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Pears and Clouds and Shadows:  
Cindy Schreyer's Story

*"Look at that sea, girls – all silver and shadow and vision  
of things not seen. We couldn't enjoy its loveliness any more  
if we had millions of dollars and ropes of diamonds."*

Lucy Maud Montgomery in *Anne of Green Gables*

I am on the hunt for Magnolia leaves, the ones that are brown on the back and green on the front, about six inches long and smooth along the edges. My gardener friend Murphy least favourite tree is the Magnolia tree. He says the show isn't long and when the blossoms drop, they make a mess. I love the Magnolia tree. I grew up in Northwestern Ontario and when I came to Vancouver and saw the tree I said, "What is that? You can grow these?" It was my first taste of something tropical. Anyway, I've got my shears and a map Murphy gave me to locate the leaves.

When I think back, I was the kind of kid that always looked for the obscure. I observed everything. I was curious. I grew up in a restaurant and learned to cook not because my mom taught me, but because I watched how she made the stock, how she did the potatoes, how she put it all together. When I was nine-years-old, an artist from Oklahoma came to our small town. She liked me and I liked her and she said, "Come on up and see me." So I'd ride my bike to her cabin to watch her paint until she eventually let me paint. Years later, I went to visit her in Oklahoma and painted with her there. She's in her eighties now, and really, she's the one that inspired me to be an artist.

I'm in transition right now. I've always been a survivor and whenever I've been hit with crises or things haven't worked out, I've always thought, "How can I change this because I don't want this to happen to me again." Right now I'm in that turmoil, in the eye of the storm, and I want to spin myself out of this place. I'm trying to figure out a way to do that. When I was in a relationship with someone I would always bounce the ideas off them and they'd say, "It's going to be okay." And I said, "Yeah, it's going to be okay." And I believed it *was* going to be okay. Now I'm alone and I don't say it's going to be okay, because I wonder *is* it going to be okay? That's scary. I know I'm alone but I don't want to think about it. I don't want to think I'm alone. I don't want to think about dying, because I don't want to die alone, although I know we have to exit alone. My life doesn't look like what I thought it would look like and my sadness is that it isn't what I thought it would be. I still feel that loss, when Steve left, the panic and the pain of being left alone with two-year-old Eli. My therapist said, "Cindy, families don't have to be just one way." But I wanted that one way. I wanted the mom and the dad and the kids. That's what I wanted. I wanted the standard family.

When Steve and I were married, he used to do all the measuring for my painting jobs. I never measured. Steve drove everywhere. I never drove anywhere. I used to think, God Steve, you are amazing, you can find anything, you're so great, like magic. And then one day he got on the road and kept going, and I was alone. I thought how am I going to find some address out in White Rock? I don't even know how to drive to White Rock. How am I going to measure? My brother said, "Isn't it terrible how relationships are so debilitating?"

I thought I was never good enough as an artist. I thought I could never take enough classes to become a better artist. I could never read enough magazines or look at enough pictures to inspire me. I thought that maybe one day I would be great and then I wouldn't be scared anymore.

Steve did me a favour, because I was afraid of so many things. I hung onto him for my strength because of my fears. That's why I went through such a horrible time when he left because I thought I just couldn't do it all by myself. I thought I couldn't do it without somebody helping me. I thought the whole world was going to collapse because I had to face something or had to deal with a problem. My therapist said, "Cindy, you need to learn how to get self-esteem." I would ask, "How do you get it?" I didn't know how and therapists didn't tell me how, they just said I needed to get it. If only I could buy a book, read it, and self-esteem would just happen. Now I realize self-esteem happened when I started taking care of myself – when I asked for directions and drove out to White Rock; when I learned how to measure rooms and walls so I could give painting quotes. When I finally realized I was able to accomplish tasks by myself, I could say, "Things are going to be okay."

