

How this Book Came into Being
by S. Elise Peeples, author of *Strands*

This book has a long history. Almost twenty five years ago, when my grandmother was in her nineties, living in a nursing home, I began to write about her life. Just before she died in 1992 at age 99, I made a promise to her that I would write her tragic story so that her life would not have been lived in vain. *Strands* is my way of keeping that promise.

Envisioning a book devoted to her life, I began doing research, interviewing her, asking living relatives to tell the stories and at one point my sister and I visited the mental institution in Michigan where she had lived for thirty seven years. It still stood looking like a medieval torture chamber. Only a small portion of it was still in use as an outpatient clinic and the rest was boarded up. When my grandmother lived there (from 1932-1969), the place housed over 3000 patients. Seeing the boarded up part of the hospital, my sister and I decided to break in a window so that we could stand inside for just a minute where she had lived for so many years. We were able to get into a hallway where it seemed we could still hear the screams that still reverberated, where we could feel the terrors that time had not yet been purged from that old place.

Soon after that trip, I decided that if I were going to write a novel, I needed to take a creative writing class. The class I enrolled in was at Laney College, a community college in Oakland, California taught by Adam David Miller who later became my husband.

At some point, I realized the story I wanted to tell was not just her story but the story of the mother-daughter relationships throughout the generations. I worked on crafting something that would involve all the generations, interviewing my mother and researching. But no central story emerged and the material I was collecting grew more and more unwieldy.

What got me started in the direction I ended up with was a dream. I was on a journey with my mother and I was carrying the *Strands* manuscript and struggling to climb sand dunes. I ended up handing the manuscript to my mother. She walked up the dunes without effort and I followed. I woke up and decided then that the character based on my mother would be the lead character of the book.

Around that same time, my sister and I were planning a surprise seventieth birthday party for our mother and fiction and fact began to weave themselves into a new reality that became the story for this book.

For some reason I knew that this book has to take place on an island and at first I thought maybe it might be Hawaii since I had lived there in the past. But in July of 1996, on my fortieth birthday, I went to the ocean at Point Reyes National Seashore to seek guidance. I came back knowing the story would take place primarily in Ireland and that I needed to go there to write it.

When I started working on the book in a flat that would become the prototype for Emma's flat in Ireland, I could hear the voices of my dead grandmother and great-grandmother, but not my still very much alive mother's voice. After struggling for a while, I realized that I had not written a good enough motivation for Emma to be in Ireland. Once I figured out the motivation, a Peaceweaver's workshop for Emma to attend there, Emma readily came and contributed

The first draft of the story came out completely in dialogue form as I wrote what I heard in my head. Many of the dreams in the book are dreams I actually had in Ireland as I wrote the book. Every evening before going to sleep, I would go over the story up until then and let my unconscious work during the night. Then, every morning I wrote my dreams before I did anything else. I had a quota of fifteen pages per day and filled that nearly every

day. I did little else in the six weeks I stayed in the flat but write and go for daily walks where the characters would continue to talk to me.

After my return from Ireland, I let the book set for a whole year before looking at it again. Peter Barnes of the Mesa Refuge in Point Reyes had generously offered to let me stay there in the off-season to write so I began work on the second draft. When I read the first draft for the first time, I blushed at how inept it was as a novel with its endless dialogue. While I was at the Refuge, I had a dream that I was on a train up in the mountains and I was let off in a forest. I made my way to a camp and was greeted by a man who handed me an oboe and told me that would be my instrument. I said, "But I don't play the oboe, I play the flute." The man shrugged and walked away leaving me holding the oboe. When I awoke I knew that this was an apt metaphor for where I was in my writing. I had written and published a book of philosophy (*The Emperor has a Body: Body-Politics in the Between*) and was fairly comfortable in that medium. Now I was being asked to write fiction and was uncertain how to go about it.

I always told my mother that I was writing the book but I advised her never to read it. I didn't know how she would handle the change I put this character through. Until finally, this past summer, we planned to spend a week together alone in my sister's cabin in Oregon. I knew I was getting close to publishing the book and in a telephone conversation with her before we went to Oregon, I blurted out that I would like for her to read the book while we were there. And then, of course, I panicked. Not only was she going to read the book, but she was going to read it in my presence!

