

A SALTY LAKE OF TEARS

A SOUL JOURNEY

LOIS CAREY

PRAISE FOR A SALTY LAKE OF TEARS

A very creative autobiography that weaves early childhood memories and dark underground travels with playful characters, Mother Earth, and the scent of roses. Though the memoir is born out of pain, it clearly reflects a profound psychological transformation that occurs when the deep feminine spirit is invoked.

—John Allan, PhD, Professor Emeritus, Counseling Psychology,
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A unique combination of autobiography, fantasy, and its exploration of the symbolic meaning of life. Lois Carey's familiarity with Jungian symbolism and Greek mythology permeates her account of complicated family relationships and recreated childhood memories and anxieties. Like no other memoir, this evocative blend of fantasy and reality resonates with compelling appeal and strength.

—Nancy Boyd Webb, Distinguished Professor of
Social Work Emerita, Fordham University

In her latest book, Lois Carey deftly transmutes her personal biography of pain and joy into a universal tapestry that is the analogue for the human condition. She infuses myth, original poetry, and allegory, and interweaves the story of the white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland* throughout her emotional journey. This is the story of a complex woman, a brilliant scholar, and a devoted, caring mother, wife and daughter. I highly recommend this read for those looking to deepen their personal experiences and connect the dots on their emotional landscape, as Ms. Carey has so done in this wonderful gift to the reader of inner discovery.

—Eric J. Green, PhD, Assistant Professor,
University of North Texas at Dallas

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by

Lois Carey

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by



Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

A Salty Lake of Tears

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INTRODUCTION

A Salty Lake of Tears brings together many years of writing in various forms. It's difficult to clarify what the book is about, though it is primarily a memoir, but not strictly so, as it is told in part through fantasy and draws on myth, allegory, and symbol that also reflects my long interest in Jungian theory. It may model the emergence of a new form of memoir. I offer it as a testament to the living faith that overcomes trauma and despair and may help others on their soul journeys.

It focuses upon my search for soul and the process that led to the emergence of my inner spiritual life. This was not my intention but it does parallel the Jungian idea of the ego's search for Self and the healing elements along the path that contribute to one's individuation process. Some chapters were written as assignments in creative writing classes; others are the outcome of workshops; still others are from my personal diaries. *A Salty Lake of Tears* incorporates various styles: one chapter is written as a play, another as a fairy tale, others as playfully serious fantasy, and several chapters recall and reflect upon overcoming my family of origin's influences—a necessary step for most everyone's journey. Other chapters follow my travels to foreign shores, including musings and learnings on those journeys. My poetry and a few significant dreams appear throughout.

By profession, I am a clinical social worker with a specialty in Jungian Sandplay Therapy. My writings to date consist of four professional books, articles in journals, and chapters in other colleagues' books.



INTUITIVE PROCESS AT WORK

One lazy summer day not too long ago, I lay dozing on the deck outside of my house with a novel slumped across my breast when came a most unusual dream. A harried rabbit scurries by, muttering to himself as he runs. Simultaneously, he looks at an unusual timepiece that hangs around his neck.

I jump up with a start, having never seen a rabbit looking at a watch and talking to himself. Or have I? A vague recollection from my tattered childhood piques my memory, but I cannot quite recall what it is. I creep up behind the rabbit, afraid that any sudden move will frighten him away. I feel inexorably drawn to this strange apparition, unsure if this is fantasy or reality, but knowing that I must follow. I simply have no choice.

In reality, I am a full-grown woman—a mother, wife, grandmother, and psychotherapist—yet I have never felt fully-grown up. Indeed, as a small child, I had a vague notion that being grown up meant that I would be confident and all of my decisions carefully thought out. Instead, as I've matured, I continue to resort to flights of fantasy, much as I did to cope with a very traumatic childhood. I would have perhaps been called an overly cautious child; today I have learned to trust myself, knowing my intuitions are at work. It seems as if I have always lived in a state of needy anticipation, “needy” in the sense of knowing there's something more that I should be doing or understanding and yet not knowing what it is or how to go about getting it. At the same time, the

anticipation to achieve “it” whatever “it” is (or was), has led me down many strange and beautiful byways, as well as some that were not so beautiful.

Aha! The vague memory that I alluded to is the story of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, a story that has intrigued me since childhood because of its array of fascinating characters.

