

LIFE ON OTHER PLANETS

A Memoir

CHAPTER ONE

HONESTY'S A BAD POLICY

(My living room. Ten years ago)

"Do you love me?"

My friend Michael sat leaning earnestly forward in my over stuffed armchair. His grey-blue eyes focused intently.

"Yes" I said after a pause.

I was sitting on the couch. I had been thinking about Michael's long-term potential as a lover just at the point he asked the question.

"Yes. But do you love me unconditionally?"

I didn't have to pause this time.

"No, of course not. Michael I don't love myself "UNCONDITIONALLY"

"Why not?"

"Why not what?"

"Why don't you love me unconditionally?"

But I was busy thinking of the bigger question. Why didn't I love myself unconditionally.

"Well, I said, everyone has room for improvement. You wouldn't want me to be a robot, just going through the motions would you? To never challenge you even when you were wrong? You'd never learn anything that way. What would be the point?"

There was a long pause.

"I love you, I said cautiously, ...just not unconditionally."

He leaned back heavily into the chair looking frustrated and sad.

There ended my last experiment in unconditional honesty.

CHAPTER TO BE CONTINUED...

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ANGUS

A pig lived in our kitchen until I was four. He came to us wriggling and squealing a little pink, curly-tailed bundle cradled in my father's arms. Daddy leaned down to give my older sister and me a closer look. We smiled and petted the pig. My father smiled at us smiling. We both fell in love with that pig. "Can we keep it?", my sister implored. Our father nodded. I looked at our mother who was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands on her hips. I hoped she would be smiling too. She wasn't smiling. She just rolled her eyes up to the ceiling.

Once we'd checked out the little pig's anatomy we called him Angus, after the man who owned the property next to us. We lived on a farm. It used to be a farm. Now it was home to ten kids, an old horse called Nelly and one cow without a name. To this "petite menagerie" we added Angus. We didn't think of him as livestock. He was our pet. Angus would follow my sister and me around like a little pink dog in heels. We'd try really hard to run and outdistance him between but Angus caught up to us.

As he grew bigger he was able to run past us. Sometimes he'd knock us down in the dirt as he rushed past snorting at the ground always on the look-out for something to eat. He never stopped eating. He grew and he grew and he grew. Finally he was big enough for both my sister and me to ride on his back at the same time. We had grown a little too but nowhere near as fast as Angus.

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One hot summer afternoon when I was three and a half disaster struck. The front door was open and the screen door latched to let some cool air into the kitchen. I was on the floor banging a wooden spoon on some pots my mother had pulled out from the cupboard that morning and never put back. My mother was at the sink peeling potatoes for our dinner. Some of the peelings fell on the floor. She just left them there and went on peeling. I kept on playing my imaginary drum kit. Mama kept on peeling.

I heard a noise on the verandah. Through the screen door I could see Angus looking at me through the lower half of the doorway. Then I guess he saw the peelings on the floor. At this stage Angus was huge, as big as a short pony. Totally unstoppable. I was staring fixated on the enormous pig at our front door. I don't know why but I just knew something terrible was about to happen. It did. I saw Angus and he was looking at the potato peelings on the floor. My mother kept on peeling blissfully unaware of the rapidly impending disaster. She often drifted off when she was bored.

I saw the peelings on the floor between my mother's slippered feet. The droppings were brown and wet. Just the way Angus liked them. My sister and I would often feed him potato peelings from the slop bucket. They were his favourite treat.

Without turning my mother spoke. "Go away Angus! Go away now!"

He took a few steps back and then getting up steam he smashed his head against the screen mesh ripping it open at the bottom charged at the lower half of the screen door. There was a horrible crash. That massive pig head crashing against the barrier of the lower part of the screen-door.

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I stopped my music making. I watched in fascination as Angus took a few more steps backwards on the veranda deck slowly backing away from the screen. My mother finally noticed and turned her head toward the screen door.

“Go away Angus; Go away now”

She might as well have blown a puff of air into the face of a charging bull or ordering Niagara Falls to “Halt”. Angus didn’t go away he just backed up a few more steps. He need to gain momentum. CRASH! There he was right there in our kitchen. I guess he thought he had a right since he’d been raised there.

