

**Book Two**  
**Partings**

**I**

*slowly immerse myself in the waters of the Red Sea. It feels like a cleansing baptism to have the waters be parted by, and then reform over the contours of my body.*

*The water's multi-colored fish and majestic coral provide a dramatic contrast to the last several days of travel since I left Jerusalem, and journeyed south of Beersheba, through the desert's hot, dry nomadic wilderness, monotonous repetition, and starkly elegant primitiveness.*

*I allow myself to drift and float and observe, giving up structure and goals for a few moments, leaving all earthly concerns behind.*

*Sinai is my goal.*

*Last night--Monday, November 2-- when I reached Eilat, I built a depression in the sand to shelter me from the wind. I'm living on Coral Beach, next to the waters of the Red Sea. There is something raw and earthy living outdoors, without a sheltering roof, seeing the stars so clearly, listening to the water. Being totally alone, just me and nature. No one knows where I am. No one to answer to. No rigid kibbutz structure; no wake up calls to pluck rocks from the field, or to fertilize the date trees.*

*Finally I am completely free.*

\*

\*

\*

*"Lai...lai lie...lai lai lai liai lia...lai lai lai....."*

*We are standing in a circle, singing, as the Rebbe lights the intertwined, braided candle for the Havdalah service.*

*I missed the Saturday morning Shabbat Torah portion*

reading--the last chapter and completion of Genesis. I can hear Johannes smirking, commenting, with his incessant word play, "Is it significant to miss the end of the beginning?"

But I did find the courage to force myself to leave my room and go to the evening Havdalah service. There are too many spaces in my day, and my life. I need some human contact, and I plan to ask the Rebbe if he can see me privately.

I listen to the Rebbe as he explains, while we are humming the niggun, "Havdalah is a ceremony of sweet sadness. Sweet in that we seek to celebrate and extend the joy and rest of Sabbath. Sadness in that we are faced with the inevitable departure of the Sabbath day. Endings and new beginnings."

As we sing, we form a circle, arms around each other, and bless the wine, the spices, the God who separates light from dark. We watch the united flame of the braided candle, as well as the five separate flames of the Chanukkah candles. Though awkward to be around people, I also feel comforted as part of a human circle. I enjoy the touch--perhaps too much-- of a hand on each of my shoulders. These past few weeks, since climbing Sinai and returning through the wilderness to Jerusalem, have been the longest I can remember going without some kind of human touch.

"Lai lai lai lai lai lai lai lai. Eliahu ha navi...." Elijah the prophet joins us. And then we sing, "Into Your arms, Your loving arms, I commend my soul. A good week, a week of peace..." swaying to the singing. I feel sad when the song ends, and the hands leave my shoulders.

The empty spaces return.

\*

\*

\*

I remember at home we would spin the dreidel during Chanukkah, and depending upon which letter was on top--Nun, Gimmel, Heh, Shin-- we would receive (or have to pay) varying amounts of Channukah gelt. The gelt--money--was in the form of shiny gold covered coins, which, once you took off the wrappers, contained delicious chocolate inside. Nes Gadol Hayah Sham. A great miracle happened there. I guess now the words to the song should be Nes Gadol Haya Poh. A great miracle happened here. I await the modern day version of that miracle here.

\* \* \*

The Rebbe signals for quiet, and says "A couple of brief announcements. As you know, our class 'Chanukkah: A Psycho-Spiritual Understanding' is now over, so there will be no meeting this Wednesday. We'll have our usual reading of the parasha portion this Saturday at 10:00. It's a new beginning-- Exodus, when we read of the rise of a human savior who will be God's agent against oppression, helping Israel--those who struggle with and toward God--to leave Egypt. Egypt in Hebrew is not just a territory, it also means any 'narrow place.' So, as you read this first Torah portion of Exodus, called Shemot--Names-- think of your own narrow places, areas of constriction and bondage in yourself, in your life, that you may be struggling to leave--with or without God's help." He smiles and continues,

"That allows me a perfect segue into announcing our new class, 'Passover: From Bondage to Liberation,' which will begin Wednesday, March 3, 2:00, and last four weeks. If you are called to come, we'd love to see you there. Finally, beginning Monday, February, I'm pleased to announce that at 7 a.m., Dr. Lisbet will be leading an eight week experiential and didactic course on

'Tai Chi, Xujing, and Dongjing:  
Finding Balance and Wisdom in All Life's Situations.'

You won't want to miss this. I can highly recommend it.

In the meantime, happy reading, and have a good and blessed week."

When he finishes speaking, a mob of students rush toward and surround the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. I stand back, waiting until the crowd thins so I can approach him with my request.

\* \* \*

I reflect on his words. "Shemot-- Names." Johannes, in his Shakespearean Garden of Eden, says to Elizabeth Mery, it doesn't matter what you are called, for a rose by any other name....

True, and not true. Why does simple reality have to become so complex? The short answer is, I don't know. But I do know that the progression from simple wisdom to complexity can be described simply by one word: inevitable.

"I answer to many names," she told me. "My full name is Elizabeth Mery. My friends and family call me Beth."

Names offer an identity. Johannes. Junior. Job. Moses. John. Jesus. New names seek new identities or solidify changes being made. Abram becomes Abraham. Jacob becomes Israel. Yet names not only identify, reveal, and concretize, but they also conceal, hide, and overly simplify.

I wonder if that's why God is sometimes referred to as HaShem, the name? Simple wisdom on the other side of complexity.

"Shemot, Names" the first chapter of Exodus. Every new beginning is an exodus from somewhere. Every name change is an exodus from one place toward a promised land, and an opportunity to start again. Entering into, and then becoming aware that we are in a narrow place, a bondage, can create the impetus for the

**new beginnings.**

I'm seeing more clearly than ever Johannes' narrow places. His first kiss with Mery, in the Garden of Eden, is really the beginning of the end of Johannes as he knew himself. His life is going to be changed forever. He does not realize that his goal--to seek home plate through parting Mery's thighs and entering the narrow place between her legs--will reveal to him additional narrow places within himself of which he, as yet, has no idea.

It's disheartening that we cannot see clearly enough to know where we are in a cycle. Is a phase plateauing, ending, a new beginning occurring? Cycles within cycles, revolutions of the circle, which seem to repeat endlessly. **And yet sometimes, even without our realizing it at the time, subtly progress forward, upward, creating a spiral.**

What about my own narrow places? What awaits me, that I don't even know?

\*

\*

\*

What I do know is that I need help. Although I realize that I've gone as far as I can take me. I'm not sure the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet are the right people to turn to. I've really only seen them a few times and all in structured class-room settings. Also, his announcements at the end of Havdalah sounded a bit like an advertisement. His rhetoric "if you are called" is well and good, but each session, they pass a hat and I feel guilty if I don't put a few "shekels" in. A class here, a workshop there, a parasha session. Each time, a few Israeli pounds, additional agorot. It's like they always have a hand out....to offer help? Or to ask for and receive gelt?

**Either/or? Can it be both? Does one negate the other?**

Also, I'm not sure how trustworthy or competent they are to deal with personal problems--my personal problems. And I hate the idea of admitting I'm in trouble. It makes me look and feel vulnerable and dependent.

But I don't have a lot of choices, I don't know where else to turn.

I summon my courage and walk toward the Rebbe. He seems more approachable than Dr. Lisbet. But they are together after the others leave, so I have to ask both of them. As I walk toward them, and see the last person leaving, I place a couple of pounds, as if naturally and with unpremeditated timing, into the upturned hat.

"That was a wonderful service. Thank you. Look, this is a little awkward for me, but I have a favor to ask of you." I glance from one to the other. "Would you be willing to get together with me on an individual basis--maybe for lunch or something?"

"Lunch? Why?" Dr. Lisbet inquires.

"Oh, just to talk and..."

"Are you asking for therapy?" Dr. Lisbet again.

"Well, nothing so formal, just some guidance and advice about where I am now in my life."

"With whom? With me or with Reb Jonathan?"

I'm feeling intimidated by her directness, as if she is seeing right through me. I want to get this started on the right foot, and I don't want her to feel excluded or upset with me, so I say "Both of you. Is that possible?"

She turns to the Rebbe, who nods, and says through his gray white beard, looking directly at me, "Wednesday, December 30.

10:00 a.m. Here in my office to ensure we have privacy. Ok?" He looks over at Dr. Lisbet who signals agreement. "We'll both be here."

"That's great" I say. "Thank you." They each give me a little pat on the shoulder. I can't tell whether it's to comfort me or dismiss me.

\*

\*

\*

I have two goals for the next couple of days. I want to continue reading about Johannes and his evolving relationship with Mery. I also want to begin filling in the gap in my diaries from the time after I cut my hand, left the kibbutz, and wasn't able to write, until my arrival back in Jerusalem.

How should I write about that period? I'm of two minds now (at least). Do I write from a historical perspective--like an omniscient narrator--telling of someone else's wanderings (a past self)? Or do I write not from my vantage point now, but what I was feeling and thinking at the time. I realize this latter approach is nearly impossible as memory may distort, and in some ways, I know how events evolved from my current perspective that I had no way of knowing or anticipating at the time.

I decide to follow Johannes' lead after meeting Mery, when he went nearly a month without writing in his journal. When he began again, he differentiated past from present. I will do likewise, which will allow me to express *past narrative in the present tense*, and also allow me to editorialize and comment from the ongoing present when I'm seeing something differently than I saw it at the time. **Simple. Complex. Simple.**

I feel excited at the idea of starting to write again, especially filling in this "gap" in my life. There is a lot to



unpack from my mind which occurred during that time. On the one hand, I am aware of the injunction that "the Word lives in living"--not in writing about living. But I also know that when I write, I feel there is an "I" that begins to exist. Somehow, it adds a reality, even a permanence--an immortality--to the events. I don't yet know how to reconcile those two views.

\* \* \*

Friday, October 30.

*"Where does God live--image in your mind God's House.*

*"How do we find God? Who is God?"*

*"This weeks' Torah portion is "Lech Lecha--to go forth. Abraham, at a cross roads, went forth. He is called by God to leave the house of your father, to "go forth" to a new land, a land you do not know. His name changes from Abram to Abraham. Lech lecha, the masculine, means leading and is outward directed. Lechi lach, the feminine, being called to go forth inward. Later, Moses "went forth". As part of this class, we will take an inward journey, connecting Abraham to Moses at Sinai. When we are at a cross roads in our life, how do we find the wisdom to choose how to go forth. Might feeling ourselves in God's house help guide us?*

*"We would like you to look inside to see, feel, explore your views of these questions--God's house, God's guiding, any cross roads you are facing in your life. Don't think too much, don't judge or critique...just notice what arises."*

\* \* \*

*I look around the room. There are about 30 of us. How did I get here? I can blame Jeremy and Marianne, my friends from the Kibbutz who were responsible for initially inviting the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet to give a workshop on the "Fall Preview" of Holydays:*

Rosh Hashannah, Yom Kippur, Succot, and Simchat Torah. Two gentiles had to persuade the kibbutz hierarchy who reluctantly agreed to offer the workshop--if participants paid their own way and there was no direct cost to the kibbutz.

After I cut my hand the day after Simchat Torah, and was taken to Jerusalem for surgery, I returned to the kibbutz. I mopped around for several days around feeling disoriented and useless. Perhaps out of pity and concern my friends mentioned going back to Jerusalem to hear a "God Search" talk and did I want to join them.

"Maybe pack a few things, this is an opportunity for you to travel and see a bit more of Israel," Marianne remarks.

"Right, sometimes things happen for a reason. Maybe what happened with your hand is a sign from God" Jeremy adds with his seemingly unextinguishable smile.

Jeremy is a fundamentalist Bible belt Christian from Little Rock, Arkansas, who is living in Israel to learn more about his "roots" and to trace Jesus' path through the Holy Land. He's sure that God placed him on Kibbutz Haon, on the Sea of Galilee, as part of his journey.

Marianne is a free-spirited Swedish girl, who wears a kerchief in her hair, and has come to Israel as a way to travel and "see the world. The kibbutz is an economical way to get room and board." An unlikely pair, who have developed a relationship and become the closest thing I have to friends here.

They're right. There is nothing for me to do on the kibbutz. What they said makes sense. But are they doing it for me, or for them? Or at the behest of the kibbutz hierarchy? Are they all trying to usher me out of the kibbutz because my mood is a drain

on them, and I'm no longer productive?

Well, if their motivation is positive, it's not a bad idea. And if it's nefarious, I don't want to be where I'm not wanted. All signs point toward leaving.

And I did learn something the first time I heard the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet a few weeks ago. Their "fall preview" wasn't horrible, though a little patronizing. It felt like they were trying too hard to be hip and relevant, pandering to their youthful audience.

But it seems like it is time to leave the kibbutz for a while since I can no longer work here, and travel a bit. Marianne and Jeremey could be my escorts to get me started, and since I like having a goal, the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet's class in Jerusalem can be my first stop. If it's too boring, I'll just... well, actually I have no idea what I'll do.

\* \* \*

Dr. Lisbet is rail thin. Her hair may have once been blonde, but is now a grayish white. When the Rebbe talks, she's always calm, peaceful, listening attentively, often with eyes closed. But she seems to miss nothing.

When she speaks, she's animated, and moves gracefully, dancing with her hands, a bit like an impish leprechaun. Her tone is soft spoken, with a slight accent, but she's very direct and her stare is penetrating. She's the one who just asked us these questions, about our views of God. Although she said at the start of class she wants to be called by her first name "Lisbet," everyone calls her Dr. Lisbet.

The Rebbe is heavy set, stocky, maybe in his late 50's,

early 60's, the same as Dr. Lisbet, with the obligatory full gray beard. Some gray hairs emerge from his skull cap, and he is wearing a tallit that looks like Joseph's robe of many colors. He continues speaking:

"Now, before Sinai, you have prepared yourself for several days to hear, see, and feel God's presence. Now if you would all close your eyes, let's take a little guided journey up Sinai in our minds..."

I have no idea what a "Jewish" God looks like. Christians have Jesus--everywhere. There are statues of Buddha. The first image that comes up is the "old man in the sky, grandfather with a long beard." It's nice to see how evolved and mature my thinking has become. I look around the room. Am I really supposed to close my eyes in a room with total strangers? I see everyone else has. The Rebbe is looking at me. I'm the last one, besides him, who still has his eyes open.

\* \* \*

"Imagine you have traveled through the desert for a long period, leaving all the trappings of civilization behind. Yes, the preparation for Sinai also involves sexual abstinence. Finally, you have reached the sacred mountain. What does the mountain look like to you? What are you seeking?"

"For the past few days, you have been camped at the base of Sinai, preparing yourself for your journey up the sacred mountain, at the top of which you will encounter God. You are aware that an extraordinary event is about to take place.

"The morning of the climb arrives. At the first sign of dawn, you begin the ascent, climbing higher and higher.

"What obstacles do you encounter?"

*"Perhaps there are some false starts. You may need to double back. Zig zag. Do you notice that as you are walking, you are more focused on the immediate trail, and sometimes lose sight--metaphorically and actually--of the summit, the reason you are climbing?"*

*"Try to keep the summit in your sight. Can you see it?"*

*"Still higher. Perhaps you start to feel a bit tired, your energy lagging. Maybe some doubt creeps in. You may be wondering 'Why am I doing this?'"*

*He got that one right. I feel the doubting part of my mind quite strongly. "What am I doing here?" I have no idea. It feels stupid to be in a room of people and pretending to be at Sinai. How could I have let myself be talked into this?"*

*"But you fortify your resolve, determined to go on."*

*"What other feelings might you be having? Anticipation, excitement, fear? Is there anger at someone who is getting in your way? Competition to be the first up the mountain? Just let your mind see all that is going on as you climb."*

*My right hand is throbbing. There is still considerable pain from the knife wound. I wonder, as a way to get some distance from and even mock this exercise, whether having only one good hand will effect my climb up the mountain.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*"Now you are about to reach the summit. Let yourself focus on your breathing in a slow, relaxed way. Let all thoughts and emotions just float away, emptying your body and mind for a sacred encounter."*

*"You are at the summit. Prepare yourself to receive."*

*"Imagine yourself in God's presence. Open yourself to receiving--through hearing, seeing, feeling-- the one word, or sentence, or color or sensation that you most need in your life right now. Just stay with your breathing, open, relaxed for the next few minutes. Don't try to control anything, just allow, and open yourself to receive."*

*My body is, in fact, tired and tense, maybe from this climb, maybe from all that has been happening in my life. I feel my mind straining to hear inwardly, listening intently.*

*Nothing. No colors, shapes, forms. I hear someone cough? Marianne? I hear what sounds like someone crying.*

*I find myself becoming upset at my inner silence and the external distractions.*

*Then, for some strange reason, I remember an argument I once had with my tennis coach. He had drilled me for years to "watch the ball into your racquet." Then one day, out of the clear blue, he said,*

*"Stop watching the ball so intently. Let yourself go into a fog." I became agitated and confused, and told him,*

*"That makes no sense, It's contrary to everything you've been teaching me."*

*"Yes and no. You are now good enough that to focus on the ball so carefully hurts your game. To go to the next level, you have to let go and trust your reflexes, your body, your eyes, your mind: you have to let go of the need to control so precisely and with such determined focus. Let yourself be in a fog. The last time a good tennis player will see the ball, it's eight feet from his racquet. Then it just becomes a blur. To be as good as you are, you needed to develop control. Now, to raise your*

game to the next level, you need the control to give up so much control. "

I try to relax my mind. To imagine myself surrounded by fog, as if there is a cloud covering the top of the mountain, through which I can't see.

Then I hear a single word, quiet, almost silent:

"Trust."

Then there is a long silence. Was the voice male? Female? Mine? Whose? Is it a command? A description? A noun? A very? Trust what?

Then I hear the phrase "You are loved."

I feel a tightness in my eyes, then tears. I don't want to cry. I feel an initial resistance at the idea of being loved. My shoulders hunch. I try to armor myself. The armor seems to dissolve and melt, my shoulders relax, and I feel a wave of sadness. Love seems so far from me.

"Trust you are loved."

\* \* \*

I surrender to the words, as if surrounded by a white cloud on the top of the mountain, ready to let it carry me away. I feel encircled by trust, a perfect love, completely accepted. My body continues to relax. The sadness also deepens and there are a few more tears. Some embarrassment. I don't want to cry in such a public place.

But it's as if a dam has been broken. As if I've been going on adrenaline, or fear, just acting non-stop; and now pausing, opening, all the emotions are swirling within me asking to be released.

*I feel myself trying to re-tighten. I don't want to trust "trusting." I don't want to open myself to feel love. It feels too open, too vulnerable. My family couldn't be trusted; Mery couldn't be trusted; society can't be trusted. I'm not even sure I can be trusted.*

*I feel my mind and words coming to my defense, to keep me from getting too close to the feelings.*

*Trust is not my strength now.*

*You are loved....by whom. Mery? My family? By me? By God? By the Palestinian rebels or Hezbollah shooting mortars at our kibbutz? By the kibbutzniks? By my friends on Sixth Street in San Francisco? There is no object of the preposition. There is no preposition.*

*Who is saying this? I try to get outside the cloud, to watch myself. I want to become a commentator on the scene, asking questions.*

*But the cloud holds me captive.*

*I am suffused with this glowing, motionless, tranquil feeling, yet my body is pulsing, vibrating, my heart palpitating. You. All of us are "You." All of us are part of this feeling--Mery, family, enemy, homeless people on Sixth Street--all separate and yet interconnected and intersecting at the same time.*

*Love is intertwined with the tears and pain and doubt. It doesn't remove them, but seems deeper than all those feelings, the place from which all those feelings and thoughts arise and return. The cloud surrounding all of us.*

*Somehow I know, no matter how hard I fight and resist, I know.*

*Experientially, deeply, non-verbally, I feel this is what it*



must be like to be in God's house.

\* \* \*

Someone coughs, another shuffles.

The cloud starts to dissolve. I can feel the moment, the love, slipping away. Just outside my grasp. Anger starts to return. Then humor at the anger.

The feeling is disappearing, but the reality of the experience still lingers with me. It's almost as if, for a brief instant, I see my anger as just a passing phenomenon against the spaciousness of a vast, loving background sky. I experience the anger, but I'm not captured by it.

I can hear voices now. The Rebbe, Dr. Lisbet, students talking. But I am no longer part of the seminar. As I leave the room, I start to drop some money into the offered hat. But somehow that seems sacrilegious to pay for this holy experience.

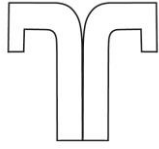
I walk outside into the street. I know where the next step of my journey lies. I am not going back to the kibbutz, nor am I going to stay in Jerusalem. I am going down to Egypt, to the desert. I am going to prepare myself, through fasting, cleansing, mental discipline.

Once I used my mind and focus to achieve success in gaining understanding of the law of man.

Now, instead, I am going to use that same effort to gain understanding and wisdom about the law of God.

I am going to climb Sinai.

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*



he sun has not yet risen, but dawn's crimson color has thrust itself, like red veined lighting bolts, into the black blue of the sky, heralding its nearing ascendancy. The bloody tentacles now creep further into and give life to the nights darkness. I sit high up, like a king on his throne, looking down at an unfolding panorama of lights, water, and landscape that reveals itself while I remain motionless. The unmoved mover. The unmoved, moving. I can't quite hide a small smile of admiration at my cleverness.

During the course of a thirty minute rotation, the center floor at the Crown Room of the Fairmont, on top of Nob Hill, makes a full revolution, allowing the world below, and the sky above to be seen through a circular expanse of windows. As the pinkish and darkened vermilion continues to part and stain the horizon, the earthly lights diminish. Elegantly written, Johannes, though a bit flashy and colorful. Are you trying to practice your new found skills from the creative writing class--or is your prose simply a reflection of the afterglow of the evening in which you are still basking. **It's also the first week in the counting of the Omer--the seven weeks toward Sinai. The first week is the week of Love--Chesed-- as context. And since it's the fifth day of Passover, it is Hod-Glory-- Aesthetics-- , for today,as content. Maybe the universal spirit is working through him as he writes, in the Crown Room--Keter--near Heaven. To the North, the forms of Sausalito and the reddish hewed Golden**

Gate Bridge emerge. As the rotation continues, Alcatraz and Treasure Island, then to the East the Bay Bridge, Oakland, Berkeley are painted by the first light. Until the sun actually is seen, the transition is barely noticeable from second to second, yet, looking back, is remarkable.

Similarly, the movement of my seat is so slow, that if I look down and write, I don't realize I am being spun both by the floor and the earth. (Isn't it amazing how Johannes can be spinning in so many directions simultaneously, and not even realize how off balance he is? **It's also a critical insight to realize how necessary it is to find, or create, a still point in time and space to allow writing and reflection in order to achieve balance amidst swirling inner and outer events. Kudos to all of us for that, Johannes included.**

The one area that keeps this view from being 360 degrees is the elevator and hall area to the west. Yet, though there is a "blind spot" from where I'm sitting, when I got off the elevator I stopped and instead of proceeding directly right to the buffet area, I looked left, out the huge picture window. Before me lay Grace Cathedral and the Twin Peaks area. (I know I shouldn't, but thinking of Mery naked last night, how could I not but think with grace about her....onward).

\*

\*

\*

My life has been a whirl this past month, like this carousel bar on adrenalin, an accelerated carnival merry-go round. Or Mery go round. Mery is six floors below, sleeping. She said she wants to sleep in as late as she can, and then have me come awaken her so we can go to the 11:00 o'clock church service. Silly girl.

Probably disoriented by too much wine and our night together.  
It's only Saturday morning. She's a day off. Unless she wants to  
sleep all the way until Sunday!

What a Friday night. Is it hyperbole to call it perhaps the  
highlight of my life? I'm only sorry I didn't have my camera to  
capture it in pictures. Dear Journal, Let me catch us up. Words,  
don't fail me now!

In fact, what a month. I remember with incredulity that just  
a few short weeks ago--my last journal entry--I was upset by a  
children's birthday party in the Shakespeare garden. I'm a little  
astonished that I haven't found time, or haven't been willing to  
write this past month. My daily journal writing habit seems to  
have vanished. I'm quite surprised. I always try to write down an  
event as soon as possible after it happens, so as to reproduce  
and capture it accurately. Things have been so good, and have  
been going at such a fast pace, it didn't really seem necessary.  
Yet this immediate past has already become somewhat of a blur.  
Though a good, dizzying blur. There is a certain freedom in not  
being tethered to a pen, not feeling I have to write every day. Ha,  
Sartre, take that, you who had to write every day. Enslaved to your own  
self-chosen habits.

How well everything turned out that first day in the park. And  
since, culminating in Beethoven's Ninth, and our night together.  
I want to sort this past month out. Maybe there is a way I can  
even use some of this as part of an assignment for my creative  
writing class.

There is a lot of ground to cover.

\*

\*

\*

I unroll the four foot wide and twenty feet long red carpet

with a flourish so that it covers and divides the blue-black asphalt leading to Mery's home. The other end of the carpet stops at Mr. Red, on whose dashboard I have placed a single lit candle. Herbert Von Karajan's 1963 performance of Beethoven's 9th is blasting from the German tape recorder my grandparents bought for me when we took our cruise to Europe.

Mery emerges from her house, and looks bewildered at seeing the carpet.

I bow, saying, "Fair damsel, ist thou ready for a Joyful evening?"

Seeing my gesture, she seems willing to enter the mood. As she steps on the red carpet, she says "Oh, kind sir, I feel myself being transformed into a fairy princess by this magic carpet. Wherever am I being taken?"

With a slow, courtly gesture, I place my right hand on my hip, forming a ninety degree angle at the elbow. She slips her left arm through, forming a linked pair.

"Dost the maiden like surprises?"

"Why, yes, my gallant, chivalrous white knight." She fans her face daintily and fetchingly with her right hand. "I place my trust in thee, and am ready to be transported in thy swift chariot. But dost thou wish to at least give this poor perplexed damsel a hint as to our destination...the tents of Kedar? the summit of Amana?"

"Thou deserveth a clue: The answer surroundeth thee."

She looks around, stares at the candle, and again has a confused expression on her face.

"Look not with thine dove like eyes, but hear the Song with

thine ears, o most beautiful among women."

"Or as Schiller would say 'Above the stars must He dwell.'"

She stops, closes her eyes, then exclaims "Beethoven's Ninth??!"

"Exactly. Two front row center seats for tonight's Von Karajan's performance."

As her face leans in toward mine, I see what I perceive to be affection, gratefulness, and admiration. She throws her arms around me and gives me a passionate kiss.

The stars are aligned.

\* \* \*

As I drive Mr. Red to the symphony hall, I hand Mery the tickets for tonight's program:

"Would you mind putting the tickets into my glove compartment--middle slot, bottom."

She looks at me quizzically, "Middle slot bottom?" as she opens the compartment. She then begins giggling in that free-spirited joyous way she has. The giggling turns into laughter that is nearly uncontrollable, leaving her breathless. Now it is my turn to look quizzical.

"What?"

"You are sooo cute. Look at your glove compartment. A vertical shelf, with two horizontal shelves. Six compartments."

"Exactly! How else do you keep order: maps, one upper left; paper and pencil for notes, two upper middle; miscellaneous to be filed later, top right; for immediate use: middle bottom." I begin smiling with her.

"I've never seen anyone so organized and structured! Maybe the law is right for you. No wonder you wanted to go swimming in

the pool instead of the ocean! Now I understand." Yes, there were a few heated words around the law; and a minor disagreement about the ocean versus the pool. But that's in the past. And, with the symphony and the Fairmont ahead, the night is just beginning.

With patience, things are working to perfection, and so far this evening is going exactly according to plan. It's hard to resist the chess moves: the gentlemanly Kansas City manners combined with taking her to what she told me in Golden Gate park was her favorite Beethoven symphony.

Since returning from Kansas City, I've played my part precisely and determinedly this past month. It's taken quite a bit longer, and been more expensive than my success, time, effort equation, but as I feel her voluntarily squash her breasts into me, I know that the goal is definitely worth it. I'm making slow but steady progress with her.

She never takes any sexual initiative. But out of kindness, and innocence, she will make gestures that I find sexually alluring, like what she is doing now. But as I get to know her better, I'm sure she is not conscious of their sexual nature, and doesn't intend them in that way. When I make a sexual overture, to move to a new base, the process is always the same. She will make a few shy, modest, almost teasingly provocative protests, but eventually, if I don't rush her, each base gets consolidated. Like the locks of the Suez canal. Then, once a base is reached, she willingly goes there on the next date--no backsliding--and even becomes more impassioned.

After the performance, I hope the best part of the evening will begin. She doesn't yet know that I've made reservations at

the Fairmont on Nob Hill, with a North facing room overlooking the city lights, the Bay, the bridges. Tonight is to be the culminating night. My goal: Parting her red-freckled thighs as I slide into home plate.

Joyful anticipation best describes my mood.

I put my arm around her, and let my right hand carelessly brush against the top of her right breast, gently massaging the soft flesh that subtly appears over her blue dress. First the right side of the cleavage, then into the shadowy abyss which parts the two mounds of flesh, and then the left breast. This is as close as I've gotten to bare second base, by direct touch. And I am not unaware that I have never seen second base uncovered. She looks over at me, smiles, and places her hand on mine, gently pressing my hand toward her tighter.

"All creatures drink of joy  
at nature's breast."

\*

\*

\*

*After our day in the Garden of Eden, I decided to postpone my spring break trip back to Kansas City for a few days. I told my family I still had my Camus paper to work on, and needed to finish it out here. I was feeling senioritis--about school, about the paper--and had been dawdling all quarter. I was fortunate the professor gave me the week extension. Yet once I met Mery, everything changed. She was like a muse to me. I have never been more productive or worked more efficiently. Within a few days I completed what I had procrastinated for months on.*

*We had an amazing week together. We visited galleries, took walks by the beach, had long conversations daily, from Jesus to Nietzsche to abstract art. Also, she's a fine pianist, and we*



regaled each other with music. She asked if I'd be willing to  
site read some flute/piano duets with her. We looked through some  
sheet music: Bach, Goddard, Mozart, and one of her favorites:  
Gluck's Orpheus. I demurred, but promised her that within a  
month, I'd be ready for Orpheus. I'll work on it with my flute  
teacher.

Each night, I'd read her my day's writing. She'd show me her  
progress on her paintings. We'd cuddle, and hold each  
other...always with clothes on. She has an innocence about her  
that I want to respect. For now. I never really progressed suc-  
cessfully any further than first base (though I tried often  
enough), and, from that standpoint, fell behind in my  
effort/reward equation. However, I was having a lot of fun with her,  
and decided that when I returned from spring break, I'd make up for  
lost time. The only thing that perplexed me when I viewed the pictures  
of her I'd developed in Kansas City, was her foggy, trance-like,  
empty-eyes look. I'd have to figure out what mystery that look  
concealed.

\* \* \*  
There are two competing aphorisms, platitudes for separa-  
tion. "Out of sight, out of mind" or "Absence makes the heart  
grow fonder." The latter applied here, and I felt as if we became  
even became closer during our time apart.

Within that context, however, I do need to write about our  
two little contretemps. One, at the pool, occurred after I re-  
turned from Kansas City. The first happened before my Kansas  
City trip, and began with what I thought was going to be a pleas-  
ant conversation about helping others. It turned into a discus-  
sion of religion and law that was totally unexpected.

\*

\*

\*

*She offers me a glass of grape juice, and puts on a "Doors" album. I raise my glass in a toast as she says,*

*"Did you get the note I left you this morning?"*

*"I did indeed. A working girl. How were the Deli customers, tough as ever?"*

*She grimaces. "Always. And I'm having trouble with my boss. At some point I want to talk to you about that, but not now." She raises her glass in another toast. Frankly, I have no desire to hear about her problems with customers or her employer, so I say "You signed your note 'E.M.' Do you realize that if you reverse your initials, it's M.E. You are me. Sounds kind of like a line in our theme song---"I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."*

*She smiles, takes a sip, and says,*

*"To the white knight who has come into my life. To us, to new beginnings, and to the help we gave Sunday to those in need." The new beginnings part I kind of like, the 'white knight' part, sure, I can get on board with that, to mix metaphors. But does she need to bring the homeless into our potentially intimate time together? And maybe I'm reading too much into it, but I feel a little uncomfortable by her term "to us." Isn't that moving toward commitment a bit fast? Is she trying to imply some sort of exclusivity? I'll just assume she isn't.*

*"Lovely. I'm glad you took me to help feed those people." I take another sip of wine, then add, "But do you think it was right that those serving were giving them not only roast beef and potatoes, but also trying to feed them a huge helping of God and Jesus?"*

*Her eyes narrow and she looks at my with what seems a combination of hurt and puzzlement. Is there also a tinge of anger, too?*

*"Are you making fun of sharing God's word? Are you mocking those who from faith do good deeds?"*

*"Well, when you put in that way, I'd be pretty callous to do that, wouldn't I?"*

*"To me religion is not something to be made light of, or criticized. I need to have faith in something more than the world we live in."*

*Fine, I'll play her game. After all, I'm the white knight.*

*"Do you believe in life after death?"*

*"Yes, I do and I believe in it not for the sake of the future after I die, but for the present so that I can continue to live."*

*"Say more. I don't quite follow."*

*"Large parts of the world we live in are ugly and unbearable. Knowing there is a loving compassionate God who created us, who has provided a better world to follow this one, makes me know that we are put here for a reason, and our job is to live as lovingly and compassionately as we can in this world. Do you believe the world as it is, is acceptable?"*

*"For me, absolutely. I guess I can understand how if you don't like this world, you need to believe in a better one" (I wanted to say a fantasy one, but no need to create friction).*

*"But faith and religion, to be truthful, are not that relevant to my life."*

*"Then how do you keep going? What do you use as your foundation? What is your anchor in the world?"*

What is she talking about? Foundation, anchor. She sounds like Archimedes looking for a fulcrum to move the world. I think of saying that, but fear she'll take it as too sarcastic, which it probably is.

"I'd say the law is the closest thing I have to an anchor. Without order, boundaries, rules, everything would be chaos. The law gives a stable foundation into life. That's what my Grandfather always said. It makes sense to me."

"But that's all human created and arbitrary. Someone says the speed limit is 25, and 35 is illegal. Then they say 35 is legal, and now it's legal. Or consensual sex between a man and woman is wrong if one person pays for it. How can you find any ultimate meaning in that."

I like that she's steering the topic to sex. I assume her example is inadvertent but could be hinting that she'd like money from me.... for sex? She seems so innocent. As I'm thinking this, she continues "What gives you the motivation to study?"

Here we go again. "Well, given my senioritis, that's a great question" I respond playfully. "But seriously, my motivation was to get into law school. To get a good job, to survive, to be happy. It's all pretty simple to me."

I pour her and myself another a glass of grape juice. I want to say, "Great vintage. A fine month" but I refrain: "Here, have some more. It fits, in an ersatz way, the song" I nod toward the invisible music, "'just show me the next whisky bar, don't ask why.'

"'Don't ask why.' Do you think you ever analyze too much? You're making my head spin."

*"Human law says what is the minimum that we shouldn't do. Ethics, God's law, shows who we can become. Don't you ever want a larger structure and order. Something beyond human law, beyond words?"*

*"You're deep, you know that?" I rub my chin, as if I am an ancient Chinese philosopher pondering substantial questions, or Rodin's thinker. After a few seconds, I say "Nope. To me, words are all there are. Without words, there would be no civilization, no law, no structure, no life as we know it. Look...." and I rub my chin again, give a version of the arch, then raise my index finger, as if I'm having a "eureka" experience.*

*"Within words you can go from the atomic to the cosmic. If I want a smaller, atomic structure, just look at morpheme. If I want a larger structure, order, and meaning: semanteme."*

*"I don't understand." She looks genuinely perplexed, and so I feel it's my duty to enlighten her.*

*"Morpheme. A collocation (that's a conjoining of linguistic elements) of phonemes (that's sounds) that contains no smaller meaningful parts. Semanteme. The science of the meaning of words. Simple. What's not to understand? Structure and meaning, small and large. Case closed." I look at her, the jury, expecting her approbation.*

*She is silent. Is it that she feels overwhelmed by my irreducible logic, intellectual acumen, and philosophical dialectic? Is she too befuddled to continue from the "wine"? Or perhaps she is just in the mood for cuddles? I put my wine glass down and decide to purse choice number three.*

How opposite the two of you are. If you take her initials, E.M. and look at them in a mirror, you get M.E., a dyslexic ME.

She is approaching life from a spiritual perspective, the Word, the law of God; and Johannes can't get out of his structure of the words and the law of man to see that. He is the dyslexic one.

---

*Time for a break from the court proceedings.*

---

*Initially, the witness seems unresponsive, but soon she is a bit more forthcoming. Victory for the prosecution.*

\*

\*

\*

---

The other contretemps occurred after I returned from Kansas City and invited her down for a swim that Wednesday, April Fool's Day. I was a little shaken after my Kansas City trip, and couldn't think of a cute, prankster deception befitting the day. I think I just wanted to return to some kind of normal structure.

---

Overall I was relieved to be back. The visit hadn't gone as I'd expected, and definitely not according to plan. Still, I didn't allow myself to be pushed around by my family like a little puppet. Now, I feel I've made my exodus from the confining bondage and conspicuous consumption of my family. I owe that awareness to Mery, who has helped me see some of the limits of acquisitiveness. I still am shocked and unable to completely remove the images from the visit to Sixth Street she invited me to take with her on Palm Sunday to help feed the homeless. Johannes, can you see any irony at all that you are writing these thoughts at the Crown Room of the Fairmont, after having driven a flashy car to a symphony? She has also been a catalyst in getting me to recognize how controlled I have been by my family, without my evening knowing it.

---

From a religious standpoint, the timing of my spring break trip was fortuitous--I was able to miss Easter Sunday services

with Mery because I was back in KC--and miss the upcoming Pass-over service with my family, which, actually, they celebrated last night.

\*

\*

\*

Now let me jump right in, verbally, into the pool.

Assumptions can get you into difficulty. When I invited Mery for a swim, I assumed we would swim in the pool, as I do every Wednesday. But Mery heard "swim" and imagined we were going to drive over to Half Moon Bay for an ocean swim. We each heard the same word, and assumed different things. It was only when she arrived that we realized there was a problem. I told her that, for me, the ride over curvy winding roads sounded horrible. I get carsick easily on those kind of roads. Also, though I love the ocean from a distance, I've never really liked it up close. I'm still a land-locked Kansas City boy at heart. The waves are just too big and ominous. Finally, I explained to her it's impossible to calibrate exactly when I have swum my six hundred yards in the ocean so I feel I have my structure.

We agreed on a compromise. We'd swim in the pool. Then I'd take her for a horseback ride along the ocean, or at least on Skyline above the ocean. I was ambiguous with her about time. My hope was she'd stay the night, and I could take her for my normal Thursday ride. I can understand how she might have thought I was suggesting we could do both in the same afternoon.

I was quite excited about going swimming with her. I couldn't wait to see her in a bathing suit. All I've ever seen of her breasts are a bit of the top cleavage. She always wears so many layers. But with a swim suit, second base would at least be more in sight.

---

*Could breasts really be the eyes of the soul? I wonder if there is a poem in that for the creative writing class I'm taking this semester?*

---

\* \* \*

It's no wonder I had a wet dream two nights ago. Johannes' focus is so body-oriented, his and hers. What is the breast to him? Invitation, mystery, something to conquer? It's not my path, of that I am clear. **It's too bad that neither of you can appreciate a breast's nurturing, symbolic value: the trust and openness that is involved when someone allows that gentle touch of an intimate body part. Johannes does not yet have any idea of the risk, vulnerability, and dependency of both people involved in that caring intimacy; and John is too wounded to be willing at this point to open himself to that risk.**

\* \* \*

---

*When I am in the locker room changing into my black Speedo, I catch sight of myself in the mirror. Well, if I'm honest, it isn't really an accident like "catch sight" might indicate. I try to look without really being caught looking.*

---

---

*When I was a sophomore in high school, I weighed 184 pounds, and had become kind of pudgy. I'd been working at my grandfather's clothing store for the summer and had gotten no real exercise. Also, I wasn't using my sit up board very regularly. Though I wasn't aware of it at the time, my parents' divorce the year before had effected me more than I realized and I was somewhat depressed and just not motivated to exercise.*

---

---

*I began a weight lifting program with some buddies. Over the next two years, I both became leaner and increased my body*

---



strength, so I could bench press my weight. When I worked as a camp counselor in Wisconsin the next year, I would run sand dunes until I'd throw up. I kept records of everything I ate, how many reps of each exercise at what weight. I became proud of my body. Mom said I became so proud that there never was a mirror I didn't pass that I didn't look into--window panes, store fronts--anything to see myself from all angles.

It is still true, though I try not to be too obvious about it. Some people mistakenly interpret healthy self-care as excessive self-preoccupation, even narcissism.

When I thought of playing football here at Stanford, I got my weight up to 215 pounds, most of it muscle, but now I'm a leaner 205. I feel strong, and I like my body a lot. Though I'd never tell this to anyone but my journal, inside I think of myself as a Jewish looking copy of Michelangelo's David: dark brown curly hair, muscular, broad-chested, narrow-waisted--a combination of weight lifting for bulk and swimming for leanness. Chiseled six pack...in my Speedo swimsuit. Though it's considered immodest, why shouldn't I be proud of this body? No one gave it to me. I created it through a lot of hard effort.

Johannes, do you remember your art class--the normal human is about six faces tall? What do you see when you look in the mirror? Great heroic sculptures, like Michelangelo's David, are eight faces high. Is that what you see? Or only seven like a Greek god's artistic proportion? Or do you merely see a normal six faces, but in such perfect proportion as to be human god-like?

How could anyone possibly misconstrue your joy and confidence as narcissism? Yes, you created yourself all by yourself;

oh, yes, there is the small detail of how did you arrive in this world in the first place?

After my days in the wilderness, literally and symbolically, my body is wasting away. You don't realize it, but the body is the main source of your unhappiness. You think you control it, but it's controlling you. You love your body. I hate mine, and wish it didn't exist. I try to avoid mirrors. **I guess that's still being controlled by the body, though isn't it? And isn't it interesting that your dreams--like some Jewish mother-- keep trying to feed you lots of pastries and donuts to fatten you up.**

I believe the more I can remove the body, the closer I get to spirit.

---

*I get a lot of compliments from girls on my body, and I'm looking forward to Mery's reaction today when I walk out of the changing room. And of course I am looking forward to seeing her. I hope she wears one of those low cut tops, showing lots of cleavage, and that hip hugging slinky bikini bottom that's so popular.*

---

\*

\*

\*

---

*When I walk into the swimming area, she isn't there, so I look to see if there are any open lanes. None. No one is waiting, so I take my place in front of lane 4, and wait. There are seven lanes, formed by six buoyed ropes pulled across the pool. Inside each lane is a black line across the bottom of the pool, dividing the lane in half. I feel like a "rook." I control lane 4 in front of me, and the entrances to all the lanes to my right and left. It is my turn next, no matter which lane opens up. Simple and fair: first come, first served.*

---

When Mery first comes out of the locker room, what is the cliched expression, "my jaw drops." Not from joy. This is not the free-spirited, dazzling bathing suit I expected. The lower part covers her belly button and is like a large girdle my grandmother might wear. The top is old fashioned, with huge straps and enormous flaps trying to cover her breasts. The top has some appeal, as there is still some cleavage showing, seemingly in spite of her best efforts to leave nothing exposed. The battle between the size of her breasts struggling with her modesty creates a tension that both erotic and a challenge. But a little exposure of the partition between the red-freckled breasts would have been appreciated.

I try to keep my disappointment reined in--after all, the present is still the same, only the wrapping is less appealing than hoped for. "Welcome to the pool." I put my arm around her in a hospitable gesture. She seems to pull back.

Another standoff. I'm getting used to it, though a bit frustrated. Several times when we'd been riding in Mr. Red, I'd put my arm on top of her car seat, and then tried my "careless" dropping of the hand onto her shoulder. Meeting no resistance, I slowly lowered into the demilitarized zone that can still be considered shoulder, but is just starting to be the top of the breast. Before I'd even gotten two inches below the shoulder, her hand would press against mine, and put it back onto her shoulder.

Since one of my rules is to never force myself on anyone, I didn't press forward. In fact, strategically, to make her feel safer, I retreated. But I also don't give up. So I tried the move a couple more times on subsequent rides, but the results were always the same. One inch down was fine, but with any

further forays, my hand was like a fly being squashed and removed. It seemed no approach of second base was allowed.

I have made some progress since my first attempt at fifteen of the "over the shoulder" move. I was in a movie theater, and feigned a yawn, stretching both arms out before me and then beginning to move them along an imaginary circular circumference, while still watching the movie. Unfortunately, the trajectory of my right arm was a few inches too low. Rather than delicately going over the top of my date's head to land on the movie seat behind her, my arm and hand unexpectedly popped her on the forehead.

\*

\*

\*

"Did I mention I was a life guard, an assistant waterfront director at a camp in the Borscht Belt, and have been trained as a WSI: a Water Safety Instructor. I'll keep you safe." Again I try to put my arm around her, but again she resists. Is she upset at our compromise, that we came to the pool?

Fine, I'll fight fire with fire. With some annoyance, I take a step back and gesture at her suit. "Kind of an old-fashioned style, wouldn't you say?"

"What's wrong with being modest?" She says this somewhat cutely, I think, turning her right shoulder toward me and ducking her chin behind it, placing her right knee next to and partly obscuring her left, and rising upward on her right toes. This would be great picture, and I pretend to take one. "Click. How about I go get my camera and take a picture?" I say.

"No. I told you at the Park, I'm very shy and self-conscious about my body. I don't even like having my picture taken fully

clothed. And I don't like to expose my flesh in public." Her voice isn't raised that much, but any cuteness I saw was in my mind. This is the most angrily animated I have ever seen her. "It seems public exposure of flesh is not a concern for you." She looks at my Speedo pointedly.

Not the praise I was expecting. Take a breath. Fire is not working.

"I'll have you know this suit is scientifically created to maximize speed in the water. That aside, no, I'm not ashamed of my body. I'm proud of it."

"Touché. We have different views."

Assumptions--and expectations--can get you into difficulty. This is not going well.

\* \* \*

I feel myself becoming even more annoyed and frustrated, yet simultaneously aroused at the movement of her breasts which jiggle each time she moves. I need to keep the goal in mind, and want to try to lighten the mood: "Good grief, Virgin Mery, your body is not obscene," I kid. "According to recent Supreme Court rulings, for something to be obscene it must be 'utterly <should I say udderly? I think to myself> without redeeming social value.' Look at you. That's hardly the case." And I point both fingers directly at her nipples which are protruding--from arousal? from the coldish weather? Gentlemanly manners?

To continue to tease her, I drop my towel, as if by accident, and ask her to pick it up. As she bends over, I wish I had Mr. Cannon with me. Her two breasts start to overflow the tight confines of her top, two cloud-like pillows bulging from their enclosure, threatening to billow forth. A couple of inches of

*cleavage are revealed. A mental picture; SNAP. I feel my lingham giving off increasing light, and walk behind her, ostensibly to give her a little massage on the small of her back, where she likes it, between the strips of black cloth of her suit. I can feel my arousal touching her buttocks, before she jumps up and steps away.*

*It is all very innocent and playful on my part, though I guess to an outsider if you took a snapshot at just the right second, it might look like a simulated sex scene in the doggy position. The whole episode probably takes only a couple of seconds, but it is a luscious moment for me, and I find that pictorial image both salacious and humorous.*

*But apparently Mery does not view it in the same light. She picks up the towel, throws it to (at?) me, beet-red and flushing.*

*"You're blushing. It complements your freckles and hair well." She receives the compliment wordlessly. I tickle her, saying, "You're so modest, and I love that about you" and jump gleefully into the water, as I see a lane--number one--finally opening up.*

Kansas City gentleman? Not forcing yourself on anyone? I can't believe your level of denial. No wonder I hate the body so. Look what it leads you to do. You hump her doggy style in a public place, and then laugh about it when she is obviously humiliated (as you should be). Then you sensitively respond to her clear discomfort by tickling her and jumping into the water. What a mensch. You are such an admirable person, such a refined gentleman. No doubts there.

\*

\*

\*

*As I run to the one to jump in, I notice someone removing his shirt a few yards from lane one, and hear him shout something as he walks toward the lane. He probably doesn't know the "rook rules." This is my lane. I begin swimming hard. The water feels cool and refreshing, and I decide to set a fast pace for the six hundred yards. I use the center black line under me as my focus to keep straight and true.*

*As I go to make a flip turn on the third lap, I see someone standing above my lane. I feel anger. He'll just have to wait, as I did. On my fifth lap, the person jumps in over me. I'm incensed. I had waited for the lane, there is supposed to be fairness and order--in swimming lanes, and in life. Who in hell is he, Mr. Entitled, to intrude into my space?*

*In my constitutional law class we were taught about a legal concept derived from English common law, known as the Castle Doctrine. It's been long held that people have a right to stand their ground if attacked in their own home. This concept has been extended by American law to our car and other personal space, and this lane is my personal space. I will defend it. Does the rook feel like he is losing his castle, Johannes? Is he feeling rooked? Poor pathetic baby. You really have a great broad perspective, and know what is worth fighting about, don't you? The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it? **John, there is more irony in your sarcastic statements than you realize.** Just ask your father.*

*I make a quick turn, and begin to stroke as hard as I can, setting an even faster and more determined pace.*

*I keep my eyes focused on the black line which divides the lanes. I take a breath and put my head back down in the water and*

continue churning forward like a torpedo. Kicking hard, reaching the lead arm forward, gliding the other arm down my belly, palm pressing the water aside.

I hope the fucking bastard runs into me, because he won't be the one who survives the collision. I even smile at the idea of legal action: I'll prosecute him, take **acciones legis**. On my next lap, I see him approach. I begin pulling and kicking even more forcefully.

He moves way to the right, almost into the second lane, at the last second. I realize that part of me is sorry. I would have liked to have smashed into him. I hope he's learned his lesson. There are certain rules, and regulations, and they are there for a reason, to keep order and to ensure chaos doesn't prevail. That's why there are laws. It's really a question of fairness.

What an asshole!

\*

\*

\*

I wondered how Mery's swim is going, but don't want to stop to check until I finish my laps. Mr. Asshole has left my space, and the lane is once again completely mine. Grandpa \$ always told me, "The world is tough, and it's either 'sink or swim.' If you want to survive, you must learn to swim--harder, faster than anyone else; if you don't stand up for yourself, others will be happy to see you drown."

My arms begin to tire, but I stay focused on my goal. I'm determined not to stop until I complete my six hundred yards. It's as if there is an unwritten law that commands me to swim that distance. If I don't accomplish that goal, my body doesn't



feel right. And even mentally I'm not as sharp. The exercise also helps keep my anger and aggression in check. I'd hate to imagine it unchecked.

When I finish my laps, I bob up and down a few times in the water to regain my breath, then hop out of the pool to see how Mery is doing. I like the process of getting out of the pool. I put my arms on the side, and straighten them, which causes my triceps to flex to the maximum. As I pull myself the rest of the way out, I'm not unaware that the water tightens my body, and the sun accentuates the ripples of my stomach and the firmness of my chest.

I look at the other lanes to see where Mery is, but don't see her.

Eventually I spot her, standing in a deserted grassy area several dozen yards from the pool. I walk over toward her, chest out, stomach in (casually though, not like a muscle beach pose).

She doesn't seem to be impressed. Instead, she looks somewhat distracted. I wonder if she's still upset with me for some reason.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Did you swim?"

"I got in and began to swim, but then some other people jumped in and it became too crowded, so I got out."

I feel anger again well up in me.

"Who are they, which ones?" I demand.

"It's not important. It's not anyone's fault. I don't have

any right to a lane any more than they do. I just thought it would be easier to let them swim."

"But you were there first, the lane was yours."

"How can you say 'mine'? What right do I have to that lane? It's just not a big deal."

I feel my anger being directed towards her and her passivity. Is she that much of a wimpish baby? Or is she trying to ruin my swim time like a pouting, sulking teenager who doesn't get what she wants? I start to raise my voice, then try to catch myself. But there is a tinge of anger still. "Mery, what are you talking about? You waited in line. Then it's your turn. Once you start swimming, it is your lane. You have every right to that lane. You waited for it, it's yours. As Grandpa said, possession is nine-tenths of the law. You just can't let people push you around."

"You sound like my therapist: 'Elizabeth, you must stand up for yourself. You have to learn to be more assertive.' Why? Why does everyone have to be so pushy. Why when someone is nice and accommodating is that seen as such a sin?"

\* \* \*

She seems flustered. Do I see tears? What's going on?

