back to give in to impatience with her.

Our relationship has evolved in the last year of interviewing. At first Ruth was quite suspicious of this book-writing project, even though she officially approved of it. She tends to resist documentation of her self or work, believing that she must be experienced in person to be known. But as I researched the context of her German youth, her years in Hollywood with Henry Denison, her fifteen years of training with major teachers during the spiritual renaissance of the sixties, we talked in depth about her life, revisiting painful periods, going deeper. Gradually she began to relax and accept this process of telling her story, began to trust my intention to present her, to the best of my ability, in her complexity.

This, we both understand, will not result in a conventional biography, as my own story intertwines with Ruth's. Also, I did not have ten years and unlimited funds to put toward verifying every name, date or occurrence in her life. Some of the evidence has literally disappeared. For instance, the village where Ruth grew up in East Prussia no longer exists—it was long ago swallowed up into Poland. All her siblings and many of

her associates, German and American, have died. In many instances I have had to rely on Ruth's sometimes faulty memory for details, and have had to contend with her occasionally giving different versions of a story. The time-line of Ruth's life I have pieced together from her own accounts, other people's versions of incidents, the dates of certain well-known world events. It is accurate in its most important junctures. Still, some of it wobbles into the shadows when I try to pin it down, and so I surrender to a certain freewheeling spirit in Ruth and myself which gives greater value to the verve and spirit of a story than its exact location in time.

This morning I am here to get her talking once again about her life—something she does with great wit and gusto—and at some point we need to begin.

Ruth has opened her jar of expensive organic instant coffee and made us each a cup, lacing them with Half and Half. Now she brings both cups to the table and seats herself across from me. I clip the remote microphone to the collar of her red sweater, and we are ready.

While setting up, I was looking from dining room to living room, at a handsome bronze statue of Shiva, Hindu god of destruction and reproduction, dancing within a ring of fire, that stands on a sideboard. The image was given to Ruth by Alan Watts, I recall. One of the myriad of students and colleagues and old friends of Ruth whom I have interviewed over these months had told me a story about Ruth and Watts. It seems like a good place to begin.

“I heard that when Alan Watts died, you were in India, and you did a temple dance for him. How did that happen?”

Ruth leans forward, smiles slowly, pulling up the memory.

The famous counterculture explicator of Eastern religions, Alan Watts, became a close friend of Ruth and Henry Denison in the 1960s. He often led seminars and gave talks in the living room of their house in the Hollywood Hills. Watts was the centerpiece of a group of friends that included psychologists and philosophers, Hindu gurus and Japanese Zen masters, exponents of LSD and marijuana, innovators and risk-takers, who came to the parties and dinners at 2796 Creston Drive. The house, perched on a steep hill above a reservoir, had the feel of a Japanese country house, simple and elegant, quiet, gracious, the perfect setting for the informal salon that Henry and Ruth hosted.

“Yah, I danced a lot with Alan, in my own home,” she begins. “And when he was there, there were always people like Dr. Janiger the psychiatrist, Werner Erhard, John Lilly and his wife Antoinette, and the two people who owned the bookstore on Wilshire who gave Alan the opportunity to have seminars in their shop. We would play Mozart—the whole opera, ‘Figaro’ maybe, so we didn’t have to put always new background music after dinner at the big table. People were sitting in front of the fireplace and talking.

“So the music played, and Alan was always like this . . .” Getting up, Ruth lifts her arms in a flowing, Isadora Duncan-like, interpretive gesture. “. . . and I played into his movements. The others were always sitting and talking, and discovering, and investigating, and projecting. But Alan and I would dance.”

She pulls out the mailing that describes Gale Norton’s deeds, turns it over, and begins to draw a diagram of their Hollywood-house living room. “Here’s the fireplace in that big room. Then our guests sat here, around it, there was a big couch, then here a couch and here a couch, and then was here the big long table. And here was space. But

you could also move onto the terrace outside. Doors slid open, big windows in the dining room also opened, you could just step over the lower part, and you could dance outside. So Alan and I, we did go with the rhythm of 'Figaro,' sometimes staccato, sometimes waltzlike, and sometimes a little bit declining in motion, kind of playing with each other. The others, they just thought that was the thing to do, yah?

