

Letters from my Soul is a remarkable, true story of healing and spiritual growth. It explores the transformation of a woman who has been suffering from chronic fatigue since college. It not only recounts her struggle to heal the pain hidden underneath the surface, but reveals the fundamental process of change in all aspects of her life.

## Letters From My Soul 2

by Chantal van den Brink

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CHANTAL VAN DEN BRINK

## Letters from my soul | 2

About being stuck in an old form  
and searching but not finding,  
until the floodgates open

A remarkable true story of healing



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Paperback ISBN: 978-1-64438-079-6

Hardcover ISBN: 978-1-64438-080-2

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Cover design: Hemels van der Hart bv

Photo cover: author's private collection

Photo author: Charline van Ommen

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2019

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Brink, Chantal van den

Letters From My Soul 2 by Chantal van den Brink

BODY, MIND & SPIRIT / Healing / General | BODY, MIND & SPIRIT /

Inspiration & Personal Growth | SELF-HELP / Abuse

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019919243

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# 1.

## In love

It's the end of July 1999, and the rain is coming down in buckets from the uniformly grey sky, creating an intense longing for sun and far away beaches, the sprouting greenery bowing its head under the heavy raindrops. The water gushing from a ramshackle pipe runs across the concrete driveway in front of my feet before disappearing, loudly gurgling, into a pit. Unwittingly, I shiver as my sturdy rain jacket and thick fleece cannot prevent the cold from creeping into my bones. This ugly brick garage, which was undoubtedly attached to the main house without the approval of the building aesthetics committee, has the humidity level of a mushroom farm. Slumped on two plastic folding chairs between the green stained garage doors, we, the brand-new owners of this country estate, are staring gloomily at the property we have just acquired.

Country estate *De Viersprong* in Woudenberg consists of an eclectic, country-style house, an accompanying coach house and a Swiss chalet on five hectares of land in the centre of the Netherlands. Back in the second half of the eighteenth century, when a wealthy aristocratic family had it built, sandy paths provided access to the estate, but these days the three buildings stand in a half-circle, in the armpit of the junction of two secondary roads. The noise of the passing cars contrasts sharply with the quiet of the park behind the buildings where stretches of grass, rhododendrons and beach avenues turn into vast deciduous and coniferous woods. In short, the estate offers the best of both worlds, making it an ideal place to live and to establish our office, but first we will have to deal with fifty years of long-overdue maintenance.

'Where in Heaven's name do we start?' The notepad on which I intend making a list of necessary renovations, lies unused in my lap. Of course, we have known for quite some time that the estate was in a deplorable condition, but now that the previous owner's furniture has been removed, leaving faded spots, cobwebs and remnants of superfluous household goods, the extent of the problem becomes truly evident. Furthermore, all that wetness emphasises the decay, like rubbing salt into a wound makes you feel the pain more.

'It doesn't look all that good, does it?' Wim grins, his black hair sticking to his forehead. 'We are the owners of a property with potential, darling; this has 'us' written all over it.' Resolutely, he gets up and with a determined glimmer in his eyes holds out his hand to me. 'Come on, let's take a look around.'

I let myself be hauled up, encouraged by his energetic attitude, knowing he's right; there's no point in having a mope.

Via the dark storage space right underneath the living room of the main house, we ascend the long wooden spiral staircase, up three floors to the loft where we enter a narrow corridor. In the large square room to our right, a plastic window seems to have been casually glued in the wall with an ugly layer of PUR foam, offering a spectacular view of the park, that view being the only beautiful thing I can discover in this room. 'It's worse than I remember, everything is equally dirty. And it stinks.' With one finger, I carefully open a cupboard door, discovering a black mouldy shower curtain dangling from just three rings on a rickety rail above an equally mouldy, yellow shower cubicle. 'Ugh! Can you imagine someone washing in here?'

Wim sticks his head over my shoulder. 'Well, that's what happens when you don't install ventilation. There is only one thing to do, pull it down, which by the way goes for everything on this floor.' Gesticulating widely, he paces through the maze of panelled cubicles. 'Let's take everything out and start anew.' His father worked in the construction

industry, just like his older brother. Even though my husband did not follow in their footsteps, he did acquire quite a lot of knowledge from them.