I take a breath to relax myself. I tell myself to think of Camus writing about Dr. Rieux. See this from a large perspective. Get some distance. Imagine writing what's happening as a scene in a book. Calm down. I'm forgetting my goal of obtaining her assets. This is not the conversation I want to be having. It's certainly not taking me any closer to second base. "What are we talking about anyway, a stupid swimming lane? It's absurd to get upset and argue over trivial things. *De minimis, lex no curat.*"

*The law doesn't cure trivial matters. And if the law says it's not worth it, then we should just let it go!"*

*I see her try to smile, and she does take a sighing breath, but there are still tears.*

*When a girl gets upset, it is often an opportunity to make a move: you can put your arm around her as if to comfort her, while pulling her closer and fondling her. It's usually a win-win. She feels taken care of and that you are a strong, reassuring presence. You advance along the base path. However, in this case, I'm not sure the move is going to work. I can easily imagine trying to put my arm around her to comfort her, and having her reject it--and me--again. Johannes, do you realize that some of your tentativeness relates to your fear of what happened in Kansas City. You fear that losing her will really cast you alone and naked into the world. I debate, then decide to take another risk. I tentatively start to put my arm around her, watching her response. I wait for her to tighten, or push me away.*

*But she doesn't. Instead, she leans in, puts her head on my shoulder, puts her left arm around my waist (I tighten my stomach so it feels rock hard), and guides me to an empty, secluded private spot on the grassy area, where no one can see us. I assume she wants to be able to cry--or scold me-- in private.*

*We sit down, and she turns and puts her head on my shoulder. I can hear her beginning to cry as she speaks. "Yesterday my boss at David's yelled at me. First he screams, 'Be more efficient. You're falling behind. Customers are complaining.' When I try harder, and make mistakes, he yells again. After I become tearful, he tells me, 'Don't be so sensitive. Toughen up, girl.*

*Don't let the customers order you around.' Everywhere is anger and judgment."*

*I say nothing, just continue to stroke the outside of her right arm. As much as I want to move over the top of her arm towards her breast, I stifle the urge. She continues in a tearful voice:*

*"Doesn't anyone focus on the person and their feelings? You heard the minister's Palm Sunday sermon. 'Jesus said the first will be last and the last will be first.' What does that mean if you can't apply it in daily situations? It's just a piece of property...a lane... Who gives us the right of ownership? What right do we really have for anything? One day we just wake up and we're here on this earth. We're all such fragile creatures. Why focus on the material rather than the soul of the person?...Why such anger in the world?"*

Mery's comments are beautiful, lovely, spiritual. It's sad I couldn't hear them at the time. But they really resonate now. It's sadder still how Johannes not only doesn't hear their meaning, but uses her vulnerability and sensitivity as a way to try to further continue along his base path, ever calculating his next moves.

*\* \* \**  
*I gently ease her down on the towel. I realize her sadness and confusion makes her vulnerable, and I think about making another try for second base, or going into a more full throttle cuddle. But I have a better idea, which will both help clear my ears of water, and may even increase my chances along the base path.*

*I stand up, and bounce up and down on my right leg, while*

tilting my head over my right shoulder. Then I reverse the sequence.

She looks up when I leave her, wipes the tears from her cheeks, and seems to almost smile when she sees me jumping up and down. "Why are you doing that? You look like a silly pogo stick jumping jack."

I make a comical silly gesture with my face, cocking my head, lifting my eyebrows, looking up toward heaven, with a scatterbrained smile like I'm a dunce clown.

"I have to be very careful of my ears. I'm trying to get the water out. I'm not sure I ever told you that I'm deaf in my left ear. That's why I didn't sit with you in the church service, you would have been on the wrong side of me. I was too embarrassed upon just meeting you to share my handicap with you."

"So that was the reason you didn't sit with me that morning. You said you'd tell me after the service, and I've been wanting to ask you. My therapist said I probably felt rejected and insecure then, so was afraid and not assertive enough to ask." I see her face again switch, from her own frustration and helplessness to compassion. So, she's talked to her therapist about me. Is that a good sign? Or not so good?

\*

\*

\*

"What happened to your ear?" She reaches out toward me, and strokes my left calf. That's more initiative than she's ever before shown. This is the kind of assertiveness I like. Thank you Mr., Mrs. or Ms. therapist!

I rejoin her on the blanket.

"When I was three, I had tonsillitis, and was given an antibiotic for it. Soon after, my parents noticed me holding the

phone to my left ear, then switching it to my right. They had me tested, and it turned out the medicine had caused permanent nerve deafness in my left ear."

"Oh, you poor thing." She is now partially sitting up. Her chest is heaving a bit from her crying, and her hair curls around her cheeks and frames her face beautifully.

"It's really not so bad," I posture valiantly "It can even be an advantage. When I go to sleep at night, if it's noisy, I just lie down on my right ear, and no problem." (The same line I used with Alice, and all women.) Also," I tease, "if you ever see me walking on your right side, (with my left ear toward you) you'll know that I really don't want to listen to you!"

She smiles. "you're really brave." She lies back, and puts her right hand behind her head to serve as a pillow. Then, she extends her left arm like a C ready to welcome and enfold me: "I'm so sorry. I really am. Lie down here."

She cradles my head in her arm, then pulls me over so my head is lying on the area between her shoulder and her breast, her left arm still around me. I feel so close to being like a pouch of myrrh between her breasts. Not quite there, but definitely on the base path. I start to quote this to her, but fear even though she will understand it, it might break the mood.

I like that she's continuing to take the initiative. We lie there silently, letting the sun warm us.

\*

\*

\*

"Tell me what it's like not to hear in one ear."

My goal in answering this question is to sound vulnerable, but not too helpless. "One of the main problems is I can't tell

where sound comes from. It's like when you close one eye, it's hard to create dimensionality. But you get used to it." She remains silent, so I continue: "Let me tell you one specific story about an ongoing problem caused by my not being able to hear in one ear. I was 12, singing in the choir. The Glee Club master came by, and in pride I sung even louder and fuller. He paused, listened to me, as I smilingly continued. He then put his hand to his mouth, and said 'Shhh, just mouth the words.' When I told my parents about this incident, they said it wasn't my fault, that I had trouble carrying a tune--you know, 'tone deaf' because of my ear."

As I share this story, I raise my head so she can see my face, and pout out my lower lip. "That's why I took up the recorder, and then the flute. When I play, then I can't sing. The instruments become my voice." I hope my look is little-boy sad, little-boy cute, and heroic--the little engine that could--overcoming enormous odds-- all at the same time.

"Oh, you poor, poor baby. Come here."

With that, she pulls my head down to rest on her chest, this time several inches lower than her shoulder, so that my right ear is resting on her left breast. I'm astounded. She's inviting me to take what I've been struggling toward and rejected from so many times. I am so excited my lingham could light a moonless sky.

My cheek is on her breast. I am finally a pouch of myrrh, at least on swim suit covered breasts. I can hear her heart. The billowing cloud-like pillow of my imagination could not be closer. Second base is nearly at hand, and at mouth. Could this be more perfect? Thank you left ear. I let my cheek nuzzle in. After

all, she called me "baby": she must see herself as some kind of nurturing earth mother: let's speak her language: "Thank you, Beth," I whisper. Calling her Beth is a calculated risk. She said only her closest friends and family call her that. How will she respond?

Well. She pulls me closer as I murmur softly, "You are so kind and nurturing; I feel so taken care of by you." Johannes, if I didn't know you so well, even I might be momentarily fooled by you. Is there any part of you that can appreciate being taken care of? Do you have any true sentiments? Or is everything a tactic, a chess move as you plot your next foray? As I say this, I rotate my head around, feeling the fleshy squishiness of her breast. I realize that there is in fact actually one thing that could make her second base softer and more pleasurable, visually and tactilely, and therefore make this moment still more perfect.

Because she's lying flat, her breasts, though still prominent, are being pulled by gravity to the side, so I can't really see any cleavage, nor feel their full softness.

The outside of the pinky finger of my left hand is lying on the towel, and the outside of my thumb and along my wrist is enfolded by her sagging breast. I slowly and subtly, eighth inch by eighth inch take my left wrist and bend it toward the sky, creating a cradle. As I shift to once again nuzzle my cheek into her, I make two nearly imperceptible shifts at the same time. I let my left hand, wrist, and lower left arm rise gently upward, which has the effect, perhaps not even felt by her, of raising her right breast up and inward toward her left one. Meanwhile, I let my upper right arm also press very deliberately, yet slowly



*into her body, which has the effect of raising her left breast upward and toward her right one. A huge shadowy division occurs in the space where waves of reddish brown freckled breasts sluggishly undulate toward each other, reaching a crest and, in my mind at least, crashing into each other, as if defying gravity and splashing toward the sky.*

*Heaven.*

*I then turn my head just slightly and give her a kiss through her black bathing suit top onto her cold and aroused left nipple. "Thank you so much" I say as I once more lower my right ear to her breast, and let my left hand fall limp.*

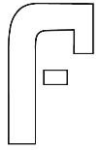
*Her heart is beating very fast, as is mine.*

*I feel her left hand slide through my hair, and begin approaching my left ear. I think of it, humorously, as my "Achilles" ear. No one is allowed to go there. It's simply off limits. I never ever let anyone touch it, as it would feel much too sensitive--psychologically, if not physically. I start to raise my left hand to block hers, but that seems too aggressive. I think what I could say that wouldn't break the mood.*

*She gently begins to caress my left ear.*

*I let her hand remain.*

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*



---

*rom this place of sanctuary, resting on Beth's breast and listening to her heart beat, I feel comforted, safe. I have no desire to move to any further base.*

---

*Though at peace, I also recognize a fear. As I look closer at the fear, I realize that having left my former place of birth and home behind, I've been swinging on a rope, and haven't been sure there was going to be another rope to grab onto.*

---

*Hearing her breathe, I feel like I've found the rope awaiting me. A new home. Second base. Mother Mery.*

---

*Things are going to be just fine.*

---

\*

\*

\*

I'm amazed by the trust you cede to Mery, allowing her to caress your left ear. Was it that you were trapped by your own chess moves and sexual goals, and couldn't think of a way out? Was it the feelings of fear from Kansas City, that you knew you'd better be careful, since she was the new womb you wanted to hide in, to keep you from facing the abyss? I can see several reasons why you would want to "play" the game with her.

But even more interesting is trying to understand her "game." Why did Mery want to touch your ear? At the time, you thought it might have been compassion and caring. But why does she reach for and caress the most incapacitated part of your body? Under the guise of kindness and spirituality, does it seem strange how often she seeks out and probes your greatest vulnerabilities--physically and psychologically? It's almost as if, consciously or unconsciously, she is attracted, initially, to

that which is strong, then slowly, step by step, eviscerates it. How trustworthy was she, really? Unfortunately, you haven't yet learned, but you will, all too soon. In retrospect, it's unclear who was playing whom.

**John, I'm amazed at the distrust and anger you still feel, not only toward Johannes, but also towards Mery. How quickly you change your view of her--from the lovely spiritual woman spouting wise statements, to the seductive, manipulating untrustworthy temptress. There's still lots of foam swirling about in your mind. And, as you're slowly learning, anger and lack of forgiveness preclude clarity.**

*1:35. We've fallen asleep together. My creative writing class is at 2:00, and I need to shower and get dressed. I awaken sleeping beauty Mery with a kiss. She says she'll lie there a bit more, then walk around the campus. We agree to meet at Tressider under the maple tree at 4:15.*

*Though I'm in a bit of a rush, I give her another kiss. Part of me wants to linger.*

*I decide to tell her of my parent's hand signals. This seems clever to me, bringing up the topic of love by showing how my parents shared love, but without having to express anything directly to her about the "1" word. "My parents developed a kind of tactile Morse code so that when they were in public and wanted to silently share affection with each other, they could do it by squeezes." I take her hand and describe and show her how three squeezes means "I love you." Then, the other person gives two squeezes back which means "how much"; and then the first person gives one whopper squeeze indicates moving toward "infini-*

ty."

She responds in kind, keeping it ostensibly not about us, but about my family "What great parents you have. That's really loving, and creative." We drop each others hands.

I'm touched by the sweet tenderness I find in this parting.

\* \* \*

When I enter the class, the professor has written a quote across the chalk board:

How pleased these fellows must have been when they felt most unhappy: they would say to themselves, "What luck! Here comes a beautiful verse."  
Sartre, Words

"Writers write.

About something they know.

Begin.

You have one hour.

Create!"

\* \* \*

Feeling happy about being unhappy? I must not be a real writer because I don't feel happy about what happened in Kansas City. I'd rather just put it out of my mind.

What to write about? Law school? Getting in: too positive; whether to go, what it would be like: too unclear. Mery? Don't know her well enough. My family? Maybe. I wonder if I can create some distance from my hellish week home by writing about it. Like I discussed in the paper for my Existentialism class (on which I received an A and "Excellent"), suggesting Camus gained some equanimity from the plagues of life by writing the Plague.

Fifty-two minutes left. Time's wasting. I need to pick something. Family. Ok. Where to start? Maybe Sunday brunch.

\*

\*

\*

"Oh my goodness. Look, he's serving a meal," my Mom giggles sarcastically, as I offer her some soft scrambled eggs. "This is definitely a first. Did you poison them?"

"Now, now, let Junior be, this is a treat for us to have him home." Nana tries to rescue me. I like it when she does that, and doesn't reflexively take mom's side. "And he cooked the whole meal by himself."

\*

\*

\*

Not bad. But then I realize the class is supposed to be a "creative writing" class, not just reportage. I look through the syllabus. Poetry. Drama. The short story. The novel.

I've never written anything but my journal and class papers. I have no idea how to write poetry. A novel? Right. Maybe a play. Act One could portray different scenes of my family life, the first one of which could be around the dining room table.

What to call it? I could call it "Plagues: Leaving the Bondage of My Family." True, and fits with Passover--actually I think Grandpa Dave mentioned it starts in a couple of weeks. But that's kind of a long title, and maybe too dramatic. What about simply, "Partings"? That keeps the Passover theme--Exodus, Freedom--and also even has aspects of the Red Sea in it. Not bad.

Forty-nine minutes. I feel like I'm spending too much time on the title, and decide just to call it, after Sartre, "Words." Not very creative, but at least a good working title. Form and content.

WORDS

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE.

SETTING: A Sunday brunch. The maternal side of a Jewish family sitting around the table.

CHARACTERS: Mother, Grandmother (Nana), Grandfather (Dave), Brother (Aaron), Sister (Miriam), and the author/omniscient Narrator/ (Moses/ God? <Joke>).

\* \* \*

I realize that Mery thinks my entire "happy, intact" family had Sunday brunch together: three grandparents, Dad, Mom, aunts, uncles, cousins. At some point I will need to let her know that the Garden of Eden story I told her, though it had aspects of truth, wasn't exactly the whole truth. If I want to read this to her, I'll have to fill her in on what happened the past five days. Is this a side of my life that I really want to share with her? I find myself torn between wanting someone with whom to share honestly, and fearing that if I am too open about the negative, it will drive her away.

It's over three weeks later, and I still haven't told her the whole truth about my family, or the disastrous visit. The fog has rolled in, and now most of the land and bay is covered. Just the tops of the bridges peak through. I can't seem to find the right time to tell her.

\* \* \*

"So, what's on your mind?" the Rebbe asks, as he comes from around his desk, and shakes my hand and offers me a seat. I look around the spare furnishings of his book-lined office. There is

the couch, toward which he points, but I don't want to sit there. It reminds me of mom's therapist's office. I choose the rocking chair. The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet pull matching brown swivel chairs up to within four feet of me, and we all sit. I turn the rocking chair slightly--maybe 20 degrees-- to the left, so that my right ear can more easily hear them.

"What brings you here today?" Dr. Lisbet inquires, after also shaking my hand. Over her right shoulder, in the corner of the room, on a mantle, I see a two foot high statue of Moses carrying the Ten Commandments. He looks old, wise, protective, and perhaps somewhat weary, if not sad. He seems to be gazing at the adjoining corner, where there is a painting of a single orangish-brown bamboo blossom, surrounded by white, executed in a delicate style.

What's on my mind? If they only knew. If I only knew. Where to begin? I look down at the journals I've brought: my reflections over Chanukkah, and my reading about Johannes returning from Kansas City. I've been thinking about what I want to say to them. I've decided the best approach is to begin at two different levels of abstraction, reflected in both of the journals.

"What's on my mind is both very broad, and very mundane. At the broadest level, what I'm wrestling with is whether life has any intrinsic meaning and value." I pause for a moment to see whether the impact of this dramatic statement registers, but they both continue to sit there, nodding pleasantly, so I continue. I was inspired by the workshop you all gave a few months ago where you had us climb Sinai in our minds. So inspired that I left the

workshop and went to the Sinai desert and climbed it."

They both smile, but say nothing. The Rebbe gestures with his hand for me to continue.

"I felt after climbing Sinai that I had the answer, a spiritual understanding that was going to be my life's meaning. But that seems to have, well, not exactly vanished, but is not as clear today as it was then. I guess what I want to know is do you have an answer to my question about whether life has intrinsic meaning and value. The best I can analyze and understand it, either the universe is sacred and holy at the deepest level, or it is indifferent, random, and meaningless. That's what's on my mind, and that's what brings me here today."

\* \* \*

"Great question," the Rebbe laughs. "I try to only answer the easy ones, so let me defer to my wise spiritual counterpart."

Dr. Lisbet gives a playful shrug of her shoulders and says to him "Thanks a lot!" She then turns toward me. "Thank you for your kind statement about our workshop. It sounds as though climbing Sinai literally was a quite profound and meaningful experience for you."

"Amazing. Well, actually, not the ascent itself. I enjoyed climbing Sinai much more in your workshop than the real climb, and learned more." They both laugh. I feel that they're liking me. I'm pleased that I still know how to talk to people and charm them. "My experience at Sinai really occurred after I had descended the mountain and spent some time in the monastery at its base. I felt I found my life's meaning there."

"Which was....?"

"Well, it almost sounds silly now, but then it was quite



real. Serving water."

"Serving water?"

"Yes, being in the desert, water is so important. Serving water was the metaphor for feeling that of somehow I wanted my life to be of service."

"Beautiful," the Rebbe says.

"That's lovely" Dr. Lisbet chimes in. "And now?"

"Now I feel lost again. Like the water has slipped right through my hands. Unsure. Uncertain."

"It sounds like you had a profound moment of grace, a receiving of a sacred message from the universe. And now you're not sure you can trust that?"

"Exactly. I know it felt true then. But it hasn't returned, and my commitment and desire seem scattered and flagging. I can't seem to sustain spiritual motivation."

"Unfortunately, that's the nature of being touched by the sacred. It's not something we can control. Those experiences seem to occur by grace. Which, from our human perspective, is very frustrating, wouldn't you agree?"

"Absolutely" I concur.

"Reb Jonathan and I are reading the Koran now, with the help of one of our students, Said Al-Salam. You two would like each other. We've just come across a passage where Mohammed laments how infrequently these God-intoxicated experiences occur. So, you're in good company, to say the least."

We all smile, and I comment "I think that makes me feel better."

\*

\*

\*

The Rebbe looks at Dr. Lisbet, as if a signal for him to take over. He begins speaking, "You mentioned there was a more mundane issue that also brought you here. I'm wondering if you could share a bit about that. But before you do, there is a mundane issue we need to address with you, which is the cost of our sessions."

That figures. Hook me in, get me to share and feel vulnerable, then ask for money. It feels like some movie peep show I went to where you put some quarters in, the scene starts to unfold, then stops. You have to put in more money to see more.

"I thought your sessions were free. That you did this to serve and help people."

The Rebbe straightens up, then takes a breath, and smiles "Our first session is free, so there is no charge for today. We wish they could all be free, but reality requires us to make a living, even as we desire to help. However, we do have a sliding scale, based on the person's ability to pay." Dr. Lisbet hands me a sheet which I briefly glance at, which has things like income level, cost in lirot, in dollars. I nod and stick it in a pocket. "Payment is due at the end of each month. Since this is December 30, if you decide to continue and find this helpful, we ask you to make your first payment at the end of January. We don't send a bill, just ask you to look at the sheet and do what you think is fair. Is this seem acceptable to you?"

I lower my chin in a somewhat quick version of the arch, as if concurring, saying perfunctorily "Sure, whatever." It's not as though I don't already have enough on my mind. At least this session is free, and I don't have to pay anything for the next few sessions. Then it's a sliding scale, and given that I'm not

working and have so little income, I'll probably slide right off the scale to 0. I want to stop talking about money and fees and get back to what's important.

John sees himself as so distant from and different than Johannes. Yet it's fascinating to see how quickly the distrustful, cautious, game playing Johannes comes out in this conversation with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. It's almost as if John's spiritual veneer--well, that's too strong--John's personal spiritual questing really hasn't yet much, if any effect, on his style of interacting with others. Maybe that's why the idea of serving water seems so appealing in the abstract, with no one around, and so difficult in the reality, when it is served to real, imperfect people by a real, imperfect person.

\* \* \*

"Thank you for hearing that so well," the Rebbe says. "Now, could you share with us a bit about what you call the mundane issue that brought you here." Is he being sarcastic--did he really think I was comfortable with their transparent money grasping attempt? Or did I fool him completely? If I did, he's an idiot and a fool. And if I believe that, why am I here, sharing my life with him? Part of me thinks I should just get up and leave. As I start to do that, another part of me realizes that I have no place to go, nothing but emptiness and aloneness to face, and that this session is free. I might as well lay out everything that's bothering me, and maybe even speak a bit faster, to make sure I cover as much as I can and get my money's worth.

\* \* \*

"What I've been doing is going through my past journals to try to find where my life seems to have gotten off track. I don't

know how to put it--Humpty Dumpty after the fall is the best I've come up with--I've lost my sense of self. I feel in fragments, and alone. I'm trying to find some way to reconnect to life, to understand better who I was, who I am now."

I pick up my journal and leaf through the Johannes sections I've marked, and read or summarize certain excerpts for them. I keep a lot back, and censor from the diary excerpts of his sexual cavorting, and manipulative conniving. I also don't tell them about the machete episode or even the accident with the whittling knife. I do share with them Johannes' body oriented narcissism, say there were sexual activities of which I am not proud, but with my new found celibacy, that is in the past (except for an occasional dream, which is out of my control). My efforts now are focused on becoming less driven by the "flesh," and more by the spirit. I mention my parents' divorce, and that during my last visit to Kansas City there were "difficulties" but that I've pretty much dealt with them and put them behind me.

I describe in some detail Johannes' anger and rage at having someone enter his swimming lane, and Mery's Jesus-inspired, saintly response; her opening me to the world of homelessness and poverty; and that I'm trying to decide whether or not I want to accept my admission to Harvard law school and the ambitious striving that whole life represents. That I was left by my girlfriend.

During this time--maybe twenty minutes--they don't say anything but "Um huh." "I see." "Tell us more." And they do a lot of nodding, just listening and giving understanding looks. Occasionally, as I'm reading, I wonder, with some hidden annoyance, if these noises--"un huh" and these nods-- are what they expect

me to pay for.

To conclude, I read them the journal entry where Johannes is lying peacefully with Mery at the pool. I then make a few comments about Johannes having found a new rope, and end by saying,

"As I read this I'm aware that I, right now, in the present moment, have no rope to catch me. Or the one I think I've found--spirituality--keeps slipping away. I feel lost, unsure where to turn. I guess I'm looking to you all for help, to somehow put the pieces back together."

\* \* \*

Both Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe nod. It's almost as if they have synchronized their chins. Neither of them says anything when I finish, and the silence feels awkward to me. I feel vulnerable sharing with them even as much as I did. They seem to sense my discomfort, and seek to put me at ease.

Dr. Lisbet says, "You're very open. Most people seem more defensive and concealing when they reach this place of confusion in their lives."

"Maybe that's because I feel I have nothing to lose. I'm not sure I have much of a self left to defend. But maybe that's good, letting go of the body for the spirit."

I appreciate her praise. But I feel it's not entirely deserved. Yes, I have been open. But also, by not sharing the darker moments and sides of me, I've fooled her more than she realizes, so I feel as if I am getting away with something. But to what end?

Yet as I look at her eyes, they seem to penetrate into me, and I suddenly feel she's seeing through me, and that her statement is deeper and more knowing than I initially realized.

"Is it that you don't have much of a self left to defend, or is it that you fear the self that you still see in you?"

I'm caught off guard by her statement but before I can respond, the Rebbe says,

"It's like a spiritual dark night of the soul, isn't it?"

I nod. Somehow, without my sharing the darker moments, they both seem to understand what's going on inside me. Maybe even deeper and more fully than I do myself. This comforts me and frightens me at the same time.

\* \* \*

"Maybe this is a good time to share a bit about how we like to work in these situations. What do you know about clinical psychology?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"I thought you were spiritual advisors."

"What does that mean to you?" The Rebbe inquires.

"That you aren't going to try to put me on a couch and 'shrink' me like my mom's therapist does with her, and tried to do with me."

"What types of therapy or counseling have you been in before?"

"Just a few sessions with mom's Freudian shrink, which I hated. And a couple sessions of 'Couples Communication Training' with Mery, which were ok, but weren't really all that effective."

"Can you share with us the most important thing you learned from the couples communication training?"

"Yes, they talked about listening to the other person, trying to really hear that person before responding."

"Excellent. And do you remember how you let the other person

know that you've heard them."

"Yeah, you do something called 'paraphrasing'--'It sounds like you've said,' or 'that you are feeling, or'....with no judgment built in."

"Very good. Do you practice it at all?"

"I'm a pretty good listener. I just do it naturally."

"So, you feel pretty good about your skill at listening and hearing others."

"Is that a trick question? I just said yes."

"What was the question Dr. Lisbet asked you just a moment ago?"

"Something about what I knew about clinical psychology."

"Good. Exactly. And did you answer her?"

I see that I have been trapped. And that annoys me.

"No, but I didn't like what the question implied."

"Thank you for your candor. That's fair. Let us suggest some ground rules here. You can always share whatever you like with us. If you don't like how we are proceeding, or where we are going, you are always free to let us know. Does that seem fair?"

"Sure, yes." I hate their almost patronizing attitude, as if they are talking to a small child: does that seem fair? Is that acceptable? Blah blah blah.

"What we would ask in exchange is that you let us know that you have heard us. For example, rather than saying 'I thought you were spiritual advisors', you might have said, 'I hear you want to know my views about clinical psychology, is that correct?' Then, when we say yes, you could say 'Although I hear your question, I'm a bit confused about why you ask it. I thought you were spiritual advisors.' That way we would feel heard, and

you can also register your concern. Do you understand?"

There he goes again. "Honestly, it seems time-consuming and boring and repetitious."

"I don't feel heard" The Rebbe says, in an even tone. "This might be a chance to practice. We see paraphrasing, and having the other person's comments acknowledged as basic to communication as breathing is to life."

Annoyed, I respond, "You want me to paraphrase your views to let you know I hear you. You believe this is a foundational and critical first step. Then I can say what I want. Right?"

"Right, thank you for hearing me."

"Now can I see what I feel?"

"Sure."

"That seems stupid."

I look directly at them to see what effect my calling their strategy "stupid" has. Instead of being annoyed, they look at each other with something akin to pleasure. The Rebbe continues,

"Thank you for sharing that concern. I understand that sometimes paraphrasing can sometimes seem repetitive and boring. Even mechanical. So, I hear your thoughts, and even your frustration that this process is just a 'stupid' exercise, right?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Good. Now, please try to hear my viewpoint. I feel that even though it might seem all those things, the goal of communication skills, like paraphrasing, is to help us communicate in a kinder, gentler, more compassionate and empathic manner, to let the person you're speaking with really feel heard and understood. Would you agree that these goals seem worthwhile."



"How can I argue with that? It's like mom, the flag, and apple pie."

They smile. Then the Rebbe says, "Thank you for hearing me. And thank you for your humor. I think we're going to do just fine together."

\* \* \*

I look at my watch. Twenty minutes to go. I don't know how much more of this I can take. I glance over at Moses. I wonder how much his weariness is from having to hold the stone tablets, or from having to listen to these two all day.

My reverie is interrupted by Dr. Lisbet asking, "Let's try again. What do you know about clinical psychology?"

Here we go again. Give them a direct and simple response. "Very little. I took Psych 101. Mery and I went to a couple "communication" sessions. I know from your workshop at the kibbutz last fall, and later in Jerusalem, that you are a Jungian. I know from my class a bit about archetype, shadow, collective unconscious. My mother was in Freudian analysis several days a week for several years, and it didn't seem to help her much. Are you a Freudian, too?" I direct the question to Dr. Lisbet, but the Rabbi answers, "The very question I asked when I first met her."

Dr. Lisbet smiles at him, turns to me and replies "I'm not a Freudian. I don't feel everything is determined in childhood and that we have to spend years painstakingly analyzing and understanding every aspect of the past to become wise and happy."

I mop my forehead with a "phew" and there are more polite smiles. Dr. Lisbet continues, "But I do believe that our present is affected to an extent by our past, and, often, by what we've

learned from our parents--either to do, or not to do."

The Rebbe picks up the dialogue "There are a couple of ways we can proceed from here. I'd like to discuss with you in more depth how you now see your anger, and your ex-girlfriend's more accepting--even spiritual-- response toward that swimming episode."

Dr. Lisbet adds, "And I'd like to understand a bit about your family, and some of the 'difficulties' of which you speak."

"It sounds like what seems important to you all is delving into my past. I feel I'm already doing that, and not really getting anywhere. I'd like to leave the past behind. I'm looking more for spiritual wisdom now and in the future-- an answer to the question of whether the universe is sacred or meaningless."

"Thank you for hearing us, and sharing your concern. We hear you saying that looking back at your past is something you're already doing and it may be repetitive to do it with us. You're even having some doubts about how helpful all this looking back is to you. You're also concerned that there may not be a connection between such past personal exploration and your current and future spiritual quest and your pressing concerns about the nature of the universe."

"I do feel heard. Now are you going to tell me why I'm wrong?"

\*

\*

\*

I feel like I'm beginning to understand how they play their game. First they use their little communication techniques on you to make you feel safe and heard. Like catering to the jury. Or softening up a witness. Then they go in for the kill. I can

outplay them at their own game.

"You're quick. I can see why you'd be a good chess player. Or lawyer. Always looking a step or two ahead."

I smile in vindication and gloating. A lawyer: Grandpa would be proud. But how did the Rebbe know about my chess playing?

He continues, "But I wouldn't use the word 'wrong'...completely." He smiles back, though his expression seems softer and kinder than mine feels. "Maybe 'incomplete.' Going into the past can be a potential trap and a dead end, if pursued incorrectly. However, I would say, and I believe Dr. Lisbet agrees with me, that our life experiences in the past are important to examine as a way of understanding how we are approaching the spiritual journey in the present. Those experiences can sometimes hinder, and sometimes facilitate our progress."

He turns to Dr. Lisbet, who shakes her head in agreement. She continues, "As Reb Jonathan says, we have found in our work together that there is indeed a close connection between our past experiences and our spiritual views. We believe what we offer--this combined psychological and spiritual approach--can be quite helpful to you. In our work with you, we would seek to help you address and heal any limiting, negative past experiences and to highlight and build upon the positive ones. Does that make sense to you?"

"Yes, but I'm already doing that...going back through my past. I was hoping for something new and different from you."

"We admire the approach you are taking because you are not trying to hide from your past, and are willing to face yourself directly and honestly. Sometimes, however, it can help to have

fresh eyes not so directly connected, to give a new perspective. That's what I feel we can offer."

"Fresh eyes are one thing, but what you two are doing is constantly criticizing everything I say, pointing out my flaws and limitations."

"And how does that feel to you?" Dr. Lisbet queries.

"Horrible! I hate being criticized."

"Join the human race," the Rebbe laughs. "Again, thank you for your candor and honesty."

"Why do you think we are giving you this feedback?"

"I hope you're not going to say 'for your own good.' I got that all the time growing up, and usually it was just a front trying to put me down and mask a verbal attack."

"Again, a step ahead of us--yes, we will only share with you in a way which we feel is 'for your own good.' But think about it, why else would we be doing what we're doing?"

"You may think it's for my own good, but you asked me to be honest. I hate it. It feels like I'm being blindsided. I want to know everything about myself so that no one can ever criticize me 'for my own good'--tell me something that I haven't already thought about and criticized myself for. I hate not knowing myself, thinking I'm doing an action for one reason, and finding out later I didn't even understand my own motivation."

"Your goal of self-awareness is laudable--in line with Socrates' 'Know Thyself.' Your motivation, though--to know yourself so others can't criticize you for something that you haven't already recognized in yourself--is, I must admit, unique."

I look from Moses to the bamboo painting. I like the simple

lines, the small, nascent pink blossoms yearning to be born from the brown limb. I wonder who painted it.

"Since your goal is spiritual growth, perhaps you could frame our feedback as something which can facilitate your self-awareness and self-understanding. Anything which we can help you see now, at your young age, that you yourself don't see, will only help you be more self-aware in the future. Remember," and there is that smile of his again, "there are no grades here. We have no desire to 'put you down.' Only to help raise and elevate all of us."

In reading this, I'm impressed with the care and sensitivity Reb Jonathan showed in his response. And how compassionate and skillful the Rebbe was in not directly attacking his astonishing defensiveness. What a double-binding paradox John offers. "I want to know everything about myself so I won't be blindsided. But don't tell me anything about me I don't already know. That's blindsiding me!" How will he ever learn what he doesn't know if he isn't willing to let others help him see what he can't see for himself? Even though there are only months separating us, I see John as a fragile, scared, young man.

\*

\*

\*

I look back from the bamboo to the statue of Moses holding the ten commandments, then back at the Rebbe. "So, you want me to believe that you are giving me feedback in a better way than anyone has ever given it to me in the past, and I'm supposed to trust that, right?"

"Let me answer your question in two ways: content and context. First, on a content level, Dr. Lisbet and I can offer feedback and nuanced ways of seeing you--and reality--that may

not be perfectly in accord with yours. For example, as one aspect of right speech, we feel it is important to be careful of our language, and watch when we use words like 'constantly,' 'everything'--as in 'constantly criticizing everything I say'...."

"See, there you go again...more criticism, my style of speaking, that I don't listen well enough, what I say, how I talk..."

"Does it feel like we're picking on you?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"Yes, and I don't like it."

"I'm truly sorry it feels that way" she says. She seems sincere, but that can be faked. I know only too well.

**Poor John. Just so much distrusting Johannes baggage, so near the surface, and so frequently influencing in a negative way his interactions with others.**

I don't say anything, and the Rebbe continues.

"Let me add one more thing about content. Content is important, and maybe no more so than on a spiritual quest. Each word we utter matters. The way we listen to, hear, and understand others is vitally important. The way we speak to ourselves, and listen to ourselves is critical. We've devoted our lives to training ourselves--and others--how to see clearly, to speak clearly. Our only goal is to help you meet your goal of being able to serve water in as joyful and healing a way as possible."

He seems sincere, too. I feel my guard come down a bit. I give them some of their language back. I try to look sincere, too, three? "Thank you. I do really hear that. Your words feel good to me."

\*

\*

\*

It's still cold outside, and even in the room, but I'm feeling perspiration in my pits. This is hard work. It's like a zone defense, one on two.

Dr. Lisbet continues the Rebbe's dialogue seamlessly. "That is the content aspect. Contextually, I want you to know how much I respect the personal work you're doing and the spiritual search you're on. My view is that there is no more important task in life than to face ourselves honestly, and to do so within a spiritual context. That you are doing this at such a young age is amazing to me. I hope you hear our content comments and feedback as an effort to help you as best we are able--with whatever abilities the universe has bestowed upon us. And that these content efforts are within a context of support, caring and admiration for what you are endeavoring."

As they say this I have an image of my parents taking me to Luce Park when I was about three. We are walking in a green grassy area, each one holding my hand. Then, they would begin to run, making sounds like an airplane about to take off, then say "1,2,3 wheeeee!" and swing me up into the air as I began to fly.

I'd giggle with abandon and glee. The image shifts so that it is my two new "spiritual guides" taking my hand and swinging me. It's a sweet image when I think of childhood, slightly ludicrous, even surreal, when I seek to imagine them now trying to spiritually swing an (almost) grown man in their arms. Actually, a fully grown man. Physically. Sigh. But hardly emotionally or spiritually fully grown. **Trying to imagine the emotional and spiritual self being swung--now that is an image worthy of a surreal painting, indeed.**

\*

\*

I smile at them, and say,

"Well, it does make it easier to hear the criticism--content feedback you called it--that you 'sometimes' (I look pointedly at the Rebbe) give me, when you frame the context so kindly."

"Thank you," both Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe say at the same time. I can't remember the last time I have been showered with so many "thank yous" during a single hour. If they're really sincere, it feels good. I like being thanked.

Dr. Lisbet speaks, "What I feel--and this is critical--is that no one--no matter how spiritually gifted--is able to successfully skip over the details of life--their personality, psychological dynamics, their family, their relationships-- and go straight to spiritual wisdom. Perhaps they can do so for a while, but trust us, it eventually catches up with everyone. The path to the spirit is in and through life, not around it."

"Makes sense. I don't think I'm trying to skip anything. Is that what you're implying?" **This really is where John has such a major blind spot. He can't see that his spiritual searching has not at all affected how he relates to others.**

"In regard to your first statement 'Makes sense': I'm glad you agree with our approach. Thank you. In regard to your second, do you feel we're criticizing you again?"

"I wasn't sure. That's why I asked."

"Excellent. It's always helpful to clarify assumptions before proceeding. Great process. And the answer is no, I didn't mean in any way to imply that. The spiritual journey can provide a perspective on life that creates a safe refuge. But it is not an easy journey. Rather it involves an ongoing commitment, disci-



pline, and dedication. In fact you seem quite willing to face those challenges directly. Am I right?"

"Fair enough. Yes."

"Good. I feel we can best help you by getting to know the personal you a bit better first. Let me promise you, as we go through the details of your life, that we will honor and never lose sight of your vital question about the nature of the universe at the deepest level. Does that makes sense? And is that acceptable to you?"

\* \* \*

This feels like a lot for me to take in, so I just nod in compliance.

"Thank you. Good. With that as context, I'd like to ask you to start, if you're willing, by reading the part of your journal entry about the swimming pool again."

The idea of re-reading what I've already read to them doesn't make any sense at all to me. It's like we're going around in a circle, rather than making forward progress. I want to say this to them, but rather than argue, and get into another stupid round of paraphrase and I hear you saying and do I understand you endlessness, I comply:

---

"...I realize that having left my former place of birth and home behind, I've been swinging on a rope, and haven't been sure there was going to be another rope to catch me....I've found the rope awaiting me. A new home...Mother Mery.

---

Things are going to be just fine."

---

I put the journal down and say to them "Is that what you wanted?"

They both nod. Then Dr. Lisbet asks "Could you please repeat to us what you said after reading that excerpt?"

"I don't remember exactly." This really is seeming silly, and useless. She nods seemingly empathically, but gives a circling gesture with her hand, encouraging me to continue, which I do.

"Ok, I said something like 'It's clear to me that by the end of this swimming pool entry with Mery last April, Johannes feels like he's found a new rope. There were some difficulties he was having with his family--but I'm sure all people go through those...just a part of growing up.'"

I look at them, expecting to receive additional praise for jumping through their circular hoops again. Instead, Dr. Lisbet look at me and asks, almost belligerently, "Who is Johannes?"

\* \* \*

Initially I am caught off guard, both by her question and by her tone. I feel like I've been hit in the stomach. I take a breath. As I recover a bit from my misplaced expectation of praise, I realize her tone isn't actually belligerent, it just seems so because of how pointed and focused her question is. What has happened to the gentle, soft style of questioning, the profuse acknowledgment she evidenced at the start of the session? Was that just to lure me in?

I keep my tone light, and try to stay calm, to show I'm not intimidated. "Oh, Johannes is the name--archetype I think you'd call it--that I've given to that old, left-behind part of me."

"Isn't he you?" she persists.

"Well, not really. More a distant past 'self.'"

"Of you?" Her voice does not raise, but she is insistent.

I feel annoyed at her probing. "Technically. Your point?"

"I believe that we sometimes try to distance from and disown our 'shadow' side, whereas the task is really to recognize and incorporate it. Not 'out and away' but 'in and through.' So, I'd prefer if you would repeat what you just said, replacing Johannes with 'I' and replacing 'past' tense with 'present' tense." Her tone is calm, but there is a clarity and straightforwardness in her words that feels piercing, even painful. I'd prefer if she'd yell or shout. Her calmness is unnerving and annoying.

**With these comments from Dr. Lisbet, not only do Johannes and I actually start to become closer and more integrated, but John and I are getting closer and closer, as they begin to teach him what they taught me over those several months. It's like in some ways I'm John having been filtered through, and transformed by their teachings and wisdom.**

I try to match her tone. "I'm already working on incorporating the good parts of Johannes and bringing them into the present." I'll show her I'm actually a step ahead of her. "For example, he's very determined, sets goals well, and analyzes things perceptively. But the rest--his life goals, his callousness, his body fixation and narcissism-- I want to leave behind in the past."

"I hear you saying you are already trying to go in and through by keeping the good in the present and leaving the negative in the past. Do I understand you?"

"Yes, exactly."

"Very good. So, you do feel I have heard you?"

I have the uncomfortable feeling feel that I've been outmaneuvered on the chess board, and an attack is imminent, but I'm not sure from where. I only have one move.

\* \* \*

"Yes. This sounds like the communication class Mery and I took."

"You're right. I'm glad you feel heard. I will always try to listen carefully to what you say. Now let me share that I don't yet feel that you heard my request."

"Which was?"

"Please repeat what you just said, only this time replace 'Johannes' with 'I' and 'past' with 'present'." Her calm tone does not waiver.

I feel like a little kid being commanded what to do, and I don't like the feeling. "To be honest, that seems pointless. Don't we want to leave behind the negative parts of ourselves? Besides, referring to this past self as Johannes is a just a literary device--what's the harm?"

"Why are you here?" the Rebbe asks, suddenly.

"To get help. I'm at the end of my rope, as I said." I am now feeling really annoyed.

"Would you like us to help you?" he asks, in a firm, but still kindly tone.

"Of course, that's why I'm here, as I also said."

"Do you want to tell us how we can best help you?"

This seems nonsensical again, and I'm sure my exasperation is leaking through. Too bad. "If I knew how to help myself, I'd just do it, wouldn't I--and I wouldn't be here." I guess you get what you pay for, and this session seems worth exactly what they're

charging: nothing.

"We'd like to help. Will you let us try."

"I am, but I don't see where this is leading."

"Do you notice how when Dr. Lisbet asks, in an effort to help, for you to restate your words, you resist and battle her?"

I feel stalemated. Yes, I want help. But wise help. Their little verbal games are stupid. But I've already told them that, and to continue the argument is not going to lead us anywhere.

"Fine. It still seems pointless, but fine. 'I'" said forcefully "feel that at this point in my journal, 'I've' found a new rope. Yes, there were some difficulties 'I' was having with 'my' family --but I'm sure all people go through those...just a part of growing up." I look at them with growing defiance. "Ok now?"

"Thank you. Is it hard for you to hear suggestions?"

"No." I say categorically and emphatically.

\* \* \*

They say nothing for what feels like a long time. Maybe there is a ten second silence. We just look at each other. They are smiling, unperturbed. I'm beginning not to like their smiles. It's as if at my expense.

I start to get angrier, then I see some humor in the situation, and I, too smile-- at the irony of the unequivocalness of my "no" and the fact that I indeed have been battling their suggestions.

"No....Yes....Sometimes." **Ah, progress from Johannes' (and John's) either/or thinking. We're moving ever closer!**

"Very good. A lesson in black and white thinking in a world of shades of gray and multitudes of color."

I look at the gray stone of Moses. The soft shades of brown on the bamboo limb, the emerging soft, almost pastel pinkish orange blossoms in the painting.

"Control is important you, isn't it?"

"No. Why do you say that?" I realize I've just done it again. "So, what if it is. Is there anything wrong with that?"

They both give their smiles. Superior, one-up, superciliously wise. Maybe just a tad of compassion and humor in them.

"Isn't that what we've just been addressing?"

"I guess in some form."

"Also, I noticed when you came into the room, you didn't sit where I offered."

"Well, that's not control, that's because of my ear. I didn't mention it--didn't see a need to--but I can't hear in my left ear."

"So that's why you moved the rocking chair?"

"Exactly. See, that's not about control at all."

"Would it be fair to say it is about control, but not a bad control. You need to place yourself in a position where you can hear. Therefore you need to be sensitive to how the environment is arranged."

"Well, when you put in that way, yes, control in that way is important to me, and it makes sense, right? Anyone in my shoes would do that."

"Right."

I'm feeling pretty pleased with myself. Their control attack has been defused and shown to be an impotent red herring.

"In fact, now that you mention it, I always need to be careful where I sit--in class, in a movie, at a gathering when I

am talking to people. My family always let me be seated first, and to choose where I wanted to sit, so I could hear. And, yes, sometimes I will rearrange furniture when I enter a room to make sure I can hear ok."

"So you moved the rocking chair because of your ear."

"I already said that."

"If I may, why did you pick the rocking chair in the first place and not the couch? Couldn't you have turned to adjust your ear from the couch, too?"

Maybe they, like Mery, should have gone to law school. What is this, a cross examination?

"I don't know, it just seemed more comfortable, that's all."

"Please understand that it's perfectly fine with us where you sit. We're just trying to help you with the goal you yourself stated: learning more about yourself. So, go a bit deeper, why did the rocking chair seem more comfortable? The couch is softer, with thick cushions. The rocking chair is hard wood. So, comfort must refer to more than just texture. Try to see what else was going on in your selection."

I start thinking, then realize they've caught me again. I hated the couch the first moment I saw it. It was like the one in mom's psychiatrist's office. They weren't going to get me to sit on that thing, or lie on it. Also, I didn't like that the couch was lower than their chairs. It would have made me feel one-down, too powerless. I share these thoughts with them, reluctantly.

"Superb insights. Very honest. How did it feel telling us

what you were thinking?"

"Horrible."

We all laugh, just a bit awkwardly.

"Well, actually, the idea of sharing it with you seemed horrible before I did it. It meant you were right, and that control was..." I look at them, remembering to replace past with present..."is important to me, and more so than I was willing to acknowledge. Somehow my being controlling seemed bad. And it's a little scary to see that the level and depth of my motivation to be in control was—and maybe is—so much deeper than I realized."

**It's still hard for you to stay in the present, isn't it? But at least you're making progress toward the present. As, I hope, am I.**

I pause for a moment then add, "And somehow admitting you were right seemed at least as bad. But, having shared all this with you, I'm still sitting here—in my rocking chair—and not much worse off." I give a genuine smile. They start to say something, but I raise my hand to stop them, and they let me continue,

"I guess one thing that bothers me is you guys don't miss much, do you? I don't know if I like the idea that you've just met me and it seems you know me better in some ways than I know myself."

\*

\*

\*

The Rebbe starts to shuffle his papers, and I look at my watch and see there is only about five minutes left. Dr. Lisbet asks me if I would like some tea. I agree, and while the Rebbe gets up to fix it, Dr. Lisbet continues.

"Please understand that our only goal is to help. When we ask questions, it's to help you know yourself better. When we ask



you about why you keep using the name 'Johannes' it is again to help.

"In the case of going through your journals, our concern is not with what you are doing, but how you are doing it. We believe you are on the right track, and utilizing a wise strategy in choosing to look back at your past. In that sense, you are going 'in and through.' However, we believe by utilizing the archetype 'Johannes' and keeping past as past, you are bringing a certain limited lens and intellectual distance in viewing yourself. You have an excellent analytical mind, and that can be both a strength and at times a barrier. I nod, and find myself curious for her to continue. She's sounding a bit like Mery, though kinder, in her criticism.

"The analytical detachment may prevent you from digging deeper emotionally, and keep you closed off to a certain extent from yourself. Thus, you may not be experiencing your past as deeply and fully as would be helpful to you. So, that is why we keep asking you to please restate what you just said replacing 'Johannes' with 'I' and 'past' with 'present' tense."

"I wish you had said that in the first place. I'm not sure I agree with you, but at least it gives a rationale I can understand. Thank you for the compliment of my mind. My dad used to tell me that I was just a 'pseudo-intellectual.' So, I've made progress. But you're now saying what Mery used to say--that I was too intellectual and analytical. I mean, that *I am* too intellectual and analytical. Let me try again.

"It's clear to me that by the end of this swimming pool entry with Mery last April, I feel like I've found a new rope.

Yes, there are some difficulties I am having with my family."

"Excellent, stop there," the Rebbe interrupts me, returning with the tea, and offering it to me. I take a sip. There is a slightly minty taste, which reminds me of the smell of the little mint garden outside our home when I was a child. I close my eyes and smell it. Feelings? Pleasant. Innocent. Poignant. Some sadness at memories of simpler times past. The Rebbe's voice interrupts my reverie

"You were going to add: 'but I'm sure all people go through those...just a part of growing up, right?'"

I open my eyes. "Yes." I put the tea down on a small round table next to the rocking chair.

"And what is the effect of that part of the statement?"

"Well, it makes me feel my problems are normal, not so big."

"Excellent, and so you don't have to face their emotional weight. And are your problems big, right now?"

"Yes, I told you they are. I feel I'm at the end of my rope. I don't seem to be able to find another one to swing to. I'm trying to become a wiser, more spiritual person. But I'm feeling dead-ended, and don't know where to go next. I know I need help. For the first time in my life, I don't seem to be able to help myself." I start to say more, then stop.

They both nod. Then Dr. Lisbet says, "You look like you want to say 'But...'"

Caught again. "Yes, I do. I'm at the end of my rope, yes, BUT the issue is in the present. How to be a more spiritual person. My problems don't have to do with my family in the past. Why do you keep bringing this up? I thought you weren't Freudian."

I pick up my tea, and take another sip. As I look at my watch, there are less than three minutes left. Where is this going?

"I hear you saying that you don't see the connection between spirituality in the present and future, and your family in the past"

"Right."

"I do hear you. I believe there is a connection. I also believe that part of spirituality involves trust....trust in something larger than yourself. Trust is learning to surrender. Would you be willing to trust us enough to let us continue with our line of inquiry for a couple more minutes? Know that at any time you feel uncomfortable or wish to stop, you have complete control to do so."

I want to make a comment that I know they are trying to "play" me by offering me a feeling of control so that I will go along with them. I could ask them if it is really control if they are the ones giving it to me. Instead, I nod for them to continue.

**Wise move, John. You are taking a first step toward allowing yourself to get out of your mind machinations, your word games, your need to try to control everything. You're about to discover what happens when you surrender to those wiser than yourself, and are willing to access deeply buried feelings more directly.**

"How did you feel when you said 'Yes, there are some difficulties I am having with my family'? Take a moment, just pause, and if you trust us enough, close your eyes, listen to your breathing, and repeat the statement to yourself."

I again put my tea down. I start to close my eyes, and realize that it doesn't feel comfortable to do so in front of two people who are really, in many ways, total strangers. But I do, and take a few breaths--I'm reminded of dad's baseball coaching. I say to myself, "Yes, there are some difficulties I am having with my family."

Rather than just say the statement as a past event, I feel its current truth, and a wave of sadness starts to engulf me. Tears begin to form. I really don't want to cry in front of these people. I want to open my eyes, perhaps take another sip of tea. As I start to do so, I hear the Rebbe say, "Let yourself stay with the feelings. Allow whatever comes up to do so. Let your eyes remain closed." I feel a hand on my shoulder.

"Tears are a sign of opening. There may still be a wound, and tears let us start to cleanse and allow emotional healing to begin."

The tears flow more freely.

I don't seem to be able to control them.

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*



After several minutes of almost convulsive crying, the tears seem to run their course. When I open my eyes, the world seems blurry, and Dr. Lisbet hands me several kleenex. I wipe my eyes and seek to recompose myself. I look at my watch, and see that the session has run over by nearly twenty minutes.

I look at them, unsure what to say. I point to my watch. "Thank you for taking extra time with me."

The Rebbe has a kind expression on his face. "We allow an hour and a half for the first session, because we are never sure what will come up. We still have a few more minutes. Would you like some more tea?"

Dr. Lisbet pours some additional hot water into my cup. I hold the cup toward my nose, smelling the minty fragrance. My feelings are swirling. Part of me feels cleansed, as if some constricted, coagulated core of pain has been released. Breathing in the aroma of the tea, I feel innocent, like a return to my childhood home, when things were so much simpler.

"It seems like the feelings with your family have not completely healed," the Rebbe comments. "Would you be comfortable over the next few weeks with our exploring a bit more about the nature of those difficulties?"

His words access the other part of my feelings. I am raw, vulnerable. It's as if when I cede control to someone else--my

parents, Mery, them--, I end up in pain. Is he trying to rub it in that I was wrong, that I hadn't addressed my family issues as completely as I thought I had? Is he trying to show me how smart they are? I don't like feeling this unprotected and exposed in front of strangers.

I realize this is a hard choice point for me. I'm so used to telling the Garden of Eden story about my family. How much do I really trust or want to learn to depend on these two strangers?

I take another sip of tea as I look from one to the other.

\* \* \*

January 6. Session Two. "It's good to see you again. Have a seat." They point to my rocker. "We're glad you decided to return. How was your week?"

I'm sure they're happy to see me back. After that lengthy free session, now the money starts pouring in and they can reap their financial rewards. "I thought about what you said last week, and I realize there is a bit of a war within me. My basic wariness and apprehension fights with the awareness that I'm pretty desperate. This does not seem like a time for any more games. So, do you really want to hear the unvarnished, negative, embarrassing, ugly darkness of my family?"

"If you're comfortable, we think it might help us to help you."

With that, I begin to vomit an unsanitized Cliff Notes version of my family, speaking quickly, trying to get as much in as fast as I can.

Acrimoniously divorced parents; philandering, abusive, get-rich, money-obsessed, gambling, lying father; suicidal, agorapho-

bic, drug addicted (Vicodin,, Percocet) "long days' journey into night" mother; obsessive worrier Nana; nebbishy meshuginah "My grandson may be the messiah" Grandpa Dave; tyrannical, money-obsessed, controlling, demanding, "you must be the best" Grandpa \$; and loving but dead blue eyed grandmother. Hardly the Garden of Eden story I told Mery.

"And here you see before you a half deaf, first born son--actually the second born son because the first was a blue baby who died after a few days. I stand before you the result of my family's evolutionary progress.

"Is there any hope?"

\* \* \*

There is a long silence. I push my feet against the dark green carpet on the floor, and rock slowly back and forth in my chair. I glance over at Moses. Still there. Unmoved.

I wonder if the Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan are feeling overwhelmed. I hope so. Let them feel some of the helplessness and pain I do. I'd practiced my "unvarnished" story enough this past week, so much so that I could appear to vomit it forth naturally and spontaneously.

I look at my watch. Five minutes. Excellent. I have covered my entire family story in the exact time allotment I set for myself. Now they have the rest of the hour to earn their money. If they like challenges, they certainly have one before them. I notice they're not offering me any tea. I've done my part. Their turn. I look directly at one, then the other. Let them be uncomfortable for a change.

