

Marsha Forest

## Fifteen Women

Continued from last month.

*Her seven year marriage breaking up, Marsha Forest goes to a week-end intensive encounter group and begins to learn about herself.*

i learned something important during this time . . . before sharing my list i made some 'cute' comments and laughed nervously . . . someone called my attention to this . . . you don't have to apologize for what you say said Beth . . . just say it . . . that's right i thought . . . i'm always apologizing for myself . . . i want to express myself openly . . . what i have to say is a worthwhile as anyone else . . . i made a promise to work on that at home, at work, all over . . .

it was getting very late . . . the snow 'was still falling . . . we have begun . . . tonight pictures have been snapped . . . tomorrow some photos will be developed . . .

i arrived home safe and sound after another harrowing drive on the icy roads . . . i shared my experiences with Jeff . . . i was starving and ate a delicious vanilla yogurt talking all the time . . . after a super hot bubble bath i fell into bed exhausted . . . fifteen faces swarmed in my mind . . . what would happen tomorrow . . .

the next morning we started by doing an exercise with our own bodies . . . lying in my own private space on the now familiar blue carpet i listened to the gentle music and the lilt on Lyn's quiet firm voice . . .

- study your hands - let one be the leader and the other the follower -

i played with my hands . . . follow the leader . . . i was enjoying myself dancing with my own hands . . . Lyn's voice broke in . . . feel the hands on each side of you she suggested . . . be aware of the temperature, the texture . . . i reached out to both sides . . . the hand to my right felt big, long fingered and bony . . . the hand to my left was cooler, thinner and didn't seem to make close contact . . .

everyone sat up . . . we shared our feelings of being alone with our own hands and then reaching out for another . . . Karen told the group that her left hand did one kind of movement while right hand did the opposite . . . she reflected that this reminded her of how she often acted . . . one part of her going one way another part going the opposite direction . . . she was often confused she said . . . Betty wondered if what she was feeling was 'right' . . . there is no one right or wrong way to act someone told her . . . i always need so much approval she answered . . . just like me i thought . . . i realized again how much approval i needed . . . from my mother . . . from other

authority figures . . . i shared these thoughts . . . many felt the same way . . . we all agreed that we needed more confident in ourselves and less approval from others . . . one good lesson i learned . . . everytime i want to ask a question i will try to turn it into a statement . . . ex: can i go now? vs. i want to go now. . . what a difference . . . i can make demands on my environment . . . instead of being the passive receiver i will be the active passer . . . i'm feeling very excited . . . stronger . . .

Lyn asked everyone to lie down on the rug . . . i want to lead you on a 'water fantasy' she told us . . . i found a cozy spot, made myself comfortable, closed my eyes and got prepared for this new voyage . . . i had read about fantasies but had never experienced one . . . the music began . . .

i became a floating raindrop  
i traveled far from the blue room out  
under the hugh sky  
i swiftly floated away along the snow filled  
roads into a lake to a river - and finally  
through a whirling pool into the mammoth  
ocean of my own life  
i traveled through distant lands and landed  
on yet unknown shores.

i went from liquid into a teardrop  
a drop of water from my own eyes  
a crystal drop reflecting the pain and  
sorrows of my life  
also the tears of laughter and of joy  
i glanced through the teardrop and saw myself  
i evaporated and came back into the raindrop  
i could not be stopped  
liquid again i continued my voyage until the  
music ended.

when the music ended everyone lay in silence each with her own thoughts . . . very slowly we formed our circle again and began to tell of our individual journeys . . . i was reticent to share my trip because i felt it was my own private odyssey . . . after hearing from some others i did share mine . . . everyone enjoyed my story . . . had i wanted to keep it private to protect myself . . . it felt good to hear the others respond to me . . . Jane told me she thought it was super what i felt confident enough to evaporate and then return in another form . . . i thought about that . . . suddenly it hit me . . . the fantasy was an allegory for part of me . . . a year ago i had ended one part of my life . . . in a way i evaporated and come to life again in a new form . . . still alive . . . more alive . . . i once again felt exhilarated . . .

two women who had experienced a variety of drugs in the past reported the fear of being liquid during the fantasy . . . Gayle, a young mother of three, told of a film she had created in her mind . . . colorful streams of light and a cast of hundreds danced in her mind's eye . . . her tale was exciting . . . watching her vivid eyes shine as she told us

about it i sensed the incredible creative energy and potential in this circle . . . i listened and saw how each story revealed a ew facet of each individual in the room . . . fact and fancy . . . reality and dreams . . . i was happy to be part of this experience . . .