I open my notepad and start to note the items that Wim lists at high speed. Then he points to the dormer in the corridor. 'That has seen better days as well, and the roof needs to be checked.' He draws my attention to a brown spot on the edge of the ceiling.

With two pages full of notes, we move down to the first floor. Wim is leading again. 'Shit!' I hear his exclamation, followed by a heartfelt curse when I am still halfway down the spiral staircase.

I dash the last steps towards him. 'What?' Then I see the source of his dismay: in the long corridor, rainwater is flowing down the walls, soaking the faded carpet. Shocked, I put my hand over my mouth. 'What on earth..?'

He pulls a window open and peers up. 'That gutter is overflowing.' I open the door of the adjoining bedroom; to my horror, I find that a section of the long wall, where there used to be a bed, is also black with mould, like in the attic. Well, at least, this room is dry. Quickly, Wim checks the other places on this floor, concluding these, fortunately, are also dry.

Downstairs, however, in the stately living room water is also seeping along the walls, not as bad as in the hall on the first floor, but enough to cause severe damage, drenching the plaster on the walls and forming puddles of water on the old parquet floor. Defeated, I stand and look. 'Shouldn't we put buckets down?'

My husband laughs at my naïveté. 'There's no point, darling; we can't do anything here. I'll call a plumber this afternoon. Hopefully it will stop raining.'

A little later, armed with a large umbrella, we cross the parking lot. Well, parking lot? The earthen floor, with the spaces between the trees which will just about fit a car, resembles nothing more than a giant mud

bath. Wim says what I think. 'This is impossible, of course. Can you imagine our clients getting out of their cars in bad weather? It'll ruin their fancy shoes for sure.' I make a note to put down paving. 'We will also have to tackle those trees as they are top-heavy with gnarled offshoots.' He takes a branch in his hand. 'The lower branches I can do myself, but for the crowns we need a tower crane. In this state, we run the risk of a branch falling on a car.'

'Or on someone's head,' I say and make a note: tree surgeon. So, it continues wherever we look: the weeds are reaching hip level; there are no terraces or pavement anywhere, nor is there any outdoor lighting.

To our relief, the coach house on the other side of the parking lot is in reasonable shape, albeit patched up with the most unsuitable building materials one could choose to restore a historic building, but it's usable. We decide to live there for the time being; at least we will be able to shower and cook.

The chalet, however, proves to be in the same bad state as the main house as the electrical installation is pre-war, the sanitary fittings calcified, and the heating system works on underground oil-tanks. There is nothing, absolutely nothing usable in it.

The fourth building on the estate, the forester's dwelling, a large barn with a tiny house attached, we don't even bother to examine. That'll have to wait till later; we have quite enough on our hands.

'Can you believe that the owner let it come to this state?' I throw my note pad on the backseat of the car. 'Unbelievable that people lived here!'

In the evening after dinner, I work out my notes; main chores, sub-chores, timeline and a first estimation of the necessary budget. The summary makes me swallow hard. 'What have we let ourselves in for?' I place the list, four A4 sheets of paper, in front of Wim on the kitchen table. 'It's a lot more work than we thought; we'll never get it done



before Christmas,' and I count on my fingers the intervening months until 1 January, the date that our lease on the office in Laren expires. 'We only have five months.'

Wim examines the list attentively. 'Yes, it's tight; but with smaller contractors, the process will be quicker. First, we need to pull down most of the interior, and I know who to ask. When that mess is out, we can take stock of the situation. In the meantime, we will look for the right people to do the job.'

The rest of the evening, we discuss the renovation in detail and decide to focus on the most necessary maintenance as we cannot afford a total renovation. In a few years, the estate will get listed as a monument, which will bring all kinds of subsidies and deduction opportunities within reach. Although that is no use to us right now, later it most likely will be.

'Honey, something different, did you speak to Ilse recently?'

I put the papers in my lap and shake my head. 'Not since she moved. I don't know how to deal with the fact that she's changed so much.' I picture the face of my dearest friend whom I met at the same time as Wim at the Visions' 'empowerment' training in 1994. A few months ago, she moved in with her boyfriend in Germany, and I know I should be happy for her, that I should go and see her and maintain our friendship. But I feel numb. Since her relationship started, I hardly recognise my friend. That change goes deeper than her wealthy appearance; she talks and behaves differently; but when I address it, she gets angry, whereas before we could always talk about anything. 'Her leaving feels like an amputation.'