"Is there any hope?" Dr. Lisbet repeats. "Of course, there's always hope." Do I detect some doubt in her voice?

"I agree," the Rebbe adds. "However, perhaps it would be best if we took your family story a bit slower. Maybe it would be helpful if you shared with us a bit about what you have called your final trip to Kansas City, the one where you said there were some 'difficulties.'"

\* \* \*

MOTHER

(Giggles sarcastically): Oh my goodness, look he's serving a meal. <The narrator offers her scrambled eggs.> Is this an Easter Sunday miracle? Are you Jesus feeding the multitudes? This is definitely a first. Did you poison them? Like when you cooked hamburgers and ladled the excess fat across the tops because you thought it was like juice or gravy?

GRANDPA DAVE

The cardinal redbird has a crest of feathers on his head, like a peaked cap.

NANA

Now, now, let Junior be. This is a treat for us to have him home. And he cooked the whole meal by himself.

NARRATOR

With a little help from you, Nana. Just to say thanks for all the Sunday brunches you cooked--my reward for attending Sunday School.

MOTHER

What was so wrong with Sunday school? You were cute then. I dressed you so elegantly. And your first Hebrew: "Aleph beth give a dog some hay."

NARRATOR



*I hated having to wear those monogrammed dress shirts, and especially the wool pants. I'd wear my pajamas under them just to keep from itching.*

*NANA*

*We always thought you looked very handsome. You still do. I like those curls, but you did used to be so clean cut with such nice short hair. Don't you think your hair's getting a bit long?*

*MOTHER*

*Nana's right. Your hair is getting too long, It's not good for your skin. You're beginning to get those ugly red boil marks on your forehead. Especially after all the expense, and trouble I went to carting you and your brother to the dermatologist every week.*

*AARON*

*Ouch. So he could take one of those steel rods with a circle at the end and torture us until the pus and blood popped out.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*Red Sea parting...*

*MIRIAM*

*Gross. Yech.*

*MOTHER*

*Remember when you were sent home for listening to the World Series with a transistor radio hidden in your sport coat and with a plug into your ear? How embarrassing, when they were trying to teach you about Rosh Hashanna and Yom Kippur, the holiest time of the year.*

*NARRATOR*

*(Pointedly, to Mother): Isn't the lesson of those holy days about new beginnings and forgiveness, and moving on? A lesson for all*

*of us. (Then, turning to Nana); I'm becoming a changed person.  
I've been inspired by my new girlfriend. She's sensitive, kind,  
(looking back toward mother) very giving, very spiritual.*

*MOTHER*

*(Taking the bait) Are you saying we're not giving or spiritual?  
How does she show her generosity besides giving you sex?*

*NARRATOR*

*Though a gentleman never tells, actually, we've just kissed.  
She's innocent and naive and chaste. And as for giving, last week  
she invited me to help serve food to some homeless winos. I must  
admit I was a little apprehensive. Yes, mom, partly because I  
didn't want to spill anything on the argyle sweater you gave me,  
but partly this was new for me. How does our family help others  
in need? I don't remember every really discussing this.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*Tzedakah. Tikkun olam. You were strangers in a strange land.  
Still are.*

*MOTHER*

*Your Nana gives by serving you and doting on you. Grandpa Dave  
is always helping those in need at the store (Looking at her  
father) Sometimes too much. He forgets who his family is.*

*NARRATOR*

*What's Tzedakah? Tikkun olam. The feeling about being among  
strangers I get. Why did we go to school on Sunday anyway? Isn't  
Saturday the Jewish Sabbath.*

*MOM*

*It's more convenient.*

*NANA*

*It helps us fit in, not be different. You're Jewish, But there is no reason to ostensibly display that fact.*

*NARRATOR*

*But what am I displaying? I guess it's ok to be ostentatious about wealth (pointing to mom's earrings, jewelry, rings, bracelets). What is Jewish?*

*NANA*

*Your mom needs to dress fashionably because she is a living advertisement for our store. As for being Jewish: it's both relevant and it's irrelevant.*

*AARON*

*It's lox and bagels.*

*NANA*

*(Defensive). We always donate to the temple.*

*NARRATOR*

*(Protecting her). Nana, I always kidded you that you would never sit during our Sunday brunches. But I never offered to help. So, consider this meal a meager payback of thanks. (Nana frowns), then shyly, almost girlishly waves her hand at him dismissively, as if embarrassed by praise just for doing her Jewish grandmotherly duty).*

*By the way, last week I was at both David's and Solomon's delis in San Francisco. As I ate the matzah ball soup-- good, but not as good as yours--I felt with every bite like you were taking care of me wherever I am. (Nana now genuinely smiles).*

*While I was there, I made a commitment to myself to show that I can go a week back home without there being any fights or problems. <Smiles at each person in the room, lingering perhaps a little too long, and just a bit smugly, on his mother>.*

MOTHER

*What about all those years when you wouldn't take out the trash for me, or ever, God forbid, clear a dish? My payback? Who was there to help me?*

GRANDPA DAVE.

*Red birds. Red Sea. Passover is coming.*

NARRATOR

*Man, what a rebellious hellion adolescent I must have been. Wouldn't take out the trash? No help for poor mom? But I thought that's why we had the cook, laundress, upstairs and downstairs maids. Wasn't that so I wouldn't have to be bothered by lesser chores and could focus on my studies? Or was all that help just for you? I know how hard it was to serve a meal to us. You had to push the button under the dining room carpet, which buzzed the cook in the kitchen to come in.*

MOTHER

*You know there was no upstairs maid after the divorce, once we moved into the apartment. You've really changed, haven't you? So much more loving and kind. (Whimpering) Mom, are you going to let him get away with treating me like this?*

NANA

*It's all his father's fault. Deserting you. Forcing you to leave your beautiful home--not that there's anything wrong with that lovely apartment you have. The good-for-nothing, irresponsible ...with that cheap I won't even dignify...*

GRANDPA DAVE

*The female sits on the eggs and the male feeds her during this time. The male helps feed the young.*

NARRATOR

Nana, Nana. Stop. I've told you, please, you've got to stop your attacks on Dad. They've been divorced for 7 years.

NANA

And whose fault was that? And why do you think you had to give up your beautiful house, not that there is anything wrong with the apartment your mom chose, and furnished so beautifully.

NARRATOR

Right, there's nothing wrong with the apartment except no yard or grass or place to play. Do you realize the youngest people in our apartment building next to us were in their 60's. You think that was a fun place to be a teenager?

MOM

Don't you dare raise your voice like that to your grandmother.

NANA

We think it's a very nice apartment. It's safe, has a guard at the front door. Your mom needs that protection. We're thinking of moving there ourselves soon.

NARRATOR

My point exactly. You'd love that, wouldn't you mom, having your parents right next to you to take care of you?

MOM

Well, no, well, yes.

NARRATOR

Ask Miriam and Aaron what it's like to sit in a walled, glassed-in room, an observer pressing your face against the window to look down to see people your own age, walking on the street several stories below. (He looks toward them for support. They both look down at their food).

NANA

*Now don't be spoiled. Some people don't even have roof over their head.*

NARRATOR

*(Trying to change the subject). Nana, remember when I swallowed the marble?*

MOM

*Yes, your father and I had separated and I was trying to do something nice for you and take you to Fairyland, where we always went as a family. You refused to go. Obstinate as ever. Then, you swallowed the marble on purpose when we left so we'd have to come back and take you to the emergency room. Dr. Gundle said you were being passive aggressive. You ruined the outing for everyone. Again.*

NARRATOR

*I told you--and him, when you made me see him because of what happened--it was an accident.*

MOM

*He said you were either denying or unconsciously acting out, and didn't even know it.*

NARRATOR

*He'll tell you whatever you want to hear as long as you keep paying him. When they took the x-ray, the Drs. said, 'There it is. Just let it pass.' And who was there to help me? Mom? No, not you. (Turns lovingly to Nana) Only you Nana. You came over everyday to check my ah, my --shi..(a glare from the mom) ... pooh-pooh ...bowel movements....Number 2-- what should we call it among family? until, a week later, it came out and you found*

it. Talk about love. No one else was willing to check my defecation. (Looking at his mother).

AARON AND MIRIAM

(At the same time) Yech, we're eating. Let's change the subject. Pleasssse.

MOTHER

Ask him who he called first when he got back to Kansas City yesterday, his father or me.

NANA

(Pointing to a now tearful mother) Look at how he--and you--hurt your mom. Are you going to defend that no good weasel? He not only deserted her, he left you kids, and for what, some little tramp. You have some nerve, Junior. Apologize to her right now.

<Grandpa Dave is sitting off to the side, and smiles a cockeyed pleasant faced quiet grin. Aaron is chowing down on his livers and eggs. Miriam twists her fork politely in her eggs>

GRANDPA DAVE

The redbird has a cheerful song...once they were trapped and sold as songbirds.

MIRIAM

The orange juice is delicious.

NARRATOR

Thanks. I squeezed thirty-three oranges. I wanted everything to be perfect. (Sighs). The best laid plans....How are your eggs? (Solicitously). Too soft, Miriam?

MIRIAM

(Looking at him with protectiveness and admiration) No, perfect. Thanks! <The audience can see that she is lying, as the eggs are runny and gooey> Oooh, you have a girlfriend!

MOTHER

What's her name? Is she the reason you call and visit so infrequently?

NANA

What does her family do? Is she Jewish?

NARRATOR

(With a smile and a feeble attempt at humor, looking at the mother, then speaking to Nana) You know, Nana, you both should have become the lawyers in the family. I must get my cross-examination skill from you two.

NANA

We are so proud of you. Harvard Law School. I've told all the girls at cards. They say I'm so lucky to have such a wonderful grandson. So smart and so handsome.

NARRATOR

(Basking in the praise). Thanks, Nana. I'm glad you're pleased. You still the canasta champ? "Nanacanasta" I used to call you!

GRANDPA DAVE

The young birds leave the nest after about ten days.

NANA

Don't try to avoid my question with flattery and cuteness! Is she Jewish? And are you going to tell your mom you're sorry?

NARRATOR

It's like an early Yom Kippur, right? Sorry, mom, I didn't mean to hurt you. I actually keep records of who I call when I get home. so as to try not to hurt either of you, and make sure I alternate. One time I call dad first, one time I call you first. It was his turn.



NANA

*(Seems content with the answer, then looks over at the Mother, who has her head down, with a pained expression on her face. Nana's rage returns, like a mother lion protecting her cub). You make it sound as if they are equal in your eyes. How can you feel that, after all the sacrifices your mom made for you?*

AARON

*PASS the jam, please. Are there any more chicken livers?*

GRANDPA DAVE

*PASSover is coming in three weeks.*

*<Nana jumps up and serves Aaron some more chicken livers, and carries the jam around to him.>*

NANA

*I talked to Sarah's grandmother this morning. Sarah thought you were 'charming' on your date last night, a true gentleman, and so handsome. You know that she comes from a fine family--not only wealthy but good stock, socially quite well-connected. She's such a lovely girl. Tell us about your date?*

NARRATOR

*It was Ok. (A pause, then): She said I was 'charming?'"*

\*

\*

\*

*I have twenty minutes left, and I'm at a choice point. I can continue writing about my family brunch, or I can talk about my evening with Sarah.*

*My thoughts briefly turn to Elizabeth wandering around the campus. Then, they return to my Kansas City date.*

*These thoughts, dear diary, are something I chose not to share with my family, nor will I disclose them to the creative writing professor Nor to Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet. **Maybe one***

day, as an evolved Arjuna, and with some perspective, I might be able to share them.

*"Sarah thought you were 'charming.'"*

*What a difference six years made. She seemed prettier than she was six years ago. Maybe because she wore a lot of makeup, a pearl necklace, and sophisticated, fashionable attire. She'd not only gone to the finishing school for the wealthy on the east coast--haughty-tauty Wesseley, but also over the summers to an actual finishing school in Switzerland. Her appearance was just the opposite of Mery's down-to-earth, no make up, more natural look.*

*"You know I'm an amateur photographer. I should take a set of pictures of you sometime. You have lovely features. Look at your cheek bones."*

*"Oh, do you think so?" She breaks into grin, blushing, almost curtsying.*

*"See, when you smile, your cheeks grow even fuller." I give them a playful pinch.*

*"I'd love some pictures. I'm sure daddy would pay you handsomely. He never thinks I take a good picture."*

*"Well, I just happen to have my camera here."*

*"Do you think my make up and hair look ok?" She walks over to a mirror, reaches in her purse for her brush and fiddles with her hair. She applies more lipstick, and touches up her eye shadow."*

*"Perfect." Click. "Now, turn your head to the side. Excellent." Click.*

*"But that's not a good angle for me." She'd had a nose job,*

and was still self-conscious about it.

"No, you look lovely from that angle." She was persuaded.

Click.

"Now, lower your chin a bit." Click. "Now slowly turn your face toward me, eyes first. Yes, exactly. Click. Your daddy will love these." Click.

\*

\*

\*

Though Sarah was still haughty, and put down everything and everyone around her as not good enough, she was open and friendly to me. She complimented my acceptance to Harvard, told me how cute I looked, and laughed at all my jokes. We even shared a chuckle about the railroad track incident on New Year's Eve.

I wondered what had changed? Is it that I am now more worldly and successful? More sophisticated? Less pimply. Has she become more experienced and more open? Whatever the reasons, this time it was she who initiated the first kiss. I didn't refuse, although I actually felt awkward and confused at first, and even a bit angry.

Were these emotions because of some guilt about Mery? I thought my experiences with mom had inured me to guilt. When Mom said she'd seen Sarah's mom at the Plaza, and that Sarah was in town and would love to see me, my first reaction was definitely not. I reflexively thought of the date six years ago. Then, I thought, well, maybe with my greater experience and wisdom, we could have a better, more exciting time. I then thought of Mery, but told myself that we hadn't made any commitments to each other. I'd only kissed her. I was and am still a free person.

Was it anger and frustration at how poorly Sarah and others treated me as a pimply sixteen year old? Perhaps. But there was

also something distasteful about her constant references to her wealth.

"Did I tell you Daddy got us seats on the fifty yard line at the Orange Bowl this year. What an exciting game! Then we went on Daddy's yacht to several islands in the Caribbean."

"It's so sweet of mommy to fly to New York with me twice a year to shop. I buy all my clothes there. Except this year she says I simply must go with her to Paris for one of our annual shoppings."

\* \* \*

I smiled pleasantly at these remarks. But it reminded me of Richard, and a level of wealth beyond either my dreams or my ability. And an entitled condescension toward everyone less fortunate. Which, though she didn't say it, felt like me. I can never keep up with what her Daddy gets her.

She didn't seem to notice either my awkwardness or anger, or if she did, she just kept pressing forward.

We ended up back at her parent's palatial mansion. It seemed even larger than I remembered it, almost intimidating. The long circular drive and landscaped lawn dwarfed our white house. Their foyer could swallow our current apartment.

Her parents were not home. I overcame my initial emotions, and was not adverse, and even pleased when she continued making affectionate overtures toward me, in the library off the main foyer. Even when I was sixteen, she had been described by my high school buddies as "built like a brick shit house." I knew that meant she was really stacked, and I would laugh, but I didn't understand then, and still don't, why it means that. But

she was. Is. Not as big as Mery, but voluptuous. I felt a thrill about beginning to win what I had failed at before.

She started dancing around the room. "That's a great picture." Click. "That's it, feel the music." Click. She unbuttons the top two buttons of her white silk blouse." Click. "You're a natural." Click.

I reach over and unbutton one more, and peel her blouse back, revealing a lovely expanse of cleavage. Click. "Now lean forward." Click.

"Oh, should you be taking those kind of pictures?" she giggles. Click. "They're like pin-ups. Cheesecake."

"They're very artful. And I develop them myself. Next time I'm in Kansas City, I'll bring them to you. You'll love them. Bend a little further. Now, chin up, eyes on the camera." Click. "Feel the sensuality of the music. There you go." Click. She continues to unbutton, then remove her blouse. "That's it. Lovely, sensual, like you're making love to the camera." She lowers first one bra strap very slowly, seductively. Click. Then another. Click.

John John, I mean lingham, has now become huge, and I imaged him as a major trombone, heralding and surrounded by a trumpet call. I heard the minister at Mery's church saying, "Not my will but Thy will." At first I laughed to myself, wondering if "thy will" for me refers to John John. Am I leading him, or is he leading me? More trumpets. Lead on, John! Light the way. Lingham. Shaft of light.

\*

\*

\*

But then unbidden, I thought of Mery, which didn't affect the trombone. But Mery led me to associate to the men on Sixth

*Street, their pain, homelessness, aimlessness, hopelessness, living on cement. How can I be happy and carefree when people like that are suffering? It's like I'm in the middle--upset at their poverty and upset at Sarah's ostentatiousness. I wanted to blame Sarah. Her main problem in life seemed to be to ensure that she sleeps in high thread count sheets. To support such a high maintenance princess is something I may have once aspired to, but now it makes me weary even to imagine it. Even if there were no homeless people. Pairing them it doubly didn't and doesn't seem right. Naturally, these thoughts dramatically diminished the trombone and killed the trumpet sound.*

The first time of non-performance, that he is not able to control his body at will. The realization that he can't just say to the shaft of light, "Up now, shaft" and the shaft will rise. There are limits to "my will." His lingham doesn't just obey him immediately and resurrect.

*"What's wrong," Sarah asked. Solicitously? Patronizingly?*

*"I have a big test when I go back, sorry, I got distracted. Big test? That's awfully close to a lie, Johannes. Your quarter is done. What you don't realize is that at a deeper level, it's not really a lie, because you do have a big test of which you are not even aware: Mery. Your direction. Facing the suffering in life. I'm such an idiot. I know this is not the time to be thinking of a test....I'm so sorry."*

*I realize I'm saying sorry a lot, lately. My father, when he was manager of the Little League baseball team "Fashionbuilt," told me when I made a mistake on the field at shortstop, never to say you're sorry. Rather, look defiantly at the next batter and*

say "Hit it to me again." I liked it when he said that, it made me feel he had confidence in me.

Sarah accepted my explanation, which was nice of her, because basically I was saying, no matter what the actual reason, that I was distracted from being with her. And that was true. Maybe it was not so much kindness as her need. She then guided my hand to her third base which was warm, swirling, and overflowing with moisture.

Soon, by an act of will, and with Sarah's probing hands, tongue, lips, and mouth--"hit it to me again!"--the light, trombone, and trumpets returned. She was now on her knees, as I stood before her.

Ah, my lingham's resurrection. I'm reminded of Abraham, and the other Sarah's surprise that he could still "perform." Of course the outcome of their surprise I want to avoid.

I liked looking down at the haughty, European finishing school made-up face. Unbidden, words from the Song enter my mind "your nose is like the tower of Lebanon."

I watched her pearl necklace bouncing on and off her neck, her breasts flopping in syncopated rhythm, her eyes open staring at me as my lingham pounded into her mouth in her parent's rich palace. What I'd really love to have is a picture of her at this moment. Click. A mental image. I debated: Should I stop, get my camera, and try to push the envelope, see if she'll let me take pictures of her like this. She's already let me take several topless ones of her dancing. Daddy would love this picture I'd tell her. Click. My lingham grew even longer, more pulsating. I realized I'd neared the point of no return. If I stopped to take the picture, I feared losing my forward momentum. Present pleas-

ure versus capturing the moment for posterity. If I knew it would work, I'd choose the later, which I could reuse over and over. But what if she resisted. Then the whole house of card tumbles down and I'd lose both. Too much thinking. I decided to save the hard core pictures for another time.

I wondered when her parents were going to return. I'd love for them to walk in and see their precious socialite innocent daughter in this kneeling, supplicant position. Click. Another mental image.

I let most of my liquid shaft of light pour down her throat, then pulled it out and let it splash over her face as I'd seen done in porno movies. She closed her eyes and grimaced, even as she was laughing. Click. Daddy would love these.

Not unpleasant. Hardly my best effort. But better than New Year's Eve. Patience is rewarded. And a nice set of pictures.

To be called "charming" and a "gentleman" is a bonus.

\* \* \*

"Stop. I now want you to begin to bring your writing to a fitting climax.

Let me give you some suggestions."

The professor starts droning on about reasons why people write, the creative impulse, looking for the narrative arc in your story. I feel like I'm back in high school, senior year, after I'd already received early admission to Stanford. Senioritis they called it. The motivation to take copious notes and study hard is gone. The pressure is off. You can just drift through classes, and as long as you pass, your future is assured.

This would be a climactic ending, but is not one I want to



share with the class.

"Actually, I've lectured enough for today" I hear the Professor say. "Take the rest of the period--the next fifty minutes, and see if you can't really polish and craft your piece, reviewing what you've done, and bringing it to a creative ending. Continue."

\*

\*

\*

NANA

I talked to Sarah's grandmother this morning. Sarah thought you were 'charming' on your date last night, a true gentleman, and so handsome. You know that she comes from a fine family--not only wealthy but good stock, socially quite well-connected. She's such a lovely girl. Tell us about your date?

NARRATOR

It was Ok. (A pause, then): She said I was 'charming?'"

MOTHER

That's all we get? You sound like you're back in high school. Monosyllabic replies. You were so distant and cruel to me. After the divorce, you just cut me out of your life. "Charming"? "A gentleman"? Not a side of you I can say I recall seeing directed toward me. Cary Grant holding me in his arms and dancing with me is a charming gentleman. You would never dance with me.

NARRATOR

Sorry again, mom. High school was a long time ago. I hope I've improved a bit. Though I'm still not much of a dancer. The date was a lot of fun. We went to see "Around the World in 80 Days." Then we went to dinner at the Savoy. We had lobster, your favorite dish. Part of our kosher heritage, right? (Smiles genuinely).

MOTHER

*I remember when I would say to you, before you went out, 'Have a good time' and you would shout at me 'What do you mean by good time?' So cruel. And you weren't just mean to me. Ask your brother. The way you'd torment poor Aaron. He'd be in tears.*

*AARON*

*(Between bites) Yeah, why did you always punch me? Every time there was a commercial. And you always tried to boss me around when mom wasn't home.*

*NARRATOR*

*Sorry, Aaron. I was just fooling around, you know, brothers rough-housing. Probably I was bored during the commercials. That was wrong. Sorry.*

*MOTHER*

*Hardly rough housing when it's always you beating up on him, bossing him around. That's why we had to kick you out of the house.*

*NARRATOR*

*(Defensive) You're right. It's all my fault. You'd tell me you were going out on a date and I was in charge. You'd tell me I was the man of the house now that dad was gone. I was the responsible one, and to make sure Aaron and Miriam behaved, and that they went to bed at their normal bedtime. I tried to. Then, when they refused, I'd raise my voice and tell them they were going to be grounded, just like you. So they went to bed. I never hit them as punishment. Ask them.*

*The next day they'd complain to you that I was too bossy and you'd tell me I couldn't tell them what to do. I was trapped. If I did let them stay up late, you'd say I was irresponsible and*

*wasn't being the man of the house. If I tried to exercise control, you'd tell me I was wrong and too authoritarian.*

*I couldn't win, could I? Still can't.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*The Jews were in bondage in Egypt. Exiled from their home.*

*<Singing>: Let my people go.*

*MOTHER*

*You were lucky that Mom and Dad were such good grandparents that they took you in.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*For you were strangers in a strange land.*

*NARRATOR*

*That was a tough time. I'm sorry, Aaron. Truly. (Aaron nods as he takes another bite of chicken livers). And Mom. And Nana. And Miriam. (She nods self-consciously. Aaron nods while not missing a bite; Nana looks down awkwardly.) I'm sorry to all of you. For any hurts I caused. Really.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*And there were plagues in the land.*

*MOTHER*

*(Seeming to ignore his apology) Even after you were gone a few months, Aaron and Miriam voted, and they still wanted you to stay away. Talk about a plague.*

*MIRIAM*

*Let's play the good memory game. I'll go first. I liked picking up acorns and putting them in the red wagon, and I liked when my big brothers would pull me in the red wagon around the drive way. I liked sledding in the winter with my brothers. I liked when we would all run after and catch fireflies in the summer, and twirl*

sparklers in the night sky on July 4.

GRANDPA DAVE

It's too early for fireflies. We need more light.

MOM

Where'd you learn that game, sweetie?

MIRIAM

The school counselor taught it to me. She told me to play it  
whenever there is sadness around me.

NANA

(Breaking in) Junior wasn't difficult at all. We were happy to  
have him here. Other than the time he lied and said he was going  
to Bill's house, and went out with that lower class Catholic  
girl, he was not a problem. He worked and studied all the time.  
In fact, sometimes we'd see him standing on his head, and when we  
asked him why, he said it was to get more blood into his brain  
so he could study harder and longer.

Maybe we're being a little too hard on Junior. These eggs  
really are good.

Now, I want to hear more about your date with Sarah. And about  
this other girl, what's her name?.

\*

\*

\*

"You have thirty more minutes. No matter where you are,  
bring your writing to some kind of ending."

\*

\*

\*

NARRATOR

Her name is Elizabeth Mery Jaellois.

NANA

What kind of name is that? Elizabeth Mery. Certainly not Jewish.

What's her family do?

GRANDPA DAVE

Elizabeth Mery. Sounds like the rival daughters of Henry VIII.

MOTHER

Jaellois. Is that French?

NANA

(To her daughter) Do you still practice your French?

NARRATOR

(To mother) Didn't you go to a private Catholic school?

MOTHER

(Wistfully) Notre Dame of Kansas City. A wonderful private  
Catholic school here in town. Je parle francais tres bien.

NANA

Only the finest girls went there. Just like Sunset Private School  
for Young Women. We sent you only to the best.

GRANDPA DAVE

Today is Easter Sunday. Jesus was a descendant of the House of  
David. Junior here could one day be the Messiah.

NARRATOR

We never made much of Passover, did we?

AARON

(Pausing momentarily from eating) Don't you remember that time  
when mom, instead of getting a lamb bone, got a ham bone--because  
she thought it sounded close enough? (Goes back to eating).

MOTHER

(With a self-conscious giggle) What do you expect from a convent  
educated young lady? (Primping her blond hair).

NANA

We had some seders at Uncle Richmond's, but it brought back hard

memories for him. And, since your cousins are being raised catholic....and you kids all fell asleep....it just sort of drifted away...And with Grandpa's store, we didn't want to make too big a thing of religion....all people buy clothes.

NARRATOR

Why do we always have a Christmas tree if we're Jewish?

NANA

It's fun. Santa Claus is fun. We gives presents. It's just a family time. It's not really a religious holiday. You want to get along with everybody, and not offend. We live in a Judeo-Christian country. We're all part of one big family.

NARRATOR

Uncle Richmond told me when he came back from Greece, that in some Greek Orthodox churches they light effigies of Judas in a ritual knowing as "the burning of the Jew."

NANA

(Visibly upset) He shouldn't talk to you about such things.

MOTHER

And you shouldn't talk about that in front of mom. Look how you've worried her.

NARRATOR

Sorry, Nana. I was just asking. I always felt Santa was like a big parent, like God. <Singing> "You'd better watch out, you'd better not cry, you'd better not shout....he knows who's been naughty, he knows who's been nice...Santa Claus is coming to town." <Aaron and Miriam gleefully join in the singing. Then they all clap>

NARRATOR (Continuing)

*Santa was the great rewarder for good behavior. My psychology class says that's just behavioral conditioning. We're like little rats receiving rewards to train us to be good. And if you only receive rewards when you accomplish something, then you come to feel that you are only worthwhile when you succeed. Oh, what a good boy, you raked the leaves.*

*MOM*

*(Clapping) Nice speech. In just a few lines you were able to criticize Santa, how we practice Judaism, and my parenting style too. You have really changed. I can't wait to tell Dr. Gundle. I'll let him know how you've evolved, and that now Mr. Smarty Pants is also criticizing his approach to therapy, too. Or would you like me to make an appointment for you to see him, so you can tell him yourself? You need it.*

*NANA*

*Is this Elizabeth girl Jewish? What does her family do? I'm going to keep asking until you respond.*

*NARRATOR*

*Why do you ask if she's Jewish? It sounds like whether or not she's Jewish shouldn't be that important to us.*

*NANA*

*Of course it's important. We Jews have to stick together for safety. That's why we belong to the Temple.*

*NARRATOR*

*Stick together. I thought you said we're all one family with the Christians. You know, Judeo-Christian. I'm confused. Are we separate and it's important, or are we all one, and it's not important? Heh, why did you pick our temple, anyway?*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*Because it was founded by the German Jews, and associated with affluence and social status. Like your dad's folks. Not like Eastern European immigrants, or poor Russian stock, like us.*

*NANA*

*(Ignoring him) We love the Rabbi.*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*And? (As if this is a well-rehearsed conversation between them).*

*NANA*

*And, yes, the best people belong there. So, is she Jewish?*

*NARRATOR*

*Her father's a minister. They live in the Pacific Northwest. (He sees his Nana's face impassive, then crestfallen, so he adds): From a very prominent family. (Nana brightens). And she's a successful artist. I've seen some of her paintings. They're a little abstract for me, but she seems very talented.*

*MOTHER*

*You're led by your gonads--just like your father. You'd find anything a woman does worthwhile if you also found her sexy----even that crazy modern art. And how could she be successful if she's a waitress? Is this just another fling for you, like your father? Have you gone dancing with her? Had sex with her?*

*NANA*

*Oh, my.*

*NARRATOR*

*Mom, I'm not dad. Hasn't your therapist explained that to you? We learned that in Psych 101. Do you get that? Has anyone I've ever dated been to your specification and met your approval?*



---

MOTHER

---

*Yes, that sweet Debbie girl.*

---

NARRATOR

---

*Right, AFTER I broke up with her. Until then, she was beneath me, socially, right?*

---

GRANDPA DAVE

---

*You don't have to be meshuginah but it helps.*

---

NARRATOR

---

*Grandpa, remember when we used to go to the donut shop together? <The grandfather doesn't respond, either because he doesn't hear, or doesn't have time before Nana interrupts).*

---

NANA

---

*How serious are you about her?*

---

NARRATOR

---

*I like her a lot. She seems special, different.*

---

GRANDPA DAVE

---

*Spring is here. New beginnings. The Hagaddah tells the story of Passover. Hagaddah means story. Each generation has to make the story their own.*

---

MOTHER

---

*Do you remember when you were 12, and we were with Nana and Grandpa watching Your Hit Parade on TV.*

---

NARRATOR

---

*(Defensively and with no effort any longer to disguise his anger). Vaguely. Why do you bring it up? Is this another story about how bad I was? Or still am?*

---

MOTHER

---

*Two words: Davy Crockett.*

---

NARRATOR

*(Smiling) I loved that song. "Born on a mountain top in Tennessee, killed him a bar when he was only three.....Davy, Davy Crockett, king of the wild frontier." <Miriam and Aaron are grimacing and making mocking faces during the singing>.*

*MOTHER*

*Do you still love that song?*

*NARRATOR*

*No. It's cute. Nice memories. But I don't love it. Why?*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*The birdbath is a place to rest, get refreshed. But the bird wants to fly on, when it's ready.*

*MOTHER*

*It was number one on the charts. You said at the time, "That's my favorite song." And I said to you, "You may love it now, but you won't always love it." And you said, "No, that will always be my favorite song. I will always love it." Well?*

*NARRATOR*

*Your point?*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*Make the story your own.*

*MOTHER*

*Same with relationships. This Elizabeth Mery may seem special now, but there are lots of songs and lots of girls. And none of them last. (Her tone is wistful, sad, yet with a hint of anger and defiance.)>*

*GRANDPA DAVE*

*(Looking through the window toward the bird bath, with a somewhat glazed expression) Great meal, Junior. Maybe the Cordon Bleu is*

in your future. Thank you.

<Then turning and looking pointedly and with focus and authority  
at the Narrator>

The bird rests and then flies off in its own direction. <Now  
enunciating each word, though in a soft, barely audible tone>

Make the story your own.

<There are murmurs of thank you, nods. Comments of what a good  
meal it was>

NARRATOR

Mom, how about if you and I go for a drive this afternoon? We  
haven't had any time, just the two of us, in a while.

MOTHER

(Flinching, as if taken off guard at first, then) Why, well, yes.  
Fine. (Now, with more focus, regrouping) Though it's kind of  
surprising for you to ask. Are you a safe driver? (Then sad and  
dreamily) Yes, I'll go for a drive, but you know what I've always  
wanted from you was for you to dance with me. <looking off in the  
distance>. You were always too shy in high school. Yes, I'll go  
for a drive with you, but the one thing I always wanted from you,  
you never gave me. You never took me dancing.

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

"  
**W**

ow! That sounds rough," the Rebbe sympathizes. "Voted out of your house by your family as an adolescent. And that brunch. You were pretty ganged up on. It seems like one message you were told is that whatever you gave, it was not enough. I can see why you are so sensitive to criticism."

"It's painful for me to read, even now. I felt helpless. I still do. We seem like such a bitter family. A house divided. I really was trying to change, to see if we couldn't just share a meal together in peace, like normal families do. I wanted to be the one serving rather than always being served, always receiving. And to do it lovingly."

"It seems like the house divided is not only at the meal. Your father was present by his absence, and certainly received his share of abuse. Even further divisions. How old were you when your parents divorced?"

"Fourteen when they separated, tried to get back together; nearly fifteen when they finally divorced."

"And what emotional memories do you have of how it affected you" Lisbet asked.

"Interestingly, at the time, very few. The main one was surprise. They never fought in front of us, always seemed happy, playful with each other. So, I remember being shocked, but almost numb when they sat us down and said it was just one of those things, 'Mommy

and daddy still love each other but have decided it's too hard for them to live together. It's no one's fault.' They told us everything was going to be normal, our lives weren't going to be affected, told us we were loved."

"Sounds like they handled it thoughtfully and maturely. So, you were surprised?"

"Then reassured. I just went on with my life. What makes me think I was affected more than I acknowledged is that year I received the lowest grades of any time in my life; my weight ballooned; my face broke out."

"And feelings toward your parents?"

"I hated mom. I really felt it was her fault. She drove my dad out of the house. And then, of course, we had to leave our house for that prison like apartment. "

"And now" Lisbet queried.

"Now, they're both horrible. They deserved each other. Still do."

"Sounds like there's still some anger?"

"You think?" I say with a sarcastic sneer.

"How are you feeling toward us, right now?" I feel I'm at a verbal firing squad with challenging bullet-like queries coming from different directions.

"Angry. It seems like you're just scratching a wound that was healed. I'm sure if you scratch any place on your body long enough, you can open the skin and make it bleed. I thought you guys were supposed to bring healing, not more pain."

\* \* \*

I push myself back and forth in the rocker, and feel like I

want to create enough motion to propel me out of the Rebbe's office. But I don't, because there is really no place for me to go.

"Divorce is rough, and it sounds like your parents' divorce, though presented to you well, became increasingly bitter. It seems there are still a lot of emotions about it. We don't want to dredge up and create painful emotions that don't exist by looking at a difficult time. But do you think it's possible those emotions are actually still within you and affecting your life?"

I sit and say nothing. It reminds me of how I used to be when mom forced me to see her psychiatrist.

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet also sit quietly. Just like her psychiatrist. I feel I am once again in a battle for control. Who will break the silence first and lose?

\* \* \*

I place my focus on Moses, and wait.

I win, and the Rebbe loses when he says, "It also seems that your good intentions--serving a meal--were received, only partly jokingly, with mockery and a feeling of pervasive distrust--your mom saying, 'Are you trying to poison us?' Whatever you gave her, wasn't enough, or wasn't the right thing."

Though I'm still annoyed at them, I appreciate his understanding. Even though I've left my family behind, there is something comforting and reassuring in his seeing things my way, and I feel he is taking my side. "What was so sad was that all I wanted to do was prepare a meal for my family to say thank you. After helping Mery feed the homeless, I felt the least I could do was the same for my family. I wanted to peacefully give back. I

wanted to show we could have a loving meal without sarcasm and anger." Am I repeating myself? I feel like I'm trying to organize a case and want to make sure I've stated all the salient facts.

"And you felt like you weren't able to?" The Rebbe.

"Exactly."

"Just like you weren't able to hold your parents' marriage together." Dr. Lisbet.

I nod in agreement, but don't trust myself to say anything without getting too emotional.

"Lot of responsibility, isn't it, trying to hold an entire family together?" Dr. Lisbet's voice seems comforting. I soften a bit, feeling heard and understood. "When your father left, you were supposed to be the new father to your siblings; to be the strong man of the house for your mother; to defend your father against your mother and grandmother's attacks; and, all the while, to be a father to yourself. Tall order."

"Too tall. I failed everywhere." I'm feeling really dejected.

"As you look back, are you surprised that a fifteen year old boy wasn't capable of holding the family together?" I notice just a bit of a smile in the Rebbe's face as he asks the question. For some reason, I don't see that smile as mocking me, but as kind. I respond with a smile back, saying,

"When you put it that way, maybe I was asking too much of myself."

"And maybe the effects were larger, as you yourself noted, than you realized at the time" The Rebbe said softly.

"But why, just nine months ago, when I'm much older and

wiser, was I still unable to help them, to serve a meal in a harmonious way? I remember feeling at the time I wanted to be the embodiment of love, like Jesus. I even told my brother and sister I wanted to be a 'love bubble,' spreading joy and light."

"And what happened to that 'love bubble?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"I feel it was punctured. I simply couldn't do what I wanted to do. I kept getting drawn back into that angry, sarcastic tone mom uses to communicate. And worse. I began to doubt whether I was really capable of love. Maybe I was/am the plague that mom kept telling me I am. I certainly didn't seem able to bring much happiness to them."

"Is that why you kept apologizing to everybody?"

I shrug "I guess."

"How did you feel doing that?"

"Mixed. Partly I was angry at them. I like the Rebbe's choice of words. I was feeling ganged up on, and felt I just needed them to get them off my back. Whenever I would try to tell my side of the story, I'd get accused of being defensive, never being willing to admit I'm wrong, and fuel everyone's annoyance. Yes, I do hate to apologize. But part of me felt they were right, and I was really an awful person. I felt guilty, bad. And, yes, sorry, too."

"Very honest," Dr. Lisbet comments. "We know it's early in our work together, and we appreciate your trust in us. It's never easy returning home. It's hard for both parent and child not to regress to old ways. But, as you probably already recognize, it's also an important opportunity to learn a lot about yourself. We thank you for your candor in sharing with us."



The Rebbe nods in assent, then says, "And I must say, I love your grandfather. What a character."

"It's interesting. When I was home, and when I wrote this draft, I must admit I saw him more as a senile old man shunted off to the side, spouting non-sequiturs. But, now as I re-read and listen to him, I agree with you, he seems a lot wiser."

"I'm reminded of Mark Twain witticism. Isn't it interesting how HE has grown wiser since you first wrote these words?"

\* \* \*

I see the Rebbe begin to shuffle his papers, and realize that our second session is drawing to a close. It seems he does this when there are about ten minutes left to go, and it's a signal to all of us to start to wrap up.

"One theme we are going to have to keep coming back to with you is this all or nothing, or what Dr. Lisbet called "black/white thinking. You're being pretty harsh on yourself calling, yourself a failure for the Sunday brunch. Did it go perfectly? No. But you tried something. You planted a seed. It may be to your benefit to give yourself praise for the small success, rather than castigating yourself for a complete failure. Does that make sense?"

"Intellectually, of course. I can see it was better to have tried and failed." I see a wince in Dr. Lisbet. "Oops, there I go again, better to have tried and had some tiny success than not to have tried at all. But, emotionally, the feeling is one of failing."

"Have you ever read Kierkegaard's Either/Or" Dr. Lisbet asks.

I feel ambushed by that question. Is it just a surface question--based on black and white thinking, all or nothing, either/or...or does she have some inkling of where the Johannes archetype originated, and does she have some intuition, and know more about me than I've actually shared about my past physical and sexual activity. I start to ask her why she's asking, but feel that might be making too much of it. Let her play her hand.

"Yes, I've read parts of it."

She nods, but doesn't say anything more. I decide not to pursue it.

\* \* \*

I start to collect my papers, assuming we are done, when the Rebbe says "We're not quite finished. There are some different topics I wrote down as you were talking that I would like to explore with you. Why don't I just list them, and let's see if any strike you as particularly important. I'd also like to hear how Dr. Lisbet would like to proceed."

I pick up my notebook, yellow pad, pen, and say "Ready."

"Obviously, you and your family's relationship with Judaism is something that I feel can be a fertile topic, particularly as it relates to your spiritual search. Secondly, and I believe this also relates to your current search for self, you felt validated when you achieved: from raking the leaves to getting good grades. Is a sense of self only dependent upon achievement? Thirdly. the issue of self and leadership. You were double binded--given responsibility--too much I might add-- for caring for your siblings--being the new father-- but not the control and legitimacy to effect it.

He pauses, and looks at me, as I take notes. I feel like I'm back with my grandfather giving pep talks as I rapidly write his advice down on the yellow pads. I motion for him to continue.

"I'd like to explore with you how you felt deceiving your grandmother by telling her Elizabeth was from a 'prominent' family and was a 'successful' artist. This is related to the issue of right speech as part of the spiritual journey. And that ties in to right speech between all your family members. It seems there was a lot of third party communication: one person saying 'Someone else said this and that about you.'"

I continue to write. I have never heard Reb Jonathan this organized. It seems like he has systematically distilled 45 minutes of my talking into several discrete issues. I'm comforted by his clarity. He continues,

"Fifth, I was also struck by that image of you at the window at your apartment looking out at the street below. The aloof, distant observer. That seems an important theme to explore with you as part of the spiritual search --being part of the world, and yet being detached from it. And that ties into my final topic-- the relationship of the body to the spiritual journey. Is it only an impediment, as you now seem to feel?"

\*

\*

\*

As I finish writing down his list, he turns to Dr. Lisbet, "What strikes you as important next steps to pursue?" I look at my watch. There are only a few minutes left. I'm feeling overwhelmed by the number of topics, and my mind is swirling. I want to say "Enough already." But since I'm paying for this, I decide I might as well hear everything they are going to say. I'll just be a

secretary, taking notes. Later I'll try to process it.

"All excellent topics." She looks at me and says, "Let me add to the last one, about the body." Uh oh, are we going to return to Kierkegaard's Either/Or and she is going to talk about sexuality? Why am I so concerned that she might bring it up?

"I was struck by your comment that your weight ballooned after your parents' divorce, and cannot help notice how thin you look now. At some point, it is going to be important for us, if you are willing," she seems to say these words pointedly, and I'm reminded of 'thy will, not my will,' she's giving me control--or at least an illusion of it--"to discuss how that transition occurred, and what it means to you, and the nature of your relationship with your body."

I don't say anything, but nod as if that's fine. Yet I notice, without initially realizing it, that I've begun rocking back and forth faster in the chair. The wood feels rough on my butt, bone on wood. Although the air temperature is cold, I can feel myself perspiring.

The body is not really an area I want to explore with them, which seems incongruent and strange. Why am I willing to lay out my entire ugly family history, but now it feels too vulnerable to share my distant sexual past? Maybe it's just too much vulnerability at once. Or maybe it's ok to have a horrible family life--you can't choose your parents; but not to have a horrible sexual history--it's hard to say you're not responsible for how you behave sexually.

That seems an excellent point. Yet, in lawyerly fashion, I cross-examine myself. I'm willing to share about my past greed and ambition, my territoriality and anger, like in the swimming

pool. Clearly I'm responsible for those, too. What is it about sexuality that seems more vulnerable to share? Why does it not seem ok share about my--or rather Johannes'--prodigious sexual appetite and playfulness--and masterful seduction plots?

\*

\*

\*

I hear Dr. Lisbet say, "Just a moment, I'll check." She leaves the room and Reb Jonathan gets up to get some tea.

I think back to Johannes' time with Sarah the Saturday night preceding the Sunday brunch. When Nana and mom asked about the date, I didn't share the sexual part, just as I'm not sharing that part of my life now with Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe.

"Thy will, not my will be done" comes to mind again. It's fascinating the different perspectives that phrase takes, depending on who is saying it and when. Johannes jokes about "thy will be done" in reference to his penis in his date with Sarah. Though he tries to make light of its temporary non-performance, it's clear to me how much he is ruled by the flesh and led around by his groin, to his detriment. Even though his physical desires have a life of their own, he still believes he is in control because he focuses not on what he can't control and doesn't even recognize is out of control--the desire itself. Instead, he focuses on how to satisfy the desire by making "moves" to get others to accommodate his physical needs. (He doesn't use intimidation or coercion, I give him credit for that.) Then he feels competent and in control when others accede to his will, and give him his physical release.

With Sarah, for a brief moment, his lingham, his view of what is light, doesn't obey him, doesn't resurrect, and has a

will of its own--not his will. He wanted it to perform, and it didn't.

My issue now is the opposite. When I say "my will" regarding the flesh, I have much more control. I don't want it to perform. I'm able to restrain, even deny my desires to a large extent. Celibacy, no sexual contact. No drinking at all. Minimum amount of food, just enough to get by. I have been able to consciously accomplish a real shutting down of the flesh.

So for me, consciously, at least. I was embarrassed, surprised and annoyed by the vividness of my wet dream---music, the copulating pastries. I truly thought I'd put that behind me. Those images are not my will. They arise from some unbidden, unholy place of my body that keeps fighting me, even without my knowing it.

I want to turn myself --my will--over to a different light than Johannes worships, a holy, serving light--the will of God, the holy spirit. It seems the flesh keeps getting in the way. Dr. Lisbet is really giving me permission to bring this topic into the light. Is this a topic I could really discuss with them?

Even as part of me thinks that I might want to discuss the topic with them--"my will" to do it-- there is another part of me that is experiencing fear, self-consciousness, embarrassment--"my will not to do it." Talk about a house divided against itself.

\*

\*

\*

My internal reverie is interrupted when I hear Dr. Lisbet return and say to the Rebbe: "Our next client is here, but has agreed to wait a few more minutes. Why don't you bring her some tea?"

Reb Jonathan leaves the room. Dr. Lisbet turns to me and says, "I am also quite interested in the dream life, so as you are willing and feel it appropriate, please feel free to bring in your dreams to us."

I'm astounded. Can she actually read my mind? "I didn't mention, did I, that I've been keeping a dream journal for nearly a decade? Mom's idea."

"No, but that's Perfect. So, there is at least one thing positive you received from your mother, right?" She smiles. The Rebbe returns and sits. "But there were also some harsh words from her about you being a plague, and never being able to meet her needs. That can't feel very good. So, if it's ok with the Rebbe--and you--I'd like to hear just a bit more about your mother."

She looks at both of us. The Rebbe nods in assent, and says, "I agree. That seems like a good place to start next week. But before we stop today, I'd like to ask one question about the Sunday brunch. After all, I am a rabbi and I'd feel remiss if I didn't at least ask if there was a blessing before the meal."

I pause before answering, taking a sip of tea.  
\* \* \*

"We never said a blessing before any meal. We'd just start eating. What kind of blessing and why a blessing at all?"

"Blessings are really a way of showing intention, or gratitude, or developing awareness. Do you know the 'standard' blessing before a meal?"

"The hamotzi--blessing over bread?"

"Right. Haven you ever done that?"

"We did that at summer camp. But it seemed sort of awkward

and boring and meaningless to say it at home. I guess I imagined mom wouldn't know the words, and would mock my doing it, anyway."

"Fair enough. But as long as you are here in Israel, how about if we look more closely at the meaning of the words--it's really quite beautiful: Blessed are You, o Lord our God, King of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth."

"I remember another reason why I didn't want to do it. I don't feel like God really needs my blessing, and I hate the King of the Universe Master/slave language."

"A lot of people feel such language cedes too much power to God, and some" here he looks at Dr. Lisbet, "object to the male pronoun. But let's look at the deeper intention. "Baruch is about blessing. We can be blessing God and giving thanks for food; we can also be blessing all those who help create the food that is on our table--Mother Earth, laborers, farmers, grocers. We see how much goes into what we eat, that nurturers and sustains us, including the miracle of wheat growing from the earth."

"I've never thought of a blessing in that way before--as gratitude and thanks to the earth and all the people who contribute to make one simple meal possible. I guess a meal can be a kind of little miracle."

"You've got it exactly. And especially here in Israel, when you see the barren desert transformed into life nourishing sustenance, it is truly amazing."

\*

\*

\*

"I did experience that sense of awe and wonder when I was wandering in the wilderness toward and back from Sinai."

"Exactly. The start of the blessing can be translated and



felt as 'O Holy One of blessing, Your presence fills creation...You who bring forth bread from the earth.' You are right, God doesn't need our blessing. God is the One who gives blessing....However, when we bless God we are in essence giving thanks...to creation...to life...and to that part of ourselves which is willing to pause and take the time to perform the act of 'giving thanks.'"

"That's lovely. I wish someone had told me that way of looking at 'blessing' before."

"Thank you. This way of understanding a blessing is not new. It's just uncovering, or rediscovering an essence in Judaism that is already there. Sometimes, however, through rote recital, the meaning gets lost. Our task is to create in each person and generation what we might call a 'Jewish renewal' --a renewal of the essence within Judaism. Dr. Lisbet tells me in Zen this idea is framed as being able to see the flower the five hundredth time as you saw it the first time, bringing a freshness and childlike innocence and vividness to the experience.

"A blessing before the meal is like an intention. In addition to the standard 'form,' we can add our own intentions. For example, at your Sunday brunch, you could have said what was in your heart: "I wanted to cook this meal for you, to say thanks. You are a great family. I'm sorry for the hurts I've caused you. I love you. Let's enjoy each other while we share a meal."

"It's sad I didn't know any of this then. That was my last supper with my family. I tried; I'm sure they were trying. But without great success. We were...are house divided." **It's interesting how John is now describing both his family, and his internal**

**state in the same language.**

"Yes, but past doesn't have to determine future. I believe there can be second chances. You might not see or believe that now. In the meantime, I invite you to consider beginning to say a blessing before all your meals, just to get in the practice. Practice having a feeling of blessing--receiving and giving. This is consistent with your vision for yourself of 'serving water.' The feeling tone you're seeking is something like 'Let this food nurture me, and let me in turn use the strength from this meal to serve and nurture others.'

I nod, taking notes. The Rebbe continues.

"Does that seem like something you might be willing to try this week, and let us know next week how it goes. By the way," he smiles, "I imagine you are a very good student. But we're not really asking you to report back in an academic way. There are no grades here. If you feel it helps, great. You're really the judge."

"I like this idea of blessings. Are there others you can give me to practice this week?"

"There are over 1000 different blessings that you can do in a day. Small steps. Build a foundation one baby step at a time. But, since you asked, I'll give you one more. What do you normally say when you wake up in the morning?"

"I have no idea. 'Ugh.' 'What am I going to do today? Exploring, planning, thinking, judging. How bad am I feeling? Do I have any hurts? Am I making progress? Whatever pops into my mind."

"Join the human race. The untrained mind. Dr. Lisbet, from

the eastern traditions, calls it the 'drunken monkey mind.' Most spiritual traditions have a morning blessing. The blessing helps focus the mind as soon as we awaken, and to focus us on thankfulness. In Judaism this blessing is called the 'Modeh Ani': I thank you. If you want to try a second baby step, as soon as you awaken, let yourself say, 'I thank you.' First words. First feelings. Try to find something to feel appreciative about and grateful for. Take a cleansing breath and just feel thanks. Learn to wake up in gratefulness. Just a few seconds is all it takes, but it's amazing how hard it is to remember, to break the automaticity of the mind. And yet, it can be a lovely way to create intention to start the day, to allow for a positive shift in mood."

I finish taking my notes. He's put his pen and paper down, a sign that our session is over. I have one more question, which I feel I must ask.

"When you say these blessings, like over the meal, you're praying from a context of a loving universe, a compassionate God aren't you?"

"Yes, a God Who blesses. A God Who helps people learn to share and get along. A God Who brings forth food from the earth. A God Who helps us learn to receive nurturance and then give it to others."

"What if I decide I don't believe the world is spiritual and holy? Does it still make sense to do a blessing before a meal?"

"You mean if we live in a random, existential, meaningless universe?"

"Exactly."

"I like that question. So, in a random world, we find that

people work and cooperate so that you can have a meal. We find that the earth randomly has the ability--with cultivation--to give forth healthy nourishing 'lechem'--bread-- for you to eat. We find that some humans are grateful for receiving nurturance, and offer to use that nourishment to give service to and nurture others. I guess what I'd say is it still makes a lot of sense to do a blessing. For in a random universe, wouldn't the gift of eating--and giving thanks for a meal--still be a miracle, indeed?"

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*



When I enter the Rebbe's office for the third session, I go through the ritual I'm beginning to develop. I say hello to them, give Reb Jonathan kind of a half hug, shake hands with Dr. Lisbet, and take my rocking chair seat. I then unpack my notebooks, take out my "Counseling Notebook" and write in the date: January 13.

"So, how did the week go?" the Rebbe asks.

I thumb through the previous pages, and describe to them the frequency, time, and results of my morning blessing, as well as the blessings before each meal. I note that I forgot a couple of times the first few days, and then made a chart--which I hold out for them to see. I tell them I put the chart on my desk--with a smaller sheet of paper in my pocket--and now check off each morning blessing, and each blessing before every meal.

They seem both pleased and surprised at the thoroughness of my charting. I'm surprised at their reaction--this is not any different than the charting I used to do of women I'd seen, and the likelihood of sexual success. The Rebbe says, "Whatever works" with a grin. And Dr. Lisbet's face is impassive, maybe even frowning, or that could be her natural state, "Like the finger pointing to the moon. Just make sure your chart doesn't become more important than your intention. Though it's not my style, I, too, believe there are many paths up the mountain."

It annoys me that she always had some criticism to make of anything I do, as if she has to get in the last word. She seems

much more rigid, much less warm and embracing than the Rebbe. I don't respond to her, but instead turn to the Rebbe and say, "I thought about your argument this week--for saying the blessing--whether the world is meaningless or holy. It was pretty airtight. I couldn't find a flaw in it. Maybe you should be the lawyer, or maybe you already are." I smile at him.

