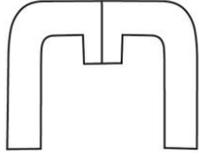


Book Five
Words



orpheus's amorphous faces... Seeking to contact the familiar. Searching. Faces leer, words uttered

"Oh, there go your eyes again...glazing over, drifting off. I'll keep reading to you until you're ready to return."

Dreaming. Pretty yellow dress, mustard seeds. Listening to formless words. Trying to talk. Can't form words. She can't hear....

"Whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble it would be better for him..."

understand them. Where is she, am I...

"... if a great millstone were hung around his neck..."

Face coming closer. Shapeless face, formless mouth, eyes bulging to pierce me. Fading into dream, buried in sand.

". . .and he were thrown into the sea."

A face looking at me, smiling. Form returns, Physical outlines. Asiya's wrinkled olive skinned face learing, taunting me.

"Lord be praised, he's awakening. A good Sunday morning to you, young man. Quite a sleep you've had."

Try to shape and contort my lips. Still unable to form words. Just silent air emerges, like a soft, nightmarish breeze.

"Shh, quiet, lie back. Stay under the covers and keep warm."

*

*

*

I hear a distant, though shrill whistle. Is the train coming to a junction? A new city? Dad and I are trying to attach an electrical wire on a high ceiling of the moving train. It's hard to keep my balance. I am on my tiptoes striving to change the bulb. When the train makes a sudden lurch, he falls forward. As I

attempt to break his fall, he kicks my leg. I feel a sharp throbbing pain radiate upward from my foot to my knee, like an electrical jolt.

I hear a knocking at the door. The conductor? A doctor? I am now in the sleeper of the train. I turn on my side and pull the covers tighter around me. Which city are we at? I bend my knees and draw the pained leg up to my chest, so I'm lying in a fetal position. The knocking grows more insistent. Dad has disappeared. I hear a woman's voice. Old. Accented. "Are you in there? Are you awake?" I don't want to see anyone. I pretend to be asleep. The knocking continues. Could it be my French teacher from college asking "Où etes vous?" Did I fall asleep in class? Am I going to get a bad grade? Where is this train going?

Just as I fall asleep to the lulling rhythm of the train's rocking motion, I yell "Apri," Open.

* * *

My eyes are closed, but I feel a presence looming above me. I try to open my eyes but they are glued shut. There are smells of fresh food. They make me feel nauseated. I hear that accented murmuring voice again, drifting toward me. I press my right ear tighter to the mattress, so the sounds will disappear. I put my arms around my knees and lock myself tighter into the curled up position. "Please," I whisper to no one in particular, "just let me sleep."

* * *

I am playing baseball, and our team is losing, badly. Dad is coaching, and I can see he's angry. "Keep your eye on the ball," he yells at the hitter. His voice is shrill and I don't want to be around it. I close my eyes, and somehow when I open them I am no longer at the game, but by a swimming pool, wearing a speedo. The swim team is working out and I wonder if I'm in good enough shape to join them. As I take a step toward the pool, I stumble on a kick board someone has carelessly left on the cement. I feel an excruciating pain in my foot and fall into the water. I let the coolness of the pool support me as I float and drift. Am I face up or down? Somehow it doesn't matter yet I'm still able to breathe. I hear my name called.

It's an insistent voice. Yelling. Gruff. It's dad. I'm up next. Where have I gone?
I want to get out of the water, but can't. I lie in the water, peacefully. But I
can see what's happened on the baseball diamond. The game has been disbanded. Our
team was so far behind that a mercy rule was called, and everyone has gone home. I
continue to drift in the water's embrace.

* * *

A hand is on my shoulder, pulling me up. I'm being drawn forth from the water.
"You must wake up and eat something." The old, accented, female voice is back.
"I've brought you some tea, bagel, and eggs. The doctor will be coming to check on
you in half an hour."

I try to remove the glue from my eyes, but all I can see is a distorted form
above me.

"Here, pull these covers around you, and let me prop the pillows up behind
your back. How's that?"

I feel the soft comfort of a bedspread swaddling me, enveloping me like a huge
diaper. My eyes open to color. There is no blue water. All I see are pale green
walls tilted inward like a Van Gogh painting, a faded yellow bedspread is my
diaper. Have I urinated?

* * *

I begin to shiver. I feel the hand rubbing my back and palms. "You've had
a difficult forty eight hours, young man. Welcome back."

My eyes are now open, and I see the blurry image of my landlady, Asiya,
standing over me, smiling. "Now, will you please eat something?" She carefully
places the tray on my lap, and picks up the little silver teapot. I look at her
fingers precariously gripping the handle, then hear the tinkling, splashing sound as
the yellowish brown tea arcs into the cup.

"Where am I?"

She stares at me. "Your eyes are still red and swollen from the ocean. Oh,
behold a boy who wept. You poor young man. You don't even remember what happened.

Everything will turn out just fine. This too shall pass." Her effort at a smile reveals a yellow-stained, broken-toothed, saliva-filled orifice. I turn away. "That sweet young girl drove you back here. She said you'd cut yourself badly, then fallen into the water. She'd had to take you to an emergency room for stitches. When you arrived here, you were still damp, shivering. Yo seemed dazed, incoherent. But don't be alarmed. I'll take care of you as if you were my own son." Asiya tries again to prop me up.

"I need to use the bathroom."

"I'm sorry. Of course." She takes the tray off my lap and places it on my desk. Then she reaches for the crutches next to the bed, and hands them to me. Her motions seem quick and hurried like a movie being shown at fast speed. I watch my hand slowly raise itself. Every motion slow, deliberate. I am aware of the spaces between my fingers. I feel divorced from my hand, and the hand divorced from the rest of my body. They are connected but don't seem so. How does it know to move? With caution the hand pulls back the faded yellow covers of the bedspread, and grips the crutches. There is no fluidity. I am astonished at how many parts have to coordinate to perform even a simple action.

I swing my left leg over the bed. My right leg, however, does not move. My right foot is bandaged and painful. She carefully helps me slide and lift it over the edge, and places it on the floor. I notice that even though the foot is painful, there is something reassuring about the aching throb. The sensations let me know the foot is part of me. Yet, at the same time, somehow even the sharp jolts in the foot feel detached from me. The medication?

The floor of my room is covered with papers. Asiya follows my eyes, and laughs. "Oh, Elizabeth said she tried to gather up as many of your papers as she could. I've put them on the floor to dry. They're sort of like a papyrus cradle. Here, let me gather them up so you don't trip."

*

*

*

As I limp toward the bathroom, I am aware of myself as fragmented

parts lurching awkwardly forward. Do these parts know each other? Are they really connected? Morpheus' amorphous dreams. I listen to the tinkle of the urine in the toilet and hear Mery's screaming voice and image black and brown and white bodies carrying me to a car, then an ER, stitches, and hearing "he's lost a lot of blood." I feel dizzy and faint, and bend my head over to regain equilibrium and to keep from falling to the floor.

Where's Mery?

*

*

*

I flush the toilet and return to the sanctuary of the bed.

Asiya's left.

Mery's gone.

Shivering in the sickly silence of my room. How long have I been cloistered here? I see a piece of toast. Do I want to butter and eat the toast? But I know Asiya brought me a bagel, how could it now be toast? This must be the start of a dream. Do I want to enter the dream? I wonder where it will take me.

To a library. There is a typewriter there, and I want to take it with me, to begin writing again. But they won't let me. They tell me there have to be rules and laws, and that's one of them. No taking the typewriter. I tell them I need it, and should be allowed to have it. I'm hurt, and want to take it to my room. I'll pay for it. No, they yell at me, like a Greek chorus. I hate being told no. They put their hand on me, shaking me, to usher me out of the library.

"You fell back asleep and haven't eaten anything." Asiya has returned and is gently rocking my shoulders back and forth. "Come on now. These , berries are fresh from my garden. They make a delicious jam, too."

Dream states giving rise to a hypnagogic waking state. Which is preferable? Do I want either one?

*

*

*

"Welcome one and all to our five week journey from slavery to freedom. Would that it were so simple." The Rebbe laughs. "But we'll do our best! With God's help." He looks around the class. I know he's not just looking at me, but his glance makes me feel uncomfortable. I turn away.

"Let's begin with hope. In the Bible, we find this hope with the birth of Moses, who, as a baby, was placed in a wicker basket in a Sea of Reeds. (By the way the Hebrew is Yum Suf, which linguists are now translating as Reed Sea, rather than 'Red Sea.')

So, hope begins with birth, and Moses being rescued from a body of water. There are many literary parallels-- in Egyptian texts, Akkadian legends, Greek mythology-- of heroic figures being rescued in infancy from death and drowning from bodies of water.

"Moses is drawn out of the water by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses-- Mosheh in Hebrew-- means the one who draws out. He is to draw Israel out of Egypt. We can also understand his name as suggesting a personal spiritual journey, that each of us needs to draw out the best of ourselves, to remove ourselves from that which binds and enslaves us."

As I listen to the Rebbe's words, I realize how reassuring it is to be back in the structure of his class. He does give me hope. Maybe he and Dr. Lisbet and Moses can help draw me forth from the morass of my life. Maybe all of us together can help draw Johannes forth from his near drowning, mental decomposition, and personal bondage...and toward the promised land.

"As those of you who were in the Parasha class last Saturday know, this week's portion is Ki Tisa. If you believe, as I do, that there are no coincidences, then it's lovely and remarkable that that Torah portion talks about Moses carrying down from Sinai two stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God. Yet, while he is making his way alone down this path, the Israelites, restless and fearful, have built a golden calf. So, as we begin our journey from slavery to freedom, each of us has to see what are the golden calves we are worshipping. What stops us from being free and reaching the promised land? Where are we in bondage?"

I both admire and am jealous of the Rebbe's certainty. I can easily identify with the bondage and enslavement. I am more doubting of the existence of a promised land.

*

*

*

As I'm thinking this, Peter asks, "If there are no coincidences, then you would say that it was God's will that the "enemy," the "other," Pharaoh's daughter, found Moses. Right?" The Rebbe nods. "Well, today, while we are in class learning about Passover, the "other religion" is beginning Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the beginning of Repentance. We begin our count down toward Passover, they begin their forty-six day countdown toward Easter. Is that also part of God's divine plan?"

"Let me." Dr. Lisbet steps forward. "Very knowledgeable, Peter, as always. There are going to be lots of cross currents between Judaism and Christianity during this spring period leading up to Easter and Passover." I smile inwardly at her use of the term "cross" currents. Was it an intentional pun?

"Ash Wednesday is a time for repentance and the beginning of Lent. Ashes were used in ancient times, according to the Bible, to express penitence. Dusting themselves with ashes was the penitent's way of expressing sorrow for sins and faults. An ancient example of one expressing penitence is found in Job 42:3-6. Job says to God: 'I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.' (c. 5-6). This also reminds us of the line often used in funeral services Genesis (3:19): 'Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.' (For those of you who know Latin: *Memento homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris.*)"

I try to see if I can translate the words, like when I'm watching a French movie with subtitles. It helps to know what it means--makes the translating easier! I'm impressed at Dr Lisbet's erudition--Latin yet--but it also seems pompous and unnecessarily showy. The way Johannes sometimes sounds. And yes, even me at times,

I guess. Also, why didn't she give the Hebrew? Maybe because the Rebbe was there, and knows it better?

"The Rebbe and I are actually working on a couple of books. One, examines the Universal/ Particular theme: How various religions are both at variance and interconnected; different paths up the mountain; and how each views others' paths. So your question fits right in with what we've been discussing between ourselves."

I wonder what the other book is. But then I realize I'm getting distracted. As is the whole class. Isn't this a class supposed to be about freedom from bondage? How did we get to this universal/particular stuff? Peter's derailed us again.

* * *

I hear Dr. Lisbet saying something about "The ashes are prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year's Palm Sunday celebrations I want to shout at everyone that they are being sidetracked, but decide to just tune them all out.

I think of the Rebbe's words. "There are no coincidences." I wonder what the Parasha would be for Johannes this week? Would it be meaningful to his life? And then I replay Dr. Lisbet's words from Job. "I abhor myself and repent." I remember Richard saying to Johannes, in an effort to be kind, something about Job. What was it? "Come on, old chap, snap out of it, you're beginning to sound worse than Job." Coincidence?

Johannes' journey is ending. At this point, he doesn't seem to recognize himself, but that's because who he was no longer exists. I image him in the fetal position. At the ocean being pulled from the water; in his bed, being cared for by Asiya.

And I remember him in the fetal position--in a wicker chair no less-- as he was being pummeled by his father. Was that a taste of the bondage and blows of the Pharaoh's task masters on the Israelites?

Who is to emerge from Johannes? I'd like to believe he will grow to become Moses, to lead us all forth from our enslavements, toward the promised land. But sometimes I wonder if what emerged from his dying is nothing but the realization of

what Dr. Lisbet calls maya--seeing the illusions and emptiness of what is. Is there really a promised land at all? Or is the Job-like pain and suffering that Johannes is feeling--and that I too feel-- really where our journey ends. In that suffering we are now essentially brothers. Moses or Maya. What are we pointing the way toward?

I've now lived almost two and one half months of my nine month journey. Am I closer to clarity? There is some light since emerging from the womblike darkness of my room. Mainly that comes from the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet. But though I may be in less bondage than Johannes, it is not clear to me that he as our so called Moses has led us forth to any place but a desert wilderness. It seems all that I am aware of now, that he wasn't, but will increasingly learn, is the enormous amount of suffering in the world, whether caused by other humans, by God, or by my own thoughts, words, and deeds. There is still so much darkness.

* * *

Dad is coaching the swim team, and I see him talking with some of the star swimmers. I'm not that good, but have been given permission to try out. Mery is croching above me mumbling instructions to help me learn how to take a leaping start. But I can't understand her. Because of my ear? The way she's speaking?

Every time I push off from the ledge, the ledge moves. I can't get any leverage or traction and just lie drifting in the water. Even when I try to take a stroke, my arms seem to have lost their flexibility. I can barely lift them out of the water, much less forward in front of my shoulders.

When I look up, I see that someone is in my lane. But since Mery is there, I don't want to make an issue of it, and move to the next lane, which is empty. She puts her hands on my shoulders and back, trying to get me to arch them so I can get a better start. Again, I try to push off, but make no progress.

Finally, the assistant swim coach, who is black, tells me to get out of the water. He takes me over to a grove, and says my dad has decided to cut me from the team. I knew I would be. I'm just not good enough, I tell him. The others swim so

fast. I then ask him what is the world record, and what time I have to swim to be able to be the best.

"Why? he asks.

"Because I plan to go off and train by myself, get into excellent shape and when I can beat the world record, I know you'll have me back on the team even if" and here I start to say, even if I'm black but I know that is awkward and sounds prejudiced, so I continue "even if I have four arms."

The assistant coach leaves. I'm startled by a hand on my shoulder. I turn, but my eyes are closed. I assume it's Mery, but when I open my eyes, I see a face which I don't recognize looking sympathetically at me. The face is attached to a woman who is placing her hand on my shoulder as if to comfort me. She's saying something, but again I can't understand the words. Then I remember what my creative writing professor said when he was talking about deconstructism: words subvert their own meaning, and every text ultimately undermines itself, betrays itself, parodies itself, collopses in on itself. The formless words I'm hearing start to take shape. Is my creative writing professor here? No, the voice is female.

"You haven't eaten anything. Enough sleep. Wake up, young man. My friend, who's a doctor, has come to see you." Asiya puts her hand behind my shoulders, lifts me to a sitting position with the Dr's help, and props me up with a pillow. "This is my old friend from Palestine, Dr. Zees. He's retired, but as a special favor to me he's here to take a look at you. I'm worried about you."

The doctor reaches out to shake my hand and gives me a card. Dr. R.M. Zees, Jr. He looks so old and haggard, I want to ask which century he retired in. He looks like he needs to see a doctor. He puts a stethoscope on my chest, back, aske me to cough. He unbandages and looks at my foot. I wince. "It looks like it was well stiched. I don't see any infection, but it is still inflamed and needs to be watched closely. Notice if the foot becomes hard and painful, shiny dark red in color, like a group of boils, a carbuncle. Watch to see if any pus discharges through the openings."

Mery is the bacteria that got under my skin, infected me. She's the plague, red-headed chaos. By offering her my sandals, I became wounded. I can't trust her. She makes me too vulnerable, then pushes me into the sea. This is her fault. Let her go. She is not order or safety. I need to find some other, more reliable order. The Seder. Writing. Classes. Words of the law. I Where have they gone. I need order, structure.

Asiya says words. Reassure her. Smile, make her think I'm ok. I need to be left alone. Lips parting. Smile.

"That's better, young man."

Let her believe I'm here. Reflex. Inertia. Machine-like actions repetitions of the past giving me momentum. I need space to sort out. Regroup. Please leave me alone.

"Keep it clean and limit your movement for the next few weeks." He looks over at my tennis racket and golf clubs. "Not for a while, son." They both smile at me. I feel like an animal in a cage. They should have been forced to pay admission.

He turns to Assiyra and adds, "It's good you kept it away from contact with water for the first two days. For the next few days, make sure he doesn't soak it or have prolonged contact with water: no baths or swimming. After day six, he can bathe and swim normally." He smiles at her. "You're doing a fine job of caring for him. Physically, he'll be fine. There's no infection. He can move about with these crutches, letting pain be the guide. There's no reason for him to be lying in bed like this."

Hello, I'm here. Why is he talking to her? Is she my mother? My brother's keeper? Aren't I here?

Asiya turns toward me, "Don't worry, I'll be here to take care of you."

Dr Zees continues, still speaking to Asiya, "There will likely be a sloughing off of dead tissue, a localized death of living tissue. That's to be expected and nothing to worry about. I'll check back in a week, but feel free to call me if there are any problems."

"Oh, you are so wonderful, Dr. Zees. Thank you. Isn't it amazing the way the good Lord created us to repair our own bodies, to get rid of that which we don't need so that new growth and life can occur? Praise the Lord."

More words. A Sunday sermon. I don't need that now, I just need sleep. Roll over, close my eyes, drift off again.

"See, doctor, there he goes again. He seems so tired and disoriented. Maybe I'll just continue to read the Bible to him and keep him company."

Words bouncing off me. Dream-like trance. Awareness too harsh, stay luxuriously slipping back, staring, her reading to me, words, helpless...

* * *

I take a hose to water my plants. By accident, I splash a neighbor's house. I go over to apologize, and offer to clean the spattered windows. Then I realize I'm on a narrow ledge, less than seven inches wide, and several stories up. I'm afraid I'm going to fall. I don't want to move. Will I ever be able to get off? In the midst of my fear, I have a thought worthy of the book Grandpa Dave always says he's writing, *You Don't Have to be Meshuginah but It Helps*. What I think is "I should have hired someone to clean the windows." It seems really funny to me. If I ever get off the ledge safely, I'll have write it down and send it to him.

* * *

An arm grabs me. Is there a chance I'm going to be rescued? Then words form, "See, Dr. Zees, this is what he keeps doing, drifting in and out, sometimes with fearful faces, sometimes laughing, and sometimes very disoriented when he awakes."

"It may be he's trying to hide from some kind of trauma. But, again, it's not physical. Maybe you can try talking with him. Perhaps he should go see a counselor if things don't get better in the next day or two." Their voices drift away as she ushers him out.

Once they're gone, I sit up. Trauma? Damaged? Counselor? Ridiculous. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong with me mentally. I'm just tired. I pick up her tea

cup, and taste the lukewarm liquid. Ugh. I'm not thirsty or hungry. On my night table, I have my dream journal, which I open. It's interesting that Dad has been in a lot of my dreams recently. Baseball coach. Swimming coach. It reminds me of real life. He was always involved with my sports and he did coach me in baseball.

Are my dreams telling me that I want a "coach" now? Or am I afraid not meeting the expectations of the coach? In one dream I disappoint him by not being there when he wants me. And our team gets mercilessly beaten. Would it have made a difference if I were there? Probably not. Since I'm hurt. In the other, he cuts me from the team because I'm not good enough. But really, I left the team when I left Kansas City. And, if I wanted to, I could rejoin it.

Though it's interesting it seems there's a part of me that feels I can only rejoin it if "I'm the best." Grandpa \$ talking. And what's with Mery coaching me? And why did I change lanes? Is my unconscious seeking to please her? Where is she? How did I get here? Suddenly I start to shiver, almost uncontrollably. "Asiya" I shout, as I pull the yellow bedspread more tightly around me.

*

*

*

How ironice that the parasha during this time for Johannes' is Behar, "On the Mountain", which occurs while he is in the depths so deep that he doesn't even yet realize the gravity of his situation. Yet the message of Behar is interesting with wisdom teachings that certainly apply to his predicament. In Behar, God commands the Sabbath as a day of rest, a time of reflection and turning toward God. Certainly something Johannes needs. And not just one day a week. But God also commands a sabbath of complete rest for an entire year where there will be no tilling of the land. Johannes, and I, are still within that one year period of rest from the old ways of acting. No external tilling. Just internal. Without even knowing what a parasha is, Johannes, unknowingly, begins our year of reflection.

Finally, the Lord requires all servants to be freed, so they may return to their families and home. Family and home are something I'm still seeking. But I'm increasingly realizing it's not the literal family and home that I search for. As

the parasha says, no one owns anything but God "The land is Mine. You are but strangers residing with Me." Home and family rest with God and spirit.

I hope.

*

*

*

"Where did she go after she left?"

"She had a friend come down and take her home. A lovely man. Al was his name, I believe."

I watch as she precariously holds the tea pot in her hand, and pours some more into my cup. "This is a special Mandarin blend. I'm told it's very healing."

"She left with Al?" Am I angry? Do I care?

"I offered her a room, but she seemed pretty upset. I could see how concerned she was for you. We had tea and she told me how you'd hurt yourself and needed all those stitches." She takes a sip of tea. "She even called last night to see how you were. She's a sweet girl. And so spiritual. We talked a lot about God."

I don't want to be having this conversation with this woman. And I definitietly don't want to hear one of her lectures about God. Ever since I've lived here, I've heard her corner people and do God talk. I've managed to successfully avoide her these previous past months. Now, she sees me as a trapped animal that she can evangelize.

"I'm really tired. I think I'm going to try to sleep some more."

"I wish you'd get up. Let me pull up the blinds. It's a lovely day." She opens the shades, and a dazzling, painful yellow light pours in. Yellow, like the mustard seed, Mery's color of faith. I want the sun to remain hidden.

*

*

*

And I want Asiya to go away. I don't like being with people who spontaneously drop in on me. When I want to be with them, I'll contact them. I feel like a caged animal at a zoo. When she visits to look at me, she may think she's being kind and friendly. But it only reinforces my feeling of being trapped and and stared at.

I start to shout at her to leave me alone. I'm not sad. I'm not distressed. I'm not angry. I just want to be left alone. But as I'm about to tell her to go, I look at her face illuminated by the sun, and it's as if I'm seeing it for the first time. Beneath her bubbly talk, I see a sad, wrinkled, old woman's face. Her face is dark olive, swarthy, which makes her deep set blue eyes stand out that much more. Beneath the smile, I see resignation. Yet there is a kindness in her eyes and smile. It's interesting how I can have lived here since September, in the same house as someone, and not know anything about them, much less even looked at them closely. She was just someone I handed a monthly check to.

"Those strawberries look good." I decide to summon the strength to be nice. Why? Maybe I am feeling a little lonely and want some companionship. Maybe, with Mery out of my life, the fact that she has a cute, though standoffish daughter that comes to visit once a month, has something to do with it. I don't know. It's too hard to think. It's enough that I'm able to speak.

"My husband and sons used to love fresh strawberries. We'd grow them in our yard. I made a promise to them that when I came to America, I'd continue to grow them, no matter where I ended up."

As I listen to her, I realize she does have a slight accent.

"Where were you born?" I was going to guess somewhere in Eastern Europe maybe. Maybe an immigrer after World War II?

"Palestine." She looks at me directly.

I was wrong. I'm surprised. She is the first Palestinian I've ever met. She doesn't look like how I expected they would look. I imagined them to be much darker, and not with blue eyes. And I'd seen her reading the Bible and rearranging pictures of Jesus in the hallway (which I tried to ignore), so I knew she was Christian, and I thought Palestinians were Muslims. Is she Arab, too? Can you be Arab, Palestinian, Christian? This is getting much too confusing for me. I just want to go back to sleep. I don't need this.

She pours me more tea. I can see I'm in for a real visit. As I sip the tea, not knowing exactly what to say, she continues:

"My home was east of the Jordan River, about ten miles from Mounts Pisgah and Nebo."

I casually shrug my shoulders and nod non-committally. "I don't really know geography very well."

"Would you like me to get a map for you?"

Is this going to be one of those maps that Grandpa \$ had told about that doesn't show Israel. I demur.

There is silence. Is an angel passing, Mery?

"When did you come to America?"

"1949."

"Why did you decide to leave?" I realize by her face as soon as the question is out of my mouth that the choice of the word "decide" was both naive and stupid. I'm not thinking well. Words are getting jumbled in my mind.

* * *

She looks at me awhile, then her eyes closed tightly. "I didn't really decide. You don't want or need to hear my story, young man. But thank you for asking." She takes a sip of tea. I look at her hands. Old, wrinkled, with brown blotches.

I don't want to know. Just like I didn't want to go find Mery at the ocean. What compels me to go where I realize I shouldn't? The proverbial moth to a flame? I resisted looking at the map. Stop, already. Yet there is a larger part of me that wants somehow to hear her story. I'm tired of all the walls there seem to be everywhere between people. What can be so difficult to hear?

"No, please." I actually sound interested. What's wrong with me? Don't I have homework to do? What about my creative writing class? Why do words come out of mouth that I don't want to utter?

"I came with my daughter when she was four. My husband and both my sons--they were only 14 and 16-- were killed during the war with Israel. Only my little daughter and I escaped. We lost everything and had some relatives here in America. So we came to start over. We were the lucky ones."

She is holding back tears, but also sitting proudly, almost regally. Yet defiantly, too. Watching me. Her face is confusing, like Mery's often was. She's sad, and there is also some anger, but she's trying to be forgiving and kindhearted and hasn't yet been able to reconcile all the feelings. How often does she share this story? It seems it couldn't be very often if decades later it still has this effect on her. Her words tumble forth fresh, as if she'd been holding them back. Yet they are clear and succinct and well scripted, as if she'd rehearsed them over and over in her head. Why is she telling me? Because I'd naively asked? Because I'm Jewish? Because she knew I was vulnerable and weak and wanted to cause me more suffering? Why do I have to listen to this? If I believed as she did, this would probably be a time I'd shout "Why God, why me?" It's amazing how little you know about your landlady. And this is definitely more than I need to know.

* * *

Excellent, Johannes. Even though traumatized and groggy and tired and in pain, you are able to returning to form, almost reflexively. You mock her as an effort to create distance from her suffering. Bravo! You say you know so little about your landlady. You know so little about anyone around you. Including yourself.

I rub my eyes. Voluntarily, to buy time. And yawn. Involuntarily. I know it appears rude, but my psychology professor said we yawn to get oxygen, and it's really an effort to help us wake up. I take a bite of the bagel and chew slowly. These kinds of topics--from the Holocaust, to the death of our dog Salty-- are not discussed in my family.

This is not the way I planned to spend my Sunday. Talking to a Christian woman, who probably feels, like Mery, that Jews killed her Savior. Whatever the truth of that, she's Palestinian, and some Jews killed her sons and husband.

"Do you know that I was born Jewish?"

"Of course." I thought so.

I wasn't exactly sure what to say. In my family, the next sentence would have been, "These are really delicious strawberries."

* * *

All I know about the war she's talking about is that the newly formed state of Israel was willing to share the land with the Palestinians, but the Palestinians attacked Israel, along with much of the Arab world, declaring a jihad and threatening to wipe Israel off the face of the earth.

I was born at nearly the same time as Israel itself. But it never was that important to me until 1967, when the Arabs launched a surprise attack, and Israel repulsed five invading Arab armies. This was the image of Judaism I liked, the tough Israel saying "Never again" will we be innocent lambs led to a Holocaust slaughter. I felt a resurgence of pride in and connection to the little state. It was as though it was coming into its own, just as I was about to turn 21 and come of age myself.

"Are you still very angry toward Israelis, or Jewish people in general?" I ask. It seems an obvious question, but I'm not sure I want to hear the answer. It also seems out of character for me to ask. Do I care about her answer? About her? Am I intellectually curious? Normally this is the kind of interaction I'd run away from. Is some kind of change coming over me? Yet, somehow the question seems right. Even if I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

She pauses and looks down at her tea. I expect her to take a sip but she seems to change her mind and looks directly at me, as if deciding how honest to be.

"Your people call it the War of Liberation. My people call it the catastrophe. Their war of liberation was our war for liberation. I don't see why we couldn't have both avoided such needless suffering. For me, it was a personal devastation."

Now she does take a sip of tea. She wipes her eyes. "I asked how Jesus would have wanted me to live. And the message is always that anger and hatred solve nothing. Only forgiveness and love can heal us. I never hated Israelis then, or now. I want us all to live together. Which we were doing, just fine, until the war. Maybe it will happen again when Jesus returns. For now, I know that my job here on earth is to patiently endure."

She pauses, gets up, finds some Kleenex, wipes her eyes, blows her nose—loudly— then returns and sits on the edge of my bed. "I can say for me my life on earth is over. This life is only suffering. Each day brings renewed hurt and loneliness. I endure knowing that this is the way the good Lord meant it to be. I am His suffering servant. I know that when I die the Lord will bless me in the next life. There must be a heaven. God would not force us to go through this to go through his awful life on earth for nothing."

As she continues to speak, I feel like I'm listening to an older, more pained, and less reflective version of Mery. It seems that the deeper the wounds, the stronger the faith, the less questioning she can permit herself. I just nod, having no idea what to say. This is a level of suffering I've never personally been exposed to. I've never heard anyone talk so openly about such terrible loss. Finally, I say, simply, "I'm sorry." I am truly sorry. For her pain. And because she is such a simple person that her only solace is in an illusory pipe dream of a resurrected Jesus. That is really sad. If you feel life is that miserable, why not just end your life? That's what I would do.

* * *

In my most recent session with Dr. Lisbet, she commented that my life has been a bit like Buddah's. For years I was kept in the castle and protected by my

family from the pain and suffering of the world. Salty didn't die; the Holocaust is not discussed. The Titanic didn't sink. But as we--you and I, Johannes-- step outside of that sheltered life, we see the pain and suffering of the world. Not just our own, but all around us. Johannes, I admire your initial efforts to hear and feel and empathize with Asiya's loss. Your bewilderment at the depth of her suffering is genuine. But you are just beginning to be born into that world, and your response also shows a simplistic, unnuanced Navite. Unfortunately, out of the mouth of babes. . . I wonder if we have more options than stoic resignation, blind faith, or ending our lives.

* * *

I'm starting to feel hungry, and take another bite of the bagel, adding some butter and cream cheese to it. I hope she doesn't think this is rude. But she doesn't even seem to notice me now. Even when I put some of her strawberry jam on it.

"The Lord knows how much I've suffered in this life. I've borne it patiently, for I know that this is His will. He wants to make me a stronger person, This pain is a test, like Job, to see if I can keep my faith in Him. He is preparing me for the final Day of Judgment. Each night, before I go to bed, I read my Bible. Not just the New Testament, where I know God, through Jesus is speaking directly to me. But the Old, also. Ten chapters a night. Sometimes I have to stop in the middle of a passage. I can't go on, I'm so moved."

I nod. She continues to talk, as though a floodgate has opened and now she is speaking much more rapidly. I wonder if this isn't kind of a pep talk she gives herself regularly, and whether I, as audience, really need to be here. Or maybe she likes having a witness listening. I merely sit and try to show through my eyes some caring and concern. That way I can continue to eat. I wonder if Mery would think I'm doing a good deed for an old woman. Perhaps the equivalent of her serving food to the alcoholics in San Francisco. I feel a pang of loss, as I wonder what Mery is doing today. Mery who? She's

dead to me. I need to move on. A fresh start.

"Every word in the Bible is the truth. Every word is from God. On the Day of Judgment, God will put on His breastplate with its twelve stones, each stone representing one of the tribes of Israel. And then either Urim or Thummim will light up, determining my guilt or innocence. I've led as good a life as I could. I trust I will receive my reward later."

Apparently I am fated for a Sunday sermon. I admire her sincerity, but am just astonished at what she's saying. I have to restrain myself not to show my incredulity at the image of Urim or Thummim lighting up like some pinball machine on a breastplate to decide whether she goes to heaven. It's shocking to me what the human mind can conjure up, and then others can believe in, to reduce the pain of the moment.

Is she trying to convert me? Tell me that I can receive this same reward in the hereafter if I believe in Christ. I wonder how she would feel if I told her Friday night I led, if you can call it that, my first Passover Seder—which historically was her Good Friday. By that reckoning, today I'd be on the other side of the Red Sea. She'd be celebrating the reborn Jesus. How ironic.

There's even more irony, Johannes. Today the Rebbe talked about how Miriam, Moses' sister, led the Israelites in dancing once they crossed the Reed Sea. He went on to say that, symbolically, crossing the Sea can be understood as moving into a new, higher state of consciousness. Even though there is still a long and arduous journey through the wilderness to get to the promised land, it is important, as Miriam showed us, to take time at each step to celebrate progress.

In some ways, this process is a kind of re-birth. The old Johannes is dying, and you are being reborn into a new state of consciousness, with all the agony of birth pangs. And, the desire of the Israelites, like an infant being born, to flee back and retreat into the womb, the old, but familiar, slavery, trapped in the womb. I guess in some ways that's what I'm doing, too—going back into the past—through you. Yet, we both know—or will learn— you can't go home again. We must each

inevitably keep trudging through our present wildernesses--at least as long as we are alive

* * *

I decide she is not trying to convert me, but just to share her pain and hope. Something comes over me that feels foreign. I try to resist it. But rather than mock her feeble fairy tale, I feel sorry for her. It's not a condescending sorrow, it's more like compassion. Before I can realize what is happening--and certainly against my better judgment-- I actually find my hand reaching out taking her old, wrinkled, splotched one. Is it because of my the love I have for my blue-eyed Grandmother? "Asiya, you are indeed one of the good souls of the world. Anyone who can grow strawberries as delicious as these is certainly deserving of reward in the hereafter."

She is silent. Was I too serious? Too light hearted? Did some mocking come through in spite of myself--equating growing strawberries with the life hereafter? Who am I to talk about and be a judge of good souls? I'm exhausted. Can I let go of her hand now? This is a mistake. Let me go back to sleep; or even start working on my assignments for next week. Please, God, just let his conversation end.

"Thank you, that's very kind." She pats my hand with her other one. "Your family must be very proud of you. Such a fine young man." She pulls her hand back and says, "Now, eat some more."

"There are no coincidences, young man. Why do you think you are waking up after such pain today? You have been crucified and now, today is Pentecost. There is meaning in that, I'm sure."

I look at her vaguely. I have no idea what she's talking about. Pentecost. Sounds like Penteuch. I just stare at her, with a glazed expression.

"Pentecost, a festival day, on the seventh Sunday after Easter." Easter. Where was I then? Vague memories of Kansas City. Yes. My last trip home. Where I was being crucified by my family. 'It commemorates the descent of the

Holy Spirit on the Apostles. Perhaps the Holy Spirit is descending on you, and this is another chance for your reawakening. Open yourself and let some of His beautiful spirit into you. It can fill you and relieve you of your pain."

I nod, just to quiet her. But it doesn't work. "Sometimes it occurs on the same day as your holiday of Shavuot, when God revealed his laws to you at Mt. Sinai. You all receive God's revelation as laws, we receive God's revelation as love and the holy spirit."

What a lovely comparison: the hard stones of the law versus the loving embrace of God. Is she trying to convert me? But which does sound and feel better? That is what I seek, God's love. **It is interesting that sometimes they occur on the same day. Does that mean that perhaps, at the deepest level, the two might be two sides of the same coin? Is there a deeper integrative wisdom that can be evolved? I wonder if that's what Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe meant when they gave us their final farewell talk.**

I have one more story I want to tell you."

Inside, I'm screaming, "Would you please leave?" Why? Tiredness? Yes. Homework? Yes. But there is something more I can't quite grasp is tickling my brain. Maybe it is feeling like an impostor: I'm not sure my family is that proud of me. Maybe it's the worry that if she gets to know me too well, she won't find me such a fine young man. Maybe it's the realization that at some point I have to face and write about what happened Friday night with Mery, and what the heck is going on with my life. All I know is that I really want this conversation to end and to be left alone.

I look over at her, and she seems so eager to tell her story. It just feels too insensitive to ask her to leave. Or maybe it's that I really don't want to be alone and face my life. In either case, I gesture for her to continue.

*

*

*

"This story happened to me just this week and shows, as I said, there are no coincidences in life. Everything is God's work. You may have seen that there is a

convention in town, reported in the papers, of the heads of Boeing and Lockheed Aircraft. And just this week I was reading about Elijah. Isn't that astonishing?"

I am so astonished, I just stare, apparently the response she wants, but I have no idea what she is talking about.

"They think with all their modern technology that they are making progress, but like wise King Solomon says, 'There is nothing new under the sun. Three thousand years ago, right in the Bible, there was a miracle which, by comparison, makes the airplane seem like a child's toy. All you have to do is open your Bible to Second Kings, Chapter 2, verse 11, and I'll quote it to you, young man, from memory.'" Her head lifted high, her back arched proudly. This is the most animated I've ever seen her.

"And it came to pass that behold there appeared
a chariot of fire and horses of fire;
and Elijah went up
by a whirlwind into heavens

Before Elijah died, the Lord lifted him right off the ground and into heaven, And He, the King of Kings, didn't even need engines."

As she utters these words her eyes light up, and her hands reach towards the ceiling. Her gaze stops there for a minute, as if she is actually seeing the whirlwind of Elijah rising. I try to imagine Elijah riding an eddy to the sky. I want to burst out laughing or crying. What is the connection in this poor feeble mind between suffering servants and airplanes and Elijah? Why is this so important to her? Can I possibly ask her that question without crushing her spirit, or worse, having her start a tar baby rant from which I won't be able to extricate myself?

. Asiya seems lost in thought and reverie and continues to stare at the ceiling, as if following the disappearing Elijah, or airplane, or whatever. Finally, she turns back from the ceiling. Her face is flushed, and her eyes almost wild. "If I could talk to those executives, I would want to shake them to help them realize how insignificant their airplanes compared to the wisdom and power of the Lord. The trouble with people in the modern world is they feel they are the ones who create,

but it's actually the Lord. That's always been the problem with human nature, even back to the Psalms. Arrogance. Arrogance. It's only God who has power. God can return Job's ten children to him; God, through Jesus can resurrect Lazarus. God can resurrect Jesus. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

* * *

I'm speechless. I imagine these executives she's talking about would howl with laughter at what she's saying about Elijah and flight, and I want to join them. Another part of me wants to cry at the illusion she has created about reality to comfort her. And some part of me even wants to reach out and hug her. This poor old lady.

"Yes, I understand what you're saying. There's really nothing new under the sun. I'm sure those airline executive would be startled and amazed, and perhaps chastised by the comparison." She smiles at my response. When she smiles, her face wrinkles up even more around her eyes and mouth--as if that were possible. But there is also a lightness and joy in her, almost as if she's being reborn beneath the flesh. I do feel sorry for her and try to say what I think she wants to hear. "Thank you for sharing that with me. I'm sure God realizes that you are a messenger for him. And you would serve as a good teacher to remind airline executives of God's presence and power. But personally, I'm selfishly glad God sustains you so you are still here to bring me fresh strawberries." BY reflex or habit, I actually wink at her. Maybe there is hope for me, some of my old self beginning to return.

"Now, now, young man, don't flirt with me."

* * *

A tennis ball sails over a high fence. Richard says he'll go around through the gate to get it. No, don't. Watch this I yell. I run as fast as I can toward the fence, and make a leap. I see the steel cross hatched mesh of the fence, and, while I'm in the air, make a conscious attempt to focus on the negative spaces, the emptiness between the cross hatches. I reach out and grab this empty space between the steel mesh with my hands. Connection!

I use the centrifugal force of my leap and hurl my legs over my head, seeking to do a cartwheel along the vertical incline and hurl myself over it. I don't make it and go crashing to the ground. I pick myself up and start running. People are aghast. My eyes are bulging out. I don't feel anything. But I know I have to run somewhere.

I awake with a start and look around the room. Asiya and the strawberries are gone, but a pot of tea is still there. I rub my eyes, and reach over to pour some tea. I watch my hands move. They seem like light, feathery birds, not at all part of me, flying through the air. Fingers land on the curve of the pot, and pinch it, lift it, like a crane, pulling it toward me, then pouring a yellowish brown arc of liquid into a cup. The arc is surrounded and enfolded by the green walls of the room. It looks frozen and static, and I only realize there is motion when the tea splashes into the cup which is steadied by the vise of my other hand, which becomes warm as the pulsating molecules of the tea, pulsate molecules in the cup and then my hand. As I look at my warming fingers, they disappear and my focus becomes the spaces between them. I even imagine the molecules that comprise them

Who am I? Disconnected parts? Spaces around the parts? I'm in fragments, pieces splattered after falling from a fence. I take a sip and feel the burning liquid caress my throat, then send fiery tentacles down my arms. I reach for my dream journal. I need to refind some order, whether from waking life or dream life. The parts of my body, the snippets of images, are not adding up to a whole being. I feel like scraps and splinters trying to reconnect my own dots into a reongiziabale form.

*

*

*

I turn on my tape recorder and, as I begin to write in my dream journal, I hear Joplin's soulful rendition of pain and heartache as she sings

Ball and chain;
Lord lord lord sitting down by my window
Looking at the rain
Something came along, grabbed ahold of me
And it felt just like a ball and chain

Honey, that's exactly what it felt like
Honey, just dragging me down.

Something has changed in her voice. There's a depth and poignancy that wasn't
there before, at least not for me.

"Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose."

* * *
I remember another dream. From last night? Or Saturday day? I have no
consciousness of anything after the waters at Carmel. I'm at some anonymous hotel,
but it has aspects that look like my home in Kansas City. Overhead sprinklers go on
to put out a fire that doesn't exist. The entire floor, walls, beds, desks, papers
become completely drenched and the place is unlivable. When people first rushed out
of the hotel they were panicked and afraid. When they realize it's a false alarm,
see the damage to their property, and realize they have no place to stay, they are
furious. At me. Somehow I feel responsible--am I the owner? Manager? I tell them
they'll get money to live somewhere else while everything dries off, even if I
have to pay for it myself.

Am I trying to buy my way back into existence, to pay for transgressions?
What am I guilty of in life? In my dreams? I look down at my fingers and hands.
These are not me. I feel the pain throbbing in my foot and leg. Once again, even
the pain feels disconnected from me. It's as if I'm divorced from my body. Spaces
everywhere. Between parts of my body. Within my body. Even in my mind. There is no
core. I feel like nothing, Yet it is I who am writing this and aware of all this.

Nothingness having awareness of itself.

* * *
Dogs are chasing me and I run into a forest, where I am alone, taking pictures
of the foliage. There are beautiful colors and shades of green reflecting what must
be an early morning light. I'm using a flash, but realize the battery is low. A man
enters the forest and tells me I need better equipment and technique, and he's
willing to teach me. I leave my camera with HIM and try to find my way out of the
forest to get a battery. I'm fearful of seeing the dogs again.

The forest opens onto a baseball field, where they need a pitcher. I throw two pitches, and make two nice catches of line drives hit at me. It's now two outs, the bottom of the ninth. One more out and our team wins. On the next pitch, an easy ball is hit to me. The third out, I think. But it takes a funny bounce and I miss it. Bad luck? My misjudgment and error? I'm taken out of the game. The next person gets up and hits a homerun, and the game is over. We lose. I keep walking, and my feet are in a soft sand, sinking down. It's hard to move. My right foot hurts.

I wake up. Groggy. My dream life seems more vivid than my waking one.

I jot down the dreams before I forget them. But I don't want to take the time to try to understand them. There's a lot I need to do, and I'm not sure where to begin. There's the play for my creative writing class; a paper for my political science class. I'm falling behind. This is not the time for a long discourse on my dreams.

Instead, I quickly scribble some questions about the dream to later come back to and reflect on. Who are the dogs chasing me? What am I afraid of now? Am I still able to escape? Is my battery running low? Do I need a new camera? A new "vision?" Who is the man in the forest? I seem to trust him enough to leave him with my equipment.

The baseball field: order from the chaos (and beauty) of the forest? Which do I prefer? The forest did provide sanctuary from the dogs. Maybe my life is too ordered? My stepping right into center stage and pitching and playing well. Did I then get over confident? Am I a loser? Who was the coach who took me out of the game? Maybe if I'd stayed, the next batter wouldn't have hit a homerun?

Why am I sinking into the sand? Am I losing the way on my journey? Unable to proceed?

Enough questions, already. I could spend my waking life just trying to understand my dream life. Why do I even write down my dreams? Just because mom once told me to? Because dealing with them seems easier than dealing with what's going on with me now?

*

*

*

Today's Sunday. Before Mery, that would have meant a fun golf game, which I've not been able to play these last months because of her. And I'd be looking forward to my Tuesday tennis match with Richard. Now I can't even do that. I'd just be hobbling around the court like a cripple. I look around the room. The walls are a pale green, not like the vibrant hues in my dream. The walls' color reminds me of what Richard said after our last tennis match as we punned our way through our beers. Was that only last week? It really seems much more distant past. As if time matters any more. What a difference a week makes.

He said beware of green bottles of beer. If you ever experience an offensive, rotting-cheese-like taste or smell while drinking beer, it's because it's in a green bottle that was exposed to sunlight. One of the acids in the hops begins to exponentially multiply under light in the blue green spectrum and attacks other components in the beer, creating a "skunky" smell. The moral, avoid green bottles and keep beer away from sunlight. My moral, be careful of coffin-like green rooms and avoid people associated with yellow.

Not only did Mery disrupt the structure of my life, she's now caused me to hurt myself. I have a quick, painful image of the bloodied, disheveled cottage. I have no desire to see her and be reminded of that chaos. I'm lucky she's disappeared. I don't think I want to ever see her again. I smile, somewhat salaciously. It's enough that I have her pictures. That's the essence and best part of her. But it's so unfair that now that she's gone, I'm not well enough to enjoy the freedom, and play the golf that I missed while being in bondage to her craziness.

*

*

*

I can hear mom saying to me, "Don't worry. This too shall pass." And Dad, in his better moments, "Chin up, son. Time heals all wounds." Does that apply to mental and spiritual as well as physical injuries? How long is the healing process? I remember lying in bed sick once when our team had an important baseball game. Mom

said I was too sick to play, and dad agreed with her. But he told me he'd call me periodically from the game to let me know how the team was doing. In the fifth inning he called, saying the team was losing by two runs, and things weren't looking good. I told him I was feeling better and wanted to come watch. Mom picked me up, and took me to the game. I was shivering with fever, but my team started clapping when I came and sat on the bench with them. In the bottom of the last inning, Dad, as coach, told me to go up and pinch hit. We were still two runs behind, and there were two outs.

Under normal circumstances, I wasn't the best of hitters. If I were healthy, maybe I was better than Bob, whom I was replacing. But now I could barely see. I walked up. I looked at Dad, the third base coach, for a sign. He rubbed his chin. "Take the first pitch." I just stood there as the pitcher threw a strike. I looked for a sign. "Take." Three balls. "Take." A strike." Now it's three and two. Clearly dad had no confidence in my ability to swing. But now there was no choice. I looked for a sign, and it was hand behind right ear: "hit away." All I'd done up to this point was stand and watch the ball.

Three and two, bottom of the ninth, bases loaded. This was the kind of fantasy I'd dreamed about. Only I was healthy in my dreams.

I watched as the pitcher went into the stretch. He looked at the runners, who were going to go as soon as he began his motion toward home. He started the pitch. The runners lept forward. I swung late, but managed to hit the ball off the top of my bat, a little loopy pop up ball to right. The right fielder came in. The first basemen backpedaled. I started to trot dejectedly toward first. Run, the people in the stands yelled. With all my strength, I tried. I felt sweaty and dizzy and confused, but I ran as hard as I could. Everything felt in slow motion. As I neared first base, the ball plopped on the ground, just out of everyone's reach. Three runs scored. The field cleared. I stood alone on first base, unsure what was happening. My team, and dad, came running toward me.

They all hugged me and held me up on their shoulders.

We'd won.

*

*

*

As I lie shivering in my little green room, feeling the throbbing pain in my foot, I notice a glimmer of hope and optimism. I did it once, I can do it again. I can rise once again from my sick bed and enter the playing field. I am not a quitter.

Yes, it's a different ball game. The rules are less clear. I'm not sure what's supposed to happen after I finish my classes this quarter, and graduate. To what? Without Mery, I am totally free to pursue any life that I want. I look at my dresser stand, and there are the two letters, one deferring law school, one to my Grandpa. Still unsent. Is that my direction?

I wish I could look up the third baseline and see my dad, standing tall and proud in his baseball uniform, the same one I was wearing--both of us on the same team-- and get a sign about what I should do.

This time there is no longer a father that I trust to coach me.

*

*

*

As I looking around the room, I see stacks of papers. Where to begin? One pile is my recent daily journals. Since I have no one outside me to rely on for guidance, once again I need to turn to the only person I can count on--myself. Maybe what I should do is review the immediate past--when did things start to go awry? I thumb through my journal. I know I was happy when I was accepted to law school, before I met Mery.

The Fairmont. That was certainly fun. Maybe I should find some of the pictures I have of Mery and have an orgasm. Why not? Now that she is gone, I still have the playful essence of her. Without all the craziness. Maybe later this afternoon. I keep thumbing through.

Alice's party. The sisters. Fun.

Ah, here *Jovial Journal* jubilate judiciously.

March 13. Just over two months ago. It's amazing how things change. Then I was sitting under my favorite maple tree, full of anticipation and hope.