Wim takes my hand. 'I know you find it hard, but you should let her know how important she is to you.'

I kiss his cheek. 'I'll call her,' I say, but I know that I will not. Sometimes I'm like a tortoise; when I feel uneasy for whatever reason, I retire deep into my shell.

A few days later the son of a good friend and his mates start the demolition work. As the main dwelling alone produces twelve 10-cubic containers of waste, the trucks are driving back and forth all day. Ceilings, walls, floors, partitions, except for the historical elements, we strip it all. Underneath the lathed wall we find old newspapers from the last century with notes made by carpenters over a hundred years ago; behind the hard-board sheets we discover old doors, and underneath an ugly as sin layer of self-levelling mortar, we find the original tile floor, all pleasant surprises. Only the discovery of a bee colony behind the roof boarding is not so useful, and the local beekeeper has to come to move the population.

Wim and I clear out our house in Huizen and move into the coach house. On the top floor, we arrange our bed, clothes and other personal items, leaving all other moving boxes stacked downstairs next to the sofa against the wall, which makes our temporary accommodation feel like a cross between a holiday home and a transit shed. In the meantime, one tender after another arrives in the mail, all thick piles of paper specifying conditions and prices. Each night we study the small print and list the alternatives.

'We'll have to borrow some more.' With the last printout of my spreadsheet in my hand, I lean next to Wim against the kitchen table.

He looks up from a tender that needs to go out tomorrow. 'You'd almost forget we also have a business to run. Is it that bad?'

I bite my lip. 'Worse, we're short of a few hundred thousand.'

He puts the tender aside. 'Then we'll have to see what we can drop.'

Together we analyse which parts of the renovation are strictly necessary. But after two hours of heated discussion and making budget cuts, there is still a large gaping hole. 'What we do, we at least have to do right.' I fill our mugs. 'A historical building like this deserves to be restored properly.'

'Then our fixed charges will go up.' As a contribution to the mortgage, our coaching firm Soulstation will have to pay a steep monthly rent.

I pick up the documents and put them in my work bag. 'Yes, that's true, but we can't go back now, in for a penny, in for a pound. Just imagine how beautiful it will be. Can't you see us sitting by the large open fireplace in the drawing-room, with clients or colleagues? The beauty, the peace and the space are an investment that will more than pay for itself.'

That the purchase of *De Viersprong* is an enormous gamble, we know perfectly well. That our young company has to almost double its annual turnover, we know as well. But what we have seriously underestimated is the weight of pressure we have taken on our shoulders. Love is blind.

Fortunately, our account manager at the bank does not see any problems, and within a few weeks, approves the additional finance; it is the time that in real estate trees seem to grow into the sky. As soon as we get the green light, the fitters, bricklayers, plasterers and painters start work, each in succession and on an average day there are no less than sixteen men on site. The grounds look like a battlefield, the buildings being surrounded by piles of sand and earth wherever you look. A contractor digs away two meters of soil next to the outer walls to make them impermeable from the outside; the removal of the oil tank leaves a man-sized hole the length of an average sailing boat and large machines chip away old layers of earth for new paths and a parking lot.

Like a mobile unit Wim and I run the project, stretching ourselves to the max; the telephone never stops ringing with various problems that need attention all at the same time; we plan, plea and have heated discussions with the workmen, do overtime and race back and forth between Woudenberg and Laren where Soulstation is operating as usual. It seems insane and even downright impossible, but we are determined to succeed and go all out to achieve our ambition. Nobody

asks us whether we are doing the right thing. Family, colleagues and friends express their admiration at us having the guts to chase this dream, and if they have any doubt, they keep it to themselves. Only my mother, who comes to have a look in the middle of the worst mess, objects. 'You're letting yourself in for a lot, Chantal.' With raised eyebrows, she steps over a freshly dug ditch in the parking lot. 'I hope that you know what you're doing.'

'We have carefully calculated it, Mum. Yes, you're right; it is an enormous step. But if it goes wrong, we can sell the estate again, can't we?' I speak from my experience of the constantly growing real estate market; my former house and Wim's flat sold quickly and made a profit at the time.

