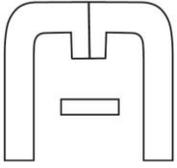


Book Four
In the Wilderness



s we sing the final chorus of Jacob's Ladder, the minister intones over the song, "My children, as you leave from our tent of meeting and head into the wilderness that awaits, remember Jesus' love is always a sanctuary in your hearts."

"We are climbing higher, higher...."

"His love will protect and guide you as you go forth to heal and bring God's word to others. Do not forget to take an internal census of what you need to do to heal yourself; and to take an external census of who is in need.

"Go forth, messengers of the harvest, in peace and love."

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"Beth, you look great." I turn and see Al pick Mery up and swing her around, her legs lifted from the floor like a merry-go-round. Beth? What is that about? What gives him the right to still call her Beth? Careful. Take a breath. I feel a rage in me. I remember a story mom told of when she first started to date after the divorce. Dad came over, saw the guy, tried to fight him, lost. Then he went to get his gun from his car. Mom called the police. I don't want to kill anyone; but thoughts of maiming flitter through my mind. My father is an unpredictable, even dangerous person. Am I also?

Take another breath. Calm yourself down. You know you don't think clearly when you are angry. Dad always said in a fight, try to get the other person enraged, because people make stupid

ill-advised mistakes when they are angry.

Try to think of something witty. Like what? "Hi, I play the flute." I sound like a moron. "You seem to really feel the music." Idiotic. "I like the way your combo competes, combines, collides." Cool and cute, but maybe too much like a critic? Maybe I should just say, "I read music. Mery says I don't really know how to feel it, much less let loose and improvise."

Awfully judgmental, Johannes. Why should you put yourself down because she does?

"So, is this the new lucky guy?" He reaches over to shake my hand in some grip that I'd never seen or experienced before. He senses my awkwardness, and so lets his hand come to rest on my shoulder. "Welcome. Beth's a great gal. I've heard a lot about you. You are really lucky to be with her."

I smile wanly. I've heard nothing about you and am completely ambushed. Why does he keep calling her Beth? Whoever she is, she seems to be focusing more on Al than on me. A thousand questions flood my mind. Why did their relationship end? Does he know about "La Causa?" Do they still play music together? Is it more fluid and fun than when she plays with me? I want to act cool and hip, but feel analytical and uncomfortable. I don't feel like the lucky guy.

Finally I say, simply, "Great playing, nice to meet you." I nod to Al, then turn to the blonde guitarist, and say the same thing, "Great playing." I try to think of a flirtatious riff, to show Mery that I can handle myself calmly and suavely in this situation. But I can't think of anything. I take an internal census, and see that there is nothing left.

I turn back to Mery who is having an animated conversation

with Al. I stretch my arms out wide, then enfold them around her.
It's the very opposite of the open, allowing gesture of the totem
pole. It's a possessive embrace, from a desperate and needy
place. And she seems to sense it. Rather than putting her head
on my shoulder, she squirms away.

I feel checked. I can't think of any more moves. I tell Mery
I need to get some fresh air, and will meet her outside when she
is ready. I nod briefly at Al as I turn to exit the church.

I feel totally alone. A panicky feeling starts to resur-
face, like the one I had last night walking alone along Geary.
Ominous dark shadows. Strange days.

The banks of the river of my mind are overflowing, almost as
if I'm free falling. I want something to grab onto, believe in,
trust in.

I don't know where to turn.

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"Teshuvah is to turn, or return to G-d."

*"Yes, that's exactly what I want. Would it be possible for
me to meet your rabbi?"*

He looks askance at me, and asks, "Are you FFB?"

*I'm wondering if this is like one of Dad's secret FBI codes.
I have no idea what he's talking about. I shrug my shoulders and
ask, "What's FFB."*

*"Frum--observant-- from birth. Have you always observed
kosher and all the laws?"*

*Again, I think of the Christmas tree. Sunday School. How
about lox and bagels at Sunday brunch? I decide that's pretty
close to observing the Sabbath. After all, sharing a family*

meal, even if on the wrong day, seems like a good thing. "My family felt that time together on a weekly basis was important."

"How did you spend this time?"

I describe in some detail the content of the brunch, leaving out nothing: the chicken liver and eggs, Wolferman English muffins, strawberry jam, soft scrambled eggs. Finally, he stops me.

"Enough. Let me describe our Sabbath. See if this is what you really want. For 25 hours, we don't do work, as it is commanded. It is a time of joy, and we don't lift, use a car, touch money, use a water heater, or write with a pen. We unscrew the light bulbs in the refrigerators, put tape on the buttons on door frames so they are presses in, and the knobs do not require turning, set our ovens set at warm so we do not have to turn them on to cook food. We even tear our toilet paper into usable pieces the day before, so we don't have to do that work on the Shabbat."

I ask him if it's ok if I write this down. He nods, and I pull out a file, labeling it "Frum." I understand the toilet paper and work premise, but I do wonder if the act of defecating itself might be considered work, especially if you are the least bit constipated. But I'm not sure it's exactly the most appropriate question.

"On Shabbat, the Torah says we must refrain from 39 categories of activities. One is not to carry anything except in an enclosed area. Therefore, in our ingenuity and with G-d's guidance, we have created in our community a small filament (erus) thread which surrounds our area. This allows us to carry what we need within its confines. We check it weekly because if the filament breaks, the area would not be usable, and we would have broken the divine law.

"Do you see how carefully we take G-d's law?"

I'm impressed. Grandpa always said that in the law, and in life, effort equals success. And effort involves precise, careful, systematic discipline. Grandpa also said it was ok to push the envelope, as long as you didn't break it. These guys are not only precise and careful, they even create their own envelope!

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I wonder if the cunning part of Johannes which resides in Ortho-John isn't also impressed at ways in which there are ways to be found around any law. Of course, it must be asked are they doing it to observe the law, and keep in sight, or as a way to get around the law and keep their comforts. More importantly, I also question whether G-d couldn't have made his intentions a little clearer, and why he left it to humans to figure out exactly what was ok or not. Did G-d not envision toilet paper, door knobs, and stoves when G-d created the seventh day? But that's between me and G-d.

Is this the best way to serve G-d? Cutting toilet paper? I have a bit of an uneasy feeling, like sometimes when I would get lost in the details of a math problem, and forget the larger picture, where I was. For me, I always like to have the endpoint in sight.

Could the endpoint be not the acts themselves, but the mental training involved in learning to do every action with the intention of keeping our focus on G-d. Of course, if you get lost in the behavior of the acts, then you've started focusing on the finger rather than the moon.

So, I return to my interrupted question:

"That all sounds wonderful. I'm sure I can observe it all faithfully. I'd love to meet your rabbi, is that possible?"

"What is your blood?"

I look at him not understanding. "Type O, I guess. But I'm not sure. Why do you ask?"

He looks at me with a combination of anger and condescension, Perhaps the faintest inkling of humor.

"Jewish blood. We'll need to see records of your parents', grand-parents' blood. Not just on your mother's side. There can be no impurities." **What irony: Our universal Type O blood trying to fit in and flow in such a particularistic setting. We could actually fit better with them than they could with us.**

"Isn't this about studying G-d's law? What does blood have to do with it?"

"We must keep ourselves pure. We can't be defiled."

Each time I make an effort to meet the rabbi, I am asked a question that pushes him and me further apart. This is one tough gatekeeper. Enough games. I ask him again, directly, to which he responds, "The Rabbi never meets anyone new until I give access and feel the person is ready. You are no where close."

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There are two only two ways to exit the church, one is a line to shake hands with Carmichael, one to take farewell of the minister. As the lesser of two evils, I stick myself in the minister's line. I search my mind for something witty to say. Blank. I glance back over my shoulder--The mistake of Lot's wife, Johannes-- and see Al, the blonde guitarist, and Mery in animated conversation. An image of her getting into the shower enters my mind "Brrr, way too cold." I see her nipples

crinkle and her breasts jiggle as she runs out, her hair red-streaked and wet, her mouth smiling teasingly at me.

The image fills me with arousal....and sadness. Why am I only now appreciating that moment, hours later? At the time, I was annoyed at her disturbing me in the shower, and her dislike of the water temperature I'd chosen. It's like we were playing different rhythms in music, the timing just off. All I could think then was, why does relationship have to be so hard? But in focusing on the differences, I didn't see the beauty of her in the moment. Like a meal, which you only realize you're eating after you finish the last bite and it's gone.

I look back at her again. Why am I having such morbid thoughts? Not only is this relationship not over--she's told me she adores me--but it's just beginning. Pull yourself together, you're getting way too paranoid, mind.

When it is my turn to greet the minister, I think of mentioning that I've met him once before. But I don't think he'll remember me. I stick out my hand. He looks at me directly. His eyes are kindly, warm, understanding. He says nothing, ignores my hand and gave me a huge bear hug.

I'm startled at first and try to resist. Then I put my arms around him, and hug him back, saying, "Thank you. Thank you so much." When he lets me go, he once again looks me directly in the eyes. I like his eyes--they are intense, yet empathic. He says, simply "Don't worry. We're all in the wilderness, brother. We all have our dark night of the soul. Trust. There really is a Promised Land. God loves you and so do I."

He then turns to the next person. Why do I want to cry? I

walk outside, and raise my hands to cover my eyes, shielding them from the sun.

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I stand for a period of time, I have no idea how long, letting the sun warm me, and trying not to think. I'm pulled back into the morning by a tap on my shoulder. I turn and see Mery joyously smiling.

"Wasn't the service wonderful?" she exclaims. I find her enthusiasm and smile grating. Rather than respond in a similar manner, I ask a serious, non-responsive question:

"Remember that old lady in the yellow hat? What were you thinking when you were watching her during the service?"

"Oh, I don't remember, nothing in particular, I'm sure." She responds still with lightness and gaiety, as though we are at an Easter parade.

I look at her peaceful, smiling face, and her non-answer enrages me. It's like she's pushing me farther and farther from her. There is a part of me that wants to lash out at her. Is this what Dad feels? Is she smiling delicately and trying to appear calm just to annoy me? As if nothing untoward is happening, as if I haven't just been subjected to an anti-Semitic Jewish-bashing tirade, a guilt-inducing bad-white man ranting, all the while she has been flirting with Al, and is now going to see her art professor for whom she models and she won't even answer a simple question about the lady in the yellow hat.

Acta exteriora indicant interiora secreta.

Overt, external behaviors are indications of interior secrets.

Sounds like Freud in legal Latin. Each is saying that be-

neath the exterior act of the smile something more devious is going on. She's hiding secrets from me.

Not only do I want to remove that smile from her face, but I want to understand what's beneath the smile. She has no right to feel happy without me, especially because she is the major cause of my unhappiness. I wonder whether she's acting so peaceful and happy in order to anger me, to make me feel that everything is fine, and all is just innocent fun. My head is beginning to spin. I'm feeling disoriented, confused. Things are becoming unhinged again, like last night at the Fillmore.

Maybe I should just leave. I have plenty of time to get back to join Inamatsu and Richard for golf. Return to an ordered routine.

We walk several minutes in silence. There is no angel passing. Finally I turn her. "I'm thinking of heading back and playing some golf today, after all."

"If you want. I know you've missed the last several weeks because of me. I don't want to keep you away from your friends forever. Thanks for coming to the service." She gives me a big hug. That annoys me. Isn't she sad I'm leaving, or is she actually happy so she can spend time alone with Al? And her art professor? What does that joyous hug really mean? I half-heartedly hug her back, and try to get a feel of her breast. She pulls back. "Shame on you. In front of a church. What a naughty boy." She's still smiling.

"Next week in Carmel?" I say nonchalantly.

"Great, fun. I'll look forward to it."

"Bye."

"Bye."

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Partings...again....and again. But not for the last time. If Johannes knew what was good for him--and me-- he would just keep going. But he has not yet learned his lesson, and is afraid to face himself. So, he will run back. Leaving the task of facing and finding the "self," unfortunately, to me.

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Nowhere close to meeting the rabbi? I feel like he's just thrown down the gauntlet, issued a challenge. I want to tell him I've already met the rabbi--yesterday at the Wall-- and he spoke to me, and I don't need any underling as any intermediary. But I have to admit my meeting with the rabbi was not exactly cordial, so I suppose I shouldn't alienate my only connection.

"What's the next step?" I ask, courteously.

He rattles off a series of books I need to buy immediately, and readings I need to do. Besides the Torah, (which I tell him I'm already studying, though he seems to scoff at me when I say that), he says I must immediately begin studying the Mishna and Gemara. He says as for the Kaballah, I am both too young and too ignorant and not even close to ready.

As I listen, I notice myself also wondering, with some concern, whether our previous conversation--FFB, bloodlines-- is helping me climb even a single step higher on the way up Jacob's ladder to God. And what is this Kaballah?

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I walk a few hundred steps toward Mr. Red. I turn around, and see Mery standing alone outside the church. She seems confused. I watch for a moment, and she still doesn't move. Maybe I

should give her a ride to the art opening. Perhaps I left too abruptly.

Then I see Al, the minister, Stokeley Carmichael, and the blonde guitarist come out of the church. Al goes over to Mery and puts his arm around her. The minister gives her a hug.

I feel like I'm watching a play--with three black men and two white women. It's not a scene I've ever before encountered in my life. I am in the audience, and the characters are on a stage far removed from me. I am an outsider, looking in, an observer, and not allowed to be a member of the cast.

But that's not completely true, is it? I left the stage, and I could turn around and reenter the scene if I really want to.

Who am I? What do I want? I thought I wanted to leave, and be alone. Now, alone, I don't know what I want.

I decide to leave the performance. It's not worth watching it unfold. I turn away from the stage and continue walking toward Mr. Red.

After a few more steps, I feel a puncture in me, like a pin pricking a balloon, and in a woosh the air is leaking rapidly out of me. I stand, anchored. To go forward, toward Mr. Red, and back to the Farm to play a round of golf seems lonely, stupid, and meaningless. I don't want to leave Mery. But I don't want to turn back and return to be with her, either.

I just stand, not able to move one way or the other.

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People jostle me, and I let them. I hear honking sounds. When I look down at the ground, I see my shadow disappear, and somewhere in my mind realize a cloud must be covering the sun.

Suddenly, my paralysis, numbness, and confusion turn to anger.

At myself. What am I doing, running away like a wimp? Anger turns to determination. I walk back to the group--three black men, two white women--and approach confidently. Mery is in animated conversation with the minister. She seems surprised to see me.

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"That must have been a pretty speedy golf game," Al jokes. I look at him steadily. It's not a glare, but it is a tough, non-nonsense, don't mess with me stare, like my father's. I then turn and look unsmilingly, and pointedly at Mery. Her face is hard to read. Is she glad to see me? Confused? Annoyed to be interrupted?

I'm undeterred. "I thought maybe you'd need a ride to the gallery this afternoon. And, if you're hungry" I point to the group in a magnanimous gesture, even staring directly at Al, "maybe you all would like to join us for some lunch?" I'll show him I'm not afraid of him, and will fight to protect my woman.

Without a moment's hesitation, Mery throws her arms around me and gives me a hug. "That's so sweet of you." I place my hand around her waist, and she leans her head onto my shoulder in an affectionate gesture.

I'm surprised by her willingness to respond in kind. When I tried to hug her earlier after she introduced me to Al, she rebuffed me completely.

The others decline my invitation. Good-byes are said, and Mery and I head off to lunch, arm in arm.

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"I was surprised--and so happy-- to see you." She does a playful little dance shuffle with her feet, jumping over some trolley tracks. I can see the glee and joy in her eyes. What a beautiful woman. The sun's rays radiate off her hair, turning it a reddish gold, while simultaneously richly reflecting a brassy brown off the tarnished trolley tracks.

Then the sun suddenly disappears behind a cloud.

"Why'd you change your mind about golf?"

Because I was afraid to face myself. Because I was scared and lonely. To keep myself from running away because of fear. To protect my investment, face my competition. I look back and see Al receding in the distance. Al called her Beth, a term of intimacy, "what my close friends call me" she once told me. Good-by, Al. As Dad said, I will not back down from anybody.

"Because I realize how joyous I feel when I'm with you, Mery-Beth. Returning to see you, after even such a brief parting, is like a reunion with my beloved. Amidst all the confusion in my life, it is you who provide a sanctuary for me."

All of a sudden, it begins to sprinkle, then rain. I hope it's raining at Stanford. Then I couldn't have played golf anyway. We both look up at the rain, then at each other, and begin laughing. She cuddles closer to me, wrapping her arms tighter around my body.

How ironic. As they walk away from the morning's service at the church--The House of God-- Johannes is feeling like a little child protected by mother Mery. "Mother Mary, comfort me, let it be."

He believes he is sheltered by her arms, safeguarded by The

House of Beth.

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"The House of G-d is all around you, within you. All is G-d's. Baruch HaShem. The next step, you ask? Study, study, and more study. Who have you studied with here in Jerusalem? Where are you staying now? Where do you take your meals?"

"I'm staying over at the YMCA...." His face looks quizzical, so I add, "across from the King David. It has that lovely motto 'a place whose atmosphere is peace, where political and religious jealousies can be forgotten.'" It's hard to gauge his reaction. I'm having trouble reading his face, so I continue answering his question. "I eat breakfast there, and sometimes have coffee and dinner at a little Arab shop. Though I'm not really eating very much any more. A kind of religious purification and fasting."

I look at him expectantly, hoping that finally something I'm doing will please him. Instead I see his face contort in disgust.

I'm not sure what's wrong, so I add "I've gone to a couple of workshops and parashah classes of Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet. Have you heard of them?" I'm sure he'll be impressed with my use of the word 'parashah,' and realize what a serious Torah student I am.

"Go, leave," he exclaims.

"Go? Where? Why?" I can't believe what I'm hearing. What is he talking about? I thought I was going to be his star student. He's dismissing me? No. I will not be rejected again. I will not just turn and walk away.

"Everything you say, American, is trefe, wrong, sinful."

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I refuse to move until he tells me the problem. "Please, I don't understand, what's sinful?" I'm begging.

"For starters, you stay with the goy at the Young Men's Christian Association." He says the name with sneering emphasis. "You admire its motto, which is only the Christians' attempt to assimilate and convert you. You don't keep kosher and eat with Arabs; you fast when you're not supposed to. And you study with a Rabbi who dishonors the texts." He has withdrawn several steps from me, as if horrified to be near me and fearful that if he gets too close he will catch a disease.

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"Don't send me away. I want to learn. Please. How do they dishonor the texts. Please." I feel like I'm pleading for my life. There are too many exiles. From my home. From fraternities. From Elizabeth. Now here. I can feel tears welling up in my eyes.

He seems to take some pity on me, or perhaps feels an obligation to try to illuminate the ignorant. In a seethingly controlled voice, he speaks, articulating each word,

"Your so-called rabbi and his whore teach modern interpretations of Torah. They deny that the text is completely true and each word is from G-d, exactly as He, Blessed is His Name, wanted it. They claim there are different editors and redactors....."

I stupidly interrupt to show I understand what he means

"Yes, I know." I start to list them, based on what Reb Jonathan had said. "J, the John Wayne type, fighting for the Lord; E, Elohem, God behind the scenes, a God who doesn't like war, and who controls what we do...."

"Stop, stop. Wrong. All wrong. This is heresy. The Torah is

divine and pure, from G-d. If you start dissecting it--as written by different people-- then it's just man made and therefore entirely man changeable, at the whim of individual personal feelings. Then there is nothing permanent. You must never study with them again. They are trefe."

"Fine. Exactly. I'm looking for something permanent. I want to learn from real Jews. I've been told you are the most strict and authentic."

He doesn't smile, but continues his tirade. "TORAH DAT. TORAH LAW. That is the only law that counts."

I try to say something but he is not to be interrupted.

"Evil forces are all around that threaten us. Even among those who call themselves Jewish. Look at the government. Only the ultra-Orthodox Shas party is even close to resembling what HaShem wants. Their spiritual leader is correct when he says the secular law is a defilement."

I decide I must interrupt him so he can see that we agree. I explain that I was planning to be a lawyer--had even gotten into Harvard-- but I, too, had come to the conclusion that man's law is limited. The yeshiva student doesn't seem all that interested in my views or my past. His disinterest makes me question why I mentioned Harvard. Am I trying to prove that I'm worthy of being admitted to his school? Wanting to show him how smart I am? He's right to keep my ego in check.

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"The high court judges in Israel are evil, unclean, led astray by dark forces. Did you know that in Hebrew, the word 'law' has the same numerical value--gematria-- as hell?"

Human law as hell. Almost poetic. I understand what he's

saying, but I've never thought about it in such starkly religious terms.

"Whoever follows human law will go to hell, together with his law. And that's why all Conservative and Reform Jews are evil, too. They're not authentically Jewish. They lessen and degrade us. Look how they view the Torah."

"Which is?"

"Those who feel the Torah is not the authentic and absolute word of G-d make it finite. 'G-d-inspired' is the best they can do in their wishy-washy ways. But then the Torah becomes just one set of values among many, capable of being changed by the whims of society and culture."

He's preaching to the choir.

Then I wonder if that is a kosher statement.

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"You must follow all the laws. Not just the ones that are obvious and make perfect sense. Of course, it is easy to keep kosher, to honor your father and mother, to observe Shabbos. But authentic real Jews must follow all the laws. My rabbi says modern people want too much personal autonomy and freedom. He says that the burden of following the laws from G-d speaking at Sinai makes them feel that life is too complicated, there are too many do's and don'ts. The easy way out is to discount the whole thing--throw out the written and oral traditions out of pure human selfishness, egocentricity, and laziness."

Intellectually I agree. I'm certainly not afraid of taking on the burdens and complications of real Judaism. But I do want to ask him about some of the simpler laws, like, say, "Honor your

father and mother. I wonder if there can be exceptions in certain cases....

But it doesn't seem like the right time to ask.

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The yeshiva student still seems upset, though I am happy that he is at least willing to continue talking with me, even if the conversation is more of a scolding lecture.

"That so called 'rabbi' you mentioned, and all the other inauthentic Jews like him, they are all ruining our religion. They let women read the Torah; let women sit with men in the same section of the sanctuary, not separated by the partition-- of mechitza--can you believe it? Women are not meant to read Torah, only men. Inauthentic Rabbis, like that man Jonathan, not only bless mixed marriages, want to ordain women, let women and men sing together, they even are sympathetic to homosexuals. Look at how the so-called rebbe you study with lives--he cohabits with a goy. And worse, a psychologist. A prostitute." He turns away and spits in condescension and scorn.

"They are as bad as Arabs, my rabbi says."

He turns and spits again, in disgust.

"My rabbi says, and he voices what we all feel, that all Arabs are evil snakes. G-d is sorry He created them. Never speak with Arabs again. Never associate and defile yourself with the impure--Arabs, unauthentic religious Jews, secular, atheist Jews. And you need to leave the YMCA immediately. You are living with the goy, the enemy. And you dare to want to come here and study with us? Why? To defile us too with your impurities?"

"Not to defile, but to learn and purify." I'm pleading, begging.

He holds his hand up in front of my face to stop me from talking.

"And we will need to get those blood records from you before we can continue."

As I listen to him, I can't help but repeat to myself his words, "The House of G-d is all around you, within you. All is G-d's. Baruch HaShem"

The words sound sacred, loving, compassionate, but something is definitely being lost in their translation into action. As I listen to this raging, ranting, attacking, scornful person, I image a young version of Dad. Why would I want to re-subject myself to that kind of angry abuse? Do I fear his anger? Yes. But is this really what the Promised Land looks like? Are he and his rabbi really the embodiment of the highest wisdom of which we humans are capable? Is this what I want to act and feel like in ten years? Even if they would have me, is this really the fraternity I want to join?

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"Why did you pull back from me when I tried to hug you in the church, after the service?" It's still raining when we enter the cafe, partially soaked. I can see the outline of her nipples through the wetness of her blouse, and bra beneath.

"Did I? Sorry." She's humming Jacob's Ladder. "I don't know, maybe I feel uncomfortable being too affectionate in church. Something with my dad, maybe."

That seems reasonable, but not sufficient. "Did it have anything to do with Al?"

"Huh?" She continues humming. "I don't know what you mean."

I take her by the shoulders and make her face me directly. I repeat my words slowly. "Did your not hugging me in the church

have anything to do with Al?"

"What is with the tone? Yes, maybe it did. It didn't feel like a hug, but like a grab, as if you were putting a leash on a dog to claim ownership. My therapist says no one should ever treat me like an object, a possession. I told you about what the older art dealer, James, made me do. I'm worth more than that and I'm not going to let that happen again. "

She's trying to distract me from my question, and put me on the defensive. She who is a model, for God's sake, and allows people to spend hours staring at her naked body. Do I objectify women too much? I'll think about that later. Her question is not really that complicated, Johannes. Do you look at women as body parts? Are you attracted to large breasts? Long legs? Do you like to take pictures of them in salacious poses? Do you want them to be available at your beck and call? The answer is yes, you do objectify women.

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But the question is actually deeper, and the true answer even worse. You try to reduce all women to one dimension--a lusty body. Think of the feeling you had taking the picture of Sarah, with her pearl earrings, kneeling before you reduced to your lap dog licking you and staring up at you. And worse, remember the joy you felt at taking pictures of Mery while the gold cross that she wears bounced up and down as she jumped on the bed at the Fairmont.

This is not only objectification, but acting toward the object in a demeaning way. You seek to desecrate that which is most important to Mery. Yes, you see her as an object. But you also want to show yourself--and her-- that behind and beneath all

the flowery spiritual rhetoric--the guise of the suffering servant-- , she is really a hypocrite, and at her core, just a rutting, animalistic slut, a slave to her horny, lustful nature. As are all women.

And of course, as I now see all too clearly, as are you.

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But your attitude toward Mery--objectification and demeaning the sacred-- goes hand in hand with your competitive nature, and wanting to possess her, like an object that you can own. Do you hope that if you can remove the church as a competitor, she becomes more totally yours.

You can't yet see it, but you are much more possessive of her and threatened by her ties to the church than you even realize. God and the minister take her away from you. She's trying to be Jesus-like, always helping others. That also takes her away from you.

It's like a sport, or a chess-game you're playing. But you don't consciously realize your motivation. You feel that if she gives attention to others and they gain influence, you lose. That's why you're always watching where her eyes and attention are focused, making sure you don't lose ground. You want a clear winner and loser. And you want to be the winner, moving objects around the board to your advantage. Objects that you possess and control, that do your bidding, like the impersonal figures on a chess board.

* * *

You're such a cad, looking for other women's vulnerability, and willing to sacrifice them as pieces with no thought for their feelings. You size them up, like a good meal you want to devour.

After eating to satiety, you are more than happy to say good-bye, leave the unwashed dishes at the restaurant, the captured chess pieces discarded at the side of the game.

Do you objectify people? What is Elizabeth thinking? Yes, Johannes, ponder it later. I wouldn't want you to have any self-critical, appropriately judgmental, self-reflective thoughts here and now, when the question is right before your eyes. If you had eyes to see. But no. It's better to dismiss and suppress the question, isn't it, leaving it to for someone else--me-- to wash and clean what you soil.

I, now, in search of the spirit, have to struggle to purify the sexual body that you created and allowed to evolve unchecked.

* * *

What John says is true, but it doesn't go far enough. We all have the potential to objectify the "other." And this is particularly true--and egregious--when the other is made into the enemy. Then we heap derogatory stereotypical epithets on them. Hitler's propaganda--as part of a long anti-Semitic tradition--did this to the Jews. Some Jews do it to Arabs; some Arabs do it to Jews. Once we can make the enemy an object, they become fair game for whatever we wish to do to them.

* * *

"But you haven't answered my question. Why such a big hug, outside the church, when I decided not to play golf. Both were around Al."

"I don't know. I was glad to see you. Even though you were only gone a few minutes, I already was missing you." She smiles at me. "Look, you big oaf, take that serious grimace off your face. I'm yours. You need to trust that. You heard Al. He said

what my therapist said, I'm lucky to be with you. She even says you're the best person I've ever dated."

I'm still uncomfortable that she talks to her therapist about me--when I'm not there to present my side of the case and cross-examine the witness. But I guess it's ok as long as the therapist has positive things to say about me. And also, I'm not sure that is exactly what Al said, that **she** was lucky to be with me. Is she just trying to mollify me? And is she lying, or merely misremembering? Or am I?

"So, what's wrong with the others, and what's right about me--of course, that's obvious, isn't it?" I hold my chin up in an egocentric, proud manner.

She gives me a little playful jab in the ribs.

"Come on, Tell me why I'm perfect."

"Great sex."

"So you're dating me for my bod and the sex? I feel so diminished. What about my mind?" I give her a big hug. I'm starting to regain my confidence and feeling quite the stud.

"....just kidding. But actually, as I told you, you're the first man I've ever had an orgasm with. You're opening me to depths of my body that I didn't even know existed."

She looks down shyly. "Sometimes it seems too pleasurable. I probably need to ask my therapist about that." She smiles, then looks at me directly. "Also, you're the first person I've been able to share so openly with. You listen to me, and pay attention to what I enjoy. Like remembering that Beethoven's Ninth was my favorite symphony, and then taking me to that concert. I'll never forget that."

"So it's my money?"

"Shh. It is hard for you to take a compliment, isn't it?"

She winks at me, but doesn't wait for an answer.

"You're such a white knight gentleman, so generous and thoughtful. I love being held and hugged by you. You keep me from floating away. And yes, so precise, systematic and clear. You're the most original person I've ever met. You open me to new levels of life I didn't even know existed."

Me? I want to ask her what she means specifically. But I remember what Dad once told me "Don't ruin a good golf shot with a bad mouth." or as Mery's therapist told her "learn to graciously accept a compliment." I'm afraid if I ask for details I may ruin this moment. Why am I so self-doubting?

* * *

One year after the Exodus, the Jews are still in the wilderness. It's now been almost one year since I met Elizabeth that fateful day, March 22. Would I have ever guessed that nearly a year later, on Ash Wednesday, I would be in Jerusalem, washing pots of beans. She certainly opened me to levels I didn't know existed. Ash Wednesday, forty days until Easter, a time of deepening commitment.

I'm still in my first trimester of my nine-month effort. Sometimes I fear I won't be able to last the entire nine months. That I will just give up, no new self will emerge from this wilderness, and I will be a stillborn birth.

* * *

A man and a woman, with three young screaming kids, take a seat across from us. The entire table is in an uproar. The two older kids are hitting each other. The parents are shouting at

them to stop, while yelling bitterly at each other.

The noise is deafening, and I want to shift tables, but Mery doesn't want to bother the waitress further. Instead she says, looking at the family, "Why such bitterness? Where is the love, the dream they must have started with?"

"Creating a healing loving framework for that family would be a formidable challenge, indeed." Is this what our life is going to look like in ten years? I shudder inwardly.

She continues to look at them, then around the cafe, which is nearly empty. There's one old couple across from us. "I wonder where all the people go when it is raining." Then, almost an afterthought, "I wonder if they are happy."

Who is she talking about? The people who aren't here? The unruly family? The old couple? Where do people go when it's raining? What nonsense. I sometimes think Mery intentionally tries to be ambiguous and vague, just to confuse and upset me, knowing how much I admire precise, clear speech.

Ambiguitas verborum contra stipulatorem. Doubtful words will be construed most strongly against this party. For her to make a ridiculous, random, non sequitur comment right after she'd complimented me for my systematic clarity is confusing and frustrating. How can you have a rational conversation with someone like that? Every word I utter has a purpose. What is her purpose in what she says? To annoy me, to challenge my framework and order? I bet at least half the time she doesn't even think what she's going to say before the words coming pouring out of her mouth.

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"How about happy tomato soup and grilled cheese for lunch?"

Ovid, I'm following your advice. I am going to ignore her comment, rather than respond nastily, and instead choose to introduce her to an old family tradition-one of the good ones.

"Is happy tomato soup a particular brand?"

"Funny. My dad would cook it some Sundays. He said he put special ingredients in it, so that every time you took a bite, you had to smile. Fortunately, he passed them on to me, so I can add them to our soup."

"Sounds wonderful."

* * *

"Why did you come back, really, and not play golf?"

I don't like the tone of her question. It sounds innocent on the surface, but it bothers me, as if there is an accusation there and I have to defend myself. I've already answered it once, flattering her. What more can I say? I'm not even sure myself. I know I was afraid to leave, and drive back alone. I felt like I was about to go off into an empty wilderness, into Van Gogh's Starry Night. I didn't know where I was. I felt confused, like staring into foggy space. I don't know who I am any longer. I speak slowly, calmly, and deliberately, belying my inner state: "I returned because you are my anchor. "I missed you. I guess I can't bear to be apart from you."

"My therapist says sometimes we need to have time to ourselves, and that too much time together might be a sign we're afraid to face ourselves. Like that song: 'Jesus walked that lonely valley, He had to walk it by Himself.'" That doesn't seem like a very gracious remark. I expected something like, "I'm so glad you did come back. I can't bear to be apart from you, ei-

ther."

"Geez, Mery, what a downer. All I said was I missed you and now I'm being told I'm afraid to be by myself and you're citing Jesus to me. Why not focus on my wanting to be with you rather than we need time apart? And enough with the Jesus and enough with the therapist already. You're making me feel like I'm defiled and soiled and should go wash my hands and face." I wring my hands, as if trying to remove dirt from them. Is this what she wants, more time apart. Fine, that's what I'll give her.

"My therapist says word choices are important. I said I missed you. But I can bear it." She smiles. "My therapist says when people get defensive, it's because something hits too close to the bone, and they're not willing to face it."

"Thanks. What a clear, kind, response to my sharing my feelings of being unclean and stained." I reply sarcastically. "Are you now saying I should also wash my mouth out because it's dirty, too?"

She turns away and looks around the room, with that glaze in her eyes. I repeat under my breath, but I don't think loud enough for her to hear it: "My therapist says, my therapist says." And now there's that pompous, distancing smile again.

Unfortunately, Johannes, Elizabeth--and her therapist--are right. What you are avoiding is that when you leave her, there is no self left. That's why you ran back. To avoid the emptiness. But I know there is no escape. She can't shield you, or be your anchor. Worse, she may even be the one who is helping push you over the brink. And, once again, the work is left to me to try to pick up the pieces. Not, I might add, an easy task.

"Mery, stop already, please. I don't need a therapy session with you. That's not a fun way to spend time." She looks glum, scolded. "Sorry, but if you keep talking like this, you may be able to counteract even the powers of happy tomato soup."

* * *

Ovid, you'd better get over here. I'm not liking the way this conversation is going, and I'm not sure I want to do all the work to turn it around.

Mery seems to sense my frustration, and changes the topic before I can respond. "Wasn't that service fantastic?" Her face shows joy, almost rapture: "When the minister stood up there and said there were times when he felt he'd really failed, and then someone put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'Don't let it get you down, you've done all you could.' That was beautiful to me. It's like failure isn't important so long as someone is there who cares. That hand makes all the difference. Oh I can't explain it, but I felt his words really touch my heart."

Ovid, I see she's trying, but for some reason, her joy angers me. I'm not able to respond in kind, and in fact want to puncture her elation.

"The service did absolutely nothing for me. The church is just a womb for babies to hide in. And that comment, it's just a lazy person's excuse for failure. We'd have no society, no progress with that attitude. 'That hand makes all the difference.' That sounds like one of those inane Hallmark card that comes out of their factory in Kansas City. I'm hungry. Where's the soup?" I feel a hardness and anger within me, and I don't feel at all hungry and have no desire to eat. I don't like the simplistic, naive beauty she saw in the sermon. And I feel

it's as if she is saying to me, "I'm beautiful because I can see beauty;" and the implication is "You aren't beautiful; you're ugly because you can't see beauty." I want to hold her, to squeeze her so tightly that I draw the beauty from her and put it in me. Let's see how much that fits into her "binding" of her suffering servant, La Causa fantasy.

Elizabeth is a sexual being, Johannes. But she also has a spiritual core, something sorely lacking in you. She was trying, albeit in a crude and disgusting fashion, to elevate that sexual nature, and connect it with the spiritual, wanting to be Christ-like, equating sex with spirituality and suffering.

However, when you take sex out of the picture--which she is able to do, at times--at least she can still see the spiritual. You, Johannes, only sought to gratify your physical needs, and reduce her spiritual nature to nothing but a further challenge for your libidinal urges. You filter everything through sexuality. That's why you can't see, much less tolerate and appreciate the spiritual side of life.

Mery once again has that glazed look on her face. All she says is, "I'm hungry, too. I'm looking forward to your special happy tomato soup recipe." She's completely ignored my negative remarks. I'm not going to let her off that easily.

"You mean the religious service, holy prayer, the bread and wine of your Savior, wasn't enough to quench your hunger and thirst?" Can't you eat his sermon, bitch? I'm shocked listening to myself. Where is all this anger coming from. I don't talk like this. Stop, mind.

She looks at me directly. She's trembling a bit. I can see

she's upset, but she speaks clearly and forcefully. "The church doesn't only satisfy me, it also makes me hungry. I see what there can be-- all of us singing, dancing, the happiness in the music, then I see what there is-- all the ugliness in the world. The church isn't only a womb for me; but it does shelter me when I'm hurting. It's a base. When I leave church, I feel more energized, happier. But that's not enough. I want everyone to feel as good as I do--to be able to sing, to celebrate life and the sheer wonderment of existence. Like the minister said, we have to be more than our individual self. We need to work together; if my belly is full when the neighbors' children go to bed hungry, then it is not right. We have to join hands with God to try and alleviate some of world's suffering. "

She's still smiling. Is she deaf, or did she just ignore the intent of my remark? Smiling angelically, beating me over the head with her cross of love, a classic one upmanship chess move. I'm better and holier than you. Look how I'm of service, and compare that to how tight and cruel and mean-spirited you are.

How can I say I have a complete and total love for her, that I want to marry her, and be feeling this fury and rage, almost hatred of her? When I was watching her sleep this morning, all I felt was her love and beauty and innocence. Now, that feels like a far away dream, and all of a sudden, from poof to pow, there's nothing but fury. I feel like the anti-Christ.

This rapid shift in emotions should be such a clear warning sign to you, Johannes--about you, and about her.

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"How wonderful and happy do you think I felt in your church, as a Jew, when your minister says Jews are too rule-bound, a

religion of rote ritual and intellectual debate and all about the law, while Jesus and Christians are about being loving and kind? You don't think that's not hurtful? First you attack me for wanting to be a lawyer, now my religion is bad because it's too legalistic. How do I feel at dinner when you say a prayer before a meal--serving fish, I might add--that invokes the name of your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

"Enough attacks. I don't like it when you attack my therapist. Now my minister. And that's not even what he said. And my prayer. And I don't like you making snide comments about Jesus, like you did this morning-- that donuts are better than Jesus remark today. That was hurtful."

"Now who's being defensive? It was just a joke. But now that you mention it, what kind of God is He anyway, that would sacrifice His Own Son. Is that really a solid foundation on which to build a religion? Was it your loving God and loving Jesus who killed my older brother? Was that a sacrifice that your God demanded? Is that Your God of Love?"

* * *

Mery at first looks at me with astonishment, as though she can't believe what she's hearing. Then shock seems to become, briefly, anger, which quickly turns to tears. She gets up from the table and runs toward the bathroom.

"May I take your order?"

I tell the waitress what I want without looking up. "Yes, two bowls of tomato soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Two teas, with lemon."

"Anything else?" I look up at her. She's actually kind of cute. I smile.

"Yes, if you can add some happiness to the tomato soup, I'd really appreciate it." I wink at her.

She smiles and gives me a wink back. "I'll do my best."

Yes! I've still got it. Yet, even though my flirtations still work with new women, and even though I won my chess-game argument with Mery, and forced her to withdraw, I'm not feeling completely content.

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"Aren't you hungry?" I take a big bite of my soup, and emit a huge, beaming grin. "See, it works every time." Ok, Ovid, I'm trying again.

Mery is sullen, stirring her soup, not eating, and not responding.

She nods silently toward a couple sitting over my right shoulder. I turn and see an ancient couple, perhaps in their eighties. "Dear dear friends."

"Huh? Do you know them? Are they friends of yours?"

"No, I don't know them. But I imagine them as dear dear friends." She is speaking quietly. "That's what I want us to be like as we grow older together."

I turn my good ear so that I can hear them. He has a thin moustache--certainly less than a quarter inch--over an even thinner upper lip. He's clean shaven otherwise. Why that moustache, I wonder.

"Does it match my hair," he says to his lady friend.

"What?" She may be hard of hearing.

"Does my mustache match my hair?" he repeats.

She's silent, and squints to look closely. "Yes." Her lips are also thin, and the corners are slightly bent downward, creat-

ing a somewhat sad impression. As I watch, the corners of her lips slowly rise up. Perhaps no more than a half inch. But that amount is enough to shift glumness into a radiant, charming smile.

"Cute."

"What?" He may also be hard of hearing.

"It's cute. Your mustache is cute."

"Thank you."

I look back at Mery. She is eating a bite of soup. She holds the spoon up, as if in a toast "Cute.....You, them, and you're right, the soup does work."

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I wish life were so easy. A bowl of soup would not only distract you from, but wipe away the huge, Judeo-Christian fight you were just having. And it would never reappear again. Yes, you two really resolved that one well, and worked it through carefully. Next. Ha, still some old Kansas City sarcasm in me.

I've now earned enough money to start seeing the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet again. But I don't think I'm going to go back into individual therapy with them. It's too expensive and not cost effective. I have to work nearly four hours for every one hour of time with them--sometimes they only allow me fifty minutes. That's really not fair. **Interesting, John, how, in order to make your story more convincing to yourself you ignore all those times they've given you extra time at no charge. You've not quite worked through this issue of money and fairness as carefully as you need to.** I think I'll go to Dr. Lisbet's Tai Chi class, even though I've missed several sessions. And they have a five week Passover class coming up in a couple weeks that I can attend. Those are both more reasonably

priced. If I have a personal question, I can ask it during the break or after class--for free. Also, before I go back into therapy with them, I'd like to have finished up my Mery journal. Let me see how much I can figure out on my own, and let them deal with everything that I can't. That should also make it less time-consuming and expensive than how we progressed before: the slow, systematic way they tried to extract information from me about dad, mom, my family history. That was such a financial rip off.

Perhaps, John, it would be more accurate to say that at this point, you feel it would be a financial rip off--if you had actually paid them, which you still haven't.

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"I didn't know you'd dated a black guy."

"Does that bother you?"

"No." Yes. I don't know. I'll have to think about it later.

"Why did it end and who was the third guy?"

"It ended because Al loves white women, all white women. The blond guitarist is his current girlfriend, or at least one of them. He's a passionate, sensual, creative guy. I love his music and the spirit that comes through when he plays. But he's off in the clouds. As I am. My therapist said it would never work, and she was right. She says I need someone more stable, down to earth, practical." She takes a bite of soup and smiles "Someone who has systematic dividers in his glove compartment."

* * *

"The nude human form, especially female, has been a preoccupation and inspiration for male artists throughout history. Painters have often portrayed voluptuous naked women in overtly

erotic poses. In Pompeii, graphic erotic art graced rich men's mansions. Think also of Botticelli's Birth of Venus; Ingres' Odalisque; Adam and Eve, especially Eve.

There has been figure drawing since the 1300's, and in the 1500's life drawing classes were introduced into the academy. Female models were used to teach discipline and detail, and the female figure remains popular in figurative art because of its soft, curved, form.

"Any disagreement?" Pierre smiles and looks at the audience. There are reciprocated smiles, and nods of accord and approval.

"All modern painters used models. Matisse's graceful spare lines; Picasso's cubist deconstruction of female faces; the passionate brush strokes of the German expressionists; the psychologically fraught ruminations of the Jewish painters Chaim Soutine and Lucian Freud."

He looks around his audience with narrow, beady focused Eyes, like a stalking predatory animal. Is he searching out his next prey to model for him?

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"Klimt, as you all know, had his sexy period pieces. He Jew Modigliani painted beautiful but distant women, with elongated forms, and expressions of carnal frankness. In fact, the French police, I'm embarrassed to say--my former countrymen--, in December, 1917, when Zborowski organized a Modigliani show at Berthe Weill's gallery, were so shocked by one of the nudes in the window, that they closed the show until the offending painting was removed. The French, Mon Dieu! We've come a long way, baby."

There is polite laughter.

"Where are we today? I believe too much of contemporary art

merely throws the banality of everyday life right back at us, unexamined, untransformed. As an artist my goal is to probe beyond what appears on the surface, to examine our passions. Look closely at the picture you will see today. Sometimes you will find vulnerability masked by bravado. Post Matisse, post-Picasso I believe in line drawings of sheer sensuous simplicity. Note how one line swoop of the brush can yield a female nude in profile; creating with texture tactile sensations within you. I want to get you the audience, the gallery goers, involved, have you be participants in my paintings. I want to seduce you into art."

There are some murmurs and embarrassed chuckles as he lewdly once again surveys his audience.

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"By doing so, our understanding of visual possibilities expands. Art is about passion. Look at Cezanne, the son of a banker, who after two years studying law, quit and went to Paris, painting as a student of Pissarro. And we all know the story of the stock broker Gauguin, who, at 35, ended up in Tahiti. Artists are those who follow their passion, You can't stop them from pursuing their dreams."

There is more sustained applause. Mery is nodding her head enthusiastically.

"Visitors spend very little time in front of each picture; they see, absorb, move on, yet a fine painting is quite demanding on the eye. When you look at my pictures, be aware of the 'blink test.' The person with the untrained eye takes less than a 1/100 of second to create a first impression of a painting.

Instead, let me ask you, as you seek to penetrate my work, to go beyond naive perceptions to the depths of my paintings. Examine every pore of the work. Try to hear the artist speaking to you."

The artist? Rather a pompous, egocentric bore. This is the guy Mery models for?

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"There is so much encapsulated in a painting. Let me give you a few things to think about. Then, like I tell all young artists, don't think about them too much and get caught up in excessive details and analysis. Here is what I tell them to think about, then ignore.

"When an artist look at a model, he must see both the whole, and the relationship between parts. A painter sees a three dimensional image and then strives to re-create what he sees within a two dimensional plane. What is the interplay between skeleton and muscles? How do you accurately produce the shape, form, and proportion of the figure? Are the arms too long, the eyes appropriately spaced?

"How do you understand and convey the body language? What is the pose? Is there movement, energy? What are the emotions, mood, spirit, soul of the person? Is she nostalgic, thoughtful, elated or sad?"

"What about the skin color-- umber, sienna, reds, yellowish, blues, greens? How do you alter and vary those colors to create ethnicity, age, skin condition, lighting? Yes, there are of course guidelines. We know, for example, that lighting on the cool side creates a bit of a blue cast to the skin. Warm light, a pinkish or orange cast.

"And what about the conscious and unconscious mind of the artist--- and the one viewing? in 1924 our French writer, André Breton,

building on Dada philosophy, incorporated Freud's work on free association, dream analysis and hidden unconsciousness to help liberate creativity. His goal then (like mine now) was to explore the frontiers of experience, combine logical and matter of fact reality with subconscious and dream experience to create a super reality. He wanted to override the dominance of reason and conscious control in the artist. He also challenged his viewers to look at his work not only for the subject content, but to search for varied perspectives. I might add, parenthetically, that this work influenced the theatre of the absurd.

So I saw to you, fellow artists, let your unconscious mind draw. Then you need to reflect, when it is true creativity coming forth, when mumbo jumbo masking as confusion."

* * *

Is this guy brilliant, full of mumbo-jumbo, and pretentious all at the same time? I'm having trouble following him. I'm also wondering if what he is saying might apply to me in terms of the unconscious and conscious control? Should I let go more? Do I want to face this "unconscious thing?" I can see how Mery would be impressed with him. But I'm still not sure he isn't a charlatan with just high-falutin' talk, an emperor wearing no clothes.

* * *

"But once you know all this, I repeat to all my students, once it has sunk into your heart, mind, and soul, you must throw all this knowledge out, and paint with passion and vigor.

"The ultimate law of the law is that there is no law.' So said the Buddha. I take that as my guiding principle. I'm not into artistic theory, academic formality. Some try to label me as

modernism, anti modernism; postmodernism—with their Dada pretensions;
abstract, neo-expressionism. Mumbo jumbo. Do we really need art
historians and theoreticians with the hierarchical canonicity; their
hegemonic media apparatus, their obtuse theories derived from
psychoanalysis, feminism, structuralism, post structuralism—ah,
there go my countrymen again; deconstructionism—and again. All
rubbish. As Sengai, the great Zen artist said 'In
ordinary paintings there are laws. In my paintings, there are no
laws.' Like most major artists and innovators, Sengai was sui gener-
is, a man standing outside the mainstreams rush, entirely unto
himself. It worked for him, it worked for Buddha, it works for
me. Thank you very much. Now, have some wine, and enjoy."

* * *

I look around the gallery. Quite posh. There are maybe fifty
well-dressed, socialite types politely clapping as Pierre finish-
es his remarks. I take out a piece of paper and make a note to
consider the issue of law—from some Zen law/non law Buddha perspective.
And compare that to what the minister said earlier about law from a
Jewish and Christian perspective; and then how that might help my
thinking regarding my own issues with the advantages/disadvantages of
law school. My head is spinning. I look over at Mery who once
again has an enraptured smile on her face--like in church--and is
clapping louder than necessary.

She is looking at Pierre St. Jacques with those same fawning
eyes that she used with Al and with me. Is he her third lover?
Pierre St Jacques, the cool, hip, lawless painter of nudes. She
gets up and walks over to him. I stay seated, looking at the
totem pole on the front cover of the church service.

Is this some kind of gauntlet I'm supposed to be running. Fillmore, Church, Jesus, Al, now Pierre. I look up at him, talking animatedly to a group of admirers, including Mery. He's short, pudgy, balding. Physically he's not much of a challenging competitor.

But his words seem like honey to Mery, and they are so amorphously ambiguous and formless they drive me crazy. It's like trying to staple air to a wall.

So this lecture is what he calls non-analysis? Bulls---! What a dodge. Let me show you how intelligent I am--what the hell-- heck, is hierarchical canonicity? Sounds like we're back in church. Look, choir, how much careful, thoughtful depth I put into a painting. But of course then I throw it all away and paint with heart and soul. Now, when you look at my paintings, look at them not only with your soul, but with your eyes and brain. Examine every inch, every pore and marvel at my intelligence and craftsmanship. But you, media, don't judge by your narrow, artificial simplistic standards. The intellectual non-intellectual. Talk about having your cake and eating it too. Can't anybody see this emperor is as naked as his models?

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I pull Mery aside from the group, somewhat brusquely, ignoring the others. I want to get her reactions to this talk. But then I realize I know what they are going to be, and I'm more interested in how this seemingly at times so shy and prudish a person can model naked for him. What is she thinking?. So I ask her.

She says "This is not the right time to discuss that." But I insist. She pulls me further away from others, into a corner and says, "Standing naked before strangers who want to draw me helped me

gain confidence about my looks. I'm a little overweight, and it was healing to have artist's eyes see me as lines and shades and curves that connect. Pierre told me to image a more Rubenesque vision of myself and also that the female nude is one of the most common secular subjects in the history of painting. Adam and Even in the garden of Eden were naked. It's natural. Only self-consciousness makes it seem unnatural. My therapist said Pierre was really good for my self-esteem and body image, and they became friends. She really likes his work, and how it helped me gain confidence. Can you understand that? Does that answer your question?"

She then looks furtively around the room, and before I can respond, continues:

"Of course I was shy and it was a little scary being completely undressed in front of people. But it was not in front of a lecherous old man asking me to dress in maid and nurse clothes. They were artists trying to create something beautiful, and I was/am the basis for that."

"But you had sex with him, your artist-teacher-professor!"

She pauses, reflects, and does not back down: "Have you ever read Anaias Nin, about artists and models? Sex in a session can happen."

"Do your parents know? People where you work, volunteer?"

"My mom might know I model. She's seen some of Pierre's pictures and asked who the model was. My dad was ready to disown me. Some of my friends can't deal with it; they don't last long. Al could. He and Pierre became good friends."

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I can't listen to this anymore and go to get some punch. What does she mean "They don't last long?" Is she threatening me—deal with

it or good-bye? Does this mean she plans to keep modeling once we're married? I leave the punch table, and see she has rejoined "the group": --Al, the minister, Pierre, Carmichael. I feel a total outsider, and worse, the group makes me feel that everything about me is bad and everything I do is wrong. I hear her introduced Carmichael to a woman she calls "her therapist." Is that even kosher? Why doesn't she introduce me? Do I want to be introduced? I take a few steps further from the group.

What used to be simple, now seems so complicated. What is my passion?

Once going to law school was the fulfillment of a dream: law was just law, I was a good hard working boy, made good grades, my grandpa was happy with me. I was the center of my family's world and dreams. Now that I've exiled myself from my family, I'm told by Mery that law is part of society and I'm supposed to think about role of law in perpetuating or challenging the social structure. I'm supposed to figure out what I think about the law's morality; it's adversarial and even deceptive nature. Now I have to ask what are my values; am I going to law school for me or because that's the way I've been programmed by my family and the society? And of course how am I supposed to figure all this out? Certainly I shouldn't try to use my negative, problem-causing, analytical mind. I feel what my psychology teacher called "double-binded."

Mery says that human law is limiting, and supports a corrupt, capitalist greedy establishment. Spending money, like going to the Fairmont, is not a pleasure, it's something to feel guilt about. When I was with my family, I argued her position. With Mery, I argue my family's position. It seems like I don't know who I am, other than being a contrarian.

Mery implies I should seek the law of God, not the laws of man. Then her minister says that not only is the law of man limiting, but following the laws of God too strictly is not good either. You need to follow the example of Jesus, who breaks the laws. And now Pierre is saying in his ridiculously convoluted way, that there is no law at all, that the truly great artist--and great person, by implication?-- seeks the law of lawlessness. And Mery seems to be enchanted with each one of these ideas, without seeing how contradictory and confusing they are. Where am I supposed to turn? Arggh.

Since I met you, Mery, am I evolving into a better person, or are you just tearing me down one step at time, with no recovery, no better net volleys at the end?

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Maybe I should just become the anti-Christ, and rebel against everything she embraces. I reach in my pocket and pull out the church pamphlet, look briefly at the totem pole cover, then open and read:

Now, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...that day will not come unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so called god or object of worship.....

Second letter to the Thessalonias, 2:1-4

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I leave Mery and wander around the gallery. I have to admit, his paintings are kind of intriguing. Minimalist. A few lines. Unpainted spaces coming through that create interesting effects. Faint colors all the more tantalizing for their inconspicuousness.

But they are hardly erotic. I can't even make out the fig-

ures in them. Overall, the pictures make no sense visually, just as what is supposed to be great jazz makes no sense to me musically. The great jazz players are supposed to hear notes from inside and between the written notes of melody's structure. I just get lost. Same with the painting. Not only can't I do it, I can't really even appreciate it. It's just dizzying, confusing, formless. Are one of these Mery? I don't see any structure to Pierre's paintings, just meaningless minimalist dabbling riffs.

And I feel minimalist. I want to crawl into one of lawless Pierre's empty spaces and disappear, like Alice down the rabbit hole. Enough of Mr. Toad's wild ride on Mery's merry-go-round. Or Beth's or Eliza's. "Oh, don't be so uptight, names are just names, I have lots of nick-names" she'd said gaily, when I asked her about Al calling her "Beth." "You take a lawyerly approach to everything, and pigeonhole, structure, and analyze each piece of my world. Just let me breathe."

* * *

What happened to how cute I was with my place for everything in my glove compartment? It's the same me. When did my way of being in the world become such a liability? I turn to see where she is. Ah, talking to Pierre, his arm around her. I want to get out of here. I don't want to hear one more time, "So, you're the lucky guy." I have nothing more to say to anyone, including her.

Get me back to the Farm, to a swimming pool, to my classes, to tennis, to golf, to my friends, to some predictability and security.

I'm swimming in uncharted waters, in an ocean with a huge undertow, being pulled down to depths and places I don't know, where I don't want to be. To stay, swimming in place, is to be

pulled under; to leave to seek shore, is to be pulled under. I

don't know how to save myself.

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Have you read Buber's *I-Thou*, or Kierkegaard?" I ask, timidly.

"I don't know this Kierk...As for Buber, he isn't a real, observant Jew. He's a heretic. Like most of the so-called Orthodox in Israel."

I like Buber, but I'm willing to learn why he's not to be trusted. It may be a way of further leaving Elizabeth behind. After all, she is the one who gave *I-Thou* to me as a present. But the yeshiva student has nothing additional to say about Buber. "We Jews want to be a light to all peoples." He starts to expound on this assertion, but then there is a hush throughout the yeshivah. I realize that while we have been talking, there has been an ongoing background murmuring of discussions, readings, and heated arguments. Now there is complete silence. I look up and see why. The rabbi from next door has entered. All heads are turned toward him respectfully.

This may be my chance to meet him. He signals to my older brother. They confer in whispers. When the student returns, he says,

"The rabbi says you need to wear tzitzit, your hat is wrong, and we can't talk further to you until you bring us your bloodline. 'Be fruitful and multiply only applies to those of pure blood. Shalom.'" By his tone, I know his shalom is not saying hello or peace. It is only saying "Good-bye."

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two little boys who are hitting each other in the back row of the synagogue, and giggling. I wonder if there are laws and rules regarding "rough housing." I'm not sure why, but something in their spontaneous play brings me a perverse joy.

Behind the boys is an old man, darkly complected, with a thick grayish-black beard, long pavous He is enveloped in a flowing robe and prayer shawl, with a large black beaver hat on his head. He pauses mid-davening, begins clapping while watching the other men and two young boys dancing. He has a pleasant smile on his face. He looks over at me, stops clapping, and picks his nose.

I can't help but feel that it's a gesture directed at me.

Poor Ortho-John. Do you really have to take everything so personally?

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I leave Mea Shearim and walk over to the Sanhedrin Park, the burial place of the Judges of Israel's first Supreme Court. The pinnacle of the secular law--what I once thought I wanted to aspire toward. The park is completely deserted. The tombs of the Judges have been excavated, and are also empty.

How do I judge what is true? When should I summon additional determination and will to fight for what I want; and when is it time to cut losses and move on?

There is still a small crack left in the door at Mea Shearim. I could write my family for my bloodline; get the tzitzits; buy a different hat. Study the texts on my own in the meantime. Will that make a difference? Would they let me in? Do I really want to be let in?

But what other choices do I have? I'm running out of trees

to swing to. It took four years to realize law school was not right. Then Mery only lasted sixteen weeks. Less than seven weeks on the kibbutz to feel squelched and bound. Four weeks in Eilat to see that that hippie paradise wasn't my home. But all those appear like lifetimes compared to what just happened in Mea Shearim. I'm going through experiences faster and faster. As I accelerate, am I heading toward a crash ending? My time span is shrinking, as if I'm looking through the wrong end of a telescope. Is my life coming to an end, narrowing further and further until nothing is left, and I just go poof?

Ortho-John, you sound confused, mixing up space and time. But you're right. Both are shrinking in your live coming to a nadir, a point of darkness, from which I'm still trying to dig myself out.

How quickly belief and attitude shift. At sunrise on Sinai, I truly felt that God was speaking to me. I believed then that God would guide me to my new teachers, who would further reveal to me the Divine Law. Now I don't know where to turn. God's human representatives don't feel trustworthy and worthy of the task. Two months ago, Ortho-John has some inkling of this at Mea Shearim, at least wondering whether he has found the right teachers, but not yet willing to admit to himself that he hadn't.

In my reading I came across a term, metzitzah b'peh, sucking the wound. During the ritual of circumcision, the Haredi, the ultra-Orthodox Jews, have the mohel, the rabbinical circumciser perform an oral suctioning, a ritual that once concluded all Jewish circumcisions. It comes from the statement of Tractate 113b of the Babylonian Talmud in which it said that if a mohel does not suck the wound it is dangerous and he is

dismissed. In doing further investigation of this, I found that there have been instances of sores, even syphilis being transmitted to the baby in this fashion by the mohelim. Doesn't this seem clear case when laws need to outgrow and changed? Yet it seems they are unwilling to do so. Why don't they have the flexibility for that? Would their whole psychological and religious structure, their sense of self-appointed closeness topple?

I currently have the same sense of doubt, clearly seeing the limitations of the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet.

Worse, I'm questioning not just the teachers and the laws, but am not sure I can trust the Source from which they are supposed to have come.

I'm afraid we are in deep trouble, Ortho-John, worse than you realize. And, as you will find out, during the next ten days before the first night of Chanukkah, it only gets darker.

As I look around at the empty tombs, I image my death. I feel I could crawl into one of them and end my life. What is left for me to do here?

I hear my Nana saying to me once at Rosh Hashanah, that if you don't attend services, then Hitler will win. Maybe that is all that is left-- go to YadVaShem, and remember what Hitler did. That can be my last act.

I have a nearly uncontrollable urge to urinate. I look again, see no one, and begin to pee.

An act of nature? An act of despair? A rebellious act? Does peeing into an empty tomb desecrate it? Does it existentially alter the jurisprudential system of our esteemed planet?

Is nothing simple?

Even the meaning of peeing somehow seems connected to how we see the world, the universe, and our place in it.

* * *

"If you want to head on back, Pierre says he can give me a ride to work."

Mery must have seen me looking at my watch. Two fifty. She may think I'm bored and want to leave. She'd be right. But she doesn't have to be at work until 4. What I'd like to do is go back to her place for one last romp before I head south.

"How about if we take off now, that would give us a bit of time together." I try to look suave and coy but not needy. She goes over to Pierre and whispers something to him, then returns.

"Sure, that would be fine. You've been a great sport. Let's go." As we leave, I put my arm around her, and wave good-bye to Pierre. Mery waves at him, too.

He ignores me, and blows her a kiss.

What an asshole.

* * *

"I wanted to compliment you last week on what you said, but you disappeared before right at end of class."

I start in confusion as Joie, the school teacher approaches me. I am frozen and don't know what to say. I want to flee. Why is she talking to me? She acts as if she doesn't notice my agitation and awkwardness and adds, "Your questions were courageous. I admire someone who isn't afraid to speak their mind and challenge authority."

I try to smile, and nod my head.

For some reason I hear the admonition "Be fruitful and multiply" and feel embarrassment. Should I even be talking to

her? The superego of Mea Shearim still rattles in my brain. I wouldn't want them to see me with her, or even in the Rebbe's class. That would ruin all chances of my studying with them.

I don't even know why I came to the Parashah class. Maybe just to get out of my little room after six days of being nearly heretically sealed in my YMCA room reading and studying the books he told me to buy. I can't believe how many of their laws I break everyday.

Did I come to see the Rebbe's familiar face? For social contact? But now that someone has approached me, I want to avoid her.

"Thanks," is all I can manage to say.

"You're welcome. I noticed you weren't in the Chanukkah class yesterday. We had a fascinating discussion of the Devus drawing, and our views of the different branches of Judaism. Did you do those assignments?"

"Not yet."

"Well, if you want, sometime we can talk about them. I'd be interested in your views. Anyway, tonight's my last night singing at the Shalom Cafe before I head back to the U.S. If you're free, why don't you stop by?"

"Last night? You're leaving?"

"Yes, vacation is almost over, I need to return home."

"Partings and endings," I murmur, with some sadness, the source and cause of which I have no idea. I've just met this girl and have no feelings for her.

"Who knows? Sometimes a parting in a story is just the beginning. Every beginning has its ending built into it; but each ending creates the potential for a new beginning."

Before I can say anything, the Rebbe enters, and starts intoning a niggun. Joie begins singing with him, as she moves

swayingly toward the front of the room. I remain in the back.

She has a beautiful voice.

* * *

The sheets are still crumpled in Mery's bed from the night before, and the two scarves still on the railings of the bed board.

All I want is an orgasm, a final kiss good-bye, and to head back to the Farm. I reach out to pull Mery to the bed, but she steps aside, and goes to her bookshelf.

"What do you see in this picture?" she asks as she opens a book on Rembrandt, and sets it before me.

"Jesus," I say cautiously. Is this a prop for our sexual romp this afternoon?

"Look closer."

I do, and say "Yes, look at the caption, I'm right. It's Jesus."

"But where do your eyes go, what do you notice."

"Jesus."

"You sound like a broken record. Pierre says we don't see what's there; we in part create what we see by how we look, what we focus on. The question is where is the artist trying to direct our interest. Initially most people see the whole picture, then they look at certain parts; guided by the artist through technique and craft, the use of light, for example, which the viewers are usually not aware of."

"Very interesting," I say ignoring the painting and pulling her to me. I've just finished suffering through one art lecture, and one church sermon. I don't need more of each.

She pulls back. "No, wait. Look how vulnerable and human he

looks, despite His divinity. Yet, there is also a self-containment, an inner toughness."

She sees all that in one face? "Fascinating. Would you like the book open while we frolic?"

She ignores me and turns to a different page. "Christianity finds life's meaning in the mystery of death. Look at the palpable affliction and exhaustion on these people's face. You can feel their inner torment. Notice the dark, devouring shadows surrounding them. There is an unimaginable sadness in their wrinkled faces, yet their posture and demeanor don't exude defeat. There is darkness, but not despair, melancholy, but not self-pity, everyday pain but quiet strength. These are portrayals of individuals with rich inner lives. They do not hide from life; they face it head on, undeluded. Where do they get their strength and inner tranquility?"

Huh? Is she reading from a text or reciting class notes? Are we looking at the same picture? It's just a few old people having breakfast. I look at my watch. Three-twenty. We really don't have a lot of time.

I don't understand exactly why she is showing me these pictures now.

Is this foreplay?

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Miketz continues the story of Joseph in Egypt. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams of the seven fat cows eaten by the seven scrawny ones as seven years of abundance to be followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh appoints Joseph to a high position in society, gives him an Egyptian name, dresses him in robes of fine linen and puts a gold chain around his neck. Joseph, now

called Zaphenath-paneah, has the task to create a reserve of food during the time of abundance. Note the issue of assimilation--what name do we call ourselves in order to be part of the dominant society? What gold chains bind us?"

I feel pride, but also some guilt and shame at hearing this story. Pride because, in contrast to Joseph and Johannes, rather than becoming assimilated, I have sought out the most rigorous training possible at Mea Shearim. I've been reading what was recommended by the yeshiva student non-stop for the past week. I'm still not able to write, and my head is about to explode. But I'm trying.

Guilt and shame because I'm not sure I'm going to be allowed to study with them. I've written my family for my bloodline, although I don't know that they have kept the kind of meticulous, generational records that seem to be required by the yeshiva. I remember Nana saying she knew nothing about her great-grandfather. Also, that scream of mine on leaving was childish. Where did that come from? I'm embarrassed at myself.

I'm also embarrassed that I've slinked back to the Rebbe's class. Is this my fallback position?

"Note also in this Torah portion the lesson of self-control. During times of abundance, it is our self-control--our human will-- that allows us to cut back and regulate ourselves."

At these words, I feel only pride. In contrast to Johannes, who definitely had his time of abundance, in which he evidenced very little self-control either sexually or materialistically, I choose a sexual and material famine.

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"Wasn't Pierre's lecture brilliant?"

Three twenty-five. Mery continues to want to talk art. I'm feeling increasingly frustrated.

"Yes, excellent" I reply, pulling her toward me, hoping to get her to stop talking. I kiss her to keep her quiet. She lies back in my arms.

"Remember when you asked me what I felt like when I modeled?" I nod. "When I hear Pierre, he reinspires and reminds me why. Art elevates the senses, creates a heightened state of awareness. That's what I want to help artists create, to inspire in the people who are sketching me. I want to be a muse to them. At the best, it's like a creative dream state ..for them, for me."

What I "want" to help artists create? or what I wanted? Didn't she say she was thinking of stopping? "Is Pierre your third lover?"