Maybe what I should do is go back to that spot, take my journal, my letters to Harvard and grandpa, and have my hot chocolate/coffee mixture and enjoy a Danish. I wonder if that old lady I paid off is still there. Get out of this coffin-like room, and go outside, reflect in a serene setting on what's going on. It's all up to me, once again. Just that thought makes me feel better. I could even call Sandy and see what's she's up to. Yes, things are going to be just fine. After all, if I'm not for me, who will be?

* * *

"Act as if everything depends on you

Know that everything depends on God.

"The wise words of Rebbe Nachman, great grandson of the Ba'al Shem Tov. As you all know, we won't be meeting next week because it's Purim. Chanukah, Purim and Passover provide a wonderful contrast illustrating Reb Nachman's wisdom. At Chanukah, the great miracle-- Neis niglah--occurred, the oil lasted longer than it should have by natural law. Clearly that was God's intervention. For those of you who were in that class, you remember that we talked about times of darkness in our lives, and how we need to look inward to find and trust that there is more light, more energy, more resources within us than we believe. We need to do the best we can, then surrender and allow God to fill us still further with Eternal light."

Was it just over two months ago that I was listening to the Rebbe's class on Chanukah? How little seems to have changed. Progress forward seems so incremental, if at all. Is life like golf? Staying near par, or an occasional birdie, is difficult. And that's the best it can be. But bogeys, double bogeys, and even worse can happen in a flash. Creating and building is hard work. Descending into entropy and chaos, destroying--ourselves and others--is so much easier.

"Yet on Purim," the Rebbe continues, "the story of Esther does not even mention God. Nothing overtly divinely miraculous occurs. A wicked man, plotting evil, is brought down by other humans. However, for those of us who believe that God is everywhere, we see this as 'neis nistar': a hidden miracle, in which God is working behind the scenes through a hero and heroine."

He looks around the room, and smiles. "Get it? Now, in Passover, we find a combination of God's effort and human effort. Clearly God performs miracles, but also works through Moses in an indirect way. Moses has to 'take a step' into the Sea, then God parts the waters. It's like a combination of Chanukah and Purim. As Reb Nachman said, we have to do our part, act as if everything depends on us. Like Purim. Then know and trust that everything depends on God, like the miracle of light at Chanukah."

* * *

"Any questions?"

Usually when the Rebbe asks if there are any questions, especially after he's given a lecture that ends in a culminating flourish, he expects none, and there are none. There is a silence as he beams radiantly and begins to put his lecture notes in his brief case.

"If I may?" I look at Marianne, who has tentatively raised her hand. I'm surprised. She's usually pretty quiet in class.

"Of course." The Rebbe pauses and gestures with an open hand.

"I like what you were saying about the hidden God, at Purim, and the miracle. But my question is really about a different aspect of the Purim story." She pauses, looks shyly down, then continues. "I love the dancing and joy of Purim, but don't you find something uncomfortable about all the joy - which is because of King Ahasuerus' edict which allowed the Jews to smite the enemy with the sword, 'slaughtering them and destroying them'.

"Then Esther asks that the Jews of Susa be allowed to commit more killings the following day. The Book continues in praise of the Jews, noting that 'They laid no

hands on the booty.' Doesn't it seem troubling that human life is destroyed, but the Jews are lauded for not touching the booty? And from this killing of others emerges a celebration, Purim, a day of feasting, gladness, dancing, and joyous singing."

There is silence in the class. No one moves.

"Then the Rebbe says in almost a whisper, "That is a very brave question, Marianne, and a very deep one. Thank you for asking. Yes, I've thought a lot about this very issue, and there is no perfect answer. But let me try. The section from the Bible, the Parasha, that we read six days before Purim, Parsha Zachor, commands the Israelites to blot out the memory of the Amalekites and all other enemy nations. Yet this is hard to accept for those of us who wish for peace, and admire the non-violence of Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

"But there are times when rather than be slaughtered, it is necessary to fight back. And to be saved from being slaughtered, from extinction might be considered a human right, even a duty." But As Dr. Lisbet has reminded us, we should fight back with no more yang than is necessary. Plundering 'booty' is not necessary. Further, there is no joy in harming others. As in the story of Passover, when the Israelites were saved, and the Egyptians were drowned, there is rejoicing at freedom from slavery, but there is also sadness at the pain of the 'other.' That is why we take drops of the wine and put them on our plate, like tears. We do so in recognition of the pain we feel at the loss of life, even of those who were our persecutors.

"It's a both/and. Miriam dances once the Israelites are across the Reed Sea. She celebrates not the death of the Egyptians, but the Israelites' freedom from enslavement. What you are doing is inviting us to be reflective, which indeed is one of the lessons of Purim. We need to reflect on the part of each of us, as humans, that is capable of hurting another. We need to see the importance of reaching out to diverse communities, as you are doing as a Christian by attending this class. Our fate is tied to those around us, and we must continue to build relationship and

be proactive against hatred and intolerance. There are Mordechais in the world who for no ostensibly reason hate Jews. There are Esters who help, and reach out. The sources of hatred and bigotry in the world are not beyond our control. We each need to stand up and reach out to our brothers and sisters.

"And, yes, sometimes amidst all the pain and suffering, we need to dance as a form of healing."

* * *

I have a plan. To Stanford and the maple tree it is. Then, when I return, I will enjoy Mery's cavorting on the bed at the Fairmont. As I gather my journals, I reflect on my conversation with Miriam. Poor lady. So beaten down by life that she no longer has the courage and strength to act on her own. Sure, I'd love to have a wise, safe, trustworthy father as my coach and guide through life. It's scary to do it all on my own. But why would I want an abusive, self-centered, immature father as my guide. Better to rely on myself.

Asiya creates God the Father, a perfect, kind, loving merciful, pipedream, to be her coach because she can't face life alone. This is what God is good for: those who are too old, too mentally weak to survive without a crutch. For those who have felt such intolerable pain that there is nothing left, nothing but the fervent hope of something better in the after life, or a resurrected miracle in this life. Marx was right--what an opiate.

Each piece of suffering has forced her closer to God. Each pain made her cling more tightly to the "good Lord." I can understand her need for Him and how she would have to have something like God to believe in. It's sad that some people, like her, have been reduced to this blind hope. I wonder what would happen if that crutch were taken away. But that's an irrelevant question, No one will ever be able to take it away. Good Lord, airplanes and Elijah!!!

Asiya is a true knight of faith. She believes in s both Job and Lazarus. Either she will get her double rewards on earth--her children and husband somehow

returned—as they were for Job—like Lazarus rising from the dead, or Jesus miraculously reappearing on Easter Sunday. If her rewards do not in this life, then she reap them in heaven. The world's pains will soon pass and with this knowledge, she can be patient, endure, wait.

* * *

“Be patient, endure, wait.” How many times have I said those words to myself since I’ve been here in Israel? Why is it that you only understand something after it’s happened to you. Words are empty when the experience doesn't directly touch you. Suffering creates a different angle from which to see the self and the world. Be patient, endure... wait. Some nights I pray just to have one small piece of the faith of that woman. Just to believe that there is hope, that there is something to wait for, some way out of the darkness. That some light, on some breastplate, will shine forth. Be patient, endure, wait.

I’d like to glibly say, Johannes, that you were looking for the wrong Father as a guide and inspiration. Part of me believes that. But I must admit there is a large abyss between having the confidence to rely on yourself, and the ability to surrender and trust that God is there to guide, inspire, and protect us.

I don’t seem capable of acting as if everything depends on me. Johannes, you still cling to the belief that you capable of doing so. But I know that is as much an illusion as you feel Asiya’s protective veil of faith. To be honest, though it’s not clear to me how capable God the Father is, either.

* * *

I’m able to move quickly in the drill. The ball is hit almost beyond my reach, but by anticipating, I get there, and hit it back smoothly and well. The woman who is throwing the balls to me--she’s tall and stately. A coach? A prospective girlfriend?-- now says it’s her turn. I hit a ball to her, just out of reach. I realize that she’s near a cliff, and in running toward the ball, she almost goes over. Whoa, I yell. That was too close for comfort; we need to find a different

place to play this game. How about down by the football field? She agrees and we walk in separate directions to get to the field.

There is a creek ahead. I go around it. Her path takes her through the creek, filled with stationary logs. Then the logs begin to move and I realize they are crocodiles. I shout, but too late. One crocodile grabs at her and several others surround her. I'm not sure what to do. I yell at some people at midfield to get help. I start to move toward the water, but realize there's nothing I do, and if I enter the water I'll be eaten too.

I wake up.

I wonder if the dream is like a scene in Camus' Fall. Jean-Baptiste hears a person drowning, who has fallen off a bridge. He realizes this is a pivotal moment in his life, whether to walk on and pretend he didn't hear anything, or try to save the person. But Camus gives the impression that he could save the person if he'd made a choice to do so. I know I couldn't have saved the woman from the crocodiles. But what should I have done? Run to the edge of the creek? Thrown her a stick? Waded in? Run away? Or is the dream really saying that I am a plague, and even when I try to help someone--by keeping the woman from the cliff-- I end up hurting them?

3:30. I'm not making very much progress toward getting up and out of bed and over to Stanford. I'm feeling so tired. I can barely stay on top of my dreams.

* * *

I just drifted off again. What's happening to me? What happened to ME? Who am I? I have no idea who I am.

I'm actually glad Asiya came by earlier today. I didn't think I wanted to see anyone, but her presence was comforting. I guess sometimes you just don't know yourself as well as you think. Was I too mocking of her story? I wonder if she was inwardly thinking she was talking to a pagan, someone with no respect for her "Good lord." I wonder if there is a "a dangerous tendency" in my words. Gitlow v. New York. Should I apologize to her?

It's interesting how law references pop into my mind. Maybe that is my direction. I look over at my daily journal again. It would be a useless, futile exercise to relive and dwell in the past. What I need to do is figure out the future.

* * *

The little baby boy, and his older sister are both sick. They have a fever and chills. I'm worried about them. Am I supposed to be baby sitting? But I'm also worried about me. I'm feeling fine, and I don't want to catch what they have. I also want to go off and have some fun. Suddenly, a tiger and lion bound through the open bay window. I'm at my Wenonga home in Kansas City. I nd yell and grab a baseball bat, chase them out the window, and lock it.

A better dream. I'm still selfish, still worried about myself, but at least this time I acted decisively and protectively. But was it to protect them, or me?

I remember in the stairs leading to the basement of the Wenonga home there were paintings on the wall. One was of a wolf, which terrified me. I simply wouldn't go into the basement without dad or mom with me. They tried to rationally explain that the wolf was just dried oils, had me run my hand over the rough texture of the painting to see that it wasn't alive.

But I guess some fears can't be quieted. There were certain dark places, where wolves lurked as a little kid, that I didn't want to go.

Still don't.

* * *

You creep up right next to the abyss, Johannes. You realize that you need to face it, but you keep retreating. You need to wrestle with the crocodiles, the part of you that fears going over the cliff; to face the lions and tigers and wolves in your life. You start to read your journal, but put it aside for a later time, and drift back into sleep. But there is no hiding. You are more in the abyss than you realize--more Job than Johannes.

You need to face yourself, who you are, and aren't. And frankly, both of us need to face who Mery is and isn't. Since the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet don't have class next week, I'm going to go back to the kibbutz to celebrate Purim. I'm stopping work, and need a break. But I've earned enough to return to therapy, and after I come back from Galilee, I'm going to take up counseling again with them. I'm determined to make a big push between now and Passover to finally put to rest my feelings about Elizabeth Mery Jaellois.

*

*

*

The world just vanished. I know there were colors and people and smells and sounds. Now all I see is black, like a starless night sky. As I look closer, there are some grayish swirling clouds. Some barely discernible light amidst the darkness. My eyes are heavy and unwilling to open. Where did the dream go? One minute I know I'm in the midst of a dazzling active life. It's vanished. Back into my brain? Is it still there? I lie silently in the bed and scrunch my closed eyes more tightly to see if anything appears with the darkness. Nothing. It's like a trap door has shut, barring access to a part of my inner dream life that is hidden from me.

My eyes still don't want to open. Maybe they're smarter than I am, preventing me from facing my waking life.

*

*

*

I open my eyes and see stacks and files of my journals. Is this what my closed lids were protecting me from? I write briefly in my dream journal, including my loss of a dream. Now should I write in my daily journal? Where does my conversation with Asiya fit? I look over and see the now dry scribblings from the pages dropped into the ocean Friday night. It was actually thoughtful of Mery to have gathered them up-- along with me.

Do I want to look at any of these? Do I want to write any more? Words dripping everywhere in my life, on the pages, in my head. Orderless, chaotic words. Even when they form sentences, what do they mean? Where are they going? Vanity in

thousands of words. These are the words that I wrote. This is the sum of my life. A one-legged lame person, lying in a bed in a pale green room, surrounded by papers, who cannot even remember his dream.

*

*

*

Enough words. Pictures. Action. I pick up my date address book.

Wether, Sandy. 1220 E. Midian Way....JEthro 7-1260. Ringing. "Hi Sandy, a voice from the past."

"Oh, my God, where have you been, stranger? I thought you'd disappeared. And wondered if you'd ever call again. I'd heard you were getting pretty seriouw about someone."

Stranger? Yes, I have been a stranger in a strange land, enmeshed in God knows what. But I try to sound casual.

"Nope, free at last, free at last. Are you free now, by any chance?" As I say the words, I feel self-conscious, inept. I want to make this conversation short. Why did I call her? And there seems something confusing in her tone.

"I'm always free for you." She chuckles... Lewdly? Awkwardly? Is she comparing herself to a prostitute? But I have a friend coming in this weekend. You'll love her. She's really cute and just your style. How about if we make it next Sunday? We could go to the flicks. Then come back to my place for a party. How's that?" Is she trying to put me off? Doesn't she want to see me-- just the two of us? Stop with this negativity. Maybe the discomfort is from the telephone. It's so hard to communicate over the phone--too impersonal too dehumanizing. You can't touch. The other person is just a voice, formless, disembodied. I feel tongue tied, slow of speech.

As she's talking, I'm thumbing through her pictures, and comparing them to Mery's. Whereas Mery's early pictures show innocence, shyness, and naiveté (or so I thought), Sandy's are all wild, thrilling, daring. She's like my Stanford Alice. Ok, I can deal with this. I'm not sure I'm ready to see anyone tonight, anyway. Just hearing her voice helps arouse me. And a new girl. That sounds fun.

"Wait a whole week? I don't know if I can last, but I'll try. I can't wait to see you again. And your friend sounds like an added desert. Toodles."

I notice that John Henry is beginning to rise from the dead. Where you been, old man? I look at the pictures and begin stroking. Sandy. Just what the doctor ordered.

Johannes seeks a city of refuge to hide from the blood avenger. And his "city" is to bring blood to engorge his lingham, hiding in the very thing which he should be fleeing. So much work to do, Johannes. You don't even know what you don't know.

Pictures are so much better than words. And they don't talk back, either. Free at last. Ahh, things are definitely on the rise. I look over at the closed blind and see the hints of afternoon sunlight peeking through. After this orgasm, which is going to be great, I'll go outside and greet the day. Everything's going to be just fine.

* * *
* * *

The irony of light and dark.

Johannes begins his "Jovial Journal" on a day filled with sunlight, writing under the budding blossoms of a maple tree. Though the day is filled with light, he is filled with self-ignorance. In Carmel, at Devil's Cauldron, with no shade at all, he gives his Tarzan yell, high on a peak, feeling proud and confident, at the height of his prowess, though he is less than thirty six hours from his fall. The next day, Friday, he plays golf on a beautiful sunny day, overlooking the sapphire blue waters and white sandy beach. He hits a perfect shot over the abyss on the 8th hole, and walks around it.

But that night, he is looking up at the mountain where he played. Though he doesn't fully realize it, his life as he knows it has ended. Not while he is in the lofty sunny heights, but in the darkness below, on the beach, with only a candle and a campfire and a hiding moon to light his way.

Now, even though he sees a glimmer of light behind the blind, he is indeed blind, groping in darkness, and needing, more than he realizes, to find his way to the light. He is alone, there are no guideposts. Job-like, he has to wrestle with the nightmare that will become his life.

Do we need to suffer and fall in order to learn and grow?

It seems suffering is often necessary for growth. But not sufficient. At least not until the suffering becomes sufficiently painful. Like the Rebbe's discussion of Pharaoh. Each plague opened him briefly to change, but then his "heart hardened."

It takes such pain to open the heart enough so that we cry. Johannes hasn't yet allowed himself to feel the pain enough to cry. He briefly opens, but recloses as soon as possible, falling back into old habits, like calling Sandy. It's as if he doesn't want to learn the lesson, and believes that more flesh, more women will somehow fill him. He's even reduced to trying to find satisfaction from two dimensional pictures. At least they don't talk back, right Johannes? A great basis for relationship. What about the pictures of Mery? He is always pushing the envelope, seeing how much he can get away with before someone says enough. I pull out my notebook and write: A list of Johannes' flaws:

- *His insensitivity and callousness to others.
- *Seeing them as objects for his gratification.
- *His incessant instrumentality and urge to have control.
- *Analyzing endlessly every action in terms of how it will affect him.
- *His unwillingness to look at himself and his emotions.
- *His defensiveness and self-centeredness.

A helpful list, John. Just a small question. Do you notice that you sometimes speak of Johannes in the second person pronoun as "you"? That creates some distance, but also a connection, recognizing that he is/was part of you. At other times, when it seems you're feeling like you want to create even more distance, you use the third person, "he." What is the right perspective? On the one hand it is

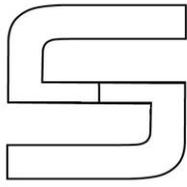
important that you (and I) honor that "we" are growing, and as such are different people than we once were. On the other hand, again, "we" are all part of the same foundational person and therefore inextricably intertwined.

And what have I learned so far from Johannes's fall? Certainly that he and I are different. His continual but ultimately futile preoccupation with the body and flesh will inevitably fail, and lead to my search for the spirit.

I know that suffering well. I want to believe it can be transformative. But I also now know that some wounds are never completely healed.

* * *
* * *

"



hit, ass, you always hate it when I beat you. You never learn."

"Ok, stop there. How do you react to that as an opening sentence...anyone?" The creative writing professor is flapping his arms as he gallops around the class. Hmm, mixed metaphors. He wouldn't like that.

No one speaks or raises a hand.

"You, Jane."

"It makes me cringe. It sounds so angry, maybe violet. I'm confused. I don't know who is talking to whom...or what. Is the narrator calling a person a profane name, a 'shit', 'ass'?"

"Jeff, pay attention. Who is talking to whom or what?"

"A guy is constipated, trying to take a crap, and is whipping his butt to get it to eliminate. Shit is a command, directed to the name, ass!"

The class laughs, and the professor says, "Mind still in the gutter I see. But that's ok; all of you, let your imagination go. What else?"

"A parent is giving a child a spanking."

"A spouse is being beaten."

"It's an allusion to Balaam's ass in the Bible." She must be Jewish, but I don't know her name. Kind of cute, but not as much as Sarah.

"Hardly the way Jesus would have acted riding into Jerusalem. I don't like the foul language." She must be Christian. And I don't know her name, either. Also cute, but I wouldn't have a chance with that attitude.

"Good. See the different viewpoints? Let's not be judgmental. We may disagree with the language, or the point, but did the author do it well, capture our interest, create a desire to know more, provoke you, make you

think, feel?"

Several nods. Me most emphatically.

"Notice the ambiguity. There can be many interpretations. You don't know, and you want to know. That's the beauty of words. As I've said, write what you know about, but make it interesting, intriguing, not just reportage. As Sartre said in Les Mots, there are whole worlds in black and white letters, fairies emerge, unbelievably fascinating events occur. All locked away in the pages of the book. You, now, are the gods, creators of stories...."

"Ok, read it again, and keep going." He looks at me and smiles. "You've come along way from the description of your tennis exercise!"

* * *

"Shit, ass, you always hate it when I beat you. You never learn."

"You're the blind ass. You're wrong. The ball was clearly in," Richard petulantly whines.

"It's my call. I call it out. Game over. Drinks are on you, loser."

"Liar."

"Cheater."

"How do you spell B-a-b-y."

"You're the baby."

"I'm rubber, you're glue, whatever you say bounces right back to you."

"You only wish you could bounce the ball as well as you let words bounce off you." Huh? That didn't make any sense. Oh well, my form was excellent. Let him try to decipher it.

As I pack up my racquets and balls, I look over at our respective partners. They're both looking down, not saying anything. They're smart.

"Hey, guys, it's just a game. It has no cosmic meaning. Get a grip."

Jeffrey, more forceful than his usual fawning self, joins the fray. And he was my partner. He won too. What's his problem?

He has no idea how much meaning it has. My life may be out of

control, but this is no game to me. This is a way to bring chaos down to a manageable size, where there are rules and guidelines, a challenge that I'm competent at, and where I have the power to make a decision: either in or out. And I've decided. Out. I win.

I wish the game I'm playing were so simple and winning as clearly defined.

Finally, Inamatsu says, "I once read that the ball actually stays on the ground and slides for a fraction of a second. The article pointed out that one person could see the ball hit the line; and another person could see the ball actually jump off the court from an 'out' spot. Both could be seeing accurately and honestly. Just from different vantage points and times.

"It's all a question of perspective...and maturity."

What a pussy. Inamatsu's afraid to take a position or offend anyone. Relativistic bullshit. In or out. Period. That's reality on the tennis court. He's just upset because he was on Richard's team, and lost. Poor losers, all of them. And Jeffrey is a poor winner. I stand alone as the true victor.

* * *

"That's a good model of a one page start. Concrete, yet some touches of larger philosophical issues. A touch of self-deprecating irony. Very good."
What does he mean by self-deprecating irony? None was intended. Maybe I'll ask him after class what he means.

"I'd like each of you to revise your own papers where I've made corrections, and continue your story for next week's class. Add more development to your characters. Perhaps some background; and continue the action into a future sequence. Any questions? Ok, see you next week." He looks over at me and points to my crutches. "Looks like you're going to be spending more time writing about tennis than playing it." I wanly smile, decide not to ask him a question, and hobble out of the room.

* * *

The sun is shining as I limp with the aid of my crutches across the quad toward Tressider. I hear the tinkling splash of the fountain as I near White Plaza. I'm proud of myself, basking in the professor's comments. Well, I may not be able to play tennis, but at least I can write tennis. And that may be more fun. I made all of my playing partners more articulate and wittier than they really are in life. Maybe I like people better when I can create and control them through writing than when I have to actually interact with them. That's clever. Sometime I should put that in a short story.

* * *

My professor doesn't realize that my opening line is even more ambiguous and multi-layered than he thinks. It could also apply to my father and me. And, with a few subtle word changes, to Mery and me. It's amazing how true it is that you can understand the same thing so differently, depending on the angle. I am really clever. I love words. And me.

Johannes, we're looking at the same thing--you, and unfortunately--for you--from my angle, I see you quite differently than you see yourself. Truer words were never said, and are even more accurate than you realize. It all depends on the angle. **Yes, John, fortunately it does.**

* * *

Now what do I do? I look at my journal. Jovial Journal Jubilante Judiciously. I put my fingers on the edge of the paper, and glance through it like shuffling a deck of cards. All the writing, ideas, hopes, dreams. Images flood through my mind. Mery at David's Deli, Golden Gate Park, the swimming pool, horseback riding, Beethoven's Fifth, the Fairmont. Ahhh. I feel my lingham's joy. Her falling in the park; her going to the ER; her horrible dinner; her dancing at the Fillmore; Al, Pierre. Enough.

I don't want to review the past. That's a dead end.

DRAW THE LINE.

Once when Dad and I were bowling, I had several bad frames in a row.

He said he had a trick that would help me. I figured it would be to show me what I was doing wrong with my approach. Instead, he went to the score sheet, and drew a thick black line after the last frame.

"Now you've drawn a line, putting the past in the past. You're ready to face the future fresh." More often than not, it worked! I would start bowling better. Though Dad's a jerk. . . actually writing the name Dad seems too intimate for someone who is so callous and untrustworthy. Senior. Though Senior's s jerk, he did have some good advice that is still helpful. I guess I'm supposed to drown the negative stuff in the Reed Sea with the Egyptians as I cross the Red Sea. That's what Friday's Passover was all about, right God? Ha! And now, Miriam, if I didn't have a bum right leg, I should start dancing.

Cosmic joke, ol' Goddy?"

*

*

*

Two months ago the leaves of this maple were just beginning to blossom. Now the foliage is thick and blocks out the sun, giving me full, comfortable shade. I think of the lone cypress on the Seventeen Mile Drive. Mery looked at it and saw its negative spaces. Being with Mery was like being in a negative space. I'm much more comfortable here under the maple tree. When I look up, there is thick foliage, and no negative spaces, only positive feelings! If Mery were with me here now, we'd be having a fight. I'd want her to save my special seat while I went in to get the food. But she wouldn't know that's the more effective way to do it. She'd just stand there passively, following after me. Then when I'd ask her to go save a seat outside, I can see so clearly her confused and befuddled expression. She'd make some comment about my being so impatient and not following the rules and how that's not fair to others who already have their food and are looking for a table. What a dead weight. It's so much easier to be alone. I can do it myself, the way I want to do it, without her judgmental words, her passivity, her negative space. She wasn't a real partner.

I'm back in my special seat, alone, and I like it. At least some things are back to normal. I want to reestablish that order in all parts of my life.

It's ironic that Johannes is like Jonah under a shade tree seeking shelter. But rather than gaining empathy for God, he's really running away from the spiritual by focusing on career advancement and going to law school. He still needs to be swallowed by the whale.

But I wonder, if he were more empathic toward God, would this God really listen and understand in return? From my lips to God's ears. If You're there and hear me.

Two months ago, I was so excited, getting into law school, on top of the world. I need to get back that energy and direction. Then my professional path was clear; my love life was outstanding, fun, and playful. I've definitely gotten off track, and need to get back on it.

Draw the line. I need to blot out the twists and turns of what's gone before. Just like in bowling. To dwell on past mistakes, bad shots, only creates a negative mind set. I need to start over. How do I move forward now?

There is something reassuring about being alone under this tree. It reminds me of high school, when during my junior year I ate lunch in a study hall separate from the regimented dining area. I had decided to go on a special health diet and had to get permission not to eat with the other students. I enjoyed the extra study time. That's the first conscious memory I have of breaking with the conformity of what was expected. Everybody eats together. But me. I liked the space. Though I used it for homework and not personal reflection, it was time separate from the crowd.

Taking this solitary time now--not to have an orgasm--not to practice my golf swing or do homework--but to reflect, seems reassuring. I trust that I can figure things out. Me, my journals, and the maple tree. I feel myself calming down, the old optimism returning, my mind seems more in control.

*

*

*

As I pull out my journal, I hear Mery saying, why can't life without certainty be exhilarating, liberating, a great adventure. Why do you need to plan things, just allow yourself to be in the present and enjoy and see who you really are?

Maybe she's right. I visualize that picture of me in second grade—the one that was part of my seduction routine—that I showed Mery and all the new girls I meet. There I am, gazing off in the opposite direction than everyone else. Maybe there is something to that different drummer thing, and I need to give myself permission to look far into the distance, in my own way, not like everyone else.

As I start making notes in my journal, I feel my fingers tightening and my hand beginning to shake. I'm furious at Mery. She ruined my past, and now she's trying to ruin my future, inserting herself into my thoughts and muddling them. Look where her advice to just let go and open myself to experience got me: crippled and confused.

I pull out my deferral letter to Harvard, and the letter to Grandpa. Do I really want to send them? That would be completely cutting myself off from everything. There is no girlfriend, no family, no career or direction. Freud, if all we have is, as you say, love and work, then I'd have neither. God, any ideas for me? I look up toward the sky, and all I see are rich maple leaves blocking my view.

I feel a hint of sadness that perhaps next year there will be no red maple tree above me. I have no idea where I will be.

Maybe what I need is some chocolate coffee and a Danish to help me think.

Inside seems so far away. How unfair that I have to limp there just to get a treat. What was once so easy.....

I slowly and painfully rise, making sure both letters are completely covered. How coy I was two months ago, wanting someone to accidentally see my Harvard acceptance. Now, I want no one to peer into my life.

Johannes, you really are trapped, or have trapped yourself in a no exit present. You say you're off track, and you want to get back on track, but you're unwilling to look at the past to see where you went astray. You say you want to plan the future, then that you want to let the future unfold to your own music and not plan it. Then you become angry at Mery for ruining your life. The swirling undercurrents of your own mind are pulling you under.

* * *

"Hi stranger, looks like you've been through the wringer. Where you been?"
As I pour the hot water for my tea, I look up and see the smiling wrinkled face of an old woman behind the counter. At first I don't recognize her, then I realize she's the dour-faced hag who wouldn't heat my Danish the day I was accepted to Harvard. I'm surprised she recognizes me. And even more surprised at her smiling face. I guess I must have made a more positive impression on her than I realized. "Want me to heat your Danish?" I actually smile. Her words sound slightly flirtatious.

"No, thanks. Not today. I had a bit of an accident, and have to watch my figure now. But if you slice me some lemons for my tea, that'd be great."

"Be happy too."

"Also, if you could pick some raisins off a couple of the Danish and put them in the tea, that'd be great, too." I add, with a serious expression.

She looks at me uncomprehendingly, and freezes. She's taking me seriously, but I know it's a joke. I wonder if this is how a playwright feels with his audience. He has complete control of them, and can sway their emotions depending on what he writes next. I like that control; you're like a human god.

I stare at her for few seconds, then smile. "Just kidding." She then breaks back into a smile. I love when I do that. I'm such a playful merry prankster. What a great sense of humor. I love myself.

* * *

A great sense of humor? You ask a favor that's against the rules, anomalous, makes no sense. The other person feels confused and awkward. Then, you tell them you're just kidding. They smile with relief and that's playful? You are in control of the situation, creating tension, then relieving it. That's not humorous, it's mean-spirited, if not sadistic.

* * *

The old lady is kind enough to carry my tea and lemon out for me, but as we approach my table, two other people are sitting there. I limp defiantly toward them. As I get closer, I recognize the girl. She's that thin, library-fixated studying, what's her name—Elaine—that I fantasized about a while back. With some tall lanky, bearded guy. What the fuck are they doing at my table? While we're still a few yards away, I start to formulate what I'm going to say. It's simple and straightforward: "This is my table, assholes. Give me my goddamn seat back, don't mess with my private mail, and get the hell out of here. Now leave." I even think of taking my crutch and lifting it as a sword to threaten them. But as we get closer, I hear Mery saying, "Who gives anyone the right to own property?" And I see her face admonishing me at the swimming pool. Telling me I'm way overreacting. Damn her. What is simple now becomes complex. She turns everything in my life upside down.

I tell the old lady to set the tea down next to my letters. She does, then waits. If she's looking for a tip, she's not going to get one. Not until I figure out my financial situation. I dismiss her with a nod and a curt thank you. That wipes the smile off her obsequious face.

Do you say this with pride, Johannes, to show how powerful you are? Don't you feel the slightest embarrassment, at how demeaning, even cruel you are to a

kind, old-woman waitress, who is helping you carry your food to your table? Why so mean? Where is your heart? Is it her you're angry at? Or those who took your table, and she's getting the brunt? Is it your fear of the future and financial resources? Even so, Why should she be punished? Or is it a non-conscious association--does the fact that she's a waitress remind you of Mery?

Impressive reflections, John. Ever wiser. And might there be still more? Is it part of each of our need for control and not liking it when we don't get our way? And that's compounded by a part of Johannes, you, and me, who still carries some remnants of dad's anger in us that comes out when thwarted? Getting to the root of, and seeking to clean up our "dust" is truly a daunting task.

* * *

"Excuse me, I was sitting here. Didn't you see my letters saving the table?" They are both sharing a chocolate sundae, with whipped cream. That makes me even angrier. I'm trying to show self-discipline and watch my eating and not gain weight because I can't exercise and they not only take my table, they flaunt fatty foods in front of me. Though nothing really looks or tastes that good now, anyway.

"Oh, sorry," Elaine pipes up chirpily and smiles at me sweetly. "We thought you'd forgotten your letters. We were going to mail them for you."

She scoops another bite of vanilla ice-cream, and dips it into the fudge, curls it around her spoon, dips both into the whipped cream, places her tongue out to hold the bottom of the spoon, and daintily puts the concoction into her mouth. She smoothly licks half of it off the spoon, then places it in her boyfriend's mouth.

Did they read my mail? I'm furious. I see their keys next to the ice cream, and want to toss them into the ivy.

I lean my crutch against the table, as she says, "Want a bite? Would you like to share the table?"

Share the table? It's mine, bitch. But before I can say or do anything she says "Congratulations!"

I'm taken aback. What's she talking about? Does she know about my engagement? That's not possible. She doesn't even know me. She seems to sense my confusion and says, pointing to the letter, "We saw your letter addressed to Harvard Law School. We assume you're going there, right?"

I pause. She is kind of cute. And she's looking at me with respect and admiration. I think she's flirting with me, and I didn't realize it. "Right," I smile. "You're right. I am. It is a time for celebration." Ah, it feels fun to be playing the game again. "I will take a bite of that ice cream." She lifts her hand toward my face, proffering the spoon. I take her hand in mine and guide the spoon slowly and sensuously to my mouth. "Yummm." I look at her directly as I think to myself, Her boy friend shouldn't be that hard to get rid of.

How can you have admit to these thoughts? Do you hear yourself? Have you no shame? Is this how you are going to try to re-establish your sense of control and competence? I have compassion for the pain you're going through, but I pity your strategy, and it makes it very hard to care about you.

* * *

Within less than a minute, they are both gone. He wisely sensed danger, and suddenly remembered they had an errand to do together. Fine. I still have her number somewhere. And now that I'm free, she's fair game.

I take a sip of tea. It's not sweet enough, but I don't have the energy to walk back in and get more honey. This tree is my oasis in the wilderness, and they tried to take it from me. Funny how easy it was to vanquish them "with honey," as Grandpa would say.

As I begin to reread my letters to Harvard and Grandpa, I look up and see Jeffrey in the distance, coming toward the sundry store. I place the papers over my face, and look down. I don't want to see him. I won't be playing tennis for at least a month, and by then, we'll all have graduated. It's time to begin

letting go of this place. That's never been hard for me before. It's like when I walk across the quad and see someone I used to date that I don't want to be with anymore. I just pretend I don't see them, or don't recognize them. Sometimes they'll take the cue, and pretend they don't see me either. Fine. Time to move on. How quickly people enter and exit your life. Fine. Not a problem.

*

*

*

As I sit drinking my bitter tea, some of last night's dreams come to mind. I didn't bring my dream journal, but I tear out a piece of paper from my professional/future directions journal. One was the football dream, again. My brother and I are on a large field grassy field playing football. Perhaps it's Swope Park, near the Plaza. Our Garden of Eden. There are fruit trees all around.

There is something in my eyes-- gifts from what mom called Mr. Sandman-- and my vision is partially obscured, and I'm having trouble hearing (in both ears).

As the visual field gets wider, I start to feel more frightened. It seems there is something outside the range of my vision that I can't see, but which I feel, and fear. In the dream I try to ignore it, and even though my own sight and hearing are limited, I try to stay calm and playfully tell my brother to go out for a pass as if everything is normal: down ten, fake buttonhook, then go for the imaginary goal.

We are playing two people on a side; I don't know who the other two people are--just some opponents. Someone is supposed to be blocking for me. But they aren't there. I feel let down, but it doesn't make sense that if my brother is going out for a pass, and I'm passing, and there are only two people on a side, how can there be someone blocking? I feel naked and alone, though; people are rushing at me. I use a quick two step and get past the person running to tackle me. But in doing so I twist my ankle and my leg is throbbing.

My brother is yelling, "I'm open, throw it." But what if he drops it? Should I try to run it in myself, even with a bad leg? I need to weave in and out of the fruit trees.

I know there are more predators out there. I don't see the lion in this dream, but I know it's there. And maybe it's been joined by the wolf from the basement. In some ways, they are more terrifying for not being seen. What else, unseen, is trying to capture me?

*

*

*

Could I just sit for the rest of my life under this tree, and avoid all predators? I'm not sure I want to go forward, either in waking life or dream life. That world is beginning to seem too scary.

Mery was supposed to be my life-long companion to help shelter me. Hah! What a pipedream, right O'Neill? The Iceman really will cometh.

Yes, I fear facing things alone, with no one to guide me. But I am alone, and I might as well admit that and face my fears. Get with the program, man. Maybe I was too harsh on Grandpa, too influenced by Mery about the evils of the law. Grandpa told me when you aspire to be the best, someone will always try to knock you down. Mery is just jealous of my ambition and success, and that's why she keeps undermining it.

What are my alternatives to law school? I think of my past jobs: putting price tags on womens' clothes, world without end; life guard and camp counselor--having to be with kids 24 hours a day; advertising manager of the Stanford Daily--selling ads, repeat, hold. And of course there was the washing dishes as a bus boy at Tressider union. Scrapping food off someone's dirty plates. That was beneath me. Grandpa said he was proud of me for stopping. "Your work is your studies." I like the way that sounds. None of what I've done in the past sound like great options or prospects. Why not go to law school--if they'll still let me in. I can take the summer to goof around, recover, then head back East in the fall. At least then I'll have a structure. The law provides order, for

society, and for me. As Grandpa and my law professors said, outside human law--
the law of reason--, there is only chaos, the law of the jungle. And for me,
without law school, there is nothing but being condemned to freedom in the
wilderness, nothing between me and death. Ugh. Too much existential reading.

I wonder if the poem I wrote in Freedom Park about the root being cut
off from the light actually originated here, with you, Johannes, and your musings
about how to earn a living and create structure in your life. Who would have
known. Thanks for being my muse.

How would my old heroes, Steve McQueen, James Bond, handle this? With much
more action, and much less reflection. Where's my suave, cool self? I remember
Belinda, the first girl I liked. It was sixth grade. I would dream of our
Prairie School falling down--a tornado?-- and me going in to rescue her, and her
falling in love with me. True, I never really talked to her. But my dreams
were big and courageous then. I need to re-find that boldness.

What's happened to me, meeting Mery and its aftermath, is just bad luck.
Sometimes you don't get good breaks in life. It's just the rub of the green.
You've got to play it as it lies. Okay, I'm not in the fairway right now. But I
can get back there, right Zeke?

I look over and notice that they didn't finish their ice cream, and it's
melting. I take a few spoonfuls of the sweet liquid, mix with with the fudge
and whipped cream, and place them it into my tea. Great improvisation, James.
Shaken, not stirred. Yumm.

*

*

*

"Life is a fight," Grandpa would tell me. "Everyone gets knocked down, it's
about how fast you get up. Like one of those Bozo dolls in psychology
experiments. You can hit it, but it almost always bounces back." He's right.
I'm tough. I have lots of strengths. And determination, unbelievable
persistence, and perseverance top the list.

That's true in whatever I do. I may not be the most natural talent, but I am willing to practice and work harder than anyone. Golf, tennis, my studies. That's the way I've always succeeded. And being competitive. Like in tennis, when I put on my confident, unyielding game face. I will myself never to lose.

Grandpa said you should always point out your best assets, while minimizing weaknesses. My high school football coach said we should sing our strengths to ourselves. That's what I'm doing.

Maybe I should try out for cheerleader. I'm pretty good at doing that for myself. Funny. Yes, I have a good sense of humor. What else is good about me? I don't like what I can't control. Mery said that as a criticism, but I see it as a positive. It's what motivates me, challenges me to learn and be curious. I'm bright, good looking and ambitious. At least I was until I met Mery. No reason I can't get that ambition back. She may not value Harvard, but Elaine, and lots of others like her, do.

Am I afraid to fail? Do I fear this is the difference between seventh and eighth grade football? Seventh grade was six-man football, I was the starring quarterback leading the team with razzle-dazzle plays. I could run, pass, catch. These were plays that Senior and I had perfected for years in our front yard. I knew them perfectly. In eight grade, they switched to eleven man. They placed me at quarterback, and it was no longer razzle-dazzle. There were too many players, and I couldn't follow all that was going on. There were new plays. People running at me, receivers and half backs cutting in different directions. I felt totally confused, lost, bewildered. I had moved to a level of complexity and improvisation that was beyond me. There was a clear recognition, this is not right for me. The world had become too large and confusing. The same thing happened earlier with baseball. The pitchers just threw too hard, and I was afraid. Do I fear this next level will be too hard for me, too?

*

*

*

I look around Tressider. My tree. It's all so comfortable and familiar.
Yes, I am afraid. Yes, I do fear this next level is too difficult for me. The
pitchers will be throwing faster than I can hit. There will be new plays, and
people rushing at me to tackle me--like real life in football, or in my dream.
And, worse, beyond the immediate, there are all the hidden dangers lurking in
life--the wolves and lions.

I close my eyes, and realize that there are only a few weeks left in the
semester. After graduation, there is nothing but this vast empty space looming
before me. I'm more than afraid. If I'm honest with myself, and why not be,
I feel a terror within me. This is where you are right, Kierkegaard. Sickness
unto death. Fear and Trembling. He must have felt it. Sartre too. Nausea. There
is nothing there to catch me, no structure.

I open my eyes and hear birds singing, and a gentle wind caresses my face.
I reread my words. Sickness unto death. Ugh, how melodramatic. I don't need to
go there. Maybe I'm just parroting what I've read. I don't have to fall into the
drama of the existentialists. I'm sounding like suffering Mery, now.

I've always been able to overcome any obstacle put before me. Draw the
line. Take a breath. Bowling and baseball. Thanks, Senior, for that.
Draw the line. Enough self-indulgent whining. We have some serious thinking to
do here. Yes, friend bard, things are at 6's and 7's. Come on, mind, help me
out here. There is no one to turn to for help. I really am alone. Create your
own story.

*

*

*

When have I been in situations this chaotic? My parents' divorce. That
was a shocker. They never fought in front of us. Then, poof, dad's gone.

My exile from my home at 16.

Bad grades first quarter freshman year.

But I'm a fighter. In each case, I survived and moved on. Just look at
sports and my body. Though I wasn't quick enough at improvising to be a

quarterback, I became a defensive tackle. When they tried to block me, I sometimes fell, but I got back up. Once I chased their tailback all the way to the goal line. I got closer to him than anyone. Never quit. I dealt with the punishment and blocking efforts of the toughest people the enemy could throw at me. Even if I couldn't see the goal---the person with the football--my job was to charge ahead, get rid of obstacles, stay low and tough. And I was tough, and I was determined. All city honorable mention. For a tackle.

Get out of my way. No fear. I took a thin little body and made it hard, strong, powerful.

And quick. I'd be behind in a tennis competition, and would never give up. I'd chase every ball down. A bull dog, mentally tough. Maybe not the most skilled, but the most determined. And also I'd use my mind for strategy, size up my opponent's weaknesses; mental and physical, to see how I could out smart and out psych them. A thinking person's tennis player.

Women. Another sport where I learned how to overcome obstacles, objections, and through wit, charm, intelligence and the way I developed my body to achieve my goal there as well.

And here at Stanford, first quarter, I started off slow. A C+, two B's and a B+. When I asked for extra help with my C+ from my Western Civ teacher, he invited me to his house to study, where that dwarf faggot professor tried to seduce me. Ugh--I rebuffed him---what we he thinking, that I was a homosexual? I extricated myself. I didn't panic. I just made a game plan for what grades I needed to get in each class for the next three years to earn Phi Beta Kappa. And I did.

I've been here before, and I've gotten through it. Let's face this challenge the same way, though with a little more systematic effort, based on my past experience and learning.

So, where am I? I'm clearly confused. Fine. Next, what are my choices? I pull out a sheet of paper, label it "life" and make some columns. Ah,

a form is taking place already, a structure. I've been here before. I've survived, learned. Now all I have to do is fill in the blank spaces and I have my answers. How now brown cow.

*

*

*

I drink the last drops of my sweet tasting combination and feel the sugary energy flow through my stomach and arms. I close my eyes and feel the slight breeze, and the shelter of my maple. Two months ago I sat beneath its small buds, spring was just beginning. How much younger I seemed then. Still like the little boy in Kansas City watching with awe the first buds on our oak tree.

I open my eyes and look up at the leaves. Now, so full and green, there is no hint that they were once little baby buds. Nor that this fall, like last fall, they will turn their bright, glorious red. Something certain that I can count on. Where will I be next fall? Again, I feel some sadness knowing that I will probably not see the dazzling color of these leaves. I'll be leaving a steady companion of four years. We've grown together during each of the changing seasons. Where will I be? New beginnings? Fallen leaves and emptiness? I wonder if this fall there will be a little boy with a red wagon collecting the acorns under the oak tree in our yard.

*

*

*

What do I really believe about me?

Grandpa said you should not believe your own press. Know what you're not saying. Know what part of what you're saying you really believe. I'm better than most, but not as good as some; well, not as good as a few. I'm really very good at a lot of things, but not naturally good at anything. I'm more of a grinder: tennis, golf, football, academics. I'm a combination of the tortoise and the hare. I like to ride the bicycle in tenth gear or not at all. I'm always moving forward in quick, focused bursts. When I do something, I do it intently: practice the flute, my tennis swing, study. But only for an hour and half, or two hours.

Then I want to rest and space out. But I am willing to do this every day. Practice, practice, practice. I will repeat something until I get it. If not one day, then the next, or the next.

I'm the tortoise in that I do it every day. I'm the hare in that I work hard and focused in short bursts. Whatever work I do will have to accommodate that style. Of course, college is perfect. A few hours of class a week, and lots of time to self-structure how you want to organize the rest of your time. I don't need anyone telling me what to do, like in a 9 to 5 job. In fact, I hate having someone clock watching me. I work when I want to work, and stop when I want to stop. I hated when I worked in Grandpa Dave's clothing store. I had to punch a time card when I began and when I left. And there was no achievable goal. You sort clothes, price tag them; and when you're done, you sort more clothes. I don't mind putting in repetitious practice, but I want it to lead somewhere. A better volley, a faster, smoother playing of an allegro; a good grade on a test. Doing the same thing just to do the same thing to earn a salary seems ridiculous to me. For someone else, maybe. I'm certainly made for something better than that.

*

*

*

But I don't really have a place I excel. I'm certainly not the best at anything. Sorry, Grandpa, but true. Well, maybe in thinking about women, and coming up with ideas about how to seduce them. At least until Mery, that was a forte.

I guess I actually use that same style with women I use with all my activities. A couple hours of a date. I'm willing to repeat it over and over until I get it. The issue is how you define "it": the goal. When the goal was only sexual, it was clear when I'd gotten it. Then it was time to move on.

The trouble with Mery is that I shifted my goal. I got what I wanted early on, and then tried for something new: a committed relationship. But she kept changing the rules. I couldn't figure them out fast enough. It wasn't like chess,

or tennis or even golf with its hundreds of silly rules. But at least golf has rules. Mery either had no rules that she knew of, or made them up as she went along. I could never tell. How can you practice a flute piece if the notes keep changing each time you play it. You can't live life like that. Repetition and practice are one thing. Hitting your head against a hard wall over and over again is another.

When I push forward, even though it's intense and focused, I keep myself well under control, at about 85% effort. I don't want to push so hard I collapse. For me this is a very efficient, consistent strategy.

Occasionally I jump off high boards, but prefer not to. Certainly coming to California was a leap, but more than I realized. I learned from Mery what happens when I go to the edge and leap over a board that is too high for me. With her, I let go of too much control. Got too close to the edge of a cliff. Where there was too far a fall. Never again.

Apri, Apri, Apri. Knock knock knock, crash, crash, crash, and nothing opens. That's not the kind of practice I want to engage in. Maybe it wasn't her fault, or mine. Maybe, and with apologies to Ovid and Kierkegaard, it's the nature of the relationship beast. I'm just not cut out for that. Better to go back to the simple, fun, playful goals that have worked so well for me. Starting with Sandy and her new friend tonight. Elaine, you may be next. She was flirtatious, even seeing me crippled. I've still got it. Maybe I should be a professional Don Juan.

When I was doing my Jewish reading the week before that infamous Passover with Mery in Carmel, I found a reference to the Days of Anxiety that follow Passover. At the time, I didn't give it much thought. Who needs to dwell on negativity? I was struck by one holiday, Lag B'Omer, the thirty-third day after Passover. A day of celebration amidst the Days of Anxiety. Poor ancient Jews, going through their Days of Anxiety, afraid that the harvest might be

pillaged by invading enemies, or destroyed by the ravages of nature.
Suffering, exiled Jews, allowing themselves only this one day
for celebrating from Passover to Shavuot.

But not this wandering, exiled Jew. As of today, I come out of the
wilderness. No more Days of Anxiety for me, I've glimpsed the promised land.
Sandy and her friend, will be just the respite I need.

I look out at the Tressider terrace, as if I'm talking to an imaginary
audience, and point to myself "This is not the stuff of either a martyr or a
masochist."

*

*

*

I want something more sweet. I lift my tea cup, but there is no ice cream
left. I tap the bottom of the cup but nothing. I've also licked the bottom of
their chocolate sundae clean. I have a panicky thought. What if Harvard says
I'm too late on my acceptance and doesn't let me in? Then what? I feel a shiver
throughout my body. It's not the cold of the ice cream. I'm genuinely scared.
It's like looking at an empty television screen late at night, when there is no
program: black and white jumbles with a static, grating sound. That would be so
unfair. I've been going through so much. They must let me in.

Ah, an idea. I'll write and say I've been taking care of my grandmother
who is sick and in the hospital, maybe even dying. I'm sorry, but my love for
her is so great that it wasn't clear if I could leave her side. But after
talking with her, I want to accept, and hope to attend in the fall. That's what
she said she wanted me to do. The only reason I might have to defer is if she
still needs me.

Brilliant. I make the assumption that they'll accept me. I sound
compassionate and loving. Who wouldn't want that kind of person as a lawyer? And
I keep an out if I want it. That way I'll still be able to collect Grandpa's
money, and can tell him I've accepted for this fall. He'll be happy. I'll get out

of this desert-wilderness funk I'm in. Ah, a clear future direction. I almost feel happy.

This is perfect. I'll just pretend like these last couple of months haven't happened. Draw the line. The past is past, and the future awaits.

I've still got the moves.

