



# FIELDS OF GOLD

Celebrating Life in the Face of Cancer

*A story of two sisters*



**Annie McGregor & Pam Morrison**

# C O N T E N T S

Foreword - Rita Charon

Introduction - Pam Morrison

In the year of the journal

The journal

Conclusion

Photo album

Acknowledgements

# FOREWORD

Fields of Gold stretch into the neverend. Pam, sister of Annie, who survives Annie, writes for herself and records her sister's words. This book gives voice to two women – one dying, the other accompanying her in her dying – and also to their being-as-one, a third presence, Pam-and-Annie together. In the course of the year of Annie's illness and death, their written words suggest how much this cup of life can hold. To read of the lives echoed in these words enlarges the cup-of-life of us readers, as if our own capacity to behold life and to weather loss deepens, widens, becomes more capacious, permitting us to not only behold life but to live it.

Words – garments we make to show the shape of experience – have turned to threads, writes Pam. Words do not soften but reveal the truth. Gossamer-light, taffeta-red, t-shirt-beefy, and mohair-soft, the separate threads of this story (a wedding, a grandson, a field in Wanaka, Keith Jarrett's 'My Wild Irish Rose', brooches made of a grandmother's buttons) are woven together into a living whole that show the shape of love. The words that make this book, Pam realises, come from her own true self – she writes to “spin [her] spider strand.” Spiders spin their homes and create their beauty from their deep tissues and fluids and biological bodies. This book is made not of words on paper but of tissue and lymph, deep secretions of self.

Right now, wherever you are, as you are about to read this journal, this utterly safe journal-box, you are being summoned to behold a sacred landscape. Whatever fields greet your view now can connect you to Pam and Annie's time and place – all fields, all gold, in living, in dying. 'The giving and receiving are inseparable. Giving and receiving is not a tide that flows back and forth. It is an ocean.' Receive, now, so that you may give.

*Rita Charon, MD, PhD; Professor of Medicine, Columbia University Medical Centre; Executive Director, Program in Narrative Medicine, Columbia University*

# INTRODUCTION

This journal began in March 2003 as a holding place for my thoughts and feelings in the wake of news that my only sister, Annie, had terminal cancer. Within two weeks it had become a shared receptacle; a form of slow dialogue and a way to capture the mystery, beauty and bewilderment of our lives.

We had a large, beautiful book, covered in a pastel artwork created by a friend. All of our entries were shared with each other. Sometimes the journalling was done when we were together, other times by phone. Annie spoke her entries, and I wrote them down, always in pencil. On occasions, when I'd written mine, we would make a time and I would read my words to her.

Neither Annie nor I envisaged then that the writing would one day be published.

We were aware, however, that these reflections, while intimate, were not private or out of bounds to others. It was Annie's wish that they be shared with family, and sometimes the entries would be read aloud when we were all together, as a way to mark the events of our extraordinary passage.

When the journal had been nearly filled, the entries were typed up by my children and sent to family members. At this time, Annie began to voice her wish that the journal would one day be published.

Five days after Annie's death, the journal was completed, but never closed. Over subsequent months, friends and extended family were given copies, and in the years following, our writing was read by an ever-widening circle of people.

It became apparent that ours was not merely a personal story of two siblings writing about a shared journey in the presence of cancer. It was a

collective story with themes and questions that were universal: How do you reconcile hope and realism? How do you articulate the questions and terrors? How do you stay authentic with each other when you are guarding your own differing griefs? How can you love life and embrace your own dying? How can you love someone and let them go?

The ritual of shared writing gave us a container capable of holding all of this. There would be no clear answers, but what we found was a safe vessel, with room enough for keepsakes and for naming what would otherwise be too tender to speak. My hope – dare I say our hope – is that others in relationship will be encouraged, when spoken words are not enough, to find a beautiful book, pick up a pencil, and take turns to write.

*Pam Morrison*

# IN THE YEAR OF THE JOURNAL

*March 2003 to March 2004*

Annie has a partner of seven years, Graham. She also has three sons: New York-based Hamish, who in this same year gets engaged to his partner Jo; Fraser, who lives in Auckland with his partner Sarah; and Andrew in Australia who is single but has been granted by his family an imaginary girlfriend, Cherie. Hamish and Jo have their first child in November 2003.

Annie has a wide circle of friends. Some feature in the journal. Others are present throughout this year, but are not named. Those mentioned include Rhonda, whose friendship with Annie dates back to 1961 when they met at secondary school. (An account of their friendship is included in the book *It Looks Better on You*, a book of women's friendships published by Longacre Press in 2003.) Rhonda, a writer, therapist and educator, is married to Julian.

Janion is another of Annie's closest friends. They met in Te Awamutu in the 1980s and share a love of music and of ritual. Janion has been living with cancer, and asked Annie in 2002 to be celebrant at her funeral. Annie said yes, and both laughed at the proviso: only if Janion would officiate at hers, should she die first. Janion supports Annie, not only as a friend, but as a medic and spiritual mentor. She is married to Bob.

There is also a network of angels (Annie's term). They help Annie and her family in a host of practical ways and undergird them with emotional support. They also give her the gift of space when she needs it. ('The ministry of absence' is a saying that Annie comes to hold dear.) The angelic host includes Pam, Diana, Jenny, Heather, Maeve, Alison, and Ros and her children Kate and Fiora,

Other important friends are Al and Kate in Wellington and Jen and Ken in Hawera.

Annie and Pam's mother Issie lives in Dunedin and their brother Alan lives in Australia with his partner Sue. Alan has three children: Kate, based in Sydney and Susannah and Tom, who live in England.

Pam is married to John and has three children: Cameron, Sally and Georgia. She also has her own band of angels: Claire, Chrissie, Anna, Pauline and Penelope.

## After Flowers, the Fruit

*For Annie and Graham*

What we wish to give  
death coming slowly  
with its straight-talking  
reputation is everything  
it always said  
it always wanted: our eagerness  
to see into each other's leaves  
and eyes, to touch  
the skin and bark,  
and to hear  
the throaty flowers  
bloom between the branching  
words of those who dare  
to say *we will* and after  
that *we do, we do*.

*Dinah Hawken*



# THE JOURNAL

*Monday 17 March 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

It is Monday. On Friday last week, I learned that Annie has cancer and that she may not have long to live.

I see now that there will be three strands to this. They will weave together, yet somehow also remain separate. One strand is my own journey. Another is Annie's. The third is our journey together.

I'm aware that for two of these strands, my part will shape them, and so, too, shape the whole. In this journal, I will try to give expression to my experience and also to mark what is happening in our shared journey – our continuing relationship.

It is helpful to see the choices that we have in this overwhelming situation. Annie has clearly chosen to face her own future with courage and do the best she can. I too choose to inhabit this fully: the bewilderment, the shock, the anger.

Overnight I have come to see that I must enter fully and take my place alongside Annie – not for my sake or for her sake, but for that third strand – for our sake. The pain of not knowing where to place myself has been growing for the last two days. Now I am clear.

I received a card from Penelope, which I opened yesterday. The picture was of a child walking with a large bear beside a still lake. 'When the child saw the bear she was frightened, but then she looked closer and could see the bear was her friend. She put her hand on the bear's shoulder and they walked safely home.'

2

*Tuesday 18 March 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Yesterday I cut my own hair.

Last night I booked my flights to Hamilton.

The anguish of separation has gone. I feel relieved and stilled by the prospect of being there. I will be moving into a – what?! I have no knowing, no words.



*Thursday 20 March 2003, Christchurch Airport*

PAM

My body has its own pace, and it's very slow. I remember reading in a book by John Donaghue the idea that it's the soul that holds the body. God/Mystery who is love holds my soul. God/Mystery who is love holds Annie's soul. I'm steadied by that thought.

Another thought: I go in alongside Annie as a co-warrior. I will stand strong, steady, loving, life flowing, alongside. Through whatever turmoil, emotional out-workings in me, or her, I stand strong to do battle for her.



*Thursday 20 March 2003, Hamilton*

PAM

4 p.m. Annie is asleep. The afternoon is hot and still. I carry within myself a sense of unreality ... I can't write.

5 p.m. And now one hour on – that feeling has moved, redefined itself.

I have experienced no sense of grief in being here. Simply, plainly, a determination that Annie will get better. The more I am with it, the wider my feet are planted. I am the wooden horse of Troy.

She will not die.



*Saturday 22 March 2003, Hamilton*

PAM

I suggested to Annie that this become our shared journal. That I leave it with her. She has taken off the cover, Claire's landscape in pastels called 'Walking with Pam', and has placed it on her Scotch chest. And I have been charged with responsibility for recording things.

So much has taken place over these two days. I'll try and put them in order...

Yesterday (*Annie's oldest son*) Hamish arrived. We went together to see the specialist – the four of us. Annie was amazing – contained and forward facing, defining her own new reality out loud before inviting the surgeon to

speak. There were no clear answers to many of her questions. But there was no sense of being short-changed. We were shown images of Annie's body – the heartening pictures of row after row of healthy organs. The sickening sight of her distended liver. The right lobe is 14 x 10 cm. The size of a grapefruit. Annie was relieved to learn that her persistent cough probably has a mechanical cause – pressure on her diaphragm rather than lung disease.

We went to lunch. Annie and I shared meals, pasta and salad dishes. Hamish had lamb and (*Annie's partner*) Graham, the chicken salad. We scored a table outside in the sun. It felt like we were basking in one another.

We spoke to a number of important people yesterday. Annie spoke to (*her youngest son*) Andrew, who rang from remote Australia, parrots calling out from surrounding eucalyptus trees. He told his mum the trees are providing sanctuary any time he feels the need to retreat and bawl.

(*Our brother*) Alan rang just after dinner, and Annie, slung into her favourite position on the charcoal couch, talked for some time while Graham, Hamish and I talked family stuff at the round table. Annie then spoke to (*our mother*) Issie. 'Death is off, Issie,' was her opening remark. They agreed that Issie will come up to Wellington on Tuesday week, will stay with Annie and Graham at (*their friends*) Rhonda and Julian's and will visit the surgeon with Annie, Graham and Rhonda.

Then I gave Annie a massage on her bed, back and front. Candles, bergamot oil warmed in my palms, and the deeply reassuring, settling connection of touch given, touch received.

Two more bed stories for today: first, a pre-dawn conversation. Annie tapped Graham on the shoulder and shook away his slumber to announce: 'I want you to know, I'm feeling good.' 'That's lovely, my darling,' responded Graham. 'Can I go back to sleep?'

And then, at 9 a.m., Annie climbed into bed with me. We tucked into one another – a soft and perfect fit, but for my left arm. ‘Just like lessies,’ says Annie. ‘No dick in the way,’ my reply.

Annie’s ‘angels’ have been visiting. Another Pam came to clean the house. Big, strong-armed, soft-eyed. She brings food, she vacuums and dusts, somehow combining thorough efficiency with sensitivity and love. Meanwhile, another friend came into the office, a quiet presence, and sorted methodically through Annie’s papers. I spent a portion of time as Annie’s Executive Assistant yesterday, rearranging her celebrancy bookings and putting together a joint email to her circle of friends. (There is so much ease in blending our two voices [Annie and Pam’s], sharing ownership).

As for me, my heart burns steadfastly, positively, for Annie’s life. Sometimes I wonder – where have the tears gone? But I have taken up occupation, for this time, quiet and steady, on a broad plain. I am deeply present, would be nowhere else in the world – would fight with the strength of the gods should anything cause me to leave Annie’s side. I remind myself that I still have more time ahead than I have behind me, here with Annie and Graham.

3

*21 March 2003, Hamilton*

*ANNIE and PAM's email*

Hello Annie's friends,

Annie has entrusted to me the task of being the message conduit to all of you who love her. She has a letter saved on desktop to you, and we have

just been talking through the other important things she wants to say. First her letter, then I will add her and my thoughts from today.

*From Annie:*

When I look at this email list I realise that some of you have no sense of what is to follow. I'm sorry if this looks abrupt but there have been many silences and tears and wonderings and unexpected love and joy around this, and now it is time to share with you our life in the past few days.

Short version: With relatively no symptoms apart from tiredness, some recent weight loss and intermittent but not frequent sharp pains in February this year, my careful GP was doing a series of blood tests which indicated a mildly malfunctioning liver. By Friday 14th March, within two days, I had an ultrasound, a CT scan, biopsy and colonoscopy, and saw a surgeon who indicated that half of my liver has a large cancer and the other half has some secondaries wandering. The surgeon thinks that there is a primary somewhere so we are looking for that this week.

I have been recommended an excellent surgeon, Richard Stubbs, who offers radical chemo treatment injecting the remaining liver directly and who specialises in secondary liver cancers. We will see him on 2nd April in Wellington and hopefully I will have surgery the following week.

Graham is very present and very tender but we are in a state of shock really. Just can't believe it. Now we have to. The boys are constant – (*middle son*) Fras coming down from Auckland regularly, Hamish just arrived for one week and will be back at Easter from New York, and Andrew in Australia working hard but ready to jump. His dad is apparently ringing him regularly, so that's great and the boys and my sister and mother and dear friends Rhonda and Julian have a tight auxiliary familial phone support. Plus our friends send us so much good energy that we are bathed and

blessed. That doesn't mean no tears – it just means we wipe them up with gossamer.

So much is bountiful but it's going to be hard and dark and we don't know when that will start or how it will be. But we do know that we will be supported on that journey.

Much love, dear ones,

Annie and Graham

P.S. Fras has the best line so far – we went out to Raglan on D-day for fish and chips and hunted for a car park. 'Do you think it's too soon to take a disabled park? No I guess not!' he said brightly.

*From Pam:*

Annie is in bed resting in her bedroom, doors flung wide to the garden, huge pink and white dahlias blooming and a leaning apple tree almost in reach. I am here for four days and Hamish arrives today for three days on his own with Annie, then he will be joined by (*his partner*) Jo. They are here for the week. Annie wants me to tell you the following things:

Annie has good energy very early in the day, but is surprised and sometimes shocked at the profound tiredness she is experiencing. She deeply appreciates what she calls 'the ministry of absence'. She wants you to know that she dearly loves you and is receiving your spirit and good will. But she is clear that she needs to be still and gather her strength for what lies ahead.

Graham has been amazing – enfolding her and attentive to many things, while the ground continues to shift for him and all of us.

Two more things she has asked me to share: one is a meditation we talked about this morning, which I have found helpful, and which Annie is now pondering: Our body is not so much receptacle for the spirit/soul. Rather it

is the soul that cradles the body, and the soul in turn is cradled by the great mystery. We have been talking about this together.

The other is a quote, sent by Janion. It is from Friedrich Nietzsche. ‘... from such abysses, from such severe sickness ... one returns *newborn*, having shed one's skin, more ticklish and malicious, with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, with merrier senses, with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before.’

P.S. *Annie says:*

The biopsy results came though at lunchtime. At this stage there is nothing new to add. The results of biopsy will be known probably by Wednesday (26th March) next week, which will give some clarity hopefully about the location of the primary and will influence the choice of chemo used.

Future plans are: an appointment with Richard Stubbs, the specialist, on 2nd April. I will implicitly trust his judgement. 8th April, tentative surgery date – ten days in Wellington. The good news is that the chemo process means I can stay in Hamilton. I won't lose my hair, I won't get sick, but I will be tired for a long time. We can manage this together.





*Sunday 23 March 2003, Hamilton*

PAM

Pre-dawn (again). This seems to be when I now wake. I have no idea of the time. Annie's clocks tell different stories and my watch has walked off (how appropriate). We feel so ungoverned by time; it's great having no sentries on duty.

The three of us slept yesterday afternoon: Annie for three hours in her bedroom, me in mine, and Graham tucked into the two-seater couch in his office. He dreamed that he caught a large snapper. A good omen, surely. At the very least, a victorious image for the present.

Before our sleeps, Annie and I took up residence in the farthest lounge space, covered up in our fluffy rugs and bathed (one of Annie's favourite words these days) in the music of tenor Andreas Scholl and in Fauré's 'Requiem'. I think my heart was beating at one stroke per minute. From where I was sitting in the winged chair I could see way, way out to the old established trees at the far end of the section. The whole wall between house and deck/garden is glass. My hands were beaming.

A former work colleague, now friend, spoke to Annie before dinner. She had dreamed she was holding Annie tight. I said to Annie there is possibly no second in the day (or night) when she is not being held by someone.

Annie and I will meet in her bedroom tonight, after the company has gone, to gather up the pieces of what will have been two days, to record them. I read this entire journal to date to Annie and Graham, who heard it with deep attentiveness, and such delight at the prospect of putting our journey in words. (That word 'journey' – so hackneyed but so perfect).

Graham shared an insight that's meant a lot to Annie; she's asked me to record it here: 'This is not a test, Annie. It's a path.'

Annie will now tell, in her voice (my hand), the other stories.

## ANNIE

Here we are – Pam and me – both in bed again. I've got my lolly pink and white stripe cheer-up pyjamas on. Outside it's really still and grey. A perfect day.

Last night was the first night I didn't worry about a thing. The night before I was worried about how we'd get the ironing done. Then I realised we only iron every six months – the clothes usually just loll about in the ironing basket. So last night was really peaceful. I especially enjoyed giving Pam a head massage at the end of the evening and listening to her sigh with contentment as I loved her. It was a nice change from practising my sickness thing where I'm the one lying on the couch.

But now, on this silver morning, the doors wide open to the apple tree and Graham in his dressing gown watering the garden (even though it's actually raining!), I want to reflect on this whole business of writing a journal. When I was first on my own ten years ago I wrote many journals and found it a useful tool to recovery. But this time I'm absolutely clear I'm not picking up a pencil. It's weird. Because I love words.

The thing that I've learnt most in the past two or three days is that my body is craving stillness and rest. And for me at the moment that doesn't mean hanging onto a pencil.

I find myself lying in this beautiful bedroom listening to my breath; with the in-breath I follow the cradling of my soul from my left foot up into my head and with my out-breath it goes down the other side. And so with an easy rhythm, I connect with my essential soul. It does seem to be cradling this mischievous body.

After sleep I always wake regenerated, and ready for a good time. So now I'm going to practise the simple rhythms of crawling into the sheets, and know that the simplicity of sleeping and resting does not mean I am dying or being a slob.

