

Chapter Eleven of *Hidden Spring* by Sandy Boucher

“WE’RE FAMILY IN HERE”

. . . we encourage ourselves to develop an open heart  
and an open mind, to heaven, to hell, to everything.

Pema Chodron

Julia Child stands a little to the side of the butcher block, her face radiating indulgent interest, as a young man chops celery and talks about how to begin the making of a shitake mushroom soup. “And you’ve already fried a bit of bacon,” Julia prompts.

“Yes, and now the carrots and the potatoes,” he says, pushing aside the celery.

I glance sideways at my roommate. Sonya sits in her cranked up bed, erect as a queen, gazing with ardent eyes at the goings on in Julia’s Kitchen. Cooking shows are Sonya’s favorite, and, ever courteous, she is relieved that I profess to like them too. We watch in companionable silence: Sonya never comments on anything she sees. In my first few days here my attempts to discover her opinion elicited only a gracious dreamy smile, and so I gave up.

The young man has removed the stems from the shitake mushrooms and tossed them into the frying pan with the other vegetables. Bacon grease sizzles delectably as Julia, looming next to the man, makes good-natured comments on his work.

I think about the soup that will result. I think about eating. With the tube through my nose and down my throat, I am not allowed to eat or drink. I know Sonya is unconscious of the cruelty of watching a cooking show when one cannot eat, and I forgive her. She is a woman beset with cravings, so busy with them that quite a few things escape her notice.

“Now for the stock,” Julia encourages, and the young man ladles in some liquid from a plastic container.

After the last harrowing hospitalization, I was moderately comfortable for a few days. Then extreme stomach pain began, and the surgeons suspected a problem at the place where they had stitched my bowel back together. I could not eliminate, and the pain became unbearable. Here in the hospital room, nurses arrive periodically to give me enemas—three so far today. (Does this rubber bag full of soapy water truly reflect the sophistication of modern medicine?) Then the surgeons gather around my bed to discuss my case. They speak of “adhesions,” or a “kink in your bowel.” One of them peers at me through spectacles, saying, “We hope to unkink it.” Five days of this. Long enough for me to get to know Sonya.

“Salt and pepper,” announces the young man as he shakes them on with a flourish.

“And to finish,” says Julia, “a pinch of parsley and a dab of margarine.”

The camera comes in close to the bowl of steaming soup. It looks delicious.

“Hey, pretty good,” I comment, turning to Sonya.

She gazes blissfully back at me.

Sonya is a delicately built young woman with a sleepy eyes, and Q-tip-thin brown legs under her hospital gown. One arm is slender, the other swollen to sausage girth and

stuffed into an elastic sleeve. “It’s from my mastectomy,” she told me, wincing as she moved her monster arm, trying to find a comfortable way to position it in the sling the nurse had rigged for her. She seems so young, and told me that a friend had brought her six-year-old son to visit her yesterday. She had gone down to the lobby to see him. “I got to hold my baby and kiss him.” Her face opened in joy.

Sonya sleeps at odd times, nodding off in the midst of an exchange with me. We don’t have conversations exactly: she tells me about herself. Like this morning. Sonya slept through her breakfast. Tortured by the smell, I coveted her toast and eggs while she lay, head lolling, mouth open.

When finally she awoke, Sonya was inexplicably annoyed at the breakfast. She stared disgustedly down at the contents of the plates. “I can’t eat this!” she complained. “This is the worst breakfast I’ve ever seen!” Frowning indignantly, she pushed the buzzer for the nurse.

Then as we waited, she told me that she missed her alcohol. Holding my eyes with a level look, she said, “I drink every day at home.” She let that sink in and then asked, “You know Cisco?”

I admitted my ignorance.

“It’s wine, that’s what I drink.” She spoke wistfully, as if about a distant lover. “I have me a bottle of Cisco in the morning, one in the afternoon, and two at night.”

I try to imagine how that looks: Sonya at the kitchen table, drinking; in front of the TV set, drinking; on the front stoop. I wonder how that fits with mothering her little boy.

“I ain’t violent or anything,” she assures me. “But if I don’t get my alcohol I get irritable.”

I have seen how anxious she can get, thrashing in the bed, loudly demanding painkillers and sleeping pills. “Nurse, I need some Valium! Nurse, bring me Demerol!” Then she lowers her head, cradling her swollen arm and muttering many motherfuckers and goddamns and shits under her breath.

Now I understand this agitation as the withdrawal symptom it is. Sonya’s suffering is palpable, and I wait with her for the nurse to come and relieve her with a shot or a pill.

Medicated, she opens up with a sweetness that is totally engaging. She speaks to everyone, making friends, and she takes care of me. “We’re family in here,” she told me on the first day. “We have to watch out for each other.” On her cigarette breaks, she tells me, she wanders the hospital wards, especially favoring the floor with the infants where she looks in on each baby.

When the nurse comes in to give me another enema, pulling the curtain between us, Sonya disappears from sight. She never refers to my problems with my reluctant gut. Later, when I rush to the bathroom, dragging my IV stand with me, and shut the door, I am met with the reek of cigarette tobacco, sharp enough to pierce my muffled chemo-damaged sense of smell. Nausea rises in my throat.

