

## **A Soulful Journey | by Patricia Carmel**

By the time Martha was 18, she had perfected her telling of the story:

"At a particular moment during WWII, in an island off the coast of Scotland, my father left the officers' mess and walked down the lane to the phone box to answer a call from his mother-in-law.

"My father and grandmother didn't get on. She didn't like him at all and he thought she was a bitch. I always wondered what made her phone him at that specific moment in time. The question has tremendous significance for me you see, because if he had not left the mess hall, or even delayed leaving there by a mere minute, he too, together with his fellow officers, would have been blown to smithereens by the German bomb that destroyed the mess and everyone in it.

"And I would never have been born."

Under different circumstances, Martha might well have been born in a different body, even a different nationality or race. But occasionally, the universe manipulates events so that over the generations, a specific set of genes culminates in an entity whose destiny serves a purpose. It is my role to guide Martha towards her destiny. I was selected to be Martha's essence, her software if you like, the part of her that is distinct and unique. Without me, Martha would be an empty vessel, an inanimate being. Some call us the soul.

I have no shape, no form, no substance. My beginnings are amorphous; my being is infinite. Over the timelessness, I have become part of many different entities or life forms; some have been the animals of the field, while others have crawled on the ground. I evolved to humans an earthly millennium ago. I guide them through their unique experiences, give them a sense of purpose, accompany them on the way to their destiny. I am creativity and inspiration. I am compassion and harmony. I am love. On a good day, that is.

When I am liberated from an entity, I transition to another; or I dwell in nothingness over many decades, centuries even. This is my journey.

Sometimes evil is unleashed into the world and souls shudder in horror. At times such as these, we are in a state of upheaval as we rapidly transmigrate from one entity to another. Those among us that evolved to unfathomable planes of purity wait in the nothingness overwhelmed with sadness. The chief of the universe waits until we're ready to continue on our journey.

The chief of the universe determines our mortal roles, the temporal life forms we inhabit. I had just been liberated from a small human child, an entity with a destiny of only six years. I watched the parents in their grief and grieved too. "Why," I asked the chief "was that necessary? I gave the child innate goodness and he had a mother and father with loving, pure souls that are now undoubtedly wretched and broken through their suffering."

The chief pontificated at length and was, as usual, contradictory, obtuse and verbose, with occasional interjection of abstract notions and puzzling parables that made no sense to me. I am not so evolved

that I can always fully understand my mission. Sometimes, as in the case of the child, I resist the pull and linger in the entity for as long as I can. In so doing, I prolonged the agony of the child's loving parents.

I have inhabited the lives of so many and what I learn from each advances me towards universal purity. Listening to the chief, you'd imagine I still had a long way to go.

"Your next mission is a female," the chief began. "You'll suffer. At the end of your mission, your suffering will be unbearable." More than once I'd inhabited entities who'd been beaten, tortured, or murdered in ways designed to inflict maximum pain on the flesh. I too experience the pain though not in the same way as the life form for I am not of flesh. But I am seared by the desire of some to cause others physical pain. They appear to be guided by dark souls from another universe.

"You will weep - often," the chief continued, "because your mission is to be the instrument of another's redemption, from whom you will also learn. By the time you are liberated from this female, you will have reached a new level in your spiritual journey and you'll be ready to traverse to a higher plane."

So that is how I came to be Martha. I was there when she was conceived. Her conception was not planned, she began life uninvited, which probably accounts for her sense of displacement when she was born. She didn't cry - or rather, she made strange, breathy sounds as she exited into the world, which greatly impressed the doctor who delivered her.

"You have an unusual baby here," he told the mother, Alice, who struggled through her drug-induced fog to sit up sufficiently to take a look at her new daughter.

"Come to me my sweet beautiful girl," she said, holding out her arms to take the baby from the nurse and hold her close.