Angus had other more pressing concerns than my mother’s hardly audible commands. He saw the peelings. My mother was bent over her task. I watched, thrilled, anticipating the inevitable. Angus grunted. His little high heeled hoofs clicking across the linoleum. He raced for the peelings. His massive head instantly widening the two inches between my mother’s ankles until his head fit. And he could reach the peelings with his snout. As he munched hungrily my mother shrieked. The knife she was using went flying and then clattered into the sink. Both my mother’s arms were raised in the air like she was a victim of a stick-up. Slowly her great bulk fell backwards. I got up and ran to a far corner. My mother crashed amid my drum set with a loud clanging sound sending the pots flying in all directions. Her housedress was wound up around her waist and one slipper had flown off her foot. It struck Angus who didn’t seem to notice as he finished off the peelings and sniffed the floor in search of more.

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I waited in my corner. You never knew how my mother would take this kind of thing. Would she get mad and hit Angus with a frying pan or would she... I waited. Then her belly started to shake. She raised her head to look about her. She saw Angus still at the sink. Slowly, softly she started to laugh. Her laughter grew until it was so hard that she started to cough uncontrollably. Laughing and coughing. That was my cue. I ran giggling over to Angus and throwing an arm around his massive shoulder and hugged him. He was safe... for now.

My father always came home at 5:00 o'clock. I watched fearfully from the kitchen as he slowly mounted the verandah steps. He stood for a while gazing in disbelief at the ripped out screen on the front door. He pushed his fedora way back on his head like he was still not believing what was right in front of him. He grabbed the door handle angrily and pulled it wide open. I could see the rage in his face.

"Jesus Christ that bloody Angus!"

Mother meekly put forward a lame explanation.

"He was hungry and wanted to get at the potato peelings. He is only a pig after all."

My father wasn't satisfied.

"This is the fourth time this summer I've had to replace the Christly door woman! This is no good. He's just gotten too big".

"Wasn't that the idea in the first place?"

She gave him a knowing glance then turning saw me in the corner. She could tell by the look on my three year old face that I knew something bad might happen to my pet pig.

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"We'll talk about it later ...tonight."

What she meant was at night, in their bedroom so the kids won't hear. I feared the worst and ran out the door desperately looking for Angus. To do what? Warn him? I jumped down the steps of the verandah I heard my mother's voice.

"Where are you going, Alan? Dinner's nearly ready."

I didn't care. I had to find poor Angus before my father did. I ran as fast as I could my bare feet throwing up a cloud of dust in the front yard.

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Chapter Three

A NEW BROOM

I watched my mother as she slept. She had carefully folded the morning newspaper for easy access to its crossword puzzle. I watched as the pencil slipped from her fingers and fell to her feet on the kitchen linoleum. Next the paper slipped slowly from her grasp and landed on the ample surface of her belly which formed a kind of desk where it came to rest.

We both sat in rocking chairs. As I was three years old at the time my chair was a miniature version of hers right down to the carved headrest. I carefully and quietly closed the Disney book I was reading. It was about Goofy. I liked Goofy best of all Disney's characters because he was clumsy and was always breaking things and doing the wrong things. Just like me. My mother had spent the last three months teaching me to read. She set up a black board on an easel in the kitchen. She had carefully printed the letters of the alphabet, both capital and lower case. Her hand writing was widely praised. Starting with words like "cat" and "dog" my mother would show me the connection between words on the board and things. When she wrote "cat" she'd point to our tabby asleep on the mat in front of the stove. I learned quickly. I could now manage to read large print, illustrated storybooks on my own.

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I carefully put the book down on the floor beside me. I observed my mother closely. Her belly rising and falling with her breathing. She wore a ragged red cardigan. The elbows had gaping holes and the pockets were ripped. It was her "Washing Day" sweater. The one she wore to hang out the wash on the colder days of fall and winter. The housedress she wore under it was ragged and full of holes. Her hair hung in "bag strings", greasy and unwashed. I never kept count but I was sure it had been days since she'd bathed. We had no indoor plumbing in the glorified shed we called a house. But the rest of us seemed to manage with the sponge bath method or TPA (tits, pussy and ass) as my older brother called it. My mother didn't bath or change her dress because she was depressed. She got depressed often and for extended periods.