Last night when Pam read what is now our shared journal, quietly and slowly, I received it as one of the sweetest gifts I've been offered. As much for its love and clarity and humour as for her measured reading. Graham had lit the candles and it felt like yet another perfect ritual to begin this journey – not a test but a path.

I want my much-loved family to experience the beauty of the journal when we gather today.



*Sunday, cont'd*

PAM

My wheels are now very small, not well oiled, but at least they're firmly attached. That's how it feels today. The outside world is sharp and a little foreign. It makes me wonder how it will be for me to leave here tomorrow.

Annie asked me to talk to the young Indian woman at the local dairy about her being unwell. I didn't want to, but I decided to do it. A gift for Annie. It was okay.



*1 p.m. Monday 24 March 2003, Christchurch Airport*

PAM

I have a heavy bag, packed with pottery plates – a gift from Annie and Graham. Its weight across my shoulder and bulk at my side is anchoring me as I re-enter this noisy busy world. My eyes are hooded like a tuatara's. I am avoiding meeting anyone's eyes. I left Graham with the words, 'I don't know what comes next.' In the plane I felt sorrow in a frisson. It travelled down my body like the lightest touch of a hand. I could, if given a place all to myself, wail. But right now I sit in wait. As Annie is surrendering to process, I feel like I too am surrendering to something bigger than me. I don't know its name and I don't know its shape. Will it feel like giving birth, like being born, like disintegrating?

Annie has received me with such love and tenderness, no clumsy gestures between us. What a strange gift: suffering and uncertainty have given us a place to stand together that feels both real and somehow rarified, as if the air itself is more alive.

I am struck by the absence of sadness and my own resolute ability to remain in the deeply calm waters of love and joy. I thought on the plane that my tears/sobs in Dunedin had been about loss and fear of loss. My experience in Hamilton has been about finding. Finding Annie, finding Graham, finding Annie, Graham and me.

Annie and I stayed prone last night, Annie's straight legs spread onto my bent legs. We'd thought we would retreat from the lounge to the bedroom for a massage and to collect thoughts and moments to record here in our book. We decided instead that we didn't need to. How good it feels to be spontaneous. To pick up and to let go.

Yesterday Annie's two sons and their partners, our niece Kate, Graham, Annie and I were together. It was different for each of us. Before dinner we read 'A Celtic Blessing for a Family Gathering in Times of Challenge':

another marker that a journey is beginning of which we are all part. All are sojourners. As Annie or Graham said, this is uncharted terrain. But, at this stage, we have no fear of the route. No-one is afraid to keep walking.



*Tuesday 25 March 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

6.20 a.m. I have been awake since 3 o'clock or so. Waiting for dawn and (*my husband*) John's departure to turn on the light and re-enter this journal. I thought as I travelled south that this book is like a pair of hands, able to hold whatever is placed in them. Also bare and so a little vulnerable – with its cover sitting on Annie's dresser. It's good to think of it now in her bedroom, breaking into the new day with her.

I spoke briefly to Issie last night, and will go over tonight with the purple mohair shawl, which Annie sent down with me to give to Mum. It's now wrapping two apples from the small tree outside Annie's bedroom doors. 'Eat them together as communion,' was Annie's request as I left.



Saturday 29 March 2003, Dunedin

PAM

In bed, a misty morning. I take up this armful of book with relief. Life has been hurtling – with little space to take a breath. But I do have that room now – some quiet hours ahead. I want to thread my way back through the week. Take notice of some events and conversations so that this journal can keep accompanying me through this time.

The thought of having slices of time now that are unknown or unremembered is terrible.

Tuesday night, the day after I returned, I went to see Mum. She had rung me the night before, on the evening of my return – had been anxious to touch base and see that I was okay. I felt sorry that I hadn't contacted her immediately. She was very understanding; but I want to set up a different motion so that I am more in touch with her. We are, together, so much a part of this. The independence we have learned – respect for one another's full lives – almost needs to be dismantled, so that we are not cautious about looking to one another for strength.

I gave Mum the shawl from Annie. We shared slices of apple from Annie's tree (a ritual gift of love and an act of love to eat it – the apple was tart). I read Mum the pages of this journal that I had been asked by Annie to share with the boys and family on Sunday.

Wednesday evening I went out to a seminar on Celtic spirituality. I was unspeakably tired, was ushered to the front row, and within 15 minutes was aching to leave. Another lesson about listening to my body. I'm slowly learning (I hope) how to live these hours and days.

Thursday night – singing practice with (*our group of five women*) As Is. Only three of us there. Claire and Chrissie offered me the ministry of presence. Dear friends.

Again, as I've done on previous nights, I fell to bed hardly able to take off my clothing. Work has been very busy – the steady pressure of a great deal to be done, but thankfully, little people contact.

I had a long, luscious talk to Annie before work on Thursday. We agreed to make a date this weekend: Annie, me, the pencil and the book.

Last night (*our son*) Cameron and I had dinner with Issie. I read her the emails from (*Annie's friends*) Janion and Ros and gave her the printed copies of photos Annie had sent through via the internet. Issie was soft, strong, open, proud. Honest about her anxiety about the two days in Wellington, where she will join Annie when she meets the surgeon about the next phase of treatment, and asking for our thoughts to be with her at that time.

When Annie rang on Thursday, she said she was once again drawing with deep delight from the love of friends. Cards from Ros's two daughters were 'perfect'; likewise her response to emails from Janion and Rhonda.

As I lie still and notice my body again, it tells me it is very tired. I have been waking early most mornings – around 4 a.m. and entering, as Claire suggested, 'vigil' from that time on. Last night, with the aid of two Thompson's Restful Sleeps, I slept until 6 a.m., then dozed for an hour. (How self-absorbed it seems to be recording my hours of sleep.)

I have been thinking how the weight and 'energy' of this ... (I'm lost again for words) ... how walking this path sits deep in the gut. There's so much talk about heart pain, heart prayer, heart compassion. I am feeling it, when it takes form in me, as a visceral thing. Can this be heard by the liver of a sister? Is this the deepest prayer of all?

## ANNIE

Graham has been struck by how close women can be. He's enjoyed observing that.

There's a shift now. Fras and I are so close. Because he's been frail he's got Sarah absolutely beside him. And I'm frail and I've got Graham. There are no longer two of us. There are four of us. It's quite wonderful.

The other day he said, 'What'll we do Mum?' We went to a movie – 'Man Without a Past'. It's a really nice theatre, great big seats. We came out and he put his arms around me and he said, 'This has been a memorable night.' We feel like we're moving to a new place. The first week was blind shock and tears, then you came, Pam, and grounded us like Gibraltar.

I asked Graham, 'Have you been squeezed out?' He said, 'No, Annie – this is my gift. I can give you all the time you need and want with your family.'

We awarded ourselves Oscars. Two weeks on – we reckon we've done really well. We're not worried about ourselves right now, today. That may change.

Then Hamish and Jo came from New York. They're strategists. We've looked at all possible scenarios. Hamish said, 'Graham, we always want you to live here so that your grandchildren can visit.'

And so we were cared for in a really different way. The garage door functions. He did a longitudinal savings plan for me. They're so able and practical.

Another small thing. I rang my accountant. He said, 'Send me your whole box of papers and we'll sort it out.'

We started the night with two dozen Bluff oysters – layers of intensity – and a crayfish. I was tired by 20 past 8. Graham put his wide hand on my



back to give me strength to get through the evening. We're so locked in together.

I can't rail on about more time, more time, because what we have together is so rich. I feel like that hand on my back will go with me everywhere. I'm reminded of the Old Testament quote, 'I have carved your name in the palm of my hand, I will never forget you.'

I still have no symptoms, apart from tiredness. Still no conclusive results from the biopsy tests. Janion can't believe it. Heather (*my friend*) was interesting. She said, 'I watched you with your women friends. You're so present – perhaps that's why you have no symptoms.' (Right now we're laughing, Pam and I, because I'm now saying, please give me cancer of the uterus – something that can be whipped out. I'm kneeling at the side of my bed praying for it!)

I received a card from Kate, Ros's daughter – this little girl who's meticulous and careful in her piano playing, whom I love dearly. I showed her the principles of improvisation, like three chords and how to add in other notes, and if it sounds good to her, that's fine. And if she wants to shift them around or change them a bit that's fine too. At the end of our hour together, she was sparkling, sparkling, accompanying Fiora, her sister, on Suzuki violin – simple pieces with no music and no rules. This is the postscript to her card – the most precious gift anyone could give me. I was reminded how I used to watch Dad play and watch his chord progressions. 'My cello and piano have really improved. I hope we have another jam session. You really inspired me with my piano. I can put in all those chords and accompany Dad and Fiora. It's lots of fun.'



*Thursday 3 April 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Last night Annie told me that an operation is not an option. The cancer has advanced too far. I have taken the day off from work. I am in bed. I have been speaking to Rhonda this morning. How strange it is to put words to this experience. It's as if the words – the garments we make to show the shape of it – have turned to threads. They lie over it. But they cannot cover it. Or define it.

And so Rhonda and I spoke. Reaching out to one another because we both love Annie. Rhonda's been waking up at 4 a.m. when the 'sabre-toothed tigers' come out and remind her that she's under threat.

At the end of the conversation, I was left rocking with the echo of my own final words. Horrified to hear myself put out an idea that was hollow of meaning. I said that when Annie dies, she will never die to me. That I will hold and acknowledge her like Maori do their ancestors...

I cannot speak of that time or how it will be. I cannot yet speak knowingly even of the likelihood that she will die. I cannot go there. There is only the now, and as I sit with what is, I can stay real and alive to love and to longing. And bewilderment. And the abyss that is unknown.



*5 April (with a 10 April update from Annie)*

## RHONDA's email:

Hi dear friends,

Had hoped to give you news earlier but it has taken till yesterday to clarify Annie's situation. She is not going to have surgery because the tumours are not confined to one section of the liver, but after further investigation and scans showing no immediately alarming signs in lungs or bones, they have decided to administer specific intensive radiotherapy to the liver at the end of next week which can reduce the tumour by 90 % and give her a year longer ... or more...

After contemplating worse, it has been happy news for her and for us all. She has now gone back to Hamilton until next Thursday 10th April when she comes back for three days for a single very high dose which will knock her flat for three to six weeks but won't give hair loss or serious nausea. She and Graham return to Hamilton Wed 15th April, Andrew is with her 17th and 18th April, Fraser and Sarah tag in 19th and 20th April and Hamish and Jo late 21st for eight or nine days. This will be the end of the first pretty ghastly three weeks so that's great that they are all together. Graham is going to Auckland Easter Sat/Sun to be with his four girls – Julia is back briefly from the US. The second three weeks isn't so bad. It has been a tumultuous and exhausting three days emotionally speaking but also intensely close and tender, and as usual Annie continues to be wonderfully Annie...

Am looking forward to a whole night's sleep... One day soon...

Love,  
Rhonda

P.S. This is Annie writing – I don't think I attached this for you on Sunday evening so I have nudged bits into Rhonda's writing. We are feeling very good about radiation – it is palliative, not curative, so it may not be first choice but this gives little trauma to the body and gives us good quality as we move through our newly defined way of being. In 90 % of cases with 90 % of patients it removes 90 % of the tumour but doesn't attend to new cells that are growing.

Three months down the track we will have a CT scan and review options. The next treatment available after 11th April would have been May 11th – ‘Too late,’ said Stubbs – so we are very fortunate to have just got in. The cards, prayers, angels, energy, long distance hugs, thoughts, and general stuff that you do when you don’t know what to do are surely working!! Graham and I and the boys are in good shape and good spirits.

Yours sleepily, skinnily and optimistically,  
Annie, with love

P.S. and Graham



*Thursday 3 April 2003, Hamilton*

ANNIE

For me, the prospect of being married brings every part of my life into exquisite harmony...

It’s wonderful to see Graham so happy. There’s something else as well – it makes me feel wistful. He’s quietly working out what I want to eat and he makes it for me...

I’m separating out. It’s taking all my energy to listen to my body and be around Graham. It feels like my children are always present. I’m getting heaps of lovely cards. I don’t want to make contact with the outside world.



*Tuesday 15 April 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Looking back, I see that the entries into this journal are broken up and incomplete. The lack of words from Annie on this page is in spite of a very full conversation with her, but it was not at journal pace. I would scribble snatches of notes, then forget to tip them onto the page. Annie taught me a new word – amanuensis – a writer of someone else’s words.

Some days have passed since I wrote. This is a measure of how well I am holding my days, my heart/head, or not, as the case may be. So, there are good and bad reasons for the gaps.

Last night I spoke to Annie for the first time since her radiotherapy. (She’s had a pioneering treatment which blasts a huge dosage directly into the liver.) Her voice was light and full of life. She seems genuinely surprised at the praise she is getting. She has been amazing in her physical, and emotional, response. Continuing to love and appreciate her life, her people. Her summation: ‘I am lucky – I have pretty good health, some optimism and masses of love.’

Rhonda said, ‘She hasn’t complained once – no whimpering. Nothing! Just at one stage, a comment. “This is hard.”’ Rhonda says they have been astonished at her strength and spirit. Coming home from hospital – walking up the path in her red shoes. Upright, if (in Annie’s words) ‘a little bendy’.

As for me – my wings hurt. Sore elbows (is this the start of RSI?) and a real concern about how I’m going to manage/reorganise my job so that I can get time off when I need to, without losing income.



*Sunday 20 April 2003, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

Andrew has been caring for me in the most understated way – in his own way. When he arrived he said, ‘Let’s make a rule: you don’t tell me how much you love me and I don’t tell you how much I love you.’ Then last night, when we were pouring gins (I was going to have one), he said, ‘Because I love you, not because I don’t love you, I’m not going to pour you a gin.’

Last night, Sarah, Fras and Andrew were here. There was music playing, the sounds of whistling and chopping, cooking noises, recipes being changed. I was in front of the fire under the mohair rug. And I tell you what: I was in heaven, or pretty close to it, about five kilometres away. Sometimes I wonder: why didn’t I come to this place earlier? Then I remember – oh, that’s right!

Graham says he’s noticed some frailty in me. And there is, at times. In the mornings sometimes, the tears come – just pop out. This morning they came. I wet Graham’s pillow. But they weren’t hot tears. They were cool by the time they hit the pillow. And I think, it’s only ten days since I had the treatment. I was told I would feel terrible. But I haven’t been trampled by an elephant; I’ve been trampled by a sheepdog.



*Friday 25 April 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I am amazed how much this cup of life can hold. I've been talking to Annie on the phone tonight, and have come away feeling reconnected and alive. She hinted at some wonderful news, and I guessed the rest – the best news under the sun. Jo is pregnant. And, all going well, Annie will be holding her grandchild in seven months' time. I said to Annie, I can hear the harmonics pinging inside my body. My own bells pealing for joy.

I also spoke to Annie of my own concerns about the health of my body. I had been reluctant to put them into this journal, or to speak them, except to name and dismiss them to friends. I have had odd sensations down one side of my face. These follow an episode where I lost most of my vision and had a dilated pupil in one eye, early in the same week that Annie was (later) diagnosed to have cancer. With delicious black humour that had us both rolling with laughter, she spoke of us both dying within the year – how comments would be made of 'those lovely girls who did so well at the party' (Mum's 80th in January this year).

This just two days before she was given the verdict on her liver. When these weird symptoms continued for me I'd thought I shouldn't speak of them to her, for reasons I'm not absolutely clear about ... not wanting to add weight to the load, not wanting to disturb her place in the limelight, if I can put it like that.

It was good that I spoke, wonderful to sense her support. But what a curious twist: Annie giving me encouragement; honouring my ability to stand with the truth of whatever shows up from the tests.

Some pictures, too, from our conversation, that will endure: the announcement to the boys of the wedding. Graham stood up to make the declaration that 'your mother and I are planning to get married'. The three boys cried. Then Annie rang Mum who also cried.

Annie said she had never seen Graham so happy, 'wreathed in smiles'. I could see floral garlands – layers of them – making smiles of his forehead, cheeks, mouth, neck and shoulders.

Goodnight.



*26 April 2003*

## *ANNIE - an email*

Dear ones,

It has been more than two weeks since my treatment in Wellington so it seems a good time to keep you up to date and to close off this chapter. Annie's bodily intimacies are being scooped up and shared on the net!

The short version which most of you know by now is that the radiation via the femoral/hepatic arteries went well – explicit (one huge dose) and expensive (thank you, Tower insurance) and I am now resting and sleeping a lot but am not the ulcerated, spewing thing that was a possibility. So it's great really.

Graham was hugely cared for in Wellington by Rhonda and Julian – our southern guardians – and he returned home in good shape. He says he feels a bit aimless and useless at times (like me!!) but we are getting on with getting on and that's a job in itself. And being present with each other which is a joy. The three boys plus partners have all been here in various combinations over Easter, Anzac Day and beyond, managing my sleeping times and my socialising (one visitor per day and two sleeps), and walking beside Graham in practical ways, getting tasks done, cooking yummy food and whistling and singing. Fabulous.

We are definitely moving out of the dark and scary times and entering a time of mystery, doing it on the presumption that there are good times ahead. Our lives



have completely changed and we are moving at a different pace, with different priorities, and it's weird and it's often wonderful. If anything seriously changes we'll let you know.

At this stage there are blood tests each month and CT scans every three months. Next one 14th July. Still no idea where the primary is so designing generalised chemo would be difficult. We are sticking with Mr Stubbs and his care programme for me.

The general context is that we are still protective of our space (I run short of steam and social energy after about an hour) but expect to emerge in some kind of a way in June. We observe at the moment that one short visitor (under 5'2") is fine but two a day and I turn into a collapsed person by early evening.

To those of you who have loved, liked, laughed, lathered (those window cleaners!), lolled ('I'll come over and sit in silence and listen to music with you'), and given us gorgeous fruit and veg from your gardens, and pies and delicacies and flowers and things to brighten our spirit and our palette, thank you, thank you.

We feel so blessed and are absolutely sure that this has contributed to my good start and our general optimism. So prayers, magic, blessings, and sent/unsent messages and surprises continue to be a critical part of our wellbeing and our prognosis. Please don't stop. The *British Medical Journal* said that post-operative sepsis occurred less in patients who were being prayed for even when they didn't know they were being prayed for. So the docs and the mystics are aligned. A bit.