“So I learned about his death while Henry and I were in a taxi in Delhi. It was a wonderment for me that he died, he wasn't that old, sixty-three?”

“I think he was actually just 58 years old,” I offer.

She blinks at me. “Really. That young?”

“Yes, well, according to his biographer, he was burning the candle at both ends.”

We slip off into a wrangle about Alan Watts' vivid lifestyle, Ruth not wanting to believe the biographer's more compromising assertions. “I admired his greatness,” she states. “He always had it.”

And we return to the subject of his dancing.

“When I heard that he was dead, I saw myself dancing with him. And I learned a great deal with movement. I enjoyed it with him, it was very inspiring. He thought that I was sexy—he wrote it in his book—and earthy. And religious. Yah, sex is also religion. You can put it into religion too, if you offer it to the spirit.”

In his autobiography, Alan Watts had described her as “a very blond fraulein who—after harrowing adventures—escaped from East Prussia during the Russian occupation. . . .” saying that she was “audaciously adventurous, sexy, practical, and religious.”<sup>i</sup>

“I saw the good connection I had with him on that level,” Ruth continues, “and also I was always happy when the people there enjoyed it.”

She pauses, raises her coffee cup to drink.

“So you were in Delhi when you heard about his death?” I prompt. “Watts actually died in November of 1973.”

“Yah, we are in the taxi, and I hear Henry reading me the letter, telling that Alan had died. Then we were both silent, and I let the pictures go by. Henry was very casual about it, I got almost angry with him. I felt him so superior about it, so unattached.

“We went back to the hotel. Henry was probably tired, he always liked to read the *Newsweek*. He would take a glass of wine, and maybe take the afternoon to sleep. That just wasn't my thing. I went off to wander in the streets, with Alan in my head. I was thinking about him, I heard the music, and was really sad, thinking about dying.”

As Ruth talks, I watch her face, whose framework of wide forehead, deep-set eye sockets, emphatic jutting chin has been carved and gullied by experience; her light eyes behind glasses gaze out with the guarded expression of one who has seen the depths of human character, and its heights. She looks ancient, a foremother chipped out of a granite block. Then suddenly, as at the arrival of the roadrunner, wrinkles burn away before the fire of enthusiasm, and her eyes beam interest.

“I was walking in the streets and I came by the Sarasvati temple, where I never had been. Sarasvati is the female deity of wisdom, you know. It was all marble floors, big columns and arches, there was no door. I go into it. There was a big hall, beautiful steps going up, lots of shoes there. It was open, one of those afternoon rituals probably, hmm?

It was full with maybe 300 people sitting there. I heard music, that kind of percussion music with a nice rhythm.

“I go in, they all sit on the floor, and maybe five people have these percussion instruments, rattles and all, and go with it.” She claps a rhythm. “They were chanting, ‘Shiva, Shiva’ in a lovely rhythm. I go in and sit there too.”

Ruth was 51 years old at the time. She was probably wearing the white sari given to her by the wife of Indian meditation teacher S. N. Goenka. Her long blond straight hair was caught up in a bun behind her head, and fell in bangs on her forehead. I have seen a photo of her draped in this sari, smiling coquettishly at the camera as she poses, one arm raised above her head, fingers clinking imaginary finger cymbals, before a painted backdrop of tree and waterfall. This is the woman who sat herself down among the chanting Indians and began to meditate.

“I had good concentration, I could come to this moment where I feel that I am just a conduit, that my consciousness was everywhere here, I didn’t need to think what I wanted to do. I forgot my surrounding.”

And then an amazing thing happened. Without planning to, Ruth stood up and began to dance.

