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Dissolving Boundaries

It was Memorial Day, 1994. I waved good-bye to my two year old son and his grandma as my husband pulled our car out of the driveway, tires squealing. "I'll be back in a few days," I called out to my son, "with a brand new baby brother for you." As our car sped onto the freeway, I tried to reassure my nervous husband, telling him the pains weren't too bad, and that everyone said the second time around was much easier. I had no premonitions at all.

I didn't know that a normal delivery would not be possible for me. That the ensuing Caesarean surgery would go wrong in every way. That I would end up having to remain in the hospital for over a month, unable to take care of my newborn. I didn't know that I would balance precariously for weeks on the frail and perilous boundary between living and dying.

That encounter with death affected me deeply, though not in the ways one might expect. I went through no dark tunnel, saw no bright lights. I did not rise out of my body and see it lying below. Mostly I stumbled through a grey fog of pain, made foggier by medication. I alternated between anger (why should I have to suffer like this) and worry (what would happen to my children). But at times I would feel a strange, lightheaded sense of peace, of emptiness, in the way Buddhists use the term. I felt as though I floated between states of life and death, and that it didn't matter which side I landed on. Because the boundary we humans had drawn between these two states was not as important, nor as irrevocable, as we believed.

I mused a lot about boundaries as I lay in bed recovering over the next few months,

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learning to live again. And it seemed to me, in some wordless way, that the art of dissolving boundaries is what living is all about. I ached to give this discovery a voice and a form. But I didn't know how until Tilo, my heroine, the Mistress of Spices, came to me.

I wrote the book urgently--almost breathlessly. Having been so close to death, I could no longer take even a single day for granted. Stylistically the book was completely different from my last work of fiction, *Arranged Marriage*, for the first separation I felt I needed to remove was that between poetry and prose. I had to give Tilo the lyricism she demanded. It was a book full of risks for me. I ventured into paths I hadn't traveled before, breaking ethnic barriers, showing people of different races at war and in love. I dipped into the language and imagery of my childhood, the tales I grew up on, and alternated them with slang from Oakland's inner-city streets. And I wrote in a spirit of play, collapsing the divisions between the realistic world of twentieth century America and the timeless one of myth and magic in my attempt to create a modern fable.

For me, Tilo became the quintessential dissolver of boundaries, moving between different ages and worlds and the communities that people them, passing through a trial by water, then a trial by fire, and finally the trial of earth-burial to emerge transformed, each time with a new name and a new identity. Reading passages aloud, as I often do when I am revising, I was surprised to find--how much I identified with her. But looking back I see that it is not so surprising after all. I too have lived in the diametrically opposed worlds of India and America. I too have taken on a new identity in a new land. And I too, in my quiet way, have visited that emptiness, at once vast and minute, that shimmers between life and death.

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