But, this rabbit, in my present dreamlike state, is undoubtedly the most unique rabbit I have ever seen. His fur has a silky texture and he is wearing a soft blue coat that fits his frame exactly. Oh, how I wish that I could stroke his soft white fur!

This rabbit reminds me of Wimpy, my dog as a child. He was white with some black markings. I used to dress him up in doll clothes and take him for a ride in a baby buggy. Why he ever stood for this, I’ll never know. He was given to me as a peace offering after my mother’s second marriage (her first, to my father, ended due to his infidelity). I loved Wimpy unconditionally. He comforted me when no one else could. I don’t know why this rabbit in gorgeous attire reminds me of my long lost pet, but somehow he does.

In addition to the rabbit’s elegant coat, he carries a large watch which he repeatedly holds up to his face and stares at, as if he can actually tell time. He takes no notice of me, so preoccupied is he with this timepiece. What can time possibly mean to a rabbit? Certainly a rabbit has no sense of mortality, or immortality, or does he?

Life seems to have raced by, and only now, after many years of struggle, do I feel a sense of peace and harmony, at least sometimes.

I must not get sidetracked. This rabbit must not escape. He suddenly tears across the grass. I follow close behind but lose sight of him for a moment. Wild, uncontrollable panic clutches at me. I run even faster and begin to pant, then harder and harder gasping for breath. This reminds me of the panic I used to experience when I was away from my mother. I was certain

that no one could experience such terror! I thought I was “going crazy,” which frightened me even more.

Much later in life, after finally entering therapy, I learned these episodes had been “panic attacks” and that many other people, particularly women, had the same symptoms.

I continue to follow my dream rabbit, my heart pounding so hard that surely he can hear me. My palms are clammy wet, and my knees turn to a gelatinous paste. I round a bend in the road just in time to see the white rabbit pop down a hole. Now, all is surely lost. My heart is leaden. I can never follow him there. But, miracles do happen, at least sometimes in dreams. As I near the hole, I see the ground suddenly part as if to welcome my woman-sized body into the bowels of Mother Earth.

This reminds me of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, the quintessential mother/daughter story, where the daughter descends to the Underworld leaving her mother alone, enraged and grief-stricken. When visiting Greece some years ago, this myth spoke directly to my relationship with my own mother.

The Demeter (mother) and Persephone (daughter) myth reveals the separation of Mother and Daughter that led to the changes of seasons. The story goes something like this: One day Persephone was out playing with her friends when she wandered off to pick flowers that were growing alongside the road. Suddenly, Hades, the King of the Underworld, snatched her up in his chariot and descended into the Great Below, leaving a shocked Demeter bereft.

Realizing that Persephone was missing, Demeter ran through the countryside, searching desperately and crying profusely. As she came near to the place of abduction, the gaping hole into which her daughter had disappeared began to close. Demeter’s pigs ran down into the hole. Since that time, the pig has been an animal linked with the Great Mother.

Demeter then sought the counsel of Zeus, King of the

Heavens, who helped secure Persephone's return, at least for six months of the year. When Persephone was with Hades, autumn and winter ensued on the Earth; when Persephone was with Demeter, the Earth again flowered and crops were made to grow, coinciding with spring and summer.

Down the hole I go.

THE UNDERWORLD

Tumbling head over heels, faster and faster, I pass all manner of unusual things on my way down. Images from my childhood flash before me. Once again, I am a terrified four year old on the morning my father announced to Mother and I that it was the end of their marriage. Much later I learned that he had stayed out all night with one of a succession of his girlfriends.

Mother took me to Sunday School when I was very young, probably ages two to five. She stopped going to church after my father left, feeling ostracized—I learned much later—because of the divorce.

For the next ten years I attended some kind of worship service or church gathering every single week, either Sunday School, church, and, in my teens, Youth Group. My mother and stepfather slept late on Sunday mornings, so I dressed and off to church I went, all on my own. Much later in life, I realized that in attending church, I was searching for my missing father—my personal father and God.

I well remember the minister of that childhood church and how I revered his presence. In my middle teens I wanted to be a minister, an impossibility for women in those days. If not a minister, then I'd be a missionary and travel to distant lands. But, the more I thought about that, the less it appealed

to me. I didn't like the idea of imposing my beliefs on anyone and remain that way to this day.