The world didn't collapse after all when Steve left, and neither did I. I live in a basement suite with Eli who is now nine-years-old. Our next door neighbour Tina is ten. She's Vietnamese and the youngest in her family. She has two older brothers, thirteen and twenty-two. Her parents never watch her. They used to knock on our door late at night looking for her. I decided to take her in as much as I could. When we first met her, she was five and Eli was four. I remember the first Christmas she spent with us. I had a jewelry designer friend make her some gorgeous pink crystal necklaces and bracelets. Eli

and I wrapped them up in a beautiful box and gave the gift to Tina. She sat in a big wing back chair and stared at the box on her lap. She didn't know how to open presents. She'd never received a gift before. Eventually she opened the box and then she didn't know what to say. Since then, she loves Christmas. She stays for night, bakes cookies, and helps decorate the tree.

Tina stays overnight with us every weekend. In the colder months, I dress her and Eli in winter clothes (she wears Eli's outerwear because she doesn't have any) and we go to Spanish Banks and explore and draw in the sand. I take a gazillion pictures of them. I compiled a "Tina and Eli" photo album, a remembrance of all the things we've done and all the places we've gone.

Tina once asked me, "Cindy, do you like being a mom?"

"Yeah, I do."

"Why?"

"It's great, because I'm thinking about somebody else and not just myself, and I've learned a lot by having to take care of somebody else. And I enjoy spending moments with both you and Eli."

The other day the three of us were driving somewhere and I let them punch in their radio station and crank the music. I said, "Hey guys, this is great, hey?" And they are like, "Yeah, just like the old days, just the three of us." I felt so good. I thought, wow, that's what age does, I've learned to be aware of these moments.

Now I do feel like a family – with Eli, myself, and Tina. I hope we can go through life together. I hope I can watch her grow into a young woman. Yes, I tell myself, I think everything will be okay.

My dream has always been to be wealthy so I could make a difference in the lives of people. Then one day I thought, you know Cindy, maybe you don't have the money, but maybe you can still contribute to the world, and while I could donate to somebody somewhere, I've got Tina in my backyard. I buy her shoes. I buy her clothes so she doesn't have to wear the same stretchy pants every day.

Now I think about what I can do to help people with my limited finances and so I go to Eli's school and give painting lessons to his class. I tell them about myself, how I struggled in school, so the kids who do have a hard time will realize that they can still get out there and make a life for themselves. While I talk, I put a ripe yellow pear on a piece of turquoise fabric, shine a spotlight on it, and turn out the lights in the room. One side of the pear is highlighted and the other side is in shadow. That's something I've struggled with – shadows. How am I going to make them look right when I'm painting? Where is the light coming from? Where do I want the shadow to be? Directly behind the object? In front? I've spent many hours with shadow, wanting to create something that looks real. I wanted the kids to be aware of shadow, so they will notice what happens to objects in the darkness and what colours appear because of the lack of light. I wanted them to see that. The more they notice at a young age, the more they'll realize that a rock isn't just grey. When they scrutinize a rock, they'll see yellow, purple, fuchsia, green, black and more. At the beach one day, I witnessed a young girl showing a rock to her mother. The mother took it from her and threw it away, saying, "It's just rock." Later the girl picked up a rock and threw it, saying, "It's just a rock." Well, it's not just a rock. It's the beginning of imagination. If I speak to Eli's class now and get them to start noticing the rocks, trees, buildings, and clouds, they'll start to see more than just the object. They'll see that a

painting of white clouds and blue sky looks alive because the colours are not just white and blue. They will see all the colours it takes to make clouds and sky. When I'm with Eli and Tina, or whomever else, I say, "Look at the sky, see, there's peach, and there's a stream of gold running through there. What colours do you see in the sky today?"

When Eli's class was almost finished painting their pears, I told the kids that if they thought the lesson was okay, I wanted them to clap, but if they thought it was better than okay, I wanted them to clap harder, and if they thought it was great, I wanted them to clap loud and hoot and holler so I could come back and teach again. And they said, "Can we clap now?"