* * *

This maple tree truly is an oasis. The sun is shining filtered light through its foliage. What a perfect combination of shade and light. It's good for me to just stop and reflect. I'm starting to feel better. I don't do this nearly enough, just have time to myself with no assignment, nothing required, nothing planned. When I have issues I need to work out, all I need to do is come here and sit beneath it and let my mind take a big overview.

It's never yet failed me.

What an amazing mind I have. It can work very well at an astonishingly detailed, precise level. Sometimes I get too caught up in that smallness. But one of the additional strengths of my mind is that I can step back and make an overview as wekk. Big focus, small focus, I've got it all. Thanks again, mind and maple.

Finally, a plan is emerging. On my paper, in column one, I write: *Short term: Graduate*. Under that heading, I list the two classes I need to finish up in order to graduate on time. My play about my family for creative writing, and my paper for honors political science. I think I'll focus on the latter first. Mac is coming down next week to talk to my polysci honors class. Won't that shock them? Then I can go up, meet with some of those bums on Sixth Street, and write my paper. As I think this, I hear Mery criticizing my use of the word bums. All right, fine. That may be too harsh, and I'm willing to learn something from the past. Those fine men on Sixth Street, who have just had some unfortunate experiences. There, better? I can dismiss her with a different choice of words. And finish my classes, graduate, and head off to law school.

Then I hear the black Reverend what's his name. I've already forgotten.
But I remember his message: how the Israelites feared freedom and started to long
for a return to the slavery of Egypt. Is returning to the law returning to
slavery for me, my fear of freedom? It could be, but it needn't be. I can return
to the law with new eyes. Maybe even use the laws created by man to help those
poor unfortunate souls on Sixth Street. I can turn my rational mind and
intellectual gifts for a good cause. They get helped by my wisdom. I get an A on
a paper. Mery and the Reverend would be proud of me (not that I really care that
much, but why not get all the praise possible.)

In the second column, I write *Summer*. After I graduate, Simple. Over the
summer I can go back to Kansas City. I will be the prodigal Harvard-bound son
returning. It will even be fun to practice the love and forgiveness that Mery
and the Reverend talked about with mom and Senior. Dad. That wasn't so hard. A
simple change of word and I'm fine with that. What a difference a word can make.
Dad.

It'll be a lot easier with them than with nutso Mery. And I could visit
Grandma. Perfect.

In the third column, I write, simply, *Fall: Harvard*.

I'm starting to feel better. That makes a lot of sense. The future
is falling into place. I look up at the glorious shelter of the maple tree. As I
do so, I actually smell the mint in our garden and the freshness of the geraniums
on the balcony of my home in Kansas City. I feel like I'm once again sledding
down our street on fresh snow, my brother on my back, giggling. I'm dancing
inside, just like I should, right, Reverend? I'm not returning to the past of
Egypt, I'm heading toward a new promised land.

*

*

*

I limp back to my car, carrying my books in my backpack. If it's possible,
I feel a spring in my step. I've found a way to merge into the future, and once
again have a direction. In fact, I'm thinking of starting weight lifting again.

There's no reason I can't keep my upper body in excellent shape. Things are definitely on the mend.

When I get to my car, there is a ticket on it. Damn! What the hell. And it's huge. Parking illegally in a handicapped zone without a sticker But I am handicapped. I left them a note saying my accident had just happened and even explained the circumstances. I'll call AAA. I remember when grandpa told me to get a membership. I thought it was stupid, for old people, but now it might come I handy.

This is ridiculous. I limp over to a pay phone and call, and explain the situation, how much pain I'm in; how I'm on crutches; how unfair this is, and how I demand a sticker now.

"Sorry, sir, but the law is very specific. It's only for severely, totally, and permanently disabled persons."

"That's completely unfair. I'll sue."

"Sir, we don't make the laws. We're just trying to help you. I hardly believe that a young healthy college student with a little cut on his foot will qualify. But good luck to you. And thank you for your membership in AAA."

* * *

Fine, I'll call Grandpa and send the bill to him. He'll be delighted I'm going to law school. What a ridiculous law. Maybe I'll eventually become a legislator and sponsor a fairer law. Show that society doesn't have to be as bad as it is. Who knows all I'll accomplish as a lawyer, changing the system from within. In the meantime, Grandpa and I will have to establish a new pay schedule for me. Gosh, it's actually been quite a while since I've talked to any of them. I wonder how Grandma is doing.

* * *

I see the first small positive buds in you, Johannes, that little part of you that is trying to grow: catching yourself and not calling the people on Sixth Street "bums"; thinking of how you might be of service in using the law; to

make changes from within society. Nobel motives, but not your only ones. You're still not acknowledging that you want--or need-- to be part of society. You're still seeking approval from others outside yourself. You're afraid to be alone, to see yourself as the lonely wanderer that you are. Certainly that I am. But now I can say with assurance that I stand outside the society's structure, the mainstream's rushing crowds. So you really care about their approval? Silly boy. You'll soon learn you have to leave society behind.

You're even exploring the idea of forgiving your family, and with some tenderness remembering your Grandmother is sick. But your motives are still suspect: you only think of running back to your family because they seem better than running to Mery.

The old you is still there--your entitled view of where you should get to park; manipulating your grandfather to continue to get money; even using your Grandmother's illness to ensure you get into law school. You're going back to the bondage of that enslaved "narrow place/Egyptian" self more than you realize.

But, of course, I know you can't really go back to that old you, as much as you may want. It's so interesting that I know you, but you have no idea about me. If you knew me, you'd probably resent me for entering your life as much as I do, condemning and judging you for the way you live. Although some of my current suffering may be an inevitable and normal part of living, I believe you've made it much worse by your self-centered actions, callousness, and pride. You're the tall tree in the forest that Dr. Lisbet and Lao-Tzu talked about. Because it stands out, it gets cut down by the forester. And because of the heights of your arrogance, my fall has been all the farther and harder. So difficult that it's still not clear to me how to recover. We'll just have to see where this leads.

That's the mystery, isn't it? We don't know the ending. Both of us hate it when there's something we don't know or understand. It's like an itch, a piece of sand in the pearl, which we are driven to probe, explore, pour over. Why? For you

it's partly a competitive drive. To be better than others, to show your competence. You, Johannes, sought to uncover the mystery in searching out the answers to external "mysteries": to uncover the seductive key to reach each of a woman's "bases"; to learn about the machinations of the law. I'm searching to uncover the internal mystery. Me. Why? To save my life. To regain it.

We're worlds apart. Will those worlds ever connect? Can the mystery of a spiritual life bridge internal and external mysteries?

*

*

*

Sandy gives me a big hug as she greets me standing in the movie line in front of Memorial Auditorium. "What happened? Fell off a mountain?" She points to my crutches.

"Nah, I was swinging, Tarzan like, from one tree to the next, over a deep gorge and the vinebroke." She's right. Her friend is really cute.

"Janice, is he everything I said he was?" Janice smiles. I reach out to shake her hand. But Sandy grabs it, pulls it to her face, and gives it a lick, then holds it out to Janice. "Your turn. Show Mr. Harvard lawyer to be what you've got." Sandy sticks out her tongue again. Janice hesitates, then takes my hand and shakes it. Her hands are soft and gentle. I can tell this is going to be a good evening.

I think of asking the girls if they'd like to skip the film and head straight to their house, but for some reason Sandy says she really wants to see this film, Bergman's The Seventh Seal. She'd even switched our date to Sunday night. Each girl sits beside me and takes my hand. All right, I'll play along. The movie is dark and despairing, a plague-ridden landscape and I find myself wanting to avoid watching it. It's also confusing. I expected more a Disney-themed water adventure with trained seals, and one of them, the seventh, is ugly but becomes the leader. Instead, some old knight plays chess with Death. Talk about a high stakes wager. Not foreplay or romance or light spirited. Not exactly

a good date movie. There wasn't even a seal in it. I have no idea what the title means.

* * *

The guy plays the chess game to buy time to see his wife whom he hasn't seen in ten years. I think of Mery, and wonder if she'd be ok with my going on a date like this. What a ridiculous thought. I owe her no explanation of my life now. And she owes me none of hers. I am well rid of her. This knight has less faith than Mery, but more than I do. A witch burns and his cynical, atheistic, bitter squire asks him whether he sees God or vacancy in the victim's eyes. He doesn't answer. What a wuss. He'd rather be a suffering doubter that recognize that life has no meaning and face his own emptiness. The clergy have nothing to offer, either. They prey upon the poor peoples' weakness and fear. Only the acrobat has a simple, pure faith, kind of like Mery's. He has a pretty wife and a young child. That's just not in the cards for me. I feel Sandy playing with my right thigh. Janice is more shy, but she is still holding hands with me. This is much better than a family, no doubt about it. Much simpler. More pleasurable.

Still, the squire in the movie does interest me. In spite of his negative attitude toward life, he tries to protect those he can, and feels empathy and hurt for those he can't, like the burning witch. Am I going to become most like him? In spite of my negative attitude toward life and people, will I try to help those who suffer? And yet it's all futile. The old knight, at the end, helps the young couple and their child escape, but he and his followers are led away over the hills in a dance toward Death. No good act goes unpunished.

* * *

When the movie ends, the girls nudge me to get up. Normally, this would be the kind of sad, Tragic, existential, dark, bleak movie that would bring me joy for I could use it as a springboard for a pseudo intellectual Kierkegardian sickness unto death despair coffee house talk leading to great sex. But for some

reason, I am sad. The conclusion is tragic. Death wins. The knight dies.
There is no joyous dance at the end. No happy seal playfully barking for food.

How can you just jump up, say, great flick, let's have some fun. I feel
myself falling into a funk, and try to argue myself out of it. Come on, you're
with two pretty girls. One is a sure thing, and her friend has potential. Life
must be lived. Don't let a stupid movie ruin your mood and a rollicking fun
night.

I make an effort to smile, to push the sad feelings aside. To not do so
is unfair to them, and me. But I also want to share what I'm feeling, and not
just stuff them. I can't be forever hiding behind a smile. I want someone
who knows me for who I am. The movie hurt. So, I just sit there. I can't get
up now. I can't move. I want to curl up and cry. I hurt so badly I don't want
to keep going. And I sit. Though I don't look at them, I imagine the girls are
feeling awkward. I feel awkward. A tear begins to form. Damn. I never cry.
Don't be a baby.

I will myself not to cry Then I think, why not cry? Why do I care what
they're thinking? Do I really care what anyone thinks? They're all strangers,
anyway. Mery would understand. No. Stop. get her out of my thoughts. She's gone.

While all this is occurring, I am watching it, as if from the ceiling of a
movie theatre. I can't stop transcending myself. Even as I act and feel, I
am watching myself act and feel. It's as if I'm not really living my life
because whatever I do, I also observe myself doing it rather than just
experiencing it. But is that distancing from myself always a bad thing? Maybe
that's what saves me from crashing and imploding. Look what happened at the ocean
when I could no longer keep a perspective.

I watch the different parts of me-- wanting to get up, wanting
to sit, wanting to cry, trying not to cry-- dialoguing. I try to analyze
which one is stronger and will win. Which do I want to win? Do "I" have a

choice or preference? Can I willfully suppress one set of feelings or the other?

Which is the wiser way to act? I survey the theater, watching the people file out. Sandy and Janice are talking and laughing, planning where we should go for dinner, or wink wink, should we go straight back to their apartment?. Do they sense what I'm feeling, and are just ignoring me, hoping I'll snap out of it, or do they have no idea what's going on?

As others leave the theatre, I wonder what these strangers must be thinking about me just sitting here looking sad. Then I wonder if my thinking about them shows empathy and compassion--being worried about their feelings and how I might be affecting them.

I guess that depends, doesn't it, Johannes, on whether you really are caring about others--true empathy--, or really only caring about yourself and how you appear to them--true narcissism.

Or is it what Mery's therapist called "giving your eyes away"--not thinking enough about my own point of view because I'm so worried about what others think about me? I hear Mery telling me that I think too much and all of this is just narcissistic self-reflection. The bitch. I'm amazed how quickly anger thrusts aside sadness. What am I really feeling?

I look up at Sandy and Janice, still laughing. Their faces seem distorted and grotesque. I feel myself coming down from the ceiling, losing my perspective and starting to get caught in a swirling sea of emotions, swimming in depths once again beyond my control. My mind feels like a cacophony of voices and feelings blurring and whirring amidst the crashing waters.

*

*

*

"We want to get something to eat, then go back to my place for a party. How does that sound?"

They have no idea what's going on with me, or are choosing to ignore it. "I'm not really that hungry. . ." I say, and see Sandy pull back, hurt. "For

food." I wink. "I have some advertising proofs I need to check on at the Stanford Daily. How about if I do that while you girls get something to eat, and I'll meet you at your place in an hour?"

"Great, big boy, we'll be waiting. 10:15 sharp." She leans over and gives me a sloppy kiss. Does Janice feel awkward at this public display of affection? Do I? Sandy then turns to Janice. "Your turn." Janice gives bends my head down and gives me a chaste kiss on my hair. I'm surprised, but I find it quite arousing. Maybe this evening will end up to be more fun than I expect.

* * *

I don't really have anything to do at the Daily, and even if I did, I don't have the focus for it. 9:15. I have forty five minutes to kill. I limp back to Mr. Red. I want a place of safety. Away from the University. I could go back to my room, but that seems too lonely. Worse, I might run into Asiya again, and I don't need any more Bible preaching. Donuts?

Johannes' thinking process is interesting, as far as it goes. He wants to be alone with his thoughts, so he says, in a place of safety. So he leaves the companionship of Janice and Sandy. Why? Because their energy is too positive? Because the interaction is too unstructured and demanding of him?

Yet, even though he wants to get away from them, he doesn't want to be alone with himself. He chooses not to go to his room because that would be too lonely. Also, he fears the opposite could occur in his room: if Asiya knocks on his door, that would demand too much interaction from him. He could have gone to the Stanford Daily and sat at his desk, or just stayed in his car. But that again, I believe, would have made him feel too isolated, only reinforcing his negative thoughts.

So he decides he wants to be out in public, where he is surrounded by people so that he doesn't feel the isolation of his room. But he doesn't choose the Stanford Coffee House, where he might meet someone he knows, and who would want to talk with him. Rather, he chooses a place where he knows there will

only be strangers—where there will be no one he knows who might interact with him, or make any demands of him conversationally. That way he can be alone in the midst of people, observing and watching those around him. He also chooses a place where there is a clear structure for interaction—a one time order at the counter. If he wanted structure and *more* interaction, he would have chosen to eat where there was a waitress who would take his order, deliver it, and keep coming over to see how he was doing. At the Donut Cottage, if he subsequently decides he wants more interaction, he can go up and ask for something else. He has more control that way.

It's fascinating how we choose to place ourselves in different environments depending on what we're feeling. I don't know that we really ever think it through that carefully. How little we know ourselves. Sometimes it works. It seems some intuition allows us to choose the correct place or make the right decision not only without full knowledge of why we're doing it, but actually with only very little information about ourselves and all the different parts of ourselves that go into a choice. But sometimes it doesn't work, and that can be disastrous. So, I hesitate to go forward without "knowing myself." My assumption is that such self-knowledge and reflection can be helpful. But I often find myself nearly paralyzed with Hamlet-like confusion as I seek to go through levels of reflection. Or like Adam and Eve gaining self-consciousness in the Garden of Eden. But once you have it, what do you do? I don't see a way out once you're entered the doors. The only way is in and through. And hope there is another exit.

Well, Johannes, enjoy your donut cottage. I know that you hope by placing yourself there, you can focus outward, and try to limit the amount of negative self-reflection you do.

My style exactly—reflecting outward on your reflections. Good luck to us both.

On the drive to my all night donut cottage, I realize I'm still not comfortable driving Mr Red. It's not just my sore right foot. It's because Mery adjusted the seat when she and Al took me back from Carmel. It's awkward, the wrong length from the pedals. Also, the mirror is off center, and I can't see what's behind me. I've tried to re-adjust the seat, but it's not easy. I can't find the right distance and angle for my legs and back. I should never have allowed her to be in charge of my car, much less my life. Did I have a choice?

I wonder if I don't like being driven by someone else because of being deaf in my left ear, so when I sit in the curbside seat I can't hear them; or because I don't like being the passive passenger? I guess if I'm still around, one day I could travel to England to test it out. I certainly don't like having my property used and left in a way that isn't conforming to what I like.

John, that line of reflection seems like a regression. Being a passenger; left ear? Why are you focusing on that? Johannes is wondering whether he had a choice---clearly he didn't in being driven back from Carmel, where he had been taken to the emergency room. But more deeply, did he have a choice in his seeking to become intimate with Mery? Why didn't you address that? Are you still afraid of her? Of his choices? Yours?

I let her see me at my most vulnerable. I let her be in control of my life. Never again will I let that happen, with anyone. Never again.

I feel the brackish water choking me, the swirling dark waves engulfing me. I pull over and stop the car. My heart is beating crazily, as I try to calm my breathing. This is ridiculous. I'm a life guard. A water safety instructor. I save people. I don't drown. I'm fine. This is behind me. There is no Ferryman rowing me over the Styx.

I hear you trying to regain a sense of control and calm yourself down, Johannes, and overall I admire your efforts. In the moment, I'd say you're coping as well as you can. You're trying to minimize the fear you felt that

night, and now, and convince yourself that in the future you'll be able to handle this type of situation better. Therefore there is no reason to be afraid.

However, you're not being completely honest, are you? Yes, you were a lifeguard--and a good one-- BUT at a swimming pool, not at the ocean. A pool is a relatively safe, controlled environment, while the ocean at night is pretty out of control. You're trying to establish a false equivalence to calm your fears. There are some things that are still fearful to you. And you're in the period between Passover and Sinai--the Omer--the Days of Anxiety. To be honest with you, I'm still working on dealing with our fears.

You would have been proud of me at Eilat, though. I did use our skills to rescue a young child who'd wandered out too far in the ocean --though this save was in daylight. Still a ways to go. But maybe our fear isn't such a bad thing, depending on where we focus it. As the good book says, Proverbs 9:10: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

And you'll learn, John that fear and awe are close to each other. Here in Safed, we are approaching the "Days of Awe" -- Yamim Noraim. The word nora has the root yod-reish-alef, the same as the word for fear yirat. Perhaps the beginning of wisdom can also be "awe" of the Lord. Think back to your/our experience at the top of Sinai, my friend. And don't forget, that even in times of anxiety and mourning, there is Lag b' Omer, a time to be happy. Metaphorically, we need to remember that, and be thankful for other temporal reminders: daily (the Asrei) and weekly, the shabbat.

An image of myself at 11 years old self forms in my mind. I'm on my bike, at the top of a steep hill, facing a winding path that was a short-cut to school. My parents made me promise always to walk my bike down that path. Usually I obeyed the them, in everything. But that day I was curious, or in a hurry, I don't remember. I touched my feet down to the ground on either side of the bike and began walking it, while still sitting on the seat. After a few yards, I experimented with pushing off on one foot, gliding, then touching down with the

other foot. This isn't so scary, I thought. Soon, I was careening down the path, totally out of control. I saw the narrow bridge ahead, and tried to aim my bike toward it. But I couldn't. I was headed over the embankment into the ravine and rocks below. Just as I was about to go over, the bike swerved and ran into a soft, pliant bush, that was strong enough to stop me, but yielding enough to absorb my onrushing shock without hurting me or my bike. I'd learned my lesson. At least for a while. Until now.

Know your limits. Don't let go of too much control.

* * *
"No old fashioned glazed caramel?" Chunky platinum blonde Annette asks when I order just tea and lemon.

"Not today. But ummm, they smell great." I give her a half-hearted wink. I'm just not that hungry." Before Carmel, before Passover with Mery, an old-fashioned glazed donut created a visceral joy in me, but not now. Something has altered. I don't yet understand it, but I can feel it. Even the sweet, syrupy ice cream I had last week with my tea didn't sit well with me.

My normal table is taken. It figures. I make a joke to myself, looking up at the heavens (beyond the yellow ceiling) "Why, God, why this too? Not even my regular donut seat is available. Definitely an absurd universe" Clever boy. I can still make cosmic chuckle jokes. Maybe I could write it down and send it to Bergman.

Why do I like that seat? It looks the same as the others. One thing I notice immediately is that it is against a wall on the left. That way my left ear is protected from anyone sitting to that side of me and talking to me. But there are several in a row along the wall. Why is there just one that I like? I realize when I examine the ceiling, that above the seat I like is a lowered area. Somehow that must make me feel more cozy. Isn't it interesting that we intuitively discriminate where we feel comfortable, and yet we may not even rationally know the reason. We just know we like it.

When I sit, I realize that I'd be even more comfortable in a chair that swivels. But at least I can rock back on this chair without having mom admonish me. Why do I like swivel chairs? Or the rocking chair in my room? Is it all from mom and my childhood? Wouldn't everyone want more choices and flexibility, a chair they can control rather than one that confines them?

Maybe, Johannes, sometimes there are too many choices, and you are trapped by your need for freedom and controlled by your need for control. What you find binding, someone else--like me--might find comforting--just to feel myself lovingly held in a secure place.

Both/and? Can we feel held in an interconnected web, but not feel trapped and entangled by it?

I take the tea bag out, and start to put it in the water, but am aware that I don't really want the tea. It reminds me too much of Mery. Why did I even order it? I leave the bag to the side.

Across from me are two really old women, maybe even in their eighties, older than my grandmas, talking quietly. A rather thin, pale man, maybe mid-sixties enters. Annette asks, "Usual?" He nods. How does she remember each person and their order? She must have an amazing memory. She should be on a game show or something. Maybe a historian. How did she end up serving donuts? What a pathetic life.

She gives him two crumb donuts, a large coffee, and a banana, which he brings to the table next to the two old women. They all wordlessly acknowledge each other. The women continue talking, and then the older of the two, with gray blonde hair, turns to the man and asks, "How is your wife?"

"Not too good," he responds, not looking at her, but stirring his coffee. "There are more and more hours each day when she doesn't recognize me at all."

These three obviously know each other. I am intrigued by the informal community they have apparently established at the Donut Cottage.

"I went through seven years caring for my husband 'til he died" she gray-blond replies. "It gets so hard at times. I found that writing in a journal helped me get my feelings out."

He nods. "We all need some way to get rid of the pain."

I'm surprised and impressed at the older woman's clarity, directness, and effort to reach out. I also admire that her gesture seems to have a positive effect on the man. There is a human connection.

"Did you ever think of publishing what you wrote?" he continues.

I imagine where this conversation is going. He is asking this question in order to get a copy of her book, which he feels might help him. Perhaps he could learn from her insights, or at the least feel a shared comradeship in reading her narrative of suffering and coping. She will insist that she give him a free copy. Perhaps she'll even sign it, "With affection, your Donut Cottage friend." He'll buy the next round of coffee and pastries.

"I did publish it."

So far so good. Now he'll ask where he can get a copy. Instead, he says

"Did it do good?"

His phrase confuses me. At first I think he is asking whether it helped her cope to publish it. But that doesn't make too much sense. Maybe he means did it help others, did anyone let her know that they felt better after reading it. She seems confused, too, and inquires, s

"What do you mean?"

"Good sales? How many did you sell?"

"I self-published it. I'm a nobody, not some famous person and no one wanted to publish a nobody's thoughts. It didn't really sell many copies; most I gave away to friends."

"Oh, too bad." He goes back to stirring his coffee. The two women return to their conversation.

*

*

*

I pick my cup up and stare into my hot water. I can almost see my reflection if I hold the cup really still. I'm fascinated by the range of emotions in me triggered by such a small segment of dialogue.

When I first realized what they were talking about—death, senility— I actually felt sad by how much suffering there is in the world, suffering that I haven't been sensitive to. Then there was a feeling of "less sadness" as I saw people reaching out to connect and share. Then the whole scenario fell apart and I was disappointed in human nature. I wish there had been a better ending. He never asks her for a book. She never offers. She's left with a dead husband, he with a deteriorating wife. What I am left with is not the connection between people, but the spaces.

"Did it do good?" Not did it help anyone, but strictly, like my father's and grandfather's world of commerce, did it make money? And her response: I'm a nobody. Is that why Grandfather always says "Be the best?" Then you're a somebody. If you're a nobody, no one will care about you.

I want to take pride that I'm a somebody. I'm about to graduate from Stanford. I'm going to Harvard. But I feel so sad. Why? I'm not them. Maybe because I saw an opportunity for human connection emerge, then disappear. My little old lady went from a potential teacher and healer to a widowed, discarded nobody. Words which could have connected, only served to cut them off from each other, and returned each to silence.

The man mashes his banana into the remaining crumbs of the donut and eats it. The women have ceased talking, and are sitting gazing into their coffee.

I drink my hot water.

*

*

*

I put down Johannes' journal, and take a sip of tea. A young couple with three little kids comes out of the coffee shop and walks toward a table next to me. Their noisy bustle annoys me, and worse, I see that they need a couple of

extra chairs. I have two extra chairs at my table. On one I've placed my feet. On the other, I have my coat and books. I don't really want to give them up, not only because I'm using them, but also even though I'm alone, having extra chairs gives the illusion that I might be expecting someone. If there is only one chair, then I am seen for what I am, an alone, lonely person who is expecting no one.

They are looking around, as if they don't see my chairs. I pretend to be reading with total absorption. But some impulse causes me to look up, and, as if I'm quickly assessing the scenario, pull my legs off the chair, and then my books and coat, offer them my chairs. My hands open graciously, palms up, "Be'vakasha" The couple smiles and thanks me. They don't know the depth of my sacrifice.

But I notice a little glow in me. It actually feels good to do something kind for someone else. I look around to see if anyone else has noticed how generous and thoughtful I am. Like when I would hit a good golf shot on the practice range, I'd want to see who else saw how great I was.

As I'm looking, I see a fat woman with a tray inside the coffee shop heading toward the closed door. I jump up, and open the door for her. I'm really on a roll. **Role? Sorry, couldn't help myself. That wasn't kind. John's trying. And trying.**

Just as I open the door for her, she turns her back to me to use her butt to push the door open. Although I hold the door ajar for her she continues to turn and push, and exits butt and back first, in one motion completes her turn, back still to me, and walks outside. She doesn't even notice me or see that I held the door open for her. Maybe she feels she opened it herself.

I feel rage. Hey, lady, I want to shout at her. I'm not your door man. I just did you a favor. But I know that would defeat the purpose of a kind gesture by creating bad feelings. I go back and sit down. Johannes, you are empty. And I'm afraid I'm still empty. What is it about me that I am so needy for praise?

will ever be happy. Mmmm. Chocolate. A cure for what ails. Better. And there's that lovely buttermilk aftertaste. Yes, ok, there is suffering in life. There are a lot of people who have worse lives than me. Like those pitiable people of poverty haggardly homeless. But poverty has always been with us--even in Jesus' time; and always will be. Since when do I have to be my brother's keeper 24/7, make other people's misfortunes my own? I'm going to write a paper about those homeless guys. I'm having Mac down to my class to educate the rich elite Stanfordites about a world outside their privilege; I'm going to go visit them in a couple of weeks to do field research for my paper. That's enough. If I am not for me, who will be? I've got to take care of me. And this donut is my friend and my comfort. Self-care.

Should I be ashamed just because I was born into a wealthy family? It's either God's will, which I don't believe, because there ain't no God; or it's random luck. But, hey, luck is not bad. Look at the ancient Greeks view of luck. What is luck? they asked. It is when, on the battlefield, the arrow hits the guy next to you. Phew.

Because I have been born lucky, does that mean I should feel guilty that others weren't? Should I feel obliged to constantly have to take on Others' suffering? Absolutely not. That's why there are donuts. Umm, chocolate and buttermilk. This tastes so good, it might almost make me believe that God exists.

*

*

*

As I take a sip of my cream and sugar-laden coffee, I hear a man chuckling loudly behind me. At first I'm annoyed at his interruption of my pleasant thoughts and turn to scowl at him. But when I turn around, I see that he is laughing happily. I give him a pleasant smile. See, if I just adjust my attitude, and angle and perspective, there is joy and laughter in the world.

He's an older man, maybe Grandpa's age, and he and a woman like Grandma are playfully interacting and talking over their game of cribbage. I love the game. I used to play it all the time as a camper.

The man is fat. His chin is so flabby that it only appears when he throws his head back in one of his laughing fits. Then, an indistinct chin appears. Clearly too many donuts and not enough exercise. I take another bite. I will have to start back into an exercise program. I give my stomach a squeeze and feel a little fold of flab. Then I suck in so I can feel my abs. Still got it, but I need to be careful.

The man deals the hand. and stares at it, intensely contemplating the cards before he throws two into the crib. Both begin calling numbers, and playing their cards. Three.

Thirteen.

Fifteen for two

Twenty five.

Go.

The old man begins to count up the points in his hand: fifteen two, fifteen four, and a pair for six. He puts his peg six spaces forward, and now he is three spaces ahead of his lady friend. He finds this terrifically funny.

He's so pleased that he's moved his peg ahead of hers and is that much closer to winning. He celebrates by displaying his indistinct chin. I start to take another bite of my donut, but seeing his wiggly chin and feeling the fat on my stomach makes me turn away from the chocolate gooey fatty buttermilk concoction in disgust. My joy at their laughter turns to anger. How can they be happy with a conversation that consists of nothing more than calling numbers to each other?

Do they realize what they're doing? They're playing a game in which the goal is move their piece around in circles faster than the other person's. To

feel joy when his peg gets ahead of hers. Great, old man. Great, into the lead. You're one step closer to finishing the circle. Then you can start another game and go around the circle again. And again.

Until your weary, arthritic fingers can barely lift the coffee cup, till the lines in your face cause your eyes to squint shut, till your neck becomes so stiff you can't tilt it back to laugh.

Then, old man, what good does our going around in circles do?

Meaningless games. Idle, empty, pointless chatter. Aging, illness, death.

10:00. Time to go see Sandy.

One must imagine Sisyphus happy.

*

*

*

Words and the mind are what hid Johannes from people. Words of writers and the books I'm reading are leading me slowly back to people. At least that's what I want to believe. Maybe it's all an illusion, and I'm doing nothing but also hiding behind words. They are my only companion at meals. I feel safer with books as my friends. I can put them down when I want. And they are always there for me when I want to be with them again.

Words, my means of healing, are the weapons with which a battle is being waged inside Johannes, a subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) shifting and battling for supremacy between Johannes and a new side which is becoming increasingly apparent. Johannes recognizes a suffering, more sensitive part of himself emerging, and he doesn't like it, doesn't even want to recognize it, and fights to emasculate it. He becomes angry and there is an internal confrontation and clash, as he fights the new foe.

As I read Johannes' journal, I also feel the different parts of his "self" are changing under my observation. Even worse, I feel a bit like a parent trying to understand and keep the peace between warring siblings, the older one who feels his place is being taken, and the younger one, newly emerging into the

world. I have to admit, although I don't like the old Johannes, the newly emerging side really isn't a lot of fun to be around, either. I wonder if I like who I am now more.

*

*

*

I think of the older brother I never had, who died a few days after he was born. The blue baby. Maybe I'm not really like a parent to Johannes, but more the older brother he never had and always wanted. Would he really want to know me, if he could meet me? I'm not sure he would. We're so different. I'm a pretty judgmental, mean older sibling. And also less sure of myself. Do I really know how to help grow him up? I don't even know how to grow me up. Where is the older brother I need? Does he exist? Can he help me?

Your plea cries out for a response, but I'm not sure what to say. I know what you mean, and, yes, sometimes I feel that too. I miss the older brother's wisdom. What I can say to you, John, is Yes, I'm here. And the seeds of me are within you. Trust yourself. You're doing fine. Like Johannes, you are struggling with your own birth pangs. Maybe one day we will discover that the older wiser brother is either somewhere within us all, to be uncovered and found, or can be created and learned from. The search continues.

*

*

*

When I try to see who I am becoming by observing myself, it often feels like the Heisenberg uncertainty principle I learned about in high school physics— whether something is a wave or a particle depends on the observer. Here, the different selves each change under my scrutiny. None feel solid, but shift and evolve even as I observe them and try to understand them. This seems true as I look at myself (selves?) now, which I can't seem to grasp as I seek to concretize and understand them/me. It's as if we are all being born, suffering, running away, seeking, sequentially and simultaneously.

Somehow it feels that this transition and battle within Johannes is one, at a different level, that I am still fighting in me as I try to evolve and grow.

From my distance geographically and temporally, I know which side eventually wins. I know that Johannes is taking his last gasps, like a sick, limp goldfish who with one more effort swims dizzily to the surface, just before it dies. But when it does, does it know or at least believe there is really hope for renewed life? Johannes is still caught in an eddy, the illusion that the law will pull him out of his nose dive.

I sit and read his journal and know that he is dying. And yet there is nothing I can do to save him, even if I wanted to. It's not entirely painless to see myself, or part of myself, on paper and know he is deceiving himself. Moses won't come out of the wilderness. I haven't come out of the wilderness. And I am helpless to do anything to help him, just as he is helpless to help me. And I may be just as helpless to help myself, though I don't want to face that and therefore so may be engaging in a similar self-deception.

The sun has risen. I've been reading and writing all night. A new day has arrived, although it doesn't seem new, merely an extension of an old day. I don't want to sleep. But when I'm awake, what do I do but continue to whine and doubt?

I curse the words I write and read for being ineffective, and yet, here I sit, surrounded by them. The words are painful; each word I write, each word I read is like a thorn, a dagger sticking into me.

And for what purpose? Is this just an empty mental masturbatory masochistic exercise? Is it leading anywhere at all? I fear that I'm not using them to free myself and gain life, but rather using them to retreat further from life and hiding behind these little pieces of meaningless black and white drawings. Made of lines and bars. They have no feelings toward me, don't care about me, even as they surround me. And even while I'm cursing myself, I'm cursing myself with words, all because I am too afraid to do anything else.

*

*

*

As I limp from Mr. Red toward Sandy's house, I feel like I'm a stiff
peg walking in circles around a cribbage board, trying to find a way out of
the seemingly endless, meaningless circular maze. However I got planted on this
board, I have now been left alone.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

No answer.

Apart, cast off from the other players. Whatever meaning I once found in
traveling the structure of the tracks laid out for me has disappeared. I still
can see the tracks, but don't want to follow them. Yet, if I look to the side
of the board, there are no tracks at all. Just emptiness.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Apri, Apri Dico.

Something's wrong, The ocean's beginning to roar, trees swaying.

Knocking at Hell's gate. Ocean roaring louder.

"Sandy?" I yell, a panicky tone in my voice.

As the door opens I am barraged by words "Hihowareyou? Gladtoseeyou.
There's the stud. Get all your business taken care of? You'll have to give us
both a ride in Mr. Red later." She greets me with a frisky, playful hug. I feel
her tight athletic body push itself into me. There are no soft curves, like
Mery. I used to find her outgoing personality delightful, a somewhat less
bombastic version of Alice. She seemed like the perfect person to snap me out of
my funk, the kind of upbeat, non-reflective energy I would like to surround
myself with.

But now her cheer seems forced, phony, and cacophonous compared to Mery's
thoughtful tone. I have trouble ratcheting up my own response to her level. But
I try. She doesn't seem to notice the discrepancy. Does she have any idea who
I am? She's acting like I'm the same person I was when I saw her several months
ago. She's talking to an external image of me. Driver of Mr Red. Harvard lawyer
to be. Sexual adventurer. She isn't even looking for the inner me, just assumes
it's the same, if she even cares.

Ocean roaring louder. "Come on in." Her arm around me. Stop roaring, ocean. Leave me alone. My foot is throbbing. I should go soak it. Boughs breaking. Dizzy spinning sickness. Words catching in my throat. Can't explain, ocean, Carmel, fire, drums.

As she pulls back, I look at her. I smile outwardly, but I'm wondering, do I know her? Who is she behind her playfulness and sexuality? Does she hurt, cry, dream? How is it really possible to know anyone? Do I even know me? Is there a me to know? I hear the song Mery played by that group the Doors "Strange days have found us."

Gershom. You were a stranger in a strange land. It's frightening, isn't it Johannes, to realize that no one really knows or understands you, that you don't understand anyone around you. And that maybe you don't really know or understand yourself. A stranger to yourself, too.

"Janice, Mr. Tiger is here. Grrrrr." She strokes my crutch. "I hope everything becomes this stiff." I look at her and smile, but am thinking, how crude. Did I ever find this sexy? Janice comes over and gives me a hug. She is pretty. Not as bouncy as Sandy, more subdued, thoughtful. I appreciate that. It's awkward for me to hug and hold onto my crutches, and I'm afraid of falling. The Doors' song echoes in my ears: "Faces look ugly, when you're alone."

I'm at a loss for words. I ask to go to the john.

I wish he could be of more help, but I'm afraid you re going to the wrong person for assistance! Johannes' scatological humor, hopefully on the other side? A little levity amidst the sturm and drang.

As I limp toward the bathroom, I try to look assured and smooth on my crutches. I hear the girls giggling. About me? My awkwardness? Whatever the topic, they continue to chatter and exclaim. How do they do that so effortlessly, so smoothly? How do you connect easily with people, what do you talk about? I feel like I've lost my fulcrum, a base, a core, some place to

stand. I've left the cribbage board, and am drifting. I no longer have the game to share with them.

* * *

I stare at my face in the bathroom, then turn away. I am uncombed, slightly unshaven, pale and unsightly in my own eyes. Don't they notice? Can't they see the hollowness in me? I feel like the pimply fourteen year old who tried to hide his face at parties.

When I return, I look at their still smiling faces. Why are you smiling? What are you talking about? Tell me, someone tell me what is funny. I want them to talk to me, but I fear it. I want to talk but don't know what to say. Where are my charming moves--was it all a fraud; if real, it seems a distant, unrecapturable skill. I think of the mortal torment, the existential dread because of an incomprehensible universe in the Bergman movie. I wish I could talk to him. How does a person who feels empty, depleted and sick gets back into life? They saw the same movie. What allows them not to feel sad?

I stand several yards from them, motionless, not wanting or even able to move. Worse, I seem to have lost the connection between my mind and body. I can't make myself move. Sandy puts on some music and begins dancing. Janice joins her, and they playfully swirl and gyrate, occasionally flirtatiously touching each other and looking over at me.

I stand limp, like a piece of flesh, a cow carcass, held up by crutches. "Since Fred Astaire can't come to us, let's go to him," Sandy coyly says and they giggle and twist toward me. Sandy unbuttons the top of her shirt, comes up behind me, places her arms around me, and rubs her flimsy bra-covered breasts on my back. Janice coyly raises her arms above her head and continues to dance in front of me.

"Come on, let's see you dance."

I smile, not from joy, but from awkwardness. "I can't move" I say as I point to my leg and my crutches.

"Dance with your hands, then" Sandy laughs, as the two women continue to gyrate around me. Then Sandy, from behind, starts to unbutton my shirt, and reaches down toward my crotch. "Dance with any other parts of you that can still move" she giggles as she begins to stroke me. Janice turns her back. At first I think it's from shyness at what Sandy is doing, but then she sways her buttocks rapidly and turns to look, seductively over her shoulder at me.

Could this possibly be what Mery's pastor meant when he said that after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they needed to dance to celebrate their victory. Does that mean I still have miles to go through the wilderness?

I'd forgotten that I'd first heard the wisdom of Miriam's dance from the Reverend at Glide. I thought the first time I heard it was this week from Reb Jonathan in his Passover class. Thanks for the reminder, Johannes. It's amazing how much wisdom we have which we forget. There is even wisdom in Sandy's suggestion, "Dance with your arms" which I have no memory of her saying until Johannes' journal reminded me. I don't dance at all, either with feet or arms. Though one day I'd like to dance with my spirit. I wonder what that would feel like. I can't even imagine.

As Sandy and Janice dance and fiddle with me like I'm a passive puppet plaything, I think of Mery, and the first poem I wrote-- for her-- which I titled "The Dance." How ironic given my current circumstances. "The I and you became we." I feel no "we" now. I feel only an empty aloneness, even with these girls surrounding me.

Sandy has finished unbuttoning my shirt, and begins to unsnap my jeans. I've raised my arms over my head, trying to look cool and like I'm having fun. But I'm feeling dizzy and everything around me is swirling. I feel like I'm going to lose my balance, and will myself to stay upright, realizing what an idiot I would look like crumpling to the floor.

I don't want to be here. I'm like a frozen statue that wants to run and escape. Why did I come? Isn't this the touch I said I want? Didn't I come

here because I want to talk and be near people and connect? But I can't dance. I can't laugh. I can't talk. I can't move. This isn't the connection I want, but I don't know what I mean, what I want. When you try to get what you want what part of your knows that isn't what you want? I don't know myself anymore. How do you know what you want? My thinking mind continues to swirl.

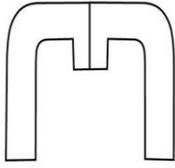
But why not just enjoy what's happening? Stop thinking, mind. If there is no core in me, why not let Sandy play with an image she has of me? If there is no me, there is nothing to hide. Why hide emptiness? I'm a Cheshire cat without even the smile. Ellison, you write about your problems with invisibility. Here's a blood brother. Without the blood. Heh? That's it, laugh, joke. Would Ellison find that funny? Or insensitive? They are probably looking right through me, seeing each other, enjoying their little game. Maybe even flirting with each other through me.

A smileless, bloodless, invisible Cheshire cat brother through whom two women flirt. That is humorous. I smile with genuine appreciation at my attempt at humor.

My smile seems to encourage Janice. She turns, and gently begins caressing my chest. Sandy has finished unzipping me and begins to stroke me, with one hand, while unbuttoning Janice's top with her other. Janice has a shy, sensual look, and I can see that she is nicely built. Not as big as Mery, but a good handful. I start to see the beginning of her cleavage. Maybe I could get into this. I think about reaching out my hand to caress her, but it doesn't move.

There is something in me, where I don't know, but something silently cries out "No!" I don't want to go back to this charade. Something has shifted so profoundly in me that even though I don't know where I want to be, I know it isn't here, and it isn't with these happy, playful, giggling women.

* * *
* * *



any tender, kind, sensual hands are stroking me. There
is a full moon and I hear the repetitive pounding of the drums. I am swaying in
a trance like meditative state as the drums are joined in counterpoint by bells,
wood blocks, shakers. I feel myself becoming aroused as an additional pair of
hands begins to caress my feet, washing and bathing them with warm water. I
am a king, surrounded by a harem, all competing to fondle and embrace me. Who
will I choose? I remain in a dream-like state, keeping my eyes closed, feeling
the soft hands stroke me, when I hear in a grating accented female voice:

They are cruel. and have no mercy. The sound of
them is like the roaring of the sea...

I keep my eyes close, drifting, and hear my own voice in Carmel reading "What
alarmed you sea that you fled... ." but my own foggy words are once again
drowned out, as if in counterpoint, by the woman's:

When the King of Babylon heard the report of them,
his hands fell helpless, anguish seized him
pain, as of a woman in travail...

Am I the king of Babylon? A woman in travail? Is that Mery in pain? Where am I?

Behold, like a lion coming up from the thicket of the Jordan
against a perennial pasture,

Is this my lion dream? Where is my brother? Where's the football? Hands are
continuing to stroke me. Whose?

What shepherd can stand before me?

The stroking sensuality is replaced by a pain in my right foot, and I
pull my leg back. I feel myself coming into consciousness. I try to open my
eyes but they seem glued shut.

"Ah, joining the living? You dozed off again, and were gone almost two
hours. Mumbling about a chess game. And lions. Here, bend your leg. I need

to place your foot back in the salt water. I wonder where you go when you fall asleep." She gently lifts my leg and places it in the basin. I say nothing, and she keeps chattering. Has she been sitting here for the last two hours? Doing what? Has she been chattering the whole time? Do I even need to be awake for her to feel she's having a conversation? It's just words spilling from her. Like her talks with her supposed God. He probably listens to her as well as I do. "Your foot looks fine to me. And the doctor agrees. You're ready to swim, bathe, get up and move around. Look outside, it's a beautiful day. You're really sleeping too much. The doctor said... ." I tune her out. Soaking my foot in salt water. Am I the bitter herb being dipped? Is the doctor the Pharaoh who treats me like a slave, ordering me to follow whatever he says I should do? Is he the lion? Is she?

The foot baths and massages began two weeks ago, when I came back from Sandy's. Asiya could see I was disoriented and sad. All I wanted to do was go to sleep, but she insisted. Annoyed, I said to her, "I thought he said no water." She kept her calm, patronizing voice, and replied, "Now now, I know there's been a lot for you to take in. But I would never do anything that would be harmful to you. I wrote down everything the doctor said. You must not have heard him, or been much in such shock you didn't listen well. Here, read here" She holds up a piece of paper. "No water for six days. I'm following the doctor's instructions exactly: one teaspoon of salt per pint of water. We want to make sure there is no infection." I remember her look--a combination of gently admonishing, but protective. And now, every day, twice a day, I've submitted to this bathing ritual, and her chatter. When I tune back in, she's still going, in that same solicitous tone.

"The garden is blooming. Maybe just a little walk outside would do you good. The Doctor, when he came by today, said."

I interrupt her, confused once again. "He was here today."

"Yes, sleepy head. He came by again today, while you were sleeping. I told you that already. Weren't you listening? He didn't want to waken you, but said we've been doing a good job. There is no infection, and your foot is healing nicely. He said you no longer need the crutches. Physically you're fine." She runs the cloth around my foot, gently. "Sometimes after a shock, the mind takes some time to heal. I know. I know." She looks down and continues massaging my foot.

I groan in response. It doesn't feel good, it hurts when she touches my foot. Why can't she just leave me alone? She's a Palestinian Christian Arab, acting like a hovering Jewish mother. Part of me smiles. Finally, a little lightness. I'm fine. I still have my wit. Maybe I should tell her what I just thought. No, that will just encourage her efforts. I'm not fine. I just want to stay in bed and be left alone. I shouldn't have left the room so soon after my accident—going to class, seeing Sandy and her friend Janice. That was too much for me. I wasn't ready for the world. I need to stay in my little green room. I feel like a fragile plant in a hot house, not yet ready to be transplanted to the outside world.

She continues rubbing my foot, and after a few minutes looks up at me and smiles. "Maybe this is your time in the whale."

I look at her like she's crazy. I have no idea what she's talking about.

She seems to read my confusion, and says by way of explanation. "Jonah, in the Bible. When God called him to do God's work, Jonah ran away on a ship. But then he was thrown overboard by the sailors and swallowed by a whale. Some see that as his punishment for disobeying God. I see it as a time of quiet and meditation so he could heal himself. Just like you're doing, before setting out to do God's work."

Sartre, where are you when I need you? I'm trapped in a room with a mad preacher woman. Help! You were so right: "Enfer, c'est les autres." Hell is other people. Let me out. Leave me alone.

*

*

*

"Maybe I should stop reading to you from Jeremiah, and read Jonah instead. Would you like that?"

"Perhaps it would be better if you read to me from the Bible about the person who suffered most in all the world." I hope she can hear how my words drip with sarcasm. I imagine each word coated in a warm bath of Kansas City blood-red barbeque spicy, salty-soaked, sarcasm sauce.

"An excellent idea. Let me bring you some breakfast, and while you eat, I can read a little more."

*

*

*

I'm glad she's gone. But I also am aware of how silent the room is without her, and how alone I am. Before Mery, on Sundays I'd be out playing golf with my buddies. But they're really only sports buddies. My relationship with them is dependent on a shared interest in golf and tennis--and performance. If you play well, you are part of the team. If you don't, well, nice knowing you. I wonder if that isn't like my family; you're part of them, and get rewarded when you achieve and perform: "What a good boy, you raked the leaves." "Oh, isn't he wonderful, look at those grades." "Ah, Harvard Law School--you are a very very good boy." When the accomplishments stop, and I'm just a wandering Jewish boy in Israel... Poof.

Or when Mery thought I might not be able to provide for her. . .poof.

I'd called Richard two weeks ago to let him know I'd be out of commission for a few weeks--just a small cut, I told him. I didn't want to appear too vulnerable. He didn't seem that concerned or interested. I felt he was already hanging up on me, thinking who he could find as a replacement. In a few weeks we'll all be going our own direction, anyway. We're just an ephemeral accident of history: at the same university at the same time liking the same sports. There's really nothing deeper there. No real relationship.

Normally, he would have said something like, "Well, chap, give me a call when you are ready to be crushed." But there was only, "See you around." Which we both knew was unlikely. What a strange way to say good-bye to a relationship of three years. "Yeah, see you around."

Maybe he was upset because I'd pretty much abandoned them for Mery these last few months. They probably already have my replacement. I'm just a cog, a part in their game. Take me out, fit another one in. So today I guess I'd be in church with Mery. Well, I certainly don't miss that, though it might be better than preacher Asiya.

I wonder if Mery is in church today. I feel a slight jealousy thinking maybe Al is there, too, playing his sax. A stupid emotion. Let it go. Let him have her. It won't last, and she'll drive him crazy, too, if he isn't already. Let Richard go. Let Mery go. It's fascinating how easy it is to end relationships and just let people vanish from your life. And a little frightening. This was the woman I thought I wanted to marry and spend the rest of my life with. Mery marry. Now, I don't even want to see her or say goodbye to her.

*

*

*

I look around my room and focus on my books. They are so well-organized. Everything has a place. Top shelf, left. Constitutional law and political science books. Middle section: Psychology and biology class books. Right section: golf and tennis instructional books. But there's no connection between any of it. There's neatness and form, but progressing nowhere. It's like placing pieces of a fragmented puzzle next to each other and trying to pretend there is some meaning there. There is no integrated core--to my books, to me. I am like a shelf of books, but really an empty shell, with no self inside. What happened to my desire to be special, to be the best? Where is the ambition, the flame of achievement? Is that what hid the emptiness?

It is time for you to realize that the sensual joy of the Song of Songs is a thing of the past. As you continue to struggle to figure out what's happening with you, you will see the gap between words and the existential truths you're seeking grow further and further. You will no longer be reading and quoting from Song of Songs, but from Ecclesiastes: "Excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body. . . . for in many dreams and in many words there is emptiness. . . ."

Second shelf, left. Greek philosophers, Greek plays. Is there any meaning or coherence in all this precise orderliness? Or is it really empty form, reflecting the tragedy of my life? Hah, was that a joke, for melodramatic effect? I don't smile. "Endless duration makes good no better, nor white any whiter."