“I had a little bit the ground rules for Indian dance, I could stand on one leg like Shiva does. I practiced it and imitated him at home a little: what should you do in a hotel? So I started doing that, according to the rhythm, and according to my own interpretation, and nobody looked, everybody continued chanting. Only the musicians looked at me, and as I had tuned in to them, they now tuned in to me. I had no qualms about it that there were people sitting or whether they were looking, not at all. While I danced, I held Alan

before me, and also the Shiva. Alan had loved Shiva. When he died, after I came back, his wife Mary Jane sent to me the dancing Shiva that you see there in my living room.” She points to the exquisite large statue. “Maybe an hour and a half I danced. I thought I was expressing Shiva—well I was expressing something. They felt that too.

“Then it was finished, and I sat down. Nothing happened. I started chanting with them again. The chanting ended about 7 pm. From 3 p.m. it had been going. Then came to me the head of the musicians and the head of the temple. They offered me to stay there, and they told me it was a Shiva dance, hmm? They thought I was kind of an incarnation of that. They asked me where I taught, what school I was. I said, ‘No, I just listened to the music.’ That was even better for them. They showed me the living quarters in the temple and wanted me to be there.

“So, well, I had a husband at home, so I told them I had to go. I don’t know if I walked or if they took me back to the hotel. But they were really bowing, and the people too. They put flowers on my feet. I was in wonderment.”

“When I told Henry, he got excited about it. He said, ‘Why don’t you do that again tomorrow?’ He accompanied me the next day to the temple. But I had not the courage to get up, I couldn’t coordinate to the music, I was not anymore present, it was not there.”

We sit for a moment in silence, as I ponder this remarkable story. It is like others Ruth tells, of her entering a situation so completely that she acts without self-consciousness, and is recognized by the participants as a gifted being. It is ironic that in this spiritual practice in which we are “training to be nobody special,” Ruth often points out how very special she is. This is only one of her contradictions. In other settings she

stays modestly in the background, serving others, calling no attention to herself. Ruth's range of behavior is mind-bogglingly broad, from interpretive dancer to gutsy laborer, from gracious hostess to wise teacher.

Twenty-three years ago, when I first encountered Ruth, I was nearing the end of a period in which I had devoted all my energies to the women's liberation movement. Political activism had engaged me for almost ten years, and I found myself depleted, in need of some kind of internal sustenance. My partner at the time persuaded me to go with her and other women down to Dhamma Dena. She had heard about the very first women's retreat there in 1979, and now she wanted us to participate in the second one, in 1980. I agreed, mildly intrigued by the idea of meditation. So we made the ten-hour drive from Berkeley south to the little town of Joshua Tree and up a dirt road onto Copper Mountain Mesa to Dhamma Dena. I had no idea what to expect.

During the following days I observed that Ruth Denison—who invited us to call her simply Ruth—participated in every detail of our experience. She rearranged our pillows and told us where to sit, she wrangled with the cook in the kitchen, complained when chores were not properly executed, sent people off on errands or to perform special manual tasks. She was everywhere at all times. At night the lamp in the little hut where she stayed would glow until dawn light etched the distant mountains. And at the morning sitting she would arrive fresh and demanding, sweeping in in her long skirt adapted from that worn by Zen monks, her blouse with its flowing sleeves, her little cap covering her hair.

In the tiny meditation hall, which Ruth called the “zendo,” echoing her many years of Zen training, we sat on pillows, practically knee to knee, while she taught us to pay attention to our breath. Then, in long concentrated sessions, she directed our attention to the sensations of the body, her guidance so precise and subtle that I perceived my physical being as I had never before. And then when it all felt too intense to bear, she would take us out into the desert to dance in a circle, honoring blue misty mountains far away at the horizon and flawless sky above. Or she told convoluted stories about her adventures with the desert creatures, that sometimes left us gasping with laughter, or about how this place called Dhamma Dena had been established. Or she spoke of “Dharma,” the teachings of Buddhism, which she said were very precious to her, and her eyes filled with tears.