Like my mother's mood our house was grey. It was covered in shingles on the outside. This would have been picturesque had it been a cottage in Cape Cod but it was just a shack in Napan, New Brunswick. Tar paper walls and tar paper under the linoleum. I looked around me with my child eyes and saw the gaps in the torn lino where the black shiny tar paper showed through. My mother and I sat on either side of the Franklin stove that heated us and the kitchen on cold days. The fire went out at night. The house got very cold. You could see your breath. My mother would sometimes come into our room late at night. She carried a bundle of winter coats in her arms. I would feel the heavy weight of my father's old woolen overcoat as she placed it over me and my sleeping older brother. I liked that heavy feeling - a warming, comforting pressure that soon had me fast asleep.

Back to the kitchen: my mother began to snore. It was a desperate gasping sound. Not rhythmic and soothing. Her breathing was agitated and inconsistent frequently interrupted by her chronic bronchial coughing. She'd cough, stir, change position slightly

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and fall back to sleep. The snoring re-commenced. I was fascinated by this ragged pattern. I wondered how long it would be before she snored or coughed herself awake. I watched her several minutes longer completely enthralled.

I looked down at the filthy floor beneath my stocking feet. Dust and wood chips covered the floor in front of the stove. It hadn't been swept in a week or so. If I'd had the vocabulary at three and a half I would have said, "What a dump!" My mother said she never saw the point in cleaning because everything just got dirty again. She always said you can't keep a house clean with kids in it. I don't think she liked kids. In fact I know she didn't. Years later when I was fourteen and in high school my older sister had asked my mother to look after her three girls while she and my brother-in-law went to Hawaii. My mother scoffed as she spoke to me.

"Me look after her kids. Why should I? I raised ten. It's her turn. Let her find someone else. I've had enough of kids. You wanna know something?" Her upper lip curled above her false perfect white teeth. "I don't like kids. Never have."

"Then why'd you have so many?" I asked. But she never answered. It might have been that she didn't know. Her mother was a convert to Catholicism and they say that converts are the most zealous. But as far as I knew my grandmother never went to church. However Mu m made sure went to mass every Sunday. We were strict Catholics. This meant no meat on Fridays and no contraception. Just the "Rhythm Method" which really amounted to no contraception at all. Besides she said once, "A condom would have spoiled the fun". "Fun" I thought. The conception might have been "fun" but I'm sure she found the consequences far from delightful. But what my mother

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didn't "find delightful" she swept under the proverbial rug just as I had seen sweep dirt literally under the lino.

Back in our Napan kitchen. I got up from my little rocking chair. I found a child's scale broom. I'd asked for one for my birthday. A subconscious desire to clear up the filth and dirt that surrounded me? Someone bought me one. I can't remember who maybe my older sister. I went to the corner behind the stove and pulled it out feeling the red hot heat from the black metal stove caress my forearm. I began to sweep. First the wood chips and sawdust. Then I tackled the rest of the kitchen floor. The old dried potatoe peelings in front of the sink. The one with the big water pump attached. If I was thirsty and wanted a drink of water I always had to ask a "big person" an older brother or sister to pump while I desperately held the glass in a trembling hand under the spout – afraid I'd drop it from the weight of the rushing water. I rarely bothered my mother. She never seemed to have the energy for much except doing crossword puzzles. If there was no one else home I'd get some juice out of the fridge. If we had any but this was risky. I got slapped by my mother for doing just that. I wasn't allowed to get my own juice. I might spill it or take too much.

The pile of dirt I'd created in the middle of the kitchen floor was about ankle high. I continued to sweep around the pile getting every last bit of dust and dirt, food droppings. The handle of the broom struck a tin cup that we used to drink from the pump. It clattered loudly to the floor. I froze with fear. I looked toward my mother. Nothing. No change. I went back to my work.

"What do you think you're doing?" I jumped and my mother laughed.

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"That's so cute. What are you doing Allie ?"

"I'm cleaning.". I said with eyes on the floor. I kept on sweeping.

"What for? It will only get dirty again. With you kids underfoot all the time."

"There's just me." I said not looking at her.

My mother laughed but it was not an amused laugh. It was more an embarrassed laugh. Like when you catch someone doing something they shouldn't. Maybe I embarrassed her by cleaning the mess. A job a mother would normally do. I continued to sweep with my little broom. Finally my mother dragged herself from her rocker. She was wider than the seat and struggled to escape the grasp of the arm rests. Huffing and puffing. She went to the big broom that hung on a hook on the back of the door. She sighed heavily and began sweeping in long broad strokes. She raised dust rather than cleared it. I kept on with my chore. Eventually we met holding our brooms in the middle of the kitchen. The pile of dust, wood chips and bits of torn lino formed a heap in the middle of the floor. My mother took a lid holder from the back of the stove and lifted off the largest lid. She bent down to pick up the dustpan that lay beside the stove on the floor. She bent straight over. She always bragged about no matter how big she got she could still place her hands flat on the floor while keeping her legs straight. A talent she'd had since she was a girl. This movement gave me a rear view of her chubby legs with stockings rolled down to just above her knees. A dirty rag – her version of a tampon I suppose trailed down her leg like a tail. She had bulging veins and dark spots on her calves.