Shakespeare's works, middle section. Falstaff, where's the joy? Is Macbeth right, that I'm just an actor "that struts and frets his hour upon the stage And then is heard no more: it is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing. . . ."

Right section, top shelf. French nineteenth century writers: Stendahl, Balzac, Flaubert. All systematically, chronologically arranged. So what? Maybe Mery is right. My structure is stifling, barren, sterile. Balzac's Pere Goriot. Madam Vaquery's boarding house. Respectable on the outside, but drab, worn, fading when you look closer. She was the boarding house, the boarding house was her.

I am this room's sterility. There is no creativity, spontaneity, no fertile life. Everything is empty, a hollow, cracked shell, like me.

I don't' understand it. These are the same books that I used to love. But something has profoundly changed. . . about them? About me? Now, there is a musty, moldy, decaying odor to them.

I look at the books on the floor, needing to be organized and shelved. Buber's I-Thou; books from last quarter's classes; Ovid. Why? What difference does order make?

The air in here is choking me. Suffocating. I wonder how Jonah breathed in the whale. Fairly tales. You can't think rationally about them. They make no sense.

I can't stand this room. It's like a mirror reflecting back my own bareness. I've got to get out of here.

But I don't move. I look down at my belly. These two weeks of hibernation and no exercise have left it soft and flabby. I squeeze roll. I should do some push ups. Three sets of ten. I wonder if my body can still do that.

I count the First set: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10. I look at my watch, wait 30 seconds. Second set. 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10. Wait. Third set: 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10.

"Here's your breakfast. I see you still haven't moved from your bed."

Does it count if I do the push ups in my mind? I've become this slothful creature that can't act, doesn't move. My only motivation to get up and out of this room is to avoid being Asiya's captive audience and having to listen to her harangues.

Yet, even though I'm going stir crazy, I'am annoyed and frustrated at seeing her. I remain passive, quiet, and take the breakfast. It's like a battle within me. One side wants to continue motionless in the safety of this hermetic cell; the opponent wants to take an expedition, do something. But there is really noting positive to entice me to get out of bed. It's easier to just stay in bed than summon the will to take an action. Let inertia win.

Even though I'm not that hungry, I take her tray, and sip the orange juice. It's fresh squeezed, just like my Nana would make for me.

*

*

*

I will speak in the anguish of my spirit

I will complain in the bitterness of my soul
If I say my couch will ease my complaint,
then Thou dost frighten me with dreams and
terrify me with visions.

I eat a few bites of the scrambled eggs and lox, as Asiya continues to read.
The food actually tastes good. Like Nana's Sunday brunch. During the week
Asiya doesn't cook for me. I guess there's no reason she should. But at least
she has been stocking my little fridge with fresh fruits and vegetables, yogurts
and V-8 juice. She's forced me to become a vegetarian, almost existing on a
liquid diet. She hasn't yet asked me to pay her back. I guess I will at some
point. Although her choice of foods has been horrendous. I hope she kept the
receipts. Otherwise, she gets nothing.

I waste away, I will not live forever
Leave me alone, for my days are but a breath

That's what I'd like to say to her. Leave me alone. Is this like Mery's
work on Sixth Street? Give them a little food, but the price is having to listen
to preaching about God.

"Don't you have anything lighter? Job isn't exactly joyful fare while I'm
trying to eat," I finally exclaim.

"But it is joyful, my young sufferer. All's well that ends well. As St
Julien of Norwich said, 'All will be well. All will be very;, very well.' We
all have our Job periods, young man. Don't worry, you'll learn from it, and
become all the wiser. This too shall pass. Think of our ancestors, who lived
in the Dark Age and suffered the Black Plague. Suffering, yes; death, yes. But
humanity survived. As our pastor--he's such a learned man--last Sunday quoted
that famous Russian writer Dust something."

"Dostoevsky," I say patronizingly, but she doesn't seem to notice and
continues chirpily.

"Yes, right. That one. 'My hosannas have been forged in the crucible of
doubt.'" She smiles at me. "See, don't worry. There is nothing wrong with
doubt. Just like Job, it all works out. That's God's mysterious way."

I am suffocating from her platitudes. I need to find enough energy to break free from her gravitational pull, or I will crash and burn lying in this bed.

It seems she also wants to get me out of the bed. "Really, young man, enough day's of rest. You've get to wake up and start getting outside and active again. The Lord rested on the seventh day,. Today is our Sabbath; your Sabbath was yesterday." Then, smiling, "And you know the Muslim Sabbath is the day before that. But you've taken advantage of all of them. Really, young man, enough day's of rest. The Lord rested on the seventh day, and then. . ."

She babbles on, but I tune her out. I do wonder what she thinks the Lord did on the eighth day, and what she thinks He's doing now...

*

*

*

"Look, the sun's shining." She pulls back the curtain. "No more hiding. The doctor says you're fine. You need to get out and about. Arise and face this beautiful world, our Lord created. Listen to the birds singing."

What is she, Florence Nightingale? Chipper. Chirp, chirp, chirp. How can I get her to fly away? I put my hands over my eyes to shield them from the light. It's much too bright. I need to learn what Mery was able to do, create a hazy veil to hide the world.

"Why don't you finish the rest of your breakfast, and let me do some cleaning for a half hour. Then we can take a little walk, just outside into my garden. Ten minutes only. I'll show you what I've been planting. Will you do that for me?"

How do I get rid of her? "Okay, ten minutes. But only if you close the curtains now." With a little put-upon harrumph, but also a twinkle, Assiua gets up closes the curtains. As she starts to leaves the room, she turns and says, "Make sure you eat everything on your plate." She really is a Jewish mother, or grandmother, in her soul.

I push my partially eaten plate of food aside, and feel a sense of relief, even freedom, that she's gone. I have a half-hour, and, for a change, I have some energy. Maybe from the food. Or from being tired of sleeping. I need to make a plan. I've had enough to eat, so I'll have to pack the rest of this up and throw it into the toilet. Otherwise Asiya will complain that I haven't eaten enough, and maybe even make me take a longer walk.

But instead of getting up, I start thinking about the feeling of sensuality and the harem from my dream comes back to me. I wonder if I have time to take out a few pictures of Mery, and Sandy, and maybe even Alice, and have an orgasm. It's been so long I wonder if still remember how to do it. I think of Asiya coming back in with my pictures spread out on my bed, and decide to wait till this evening, when I know she won't be interrupting me.

As I've been thinking about pictures and trying to make a plan, I realize I've also been staring at the closed curtain. A feeling wells up in me, inchoate, inarticulate, but clear. I pick up my pen and piece of paper, and begin to write:

The translucent curtain's drawn shut;
Early morning light
casts tree limb shadows
Outside, a hummingbird, wings buzzing
the unseen light hurls its image
onto the curtain
It pauses, dancing and weaving
among branches
Pull back the curtains
It's gone.
Close the curtain...
Only shadows return.

It's all shade and shadow, right Plato? Do we ever see form?

*

*

*

The water is rising, and covers an inch of the floor. I look up and see dripping from the ceiling. Has someone flushed a toilet? Is a shower running and leaking? My papers are getting wet, but I'm unable to get out of bed. The water is cold, and I'm shivering, naked as it drips onto me. Fragments of the

ceiling paint begin to peel off falling on my bed and the floor. I'm cold. I
look out the window and see a warm, roaring fire in the neighbor's hearth. I
see a painting of a young girl skipping by the ocean. Water leaks onto the
painting, and it begins to bleed and cry. I feel like I'm going to cry.
Instead, I make an effort to get up and find my camera. I want to take a picture
of it before it vanishes. Maybe I can write a poem about it, too. These
thoughts comfort me, but I'm still shivering.

The neighbor, whom I don't recognize, comes out of her house. She's a
rail-thin older woman, with short brown dyed hair severely pulled back. She
tells me I must see a doctor to treat my shivering, and when I tell her I don't
know any, she says she'll drive with me in my car to her physician . When we
arrive, she tells me not to park there or there or there. I can't find a place.
I let her out, and finally I see a space near the front of the building.

I have to parallel park. I put on my blinkers, but the car behind me stays
on my fender. I motion for him to move back but he doesn't, and now there are
cars behind him. I'm not going to budge. People begin honking. On the outside,
I appear to be waiting patiently, but I'm seething inside. I motion for the car
behind to go around me. Maybe he wants the space, too. Not a chance he's going
to get it. People are shaking their fists at me. But I want this parking place
and I need to see the doctor. I pull out a pen and paper, and begin to write a
story, and in the story, I describe my situation, and create the outline of a
legal brief, stating the objections of the other drivers, and then refuting
each of them to show why my case is right and fair and just.

Finally, the jerk behind me moves on, but not before giving me a raised
clenched fist, then a middle finger. I park and get out of my car. It turns out
the parking space is illegal, because it's reserved for contaminated waste
removal and now the other drivers are even madder. In fact, as soon as I get out
of my car, someone comes and tows it away. There's nothing I can do about it
because I'm late for my doctor appointment.

In the meantime my neighbor has disappeared and I don't know where the doctor's office is, or even his name. I wander around lost, and meet two people, an older couple, who tell me they know where the doctor is. There are several physicians in the suite: an ophthalmologist, a dermatologist; a cancer specialist. The office is overflowing with people, who are pouring out into the hallway. My appointment was for 1:30. I don't have a watch, but I know it must be later than that. The sign on the wall says No One Admitted After 3:30. I'm too late and don't know whether I can go in.

I push my way through the people, and reach the receptionist. I'm ready to plead and yell and tell her she must let me in today. She looks up, gets my name, reads down the list, and merely says "You're late. It's 2:30. You're going to have to wait a long time." Partly I'm relieved because I will get in today. But then that's not enough. I don't want to have to wait a long time now that I know I can get in. I tell her forcefully I can't wait here, that my car is being towed from a radioactive waste zone. I promise her that I won't be bad anymore, and then I burst out crying. Even as I'm weeping, I'm aware that I could have held back the tears, but I thought they would make her more sympathetic. I wanted her to see how sad and fragile I am. I also realize I am not telling her the truth, because my car has already been towed, so making up this whole story merely for my convenience because I wanted to get in quickly and not have to wait with all the other people. But I also realize I was believing my own story, and feeling sorry for myself and that was why I was crying, too. I believed my own deception, even as I knew it was a deception.

Someone grabs me by the shoulders and starts shaking me, and I try to wrestle them away, shouting don't, don't, leave me alone. I must see the doctor now.

"The sun is still shining and the flowers are waiting. You love that bed, don't you? Enough time in the whale, Jonah. Let's go for a walk outside."

Asiya is gently shaking my shoulders to awaken me from my dream. Again, I wonder, as bad as the dream was, is this really better?

*

*

*

I'd forgotten this dream. I'm glad he wrote it down. Now when I read it, it seems to me that Johannes is starting to deal in his dream with the whole traumatic experience at the ocean in Carmel. He allows himself to cry for the first time since that event, albeit in a dream, and for a different reason. But I'm not so much struck by the struggle and loss (the towed car) —I know that all too well—as much as I am by how much help and support he received, and all the people who come to his aid.

He needs healing, and a neighbor appears to get him to a doctor. An older couple appears to lead him to a doctor's office. The receptionist says he can still get in, even though he is an hour late. There is actually a doctor who will see him and try to help him. Yet, he feels that no one is really giving him what he wants and he has to fight for, and be deceptive to get his needs met. It is true that no one person does everything for him, but each gives something. Maybe, in Dr. Lisbet's terms, it's learning from each of the imperfect parts of our self, that are doing the best they can to create healing, and working for the best interest of the whole self. And it's also about those parts of the self that are still narcissistic and primadonna-like: parking where he wants, anger at the people who try to stop him from parking (in a radioactive zone), not wanting to have to wait.

I find it fascinating that amidst all the flurry and stress and confusion, he still finds time to pause and make his legal case, still clinging to the law as though it holds the answer. It's also interesting that he recognizes that even while he is crying, he is creating a story to make himself cry, and is using the tears in a self-serving way. Johannes, you are such a manipulative ass. But maybe the most important message of the dream is that he

"I'm surprised you don't have any impatiens." I might as well let Asiya know I'm not completely ignorant. I think of the beautiful multicolored flowers in Carmel, and how Mery said she liked them so much because they were hardy and could grow both in and out of sunlight. I wonder if she was being philosophical at the time, and I missed it.

"They're nothing but weeds. So common. Everyone has them. They're not unique, and frankly, I find them ugly." I feel hurt and angry by what she's saying, and want to strike back. I want to tell her that I've heard that the beautiful California pepper that she prizes, referred to a common tree that grows like a weed." Maybe one person's weed is another's beauty; and one person's flower is another's weed. Though I will get some satisfaction if I ever see Mery again to let her know that a noted horticulturist thinks her beautiful baby impatiens are nothing but weeds.

Maybe that's what Mery was. I thought she was a beautiful flower, but she was nothing more than a weed growing inside me. A weed which, fortunately, was plucked out and tossed.

* * *

"Brugmansia."

"What?"

"Brugmansia. In the nightshade family." Asiya walks over to the hanging yellow flower and smells it. "The angel's trumpet's actual name. They can be traced back to the Inuit American Indians from the Andean slopes of South America. They were brought here. We all immigrate here in our own way." She touches the long inverted bell-like yellow flower. "Look at this shade of yellow. It's my favorite, but you can get them in white, red, pink. They grow so rapidly, and flourish in sun and shade." She continues to breathe in deeply. "You can just barely notice the scent now, but wait until tonight. It has a glorious nocturnal perfume, impossible to resist."

I go over but smell nothing. I stick out my tongue. I'm not sure why. Out of annoyance? To lick it? Asiya grabs me and pulls me back. "No, no, careful. All parts of it are highly toxic. It's poisonous. That's why some have even called it the devil flower."

Poisonous and beautiful. Angel's trumpet and the devil flower. Sounds like Mery.

* * *

Asiya goes over to a tree with little oval orange things on it, and pulls one off. "Here, try this." She eats one, and offers another to me.

I look askance. "What is it?"

"A kumkwat. They're delicious. Some people eat the whole thing, skin and all." She pops another one into her mouth.

"What's it taste like?" I turn it over in my hand. It looks like a baby orange that grew funny.

"It's sour at first, a bit like a lemon. Your mouth may even pucker up, but don't spit it out. It's like life. If you can endure, even enjoy the sour, you'll then notice a subtle burst of sweet."

She seems in rapture. "We must enjoy God's gifts, and appreciate all we are given, including God's greatest gift--our life. It's sometimes hard, but we suffering servants must stick together. God has majestic, sacred plans for you, I just know it."

All this from a kumkwat? She's not as cute as the cheerleaders at football games, but she certainly is trying as hard, as if she is God's special rooting squad. She reminds me of a simpler time when I truly believed it when mom would say she had confidence in me, that I could do anything. I nod, half-heartedly, still saying nothing. I've had enough of my outing, and want to get away from her blissful Garden of Eden. I feel tired, and want to be left alone again. Her constant efforts to pep me--and herself--up with these platitudes

are becoming annoying. I no longer want or need her to take care of me, if I ever did.

"Doesn't the sun feel good on your face? You were getting a little pale, if I may say so. Young man, it's time for you need to come out of hiding. God's world awaits you. Trust and have faith. Let the Lord take care of you, as you do His bidding."

* * *

I have no reaction to what she is saying. Like the air going out of a balloon, something has again broken in me. I hear her words, but they drift over and through me, causing no feelings. No annoyance, no hope. There is nothing: no love, no hate, no fear. Wordlessly, I leave her and hobble back into my room, close and lock the door, pull down the shade. I lie down on my bed and close my eyes. Waters again beginning to swirl, Memnon's statue. Banks of the Nile. Drifting. And that's what I want. I don't want to be drawn forth. I don't want to awaken. All I want is silence, to be Jonah in the whale, swallowed by a darkness from which there is no escape, nor any desire to escape from the fractured pieces of my broken Humpty-Dumpty life.

I lie awake yet not awake and feel something in
my stomach lodged deep inside me,
like the slow drop by drop leaking of acidic juices
oozing slowly, penetrating every part of my being.

The throbbing pain is attacking me, an ache
that can't be located or defined;
a tender grief which squeezes and saps my strength
until I'm too-weakened to cry out, too tired to care.

So I lie motionless, in darkness, feeling the
Soft, water-dripping hurt whirl through me;
helpless to do anything but feel its agonizing suffocating grip,
drowning me from within.

I feel the pain in my leg. It is quite intense. Dr. Zees gave me some pain killers. I still have them. After seeing mom's addiction, I try to avoid any kind of drug. I also feel a pain in my mind and my heart. Is there

medication for that? Mom once told me that, although she's had a lot of physical pain, the mental pain is worse by far.

It's sad that you can't really understand and empathize with someone until you've experienced that suffering yourself. Sorry, mom.

* * *

Did you eat the kumkwat? I don't remember. Maybe that's the reason for your acidic juices. I've experienced what you write about. But there comes a point when empathy gives way to numbness. I'm tired of realizing how long this has been going on.

I put salt in the basin, and turn the hot faucet two and a half turns, the cold faucet one and three quarters to create the proper temperature. I let the basin fill, with my foot in it.

My foot almost immediately begins to feel better, but nothing heals the wretched, internal pain. I reach over and turn the cold water off, letting just the hot scalding water run, scorching my foot. It is painful, but I prefer the physical pain. At least that makes sense and is understandable.

When the water is too hot for me to stand it, I turn it off, and begin to soak. One half hour to go. I stare at the four pale-lime, nausea-green walls. Why didn't I decorate them? Too lazy? Too busy? Uninterested? Because I'm just passing through? There is no heart here. Only ugly silence staring coldly back. I imagine the crazy-making, tortured swirling colors of Mery's Starry Night print superimposed on the green void of my walls. At least she, and he, had passion in their pain.

I have never been this alone.

A half hour passes. Time to stop soaking my foot. Domus sua cuique est tutissimum refugium. The home is my castle. I am the knight of emptiness.

Now, nothing to do...

Now nothing

Now...

No...

*

*

*

Hours pass. Sleep? Dreams? It is now completely dark outside. And in. I continue to lie in bed, but I am no longer at all tired.

But why get out of bed? There is no reason. Here I lie. No one knows or cares what is happening to me. Sandy and Janice have found someone else to dance and screw with; Richard and Jeffrey and Gregory, others to play tennis and golf with. My family and Mery have moved on. I could die, and no one would know. Or care. To what person would my death make a difference?

Alone. I've never been alone before, Never.

Or maybe I've always been alone and I never would let myself face it. Always trying to hide in the womb--to keep myself from facing myself. Family, grades, college, women. Always within a system, always a direction, flowing with the current within the banks of the river. Never stopping to question. And why question, I was succeeding...by the systems' standards. Why question what's working?

Until Mery. Too many questions. Too many thoughts. Too many empty spaces.

I can't seem to grasp the days, to find a foothold, a base, something solid to grasp onto. I'm hanging between and outside time, and am helpless to do anything about it. The present is too much for me. Everything is slipping past.

*

*

*

The past is my only real companion.

It's too simplistic to say Johannes and I are completely different. But also too simplistic to say we're the same. Johannes is being left behind. There

is an exodus from Johannes, but the new self has not yet emerged. He doesn't yet have his new names. Shemot.

I am what is ahead. What connects us? What is the bridge? Maybe what I'm trying to do is remove the shadow by pruning away all the excess unnecessary, foliage. I smile. It's like looking for the afikomen--trying to find the unleavened bread of Johannes, unpuffed up. You remove the shadow by removing what is unneeded--so that new growth can occur. But when you remove all Johannes' plumage, what is left? I know you by name, Johannes, but you have not found favor.

Like Job, there is suffering. Like Jonah, he is beginning to recognize--from the depths of the darkness of his hibernation-- that he has been running away. From what? What is his/my true calling. Maybe that's why we spend time in the belly of the whale, taking time to reflect on and seek what that calling might be.

I read about the sadness of Job-like, Jonah-like Johannes resting in the empty darkness of the cell-like confines of his room. And I read about him from the cell-like confines of mine. Has anything changed? He's being born into the pain, I'm searching, nine months later, to see if there isn't an exit from the suffering--either through life, or through death. But this agony cannot go on. My shades are also drawn.

As I read his journal, I feel proud and honoring of his heart, which is slowly beginning to open and feel at least some empathy with others. But I also feel drained, sad, exhausted. I need a respite from my own solitude, and from him. The past is a shadow that darkens my present. Can you flee a shadow?

I'm trying to bring light to that shadow. Am I succeeding? Or am I just scratching a wound, making it bleed more?

In some ways, Johannes is suspended in the present, seeking his new future, as I too live in a suspension of time. I can neither fully live nor die

till I finish going through the past. It is as if I've made the conscious decision not to decide.

That is my decision for now--to review and go through my book of life to create a judgment about whether my life is worthy living. Either I gain enough understanding, wisdom, momentum to leap the abyss, or failing that, to plunge into it. Right now I'm hanging between time--writing and reviewing life. This may be a hiding from living, but that 's not my intent or conscious goal. After finishing the writing, I'll decide.

This truly seems like one of the real either/or choices. In the book of Deuteronomy God says, "Choose life." You either do, or you don't.

Now, no more delays. I plunge myself back into my shadows, like looking in a mirror, or a pool of water slightly rippling, trying to grasp my image, myself. I reflect on my past self who reflects on and writes in his journal, trying to create a mirror of the reality he sees. As soon as he finishes one more repressive activity.

* * *
Sleep rescues me again. I fell asleep sad and confused, and I am awakening with a lighthouse tenting the covers. My lingham is shining a bold search light under the blanket, warning all ships of the foggy weather and the rocky shoreline. Do I want to relieve myself immediately, or do I trust I can write in my dream journal first? I give myself a few strokes. Oh, man, it's been too long. I can bring this puppy back anytime I want to. Let's use it as a reward for dream writing.

The first dream was a scrappy movie mystery, a puzzle the audience was supposed to solve, but the clues seemed to be in the colors of the movie, not in what the people actually said. There were multi-hued hints throughout, right before my eyes, but I didn't begin to decode it until the end. I was traveling in a covered train, watching the colors reflected from the outside world onto the chair in front of me. Before getting on the train, I'd been trying to help

a woman n uncover artifacts buried in the sand. She was tired, and couldn't dig any more. As I dug into the sand, one of the shards broke. I kept digging, and found others. I tried to carefully dislodge them. Water filled the square hole, and it began to look like a liquid grave. Meaning? See what's before your eyes? Nice that I was helping others, but I was clumsy and not much help. What do the artifacts repretent? Do I have something in my past that needs to be dug up? Was I helping Mery by the ocean? Hah. I should bury her in the water, and leave well enough alone.

I get up and hobble over to my window. I open the shade. It's dark outside. I open the window. Asiya was right. There is an unbelievably delicious perfumed smell coming from the angels' trumpets. My lingham begins to rise again. I remember my second dream--it was of an elongated dick, filling the whole dream. Then a small blonde woman appeared, riding it like a horse, her legs straddling both sides.. I wonder what that could mean! That I'm horny and feeling cocky? Ah, I'm so cute, I think, as I stroke myself. What a wonderful mind that would create dreams like this for me. It's like there's a camera in my mind taking a picture of a cute long legged blonde. The message is clear: there are lots of other fish in the sea besides Mery. Wisdom is learning when to move on.

*

*

*

I give myself another stroke. What an amazing instrument. It just fills up with blood and gets happy. I wonder what goes on biologically to have an orgasm. All I have to do is stroke. Sometimes I have to add pictures or a good story to get it going. Sometimes it just acts on its own. You can always tell when a guy has an orgasm. But how do you really know if a woman does, or whether she's just faking it? Why do I even care? It's just another uncertainty that shows you can't really trust them. As long as I have my pleasure, that's enough.

I gather together several pictures of Mery, and lay them out on my bed. This is so much better, so much safer, than being with her in person. I arrange the photos out in the sequence I want. I don't have to pay any attention to pleasuring her, or to her crazy-making stories and fantasies. She's mine. Oh, shy girl, here you are bare breasted, your long full boobs starting to drop toward your navel as your bra comes off. You don't look that shy, smiling at the camera. Your hand is not in the picture, but I know that what it's doing outside the camera frame-- stroking me. I shift to the next picture, where her mouth is actually sucking me. This time her mouth obviously can't smile, but her eyes are looking down, as if unwilling to face the camera. This is like a porno flick. Well, poor little artist girl, I guess you have to do what you have to do. But look what nude modeling can lead to. Don't let these men take advantage of you and treat you like an object.

I realize that of these two pictures, I enjoy the first one more. It's the mystery, the off camera surreptitiousness that is arousing. Also, I like that she's looking directly and consciously at the camera. She knows what she's doing. Don't play innocent with me. What are you thinking as you let me snap these pictures? What would your parents think? Do you worry that I'll show these to them? I won't, but how much trust she's putting in my hands. That's amazing. I wouldn't even trust me that much.

As I continue to stroke, I realize how good I'm feeling. An orgasm is the perfect medicine. If I'm too agitated, it calms me down and lets me refocus with clarity. If I'm too tired, it energizes me, and keeps me from feeling sad. My only problem these last two weeks is I haven't been taking my medication.

*

*

*

In one of my fantasies, I used to think what it I had a totally submissive woman at my beck and call. I imagined there would be no sexual problems or frustrations, only pleasure and contentment. I would enjoy using her and she would enjoy being used. Short term that's possible, I suppose. But not for any

long-term relationship. I'm not sure such an animal really exists. A totally
submissive woman is a contradiction in terms. Sandy is always ready, but she
has her needs. Mery would submit, but only within the fantasy she liked.

But I've found something better and truer: the totally submissive picture.
These babies will do anything I want, when I want, how I want. I can put them
in any order, tell any story, and they will never speak back unless I want them
to. They'll always say the right thing, and follow their script exactly.

Thank you, Louis Jacques Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot. Such long
names. But I don't know what I'd without you. How could I have lived happily
before 1839? Paintings just don't do it for me. Then I think of Grandpa Dave's
book of sensual Renaissance paintings. Those were good when I was younger, but
I like seeing someone I've been with in these poses. And to paint them would
take much too long! I'm so lucky to live in these times. The best of all
possible times, right, Pangloss!

I think back to the first pictures of Mery. Oh no, please don't take a
picture of me. I love overcoming the resistance. Would you have ever thought
from those first shy "No's" she'd be sucking chocolate covered bananas while
jumping nude on a bed in the Fairmont? It's a testament to my slow, steady
style. I push, then when the no becomes too strong, and they're really about to
resist, I pull back. Then they fear losing me, see how flexible and nice I am,
and they slowly allow a bit more. I tell them they are always in control, and
that I am such a respectful, gentle person. As I move back, they come forward..
I've learned just how far to push. Then when they push back, I retreat. Their
own momentum makes them fall into my arms and I catch them.

*

*

*

I spoke too soon. I thought Johannes was ready to move on, leave for San Francisco, and try to be of service to someone besides himself. I wonder if that's my repression. I'd forgotten about his self-service picture ruminations. He still hasn't learned that he's searching in the wrong place. The body will

never give him a satisfactory answer. And there is something disgusting about these explicit photographs: full frontal exposure, even pornographic depictions. Not that I would want to look at even remotely sensual images, but what about tenderness, gentleness, kindness, thoughtfulness rather than just plain, naked lust? Bodies kissing and groping with shameless abandon. What about respect for personal privacy? I remember when I was in kindergarten, having to go to the bathroom in an open stall, with the teacher right there. How embarrassing. Johannes seems to have lost that bodily self-consciousness--to his detriment. Rather, he became a connoisseur of humanity's base appetites, seeking to corrupt the innocent, and to sniff out, intensify, and exaggerate the moral corruption of those already so inclined. It's a doomed path. But he'll have to learn that for himself.

I want to slow things down. Like when I initially took the pictures. There are so many more of her clothed from the start, compared to more explicit snapshots at the end. Unlike with Alice, or Sandy. They just said pictures, wahoo, why waste time with clothes. At the time I thought "Great." But now I realize it's not as much fun, because there's no sense of my accomplishing anything or influencing them. As nice as these explicit pictures are of Mery, I want to remember what she was like in Golden Gate Park when I didn't know if she would allow me to take her picture. And she had no idea how far she would let me go. I place some of the early pictures of her on the bed. Shy, coy, the scarf around her.

This is so much better than a porno flick. It's like still frames. I can pause and slow things down. A movie is much too fast, what is it, 16 frames per second? You have to go along with the director's interests. Sometimes when I've watched a porno movie, it gets frustrating. I can't time my arousal to their sequences. Just when I get excited, they'll pan to the man's face; or some feature of the woman that's not attractive to me. With my pictures, I can dwell on each frame as long as I want, telling the story that creates maximum arousal,

and then move on when I'm ready. I can study each part of her face, savoring the wide-eyed surprised look, her deep-set brown eyes, arched brows, the little furrow above her nose. I can admire at leisure every detail that interests me. In some ways, I can create a motion picture with one frame, just by how I move my eyes over the picture, and the story I tell. That way I have complete control over what's going on. I'm the director of the scene, not someone else. And who knows best what I like other than me? Then I can skip several frames and look at her bending over on the bed, her backside to me, peering between her legs, with a smile on her face. What a great juxtaposition. Her passion and desire to please overcoming her modesty. Victory for me.

I continue my luxurious self-service. It's been way too long. No wonder I was feeling tired and disoriented. My energy's returning, and it's glorious.

Mery doesn't really have great legs, her thighs are kind of chunky. I'd never really noticed that, or cared. It must be because I was blinded by her breasts--they metaphorically hid her thighs. I smile at the image, and my great sense of humor.

I notice that I spend more time looking at the earlier, clothed pictures, than the more lewd naked, later ones. I wonder why that is. If my goal is to get to the latter pictures, why not skip the early ones? I think that's the problem with girls like Alice, or Sandy. They want to skip the adventure and unknown quest, and just get right to the action. It makes logical sense, but I don't seem to work that way. It's like a sport. If you know the outcome, then it's not any fun. Like Zeke said, if I knew where every putt would fall, that each shot would be perfect, then I'd stop playing. It's the challenge. Each sort is good clean fun.

But that doesn't completely make sense because I want the orgasm. That is my goal. I guess the challenge of the quest, the effort of seduction enhances and increases my enjoyment. If there is no challenge, and they say sure, let's

do it---or the ball goes directly into the hole with no sand traps-- that's not really sport. It's like fishing in a gold fish bowl.

Worse, it's as if the fish expect something in return. When they're not sure, and I'm making inroads, that's exciting. When they say, sure, let's do it, they expect something from me. I have to think about pleasuring them--what they want,--not pleasuring them as part of my seduction. Then I feel some pressure to perform, to make sure my lingam is in go mode. Nothing is harder, and makes it softer, than being told to dance on cue. Like someone saying to you, for the next thirty seconds, be funny. I don't work like that. When I'm in control, making the forays, and they're unsure and uncertain, then my lingam just naturally comes along, rarin' to go along for the ride. That's why looking at pictures is so wonderful. I can create the story of the challenge (hiding the later pictures) and proceed at the optimum pace, with never any demands on me. That must have been why God made humans smart enough to invent the camera. Thank you, God. I continue to stroke. You are making one human very happy.

*

*

*

Mery made sex dirty. I like seeing the woman slowly surrendering of their own free will--overcome by my masterful seduction. My job is to lead, guide, cajole, flatter them down the path, but never force them. I want them to want what I want. I like feeling their energy and arousal, it's like an audience applauding my performance. But it's not any fun to tie someone up, and dominate them. Where's the sport in that?

I prefer a wild horse trying to get away but slowly being tamed. I like seeing their confusion and awkwardness turn to passion. I look at Mery voluntarily stroking me as I take her picture. Her eyes a bit veiled. Oh, aren't I a good girl. Is this ok? Would daddy approve? I look at her full breasts hanging, the red-pink berry nipple. Too much. That's the goal. I'm not ready for it yet.

I pick up one of the earlier pictures, with her deep cleavage. The hidden nipple. In another picture, she's taking off her blouse and is wearing a white bra. I can see where the nipple is by the way it pushes through the fabric, arising from the lightly shaded area of the areole. The nipple actually can be seen as a white space rising from that lightly shaded area. It's in prominence by its light, yet casts its own even darker shadow. Would Mery call this negative space?

Better. This picture creates even more yearning. What is so alluring about that pinkish color? Once you get there, you're there. There's nothing left. But now, there is light and shadow and mystery, the barely seen, the not yet reachable. This desire is what creates the arousal. Oh my gosh, will she let me see them? She's so innocent and pure. "Oh, Mr. White Knight, what designs do you have on this fair maiden?" I wish I had taken some pictures of her in her bathing suit. That's the one thing that I regret not doing. Maybe it's worth it to reconnect with her, to fill in that piece of my montage.

You just don't get it, Johannes, do you. You're always one picture or one woman away from happiness--so you believe. Do you really think that with one new picture, your set will be complete, and your life better? If you would really think it through--and not with your dick--the answer is so obvious. You're on a merry-go-round. One new picture will lead to the desire for one more. And when you are satiated, you will throw that fish back into the sea, and seek another one. At least the old, unreflective you would. But you're so close to realizing that the chase is really stupid. You're almost ready to ask the question, why do we keep doing something over and over again that we think will make us happy, only to learn each time that it doesn't make us lasting happy, that it doesn't fill the emptiness? Like the rat in the lab, how many trials of learning does it take? Or that Bob Dylan song,

How many times must a man look up
Before he can see the sky?

Yes, 'n' how many ears must one man have
Before he can hear people cry?

You of one ear need to hear and feel that you're chasing after illusory happiness with the body, continuing to do something that you know only brings you fleeting pleasure, and won't make you happy. You think if you do it over and over, faster and faster, it will be like a swirling fan, giving the illusion of solidity, hiding the fact that there are enormous spaces between each blade, huge empty gaps in your life.

I wonder if Dylan knew the depth of meaning in his chorus "The answer is blowin' in the wind." Wind, in Hebrew, is ruach, which also means breath, and spirit. That is the answer I seek. I only hope he didn't mean wind as in the sense of emptiness and randomness, something ephemeral and ungraspable. Like Kohelet writes in Ecclesiastes.

I applied my mind to know wisdom and to know madness and folly. I perceived that this also is but a chasing after wind. For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow...¹What is crooked cannot be made straight,...all is vanity and a chasing after wind.

Still, like you, Johannes, in my own way, I seek the ungraspable. What choice do we have?

*

*

*

I stare at the cleavage between Mery's breasts as I continue to stroke myself. This is pure bliss. I want her breasts, all breasts. I tell her to dance and shake her breasts and I imagine them swaying in her blouse. I feel myself suckling at them, my desire increasing, while I strain and moan. I have this strange feeling that I'm connecting to the source of desire, all desire. I know I can do anything. I feel my motivation returning, energy pouring out of every pore of my body. It's amazing how the world changes when I'm feeling the positive energy of eroticism flowing through me. It spices up the grim, removes the negative philosophical speculation about life's meaning, or my purpose. The now and pleasure is all there is.

Her cleavage is amazing, but isn't enough. I want more. I look at another picture, with her breasts uncovered. But I realize that's not what I want either. I look back at the cleavage. Is that what I want--the covered, the unseen, the straining and not yet arriving, that which I can't quite reach? I think of store fronts being remodeled and covered by brown paper---like what they do to hide dirty magazines sent through the mail. I know intellectually that all there is in the building is construction work and dust and lumber. But if there is a peep hole, I'll look, to see. It's exploring the forbidden. If the nipple is covered, it must be the goal. I always want to find a peep hole. If the store had no covering during the remodeling, it wouldn't be interesting at all.

Once I've seen her nipple in the picture, it's not that interesting. I move on. I look at her naked on the bed, her legs slightly spread, her reddish pubic hairs showing, and maybe more pink hidden beneath. I turn away. Not exactly in disgust, but her crotch is not arousing. It's a siren luring me, wanting to swallow me. Where do the pictures cross the line between art and pornography? Is it her attitude? My attitude? I could argue either side of the case. None of them have any redeeming social value. They are only for his arousal and pleasure, your honor. I object. They all have redeeming social value. Arousal is not a factor. They speak to the psychology of seduction, and that in and of itself is worth learning about.

I turn away and look back at a picture of her with a short skirt, seated, legs crossed. Her eyes in one are innocent, pure. I love that. Her eyes in the next have a twinkle, as her skirt is raised a bit more. I love that, too. Innocence being corrupted, and the pure girl going along with being just a bit naughty. Just at the beginning of the journey, when she's still clothed, when there's still tension and uncertainty about whether this is going to work. That's so arousing. I stroke myself faster as I climb her legs, toward the mystery under her dress, while looking at her eyes. It's a stealth attack. I

continue to talk to her about the weather, her art classes. When I'm under her dress, I stop and switch pictures, stroking the top of her cleavage, while still talking to her, asking her about her favorite music.

Why did she let me do this: make love to her, take pictures of her? Was it her need for sex, her wanting to be wined and dined? Needing to be needed? Wanting to please? Anger at her father? Wanting to serve? Wanting to be thought of as pretty? My charm? I don't care. All motivations that lure them into my arms are great.

*

*

*

My musings have decreased my arousal, but that's fine with me. I want this to last. It's been too long since I've felt this level of pleasure in my life. I wonder what Freud would think of my love of covered breasts. Is this psychic locus of my desire from the inevitable Oedipal lust of the son for his mom? Wanting to dissolve all boundaries and become one with her? Ugh, hardly.

But when I was a little baby, I must have wanted her breasts, longed to be held by her, to be nurtured by her. Maybe this is all about trying to get what I was denied then, because she didn't breast feed me, didn't hold me. On the other hand, maybe if I had been breastfed, held cuddled, suckled against that mammoth bosom, nurtured a lot, I'd still want breasts, because I once had them and then she took them away, so I'm re-seeking that nurturance. It's confusing, and certainly my psych professors would say it's not good science. There's no theory you can test. Both hypotheses lead to the same desire: wanting the breast.

But then how do you explain why, as I get closer and closer to the breast, or even am actually suckling it, it's never enough? Is it because you can't ever dissolve all boundaries? Is it that once I've captured the mystery, it's like lifting the curtain of Oz--not that spectacular? Or even if the orgasm is spectacular, the mystery is gone, and so is the desire. What great

questions. I can see a paper: Sex: the Hinge of the Cartesian Mind-Body Dilemma.

* * *

I wonder why sometimes just looking at pictures is enough for me to push through an orgasm. Other times, I need more than the visual. I need to create a story, a dialogue, a fantasy to create sufficient arousal.

I think of the first time I saw a real naked breast, at least in a picture. Playboy at 13. I'm not sure I actually got aroused. It was more curiosity. So, these are what they look like. I could stare to my heart's content. Arousal, and orgasm, had to wait until my sit-ups, weight lifting stage. How was I to know where all this was leading?

My lingam is giving off little light, and I want to restore it. I look over at the pictures of Sandy and Alice. I wonder if Mery would have liked meeting them? If I were still with Mery, would she be upset with me for self-serving with her pictures? Would I still be considered faithful and not cheating if I were doing it with pictures of other people? The very thought is arousing. Mery, meet Sandy. Oh, Sandy, you're very attractive. I can see why he likes you. Oh, Mery, you are so much fuller than I am. And you have such an innocent face. Oh my gosh, Sandy says, did you let him do that to you? I imagine Sandy looking at the picture of Mery, and seeing a little innocent trusting, surrendering lamb, as a long penis starts to enter her oval lips. Her mouth is waiting, as if she is at the doctor's, opening her mouth to swallow a pill. " Mery, I'm surprised you did that, you naughty little girl you. Would you like to come to one of our parties sometime? You'd fit right in." I look at Mery's hands with open palms and stretching upward in a supplicant position, mouth open, like a dog panting to receive affection, needy, submissive

My lingam is about to burst. My breathing is faster and shallower, my moaning and groaning louder and deeper, in an ecstatic monologue of lovemaking.

* * *

I know I'm about to have an orgasm. I've reached that inevitable point of joy, where nothing can stop me. I can, if I want, , decrease my touch to almost nothing, and, really, stop all self service, and this glorious pleasure will still crescendo and explode. For some reason, this time, rather than speed up, I want everything to slow and this pleasure to last forever. Time accedes to my wish.

I look down at the photograph of Mery jumping on the bed at the Fairmont. I hear her yell a Joycean "YES!" in ecstasy as she smiles at me with her mouth and eyes. Another where she is sucking the chocolate covered banana while chocolate splashes over her lips, chin, and breasts breasts. But are these the very best pictures to rest my eyes on? I look back at the earlier ones in Golden Gate Park. First, completely clothed, her eyes like a deer caught in headlights, so innocent, helpless because she doesn't know how to be assertive enough to stop the "click, click". I find that innocent passivity sexually arousing. Well, I didn't love it when we were at the swimming pool, but in my current mood, I forgive her her non-trespasses there. It's all good and fine and funny.

I continue a light stroke. Oh, yes. Amazing. Then I shift to a picture of her tied up in Carmel. The self-sacrificing little lamb. Still yes. But I want more. I look at Alice. And Sandy. All of them swirl in my mind as the pleasure rises. I start laughing. What a perfect life captured by these pictures. I choose only the ones that I want to keep, that tell the story I want them to tell. I look at them all smiling at me. They all think I'm amazing. They've all trusted me enough to overcome their shyness, if they had any, and are looking into the camera, saying I'm letting you do this and I'm ok with it. That's it, be playful; you're the star of the world, the center of the universe, these pictures are about bringing out your beauty. Their self-consciousness dissolves, they smile at the camera-at me. I can take a dowdy girl, with no smile and have her giggling, laughing, sensually flirting, and feel she's doing

it of their own free will. They're all in my power, and I can do whatever I want with them. They're like puppets at my command.

I start laughing louder, more boldly. I wonder if I could live life with only my snapshots of people. Make the story my own. Words and pictures. It's so much easier than being with the real people. I keep only the good pictures, the ones that capture life as I want it to be. Picture-wise, I want my women shy, or smiling. When they lie down, I don't like the breast in its natural state flopping over their ribs, so I have them use the insides of their upper arms to push their breasts together, so that they are like little rocket ships propelled toward me. And as they ascend and point up, they also form a soft cushiony pillow on which I can lie place my head, and be comforted.

When a woman stands, I want them to place their hands submissively behind their back, letting their breasts again push forward, and showing they're doing this of their own free will. I can create the visual world I want, and then capture it for eternity. Why would I ever want to go back to so called real life?! And then, as Grandpa said, with my newfound creative writing skills, I can make the story my own, describing the world and our relationship exactly as I want it to be, without having to be bothered by them actually being there. I laugh again at how clever I am. It feels wonderful to be laughing again.

This is the longest I've gone without a climax since I discovered them lo those many years ago as a teen. For the past couple years they have been daily, sometimes two or three a day. But in the last two weeks there have been none. I can feel them all--28, 42--inside me ready to come out. I've never felt such glorious indescribable sensations, ever. Buber, why would you want spiritual ecstasy that you describe like sexual ecstasy, when you can have the real thing? This pleasure is my religion. Oh my God. All the effort to get the pictures, to uncover the mystery, then to rewrap the gift so I can do it all over again seems humorous. Maybe it's all foreplay, a way to get aroused to a point where

I don't need any of them. The feeling in me is so powerful that no focus on any picture can do it justice.

I see a picture of her in profile, with her bra straps off her shoulders, her eyes turned knowingly toward me, and a slight Mona Lisa smile. Because of the way I've shot the picture, there is a black shadow on the wall, outlining the curvature of her face and breasts. In my current state of heightened awareness, my erotic body tingling, looking at her eyes directly looking at me is disconcertingly intense. I shift my focus from her face and body to the shadow. There is something extraordinarily erotic about gazing at the flowing curves of this simple shadow. Then even that seems too much to focus on, and I close my eyes.

I feel all women surrounding me, caressing me. Jayne Mansfield, Sophia Loren; Marilyn Monroe; unattainable movie stars are mine. All the girls who rejected me growing up are mine. I feel held and stroked and loved by the world and the universe. My body is tingling throughout, as if the light of the lingham has reached every cell.

"Are you alright?" I hear a knocking at the door. Knock knock. "Are you in pain?"

I continue laughing. Nothing can stop what's happening. With a final burst of joy and ecstasy, I open my eyes and shoot the nectar of the gods all over the pictures, like a machine gun spray, watching the cum dripping from their lips, their forehead, their clothes. I shout back at Asiya, "I'm fine. Everything is perfect. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Amen. Good night. Ahhhhhh. . ."

*

*

*

This would be a perfect ending to your story, wouldn't it, Johannes? You have found a new dazzling rebirth, by your own hands, with the light of your lingham. You have been revived, joyfully and ecstatically. For one brief moment, through something I'm sure my psychology professor would call the

Pavlovian classical conditioning of euphoria, anything which comes into your mind is bathed in the ecstasy of orgasm. You feel you can do anything. Nothing bothers you. And for that moment you believe it will last forever.

So you think and feel. And how wrong you are. There's a reason the French call the orgasm "le petit mort"—a little death. This orgasm is really the death of you and your seductive ways. You don't yet know it, but this is the last orgasm you will have in America. And I'm not sure I can even blame you for the time in Eilat. That was my regression.

*

*

*

I gather my pictures together, to replace them in their respective folders. It's funny, when I think of my time with Mery at the Fairmont, I think of it based on the pictures I have, rather than of the actual event. Why not? The pictures are better, and maybe even more true than the event itself. Certainly that's true for Carmel. She let me take some great pictures before finally wailing that she just wanted me to be with her, no more camera. I wonder if that was an example of the new found assertiveness she learned from her therapist. And what happened when I put the camera down and became present? Ugh. I don't even want to think about it. Pictures are definitely the way to go.

I pick up a picture of her and stare at it. She's pretty lopsided, if you look closely. The left side of her face is longer; one side of her mouth is wider; her eyes are not the same. I look at the light and shadow around the discoloration of her areole. That's the prize? I look at her red pubic bush. The thighs leading to it are somewhat thick. And that red burning bush—too crude, not exactly beautiful, to say the least, and definitely too hot for me to handle. How could that ever be the object of adoration?

In fact, if I look closely at Mery, and really study her picture, she's not really that attractive. I wonder what I ever saw in her. And these are the best pictures of her. I did as well as I could given the material I was working with. It's not the photographer's fault. Dear Mery, you've served your purpose

very well tonight. Back into your folder until I need you again. Good night.

Mery.

*

*

*

I try to recall what my psychology professor said about a narcissistic person, something about being self absorbed, self important, and lacking in warmth and prone to exploiting others. I wonder if Johannes' picture is next to the definition.

Good night, Johannes. I leave you reviewing your pictures, panning for sexual gold. Your pictures are in color. I sit here, trying to understand how to color in the shades and tones of your life in my mind, reading and reviewing the black and white lines of the words, looking for nuggets of insight.

You self serve, alone, at night, surrounded by pictures. I read, alone, about your onanism during the day. Mental self-serving? Day and night, dark and light. Like a photographic negative. It reminds me of the image of Mery's bra. I remember developing that picture. It looked like an archery target, black bra, white shaded area in the middle, dark center point. There is something visually, even intellectually compelling—the interplay of forces of dark and light-- about that image of her white bra, then a light shadow in the center; then the whiteness, a reverse shadow standing forth.

He knows where he's aiming. Do I?

Why is it that he, Johannes, like all people, keeps only the good pictures, and throw the others away? Does anyone have a photographic album that includes pictures of themselves that they don't like? Then why do I insist on so carefully scrutinizing, exploring, writing about and keeping all aspects of my life through words? Why don't I just cut out, ignore, and throw away the bad parts? Why not have a past of memories that are only good, an edited photographic album?

There's something appealing in that idea. But doesn't that idea invalidate everything I'm doing--going "in and through" to try to find my way out of the mess of a life that Johannes left me?

* * *

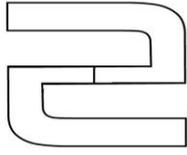
And the yearning. How many times do I have to read about how Johannes uses mystery and what is hidden to create yearning? Then once he arrives, has his orgasm, the next time he seeks a , novel person, a new picture or story to recreate yearning. Over and over and over. It's like an endless merry-go-round, that's not at all merry, at least to me. And no pun intended this time. I'm tired of all his sexual yearning, and also tired of all my spiritual yearning. Perhaps, rather than being the prerequisite for achievement--bodily or spiritually--this yearning is really the major impediment. Just like he ran after orgasms, I run after God.

But where should I look for wisdom? Is it outside or inside? When Johannes has his supreme orgasm, he closes his eyes. He turns from his external pictures to his internal world. Of course, then he creates images and memories from the external world. But he also focuses on his bodily sensations. Wasn't that the goal all along? Then, if the goal is an internal one, why do we bother with the external at all? Is the external really nothing more than a means to create an internal experience? Is it the same spiritually as it is physically?

Should my search for God take place outside on Sinai? Outside through ritual and observance? Even outside through the Rebbe and Torah reading? Or is all already within, and I just have to find a way to access it? Too many questions. Too few answers. I envy you tonight's peaceful sleep, Johannes. Enjoy it while you can. Good night. I wish I had some form of release that could calm me. There is still too much light in the day for me to sleep. And all of it is filled with darkness.

* * *

* * *



ippety do dah, zippety day,
my oh my, what a wonderful day.
Plenty of sunshine, heading my way,
Zippety do dah, zippety day,

Mr. Redird's on my shoulder
It's truth, it's actual,
Everything is satisfactual.

Both grandpas would be happy with me today. One, that I'm singing "our"
redbird song, the other that my energy has returned. What a glorious Monday morning.
The start of the week, and a new attitude. It's funny how when things seemed dark, I
was apathetic, unmotivated, couldn't see any reason to finish my classes and
graduate. But today, I'm back on track.

Time to leave the womb of the whale, Asiya. Give the old woman her due. I may
even have learned something from her constant reading to me. For example, that fish
story. The Lord told Jonah to warn the people to change their ways, but he ran away
from the Lord's calling. He didn't want to get involved. I wonder if that part of me
that called Sandy to take care of me--physically--was really my running away from my
task. Maybe I was trying to hide in a woman's breast. Instead, I got swallowed in
darkness, as did Jonah. I can see that the path of constantly running to women leads
nowhere. Not only is it unsatisfying; worse, they can't be trusted. Mery is the one
who caused my darkness in the first place. Women are not a solution but the cause
of the problem. I'm finished with them.