One day she explained the reason for our meditation. Seated in front of the group of women, she leaned toward us with great urgency.

“We practice,” she said, “to reduce the compulsiveness of our minds. We come to the body sensations, hmm? And what happens? We contact our root, our life force. Yah, we are holding the mind *here* where life unfolds, we train the mind to become quiet, we take away its noodlings so it has more ability to see and begin to understand.” She opened both hands toward us, and her voice softened, “You see, my dear sisters, we come in this way to know ourselves, we touch our joys and our sorrows, we see those troublesome habits that run us raggedy. It is to our whole unfolding that we want to be present—yah, to all that we are experiencing right now, right here—and then is re-established the natural order of the mind.”

The natural order of the mind eluded me at that retreat. I was struggling with a body that did not want to sit still, with a mind that kept slithering away from the task at hand, with a rebellious spirit that did not want to be told what to do at every moment by this insistent German woman. Nevertheless, I sensed what was being offered to me. Ruth through her instruction led me to a profound contact with my physical/mental being; perhaps only as a child had I been so alive to every moment of my existence. At some points during that retreat, my attention to my actual living experience opened me to moments of transcendent clarity and peace. I became very excited as I began to understand that I could learn to live from *that* place in myself rather than fall back into the mental, conceptual, distracted mode that generally ruled me. Ruth offered practices to achieve this consciousness, but I had had enough experience of my resistance and struggle at the retreat to know I would have trouble performing them. Could I do this thing? Could I learn to sit still and investigate my body/mind, in the search for awareness? Could I learn to bring my attentiveness to every action of my daily life? I was gripped by the ardor of knowing that I wanted to take on this task. I had no idea this was the beginning of a twenty-year practice and relationship. And I did not realize that I had had the great luck to find an absolutely authentic, deep, unique teacher of how to live.

Now in Las Vegas House in 2003, the phone rings, and we are back in the constant activity and interruptions of Ruth's daily life. Ruth jumps up to answer the call, and I lurch forward to unclip the mike from her collar before she hurries across the room to the telephone.

Listening to the voice at the other end, she lifts her hand. “Yah, Seimi, I called you to go to the airport to pick up . . .”

Seimi is a man who has lived in and around Dhamma Dena since the seventies and who often does favors for Ruth. I know that she is asking him to pick up a Buddhist nun, and that he is objecting because the traveler insists on maintaining the rule that a Theravada nun cannot be alone with a person of the opposite sex.

Ruth’s face wrinkles impishly. “No, Seimi, I have the solution! You can wear a wig and a dress. I have both here for you.”

Now she is smiling outright, as Seimi apparently objects.

Ruth tells him, “Well, Henry always wanted to do that.”

When she gets off the phone she has not convinced Seimi, and comes back to the table chuckling.

“Yah,” she says in mock objection, “it’s true. Henry sometimes said he wanted to try dressing up as a woman.”

Her husband had been a patrician, bearded fellow who stood at least 6 foot 4 inches tall. Imagining him in dress and wig sends us both off into giggles. Henry and Ruth had been married for forty years, their union a crucial element in Ruth’s spiritual development. Henry had been a difficult man, by turns supportive and denigrating, charming and sarcastic, kind and cruel. It was he who had first taken her to Asia where she connected with her spiritual teacher, and through him she encountered many other teachers. In the hardest times with Henry, Ruth never forgot the gifts he had brought to her.

I get up to go to the bathroom and come back to find Ruth washing dishes at the sink. “Are you hungry, dahling? Do you want lunch?”

When I tell her I’ve brought my lunch of peanut butter sandwich and an apple with me from Dukkha House, the women’s dormitory, she protests.

“I would have *made* you lunch. I have a nice avocado here. And some cheese.”

Now I remember how important it is for her to nurture and serve her guests. I had brought the sandwich because some days we become so caught up in stories that Ruth completely forgets to eat and I feel embarrassed to mention my own hunger. Now I am uncertain.