'You take it too lightly. If the market collapses, you're left holding the baby.' My mother started her business during an economic recession years ago, and she speaks from experience.

But I'm deaf to everything except what I want to hear.

Fortunately, there is also a distraction. In the early fall, I have the almost-two-year-old son of a friend come to stay with me, as his recently divorced mother is going away for the weekend. On Friday I take him to the Zoo to have a look at the monkeys, on Saturday I put him in his buggy to go shopping in the village and on Sunday he comes with us to the sauna. On Wim's back, he glides through the water in the pool, shouting with joy. But of course, the little boy doesn't think much of the hot rooms, so, wearing his rather tough-looking bathrobe, I put him on a rug on the floor in the relaxation room and settle myself in a reclining seat.

Tenderly, I look at the little man playing so attentively with his cuddly toys. 'Look, nice!' he proudly shouts now and again. Alternated with shrieks of 'yees, aaah, booh...'

I would have been seven months pregnant now. For a moment, I put my hand on my flat belly while a pang goes through my heart. If all had gone well, our baby would have been born in November. Did the child's soul know that such an extensive renovation was awaiting us? Would that be the reason why I had a miscarriage? Guesswork, of course; who's to say? I take a bottle of apple juice from my bag and give it to the little boy next to me. He takes it with two hands and starts drinking with greedy gulps.

Will I ever become a mother? According to my guides, next year, the moment will be there. If so, then a lot will have to change in my life. Currently, I am in charge of my timetable, having no other demands apart from my job and this renovation. However, if I think about how many hours I work currently... But never mind, it's a phase. Once the remodelling is done, it will get quieter; that is, if this renovation ever gets done, and I admit there are moments when I have my doubts.

But of course, all turns out well, or at least, so it seems for a while. When my 'child-for-a-weekend' has long gone back to his mother, and the trees start losing their leaves, the first results are showing. The most significant improvements aren't even visible; a completely new electric installation, insulated walls, ditto floors, new window frames where necessary, a partial new roof with new gutters. In all, the estate once again meets this era's aesthetic norms in a mix of modern comfort and historic elegance.

At the end of November, during the last phase of the renovation, I am just walking into the coach house, putting my bag on the sink, when my telephone rings. Absent-mindedly, I pick it up, expecting that Wim wants to fine-tune something with me. But it's my gran, an intensely sad and weeping gran. 'Chantal!' her voice is so hoarse that I can hardly hear

her. 'Chantal, will you please come and help me? They left me like this, and I don't know what to do!'

With the telephone pressing against my shoulder, I put the kettle on, my throat feeling as dry as parchment. Left? Who? Where? Then it dawns on me. She is supposed to have moved into a different flat this week. 'Popoe, calm down and tell me what's going on.'

Sobbing, she tells me her story. The movers, as agreed, neatly packed her things and moved them to her new place, but they did not unpack or organise her room.

'But don't the people of the home help you?'

'No, they consider it a family thing, and your mother refuses to come.'

My blood starts boiling; how can my mother be so unkind? How can she desert her mother, her blind, old mother who can only walk with the help of a stick? Yes, of course, her mother, my gran can whine a bit and be quite annoying at times, but really, under the circumstances? In my mind, I scan my programme and realise that going to her aid will cause problems as I have to prepare something, and my body is screaming for some rest. But it seems I have no choice, what has to be done, has to be done. 'I'll be with you in an hour.'

I call Wim, who is at the office in Laren, and explain the situation. 'Can you come with me?'

'Not really, but we can't leave her like that. I'll see you there.' Such a sweetheart!

We find my gran, hair dishevelled, in a state of collapse, in her chair in the corner of the room, surrounded moving boxes and randomly placed furniture, piled up so densely there is not enough room to swing a cat. Next to her chair, I sink on my knees and put my arms around her frail body. 'It'll be all right, darling.' She smiles bravely through her tears. 'Tell us how you want it.'