*Best News:* Following discussions that began on Rakino in February, Graham and I decided together in March that we would like to be married and a small family ceremony is planned for Sunday 13th July at home. Evan Sherrard will be the celebrant; he is a very old friend of Graham's who took the marriage ceremonies for two of Graham's stepdaughters. We are very happy and the boys are bursting with joy following our announcement round the fire fortified by champagne this week. All is well.



*Monday 28 April 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Life, movement, loss continue. John's father is in hospital, bleeding from the bowel and very ill. As for my girls, Sally rang from Motueka. She wants to return home tomorrow. Georgia has gone to camp. The nest empties and fills.

John has returned to work after a break of two weeks. He is looking surprisingly robust after his first day back. I have begun the process of reshaping my job. Informally negotiating with my boss to shed aspects of my work that are killing me. My mind is ranging with broad sweeps across possibilities of rearranging our home to boost our income.



*Thursday 1 May 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Annie called this morning. To send love for me, to me, as I go in for the MRI scan this morning. While chances are I'm fine, the unknowing and the possibility of illness are creating a shared platform – a place to stand together in an extraordinary and totally unexpected way.

We talked of big things. I declared that I don't want to die and I don't want her to die. Two truths. And I told her of the decision, or realisation, that I cannot project forward. But that I will simply, fully, inhabit the day.

P.S. (Later.) My brain scan, by the way, was clear.



*Tuesday 17 June 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I woke at 4 a.m. and when I thought about re-entering this journal, it seemed that the pencil would be a dead weight – too heavy to handle. Now it's 6.19 a.m. and the process is easy – at least the pencil is light.

I'm not sure why I have spent so many weeks away from recording my thoughts. Too hard, too busy, or inertia – lacking the particular energy that I need for this. Perhaps it takes me back into the place of acknowledgment and I haven't wanted to be there.

Over past weeks I have been taking up a corner, in relation to Annie, that will not accept a bad outcome. It's like a new form of denial with a certain stubbornness to it. A bit like a child's. And yet it has had its cost – I've had less contact with Annie, because, of course, she's okay.

I talked to her yesterday and she's not okay. She's coughing a lot and by 8.30 a.m. was ready to lie down again. She is, however, strongly stating that she does not want to be defined by her illness. Her celebrancy bookings have dropped off as people have come to realise that she has cancer. And the cards are also a daily reminder that she is facing the biggie.

She spoke of her writing project for her grandchild, and said, 'The main thing is to not let this slip through my fingers.' A sign, I think, that she is feeling her grip and her endurance starting to shift.

I told her yesterday about John's plans to take leave from work and about my concerns over the house. It looks like we might have some expensive work coming up. On one hand it makes sense to talk about it. It is my life at the moment, and I am sharing it – one sister to another.

But I wonder, am I wanting to balance the scales of adversity, so that her cloud is not our dominant story? Am I adding to her worries? Am I projecting a victim/poor me aspect? So ... lots of wonders.

I dreamt last night I was in a room with a number of beds. There was a large case on the floor, shaped to hold a harp. There wasn't a lot of floor space. I knew that it was in fact a casket and I didn't want it under my bed, as it would bring death in beneath me somehow. The person in the next bed was quietly insisting that the case was mine and should go under my bed.



*Sunday 6 July 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Is it that I am not a scribe, that I am too disorganised, that this is too painful in putting me in touch with reality?!

My book – this book – constantly at my side in the bedroom, has been dusted off so I can re-enter it again. Today I come with fresh shock and a refocused picture. Annie had her second CT scan late last week. It showed that the liver has held – has marginal growth. But her lungs have tumours which have doubled in size in three months and, without treatment, will double again in the next three. They predict that she will not live past six to nine months.

Someone said to me once that her grief was a cloak – sometimes an unbearable weight, sometimes silken – but always present.

This imminence of death (within a known frame of time) is like a fellow creature who walks with me. Sometimes nimble – casting barely a shadow. And sometimes, like now, a lumbering dark form – one I can't turn my eyes towards.

We walk in the same direction and at the same pace. Right now, if I draw too close, as I did on Friday, I feel immobilised, without breath, heavy as stone. So I'm keeping my distance.

In time I must find a place on the path to stop, and stretch out big enough to embrace this being – a companion I never chose to have.



*Sunday 20 July 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Annie and Graham were married on 13 July. They asked me to write about the wedding to send to friends. This is what I wrote:

How was the wedding? people have asked me. It was everything, I would say, because it was. And now Annie has given me the exacting privilege of taking the everything word and giving it definition and shape with a description of the wedding. So here goes – about a day that is now an indelible part of our histories as it is part of Annie and Graham's.

The celebration, from its beginning, was full of moment. In that graced and magic way in which time will sometimes arrive, it billowed for us, and made room for ... well, everything.

For me, the first abiding impression is of resonating sound. Graham and I talked about it the day before the wedding. It was like a hum of energy that was steadily gathering and growing as people who love them both turned towards them – some arriving in body, others preparing to come, and many others sending their love/thoughts/energy/ prayers.

It was an absolutely perfect day (of course). Still and clear and beautiful. We – close friends and family – gathered in the living room, where the love hum (I can hear it now) was a palpable and living presence.

Annie and Graham walked to us across the lawn and over the deck from the bedroom. Annie had chosen a Renaissance dance to accompany her and Graham to the wedding room. (The unknown composer has never been so honoured in 700 years as he/she was on that day.)

Their passage through our midst was prepared by Claris, daughter of Graham's stepdaughter Tracey, who scattered rose petals. We saw the two of them arrive arm in arm at the glass doors, backdropped by blue sky and their own beautiful garden. They paused to absorb us into their eyes and hearts, and we did the same them.

'Graham has wet eyes,' Annie told us when she arrived at the place they would do the ceremony. 'And I feel fantastic,' she said. Both those emotions were rippling through us as well. Tears brimming for many and all feeling fantastic.

The image of Annie is imbedded forever in my mind. She was beautiful. Tall, proud, intensely alive, with a smile that went round the back of her head and met itself. I try to imagine what it must have been like for them. Looking out into the cluster of people who love them. The front row and side couch ringed with Annie's 'best men' – her boys and their women (except Cherie), plus (*our brother*) Alan, Mum and me. Three of Graham's stepdaughters and theirs, standing and encompassing from their positions. (We had knitted into one whanau the night before with some big-throated singing.) And then the close friends who are woven into their lives through shared histories.

I don't have the programme, but will go through each piece as I remember it. Evan Sherrard, Graham's longstanding friend was officiating. He invited us to take the rings, bound together by ribbon, and, in turn, to imbue them with our heart wishes, in whatever way we chose. And so while the

ceremony took place, the rings passed into the powerful hands of each person in Annie and Graham's inner circle, finally arriving back to Issie (*Annie's mum*) in time for her to present them.

While this private blessing was taking place, Annie and Graham moved into the first part of the ceremony. They had each chosen a reading that was special to them – Graham a reading from George Eliot on the comfort of friendship (*see below*) and Annie, 'Love Sonnet XVII' by Pablo Neruda.

They had each asked a friend to read these, sharing with each, privately and at length, why they had chosen the reading and what the marriage meant to them. The friends gifted back to them and to us the readings themselves and the words that gave depth and context to each poem.

Since it was a perfect day, the rings arrived back in perfect time (of course) for the vows. The words I don't remember. The feelings I do. Annie gave me, honoured maid, her handbag-cum-flowers – a creation of silky grey lambs-ear foliage studded with sparkles and filled with purple flowers – to carry while this sacred commitment was voiced. (I held it out from the knee – it had already entangled itself with Annie's skirt, to much laughter).

They stood facing one another to give and then receive a pledge of the love that they have arrived at and entered into so wholeheartedly together.

Graham had been nervous beforehand: 'I must learn my words ...' he said many times as he moved from task to task in preparation. He delivered them with conviction and without hesitation – as did Annie. There were no dry eyes.

We were invited to set our seal on the deed with noisy acclamations. Which we duly did. Whoops, claps and the wild banging of feet. They were married and we were glad.

Then there was another glorious mood change as they signed the marriage certificate. A cellist played a piece called 'Faith', accompanied beautifully by Rhonda Pritchard, who had dusted off her piano hands to make this

courageous and accomplished gift to Annie, her dear and oldest friend. There had been two dry runs – one on Saturday morning as Annie and Rhonda had sat side by side at the piano – Annie singing the cello part – and another when Rhonda and the cellist first met to run through the piece. Its final delivery was spellbinding.

We all voiced our blessing to them both in a compilation reading, put together by Janion, which embraced every heart wish for their lives together as a married couple.

And finally, a song of celebration from me which Annie and Graham had trustingly invited me to write and sing for them (*words below*).

Graham and Annie's exit was a riot of stomping, grooving, grins, hugs and tears. The Beatles (and us) were singing 'All you need is Love'.

P.S. Those not present were very present. After the clamour subsided, some were given voice, when Rhonda took the book she'd had made, which carried loving wishes from friends and family who could not be at the ceremony, and read a selection to us all before we departed.

The circle was wider – much wider – than those we could see.



### The READINGS:

Oh the comfort,  
the inexpressible comfort  
of feeling safe with a person,  
having neither to weigh thoughts or measure words,  
but pour them all out just as they are,  
chaff and grain together,



and a faithful hand will take and sift them,  
keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness  
blow the rest away.

What greater thing is there for two  
human souls,  
than to feel that they are joined together  
to strengthen each other in all labour,  
to minister to each other in all gladness,  
to be with each other in the silent  
unspeakable memories.

*George Eliot*

## Wedding Song for Annie and Graham

*By Pam*

Hear

Hear the tread of his footsteps beneath the canopy  
Hear his heartbeat slow as the flow and ebb of sea  
Hear her colours, how at counterpoint, they sing aloud with glee  
Hear dissonance resolving in surprising harmony.

See

See her striding out resplendent in taffeta and tiara  
See her bending making music magic with Kate and Flora  
See him glide around the kitchen making good wine out of water  
See him still and basking in the sun of close friends and his daughters.

Taste

Taste words as ripe as peaches plucked for juice and succulence  
Taste the sacred and the silly in the fullness of the dance

Taste woodsmoke and oysters and laughter on the tongue  
Taste the sweetness of the morning as the day unfolds to sun.

Feel

Feel the hum of the joy of union of husband now and wife  
Feel the cloak of courage in the pilgrimage of life  
Feel the breeze from the great unknown, the mystery borne of love  
Feel warmth of friends and family, below, beside, above.

(Chorus)

In the plane tree's wide embrace  
In meeting face to face  
In harmony with time and place  
Graham, Annie, you are known  
And in joy that flips and bends  
In belly laughter with good friends  
In family love that never ends  
Annie, Graham, you are known.



*Monday 28 July 2003, Hamilton*

ANNIE

I've been married for 15 days. We're so proud. I listened to an Eastern meditation last night and it asked me to identify a time that I was really happy. It was wonderful. I immediately thought of standing beside Graham at our wedding ceremony bursting with love.

At the end of the meditation the swami/guru said, 'Now open your eyes and smile.' I just had this huge smile. I was all on my own. And then when I went to bed I wrote Graham a love letter and told him about it and he read it when he got home from Auckland. He told me tonight how much he enjoyed it. So that's one of the best constant things in our lives at the moment – our sureness.

However, I'm struggling with the changes. I can't believe that I haven't written anywhere about the details of our wedding. But going to the specialist the day after the wedding and learning then about intravenous chemo was another big lurch. The week before the wedding, on 7th July, we had our last visit with Stubbs and he intimated that the lung cancers had doubled. There's a part of us that's just so naïve. We cried and cried. How could we not think it was a possibility?

But then by 6 o'clock we mopped up and went off to the book launch of *It Looks Better on You* – Rhonda writing about our friendship. And the next morning, a wonderful wedding shower with 18 dear Wellington friends, including (*my cousin*) Al Morrison and Kate. It feels like my family are quintessential to my wellbeing and gradually I'm coming to realise that nothing else matters.

Right now it's day six of the intravenous chemo. Graham is a gem, and that's constant. He says I'm doing well, but sometimes I feel like a baby. It's weird. I don't want to talk. I'm not listening to much music. I'm not reading much. I'm in a world of silence. But I'm buoyed by my current project of writing rhymes and family stories to record for our baby grandchild, who'll be born in November, wee Mac. Twice today Fraser has said, 'Our babies, Mum – you're doing this for our babies as well.' It's that family thing again.

The mechanics of chemo: a pickline, intravenous tubes; chemo into my body for eight hours went pretty easily really. But in the weekend when Graham was in Auckland and Sarah and Fraser were with me I was deeply

shocked by my lethargy. I think someone else is in my skin. And I'm waiting to meet her. I'm quite sure the secret is rest – serious rest, and the more I stop and breathe, the better I feel. Not exactly contented, but in the present. And that's where we need to live. Quite hard for a spirit like mine. Of course there are rewards. And I'm learning about those too. I'm not frightened. The love and support are overwhelming.

Good line from Fraser during discussion about whether I should get a wig. He wasn't keen and I'm unsure. But then he said to stick it in the dress-up box so he can go to a party dressed as Annie McGregor.

I have one class a week lecturing in communication studies. Ten students and a tutor for support. Last week it was on self concept. Just before the break I said that my self concept might take a battering soon. I explained exactly what was wrong and pointed to the chemo bottle at my waist. I said that when the first clump of hair falls out in week three, my hairdresser will give me a number three. Then I said that this makes me cry but pushed the two tears back by pressing into my eyes with my forefingers. Then I said, 'Hey, what about a hat week in week four?' and they lifted their arms and said, 'Yeah!' and after that it was easy.

During the second half I was working with a student in a pair and I said, 'Hey, was that okay, what I said?' And she said, 'When we all walked out we thought you were a lion.'

But I now know I had 5 mg of steroid in my body making me feel snazzy. Right now I feel like a dormouse. Interesting to see how next week goes. But I feel clear and open and ready.



*Wednesday 13 August 2003, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

I had a sensation in the weekend that my hair might be coming out. It was like a ponytail, taut, that had just been released, and parts of my head felt as though fine wire was piercing it. I knew this was a sign. It felt quite okay. But then yesterday when a clump came out in my hand in the shower, and I could feel the brushing of loose hair across my mouth and my nose, I lost my bravery and started to sob. I knew I wanted my hair to be cut, and Graham was prepared to do this, and Janion would be my support with some kind of ritual. I rang her, bawling into the answer-phone. I felt better before I'd finished my message. She rang back immediately and said of course she would be here tonight, with food.

And what a rich night we've had. I feel ready for what is to come. Eight hours of chemo today, four of which I spent in a deep sleep. When I woke at ten past four, Janion was beside me. She'd been there for half an hour. We picked up the clippers from my hairdresser, came home, listened to much of Elgar's 'Dream of Gerontius' together – she knows every word and sings along. It has been in her family for three generations in times of grief.

Graham and Janion and I shared warm chicken salad. I enjoyed the wine, followed up by summer pudding with redcurrants, blackcurrants and loganberries from their garden. Then the hair. We put a sheet on the ground to pick up every hair, and another sheet around me. Graham remembered what it was like to clip his dog. We agreed on a number three and not a number seven. As Graham cut my hair with the smooth pulsating rhythm of the clippers, Janion held my hand tightly and read from Leunig about hair:

We give thanks for the mystery of hair.

Too little here and too much there.

Censored and shaved, controlled and suppressed:  
Unwelcome guest in soups and sandwiches.  
Difficult growth always needing attention.  
Gentle and comforting;  
Complex and wild;  
Reminding us softly  
That we might be animals.  
Growing and growing  
'Til the day that we die.  
And the day after as well  
So they say!  
In all of its places  
And in all of its ways  
We give thanks for the blessing of hair.  
AMEN.

She had given me a box and said, 'This is for safekeeping until your grandchild arrives.' In it was a plain oval silver locket, and we placed some of the hair in it. She had also given me a small plain square linen envelope with lavender seeds and suggested I put some of my hair in there as a keepsake and reminder of new beginnings. Then we all gathered up the hair and put it in one of Graham's precious green bowls I love so much. The hair was very soft. We have decided to put some each day under the little pear tree where the birds gather and they may take it away to help them build their nests. Or it may blow into the garden, and that's fine too.

Graham brought in his large wooden mirror for me to see the finished product. I looked like myself, but prouder and braver. I felt really good in every sense. Finally Janion gave me a head massage with lavender oil. I haven't mentioned Graham much, but he cut my hair with great tenderness and care and gentle sweeping motions. It felt like a dignified and respectful process. I felt like a Buddhist novice – although without my saffron. I'm ready for the next part of the journey.

P.S. One of Janion's patients was so dismayed by finding a clump of hair on her pillow at night that she got up in the dark and vacuumed off her hair. I heard of someone else who walked into the Wellington wind, and her hair blew away. I can't be nonchalant or silly about this, even though I'm attached to my silly person. It feels as though we've given the process the dignity and space it deserves.



*Sunday 17 August 2003*

## JANION's email

Dear everyone,

While Annie and I were up at the beach some weeks ago I was catching up on some recent research into consciousness/healing/intention etc., and we talked about it. I wondered if Annie would like a distant healing done by willing friends; she said 'yes please', and so the idea of a 'Gentle Wishing for Annie's Wellness' was born.

The title incorporates some of the features of the intention which the research shows are relevant. It seems that a 'gentle wishing' is more effective than a desperate, passionate striving, or demanding; it seems, too, the 'non-directed' intention or prayer is better than asking for a specific outcome. That is, wanting the best for Annie's wellbeing is better than asking for her cancer to be cured. While distant healing clearly works independently of time and space, and can be done by, and for, complete strangers, it is also evident from the research that healing intent by those who have an emotional, or loving/friendly relationship with the person is more powerful. I think also that coordinating some sort of a time frame will harness for Annie an even stronger sense of healing potential, and being-wished-well-for, than if we do it all randomly.

I realise that for some of you it may not be your thing, but if you receive this letter it is because Annie wanted you at least to know it was happening. (I have also added a few friends to her list as I am sure you will all be willing to join in.)

For those who want to participate, 'The Gentle Wishing for Annie's Wellness' will take place from 7.45 p.m. to 8.45 p.m. next Sunday August 24th (NZ time). For those in the Northern Hemisphere it will be Sunday morning and we hope manageable. For Hamish and Jo in New York it will be some horrible time in the middle of the night, I suspect, sorry! Over the hour Annie will rest in a receptive, quiet stillness, and what will be, will be.