“Peanut butter!” she scoffs. “That is for breakfast only!”

“Okay,” I agree, “I’ll have a little avocado.”

Making the sandwiches, she is reminded of a big “puja party” she and Henry hosted in the Hollywood house for Lama Govinda. (Puja is a Hindu prayer ritual.) Lama Govinda was a German-born seer whom they had studied with during an extended visit in Almora, a “hill station” in the foothills of the Himalayas in India. In 1971 Lama Govinda made a journey to the United States and Canada, and was hosted by Henry and Ruth. It is the menu at the party that interests her, as she tells the story of a culinary coup.

“We had the fire in the fireplace, and he would give his sermons, hmm? I would always provide a nice little dinner. I had a very special dish that everybody was raving about, because it was green, it was cold, it was almost jelled. Here is how I made it. There was a party before, probably a big party, and there was leftover lettuce that was limp and drowned in the dressing. Somebody helped me. I said, ‘No don’t throw it away, just put it all into one bowl and I will put it in the refrigerator.’”

Ruth is famous for her frugality. To one who suffered through the near-starvation of post-war German life, wasting food is sacrilegious. I wonder what is coming.

“Then next day I look at my bowl of leftover salad. You cannot serve that, but there is good stuff in it, you know, beautiful dressing, and nuts were in it. It wasn’t foul, only limpy. I look around and there I see my blender. I brought the two together. I took the bowl out and put it in that apparatus, huh? Pushed the button and it was grinding and blending. And out came a beautiful fresh light-green substance, like chocolate pudding cooked but not chilled yet. So I took two of my most elegant small crystal bowls and put it in, and put them in the refrigerator.

“In the evening, my party saw that on the table were two green bowls, a very special dish. Now they get the crackers and cheese and they start taking this, and they ask ‘*What is this? What is this? Can you give us the recipe?*’ Well, I said, ‘I think I put a little green spinach in, maybe I had some. I really cannot give you that recipe, it’s quite a complicated thing, you know the French recipes.’ Anyway, this was the big thing of the night. It was the *puree la verte, a la Francaise*. And they had a great time.”

She brings me half an avocado and a lemon slice.

“Do you want bread, dahling?”

As we eat, we hear on the roof above us the first pats of raindrops, increasing to a steady drumming.

Ruth is ecstatic. “What a divine thing! We will have a big desert!”

She means that the high-desert foliage will put out new green leaves, and that delicate wildflowers in yellow and pink and white will dot the sandy soil.

Soon Jim arrives. He is a meditator staying here for six months before he leaves for India. They go to look at the sagging door, standing just inside out of the rain, and engage in a lengthy discussion of how to fix it, although Ruth has decided Jim should wait until the rain stops to do the work. This they disagree on, as he would just as soon work in the wet, but she prevails.

Seated at the table, I look at the end of this dining room that had been Henry's place during his dying. A wood stove with black stovepipe dominates the corner, flanked by a standing Buddha on a table; before the window stands Henry's big black contour chair. Entering the house during those five-and-a-half years of his decline, having made one's way past the yapping dogs, one always found him sitting here. His mind had begun unraveling, until he was only intermittently present. Ruth encouraged people to come talk with him, because the contact kept him more alert. So I would sit across from Henry, a thin handsome man in pajamas, whose stillness and noble bearded head gave him the look of some dignified ancestor, and try to hold a conversation. Though much diminished, Henry still expressed the range of his contradictory character, at one moment warmly gracious—"It's so kind of you to come visit me," he would say, his eyes gentle and friendly—at the next, after I had used some trite phrase such as "To tell the truth . . . ,” he would adopt a coldly contemptuous tone, saying, "Well I would *hope* you are telling the truth—or else you must be lying." His eyes shot me an icy challenge, and I would be left speechless. Each foray into conversation had to be led by me, as Henry's attention span allowed for only one exchange, so our communication consisted of my questions or assertions and his responses, followed by silence while he stared at me with sometimes fierce, sometimes puzzled or distracted eyes. But no matter how difficult our half-hour

had been—and no matter how withering Henry’s sarcasm still was—I always hugged him and gave him a kiss before I left. He was, after all, still Henry, the man Ruth had adored and struggled with for forty years.