'Well, I thought my bed in that corner,' starts my gran. I smile. She may be blind and frail, but her mind is as sharp as a razor. However, she doesn't seem to realise that this new room is half the size of her former home so she can't have everything in it. Cautiously, Wim and I start moving things around until the best pieces have found a place. Next to her chair on the right-hand side, we place a second velvet armchair and, in the middle, the small oak table that witnessed so many long talks over many glasses of sherry. The heavy blanket chest which used to be full of linens I loved to touch as a child we shove against the long wall. Above it, the carpenter will later mount a Gobelin tapestry and her collection of tin plates and oil paintings. Over the bed, my gran tells me, she plans to hang my favourite, a soft green painted panel with white roses. Finally, we squeeze a small table to the left of her chair on top of which we install her telephone with the extra-large buttons which she can find by touch. And of course, her stereo, most important, because now that my gran can't watch television anymore, she likes to listen to radio broadcasts, preferably about world politics. She often catches me out when she draws me into a discussion about our government's latest decisions, knowing much more about the world at large than I do. When all is done, we put the remaining furniture in the storage space.

After that, we unpack the boxes. Crockery, linen, clothes, we find a place for everything as best we can, working late into the evening and grabbing a quick bite at the snack bar. My gran chatters away. 'Did you know that my sister just had an operation?' I don't have to answer the question as she automatically starts relating all the details. She comes from a family of five girls, of which two are still alive, and she has found it very hard, losing her loved ones. My gran herself has been close to death a couple of times, the last time a few months back, when she was rushed to the hospital with a severe case of pneumonia. But a creaking gate hangs on, and she surprised everyone by making a full recovery within a week. Then she changes the subject. 'Never have children,

Chantal. There is no point. Look at me. Your uncle is always abroad, luckily, he telephones, but I never see him. And I don't hear anything from your mother.' Every visit, it's the same tune, but no matter how much I feel for her, I have little influence on the situation. So, we let her talk, we listen, nod and in the meantime, work as hard as we can.

Before we leave, we help her into the freshly made bed. Carefully, she lowers herself onto the edge, one hand tightly gripping her stick. Her wrinkled face looks pale; she must be dead tired. 'You go along,' she says softly. 'I'll manage now.'

'We'll come back at the weekend,' I promise and we both give her a big kiss.

In the car going home, I can't let go of the image of my gran on the edge of her bed. How hard it must be not to be able to see where you are, to get your bearings by touch and to be dependent on other people's help, while your children don't bother about you. How did it come to this? But I know that there is no point in talking to my mother about it.

Nevertheless, I can't help myself when on the phone a few days later. 'The movers left her just like that, Mum.'

My mother responds coldly. 'Well, those people never unpack. Didn't the house help her?'

'No. But surely you could have done something?'

'I wouldn't think of it, Chantal. She's always harping at me; I never do anything right.'

'But Mum,' I start my protest.

She doesn't give me the chance to finish my sentence. 'Mind your own business! This is between her and me.' After which, she swiftly changes the subject. 'Are you coming this way soon? I want to rehang that large picture and hoped that Wim could do it for me.'



I heave a sigh. The last thing I feel like now is an obligatory family weekend. 'Not for some time, Mum, we have our work cut out for us here.'

But she will not accept that. 'You don't know what it's like, Chantal, always having to do things on your own. I don't have a man beside me. It's easy for you to talk.'

Such is so typical for my mother, to apply double standards. She has never helped us, ever. Whereas Wim's family is always ready to help us, mine always fail. Help unpack, clean up, paint or wallpaper? Just hire someone. God, how much I hate her sometimes, but I suppress my irritation as if I join in the tirade, it will only get worse. So, I remain polite and start talking about the renovation. 'It's getting somewhere, Mum. With a bit of luck, we can move in soon. Do you want to come for dinner at Christmas? Then you can see how it has turned out.'

But my mother refuses to commit herself. 'I don't know yet; I first want to hear what your brother's plans are. I'll call you.' And she hangs up.

With the receiver against my chest, I stare out the window. In front of the coach house, Wim tackles the park's overgrowth with a group of friends, knocking down man-high bramble bushes, all sorts of tangles and numerous Christmas trees. The rented shredder consumes the trunks as if they are matches. The men, relaxed with each other, laugh freely, unrestrained, now and again warming their hands at the fire. How much I would like to laugh so uninhibitedly, but I have never been able to laugh like that, act funny, or move freely in a group. Why don't I make them some tea, at least I can make myself useful.