We were taken home to the family with which Martha would grow up. Her small body was covered in beautiful, soft clothing and she lay in a crib adorned with lacy, white frills. Alice held her, hugged and kissed her but her daily needs, such as nappy-changing and feeding, were attended to by a nurse. The nurse fed her from a bottle and then rocked her until she slept. Sometimes, Julian, the father, would come and gaze upon the baby's sleeping face and awkwardly run his finger over her baby-soft skin. The father's love for his new daughter was so palpable, it surged with a force so strong, it was able to quell painful bubbles of gas in the baby's primitive stomach. Momentarily, Julian's soul and I connected on a sublime level in our shared love for the baby.

Martha had a big brother and an even bigger sister. They gazed down at their new sister and Martha, enraptured by their attention, gurgled and chortled, and kicked her pudgy legs excitedly.

"Hmm, I would've preferred a brother," said the brother.

The sister put her hand under her chin in a gesture she had seen her father make. "Let's take her eyes out," she said nonchalantly.

Martha's unsophisticated baby brain could not comprehend the words and she continued to gurgle happily, her legs moving spasmodically.

But for me, the sister's words hit like an explosion. In shock, I spun out of control, went berserk, even leaving Martha for a nano-second as I sought equanimity. If I were composed of matter, I would best describe my reaction as having had the breath knocked out of me.

When Martha was about two, there was an incident in the family that threatened to tear it apart. Martha's Aunt Lorna, her mother's older sister, had thrown her husband Bernie out of the house. Although Martha's brain was far too undeveloped to make sense of the drama surrounding us, I was aware of the undercurrents, especially when I became privy to one particular, unsavory scene.

Alice's mother, Martha's grandmother, had pulled her father, Julian, into the dining room and hissed at him, "This is all your fault." Martha, sitting in a corner scrawling her colored pencils on scraps of paper, was oblivious to the scene unfolding before her and neither her grandmother or her father took any notice of her.

"Watch your tongue," Julian had responded. "I had nothing to do with this."

"You had everything to do with it. The shame of it!" Martha's grandmother's face was distorted with rage. "You have ruined Lorna's life - and mine. I'm sorry you ever came back from the war."

The viciousness of this exchange wrought about such a weakness in me, many in the family wondered if Martha were sick.

Four years later, Martha's mother, Alice, died. The death was sudden and unexpected; the household was in shock. Within hours of finding her lifeless body sprawled across the bed, an empty bottle of pills on the bedside table, the house was swarming with medics, social workers and police.

Julian sat at the dining room table, his body heaving with heartrending sobs. Martha crawled into her father's lap, discounting her own inarticulate pain in an attempt to comfort him. Julian clung to her small body, his tears drenching her dress; father and daughter wept, their loss too profound for words.

The grandmother's grief evaporated into unadulterated fury at the sight of her son-in-law. "She died because of you, you drove her to it. I wish she'd never met you. You've ruined our lives." The hatred in her tone was so tangible, the air around her became static with it.

With the passing of her mother, a loving and gentle soul left the home. Until then, Martha had been the spoilt baby sister, inexplicably and unwittingly inviting the resentment and at times, jealousy, of her older siblings. After her mother's death, Martha and her father became closer than ever, each seeking to mitigate the other's pain. She learned how to make his tea in the morning and she ran to welcome him when he came home from his office in the evening. Slowly, the family began to heal.

At 14, Martha was the only child still at home, the brother and sister having taken themselves off to university and trotting the globe, respectively. Although physical beauty is perceived on a different

dimension, I was aware that Martha was not considered a pretty girl, not by her peers, nor by her family. She was overweight and pimply and her facial features were unappealing. Her chest was flat, her tummy protruded and her thighs bulged beneath her jeans. Some people saw past her physical deficiencies to the part of her with the loving heart, the trusting innocence and her joy in the beauty of life. "She's a good soul," they would say of her.

During her teenage years, Martha's brain and I worked more in tandem so that unarticulated anxieties and questions began to take form in her consciousness. I was her inner voice and as she grew in self-awareness, she learned to tune into me; I was her truth. She began to identify events that had occurred beyond her memory. She lived with a sense that there was something disquieting in her family, a heaviness that transcended the divorce of her aunt and the suicide of her mother.