She returns from the back of the house. “I sent Jim away,” she tells me. “He should not do that work in the rain.” She sits down at the table again, and I reach for the mike to clip it on her. “He’s a good one, you know.”

Most of the work of the building, repairing and maintaining of this meditation center over the years has been accomplished by visitors like Jim, who work off their room and board by laboring.

“He’s fixed up that trailer in my back yard. Dahling, it will be wonderful when I am old and creaky. Someone can live there and help me out. Have you looked at it?”

I wonder if there really will come a time when Ruth cannot manage her high-energy life and will become dependent on the care of those around her. I can fall into the habit of thinking of her as she was in her fifties and sixties, always vigorous and strong, never tired. But she has confided in me that sometimes now she feels weary and wants to simplify her life. And there are moments when I am confronted with her physical fragility: at one retreat I took her to the emergency room. Working with scavenged bedclothes, she had picked up scabies and had to be treated for the resulting sores. When we came back to Las Vegas house, I offered to help her apply the healing lotion to those places she couldn’t reach. Seeing her without her clothes, I was momentarily taken aback by the vulnerability of her slender, soft, old-woman’s body; and I realized that despite her relentless energy, she is becoming more frail and transparent as she ages.

But Ruth returns me to the here and now, describing the remodeled trailer parked against the fence behind her house. The grounds of Dhamma Dena are dotted with house trailers, large and small, among the houses. Ruth has acquired them over the years, drafted retreatants to clean them out, furnished them with beds and chairs from Goodwill, lamps and fittings scavenged from trash-night in Hollywood or brought from her own Hollywood house, and has made dormitory space and small private accommodations for special guests.

“The air conditioner, dahling, it was going to cost me a *fortune* to get it fixed up and attached! Jim drove up to San Francisco and bought materials at a place he knew there and did it for practically nothing. He is good. And he does things his own way—I can’t tell him how.”

“Maybe it’s time to break,” I suggest.

“Yah, maybe . . .” She glances around the room and I know she is identifying the plethora of tasks that will engage her for the rest of the afternoon.

“But maybe one more story?” I ask.

“Dahling, I don’t know.”

“How about the baby opossums?”

Ruth smiles. “Oh, you like that? Do you know there are *two* opossum stories?”

“Well I remember the one about the babies that you fed with an eye dropper.”

She tilts her head coquettishly at me. “This is the other one!”

And I settle back to hear about this time when Ruth was still living in the Hollywood house.

“I saw him injured on the road, a young one. He was injured in his mouth. The lower jaw was pushed in the opposite direction of the upper, and it was like a cross there, he couldn’t eat. And he would always go . . .” She makes a raspy, gasping sound. “So I picked him up and brought him to our house, and put him into the bottom of the shower, just to confine him and keep him safe. Then I began to feed him a little bit with mashed banana on my finger and put it in his mouth. Somehow his mouth kind of adjusted itself a little bit, by me doing this. And he became my pet.

“I was again alone. Henry was gone.”

Henry was a seeker, who traveled the world searching for spiritual awareness. Often Ruth accompanied him, but sometimes she was left behind. Luckily she found a great deal to occupy her at home.

“I would sit at the table at breakfast and would have the ‘possum. He is a nocturnal animal, he doesn’t do much in the day, hmm? I would give him a piece of banana, but he would hardly eat anything because it was daylight.

“So then I put him on my shoulder, and I would do my porridge or what I was doing in the kitchen. I stand there and stir my soup or so, and he sits here on my shoulder, then he goes down along my arm with which I stir. I say, Oh! He falls down!

“In the soup?” I ask, and she laughs.