You are asked to hold her in your thoughts, prayers, meditations and/or actions for any period of time during this hour. It may be a simple 'Cheers Annie, go well', or a mindful walk, or a prayer to whatever God you worship, or a more formal meditation for a longer period of time, or the playing and singing of a favourite piece of music with Annie in mind. If you have any friends who would like to be part of this and will share in the healing intent, please invite them to do so.

Thankyou, Shalom, Janion



*Friday 22 August 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I am in bed with the flu. I have been here for coming up to three days. I've felt listless and bleached, reading unsatisfying books and seemingly unable to pick up a pencil – until now. I am getting the sense that these journal entries are steps through time. A pencil weaving of life. I am feeling less struck by the gaps than comforted by the connecting points. And here, I'm



striking another post into the ground – a marker that can be revisited, if I so choose.

It is curious to spend so much time physically inert. My thoughts are spreading, much as my body has done (or so it feels). I am surprised and gratified that John and the girls are talking to me, responding to me, treating me as fully real when I am feeling somewhat spectral.

In four weeks Annie will be here. I feel woozy with pleasure and anticipation. I also feel a wondering/concern. Will she be well enough for it to be okay for her? Will she be afraid? Will we be able to meet and support her in whatever way she needs? Will we be afraid? As I speak all this out loud on the paper, I don't think any of us will be afraid. The love that returns time and time again is our earth and air.

I told Annie, but don't think I've written here, that after each conversation with her – even texts and emails – I roll back, contented, like a baby who has suckled or a mother who has breastfed. I am both sated and relieved.

On Sunday I went to a church service after speaking to Annie at length on the phone. The ritual was a backdrop. I was feeling struck by the whimsical and unfaithful nature of life. For now, life is a lover to me, beating my heart, dancing with my limbs, drawing breath in and out, clamouring for food to keep me nourished. To what end and for how long?

Last night Georgia came up and initiated a talk about death. 'Why should we be afraid to become nothing? We were nothing for a very long time before we came to be.' And I found myself swallowing a morsel of that truth in a new way. Materially, our destiny is to become nothing. And yet in that reduction – annihilation of material self – comes release of spiritual self (I believe), a returning to the place from where we came. Georgia looked doubtful when I voiced it. And who's to know? (Perhaps all of us, in the fullness of time.)

Yet even as I write this, I am warmed by the assurance of wholeness – a wholeness that accompanies my muddle. It journeyed into this life with me/ as me and will journey with me/as me, back home, when we somersault out of this envelope.



*Sunday 24 August 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

In the middle of the table in front of me there is a squat, square jar, packed tight with flowers and foliage. An agapanthus leaf, an onion flower, three hellebore flowers, a yellow daisy, a sprig of kowhai and a few other bits and pieces I can't name. They make up a very precious posy.

Tonight, between 7.45 and 8.45 p.m., along with countless other friends and supporters of Annie, we entered into the ritual of 'A gentle wishing for Annie's wellness'. It has been suggested by Janion – an invitation to all those who choose to – to wish with gentleness for Annie's wellbeing. The kids came up as they do now each Sunday night; Issie was here, as is happening more frequently, and the homestay students were also with us. We'd eaten in front of the fire. It had been warm and comfortable – a good meal, followed by photographing and videotaping of our company by our overseas boarders, Dung and Fahid, for sending home to Vietnam and Saudi Arabia.

We had a date to make: 7.45 p.m., and when the gadgetry was put to one side, candles were gathered up from the side of the room and placed on the lower central table, and Janion's email read aloud. I had gathered up flowers and greenery from the garden before tea, which was laid out on a

long flax tray. These were for placing individually into the vase, with words spoken if people chose to, in recognition of the good life-giving water that is being drawn into Annie's being. She, and all her tendril roots, are lovingly nourished by the prayers and heart wishes of family and friends. The kids, Issie, John and I were the first to place the flowers in, then our boarders, with solemnity and conviction, placed theirs. Four bits left, so these were duly added to the posy on behalf of animals, living and departed.

It felt rich and connecting. The vase of flowers now sits there with the brightness of a flame, and it will light the room until next Sunday, when we will renew it again. And now to bed.



*Tuesday 26 August 2003, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

Sunday was the first of gentle wishing for my wellbeing. I was surprised to find myself really excited – like meeting a boyfriend for a date. Hamish set the tone for me when he told me he had twelve friends in London and two old flatmates who wanted to be part of this, and his old flatmates Cam and KP whom I stayed with in London had my hand-painted fish magnet on their fridge and were going to play Split Enz over breakfast.

I climbed into a big bath, lit the candles and the oil burner with lavender, and stayed there for an hour. Usually I only last about 10 minutes. Before I got in I felt my tummy and said to Graham, 'This tumour feels enormous.' I want to feel my body and the shape of what's happening.

I climbed into the bath and invoked the spirits of my grandparents. Bill's gentleness and patience, Nana Molly's fortitude with cancer, Grandma Annie's courage with her daughter's handicaps for 30 years, and Andrew's sense of adventure with whatever came his way.

I've been quite frail, wondering how I will deal with baldness when that happens. We found a great little black cap at a Raglan surf shop and I decided in the bath I wanted to decorate it with Grandma Annie's buttons from her button box. I want her patience, and her strength.

Then I revisited a Bernie Siegel meditation that Janion gave me. Siegel suggests putting down a bridge to the universe and deciding whether it's a drawbridge, a toll bridge, or a wide open bridge where everyone I love, like, and half-pie like can come across. I decided on the last. My bridge had wild flowers growing on the edges, and my friends moving across as I lay in the bath. I'm going to change the design of the bridge, to make it stronger and larger. After an hour I felt full and replenished and I absolutely knew my tumour was smaller.

It was lovely hearing from Pam about their extended family gathering around the table. Jo and Hamish got up in New York in the middle of the night. Hamish's friend's father in Takapuna got the time wrong and got up early in the morning.

Yesterday I had a visit from an old school friend with a large soft parcel she had made during their family meditation, with their French boarder. She's a friend from my past I rarely see. It was a beautiful mohair indigo and black shawl. She makes them for her women friends and sees them as a symbol of women nourishing women over the centuries. I'm number twenty-one. I was really touched. My gentle wishing is much bigger than I am. How can I possibly be unwell, with gatherings such as these, all around the world?



*Monday 1 September 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I'm almost scared to begin writing today. I am experiencing something new – I am feeling afraid. Annie spoke to me last night about her despair when she discovered two more hard lumps under her skin – more cancer. After a week of feeling light and hopeful, she said she realised, suddenly, that she was not in control. 'I tell myself all will be well,' she said, 'and I believe it. Then I realise that I don't want to die and I'm a liar.'

The same is true of me. I am resolutely in the present. There is so much that is sweet and satisfying. And now, suddenly, with the image of the black ugly knot inside Annie's body, I feel shocked and afraid.

I recall speaking so mystically and calmly and philosophically last night, and today it feels like a crock of shit. It's like my emotions are on slow release, and 12 hours after the conversation they catch up with me. I want to call her, to apologise for something I can't name. For being healthy. For not having to face what she does. For pouring out words and ideas to give breathing space to my feelings, and imagining that they would give solace – when I know she is afraid. And what I want to do is sit with her and say: I am afraid too.

P.S. (Later.) Annie wants added that she has found out the lumps weren't cancerous – they were the result of injecting herself with chemo fluid.



*Sunday 21 September 2003, Purakaunui*

## ANNIE

We're sitting in front of the coal range, fire burning in a small beautiful cottage, 'As Ye Like It', on the very edge of Purakaunui Inlet. This is a runaway retreat for Ronnie (Rhonda), Pam and I – a place where we can treasure each other's value and appreciate our current journey and celebrate being women. Food, wine, Rumi, walking, Alice Munroe in our pyjamas, filthy scrabble (only dirty words allowed), shifting tides, yellow gorse and clear blue skies. Our heaven. We've just finished reading some of the journal entries, and reflecting how much has changed. But how constant we are, together and separately. With a bit of luck, they might even join me and go bald.

## RHONDA

At Annie and Graham's wedding shower I told our guests that we had sent cancer to its room. This weekend I've made room for cancer in our room. Annie with her bottle of chemicals and her needle that pierces with ease – it's a gift to me that I can now bear it. We're all poets and love words, but mostly we're bodies, flawed, wrinkly, too fat, too thin, pink, boobs, farts, wees, mois (ref. filthy scrabble). We are also sensing: exquisitely plopping oars, the taste of whiskey, oyster catchers, an only-just-breathing seal. We are all breathing – all alive.

## PAM

I've been anticipating this weekend for weeks, feeling heady and full-hearted. It's been the focus up ahead for ages. I can remember lying in bed with Annie in Hamilton and her saying, 'One of the things I'd love to do is

find a little house by the sea where we can spend some time together.' So coming here, being here, is a dream come true and reminds me we have a lot of power to give shape to the things which are important and bring them to pass. I look out the window, and if I sink low enough in my chair, all I can see is water. I could well be on a boat.

We've had a capsule of time and I've felt really reluctant to ring out and make contact with the world outside. The weather, the tides, the light have been constantly changing and our tides have come and gone and ebbed and flowed as well, and they've been in turn noisy laughter, deep conversation, quiet times, room to be together and alone. I love being enfolded into Annie's relationship with Rhonda and enfolding her into ours. We've slept in the same room together – Rhonda and I have shared a bed and we've connected up in threesomes and twosomes and felt nature wrap us around.

## ANNIE

I accidentally saw myself before in the bathroom mirror, saw bright pink cheeks, runny nose, two half eyebrows, tiny little eyelashes, the changing texture of my skin (despite lashings of moisturiser) and soft white-grey fluff around my ears – where the hair used to be. My chemo bottle clangs from my waist and – although these girls don't know it – even my pubic hair has gone. Weird, and yet I realised quite firmly and quite definitely in a specific moment a few minutes ago that I feel very, very well.

I'm yawning; it's about 1.30 p.m. and, as usual, my body asks for a rest. But I know more clearly that indeed I am truly well.

P.S. We opened a parcel from Janion yesterday – one parcel each. Inside were three paua-shell angels, simply constructed and bound with fine silver wire. A perfect gift.

*Sunday 5 October 2003, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

Just had my fourth chemo on Thursday, and it feels as though today is a really big day. I have a sense that while chemo is life-giving, it is damaging part of my body, albeit temporarily, and I need to be really, really careful and less flippant about how I manage my life. I thought I needed to be careful for the next three months till mid January when this finishes, but Janion brightly suggested six tonight. I came here on Thursday after sleeping most of the day and felt hollow-legged and potentially tearful, but then thought, don't be dumb, you never cry on day one.

Graham said tonight that he doesn't want me to protect him and I can cry if and how and when I like.

Over the last two or three days my cheeks are pinker and burning, which is a minor side effect. But my skin – my face and my neck – are now really rough and dry (Graham calls me Mrs Handbag). It feels like an overt, explicit sign that there are changes happening and I do have cancer in some shape, for which I'm being given chemotherapy. I have to reduce my life to its sweetest and purest essence. I don't want to exacerbate these symptoms.

I meditated in the bath tonight with the candles. Again it was so powerful it takes my breath away. I called on my grandparents and their spirit yet again, I made myself a mountain yet again, and I put my bridge across to the universe, but this time I knew there was a gate halfway across. On one side there is an oasis for my family and those dearest to me and many others I can see and they can see me, but I can't let them in. I've just cancelled three engagements this week, one lunch and two dinners. I don't need them and I don't want them.

Next weekend I'll have good energy when Fraser and I record my stories for wee Mackie – my soon-to-be-born grandchild.



I thought of the sweetness of doing this with Frasier and then I found myself tearful. I'm sort of wondering whether I'm at a stage where I don't have to put out how fabulous I am. But actually, it's okay to ask for help. Not help help – just to find times when I can safely speak my uncertainty and my truth. It's not about sickness at all (I hate that word 'sick'). It's just about dealing with physical change. This week, my cheeks. However, I went to Victoria Park market and bought a fabulous red denim ruffled pockmarked two-tone cotton hat for eighteen dollars, which will perfectly match those cheeks, and at least I'll be coordinated.

So it's been a really big night and an important one in terms of self-management. A really nice positive thing this week (in my new quiet life, ha ha) is that I have decided to focus more on taking funerals next year than weddings. The short time frame of funeral preparations feels absolutely congruent with my own knowledge of my wellbeing, rather than the long-distance planning necessary for weddings. I feel really contented and optimistic and confident in this shift in direction.

P.S. Four sessions down, five to go (fifteen weeks in all).



*Sunday 12 October 2003, Hamilton*

ANNIE

This week I renewed my driver's licence. When I asked, 'When do I need to come back to renew it again?' she said, 'In ten years' time.' I couldn't stop smiling, punched my fist into the air with joy.

Another thing: I had my first haircut on Friday. It's a number three with scissor tweaks. That means my hairdresser even used scissors to make me feel it was like a real one. I walked out crowing and sassy.

Pam read me a song yesterday that she wrote for Sal's 18th birthday. It's been my present to about five friends as I read it to them. Pam's fabulous and she's clever and I call her Dr Morrison because when I talk to her, she makes me feel better. Like now.



*Sunday 2 November 2003*

ANNIE

The shawl

*For Hamish*

I thought it was simple  
Find it  
Wash it  
Send it

But holding the bundle of wool again  
Burying my face in it  
I am shocked by the power  
Of the sweetness of the memory

Every stitch knitted with Joyce's arthritic fingers  
Every family given a shawl

I find I am twenty-three  
Holding you again to my heart  
Seven pounds, two ounces  
My most precious  
Your eyes trusting  
Your fingers curled on mine  
I believe and I disbelieved

So this is not just Waikato wool to a New York winter

Now it's your turn to wrap and love your precious one

As I did with you  
And will always do  
Even without the shawl



*Friday November 7 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I want to gather some of the threads of recent time, put them on the loom again. There have been no entries for a while. I'm not sure why. One reality is that I am so enjoying the plump robust intimacy of all of my connections with Annie that I don't want to explore anything – just enjoy the good fruit for what it is. I have been – and am – in the 'now'; not giving a whisker of acknowledgement to any difficulties that could be predicted to lie ahead. Sometimes I have thought of the journey with Annie as a dance, that I take my lead from her. There is some truth and wisdom in that. But the exchange of cues and energy is more subtle than that.

All that said, I was overtaken a few days ago with a rush of sadness. I was listening to a chirpy message from her on my answer-phone at work, pushed the delete button, and was suddenly awash. I had a weep in a colleague's office, who met me in her caring and angular way. More weeping on a walk, but no close connection between the feelings and conscious thought.

I had (again) a lovely exchange on the phone with Annie the other day. It had an interesting outcome. I'm not sure what I learnt, if anything, but I'm grateful. We were talking about my spiritual direction training coming to an end. And Annie said she'd like to explore ways to pray. She suggested (as a fantasy) we go retreating when we are in Wanaka together in early January. I immediately had an image for prayer, which related to the idea of soul cradling body and links to the strongest theme in Annie's life right now – the coming baby. I suggested that she might approach prayer and communication with God/Mystery like a baby in utero. She can talk softly – even hum to the mother. Or be still and listen to the heartbeat.

After we'd hung up, I told myself off for breaking one of the rules of spiritual direction training – giving my own image to the person, instead of allowing them to explore and define something meaningful for them. I reminded myself that I have a long way to go ... lots to learn about this! Interesting – the next day we spoke again on the phone and Annie said how helpful that image had been, how she had shared it with Graham. I was reminded that sometimes it is good to speak – say what rises up in us without being too careful about getting it right.



*Tuesday 11 November 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

Hamish and Jo's son, Annie's grandson and my nephew, is born! He is Angus Barnaby Hamish McGregor, 6 lb 4 oz. Last night I received photos of him, eight hours after his delivery and tonight, after work, I took copies to Mum.

I spoke to Annie (again) today, and she says her response to the arrival of Angus is a sense of contentment. The warm feeling for me has been a sense of the power and strength of life. It's been like seeing an island emerge up out of the ocean. That new life is taking shape, and nothing will stand in its way.

I have a thought that I would like to write a song or poem for Angus around the idea of songlines. I know just a little about them, but they are the Aboriginal name for the footsteps of the ancestors – invisible. And as the feet of the living find them, so ancient wisdom is found. And that wisdom is linked to song. The ancestors sang the world into being and the current generations continue to sing it into being. Wonderful fodder in there. I'll ring Jo's mum and get the names of some of Jo's forbears and will include them, alongside the names of Hamish's.



Thursday 20 November 2003, Hamilton

## ANNIE

It's ten days and nine hours since my first grandson Angus Barnaby Hamish McGregor was born, and I've spent those ten days falling in love. That says it all. I'm speechless, but not thought-less. Thirty photos and two video clips of Hamish McGregor with Angus, and later Hamish sitting with Angus, have made us feel very connected to the family. He was 6 lb 4 oz, born at New York University Hospital. (As I talk on the phone and Pam writes this down, she says how good it feels to do this. And I realise we're preserving and somehow sanctifying, making sacred our shared family. This journal box is becoming a secret treasure trove and this process of recording detail utterly safe.)

In March/April this year there was some muted doubt that I might see him. But now I know that in 29 sleeps, at midday on 19 December, I will hold him in my arms. The little red-haired one. I have wanted red hair all my life. And now I've got it. Well, he has. I have watched Hamish and Jo's tenderness with each other and Angus and know there are so many joys that will spill over. (As I'm speaking, I'm watching a bee climb into the bell of our proud white foxglove outside the bedroom door, sucking sweet nectar in the evening sun.)

On the Monday that Angus was born, Graham and I went into town and had beautiful champagne and food. Later I walked into book club, and the seven women waiting for me burst into a tuneful rendition of the old song, *On the baby's knuckle or on the baby's knee, where will the baby's dimple be ... seems to me it would be a sin if it's all hidden by a safety pin*. I was given time to report on the first photos I'd received of Angus just 20 minutes before, and then finished by reading my poem 'The Shawl' that I'd sent to Hamish and Jo a week earlier. It was a gorgeous night.

On the Tuesday, we ‘wet the baby’s head’ with the gang. Everyone was exhausted, but we had a lovely night and finished by reading a children’s storybook, *My Dad*.

PAM

Annie has asked that I record my closing response to her entry: Right now I feel like the bee in the foxglove.