Lyn had placed three full-length mirrors around the room . . . she now asked if we'd like to try to do some work with them . . . after a medley of assorted groans we all gathered around the mirror near the record player . . . i noted in retrospect that those who groaned the loudest worked the hardest at the mirror later that day . . . silence . . . Sharon volunteered . . . she slowly stood up and faced herself in the mirror . . .

- what do you see - talk to your reflection -  
Lyn urged . . . -  
- i see two shoulders - one is lower than  
the other - my neck looks stiff -  
- talk to your neck - Lyn said  
- neck, you look so stiff like you are  
carrying a heavy burden  
- what's it carrying asked Lyn  
- my head - laughed Sharon  
- talk to your head this time Lyn suggested  
- head, you are so bloody heavy, so weighed  
down with worries and troubles and fears

Sharon began to cry softly . . . she faced the group . . . she had been a silent participant till then . . . now she told us about her life . . . she felt no one had time to listen to her . . . everyone was important but her - a husband, two children and no one to hear her feeling: . . . as she spoke her body seemed to relax . . . i feel better she told us and when i go home i'm going to demand some air time for myself . . . she looked around at all of us . . . she was smiling a very warm smile . . . i smiled back . . .

one woman at a time faced the mirror . . . although everyone did not volunteer to stand up i felt each time one faced the reflecting glass each of us became part of the image . . . we all became mirror images of the mirror figure . . .

i felt the intensity level of the group rising . . . it was long past lunch hour . . . if the thermometer had been inserted into the metaphorical rectum of the group we were up around 103 degrees . . . i don't precisely remember how it began but suddenly Rachel, a large long haired attractive woman, began to tell a quiet story about herself, alcoholism, and what it meant to her . . . although she had stopped drinking and was now an active social worker a fear haunted her . . . she had once been in jail . . . what would happen one day when her child grew up and found out her mother had been a hustler . . . and a drunk . . . her hands shook and her voice trembled as she spoke . . . maybe my child will want to go away from me and live with her grandmother she cried . . . a play began . . . a child and a grandmother were chosen from among the faces in the circle . . . a psychodrama was enacted . . . the director (Lyn) led the players deftly through this living open theatre production while the

audience sat in muted silence . . . when the play ended i was wet-eyed . . . a few others were quietly crying . . . the lead actress had seen that the answer to her fears did not lie in the child or the grandmother . . . the answer was within her . . . it was *she* not the child who would not yet accept herself, forgive herself, integrate the past and live in the present . . . it didn't matter how many times her daughter told her that she loved her . . . unless the mother could love herself it just didn't matter . . . this theme was to be repeated in different ways during the life of the group . . .

Rachel asked us how we felt about her now that we knew about her 'history' . . . a few told her they had drawn closer to her . . . they felt she would now be easier to talk to . . . one said she no longer felt so alone with her own private agony . . . although i'm not ready to talk now i feel less frightened, she said . . . i told Rachel that i hadn't really changed toward her . . . she was still the person in the group i was most attracted to . . . i saw her as an exciting energetic woman doing meaningful community organizing . . . everyone has their own type of 'habit' i told her - drink, drugs, marriage . . . everyone laughed . . .

by 2:30 we were all starving . . . and agreed to have a combination lunch-dinner and to take a much needed respite from the blue room . . . i felt quite alone now . . . i began to see this aloneness as a pattern of mine . . . i was an only child . . . i always had one best friend in school . . . i made friends easily, was well liked but developed strong bonds with few people . . . i was feeling accepted . . . this is something i value for myself - the ability to form intense intimate relationships and then to be able to move on - not hang on . . .

after my alone time i joined the others and ate a delicious fresh salad . . . talk at the table was about women - women as wives, mothers, artists, teachers, doctors . . . personal anecdotes were shared of marriages, divorces, natural child birth, women's liberation . . . it was an extension of the blue room . . . our temperature was still high . . . we consumed an enormous quantity of ice cream . . . we had burned up lots of energy and everyone was refueling . . .

at a relaxed pace fifteen women filtered back to the blue room . . . a few had gone for a walk in the snow . . . others clustered in small groups . . . some talked - others danced . . . finally everyone was together again . . . we decided to stay as one large group rather than break into smaller units and explore some 'i want' cards . . .

