

Column

LIGHT & SHADOW: Pluto and Persephone

Sagewoman #55, Autumn 2001

Theme: Light & Shadow

© Ann Kreilkamp

As soon as I saw the theme for this issue, I knew it was time to tell the story of my year in hell. Best year of my life, I'd say now, in terms of its learning curve, short and steep. I hope this story will resonate with all those who ever considered themselves victims of outside circumstances and lived to regard it, not as a "mistake," but as transformation.

I am sitting — tensed, trying to make myself as small as possible — in the seat to the right of the driver, a tall rangy bearded man with spider-veined nose and cheeks. We are chugging down a two-lane Idaho highway in his old Chevy truck with a camper on top, on our way to paradise, I think, I hope, though I do have my doubts.

I light up another cigarette. Blow smoke through the side window. He smokes too, so no problem.

I don't like to think about my doubts. I try to ignore them. I must keep up this brave front, this steely determination to show everybody that I was right, that he is a decent man, that we will do fine together.

We are headed out on a road trip through Montana, where he periodically works as a traveling salesman, to gather enough money so he can go with me to Findhorn, the fabled New Age community in Scotland. For the past year I have saved and scrimped for this long-imagined trip. I am to hold a workshop there, and hope to be allowed to stay and live.

I was to travel there alone, but then Phil appeared. When I think of him with me at Findhorn my mind goes blank. I simply can't place Phil Lowman in this idealistic setting. He would stick out like a sore thumb.

On the other hand, so will I, since I still smoke cigarettes! (I'm sure that nobody at Findhorn smokes. Since they live in Utopia, they must all be perfect.) Mentally, I berate myself once again for this stain on my purity. Over and over again during this past year I tried to stop smoking and failed. I am so weak! I have no control!

Oops! I catch myself. There I am, entertaining those doubts again, letting them sneak up on me. Mustn't do that. Just keep with the program: first, road trip, second, fly to Scotland.

I had connected with Phil two months earlier, at our 20th high school reunion, where he had been the only man in the Elks Club ballroom not wearing a sport jacket and slacks. His discolored tee shirt and faded levis were grimy with dirt. I liked that; thought he was the only man there not trying to impress anybody.

Then I found myself talking to him, which surprised me, since he had been the chief hood back in high school (our class of 1960s version of Jimmy Dean) and I had been the snooty girlfriend of the student body president.

He told me he had just come down from the hills south of town, where he had been panning for gold — which explained the grimy clothes. And he had glittering eyes, weird. Eyes I had never seen before. Why the glitter? What was going on behind them?

I had come a long way from the shy, serious young girl whose academic performance masked her terror of nuclear war. In high school I was a goody-goody, and Phil was one of those in slung-low levis, greased, duck-tailed hair and tee shirt with cigarette pack rolled up in the sleeve. Every morning he would drive his souped-up car to school, then stand in a line with other hoods

against the hall wall and cat call the girls walking by. My response had been to stiffen, walk erect and rigid, pretend not to see them.

So, here I was, sitting in the truck with him, still stiff; terrified, really, though I wouldn't let myself realize it. Wouldn't admit that the only reason I was in the truck with Phil now, leaving Idaho for an unknown future, was because he scared me, and I didn't have the guts to provoke him by walking away.

At the reunion, I had danced with him and felt others' eyes upon us. I knew we made a strange couple: the seedy, slouching ex-hood with the youthful, now sexy ex-valedictorian. But so what? I was used to provoking people by this time. I was twice divorced; I had abandoned my children to the custody of their father; I had been fired from an experimental college as "too experimental." Now I made my living as an "astrologer" and published a community magazine, *OpenSpace*. My lifestyle was a reflection of my changed beliefs. I was no longer the goody-goody, I was radical, I lived on the edge.

[In hindsight, I can see that my pose back then in 1980 was a joke. I was still a goody-goody, as subsequent events with Phil would prove. Phil was my teacher, an unconscious teacher, to be sure, but perhaps the greatest teacher I ever had.]