Martha's grandmother, who had exuded such hatred for Julian, had died a few years earlier, her last words a bitter curse against Martha's father. What had her beloved father done to warrant such deep hatred? Martha realized that her grandmother had blamed Julian for her Aunt Lorna's messy divorce from Uncle Bernie and more horrifically, for her mother's suicide. And, Martha sensed that there was a connection to an event that took place during the war, although the idea was still too tenuous and fleeting for her to make any sense of it.

"Dad?" Martha decided to broach the subject one evening as they sat down to supper. "Why did Grandma hate you so much? She did hate you, didn't she. I always felt she did."

Julian was taken aback by the question. Martha had never spoken of the relationship between him and his late mother-in-law, and he wasn't sure how to respond. "Well, she was a bitter woman," he said. "She lost a daughter and suffered the shame of a divorce in the family."

"But she blamed you, didn't she? Why did she blame you?" said Martha, verbalizing an insight beyond the span of conscious memory. "Was it something to do with the war?"

Again, Julian looked uncertain how to proceed. And then he told her the story of how her grandmother had actually saved his life. "I left the mess hall to answer her call," he recalled. "And while I was talking to her, I heard a loud explosion. The building I'd been in a few minutes before had been completely destroyed by a German bomb. Everybody who'd been in the building was killed on the spot. So you see, your grandmother actually saved my life."

Humans think life is one of chance meetings and events. But the force that compels a child to stoop to tie his shoelace, delaying by precious seconds the headlong rush into the road that would have slammed him against the front of a truck, is not chance. The businessman, fulminating at losing his keys and arriving at the airport too late to board the plane that crashed killing all on board, is not chance. It is simply not the time designated for us to leave the body of that child or that businessman.

On the other hand, the mugger who panics and fires a fatal shot becomes the instrument of his victim's fate. So little do human entities understand how each interacts with the other in order that their respective destinies be fulfilled.

"But why did she phone you?" Julian avoided answering and spent the rest of meal reminiscing about his war experiences. Martha had heard many of the stories before, including the way he always concluded them. "And after all the terrible things I saw in the war, all the friends I lost, all the brutality, I came home and two years later, you came along. I think your birth saved my sanity. You were Daddy's wonder baby - without you, I don't know if I would ever have recovered from that hell." Julian took Martha's hand in both of his and held it still for a few moments.

The bond between Martha and her father grew stronger, especially now that her elder siblings had decided to make their lives on different continents, the brother in Australia and the sister in Canada. They rarely visited England and barely maintained contact beyond birthday greetings.

Despite their special bond, Martha was becoming aware that not everyone admired her handsome and charming father. There had been phone calls from business contacts whose strident voices could be heard from the other end of the line as Julian adopted a wheedling tone to placate them. He'd say things like, "You've earned an unprecedented profit on that investment and you just have to hang on a little longer and everything will be all right," to mollify the voice at the other end of the line. Sometimes, the conversation would continue with Julian becoming increasingly more conciliatory, occasionally undertaking to deposit large sums of money in the caller's bank account.

There were also phone calls from women, many women. Martha had grown used to seeing her father with a slew of different women and didn't think much of it. But there was one woman who was more a constant in her Julian's life. Norma had large brown eyes and wavy dark hair and had a special way about her so that a person felt important in her company.

One evening, Norma cooked a marvelous dinner and while they lingered over dessert, the phone rang. Julian left the room to answer it and Martha and Norma were left alone.

"Do you think you'll marry my dad one day?" Martha asked suddenly.

Norma looked at her. "Would you like me to?"

"Yes, of course. You'd be my step-mum."

"Well, I'll have to wait until your dad asks me, won't I," she said, a little brusquely, and began to clear the dishes from the table. Her hands shook slightly.

As the years passed, Martha lost her dumpiness, her skin cleared and she grew into an attractive young woman who, at the age of 18, was experiencing the rush of first love with a young man she'd met a month earlier. One evening, they sat in her bedroom, kissing and fondling, talking and arguing, when their attention was diverted from each other by the sound of loud voices coming from the kitchen.