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With a huge sigh of breath she raised herself up and using her broom swept part of the dirt pile onto the pan and down the contents into the flames that rose up from the open stove. She repeated this action a number of times before throwing down the broom and dropping the heavy, black metal lid back onto the opening on the stove.

“There” she snickered , “Satisfied little fuss pot?”

I got the dust pan and swept up the remaining bits of dirt until every speck was on the pan. My mother laughed at my diligence.

“It will only get dirty again’.

I didn’t care as long as it was clean now.

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Chapter Two

It is summer. I am four year's old. We had moved from the shack in Napan to a rather luxurious big, clap board house. It was white with green painted shutters. When referring to it later I always called it The White House. Everyone knew which place I was referring to. We moved around a lot so it was a way of keeping track. Anyway: it's summer and it's hot. I'm outside playing with my sister Janet and older brother Stephan. I was hungry. It wasn't dinner time yet but I knew there were gingerbread cookies in the kitchen cupboard. My grandmother made the best ginger bread cookies on the planet. She had stayed with us and left a stash. My mother was always changing the hiding place so finding cookies was always a challenge. It was also dangerous or so it proved that hot July day..

My head was sweaty from running in the humidity. I got some water from the tap in the kitchen. My mother was cutting up potatoes for dinner. It was only quarter to five but we ate early in our house. My father got home at 4:300 p.m. and expected dinner exactly at 5:30 p.m. I looked over the top of my water glass as I drank not wishing to bring my mother's focused gaze upon me. You could never tell if you get a smile or a scowl. Hard top predict.

"What are you doing I here? It's not time for dinner" I jumped spilling my water.

"I know. Mama, I 'm hungry. I want a cookie."

"We don't have any cookies.' She lied.

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“Yes we do Grammy left some gingerbread ones.”

“Aren’t you the clever little puss?” She sneered. “Well even if she did you can’t have one. It’s too close to dinner.”

She continued cutting up the potatoes with the large and dangerous “butcher knife”. It was a hundred years old. It had been in her family for that long. It kept losing its handle. My father kept carving a new one and attaching it with rivets to the blade. But it kept coming off. It was off now. My mother was grasping the metal hard in her hand. I was wary of the knife but my desire for a cookie overcame any reservations I might have had. I climbed on a chair. I opened the cupboard.

“What are you doing? I told you..” My mother moved towards me holding out the knife in her right hand. I jumped down grabbing the edge of the table on which she was cutting for balance. She raised the blade and brought it down. I jumped back too late. I wasn’t fast enough. Down came the blade. My mother stared into my eyes with a kind of glazed look. I backed away. Unfortunately I didn’t back away far enough, fast enough. The blade came down across my hand. I felt a sharp pain as the edge cut into my four year old thumb. I screamed. I saw the blood. I was frightened I’d bleed to death. I covered the bleeding wound with my right hand and ran still screaming into the livingroom where I knew my father would be sleeping on the couch waiting to be called for dinner.

My screaming woke him up. He was always grumpy when you woke up unless it was for dinner. He opened one eye. He saw the blood, jumped up, took me to the downstairs

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bathroom. He put my hand under the cold water tap and wrapped it in a towel. He walked me back to the livingroom.

“Stay here’, he said. I sat on the couch holding my bleeding hand. He went into the kitchen. The swinging door closed behind him. I heard muffled voices. His deep and form. Her’s low and inaudible. He was in there for about ten minutes. Every once in a while his voice would get louder.

“What the hell were you doing? That’s crazy.”

I jumped at the word “crazy”. I’d never heard him use that word to her before. But that’s what I was thinking. This woman is crazy as I replayed the tape in my head and watched her swing the blade and cut my hand. I wasn’t afraid of her at that moment as much as I’d come to the realization that at age four my mother I could not trust my mother. She was someone to be cautious around, wary of. I wasn’t going to take anymore chances with her. A life lesson.