Still, I recall one Easter Sunday when I pleaded with Mom to go to church with me. She acquiesced. It was a major disaster because the title of the sermon was "Easter Sunday Christians." She never went to church again.

In the next picture, I see myself as a hurt, sad child of six or seven suffering intense stomach spasms each morning, as I leave Mother for school. I can almost feel the pain again.

Time leaps ahead and now I'm a teenager feeling the first inklings of sexuality. Suddenly, I crash against the solid base beneath me, a sort of "bottoming-out." The air in this unfamiliar spot smells dank, murky—strange and familiar at the same time. I feel as far down as a person can go without emerging in China. But am I alive? Or am I yet again in a fantasy state where nothing is real or solid? Sometimes it seems I've spent most of my life seeking solidity. The texture of this particular piece of earth is so very strange that I cannot possibly tell whether this is reality or fantasy. The earth feels soft and yielding and yet, simultaneously, hard and rigid. As a young child I regularly experienced imaginary beings and events, so this is a familiar state. Fantasies kept me alive. I could be a merchant sailor exploring the great beyond. I could bob my hair and easily pass for a boy. A thin, weebegone child, my figure cooperated. I was an avid reader and spent hours pouring over seafaring books. (Many years later, my husband and I would own several boats, and my childhood fantasy life became a reality.)

I also fantasized about becoming a movie star pursued by the wealthiest of men, any of whom could ease the terrible suffering of my early life. I could change into whatever I wanted to be at the flick of an eyelash.

Now, I single-mindedly pursue my white rabbit, (for I have made him "mine" by now) only to discover that he has disappeared. Whatever am I to do?

I pick myself up, dust off my dress, and begin to look around this new world. Has light ever penetrated this hidden dank and musty spot? I try to stand up but find the arched ceiling above my head only high enough for a rabbit. I must creep through this passageway. Feeling like a newborn baby groping along, I crawl and struggle, making my way through this narrow tunnel.

Proceeding, I see a succession of beautiful paintings interspersed with other horrible scenes of abuse. One scene shows my grandfather's rose garden in the backyard of his house. On one side of the yard he planted vegetables and on the other, his prized roses. The scent of his roses is one of the sweetest smells that I can remember.

In another scene my uncle, my mother's younger brother, babysits me. I am about twelve and he nineteen or twenty. He had lost one eye when he was about twelve, struck by a bat during a baseball game. His glass eye gave him an odd appearance. In the painting we are sleeping in my parents' bedroom that contained twin beds—he in my mother's bed and me in my stepfather's. I hear a loud thud and awake to discover that my uncle has fallen out of bed onto the floor. He evidently had found my stepfather's liquor supply and was quite drunk. I had no idea what to do but quickly dialed my grandmother (my natural father's mother) who lived just down the street from my mother, stepfather, and me. She came up the hill as fast as she could and arrived just as my mother and stepfather came home. A major argument resulted, and my stepfather told my grandmother she "should keep her big nose out of our business."

I suffered a heated reprimand and shaming for making this call—another blow to my self-trust, another reason to be afraid.

3

PICTURES ON THE WALL

When I first see a picture of my father—tall, handsome, my adored hero—I bounce back from how my stepfather shamed me. My parents married when they were both twenty one. I was born eleven months later.

Father deserted us when I was only four years old. Why do we so often idealize those who have forsaken us? I fantasized about him well into my adult life, especially by looking up to male authority figures—teachers, preachers, and so on—who did not always measure up to my unrealistic expectations. In the picture he stands with his next wife and baby son, and in the next with still another wife and son. My father had a total of four wives. His last wife was infertile so they adopted a baby boy—yet another son. A likely sociopath, my father had no apparent moral sense of right and wrong. He even married each wife *before* legally divorcing the preceding one.

I once saw an old newspaper article that revealed he had a girlfriend while my mother was pregnant with me. He had numerous girlfriends until their divorce after only four or five years of marriage.

Before Mother and he married, he also had trouble with the law, accused of embezzling funds from the bank where he worked, but my grandfather got him off the hook. Again, when my father would not pay my child support, my grand-

father paid his fine and supplied my mother with limited support until she remarried.