"Every Jew is a lawyer. I sometimes think it's in the blood; the *Gemara*, the *Mishna*. Rashi. Layers and layers of argumentative commentary" He smiles back.

While we are looking at each other, Dr. Lisbet adds, "Every person is a lawyer, internally. There is an internal court, an internal dialogue, a judge and jury"

Why does she have to chime in?

I overtly ignore her comment--though it actually seems intriguing. Instead I let them know I have continued to go through my journal, and have focused primarily on mom, as they suggested. If it's mom they want to hear about, it's mom they will get. Let's see if they can have better luck with her than I did. Let's see if this information really helps them help me, or is it just opening a wound for no purpose?

\* \* \*

---

*"Mom, do you know one of the nicest compliments I remember from you?"*

---

*"Is this a trap?"*

---

*We're driving south on State Line, on the Kansas side. The sun is slanting into my side of the car, and I move my visor over to block it out.*

---

*"That reminds me of when you were about four, and I was*

driving you somewhere and you were playing around in the back seat. In a certain area, the sun shone directly into your eyes and you complained to me. I said, 'Move or just cover the sun with your hands.' To which you replied 'No, mom, just go get a ladder and climb up and move the sun over. Sigh, the fall from grace. You had such high expectations of me.'

We both laugh, and she says, 'So, what's the compliment, and what's the trap?'

'No trap. We were in California, eating at a fancy restaurant. I was about 9 or 10. The waiter asked me what I wanted. I ordered an avocado salad, filled with baby shrimp. After the waiter left, you said 'You are so sophisticated. I'm so impressed with what you ordered.' I've never forgotten that.'

'Well, that was pretty amazing. Some moms are still searching the menu for the kids at that age---do you want grilled cheese, or peanut butter and jelly? You were amazingly sophisticated.' She gives me a little pat on my arm as we are driving.

'Still are! The way you opened the door for me when we got in the car. You know all the manners--you stand up when a woman enters the room; keep your left arm in your lap when you eat. You can be such a gentleman when you want to be. I'm very proud of you.'

'I had a good teacher.'

'Thank you. But you're right. I should be more proud of me than you, because I'm the way who taught you.' She looks at me, as I make a face. 'Now, now, I'm just joking. I'm glad we can talk like this. I worry about you sometimes. I know you have your positive qualities.'

'I remember when you were only three, and stung by a bee.'

You howled. Your hand became very swollen. When you started to calm down, even though you were still hurting, you asked us what became of the bee. We told you it died, thinking you would be happy to know that what hurt you had also suffered. Instead, you started crying again. When we asked if the pain had returned, you said 'I just wanted to pat the bee, I didn't want to have it die. Did I kill it?'

\*

\*

\*

"My psychiatrist says that unless a son can first love his mother, he'll never be able to love or be loved by a woman. But when we feel close like this--when I think of your kindness toward that bee--I know you'll be able fall in love and be loved."

"Phew. I'm glad Dr. Gundle and you think I have a chance."

"Don't make fun. He's a very wise man. And what am I, chopped liver? Though I'm not as college educated as you---don't forget I did study two years at Connecticut College for Women, and I still take classes--poetry, world literature. Remember the gifts I gave you--East of the Sunrise at 21-- and "If" at 16?"

"Great gifts and I still keep them displayed where I live. I've always thought you are were intelligent, mom." She smiles. "Much better than the dead flowers that also accompanied my 21st birthday gift."

"That was so funny. You just have no sense of humor."

"Funny?"

"Yeah, like a rite of passage. Your childhood was over and gone, dead, so that's the way I symbolized it. You know, now you're a man."



*"Great. Dead flowers really made me feel like a man."*

*"Don't bring up old stuff when we having so much fun. Just positive memories. Remember Chasan's?"*

*"How can I forget? Now that was fun. The same trip where we went to the Mickey Mouse club studio and I got to meet my fantasy girls: Annette and Darlene, and get their autographs."*

*"And that night we went to the premiere of War and Peace. Just the two of us, on the red carpet. Thanks to tickets from my friend Walter Mirisch."*

*"And I was getting autographs from everyone."*

*"Right, including that woman next to you. She was so surprised. It turned out she wasn't anybody important, not a star, not famous, just some bimbo beauty." We laugh. Then her smile turns to a grimace. The space between her eyebrows furrows, and she purses her lips, "It's unfair. Looks fade so fast." She pulls the scarf tighter around her body.*

*I know she's fishing for a compliment, but I ignore her comment and emotion. Instead, I reply, cheerfully,*

*"At Chasan's, you taught me about the Monte Cristo sandwich. Yum. Ham, turkey, melted cheese, French toast and grape jelly."*

*"You have such an amazing memory." She lets her mood shift towards me.*

*"I sure know my jellies. Strawberry with cream cheese and bagels; Grape with Monte Cristo; mint with leg of lamb."*

*"That's perfect. A place for everything, and everything in its place."*

*"My motto exactly. Did I get that from you?"*

*"Dr. Gundle always says, 'The apple doesn't fall far from the tree'."*

\*

\*

\*

*"Why didn't dad come to that premier."*

*"There were only two tickets, and he hates formal stuff like that. He's much more comfortable in casual clothes. He doesn't have my father's elegant style, or mine. Some people have money, but don't know how to have style. Like all his family."*

*"Mom." I want to tell her what I told Nana, let's not get into a dad-attack. But we've gone over this so many times, I don't have to say more. It's as if she knows exactly what I'm going to say, and I know how she's going to respond: defensive, and with more attacks. I feel helpless to prevent it.*

*"But it's true. Did you know that when he went to dinner when he was a child, the way he'd select what to eat was to look at the prices. Then he'd pick the most expensive item. Without looking at what he was ordering. He was proud of it, showed his family could afford anything." I don't want this to turn into a dad bashing conversation. I try to segue.*

*"You know, mom, I sincerely appreciated that comment to me when I broke up with Molly, you remember, that girl in Florida last Christmas."*

*"I was happy you trusted me enough to call. It's not every 20 year old son who feels safe enough to call his mom when he's just ended a relationship."*

*"That's true, you were the first person I called. I was feeling alone in the Miami airport. We'd had such a wonderful time at camp. I was the assistant water front director; she was a counselor for the girls."*

*"Summer fling. Hard to sustain."*

"In some ways she reminds me of Sarah. Sarah's family, and hers, are so wealthy. Sarah was telling me about her family's yacht, and the Orange bowl tickets her Daddy gets her. I almost felt like she was creating some kind of competition, saying are you going to be able to provide for me like my father does? Fly me to New York for shopping, get me a bigger yacht than Daddy has? For the first time, I wasn't sure I could, or that I even wanted to."

"Money's a funny thing. I love it. I'd love a yacht. And European vacations. And I'd know how to use money. Not like your dad's folks. They have money, but are so tight with it."

"But didn't they buy you and Dad the house on Wenonga? Wasn't that generous?"

"Not true. Grandpa JC gives in controlling ways. He didn't buy the house, he bought us the land. We had to build a house on it. And what kind of house do you build in a fashionable area on a huge piece of land? You build an elegant house. We had no choice. Then he'd show us and our mansion off like little puppets in a doll house to his friends, saying how proud he was, what reflected glory we brought to him. At the same time, he knew how much debt we were in, and would constantly complain about having to bail us out. It was his Machiavellian way of always controlling us. We should have started smaller, but neither of us was smart enough. We were too greedy. It was all JC's fault. He made us think it would all work out. It doesn't."

I don't know how to defend Grandpa, and am not sure I want to. But I do want to see if I can't get mom in a better mood. While I'm trying to think what to say, she continues her attack:

"You've seen the way they keep their furniture covered with

plastic, like a museum with a Do Not Enter sign. A home is to entertain in....

"When they take a cruise--you saw this, too--they get these tiny inside cramped cabins. " She gives a theatrical flourish "If you're going to take a cruise, take a joyous cruise, with a beautiful view. Why have money just for show, if you don't use and enjoy it? Oh, what I could do with lots of money."

She unties, then takes off the scarf covering her head, and brushes her hand through her blonde hair. As she does so, she lifts her chin skyward. The wind is blowing through her hair. Her face looks happy, carefree.

\* \* \*

I like seeing this playful, high-spirited side of her. The only mom in Kansas City who drives a convertible. I imagine right now she is thinking she is Marilyn Monroe, out in Hollywood, being discovered. Her favorite fantasy. For an older woman, she is pretty. The lines on her face seem to dissolve, even though the sun is directly on her.

Then, just as quickly, her face becomes hard, pinched.

"But you shouldn't spend what you don't have. That was one of the main problems between your father and me. His parents bought us this wonderful piece of property. Then we had to build a house that we couldn't afford, and then we had to keep up appearances. The yard people, the maids. Everybody thought we were so rich, and we had to act it, and go to charitable events, spend lavishly and entertain to keep up appearances."

"Do you remember that Christmas--you said it was your best ever. When you woke up, you found a basketball goal cemented into

our driveway; a trampoline in the backyard. Your dad had just lost his job. His temper again. Your grandfather set him up in a cushy real-estate job with Irv Goldstein. Your father....never mind....."

She puts the scarf back on. "We had nothing. We could barely afford food, and he, Mister Big Shot was going to show it didn't affect him, and wouldn't affect you kids. He was still going to be the hero on the white horse.

"Trying to keep up appearances" she repeats, "so, you were wise not to get trapped by someone who has such high expectations for material things. Though Sarah's such a nice girl. And she does dress elegantly, so stylishly, and such fine jewelry."

She looks over at me, and puts her arms on my shoulder. I start to say something. What? To defend dad. To say that I don't think it will work out between Sarah and I. But mom is on a roll, and before I can begin, she continues,

"Nana would be so happy. She was disappointed when you broke up with that rich Miami girl. Just like she was disappointed when it didn't work out when you dated that Elida Rockefeller girl at Stanford. 'Such a proper family' she said. And did she care about Jewish then! Not your grandmother. But it's all because of her and grandpa's roots."

\*

\*

\*

Mom stops talking. She looks away from me and out the window. Is she tearful, pensive? I can't tell what's going on with her. But I don't want her to stop talking now. Nana and Grandpa's background is something I know almost nothing about.

"Grandpa's family came from Russia, right?"

She wipes her eyes, and turns back. Did the wind blow some-

thing into them? Is she sad? Her voice is firm and strong when she continues.

"His family immigrated from the persecution of the Soviet Union in the early 1900's. Her family's history is a mystery no one discusses. Dr. Gundle says her one goal in life was to be part of the high society that she was never admitted to as a child. Money was important, but more important was being able to play cards 'with the girls' who were the social elite. If it meant sending her Jewish daughter to a private catholic school, then she would do what was necessary."

"So Judaism wasn't that important. Then why did you all raise me Jewish?"

"Dr. Gundle said it was important: to give you Judaism so you had something to react against, a place to direct your adolescent rebellion. For Nana, belonging and fitting in was more important than being Jewish. She wanted to make sure we had everything. And so did Grandpa. You remember he got you and that Miami girl a room at the Essex after camp?"

I like that once I break up with a girl, mom takes my side, and the girl no longer has a name.

"That was majestic. Overlooking Central Park."

"Grandpa was such an amazing man. Such taste. Merchants in New York knew he was a brilliant buyer of women's clothes. He helped set the style in Kansas City. Always dapper, well-dressed. A woman's man.

"I hate to see him like he is now. I wish you'd known him as the man he once was. Trout fishing in Canada with Sarnoff, the President of RCA; lifting weights so he'd be strong and healthy

to play with his grandkids. He made sure I dressed elegantly, fashionably. I could always trust his taste. Did you ever notice that the label of his store was sewn in upside down? You know why? So, when a woman puts her coat on her chair, and drapes the collar over the back of the chair, the label will be right side up, so others can read it as they walk by. He made me so proud....once. Now, it's embarrassing. All that Jewish talk, and constantly rambling about redbirds. Dr. Gundle says fathers are important. It's hard when you feel they can't protect you anymore. He just sits and waits by the window each day hoping to see one."

\* \* \*

We arrive at Tippins, mom's favorite pie place--because she owns a few shares of it. I park and start to go in. She waits in the car, checking her lipstick, and putting another dose of Chanel No. 5 on her neck and behind her ear. I come back around and open the car door for her.

When we're seated, she orders apple pie, double crusted, with two scoops of vanilla ice cream. "Want to share it with me?"

"I'd love to."

"Perfect. This is so enjoyable. I'm so glad you asked me out for a drive."

\* \* \*

The pie comes. Before we begin eating, I pull Mr. Cannon out of his case, and take a picture."

"What's that about, you and your camera?"

"I just want to immortalize this moment: mom and I eating pie. A time of peace and happiness."

"Well, this is kind of like a date," she says, coyly. "It

reminds me when I volunteered at your school to help with a clothes drive. Do you remember?" I shake my head no.

I search my mind for any possible connection between our eating pie now and her helping out at my school. I see none.

"I was wearing a very flattering camel's hair suit. I'd just had my hair and nails done. I was feeling very pretty. It was warm, so I took off my jacket. Underneath I was wearing an elegant white blouse. Now do you remember?" I still shake my head.

"You came in, and said 'Mom, put your jacket back on, you can see your bra right through that blouse!'"

"I have no memory."

"My therapist would say it's Oedipal denial. I was shocked at the time, and crushed. But he said you were just jealous that I was such a pretty young woman, and couldn't handle it. He's such a wonderful man."

I feel a bit awkward now. I truly have no memory of this incident, but I can't help imaging the scene as she described it, seeing myself looking through her blouse. Awkward is euphemistic. And I still don't see how one reminded her of the other.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

I know there is only one right answer, and I wonder why I pause. But something in me resists.

"Never mind. Dr. Gundle told me I shouldn't keep asking you and others for validation. He says I'm pretty, and that I should believe him. He says he'd take me dancing if he could, but it's against professional ethics."

"Of course you're pretty, mom, and doesn't that new man



you're dating think so, too."

"Yes, but I wonder if he's too old for me."

"How old is he?"

"About twenty years older. At least I'll always be young compared to him. He'll always think I'm beautiful."

I wonder what the significance is that my father is dating someone twenty years younger, and my mom someone twenty years older. Her need to be beautiful in someone's eyes? His need to have a beautiful appendage on his arm? What a mismatched couple they were. Of course looks are important. But I find myself wondering, for the first time, why looks and appearance are so important in my family.

\*

\*

\*

We continue to eat our pie. There is a silence while I'm thinking about the age differences between mom and dad's romantic interests: hers is over 60, his is more my age. It's like they leaped in opposite directions. Mom pulls out a cigarette and starts smoking, blowing the smoke away from me. She smell of the smoke mixes with her Chanel No. 5, a combination--smoke and perfume--I'm very familiar with, and which makes me feel nauseous. I leave to go to the bathroom.

When I return, she's finished her cigarette, and as I sit down, she says, "You should thank me."

"Uh-oh. I'm sure that's true, but for what in particular."

"Saving you from this disgusting habit." She holds up a cigarette. "I knew it was bad, and I wanted to save you from my mistake."

"I do thank you. It's never been an issue I've had to struggle with."

*"I feel bad though. I think the whooping cough and pneumonia you had when you were just a little boy may have been partly caused by my smoking. Dr. Gundle says I shouldn't feel guilty. But do you remember one winter we had to send you with Grandpa JC and Grandma for months to Arizona, hoping the desert heat would help cure you. It seemed to, but I still feel guilty."*

*I know I should say "Forgiven" but something stops me. Yes, she's being contrite. Yes, she taught me not to smoke. But I can't help but wonder how much my inability to run long distances, my frequent coughs and chest colds are due to her ruining my lungs. The best I can manage is "Don't be too hard on yourself."*

*"Even when you were gone during those months, I'd still sing to you each night, like I always did when you were a baby: 'I see the moon and the moon sees me, the moon sees somebody I want to see...' I missed you so much. I was afraid I was going to lose another son. Somehow either God was cursing me, or I was cursed, and bringing it on myself."*

*I reach over to put my hand on hers to comfort her, and as I do so I see her big multi-colored gaudy rings--faux jewelry, she calls it. But before I can reach her hand, her ringed hand picks up a fork and takes another bite of pie.*

*"Well, I must compliment you, you're much more sharing than you used to be," she says between chewing. It always amazes me how quickly she can change topics and moods. Only a few seconds ago, she was talking about fear of losing another son--me, wondering if she was cursed by God--and now she's talking about sharing. Even if I listen with minute care to every word, she's*

still hard to follow. I go with her new theme, smile, and say,  
"Thanks, but what in particular?"

She points to the pie with her fork, still chewing. "When  
we'd share in the past, or if you had to divide something between  
you and your brother or sister, you'd always want to make sure  
you got the larger piece. We called it the "Junior's 51/49  
model." Some people go for 50-50. You want the larger share.  
Always. Are you on a diet or something? I can't believe you're  
letting me eat more than you! And the courage you showed, going  
to the bathroom, letting me sit here all by myself with the pie.  
I wouldn't leave it unattended with you."

"Hey, I didn't realize it, give me back some. And make sure  
you don't take too much ice cream" I respond playfully.

\* \* \*

Mom pulls out a lighter, holds it up, and snaps it so the  
flame emerges.

"No, mom, not here."

"Why not? It's the fashionable way to find your waitress.  
Much more delicate than 'hey you'. See, here she comes."

The waitress does appear, and mom orders two more scoops of  
vanilla icecream.

"Now, before it gets here, I guess it's safe for me to go  
to the bathroom" and she jumps up and rushes off.

When she returns, she looks at the doodling I've been doing  
on the napkin.

N

A

caNANAasta; caNsta

A c a n a s t a ;

"You and your word games. It's like when you used to read the dictionary. Every word."

"Doesn't canasta sound like a 'nasty' word? Say it; 'Ca,' as your mouth opens, tongue low; 'Na,' the tongue raises to the roof of the mouth, lightly touching it. Then for the final syllable the tongue pushes up harder to the roof of the mouth, and bounces off, like racquet ball, or whiplash. It's a great word."

"You've come a long way in your phonetics, when you were placed in the bottom of the class, you and one retarded boy."

"Practice, practice. But they asked me how many syllables were in Christ's name. Simple Chri/st. Two. Sigh."

"Nice try, Junior. But no distractions here. I bet you have even forgot what we were talking about."

"You're right. Do I want to remember?"

"I asked Dr. Gundle about why you always wanted to get the larger share. He said some people feel entitled in life. They feel if they give others anything, that's more than they would normally be getting, so they don't have to share equally, especially of themselves. He said these types of people are not going to be very successful in relationships. They expect more back from others than they receive. They're always looking to see if they're being taken advantage of, and feel they give more than they get."

"Was he talking about me or you?" I say, only partly kidding.

"I'll pretend like I didn't hear that. I remember on your 6th birthday party, we had a huge cake. You wanted to control everything. So entitled. You first ordered each person where to sit."

*Then you began crying hysterically when the maid started to cut the cake. You wanted to cut each piece of cake, as well as decide who got which size piece, who should get served first, second. Actually, you weren't just like that on your birthday, but in life. You always wanted to control everything."*

*"Sounds perfect to me. I like control. Serves me well. How about some more ice cream over here, it's not balancing correctly with my pie."*

*\* \* \**

*She takes the pie and ice cream plate and creates a circled wagon effect around it, laughing, and says, "I'm only trying to protect you from getting fat. Do you remember every winter you'd get heavy, blubbery. Your jeans would be too tight for you. Then I'd say to you, each spring, should we go shopping for a bigger size since you no longer fit your pants, or do you think you'll do some exercise this summer and lose weight? You always got the hint, and every summer you did lose weight. Then, one summer, you just sprouted, and became way too skinny."*

*"Couldn't ever get my body just right, could I?"*

*"Not from lack of looking at it in the mirror--constantly. There was never a mirror--or window reflection--you didn't find."*

*I stare at her pointedly. "It's the story of my life with you, isn't it? I can never get anything just right, no matter how hard I try."*

*"Now, now, don't get petulant on me," she says with a wave of her hand. "Do you remember when I was pregnant with Miriam?" I have no idea where she is going with this. I say nothing. "I walked out of the shower and you were sitting there staring at me. I asked 'What are you looking, at mom's big belly? Your new*

brother or sister is in there. You came up to my stomach and looked closely, then pointed to my belly button and asked 'Is that its eye?' You did have your cute moments."

I reach for the pie, but she keeps the wagons circled.

"Still trying to be cute, eh? Then when Miriam was born, we decided to move Aaron into your room"

"I remember I was happy about that."

"Right, so you locked him out," she says sarcastically. "Dr. Gundle told me to ask you why. He said he felt it was probably some territorial thing, you trying to keep the room to yourself. He was partly correct. When I asked if you were trying to lock your brother out, you said, 'No, I just want to make sure he knows I'm the one letting him in.' Talk about control needs. Even then, control was your middle name. And Dr. Gundle and I could not figure out where you got such high control needs from. He thought maybe it was because of your ear. We always let you pick the seat you wanted, so you could place yourself where you could best hear. Maybe you thought you were entitled to always getting what you wanted."

"I have no idea. Sounds deep. Except right now I have no control, since I'm being given no access at all to the pie and ice cream, which is melting even as we speak. I'm beginning to feel very out of control." I reach again toward the pie, mainly smiling, but am once again thwarted by her hands.

\*

\*

\*

"And the entitlement. Remember when you asked me--maybe you were 12-- why, if there is an empty seat in a movie theater, they don't just let you in for free? It wouldn't hurt them, and it

would help you. Ever the conniving lawyer mind."

As I'm thinking this over, with some pride--age 12, pretty clever-- mom says, on a roll now, "And I remember when you were six years old, and your favorite line was 'I want it and I want it now.' Dr. Gundle said we should try explain to you with a new brother and sister, every one had to share mommy and daddy's time, and that when you said to us 'I want it now' we should respond "That doesn't make mommy and daddy feel good. We feel tense and pressured.'

"You looked at us, and we thought we saw an understanding light in your eyes. Then you said, 'When I say I want it and I want it right now' it makes ME feel good. I feel happy."

"I want the pie and I want it now!" I say as I grab for it.

She offers me a bite of ice cream on her spoon. "See, I never could control you. You always get your way."

The bite is ok, but not as large as I want. And I'd much prefer taking my own bite than having her feed it to me.

\*

\*

\*

"Could it be I craved control so much because I felt like I never had any? You were always grounding me."

"I asked Dr. Gundle. I wondered if your need for such excessive control could be my fault. And how I should deal with it. He said even if it were partly my fault, it was for your own good. You needed boundaries, even though you hated them. You hated when anyone said no to you. Do you remember when you were nine years old, and they told you to walk your bike on the sidewalk in Prairie Village?"

"That wasn't my fault. Some old guy at the drugstore started yelling at me because I was riding my bike. When he told me to

get off, I pointed at the sign and kept riding. He yelled after me he was going to call the police."

"And the reason you kept riding?"

"The sign said 'Biking Prohibited.'"

"And what does prohibited mean?"

"Honestly, I really thought the word 'prohibited' meant 'permitted.'"

"I believe you--then and now." She laughs. "Talk about a distortion of reality. You came home and said 'Some guy is trying to get you to break the law.' What I like about that story is that it's you. You actually see reality in a way that says you are permitted to get what you want. Then when you don't, you just don't understand, and have a tantrum."

"You paint such a flattering portrait of me."

"If you don't learn these lessons, Dr. Gundle said, they will be with you all your life."

"I remember when your brother had a minor surgery..."

I hold up my hand. "No, stop, I've had enough."

"Shh, one more lesson. You need it." I place my left hand politely back in my lap in resignation. I know she's going to tell the story, and it's simpler just to listen. Otherwise, we could spend the rest of the afternoon fighting about it.

"...surgery on his ear and I told you that you couldn't touch his ear. You burst into tears. We thought it was because you were feeling sorry for him. Then you said, 'But I WANT to touch his ear.' You had no desire to touch his ear the day before, or the day before that. The only reason you wanted to touch it was because you were told you couldn't. Always wanting what you can't



have." She points her finger at me and makes a lisping sound "Tch  
tch. Better learn your lesson. Cross my heart. I'm telling you  
this for your own good."

\* \* \*

"Tell me about this Elizabeth Mery artist girl. Do you  
really think she's a better match for you than Sarah?"

"There's a lot I like about Mery."

"But it's only been a week. That's ridiculous."

"It was a magic week."

"How, if there was no sex."

"Mom."

"You know we can talk about everything."

"She makes me think. Like you did when you asked me whether  
I was playing football for myself or for dad. I hated it when you  
first asked. I thought you were trying to make me into a sissy, and  
trying to drive a wedge between dad and I."

"I was worried about you. You seemed so aggressive and  
angry, and I was afraid you would hurt someone, or get hurt  
yourself"

"For my own good, right?" I feel like I just beat her to the  
punch line.

"Dr. Gundle told me to ask you that question. He said it  
was a way to try to teach you to think for yourself. He said that  
young men will do anything at your age to show that they are  
'true tough men' and to gain the admiration of their father  
figures. He said that you think you know who you are and why you  
do things, but you have no idea."

I could hear this as another dig from her, but for some  
reason, I don't feel defensive at the statement and merely re-

spond "I guess there's always a lot to learn, right? That's what I like about Mery. She asked me this week a question I'd never really thought about 'Why am I pursuing the law. Is that really my passion? Who do I really want to be.' She's very spiritual." As I'm saying this, I see a pained expression come over mom's face. I realize that telling her about how admirable Mery is may serve two purposes. First, an honest sharing with her. Secondly, I know that telling her how wonderful another woman is always bothers her a bit, so maybe her dig upset me more than I'm willing to admit. Nevertheless, I continue: "She likes helping the poor, those who don't have a chance in life, or need a second chance." I'm on a roll now, each positive accolade about Mery creating more furrows on mom's forehead. "She has great passion about her art. And she's very smart. We talk about God and existentialism. Being and nothingness."

"Stop, stop. You're getting way over my head. So, she's from a prominent family."

"That's also really nice about Mery, in contrast to Sarah. She isn't from that wealthy a family, and she herself is quite poor, the struggling artist. She's even working as a waitress now to earn money."

"Wait, why does she have to work as a waitress if she's from such a wealth family, or unless they've disowned her."

"Mom. Always looking for the best in people. Her father is a minister, so within the church community, he holds quite a distinguished position. I didn't go into a long explanation with Nana because I wanted to keep her happy and not upset her."

"A waitress?"

"Now, mom, an artist. And money is not important to her at all. In fact, she often seems uncomfortable when we go to a nice restaurant. She'd rather cook for me." I look at mom, and realize that was the wrong thing to say.

"Are you making a comparison to the fact that I didn't cook?"

"No, really, sorry. Truly. Forgive?"

"Fine, well, just be careful that she's not after your money."

"Now you sound like Grandpa JC." We both smile.

"But I'm serious. I'm just trying to protect you. You're a great catch, big Harvard-to-be lawyer man. And some day you'll be a very wealthy man from your grandfather. Be careful, that's all I'm saying. You really never know who you can trust."

\*

\*

\*

"Does your therapist every discuss dreams?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I had an interesting dream during a nap after brunch---I think all that cooking exhausted me. Would you like to hear it?"

"Is there sex in it?"

"No."

"Is it about me?"

"No."

"Then why would I want to hear it?...Joke. Of course. So, you're still keeping your dream journal?"

"Yes, that was another great gift you gave me---journaling. Now I have journals about daily life, dreams, exercise, classes, people I date...it's gotten so I need a journals of journals just to keep them all straight!"

*"Isn't that a bit excessive?. Though I'd like to see the date journal sometime. Do you have a journal about me, too?"*

*"Of course."*

*"I don't know if I like that. You'd better be nice. What was your dream." She settles back, takes a sip of coffee, and says "I know I can't trust you around food; so I'm going to eat some more pie while you prattle on."*

*\* \* \**

*"I'm in a plain room with Miriam and Joseph. It seems like in our old house. Dad's parents, Grandpa JC and my blue eyed grandma, are there, too. Miriam and Aaron are in a fight. Aaron says he tagged her and she's it. She says he didn't and he's still it. The grandparents are getting upset at their bickering and fighting.*

*"You're lying!" Miriam yells.*

*"No, you're lying," Aaron counters.*

*"I say 'You're both right. Look, Miriam is wearing a thick jacket. Aaron, you touched her jacket," and with that I push in on the jacket. 'But it's so thick that it can go in an inch or so, and she doesn't feel it."*

*"They both look at me, then touch the jacket, understand, start giggling and continue to play. The grandparents look at me with pride. Grandpa passes me a wad of money as thanks. But I give it back to him, saying "Seeing them stop fighting and start laughing is it's own reward." They both look at me with even more pride.*

*"There, that's the dream. "*

*"Well, that's an interesting dream. Giving back the money.*

Clearly a dream!"

"Thanks for your vote of confidence."

"And what are you doing dreaming about your father's par-  
ents. I don't know if I like that."

"Mom, I can't help what I dream."

"Maybe not. Always the lawyerly counter-argument. I wish my  
therapist was here. He's so brilliant with dreams. He'd know how  
to interpret it. I need a cigarette."

As she reaches into her purse, I reach across the table for  
another bite of pie. I feel a light slap on my hand.

"Greedy, greedy. Do you wait for me to let my guard down,  
then go in for the attack?"

"I'm still hungry."

"Fine, then take it all." She pushes the plate toward me. A  
classic move. What she expects now is for me to feel guilty and  
push it back. Instead, I just say "Thank you" and take a bite.

"Would you like me to light your cigarette."

"Fine."

"Now, go ahead, give the dream a try. I've heard you be  
pretty insightful about other people's dreams. You always put  
yourself down!"

"Well, ok. Let's see. You're the center of the story.  
Naturally. But in a lot of ways that's been true in our family.  
The first grandchild. First son. Smart. Handsome." I raise my  
chin and posture. "Don't get too narcissistic. But really, we all  
have such high hopes for you. And I think you can be anything  
you want. I always have."

"I know that, Mom, and you've said that to me a lot. I  
appreciate your confidence. But go on with the dream."

"Well, it obviously has to do with money. Maybe what we've been talking about. You're trying to stand on your own now, not keep taking money from Grandpa. Maybe wanting to grow up. Also wanting to please your Grandpa. You were like a lawyer solving a case."

"That makes sense. I did have a nice feeling from the dream. I was proud of myself. I felt like I acted in a peace-keeping way. And that was enough. I didn't need the money. Thanks." I'm feeling proud of myself, when mom adds,

"Maybe the dream is saying it's about time for you to grow up and stop trying to please your grandfather. Just look at what you're planning for your next step in life. Are you sure you really want to go to law school? Is that for you or Grandpa?"

"Normally, mom, I'd say you've done it again--break my positive mood. But this time, your emasculating question is actually interesting. Mery, as I told you, asked me the same thing. I'm pretty sure I want to go. But she also pointed out it might be good for me to take a year off, think, reflect, give myself some freedom. I've never done anything but lockstep achievement: Country Day School, Stanf..."

She interrupts. "You made your own choice about Country Day."

"Did I? I remember you sat me down and said you have a choice, you can go to the horrible public schools where losers and deadbeat people go, or a great new school where your father went. And the girls are prettier at Country Day's sister school than the girls at public school. And there are lots of parties. But it's your choice. At 11 years old. Yes, I was really in control, wasn't I?"

"We were just trying to do what we thought was best for you. Some parents would have just laid down the law. That's what your Dad wanted to do. But I wanted you to feel part of it. I can't believe you're attacking me for my good intentions."

"You're right, that's past. In any case, Mery and I have talked--obviously in a very preliminary way--that it might be a good idea for me to take a year off, take a deferral, and let me explore myself a bit more. It would also give me more time to spend with her."

"You know your grandfather is not happy with you?"

"Huh. Where'd that come from?"

"He's not. He doesn't like your new girlfriend. He thinks she's trouble."

"Mom, I hate it when you do that."

"Do what? I'm just trying to warn you, and you know why."

"But you always use indirect communications. I hate that. You know what happens. Now if I go to Grandpa, he'll say, I never said that. What's she talking about?"

"Don't you dare tell him I said anything."

"Arrgh. It's like at brunch, you saying, Nana is upset at me because; or Nana saying look how you've upset your mother; or you saying your brother and sister didn't want you back. This drives me crazy. I want order and structure. Everything in its place, remember our motto. Grape jelly with Monte Cristo, mint with leg of lamb. This type of communication gets so jumbled, there is no way to grasp it, to untangle it."

"Fine, just eat your pie. I'm not hungry. I was just trying to help. "

\* \* \*

*I watch as Mom places the scarf over her hair, then in an effortless, even graceful continuous motion flings the right end of the red silk material over her left shoulder, letting it cascade down her back. The motion is elegantly casual, like an accomplished performer on stage. She withdraws a small mirror from her purse, and makes a few adjustments to ensure she's covered her hair completely, and is satisfied with the way her face is framed. She then sits back in the booth.*

*Is this a signal that she is ready to leave?*

*There is an awkward silence. I can't think of a topic that doesn't seem unsafe, so my mind drifts to my dinner this evening with Dad and Grandpa JC. I realize I still have some questions about Dad, and as difficult as mom is to talk to, she seems the safer source. Since nothing I can say to her is going to be effective anyway, I decide I might as well ask her something that interests me.*

*"Was dad a famous bombardier pilot in Germany in World War 11?"*

*Until that point, she's wearing a hostile, tight face, which barely masks underlying tears of a hurt, victimized little girl...little red riding hood in her scarf? When I ask the question, she looks stunned at first, and finally bursts into laughter. I get out of my side of the booth, and go over to pat her shoulders. I actually think she is choking.*

*"Where did you hear that?"*

*"Aaron was asking me. He'd said dad told him."*

*"Your father is a Walter Mitty, a person who lives in a dream world of his own creation. That's a great one, though."*



No, after we got married, he was drafted and we both moved to Texas. He was in the air force, but was grounded within the first week because of a bad back. I'm not even sure how bad it was. I think it was more nerves. But he never left Texas. That's just great, so typical." She starts laughing again.

"He tell a witty story. But as long as he going to be such a pathological liar, he should tell a great story. Really make one up. Why be just a hero? I'm actually surprised at him. Why not be THE hero? I think he's lost his touch. Let me do it for him. Here's the way it really happened. Eisenhower called Patton and said, 'Hey, I need to borrow your greatest bombardier pilot ever. It's the only way we can defeat the Nazis.' 'No, Rommel says, 'I need him here in Africa.' They then fight over who would get him, and fortunately Eisenhower won and the fate of the free world was saved forever."

\* \* \*

She's in hysterics, and throws her scarf off.

I have mixed emotions. I'm disappointed that Dad's been caught in a lie again. But I enjoy seeing mom so joyously laughing, even if it is at Dad's expense. And her story is truly funny. I actually start laughing, too.

"Mom, you've got a great sense of humor...wicked, but funny!"

"Your father is my straight man. He makes it easy. You know, he's been a judge, too! Once, when we were on vacation in Florida, he told a couple we met there that he presided over important judicial cases back in Kansas City. He was always trying to pass his father up, but never had the work ethic to do it. Brilliant man. Just lazy. And a gambler. Another effort to get more money

than his father, the easy quick way."

"Did he, does he gamble much?"

"Are you kidding? It got so bad that the Mafia in Vegas was  
after him for not paying his bills. He told me Robert Kennedy  
saved his life. As attorney general, Kennedy went after the  
Mafia, so they had to lie low. But to this day, when your dad  
slips off to Las Vegas---with that "other person"-- he still  
can't use his own name."

\*

\*

\*

As I think about this, I realize it's starting to feel like  
more than I want to hear. Yet, there is something fascinating  
about this quasi-Mafia-involved, Walter Mitty character. And,  
like a moth to a flame, I ask for more.

"This may seem like a strange question. But as long as we're  
talking openly, no one ever said why you all really got divorced.  
Just that sometimes two people who love each other can't live  
together. It was no one's fault. Yet you and Nana are always  
angry at Dad."

"Dr. Gundle said I should try to protect him. Protect your  
image of him. Not tear him down. Never once did I say the di-  
vorce was his fault, did I?"

"No. Was it?"

"Of course."

"His gambling?"

"Dr. Gundle said the gambling was only a symptom. The deeper  
problem was that your father didn't know how to be man. Gambling  
was a way to get rich, to show he was a bigger man--had more  
money-- than his father."

*"So it was about money, his never being able to hold a job?"*

*"That and his women."*

*"That woman from Connecticut?"*

*"No, she came later. He went to Texas with his manicurist. A manicurist! How many men do you know who see a manicurist-- he'd have his nails--hands and feet-- polished every week, like a woman. He powdered his face every morning, for goodness sakes. Anyway, I had him followed by a private eye."*

*"You had him followed by a private eye?" I ask, incredulous.*

*"You know your father. He's so slippery, a brilliant con and liar. I wanted proof. When he was caught, he apologized. Even then I wanted to make it work. I was stupid. I took him back."*

*"And?"*

*"And he did it again. Lied to me some more. Dr. Gundle said he couldn't help himself because he still had to keep trying to prove he was a man by showing his prowess with women. He was always trying to prove he was a man's man because he felt so inadequate in his father's eyes. He did it again, with some other woman. And he continued to lie. Cheated. Lied. It was just too humiliating." She's sniffing now, and pulls out a handkerchief into which she blows her nose. "He was the only man I ever knew. But after the divorce, I had a blast. I met lots of other men. Real men. Later, I told Dr. Gundle I thought the real problem was--though because of my inexperience I couldn't have realized it at the time--that it was impossible for your father to feel secure in his masculinity because he had such a little....you know, little penis."*

\*

\*

\*

*She blushes, laughs, then starts to cry. This is also more*

than I need to know. Maybe it's time to draw this pie-eating-cafe-outing to a close. I have tried to listen as a dutiful son, but now I just want to see if we can't stop it without a blow-up.

"Sorry, mom. No one ever really talked about the divorce. It's been 8 years. I always thought you guys got on great. I never heard you fighting. Then one day, woosh, our family of five was no more. It was just confusing."

"For me too. I talk about it all the time with my therapist. I wanted you to see him, too, to help you understand what happened, but you'd always refuse." She looks over at me, as if she's just had a great idea. "If you want to see Dr. Gundle while you're here, you know he admires you. Maybe you need to talk about it with someone. Seriously, it might be very helpful for you."

I can't help but think that psychiatrists and psychologists are for crazy people, and mom's doctor doesn't seem to be helping her very much. I refrain from saying this.

"Thanks for the offer. Yeah, maybe sometime. Not this trip though. After lunch, before I feel asleep, I started looking back at my old teen-age journals--after the divorce, during high school, and during the time when I was asked to leave the house. I came across something I'd written, but had no memory of ever writing it down. I brought it with me."

I pulled it out and read it to her:

"Today Miriam and Aaron and I were watching TV. A commercial came on. I turned to Aaron, who was watching the commercial jingle, and I hit him. Hard. He started crying. I have no idea why I did it. I think I may have mental illness." p. 33

I put down the journal and look toward her for reassurance.

*She consoles with three words: "You were awful."*

\*

\*

\*

*The waitress comes to see if we want anything else, and mom asks for more coffee. I mull over mom's reply: her normal, compassionate, sensitive caring comeback. But rather than take offense, I say, "It's disturbing, even scary, that I don't even remember feeling this way--what was I, 16? I must admit, after reading this, it makes me question how much I know about myself. Why would I act like that?"*

*"My therapist said you were a bitterly angry young man. You were angry at your father for deserting you. But when he came around, you were afraid to show him your anger, for fear it would only drive him further away. So you took it out on me mainly. You blamed me. That's why you were always so angry and mean to me."*

*"But why were you so controlling of me? There was a point when I was grounded for years!! I was an amazing teenager, especially compared to others. I didn't smoke, didn't drink. Got excellent grades. Always came home on time. The only time I ever played hooky at school was my senior year, and it was at your suggestion!" She smiles at that, but replies,*

*"Someone had to be the disciplinarian. I had to be mother and father. You started beating your hands against the wall in fury when I grounded you."*

*"And that added more years to the grounding! I couldn't win."*

*"You locked me out of your life."*

*"I locked you out of my room. I needed some privacy."*

*"I remember that. I told you not to lock the doors."*

*"Right, and I'm in my room, with the door locked, and you're*

telling me I'm grounded next weekend for locking the door. And then you say if you don't open it this minute, your grounded the next weekend."

"And you didn't open it. Just disobeying me."

"And then when I did open it, you demanded to know what I was doing. I said I didn't want to say. You told me if I didn't tell you right away, I was grounded a third weekend. Finally, I said, I was masturbating. You said, how dare you talk to me like that, You're grounded for a month."

"You were insolent and angry."

"Mom, even when I came back from college, and just wanted to go across the street for a piece of pie, you said no, it's past 12, your curfew."

"And you went anyway."

"Right, but why wouldn't you let me go?"

"Because you were in my home. Dr. Gundle said when you are in my home, I'm the boss and I have to show leadership and authority and make sure you know who is in control. I told you, he said you needed those boundaries. They were for your own good. Stop making me repeat myself. Do you think I enjoyed that? These are horrible memories. I don't want to discuss them anymore."

"Sorry. Let's change the subject."

There is a long silence as we each fiddle with our pie.

\*

\*

\*

"Don't pull that on me again."

"What?"

"You know exactly what."

She's right. I recall one evening when we were alone at

dinner, still in the big white mansion--I was probably 14--just the two of us at the formal dining room table. The maid, Oreba, came in and served us: roast beef, small round potatoes, asparagus with hollandaise sauce. I remember the meal well. My brother and sister were visiting Dad. He and Mom had been divorced about a year.

The food was delicious, and I was feeling happy. I asked mom if I could have more roast beef, and she pushed the buzzer under the table, and Oreba came out, asking what we wanted. She brought more roast beef, and I ate it. I liked to combine the foods, a little roast beef, followed by the potatoes. Then, before I'd completely swallowed that bite and the taste was starting to fade, I'd eat some asparagus, the dip tipped in hollandaise sauce.

The meal ended. I wiped my lips, politely, as mom had always instructed me. I also arranged my silverware on the plate together, at the back, to let Oreba know I was done. I felt content, and looked at mom for some sign of praise at how well I'd cleaned my plate, how delicately I'd wiped my lips, and how thoughtfully I'd laid out my fork and knife.

When I looked at her expectantly, she looked back at me, and I sensed anger. I wasn't sure what I'd done wrong--hadn't I kept my left hand in my lap while eating. I thought I had. Maybe she wasn't angry, I wasn't sure.

Then she screamed "God damn your evil silence...for an entire meal. Punishing me. I don't deserve being treated like that. Don't you dare shut me out!"

As honest as I can be, at the time, I didn't realize there was an "evil" silence until she broke it. I was just pleasantly

eating my dinner.

But now I look across at the womb from which I came, and I  
can't think of anything to say that won't be injurious or upset-  
ting. What do we have in common besides shared hurts? Strangers  
starring at each other over apple pie. Afraid to speak. Afraid  
not to speak.

\*

\*

\*

"See, you're doing it again. The silent treatment. Just like  
your dad." I start to respond, just to say something, even if it  
turns acrimonious. The fighting is at least a comfort zone, and  
a relief from the deeper emptiness of realizing we're strangers.  
Mother and son. Roles. Roles which no longer apply, are no longer  
useful. Is this like a reverse giving birth, the pain of endings?  
Is there pain when a snake sheds its no-longer-needed skin? I'm  
actually pleased when she continues her diatribe.

"And you were never grateful. Do you remember when you  
complained because Scotty's mom had such a great feast of food  
in their icebox, and our was nearly empty. To please you, I  
ordered from Wolfermans' all sorts of English muffins, jams,  
roast beef, turkey, ham, cheeses. Then, a few weeks later, you  
decided you were going on a diet, and complained about a full  
icebox. You told me, 'You're trying to sabotage my eating and  
work out program.' I could never win with you; I was never a good  
enough or the right kind of mother." She begins whimpering again.

I get up, cross to her side of the table, and give her a  
kiss. "Sorry, mom." She starts to turn away, but returns the  
kiss. Though meant as a loving gesture, the kiss is filled with  
despair and sadness. It's as if we are desperately trying to



reach out and touch each other caringly, but we just don't know how. There is some unbridgeable chasm which I sense. I think she is also sensing it. I return to my seat and say,

"Point for you. That must have been nutso making." I know I should stop there with my sort of apology. But something of which I don't have control propels me forward: habit, momentum, anger, frustration? I'm not able to just stop with a pacifying effort. I go back on the offensive, with what I realize even as I'm saying it is such a childish trivial rant: "Mom, you say you feel I shut you out of your life, but when I would call you from college, you never showed any appreciation. You'd always say, 'Why has it been so long? Your friends call their mother so much more than you do' I felt whatever I did for you was never enough.

"I remember one time when you were lying in bed, tired---because of all the maids having gone home early?---and yelled, in that raspy quiet shouting way of yours "I need a Dr. Pepper. Get me a Dr. Pepper." I brought it, and your only comment, in your suffering state was 'Ice. Where's the ice.'"

"I was sad and depressed. I can't believe you're throwing that up at me. Even your father said, 'When you bring someone the Dr. Pepper, bring it graciously.' And if the person wants ice, bring the ice. Graciously. Why bring it with a bad attitude. Then you get no credit, and you have done it anyway. You did it with such hostility. And I was so tired and hurting so badly."

"But you gave me so much responsibility. You said to me 'You're now the man of the house, but in reality all I was, was your personal slave. 'Do this; do that.' 'Watch your brother and sister when I go out.' 'You're the man of the house now.'"

*'You're responsible.' 'You have to do more.' Then it was 'You did a terrible job of watching them. They shouldn't listen to you.' Talk about cutting a guy's balls off. Is that what you did to Dad, cut his balls off, too?'*

\* \* \*

*The waitress appears, and I can't tell whether mom is more upset at what I've said to her, or what the waitress might have overheard. She dismisses the waitress peremptorily, and turns back to me.*

*"You didn't help me when I needed you, when I was suffering."*

*"Mom, I was 15, and you're calling me into your room telling me you just overdosed on Valium and sleeping pills. Call the doctor. Call your uncle. How many times did you try to commit suicide? Ever time your door was closed, and you called me to come in, I didn't know whether it was to bring you a drink, some chocolates, or you were dying."*

*"You're so thoughtless. How can you throw that up at me. You're just like my brother--your uncle, an emotionless, unfeeling machine."*

*"Thanks for another lovely compliment. I hated your bedroom. You always kept the curtains drawn, you could never tell whether it was day or night. It was always dark and gloomy, like a morgue."*

*"Why do you think I did that? Do you think I enjoyed looking out at the street and cars below, being reminded daily that I no longer had a balcony and a big oak tree and a huge backyard? Do I want to see the bright sun shining reminding me daily of my*

loss? You don't understand, I was once a princess in a fairy tale."

"But even a fairy princess gives something back to others. Why didn't you ever try to give anything to anyone else? Like Mery feeding the homeless and hungry. You had nothing to do all day. Lots of maids. Why didn't you do anything with your life?"

"That's so mean. I served on the PTA as president. I was a model in charity fashion shows. Until my fears got too great and I couldn't leave the house."

"Maybe you were just too worried about trying to be a fairy princess to think of others who were suffering more." I repeat and enunciate each word slowly, trying to punish with each word: "The hungry, ...the homeless.... And you would just sit in the luxury of your room, doing nothing for anyone. "

Her face hardens. She is either going to start crying and run away, or counter-attack. I realize that these are difficult questions for anyone, including me, and I shouldn't be asking them so mean-spiritedly. "Mom, I'm not trying to attack you." Or am I? Why did I confront her? Did I want an answer, or did I want her to feel the same frustration and helplessness I experienced when I went to Sixth Street with Mery.

Probing deeper, but with a softer voice, hiding behind a benign looking smile, I query, "Don't you feel concerned about people less fortunate than you? I'm not trying to attack you, I'm just trying to make you more aware."

"Oh, you serve one meal and now you're the great champion of the poor and downtrodden, Mr. Fix-it-all, Lovebubble. Why don't you do something instead of wallowing in your own self pity and going after your poor mother? You with your golf and

tennis and flute lessons and private dry cleaners. I've never  
seen a more selfish life than you've lived, ever.

"Try looking in the mirror, fairy princess."

\*

\*

\*

She looks like she is going to start to cry again, and I  
realize I've hit too hard. The ice cream has now completely melt-  
ed, and we weren't even able to make it through one piece of pie  
without ugly rancor. I try to think of some way to exit this line  
of conversation, to find something humorous, or distracting to  
utter. While I'm pondering, she says,

"I've suffered excruciating physical pain in my life. But  
the mental pain is so much worse. I wouldn't wish it on my worst  
enemy. You just don't know how bad it was for me. You never tried  
to understand how awful I felt."

"How could you have expected me to handle that? It was like  
long day's journey into night. I feared at any moment you were  
doing to commit suicide. If I did anything wrong, it could set  
you over the edge. I had to tiptoe around you."

"Tiptoe. You were so cruel, never appreciated how hard it  
was for me raising you alone. How hard my life is. Never mind, I  
can't talk about it anymore. My psychiatrist was right. What is  
that girl's name in San Francisco? I'm going to call her. I'm  
going to warn her that you're incapable of love or being loved  
because you can't love your own mother. Be careful of my son,  
I'll tell her. Even my psychiatrist says he may think he knows  
who he is but he has no idea. He'll only hurt you. He's demonic.  
A plague. Unlovable. Incapable of love."

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

"  
**E**

aster is supposed to be about resurrection, isn't it?" I ask pointedly of Dr. Lisbet. "My time with mom felt more like an Easter Sunday crucifixion."

"I'm sorry for you. For her. That must have been very painful. "

"For her?" I repeat to myself. What is this woman thinking? Aren't I the client? Aren't I the one paying?

"Is mom right?"

There is an awkward silence as the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet look at each other. Finally, Dr. Lisbet replies,

"Are you concerned that your mother is correct?"

"Of course." Sometimes this woman seems nothing more than a parrot, and not a very smart one at that. "She said some horrible things about me. Since I don't think I will ever be able to have a close relationship with her, that would mean that any future potential relationship with anyone else is doomed--even if I ever again decided I would want one--which seems highly unlikely." I feel like I'm sputtering to get all the words out in a coherent form.

"You seem pretty discouraged," the Rebbe responds.

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Yes," says Dr. Lisbet, "but the answer, like all answers in

psychology, is more complex than your mother's simple statement. Of course, subsequent relationships are influenced by a person's experiences with mother; and father for that matter. And some people, without counseling to see where things went wrong, may repeat the same unskillful patterns. But that's why it's good that you are working on yourself--to learn what you can from the past. Change is definitely possible and there is no inevitable relational 'curse' on you, or anyone."

I nod. The words are reassuring, but I feel exhausted after this exhumation of my relationship with mom. "I do feel a 'curse' --like I'm a relational plague. What do you see as needing to be changed in me to remove this "

The Rebbe responds, "There is a lot of valuable material you shared with us about you and your mother. I've taken some notes, and will be happy to share them with you. But first, I'd like to hear from you. As you look back, what do you see as the main issues."

"Often it seemed like we were talking past each other. Not really listening. Trying to score points, to show how one of us was right, and the other one wrong."

"That's exactly right. I sense there is love. And both of you were trying...trying to be loving, trying to be empathic, but your pain, your defensiveness kept getting in the way, causing you each to attack the other where you knew they were most vulnerable. When you were listening to each other, it seems it was less for understanding and empathy, and more how to find the weakness

and plan the counter-attack."

I nod and counter, "Perhaps that was pre-law training, or a way to stay safe in my own family, or both?"

"But that's past. What can be learned from this encounter, or corrected now?"

Dr. Lisbet takes over. "That depends on you--and what you are willing to learn about yourself. You're asking, in essence, what truths and wisdom, no matter how hard they are to hear, does your mom have for you? There are really three areas. Is there a truth to the issue of entitlement? Needing to be in control? Taking more than you give?"

I grimace, and Dr. Lisbet continues, "Look, you yourself said you feel at the end of your rope. This is not a time to mince words, but to face yourself as honestly as you can. We are here only to help support you in that. Understood?"

"Fair enough. But speaking of empathy, how do you think it feels to believe you are a plague, then to hear, well, yes, you are selfish, entitled, controlling, and narcissistic. Oh, good, I feel so much better now."

"Is that the Kansas City sarcasm of which you speak?" The Rebbe gives a bit of a smile, and continues. "Let me caution you to be careful of black and white thinking. Even if there is some truth in those words, don't let them completely define you. We can and in fact need to keep acknowledging the strengths you have as a foundation--your willingness to change, your desire to be a loving force, your spiritual quest--even as we can learn from and

clean up what Dr. Lisbet and the Zen tradition calls 'dust on the mirror.' In Judaism, we believe *neshama*, the soul which God gives each of us is pure. We're going to work on learning to trust the pure, loving parts, and healing and cleansing the areas you want to change that may no longer serve you well."

"That sounds good, if you believe in a compassionate God, and we in God's image. But what makes you feel so confident that there is a pure, good, loving side to me?"

\* \* \*

The Rebbe asks if I would like some tea, and gets up to prepare it. As he does so, he says, "As I told you, I leave the tough, deep, philosophical questions to Dr. Lisbet."

And, though I had asked the question of the Rebbe, it is Dr. Lisbet who responds. "Consciously, your intention was loving with your family--the Sunday brunch. And with your mom--taking her for a drive. Would you agree?"

"Yes, but..."

"I'm interrupting you just to point out to you how often you say 'Yes, but....'. Now, continue."

Self-consciously, I say "Yes, and...no, it's really but. My intention was loving, but I don't trust my...I don't know how you'd call it, subconscious, unconscious. I seem to sabotage what I'm trying to do. Is that possible? Is there an evil subconscious that is controlling me even though I don't know it?"

"Let me respond in the same style. Yes, there is a subconscious. And yes it can sabotage us unless we learn about it,



which is exactly what you're doing. BUT, I don't believe the subconscious is always negative. And let me give you an example...from the dream you shared with your mother."