"I never promised to marry you," Julian was shouting.

"You're a liar. A liar and a cheat." Norma's voice, usually so gentle, was harsh with anger and her words became incoherent as her voice rose shrill in tandem with the angry tones of her father. And then the front door slammed.... There was a screech of tyres.... A scream. Silence.

Martha and her young man raced down the stairs as her father lunged out of the door to the street. Norma was lying in the road, her tear-stained face staring expressionlessly up at the sky. A woman, clearly the driver of the car that had knocked Norma down, was whimpering for help. "Somebody... an ambulance... please help." She stared aghast at Martha and Julian as they crouched over Norma's lifeless body and began to babble, "She ran straight into the road, right in front of me, I couldn't stop..." her words faded away as the enormity of how her world had changed penetrated her mind.

How was it possible to endure so much grief. For weeks after Norma's funeral, Martha floundered in an echo of the pain she'd suffered when her mother died. And although she couldn't explain her reticence, she made no attempt to comfort her father. Deep within her, a voice, small and insistent, held Julian accountable for Norma's death. Martha increasingly found herself yielding to her inner voice, accepting her inner truth, unable to verbalize why.

A pall descended on the household. Julian went back to his business activities and soon enough again became subject to phone conversations from irascible clients. At the same time, he took to bringing - parading almost - so many different women back to the house that Martha soon lost track of whom each one was. Instead, Martha, long parted from her first love, chose to concentrate on her studies, determined to be accepted to one of England's finest universities. The relationship between father and daughter, although loving, was devoid of the warmth that had accompanied Martha throughout her childhood.

Good news arrived in a letter from Manchester University, where Martha had been accepted to their English Literature program. She and Julian celebrated her pending departure with Thai takeout.

"Here you are, all grown up and off to university," said Julian. "It's a new stage in your life."

"I know, Dad," responded Martha. "I'm very excited about it. But what about you? You'll be OK living alone? Well, I guess you'll have company whenever you'll need it," she concluded with a slightly nervous laugh, aware this was the first time she'd made even a passing reference to her father's promiscuous lifestyle.

"Nobody will replace your mother for me," he said. "Even Norma couldn't do that."

Martha put down her wine glass as she thought about how to broach a subject that had been strictly taboo between them. "Why did Mummy commit suicide, Dad? And why did Grandma blame it on you?"

Julian blanched and began moving the food around on his plate.

"Come on, Dad. I'm grown up now, it's about time you came clean with me."

Julian took a deep breath. "I wasn't the best husband in the world," he said, his eyes downcast. "Your mother got wind of my er... friendship with Norma. She..." he faltered, and then continued in a defensive, almost pleading tone.

"The relationship with Norma was completely platonic. Norma and I got on so well and well, your mother wasn't always the easiest person....," he began but faltered when he saw Martha's aghast expression.

"You're lying," she said, venom souring her voice. "And two women are dead because of you!" her voice rose to a wail as the enormity of her father's culpability hit her. "All my life.. my life.." Martha suddenly found it hard to breathe. "My mother, she loved me, and I had to grow up without her because of you and your women," she stuttered.

"And what about Aunt Lorna? Did you have an affair with her too?" Martha had been so small when the scandal erupted, she had no conscious memory of the event. But now, when she spat out the words, she felt that she'd always known that Julian had had a part to play in the divorce.

"The whole divorce thing had nothing to do with me," he said, slightly impatient. "Why are you dredging all this up now, just before you go away," he asked, a plaintive tone creeping into his voice. "You know Daddy loves you, darling. I'd never do anything to hurt you."

"Well you can start my not referring to yourself in the third person," said Martha, pushing her chair abruptly away from the table.

Martha sat on her bed, trying to will herself to start packing but all she wanted to do was to scream at the top of her voice. She felt nauseated just thinking about the loving mother lost to her during her most important years because of the selfishness and fecklessness of the father she loved and had, at one time, revered to very much.