“No. Before it. But he *didn’t* fall. He was hanging. He thought my arm was a branch. He has this long prehensile tail, and naked, it has no fur. So he was hanging there.” She stands up to demonstrate stirring with an opossum on her arm. “Then I think I went to the table again and put him up there, and he crawled back onto me. So I walked with him in my house. And he was sitting on my shoulders in the day. No danger.

“Then I wanted a picture to send to Henry—I think he was gone for a year that time. So I dress up in my finery. I go to the photographer, and I hold the ‘possum here on my arm once, and once he was on my neck. It gave me an idea. I thought, It is like a fur collar. I let him rest there.

“I go to the car and he stays around my neck. But I want to go to the post office. He was quiet. It was daylight. Lo and behold I advanced into the post office lobby. I held him with his tail here a little bit, but he was slumming, the eyes closed, he felt good there. I stand in line.” We crack up, chortling, as I imagine the scene. “I stepped forward, and behind me were many people. And as I communicate with the one in front of me, the ‘possum started moving. And they just *go!* The one before me turned around because the one behind me screamed. So I was suddenly the first one, and they were all around me!”

She gives herself up to laughter.

“But you know, dahling, everyone had fun at the end. And admired that perhaps, hmm?”

“So I came home. First I brought some hay in at the bottom of the shower, so when I went on the toilet, opposite was the shower door, I opened it and talked to him, hmm? Or I would take him on the table and he eats his bananas and nuts and he had a great time. Also in the bathtub I put him, and my student Elizabeth had an adopted child from Cambodia, a 4 or 5-year-old one. He liked to be in the bathtub with that baby. No water there.”

We hear the renewed pulsing of rain on the roof, a loud enclosing sound.

“Wonderful!” she exclaims. “Yah, that will give a boost for the desert again.”

“That’s a great story,” I say.

“It’s not finished!” she tells me.

“So now finally I thought, he can eat, I started feeding him a little bit from outside, leaves and so on. I decided he has to be going back to nature. So, we had a gardener at that time, and the gardener built a box for me, the walls with wire, and a door in it. The wire gave him the feeling of the outside. I would sit him out on the hillside in the wire cage, and left it out a few days. Brought him the material he would eat. He had to eat outside, I stopped all the finery. And I began also to read about them and their habits, and so on.

“Then one day I opened the door. The first night he didn’t go out. The second he was gone. Yah.”

She looks at me with great satisfaction.

Darkness is entering the room from the storm outside. It’s almost 5 p.m. already. I ask if it’s time to stop now. But she is thinking of that hillside behind the Hollywood house, seeing it in her mind.

“You know it was wild when I first came there to Henry’s house. They had made a big sign on the hills, fifty-dollars reward for shooting a mountain lion. Yah. And deers were there, coming in our garden.

“You see, I fed the coyotes there in Hollywood too, just like I do here in the desert. I would carry down the bucket and had made steps in the hillside. One Zen *roshi* [head Zen teacher]—the one who gave me the name Myodo, Myodo means ‘the bright way’—that roshi came down with me to see where I fed the coyotes, and he wrote about it in one of his newsletters. He was fascinated by my doing what I did, feeding them.”

Another burst of sound beats at the roof. Ruth is delighted.

“Oh, that rain!”

Later she drives me in her old green Pontiac stationwagon like a ponderous hearse, back to Dukkha House while rain slashes across the windshield, bending the creosote bushes, soaking the earth.

Seated in Dukkha House, watching the downpour from a window, I smile at the tale Ruth has told. The rescue of the opossum speaks strongly of Ruth’s attitude to life. This is what she teaches: not to carelessly do the usual, conventional thing, but to see deeply into each situation and act to support and encourage living beings. First Ruth allowed herself to feel the suffering of the injured animal; then instead of passing by or dropping it at an animal center, she gave her time, attention and caring to nurse it back to health. And she did so with her eccentric imagination and humor. Every day, every moment, Ruth involves herself intimately with the whole complex web of life.

---

<sup>i</sup> Watts, *In My Own Way*.