"The one where mom said I was, as usual, the central character, and the dream was primarily about money and my needing to stand on my own two feet?"

"Yes, that dream. Let me share a bit with you about my dream approach. Who creates the dream?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes you do, this is not a trick question."

"Oh, like when my 8th grade teacher asked me a simple question, about which I thought for a long time. Finally, in exasperation, he asked me another question, 'Who is buried in Grant's tomb.' I couldn't figure that one out either. Everyone in class was laughing. Finally, he said, 'Don't think so much. The answer is right before your eyes. Grant, stupid.' Ok, right, there are no surgical implants in my brain. I dream it."

"Good story. Exactly. I believe, since we dream the dream, there are many ways to interpret it. One is on a literal level--what's going on in our life. A second is looking for symbolism. Or, as Freud said, we can look for wish fulfillment. However, we can also interpret the dream as oneself--and all the people inhabiting the dream are merely different aspects of ourself."

"That sounds deep, but a bit abstract, even for me. How would it apply to this dream? And to my subconscious?"

\*

\*

\*

The Rebbe returns with the tea, and I take a sip. I then put down my counseling notebook, and pick up my dream notebook, and give her a ready sign. Dr. Lisbet continues,

"On the surface, the dream involves your family: you, your brother and sister; then it skips a generation, and involves your dad's parents. Has that configuration ever occurred in reality."

"Yes, when we go to the restaurant in their apartment and have dinner with them--ending with double crusted strawberry pie and vanilla icecream."

"Ok, and what are those dinners like?"

"Quiet. Grandma never says much. There are lots of silences, and we three kids would goof off, kick each other under the table, stuff like that."

"So, you dream of a meal setting--not like the noisy, attacking one you just had at brunch--but with different grandparents. And you dream of yourself not at the center of attack, rather, the battle has transferred to your siblings."

"Interesting. Right. The dream puts me in a safe environment."

"Exactly. And what happens. You become the healing force between your siblings, just as you were trying to be the healing, loving, giving force with your mom's family at Sunday brunch. In the dream, however, in contrast to reality, you are completely successful. Your subconscious created a positive dream, showing you that you do have that pure, loving side within you."

"I like that interpretation, and that subconscious, wherever it is. Is there more?"

"Some would call that interpretation of the dream wish fulfillment. I don't. I see that as your subconscious modeling for you an essence inside you. An inner core that is a vision for you to work towards."

"Are you trying to make a statement about my inner nature, and the nature of the universe as pure, like the Rebbe did?"

"How does the image of yourself as having an inner pure nature feel to you?"

I'm not unaware that she has used a lawyerly trick and not answered my question. But what she did ask is sufficiently interesting that I choose to respond:

"Mixed. I like the vision. I'm not sure I believe it or trust it to be true."

She takes a sip of tea. I look over at Moses, and wonder if there shouldn't be a statue of Joseph placed on the mantle, brought out especially for dream interpretations.

\* \* \*

"If it's ok with you, I'd like to stick with the dream for the time being." I assent. She continues, "Notice the symbolism and importance of money. You can begin to see the shift in you regarding money, goals, striving. You are wanting to make a positive difference but are doing so not for external reward--you give the money back--but for internal values, "

"I like that interpretation too. And it does fit with

having just gone to feed the homeless with Mery."

"Good. Then I ask myself, what parts of this dream are a wish fulfillment. I wonder why your parents are not in the dream, and whether your grandparents might be substitutes for them. Does the dream, at this level, represent the opposite of what you are feeling?" I look puzzled. She notices this and says, "Let me try to explain. You are feeling, in your terms 'a house divided.' Divorced parents. Your parents don't eat together; your maternal and paternal grandparents don't eat together. You went to a brunch of the maternal side of the family on Easter Sunday. There are attacks on you, particularly by your mother, and to a lesser extent by your grandmother, trying to protect her daughter.

"Are you with me so far?"

I motion for her to continue.

"Yet in this dream you are in the dining room of your old house. You are home again. Not kicked out. Not forced to leave your castle. And what if in this home you are with not your grandparents--but what they represent--people who have been happily married for decades. They may symbolize your mother and father. You are central, yes, but not as one attacked, rather as a healer. Your father gives you money, which, you mentioned in your father's world, is love. And your mom looks at you with admiration. Your brother and sister don't exile you, they are healed by you and return to giggling. Home."

\*

\*

\*

I feel sad as I listen to her. I don't want to begin crying

again, so I take a sip of tea in an effort to recompose. A minute or so passes. However, the silence does not feel awkward. I even enjoy it. Finally, I look to Dr. Lisbet and say,

"I love that interpretation. Yet it also makes me feel sad."

"Because.."

"Because that's not going to happen, ever again. I'm never going to be a healing force that can bring them back together. They aren't going to be remarried to each other. Our home is gone forever."

The Rebbe, who has been quiet during this entire dream discussion, responds, "True. And that is sad. Remember when Dr. Lisbet said there were three areas where you could learn?"

I hold up my hand, pick up my counseling folder, thumb back a few pages, and see the list--entitled, controlling, a taker. "Yes, what does that have to do with our home being gone forever?" I feel as though he's using some kind of diversionary tactic, which seems unlike him.

"Each of those has to do with trying to gain, or hang onto something--to get what you want. All of us have to learn, at some point in our life, is when to accept and let go. In this case, the past is past. You're right, you cannot change your parents' divorce. You do not have enough control to unite your parents, or to turn back time to re-create a scene of perfect childhood happiness. You need to learn to mourn and grieve for that which is past, for that which is not the way you would like it to be. Do you understand what I'm saying? Does it

make sense to you?"

\*

\*

\*

I rock back in forth in the chair as I ponder his question, and notice the way the light plays on his beard, highlighting the gray hairs.

"Does it make sense to me? You're really asking three questions, aren't you?" I feel like I'm having to do all the work for them, and they're supposed to be helping me. "First, do I understand you? The answer to that is intellectually, yes, I do. Secondly, do I agree with you? Well, it seems like I have no choice when I listen to the way you put it--no, I can't change the past. Three," and here I lean forward in the rocker and stare at him, "is it clear how to go about doing that accepting? And the answer to that is no. I thought I'd done that, and moved on. Apparently not. It seems too simple to say 'Accept, mourn, let go! Like ordering someone to swim without showing them how.'"

"A clarifying answer worthy of a Talmudic scholar," Reb Jonathan replies. "Thank you. You wisely see that the task of letting go is not an easy one. Dr. Lisbet and I have studied together--and are still learning--how the world's great religious and philosophical traditions go about this process. Our sense is that just as it takes enormous effort, skill, and courage to learn to be a strong, assertive, competent person, it also takes at least as much effort, skill and courage to learn to accept and let go. The problem is that most cultures--like ours, and yours-- teach and reinforce the former and not the latter. We're

here to work with you on developing this accepting, letting go mode--for those times when it's needed." He pauses, "I know that's a long answer, but your delineations deserved a thorough response. Does that help explain, and now make more sense to you?"

"Fine. Teach me. I'm ready to let go of all that craziness."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Excellent. One of the first steps in all wisdom traditions is forgiveness."

"Forgiveness? After what they did? Not a chance."

\*

\*

\*

Dr. Lisbet takes a sip of tea. I wonder if this is to hide her annoyance with my response. I merely rock back and forth in my chair and stare from one to the other. Now let's see what they say in response to my defiance. I can't believe after listening to the pain and anguish I went through, that Dr. Lisbet could say she felt sorry for mom, and the Reb Jonathan could actually talk about forgiveness. For what? For the way I was treated, exiled, bullied, called unlovable, a plague? Forgiveness--not on your life.

The Rebbe starts to shuffle his papers, which I know means our session is coming to an end. What a cop out.

"The flower blooms when it is ready," Dr. Lisbet says. "Next week I believe it's time we turn in more detail to your father. So, please spend some time this week thinking about that relationship and where you stand now."

Reflexively, like the dutiful student I've been trained to be, I write down her instructions, as if I'm taking down a homework assignment. I'm annoyed at myself for my passive, compliant behavior. But I'm not yet ready to sever my relationship with them. They're really my only human contact, paltry and unsatisfying as it is.

I also realize that over the past three weeks, in some ways these times with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet are the highlight of my week. Though they frustrate me at the time, I'm also sorry to see the sessions end. I haven't yet told them this, for I don't want them to feel I'm too dependent on them. Also, they haven't told me what they're going to charge yet, and I'm afraid it would be higher if they think I'm impressed with them, and getting something out of what they offer.

\* \* \*

I can see that Dr. Lisbet is about to stand up and say goodbye when the Rebbe says, "We look forward to seeing you at the parashah session this Saturday, if that sounds good to you."

I give a noncommittal response, close my notebook, and prepare to leave.

He says in Hebrew "Bo," which means "Go" and I hear it as an injunction to leave. I get out of my rocker and start to walk to the door.

"Whoa, wait a minute," he says. "I'm not quite finished." I return to the rocker.

"Bo is the parashah section for this Saturday. This section



is about the Lord commanding Moses to "Go" to Pharaoh again, to try to free the Israelites."

I hold up my hand and ask him to wait so I can find my parashah notebook. Already, with these two, I'm feeling journal overload. Now I've got a counseling journal, and in it I've had to create sub-categories: one for mom, one for siblings, one for Nana and grandpa; a dream journal; a Torah portion journal; a "blessing" journal for morning prayer and prayer before the meals. When I get back, after this session, I'm going to have to find a place to put the three insights about me--controlling, entitled, wanting more. And I'm wondering if I'm going to need a special section on this letting go, acceptance, mourning, forgiveness topic. Arrgh. My head is spinning with trying to organize my mind.

I find the parashah notebook and signal for him to continue. "Pharaoh has consented previously several times, but then his heart hardens; a new plague comes, he again relents--momentarily--and then his heart hardens again. Note in the character of Pharaoh the difficulty we all have in making changes---the part of each of us that seems incapable of surrender, full of disdain, anxiety, and shrewdness."

I write down what he's saying, and wonder, as I do, if he's trying to give me an indirect message? "Anything else?" I counter, with the annoyance of a petulant student being given way too much homework.

"Is there room for anything more?" Reb Jonathan responds.

I don't like his retort. It puts the responsibility back on me. I realize that no one is forcing me to be here, or do any of this. I can leave at any time. I can say there's no more room.

"Fine. What?"

"Notice line 10:26: 'We shall not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there.' See what, if anything, that might mean to you on your current journey."

"Is that like when you're on the on ramp to a freeway, and you don't know exactly where or how you're going to be able to merge, but you trust that when you get there, there will be an opening?" I'm striving for a bit more humor, but also to take his abstractness and ground it in my vernacular.

"Clever. A little concrete." He smiles. "You Americans and your cars and freeways. But yes, you're definitely moving in the right direction."

Connection. Right direction. Is the Rebbe cleverer than I thought? Might he be a worthy word-smith competitor?

"As you think how it applies to your life" Dr. Lisbet intones humorlessly, "try to ask the question of how you can serve water both in the future--once you have merged onto the highway--as well as in the moment, in the here and now--while you are still on the on ramp."

Her words are wise, but insipid. Yet I dutifully write the in my journal.

\*

\*

\*

I look over at Moses, and wonder what it must have been like

for him facing the obstinacy of Pharaoh. It seems like Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe always have to add one final word of advice and wisdom, always have to get one more thing in. My comments can never be complete and sufficient as they are.

"Anything else?" My annoyance has returned.

"You have been very conscientious about doing and recording the behavior of the morning prayer and prayer before meals. As we discussed, one major intention behind both of these prayers is thankfulness and gratefulness." These kind, syrupy words seem a set up for something. I wait for the shoe to drop, and say nothing.

"There is an evening prayer of forgiveness." I make a face. There it is. Bang! I look up from taking notes. These guys are relentless. If at first you don't succeed. The Rebbe continues, "I am aware that you're not feeling forgiving right now--especially toward your mom. However, the forgiveness prayer has three aspects, and I'd like to share them with you, as well as a way to begin the prayer that honors what you are currently feeling. Ok?"

"I've told you, I don't feel ready to forgive."

"I do hear that. And, of course, as Dr. Lisbet, said, you will have to decide when and if you are ready. I feel it would be helpful for you, however, to at least hear the prayer, and it's components. Fair enough?"

I motion for him to continue. I decide I'm willing to listen to what he has to say. But he's certainly right that I'm not even

close to forgiveness. If he asks me to do an evening prayer of forgiveness, I most definitely will refuse.

"The first part is to forgive others who have hurt us, either intentionally or unintentionally, by their thought, word, or deed." I write down his words. Writing a big "Never" after them. Wait until he hears about my father, and see what he says then.

"The second part is to ask forgiveness of others whom we may have hurt, either intentionally or unintentionally, by our thought, word, or deed."

I continue writing, then ask "Shouldn't others be asking me for forgiveness. Why should I reach out to them when they don't even acknowledge what they have done wrong?"

"A perfectly fair question. Why don't you make a note in your journal. We're almost out of time, and I want to make sure we have the chance to discuss it in another session. Right now, let me give the third part of the prayer 'I forgive myself for hurts which I have caused myself, either intentionally or unintentionally, by my thought, word, or deed.'"

"Why would I want to forgive myself, if I haven't even learned the lesson and may repeat it?"

"Also, excellent. Again, please note it and I promise we will get to those questions."

I write down this question, and wonder if he's just putting me off because he really doesn't have a good answer and wants to confer with Dr. Lisbet or his library.

Dr. Lisbet then speaks, I'm sure to make sure he doesn't get the last word and she doesn't feel left out. "Have you ever consciously asked for forgiveness?"

"Sure, you heard me say to Aaron I was sorry for hitting him."

"Good. Then one way to practice the prayer is to focus on an act you have already done. For example, this evening, say 'Aaron, I ask your forgiveness for hurts which I have caused you, intentionally or unintentionally, by my thought, word, or deed.' Is that something that would feel comfortable?"

"Yes, but it seems silly, I've already done it, he's not here, and he's not asking."

"I understand your concerns. They make sense at one level. But would you be willing to try it, just to see how it feels as a practice?" I nod. She continues, "And then would you be willing to forgive Aaron for hurts he has caused you intentionally or unintentionally, by his thoughts, words, or deeds?"

"Yes, but he hasn't really done anything that bothers me."

"That's all right. Remember this is just practice. But brothers quarrel, and you may find something even though it is small."

"He took my coin collection once and sold it."

"Ok, good."

"I'd forgotten about that."

"Are you willing to forgive him?"

"Now that I think about it, no. See, you've just caused bad

memories to come up."

\*

\*

\*

Dr. Lisbet takes a sip of tea. For the first time, I think I've penetrated her carefully constructed veneer of stoic tranquility. The Rebbe steps in, as if to rescue her.

"I believe what Dr. Lisbet is doing is trying to help you find small steps toward the practice of forgiveness. With this approach, you try to find a small, inconsequential area of forgiveness to practice on, with some person toward whom you are feeling loving. You may want to place the more difficult people and the more painful hurts into the back of a symbolic filing cabinet, until you feel more ready to deal with them. Similarly, there may be small hurts you have caused others that you would like to ask forgiveness for. And perhaps small hurts that you have caused yourself on which you're ready to begin the process of healing and forgiveness. Do you at least understand the general principle we're trying to share here?"

"It's not that complicated. In my psychology class they called it successive approximation, or repeated exposure systematic desensitization. Like getting a person willing to get closer to a snake. I'm not stupid, you guys. You don't have to patronize me."

"You clearly understand the principle. Sorry, I didn't mean to sound patronizing. It's just that I feel this is an important area for you to begin to work on. Perhaps in my haste to be helpful, I may have given you too much too soon." He seems to

smile, and that really angers me. I'm just about to say that when he says, "Honestly, I can tell you that I will ask your forgiveness this evening, in my prayers, for any hurt which I've caused you, intentionally or unintentionally, by my thought word or deed.' I'm truly sorry if I've hurt you."

\* \* \*

I get up to go, but the Rebbe says, "Please, before you go...a concluding prayer," and he reaches out his hand to Dr. Lisbet, who takes it, and they both reach out their hands to me. I watch them close their eyes, and I do the same, only peeking a little through squinting lids. He intones, "This is from Psalm 133: 'Behold How good and how pleasant it is/ For brothers (and sisters) to dwell together in unity,/it is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the Mountains of Zion.' May we all open ourselves to seeing everything in life as from a sacred source. Let us learn to see our pure soul. Let us learn to see our defensive habits as trying to protect us, and, as we are willing, thank and forgive that defensiveness, and recognize it's no longer necessary. Let us learn to see others as from the Source. Then, each person who enters our life is, at the deepest level, a gift we can learn from, to help us.

"Regarding your mother, my mother, Dr. Lisbet's mother, all mothers--the person who carried us within them, who brought us to life--may we work toward the day when we see not only their foibles and weaknesses--often with anger--but also their pain and suffering. May we learn to see them more fully, with greater compassion.

May we slowly, as we are able, develop increased empathy, and move toward forgiveness."

They both say "Amen" but I refuse to join them.

\* \* \*

I start to get up. This seems like it's been an interminable session, and I wonder if they're going to charge me extra. As I gather my notebooks, Dr. Lisbet says, imperturbably, "I know we've covered a lot of ground this session, but want to let you know, we aren't done with that dream. yet." I grimace, sit back down and dutifully pull out my dream journal.

"We have been talking today about mourning, and letting go of past hurts, and things you can't change--like your parents' divorce. That is reality. But, as we discussed, if you look at the dream in terms of you, and your relationship to your family, it's quite a hopeful dream. The dream is saying that if you look deep within yourself, you still have a desire to be a healing force in your family. Further, the dream is suggesting, even given where things are right now, that you will be creative enough to find ways to bring that compassion and healing to your family. You can become that person in reality."

I notice my mood shift again at what she is saying. It may be polyannish. It may be overly optimistic. And I have no idea what it means practically. But it feels really good to hear her say these words.

"Thank you again for that. Your words give me a feeling of hope at a time when I feel very little. And you're right, I did dream the



dream, so maybe at a deep level inside me, all is not lost."

She smiles. For some reason this smile seems more sincere and genuine than previous ones. I bask in it, like feeling the warmth of sunshine.

"Exactly. The dream is about you. However, what I'd like you to consider this week is that all parts of the dream--all the characters in the dream--may represent you."

I'm puzzled, and start to say something. She holds up her hand to stop me. "Let's don't talk about it now. I know it might not make sense. But I'd like you to work with it a bit this week to see what you come up with, before I say anything more."

Though I'm not going to say this to her, I am feeling particularly impressed with Dr. Lisbet's interpretation of my dream. She has added a dimensionality and understanding that, even with my ten years of dream journaling, I haven't been able to do myself. I think of mom's statement: "You think you know yourself, but you have no idea." I realize in some areas I don't even know what I don't know.

\* \* \*

I notice that the more time John spends with Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet, the less I feel a need to comment on his behavior and thoughts. It's as if their greater wisdom provides the insights and wisdom, and in a much more skillful way. However, I want to make some remarks here. But not on that part of John's behavior which hasn't changed, and is very like Johannes'--often defensive, boorish, stubborn, but to be expected due to his hurt

and wounds. No, I want to comment on Reb Jonathan and Dr. Lisbet.

In terms of content, they are of course accurate, John/Johannes needs to learn forgiveness. But before they have heard all his wounds and hurts, and in spite of his repeated protests that he is not ready, they seem to press ahead, almost in a double team. "We know what's good for you and you will hear it by golly." Even though they are right, in terms of content, this is one of the few times, looking back, when I feel their process was not as clear-sighted and skillful as I would have expected from them. Especially the prayer at the end of the session--as lovely as it is--seems pushing John too hard too soon.

Is it because the session's coming to an end, and they want to get squeeze some final wise points in? Is it from frustration with his stubbornness? Trying to model and create a breakthrough experience for him? I'd like to ask them. I wonder where they are now and how they are doing.

\*

\*

\*

"How did your class go?"

"Great, it was really fun. He had us do a creative writing project. It seems like the class is going to be a refreshing change from my pre-law academic classes."

"What did you write about."

"Sunday brunch with my family...I did it as a play."

"How creative. You're so lucky. What a wonderful tradition: a Sunday brunch with your mom, dad, your grandparents, all together, plus your brother and sister and cousins and aunts and

uncles. I'm a little jealous of your close-knit loving family. Is your play ready for an audience yet, I'd love to see it."

I look at my watch and see it's 4. Though Thursday is my usual riding day, I'm wondering about asking Mery if she would like to go riding now, near the ocean. My other option is to ask her to stay the night, and ride tomorrow. That may look a little forward and pushy, and I don't want to make her skittish.

"I'd be happy to let you see it. But let me polish it a bit more, first. After all, this is my first effort."

"I understand, that's the way I am with my art. I seem to never finish. It helped when one of my teachers told me Van Gogh once said 'A painting is never finished. You just decide one day to stop working on it.'"

I smile and decide, before asking her about riding and the ocean, to say something more fully truthful about my family.

"Regarding my family, there's something I've been wanting to tell you."

I look over at her, and she has a deeply concerned expression. "What's wrong?"

"It's about the Sunday brunch."

"Yes?"

I pause, and consider how to say this. "My blue-eyed grandmother is quite sick, in the hospital, and she wasn't able to come." That's certainly a truth.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I love her so much. Mom told me she really got excited when

she heard I was coming home, and even put on makeup when I visited her at the hospital. We didn't say much. I held her hand, and stroked it. She seemed a little pale, and had lost some weight." I laugh, in a pained way. "But she could have stood to lose a little."

"That sounds very hard. I really am sorry." And she puts her arms around me and presses her head into my chest.

I put my arms around her, and she says,

"I feel very safe and protected when you hold me."

I start to stroke her back. "That's funny, I was going to say the same thing to you. Seems like we make be a good team. I feel very warm and secure holding you, and being held by you. I feel like you're helping open me to me." We stand there for a while, then I say, "It's strange seeing my family react to grandma's illness. I can't quite describe it. I'm seeing sides of them--and me--that I've never recognized or realized were there. It's pretty confusing. Maybe I'll write about it one day as part of the play."

"My heart goes out to you. I can feel how much your grandmother means to you, and how hard that must be. Writing down your feelings may help. When I'm suffering, I paint, or play the piano, something to find a release."

We stand holding each other as I stroke her reddish hair, shining yellow gold in the sun.

After a few minutes she looks up at me, and there are tears in her eyes. "I forgot to tell you, last week on Easter, I went

back to Sixth Street to serve food, and a couple of the men there  
asked about you. Especially a guy named Mac. He said to tell you  
he sends you his prayers." She continues to look at me and adds  
"He and I both send you our love and prayers."

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*

**I**

'm about ten minutes early for my session, but see that the Rebbe's door is partially open. I figure I might as well ask if they will start early. Sometimes they go late in a session--though less and less frequently, especially after the first one. But maybe they'll begin a session early, too. As Dad said, you never know unless you try. Since they charge by session, the more minutes, the better deal for me--getting more for my money.

As I start to knock on the door, I observe through the opening that they are each seated on a round, plump, black pillow. Their eyes are closed--meditating? silently praying?-- and they are holding hands. I watch for a few seconds. There is something endearing about these two old people sitting on the floor, cross-legged, holding hands.

I wonder if they ever have sex. That image is not only slightly disgusting, I'm even embarrassed that such a Johannes-like thought would come to mind.

I've never before seen the pillows on the floor, and wonder where they come from--some secret, enclosed cabinet? As the minutes pass, I start to feel antsy. We're nearing the start of my session. Though part of me doesn't want to interrupt their stillness, I am also aware that each minute I wait takes time away from my session.

Finally, a few minutes before two, I knock. The Rebbe slowly opens his eyes, lets go of Dr. Lisbet's hands, and rubs his palms back together against each other several times. He looks over at

me, nods pleasantly, and his hands spread open gracefully and float slightly-upward, as if he is holding a bowl offering water. At first I think he is pointing to Moses. I wonder if they are using Moses like a Buddhist or Jesus totem to pray toward. Then I see that he is pointing to a pillow the couch. Ah, that's where they were hiding the pillows.

I enter, take the pillow, and stick it under my butt. I sit down somewhat awkwardly. I'm not surprised that Dr. Lisbet, with her slim figure, is flexible, but I notice that the Rebbe is also sitting in a cross-legged position. I try to emulate them, and am actually surprised that crossing my legs like theirs is not at all difficult for me. I wonder if I'm a "natural" yogi.

Reb Jonathan begins a niggun chant and is soon joined by Dr. Lisbet. I hum along, but keep my eyes open.

\* \* \*

After a minute or so of humming, I am getting bored, and open my eyes and look at my watch. 2:01. This is my time now, and I feel we're wasting it. Before I can say anything, the Rebbe, still with his eyes closed, intones in a deep voice:

"May we open ourselves to the highest level of wisdom in the universe. May we allow that Source, oh Holy One of blessing to guide us in our sessions together...toward healing and wholeness, and wisdom."

We all say "Amen." I uncross my legs, and rub my hands together like I say the Rebbe. But they continue to sit, eyes closed. I try to focus on my breathing, remembering Dad's injunction. But that was usually one or two breaths at the most. They continue to sit for several minutes, which seems interminable to me. 2:04.

I'm increasingly annoyed at the minutes ticking away on my session time. I have a lot to tell them about the homework they gave me which consumed my week. I haven't talked with anyone--other than ordering food-- since I last saw them, and there are lots of thoughts and ideas I want to share. It's instructive that I'd rather be alone, and even lonely than go to a group gathering where I don't have a starring role, and am not the focus of attention. I was absolutely unwilling to do any evening forgiveness prayer.

I've reviewed my relationship with my father, and grandfather, thought about my dream, and have some additional ideas about the parashah portion challenge them about the fourth commandment. How can you possibly be expected to honor your father and mother when you have parents like mine?

Finally, they open their eyes, and Dr. Lisbet says, "Take a few gentle breaths, let yourself stretch your legs." She uncrosses her legs, and alternately raises and lowers each knee, like in a pumping action. She then bends forward, and touches her toes. The Rebbe emulates the same motion. However, whereas Dr. Lisbet can reach and surround the soles of her feet, the Rebbe can't even reach to his ankle bone.

I wonder if he is at all competitive and if her greater flexibility bothers him.

I reach down to see how far I can stretch, only to hear the admonishing voice of Dr. Lisbet: "No, no, careful. You should only stretch on the outbreath. You have to relax into it. Watch." She demonstrates, touching her knee on the outbreath. Then pausing on the inbreath. "Now, on the next outbreath, I stretch just a few inches further. If you try to do it too fast,



without proper care, your muscles will tense up and prevent the very motion you're trying to achieve." She continues to stretch. I follow her action. She's right. I can go further with my breathing on the outbreath. That doubly annoys me. One, that she's right and I was doing it wrong. Two, even doing it the correct way, I can only get to a point half way between my knee and the ankle. I'm even worse than these two old people.

She sees me struggling and says "Slowly, slowly, each day. The purpose of yoga is to stretch yourself, and grow, but to do so with centerendess and inner peace. It's not a competition, after all."

What does she know?

\* \* \*

I rise and get into my rocking chair, as they also return to their leather brown swivel chairs. Once we are re-seated in a more elevated posture, the Rebbe asks if I want tea. 2:09. He must be kidding. Another stall tactic? "No thank you, there's a lot to cover today, I'd like to get started."

"Please." His hands open again, palms up.

I realize I don't know where to jump in. The transition seems too abrupt from the quietness of the meditation to the turmoil of the events I reviewed this week. I decide to waste another minute and make some polite conversation.

"I've seen you all meditate in that workshop you did, but why were you doing it now, before our session?"

"We were just 'cleaning ourselves' from our last session to prepare to be open and receive you." Dr. Lisbet. This seems pretty slippery and disingenuous to me. Somehow what they are doing is "for me." What about personal responsibility, guys? I'd

rather you do that on your own time.

Also, though I don't mind the idea of their preparing to receive me, I don't really like the image of their having to "cleanse" themselves after my session is over. It sounds like clients are sort of waste in a toilet that need to be flushed before more shit enters.

I'm not sure what to say, and the Rebbe continues "We also believe it important before a session, or really any activity in life, to say a blessing of intention. Like we have discussed with -- intention before a meal; upon waking up." He pauses. "And before going to bed."

"I did continue with the morning blessing, the prayer before the meal. But there was no forgiveness prayer. I think you'll see why, after I share what happened this week--it was filled with male energy. Three generations--me, my father, and his father, my grandfather."

\* \* \*

*"How's my best GRANDson. God, that's an ugly looking boxy blue building. Not even that good a part of town." He looks up at the apartment complex from which I'd just emerged. He is the bridge to take me from mom's place to dad's. It's safer that way, for it keeps them from running into each other.*

*"Did you have an enjoyable brunch with your mom's folks? An enjoyable drive with her?" We begin driving down sixty-third street toward Kansas.*

*"It was fine. We went to Tippins to get some apple pie."*

*"Tippins. Way overpriced. Bet the pie wasn't nearly as good as our double-crusting strawberry, was it?"*

"Nothing compares to that. it's the best--the gold standard. Thanks for picking me up, Grandpa." As we pass the circular fountain structure at 63rd and Ward Parkway, I remember my one rebellious act, a week after I was given my driver's license. I was spending the night at the house of my older friend, Dana. Late at night we snuck out of his house and went driving. When we reached the fountain, he dared me to stop the car and climb it. We ascended the gigantic structure, water splashing in our faces, and at the top, we both emitted powerful blood curdling Tarzan yells as water sprayed our faces.

Interestingly, as I look at it now, it seems to have shrunk in size over the intervening years, and doesn't seem nearly as huge as it had become in my memory. Though I do remember the police sirens, yet somehow we escaped.

"And how are your mom's folks? Dave as senile as ever? Probably shouldn't be so hard on him. Happens to all of us, my mind's still sharp as ever. Eyes going bad, though. We rust out before we wear out. No self-pity. Just the way it is. Can't believe I invested in his clothing store. Only did it for your father. Made my money back, but not a great return.

\* \* \*

I pull down the arm rest between us. "Do you remember when I was little and I could actually sit on this and ride here between the two of you?" It's even hard for me to imagine myself that small. In some ways, it seems like all of Kansas City has become like that arm rest. Too small. I've outgrown it. The fountain is smaller. Yesterday I accidentally ran into Dr. Pakula, my former pediatrician. He's retired and lives in the same apartment complex as mom. Growing up, he was a giant of a

man who kept me alive. Now, all I saw was a stopped, small little Jewish man with a cane.

"You won a place in her heart when you were just, what, three, four years old. You were so sick -- bronchitis and pneumonia."

"I have vague memories of walking down a path with you and grandma. There were dim lights on the path. A fresh, happy smell."

"Arizona evening. Your mom and those damn cigarettes. No will power. When the doctor told me to stop smoking cigars, saying they were hurting my eyesight. I stopped. Done. Self-control. She--she smoked all through her pregnancy--maybe didn't know any better--but I warned her. Then she couldn't even stop when you got so sick. Disgusting smell. Disgusting."

"How long were we there?"

He doesn't answer, and I see he's looking at a hitchhiker on the side of the road. A young man, about my age, not badly dressed, clean cut.

"See that fellow? Feel sorry for him. Maybe he never got any breaks. Don't know, but do know you can't pick him up. It's a dangerous world. You can't stop to pick those people up. Sad, but true. Poor little man. Just didn't have the advantages of my big man. We help where we can, but we must remember that family always comes first. You have to protect your own. Can't trust anyone but family. They're the only one who looks out for you. The world is composed of predator and prey, it's either eat or be eaten. That's the way it is, whether you like it or not. You've got to feed yourself, and your loved ones, Lord willing."

We leave the hitchhiker in the dust, and Grandpa says, "What were you asking. Oh, I remember. Arizona. About four months. It took over two months for you to get better. But by then, Grandma was having so much fun with you, she didn't want to take you back home! Never seen her fuss so. Not even over our own children. You've always had a special place in your Grandmother's heart. You're still her favorite. "

I feel somewhat embarrassed at talk like this, even as I relish it. "I don't know what I did to deserve that status. But I do feel this special love when I'm around her. It's a wonderful feeling. It's like I don't have to do anything, just be loved."

"Very unusual in life. She's a great woman. I had to constantly earn her love. We were poor as church mice. Or synagogue mice. Then, when I'd have some success, win a case. I'd be happy, want to relax, take a few days off. Be my own boss." He smiles over at me. "So I thought. Not a chance. I'd hear on the second day 'JC, get your self out of here and back to the office.' Behind that sweet smile, and few words, she's tough as nails, that woman."

\*

\*

\*

Grandpa has rolled the windows up and turned the airconditioner on. Even though it's still spring, we're having a muggy, lethargic summer day. The houses we pass along 63rd heading toward State Line are ones I've seen thousands of times. But for some reason, I find myself looking at them afresh. Lovely, large, stately. Not as large as Sarah's but still mammoth, with well manicured grounds. Everything is neat and clean, almost sterile. There is a stagnant and oppressive quality about them, like the day's mugginess. Unchanging.

*Like the lives of everyone here, sheltered in the womb of upper class suburbia. And that womb is tightly nestled in the womb of Kansas City, the center of the United States. Doubly protected from all problems domestic and foreign. Nothing seems to touch the people here, so far removed from the world and its cares. It seems a metaphor for the way we hide from the heat in the car's closed windowed airconditioning, shutting the rest of the world--hitchhikers, heat--out.*

*Nothing has changed here, nothing will change. And how do they fill their lives? Nana's cards twice a week; mom lying in bed drinking Dr. Pepper; Dad, I have no idea-- golf, bridge, trying to find a quick money-making scheme? Grandpa Dave sitting by the window hoping a redbird comes by. Grandpa overseeing his real estate holdings. Grandma? I don't know how she spends her days. Eating? Looking at her jewelry? All with walls around them, nothing allowed to interfere or break those walls. Yet within the walls they are trapped by angers and pettiness. Like a pinball ricocheting from one trivial upsetness to another, I now clang from family brunch to mom to seeing dad.*

*Grandpa \$ provides a respite of sorts, though I need to constantly be careful with him, too.*

*I feel so confined and trapped here, in bondage to their whims and neuroses. I find myself thinking seriously about cutting my already short trip even shorter, and getting back to the freedom of California.*

*The promised land, "California here I come...."*

\*

\*

\*

"Grandpa, why did you decide to live in Kansas City?"

We continue down 63rd, which has now turned into Tomahawk. What a great name, a powerful Indian warrior's weapon. I never thought of its meaning--only its utility as a means of getting to our house. As I start thinking about where I grew up, I ask, "Do you mind if we go by the old house."

Grandpa turns on Wenonga Road, by the creek, then winds his way left and up the street. "Why Kansas City, GRANDson? Great question. No real answer. We're like little ants, barely eking out an existence. This is where I found myself. I wanted to develop some stability--felt like we were nomads--like your mom's folks. Didn't belong anywhere. Wanted roots."

We park on the other side of the street, facing the magic circle, and get out of the car. We lean against it and just stare silently for about a minute.

"Your father could have gone anywhere. Didn't have to return to Kansas City. Wharton. The world was his. I had to go to local school, couldn't afford anything more. He was sent to the best. My beneficence. A chance I never had But he came back. Afraid to get out from under Grandpa's wing. He points to the house.

"Pity. Bought them that house. What a dream we all had. Gone."

\* \* \*

As I look at the house, my reactions are mixed. I'm sad, like Grandpa. The dream is gone. There is no more family home, literally; no more cohesive family dream. I'm also struck by how neatly beautiful it is, the white brick framed by the now maturing spring buds of the oak trees, arising from a perfectly manicured lawn. A long circular drive leads to the polished, gleaming

*English carriage lights highlighting the entrance, a tidy row of geraniums on the second story balcony. But even though it is majestic, stately, and elegant, it also seems unfair. Not just unfair that I no longer live there, but unfair that there are people homeless on Sixth Street. Growing up it was impossible to see those people from my house. Now, it's hard for me to not see them, as I look at the house.*

*"That's where you kids used to play," Grandpa says, interrupting my reverie, as he points to the magic circle. "I had the city put in those signs for you: Caution, Children at Play. Wanted to do everything I could to protect my Grandson. Glad you're bringing reflected glory to all of us. Tough time now. Need some happy thoughts to hold onto. Your success is one of them."*

*I smile, awkwardly, in thanks. I wonder why he feels now in particular is a tough time. They've been divorced several years. There is something old and sad about Grandpa as he's talking. Something, in a way, old and sad about the house. Like a stately grand dame, well-preserved, but beneath the tough brick exterior, such pained memories on the inside.*

*Whether my parents still lived there or not, I sense that the house would no longer be mine. There is a feeling of confinement, even in its expansiveness. A feeling of time to move on.*

*Partings.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*We continue driving toward Prairie Village, which is less than a mile from our home. When I would ask mom to drive me there, she would say she was too tired, and I should bike: "It's good for you." I used to love biking down the big hill right before the*



Village, but hated having to bike up it. I always wondered why it was good for me to bike, but too hard for her to drive. Now, after San Francisco, the hill looks almost like a flat grade.

"This should be an easy semester. I've only got two classes: senior honors thesis, and creative writing."

"Why are you taking that writing class? You already write well."

"I thought it would be fun. And isn't there a certain amount of creative writing in law?"

He laughs. "Clever. Creative writing, creative interpretation. You'll make a great lawyer. Always knew you would. And what's the thesis on?"

"I'm supposed to do some law library research on senior citizens, social security, and social services."

"That's more like it. Did you get our gift to celebrate your admission to Harvard."

"Yes, I actually used part of your gift to contribute to the food program at the mission. It was Mery's idea, and a really good one. I thought I'd try to relate my class this semester to the homeless people I met on Sixth street last week."

"Good to think of the poor. I always give something, when I pass a beggar. Leviticus. Share a corner of the field. Makes you feel good. Just need to remember family first. Protect your own."

\*

\*

\*

Traffic slows as we approach a mall. There are several cars backed up, trying to exit and merge onto the street. The car in front of us lets one of the cars go, and a second one also tries, successfully, to merge. When a third car tries to merge, Grandpa sounds his horn and shouts, "Move on." He looks straight ahead, with

his dark sunglasses covering his eyes, and says to me, "If you let anyone get in front of you, they'll see you as a sucker. Everyone will try to take advantage of you and you just end up at the back of the line. Always keep moving forward, Grandson. You've got to be the best or you're nothing. That's what Grandma always says. Never rest on your laurels. Money doesn't last forever. Can't get complacent. The government doesn't rest on their taxes. They always want more."

"I see you've still got the Cadillac."

"Always have. Only difference is now I can afford it. But, I drove a Cadillac even when I couldn't afford it, an investment in myself. Made people think I was successful, even before I was. Worked wonders. They knew I was smart. But that's not enough. They want a winner. They'd say 'Look at that, JC's driving a Cadillac; smoking that big cigar.' And the cases came rolling in. Just like they will for you. You're a winner, my Stanford/Harvard man." He looks over at me with as close as he can come to an affectionate expression in his face "Our GRANDson."

\*

\*

\*

We have long since left the "show me" state, crossed the state line, and are now several miles into Kansas. When we are just a few blocks from Dad's apartment, Grandpa turn to me and says, I need to talk to you about our dinner tonight."

"Great. It feels like all I do is eat when I come home. But I'm still hungry. Where are we going to go?" I expect a smile, but he says, in what seems an almost perfunctory way, "What did you have for brunch?"

"The usual. Chicken livers and eggs. Wolferman's....."

"That's kosher for you. Why not cheeseburgers and lobster."

Is he angry? What's going on? I think of my lobster dinner with Sarah, and ask "Do you keep kosher?"

"Used to. When my parents and your grandma's were alive. Stopped when they died. Empty ritual, empty law. Those who observe kosher are just practicing superstitious Judaism. Ignorant folks. Though surprised your mom's folks--especially your Nana--don't, you know, with all her worries, fear of the 'evil eye,' all that nonsense. Maybe she fears being too different, not fitting in--always trying to get ahead in society. No need for educated people like us to follow it. Once it made sense--don't eat pork. It was a health practice, because of disease. Not an issue now. I love my bacon, though the Doctor says I need to be careful, too."

"You're healthy as a horse, Grandpa. You'll live forever." I said this to make him feel happy. Instead, his eyes seem to moisten, which is very unusual for him. He's always a tower of strength. I'm actually astonished that so innocuous a comment would have such an effect.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm fine, fine, physically. You're right, strong as a horse."

"Good." I look away as he wipes his tears.

"It's actually your grandma who isn't feeling so well."

"Oh, won't she be able to join us for dinner?"

"No, she's in the hospital."

"What!? How come no one told me? I can't believe I had brunch with everyone, then spent all afternoon with mom. Do they know?"

"Yes, I asked them not to tell you. I wanted to."

"How long has she been in the hospital?"

"Several weeks."

"Why didn't you say something?"

"We discussed it as a family, and decided it was best not to distract you from your studies at such a crucial time. There was nothing you could do." He pauses and looks at me, with a stoic sadness "There is noting any of us can do. Her stomach. Cancer. It's inoperable."

\*

\*

\*

We are definitely in another state. The world has intruded even into the doubly protected and sheltered Kansas City enclave. I don't know what to say that doesn't sound trite, so I say nothing.

"I just came from the hospital. She's doing as well as can be expected. She sends you her love. And is looking forward to seeing you before you leave."

"Absolutely. Should I go now?"

"No, she wants us to all have a nice dinner together. Maybe you can go later, after we have dinner with your Dad."

I put my hand on his shoulder. I feel tears in my eyes, but Still don't know what to say. I don't need to say anything, for Grandpa begins one of his speeches about her. I'm glad he has the familiar on which to fall back.

"Been together over fifty years. An amazing woman. Not just in her own right, but that she put up with me. I can still remember when we eloped. Had to borrow \$150. Ever told you the story?" I nod. He continues anyway, but I don't' really mind hearing it again. "That night, she was a pure virgin. Not that I was before,

but from that night on I never strayed. Before she got into bed, she sat me down and read me a passage from the Bible. Genesis 2:24. 'A man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.'"

He pauses, and I can see the confusion, the non-comprehending grief on his face. He departs from the standard story and adds a line I've never heard before:

"I can't imagine her parting. I can't imagine life without her."

\* \* \*

When we arrive at Dad's apartment, Grandpa parks the car, but leaves the ignition running, and doesn't move. I wonder if one day I might be able to settle down and get married. Am I even close to ready? Could Mery be the one? I look over and see that Grandpa's face at first seems taut, stoic, then almost sad, then angry.

"Are you ok, Gramps?" I assume he's thinking about Grandma, but I'm wrong.

"After all I did for him, here's where he ends up. Wharton School of Business. My connections got him in. Then I got him a realty business, but he can't stick to it. Then I invest in your mom's folks' store so he can work there. He left after a year. Then his gambling debts. Constantly, I'm sweeping up after his elephant shit."

"Now, Grandpa, don't be so hard on him."

"Why not? It's not like he didn't have potential. Still does. Just too lazy. Won't stick to anything. Wants it all

right now, without having to do the daily grind. I gave him every opportunity in life." He pauses, turns off the ignition, and looks straight at me. "Like you. You have every opportunity. We know you're not afraid of hard work. Don't make a mess of things like your father. We're counting on you. All of us."

\* \* \*

Dad greets us at the door, shakes Grandpa's hand, and gives me a hug. I realize as he hugs me that I'm actually several inches taller than he is. I like the fact that he hugs. Though he's a man's man--strong, burly, short and stocky---he's not afraid to give a loving bear hug. He runs his hands playfully through my hair. "Getting pretty long, curly top, like when you were a baby. You trying to become one of those, what do they call them, those California hippies?" Even though I know he's being playful and basically kidding, it feels patronizing how everyone is always commenting on my changed hair style. I want to shout in childish rebellion, "You think this is long? I'll show you, and grow my hair really long." As I'm seeing the silliness of this reply and trying to formulate a more clever retort, he says,

"How's mom?" I think he's talking to me, and I wildly search for something safe to say. Then I realize he is talking to Grandpa.

"No change. I told Junior. Breaks your heart. She's looking forward to seeing Junior."

"What about me? I spent all morning with her. What am I, chopped liver? I'm her son." He was smiling, like it was a joke, but it was easy to hear the anger and hurt behind the smile. No one replies as we enter his apartment. It's interesting he and mom use that same expression "chopped liver." I wonder where it comes

from-- the source.

"Look at this little apartment. At your age. After the house I bought you." Grandpa says once inside, shaking his head in disdain and condescension. Dad's face actually turns red. I know that anger rush in him.

One room in the apartment is "out of bounds." Though no one says anything, we know this is where he keeps the belongings of the young woman he met in Connecticut--rumor has it she was a former Miss Connecticut. He was there as part of a new job he took, selling popcorn franchises. It was a period when he just disappeared from our life. I didn't even know where he was. I knew he was always changing jobs, always seeking another chance to finally find success. It never was clear to me why he needed to go to Connecticut to sell popcorn.

\*

\*

\*

Neither Grandpa nor I look toward the supposedly non-existent room as we enter.

"Can I get you all anything to drink before we begin our little man to man chat." Dad and Grandpa have a scotch on the rocks. I ask if there is any wine.

"Oh, Mr. Haughty Tauty, who never drinks, now will indulge a glass of wine. No, I don't have any of that sissy stuff." I ask for orange juice.

Dad isn't yet done with Grandma. He turns to me and says, "Have you ever noticed when you go to kiss her, she turns her cheek and raises her head in a haughty expression. She never initiates a kiss. I've even seen the same thing with Grandpa. Never kisses him on the mouth, either."

"That's just your mother, son. She's always been that way. She's a loving woman, in her own way. Doesn't ever kiss anyone on the lips. We've had fifty years of marriage this year. Traveled the world together many times. You learn to dance with your partner, match your steps together. It takes a while. Then this. Inevitable. But still not prepared. Sad." He looks at me. "Glad we got to take you, Junior, on that cruise, a few years ago."

I'm feeling caught in the middle again. For me, the trip was great. A lot of fun. But for Dad it was, and maybe still is, a sore point. I went, his sister (my aunt) and her husband went, but he wasn't invited. I want to respond to Grandpa, but don't want to antagonize dad.

"My favorite memory was when we were walking up that hill in Italy, toward La Scalia. You were taking me to the Opera. All of us were tired. I stopped to rest. Then I looked up and saw you with a finger in Grandma's back, and she with a finger in your back. I asked you what you were doing."

Dad is looking annoyed. "What were they doing, sticking guns into each other's back, saying 'This is a hold up.'"

"Well, without the guns, it was a type of 'hold up. Grandpa showed me something that day I hope I can one day have in my life. I've told my new girlfriend, Mery, this story. She loved it. Grandpa looked at Grandma with such affection, then he looked at me and explained, 'We're pushing each other up the hill.'"

\*

\*

\*

I look around Dad's apartment, and, if there were an elegant/casual scale, mom's apartment would be at one end of the refined, even dainty side, dad's at the other end, on the informal, almost careless side. Like the ages of the people they were



dating, they chose surroundings and people at opposite ends of a continuum. How did they ever last eighteen years together?

"Your Grandmother thought you looked so handsome on that cruise." He turns to Dad "A well-deserved high school graduation present for our man, number three in his class. Superb grades. Grandmother said we had to buy him three tuxes--black, blue, and white--for the Queen Mary European cruise. Monogrammed cuffs. Quite a sight."

"You've been dressing him in monogrammed cuffs since he was five years old. You created a Brooks brothers baby. Was it really for him, or was it for you--reflected glory and all that? Certainly I hated it when you made me dress up. My suit pants would always itch. What about you, Junior."

I laugh, but I'm uncomfortable, knowing that once again I'm caught in the middle and being forced to choose sides. "I liked the tuxes. It felt cool wearing them to dinner. Like I was a prince or royalty." Grandpa smiles. I've appeased one side. "But I do remember going to Sunday school in wool pants, and the itch was horrible. You taught me the trick of wearing my pajama bottoms under them." Dad now smiles. I've appeased the other side.

"I also remember wondering about the big letter J on my cuffs, in the middle of the two smaller letters. I was learning to read the alphabet in school. The J looked like an upside down candy-cane to me, or a soup ladle, or a fishing hook." I look at dad, then at Grandpa. This seems like a cute, safe story.

"I'm glad Junior has such good memories of his travels with you. Mine aren't nearly as pleasant. Remember in Egypt, I was ten

years old and you and mom went out, leaving me alone with some big guard at the door. I'd open the door and see this tall, fierce sworded figure. He scared me to death. I'll never forget that night, alone, abandoned, and guarded."

Grandpa starts laughing, and dad starts to redden again, saying "What.."

"Nah, that wasn't a guard, just the costume of the hotel staff. Good for you, make a man out of you. Or should have. We gave you enough opportunities, all the resources any child could have."

"Our house was like a museum, our 'living room' such a misnomer, it was never lived in. I felt like I was an outsider who should buy a ticket to view the home I was supposed to belong in." This sounds like mom's view exactly. I wonder if one area they both had in common was disparaging the way Dad's parents lived.

Dad continues, almost without taking a breath "And what about my football and basketball games?" Dad sounds petulant, like a little kid.

"What about them?"

"You never came."

I notice myself becoming uncomfortable listening. This doesn't seem like a conversation I should be privy to. But I feel I would be more conspicuous leaving, so just hope it ends soon. I try to think how to intervene, but decide I'd better be careful, or Dad's anger could easily turn toward me.

"I never came because I was earning a living for you. Would you rather have starved? We came from nothing. It wouldn't hurt you to have worked a little more and gone to a few less of Jun-

ior's games."

"All you ever gave me was things. I'd play my heart out, and look at the stands, see people applauding, and you weren't there. It was a lonely, empty feeling." Turning to me. "That's why I always went to Jr's games. All of them, including the practices. I was there for him. I give of myself. I may not have much materially" he points to his apartment, "but I give of myself. Right, Junior."

"I did like you being in the stands, Dad, especially when I played. I could always hear you rooting. And the coaches always liked you." I smile appreciatively at him.

"I remember that game in St Louis. You were an animal. Didn't back down from anyone. Tackling unassisted. Crushing their offense. You won student of the week with your fearless play. I was really proud of you. That's what I wanted from a father."

\*

\*

\*

I'm not sure what to say or where to look. Somehow Dad's statement of pride in me is seeming less directed as praise toward me than as an attack on Grandpa's fathering. I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, where I can no longer hear their words. But I can hear their yelling and raised voices.

As I take a pee, I see above the toilet a picture with a black felt background of a matador holding a red cloth, and a raging bull, with two swords in it's hide, charging toward him. I remember when Dad bought it in Acapulco, during a trip that he, my Tarzan yelling friend Dana, and I took during Christmas vacation of my Freshman year in college. It was spur of the moment. I'd come home, he'd asked my how my base running was going. I told this first quar-

ter was a pathetic regression. I was studying all the time. Plus I was once again low man on the totem pole. The freshman girls were sought after by freshman through senior guys; and I didn't have a chance with the upper class women. And Grandpa had said no car Freshman year until I proved I could get good grades.

"I'm going to take you to Acapulco. Get a buddy. You need to get the poison out and hit some home runs."

The next day we left. It was a strange trip. I remember on the drive down, after we finished eating in the car, dad would just throw the trash out the window on the street. I asked him about that, telling him the story of how I'd been admonished on a hike at Stanford about littering. He looked at me and laughed "California pussies. I'm just feeding the animals."

\* \* \*  
We checked into our hotel. Las Brisas.

Little pink golf carts to transport us wherever we wanted to go. During the day we'd ski and snorkel and swim. At night Dad would take us to the redlight district. He and Dana would drink shots of tequila. I ordered a "Shirley Temple" and the bartender laughed at me. I ended up with a modified Tequila sunrise without the tequila. As I watched the grenadine splash into the orange juice and saw the reddish color spread sensuously throughout the orange, I'd hear Dad shout to Dana, "No bra on this one." Dana would reply "No underwear on this one." Somehow the male camaraderie public bonding only made me feel shyer, more stilted, awkward, and out of place. It was after one of these drunken nights that Dad bought the painting. Even once sober and in the daylight, he still loved it. "Guess your mom would shit in her pants if I'd ever tried to hang that in our Wenonga house, huh?"

he'd said on the drive back. It looks like this new girlfriend had allowed him to hang it. Where it belongs.

\*

\*

\*

"And it wasn't just football games." Dad looks at me as I reenter. "Right, Junior. I took him bowling on Sundays. I taught him to fish at the lake hole at the country club--he caught his first fish."

I interrupt and smile "Sixth hole, right!" I remember the little dock. I standing, while dad sat on his keens and baited my hook. Even on his knees, he was still taller than I was. I watched his dexterous hands skillfully sticking the hook through the squirming worm. Looking out at the vast expanse of lake, I wondered what lay beneath it, ready to be caught.

He continues. It seems he's not really speaking to me, but for Grandpa." We'd take our BB guns and go to the empty lot across the street and set up coke bottle Indians to shoot." He looks at me proudly, as if to cement a bond between us, in which Grandpa has no part. "You were a great shot, a card carrying junior member of the member of the National Rifle Association." He looks back at Grandpa, " I took him to see the A's play baseball; to see KU and Wilt the Stilt play basketball."

I know I'd better say something. "I did love that first night baseball game. All the lights. It was magical. And Wilt was my hero."

Grandpa is looking unfocused, silent. At first I think he is retreating, maybe weary, maybe hurt by the conversation, or thinking about Grandma. But when he replies, I can tell he was regrouping, and comes back strong.

"You didn't finance Jr's education at Country Day because

you couldn't afford to. I paid for you to go there; and I paid for him to go there. What kind of father were you? You're a little kid trying to live your high school games through him. You go to his practices because you don't have a job. Jr's told me privately that he's embarrassed at how loud you root in the stands. The coaches have told me they feel you're intrusive, and don't say anything to you only out of respect not for you, but for me.

Dad seems caught off guard by the onslaught. But Grandpa is not done. I can imagine him in a courtroom, rising for the closing summation. "And the way you pushed him in those stupid sports." Grandpa looks at me. "His mom told me about the time Junior had just been given the role of starting runner back--whatever it's called--and sprained his knee and ankle, and could barely walk. But you wanted him to play so badly, you took him to a doctor to get a shot so he could play and not notice the pain."