The months passed. Martha studied hard at university and held a part-time waitressing job. During vacation time, she preferred to stay over in the small flat she shared with her boyfriend Kevin or travel somewhere abroad rather than go home to her father; she managed to maintain desultory contact with him through the occasional letter or phone call. One day, when she was halfway through her second year, Julian sent an emotional letter almost begging her to come home for a visit. "Just for a few days. Please come. I miss you so much," he wrote.

"You don't have to go, you know." Kevin told her.

"I know. I don't really want to. I should go, though. He's my father. And I'm all he's got."

Julian's face shone with happiness when his daughter walked through the door. He enfolded her in a tight embrace, unwilling to let her go.

"Come on, Dad," laughed Martha. "I can hardly breathe."

That evening, father and daughter reunited, sat together over the simple meal Julian had prepared and with something akin to the warmth they had shared in earlier years, they talked comfortably about all that had happened in their lives since they had last met. Julian asked a lot of questions about Martha's studies, good questions that showed he was really interested and not asking just for the sake of form. He also told her about his new relationship.

"I've learnt my lesson," he said, a little diffidently. "I'm hoping this one works and I'm trying to make sure I don't do anything to spoil things."

"And what about business, Dad? How's your business going?"

"Have to tell the truth, my love. Things aren't going too well. Especially with one of my clients who's not quite right in the head, if you ask me."

It seems Julian had undertaken to invest this man's money and instead of the huge profits he'd expected to get in return, he'd lost a considerable sum. The client had been issuing threats and Julian was considering buying a gun.

"Surely it can't be that serious," said Martha, suddenly alarmed but calmed herself with the thought that Julian was probably just being melodramatic. "Are you expecting someone?" she asked with surprise, as the doorbell chimed. Perhaps he'd invited his latest flame over to meet her.

"No, not expecting anyone on your first night home, it's probably just Jehovah's Witnesses," said Julian, as he got up to answer the door.

From the dining room, Martha heard an angry male voice and her father's placatory tones.

"Come on, Strabogi," she heard her father say. "You know you'll get your money, it'll just take a little longer, that's all."

Strabogi let loose a string of abuse, his tone strident and violent. Suddenly, there was a crash and Martha heard her father yell, "Are you crazy, put that away...."

Shocked, Martha jumped up from her chair.

Even if my voice were to permeate her entire being, she would not heed it.

Through the open dining room door, Martha saw her father walking backwards, his hands held up in front of him as if to ward off whatever Strabogi was threatening him with.

A shot! Julian staggered, his hand clutching at his shoulder. Martha screamed and ran out of the room towards her father and towards her destiny.

But I did nothing.

There was nothing to do.

"Go to hell, you bastard," Strabogi shouted and shot at him again before turning tail and running out of the door.

It happened in an instant: the bullet whizzing by Julian's ear and ricocheting off the wall; Martha reaching out to support him as he fell and taking the bullet instead, through her temple.

The pain was intense, on a dimension that transcends the physical. I strained to leave the entity but my journey was not yet over.

Martha fell without a sound, the silence broken only by Julian's screams.

For three weeks, Martha lay in a coma, machines controlling her bodily functions. The doctors had told Julian there was no hope of recovery.

Julian sat constantly at her bedside, weeping and mumbling incoherently to himself.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, my darling, my baby. Daddy would have moved mountains to protect you."

The days passed. Julian replayed in his mind the events of that evening and what he could have done to prevent things from spiraling so disastrously out of control.

"I tried to be a good father to you," he began. "I wanted to provide you with a good home." He stopped, with a sense that his words were hollow. "But I should have been more honest in my business dealings, it's true."

Julian bowed his head, tears spilling down his face.

Suddenly, a need to unburden himself to the daughter he loved so much welled up in him. He'd heard that patients in a coma might be aware of their surroundings and can hear what is said around them. "Is it true, Martha dearest, can you hear me?" asked Julian, the weight of his sorrow finally robbing him of all pretence and attempts to self-deceive. In almost an orgy of self-flagellation, Julian began to speak.