She takes my arm away from around her, and sits up, laughing. "Heavens no."

"You're saying he's not attracted to you?"

She giggles. "Maybe. He likes all the women who model for his classes--and maybe some of the boys, too. But our relationship is not sexual, never has been, never will be." She pauses, seemingly thinking whether to continue. "He's the one that introduced me to James, the gallery owner. And when I started dating James, that was a problem for Pierre. No, he's just someone I admire, a great artist. Someone I've modeled for."

I notice the tense of "modeled." Should I ask her if that means it's in the past, or leave the topic for latter and get back to the task at hand? But then I do neither, and ask

"Who was the other lover then, besides Al and James?"

"Probe, probe, probe. Fine, it's not a big deal. And not a very happy experience, either. Peter. He was my first boyfriend, right after high school. He was a pretty lost soul. He wanted to be a poet, a rebel. He experimented with all sorts of drugs. Dad hated him, and I think that's why I went out with him. It didn't even last the summer." She looks at me. "Now you know my entire history. Satisfied?"

I look down at my lingham, smile, and say, "Not yet."

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She looks at her watch. Three-forty. "Sorry, there's no time."

Arrgh.

"I wish I could sell more paintings. Then I wouldn't have to go to this stupid job. I'm really sorry."

"Can't you help me out a little?" I point plaintively.

"Can't you see the inner affliction and unimaginable sadness on my face, the silently suffering and inner torment. I need my tranquility!"

She looks over at the Rembrandt book, unsmiling. "Let's just cuddle for a couple minutes." She lies back in my arms.

"I'm confused about this whole sexual thing--I've been thinking about what you said this morning, about how what I like makes you feel. I want to talk to my therapist about that. I don't feel like we should have sex until I figure this out. Would it be ok if we just hold each other for now?"

No! Ovid? "Sure, sure." And I begin to stroke her hair.

* * *

Maybe rather than Ovid, Johannes should be reading Marcus Tullius Cicero, the orator and political philosopher, who lived

before Jesus (106-43bce). Let me quote to you, Johannes, what he said (though unfortunately I know you can't hear me; I can only hear you). "Now we come to <another> accusation people make against old age: sex, or rather the absence of it; but in fact it is a great compensation of age that it frees us from what is the source of so much corruption when we are younger." Cicero talks about the ways desire for sexual gratification can dominate the mind and thereby interfere with the pursuit of excellence in life. Maybe you should be happy that Mery only wants to cuddle with you. Even though this might not make as salacious a story, it may lead you to becoming a wiser, more spiritual person.

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"Oh, God!" Mery jumps up, looking at her watch. It's Four
twenty. We both fell asleep.

"I've got to go. I'm dead. He'll fire me for sure now. Will
you drive me?"

I am in a foggy state. We stumble out the door, get in Mr.
Red, and drive her to the deli. Mery is frantic, brushing her
hair, straightening her clothes. Yet there is also that glazed
look on her face. She rushes out of the car not even turning around
as she slams the door saying "Thanks."

"I'll pick you up Friday morning for Carmel."

"Sure. Fine."

"Bye."

"Bye."

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Da dada DUM!

I'm so happy to be back in class. Finally, some structure
after the craziness of this weekend. A class, with rows of

seats, a beginning and ending bell to signal start and finish, an assignment to keep us focused. And even if this particular class--creative writing--is one of the most amorphous, formless, unstructured classes I've ever had, at least it is a class.

It's been hard for me to regain my moorings down here, after the craziness of the weekend. Monday I had my flute lesson, but after the fiasco of my music playing with Mery Saturday night, it felt both boring and meaningless to keep practicing--not only Orpheus, but any tune. Tyrannical Taylor was furious with me, calling me lazy and ill-prepared. Normally this prods me to greater efforts, but I simply couldn't take his criticism. It felt grating, mean-spirited, and unhelpful. Finally, I just cut the lesson short. He became more furious when I asked if I could pro-rate the cost of the session.

I paid him in full, reluctantly, but told him his services would not be required for the next few weeks. If and when I send my letter to Grandpa and Harvard, I'm going to need to watch my spending, and I certainly don't want to waste it on his criticism.

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I spent the last three days getting ready for this upcoming weekend with Mery. Most importantly, I looked for an engagement ring for her. It was not easy to find, and I had to cancel my Tuesday tennis game--they agreed to reschedule after class today. And I even missed swimming today. But, finally, I found a lovely double helix-like silver band with two stands of metal coiling around and through each other. I'm also getting a solid silver ring with our verse from the Song of Songs--I am my beloved and my beloved is mine--engraved on it.

I thought about having the inscription written in Hebrew, and called the campus Hillel Rabbi to see if he knew a Hebrew engraver.

"Mazel Tov. A marriage is always a blessing. I'm very happy for you. I don't believe I've ever met you, have I?"

I told him I'd been working on my studies, and hadn't really had a chance to visit the Hillel, or him.

"Must have been quite a busy four years! Well, it's never too late. Why don't you come by? I'd love to meet you. Do you have someone to officiate at your celebration?"

"No, not yet, but I'll keep you in mind." Is he trying to drum up business? All I want is a simple answer to my question.

"Thank you. Unfortunately, I don't have time this week. But do you know an engraver?" I have to be persistent with everyone, otherwise I'd be sidetracked from my goals.

"Hold on a second. Let me look." I imagine him going through a rolladex of cards. "Tell me how you picked that lovely line from the Song. Do you know it is part of the Passover Seder?"

"No, really?"

"Yes. There's a wonderful teaching about why that is so. Sometime we should talk about it."

"Hmm, sure." Is he stalling just so he can talk to me and lure me to his office?

"How was your Seder this year? Fulfilling? Uplifting?"

What seder? A month ago, at Passover, I was with Mery at the Fairmont, delighted I was missing the long, tedious Seder my family holds every year.

Maybe I should create a make-up Seder for us this weekend in

Carmel. After all, Mery's inundated me with her Christian stuff-- church and prayers and Rembrandt pictures-- why don't I give her a little Jewish education? Though I realize I'll have to first give myself one.

"No, I can't find an engraver up here that I know of. There are several in the Fairfax district in L.A. Would you like one of those numbers?"

He gives me a few names. "Feel free to call any time. And if next week is any better, let me know. I'd love to meet you, and the lucky woman."

Before he can hang up, I say, "Actually, Rabbi, I have one more question. Could you suggest a good basic book or two about Passover and the Seder?"

"I have some here. Are you sure you don't want to come by?"

"No, that's ok, I can do it myself, thanks."

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I decided it was simplest to have the ring engraved in English. Hebrew might seem intimidating and foreign to Mery.

And to you?

See how empathic I am to her religious sentiments; if only she would be similarly sensitive to me.

I spent a lot of time in the library these past two days, reading excerpts from the books the Rabbi suggested--and taking notes in a new file, entitled "Passover"-- so I would be ready for this weekend's Seder.

And my final acts of preparation for the weekend were to buy a couple of Doors and Janis Joplin tapes, and, based on Mery's comments about my contacts, I'm having a pair of glasses, with cool gold, wire-rimmed frames made for me. Finally, I had

myself fitted for a pair of sandals. After the Fillmore, I don't want to be caught in my wingtips again. But I didn't want to get just any off-the-shelf sandals. These will fit me exactly.

Who says I can't change with the times. When in Rome.....

Everything is ready and in order for Carmel. Order, the very definition of the Seder, as I have recently learned.

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In creative writing class today, the professor gave me a gift. It was not intended for me personally, of course, but he finally put some more detailed meat into the previous formlessness of the sessions. He talked about some of the most important elements of writing fiction: title, opening line; story arc from beginning to ending; narrative voice; depth of primary character(s); sense of place.

Our assignment is to brainstorm ideas for a short story, play, or novel, and let the professor see our thinking. He said to write what you know.

Since I've already written and turned in a draft scene of a play about my family, what does that leave? It's interesting how quickly bad affect fades. Whatever negative feelings I had toward them at the time I wrote it are gone. With no effort.

Right. No effort. No "in and through." No conscious effort at learning and then forgiveness. Thanks for leaving that for me.

Da dada DUM! Now there is only one topic of interest and affect....Mery.

I certainly know her--biblically and otherwise! Perhaps I could write something describing giving the ring to her, her joy in receiving it, her happiness in saying "yes" to our marriage. This could be the start of a happily ever after story arc.

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That sounds great for life, but boring for an assignment.

Maybe it would be more interesting (and salaciously saleable), to write about my past adventures with women. I could call it "Dates."

That has a certain sweet, multi-leveled flavor to it. I could write about my dates with women, on what dates those dates occurred, and how edible they--and I--were. Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, there are some problems with this idea. First, a story like this may be more than I want to share in writing. Secondly, there is no narrative arc. It would be more like a catalog, just a repetitive series of similar events. Like writing something called "Meals." Each one can be nice, keeps us healthy, but then you go on to the next day and eat (good double entendre, there) a new, different one. I suppose I could talk about the different flavors, seasonings, subtleties.

"J's Dates."

Not much of a ring. (Ah, there I go again, spicing it up with intelligently ironic issues of intimacy). "J's Dates." Actually, it sounds like something that could be found in the produce section of a supermarket--a special type of sweet, juicy fruit.

Maybe if I wrote about some of my dates, then had the story culminate in the Don Juan-type character transforming and making a commitment to one person, the last "date," where he marries Mery. That would give me a narrative arc. It would be like a story called "Meals" ending with "The Last Supper."

<Gosh, I'm a witty, wily, (w)romantic writer>.

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Da dada DUM!.

The first line. The professor told us today that one of the most important aspects of any work is the opening sentence.

I would want to open my novel with a cadence, bringing a musical rhythm and meaning to the words. For example, as beginning "notes" (joke) for that first sentence, I could use:

Da dada DUM!.

Beethoven's Fifth. Fate entering. On the fourth syllable, the "DUM," I imagine the conductor jabbing the air for emphasis. Like a right upper cut.

Initially unbeknownst to the reader, that cadence would underlie the first four syllables of the opening words.

Now I need to find the perfect first four syllables.

I would want these opening words to suggest the narrative arc of the work, to set the tone of transformation possibilities right from the start, perhaps containing in seedling form the entire book. Ah, now we're getting somewhere. And this could all be done with "a literate alliteration," my forte!

James Joyce opens the *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* with a small child speaking of "the moo cow."

The first three syllables of my opening "Da dada" could be understood both as the music of fate, and a small baby babbling, reaching out to his dad "da", "dada."

"Dada" could also be understood as a reference to the early twentieth century movement in art and literature based on deliberate irrationality and the negation of traditional artistic values. Maybe even borrow something from Pierre St Jacques' lecture. How is that for irony.

From "da" (dad) to dada (irrational negation) ending

with a father's punch. Or Is that the father's "dumb" punch?

A similar progression could be made for the mother.

Ma mama mum. Same young boy, only this time reaching out to his mom (with a little English variation at the end); or the last syllable "mum" could also be the transformative tale of a mother accusing the son of awkward silences, or a mother who is silent when he seeks her love.

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If I don't think about what jerks my parents are, but only of them as literature, these are great opening lines. I should definitely try to work them into my family "play." But enough about family, I need to get back to women, and one woman in particular. Mery.

I let my mind start daydreaming about content and the first thing that comes to mind is my upcoming date with her at "Carmel by the Sea." There, I will ask Mery to marry me.

Passover would be a wonderful backdrop to the date "story," suggesting the character's liberation from his enslavement to his need to date ever-new women. It will have been one month exactly since that lovely fateful night when we went to hear Ode to Joy, and then spent the weekend at the Fairmont. It was the week of Passover.

First he leaves the bondage of his family for a new beginning.

Then he leaves his compulsive need to run from girl to girl. And the transformation, the way he becomes free is ironic-- by being willing to make a long-term commitment to and "date" just one person for the rest of his life. Before, my Don Juan character would have thought of this transformation in completely opposite terms: as a movement from the serial romance to the bondage of marriage.

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Maybe I could conjoin the two dates--Fairmont and Carmel--
into one story. At the Fairmont my protagonist is still a "play-
er." But in Carmel, I will be the commuted beloved. What a
crafty arc for the voice: from third person detached, impersonal
to first person here and now engaged.

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Ok, now to the first sentence. Brainstorm opening sentences,
without regard to syllables or alliteration. Don't censor, just
let ideas creatively flow.

Mery....Passover....Marry.

The story could begin on a date with Mery at Passover, where
Don Juan commits to marry her, then flashes back to various
aspects of his other previous dates, and what has led him to this
moment. This has the narrative arc I want, a transforming move-
ment from a sexually carefree Lotheriao to a serious, insightful
young man on the cusp of making a major life change. The charac-
ter becomes ready to take a leap of faith from "playing the
field" to committing himself to one person for life.

Alliteration? M words associated with Passover:

Mary.... matzah...Marry.

No, she's certainly not flat!

Mery....Mazor...Marry.

Bitter herbs. Too dark, though sometimes true! But both
words and images are too one dimensional.

There needs to be movement. And the right number of
syllables to fit in with Da...dada...dum.

Me...Mery...Mer.

Ah, that's not bad. Starts with "me". And the "me" is then

embedded, enfolded, and becomes part of "Me"ry. I could even place a dash between Mery: Me-ry, as a way to show how the Buber book she gave me and the dash between I - Thou has influenced me. Two join and become one, while still containing two. They "Mery" (i.e, make merry, and marry) by the mer (sea).

There, the opening sentence can now be read on multiple levels.

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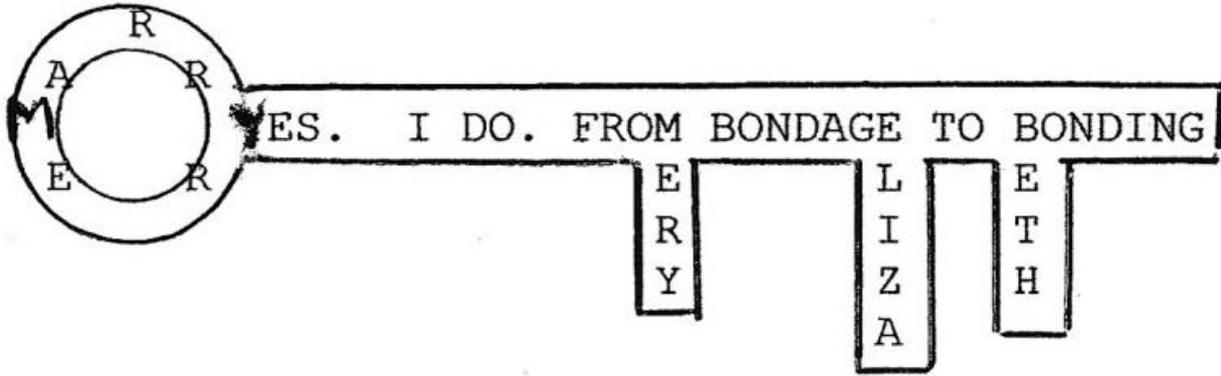
Even more than you know, Johannes. What you see as joined, embedded and enfolded within Mery, I now see as engulfed and swallowed up by her, then spit out and cast adrift into the sea.

* * *

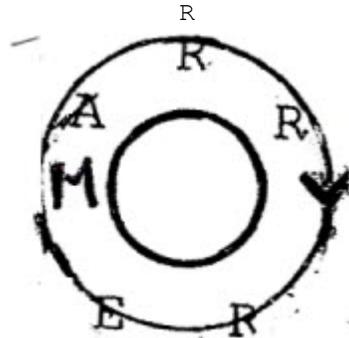
Words are amazing in their elasticity. Yes, a story has to be written with words, which are discrete and finite, composed of letters. But the meaning of a word can be multi-leveled, depending upon how it is joined and connected with others. Like a crossword puzzle. Take that, Mery. Form AND content.

Right, Johannes, so many meanings in a crossword puzzle. On one level, it's trying to solve a puzzle, the very definition. On another level cross words, the theme of anger, for example suggest emotions conveyed through words. Maybe a third level would be the shape and form of a "cross" word puzzle. And maybe there are deeper levels still that I can uncover or develop.

I can even imagine the narrative arc of my story as an interconnected series of words, artistically shaped. She has found the key to his heart.



Putting a ring on her finger as he "marries Mery" (the



start of the key, in circular form, like a ring!)

And he gets three women for the price of one!

Kierkegaard's "Or" and Ovid's "Part Two" would certainly be proud!

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"Reb Jonathan, when you talk about Joseph's assimilation in this weeks Parashah, that raises a question for me in my own life. Do you mind if I ask if you eat pork and shrimp?" It is Mister Suck Butt Peter. I feel frustrated and annoyed, as usual, when he makes his inevitable query. Though I am curious about what the Rebbe will say.

"Wonderful. I'm happy to answer your question, Peter, and I will, but first, my guess is there is a deeper question behind the question, is that correct?"

"What do you mean?" Peter looks puzzled. I'm glad

"Why are you interested in whether I eat pork and shrimp. What does that mean to you if I did, or didn't? Why does that interest you?" . Finally, the Rebbe is showing a bit of spine, some lawyerly cross-examination. I bet he learned this style from the master, Dr. Lisbet.

"Ah, ok, well, the Orthodox say you're not supposed to, that if you do it's a sin and you're not keeping kosher." I look at him smugly. He doesn't know the half of it. In Mea Shearim, they believe that most Orthodox people don't keep kosher carefully enough, and so won't eat in their homes. I'm impressed with the depth of my knowledge about the nuances of Orthodoxy. And what kind of kosher name is Peter? Wasn't that the name of Elizabeth's first boyfriend? No wonder I don't like him.

"My family says that's just a bunch of superstitious nonsense. Once it may have made sense for health reasons, before there was refrigeration, but now it's pointless."

"Ah, now we're getting deeper. So you're asking if it's an archaic and unnecessary restriction that can and should be ignored in modern times, is that correct? " Peter nods. "And you're asking whether I eat forbidden foods to find out if I don't, why not, and if I do, how do I justify it." Peter signals agreement.

"This is actually an ideal example of our views of evolution. Early in Genesis all meat is prohibited. Then, later in Genesis, God says, ok, I realize that's too hard for you guys, meat is ok, just don't mix milk and meat, and don't eat certain types of meat and shellfish.

"Why no pork and shellfish? I agree with your family that initially there foods were probably prohibited for sanitary reasons, and religion was a way to reinforce healthy habits.

Since we can know with relatively good assurance that pork and shellfish are safe to eat, you're asking whether it make sense to change the restriction. I would say, in current times, that particularly restriction is now arbitrary from a health standpoint.

"But having said that, I believe that any arbitrary act, done as a sacred spiritual observance, can make each of us a better, more holy person. This can apply particularly to a daily act, like eating, in terms of what we choose to eat, and choose not to eat. Further, tradition can add a depth of feeling of belonging for some.

"For me, the spirit of kashrut is mindfulness and gratefulness. Whatever we eat, we should feel grateful for all those who helped prepare it: farmers, the land, the animals whose life we're eating to nourish ours. The act of eating can and should be a holy act, done with great attention, care, and thankfulness."

** * **

As I listen to him, I decide that I will become a total vegetarian. Not only is that what God first wanted, it also makes a lot of Mea Shearim's fastidious rules of kashrut simpler. A win-win.

I like the spirit of what the Rebbe is saying. But I notice that he still hasn't answered Peter's question: does he eat pork and shrimp, or not?

"But wouldn't the Orthodox say you are violating the law and are sinning?" Somebody has to push him and hold him to a higher standard.

"I respect all positions, if they are done with conscious attention and gratefulness. If a person chooses to be a vegetarian and honor animals in general, that is lovely. If a person chooses not to eat pork and shrimp only because of tradition,

that is fine too, and we can respect that. And, though I know this is not a popular position in Orthodox circles, I believe that if a person chooses to eat pork and shrimp, so long as it is done mindfully and gratefully, I can respect that position, too."

"But they don't respect your position, do they? What happens when there are no standards at all? Do you just throw tradition out and let everyone fend for themselves?"

I'm not sure Ortho-John realizes that his antagonistic questions are both a reflection of his deepening confusion, and evidence of adolescent rebellion, a contrarian streak embedded within him?

When Ortho-John is with the Mea Shearim Jews, he wonders if they aren't being too obsessive and harsh in their views of others; when he is in the Rebbe's class, he uses the self-righteousness of Mea Shearim's beliefs to attack the more progressive Reb Jonathan. Just like Johannes, with his family, used Mery's attacks on the law to criticize his grandfather; and his grandfather's perspective, to counter criticize Mery's position. Both Ortho John and Johannes have this in common.

But what do they stand FOR? Do they have an independent core self? Who are they other than someone who rebels against whatever position is being presented --a reactive identity obtained only through taking an adversarial stance?

They would make good lawyers, arguing whichever position of the case they're hired to represent. Either that or find out who they are, a task both left to me.

* * *

"An intriguing question, actually two questions. The first is really a statement. You're saying if I take a position that

goes against tradition, what happens to tradition? Let me return to that when we talk further about Chanukkah and about this week's parashah—Joseph and his assimilation in Egypt, which we've briefly mentioned.

"The second question has to do with who decides 'truth,'--both for oneself, and for others. Here is where I believe the law--and harsh judgment-- can get in the way of the spirit. Those who would look askance at you if you eat pork, or a cheeseburger, or shellfish, often do so from the belief that you're 'violating the law.' There is one absolute, inviolate Truth for them, and their truth is true for everyone. Of course that Truth -- with a capital T-- , has many subtruths, all based on their subsequent interpretation and understanding of how to live in the modern world. But those, too, are of course--in their belief--equally unerring.

If you see Orthodox pronouncements as the one and only Truth, then, yes, you are by definition violating God's law if you ignore them.

"I respect those who observe the laws of kashrut to the finest detail. It is a truth--for them. But I am sorry, however, when I see their fanaticism and panic and fear at violating kashrut cutting them off from others--their refusal to eat in other's home, for example, whom they feel are 'unclean' and 'impure.' I would wish that they did not feel more holy than someone else who, after careful consideration, doesn't keep that practice as rigorously as they. And I also would hope they do not feel they are acting holy if they only observe the behavior and do not bring a spirit of sacredness to all aspects of eating.

"For me, for us," he points toward Dr. Lisbet, "that holy

intention clearly is our goal. From that perspective, whether someone eats, or doesn't eat pork, is really a less relevant question than the process by which that person has come to a conscious choice about what and how to eat."

He looks around the room with a bemused smile. He pats his tummy. "And then of course there is how much to eat. I am working, with Dr. Lisbet's help, on eating less." He stops smiling and says in a serious tone, "Food makes me confront my greed and gluttony, especially in a world where many do not have enough to eat. As Dr. Lisbet and I learned when we were in India, Gandhi once said, 'To eat too much when others do not have enough is like stealing.'

"There are many facets involved in what it means to be holy when we talk about eating. I'd be careful of narrowing it down too simplistically--and self-righteously-- to a specific type of food."

** * **
I have a self-satisfied smile when I hear him say this, knowing that I am eating less and less. I feel like I am a righteous person. But also annoyed...at him. I can contain myself no longer. "Do you or do you not eat pork and shrimp?" I ask with agitation.

"I apologize. I was rather long-winded. Though I now no longer eat pork or shrimp, I have done so on occasion in the past. Sometimes with guilt, sometimes with awareness and thankfulness." He smiles again.

"What about cheeseburgers?"

"Well, that's a different prohibition. As you all may know, that has to do with mixing milk and meat. Probably this later

prohibition involved a sensitivity about not eating the calf with its mother's milk, not consuming the offspring in the presence of the mother's nurturing sustenance. A pretty holy sentiment, if you think about it. That's something I don't do, and never have done.

"Thank you again, Peter, for your question, and you"--he nods toward me, "for your follow-up."

I'm not impressed with his open violation of the law, but I am impressed with his non-defensiveness and I have to admit that at least some of his answer makes sense to me.

"We hope each of you will bring a conscious attention to all your acts. Eating is a great opportunity, because it's necessary for our survival and occurs every day. Each of you has the opportunity to notice your own eating habits, why you choose to eat what you eat, how you feel both about the content of your food, and the process of consuming it. We invite you to bring a few degrees more intention to your eating and see it as a holy, conscious act, for which we should all be grateful. That to me is the essence, the deepest spirit of kashrut."

I remember when I was young, one of my favorite presents was a paint by number set. You would have this lovely white cardboard canvas, with a picture already drawn on it, and numbers representing different colored paints. My job was to paint the colors onto the appropriate numbers, and what would emerge would be the most magical and beautiful shadings and colorings.

It's interesting how Johannes recalls this memory while trying to plan the contours of his work of fiction, seeking to create the "form" for his writing. And Ortho-John recalled the

same memory, while seeking the precise laws of the Orthodox, to fill in the form of God's ways. It's like having the sheet music before me with notes already written just waiting to be played, or having the tracks laid down, so you know exactly how to proceed, and which course to take.

Now I'm having to develop the structure and form of my life in which to create the content. It's like having to fill in a crossword puzzle, but first you yourself have to create it. This is not something I'm used to doing. Nor is it something I'm very good at.

* * *

The professor goes to the blackboard and draws a circle. "I don't know how many of you are familiar with this Taoist yin-yang symbol." He continues to draw, "Within a circle is an 'embryo' or comma--the yin--of darkness with a small dark circle in it. This represents female energy. You will notice that by drawing the dark, you automatically create the embryo of light." He then draws a small circle within the light embryo, and colors it in.



"Dark within light; light within dark." He turns and looks around the classroom. "My own interest in Sartre's and Heidegger's ruminations on being and nothingness has led me to dabble in Eastern thought, and I've been particularly impressed with the Taoist wu-wei--emptiness-- and this symmetric symbol of form that emerges from that void and formlessness."

I feel confused. This seems way too abstract and philosophical. Is this an art class or a class on creative writing? I raise my hand and ask him that.

"Don't be so literal. Let your mind expand. Everything can be grist for the creative writing mill. Think of how you might apply this image to a story." I am now totally confused. This is too much information too fast with no framework for me to assimilate.

"Can you give an example?" I ask.

"Ok, to give you a pat, simplistic Hollywood script, what if the light--male energy-- and dark--female energy-- were separated by time and place at the start of the story. Symbolically, the narrative arc could be how these two embryos, separate and apart at the beginning (though with a small circle of the other embedded within them), find each other and in so doing complement and birth a circle of harmony. The embryos could be two different people; it could be two parts of energy within the same person....."

There is silence. I raise my head and see him looking around the room. I'm the only one who is desperately taking notes. Others are just nodding; some doodling. He continues, impassioned. I return to writing, furiously.

"Imagine visually you are creating a painting. Draw a picture-- with words-- at the start of your story, of a place--an actual physical location and/or mood. Using nature--the sun, moon--or human sources--thanks to Edison-- or some internal psychological dynamics, portray light--containing just a small circle of darkness; or convey darkness, containing just a small circle of light. Or both, though separated by time and space--if you're really creative. How would these come together? How would

you create an ending using mixtures of light and darkness?"

I still feel perplexed, my mind spinning. The bell rings. "Think about it, class. Go into your creative center. There's a seedling of an idea there. I guarantee it. In fact," he raises his voice as he sees the class disappearing out the door, all except me, who continues to take notes, "I bet Joyce, if he had studied Eastern religions, would have found a way to go beyond the circularity of Finnegans Wake, a way to integrate duality and unity."

He stops talking. I stop my scribbling. When I look up, I notice he seems so impressed with his own ideas that he actually has begun writing some notes to himself.

* * *

I walk outside into the bright, oblique afternoon sunlight. I close my eyes and let it warm me. I try to clear my head from yin-yang embryo comma thoughts buzzing like white lightning streaks in the darkness of my mind.

Is this what he means? It's way too confusing for me. Where is the linearity of the law when I need it? I pat the letters in my pocket--one to Grandpa, one to Harvard.

I'm having some trouble sending them.

Right now, everything is in a perfect suspension. Grandpa's money is still coming in, so I can buy custom-made sandals, an engagement and wedding ring for Mery, and have enough for a vacation to Carmel, driving Mr. Red. Also, after my confusion in writing class today, and even this past weekend with Mery, having a clear direction in life--the light of Harvard Law inviting me to join them-- seems like something I don't want to lightly throw away.

I can wait another week. Maybe I'll send them after I return

from Carmel, and Mery has accepted my proposal.

I think of giving Mery a call to tell her that she's going to be a star in my fictional story. As my teacher said, "Fiction cedit veritas." Fiction leads to truth.

She is going to be a character in my story, and the love of my life. I bet she'll be delighted at the fame she'll get as the heroine of my novel; and also pleased that she has become my muse for verbal creativity, just as she desires to be a muse for others' visual creativity. Maybe the yin yang embryos the professor talked about are Mery and me. Opposites in so many ways. Separate at the start of the story, and then at the end coming together in a beautiful, symmetrical, complementary harmony.

As I think of calling her, something holds me back. What? I image her modeling. I still feel a pang of jealousy at that idea. I hope she does stop. I may have to demand it. Right now, with Mery in San Francisco, and me here, things are in a homeostasis which I don't want to interrupt before our trip to Carmel. Just let things rest for now. I need some exercise. I'm ready for a little competitive tennis.

* * *

Johannes, the embryo being formed in your life--and story-- is the work you're doing to transform yourself from a Don Juan to a committed beloved. You are trying to turn women, whom you saw--as you saw almost everything--as "Its" into the "Thou" of Mery. In a way that is only fitting, since it was she who introduced you to Buber's I-Thou. With Ovid's help, you wish to grow the embryo into a committed, loving husband.

But your spiritual stirrings are minimal, if at all. The Song of Song verse you are having engraved on the ring is, for

you, only interpersonal. The dash between the "I" of you and the "Thou" of your beloved, Mery, is similarly just about seeing her as a beloved, with no spiritual context, as your four syllable opening line suggests.

Me...Me-ry...Mer.

* * *

But you chose not to call her, didn't you? Why? I think you knew that the story you wanted to unfold of "happily ever after" wasn't going to occur. The opposites of yin and yang were too far apart to be joined in this relationship. Rather, some part of you feared that rather than finding an eternal embrace in Carmel-by-the-sea, Mery was going to symbolically drown you in that sea.

* * *

So I am left to write a different story. Your sentiments are noble, but limited, Johannes. Although you don't yet see it, the embryo being formed is not the committed spouse, but your spiritual birthing. Buber would say that God is present when humans can connect in a deeply spiritual and loving way. You are wrestling interpersonally with love trust, faith, intimacy, commitment, the same themes I am now wrestling with spiritually. As for me, I now no longer view the dash in terms of human relationship, but in terms of the "I" of me, seeking the "Thou" of God directly. Similar, after Sinai, I now understand the Song of Songs not about two interpersonal lovers, as you so foolishly thought, but of a person's--my-- yearning toward God.

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And how do I see her--Elizabeth to me, Mery to you--fitting into this story? Given what happened in your relationship with

her, it's hard for me to see her as an entirely positive person. To me, she is, in many ways, Mery the harlot, someone who acts spiritual and innocent, yet models nude, dances wildly, smokes dope, and has bizarre sexual desires. This is the Mery who seduced Johannes away from himself, who drove him--and me-- to the chaos of the sea, who took away our entire ground of being and all the anchors of our life.

Just as I feel I can't trust my family, I feel I can't trust her--or women in general. I want nothing more than to leave her behind in the dust bin of history. I do not desire interpersonal relationships, or beloveds, or family. They are simply too untrustworthy. I seek only the highest Source of Trust.

* * *

How about that, Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet? Pretty deep, huh? And didn't cost me a penny.

* * *

John, my friend, you point the way, but do not go far enough. The story, to be fair, is more complex than the one you tell yourself. And your omissions are more costly than you realize.

Look at the yearning we all have for belonging--Johannes in interpersonal love; you in spiritual love. And look how beloveds and family and spirit all intertwine.

Johannes' consideration of "Ma Mama Mum," as an opening sentence is, I believe, at least unconsciously, an expression of his looking toward Mery to fill the unbearably painful hole left by the loss of his parents and family. He was seeking a new family structure, searching for a new, more loving mother, Mother Mery. Not that different from you, John. Though you seek to

distance yourself from her by calling her Elizabeth, aren't you also seeking a spiritual Mother?

All of us are searching for that mother. To give your Elizabeth, our Mery, credit, she is the mother of and helped birth my--our-- spiritual yearning and quest. At the very least, it was midwifed by her. She was the catalyst who caused us to relook at the religion of our birth, Judaism, and its relationship to her religion of Christianity.

We are all seeking, each in our own way, and in different forms, the spiritual Mother and Father.

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I'm at a choice point. I can continue to read Johannes' journal, knowing that this next week--unbeknownst to him-- is going to be a descent into hell, the likes of which he has never before known.

I can write about Ortho-John's final week, completing his experiences up to Christmas, and his trip to Bethlehem, when he/I could finally write, after the two month hiatus caused by the machete. Again, I know what he doesn't-- that week will be an even worse descent into darkness than Johannes', nearly destroying him--us.

Is it any wonder that I don't particularly relish either task? Although it doesn't seem very spiritual, and is not the image of the wise spiritual seeker--and I even feel embarrassed to admit it to myself--there are times when I just need some mental distraction from writing, reading journals, and cleaning pots and pans. Like fiddling with crossword puzzles, or carving my chess pieces, or even goofing around playing silly tunes on the flute.

Even though I have no desire to write a novel, it does sound fun to imagine--as a diversion-- what I would use as an opening line for this crazy story that's unfolding.

I'd keep Mery in there, but rather than marriage, I'd want to bring in the theme of spiritual quest right at the start. I'd reinforce the Passover theme more strongly. And, yes, Johannes, I'd try to keep your four syllable da dada dum, and even your alliteration. How about....

Mery.....Moses.

I take down my reference book and look up Moses. Moses, meaning to "draw forth," a man who helped liberate those who were enslaved. How about a story in which a young woman, Mery, meets an atheistic young man, and helps "draw him forth" from his bondage to legalism and materialism by opening him to religion through the influence of her faith.

Moses, a religious leader who guides the Israelites out of bondage. My opening line could foreshadow a coming of age story, a theme of growth and maturity, suggesting the author was going to write a spiritual bildungsroman seeking something beyond the conventional realms of daily life; a search for higher truth.

* * *

I look over at my cross-word puzzle, and draw two boxes with a dash in each.



What are these? I guess it depends on the viewer. Crossword boxes that need to be filled in? Stylized eyes with which to see? Closed eyes with square rimmed glasses? Johannes might say stylized breasts?

I enjoy letting my mind be playful, as Johannes

often would. It's a side of me that has been buried, but maybe can be allowed to be reborn, to remerge.

I return to titles. Let's experiment. Brainstorming, uncensored.

Eliza.....Elija

With the change of one letter, the "z" of Eliza replaced by a "j" of Elija we have transformation. Elija, the prophet who championed the worship of one God instead of a myriad of other deities. Elija, who one day will return at Passover, through the open door, to drink the extra cup of wine poured for him, and usher in the Messianic era.

I look up Elija for more information. Sigh, it looks like Elijah is spelled with an h at the end. Oh, well, there goes that idea.

I guess that's ok because one other concern is that both of these openings are too purely symbolic, and aside from the symbolism, they sound kind of silly. What would be most important is that the reader be able to understand the opening sentence on a literal, non-transformative, non-symbolic level; then only later come to realize that there was an unexpected richness, dimensionality, meaning and shading involved.

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Arggh. I can't believe how pompous I sound, like Elizabeth's artist professor Pierre's lecture, trying to get the viewer to see how much thought and attention went into his paintings. I start off being playful, then all of a sudden the machinations of my mind take over. It's not like I'm really trying to write a novel. It's not like I'm still in class, needing to impress the professor with these musings. This is supposed to be fun, an

intellectual respite from the doom and gloom that awaits me--,
them--Johannes and Ortho-John.

* * *

I now know that the story doesn't end as Johannes is planning it. The two embryos of the yin and yang, separate at the start of the story don't come together in a balanced harmony as the end, as he fantasized. This isn't a story about boy meets girl, they connect, they marry.

If I were to write this novel now, Johannes, knowing how things turned out, I would of course do it differently than you. I'd open the story at a time of symbolic, if not literal darkness, though ideally both. A solitary, shadowy, embryo-like figure would be engaged in a lonely struggle, his dark night of the soul. This would be Johannes after he and Mery break up, and he is going through torment and Job-like suffering.

To make the story uplifting, I would have, amidst that darkness, just a bit of light, symbolizing his yearning for spiritual birth and awakening--and completing the yin embryo. Like a candle in a darkened room.

The final scene would take place with the dazzling sunrise at Sinai, the encounter with God, and the ah-hah realization that my life is about "serving water." A transformative tale of seeking and finding God through prayer, study, rational thought, crying, grace, evolution, revelation.

"God was in this place and I did not know it."

The dark embryo at the start becomes the white embryo at the end.

* * *

A great story.

But something's wrong, even if I completely suspend disbelief and assume for the sake of this fairy tale that I truly experienced God on Sinai, which I feel I did, but now seems such a distant memory. And even if I posit that this God Whom I encountered is the all-compassionate, all-loving, all-powerful God I was and am seeking, something is still wrong.

The problem?

The yin/yang symbols would be limiting as a portrayal of that encounter; and insufficient as a metaphor to convey the role of God. Yes, God could be the little white light circle in the dark yin at the start, the big light of the yang at the end.

But that wouldn't express the sense of God as everything. If God is One, then how would this Oneness be shown by the black and white embryos, which are opposites. The transformation of increasing light and decreasing dark suggests wrestling and a struggle between light and dark. That makes no sense because it would mean God is wrestling with God. I don't want to show complementarity, or joining together, which is what the yin/yang embryos do, at best.

Further, having a separate yang embryo at the end is limiting in terms of portraying God--intellectually and metaphorically.

I want to show the unity of the God I am seeking.

* * *

What could be a better, more accurate model?

I look around my room. The railroad station picture, with the suspended leaper; Devu's black and white drawing. There is some light coming in through the half-drawn window blinds partially covering my one window.

Why am I trying to find a pictorial way to encapsulate this never-to-be-written novel in symbolic form. It seems ridiculous, a waste of time. Yet, it's the way my mind tries to understand and make sense of life. Making models of reality. Charts, graphs, forms.

As if you could put God in a box, reduce God to a diagram.

* * *

I look over at my crossword puzzle, and the two boxes I drew.

I smile....I see potential there.

What about a narrative arc that begins with Johannes searching after women, symbolized by breasts:

(.) (.)

When that search fails, he turns to the spiritual life, illustrated by two boxes, the littler box representing him--"I" at the start of the story-- and the bigger one, God, the "Thou" Whom he is seeking.

There, I've pictorially reduced God and me to boxes, and I've transformed Johannes' sexual quest to my spiritual one.

A dash between the boxes connects them. The dash could symbolize, like Buber's idea, God reaching out to the struggling soul.



I like this for the beginning. It expresses the feeling of yearning and separateness at the start better than just a single dark yin embryo. The dash inside the small "I" box could serve

the same symbolic function as the white circle in the dark embryo, God yearning to be seen and heard and felt.

Oh my gosh, you really did put God in a box.

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So far so good.

Now, for the ending.

How can I illustrate this joyous, profound, unified, enlightening ending, one in which God is One? I feel like I'm recycling and asking the same question, though in a different context, that I did on Sinai.

What does it mean to know and experience God?

How can I convey this sense of God as everywhere using the boxes? Is it enough that God is the little dash within the small "I" box, the dash between the boxes, and the large box?

No, not ideally, because then there is still separateness. In my story I want to show the feeling of what Jesus meant when he said, "The Father and I are One" Of what the Shema means when it says God is One "Adonai Echad."

This perspective would mean that the small box and the large box are no different. God is all and everywhere. How would I draw that? Would there be just one box, the two merging into each other? At the end of the fairy tale story there would only be One box, and that box would be infinite. Either one infinitely large box, or the Ein Sof, the infinite void. Oneness and unity, either way.

* * *

You will love it here in Safed, John. I'm surrounded by a group of wise elders—men and women—discussing, wrestling with, praying about the same questions about the nature of the universe at the deepest

level, that you are addressing. I am the lowly scribe here, taking notes furiously as they talk. I like to think of them as my teachers and guides, my sangha, and even in some ways my family. My Muslim friend Said Al Hasrumi, shared the opening of the Muslim profession of faith, the Shahada, "There is no God but God." Prem Devi, from a Hindu perspective, mirrors with the Gita's "God is One without a second." And Buddhist Akishige, from a Buddhist perspective, reflecting what Inamatsu once told me on the golf course, states, based on the Heart Sutra, "Fullness is emptiness and emptiness is fullness."

Similarly, what you've forgotten the creative writer teacher said, John, but what Dr. Lisbet will soon remind you, and what I'm learning about further from Lin Zscho is that the Taoist concept of wu-wei, and xu-jing, refers to the eternal void, the formlessness that exists before and from which the form of the yin yang symbols come into being.

It appears there are quite a few different wise particularistic paths leading to the same universal top of the mountain.

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Portraying God and the transformation, though impossible, is actually the easy part of my problem with this fairy tale story.

The harder part is to understand what happened to, and why was there a dark embryo at the start? If God is One and all and everything, and that is Truth with a capital T, why was there dark to begin with? Is God in the darkness, too? Is darkness just absence of light?

Then why is there a feeling of struggle to overcome darkness? Why is there ever a search for God, a yearning for close-

ness and connection with God, who is already there and everywhere? How can there be a rejoining, when God is already within us? Does God create that separateness, too? How? Why?

Yet I know, experientially, I almost always feel separate from God. I know I see real darkness in Johannes, in Elizabeth, in my family, in me. Is that God?

How can that be?

How can it not be?

Where is the God I seek?

* * *

Sigh. Unfortunately, maybe the reason I can't end the story with a fairy-tale flourish--da dada DUM!-- is because that is not the way things have turned out in my life. From the glorious height of Sinai, I have once again been catapulted back into the horrific pain of these past two months following the hellish week Ortho-John is about to face.

* * *

But this IS my fantasy story, after all, so why can't I start at a time of this second darkness, and create a new uplifting scenario, one which ends in total light?

In my ideal fantasy story ending of happily-ever-after, I'd show how the little circle of spiritual light within the black embryo evolves, grows, and transforms. The story would have a positive evolution and ending. The dark at the start--whoever I am now, covered in darkness-- would point the way to a rebirth of myself, once again climbing toward the light. By the end, I would have been transformed. As I ascend some mountain in a holy location, a spiritual vortex, there would be a great dazzling white luminous glow, symbolizing a rebirth into the light.

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I want my story to end there.

But something in my mind stops me from doing that. Why do I have to keep asking, "What happens to the darkness? I know it still exists. "Stop, mind, please."

In the ending, I still see a small circle of darkness, a shadow within the light.

Why can't I just make it all light?

Because that is not my experience. And intellectually and emotionally it doesn't feel accurate.

Maybe I can rationalize the darkness as a small flaw in me and in an otherwise happy ending story. Artistically, this bit of darkness could be seen as important so the story would not seem to be too Hollywood, with a ridiculously happy, pat ending. All light and purity is not the way things end in my experience.

All right. The darkness means, at the end, I'm not perfect, but have had a deepening awareness of the light, and am definitely on the right path.

I look over at the Devu drawing, and notice how clearly there is a separation between the light at the top, and the darkness of the water below.

The hand is still plaintively reaching skyward.

Too many painful questions to wrestle with, God. Too much suffering still within me. This was supposed to be a playful distraction. I can't even fantasize a perfectly happy ending, because the world and myself still don't make sense. I feel like I'm back where I started, still struggling with the very questions that I entered counseling to ask Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet.

And where have they led me?

To washing dark stains of beans out of what were once shiny stainless steel pots.

* * *

Is there spiritual wisdom in washing pans? In crossword puzzles? In playing with fantasies of a novel you don't intend to write?

Even wrong paths sometimes lead us to experiences and wisdom that we can learn from for the next time. We never know how the story is going to turn out until the end.

It's fascinating to see each of your efforts, Johannes, and John, to create a transformative story. You, Johannes, through seeking a committed interpersonal relationship. You, John, through seeking a committed spiritual relationship. Each of you sees your quest as the true one, and in an either/or fashion. Johannes, you have evolved to the point of wanting a committed relationship, but are not able to see the spiritual aspect of interpersonal connection. John, you are wrestling with God, and want to be a guide toward a spiritually focused relationship with a loving God, but feel that the body, the flesh, and interpersonal relationships impede that spiritual search.

* * *

Each of you seek to write opening lines to a story that can be read on multiple levels. Let me point out one additional level that neither of you recognized. It involves words, and is right before your-- our eyes.

The Rebbe opened me to it this insight in his discussion of the Talmud: the white piece of paper that is meditated upon before the book is studied.

The one thing neither of you mention, Johannes and John, is in discussing a crossword puzzle image, an embryo picture, or writing in general--- is the most obvious--the paper itself. We have to begin with a blank white sheet. Before words is whiteness, emptiness. And the letters and words are created both by forms--their lines and shapes-- but also by the whiteness that surrounds the form. So, the lightness of the paper is always there, even though often we don't see it. We focus only on the dark forms placed on it. Yet it's only possible to recognize those forms because of the underlying whiteness which surrounds and enfolds them. It's amazing how sometimes we don't see that which is so obviously before us.

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Beautiful." Inamatsu smiles and raises a glass. "We have missed you these last couple of months. But your tennis game is still very good." Inamatsu normally doesn't say much. He's quiet, stoic, and very polite. Too much so, sometimes. It drives me crazy when he wins a point, says nothing, but gives a little bow. Is that false humility? "Oh, so sorry I beat you." He's unbelievably quick, has faster reflexes than I do. He says it's from his Zen practice and calligraphy--sumi-e brush stroke painting. He has so many names. A temple name. His Japanese name. His American name, Gregory. And our nickname for him. It's interesting to think of different names reflecting diverse parts of a person--like a prism's colors.

"Your tennis game sure is still intact, especially that wicked service return down my alley. I hate that. Over the highest part of the net. I feel like an idiot when you pass me like that." Jeffrey smiles, and looks at the ring. "Congratulations. I'm very happy for you." He puts his arm on my shoulder and clinks Inamatsu's my and my glasses. Jeffrey's not a gifted natural athlete. But very determined. He's the least wealthy of our group, but kind, sometimes even obsequious. "Now we know where you've been."

"What happened to the jewels, did they fall out?" Richard chortles as he looks at the silver entwined band being passed around. Because we are seated at a round table, and Richard is sitting on my left, I have to adjust my seat, so I can hear him. Though given

the verbiage he emits, it would probably be better if I couldn't hear him. "Drinks on you, or can you afford it?" I love when I can pass Richard at net down the alley from the deuce court. But it's harder because he's left handed. When I pass others, they always say nice shot. When I am able to pass him, he never says anything positive, only some lame excuse or "lucky shot, open your eyes next time."

Today he played poorly when he was my partner. Then in the second set, when he was against me, he played much better. I quipped "Why didn't you play like that in the first set" to which he replied "Carrying a heavier load." Another one of his attacks on me. He just sucks the energy right out of me. In fact, I was carrying him.

I sneer at him, then smile, and say, "Sore loser, eh? Not only do I beat you in tennis, a--hole, but look who still has trouble getting dates." I nod at his long dishwater brown curly hair and thick glasses trying to cover a once pock-marked face. "and look who is getting married to the woman of his dreams."

Inwardly, I am furious and hurt. I can never win--once and for all-- with Richard. And his statement hits closer to home than he knows. Once I send the letters in my pocket, I won't have any resources at all. I'll be the poorest one of the group. Why do I bother to hang out with this guy?

"You could do better---both with the ring, and the woman." He clinks his water glass to mine. "And speaking of doing better, congratulations on getting into Harvard. I wish I had heard from you directly." I raise my glass and clink back. "Still thinking of corporate law?" I shrug my shoulders. "You might be able to make a decent living there, but if you really want to be successful, you should also get your MBA. Though working fourteen

hour days, seven days a week, I guess your tennis and golf games will suffer. Tant pis." He clinks my glass again. "Just kidding....." I look at him with incredulity. Is he actually going to make a kind comment, or own his sarcasm?

"Just kidding....given who you are, you probably couldn't afford more for the ring, and she's about as good as you deserve."

* * *

It sometimes feels like life is one big chess board, with Richard and me constantly engaged in a game to gain position and defeat the other. If I say yes, he'll say no. And vice-versa. It's like we're contrarians to each other; anti-magnets that somehow also attract. We both hate to lose, to feel controlled, and not to be central--and at the head of the table, even it is round. Two number one sons.

I show my ring, and am proud and excited about my upcoming engagement. He seeks to take the wind out of my sails and counter-moves. Same with Harvard. That's why I didn't tell him. And that's why I like sports. There is structure. There are rules of engagement, and there is a clear winner and loser.

Tennis is like chess, in that strategy on the courts is at least as important, if not more so, than your stroke, fitness, mental strength--all of which I also have.

Modesty, too.

The first serve is the opening gambit, like the accelerated dragon: black pushing his g pawn to start a fianchetto of his bishop at f8 and to accelerate the dragon formation. Similarly, I put a lot of time planning my first serve--its placement, spin, speed. If I've played the person before, I also factor in

his strengths and weaknesses in my choice. Whether I spin it out wide, at his body, or down the t, I always know my next two or three moves in advance.

Generally, I believe in striking first, striking hard, and using all the resources available. If I win the toss, I'll serve first. I note the wind and the sun, and will serve to use the wind to enhance my spin; or place the ball where the sun will make it most difficult for my opponent to see it. Or, I'll note the shadows on the court, and serve into the body, so that the ball goes from sun through shadows before it reaches them.

Sometimes, however, if I win the toss, I'll alter my strategy, let my opponent serve first, so he has to serve into the sun. I leave nothing to chance.

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Of course, that's the problem when we play doubles. When you have a partner, you add complexity and ambiguity. Now you're not just communicating with yourself against an opponent. You have to know your strengths and weaknesses, your partner's, and your opponents'. You have to signal and communicate: where your serve is going, when one of you is going to poach, who is going to take an overhead. You have to learn how your partner takes criticism and feedback, and the best way to help him improve his weaknesses, when to encourage him, when to offer guidance.

Some people are so defensive, it's hard to instruct them on what they're doing wrong. They'll just look at me annoyed, saying "I'm doing the best I can."

I once had a partner who was very sensitive to criticism. He double faulted for the first point on his serve. I bit my tongue and said nothing. He then double faulted again. Now it's love

thirty. I bit my tongue harder, and said nothing. He proceeded to double fault a third time. I took a breath, clapped my hands, and said, "Come on partner, take a little off the first serve, just get it in. Make them work."

He looked at me as if I'd just said his mother was a whore. "Go fuck yourself. Mind your own business." Needless to say, we lost the game. I asked a coach, who'd actually trained the world's number one player, how to deal with someone like that. He said his player had asked him the same question. "When I said to my partner, after a lot of double faults, 'Just get the first serve in' he said to me 'Don't you think I'm trying to, asshole.'"

The coach said his advice was "Just tell him to spin it in--a higher percentage serve...that way you give him a concrete method rather than a global suggestion." Good technical advice, but not effective with the group I play with.

Of course, sometimes nothing works and you need to change partners. Better yet, give up competitive games. Like I have. You need to reflect more, Johannes, and ask yourself why you are engaged in stupid, meaningless games. You're way too competitive.

Either-or, again, John. Yes, Johannes is too competitive and sees only the winning and losing aspect of sports. But the answer to that is not necessarily to run from competitive sports completely, as you have. First, as I know you are just beginning to realize, leaving sports doesn't take the competitiveness out of you--as you may notice in your interactions towards other students, like Peter, who speak up in class, or even toward the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. Secondly, sports can be a way to playfully enjoy life. A time of social interaction, learning how to transcend winning and losing by keeping your center.

Think back to the poem by Kipling that mom gave us when we were sixteen: "If you can meet with triumph and disaster, and treat those two impostors just the same." That's why they call it "playing" sports.

Yes, you still have some work to do on your competitiveness, as well as learning how to "play." And, speaking of mom's gift of that poem, perhaps you may want to take another look at your view of her. Right now you see her--and the entire family--as completely untrustworthy, people from whom you must exile yourself in self-protection. There's some truth in that, but it's not the whole truth. Witness the gift. This was something thoughtful and insightful that came from mom. Your attitude toward her is just another example of your black and white thinking. Let a little light into your current darkness. See that, amidst the pain, there were signs of love.

Just a future dialectic for you to look forward to.

I pride myself on being able to bring out the best in my partner. But it's hard work, and I have to carry them physically on the court, but mentally, too. It's exhausting.

But fun, especially when I cause us to win.

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It feels to me like we've been waiting a long time for a waitress to come take our order. I look around, and see no one in sight. I ask Richard for a lighter--he sometimes smokes a pipe. I snap, and a flame appears. I hold it up high. The bartender sees it, and calls to a waitress. A technique mom taught me.

Richard says, "Slick trick. By the way, you know you wouldn't have won today if you hadn't cheated and called that ball out when it was so clearly in. But hey, I guess you need to win at

something, however you can." He guffaws.

"It was definitely out."

"In."

"Out."

"What a baby. How do you spell poor loser?"

"I'm rubber and you're glue, whatever you say comes right back to you. You're the loser, baby" and for emphasis I stick out my tongue.

I can be just as immature as he's being, and match him verbal stroke for stroke. I look over at Ina and Jeffrey who are turning their heads from side to side as we speak, as if watching a ping pong match.

Or shaking their heads, with me, in disgust.

Finally, Jeffrey interrupts us. "I once read that when the ball hits the ground, it actually slides for a fraction of a second before it comes up. So, you both could be right. It might have hit in, which is what Richard says, but when you saw it," he nods to me, "you actually saw it leaving the tennis court surface after it slid, making it out. We'll never really know Now, how about shaking hands and let's order."

We grudgingly comply. But also thankfully. Sometimes we need a referee to separate us. Ina chimes in "Let's order."

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Richard knows all the rules of tennis, and is always calling them on me. Today on a great serve of mine that pulled him wide off the court, he hit a shot around the side of the net. "Not fair," I said to which he pulled out his rule book and showed me it was kosher. He can always find a rule to support his point, and invalidate his opponent's. Like when you can place your racquet over the net to hit a ball, when you can't touch the net; at what point you can. What a stupid waste of brain power. He

tries to win by rules, not by skill. Just like chess, always learning moves and rules. I have better things to do with my time.

I hold up my left ring finger. It looks lewd, a stand-in for my middle finger. I like being able to communicate what I'm feeling without having to directly say it. It's interesting how much can be conveyed by a finger.

"That's very mature. How old are you? As I said, I guess you need to win at something. You certainly could never beat me at chess. Is that why you quit?"

"That's not true and you know it. I just didn't have time, with all my studying."

"You make time for other activities--swimming, horseback riding, your women. Why? Because they're more fun, right? Why are they more fun? Because you don't always lose. Face it, you only like to play what you win at...you're a loser, and a coward to boot."

"Who's smarter, Richard? Me. I make better grades than you, I didn't buy my way in as a transfer to Stanford. I could beat you at chess if I put in ten percent of the time you do studying the game."

"Your counter-argument, Mr.-Big-Shot-Lawyer-To-Be, is irrelevant; distracting; immaterial, and a non-sequitur, to throw your own legalese back at you. The point is, simply, you lost, every time you played me; you hated that, and you quit. Why not for once face yourself honestly?"

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I hold up my ring finger again. Am I giving him the finger? Saying I'm number one? It's interesting how ambiguous a finger

can be. I think of tennis today. Richard hit his first serve out. I struck the ball to the side of the court, but it bounced off a garbage can and trickled back onto his side of the court. He had to retrieve it. I held up one finger, meaning go ahead and take a first serve, for your concentration and flow has been interrupted. That was a nice gesture on my part. (He was losing and I figured why not).

Rather than kindly acknowledging my gesture, he shouts at me "Go F---yourself." He softly served the next serve in, and I hit it for a crosscourt winner. He holds up his middle finger.

Later I asked him why he was so pissed (besides losing).

"Because you didn't give me two serves when your ball came back onto the court."

"But I did. I held up one finger....saying it was your first serve."

"Bullshit. I thought you were holding up one finger meaning I only had one serve left. You should have held up two fingers."

"That's funny. If I had held up two fingers, I thought you would think I meant it was your second serve, not that you had two serves coming."

Non-verbal communication, or communication with words, it's all ambiguous. What determines the meaning of words? There are so many misunderstandings. Look at all the effort Wittgenstein and Heidegger spent trying to explain what words do and don't mean. Is it just our intention that determines words' meaning? If I use sarcasm or irony, my words mean precisely the opposite of what I say literally. Or is it only how they're heard? It's amazing we even believe we think we're communicating at all.

Richard knows exactly what I mean by my non-verbal index finger gesture. But just to make sure, I add words:

"Careful, Richard, the green-eyed monster is showing through. You almost sound jealous beneath all that cool bitterness. All the money and lessons in the world can't make you a better athlete; can't get you best seat at a round table, and consulting all the..." most renowned doctors in the world can do nothing more for your face. I stop. Commenting on his face is too cruel, even though part of me feels he deserves it. I know how sensitive he is about his adolescent acne and all the efforts he's made to smooth and correct his skin. It's not really that bad, but to him it is.

Even though Richard and I banter with each other somewhat harshly, generally it is just in good fun. Each of us tries to be careful not to cross a line, attacking the other's vulnerabilities too viciously. Sometimes, however, we do cross the line. It's like when my brother and I used to play the 'let's hit each other softly' game, but each hit has to be just a bit harder than the last one. I'd lightly touch him. He'd pat me back slightly harder. I'd poke him. He'd jostle me. Soon, our jabs were hits, harder and harder. The trouble with that game is starting it. You think you can control yourself but at the end you can't. Sometimes, verbally, Richard and I spar more than is healthy for either of us. Someone, like Ina, has to stop the escalation.

So instead of attacking his skin problems, I change what I was going to say, "and consulting all the...wisest teachers in the world will never make you any smarter." I smile, and take off the touring cap gave me and point to it. I put my arm on his shoulder. "This was a great gift. Worn by the British armed

forces and NATO. I'm sure it brings me luck in tennis---and life.
And, hey, as partners, we whupped them, didn't we?" I point to
Jeffrey and Inamatsu.

"And you, finally, your backhand volley was on fire."

Ah, a compliment from Richard. I see Jeffrey and Gregory are
talking to each other, and this seems like the time to ask Rich-
ard about his earlier remark about, "carrying a heavier load."
"Why did you say that to me. Do you think I'm a heavier load,
jerk?"

He leans in and whispers, "No, I meant I had to play harder
because I was playing with Jeffrey, and he's a heavier load. Are
you paranoid? Feel everyone's out to get you, saying mean things
about you." He winks at me.

We're back on a safe plain again. At our best, we are re-
spectful warriors. I'm able to tell him about my family and its
craziness, and he can share openly about his insecurities, like
his acne scars. Beneath his toughness, he has a sweet side. And
he's always giving me nice presents, almost as if he's trying to
buy my friendship. I don't mind.

Recently, when I happened to mention I'd read Henry IV, he
gave me an early edition of Shakespeare's Richard II. It was
really a great gift, even though he spoiled the effect somewhat
by saying "This is to remind you of me and my greatness. And, as
any well-educated person would know, you shouldn't read Henry IV
without first reading Richard II. You can't know the future
without having a foundation in the past."

My sentiments exactly. I guess I should thank you for that,
Richard.

A gift with a put-down attached.

But he's an only child, and each of us wants to be the number one son. I may bring out the worst in him, at times. I'm sure that's why we picked guys like Inamatsu and Jeffrey--outsiders, willing to play second fiddle to us--as friends. But why did we pick each other? Do we enjoy having a worthy opponent with whom to do battle?

Maybe I envy his money, and like his nice presents. He benefits from my attractiveness to women. I've passed along several girls, setting him up on dates, once I had no further interest in them. Far from rejecting "second hand" goods, Richard is always delighted and reports happily back to me when he "scores" with one of these hand me downs.

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The waitress comes. She's cute but surly, grumpy, officious, and no fun to banter with. I decide to make it a challenge to see if I can get her to smile before we leave.

"Richard, just to show I'm not a sore winner, I'll buy the first round. Let's play the 'Shakespeare Falstaff--Beer--Well' game and see if your mind is more effective than your body--give you a chance to redeem yourself." Inamatsu and Jeffrey both nod willingly.

I smile at the waitress, charmingly. "Four brews for the bros. Four brewskis for the broskis. Falstaff if you have it. Truth or dare if you don't." False, true. A little stretch, but shows I'm willing to be creative.

She looks at me like I'm a strange preppy creature from a remote country-club world, dressed fastidiously in tennis whites, who is totally out of place in a bar. She's actually right. Not only do I hate beer, but I hate bars. She repeats,

"Four Falstaffs" and turns away.

"Cute." Jeffrey nods after the girl.

"Nine of ten girls in California are pretty, and, just my luck, the tenth goes to Stanford" Richard adds, giving an old saw.

"Sounds pretty bitter, Richard. Not my experience, and I wonder what they say about us?"

Ina breaks in to keep the peace "All look pretty, especially late at night when bar is closing, and I have plenty to drink."

We all laugh, then there is a silence, which Jeffrey fills by asking, "Which do you like better, the foam or the beer?"

"Beer is about bubbles, and bubbles need to run free. I am bubbles man." Inamatsu giggles.

"Me, too," Jeffrey responds. "If you drink from the bottle or pour without creating a head in the glass, bubbles can't do their job and you miss out on most of the flavor."

I hate beer and have nothing to say. Instead, I watch Richard, knowing that somehow he will pounce on an opening whenever it occurs.

"Did you know that for the perfect aroma, you need to leave beer out of the fridge for five or ten minutes. When it's ice-cold there is scarcely any aroma. It must be half-way between refrigeration and room temperature. Fifty degrees for lagers, 60 degrees for ales. As long as beer is under pressure in a bottle or keg, it's stable, water and carbon dioxide molecules stick together. Only when it is poured out, it gets shaken and the agitation makes the bonds break, releasing the carbon dioxide as bubbles." True to form, Richard has seized his opportunity with a vengeance.

"I thought you only lectured on wines. Have you expanded your repertoire? It's better when you remain stable in your bottle, Richard. Agitation causes you to froth." I'm trying to puncture his efforts.

Actually, Johannes, it is you who are becoming unstable and agitated, not just with Richard, but everywhere you turn.

He rises to the bait, like bubbly yeast.

"Bubbles are then all about how you pour. Or is that 'poor' for you?" He winks at me. "You must pour boldly at first, splash it to make a good head; then pour the rest of the bottle gently down the side of the glass under the head."

There's something sexual about this entire description. Is he intentionally making double-entendres? I look over with a smile at the waitress who is returning with our brewskis.

Richard keeps talking as she serves them. "Beer doesn't have the attractive fruity acidity that wine has. Jeffrey and Inamatsu, you're right, without bubbles exploding in your mouth, it's flat, bland, and syrupy." I know there's something sexual in what he's saying. Is he conscious of that? Is it just that it's been too long since I've been with Mery? I try another flirtatious remark with the waitress, but it falls flat.

The foam on the beer starts to overflow the sides. Richard sticks his finger in and it subsides. We all do the same. He looks at all of us and smiles. "If a glass starts to bubble over, you can stop it by touching the foam with a fingertip, because the oils in our skin interfere with foaming."

Inwardly, I have to admit, I'm impressed. Some of his knowledge finally came in handy. I might have to pour a beer for Mery and me this weekend, just to show her how to stop the foam.

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I watch Richard as he continues to lecture. He loves center-stage, showing everyone how in control and powerful he is. He is always trying to dominate conversations in a way that reminds me of dad...Senior. Is there any viewpoint in the room other than his own? I wonder if that's why I'm a good listener. Like Grandpa, I've learned to hear the other's perspective, so I know when there is an opening, and how best to counter-attack.

Sounds like a wonderful motivation to learn to pay attention to other people's points of view, Johannes. But underneath your "counterattack" bravado, you're not really acknowledging you also sometimes have a fear of speaking up--that you might offend, drive those around you away, or risk igniting and escalating their anger. For those negative fearful reasons, and for a desire to be a kinder, more loving, less angry, "turn the other cheek", forgiving, wiser person, I'm trying to be much more careful in my speech. And to I work with and address challenging emotions so that I don't counter-attack, but try to be a better human being.

"Beer is now a plebeian drink, but it was once a major social and technological development. It helped humanity along the path to the modern world, accompanying epochal change after 1000 BC from a nomadic existence to the more settled life necessary to cultivate crops."

Jeffrey and Inamatsu listen raptly. I call the waitress over for a pen and paper, so I can pretend to take notes. She is harried and annoyed, I guess because of the extra trip. She throws them down at me and turns away.

Richard, meanwhile, is still lecturing. "The fizzy liquid resulted from wet grains left lying around for a few days. Beer

actually became currency in the earliest urban societies. Workers who built the pyramids were paid in beer."

I wonder why this was never mentioned as part of the Exodus story. I reaffirm my resolve to have a "mock" Passover seder with Mery this weekend, even though it is temporally out of sync. Maybe I'll add this piece of information to my Seder. I take a few notes on a napkin to add to my Passover folder.

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I let Richard spout on, and think back to our tennis match this afternoon. The one place I can use Richard's need for centrality and control against him is in sports. Wealthy left-handed Richard from South Africa via France and Britain, with his Modigliani painting, and his XKE Jag convertible. I first met Richard when he came to work at the Stanford Daily, in advertising. I was the advertising manager, so technically I was his boss, though he never would acknowledge it.

He's usually suave and poker-faced. But there is an angry core in him. It works for him on the courts--up to a point--getting him focused, intimidating his opponents. But if I can win enough shots in a row, he starts to lose his concentration, and becomes wild, spraying shots, double faulting, yelling at himself and his doubles partner.

Then his anger becomes a liability.

Tennis is a game where you need to keep your emotions under control. And yet there are so many emotional extremes: visceral helpless and impotence at missing a shot, or being run around the court and unable to retrieve shots; anger at yourself for incompetence; fear of double-faulting, blowing a shot, letting your partner, and yourself, down. But all that has to be set aside for

focus, anticipation; quick footedness, hand-eye coordination.

Then there is the joy of winning after battling so hard not only with your opponent, but with yourself. I hate losing.

What Richard still hasn't learned is that I'll never back down. I'll always find a way to beat him and win.

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In singles, I know my game plan, and rely only on myself. I like that. That's why I prefer playing singles to doubles. In doubles, you have to depend on a partner, which raises all kinds of problems of communication and complexity--like trying to play music with Mery. But today was one of the doubles tennis rounds I love. The only time anyone won a set was when they played with me. I not only played solid tennis, I was able to make each of my partners a better player when they were on my team. I won 3-0. The triple crown, the trifecta. They were each 1-2. It's clear who the king of the court is, who the best player is. And who the pawns are.

My dominance today reminded me of one summer at camp--I was fourteen-- and they had a tennis tournament of about twenty people. There were eight seeds. I had no idea what a seed was--I thought it was part of a gardening club. But I wasn't one of the seeds. But, to everyone's surprise, a dark horse--me-- won the tournament.

The counselor later told me--I think he felt it was a compliment-- "You may not have the best strokes, but in a tournament you get everything possible out of your game." Talk about a "backhand" compliment. It seems he was saying I may not have been the most skillful player. But he was also saying, in making the seeds, they forgot to factor in grit, determination, effort, and mental

toughness. I simply will not allow myself to lose.

Yes, Johannes, you did win that camp tournament. In fact, you are quite a good tennis player. And you are the best of these three you play with regularly. However, what you're not looking at very carefully, is that YOU pick your competition. Yes, they are reasonable tennis players, and give you some competitive play. You don't pick far inferior people, because that would be too easy and no fun. But overall you are better than them. You don't play on the Stanford team, where you would get clobbered. You pick people you can beat.