Dad rises for the counter summation, but he seems to redirect his anger. "I remember that game. Every time he carried the ball--it's called fullback by the way--rather than cut around end, he just kept running to the sideline. The coach shouted, 'Cut up field, cut.'" Dad turns toward and on me. "You just ran straight to the sideline like a scared little chicken. I've never backed down from anyone." He stares at me, then back at Grandpa. "A man has got to be a man." He repeats himself "I've never backed down from anyone. Ever."

\*

\*

\*

I feel like a member of a jury who doesn't want to be there. I can feel Dads' bile rising, and I know from experience that all I want to do is get out of his way, and do nothing that will provoke him. I think of going to the bathroom again, but

fear that to leave would call more attention to me. The matador and bull will have to continue their fight unobserved.

As I fear, leaving or not leaving doesn't make any difference. Dad turns to me. "Let's get to the main point Grandpa and I want to discuss with you."

I have no idea what he's talking about. Maybe it has something to do with Grandma? Maybe with how poorly I ran a play in football? Maybe about my manliness in general? What I do know is that he's looking for a fight.

"I talked to your mom this afternoon, and I called Grandpa immediately. She told me you were thinking about taking a year off and not going to law school this fall--just to enjoy yourself, have some freedom. And that it has something to do with that waitress woman. Are you thinking with your balls again?"

I recoil, and feel the need to cover up to protect myself, like in my boxing class when I would start to get hit by jabs to the ribs. Mom's exaggeration, violation, and betrayal of our discussion, Dad's seeking to use this to unite himself and Grandpa against me, are body blows.

My first strategy is to go after mom. I could use a legal defense--it's hearsay, and not admissible. But is that in civil, criminal, or both? And am I saying her conversation is hearsay, or mine, or both. If only the latter, then they can just ask me. I could deny I said it. No, too clearly a lie. I could explain it was just an off-handed remark, not a formal declaration. I could go after mom. "I can't believe mom said something. She's the one who told me I should not just do things because...." I catch myself, realizing that mom's entrapment--"don't do it for your

grandfather"-- will not endear me to anyone, nor will it protect me. I regroup. "I'm sure I'm going to go to law school, probably this fall, as planned. It was just an idea Mery had. I'm just tired after a hard quarter. Really a hard number of years. But I'm fine. There's really nothing more to discuss."

"You're damn right there isn't. You've got all this summer to enjoy, be free. I assume you're not planning on getting a job," Dad continues, angrily. "Were you just wanting to take a free year just to shack up with this girl. I cant believe how lazy and ungrateful...."

Grandpa holds up his hand to stop him. Dad immediately becomes silent. Grandpa continues, "I can understand how you'd be tired after all the hard work you've put in, my Stanford Phi Beta Kappa man. Grandpa was also tired the last few months before he finished college." He smiles at a memory. "Don't know whether I ever told you, but I met Grandma that last semester. Already into law school. Got lazy, almost didn't graduate, and was going to lose my Phi Beta Kappa. Grandma set me straight real fast. Wouldn't see me until I got my grades up. 'JC, never let down. I don't want to marry a lazy man.' He shakes his head, somewhat sweetly, somewhat sadly, then turns back to me. "It's good to have a strong woman on your side. Someone who asks tough questions. Who makes you think. Nothing wrong with that. Looks out for you. Tell Grandpa what's on your mind."

\*

\*

\*

I look at the closed door behind which the mystery woman's belongings (and maybe even she herself) reside. Part of me wishes I could creep away and vanish behind some locked door, and not be missed. I'm not sure I want to have this conversation now. I



didn't like it when Mery made me question my direction, my anchor into life. It was all too abstract and groundless. I feel like broaching the subject with my family is continuing to open a Pandora's box, better re-closed. I'm wary. Even though I appreciate the kindness of Grandpa's tone, and his solicitousness, I know he can be tough. Even more intimidating than dad's overt brutishness.

What am I afraid of?

Displeasing him and losing his approval? Hurting him when he's already suffering because of Grandma? Probably yes to both. But also, if I'm honest, fearful I'll lose Mr. Red and my revenue stream if I make a decision that he doesn't support. I know I need to be careful how I respond.

Yet, who better to ask the questions that Mery raised. Grandpa has a great mind, and maybe he can help me refute Mery's concerns about law and life direction, give me ammunition in responding to her.

I look over at Dad, and it seems he's lost interest again, after Grandpa told him to hush up. I decide why not, and say to Grandpa, "You're right about my being tired. I know that's part of what's going on. I think Mery was just suggesting that it might help me to take some time off, not only to rest, but also to sort out why I'm going law school. That way I can ensure I'm really motivated and focused, and--to use a sports metaphor--" I look over at dad--"I can hit the ground running once I arrive."

"Tiredness I understand. What do you mean about focus and motivation?" Grandpa's tone is serious, direct, and no longer solicitous.

*"It's not really that important. Just some questions Mery asked me. They were really pretty abstract, airy-fairy, idealistic. We can talk about it another time."*

*"You dad may never run away from a fight, but that's why he ends up black and blue. I never run away from a question, no matter how tough. That's why my mind continues to be sharp as a tack. And no matter how much you say these are Mery's questions, they seem to be reverberating in you. Out with them. You know I'm on your side."*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*I know I shouldn't keep going, but the box continues to open and out fly my words. "Well one question is about an my anchor in life. I told her the law was my anchor, but she asked how do I know whether I'm choosing the law, or others are choosing it for me? She made me wonder whether I've been so tunnel visioned trying to get through classes and get into law school that I haven't really taken any time to think about why."*

*I look over at Dad, who starts to sit up and pay attention. Grandpa doesn't seem to be offended by what I'm saying, and in fact motions for me to continue, saying "And what else?"*

*"Some of her questions were about whether the adversarial legal system really creates the best, kindest, most compassionate, open-hearted society? I told her I'm not even sure those are the goals of the law, but that without order, boundaries, rules, everything would be chaos. The law gives a stable foundation for society. That's what you always said, Grandpa. And" and I wink at him, "it's also a good way to make a living."*

*"And did that satisfy her--and you?"*

"I was fine before she asked. But then she said that if all laws are human created, fallible, and arbitrary, how can I find any ultimate meaning in that? She said that human law only focuses on the minimum--what humans shouldn't do. There is no grand vision of human potential. Ethics, God's law, on the other hand, shows who we can become, and gives us a larger structure and order, something beyond human law."

While I've been talking, Dad's face has turned crimson again. Even though he knows Grandpa doesn't want him to say anything, he can't contain himself.

"I'm going to vomit if I hear any more of this God damn ivory tower pseudo-intellectual elitist bullshit. Quit spouting that dribble. It drives me crazy. If you don't want to go to law school, get a job. Then, Mr. Philosophical Socrates, see how important those questions seem while you're flipping burgers."

\*

\*

\*

I think of the bull with the swords in it. Are my words swords that stick in dad, causing him to be enraged. Not intentionally. Or is he the matador, trying to rile me, to get me to charge, and so let Grandpa see that I'm not the elevated, ideal grandson I'm made out to be. I say nothing, waiting to see how Grandpa will respond. He ignores Dad's tirade and even seems like he's coming to my rescue.

"You should ask yourself deep questions about the law. That's healthy. I would expect nothing less of my GRANDson.

I smile at him and at Dad. I know that another sword has just entered the bull's hide.

"Bring me another Scotch on the rocks," he orders Dad.  
"Junior and I are going to have a little philosophical conversa-

tion about the law, and life, aren't we Junior."

I smile again as Dad gets up to get the Scotch.

\*

\*

\*

Grandpa asks me for one of my legal pads, and writes down a few things. A couple of minutes pass. Dad returns with the Scotch. Grandpa takes a drink, then says, "When you were talking, you would often say, 'Mery asked; or 'Mery questioned.' What do YOU think about these topics?"

"To be truthful, I'm not much of a philosopher. Questions about the law's fairness, it's adversarial nature, the search for truth are not ones I have spent much time asking, much less thinking about."

"Stayed on the straight and narrow. Did your work. One foot after the other. Nothing wrong with that. Good work ethic, Grandson. But once you reach the summit, to take a bit of time for reflection, nothing wrong with that, either. As long as you've raised the topics, go ahead, reflect a bit." He then settles back into his chair, and takes another drink. Dad joins him. There is another moment of silence, during which I seek to collect my thoughts. Finally, I begin,

"During my mock-trial class, we'd fight to win the case, using all the means at our disposal. It was indeed an adversarial, battling process, where we only presented information that helped our case. It was definitely fun. I guess Mery's questions make me ask whether this legal skirmishing--with its contentiousness and animosity-- has anything to do with finding justice, fairness, and truth. Does the law even have a Truth--or are we merely learning to shade the truth, and become more skilled at

finding the fine edge of deceit?" I feel a bit like a parrot, echoing Mery's comments. But as I say them, they do have some interest for me.

"What's wrong with that?" Dad interrupts. "As long as it's legal, or they can't catch you."

I ignore his question "And, Mery also pointed out, whoever can pay for the best lawyer wins. What about those people who don't have the resources that we do. Is that fair?"

I stop and look over at Grandpa, who is nodding, and taking a few more notes. Dad, sips some more of his drink, looks toward the locked room, and once again seems distant and bored.

Grandpa looks at dad and says "Those are great questions. Very impressive." I wonder whether he's complementing me, or Mery. Then he turns to me, tears off his top sheet, and gives me back the legal pad. "Ok, get a pen. Ready?"

I look into my brief case which contains pens, yellow legal note pads, folders, Mr. Cannon. It feels like old times, Grandpa giving me my pep talk sessions before I began high school, I with yellow legal pads he'd taken from his office, writing furiously. Effort=success. I raise my pen.

Dad, looking askance, speaks before Grandpa can begin "You still doing that--taking all those notes. I've learned long ago never to put anything in writing." Grandpa shakes his head dismissively and says,

"Ok. First, let's title this sheet 'LAW, PHILOSOPHY, SOCIETY. Colon: Concerns.' Then date it, March xx. Good. Now along the left hand side let's list the five concerns you've stated: First, Adversarialness. Second, Truth and Justice. Third, Fairness to all. Fourth, Is the law the best approach for making people

compassionate, and kind-hearted. Fifth, your free choice and direction in the world. Would you say that summarizes what you've said?"

\*

\*

\*

Grandpa is amazing. He's stated my ideas more clearly than I'd thought them. Maybe I should hire him as a lawyer to defend me against Mery's questions. "Yes, exactly."

"And did any of these feelings arise from your experience with feeding the homeless that you mentioned to me on our drive over here?"

Again, I'm in awe. He doesn't miss anything.

"Yes. When we went to Sixth Street, I felt such a visceral disconnect between the idea of taking an abstract honors political science class next quarter on social services, and the palpable suffering of the people I saw. Serving them food, talking with them, though awkward and hard, seemed so much more immediate and practical than intellectual ivory tower classes."

I realize that they are both just staring at me, saying nothing. Dad seems to have perked up, realizing that I've just put my foot in my mouth. I fear I've said too much. These are thoughts that I haven't really ever articulated, even to myself. They are being formed as they emerge. When I'm calm and in control, I consider every word and gesture. When I become nervous, sometimes I stay quiet; sometimes I just blabber. And here their silence--and my verbiage-- gives them rope to hang me. This is not the time to let my words come out unfiltered and uncensored. I sound like I'm on a soap box. I need to think of a way to try to recover. Have I just plunged a sword into myself? I

can feel the blood of Mr. Red oozing away.

\*

\*

\*

"A bleeding heart liberal. The only reason you're not there with them is because your family shelters you. Be on your own in the real world for a while, and see how sensitively sappy you feel then," Dad returns with a vengeance.

"I want my lawyer to have a heart. Just like my surgeon. Nothing wrong with that." Grandpa speaks to both Dad and me. "But I also want my surgeon to check his heart at the door, and not get squeamish at the sight of blood, or be so caring that he becomes nervous and loses his precise, carefully honed technical skills." He turns to me. "Junior, I respect your developing sensitivity. It's like what I felt toward that hitchhiker. Now, let's put on our thinking caps and take each of your concerns in turn. Are you ready?"

It's interesting. With Dad, and even Grandpa, I feel I'm being just what they said "too sensitive" and need to be reined in, told to be more rational, less "bleeding heart." When I compare myself to Mery, I feel insensitive and callous, overly rational and analytical. Where's the real "me?"

I'm feeling more confused about my life direction than I had realized. It seems with Mery I take a strong anti-religious, pro-law stand. With Grandpa, I seem to be taking a more pro-spiritual, questioning of the law stand. But maybe that's just Mery speaking. My views don't seem very stable, changing depending upon the position the other person I'm with takes. I thought it was just an innocent little remark I made to mom this afternoon. Mery's simple suggestion that I consider taking time off from charging ahead to law school this fall; that it might be good for

me to have some additional time to reflect. Maybe there's more perplexity and bewilderment in me than I realize.

I motion for him to continue.

\*

\*

\*

Dad is now longer just sipping his drink, but taking gulps. Grandpa starts to take a drink, but doesn't, and instead sets his glass down and pushes it away from him. He leans forward in his chair.

"All right. Number 1, top left. LAW. Adversarial. Underline it. Is the law adversarial? Absolutely, built into the very nature of our American legal system. Each side argues its case as strongly as it can, then an independent jury decides. Can it be misused? Of course. Especially by those damn prosecutors. As a lawyer, I've argued forcefully and complained bitterly--in court, and to our bar association--that they, as representatives of the all powerful government, must not use cutthroat tactics to seek victory. Someone has to protect the little guy from their bullying." I suppress a smile as I wonder if Grandpa is thinking of Pendergast as one of the little guys.

Grandpa thumps his chest in a grand gesture. I am writing as fast as I can. I feel comfortable in this mode. The good student, receiving wisdom. When I finish writing, I look toward Grandpa. I decide not to glance at Dad.

"But let's look deeper, more philosophically, more historically at your question. If you're going to tackle tough issues, Junior, you need to do your homework. Know what you don't know.

"There is no place on earth, no society, no situation, in which law doesn't exist in some form. It touches everyone's life, every day. The only interesting question is what type of law



should we be ruled by. Think for a moment about the assumptions and implications behind our adversarial legal system. Before civilized law, there was--and still can be-- the law of the jungle. The stronger, more brutish win. Hobbes was right. Human beings have a base, animalistic nature. Our civilized laws evolved to govern our unruly selves. In our society, rather than fight physically, we channel our conflicts into an arena."

I hold up my hand for him to pause, as I continue writing. He turns to Dad and says, "My throat's getting dry. Please bring me some water with ice. And take this drink away." He hands him the Scotch.

"Yes, our legal system is adversarial. Sounds barbaric, doesn't it, just like the Bible's 'an eye for an eye' also sounds primitive. Gandhi said if we followed this Biblical injunction, everyone would be blind. What people forget is the context: barbaric compared to what? In pre-Biblical times there was literally a disproportional response: if an eye was lost, or other bodily harm suffered, the vengeful punishment was often death. Gandhi misunderstood the deeper wisdom of fairness and mercy in that Biblical injunction, seeing it only as vengeful.

"Similar attacks on the adversarial system also lack historical context and nuance. How did it evolve, and why? Compare adversarial law to jungle law, and you see a positive evolutionary step forward. Just by stepping into the court, and agreeing to certain rules, we've created a non-violent way of negotiating disagreements, a means of maintaining order in society. Does that make us as a society, better people than if we lived under a jungle law? A rhetorical question, Junior. Of course it does, without question, and I don't believe anyone can disagree. Case

closed. Next point."

\*

\*

\*

Everyone always said I was like Grandpa because I could argue both sides of a case. What I see he's done is hear my arguments with perfect clarity, so that he could argue my side better than I could. Then, once he knows my position, he responds and minces it to pieces. I feel like I'm gathering material to present to Mery--and me--when I'm having doubts. Grandpa, meanwhile, is on a roll. Though his language is still often clipped and elliptical, there are patches of passionate eloquence I don't often hear in his daily speech.

"Second point. Truth and Justice. Underline it. Subpoint: Connection to adversarial approach. I once heard of an example from an adversarial English court in which a judge, aggravated and bewildered after hearing differing accounts from successive witnesses, asked the barrister if he was ever ABLE to hear the real truth. The barrister looked at him and replied, 'No, my lord, merely the evidence.'"

I laugh. Even Dad seems to appreciate the story.

"What's the alternative to our adversarial system." There is silence, and I realize this is not a rhetorical question. He's asking me. And Dad. Neither of us say anything. I shrug. "More homework, Junior. The first effort to move beyond jungle law was the Inquisitorial system--used often by our European friends--based on civil law systems deriving from Roman and Napoleonic codes. In this system, a neutral judge tries to solve the case. Is it an improvement over jungle law? Yes. But what's the problem with it? Why did the adversarial system evolve?"

He looks at me. I shrug again. If I were in an actual class, I would see my grade going down rapidly.

"The little guy. In the inquisitorial system, especially in the early English courts, the judge could be inquisitor, prosecutor, and fact finder. Criminal defendants couldn't have counsel, call witnesses, conduct cross-examinations, offer affirmative defenses. The adversarial system is based on the theory that each side should be able to develop its own proofs and arguments. I believe that is the best way to help the judge or jury resolve the conflict. The inquisitorial courts are far less sensitive to individual rights than our adversarial system. We see the adversarial system as the best way yet devised to obtain a fair resolution, elicit the truth, and protect individual rights."

He pauses with a rhetorical flourish. I guess the case is not yet closed. He takes a drink of water, and I continue writing. He takes a breath and begins again.

"Is our current legal system the apex and final word? Certainly not. Is it messy, contentious, at times even vengeful? Yes. But look at where we were. Look at the evolution. We are on a SEARCH for truth and justice; we have not settled on final pronouncement. It's evolving knowledge. You know from your classes that the Constitution bars cruel and unusual punishment. But what does that mean? Chief Justice Earl Warren in 1958 said this rule must be judged by the 'evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society.' The best practitioners of the law seek truth and justice. Are we there yet? No. Are we on the right path? Yes. Case closed. Next point."

\*

\*

\*

I continue scribbling as Grandpa pauses for more water. I

feel he's talking to me personally. Yet he once told me that the best improvised speech is one you have prepared beforehand. I have the feeling that this is not the first time he's considered these issues.

"Point three. Fairness. Underline it. You're really asking whether people with more resources have better legal representation? Again, there is no doubt. Is that as it should be? Absolutely not. As Grandpa does, you too will need to do pro bono work to help poor people in need. That's where your good heart will serve you, keep you compassionate. Case closed."

"Point four. Is the law the best way to make people open, kind-hearted, compassionate? The answer is yes and no. Without our law and legal system, you would have a brutish, violent society. Law provides the basic foundation for society, Somebody has to be the trenches doing that work. That's the role of the lawyer. THEN, and only then, can other professions--religion, maybe philosophy, maybe great works of literature, the poets-- have the time and space and safety to reflect, write, think-- about love, kindness.

A lawyer's job is to constrain, if not remove our bestiality. It should not be, and actually cannot be a means to legislate morality and kindness. The law provides an ordered, safe, fair framework so that others can enjoy and build on the fruits of the lawyer's work. You're mixing apples and oranges. Yes to apples, no to oranges. Case closed. Next point."

\*

\*

\*

Grandpa sits back in his chair. He wipes his brow. "Ok, one to go. Your path. Your free choice. Will I be proud if you

become a lawyer? Of course. Do I want you to do it if you don't feel it's right for you? Of course not."

I'm continuing to take notes when I hear Grandpa say "Stop. This is not about notes now, this is about you. I want you to do what you want. HOWEVER, whatever you do, I want you to throw your heart and and mind and soul into it and be the BEST. Period. That's my only standard. Always been my philosophy. Be the best. Just ask you Dad."

I look over at Dad to see if he's squirming, but he sits motionless.

"My grandfather was a Rabbi. When I was a teenager he gave me Martin Buber's book, I-Thou. The opposite of adversarialness. I loved it. I loved my grandfather. He'd hold me on his knee and sing Hebrew prayers with me. And we had almost nothing to eat. I wanted to make sure there was food on the table for my family. I didn't have the luxury--and perhaps the burden-- to ask the questions you are raising. I had to earn a living right out of the gate. The law is a tough profession. You have to be a fighter, tough-skinned. Maybe that's not for you. You have to decide."

I start to say something, but he holds up his hand.

"What I will tell you is, it is people like you, who have the mind and the heart, whom we need to be lawyers. People who can help change the law from the inside, to ensure that it becomes even better, more filled with truth, justice, and fairness. To make sure that adversarialness occurs within a larger context, not as an end in itself. Grandson, in the fractious, pluralistic society we live in, the law is a noble pursuit that creates a foundational body of secular wisdom upon which all other disciplines can build. Being a lawyer teaches you how to think, how to

*listen, to hear the other person's point of view.*

*Lord willing, you will want to make us all proud and bring us reflected glory, by serving in that esteemed profession. But you alone, with your Creator, need to determine what your ultimate meaning, purpose, and vision is here on earth. Those are questions that are too deep and philosophical, even for Grandpa. That choice is yours alone. Case open."*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*Dad starts applauding. At first I can't tell whether it's sarcastic or genuine. He holds up his glass. "A toast to an amazing lawyer." We all clink. I see that dad is actually filled with admiration. His mood seems to have shifted again. His anger is gone; his unfocused bored expression has disappeared, and he is light-hearted and jovial. "Let me tell you a story" he says.*

*Dad is once again in his element. No one can be more fun, and tell better stories than Dad when he's in the right mood. I used to love curling up in his lap when I was a kid, listening to stories of Kokomoland, a far away enchanted place, where I was always a hero. Sometimes I battled alone, sometimes with Miriam and Aaron--once they became old enough. Our enemy was evil; our task to save the fairy queen, by vanquishing the cruel tyrant and his nefarious armies. I was a mythological hero. He the narrative god of fantasy land.*

*And, now, he's shifted from a Grandpa-bashing to a Grandpa admiring mood. And I'm looking forward to the story.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*"Have I ever told you about the Greyhound case?" I sit back in the easy chair. Grandpa does the same. I am sure if Grandpa*

still smoked, this would be a time he would light up a cigar. I've heard the case before, but I enjoy listening to the sound of Dad's voice when he's like this. I also feel I can relax, for these kinds of stories are safe, ordered, and have a happy ending. I feel like a little kid, yet smile as I look and see the story teller is a middle aged man with a mane, of wavy gray hair; and his audience is an old man with gray thinning, wispy hair combed from front to back to cover the top of his head; and a young man, with longish brown curly hair.

"Your grandfather was clever, and fair. He'd fight for the underdog. Once he had a client who nobody would take, a poor guy, with no money, who wore tattered clothes and, to top it off, was a drunkard. This man was suing the bus line because he claimed the driver pulled away just as he was boarding. He said the driver had closed the door on him when he had only one foot on the step, causing him to fall back on the cement. He wanted hospital claims and money for pain and suffering. Everyone assumed he had just fallen down in a state of intoxication, and no one wanted to take on a poor, uninsured drunk. No one except Grandpa.

"Grandpa did some research, and agreed to take the case for no fee if the man lost. He used his own money to buy the poor guy some clothes, shoes, get him a haircut, and a shave.

"I went to the trial. The bus driver was on the stand. Said yes, the man had definitely put one foot on the first step. However, contrary to what the plaintiff claimed, the driver said that the man had also put his other foot feet on the first step, and only when they were both firmly planted had he tried to close the door behind the plaintiff. But the plaintiff, before

the door actually closed, drunkenly fell back into the street.

"The jury was looking bored. It was a he said/he said case. Even after your Grandpa cleaned up his client, it was obvious the bus driver was a much more credible witness.

"Then Grandpa began his cross-examination. It was very quick. 'So you say you saw both his feet on the first step.'

"Clear as day."

"And how far were you from him?"

"Closer than you to me. Maybe five feet."

"Seated on your driver seat."

"Yes."

"And how tall are you, sir."

"5 feet 9 inches, give or take a 1/2" inch." The bus driver looked at the jury and smiled. He felt invincible.

Grandpa ignored the smile and pressed on. "Have you ever heard of Wilt Chamberlain?"

"Objection, irrelevant." The opposing counsel, jumping up, shouted.

"Sustained." The judge admonished. "Stick to the facts, counsel."

The jury is tittering and guffawing, sure that this case is over, and this hick Kansas City lawyer is about to get tossed out of the courtroom.

Grandpa looked over at the jury, smiling and nodding deferentially at them, then at the judge. "With all due respect Judge, and ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I am sticking to the facts. Your honor, this man would have to be eight inches taller than Wilt Chamberlain--at least 7 feet 8 inches-- in order to see



what he claims. Are you 7 feet 8 inches, sir?"

The jury became hushed, attentive.

"Objection."

"Overruled. You may proceed. Answer the question."

"What are you talking about? I'm five feet nine."

"Grandpa pulled out a diagram showing the bus driver's seat, the dimensions of a six foot man seated in the seat, and the eye line to the first step. 'As you can see from this diagram, taken from the measurements of the bus in question, a person would have to be 7 feet eight inches to see the first step when seated.' He let his fingers go along the dotted diagonal line from the silhouetted man to the first step.

"There were audible gasps from the gallery and the jury. Even the judge. If applause were allowed in a courtroom, you would have heard it."

Dad was looking at Grandpa with admiration. Grandpa was smiling. I began clapping.

"Case closed. Victory."

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*



ou sound very proud of your grandfather when you recount that story. And also I hear affection in your voice when you mention your father's story telling ability. You're having to do a lot of ducking and weaving to keep things on an even keel with them. That must have been especially hard after the feelings you were having about Kansas City on the drive over, and then what you learned during the drive from your grandfather. Overall it seems you're doing a good job of holding things together. Would you agree with my assessment? And what in particular what you like to focus on from that time with them?"

I realize that if Dr. Lisbet had made this statement and asked these questions, I would be angry at her. I would point out that her delicate dancing around and avoidance of the shocking news of my Grandmother's cancer is really insensitive. And I would tell her that her unwillingness to tackle directly the pain I'm feeling at Kansas City's cloisterdness, my confusion and unraveling about my life direction, and the mean-spirited comments of my father is cowardice. However, since it is the Rebbe who makes these comments, I accept that he's trying to put a positive, optimistic frame on the situation, and allow me to take responsibility to choose what I want to focus on. So, I reply differently to him:

"Grandpa once told me a joke of a person who tumbles accidentally off the Empire State building. As he rushes past the 36th floor, a reporter holds out a microphone and says 'How's it Going' to which the falling person replies 'So far so good.'"

The Rebbe smiles, as I knew he would. Dr. Lisbet remains impassive, as I expected she would.

I smile back at the Rebbe. "I was really trying to keep things peaceful. I felt like I had two strikes on me. One at the brunch, and one with mom, and I made a commitment with myself to do better with Grandpa and Dad. I didn't want a third strike. So, yes, I was very attentive to trying to keep them both placated. I felt like I was hugging the plate, protecting it, fouling off some pitches. But I was pretty off-balance. I felt betrayed and entrapped by mom-- mentioning my off-handed comments about law school in the fall. That wasn't something I planned on talking about with them."

"And your grandmother?" Dr. Lisbet interrupts.

I know what she's asking--if I would like to discuss my feelings about hearing of her cancer. But I don't want to talk about Grandma. I'm too tender and raw. So I look at her, almost angrily, and reply,

"Dead."

\* \* \*

There is silence. Dr. Lisbet starts to take a sip of tea, but then puts the cup down. "I'm sorry."

"So am I, but that doesn't help."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No." I feel like I'm an adolescent back in therapy with Dr. Gundle, giving either sarcastic or monosyllabic replies, totally stifling the interaction by my passive aggressive non-compliance.

The Rebbe comes in to break the impasse.

"I, too, am sorry for your loss. Know that we are here to talk with you about your feelings when you are ready." He pauses. I see genuine compassion in his face, particularly his eyes. Dr.

Lisbet says the same words, but I don't feel the same from her. "Are there some issues that arose with your father and grandfather that you would like to discuss with us?"

"It seems to me in that conversation I can see for the first time confusion in my professional life direction. With a clear, unquestioned goal--getting into the best college, then the best law school--life was simple. When I question the very tracks I are on, the seeds of chaos are sown. A slow unraveling occurs." I notice it is difficult for me to swallow, so I take a sip of tea. For some reason, I decide to let my little pinky come off the cup and curl into the air, like mom used to do. I have no idea why.

"The unraveling started so subtly. A conversation with Mery, a casual remark to mom, her passing that on to Dad, he to Grandpa. And I began to realize how unquestioning and unreflective and ignorant I'd been about why I was doing what I was doing. In some ways, I wish I'd never met Mery."

"Are you trying to blame Mery for making you reflect about your life direction? Do you think that wouldn't have happened otherwise, or you'd have been better off continuing down what you called your 'tracks.'"

Dr. Lisbet's question is astute, pertinent, and extremely annoying. Why am I developing such hostility toward this woman? I try to ignore my feelings, and respond:

"I've asked myself that question a lot. Yes, there is part of me that wishes I'd never asked those questions. I would have been a lot happier for a lot longer."

"That's an honest reply," she responds. I soften somewhat at her compliment. Then she says, "Of course, that's the answer of a

contented pig."

"What are you talking about?" I respond angrily. "Are you calling me a male chauvinist?"

"Touchy touchy. No. Should I?" She remains even tempered. "Haven't you ever read Mill's Utilitarianism, or Voltaire's Story of the Good Brahmin? If not, you should. Mill said 'It is better to be a human (or Socrates) dissatisfied than a pig satisfied.' That's what I was referring to. "

"Which would you rather be?"

"In Buddhism's Wheel of Life, the pig symbolizes ignorance. Islam says knowledge can lift us to the celestial world. Without it, we are no better than a pig. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, suffering and self-consciousness is the price of knowledge--learning about good and evil. Your response flies in the face of everything I believe about life and consciousness and human growth. And it bodes very poorly for successful therapy."

\*

\*

\*

The Rebbe gets up to get some more tea. What a coward. I push my feet into the ugly dark green carpet and start rocking. I wonder if the slight, almost frail-looking body of this old woman is just a front for a ram rod steel core. I have no judicious response. "Thank you for heaping further criticism on me when I'm already feeling downcast, and just trying to be honest. That's really very decent and compassionate of you."

"Do you feel hurt by my remark? Do you respond sarcastically to hurt?"

"Of course I feel hurt."

"Look, young man, let's get something straight. Again. I will tell you what I think you need to hear. Not what you want to hear. And I will tell you that for your own good. What you do

with it, and how you respond to it is up to you. You can learn from what I say, and you can learn from how you respond. Or not. To me, life is about self-reflection and growth. At the deepest level--as you are so fond of saying--I don't believe we humans have any other choice if we are going to survive."

The Rebbe returns with more tea. I take a sip. I'm angry. I want to cry. I don't trust myself to say anything. Dr. Lisbet continues, "I believe people are only trustworthy to the extent that they know themselves and have a consciously evolved and thought-through values framework. That includes me...and you...and the Rebbe.

"I'm sorry if you find this process difficult. Aristotle said philosophy is born in wonder. Kierkegaard said he only wished that were still true 2000 years later. For him, philosophy was born in fear and trembling. I'm sorry you are feeling the pain, like Kierkegaard, like Voltaire's Brahmin, of asking difficult questions."

She pauses for me to comment but I say nothing. She continues,

"Your life in many ways parallels the early life of Buddha. You were shielded from your family in a literal and psychological castle. The Titanic doesn't sink; they don't tell you of your grandmother's illness; you are sheltered and protected from financial concerns. Then, one day, there is a crack in the castle door. You see poverty and homelessness; you see death staring at you. That is reality. Join the human race, young man.

"Before that, you were not a very compassionate person. Now, it's up to you how you want to choose to respond to the realities you've seen."

\*

\*

\*

Why is it that I'm so often the recipient of other people's lectures? I know that Dr. Lisbet's words are profound, but I don't really want to let them penetrate too deeply into me. To keep them at a distance, I write them down so I can consider them later, at my leisure, and not in this pressure-filled situation. Like my flute practice, I will need to go through them several times.

"Do you think I'm a chicken?"

"A what?" Dr. Lisbet asks, wrinkling her brow.

"A chicken." I can play the animal game as well as she can.

"I'm still not clear what you're asking."

"A cowardly lion." I wonder if she knows the Wizard of Oz. Then, by random association, I think of the lion in the dream where my brother and I are throwing the football. Stop mind. I make a note for later.

"Why do you ask that?" Dr. Lisbet asks.

"What you just said now about the contented cow...pig. What Dad said about my running toward the sideline rather than downfield. First I wonder if I fear facing myself. Then I sometimes wonder if all this introspection and self-exploration is a way to avoid life, a way to keep running toward the sidelines rather than downfield, like he said."

"You suspect? ...worry? ....you want to avoid life by not thinking about it; then you fear that reflecting about your life may also be a way of running from it?"

"I think it might be."

"Are you afraid?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe afraid I'm a weak person....Maybe afraid of running toward life, running

down the field, when I have no idea where the end zone is. Or what's end zone and what's sideline. Getting tackled for no reason, for no point. When I was with Dad and Grandpa, all I wanted to do was get out of there, go see Grandma, then head back to California in time for my Tuesday tennis game. I didn't want any more acrimony, any more fights, any more sadness. I still don't."

The Rebbe begins to shuffle his papers, then speaks. "You said when we first met you that you no longer had a rope to swing to: you'd left behind the womb of your family, your girlfriend, your admission to law school, your country. Was coming to Israel a running away from your life?"

"At the time I thought it was a courageous act of independence. Now, I'm not so sure. Maybe I was just afraid to face myself and my problems back there."

The Rebbe stacks his folder neatly on the side of his chair. I feel like I'm looking in a mirror. "Dr. Lisbet has studied and practiced the Chinese philosophy embedded in tai chi. I believe it would be helpful for you to consider coming to one of her classes. It would help address non-intellectually, in a physical, soft martial art form, the essence of the questions you are asking." He hands me a flier. "Her new class begins February 1--in less than two weeks. I invite you to consider it. In the meantime, I sense that there are some important topics we need to discuss: what it means to be male, to be courageous, to find your direction in life. That's where I'd like to see us focus next session."

\*

\*

\*

I'm relieved this session is ending. But I'm also annoyed. I'm feeling unresolved. I haven't finished sharing about my



encounter with Grandpa and Dad. The Rebbe's raising further unresolved questions. He's not answering directly whether I am a coward. Just telling me to take another class from them—From Dr. Lisbet. For more money. And now they're kicking me out into aloneness to be by myself for another week.

Then I remember the thoughts I'd had about the dream of my grandparents and brother and sister, seeing how I could be all the parts of the dream. Maybe they'll give me some extra time to talk about it. After all, it was an assignment that I dutifully completed for them. "Dr. Lisbet, I did think about the dream, as you asked."

She has a blank stare. "You know, the one with my grandparents, and siblings, that you said was partly wish fulfillment, me wanting my family back together."

She seems to recognize what I'm referring to. "You asked me to imagine that all parts of the dream were me, and I took some notes about that. Can I share them?"

"Yes, of course. Interesting. But our session is nearly at an end, and the Rebbe wants to talk about the forgiveness prayer. We can do it next week."

Great, putting his needs before mine. And I'm supposed to be paying for this. Another injustice toward me that I'm not going to be willing to forgive. I can feel myself sulking as I put away my dream journal entry.

\*

\*

\*

"Did you do the forgiveness prayer this week?" The Rebbe asks. "And make one of your extraordinary charts?"

"I told you I'm not ready," I say with some annoyance.

"As I shared with you," the Rebbe continues, still calm, as if ignoring my emotional tone, "one part of the prayer is forgiv-

ing others for hurts they've caused you. I hear that you're not yet ready for that. One part is asking others to forgive you for hurts you've caused them. Might there be some part of you that feels more ready to add that part?"

"There are some people I can say that to--those who are mainly innocent: Aaron, Miriam, Grandpa Dave, my blue-eyed Grandma--of course I can do that. Others, mom, dad, Mery, Richard, even Nana and Grandpa JC, I'm not yet ready. And God I don't even want to think about for now."

"Fair enough. That's honest, and that's where you are. Maybe this week forgive those whom you can, and ask their forgiveness. Just as a way of starting the practice. Would you consider that?" I slightly incline my head. He could take that for a yes. I'll decide later. "And, as I said last week, there is one more part to the forgiveness prayer....forgiving yourself."

"For what?"

"Sometimes we do things which cause ourselves hurt, intentionally or unintentionally, by our thoughts, words, and deeds. Nightly, we can ask forgiveness for those hurts."

"From whom are we asking forgiveness?"

"I ask forgiveness both from God, from the compassionate Source of the Universe, and from myself."

"What if I haven't made up my mind yet about the universe's compassion?"

"Look, son, when you are beating yourself up because you're not sure whether you're running away from life by going toward the sideline, or coming to Israel; when you are running into tacklers and letting yourself get hurt even though you're not sure where you are running...you are creating hurt and pain for

yourself. There are sometimes when you have to recognize that you just don't know what is true. And in that learning and growing process, there is a lot of birth pain. No matter what the source, I believe it is important for you to start practicing some compassion and forgiveness toward yourself." He looks at me in that kindly way of his that makes it hard to stay angry with him. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

This time I incline my head fully, signaling yes.

He raises his hands, in the Star trek finger separation, and holds them above me. "Blessings of peace and healing upon you. See you next week."

\*

\*

\*

---

*"Your grandfather sounds wise. Not only is he shrewd in winning his case, but he really has a deep philosophical understanding of the role of the law. You must be very proud of him. I'd shared the story of Grandpa's Wilt Chamberlain victory with Mery, and a few of the more telling points Grandpa had made about the law. I want to show her that the law is a noble--even compassionate-- profession.*

---

*"And I love the image of you, your father, and grandfather having such a thoughtful dinner together."*

---

*"Thanks, yea, it's great that we could all be so supportive of each other at such a rough time, because of Grandma."*

---

*Mery gives me that compassionate look that always precedes a hug. I welcome her caress, and as I hug her back, I say, "We are at a choice point. We could go over to the ocean now--or, if you'd like to go horseback riding with me by the ocean, my normal riding day is tomorrow."*

---

*She pulls back from me. "Where would I stay tonight?"*

---

*I try to say calm and cute, putting my hands behind my back,*

looking up at the sky, and whistling "Gee, I don't know. I could find you a room with a friend. Or a hotel room. Or, I could sleep on the couch. Or like when I'm visiting you, I could agree to sleep on the far side of the bed, except for 'cuddles."

"Did you plan to have me sleep with you when I came down here? I thought it was just for the day." Cuteness does not seem to be working.

"Mery, you know how much I respect you. And I know what a religious, spiritual person you are. I wouldn't ever want to do anything that makes you uncomfortable. Really."

She softens. "Ok, I trust you. But since I have to work tomorrow, it would be better if we go to the ocean now, and I drive back this evening. Is that ok?"

"Only if you let me take you to dinner tonight before you go home."

"Why kind sir, you drive such a hard bargain." She gives me another hug "Are you ever the charmer. I love a respectful man."

\*

\*

\*

I feel the powerful purr of Mr. Red hugging the curves as we drive up toward Skyline and toward Half Moon Bay. I put my arm around her shoulder nonchalantly, and simultaneously tell her a story that I know she will like.

"My grandfather recently sent me some money with one of his notes, telling me how proud he and grandma were of me, that he knew I would make the right decision, and wanted me to do something fun." I playfully tap her shoulder saying "though I'm not sure he thought I would spend most of it on you!" She smiles awkwardly, starts to respond, but I stop her. I know she'll come around once I finish the story...it's tailor-made for her.

*"I wrote him back, thanking grandma and him, asking after her health. I also told him I wanted him to know that I used part of the money to contribute to the food program at the mission. I told him that was your idea." I look over at her, and see her staring so kindly and warmly at me. She leans over, and places her head on my shoulder, and her hand on my thigh. Ah, called that one right!*

*"I've learned so much from you. There's such a disconnect between the honors political science class on social services, and the real people that I saw at the mission. Their suffering is palpable. It seems wrong to be studying them so abstractly. I really am beginning to understand what you mean by intellectual ivory tower. Is law really the best way to help? Feeding them, talking with them, though hard, seems so much more immediate and practical."*

*She doesn't respond verbally, but her head rests more tenderly on my shoulder, and her hand continues to stroke my thigh. No other response is needed.*

\* \* \*

Really?! I'm embarrassed, even disgusted by you. Moments before you're sharing a story to convince her that the law can be a noble and compassionate profession. Now, you're telling a story about how you see the limits of the law, and again, what a kind, compassionate person you are. Geez, you would make a good lawyer. You can argue both sides of a position with equal conviction, all so you can "win" whatever you feel the prize is. Is there no moral core in you?

\* \* \*

*We drive for a while in silence. As we near reach the stables, she asks "When did you first start riding?"*

*"My first experience, I was about five. I was pretty scared of horses. But my parents told me I had to face my fears to*

overcome them. Actually, they told me that twice. The first time I burst out crying on the horse --actually a little pony. But it started bucking, and my mom pulled me off with such force that my little high-topped and tightly laced tennis shoe was left trapped in the stirrup."

"What a mother. Your family is amazing. You must feel so loved."

"Well, at the time, I felt rescued, but also that they were the ones that had put me in danger in the first place. And now I was really crying. That's when they said, when you fall off, or get scared, you've got to get right back on. So back on the horse they put me. Now, no fear!

"Then, later, my family would take yearly trips to a dude ranch in Tucson. We'd go on all day rides into the desert, cooking breakfast, hiking. Dad had taught me to ride by explaining horses were like dogs. We grew up surrounded by three large German Shepherd police dogs.

"'Dogs want to know who their master is'" dad would intone in that deep baritone voice of his. 'And you can never show fear. They have to know who is boss. Same with a horse. A horse feels a predator on its back. You have to show them who is in control.'" Same with a child, I think to myself.

"The dogs were always friendly to me. I had no fear of them, but some of the neighbor kids and their parents weren't too pleased." I smile over at Mery. "But dad said they were great watch dogs and would protect us.

"One day the neighbors' golden retriever came into our front yard. He was a big friendly dog, Rex was his name. Two of our Shepherds started barking frantically, then actually leaped our

fence and chased him away, biting him in the process. Though I felt sorry Rex was hurt, I also experienced a certain pride that in some areas we were more powerful than our countryclub neighbors. We had our turf, and it was well protected."

I realize by Mery's silence and non-responsiveness that this is not a well received story. It veers too closely to the swimming lanes issue. "Do you like the pines and redwoods?" I ask, shifting content and focus.

\* \* \*

"I'm really pretty afraid of horses. Do you mind if I just watch, or walk along the beach, or hike up the bluff?"

"Are you afraid I won't be able to pull you off in time if it start bucking?" I tease.

"Great, now I'm really afraid."

"I'll tell you what, if you won't let me teach you this time, you can ride with me on my horse. I'll keep you safe." She still seems hesitant, but I reiterate I am a trustworthy horseman, and if the ride becomes too scary, we can stop when she wants. To overcome her not wanting to get on the horse in the first place, I am seeking to give her a sense of control once she's on the horse. Inwardly, I am proud of my integrating lawyerly argumentation and psychological acumen to persuade her.

\* \* \*

I mount the horse first. Then, with the stableboy's help, Mery puts her left foot in the stirrup and swings her right leg over the back part of the saddle. Though there is something erotic about her having to spread her legs to mount the horse, I am disappointed that they dangle down and clutch the horse's flank. If we were riding a motorcycle, her legs would have to be

spread on either side of me. I imagine she would clench her thighs in fear tightly around my buttocks. At least she places both her hands around my stomach, pulling her breasts into my back. I like that she is forced to place her trust in me. It bodes well for future trust situations.

"Hang on," I say needlessly. I squeeze my knees and thighs into the horse, and off we go at a walk.

\* \* \*

I image myself telling Richard about this moment, Mery getting on the horse, her arms around me, holding me tight, riding along the beach. Why would I want to share this with him? To brag, like telling him about getting into Harvard?

Thinking of him is a mistake.

I hear him saying, "You used a saddle? How unromantic, and how uncomfortable for her. You had a stable boy help you? How unmanly. You put her behind you? How ungentlemanly. If you really wanted to be suave, you would have ridden bareback; you would have lifted her onto the horse, then grabbed its mane and swung yourself up behind her.

"What kind of horse did you ride?" I hear his monologue continuing. "Knowing you, I'm sure it was a steamy, snorty, macho, uncastrated stallion, with really developed musculature, right? Was it A gray, with its snowy white color. Oh, no, dude ranch boy, how about a gelding, nice and castrated, or did you select a mare, out of respect for Mery's temerity? Or yours? What a sissy."

\* \* \*

Although I start the ride at a slow walking pace to allow Mery to adjust and feel comfortable, this dialogue with Richard infuriates me. I grab the saddle horn tightly with my



left hand. I know that's wussy, but that's how I was taught, and it makes me feel secure. Richard's voice intercedes again "That's not a horseman, that's a hacker."

The horse realizes it's going to be dominated. Man against beast. Predator against prey. She lays her ears back. Her breathing is not easy. I'm sure I could see the whites of her eyes and the swishing of her tail. No matter, I'm the boss. She will see no fear in me.

I tell Mery to hold on. The horse begins to trot. I look down at the reddish brown color of the bay mare, with its black mane. I imagine its black tail swishing as we pick up speed.

I lean back and shout to Mery, "If we were standing on the ground, and watching the horse, we could see her diagonal legs swinging forward together. That's what a trot means." Then as I kick into the mare and slap the reins against her neck, she begins to go a bit faster, breaking into a canter as I sing out "Da da dum; da da dum" to the three beat gait. I think of trying to explain how the horse's legs move at a canter: right hind, left hind, plus right front suspended, then moving only her left front leg. It's poetic visually, but too cumbersome verbally, so I just continue my da da dum vocalization. As Mery holds me tighter, and I sing louder and louder, Richard's nasty voice becomes a distant, receding memory.

\*

\*

\*

We spend the next hour riding through the trails and hills and along the ocean. I notice an almost surreal feeling of ecstasy arising in me. Part of it is arousal from being so close to Mery. Part of it is a feeling of irreducible power--the horse is an extension of me. I pull the reins, she reacts instantly. I

*kick her with my heels and pinch my knees into her belly, and she canters and gallops for me. It's almost the same feeling I sometimes get playing tennis, when my arms and legs work together in an intimate harmony, directing the ball exactly where I want it to go. At those times I feel whole, in flow, graceful. Now I am feeling the same intimate connection and harmony, as if I am one with the horse.*

*Faster and faster the horse seems to be flying over the ground. I see and feel everything, yet focus on nothing, all senses blurring. The wind in my face, Mery's arms around me, the waves pounding the beach, the horse's dancing hoofs splashing water onto us, the roar of the ocean as the setting sun glitters and glistens dazzlingly, like cut diamonds, on the water. They all seem at my beck and call.*

\*

\*

\*

*I can feel Mery's initial stiffness dissolve, and my lingham's stiffness begins to increase. She is laughing, giggling, kissing me on the neck. "This is glorious" she cries out, almost shouting. I image her hair blowing in the wind, her head thrown back. I am holding tight to the saddlehorn with my left hand. I put the reins in that hand, and place my right hand on Mery's hands, which are both still on my stomach. I take her top hand, and lower it a few inches so that she has her own saddlehorn to hang onto--trying to get her to caress my lingham. At first she is hesitant, and I feel her hand tense. I gently massage her hand, and feel it slowly relax. I know she really has no choice but to accede to my invitation. What else is she doing to do galloping along on the back of the horse? She begins to caress me.*

*Glorious indeed.*

\*

\*

\*

*As we continue riding like this, I feel myself leave my body, rise into the air, and onto a nearby hill. It's as if I am no longer riding the horse; I am no longer being hugged and caressed by Mery. Rather, I am sitting and looking down towards the beach. There are two people riding a horse on the sand. The sun is beginning to set. The girl's hair is alternately golden, then dark. The surf pounds onto the shore and the ocean stretches to the horizon, its far edge merging with the edge of the sky, while its swelling mass reflects the infinite heavens, multicolored, with blood red lightbulbs flashing and radiating from the setting sun like crimson stars amidst the dark blue undulations.*

*The person on the hill looks down on all this. He sees these two people who are merging with the ocean and the sky, part of the picture. They are the picture. The self watching these two people knows that they are happy; and, after watching them awhile longer, he floats back down the hill and back into me to join us for the rest of the journey.*

*I know that I am happy, peaceful, content.*

\*

\*

\*

*As I pull Mr. Red into the valet parking at the San Francisco Symphony Hall, where the signs advertise Von Karajan and the Berlin Philharmonia's performance of Beethoven's Ninth, I place my arm once again on Mery's shoulder, and the only thoughts and feelings in my mind and body are "Ode to Joy."*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

**J**

ohannes' altered state feeling of oneness, wholeness, and intimacy with the horse and Mery is convoluted and distorted with power and control. Yet, almost as soon as he reaches that state, he reflexively pulls back, and distances himself, becoming the detached observer. Why?

It's a question I want to ask the Rebbe for sure, and maybe Dr. Lisbet. It feels like a different type of detached observation than the one the Rebbe commented on when as an adolescent I would stand at our apartment window looking down at the people on the street below. There was no intimacy in that. Is the withdrawal from fear of being too much in the moment? Fear of getting too close to intimacy? Is it a problem?

There are so many topics to cover. I still haven't finished with my father. Or the dream. Or my comments on the parashah. I make some notes and add these questions to my ever-growing list.

\*

\*

\*

As I enter the Rebbe's office, I am aware that this is the last Wednesday of the month, and the issue of payment may come up. I decide to share about Dad, but also indirectly share about what financial straits I'm in. They may get the hint that I slide right off their sliding scale, and not ask me for anything. Also, they may feel sympathetic for what I've suffered.

We go through the obligatory greetings and cleansing meditation. The Rebbe ends with his usual "May we open ourselves to the

highest Source of wisdom in the universe. May we allow that holy sacred Source of blessing to guide us in our sessions together...toward healing and wholeness, and wisdom." I notice that I do enjoy this little ritual at the start, and hearing the Rebbe's blessing. It creates a feeling of hope, trust and optimism in me. With those feelings, I begin to share more about Grandpa, and especially Dad.

I'm feeling pretty good. Dad has told a story of Grandpa's victory. Grandpa has been relatively open handed about my choices. It seems like now would be a good time to go to dinner and call it an evening.

"Anybody hungry?" I ask pleasantly.

"Son, Grandpa and I need to talk for a few minutes. Why don't you excuse yourself to my bedroom, or go wash up in the bathroom. We'll call for you."

I feel hurt and puzzled by this ostracism, but I dutifully join the matador and the bull in the bathroom. I leave the lights off, and the door a crack open.

"Sad turn of events. Had hoped he would have been able to keep nose to the grindstone longer, without asking big questions. Better for him not to think too much. Too hard. Grandpa knows. Always protected him. Protected Grandma. Now can't. Maybe some-time everyone has to ask. Grandma's scared. Asking too many big questions, too."

"Why were you complimenting that girl, Dad. It's clear she's the one pushing him off course."

"If I start to attack you, son, what do you do?"

"Fight back, of course."

*"And if I were to attack someone you are dating--" there is a pause, and I assume Grandpa is pointing to the locked room, "would you listen to me?"*

*"I'd want your approval. But I'm a grown man. No, I have to make my own decisions."*

*"Fine, case closed. Why do you think your son is any different? If I attack his girlfriend of a week, he'll only resist and become closer to her, as a way to ward off the attack. He's tired, he needs a little companionship. It's only been a week. It'll blow over. He's not going to end up with a waitress. Don't make such a big thing out of it."*

*There is silence, then Dad says, "What's all this about whatever profession you want is fine? You've told me from day one you wanted him to be the lawyer that I never was."*

*"You'd have been a fine lawyer. Just couldn't control and channel your temper. Couldn't stick to anything. Need to put in hard, disciplined work. Effort equals success. "*

*"I don't want to rehash me. What about him? Why all this whatever you want to do? And what's with this GRAND....son? I don't like the way that sounds. I'm the son."*

*"Don't be petty. Catch more flies with honey than vinegar. First, the honey. Let him feel safe, trusting. As you know, there are consequences for actions. I'll remind Junior of those. You, son, could learn a lesson or two from me on getting your way without having to bully. Enough said. Call Junior back, I'm getting tired. I want to go visit grandma again tonight."*

\*

\*

\*

*"Junior, do you remember when you called me-- two weeks ago yesterday--and let me know that you had just been accepted to*

Harvard?" What a difference two weeks makes. I remember my excitement when he said he wanted a serious conversation about additional cherries--a monetary reward for my success. Now, I feel I'm dancing on thin ice. I don't like feeling Dad and Grandpa are ganging up on me, dad with his brutish attacks, Grandpa with his duplicitous chess moves. I feel like I need to get away and think things through. This is not the time to make a stand--even if I knew what that stand was.

"It was exciting news. We were both very happy."

"I told you then we needed to have a conversation about the 'cherry' tree. Still need to. We also must talk man to man about your car. The lease renewal is coming up this fall. Once you've matriculated at Harvard would be a good time to discuss both of these. Agreed? In the meantime, you already have several cherries from the tree that I gave you at 21 to keep you going, right?"

"Of course, that was so generous of you, Grandpa." The stocks and bonds give me an income of less than \$50 a week. Well below the poverty line for one person. But I knew then and now, never to seem needy about money. The best strategy is always to praise his generosity and never ask for anything.

"And you remember my saying that was just a bite from the cherry tree? There are lots more cherries. Depends on your choices. Your choices have always been excellent. Phi Beta Kappa like your grandfather." Dad winces. "You must continue to be the best. Stanford undergraduate is the best. Harvard Law School is the best. Period. We can talk about additional cherries in the fall."

I can feel Grandpa's controlling reins start to tighten.