*Saturday 29 November 2003, Hamilton*

ANNIE

It’s been a tough ten days. I was thinking last night that the wash of colour over Graham and me is a kind of pale mushroom brown. And yesterday, Friday 28 November, when my pickline was taken out and the chemo finished (a celebration and a liberation allowing my struggling immune system to revive on its own) I was told by the head chemo nurse that Jeremy Long, our consultant, would definitely not offer me top-up chemo next year. I heard the sound of a very heavy solid wooden door drop from an upper lintel and hit the ground.

This all started ten days ago – 20th November. Just before my final chemo, Jeremy said, ‘We’ve partially cured you. We haven’t won the war, but we’ve won some battles.’ He said the chemo has been very successful. The 14 cm cancer in the liver was now 2 cm and we had done well. (He had said in July that I was very sick, and he thought I had eight weeks to live.)

He looked at me squarely and said, ‘Annie, you will have a good life after chemo.’ We know that, Graham and I. Then he said ‘There are tools with which we can help you, like hospice and palliative care.’ We were speechless. Dying is off the agenda. I said to Graham, it felt like the leering face of a jack-in-the-box springing out and wobbling, when we thought we had secured the lid and put the box to one side. It was very sobering and a reality check, which was okay in a way, but felt tough.

I came home and cried all afternoon. Sat at the computer. Couldn’t see the keys. But it was clear that I had to weather this part of the journey on my own. At that point I felt hands on my shoulders. It was Maeve and her friend Jane. Perfect timing. One of the things we did was set up a cushion-making day in two weeks. Jane sews beautifully and will turn eight exquisite fabric samples I’ve been given into cushions. Maeve is making some scented wreaths from fragrant plants for Jane and me. Dear Ruth Davey (80) is coming to draw and I’m doing food and music. Perfect. I decided that if I’m going to die, I want decent cushions in the house!

At 5 p.m. I had my first private yoga session with a friend’s daughter who has travelled in India – a gorgeous, stilling experience. And Graham came home later with some fine silver earrings for me. We just said this morning, when we live in the present, it’s perfect. It’s projections that create the problems.

It was my last chemo on Thursday. I am really enjoying Michael King, author of the recently published *Penguin History of New Zealand*. His chemo has paralleled mine and we share a room when we get topped up at Waikato Hospital. He’s a dignified and most gracious man.

We decided to celebrate the last chemo with a weekend in Auckland. We went to the Grey Lynn fair with Fraser and Sarah, visited two lots of friends, and then came home to watch the finals of the World Cup until midnight. (Except I kept sneaking out of the game to look at video clips of Angus on my computer.)



Sunday afternoon I went to the Christmas Oratorio and by Monday, of course, I was exhausted. It transpired later that my white blood cells had been battered by the chemo. But it was a fabulous weekend. I looked good and felt good and we were nourished by family and friends.

Now it's the quiet life, and what a treat that is. In retrospect, we've been forced to look at a possible reality that is not of our choice. For the first time, I've sensed this explicitly in Graham. We're planning a holiday at Easter, and he said he was reluctant to make bookings. I asked if he was worried about my health and he said yes. Although we are so contented and always delighting each other, way, way down there is a gentle tapping, sometimes of a pale sadness. It doesn't get in the road, but it's part of our alluvial plain – mushroom brown.

P.S. I tapped Graham on the shoulder at 2 a.m. earlier this week and said I thought I was losing my spirit. He was reassuring and gentle. The next morning I climbed into bed with Janion, who had stayed the night. I said to her, 'If I'm losing my spirit and a bit tired, does that mean I'm giving up?' She said loudly in her inimitable English accent, 'Hell no. It means you've just finished four and a half months' chemo.'



*Sunday 30 November 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

I finally make my way into this journal at a time when I am feeling quite undone. I have been waiting for Annie to speak into these pages first – to make her mark on the events and shifts of the past fortnight before it feels right for me to articulate what's been happening for me. And at any point

over past days, different notes would have sounded, all of which, I imagine/ believe, are still in me. Last night I woke at 2 a.m. and stayed awake until dawn. My thoughts and fears were not focused on Annie or her future. But it's as if the new reality – which is how it feels – has become a receptacle. It's not easy to sleep when you are adjusting to a new shape.

But back to some of the responses I mentioned earlier. (More than 'responses' – places I've inhabited.) One of the dominant feelings has been of movement downwards, into a more primal part of myself. I can only liken it to the power and clarity I felt (between contractions) when I realised I was going to be giving birth to Sally at home – unplanned. I had every inner resource I needed to ensure everything was ready: covers back, towel in place, lumbering into position. In some similar way, I feel I am garnering myself.

I know earlier in this journal I wondered about the experience of grief that consumes us in its own time – would it would be like annihilation? Right now it feels like that process is about becoming bigger and moving with a new and awe-full consciousness. Sometimes I feel so powerfully primal that I can hardly believe it won't heal her. When I was away with Sally at Bull Creek, I positioned my chair towards the sea, so that it visually washed me. Then I placed my hands on Annie's imagined body, one part, then another, to discharge life into it.

At another level – and this makes life awkward – I have less energy for things – specifically work – that need to be done, and are deadlined. Which means that today, Sunday, I have to go into that small, lifeless office and produce some writing. I'm also experiencing pain in my joints again, which doesn't help.

On Friday, one of the tasks I undertook at work was checking how to be with Annie for an extended period. There is no paid leave available to me, but I can use time in lieu, and that is enormously reassuring. I will take whatever time is right, and work that fifth day each week when I return, to

make up the time. And that is my only concession to the future. Now, as Annie so wisely said in her last entry, I return soundly (there are those notes again) to the present. Where all life resides.

And so I come to the end of our first book. It feels quite significant – not that it's ending but that it's about to flow on to another. That this story doesn't end and isn't confined by covers. Annie spoke on the phone yesterday after her entry, about how precious this process is. That things – some of which are not named anywhere else – are named here, and so have a holding place, and we can get on with other things.



*Wednesday 17 December 2003, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

A new entry in a new book. Fresh pages and a fresh start. I can't believe we've been going for nine months in this wonderful process of sharing a journal. I really want to record a conversation I had with Graham a few days ago. We were in bed, and he sighed. He said, 'Oh, Annie.' I felt myself tightening and wondering if this was his way of expressing a grief around the lurking demons that haphazardly present themselves. Was he deeply sad? In a flash, with uncharacteristic brilliance, I asked what he meant by the sigh. He said, 'I can't believe we've got to the end of this year, and you are so fabulous.' It was such an affirming and marvellous response.

Two sleeps to go and my grandson will be in my arms. I've been potty with excitement, laughing, crying, ever since I've known they were coming. Now, suddenly, on the eve of their arrival, I find I'm unsettled by the reality that I haven't got the vigour to care for little Angus and noisily celebrate

him, as I would once have loved to do. But that's so dumb. He'll really want his parents to care for him – to be his primary carers. And my experience of little babies and noisy celebrations is that they don't necessarily go together. I'm interested in this unexpected caution. I guess I want things to be perfect, and am wondering how we will all be together. In the meantime I picture that I'm looking into his face, little dark eyes, feeling his compact little body and his tiny little hands and knowing that I love him.

Second major disaster this week around the pressing of the CD, 'Blimmy Blommy Blummy', my gift to Angus (and the grandchildren to come). Can't bear to talk about what happened, but all will be resolved, and with luck, we'll have the finished product on Christmas Eve, with its gorgeous cover and its simple stories and poems. It's been one of the best projects I've ever been involved in. Not the most perfect – there are heaps of flaws. But when I think that the project was conceived in April, when it seemed that there was a fair chance I may not be around in November, I am bursting with pride and joy. My creative person is alive and well.



*Friday 19 December 2003, Dunedin*

PAM

It's early morning – 6.17 a.m. I woke at 5 a.m., when the birds were starting to call. Padding across my room to try to get this pencil I was aware how tired and stiff my feet and ankles are feeling – as if I've been on long walks. The night before last I dreamed I was holding a small baby wrapped in a blanket. Its face was pale, as were its lashes. The baby's face

was tired and not expressive of any other emotion. It spoke – which surprised me – and said, ‘Please lay me down. I just need to sleep.’ I was on a bus, and I wondered whether it would be too risky to lay the child on the seat beside me. So I kept it in my arms, well cradled, but aware it wasn’t the best place. A very apt metaphor.

Today Annie’s baby arrives. What a poignant meeting it will be. And how perfect and right that her world will open up to receive her grandson.

I hope to write him a song before I meet him on 3rd Jan (I’ve suddenly remembered!). I have just the vaguest wisp of an idea. Maybe having him present in New Zealand, and with the family, will set the wheels in motion. My talk to Annie two nights ago has left me feeling ... so hard to put this into words ... aware of entering new territory. The image of a journey is so appropriate. The landscape is changing. I wrote a Christmas email to a friend in England yesterday, and said that in the face of an unimaginable future, my faith lies in this: we walk where we must.

So much is so unknown. To speculate, perhaps strangely, feels like an indulgence that desecrates what we have here and now.

Sometime I see a pool of light ahead of me – shaped like an oval and altering in size. Beyond its edges – nothing: absence of knowing, of colour, of light. My joy has been, and is, in occupying the light pool – the womb. And yet I know it cannot continue...



*Wednesday 7 January 2004, Wanaka*

PAM

We are sitting together on warm stones beside the lake at Wanaka. Annie is my amanuensis today. I said to Annie as we drove here that I felt full with all that I've taken in over the last couple of days. I'm aware of my throat right down to my pelvic bone. Everything has had a striking vividness – feelings on skin and sights into my eyes.

In my dream last night, I was weeping, and it spilt over into the first two or three minutes after I woke up. Then buoyancy returns when I see Annie and sense the climate of love that envelops her and Graham. There are so many layers to being here. On one hand I feel like I'm in an enormous world with a great huge canopy of sky and enough room to grow into a giant, and another part of me wants to get under a blanket with Annie and flush our watches away.

Annie has just invited me to keep speaking (she's writing), and that gives me some choices about what I say, and what I entrust, not just to this journal, but to her as well. Here goes.

I've been in tune with her lively courage and optimism all these months, and sometimes I know that there are other songs or melodies in me that need to be played. But I feel cautious about singing them with her because I want to give her all the room in the world.

But I'm realising, maybe I need not confine my weeping inside my dreams and over my Christmas dinner, but let her see my shape too, because there is lots of room for all of this – for both of us. I guess I'm nervous that if I don't stay true to what I am really feeling, I'll disappear...

We had a special time this morning. Annie lay splayed on the two-seater couch and we propped up the CD cassette player and together we listened to her collection of treasures: poems and stories from her childhood's own

history, 'Blimmy Blommy Blummy'. It was a bit, I said later, like having a swim. I experienced eddies of images and memories from our past, wrapped in the resonance of Annie's voice, and also a poignancy that I still find too hard to name.

We laughed heartily at the noises that she had threaded through the stories. I know I'll listen to it lots of times, and I know that I'll keep laughing.

## ANNIE

When I came to Wanaka on Sunday, I knew it would be good, but I didn't know what kind of good. I was feeling tired and anxious about changes in my body and was not wanting to listen to those things.

As Pam and I sit on the lakeside listening to the lapping sounds of our childhood, writing this journal, dwarfed by the mountains and the yellow-brown landscape I have been longing for, I know that in this moment, at this time, all is well.

The reason for deciding to come here was that it seemed really important to stand on Hamish and Jo's land on the corner of Morris and Ballantyne Roads. Fifteen undulating acres ringed by indigo mountains. One of my visualisations last year was striding across this land with my grandchild gangly beside me.

There were ten of us at the picnic yesterday: Jo's family, Graham and I, Pam and John and little Angus on his first visit. Jo's mother Laurel prepared a perfect, simple summer tea while we swished through the yellow barley that a neighbour had planted.

When we arrived on the land and I jumped out of the van, I felt deep sobs in my belly. My dream of the year was a reality. This place would house

our family and our extended family and their friends for many years. It was a moment of completion. Any thought of tears turned to exultation, as I realised we had arrived and would take our knowledge away with us – the smell, the feel, the glorious mountains – and all that would never leave me. Integration at its best. I thought of Sting’s song ‘Fields of Gold’ and the beautiful rendition by Eva Cassidy: *You’ll remember me ...*



*Saturday 10 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I’m in bed at 10.16 on a fine Saturday morning. My lower legs are smarting – they have been itching for two days. Initially I wondered if my body was answering Annie (Graham told me the other day that his had ‘gone out in sympathy’ – maybe they were Annie’s words – in relation to a rash on his arms). John sensibly suggested it was probably the result of walking through barley grass in shorts on Hamish’s land. I am glad to carry that memory on my body.

I’m also glad I can choose to stay undercover, and stay in my own best place even on an outdoor day. I’ve had two or three hours awake. Last night and today, I have been feeling tearful. And yet now, after a phone call and a trip downstairs, I have resurfaced to a calm place. I would like to capture, though, my thoughts and sensations from the earlier morning.

No ... no capturing. They have flown and I will let them go.





*Sunday 11 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

What if I can't find words? It frightens me. I'm afraid that if I have no means to build, there'll be nothing for me to inhabit. On one hand I think I want to read – to find something, anything, that will give me a 'vocabulary' for this uncharted terrain. At the same time I have a revulsion against fiction. I can't bear the thought of feeding anything in that will take up space and leave no room in me for what is real.



*Sunday 18 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I sometimes wonder if I'll be amazed how I let time slip between entries into this journal. If it will feel like a squandering of opportunity. I have cleared a small shelf from my bookshelves and placed precious objects and reading material into it – flat so that they can be seen and accessed. This book lies in there – a quiet presence and an undemanding invitation. There is no urgency at the moment.

Annie is at the beach in the Coromandel with Graham, Rhonda and Julian. She was going to phone last weekend, but didn't. She is, I imagine, very immersed into the world she is inhabiting there. And for me, there is a loosening again, a stronger sense of re-entry into my life here. Having said that, however, it has been far from straightforward. At times I feel like I'm in a paper boat, bobbing on a current, which takes me anywhere it pleases. At other times it's felt like I'm under an ever-changing sky. I look up and

find there's been a dramatic shift. And I've had absolutely nothing to do with it.

I've been wrestling with the question of how to give expression to my own needs and feelings when I'm with Annie. A week ago I was feeling dismantled and, consequently, distant from her and me. Lots of crying.

Now, three days on, I think there is no place for any of this while Annie is alive. I was almost appalled that I would take any measure of sorrow into my interaction with her.

And now, as I write that, the pendulum has swung again. How could sorrow not be present? And so the sky changes. My boat sails on.



*Tuesday 20 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I wonder what it will be like to read this in one hit. Will there be room to breathe? It wraps its hands around chosen moments, and I wonder how they'll lie side by side. I am on the bed. My feet are aching as if I have walked 20 miles on stony ground. John massaged them – ah, lovely – but the relief was just temporary. I wonder (more wonderings!) if my body is giving voice to something. I feel gently saturated with an awareness of Annie. I remind myself that this is another soft call to prayer.

I spoke to Rhonda on the phone last night. She and Julian were just home after several days at the beach on the Coromandel with Annie and Graham. She talked about her and Annie taking nude swims – walking hand in hand into the waves. One body skinny, the other plumpious (she says). She

found it hard that Annie was physically unwell and getting more so, and that there was no opportunity to talk about this with Annie, or to bring her own feelings into their interaction.

It was good to speak to her – to hear that her experience was so akin to mine. That she is struggling with similar questions.

She says Annie is getting thinner, her tummy is protruding more, and she is finding it difficult to get comfortable. She says she is like a baby with colic – unable to settle in the evenings and having broken sleeps.

Annie rang yesterday. She was on her cell phone, but we still ended up having a long talk. Throughout the conversation, though, it felt like she was guarding her mouth (perhaps her mind too). For all her positivity, I'm finding this a sombre and confusing time. A picture comes to me of her vivacity starting to echo and bounce off walls, as if the room were becoming empty. Is this what happens when the trappings and padding of 'normal' life are stripped away? Or am I feeling this way because of things we haven't been able to say to each other? (Perhaps when we can both give voice to what is scary – each in our own way – then the echo will go; true notes will sound.)



*Friday 23 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

Two days ago I practised it in my mind. I was driving down London Street and I imagined the words in this book: 'Annie died.' When I said them out loud my stomach rose and I started gagging.



*Sunday 25 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I have just arrived home from Issie's. She was hit by a car on Friday, and I have spent the last two-plus days tending to the needs of her poor bruised body. I am home for two hours and in that time hoping/planning to connect with Annie. I have a deep longing to do so.

In our last briefish call, after she'd talked to Issie, she talked to me about how she is befriending the sea, learning (and loving) to dive under the waves. I called her the sea creature – it feels like a good name for her.

*(Annie's later addition: Pam just read me this bit – conquering my fear of waves and diving into the surf feels like one of the most marvellous things I've learnt to do – it feels like a good omen for the year.)*

I have been pondering the idea of spirit as sound. When I came back from Wanaka, and spent a night with Claire and Penelope, I was tearful. I realised that the resonance of Annie that I carried within me could be silenced, and it terrified me. The idea that it would stop, like a light going out. I feel like I can go anywhere this journey takes me. But how can I live with that absence of sound?

And yet as I think of Annie's body losing its vigour and health, I know that her resonance doesn't and won't dim. I heard once that the earth emits a sound, out of our detection range. Our beings surely do the same. Here I am, as I wait to connect with Annie, waxing metaphysical. I suppose it provides context – and comfort.

*(A short time later)* I have been sitting here in bed, journal and pencil at hand, ready to record Annie's chapter. But when Annie phoned, she was very uncertain about putting anything into the journal. It seems this could mark the start of something new – which I hadn't anticipated: that she has decided not to speak any more into the journal.

I truly hadn't considered that this might happen. For some days I have been wrestling with and recognising that she might need to be physically separate in order to manage the next stage. But I hadn't imagined that this book would not continue to receive her. Not just this book. That I would no longer be given entry. And that the precious, slow process we have put in place to meet one another would end – like a book shutting.

What this puts me in touch with is the fearful truth that we are both called in the end to 'go it alone'. This doesn't negate the intimacy and power of shared time. Or the longing for more. But in the end we will be separate, and this separation may begin before the very end.