John, you're right about Johannes. But it's a lesson you still haven't learned at the deepest level. Your choices, too, and your denial and lack of recognition about the roots of those choices, keeps you from making the valuable distinction Dr. Lisbet taught me. She told us "Don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good." You still need to learn the lesson between seeking to the best---internalized from grandpa? --an illusion you still try to maintain-- and being the best you can be.

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Even when it seems like everyone is ganging up on me, I still will not back down. Three on one. Bring it on.

I remember when I first transferred to my private school in seventh grade. The first few days during recess after lunch-break, several of the biggest guys ganged up on me. When I'd be walking along, they'd jump me and try to wrestle me to the ground. The first day I was totally surprised and went down easily. The second day I was ready for them. I found some reserve of strength, and when the bell rang signaling time to return to

classes, I was still carrying all three of them on my shoulders.
Unbowed.

Their ring leader, Harry, the best athlete in the school, and by far the strongest and most developed 7th grader, sat behind me in history class--the first class after lunch. One day, he started flicking my ear. I tried to swat him away. He did it again. I swatted again, and missed. I was trying to listen to the teacher and take notes. He flicked again.

I took my pencil, point first, and stabbed it back into his leg. It didn't break his pants, but he shrieked. It broke his will. I was never ganged up at recess or swatted by him again. Those guys never became friends, but they did treat me with respect, and kept their distance.

As dad taught me well, I don't back down from anybody, ever.

Except your father?

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Shakespeare's Falstaff is the model for our wordplay. Falstaff, past his prime, and with an immense capacity for wine and women, lives for the moment. To him, the past is not worth thinking about; the future has nothing worth looking forward to. He is a perfect model for a beer drinking get together. "We strive mightily, but eat and drink as friends."

I hate beer, but want to be a good sport, not only because I won, but also, who knows how many more chances we will have to get together? Each of us is graduating in less than a month. This may be one of our last times together as a foursome.

I wonder if the realization of that impending, looming ending is the reason I feel so much more sensitive to the how many times in a day structures form and dissolve. Today, during

our third set, about half way through, I started to realize that in a few more games, the structure of the tennis "womb" would be done for the day, and, win or lose, the match would come to an end. I'd have to leave it behind and to find or create some new structure. What is the next wave that is going to carry me forward. Would we go to a bar. If not, would I do some homework? Read about Passover? Call Mery? Look at some of her pictures to self-serve? Of course, I lost the point!

But what's interesting is realizing that each day there are beginnings, frameworks are created, and then they dissolve. Like our time at this bar, which is just beginning, will soon be over. Like our time at Stanford is drawing to a close.

Normally, I'm not that sensitive or sentimental about endings. I keep myself busy and swing from one task to the next. I wonder why this awareness of spaces and endings is coming up now? End of the semester? Senior year? Graduating Stanford? Leaving Mery this past weekend? Missing her? I'm not sure. I briefly notice some sadness pass through me. I shake it off, and return my focus to my fellow barmates.

What you try to shake off, I now see in spades every day. All the spaces, endings, losses. Even good moments are like a musical note, some brief joy, but even as it plays, knowing it will end, and there is absolutely no guarantee another note will fill the emptiness.

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They like beer, they like this Falstaff game, and I'm willing to be one of the guys today. That way I won't be criticized for being too aloof and hoity-toity. Like when I have a glass of wine. Or orange juice.

Jeffrey once told me I act like I'm slumming when I come along to have a few drinks with them. A courageous statement on his part. And one with some truth--it's not so much slumming, but for me, it's all about the tennis--the excitement, the competition, the physical exercise. And the framework. You know when the match is over. There are rules and guidelines. To be honest, sitting and drinking with them afterwards is a little boring. I feel diffuse, sometimes even confused, there's no framework-- no time limit, no real purpose, no clear winner and loser.

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"Ok, let the games begin. I'll start." I hold up my glass and we all clink. "I'll drink to that, Beer, I'll drink well to that." Well, beer. A good, simple start. We all start to chug our beers, but Richard stops us.

"No, no, no. I can't let the drinking/chugging continue in the same crude fashion you all have used in the past. Watch." He points to the mouth of the glass, and swirls the beer, which threatens to spill over but doesn't. "The glass has to be wide enough for aromas to spread, but not too wide so that they dissipate. You must swirl the glass to get the whole aroma." He sticks his nose nearly into the foam. "Learn, my friends, to distinguish the dry, crisp, bready effect of a lager from the spicier aroma of ales, which sometimes have a touch of dried fruit aromas. And smell the hops, which have a flowery aroma."

Inamatsu and Jeffrey dutifully sniff. I wrinkle my nose in annoyance. Richard ignores me and continues, "Now, hold the glass to the light. The color is determined by the amount of extraction from roasted malts; the darker the barley malts are roasted, the darker the beer will be; a darker color generally indicates

deeper flavors such a toffee, nuts, espresso and caramel. Pay attention to the clarity. Hazy means unfiltered yeast is present; yeast adds texture to the mouth-feel."

I feel like we're in a slow motion movie. What could have been a simple act of drinking a beer is now being broken down into all these component parts. Stir, smell, hold to light. I wonder if this is how Mery feels when I analyze something in detail, like a musical piece. Somehow it makes sense for me, because that's how I learn, but here it just seems boring and tedious. Just drink the stupid, foul-tasting beer, already. It's not that complicated.

Finally, the director says we can take a sip, but of course he tells us how to do it. "Hold the beer under your tongue, open your mouth slightly and inhale gently through the mouth. That's it, suck a little air through the beer to bring out the flavors: the caramel-like sweetness of the malt, the bitterness from the hops, the mouth-coating savoriness of the malt protein. Relish the aromas of the hops and the roasted qualities of the malt a second time as the fumes rise from your mouth into your nose."

Inamatsu and Jeffrey follow his lead. Out of curiosity, I do, too. I suck in air. I notice nothing different, start to gag and choke, spit some of it out. It still tastes horrible to me. Inamatsu pats my back. Richard ignores my gagging and says,

"Take a bigger swish and note the viscosity and weight of the beer; the more viscous means more malts and usually a higher alcohol content. Malt makes up the mid-palate of the beer." He pauses, closing his eyes like a meditating swami.

"A delicately floral and herbaceous nose, redolent of hibiscus flowers and a fresh bouquet garni; a soft and velvety mouth.

Feel the gentle tannic with a lingering spicy tart finish." He looks around at us. "The top notes of aromatics generally reveal the floral aspects of the hops; pine resin, citrus rind or chamomile tea. A strong presence of yeast adds notes of ripe tropical fruit, bread dough, warm spices such as cloves or coriander. The finish brings in the bitterness of hops. Yes, there is a lingering, Complex finish, involving spice and dried dark fruits...prunes or black raisins." I hate this stuff. Are we drinking the same thing? Way too much deliberation, examination, and analysis. Why doesn't Richard just enjoy his beer?

So even Johannes can be out-analyzed. But he's quick. He uses the very criticism Mery levels at him to attack Richard. It seems we each bring thoughtful, careful attention to areas of our life that we find important, and criticize others when their efforts of analysis go beyond our capacity and interest. Did I analyze that well!

"Now, plebeians, let the games continue. I believe my friend, here, just made a pedestrian beer-well effort. "He looks in my direction. Who's next?" Richard is still dominating center court, something he couldn't do at tennis.

"Yes, right, let us go for the gusto, Falstaff." Inamatsu chimes in, in his broken English. He's learned a few of the phrases, from past games, so we let him go second because he doesn't like to initiate.

I applaud what I perceive as a barb at Richard's methodical analysis. "Hear, hear, more gusto, indeed." We all cheer and continue to drink.

"Falstaff, ye man of noble character, will you drink a Falstaff with me?" Jeffrey giggles and clinks. We all chug, except

dainty Richard. I'm glad. We're back to normal.

"Ah, John, 'tis indeed good to have one such as thee as drinking companion." Inamatsu unexpectedly and surprisingly, reenters out of turn.

"I could drink a well of beer, or I am a Jew else, an Ebrew Jew," Richard offers; then turns to me. "Drink O fellow boarder of Eastcheap, or is that boarder going East, and who is cheap?"

I feel the quasi-playful barb directed at me.

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"Well I'll drink beer to that. O you of the false staff." I retort. Will he get that as a reference to his manhood--and limp penis? Pretty good, and new, too.

"Speaking of cheap, well, well, how is that showy, inadequate car of yours? One, I might add, that reflects your plebeian beer car taste, certainly when compared to my champagne Jag, with its wildly purring engine that leaves your little plaything in the dust."

This is a brilliant counter move, the territory where he clearly has the upper hand--car knowledge in general and his car in particular.

When I told Richard how I'd taken Mery to Beethoven's Ninth, rolling out the red carpet, leading to Mr. Red, his only comment was "Why couldn't you have done it in style....I'd have driven a 1938 Talbot-Lago T150-c Lago Speciale Teardrop coupe with coachwork by the Parisian artisans Figoni et Falaschi. Ah, bodies with violin-like scroll work, definitive pontoon fenders ending in chrome waves." He sounded in sexual ecstasy as he described his fantasy automobile. "One day I will own one of only 16 in the world built by Figoni et Falaschi." I felt inadequate, but

thought I gave as good I got, "Whatever turns you on, Richard. If you can't have a girlfriend, why not make it with your car?"

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"Limp staff, like the rods and valves of your cheap, Mr. Red; cheap, like your ring. Champagne tastes, beer budget. It's good to know your limits, what you can afford. Doesn't hum or have the engine or horsepower of my Jag, does it. Or would you like to try to challenge me again, to see if you're any faster this time around, or will just lose again?"

"Well, Richard, you're now going beyond the rules of the game; these are just cheap shots. Blanks."

"Hey guys, losing focus here, aren't we?" Inamatsu interjects.

"Well, I want beer. I have the key to bring ki to you two and beer to me." We look at him perplexed.

"Key to bring key? There is a translation problem, Ina." He is never offended by the nickname we've bestowed on him. In fact, when we first explained Ina is a girls name in English, and usually the name of ugly girls at that--he just grinned broadly, though covering his mouth. Unlike Richard, Inamatsu never gets mad, but it's hard to know what he's really thinking.

He smiles. "No, no, all is well. Ki, spelled 'k-i' the Japanese word for peace, like AiKido. It sounds like your English word k--e---y. Good, huh? You guys buy me another round."

"Well-done. It doesn't have anything to do with Falstaff, but still...a multi-lingual point for you. Another round. Let's expand the rules, and open the game up to tag words."

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As I search for the annoying and disappearing watier, I hear "Ki-Hebrew--because." Richard. Chug.

"Hebrew mi....who?" Me. Chug. I keep looking.

"Hebrew who...me." Richard. Chug.

"Me so happy." Inamatsu. We all start to take a drink, then I realize that not only is his broken English more pronounced than usual, but his pun isn't really a pun, or even a clever word-play.

"How's that supposed to fit? That's not the level of quality we've come to expect from you."

He smiles. "Be careful of simple which hides deep."

"Ah, like the inscrutable poem of Kipling...East and West which never meet?" I retort.

He bows. "Hakuin, famous painter, drew wren sitting on... " He holds his left hand in a cupped form, and points with his right index finger into the palm, and stirs. I feel like we're playing charades.

"Bowl? Stir?" Jeffrey guesses. Ina shakes his head no.

"Birdbath?" I venture. No again.

"Mortar and pestle," Richard says smoothly. Ina looks up and smiles.

"Exactly. Wren sitting on pestle, resting in mortar. Wren is simple creature. Japanese word for wren is *MIsosazai*. Pestle and mortar used to prepare *MISO* paste--like in miso soup. In Zen, simple, plain, ordinary is wise, makes you happy. Me so happy to explain all this to you."

"You're deep. That's brilliant! Mi mi mi mi mi do re mi," I sing. Chugging to sounds of "Ugh" at my voice.

"You're not a songbird, my friend. Wren. Bird. That waitress is a cute bird." Richard tries to worm his way back in. "Hey, by the way, there's a very interesting French-born painter, who employs

some of the sumi-e style of Hakuin. He's showing at the Kantor gallery in San Francisco. We should go up there some time."

"Keep your zipper shut, Richard--at both ends. Zip, zipper, Zipporah, I met you at the well." Me. Chug. We order another round.

"Beersheba." Chug. Jeffrey.

"BEERusholoyeem....la shannah habbah beerusholoyeem, next year in Jerusalem." Richard. More groans.

"Brewhaha, Falstaff, brouhaha." Jeffrey. Chug.

With that, Richard lets out a loud fart. "Tag. Breaking wind. Hebrew ruach, wind."

Ruach, wind, spirit. Our breath, the universe's breath.

"You a bunch of hot air, out both ends." Inamatsu, blushing. Chug. We all laugh uproariously, both at his "tag" and his expression.

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"Blowing mouth, os rotundum, Horace." Me, to grimaces from all.

"That Hebrew, Latin multi-lingual tag pun is as difficult as climbing on the wind's back." Jeffrey. Very skillful.

"More like a round, blowing mouth showing off. Round mouth. Tag. Oral sex." Richard.

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Richard got my double entendre on Horace's comment about oratory, and extended it to sex. It was a softball, really, but only he picked up on it. But for some reason, I don't want the game to start down a sexual path, so I raise a finger and turn the conversation back to Horace's original intent.

"Speaking of words and air coming out of mouths, in my creative writing class today, the professor said that words have great power. He pointed out that, in the beginning, God

created heaven and earth through words. 'God said, let there be light, and there was light.' So, guys, we're not just playing a word game, we're creating lives and reality. We are like gods." I raise my hand in a toast. "To the four gods!" We all gulp, even Richard.

Let there be light. Or, Hebrew, light. Either/or. Or, Old Testament beginning with "God said"; New Testament with "In the beginning was the Word..." I don't need anyone else, I can play this game all by myself.

Words are amazing. How did language start? Who decided let's call light, light? How did people agree? Or more abstractly, who said "me" should mean, well....."me"? Even more abstractly, where did the word "yearning" come from?

So it's not a game we're playing in vain?" Richard asks, sarcastically.

"No, only by vain people." Jeffrey.

"Words create life. Ah, I feel blood flowing in my veins." Ina offers.

"When the wind blows, I wonder whether God needs a weather vane." Richard again, before I even have a chance to say anything.

"Gosh, I'm not ABLE to play the game as WELL as you. I feel handicapped, in need of a mental CAIN to assist me." There are groans at my effort, and more drinking.

"Why is a pussy on fire part of a religious quest?" Richard queries.

Jeffrey says "Lewd, man. You're going to burn in hell."

Richard smiles, "Because it's a burning bush!" We all swallow.

"Jason and the Golden Fleece." Everyone looks at Ina with astonishment.

"You know colloquial English pretty well, Ina," Richard comments, then turns to me "So let me ask our barrister, here,

how can we get from the second amendment to erotic porno in five words?" We all pause, before Richard says, "The right to bare arms!" We groan and drink. "Bare arms, golden fleece, burning bush" we spout.

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"Speaking of which, show us a picture of her. I'm sure you've taken some." Richard knows I enjoy taking pictures of women, but I never show him any salacious ones, even after I've stopped dating them. The pictures are just for me.

Ignoring him, I counter, "Did you ever count the number of nuts you put in your mouth at a time?" Not bad, is this a veiled homosexual reference? That should put him on the defensive. Then I reach for the bowl, and place four peanuts in my mouth. "Just the right amount for a full crunch, but not so many as to be overwhelmed."

"You analyze way too much." Richard, breaking the rules again. Fine, I'll show him.

"Attacking analysis is the last resort of lazy, enfeebled minds. Poor little Richard, is my verbal sparring too wordy, prolix, verbose, redundant and longwinded for you to follow? Are my tautological circumlocutions too periphrastic?" I smile smugly at him. "Let me put it in terms you can understand." I make a backhand volley, palm facing them. Then I gracefully move toward a chopping downward motion with my left wrist on the crease of my right elbow, causing my right hand to thrust upward..

He ignores my gesture and retorts, "You sound like an SAT thesaurus. How long did you practice emitting that spontaneous foul-smelling detritus?"

I in turn ignore his verbal comment, and make another chopping

motion, this time a forehand volley, perfectly executed.. "Is that why my backhand volley is now so wicked? Yes. From analysis. Is that why my golf game is so superior to yours? Yes. From analysis. My academics? Yes. My goals in life? Yes. Choo choo. I am a fast train going smoothly down the tracks of life. From analysis. To life! L'chaim." I take another chug. I really really don't like the taste of beer. Ugh.

"Players like you are fine, until they make a mistake. Then they have nothing to fall back on. When I make a mistake, I can figure it out and correct it instantly. That's because I have a framework, an analytical, in-depth understanding of the game."

I look at all of them. "If we went to the restroom here," I point over to the corner, "and knocked, and someone were in it, have any of you ever thought how long you would be willing to wait before knocking a second time?" They all look puzzled. "I have. Because I've timed it. You have to learn everything about life, create a framework for all experiences you will encounter going down the train tracks. How? By analysis." I turn to Richard

"Your problem? You live life with way too little awareness."

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Johannes would have made a good lawyer. I'm impressed at how he can argue both sides of the same issue--for analysis and against analysis--at different times. Always doing so in order to attack his opponent, Richard, and not even realizing he's being inconsistent and contradicting himself. **Well, John, yes and no. It's not either/or. Yes, Johannes has little awareness that attacking and putting down Richard is his main**

goal, or that it doesn't matter which position he uses. But no, it's not necessarily inconsistent. Sometimes analysis may be helpful, sometimes not. Johannes hasn't yet learned to make that discrimination in his own life. It is his only tool, one he believes is always useful for him. It's a lesson you have not yet learned, either, John. Nuance and subtlety, my friend. Lessons from Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet you are about to receive.

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Richard claps. "Quite a monologue. Shakespeare would have been proud." His sarcasm is thick. Ok if anyone else speaks? He is glaring at me. "How far back do you pull your arm when you throw a baseball? How many inches do you cock your wrist when you shoot a basket?" I have to admit, I don't have answers to these questions. I just "do it" intuitively.

"There are limits to your vaunted analysis. And when you reach those limits, that's when you will come off the tracks." He wants to continue, but before he can, Ina interrupts him "Ki." Then to me, "Ki....Do you have picture?"

For Inamatsu, not Richard, I pull out a picture of Mery at Golden Gate Park from my wallet. She looks dazzling, smiling, playful, the sun reflecting off her hair.

"She's lovely." Jeffrey says sincerely.

Just then the waitress comes by and throws the bill on the table. I look at it, and, following protocol of the winner pays, place some money down, including a nice tip.

"Need change?" she asks with the same grumpy face.

Here's my chance to get a smile. "No, the extra's all for you." I look up, waiting for her lips to curl skyward. Now, finally, I'll get my smile. Nothing. She turns and walks away,

without any acknowledgment. I'm livid.

"Excuse me." She keeps walking away. I raise my voice, nearly a shout, "Excuse me, Ma'am, waitress."

She turns, surly, "What?!" in the same loud tone.

Bitch. I'm not sure what to say. I want a smile, and I want to get her at the same time. Then I remember something someone said in a psychology class--maybe a fellow student, or a T.A. I take a breath and say, in a pleasant, firm voice, "Did you know that children smile, giggle and laugh three to five hundred times a day?"

She actually smiles. Then, as she turns away, I see doubt in her face, as she realizes that what is seemingly just a statement of information is also a put down of the way she acts. A double whammy. I got her to smile and insulted her at the same time. Two points for me. I win.

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"Very beautiful. You a lucky guy. Jaemin." Ina is looking at Mery's picture.

I repeat "Jaemin?"

"Yes, a Korean name--my grandmother's. It means, 'to exist in the heavens.'" He smiles. "It's also a variation of the Hebrew name, Yamin, meaning right. See, we Japanese can be quite multi-lingual, too."

I'm impressed. Depths to Ina I hadn't realized.

Richard is more precise. "Pretty hair. Nose--high bridge, slender. Goy-looking. No make up. Wide cheeks. Not very fashionably dressed. Huge knockers. Could afford to lose a few pounds. Modigliani wouldn't appreciate this face or body. Would want thinner cheeks, narrower hips. Innocent, naive looking face. The

kind you like to corrupt, chappy. You want your cake and to eat it too. Though you still pretend you're a gentleman, right?" He guffaws like a hyena, and looks more closely at the picture. "Actually, there's more than innocence here. Modest yet provocative. Polite, but an invitation. Sweet focused, eyes, yet there's something funny about them."

"Thanks," I reply, seemingly ignoring Richard's comment. But I want to relook at the picture to see what he means. "You're right, Ina, I'm a lucky guy. Tomorrow I pick her up to go to Carmel, and take the plunge."

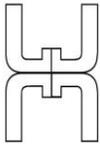
I thrust my ring finger into the beer's frothy, foamy, sudsy top layer, diving into it, pulling it back, and driving it back, creating even more bubbles and foam.

No ambiguity about what I mean by "plunge," Mr. Creative Writing Professor.

I pull my finger out, bring it to my mouth and suck it, as my friends chuckle and we all take another chug.

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ello, I Love You, Won't You Tell Me Your Name."

Both of us are in a giddy, happy mood as we sing to a Door's
tape that I bought for the drive down to Carmel. I'm wearing my
new hand-crafted sandals, which fit perfectly. And my new wire-
rimmed glasses.

I thought both of us might be a little nervous and awkward
seeing each other this morning, after the chaos of this past
weekend. But when I arrived with my Mr. Red Chariot, things
seemed gentle and easy between us. Mery gave me a big hug and
kiss. Perhaps, ideally, she would have invited me in for some
shenanigans, but probably it was best we get started on the
drive. Both of us seem on our best behavior.

"Look at you. I love the glasses. You look very scholarly,
and friendly."

"Look," I show her, no rims, attached by a bar at the t. But
there's only one problem. If I look straight ahead they're fine. But if
I keep my head straight and turn my eyes to talk to someone on the right
or left, the bar gets in front of the person I'm talking to. I called
the Dr.'s assistant to ask what to do and she said 'Just move your head
so you can see the person without the bar.'" I say it in a joking manner
to maintain the mood. But when the assistant said that to me, I felt
anger, and replied snootily, "Wow, that's really clever. I'm glad you
told me that, I couldn't have thought of it myself.'" I don't share my
response with Mery, not wanting to break the mood.

Mery laughs. "Great advice. If you think about it, if we put a
finger in front of our eye, we can wall ourselves off from great

distances and vistas. Just a slight shift can dramatically change our perspective."

What a wise woman. I smile and point to the sandals.

"Oh my. How cool. I bet they're comfortable." I nod, but don't tell her how I had them made. She might feel there's something snobbish and ironic in hand-crafted sandals. I feel cool, loose, free.

"Hello, I love you, let me jump in your game."

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I feel the ring in my pocket. All that is missing is the perfect time to give it to her. Last night I felt like when I was a child on Christmas Eve, knowing that if I could only go to sleep, the morning would come and I would find all the presents under the tree. But until I go to sleep, Santa won't come. So I'd toss and turn and twist. I remember so clearly those unbearably long Christmas Eve nights.

Last night felt like an eternity waiting for sunrise. But this time, rather than looking forward to opening my presents, I'm looking forward to giving the present.

Such a deeply Jewish home...the Christmas tree wasn't even called a "Hanukkah bush." How far Johannes has come, giving a present. How far I've come from my non religious assimilated roots.

"How was your week? I missed you." Mery puts her left arm behind my neck and rubs it.

"Your hands are like magic on my neck. That feels great. I missed you too. But I kept busy--creative writing class, some tennis, hanging out with the guys."

"I see you packed your racquet--and golf clubs. Mr. Sportsman. How'd the tennis go?"

"I won the trifecta."

"Sounds good, what does that mean?"

I explain that we rotate partners and the only time anyone won was when they played with me.

"Sounds like I'd better stick with you if I want to be a winner."

I smile. "You got that right." I feel the ring and wonder if this might not be a good time. She asks me to load her belongings. I notice some annoyance that it's hard to pack Mr Red because she's brought her paint supplies and a big canvas. But I guess that's her equivalent of my golf clubs and tennis racquet. I'm going to have to learn how to share space.

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Honk! As I come over a hill, I see a huge lumbering semi-trailer dawdling along in my lane. I'm in the far left lane and going a reasonable seventy-two miles an hour, as Dad taught me. Fast enough to push the envelope, but "As long as you're within seven miles per hour of the speed limit, a cop won't give you a ticket--you're under their radar."

I honk again. I want to yell "Move over, jerk" but fear Mery would criticize me. So I smile and say, "Slow traffic should stay right." She doesn't say anything. The driver changes lanes, and I move forward.

We're both quiet, and there's not that much traffic as we pass through South San Francisco and Daly City. As we head past San Bruno, I turn to Mery. "You know, this has been called the most beautiful freeway in the world."

She smiles. "It's great when the journey is as much fun as the destination."

Things are once again as they should be.

"Besides being good and winning, why?"

"Huh? I'm not sure I follow. Why what?"

"Why do you like tennis? How'd that become your sport?"

"Great question. That's what I love about you, you make me think. Let's see. Well, I guess it has to do with seeing my opponent. When I played squash in high school, I was pretty good, and quick, but I hated that sometimes my opponent was behind me, and could drill me in the back with the ball."

"Ouch. I get that. Did you play tennis all through college?"

"Actually, no. I tried out for the football team. I wanted to be a punter. I was pretty good in high school, had an over forty yard average. I thought the Stanford coach would be impressed--that was as good as some pro stats. But he said in order to be a punter, I'd have to practice with the team. I looked around the locker room and saw all these huge, muscular guys, and said, 'Thanks but no thanks.' That ended my college football career."

"Short and sweet, but safe."

"Yes, but I felt a little wimpy. So I went out for crew."

"Look." She points out the window." There's a lovely body of water to our right, nestled against the Santa Cruz mountains. We're passing through Hillsborough. That would be a great place to live. Though I wonder how I'd ever afford it.

"Wow, it is pretty, reminds me of the fjords in Norway."

"Where did you row?"

We rowed in the bay in Redwood City, every morning before dawn. Johannes is like a puppet on a string. Mery interrupts him after he's just shared he felt wimpy leaving football.

But instead of asking him about that, or comforting him, she changes the topic completely, to a passing scene. He gets distracted, feels insecure, then tries to show how he's a world traveler to regain his stature. She ignores him again, and returns to the rowing. And he just continues, like a little puppy dog. Who am I most upset at? Mery, as I realize how controlling she is; or Johannes, for not being more assertive with her?

Then we'd run the stadium stairs until we puked. Or at least I did. Finally, one morning, I passed out in the shower from exhaustion. That ended my crew career."

"That sounds terrible. Was it just too exhausting for you?"

"That, and I felt like a cog in a machine. In football, as punter, I was part of a team, but unique, special. In rowing I was just one of several uniform pieces. I felt myself disappearing."

"But what about being part of the group? I'd love that."

"Not me. Remember, be the best."

"Ok, maestro, what came next, tennis?"

"No. I still felt like a wimp, so I took a class in boxing. After a week of teaching us some moves, he paired us up. I was the second biggest in the class. The biggest guy was about three inches taller and forty pounds heavier. When we sparred, I couldn't reach him, but he clobbered me. After less than a minute, the coach stopped the fight. I was bleeding pretty badly. I left the class and turned in my 'drop' card, and that was the end of boxing. I guess the good thing about tennis is not just that you can see your opponent, but they keep a net between you and him!"

"Ouch, poor baby. Short and bloody. I guess we learn

sometimes as much from what doesn't work as what does. I think
you're courageous just for trying."

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Maybe there's hope, yet. In a very quick period of time Johannes went through several sports, trying to find his way and make the transition from the small cloistered prep school, to the larger stage at Stanford. Football one day. Out. Crew three months. Out. Both of those were efforts made with the goal of eventually playing varsity sports.

When he realized he wasn't good enough to play at that level, he switched to a regular Physical Education Class. This was a difficult admission he couldn't compete at that high level, but to compensate and show he was still macho, he picked boxing. Which lasted two weeks.

Finally, Johannes settled on a p.e. class in tennis, since he knew he wasn't good enough to play varsity tennis. First he tried the advanced tennis, but even that was too difficult and he could seldom win. So, he dropped down to the moderate class, where he did well and won a majority of the time. And eventually, Jeffrey and Inamatsu from that class, along with Richard, became his regular tennis buddies for the next several years. Competitors whom he could almost always beat.

Along with a Water Safety Instruction course in swimming, where he earned his certificate, and his tennis/golf buddies, he eventually pieced together a structure that served him well for several years. He found a sports home.

His transition, in some ways, seems to mirror my efforts to find the right framework for me in life, as I bounce from the kibbutz to Eilat to different teachers here in Jerusalem.

It took him several missteps--including initially seeking out sports which were too tough on his body, as if he had something to prove to someone. Only after being bloodied, did he find the his right, where he where he could enjoy himself and had sufficient skills. Johannes had to find his level both by accepting his limits, and still finding a way to feed his desire to win and be the best--in an ever smaller pond. I'd like to trust that I will also find my right level, the right "match" for me. My spiritual home. Unfortunately, this seems like a much larger stage, and a much more difficult game.

She continues to massage my neck. It feels nice, but I'd like her to move her hand to my leg. I remember her pulling back the last time we cuddled on Sunday, so decide to continue driving and not make any moves, yet.

"I was actually thinking of you on the tennis court."

"Why?"

"I was at net and a ball was coming at me at a hundred miles an hour."

"That's a lovely image of me. Was I smiling even at that speed?"

"I'm not done, wise mouth. I let the ball go, and it was two inches out. I wondered, how did I know to let it go. It seemed..."

"Woah, hold on. Are you giving me a hint that you want to let me go?"

"You're not the ball. Silly girl. That's not what I'm saying. Listen up."

She tossels my hair. "I really do like your glasses."

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I adjust them on my nose, with a feigned snobbish vanity.
Maybe I should have gotten the glasses earlier. Do I really look better
in them? It seems to her I do. I still think I'm more attractive in
contacts. Mom always said I had beautiful eyes. But maybe Mery's
teaching me not to be so worried about my looks.

Sounds like you're learning that lesson well!

"So, you let the ball go--not me?"

"Right. That's what I wanted to tell you. It was intuition,
I just felt in a microsecond it was the right thing to do. There
was no way to analyze that at the time, or try to calculate
height, velocity. I thought you'd be proud of me. No analysis.
Just instinct."

"So you analyze times when you don't analyze! Fascinating!
And that made you think of me. How flattering!"

"Exactly! And then I saw times when I did focus analytically. For
example, did you know that the eye tends to react to
motion...so normally we follow the hands and arms and racquet of
the server. But that is a waste of energy and focus. We need to
go against what our eyes want to do, and instead focus not on
the server's motion, but just where the ball is at its apex and
is hit by his racquet."

"Actually, that is fascinating. Tell me more, Romeo."

"And did you know that even though you're often told to
watch the ball hit the racquet, in fact, at the speeds at which
we play, the last time you see the ball before you hit it is
actually several feet away, and the rest is trust. There's only
so much you can actively control. So, like you, tennis teaches me
trust....and the limits of my control! See, I'm learning from
both of you."

"I see. More flattery still. Any more lessons. We have a long drive." She smiles and continues to rub my neck.

"Ok, only one more. I need to keep some secrets to myself. One of my favorite tricks is to try to recognize the number on the ball being hit...so I focus on the ball and don't think too much and overanalyze my mechanics. Like you in the park with that tennis dance. See, I learn from you all the time."

"I'm amazing. I'm glad you see me everywhere!"

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As we near the Seventeen Mile Drive, you can see hints of the sun seeking to break through the gray cloud cover. We have a few hours before we can check into our little Inn, so I pull off to take this longer, more scenic route into Carmel.

Mery claps her hands like a happy little girl. "I've never been on this stretch before. Another new adventure with you. I can't wait to see it. I'm so glad you're going this way." She smiles at me. Three of her four front teeth are straight, but the left little one on top turns in and covers part of one of her front teeth. Though it's not symmetrical--like my naturally straight teeth--it's endearing, and very cute. Her bottom teeth are more jumbled--but nothing that braces can't fix.

"Ok, sunshine, I have a big question for you." I feel the ring in my pocket.

She looks over, smiles quirkily, and says "Fine, let's see if I have a big answer for you."

"You told me your therapist said I was the best person you've ever dated. You said you agreed, and when I asked you why, you told me I'm a good listener, and you could share and be open with me." I place my hand on her lower thigh. "See how well I

listened."

She covers my hand with hers and holds it there, replying cautiously, "Yes, I did. True true, but I don't hear a big question."

"Well, being a good listener is good. But you have given me something even more important. You've opened me to trying to be a more giving person, and helped me learn about myself. I guess my question is Is there any new level of life I've offered you?"

She turns her head away from me, and looks at the pines whooshing past us. As we turn south, she still has said nothing. So I say, "Look....Point Joe. See those rocks. Many boats crashed there. Early mariners thought it was the entrance to Monterey Bay."

"When she faces me again, she has a quizzical, yet pensive look on her face. I'm not sure she's even seen Point Joe or heard my historical commentary. "My therapist says when I ask I question like that--"What is my value?-- or comparing my worth to someone else's--I'm feeling insecure. She says I should be careful because it will be hard for me to really trust the response I get, and often it won't be enough to address my confusion."

This is not the answer I'm expecting, and I'm not sure what I'm wanting, so I just nod my head and continue to drive.

Suddenly, she brightens. "Stop, look." As I pull over, I can see several people riding horses along the ocean. "They remind me of when you took me riding. What a beautiful evening." She strokes my hand, which has continued to rest on her thigh. I try to move it higher, but without success as she holds my hand firmly in place.

"Do you know what that stretch is called?" I ask. She shakes her head. "Bird Rock Hunt Course. It was used in the

early 1900's by the 11th Cavalry for riding and saber practice."

"How do you know all this information?"

"Top right cubby."

She laughs, opens my glove compartment, and pulls out a map of Monterey/Carmel. When she opens it, she can see that I've highlighted the Seventeen Mile Drive.

"Since you're fishing for compliments--and, wanting someone to sing your 'hallelujah's'" she laughs and melodiously sings Hallelujah three times, accentuating each syllable. Then she says, "What you really give me is....and my therapist and I talked at length about this....is a dazzlingly adorable glove compartment filing system."

"Thanks a lot. I feel so valuable."

She laughs. "Actually, we really did talk about it. What it signifies. You have a much more systematic and structured approach to life than I do. And I need someone like that to help ground me so I don't fly off into the clouds."

I've heard this before, and it didn't sound that reassuring and special the first time, and it sounds even less so this time.

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We continue south in silence. Mery is looking out the window at the passing scenery. I'm trying to digest what she said. My systematicness is an asset. Yet isn't that the very precise, analytical style she attacks when we play music, or when I dance? Maybe her therapist is right. If I am fishing for compliments, then nothing she says will be sufficient. Or maybe, with the help of her therapist, she's beginning to realize that my style is a strength, and I'm perfect for her.

"There are a lot of golf courses and huge houses, aren't

there? I'm surprised it's so developed." She pauses, and points to the map, "But here, Cypress Point Lookout. Humans can't take away the beauty of the sea."

I look over cursorily, but continue driving. "Are you getting hungry?"

"Starving."

"I was thinking we could stop at Pebble Beach for lunch. I'm going to see if I can get a tee time, and they have a great restaurant overlooking the 18th hole."

She offers no response. Did she hear me? Too absorbed in Cypress Point? Looking at the map for Pebble Beach? Didn't like my idea? I'm starting to get annoyed, but decide to just breathe and see what happens.

Finally, after another minute, Mery says, "Let me say one more hallelujah. My therapist has pointed out that in the past I've always picked damaged people. My rebellious first boyfriend Peter; Al, with his fondness for any white woman who would sleep with him, and no direction in life; James, way too much older, and who would never have made a serious commitment to me. You are so normal, so confident, so willing to commit, and that's what my therapist says, and I agree, that's exactly what I want and need.

Before I can say anything, she continues. I'm happy to just listen and let her praise wash over me.

"You also have a courage about the way you approach life that I envy and want to learn from. The way you got those front row seats at the Beethoven concert, then went up and found a way for us to sit in the box seats as well was amazing. I've never known someone who could do something like that or be that confident stepping outside the boundaries. It's like you

feel you belong anywhere, and can do anything."

As she's talking, her face is glowing, almost blushing. Her words come fast and joyous. "You make me realize how passive and fearful I often am. You show me how to be brave. I love the way you take risks and act boldly--what's the word, chutzpah?-- not only for yourself, but for me. You brought me a beautiful musical experience. You make me realize that I do deserve to have good things in my life. Your confidence and style teach me that I shouldn't be afraid to pursue my own goals, Those are priceless gifts."

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I'm overwhelmed by what she is saying. Her words are like music to my ear. I feel awash in her praise, and am not sure how to reply. "Thank you" doesn't seem strong enough. "I'm overwhelmed" seems to suggest insecurity, which I don't want to reveal. Instead, I start to sing the chorus of the Pirates of Penzance

"I am the very model of a modern major general..."

and then, while saluting, add "Ambitious, self-disciplined, confident, bold, yet playful" I tickle her. "The list is endless isn't it? Handsome, sexy."

She's laughing as she says "Here's where I'm supposed to say, 'You forgot modest and humble. But what I will say is you forgot vulnerable. Even more than you recognize.'" I start to query what she means by that, but she holds up her hand, still laughing "Don't ask, just accept that I know what I'm talking about. But that's a good thing. I like taking care of that little vulnerable child in you, who is also the playful impish little boy who makes me laugh"

I smile and continue my childishly playful list, for which I have now been given permission: "intelligent, artistic, sensitive, great love

maker.,."

She holds up her hand. "Enough, or I'll barf." She opens her mouth and sticks her finger down it, as if to gag herself.

"Man, what I wouldn't give to be that finger now."

"You've got such a dirty mind."

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We stop to look at the Lone Cypress.

Holding hands, neither of us says anything. Finally, after a few minutes, she asks, "When you look out at this view, what do you see?"

It seems a pretty obvious question. I respond "The tree, the ocean behind it. Some craggy rocks. Why? What do you see?"

"I see the negative spaces between the limbs, framing the ocean and sky."

"Negative spaces. I remember that term from my art class. At first it seemed pejorative: Negative. I'm not very good at seeing them unless I train my eye. I mainly just see what is there."

"What is there? That's funny. I guess that means I see what isn't there?" She smiles. "For me, my reality, I naturally see the spaces in the world." Her smile seems to turn a bit sad as she says, "Does the tree seem lonely to you?"

"A little. But I'm more impressed with its chutzpah. Growing out of that isolated rock, alone in the winds, bent but alive, affirming its right to be."

She continues to sit and stare at the tree, but takes my hand and puts it on her left thigh. "That's so beautiful, so poetic, so deep."

Thank you, creative writing class, thank you existential class. This seems like it might be the perfect moment to ask her the biggest question.

I ask her to close her eyes. I go to her door, open it, and go down on one knee so that when she opens her eyes she will see the cypress over my right shoulder.

I take the ring out. My heart is exploding, as waves of blood crash through my body, a counterpoint to the ocean waves thrashing the rock.

"Ok, you can open your eyes." I hold the ring out to her. "Elizabeth Mery Jaellois, I want us to be brave and courageous like the Lone Cypress. I want us to be adventurous and playful and happy like the children dancing in Golden Gate Park. I want us to take the journey together. Will you marry me?"

Before I can even place the ring on her finger, she leaps out of the car, grabs me under my shoulders, lifts me to my feet, and starts crying and laughing. "Yes, yes, yes." She is gasping for air as she hugs me and we spin each other around. She is showering kisses on my cheeks and lips. I feel joyous, and tearful.

I place the intertwining silver ring on her finger, and show her the silver band. "It's inscribed. 'I am my beloved, and my beloved is mine.'"

"They're perfect. You are my knight in shining armor. You are such a romantic, such a gentleman. You make me feel so beautiful and valued."

Our tears and laughter mingle as we hold each other tightly.

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T H E E N D.

The cameras could fade out with birds singing, and sunlight coming through the clouds with the lone cypress and the Pacific Ocean as the backdrop to the embracing couple.

This is where Johannes would like to end his story. I don't blame him. At the time, I, too, was caught up in it all--the story, picture, the excitement, the hope. At that moment, all the past differences and confusions with Mery have been put aside. There is a belief that love will conquer all. Johannes felt like this was a new beginning of a happy ever after life. His story was working out just as he had planned.

Yet the very things that Mery says she values in him--his courage, his structure, his "normalcy"-- she systematically mocks, rejects, and tears down piece by piece. Was Johannes a damaged person before he met Mery? Of course. But not nearly as damaged as he was after he met her.

Is it really any wonder that I, left to pick up and try to re-put together the detritus, feel bitter now?

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As we drive the remaining distance to the Pebble Beach Lodge, I feel like we are flying. We sing to the Doors Album; then we listen to the Fourth Movement of Beethoven's Ninth, which is playing as we arrive at the lodge. We are in perfect harmony.

As we pass the putting green on the right, I am in awe. The mecca of golf. Mery is giddy, commenting on the warmth and rustic charm of the architecture. The valet parks Mr. Red.

"Do you mind if I get a tee time before we have lunch?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Knight."

Things continue in perfect flow. I schedule a tee time for the next day at 11, and reserve a caddy. There is a slight glitch when they tell me the price. I joke back "I don't want to buy the course, just play it." That sounds like something Dad would say. Pretty good, I have to admit. Humor to deflect and partially

express annoyance. Oh well, I have no idea how my finances are going to work out. I only know I don't have enough to live on for more than a year or two, so why not enjoy the now? All it means is that I run out of money a week or two earlier. As mom sang to me, "Que sera, sera."

I go to the phone to call the Green Lantern Inn to see when we can check in. I can't find the number, so I call information, and when they give me the number, I write it on the phone directory.

"You shouldn't do that." I turn. It's Mery. I smile. "I'm calling to see when our room will be ready."

"No, I mean, writing on the phone directory. That's community property. You shouldn't deface it, that's like graffiti. Now that we're going to be a team, we need to think of others, as well as each other."

I feel like I'm back in church. I'm not sure she's wrong, but it's something I would never give a second thought to. It's just a stupid phonebook. Graffiti?

"Thanks, dear. You continue to make me a better person." I snort inwardly, Ovid.

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As we enter the lunch room, I tell her how expensive the golf was, and repeat my joke. She doesn't smile. She picks up a menu as I ask for the maitre'd for a window table. He tells me they are all reserved for the rest of the afternoon. I slip him a \$20.

He hands it back to me. "Sorry, sir. There is nothing I can do. We are completely reserved. Perhaps something over here." He points to an area in the far back. I feel enraged. And embar-

rassed. I feel I need to show Mery that I can make things happen,
am competent. Especially after all the things she said she liked
and valued in me.

Mery touches me on the shoulder. Her touch startles and
annoys me. "What?"

"I have an idea. Look at these prices. I can make us a
picnic for much less, and we can go to Point Lobos. We'll save
money, and be right in the middle of nature, all at the same
time. How about it?"

"Brilliant, oh red-haired Queen. Let us flee this stilted,
artificial place, for the wilds of nature." I stuff my \$20 back in my
pocket. I want to hit my left palm into the curve of my right elbow,
thrusting my right fist upward, thereby giving the maitre d' an
"up yours" salute. But that's hardly the romantic gentleman that
Mery thinks she's marrying. Instead, I put Mery's arm in mine,
turn and exit.

I've found a winning partner: pretty, sexy, smart, and
saving me money, too.

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"Beautiful, exquisite." I raise the coarse, tannish wine
flask, as Mery and I look around at the Coast Live Oak, the
Monterey pine. California sea lions are frolicking in the ocean.

"Did you know that the landscape artist Francis McComa
called this 'the greatest meeting of land and water in the
world'" Mery responds as she takes a drink.

"Yes, the scenery is nice, too, but I was toasting you!"

"Oh, you trickster you." She beams that girlish, impish
smile that I love.

"Do you hear the chickadees twittering in the treetops on

the way over?" Mery asks as she spreads out the feast she has purchased, at less than 1/4 the price of eating at the Pebble Beach Lodge. Purchased, I might add, however, with my money.

She bought a cheap red wine, something no one but her friends on Sixth Street would drink. But I say nothing, and counter by impulsively and improvisationally buying a cheap faux-leather wineskin that is hanging from a rack in the store. It has a soft feel, and its round base narrows to a capped point, like a ram's horn. I sling it over my shoulder like a canteen.

As Mery prepares the picnic, I unscrew her wine jug and pour it into the opening of the skin. "New wine in a new wine skin" I say.

She smiles, not realizing I'm actually criticizing her "new wine," which may have been aged all of several months.

Drinking from the wineskin should be fun, much better than sipping wine daintily and demurely from a glass, smelling the bouquet, acting with insipid, Richard-style pretentiousness. This is a time for letting loose and celebrating.

I run my hand over the wineskin. It's soft, like a chammy cloth. "Mery, how is this wineskin like a Swiss army knife and a double entendre?" She looks puzzled.

"Give up? Because it has many uses. I love that. It's a wineskin, right, to hold wine. But the soft material could be used to polish and shine Mr. Red. And, if I got some charcoals and pastels, I could draw you, and use the skin to create shading, like I did in art class. Is this a great purchase or what?!"

She laughs, rubs the wineskin, and says "I'll toast to that. May we be like that cloth--and find many ways to enjoy each other."

She takes a drink, passes it to me, and I do likewise.

"To a wonderful beginning."

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We watch the swirling waters clash and crash together, tossing themselves high toward heaven, white foamed, sparkling cut diamonds in the sunlight. "This is like paradise, a bucolic Garden of Eden, and I am with my beloved." Mery gives me a chaste tender kiss on my hair. I think of going for more, but remember again what she said last Sunday about sex and taking it slow. I guess I'm going to have to ask her if she talked to her therapist this week, and what they discussed. I'm feeling more inhibited, like back in high school, and like then, not making much progress on the bases.

"As we were walking to our picnic spot, did you see the wild mushrooms?" she asks.

"No, why?"

"I love mushrooms. But I'm afraid to pick one, for fear it might be poisonous. Do you think that's wise or foolish?"

"Wise, of course."

"I knew you'd say that. That's why I'm glad I'm with you. But there's some part of me that feels if you never try anything new, you never have the excitement of true adventure and risk."

"Being on the edge of the Devil's cauldron, and this close to the ocean is risk enough for me. "Hey, I have a joke. Instead of fowl, perhaps you should have bought bar-b-q." I say slowly, enunciating in an exaggerated way, "SPARE RIB, which Kansas City is known for."

She looks at me awkwardly. "Is that the joke? That's not funny. I don't get it."

"You said Garden of Eden. You know. Adam and Eve. Spare rib. Eve came from Adam's rib." She groans. "That's ok, I was

just ribbing you." She groans again. "I feel like the first man.
Adam. And you, my beloved, the first woman."

Adam, from the Hebrew word Adamah, earth. We are born from and connected to earth. I remember the Rebbe sharing a wisdom that we should always carry a bit of dirt in our pocket. When we feel too noble, too egoic, we should feel the dirt in our pocket, and remember that from dust we came, and to dust we will return. When we feel despairing, we should touch this same dirt, and remember our noble nature, that out of dust we were created in the image of God, just a bit below the angles.

I point to the map. "Devil's Cauldron...between Sea Lion Point and Sea Lion Rock." I laugh. "Look, it says 'Remain at a safe distance.'" I take another gulf of wine, and set it down next to the Bacchanalian feast of chicken, corn, French bread and apple pie.

Apple. And where--or who--might I ask is the serpent? Paradise or Devil's Cauldron, right next to each other? Johannes, remember what your French teacher asked you when you were drifting off in class? "Où êtes-vous?" Where are you? The same question God asked Adam. *Eifo atah?* Actually, I wonder if that's how it's asked in the Bible. Genesis. 3.9. *Aiyeikah*. I wonder why there are different phrasings between biblical and modern Hebrew? Is it like American English versus Shakespearian English? Why did I look that up? Is that part of my spiritual search, or just my intellectual curiosity keeping me distant from myself? How am I different from Adam, who replied "I am hiding"? It's easy for me to sit here and ask you, Johannes, the same question now. Do you realize how much you are hiding in this illusory world and story you've created?

Is there a you in there? I guess I could ask Mery the same

question, when she goes behind her veil. And, unfortunately, I guess I could ask myself the same question. Once I was a student, a lawyer to be, a son, a boyfriend. Now, I say I want to be a spiritual person. Am I still hiding? Where am I?

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I take another swig. "Mery, I feel like Odysseus, the conquering hero who, having finally returned home, banished the suitors, and grabbed Penelope for a Dionysian good time." I take one more gulp, and put my arm around her shoulders, and pull us both back onto the blanket. She doesn't resist.

And where is your home, Johannes, that you are returning to? You haven't returned home because you haven't ever left it. You've jumped from the womb of your family to the womb of college to the womb of Elizabeth. You are in a womb of your own creation. Worse, the wombs in which you are hiding are ones that will expel you, and you will realize that you never really had a safe home, a safe harbor.

This seems like a time of a fresh start, to stop thinking, and let myself spontaneously improvise and enjoy. I take off my sandals, which served me well hiking down through Point Lobos. I also take off my glasses, which Mery likes, and which don't seem to diminish my attractiveness. I can't believe all the ways she is helping me free myself, learning to be less uptight, and to let loose and really enjoy life.

Rising up like my hero Odysseus, I stand and remove my shirt, letting the sunlight reflect off my hardened stomach. I angle myself just right so that I imagine Mery can see all the definitions in my abs. I take off my pants, wearing only my speedo swimsuit, and step off the blanket.

More illusions. Johannes, you're hardly a Dionysian, except in your self-image. Every step in your life is an Apollonian calculation, including this effort to "let loose." Unfortunately, you can't see Mery's reactions without your glasses; nor can you see mine. But both of us are having the same uncomfortable response to your display of bodily narcissism.

I lift the wine flask high, tilting it until the red-rubied sunlit liquid shoots straight into my mouth. I raise the flask still higher, and the stream of wine hits a corner of my eye, trickles down my nose and, with the delicate tilting of my head, gently flows into my mouth.

"How's that, Kazansatkis? Call me Zorba!" I begin singing the melody from the movie--dada dada dada dada-- and begin a Greek dance, hands over my head.

The more that the wine flows into the mouth of the delta, the braver the hero becomes. Soon the wine is pouring forth in torrents over my head, like a red sea, cascading over my eyes, and only with the greatest ingenuity can I twist myself in such a manner to catch at least part of the raging current. The rest continues its plunge, rushing down over my ribs, reddening my stomach, splattering over my swimsuit.

"I am man, hear me roar!" I give a loud Tarzan call "Ayeeeeaaaahhhh" over the pounding surf.

You don't see the remaining liquid hitting the ground, seeping between the crevices of the rocks, and slowly making its way to join the crashing waves at the Devil's Caldron.

"Down, Odysseus. You need to eat something." Mery laughs and tears off a piece of chicken for me. I feel like I'm in the movie Tom Jones.

That church in San Francisco may be Elizabeth's religion, but this is mine: A religion of the body and sensuality-- A beautiful red-headed girl caressing me, wine and lots of good food, basking in the sun. I recline, placing my head on her lap, and look up at the sunlight as she continues holding bites of chicken above my head for my enjoyment.

Who are you, Johannes? Everything but what you think you are? You think you're in control, but you're more like a trained seal about to be fed. Or a false Tarzan, making yourself into a god, a false messiah of your own cult, right before falling off the cliff.

Who says you can't have it all: the commitment of relationship and the joy and freedom of self-expression? This post engagement honeymoon is getting off to a great start. I give thanks to my circle of advisors--Ovid, Kirkegaard, Zorba, Adam, Falstaff, and Odysseus. You all are my true friends. You have served me well, and I know I can count on you never to desert me.

Paradise found.

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She continues to hold the chicken above me. What is she waiting for? I'm hungry. I see her eyes are closed, and her lips are moving. "What are you doing? Can't you see I'm starving?"

She looks at me awkwardly. "I'm saying a blessing, but I didn't want to say it out loud, because you told me last week that when I say a prayer with the name of Jesus

Christ in it made you uncomfortable--and even offended you. I don't want to hurt you again. But I do want to say a blessing before I eat."

I rise up on my elbows. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness, but it's not a good solution for you to hide from me such an important part of your life. Let's use this as a test case, to show we can come to a compromise. I'm not such an anti-Christ

that I'll refuse to do a blessing."

"What are you thinking of?"

"I don't know, how about something that just expresses how thankful we feel for what we have right now?" It sounds a little corny, but I want to show her I'm open and willing to work together. As long as it doesn't get too spiritually syrupy.

We play around with different ideas. She agrees to no mention of Jesus, but says "I want us at least to pray to a sacred, loving, wise God."

"Do you believe God is the wise, loving Grandpa in the sky?" I try to hide the mocking disbelief in my words, and apparently do a good enough job, because her reply responds to the content, not to any skepticism that might have leaked through.

"Not so literally, but yes, at the deepest level, I do believe we live in a loving, compassionate universe, don't you?"

"I've never really thought about it. I know I don't believe in the Grandpa God of Sunday School. Or the God that punishes you if you're bad or rewards you if you're good. Guilt. Shame. Yech. It's bribery. Sounds like Santa Claus." I begin singing, mockingly, "He knows when you've been naughty, he knows when you've been nice... Santa Claus is coming to town. ."

"Then what do you believe in?"

"I told you, I've never really thought about it. It all seems like kind of different stories to me."

"What do you mean, different stories?" There is a slight edge in her voice.

"Well, in high school we had to read all these books like the Myth of Gilgamesh, and different creation stories. Want to hear one?" She nods unenthusiastically. "It's from Ghana. Their god was called

Mangala. Before creating our world he created another, didn't like it and destroyed it. When he tried again, he ended up creating a trickster named Pemba, who committed incest with his mother. Mangala fixed things by castrating Pemba. So the beginning of human life comes from the issue of an incestuous randy being."

"That's a horrible story. I don't like it at all."

"Is this better. This one's from Baghdad and Babylonia. Marduk was the god of gods. He smashed the skull of Tiamat, the primordial mother of all things, and her blood ran streaming to the ends of the earth. He split her carcass in half, the upper part he used to support the arc of the sky; and the bottom half to hold down the seas. Like that one?"

"I hate it. It's sexist and bloody and mean. These are horrible, primitive stories filled with untrustworthy men and gods. They make me cling more than ever to the love and compassion of Jesus."

"With all due respect, they make as much sense as winged chariots and virgin births and a bloody writhing figure nailed to a cross who then rises from the dead. They're all myths. We tell ourselves stories to make us feel, I don't know, secure, or that somehow this makes sense." Mery does not appear pleased with what I've said. But it's true. She's living in a fairy tale. Those stories are no different than her own illusion.

I look away and see a spider web, and a fly caught in it. That's what she's like. Trapped by her illusory faith.

Or maybe it's you, Johannes, trapped like a fly in Mery's web. Maybe she's the spider woman.

"The Hopis believe in a sun god Tawa and a goddess, Spider Woman. They made all the creatures of the world beneath an

intricately woven white blanket. Do you like that better?"

"At least it's less bloody, and seems purer. But I didn't like your comments about the Cross at all."

"So, what do you and Jesus want to do with the fly?" I point out the fly caught in the web. Mery winces.

"I want to save it. Shouldn't we do something?"

"If God is all good, He made both the spider and the fly. The fly is the spider's life source. Who are you to play God? Isn't everything perfect? Aren't you being hypocritical? "

"Everything doesn't have to make sense for me to have faith. Not everything should be analyzed. The goal isn't always to be logical and consistent." She's clearly upset.

Why did you begin by telling her only violent origin myths, Johannes? Are you trying to create distance because you fear this topic? Were you looking for a fight? If you wanted to approach Mery more gently, rather than antagonistically, you could have told her the sweet tale from the ancient Yoruba in which an artist deity, Obatala, designed the human body. Then a heavenly potter Ajalamopin chose an "inner head" to be placed inside our human head. Like God breathing ruach into humans, their deity, Olodumare, breathes life into this "little head" and nine months later we finish our incubation.

I hope there is someone breathing life into my little head right now. I have six months left of my incubation.

* * *

Johannes, you dismiss the stories as myths but have never really explored what you believe. Except the law. Where you were Mr. Strict Constructionist. My Ortho doppelganger would discount all myths but the literally true Biblical one. A Biblically strict

constructionist. There must be some part of me that seeks absolute certainty and clarity. But for some reason, another part--or the events of life--keep me from holding to such literalness.

Where do I stand? I guess I'm more open, more confused. I have your skepticism, Johannes, about Grandpa God, and virgin births, but somehow, somewhere in the Bible--old or new Testament--I want, no, need to find something I can believe in that touches not only my mind, but my heart and soul.

* * *

"It's amazing to me that someone who thinks and analyzes things as much as you do has never spent time thinking about the nature of the universe at the deepest level, and our place in it."

Mery sounds like a law professor scolding me during one of the few classes when I wasn't prepared. "All that erudition is just pretentious fluff and intellectual sophistry unless you focus it on something meaningful. Faith is something everyone possesses; whether devout believer or atheist. We all have to have a personal quest to try to find meaning in life. It's what distinguishes us from animals."

"Ok, all right. If you put it that way, I certainly want to be better than an animal." Where do I begin to create my belief system? I look inside. Nothing comes up except what I don't believe. Ok, I have two sources of knowledge: my family and my classes. My parents never talked about what they believe. Grandpa Dave believes in red birds--sweet and goofy. Grandpa \$ is always saying "Lord willing" but I think that's just superstitious chatter. He probably believes more like what I learned in biology class, which, if I think about it, is probably as close to what I believe as anything. Maybe mixed with a bit of my existential class. I share this with Mery.

"I'm probably more of a Darwinian survival of the fittest, existential type guy. It's all random. Each of us has to make our own way...you know, John Wayne, confident, ...the very things you love about me, right?" I want to add, religion is for the weak, the "opiate of the masses" but decide I've probably said more than enough. All I want to do is eat some chicken.

"Then do you object to the word God, too?"

"Object is too strong. But, yes, I'd prefer something more neutral." I pull out my ever-present paper and pencil, and draft some notes.

She looks at them, suggests a few substitute words. We argue, challenge, and finally, after a couple of attempts, in which both of us are becoming increasingly annoyed--and hardly thankful--we agree to this version:

"May we open ourselves to the deepest level of divine wisdom and sacred loving, compassion that exists in the universe." She's happy, because she reads it as a declarative sentence. I read it as a conditional sentence: if such wisdom exists--and I guess I don't really believe it does-- then the sentence works for me, too. It's not that I'm against such a universe. I'm all for deeper wisdom and love. Good Lord, if I ever needed it, now seems the time. If there is deeper wisdom, great. But I don't want to put my faith in pipe dreams, some illusory crutch to lean on.

A fair compromise, as Grandpa said, is one where neither party is completely satisfied. This one is even better. We both think we won.

We also add additional words of gratefulness which I'm able to whole-heartedly support. "We thank the universe for all its gifts, including this meal. May this food nurture and strengthen

us and we may in turn nurture, strengthen, and serve others."

She smiles. I smile. I'm actually appreciative to her for reminding me to give thanks. This is the part of Mery that pushes me to be a better person. We are a good team, indeed.

"Now, oh spiritual teacher, may I now be fed?"

She obliges. Yummm.

* * *

Johannes needs someone like Elizabeth to remind him of all the privileges he began life with--wealth, home, shelter, center of his family's universe--all of which he took for granted. He is so self-absorbed, he thinks of no one but himself, and is always whining about what is missing, or what he is lacking. Perhaps he just had too much given to him too soon.

I've pruned away all those limbs and branches. I have reduced my body by fasting, removed almost all human contact, left behind everything I've ever once known and loved. No family, no friends, no country, no beloved. I am trying to whittle myself down to spiritual essence, and to find God, the Tree of Life.

I have two fears in this pruning process. I'm afraid I will make too big a cut, and actually injure myself. Even if I don't do that, I dread realizing that after tearing off so many limbs, there is no spiritual essence within me, just emptiness.

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The Rebbe asked each of us this week to make a contribution to a tree fund, because it is Tu B'shevat, the New Year for Trees. When I was a child in Sunday School, I remember giving money to buy trees in some place called Israel. And now I am in Israel, still like a child in religious school, still being told to buy trees for Israel. I'm tired of the Rebbe's always asking for

my money, especially since I am now so poor, and working so hard just to save a little money for therapy with Dr. Lisbet and him.

Symbolically, I suppose, this holiday might be a good sign for me. It signals the approaching end of winter, and is a harbinger of spring, when sap shoots up the trees, and fruit begins to form. I'd like to feel that renewed energy, and to believe there are new buds forming in me.

The Rebbe told us a story from the Talmud, about a person called Honi, who was walking along the road when he saw a man planting a carob tree. He asks the man, "How long before your tree will bear fruit?" When the man replies, "Seventy years" Honi says in surprise, "But you won't even be alive then." The man agrees but gently observes that when he entered the world, it contained carob trees planted by his ancestors, so he is now planting them for his children and their children.

I feel like I'm so busy working on myself that I don't really have the time or energy to think about anyone else, or what I should plant for them. I certainly didn't do very well working on the date trees.

What would I want to plant? For whom? Will I ever have children who will one day see the trees I am spending money to plant?

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John accuses Johannes of being too self-absorbed, not appreciating what he has, and not thinking of others. I suppose it's easy to hold up a mirror to others, and point out their flaws. I can easily do the same for John. Though he does want less in life, he still does not appreciate what he has. He is so self-preoccupied. He either is thinking about himself, or asking

others to think about and help him. It seems easy to criticize him for not setting aside his own circuitous reflections and begin to think about helping others less blessed than he--even in his "pruned" state. After all, this cutting away is self-imposed.

Perhaps there is always an excuse we create why we don't have the time or resources to help others.

From a different angle, however, John's time of self-reflection may be part of an evolving, important, even necessary process. Dr. Lisbet cited the historian Toynbee saying many people who have made substantial contributions to humanity have gone through cycles of "withdraw" and "return." John really does need to figure out who he is and what contribution he can make. That is the soil he is seeking to create so that others, who come after him, might then grow and give back shelter.

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As if things couldn't get any better, two mating monarch butterflies flit above us, separating, re-joining, a counterpoint of beautiful orange against the sky.

We sit up to watch them the fly away, and Mery offers me a piece of fresh, homemade apple pie. How can I resist?

As we share it, three sparrows land in a small, clear tide pool of water formed by the retreating waves. I'm reminded of Grandpa Dave's birdbath. I assume they are seeking refuge from the sun's warmth. They flutter their wings, splashing each other and themselves with water. But rather than fly away, they seem to do a little dance, quivering, pulsating, and splashing more water by their shaking motion. They are doing nothing practical, just playing with each other for the pure enjoyment..

Mery and I don't need words. We both are seeing and feeling

the same thing. I'm sure of it by our joyous smiles. We lie back on the blanket.

The sun is scouring me, as I am dandled by the gentle rocking motion of Mery's body. All impurities are being removed. I'm like a small child nurtured and cradled, as I hear the wind-blown water lapping the seashore. This is the first time she's let me place my head on her breasts since last Sunday. Progress. But I don't feel aroused as much as peaceful. An interesting anomaly.

Mery begins to sing softly, a lullaby tune. Above us is a stage on which a white drama is unfolding. The clouds blown by a soft eastern breeze, continually change shapes. The curtain goes up and the play begins. The first prop is enfolded in a mass of white. "Look, Mery. Do you see the column, like a tree trunk. It reminds me of Asheroth, a pagan fertility goddess, represented by the planting of a tree or a pole." She smiles with her eyes, and continues to sing. I'm not sure she really understands the salacious intent of my free association. So I continue.

"She was part of an ancient religion practiced by the Canaanites, a tribe which dwelt among the Hebrews during the time of Joshua and the Judges. Their goddess, Asheroth, was worshiped by having sexual intercourse with the priestess. Maybe that is why the all-powerful Jehovah warned the Hebrews 'Thou shalt not whore after strange gods.' After all, He is a jealous God, and would want monogamous commitment...like Kierkegaard's Or." I chuckle at my own inebriated musings. It's interesting watching my mind as it fills with wine. It doesn't seem that much different, only the thoughts, words, and associations come faster, whirring, buzzing.

"But then I wonder, why would God say that those with

crushed testicles or whose male member is cut off shall not enter the assembly of the Lord?" I place my hands over my speedo-covered balls in mock terror. "Maybe He likes His followers virile, just as long as everyone knows He is the most powerful, the most virile? Guess I'd better keep the family jewels intact if I want to approach God, huh?" I'm not sure Mery is listening, as she continues to sing, but I'm enjoying talking to myself, and continue to observe the clouds.

As I watch, the pole thickens--tumescence?-- and becomes a pillar of cloud...salt, no doubt. A Lot of salt! The pillar continues to grow. It divides at the top into elongated fragments. A wrist forms from which five fingers extend, a hand. Che gelo questo mai. At that altitude, it certainly can't be too warm, eh Mozart?

Or is it Rodin's Hand of God, from which the newborns-- Mery and I-- are emerging? I feel Mery's hand softly stroking me on my neck, as she continues to gently rock back and forth and sing to me.

The white cloud hand changes, the wrist enlarges, the fingers grow thicker, and lo, a crown. Prince Hal, it is only befitting that Falstaff present thee with this trophy. Look how I have evolved. My mind is at peace, restful. No more swirling starry night. It certainly couldn't have been on a day like this when Van Gogh painted his famous picture, a lovely woman on his arm, a peaceful sky above, butterflies dancing.

There are hidden worlds awaiting, Johannes, right before your eyes. You just can't see them in the daylight, especially in your wine-induced haze.

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"Tell me a story," Mery whispers.

"What kind?"

"Oh, I don't know, something heroic, adventuresome, playful; or that's beautiful and peaceful, like now."

I wish my father were here to help me. He would tell the greatest stories. Dad would begin with real people, then add fantastic details, like the adventures in Kokomo land. A story doesn't really have to be completely true. You're allowed much more latitude than the law. I think back to my creative writing class and my teacher's advice "Write about what you know."

"How about if I give you a list, and you can tell me which one you want to use as the beginning of the story." She nods enthusiastically.

"Sailing in the fjords in Norway, around Aandelsnes and Trondheim; snow-skiing around Lake Tahoe; water-skiing in the Lakes of the Ozarks; hiking in the Catskills; deep-sea fishing in Acapulco; canoeing in the serene lakes of Minnesota and Canada..."

"That one, the last one. I love the idea of being alone in the wilderness, in harmony with nature. Like Jesus in the wilderness, learning about Himself. That's what I want to hear."

"Ok, children, gather round the campfire, and I'll tell you about my summer camping and canoeing." We reverse positions. I sit up and Mery closes her eyes and snuggles with her head in my lap. So close but yet so far.

She wants a story of a heroic, Thoreau-like solitary man in nature, that's the story I'll give her. I'll just leave out the other camp counselors and all the noisy campers. Creative writing, creative story telling.

Does it interest you at all, Johannes, that you never

ever spent time by yourself in nature? Or anywhere else? You are a thinking person, but not a deeply self-reflective one. Yet.

"I'd taken a few days off from my job as camp counselor in Wisconsin, and headed up north to the lakes in Minnesota and Canada. I discovered the upper and lower Basswoods, tranquil clear lakes. There was just me, my tent, my food, my canoe and my paddle. No other people are around. During the day I'd paddle through 'God's green wilderness.' That was actually the title of my high school freshman paper. I remember Mom and Dad helped me write that line, both of them standing behind me, dad eating his chocolate and chocolate chip ice cream, giving me an occasional bite as reward. I still remember the opening line: "God's Green Wilderness. I have been there, and I want to share it with you so you will feel you, too, have been there.' That's way too corny to share with Mery now. Instead, I say, "You know telling you about this experience reminds me of one evening with Mom and Dad, eating icecream, laughing and sharing stories. They were an appreciative audience as I regaled them with my adventures."