I think of the words Asiyra read to me this morning from Jeremiah,

Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and
Righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the
cause of the poor and needy. Is this not to know Me?
But you have eyes and heart only for your dishonest gain.
You said I will not listen. This has been your way from
your youth--that you have not obeyed My voice. You shall
be ashamed and confounded by all your wickedness.

Well, if I don't take the word "father" literally and think of my father,

who is pretty much the opposite of this righteous man, I understand what Jeremiah means. Maybe that's why I've been feeling so bad. I ran away, as did Jonah. But after his time in the whale--his quiet retreat in darkness--he returned to do the Lord's work. There is a better way, and it seems clearly in front of me. I don't need to call it the Lord's work, but it's my work, and it's what I've been fleeing. I need to use whatever gifts and talents I've been given to follow through on some kind of service to others less fortunate than I've been. And I am willing to trust enough that part of my direction leads me through the homeless on Sixth Street. No more self-centeredness. I'm tired of making my own self-hatred the only thing with which I fill my empty insides. I am going to do something about the poor, sad people up there. That is my direction, my order within the chaos.

Every person needs vision and hope. I can be that for them, and they can be the vision of my new direction for me. "If not now, when?" I'm going to spend the day in the library, working on my honors political science paper. Then tomorrow, or maybe even tonight, I'll go up to San Francisco to do some field research on Sixth Street. I'll see if I can find Mac and invite him back to my class to talk about this experiences and what needs to be done. Won't that shock my staid, square prof, as well as my classmates on the Farm. ? Bringing the real world to academia. Maybe I'll become a legal crusader for the homeless and poor. At an excellent salary of course, as befits a Harvard-trained lawyer. Law is my salvation, brining me out of the wilderness.

See, little whiny self, there is a way out of your pain. You definitely do not need to be Jonah running away any longer. There's a promised land, our salvation. I'll carry you until you snap out of this tiff. And the law will bring both of us out of this wilderness.

These are overall admirable sentiments, and most unlike you, Johannes. Helping others. Where do you think they sprang from? Mery, of course. And yet how quickly you incorporate them as if they are your own, with no acknowledgment of her role in

this at all. Is that because you really don't know her role? Or are you afraid to acknowledge it? Or do you secretly hope that by doing good, you can win her back? It's amazing how complex the mind is, conscious and unconscious. I'm not sure even now, I have the full answers to those questions. And somehow understanding not only myself, but what happened with Mery in the past, seems so crucial to my future. That's why I am going now to see Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe.

Of course, I still have to care for myself---"If I am not for myself who am I." In fact, maybe I'll take myself out to a delicious dinner on the Wharf before I go help them. I have a two-for-one coupon I was saving for a special occasion.

I open the window blind. Has the birds' chirping always been this bright and cheerful? Zippety do dah, zippety day. No one's looking and I give a little Zeke-like two step dance. Hurray! I'm back. And all of this wisdom while standing on one foot, too.

*

*

*

"Two for dinner?" the maitre d' says as I hand him my coupon.

"No, just one." I look at him directly, and realize my tone is more defensive than it need be. Probably to hide some self-consciousness at being alone. I wish I hadn't used the word "just." That seems unnecessarily demeaning. Couldn't he see I was alone? Why did he have to make such a big issue out of it? Is it my crutches? Don't I look pathetic enough already?

"I'm sorry, sir. This coupon is not valid." He looks at me askance. What does he see? A poor crippled person, alone, seeking a deal? I follow his eyes to my sandals. Yes, mister, I'm wearing sandals. I just bought this new pair, off the shelf. No more custom fit. But I can replace my sandals as easily as I can replace my girlfriend. And if you complain about a dress code, I'll just say doctor's orders.

"Yes it is," I counter. I'm back in my legal argumentative mode. He doesn't have a chance. "Look, it says good until June 17. My birthday in fact. Today is June 8. I'm well within the expiration date. And I'm treating myself to an early

birthday celebration." I'm talking too much. It's more than he needs to know. Just stick with the facts.

"We all hope you have a very happy birthday, sir. Unfortunately, you don't seem to understand. It's stated quite clearly on the coupon that the second free meal has to be of equal or lesser value than the first. We can't give you half price on one meal."

"No, it's you who doesn't understand." I feel like Grandpa, giving closing arguments when I know I'm going to win. "I will use this coupon, and I will use it tonight." I see his face tighten and scrunch. I'm getting to him. His cool, suave demeanor is starting to shift, like wet paint dripping off a picture. His eyes and smile are heading south. He starts to speak, but I hold my hand up in his face. It's rude. It's interrupting, and I love it. I smile-- mocking, snide, arrogantly-- and say in a soft, faux-obsequious manner. "I plan to order two meals tonight. Both for me. Here's your coupon. I'd like a window seat, please."

*

*

*

Bravo, Johannes! Encore! That's the stuff of which you are made. See how long you can keep up that positive, feisty energy while you sit alone, having dinner by yourself in a pre-celebration of your birthday.

The menu is daunting. I'm starving after the carrot stick veggies and fruit with which Asiya supplied me the last few weeks. I wonder if two meals will even be enough. But how do you choose? Do I ask my eyes, my stomach, my tongue? Who decides? I wonder if I should create a food journal. If I go out to a restaurant, what should I order? I love steak. Should I order steak every time I go to a restaurant to find out which one has the best steak. I could create a grid, scoring it for tenderness, presentation, taste, seasoning. Then, after trying all the restaurants in a given area-- say a radius of thirty miles-- I'd go back only to that restaurant and always order steak.

That makes sense, but only if I believe that steak is the best food that exists. But how do I know that? Maybe I should find the best restaurant, and try

all the items on the menu, systematically, and decide which one I really like best, and why. Maybe it isn't steak. Or maybe I wouldn't always want to order steak even if I do like it best. Wouldn't it get tiring? I guess I could monitor that, too. How many times could I eat the perfect meal before it begins to lose its luster? Like women, I guess.

"What will you have, sir?" Before me stands a male waiter in a black jacket he barely fits into. I'm disappointed he's a male. I know I shouldn't be. But it would have been fun to flirt with a cute waitress. Maybe I'm lucky there isn't one. I'm out of practice in the flirtation department, and even if I were successful, I know where that path leads, and it's one I don't want to go down again.

"I'll have the filet mignon, medium rare; ketchup on the side; asparagus tips with hollandaise sauce on the side; brown round potatoes well done; warm sourdough bread; a house salad with Thousand Island, and a glass of your house merlot. And for desert I'd like a piece of New York cheesecake, a glass of milk, and a pot of tea."

"Very good sir. Excellent choices." I watch the waiter closely as I order. Overall, his face remains unflinching, although I saw perhaps the slightest grimace at the mention of ketchup with my filet mignon. He is now looking at me patiently, with a bemused expression on his face. "I've spoken with the maitre d'. I understand this is a special night for you. May I ask what you will be having for the second meal."

Asshole. Is he trying to emphasize my aloneness? I look up toward the front of the restaurant. The maitre d' nods at me and gives a little bow and smirk. The restaurant is nearly completely empty, but he has seated me near a window table in the back, next to the kitchen, where the doors are constantly swinging in and out. I asked for a different table, but he said all the others were reserved. For some reason, I felt intimidated, like I'd shot my wad of assertiveness coming in, and meekly sat down.

I try to think of some witty repartee to the waiter. Maybe a line from the humanistic psychologists I learned in my psychology class: how we all have to become our own best friend. I'm befriending myself.

But that seems stilted. And too convoluted. Where is my quick repartee? I decide it's best just to ignore his smugness. "I'd like the Cobb salad, with blue cheese dressing, extra bacon and turkey, lots of cheese, no pickles or anchovies; an artichoke with melted butter; a bowl of thick tomato soup with croutons; and for desert a fudge brownie, no nuts, with two scoops of vanilla ice cream and fudge sauce, whipped cream, and a cherry." I also get a second drink. I think of ordering a bloody Mery--but he wouldn't get the humor--and instead I order a second glass of merlot.

"Again, excellent choices, sir. Would you like your Cobb salad with your dinner salad. Or, in the European manner, after your main course?"

If I hadn't gone on that cruise with grandma and grandpa, I wouldn't have known that Europeans ate salad after their entrée. He thinks he's scoring a point on me, but he's not. But I realize I don't even care to let him know that. "Whenever anything's ready, just bring it out. That would be fine."

Well, Johannes, you kept your cool relatively well. But aren't you planning to go "help the homeless" after the meal? Why didn't you think of leaving the restaurant and returning with someone who is homeless to enjoy the meal with you? Too much forced conversation when you want your space? Then how about, before you get completely sick stuffing yourself, having them pack up a second meal to share with the people you seem so eager to "help"? Too selfless a thought for you at this stage? Or suppose they said you can't pack up the meal to take out of the restaurant, like some of those all you can eat buffets you used to go to? Rather than argue, you could drive a homeless person to the restaurant, leave him there, and let him enjoy the meal at your table. Or, channeling some of your Kansas City sarcastic wit, have them pack up the second meal, and when they complain, say that you don't plan to take

it outside the restaurant, but want to give it to the waiter and the maitre d' as a tip to thank them for their kindness.

Sorry, stooping to your level. I'm trying to empathize with your plight, while gently nudging you toward being a more considerate person. But I must admit considerable judgment at your gluttony, particularly given the conscientious, ascetic lifestyle I lead. Think of all the hungry people you could have fed if you'd shared what we might now consider your last supper of this nature.

*

*

*

I look around the restaurant. It's still pretty empty. I stare out the window. It's beginning to get dark. Now what do I do? I could review my notes from the library today, and start organizing them into a more cohesive paper. I could make that big chart of food. I certainly have a lot of material I'm going to be working with tonight.

The last time I was alone in a restaurant was when I was going up to Alice's party in Berkeley, and decided to stop off at David's Deli. What strange turns life takes. I look up at the maitre d', who is greeting an older, distinguished looking couple. They are both tall and lean. Older than my parents, younger than my grandparents, I'd guess. They remind me somewhat of the couple that let Mery and me listen to the Beethoven concert from their box seats. I wonder if they are the same people. I think of getting up to introduce myself, and thanking them again, but that seems awkward. How well dressed and confident I looked and felt then. I look at my sandals. How much has changed. They might ask about Mery. And then realize I'm sitting all alone. I wonder if I'll ever have someone as a partner to grow old with. Or do I even want that?

The maitre d's smiling at them. A much more genuine smile than he gave me. I remember vaguely something from my psychology class about smiles. Some French doctor in the 1800's found that there were two kinds of smiles, ones that stop at the lips, and ones that extend across the face to the eyes. The smile was genuine only if it reached the eyes. The real smile was named in his honor, the Duchenne smile.

I wonder if I could practice that?. Creating a smile that looks genuine and sincere. Then I could use it on the maitre d'. There are so many kinds of smiles. Joy, amusement, politeness, mockery, disdain, lechery, deceit. Sometimes in Mery's pictures, there are smiles that reached her eyes. I believe she was genuinely sincere. Other times, her mouth was smiling, but her eyes were glazed. Next time my lingham is in need, I could review and catalogue her pictures. See what other kinds of smiles she had. Maybe smiles where she was trying to please me, but was confused; awkward smiles. A Mona Lisa smile, ambiguous, making me work to figure it out: bemused, yet with a deeper wisdom. Her mocking, haughty, supercilious church smile: I'm enraptured and you're not. I hated that one.

How would I catalogue a Cheshire cat smile? All of me disappears but my teeth. They're probably my best feature, anyway.

I take a few notes on smiles. I look around the room at people's facial expressions to see if I can describe their different kinds of smiles. First I look at what happens: the lips curve: could you measure the upward tilt? How much is needed to notice it? One eighth inch? One quarter? When it's really a high lip curve, but with no eyes, it looks like a grimace. When do the lips part and the mouth open to reveal teeth? When do the cheeks lift? And what about the eyes? I need to study the eyes, and how congruent they are with the lips and cheeks. When the old couple smile at each other, they appear more attractive, kinder.

I wonder when I have ever shown a genuine smile that was spontaneous, when I wasn't trying to impress or convey a meaning or perform a seduction. When I was just so happy to see someone that the joy just broke through and filled my face and lips and eyes and heart. Have I ever done that?

Yes, actually sometimes I have, for instance when I see a small child playing, or that time at the donut shop watching that grandfather and his grandchild. I guess few and far between!

I'm increasingly able to experience that spontaneous joy on a daily basis. And I notice it happens a lot when I see Joie.

The waiter returns with my soup, artichoke, two salads, and warm bread. "This should get you started, Sir." He smiles at me. I would like someone to smile at me and have it be genuine, a smile I could trust. I give him a polite, distant, snide smile back. It's amazing how we can voluntarily control with our mind --lips, cheeks, and eyes-- and show such different nuances.

An involuntary smile. I think of my lingam. Sometimes I have to work to arouse it. Sometimes it has a life of its own, and just comes to attention all by itself. I wish my smiles were as smart as my penis.

*

*

What a feast. I really want to enjoy this meal. I wonder what the best way to do that is? What is a perfect bite? What a great philosophical question to keep me entertained during this fine repast. How to begin? With all these savory choices before me, I don't just want to eat one thing. Which bite should I take first? How do you choose? I feel like a virgin facing this repast. It's been so long since I've tasted real food. I decide to start with the Cobb salad. A major decision in and of itself, but that leads to even more choices.

Lettuce alone is boring. Same with bread alone. I want to combine the different elements for texture--soft turkey and ham, a little cheese, some barbecue sauce - sweet and sour--orange slices, onion bits, eggs crisp lettuce, bacon bits, bread for filler and substance.

Should I make the first bite a succulent combination of bacon, egg, cheese, turkey, and ham? In balance or some proportion? I put a little of each on my fork, in equal amounts. There's still some room, so I add some crisp lettuce and dip it all into the blue cheese. Too much blue cheese. I wipe some of it off with my left hand. There.

I pause and look at my filled fork. It's not just food, it's a work of art. But there is still more parts to add, and not everything will fit on my fork at once. Should I prepare a second fork? In what sequence do I place them in my mouth? Do I start chewing the first pieces while I add more? When is the combination of

tastes just right? Is there a perfect moment before I start to swallow some of the food? How long can I keep the enjoyment? Do I want to add more of something as part of what's already in my mouth goes down my throat?

The work of art disappears into my mouth. I feel the coldness of the turkey, the soft squishiness of the egg, the crunch of the salad and bacon, the savory texture of the blue cheese. The ham is subtle, perhaps unneeded. I close my eyes and let each flavor fill my mouth. I wonder how many chews it takes to eat a bite of food, and begin counting. I also notice, as I'm counting, that I chew most of the food on the right side of my mouth. I wonder why that is? Should I try to shift some over? Are some taste buds being neglected? It's interesting how my saliva naturally comes in to help as the foods combine and mush together. I prepare to swallow. Is there taste in swallowing? It's a little bit like baby food going down, but most of the flavor is gone.

I notice as the food disappears there is a moment of joy, followed by a moment of sadness, like a flute note disappearing. It's as if I'm losing a good friend that I had just created, then swallowed. Gone forever from sight. Damn. I really don't want to feel sad. That's silly. This is supposed to be a celebration.

While there is a part of me that wants to rush to fill the void with the next bite, another part reminds me to sit back and breathe and just appreciate the memory of the pleasure just experienced. I remember mom telling me I always took one more bite as I left the table. Never satisfied, I wanted to keep the experience going as long as possible.

Though I have distaste for the content of Johannes' gluttonous musings, I realize how ubiquitous the issue of parts and whole is. When I played sports--golf, tennis or learned tai chi, I had to master the movement of each body part - neck eyes, hands, legs, hips- then integrate all those parts into a fluid graceful whole. My approach in these activities is not dissimilar to how, in viewing a Rorschach, I always tried to fit the details into a unified narrative picture.

There are moments, like Johannes' perfect bite – perhaps times of Kairos – when it all fits together. But most of the time—in chronos--I find myself caught in the middle among disparate parts, struggling often futilely to meld them into a coherent unity. Still I persevere, trying to add more flavor and understanding in the hopes that a wholeness will emerge.

"Sir, a second helping of bread comes with your meal. Would you like that now, or should I wait? We also have refills on the first bread that I brought you. So, whatever suits you best." I open my eyes to his fleshy grin. I wish I were still chewing so I could say something pleasant to him with a mouth filled with mashed Cobb salad. Instead I nod politely and ambiguously. His statement doesn't deserve a response, and I turn to the artichoke, decisively pulling a leaf off, swirl it in the butter, and left my chin high as I slowly feed it into mouth as if it were coming from the sky. "Mmmmm," I smile as I suck it, watching the supercilious waiter turn and walk away. I'll be sure and give him a high percentage tip--times the cost of the second meal. He'll have deserved every penny.

I pull out a blank piece of paper, and label it "eating." I make several rows, listing each item of food before me. Then several columns, one labeled number of bites, another length of bite, a third quality of taste on a seven point scale. When the grid is completely laid out before me, I make a mark under Cobb salad. I forgot to time it, but it took 23 chews. I'll time my next bite. I give it a five on the seven point scale. There's room for improvement, but the freshness and newness of the experience helped elevate its score.

Excellent. Order is being restored. I'm feeling better. A wonderful repast still awaits. I've only just begun.

*

*

*

As I look over the grid, I realize I have to make a mark for the artichoke. But that's more of a sucking than a chewing. I make a notation for c=chew, s=suck. The s will also be important for the soup. Then I make a 2 by the artichoke, indicating

that I'd eaten the first petal tip as my second choice, after the first bite of Cobb salad.

This is starting to become more confusing than I'd like. I'm just trying to enhance the joy of my meal. My thoughts are interrupted by a new person, perhaps further down the food chain--or a replacement of my waiter? "The filet, sir. Would you like me to set it in the empty place setting?"

What a jerk. I'm sure he was put up to this by the waiter, or the maitre d'. Why can't I just have a pleasant dinner, me and my own mind? I give a barely perceptible nod, then take a quick scoop of the tomato soup. Very good. But not as good I remember it from home. A 4. I make a mark on my chart, and move the steak in front of me. Umm, the smell of the brown potatoes is superb. And they are cooked well-done, just the way I like them. I add another column to my chart: length of time between bites. After an orgasm, there is a certain waiting period before I can go again. But with food I can take the next bite as quickly as I want. Do I want to wait a certain length, though, like foreplay, to maximize the enjoyment of each bite, savoring the smell, look, presentation? Or do I want to go a bit faster, reducing the time I need to feel the sadness and loss of the previous bite? What is the perfect waiting period? Does it depend on the food being eaten?

Is food like women? Each meal is good, each bite should be savored. Then you go on to the next bite. Perhaps a different flavor or texture. I notice that I like to rotate between foods. Too much focus on the steak begins to feel like a task. I love the freedom I have to roam. I survey my domain.

And I know that at the end, still unseen, cheesecake and fudge brownie ice cream await . There are a lot of edible mountains to climb. And I know that at the end of each one, I have to start over again with the next, like a boulder rolling back down the mountain. But each new trip up is delicious. I believe I am up to the task. I agree with you, Camus. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. Yes, this is a celebration, indeed. A feast for a king.

*

*

*

"Two more doggy bags, please." I point to the ice cream and fudge mix, as well as the cheesecake. Even my stomach has its limits. There are already five different ones on the table, containing the uneaten portions of the main meal. Seven doggy bags. That must be a record. I need a few more suitcases just to carry them. I imagine hiring a slew of bellmen to follow me, safari-like, with my supplies.

When I called today to invite him down to my honors class Tuesday evening, he said he'd be glad to visit "the hallowed halls of the academic ivory tower." I liked his "dig" at the University. I really want to show my political science professor how distant and insular he is from reality, and Mac seems perfect to do that. He said he needed a ride down, and invited me to come up tonight, to let him show me around "You could call it field research."

In some ways, my spur of the moment decision to get out of the library and come up here is all his doing. I have a choice now on where to go next to stay for the night. I've booked a room at the Fairmont. I could also see if I can find a place to stay near Sixth Street. Mac told me there is a shelter for the homeless and it might be a good experience for me to stay there, as part of my field research. There is also a nearby hotel, he said, where a lot of the Sixth Street denizens stay when they can afford it.

So, let' see, how do I decide? If I go to the Fairmont, I can watch TV, work on my paper, and have a late night snack with the left over food. If I go to Sixth Street, I may or may not find a place to stay. If I do, I'll most likely be in a room with others. If there is a TV, I'll have to watch what they're watching, and I'll probably have to share my food with them.

I wish all choices were this easy.

I pay for the meal, leaving a small tip for my the first meal--enough to sting him--, and no tip at all for the second. Can I help it if my companion is a cheap tipper?

I realize it's not going to be easy to carry out all my doggy bags while using my crutches, and I call over the waiter and his under study, and ask them to help me.

They both carry as I limp along behind them. I feel like I'm on safari, with others shouldering my nourishment. When the valet brings Mr. Red, they place the goodies on the passenger side. I almost expect some wise-crack, like I hope you all have a fun night. But they say nothing. I give a couple of bucks to the valet for his good care of Mr. Red.

Then, out of pity for the obsequious panting-dog like waiters hoping for another bone, I pull out a few more dollars, and say, "Thanks for a wonderful night." Could there possibly be anyone kinder and more generous than I am?

* * *

I'm given a nice room at the Fairmont. The bellman carries my suitcase and food up to my room. I open the blinds and see the lights below. When he leaves, I open my suitcase, and spread out my papers before me on the bed. What a perfect place to work on my honors thesis. So much better than the library today. And it feels wonderful to be away from Asiya and the pale green walls of that coffin-like room. This is what going to law school and grandpa's money affords me. Great food, great accommodations.

Before I start to work, I glance at the complimentary newspaper left in my room. As I'm thumbing through it, I notice a Star of David and an announcement of a Shavuot study group beginning at midnight. I know that's a Jewish holiday—I can't remember which one-- and I'm curious. I glance at what it says. Something about staying up all night to prepare ourselves, through fasting and prayer, to receive God's law. Shavuot. I think it's the one where you stay outside all night? No, wait, that's Succot. Shavuot. Right. That's when Moses comes down the mountain with the laws and commandments. Perfect. He brought his law then, I'm doing my law work now. I wonder what golden calves I'll encounter. For some reason, I cut the ad out and place it on my desk. Maybe for inspiration? What a coincidence. I had no idea.

I continue thumbing through the paper, looking at the sports page. I wonder how the Oakland Athletics are doing. I can't believe they stole our team. Dad was

sad--and furious-- when the Kansas City Athletics moved out here two years after I started school. He kiddingly--hah--blamed it on me, saying they just wanted to be close to where I was. But I could tell he was angry. They're doing better here than they did there. Like me.

Before I put the food in the fridge, I decide to treat myself to just a couple more bites of the cheesecake, even though I'm totally stuffed. After all, this is a celebration. I take a few mouthfuls, then a bit more of the brownies, ice cream and fudge. I'm surprised there is room for it to fit. I guess, like my brain did when I was studying presidents in eighth grade, my stomach will expand to meet the input. I rub my belly. Hard as a rock. But not from exercise.

* * *

I wonder if I should call Mac and tell him I decided not to take him up on his offer to stay at a hotel shelter. I think of our conversation when I said I would be coming up from the Farm. "Ah, are you, like the Caped Crusader from the Farm....have you come to rescue us? Study us? Dissect us like a butterfly?" He chuckled kindly as he said it, and I imagined that gentle, impish, gleam in his eye. But I still didn't like his statement. Inviting him to come talk is about putting down my professor. I don't need any sarcasm directed at me.

What do I do if he asks where I'm calling from? I don't exactly want to say, oh, just up the hill at the Fairmont. I look around at the lushly appointed room. Maybe I could say I'm still in Palo Alto. No, that's just a lie. I could say just up the street. Better. Or maybe not call him at all and show up tomorrow. That's best. Ok, let's get to work. Enough procrastinating.

I go over to the bed, and rather than start reading the papers, I lie down next to them. Maybe a little siesta before I start working. I wonder if I should order up some hot coffee from room service. And maybe another scoop of ice cream to balance out the brownie and fudge.

No, I don't want to be disturbed. But I don't want to lie on the bed either. I feel restless, and get up and look out at the lights of the city and Bay. It's

glorious. I'm up with the gods again, on Mt. Olympus. Or maybe I should say Mt. Sinai. I laugh. I've eaten so much tonight, and my belly is so round and firm, like a ball, if I were Moses, I could easily descend the mountain just by rolling down it. And voila, I'd be at Sixth Street, where the anxious masses below await God's commandments.

*

*

*

There are only two other times I remember being this stuffed. Once at camp in Wisconsin, we went to a lumberjack all you can eat place. Inside, there were these giant men in red and black checked jackets. They start you off with plates of donuts. Then mounds of food. Ending with apple pie and icecream. I actually ate so much I felt sick. Even so, I couldn't come close to keeping up with the guys around me. And couldn't even those around me. The second experience was my freshman year when I first arrived at the Farm. I was alone one night, and went to an all you can eat diner. After my fifth trip back for roast beef, the manager came forward and told me that I couldn't come through the line anymore.

I was incensed, and told him the sign said all you can eat.

"Young man, this is your fifth trip. No more roast beef for you. That is all you can eat." I thought about suing, but decided I'd just boycott instead. In one place, I'm a paltry specimen of food consumption; in the other, I'm a greedy overconsuming rebel. Same person, same appetite. Go figure. It's hard to find a place I fit perfectly.

I realize I'm still procrastinating.

Maybe I could make this one paper into two papers, with just a few small change--one for the honors political science class, and one for creative writing--maybe throw in a poem or two, some vivid character sketches and personal narratives to humanize the legalistic dryness. That would be a win for everybody. I get two papers done, and by writing about those on Sixth Street, maybe help them. What a powerful two-sided stone tablet that would be, eh, Moses? Not exactly David slaying Goliath. But who knows, one day using the legal system---after I graduate

from Harvard-- , or even more immediately, maybe by writing a newspaper account to bring their situation to the public's eyes, I could do some good.

Do I really believe it, or is that just some soft, fuzzy rationalization so I don't feel I'm exploiting them? Does anybody really care about their plight? Do I? I've got to be careful not to get too sentimental. I need to fortify myself mentally, like when I would first start back playing competitive tennis after a lay off. My mind isn't yet tournament tough. I'm still soft after my time with Mery, and my breakoff from paper writing. I can't feel guilty if they're suffering--it's not my fault. And I shouldn't feel guilty if their suffering helps me write a paper. In truth, I'm not sure what I'm doing will help anyone, really, except me. No government bureaucracies will have their rough exteriors crashed through, or their hearts opened to really serve those people. But at least I will graduate with the least amount of effort.

I definitely have senioritis. I don't feel pressure. It's more like I've run out of gas. I'm going on fumes. Or like a full balloon, when you stick a little pin in it, poof, all the air goes out. I feel like a pinball in a machine, ricocheting off familiar bumpers. Running to Sandy, heading to the donut shop. It's all boring and past. All I want to do is graduate, get out of here, and head for my new home at Harvard. I'm sure the energy and excitement of a new environment and challenge will revive me. This place is dead, done, over.

Fumes, balloon, pinball. Good metaphors. Maybe I could write one paper for both classes, using a creative style. Include some research and facts, but also personal elements of the people--besides Mac, they're just faceless nameless bodies to me. I also need to throw in a few of my personal " heart-felt" reactions to show how humane I am. Actually, since it's Shavuot, why not create a fictional narrative, like me as Moses coming down the mountain, presenting the law to the waiting people. That's clever. Yes, I think I could do one paper to submit without any changes for both classes. I like simple and easy. Two birds with one stone. Or two stones--the

two tablets—with one—hmm, one bird doesn't quite make any sense. How about one flight of imagination?

Not bad, but not great. Come on wit, don't fail me now. We've got a lot of work ahead of us.

* * *

I review my notes and what I've written. What a jurisprudential maze. At the library, I decided to look at all the social security legislation that has been passed since 1967, when the trial period ended for the 1962 amendments. I reviewed USCA, section 42, Public Health and Welfare, and checked the current laws and legislation in the US Code, Congressional and Administrative News. It was difficult to start pouring through the case books. I'd never realized in what a detached style they are written. Of course, I understand the necessity for precision in law, but the words seemed so cold and distant, almost as if they were designed to shield us from the problem, rather than to address it.

Once the law was able to shield me from those homeless people in the Mission District and their suffering. I had so much distance, I didn't even understand they really existed. What can I do to break through that barrier, without being consumed and swallowed by their pain?

It feels challenging, but necessary, to put a human face--like Mac's--on bureaucratic legislation, to somehow connect the impersonal words to real human beings. I think of the lonely, isolated people living on the cement.

I used to love being in the safety of the law library, with its high, towering, cathedral-like structure. It was my church. I know the laws are designed to help people, but reading them today felt so impersonal. And, as I looked around the library, it also felt cold and lonely, each person isolated, buried in a book.

This is beginning to sound like a lot of whiny philosophizing, I need to get tournament tough. As Asiya told me, when horticulturalists want to prepare hothouse plants for replanting outdoors, they subject them to stress to

strengthen them. That's all that's going on now. I've been indoors, in the belly of the whale, and I'm just subjecting myself to a little stress in transitioning to the outside world. Things are fine. Just a little patience and continued determination.

I must say I feel respect and admiration for your wrestling, Johannes, and to see out of the cold ground, the first green shoots of empathy and compassion emerging from your heart chakra. You are struggling with the coldness of the law, its absence of humanism. Even though you're doing it from the lofty tower of the Fairmont, after gorging yourself. I even understand why, when your heart starts to become tender, you then try to pull back to protect yourself, relabeling your feelings as necessary stress to make you stronger.

I too still wrestle with how is it possible to ever feel real, pure joy and happiness in a world in which so many of our brothers and sisters are living lives of such deprivation and suffering. I ask this question not from affluence, but from a dingy room and with an ascetic lifestyle. Yet if I'm honest, I do this by choice, and even that doesn't diminish by one bit their suffering.

It's interesting to look back and see the different parts of myself arguing like internal siblings battling each other. Johannes favors leaving the church and going back to the Fairmont. The emerging social consciousness of the Jonah dimension urges that it would be better to emerge from the womb of the church, find Mac and spend the night in the shelter. My Job-like side wants to retreat back to the coffin like room of suffering. Each is battling for supremacy, criticizing and attacking the others.

What would I say now about the chances for harmony, a unified self? How successful am I at unification here in Jerusalem? I've pretty much left Johannes and his bodily driven self behind, though I miss his enthusiasm and energy. I have more perspective on my Job-like suffering, though that is still a large part of me. And, if I'm honest, the service part of me is still pretty small and fledgling, though I'm trying to strengthen it.

Yet I still do not understand how it is possible not to have a part of me feel guilty every time I feel a moment of pleasure surface. I want to ask Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan how they handle this. I want to ask God how He can allow it.

He or She? I, too, still struggle with this question. I wonder if I could invite the gathering of wise elders here in Safed to share the wisdom of their different philosophical/religious traditions about this.

* * *

Asiya's horticultural analogy makes me think of the mushrooms Mery and I saw near Devil's Cauldron. I should look up material on wild mushrooms. I wonder if there is a library that is open, or an Encyclopedia Britannica downstairs at the Fairmont. Stop. No, not now. Enough procrastination.

I start reviewing my notes on the laws on old age and social security. Soon the words began to flow more easily in my writing. Perhaps the texts' cold icy style was forced to melt from the attention of my gaze meticulously scrutinizing it with heated intensity. Ha, see, I still have my wit about me.

I become increasingly focused on the texts, and for a while, I remember why I love the law--its solidity, precision, substantiality. But after several hours, my mind is mush and I need to stop.

I'm glad I came up to San Francisco. It was good to get away from the Farm. But now, even in the luxury of this room, it feels lonely, too, just like in the library, and I'm having trouble focusing. It seems so anomalous to be pontificating about those people down the mountain from these ethereal heights. I feel restless. The room seems stifling. Against my better judgment I decide maybe it would be worthwhile to go down to Sixth Street tonight--unannounced and with no Mac or Mery to guide me-- to see what it's really like. I wonder if any of the people down there will be the same as when Mery and I first visited. Is that the word, visit? Sounds like a vacation destination. Even if some are the same, would I actually recognize them?

I think of great leaders descending mountains. Moses at Shavuot coming down the mountain with the law. Was he satisfied with the message he was carrying? Did he feel it sufficient? What about the love expressed by Jesus at the Sermon on the Mount? Which am I? Why not both? Yes, I'll bring the law and love down from my Fairmont peak.

* * *

I dial operator. "How long would it take to walk down to Sixth Street and Market?" There is a long pause. "It's only about five minutes, sir. But sir, even though it's geographically close, we advise our guests to be very careful about venturing into that area. Perhaps we could call you a cab?"

I thank him and look at my crutches. Well, even though it's a five minute walk for a regular person, I definitely shouldn't try to walk down the hill with my crutches. But when I think of driving Mr. Red, I realize what an attention magnet he is, both in terms of color and wealth. Five minutes apart, but such vast differences. There's a whole world down there, and I'm not sure I really want to explore it. I wish Mery had never introduced me to it. But now, how I can I pretend it doesn't exist?

What you're saying about geography, I feel about you and me. There are whole worlds of ourselves I wish I didn't know about. But now, what choice do I have but to explore them?

I wonder if Mery would be proud of me, and this new awakening social conscience. She'd probably be appalled, though, that I'm using the Fairmont as my base of operations, or that I might take a cab down there. Forget her. There's too much of a fault line between us to ever be healed.

* * *

I decide to walk it. Not for Mery. For me. I could use some exercise after that meal. I go into my suitcase and pull out my toiletries. I turn the deodorant stick a quarter turn at the base, then three strokes under each armpit. I then place one dab of Old Spice behind each ear, one on each cheek, and two under my chin. I

smile into the mirror. No food between my teeth. I'm ready. It feels like preparing for a date. I guess in a way it is. Although the contrast between my fine grooming and their stench may be off-putting for both of us. But at least an observer would know who is whom in the scene.

I gather some of my papers. If I see Mac, I'll want to show him what I'm writing, and get his poetic input. I ask the concierge for directions. He seems reluctant as he gives them to me, and reiterates the front desk person's admonition. For some reason, I also ask where Glide is in relation to the hotel and my destination, and he shows me that, too.

I limp through the lobby, the bellman opens the front door for me, and I'm out in the night air. I take a deep breath. There's nothing to be afraid of. I'm fine. I'm glad I've got the crutches for support, but I remind myself that Asiya's doctor friend said that my leg is basically fine. Maybe I'm comforted by the stability they give me, and that if needed, they could be a defensive weapon if anyone wishes me harm.

I begin my limping walk down Mason. After a couple of minutes, I arrive at Bush Street, where I'm supposed to turn left to get down to Sixth and Market. If I kept going straight, I could head to the church where I surprised Mery that Sunday morning so long ago.

I wonder what it's like at night. I start to keep going on Mason, then change my mind and turn down Bush. I laugh. I see the burning bush, and know my calling. It's to head down the mountain to free my people. I am a religion of the law. I don't need to go to some church to seek religion. That's for the weak, like Asiya, like Mery. It's for the lost and hopeless. It's not for Stanford Phi Beta Kappa's who are going to Harvard Law School. I piece of a song from childhood Passovers enters my mind--I remember Grandpa Dave telling me it was sung by the slaves before the Civil War.

Go down Moses, way down to Egypt land. . .

Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go. . .

*

*

*

As I walk, I start to compose my assignment.

This paper reviews social security legislation that has been passed since 1967, when the trial period ended for the 1962 amendments. It is based on researching the USCA, section 42, Public Health and Welfare, and the current laws and legislation in the US Code, Congressional and Administrative News. Its intent is both to explore the laws academically, and to then examine in a case study through field research how they apply to a particular demographic: elderly homeless people living on Sixth Street in San Francisco. The discussion section explores the limits of such an approach in terms of generalizability of findings, and also whether the intent and purpose of the laws are meeting their stated aims and objectives.

A good start. I can already see the Professor giving me an "A" and writing in red pen, "Innovative: both academic and creative, integrating the ivory tower and the real world. Superb job. Have a great career at Harvard. We're all very proud of you."

I hold my crutches up and take a step on my own. There is some fear in doing so, but I feel ready to try. My foot feels a bit vulnerable, but holds up pretty well. Maybe that doctor was right, and I don't need the crutches any longer.

I decide to continue to use them for the time being, but to lean press less hard on them when I take a step, relying more on myself to carry my own weight.

I wonder how Moses felt coming down the mountain? Did he feel sure of foot? How did he feel about the law he was carrying in his arms? Though I don't want to admit it, I have to say that what I learned about the social security legislation feels paltry, incomplete, remote, and frankly, pathetic. If I were Moses, I'd actually feel embarrassed to present this personally to anyone as a solution to their problems.

Just as a flight of imagination, if I weren't doing this for a grade, what would I really like to say to those people as I come down the mountain? I imagine crafting an open letter, one I'd send to them, but also one I'd send to someone somewhere in the government. I'm really not very pleased with either of them.

Neither the detached, aloof, government bureaucrats; nor the poor, pathetic alcoholics I'm about to encounter.

I look down at my crutches. I don't like that I have to use crutches. I don't like weak people who use crutches. And, in this case, I don't like the crutch that the government and its laws are providing.

Dear Old People at the Bottom of the Mountain:

First, thank you for patiently waiting for me. I'm sure you sometimes doubted whether I would even come. After all, it's a lovely view from the top of the mountain. Who would really want to voluntarily descend? But I am coming. I'm sure it will be an honor to be once again among you. I only ask that in order to receive and hear me fully and clearly--and my message from the law--you put away your golden calves. Yes, right, for a few minutes, no more wine bottles. I have some important legal information to share with you, and I'd appreciate your undivided, focused attention.

You should all feel gratitude that you live in the sunny, Golden State of California. The federal government and most other states call its aid to old people "Old Age Assistance" but California calls it "Old Age Security." Now, doesn't that make the day look brighter? See what a profound difference words can make. I imagine the sense of "security" that change of name gives you has an immense psychological effect on your outlook on life. Just think, you are not being told you are dependents, in need of assistance. Rather, you are being made more secure, just like our kind parents used to make us feel secure as children.

I reach the corner of Bush and Mason. Here is a choice point. I could continue on to the church. I could turn around and limp back to the Fairmont, or I could begin the descent straight down the mountain. I stop and remember the magic blanket my parents used to wrap around me when they put me to bed at night. "With this blanket, you will always feel loved and protected."

Thanks, parents. What a load of crap. I now stand alone and crippled under dark skies in the middle of the street in San Francisco. No one knows where I am.

And no one really cares. I feel a cold wind come from the bay, and start shivering.
No. I will not have one of my immobilizing chills. I close my eyes and clench my
fists. In spite of myself, as I take a step down the hill, I imagine my parents
lovingly placing that protective blanket around me.

*

*

*

Look around you, my friends. Look at these lovely, secure
surroundings with which we have sheltered you. Breathe the fresh air. See your kind,
loving neighbors. How fortunate you are. As far back as 1956, even before most of
you were eligible, the government was already thinking of you. In the 1956 amendment
to the Social Security Act, each state was encouraged, and I quote "to furnish
financial assistance as far as practicable under such conditions, to help such
individuals attain self-care."

The two words I want to emphasize are "individuals" and "self care." You
men must understand that you are autonomous self-reliant individuals. Now, put the
wine down. How can you ever attain self-care if you don't pay attention. You must
listen, for I'm trying to help you. All you have to do is repeat: "We will do and we
will be obedient. " Naaseh V'nishmo. You must follow the commandments and rules which
the all-wise government has laid out for you. If you can do that then you will have
made great strides towards the attainment of your individuality and your self-
care.

I wonder if I would have the guts to actually turn a paper like this in. To
really express my disillusionment with these laws, and how they're applied. If I did,
I bet my political science professor would have a cow and freak out. I'd have to take
that course pass, no credit. But what difference would that make? I'll still
graduate Phi Beta Kappa. I'm still into Harvard. Maybe that could be my act of
rebellion against the system.

As I take the first step down Bush, I wonder what it must feel like to be Moses
bringing the law I shiver again, and feel anger arising at so much unfairness. For
them. For me. There is not much love in my heart. But there is a lot of bile and

fury. Paradoxically, those feelings begin to warm me, and I feel better and less afraid. I clutch my crutches tighter. For security. For protection. I wonder if Moses threw the tablets down and broke them, not only because he was upset with the masses below, but also because, like me, he was dissatisfied with laws he'd received.

I can't believe your narcissism and grandiosity. For God's sake, you've done a little law library research on a small little section of social security, and you're going to spend a miniscule bit of time amongst a tiny tiny fraction of those to whom it might apply, and all of a sudden you're Moses coming down from the mountain. There are limits to what Grandfather \$ meant by "being the best." Have you had too much to drink? What delusions of grandeur.

Well, John, he *could* see himself as Jesus bringing a message of love, bringing a protective blanket, down the mountain. He could see himself, as Grandpa Dave once said, as the Son of God, as John pointing the way to the One who comes. Some illusions die hard, don't they, my friend? Perhaps we can't solve the puzzle, and the best we can aspire to is being a wise, compassionate piece of the puzzle.

* * *

I'm not unaware that Kansas City sarcasm drips from my monologue. And I love it! But I'm also aware that it raises fascinating philosophical questions and themes. For example, how do you teach people to gain more control of their lives? Isn't that oxymoronic, a contradiction in terms? Who has the right to exercise that control over another; and to call it teaching them self-reliance and self-control? Let me, the great white father, teach you how to take care of yourself and be independent. I will show you how to be an individual. Follow my laws to gain your freedom. I jot down some notes. Another paper for another time. Let's get back to my open letter.

Even our esteemed lawyer president wants you to stand up for yourselves and to assert your rights. Although maybe he wasn't thinking of you specifically, but the cleaner, whiter versions. Just a little over a year ago, he set aside the month of May as Senior Citizen's Month. His immortal words must bring noble visions to your

mind and joy to your heart, as he appeals to you directly, personally: "I especially invite the older citizens of this nation to use this month as a time for re-examining the social role they are playing and the conditions under which they live."

Don't those words speak clearly to you? Just look around at the lovely, albeit garbage-filled, cement street on which you live. Re-examine it, for the president wants you to share your conclusions and recommendations with your countrymen. Please tell me, how do you find the cement, the glass you sometimes sit on? I'm sure the country would love to know. If you didn't have a chance last year, you're getting a second chance now.

Of course, you can always wait till next year.

Why next year?

Don't you remember, on September 28, 1968, President Johnson signed a joint congressional resolution for a White House Conference on Aging for 1971. Not long. Just one more year. Sit tight and if you aren't yet dead, they will discuss your situation more closely.

* * *

When I reach Montgomery Street, I turn right and head to Market. I still haven't seen any of the homeless yet. Maybe that's why it's easier to address them. And mock not only the law, but them.

Wait. Sit up. You aren't even concentrating, How can I help you if you don't listen? Put the bottles down now. I've already told you that you can't drink and listen at the same time. This is my sermon from the Academic Mount, right Grandpa Dave? Some of you aren't listening. Are you trying to dissuade me from my legal calling?

Don't you realize what a significant day this is, Shavuot, the giving of the law? And on this day we all eat honey cake together, to show that the law is sweet as honey. It is no trifle to you, for these laws are your salvation. Give us this day. Don't you appreciate my sacrifice for you, the blood and sweat from my brow.

No choruses of "Hallowed be my Name" for my trying to find a way to gain you a soon-to-be land of vache et halav, milk and honey. Shhh, quiet. Now, let me continue. You shall not add to the Word which I command you, nor take away from it. You must not question the law.

You are drunk. Or muddled, if not from wine, from life. You can't distinguish Jesus from Moses, the difference between giving love from the Sermon on the Mount, and giving the laws written in stone. In any case, you do neither well. You have no idea who you are.

Should we share wine? Red Mountain? How much was this? Seventy-nine cents, eh? You get what you pay for. Not what I'm used to, but I appreciate the gesture. I imagine this is the higher end stuff that you went to since the good news of January, 1968. At least those of you over seventy-two. Yes, sure was nice of them government folks to pass a law amending the old welfare laws. Earnings were increased, for those who had little or no past earnings under social security, from thirty-five to forty dollars a month.

Why, with that money, you can afford to buy fifty gallons of wine each month especially with rent so little, in fact nothing. You men are rich. Of course, then you couldn't afford to buy shelter, clothing, food. But, if you didn't buy wine, then you would have a dollar thirty a day for food, clothing, shelter, Can't complain now, can you?

Look, even more good news. Section 2005 of the Welfare and Institution Code states that no aged person is to be disqualified by a refusal to seek or accept employment. See, you don't even have to try to work. Just drink and lie in the street and enjoy life. Thy Kingdom come. Lazy lives lounging luxuriously, drinking dewy drops of wine, lucky men, indeed. Don't fret.

You are our role models. Remember, the American Public Welfare Conference in Chicago said that one of the functions of the elderly is "carrying on traditions, transmitting stability, cultural community, and a smoother transition

between generations." More wine? Let's keep the transition smooth and do our share for cultural community. I'm learning so much being here with you.

* * *

As I take the final few steps on Montgomery, I feel a sudden rage building in me. I feel furious at our callous, impersonal government and its laws and policies that dehumanize these people. I feel angered that whatever efforts I make on their behalf will be so paltry; no one in any government bureaucracy will listen to me. I'm also angry at these people's wasted lives, and their helplessness to live any better than they do. I'm even angry at Mery for showing them to me, for making me face not only the futility and hopelessness not only of their lives, but also the futility of my good intentions.

I remember psychological research from my class that said that old people displace their problems because they can see no real fitting solution to the challenges they face. I wonder if the wine isn't a way for them to hide and numb themselves from the their problems rather than facing them. Would it be helpful to point out to them their unhelpful coping strategies? Or just make them feel more helpless, and angry at the messenger?

And what about me? I wonder if my big gluttonous meal tonight was my effort to avoid my own problems, or if I'm displacing my problems through an attempt to try to solve theirs. If so, the effects are wearing off. Too much reality is breaking through. I no longer have the distance and shelter of the law library, or the separation that the Fairmont and the top of the mountain provided.

Oh my gosh, self-reflective insight from you. I'm impressed, even though it's meager and limited. At least it's a start. Could you be angry, too? Is your scorn and anger at the law a way to hide from your anger at Mery, at your parents, at yourself for the mess your own life is in? Is your mocking and distancing from those homeless people a way to hide from your fears that you could end up like that them, physically, mentally? That you are really bereft of direction and purpose and facing a life as bleak and hopeless as theirs?

I know the feeling. And I may be using you as the same type of foil.

*

*

*

When I turn right on Market Street, fear replaces anger. I look down at my map for reassurance. At least I can see clearly where I am and can orient myself in space. Four more blocks. Then I look at my watch. Five after twelve. Shavuot has officially begun. Actually, that's not Jewish custom. I guess it began when the sun went down. Take a breath. You're oriented in time, sort of. I can't imagine this confusion I'm feeling is really from two glasses of wine. But maybe so. It's been a while since I've had anything to drink. I remember a Greek legend that a blue/purple stone, amethyst, is a remedy for drunkenness. I wish I had one with me now. Maybe that's all that's needed to help me, and these poor souls I'm about to meet.

Purple, a spiritual color, according to Dr. Lisbet's discussions of the chakras. Maybe what you need to help you, dear soul, is not a rock, but that to which the color points, the spiritual source.

*

*

*

The last time I walked down Market, it was arm in arm with Mery. I remember the joy I felt being with her, though also how annoying it was to have to listen to the incessant clanging of the workmen tearing into the street to create BART. Now, Mery is absent, no longer on my arm. But for some reason, I hear ringing in my mind the clanging of the drills. As I look around, I see the scattered broken cement that is the effect. The great construction feat. Ripping up streets to replace them. The clanging continues to shrilly vibrate within me, even though the night is still.

I walk along an area sectioned off for pedestrians. Buildings tower along both sides, their tops bending towards each other, cutting off the sky from my vision. The fog-encrusted, black-gray sky. Is there really a moon up there? Is there really a sun somewhere that shines? I may know intellectually that there is natural light and warmth but I don't feel it in my heart. The intellect is such a

paltry weapon, so ineffective. How could I have once seen it as our crowning achievement?

The darkened buildings look ready to fall, if only someone would give them the signal. I smell smoke. Is there a fire somewhere? Outside in a trash can? Inside, in a hearth? People's efforts to keep warm are choking me. The smoke and smog mix in my nostrils and eyes, bringing involuntary gasps and tears.

My feet step in dirt and mud along the path, covering the occasional bits of broken glass, discarded cans. The tops of the buildings seem to move closer to each other. The clouds hang low, oppressive, and the clanging continues incessantly.

I see an old man, bent, with a derby hat covering sweat-soaked strands of gray hair, wearing disheveled clothes. His face, where it is not red-streaked and veined, is pale. Mahlon and Chilion. Sons of Naomi, sickness and destruction, fated for death. Their fate? Johannes'? Mine? The man looks sickly and wasting away with blank, veiled eyes, like Mery's, yet his have a piercing, staring quality, as if he is looking straight into me. He's walking towards me. I want to hide my face, take off my sandals, throw down the crutches and run away. The ragged blue ends of his jacket, torn shreds, hang like tassels.

"Some money, please." Garbled, foam-caked words.

No, damn it no. Get away from me. I know you not old man. Become a statistic, words in a paper. You are too real. Sweaty hair, saliva spitting from a livid mouth. I can't stand his begging, looking for a handout. Here you are, poor old, lost fool. Here's a quarter for taking the trouble to stay alive. Go get stoned, and don't bother me anymore. I've done my duty and more.

What's he really want? A hand? The clichéd hand that Mery's pastor spoke about "the hand that makes all the difference." What if I cut off my hand and gave it to him? Would that really help? What if I put my hand on his shoulder and said in my most compassionate voice, "Sorry, poor old man"? Would that really help? It's futile, old man, it's all futile. Dust and ashes, a chasing after wine, a chasing after wind.