Coming out to climb wearily into the bed, I say to Sonya. “You’ve been smoking in the john.”

She glances drowsily at me, shrugs her good shoulder. “Yeah, sometimes I can’t make it downstairs fast enough.”

And I am left to ponder desire—Sonya’s and my own—the clinging and craving that cause us such suffering. In Buddhism we speak of the realm of *samsara*, the endless circling from suffering to desire to more suffering that occasions more desire. The image is a wheel, an ancient Indian symbol for the eternal round of conditioned existence alternating birth and death. The wheel is turned by the energy of our desire for ego satisfactions of every kind, our unceasing appetite or *tanha* (thirst). The goal of the Buddha’s teachings is to liberate us not from ordinary existence or the phenomenal world but from the patterns of thought and behavior that enslave us. It is said that to fully realize *samsara* is to achieve nirvana or enlightenment. The two realms are one, and the effort is to transform one’s consciousness so as to break the chain of conditioned responses.

When we begin the practice of meditation, we become aware of the workings of *samsara*. I can observe it in myself, here in the bed. The tube in my nose hurts, and so I want it to be taken out; the more I resist its presence the more it hurts. The needle burns in the vein in my hand and so I want it removed. I want the pain in my gut to disappear, and I want to eat and drink again. When my mind focuses on my discomfort, it manufactures desire—the fervent wish for things to be other than they are.

I realize this is not much different from my ordinary suffering within daily life—so many moments of wanting something else than what is happening.

So I close my eyes and bring my attention to the reality I am actually experiencing. I let myself feel the weight of my body in the bed, the pressure of the tube against my nostril and inside my throat, the pulling of the needle in my vein. As I pay attention to the sensations in my nose and hand, I begin to realize that they are changing, fluctuating, vibrating, and I become more interested in the sensations than in my distress.

The sensations continue—of pressure, of heat—but I am no longer resisting them or defining them as discomfort/pain, gradually I experience them merely as sensations. Now I shift my focus to the breath, following it in and out, letting my mind move with it, all the way in through my nose and throat, then back out. After some minutes of this, I calm, arrive more strongly here where I am..

Then I realize that Sonya is talking to me. I open my eyes to see her holding up the remote control.

“Let’s cut it on and have us some nice TV. Want to?”

She smiles charmingly, and I suspect this is a gesture of apology for the cigarette smoke in the toilet.

“Sure.”

We find ourselves observing Molly Katzen, author of the *Moosewood Cookbook* and many others, concocting an East Indian dinner.

Sonya is immediately engrossed, and I know there will be no talking until Molly has chopped up lots of garlic and mixed it in the cooked yellow split peas to make dahl. We watch her add black pepper, crushed red pepper, mustard seed, turmeric, coriander, cumin seeds, cinnamon.

Earlier I had asked Sonya if she liked to cook, only to receive a vague shrug. Did she like to eat exotic food? Again she shrugged, as if I were asking the wrong question. Perhaps what fascinates her, I speculate, is the great care that is expressed here, the civility of lavishing such time and effort on something as humble as dahl, the subtlety of the imagined flavors. Perhaps the cooking shows speak to Sonya’s innate refinement, to a longing for order and elegance in her.

I entertain these thoughts as Molly Katzen dribbles lemon juice over the dahl and salts it, and tells us it is best eaten with chapatis, thin pancake-like breads. As I watch, as I think, my sense of my body remains as a background. I feel strongly connected to the living process of my physical self.

Molly sets the dahl aside and begins the preparation for the rice pilaf; my mind wanders back to yesterday, when I had seen Sonya's fierceness. It had been a hard night, with much noise from a neighboring room where a man sang and laughed wildly. The nurse told us he was a "5150," a psychiatric patient, with broken bones, who could not be moved to the psych ward until a doctor "signed him off." During the night Sonya had persuaded the nurse to give her a shot of Valium, and she became downright cheerful. But I was worried and irritable, for the machine sucking brown acids from my stomach through the nose tube had stopped working. I imagined the acids burning into my stomach lining as I pushed the bell and complained to Sonya. Finally, when no help came, Sonya sprang from her bed and, head up, puffy arm cradled against her side, she announced, "I'm goin' down there and get you a nurse!" She sailed out of the room, gown flapping behind her narrow buttocks.

I lay back and found myself suddenly crying, the tears crawling hotly down my cheeks. When Sonya returned she stood at our doorway, alternately gazing reassuringly at me and peering imperiously down the hall in the direction of the nurse's station. In a few minutes a nurse arrived to adjust the machine and get it working again. When she had gone, drying my tears, I thanked Sonya, who didn't seem to hear me.

Now we watch Molly Katzen add almonds, walnuts and raisins to the rice pilaf, and grate some lemon peel over the top, while Sonya smiles with satisfaction and deep

interest. Mentally I thank her again, for being a teacher to me, fragile as she is, pulled about like a dandelion puff in the wind, and yet so generously loyal to life.