Mery stirs, "What a supportive, amazing family you have. Please continue." I try to subtly adjust her head closer to my lingham, but she just as subtly resists.

"An occasional deer would dart through the woods and along the bank. Imagine it, nature flowing past me, the canoe merging with the water, my paddle gliding. It's actually hard to describe with words how beautiful and serene it was, without making it into a Disney caricature. I remember half-expecting Bambi to come out and start talking!"

I see Mery smile.

"I was really feeling part of the surroundings. I became

that peaceful setting, became nature. I was part of the water's blueness, the trees' greenness. There were many portages between lakes. I'd put my packs on my back, swing the fiberglass canoe over my shoulders, and carry it across the island to the next body of water. A pioneer charting new horizons, wandering awe-struck in the endless beauty, trying to caress the clouds. No sounds except the rustling of twigs under my feet. Crackling noises, each step bringing forth a rich flourish of nature. I felt my hearing come alive as never before. I wanted to never miss a sound."

Mery reaches up and caresses my left ear. It still doesn't feel entirely comfortable to me, but I let her.

"Toward evening I'd stop, having exhausted myself by paddling all day. I'd undress and lower myself into the water. It was always cold and my skin would tighten. I just let go and drift with the current, like Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*. Floating, trusting, held up by the world. Lying on my back so I could watch the sunset and the lands as they glided by me."

"That sounds so beautiful. You would make a great writer. Your descriptions are so poetic. You have a gift for storytelling. I'm so glad we're going to be married. You can tell me stories every night. Please, more." Does she snuggle a bit closer?

A great storyteller, for sure. And some of it is even true. A mimesis, a realistic mirroring of nature by employing the elements of nature itself. Anything for a good story, right (write) Johannes? With thanks to Plato and Aristotle.

"Maybe you could call me Calliope, the Greek muse of heroic poetry. It all began with 'Dance.'" She laughs.

"Enough of the praise of you, o heroic poet praise. Continue

your story already."

"In the evening, I'd build a little fire and cook. Nothing great, just folding food into aluminum, and placing it on the fire: potatoes, onions, spam; and for dessert, feeling like a little kid, I'd make somemores; chocolate, marshmallows and graham crackers heated and melted."

"Yumm," Mery purrs in her semi-sleeping state.

"At night I curled up on the earth, often not even using my tent. The dirt was my pillow."

Right, oh tough, courageous pioneer, and you whined to your counselors that there was no real pillow, and the ground was too hard.

* * *

"The nights were briskly cold and I'd huddle near the ground for warmth, watching the stars in all their sparkling clarity. I'd awaken with a peaceful smiling energy I'd never experienced before. My dreams were abundant and vivid, and I'd write them down. The sun and fresh air blowing over me. No watch. Time didn't exist. Timeless moments that I wanted to last a lifetime." Tell her how you started crying, and asked the counselors to take you back before the canoe trip was over.

"Were you lonely?"

"Yes. Sometimes, but I knew I needed to face myself. It was really my first experience alone. In the evening, I'd sit and ponder about the course of my life, where it was going. Before I met you, I think it was the most symbolically naked I'd been in the world. Was I lonely? A little, but not as much as I expected. It was very purifying. Like now."

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"Have you ever thought of being a writer?"

"Not really. Though I am enjoying my creative writing class"

I wonder silently if there is some way I could turn in this story as part of an assignment for that class. "If I did become a writer, I'd want to write in the same style as Hemingways' Bwana Harry. Except I wouldn't situate myself on Kilimanjaro but in a warmer climate so that the sun would be shining for al fresco love making."

She giggles that girlish, playful laugh of hers that I love so much. Is that a positive sign for an al fresco love making here? Would be a good time to make a move, to initiate glorious sex by the Beach? I decide it's probably best to exercise some self-control. Instead, I will look forward to a magnificent and ribald evening in our cabin tonight

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The effects of the wine, the water's waves, Mery's singing, lull me to sleep, and when I awake, the sun is beginning to set. We gather the supplies to continue our journey to our royal palace. The ocean surf is beating more powerfully on the rocks, as the sun reddens in the distance. When it goes behind the clouds, I feel like a god, in command not only of myself but, of all the land I see. The Passover scene I envisioned in creative writing class is unfolding perfectly. I am a heroic figure, a Moses, before the sea, leading us from bondage and exile toward the promised land.

What, may I ask, Moses ben Johannes, is the bondage from which you feel you are leading you two forth? Her sexual fantasies? Your self-chosen exile from the constraints and expectations of your Kansas City family?

The Jews in Egypt weren't even aware they were in exile. Just as you are not aware of your own current bondage. Look how you try to liberate yourself-- through "spontaneous" and excessive drinking and near nakedness. You are not leading yourself from exile, but only continuing your bondage of body-focused egotism, and narcissistic belief that you are a god. This self-aggrandizing focus is all the religion you have, or want. Ribald cavorting with a buxom woman is your idea of a promised land, which is a very different from the Promised Land I seek.

Again, though you don't know it when you give your Tarzan yell, there is no rope and no tree for you to swing to. You are ripe for the fall.

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Dr. Lisbet's tai chi class began today. She told us to write about a scene containing a river, a tree stump, and a log cabin. I focused on what must have once been a huge tree, which was cut down and is now just a stump. There is nothing to swing to. When I see Johannes acting so high and mighty, I know he is going to crash. I wonder if this is why I have such a fear when things seem to be going well. Just when everything seems in place, and I feel back in control--a tall powerful tree-- my world always crumbles. I want to share this with Dr. Lisbet during the break in our next class.

Moses ben Johannes, if you read your Bible more carefully, you would realize that Moses is allowed to see, but never to enter the Promised Land. Are you sure you still want to compare yourself to Moses? You look at a promised land, Johannes, that you will never enter. And even as you think you are leading you both from bondage, you are only leading each of you, literally and figuratively,

into bondage.

Will this also be true for me? Will I be allowed to see that to which I point, but never realize it?

* * *

Mery takes my hand. "Even though we didn't go swimming, I feel like we've just been baptized. Any negativity from the past is washed away. We are cleansed, reborn."

I hesitate. "In my tradition, I don't think we have baptism. But I remember my nana talking in a giggly way to mom about something called a mikvah--like a huge hot tub that is supposed to purify body and soul. But, no matter what we call it, I like the idea of a new, fresh beginning...with you."

We sit and hold each other as we watch the sun just a few inches above the horizon, casting its reddened golden glow on the water.

"New wine in new wineskin. I liked your quoting that today. Do you know where it's from?"

"Your Bible? Didn't Jesus say it?"

"It's quoted in all the gospels but John, Dad would read it to us from Matthew, Luke, and Mark, trying to teach us to compare different Gospels, to find the meaning of each passage."

"And, da dada dum, the meaning is.....?"

"John the Baptist and his followers, as well as the Pharisees, were fasting, but Jesus and his followers weren't. Jesus said that at a wedding feast, in the presence of the bridegroom, you shouldn't fast."

"Well, I agree with the idea of not fasting at a wedding feast. Obviously, after the banquet you prepared today, I'm glad we're not fasting. I guess I'm the bridegroom, right?"

"Clever, but I think Jesus is the bridegroom."

Is she comparing me with Jesus, or replacing me with him? I say with a touch of annoyance, "So what's that have to do with the meaning of the new wine in new wineskins? Are they drinking at the wedding feast?"

"It's not a wedding feast per se. Jesus is just eating a meal with accountants and sinners." She is silent, then continues: "As I think about the expression, it's not very flattering from a Jewish perspective, at least the way daddy told it. It has something to do with not wanting to put the new fresh teachings of Jesus into old wine skins--that would be the Jewish teachings--because the old wine skins can't hold them. And Luke adds 'No one, after drinking old wine wishes for new, for he says 'The old is good enough.' Sorry, I need to learn to think before I speak."

The sun seems to sizzle as it begins to disappear into the ocean.

We are quiet a moment. I think of saying "But old wine IS better." But I don't, Ovid. To change the mood, let Mery off the hook, and return to our joyous, light feelings. I ask, "Mery, do you know why the sun is setting now? Because I just told Hespera to announce its safe arrival on the western shores of the ocean. You see, I order the gods and they obey my every whim, providing us with a delightful sunset for our entertainment."

Mery laughs. "You are my powerful white knight, who created this beautiful day, one I'll never forget. And now the same white knight is banishing the sun and creating the dark night."

"Not bad, woman, you're getting the hang of it. I'll make you a punster yet."

She whispers something, which I can't quite hear. I ask her

to repeat it. "Oh, I was just being silly. I said, 'I'll make you a more spiritual person yet.'"

"That's witty, Mery. I'll respond in kind." I'm feeling slightly annoyed at her statement. Why can't she just leave well enough alone? "Remember what your minister said one of those times you took me to your church. He told us Paul once said that food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food. And the body is meant for the Lord and the Lord for the body? And I ask you, isn't the stomach part of the body? Since the body is made for the Lord, and I eat, ergo I am religious." She doesn't laugh but just stares at me. That annoys me further. So I continue, as if I am a lawyer making a summation, "But, if you ever do make me spiritual--and I say this with all due respect to the lovely jug of fresh new wine you bought today-- any sophisticated, thoughtful person would always choose a fine aged wine to a newly minted one."

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By the time we arrive at the Green Lantern Inn, it's beginning to get dark and we can see the sparkly lanterns all over the grounds, like green twinkling fireflies. We are in a little cottage, tucked into the woods, yet near enough to the beach so that, as I write this, I can hear the ocean. Mery is making a fire, and I can see her hair glowing in the flames.

I'm really horny after a day in the sun, without any orgasm, and am looking forward to the first night of our new beginning.

"Your head crowns you like Carmel. And the flowing locks of your hair are like purple threads." Foreplay, and I hope a signal. I spread my arms inviting her sit in my lap. She doesn't move.

"That's beautiful. You are so poetic." She still doesn't
move.

I remember with frustration her hesitancy last Sunday. How long am
I supposed to patiently wait? I try to gather my courage to ask her
what she--and that therapist!-- have decided. Instead, I stay
cautions. "Thank you, my spiritual woman. In preparation for our
'engagement' vacation here--and the Passover Seder I'm going to
prepare for us tomorrow evening--I did some
research on Carmel's etymological and spiritual roots. I thought
you'd be proud of me."

"I'm always proud of you. What did you find out?"

"This will be a magical place for us, Mery, because it
encompasses both of our traditions. Did you know that the Virgin
Mery is also known as Our Lady of Carmel. Mt. Carmel in Israel is
considered the mountain of Mary, symbolizing beauty and
sanctity." I go over and stroke her hair. She allows me. I
would love to mount Mery.

"In fact, a Carmelite order of the Virgin Mary of Mt Carmel
have proclaimed and named a special day for her, July 16. Perhaps
a perfect day for our wedding?" She lets me hug her.

"That would be wonderful. Over the summer. And how
thoughtful of you to pick a day associated with the Virgin Mary."
She makes a little "e" with her hands by curling the thumb and
index finger of her left hand into a c, then placing her right
index finger inside in a straight line under the arch of the c. I
find something erotic in the gesture.

"Why did your parents pick the name Mery, with that spell-
ing?"

"A fight between Mom and Dad. Dad wanted me named after the

Virgin Mary. Mom thought that was too much pressure for a child. She wanted to bring some mirth--merriness-- and celebration to my birth. Mery was the compromise."

"That's a good story." I wish my name was as interesting. I've never really asked mom and Senior what their decision making process was. I wonder if it's because of my older baby brother? I guess it's too late to ask now.

"Given what you've said about your dad, I'm surprised he was willing to compromise."

"He made sure I understood his expectations. When I was still pretty little, he gave me some academic explanation about how the Virgin Mary, by virtue of her inherent role in the Incarnation, is considered the bridge between humans and the divine. He said he had high expectations for me. High? How about impossible!"

Now it's my turn to stroke her neck. She relaxes back into me. "You know, as long as you're suggesting dates for our wedding around 'Mary,' August 15 is a date Dad always observed, the day of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. It represents the gathering up of a person into heaven. Our wedding could be a day to celebrate the beginning of our heaven on earth."

Assumption is an intriguing word. Laying claim, taking, like an assumption of power. Watch Mery assume Johannes' power. Assuming something as true; taken for granted. Watch Johannes make assumptions about Mery that aren't true. Taking over another's debts. Watch and see how much they both have gret debts...that need to be paid to life.

Hardly an assumption into heaven.

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Before I have a chance to respond to her new wedding date proposal, or to continue with my discussion of why Carmel has Jewish roots, as well as Christian, Mery interjects joyfully, "I'm so excited. Does your family know about this proposal, you sneaky man, you? I certainly had no idea! Should we call them and tell them the good news? I can't wait to meet them."

I feel a hit to my stomach. Tell them? Meet them? Not a chance. Mery just keeps going. "And I want to call my mom. I can't wait to tell her. Can we do that now?"

"Wow, I love your enthusiasm. All in good time, my love. But first can I finish my telling you about my research. Mery acquiesces without a smile. "Remember? Carmel, Virgin Mary. That's your tradition. Now, for mine" I'm feeling annoyed at her "assuming" my only point was about Christianity, and I'm also a little panicked about what to say about my family. I try to mask both by plunging back into the safety of what I learned from my library research this week.

"For me, and my tradition," I say pointedly, "Mt. Carmel is the holy mountain of the prophet Elijah, a sacred mountain where he performed great spiritual deeds." I continue to stroke her hair. "The word itself comes from the Hebrew Kerem--garden--and means Vineyard of God. So, beloved, we are in the Vineyard of God, the mountain of the Virgin Mary and of Elijah."

I pause, then "And I am entranced by you flowing purple locks." My hand follows her hair down over her shoulder, then slips past her gold cross toward the top of her breasts. Mery doesn't look up from making the fire, and doesn't turn toward me for a kiss, as I want. Do I feel her tense slightly? It seems like I'm starting all over with her, sexually. Progress in

reverse. Finally she says, still not looking up, "Wouldn't it be fun, one day, to go to Israel and visit Kerem-El. Maybe for our honeymoon?"

"On whose dime?" I think I'm making a clever statement, but it sounds harsher to me than I intend.

Mery continues to work on the fire. Then she bursts into tears.

"What?"

"I lost my job this week. They fired me because I was late again." Oh, great. Now neither of us has any income.

I continue to rub her neck and shoulders, trying to hide my fears and respond optimistically. "That's ok. You're made for better things than being a waitress. Everything's going to work out fine." She softens and places the back of her head on my thigh.

"We'll get to Israel one day. I have some money put away. But, given our finances, we may have to do what Grandpa and Grandma did, elope, though we won't have to borrow the \$150."

She looks up at me and smiles through her tears. "I love that story about them. It makes me think that anything is possible if there is love." She wipes some tears off her face. I help her. "Of course, you're right. Money is not that important, nor is a waitressing job. I guess sometimes I just get little-girl scared."

She rests her head again on my leg. "And about going to Israel, that's just the flighty, impulsive, impractical side of me, not thinking before I speak. You're right again. One day we will go there, when it's supposed to happen." She wraps her arms tenderly around me leg. I can see the silver entwined

ring on her finger, and the gold cross around her neck, both reflecting the fire's glow.

"And I'm really looking forward to sharing a Passover Seder with you."

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I pick up my flute, and begin a Quaker song "Tis a gift to be simple...."

Mery sings along "Tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come round where we ought to be. And when we are in the place just right, we will be in the valley of love and delight...."

This duet works perfectly as a team. I am content to let her be the melody, and she follows my timing and rhythm.

When the song ends, she claps. I put my flute down, and give her a big hug, letting my hands drop down to enfold her breasts.

I feel her once again start to tense. She turns away from me as she says, "There's something else I want to talk to you about." Now what? I remove my hands, and sit up.

"I'm all ear."

"I talked to my therapist this week about some of the things you said about my, my 'La Causa' fantasy. I'd never talked to her about it before. It's the one thing I'd never shared with anyone other than you. I think I've been trying to pretend it's ok but you said things that made me feel maybe it was dirty and not right."

Oh, great, this is my fault. "You've never talked with anyone but me about this?" I do feel honored by that.

"Not living people, anyway. When this first happened, I felt confused. Like I was pretty weird and bad and evil. What was I doing mixing up a sexual response and Jesus' suffering? And obviously there

was no one I could tell or discuss it with. I didn't know what to do. Then, as if by a gift, or miracle, my boyfriend took me to the university coffee house to meet some of his older friends..."

"This is the drug dealing rebel guy?" I cut in.

"Well, that's one way to describe him, I guess. Anyway, his friends were sitting around talking about whether there was any connection between religion and sexuality in the class books they'd been assigned in a course on the philosophy of religion. They mentioned names like Kierkegaard, Buber, De Chardin. I was fascinated, and began reading to see if I could understand myself better, and find some answers. First Kierkegaard, especially..."

"You read Kierkegaard in high school?" I ask with some surprise.

"Don't be so shocked. That's why I became a philosophy minor at Berkeley. I read all of Kierkegaard. He's one of my favorite theologians."

"Did you like the 'Either?'"

"I though he presented the cad Johannes in an amusing, delightful way, to show his limitations and weaknesses. But what really helped me with Kierkegaard was that he saw suffering so clearly, the sickness unto death, the leap of faith. I realized that suffering shouldn't be run from, but faced head on."

"But where's the sex in that?"

"Patience, patience. You sound like Kierkegaard's Johannes. I'm getting there...assisted by Martin Buber's *I-Thou*. Here was a prominent, respected theologian poetically talking about God and relationship and love, and saying that religious ecstasy is like sexual ecstasy. I felt much better after that because that's exactly what my experience was. For me they also intertwined with each other, at times becoming the same."

"Why didn't you ever explain this to me before?"

"Well, it's awkward. And I tried, sort of. That's why I gave you a copy of Buber's I-Thou. I hoped you'd understand. I guess talking with my therapist this week helped me put it all together more clearly."

"If I'd known Buber was all about sex, I'd have read it more carefully."

She ignores my comment—not even a smile-- and continues. "The other book that helped me, my absolutely favorite book, is Teilhard De Chardin's *Omega Point*. It might sound pretentious, but sometimes during an orgasm I image myself as helping move the world toward the omega point de Chardin talks about--that inevitable evolutionary place of higher consciousness, a place of great universal love and compassion. It makes me feel that all the suffering in the world that I see around me one day will make sense, has a purpose, can teach us. So, that's the way I explained it to myself."

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I look over at my flute. Its polished silver is reflecting both the room's light and the filtered light of a nearly full moon coming through the pine trees. The flute looks phallic, almost sensual. I guess anything can be transformed into sex, even suffering. But I agree with her initial assessment, this is pretty weird stuff, with a whole lot of later rationalizations. Why is she so afraid to just enjoy sex? Like Alice. Why make it so complicated? It must be because of her upbringing, her dad's admonishments. But I know I'd better not say this if I want to see our sex life return, so instead I say, "Now I see how you understand your fantasy, the meaning it has for you. It makes much more sense to me. It's really an expression of your inner beautiful self and giving nature, right?"

She looks at me and smiles, throwing her arms around me. "Thank

you so much for understanding. Yes, you do hear me, beloved." She pulls back and with gleaming eyes begins rubbing my right ear. "This is a superb part of your body."

Her hand on my ear feels annoying and frustrating, like a bad itch. I gently remove it as I ask "But why the shift now, if sex is so uplifting and transformational?"

She begins fidgeting with her hands. "Well, this may not be fair to you. My therapist said it might have been a projection." She looks over at me, to see if I understand the word. I find that incredibly condescending and patronizing. I want to give her the textbook definition, tell her I took Psych 101. But I know enough about psychology--and law-- to realize this is not a time to distract the witness from the task at hand. I merely nod.

"What might have been a projection?"

"Well, you didn't actually say it, but when you wouldn't go along with my fantasy, you seemed to imply it sounded dirty and wrong, and that maybe I was even being masochistic under a spiritual guise, something like that. So when I mentioned your reaction and reluctance to my therapist, she said that regardless of whether you said it, or I just picked up on your feelings, or I was just projecting, in any case it sounded like there is some part of me that is still not perfectly comfortable with my own sexual desires. We explored whether I could get the same spiritual feelings without sex, and, . . ."

"Whoa, whoa, wrong question. Why not ask whether you can get the same pleasure without pain?"

"That may be your question. It's not mine."

I look away from Mery, toward the fire, and begin singing softly, "Tis a gift to be simple...." Why isn't anything ever simple?

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As I watch the fire, Mery continues. "My therapist explained to me that because I'm feeling more open and closer to you, I'm also feeling more vulnerable and frightened. She also told me that because I'm so sensitive and confused about my body and my own sexuality, it would be best if we didn't have sex for a while. We discussed how I could make this change as part of Lent. You were so understanding last Sunday. I know you wanted to, to have s.--wanted to make love-- before I went to work, and you were willing to just cuddle me. Would it be ok if we continued with that for a while until I'm feeling less confused?"

Fuck no. Talk about feeling like I'm living with a virgin. What is going on? I make a commitment to be with one woman, and not have sex with anyone else, and now she is saying she won't have sex, and is that ok? I want my ring back. It was obtained under false pretenses.

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When the student is ready, the teacher appears. Sometimes, it seems, the teacher appears even when the student is not ready. Mery is teaching you to control your sexual needs, Johannes, and that is only for your own good--at least my own good. Flesh is flesh and spirit is spirit.

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"I don't understand. You're feeling closer to me, so you show it by saying let's not have sex?"

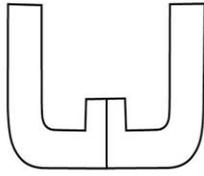
"I don't like your tone, and I don't want to talk about it anymore." I see the glazed veil go over her eyes. She then turns to lie on the floor on her side, her buttocks and back toward me, folding both her hands in a prayer position and placing them under

her right cheek like a pillow.

I feel like the fire's embers, dirty, dark, lonely, cut off from everything. I have no parents or family I want to call to share the news of our engagement. And the person who was going to be my life partner has just told me she doesn't want to have sexual relations.

I walk outside. Through the trees I can vaguely make out the full moon. Surrounded by a starry night. There are not many sounds, but I can hear the ocean waves in the distance.

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What am I doing out here?

I look at the night sky, and can see the stars clearly though the pines. But I can't make out the forms of the constellations. Where is the Big Dipper, with its tail pointing to the North Star? I search for the familiar, but can't find it. Disoriented, I hear the ocean, like a siren calling me, and begin walking the few blocks toward it.

As I walk, I remember once in Kansas City, when I was a junior in high school, I was spending the night at my friend Dana's house. He nudged me at three in the morning, and said,

"Wake up."

"What, huh."

"Wake up, let's have an adventure. I hear the ocean calling. Let's hitch hike to California, the promised land."

We got up, dressed, snuck out of his house, and began our pilgrimage. A black janitor drove us down 63rd to the 18th Street Expressway, as we sang "California Here I Come." A college student took us to Lawrence while we sang "a hundred bottles of beer on the wall." A trucker took us to just west of Topeka, home of the famed Menninger Clinic, where mom's psychiatrist thought about sending her. Three hours later, we'd traveled about a hundred miles. We were standing in the middle of the road on Highway 70, outside Junction City. The sun was just rising. Our initial enthusiasm and singing was fast waning.

We were both hungry. Checking our pockets, we had \$4.12 between us. I was scared, and feeling too far from home, but unwilling to admit defeat. However, when Dana said, with that wondrous crazy laugh of his "I don't think that's enough to live the lifestyle we want once we reach the promised land. How about if we turn back, earn some money this year, and try again this summer?"

Although lured by some siren call of adventure then, I was only too happy to return to his house, crawl under the covers, and sleep late, to be awakened by his mother's home cooking.

I feel the same impulses pushing and pulling me. What is this siren calling me now? I'm drawn by some force toward the mystery, the unknown. But as I walk, I feel that what I'm moving toward is dangerous, untrustworthy, luring me beyond what is safe and familiar.

After a block, I'm feeling increasingly dizzy and unsettled and want to turn back. The ocean is frightening enough in the day. I don't want to see it at night.

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You are a bundle of ambivalences, aren't you Johannes? You seek out people—Dana, Mery—who challenge you and push you beyond your comfort zone. But then you panic and never push anything through. You peek out from your covers and follow Dana toward adventure, but hours into your trip, scurry back to the comfort of bed. You try to confront the ocean, to move from the narrow confines of weekly swimming rituals, only to seek refuge in Mery's arms.

And where does that lead you? You are forced to realize there is no shelter on the human plane. Dana is dead, died of a heart attack from a cocaine overdose. You will never see the physical form of your adventurous friend again. And Mery, also lost. The only promised land is the world of the spirit. This is a task I must push forward, and not retreat from, no matter how frightened I become. Yet, I too, keep ending up like a little baby under my blanket

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When I return to our cottage, Mery is lying in front of the fire, reading. She's put on her nightgown, a thick plaid flannel one. She looks up and says "You look like you've seen a ghost. What's wrong?"

"I feel dizzy, nauseous. The stars were swirling, like that Van Gogh painting. I almost understand what he must have been feeling when he painted it." Maybe from too much to drink, today? I don't know. It was weird." I try to smile. "What are you reading?"

"Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*." She smiles. "Probably not the most uplifting title for your current condition. Come here, baby."

I lie down next to her. She puts my head into her lap, and begins to stroke my hair and face. When she leans over, I feel her breasts sway over my face, as she pulls me tenderly into her. Unlike earlier today, when she caressed me, I now find myself becoming aroused, and the faintness and lightheadedness starts to disappear. I realize I've gone all day without an orgasm, something that almost never happens. I need my two or three a day to keep me even keeled. No wonder I feel so strange.

"Kierkegaard said he envied Aristotle, who wrote that philosophy began with wonder. Now, Kierkegaard says, philosophy begins with dread, with fear and trembling." She continues to rub my hair and hold me to her.

"I like Aristotle's view better."

"Who wouldn't? But we don't have a choice, it seems. I'm sorry you're having to experience it now. It's such a scary world, and we are such small vulnerable creatures. I understand what you're feeling."

She may understand what I was feeling—though I'm not really sure--, but all I'm feeling now is horny and frustrated, and wondering if I might make a move. "What a smart woman, where'd you learn all this?"

"Not everyone who doesn't go to Stanford is a dunce, Mr. Intellectual. I told you—I was a philosophy minor at Berkeley. Kierkegaard—and Buber--were my saviors."

I want to joke with her that she now has me as a savior, but instead say, "Well, you can be my savior. I'm feeling better, and as you can see" I point to my lingam, "I'm feeling in need of being rescued. Any chance you and your therapist would be willing to allow you to help me out—in some creative way that doesn't make you feel too confused and vulnerable, doesn't violate your new desire, and would help me deal with my desire?" I push out my lower lip so that I look as adorable and pitiable as possible while I nuzzle my cheek up against her breast like a little baby.

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She is silent for a long time. We both watch the fire. When I look over, I look up, over her breast, and see that Mery's eyes appear glazed, as if she has drifted into a dream-like trance. I wonder if this is what Richard saw when he commented on her picture. Her face seems veiled, lacking all expression. Part of me wants to ask her if she would lift the veil, but I also dread doing so. I'm not sure why. Afraid of what she will say? Of what lies beneath? Wondering where she is? Who she is?

I reflect on Ovid's admonition in Ars Amandi, the Art of Loving: "Nox et hiems longaeque viae, saevique dolores/ mollibus his castris et labor omnis inest. The night, winter, long marches, cruel suffering, painful toil, all these things have to be borne by those who fight in Love's campaign." I think of sharing this with Mery, but know it is not the right time. Is she even there? Is the fight really worthy it?

Desperate now for an orgasm, I also know that now is not the time to ask myself that question. Looking at her, I can see that she is not going to be my sexual partner tonight. My arousal vanishes, and I feel my orgasm slipping away, receding deeper inside me. I don't want to lose it, again, like this afternoon, when we cuddled at Point Lobos. At the time it seemed ok to just hold each other tenderly. I was wrong. What really happened is that she used passive cuddling as a female ploy, an end in itself. That only makes me more frustrated, burying the orgasm within me, creating distress in my body, By not having an orgasm, I lose male power. Her wanting to just cuddle takes away my masculinity. I'm not unwilling to cuddle, but as a prelude to sex. This isn't working for me. I pull back from her breast, remove her arm from around my neck, and go into the bathroom with my suitcase.

I haven't lost the ability to self-serve.

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It's too bad you aren't here with me now, Johannes, to get some perspective on yourself. You're too close to the situation and your own narrow frame of reference to see the potential for new beginnings. Your buried orgasm, for you, is about losing your masculinity. For me, it is an opportunity to see

how driven you are by your body, to stop being so trapped by it, and to learn from Elizabeth's desire for celibacy.

Once again you miss a chance to birth a new way of being in and understanding of the world beyond flesh. Now, nine months later, I am what will be conceived once you understand this lesson. If you had known this then, you could have saved us both a lot of unnecessary labor pains.

It's too bad life can't be lived, or re-lived again, after a few practice sessions, or at least a dress rehearsal. There's simply too much going on at the time, internally and externally, to ever think that we can get it right without any preparation or script. Life unfolds much too fast, and in so many unexpected directions. I am truly sorry you are going to have to face what lies ahead during the next twenty-four hours.

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I open my suitcase, and pull out a few of pictures of Mery. I brought them so I could show her some of the prettier, less salacious ones. I wanted her to see both how lovely she looks, but also how good a photographer I am, able to cast her in the best light. Assuming she approved of those—and I was sure she would—I also brought some of the pictures from our night at the Fairmont. I was hoping these might remind her of the heights of sexual playfulness to which she had risen (and risen me), perhaps jump starting her sexuality, and reprising the mood of that night.

Now, all I am left with to arouse me are these pictures of Mery, while she remains by the fire reading Kierkegaard. I manage a smile, thinking once my orgasm was born in wonder, now I'm trying to conceive it in dread, anxiety, and tension.

I look at her pictures, and start stroking myself.

I notice her glazed eyes in the first picture I took at Golden Gate. When I developed it, I attributed the strange expression to nervousness from having her picture taken. But she's a nude model, for God's sake. In any case, this train of thought is not arousing.

I turn to the more delightfully daring Fairmont pictures. She does have a beautiful body. The one with her dripping chocolate into her mouth from the banana is my favorite. I start to stroke more fervently.

Nothing.

Damn. I was right. She's buried my orgasm somewhere deep inside me. I know it wants out. I look more closely at her face. What surprises me is that even though she is dancing and smiling and her mouth is open in anticipation of the banana, I see the same veiled look in her eyes. What does that mean?

I look back at the Golden Gate pictures to create a story starting with her sweet, naïve, and clothed, and culminating with the Fairmont seduction.

Nothing. Still limp.

I notice a small discoloration on the top of her right breast in one of the more revealing Golden Gate pictures, where she has removed her scarf. I've opened her blouse a bit and she is leaning over. I try to remove the discoloration, thinking it must be a smudge on the picture. Then I realize it's part of the picture. When I look more closely, it appears to be a hickey. Certainly not from me. I'd just met her. Whose? The old guy? Al? Some anonymous student in her class.

What a slut. I stroke faster. The celibate slut. From the depths I feel the clogged plumbing begin to flow. Did she beg for this? Was she tied down? Was she feeling all spiritual and saintly. My hand is flying. I close my eyes. I don't need to look at the pictures anymore.

I don't want to lose this orgasm. It's not quite at the inevitable release place yet. I stroke harder. I fear it slipping away. I think of taking the pictures back in the room and lying next to her and having her watch me stroke myself to her cavorting images. It would serve her right. See what you're making me do, you slut. I'll get you one way or the other. I feel myself getting closer. A great chess move. Then I image her eyes. Are they judging me? Glazed? Both images cause my orgasm to begin slipping away. I become angry at my being exiled to the bathroom. Her counter move with her eyes—even if it is only

imagined by me—has stymied my self-serve sexual efforts. Not only won't she have sex, it seems she won't even allow me to enjoy myself sexually.

I need outside help. I think about standing over Kansas City Sarah, kneeling before me, as I spurt my semen all over her face. Better. My lingham stands tall. Then I see the two sisters seductively dancing with me and each other at Alice's house. Yes. My hand is moving faster. The mother and daughter in the Berkeley Hills. All of them wanting me, desiring me, stroking me. I feel like a Yellowstone Geyser. Old Faithful is back. Spurting, gushing, throbbing. I image it landing all over my abs, and maybe even some of it hitting the ceiling. Ahhhhhh....

After a few seconds I open my eyes, pull off a wad of toilet paper, and look for the globs of white sperm to wipe up. There aren't any. All I see are a few drops of clear liquid around my groin, which must have just dribbled out. Does this count as an orgasm? Did she stop me from having a true one? Was I unfaithful by thinking of other women? Did she just win this chess game? Too many thoughts. All I want to do is get under the covers and go to sleep.

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The room is dark when I enter, the only light from the dying embers in the fireplace. Mery is asleep, and I quietly slip under the covers, careful neither to disturb her, nor to touch her.

She is making strange, snoring, grunting noises. We both seem pretty strange. Is this like college, when the excitement and newness of the freshman year begins to wear off, and by your sophomore year you realize you're in for a long haul? She makes another rumbling snoring groan. Am I seeing something clearly, or are these just late night musings that should be reburied, foils for my fear of getting closer? Is it that I really don't want this closeness that I say I now want? Her breath doesn't smell that good when she awakens. It's not charming to watch her go to the bathroom. The first date soft lens focus is now becoming sharper. And the dimensionality and clarity is not all for the good. Is this really the person with whom I want to spend the rest of my life?

As I try to fall asleep, I watch the wane shadows and movement of light and dark flicker on the ceiling. I think of the contrast to a few hours earlier when I felt I was being scoured and purified by the sun of day. Slowly the shadows disappear, until there is nothing but darkness.

The first night of being engaged.

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"Let's cuddle." I awake with a start to Mery's words. They shock me out of my dream. I'm annoyed. I hate being awakened. And when she says "let's cuddle" it's really a "passive voice construction." What she really means is let her lie here inert with her arms limp at her side, and for me to hold her in an embrace, so she feels secure and protected, and then to rub her hair, back, and neck only.

"Let's" suggests mutuality, and her idea of cuddles is hardly that. I grudgingly oblige, for that seems the path of least hassle. It's late, and all I want to do is get back to sleep.

As I hold her, I feel the softness of her breasts on my chest. I have to admit, I do find her long flannel nightgowns sexy. I know that's not her intent—and I'm probably one of the only people in the world who actually likes them better than some short, too revealing Fredericks of Hollywood lingerie.

My lingam starts to grow, and I concave my body so she won't feel it. Then I remember my dream. The feeling in my body was one of intense sexuality, and I may have been on the verge of a wet dream. But the accompanying images were strange, like a stage set from a 1950's movie or TV show, where all things sexual are only implied. I could see in soft focus a woman with a blue sheet pulled tightly around her chin. A man enters the room from the bathroom, and because of the lighting behind him, his face and body are covered in shadow. I'm pretty sure he is me, although he's wearing a long robe--quite unlike me.

He gets under the covers. The camera focuses in tightly on the blue sheet beginning to slowly undulate, but in the next instant the couple has disappeared, and all I can see is a blue sheet hanging on a clothes line, gently fluttering as it is blown by a warm summer breeze.

As the sheet waves, swaying and dancing softly in the wind, I hear for the briefest second, the sound of the woman purring and the man moaning. That sound is quickly submerged under quiet rolling drums, which become louder, and then are accompanied by a deafening thunder clap. The sheet begins to sway and thrash as the wind blows harder. Another thunder clap, accompanied by pounding drums as the sky bursts open, unleashing a torrential rain. The sheet becomes soaked with water, thrashing back and forth until the drums and thunderclap merge in one final crescendo.

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Then the rain abruptly stops, the wind dies down, the thunder disappears, and there is silence as the camera pans to the bottom of the sheet where drops of water drip slowly to the ground, forming a puddle. The camera comes in closer, focusing on one individual drop that is hanging from the sheet, ready to be released. There is quiet laughter, accompanied by the lilting soft sound of a windchime giggling in the wind.

The camera shifts to the puddle on the ground, where the single drop on the sheet can be seen in reflection, as if in a mirror. As the chimes continue to tingle, the rain drop falls into the puddle. Water joins water and the two become one.

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It was at that moment that I heard Mery's request, and I awake.

Is she censoring my dreams, too? Not only does she interrupt it, but she seems to have made it G-rated.

Was it a wet dream? I surreptitiously reach for my lingham, but can't tell.

What you envision as a scene of love making, Johannes, I experience as a beautiful spiritual image--the rain, the puddle, and the mirror are poetic, even cleansing. I didn't know you had it in you! Maybe it emerged from some combination of your creative writing class, your unconscious dream life, and the paucity of your orgasms that day, all swirling around together. As Balzac said every time he had an orgasm, "I just lost another novel."

Those images at the end of your dream would make a lovely haiku, something Dr. Lisbet would really appreciate.

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The puddle mirrors
Rain drops dissolving in the
image they contain

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Early light filters through the trees and morning clouds and enters the room, awakening me in a much more peaceful manner than Mery's command to "cuddle." She has rolled over onto her side, with her back facing me. I pull out my dream journal and begin to write about the dream I was having upon awakening.

In the dream, Mery and I are playing music together, I on the flute, she singing. Actual musical notes-- eighth, quarter, sixteen-- are floating out of her mouth, as she sings. Once the notes leave her lips, they start rushing toward me, and feel threatening, like attacking crows, or bullets being shot at me. To defend myself, I take my flute and swing it like a baseball bat to crush the onslaught.

When I hit the round bulbous base of the notes, they explode and bright red blood pours from their center. Mery's song turns into a scream, and even more notes emerge from that sound, and I bat them away, too. In the dream, I'm horrified--not at her reaction; but that some of the blood lands on my new sandals, staining them.

As I recall the dream, I feel shocked, too. Not at Mery's reaction, not at my sandals being bloodied, but at the level of rage and anger that must be in me toward Mery. It feels like at some unconscious level, I am becoming my violent father. Nothing in this dream bodes well for our relationship, or for me.

I have two advantages over Johannes in interpreting this dream. One is what I've learned from Dr. Lisbet that you can view all aspects of the dream as part of the self. From that view, the person singing represents that part of Johannes trying to find his voice, his melody in life. The flute player who bats the

notes symbolizes the part who sabotages himself, and blocks the song. The blood and the sandals could signify the spiritual life that Johannes doesn't yet realize he is embarking on, even as he resists it.

Hmm, I wonder if interpreting sandals--bloodied sandals at that-- as a symbol of spirituality is a bit of a stretch. I think Jesus wore sandals, though it's confusing from my New Testament reading. In Mark 6:8-9 He tells His followers to wear sandals; in Matthew 10:10, He tells them not to wear sandals. I wonder what Dr. Lisbet would say about this dream, both from as an expert in dream interpretation, and as a Christian. If there is time, I'll try to ask her during the break in her tai chi class next week.

The second advantage I have over Johannes in interpreting both this dream, and the one he had earlier in the night is that I know what is going to happen in the next twenty hours.

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I struggle out of bed, head to the bathroom, and get in the shower. I feel groggy, like I'm in a play--Act 5, Scene 1 no doubt--Macbeth's wife trying to wipe the blood of the dream off me. Mac and Beth I think idly to myself. What a strange and odd juxtaposition. Beth introduced me to Mac. So? Stop, mind. The newness of the shower handles annoy me, as I try to find the right balance between hot and cold.

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As I reenter our room, wrapped in a towel, I gaze at Mery lying on the bed. Will I ever know who she is? This desperate fury is bent on destroying me. Quest furia desperate Mi vuol far precipitar.

Lying there so peacefully, she hardly looks like the devil tormentor I've felt her to be in my dreams, and throughout the night. Rather, she appears angelic, her red hair framing her freckled face. Is it my imagination, or does the sun start to peek through the clouds, and our room become more filled with light?

What is it about her face? As I stare at it, there's something unusual that I can't describe. Her features are easy enough, red hair, freckles,

brown eyes. It's a young, innocent face, but also mature, ageless. It looks serene now, but it can also be shy, nervous, blushing. It can be intense, then glaze over as if under a veil. No matter how often or long I look that face and study it, or how many pictures of her I take, there's something about it I can't capture. I've never encountered a face like hers before. Maybe because you've never allowed yourself to get close enough to anyone before to see them in all their complexity, rather than as a one dimensional utilitarian conveniences: whether sexual object, tennis partner, competitor. Welcome to nuance and shading and paradox. I'm drawn to its mystery, even as part of me is afraid of it. Is that the part of me that's attracted to what I can't control? Only if I think I can eventually control it. One day I'll learn how. . .

Drink as I sing to thee of the challenge: "Non sperar, se non m'uccidi Ch'io ti lasei fu it mai. . . "there is no hope, unless you kill me that I'll ever let you go." It's a new morning. I'm feeling determined, with renewed energy. The darkness of last night is past.

I begin to sing to awaken her "Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free. . ." I feel like I'm back in a fairy tale, my sleeping beauty here in our beautiful cottage in the woods.

"Good morning, little angel."

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Yes, Johannes, now, everything is beautiful. Like in a fantasy. Of course. I guess it must be tea-time at the March Hare's place (or, for you, the Tuck Box). Probably because the Queen of Hearts realized that you, Johannes were murdering time by singing this morning. Tea hour would be a delightful respite. But what if your Red Queen, like Alice's, turns into a bespectacled sheep with knitting-needles, a lamb in red queen clothing. I'd hate to be in that sheep's shop. Poor Alice, as soon as she looked on one shelf, the shelf became empty and all the other shelves became full. Poor Johannes. Poor Alice, crying in despair, "Things flow about so here." Oh well, after all it's only a fantasy, a good story, right? We all live in suspended time, don't we? Just like I

suspended time for you, to give myself a respite. And just like reading about you suspends time for me.

Now it's morning for you, though it's evening for me. I wonder if that time difference can be reconciled by the different time zones. If that were true, then the only difference between light and dark would be where you are in the world. Except, if I were to fly back to San Francisco, it would be dark by the time I arrived, The sun rises, the sun sets.. *Vanitas, Vanitatum, et omnia vanitas. M'ouvrais a` la tendre indifference du monde.* I think Camus and Kohelet would have been soul brothers.

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"Good morning, little angel." I stroke her hair as she starts to enter reality. Then I put my index finger under her nose, and rub it back and forth, a habit she does every morning upon awakening. She laughs. "What a blessing, to have my own personal alarm clock and nose massager all in one." She pulls me down to her for a cuddle. Things are definitely showing more signs of life.

"How about this as a plan? First I take you to the Tuck Box for tea and scones, then you join me while I play my virgin round of golf at Pebble Beach."

"Sounds fun...and a little bit naughty. I'm up for it."

I like her spirit. She seems to be warming up. I certainly am. I wonder if her words are an invitation for me to make another move. But if she says no, I'll feel rejected and that will break the mood and get the day off to a bad start. I don't want anything to ruin my golf outing.

Maybe I should go into the bathroom and have an orgasm, so I'll be calm and focused for breakfast and Pebble Beach. It seems awkward and ridiculous to have her lying here and me leaving her again to masturbate to her pictures. Maybe I should show her what she's driving me to--go get her pictures, return to the bed, and start masturbating while alternately looking at her and the pictures. Simultaneously I feel increasingly sexually aroused--and angry--at her. Those two types of arousals have always been opposite emotions for me, never occurring at the same time. It's strange and foreign to feel them combined, almost as strange as Mery's pain and sexual confluence.

I look at my watch. My tee time is 11. I want to be there by 9:30 for check in, warm up and putting 9:45 at the latest. I need to leave the Tuck Box at 9, maybe 8:45, in case there's traffic. So, we need to get to the Tuck Box by 7:30. It's already a few minutes past 7. Unless everything goes really efficiently, there's not enough time, and figuring all this out certainly hasn't had an aphrodisiac effect on me. Why am I the one who has to do everything, plan all the activities, take all the initiative? That's so unfair. All the pressure is on me. How come she never suggests anything?

I look at Mery, who has once again closed her eyes and is lying peacefully under the covers. It's just too much effort to try to have sex with her now. I kind of had an orgasm last night in the bathroom, and maybe during my dream. That will have to suffice. Tonight, after I create our Seder, and we read the Song of Songs, we'll actually practice what the words describe. No more "let's just cuddle."

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"This place is soooo cute." Mery chimes in, joyously.

The waitress seats us at a table right next to two others on both sides. It feels much too cramped to me, so I ask for the table under the tree at the back, where a couple is just finishing. I'm annoyed we had to wait in such a long line to get in, and more annoyed that my favorite table is not available. I'm also feeling the time pressure of getting to Pebble Beach in enough time so I can go through my usual practice routine. I wonder if I should have had an orgasm before we left. Did I actually have one in my dream? Would that count? Will that make a difference in my golf game? Why don't those people get up already? They're just sitting. I stare at them--not a glare, but with a touch of impatience; and move closer, though not so close that it's obvious, but near enough so they can feel my presence. They get up and leave. Finally.

Mery follows me dutifully from table to table. I can see that she doesn't care at all where we sit, and would take any table. She's just happy to be there. I know she doesn't like when I do this, but won't say anything to me. Just too passive, but in a good way in this situation.

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"Half hot chocolate, half coffee, no whipped cream, scones and strawberry jam please." I smile at the waitress even though she is old, fat, and ugly. I need to calm myself down for the round ahead. Pleasant and peaceful is the way I play my best golf. No more frustrations and distractions. It's 7:45. We have over an hour.

"I'll have the same." Mery says. When the waitress leaves, Mery turns to me, "You certainly seem bright and chipper. You were extra nice to that lady. I appreciate that. You probably made her day, a handsome young man flirting with her." Then, without pausing, "This place is darling, and all of Carmel has been wonderful. What a great vacation. And I loved our great cuddles last night and this morning." She looks longingly at her ring, at me, and smiles.

I smile back, then take her hand and begin to massage it, while thinking, I can't believe we're taking about the same evening. How can two people view it so differently?

I adjust myself in my seat to get more comfortable. The chair is too soft, and I feel myself sinking passively into it. I fold the cushion over to make it firmer, so I can sit higher. Then I move it so I can be more in the sun. It's cold in the tree's shadow, and I want to feel the heat, and work on my tan. It's hard to get everything just right. I want an angle where I have a good view and can see people and am not just looking at a wall. I want Mery on my right side so I can hear her. I want some privacy so we can talk confidentially, and even be flirtatious if for some magical reason she snaps out of this phase she's in.

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We sit in silence. I think back to how difficult it was to park. That's why our schedule is a few minutes off. I'd entered a one level, one way circular parking structure. As I started to circle, I saw a man walking toward his car, two spaces behind me. In the meantime, another car had entered the structure, blocking my access to the departing spot. I put my car in reverse, smiled and started to back up. He didn't move. In fact he honked me forward. Finally, I got out.

"Excuse me, I'd appreciate if you could back up so I could go into that space."

"Sorry, there's someone behind me. Just go on forward." The car behind him began honking, so I went and asked him to back up. "No, just move on." I saw that there were no spaces ahead, and even if there were, this wasn't fair. I was there first.

"No, I'm not going to move on. I deserve that spot and I'm going to get it. I have nothing to do all day," I bluff "so I'll just wait." Finally he backs up. Begrudgingly, the car behind me does likewise. I then back up, the man leaves, and voila, I pull Mr. Red into MY parking space.

"Parking was sure frustrating. I can't believe that guy wouldn't back up. It was obvious I was there first. That's the trouble with a damn one-way circular parking structure. There are no guidelines to ensure fairness. I hate that ambiguity. It's a free-for-all, survival of the fittest. That's why we need laws. I could have circled for twenty minutes and then some jerk comes in and gets a space just because of where he happens to be in the queue. That's the trouble with people," I say with a flourish, imitating my grandfather and a favorite law professor "without laws, they're just animals." I realize as soon as I say this that Mery is probably the wrong one from whom to seek empathy. I think back to the swimming pool lane argument, to her admonition about the telephone book. But at least I've tried to frame this as common fairness, honoring the common good.

"I understand how you feel. You were there first, and even though you'd passed the car that was departing, you were entitled to it. You wish there were a law to cover every situation and every ambiguity."

"Yes, exactly." Since she seems to understand the importance of laws, I think of mentioning to her that I haven't yet sent my law school deferral. It's still in my back pocket. Then, repeating her statement to myself, I realize that it might be a therapeutic or lawyerly trick. All she really said was that she understood me. But she didn't say she agreed with me. "You see I'm right, don't you? It's only fair."

She doesn't say yes or no, but answers in an elliptical, Socratic questioning style, which I abhor. "Do you remember when you got upset driving down here, when there was that big van in front of you and you were trying to pass?"

"Yes, so?"

"There wasn't a law to cover that, was there?"

"My point, exactly. And so there was ambiguity and chaos."

"But you can't have a law to cover every situation. Even though your people tried in their Talmud. It's impossible."

I don't like her reference to "your people" but that's a distraction, and I keep myself focused. "I say why not try to clarify and make laws for ambiguous situations. Even if it's difficult, even if it's impossible, why not try. It's in all of our interests. What's your solution?"

"How about patience. Common courtesy. Thinking of the other person. Maybe rather than more laws we need an example of a loving, forgiving, kind person, who doesn't always act in their own self interest. Someone like Christ."

Christ. Oh, God. Here we go again. It's like throwing red meat to a dog. I'm sure she's being intentionally provocative to sidetrack me. I don't bite. I just sit there. But I have no idea what to say. She fills the silence.

"If the situation had been reversed and the departing car was in front of you, and another car that had already gone ahead, put itself in reverse, would you have backed up?"

She's not exactly accusing me. Her tone is even, as if it's just an interesting question. I know what the right answer has to be, so I don't appear hypocritical. But I also know the truth. Tough, that's who I am. I'm not going to try to pretend otherwise. I muster my arguments. "Look, sometimes, when there are no laws, you actually are in the jungle, and it is survival of the fittest. As Brecht said 'First comes food, then comes morality.'" I shrug my shoulders, trying to look charming, rather than callous. "When it's jungle law, I'd probably say the first person missed their chance. You can't choose your birth order. Sometimes the second person wins. Just the luck of the draw. Sorry, Charlie." I

wink at her. "I guess I'd be a pretty good lawyer, huh? I can win either side of the argument."

Or lose both ways. Johannes, you get points for honesty. You use your rational mind to concoct arguments that are self-serving stories on both sides of the situation. But what a horrific statement. How entitled. And worse, aren't you even thinking what you're really saying about your older brother? Rather than being so charming, why didn't you pause, take a breath, and look at yourself. Is this really the person you want to be? I'm embarrassed to know you, much less have been you.

Mery is quiet, and at first I feel I must have intimidated her by intelligence, brilliance, and impeccable reasoning. But I should have known better. Even when I outthink her, and she can't challenge my arguments logically, she attacks from a different-- holier-than-thou-- direction.

"You seem to play the law as a game. Aren't you looking for fairness in life? How would you like to be treated? If everyone acted like you, only in their own self-interest, we'd all be constantly looking at each other distrustfully, as if the other person were a calculating snake ready to strike whenever it felt justified."

I hear this as a personal attack. She the good saintly person, I the snake. I ignore the argument (which is actually pretty strong and makes me look bad) and attack her process logic again. "Now you're talking out of both sides of your mouth. You say there can't be a law to cover every situation; you say that laws are unfair; and now you're criticizing me for saying how I'd deal with a lawless situation. What about artsy Pierre? You agree with him, too. The only law is there is no law. Well, which is it? You're being inconsistent and illogical."

Mery says nothing, wisely keeping quiet. The ugly waitress bringing our food interrupts our silence.

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"This looks delicious," Mery says brightly. "Oh look." I see her pointing to a small baby, maybe seven months, smiling at Mery with its eyes sparkling and mouth open wide. The food seems to have brightened her mood.

"Could you take the whipped cream off?" I ask the waitress with annoyance. Not only is she ugly, but she is also stupid. I could take it off myself, but I want her to know she made a mistake.

"I'd be happy too, but if you don't want whipped cream, it's best to let us know when you order."

"I said no whipped cream when I ordered," idiot. I look glaringly at the waitress, then toward the baby Mery's cooing at. When the baby sees my face, it begins to cry. Great, it's all this brainless waitress's fault. I try to put on a happy face, but the baby is having none of it. Is there something wrong with me? Can this stupid baby sense my annoyance?

I feel like when Mery fell in our tag game, that there's something wrong inside me, and the baby is seeing through to it. Am I like the wicked son I'm going to be discussing in tonight's Seder? Mery makes the baby laugh, I make it wail. I feel a darkness and negativity welling up within me. At times like this I even find myself wondering why Mery stays with me. Does she not see what the baby sees?

"What?" I glare at Mery. I know these thoughts are not going to help my golf game at all. I should have had that orgasm before I left.

"It's just whipped cream. Why make a federal case out of it? You could have just scraped it off."

"And when she tells me it was my fault when it wasn't?"

"She's busy, she made a mistake. Maybe she didn't hear you."

It's difficult to hear Mery over the wail of the baby. Her father picks it up and carries it out to the sidewalk. Thank goodness, what a disturbing racket. "Her job is to listen. People who make mistakes have to be held accountable. And how would I feel about myself if I let people push me around like that? You want me to just let her tell me it was my fault and just swallow that malarkey."

"Malarkey?"

"Yeah, it's a word Dad uses all the time. He told me it was Yiddish for bull---sh..." I smile wanly, and put some butter and jam on my scone. I want to take a bite, but not without my chocolate and coffee. It's getting cold. Where's the bungling waitress?

"My therapist says we sometimes think we're acting in our own self-interest when in fact what we're doing is hurting ourselves. She said fearful people, like me, feel we are protecting ourselves when we hide from the world and act passive in the face of insults." I nod vociferously. But before I can tell her how wise I think her therapist is, Mery continues. "She also says anger is self-destructive. It tears up the angry person's insides, and drives people away from them. She says people like my dad, who are always self-righteously rageful, not only hurt themselves, but they unleash that venom on the world."

"That makes sense. It sounds exactly like my father, too." Mery turns away, and looks toward the table where the baby and its father are absent, and the mother is eating alone. She couldn't possibly be talking about me, could she? Occasionally I get upset, sure, like any normal person. But I'm hardly as rageful and out of control as dad.

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Is she comparing me to her father? I take a breath, not wanting to fall into her trap and yell at her, as she expects. I take a bite of my scone. It tastes good, but I'm forced to drink water with it. Mery also takes a bite.

Finally, the ugly one returns with my drink. She puts it down and turns away in a huff. All my good efforts of smiling at her at the start of the meal are wasted. I wonder if she spit in it.

When I speak it's in a quiet, subdued tone. "Your therapist is definitely right about you. You are too passive, sometimes. You need to stand up for yourself, or others will walk all over you. But maybe that's what you like. Or used to like." I'm still using an even keeled voice. "I bet you're taking her side because you're a waitress, too; or used to be." Judge, I want this person to be treated as a hostile witness.

She looks hurt by my words, even near tears. Fine, it'll teach her not to attack me. If she's going to be my wife, we need to be on the same team. She doesn't cry, and instead responds in just as even a tone as I've used. "Perhaps my being a waitress is part of it. I know how challenging the job is and I feel for her. But my therapist told me I need to remember that the world isn't black and white and motivations are multi-layered. If you defensively dismiss what I say by feeling I'm just siding with her, then you'll never learn anything about yourself, will you? You may want to think more seriously about therapy. I sense a lot of entitled, self-absorbed rage in you, even though you try to mask it. I'm sure you want to nip it in the bud, so you don't turn out like either my father...or yours. Therapy has really been a big help to me."

The father and baby return. There is silence, as I look at my watch. 8:40. We have five more minutes. I tear off a piece of scone, dip it in jam, and wash it down with my whipped-creamless chocolate and coffee.

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I have some scone left, but no more strawberry jam. I notice that Mery has used all her jam, too. I look around and see an unused jam container on a table next to Mery.

"Would you like some more jam" I ask gallantly, pointing to the jam on the table next to her.

She sees that we have none left, but says "No, thank you. I don't want any more."

"Well, I do. Would you mind asking those people at the next table if we can borrow theirs; they're obviously not using it." She turns a shade of pale crimson, and shakes her head no.

"What if the table were empty, and it was just sitting there?" I probe, accusingly.

"I still wouldn't do it. For me, it's breaking too many rules to take something from another table--even an empty one-- without asking the waitress or the manager if that's ok."

I get up out of my double folded pillow seat, cross slowly and deliberately in front of Mery to the next table, and graciously ask if they are using their jam and if not, "could I borrow it." I love that term. It's so euphemistic. And much better than "have it" or "steal it."

They say of course I can have it, and give it to me with a smile. I smile back, then smile with sarcastic and scornful condescension at Mery as I walk back to our table. "Not so hard now, was it, little lady?"

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I look down and see that it is orange-marmalade jam, my least favorite jam. Shit. I resituate myself, spread the marmalade on my scone, and eat. It's not strawberry, but it's 8:46, we'll need to leave in a couple of minutes so it will have to do, especially after all that effort. Although it crosses my mind that not eating it would make a more telling statement to Mery.

As I'm eating, I notice Mery taking some of the jam and placing it on her scone.

Ah, hah. "So, you did want more jam, you were just too unassertive to break the rules and get up and ask for it, right?" I stop myself from adding "Looks like therapy isn't helping you all that much, you're still so passive and fearful. I realize how cruel that sounds, and she'd probably just cry. I'm angry at the lack of sex--angry at her for not being passive and fearful about withholding sex from me; And angry at her therapist for giving her permission to be withholding. Her therapist needs to get out of her marriage bed.

She looks at me, almost with defiance. "I love orange-marmalade. It's my very favorite. Mom and I used to make it every spring. Thank you for your gallantry." The sarcasm drips.

"If you love it so much, why didn't you order it at the start of the meal, or ask for it later?" I'm annoyed with her, but have to admit it is a touching image of she and her mom making jam together. See, Mery and Mery's therapist-- I can have multiple levels of emotion.

"I'm content with what I have. It wasn't worth the effort to bother people at another table, and you'd already given the waitress enough grief."

"But you ate it!"

"Once you got it, I'm happy to eat it. Thank you again."

This is as much arguing both sides of the issue as my circular parking lot machinations, but she won't even admit to her contradictory positions. Partly I admire what she's done, partly I resent that style being used against me.

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I signal the waitress for the check, pay, and give her a meager tip. Dad said you should always give them something, even if the service was horrible. I asked him why, thinking this was an uncharacteristically kind attitude on this part. He said "If you give them nothing, then they think you may just not be a tipper, and it's your problem. If you give them a pittance, then they know you are really dissatisfied with them, and it makes them feel even worse." He said all this with that beautiful smile of his.

"You're right." I say to Mery with a smile.

She seems confused. "What do you mean, I'm right? About what?"

"You told me you felt you were too passive and unassertive, and admired my chutzpah. You're right, therapy really has helped you a lot."

"That's a mean thing to say."

"Just being honest, isn't that the way we learn? At least that's what you told me earlier." She says nothing as we get up. I start walking toward the car, assuming Mery is behind me. However, when I get to the gate, I realize she is still at the table. I see her placing a couple more dollars on the check.

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It's only a short walk to the parking structure, though a silent one. Once we arrive there I decide not to open the car door for her. If she wants to be the man, and leave the tip, fine, she can open her own car door. But if she really wanted to be the man, she could have paid for the whole thing, plus the tip. Given her financial situation, just having lost her job, that's not likely. And my situation isn't going to be very good, either. I wonder if it will bother her that we won't have a lot of money and can't do nice things. She doesn't seem very materialistic, but I'm aware that money has always been a boost to my self-

esteem. As soon as I mail the deferral letter and tell Grandpa, money is an issue we're going to have to discuss.

I feel for the letter, still in my right back pocket. But I don't want to do it now, and I don't want to get into an argument with her. I need to focus all my attention on the upcoming golf.

I put on the burgundy touring cap Richard gave me. Mery is still standing by her door. I ignore her, and reach into my left pocket, taking out my golf glove, and my instruction list-golf folder, manual and distance chart. I place the "Distances per Club" sheet behind the "Golf Simplified Rules" turn to p. 23 and then review.

"Your hat looks great with that outfit. Perfect for the golf game right?" Mery says breezily. I don't look up, just nod and continue reviewing my notes. She never compliments me on how I dress. Why now? Though she's right. In my khaki slacks, light baby blue short sleeve Lacoste polo shirt, and blue sleeveless argyle cashmere sweater, I could be a fashion model in a golf magazine. I think of pulling up my sweater to show her my alligator, but decide she might not appreciate it sufficiently. Much too elite. Though I've noticed they are increasingly showing up on the masses, under the cheaper Izod Lacoste brand. At least cashmere is still cashmere.

"I could be a fashion model, couldn't I?"

"I guess for those that like that preppy boy look."

"That's not very kind. Soignée you're not."

"And I don't want to be, preppy boy." She smiles breezily, and then startles me by asking "Mind if I drive?"

"What? Why?" I never let anyone drive my car. "You don't even care about cars."

"Not really. But I was talking to my brothers this week. They love cars. I grew up with their constant chatter about this torque and that compression ratio. I know way more than I wish I did about cars. Anyway, when I told them you were probably going have to give up Mr. Red, they made me promise that I would ask you to let me drive it--for them. So I could tell them what it was like."

She told her brothers I'd have to give up the car? That doesn't paint me in a very good light. I look at her plaintive face. "Sure, fine, why not? Just this once." I hate being driven. It's not just that I'm a better driver than others, and trust my reflexes more, it's also that I then am sitting on their right side, with my left ear toward them, and that feels awkward.

She comes around to my side, opens the door, and gets in. She then turns, reaches out her hand, and says, "How about the hat, too? I might as well do it in style."

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She spends a long time looking at the panel. I look at my watch. 9:03. It's only about twenty minutes to the course, even in bad traffic, but her dawdling annoys me.

"Put on your seat belt" Mery says suddenly.

"What? I don't ever wear one. They're stupid."

"When you drive, you can do what you want. I always put mine on. My brothers and father made me promise. And when I'm driving, I want you to, also."

"No," I say like a petulant little kid being order around by his mommy.

"Fine, I can't make you."

I feel helpless in the passenger seat, I don't like the feeling.

We both look behind us and see a line of several cars waiting for our parking space. Why did I turn around too? She's the one driving. I don't need to see behind us. It's because I don't trust her to back out correctly, and feel I need to be watchful and help guide her.

Or, alternatively, Johannes, because you are feeling helpless, and are trying to give yourself the illusion that you have some control. The grand illusion, my friend.

I also don't like that someone is going to be taking our parking spot, without giving us something in return. We have something valuable, and they are going to get it for free. I share this thought, although in a more altruistic version, with Mery.

"We're going to make someone very happy. Parking spaces are at a premium this morning."

"Good. I like making people happy." She slowly worms her way backward.

"But wouldn't you like some credit, some gratitude for giving up our space? It's like when I hit golf balls on a range, and decide I've had enough practice. If there are some balls left, I always pick someone out, go over to them, and say 'I'm leaving. Help yourself.' I might even make a joke 'That's as good as I can get today;' or 'I've hit my frustration quotient.'

"I know if I don't do that, someone will just take them anyway after I leave. But this way I feel like a nice guy, a giving person, and I get someone to acknowledge that and say 'Thanks.' It's the same here. I want the person who takes our space to wave and acknowledge how grateful they are and what a nice person I am for giving them my spot."

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At first Mery doesn't respond, and continues to focus intently on maneuvering the car out of the space. She's going so slowly, I'm surprised people don't begin to honk in frustration. She finally extricates herself from the slot. She puts Mr Red in forward, and glances briefly at me with a goody two-shoes face. "Your analogy makes no sense at all. You bought the balls, so they are yours. I guess I understand why you would need to be thanked. I'd just leave them and trust the right person would enjoy them and that would be enough to make me feel good. But for goodness sake, you don't own this parking space. It was a gift given to you. Actually, one that you took. And there is no charge to park here. It's free. Now you want to be thanked because you're leaving it to go play golf? And you want others to tell you what an incredibly generous, kind, and giving person you are because you are offering them something that you no longer want?"

"Why not just give it up graciously? Why do you need to be recognized for a selfless act that isn't at all selfless? I wouldn't have even given it a second thought whether or not they acknowledged me. I'd just be happy I could offer something to someone else. And at no cost to me."

She doesn't get it. I feel like I'm losing something. Yes, I do feel like I owned the parking space. Even though it's free, my time limit has not expired and if I wanted, I could continue to stay there. That makes it mine. Now someone else is lusting after it. I want something back in return. Money? Not really, but I wouldn't mind. Thanks? Yes, sure. It's like there is an emptiness at the loss. Someone's getting something, and I'm losing something, even if I no longer want it. I can't quite explain the feeling logically. But I know what I'm feeling. And I don't like it. And I don't like that Mery can't understand it.

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As I read this section, I'm aware of an emptiness in you, Johannes, that neither money nor Mery can fill. I know that feeling well, but I don't understand it; and I'm not sure yet what can fill it. God?

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"As you read that section of your journal, what are your feelings about how you acted?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"At the time, I felt Mery was wrong for not appreciating my kindness in allowing the next person to have my parking space, and my wanting an acknowledgement of that kindness. Now I feel like I was greedy and entitled, As she said, the parking space was never mine to begin with, only being 'lent' by the universe."

"And how would you have felt if you had just exited, and not received any thanks from the waiting car?"

"Like I'd been wronged, not given proper credit."

"And the feeling?"

"Anger, maybe even rage. Then maybe some guilt at seeing in me the same reflexive uncontrollable anger that I hate in my father."

"Good insights. Any other feelings?"

"Guilt and anger are enough."

"Ok. But let me push you just a bit. If you didn't feel guilt and anger, what would you have been feeling?"

I'm annoyed at their question, but close my eyes, as they've taught me, and try to feel beneath guilt and anger. After a couple of breaths, what comes up is

"Emptiness. Maybe even some sadness. I was annoyed at Mery from our tea and scones. I was feeling alone. Empty."

"So the car behind you was a way to distract yourself from the sadness, and perhaps a way you thought you could 'fill yourself' by receiving a compliment?"

I smile, remembering mom's words, you don't know yourself nearly as well as you think you do. I'm impressed with Dr. Lisbet.

"Thank you. You're right. So, I now realize I was feeling anger, guilt, sadness and emptiness. And Mery was right. I hadn't done anything noble or even nice. That space wasn't mine to give. We were leaving anyway. Why try to get credit for something I was doing naturally? To expect thanks under these circumstances is egocentric, entitled, egotistical, and narcissistic. She may not have actually said all those words, but it's what I heard in my mind from her (and perhaps my mom's) judgmental tone. What a fine specimen of humanity." I take another breath and again close my eyes.

"Do you remember when we discussed the swimming pool situation with you?"

I nod, but remain silent.

"There, as here, you at first rejected Mery's view point, then later looking back, and being less defensive, you bought into her point of view. She was good and saintly, and you felt these examples showed you just how awful a person you were."

Again, I nod. Is this supposed to cheer me up? But I say nothing.

"Just as in the swimming situation, so too here, more nuance can be helpful. Once again, life is not always black and white. Yes, you may want fame and recognition, perhaps more than most. And that is something you may want to keep an eye on. It is a part of you. It can be problematic, a speck of dust, which causes you to react with a reflexive emotional angry reaction from a need

to receive recognition you feel your deserve and can create unskillful mind states and behavior.”

“You sound like Mery, and my mom. This still seems pretty black and white to me, and I am the darkness. Is this supposed to make me feel better?”

“Perhaps if we take a step back, and look at what it is you’re really seeking. What does ‘recognition’ give you? Isn’t it a kind of human connection you’re looking for? That’s something all of us seek. There is nothing wrong with the impulse to want to be recognized for your positive actions. There is nothing wrong with wanting human connection. Is there a way to soften your ‘need’, your ‘demand’, your expectations by just a few degrees?”