Back then, as the dance was winding down, I decided to invite him home. Casually, he agreed, and we went to bed together and "had sex." I use the phrase — current now, but not then — advisedly, because it didn't mean much.

That would be the last time we were sexual, though we slept in the same narrow bed for more than a year.

The next day was the class picnic. By this time, I was beginning to tire of the shock value of his company. During lunch, sitting next to him on the grass at the park and catching up after 20 years with my best girl friend in high school, another part of me was secretly plotting how to get rid of him.

[Looking back, I realize that I was already afraid of him, else why would I stew over how to tell him to go?]

On the way home from the picnic, I was quiet, tense, and remote. I wanted to get home, sit him down at the table, and tell him in clear, forceful terms that this was the end.

Finally we were seated, exactly as I had imagined. The words I had scripted rolled out of my mouth. I was going to Findhorn in a month. I had to get ready. I didn't have time to spend with him. Would he please go?

He looked at me, rocking back in his chair with his arms crossed, a sly grin on his face. Finally, he said quietly: "I think I'll just ignore that."

Well, *that* was an interesting response. Here was a man who dared to defy me! I had been so used to calling the shots with men in my life that his remark threw me off balance and, as I recovered from the shock, found myself fascinated. Here was a *real* man. Maybe I *would* have time for him.

[Looking back, I see my "fascination" as an on-the-spot cover for the fear that had gripped me at a deep unconscious level from the moment we met.]

That was how it began. My two sons were there for the summer and Phil became their Pied Piper, taking them swimming, telling them stories, playing ball. He also volunteered to cook and clean, leaving me free to do the one ritual that mattered to me before I left town: burning the journal I had kept for over 10 years, page by page.

At some point we agreed that Phil would come with me to Findhorn. And that's when anxiety began to surface. Something didn't feel right. What?

[Looking back, I can say that my need to be accepted by the Findhorn community of my dreams clashed with my unconscious sense of Phil as a — what can I say? — lowlife. I was unable to integrate light and dark inside me, so this dichotomy played out as a projected drama.]

After we closed up the house and returned my children to their father, Phil and I left Twin Falls for Ketchum, where my parents lived, and where he had a studio apartment. We were going to close that apartment too and be on our way.

You would think that the first sight of Phil's apartment would have convinced me to flee from this strange man. Strewn about the floor of his studio were two types of objects: guns and stacks of paper, mostly unfinished manuscripts of articles and books he was writing which, I was to discover, detailed his right-wing paranoid view of the U.S. Government.

But I ignored the sight and went in. I even slept in his filthy bed that night.

Around 2 a.m. Phil got up and went into the bathroom and didn't return. After a while I got up and knocked on the door, asking if he was okay. No, he said, he wasn't. He was "bleeding out," would I please call my father. "What?!" I asked, alarmed.

[I didn't know it then, but my father had treated Phil in the emergency room of the local hospital several times. Each time, he talked to my mother about this awful patient who tried to control the entire situation. He never talked about his patients, so Phil must have really gotten to him.]

You can imagine my father's horror when he received a phone call from me in the middle of the night to ask him to make a house call on Phil Lowman. You can imagine *my* puzzlement when my father refused and told me to take him to the emergency room.

That was the first of many emergencies with Phil Lowman. Each time he bled out half his blood from esophageal varices (varicose veins) that had resulted from his alcoholism.

I, of course, didn't know about the alcoholism; in fact, I vehemently denied it every time a doctor told me that Phil was alcoholic. "But I've asked him and he tells me he isn't!" I would protest, unaware of the way in which lying is an integral part of the alcoholic lifestyle.

[Had I looked back on the year prior to meeting Phil, I would have noticed that I attracted alcoholic men to me over and over again, and each time, as soon as I realized they were addicts, I kicked them out. Phil was the one alcoholic clever enough to keep me guessing. Meanwhile, my own addictive behavior — with cigarettes, marijuana, sugar, salt, and caffeine — kept me numbed to my own self-deceptive behavior. I had attracted Phil as a mirror.

He was a projection of my own denied shadow, and it took me 13 months altogether, before I realized that every front has a back, every yang its yin.]