*

*

*

Their bodies are more frequent now. I take a breath. What possible positive feeling can you have toward those homeless, alcoholic beggars without sugarcoating reality? I try to suppress all my reflexive responses: to shun them, run away from them, avoid eye contact. It's so easy to fear and run from what I don't understand. But is pity the answer? These people seem beyond help or hope, disposable trash at best used like political pawns. They're like annoying, almost subhuman litter--stiff swollen carcasses-- that no one picks up and puts in the trash. Wouldn't I really like to ignore them, harden myself as I rush past them to some appointment? These really are the dregs and discards of our society. How can I, how can anyone, see these people and cope with seeing their pain?

I'm actually impressed that later in your paper you chose to cope by writing a poem about them, trying to express both their and your pain and struggle, and trying to find a core humanity in each of you.

bodies warm with blood and flesh,
but dying on the pavement's coldness,

begging with crying insides,
tears so deep they no longer hear them,
insides screaming with loneliness which runs
through their bodies

with the wine, deadening the pain, pretending,
it doesn't exist.

yes, it's lonely.
yes, it's cold and hard, but cry
cry and you're living, drink and you're
closing yourself and dying in the midst of your life.

I remember how furious you were when your professor told you what an awful poem it was--sentimental, trite, a self-indulgent, ineffectual effort. Johannes argued that it was unfair to grade a person's emerging emotions and pain by artistic and literary standards "the meter rambles...even free form needs some formal structure." At least you were willing to suffer for your art, to describe for yourself and others what they themselves can't see or don't want to see--outer pain, inner pain, the search for a common humanity.

I was actually proud of you for telling the professor that you didn't care about the grade, that you were going to take an incomplete in the class, and that you were not only embarrassed at the professor's self-righteous pomposity in grading his work, but even at yourself for trying to get a good grade, based on other's suffering and despair.

* * *

As I look down the sidewalk, it seems like a flowing river of concrete, ever changing, but the same. Have these people in some archetypal form always been here? Maybe different faces, but I wonder if they don't all have the same pitiable, pained, wrinkled sadness. Will they always be floating aimlessly in some river somewhere? Is this an inevitable part of the world we live in? I want so much to show them their beauty; to tell them not to give up, to quit begging. I want to believe the ugliness in the world can be cured, to believe each person has a beauty within them if only they'd let themselves see it. That if we all work together, change is possible. Is that just a pipedream? Sugar-coating? But how can you honestly look at all this misery and continue living without that pipedream?

Is it them I'm really concerned about, or me? Am I really afraid that there is no beauty in me? And so I try to will them to be more alive, more hopeful, to banish my own feelings of worthless, ugliness and despair.

* * *

I pass Fifth street, and see Mason on my right. I could stop now and head back up the mountain to the safety of the Fairmont. I've seen enough and done enough field research for my paper. It's ridiculous for me to be down here at night. Do I have a death wish?

What can I really do to help these people? Would I really be willing to spend my life as a lawyer engaging in adversarial battles on their behalf? What if I were a journalist, a reporter? Would it help to try to show others how these people are living to see if the consciousness of our nation can't be moved? But why should I suffer here so that someone in their lilly-white bedroom can read

this and say oh, oh, how morbid how ugly, do people really live like that? Well, it's probably their own fault. What else is on TV, honey?

This is absurd. I won't write about their insides, their pain, as a side show so that people can let their liberal consciences feel a twang of remorse, or my ivory tower professor, even my literature professor, can feel the least bit assuaged of guilt. I don't want to be the sponsor of a side show. All those pompous people peering from their self-righteous positions. Get your damn eyes away from the cage. It' isn't a show, it's life.

* * *

As I pass Mason, I see more shadowy figures huddled up ahead. The clanging in my mind recedes, though I still hear it. But now the Doors' song that Mery played for me starts in my mind.

People are strange when you're a stranger
Faces look ugly when you're alone
Women seem wicked when you're unwanted
Streets are uneven when you're down

When you're strange
Faces come out of the rain
When you're strange
No one remembers your name
When you're strange
When you're strange

I could stop and turn around. There is no need to continue, but for some reason, I do just the opposite, and barely using my crutches, I start taking steps faster, as if I have purpose and destination. The street is becoming more crowded, littered with bodies, fallen or barely upright. Some are tucked away in indentations in the sidewalk sheltered by buildings. A few man are gathered around a garage-can fire. Although they are the reason I came down here, I try to avoid looking at them. But I feel that each person on the street--awake or asleep-- is glaring at me, seeing into my insides. I try to twist my body, turning, dodging. But I'm exposed at every angle.

As I take a few hurried steps, almost at a jog, I realize my foot is fine. I'm actually not putting any weight on the crutches, and they are just barely touching the ground. Why not throw them away? I realize I don't want to. They are a weapon if I need it, a means of protecting myself. And I like being seen as disabled. It's like an external sign of internal feelings. It also sends a signal to those around me: I'm a cripple, too, be nice to me.

A man, black shadows on gray pavement, reaches a hand out to me. As his hand takes shape in and emerges from the blackness, it is somehow illuminated by a light source. All I can see are the bent fingers as if growing out of the tops of a wrinkled palm, trying to extend themselves toward me. I reach into my pocket. I have no change, so pull out a dollar and give it to him, placing it in his palm carefully, trying not to touch him, the way you might place food in a dog's mouth that you don't yet completely trust.

I don't wait for thanks but turn away and continue hobbling. How will he use it? For a drink to numb him? Why did I do it? Bribery, so he'd leave me alone? Compassion, guilt, to make myself feel better?

I am careful with my steps to avoid the rotting trash and can't avoid the urine like stench of the street. Drunken bodies staggering, when not collapsed, try to find shelter and warmth under discarded clothing, cardboard boxes. A bird flies overhead. It's smart not to land. Better to avoid what I'm seeing up close. Better to keep a distance from up high.

*

*

*

I wonder if somehow that image of the illuminated hand became etched in my unconscious, and that's why I purchased the Devus' sketch of the drowning man reaching up through the water. He is that faceless shadow from Sixth Street. He is Johannes helplessly drowning; he is me reaching skyward to God.

Can the law help? Can society face the ugliness of what exists here?
Can I? Why am I here?

Did I come here to help? To motivate myself to get back on track? To see how I might otherwise end up? To gloat? To find a physical manifestation of my inner feelings? I feel like existentially, I stand out, stick out, as anomalous as Mr. Red amidst the black and white day. I imagine people look at me and think me real, but they are only looking at a shadow, an empty object limping, lamed, trying to find a way out of the darkness of a cave.

Dante, hell isn't your seven circles of symbolically contrived monsters. The people caught in your circles howl and groan. But they aren't really in hell. There is a lower, eighth rung. In that rung there are no cries of anguish, no painful wails. In that rung there is silence. For that rung is made up of those who are numb, who have given up hope, who no longer reach toward the sky and cry out.

The indifferent don't scream.

* * *

Johannes, I hear your pain. I even feel it, at some core level. But there is also part of me that feels the need to mock you. Yes, suffering is suffering. But all that's really happened to you is you broke up with a girlfriend, cut your foot, aren't sure you want to go to Harvard Law School, and are seeing, in your twenty-minute descent from the Fairmont, the grittiness of Sixth Street. Don't overdramatize, poor baby.

Truth has many sides, John. Yes, Johannes's "descent" is from a very privileged position from inside a castle--in Kansas City, at Stanford, and from the Fairmont. And yes, it's only been a short period of time since the "Jovial jubilation" of the Harvard acceptance. So, on the one hand, I understand the mocking, belittling tone. However, as you know, his descent is real, his heart is truly starting to break open, and perhaps you're being a bit harsh on him. Could one reason be that you're still suffering, as I am, the aftershocks of that descent?

* * *

I arrive at Sixth Street, the mecca, my destination. I look down the darkened street to my left. Somewhere Mac is down there. I wish I'd brought the leftovers from my dinner so I'd at least have something to offer. Mom would be angry at me. She always said she should bring a gift when visiting. Normally I bring a nice bottle of wine. But that hardly seems appropriate, even I didn't intend it to be mocking. The food from tonight at least would have been something. The extra sourdough bread I didn't even touch. Bread with the wine. Our daily bread, a thanksgiving offering to be placed at this beautiful Sixth Street tabernacle shrine. What a selfish, thoughtless glutton I am. The least I could do is give them something as a way of saying thanks for your generous help and support in writing at least one, and maybe two papers.

Why turn down Sixth Street? Do I really want to put faces to my paper? Isn't it easier to keep them faceless--an aggregate, a group-- that I can feel sympathy for in the shrine of the law library, or preach to as I walk down from the Fairmont, talking to the wind and the void?

What was I thinking? Do I really believe there is a legal prescription, a remedy that could save them-- and me? Does going to law school make any sense at all? If I turn left, I will go further down the road toward facing my fears and the entanglements of the law. It seems like a briar patch. If I turn right, I could head up Taylor back toward the Fairmont.

Maybe I could even stop at Glide. If there is not a legal answer, could there be a spiritual answer? More briar patch. Be careful to do the commandments and statutes that I command you this day. You're going to be saved, oh homeless. The harbinger of the redemption will appear, will return to save the poor, the downtrodden, and the weary. Have a glass of wine ready for him. Elijah's glass waiting. Jesus's glass: drink it and you're drinking His blood. Hang on, right around the corner, a First or Second Coming...(and not of the sexual variety) Do

you believe? Do you care? Do I believe? Do I still care? I stand paralyzed, and
more lyrics from the Doors flood my mind:

Strange days have found us
Strange days have tracked us down
They're going to destroy
Our casual joys
We shall go on playing
Or find a new town

Strange days have found us
And through their strange hours
We linger alone
Bodies confused
Memories misused
As we run from the day
To a strange night of stone

I feel myself re-sinking into the pain of the past two weeks, and I will
myself not to. That sickly, amorphous, wishy-washy, futile helpless feeling
threatens to once again overwhelm me. I want to cry out, to weep and wail. Big boys
don't cry, Dad said. What good does it do to feel the hurts and suffering of
others when you can't do anything to help them? You were wrong, Mery. You and your
false, arrogant saviors and messiahs. Look around. Suffering, poor, homeless people
are all still here. All you do is end up making yourself and those around you
miserable.

Coming down here was a mistake. I can't face any more of this night. As if on
cue, or to add a touch of irony, a light mist begins to fall. When you're strange. .
.Faces come out of the rain." I don't want to, can't, see any more strange faces. I
turn my back to Sixth Street, and begin heading back toward the Fairmont. There is
a thundering boom. I feel the emptiness returning. There is nothing I have to give.
There is nothing anymore in me. I wonder if people don't just look through me. The
Cheshire cat became nothing but a smile. I am nothing but a mind that whirls
around, a dizzy, nauseous whirling. A mind which can't do anything effectively,
which has no purpose or utility.

Another burst of thunder. It's accompanied by a return of the clanging of
drills inside my mind, louder and fiercer, Trumpet-like, pounding, throbbing in my

ear. A flash of lightning. A sickly whirling in my head. I feel trapped in my own skin, and can't find a place to flee. I try to work efficiently with my crutches to go back up the hill. I find myself beginning to detach, but I can't completely leave my body. I stay in it and look down with an amused interest.

My legs and crutches seem like objects not part of me, neither fastened to me, both equally distant. I watch as one object bends at the knee. Then I see two other objects stretch forth to touch the ground. When weight is placed on them, I am propelled forward. A fourth object bends and rises. The process starts again. Like the wheels of an inefficient railroad train.

Careful legs. Streets are uneven when you're down. There's a curb, ahead. Listen to me or you'll...

Tripping, falling onto the street. Law writing thrown to the ground. Broken beer bottles, green glass.

I pick up the glass and examine it. Glass that one looks through, which is used to shield one from those on the other side, also can cut us. I run my left finger along its jagged edge, the one that crashed through the glass door when I was little. I see blood start to trickle out. There is something pleasurable about the pain of the cut. Is this what Mery meant that pain can be pleasure?

Like the throbbing on my sole, the blood as a red badge of courage. I too have suffered. Can't you see I have crutches and wounds, just like you? Don't berate me, don't judge me, don't ask anything of me because I too suffer. Somewhere I belong; I suffer and therefore I exist. Suffering makes me feel alive, a step up from the numbness and nothingness. I think of Mery trying to find ways to keep from closing up through her art, her work with the autistic children.

I suck the blood off my finger, wrap a handkerchief around it and hold it tightly. I look around me. Everything is hazy, as if there is a gray lens in front of my eyes, making what is dark even darker. Part of me just wants to close my eyes and lie here, fall asleep and not get up. I remember Mery getting angry when I told her our story would end like the little match stick girl. How was I to know it

wasn't a happy ending? My family never prepared me. I feel pity for myself, like I'm the little match stick boy, this isn't the way my story is supposed to end.

I feel a flicker of anger at myself. The last match? I'm angry that I'm letting myself lie here, doing nothing. This is supposed to be my field research. Maybe I should take some notes. Be Camus writing about the plague. Save myself by getting enough distance so I can be somewhat objective. Describe what's going on. I gather my fallen pens and papers. The image actually brings a smile to my face, warming me. The Stanford student, in the gutter, conducting research, taking notes, to the very end. I can't wait to present this to my uptight, bow-tie wearing, dapper, bald, academic ivory tower political science professor.

* * *

I don't know whether to laugh or cry at the image of you lying in the gutter taking notes. What a gritty, methodical, labor-intensive effort you have made. Armed with pen and paper, you go to peer at suffering, like looking at exotic animals at a zoo. Your field research is so substantial and in depth. What's it been, an hour since you left the Fairmont? You've given money to two faceless people. Bravo. You truly are a fearless scholar and compassionate human being. You try to protect yourself by making this trip part of a class assignment. (and actually are going to try to get two papers out of this expedition). And aren't you involved in what your Psychology professor talked about: downward comparison-- to build yourself up by seeing those less fortunate than you? Isn't there a voyeuristic attraction to those less fortunate, a way, as you yourself even realize, to see an external manifestation of the internal turmoil you're going through.

Yet, though your effort is in many ways juvenile, awkward, and deficient in many respects, from a different perspective, I have to compliment you, Johannes. The very fact that you would go down to Sixth Street at all is a major venturing forth beyond your fortified castle of privilege, plenty, and prosperity. I'd like to think that reflects the growth of a more sensitive, empathic side not solely concerned with satisfying your own pleasurable biological drives. Your action also

reflects your own Job-like suffering and the Jonah-like desire to be of service to others.

It is a start in the right direction. Yes, it's easy to criticize you, and these early uncertain efforts. But an effort to do something new always begins with tentative, awkward first steps. I find a small part of myself proud of you. You're trying to stretch yourself, to see if you can continue to develop a new-found urge to be of service to others. You are breaking out of your sheltered life and seeing the underbelly and darkness from which you have so long been hidden. And from which I still try at times to hide. I do admire that. We all have to start somewhere. It's not easy. There are places in the world, and in each of us, that are so ugly and sad that I'm not sure what else to do but cry.

You did write a powerful poem. And you even had the chutzpah to turn it in--to both your political science class and your creative writing class. I thumb ahead a few pages, and read:

The man looks towards the gray sky,
Reaching his hand out towards....
Money, connection, hope, help?
But all he grasps is
The nothingness...
And as he holds it tightly
it starts to squirm...

A bird flies
through the murky clouds
of fog-covered sky.

...like the unlucky worm who just ended
his journey, caught, squeezed, squirming
in the bird's grasp yet
still hopeful
until motionless

The sky's clouds descend
and cast silvery shadows over
night's steely stillness.

Hollowness echoes to a crescendo, as the
nothingness stops flailing and
slowly
sinks
through the pores of his palms, digested,
entering his bloodstream,
through his veins, lodging in his heart.

He fights desperately, his fists
clutched in rebellion, his shouts
tearing the now darkened night air.
Writhing, pouring out his tears.
Hope? Help...

If only the nothing could leave through
the eyes' tears
the mouth's cry
If only he could give it form, could
see
find
expel this indefinable it.

The next morning he opens his eyes,
but no longer feels like crying,
no longer feels like fighting against
the no help, no hope, no thing ness.
Numb, he no longer cares.

As the sun rises,
the man is in my shadow,
yet I am a
shadow of that man.

* * *

As I read this poem, what comes to mind is your creative writing professor's comments. In a thick red pen, he scrawled : You did an excellent job of capturing the existential darkness and emptiness of suffering--the nothingness, fighting the inevitable, the resignation. He also said he liked the two embedded Haiku's and felt they effectively created an objective environmental correlative as context and backdrop to the internal feelings and searching of the author.

A bird flies
through the murky clouds
of fog covered sky.

The sky's clouds descend
and cast silvery shadows over
night's steely stillness.

He even commented favorably on the alliteration in the second haiku. I guess there is a place, occasionally, for what I find to be Johannes' sophomoric sound sophistry.

Why do I like this poem? I feel less alone when I read it. I feel the writer-- a version of me-- understands something that is still a part of me. I like that pain

can be crafted into art. To do so requires both the experience of suffering, and the ability to develop some distance from that very suffering, so that you mold and create it.

I guess the danger is that the art--and the distancing-- become the goal, and the people on Sixth Street and their suffering are reduced to a means to encourage creativity, and are left behind, still in their gutters. I'd rather read a poem about that experience, than re-experience it. Maybe I'm still too close to the feelings to really allow myself to open to them. I'd rather be the bird, flying overhead, not getting too close, a strategy both Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe have pointed out that I use a lot.

*

*

*

I don't know how long I remain lying there, taking notes, but finally I set my pen down and close my eyes. I feel like I've lost any justification for my existence, or am realizing that I never had one. I feel like an invisible shadow blending into the darkness that people look right through-- empty, purposeless. I think again of Ellison's' invisible man. Yet, simultaneously there is a prison-like blinding searchlight being focused on me, that reveals my emptiness from every angle. I have no place to hide.

I feel there is no me to hide, and I must hide that fact.

I think back to the man on Market with the derby hat. I have this naive yet powerful rush of emotion. Affection? Empathy? I want to throw my arms around him and say, please don't think ill of me. I'm begging, too.

I'm begging for existence, and I don't know where to look. The law is of as little help to you as it is to me. It's futile to seek answers there.

I'm lost. I feel like I'm looking into me, so deeply that I've hit the other side. I've ripped through my body, clawing and tearing at flesh, creating wounds, re-opening wounds, to find some center, some base from which to start.

And it's hollow. There is no self there.

I feel paralyzed and can't move. I don't know any longer where to go or what to do. Not only about big issues, like the rest of my life, but the little ones as well. Should I turn around, return to Sixth Street, try to find Mac and a place to stay for the night? Should I go back to my room at the Fairmont, re-climb the mountain to the tower of pomp and privilege, draw a warm bath? Should I abort this whole trip and return to the safety of the Farm. But what safety? I don't belong anywhere.

So I just lie here, a person without a role, without a goal.

I remember when I was seven becoming separated from my family on a trip to Disneyland.

At first I felt panicky, wandering around among all the bigger people, looking up at each one to see if they were my parents. To calm myself, I imagined myself as an even littler boy, when mom and dad would place the "magic" blanket around me while putting me to bed. They began at my toes, and they pulled it up over my legs, stomach, chest and face. When I asked about covering my face, they said it had lots of air holes, so I could continue to breathe normally. Yet, though light, they said, it was also powerful and protective, so that nothing bad could happen to me while it was around me. I kept trying to remind myself that I had the magic blanket covering me, and I would be ok.

I start to feel that same blanket covering me now, and I feel warmer and safer. I close my eyes. Now I can sleep. Maybe that is all I'm meant to do in this life. Jonah's work is done. Job's life is unendurable. I am not willing to be Moses going back up the mountain again to find the law once more. It's a Sisyphean task of which I'm just not capable. All I want to do is sleep. Just let me sleep.

*

*

*

I'm not being completely honest, am I? As usual. I'm trying to put a positive cast on how those "nakedly vulnerable" writing efforts were viewed. Like looking through a scrapbook filled only with positive pictures. What about my commitment to total honesty? There was much more criticism. First, the uptight aloof political

science professor was more of a caricature I had created than I realized. He'd actually written his Ph.D dissertation on the role of wealth in New York City politics, and that he couldn't find a New York publisher because the thesis was so critical and unflattering of the idle rich. Of course, that made his criticism of my-Johanne's-paper are all the more stinking. He gave him a bad grade for being too humanistic, "touchy-feely," sermonizing with insufficient data, references, and impartial contextual analysis. In red ink, all over the paper, were questions like, "What percentage of your sample were men, what age, what ethnicity? How many were mentally ill?" "Did you do any field interviews?" "If you want to use qualitative data, so be it. But there's none here, either. How did these people end up on Sixth Street? What are their stories?" "Aren't you conflating social security with all legal remedies and over generalizing?" "What are your suggestions for addressing this situation? At the very least you should have followed up on Mr. Mac's discussion about the implications for society if alcoholism were reclassified from a crime to an illness. I read his essay 'The Big Sickness.' Did you? I suggest you take this course pass/no credit."

The creative writing professor said the two homeless people that were described had visual immediacy, but lacked depth, history, and poignancy. He said literarily what the political science professor said scientifically: "There is no story to humanize the suffering of those 'men' on Sixth Street. They never came alive, they were just an abstraction. This is all and only about you. That may be where you need to start, but it should not be where you end."

It's true,, mostly what and how Johannes wrote then was about himself. He was the outsider, and a fearful one at that. It really was unclear to him what he was doing there. Was it to study them? See what Mery meant by suffering? See if he could view suffering without feeling it, keeping his objective distance? In some ways, what he wrote about them was simply his own projections.

It seems I was pretty unaware of the stories of the humans who lived around me, like the political science professor or others on the Farm, as I was about the people

on Sixth Street. I didn't then, and still don't know where "these people" come from, their childhoods, their fears, lost dreams, hopes, visions, what their daily life is like. What Johannes wrote about was his pontification, his inner suffering, fears and lostness. Trying to understand how this suffering affected him, how to try to regain some solidity, meaning, and direction in his own life.

Is that inappropriate? From one perspective, no. If I am not for myself, who will be? He has to learn who he is. No one can do it for him. I guess the danger is that's where we end. I'm still doing it. When does the next line come in: If I am only for me, who am I? Will there ever be an end to this internal searching? As I'm continuing to learn, I was then and still am no pretty unclear on my own story, too. It's embarrassing, even humiliating how ignorant I am of everything and everybody around and within me.

* * *

I open my eyes. About twenty yards away, I see three tall, powerful, black men come out from the shadows and start walking toward me.

I watch them as they near within ten feet. What must they be thinking and seeing? A white honkie lying in the gutter, a helpless victim on crutches? Easy prey? I feel like that seven year boy, but now knowing that the magic blanket doesn't exist anymore. It has been stolen from me, and I am a little lost child wanting to break into tears.

Suddenly I exist, but only as a victim, and a fearful one.

And a judging, stereotyping one. **True, John, but how do you know when you're accurately perceiving, and when you're being inappropriately defensive? The answer can't be only after the result of the event. Dr. Lisbet has tried to teach me how to suspend beliefs, remain ready for all eventualities. Not an easy thing to do.** They approach, stop, and stare at me. I hear snippets of a song. From where? A radio, the church? My mind? Who is singing? Dylan? Hendrix?

You've gone to the finest school all right, ...And nobody has ever taught you how to live on the street.

They don't know me. How did they get there? How did I get here?

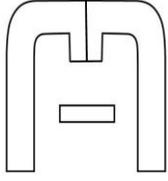
Once upon a time you dressed so fine
You threw the bums a dime in your prime, didn't you?
How does it feel
To be without a home
Like a complete unknown
Like a rolling stone?

They have no idea of my story or how I landed in this gutter.

No one says anything. I avert my eyes and cower in a fetal position. Where is
Mery's minister when I need him? Or a policeman? I grasp my crutches. Will they
provide any protection? I hear a mocking laughter. I look up and see that one has
reached into his pocket. I expect him to draw a knife. I don't have much money to
give. But I'll give them all I have.

But before I can say anything, he removes his hand, and sticks a dollar bill
next to me. Then they walk on.

* * *
* * *



s I watch their backs walking away from me, I think I
hear one of them say "rev." Is he talking about a car engine? The
"Rev" at Mery's church? The clanging is gone. So is the Door' music.
After getting over the shock of my expectations, my mind and heart are
filled with laughter. I want to burst into song. What? Zippety do dah?
Hallelujah!

These black men saw a poor crippled person, in sandals,
clothes wrinkled and torn from falling, lying in a gutter and they had
pity on him and gave him money! I don't think I've smiled since
Carmel. How about a book title, not "Darkness at Noon" but "Laughter
at Midnight?"

In the cold, foggy damp of night, I feel the coolness of the
evening air. But it's not chilly, it's fresh and enlivening.

Thank God I've left Sixth Street behind me. Now it's time to
arise out of this gutter.

I roll over on my left side, curl my left knee toward my
stomach. I imagine looking down on myself from above and seeing a
person in a semi-fetal position. The right leg appears to be
unfolding, straightened and readying for action--a move from
fetus to greater mobility and maturity. Ironically, it is the right
leg that I'm protecting, and yet it is the one that keeps me from
looking like I'm completely in a fetal position.

I continue another half turn until both my elbows are
on the raised cement curb. I'm resting on my left knee, and my right
leg is sticking straight out into the street, so that no weight is on
it. My stomach is slightly touching the ground, but rising a bit. I

push my left heel toward the sky, toes on the ground. My left foot is now parallel with my chin. I push from my elbows, leaning into and placing most of my weight on my palms, allowing me to straighten both arms, and push against the cold hard sidewalk. This allows me to bring my torso up so that I'm sitting on my left knee. I place the crutches under each shoulder, press with my shoulder and hands, left knee, and left toes and heel, and hoist myself up.

Now I'm standing.

Balancing my weight on my left foot, I lift both crutches off the ground, and make a half turn with my body and crutches. I'm now facing the top of the mountain.

How can anyone possibly be expected to navigate through life when even the simplest act of standing up is this complex.

* * *

I feel like a battery-driven, but nearly chargeless top. With an ungazelle-like gait, I begin walking up Taylor to the Fairmont. I hear in my mind Asiya's voice:

When the tent that houses us on earth is folded up,
there is a house for us from God....
In the present life we groan under the burden...
God who designed us for this purpose, and He has given
us the spirit as a pledge.

When she first read it to me, I wondered what kind of God is it that designs us to groan under our burdens? The passage struck me as some of her New Testament evangelical clap trap, to keep her and other weak souls like her moving forward. Maybe, as Zeke would say, I was a wee bit too harsh.

As I pass Ellis, I decide to turn left and head to Mery's church. Maybe I should just go by, see if it's open. A house of God is never supposed to lock its doors, right? What have I got to lose? And

I can always go back to the Fairmont for a warm, hot baath. Maybe there is something at the church that can bathe and fill my tired, empty soul groaning under the burden of life.

*

*

*

As I limp along a few more steps, testing my foot, I remember walking these sidewalks with Mery, on the way to church. "Groaning under the burden," I repeat to myself. Who needs that? It sounds so melodramatic. Poor little sad match-stick boy, dragging himself to church. Just like Mery dragged me. But then I have a happy thought. Before we went to Church, we ate donuts. Ah, donuts. That is a cure for sadness, indeed. I remember when we were there seeing that beautiful little girl with her grandfather. Remembering the joy they took in each other makes me happy.

The church may or may not be open, but I know the donut cottage will be. That definitely has a stronger pull. Time for a repeat performance. I feel some of my old courage and confidence returning. I may be alone, but I have my mind, and with it I can choose to remember only the good times. The smells of the donuts, the happiness in that little girls eyes reflected in her grandfather's love. I can choose to remember only the fun times I had with Mery--and I have the pictures to prove it. My tennis coach said, "Let go of the bad shots." My golf coach said, "Bank in your mind only the good shots." My psychology professors talk about getting rid of negative cognitions. Perfect. We're all in accord. My mind makes life livable...and makes reality into the image I desire.

*

*

*

As I walk in, the aroma of the donuts surround me. Ah, my good Jewish nose, infallibly working again. It's nice to have you

on my team once more. I guess when the smells are urine and stench,
it's best to shut down and numb yourself. But now I enjoy the return
of my senses, bringing renewed pleasure. I notice an erotic feeling
starting to surge in me. It might be fun to find a woman this
evening, someone I don't know, with whom I have no past---maybe even
pay for it---just because I look so shabby and don't feel like being
charming or dressing up. Just be who I am now. Then surprise her and
take her to the Fairmont in Mr. Red.

Though the Donut Cottage is dimly lit, it appears positively
bright in contrast to the darkness of the street. The pleasant
sensations of the donut smells are a joy. They go right to my core.
A small greyish yellow poster on the wall announces, "Encounter
Group: Thurs, June 11, 8 pm Unitarian Church. 33rd and Eddy, All
Welcome. Safe, Supportive."

So, in 42 hours people will be encountering each other. Safe
and supportive sounds good. In forty-two hours, Mac will have talked to
my political science seminar, ending that class. By Wednesday, I will
have attended my last creative writing class, and brought Mac back
here. I'd even be able to attend if I wanted. But I can do that for
myself. I don't need them. I've had enough encounters, God
knows.

Enough morbidity and darkness. Things are definitely chang-
ing. I'm actually a little bit hungry, which is astonishing after my
two meals, cheesecake and hot fudge brownie Sundae. I buy two old
fashioned glazed, and as I walk to a table, I look down at them. They
smell delicious, and look like two lovely breasts on the plate. Yum.

Three men are sitting in a booth in front of me. A respite from
the street? These must be the lucky ones.

Life is good. I even have people watching for entertainment, all as part of the price of admission.

I take a bite of the donut. I'm surprised how sweet it tastes, and feel its sugary energy like an electrical current all through my body. Followed by a generous dose of milk. Maybe it's all the exercise, stress and strain. The lad needs to keep his energy up.

The men are unaware of me watching them.

They also seem to be unaware of each other. All three are looking into their coffee cups.

I take a sip of coffee for warmth. I wonder if these men, who have money for coffee, are a higher rung than those on the Sixth Street food chain. Maybe part of an AA program. Good for them.

One speaks. Low guttural sounds. His words merge, almost inaudible. Neither of the other two look up.

They all begin humming. Occasionally one of them will speak, but there is no response by the other two. And all three continue staring into their cups of coffee.

It's like I'm watching a play by Ionesco or Beckett. Theater of the absurd. None of them can get out of themselves enough to either listen to or hear what the others are saying. Just long silences. Inaudible words.

An easy play to write!

*

*

*

I take another sweet syrupy bite of donut to receive another electrical charge. I think briefly of tearing down the grayish yellow notice, handing it to them, and suggesting they might consider going. But I know that I wouldn't be doing this to help them so much as to mock them.

I'm much more comfortable watching this play, then to go outside, and live the drama what awaits there.

I smile at my inside joke, then think, this play's not something I'd pay too much for, but the snacks are worth the price of admission.

As I take a third bite, I hear Elizabeth's "still small voice" accusing me of using "distancing strategies" to keep from g or empathizing with these men.

I try to swish her away, like that stupid annoying fly at a picnic, but she keeps buzzing, becoming louder and more irritating.

I look directly at each of the three old men. I don't feel empathy, I feel anger. Old men, look at each other, damn it. Look up, talk, connect. Discuss the weather, or politics, or something, even your pain. Or that there is nothing to say. "An angel is passing over," Mery would say in her poorly accented French. We need to clap our hands and get Tinkerbell moving again. She's suspended in mid air. Come on, old men, you must have something to talk about.

Or is it too hard to speak, too much effort to make that connection? Would they think my clapping a reward for their theatrics, a fitting end to a theatre of the absurd performance?

I wonder if they are aware of the spaces and barriers between them. Are they more than just lumps physically sitting at the table? Where are their minds? Maybe lost in an excursion into their pasts, their youths? Was there ever a moment of joy in your lives? What happened? Do you ever wonder "How did I end up here?" Is this where we all end up? Do you have any unfulfilled dreams for the future? Do you have a future? Or are you condemned to live in this hellacious deadening present?

I want to shout at them, Old men, are you there? Are you just numb mannequins? Are your indifferent, detached, mechanical lives worth it? Is the cup of coffee that good? Does it warm you? Does your conversation warm you? Is that enough to make life worth living?

Then I wonder what it would be like if I were not watching the play, but was part of the play, and someone was watching me and commenting. Wouldn't everything I'm saying about them apply to me? Here sits this person, all alone, with huge spaces all around him. He occasionally chuckles and smiles, like a mad man, while he eats his donuts. And the faster he eats them, the more he exposes the nothingness that lies at their center. Heideggerian donuts outer field with nothing on the inside.

If I were watching me in a play, would I talk of me in the third person, he, to create distance, or more personally address me, as "you," to try to give some illusion of dialogue and personal intimacy?

Why do you sit here? I guess it's better than the street, a rung up from Dante's Hell, the cracked sidewalks. But this isn't living, either.

Why do you sit and die while living?

Isn't the slow pain of death unbearable? The slow pain of life?

I notice that while I've been watching and thinking about them, my hands have been fiddling with my donuts, and I've crumbled them into little pieces.

* * *

What a chaotic and disastrous Shavuot he's having. How different from the lessons on Shavuot that the Reb Jonathan gave when I first met him, and he had us imagine climbing Sinai. How different from my actual climb up Sinai. I wonder how Johannes' Shavuot would have been

different if he had had the Rebbe to guide him up the mountain? What would his word have been at the top? What spiritual wisdom might have most helped him then, helped me a year ago? Or was there no help possible, and he had to go through his free fall? **Or was there a message right before him, but which he just didn't recognize?**

*

*

*

This night is also not going as I intended, or as well as I wanted. I remember Mery saying that humans plan, and God laughs. Is this all part of a cosmic joke? I leave the Donut Cottage determined to have some fun. Either a warm bath, or a trip somewhere sensual. Or both. Sequentially or simultaneously.

The trip back up the mountain seems onerous, and I look for a cab. See what you were missing out on, Moses?

The wind increases, a light rain starts to fall, and no cab is in sight. Ah, sensation. It's windy and cold. I wonder if they've been there all along, and I've just been too numb to feel it. There is discomfort, even pain, in the elements. But there is a pleasure too in just feeling something. I wonder if this is the pain and pleasure mix that Mery felt? Am I starting to understand her better?

To seek sanctuary, though against my better instincts, I hobble in my awkward gait the short distance down Ellis street toward the church. The door is unlocked. As I enter the church, the lights are dim, too dim to casting shadows. I notice some scattered light-blue leaflets on a table a few on the floor beneath it. I casually pick one up and read: Shavuot: An Interfaith Service. I stuff it into my pocket and enter the sanctuary.

I look at the stained glass windows on the left. With no sun or back lighting, they are almost opaque, but the deep dark blue again

draws me toward it, seeming to engulf all the other colors. I once again stare at its velvety pulsating texture.

As I walk up to the window, its color changes to a greenish-blue as my movement brings the yellow street lamps outside into view behind it. The yellow of the mustard seed. Mery's faith.

I touch the glass with my cut finger.

This time, the glass doesn't harm me. But like a piece of beryl, it's cold and hard.

I feel a welling up of inchoate emotions. What is wrong with me? I'm on an emotional roller coaster. What's going on? Am I sad because this church reminds me of that first wonderful morning with Mery? Am I so emotional because I've left the cold windy rain, and the pain and sadness which litter the streets outside and therefore I'm sheltered enough to warm up, and safe enough to let down my defenses?

There was suffering outside. But as my internal numbness slowly ebbs, in its wake a deeper, dizzying pain returns. Is this pain a step above or below the numbness? Does it bring me closer to the sunlight?

At the front of the church near the pulpit, an older woman is praying. The church appears empty otherwise.

I wonder if God is lonely, too.

* * *

I place my crutches on the bench, and sit in the back row, where I sat the first time I came here. I remember the excitement of seeing Mery come in wearing her bright, sunny yellow dress. When I stood up to sing, I saw that I was taller than almost everyone. How proud I felt. How full of hope.

I hear the low, mournful notes of a flute. Am I imagining the sound, the way I did the clanging outside on Market? I look around and see no one playing. I listen carefully, as each note is played

slowly, arises, and then vanishes into silence. Lost, forever gone, irreplaceable. Leaving only emptiness.

I hear the Reverend's words echoing in the silent hall, filling my mind. "I'm not talking at you, I'm rapping with you. Jesus never split the scene. We are all Jesus-like, we all have that potential for faith, the faith of just one tiny grain of mustard seed." Not me, Rev. I'm out of there. I just ran away from them, left them cold and lying on the street. I'm no Jonah, unless it's Jonah still running away. I return and drink a fifth cup of wine, Elijah's, but I'm no Elijah. I'm no Jesus serving the poor. If I'm honest, Mery is the person of faith, a field of yellow mustard seeds. She's the one who tried to teach me to give to others. Jesus gave his life for others; Mery gives her life to help others.

I don't look up, but I feel Jesus looking at me, telling me how guilty and bad I am, like the worst parts of mom and Nana combined. He's staring at me. I know he is. I want to hide from Him. Like a little boy, I bury my face in my hands, hoping that if I can't see Him, He can't see me.

* * *

I've never before wondered whether death might be a blessing. At least it would end this pain. I wonder if this is what mom felt. It's not just physical, like the cut in my foot or my hand. That I can manage, and I understand. But this other pain, I can't describe it. I feel it physically throughout my body, a dull, dizzying, confusing whirling. I can't grasp it, label or define it. The swirling nausea of a winding road at night. A throbbing ache in my belly.

Jesus.

Face bent forward, looking downward. Mouth tightly clenched,
teeth biting his tongue till it bleeds. Trying to stop himself from
screaming out in pain. Deserted. Father, why hast Thou forsaken
me? Left to die on the cross. Lama sabachithani. Cast
adrift, dying. Is He like all of us, living a pointless, meaningless
existence, full of sound and fury, culminating in the futility of
death? In the present life we groan under the burden...Are we
supposed to sing Hallelujah, God, thank You for this burden; God who
designed us for this purpose? Do You like what You have created--
suffering fools? And our only reward, "Your spirit as a pledge"?

We all suffer on the cross, and we all end up dust and ashes in
the grave. God, is this life just a hollow, empty, inconsequential
cosmic game? Is this a test? Are You trying to see how much we
can take before we break? Do You delight in our suffering? Is this
how we are meant to spend our live crying out, bloodied, bowed....?

See me cut on the outside, hand and foot. See me cut on the
inside. Mery's gone. My family's gone. I have no idea who I am and
where I am going.

Hear, then rejoice in my tears. Yes Father, yes father, big
boys don't cry. But I'm no longer a big boy. I give up. Here they
are. See them?

Are you happy now? Smiling? Yes, I'm crying. Weeping. I can't
keep them down. I'm crying them out. God help me, God help me, somebody
help...

Are You listening? Do You care? Are You even there?

*

*

*

The pressure at the top of my back startles and frightens me.
It's heavy, piercing, sharp, as if a knife is being plunged into and

through my clothes, my skin, and into my too vulnerable, naked, bloodied innards.

I turn angrily, and see a shadowy figure behind me, a hand on my back. I thrust it off. Why are you touching me? As the form comes into the light, all I see is the kindly wrinkled face of an older woman looking down at me. She has felt my flinch, or seen the fear in my face, or maybe the suppressed shout and pulls back. She has been crying too.

But now her face seems afraid, like mine. She takes her hand away, turns, and leaves.

Wait, no. But I don't move or say anything. I want to get up and stop her, thank her. I'm afraid to be left alone, but I wouldn't know what to say, either. I no longer have words to speak. I no longer trust my voice.

Increasingly I seem to frighten and drive people away from me, like the plague that I am. People to turn in horror from me, whether this woman, who doesn't know me at all, or Mery, who knew me too well.

I still feel the soft pressure of the woman's hand on my back and shoulder. It makes me feel less and more lonely at the same time. I want that touch, but I'm too frightened and vulnerable to receive it. I place my face in my hands, and continue to cry.

* * *

I hear Asiya's voice, and the song she'd sing to me during the last few weeks, after she'd finished reading a section from the Bible

Deep river, my home is over Jordan

Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into the campground

Oh chillun

Oh, don't you want to go to that gospel feast

That Promised Land where all is peace

Sometimes it was all I could do not to burst out laughing. A Middle Eastern Palestinian woman singing Southern gospel. Now, as it plays

in my mind, I feel angry. Listen to that song. Oh, dear all mighty good God, let me have the peace of your Promised Land. Oh, You are so wonderful God, to create all this suffering so we can pray, sing, and beg for something better.

Barf. And I don't mean existential nausea.

* * *

I sit for a while in silence, save for the sound of an occasional sob. Then my anger at God turns to anger at me. I feel myself once again rising above and outside myself, as if I'm directing a play. And down below me is a poor self-absorbed young man. Cue the music.

Moribund, melodic minor music in b flat. Five flats. "Oh how flat my life is" he whines. Now cue the oboe from the second movement of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4, depicting sadness and loneliness. How about some violin strings crescendoing as background to the little sobbing whiny boy's tears?

What is going on with you, little baby boy? You've got a little cut on your foot and finger. You had a bad weekend with a girl friend. Too bad. Wah hah wah. Get over it and quit acting like a sniveling, pampered spoiled brat. What is this victimed giving up, woe-is-me whining?

If all you do is talk about loneliness and nothing to look forward to, you're not exactly the fun type of person people are going to want to hang around with. Or even that you yourself would want to hang around.

Johannes, don't flatter yourself. Whether you're whining or cock sure of yourself, you're never that much fun to hang around with. Though, since I'm not the stuff of which masochists are made, I guess there must be something redeeming about you that makes me continue to spend so much time with you.

I need to remind myself that the sun is always shining.
Sometimes it just hides behind the clouds or is on the other side of
earth. But it is always there. I've been reading too many books
about existential despair, and am starting to act like suffering
servant Mery. Oh, how cruel and harsh life is, Rhett.

Why all the hysterical theatrics? I'm not going to break. I'm not
going to let myself be this moaning victim because of Mery or God, or
anyone. I'm a winner, and I'm a fighter, and I'll battle this and
You to the end. You don't know Your opponent. You've picked the wrong
one this time. This is not some mealy mouthed little Job who will come
beseeching You in the end.

Better. I take a breath, and look back up at Jesus. Could I be a
little more open-hearted? Sure, I'm not happy about nor do I enjoy
others' suffering. But if you couldn't be happy unless everyone in the
world was pain-free and had a great life, then you'd never be happy.
I've got to remember to be for myself. I don't want to spend all my
days hanging sad-faced from a cross. This place is depressing. I've got
to get out of here.

Enough salty tears, and enough of this god damn God.

* * *
The early morning light is filtering into the room as I lie
beneath the sheets, pulling them more tightly around me. I'm finally
alone. Thank God she left. What a hellacious night.

I thought I was just going to come back to my room, draw a nice
warm bath, and go to sleep. Why didn't that happen?

I feel the throbbing in my right foot, and up my leg. I
definitely did too much walking last night, focused way too much on
making a difference in others' lives rather than paying attention to my
own needs. What a stupid idea to do that field research.

After I left the church, I couldn't find a cab, and decided to walk up the hill—to take care of myself. As I was walking, I felt some humor and joy return in the witty wonder of my mind.

Going to the The Fairmont. The Fair Mount(ain) beckons.

Fair Mount. The horse that I rode with Mery. Also where I once had a Fair Mount: a mounting of someone fair. Cute. Awful. A complete regression back to your sophomoric, mechanical, body-driven sexuality.

I nod brusquely, ignoring the stares and concerns of the doormen, who appear to be shocked at my disheveled appearance, limp, and dried blood on my hand. None of their business.

When I arrive at my room, the first thing I do is pour water in the tub, creating a mikvah, for cleansing of all the difficulties and troubles I've been going through. I even think it might be good for me to skip my class tonight, not go pick up Mac, but instead take a couple of days of recuperation in this peaceful environment, the top of Nob Hill, the top of the mountain from which to gain a perspective, and wash away all the silly, sad, salty tears.

* * *

Once the bath is prepared, and I am disrobed, I pause and look in the mirror, but don't really see who I'm looking at. Instead, I wonder, what is going on/ Why, when I try to find happiness, does it elude me? It used to be so simple. Now, even seeking a little joy and respite in the Donut Shop, I end up seeing sadness everywhere-- in people, even in donut "holes."

The same thing happened a few weeks ago after going to that depressing movie with Sandy. A different donut shop, unrelated people, yet I end up with the same feelings. The same in the church. Morbid, a hanging dead man on a cross. My thoughts start to re-circle

and repeat. Why is there so much sadness in the world? How can anyone be happy if you can only be happy when there is no one who is sad? I feel like there is a broken record in my mind, endless replaying the same sad track.

I've got to stop this sadness and loneliness from infesting and infecting my life. Otherwise I won't be able to escape it. I end up feeling like I'm in my coffin-like little green room, whether among the dregs of Sixth Street, in church, at a movie, or the opulence of this room at the Fairmont. I'm not going to let the loneliness and misery descend upon me again. I'm getting tired of the eternal repetitions of negative experiences.

The problem is not with them. The problem is with me. I'm not able to block it out like I used to. I've got to learn that skill again. It will take practice, just like learning tennis.

Carpe Diem. I want some physical connection. When I think of the experience with Sandy--what a desert wilderness that was-- I realize I need to be with someone with whom I have no history. I don't want to be trapped by expectations. I also don't want any commitments. I've heard the Tenderloin district is the place I need to go for this this type of an exchange of services. My money. Their companionship. Just what I need to jumpstart old John Henry, my lingham, my shaft of light, in this darkness.

* * *
Even though I am undressed and ready to step into the tub, I change my mind. I don't want to cleanse myself. I want to leave the dirt and stains and cuts on me. I feel dirty, look dirty, and that is perfect to visit a disgusting, seedy place--not the one I'd just come from with all those pathetic old men who had nothing to offer me and

only wanted to take from me; but one where there are some women, who will want from me, but also have something I want.

How sad, how scary the way the mind works. You see yourself as victim--being taken from and used. What about the man who gave you money? The old woman in the church who tried to comfort you? Such a victimized, warped perspective.

I turn off the water, put on my torn clothes, and go downstairs to find Mr. Red. I definitely don't want to walk down the mountain again. I think of getting a cab. Maybe that would be safer, less ostentatious, but I don't want a third person knowing what I'm doing, It would be embarrassing to ask a cab driver to "Take me to the Tenderloin" from the Fairmont. I'm sure I'd get a knowing look.

I drive down Leavenworth, partly so I won't have to go by Glide. I don't want God or Mery or the Reverend seeing what I'm doing either. Also, Leavenworth is a perfect choice. It reminds me of Leavenworth the famous prison in Kansas. Yes, I'm still in prison on this Shavuot. No Passover liberation this year. Tough luck, God. You weren't successful with this one. You didn't get your matzah's (un)leaven(ed) worth, huh. Instead, I'm going to find my golden calf--or is that golden calves-- on Golden Gate Avenue. I'm going to find golden, tender loins at the Tenderloin.

Johannes, unlike Moses, you are descending on a red chariot bringing nothing --no law either secular or spiritual. You only bring your perverted lust. At least you had some temporary, embarrassed self-consciousness at what you're doing. But there is really nothing ennobling about you. I find you disgusting.

There is a red light, and I stop. Idly, I listen to the engine idle. Clever. My mind's wit has returned in full force.

I look around. I see nothing-human or automaotive-- in any direction. The absurdity of laws, rules, and regulations. It's 3 a.m. And I'm stopping at a stupid red light. Normally I'd just look around, see no cops, and run it. But I hesitate. Because of Mery. Even though she's not with me anymore, she's gotten inside me. She makes me think and rethink everything. I hear her saying, "You shouldn't break rules even if you can get away with it. That's not thinking of the other person." What other person? Then I hear her say "Do you think you're above the law? Suppose another car suddenly appeared and you killed someone by your actions?" That makes no sense. There's no one around. She's an idiot. She doesn't even believe in the law. She's so full of contradictions.

But then I think, what if I get caught? Maybe there is an undercover cop, like Dad, waiting. The only thing stupider than stopping at a lonely red light, is to run it and then get a ticket. What I like is freedom, the open road, people getting out of my way. I feel like a passive idiot waiting, as if someone has put invisible chains on me, and I'm unable to go forth.

*

*

*

As I listento my car idling, watching the red light that is my jailer, I hear Richard talking about how meek, crude, and coarse my Vette sounds compared to the complex underlying symphony of his Jaguar. Once while he was driving me to a double date, he said, "Listen, chap, and you'll hear the mellow, refined exhaust growl at 200-400 hz while I'm cruising due to the closed spring loaded plunger valves in the inlet pipes of the 'silencer'-what you chaps call a muffler. But," and then he opened the throttle and floored it "now listen, the increased exhaust gas pressure pushes the valves open, changing the exhaust sound to a bright metallic snarl and growl, a

pure 700-800 hz. Crispy-clear and defined, chap, not wooly around the edges. Meow." He winked at me. "They even bore a hole so you can hear the engine note's color and timbre, adding to the chorus, but with none of the excessive noise, vibration and harshness in your machine. It's just another example of superior quality." He couldn't just drive us somewhere. He always had to make it a competition about something. I was out of my league, and had no idea what to say, so I sat silently, while he added, "Sounds evoke a lot of emotions, don't they?"

*

*

*

This morning I awake to the sound of the snoring of the girl I'd picked up last night. Her name, she said, is like a candy bar. Ruth, as in Baby Ruth. To go with her baby face.

I get out of bed, open the blinds, and look at the gray fog before me. Returning to the desk, I pull out a pen and my journal, and begin to write about last night's dreams.

The first dream was simple. I'm an adolescent boy, about 14, and mom has hired a baby sitter to take care of me. It turns out that she is in law school, and babysitting part time. When everyone leaves, she tells me a story about one of the cases she recently read about. A retarded woman who was selling M and M's and recipes, but a big monopoly had forced her out of business. I have no idea what she's talking about, but she's really stacked, with long legs. She then starts hugging and kissing me and telling me how adorable I am. Her boyfriend comes over and catches us. He's huge, tattooed, muscular, and furious. I chirp innocently, "Hey, we're all friends. No big deal."