I don’t answer, but just continue writing in my journal, while still listening.

But instead of Dr. Lisbet’s voice, I hear the Rebbe’s. “The name of your Biblical forebear, Jacob, has several meanings that may be of interest to you. Jacob came out of the womb holding the heel of his twin brother, Esau. The name itself comes from the Hebrew root meaning ‘to follow, to be behind.’ But it also is derived from a root meaning ‘to supplant, circumvent, assail, overreach.’ How might those qualities apply to you? Is there a part of you which is never satisfied being second, following, and always trying to reach the heel of and surpass your metaphorical older brother, and be recognized as first and in the limelight?”

I think of Grandpa’s “be the best.” My ego battles with Richard over tennis and cars, and now Mr. Suck Butt in class. I’m never quite happy where I am, always wanting to be more central.

Yet now, in Safed, I am content to be a follower, a learner, with no desire to be other than where I am with the wise “brothers and sisters” who are gathered here.

These thoughts are interrupted as Dr. Lisbet continues: “Let me invite you, as an experiment, to consider each day looking for ways to do something nice for someone, with lowered expectations of reward. In the Hindu scripture, the

Bhagavad Gita, this is called 'being non -attached to the fruits of your actions.'"

I nod, not necessarily agreeing, but willing to hear her out.

"If you can keep the dust relatively clean, you may get to a place where you aren't primarily focused on recognition and acknowledgment, but rather are seeking out opportunities for moments of kindness and connection from you to others. See if there might be something fulfilling in that in and of itself. Then you would need nothing else back. And I guarantee if you do actions in that way, sometimes, in addition to feeling good about yourself, you will notice that occasionally there will be an additional personal connection of an exchanged smile, a wave of the hand. It can be a wonderful experience of sharing, people working together."

She stops for a moment. Is that to let me finish taking notes?

She smiles as she adds, "And another advantage of this perspective is that you might be motivated to be more aware of the people who are doing kind acts toward you. A good karmic win-win for everyone."

As I finish writing that down, I try to remember whether I thanked the person who gave me the parking space. I'm sure I didn't give it a second thought. I silently thank them now. And I give a silent nod of gratefulness to Dr. Lisbet.

Even though there is no one in front of her, Mery circles the parking lot at an agonizingly slow pace, until she reaches the exit. We need to turn left to cross the two-way street. But instead she puts on the right turn signal

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to turn right, go to the stop sign. Then make a left turn, and go around the block. Then I can make a right turn and we'll be headed in the correct direction. We'll get there fine. I'm just more cautious than you. It's too confusing to me to have to look left for traffic on my side, then try to cross half the road, and look right for traffic coming your way. Just let me drive."

I look left, and there is no car coming for thirty yards. She waits.

"Go."

"No, I want to make sure it's safe."

"But it is safe."

Finally, she pulls out of the parking lot. She throws one hand in the air. "Victory. All right."

As annoying as she is, I have to admit, she looks cute. "You look very pretty, even sporty in my cap. Everything in red: car, hat, hair" I run my hand through the mane blowing behind her.

"Thanks. I like it. Where'd you get it? I think I'd like to get one."

With whose money? I don't say it, not from taking Ovid's advice, but because I want to be relatively calm for my golf game. "From a friend, Richard. He's a tennis and golf buddy, from South Africa."

She puts on her left blinker. She waits, let's a car go through the four way intersection; then another. Finally, she makes her turn. After another block, cars are backed up. There is a parking lot on our right. Rather than stay flush behind the car in front of us, she signals for a person from the parking lot to enter. Then lets another; and a third squeezes in.

"What are you doing? Go already."

"We'll get there on time. Don't worry. I'm just showing common courtesy when I drive. Something you could learn from."

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I sense a fight coming. I don't want it because I need to stay focused on golf. But somehow I'm helpless to stop it. I counter jab, but not that hard. "Something **I** could learn from. What are you, Jesus? The first shall be last? Doesn't it bother you when people take advantage of your good nature?" I flash on the image of all those "artists" looking at her nude, using her as a model; and all her boyfriends molding her to their sexual desires. Am I being hypocritical? It's that good, trusting, kind nature that I used to my benefit at the Fairmont. It's ok for me, but not for everyone else in the world. If that's hypocritical, so be it.

She sloughs off my remark as if I barely touched her, and counters, "I don't feel taken advantage of. I feel like I'm being nice and friendly. People

are more important than cars. Remember the common good. Like with the telephone book. Think of others. That's what makes a civil, kind society."

I feel a sting. I really don't want to escalate. Otherwise it will end up like the black and blue game my brother and I played. I try reason.

"What makes a civil society is people following the laws. It's a question of fairness. You have the right of way. My Grandpa said that if you let one person in, then another and another will try to squeeze in, too. He warned me that if you start off being nice, people will think you are a wimp and play you for a patsy. It doesn't work. You become the weak link in the chain. And that's exactly what just happened to you." Another person edges part way into the street. Mery waves him in. Her gesture is stupid. He was already half-way into the street. She had no choice, other than to hit him. He waves back at her and gives her a big flirtatious smile.

"The law may be what you have to do. But that's just a minimum--the difference between legal and illegal activities--what you shouldn't do. All the 'Thou shall nots. . .' But what if everyone did just that and nothing more? Not only would you allow disrespectful, deliberately offensive but not technically legal actions, but what about positive, desirable loving behaviors?"

"So now you're going to legislate compassion?"

"You're not listening. You're just arguing. No, I didn't say that. Your law can't make people compassionate, and that's its limit. But if you live only in the law, you never learn to go beyond it to the world of love, like Jesus. Don't you ever think about ethics--what you should do, what is moral, fair, honest? I'd rather be giving, living in Buber's world of I-thou, than cold, calculating, and withholding, seeing everyone as "its" on a chess board, keeping to the letter of the law but losing all spirit in life."

She gives a playful, coy smile back to the driver she's just let in. "And, see, a little kindness makes others happy."

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No sooner has she finished these words, then we hear a loud noisy honk from the person behind us. I turn to see who the asshole is, but can't because

sunlight is dazzling off his windshield into my eyes. I give him the finger. It's like I'm being attacked front and rear. Why am I angry at him, defending Mery's actions? I feel like I'm arguing both sides again, and being pummeled.

"Why did you wave him forward?" I ask, not knowing which annoys me most, his response or her passivity. I know when someone plans to merge in front of me and I have no choice but to allow them, sometimes I will make the same open handed, palm up waving gesture, to try to pretend I'm a nice guy, acting like I'm in control, letting them go. If they gratefully acknowledge me, I feel better. If they don't, but instead ignore me and act entitled, then I feel doubly enraged

"I wanted him to know it's ok to go." She sounds like a church sermon. While driving my car. And I'm trapped in the passenger seat. And that condescending smile.

"But he was going to go anyway. Either you wanted some illusion of control, or you wanted thanks. And then you're no different from me and my feelings about the parking spot."

"What a barrister. Let me think about it later. For now, do you mind if I just drive. It's taxing enough in a strange car without your raising philosophical issues right and left." She pauses. "That's a pun."

I'm annoyed at her nonchalant attitude. "Look, you're like Mr. Magoo. You think you're being nice to the person in front, but you're ignoring all the people behind you who have to wait because of what you think is considerateness. You criticize me for not being sensitive to others, and bullying my way ahead. But I'm merely following the fair procedures society has set forth. That's not insensitive, it's the height of fairness. Your wishy washy passivity is really what's insensitive, inconsiderate, thoughtless, and hypocritical."

There, I wiped the smile off her face. Oh no, she looks like she's going to cry. Don't do that. Geez. She stares straight ahead, and says nothing. At last, we've back on the road, heading in the right direction. This is the last time I'm going to be trapped in the passenger seat, and let her drive.

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I look at the trees whirling past. I'm on the way to play golf. The sun is shining. I take a breath and start to refocus.

"So, you think it's a fair society to just let those homeless people live on Sixth Street? You feel your laws are doing enough?"

Where did that come from? Clearly, she's not through punching. Fine. "What do you want, more government handouts to the lazy? Frankly, your giving on your time is your business. If you want to salve your conscience, fine. But leave the government out of it. It's irresponsible to mollycoddle the slothful and indolent. You just drive all of us into debt, creating higher taxes for the hard-working among us, and what's more by giving them handouts you keep them trapped as victims, so they never learn to stand on their own two feet. Like I am. Life is competition, survival of the fittest. Winners and losers. That's how I got into Stanford and Harvard." And frankly, Harvard is looking better with each passing moment.

"What's gotten into you? You came down to help me feed them. You seemed to be so open and compassionate. I felt you were truly touched by their plight. You even donated money to help them. What changed? Or don't I know you? Was that hypocritical? You're acting like everything is a competition, an adversarial fight."

Mery is actually being gentle on Johannes. She could easily have attacked him for his ridiculous statement about higher taxes for the hard-working among us. How much have you ever earned, Johannes? How much has been given to you in family "hand outs?" In what sense are you standing on your own two feet? Your denial is amazing. Survival of the fittest? Hah! What an embarrassment you are. Sigh, and I guess I still am.

John, you're being tough on Johannes for his denial. You also sound pretty guilty, and self-punishing.

To the best of your ability, each of you is making efforts toward your goals. Hard work is really not an issue. You are both working hard. The Protestant ethic is indeed intact, even among Jews. Are your efforts based on

limited information, perspectives, and support from others? Yes. But isn't all life?

Do we ever see everything clearly? Do we ever do it completely by ourselves? Reb Jonathan said "No one can do it for you. But you cannot do it alone." Both of you are missing the interconnected element of life.

Perhaps what might be best for all of us is less criticism for past denial, less guilt, more appreciation for our efforts, and forgiveness for our weaknesses. In terms of the blessings we have been given, when the universe bestows good fortune on us, rather than take it as an entitlement as Johannes does, or feel guilty about it, as you do, John, perhaps gratitude and a feeling of wanting to share with others might be wise.

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"Life is a fight. And to deny that is being naïve. Remember the spider and the fly. Eat or be eaten. Why do you think there are signs saying 'Please do not feed the birds?' Because they have to learn to fend for themselves, otherwise you create an unnatural, over-population which can't survive on its own. It's the same with your homeless people." Though this is what I believe, I'm not sure why I'm saying it in such a mean, angry way. Is it because I feel she's attacking me, and I'm feeling defensive? I try to soften my tone. Grandpa always said if you're right, you can say it softly, and your words will be even more piercing. Her goal seems to be to put me in a box, telling me I'm uncaring and selfish. I need to show her, or at least act, like I'm not. "Sure, I feel for those guys, especially when I talked with a couple of them, like Mac. And it's sweet of you to try to help. But basically I just don't think philosophically it's the right approach. There's a story my grandfather told me about giving: You hand a fish to a poor man and it feeds him for a day. You teach him to fish and he becomes self-sufficient. That's what I believe in."

"Then why did you do it? Why did you go down there with me?"

"For you. It was part of the game. Look, think of golf, tennis, any sport. There are rules. That makes the game fair. Then, yes, it's let the best man win."

That's how I play sports, that's how I got into Harvard. Frankly, that's how I got you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't be naïve. You know life is seduction. You want what you want, and you find the best way to get it. You put your best foot forward. Like in the law. When you present your case, you don't lie, but you leave things out that don't support your case, and give the facts that do so you present your best case. All is fair in love and war, as long as you play by the rules and don't break any laws. Don't pretend you don't try to put your best self forward little miss innocent I'm oh so giving." And oh, is my cleavage showing, gee I really didn't notice.

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She says nothing, but seems to grip the steering wheel harder, and speeds forward. Finally, she responds, "So I was just a sport to you, a legal case, a seduction you wanted to win?"

"You make it sound nefarious. It's not about hurting anyone. You play tennis, you want to win. The laws are there to make it fair and minimize suffering. One person loses. Deal with it. Afterwards, you shake hands. It's fun, just a game. Lawyers want to win their cases. Theologians want to win converts, so they offer you community, a warm close family substitute, life hereafter, happiness, peace. Parents try to get their kids to do what they want them to, or, euphemistically, 'what they think is best'; kids try to get their way." I realize that she may be surprised because she's never heard this conversation before, but I have it with myself all the time, like when I first entered her church that fine Sunday morning. "You find out what people are like, their styles, what they want, and you give it to them. Money, charm, compliments, companionship, sex. And, in return, you get back what you want." She says nothing. "What? You look shocked. Don't play the innocent little lamb with me."

"Sounds like you have everything stacked in your favor."

"I try to." I like it when she says the word stacked. But I'm not sure pointing out the double entendre at this time would best serve my arguments.

"But then you aren't living, you're always planning, conniving, always looking at the other person as an 'it' a pawn, an adversary to be conquered, a means to play your game. Is that the kind of person you want to be, looking for weakness in others so you can beat them in a competition? That's no way to live. That's not life. Where's the heart and soul in that?"

"It depends on your perspective. Think of that Native American flute playing trickster, Kokopeli. He's a charming, wily seducer who uses mayhem and wits to wile his way through situations. I love him. He's full of heart and soul, dancing his way through life."

"Really? Is that the kind of person you would want to be? A charming, wily seducer? Is that the kind of person you would want to live with in a caring loving relationship? It's not who I want to be with. It's not the kind of world or society I want to live in, either. Then you could never trust anyone. You'd always be looking out for the schemer, the deceiver. Is that really what you believe, what you'd want?"

I know enough not to say anymore. But she's not through. She points to the sign noting we are getting closer to Pebble Beach. "And speaking of fair competition, what about the level playing field? You, at your age, are about to play golf at Pebble Beach. Look where you started, and how much you were given. Did that have any effect at all in your getting into Stanford and Harvard? What about the handouts the rich receive, Mr. Play By the Rules?"

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It's disturbing in reading this journal entry to realize how often insights I think I am having by myself end up being merely parroting what Mery has already said about Johannes. I think they are my own, only to realize that nine months earlier she has already seen the same thing that I'm just coming to.

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There is a lengthy silence. I feel stalemated, if not checkmated. I'm tired of the game. It's going nowhere, and it's certainly not going to help me play golf.

"Is he interested in art?" She interrupts our lengthy silence.

"Who?" I have no idea what she's talking about.

"That fellow Richard, the one who gave you the cap."

"How'd you know?" I'm stunned.

"Lucky guess. It's just that there is a wealthy South African art collector from Stanford that Pierre told me about who often visits the Kantor gallery. It seems this guy likes Pierre's work, and even has thought about purchasing a couple paintings he made of me. I figured how many guys from South Africa can there be at Stanford." She starts to look at me, but changes her mind and stays focused on the road. She smiles. "Pierre told me he drives some kind of fancy Jaguar car. I think Pierre was jealous."

I'm glad she didn't look. I feel the blood rushing from my face. Pierre knows Richard? Richard has seen nude paintings of Mery? Pierre admires Richard's car? I feel totally out of control. Mery doesn't seem to realize the effect of her comments on me, blithely driving through the gates heading to the Seventeen Mile Drive.

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Let it go, I tell myself. You need to focus on golf now. I sit in silence, trying to replace images of a nude picture of Mery, and Richard's car, with the image of a smooth golf swing. Mery interrupts my swing by asking, "When you grandfather decided to get you a car, why did you pick this one? Are you going to be sad giving it up?"

For a non materialistic person, she asks a lot of material questions, and also seems to be having a lot of fun commanding Mr. Red. Should I answer her question, or stay with my golf swing? Just answer her question. Why not? It seems safe enough, unlike Richard and Pierre and modeling.

"You won't believe this, but I don't really care all that much about cars. Why did I get this one? Actually because when I graduated from high school, all my friends liked it. It was the cool, powerful car. I didn't really care about the power. I've never driven more than seven miles over the speed limit. My dad loved the idea of my getting it. He told me I'd really like it. I think he really wanted it more than I did. He and my friends would stand around it,

talking about the , V8, 300 horsepower, slanting louvers on the sides of the front fenders, the blacked out grille, the different rocker panel moldings, the flat dial, the straight needle design with aircraft-type influence. They would say all this as they ran their hands lovingly over it like it was a woman. It never felt that good to me. It's just metal. I'd rather have the softness of a woman."

I look over at Mery to see if she is going to respond to my flirtatiousness. Nothing. Cold as a fish. She continues to drive studiously, focused, and with no sexual energy at all. I act like I don't notice and continue,

"Dad loved to drive my car. He'd get in it and make noises like a little kid 'Varoom Varoom.' Mom says he likes the idea of power, as well as wanting to regain his youth. She's surprised he isn't more jealous of grandpa giving me Mr. Red. I must say that girls--except the ones at Berkeley--have always liked it." I look over at her, and put my hand on her thigh. "Though now that I have the perfect chick--I mean woman--, I guess I don't really need the car any more, do I?"

She smiles--vaguely--and says, "Chirp, chirp," but she removes my hand from her thigh

"How come you got an automatic?"

"Because I never learned to drive a stick. Richard says that makes me a sissy. That less than 10% of people get this car without manual transmission. He sounded like dad and my friends."

"Well, a stick would allow you to feel more in control of the car, less passive. But it shows you do have opinions about some things."

That seems like a back-handed compliment at best, but I ignore it, and say, "To be truthful I've always been a bit embarrassed by its boldness and its color. Rally Red. My friends call it candy-apple red. It's not really me. I liked the freedom and mobility it gives me. But it calls too much attention to me. I feel like I always have to be 'on', or performing when I drive it. I like that sometimes, but not all the time."

"So, you let other people decide things for you? I thought you were the bold, strong one. You're not entirely what you seem, huh? Not really as you present yourself?"

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I thought the car was going to be a "safe conversation." But she's right, I'm not exactly what I seem. Not with my family, for sure. I'm sharing with her pieces of the truth, but she doesn't yet have the whole truth. Soon. Maybe when I send the letter telling them about my not going to Harvard.

I feel the letter I'm sitting on in my left back pocket. I wonder if one of the reasons I'm thinking of not going to law school is because I don't believe I'm as smart as I seem, either. As Mery said, I'm not really as I present myself. And I'm afraid others will find out. I'm not stupid, but I'm not that intelligent, either. Certainly not near the best. Why am I thinking this now? I shouldn't be having vulnerable thoughts like this right before my golf game. I start to shove the thought aside, but then decide to share it with Mery. It's almost like I want her to see more and more of the real me, to know who she's going to marry. I need to tell someone my doubts. She's really the only one I can trust.

"Oh, you're seeing right through me to my soul, fair lady. But I feel I can trust you to see deeply into my core, to know all of me-- and still love me. That's why I love you and want to marry you." I take her right hand from the wheel, and kiss it, placing it next to my cheek.

"Oh, so tender, so romantic. That's real, I can tell!"

"Sometimes I feel afraid. Like I'm an impostor, like I don't really know who I am. I get a car, but like you said, I let other people decide for me what kind of car it should be. I live like a rich person, but I'm someone who soon won't have much money. And I'm smart, but not that smart."

"Phi Beta Kappa at Stanford's not bad; not to mention admission to Harvard Law School."

"Yes, but I have my doubts. Even if I wanted to go to law school, I'm not sure I could do the work. Remember the story I told you about when I was in second grade, and asked to pronounce my name?"

"Yes, you said it had three syllables. Jay-kah-buh I guess that proves once and for all you're a dunce." She laughs. "Don't be silly."

"But the class laughed at me, too. And not kindly, like you. Then I was asked to pronounce 'pheasant' and I said 'peasant.' They laughed again. I was put in the lowest group—the dunce group. There were only two of us, me and a retarded kid. The class laughed some more. It was only my parents' talking to the principal that got me reassigned to a higher group. The very next year, I was pulled over by a policeman for riding my bike on the sidewalk. He pointed to the sign which said 'Prohibited.' I thought prohibited meant permitted. Mom mocks me when she tells the story, saying it's just me wanting to have control everywhere. But I felt it was because I was stupid. Not only not the best, like Grandpa wanted me to be, but actually one of the worst."

I can see that Mery is listening intently, and with compassion. She's no longer smiling. I continue, "In High School, I made better grades than almost all the guys, but many of them ended National Merit finalists and semi-finalists, and I didn't. I've always wondered whether it was only my hard work, my grade-grubbing, my grandfather's money that got me where I am." I pause, and think of Dad's mean comments to me, and whether to share them with Mery. I decide in favor of honesty. "And it didn't help that Dad would often call me a pseudo-intellectual. I think I secretly fear he is right."

"Oh, you tender little boy. That wasn't very nice of him." She places her hand on my thigh. It's meant to be comforting, and it is. But it is also erotic. I really should have had an orgasm this morning. Look what's happening to me. I'm yelling at her at breakfast, making a baby cry, and now I'm acting like a little scared baby myself. What's going on?

"Don't worry, everything's going to be just fine. We're a great team. Especially with me in the driver's seat."

"Promise everything's going to be ok."

"I promise."

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I don't like where this conversation is going. I'm feeling eedy, passive, doubting. I want peace and quiet to prepare for my golf game. I don't want to listen to her anymore. I don't want to talk to her anymore. I look for a tape to have some noise to drown out the possibility of further conversation. I wish I'd brought something soothing like Mathis, Sinatra, or Goulet. Or even something buoyantly familiar like Jerry Lee Lewis. But all I have is the Doors or Joplin. I lot of good they did me. I stick a tape in the cassette.

Out of the speakers, in a shrill, raucous voice, I hear

Oh, whoa, whoa, mama, mama, mama

Oh, whoa, alright, come on feel it!

Oh, whoa, waaaaaaah!!!

Whoa whoa whoa, whoa, whoa

All of a sudden the car lurches forward, and I am thrown back against my seat. Mery's head is swaying to the music. She's singing loudly. She points to the aircraft inspired-instrument panel and says, "Varoom. Varoom. I feel like I can fly. This is fun."

The pines begin to rush by us in a whirl. I'm not afraid, but I'm feeling dizzy, and this speed is definitely outside my comfort zone. I put on my seat belt. "Mery, what's going on?" She pushes the accelerator down. We zoom ahead as she boldly takes a curve.

"Hey, slow down. What's gotten into you?"

"I don't' know. Something about hearing her music. I feel like I'm back at the Fillmore dancing, my whole body's tingling. "Woah, waaaaaaah!!!" she shouts to the music.

Yeah, we're gonna knock you, rock ya

Gonna sock at you now.

She throws one hand into the air, then lets it come to rest on my thigh.

"Where has this feeling been all week? It's like everything has been numb in my body. Finally, I feel sensations, vibrations, passion again."

Heh baby

Everybody over at the Avalon Ballroom in San Francisco Bay

Everybody have have have a lot of fun I know

I can tell you that they're feeling good

"My brothers told me that this little puppy--can you believe what they call it!-- can go from 0 to 60 in under 6 seconds. 0 to 100 in under 14. They'll be ecstatic when I tell them I'm driving it. Wheeee."

She looks over at me, and runs her hand up my thigh. "I want to feel your body again, too, close to me."

I know, gotta try the feeling, baby.

Gotta try the feeling, gotta

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa oh

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa yeah

She begins stroking me on my thigh, then a bit higher. I'm not sure what to do. The feeling is definitely pleasurable. I decide just to close my eyes, listen to the music, and let her drive. It actually feels good to not be in control, let her be in the driver' seat, just lie back passively and accept her caresses.

Baby, I've got to feel you more

Hey, come on, feeling good, baby, baby

Come on and do it, come on come on

Come on, try it with me, try it with me baby.

I hear Mery singing, then saying to me, "You've been such a good sport. I want you to know that tonight," and she returns to a singsong voice "I'll feel you more, you can try it with me baby, we're really going to have fun, I'm going to rock you....." as Joplin comes in:

Hey!

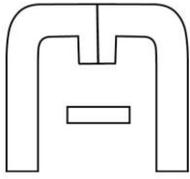
Ooh!

Do do

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h, the Mecca of golf. I've arrived.

We pull up, and a valet removes my bag. I get out of the car to open the door for Mery, but before I can, he does. I watch him watch her as she gets out. First she swings her left leg out and onto the ground, which parts her thighs, as her yellow mini skirt rides high up her legs. I know that beneath the skirt is a pair of granny underwear, but to the untrained observer, she looks like a glamorous sexpot. Even in a black turtle-neck sweater, her breasts are huge and luscious. Her face is flushed, her hair disordered under the sporty touring cap. I can see him give her the once over. I'm both jealous and aroused. Then he sees her ring and turns his head aside, as she gives him the keys. She is mine, buster. And tonight I'm going to "busther" wide open, I think playfully, as I part those red freckled thighs. Finally. Maybe Joplin will help open the Doors for me after all. I smile inwardly. Patience will be rewarded.

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I check in, take off my sandals and put on my black wing tipped golf shoes. I take a few steps to make sure they are comfortable, and listen to the spikes clanging on the tile. Although I like the freedom of my sandals, I feel much less vulnerable, and more secure covered by the wing tips. I'm now back in my element. 9:38 right on schedule.

I have an hour plus for my pre-game warm up. Finally, I'm center stage again, and there is some order returning to my life. I know how to structure this hour of warm-up, down to the second. And then I have eighteen luscious holes ahead of me, one after the other. There is a clear direction and framework. Then, tonight, I will create a Seder. Seder, meaning "order." What a relief after the craziness of last night, the difficulty in the parking lot of

finding and then giving up my space, the fiasco of breakfast, and at least the first part of Mery's drive over here. There are too many gray areas in life. Enough of being in the passenger seat.

I head to the driving range, where they tell me my caddy will soon join me. Mery tags along behind me. At last, things are back in control.

In the first dream, I'm driving Jack Nicklaus. Like a caddy? I'm so proud and excited to be in the car with him. He's only a few years older than I am, but he's already so famous--the first to win the Master's twice, the youngest to win all four majors. He's my golf idol. I really don't want to make a mistake. In the dream I'm telling him about some golf dreams I've had. One is about losing my dad's wooden driver and trying to retrace my steps to find it. I can't find it, so return to hit with another club. In another golf dream I share with Nicklaus, I'm trying to find a place I can tee my golf ball up--the tee box is rocky or with deep holes that make it impossible to hit from. There is no safe place.

Nicklaus seems vaguely interested in my discussion of my past golf dreams. As I'm sharing them, we reach a point where the road ends, and a cliff lies ahead. Nicklaus tries to get out to look ahead, but as he does so the car begins to lean right. He gets back in and I start to back up. I know there must be a road behind us that we've just driven on, but I can't find it. I hit the brakes, but they don't work. I'm fearing that this is it, the end of both of our lives. I apologize to him, saying I'm so sorry you ended up in this car with me. As I'm thinking these thoughts, still in the dream, I "wake up." I ask myself why I created the dream and what I could have done differently. I realize we could have gotten out on my side of the car and been safe. I also could have built a bridge for the car over the cliff; or created an alternative routing. As I'm having those thoughts in the dream, I really wake up.

INTERPRETATION: Obviously part of the dream reflects my need for fame--I hang out with famous people, although in a subordinate capacity.

And if I'm all parts of the dream, it reflects my wanting to be Nicklaus--

the best golfer in the world. Another part of the dream is my fear of making mistakes and doing inadvertent harm. I lose my father's golf club and can't find it. (Fear of losing my father?) There's also something about my fear of being trapped. Trapped in the car. Trapped in the present--I'm not able to back up--the road had disappeared--my past has vanished. And when I lose my dad's wooden driver I try to retrace my steps to find it, but can't go back here either. Does this mean I fear that all the time I've spent reviewing my journals-- going through my past -- is not going to be helpful-- that there is no safe place? Not only is the tee box rocky with deep holes, but now the car is wobbly and there is no road ahead, only a cliff. Does this mean my past and present may not lead to a better future? The brakes don't work and I can't stop time.

Yet, amidst all this craziness and hopelessness, the dream holds out a glimmer of hope at the end because I can "wake up" --even within the dream, even in a wobbly state-- and look for alternatives. I'll take hope wherever I can find it.

* * *

I take out my papers and ask Mery to hold them for me. She starts laughing.

"What?" I grin playfully at her.

"You have a Table of Contents! You're just unbelievable!"

"So? I need quick cross-referencing. Now, just be quiet, girl, I have to go through my stretches. You can follow along on pp 2-3 if you'd like. You'll be able to both see poetry in motion, and read it at the same time."

My pre-routine stretching is a version of the tennis drill I did in the park with her. But instead of moving, I stay stationary with my feet shoulder width apart my arms extended to my side, shoulder height. My goal is to loosen and relax relevant muscle groups: neck, shoulders, hips, knees) , and "unhinge" them from each other. I look over and see that Mery is watching. I begin by slowly turning my right shoulder to the right, bringing with it my

arms, head, neck, hips, and knees. When my right hand/shoulder has gone as far to the right around my body as it can, my left arm slowly catches up to it. My head, is looking over my right shoulder and my eyes are looking down my right arm. Then I let my eyes continue to the right, now looking as far over my right shoulder as I can, though making sure I keep my left foot planted. I feel this stretch in my right hip, left back, small of back and shoulder.

I then I reverse and turn everything and begin unwind my shoulders, knees, and hips until I are now facing the driving range again. However, my arms are. still facing right, as I let them lag behind. With my left shoulder, I pull everything (arms, head, neck, hips, knees), around to the left.) My shoulder, hips, and knees reach the left side first; I let my arms follow, and let them swing slowly (as if pulled by centrifugal force) until they have gone as far around the left side of my body as possible. This has a direct application to the golf swing, as the hips and shoulders turn, unhinged from the arms, which follow flowingly.

I feel graceful, and look over at Mery. "Two down, six to go."

She claps, "This is the most complicated instruction manual I've ever seen. You look better doing it than it reads! Third rotation: now you rotate everything right but your head. Ah, I see. This is actually practice in keeping your head focused on the ball, while the rest of your body turns right, like the back swing. Very ingenious. Everything has a purpose."

I continue through the movements. When I reach number seven, Mery starts laughing again. "Is this really the way you learn this stuff? Oh my God. Talk about trying to walk and chew gum." She reads out loud...I can tell she's on page 3:

SEVENTH ROTATION: NECK, HIPS, SHOULDER, ARMS RIGHT; FACE, KNEES LEFT. Start the turn with your hips turning right, and your shoulder and arms will follow; keep your knees planted (so they will be going left (keep right foot planted, with weight on instep); and keep your head and neck turned left (head will actually be looking straight ahead).End it with your eyes continuing to go left.

As I finish my eighth rotation, I hear a gravelly voice say, "More oil, sir, you look like the Tin Man. Flow, sir, flow. Be like a tai chi master—feel the energy in your tantien." I turn and see a thin, wizened old man with a clipped white beard pointing to some place below his belly. He seems about half my size, and looks as if he can barely carry himself upright. Although I don't smell any liquor on his breath, his reddened face suggests he's had more than his share. He could be one of the men on Sixth Street that Mery feeds. He proceeds to demonstrate some very strange looking, though admittedly fluid gestures. "'Golf tai chi' I call it—not just for old folks. You're never too young to learn." He saunters over to me, with a surprising spring in his step, and holds out his hand.

"Name's Zeke. Glad to meet you. I'm your caddie."

I introduce myself, and Mery. She pulls me aside.

"You're going to make this little old man carry your clubs? You should be carrying him."

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Fifty-three minutes to tee time. My warm up took five minutes, and there was an unexpected three minutes of introductions. I turn to page four of my handouts. "Sixty minute warm up" and show it to my caddy, as Mery looks on.

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1. Hinge rotation Stretch: Five minutes.
 2. Ten pitching wedge, quarter swings, to nine o' clock. Sixty yards
 3. Ten pitching wedge, $\frac{3}{4}$ swing (to 12 o'clock); 95 yards.
 4. Ten full swings, three wood. (half hour to here).
 5. Five seven irons; five four irons. Work on tempo and keep swing smooth (13 minutes)
 6. Practice 10 high wedge shots, full swing.
 7. 10 to 15 balls with driver (7 minutes) at only 85% power; solid contact by sweeping ball off tee
 8. Chip shots: 14, 20, 28, 35 yards;
 9. Putting Green. Hit 6 balls, no backswing, just follow through, from three feet; then 6 balls, three feet; then 6 balls from forty feet, for lag putting; then 6 balls from six feet in a circle rotation, for up and down hill, breaking putts. (10 minutes)
-

"Looks very precise, sir. I can see you are a well-schooled golfer." He takes my pitching wedge out of the bag, cleans it off for me, then hands it to me so I can begin my sixty yard quarter swings.

I see Mery yawn. She doesn't even cover her mouth. "If this is boring you too much, why don't you go take that walk" I say with some annoyance. I thought she'd be delighted to watch me practice. But I don't need any distractions now. I need calmness and focus. I'm almost pleased when she says,

"I think I'll go for a drive. This is my only time to enjoy Mr. Red, before we give it up. That'll wake me up for sure. I'll be back before your tee time. Bye." She gives me a quick peck on the cheek. As she walks off, I can't help imagining—in slow motion-- the valet helping her get into the car.

* * *
First tee, Pebble Beach. My virgin shot. I'm up next. I check the wind with my caddie. A small right to left breeze. There's a slight dog leg left, and I want to hit my three wood with a slight fade. I check my table of contents, find "fade" and briefly review my notes, p. 8: "Open stance, slight outside-in swing, restrict left hand rotation; feel as if blocking the release; finish with hands high and open." I take a couple practice swings. Fine.

"Very good, sir," Zeke encourages. "Just like that. Three wood is an excellent choice." He didn't say much on the practice range. Just watched me. Occasionally he would offer "Nice shot, there, very graceful," or "Yes, very smooth indeed."

I may grow to like this elfin-like person. Perhaps I could implant him in my brain. Those are good thoughts, a perpetual cheerleader. I like the encouragement, even if I have to pay him to praise me.

A few more minutes pass. Mery hasn't yet returned. I turn to my "Cliff notes sheet, p.1 "Quick Overview" and review it. It almost feels like cheating. I wish I could have taken notes into my classes.

QUICK OVERVIEW
PREROUTINE: wind, distance, club selection. Pick a spot as target.
POSTURE: Square up feet at 90 degree angle; Unless fade or draw: (see p. 12)
Grip club with overlocking hands, slightly strong grip. Club pointing left with wedge, toward zipper with driver. Lean over ball, legs slightly bent at knees, let hands fall down with gravity; right hand slightly behind left; rt arm slightly behind left; right arm with bent elbow in body, right arm crease facing forward, keeping butt out head a

little bit back of the ball, hips a little to left and up; rt shoulder a little to right and down--looking at left quadrant nearest my right foot;
 TAKE BACK. Right shoulder trigger take away, then long, slow back swing to 9, Checkpoint; as if shaking hands with left hand)then wrists male to 11:30;
FULL SHOULDER TURN; keep right knee taut; left arm like fire hose; pause; kiss left shoulder under chin; left shoulder over right foot; keep eye on ball, head and eyes behind ball; at 1/2 turn, club at 11:30;
turn shoulder 90, hips 45; left wrist mainly straight (imagine comb in it, non-bent (keep this through impact); 90 degrees: left arm and clubshaft; shoulders turns 90; and right elbow at 90 (**AN "L"**); make sure shoulders not dipping; ((called shoulder drift toward ball)
 DOWN SWING. Let hands drop down, as **HIPS FORWARD AND TURN** and relaxed **ARMS FOLLOW;** Harvey Penick's: magic move weight shift weight to left foot while bringing right elbow back down to hip (into slot) keep eye on quarter quadrant;); remember target in my mind; butt end of club points to spot slightly inside ball; swing is inside out; left arm separates from rt shoulder; **RIGHT HAND tracking DOWN TARGET LINE;** hold right leg til shoulders turn it; left arm straight left wrist flat at impact; (right hand doesn't turn over until reaches left pocket; swinging through let hips whip through; (see wrists before see club; don't let the clubhead pass the hands before impact; right wrist staying cocked; **EXTEND** left arm straight; head down stay behind ball at impact. club face square at impact. let club head release to right of target;
 FOLLOW THROUGH. Arms extended; swing outward to target arms straight, head behind ball. Shake hands with club about three feet in front of body. Weight on left side; right shoulder moved around. Club over shoulder; hands above left shoulder; swing through fully and completely; left hips and shoulders turn to face ball. right arm straight; **AGGRESSIVE TURN. END IN CARRYING TRAY;** Hold position till ball comes down to check balance.
 PRACTICE SWING Take two practice swings. Waggle club back, locking in right knee. Weight on right foot instep. Two practice swings. One for mechanics; one for the Target. The important word is to feel **DECISIVE.** Have no doubt. Don't swing until you are confident.

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Mery comes rushing up just as I place the tee in the ground. I give her a kiss for good luck. She is exuberant and excited though flighty and unfocused. I'm happy she's here, but annoyed at her timing--I fear she may distract me from the task at hand. I put her out of my mind, and take my stance. I place the inside of my heels just under my shoulders, and take my two practice swings. I try to stay focused on the target, the ball, and my swing thoughts: the bold, indented words in my Cliff Notes: my Cliff Notes of Cliff Notes:

Back Swing: FULL SHOULDER TURN; REACH L;,

Down Swing: HIPS FORWARD, ARMS BEHIND,

RIGHT HAND DOWN TARGET LINE, EXTEND,

Follow through: AGGRESSIVE TURN. END IN CARRYING TRAY

DECISIVE

I can feel my heart throbbing and my mind is whirring. I can visualize my swing thoughts perfectly in my mind. I pull the trigger. Now I just need to repeat each one at the proper time.

The ball is launched, and because of the wind, and perhaps my adrenaline, shoots off straight and low. I hold my pose. Mery claps. "Fade, baby, fade" I encourage it, but it stays straight as an arrow, and lands behind the tree on the left of the fairway. "Damn."

"Fine start, sir. Not a problem. Just makes life a wee bit more interesting."

* * *

Wee bit more interesting. What is he, a pseudo-Scottish, pseudo psychologist? I don't talk to either him or Mery as they walk behind me and engage in conversation as we head toward the ball. It's in a horrible lie, and the tree is blocking the way to the green. "Shit," I yell petulantly, and even stamp my foot for effect.

"A challenge to be solved, sir. Not to worry. All our lives we want to be in the fairway. Just like in golf. Problem is, most of us--myself included--very seldom find ourselves there. Usually we're behind a tree, or in a trap."

Not to worry. Now he sounds like my Aunt Bev. Is he Jewish, too? "So what's the solution?"

"Ah, that's what golf teaches. When we're not where we want to be, when there are obstacles, that's when we learn who we are. That's when this great game teaches us how to live."

"All I want to know is what club? What am I, a hundred and seventy-five yards out? Should I hook a five?"

"Hard shot from the rough sir, even though wind might help you a bit. I'd say, sometimes, it's best to just take your medicine. I'd try to get back on the fairway at your ideal wedge shot away. Put yourself in position for a chance at par. Take double bogey out of the picture."

"Give me my five. No guts, no glory." I look up "hook" on p. 8: "closed stance, inside out swing, bring wrists around." I set my face determinedly. For my stance, I place the outside of my heels just inside and under my shoulders and take two practice swings. At the end of the second practice swing, I hear,

"Remember, it's just a game, sir. We're having fun."

The ball clips the tree, doesn't hook nearly as much as I want, and ends up in the sand trap to the right of the green.

I march to it, grumbling. It's his fault, he put the negative thought of "sand trap" in my mind when he was talking about often we're not in the fairway, but in the sand trap.

My troops follow behind, wise to stay out of my line of sight.

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Sand traps are not my strength. I review the instructions, p. 6 "Oen my stance and club face, pick a target to the left. I look at the calibrations I've made for distance and length of swing.

SAND:

YARDS TO PIN	8	15	20	25	30
LENGTH BACKSWING	9o	CLOCK	11oC	1oC	1oC
BALL PLACED	FRONT	FT	FRONT	MID	BACK
CLUB FACE	OPEN	OPEN	MID	MID	CLOSE
DISTANE HIT BEHIND BALL	4"	3"	2"	2"	1"

I pace off the distance. Twenty-two yards. I need a full swing, the ball toward my back foot, and club midway closed. I don't want to leave this short. I blast out, fifty feet past the pin. The damn wind came up just as I hit. Neither Mery nor Zeke say anything. Zeke hands me the putter.

I pull out my instructions for putting. I walk around the green to view it from all angles. It looks like a fairly slow putt, slight right to left break. I count the steps: 17 paces. I look at the putting sheet calculations, P. 6:
The back swing is the number of paces in inches plus three additional inches

25 paces 80' 4" back of right shoe edge
23 paces
22 paces

70' 21 paces 3 " back of shoe edge
20 paces
19paces 22"
60' 18 <16"dn;18"up>
17paces 20"1.25" back of shoe
16paces 19";1/2" back of shoe edge
50'15paces 18"outer edge shoe
14paces 17"before outer edge
13paces 16"outside middle of shoe
40': 15"inside middle of shoe
11paces 14"between toe and inside middle
10paces 13"start of toe of shoe
30' 12" (inside heel)

Seventeen paces means a seventeen inch backswing, plus an additional three, according to the formula. Twenty inches. That's ¼ inch beyond my right wing tip.

Zeke walks around with me, still not saying anything. Finally, he asks, "Do you want any advice here, sir?"

"What" I snort. I know exactly how to hit it: one and one-quarter inch backswing behind my shoe (twenty inches). I don't really need his help.

"Well, sir, the greens are deceptively fast, and the ball heading toward the ocean makes it even faster. Also, it won't break as much as you think. Would you like me to point to a target."

"No. I'm fine. Thanks. I can take it from hereI see my target clearly. I want to drain this baby. Show Zeke that doing things "My Way" I still can get a par. I'm a scrambler and fighter, not a quitter.

I take a couple of practice strokes to get the line. I take a smooth backswing, pause and hit the center of the ball in the center of the putter. I follow through twice as far as my backswing, letting the club come way out—34 inches. I know from the feel of the strike that the ball is rolling perfectly end over end.

I keep my head down, watching the spot where the ball once was, waiting for sounds of oohs and aahs from Mery and Zeke. Silence. I continue to wait for their applause. Nothing. Finally, after a few more seconds, I look up to see the ball has gone almost twenty feet past the flag, and rolled off the green onto the fringe.

As I walk to the ball, Zeke starts to say something, but I hold up my hand. I don't want to hear "I told you so." I go through my routine again. Now I know the putt is uphill and away from the ocean. I can take an aggressive swing at it. See, I can learn on my own. I tell Zeke to take the flag out. I know that's not usually done on a putt of this length off the green, but I want to show my confidence.

I take my back swing, keep my head down, but just as I am about to follow through, I notice a fear thought. What if I hit it too hard, and I have another down hill putt coming back? I strike the ball, follow through, keep my head down, and again wait for the oohs and ahhs, or perhaps even the sound of the ball dropping into the cup. Silence again. I look up, the ball is eight feet short.

I turn in disgust to Zeke and say, what were you going to say"

"Goldilocks, sir."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I look at him angrily, and then at Mery, who is trying to suppress a giggle.

"Goldilocks. First too hot, then too cold. We often end up playing the golf shot we just hit. You, sir, want to be seen as powerful and aggressive. You would hate to be seen as unmanly--which of course you're not, sir. But am I right?"

I nod but don't say anything.

"So, your first putt was most likely going to be too hot, too fast. No real man would want anyone to think we were a sissy girl--to be called Alice, or Lacy Lucy, or Jennifer--now would we?" He smiles at his own warped sense of humor.

"But then you worry, am I too aggressive? So, your next putt is based on the last putt, and more often than not is 'too cold.' Just like Goldilocks. Now, sir, forget both of those, and let's just trust your swing." He points to a spot on the green next to the hole. "Here. Right edge target. Smooth, flowing swing. You will get this one just right."

Kerplunk. Right in the bottom of the cup. I'm happy to have sunk the putt, but grumpy that he is right. And grumpy that I just started off my round with a double bogey.

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The next five holes are a dizzying whirl of emotions, frustration, curses, and some joy. Three pars, two bogeys, and by the time I reach the tee at number 7, I am four over. After the double bogey at one, I decide I might as well see what Zeke has to offer. I can't do any worse. Is the improvement in my score these last holes from his advice, or my settling down? I don't know whether it's fair to give Zeke any credit. But now I'm back on track, closer to my 9.8 index. If I can par in on the front, I'll be under my index, and I can even afford one more bogey on the front. Not bad given the start.

Now, at the height of the seventh hole, looking out over the ocean and the beauty of the seals playing on the rocks, I see why Pebble Beach is considered such a mecca. I smile at Mery who is happily watching the seals, too. She comes up next to me and gives me a hug. This really is beautiful. Thanks for inviting me." I hug her back, partly for the enjoyment, partly for my golf game. Zeke told me on the second hole that "Golf is like making love to a beautiful woman, sir. Like the one you're with here." I ask him to give me an example. If I were at the bar with Richard, we'd probably say something like "getting your balls into the hole." Actually, that's not bad, I'll have to share that with the guys.

Instead he says, "Sir, look how you hold the club. It's a bit tight and forced. You lose your feel. Try gripping the club lightly, like picking up a spotted owl egg; or gently holding your beauty's hand to your lips, soft, caressing."

"That's all very lovely rhetoric, Zeke, but it's just fluff. That's what someone says who doesn't really know the mechanics of golf."

"As you say, sir. However, sir, if you want more precision, I would suggest you focus softly in your set up on the left thumb, and right second

finger on the club, feeling they're touching a wet towel, and you want to leave just a wee bit of an impression, but not so tightly that water drips. Then , at the top of the back swing, allow a pause, like an ahh after a gentle caress, and then feel pressure on the first three fingers of your left hand; while keeping your right hand pressure less than your left. However, with your right hand, the pressure is still more on the first three fingers, and very little in the right thumb and forefinger. Yet, focusing on the right, sir, the ring finger and middle finger are your anchor points."

I look at him with awe and confusion. There is no way I can follow everything he just said, but I guess he knows more than I thought. I tell him that.

"Yes, sir, I know a lot. But I also know that, as I said, golf is like making love: KISS, keep it simple, sir. You, sir, have a fine game. We don't need to take away any of that valuable knowledge you've acquired. But I might be able to help you just loosen up a wee bit, and you will not only play better, you will have more fun, too. Would you like to give it a try?"

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What's with this wee this, wee that. He sounds like a little boy saying a naughty body part; or when mom would pull my toes, and say "this little piggy went wee wee wee all the way home." I ask him, "Are you Scottish?"

"No, sir, but I lived there a few years caddying. Had a chance to play all the great courses, even St. Andrew. You must go once before you die."

"Oh, I want to go there" Mery pipes up. "Why'd you ever leave?"

"I never stay in one place too long, ma'am. I move about, more like an Irish leprechaun. You know, of course, the lore--leprechauns reveal where the treasure is hiding, if you can catch 'em." He smiles mischievously with his crooked, yellow-stained teeth and looks at Mery and me--longer at her-- then does a little jig. "That's why I have to be fast on my feet. I may be old, sir, but there's but still lots of spring in these steps." I wonder if this is all part of his strategy to loosen me up, or to flirt with Mery.

Mery laughs gleefully, does a little hop scotch up and down on her feet for a few seconds. It's cute, and clearly his strategy is working with her, but it is a misstep, and has just the opposite effect on me. I start to feel uptight, and am reminded of and Mery dancing with someone else, like at the Fillmore.

I try to cut the merriment short by asking Zeke sternly and preemptively, as if speaking to an underling, or a witness, "What's the wind direction and speed?"

Mery looks annoyed-- at my unwillingness to join them? At the tone of my question? Zeke just smiles at me. "You're a challenge, sir. But don't worry, before the day's over, you'll know both the wind speed, and your swing will be as smooth, soft, and fluid as the wind."

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And work on me is exactly what he's been doing these past five holes. On the second hole, before my tee shot, Zeke asks me what goes through my mind during the swing. I tell him my five step summary of my Cliff Notes summary, and that I have five parsimonious words or phrases I say to myself during the routine and swing.

"Ah, you are an analytical, auditory one, aren't you sir? Love the words and thoughts, do you? All that impressive self-talk." I await the "however" and it follows instantly, "If I may suggest a couple of slight additions? We'll take nothing away, but I'd like to see us add a little visual imaging—a movie in your mind--, and a little feel in the body. Of course, they are all connected, right sir. How about it?" I nod and he continues.

"All righty then, when you are behind the ball in your set up, after you've picked your target, visualize the shot you want to hit. That way we add visual images to all your words."

I agree to try. "OK. After you've stood behind the ball and picked your target, but before you approach the ball for your set up, I'd like you to image the ball flying from the tee to the target. See its flight and trajectory, where

it lands, and how far it rolls. Eyes open or closed, whichever you prefer." I try it. It's not all that hard. "Now, take your regular practice swings, but add one more practice swing with your eyes closed, and feel the flow in your body. Nice word, that, sir. Flow. Get the body and the mind all in harmony. Also, get the body and mind in harmony with the target."

At the time, I feel skeptical. What he is asking me to do is so simple. But the result turns out to be fantastic. One of the best drives I've ever hit.

From then on, I'm putty in his hands. (At least until that stupid jig. That's going overboard).

Little tips kept springing from his lips. "When you feel at one with the target, that's the time to pull the trigger." "Think RELAX as you go into the back swing." Each time, depending on the shot, he seems to know exactly the right thing to say to me.

"**Allow**" he emphasizes the word, "the momentum of the turn and folding of the right arm to set the club at the top. **Feel** your arms like a hot air balloon rising on the back swing. That's it, perfect. Now, we want a wee pause at the top of the back swing. Like foreplay. You don't have to rush forward; trust the club will find its way home!... Yes, very good, that's it making sure you finish the back swing before beginning the down swing. Yes, good, maybe giving a little longer pause at the top, perhaps a sigh, ahhhhhhh once you reach the top." He looks almost lustily at Mery "That's it. Ahhhhhhhh. It's almost like a transcendent moment. You are defying gravity, weightless. Ahhhhh."

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I practice what he says. I wonder if he's teaching me how to make love to Mery this evening after the Seder, as well as how to hit a golf shot. "Perfect, yes, exactly, notice your soft hands at the pause; and after the pause, when your hips turn and thrust forward, still keep your hands soft, gravity allowing them to fall--as you state in your notes sir, from Harvey Pinnick's Little Red Book, a magic moment.

"Now, sir, what do we think about this 7th hole? A beaut, isn't she."

"How much drop is there?"

"About a 100 foot fall to the tee, so three club lengths. Then let's add back half a club for the wind coming from the ocean."

I pullout my yardage sheet. The hole is listed as 140. Subtract 30 for the fall, makes 110; add back five for the wind, so 115 to the center. I look at my yardage sheet from 80 to 140, to see what club feels most comfortable. Each yardage has been calibrated based on several practice shots at different back swings, from a quarter swing at 9 o clock angle, to three quarter at 12:00.

8 full swing	142
9 full swing	133
pw full swing	126
3wood, 9o'clock	120
SW full	105
sw 12o'clock	100
5i 9twist:	100
6i 9chip	100
4 8o'clock	100
SW 10 o clock	90
8 (9 swing	90
4 chip 9:30	90
5i(9 chip:	90 22air/68run
3wOOD 8o'clock	94
6i 9 twist	90
9 9 swing	80
7 (8chip	80(20air+60run)

Damn. I'm between clubs. There is no 115 yard shot that I've practiced enough to have recorded. Laziness. Stop, this is just negative thinking. Why punish myself now when there's nothing I can do about it?

My fault. But not completely my fault. There's a huge gap between by pitching wedge and nine iron. Why can't another Sarazen come alone and invent a new club. Though I guess to keep to the limit of 14 clubs, there will always be some awkward space for which there is not a club.

I could try to crush my sand wedge; I could use my pitching wedge with a modified swing. But what number on the clock? 11:00 o'clock? 11:30? 12 o clock? I could try a low liner 4,5,6, or 7, but again I'd have to calibrate my-take away because I haven't practiced them specifically. It seems no matter how

precise I am—how many golfers at my level have even this detailed a shot data sheet?—there are always areas I haven't covered. Ostensibly, I'm mumbling this to myself, but I say it loud enough for Zeke and Mery to hear it. Mery looks fearful, even intimidated by my annoyance. Zeke seems to take delight.

"Can't control it all, can we, sir? A great lesson. Now, what do we do when we aren't sure?"

"I hate sight-reading music." Why do I say that? He doesn't even know I play music. It's totally irrelevant. I'm getting flustered. "I hate not being sure."

"I understand, sir. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, I haven't yet seen a detailed map covering all unknowns in life. Have you?" He looks at Mery. She smiles gleefully. I shake my head grumpily.

"So, let's have fun with the unknown, sir. All we can do is the best we can. Let's just make sure we don't make it worse by being unsettled and fearful. Sound fair enough? Now, where's your target?"

"The pin is tucked front left. Trap on the left and right. I'd rather be a bit long, maybe front right center, about 110, stay away from the trap on the left, don't want to short-side myself."

"Excellent thinking, sir. See, although we don't have all the information, we do have some. And you're using it well. So, which club and swing do you trust the most? It's really a question of trust, isn't it sir? Trust your body, it knows what to do now, doesn't it sir? You've practiced thousands and thousands of swings. I can tell, because you have a lovely swing. Visualize all the good short 100-120 yard shots you've hit. Money in the bank, sir."

I look over at Mery. She seems bored and lost in reverie at the same time. She certainly isn't focusing on me. "Mery, ah, hem, harumph" I say to get her attention. She is startled out of her dream-like state. "This is a tough shot. I'd like your support, please."

She's not intimidated by my tone this time. Instead she looks me straight in the eye. "But it doesn't look that hard. It's such a wee short shot." She

smiles at Zeke. I ignore her comment and turn back to Zeke, talking man to man:

"I know the pros might hit a low shot into the wind, maybe a 9:30 7 iron or a 10:30 8 iron. But I don't practice those very much. I like my pitching wedge a lot. How about an 11:30 pitching wedge?"

"Perfect choice for you, sir. Remember, like with a woman, you want to feel her presence. The only way to hit a good shot--no matter what the club-- is to feel the clubhead. Soft hands let you do that."

I turn and look at Mery. The palms of her hands are pressed together, her eyes closed, as if she is in prayer. Better. That's the support I want. She looks like a heavenly angle. Or is she being mocking?

Never mind. I've made a choice, and I commit decisively to it.

I stand behind the ball, pick my target, and visualize my shot, a soft high draw. I take my first practice swing, thinking relax, flow, and feel the clubhead as I swing through. I remember his advice on swinging through: "Release, as if you're tossing bag of golf balls; or even throwing the club out to the right of the target." I look up at Zeke for approval and reassurance. He is smiling. "You've got it sir. Now, just like after the pause you have to clear your hips out of the way to make room for your swing, let your mind go blank except for you, the ball, and the target. You are all one. Clear everything else out of the way to make room for the shot. We have to learn to get out of our own way!"

I take my second practice swing. I look at the target. Look back at the ball. Me, the ball, and the target. As one.

At that moment, I pull the trigger.

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Sometimes you just know things are, to quote Zeke, "in flow." As soon as I pull the trigger, I can feel my left shoulder effortlessly turn and my hands rise in a relaxing, slow easy back swing, pulled to the top by a hot air balloon, right to 11:30. Even as that happens, my eyes are focused perfectly on

the left quadrant of the ball, and my mind's eye sees the target ten feet to the right and behind the pin. I feel my right instep against the ground, as I come to a lovely, weightless gravity-defying pause at the top. My weight naturally shifts to my left foot, my hips begin their turn, while my hands remain suspended, then as if pulled through by a wooshing, wind-like sound, my arms come flying forward swinging freely at the behest of my turning hips.

I feel the weight of the clubhead in my hands, which are softly holding the club, yet at impact, my left arm is strong and steady, like a fire-hose, and my right wrist is flowing right down the target line. My head is still behind the ball as my arms and club head go right, like I'm throwing a bag of balls, and my hips left. Then they all join together in a graceful follow-through, which I hold as I watch the dazzlingly white ball soar upward against the majestic blue cloudless sky.

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"Great line, sir. Be the right club."

For a moment, I wonder how good I would look in that pose to someone standing behind me with a camera, seeing me in Mom's good-luck blue argyle sweater, on my right toe, my back curved in a C, the back drop of the Pacific, the hole before and below me, the ball suspended in flight.

The ball continues to soar, almost gravity-defying, then changes its arc and starts to descend and at the same time begins a slight draw.

It lands within inches of my target. I could not have set it down closer to where I was aiming. It then stops, and rolls back three feet closer to the pin.

Inside, I give my Tarzan call. After all, this is a golf course and there is etiquette. But I can't refrain from pounding my chest a couple of times and whooping "YES!" Mery claps, throws her arms around me and gives me a big hug. Zeke pats me on the shoulder. Then, corny as it would have seemed five minutes earlier, I say what the heck, and on the seventh tee, with the Pacific

Ocean spread before us, the three of us join hands for a few seconds and, together, do a very playful, quick circular jig.

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It's good for me to remind myself that there are moments when everything does come together. For Johannes, it's from the literal heights of the seventh hole of a golf course, after a great shot. For me, it was at Sinai. Sometimes I feel that what happened at Sinai really didn't happen. It was just a trick of my mind. But, even though I'm embarrassed that I ever once played such an elitist, boring game, in an ironic way, Johannes' golf experience helps me believe that my experience at Sinai was true. Johannes just didn't imagine that his body and mind and swing were in flow. He actually hit a beautiful golf shot. Behavioral proof of an internal harmonious body-mind connection as my psychology teachers would say.

What to do when I can't re-create and re-feel what I once experienced?

Zeke seems to have advice that applies to both Johannes and me when I feel under pressure. In times of pressure, keep to a routine. There is nothing wrong with my working toward creating a daily structure for myself, one that I can fall back on when I'm stressed. My journal writing. Reading. A few daily blessings.

The back swing shows me that seemingly going away from the target--to "swing" back through my past--can actually help build momentum as a way to better go forward toward the target. And even though there is tension in going through the past, that may be ok. A goal in the backswing is to let yourself coil and actually become tightly wound yet at the same time stay balanced. Tension is part of, and can be seen as positive --if I can learn to hold it with balance. The lesson: I can learn to be, feel, hold, and contain two different emotions at the same time.

At the top of the back swing, a pause is necessary. I need to trust that what seems like a hiatus in my life now, is a critical phase, a regrouping, and, actually a means to help me move forward more effectively.

On the down swing---reengaging with life?-- I need to remember Zeke's admonition to "get your body out of the way"; even "get your 'self' out of the way and let the shot happen." I take this advice literally. I am seeking desperately to get my body out of the way, for I know it is a major impediment to my search for the spirit. What would getting my "self" out of the way mean now? Less effort? Less self-destructive internal dialogue, more trust and allowing? Less "my will"; more "Thy will." I guess it could be like hearing the whooshing wind-like sound as Johannes allows his arms to be pulled forward. At some point, I need to feel God's grace, God's wind and breath--ruach--drawing me forward and upward. I can't seem to do this all by myself.

After impact, when my hips go left, and my arms go right, it can feel like there is fragmentation and disintegration. The pieces and parts are flying off in different directions. That's the way I feel now. What I have to remember is that it can all come back together, as part of a whole. As Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet say, "Simple, complex, simple." I wish I could trust that.

On the putting green, Zeke reminded Johannes, "it's hard to putt through your own shadow." It seems it's hard for me to do anything through my own shadow, but at least I'm beginning to recognize my shadow, and hopefully learn from it.

All apt lessons. A "wee" bit more trust. Practice letting go of my will and getting out of the way. A "wee" bit more patience. A "wee" bit more faith that even as I go through the darkness of my shadow, and feel my "self" flying in different directions, I'm really heading toward Mecca, toward the Promised land, toward wholeness and oneness.

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"See it, feel it, trust it, hit it." Zeke smiles.

"Easy for you to say." I actually smile back at him, though I'm feeling really nervous inside. Seven feet is not a gimme, and this could be my first birdie at Pebble Beach. I could drop to three over, well below my index. "This

is a crucial shot. If I miss, it's like hitting it into the ocean, losing a whole shot."

"Perhaps not the wisest self-talk, sir. Do you hear the gulls? Lovely birds, those. Birds flying all around. One shot at a time. All are important. All are the same. You can do this."

He's certainly given me enough advice. We've looked at the grain--from the way the grass is growing, the color of the grass, the location of the sun He's helped me with the line. "Just imagine railroad tracks from the ball to the whole. All you have to do is start it down the tracks, and listen for the kerplunk as the ball hits the bottom of the cup.

"I've been noticing, sir, your putting is becoming looser, freer and more confident with every hole."

I count off the two plus paces from the ball to the hole, and calculate a five inch backswing, ten inch follow through would be perfect. I take a couple of practiced swings.

I see the line; I feel it in my body. I trust. I hit it.

Now there is nothing to do but wait, and accept. I watch the spot where the ball left. I breathe. I hear the sea gulls.

I hear kerplunk. Birdie.

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I feel like a little boy giddy with excitement. I give Mery a big hug and swing her around. Then, surprisingly, I pick up Zeke and give him a big hug and swing. He reminds me a bit of Mac on Sixth Street. I'm surprised I hadn't noticed that before.

I walk toward the eighth whole, arm and arm with Mery, while Zeke lags behind us, carrying my bag. A birdie. Now I'm at three over. If I could par the next two holes, I'll have a 39 on the front! If I can do the same on the back, I'll shoot a 78. Superb for my first time at Pebble.

As I stand on the tee at number 8, I start to feel nervous. It's a blind tee shot up over a hill. I can't see my target. "FUAB" I say to Zeke.

"FUAB?" Mery asks.

"Fuck up after birdie," Zeke laughs. Then, turning to me, "Nothing wrong with a bit of fear, sir. Keeps you from getting overconfident. But now let's let the fear fly away and bring back our focus. The wind's behind us, always a good sign." He points to a target at the top left center of the hill. "Your fade is working well. I'd say a three wood. There's a big drop off up ahead. Don't want to hit it too far! Let it sail, nice and easy."

A big drop off. Truer words were never said.

I hit a low liner. Not intentionally, but it does cross the target Zeke picked out for me. "Great shot sir. Wise to keep it low like that, so the wind won't effect it too much. Should be in good shape." I smile, acting as if that was my plan all along.

Why? Who are you trying to impress? Zeke? Mery? Yourself--with self-deception?

As we walk over the top of the hill, I can't see my ball. I fear I've hit it too hard, and it's gone off the ledge. As we get closer, however, we see that I've landed about ten feet from the precipice. A little bit of luck. Phew. It's a lot steeper than I imagined

"Sir, my intention is not to frighten you, but to lay out your options. This second shot on the eighth hole is considered by some to be one of the hardest in golf. It's over a cliff-like ravine. And, as you can see, there is just a small green on the other side as a target. The ocean is to the right, and it's a precipitous carry." I survey the scene, my arm still around Mery. "There is a bail out to the left." Zeke points. "What is your pleasure?" This evening Mery will be my pleasure. I do feel a tension in my stomach. But it seems I'm doing well even though I didn't have an orgasm this morning.

"My pleasure, now?" I give Mery a hug. "No guts, no glory. Let's go for it. What abyss, Kierkegaard? Would you say an easy 4, slight fade?"

"Perfect choice, sir. I don't see anything either, except a lovely green target beckoning."

Again, I follow all Zeke's shot advice, and, coupled with my own, hit an almost flawless shot after a nearly perfect swing. The ball sails high over the precipice, and fades softly, landing on the back fringe of the green.

Mery and I walk around the steep drop-off arm and arm. We even skip a few steps together. It's wonderful having a caddie to carry my bag, so my arms are free to hug her. I break out into a song that Grandpa Dave taught me when we'd watch the redbirds at his bird feeder.

Mr. Bluebird's on my shoulder. It's truth, its actual,
everything is satisfactual.
Zippety do da, zippety day, my oh my what a wonderful day.
Plenty of sunshine, heading my way.
Zippety de do da, zippeety day.

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As we get closer to the green, I can see the green is severely sloped, and I realize I have a huge putt. I turn to Zeke. "I guess my 2nd shot wasn't as good as I had thought. Why was I such a chicken. It's a right front pin location, and I hit it left back."

"Greed, sir." he laughs. "You forget the fear on the other side of the valley. You took the ocean and the precipice out of play. Fear was a good teacher and served you well. You were bold to go for the green, and wise to not be reckless and shoot for the pin. You were already taking enough risk, sir. Now, in hindsight, don't ruin a good shot by getting greedy!"

I guess he's right, but this is not going to be an easy putt to get down in two. I'm afraid I'll three putt it. I count the paces. It's nearly twenty-four paces, near the outer limit on my cheat sheet, four inches behind my shoe on the backswing, one I seldom practice.

Zeke stands next to and points out a spot about fifteen feet left of the pin, and forty-five feet from me. "That is your target. Hit the ball to stop here."

"All I want is a two-putt lag. I'm not greedy here. It seems like you're going to leave me with a long second putt. What about the ocean, and the grain;

won't that pull the ball left? And aren't you relying on the green to be pretty fast, to carry the ball the last 25 feet?"

"Great questions, sir. Yes the ocean and grain will have some effect, but not as much as you think given how severely sloped the green is. And it's more downhill than you realize. Trust me, sir."

Why not? So far it's been working pretty well, though that sure isn't the target I would pick. Then I remember the first hole, where I followed my own advice...with disastrous consequences. I guess it's good to know when to trust yourself, and when not. I go through my pre-shot routine. I look at his target, ignoring the pin, then say to myself, "See it, feel it, trust it, hit it."

I keep my head down a second or two, but feel compelled to look up rather than wait for any response from Zeke and Mery. The ball takes off toward Zeke's target, straight toward the ocean, just where he has asked me to hit it. At forty-five feet, it crosses within an inch of the target he pointed out. Well, I've done my part. But it seems the ball is still going toward the ocean, and not turning toward the pin. Further, it's beginning to slow down. I have an image of a twenty-five foot second putt, or worse.

I look over at Zeke and start to share my exasperation, but he shushes me before I can speak, with a finger to his lips. Then the ball begins to curve toward the pin, and even picks up speed. I take a few steps forward, following it. About ten feet from the pin, it's right on line, and seems like it has plenty of speed. One foot. Six inches. Kerplunk!

I leap into the air. A birdie on number eight. I did it!!

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I remember another poem mom gave me, along with Kipling. I don't remember the author, some English fellow who lost a leg. "I am master of my fate, captain of my soul." Johannes' "I did it" reminds me of that poem. He feels master of his fate. Yes he did putt the putt. But perhaps he had a "wee" bit of help from Zeke, from the money our folks put into golf lessons, from the privileged upbringing we had on our "castle" and maybe even from the "golf

gods." "My will" is such a seductive siren call.

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When bowling with Dad, he would tell me that three strikes in a row is called a turkey. I wonder, while walking toward the ninth hole, why not three birdies in a row? I'm now two over par, and if I just par the ninth, I'll have a 38 on the front. Maybe I should become a professional golfer. I'm amazing.

Mery interrupts my thoughts, "The beach looks so beautiful. I'd like to go down there and take a walk. Maybe even go back to the cottage, get a canvas, my charcoals and paints--and do some sketching. You're in great hands." She points to Zeke.

The beach and ocean do look beautiful--from a distance. This is as close as I want to get. How do I feel about her leaving? Things seem good between us, so I don't want to cause friction. On the other hand, I'm a little annoyed. I'm having fun with her watching me. Maybe she's good luck, and it'll jinx me if she leaves. "How about if you stay one more hole, finish the front side."

"Sure." She gives me a warmer hug than I expected. Tonight is going to be fun.

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"The wind's from the right, sir, and as you can tell, it's picking up. There's a tendency to try to power through the wind. But the best strategy is still to 'swing easy to hit it far.' Don't try to beat the wind!" Zeke grins and shows his yellow-stained crooked teeth. I guess that's a fair price I have to pay--looking at him--in exchange for his advice. But it's getting tiring. I'm really doing fine on my own.