Phil was a Vietnam veteran, so the local hospital referred him to the VA, which airlifted him to the VA hospital in Salt Lake City. This was a moment of choice: I could have backed out of his life right then. But something held me there.

Aghast at my own decision, I used \$400 of my hard-earned money to fly down to be with him during his recovery. There were several aspects to this situation that attracted me. First, he was sick and I thought I could make him well. Second, by helping him through this crisis I would pay him back for the month when he kept house for me and cared for my children. By the time it was done, we would be even. I would owe him nothing. I could walk away.

Ten days later, we were on the plane back to Idaho and once again I found myself wondering how to get rid of Phil. By this time I was waking up to my fear of him. *In an act of utter despair, I recognized that I did not have the courage to leave him, even though I knew I must.*

That was the beginning of the end. With that single glimmer of self-knowledge I transformed into Persephone, condemned to follow Pluto down to hell.

[I should have known that this would be my fate, given the conditions of my own life at the time, but I did not. I had anticipated something easier, despite the fact that for the year leading up to Phil's arrival, I had noticed an interesting astrological progression to my own natal chart: the Progressed Sun, which moves at the slow rate of one degree per year, was coming to its once-in-my-lifetime exact opposition to natal Pluto. "Oh goody!" I had thought, "I'm about to be empowered!" Being an eternally optimistic Sagittarian, I had not let myself recognize that Pluto's transformation requires first hell, then death, then grieving, and only then, possibly, rebirth.

I was about to discover the kind of death my own nature would require me to endure. A death to my pride, to my sense that I could help another. In my pride and need for total control, I didn't recognize Phil as a projection of my own denied addictive self. Rather than work on myself, I would transform him: heal his body, change his mind, save his soul.]

I'll fast forward over the gory details of that year together:

- How we bought an RV with the rest of my Findhorn money and moved into a trailer park in the middle of a eucalyptus forest near Sacramento, a haven for drug addicts and ex-cons.
- How relieved I was every time he bled out again and had to go in the hospital, leaving me alone and longing to just walk out with the clothes on my back, but too proud to call anyone and beg for a loan.
- How he asked me, in the middle of one of these emergencies, to marry him, and how furious I was that he blackmailed me when he knew I wouldn't refuse, given his dire straits.
- Of the contract I wrote up and asked him to sign, as a condition of this "marriage," which, I said, would end as soon as he was physically healthy. (The rules were that he was to eat right and think right. He eagerly agreed to sign, of course; this way he could stay sick forever and I would never leave him!)

Nor will I go into detail about the "wedding ceremony" in the tiny Las Vegas chapel with the secretary as witness and canned music and the ten-foot walk up the aisle. Nor about the house we managed to buy in Bellevue, Idaho, and furnished from the Sun Valley/Ketchum dump. How once again he mesmerized my kids during the summer with his stories and wanted them to stay with us always, knowing that if they were there I would be unlikely to leave.

I'll just skip all that and go to the finale: the night Phil showed me the truth, what set me free.

After my children returned to their father at the end of that second summer, Phil (unknown to me) invited his teenage niece to live with us for the school year. Like my sons, Jennifer loved Uncle Phil as her Pied Piper. She had been in trouble with the law and her father was a police officer, so her parents were glad for some breathing room. The day Phil took my kids to the airport in Boise he also picked her up and brought her home to me — and then left for parts unknown, saying only that he would be back "later."

She and I ended up staying up late, talking. Early on in the evening, I referred to a story Phil had told me about his life. She looked surprised, then said the way he told that story wasn't exactly true. She told me the real story, and I saw how he had twisted the tale to make himself look good.

Aghast, and yet intrigued, I told her another one of his stories, with the same result. I then started dredging up from memory every story I could remember that he had told me, and she corrected every one. Phil had systematically deceived me! Layer by layer, scales were dropping from my eyes. The truth was freeing me from his web of lies. By the time we went to bed, around midnight, I knew I would leave Phil with Jennifer in the morning and return her to her parents.