He doesn't see me as a threat, but like a little puppy dog, and says ok, this time you can live. Then they start making out, and she begins stroking him. I wonder if he'll be angry if I take some

pictures of them. I'm really horny, but in the dream I'd recently had a huge meal and I'm feeling too heavy to have an orgasm.

Could this mean I'm still attracted to the law (at least if she were a sexy female, blind folded liberty? But I'm not enticed by the tough, bruising nature of her boyfriend. I'm also still horny, after last night with Ruth, but feel slothful and overweight after my orgy of food.

I wonder what I'm going to have for breakfast. More baby Ruth, or some cheesecake? Or both. Or maybe I'll order up some room service. I have a brief moment of guilt as I anticipate the abundance of my meal, and my being served luxuriously, contrasted with that homeless man rooting through the trash for food. But I quickly dismiss the feeling. It's not logical. How does my eating or not eating affect him one way or the other? I look over at Ruth. She's still sleeping. I continue writing. My final dream of the night.

I'm at the beach. There is a contest, and people are making sand sculptures. One makes a castle; another a camel; a third a big head. They are quite intricate and large. I decide to run along the beach but my eyesight is poor, the sun is blinding me, and as I jog I run into each person's project and smash them. I apologize, tell them I didn't mean to, but don't know what else to do, so I keep running. At the end of the beach, there is a discarded car. Two hippies are in it, smoking. I tell them they shouldn't smoke. They tell me to fuck off. I say, fine, it's your life, your death. I'm not upset because I plan to go back to my lovely room in our beautiful home in Kansas City where I'm going to write a short story about someone running along the beach where there is a sand sculpture contest and finding a car with two hippies in it.

The first part of the dream—running into and destroying the sculptures-- seems obvious. Once again, I'm a blundering, destructive plague. That is a self-image I'm getting really tired of. Even my dreams attack me. I have no idea who the hippies are. The next generation of people who will end up on Sixth Street? I'm trying to help them, cure them of their bad habits. Unsuccessfully, of course, just like last night would have been if I'd tried to tell the homeless alcoholics not to drink.

Maybe the most intriguing part of the dream is the illusion that I could go home and be safe in my room in Kansas City. That house is no longer ours. I no longer have a home. But what does writing the story mean? Is it my preparatory work I'm doing now for my political science paper? My creative writing paper? It's a pretty creative dream. I'm not only experiencing the dream, but I'm also gaining a certain peace of mind by planning to write about the event, thereby gaining some distance from them.

And here I am, now, in the City, planning to write about the events I'm experiencing. It's like an Escher painting, in which my waking life and dream life are intersecting in strange, non-ordinary perspectives.

*

*

*

I put my dream journal away, take out a fresh clean piece of paper, and write a few words:

hissighing...

still, softly, the silhouette's shadow
sensuously seeks

I hear a groan. "Too much light. Close the curtains." I get up and pull them down, go over to the bed, and climb under the covers.

Round three? She barely opens her eyes, looks at me, and tells me that my nose is peeling.

I ask her if her dark skin protects her from sunburn.

She smiles, says nothing, and rolls over, offering her butt to me. Or so I think. But she keeps rolling, plops her feet onto the floor and gets up.

"I'm going to take a shower. Do you want to join me?" she asks, turning coyly toward me while covering herself with the sheet.

I demur, and instead go back to my desk.

Passing up a shower with a naked woman for my art? Something is definitely different. I continue scribbling, crossing out, adding words to the alliterative poem.

Maybe twenty minutes later, she returns from the shower wearing a towel, walks over to my desk, shakes her head flirtatiously, dripping water on my writing, and pinches my peeling nose.

I make noises like a pig: oink, oink. I tickle her and she giggles.

I ask her if she's ever felt nothingness.

She pinches my nose again and laughs.

"Careful, you'll make it even bigger and people will think I'm Pinocchio and lying." I laugh, but not really a laugh.

She asks if something is wrong.

I ask her if she ever feels life is absurd.

She starts to pinch my nose again, but I turn my head, pick up my journal and ask her if she wants me to read to her a poem I've just written about our night together. She says sure, but leaves the desk, goes over to her purse, pulls out a nail file, sits down on the bed, and begins to file her nails. I watch her, as she proceeds methodically, starting with her left hand pinky. She must be right

I'm feeling. It's too impersonal. She doesn't care about or want to understand me. But isn't that what I was looking for?

But now that superficiality angers and saddens me. Her smile feels empty, an effort to hide herself from me. Or maybe she's being patronizing, condescending? Thinking, "Poor little rich kid, needing to pay for pleasure, my John for the night."

Or maybe the smile is more self-conscious and awkward. She might be thinking, "Just let me out of here. This is more than I bargained for. You didn't pay me to listen to your whining, sighing poetry."

No matter what the reason, her smile accentuates my aloneness and separation, from her, from everyone.

Why did I choose her? Is she any less of an object to me than I to her? And why a black woman? Was I trying to buy the comfort that the family maids offered me when I was young? Fee for service. A known exchange: her sexuality for my money. No strings attached. No commitment. No connection past the moment.

Or did I pick her because she was the unknown? My first time with a black woman, the mystery, the night. Darkness.

Was it revenge on Mery for being with Al? To show Mery that I was cool and hip and non-prejudiced? Was I feeling grateful to the black men who had given me some money and wanting to return the favor?

Why can't anything be simple anymore? Too many thoughts. Too many growling, snarling sounds in my mind.

* * *

She puts her nail file away, and pulls out a cigarette. I hate the smell of smoke, it reminds me of mom's perfume and mouthwash futile efforts to hide that ashen odor.

This is a perfect excuse for me to become angry.

Instead, I merely ask her to please wait to smoke until after she leaves. She looks at me confused. I let her smoke last night. Even took her lighter and held it for her. My reflexive gentlemanly manners. For some reason it was ok then, kind of erotic even and I didn't mind it. But this morning, it's not acceptable.

She says fine, and begins to get dressed. I open the curtain again. Why get upset at her? I'll never see her again. She's not doing anything wrong, just trying to survive, like all of us. As I look at her in the slanted rays of the early morning sun, I see that she's really a pretty young woman. Small breasted, thin, narrow-hipped. Not really my style, if I still have a type that I like. That's the way she's made. She is who she is.

She's not doing anything to deserve my annoyance.

I thank her, pay her, give her cab fare to "wherever." She again smiles, thanks me, says, "Any time." Gives me her number, hugs me and walks toward the door.

As she's leaving, I expect her to turn around and again give a coy wave. I blow her a kiss, with my palm open. But she doesn't turn, and therefore doesn't see the kiss coming toward her. As she leaves the room, I imagine the kiss missing her and ramming into the door, which is slowly being shut on me.

* * *

I go into the fridge and pull out my cheesecake. All I need are some French fried onion rings and this would be a perfect post-love making meal. I take a bite of the cheesecake. It's all right. Not as good as fresh New York Stage Deli. I take another bite. Not as fun as after a lovemaking with Mery.

More like last night's sex. My first experience of consummated physical intimacy since Mery. Should I call it "lovemaking?" Do I even know what that is? I eat another forkful of cheesecake. I feel like a robot, bite, swallow, bite, swallow. Mechanical, like last night. She just wanted to shed her clothes. I tried to keep it slower. Going from base to base. First touching her right breast outside her clothes; the sides of her breasts as her bra comes off; the left side of her pubes, the right side; her buttocks under her pants; the sides of her breasts.

At least my shaft of light still worked. It seemed to have a life of its own. But how could this ever have seemed enjoyable? Mery has ruined it for me. This was just sex. With Mery I realize it was something more—it really was love making. What does that even mean? Maybe something about physical, mental, emotional, even spiritual connection? What does spiritual even mean?

What dream world are you living in, Johannes? Re-read your journal. Show me one example of this connection you're talking about. Maybe the first night at the Fairmont? But I'd hardly call that night, with you pouring chocolate on her, a deep spiritual connection. If you're honest, it was all about lust, wasn't it? You're right, you don't have any idea what a spiritual connection means. I don't know if I do either. But I know one thing--it doesn't need the body.

Nuance, John. Your rejection of Johannes and the body, though understandable, isn't, I believe, our final answer. We're all still learning to evolve and grow, as we find our way into the numinous.

I take another bite of cheesecake, then toss the rest into the wastebasket. I have the whole day ahead of me. I'm starting to fall back into a stupid sadness. I need to get out of this room and do

something enjoyable. The only problem is, besides food and women, I don't know what's pleasurable. And now even they are no longer fun.

*

*

*

Go west, young man. I get into Mr. Red and head down Geary toward the ocean. What could I do differently today, with complete freedom to choose anything I want. I think of Benjamin in The Graduate, energized and seeking to find meaning by chasing after Elaine. What if I did go and see Mery? Just to find out how she's doing, to explore what might evolve, without any structure or expectations. I must admit the idea excites—and terrifies—me. I actually feel a chill and the hairs on my arms stand up. That's both amazing and sad.

When I pass Park Presidio Boulevard, I think of turning left and heading to Golden Gate park. It might be fun to revisit the Shakespeare gardens this fine morning. That's always been a peaceful, restful spot for me.

But I keep driving. The last time I was there with Mery, she fell and had to be taken to the ER. That brings back horrible memories. I don't need to relive that.

I reach the Great Highway. That's what I want, a great highway which leads me to a great life. I turn left and drive along the ocean. It's the first time I've seen the ocean up close since that ghastly, ghostly night in Carmel with Mery. Why does every event lead me back to her--and to such unpleasant emotions?

Maybe I should head south to Harding Park. Watch some golfers. Maybe putt a little bit. I'm sure my legs would be fine for that.

I'm not unaware that I'm making a concentric circle which leads me ever closer to where Mery lives. Am I just postponing the inevitable?

As I get closer to Harding Park, I pass the Zoological Gardens.

Change of plans.

Again.

I'm having a lot of trouble making decisions. More than usual. I feel like a pinball in a machine, ricocheting off the bumpers. But isn't that man's fate, Malraux. We're condemned to freedom. This is the existential given. My throwness. Fine, but I have a right to make as many choices and changes as I want to. Thank goodness no one but me can see into this mind. What a morass.

This time the idea seems to click. Creative, new--at least something I haven't done in a long time--the Zoo!

I hadn't been to the zoo since I was twelve. Fun. At least it's a place I've never been with Mery, and with which I have no bad associations. This will just be enjoyable! A great way to spend Shavuot, my day of freedom from the law. Now I'm a pinball that's broken free of the game, no longer bound by its laws.

*

*

*

I walk in with barely a limp, my head held high, my back arched, as if I have a sense of direction, as if I belong here, and my choice makes sense. To be a Land Surveyor, one must convince not only the Castle guard, and the villagers, but oneself as well.

When I walk in, with my two steel pillars escorting me, I'm transported back to the playfulness and carefreeness of childhood. Maybe even further. Without the confines of Mery, the law, my past, I am like a newborn baby, able to see things afresh. And from that vantage point, what an amazing world it is.

If you take away the label, the word, "elephant," or "camel," and simply look at them--rather than the expectation and classification,--look with the fresh eyes of a child, they are

unbelievable! A clearing of the doors of perception--Huxley's and mine. I feel stoned without being stoned.

I'm in awe. The elephant's trunk. The giraffe's neck. Monkey's and birds, like a kaleidoscope of colors and forms. Each animal is adapted in some way to survive. Miraculous. Mind-altering. And like them, I am here, and need to trust I also have evolved, am evolving in a way that will allow me to survive. I feel a renewed confidence in my step.

I just need to find my special trunk or neck.

* * *

I buy some peanuts, and throw a few to the elephants. I save some for the monkeys. Looking at the map, I decide next, though, to head over and see the horses.

As I walk with a renewed spring in my step, I realize that it's been quite a while since I've taken my weekly horse back ride. I got out of sync in my schedule during the past months with Mery. I try to remember the last time I rode--it was with Mery, at the beach. The vividness of the lovely sense of freedom and happiness I had returns to me instantly, filling my mind and body. But then, just as quickly, it starts to recede, like a dream. It was a beautiful, peaceful dream-like moment. Maybe I should see it like blowing bubbles. At the best, the bubble emerges from the bubble-maker whole, floats skyward, then pop, poop, poof...gone.

* * *

Up ahead, I see a sign:

PRESWALSKIS

The only wild horse left in the world. All others are now tamed, or have once been tamed by man.

What a fascinating, contradictory, paradoxical, ironic statement. The only wild horse left. Yet, where is it found, but

caged in a zoo? The rest of the horses which were once free and unrestrained, humans have already bridled, put a bit into their mouths, tamed them, made them slaves.

Horses no longer have their freedom, but must conform to our law and order. How pathetic we humans are. But isn't that exactly what the law and society are trying to do to me, to everyone? Tame all of us, make all of us slaves? Carrots if we fit into the confined structures, sticks if we step outside the framework. Is that really the profession I want to pursue, the way I want to spend the rest of my life?

But then, as if from nowhere, I'm struck with the ugly thought that I'm attacking humans, society, the law, but ignoring myself and my own behavior. How was I any different while riding with Mery? Didn't I want to be in control? Taming the horse, taming Mery, order them around, getting them to fit into my world order, meet my needs. It's embarrassing to think how ugly and controlling I was, and yet how I truly felt at the time that I was in harmony with the horse and Mery. What a pathetic illusion. How little we know ourselves. Mom was right.

It is embarrassing how long it took Johannes to gain this insight about himself. I guess I should be thankful that at least he's beginning to wake up a little bit. It makes it much easier when I read his journal that he, too now realizes how pathetic he was acting.

Looking at me leg, and crutches, I realize it will still be a bit of time before I can return to my routines like golf and tennis. But maybe that's just an excuse. Would I really want to return to that routine? Or maybe it's an illusion. Maybe there is no routine to return to.

*

*

As I move toward the camel section, there is a heavy-set older man wearing a faded brown sport coat feeding peanuts to them. Although the sport coat is torn and patched and he hasn't shaved for a few days, he seems happy, and unbothered by his disheveled look. He's actually smiling a toothless grin, countered by the camels sharp-toothed reply.

I also still have on my torn clothes from last night. And haven't shaved either. For some reason, I wanted that girl last night to have to accept me, dirty clothes, unwashed, just as I was. And I want to look the same way today. Although I'm not as comfortable looking shabby and ungroomed as that old man seems to be, maybe it's something I can grow into. The animals seem to accept me just as I am.

What was her name? I've already forgotten it. Another vanishing dream. Edible, like a candy bar, that's it Baby Ruth--I should have made a joke last night about that. Oh, can I eat you? That sounds crude. I'm glad I didn't say anything.

The old man may have heard the clanking of my crutches, for he turns toward me. Once he sees me, he seems to become self-conscious, his grin disappears, and he shuffles away.

I brace the crutches under both arms, and with my good foot, I kick a small stone. It lands in a puddle, accumulated from this morning's rain.

THE PEBBLE AND THE PUDDLE.

The puddle was calm.

So calm that I could see my empty self reflected in it. So calm that the old man could see his smile in the camel, his only reality the joy of feeding and giving to another.

A pebble lands in the puddle.

I cast a stone into this image, sending shattering waves, engulfing his reality, drowning his illusory joy.

Cascading ripples.

It's as if I can see my angst mirrored in other people's reactions to me. I drive them away, tarnish and destroy their joy. My self-consciousness is immobilizing me. My consciousness of others pollutes them.

And my "self-consciousness"--my consciousness of me? I feel empty and lost--invisible. But when I do feel something, it's that I'm a plague, filled with darkness.

And I seem to cast that darkness like an onrushing flood of black shadows onto others around me.

* * *

I'm actually impressed with your three line poem and explication. Johannes. Johannes? That name increasingly doesn't fit. What should I call you? That's not a poem you would write, but it's quite good, nonetheless. What's particularly impressive is that you wrote it with only a minimal exposure to haiku, and hadn't yet heard of the famous poem by Basho, which sounds quite similar to yours. (And of which yours is but a pale shadow). Also, you have one extra syllable in the second line. But, hey, why should you have to follow the rules? That seems more like you!

Into the ancient pond
A frog jumps
A deep resonance.

* * *

I leave the zoo and walk outside. I reach the curb of the street, and wait patiently for the red light to change. Once it becomes green, I don't move. I remain where I am, as if immobilized.

I have nowhere to go. People who pass me, those in cars waiting for their red light, seem to be staring at me. Why is he just standing there, crippled, pathetic, lost person? I want to yell at them, "I'm a land-surveyor, Just ask the Castle."

When the light is red again, I feel safe. Yet, for some reason, as the next car comes, I make a motion to cross the street, then step back on the sidewalk. None of the cars slow down, a few honk and scowl, swerving slightly, but that's fine with me. I like their noticing me and reacting angrily. Don't you fools realize I'm not really trying to cross the street. For there is nothing on the other side that has any more meaning than where I am now.

* * *

When the light turns green, I stand still again. I'm not going to be told what to do by some stupid light. As the light turns yellow, I decide to step into the street, as if I have purpose and conviction, but then the red light causes me to pull back and I am thwarted. Someone watching me for the first time would think, oh, what a cautious person. He has a goal, of course, to get to the other side of the street. They are satisfied and I am justified. My existence is established because they believe it is.

At some point amidst this repetitive back and forth stepping, I have a humorous image of a minimalist play, a la Waiting for Godot. What would it be like to see a person, on crutches, stepping off a curb, and back on, for three acts.

Deep? Insightful? A breathtakingly vivid description of our human existential condition?

Perhaps.

But also....boring.

I do this through several cycles, alternating immobility with apparent action, over and over repetitively, eternal repetitions. I think of the old couple playing cribbage in the donut shop in Palo Alto.

My life is now a cribbage-board reduced to one step back and forth from a roadside curb outside the zoo.

* * *

My life is like walking into a >, a sideways V, a funnel, which becomes narrower and narrower. Things are closing down. What's left? I need to pick Mac up at some point today and drive him to my class. But I don't have to do that for several hours. I can stand here during that time, which seems absurd, but nothing really seems less absurd.

I again review my options. I could go back to Golden Gate Park and visit the Shakespeare gardens. I could go to Harding Park and putt some golf balls. I look down at my crutches. Why do I keep lugging them around? I know it's more for moral rather than physical support. So people will feel sorry for me, as I do for myself. I'm not willing to toss them.

An old couple eating ice cream, holding hands, walks past me. They aren't saying anything to each other, but they seem happy. What's wrong with me? Why can't I enjoy the simple pleasures? That's who I want to be, an old person, holding hands with someone, eating ice cream. I think of Mery. I'd like to say to her, "Let's grow old together, hold hands when we cross the street, go to the zoo. The best is yet to come."

* * *

I feel myself becoming tearful. Numbness and confusion are turning to sadness again. I've got to stop this emotional whining and self-pity.

I pull out my map to see how far I am from Harding Park. I realize again that, consciously or unconsciously, I've been circling Mery's home, coming closer and closer. Is this like a moth to a flame, obsessive and self-destructive? Or do I really need to see her again? After all, this is the person I said I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. It's ridiculous that I haven't spoken to her in weeks. Even if it is over, that's no way to say good-bye. My psychology professor talked about the importance of "closure." I feel a flicker of excitement. Maybe there's a chance that time has healed the wounds, and the sparks that were there can be rekindled.

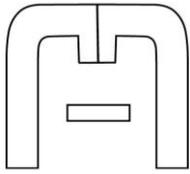
A surge of joy rushes through me. I pick up my crutches and sling them over my shoulder, like a rifle, and begin walking. "Hallelujah, Lord, I'm cured." I can walk again, and I have someplace I want to go.

I leap into Mr. Red, and hear its lovely engine. Fuck off, Richard, you're just jealous. I know exactly now how Benjamin felt chasing Elaine. Mery, here I come. Maybe this story will end with the two of us in the back of a bus, looking out at the world, kissing, laughing, going forth into our new life together.

* * *

The iceman cometh. What pipe-dreams and illusions. First the pipe-dream that you and Mery might get back together. Secondly, and worse, the pipe-dream that life ends in happiness with two lovers on the bus. Where are they going? What are they going to do? How are they going to pay for it? Relationship solves nothing. You're still hoping to find truths in the ways of the flesh. I don't know what the right path is; but I do know that is the wrong one.

* * *



s I drive away from the ocean, the crashing waves begin to sound louder. That's perfect. Everything with Mery seems topsy turvy. I laugh and sing and feel like Alice once again going down the rabbit hole. Why shouldn't the ocean get louder? She lives on Ocean.

As I turn down her street, the ocean's rumbling becomes so loud that I can no longer smile. The ocean noise mingles with the clanging of jackhammers from the ugliness of Sixth Street. All this while I'm trying to sing my self-created medley. My memoires become disheveled and confused, like Mery's falling in Golden Gate Park, the ER, our inability to play music together, her distant wild dancing at the Fillmore without me. Why didn't I draw the line earlier? How many bowling frames is too many? It's as if I'm being pulled by an eddy, drawn into a vortex. Al in church, her artistic teacher Pierre, what kind of pompous affected name is that, just call yourself Peter, Frenchie. The blood all over the table cloth and the Passover Seder. My ocean roaring. My blood mingling with the salty water while I hear the bongos and syncopated rhythms from the camp fire.

If I were to try to organize and label Johannes' and John's journals, this would be Chapter 6  of Book V. An inverse J in black, symbolizing things are backwards and dark? Everything at "6's" and 7's?! The first letter of the chapter beginning with two upside down white J's coming from different



directions . They look like they're necking. Without the line between them, it would be an M. For Mery? With the line, it's an A. How ironic that the beginning of the alphabet, the alpha, is really the end of the relationship and the last meeting with Mery. Is the line a minus, meaning a subtraction, a line that holds them apart rather than connects? Yet isn't there still a

connection? Won't she always be part of me? Words and letters are cold, impersonal lines as well as fascinating, multi-leveled, even playful symbols that join even as they distance.

I feel like I'm entering a time warp, a compressed vacuum where everything is simultaneously still and empty while being crushingly loud and jammed. What's going on with me? How can I allow any person to effect me so dramatically? I try to remove these images and sounds by remembering our first week together, when I was writing my Camus paper and she was painting. I loved how she would lean over my desk to see what I had written, trying to read the words backwards, her blouse slightly open. Then, laughing, she would come behind me, lean further over my shoulder, her breasts pressed against my shoulder and back. Did she know what she was doing, or was it just her innocence? So light, so playful.

And these flirtations led beautifully through Beethoven's Fifth and then to her dancing on the bed at the Fairmont, like jumping on a trampoline, her breasts bouncing chaotically and joyfully. Would I have ever guessed that she'd allow me to take pictures of her while she sensuously licked, then ate a chocolate fondue covered banana? How could someone so religious, so spiritual, so seemingly innocent also be so sexually accommodating?

Two different nights of music and dancing. Only eight weeks after Beethoven's da da da dum with energy rising there was Joplin's screeching chaos and cacophony with energy falling, descending. But there's no reason things can't once again turn for the better, is there?

* * *

As I stand before the steps leading up to her house, I try to think of something clever and light to say. "Hi, I was just over at the zoo, and thought I'd stop by and see how you're doing." Is that too flip? It doesn't really show how I've changed? How about "I was on my way to pick up Mac to go with me to class, and..." Not bad in that it shows my social conscience, but it's pretty

unemotional and distant. "Hi, I've missed you and wanted to see how you're doing." That shows my emotions and caring for her, but also feels too vulnerable. This is silly. Too much analysis she would say. And maybe she isn't even home.

I walk back to the car, pick up my crutches, put them under my shoulder, and, as I begin to climb the stairs, one step at a time, her names fill my mind. Eliza, Beth, Elizabeth, Mery. So many names, so many forms and sides to her. I try to image her face and have trouble doing so. It still eludes me, changing shapes, not paintable as a static form, not capturable in my mind. What a reprehensible person I was, trying to capture her with my camera, making her into an "it", a sexual object only.

I hear her voice, her still small voice within me. It is a message of hope, risk, faith. She is a person who doesn't hide herself from the suffering that exists in life. It's not her fault there is pain in the world, homeless men on Sixth Street. I was trying to lead my life in blindness and denial. At some point, inevitably, I would have had to face the ugly side of life—and myself. I don't think anyone can live their whole life closed off to others, unwilling to see their own demons. Or should, even if they can. Of all the people I know, I believe she understands me the best. And she knows first-hand this pain I'm going through.

* * *

I need to thank her for opening my eyes to the suffering that exists in the world, for seeing life as it really is. And for helping me realize that the laws of this society, and the society itself, are so heartless, cruel, and insensitive. She already knew what I'm just learning.

I need to ask her forgiveness. I was too harsh toward her. I've been trying to push away the one person who can really save me. I hope she'll forgive me. I'll let her know how I've changed, how I've suffered like Job, have seen the spiritual light like Jonah, have gone to Sixth Street to help,

have been back to our church, have been studying the Bible with Asiya and learning about Jesus. I'm seeing the limits of my callow, materialistic ways, the greed of the moneychangers—the capitalistic evil of our way of life.

Why not flee it? Find a true promised land. Why not ask her if she wants to go to Israel with me, and trace Jesus' path through the Holy Land, like we talked about just a few weeks ago. Go to a true promised land. Where people work together to build a country, where on the kibbutz there is socialized living, where greed and arrogance and insensitivity to the plight of the poor are unthinkable, where everyone works together as brother and sister, one big happy family.

The possibilities once again seem limitless, exciting, hopeful. I want to blurt out to her, Oh, Mery, I'm becoming more like you, more sensitive to people. We could be so good together. "My wild love, you're the sun. You live on Love street. The river knows" that if you don't come back, "I'll have to drown myself in mystic heated wine." Let's have a rebirth together. A renewal of love. "Love me two times girl."

* * *

I ring the door bell. I look at my watch. 11:47:35. Almost time for lunch. Maybe I'll see if she wants to get something to eat. "Hi, hungry?" 11:48. Is it too soon after twenty-five seconds to ring again. I'll give her thirty-five seconds, that will be a minute, then ring again. Well, I could knock now. That would be ok. I give a cute knock. A kid's playful knock: Da, da-da-da-da, pause, da da.

11:48:25. Ten more seconds and I can ring again.

I ring. Still no answer.

Where is the fine line between bold, courageous determination and excessive perseverance. When is there the wise realization that it's time to let go? But I'm not a quitter. I don't just run away from difficult situations. After all, this is the person I was planning to marry. I think of the church

service and my running away after I met Al, then going back to reclaim her. But was that rash youth? Mery is a few years older than me, and Al must be in his early thirties. What am I doing trying to be with someone older? Why am I standing here passively at her door? I feel my body becoming as tight as my mind. All the ugly memories of that night in Carmel start to come flooding back, like the Reed Sea closing in on me. I think of the Bergman movie. Savage personal relationships; people eviscerate those they are closest to.

11:49:12. Ok, one final knock. Then maybe I'll just leave her a note. That's probably better anyway. Then I can say zoo, Mac, feelings, lunch all in one. Cute, socially conscious, emotional sensitivity, and an invitation all in one.

As I reach into my pocket for pen and paper, the door partially opens.

*

*

*

Whatever witty, verbal fluidity I thought I had vanishes. My mind goes blank. Her face, too, registers surprise, even astonishment. Do I see fear also? I know I need to say something. I'm always the one who has to carry the weight of the conversation, but before I can say anything, Mery says, "I've missed you." My heart leaps. I feel a great overflowing happiness. "Are you feeling better?" She nods toward my crutches.

I feel confidence and bravery returning, mingled with eroticism. I want to toss the crutches down the stairs, and begin to dance and sing. As I look at her face, it seems flushed, her hair disheveled, covering her forehead and part of one eye. I love those eyes, brown, sparkling, pulling me into them. I notice that she's wrapped a blanket around her, which is slipping off one shoulder. Did I awaken her? Is she still out of work?

I put my hand on the door and take a step forward. "I have so much I want to say to you. I was just coming from the Zoo, on my way to pick up Mac, and ..." Then, stupidly, I think of Al, and his blackness and the girl last night. I start to mention the girl and know that is wrong but I want her to see I'm a new

person, more open to black people, so I say, "How's Al? That was nice of him to drive you home that night. Please thank him for me." She looks at me quizzically, then smiles. "Have you seen much of him the last few weeks?" Damn, I sound possessive, jealous. Keep it light. I'm being stupid. Ovid, Help.

"No, I haven't seen him since he drove me home. Al never does a good deed without an ulterior motive. I think he was not so secretly happy we had a difficult time. All the way back he explained how he was really better for me. I told him firmly 'No, you can't go home again.' He's not become any more right for me. I've moved on from him. He hasn't contacted me since."

Is she subtly sending me a message? What do I want? How do I know? Here I go, we go, again. Keep it simple, Ovid advises. "I've missed you, too. May I come in? Would you like to get some lunch?"

*

*

*

"Hurry up. Who is there?" I hear a nasally high pitched French-accented voice pierce the silence. Mery looks awkward and confused, then says, "This is not a good time. I've doing a modeling session with Pierre."

A few moments ago I interpreted the blanket, her flushed face, the disheveled hair as signs of her just waking up, and her surprise at seeing me. Now I know there's nothing under the blanket, which she takes off for Pierre, but not for me. And her demeanor and appearance are hardly that of someone "just modeling."

"Can you come back later? I want to see you."

I feel like the pinball, pushed away and pulled back at the same time. I want to say forget it, turn and flee. But I realize that Mery really is my last link to anything. So I say, somewhat gruffly, "What time is later?"

"Always precise." She smiles. "How about 3:00?"

That would still give me enough time to pick up Mac and make it to tonight's seminar. If I even want to go. "See you in a few hours." I move in to give her a kiss. I put my arm around her neck. She places her right arm on

my shoulder, causing her blanket to drop further from her breast. She looks lovely. But as it falls, she gives a little start, removes her hand from me, pulls back, and says, "See you soon" as she shuts the door.

*

*

*

As I turn and walk down the stairs, I feel giddy with excitement. The crutches don't even touch the stairs as I quickly glide down them. Did she wink at me as she closed the door? She gives me a little human connection, a bare shoulder and some breast, and I'm like a puppy dog,

But by the time I reach the bottom step, I'm angry with myself. And her. I'm the little dog that's been sent away so she can completely remove the blanket for Pierre. Fine, he wants a battle for her. He's got it. Al's out of the picture, or at least so she says. You're next, Pierre.

I hop into Mr. Red, rev it with its motor sounding just fine to me, asshole Richard, and begin driving. Where? I have a few hours to kill, and heaven knows, I'm not hungry. I think of the Reverend's statement that only ye who become like small children shall enter the Kingdom of Heaven. I remember playing tag at the Shakespeare Gardens in Golden Gate Park with the children, and Mery saying how good I was with them, I notice a feeling of peacefulness and contentment, a visceral recognition that the gardens are a safe space for me, where I feel peaceful, childlike, a resident of the Garden of Eden.

Once I have a new goal, I instantly feel better. Then I hit a red light. I think of running it, but don't. Still, I notice that I start to feel flustered and impatient, which seems odd, since I have absolutely no place to go, no time schedule, nothing that comes after this event for several hours. Why be impatient when the waiting is as much reality as the arriving?

Both are equally arbitrary, and help kill empty time—waiting at a red light, walking through Golden Gate Park. Is the problem with a goal, even a completely capricious and arbitrary one, that once I have it, I feel enslaved

to it? Nevertheless, for me having a goal, no matter how unimportant, is still better than nothingness.

But why so impatient? Maybe the agitation is because I feel out of control on so many big things--relationship, work, life-- that I want to feel I can control the small ones. Like getting from A to B: or O to G: Mery's home on Ocean to Golden Gate Park.

Actually, that's a profound insight, Johannes. What Dr. Lisbet calls identifying both the root issues (the core vulnerability, confusion, chaos, insecurity of life) and the content issues (red lights) and not conflating them. Even work and relationships I've decided are content issues, not core. As for red lights, Dr. Lisbet says that wanting things to be other than they are is what causes suffering. So many reasons to be perturbed by a red light. Life really is complex.

I loved Dr. Lisbet's statement about "wanting things to be other than they are is what causes suffering" when she made it I still think it's profound and true--but also limited. Yes, sometimes we cause ourselves unnecessary suffering by wanting things to be other than they are. But isn't it also true that wanting things to be other than they are in the face of injustice, callousness, and bad habits, is also wise, and feeling "suffering" at that injustice can serve as a positive motivation for trying to make changes? I try to help reduce suffering in oneself and others. I suppose the wisdom is knowing when to act assertively, and when to let go.

But of course Dr. Lisbet discussed that question with us, too. So many levels to try to integrate. So many ways that are potentially wise. Life really is complex, John.

*

*

*

I am carrying my crutches with me, even though I know I no longer need them physically. But I'm not willing to just leave them in the car. Maybe I'm bringing them along in case I get tired, or there is a wild dog or a

particularly hilly area to navigate. Or maybe you want people to feel sorry for you, a poor "crippled" person.

Using the crutches makes it difficult to carry my flute and my journals. But I want them both with me, so I hold them tightly under my armpits and manage, slowly and clumsily.

I initially head directly for the spot under the Rose plaque, which I consider my territory. But then I become annoyed with myself. Why do I always come to this particular garden, when there's an entire park to explore? I never go anywhere but to this one little garden. And then to this one little corner. Right under the engraved stone: "Roses and Names."

I decide to take a fresh look at the gardens and maybe even a little beyond, and I wander aimlessly, seeing if I can regain the freshness of sight, smell, sound I experienced at the Zoo.

Indeed, with this new attitude, everything does seem changed.

But not in the way I expect. I notice the brightness of the red roses. But for some reason, they don't seem fresh, happy, or pleasant. There is something distasteful about the color, and it used to be my favorite. Like Mr. Red. Like Mery's hair.

To me, there's something strange and eerie about the park. I can feel a difference, but can't figure out exactly why. It's changed? I've changed? I see some violets. I'm attracted to the blue spectrum, the morning glory-like purple, but they still seem too tempered by red. Red everywhere. For a brief moment I once again see flicker in my mind the bloody sheets of the Passover table cloth, my blood running into the ocean.

I walk more quickly, as if I can outrun and escape these distasteful images. I hear rustling to my left. I think it may be a wild animal. But I see that it is an embracing couple lying in the bushes. Don't they have to work? What are they doing here on a Tuesday morning? Lunch break? I feel embarrassed and self-conscious, like a lonely voyeur, and walk on.

Finally, after a long, slow arc, I end up at my spot: "Roses and Names."
Thank goodness no one is in there. I have it space all to myself. Ah, Bard,
I'm home.

But for some reason, I can't find a comfortable place to sit, or a
pleasant sight to focus on. I'm too restless, my body filled with prickly
sensations. I'm sure it must be internal. But when I look I see I've sat near
an ant hill, and they're crawling all over me. I brush them aside and move away
a few feet.

* * *

Come, Bard, work your magic, make me happy. I think of Falstaff, my go-to
man Let's lighten things up, make me laugh. But instead of Falstaff, Shylock
arises.. What are you doing to me, mind? Why him? Why now? I don't like that
play, or him. It's not one I've really spent much time studying. I will myself
to dismiss the image, and refocus on Falstaff and the Henrys.

But Falstaff's mirth is as flat as beer left standing too long, as flat as
the obligatory guzzling sessions after tennis. Thinking of him doesn't make me
laugh. Just the opposite. For some reason, it's hard for me to imagine I ever
once had admiration for him. His aesthetic, Dionysian life no longer appeals
to me. It seems somehow juvenile, sophomoric, too unreflective. I think he
must have been an unhappy man, even if he didn't realize it.

Is this a sign of maturity, or depression? Or is it that I realize at best
I only have one more chance with Mery, and I'd better not be a buffoon in how I
act.

I once thought I could act like Falstaff, without being him, that perhaps
I was really more like Hal. As the play opens, he, like Falstaff, enjoys
drinking and carousing at the Boar's Head Tavern. But Hal is more aware than
Falstaff, and is conscious of himself drinking and playing the games of
this sybaritic lifestyle, while simultaneously feeling superior to them
because of this consciousness. Just like me.

Of course, I also thought myself superior to Hal. When I first read his soliloquy in the First Act on the pitfalls of the aesthetic life, the life-for-the-moment, I thought of him as a kill joy, much as I did Kierkegaard's "Or."

Now, of course, I realize there are important lessons for me in his words. I guess we don't understand and see until we're ready to understand and see. What a pity that that which is right before our eyes and could teach us, we can't learn from until we're willing. Sometimes that's too late.

* * *

This really is a time when things need to shift for me, when I need to realize the bondage I was in, and didn't even recognize. Bondage to my body, my ego, status, law school, my family, society's wealth and materialism. I'm glad I drafted that paper for my political science class. It's forced me to rethink my feelings about the law. A modern day exploration, like Deuteronomy, the Second Law? Yet, I know that with no law to guide us, it's chaos, a river without banks which floods everything. The law gives a framework and structure. I hear Mery saying "You can't create a law for everything." Her imagined voice annoys me but I still reply: "Someone has to. What's the alternative?" Then I catch myself. Why am I arguing with her? I basically agree with her about the problems and limitations of the law. I'm still annoyed at her inconsistency. She criticizes the law, but is much more rule-bound than me. I'm more willing to disregard the law if I'm not hurting anyone and it will benefit me, or just makes more sense to me. I wonder if part of the reason I'm interested in the law is because if I know it well enough, I can circumvent it when I need or want to?

Neither of us is very consistent. I accept that we need laws, but I'm willing to try to get around and thwart them. She criticizes the law, but tries to follow it exactly.

* * *

It's hard to believe that it was only a few weeks ago that Falstaff's bonhomie was my companion and model of living a good life. Now I realize the limits of that lifestyle. As did Hal. But Hal, my new friend, what happens to you when you realize the limits of the convivial drinking and become Henry V? Is the life of the law any better?

Hal now has his crown, the symbol of law. And what does he find? He realizes that he's become confined and trapped by the law. If there is no freedom in drinking and gratifying the flesh like the boorish Falstaff; and if there is no freedom in being king and administering the law, what is the answer? What is my answer? Where is my path to freedom?

* * *

I see a few children with their mothers walk toward where I'm sitting. They seem old enough to be in school. How annoying. Are they playing hooky? Then I realize that school may be out for them. But why do they have to come into my space when I'm trying to figure out my life? Then I remember how Mery said I was so good with children. And now I'm annoyed with them. Is there anywhere I am consistent? I feel awkward and self-conscious, a disheveled, crippled person sitting with journals surrounding him. I try to avoid contact, and resume my ruminations.

* * *

I continue making notes in my journal. Even if we need human laws, that doesn't mean that's my direction. I don't like it's adversarial nature and its underlying premise of conflict and battles. I'm tired of fighting—with my family, my professors, Richard, even Mery. I'm tired of our capitalistic money-grubbing, impersonal, competitive, cutthroat society. I know there has to be a better social society than the one I'm living in now. I think if the book Mery gave me "I-Thou", the very opposite of what the law and our grasping society promotes.

Maybe what I'm looking for is some kind of personal law, personal order, principles for my own life--how I want to live in a more kind, compassionate, wiser way. But where are the guides? Psychology? That seems to be the new secular religion for those needing help. But I really don't want to go into therapy, like Mery, or mom. What good did that do them?

What about the wisdom of religion itself? I think of Mery's pastor; the author of the book *I-Thou*.. Maybe there is a higher law in religion, and maybe it's one I could find in Israel. After all, it's the birthplace of the world's two great religions, Mery's, the pastor's, Asiya's Christianity, and Buber's and my families Judaism, And I've heard the Kibbutzim are like a family, a better society than ours, in which no person is homeless and hungry, and all work together so share.

Oh, Johannes, I hate the phrase "shooting fish in a barrel." Too violent. But that's how easy it feels to criticize you. So before I point out your ignorance, let me acknowledge that I do admire your struggle to find a new path forward--your desire to try to find an "alternative" family on the Kibbutz and a more equitable form of social justice. Our looking for guidance--even considering "religion." But your ignorance and insularity is daunting--you don't even know what you don't know. The worlds two great religions? Well, at least you have added Christianity. And I'm certainly trying to deepen my understanding of each. I'm not only realizing how much more there is to learn in each tradition, but also am catching glimpses from Dr. Lisbet of Asian traditions, and even becoming curious about the Dome of the Rock and the Islamic tradition. Progress? At least, I'm beginning to realize how much I don't know.

Yes, John, one step at a time. I look forward to sharing with you my deepening exploration of different traditions from the wise elders here in Safed.

*

*

*

The children are running around and screaming in a chaotic fashion. Don't their parents have any control of them? I remember the first time Mery and I

came here, when I taught some of them my tennis drill. Mery had such admiration for me then. Maybe it was the little child in me coming out. I'd like to scream and yell and run around in circles and call it fun. I want more playfulness in my life. Maybe I'm just jealous of them. They seem happy, carefree. I will myself to be happy like them. Why not? Where is all this suffering getting me?

I reach into my pocket and pull out the brochure from the interfaith Shavuot service, and lie back, placing my head on my arm for a pillow. As I lie down and look up at the sky through some overhanging tree branches, I realize how tired I am. I certainly didn't sleep well last night. The children's voices provide background chatter as I begin to thumb through the pamphlet. On Shavuot, our Jewish brothers and sisters read the story of Ruth, which is a beautiful ode to loving kindness, a story of strong women, and of faith. Ruth, a non-Jew, marries a Jew, and has two children. Her mother-in-law is Naomi. Naomi's husband dies, and Ruth's husband and two sons die. There is no longer any real tie between Ruth and Naomi, but Ruth converts Naomi "Where ever you go, I will go" she swears, and follows Naomi back to her homeland.

I wonder what the moral of this story is for me? I think of the woman I was with last night. An ok connection-- exchange of services and money. But then we each disappear out of each other's lives. What creates a depth of connection between two unrelated people? Would Mery ever convert to follow me? Would I ever convert to follow Mery? She is really the only strand holding me to this society and this world.

The Rebbe told us that one way to understand the story of Ruth is to realize that, in the particularistic sense, that at the deepest level, every Jew is a convert to Judaism. What he meant was that, for him, the real meaning of being a Jew was not because you were born into the religion. That isn't enough. Each person, at the core of their being needs to existentially **choose** to be a Jew--to practice the religion, to live by its moral code. And that the

process is a journey. The more we convert to the deepest spiritual intent of Judaism, the closer we bring ourselves to God.

I like the spiritual meaning more than the relational one. The idea of two people following each other is either a pipe dream, or the sign of a weak person who has no direction and no ability to create an independent life.

Perhaps the spiritual journey and the relational are more intertwined and linked than you realize, John.

*

*

*

I've let myself be too overcome by feelings of life's vulnerability. I've become paralyzed with fear and insecurity, afraid to take any action. I know there is still that strong, courageous, leader side of me. I was once a Pied Piper with these children. I can re-find that charisma. I can get Mery to re-see me as she once did: how good I am with children, how playful and funny and, at the same time, well-organized and filled with ambition and direction. I won her once. I just need to make a more thoughtful plan. Ok, Ovid, we try again. This is for all the marbles. And I know I have only one more chance.

I need to take all her criticisms of me and tell her I've addressed them: lecher, materialistic, insensitive to others. I'll let her know how hard I'm working to change, how non-defensive I am. I'll show her that I understand what she meant about the scariness of life, and how much I admire her courage to continue in spite of that fear and trembling.

I realize how important it is to me to get her back, to have her approve of me, and how devastated I'll be if this doesn't work. Maybe what I need to do is write her, so that I can make my best case and put down everything I need to say. It's too hard in person to lay out all the points, as I realized when I just saw her. This way I can make sure each word is perfect, and presents me as polished and shiny as I can be.

This is not going to be easy. She likes the little boy in me, playful, child-like, but she doesn't like my Peter Pan never-want-to-grow-up side. She

wants me strong, bold, yet likes my vulnerability. I remember those wild mushrooms she saw in Carmel, near Devil's cauldron. She liked that I said it wouldn't be wise to eat them, but at the same time there was a part of her that felt she'd be missing out on life's adventures if she didn't try one.

I look back at my notes from the research on mushrooms I did in the library a couple of days ago--when I probably should have been doing more research for my honors paper. Procrastination? Trying to re-live moments with Mery? I thumb back to my notes. Dinner plate sized, amanita calyptrata--a delicacy which can be delicious when sautéed. But some are famously toxic. There are definite marks that distinguish the edible calyptrata from their lethal cousins, called death cap and destroying angel. Those are the deadliest of all mushrooms, a toxic species in this genus that cause 90% of fatal mushroom poisonings.

The article advised never to eat a wild mushroom like that unless you were absolutely, indisputably 100% sure that it was safe. Otherwise a single moment of joy would be replaced by an agonizing death. The choice: a momentary pleasure savoring of a wild and unpredictable act, or absolute stupidity ending in an agonizing death. When in doubt, throw it out, the article advised. How can I be 100% sure that Mery isn't a poisonous mushroom--a destroying angel, my death cap. I can't. if everything is coming to an end, anyway, why not take the chance. As Joplin said, Freedom is having nothing more to lose.

*

*

*

I pick up my March journal and read, "Jovial journal, jubilate judiciously." I feel a sadness come up as I start to thumb through it, looking at my first descriptions of Mery. I feel some embarrassment at describing her "36DD's at the Delightful Deli David's." My first glance of us, reflected in the window; "you, coming toward me...dark yellow button down pullover,

voluptuous, diffident, flaming red hair." I thumb through a few more pages, the
put it down. That's past. I need to create a plan for a future with her. The
words which I need to write are critical. They are my future.

What are my goals? To return to great sex? No, clearly not, well, at least
not the top priority anymore. To understand and be understood by someone?
Definitely. To have a guide on this perilous path? Yes, I think she understands
more than I do about life. To have a life partner? For sure. It's just too
lonely doing this by myself.

But I'm on terra incognita. There is no structure or plan for writing
a letter to convince someone to be a soul mate; no sheet music to turn to, no
case studies in the law, no blueprint in a creative writing class.

I have a few hours before I see her. It's good I have this time to
collect my thoughts. And writing is a better way to present them. I almost feel
too raw to do that well in person.

An hour and a half later, I read my results. I've never been more careful
on any paper for any class: writing, correcting, changing, editing. I decide I
really need to be vulnerable and open with her, and even use a few poetic lines
from the Ecumenical service to show her that I'm working on becoming a more
spiritual person. I know this is my last chance.

*

*

*

Dear Mery,

I'm at our special Shakespeare garden spot in Golden Gate, and have
my trusty flute with me, which you so beautifully named "Grace." There
are several lovely, playful children around. I remember how much you
liked seeing them dance joyfully around me when I played the flute the
first time we were here.

I'm writing this to you--and I hope the Bard helps inspire me--
because I want you to understand how much you mean to me, and how I've
changed since I last saw you several weeks ago. In a letter I can write
everything down, and make sure it's as clearly and fully presented as
possible. I was so happy to see you today, and hear you missed me, as I've
missed you. I hope this letter will make you miss me even more, and want
even more to be with me again.

So, here goes.

I remember our first encounter. I saw you reflected in the glass, and then, turning, saw your eyes. They were and are so full of kindness. They were the first thing that attracted me to you. And your glorious smile. It's like sunshine when you smile, lighting up everything around you.

I now realize how amazing that smile is, because it hides from nothing. You know so much more than I do about how to face the suffering and ugliness in the world, and I want to learn from you. I remember asking you about the picture in your room, Starry Night. You told me that Van Gogh said about it, "There is another world, a world accessible only to certain men." I didn't understand what you meant then, or I was too afraid to understand.

But I do now. I want to be one of those men.

I want to hear and see and feel more clearly than any before me, as much as is humanly possible. I don't want to ignore the fear, but instead have courage in spite of it. As he painted, I want to live. Maybe one day I'll even find a way to share my experience of the infinite variations of the finite. But I need your help and guidance. I fear seeing too clearly, too much, too fast, and it is overwhelming. Is there a humorous irony in this? A person who wears glasses, yet sees too much, who is deaf in one ear, yet hears too much. Can we ever be cursed by being too human, too sensitive? Mery, how can people keep going amidst so much suffering and tragedy? I want you to teach me.

I'd like to take this life journey with you as my partner. I want you near me again, someone to hold with whom I can share myself at this deep level. You understand and know me better than anyone. I can't tolerate the superficialities of others. Without you, I feel so alone. I feel like a voice crying in the wilderness. Do you hear my crying out to you?

I hope this doesn't feel too needy or maudlin, but I really want you to know how deeply I've searched my own soul. I know I sometimes use words as games, to hide behind. But this time I want to use them as a way to reach out, to share my innermost being. You have an inner beauty and kindness, a sensitivity, and spirituality--you see a different world I've never before known existed--that I am increasingly admiring and longing after. I feel that I can only add this dimension to me through you as my teacher. If you, who knows me so well, can accept me, then you must be seeing that potential in me, too.

It seems, as I look back at our relationship, as though we were contrapuntal themes to each other. At first, that was a good thing, and we naturally made beautiful music together, almost effortlessly. My systematicness and rational mind were an anchor and rudder for you. My ambition and desire for creating order and control by taking initiative was something you admired--remember Beethoven!

But you've helped me realize some of the negatives of those qualities. I realize I live too much in the world of my rational mind. I am increasingly seeing how limiting, even paralyzing, all that analysis is. How it can distance me from others, keeps me from truly feeling any emotions. You have taught me to realize the obsessed, materialistic, rational physical world I had chosen without even knowing it.

I didn't even realize the wombs I was living in until you revealed them to me. All I had done was go from the womb of my family to the womb of college; and, without meeting you, I would have gone directly to the womb of law school and the womb of society. My wombs locked me in the castle of privilege, locked suffering out. And my mind was a castle that locked out others' suffering so I didn't even see it when I saw it--but rather ignored it through denial, ignorance, joking, intellectualization. I now see how I used words and word games to hide, rather than reveal. I can see the limits of human law; the limits of our materialistic, hardened society. I see that I've been falsely worshiping the gods of Baal.

I would never let myself become too close to anybody, get involved in doing anything for anyone else, until you, Mery, broke the walls down that were imprisoning me. You are helping midwife me into a different reality, helping to birth a new me. Because of you, I've broken free from these wombs, and am striving to be like you, meeting people in an I-Thou way. By going deeper into me, I am able to see deeper into you, and others.