The fairway slopes right to left towards the ocean. I ask him how far the sand trap is on the far left. "245 yards, sir."

"I thought I'd aim for the right side of the left bunker, and let my fade and the fairway slope counter balance with the wind, landing me in the center right. That would give me a clear shot at the pin, center left." I look over at

Zeke, giving him my dazzling smile, waiting for his approval at how well I've sized up the situation. I'm really my own best caddie, minus carrying the bag.

"I couldn't have thought it through any better, sir. Have at it."

I go through my pre-shot routine, perhaps a bit faster than normal, but I am feeling supremely confident. The same decisive feelings remains with me as I swing.

I look up to see how wonderful a shot it is.

What I see is a low line drive, barely five yards off the ground. "Damn." I remember a golf instructor once telling me, "If you don't keep your head down long enough after your shot, but feel the need to look up to see where the ball went, you won't want to see where it went." "Damn damn damn." My ball scoots along the fairway, maybe 200 yards. Damn. Why did I look up?" I continue to curse. Now what's Mr. Know-it-all going to say to me? And damn Mery for distracting me with her self-centered need to leave during the most special round of my life. Neither of them say anything as we walk to the ball. Both of them walk silently behind me. Wisely.

When we reach the ball, I turn to Zeke and demand, "Give me my three wood. I'm going to crush this baby."

Zeke looks at me, hands folded, and doesn't move. "Sir, you are two hundred fifty-five yards from the pin. How far can you hit your three wood."

"Two hundred, 210 if I really clobber it. So?"

"After you hit a shot, is there anything you can do to control that shot."

"No." Although if I were in a lighter mood, I might tell him that sometimes it feels like I can talk to the ball in flight--just as he did on the seventh: "be the right club; go, go; turn right." But I say nothing more.

"That's right, sir, you just have to accept. After you've hit a shot, it's gone. You've learned from what you did wrong, a wee bit too excited, so you looked up. Now, let's leave that behind us and move on. It doesn't do any good to take your anger and frustration out on this shot, sir. Sometimes you just

have to take your medicine. Rather than hit a three wood, which at best will leave you an awkward forty-five or fifty five yards away, why not lay up to a comfortable yardage, say the magical 110 you just hit so well at the seventh hole. Why not a smooth seven?"

I agree, even though I want to crush something. I hit a smooth seven. I don't look up. Zeke and Mery ooh and ahh. But so what? I'm going to be lying two and still 110 ten yards from the pin.

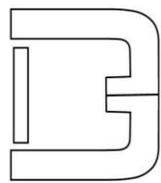
For my third shot, I pull out my pitching wedge. I remember the experience of hitting it perfectly and fluidly two holes ago. I make the same swing. I don't look up, and once again, I hear Mery and Zeke's shouts of encouragement to the ball. They seem more enthusiastic than warranted. I finally let myself look up, and see the ball landing on the green, fifteen feet in front of the pin. The ball takes a nice leap forward, and starts rolling closer. Five feet. Three feet. I start running toward the pin. Two feet. I run faster. One foot. Could this be my third birdie in a row. Six inches. Two inches.

The ball stops. "Damn" I yell back and Zeke and Mery. "The wind must have died at the last minute. I guess you can't control everything." I break into a smile.

When I reach the ball, I tap it in for a par. 38 on the front at Pebble Beach.

What an easy game.

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e back at the cottage by 7 on the button, for that's when our Seder will begin." I look at my watch. 1:30. "That gives you six and a half hours of freedom."

She gives Zeke a hug, a little longer and more flirtatious than necessary. Then she gives me a hug and kiss, saying, "I can't wait to see what the chef is preparing." As she starts to walk away toward the beach, she turns with a smile and a wave and adds, "I feel Passover is already working its magic. Thanks for the independence."

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And then there were two.

As Zeke and I walk toward the tenth tee, I see Mery starting to scramble down toward the ocean. She could have walked the tenth hole with us, but I don't need her with me, especially if she doesn't want to be here. What was with the long hug with Zeke? And that last comment? Was she being truly thankful, or sarcastic? I try to put these thoughts out of my mind. I have my own priorities--the back nine. I can't be worrying about her now. Let the little lady have her fun painting. We'll talk about her departure, if we still need to, tonight.

"Sometimes it does feel like an easy game, doesn't it, sir? You know, on a day like today, when we don't have a playing competitor, there are only two opponents. One is the course itself and other external conditions, like the weather. The other, more formidable opponent is, certainly, ourselves. You're handling both very well, sir." I nod with a determined smile, and keep walking.

"Do you want to stop for a snack sir? Or maybe something to drink. There's no one behind us. We have time if you like." I know etiquette is that I

should buy him something, but I'm not hungry, and I don't want to lose my momentum. "No, maybe later. I'm on a roll." Zeke says nothing, but continues walking with my bag. Then he sets it down for a moment, and says, "Go ahead, sir, I'll catch up with you." I continue, but after a dozen yards turn around. He is facing away from me, his head high, as if looking at the heavens. I can see the crook of his left elbow, as his left hand disappears behind some wispy gray hairs on the back of his head. I bet he's drinking something.

I turn back and march on. It's amazing that I got a tee time, not having to share my space with anyone, and no one in front or behind us. Maybe I did buy the course, I chuckle to myself. Or maybe no one else can afford to play it except an unemployed student--using Grandpa's money. In any case, I enjoy not being pressured. That's one of the things I don't like about golf. You have to make a reservation, and you're slotted in between all these other people. That makes me feel like a cog in a machine, that somehow I'm not unique.

When we reach the tenth tee, I put these thoughts out of my mind, pick my target, then visualize my shot. I step up to the tenth tee. Confident, but not overconfident. I take my practice swings, and when I hit the ball, I keep my head down. "Beautiful drive, sir. Perfect."

I look up and see the ball sailing straight down the middle of the fairway. An easy game, indeed. I look toward the beach. I think I see Mery. She is just, as Zeke might say, "A wee little thing running along the beach."

I head to my ball, ready to conquer the back nine.

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When I used to ride my bike, and the wind was against me, I was acutely aware how hard it was to peddle and the obstacles I faced. When I'd return, and the wind was at my back, I truly didn't feel the wind, but only felt how strong and powerful I was. When life is going smoothly, we feel it is an "easy game." Yet we really don't learn anything during those times. And how quickly we forget and bury all the trauma and swings of emotions leading up to those "easy"

moments--fear, anticipation, trepidation, self-doubt, anger and rage. How interesting that we are willing to endure all that suffering for those rare moments of elation. Johannes will learn, as I am, that easy does not last, the stretches of difficulty return, are longer, and seem like they will never ever leave. Zeke was definitely right--it's a constant battle with ourself.

So many lessons that day, and all of them went in Johannes' one good ear, and out the other. It's like a therapy session for me to be able to read and re-learn from Zeke. I go back over to summarize:

*"Even when the wind is blowing against you, you still want to keep an easy swing. You just can't overpower it." I take a breath. Do sometimes feel I'm facing Job-like winds in my face. All I can do is take one step at a time.

*Choose your club wisely, then hit confidently.' No second guessing. A good one for me. I seem to have so much trouble deciding, and then constantly doubting if I'm doing the right thing.

*"Acceptance. Once you hit the ball, there is nothing you can do but accept; you did the best you could." Even when the shot is not very good, like the drive on the ninth hole, going patiently and slowly on the next shot works better than great grand gestures born out of frustration. I'm going to make mistakes. Learning from them is essential. Beating myself up for them is foolish. Beating something else up--even a ball--is also foolish.

"We are where we are." "We play the ball as it lies." That's not just a lesson of honesty, it's a lesson of reality. That's where we begin the next shot. There's nothing we can do about the last shot.

*Creative coping." I remember Zeke saying on the first hole that we may want to always be in the fairway, but that's often not where we end up. That's when we need resourcefulness--when we're in the sand traps of life; or even out of bounds. "We may not always be where we want, but we can learn to trust we can get out of those situations. Bank it in the memory sir, for golf, and life."

*Watch what I say to myself." On the seventh hole, when I said, "If I miss this putt, it's like hitting the ball into the ocean, losing a whole shot," Zeke interjected, "Perhaps not the wisest self-talk, sir. Do you hear the gulls? Lovely birds, those. Birds flying all around. One shot at a time. All are important. All are the same. You can do this." That was brilliant. He showed me what I could tell myself to feel more confident. And interestingly, even though I didn't realize it at the time, he was working with my subconscious, talking about the gulls, both to relax me, and to imprint the idea of "birdie."

*"Have fun."

That may be simultaneously the wisest and most annoying, cloying remark Zeke made all day. Not only for Johannes, but for me. This is supposed to be fun? Life? I pick up my flute, and play the song Johannes played the night before to Mery. "Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free, tis a gift to come around where you ought to be And when you are in the place just right, you will be in the valley of love and delight." I must admit there is something a "wee" bit joyful and calming, even if saccharine, in the lilting melody.

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"Something smells delicious. Chicken soup?" Mery rushes into the cottage holding a canvas under her arm, looking flushed. It's 7:15. Not only is she late, but she's unapologetic. I've been cooking and cleaning like Cinderella for the last several hours. Well, not really, but it feels like it. I've been coordinating and organizing the last hour. But I still feel frustrated and annoyed.

Interesting, isn't it, Johannes, the stories we tell ourselves to justify our emotional feelings. Good catch, though it didn't really change your emotions, did it?

Thank God for the caterer. They provided everything-- the table cloth the utensils, even the silver chalice. And they did all the cooking. I told them what I wanted, and they even made the haroset without nuts. They weren't as

elegant as the Fairmont caterers, but they came through in a pinch. And I got to finish my golf game without worrying about having to prepare dinner.

"It's matzah ball soup. Where have you been?"

"Mmmm, I'm hungry. On the beach, painting. I wanted to give you a gift for this evening. Sorry I'm late, but there were a few additional touches I wanted to make. It's still not quite finished. Want to see it?"

I don't want the food to get cold, and I want her to be more appreciative of how creatively I've organized the Passover spread. I start to admonish her, but she looks at me so expectantly, like a little panting dog wanting to please. I find myself softening. It's hard to stay angry at her when she's like this. Give me a gold star, Ovid. "Yes, I'd love to see it."

"Umm, yummm, I'm hungry." She walks to the far side of the room, around the table cloth and the Passover setting. "Wow, that's interesting. On the floor, yet."

"Passover is about freedom from bondage. I realized how furniture is always telling you where to sit. I thought the floor would give us more freedom."

"An interesting anthropomorphism. You love your control, don't you?" She laughs. "You did a lot of work. Look at all the different bowls. Oh my, and you have have each one numbered!" She laughs again, and sets the picture on the couch. I've got a present I want to get for you Oh Mr. Sweet spontaneous... a book of poetry by ee cummings."

"What made you think of him?"

"Oh, I don't know." She tosses her hair back, turns her head to the left and skyward, furrows her brow and rolls her eyes upward. Maybe because he valued intuition over scientific and systematic knowledge. Not that I see how that might apply here." She grins, and looks at me mischievously out of the corner of her eyes. "Anyway, that's a present for a different time. I have another present for right now. Close your eyes."

Why do people do that? Not just little kids, but adults, too. They hold the flowers behind their back, then, "Surprise." It seems ridiculous. **Is it to create a sense of newness? To stop time and "frame" a moment? Maybe it's like saying a blessing over the food--a way to pause and appreciate what's coming next.**

I debate. I'd like to spend time showing her more about how I've organized the meal. She wants to show me her picture. I let her win, and close my eyes. Another gold star, Ovid. And, hey, Mr. eecummings, how's that for spontaneity? I'd better reap a luscious reward tonight.

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"Ok, when I say three you can open them." This is stupid and silly, but I go along.

What I notice now, and didn't see then is not only how controlling Mery is in this situation, but what a brilliant strategy she uses. First, she tells him *he's* so controlling and needs to be more spontaneous. Then she *directs* him to close his eyes until she tells him he can open them. He feels trapped into doing what she wants. And he doesn't even realize how she's checkmated him. The lesson? Beware the seemingly innocent little lambs. No one is really safe to be around.

"Ok, you can open them."

I see a picture, not yet complete, of a little girl jumping over water that is coming from the land, and heading to the ocean. Perhaps from a sewer drain, which has created a ditch? The sun is setting behind her. Both her feet are in the air, the front foot has risen above and over the ditch. Her hair is reddish brown, trailing behind her like wings. She's a combination of graceful ballerina and awkward hurdler leaning forward. Her face can only be seen in profile, but seems, based on the one eye and the expression of her mouth, filled with both concentration and angelic joy.

"It's beautiful. I'm impressed. All in an afternoon?"

"Yes!" she says gleefully. "But it's not yet done, as you can see. I'm so glad you like it. It's for you. And the title is for you, too. Know what I call it?"

"Kierkegaardian Girl Leaping the Abyss at Sunset?" I venture.

"Oh, that's clever. Maybe even better than mine."

"What did you call it?"

"Never mind. I like yours. I think it's better. Do you know why Kierkegaard, a devoted Christian, said Christianity was the best religion?" She doesn't wait for me to answer, but proclaims, "Because it was most ridiculous."

I smile and nod in agreement. "Got that one right."

"Now, don't be a bad boy. Think of the paradox: an eternal God appears in time and dies. That is contradictory, logically impossible. Thus, Kierkegaard said, you cannot have true Christian faith unless you are capable of destroying and transcending your own rationality. You can't make an indecisive leap of faith. What I love about him is he understands that true faith challenges our ability to comprehend what appears unknown and incomprehensible; it exceeds our attempts to explain rationally."

"That's the most convoluted, irrational effort to challenge rationality I've ever heard. He'd be thrown out of court in a minute." She pouts, as I expected. I put my arm around her. "But that's why I adore you. You are so earnest. . . so inexplicable. . . and so cute all at the same time. Now, what did you call the painting?"

She shows me the card where she's written:

WEEEE

Little Girl

"I like it. Very clever!"

"I knew you'd get it. Should I put the h in w(h)ee? Or does that make it too obvious? How much should I explain? You're the wordsmith."

"No, leave it like it is. Adding the h, making it whee, is too saccharine. Leave it like this, and only you and I know where weee really came from." I pick her up and spin her. We both shout "wheee."

As I set her down, I add, "And I want you to know I'm triply impressed. The 'we' is you and the little girl in you. And it's also your gift of joy to us, our 'we.' You have gone back to Aristotle: philosophy born in wonder as she/we leap the abyss. What a great gift. Thank you." I give her a hug, a chaste, gentle kiss. "If I were to paint you, it would be as a semi-nude damsel posing as a fairy or goddess, wandering through bucolic landscapes. And there would be mischievous, impish spirits cavorting and dancing all around." She giggles and whispers back, "This is a perfect relationship. We could be muses for each other." I let my hands wander tentatively around to her lovely black turtleneck-covered breasts. She starts to pull back, almost reflexively, but then changes her mind, and doesn't pull away. Progress must be measured in small increments.

This may be an excellent Seder, after all.

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I look up at my picture of the man leaping the water at the railroad station. What a contrast between the joyful vibrant colors of Elizabeth's painting and the dark black and gray shadows of the railroad picture. The leap is no longer in wonder and awe, but now in dread. Did I buy that because it reminded me of Elizabeth's picture? To the best of my knowledge, that didn't enter my mind. But there must be a connection, even if I wasn't aware of it. It's scary how primitive the mind is. I remember once walking with Dad on the beach in Laguna. We came to an Orange Julius stand. I wanted to order one. I loved the sweet, syrupy powdery taste. He said "I hate that place. It's a horrible establishment, and their drinks are awful." At first I thought he was just in one of his ornery moods. But just a moment before, as we were walking

down the beach, he was laughing and pointing out all the buxom women, and giving them ratings from one to ten.

What shifted, I wondered, thinking of my introductory psychology class, where the professor had said nothing happens by chance. "When a mood shifts, something is going on. Learn to spot it. Look outside. Look inside." We were also studying the Oedipus complex. Given dad's relationship with his own father, Julius, it's no wonder he didn't like a store called Orange Julius. I laughed and shared my insight with him.

He got angry, telling me to quit being a pseudo-intellectual, that I didn't know what I was talking about. At the time I thought he was just being defensive because he knew I was right. Now, I think he may not have made the connection in his own mind. If, as Dr. Lisbet says, people are only as safe as they know themselves, then the prospects for being around safe people—including ourselves—seem limited.

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"Stand next to your painting. I want to get a picture of the artist and her work." She starts to resist, as she always does, but her ego overrides her initial shyness. Artist and her picture. Very skillful on my part. I pick up Mr. Cannon and shoot. "Excellent. But a bit stiff. Let's loosen up. Turn to the side. Good. Hand behind your back." Oh, I like that one, it really accentuates her breasts. "Now look toward the picture, slowly, out of the corners of your eyes. Almost. Let your eyes turn toward me faster than your neck. Yes. That's it. Head down more. Good. Bring your right shoulder up a bit. Now a little flirtatious whimsy. Yes. Excellent. You seem natural and relaxed." She smiles. Nothing salacious. But I've primed the pump for later in the evening, I hope.

"Look at the lines on this painting, here. She's going to be a very sensual young woman when she grows up. And she must have been painted by a woman who has those same qualities." I smirk.

"This painting is not about sex. Art is not always about sex. Is there anything in your life that is not used for sex or that doesn't remind you of sex?" She huffs, exasperatedly.

"Do you want the short answer or the long answer?"

"Either."

"The short answer is 'No.'" The long answer is 'No, no, no.' There is nothing for me that isn't about sex, or doesn't remind me of sex. It's all about sex. Just the way Darwin wanted it to be. Or God. Or evolution. And that's just fine with me, and all life forms. Ah, sex.... it's fun, its playful, it's energizing, it's meant to be a natural part of life. And frankly, lassie, you like it too, or did until last week, so don't get so prissy. After all, tonight's not only Passover—a Second Passover at that, where the Song of Songs is the theme song, it's also Shabbat. You're the Sabbath bride, and I'm the King. This should be a doubly good night, if you know what I mean." I give her a knowing, exaggeratedly, lecherous wink.

"That's enough already. I'm sorry I asked. How'd you shoot on the back nine?"

I let her segue, knowing that I'll return for more pictures later. "Zeke said you should never ask a person their score after a golf round, only if they had fun."

"Did you have fun?"

"As I walked along the tenth hole, after a great drive, I saw you down at the ocean. You looked like a frisky little puppy running in the foam. I saw a huge bird, maybe a cormorant with an unbelievable wing span gliding across sun-sparkling water. It was a hypnotic contrast, like the pulsating strobe light at the Fillmore, and the grace of the bird was like your dancing. The water, the sun, you all beckoned. It looked fun, and I asked myself if I would rather be splashing with you in the ocean. At the time, I thought I'd rather be up on the course looking down on the water. You know how I feel about the ocean—it's too

unstructured and tumultuous, even in the day. At least, I thought, the golf course is ordered and contained. As Zeke kept reminding me, 'It's just a game, sir. The traps, the rough, sir, all just for our entertainment.'

Mery smiles. "I'm hungry. And confused. Was that a yes, you did have fun?"

I look directly at her. "I guess that's a long-winded way of saying, No, I didn't have fun. The back side was a chaotic disaster. It would have made getting tangled in a crashing wave look and feel serene." I try to smile. "I shot eleven over par on the backside. Not only didn't I make one birdie, I didn't even make one par." I glance over at the picture, then back at her. "I wanted to blame you, but my first shot after you left was perfect. So, though I tried, I couldn't." I shrug. "It got so bad, Zeke started pulling a little flask out of his pocket and he started to remind me more and more of those guys on Sixth Street. It was more than he could handle, too. I must admit there were times I even thought about joining him for a 'wee nip.'" I think about telling her it all started when I didn't buy him any food at the turn. But that doesn't put me in a very flattering light, and it's not really my fault. I'm sure he would have found an excuse.

"He was drinking on the course?"

I nod and she is silent for a moment. "That sounds really bad, for both of you."

"It was. Once I threw my club. I haven't done that since I was a teenager. Zeke ran after the club. When he brought it back, he said 'It wasn't a very good shot, sir, but it was a great club!'"

"'Why is this such a hard game?' I whined as he handed it to me."

As I tell Mery this story, I feel like an actor, taking both roles, and I adjust my voice and size accordingly. When I speak as Zeke, my voice becomes faster and higher pitched, and I squat a foot shorter.

"He smiled. 'Sir, if there were a pipe you could attach from the tee to the pin, and all you had to do was put the ball in the pipe, and it would roll down to the pin, would you still play, would you spend time practicing?'"

"'No, that would be stupid. It wouldn't be any fun.'"

"'Ah, so fun is in the challenge, right?'"

"You know, Mery, I felt like I was in court being cross-examined, and by a leprechaun at that. But I had to admit there was a truth in what he was saying."

"'All right,' I said, 'I'll agree with that, but why can't I just repeat what I've been doing, hit the good shots that I know I'm capable of?'"

"Then he gave me one of his lessons, one that was deep. And even applies to our relationship. 'Sir, that's the challenge of the game. We want to repeat the same motion every time. But think about it, if you were a machine and could hit a perfect shot every time--as could everyone else--would you play golf? No, it's the challenge, even the yearning to seek perfection that draws us to the game, even though it's unobtainable. You, sir, like the challenge, the chase, the seeking. That's what makes it fun. Only sometimes you forget that!'"

I'd forgotten these words. It's a good lesson--on the golf course, and of course it applies to Johannes and his womanizing before he met Mery. But I wonder whether it really applies in all situations. For example, would this lesson really be helpful at those times God's presence seems to vanish, and, no matter how hard I try, I can't recreate a connection? Each day, I do the same blessings. I do them with yearning and desire. Sometimes I feel an inkling of God's presence in the blessing, but nothing like Sinai. More often it's just rote--I take a shot, the best I can--but though I seek, I can't find God. Is the "fun" really in this challenge?

Is it really like golf or women for Johannes-- that I want the yearning and wouldn't be satisfied if it were too easy? That I'd stop playing the game if it weren't a major challenge and that I really enjoy the frustration? I don't think so. Maybe I wouldn't have started the game, wouldn't be seeking God

without the suffering. But I'm sure if every time I prayed I felt God's benevolent presence I wouldn't be bored or feel the spiritual path was insufficiently interesting. I would embrace this with joy.

I think. But maybe I'm fooling myself. If God is always there, and can be summoned at will, why would I continue to do blessings which only point the way? I'll always take the short cut if I can, won't I? And maybe it would be like biking with the wind at your back. I wouldn't even notice it was the wind that was propelling me faster. I'd think it was my own efforts. I wonder what Reb Jonathan would say.

Mery looks at me. "You said Zeke's words apply to our relationship. I assume you're telling me that so that when you become such a challenge to me, I should remember that I love you and this is fun, right, and that I wouldn't want any less of a difficult, daunting task?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking--about you, you wee little challenge, you." I pull her to me, and she allows herself to come in for a cuddle.

"I like Zeke, though I'm not happy about his drinking. You got a caddie and a philosopher. I hope you gave him a nice tip. Was it hard saying good-bye?"

"Not at all. I think we were both glad to be rid of each other, forever. He's just another loser, like those Sixth Street bums. I paid him and he's now out of my life."

"That's not a nice thing to say. I'm sure he's had a rough life. You're being mean. I don't like it when you're like this." She pulls back from me.

I am being stupid. Why make such a derogatory statement about him? Am I still angry about the back nine? Probably. But why bring that bitterness into my relationship with Mery and ruin a good evening. Tonight is about freedom, removing the bondage of the past shots. I try to think of something light to say.

"He did leave me with some parting words. Want to hear?"

She nods, sulkily.

"When you hit a bad drive, you shout FORE to warn the people ahead that they may be in danger, and to cover themselves."

"So? Is that some sort of warning about our relationship?"

"Is that what you think he meant? Being a little defensive aren't we? No, as we were leaving, Zeke said, 'Have fun, tonight, sir, with that lovely fiancée of yours. She's a real gem.'"

"I'm liking him more and more."

"Then he continued, 'And remember, sonny, tonight, and as you go through all this wee little life. . . .'" Then, he did another little jig, before adding, with Catskill timing,

"'It's all for(e)play.'" With that he chuckled drunkenly, and poof, like the leprechaun he is, vanished from sight.

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It's interesting that Johannes thought Zeke was gone forever. Physically, yes. But emotionally and spiritually, I feel his presence. I wonder what he really meant by his parting words. They change over time, as I look back on them. Johannes took them as a sign that golf and cooking a meal was foreplay, and the sexual shenanigans and climax would come later. He also heard it as life is "for play," and to try to enjoy it more.

But was he, like Mery suggested, also trying to warn them both about their relationship, with the emphasis on FORE. If so, he was prescient.

Or was he making a deeper spiritual statement, saying life is foreplay, and after life, comes the life of the spirit, and that is what truly matters?

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"What alarmed you, o sea that you fled?" Psalm 114.

"What aileth thee, o thou sea that thou fleest"

I think I like the old translation more, there's a certain charm that is lost in modernizing. I'm reading the last words of tonight's Seder from the Psalms of Praise. "When Israel went forth from Egypt. . . Tremble before the

Lord, before the God of Jacob. . .” I end with a flourish, and more than a touch of irony. Not only has the sea fled, but Mery has just left in anger, and fled to the ocean.

Everything is at sixes and sevens. Where’s the Bard when I need him? Or Ovid? Where is Moses to show me the way out!

My golf game and the Seder seem a perfect reflection of each other. Both began with high hopes, and both ended in just under five hours-- we did finish by midnight which was always my family's rule. The front nine was amazing, as was the first half of tonight’s Seder. And the last half of both were a chaotic disaster. On the 18th hole, I was yelling FORE right and left, and the sea was probably fleeing from how many golf balls I hit into it. Tonight, we needed to yell FORE, given the malignant atmosphere created by our wild flight of words. . . .and more...what a bloody mess.

Interesting that Johannes begins his journal reflections about the seder at the end of the Seder. And a bloody mess. And he ends the reflections at the beginning of the Seder...washing his hands in purification.

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Order. The Seder is about order. What a cosmic joke. Since I met Mery, nothing seems to go according to script. For God’s sake, I was on my way to Berkeley, to Alice’s party, to celebrate just getting into Harvard Law School. What happened? Why did I ever stop at David’s deli, and why was she there? My grandmother used to quote an old Yiddish expression: Man makes plans and God laughs. Well, God must be splitting His sides now.

Make the Haggadah your own, my grandfather said. This isn't exactly the story I imagined. And I like the known structure and order, not like improv music, art, or theatre.

Before I try to find her, I'm going to take some time to write about what happened this evening to try to settle myself down and re-create out of chaos. Camus, in one of my college papers, I wrote that you fought the plague by

writing the *Plague*. Well, tonight, unfortunately, but fittingly, there are many plagues, inside and out. Let's see if writing can help give me a perspective. That's why mom got me my first journal oh so many years ago. I need all the help I can get. I don't know that I've ever been so angry, so close to completely losing control. I need to take a step back to try to be more objective, more like a detached writer creating a scene. I'm much too involved to see things clearly. And I don't want to do something that I will regret forever.

Take a breath, as dad taught me. I need everything now to keep from becoming the worst of my raging, violent father or my collapsing, suicidal mother.

Enough self-pity. I take the final sip from my glass of wine. Think rationally. What is my goal if I go out into the night to find her? To vent my anger which she says I'm afraid of? To create a healing? She is my fiancée, after all.

I really don't know what I want. That's why I need to write in my journal. To see if I can't step back, like a detached observor, and see what's going on, and what I really want. Even Dad told me that it's not helpful to act while you're feeling enraged. So, let me write clearly and calmly. And while writing, I need some more wine to fortify me before I leave the warmth of the cottage. I look around. Only Elijah's cup is left. We must have really drunk a lot tonight. Maybe that's what caused the problems. A glass of wine to end the service, just like a glass of wine to begin it. What went wrong? Maybe there was still some frustration in me from the golf round, or not having had an orgasm all day, and her sexual withholdingness this past week. But that was all changing. I thought things were fine. They sure seemed so with the first toast.

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"Mery, beloved, let's begin the Seder by sharing a first glass of wine together in a perfect setting here in Carmel, Kerem-El, The vineyard of God. I ladle two wine from a large punch bowl, labeled #4, in the center of the table, into our wine glasses. Given the low quality of the sugary kosher wine for Seder that we're going to be drinking tonight, this seems an appropriate way to serve it.

I look at my watch. 7:45. We're an hour late. After showing me her painting, Mery wanted to take a quick shower and change. I was annoyed, but now that I see what she's wearing, I quickly forgive and forget. She looks radiant and voluptuous, in an off-red, relatively low-plunging sweater, which harmonizes with her hair. Also, I can tell she is braless, which is unusual for her, and I take as a positive sign for this evening. She is wearing tight, faded blue jeans, which also look very cute on her.

I extend my hand over a section of the floor, upon which I have placed a virgin white tablecloth, surrounded by several large brown pillows from the couch. "This is what Macbeth must have meant when he said 'The table's full.' Normally the food all goes on one big symbolic plate, but in the interest of newness and creativity, I decided to depart from the script. It makes life more interesting." I gave her a little flirtatious playful tickling in the ribs. "See, within the framework of structure, even I can be flexible."

I notice that she rubs her rib where I've lightly tapped her, and says nothing. Could I have hurt her? Impossible. I did it good-naturedly and gently. Did I? Am I still upset with her for being late and throwing off the timing of the service? I think back to playing tag with her in the park. No, I don't want to go there, mind. Focus. Back to the Seder. "This meal could be construed as my painting: a feast of textures, colors, tastes and meanings all prepared for you, for us, on a white canvas—living and edible art." She stops rubbing her side, and smiles.

I feel like I'm reading a Greek play, knowing how it evolves, even though Johannes doesn't. I watch him try to "make the Seder his own" adding "improv"—like the tickling, to keep it from being dull, rote, and boring. He needs to show he is free, and not bound by trying to fit into someone else's external structure and mechanical mindless recitations. He wants to do it his way. Then when he gets lost and confused, he wants to return to someone else's structure, just to get through the service, to click off a check list to get it completed so he can proceed to what he hopes will be the main festivities. Again, so many levels, so many different sides within the same person.

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"This looks lovely. Very earthy. . .and creative. We may make an artist out of you, yet. I can see you put a lot of work into it. And the numbers, ever the systematic one!" She sits down on the floor, upright and stiff, legs tucked under her.

"Well, I want to make sure I know where and what everything is. And thank you for the compliment. It was a lot of work, though I had a little catering help, too!"

Still painting by the numbers, Johannes.

I remove my sandals, sit down, and we encircle our elbows. "A toast." As we clink glasses, I try to wax my most poetic. "Being here with you is like being in heaven. And, as it says on your wedding ring, 'I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.'" We drink from each other's glass.

"Oh, that's so romantic, so beautiful." We drink again and Mery toasts back, "May it always be like this." I look over at her, and feel a surge of pleasure. It's not an aroused sexuality, more a deep contentment. I raise my glass for another toast.

"I am really happy being with you, Mery. Last week when I was thinking of the final quarter, I realized my buddies and I are not really that close. We're just conveniences for each other thrown together by circumstances. After we

graduate we're almost certainly going to drift apart, like ships passing in the night. She starts to say something, presumably to comfort me, but I hold up my hand. "Please, let me finish. I'm like them. Until I met you, I never allowed myself to be open with anyone. That was too vulnerable, and I knew they would eventually leave me, like everyone else in my life. From my older brother dying to now, with my parent's divorcing and my father moving out. You're the only one I trust and want to be with forever."

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As soon as I say these words, I feel uncomfortable. I sound way too needy. Do you also feel uncomfortable because you're dissimulating, and may get caught? Your father moved out almost ten years ago. How would his physically moving out of your family Kansas City home now, while you are in college in California, make any difference in terms of your relationship? Even when you're trying to be open, you're holding something back. Are you so smooth at deception that you no longer catch yourself or are bothered by it? Pathetic.

I look at Mery, and wonder if she also is feeling awkward. She's not saying anything. I take a sip of wine. She does the same, then she says, to my relief, "I'm touched beyond words. Thank you. All I can say is to repeat my toast, 'May it always be like this. I'm so in love with you.'" She takes another sip, then sets her glass down and in a lilting voice asks, "Why is there that silver chalice on the other side of the wine bowl? It's beautiful." She smiles. "I guess, in your parlance, I could ask, what is 5 on the other side of 4?"

"Ouch, what a barb of a question. You pierced me again!" I feign injury and fall over, and close my eyes, as if dead.

"Just teasing." She laughs, and pats my shoulder.

I smile and sit up, while saying "Ah, like raising me from the dead." "That's your tradition. Elijah, in our tradition, never died, but was borne to heaven in a whirlwind and a chariot of fire." She doesn't seem appreciative of

my statement. Why? Am I trying to one-up her: Elijah's better than Jesus? Where do these statements come from? She's making me think too much.

I make a dramatic upward sweeping gesture with my hand. "And that's his cup." I raise my wine glass. "Let's toast to Elijah, who admonished, then slew the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel. We, too, are removing and leaving behind our bondage to false idols, becoming wiser. What could be more fitting for Passover than two beloveds helping each other become freer...." I raise my glass in another toast. She joins me, as I say, " To Elijah, the patron of the poor, the downtrodden, the persecuted, the harbinger of redemption." We both take another drink.

"That's lovely. My dad talked about Elijah a lot, saying no prophet in the Old Testament is referred to in the New Testament more than he is. He was a symbol of justice and righteousness, but was also compared in many ways to John the Baptist for his sternness and power, and both had long retirements in the wilderness and the desert." I know that part, about being in the wilderness. And the desert. Literally and figuratively. I wonder if the Jews knew that the price of freedom and escaping from slavery was not going to end in a victory celebration after crossing the Red Sea, but in 40 years in the wilderness, would they have still have gone ahead. I know I would find it intolerable to live that long in the state I'm in. And knowing I would never reach the promised land. It simply wouldn't be worth it. **I wonder if they knew, or hope kept them going. Maybe there was an altruistic motive—even if they couldn't see the Promised Land, their children might.**

"More importantly, he was one of the prophets in the Old Testament who heralded the advent of the Messianic Era and pointed the way toward Jesus. And according to Luke, he, along with Moses, appears at the Transfiguration of Jesus. Isn't it amazing how Moses and Elijah, part of your Passover tradition are linked in so many ways to my Christian faith." I start to feel annoyed again. Why does everything about our tradition have to be usurped and one-upped

by hers? I drink more wine. When I set the glass down, I look over at Mery, who has stopped talking, and is staring with a glazed, yet sad expression at the cup of Elijah.

I'm not sure how to respond to what she just said, so I continue with my own Elijah story, one I'd heard once from our Rabbi in Kansas City in one of his boring sermons. Parallel play? "Did you know that Elijah was said to have often dressed in disguise, and that even today he may appear to people in the guise of a homeless person or an irate driver; or a person you hate, just to see how we react. Therefore, we're supposed to live as if everyone with whom we have contact could be Elijah." I think of the men on Sixth Street. The people that cut Mery off today while she was driving. There is simply no way any of them could really be Elijah. A typical, unrealistic sermon. "I believe that means you have to be nice to me all the time, because maybe I could be Elijah, too, even when I act like a jerk."

She smiles vaguely, but otherwise ignores my comment. "Dad could speak so eloquently and movingly. He said Elijah found God in a still small voice within himself. He told me that I should always listen to that voice inside me, and it would never mislead me." She pauses again, with the same sad expression, then adds, "And Daddy also said that Elijah is the one who will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers." She takes another sip, then adds. "May it be true."

What pipedream does she live in? Would I even want it to be true? But when she adds "Amen" I mumble the word and we clink glasses and drink some more.

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"Let me give you a little massage," she says brightly, apropos of nothing. "You must be sore after a long day of golf. Here, take off your shirt and lie on your stomach. I'll work on your back and shoulders." I do as she says. I'm not sure why. I don't really like massages. I feel too passive just lying there. She begins the massage and I really am feeling uncomfortable. What do I

focus on? I try just receive, to follow the movements of her hands, but I don't know where her hands are going to go, and I feel like I'm playing catch up, always trying to guess and anticipate her next move. It's all so unsystematic. "I love the tightness of your body; it's so strong, powerful."

I give an "mmmm." I like what she's saying, but where is this leading? Is this instead of sex? It's not even that arousing. I'd rather turn over and take my pants off if that's what we're going to do. Where is the order? She moves her hands suddenly from my back to my face, saying "His cheeks are like a bed of balsam" and then jumps to my hair, where she starts stroking, while murmuring, "His locks are like clusters of dates and black as a raven." Is she giving me a cue that she's ready to resume our sexual activities? Maybe I should turn over. Would she feel I'm taking too much initiative? I feel immobilized and indecisive. My mind is whirring. Then she says, after a few more minutes. "There, how was that, better?"

"Better. Thank you so much."

"Good. Now, let's continue with the Seder. I'm really interested."

I'm surprised at myself, but I'm relieved that she didn't want to begin a sexual romp, and happily return to the order of the Passover script.

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"My grandfather said we should make the Passover story our own."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, technically, I think it means that we should tell the story, not just as an historical event, but note how it applies in our own lives and times. Free ourselves, free others who are in bondage."

"That's beautiful. Is that like my...our efforts to help the poor people in San Francisco, who are living such difficult lives?"

"That's certainly one possible way to make the story our own, write a new and better script for our lives by helping others." I look at her with

tenderness. "You really do have a beautiful heart." There is so much for me to learn from Mery. Yet, even as I have this warm feeling, I notice a rising undercurrent of annoyance at her constant goody-two-shoedness. Always trying to show me how loving and compassionate she is, one upping my comments with even more self-sacrificing, giving ones. I choose my words carefully.

"Yes, Mery, we must continue to help others in need. When we return to San Francisco, I want to make sure we recommit to our efforts to helping those poor people. We can free ourselves from our own bondage and become better people, as we work to liberate others from their difficult and oppressive conditions" I give what I think she would feel is a spiritual beatific look. That's one I haven't really practiced very much, and will need to work on next time I'm around a mirror. But apparently it's good enough, and she gives me a smile back with those lovely, sparking brown eyes. I feel I am on a roll. And in a role.

Johannes makes a gesture to help others in order to be seen as lovable by Mery. But at least he occasionally makes the effort. Who am I seeking to help besides myself? Mery helps the people on Sixth Street for God's sake. I admire Mery's motivation more than Johannes', and frankly, more than my own, too. Is my searching for God just a lazy excuse to continue to focus on me without ever having to do anything for anyone else? Oh, poor me, I'm so unhappy and distraught, my life is filled with such angst, I'm suffering so much. It takes all my energy to just get through a day. I sound like such a whiny little baby.

You're pretty harsh on yourself, John. Yes, there is the danger of self absorption as you say, but also sometimes, as Dr. Lisbet says, pausing and reflection is part of the process of growth. I guess it depends on what you do with your new learning, doesn't it? Try to be a little more gentle on yourself, my friend.

She hugs me closer. I feel the warmth of her breasts. Thank you, God, for delivering to my mind such an inspiring story, with the potentially luscious

results of freeing her from the limitations of her self-imposed sexual abstinence into the promised land of my arms and body.

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"Since you mention their hard life. . . ." I have a perfect segue. I'm hungry for sex, and I plan to say, I feel my lingham getting hard. But I'm also hungry for food. For some strange reason, I choose the latter. Perhaps I'm wary of pushing Mery too far too fast. I pull back from her hug, and repeat, "Since you mention their hard life, I have a riddle for you. What's red, but when a horse is put before it turns white?" When she shrugs and doesn't answer I pick up some horse-radish from the sixth bowl, and say, "Oh Mery, I compare you, my love, to a mare of Pharaoh's chariot." She seems puzzled by how to take the compliment and just looks at me. So I continue the lesson. "You said hard life. That's a perfect segue--though not quite in order--to our sixth bowl. And also it lets us eat something. In this sixth bowl we have horseradish and lettuce. It's called Maror, which means bitter, and is symbolic of the bitterness of the life of the Jews in Egypt. It's an amazing coincidence that it's also symbolic of the life of our friends on Sixth Street, too."

"That's a powerful symbol. I like it. Now, how do we eat it?"

"I think we put it on matzah, and also, I remember somehow that we combine it with this stuff, called Horoseth." I point to the second bowl. I'm not sure exactly what the kosher order is, but this seems close enough. We make a little sandwich of 2 and 6, surrounded by matzah.

"Does this horse stuff have meaning, too?"

"Horoseth. It's usually made from apples, nuts and wine. But I don't like nuts so I had them put in raisins. It's supposed to resemble the clay mixture the Jews used in order to make bricks for the monuments of Pharaoh, Ramses." I continue our new improvised script. At some point we're supposed to hide the afikomen. But it seems my free flowing improve Seder is providing sufficient order, and I don't want to interrupt the positive feelings between us.

Mery thinks a moment, then smiles. "What are we going to build together in our life? Do you want children? I do. With you. Lots of them!"

Children? I'm still a child myself. I'm certainly not ready for children.

Amen. Though not for the same reasons as you, Johannes. I'm no longer a child. I feel like an aged, wizened, battle-scarred adult. But I'm still not ready for children, either. I don't even seem to be able to take care of myself properly. **Hearing Mery's enthusiasm and excitement about sharing a life with Johannes, I notice feelings of sadness in me for a dream unrealized.**

I try to make a joke out of it. "I don't know if I ever want to grow up. Me and Peter Pan. I may have shared this story with you, stop me if I have....She says nothing, so I continue.

It's hard to remember whom you've told which story to, even if they are true stories. I do love my stories, though. I wonder if a great profession for me might be a teacher. Each year I'd get a new class, and I could tell my same stories without fear; to these naïve ears, the stories would be fresh and heard for the first time.

"My father once pointed to his gray hair, and told me, 'When I look in a mirror, I see an old man. But when I look inside these eyes' and here his face crinkled and lit up, "'Inside these eyes there is still a little boy jumping and playing around.'" I look at her and smile. "Do you realize how good a baby has it, his only task to be pushed around in a carriage, to play, have fun, and have his needs met! I've decided that is happiness. And you know what else is happiness?" She says nothing, so I continue. "Happiness is lying by a pool at a big hotel, on vacation, and knowing that someone is paying for you. Otherwise, to have to pay for a vacation, ugh. Too much pressure to enjoy it." She's not smiling.

"You know, Peter Pan, at some point you do have to grow up and become a man; I like the little boy in you, but we don't want only the little boy, right?"

"Right, indeed. And to let you know what a mature man I am, I want you to know that although I haven't really thought about having kids, I'm more than willing to practice with you trying to make them. Practice makes perfect, you know."

"You're horrible. Always in bondage to your. . ." and she nods her head toward my lingham. "I think we need another glass of wine to wash down the bitter herbs."

"I learned in my psychology class that the more sexually driven you are, the more ambitious you are. So, there are some pluses to my..." and I nod south.

I ladle us more wine, and say, raising my glass, "I toast to all of you, slaves of old, and to the bitterness of your life in slavery." We take a drink. "I toast to you, all who are currently in bondage, may you become free." We sip again. "And I toast to the act of creating children." I sip alone, but I think I see a wee smile on her face.

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"When my grandfather said make the story your own, however, he had in mind that we could each create an individual story about Passover, and he had a wonderful fairy-tale like story he created for me."

"Is this the grandfather lawyer who said be the best? I can't wait to hear his Passover version of what you should be the best at. The new Moses finding and bringing forth additional laws and commandments?"

Is this a criticism--of me? Of him? Of her view of legalistic Judaism? I decide not to ask and reply, "No, wrong grandpa, though that's a good fairy-tale, too. Actually, both Grandpas linked Passover and Christmas, though in quite different ways. The Grandpa you're talking about, Grandpa Julius," and I make the little dollar sign, an S with a line through it, \$, " is the wealthy one. Money is his one's raison d'etre. He's more interested in profits than prophets. I remember he once used money to connect Passover and Christmas, noting that a large percentage of store owners' profits for the entire year

comes during the month preceding Christmas; and for Jews, even though only a small percentage keep kosher during the year, during the week before Passover, kosher stores do forty percent of their yearly business."

"That's not a very uplifting story. It focuses on money and the commercialization of spiritual events."

"In response to you, Grandpa \$ would counter in his deep baritone legal tones, 'It depends upon your perspective. If you're a businessman, it's a very uplifting story.'" She doesn't smile. It feels like she's taken the boldness and confidence out of me. She constantly is criticizing me, either by what she says, or doesn't say. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells around her, and don't want to break any more. And this is the best it's going to be. Here we are in a beautiful Carmel cottage. After I send the letter deferring law school, I'm not going to have as much money, and won't be able to do this with her. At least she's not that materialistic, unlike Grandpa, and Dad. That's a plus, so maybe everything will turn out all right. I raise my glass in a toast. "I, of course, agree with you. You're very wise." She joins me in clinking glasses and imbibing.

"Now, this Christmas, Passover, and even Easter story is from my redbird watching grandfather, Grandpa Dave. I hope you find it more uplifting, but I must say I'm a little embarrassed to share it with you. You have to understand this is the grandfather who wants to write a book 'You don't have to be meshuginah, but it helps.'" "

"Meshuginah?" She asks as she takes another sip of wine.

"It means crazy. My mom and grandmother both think he's a bit of a mental case."

"I totally agree with him! It does help! I like him already. Tell me his fairy-tale."

"Well, one time during a Seder, after everyone had had quite a lot to drink, he asked, 'Isn't Elija the precursor to the Messiah?' There were nods.

And then he asked 'Isn't the Messiah supposed to be Jewish?' Again, everyone agreed, telling him that was obvious, and to hurry on. 'Well, I happen to know it says in the Bible that the Messiah will come from the House of David.' And here he points proudly to himself. And then he pointed to me, saying, 'So there's no reason that my grandson here, who is Jewish, and from the House of David, can't be the next Messiah and usher in a heaven on earth?'" I stop and take a sip of wine. I watch through the glass to see how Mery is responding.

"Let me also take a drink while I think about that," she laughs. I watch as she swallows a rather large quantity, and I notice how cute her little pinky finger looks extending from the glass. I see her face through the wine glass, pinkly distorted. "Didn't you once say you were a member of the Charles Atlas club." I nod, not seeing the relevance. "Well, like Atlas, you're going to need pretty large shoulders, carrying the weight of the world. That's quite an ambitious vision he has for you!"

Yet no different in ambition that Mery's vision of herself as the suffering servant. Great. We have two competing Jesus figures--Mery and Johannes-- at the same seder. No wonder I'm in Israel reading the New Testament.

Maybe it does help to be meshuginah, John...and have a little humor.

I flex my biceps and puff out my chest, then slump my shoulders. "You're right. It was weird, a very strange experience. The family was embarrassed, called him an eccentric, and told me not to have delusions of grandeur, and to eat my matzah ball soup."

"Speaking of which, if it's not too cold, can we have some of that? It's what you ate the first night I met you." She smiles, and adds, "How strange the twists and cycles of life. I'd have never thought then I'd be having matzah ball soup with you one day in Carmel, at a Seder, with an engagement ring on my finger." I see the genuine affection and love in her eyes, and blow her a kiss as I spoon the soup out of the container by which I have placed an 8, an iron pot. The smell reaches us first. I realize how hungry I am. I look at my watch.

9:15. I mumble a Hebrew Blessing "Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav, v'tzivanu al achilat matzah." I assume that will be kosher enough for matzah ball soup. I'm amazed it's still warm enough as we begin eating it. And I'm amazed at what rote blessings from childhood still remain with me.

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"There's more to his fairy-tale story," I add between bites.

"Oh my, I can't wait to hear. By the way, the soup is great; I'm starving. Tell on, bard." She slurps down another bite.

"Perhaps someone should have silenced Grandpa. But he was on a roll. He kept up his Socratic questioning. 'Jesus was a Jew, from the House of David, and Christians believe that Jesus will return, also to usher in a heaven on earth, don't they?' At this point, most were ignoring him. I was looking down at my soup, feeling awkward and confused. It was never a good sign when we talked about Jesus in the house. And I'd never heard it done on Passover. 'What if it turns out that the Jewish Messiah that comes the first time is the same person as the Christian Messiah who comes the second time, and, as a single person they bring peace and happiness to the world? Wouldn't that person be the One who could reconcile Judaism and Christianity?"

Mery pauses, sets her soup spoon down, looks at me with an expression I can't read. Are her eyes beginning to glaze? She says nothing, and I continue, wanting hurriedly to offer more explanation, yet desiring to be done with the story, too. "I think he was saying, would people really care as long as there were truly peace and happiness on earth--no matter what the Source, Jew or Christian, through law or love-- and the lion and the lamb could finally lie down together, without one being eaten."

I look at her, awaiting her reaction. Will she be angry? Shocked? She takes another sip of wine. I look down at my soup, and stir it. Finally she says, "I like the image of both of us hoping for a Messiah. It offers a commonality of our faiths, shows that we can always harmonize our differences, even when they may seem irreconcilable. Your Grandpa's story is beautiful and creative. It really does bring our two traditions together."

I laugh. I'm glad she's taking it with good humor. I feel relieved, even joyful. "Even if I didn't go to law school, saving the world might make even my lawyer grandfather happy and proud of me. After all, I'd certainly have fulfilled his ambition for me of 'being the best!" I take a swig of wine, too. "Maybe that would help join grandparents, my parents, and all fathers and children." We both clink glasses in a mutual "Amen."

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o you ever wonder why Jesus hasn't returned?" she asks,
seriously.

"No, I never have. But I have thought about why Elijah doesn't
come to save the poor. Want to hear?" She nods. "When I was younger,
I'd ask, why do we always leave the door ajar, but he never enters.
At least that we see. And the world is still filled with poor people.
Dad would tell me to be quiet. That was the first time I remember him
telling me I was sounding like the 'stupid child' at the Seder, always
trying to masquerade as a pseudo-intellectual wise-ass. But I did a lot
of thinking about it. I compared it to Santa at Christmas. The night
before Christmas we would always leave cookies out for Santa, and the
next day they would be gone, even though we never saw Santa arrive.
But we all know how fat Santa is, and, though I didn't have the
language then, I must have intuited, as my psychology professor might
say, it's more than correlative, it is causative, and must obviously
be from eating all the goodies left out for him." I look over at Mery,
and she seems to be attentive, continuing to sip her wine and looking
at me with interest, so I continue.

"The next morning, I checked Elijah's wine glass, and it was
empty. I asked Dad if that meant, like Santa and the cookies, that
Elijah had come. And if he had, how come there were still poor people,
whereas when Santa comes, he always leaves presents, even though he is
fat. He just looked at me, and said, 'If you're so smart, you figure it
out.' So I did. What happens with Elijah is that he goes to as many
homes of the Jews as he can -- across the nation, and across the world-

- and drinks the cup of wine on each table set out for him. But unlike Santa who just gets fat by all those cookies, Elijah, by imbibing all the wine at every table, becomes so inebriated with good sack, like my noble acquaintance Falstaff at the Boar's Head Tavern," and hear I swig the rest of the wine in my glass, and speak as if I'm now a Shakespearian actor, "that he wouldst lose his capacity to save the poor, for he wouldst find his good self in a state of intoxication causing interminable incapacitation." I finish with a flourish. "Does that help you understand why Elijah hasn't been effective in saving the poor? Of course, I guess I could now turn my erudition to why Jesus has come, at least once, but we still have poor."

"A little strained and sophomoric, Boars Head bard, but witty in a crude way. And not very nice of your father, again. But no, no need to turn your scholarly mind to Jesus. Remember, no Jesus jokes, you knight of little faith you."

Why bring in Falstaff and causation and correlation, Johannes? Are you still trying to prove your erudition to your father?

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I raise my wine glass again: "You, my red-haired maiden, are a woman of valor, fair among rubies, your worth far above jewels. L'SHANNAH HABBAHAH BEERUSHOLOYEEM, NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM. Isn't it fascinating how Passover weaves all time periods together, past, present, and future? Maybe one year we'll actually travel there together. Would you like that?"

"You know I would. That's a dream of mine. I'd love it." She snuggles closer. Yes, Johannes, it's even more fascinating than you realize.

"Land of milk and honey," I joke, feigning nursing by placing my cheek on the outside of her sweater. "I'm like a little baby with you." She doesn't push me away, and actually pulls me closer, placing her hand on my head, stroking through my curly hair. She seems to be laying aside her physical prohibitions. Finally. The Seder couldn't be getting off to a better start. I turn my lips toward her breasts, and at the same time raise my hands and start stroking them, pushing them together playfully.

"I'd love to trace Jesus' path through the Holy Land" she says, at the same time shoving me gently off her breast.

I like the part about traveling with me. But being removed from her breast doesn't help; and retracing Jesus' journey isn't exactly what I was thinking about. Surely not as we begin our Passover Seder. But this is not the time to create conflict, only to show shared opportunities, right, Ovid? So, I say, trying to be tactful, "Hey, why not, we'd each bring a unique perspective. I guess our Passover doesn't exactly have the same meaning for you as a Christian." I'm amazed how aroused I am. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to last the entire Seder. Ignoring her push, I nuzzle back into her breasts.

I realize that what I just said about our two perspectives isn't the most judicious thing to say. I don't think clearly when I need an orgasm, even when I try. And perhaps I shouldn't have tried to kiss her breasts, either. But I'm not exactly thinking with my brain, now. To recover, I add, "Isn't it amazing what we can reconcile when we're in love?"

If I were to think that statement through rationally and specifically, it doesn't make any sense. But it seems to work globally and contextually, creating the right mood. At least she doesn't push me

away, and I realize that familiar ground is right before me as I let my hand slowly inch up toward her deep valley of "two breasts like two fawns, twins of a gazelle."

I whisper to her, "The vineyards of Engedi, climbing on the mountains of Bether, leaping on the hills, descending from Mt. Gilead, you are as lovely as Jerusalem, eyes like pools in Hesbon." I feel her relax. "It seems each piece of the Holy Land is like poetry. Like the poetry we created at the Fairmont with the Song of Songs, beloved."

The mountains of Bether...to divide or dissect. Oneself, each other. Fore. I can warn Johannes, but it's a futile and useless endeavor. Too late. But aren't I, by focusing on him, really avoiding myself? What does next year in Jerusalem mean if I'm already here? What is my bondage, where am I enslaved? And what does it mean to find the Promised Land? Clearly it's not just geographical.

She takes another sip of wine. I do the same. I pull the wedding ring out of my pocket, with its inscription, which I read, once again: "I am my beloved and my beloved is mine."

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I invite Mery to lie back and relax on the pillow. She looks askance, and asks, "Why did you place the meal on the floor? Is this part of a seduction?"

"Moi? I'm not sure that's one of the four questions, Mery. And the way you ask it makes me feel like I'm the wicked child." I smile. "Honestly, this is part of Passover, where we recline in comfort to signify that we are no longer slaves. On this night every Israelite, being free, is noble royalty, and can sit any way they want." Though eyeing me suspiciously, she reluctantly agrees, and joins me, stretching out on the pillows, each of us still with our glass of wine. "Of course, if I am a king, that means you, Mery Elizabeth, are my

royal red queen." I kiss her chastely. I hope she might call me her "royal king" back, and salute me with a more passionate kiss, but she doesn't.

"This reclining was one of my best memories of Passover?"

"Why, did you have a cute cousin? Or was it so you could sleep while you were pretending to listen."

"What a nefarious, salacious mind for a Queen." I tease her. "Actually, it gave me a freedom at meals that I normally didn't have. In our dining room, we had beautiful antique French chairs. To me they were uncomfortable, and as I got older, and my legs long enough, I would push off the floor, causing the chair to rock onto its back two legs. I loved the feeling of movement. Like I was in a rocking chair and I would do it frequently. It allowed me to feel less confined and imprisoned in that old stuffy chair. This lasted about three weeks, until one day mom screamed at me, 'Stop that. Don't ever do that again. You're going to fall over backwards and hurt yourself."

"She didn't want you rocking?"

"She told me it was too dangerous, and she was protecting me. I think it was because she feared I would break the back legs, and, if I fell, her valuable furniture would be even further damaged, and expensive to repair. So, when Passover came, and I didn't have to sit motionless and formal at the table I was delighted."

Mery puts her arm under my neck, and cuddles me, as we both watch the fire. "When you first took me out, I thought you were going to be really stuffy, and harshly criticize me for making a mistake like using the salad fork for the entrée. If only I'd known how messy, I mean ah casual you are when eating. Is that why you eat with your fingers so much, too--you don't like the formality of silverware?" She strokes my hair.

I smile, "Exactly. It makes everything a Bachannalian feast, my darling, my beautiful one." We each take another sip of wine.

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I want this to be a special, erotic evening, a reprise of the Fairmont experience. The Passover seder is hardly a sexy story. But it has three elements going for it: the reclining, the wine and feasting, and the Song of Songs. Grandpa said I could make the story my own, so I thought why not keep the framework and context, and add additional content--erotic content. Also, Passover is about freedom, but leaves open the question, "to what ends?" Here, the Jews can learn something from the Greeks. All we have to do is go to a different banquet scene, where everyone is reclining, having a feast, drinking wine, but are talking about eros, bodies, and lust. I share this with Mery, in a tactful way.

"As I told you, my grandfather told me to 'Make the story of Passover your own.' So, when I was doing my research this week, I thought what could make this story extra special, even if it meant going outside the Jewish framework."

"Listen, my White Knight, you're supposed to be the king of order, but you're confusing me. I don't even understand the basic Jewish Passover, and already you're adding new and different parts to it. I'm not sure you're being the leader I need...I'm losing the structure you're supposed to provide."

"Oh, ye of little faith, bear with me, and you'll see how it all fits. Ok?" She doesn't say anything, not even commenting upon my ecumenical dig at her. So I just continue, "I remembered from my Greek studies a lovely description of the banquet room dialogue of Plato's Symposium, discussing eros, with the intent of joining heaven and earth, physical and spiritual love and I thought how well that applies

to us. You come from heaven, I from earth--first man, Adam, from earth, adamah." I continue, entranced by my own creativity, the effects of the wine, and more than a tad of lust "Together we will join and make beautiful music."

She takes another sip of wine. "Dear Platonic Adamic Solomonic White Knight Bard, you do a disservice to your own spiritual inclinations and soul. I see it in you even when you do not. We're all made in God's image, and you're no exception." She takes her hand and puts it on my cheek, then crosses the bridge of my nose and rubs the other cheek.

"That was quite a mountain you just had to climb," I say self-consciously.

"What do you mean?"

The mountain of belief that Johannes is in the image of God?

"When I was in second grade, the teacher had us make a shadow profile for our parents on Christmas. We sat still as she shined a light on us, and our profile showed up on a piece of colored paper on the wall. The teacher, Mrs. Rivers, outlined the profile. As she was outlining mine, she commented, 'You have an enormous nose.' I never thought my nose was particularly large before this, so when I went home with my picture, I asked my parents. They reassured me that I had a handsome, strong nose. I, of course, believed them."

Mery rubs her hand up and down my nose. I don't feel completely comfortable with her doing this. It's not as bad as when someone touches my left ear, but it does feel vulnerable. "I love your nose. I agree with your parents." She looks closer. "What's this little dent in the center?"

"Sigh, you're finding all my flaws. The next year I got chicken pox. My parents told me not to touch or pick at them. But I picked one

off at the center of the front of my nose. Dad and mom both, independently, told me "Don't worry, at least you picked off one in a place that's inconspicuous."

"Oh, I love your parents. And you, you poor baby." She rubs her finger over my nose again, letting it circle around on top of the dent and even probe down into it. Then she pulls me and my nose into her chest. Partly I like feeling my nose and face buried against her soft breasts, but partly I wonder whether she is only cuddling me because I'm feeling vulnerable--which she made me feel. And I don't like that. If I want to tell a self-deprecating story, or use faux vulnerability as a strategy to make a woman sympathetic toward me and help me move along the base paths, that's fine, because I feel in control. But to be cuddled when I'm actually feeling vulnerable is not nearly as comfortable. And what is this perverse pleasure she seems to feel in my flaws--touching my deaf ear at the swimming pool; probing the recesses of my nose dent. Is she attracted to handicaps and deformity?

She picks up a cluster of grapes from the third bowl, which is filled with fruits-- apples, lemons, dates, bananas--, and surrounded by yellow mustard seed. "As I said, we are all spiritual, and we are all made in God's image." She holds the grapes in her hand, and begins to feed them to me. As she does so, she adds: "And I'm not just spiritual. I have a physical body too, in case you haven't noticed," as she looks down flirtatiously, almost salaciously, at her plunging neckline.

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These words are music to Johannes' ear, but grating to mine. Why doesn't Mery have the courage to stick to her spiritual resolution and keep body out of the picture? It would have been better for both of them. It's just her weakness. And Johannes, what a

disgusting, limited, perversion of Plato. Yes, the symposium begins with the lust for a beautiful body--one body, many bodies--but it ends with the realization that the only true satisfaction is the desire for beauty in its most abstract, spiritual form--a lesson he is unable or unwilling to hear, either from the Greeks, or in the beauty of the Song of Songs, as we, Israel, struggle and yearn for union with God.

Haven't noticed, I think to myself. That's all I've been noticing. And you keep playing hide and go seek. Here they are, braless in a red low cut V sweater. No, now don't touch. You shouldn't even look, you beast. Here, let me nuzzle you while you suckle, little baby. Hey, don't stroke me like that, pushing me away. She's driving me crazy. But overall the direction is good, I'm getting closer to the hole, and finally, I feel like I'm just about to sink a long putt.

Yet, for some reason, I'm annoyed at her brashness in giving me the grape, and her flaunting of her breasts. I'm also irritated at her telling me I'm more spiritual than I feel myself or want to be. I parry her hand as she offers the grape, and turn my head away, as I say, in a somewhat patronizing tone, "Now, now, everything has an order and is scripted. There is a time and place for grapes, but we need to get started in the proper order."

She snaps back away from me, almost as though I'd struck her. All I'd done was gently move her hand away from my mouth.

"What's the matter?" I ask, confused.

"Don't try to intimidate me just because you're larger. I don't like your thrusting my hand away so forcefully."

"Did I hurt you?" I take her hand to look at it, but she withdraws it.

"No, but you could have. And how come you can be as flexible as you want-- go outside the Jewish framework, bring in Plato, make the

story your own. But when all I do is give you something with love you reject it, telling me everything is supposed to be ordered and scripted. Who are you, God? Mr. Rigid Controller?"

I decide not to rise to her provocation, and merely reiterate, "A time and place," while patting her head.

"That is so condescending. Don't touch my head like I'm a little girl needing to be put in her place. I'm working in therapy on being less fearful and more assertive, something you say you want--like at the Tuck Box today. Yet look how you punish and reject me when I do take initiative. I can't win with you." Her voice is becoming louder, as she becomes increasingly animated. I sit dumbfounded, not sure what to say. Her rant continues.

"You want to control everything. You beat the horse you ride to get it to conform to your wishes. You try to mold the law to work for you. You're always trying to mold me--shape my breasts into a position you want for your camera or your desires; like I'm some character in your creative writing class or in your mind." She is angry and weepy all at the same time, her face contorted in a way which I find not at all a form of beauty.

I think she's done, if only because she's too tearful and choked up to continue, but I am wrong. She looks at me, with fury now. You and your shushing of me in the Seder so you can do it your way. You don't like it when I touch you unless you've asked me to, or you pull my hand to you. Yet you feel you can touch me whenever you want, like I'm a little plaything. I won't stand for being treated like that."

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Triple bogey. What got into me? She was right where I wanted her to be, sensuously offering me grape, and I pulled back. Is she right?

Am I afraid of her taking the initiative, of my not always being in control? That was so stupid of me. I was just about to get exactly what I say I wanted, and I sabotaged it. Now look where we are. I don't understand me. But wait. What about this afternoon, when she was driving, and reached over to me. I let her, and it didn't bother me at all.

"That's not true at all, and you know it. Look at the way I allowed you to play with me like a little toy when you were driving today. You took the initiative, and I just lay back and enjoyed it. You were completely in the driver's seat. Am I right or not?" I look at her pointedly.

I can tell that she's deflated momentarily by my argument, but then counters by ignoring it and attacking my strategy, again revving up her angry and self-pitying emotionality. "Everything is a legal argument with you, a chess game you have to win. This is just too complicated for me. My therapist was right. I'm too tender and vulnerable and not ready to reengage with you physically until I sort things out better. I should have stuck to my boundaries of no sexual contact, and I think I should even have even said no physical contact. That way you couldn't keep trying creep across the line, inch by inch, when all I want to do is cuddle. And then I wouldn't be looking for ways, like the grape, to please you sensually. See, this is what happens when I try. I think God may be punishing me for trying to show some physical initiative."

God or her dad? No physical contact?! It sounds like she's back in high school. This is not going well at all. Time for a change of tactics. "I'm sorry. My fault. You're right. I wasn't very sensitive to where you are, and your kind offer. Please would you give me a grape? And please may I give you a peace offering hug?" She doesn't

look at me, but does hold up a grape, which I take. "Delicious," I say, as I hug her. She hugs me back, but it's more like brother and sister, There is a coolness in both of us, made more chilling by its contrast with the warmth of the fire.

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"What do you have on your schedule next week?" I ask, just to change the subject and mood.

"Why?" she counters as if I'm grilling her.

I feel defensive by her response, as if she feels my question was meant to control her, even though it wasn't. I take a breath, and try not to escalate. "No reason, just thinking it would be fun to spend time with you. I could come up to the city; you could come down and maybe stay with me; or maybe we could even stay here a few extra days."

"Sorry, I can't. I'm going to be really busy. I've got to look for a job."

"I could skip a couple of classes and come up and help you."

"No, I think it's something I'd better do on my own."

I'm surprised at the intensity of my feelings. I feel pushed away by her, and what arises is not anger, but a dizzying fear that is way out of proportion to what she said. "But it will be so empty without you."

"Are you afraid to be alone?"

"Well, not afraid, but I feel so close to you. I'll miss you. It'll be hard leaving you." I imagine dropping her off Sunday night at her place, then driving all alone back to my dark, cold little room where there is nothing for me to do but work on class papers. I reach over to give her another hug, but she pulls back this time. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I am afraid. But why would that be? Why do I have such fear?"

Ah, Johannes, your first real non-defensive introspection.

"Maybe you're afraid because it means you would have to face yourself." Still that smile. My mind searches for a response.

"No that couldn't be right," I say much too quickly. "It's just that. . .well, it's interesting how we meet so many people in our life, and then one appears, and you don't know it at the time, but they start to grow on you, and you become closer. When we first went out it was a date here and there, something to do on the weekend, a nice dinner, a show." The promise of great sex. "But then there is a shift. Somehow you became not just a few discrete events, but part of the fabric of my life. You filled the spaces. Now not being with you feels like a void. Why do all the other people get left behind," like just so many meals, sexual experiences that are enjoyable, but then become part of history "and one stays, becomes more than just a someone to share a meal with. I don't think I'm saying this well." I pause to clear my mind. She doesn't say anything, just smiles at me with a glazed look.

You're not. Because it's not clear. It still isn't, even to me. Is it all just a series of events, and all things get left behind, except for memories. Like flute notes. Lovely when they sound but then they instantly disappear, and we have to seek new notes and experiences to fill the void that is left. Is continuity just an illusion of fragmented pieces?

"I guess what I'm saying is that we've spent so much time together that you have become part of me. So, by leaving you, I am leaving a part of me behind." There, that's beautifully stated. I look over at her expectantly, assuming she will feel flattered and appreciative. She smiles but says nothing. There are times when I really do hate that smile.