*It helps that there is a one-generation remove. I wonder what it must have been like for Dad. Yet, even with this buffer, I still feel some fear. I wonder what life would be like without additional cherries, without Mr. Red. "Change is never easy, Junior. It's hard to leave a place you've been for four years. But change is inevitable. It's time to move on, and change can be an adventure, exciting. Remember, you're going to be finished at Stanford in a few months. So have some fun, but go slow, enjoy your freedom as the promising young man you are." He pauses, then adds with a wink, "And make sure you keep making good choices."*

*"I'm grateful. Really. This is a wonderful opportunity. I'm feeling much better after our talk, a lot clearer. I'm sure it was just that I was feeling tired, and therefore vulnerable to some of the issues Mery raised."*

*"Grandpa doesn't want to hear your self-indulgent feelings," Dad interrupts. "He wants you to tell him you're going to Harvard, and all this mealy-mouthed whining this woman is putting into your head is going to stop now."*

*I've just said what they say they want to hear--that I'm going to go to law school in the fall. Yet Dad keeps charging, sticking more swords in me. He's looking for a fight, wants me to charge at him. I can feel that part of him is disappointed I'm backing down and agreeing to go in the fall.*

*He's also trying to show that he is still a force to be reckoned with. This time Grandpa doesn't stop Dad's tirade. Instead, in a calm voice, he reinforces it, "Junior, money, societal approbation, being well respected, those are the extremely valuable, some of highest accolades you can receive in life. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."*



I surrender still further. "I understand. You are amazing in what you achieved, Grandpa. And it's hard to follow that." I look at Dad, somewhat apologetically, somewhat pointedly, because I know this is a vulnerable area for him. Two can thrust swords. Mine are just less direct. Dad returns my stare.

\* \* \*

"I didn't have the opportunity I'm affording you. I had nothing. Everything I got I earned. I made sure your father had advantages and opportunities I never had, but he didn't fully utilize his Wharton education, never went on for further study. Now I'm offering them to you. I want you to bring reflected glory to us. You have a chance to go to Harvard. The world is yours."

Though I've heard Grandpa talk before about all the advantages both dad and I have received from him, he doesn't seem to be speaking with the same authority. His voice seem tired.

Seeing my grandfather's saddened face, Dad turns livid. "You ungrateful little..." My grandfather holds up a hand, warning him to back down. My father immediately swallows his words and ostensibly changes his tone. "Dad, let Junior and me talk a bit. Why don't you go see how grandma is doing?" He looks at me, scornfully, "I know that Junior here is also worried about her and doesn't want to upset you further. He and I can have a little talk while you're gone."

"Can you drop Junior by the hospital after you two have dinner?"

"Be happy to. I'm on Sheriff's patrol tonight. I can go right by there. Then I'll take care of all the scum that crawls out from under the rocks when it gets dark."

Grandpa picks up his hat and turns to me. "You know how proud I am of you. Don't disappoint me. I'm sure you won't. Enough said. I am feeling tired." He turns to Dad and me. "It will be good for the two of you to have some time alone together." Grandpa then straightens up, as if determined not to be bowed down...by this conversation? By Grandma?. He then takes several firm, resolute steps, and at the door turns and says, "Remember, Junior, no matter what the adversity, you are the architect of your life."

\*

\*

\*

This is not a happy turn of events. I feel sad as I watch Grandpa go. I have no desire to be the source of more disappointment in his life. He seems older, grayer, more bent than I've ever seen him. Yet I admire his efforts to re-right. Did he do that for himself, or for me? But I don't have much time to dwell on him, because now it's just Dad and me alone. I feel like the little boy who was often told by mom, "Your father will be home later to punish you." I remember how I'd stick a book or pillow in my pants, trying to mitigate the pain of the whopping, to cut the slash of the belt. But of course that was a mistake, and only increased his wrath. Except the first time, when he actually broke into laughter, and said, "Clever boy, you're off the hook this time." Ok, I'm older now, more mature, just stay calm and see what happens.

\*

\*

\*

I decide to take the initiative, to ward off whatever attack may be coming.

"Dad, when Grandpa sends me a letter, he puts at the bottom 'dictated but not re-read.' What is that about? It seems kind of

impersonal. Does he ever send you letters like that?" As soon as I say this, I become afraid. Either dad will pair with me, but later tell Grandpa; or he will get angry with me for criticizing Grandpa.

"Grandpa's letters were never personal. All he ever seemed to care about was pushing me to success, 'You are the architect of your life stuff.' But he only did that to bring 'reflected glory' to himself." He pauses, then, as if remembering the question. "But the dictated but not reread is recent. I don't think he means anything by it. It's because he's losing his eyesight. He won't admit it, but he has trouble seeing. He probably shouldn't even be driving. He doesn't want to unnecessarily tax his eyes and that's why he doesn't read the letters."

Though I feel sorry for Grandpa, I'm actually relieved and happy to hear that it wasn't anything personal (or impersonal) that caused him to do that. So far, so good. I try another question:

"Dad, when Grandpa and I were driving over, I asked him why he decided to stay in Kansas City. How about you?"

He looks at me for a moment, as if deciding whether or how to answer, or if he should be offended.

"It's a good place to be, son. A fine economic climate. We're established here, have a good name. Your mom was from here. She wanted to be near her folks. Her brother, your uncle returned here. There was never any question in my mind that I would live anywhere else. I traveled the world with mom and dad. I'll never leave America again. And this is the middle of America, as safe and secure as you can be." He then narrows his eyes and looks at me. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious. It seems for Grandpa, after his family left the chaos of Germany, it was everything they could do to make a new life for themselves. His opportunities were limited. In some ways he was trapped. The best he could do was go to the state college, and that was a big step forward given his roots. Earning money was a way out of poverty, a way to create opportunities. It allowed him to send you to Wharton, me to Stanford. It's like grandpa wanted to give us broader visions than he had for himself. There's something amazingly strong about that. Wanting more for your child and offspring than you had for yourself."

Dad doesn't say anything. Is he listening? Bored? Did I just share too much? Am I just trying to understand dad better, or is this a way to subtly, subconsciously make a dig at him. I'm not even sure myself, but curiosity wins out. I continue:

"But whereas he needed to build a base where he was--in Kansas City--in order to make money, you could have lived anywhere, just like I can. I just wondered why you chose here."

"So, Kansas City isn't good enough for you, you who had everything given to you on a silver platter." Here we go again. I notice my own feelings are defensive. I want to say to him, first, I had nothing more given to me on a silver platter than you, and I took what was on the platter and worked one heck of a lot harder to take advantage of it than you ever did. I know that's not the right response. And then I want to say to him, you're just afraid to leave the womb of your family. Even Grandpa says so. You traveled as a child around the world with them. But not as an adult. Now, you want to hide here, because the world seems too scary for you. I know that is not the right response either. I wonder if it would be safe enough to ask whether he ever finds Kansas City stultify-

ing. Does he ever feel trapped here? But to keep harmony, I decide that's about as far as I should push this conversation. I decide to completely change the subject.

\* \* \*

"Do you remember when I got caught in Sunday School listening to the world series with my transistor radio?"

"Boy, was your mom mad at you. And then at me. All I did was laugh. Then, when she gave me that look, I turned and said, 'Don't you ever do that again.'"

"With a huge wink."

"You bet." He moves his hands, as if balancing invisible weights. "Sunday School. World series. Are you kidding? I was a boy once. Still am. I know what's really important." He walks over to a wicker chair in the corner, and reaches behind it "Here, go out for a pass. Five and fake button hook." I get up from my chair, take a few steps, button hook. "Now go" and I as I turn, he throws the ball. It's a little bit out of my reach, but I get one hand on it, before the ball crashes into a glass and falls to the floor.

"You never could catch."

\* \* \*

Dad ignores the broken glass and turns to me and says "Are you intentionally trying to upset your grandfather at such a vulnerable time? What is this nonsense talk about the homeless suffering? I see their ilk every night on patrol. They don't deserve your concern. Why are you really starting to question law school? Don't be an idiot. Your grandfather and I didn't pay good money for your education so you could throw it away by ending up

in the gutter like some lowlifes. What kind of propaganda has this waitress been feeding you? Are you just thinking with your balls, Mr Primadonna? Try thinking of someone else besides yourself."

"You paid nothing for my education, Grandpa paid it all," I say to myself. But it's almost as if he has heard me. He raises his hands as if he's in a boxing ring "Didn't you take a boxing class. Come on, let's go a couple rounds." I stand there and say nothing. "Just kidding, sissy."

He turns to walk toward the bathroom, then stops and looks back at me.

"Can't you see how he is suffering? Grandma was diagnosed with cancer several months ago. They she said we shouldn't tell you, because they didn't want to upset Mr Primadonna's studies. Well, she's got cancer, and it's spread, and she's very sick."

\* \* \*

When dad returns from the bathroom, his face is washed. He seems more subdued, calm, almost pleasant. A facade, or real? Has he been crying?

"I remember when you were a baby, your mother would put you in the cradle when it was time to sleep. We had a wooden one that rocked back and forth. You'd cry and cry. Finally, your mom would send me in. I'd rock you, tell you a story. Soon your eyes would close. I'd stretch my arm out as I backed toward the door, still rocking the cradle.

"Slowly, with my other arm, I'd open the door. Rocking, rocking, sneaking a foot out the door. Seeing your eyes peacefully resting, lids lowering.

"As soon as I got both feet out the door, and let go of the

crib, 'WWAAAAAHHHH.' And back I'd come, rocking again." He smiles. I smile back. I've heard this story before. It's a cute one, depending upon how he chooses to interpret it. Sometimes he tells it to show how close we were; sometimes to show how I was never satisfied, a primadonna always wanting more, even as a baby, and always complaining. I'm wondering where he's going this time.

But with no transition he switches to "How's your mom? Are you two getting on better?"

"We had a nice drive and shared a piece of apple pie." I respond cautiously. He doesn't like it when mom and I don't get on; and he doesn't like it when we get on too well.

"She as beautiful as ever?" Before I could answer, he says "Never should have been divorced. I'd take her back in a second if she'd have me. Wonderful woman. People think she's weak. Wrong. Strongest woman I've ever met." He's been looking up over my right shoulder as he was talking, but now refocuses on me.

"When you were five, you'd crawled under a big chest of drawers--several hundred pounds-- in our bedroom. You turned your head, and then came a fierce, terrified cry. I was there in the room. But before I could do a thing, your mother, pregnant with your sister, rushed over and lifted that chest of drawers by herself--several hundred pounds mind you-- and I pulled you out. I've never seen such strength in a person. Later I tried to lift it and I couldn't even get it to budge. She's a remarkable woman." For a moment, he seems to have the same wistful look that mom did this afternoon.

"Why did you get divorced?"

*"It was all your mom's fault. I was happy to stay. She was so puritanical, wouldn't even let me kiss her in public. Damn Catholics put the fear of hell in her about sex."*

*As he says this I think of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

*"Though I liked that shyness and properness about her. To protect her sensibilities, we even developed a hand signal when we were in public. One of us would squeeze the other's hand three times, meaning 'I love you.' Then, the other person would squeeze back twice, meaning 'How much?' Then the original person would squeeze hard--meaning "Oohhh, this much." I'd never squeeze too hard, of course, she was dainty, and I never wanted to hurt her. She was my princess. When I'd leave for work in the morning, I'd write her little notes. I even became poetic. My best 'Good morning beautiful princess. How does it feel to be so completely loved by someone...that's how much you are loved by me."*

*He gives a nostalgic, romantic sigh. "That was good, wasn't it?"*

*"She mentioned a manicurist?"*

*"Oh, that. Your mom. You should know by now that you can never trust her. Do you know that picture of her holding you so close, looking into your eyes when you were a baby?"*

*"Yeah, I love that picture."*

*"It was completely staged. We had a professional photographer there. Your mother never nursed you, was even too afraid to hold you. She was scared she'd do so something wrong, make a mistake, have a panic attack. She always had the maids take care of you. She was so afraid of ending up with another dead child."*  
*He stops, puts his hand on his mouth, as if aghast at what he*



just said...

"What are you talking about? Is this another of your stories, complete with hand to mouth theatrics?"

I look at his face for signs of a wink. He seems serious, but he's good at lying while appearing earnest, sometimes especially so. You can't always tell. "Sorry. No, it's true. Your mom and I had a baby who died before you were--a little boy. They called him a blue baby, he didn't get enough blood; and only lived a few days. "

I'm speechless. I feel kicked in the stomach, shock, but the feelings are inchoate. Horrified, angry, confused.

"Why didn't anyone ever tell me?"

"What good would it have done? What difference would it make in your life? That's what your mom and I decided. Especially her. She wanted to protect you from everything bad in life. You know, the Titanic never sinks, our dog Salty never died. Everyone wants to protect you. That's why they told me not to tell you that Grandma was sick. Anyway, it just slipped out. It was a long time ago. Your mom and I never ever spoke of it again. "

"Then why are you telling me this now."

"You were making your mom into a saint, attacking me. I was fighting back, letting you know she wasn't such a good mother. I was trying to explain why she was afraid to hold you. Your mom makes me so angry. Like I said, it just slipped out. I still get enraged when I think of what your mother did to drive us apart."

\*

\*

\*

I'm a cauldron of emotions. I'm not the oldest son?

"Did you name him?"

"Yes, your name, Junior."

I had an older brother.

And the picture of mom caressing me...staged. I wonder why  
it hurts to have a positive memory shattered when found illusory  
more than twenty years later. I feel sad, even angry.

At mom. At dad. He admitted he told me the story of the  
posed picture to get even with mom. Did the story of an older  
dead brother really just slip out?

Dad always told me the best way to foil your opponent is to  
deflect their attention, get them emotionally confused, then they  
lose their ability to fight successfully. I feel myself stuffing  
and channeling all my emotions into a focused sentence. I'll  
deal with this other brother later. I'm not going to be side-  
tracked. I ask him again, forcefully:

"The manicurist?"

"Oh, that. Your mom was so distrustful. She even put a pri-  
vate eye on me. She was wrong about the manicurist. She was just  
a friend. The sex was for fun, meaningless, it didn't threaten  
our relationship in any way. She didn't seem to understand that."  
He seems like he's going to get angry, then smiles, almost con-  
spiratorially. "But there was one, though. Your mom never found  
out. Cynthia. She was a beautiful woman, tall, even taller than  
me. We were in a bar and they were giving out free popcorn. To be  
friendly, I offered some from my container to a new guy who  
walked in. We made small talk. He was a nice guy, then he left,  
and I didn't think anything of it. Ten minutes later, he returned,  
told me he went across the street to a used car dealer, and  
there was a guy who started asking questions about me, showed him  
a picture, asked if he'd seen me in the bar with anyone. He had a

camera, probably to take a picture of me leaving the bar. That was how I discovered your mom had put a private eye on me. Can you believe it?

"Believe what?"

"That this stranger, whom I'd just met, had become so fond of me that he came all the way back to warn me. So, I told the bartender I needed an escape route. He was a pal of mine, led me into his private quarters and Cynthia and I slipped out the back. I'm sure the private eye wondered where I'd disappeared to."

Dad is laughing. I'm laughing. It's hard not to get caught up in his engaging raconteur style. When he smiles and laughs, it's like a little kid. He has perfect teeth; his eyes glisten; his whole face lights up. At times like these, it's impossible not to fall under his spell, to feel charmed by him. Just ask the stranger who came to his rescue; the bartender who joined in the escapade. To dad, it's all just a fun story. And he tells great stories. That he was lying to mom, deceiving her, doing what she had specifically asked him not to do, only adds to the entertainment value.

\*

\*

\*

"So, back to you. You know your grandfather only wants what's best for you. Be honest with me, what's going on? We've always been able to talk openly. Remember the baseball game and your 'bases' journal? You've always been able to come to me with any questions. Same now." He seems open and eager to hear, to be of help. I remember when I was 16, sitting with him in his undercover police car outside my new "home" at Nana and Grandpa Dave's house, after mom had kicked me out.

"Anything you want to ask me, feel free. If anything happens, you get a girl pregnant, know you can come to me." It felt wonderful that someone was talking to me, while I was in exile from mom's home.

\* \* \*

With these good memories, I decide to share one back, just to test the waters.

"When you had your pallet business, I was a sophomore in college."

"Yeah, so."

"And I called and said 'Dad, isn't the goal of life to make money? and you said 'Yes, of course.' And then I said, 'well, why don't I drop out of college and come help you with the pallet business. That way, I could start earning money, and there wouldn't be any more college costs.'"

"What did I tell you?"

"You told me to shut up, you never wanted to hear such nonsense talk again, and to keep my butt in college."

"Why are you bringing this up? It was good advice. I didn't need your help. Damn government. Lost my contracts. Nothing you could have done to help."

"It was good advice, but I didn't see it at the time. I guess I just wanted to say thanks."

He looks down awkwardly, clears his throat, then says

"That's not really a question. Don't you have any?"

\* \* \*

Things seem to be going well, and so I decide to step into his question. "I know you all are proud of me, and that I can speak openly with you." He nods for me to continue.

*"When I first went to private school in 7th grade, I co-won the prize for outstanding academics, athletics, and citizenship."*

*"Yes, I remember. So? You bragging again?"*

*I wonder if maybe I am. But I say, "No, it's really a question. When you and mom got divorced, she would often ask me why I was playing football, doing athletics-- for me or for you?"*

*"And."*

*"I told her it was for me. But it was kind of a confusing question. I didn't really like her asking it. I just wanted to play sports, and I liked it when you were proud of me."*

*"I loved watching you play. My anger management teacher told me your mom was just being caring. But I know what you mean. She'd attack me, too, telling me I was pushing you, you were going to get hurt, and it would all be my fault. It was like she was trying to drive a wedge between us "*

*"Yes. Exactly. It was confusing. Was she caring for me? Trying to get you? And why was I playing? Before she asked, I just played and had fun. I guess more than I realized, I'm feeling now a little confused again. I always thought I wanted to go to law school. But Mery, by asking questions and making me reflect --and it seems like her motives are caring--makes me wonder whether I'm going to law school for me, or to bring 'reflected glory' to Grandpa. And, maybe it really is that I'm just tired after four years of working to reach this goal. That's not all that clear, but it's as honest as I can be."*

*"Grandpa can be tough. Always pushing you to be better. I got that 'reflected glory' stuff all my life, too."*

*"Right. So I've been wondering who I am really. It was*

always 'Good boy, you raked the leaves.' I was rewarded for what I did, for being good, for accomplishing. Would I be praised--even loved---if I didn't do good things. Grandpa seems to imply he'd take away my Corvette, he'd take away the rest of the cherries if I don't behave the way he wants me to. I know that's not a reason not to go to law school. But do I want to? I've never really thought about the law--what it is, what it means. Or maybe never really thought too much about me. I mean I think about how to accomplish things, to navigate my way through the world--school, relations--but who is the me doing the navigating? Does that make any sense?" I realize these are new thoughts, not only in terms of sharing with Dad, but also sharing with myself. They seem like they are springing full-born from my brain. But I've never really done this kind of questioning before. How did the thoughts, doubts, questions get there? Where have they come from? Is it from the existential reading, from Mery? I look at Dad to see if he understands what I'm saying.

\*

\*

\*

"Does that make any sense?" Dad pauses, almost cutely, stroking pensively an imaginary goatee. "No, it makes no sense. You're just babbling. Get to the point. The law is a fine profession. Why are you disappointing Grandpa? Why can't you just rest your mind this summer, if that's what you need; or stir your mind to find out who you are, whichever you want. Then go to Harvard in the fall. Frankly, I think you're just trying to indulge your primadonna fantasies. 'Oh me oh my, should I go to Harvard or not, poor me, I'm so confused.'" He makes a silly

*little ballerina gesture, then lets both his wrists fall limp beneath his chin, palms facing his chest, and sticks his tongue out, like a little panting dog seeking approval.*

\*

\*

\*

I look away in embarrassment, but am not sure where to focus. I see the broken glass and go over to pick it up. "Let that be," he says. His tone changes from mocking to earnest and caring.

"Look, son, sometimes you have to be brave. Face the challenges of life. You can't just run away. I'm here to help you.

"Who stroked your forehead with a cold cloth when you had fever during the flood? Who told you it didn't matter if you picked a chicken pox off the tip of your nose and got a scar there, because it wasn't in a conspicuous place?"

I smile at the ludicrousness of his consolation—and that I believed him! I also feel like Job confronted by a litany of God's accomplishments. I choose to play along and continue the chorus.

"You were there for me, Dad. Still are. I know that. Ok, here's one for you. Remember when we went to the Union Station for dinner? I always ordered chicken cacciatore, and you told me that if I ate everything, they'd give me a free cartoon book in the gift shop?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Honest answer. Did they really give free cartoon books if you ate all your food?"

He laughs. "Remember when you came home sad because you were cut from the basketball team?"

"Are you changing the subject?"

"Shh, just answer me. Do you remember?"

"Right, one day the coach read the team list and my name

wasn't on it. I was sent to the intramural team. The next day he yelled, "Hey, Get over here. What are you doing in the intramurals." I reminded him he hadn't call my name yesterday. He said, 'What, are you deaf, I called it right after Rogers. Get up here.' Because of my ear, I assumed I didn't hear him." I pause, unsure whether to add more, and decide to continue "But I'm pretty sure you had a hand in this. I look at dad inquiringly. He twinkles his eyes mischievously, but instead of replying, introduces another story.

"Do you remember at the end of junior year when you weren't on the list of students earning a varsity letter." I continue to play along with his digression, not sure where he's going with this story.

"Right, and then the next day they put up a revised list and my name was there. I assumed they realized their mistake."

"Some things, like cartoon books at the Union station, you being cut and reinstated in basketball, your name magically appearing on the varsity list, just accept. Sometimes Santa Clause is real. Don't ask too many questions. You get me?" I had always wondered if he hadn't pulled some strings in each case. I smile, appreciatively, and even co-conspiratorially.

"You can always count on ol' Dad. Now, go out for a pass. I know you can do better."

\*

\*

\*

We look around the room, and can't immediately find the football. "Never mind," Dad says, "We don't need a football. Five, button hook, and go." I go through the motions, stepping around the ottoman and the glass on the floor. He throws an imaginary football, and I pretend to bobble it then catch it with one hand



*while diving onto the ottoman. "Touchdown" I shout.*

*"It's all because of the quarterback" he smiles. Then, in one fluid motion, he shifts from football to basketball. "And who taught you how to shoot a fade away jump shot?" He doesn't wait for an answer, but starts to dribble an imaginary basketball "One, two, step in, step back, jump. From 12 feet away, right side of the court. Swish." His right wrist, after an elegant follow through, holds its position for a few seconds, palm facing downward.*

*"And who taught you how to go low to pick up a grounder?" His eye is on an imaginary ball as he scoops it up and throws to first. Then his right hand swings over his head.*

*"And who taught you to watch where the ball was going to be tossed on the tennis serve, not to watch the motions of the server?" and he hits a backhand service return and yells "that's a winner and jumps up with a "hurrah" fists raised to the sky.*

*Catching his breath, he starts laughing. "I sometimes look in the mirror, and on the outside I see a person becoming an older man. Gray hair, crinkles around the eyes, though still a smooth, unwrinkled face. But then I look inside my blue eyes and you know what I see? Look in these eyes." He is now gazing at me with a gleeful twinkle. "Inside, there is still just a little kid dancing and skipping around."*

*\* \* \**

*We both move to the makeshift breakfast room table. He takes a large swallow of his drink. "More exercise than I've gotten in a week," he pants. There are lots of papers on the table, which he pushes to the side. He pulls a salt shaker from the counter. "The goal is to get the salt shaker as close to the edge, without going over. Try it."*

I push the salt shaker across the table, and it stops about ten inches short.

"Sissy. You've got to go for it."

He pushes the shaker across the table, and it stops two inches from the edge. "All right!" he shouts. "Try again, Alice. Your turn."

This time the shaker goes off the table. He nimbly catches it. "Loser." But he's laughing. He then pushes it back toward me, and it looks like it's going to fall off, too. I don't know whether to hope it does or doesn't. It comes to rest with about 1/4 of the shaker hanging over the edge. Dad let's out a "Whoopee!!! I should be in Vegas now. I'm on a roll. So much to teach you, so little time." He looks at me, grinning that infectious smile of his with those perfect teeth.

"Who taught you to drive?" I have no idea where he is going with this.

"You. I remember your trying to trick me, saying, look at the cow over there."

"Right, and you didn't, just said, 'Dad, you told me to always keep my eyes on the road.'" He reaches across the table and tousles my hair. "Smart boy. Good answer."

"And who taught you how to sweeten your study time with ice cream." The version of God and Job continues, God citing his accomplishments, Job the obsequious dutiful choir.

"You again."

"The only way to study--while eating icecream. You need a pint of chocolate chip icecream and a pint of vanilla icecream. Let them melt to the right temperature, and then stir and eat."

*That's the way to make learning fun." I smile, remembering his giving advice about homework while he smushed together various scoops of his flavored icecream, stirring them slowly and thoughtfully as he dispensed his wisdom.*

*"Who came to everyone one of your football games? There I was. I knew the coaches. I knew your teachers."*

*"You, Dad."*

*"And why? Because it was fun for me. I never acted from shoulds or duty. I did it because I wanted to be the father I didn't have, to be the father I wanted. And I enjoyed it. Nobody made me do it. Nobody makes me do anything I don't want to."*

*\* \* \**

*His tone has shifted again, from gleeful, to slightly ominous. "And who managed your baseball team. Remember when our team was playing in the league finals. I was the manager. You were pitching. I was home-plate umpire. Our last pitcher had loaded the bases. I brought you in from short stop. Bottom of the last inning. Two outs. Three and two count. We're ahead by one run. Do you remember what happened?"*

*"I remember it well. I was petrified, feeling what am I doing here, there's too much pressure, I'm out of my league. I felt like everything depended on me. I could lose the game for the team."*

*"You called me out from behind the plate, to the mound. Told me you were afraid they'd get a hit off you, you remember? And what did I say to you? That's not the way a winner thinks. You are supported by a great team. Look around, see the other players behind you. They're there to help. A winner loves the pressure. No fear. Now, take a breath, and pitch."*

*I say nothing, and he continues*

*"And what happened then?"*

*"I wound up, delivered the pitch and the batter fouled it off. That only increased the pressure."*

*"Then I made what became the final pitch."*

*"You, the umpire, gleefully shouted 'Strike three, you're out.' And everybody on our team starts cheering. 'We won the game.'"*

*"But you weren't cheering."*

*I shake my head in agreement.*

*"In fact, you walked past the catcher who was rushing out to greet you, came up to the homeplate umpire, and said 'Dad', loud enough for everyone to hear, 'Dad, that pitch was outside. It shouldn't have been called a strike.'*

*"If we hadn't been in public, you would have gotten a potch right then and there. I remember the embarrassment, shouting at you, 'The pitch was a strike. I'm the umpire. He's out. Game over.'"*

*"But dad, even now as I think about it, do you think it was right for the manager of one team to be the umpire, too."*

*"Look, Junior, I'm the umpire. Some umpires say 'I call 'em like I see 'em.' I call em like I see 'em, and how I see 'em is how they are. How I seem 'em is the truth. I am the ultimate controller of the game. That's how I help."*

*Dad's tone is becoming more menacing. "And you better learn how to accept the help I give you. I told you then, and I tell you now, 'Don't ever do to me again what you did during that baseball game.' You know what I'm talking about? Don't ever chal-*

lenge your father. Now, tell me what your thoughts and plans are. I'll consider them, and then I'll let you know what the decision will be." He seems to be done; then he pauses, looks at me, and continues. "I'll umpire."

\* \* \*

I am sitting in a blue sofa, my legs up on the ottoman. Dad is still seated at the breakfast room table, with lots of papers scattered around on it. He's stirring his drink. He's not really drunk very much during this conversation. I know that how I reply is critical, and that the safest response is "You're right. Whatever you say, I'll follow." It's not really clear to me that dad cares whether I go to law school or not. I even imagine part of him is jealous I got in, and that Grandpa is lavishing so much attention on me. So why's he pushing me? I believe it must be to please his father, to show Grandpa that he, dad, is a powerful man, has influence over me, and can get me to do what Grandpa wants me to. Or, maybe it's just to show that he's powerful and in control, period.

"Dad, I appreciate how you helped me, and us, win that game. And your guidance has always been important to me But I'm over 21 now--as you always said; over 3x7, time to stand on your own two feet. I really am grateful you are offering me your opinion. But I need to make the final decision. I've got to umpire my own life game. As Grandpa said 'You are the architect of your own life.'"

He sits silently and stirs his drink. Then he calmly and slowly pushes it away, toward the papers grouped on the far side of the table. Some of them fall off the table and drift lazily to the ground.

As the papers fall, he sluggishly, but methodically pushes

*his chair back and rises.*

*The smile is gone. It looks like I've said the wrong thing.*

*Another sword into the bull?*

*"See your feet on the ottoman. At the country club, my friends said they saw you pull out a second chair, and put your feet on them. Like you owned the place. Like a God damn primadonna.*

*Take your God damn fucking feet off my ottoman."*

*He walks with a calculated, deliberate pace over toward the ottoman. The menacing, reddish contortion in his face is returning. After several steps, he is standing over me. I know that face well, and can feel the old terror return. He raises his arm to strike me, and almost as if in slow motion, I feel myself go into a self-protective posture. My knees bend and I pull my legs in to protect my groin and stomach; my arms cross at the elbows to protect my neck and I put my hands across my face. I turn on my right side, protecting my good ear, offering my buttocks. I feel myself looking down from the ceiling, and from above, I see a grown man in a fetal position cowering before the engulfing shadow of a towering figure.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*Nothing happens. After about thirty seconds, I start to lower my hands to see where he is. As I do so, I feel a left uppercut punch hit me in my stomach so hard that I gasp for air.*

*"Come on you little fag boy, let's see you question the umpire's call again; let's see you really fight back against the umpire. Come on hit me. Mr. 3x7 grown-up man, Mr. Pseudo-Intellectual. Think you're such a know-it-all smarty pants, trying to show everyone up." He raises his arm again. As I catch my breath, from one angle I look at his looming presence and all I*

see is the anger of his reddened flushed face. From another angle, from the ceiling, I can see the broad shoulders and strong back, and what comes to mind is when I was 7 or 8 years old, and we would play submarine in the pool. I would hold onto his huge broad shoulders, and he'd say, "Ok, submarine going down, hold your breath." I would float gently and easily as we sank beneath the waters together. The powerful kick of his legs propelled us forward. His back was my life raft. No one could be more powerful, no place more safe.

As I look at him now, this powerful, stocky presence has become a leviathan emerging from the sea, large, formidable, capable of destroying me. There is a light behind him, causing his shadow to completely dominate and blanket me. I know from past experiences that if I express too much fear, it will stoke the rage of the beast, and unleash a pummeling. I also know that if I act cocky, defiant, show any sign of strength, it will also increase his rage. This beast could destroy me; he is too strong, his fury too mighty, the twisted contorted face too furious.

Then another thought enters, almost simultaneously. I've been working out. I've grown strong myself, and am now taller, and in many ways as powerful, if not more so than my father. I think I could actually beat him up, pummel him. This thought creates even more fear in me than the first.

"Come on, you little wuss, I'm going to tear you a new ass hole, you piece of shit, you little transvestite, ...I've always known you were a transvestite wussy pseudo-intellectual."

I look up at him with a clarity I've never had before in my

*Life. I have no idea where it comes from. I say calmly, "Dad, I'm not going to hit you."*

*Something in my statement and demeanor seems to shock, even short circuit him. I can see it in his eyes. My response is neither the counterattack nor the obsequiousness he expected, and instead of a second strike, he turns and simply leaves the apartment, slamming the door. I hear him get into his car and drive off. I feel sorry for any "lowlife" who crawls out from under the rocks this evening. I wouldn't want to be them meeting the volunteer sheriff in his undercover car out on patrol.*

*My breathing is ragged as I uncurl my body from its fetal position, and look around the room.*

*I realize his large shadow is no longer blanketing my body.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*I'm alone in dad's apartment. 6:15. Still curled in the chair. The dinner with grandpa, dad and me was set for 6:30. Strike three?*

*The diner that dad favors is just around the corner, within walking distance from his apartment. I wonder if grandpa left because he wanted Dad and me to have time alone, because he wanted to see Grandma, or because, as he's told me, he hates eating in that dirty "greasy spoon" restaurant.*

*My thoughts and feelings are jumbled. There is rage and anger. As well as still fear. Now that dad has left, the fear is diminishing and the anger rising. Was it calmness or wussiness that stopped me from defending myself? Anger surges and I want to go after him.—not physically, but mentally, my greater weapon. I hear myself calmly telling him*

*"You think you're such a tough guy, But you've never been able to succeed like your father. You know he thinks you're a failure, a*



loser, and a little angry man, who tries to be powerful by bullying others. You're just jealous that grandpa values me more than you."

I could feel the pent up bitterness and anger roiling in me. "What does it feel like to have failed in business after business, forcing grandpa to bail you out? What does it feel like to have failed in marriage, then to have run away and left your children? Still drinking...gambling...talk about a real loser."

Even as I'm sitting, curled in the chair, alone, I could feel dad's anger and temper infecting me. It's not just at him. The rage I feel at the swimming pool when someone gets into my lane, or when someone cuts me off in traffic...that's me. I know what's inside him because it's inside me to. Was that what the psychology professor meant when he talked about internalizing and repeating the cycle of abuse? Yes, I hide the anger better beneath a jovial, intellectual smooth exterior, yet it is within me. Even as I try to keep it hidden, even from myself. I was now feeling the depth of this fury, and knew that it was not going to be easy to address. Maybe mom was right. Maybe, for so many reasons, I'm unlovable and incapable of love.

\*

\*

\*

I get up off the couch and go pick up the pieces of glass from the floor, being careful not to cut myself. Partly to protect my physical self, partly because if I cut myself, and bled, dad would get angry that I damaged his carpet. As I gather the glass shards, I am aware still of the enormous raging ocean waves and foam circulating through my body. But I am also aware of a discernible, though much smaller presence of understanding. Now, this understanding was a miniscule piece of seaweed amidst the currents, but I noticed it nonetheless. And then, almost more surprising, I became aware of a much smaller growth on

*the seaweed—a feeling .... it was not pity exactly, --but more  
compassion emerged from the understanding I actually experienced the  
pain that he must feel at the his perception of the ruin of his life.*

*I was reminded of the very faint tones I'd hear in my one good ear  
when taking an audiology test. At first you're not sure the sound is  
there, that I may be a phantom sound. But when you realize it is there,  
sound born from nothing. Compassion was born from understanding. Small,  
but noticeable, just as seaweed is tossed about in a vast, black,  
foaming ocean.*

\* \* \*

*Leaving dad's apartment, I walk over to the diner. Why? To cancel  
our reservation? To see if Dad is there? To say good-bye? When I walk  
in, I'm greeted by a short, mousy looking man, who is balding, but has  
created a comb over of long strands from the left side of his head.*

*"Just one?" he asks and points to a counter.*

*"There were supposed to be three. My dad comes here a lot,  
maybe he made a reservation." I give his name.*

*"Oh, is this a special meeting."*

*I'm not sure exactly what he means. "Unfortunately, it has  
to be canceled. I'll be the only one here."*

*"Is he safe?" the man asks, with growing concern and excite-  
ment.*

*"Yes." I'm still not sure what he's talking about. "Why do  
you ask?"*

*He pulls me aside, speaking furtively and in hushed tones.*

*"Are you one of them?"*

*Of whom? Part of the family? A deeper question than I want  
to answer at this time. I shake my head up and down.*

*"Ok, then I just want you to know that I know."*

*I shake my head again. Know what? I probe by saying "So he's talked to you."*

*"Yes, I know that he's a member of the FBI's SUTF: Special Undercover Task Force. But, like I told him, I won't tell a soul."*

*Dad's worked his magic again on another unsuspecting patsy. What a con artist, what a liar.*

*"I'm actually here to give him a message. Can I entrust it to you?"*

*"Absolutely." He leans nearer, with conspiratorial glee.*

*"Tell him number one from California was here, checking in, and the message is--" I lean forward "remember you must get every word correct. This is vital intelligence I'm entrusting you with."*

*"Yes, yes, of course, what is it. I'll remember every word."*

*"Tell him #1's parting words are 'The hostage is no longer in bondage. All systems are go. Let freedom ring.'"*

*"I've got it. Dinner?"*

*I look around, mirroring his conspiratorial secretiveness.*

*"I've already spent too much time here. I don't want our cover blown. I must leave now. Be careful. Be safe."*

*As I go through the door to leave, I see him go behind the counter to write something on a note pad. When he thinks I'm out of sight, he puts his hand around the shoulder of a sassy-looking waitress, and whispers into her ear, pointing at the closed door through which I've just departed.*

\*

\*

\*

*I take a cab to the hospital. Before going up to see Grand-*

ma, I call my brother and sister to say good-bye. I feel more sadness than I expect. It feels like a good-bye that is open-ended.

Grandpa has already gone home.

Grandma's eyes are closed in sleep, and I stroke her wisps of fine gray hair, matted down. Her breathing is labored. When the lids open, there are those lovely blue eyes. Eyes that say, 'I am so happy to see you. I love you for who you are. There are no reasons, no explanations, nothing you have to do.' It's beyond my comprehension. Is this what Mery means by grace? I continue stroking her hair, her cheek. She starts to say something, then points to her throat.

"I know, grandma, don't talk. I hear you."

I see the moistness in her eyes, which mirror my own.

"I came to say good bye, Grandma, and to say thank you and I love you."

I bend over to kiss her on her cheek. She takes my cheeks in her hands, and, with a slight groan, stops the forward momentum of my face. I think she is going to turn her cheek even more to the side.

She does nothing but look at me. Now there are no tears in her eyes, only a clear focus as she stares at me. It lasts maybe five seconds, but feels like a moment of eternity. Then, she pulls my face down and gives me a brief, gentle kiss on my lips.

"Good-bye, grandson."

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

\*

"  
**I** guess there were...may be...are... a 'few difficulties'  
still to be addressed from my Kansas City visit." I try to smile.  
Both the Rebbe's and Dr. Lisbet's face seem filled with concern  
and compassion, so I'm surprised when the Rebbe looks at his  
watch and starts to gather his papers together, signaling we have  
just a few more minutes in the session.

I feel enraged. I've just poured my heart out. Dead brother,  
dying grandmother, life direction in disarray, abusive father,  
and they're going to end the session. They'd better not give me  
a bill.

"We are sorry for all the pain you must be feeling. There  
is clearly a lot that we need to work on," the Rebbe says, point-  
ing to me, Dr. Lisbet, and himself when he says the word "we."

"Could we spend some more time now? I feel like a  
wreck."

"Unfortunately, our session time is coming to an end, and we  
have another person to see right after you."

"So you're just going to leave me like this?"

"I was going to offer a healing prayer to end our session."

"I don't want any healing or forgiveness prayers now. You are the  
ones who made me open up all these questions. I was done with Kansas  
City, ready to move on. You kept probing. 'Tell me more about  
your family, what were the difficulties you mentioned about  
your trip there?' Thanks a lot. You make me scratch a healing  
wound, then let it start to bleed with all your probing, ripping,

tearing, and then say, 'Bye, session's over.' Are you going to give me the monthly bill now. That would make it perfect. Thanks for nothing. You'll get paid what your service was worth. Good bye."

I gather my folders and notebooks together and stand up to leave. The Rebbe, who has been sitting nearly motionless, begins to sway, and hums a niggun.

I can't believe him. What a waste of my time. What a useless experience. As I start to walk toward the door, Dr. Lisbet stands and walks over to me. I'm more aware than ever of the slightness of her build. She is also nearly a foot shorter than I am. As she approaches me, she places her hand on my shoulder, forcefully.

"You asked whether we saw you as a coward, running toward the sideline. I have seen nothing but courage in your sharing about your family. Until now. Do not run away. I promise you, you will regret it. Sit down, and let's make a plan."

The Rebbe continues to chant his niggun.

\* \* \*

I gently stroke Mery's hair, right shoulder and arm as we sit in our front row center seats. She's like a purring cat as Von Karajan's rapid motions signal the second movement is coming to an end. Talk about fate! She likes Beethoven. God creates a Beethoven concert. The Berlin Philharmonic travels to San Francisco to play the 9th, her favorite. It's like everything is a stage set to create harmony between us, and move me toward home plate.

The front row seats are great. We can see in detail every

expression and nuance of the musicians. During the intermission, however, I look around the concert hall,--it is my first time here--to see if there is a different, "overview" position that might be even better.

I spot some enclosed box seats surrounding the second level, and I pick out the center one. I tap Mery on the shoulder, and point to them. "It might be fun to sit there. Maybe they'd like to change seats with us. They could take our front row seats and we would take theirs for the second half. What do you think?"

"Our seats are great. What are you talking about? I'm not sure that's such a good idea," Mery protests in her gentle way.

"You're so cute, Mery, Mery. But wouldn't you rather see the rest of the Ode from up there?"

"I'm happy being here."

"So am I, but you didn't answer my question."

"Yes, it would be fun, but what if they say no? It's not really fair to bother them." Seeing my frown, and trying to accommodate me, she offers "Maybe we should ask an usher if it's ok." Ah, she's made this into a challenge. Now I really want to see if I could persuade them to make a trade.

"What if we're doing them a favor? What if they're secretly wishing they could be in our front row seats! Also, my father always told me if you ever have something you want, never ask an underling. Go to the top and ask. All they can say is no." I'm not sure she is happy with my choice of words to describe the usher, but she seems to be convinced by the overall logic or at least willing to let herself be led like a little lamb, and to follow me and allow me to try without interfering.

\*

\*

\*

An elegantly gowned woman opens the door to the box seats.

Behind her I can see an older man in a tux.

"Who is it, dear?" I'm glad I've worn my double breasted Brooks Brother blazer, Countess Mara tie, and gray argyle sweater. "No one we know."

"Tell them to go away. What do they want? No solicitations are allowed." I let Mery stand behind me, as she really is somewhat plainly, if not dowdily dressed in her thick woolen black dress and yellow shawl. And, though I hadn't noticed before, she's wearing sandals.

I give my most charming smile.

"Hi. No, we're not asking for anything." I make the introductions. Mery pulls the shawl more tightly around her slightly visible, though still ample cleavage, and gives a wan smile. "We're sitting in the front row center, and I have an invitation, an offer. Would you like to exchange seats for the third and fourth movements." I point to where we were sitting.

The couple looks at me, then at each other with surprise, bordering on incredulity. Although I now realize it was naive of me at the time, I assume their astonishment is really delight at having the opportunity to sit so close to the musicians. To me, it really seems to be an equal trade. Who wouldn't want the best of both worlds: overview for one part of the concert, proximity for the other?

"Thank you for your kind offer, but these seats have been in our family for years," the gentleman in the tux says, "and we're quite content with them." I can feel Mery starting to tug me toward the door. She's muttering something, but I can't hear her



words. I'm feeling a bit frustrated. On the one hand, I'm trying to think of a comeback to the couple, on the other hand I'm aware of Mery's discomfort, which is distracting me from the task. The woman and the man are speaking in hushed tones to each other. Before I can say anything, however, the woman pipes up,

"You seem like such a lovely young couple. We'd be happy to have you join us. Our great-granddaughter has the flu, and our granddaughter and her husband had to cancel at the last minute. We have a couple of extra seats. Please...." and she gestures for us to enter.

I once again put my right hand in a fist on my right hip bone, which crooks my elbow out at a ninety degree angle, and turn to Mery. "M'lady." She puts her left arm through my arm, and pulls my upper arm tightly into her left breast. The look of admiration and awe she gives me as she does so is both priceless and promising.

\* \* \*

The choir's singing of Schiller's poem harmonizes with my continued stroking of Mery's hair. I am chutzpah man! Thanks, dad, good advice. Never be afraid to ask. Always go to the top.

We hold hands through the entire forth movement, until the final part of the Ode washes over us.

Mery seems in an ecstatic trance. Once the music ends, she doesn't move for several seconds. Then I feel squeezes on my hand. At first, I'm confused, then I realize she's using mom and dad's signal, and saying to me "I love you." Wow! My seduction plan is working even better than I imagined. I need to be careful that she keeps those feelings through the rest of the evening, but not so long after that she becomes clingy and depend-

ent. I don't want her to get hurt. I squeeze back twice, and then, still looking straight ahead, she gives me a huge squeeze.

I know that in mom and dad's ritual, the other person is then supposed to reciprocate. But Mery doesn't know this, and I don't want to lead her on unnecessarily. Instead I get up and thank the older couple, and exchange names and phones numbers. As we leave, the husband says "Good luck at Harvard Law School" and I overhear his wife say: "Such a promising and fine young man, don't you think, dear?"

\* \* \*

"I want to keep these as a souvenir," Mery says as she places the program in her purse. "This has been such a magical evening. I can't believe your courage. Front row center seats the first two movements. Center row balcony box suites for the third and fourth. This is a night I'll never forget it." Our arms are around each other as we walk down the stairs, like a prince and princess descending into the grand ballroom, just before being introduced to their waiting and adoring court.

At the bottom of the stairs, I make a phone call. "We're on our way. Please have everything ready."

Yes, a magical evening. And the night is still young.

\* \* \*

"Where are we going?" Mery asks quizzically as I head in a direction different from her house.

"So far the surprises have been good, right?"

"Yes."

"So, just trust me. I have a very special meal planned for us this evening." I'd contacted catering at the Fairmont at the

start of the week, and told them what I wanted placed in my room. They told me to call when I left the concert, so everything would be delivered fresh, ready precisely when we arrive. It's not clear to me whether I'm going to be going to law school in the fall, and if I don't, it's not clear to me whether Grandpa \$ will continue my allowance. Although I guess it would be more prudent to be the wise squirrel and save some acorns just in case, that's not my style. I figure as long as I have the money now, might as well enjoy it, for I may not have this chance again. Tonight, I go all out, no expense spared. As dad would say, "If you're going to do it, you might as well do it right." No cramped little dark, dingy windowless cabin like Grandpa gave me--and himself and Grandma--on the cruise. They even slept in bunk beds. Ugh.

Mery snuggles in closer, starting to hum the Ode. I join her.

"I like when you hum. I thought you said you couldn't carry a tune. You're doing fine."

"Thanks. Practice, practice, practice. I have a friend who leads sing alongs for groups of people. He is the one who encouraged me to sing. Actually, he encourages everyone to sing." He's a little too God oriented for me--if he's being serious--but I don't share this thought with Mery. "What he says is, 'If God gave you a beautiful voice, you must sing loud as a way of giving thanks. And if God gave you a horrible voice, you must sing loud, in order to .....get revenge.'"

She laughs, and we both continue humming and singing on the short drive to the Fairmont.

\*

\*

\*

Though she seems fine when we pull up to the valet parking,

I can sense she is feeling somewhat shy and apprehensive when I leave her in the lobby to check in and get our key.

"Now, close your eyes, hold my hand. I've got a big surprise for you." She hesitates, and I say, "Trust, right? Have I ever led you astray?"

She closes her eyes, takes my hand, and we begin walking. I head to the elevators. Somewhat like a doe or rabbit caught in the lights, she continues to follow me as I lead her to our room.

I unlock the door, and guide her into the center of the room.

I take off my jacket and sweater, and roll up my sleeves to a preppy, sophisticated three quarter length. My button down blue shirt is tucked neatly into my gray, creased slacks, ending in cuffs that cut just above my black wingtip shoes. I am a sartorial sight, if I do say so myself.

"All right now, you can open them."

She gasps. At me? The room? The view? I turn her around and give her a hug from behind, putting my hands on her stomach. Slowly I pivot, and we make a 360 degree turn, surveying the room.

Softly burning candles have placed everywhere. The candle light is reflected in the windows, but we can see through the windows north to the lights of the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges, Sausalito, Treasure Island, and Alcatraz.

I whisper in my most poetic, reassuring style, "All is asparkle, like heavenly stars."

We continue to turn in a leisurely fashion, like a dance. "Fresh loaves of bread, dark red grapes, strawberries." I note

as I start to softly caress her neck and ear. "French cheeses, chocolate fondue, melting ripe pears" my hand rotating in a clockwise circle around her belly, "crisp apples, honey, raisin cakes, the smell of cinnamon spices..." On the upstroke from 11 to 1, the circumference grows larger, barely fondling the undersides of her breasts; on the downstroke, from 5 to 7, especially at 6 o'clock, stroking lower and lower below her navel, gently caressing her now gently undulating belly and pelvis.

Still slowly turning, I intone, "Smell the fragrance of the lilies" as we see the bouquet of white sweet scented lilies, and then the arrangement of other colorful flowers--yellow and red roses, daffodils, sunflowers, even a few purple orchids--I've had placed around the room.

"Ummm, what a feast. It's like...a sacred altar. Would you call that a tabernacle?" Before I can answer, she continues "You have the kindest, gentlest touch. Healing hands.." and she rests her neck completely on my shoulder. I take my right hand and began to stroke her hair, as my left hand continues its journey, moving from a strict clockwise progression, to a more subtle S curve on the way down, and a reverse S on the way up, creating a figure eight.

"I love seeing the candle light shine on your hair," I whisper to her. I know that saying the word "love" is important at a time like this, and I am always careful how I use it, so that I'm not being dishonest. "You are such a fair one....gentle eyes like doves." She renews that cat-like purr of hers. I turn her cheek up toward me and kiss her, while gently easing her toward the bed, where we both sit.

She keeps both her legs planted on the ground. I've known

some women like that. They feel uncomfortable being on a bed with a man, but justify it to themselves by saying as long as their feet touch the floor, they're not really doing anything improper. First I will need to get one foot off the floor, then the other. But patience. One step at a time.

\* \* \*

"Some wine or champagne?" I offer. For champagne, I had ordered Moet and Chandon. Once, in another encounter--at the Essex in New York with a young woman from Florida-- I'd used the same brand of champagne partly as drink, partly as bubble bath. Would I be so lucky again this time!?

"Just a bit of wine, now," she says.

"As I open the bottle, I explain "I contacted the sommelier, and we discussed various options that might be pleasing to you: year, vintage, terroir--special geographic characteristics."

Mery doesn't really understand what I'm saying, but I can see that she does care that I've thought about her, and been willing to lavish both attention and money on our evening. The devil is in the details.

Wine is often an important part of my seduction plan. I have learned enough about this fermented grape juice so that by expressing my erudition, I evoke and make myself sound like part of progressive, cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and intellectual societies. I also am not above, when appropriate, calling upon wine's sacred, religious symbolism, if that will make my date feel safer, and move my designs forward.

I'd thought of buying a French Bordeaux wine, but I wasn't sure Mery would appreciate it, especially at the price. "We

decided on a couple of bottles of a fine 1966 California Cabernet  
would be perfect for you. I hope you like it."

We encircle our arms at the elbow in a toast, looking at  
each other. As we swirl the wine, I can see her image reflected  
in the wine glass.

"in vino felicitas: In wine there is happiness. To the  
beautiful mystery that is you."

\* \* \*

We each take a small taste of the Cab.

"The wine is a bit tight, but showing nicely."

She laughs. "You'll have to translate, Maestro."

I tickle her with my free hand "It's young, could do with  
some cellaring, but it drinks nicely."

She takes another, more substantial drink from her glass.

"Anything else you notice?" she asks, still laughing.

I take a slow, serious drink. I'm pensive, meditative, as I  
consider the wine. "Nose of cherry, hints of chocolate and  
herbal notes. Full palate with very good concentration; medium-  
long finish with medium tannins."

She again takes a substantial drink, sets her wine glass on  
the table, and, as she starts tickling me, says "Yup, just what I  
experienced."

Her response is cute, unpretentious, playful, even innocent.

Yet something annoys me in her answer. To make matters worse,  
Richard, unbidden, makes an unwanted appearance. "You bought a  
California wine? How déclassé. You know the French wines are the  
very best. Even a poor French wine is far superior to your pedes-  
trian Californian grape. Pity, and your evening had so many  
potential positive aspects. Sorry you had to ruin it, old chap."

The arguments between California and French wines are a long standing and familiar battle between us. I try my usual counter. "That may once have been true. But since the French chemist Andre Tchelistcheff was brought over by George Da Latour in 1938, California wines are catching up, and I'll guarantee you one day, if not already, will surpass even the very best French Chardonnays." I try to push him out with arguments, but he won't leave my mind. "Pipe dreams. Nevertheless, if I were preparing an ultimate seduction, and wanted to do it right--and of course not penny pinching like you-- there are so many better choices. The 1961 Cheval Blanc, named not for a white grape, but rather a white horse. Then you could be the white knight riding that gray. Or the legendary Chateaux Petrus, often considered by many one of the greatest cult wines in history. No, I know, I'd have bought a 1961 Chateau Latour from the Pauillac region of Bordeaux." I remember when he opened and tasted a bottle of that wine in celebration after he beat me for the first time in tennis. He swirled the wine around in his glass, then took a sip, slowly, pensively, eyes closed. He then opened his eyes and looked directly at me with his smug, self-satisfied face, saying, "Nose of blackberries, truffles, and cedar; chewy, sweet palate with perfect balance/acidity. Seamless tannins." And as he drank another sip, I thought I could hear him say under his breath "Loser."

\*

\*

\*

Why do I take him so seriously, and let him get under my skin like this? I should learn from Mery's unpretentious reaction. Wine is not a competition. It's to be enjoyed. And anyway,



he's never beaten me at tennis since, and he never will. I unceremoniously dismiss him with that volley, and return to Mery:

'Give me the kisses of your mouth, for <they> are more delightful than wine, oh fairest of women.'

Mery smiles in recognition at the Song, picks up a cluster of grapes, and holds them above my head. "Is my fruit sweet to your mouth?" she asks, pulling off a grape, and watching me as I open my mouth in anticipation. She places it partly in my mouth and I feel its cool sweetness with my tongue. She has a shy, yet sensuous smile. She pulls out the grape, and caresses it with her tongue. I've never seen her acting like this before, taking this kind of overt sexual initiative. She then places the grape between her lips. "Come see how sweet," as we suckle the grape and each others lips.