Lyn suggested that we each write one sentence on a blank sheet with the thing we wanted most . . . everyone wrote . . . the cards were all placed in the center of the circle and mixed . . . everyone would get a card and read it 'as if' it were her own . . . we never got past the first card . . . Mary read the one she held - i want a full sexual relationship with a man . . . silence . . . would a feeling of mine be confirmed i wondered . . . i felt we had avoided the issue of sex . . . now it was facing us head on - no longer to be skirted around . . . suddenly the author of the card owned it . . . i wrote what Jamie said . . . her baby soft voice began to describe her private agony over sex . . . to me Jamie was a childwoman . . . her voice told me she had gone to a posh all girls east coast private school . . . i was right . . . of all the women in the group Jamie annoyed me most . . . she was too cute, too much the little girl, too sugar and too

spice . . . as she began to talk i felt a bit guilty for some of my feelings . . . she was struggling, too . . .

i hate to be touched she whispered . . . before i was married sex was illicit, secretive and fun . . . now i feel it's dirty chore i have to do . . . i wish my husband wasn't so scared and hurried . . . he's so young and fumbles at me . . . we haven't made love for six weeks and i'm scared . . . Jamie was now crying . . . i was crying . . . all anyone wants is to love and to be love i thought . . . that's what i wrote on my card . . . i want an open loving relationship with another human being . . . i felt i had found this intense and full love with Jeff . . . that's what it's all about i said to myself . . . openness and love . . . understanding and love . . . acceptance and love . . . Jamie broke the spell of silent thought by imagining a large penis chasing her around house . . . the laughter that followed was a needed tension release . . .

i had never cried in front of a group before . . . i sat there feeling so full of feeling and my tears felt warm and salty on my face . . . if felt each woman in the circle was part of a chain . . . each of us was a link to the other . . . i felt a powerful sense of 'self' at the same time feeling an incredible unity with the others around me . . . i could stop fighting so hard to be different or special . . . i only had to be me . . . me very 'meness' would make me a unique human being . . . in that moment i felt at one with all women - their sorrow, pain, fear, and joy were mine . . . were part of me . . . i felt linked to humanity . . . it was a very special moment for me . . .

someone in the circle suggested that some quiet time would be nice . . . i'd like a body massage Sharon said . . . i thought that was a great idea . . . i love massages . . . groups of four naturally formed and the lights were dimmed . . . i gave and received . . . my body felt relaxed as i rolled over to a corner of the room for a quick cat nap . . .

i stayed in my corner for a while . . . i heard Margaret crying . . . Margaret was the one older member of the group . . . she was in her late forties and at first felt estranged she told us . . . she wore make-up and more formal clothes while the rest of us - most in their twenties and early thirties - wore casual clothes and little or no make-up . . . gradually Margaret had been included in the group . . . now she was sharing a memory from her past . . . a time long ago in another country . . . she was allowed to show her feelings as a child and had developed a cold hard exterior . . . here in this room she was melting the barriers she had erected . . .

Lyn suggested everyone find their own space again . . . each woman took a pillow and went off alone . . . some fell asleep . . . a few snuggled together like teenage girls at a pajama party . . . two laughed and fought for a pillow . . . when the mock fight was over one sobbed in the others arms . . . and i . . . i began an incredible journey into myself . . .

me and my pillow . . . i stroked you - then pounded you . . . i stood up and flung you to the ground . . . the anger never came . . . i am giving up the image of an angry me . . . i can get angry . . . anger at war-poverty-injustice . . . but i am a lover . . . i am full of love - not full of anger . . . when my husband of seven years came back to see me after a three month separation he said i was like a flower . . . fragile at

times . . . strong and growing . . . don't change he said as he drove away from me that day . . . we both had tears in our eyes for a first love that was now over . . . i walked home and sobbed in the arms of my new love . . . a love born in equality and acceptance . . .

flashback . . . i had many that night . . . two men . . . and me . . . i crept to the mirror at the far end of the room . . . i held on the pillow . . . no more holding on i thought to myself . . . let go . . . that's what it's all about, too . . . letting go . . . of a husband . . . of parents . . . of the security so warm and safe . . . let go to risk the unknown . . . i threw the soft pillow away and faced myself in the mirror . . . it was as though i was seeing myself for the first time . . . although the lights were dim i saw clearly . . . in that darkened room i faced a strong determined woman . . . soft and beautiful . . . hair loose . . . clear eyes . . . then fear . . . i reached out to see if this me was really there . . . my face stared out at me like a mask . . . a death mask . . . death and life . . . am i death . . . must part of me die to be reborn again . . . i sat and stared at myself . . . no more a little girl in the looking glass . . . i felt expanding . . . my fear of losing Jeff is only my fear of losing myself . . . i reached out for the pillow again . . . i knew who i was and could now reach out to another . . . i don't even want to lose me again . . . i put my head on the pillow . . .

the evening came to a quiet end . . . no spectacular scene . . . just people putting on coats and boots and hats and going home . . . some were dancing at one end of the room . . . others sat and talked . . . a group of us rushed out for hot fudge sundaes . . . Jeff was lonely . . . we got home and made love . . . i am stretching myself . . . i am energy going forward . . . i am . . .