When I walk to the kitchen, I am aware of the dull pain in my heart. I had hoped that my mother would soften up during that healing training she's in. My friend Ilse and my healer Meta, who both study at the same school where they even share a room with my mother, say she has

indeed changed. According to them, my mum shows a different, vulnerable side, at school. But to me, she is still her usual distant self.

*'It's time to heal this,'* my guides tell me, when I write in my journal that evening. *'Next spring, you will be pregnant again. If you heal this pain between you and your mother now, you won't pass it on to your child.'*

Yes, that is quite true. What parents do not process in their lives, they pass on to their children. Of course, I know that, and by no means do I want to hurt my child. Hopefully, my eldest will be a boy so that the pattern won't repeat itself. I've been angry at my mother for such a long time, I think, 'I wouldn't know how to change things.'

*'Welcome the anger; it is genuine. Do not push it away; you've done that too often. The denial keeps you away from your power.'*

Power, I let the word move through me. Ever since the miscarriage, I have felt reasonably well; according to my naturopath, the hormones produced during pregnancy most likely strengthened my body. But with this renovation I've asked too much of myself, again. My old symptoms are back; once more, I'm dead tired. Could the answer really be in the suppressed rage towards my mother? Somehow my feelings do not make sense. Yes, we have a problematic relationship, and yes, she is cold and distant, but does that really legitimise this rage? Why are things so strained between us? Although we've never been affectionate my whole life, I fail to understand why we have not been able to become closer over the years.

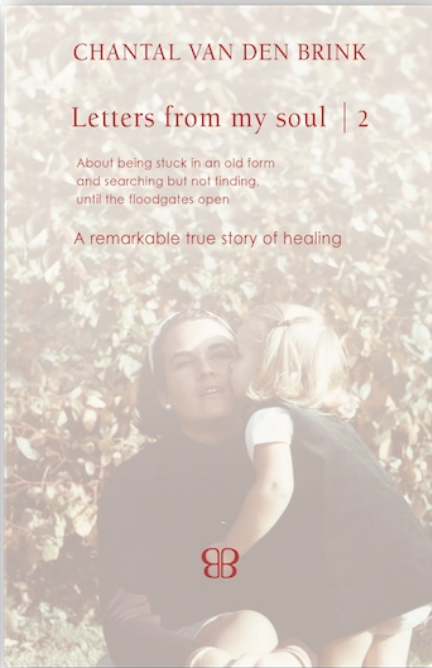
Thus, I write on for a bit and receive tips on food, meditation and letting go. I have to smile. The spiritual world doesn't understand the concept of time, and my guides keep repeating their advice until I apply it. I resolve that I will first move house, then after that, I will better my life.

Mid-December 1999, just before Christmas, our office moves into the three-story country house. Next to the entrance on the ground floor, we create the most beautiful reception in the Netherlands; which office manager has such a view! The large drawing room next to the reception serves as a meeting room, the first floor gives space to four coaching rooms, and in the loft, we set up a large training room with a second kitchen. Of course, we don't have the furniture to fill an office this size, but with a new bank loan (we duly paid off the old loan), we can go shopping.

A week later, we move our private home to the charming chalet, a wooden cottage with colourful shutters right next to the main house. With a large living room, a kitchen, two bedrooms and a bathroom it's precisely right for the two of us. The coach house will be rented out after a proper fix-up, as we don't need the extra space and we can pay the ground lease from the revenue.

The memory of that first period on the estate, I will always carry with me: the smell of the burning wood stove while we unpack; the sound of the heavy shutters which we pull close because the cold comes through the single pane of glass after sunset; and the silence of the park when the noise of the traffic comes to an end during the night. For hours on end, I stand in my slippers in front of the window, staring outside, filled with love. That admiration I also see in the eyes of friends and family when they visit over Christmas. We show them around, yawning with fatigue, but as proud as any man living, first through all the buildings, then through the park. We cook in the new kitchen and eat at my festively set French dining table, the candles burning and the music playing.

Somehow it feels unreal; I can't fully take in the fact that we live here now.



Letters from my Soul is a remarkable, true story of healing and spiritual growth. It explores the transformation of a woman who has been suffering from chronic fatigue since college. It not only recounts her struggle to heal the pain hidden underneath the surface, but reveals the fundamental process of change in all aspects of her life.

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