A horrible image comes into view: I see myself at nine, clinging to my mother's skirt as she sobs uncontrollably. Locked in each other's arms, we stand on the sidewalk outside of our house. She cries to me, "I'm going to go and throw myself off of the Sixth Street Bridge." Terror sweeps over my tiny frail body. As I begin to tremble, my sobs mirror hers, as my emotions usually do, as I cry "Oh, Mommy, Mommy, please don't say that. What will happen to me?"

She hears me, her sobs slowly subside and we go back inside the house.

One of many alcoholic scenes with my stepfather precipitated this episode. Mother and I never knew when he would arrive home or in what condition. The later his arrival, the more frightened I became expecting an ugly scene to ensue. Alcohol played a pivotal role in that marriage and I always felt my mother's pain, as if we were "joined at the hip." Later in life, after much therapy, I realized that her suicidal threat likely arose with the awareness of her abysmal choice of men. I vowed never to marry anyone who drank.

Next I see a picture of my sweet, patient, long-suffering mother—so beautiful, yet fragile, so unprepared for the many tragedies that life laid at her door. She contracted diphtheria as a six year old, leaving her blind for six months and with a damaged heart. My mother had been told never to have children and that she would probably not live past 40, though she desperately wanted a large family. Out of her three or four pregnancies, I was the only child who survived and my birth left her bedridden for nearly a year. She once told me that she was to have been hospitalized for my birth, but when called, the doctor refused to come saying, "No first baby is ever born under twelve hours." Four hours later I was born, at 4:00 a.m.

A nurse living upstairs was called down to cut my umbili-

cal cord. My paternal grandmother tried repeatedly to rouse this nurse, but she had taken two sleeping pills before she went to bed. My grandmother's loud pounding finally woke her up and she was alert enough to perform the task, thank God. I still have the scissors that performed the act, stained with the fluid from my umbilical cord. I have no idea what role, if any, that my father played in my delivery.

I make my way slowly to the next scene. What is this? It couldn't be! My adored father strikes my mother across the face. It feels as if he has struck me. I can't look and turn away, but then look back, stunned in disbelief.

Next, comes another tragic scene: Mother has given premature birth to a son. He lives for only seven hours. I am only eight or nine years old. I have had misgivings about this pregnancy from the start because it's my stepfather's child too. In my wee heart, I knew that this child would be *theirs* while I would always only be *hers*—sibling rivalry in the womb. Fate was with me, that child ceased to be a threat. I was secretly relieved, yet riddled with guilt—such complicated feelings for a young child.

While visiting Mother in the hospital, she turns her face to the wall to hide her grief from me. I try to console her, “Mommy, you still have me.” Even deeper wrenching sobs come from her, as I speak these words. I leave the room speechless and bereft, wondering if it matters at all to her that I am suffering *with* her, not for the dead child, but for her pain.

Now, in their portraits hanging on the walls, I see both sides of my family, appearing so very unlike how they actually were. Wearing their Sunday best minimizes the differences between them.

According to Father's standards, Mother was born on the “wrong side of the tracks.” Most members of her family were farmers who worked with their hands. Mother was the second-born of six kids when the big Depression came and wiped out whatever assets her father had earned. He was a car-

penter and made me my first bookcase. During the economic Depression, my grandfather—Pop, as he was called—fell into his own deep depression that lasted throughout his lifetime. My only memories of him are the visits we made to his house. Pop always sat alone in the living room and stared into space. He'd rouse himself just long enough to say, "Hello, how are you?" before retreating into his vacant solitude.

The rest of the family sat around the dining room table: "Mom," my grandmother, like a tiny sparrow and Mil, my aunt, just five years older than me—Mil of the "fits." Her fits terrified me because they came out of nowhere. She would begin to moan, thrash around, and then faint. I learned later that she had epilepsy—something that my child's mind could not understand. I hated seeing this and wished that I could melt into the woodwork during these episodes.

I hated Mil's visits. When she came, Mother insisted that I share all of my toys with her. One time Mother even let Mil take my very favorite Raggedy Ann doll home! I was furious, feeling completely powerless and invaded. (Mothers can be so very insensitive at times!) Mil also had to sleep with me in my double bed on these visits. Rather *she* slept while I stayed watchfully alert, prepared in case she had another fit.