And there was an added layer just to make things more stressful, just before I went to Oregon I learned that I had a form of potential breast cancer that would require my having a mastectomy and that because of other physical conditions I could not have reconstruction. I was in a state of heightened anxiety and distress. I have been in a healing circle called Dare (see BayAreaDare.com for more info) for about eight years and the founder of the group, Elenna Rubin Goodman suggested that we call a Wisdom Council for the night before I left on the trip. This is the letter of invitation I wrote to my women friends:

Dear Sisters,

I have come to the next step in my journey both with the tumor in my breast and with the work of healing the Motherline. Please join me in a women's sacred circle at Elenna's house. Your presence and support there would be greatly appreciated.

This sacred circle joins a larger field that is coalescing, that is calling. In the field are the relationships among the tumor, my breast, the Dare community, healing and peace-making, women in my life, and my grandmother ancestor Harriet's awakening me to the desire to (as Elenna has stated it so clearly) pull the motherline through into the present.

After much praying, wailing, begging, losing sleep, confusion, information gathering, sacred story/illness work with Elenna, consultation with ancestors through Owl Snake, and consultation with other dear friends, I have decided to have a mastectomy on my right breast. Without this procedure, I feel I would be constantly looking over my shoulder for the time when a cancer could develop and without warning metastasize and move to any organ of my body through the blood stream. As Owl Snake said to me, "you must pick your battles." While my own health is important to me, it is not what I want as the focus of the rest of my life. I cherish this life and work that I have been given and am willing to offer myself to it.

Part of the work I have been given is the healing of the motherline, both my own

personal strands and the multitude of strands that have been relegated to silence in this culture. The novel I am about to publish is about this subject and gathers as its material the life histories of women in my family—me, my mother, my grandmother and my great-grandmother. On the day after our sacred gathering I leave for a family reunion which will be followed by a week alone with my mother on sacred land in Oregon. My mother will be reading for the first time this novel in which the lead character is based on her. I expect that we will be doing very deep work around the mother-daughter line and that there will be much opportunity for healing.

The hope for this sacred ceremony created on Tuesday is that we will pull through and together all of our motherlines and those of future beings. I cannot say what this ceremony will look like because I do not know.

Please prepare for this circle as you might any sacred gathering, doing whatever work of your own that needs to be done ahead of time so that nothing prevents you from being fully present.

Elise

The power of that gathering of fifteen women cannot be overestimated. I read from the novel and we all spoke of what healing the motherlines meant to all of us. The gathering gave me the strength of the backing of community and not just live ones, but a chorus of ancestors urging me forward, my grandmother the loudest of all.

My mother's reading of *Strands* was an incredibly humbling and heartening experience. Before I handed it to her, we talked briefly about what I felt the book was about: that I am using the facts of our lives as a vehicle for healing both our own motherline (four generations of women in my family) and the healing of our society's so-often ruptured motherlines. She cried even before she began reading saying that every time she thinks of her mother's life, she cries. I didn't even know that. In fact, what is remarkable is how little I did know of what I was actually doing in writing this book.

As she read, my mother would sometimes pause and ask if something I wrote was true or if I made it up. At one point, she read a passage where her mother says she loved her and fought to keep her. She asked me if that was true and I answered that I was pretty sure it was. Time stood still for me when I realized that I had just delivered a message from the grave that her mother loved her! Without my knowing it, this was one of the reasons I wrote the book.

And my mother loved the book! And she keeps thanking me for letting her read it. I asked her just what it was that she liked about it. She answered in her way, "It was organized so well." Well, I translate that to mean that her story now has a coherence it never had before. All of us have memories of the past and our memories play tricks with us so maybe this story is as true as other people's stories of their pasts are—fact mixed with fiction mixed with analysis. She will be processing the stories for a while to come and so will I.

From then on, I was on a roll to finish the book by the end of the year. On September 4, I had the mastectomy and three months later I sent the files off to be published. (for more information regarding my experiences around the mastectomy, please read the forthcoming chapbook called *When Things Happen to People* a link to which will be found on my website: ArtBetweenUs.org.)

After I received a hard copy of the book, I conducted a ritual with it and my grandmother's picture facing each other. I sang her an improvised song about how her life had not been lived in vain; her story was now told. And I let her go. Blessed journey, grandmother!