I am starting to feel sick again as I write this, but I think I need to. I guess one (irrational) fear about putting this into words is that it will self-fulfil. Yet I know there is no truth in that. And it is important that I keep giving pencil shape to the stuff that is me. To sound my resonance, as I wrote earlier, even if it's confused and disturbing.



*Tuesday 27 January 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

Annie rang tonight. She said – when I asked how she was, 'Ah ... um ... try some words on me.' 'Shitty?' 'No.' 'Reflective?' 'Yes.' 'Weary?' 'Yes.' And that was enough of descriptive words. We have agreed to a date tomorrow at 6.30 p.m. for a conversation in the journal. Some her, some me. I look forward to that with great relish.

She read me a poem on giving that Dinah Hawken wrote for Al and Kate's wedding recently. We both loved it and I think we'll talk more about that tomorrow night. I'm aware again – but this time in a precious and life-affirming way – that I want to create a gentle and roomy space for these tender reflections. The fear I was expressing the other night – harsh and frightening – is some of my experience in this time. It is not hers. And it is not ours. And so I see clearly again. Our journey together is a fine dance through a delicate and flourishing landscape. One in which soul and spirit can stretch and leap, with the body in a backpack.



*Wednesday 28 January 2004, Hamilton*

## ANNIE

Finally, we're together again. I think I've put off four conversations – always too tired. But today, tonight, it's a priority. 6.30. Pam has just read me some of her reflections about this journey and wasn't sure I wanted to hear them. I do. I do. I do. One of the things I've learnt in the last two weeks at Whangapoua, being with dear friends Rhonda and Janion, is that I am not the only one in turmoil. My underlying optimism serves me well, but sometimes I have a deep sadness and disbelief that sits in my belly. And when we're all honest together, that load is so much lighter.

Fraser and Sarah and Andrew joined us for a few days. Following my inner hum, I knew they had to be there. That time is precious. Frasier sat on my bed at 1.30 a.m., stroking my head and saying, 'Are you ok, Mum? Graham is worried about you.' Andy too has been a joy, and we are rediscovering him after his eighteen months away. So we are bountifully blessed. I guess it's

just the skinny arms and shoulders, sore back sometimes and ever-expanding, hard, uncomfortable middle bit that make me wonder: what's going on? And what is ahead? And whether we want to know. The thing I find most difficult is deep, constant fatigue and breathlessness at the end of the day. I'm not frightened. It's just bloody annoying. Who is this woman that lives in my body? That's my truth today.

I had a revealing and wonderful experience with Bob and Janion on our last night. How can you possibly repay someone who gives you their beach house in January as a gift for three weeks? We bought a frying pan and tongs that they seemed to need, and a luscious crown of artificial flowers as a piece of last-minute whimsy. One for Janion and one for me.

I quickly decided to have a ritual of the placing of the crown, binding us together as friends. And within a minute or two had written a pretty silly parody of a Baptist hymn, 'Crown him with many crowns.' I knew Janion loved hymns, but I wasn't sure whether she loved garlands of artificial flowers. The kitchen utensils turned into a percussion band. And at an appropriate moment in line four, Janion's wreath was placed on her head, and by line five I had mine too. It was so silly. And such a lot of fun. As I finished conducting and singing and laughing, all of us in high spirits, I realised with amazement that I suddenly felt completely well. No back pain, no tiredness, no discomfort, and a simple clarity that I had returned to the world. Janion said later that, with many of her patients, the body might become smaller, but the spirit becomes enormous. I couldn't stop smiling all of the next day.



*Sunday 1 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I woke recently with fragments of a curious dream. Annie and I were leaving – not forever – but definitely saying goodbye. We were both overtaken by laughter at something that had happened, or was said. Double-up rip-roaring laughter. I had a shawl over my head and shoulders. By the time I was collected enough to notice, she was gone.

Yesterday morning I spoke to Annie, then to Graham. Annie said she was feeling ‘like shit’. She was finding it difficult to hold down food. She had a ‘dark day’ on Thursday, with a lot of crying. Since then, she has been in Raglan, cocooned in the love and care of the family. She said there has been no darkness there, but for the first time, she said, ‘It looks like I’m not getting better.’

I also spoke to Graham. He said there has been a marked physical deterioration. (*Her GP*) Mike mentioned it when he saw Annie last Thursday. And Graham believes the meeting with the oncologist and with Mike, scheduled for Tuesday, will usher in the next stage.

I spent the morning in bed. Weeping into my sheets, for some of that time. I said to John, what a pitiful thing that the body’s response to the enormity of this is to get red cheeks and leak tears. Where is the sackcloth and ash for the people who live in our time? When can these feelings get bellowed out, in a way that even begins to befit what’s happening?



*Monday 2 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

For the last two days (*my son*) Cameron has been at the computer, his long body taking up extraordinary postures, as he has worked his way through these journals – our recent shared history. It has felt unspeakably good to see these entries transcribed, and given honour as they are lifted out and placed in a new, more public, receptacle. The impetus has been Annie who was keen to have our story (to date) with her. (*My daughter*) Sally covered the first few months before going away. Cameron took it up, and last night completed it.

It has been special, and safe, to invite my children into this private, intimate yet not secret exchange. They have been deeply respectful and connected – our amanuenses.



*4 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

Yesterday we heard the news we've all been dreading. Annie's cancer is very far advanced. The swelling in her belly is all tumour – not fluid (which could have been drained off to give her relief). Her liver is now so swollen it has reduced her stomach capacity to the size of a golf ball.

I rang Annie yesterday before she and Graham visited the oncologist. She said they had made a commitment to face the full truth and to hold their heads up(ish). She sounded vulnerable and brave.

She rang me in the afternoon to tell me the news, which she gave a score of one out of ten ('but we're not sure what the one is for').

I heard the news with disbelief, in spite of all my inner knowing. The knowledge has expanded and contracted in me since. I would find myself in cycles, slowing to a stop, weeping, barely able to breathe, then gradually moving again to a functional pace. I had a project to complete by 5 p.m. – putting together this diary to date for the three boys. I had already sent one to Annie and Graham, which they received yesterday. I had time to print and compile three. (Not the five I had planned.) I had insisted on all of them coming off my printer – not being taken away for photocopying. It felt really important to be at the heart of the process of getting them together, and I wanted no-one else involved.

By the time I came back from putting them into the post (it was 5 p.m. and the pick-up man was waiting – bless him, bless him), Penelope and Claire were here with their loving presence and with flowers. By the time Claire left I had done some hearty laughing amidst the crazy sad turmoil of this.

In the evening John and I visited Mum and there we were – another support cell in this body of grief.

I have spoken to Graham, but not yet to Annie about going up. I am ready to leave at a moment's notice.



*5 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

It's 11.30 p.m. I've just come off the phone to Rhonda, and before that, Alan. It's been a big day, a difficult day. And/but I'm now inhabiting a different bit of territory, and I'm surviving. I talked to Annie on the phone this morning. She, Graham and the boys are moving into a powerfully supportive place for and with one another. There is some very special, important stuff going on for them all. But she is not ready for me to come. And that has been hard.

I can see from all sorts of different points of view that she needs time just with Graham and the boys – and why. But it still leaves me stuck in this hard place (not true, I am moving) ... with some very tough stuff to process.

I'm very tired and unsure how to express what this has been about for me. It is important though. I'll try again in the morning.



*7 February 2004, Hamilton*

ANNIE

Huge week. We've hit the wall with the oncologist. She told us what we knew. Graham said this January was filled with dread as he watched my increasing frailty. But as usual I cheerfully tried to ignore it and just went to bed a bit more often – mostly when work was being done. (It's a technique

that worked really well when I was a kid. Always do your music practice when the spuds are being peeled or the dishes washed.)

Anyway, we're facing the truth now and we don't like it but it's the truth. In Jeremy Long's words: the cancer is a juggernaut. 'Think of weeks and months; do the things that are really important to you during the day.' Liver, lungs, peritoneum.

We came home to Andrew and cried all day. It might sound weird but I'm not quite sure why I'm crying except that I know I just can't stop. I guess if you're faced with the prospect of death, it's not an unreasonable response.

My deepest grief is for Graham and I and yet, as he said, in our seven years together and our ten years in this home we've had this jewel – and it's almost perfect.

He said, 'In my counselling experience I think I know how to help people through grief and when I lived on my own I was pretty staunch. But you and I are so close. I'll really, really miss you.'

But on that terrible Tuesday 3 February there was such bounty. Fraser, Hamish and Jo, Andy and Angus gathered in Mike's surgery for our family doctor appointment to start to think about strategy. And that night, we sat outside at our big table on the deck and gathered in with lots of tears. I said, 'I want to make a speech. I don't know what to say, I don't know when to say it but I think it's probably now.' And I told them the specific ways that each of them is currently supporting me. Andy (fresh from Australia) shooing away visitors and answering the phone wisely; Fraser and Sarah ready to drive down from Auckland and Hamish and Jo putting their presence into our home and hearts generously so that when they go they will never leave. Four visits from New York in one year. How constant is that?

Andrew banged his fist on the table. He said, 'Now look here, Mum, you've always been a mother and looked after us. I'm twenty-seven and

I've got a job and now I'm looking after you.' (He got the job the day before.)

Fraser commented on his dilemma on hearing of my first diagnosis in March last year and how when things go wrong he always comes to me. But what was he to do when it was my health that was going wrong? He commented that working through that dilemma has been an enriching process.

And Hamish with little red-haired Angus asleep in the front pack, stood beside me, hand on my shoulder, and said, 'Mum we want to operate from truth. Sometimes you pretend that all is well to protect us. Don't protect us any more.' I think I am doing what he asks.

And then they again affirmed their love for Graham and that this place is and will always be their home. It was such a perfect night – balmy, enveloping. We could hardly breathe for joy, overlaid with buckets of tears. Such a mystery.



*7 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

After two days of turmoil, lots of crying, I am now in bed, feeling contented and at peace. Speaking to Annie tonight has completely restored me. I can hardly believe the transformation. I am grateful.

Since my last entry I have felt struck down by sadness and tormented by the fear that Annie no longer wanted me alongside her. I replayed her conversation many times, and read into it – with increasing conviction –

that I was now shut out from her journey. I interpreted her wish for me to come later in the month as a delaying mechanism. Maybe that sounds a bit crazy. But that's how it was. And I have wept inconsolably.

On the phone, on the bed with her tonight (it's now so familiar to be curled around this book with a pencil and flowing between conversation and recording) I was deeply assured of our love, our place with one another. The possibility of exclusion that I had so feared evaporated like mist.

We have agreed that, all going well (enough) in the interim, I will come up for four or five days around the weekend of the 28th. It is the weekend before I turn 50. It is also – I now realise – Cameron's birthday. But – sorry, my darling son – there is no contest. We will celebrate both events at another time.

Alan is going to stay with Annie for two days next week – Tuesday and Wednesday nights – then on to stay with Mum. Issie is beaming – joyful and tearful with anticipation and relief at having him here. Annie asked how Mum was doing 'around me'. I told her she was sad and soft. 'That sounds appropriate,' Annie said.

Our conversation was shot through with both tears and laughter. She talked about her plan to have powerpoint at her funeral. We laughed at that.

Annie's projects still on the go! She's going to make a video of her accompanying some sing-along songs. Sarah will take the video into work, put it onto DVD and add the words and the karaoke bouncing ball, so that – as Annie puts it – her sons can pull their children onto their knees, crack some beers and sing.



*Sunday 8 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

Graham rang yesterday. Annie had left to go to Whale Bay where she will stay with Hamish and Jo for some days. Alan will visit her there on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Graham gave a full picture of the last few days, and how Annie is now. It was very sobering. He believes two and a half weeks is too long for me to wait. He has suggested I come for a week, leaving a week from today – 15 February. I have been surprisingly steady, broadening out at the base. But I am also waking up to, and taking to myself, the picture of Annie – her arms and shoulders even thinner, her belly bigger. I love her. I want to become familiar with this external shape of her before I go to see her, so there is nothing in the way, no shock to hold me back, when I arrive. Am I dreaming?

I am 50 in less than four weeks. When my future looked clearer, the old gang of scattered friends had agreed to meet in Dunedin to go away together – as we had when we were 40. I spoke to Rob in Auckland yesterday. They will still come down and retreat to Wanaka for the celebration. I will come if it is possible and right for me to be there. They will leave on the Sunday after a gathering here with my dear Dunedin friends – again, if I am here. These things that would have been such special markers – highlights of my year – are still important, yet they don't figure on the radar.

Graham talked candidly about Annie dying and about the gradual process of her coming to terms with that reality. And while I can hear all of that, and have seen, and have struggled with, Annie's optimism, yet I'm wondering how far off that recognition is for me. I think those two are way, way ahead of me. I said to John yesterday, it is time for me to become aware that some time soon, possibly in the next few weeks, my sister will

die. Perhaps if I write it again and again on these pages I will begin to believe it ... Annie is dying ...



*Sunday 15 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

When I think about or look at that last entry, I am aware that I feel a sense of betrayal, and I am the betrayer. On the one hand I feel like I'm having to haul myself through the portal that Annie and Graham seem to have passed through – to the acceptance that Annie will die. Yet when I allow that reality to take shape, I feel like I am letting her down, betraying hope.

In four days I will be there. Being alongside them will help to align these unfamiliar feelings that roam around inside of me. It is as it is and I will be there.

I have continued to be visited by the idea of spirit as sound. I reflected on it again yesterday and was comforted, as I sat with Alan and Issie at the memorial service for Janet Frame. It seemed to me that all that spills out from spirit – melody, harmony, dissonance, vibration – can never be contained. They take their place. Some notes will be out of audible range. But they are no less real for evading capture. Like aspects of this experience that can't be plumbed or articulated.





*15 February 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

Annie called tonight. She has been taking morphine for two days. We started talking – she was just starting to touch on her feelings in the few weeks leading up to the decision to take morphine – then suddenly she had to go. ‘Something very exciting is happening,’ she said. ‘I’m going to poo. I’ll call you back.’

When someone rang for Georgia soon after, I begged her to get off the phone, then cradled the cordless hand piece like a sleeping pet for about 20 minutes, waiting for it to wake up. Eventually I called her. She had prepared some fruit salad for Graham and was needing to remain with him.

Another ride. Another stop. It’s hard.

I find my antennae are extended way out. Has anything changed, now that she is taking morphine? The effect, as she put it when we were talking, is that she is either ‘gabbling or sleeping’. She is clear that she wants to take care of Graham. She also expressed concern for Mum. Had Alan’s visit been long enough and had it provided for Mum what she was needing? I assured her that I believed it had.

3

*20 February 2004, Hamilton*

ANNIE

Pam is here. I’ve been longing for her. We tuck into one another’s bodies and cry and then laugh and then cry more. I feel so safe. She’s been here for

23 hours and we've just started to journal, and I'm reminded how precious this process is. But there's also something infinitely sweet about living in the second.

Amongst other things, she gave me a beautiful t-shirt and we sat in bed until quarter to 12 looking like fashion boffins, hanging onto one another and whispering personal and sacred details about my dying process. It will be an anointing, sacred time for our family. Some if it was a bit of a laugh really. Like whipping off my favourite red skirt before the lid goes on the coffin at home so that the skirt can go in the dress-up box. But of course the irony is that it's not a laugh. And frequently, like now, tears roll out. I can even do big dry noisy ones – so I've got quite a repertoire. And with Pam they are safely wrapped.

People think that I find things easy, but parts of this have been really hard. I'm bursting with pride that this last week I've conquered two demons: steroids and morphine. I started steroids on the day before I took Graham to the Bryn Terfel concert at the Aotea Centre. We had Japanese food with Sarah and Fras first and I was as high as a kite. A public embarrassment. Graham and I looked gorgeous and we were very, very happy. But next time I won't take the reins of the world. I was riding the world bareback and I think it pricked Graham's bum. We stayed with the kids in their new rental house, with their wonderful style, and it was a perfect, perfect night.

A week later we made a decision to start me on morphine, and now I'm a drug addict (20 mg a day. Some people take 3,000!). All this has made a huge difference to my wellbeing and my courage and my pride. Graham patiently counts and manages my pills. He is my darling man. I often think of Issie, caring for Dad and counting his drugs. It's a tough job.

Whale Bay was a perfect break for our family, and a luxury. Two things happened, in particular, that were really important and need to be recorded. On the last evening Jo and Hamish gave me such a precious gift. I thought it was the perfect end to a perfect holiday. They were concerned about their

wedding ceremony – a selection of three traditional ceremonies which have been melded together, for a service to be held in a traditional interdenominational church in Wanaka in September. How could this be as special as the wedding itself will surely be? In the morning I'd spent about two hours doing a critical analysis of the ceremony words and their associations for me. I love doing stuff like this. I was so happy. Within half a page I'd run upstairs to Jo and said, 'This is elegant and beautiful, and with care it's going to be perfect.' She was smiling and sparking and said, 'I feel so relieved Annie. I knew we could trust you.'

In the evening after Angus had gone to bed and all was quiet and still, the three of us sat on the couch, I was in the middle, and we carefully and gently rearranged small parts of the ceremony. They've asked me to record some music for them to be played as they sign the registry. What an honour. I never imagined that. I hope it will get done. There was a sense that I was handing over in the sweetest way an important and sacred part of my work to them. One filled with joy and optimism.

I thought that this was the perfect end to a perfect holiday. But I was wrong. On Tuesday morning we were packing to leave and everyone was cleaning up. My job was to stay in bed and adore Angus. Easy, till he needed to change position from beside me onto my big bump. I was in my Glassons white t-shirt. He was in his New York designer white top. His red hair was sticking up and my hair was sticking up too. He placed a starfish hand on each of my shoulders, little feet splayed on my tummy, took a deep breath and fell instantly asleep. It's never happened before. I firmly believe he was breathing into my heart. And we will never be apart. It was the very best end to my family time – a completion of the circle. Something that was just a dream in parts of last year.



*5.42 a.m. 21 February 2004, Hamilton*

PAM

I have been awake for some hours. I remember, when I was a child, I would flip a switch inside myself when it was dark and I was in bed, and consciousness of the things that held me in place would dissolve, and I'd be spinning. That's what's been happening tonight. I woke after a short sleep, strongly conscious – as I have been here in Hamilton – of being very anchored in my body. Then suddenly it seemed I was moving beyond my own edges, losing hold, and starting to spin, without any reference points.