\* \* \*

Mery lies down on the bed, her legs draped over the edge, feet still touching the floor, and places her hands over her head in a submissive gesture. I feel she is ready for the next stage, but become a little confused how to proceed.

I'm not sure I'm finished with first base. I was enjoying the kiss, and feel a little disappointed that she broke it off. Of course, I could just lean over and continue to kiss her, perhaps repeating the line "Give me the kisses of your mouth."

This would also be a good time to make my move to second base. I'm pretty sure she would allow me to slowly unbutton her dress, blouse first. I yearn to see her breasts, and to caress their flesh. I know exactly the words I will say as I search them out: "Your breasts are like clusters, let me climb the palm, let me take hold of its branches...let your breasts be like clusters

of grapes." I hear the words in my mind. I've used them many times as part of my seduction. Solomon's wisdom is eternal, and poetic, always enchanting to women.

I image those breasts that I have kissed through her swimsuit, the tops of the flesh I had been allowed admission to. But to see them fully and completely naked, the mystery unveiled, that would be wondrous. This seems like a plan. I can share the words of the Song as I unbutton the top button of her wool dress, which I reach for.

I look at her face, eyes closed, soft, reddish-brown freckles. For some reason, I hold back. Is it because I'd rather approach her breasts when she is sitting up, and they are fuller, billowing forward, not when she is lying down, and they are pulled by gravity toward her sides?

The solution is obvious. I need to somehow get her to sit up. Maybe offer her another glass of wine before going after second base.

But I don't want to be too obvious. Buxom women know that men who are attracted to them are often only yearning after their pendulous breasts. I have learned the art of obliqueness. Don't look at their cleavage. Rub their back. Compliment their eyes, their feet. Distract them. Put them at ease.

It's the same "indirect" strategy I use if I see a pretty girl, and she is with a less attractive friend. I always approach the less attractive one, talk with her, ignore her prettier companion. Then, once the prettier one sees I'm safe and friendly, she may make an initiative, or I can then go from the known and easier to the unknown, stretching toward what I'm

really after. You mention how it makes the prettier girl feel safer, but what about you? It's also a face-saving strategy for you, a way to test the waters before making a commitment. It's safer for the ego, less chance to be directly rejected. You don't even realize how sensitive and insecure you are, and how frequently your strategies are just a way to protect yourself. As I write these comments, I think that Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe would be proud of me. Maybe I'm learning something from them after all.

Dad was wrong. I don't just run to the sidelines. I know my goal. Sometimes you have to run perpendicular to your goal, until you find the proper opening. And sometimes it is simply wiser, safer, and more effective to run down the sidelines--to take an oblique approach. **And sometimes when you are wounded, you need to go out of bounds to take time to stop and heal yourself. Wisdom may also be having the freedom and chutzpah not to be boxed in by arbitrary lines.**

But I begin to worry that to ask Mery to sit up after she has voluntarily spread herself onto the bed may not only be too obvious--she might see through my machinations, and know what I am really after-- it might also break the mood.

I think of a different line of attack with Mery. I could place my body on the bed next to hers, and I could rub her neck and slowly move to caressing her in a full, body-to-body, embrace. I imagine the warmth of her body. At first, lying side by side, then lying on top of her. I've never done that before with her, and I can feel how fresh and exciting it would be to surf on her undulating body, as she becomes more and more aroused.

I could even approach from her legs, slowly raising her dress, seeing the mystery of her inviting thighs unveiled,

"the curves of your hips are like jewels" opening to her vineyard, the tangled patch of (I imagine) reddish hair curling over itself. "I went down to the orchard...to see whether the vine had budded and its blossoms have opened." Hiding, concealing, then slowly revealing the moistness and crimson lips of her inner sanctum, the bursting forth of the red clitoral bulb. I imagine the smell and taste of those lips, finding her little flowering nubbin to gentle nibble and suckle. Her pelvis would begin to undulate, her moans crescendo.

\*

\*

\*

I remember Grandpa Dave talking about Passover, "Make the story your own." This is Passover week, and my story can be that I am Moses, rescuing and liberating the poor slave girl from her sexual bondage. She's much too uptight. Tonight she will learn to taste freedom. I, Henry Higgins, will teach poor little Eliza a thing or two. I only wish I had my camera with me to record and immortalize the unfolding seduction and liberation, the parting of her red-freckled thighs, revealing her inner sanctum.

Under the guise of "giving" to Mery by "liberating" her, Johannes is obviously such a taker. Talk about a self-delusion. Yet, as I found out, and he will find out soon, all self-serving delusions eventually get punctured. Painfully. Johannes' story is Henry Higgins the teacher with his pupil Eliza. What is my story? Is it Elizabeth, mother of John, giving birth to a new Johannes? Or is it a stillbirth? The jury's not yet in. **Is this jury not yet in on Elizabeth Mery or not yet in on you, John, and what you point to? It's fascinating how often we base our judgment of an action and an event on how things eventually turn out. As if there is a truth that only**

**history can decide in hindsight.**

Why am I hesitating? I always look for and sense the opening, the vulnerability, the next logical progression and movement in the sexual symphony I'm orchestrating. I see many possible variations on a theme. So why hesitate? Is it that there are too many options? Is it confusion about which approach and next step would be the most fun?

Perhaps, but all paths up the mountain sound wonderful. Is it worry about which one she would allow? I don't think so. The timing is right since she seems ready, even eager. Is it that she's too willing now? The conquest and victory is in sight, there are no more defenses and obstacles to overcome, so all is possible, and too easy.

Is it fear about my own readiness? I look down at my lingam, bursting tent-like from his hiding place. Nope, I am certainly sufficiently aroused. My lingam--my shaft of light--contributes an additional incandescence, complimentary to the candles and the lights of the city.

Is it that I don't want to corrupt her..the innocent virgin Mery? Do I feel I'm taking advantage of her unfairly? Soiling her innocence? Such a sumptuous feast before me. Do I feel like Judas at the Last Supper? I think again of Grandpa Dave's injunction. Make the story my own. Is it time for a new story? What would that mean? It is Friday--her good Friday--the week of Passover. Am I in bondage? Stop all this thinkin. Just act.

Yet, something is stopping me. I look at her face. "Her cheeks are like a bed of spices." Here she is, an innocent lamb, ready, and I'm hesitating. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Is there something wrong with me?

\*

\*

\*

I turn and look at her, and my eyes are drawn to her feet still resting on the floor. That is where I want to go next. Her feet. I want her feet off the floor before I continue. I begin a stroking of her right leg, just below the knee and continue downward, as I say outloud, "How beautiful are your feet in sandals."

I know the Song is the right mood, but there is a part of me that feels it's too sappy sweet. I want to burst into a song which I know would be totally inappropriate to this quiet, peaceful seduction, something like Jerry Lee Lewis, "Goodness gracious, great balls of fire." Or even the Door's "Come on baby light my fire."

I slip to the floor, take her right foot into my hand, and rub the ball of her foot. "Great balls of fire" I think to myself. She offers no resistance. I look down at my lingham. My balls of fire are already lit. I have one foot off the ground. I continue to say nothing, but stroke her arch from the heel to the toe with as firm and kind a touch as I'm capable. My hands are filled with a heat and warmth that I sometimes experience--and which my dates often comment upon--but tonight it feels especially strong. I have no idea how this happens. Is it within me? It almost feels as if this extra warmth is coming from a source beyond or outside of me.

Time seems to disappear. I don't know how long I spend on each toe, each crevice. I'm definitely not a religious person, but there is something enigmatic--Mery might call it holy--happening to me. I feel myself drawn to kissing her foot as I massage it. When I put the right one down and pick up the left, there is a moment when both her feet are off the floor, and, like her feet, I feel a weightless suspension in time and space.

I am joyous. Not an ecstatic, but a calm radiance. There is even a twinge of sadness, which I don't understand. And from nowhere a tear forms in my eye, falls, and moistens her left foot. What's going on? I feel like I'm losing control of my body, my emotions.

I hear her moans, like music filling the room with a feverish, almost delirious crimson color. The moisture of her body sweat is like perfume, mingling with the sweetness of the flowers.

She calls to me, and then pulls me up to her, placing my head on her chest, murmuring: "I feel so close to you. 'You are like a bag of myrrh between my breasts' beloved.' Hold me. Please help me open myself to you."

\* \* \*

In normal circumstances, these are exactly the words I want to hear. It means I've won. She is ready to be taken, then discarded until the next time I'm ready. But for some reason I focus not on pressing forward to achieve the upcoming victory and my ultimate, triumphant winning. Rather, at first I recoil at her words. I hear her saying "I need you" in some deeper sense. Ugh. Too much pressure. Doesn't she know the rules?

But then something else occurs. Rather than rush to satisfy my lust, or a recoil at her neediness, I focus on her generosity in offering the gift of herself to me. I have an urge to take care of her, guard her gift, protect her. Where is this coming from? Is this part of a new story?

Johannes, are you actually thinking about someone's feeling besides your own? Talk about a miraculous parting of the waters.

Once again, her presence feels like a sacred offering--one to be received, unwrapped and opened with care, appreciated and savored like fine wine. But there is more. I feel some sense of responsibility to her beyond that of achieving a delicious orgasm for me. I'm not sure what that means. Is this what religion is to me, a true religion of the flesh?

I let the moment linger as long as I can. I realize I don't want this night to end. Something special is happening, a puzzling, enigmatic unfolding I have never experienced before.

I want to participate in it, observe it, capture it, hold it, for as long as is humanly possible. Damn, I wish I had my camera.

Yet I want more.

I want kairos and chronos to merge.

I am not disappointed.

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*





wonderful example of a Tai Chi dance, thank you for participating," Dr. Lisbet says. I tell her I'm not sure what she means by Tai Chi dance, and she says she'll clarify this afternoon. "This was a thoughtful and wise negotiation and compromise. See you at 5:30."

She and the Rebbe said they had some time later this afternoon, after they saw their other "counselees." As I leave their office, the Rebbe hands me a typed page, saying, "I missed you at last Saturday's parashah. Here are my notes. I think you may find this week's passage of interest."

I fold the page and place it in my pocket. It feels a bit like a bribe--here, take these written words with you as a substitute for me. Make sure you close the door on the way out. What compromise? They weren't willing to have their next client come back later, or impinge on his time. If I wanted to see them, I had no choice but to submit.

Once I leave their office, I realize that I have no where to go, and nothing really to do.

I'm not particularly hungry, so I return by default to my room and my usual task. For the past hour, I have been reading about Johannes' chutzpah, Beethoven's' Ode, and Mery's adulation. I'm tired by his enthusiasm and excitement. It feels too passive, amidst all his energy and activity, to just sit and read.

I also feel like I'm watching a train wreck occurring in slow motion, as Johannes struggles to maintain his sense of order, even as he finds himself becoming increasingly confused

and approaches closer to the abyss. I'm still ambivalent about this--is what's happening part of a spiritual breakthrough, or is it Mery leading him over the chasm?

I decide to return to my own writing, to continue filling in the two months when I wasn't able to write. I pull out my Eilat folder, and find myself lounging in the Red Sea (I like that phrase), before heading to Sinai and the wilderness. Once again seeking the promised land. I recall Grandpa Dave's words, "Make the story your own."

\* \* \*

*It's been two weeks that I've been in Eilat, lounging in freedom by the Red Sea. Each day I say it's time to head forth into the wilderness, to begin my climb of Sinai. And each day, the lure of the azure sea, the beautiful coral, the peaceful quiet pace keep me here. What is the rush? After the order of the kibbutz, and really the programmed structure of my entire life up through Stanford pre-law academics, I am trying to develop a new state of consciousness, one which allows each day to unfold organically, without a pre-set plan or time table.*

*For the first week, I keep completely to myself. I enjoy the solitude after the enforced closeness in the kibbutz. Each night, there are several camp fires surrounded by what appear to be fellow travelers. There is lots of laughter, singing and I imagine convivial drug activity. I am content to watch from a distance, do a little Old and New Testament reading, play a little solitaire, and compete against myself in chess. I look forward to my hand healing so I can begin carving my chess set. The nice thing about the company of my chess pieces is that they*

are safe, and don't talk back unless I ask them to. And then I can tell them what to say.

\*

\*

\*

When I think about it, my trajectory and pattern seems one of group to individual: At summer camp, at first I was a camper, living in a structured group setting, a cabin of ten. Like the kibbutz, there was no privacy, but I really didn't realize or mind it. Then, I became a counselor, in charge of campers, but still living in the cabin, with a co-counselor. There was a flimsy partition--a small half-wall topped by a mesh screen--between campers and counselors. But still it was communal living. Then, later, when I became a water front assistant director, I lived in a cabin with two other life guards. No campers. When I was growing up in Kansas City, I went from a shared bedroom with my brother to living in my own room at Nana and Grandpa's. At college, there was the same progression: from living in the dorm with a roommate, to a single room in someone's house.

Now, I'm repeating the cycle again. Initially, the groupiness of the kibbutz appealed to me, an antidote to address the loneliness of that single room, and life which, without Elizabeth had started to feel overwhelming. But I am now enjoying my alone space again. An interesting cycle. I wonder when and who might be my next human contact.

\*

\*

\*

It turns out to be Jean-Claude, the guy who rents out the skin diving equipment, aptly titled "J.C.'s Junk." He is my first human contact in a few days, and it feels refreshing to talk to a human versus chess pieces, especially because he is easy to talk to, has a ready grin, and seems content. From his business, he makes about

fifteen lira--three dollars a day--and that gives him enough money to buy provisions on a day by day basis. That's the way he's lived since he arrived in this country, and that's the way he plans to spend the rest of his life.

"Don't you worry about the future? Aren't you scared?"

J'ai peur...  
de vivre. .sans.comprendre.  
De vivre sans... amour  
De mourir sans amour.  
D' amour.

He's from Morocco, and emigrated to Israel about fifteen years ago. He's a self-styled poet, and though he speaks several languages fluently, he finds he writes his best poetry, and still expresses his deepest thoughts in French.

Although we begin talking in Hebrew, then French, he finally realizes that we will communicate most easily in English. Though trying to be less so, I am still the narcissistic American, who expects everybody to speak my language.

Jean-Claude lives in a hut, a self-made structure which sticks out over the sea. Its foundation consists of four poles stuck into the ground. It's impervious to the elements, so he claims.

I am drawn to his individuality, and the freedom of the life he's chosen, especially compared to the and group orientation of the Kibbutz.

Though he lives alone, he is quite social, and says he wants to introduce me to the "community of travelers from different countries who have congregated here in Eilat and who in the evening, share warmth and wine around the campfires...voyagers and journeyers who drift in and out of Eilat, like the river

*stream, always there, never the same."*

*Jean-Claude has an amiable rapport with these "journeyers," and he has become a central hub for the life here. Partly I find this lifestyle intoxicating. I feel as free as I've ever felt in my life. There are no classes to prepare for, no grades, no kibbutz regulations. I feel in some ways he is helping me reconnect with an important aspect of me that I had lost: a sensual, playful, childlike freedom.*

*He has many friends, male and female. When they visit, he enjoys them. When they leave on their journeys--to Egypt, India, Jordan-- he hugs them and lets them go.*

*He has an easy, good-natured repartee with people, and models for me the kind of wit and humor, that I felt I at least occasionally had, in certain structured situations, but which seems to have eluded me lately. Jean-Claude is like Alice, he seems to have a facility for being with people whatever the situation. I'm also aware that beneath the quick-witted repartee, there is a depth and wisdom to him that I know I still don't have. Yet, although I don't have his wisdom, at least I am beginning to have enough to recognize what I don't have, and I believe that's progress.*

*\**

*\**

*\**

*I tried to convince myself when I initially arrived in Israel that part of my increased difficulty in communicating with people was because of the language barrier. Though there may have been some truth in that, I am also aware that a lot of it is from the woundedness I'm still feeling from Mery.*

*It's ironic that here, in a beautiful setting, as I start to feel more peaceful and free, less numb and in pain, the next*

*feelings that arises is not joy, but a return of my anger toward Elizabeth. I resent the detour she forced me down (or I get angry at myself for allowing her to do that). Why did she push me so hard, challenge me so much? In this beautiful setting, as my wounded hand and heart begin to heal and my body's sensuality to return, I would think anger at Mery would be the farthest thing from my mind. Maybe it's because I can no longer think of myself as suave, charming, confident, poised. Or even if I did, I'm no longer sure those are attributes to be valued. Maybe it's because there is a certain loneliness that I feel now, no matter who I'm with. I see pauses between the notes, the spaces between people. Spaces to which I was oblivious, like that night at dinner with mom, empty spaces that as far as I knew, didn't exist.*

\*

\*

\*

I leave my writing--Johannes at the Fairmont, my peripatetic wondering Jewish self in Eilat--and depart from the Y. I need to take a walk, get some food, clear my head.

I walk into the Old City through Jaffa Gate, and stop at an open market on David Street to buy some pregort and fifty agora worth of cheese. I notice with just a glimmer of humor that despite how much I've transformed from Johannes' breast obsession, I wonder if my eating so many milk products is a symbolic desire to return to the breast, to be suckled and taken care of. Do I also want to return to the womb, and not have to face what my life has become?

I walk back, looking for a place to sit down. I turn left down Armenian Street with the intention of going to the Jewish

Quarter. After a few hundred yards, I see a ledge on my right which overlooks the street. I climb the stairs to the ledge and realize that it is the remains of what was once the drawbridge of an ancient castle.

I take out my whittling knife and begin to carve the queen, stopping periodically to nibble on the cheese or take a bite of the pregort. I'm very careful with the blade. The extra attention is helpful. No accidents.

A small girl, about five, with a dark-black, waist-length pony-tail sits down next to me. Her eyes seem to be asking something. There is sadness there, almost a plea, but I'm not sure for what.

I offer her some cheese, but she refuses, moving further away. I feel like a plague. Once people get too close, they don't wish to remain. I drive them away.

She calls to her friends who are running by on the street below. The two little girls start to scramble up the stairs toward her, but before they reach the ledge, they see another group of children playing and rush back down.

The girl is still alone.

She climbs down to the street, wanders about, inspecting random objects on the ground, occasionally looking back at me. She looks so small in the midst of all the people. I feel her aloneness, and see the innocence of a small child being hurt, left by her friends. Are the others aware of the suffering they are causing her? Is it intentional on their part?

Why do my eyes and heart follow her? I wonder if by worrying about her smallness, if only for a moment, I forget my own. I wish I had the power to put an invisible magic blanket over

her to shield her from suffering.

I remember the father on the brochure from Mery's church, blanketing his son with protective arms. I don't want this little girl to have to feel any pain. My role: her benefactor. I, her salvation. Innocent, lonely Israeli child.

Or is it that I want to become like a small child myself and once again be protected? By protecting her, I'd be protecting myself. I, like her, feel vulnerable. Although to me she has an innocence and purity and naivete that I no longer see in myself. How are we, any of us, really any different than that child? Even with all our wisdom and knowledge, how have we progressed beyond that child's tears? Is this world, our lives, the galaxies, even with all of our facts and information, really any more understandable, any less mysterious?

In my mind, I hear Elizabeth singing:

Jesus walked that lonesome valley  
He had to walk it by Himself.  
For nobody else could walk it for Him,  
He had to walk it by Himself,

You have to walk that lonesome valley,  
You have to walk it by yourself,  
for nobody else can walk it for you.  
you have to walk it by yourself.

I know I'm going to have to face the lonesome valley by myself. This little girl, too, will have to face it by herself. I walk down the stairs and onto the street. Across the street is the Church of Christ.

I look in, but all is quiet.  
\* \* \*

I walk out of the church. One and a half more hours before I can return to see the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. I still have no place to go. I could return to my room and continue writing about



Eilat and Sinai; I could continue reading about Johannes at the Fairmont. I'm drawn to neither past.

I once again climb back onto my ledge, and continue carving the queen.

I look down from my height, and am sorry to see that the little girl is gone. In her place is a couple walking below. Were they there before, and I just didn't heed them? It's interesting that out of all the things we can focus on, why, at a certain time, we choose one angle and perspective, and at a different time, another. Is it growth, change, or only difference? Like when you re-read a book and it has one meaning one time, and a different meaning, the next.

The couple has an aura of people newly acquainted with the mysteries of love. As they stroll arm in arm, laughing and looking into the shop windows, they act as if absolutely nothing can come between them. The world's problems, metaphysical questions of what are we doing here, where are we headed, don't exist. They see only each other. Their love can conquer every hurdle, like dancing gazelles, bounding over mountainous rocks and infinite abysses. How easily love makes those leaps, almost as if there were no leap necessary, no abyss seen.

For Johannes, before meeting Mery, deep, aesthetic committed love was not even a goal. The hedonistic pursuit of sensual pleasure--from girl to girl, woman to woman, -- hid him from the abyss. Mery both revealed the abyss to him, and was the one whom he wanted to hide him from that very chasm.

\*

\*

\*

I finish creating the rough cylindrical outline form of my

first chess pieces. The queen. She's about three inches high, and I sand the circular base to a smooth, flat finish, so that she can stand on her own. I look at the cylinder, imaging the queen within, as Michelangelo is supposed to have done with his pieces of marble. He claimed he could visualize each figure within the block of stone. His only job was to help set it free, let it emerge into the light.

Why did I choose the queen as my first piece, and who is the queen within that I visualize? The queen is the most powerful piece on the board. Her job is to protect the king. Am I creating a talisman to safeguard me? Is this the Shabbat queen, the Shekinah feminine energy that I'm seeking? Is this the Red Queen--a crazy-making tyrant whom I can't trust? I look at the smooth cylindrical form. Its absence of definition and shape makes it like a Rorschach. Perhaps what I carve is more a reflection of me and my projection onto it, rather than an expression of its innate essence. Is it Mery? Queen of Heaven? Queen of Hell? Who is she? Who was she? "I answer to many names."

\*

\*

\*

I know that my willingness to love and commit to Mery was real. But was it an effort to cannibalize and incorporate her spiritual goodness, to make up for a deficit in me? Mery Queen of Heaven. Or was it an effort to hide and escape from facing the fear and trembling of life? A crazy-making abyss to which she, the Red Queen of Hell, led me, and pushed me over?

I thought love could vault me over the hurdles, the abyss, could keep me from facing the nothingness, could hide me. Even when I'd begun to experience the agony of indifference, I still hoped that love could help me--someone to share the waiting, the

endlessly recurring pain. "No," I shouted, "I won't be another Sisyphus. You can't imagine him happy, Camus, because alone we can't be happy."

Only now do I viscerally realize that facing the abyss can't be done with another. You have to face it yourself.

These people strolling arm in arm hide each other from the nothingness. If they would even only once see it, their bubble would burst. As soon as the nothingness is seen, visions of romantic love vanish. I doubt I'll ever again be able to fall into someone's arms. I've seen too many barriers, too many levels of myself, too much ugliness and misery in the world.

Nothingness precludes love.

\* \* \*

I'm growing increasingly agitated, and realize that it is a signal to put away my whittling knife. This has not been a healing or refreshing outing. All I wanted was to take a break, go outside to get some fresh air and a bit of nourishment. I see a little girl, then a couple, and I'm back in a dark depressed place. Maybe I should return to my room, and play some funky blues piece on my flute.

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet have talked about falling to the bottom of the well. Am I there?

But why become upset because I don't have a beloved? I don't want to fall into anyone's arms, I don't want to allow a woman's body to protect me. I've left Elizabeth's womb forever. You cannot trust a woman to protect you. There are simply too many difficulties that exist between people. Even if someone really wanted to, even if you could overcome some of those prob-

lems, it's still futile. Flesh is transitory. Bodies decay, their breasts get cancer, or they succumb to a heart attack. There is no one who can protect you from life and its emptiness. We're basically alone and can't hide that fact. I'm finally seeing life without any illusions.

The only way life makes sense is if it has a dimension beyond the flesh: the spirit. It is that life of the spirit that I seek, no matter where it may lead. And that search has to be done alone. I need to seek this on my own. No one can do it for me. No more wombs. I won't let myself hide behind love's illusions. I see that this is my task. To find spirit and meaning without recourse to the flesh.

Or to fall, like Icarus in the attempt to soar to Heaven.

\* \* \*

Kairos and chronos merging. I am not disappointed. More

Reflections, jovial journal:

Mery places my head on her chest, saying:

"I feel so close to you. 'You are like a bag of myrrh between my breasts, beloved.' Hold me. Please help me open myself to you."

As I rest between her breasts one part of me is experiencing lofty thoughts of a mysterious unfolding, receiving a gift and wanting to give in return, even feeling that a religion of the flesh is being born before my eyes. However, , another part of me, races lustily wondering how to best help her open up to me, and begins contemplating which orifices of hers I would like to see open.

I feel something of the thrill of what it must be for a climber finding a path up a mountain never before scaled, or seeking a new ascent up an old mountain. I want both at once. The challenge and excitement of new adventures. I feel like

Prometheus about to steal fire from the gods, and I can anticipate and empathize with his joyous celebration afterwards as he returns with the flame in hand. I imagine parting the red flames of Mery's inner thighs, sliding into the fiery red home plate.

\*

\*

\*

As I let all these thoughts swirl through my mind, I continue to stroke her hair, and listen to her shallow breathing, and her rhythmic, though fast-paced heart beat.

Her phrase, "Help me open myself to you," keeps playing through my mind. This time, there's something I find slightly uncomfortable about it, and I notice my lingam starting to decrease. Does it take away the challenge, like the conquest has disappeared? It's not really a mountain, just a little footpath over a small mound? Is it too lovey dovey?

There is nothing particularly erotic about lying on her chest bone, her breasts sagging to the side, listening to her breathe. I try to imagine the novelty of lying on her breasts the first time at the swimming pool. That was more furtive, someone could have passed by and seen us. It was a bit wicked. I wasn't sure how far she would let me go. That train of thought and image helps revive my light a little.

I wonder if maybe this is some "naughty" adolescence hold over. Part of sex needs to be animalistic, not dirty exactly, but furtive, stealthy. Too much light, candles, and airy fairy angels singing may work as a setting to reassure some women, but it's not my favorite. I like the forbidden fruit.

I let my mind wander, thinking of another furtive, erotic experience. I was in Berkeley with one of Alice's friends, a

lithe, petite girl named Julie, whom I'd met at Alice's party. Julie, saying she wanted more privacy than Alice's party afforded, invited me to her home in the foothills.

When we got to her house, we started fooling around in the living room. I heard some noises in the kitchen, and asked who else was here, to which she replied "Oh, it's just mom in the kitchen. Don't worry. She'll keep to herself."

As we continued to become more passionate, I asked if we shouldn't go into the bedroom. After all, Julie had said she wanted to leave Alice's party for more privacy. "I told you, don't worry, mom was a hippie before there were hippies. She's cool. We're fine where we are." I found myself becoming even more aroused. I think part of the excitement was the possibility of being caught.

I can feel my lingam start to rise even further. It is not in response to Mery now, but to the image of Julie in her living room. We were lying on a dark green couch, with fluffy yellow pillows. Her mother came out of the kitchen, and caught us in the throes of passion. Though I like adventure, at first I was uncomfortable. But then the daughter put her arms around me and pulled me tighter into her saying, "Keep going, she doesn't mind." The mother, wearing an apron over a red and green ski sweater, casually approached us, and, amazingly to me at any rate, not only didn't chastise us, but started rubbing down my back with her hands.

She then took off her apron, pulled her sweater over her head, took off her bra and began rubbing her pendulous middle aged breasts over my back and buttocks. "As if you had nursed at my mother's breast...I would bring you to the house of my

mother."

\*

\*

\*

My lingham is now back in full force. I murmur to Mery "Turn over and let me massage your back." I'd taken a massage class at the Free University. My goal was basically to meet new girls. I also learned some important points about the value of massage--that if you take a little extra time giving a girl a massage, you often receive back a double and triple bonus return for your efforts.

Mery is lying on her back. Her legs, bent at the knees, dangle her calves over the side of the bed, allowing her feet to continue to rest on the floor. Her red-freckled calves emerging from the black dress remind me of a waterfall reddened by sunrise.

In order for her to turn over to allow me to massage her back, she will have to pick both feet up off the floor at the same time. I assume she will just scoot up the bed, lying completely on it.

I assumed wrong. She violates my expectations. What she does is turn over, scooch down the bed, so her body from the buttocks up is resting on the bed, while she kneels on the floor.

My first reaction is that she's offering her buttocks to me. But before I can begin to sing "Hallelujah" I realize that her knees are clenched tightly together, and that she may have gone through all these machinations merely to keep her feet on the floor.

Maybe this isn't going to be quite as easy as I thought. It's going to take great ingenuity to figure out the key to get

her knees, tightly locked together, to slightly part.

Good.

\*

\*

\*

Mery's words, "I answer to many names" continues to echo in my mind, and I'm reminded of what I wrote several weeks ago. I take the chess piece out of my pocket and place it on my Johannes diary. I pull out my journal, and thumb back to my notes on the Rebbe's comments on "Shemot, Names" the first chapter of Exodus, and read.

"Every new beginning is an exodus from somewhere. Every name change is an exodus from one place toward a promised land, and an opportunity to start again. Entering into, and then becoming aware that we are in a narrow place, a bondage, can create the impetus for the new beginnings."

I'm seeing more clearly than ever Johannes' narrow places. He does not realize that his goal--to seek home plate through parting Mery's thighs and entering the narrow place between her legs--will reveal to him narrow places of which he, as yet, has no idea."

I look up from this reading to the chess piece resting on Johannes journal. I feel for the whittling knife in my pocket, and as I reach for it, find the page from the Rebbe.

\*

\*

\*

"Week Four of Exodus. This weeks parashah is Beshalach, to let go. At last, the Pharaoh has said the Israelites could leave. God guides them, leading them by a pillar of fire at night, a pillar of cloud in the day. Ask yourself, what is the fire that guides you? The cloud which inspires and reveals God to you?

"Change, as we've seen reflected in the Pharaoh side of us,



is difficult, and once again, Pharaoh has a hardening of his heart, and decides to pursue and recapture the Israelites--that part of us seeking freedom from bondage and narrow places.

"Bound by the Red Sea, Moses looks back and sees Pharaoh's army closing in. The people are fearful, saying to Moses, have you brought us into the wilderness to die. Moses says 'Have no fear...the Lord will battle for you.' (Exodus, 14:11-14),

"Now this is critical. Moses is showing his faith in the Lord, and praying. And how does God respond to this show of piety? For those of you who will be taking Dr. Lisbet's class on Tai Chi, you will learn that there is a time for assertiveness, a time for acceptance. 'The Lord says to Moses, "Why do you cry out. Tell the Israelites to go forward!"

"In other words, God chastises Moses, saying, enough prayer and piety Moses, you have to act. I'll help you, but you yourself need to take the first step forward into the water. There comes a point in our lives where we have to stop crying out and praying to the Lord, and take action.

"Once action was taken, the sea parted. The parting of the sea and the crossing through it to the other side can be understood as shifting into a new mode of consciousness. Let me ask each of you to consider how this page applies to your own life. Is there a part of you that is seeking to shift into a new state of consciousness? What steps do you need to take to continue that shift?"

I wonder if the Rebbe is directing these words to me.

\*

\*

\*

I look up from the Rebbe's notes, past the chess piece, to

the Grebu drawing of a person drowning in the water, and the hand outstretched toward him. How much is Johannes' consciousness shifting? How much is mine? Am I both drowning and seeking to rescue myself? Drowning and seeking God to rescue me?

I continue reading the final part of the Rebbe's notes "Escaping from bondage and our narrow places is a first and essential act--freedom from enslavement. But then we need to create the next step: freedom toward what? As we all know, what follows the crossing of the Red Sea (technically, as you know, now named the Reed Sea), is a long period in the wilderness. However, even though the journey is by no means over, it is important to celebrate each victory as it comes--and this is the meaning of the Shirah--the song at the sea, the dancing led by Miriam. So, let me invite each of you to celebrate, by song and dance, your small victories along the way. And now, I think a little dancing would be appropriate as a way to end this Parashah."

\*

\*

\*

Part of me is sorry I missed his class. I would have enjoyed the structured human touch that would have come through dancing. And it couldn't hurt to have a little more joyous celebration in my life.

I thumb through the Torah to see where and how the book of Exodus, with its eleven parashas, ends. It's interesting, the last chapter --Pekude-- records--takes place a year after the parting of the sea and the exodus from Egypt. This last chapter talks about the erection of the Tabernacle, and gives an account of all the materials used. Johannes has erected his tabernacle with fruits, wine, candles.

He has erected his erection. Where am I, nearly a year after his efforts at parting?

I feel both a fear and a pull to see the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet this afternoon. It's 4:30. I have one more hour. I return to Johannes' festivities.

\* \* \*

I go to the bathroom, and return with a warm basin of water and a cloth, which I set on the carpet next to Mery's feet. This time I am really going to massage them in style. I believe this is the best way to begin my assault. I bathe, wash, and massage her feet for several minutes. Then I start rubbing her calves, one leg at a time, beginning at the ankle with both thumbs, then letting the thumbs part as they go around the swell of the calves, ending at the knee.

Her black woolen dress hangs just a couple of inches above the knee. As I look closer at her dress, I realize it may actually be a dark navy, rather than black. I'm interested why that should interest me, and decide it shouldn't. I'm getting distracted.

I refocus and continue to massage higher on her leg, just under the dress. "Your rounded thighs are like jewels" I say as I let my hands go a few inches higher still up her thighs and under her dress. I'm careful to come close to, but not yet touch her underwear, as I rub the top of her thighs in a curved semi-circle, following the curvature of her buttocks.

Mery begins to undulate and moan.

I let my thumbs follow the curvature of each upper thigh one more time, then take my hands out from under her dress, and smooth it down, running my hands over her thighs, toward her knees, as if I am the guardian of her virtue, ensuring that she

looks prim and proper. I hear her give a little giggle as I do this.

I place my hands on the top of her thighs, but now outside her dress and say, as I learned in my massage class, "Take a deep breath." I let both hands gently, but firmly massage the top of her right thigh, then let them drop between her legs, and run them lightly up the crack of her buttocks, to her lower back. "Feel the good energy rising in your body," I say softly.

"Now let the air out slowly." As she exhales, I take my hands and apply a firmer pressure as I move them in opposite directions, across the tops of her back, above the buttocks I'd already moved across. "Let any stress or negativity just vanish from your body." I let my hands drift a bit under her belly, and pull them out, lifting her by the sides so her buttocks rise slightly. "Let yourself open and yield, feeling calmer, floating."

I know from first hand experience that this creates a relaxing feeling, almost like being hypnotized. I don't happen to like it, but I know that most girls I've practiced it on find it very peaceful. And also arousing. Slowly, surely, I am building both trust, relaxation, and a heightened sensuality in her.

"One more time." I again massage outside her dress, this time up the left thigh. "Another in breath," as I move across the buttocks crack and this time just a bit further toward her groin. She is moaning and undulating even more, pressing her pelvis into the bed, as my hands leave her groin, venture to the center of her back, and once again, massage across her lower back as I say, "Let the air out with an ahhhh. Thata girl. Excellent."

It occurs to me that I am talking to Mery like I talk to my horse, to calm her when she's nervous. I'm reining Mery in and soothing her like a thoroughbred, getting her ready to obey, ready to be ridden.

\* \* \*

I return to her knees. I let my hands go under her dress and slowly, inch by inch, work my way up her thighs. "Beautiful, keep breathing. Let us see if the vine has flowered, if its blossoms have opened." I let my hands continue upward, now massaging her buttocks over the undergarment. Her dress is now resting on her back and her thighs are completely exposed.

When at last there is no resistance, I let my hands slip under the sides of her panties, and begin massaging her buttocks directly, occasionally applying pressure with my thumb, saying "Tighten, now open and release."

She continues to sigh, to oscillate her buttocks, like an electronic pulse, and to press her pelvis into the bed. I find it so cute that she still has her feet firmly touching the carpet. So chaste.

She seems ready, so I begin to slowly pull her underwear down, first so just an inch of her buttocks shows. I love that look, like breast cleavage. I stop there, both to enjoy the spectacle, let her accommodate to this new territory, and make sure she is comfortable. I once again wish I had my camera with me. I'd love a picture of her lying on the bed, her dress up, her panties starting to be pulled down.

Then I realize I'm glad I don't. Because I might be tempted to stop and take a picture. That might break the mood, and I'd lose everything I'd worked for to this point, like a house of

cards tumbling down. If this works, one day we'll do a series of pictures. I find myself becoming even more aroused than I currently believed possible.

I pause a little longer. The vulnerability of removing the panties often causes the girl to flinch. I've learned that although my impulse is, once started, to push it through quickly, generally that is not a good strategy. Patience, slowness, one step at a time gives me better odds for success. Better now to "linger on the outskirts of the garden" before digging in.

I again rub her sides and slowly lift them upward. She again complies, which allows me to lift her underwear off her buttocks to mid-thigh. I take another mental picture. Linger again.

I want her to feel so comfortable, so aroused, that at her initiative, it can be, "hurry my beloved, swift as a gazelle or a young stag, to the hills of spices."

And then finally I pull her underwear down her legs. This is another check point. I need her help to lift one of her legs in order to pull them off completely, so that I can spread her thighs. It's possible to enter from the rear with her underwear part way down her legs, but not easy. And especially not the first time.

I place my left knee gently on her left foot, anchoring it to the ground. This is to make her feel safe. I lift her left knee, and pull the underwear under the knee cap to the top of her calf. Then I lift the right knee and do the same.

With both hands I pull the panties to her ankles. Gently massaging her right foot, I lift it just an inch off the ground, and pull the underwear off. Victory. Her legs are now free to

open without the elastic constriction and bondage of her panties, which dangle from her left foot.

There is still no resistance of any kind. If it weren't for her intermittent moans and sighs, I would think she's sleeping. I look at her face, turned on her right cheek. Her eyes are closed. Her reddish hair is flowing down over the blue-black woolen dress, stopping a few inches from where the dress is bunched in a heap above her buttocks, like a damn stopping its flow and causing it to pool.

\*

\*

\*

I return her right foot to the ground, but move it several inches further from her left, allowing me enough room to place my knee between her feet. The effect is to part her calves, and create the start of a part in her thighs. As I continue visually up her thighs, I can see the first signs of red curls in her garden.

Slowly I let my hands follow my visual progress, beginning with massaging her calves, her thighs. She must know that I'm headed into the garden, but I need to appear to be in control, not in a hurry. Keep the mood soft and sensuous.

When I reach her vineyard garden, I allow my fingers to softly test the soil, like little raindrops delicately hitting the earth. She's moist, almost like a flowing river. Feeling for her opening, she's a bit tight, but I don't meet any major resistance, either from her physical size, or from her demeanor. "Mixed wine is not lacking." I never really understood that phrase from the Song, but for some reason it comes to mind. Maybe I will mix wine in the bowl-like cavity of her belly button. Intoxicating. **Intriguing guess, Johannes. It is about wine**

**and love. Not dissimilar from the Proverb: "May you stagger like a drunkard in her love.**

Like the waves at the ocean at sunset, she's undulating, opening, spreading, allowing.

I remove my hands and begin to massage her lower back, above her buttocks, as I had previously done. "Another nice breath. In, out."

I allow my shaft of light to slowly replace my once probing fingers, causing it to rest just at the entrance to her garden.

I apply a subtle, light pressure, not enough to push in, but enough to let her narrow place slowly expand and part to accommodate me. I ease up a little, not leaving the garden, but letting my lingham soak in her juices, and then once again seek entrance.

Slowly, she opens a bit more, the parting of her deepest core. I love this first half-inch of entry. It's the difference between zero and infinity. Even though she is tight, I don't believe there was a hymen. Even if there was, and she was a virgin, she is no longer.

I continue to linger, and think back to my first effort to understand what the word hymen meant. I went to my most trusted source, the World Book, from which I had learned how to play tennis.

Hymen, it said, was a marriage song among the Greeks. Later, it was the name of the god of marriage--son of Apollo and one of the muses. There was a picture of a youth carrying a torch. This didn't really teach me what I needed to know about a woman's hymen.

The World Book gets one point for tennis instruction. No points for female anatomy instruction.

I insert the next half inch, and the next, all very slow and



gentle. It feels wonderful, but not the same intensity and excitement as the initial entry.

Now I stop, just a couple of inches in, and rub her neck and back some more, from the top of her spine down to her lower back, and then across her buttocks. Her swaying and purring are increasing, and it's time for another inch. But before I start the gentle next thrust I hear,

"No. Don't. Stop."

\*

\*

\*

I don't say anything but I think to myself, You must be kidding. Does this count as a home run? What's going on? Am I being thrown out at home plate, or have I already crossed the plate and am safe? Her tone is not harsh, but rather almost dreamy. I don't continue entering her, but I don't draw out, either. I do continue to massage her upper back. I look at the candles, and think of Molly last summer in New York at the Essex. Same position. I'd just entered the initial pathway of the garden, when the smoke alarm went off. One of the candles had caught a piece of cloth on fire. We'd used the champagne to put it out, but not before the hotel staff were calling and pounding on our door. It was definitely an awkward time to have firemen and hotel staff rush in.

Mery's "No. Don't. Stop" feels to me like that smoke alarm. As I look around the room, all the candles are on plates or in holders.

"Are you ok? Am I hurting you?" I rub her hair, trying to soothe her. I can't see her face, because she is still on her stomach and her face is buried in the comforter.

She starts to turn over, and I am forced to pull out. I do

so as slowly and lingeringly as I can. Shit. And I don't like to  
curse. Shit. Now what?

She continues turning over, and scooches up the bed a  
little, but keeps her knees at the edge, tightly pressed together,  
her calves dangling over the end, and her feet still on the  
floor. She pulls her dress down, and looks at me directly.  
Although I'm trying to hide my feelings, I imagine she can see  
the disappointment and frustration in my face.

"I don't want the first time to be like this."

What is she talking about? Like what? I have no idea what  
she means. And first time? With me? Ever? But I know to show annoyance  
and anger is never a good strategy, especially at a time like this. I  
lean over and kiss her on the forehead, the cheek, and, using all my  
self-control, whisper, "Of course, whatever you want. Guide me. Help me  
understand what you mean you don't want it to be 'like this.'" I say  
nothing about "first time."

She closes her eyes, demurely, shyly. "You know, from the  
back." Her eyes open and she looks directly at me. I see a lam-  
bent expression, as the light of the candles plays on their  
surface, flickering softly, brightly, and radiantly. "I want  
to see you while we make love."

\* \* \*

I hear the Ode to Joy flooding my mind. Hallelujah. But all  
I do is smile, and ask,

"Would you like another glass of wine." She nods and I walk  
over to the 'altar' table, and pour us each a small glass. My  
back is to her, and when I turn to ask if she wants some fruit, I  
see that she has turned over once again, and is crawling up the

bed. What a sight, her buttocks and secret garden and moisture and thighs reflected in the candle light. She then pulls down the covers, but before she turns around, I turn back and make busy at the table. I count to ten, one thousand one, one thousand two...giving her enough time to get ready, whatever that means, then turn, with a smile, and head back to the bed.

\* \* \*

She has now completely slithered under the sheets, her red hair resting on the pillows, the covers pulled up around her neck. I sit back on the bed and offer her a glass of wine. I notice that her dress is now lying on the floor. It has been tossed in a disheveled pile, not neatly laid out as I would have expected from her. A sign of a burgeoning wild side? I humorously wonder.

As we sip our wine, I smile. She appears a bit self-conscious and looks down shyly as she drinks. She curls her little pinky finger away from the glass, as mom does. I always thought it affected when mom did it, but with Mery, it looks endearing. I gently take my thumb and two fingers and run them along her pinky. She giggles.

The sheets start to come down a bit from around her neck, and I can see the first glimpse of cleavage, growing. I feel my lingam start to revive. I've been to home plate, at least temporarily, but what I'm really looking forward to is the first glimpse of second base. I wonder if the display of the nipple would be so much fun, so exciting in a more primitive (or advanced!) culture where women went topless as a matter of course. In our culture, legally, the display of the nipple is the definition of public nudity. Is that really a law I would want to

enforce? Or is it the fact that it is against the law that makes it seem exotic, forbidden, naughty?

I put my arm around her and stroke her right shoulder, as we continue to drink our wine. My stroking has a dual purpose. One, to continue to relax and comfort her; two, to start to remove the bra strap down her shoulder, so that more cleavage and breast flesh comes into view. As she sips the wine, she closes her eyes, and this allows me to stare at her cleavage. I'm fascinated that what attracts Johannes' focus doesn't exist. Cleavage isn't there as some thing. It's empty space.

I now stroke further down her right arm, taking the bra strap with me as far as it will go. As I take my next sip of wine, I look through and over the glass to see what I've uncovered. The top flesh of her breasts is truly enormous, and I believe I can see the first sign of the nipple, like the faint glow of a full moon rising at night over the horizon. I feel the same anticipation and excitement, the intimation of the light.

\* \* \*

I take our glasses and place them aside as I crawl under the covers with her. I let my left hand run over the top of her bare flesh for the first time. and it moves slowly toward that delicious red berry.

Although it doesn't seem necessary at this point, I know from experience that with large breasted women, it's good not to focus too much attention exclusively on their breasts. So, while continuing to caress her breasts, and as I begin my assault on her nipple, I use the diversionary tactic of first base, and lean in to give her a kiss, so that she is less likely to pro-

test. "The kisses of your mouth, your crimson lips" I murmur and I kiss her on the eyes, the cheeks, then the lips. I continue to let my hands feel the enormous size, weight, heft of her breasts. I'd say at least a DD cup.

I let our lips gently caress, soft kisses along her thinner top lip, starting at one corner and going across to the other. She starts to let her lips part. I decide not to enter her with my tongue, but continue a circular motion, now on her lower lip. Meanwhile, my left hand is making smaller and smaller circles around her aureole. At last, it reaches, strokes and lightly pinches her nipple. She moans. I pinch just a bit harder, and her moan increases. Then I let my hand play around and squish the entire mass of her breast, like a little kid finger painting or splashing in a foamy shallow water pool, dancing and leaping and jumping, probing and pushing and stroking, as sea swells and waves rise, tremble, and reform in different shapes,

\* \* \*

As I'm kissing her and feeling her lovely breasts---not at all like a cluster of grapes---maybe a mango, papaya, or cantaloupe--I wonder if my shaft of light is illuminating the darkness under the covers. I let out a little chuckle at that, then say quickly, so she is not confused, "I'm so happy being with you." I continue suckling at her breasts, and the picture of mom holding me as a baby pops into my mind. I wonder if Mery is looking down at me like that. I start to pull away, feeling embarrassed. A grown man shouldn't be acting like a little baby. But instead, I remain, feeling the warmth and comfort of being nurtured by her breast, one of the first times I can ever remember remaining this long on something I say I so yearningly seek.

Reluctantly, I leave her breast, and let my hand drift downward. Although I can feel some softness on her belly, she's in pretty good shape. Not as hard and taut as I am, but I don't like it when a girl is. It feels unfeminine, or like we're competing.

I take her hand and move it towards my shaft of light. She allows me to do so, and begins to stroke it. Flesh on flesh. Much better than when she did it during the horseback ride.

She is naked except for her bra, and I have no desire to take that off. We hold each other, bare bodies caressing for the first time.

When is it time for me to begin my ride? I'm ready, she's ready. I smile again at the thought that we will be doing it in the missionary position. For someone as innocent and spiritual as she is, that's perfect symbolism. Where my world of the flesh and her world of the spirit meet.

I see her little gold cross reflecting the candlelight. As I look more carefully, I realize it's a shiny brass color. I wonder if I can see myself in it.

\*

\*

\*

I nuzzle her neck, she opens her thighs, and I again go through the procedure of entry, one half inch at a time. Joyous, but if I'm honest, not as joyous as the first time. She once again begins her moaning and pelvic undulation. I feel a throbbing in her vagina, very tight and moist around me. But she is keeping her legs flat and relatively motionless. I reach down under her thighs, and help her bend her knees, so her soles are now flat on the bed.

"Push down gently on your feet. Let your pelvis rise." I put my hands under her buttocks to guide her. The first couple of times she is awkward and timid, but soon we are developing a rhythm. Her hands go around me. Ah, initiative. I like that, especially from someone so shy.

"That's it, let yourself open, let yourself go."

She speaks softly, almost as if in a trance. "His left hand was under my head; his right hand caressed me."

"Beautiful maiden."

I can feel a pulsing and throbbing in her vagina...too crude a word, what's it called in sanskrit--love tunnel, yoni. She throws her head back. "Oh, yes, please, a little harder." With that she takes her hands from around my back and places them over her head, grabbing the bedboard railing.

"Grab my hands, hard, please." Our hands enfold, my right in her left, my left in her right, as she continues like a churning sea, the waves windtossed, moon-driven and losing control. "Press into my palms. Harder. Harder. Hold me like you're binding me, so I can't move my hands."

I feel a bit like when I was placed on the pony as a child. It's all I can do to hang on. Maybe more accurately, she's like a bucking bronco. I don't mind her thrashing body movements. I feel in control of them, and even the cause of them. But I am startled by what she's asking me to do. This is not the shy passive, quiet innocent virgin Mery I anticipated. I also feel some discomfort at her ordering me around. But when in Rome....I decide to see where this is leading. I press into her hands somewhat firmly. Pain is not something I'm comfortable with--giving or receiving--so I'm cautious.

She's now pulsating and vibrating, and I'm afraid the bed may break. This is not a paranoid thought, for during my first experience with a woman, she thrashed about so hard, we actually did break the bed. Which startled and scared me, until she burst into laughter. Mery is also nearly screaming, and I hope the rooms are really well sound proofed.

I look around the room at the vibrating candle flames, dancing, frolicking, reaching skyward.

"Harder, please, harder. Pierce me."

I increase the pressure a bit with my hands, and thrust my lingham further into her, letting its shaft of light pierce her darkened tunnel as deep and as far as it can.

Then a gasp from her and a wail of a depth and intensity that I'd never before heard.

I'm startled by the sound. It sounds almost frightening, and I begin to feel like things may be getting too far out of control. When I look through the window, I can see the darkened night sky, and a few stars, their illumination mirrored by the earth bound lights.

I feel slightly dizzy, like I'm reeling between lights above and below. Lights outside, and lights flickering in the room. My light in her darkness. Our two dimensional shadows on the wall, rising and falling, like a writhing, coiling snake, a wave gathering force just prior to its cresting.

\*

\*

\*

Her wailing continues, and I turn myself over to it, as if I'm riding the sound. I feel myself catapulted into space. I'm suspended, floating. When I look up, there are stars brightly



glimmering in a scintillating dance. When I gaze downward, I'm looking at city lights which are incandescent candle flames arching skyward, vibrating like stars in the night sky.

I'm floating between two sets of candle flames, both illuminating my shaft of light. Up and down no longer make sense. My moorings are lost. I'm floating, carried along by the energetic, oscillating pulsating sound of a wail of love and suffering that has no name and no form and no way to grasp or categorize it.

As the wail grows higher and deeper and shriller, I feel a lightness opening within me, translucent. Light is filling me from without, and light from within is glowing and beginning to radiate outward.

The waves continue to crescendo toward their crest. Her red freckled parted thighs grasp my sides, her feet intertwine, and pull me harder into her as she pulls herself up into me. Our arms encircle each other. The moisture of our gardens are intermingled, the vine is flowering, its blossoms are opening. We are bound together. My shaft of light has entered through her red pubic curls, has parted the sea of foaming moisture in her narrow place.

The wave is just about to break and crash, the slithering snake about to strike.

My face is buried in her neck, kissing her. I unbury it, and arch my back for my final thrusts. As I do so, I open my eyes and look at her. Her hair is waving back and forth across her visage, concealing her features as, eyes closed, she twists her face right and left. As the crest of the wave reaches its final height, she opens her eyes and looks at me looking at her. There

is moisture in both of our eyes--tears? sweat? Both? The glance lasts only a second and we look away. It's too intense. Again I bury my face into her neck as I make a final downward plunge and ejaculate into her narrow place. The gift of life...a new beginning wanting to be born.

We embrace for several moments. I feel myself wanting to rise above and look down, but will myself to stay in the caress, and instead imagine what we look like holding each other. I bet Aristophanes would be happy to know that man and woman are no longer split, but have once again reached a complete physical unity. **As I read this, the image that comes to mind is Rodin's sculpture, Hand of God. The sacred hand molds matter, and brings forth humanity from emptiness, forming two new creatures. It is amazing that the origin of Rodin's Hand was a study for a hand whose gestures expressed farewell and despair. It shows that partings and sadness can be the impetus for new beginnings.**

The flames of sky and earth meet and illuminate and encircle each other. "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine."

\* \* \*

Even as I'm having one of the most glorious climactic experiences I've ever felt, I'm simultaneously recognizing, for the first time, the depth of something I don't know how to describe or characterize. It feels vulnerable, too open, too out of control. A binding. Her arms are tight around me. When is a hug a cuddle, when a coffin-like confinement? I feel trapped, in a bondage I don't understand. I'm in a narrow, constricted place. Is this a kind of dying? Is this narrow place the birth canal? Is something being born?

**Just as an exodus may lead to a new beginning, every new beginning leads to an inevitable ending.**

I feel my shaft starting to recede. I'm aware that something extraordinary has just happened to me. And it's gone. It's like water slipping out of my hands, an ungraspable musical note disappearing. I feel happy and achingly sad. The moisture in my eyes is tears of joy and loss. I have an intimation of what the French mean by describing orgasm as *petit mort*, a little death. My lingam recedes further, parting from her insides, and slips out. Mery pulls her hands out of mine.

These swirling thoughts and feelings are too hard for me to grasp. Sometimes, like in tennis, you have to just stop thinking and hit the ball.

"Beth," I hear myself whispering, reaching for and squeezing her hand three times "Beth."

\* \* \*  
\* \* \*  
\* \* \*