

# Morning Light

Nancy King



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First published in the United States of America in 2007 by Atelier Books, 2810 Plaza Rojo, Santa Fe, NM, USA 87507-5377.  
atelierbooks@gmail.com.

ISBN 978-09706632-7-6

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Printed and bound in the United States.

# 1

Sometimes I think I have two minds and the one I like best takes the longest to get strong enough to tell the other to go to hell. I wish I knew what would speed up the process.

As a child, when I was in need of consolation I crawled under my bed or hid behind a large upholstered chair we had in the living room—any place I couldn't be seen. Then, I'd close my eyes, imagine myself in another world, and pretend I was a heroine performing amazing feats in spite of fierce monsters or soldiers in thick armor. In my stories, I was always loved and cherished and honored and wanted. I even had an imaginary companion I created after reading a collection of Aboriginal myths. I don't know where he went or how I lost my stories but they're gone.

After graduation, when most of my classmates marched in twos from the doors of college advancing toward the ark of marriage, loneliness was the least of it. There was no chance of my getting on board. I was stranded on an island while the ark kept moving farther and faster away. I watched them leave, wondering if my turn would ever come. You need a mate to climb the gangplank, and none of my male encounters stayed the night, much less the course.

From the outside, I didn't look much different from the women in my classes. We all wore short skirts or bell-bottomed hip huggers, Indian prints, and beads. I wore my earrings long, dangling and shimmering, having spent hours meandering in and out of jewelry shops on West 4<sup>th</sup> Street in Greenwich Village that catered to low budgets and active imaginations. Like many of the girls, my hair was long enough to braid in a single plait that knocked against my butt as I walked. Still, when I looked at my classmates I felt different. As I watched them choose spouses and careers, I felt pushed and pulled by mysterious forces that made me wonder about my inability to make choices. Sartre wrote that choosing not to choose was still a choice. Yet he didn't explain how will becomes so paralyzed you can't remember having a choice to make.

I'm still not sure how I chose to major in education rather than literature but when I met the Dean of Education, a huge man with a body that looked as if he'd been a football player, I had a chance to find out. He got up from behind his imposing desk and came around to shake my hand. "So, Miss Baum, why do you want to be a teacher?"

"I believe kids need to be in a classroom where they feel safe. Where they can make mistakes without anyone laughing at them. Here in New York, many kids come to school, they don't speak English, they can't read, their parents don't know how to help them, and they just keep falling behind until too many of them quit. I'd like to give them a better chance."

"And you think you can do that with thirty children in a class? A small woman like you?"

"Size has nothing to do with competence."

He grinned. "Well done."

For years I believed my degree in education was a second-class degree, but I loved my current job, teaching preschool. I can't imagine how close I came to making a career of teaching literature to restless adolescents with raging hormones and thirty-second attention spans. Still, I hated almost every minute of the four years it took me to graduate. I survived by taking literature courses with any professor who encouraged intelligent adult discussions instead of the inanities we were forced to treat seriously, such as finding the "right" tone of voice to say "Good morning" to first graders. I hated the officially sanctioned phoniness; we were being taught to be untruthful.

At the time, I didn't know why it bothered me so much but now it was pretty clear. My mother, Sadie, could change her expression in an instant. One minute she was hitting me and in the next, she was smiling at a neighbor who came to borrow a cup of sugar. What upset me most was that people fell for it. To me it was as phony as a seven-cent coin, yet it seemed genuine to the public before whom she performed. Somehow, my father, Heshie, managed to keep a smile on his face no matter what number of derogatory expressions my mother hurled at him or who heard. I remember one Thanksgiving when my grandparents and Aunt Lilly and her family came for dinner. My father spilled cranberry sauce on the white tablecloth and my mother started yelling about how clumsy he was and how she'd never get the stain out. "Sadie," he smiled, looking at me, "It's pretty. White is so boring." He winked at me and I wanted to wink back, but I knew if my mother caught me she would make sure I got "what I

deserved." I sometimes wondered what would happen if he caught her choking me. Would he wink and smile, pretending it hadn't happened?

Despite my dissatisfaction with the education program, what kept me going were the children. Early on I volunteered to tutor a child. Kaisha, a fourth-grade student, was having trouble reading and, according to her record, refused to speak in class. A tall skinny kid with braids carefully wrapped in pink and red ribbons, she sat on the edge of an orange plastic chair in the principal's office, looking like she was ready to run. When we were introduced her lips tightened, then pursed in disappointment.

The principal spoke sternly. "Kaisha, stand up and say hello to Miss Baum. She's been kind enough to take time from her busy schedule to help you."

"Hello, Miss Baum," said a low voice from a bowed head.

"Kaisha, you and Miss Baum will be working in room 203-A. Miss Baum, when you're finished, please walk Kaisha back to her room. She'll show you where it is, won't you, Kaisha?" Kaisha nodded, staring at the tile floor.

"Kaisha, what do we say?"

"Yes, Mr. Brown." The principal showed us to the door.

We started walking, her head still bowed; a grim expression on her face. *She hates me. How the hell am I going to help her?* I followed as she showed me to our room, little bigger than a janitor's closet. It smelled of disinfectant and lemon wax. Kaisha sat down and stared into space. I moved a chair from behind a desk and put it next to hers. *Now what do I do?* We still had twenty-five minutes.

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My mother sees my report card with an "S" for satisfactory behavior instead of an "O" for outstanding and smacks me across the face. "You know better, Anna. When you gonna do better?"

Although I try to hide my feelings I'm not very good at it. The less my mother knows what I'm thinking, the more likely I can avoid being hit. She sees me looking at her and hits me again.

I can feel my mother's eyes boring into me from behind when she shows my father my report card. He shakes his head and says, "This is not acceptable, Anna. Your mother and I expect you to do better."

He touches the bruises, and I wince.