When she was older, Mil was occasionally hospitalized for mental problems. I vividly remember my last contact with her. After my mother's death, my stepfather was quite ill and asleep in an oxygen tent in the hospital. I had gone to visit him and answered his phone when it rang. It was Mil. She requested that when he died he leave their piano to her! I shook clear to my boots as I hung the phone up on her. I could not believe that she had the audacity to make this request while the poor man was still alive. I called my Uncle Bill, her brother, and told him what had happened and he saw to it that she didn't call again.

My Aunt Jessie also sat around the table at my grandmother's house, Jessie with the many missing teeth. As a little girl,

she frightened me because she looked like a witch, or what I envisioned a witch might look like. But, she was apparently crazy about me and tried to kiss me while I did everything possible to avoid her, usually by hiding under that big, round dining room table.

Clarence, Mother's youngest brother (the one I described earlier in the babysitting incident), always lived at home, never left. He died at age thirty eight from alcoholism. As an adult, he peed his bed every night and the house reeked with a stench that's hard to forget. During my college days, on a class trip to a facility for retarded children and adults, one of the back cottages had that same stench. I ran out, nauseated by the overpowering smell, as it brought back all the old frightening memories.

Mother's two other brothers were married and had children. They both lived on a dirt road just a couple of houses away from my grandparents in a very poor section of town. When we came to visit, everyone would gather, so I was privy to all of their crazy interactions, including the behavior of an alcoholic aunt who was married to one of my uncles. Mom had no use for her at all and let everyone know—adding more dysfunction to this family with tragicomic proportions.

Then there was Mother. She tried very hard, whenever possible, to help her family. She always was a "kind Santa" at Christmas and brought gifts to them all. One time, she even considered adopting one of Jessie's seven children just to lighten her load. She seemed to feel guilty that she had made it out of the "ghetto" and into a better life. She told me that she also wanted "better" for me. Frail since her sickly childhood and burdened with the strain of difficult men, she died at age fifty one.

The other side of my family didn't fare much better. Father, the eldest of two children, had one sister, my very favorite aunt "Sissy," as I named her when I was four. She lived with my grandparents, Mammy and Pap, until she made a

disastrous marriage at age forty-five. Four or five years later, she returned home when the marriage fell apart (another alcoholic scenario) and died of a stroke shortly thereafter, leaving my grandparents grief-stricken.

My paternal grandfather was born into a large immigrant family from Germany. His parents had an inter-religious marriage that in the 1800's was unheard of. My great-grandfather was a German Jew and my great-grandmother a Catholic. When Pap was nine, he was told that he had had enough education and must quit school to help support the many children in his family—eight or nine siblings. At his tender age, my grandfather became an apprentice to a shoemaker for many years. When he matured, he managed to build a real estate and insurance business and created a comfortable life—comfortable, with the exception of severe phobias and deep depressions, that led to hospitalization and electro-convulsive therapy in his later years.

Pap refused to go anywhere that took him farther away than his own home and bed. "In case I die, I want to die in my own bed," he would say. He said this when he was forty and died at age eighty-seven in his own bed. He also had a food phobia. He only ate just enough to subsist on because he said, "If it's tainted, I won't get too sick."

I don't know too much about Mammy's family, but one of her aunts hailed from the moneyed class. My great-great Aunt Gertrude lived in Indiana, Pennsylvania in what looked like an elegant mansion, a house directly across the street from Jimmy Stewart's family. He was an aspiring young actor at the time, but a lot of excitement accompanied each of his visits!

I especially remember visiting Aunt Gertrude for lunch with her and Mammy. A maid wearing a starched white apron served the meal from sterling silver platters. Aunt Gertrude gave me two of my favorite children's books and I treasure them still: *Peter Pan* by J. M. Barrie and *Birds of America* by John James Audubon.

Another picture I see on the wall is my Aunt Sissy's funeral. I am thirty two or thirty three years old and arrived at the funeral home by taxi from the airport. I have a mixture of feelings—sadness at my favorite aunt's death and anticipation of seeing my father. I had not seen him since the day of my wedding some twelve or thirteen years before.

Upon entering the room, I find him talking to a group of unknown people.

I approach him gingerly and ask, "Do you know who I am?"

"You must be Till's daughter," he answered.

"No, I am *your* daughter."

Recognizing him immediately, I am very upset that he does not recognize me, the spitting image of my mother!

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—Eric J. Green, PhD, Assistant Professor,
University of North Texas at Dallas

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