

Each spring a torrent of muddy water raced through the ditch and over the four-plank bridge in front of my Ismay, Montana, schoolhouse. The strong current forced most of the seventy first-through-twelfth-graders and the four teachers to detour to the far corner of the playground. There, all but the boy daredevils entered the two-story brick building from the gravel road where the water rushed through a culvert. Most of the year the four-foot deep ditch stood bone dry, like everything else in my corner of southeastern Montana.

One sunny April Saturday in 1949, when I was six, I put on my white rubber overboots and teddy-bear coat with the red trim that Mom had made me. I crossed the road next to our first house a block uphill from the school and squeezed through the barbed-wire fence at the base of the nearby hill. My mission—to find the origin of the angry waters that spilled over the school bridge.

I clambered up the hill through ankle-high grass and stepped around mud puddles. Small piles of snow crunched under my feet. I jumped over small streams that rushed around limestone boulders and emptied into deep gullies. Water snaked from every direction as if an imaginary faucet were open behind each sagebrush. When I reached the top of the hill, I looked around in amazement. No rushing waters.

Quiet rivulets gurgled under my boots. Tiny streams ran together into little rivers and hurried down the hill. The muddy waters rushing over the plank bridge that drove us to take an alternate route into the school began as calm, clear waters from melting snow. I took off my coat and leaned against a sandstone boulder to take in the astonishing sight. A surge of satisfaction welled in my chest. I had made a discovery.

I would make many more as I moved from Ismay's small hills to the mountains of California and Perú.

My Catholic religion and small town upbringing dictated for me a traditional future of marriage and motherhood. Ismay girls planned for the horse and the man they wanted, in that order. My parents, teachers, movies and books presented me alternative streams of possibility that would lead to a more independent future.

From innocence to sexual awakening to passion. The emotional eddies that flowed through the hills and gullies of my Montana childhood began as silent streams of religious reverence and family protection. My social development crept along at a slow creek's pace when I was a teen in California, then erupted like a storm-stirred ocean as I entered my twenties and lived in Mexico, Puerto Rico and Perú. The Latin American culture stirred my body and soothed my restless soul.

In California, Mexico and Perú, I found a world of different cultures, languages, and ways of thinking. I discovered how I could contribute to the world and live a stimulating life. Idealistic and eager to fulfill a noble purpose, I joined President Kennedy's recently founded Peace Corps. I believed my community development work in Perú could make a difference for poor people there. Little did I suspect the moral and spiritual challenges that would confront me during my two-year experience.

I questioned beliefs from my early life and doubted whether I had the strength to navigate the turbulent currents I encountered. But close friendships and firsthand understandings in new countries helped me gain the self-confidence and knowledge.

When I graduated from college in 1964 the world was in turmoil. We were still in a Cold War with Russia and I'd taken two years of Russian because of it. Young men my age left to fight in the growing Vietnam conflict. Others protested the war, and still others turned to drugs and dropped out of traditional society. Reading Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in college reinforced my belief that despite the world's turmoil, I could obtain what I wanted. I yearned for a life of excitement and adventure. I got it.

In the majestic Andes, rivers rushed through deep valleys toward the mighty Amazon. I hurried above, tossed back and forth on precarious mountain switchbacks, struggling with the new emotions that surged within me. A desire I didn't comprehend compelled me to risk body and soul for country, adventure, and love. From rivulets to streams to a torrent, the forces of nature shaped my life—and at age twenty-two, a tsunami of passion swept me away.