"I was a philanderer," he began. "I was young and handsome and women just gravitated towards me. And I gave in to the temptation nearly all the time. You know, I even had a fling with your nurse." Julian paused to muse momentarily on the time he'd spent with the young nurse. "She was pretty," he said, a little sadly. "Your mother didn't know about her, but I think over time she came to suspect that I saw other women. But none of them seemed to threaten her as much as Norma. Norma was one of her closest friends, once. Did you know that?"

Not expecting a response from the comatose Martha, Julian continued to ramble on. "Of course, you were right. Norma and I did have an affair and your mother got wind of it. She killed herself because she thought I was going to leave her for Norma."

Julian sat in total dejection, his body slumped. "It's funny, but your grandmother always seemed to sense exactly what was going on, all the time. How did the old bitch know, I'll never understand it."

Mention of Martha's grandmother reminded Julian that he'd avoided answering Martha's question about an event from the war. "Strange how it was your grandmother who saved my life. The phone call wasn't a friendly one, though. You see, when I left for the war, I'd given my business over to your Uncle Bernie for safekeeping until I got back. He was supposed to have given your mother some money every month but when I went home on leave, I found out that he'd given her nothing, not a penny. And, if that wasn't enough, he'd effectively stolen my business from me. He'd drawn up papers of ownership and he was working with all my clients.

"So I went to a lawyer and just before my leave was up, the lawyer served him papers. I meant to sue the backside off him.

"So that's what your grandmother was calling me about. She tried to convince me not to sue him. I asked her why I shouldn't, after what he'd done and she said, he's my son-in-law. I said, but I'm your son-in-law, too.

"And then, just then, the bomb fell on the officers' mess. What's that, she'd said. But I didn't wait to answer her.

"I gave in, I cancelled the lawsuit and started a new business. But I never forgot what Bernie had done to me. And one night, I took your pretty little nurse to dinner. While we waited for a table, we had a drink at the bar and got into conversation with a nice couple and I told them my name was Bernie Croft. Turns out the wife was a friend of your grandmother. They bumped into each other at the greengrocers and she told your grandmother how she'd met her son-in-law and what a sweet little blond thing his wife was. Well, your grandmother realized at once that she wasn't describing Lorna. So, of course the interfering old cow told your Aunt Lorna and she never trusted Bernie again. Of course, he insisted that he was innocent and he was, at least when it came to cheating on his wife. But he was guilty as hell when it came to stealing my business. I never forgave him.

"Things got so tense between Lorna and Bernie, so much so that in the end, she didn't believe a word he said, and she threw him out of the house."

Suddenly exhausted, Julian fell silent. Was he contemplating how different his life could have been? Maybe, somewhere in a parallel universe where he neither womanized nor ran after shady deals, he was living with his Alice and raising his children in a loving, nurturing home. Julian gazed at his comatose daughter, and knew he was losing the only person left in the world who loved him.

Slowly, Julian raised his hands to his face and briefly rested his head in them. He made a small sound, a whimper, in which all the despair and heartbreak in his miserable life commingled. Then slowly, the sound intensified until it became a crescendo of pain that emanated from the very depths of his miserable soul and soared to a full-blown scream of utter grief; exhausted, Julian fell across Martha's bed in a deep faint.

*I didn't linger long after Julian's disclosures. Martha's life had served its purpose; the deed was done and my mission was accomplished. Having experienced the sufferings of the terrestrial world, I now return to the source, to the celestial world to dwell with the angels.*

*Julian continued to live a very long life, well into his nineties, lonely and alone. With no family around him, his beloved daughter lost to him forever, he found no joy or pleasure in his remaining years. By the time his wretched soul was liberated from his body, Julian was more than ready to say goodbye to the world.*

*The soul that had dwelled within Julian was in such an afflicted, desperate state at its liberation, it now flounders in the infinite expanse of the cosmos while it ponders its last journey.*

*In the ethereal nothingness, the chief of the universe puts a mark in the checkbox! Cosmic justice has been served.*

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