Now the light is on. I have somehow found my way back. And I have the journal in my hands again, to spin my spider strand. A spinning of a different kind.

This book keeps altering its weight and shape. As I thought about it, before turning on the light, it seemed like a heavy, angular object, too heavy for the soft, intricate weave of these times. I've wondered too if writing in it is something of an idolatrous practice – a substitute for the terrifying and holy and beautiful thing that is taking place here.

I have been with Annie two whole days and three nights. I had the thought in the shower yesterday that my body seems covered in lactating breasts. It's a sense that I've had a lot since I arrived. And as I write it, I'm in touch with it again. I have no idea how, or whether, I am feeding Annie. But that is my state. It's part of the physicality of this time (except in the dead of night) that I spoke of before.

I need to record what the past few days have held. And to write about Annie and how she is. I said to Graham, as I went to bed last night, that this journal, which has been a duet all these months, feels like it's moving towards being a solo voice again. Annie and I tucked up on the couch for her last entry. It was powerfully comfortable and familiar. But I'm also hearing her say: I need to just be, and not be doing. I can see that this

writing process needs precious resources: energy and capacity – and time for reflection. And so (for all the questions I had earlier about this journalling) it falls to me to be the amanuensis – not of her measured words, but of her life as she is living it. And of the shared experiences. There is a lot more to say. But for now, I will try to sleep.



*23 February 2004, Hamilton*

PAM

Layer upon layer of experiences, ordinary and extraordinary, have filled the last few days. I'll take them one by one. Moving backwards ... last night, after 'NZ Idol' was over and we'd finished eating, Annie suggested we get together in her room to talk and journal. I had brought the cluster of candles from home – now melded – that we would often burn on a Sunday night when 'wishing gently' for Annie's wellness. I'd also brought with me a small towel and some rose oil. Annie played Keith Jarrett's 'Melody at Night With You' – a compilation of piano music, composed when he was emerging from a serious illness. The music was simple, heartfelt and heart-paced (especially Track 5, 'My Wild Irish Rose', adds Annie).

I loved massaging her feet and ankles, now starting to swell with fluid. She had on a new t-shirt – pink, with a row of three red jugs and under them the words: handle with care. It's this year's Cancer Society issue of t-shirt. She also had on her pink and red swirly floral skirt.

When I had finished massaging she invited me to spoon – to curl up with her on the bed and talk to her. I held her in my arms. Her upper frame is now tiny. 'Tell me how it's been for you, and what it will be like when you

go home,' she said. I told her that I'd been feeling sad yesterday, but I realised that, for now, I did not want to and did not choose to stay there. That, above all, I was holding her and loving her. That I had taken her in. And that I had the sense that, going home, I would be able to continue to do that. To hold her and love her. I said that I had been unable to think or talk about leaving Hamilton when I was planning to come. All of my focus was on arriving and being here. I talked about the sense of separation I had experienced before I knew the dates that I was coming. And I told her that had arisen when I felt afraid. Now (at this point) I am not feeling fear. I feel richly connected. (She told me – for the second time – that she has never felt separate from me. It was a good thing to hear.)

Annie has told me that the one thing she's found difficult is having to ask me to do practical things for her. Hopefully, I've reassured her that I will – without hesitation – be anything: practical, still, present, absent. I have loved the opportunity to do things that are hard for her.

Another layer back in time ... yesterday Annie gave the performance of her life. She decided that while I was here, she would tackle the film project – playing songs on the piano to put on film for her family and close friends.

She put on her red taffeta ruffled skirt and her jugs t-shirt, moussed her cropped hair and put on her sassy glasses – though they no longer help much with seeing music. Gayle, Annie's work colleague, was here, and Paul, a film-maker from the Media Arts Department at Polytech. The filming was a gift from her department.

Annie and I had been through the songs the evening before, working hard to get the right words/chords/emphases for 'Desperado' and 'Tutira Mai', and running through the others that were more familiar.

She may speak about how this was for her, but she played like an angel. 'Pokarekare Ana' was the final song. It was out of this world. Breathtakingly beautiful.

I have seen, through being a part of this, Annie's ability, even when her physical frailty has diminished all of her resources, to give herself completely to a chosen focus. To pour herself into it with such generosity and brilliance that she becomes enormous.



*10.45 a.m. 23 February 2004*

## ANNIE

Saturday – The Practice:

I was really, really proud of this filming project. I've done 'proud' things before, but realise they've been easy actually, and this wasn't.

It's been suggested that 'letting go' rather than 'dying' is a better phrase to use about parts of me getting smaller. And I like it. That's what's happening. But it has been quite shocking (really shocking) to see myself struggle, for example, to get up the one step from our bedroom to the hall, lurching on the walls as I go.

Probably one of the most terrible moments of my life was at the piano at 4 p.m. on Saturday, ready to practise, thinking that the keys were too heavy to push down, and I simply didn't have the muscle tone in my hands and arms to play. This is Madame Basham Bunkum speaking, who's known for crashing her way through the keys with great and gay abandon.

I played with gusto and joy at our carol service on December 7 last year for 50 friends. But on the day I practised for the filming, it seemed clear that this central and sweet gift to my children and friends that Graham had suggested last year was not going to be a possibility. It was awe-full in the

biggest sense that I knew, because in some ways you could say it wasn't important. But in other ways it really, really was.

Pam tucked in quietly beside me and sang vigorously and within half an hour we were away, both happy to bursting and knowing, of course, that this was possible. It wasn't the old Annie playing the piano. It was a new rooster.

Graham tended to our needs wisely and quietly. We worked out a programme of 13 songs and it was one of the most gorgeous and marvellous nights I can remember. As if all the music in my life had come to fruition in the simplest way.

Although we were exhausted when we finished at 10.30, Pam rang Cam who was having a cocktail party for his 20th birthday. We sang joyously with all of the new life that we'd gathered, into a carefully harmonised version of 'Happy Birthday', then an upbeat version, me slapping the keys, Pam slapping the vocals, and finally Graham joining us for the big fat goodie at the end. I reckon Cam got the best 'Happy Birthday' to come out of this house.

Sunday – The Filming:

We were ready. This was a gift from my colleagues at work, and the most perfect one I could have wished for. We had a great team – Paul Judge, head of filming at Wintec, a gentle, sensitive man, and Gayle Pittaway, my roommate from work, a musician, who took her perfect place beside Pam as a support for me at the end of the piano, where I could see them but they were out of camera range. And of course Graham, quietly listening and present. I felt gorgeous. Bare feet, favourite red ruffled taffeta skirt and new pink and red t-shirt from the Cancer Society, gooey hair, and for the first time in months, some earrings. It does make a difference to me, and I'm going to remember that. It's too easy to slide into pyjama mode.



So at 1 p.m. I was humming and ready for the challenge. A couple of songs were too hard – they made me cry – so we waited, shifted the camera angle (it now included Graham’s colourful Clarice Cliff which really pleased me) and started filming again, without the pink wet cheeks. In hindsight, I reckon those two songs were two of the best – ‘Desperado’, a sentimental family song and ‘Danny Boy’ about Scottish history.

I’ve learnt a huge lesson. I’ve learnt that really simple gifts, authentically given, have their own particular beauty.



PAM - a letter

*Morning 25 February 2004, Dunedin*

Hello darling Annie,

I’m sitting at the computer doing the rooster. My comb is unruly and my body is unwashed. John is asleep in bed and I am entering the day with great gentleness, my mind moving across to you again and again.

When we spoke about me being here (I can’t call it ‘away’) you invited me to keep connecting this experience with words. Words that I could then send to you. I’ve been giving room to what that means. How to express that extraordinary connection with words and images.

As we said more than once, truth doesn’t have to be encapsulated in words. We can allow it to take its place, and know that it is as it is. But how wonderful it is at times to cast our beam of light and catch a bit of it. Have

an image that we can hold to our face, and sniff like a blankie, or spread over our knees and finger when our eyes are elsewhere.

Here, I find I have used fabric to talk about the finding process. Funny – because fabric is also my found object. It's the metaphor that has been draping me as I've thought about the connecting power of this time.

This morning it came to me, clear as day, that one of the gifts of moving into this part of the journey, is that love relationships – and our love relationship – are showing themselves. Really showing themselves. Not just as emotions and heart feelings that are shared. But as a presence in their own right. When love 'is' (and especially when love 'is' through time), it takes its being. And that being is what will remain, always.

You talked about gossamer in our journal. I've never seen it. I have this sense of it as something exquisitely woven, so that warp and weft are no longer visible. And something that has no weight. And I have decided that it is also as strong as life, and death, and love.

That is what I see and sense, as your physical body gets frailer ... and you get ready to disrobe and move on. A love that remains that has strong and subtle and perfect substance. A gossamer that is imbued with colour. I think probably a changing colour. I look forward to discovering them.

I remember, we were lying in bed in your downstairs room last year, and you told me that your colour was changing. That it had taken on a hue that was like the colour that is called out by light at the end of the day. The slanting beams of a low sun. You said there was no shadow or darkness.

For all of the unspeakable sadness of this 'letting go' there is no shadow or darkness in me either. There are riches that I could never have imagined, colours I've never seen, and now, this gossamer blankie.

It will never leave me. It is the substance of what you and I are together. It is the substance of our love.

Till I see you, and forever after that ...

My love,

Pam



29 February 2004, Dunedin

PAM

I was unsure whether I would be able to enter this journal again. As I said in an email to (*my niece*) Kate, it feels too lonely to continue, when Annie's voice will no longer be accompanying mine. But somehow on 29 February, the day that is fabricated to fix up time, the day that doesn't really exist, I feel able to give it a try. And I'm aware of the life I still carry from my time with Annie, and I want to give words to that.

It occurred to me yesterday that perhaps there is a sum of life which is fulfilled no matter what the length of it. That there is a portion (actually a whole pie) of experiences for the soul which simply take place differently, according to the length of time that is allotted.

It's felt like the fences are down, the borders are opened. There is an opportunity for exploration together in a broader plane – almost a different dimension. So that we're all filling up and carrying the riches that would have accumulated differently, if time had been different. (That's my thought now. In two weeks I may not make sense of this.)

I want to record more of the experiences of last week; aptly, they've had to wait their turn. I have been in them; now I am standing a few paces away. I can pick them up, turn them over, notice things about them, again.

Ahead of time, Annie and I celebrated my 50th birthday. Rather, she celebrated me. She has taken me on a journey of love and affirmation which has both humbled and enlarged me. I found myself arriving in a place where receiving and giving were inseparable. (Annie has spoken of this truth a number of times. Now I have grasped it.)

Where to begin ... ? She declared her intention to 'do the birthday' on the night that I arrived. She told me that she had some gifts that were almost ready, and another that she was still to purchase. With 100 percent conviction (which chased out every ounce of reality) she said she wanted me to drive her to Auckland so that she could take me to a gallery in Kingsland to choose a brooch. This, when her body is so frail that a walk to the letterbox is almost too hard.

The next day she conceded that Auckland was too far, but she was very clear she wanted to us to visit a local gallery to check whether they had the right gift.

We drove into the city centre, parked the car, and Annie conquered the 12 or so steps to street level. Then into the Waikato Society of Arts Gallery, where she checked everything with a clear eye and a powerful sense of purpose. Sitting, waiting, while the assistant checked someone's contact details for us, Annie picked up a box from the table beside us. It was exquisitely crafted. Forest green with fine, blue decorative markings. Two blue tassels, pulled sideways, opened the two halves of the lid. 'It's perfect and you shall have it,' was Annie's response. 'It will hold the two gifts I have for you, and the brooch which Graham can look out for when he goes to Auckland.'

My temptation was to say, 'Don't spend so much on me, Annie ... you've already done so much ... how can I keep receiving?' But I knew this was a

time for none of that. And so I continued on, watching with some ... awe (that word again) the process of her generosity.

Over lunch I told her that being a part of the unfolding story of seeking the gift had been a huge part of the gift itself. It revealed so much of her way of loving – establishing for me an ongoing flow of receiving (me, who so often finds it hard to receive). It also reminds me that it's not the what but the how and the why that are at the heart of things.

On Monday night we did the birthday. (She had found out that afternoon that she had a perianal abscess requiring an operation. She was adamant she would not go into hospital until the next day as she and I had to have our last evening together. Another gift.)

She parked me on the step into her bedroom – around the corner and out of sight of the bed. She softened the lights, lit candles, and with the grace of an Elizabethan Court dancer, took my hand and led me in.

We took up our comfy and familiar positions on the bed, and she took the box into her hands and began the handing over of the gifts, now full of story. I had already seen some of the orchestration behind the first one. Some time ago, Annie had put aside a suspender buckle and button from our grandmother Annie's button box. This was to be forged into a brooch for me. Annie had told me a little about it two days earlier, and while I was staying, there had been whisperings to Maeve – asking that she organise what Annie had been unable to, and get the pieces made into a brooch.

And so Annie presented the first gift to me. It was, she said, a celebration of womanhood, of things womanly. To be worn among women. We laughed to think that this was the button that had pressed against the thigh of our grandmother perhaps 100 years ago. It was both whimsical and wonderful. Annie our grandmother, Annie my sister, and me. Isosceles triangle of three Morrison women. And me with a badge to celebrate our shared womanliness (and perhaps even our thighs).

The second gift came wrapped in lime green cloth and tied with twine. It is a garland of fabric flower petals in hot pink, hydrangea blue and green-bronze. (I have it on now as I write. The green gauze is on my lap.) She said to me, when I had opened the parcel, ‘I have worn this garland twice and each time I’ve worn it I have felt absolutely glorious. At some stage, on your birthday especially, I want you to wear it and think of me.’

After Annie had told about her experiences when she wore the garland, and the history that it now carries, I talked about the meaning that it would hold in its future, when I wear the garland.

The garland seems to epitomise Annie in her fullest self. Her zany, lit-up, starring self. To take it and wear it is in some way to crown myself with her. Yet it is also, I said to her, the most challenging thing to do. Because for me to adorn myself, take on any garb that hoots for attention, is a bit scary. This garland will be my bridge, I declared to Annie, as I step out into new places, being big and bold. Love will be my courage.

Annie then talked to me about my fullest self. About the reflective and spiritual aspects she saw in me that she was now starting to explore in herself. How that had been good, rich new territory. And she said I had enabled that to happen for her.

And so we saw it – our shadow selves growing, and recognising that the strong frame of our sisterhood, acceptance of self and other, had enabled that to happen. It was a very special time. Giving and receiving is not a tide that flows back and forth. It is an ocean.



*12.21 a.m. 1 March 2004, Dunedin*

PAM

I have just finished typing up the journal to send to Annie. Today (yesterday) I had a phone message and a phone call from Annie then a phone call from Graham. Reminders that this is a bloody hard road with grave physical indignities and demands. Their words, though, were once again courageous. Annie is having to drain off fluid three times a day. (When I was there a week ago, she'd had it done just twice in more than a week.) She was leaking fluid when they got home from the hospital on Friday night and 'with gritted teeth' says Annie, they managed, just the two of them, to attach a bag, and drain her stomach.

The hospice nurse paid her first visit on Friday, and will see them every day from now on. Tomorrow I take Mum to the airport. She will fly up to be with Annie for three days.

Annie's message and call were to say that our journalling will continue. The book is still open.

3

*10 March 2004, Hamilton*

PAM

Annie is dying. I received a call from Hamish on Monday night to say, 'Come tomorrow.' I have been here 15 hours, time that has been warmed by life and presence, the love, sadness and humour of family. And it has been shot through with grief and loss.

I have thought a lot about the three strands that I wrote of in my first entry in the journal. There is my journey. There is Annie's journey, and there is our journey together. Our shared experiences have held invigorating sweetness and life. But the reality, right now, is that I am now walking my own path, alone. I have felt unable to reach Annie, and it has been painful. Extraordinarily painful. As I return to myself (with lots of crying) I have a picture of a pyramid, three sides with an apex. It cannot be toppled. And I know the resonance in me will continue to sound. But there is no sense, at this time, of a meeting, of our sounds humming together, as they have done with such energy.

It is, in some way, my fear come true. The thing I have struggled with and dreaded. And yet here I am. I am standing in it. I am surviving. I said to my dear friends and supports in Wanaka that I was coming to Annie so opened up to her, I felt in danger of being the receptacle to her spirit when she died. I arrive to find no eye contact, no tightening clasp of a hand. Nothing to tell me the gate is open. And so I am alone.





*2 p.m. 11 March, Hamilton*

PAM

The house is deeply settled in a blanket of peace. Graham is lying on the bed with Annie. Stroking her arms and face with utmost tenderness and gentleness. We are moving into the next sacred passage. I want to record yesterday ... in bringing this book out, there's a sense that it too is being immersed.

But no, this is not the time. I cannot do it.



*10.05 a.m. 12 March, Hamilton*

Yesterday it seemed Annie was close to dying. Today she is sleeping, and her leaving feels less imminent. I've hunted out a pencil, and settled into my bedroom. This journal, spread across my knees, feels like a comfort and a friend. Each hour has become many hours, each day many days. It feels like I have another whole book unwritten in me since arriving. And having said that, I don't know where to start. I have reread the entry I made after I arrived. There has been such terrain covered since then. The acute pain has gone completely. I am sitting with a heart that is wide and weighted like a bowl. I am at peace.

It has taken time for me to find my place with Annie and with myself. I arrived with a longing for the connection that we've known in the past, the connection that is us. Aware of my own selfish (if forgivable) need for acknowledgement, for reassurance, for a goodbye that is ours – not just mine to Annie. I said to Janion on Wednesday afternoon, it had been hard to

receive no greeting. And I had to laugh (and am still smiling) when at 5 p.m. – 24 hours after I'd got here, she opened her eyes wide, looked at me and said, 'Hooray – you've arrived!'

There had been wisps of comprehension earlier in the day, when I had a clear sense that she was able to understand me. I went into her room on Wednesday morning, after a late talk to Alan on the phone the night before. He had a message of love that he wanted me to deliver to Annie.

I spoke that to Annie in the morning – and her responses gave a clear indication that she had heard and received his message.

I also talked to Annie about the piece from the journal that I had thought I would read at the funeral. 'Perfect,' she murmured.

In the afternoon I stroked her feet and lower legs gently under the red mohair rug and sang my own melodies to her. And at 5 p.m.: the greeting.