After the lesson, the teacher asked them, "What did Cindy teach you today?"

One boy said, "I learnt that whatever the object I'm drawing or painting is sitting on, that colour is reflected into the object."

He hadn't seen that before, but when I had showed them what was before them, they could see the turquoise reflected in the pear. I like that – being able to show them something they couldn't see before.

When the classroom had emptied, one girl, Scout, stayed behind. She said, "I'm just like you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not very good in school, but I can draw."

The next day, the kids told Eli he had a cool mom and that he was lucky. I think that was good for him to hear – that his mom was okay. He could see what his mom is capable of.

I'm proud of what I can do. I showed a painting sample to the powers that be who were designing GM Place. They tried for a year to find somebody in the union to recreate my sample. In the end they said that they'd allow a non-union trade to come in, but I had to hire a union member to help. The Cactus Club, Earls, The Cross, the St. Thomas yacht, all have my signature decorative artistry, but the best job I had was spending two years doing a *trompe l'oeil* mural in a garage. When it was finished, the owner held a catered celebration - \$5,000 in flowers, Flamenco dancers, hundreds of guests, including Lloyd Axworthy. I thought, wow, Lloyd Axworthy, I'd like to meet him. So I introduced myself as the artist who had done the painting and explained that my family was involved in politics; my uncle had been the Premier of Manitoba, my cousin was the former Governor General Ed Schreyer; that I'd been to Rideau Hall many times. He replied, "Are you the garage painter?" Then the hostess gave a welcoming speech and congratulated Lloyd Axworthy on his Order of Canada. "But most important of all," she said, "We are here to celebrate my garage. Would my resident artist, Cindy, please come forward to receive a small token of my appreciation." I laughed. I beat Lloyd Axworthy's Order of Canada that day.

I think there are still clients and houses that suit the faux finishing or Venetian plaster work that I do. I think there's still a place for me and my art. People who travel the world and see the longstanding art and the frescoes, who visit Europe's high end hotels and see artists at work, who delight in walls and ceilings touched by the human hand, a touch that takes away the edginess, the manufactured look, those people appreciate an artist's softening touch.

One day I had stapled canvas to the wall and was painting when Eli came in and said, “I like how you did that over there.”

“Oh, you noticed. Yesterday I didn’t do that, but today I added this part and those colours.”

“I like how you made that shadow.”

I realize I know a lot about my craft. I don’t think about it anymore, I just paint. I don’t look at anything and I don’t compare. I’ve been painting for so long now that I know where the shadows are. I know where and when to add the colours. I know how to make something look round or cylindrical. The information is inside me; I don’t have to read a book to do my art. I am finally moving forward truly changed because I’ve been able to let go and feel better about myself, believe in myself. I’d still like a safety net, but that’s okay too, because I just keep going. I’ve moved beyond the familiar and embrace curiosity, trust, and flexibility. The passion and the belief are part of me and I have to trust that intuitive part of myself, knowing that each transition in my life is a new experience to be explored. That’s what I want to teach those kids in Eli’s class, to trust what they are doing, that their work doesn’t have to look like anybody else’s. I want them to want to get better at whatever they find passionate, but more than that, I want them to *want* to get better and not be afraid of the shadows, those unclaimed, undesired, and unbefriended aspects of our nature. I want them to know that to be fully developed human beings we need both the light and the shadow.

The underside of the Magnolia leaf, the part that lives in shadow, is a beautiful velvety brown. The side that faces the light is a shiny deep green. Both sides come from a deep rooted tree that tolerates chilled winter months, has a smooth bark that exfoliates in

small patches, and is resistant to fire. I tell Murphy that the Magnolia indeed puts on a fine brief show of white blossoms that make a mess when they drop, but it's not really about how long the show lasted or that they made a mess, it's that the bloom appeared, and will do so again, that the leaves will drop again, and that they will be raked up, again. Everything will be okay, again.