Now comes the moment that stands out in my mind as a peak experience, the climax to which this entire tale has been leading . . .

At 1:00 a.m. I was awakened abruptly from deep sleep by an internal voice:

Loudly, clear as a bell, it instructed: *"Center yourself. You have one minute."*

The voice made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Instantly alert, I sat up and moved into center. Simultaneously, I heard the old Chevy truck door slam, then the door to the house open and close, then Phil's slow, unsteady, drunken walk toward the bedroom. When he opened the door he was backlit, and found me sitting on the side of the bed, facing him.

That was the beginning of a four-hour ordeal during which, in order to save my own life and the life of Phil's niece, I had to take psychic power over Phil and stare him down. I discovered that night that, yes, Progressed Sun opposite Pluto did eventually portend empowerment, but the conditions under which it was offered were drastic, urgent, and compelling: Plutonian. Only when faced with death did I truly choose life.

At some point during the night Phil got his guns out and, to taunt me, started polishing them. I didn't flinch, just kept staring him in the eyes. Finally, I told him that I was going to call the

police. He grabbed the phone and said no, he would. He looked up a number in the phone book, dialed it, then talked to someone on the other end.

The man who showed up at our front door was the bartender of the bar where Phil had been that evening. Someone Phil barely knew had agreed to get up in the middle of the night at his request! Amazing, the presence of such angels in the world.

[Looking back, I find it equally amazing that Phil made that call. Even when drunk, a part of him knew that he needed to be stopped, and was concerned for my safety.]

I told this man to please keep Phil there while I made my escape. I took Jennifer and went outside to get in the car I had bought only a month before. The car wouldn't start. Phil had pulled out the spark plugs.

So I climbed in the big old lumbering truck, which thankfully started up, and drove to the nearest phone booth. Dawn was just breaking as I called the first and only friend I had in that valley. I had met her while working at the newspaper part-time to get enough money to make my escape. Another angel! She sheltered us for a few days while we figured out what to do next.

I now look back on this period of my life and thank Phil for finally showing me who he really was: an alcoholic. A part of this con man was honorable. That part of him knew he needed to let me go, and that's why, I think, he allowed his mask to slip. He went on to marry another woman, who also thought she could heal him, and he finally died, of bleeding and cirrhosis, a few years later.

Phil Lowman, Phil Low Man, was my shadow. He came into my life during the exact year of the Progressed Sun's opposition to natal Pluto so that I could take Persephone's journey, live out the shadow's projection, and then, finally, honor and integrate it within.

For years afterwards, I dreamed of being followed or attacked by what I called a "sleazy white male." It was not until my late 40s that I realized that the sleazy white male came first, and Phil

second. That the negative *animus* was *in me*. I was the one who needed total control and who had to live in denial in order to maintain it. The war between male and female was my own.

So would the peace between them start within me.

The desire for perfection is a two-dimensional mockery of the need for wholeness. Wholeness is three-dimensional; when illumined, it throws a shadow. The stronger the light, the stronger the shadow.

Update 2010: A few years after I left Phil, my mother called to tell me that her hairdresser told her that Phil had died. On hearing the news I felt instantly both relieved and thrilled — for me, that I didn't have to worry about him stalking me any longer; for him, that he had finally been released from the suffering of a life that seemed to have gone tragically “off” early on.

Many years later, I was passing through tiny Malad City, Idaho with my fourth husband, Jeff. I mentioned that Phil's beloved grandfather had lived there, and wondered if Phil would be buried in the tiny cemetery. Jeff surprised me by suggesting that we find out. After slowly walking up and down the rows, looking closely at inscriptions on the graves, it was getting late, almost too dark to see. I suggested that we give up; Jeff was ahead of me, as we started to walk towards the exit. Then he stopped, and called to me softly. I came up, and there, in the half-light, were three “military” gravestones. Phil's was the middle one. Seeing his name engraved there, I surprised myself by bursting into tears. It was only then that I recognized the great value of our karmic contract. And I very much appreciated that the military had buried him in the cemetery that, no doubt, he had requested.