Yesterday after the deep hush of early afternoon, there was quite a lot of activity, and Annie seemed to return more to an awareness of this world and of her own restlessness and discomfort. For the first time she gave indications (to Fraser) that it was 'hard', and when I was with her, she said, 'It's so long, it's so long.' The hospice nurses washed her and put her on an air mattress, which breathes and sighs, gently moving her so that her skin is protected from pressure sores.

And all the while, amidst the gentle flowing of family in and out of her bedroom, there is life and community in the house. Laughter, tears, warmth, practicalities, hugs, cups of tea, wonderful food, Bach, cricket on low volume (one viewer). An extraordinary full parcel of living.

We have been quietly working through what needs to be done for the funeral. On Tuesday night we chose photos to be scanned for the powerpoint for the funeral. On Wednesday we pencilled out the programme. On Thursday we bought beautiful paper – called 'moonlight', and Sarah typed up the order of service in powerpoint. We have included

some of Annie's favourite quotes, taken from her handwritten books, treasures she has found and recorded over the last few years. On Wednesday, in a wakeful period, I read her these and told her we were planning to include them on the service sheet. Once again I sensed she was acknowledging and saying, 'Yes!'

On Wednesday night we watched the video of Annie playing the piano. 'Pokare Kare Ana' in particular, was really special. When she finishes the piece she turns to the camera with an ear-to-ear grin, strides up the piano with her hands, then peals with laughter. We've decided, after quite a lot of discussion, that we'll play this while we are carrying Annie (is she still Annie?) out of the hall. As Janion said, 'She can play herself out.'

This morning I rang Rhonda. It was good to be in touch. How much harder it is for those who are here in heart and spirit, but physically so far away. My cell phone is a thing of joy. A source of sweet short messages from those I love. And on that note I will go – send love notes to my children.

One other thing I want to place in here: Claire and Penelope brought me a candle as I was leaving. They have others which they have been burning. The candle was placed in Annie's room and has burned since Tuesday night. It is nearly finished. It has been a steady presence, and a conscious comfort to me, to know those candles are burning and linking us all.

3

*11.31 p.m. 12 March, Hamilton*

Annie died today at 2.07 p.m.

Graham, Hamish, Fraser, Andrew, Sarah and I were with her. It was perhaps the second time in the four days since we came together that we were all in Annie's room. Hamish had arrived back from a trip to Te Awamutu just minutes earlier. Janion was returning from another visit, and drove in minutes after she died.

She had her red mohair rug and the crocheted baby shawl over her – Hamish had laid it over her last night. Each of us had taken up a position around the bed. I was by her head on her right, Fraser was beside me, then Sarah. Hamish was at her feet, Andrew was reclining, halfway up her left side, and Graham was lying on the bed by her head. I had a stronger and stronger sense that our circle was creating a cradle of love. I wanted to assure her that our love was supporting her from beneath, and not holding or covering her from above. That she was free to leave us. And I knew that it was time for me, her sister, to say goodbye. So I spoke all of these things. Then the boys also said, 'Goodbye', 'Goodbye, Mum.' Her breathing started to alter. And within what seemed like just a minute or two, she was gone. Her body was still.

One of the boys pulled the curtains and flung open the French doors to the garden. Someone pulled the venetian blinds and the room was flooded with light. We hugged one another and cried, and smiled with relief and some awe. That we were all there. That the timing had been so perfect. That Annie had left us so peacefully. After about an hour, filled with practicalities of contacting family and close friends, the paper with a death notice, and the funeral director, Graham and Janion washed Annie's body and dressed her in the clothes of her choice – the red taffeta ruffled skirt, the pink cancer society t-shirt and the beautiful scarf from Janion's daughter, Katherine. Then the boys and I anointed her – each taking a foot

or a hand, and lovingly stroking rose oil into her skin. All that she had elected to have happen was taking place.

The hospice nurse arrived, fortunately, blessedly, after Annie had taken her leave, then Heather arrived with the CD of photos for the funeral. And then the undertakers, to take her away for treatment so that she can be returned tomorrow to lie in her coffin, for people to visit her over the period until the funeral at 2 p.m. on Sunday.

And now I must try to sleep.



*7.56 a.m. 13 March, Hamilton*

Outside my window there is a hot air balloon hovering in the still air. It feels like another gentle celebration of and for Annie. Late yesterday afternoon I sat in a large comfortable black chair, looking out onto the lake from the Performing Arts Centre where we will hold the service. Birds were swooping in ever-changing formation and, on the lake itself, even though the afternoon air was quiet and still, the surface would ruffle and trill, here, then there, as if Annie were saying: I'm present.

Even this morning, as I pick up this book, I feel her with me, and I find myself talking to her under my breath, noting the way this home (and wider place) is lovingly displaying itself to her, as she gets ready to take her leave perhaps.

Today there are many arrivals. Annie (we talked last night about what we call that part of Annie that remains, and have decided – Annie) arrives back from the undertakers (what a strange word that is), Mum, my John, Cam and Sal arrive today at 2.30; Rhonda flies in at 12.30, is picked up by a

friend and will come over with Julian in the early afternoon. I think there are others, but these are the main ones in my mind.

I'm interested that my hips and legs are aching as I wake this morning. The long, long walk to the bridge with Annie is now over. Over this time I've developed tendonitis in my right foot, all sorts of pangs, pains, and even a tender bump or two in the left one. And now, this overwhelming weary ache in my lower limbs. I kind of welcome it. They feel like honourable wounds. It would be weird to come to the last mile and still feel physically spry, out of keeping with the emotional and spiritual pilgrimage we've been on.



*10.04 p.m. 15 March, Dunedin*

Two days have passed. I have been alongside the body of Annie as she lay in an open casket. I have taken part in the celebration with more than 500 people, honouring her life and spirit. I have circled her coffin hand in hand with family and close friends. And I have watched as her body was delivered into the fire in the crematorium furnace.



*8.23 a.m. 17 March, Dunedin*

Annie my darling, how fitting it is that I should wake up to a grey, grey day, with only just enough light, even at this time in the morning, for everything

to show itself. Only a small slice of the colour spectrum to be seen. I can only write if I talk to you. And so that's how I'll do it today. There's a lot of detail – wonderful, important things – to recount from the past few days. And although you have gone, the only way I can form these sentences is to address them to you.

You arrived back at the house at about 12.30 on Saturday afternoon. Your pine casket was painted in the colour of your and Graham's choice – a subtle sagey shade of green. The handles, chosen with care by Fraser and Sarah, were just right. And there was a simple engraved plaque on the lid, which said Annie Barbara McGregor-Harbutt. I don't remember if it stated the dates of your birth and death. But I think it probably did. We carried you – a test run – through the garden and into your lovely bedroom, through the French doors. You were placed beside your side of the bed, facing the same view that you have so loved to look out on. The Funeral Director (FD) unscrewed the lid, and there you were, lying on your red mohair blanket in the clothes you had left us in, your lipstick (sent off with you, thanks to Sarah) immaculately applied. The FD said, 'I tried to smooth down her hair, but it didn't seem to want to go.' We gusted a sigh of relief mixed with laughter. Thank God for that too.

Your feet were bare, you were cold to touch. Your expression was peaceful and staunch. You looked bloody gorgeous. No longer any vestige of sickness or of struggle. And so that's where you lay for 24 hours. Many people came to visit – as on the bridge of your meditation – people you loved, people you liked and maybe some people you half-pie liked. We did some sitting, some sobbing, some laughing in that room with you. I think Andrew may have even watched some cricket on the small TV. But mostly we had the most beautiful of music playing – the Keith Jarrett CD you loved so much, Cecilia Bartoli ... probably others as well. Sometimes there were a lot of visitors, sometimes not many. I didn't like it when I was introduced to someone new across the casket, nor when they asked in the next breath. 'How are you?' But I did like it when, in the half dark of the

passage from your room, I greeted someone and introduced myself as Annie. It was an old friend, and we both laughed, almost with tears at the shock, absurdity and strange sweetness of it. 'I'd been hoping that Annie would get well', he said. 'But I didn't think it would happen like this.'

At midday the next day, the house humming with guests, your red skirt was taken off for consigning to the dress-up box, as you requested, and the lid placed back on the coffin by Graham and the boys. We arrived at the venue by the lake, where you would have attended many concerts and functions, and many people were already there. We took the third and fourth rows (elevated above the first two) – all of the extended family and your close friends. People had brought flowers from their gardens as you wished, and they lay strewn across the front of the stage. A heaped cluster of flowers, lovingly picked and beautifully arranged by Maeve (from your garden and hers) sat on the top of your casket, as we waited to carry you in. The music you had selected was playing, and the photos of you with family and friends were projected onto a screen. The auditorium kept filling and filling until all the seats were taken including those upstairs, which ringed the stage, and another 50 or so on the stage itself. There were another 100-plus people watching the service on video links in the foyer.

The celebration was everything you could have wished for, my darling. Tributes lovingly spoken, your choice of songs heartily sung (and yes, a good descant for the last verse of the 23rd Psalm). 'Fields of Gold' was performed live with just a day's practice. (What clever musician friends you have.) Splendour, heart, style, a flow of laughter, tears.

You left us straight after the service.

Everyone had drinks and food, and a large core of people came back home to Tawa Street; some peeled away before dinner, and close friends of yours, Graham's and the boys' stayed on.

Early the next morning, while the mist was still hugging the river and softening the edges of everything, we drove to the crematorium. You



arrived in your green box – your cradle, I have sometimes called it. I'll tell you who was there: Graham, Hamish, Fraser, Andrew, Sarah, John, me, Georgie, Mum, brother Alan, Sue and Kate, Rhonda, Julian and Gabrielle, Cousin Al and Kate, Ken and Jen, son Tom, and Janion. Twenty-one of us. We held hands around the casket that held your body. Janion read from Leunig:

When the heart  
Is cut or cracked or broken  
Do not clutch it  
Let the wound lie open

Let the wind  
From the good old sea blow in  
To bathe the wound with salt  
And let it sting.

Let a stray dog lick it  
Let a bird lean in the hole and sing  
A simple song like a tiny bell  
And let it ring!

Rhonda read this quote from Aldous Huxley:

Lightly, my darling, lightly, even when it comes to dying. Nothing ponderous or portentous or emphatic. No rhetoric, no tremolos, no self-conscious persona putting on its celebrated imitation of Christ, or Goethe, or Little Nell. And, of course, no theology, no metaphysics. Just the simple fact of dying and the fact of the clear light.

And I sang the first verse from what has become 'our song': 'Fields of Gold'.

The FD took out his power drill to take off the handles so that each of us could take one home. We asked him how often he's had this request.

'Once,' he said. We laughed. We were very pleased at that.

Then, true to your request, we watched as your body was rolled, so quickly, into the furnace for cremation.

Janion gave us, the pallbearers, a handle each, and read aloud the following, again from Leunig:

We give thanks for the invention of the handle. Without it there would be many things we couldn't hold on to. As for the things we can't hold on to anyway, let us gracefully accept their ungraspable nature and celebrate all things elusive, fleeting and intangible. They mystify us and make us receptive to truth and beauty. We celebrate and give thanks.

AMEN

And so, Annie, we did as you had asked, right to the end. They were big asks, and we did them 'bigly'.

Biggest of all, though, was that we all somehow managed to complete the journey. You, to the point where you were ready to leave. And us, to our destination: able to say goodbye.

I am coming to the last leaves of our second book. I have erased back page jottings I made for your celebration with a pencil rubber, so that I have room for these words.

I don't know anything about my future. It holds almost as much mystery as your own. But right now, it's 1.16 p.m. and, as I have dipped in and out of this journal this morning, I am in a different place from where I began. I can trust that movement will continue. That's all I know. I am ready now to get up.

# CONCLUSION

*March 2014, Dunedin*

Darling Annie,

Astonishingly, it'll soon be ten years since the day of your death. I'm curious that I still can't say 'the day you died' – perhaps because you have been and remain so alive to me.

When I thought about writing a conclusion to our journal, I considered different ideas, and even wrote some up. But it's this way, with a letter to you, that I want to bookend our very precious process of journalling.

I remember, in our last telephone conversation, you said to me, 'Pam – our journalling will continue.' I wonder if you knew what those words might mean. You were dying. We both knew that, and a listener might have thought this was crazy talk. But here we are ... the journal has continued. That lovely clear assertion, amidst the terrible, tough times of those final days, has taken on a prophetic tone!

You told me more than once that you were happy for the journal to be shared and published. You were clear about your position on that, but then again you were getting ready to leave. For me (still here), the process has been more gradual. I've been learning to trust and pace myself, and over time have expanded the invitation for others to read our story.

Now I've got to where you were, Annie: ready to let it go, and share it with others. There's something significant about being now in the tenth year. It feels as if our shared story, which I've carried inside me, has been birthed. It has its own separate existence, and can now go out and have its own life.

You'd be delighted to know that others have been inspired by what we did together. I presented a paper on our journal at an international conference on attentive writing at Glasgow University a few months ago (August 2013). I shared excerpts from our writing – and it's safe to say the

presentation struck a chord. Quite apart from what we've shared in our journal, it seems that the idea of co-authoring is catching on. A practitioner emailed me to say he was introducing it to cancer patients and their families. Another mother and daughter have created a beautiful book and are writing their way through tough times.

And now, Annie, can I fill you in on things that are harder to talk about? You have six beautiful grandchildren. You always said you would have been a fantastic grandmother, and we all knew the truth of that. You wrote so few negative words about your process in that last year, but you did tell me once that when it came to grandchildren, you felt cheated. Yes, you were. And yes, they are too. But those family bonds are very strong. There are many gatherings, and you, Annie, are always there.

As for me, the turbulence and bewilderment of losing you have settled. When I think of you, I'm amazed and grateful at how easily you are called to presence. Our conversations come and go, as they always did. And at times like now, you feel solidly beside me, hip to hip, as we get this show on the road.



# PHOTO ALBUM



*The family, Issie's 80th, 12 January 2003*

*(From left)*

*Front row:*

*Graham, Annie, Issie, Pam, Susannah*

*Second row:*

*John, Hamish, Andrew, Cameron, Alan*

*Third row:*

*Jo, Sarah, Fraser*

*Back row:*

*Georgia, Sally*



*Annie and Pam, March 2003*

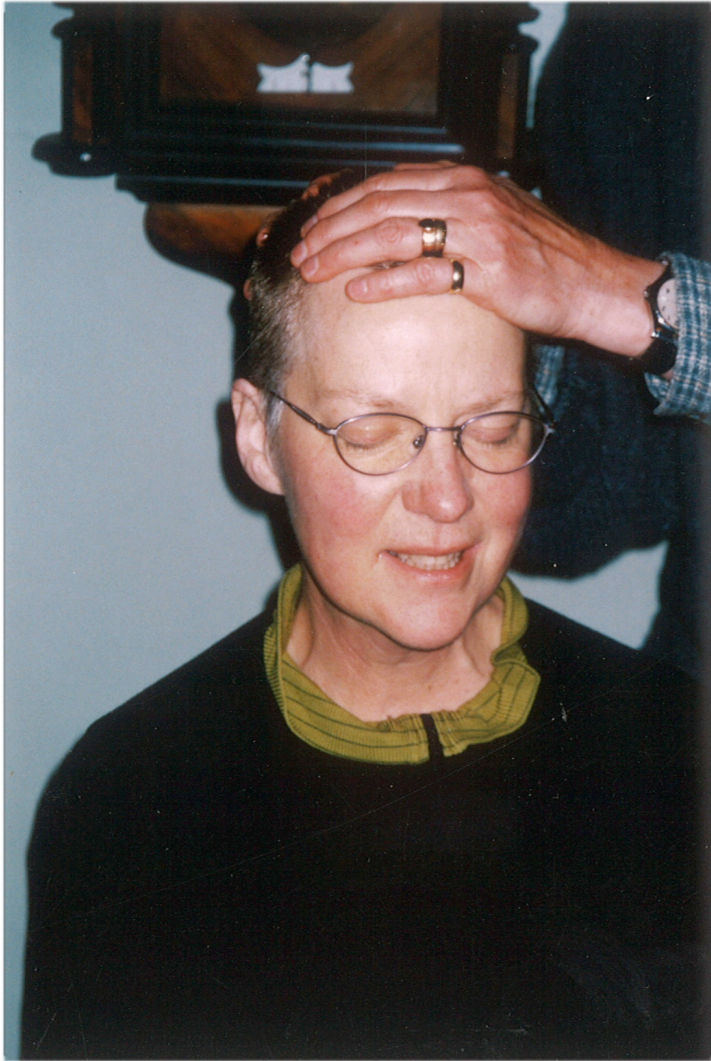


*Annie and Graham on their wedding day, 13 July 2003*



*The wedding, after Pam's song, 13 July 2003*





*Annie's hair ceremony, 13 August 2003*



*As ye like it. Pam, Annie and Rhonda, 21 September 2003*



*Annie recording 'Blimmy Blommy Blummy', 11 October 2003*



*Annie, carol service at home, 7 December 2003*



*Annie, Hamish and Issie with Angus, 20 December 2003*



*Annie and Pam, Treble Cone, Wanaka, 6 January 2004*



*Pam and Annie, Wanaka, 6 January 2004*



*Annie and Angus, Whale Bay, February 2004*





*Annie and Pam, 20 February 2004*



*The filming. Annie with Paul, Gayle and Pam, 22 February 2004*



*Annie and Pam journaling, February 2004*



*The two journals*

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all of those named in the journal – family and friends – I give my heartfelt thanks. Thank you for being part of our lives, and so part of the story, then and now. This journal is our shared experience, and belongs to us all.

Thank you to those who have had faith in this publication (ad)venture, and have respected my way of getting there. The route was anything but straightforward, and I am deeply grateful for the way you have honoured my process.

There are many people who have accompanied me – too many to note in person. I value you all, and some I want to name.

My thanks to Issie who always wanted this but never pushed for it; to John for his sound judgement and solid support; to Jen for her heart-tuned responses and helpful feedback; to Claire who believed from the beginning; to Penelope who kept faith in the project, and whose offerings were beautifully honed, always.

We are grateful for the kind permission given by Michael Leunig to reprint the following poems/prayers, published in *The Prayer Tree* by Leunig (HarperCollins Publishers Australia, 1990): ‘We give thanks for the mystery of hair ...’, ‘When the heart is cut or cracked or broken ...’, ‘We give thanks for the invention of the handle ...’

*Dear Reader,*

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