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I remember dad telling me--though he could never practice it--
that when you are having problems with a woman, the simplest solution
is just to apologize and compliment her. "See the mustard seed around
the third bowl. I asked them to put it there especially for you,
because I know yellow is your favorite color. I also know from the
Minister's sermon, that in Christianity the mustard seed is
considered a sign of faith, and you are such a loving, giving,
sensitive person of faith. I'm sorry for what I said and did. I was
being playful, but inappropriately so. Will you forgive me? Remember
the Minister said how Christianity stress forgiveness. I could use
some now." I smile as endearingly as I know how, and then pout out my
lower lip and stretch my hand forward, palm up.

As I'm speaking, I'm watching Mery closely, the same way grandpa
told me you should watch a jury to see how they are reacting to your
closing arguments. The shift in her face and mood is fascinating. It
reminds me of a little child I once saw who was crying and yelling
because her mom had taken her off a swing and put her into her
stroller.

During this hysterical eyes-closed crying, a bird started to
sing. The young child partially opened her eyes and saw the bird
flying overhead. Entranced by its movement, she opened her eyes
completely, and began following its flight. Her crying stopped, and
was replaced by a joyous smile at the bird's grace and soaring. The
bird flew on, and disappeared. The child rubbed her eyes, as if
trying to remember what the eyes were doing before seeing the bird,
and why they were wet.

As Mery follows the flight of my words, I can see the anger
melting from her face, replaced by tenderness. Thanks, Dad, for the
advice; thanks, Grandpa for the oratorical and observational skills.

And, most importantly, thanks to me for practicing them, and my different endearing faces and gestures in the mirror.

Mery picks up a mustard seed "'Those who have faith the size of a mustard seed can move mountains.' That was very thoughtful of you. I didn't even notice it. And what you said was beautiful. I'm sorry. I overreacted. I'm being way too sensitive." She shakes her head up and down, then side to side, almost imperceptibly. I assume that means yes I'm forgiven and no she's not angry with me any longer.

"What's the egg for. It reminds me of Easter...a time of new beginnings, re-birth?"

Phew. It looks like she's moving in. Dodged another chasm. I think of the joke Grandpa would use in closing arguments: "The prosecution's case has more holes than a piece of Swiss cheese." So far this Seder is just like Swiss cheese, too--full of holes I'm trying to avoid falling into. I look over at the lamb bone, and wonder, since milk and meat products aren't supposed to mix, if applying a Swiss cheese joke to Passover would be considered kosher.

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I look at the egg. Labeled number 0, next to the first bowl of salt water. I have no idea why it's there, and feel some annoyance at all her questions, especially the ones I don't know the answer to; and also at her making everything once again about her religion. But I've just recovered from one battle, and decide this is clearly not the time to engage in another.

"Sorry, I don't really know. You're probably right. Maybe renewal, rebirth. Like Easter. Like we're trying to do now. May I kiss you?"

"Of course, silly boy." It is soft, timid, tentative on my part, and hers. I think both of us are being cautious, wanting to

regain some structure. I probably was wrong to jump into the middle bowls 4-6--wine, Elija, maror. Let's return to the beginning.

No wonder Ortho John wants more precision, detail, following rules. Johannes is precise, but flighty on a whim, and feels he can do things his way---until he loses his way and gets lost.

"The Seder is supposed to begin with a washing of the hands, to cleanse ourselves and prepare for the feast. This is a way for us to begin anew, to wash away the preceding moments and start afresh, okay."

She nods, and we both get up and go over to the sink, where I fill a bowl with water. She holds out her hands, which I wash tenderly in the water. After, she strokes my hands. The water starts to thaw us, and I can feel a tenderness and warmth returning in both of us. Ah, a ritual that works. Maybe there is something valuable to this tradition, after all. I theatrically stretch out my left hand, palm up, back toward our dining area, saying, "Mery, the feast is ready."

I take her hand and squeeze it. Three times. She squeezes back twice, and I apply substantial pressure, though acting like I'm giving it everything I have. "Let the order begin! We are now officially commencing. Seder in Hebrew means order. So, we have a ritualized evening, which follows a script called the Haggadah, which means tale, or narration. The root essence of the script is freedom from bondage, not just the story of Israel 3000 years ago, but for us today." I feel comfortable and back in control as I say this, as if I were reading from a well-rehearsed legal brief. Structure has returned. Courtesy of me.

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I turn off the lights, and the room is dark except for the spindly red, blue, and yellow flames of the fire licking skyward like

tongues seeking the heavens, and the moon's rays coming through the window.

"It's like the light of the fire and the light of the moon are striving to connect, just like us," I say romantically, and, pointing to the moon, "Lux aeternum. The eternal light. Now all we need is an ark with the Torah inside."

"Aren't you supposed to light some candles?" Mery asks, "and wear a head covering? That's the way it was done when mom took me to one of her friend's Sabbath services when dad was out of town." I feel a sudden swell of frustration, bordering on rage, at her statement. I feel emasculated. Why? Partly because she ignored the romantic, even poetic statement I made about the light. But I'm even more angry because she ignored my Jewish knowledge about the Eternal Light. Instead, her only response is to criticize my Jewish inadequacies. It's like she's recircumcizing me, and the irony is, I don't even care that much about this stupid religion. What's going on? "Fine," I say gruffly. I get up and put on my touring hat. "Satisfied?"

"You don't have to be so angry. I was just asking. And what about the candles?" She's like a relentless prosecutor, yet her voice is smooth and calm, and she's smiling. I don't trust that smile.

"I forgot them, ok. Stop making such a big deal out of it. They're not that important."

"But don't Jews always light candles on holidays, and on your Sabbath?" She probes, still smiling, almost as if she's gleeful at catching me making a mistake.

I take a breath. My anger is not getting me anywhere. Why not just answer. "The whole candle-lighting ritual always seemed silly and pretensions to me. On Shabbat, my grandmothers would light the

candles, hide their eyes with their hands, say the blessing, then remove their hands and act surprised. It never made any sense."

"That sounds like a beautiful ritual. Maybe they cover their eyes as a type of prayer, and then feel joyful at the light which they see when they take their hands away."

Mery's explanation is lovely. A prayer to see light...overcoming sadness, depression; then seeing light. Or maybe it could mean how we, by our actions, hide ourselves from the light.

The whole candle ritual is actually a conundrum that even Ortho John and the Orthodox haven't been able to solve literally. In the normal course of things, the blessing always comes first, then the act. But on the Sabbath, as Ortho John learned in such detail, you aren't supposed to do any work, and lighting candles is considered work. Therefore, the candles are lit, then the eyes are covered and the blessing over the candles is made. Opening the eyes one acts as if a miracle has occurred--oh my gosh, the candles are inexplicably lit. When I visualize my two grandmas' faces, shadowed in darkness, and then as they uncover their eyes, both seeing light and bathed by the twinkling candles' illumination, it doesn't seem at all like a silly, pretentious ritual, as Johannes characterizes it, but rather an endearing, profound, and tender image.

Yes, John, that's it! You're beginning to allow your gentle side to start to come forward.

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"No matter how nice you find the ritual, Mery, there are no candles tonight. And I'm not going to go out into the dark to find some. Can we still proceed or do you feel I've committed some major sin?" I glare at her. "Or if you would like to take the driver's seat once again, and lead the service, then please, be my guest." I stare

at her, consciously not blinking. "Why not let the moon and fire be our two candles, okay?"

"Sorry, I was just curious. Please, please go on." She turns her head away, averting her eyes from mine. I take it is a subservient gesture. She has just had to retreat on the chess board. Finally. I feel like I'm dealing with a stubborn horse, or one of dad's dogs, that is being defiant. Dad always said you can't let them get away with it. They need to learn who the master is. I wonder what he would say about how to deal with this woman with whom I'm planning to spend the rest of my life. He probably would say I'm acting like a wuss, and I shouldn't have encouraged her assertiveness in the first place, and that this type of disobedience cannot be tolerated.

That's inspiring, Johannes, a perfect lesson for Passover, as we celebrate freedom from bondage and slavery. I see you are learning the teachings well.

Oh, John, back to sarcasm again. What happened to your tender side of a few moments ago?

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I'm not sure where we are in the service, and think of consulting my notes, but decide instead, when in doubt, pour a glass of wine. I invite Mery to do the honors. "Mery, it's time for cup number two. Could you refill our glasses?" This seems a timely gesture by which I allow her to stay involved.

"Nice job of pouring, Mery," I compliment her, as I imagine a director would an actress in a movie. Then I add, "Doesn't the Seder seem like a staged play? I feel like I'm back in High School, where I was assistant director of Gilbert and Sullivan's Pirates of Penzance. My job was to make sure all the props were in place, and all the actors happy."

"I didn't know you were involved in theatre. Though it figures you'd want to direct." She continues drinking her wine.

"Actually, I wanted to be in the play, but because of the quality of my singing voice, they thought it would be better to have me 'help' direct. It felt awkward, in some ways, like I was part of the play, but really wasn't, because I was an outsider watching the play. But I loved the music." I take a quick gulp of wine and start singing, "I am the very model of a modern major general. . . ."

Mery claps, and asks, "Did you ever want to act?" as we continue drinking from the second glass.

"I actually did, though in non-singing roles. One year I played Jean in Ionesco's Rhinoceros, a refined young man, touting the virtues of will-power... of course until I turned into a rhinoceros!"

"Ah, the beast within you? The Nazis? Theatre of the absurd, my favorite," she giggles.

"Indeed. The beast within all of us? What a woman of culture." I drink some more. "And next came the role of a life time--for a high school senior-- when a major touring company came to Kansas City. I auditioned, and was selected for a non-singing sword carrier in an Italian opera. You should have seen how gracefully--though wordlessly-- I pranced across the stage." I smile at her.

"So, you either direct the play, or you run across the stage with some sharp instrument in front of you--a sword or a rhinoceros horn? Sounds slightly obscene, doesn't it?" She says this good-naturedly, and takes another sip.

"Touché! If I may, in the spirit of all worthy actors, engage in a little improvisation, let me offer a toast: 'Give me some wine, fill full. I drink to the general joy of the whole table, and to our dear friends Banquo and Elijah, whom we miss. Would they were here.'" We

clink glasses. Then I add a further toast, "Viva le feminine, viva il buon vino." We clink and drink again.

I feel both like the director and an actor in a play. I enjoy the sense of stage presence and theatricality, and like giving orders and directing the show. I have a script, but I also have the freedom to depart from it at will.

It is, in some ways, a perfect role for you, Johannes, and for me, with our reflective minds. Even as we are actors in a play, there is a constant split, and we are also outside the play, watching, observing, directing the action.

Mery may be right about me after all, including the sharp pointed object that protrudes in front of me as I cross the stage, even now, during the Seder performance. If I were lying flat on the group, she would see a "tent" in my pants, another Mountain she could climb.

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My arousal is short-lived, however, as Mery interrupts my toasts by saying, "I called mom today to tell her about our engagement. She says she is really excited for us and can't wait to meet you."

"Great. Let's plan a trip to Seattle." Why not? She's not going to meet my folks, that's for sure.

"Well, maybe that's not such a good idea, right now."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad didn't take the news so well."

"What do you mean?" I repeat myself, flustered and angry.

"Well, when he heard mom all excited, he got on the phone to find out what was going on. I mean, he likes Jews. He says they are blessings who will bring forth the return of the Messiah, as it says in Revelations."

"So? What's the problem?"

"Well, he just doesn't like individual Jews. I was never allowed to date someone Jewish, and he's not exactly happy that I'm now engaged to one."

I feel fury. At her dad. And then I wonder, somewhere in the back of my mind, at Mery's choices in lovers. The rebellious drug dealer in high school that her dad hated; the older art dealer guy, trying to find the good father; Al, the black guy, whom her racist father hated; and now she's chosen a Jew. Did she choose me for me, or to get revenge on and rebel against her father?

All I can say is she didn't choose you for very good reasons, and frankly, you didn't chose her for very spiritual ones, either.

Motivations are complex, Johannes and John, not black and white. Perhaps, among other things, she also chose you to validate the more tolerant side of her mother. It's interesting how when we are in a dark space, we often attribute only the worst motivations to others. Holding a more nuanced view, though more accurate, it also more difficult. That's still hard for me to do, too.

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I take a swallow of wine. Mery does the same. The only noise in the room is the crackling of the fire. Finally, I say, "We have to make our own lives, Mery. We can't be dependent on what anyone else says."

She snuggles into me. "That's so wise and brave. I love and adore you soooo much. You are my white knight and king protector"

"Now, let's see if we can't get back to the order of the Seder. "Time for more hand-washing. But before we do so, you need to hide the afikomen." I break a piece of matzah from around the matzah ball soup, into three pieces, and give her the middle piece, thankful to have something structured to fall back on.

"What's an afikomen, and what do you mean, hide? And for that matter, why do you all eat matzahs?"

"Full of questions, aren't we?" Which child is that saying "you all?" Wicked and stupid at the same time? "Matzah is unleavened bread, symbolic of the haste with which we Jews had to flee from big mean Pharaoh." I feel like I'm lecturing to a small, ignorant child. Matzah is also symbolic of trying to curtail an overlarge, puffed up ego. I wonder how that might apply to you, Johannes?

"Hide. Like an Easter egg. It's a left over ritual from the Temple days when the paschal/Passover meal ended with the tasting of the paschal lamb. But at the Seder, as you can see, we have a real lamb bone, and a real roasted lamb." I point to bowl 7. "The whole afikomen thing never really made any intellectual sense to me. But, hey, maybe it was just an excuse so they could give us some geld--some money! What I do know is that at the end of the meal whoever finds it--in this case that would have to be me!-- gets a prize."

"But what if I hide it so well you never find it?" She gives an impish smile.

"Well, in my family, we would ransom its return with the promise of a gift. So one or the other of us will win, that's for sure! Then at the end of the meal, we both get to eat it." I cover my face with my hands, but keep my eyes open. She walks around, lifts up some pillows, goes into the bedroom, returns, and I see that she sticks the matzah in her back jean pocket.

She sits back down. "Okay, you can peek now."

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"When you asked about the matzah, technically, we're supposed to eat only unleavened bread. We were also supposed to start the preparation for Passover yesterday by searching for and clearing

the house of Chametz, which is leavened bread. Anything that is one of the primary grains, which has been fermented in contact with water for eighteen minutes or more--must be removed because it's considered impure."

Why are you using the word "we, Johannes?" Certainly you're not saying Mery should have done this? Is it taking too much responsibility to say "I" should have done this? Are you saying "we Jews." Dr. Lisbet forced me to think about precision in how "we" refer to "ourselves" and I to myself.

"That sounds technical and legalistic. What's the purpose? Is it a symbolic action, to help you focus internally on cleansing yourself, like we do at Lent. Giving up candy or something like that?"

She's actually making an interesting point. I hadn't ever thought about why we go through that ritual. But I feel annoyed. First, she's making me think too much; secondly, I'm not able to make much forward progress in the Seder because she's constantly interrupting me; and third, I hear an implicit if not explicit dig at my religion and the law in general. I want to counter attack, but that would only delay things. Ovid, give me a gold star.

"I don't know the deeper meaning, but it's an interesting thought, my wise red-haired Queen." Now shut up, please. I hurry on, using my words to hold back hers.

"The point I'm trying to make is that we're in a dilemma, kind of like the candle-lighting, though that was God caused; this is human caused." I smile and point to me. Who says I'm defensive? "We should have done the search yesterday. Therefore, by not doing it, we broke the ritual; yet, to do it now is to break the order.

"To try to rectify our, my, mistake, is to 'sin' against the ritual. Do you see the challenge?" I said that rather cleverly. Bolingbroke would empathize with my problem, I'm sure.

Mery doesn't. She smiles, but then probes again, almost like a further attack. "This is where the letter of the law seems to violate the spirit, wouldn't you agree? It seems to me to call breaking a mere ritual a sin is trivializing sin. What is important is working on our bad habits. To not work on them because it's 'too late,' or because it violates some artificial order, means there's something fundamentally wrong with the order."

Aren't I supposed to be the director of this play? My actress isn't following the script. I like the content of what she is saying-- to me this ritual had always seemed silly, too. But who is she, Miss Rules and Regulations, the one who is afraid to ask a waitress for jam if it means violating the order of things, to now proclaim my religion is fundamentally flawed? Do I counter her assault, or move forward? Ovid?

"There are four types of children at the Seder--wise, wicked, silent, and stupid. You are clearly the wise child." Now. Please be silent.

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The next part of the service is another ritual cleansing. I, we need it, but I don't want to get up and go into the kitchen. I suggest we can use the bowl closest to us, on index card 1, which is filled with salt water, next to which I have placed some celery.

"En garde, mademoiselle." I hand Mery a celery stalk and we duel briefly. I miss a parry--from fear of hurting her?-- and she ends up stabbing me in the heart. "Ouch, good-bye cruel world." I keel over, and she throws herself on me.

"No, Romeo, no. Oh, it is all so absurd after all."

I turn over and we laughingly hug. She doesn't pull back.
Excellent. The prissy virgin Queen Elizabeth of this past week is
starting to loosen up.

"Why is this night different from all other nights?" I ask.

Mery giggles and playfully pokes me again with the celery
"Because I got to stab you rather than vice-versa?" A second dip?

"Clever, oh Red Queen Mery." Is that bloody Queen Mery, who
preceded virgin Queen Elizabeth? Or Alice's mean Red Queen. Either
way, careful, Johannes, you don't realize what you're in for.

She raises her celery stalk above me and asks me to kneel before
her, which I do.

"Or maybe, given the question of why is this night different, I
should say because it's one of the only times when the Queen not only
knights a knight" I point to her celery sword, which she dramatically
lays on my proferred shoulder, "but actually is a knight-- you, Oh
Queen, are the Kierkegaardian knight of faith." I stroke her hair.
"And a red knight at that." On a red night? When you will see the sea
parting, Johannes. I dig my thumbnail into my index finger, hard. I'm
angry at myself--and Johannes. Why do I want to join in his silly
sophomoric, barbed bard pun fest? I thought that was behind me. I'm as
pathetic as he is. **Feeling like a royally ruled reflexive pathetic**
pawn, John? Old habits die hard, for the swirling subconscious sea
surrounds us all. But some playful punning shouldn't be too primitively
punished.

"And you, of course" and she taps my shoulder again as I kneel
and bow before her, "are my white knight. But that is true tonight and
every night."

We both laugh at our cleverness as we stick our celery swords in the salt water bowl, and eat a few bites. Then we wash our hands for the second time, though this time in the salt water bowl, a slight deviation from the ritual, but one I've approved.

"There's a lot of hand-washing in the Seder, isn't there?"

"So it seems. Out damn spot. Heh heh, A little water clears us of this deed. Does it work, Lady M?" I think I'm being clever, but she doesn't smile. "Get it? Lady M. Mery. Macbeth?"

She still doesn't smile, but merely says, enunciating each word, particularly the first "I've done nothing to feel guilty about. Lady Macbeth's not exactly a great role model, and I don't like to be called her name, even by implication."

When will I learn to keep silent when things are going well? When I need an orgasm, I try too hard, and can't trust myself. My humor, though funny to me, just doesn't go over that well.

"Sorry. Nothing meant. Just a joke." But it's not just my problem. The lady doth protest too much. My psychology professor would say that when someone says so strongly they have nothing to feel guilty about, they're feeling really guilty. But I know it is not the right time to share this wisdom.

She's silent. I'm silent. There is a small crackle from the fire.

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he finally breaks the stillness and asks, somewhat timidly, "Is the salt water symbolic of the ocean?" Then adds, with annoyance, "or am I allowed to ask questions without being given permission by the director?" She gives a feigned flourish, as if bowing down to me, a vassal to a lord.

I try to ignore her tone, to brush it off like an annoying fly. Here we go again. I need to be careful how I respond. "Of course you are, and that's a wonderful question." I reply, magnanimously. "In this case, however, the Red Sea is not part of the ocean and isn't salty. This bowl is symbolic of the salty tears the Israelites cried because they were in bondage." I smile, then realize the smile might appear condescending. Then I think that not smiling might look harsh and judgmental. I'm not sure what to do, but it doesn't seem to matter, because she is upset again, whining,

"Don't I feel like an idiot. Sorry. I guess I was way off base. I should just keep silent and let you tell me everything."

There is truth in what she says, but I know that's not what I should say. "No, no, my grandfather always said you never learn unless you ask." I realize this might sound patronizing, too, like I'm her parent or teacher encouraging her to speak up. I feel tongue-tied, uncertain what the right words are to comfort her.

Johannes, one answer is right before your eyes, though out of ignorance, you don't see it. I can tell you from first hand experience that the Red Sea is indeed salty, in fact, one of the saltiest bodies of water in the world. And it is an inlet of the Indian Ocean. Perfect symmetry and merging of your two answers lies ahead: weeping salty tears in a salty ocean.

She smiles vaguely, and takes another swallow of wine. As she bends her head down to do so, more of her vast cleavage is revealed. She really does look lovely in the reflected fire and moonlight. I'm not sure what to say. Then I remember an interesting piece of information I read this week. "Do you know why water turns red?"

"Tell me, oh intellectual fountain. I sit ready to learn at the foot of the master."

"Red tides occur when microscopic phytoplankton reproduce quickly in large numbers, giving water a reddish brown hue. And why do they turn red? Certain marine invertebrates, a jellyfish-like creature use a red fluorescent light-- wave lengths of light-- to lure prey which are attracted to the twitching lights, and then become tangled in the tentacles and pierced with paralyzing toxins. Sounds like a red light district, huh?" Or, I wonder, what Mery is doing to Johannes?

She doesn't even smile, but just counters, "Does your explanation offer anything to help make the Passover more spiritual?"

"I guess not. But I thought it was interesting."

Then she begins to pontificate. "I've heard intellectual explanations from dad that the red comes from the mountains around Edom, which have a 'ruddy' complexion. I've also heard it's not supposed to be called the Red Sea, but the Reed Sea, and that there may have been a mistranslation of the Hebrew words. And, frankly, none of that interests me at all. I can play that game, but it misses the point completely, doesn't it? It's not about intellectually explanations of the sea's color; it's about the moving message, the feeling. Again, why don't you make sure you read ee cummings? When I was a child, the name conjured up for me the blood of the Egyptians writHing and dying as they met their death."

First she tries to one-up me intellectually then she criticizes me for using my intellect and not feeling, then she sympathizes with the Jew's enslavers. I can't win with her. I wonder if she isn't secretly jealous I went to Stanford and she went to Berkeley, and now I'm going to Harvard. She's constantly tearing me down. I could point this out to her, but she'd just deny and attack harder, telling me I was being elitist. This path is a game I can't win. What do I want? I look at her cleavage. I need to stay focused on the prize, the afikomen. Clearly, if I'm going to win, I have to change strategies. This current direction is not going well at all.

Then I remember again what Dad told me-- apologize or compliment her. It doesn't make any difference if it makes no sense. I look once again at her cleavage, and my heart melts as my lingham rises. I'll try anything. But since this time I really have nothing to apologize for, I'll start with a compliment.

"You really have such beautiful eyes."

"I've told you, without a mirror, no one can see their eyes. So, I can't see my eyes; and in this dark light, I'm not sure you can either. Don't try to disarm me by changing the subject and trying to charm me." Her words say it's not working, but I can see her anger is lessening and I am regaining terra firma.

"I'm not trying to charm you. I'm telling the truth. Let me be your mirror. You are a beautiful woman, and your passionate championing for those who are in pain only makes you more beautiful-inside and out."

"Darn you." She smiles. "It's hard to stay angry at you when you go on a charm offensive. I don't like how quickly you can change my mood."

All right, Dad, this is working very well. I'm willing to go to the next level, even though I have nothing to apologize for, I'll do it anyway.

"I'm sorry.. you're right. What I..."

She holds up her hand and interrupts me. "Say no more, kind sir, my gallant white knight. No need to qualify that statement. I like the way it sounds. 'You're right.' Music to my ears. I'm liking this service more and more!" She looks at me playfully and sweetly. "May I give you a kiss?"

Finally, some forward movement again. "Why yes, of course." And as she leans over to kiss me I whisper, "You're right you're right, you're right." And with each vocalization she kisses my cheeks and eyes more fervently! I love it: A new aphrodisiac, almost as good as the Song of Songs, which I now add to the slowly heating up kindling:

"Behold, you are beautiful, my love. Your eyes are doves behind your veil, your lips like a scarlet thread. My beloved, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes. Please turn aside so I may find the strength to continue." She smiles, more genuinely and actually moves closer and cuddles up next to me. Ah, Song of Songs, thank you. A reliable, well-rehearsed script I can always fall back on.

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To have this evening proceed to a fitting climax is going to take all my resources: Ovid, the Song of Songs, wine. I may even have to help her indulge in her little fantasy. Somehow I have to arouse her to a place where she allows our sex life to recommence. This is like a bad cosmic joke that needs to be corrected. I, who want all women, sexually, agree to commit to just one woman, and she decides that she no longer wants sex, and maybe not even any physical contact. That's

not acceptable. I need to break through this barrier tonight, and if I can't then to ask for my ring back. Enough patience.

I take both her hands in mine, and squeeze them, especially applying pressure in her palms, where she likes to feel bound. My actions have the desired effect, and she kisses me back, passionately. Almost too much so, as she gives me a juicy wine-induced kiss which is so sloppy and messy that I have to will myself to stay consciously connected to her and not pull back. Finally, it is too disgusting, so I take one hand off hers, and dip it into the wine bowl. She starts to say something, but I place my finger on her lips, which has the effect of silencing her. "What divine lips" I murmur, as she licks the wine off my finger.

I keep the pressure on the other hand. She hollows her cheeks, and begins sucking my finger further into her mouth. As she does so, I moan, in faux passion, and trying to be somewhat subtle, start to move my lips down her neck and toward the top of her fabulous cleavage, a shadowy hollow between two fully ripened pomegranates, bursting forth. Shadow and fruit have been beckoning me all night.

While my left hand still presses on hers, and my lips nibble my way south, I remove my right finger from her mouth, dip it again into the wine, and start to place it back in her mouth. I feel like a high-wire juggler, with three tasks going at the same time of varying levels of complexity, pressure and motion—hard and circular on her hand; with medium force in and out of her sucking lips; soft and up and down with my lips.

Johannes, do you realize that what you're doing is a disgusting perversion of the Passover Seder? I've learned in the Rebbe's class that the reason we dip our fingers in the wine after the recitation of each plague, and put a drop on our plate, is so that our joy is lessened and we feel empathy for the suffering of the Egyptians.

You're making Mery's mouth and body the plate, and using the wine to increase your bodily joy. That's pathetic, and so are you. **John has learned the importance of empathy toward one's enemy in the Rebbe's class, and yet he uses this knowledge to chastise Johannes. Why does it seem that as we become wiser, we often use that wisdom to beat others over the head who are not being as loving, wise and empathic as we feel they should be? This is something I know I need to be careful about, and watch out for in myself. I guess it's just part of the process. Each new step of wisdom has its own set of pitfalls.**

She continues to sigh and allows my lips freedom to roam over the tops of her breasts. Between nibbles and kisses and little child-like sucks, I say, "Oh my beloved, where is the bag of myrrh that lies between your breasts, fairest of the fair. Much better is your love than wine." I remove my hand from her mouth, dip it once again into the wine bowl, and this time place the wine directly on her breasts, then kiss it off. Even though I'm still a couple of inches away from her nipples, I decide it's ok to say, "I drink my wine with thy milk, Oh maiden." Then I lift my head up and look at her. Her eyes are closed, her hair disheveled, some strands across her forehead, some on the brown pillow, a few have found their way to the table cloth, flowing red on the white sheet. She looks like an angelic paschal lamb, ready to be consumed.

I try to decide which lines of the script to say next. If she would open her eyes, I could say, "I stare deeply into your dove-like eyes, fair damsel." I guess I could say, "I stare shallowly into your veiled-covered eyes," but decide now is not the time for a poor attempt at humor. Keep it simple, Zeke said.

"I remember the first night I met you, beloved, and you served me. I asked you for water. You gave me milk. You were never cut out to be a waitress." I smile at the memory. She smiles, too, but keeps

her eyes closed, and pulls me closer to her. She served me then, she will service me tonight. A full cycle on the night of a full moon.

During the middle of her bloody cycle... and yours.

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For a moment, I decide to just rest at second base, before resuming my base running. I place my right ear on top of her right breast. I can hear her heart beating rapidly. But if she were to say something, I wouldn't be able to hear her. So I turn my head and place the left ear on her heart. Now I can't hear her heart, but I hear her breathing.

I have a caretaking urge that runs through me. I remember a story mom would tell, and I repeat it to Mery, speaking softly. "Once, when I was about eight, dad had to go out of town on business, and my brother and sister were spending the night at my grandparents. I had a bad dream, and ran crying into mom's room. She brought me into her bed and I fell right asleep. The next morning she told me what a wonderful boy I was. She said that all night I lay next to her, and patted her back, as if I were trying to reassure her that everything was going to be ok." I put my hand on Mery's hair and stroke it.

She begins to purr, in that way I love, and whispers back, "What a compassionate little boy you were, and what a wonderful man you've grown into, so tender and considerate." She pats my back with her free left hand. "Everything is going to be ok, and I love you so much."

I'd forgotten that story. Thanks, Johannes, for reminding me. It actually creates some optimism in me, too, that there is that compassionate side buried somewhere beneath us all.

As I listen carefully to her words, I think I can also hear the sound of the ocean's waves breaking upon the sand. I close my eyes and feel happy. The Passover story is going even better than if I'd written and directed it myself. I, the leading man, am snuggled between and

resting peacefully on my beloved's breasts. She has the whitest breasts of any girl I've ever seen. "In the beginning was the breast. And the breast was with woman and the breast was woman." Her nipples are pink, soft, yielding and I let myself nuzzle into them.

I know now I can make a commitment to being with just one woman for the rest of my life. Rather than many women with many different types of lovemaking, she's one woman but within her are many women.

Aren't each of us, all of us, many variations of the One?

I feel like I want to spend the rest of my life lying next to her running my hands through her hair, listening to her softly breathing, her heart's steady beat, the pounding surf, the crackling of the fire, the smell of the soup. I feel so secure and sheltered, so warm and comfortable. I want to lie with her forever. I feel a complete peace in my bones."

This would indeed be another perfect ending for his script. Boy meets girl over matzah ball soup at a deli; there are some problems and tensions which are addressed and handled, more or less. He has a few breakthroughs, asks a couple of questions about the meaning of life. They decide, at the Passover Seder, with the smell of matzah ball soup once again in the background, completing the cycle, to forge a new path together, doing good deeds and loving and supporting each other. The end.

Johannes truly is feeling peace, and believes that it will last forever. That is how he intends his script to unfold. From one perspective, it's fascinating, from another, frightening how quickly emotions change in ways that are not part of the script. Within the hour, the entire scene will have terrifyingly shifted.

I decide to resume my attack on her nipples from a different direction. I re-stick two fingers into the wine bowl, and, lifting her sweater from her waist, I let some drip onto her belly. "Your navel is

a rounded bowl that never lacks mixed wine, Mery my love." I lick some of the wine from her navel, as I allow my right palm to gently move under her sweater, still keeping the pressure of my left hand strong on her right hand. "You are as stately as a palm tree which I climb to lay hold of its branches. Oh, may your breasts be like ripe juicy, grapes on the clusters of the vine."

This would be a great cue for her to have fed me some grapes. I think of making a joke, but realize it not only wouldn't be funny, it would also interrupt the forward movement if we were to stop and feed each other grapes. I continue my upward assault. My palm now completely covers her breast and nipple. Second base at last, once again. " And the scent of your breast is like....like apples," I debate, and then decide, ok, I can add a little levity here. "Actually, like the apple pie we ate yesterday. . .we continue to be surrounded by the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge in our Garden of Eden!" She smiles. . . at the memory? The allusion?

Now what?

Third base is the natural progression. But I'm afraid if I go too far to fast with her, the whole house of cards will collapse—and she will return to her virgin Queen Elizabeth self. And I'll once again have to be eating bitter herbs and answering stupid Passover questions. I'm also worried that in order to move toward third base, I'll have to unbutton her jeans, which means removing my left hand from hers. For the first time, I realize how useful that ridiculous fantasy of hers could be. I wish we were on her bed, then I could use her scarves to bind her hands, and proceed at my leisure. She likes that, and it would help me move forward.

As if by divine intervention, mirabile dictu, she seems to sense what I'm thinking, and asks, "Did you bring any ties? Or I may have a couple scarves in my bag."

"You just lie there, peaceful little angel. I'll be right back."

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I remember singing the song "Dayenu" -enough at seder's when I was a child. The idea is that at each stage, we should feel pleased and satisfied with what we have received. Johannes, why not stop while you're ahead? Why do you keep pushing for more? There is no dayenu in your Passover. More is never enough.

When I return, she is still lying in the same position. It's as if she's already bound. What a strange, complex creature. She's a passive lamb ready to sacrifice herself to me; a spiritual body-fearing prude; a nude model; a Joplin-lover dancing without restraint; a fearful little girl unwilling to ask for jam. Who is she? Well, right now, I see her as a temple prostitute, a pagan goddess ready to sacrifice herself in a fertility rite.

The fire has burned down to red glowing coals. They remind me of mom's carbuncle ring, huge semi-precious red stones. I wonder how one word can mean such different things. I remember my Latin teacher saying the word means little coal because ancient people thought the fiery red stone glowed in the dark like burning coal. Yet it also means an inflammation of the skin and deeper openings for the discharge of pus and sloughing of dead skin. It's hard enough when people are complex and multi-dimensional. Somewhere I want simplicity and order. But it's even worse when the words that we use to create order, are riddled with complexity.

I agree with you. Why should there be good and evil, a beautiful red precious stone and pus and death? Glowing warmth from fiery coal, and that which can burn our flesh mercilessly. Why not just good and beauty, God?

I stare at her breasts. They, too, are complex. They are there to nurture me. But I don't just want them passively and submissively

offered up to me. I want to have to uncover them and capture them through my own efforts. I want to feel called to them, letting my yearning and tension mount, while I seek to resist the urge, as if they are sirens beckoning me, nurturing yet dangerous at the same time. I want to be almost out of control, but overcoming obstacles and staying in control at the same time. It's a strange dance, and it's all in my mind.

I rock her from side to side, the silk ties in my hands, and her breasts begin to undulate, like ocean waves. Better. Now they are elusive, luring. I want them, but how do you capture a wave? I know I need to be careful, I don't want to crash on their shore. Like being in the presence of a mountain--a mountain of myrrh--whose summit I can barely discern, yet which calls to me, and I feel I must climb, but the mountain's height and slope require such an effort that in my desire and attempt to scale it, master it, gain control, one false move and I may crash down and lose all control.

Breasts as waves; breasts as mountains. Nose as mountain. Tented lingham as a mountain. Johannes, you need to keep your overactive mind and metaphors simpler and more consistent.

Can I capture this elusiveness with a picture? I set down the ties. Pick up and aim Mr. Cannon at her closed-eyed form. Click.

She stays passive, as if she's asleep. But her breasts, without my help, are once again motionless, dripping off her ribs, and not very interesting. I roll her over, so they squish together. Better. More erotic. Click. But still not right. She lets out a little noise, to show she is aware of what's going on, I guess, but still doesn't open her eyes.

I'm not sure how to capture what I want. It feels more difficult than the first time I took nude pictures of her. Then, anything I shot was wonderful. And that was a miraculous session. Maybe I'm spoiled,

but how do you top that? It's like a new restaurant, the first time you go there, you are just happy to get a seat. Then you see where the best seat with the best view is. Eventually, after several times, you get that seat. And that night, there is a beautiful sunset over the ocean. The food is perfect. Now, each time you go back, anything less than that feels inadequate. A lesser table; if there are clouds blocking the sun, if the ocean waves aren't as interesting. And even if by some miracle, the exact conditions are the same, it's still not as magical and dramatic as the first time.

Hmmm, dayenu?

I realize I'm asking a lot of life--and her breasts. I want them in just the right light, with the right amount of cleavage. I want to be tantalized, but also not too much hidden from me. I want the angle of her nipples to be upright, but the breast full enough so there is something worthy going after, yet not hanging too much.

"Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies.' Let's sit up for a moment." She resists, passively, but lets me sit her up. I take part of the table cloth, and cover the lower part of her breast. "Here, hold this. You look like a virgin in white. Beautiful." Click. "Let me adjust the lighting. There, now the shadows are enhancing your beautiful body." Click. I move her arms, letting them cradle the breasts like banks of a river guiding lawless waters. It's interesting that if I don't create the cleavage, they'll just hang anarchically toward both ribs in an equilateral triangle from her neck. Click. I now fold her arms under her breasts, pushing them up like a damn holding back a flood. "Yes. Perfect." Click. "When the shadows flee away, I will go my way to the mountain of myrrh." Her eyes are still closed. I wonder if they would have that veiled, glazed look if she opened them. I pull the table

cloth down, letting her nipples rise like the night's full moon. Click.

"And to the hill of frankincense." Click.

She lies back down. "Please, no more pictures. Come to me."

I'm not done yet, but I'm willing to pause for intermission.

I set Mr. Cannon down.

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She throws her arms around me. I can tell she's really happy that

I got the ties, and now the stage is set for her little La Causa
passion play. While she's hugging me, I notice that I'm starting to
feel manipulated, like I'm an actor in her drama, rather than she
being one in mine. She's pulling me tighter to her to get what she
wants, just as I often hug women as a first step toward getting what I
want. Her hug feels like a noose, trapping me. I want to stop and make
a note in my journal---but realize it's in the bedroom, and fear losing
the forward momentum by going to get it. But I'd like to make a note to
explore when hugs feel nice, and when they feel ensnaring and
confining. What determines that? Time, place, person, length of hug,
mood? Too many thoughts. And not a time to write them in my journal.
I need to rewrite this script so I feel it's mine again.

I caress her hair, "By the fire's embers, your locks looks like
purple flowing tresses." I stroke her arm to continue soothing her,
and, as I begin to tie her right hand to the table, I quote from Omar
Khayyam, one of mom's favorite poets, "Here with a loaf of bread
beneath the bough; a flask of wine, a book of verse and thee, beside
me singing in the wilderness, and wilderness is paradise now." I finish
tying her left hand. Firmly.

Johannes, you have the Seder backwards. First comes the bondage,
then freedom, then the wilderness, then, so I'm told, the Promised Land
after years of wandering You somehow feel that bondage and wilderness

and paradise all go together—legally, spiritually, metaphorically. To say the least, you are out of order.

I reach down, remove her sandals, and my own, and begin massaging her feet. Then, slowly, I run my hand up her legs, along the surface of her jeans, repeating the very words from the Fairmont: "O queenly maiden, how graceful are your feet in sandals, and your rounded thighs are like jewels, the work of a master hand." When I reach her waist, I unbutton the pants. She gives a little twist--resistance?--and starts to say something, so I place my lips on hers. She kisses me back. While continuing the kiss, I place my fingers into the wine, and as quickly as I remove my lips, replace them with my fingers. She gives them a kiss, and is once again silent and passive.

I return to her jeans. This time there is no resistance and she even raises her buttocks to help me roll them down her legs, along with her granny undies. I make sure to pretend I don't feel the aphikomen in the back pocket, although I'm already finding and uncovering the prize.

A funny image of second grade fills my mind---the girl I liked was on a teeter totter. When her partner was on the ground, and her side was up in the air, I ran over, and held the teeter totter up so she couldn't get down again. She screamed, I think playfully. Her animation excited me. I gave her a kiss on her butt, then quickly ran away to play tag with some friends. As I look down at Mery with her sweater pulled up over her breasts, her blue jeans down around her ankles, her hands tied to the table, I want to burst out laughing at the bizarre mating rituals of my life.

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"Gofuranus."

"Huh?" She's speaking quietly, my wrong ear is facing her, and I'm down by her feet, trying to remove her jeans. Is she asking me to do something to a furry anus? Go for her anus? Could she possibly have

known what I was remembering? Is this a new base she's proposing?

Gopher anus? I have no idea what she's saying.

I ask her to repeat it, which she does. This time I hear the J: gofurJanus. But that doesn't help much. Why would she bring up Janus, the two-faced Roman god? Does she want my head to be in two places on her body at once? Finally, she enunciates loudly, and forcefully, "Go for Janis. . .her tape.'" It's like she's barking an order.

Ugh. The tape is in my car and it's cold outside. I try to think of an excuse, but then I remember her passionate reaction in the car to Joplin's singing. I realize that even though it seems incongruous and even a violation of the Passover Hagaddah to play this type of music during the Seder, it actually may enhance the script that I now have in mind. I pull her sweater down, swing her legs onto the unused part of the table cloth, fold some of it over her to cover her groin, give her a kiss, and leave.

I step through the door, which has been left slightly ajar so Elijah can enter. I think that now Janus would make sense. The Roman god of gates and doors. The guardian of new beginnings, worshipped at the celebration of marriages. And I vaguely remember something about his ability to see both forward and backward aided him in the pursuit of the nymph. All nymphs? What a great skill that would be for me, at least in my former woman-chasing life!

And what a great skill that would be for me in your future life. I'm working to see you, Johannes, backward. I wish I could see the future more clearly, forward. Janus, worshipped at transitions, both beginnings, which you think you're in--as you anticipate your upcoming marriage--; and endings, which I know is actually what's happening.

When the air hits me, and my bare feet touch the cold ground, I feel a shiver coming on, which frightens me. Three times in my life, outside at night, I have experienced an uncontrollable shivering and

shaking through my body. It's how I imagine an epileptic seizure. It's as if my body temperature drops precipitously, and a trembling quiver seizes my body. I can't move or talk. I will myself not to have one of those episodes. I debate whether I should run back into the house and put on the sandals, and a sweater. I hurry back in, knowing that if I think too long, the coldness will take over, and I will be frozen motionless until someone comes to put warm clothing or blankets around me.

My teeth are chattering when I return, and I can't talk. I merely pat Mery on the head, put on two pair of socks, my sandals, and two sweaters, and sit for a moment by the burning coals. When I feel my body stop shaking, I once again venture forth into the night, hurry to the car, find the tape recorder, and reenter, leaving the door still a crack open for Elijah. I think of making a joke: "Hi, it's Elijah, anybody here" and then partially close the door after me. That's the closest we'll actually get to his coming. What a pipedream people live.

I place the recorder by Mery, turn on the music, and rush into the bathroom to run warm water over my hands and face. For some reason, and contrary to my normal habit, I don't want to look at my face in the mirror.

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The music is loud and I can see Mery's body, by the moon and embers' light, engaged in a horizontal, hypnotic, writhing dance that looks exactly like her flickering shadowed strobe-lit dancing at the Fillmore Now her hands are above her head, bound to a table. At the Fillmore, they were raised and bound to the heavens by some unknown force. Her hair is disheveled as she twists her neck from side to side, her belly undulating and slithering to and fro, her lovely full breasts swaying and jiggling, up and down, sideways, even her legs and feet

tapping and twisting. If it weren't for the sounds of Joplin's voice, I would think I am watching a silent film. A pornographic one, at that.

Heh baby

Everybody over at the Avalon Ballroom in San

Francisco Bay

Everybody have have have a lot of fun I know

I can tell you that they're feeling good

I have no idea where to begin the feast.

And then I realize that I'm not sure which feast I want to begin more: to finish with the not yet done Seder; or turn full attention to her. Even though she looks ready for the taking--finally!--and even though I desperately need an orgasm--I haven't had one since last night--I notice a part of me holding back, watching, and not wanting to enter the play. The script is going well, but I can't help compare it to that magical night at the Fairmont, a mutual dance between the two of us. Tonight seems more of a one-sided monologue, each one of us with a part, but dancing alone, like at the Fillmore, a corny, sophomoric, bizarre ritual--a theatre of the absurd-- rather than a passion play.

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"Kiss me" she instructs.

I bend to kiss her chastely on the lips, not liking being told how to proceed in my Seder play. Is this the new assertiveness she and her therapist have been working on? It's what I say I want, but do I really? She opens her mouth wide and begins a tongue-washing, face-licking kiss.

"Damsel, indeed, let's be careful to keep this banquet ordered and ritualized. We certainly wouldn't want it to end with one of us saying, 'Stand not upon the order of your going but go at

once.' Let us proceed in an orderly manner." As I say this, I am able to extract my lips from her sea of foamy saliva.

I turn the music off. "So my Queen, do you want to hear more about the Seder and the Jews escape from bondage?" I point to the ties, and start to loosen them. I really don't like the idea of her being tied up, it just seems wrong to me. Aren't I now embodying the Passover story, helping to set her free from her restraints, giving her give more control, not forcing either me or the Seder upon her, but letting her feel involved.

Mery looks at me with confusion and surprise and asks quietly, though I can see she is flushed and filled with passion, "What are you doing?"

"Excellent question, wise child. I'm freeing you," I smile.

"Turn the music back on, and don't touch the ties. And I am not a child." She is not smiling, and her tone is restrained, though demanding, her face looking shocked, even angry.

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"When you get angry at me, do you know that your eyes crinkle at the sides? Very cute." She looks at me, startled but seemingly less angry, as if caught off guard. My reply is apparently unexpected; I'm sure she is used to someone escalating the fight. I'm keeping my cool, Ovid. But I know I'm just beginning. She will not get away with talking to me like that. I am going to come from an unexpected direction for my attack, and I want her disarmed.

"Last night, when I went into the bathroom to relieve, ah, help, ah, self-serve, I used some of your pictures." I stare straight at her, and she averts her eyes, looking down. "I was struck by one in Golden Gate Park. You had a large hickey above your right breast. I know it wasn't from me, because I'd just met you the night before. Who was it from?" She says nothing, and I can tell she's on the defensive.

I press forward. "Was it from one of your little La Causa fantasy sessions with someone?"

She looks up at me, but she's not ashamed, as I expected, rather she's angry. "When I told you about my desires, I did it because I felt I could trust you. I let myself be vulnerable with you, not so you could throw it back at me. But I'm not embarrassed by what I feel, even if you want to make it dirty. I thought you were more of a gentleman."

She's making a good counterattack, but still hasn't answered my question. I'm not deflected. "Who?"

"Why do you care?"

"Who?"

"It was James. No, I never told him my fantasy. He did it because he was jealous I was still modeling, particularly my private sessions with Pierre. He didn't want me to continue showing my body to anyone." She laughs, but it is not a pleasant laugh. "Anyone except him and his perverted friends. He wanted to embarrass me into stopping, so his mark on me was not from love, but meanness. With you, I felt your passion was from love. I gave myself fully to you. And after our evening at the Fairmont, anyone else would have made me feel dirty and vulnerable for what I did. But you didn't. I thought you were so different, a . . . a . . . a Jimmy Stewart, a mid-Western gentleman who would never hurt me." She looks at me and anger shifts to near tears, as her face contorts. "What happened to you? What happened to that kind person?"

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I reach over slowly and methodically to put some bitter herbs from bowl six onto the horoseth, bowl two, and put the concoction between two pieces of the bottom matzah, next to bowl eight. All my actions are deliberate, done with a care and calmness I'm not feeling.

Her comment stings, but continuing the Seder helps re-orient me. She watches me quizzically.

"Let's remember the purpose of the Passover, and think of those who are suffering and in bondage. That is what the maror reminds us of. But the horoset is sweet, with fruits, brown sugar. For us, at this Seder, it helps soften the maror's bitterness. It historically represents the mortar the Jews put between the bricks to build the pyramids. For us, now, it can symbolically represent the mortar that holds us together."

I then bend over and gently place them in her mouth. Why? To silence her? A peace offering? To let her know she has a bitter mouth, bitter voice, bitter words? I no longer know why I'm doing what I'm doing. I'm just acting. But I hope she will see it as a nurturing gesture. Ovid, are you still here?

She spits them out.

I guess I didn't read her reaction correctly. I'm increasingly surprised at how often that happens. "What's wrong, sweetie? I'm just trying to give you a peace offering, and a little nourishment, like the kind person I still am."

"You weren't offering, you were shoving it, forcing it down me, and I don't like that." She tries to sit up, but that only serves to tighten the ties around her wrists. "Ouch." She looks ridiculous lying there nearly naked, bound to the table, trying to make her argument. I move once again to untie her, but she shouts "Leave me alone."

"I guess your therapist would say it's hard for you to accept kindness from others, huh?"

"Bull. That wasn't kindness. But when I gave you a grape, truly in kindness, what did you do? You pushed it away, and that's supposed to be ok. You want all the control. You can give food and it's kind,

and when I give it, it's wrong!" I can see her anger, and it isn't attractive. "When I hug you, you tell me it's too tight, I'm confining you, but you hug me and it's just a caress. When I kiss you, you pull away. Everything you do is perfect; everything I do is wrong. Is that the way the world works, Mr. Control?"

She must have noticed how repulsive I find her sloppy kisses. But I've had enough legal training to know better than to admit anything. "Now, now, sweetie, temper, temper. But you do look cute, even when you're mad." It's hard to be mad angry and seriously argue with a bound naked woman. "If all court cases were handled this way, I might very well go to law school." I playfully flick at her nipple. "Very cute indeed."

"Don't patronize me, and let me finish." Her tone is hotter, more fiery. Does she want to finish saying something, or does she want to finish with the passion play, and have her sexual climax?

"Sorry, I'm not trying to be patronizing. Just truthful that I'm finding you very attractive at this moment. But what do you want to finish? Is there something else you want to say?"

"Don't act stupid. You know what I want to finish. You arouse me, tantalize me, excite me. Then you just stop and leave me dangling for no reason. That's just not fair. It's cruel and mean." She's nearly screaming now."

Would my law professor say this is cruel and unusual punishment? I smile inwardly. "You say there is no reason. But, dearest fair maiden, there is a reason. For the Seder. I want to make sure we finish by 12:00. That's the rules." I try to keep my tone playful, like I'm a just being a good little boy following my family's instructions. What's gotten into her? She's like a raging, imprisoned tiger.

"Don't give me that just following orders bullshit. Don't pretend you're some helpless Hebrew slave in your Passover story. You

sound like Arendt's the Banality of Evil--what the Nazi soldiers said, 'Oh, it's not my fault, I was just following orders.' You only accept orders when it's what you want to do anyway. You do everything in your way, when you want it, so you can control it all. You break the rules when you want to, so that you're always in control. But you don't think of me at all. Your insensitivity, your callousness, your detached analyticalness, your self-righteous smugness---those are the real plagues. I'm just supposed to go along as your rag doll plaything. I feel like a little puppet you're maneuvering, or a pinball being punched around in a lit glass case. It's demeaning and I will not stand for it. I deserve better. I demand better." Her breathing is ragged, shallow, almost gasping. She once again pulls against the ties that bind her, trying to sit up. "This is crazy. We were in the middle of making love and now I'm starting to sound like you making a legal brief. Untie me now!"

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What do I reply? I realize that my only tool to figure out my response is analysis. Which she just criticized. She's trying to take away my very means of being in the world by condemning it. That's the point to make. I muster my arguments. But before I can say anything, she continues her tirade. "How can you worry about what you shoot on a golf course when people are starving and dying? How disgustingly insensitive and pompously, hypocritically elitist for you to spout platitudes about helping the poor, when you do nothing for them and after you've just played golf at Pebble Beach and we're sitting here in the luxury of this room. How do you find your life tolerable when there are real live homeless suffering people, not the caricatures you make them. How do you live with yourself? You don't understand suffering at the right level."

I have no idea what she means by suffering at the right level, but I know enough not to take the bait. I know now, Johannes, what she means. You will, soon enough, I assure you. "All of this from a little maror and not getting your climax? I'm impressed." I look at her with mocking disdain. "And you, tied up, in the same luxury cabin, how are you helping the poor, Miss suffering servant? They're still there while you paint a picture of a little innocent girl gaily skipping and jumping by the ocean going, saying Wheee..." I taunt her.

"That's the difference between us. When I paint, it's a way to face and try to overcome the constant pain I feel at being alive. Everywhere I look I see suffering, and there is no way to eradicate it. You golf completely oblivious to suffering you don't even see. Every minute I'm alive is an act of will and courage on my part."

What a sanctimonious martyr. She's the very opposite of the sweet, saccharine hallmark card I once thought she was. I start to say this, but before I can, she continues her rant, "I don't feel I deserve anything; you feel entitled to everything. One of your original sins is definitely pride, hubris." She's both shouting and tearful at the same time.

I calmly state, "You make it sound like it's my fault that suffering exists, as if I personally caused it by my so-called pride, which by the way is just healthy self-confidence. Just so you know." I stare at her. "And you're throwing all the world's suffering up at me—why? Just so I can feel the same frustration and helplessness you do, even though there is no solution? You're not reducing suffering, you're spreading suffering. Is your goal to get everyone to feel as miserable as you do, since you yourself acknowledge there are no answers? Do you want to spout off self-righteously, make others more aware and equally helpless, so we can all wallow in the same self-pity and suffering you seem to enjoy? Sounds like something you'd better talk to your

therapist about." I keep my voice soft, and give her one of her benign looking smiles back, even as I hope my words stab her like daggers. But she's having an effect on me. I'm taut, tense, constricted. I'm feeling ugly and mean.

I listen to this fight, where one attacks, then the other. Now that Mery and Johannes are no longer here to engage in the skirmish, I realize that I am now holding both of them within me.

THE ATTACK

THE ATTACKER

I hear people trying to assert themselves by diminishing, even destroying others;
trying to fill their own, empty insides
with the pain of another,
as they tear and rip at the
other's mind and body,, hurling criticisms of daggers
clothed behind benign fake smiles,

THE ATTACKED

I see people walking, casting furtive glances
watching, staring, in order to keep others
at a distance.
They so fear that someone might trespass
upon the thinly cloaked shell of protection
that hides their empty insides.

I am the attacker, the attacked, and the battleground.

If only I could feel that my insides weren't so ugly, that they didn't need to be protected by a shell. Is there really an attack, or do I myself attack in order to provide justification for keeping the wall up? And why this bitterness?

* * *
"Nice deflection. Throw it all back on me, as if it's just my problem to address with my therapist. Your vaunted analysis once again leaps to your rescue."

"You analyze all the time, Mery, and you don't even know yourself well enough to realize that. You analyze when you think

I'm being too sarcastic, when you feel you've had enough to drink. You analyze when you think I should give you better answers to the Seder, and when you feel I should stop the Seder and attend to your physical needs. You are even analyzing all the faults you think I have. See, you analyze, too and you don't even know yourself," and here I give a smirk at my own wit, "or analyze yourself well enough to realize that."

I'm rubber, and you're glue. Whatever you say bounces right back to you. Both of you guys are really mature. What an impressive couple.

Mery merely looks at me. She doesn't seem stung by my rebuke, and is even-toned, and dismissive, "That's the best you can do, little lawyer boy? I'm embarrassed for you. You fight just like you play your music, all prissy and neat and by the book, following orders, reading the notes, without passion, just like a robotic metronome".

I'm speechless, but it makes no difference, because she's not done as she hisses at me through her teeth, like the snake in the Garden of Eden. "If I like it, why do you hold back?" I just stare and say nothing. Then, like a chameleon, or a magician of forms, she seems to switch her inflection again, becoming softer, more childlike, and adds in a more even-toned voice, "Especially after I was so vulnerable and shared so much with you." When she's like this, I feel more sympathetic towards her. But before I can give her a hug, or say something nice, she switches again, and looks at me accusingly, like a trial lawyer cross-examining a hostile witness, or mom admonishing me, "You should be more sensitive to me."

I find myself becoming more confused. More sensitive? Everything is upside down, Alice. If I tie and bind her and hurt her, that's sensitive? This is all backwards. "You fear acting strong and manly, you're afraid of real passion." Be more sensitive, be more manly? All kinds of unbidden questions start to pour forth and

flow through my mind. Am I too passive, too lacking in passion? Is this what mom meant by calling me too unemotional, a person without feelings, like my uncle?

Am I too fearful of my aggressive male side? I always felt, though I didn't really like to examine or admit it, that if I had any weakness, any area of danger, it would be the opposite quality. Not too passive, but too aggressive, and that's what I had to keep under control. Mom would always tell me to act like a gentleman. To her that also meant never criticizing her and doing everything she asked me to do. If I ever made even a slight criticism of her she would accuse me of being a mean, selfish bully, and it would throw her into an hysterical collapse. Sometimes she would even say that my behavior and actions were going to be the death of her, which I heard as a threat that she might once again try to commit suicide, and it would be my fault.

Now Mery is telling me that manliness is tying someone up, pressing hard on her stomach, pinching her nipples harder and harder. Is there something wrong with me that participating in her sexual fantasy makes me so uncomfortable? Why not relish it? She likes it, it arouses her and catapults her into an orgasm. Yet every time I think of doing it, I see Dad's puffed, angry contorted face, bulging eyes, a raging brutal animalistic male totally out of control. Yes, I do fear that in me.

A brutal, out-of-control animalistic father; a collapsing, suicidal mother who called me unemotional, passionless, a mean selfish bully. No wonder I'm such a healthy, well-adjusted person.

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As I am thinking all these thoughts, I realize I've been ignoring and not responding to Mery who is still lying there. Finally, she intrudes into my reverie. "Indecisive little Hamlet. Stop your

analyzing, and untie me.” Her voice rises to a shout, as she pulls against the ties.

I hear her condescension, and something shifts in my mood. I look at her lying there, tied up, naked body squirming, and shouting at me that I’m the plague because I don’t want to fornicate with her while she’s bound to the table. I make no move to untie her, but instead say, forcefully, but in an even tone, “You’re the one who interrupted a beautiful love making by asking me to get up and go outside so you could have the Joplin tape playing.” I pause to gage the effect of my words, and continue, “You accuse me of being too controlling, and yet look at you. You are telling me how to how to control you; how to make love to you; how to act and think. Who’s really in control here? Who’s really the controlling one?” Good legal points, all; an excellent analysis... but the jury is not moved. I need to ramp up my closing arguments, bring in more passion.

“You say that what attracts you to me is that I’m systematic, grounded, and keep you attached to the earth. Then all you do is try to get me to not be that way, and want me to be more of a free spirit like all your past lovers. You were drawn to Al, who improvises jazz; to Pierre who paints according to rules he makes up as he goes along; to a druggy rebel in high school. You try to make me what they are, and get rid of the very things that attracted you to me in the first place.

“Is the little boy afraid of what he can’t control? I saw your reaction to Al. Not that many blacks at your country club, are there? Maybe the only black people you’ve ever known are the maids that you ordered around at home. Nice little innocent rich Kansas city boy afraid of the big world? No drugs. No swearing. If it’s too much for you to handle, then find someone else you can place under your thumb.”

I'm reeling. This is a powerful counterattack. I pause, drink
some wine, take a breath and seek to regroup. How should I respond? Her
Jesus would say to turn the other cheek. Advice she's sure not
following. And grandpa said if you turn the other check, all you get is
slapped on both cheeks. He said sometimes you have to fight fire with
fire. I feel a raging, caged animal in me screaming to get out. I want
to crush her, beat her bloody, give her what she says she wants, and
more. I plan my defense. Ira furor brevis est, New York Supreme Court
ruling. Your honor, he acted without reason, without thinking. I shake
my head back and forth. This is not the person I'm meant to be. And
she's definitely not the right one for me. With an extraordinary act of
will, I channel my rage from physical into verbal blows.

"What is demeaning, suffering servant, is that you dance like a
naked nurse for that older guy James; you model nude in front of
strangers; you screw a black guy who wants you only because you're
white; you continue to model naked for Pierre, and probably have had
intercourse with him, too. You let your breasts bounce and flop all
over the place while dancing and smoking dope at the Fillmore. You
want to be tied up and hurt and punished for some crazy image that this
is like Jesus suffering on the cross. And all the while you protest how
pure and innocent you are." I start singing mockingly, tauntingly

Mery wants to be a little lamb, little lamb, little lamb
Mery wants to be a little lamb whose fleece is white as snow
But she's nothing but a tied up lamb, tied up lamb, tied up lamb

I look into my mind for the final line. Normally puns and rhymes just
flow for me but nothing comes. I feel tongue tied. I want to call her "a
sacrificial goat"; "a promiscuous slut". I stare at her. Then, as if a damn
breaks, I continue the last line adding more and more. . .

Just a black sheep in her soul, full of woe, from head to toe

As I sing the last words, I run my hand slowly over her body from her red hair down to her feet, lingering briefly at her breasts and red bush. She pulls at the ties, writhing and twisting in her restraints.

"Look at you. What you asked for. *That's* demeaning. You're the plague."

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This time I get to her. I think if her hands were loose, she would actually start pummeling me. Then, as if a switch in her body is turned off, she calms down, her body almost limp. She looks at me, enunciating slowly, "In every Easter sermon, after your Passover, when our Savior arises, my father taught us that that not only then, but now Jews were, are, and always will be responsible for His death." She says softly, Mark, 14:10 'and Judas Iscariot went off to the chief priests in order to betray Him to them.'" Then, raising her voice in fury, she shouts at me, spittle coming from her lips with her words, "You are the Christ killer" as she bends her leg, and pushes me away with her foot kicking me in the stomach.

She's attacking me as if *I'm* the powerful, evil Jew who killed her Savior. Am I supposed to just passively accept this and not fight back? I hate the image of the Jews as small and helpless people, afraid and timid and unwilling to defend themselves. The Wailing Wall, symbol of a people who are always whining. I will not let myself be abused again, not by my father, not by Mery. I wipe her saliva from my face, as I feel the air go out of me, both from the physical and verbal blows. "What?" I screech at her, slapping the thigh of the leg that kicked me, hard.

"Oh, big strong man hitting a little tied up girl. Very brave. You heard me. And are you going to now beat me like the Jews beat my Savior? You Jews must feel guilty, look at all the hand washing in your Passover ritual. Trying to get out the damn spot because you

killed Christ? Want to hit me again?" Her tone is now once again restrained, calm, but all the more piercing for its quiet.

Is this part of her fantasy? If she can bait me enough into anger, she can feel we're reenacting a passion play? Though I'm angry enough to slap her again, I don't want to give her what she wants, and I don't want to become my father.

An excerpt of a Beatles' song pops into my mind. I look at her with a bemused smile, which I know will gall her, and sing:

When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be.
And in my hour of darkness she is standing right in front of me,
speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be.
Whisper words of wisdom, let it be.

"No, I won't just let it be. Are you afraid to let your guilt out, your plagues, your anger. What's your problem with a straight answer? Hiding behind all this Shakespeare and intellectualism and silly puns, and horrible singing, and pseudo Seder ritual. You just can't face the truth, can you, that you killed our Savior? It may be a meal of freedom from bondage to you, but it's the Last Supper for me. Now untie me."

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I turn away from Mery and look at the dying embers. There is just an occasional spark, as they try to remain alive. The room is nearly dark, as the moon seems to have disappeared, too. Behind a cloud? A Monterey pine? There are almost no shadows. This is definitely a departure from the scripted story. And I don't like the new script at all.

"At first you want me to tie you up, now you want me to untie you? Which is it?"

"You're too afraid to do either. You're not man enough to untie me; and you're not man enough to follow through with tying me up.

You're just a confused little baby, so afraid of your own anger. You don't know how to be courageously angry, do you little boy? If you're angry, be man enough to express it directly. Don't give me these little indirect digs."

What's going on? I thought she didn't like anger. She keeps telling me she doesn't like me when I'm mean, and not sensitive. I've never heard her talk like this. Does she want me to become mean, like her father? Yet even as I'm trying to sort out what's happening in my mind, I realize that if her goal is to enrage me enough to have me punch and bloody her, it's working. I once again see an image of my father standing over me, pummeling me, his face contorted in rage.

"Make the story your own" I hear my grandfather say., but this script is definitely getting out of my control.

"And because you don't know how to be angry, that's why you're so afraid of, and don't know how to be passionate, either. You just can't let go in any realm. Always holding back, always watching, always trying to be in control. Not from strength, but because you are just a timid weak little man."

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Earlier I wanted to untie her, but now that she's ordering me to, I don't. The anger in me turns to bitterness, and arousal. I unzip my pants and whisper, barely audible, "You want me to force this down your mouth, slave girl. Or are you still the Red Queen? Or both? But I'm no slave, no matter who you are. You want to see anger? Watch what the Red King can do. I'll show you anger."

Johannes the Red King? Why, because of his angry reddened face? I wish this were all now part of the Red King's dream, from which I and all of us could awake and disappear.

"Oh, passion from the wimpy prep money boy. Put that away. Now."

"I thought you liked a little suffering, Mother Mary. Or is that Mary Magdalene, a little slut showing her body for Mr. Art Teacher, and whoever else wants to see her naked for the price of admission?"

She stares at me icily. "I'll show my body to whom I want, when I want. I don't need my father preaching at me, and I certainly don't need your judgments, you of all people. You don't make love. You relieve yourself of bodily fluids. And you know nothing of true passion or true suffering."

"Oh, the expert on suffering, right? You like that with your lovemaking, that makes it pure. Otherwise you have to space out with those veiled, glazed eyes, and pretend you're not really you. Why don't you take responsibility for being nothing more than a passionate animal, just like me."

She suddenly becomes very still, and looks at me as though I am a little boy whom she is about to scold. "I'm just going to say this to you once, and never again. I advise you to listen. Your religion has a lot of wisdom. In your Seder you have that ritual of eating the horseradish, to remind you of the suffering of others. Not as a joke, but to feel with them. As part of the order of your Seder, you make a place for suffering." She is breathing shallowly, and takes a moment to catch her breath. But she doesn't stop focusing her gaze directly at me.

"You don't know the gift of suffering, of taking in another's hurt and pain into your own body in a compassionate way and experience it with them. You try to avoid suffering and only focus on pleasure. Maybe it's because you're still so young and immature. You haven't yet learned what I have--that it's only by opening myself fully to the world' hurts so completely that I can face the suffering directly, go

through it to the other side, and realize the pleasure of God's grace
and embrace. Love making reminds me of that."

At first I think she's done, but then she adds, "There is such
unimaginable pain in this world. Suffering is part of life, and most of
it we can do nothing about. But your thoughtless, insensitive
comments cause needless, unnecessary suffering. And if you aren't
deep enough or wise enough to understand the difference, I don't want
to be around that kind of ignorance. I pity you."

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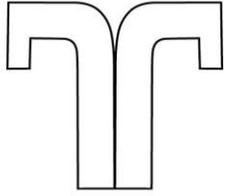
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he dying embers offer an occasional light which flickers across her motionless body. I don't want her pity. And I don't really want to fight back anymore, physically or verbally. What do I want?

She's chastising me like I'm an immature little kid, and she's the wise older woman. Worse than when your hand's caught in the cookie jar. I've just been scolded by mom and dad. She didn't collapse like mom. Though I did feel like I was grounded. Or threatened with exile, some of mom's favorite punishments. She has some of dad's anger, but not his tsunami, inchoate rage. And no physical abuse--other than that kick. In fact, in a court of law, if I were a jury, I'd say she's making some interesting points. Away from the heat of battle it would probably be helpful for me to reflect on them. My seeking only pleasure, wanting to avoid pain. Her finding pleasure through suffering. Is that wisdom or craziness? This is not the time for reflection. I need to do something, but what are my choices?

I could return to the structure of the Seder, such as it is. I look over at plate seven, the lamb bone. I could pick it up and gnaw on it, make a joke about Jesus, the Lamb of God, and his suffering. Even with my disoriented mind, I know that is stupid. I need to regain control, and the Seder is my vehicle. Be careful, don't let your anger come through. I'm just going to shift the focus completely, and pretend what just happened, didn't happen. I zip up my pants, and pick up the lamb bone.

"The lamb bone, in the story of Passover, is one of the central elements to remind us of God's gift to us of freedom. In the days of the Temple, all good Jews would go to Jerusalem to partake of eating the sacrificial lamb. Once mom bought a ham bone, thinking that was close enough." I laugh. Mery doesn't. Maybe she doesn't understand Kosher, and that's why. "That was a big mistake--you see, ham, in Judaism, is considered non-kosher." I tell the story of mom to bring in some levity, and show here I am not wounded by her attacks, and still in control.