## Sunday

Sunday was a beautiful day . . . i felt like staying in bed but i got up and drove over to the now familiar blue room . . . i didn't expect much today as it was our last session together . . . so much had happened already . . . everyone must be exhausted . . . i was in for a surprise . . .

Lyn led us through a series of body movement experiences to get us back into the swing of things . . . in one exercise i lay on the floor and become open and closed with my body . . . i felt like a snail all curled up in my closed posture . . . when i opened up i was a coil unraveling . . . i smiled to myself . . . next we were to mirror another's body position . . . i joined Rachel and we played our follow the leader game till we began laughing and both ended up on the floor giggling like two happy kids . . .

the entire group then joined in a circle once more . . . what had we learned or discovered these past days Lyn asked . . . Jamie began . . . i feel less burdened and freer than i have for weeks she told us . . . last night after soaking in a hot tub i had a long talk with Carl (her husband) . . . it was our first honest talk in months . . . i am beginning to face myself . . . i want to grow up . . . silence . . . Sharon said that she realized how her words served to hide her feelings . . . as a college professor she always got by with her high verbal ability . . . she had discovered how much fun it was to use her body . . . she wanted to dance . . . i have new worlds to discover she said . . . she

asked if anyone could recommend a modern dance group . . . she had made herself a promise to enroll that very week . . . Trish was unhappy . . . she came expecting something different . . . she had sat on the fringe all weekend . . . glum and silent . . . an observer . . . she was a psychology major and had thought of being a group leader herself . . . she wasn't so sure now . . . she was asking herself . . . she wasn't so sure now . . . she was asking herself some important questions . . . Sally was scared . . . she loved her husband and two children but was discovering she needed to be more than just 'mommy' . . . she had graduated from college years ago and had a degree in nursing . . . she wanted to go on for a masters degree . . . seeing other women her age combining work and family gave her confidence . . . she had decided to confront her husband with the decision . . . what will happen tonight when i get home she wondered aloud . . .

everyone was sitting up now except Karen who was lying on the floor . . . she began to talk . . . i feel a heaviness in me . . . i'm burdered and loggy . . . i want help . . . she began to cry . . . please help me . . . i hate my body she suddenly screamed . . . Lyn gently guided her to the mirror . . . Karen continued . . . i'm fat and puffy . . . i'm dumpy and ugly . . . to me she was quite an attractive person . . . curly brown hair . . . rosy cheeks . . . wide intelligent eyes . . . it didn't matter . . . others could say she was pretty . . . it didn't matter . . . she felt fat and ugly . . . i'm so scared, tight . . . i'm holding myself together in a knot . . . if i don't hold tight i'll disappear . . . i just won't exist . . . Lyn's confident voice urged Karen to become the knot . . . Karen sank slowly to the floor . . . be the knot Lyn said again . . . stay the knot as long as you want and then whenever you're ready let go very very slowly . . . Karen remained on the floor for what seemed an eternity . . . slowly the knotted body untied itself . . . a smile appeared on Karen's tear streaked face . . . look in the mirror again Lyn said . . . Karen turned once again to face the mirror . . . i'm different . . . thinner . . . my face is less puffed up . . . perhaps you had to be there to believe it . . . her face had a soft relaxed glow . . . the puffiness was gone . . . she was radiant . . . it was a face i won't easily forget . . . i wondered how many other clear beautiful faces lay beneath layers of unsaid thoughts, uncried tears and unexpressed feelings . . .

it was noon . . . soon the group would disband . . . each would go a separate path . . . Lyn asked us if anyone felt they needed extra time - extra help . . . she made sure everyone knew she would be available for anyone in trouble . . . Kathy said she was scared to leave . . . i've opened up so much these past days she said . . . will i close up again outside . . . only you can make that choice Lyn answered . . . only you have the power and the responsibility to decide what you will become when you go out the door today . . . that was true for all of us . . .

what did the experience mean to me . . . it was another step in my life . . . a journey into a self i had submerged for a long time . . . i was emerging from out of my cocoon . . . i was more confident . . . i could get along with a group of women and share intense personal feelings . . . i could be me . . .

i was the first to arrive that Friday evening in the snowstorm . . . now i was the first to leave . . . the first day of spring . . . the air was cool and fresh . . . i got into my little red car and drove steadily home . . . i had a destination . . . a meaning . . . a place to go . . . a friend waiting for me . . . i honked the horn . . . Jeff came to the door . . . i kissed him gently . . . i was home . . .

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The following is a list of ten books which were important to me in forming some of the background for this paper. There are also numerous articles, films, etc., not mentioned.

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