At first she doesn't respond, but just stares at me. Then she says, with the same passion with which she has just chastised me, "Wasn't it the blood of the lamb that you Jews put on the houses so that the Angel of Death wouldn't kill your firstborn?" I nod. "Doesn't that seem harsh and barbaric of your God to kill innocent babies? That's hardly a God of love, like Jesus, our Lamb of God."

"I don't know what God's thinking was at the time. I wasn't there to talk with Him about His motives and intentions." I have a little smirk, proud of my non-defensive response.

She says nothing.

"Are you angry at me, or at Jews, or God or what? I didn't make this world where there is suffering, Even with your Jesus, there still is plenty of suffering. That's not my fault. Don't blame me." Hmm, my non-defensive posture seems to be slipping.

She continues to stare, then says, "My father told us you Jews eat the lamb bone on Passover as a way to reenact your killing of Christ."

"So, it sounds like you're uncomfortable with the lamb bone? Do you feel like it's better that we not be seen eating your Savior again?" I'm proud of myself. Better. Restrained, humorous. But I

can't stop there. "Mery, that's ridiculous and you know it. That's
incredibly anti-Semitic. Is that what you think? The Jews killed
Christ? I killed Christ?

"Jesus, why would you ask me that? Who killed Jesus? Do I
feel guilty? Geez." We are now separated by a few feet. Did I move
back? Did she? I answer my own question:

"I don't know. I was always taught it was the Romans. Jesus
was a Jew. Some Jews --those in power, the Pharisees-- didn't like
him. But Jews were always arguing about something. Then, and now." I
try to smile to lighten the mood, but it doesn't work. "No, I don't
feel guilty. I wasn't there. Do you think we Jews killed Him? Does
that bother you? Is that why you just went after me? Talk about a mood
breaker."

I think of making a comment I heard grandpa say about how
Christians drink and eat Christ's blood and flesh symbolically and
Catholics feel they are literally eating Him when they accept a
communion wafer and wine. Who's barbaric and cannibalistic? But I know
better than to say this now. I pause, then pick up the lamb bone. "To
me, when I eat this, I'm not eating Jesus. I'm eating a lamb bone." I
gnaw on it. "And, frankly, it would taste better if there were some
mint jelly."

* * *

They deserve each other and both are horrible. His wanting to smear mint jelly on the lamb bone when Mery has just told him for her it symbolizes Jesus? Insensitive. Even more appalling is the father's interpretation that gnawing on the lamb bone is eating the lamb of God.

When I told the Rebbe about this episode, he was quite knowledgeable, and said he and Dr. Lisbet have explored this topic with care. He pointed out that Mery was just repeating a long history going

back to the letters of Paul, which are regarded by historians to be the oldest works of the New Testament (written 10 to 20 years after Jesus' death), in which he mentions, almost in passing, "the Jews who killed the Lord, Jesus" citing I Thessalonians 2:14-15.

The Rebbe added that the idea that the Jews bear primary responsibility for the death of Jesus figures more prominently in the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four suggest either implicitly or explicitly that because the Jews were not allowed to punish other Jews who were guilty of blasphemy, they had to prevail on the reluctant Romans to kill Jesus. According to the Rebbe, Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, is described in the Gospels as basically sympathetic to Jesus but unable to withstand the pressure from the Jews who demanded Jesus' execution. The Jews come out pretty badly in the whole affair. Matthew describes the unfair trial of Jesus arranged and presided over by the Jewish high priest who scourges the land to find anybody who would testify against Jesus, and eventually concludes that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy. Matthew seems to seal the fate of all Jews for all eternity when he notes that the assembled members of the Jewish community tell the reluctant Pilate, "His blood be on us and on our children" as written in Matthew 27:25.

All this sounded pretty bleak to me. Were 2000 years of persecution and pogroms really the fault of the Jews? Did Christianity somehow figure out a way to blame the victims? I said as much to the Rebbe. Ever the optimist, he pointed out that just a few years ago there had been some small progress when the Second Vatican Council published the *Nostra Aetate* which concluded that modern-day Jews could not be held accountable for Jesus' crucifixion and that not all Jews alive at the time of the crucifixion were guilty of the crime.

I suppose that's progress. But still a long way to go for bridge building, for all of us, as religions, and for Johannes and Mery, as individuals.

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She doesn't laugh, but I'm pleased when she responds, "That was an awful comment of dad's and I shouldn't have repeated it. I'm not being the person I want to be."

Ah, now we're getting somewhere. She's listening to reason. But before I can say anything, she adds, "And the reason is because of being around you. Untie me. We're finished here. The Seder is over. I've had enough."

I feel the dam bursting in me. I tried to return to the order of the Seder, and even bring in some humor. That didn't work. The rage and anger have been building slowly, and I've reached a boiling point. Still, I reflect. What are my choices? I could just stop talking, unzip my pants. take out my lingham, stick it in her mouth so she'll stop talking, and tell her to enjoy the suffering, and eat my bone. Maybe that's what she really wants.

The image doesn't appeal to me. Too much of dad's anger--more controlled--but just as violent. Also, by now my dick is smaller than if I'd jumped into a freezing nighttime ocean. There is no light in the lingham.

I could retreat, ask forgiveness. Probably the smartest, but it feels too demeaning. And I'm tired of all the times I said "I'm sorry" this evening. What am I, a punching bag, who every time it gets hit has to apologize? And even if I were to say "You're right," which I don't really feel, it seems it's too late.

I could untie her and let her leave. I could tell her that maybe it's best that she go. Perhaps she could return to her therapist for

more counseling. After all, the therapist was so helpful for her in keeping her waitressing job. And so helpful in ensuring that our sex life stop. Maybe the therapist would be a perfect lover for her. Or maybe she should go model for Pierre and let him screw her. I think of saying this to her while reaching into my wallet, throwing her a few bucks and telling her to find her own way home. I'll find mine. I won't have to give her much money, because she doesn't like cabs. Too elite and bourgeois. Fine. Wouldn't want to spoil her. It saves me some money, and gets rid of her.

Johannes, look at the first letter of this section of your journal. The "T" composed of two J's. . Note how they are facing away from each other. Try as you might, your fate is sealed. You two are facing different directions—think of the first letter of her last name. And you, yourself are divided and facing in different directions from yourself.

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At first that idea seems attractive. Is this really the person I want to spend the rest of my life with? But then I feel a numbing coldness, almost shock. The idea of living without her creates a darkness in my mind. Fear, loneliness, directionlessness.

I see her naked before me, and naked in my mind, modeling, with Pierre painting her. Did they ever have sex? I imagine her and Al making love? Did he ever bind her? I feel anger arising again.

I think of actually hitting her, like my father would have, while shouting at her, "Is this the passion you want, bitch? 'Hit me Father for I have sinned.' Does this help you feel others' suffering and give you pleasure?" Take a breath. Anger leads nowhere.

I'm sinking to her level, with her sick, masochistic

rape fantasy, the bad daughter to her minister father. She acts like she's being forced, because she isn't able to acknowledge that that's what she really wants. Yet she's really orchestrating the whole thing. I try to make sex light and fun so that no one gets hurt. She tries to make her dark animal longings pure and spiritually elevated. Oh, look at me, Miss goodie two shoes, I'm only having sex as a suffering servant to help "the cause" of the poor. BullSH--.

And she's wrong. I'm not afraid of anger, I just don't think it's wise to become my father. Maybe, too, there is a part of me that is afraid to lose control, afraid of what I'm capable of with anger and rage let loose. Why am I conjuring up these images of her in the past, real or imagined? Am I just trying to fuel anger, pick at a wound that is already bleeding? Why do I care what she's already done? I can't change what's happened, any of it. I know it shouldn't bother me, but it does.

Given your sexual history, you're certainly not in a position to be the one to cast the first stone here, are you, Johannes? And what a profound insight... you can't change the past. True. Unfortunately. I wish I could somehow step in and stop what's happening, what's going to happen. Then I wouldn't have to be living with the consequences now.

* * *
I feel myself floating toward the ceiling and looking down. All I can see in the darkened light are two people, one lying face up on a white tablecloth, one hunched over and seated beside her, each looking in different directions. They appear in freeze frame, like a motionless sculpture. I have no idea what the next scene in the movie will be, once the film starts rolling again.

Since the light is too dim to see the woman's face, she appears as if in a silent film. From my perch above the scene, I remain silent, continuing to watch. Then the man bends over, and pushes a button on a machine. It's as if he's turned on the sound in the picture.

A woman's shrieking voice blares out accompanied by music

I know, gotta try the feeling, baby.

Gotta try the feeling, gotta

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa oh

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa yeah,

The man picks up a camera, and I see the flash which illuminates a woman's writhing body. Is she in sexual passion, or trying to escape? He squats over her, unzips his pants, his penis sticking out like a thrusting sword. There is another flash. His penis is now probing between her breasts. Flash. Her face is partially covered by her hair as her neck turns from side to side. He squats further, and I hear him tell her to push her arms together. She does so, and her breasts rise up and surround his penis. Flash. He leans forward, and spreads her hair out, flowing dark reddish strands on a white sheet. Is her face confused? Passionate? Angry? His shaft grows longer, brighter red, almost glowing, enflamed. Flash. It enters her mouth. Flash. I hear him say, "Let me see that cute tongue." She sticks it out and licks his sword. Her brown eyes are looking directly into the camera. Are they glazed? Defiant? Yielding? I can't tell. Flash. Her eyes are now closed. He tells her to open them again, "Look straight into the camera, like you're making love to it." Flash.

This time, as she opens them, there is no mistaking their fiery intent as her voice yells, "No. You always cross the boundary; that's not art; that pornography. Stop hiding. You're always hiding

behind something, your writing, your law, the camera, always distant,
always watching, and everything with you is about control and
manipulation. Always with a script. You never enter the scene unless
it's preplanned to meet your needs." She becomes a bucking bronco,
shouting, "Throw that thing away. Either get on or get off. I don't
want to make love to a f----- camera."

He says nothing. Rather, he sets the camera down, bends over the
prostrated, bound woman, spreads her legs, and climbs on top. She
writhes, her legs kicking--in protest? in passion?--as he begins to
undulate on top of her. She is moaning and yelling. At first the words
seem like nonsensical syllables and sounds, then I realize she is
discordantly singing along with the shrieking voice.

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa oh

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa yeah,

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I thrust, not with love, but with an angry fury. She seems not
to be able to tell the difference For her, passion is passion, and she
continues to respond like an erupting volcano, lifting itself off a
white table cloth, singing, yelling "More, yes, harder." It's amazing
how quickly she shifts from a bitchy tigress into a passionate
suffering servant. The power of sexual urges and fantasies.

She wants harder, then harder she will get. She wants to see
unrestrained passion and letting go. Fine. I bury my face in her right
breast, and begin sucking. I image James' face on her breasts, creating
a hickey.

I push my hands around her buttocks and squeeze them harshly,
pulling her tightly up to me, letting my index finger explore her
anus. She's in a vise now, as I simultaneously plunge down harder
into her. She's being probed and pinched and sucked and violated in

every orifice possible except her mouth. For symmetry, I reluctantly raise my head from her breast and stick my tongue into her mouth. Yech. Yet, all I hear from her are louder expressions of passion commingling with Joplin's nasally screechy voice.

Amidst the cacophony I hear the words of the Song of Songs, rising unbidden and reflexively inside my head. "Ah, dearest one, the roof of your mouth is like the best wine that goes down smoothly.. Honey and milk are under your tongue." My kisses become more feverish, covering, sucking, almost biting her lips, eyes, neck. "Blessed above women shall you be" as my index finger probes her more deeply, and my lingam thrusts harder into her pelvis.

This is not a seduction. This isn't even lovemaking. It's more like a gladiatorial jousting, a wrestling match with a devil or an angel? on the white Seder table cloth. "You are a garden fountain" I hear myself whispering while she continues to hurtle herself up at me.

The words of the Song continue rising within me--incongruously sultry, seductive, sensual sonorous phrases, which seem crazy, absurd, and out of place with Joplin's screeches and our furious dueling thrusts. Echoing in my mind, they embarrass, even haunt me by their inappropriateness. "How beautiful is your love my bride."

I can feel the build-up of all the orgasms that I haven't had since last night beginning to rise inside me. I decide to give her even more of what I know she wants, increasing my force and pressure, opening and penetrating her further. Her body is naked, vulnerable, compliant, docile, yet like a roiling current. "You are a well of living water..." I say, still louder, though barely audible.

I know she can't hear me through her cries and Joplin's voice as I imagine her adding, "My beloved is dazzling. . .outstanding among ten thousand." I press harder now, with all my strength. I hear her

groans of pleasure, but there is a slight recoil. To keep her from pulling away, I push my knees out stretching her legs wider apart, letting them rest on my shoulders, putting both my hands under her bottom, so her bare soles are now pointing skyward toward heaven. I'm not willing to look at her. "Turn your eyes away from me, for they have confused me."

Her body starts spasming like in an epileptic seizure as she yells "Yes, harder, more. Bind me, I'm yours." And then in a whisper, "I forgive you, all of you, for you know not what you do."

I make my final climactic plunge in accompaniment to her last gasping sobs, and once again, a shrieking voice engulfs her gushing oils and my throbbing climax. Inside my mind I hear, "We are flowing streams from Lebanon" while outside, as I feel her entwining her legs forcefully around me, the scream pierces my ear

Gotta try the feeling, gotta

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa oh

Whoa whoa whoa whoa whoa yeah

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In the darkness I grope my way into the bathroom.

When I turn on the light and look at my shaft of light, my lingam, I am shocked to see it's covered with blood. I pull off the semen filled, bloody condom and throw it into the toilet, but a red sea is still flowing around my pubes and down my legs.

"I'm bleeding. My period's flooding the table cloth. Bring me a towel, quickly," Mery shouts at me.

"I need to wash myself." I reply calmly. Just like the Seder should have started. I turn on the shower. The water's freezing. I wait for it to warm up. Damn handles. I don't know the right amount of turns. I wait until the temperature is just right, and wash my groin

thoroughly. Then I jump out, grab a couple of towels, one for me, one for her.

I enter the room by the light from the bathroom, and head to the light switch. When I turn it on, I see Mery, lying in a pool of blood on the once white table cloth. The blood has created red streaks around all the bowls and plates of our Seder, soaking into the white table cloth. I turn the light back off.

"How could you just leave me lying here, unable to move?" She is crying. "Untie me. Now."

I untie her.

In silence, she gets up, goes into the bathroom, and takes a shower. I turn off Joplin, pour myself a glass of wine, and add another log to the fire, which I stare at. After some period of time, I hear the shower turned off. She comes out of the bathroom. I don't turn around. Neither of us says anything. I hear her dressing. Then I hear the squeak of the door as she opens it. A cold wind blows through. I wait for her to leave, and the door to shut. Instead, I hear her coming toward me. I still don't turn. She takes a blanket and puts it around my naked body, and once more walks toward the door.

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What happened to the script? What is my part now? Her part is to depart. That's good. Cute. Write it in the script. De(part). Keep some humor, some playfulness, right, grandpa? I'm amazed I can do that amidst the currents of thought and feeling swirling around and inside me, trying to drown me.

When I turn, I see that she is still standing in the doorway. I look at her blue jeans, faded with white streaks, like the ocean. She's put her red sweater back on. But has no shoes. I could call her back. Is she hoping I will? A few seconds pass. I say nothing. Her

shoulders rise, as if she is taking a deep breath, and then I watch her hips undulate as she takes a step through the door. Her walk reminds me of waves of flowing water...a red sea (de)parting. She doesn't look back, and I see her disappear into the dark.

I sit watching the fire. I'm cold, but I throw off the blanket she's given me. Rather than feel comforting, it feels confining, like a strait jacket. And demeaning. One more way to say, even when we are fighting, and there is bad blood between us, I'm still nicer than you.

My mistake to try to recreate a Seder. I should have left well enough alone with the Fairmont memories. Last week it seemed like such a good idea. And I couldn't believe that when I did the research, it was actually kosher to have a second Passover. In Numbers, it says it's allowed.

Yes, Johannes, you're right, in the book of Numbers, Book 4, Bemidbar, In the Wilderness, it states that a second Passover is allowed for certain people: those who through ritual uncleanliness or unavoidable absence from Jerusalem were precluded from sacrificing the Paschal Lamb on its proper date. Given your sexual history--and geographical location--, you could indeed make a compelling case that these exceptions apply to you. And perhaps it's fitting that this Passover will send you--and me--into the wilderness. I guess you reap what you sow. And, unfortunately, I have no control over your sowing. How could everything have gone so wrong? I look at the half-open door, through which a cold wind is blowing. Have the coldness and ferocity of the wind picked up, or have they always been there and I just haven't noticed? One of the great unanswered philosophical questions I'm still wrestling with, Johannes. Though I'm not sure that's what you were wondering. I think of the Fairmont, singing "Great balls of fire; come

on baby light my fire." There was such fun and playful innocence then. How inappropriate that would have seemed tonight.

Elijah doesn't enter, no one is knocking at the door, Leporello.

I look at the windows, through which some light from the moon still enters the room. For some reason, my eyes are drawn not to the light, nor to the panes, but to the wooden strips framing the square panes. These strips appear to me as a myriad of interlocking crosses.

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I suppose to conclude the Seder, keep some semblance of order, and complete the pieces of its puzzle, I should seek Mery, upon whose person the afikomen is hidden. I remember the moment when I was no longer a child at the Seder. It was when I realized that looking for the afikomen was a stupid game, and the prize was no longer worth the embarrassment of acting like a little kid. Seeking the afikomen to find Mery as the reward seems a similarly less than grand prize, a prize which is no prize at all.

Part of me wants to remain in the womb of the cabin. I've had my orgasm. And if I need another before the night is out, I can look at the pictures of Mery, self-serve, go to bed, and leave tomorrow. Why not just say this has all been a bad dream, a wrong turn on the tracks. I'll leave her money for bus fare back. This was a noble experiment in relationship and commitment, but accepting failure and moving on is wisdom indeed. The choice is really clear. In my back left pocket, I still have my unsent letter to Harvard. In my back right pocket, the wedding ring. What a nightmare, farce, and pipedream that's turned out to be. I can just go East to law school, and leave her behind. Just like my family. Harvard accepted me. She didn't. She, like my parents, seems like the bondage I'm supposed to escape from.

Passover will be here in six weeks. In the Rebbe's first class, he asked us to look at where are we still in bondage in our life? Where have we made progress escaping from past enslavements?

I feel like I've made progress in two areas. I'm freeing myself daily from my body. I remember one winter, mom told me that my jeans had gotten too tight, as they did every winter. She asked me whether I wanted to buy some larger ones, or wait till the summer, when I would get more exercise, and lose weight. I heard her comment as a criticism, telling me that I'd gotten too fat. Also, as a criticism that it happens every year and I didn't even know myself well enough to recognize the pattern that she knew about me, that I didn't know about myself. I said let's wait.

Johannes took those remarks to heart, and that's what led to his grand body building activities. But he became a slave to his body, wanting to perfect it, show it off, and then allowing himself to abuse it through his rampant sexual activity. Though he thinks he's free, he is still a slave to his body. But now, I no longer have to worry about my weight. Nor have I fallen into the trap of trying to perfect and muscularize my body. The only perfection of the body I want is to see it further wither away and not intrude sexually on my life, even in my dreams.

The second area is that I've finally escaped from the bondage of my parents, both literally, and also the tyrannical grip of their parenting. I've escaped from mom's suicide attempts and passive controlling nature, the way she uses guilt and tears to manipulate. I'm free from Dad's anger and fury and violent controlling nature. No more being enslaved to them. From a distance, I can see the powerful hold they still have on Johannes, even though he thinks he has escaped from them by leaving Kansas City.

I can see so clearly how Mery, using a combination of their styles—tears and threats of leaving, furious anger—manipulates and controls Johannes, who reflexively falls right back into his adolescent, fearful, guilty, confusion, and feels trapped and unsure about how to respond. He may have physically left his parents in Kansas City, but the scars of their upbringing are still in him, and Mery took advantage of that, like termites entering rotten wood, and feasting. I have removed the dead wood, and healed those scars. I am finally truly free from their bondage. **You have made progress, John, I agree. But I wish it were that simple that once and for all we remove the bondage. As you shall discover with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, it's a process, and there is still more work to be done. By all of us.**

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I look over at the dying coals. There are still some that occasionally flash bright red, the color of Mery's hair, like semi-precious stones with convex cuts. I see one with a garnet cabochon cut, red like a pomegranate, more or less transparent, a vitreous dark red color. Alluring, enticing, beckoning with its warmth, yet to touch it would result in the severe pain of a burn.

The wind coming through the door intensifies. The light from the coals is fading, and the moon's light is once again disappearing, slowly removing shadows from the room. It seems like the eternal light is about to be blown out.

What a vision I had: a beautiful weekend in Carmel, giving the engagement ring to my about-to-be Sabbath bride, sharing our own special Passover in a little cottage in the woods, reciting the Song of Songs. I once again touch the wedding ring in my pocket with it's inscription from the Song: I am my beloved and my beloved is mine. Ani le dodi and le dodi li.

I look over at the blood-streaked Seder table cloth, the overturned, strewn food. There is something appealing about packing a few salacious pictures of Mery for my collection, walking out the door, and leaving all this behind. I can get into Mr. Red, pack up Mr. Cannon and Grace, drive back to the farm, finish my classes, and fly East to law school this fall. A fresh start, a new tree to swing to. Why not?

What's the alternative? To go find Mery and see if we can make this relationship work? To lead a life of what? Artistic and intellectual self-exploration that ends up in a bloody mess? Why?

Is this any foundation on which to build a future life with her?

Yet, can I just run from this, pretend it never happened, and not have the scars of it one day catch up with me? I think of mom's words, if you can't love me, you'll never be able to love anyone. By leaving am I just proving to mom, to Mery, and to myself, that she was right? I think of Dad telling me what a wimp I am. By leaving, would I just be running away, a timid and fearful cowardly lion?

I'm not a coward. And I'm not willing to have mom's warning turn out to be correct. Something almost beyond my will draws me to the partly opened door. Like Giovanni, "If I would be enlightened I must go myself and see."

The door is still ajar. I am not a quitter. Of anything. Even this stupid Seder. I need to read some final lines from the Psalms of Praise to end it. 11:54. Right on schedule. At least one part occurred in the right order. Make the story your own. It's like a bad fairy tale. I wonder if Mery left because she's really Cinderella and she changes into a pumpkin, or an even more wicked witch at midnight? Who knows?

I realize I don't have a Bible, and begin to look around the room. I open the desk drawer, but there is none. Then I open the door of the cabinet, and there it lies in all its splendor. Ah, the Torah--at least a Gideon Bible, oh well you go with what's available. It is encased in a magnificent mahogany ark. Bezalel would be jealous. I take it out and open it. Part of me feels what I'm doing is stupid. I only did this service for her. But another part of me now feels the need to keep some order, to see this through to the end.

"Here my garden fountain, my well of living water, let me read this to you.

"'What alarmed you, O sea that you fled?' Psalm 114. 'When Israel went forth from Egypt. . .Tremble before the Lord, before the God of Jacob. . .'" I end with a flourish, and more than a touch of irony. Not only has the sea fled, but Mery has just left in anger, and fled to the ocean. I write down these last lines in my journal, and stick it under my arm. The Seder is now completed. The order may not have been perfect, but all the pieces have been addressed. I glance briefly at the bowls and plates.

It is time to take the next step in this journey toward the sea, and into the wilderness.

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When I reach for my sandals, I see that some of Mery's blood has gotten onto them. I don't want to wear them. I probably should never have bought them. Just another way she's trying to make me someone I'm not. Then I realize the only other shoes I have are my wingtipped golf shoes. The plus is that they are not bloody, and would be a lot warmer. But it seems kind of silly clickety clacking with metal spikes through the streets. Though I guess once I reached the beach, they'd

help because what is the beach but one big sand trap. Though I'd look sort of stupid walking on the beach in wingtipped golf shoes.

I don't know why I care what anyone thinks, but I do. Is that an area where I'm still in "bondage?" I can't think about it now.

I gingerly pick up the sandals, go to the bathroom, and furiously wipe away spots of blood.

* * *

As i open the already partially ajar door, a gust of cold wind hits me. I step outside, and start to feel myself shivering again. I return to the cabin. I smile at the image of myself as Elijah, once again coming through the open door. But my smile ebbs and evaporates as I imagine elijah seeing the bloody mess of our Passover

Near the fireplace, I see the light tan, camel-colored blanket that Mery gave me. I wrap it tightly around me. I want another glass of wine. There is none left, except for Elijah's silver chalice. i drink it, too. I then head outside. Better.

This search and rescue mission is not going to be easy. I decide I need to increase my advisory pool. Ovid, Kierkegaard, I mean you no disrespect, but I'm going to add back some additional members to the Board of Directors, some who are a bit more battle-tested, tougher, more action oriented. I think of my adolescent idols: My name is Bond, James Bond. Shaken not stirred. Unflappable. He'd know exactly what to do. Or Paul Newman, Steve McQueen. All the epitome of cool. I summon them to my aid as I head into the night.

I smell the sea salt as I used to do when we would drive as a family to California. Dad would get so excited at that first smell. Mom would tease, "Now it's official. We're not in Kansas any more, Toto." We kids would sing "California, here we come, right back where we started from" and then "California, here we are!" There was a

palpable feeling of excitement and adventure, the ocean was near and our vacation was about to begin. I think of Mery's comment about philosophy born in wonder. Tonight the sea salt doesn't bring excitement, only fear and dread.

I head through the woods toward the ocean.

* * *

How often do we actually recognize major turning points in our life while they are happening. In most cases, it is only in retrospect that we realize they have occurred, with hindsight gained from the passage of time.

Even if we did recognize these critical moments, could we do anything to change course? Would being Cassandra give us the chance to create a new railroad track; create a new channel for a river? Make the right, or difficult choice? Or would we merely be passive passengers on a train from which we can't escape, a leaf helplessly pulled down the stream, forced to face whatever fate awaits it at the end? As I anticipate what is about to happen to Johannes, I feel a pencil has fallen from my hand, and is inevitably going to hit the floor. I don't have time to catch it. All I can do is watch as it heads inexorably toward the ground, and await the crash.

Does the concept of a fork in the road make any sense if we don't have the ability to make choices? Or can't undo what's already done?

* * *

It's bitterly cold, and I'm thankful for the blanket. I also appreciate that the moon has once again come out from behind the clouds, lighting my way through the curved streets and ominously towering pines. I clutch my notebook tighter, as though it, too, is a protective shield. My creative writing professor told us, "Kafka said

words can be used as a 'higher type of observation.'" If I can just keep some distance from what is happening, I know I'll be ok. I don't want to get dragged down to her level again. I think of my second shot over the 8th hole, how I made the ball soar over the abyss. I made a birdie. I'm a winner. I think of Grandpa Dave's cardinal redbirds flying, singing. I always land on my feet, like a cat. I always find a new rope to swing to, like Tarzan. I have nothing to fear.

* * *

"Those who are calm and feeling in control," the Rebbe begins this morning's class, slowly looking around the room, "clearly don't understand the situation." He smiles, enjoying our laughter. "The Israelites in Egypt were so accustomed to their bondage that they had come to accept the situation."

"One problem is passivity and helplessness," Dr. Lisbet adds, "where you feel there is nothing you can do about what's going on in your life. The other potential problem is. . ."

She looks over at the Rebbe, who takes up the baton, "It's like the story of a person who is lost, going down an unknown road, and he decides the best way to find where he is. . . is to go faster!"

"The other potential problem"" Dr. Lisbet repeats, allowing some space for more chuckles at the Rebbe's humor, "is when things are out of control and you recognize it, and you feel it's within your power to solve the difficulty by continuing the same strategies that you've always used. Sometimes that may work, but there are times when it's better to stop, pause, and get your moorings. Does this make sense?" She looks around the room. There are mostly affirmative nods. Reb Jonathan steps in.

"Imagine this. You are falling down an empty, deserted dark hole, like a dry well, and as you are tumbling down, you make a valiant

effort, stick your hands and legs out, and somehow manage to stop your fall. You press against the sides of the hole with all your might, holding yourself in place. Then, you try to begin climbing upward, but are unable, and in the process continue slipping downward in small increments. You are feeling totally exhausted supporting yourself and it feels like a losing battle." He looks around the room. "Have any of you ever felt yourself in that situation? The metaphor's not perfect, but think about it in relation to areas of your life where you feel like you're losing control." He pats his stomach. "I know when I diet, sometimes I feel that. I feel I'm making a huge effort, yet slipping, and can't seem to stop the slide." He gives a wry smile.

"Sometimes we need to let go of efforts, and stop resisting. As Kazanzatkis said in *Zorba the Greek*, sometimes you beat the devil by becoming a devil and a half." He laughs. "I wonder if that means eating all the pastries I want to I really know what fullness feels like!" He chuckles again, as do we all.

"To continue the metaphor, what you don't realize is that there are actually only a few inches left before you hit the bottom of the hole." He grins in that playful way of his. "Sometimes, we need to let go the rest of the way, and finish the fall. At the bottom, we can rest, regather our strength, recover on solid ground. Then, we can begin to reformulate a plan. Clawing toward the top when you are a few inches from the bottom is not a wise or effective strategy. But we continue because it's the only strategy we know."

"But what if the bottom isn't only a few inches away; or the well is not dry, but filled with water and you drown?" Ah, Mr. Suck Butt Peter is at it again.

"That's the fear, isn't it. Unless we keep up our desperate efforts, we will drown, or crash. The truth is, we don't know. It is a

risk to let go. On the other hand, there are times when we've so depleted ourselves, and our old strategies aren't working, that taking time to pause, and trusting, may be a wise--though not perfect or risk free--alternative. I don't want to minimize the fear. Especially when you are so far down the hole that there is only darkness, and no light can be seen. Only hoped for."

It's fascinating. I can take the Rebbe's message and easily apply it to myself. Though I guess I'd say that I'm now at the bottom of the well. And looking for ways to inch myself back up. I can also take what the Rebbe is saying and apply it to Johannes, who, I know, has fallen as far down the well as he's ever been; so far down the hole that he's near the bottom, too. But he's struggling desperately not to land.

He still believes that with a little more effort, he can make everything right with Mery and his life. Somehow, a new rope will appear, deus ex machina, which will allow him, Tarzan-like, to swing to the next tree, or, with respect to the Rebbe's story, pull himself out of the hole.

There is no escape from facing the abyss. For all his clawing and scratching and hoping, it will slowly begin to dawn on Johannes that this is a new, never before faced situation. The railroad tracks of his existence are being pulled completely apart, even the terra firm on which the tracks exist is rapidly disappearing.

But now, as he leaves the cabin, he feels magically protected and sheltered. Clearly he doesn't understand the situation.

Otherwise he would not be so naive as to venture out into the dark, leaving the safety and warmth of the cabin.

Maybe that's not fair to him, though. Was there really any way that Johannes could have stayed where he was that could have kept him

safe? Maybe the bloody Passover is symbolic of the inevitable death of who he is. I can tell him now, the only way out, the only hope for a new life --and this is still my hope--that there is a way out, and that a rebirth, a new life is possible-- is through facing the abyss directly. Though the specifics may not have been foreordained, the inevitable confrontation with the abyss was. Even with my foreknowledge, I don't see a way around what he has to face, his own inner bondage, the dying of who he was. The Red Sea of blood lies behind him in the cabin. The Red Sea that he has to plunge into lies before him.

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I haven't gone more than a dozen steps, when my shadow starts to waver. I look up and see the moon is becoming covered by some flimsy clouds, which allow a flickering light to filter through the pines. Then the clouds become denser, and the light of the moon is blocked, though there is an eerie halo around the clouds' opaqueness. Finally, the light disappears, and all shadows are sucked into the night's darkness.

I hear the ocean's waves, though I still can't see them. The crashing waters seem to be surrounding me, and their pounding noise coming from all sides. But I know that is only an illusion caused by being able to only hear in one ear. I know in which way the ocean lies, and I continue to make my way forward into the blackness.

Of all the parts of Johannes' journal, this is one of the hardest for me to read; and keep my distance. I feel a harsh judgment toward him. He deserves exactly what he is going to get. Yet there is also a great compassion for the end of Johannes, for his coming death. I also feel helpless. Even as part of me wants to see him die, part of me, even though I know it is impossible, wants to rescue him from his

fate. He doesn't know that the last few inches of the drop await him even as he seeks to claw his way back up the rabbit hole. He's never faced the ocean at night. Even in the day he avoids it. He swims in the structure of the swimming pool. He rides along the ocean on a high horse. Everything within a confined framework, keeping his distance.

Until now.

* * *

Mery acts like I'm the big bad wolf: selfish, narcissistic, lecherous, overly analytical, insensitive. That's so unfair. She hides her narcissism better, but she wants everything to revolve around her, the poor little victim. Look how much attention she gets acting that way. Big bad wolf. Aren't I a man? Is it so wrong for a man to want to make love to his fiancée? I'm hardly a wolf. The whole story is backwards. The so-called wolf, me, is really an innocent lamb.

Why all the apologies to her if I didn't feel I did anything wrong? Just a strategy. And a bad one. I have nothing to feel sorry for. Am I selfish? Sure, I'll admit it. And I'm not ashamed or guilty about it, either. Who isn't selfish? Only losers, who get walked all over. Guilt, shame, self-blame are useless emotions. Senior taught me on the baseball field, if you make a mistake, suck it up. Don't say sorry; you'll sound like an unconfident wuss. Too many times saying "I'm sorry" tonight. I have no need to repent. I did nothing wrong. Mistakes are made. I don't want her to feel hurt. But she's way too sensitive.

You have to look out for yourself. I learned that long ago, when I was exiled from my home as a teenager. And now I have chosen self-exile from my home. There is no one now to look after me but me. What was that line from Sunday school. "If I am not for myself, who will be?" On one foot. Exactly.

I stop and try to balance on one foot. But in the dark, it's harder to do than I expected.

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A vicious side of her came out tonight. And even though she's the one at fault, it's me having to chase her through the woods in the cold to search for Little Red Riding Hood, who thinks she is an innocent lamb, but is really a wolf in sheep's clothing, trying to hide her basic animalistic nature under a spiritual veneer.

I'm not a quitter. Most people would just run away from this kind of adversity. I've learned to stick it out, push through adversity after adversity to reach my goals. I feel the ring in my pocket again.

Where's grandma in all this? I think of the pain of leaving my blue-eyed grandma in Kansas City. I wonder how she is doing. Too many confusing thoughts. Just keep going forward a step at a time.

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Is this really courage, or am I a passive fearful baby following after her? Mery had a little lamb. . .and everywhere that Mery went the lamb was sure to go. Maybe I should just turn around and let her go. Sometimes you have to move on. Like I did with my family. Just wash off the bad memories, and leave. Otherwise, I'd be forever stuck in the past. I know that feeling. Like I did with other women. Find a rope and swing to the next tree, Tarzan. Why am I chasing Mery?

I hear mom's words. "If you can't get along with me, you'll never get along with any woman." I need to show myself--and her--that I can make a relationship work. And I'm also aware that I've been close to crossing a boundary of anger and losing control. I need to show myself that I'm not being infested with the plague of my father's rage and violence. Could I be following her to ask

forgiveness, like her Jesus would do? But doesn't that contradict everything I just said? What do I believe? Too many arguments from both sides of the bench in the same mind. Where's the judge to sort out what is true?

In the darkness, sounds surround me. Inner thoughts, outer noises. The tap of my foot on the cobblestones; the whooshing of the wind through the trees. Each sound makes a different vibration in my body. If I'm going to go deaf one day, I want to make sure I have listened to and felt every sound the world has to offer.

I keep heading forward. "Of fear none shall accuse me." No backing down, no running away. It feels like it's getting colder still. Che gelo e mai. "What deadly chill is this." I wrap the woolen blanket more tightly around me.

* * *

Through the woods, a wolf in woolen clothing--camel colored. Am I a camel, a wolf, a sheep, or a lamb? Good, keep your sense of humor. You don't have to be meshuginah but it helps. This Passover certainly was crazy, and had it all, Grandpa--darkness, blood, my family with the death of the first born son, the Song of Songs: My beloved has turned and gone. I searched for her but. . .will I find her? The last chapter is not yet written. . .

I remember a song mom would sing me at night "Whenever I feel afraid, I hold my head erect, and whistle a happy tune, So no one will suspect, I'm afraid."

This is all going to turn out fine. I just need to keep my perspective. This could all be material for a great short story for my class. I'm in control here. I'm choosing to do this. My life is just beginning. The whole world is my oyster, right, mom? I'm way too young

to be having a midlife crisis, right, Dante? No midlife confusion, no descent to the depths after seeking Beatrice.

But if not Beatrice, then who is the protagonist searching for? Donna Elvira? Red Riding Hood? Cinderella? Alice? The white queen? He's searching for his garden fountain, his well of flowing waters. I'm off to see the Wizard the wonderful Wizard of Oz. Who am I that is seeking? A wolf, sheep, camel, Dorothy, Don Juan, a King, white knight? Who am I?

Words rush through my mind, jumbled fragments. Mozart, the Song of Songs, trying to find the Yellow Brick Road. I feel my heart beating more loudly. From passionate love? The adventure of a quest? From fear? Stop analyzing everything. It's just blood. What is? That which is in my heart? On my sandals? Covering the seder table?

All waters, all paths lead to the ocean, where I seek my love. Love is what I seek. Love is strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a most vehement flame. I think of the flames engulfing Don Giovanni. They bring me some warmth.

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The woods open onto a beach, and I take a few steps into the white sand. I start to laugh again. I imagine how I must look in my tan-colored blanket, like a camel about to cross the sands of a desert wilderness. Wouldn't that make a great opening scene?

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"All is dark, the moon once again hidden. He pauses, unsure which direction to continue walking. Then, as if pulled by some unknown force, he begins walking to his right. The dark black waves crash to his left. Ominous bluffs rise above him on the right. He looks up toward the lofty hills, as if he's drawn in a primordial way to the mecca where just the day before. . ."

That's good. Very strong. Then I laugh, ". . .where, just the day before. . . he had played golf." Playing golf? Sort of pedestrian and elitist at the same time, and not exactly the punch line I'd like for the opening of my story.

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Though I can't see it, I know, in the distance, is the tenth hole, where Mery left me today. I look at my watch. 12:30. Where she left me yesterday. How arbitrary time seems. As I stare toward the hole, it's like looking up toward a holy mountain. If this were Shavuot rather than Passover, it would be perfect. I'd have already crossed the Sea, and be at the foot of Sinai, ready for the ascent to see God. Maybe another story for another time. Especially since I've already been to the top of the mountain.

Where, unfortunately, I bogeyed it. I smile. Well, Moses goofed up on his first ascent and descent, too.

When I looked down from the tenth hole today--yesterday, I would have never expected that this night I would be walking on the beach below. Then, all that mattered was to get a par, and keep my great score from the front nine intact.

The difference between day and night.

* * *

As I continue walking, I know intellectually that the waves are on my left side, but I hear their ominous crashing in my right ear, and it seems the sound is coming from the bluff to my right. I feel disoriented. I stop and turn toward the water. When I do so, the waves' sound crashes louder, more directly into me. I feel my entire body vibrating. A chilling fear courses through me. I begin to run, as if to evade it.

He runs faster along the beach, parallel to the bluff.

His legs are churning, breath gasping. Does he even
know where he's going? He makes a sharp turn to the
right, as if to ascend the mountain. As he twists,
his legs give way under him and he falls toward the
ground. The clouds partially part, and a glimmer of
moonlight reemerges and bathes the water, throwing
confetti sparkles onto the breaking ocean waves.

The strobe-like flickering hypnotizes me, and I turn my eyes
away, looking to the right. As I gaze further up along the beach, I
can see that there is no Mery in that direction. I get up, make a half
turn, my back to the ocean, and stare upward toward the tall
overhanging bluff.

I'm leaving behind my golf mecca, which for so many years had
been my dream. Like an adult version of Disneyland, a fantasy world I'd
just read and heard about. Now I've played it, wrestled with it, and
in the end, it defeated me. Will I ever return? I turn away from the
vanishing, vanquishing mecca. And, in so doing, I have this empty
feeling, as if there's unfinished business, almost as if I'm leaving
the base of Sinai without ever actually climbing the mountain.

* * *

Retracing my steps, I now hear the water's pounding with greater
urgency and immediacy, its sound and vibration pummeling directly into
my ear, ricocheting and echoing throughout my body.

In the distance, way down the beach I see a light. It's not more
than a quarter inch high. That becomes my new goal. Maybe that's
where I'll find Mery? Once more, I feel the chilling fear. And hear
mom's voice:

"When shivering in my shoes
I strike a careless pose
And whistle a happy tune

And no one ever knows, I'm afraid.

Make believe you're brave

And the trick will take you far

You may be as brave

As you believe you are....

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Then I chuckle. If this is to be a grand story, there has to be deep spiritual significance. Maybe that light is really the Star of BETHlehem, where I will find the Virgin Mary. Hmm, wrong religion. Especially for Passover. I wonder where that story originated. Maybe someday I'll read the New Testament. Sorry, Matthew.

I should be Moses, called to free my people by a burning bush, whose flames burn but do not consume. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire. I look up toward the heavens, raise my hands, palms upward, like Mery's legs once reached, and shout "Here I am."

I remove my sandals and continue toward the light.

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After a few steps, my feet become cold and I feel the shivering beginning. I put my sandals back on. For some reason, as I leave the mountain behind me, I hear the words of Mery's art teacher "The law of Buddha is there is no law." That's the trouble with Mery. She's not consistent. Not the law of man; not the law of God; the law of no law. She keeps changing, is ungraspable, like trying to hold water between my fingers. How can you do anything without order? It's like trying to play chess or tennis or golf without rules, or rules which are ever in flux. I don't know the rules of this relationship game. She drives me crazy. Then why am I searching for her?

As I get closer, I see the light is a campfire.

As I get still closer, the flame is now a couple of inches high, and I can make out the shapes of miniature shadowy forms, maybe thirty or forty figures gesticulating, swaying, twisting. It appears as if they are dancing to the beat of the crashing waves, which is the only sound I hear.

When I am a hundred yards away, the flame now several feet high, I hear the waves begin to mix with the pounding of drums. It looks like how I would imagine an African tribal dance ritual of hunting and fertility. At the forty yard line, I see a pair of black hands flashing on the top of a sleek, elongated congo drum. Fire plays with the hands, black shadow on white drumskin.

I turn away from the fire toward the ocean, and see the moon's light coming toward me on the water. It's not a straight path, because the swirling currents elongate, then contract the reflected light, as if playing visual music on an oceanic accordion. Nonetheless, the light inexorably finds its way toward me. I feel mesmerized, and even find humor at observing myself--reflecting on myself-- watching reflected light reflecting on the ocean.

A haunting voice--within? without?-- unbidden, fills my mind:

Always turning from religion.

Until I had a vision...

Then I could not turn

From their revel in derision

Why do these words and images spring up? Am I trying to recite poetry for my class? Who is speaking them, if not me?

I feel myself pulled to the campfire like a moth pulled to a flame, but I try to resist. Keep your distance. You are the observer. Imagine it as a scene in a short story for your writing class. "Tribal Dance." A writer comes down to a place of white sands--a beach, a

desert-- looking for a mystery woman. He's afraid, wondering even as
he seeks her, if wisdom would not be to turn away and head in a
different direction. Why does he keep going forward? Is it like
passing an accident, afraid to look, too curious not to look? If she
is somewhere among the people around the fire, is there any way that
this could turn out well?

Another song, this time from mom, comes unbidden:

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens....
Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes...

When the dog bites,
When the bee stings
When I'm feeling sad,
I simply remember my favorite things
And then I don't feel so bad.

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A lighter skinned man--Chicano? middle eastern?--is hitting
wooden sticks together, while another, a white man with a beard, is
vibrating a metal shaker in each hand. Two women, one white, one
black, have their knees and thighs wrapped around hourglass drums,
which they beat in a rhythmic thumping, counterpoint patter of
pulsating fingers. There is something more than a little erotic about
their dresses hiked up to hold the drums, and the soft sensual motions
of their arms, hands, and heads moving up and down.

Off to the side, another black man is dancing while eating a
watermelon. Genet would be proud. Not afraid to transcend
stereotype.

The protagonist turns away from the campfire again, still not
having seen the woman he is seeking, and looks back at the ocean.
Interracial campfire. Race. A good theme. Melting pot, salad
bowl.

I think back to the church service where I first saw Al, and was
forced to listen to Stokely Carmichael ranting about how afraid we

whites are afraid of black masculinity and sexuality, the brutish black male submerged in our sub-conscious. He said blacks are much more willing to admit their wariness and mistrust of whites given whites brutal enslavement of them, but whites cannot admit their mistrust. Get over it. It's not my fault. Should I react to every German I meet with wariness because I'm Jewish? Maybe my Nana does. But not me. I'm willing to marry Mery, even though her grandmother is German. How long do you have to carry the burden of the past like an albatross? Trying to enflame white liberal guilt and self-lashing. I wonder if the Supreme Court will ever have to pass a reverse Shelley v, Kraemer. Blacks no longer allowed to have restrictive covenants barring whites.

I won't hurt you. You don't hurt me. Next.

Am I racist? That's ridiculous. Was I upset by Al's blackness? Not at all. It wasn't his skin color that bothered me, but his improvisational musical ability, the lack of which Mery criticized in me.

I'm impressed with your intellectual sophistication about race, Johannes, especially given your deep and thorough multi-cultural exposure. What contact have you actually had with blacks, other than your maids cooking and cleaning and doing laundry, or the doormen at your apartment? Your country club was all white members; your Country Day preparatory school was definitely all white, though in your senior year they did take a bold and controversial step by admitting a black boy into the 7th grade. And your college roommate's best friend turned out to be black, as well as a star football player. Mery's Al was the first black person who actually entered your life. I can't imagine that you didn't experience just a little bit of discomfort that she had dated a black jazz saxophonist.

My psychology professor made the same points, though in more academic language. He, too was trying to make we white Stanford students feel guilty. Not me. Let the liberals weep and wail. The professor claimed we are all racists, and have a similar fear response to a person of a different race as we do to spiders and snakes. He said it was our primitive reptilian brain's suspiciousness of that which is unlike us. We avoid what we fear, which prevents us from knowing people who aren't' like us and makes them a blank slate for projections that justify our anxieties. Therefore, we are more likely to assign nefarious motives and intentions to them. He even cited research that said negative associations stick more easily and relentlessly to faces that don't look like ours.

As if on cue, and they know what I am thinking, two of the drum players look over at me. A stranger in a strange land. Them and me. I stare back at them. Proudly. Defiantly.

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I still don't see Mery.

I remember her dancing to Joplin's singing, her gold cross bobbling around her neck. The same gold cross that danced while she writhed beneath me less than an hour ago while we made love.

If you can call it that. What is wrong with her mind? Being tied and bound, feeling suffering as a way to find orgasms and God? She is Jesus on the cross, giving to others while having sex. She is Jesus bound and having sex and receiving satisfaction. Maybe it's not just her, but her religion? You are sinners. All of you. Punishment and suffering lead to the realization of God. Jesus on the Cross, suffering and dying for our sins. Morbid. Weird.

Frame all that's happening as a story. As well as the theme of race, there could be a religious theme, too. A Jewish man seeking a

Christian woman. Passover. The Paschal Lamb. Convergence. Assimilation. Divergence. How will the story progress?

Better. Creating a story helps me step back. Calms me. I smile as I think of my first religious stories. Sunday school questions. If God is all powerful, can God make a stone so heavy He can't lift it? If God is everywhere, when God goes pee, does He pee on Himself? When we go pee, do we pee through God? Questions which didn't endear me to my teacher. I wonder how Mery would respond if I asked her what it looked like when God created a baby with Mary. What is His means of insemination, and is she really still a Virgin after God did the deed with her? She might not take it so well. Perhaps another time.

He tries to distract himself with mindless questions, but he's actually afraid to turn back and look at the fire, imagining he will see the woman dancing, arms above her head, breasts anarchically bouncing, like at the Fillmore. Perhaps two or three guys will be charming and enchanting her with their music, arms around her, caressing her voluptuous body. He imagines her red sweater somehow pulled up or down, and her nipples showing, even though "exposing any portion of the breast at or below the upper edge of the areola of any female person is a misdemeanor-- indecent exposure." His self-created imaginings make him feel angry. Then he laughs, awkwardly and too loudly, thinking maybe he will perform a citizen's arrest. Softer now, he smiles, at his childish petulance, and how fertile his imagination is, still without even looking at the reality less than twenty yards from him.

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I look closely toward the fire, then in larger and larger concentric circles covered by the fire's light, where dancing, swaying forms continue to undulate, parts of their bodies reflecting the fire's

harsh glare, other parts hidden in shadow, depending on their motion.
Several dogs, unleashed, are yelping, barking, howling and running
around the campfire. They frighten him. As he looks more closely at
the scene, he realizes he's no longer focusing on the arms and body
forms, but seeing the night and fire through them. Empty spaces.
Negative spaces that are disjointed, fragmented, unconnected to any
reality he's ever experienced.

Mery's not among the dancers.

At the outermost limit, and where the white sand is darker
because the fire's light is blocked by so many forms, vague writhing
shadows are cast onto the already uneven sand. Those shadows also
caress her body, which stands alone, outside the flame and heat of
the campfire, on the opposite side of the fire from where he is
standing,

He walks around the perimeter, careful to avoid the dogs, and
watching the sand so as not to step in any of their feces. As he gets
within yards of her, she doesn't see him because she is looking down,
and rubbing her eyes. Has she been crying? When she looks up, they nod
wordlessly at each other. There is a coldness in the air, an aloof
self-protective distance in both of them. She doesn't move, but he
continues to take the initiative and walk towards her, his hand in his
pocket, clutching the ring. The ocean is on his right side, and the
rumbling noise echoes loudly in his ear, drowning out the cacophonous
beat of the music around the campfire.

He extends his right hand, which she takes and wordlessly they
begin walking along the beach, in the direction from which he has come,
back toward the mountainous shadow of the tenth hole.

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How different the perspective from up above during daylight, seeing lovers on the beach. How different the feeling, at night, as we walk below the darkened course above us, the ocean to our left. She is on my right side, next to my good ear. The ocean's rumbling sound recedes, due to our change in direction, and now our backs are to the writhing forms and loud music receding behind us.

For some reason, unbidden, the image of my first date at the ocean, with Lori, again comes to mind. I wanted to impress her with my courage and fearlessness. After all, I'd been coming to California since I was ten. Dad had taught me how to plunge into the surf. "If you dive deep enough, you'll get to a still place beneath the turbulence." I still am diving, awaiting that still place.

With a Tarzan yell, I'd rushed into the water and, seeing an oncoming wave, leaped forward in a lovely lunge to dive under it. Unfortunately the wave that I thought was coming in, was going out. There was nothing to catch me and I landed in a splat on the sand.

I remember the wet sand molding to the contours of my face. I didn't move, fearing a broken neck and being paralyzed for life. When I realized there was no physical pain, and I could move, I still didn't want to get up, for I knew there would be peals of laughter at my expense.

Have I learned my lesson---not to dive headfirst into unsafe, unknown territory? I hold Mery's hand tighter.

We continue to walk silently. I have no idea how to break through the silence. What will be our first words? I see a piece of trash (from the campers)? I stop to pick it up. I want her to see how much I've changed from my earlier careless littering days, how I care for our good earth, what a good person I am.

As I lean forward, she stumbles, and the silence is broken by a yelping "Ouch" as I hold her hand harder to keep her from falling. She clings to me, as she picks up her left foot and stares at the sole. By the full moon's light, we can see that she has stepped on a seashell. There's a slight cut, a few drops of blood, but no real damage. I bend down, and wipe away the blood and sand from her bare feet. She puts her hand on my shoulder to keep her balance.

"Standing on one foot, with me as your support. No sandals. Naked soles. . ." I smile and remove my sandals, and once more gently rub her foot, before placing a sandal on each. Though loose, they fit well enough, and now her feet are covered. "Sometimes even a spiritual person's soul is too naked, and needs protection. 'How beautiful are your feet in sandals.'"

See, I'm not always selfish. Sometimes I'm kind and considerate. She's shivering, so I wrap the entire blanket protectively around her in a double wrap. As we continue to walk, Mery lets go of my hand, and places both her arms around me. I interpret this as a sign of increasing trust from her, that she's seeking not only stability, but comfort and warmth from me. The moon romantically gleams off the water.

I'm still the Kansas City gentleman, and it's working. I wish mom could see me now. I think of the song she would sing me at night when she put me to bed: "I see the moon and the moon sees me, the moon sees somebody I want to see. . ."

Would she be proud of me, overcoming my demons and plagues, and reconnecting with my beloved? Or would she feel like I'd proven her wrong, and be upset?

* * *

Without my blanket and sandals, and wearing only shorts and a t-shirt, I start to become colder, and the first signs of my shivering

reappear. I put my arms around Mery, pulling her closer to me to try to feel her warmth. She seems to resist, and even lets her arms drop from around me. She pulls the blanket tighter around herself.

My shivering becomes more pronounced, and I begin to walk faster, my teeth chattering. I will my body to stay warm. Though I'm glad to have separated Mery from the fire dancing bodies, I think of returning to the group, just to feel the heat of the flames. Each step I'm taking toward the tenth hole removes the heat and light of the fire farther away. I need my blanket back.

As I twist to turn back, I feel an odd sensation on the bottom of my foot. Like a paper cut. It's both a sharp quick pain and no pain. I want to say out loud "My Achilles heel," and make a joke, but the cold is too much, and I can't talk.

Maybe I, too, just stepped on a seashell.

Then I feel a granular oozing a liquid sensation, like coagulated water. Leaning against her with one hand, I lift up my foot, and see, like a sword, an orange-brown shard of glass from a broken beer bottle has lodged in my foot. Though it's bleeding, there isn't much pain. I look at the pierced foot with some detachment, and think, Falstaff, my friend, the beer is getting its revenge.

For a brief moment, I feel warmth. I think of Mery's fall in Golden Gate park, her bleeding, our trip to the emergency room. In some twisted perversion of self-interest and self-preservation, I'm glad this time it's me who is hurt, not her. Does that make any sense, Darwin? This time, whether my intention or accident, I didn't cause her to fall. I am not the plague.

For some reason, for luck, security, warmth, I don't know why, I reach for the ring in my pocket.

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A large wave breaks, its frigid waters rush toward them and the foamy tentacles are like a snake curling around his feet. The red from his bleeding foot mixes with the white bubbling foam, a witches' brew being alchemied before his eyes. At first he is numb, just watching his foot ooze red and the glacial waters encircle him.

A cloud begins to cover the moon, slowly removing the diamond strobe-lit stones from the water.

Shivering, he reaches for the girl to cling to and balance himself. He feels himself being pulled by some strange magnetic force, as if the tentacles of the blood foamed waves are luring him into the ocean's dark mysterious depths. But she's not sure footed or strong enough to hold him up, and she stumbles, and falls against him, bumping and pushing him further toward the ocean, and the very water he's trying to escape.

His body starts to shiver uncontrollably, his teeth chattering so hard he feels they may crack and break.

* * *

Many waters cannot quench love, neither
can the floods drown it.

That's it, think of something you know. The Song of Songs is your rope to cling to, your script. I try to pull back from the water, to regain control. I once again grab onto Mery. She slips out of my grasp, like gossamer. There's nothing solid, nothing to cling to.

*I opened to my beloved, but my beloved
had turned away and had gone.*

Another wave breaks over my feet. Its fingers, like a curled rope; it's haunting crashing noise, like a siren's lulling; both pulling me-- by touch and reverberation-- into its depth. I try to take a step back, but am unable. Keep your distance. Step back mentally and

gain a perspective. Imagine writing. This is happening to another
character in a story. The object being written about. The story is in
him. He is the story's creator. Every act a new sentence.

Change flesh into words.

* * *

Exhausted, trapped, he's caught in the cords of affliction
tangling his feet. He again tries to take a step back from the water,
though he also likes the soothing numbness as the salty ocean like a
balm, bathes his bleeding sole.

It's the first time he's ever been by the ocean at night. He'd
always known that it was off limits, a line he should never cross. The
menacing waves, pulled by the moon's unseen strength, mount higher,
then hurl themselves at him like crashing marines landing on the beach
to conquer him. Ominous rumbling greetings foreshadow their attack.
Spindly fingers, slimy tentacles gently, softly, caressingly encircle
his feet. Water is sucked back, inviting him, luring him, forcing him
to enter its darkness.

* * *

Encircling my feet. His feet. The man's feet. Sandals are gone,
given to Mery. I'm naked, my soul bared.

Terrors unknown are freezing me.

The commandment. Telling me to repent.

Passover, not Shavuot.

The music grows louder from the campfire. Congos pounding,
voices chanting, boomlay boomlay boomlay, boom. A campfire, a moon,
yet it's dark. There's so little light. It's so dark.

* * *

He feels his body and mind slipping from his grasp. Numbed and shivering at the same time. Each step he takes adds more words to the story. Each shiver is a word. He is composed of words, a composer of words; thoughts thinking words faster, blurring. Body losing control of itself, mind losing control of itself.

The two join, like ocean and wave, subject and object. Words become fluid, like flowing water. No banks. No structure. Words not in one place, shifting too rapidly, Heraclitian flux.

Words become flesh become words.

Who's thinking? Where is the self? Who's thinking "Who's thinking?" Words flowing faster, like a disconnected torrent. I need to create spaces between them. Pauses. Breath. Ocean roars louder. Unimaginable fear. The ocean without structure, each wave laughing, taunting, mocking. Insubstantial water, fluid, yielding, yet encircling, crashing, powerful alluring.

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Use your mind to create order. He's being pulled by the siren call of the ocean's waves; from the Greek seirazein, to dry up. These sirens dry him up by luring him into the water. Good paradox. Laugh, that's it. Better. Sweet singing sirens. They promised Odysseus foreknowledge of all future happenings. I should be able to know how this story ends.

And the sound of those around the campfire? They are death angels chanting dirges to lyre music, calling him to their sepulcher island, Molpe and Thelxepeia luring him with music and soothing words.

The moon is returning, playing hide and seek. White foam reflects the moon's reflected light. The sea foam, churning around severed genitals, gives rise to Aphrodite swaying sensually and naked, a horizontal, abstract of Botticelli's rendition of the goddess Venus,

rising from the sea, the titian goddess of love sex and fertility born
of ocean waves, dancing to Molpe on the sea's undulating chaos. The
moon's light reaches down from heaven and shimmers toward my feet. If
I step into the water, I feel I could begin my climb to heaven on an
illuminated Jacob's ladder.

Or at least to Safed?

I grasp at Mery as an anchor, seeking her warmth. She seems
terrified at the way I'm mumbling and staggering. She pulls the blanket
from her own shoulders, and tries to wrap it around me, but it falls to
the wet sand and is immediately drowned by a new wave.

Smiling waves. Waves have faces, disappearing faces,
Reappearing faces, all the same, all different, all from the same
source. There's nothing for him to grasp. Ponta rhea. Everything
flows.

Good, humor: diarRhea from this.

Flowing. directionless flux. Nothing, nothingness. Darkness.
Waves are fingers merging into a wrist. The wrist reaches out to
grasp him, more tightly entwining around my leg. His mind flowing
into dizziness, losing control. A new feeling. I've never before
lost control. Always something or someone to catch me. Seeking solid. A
rope to pull me up, not tightening around my feet. Fear swelling with
the waves. Heart flooding. Nakedness.

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"Help me" I hear a plaintive wail, and realize it's my own voice
crying out "Where are you?" as I reach out toward the light and dark
that is her face and body, trying to grasp it. "Hold me, Mery, hold
me." Looking up at the sky's darkened night for the order of the
stars, I stumble to the ground. No structure, no Big Dipper, just
swirling flow. I am in a fetal position on the sand. I've dropped my

notebook and papers, and they land around me, surrounding me on all sides like a cradle. I reach for them, to gather them up, but they are wet and damp, and tear in my fingers.

The ring. I reach into my pocket. Its cool solidity gives me something to hang onto. The rope to swing to. "I am my beloved and my beloved is mine." She can make me whole, she holds the key. She's trying to reassure me, hands softly caressing me, telling me not to be afraid, that I'm safe in her arms.

"Shh, just lie there. I'll go get some help." I can see fear, pain, grief, exhaustion, incomprehension in her face. Which I know is a mirror of mine. I don't want her to leave me.

"Don't go. Sing to me." I barely stutter a whisper. I try to sing "I see the moon. . ." but I can't because of the cold and shivering.

"I don't know that, but I'll sing. Just relax." She continues to caress my head. "This is a song my mom sang to me." She begins singing. I hear the sadness in her voice, but have trouble focusing on and grasping the words' meaning.

Der Eichwald brauset die Wolken ziehn
Das Magdlein Wandelt an Ufers~Grun;
Es bricht sich dis Welle mit Macht...

Then I realize it's German. The one language my Nana said never to learn--the forbidden language, invoking in her a contorted face like Munch's scream. I had always dismissed Nana's admonition with a patronizing nod. But now the guttural sounds are harsh and foreboding and I feel the same anguished expression. "No, God, no," I scream. Then pleadingly, "English!" I plead. What is she doing to me? Her smile is not hiding me from the ocean, it's revealing the ocean, pushing me into it. Her haunting, disembodied voice continues.

The cloud doth gather/ the greenwood roar,
The damsel paces along the shore,

The billows then tumble with might, with might..
and she flings out her voice to the darksome night

Her bosom is swelling with sorrow.
the world it is empty, the heart will die.
Thou Holy One, call Thy child away.
I've lived and loved and that was today.
make ready my grave-clothes tomorrow.

The words are like glass swords, piercing me. Why is she
singing this song? Why such frightening, doom-filled lyrics. Painful
words bring echoes of painful words. I hear in my head

rock a bye baby, in the tree top,
when the wind blows, the cradle will rock,
when the bough breaks, the cradle will fall,
and down will come baby cradle and all.

I know I should be empathic, but my distaste for Johannes is
still so strong. What echoes in my head are new lyrics

while the waves roll
the cradle will rock and
when the feasts over you'll go to the sea
good bye Johannes, I wish you weren't me.

These are horrible words and images, too. What's happening to
me? I hear Mery again above the noise in my head.

Suzanne takes you down to her place near the river. . .
You can spend the night beside her
And you know that she's half crazy
And that's why you want to be there. . .

I stare at her face. The moon is behind her, framing her red hair in a
halo. But I can't see her face. It's only formless shadows. Where are
the freckles? What are her eyes saying? I hear music, the Doors' "I
can't see your face in my mind." Next to last song, side two. That's
it. Keep order, structure. What happened to the Seder? Why is this
night different from all other nights?

Is she crazy?

Now I hear Don Giovanni inside me, "My soul is rent in
agony! condemned to endless misery...no more to see the light." I

can't talk, I feel the coldness of the water like flames of the
campfire scalding me. I can't stop her singing

There's a dark spirit walking in our house.
And swiftly with the destiny close on us.
It drove me hither from my calm asylum,
It mocks my soul with charming witchery.
It lures me forward in a seraph's shape
I see it near, I see it nearer floating,
It draws, it pulls me with a god like,, power..
And lo; the abyss -- and thither I am moving
I have no- power within me -not- to move.

Stop, Mery, I want to cry out. "No more, I don't want to hear
any more words. I roll my head down onto the sand, grinding my right
ear into the water. Now I can hear nothing except my mind. Is she doing
this on purpose? I can't feel her. My body is going numb. I try to
pull her to me harder. Nothing. Ixion. A cloud. Jovial trick, Zeus?
Not funny.

I hear the last lines of Mozart, as the flames increase and
engulf Don Giovanni. "He who wrought selfish pleasure shall
depart without, yes, without a friend." Damn morality play.

Her face won't stay still. The smile. Red hair, like a devil
passing through the flames of hell. Mocking, peaceful smile. Scorching
hair, agonizing coldness. Shifting face of an angelic devil, she
won't stay just one thing. She led me here, cast me here. Why?

Her why's led me to the sea. Mery. Words. The Y. The "y" was
only to disguise it. La Mer. Dizzy crescendoing growing louder. She's
deserting me. Boomlay boomlay, boomlay, boom. Where are the
campfire and the drums? I hear them echoing all around me. In me. Can't
trust her. Can't trust anything. Anyone.

Playing an angel, acting as if there is nothing evil in
her; an innocent lamb without blemish. Anger surging faster.

Boomlay boomlay boomlay.

You repent, not I. "Pentiti cangia vita pentiti scellerato."

Boomlay boom. Congos pounding. I protected her, healed her sole, where
is she now? Who is there to protect me? Water higher on my ankles. At
the edge. Can't see. Too dark. Turn inward. Where does the scene end?
Can't see. The scene is not far enough along in his mind. Too vague,
nothing clear inside: tiny white freckles on a black sky. For love
is strong as death. Being pushed toward the sea. By her? Being
pulled by the infinite mysterious ocean.

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Then I heard the boom of the bloodlust song
Beware, beware walk with care.

Tears flowing. I can't stop them. The sand feels cold against
my face. I feel the tears that I've never before let out. Crying for
the first time over being exiled from home; my parents' divorce; my
father's blows; my mom's suicidal collapses. My tears merge with the
salty water. I can't feel the ring in my hand. Did she take it? Was
it washed into the ocean? Her red sweater, my blood, her hair, the
ring. A red sea not parting, but covering me in disjointed flowing
colors. Ocean rumbling louder. Where is the Seder's order?

Can she hear me? Thunders of heaven reverberating. Trees
violently bent by the wind. When the bough breaks. "Apri, knock,
knock. Apri dico. Let me enter." Door's closed. No plans, no
calculations. Reason is thrown overboard. He doesn't want to look at
the ocean. He doesn't know where to focus.

Do you understand? Glazed eyes. Veiled. Does she hear?
Is she really there? I try to hold her tighter. Limp, glassy-eyed.
"Turn your eyes away from me for they have confused me." I hear that
ominous violin again. Take her hand. "Not death itself were colder."
Don't you hear my words? Why don't you talk? Please, I'm helpless.
Her lips are moving. My right ear in the water, I can't hear. Nothing

but pounding surf. Veiled stare. Like a ghost. "Quit my sight. No speculation in those eyes. Her hair like gusts of flame. Don d'escono quei vortici." Trapped. Enslaved. Water and blood mingle with her red hair as she hands me the afikomen. A Jewish mother trying to get me to eat something? That's funny. Meshuginah, Grandpa. Communion?

Music coming from Memnon's statue. "When the music's over."

Side two, last song. Song of Songs. Where are the clusters of the vine? I reach for her breasts, which slip out of my hands as I fall back. Numbness creeping through me. Surging waters before me. Banks of the Nile. Trees, sand, stone. All become a mass of frothing faceless water. Encircled, no place to turn. A Sea of Death opening before me. Barking dogs. Dizzy-crescendo water's roaring. Faintness. Cradle will fall. Eastern wind rising. Che inferno, Love is strong as death, Che terror, music of Doors fading. Can't grasp the words, her face, bloody waters rushing back, pulling me in. Don't let the dancer speak the epilogue, waters rushing back ahha. . .rushing b. . .I hear the dogs barking the drums pounding. How can I, with my ear on the sand? I must keep the dogs away. I close my eyes but I can feel them sniffing me, wanting to urinate on me, defecate on me. No. No. Hands are grasping me, trying to pull me away from my sleep. I hear mom telling me never to curse, be a good boy. Yet what starts to emerge from deep in my innards, working its way in an echo up my body is a single word, a forlorn, blasphemous curse that I promised I would never say. In my heart I hear shouting, a blood curdling, plaintive, enraged, word that mingles with the congos and barking and Mery's singing and the ocean's rumbling. Shhhiiiiiiit.

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