I know you'll understand what I'm saying because you too have gone through this nothingness. I'm hoping we can help each other face this lostness together. Gogo and Didi did, waiting-- but loving and caring for one another while they waited. I want you to hold me again and tell me that together we can do it, together we can love in spite of the nothingness. On the other side of the abyss, we can again create, you painting, me forging a new direction, while we spend our days creatively loving.

I think (I mean feel!--see ,a little humor) you know that there's more than just passive waiting. You live in a world I want so badly, a world of the spirit--I'm not even sure exactly what I mean by that word, but I know you know, and I believe I've caught glimpses of it through being with you. I see it in you, and your pastor, in the sensitivity, warmth, and caring for others you both display so effortlessly.

I now understand you so much better. Your kindness at the swimming pool versus my rage--at the man, then at you. I saw your behavior only as passivity and weakness. I feared becoming too stepped on, trampled if I let kindness and tenderness into my being. I'm becoming increasingly aware just how helpless, angry, and frustrated I get when I don't have control. I apologize. Although I can't yet experientially feel it, intellectually I do have more sense of what you and the pastor at your church, and Jesus, meant by the "last shall be first".

I would like us to once again share the journey of our lives together. I need someone to help me endure this solitude. We could help each other. As the Bible says, "Do not ask me to leave you: or to return from following you for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and.. your God my God."

Ruth, the great grandmother of King David, followed Naomi back to Israel. Wouldn't it be fitting and joyous if we, who met at David's Deli,

who have now survived a metaphorical famine of being apart, joined together on an adventure to the Holy Land?

Could we embark on this quest, this journey together, you painting, maybe me writing, both of us celebrating and dancing in spite of what is?

I want to find something permanent, lasting. I realized with you that I no longer wanted the moment to moment living, each woman, like a dinner, lovely at the time, then vanishing, as I begin to think about the next morning's breakfast. My life--and me-- was like a series of musical notes. As soon as each is heard, it vanishes. Only silence. In the prolonged silence of these last few weeks-- a long rest note?! Asiya called it my time in the whale--I realized that there was nothing to me, no essence.

I want a life partner to help build an essence with. I seek someone I can spend a life with, someone as sensitive and caring as you, who has loved as deeply and cried as hard, and who can accept me and my love with all the problems and insecurities. I hope you can hear me.

With affection, Your once arrogantly jovial, but now humbly suffering friend

With gratefulness for what has been, with hope for what could be, and with deepest love surrounding both, I await your reply. . .

PS I wrote you a poem, which I would like to share as a gift.

I sit...
like a top wound but
unable to spin

I lie down...
my insides screaming,
turning, twisting

I stand...
and try to run
to dash
out of my body...

Little monsters, molesters,
trapped, hurtling against
skin, tearing, gnawing,
throbbing,
begging for freedom.
Please leave,
I want you to go.

Why can't I
now I lay me
down to sleep, goodnight, lights
out in darkness

Peace. Where are you
elusive god?
Where to strive after, find, seek
you? Are you real?

Do you ever come
out from hiding?

PPS I didn't answer the question you asked me today, about whether I'm feeling better. I've shared more about my emotional state than physical! My foot is slowly healing, and I can now walk looking slightly less awkward and clumsy. A reflection of my mental state?!

There are several children around, and it looks like the inevitable tag game is starting. One day soon, I'll be able to join in once again!! I hope with you by my side.

* * *

I sometimes have doubts that the best way to face the future is to explore my past. At one level it seems obvious; at another, counterintuitive. True, by plunging forward, I hit a dead end. But that's no guarantee that going back will help me go forward. That's just a leap of faith. Or as Joplin said, "nothing more to lose."

What I do notice in going through the past is that it seems I, and maybe all of us, have certain filters through which we view a situation. When I read something --like the swimming pool situation-- I see it with a new perspective that is different from my understanding at the time. Change often comes so gradually that without some point from which to measure, it's impossible to realize that it has occurred. It's like the measurement of my height by my parents on the hall closet: without those accumulating marks, it was hard to realize I was actually growing taller.

Johannes at the swimming pool with Mery provides one such baseline marker. In that incident at the pool, he has a very rigid view of fairness and rightness. He waits for a lane. A lane opens up. He jumps in. It's his. Anyone else entering that lane has violated his unseen but very real posted "No Trespassing Sign."

Johannes feels this view is important not only for him, but for society as a whole. Laws are important to regulate human behavior. Those who disobey should be punished. QED.

When he writes Mery, he sees some blind spots in this view. One blind spot is his unwillingness to look at how often he bends and stretches the law and circumstances to his advantage in a self-serving way. Secondly, he isn't very good at addressing ambiguous circumstances. It's more my way or the highway. He's trapped within his belief in an ordered world, which so far has worked for him. But really, in the world, there are often ambiguous situations with no posted rules, just like at the swimming pool. What if Johannes arrives at the pool first, stands waiting for one lane, and then someone else comes later, and stands waiting behind another lane. If that other person's lane opens up first, Johannes would feel he should get it, because he was there first. It's like he's a "rook" chess piece, who controls all the lanes, right, left, and center. He wants to knock off any piece that comes after he does. But someone else might think each person is a pawn, and can only go forward into their own lane. In fact, the situation is ambiguous, but Johannes feels, by his own internal legal system and calculations, whichever lane becomes open, it should be his. Then, once he gets his lane, the idea of sharing is anathema. It belongs to him. "Trespassers" get bullied, pushed aside, and punished.

In this encounter, Mery, from a Jesus-like perspective, comes off looking pretty good. The first shall be last. She would rather give up her place swimming than upset anybody. To her, people are not just chess pieces in a vast legal encounter. People are valuable, alive, more important than any swimming lane.

So Johannes evolves beyond his callousness. He tries to develop the sensitivity that Mery advocates. I can only say that is progress. But now, from my current vantage point, I think that there are also limits to the reasons and flaws in the way Mery does this "noble" deed, as she herself realizes in her own therapy.

*

*

*

When I finish revising the letter, I set it aside, and play a few notes on my flute. Grace. If ever I needed that word, it's now. I see a few children look over at me, and I try to give a little twinkle with my eyes, to them, and to their moms. Just to let them know I'm a safe, kind person. The notes that come out are mournful, slow, even ponderous.

I like the tone of the letter I've written, and the poem--I seem open, sharing, not hiding, full of honest emotion. That should help soften her concern that "I'm too analytical." I've shown her that I am capable of deep emotions: I can feel great pain and suffering; and I also share my love for her. It's good the way I frame it as a joint journey, and remind her of some of the qualities she once liked about me.

That's the advantage of a letter. In person, it'd be hard to do make all these points because she'd interrupt, have her own point of view, and it'd be hard to make sure everything I wanted to say got said before she started talking.

Fair point, Johannes, but it does read like a soliloquy. Note almost every paragraph begins with "I". Is it possible that the form of your missive belies its content--and that you are unconsciously realizing that you would be more content (sorry, no pun intended) taking the journey yourself?

Although I am open and vulnerable and show I understand the suffering in life, I don't tell her how I've tried to become a better person, like going to Sixth Street, inviting Mac to talk to my honors class tonight. Would that be too much bragging, more like the old me? I think it's better to leave that out, then tell her when I see her.

I also don't say what went wrong in our relationship. That doesn't seem a good thing to dwell on. Should I talk about what can be changed to make us healthier for each other? Maybe I could add a line about my willingness to seek counseling. No, I hate that idea. If she brings it up, I'll need to consider it. But for now, some things are better left unstated.

I should probably apologize for the anger I felt toward her in the church, when she seemed so happy, feeling and appreciating the pastor's words, while I felt she was intentionally shutting me out, smiling at me to let me know how uncaring and unfeeling I was. I know she was completely innocent, and that I was the emotionless, uncaring monster. But I never really said anything to her at the time, and I'm not sure sharing that I have those types of emotions serves my interest in getting back together. What a pathetic person I was. Either filled with lust, or, if that was thwarted, anger and hostility. Only thinking of myself. Not exactly the kind of person with whom I'd want to spend the rest of my life.

As I read and re-read the letter, I wonder if that part about women being like meals is too revealing. It's true. But it doesn't put me in a very tasteful light. I want to appear open, suffering, vulnerable. But that seems awfully tasteless. On the other hand, it does say look how much I've changed. I think I can leave it.

A worse fear I have about the letter is that it may come across as too serious and analytical, even calculating, like it's another chess move on my part. I hope she can feel the emotions beneath, between, around these words, these little black and white drawings. Yes, of course, there is analysis in it. But that doesn't mean there isn't feeling, too. What exactly did she mean when she said that night in Carmel that I analyze too much? What a conundrum. How do you figure it out? Here I sit, trying to be as honest as I can, while cursing myself for being analytical, yet at the same time trying to analyze why I am so analytical, and using my analysis to make sure the letter doesn't seem too analytical. But how else can you do it? She makes me feel so confused.

Isn't this just one more deception? You demean analysis in the letter, and yet look how much analysis went into writing this letter.

I feel that each word must be perfect, and am afraid the letter itself may defeat my purpose in writing it. I'm spending so long considering each word, its nuances, meanings, potential effect, and I fear any emotion and passion may be killed by the logical analysis that goes into how to express them. Should I write that in the letter so she knows I'm wrestling with it? I don't think so, because it would appear too self-conscious, and bring these issues to much to the fore. Better let the letter speak as it is, and not describe the way I went about crafting it.

I pick up the flute and play a few more notes. I have a bad feeling, and try to let the notes express and discharge it from me.

I know that she's not going to react favorably to the letter. Something has shifted in me that makes me so that I feel confused, unlovable-- a plague. Maybe I'm just recognizing that I've always been a plague. All of a sudden I know with certainty Mery doesn't want me to inflict any more of my pestilence, my scourge on her. I know she'll see right through the letter, and see how needy and desperate I am, and that I really want to run back to her and have her be the new womb I hide in. I feel like I'm striving to gain a foothold into the world, and want her to be that base, that fulcrum. And I'm afraid she'll smell this, like the slightly suspicious odor of a three -day old fish.

Did you really expect someone else to be able to provide you an essence? How needy you sound. Do you really think you can run back to her and hide in her womb?

I don't know how I gathered the courage to go see her. Now, I'm tentative. I'm sure she'll see right through me to how ugly I am. All I can do is hurt her too, infest her with the plague that pollutes me.

Gnawing hurt as stomach
Descends. Dark depths
inside twist and
churn, ugly and black

*

*

*

Pathetic. Sniveling. Wailing. Whining. Groveling. You sound so fearful, trapped and boxed in, like you have to convince her that you've changed and justify yourself to her. That's not a brilliant strategy, it's a recipe for disaster. Where's the charm, the playfulness?

What are you doing, man? That's the most ineffective, embarrassing letter I've ever seen. You come across as self-absorbed, introspective, whimpering lonely little boy. Why you would want her back is beyond me. Unless as a challenge. But if you do, whiny one, let me tell you how to do it. You could start it out with that new fangled darkish music she likes by the Doors, putting a little oomph and pizzazz into it:

Dear Merry Mery

"Mine eyes have seen thee" and I was awe struck by the beauty and charm of your manner, by the ease and grace of your walk. I was immediately captured and enraptured, enhanced and entranced by the ravishing dashing beauty of your inner and outer bearing.

See, humorless one. You're like a dull, lifeless clod going through existential agony. No one wants to be around a person like that, listening to them complain all the time about how hard life is. If you want to show some of the agony you're going through, do it with purpose, to win her, not just to barf on paper. Here, let me try again, this is an idea that the master seducer himself would be proud of. You know she likes Kierkegaard, values your wit, sees herself as a romantic figure. Use what you learned about Kierkegaard from that existential class you took to serve you well, as a way to get through to her. The way you used it in your letter—as a "fear and trembling" "sickness unto death" backdrop undergirding your first missive serves you poorly—a hodge podge of whining about your adulterated suffering! I have so much to teach you! Look, try this.

Dear Mery of the Yellow Flowers,

I hope you will not be affronted by this edifying discourse, but I feel that, in keeping with my point of view as an author, I have a duty to warn one so fair as thou art.

Along the stages of my life's way, I have discerned that there is a young man with evil intentions uponest thou. This cursed seducer will employ very careful and well concealed tactics with respect to thy character and thy passions.

I feel it is my duty to protect thee, Either because of thy purity of thy heart. (And mine). Or because of thy works of love.

I do this, even if it means remaining in the wings, unforeseen and unsuspected by this vile seducer,

I have heard of his tricks and devices. Be not deceived, oh red-headed beauty. This fellow will approach thee and tell thee that all has changed; that he is indeed a new person, with a new, more ethical outlook on life. O dreadful lies, conceptually conceived in philosophical fragments.

Further, he will tell you that he has gone through great misery and suffering without you, that he has spent many long hours bemoaning the aloneness and nothingness of the world and fears that you have forsaken him. He will tell thee that his pain is a sickness unto death when there is no death.

Do not be deceived by such rhetoric. Do not give into his talk about suffering and tears. Know that it is all a ruse to win thine own fair hand. Therefore, damsel, remain in fear and trembling.

I have seen it meet to inform you of this, because I want thy fair-skinned maidenhood not to be sullied by one so cruel and harsh, so callous and so wicked that he would intend to gain thy good grace and loving warmth by means so oblique and nefarious.

Take heed, madam. I am thy faithful servant who, for the present, must remain anonymous. Unless and until thy good soul and heart choose to honor my poor humble self with the grace of a meeting, perhaps at some delightful deli of your choosing...

Your faithful servant, off center stage, but ever caring.

*

*

*

Now, do you see, mournful, morbid, dour one? Behold before your eyes a bedazzlingly splendid example of passionate prose presented in epistolary form. Shout shibboleths of selah...

You're analyzing yourself too much for the wrong reasons. If you need to analyze yourself, don't do it for navel gazing where you just spiral more and more inward toward darkness and confusion. Do it for an outward purpose, a

goal, analyzing which next move will have the best effect to help youo
succeed and conquer.

The only way your letter can ever succeed is if you are using that
existential nothingness sad whimpery lost stray puppy style as a strategy to
touch her heart. She may find your suffering appealing, and take you on as a
basket case, a project, like those homeless losers on Sixth Street.

But I don't think you're really that smart. Your letter didn't have that
strategy in mind. You need some moves, man. If you're going to be vulnerable,
do it with a purpose, to win her sympathy. Otherwise your writing is just
black ooze, and your poetry unfiltered sewage.

* * *

I feel a new found confidence. I want to get up, leave my wimpy whiny self
behind, as well as my crutches, and go straight back to Mery's house. I want to
tear up the first letter; but then realize the second also is unnecessary. They
may have been good for catharsis, but are no longer needed.

I don't need to place a wall of words between us as a self-protective
barrier. I trust myself enough to be charming in the moment, and am strong
enough to be with her in person. I'll just be the words made flesh. And I'm
much better in the flesh. She wants a strong person. That's why she was
attracted to me in the first place. She doesn't even know that despicable, weak
person who wrote the first letter.

I look at my watch. Still an hour before I'm supposed to arrive. After
all that exertion, I feel tired. Why not just enjoy the beautiful sunny
afternoon, and take a little siesta? I don't need to hide behind the words.

* * *

Before you fall asleep, oh mighty one, Brave One of the os rotundum, let
me beg to differ with you. What you call sewage, I call authentic. I don't
want to get back with Mery under some false pretense. With your words, you

remain devoid of true emotion, truly hidden, and afraid to face your fears. I don't want to win on your terms.

I want Mery to know who I am. I am too tired, and have too little energy to play silly word games and hide behind humor. I also want to be honest and sincere. If she doesn't want to be with me as I am, and as I'm becoming, then that's additional suffering I will have to take on. You try to hide any hurt or pain, and so never feel any suffering, but neither do you feel any passion. I'd rather be open to life than constantly hiding and trying to protect myself. And as for strategy, she will definitely not respond favorably to your letter. She will see right through it to the shallow, immature, inauthentic manipulator you are. Punning, playing with words, hiding. You don't even realize how deluded you are. You're right not to send the second letter, either.

* * *

Oh, bravo, little boy. Standing up for yourself, but you're wrong nonetheless. Your letter has no chance with her. Why don't you just skip the next phase of your life, go straight back to Sixth Street and give up now.

But I'm glad you felt strong enough for the moment to peek out from behind your little blankie where you've been hiding like a little baby afraid of all the big scary monsters in the world. Wah wah wah, cry for us on cue, whiny boy. Do you have your little green teddy bear to hold onto? Hold onto it tight, now, because I really am going to lie down and fall asleep. You may join me if you're not too scared.

* * *

There is a steep hill ahead, worse than Lombard Street, and there are no sides to it. The sky is overcast, and it must have been raining because the street is slippery. I see an intersection up ahead, and want to move into the right lane, so I can turn there. But I don't want to stop and turn around to see if there are any cars in the right lane. Worse, my turn signal isn't

working, and the window is fogged up. I yell to Mery to roll the window down, and stick her hand out to let the cars on the right know I'm changing lanes. She sits there passively, hazy-eyed, doing nothing. I'm afraid to shift lanes, and we end up on the steep road. The car begins to skid, slipping toward the canyons on either side. I yell at her, "This is the wrong road; we're going to crash; we need to go back." When I look over, she's no longer there. Suddenly I'm on the ledge of a high building, crawling, alone, at a dizzying height.

I turn crawl back into the room through a window, and am in a room where a Persian man is fixing the tiles in the bathroom. I see there is something wrong with the overhead wires, and climb a ladder to try to repair the overheated electrical socket which is embedded in a type of putty rock. I hear Mery's giggle, and realize she is also in the bathroom, and is flirting with the man, asking him about soccer. She never asked me about my sports. I can hear her sing-song lilting voice. I climb down the ladder, enter the bathroom, and see that she is massaging his shoulders. She's wearing a towel, and has just come out of the shower. Both of them look at me awkwardly. I feel angry, then trapped, claustrophobic. I rush out of the bathroom, return to the open window, and climb back out onto the ledge.

*

*

*

I awake furious. At myself. There is no house divided here. Why should I run fearfully to the ledge when she is flirting with someone else? But also why have I spent the entire afternoon writing her letters and not even allowing myself to feel what I should feel about her having moved on so quickly, returning to her modeling with Pierre? If that's all they were doing. What's wrong with me? Am I so afraid of losing her that I pretend that what she was doing is ok? Why do I need a dream, and my unconscious to tell me that she's a dangerous, flirtatious, unsafe person to be around, who drives me to the brink of destruction?

I remember my psychology professor making a joke about a hierarchy of internal dialogues:

talks to self;

argues with self;

loses argument with self.

She's making me fight myself. If I have to be a sniveling little baby—oh, look how lost I am, won't you help me-- to get her back, it's not worth it;. I've had to put up with so much crap from her. When I first met her, I thought it was so cute how clumsy she was, spilling water on me. I wish I could have seen that as a sign. From spilled water, to my being cut and bleeding at the ocean. That would never have happened if I hadn't met her. Isn't all this chaos and confusion I'm feeling her fault? Isn't she really the one who derailed me? I was fine and happy before I met her. There was no confusion, no disorder in my life until "I Looked at You." She lured me through the door into a world of chaos.

At the least she was the wedge that opened the door. Taking me from the order and security of my exercise in the swimming pool during the day to the tumultuous crashing waves of the mysterious ocean at night. She led me to the ocean, the door swung wide open.

I thought she was protecting me, sheltering me in her breasts but it was the opposite. Rodin's hand of God is not two people loving, but two people struggling. I asked for water, she brought me milk. Was it really a mistake? The red-headed devil feeding me milk and then bashing my head in.

Nearly naked, she closed the door in my face so she could take off the blanket and be completely naked for Pierre. Why did I meekly turn and walk away? Why didn't I shout, "Don't shut the door on me. Knock knock. Apri, apri dico. Open. Please open." I know that I shouldn't get angry at her, that rage and fury are not going to help me get her back, and are no way to re-build a relationship. But I'm furious at her. In fact, in some ways I hate her She

keeps dodging. She says, "Oh I missed you" and I passively melt and allow her to shut the door on me. It's like she intentionally dragged me to the edge of nothingness, and then pushed me in. Please don't leave me here. I've changed, won't you listen. Don't shut the door on me.

Don't shut me out

*

*

*

Of course there is no answer. Only an ugly dark green door staring back.

The wind is picking up. I feel the nausea returning as the wind swirls around me faster and faster. Why won't she open the door, let me in? Why won't she let me escape and leave my mind, let me out.

Again, I feel the currents again swirling in me. I can't seem to keep control of my mind. I start off brainstorming--embarrassingly, but with intention--to find a way to re-connect with Mery on a journey. I end in anger, blaming her for creating chaos in my life, hating her for what she did to me. It's like I'm being pulled up or down in an eddy. I know that blaming everything on her is simplistic. I'd just like a clear form and direction. Either love her or hate her.

She's the first thing in my life I can't describe, create a sense of order about.

But not the last.

I still am wrestling to understanding her. What did she do? She made you see yourself, made you tear down the illusory finite walls you'd built, the walls of words, of the law, of your opaque, protected existence. As Dr. Lisbet said, you were living in a moated castle.

It wasn't until you walked through that door that was locking you in that you realized there is no room, there are no walls. The ocean's disorder is all around. And you blame her. Is that really fair? Before her, when did you ever feel pain at someone else's suffering? Did you even know that the men on Sixth Street existed? Remember the conversation you had with her about the retarded

children? Their suffering caused her pain. She had to draw, to run, to cry, to get the pain out of her system. Yet she hung in there and tries to help. Never ran away. She is so much more sensitive than you could ever hope to be.

She's not the one you hate, it's yourself. Your coldness, aloofness, calculating callousness. Grandpa Dave would joke that you are descended from him, like from King David. When I traced that back, I saw that you (we) are supposed to be descended from Obed, the son of Ruth and Boaz, the grandfather of King David. Obed, which means serving. You are hardly deserving of that tradition. You serve no one.

Though I wonder if by attacking you, I really am deflecting the fact that I don't serve anyone, either. In a way, I'm as absorbed in self as you are, through continued arguing with self. I'm not sure I, either, have anything to offer.

Can I blame Mery for the fact that I'm still fighting myself? I'm not really one to cast the first stone there--for I know in my heart I haven't forgiven her, either. Sigh. I know I need to talk about this with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet.

I can hear them saying to me, whether she pushed you in the ocean, or you were already in, and didn't know it, what difference does that make? How long do you want to ruminate on explore a now irrelevant question? You're in the ocean. It's time to fall to the bottom, under the waves, and then resurface and learn to swim.

*

*

*

I hear a high scream, then the cries of a small child, and look over and see a little child, maybe about two, writhing on a plaid blanket spread out over the grass. My first thought is, thank goodness I didn't do anything to cause that. Then I wonder if there is something wrong and I might be able to help. But I am afraid to get involved, sure that somehow I'll either be blamed, or will make matters worse. I see his parents uncertain, concerned, talking to each other worriedly within a few feet of the child. I decide to do nothing,

but just watch carefully to see how they handle the situation. I take a
perverse glee—what do the Germans call it, schadenfreude—in seeing someone
other than myself—the parents—upset, worried. But have I really sunk so low that
I take pleasure in a child’s scream? Even I have some difficulty taking joy in
a child’s scream and tears.

Though they are loud and annoying.

* * *

I look at the mother’s eyes. At the first sign of tears, she seems to show
a panicky fear. This lasts for a few seconds, and then passes, or is repressed,
as she hurriedly runs over to the child to find out what is wrong. She gives him
a bottle, checks his diapers, tries to stick a rattle into his hand.

Still he cries.

There must be a reason. Her face flushes, turning red, there is sweat
on her forehead as her hair falls into her face. For an instant the placidity
and order of her picnic in the park is overthrown.

Others are now watching the child’s wailing and writhing. Some smile,
that all-wise smile that objectifies the situation. A child is crying. Children
cry. Look, his mother is there. Mother and child, as old as humankind. We
understand and we smile.

The mother looks up at those watching. For help? Do I see an awkwardness
in her face? Are you embarrassed, mother? Is it only because of the other
people watching? Are you concerned about disturbing them; are you worried that
they might think you’re not a good parent?

And you people who are watching-- as long as you can smile at his crying,
you'll never hear or really allow yourself to feel the pain and anguish of that
cry. Your smile blocks your ears and heart to his pain.

And what of those away from the park, working in their businesses. The
businessmen and clerks and salespeople. How would they respond? Would they
glare in frustration, as their fingers busily work the cash registers, trying to

add up the receipts, trying to figure out how much money they've made. Or would the jingle of money simply block out the sound?

The mother begins to scold the child. "Shhh, Come on, you're a bigboy. Stop that. Use your words."

Embarrassment becomes anger as she calls her husband over. Both parents are perplexed, searching for a reason: "Is he hungry; when did you last feed him; are his diapers wet?" "He doesn't want a bottle and I just checked his diapers." "Then maybe he just wants to be held. Why don't you pick him up?" He does, but the baby continues to cry. He hands him to her, but the wailing continues even as he is caressed.

They've done all they can, yet it is not enough. The element of fear returns, even a franticness. "Did a bug bite him? Does he have temperature. Should we take him to the Doctor?"

Yes, parents, maybe he's sick, but maybe he's seeing what you're afraid to see, a huge confusing world that makes no sense. Everything is baffling, even terrifying, and he understands nothing. He can't express his thoughts in words. So there is nothing to hide him from the chaos. He just feels, and then cries, and what is your solution?

You hand him a rattle.

I hear the child's cry, and I understand. Maybe you too, parents, would be crying if you could hear what he is feeling, hear behind the tears, directly into his heart. You heard it, mother, I know you did, during that infinitely long second when, with a feverish panic, you allowed his tears to raise the great uncertainty within you. We're all little children, crying in the wilderness. We just don't let ourselves acknowledge it. We seek desperately to find a solution reason for the tears: milk, cleanliness, love.

But, for that one second, the shrill wail broke through the patterned routinization and self-serving habits we use to block out that fundamental terror that would make us all realize there may be no answer, and cause us to

sob like a child while writhing in utter helplessness on the colorful blankets of our own choosing.

* * *

I feel an itch on my arm, and turn my gaze from the child. A single ant is crawling in the crevice of my elbow. I start to crush him, then stop and watch. I remember Dad and me playing tennis. Just as he was about to serve, he looked down and stopped his serve, calling me over.

As I ran to his side of the net, I asked, "Why didn't you serve?"

He pointed to the ground, and there was a single ant. "Does this ant have any idea where he's going? He seems completely lost, and I was just about to step on him by accident while serving. What's he doing on the tennis court? He looked up at me and smiled. Let's watch him."

For the next few minutes, as the ant crawled toward the fence, and freedom, we watched. As it was just about to crawl under the fence, Dad said, "Ok, let's return to the game." I started to run to the other side, but he stopped me. "Oh, and I just want you to know how badly you're going to get beaten today." I smiled at his taunt. "How badly?" With that he smiles back at me, raises his foot, and smashes it into the ground, where he rotates it several times onto the ant.

* * *

I gingerly take the ant off my arm, place it on my thumb, and with my index finger, flick it back toward the ant hill, from which it came. I watch it tumble through the sky. What will the other ants think? "ook, Johnny's learned to fly?" Maybe they'll believe, like Asiya, that it's ant Elijah coming from the heavens to rescue them.

* * *

Maybe I should go back to Mery's and ask her if she wants to come back to the park with me. It's a beautiful afternoon, and it might bring back memories of our first time here together, when I first kissed her, first took

pictures of her, first played music as the children danced. Like the revolution of a record, or a merry-go-round, back to the beginning, to start again, afresh.

Then I think of the last time we were in the park, and that unfortunate accident when Mery fell and cut herself, and we had to go to the emergency room.

Negative emotions once again start swirling in me. Stop, thoughts! Why do these negative thoughts keep entering my mind just when I'm having happy, peaceful thoughts? Where do they come from? Out damn spot. All I want to do is enjoy a quiet afternoon in the park.

Several of the older children are now beginning to play a game of tag. Maybe that's what reminded me of Mery's fall. Perhaps I subconsciously heard their yelling. Well, this time I won't be the cause of any problems. I can't join in, I can't run. I smile as I think of using my crutches to hobble around. No, I'll just sit quietly and watch.

I'm just an innocent bystander. The thought of not hurting anyone--having others be safe from me--brings some mild comfort. Hey, I've just saved an ant's life.

But as I watch their game, I also sense some sadness and loneliness at being on the outside looking in. I remember Mery saying how well I interact with children, what a good teacher I am for them, and her admiration of that child-like part of me. Now, sitting, watching, I feel like I don't belong. Like the young child in me is being lost. I'm too old too young.

*

*

*

I play a few notes on the flute. They come out more mournfully than want, so I change to a faster pace, and play a lively, spry dance jig. I notice my mood immediately improves. Is it because I released the pain out through the first sad notes--would my psychology professor call that catharsis? Or is it because I made a choice to change my mood-- that would be a different

psychological theory. In any case, I'm feeling better. I put my flute down and smile and clap as one youngster tags another.

A few of the kids look over at me, grinning. As one runs by, I hold out my hand in congratulations. He slaps it playfully, and runs back to his friends. Chasing, running, laughter. I wish Mery could be here now to see me.

Seated, I continue to watch them, clapping, feeling included, yet far enough away that I can do no harm. This may not be a bad life role for me temperamentally-- participating, but also outside observing. I wonder what career might allow that?

Again, the youngster tags his friend. I clap, and he runs over to get another slap of praise. He's approaching from a different angle this time, and as I raise my hand to congratulate him, he attempts to make sure his hand firmly and accurately hits mine. But in watching my hand, he doesn't see my crutches, and trips over them.

As he falls I try to grasp his hand but we have too loose a clench and I'm unable to hold him up. His fingers slip out of mine. He lets out a scream. His mom looks over. Although I can see he's clearly not hurt from his fall onto the ground, his mother, and some of the other mothers, run over to him.

He is lying on the ground shrieking, in tears. I can see that from his mom's perspective, it may look like I either tripped him, or somehow caused him to stumble with my hand.

His mother comes over and holds him tightly to her. She glares at me.

It wasn't my fault. I didn't push him or trip him.

Quit looking at me, mother.

*

*

*

I lie my head back in the grass, and stretch out my hands to the side, clenching the freshly cut green grass. The smell reminds me of August, football preseason, feeling determined and strong while preparing for the gritty fall ahead. The air filled with expectation and hope, camaraderie.

The child's tears crescendo in my head. His tears. My tears. Salty water. Dark blue-black ocean waves crashing. Did I push Mery? Did I push her away?

I hear mom saying "You push everyone away from you. You don't even know how much you don't know about yourself."

The mother and her child leave, and I am left alone.

There is nothing wrong with tears. The grass is green from the rains, then sunlight.

Is there any sunlight in me? Was there ever? How do I create these hurtful actions of which I have no conscious intention? It's bad enough knowing that sometimes I make hurtful statements that I intend. Am I worse than an empty shell? Am I really a plague that others had better stay away from? It's like I'm a mirage. Outside normal and healthy looking, inside I feel so ugly, leprous, filled with boils and sores. How could Mery ever have come near me? There's no way I can let her see me like this.

I know there is something positive I have to offer--to her, to the world.

I just don't know what.

If I'm to have any chance with her at all, I need to present myself to her through the words of my writing--the letters. I'm glad I didn't tear them up. I have to hope that they offer a better picture of me than I can of myself.

*

*

*

I feel an irritating tickle on my arm, and see that several ants have crawled onto it. I sit up, and gently brush them off near their ant hill. I remember when I was a little boy playing with my ant farm, watching with fascination as they built tunnels and carried food. With some of the same childish joy, I begin to play with the ants, putting stones, twigs, leaves in their path. They are so creative, finding a way around the barriers. I can learn from them. I don't need to be trapped by seeming obstacles.

For some reason a high school physics lecture comes to mind. Entropy, the teacher said, is the ultimate state reached in the degradation of matter in the

universe. It is the absence of form, hierarchy or differentiation, the general trend of the universe toward death and disorder. Am I reaching a state of entropy in my life?

I see a particularly courageous ant crawl up over the twig, then onto the rock, and down the other side. His comrades follow his lead. It is so easy not to see ants as "thous," but to treat them as "its," as pests. Isn't that what we do in war? We make the enemy into an "other"—an object, a pest. That's the only way we can allow ourselves to harm another living thing. How easily we rationalize our actions. How much needless suffering we bring to the world.

I think of the profound influence Mery has on me, her gift to me of the book by Buber. I wonder if he's still alive, and if I went to Israel, whether I might meet him.

* * *

The bold, pioneering ant is getting close to his home, his brethren behind him. He's found his way back. Will I ever be able to do that? Do I have a home anymore?

I think of Mery in her home, naked, with Pierre. I hear Senior yelling at me, saying, you're just a wimpy little boy, afraid of your own shadow. Am I becoming a Jude the Obscure, crying and weeping because of sap bleeding from a tree? How can I so calmly let Mery flaunt herself with Pierre, be so easily placated by her remark, "Oh, I missed you." She's playing me like a pawn on the chess board, brushing me aside with crumbs.

The brave ant will never see its home. I feel the power of God, ruling my kingdom, choosing who will live and who will die.

As my hand falls, and I feel the squishy commingling of ant and earth, I wonder whether it's Mery or Pierre or Senior or Mom or me that I'm crushing.

* * *
* * *

1

I'm caught up in a whirlwind taking me to heaven. At first there is only fog and cloud cover, oppressing me, keeping my vision narrowed. When there is only darkness, it's truly hard to believe that sunshine lies above and beyond. Eight thousand feet and climbing. What would Asiya think? Would she be proud of me? Is this a miracle?

It feels like one when we break through into blue skies, and I can see the sun. I look down as the green grass of earth and the pale blue of the Pacific recedes into the distance, as clouds swallow up and obstruct everything below, hiding the past and all the people in it.

What a hellacious month. But now, I'm free at last, thank god, I'm free at last.

As we reach twenty thousand feet, wispy, alto stratus clouds play around me. I open my mouth in a forced yawn to try to clear my ear.

I feel a contented smile remembering Asiya's tale of Elijah climbing toward the heavens on the chariot. Her ride from Israel.

Mine to the promised land.

*

*

*

Jumping off the diving board at eight years old, climbing onto the plane now. Both leaps into the unknown, where, once I let go of control, there is nothing I can do until I land. Except in the former my family surrounded and applauded me, and there was a lifeguard standing ready to rescue me. Now, no family, no life guard, no applause.

As the plane soars higher, I scrunch myself comfortably into the seat, put a pillow behind my head, and let the memories of that first leap filter through my mind. We were in California on vacation at the Miramar Hotel, and the long

lazy days were spent around the pool, with its daunting high dive. The first couple of days, I climbed the ladder, each day going a few steps higher, before climbing back down. My father seemed admiring and mom apprehensive, but neither said anything.

The fourth day I stood at the top of the ladder and looked at the water below for about 30 seconds. My stomach was in turmoil and chaos. I was afraid, Peter being made to walk the plank by Captain Hook. The difference was that no one was making me do it. And that day I couldn't make myself do it. I climbed back down the ladder. I thought I saw disappointment in both my father's and mother's eyes.

Why does the little baby start turning over; then sit up; then go from crawling to walking? When do we decide, consciously or unconsciously, to take a chance, to leave the comfortable, to be willing to fall and hurt ourselves, and for what?

Now, as I look back, I still wonder why we take those risks. My psychology professor spouted lots of theories: wanting to be competent, exploratory drives, curiosity, risk-taking, need for stimulation and thrill-seeking, wanting approval, a heroic quest, proving one's maleness, an unconscious urge to explore, to test our limits. All I knew then was that there was something inside driving me forward, and something holding me back. Do we ever really completely know why we act?

The next day I climbed up again, and took a few tentative steps forward toward the water. I had every intention of climbing back down the ladder, and just wanted to test how many steps I could take along the board. Then, I remember so clearly, it was as if a switch flicked in me, and I knew I was going to do what I'd never done before. Take a leap into the unknown. I walked slowly to the end, scared, but determined.

Then letting go, free falling, trusting.

What else can you do? Then I was in the hands of gravity, pulling me down.
Now, I'm in the grip of an engine, pulling me up. Both forces beyond my
control.

There is something both frightening and exhilarating in the freedom of not
being in control. All the senses are open and alive.

I want to give a mighty Tarzan call. As if I've been up in a high tree
that's being chopped down, and as the tree begins to fall, I see a rope, which I
grab onto in order to swing to another tree. Tarzan still lives within me. I'm
going to find a new place to land.

I feel the same exhilaration, as the plane rises, of climbing slowly in a
roller coaster, before the first big hill, waiting for the excitement to follow.
Rising, falling, jumping, being pulled up. So many metaphors. But one feeling:
joy at leaving the messiness of my life behind me and excitement at the freedom
and new beginnings ahead.

*

*

*

As the stewardess comes through the cabin with the meals, I am aware of
how little exercise I have gotten over the past month, and how poor my eating
has been. My body has become soft and flabby. As part of this new beginning,
I'm going to begin to eat more carefully, starting with skipping whatever they
serve. I'll just rest cozily and watch the clouds and enjoy my new freedom.

I received a huge hug from mom and dad when I swam to the side of the
pool after my jump. They were both proud of me. Especially dad. They even
clapped and told me what a star I was, such a brave boy.

How different everyone's reactions are now at my new leap. Then I was
hugged to their hearts, now I leave as the prodigal son, with no intention of
returning. I'm free of parents and family and their attempts to ensnare me by
their guilt, which only shows their own bondage to the society and culture,
their trappedness by golden calves:

Senior: "How are you going to afford it? What a waste, you're throwing your life away."

Grandpa \$: "Israel is a fine country, and I contribute substantially to its well-being. But isn't this a bit rash? I know you're tired, but after all I've spend on your college education, you're not going to graduate? What did you tell Harvard?"

Mom: "How can you do this to your poor Nana? She's not in good health and is worried sick about you. You're so thoughtless."

I take out a pen, and my journal called "Creative Writing: Play" and jot down their statements. Well, Grandpa, I only have one class left to graduate—the creative writing professor gave me an incomplete until I turn in the play I'm supposed to write. But don't worry, I'm conscientious, and will complete it. Your reactions are even helping me write it.

Thirty five thousand feet...

Leaving everything I own and know behind. Forgetmenot, San Francisco. tennis and golf buddies. Classes. My life receding into the distance.

Ahh, take a breath. Phew.

People are so much easier to deal with from this perspective!

I'm remembering your parting advice, Grandpa Dave. "You don't have to be meshuginah, but it helps. I can see we're made of the same fine cloth! Don't lose your sense of humor. We'll manage fine. And remember the cardinal red birds."

*

*

*

I reach into my back pocket, and pull out two letters, that arrived within days, in response to my two letters. I leave the third letter, which arrived on my birthday, in my pocket.

I've read and re-read these two letters several times this past month, and they are much the worse for wear. They are both on green stationary, with

little swirled yellow flowers at the bottom, and a hint of blue in the border.
When I first received them, I believed I could smell a whiff of perfume, at
least on one of the letters. I read them like a child who is learning to read,
and repeatedly goes over the same book again and again, so it's not clear
whether he's reading, or has memorized the words and is reciting from rote.

Oh my goodness, two letters arrived today from two humble
and faithful servants. I feel honored and touched by such greet-
ings. I would like to respond to each in the style they deserve.

Dear White Knight,

I have read your protective utterances with care and trepida-
tion, and no small measure of appreciation. The damsel in the
castle feels your kind concern and steadfastness. Your strength,
wit, and courage do make my heart feel secure and sheltered.

My brother once said "Fore warned is four arms" Thank you
for four arming me! As another reincarnated white knight would say if
I seemed to be straying from the course, "Fore". See how much you've
taught me, almost by osmosis!

Yet, alas, there is also confusion in the castle. Your
letter lacks clarity regarding this treacherous manipulator
from whom you say you are protecting me.

Are you saying that you have changed, and that is a good thing; or
that you are going to tell me you have changed to win me
back, and so I shouldn't trust that?

But then because you're warning me, I should trust you.

If so, I want you to know I appreciate your efforts, but am
no longer in need of those services. This damsel, though once,
and yes still, often in distress, is learning to be more
independent and self-trusting, less needy of white knights.
Especially ones who don't express their emotions directly. And
who hide behind crafty phrases, and obscure philosophical refer-
ences.

I fear, instead, that your words belie a wolfish wanting, a
sexual avarice, that often lacks true passion, love and giving
of yourself.

Know that I do hear the caring behind your words. I thank
you for your warning, and I do take it to heart. For now, I
believe that you best care for and protect me by continuing to
stay off center stage. I am seeking professional guidance on my
quest. And I hope one day we can reconnect on a different level.

You will find a gift I want to give you and your new,
changed friend in the accompanying package. It is my way of

reaching out to you and also a way of saying good-bye and thank you.

As ever, your lady of the yellow flowers and reddish hair.

*

*

*

From the back of the plane, I stand up to see where the stewardesses are. What's taking them so long? Though I'm not going to eat anything, I feel a gurgle in my stomach, and am a little hungry. At least I could get some orange juice or something to drink. I see, over the panoply of colorful heads, some in black hats, others with scarves, others with no hair, that they have barely reached the quarter way point. Although sitting in the back seat has the advantage of perspective, there is the downside of being served last. I'll just have to wait, though patience is still not my forte.

I take Mery's letter and tear it into little strips. Even as I do so, I hear her voice echoing the words, "don't express emotions directly, who hides behind crafty phrases, and obscure philosophical references" Couldn't she see I was just trying to be clever? She has no sense of humor. But worse, "lacks true passion, love and giving of yourself." She sounds like my mother. I continue tearing the strips smaller and smaller. The bitch. Not cute at all. I realize I'm not perfect. I know that, and don't need her superego mean voice rubbing it in.

I was hoping she would see that I could shelter her and help her, protect her from the whiny part of me that I don't personally find trustworthy. I thought my letter would appeal to her dependency and need for my strength. And also she would appreciate my openness and vulnerability. Well, I was wrong. People change.

I'm changing. A new start.

I get up, go into the bathroom, and throw the pieces into the toilet. "Wolfish wanting, a sexual avarice." So? Aren't I a man? Fuck you, asshole.

I'm well rid of you. All her cute punning with four arms and forearmed and fore. She's the one who forsook me at the beach. I flush the toilet, but not before I've peed all over the paper, turning it a lovely blue color. "Stay off center stage." Is this far enough away? "As ever." Fuck her again. I should have placed a big turd of shit on her before I flushed.

* * *

Before I leave the bathroom, I look into the mirror. What looks back is a gloating, though whiny, fearful, angst-filled face, some creature has occupied me, and is inwardly taking pride at my failure, and how unsympathetically Mery responded to my chivalrous efforts.

As I return to my seat, I see the stewardesses haven't made much progress. I'm glad there's no one sitting in my aisle. I need the space and don't want to be around anyone. The plane's not that full. Nana warned me not to fly to Israel, because of the hijackings. Nana's not a very educated woman, but she has an amazing memory for things that create fear in her. When I first told her I was going to Israel, she recounted in great detail an act of terrorism just two years ago this month, near the day of mourning, Tish b'av. A time of weeping and bad luck. She said it was a mistake for me to travel on that day. Ten crew and 38 passengers on a flight to Israel from Rome were highjacked by three members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

But they were all freed, I told her. Nana just stroked her coiffed gray hair and recited all the attacks just last year: an El Al aircraft at Athens Airport was stormed and an Israeli mechanic killed; Palestinians assaulted an El Al plane at Zurich Airport, killing the copilot and injuring the pilot; bomb and grenade attacks occurred at El Al offices in Athens, Berlin, and Brussels. I asked her if that meant I shouldn't fly El Al. "No. It means you shouldn't go. But if you go, you must fly El Al. The Israelis know best how to handle these threats." I wonder why I'm not afraid. The low odds? The Israeli

security? Letting Nana do all the worrying for me? Ah, Nana. Maybe you'll have to be in the play, too.

*

*

*

I pull out the second letter, addressed to The Dark (K)night of the Soul. I have to admit that is cute-- my style of wit, seeing us as the White Knight and Dark (K)night is really quite clever. It shows she had potential, if only she'd stayed with me long enough to allow me to continue teaching her how to have her budding potentiality to truly flower.

Dear Dark (K)night of the Soul,

As you could easily have predicted, your letter touched me deeply, and I can clearly hear the change in you. You show a kindness, passion, intensity, and yearning that moves me to tears and compassion. I want to hug and hold you and care for you in your pain. I'm so sorry for what you're going through, and so sorry for whatever part of me was in any way to blame.

As I write this, Joan Baez is singing,

"I could have loved you better,
I didn't mean to be unkind,
you know that was the last thing on my mind."

I'm crying, too.

This has also been a very difficult time for me. I miss you deeply, and have been trying to find a way to reach out to you. I'm so happy you authentically shared yourself and your pain with me. To be honest, this has been such a painful time for me that I've entered into a course of even more intensive therapy. My parents are very worried about me, and have offered to pay for me to go several times a week. I feel guilty about that, and, as you know, have begun modeling again to help pay them back. I'm truly sorry Pierre was here when you came by. That felt very awkward to me. I would have liked to have spent some time being with and getting to know the new you.

But my therapist says that would be a mistake for me now in my current condition. She says I have been leaning on you too much to provide my structure and safety in life. I was seeking the strong male who would take care of me. I admired your direction, your intellect, your strong sense of self. Yes, even as I chided you and pushed you to question yourself. I'm sorry about that.

But, with her help, I'm realizing that as you become more open to seeing different new possibilities--the very things I asked and challenged you to do--, you also became less sure of yourself, more out of control and therefore less of a good protector for my neediness,

and less safe for me to be around.

One of the main things we talked about relates to what you called our being "counterpoints" to each other. I understand what you're saying, and thank you for your kind words about my opening you to the spirit, to compassionate feelings for others. But as I'm discovering, I need to learn some of your assertiveness, and my therapist has pointed out to me several positive examples where you helped model this for me.

Our time at the swimming pool is one example, and one my therapist and I have talked about. She says one of my main issues is that I often don't feel I deserve anything. So, I don't stand up for myself and allow other people to either push me around, or ask them to take care of me. She pointed out that Jesus' saying the first shall be last, does not mean you don't respect yourself, that you don't kindly, but firmly stand up for your own rights. You do that so well, always taking care of yourself. I need to learn that better. She told me that having no sense of self is different than yielding from a strong sense of self.

My therapist had told me that even sexually, I need to be more careful of my total submission, my willingness to give anything and everything to a strong male in return for his protection. I thank you for not taking advantage of me in that regard (and I need to be assertive here and ask you to please destroy those pictures you took of me. I'm embarrassed to think I allowed you to do that). I know that speaking to you as you are now, you will understand and honor that request). I am so confused about sexuality now that my therapist says I should continue practicing celibacy for quite a while, until I become clearer and stronger. I've promised her I would. Although I know I don't have to share that with you, I trust this new you so much, that I want to.

My therapist also says I need to learn to be strong for myself, and, "Not desert myself when I most need myself." I know you are going through your dark night of the soul, and I share this with you, in case it might be helpful, while you are going through your own struggles. You have a deep and sensitive heart. Sometimes, as you now know, it can seem too sensitive. Don't desert yourself. For your sake, for my sake, and because the world needs more people like you.

I do not mean to add to your pain, but it's clear to me that I cannot be in relationship with anyone until I become stronger and more respectful of myself. Coming from a different "counterpoint," let me risk saying the same may be true for you. You might consider spending some time alone, without a relationship, looking at your pride, over confidence, (yes, sometimes arrogance) and perhaps try to learn to love and respect yourself while honoring your vulnerability.

Finally, though I hear your pain, I'm not sure you really are yet in a place to think about or feel mine. As sensitive as your letter is, it's really all about you. You don't give any indication you understand how difficult it was for me our last night together in Carmel. I don't want to relive or re-bring back bad memories, but we can't hide from them, either. Both of us had just been through an

ugly event—yes, blood everywhere at that Passover Seder.

I could tell at the beach how upset you were, but so was I. It was very hard for me to be with you at the ocean that night and see you totally coming apart. I was trying to reassure you, to smile to let you know that everything would be ok. But I was totally frightened and scared. My protector was deserting me, falling to pieces, and I didn't know how to comfort or rescue you.

I know how hard it is to focus on someone else's feelings when our own seem so dark and negative. That's why I don't feel this is a good time for either of us to try to resume a relationship. We each have too much internal growing up to do.

I hope you can feel that I'm saying this not from meanness or to punish you, but from kindness and caring. I'm truly touched by the kind things you said; I can honestly see the changes you're making to improve yourself and to become a better person. I know what you're going through as you try to put your life back together. I honor that, and respect that's where you are and need to be. But, as the song I'm listening to says

"Jesus walked that lonely 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 lonely valley....
you have to walk it by yourself
For nobody else can walk it for you
you have to walk it by yourself

We are both in a lonely valley now. I don't believe either of us can fill our loneliness with the other. All we'll end up doing is hurting each other. We are not in a place for relationship. I agree with my therapist who told me we each need to do our own individual work first.

I know you have some negative associations, and even fear of counseling from how you understand your mom's experience. But I can honestly say the counseling I've received has been very helpful to me. As someone who cares about you, let me invite you to consider it at some point, if you feel the inclination.

The song says, we have to walk the path by ourself. But sometimes it helps to have someone who has been there before to guide us. I accept all the help I can get. Both on the earthly plane, and the heavenly one. In any case, it's just a suggestion. Please know that though I will not be with you for this next phase in body, I will be with you in spirit.

With blessings and affection and hopes and prayers for a safe and healing journey, wherever life takes you.

From your friend of the yellow mustard seed, who understands dark

starry nights very well.

PS.I admired your peace poem very much and hope you find that elusive monster, inside and out.

PPS I loved the image of you playing the flute for the children, and them dancing around. You have so much potential to make so many people happy.

PPPS I guess I put in all these pppps's because it's hard to say good-bye to a dream, isn't it? Good-bye, fair knight. Don't desert yourself.

* * *

Dr. Lisbet hands the crumpled green stationary, with little swirled yellow flowers at the bottom, back to me. It looks like the page of a book that has been read too many times and is much the worse for wear. There are underlinings on it, and notes in the margin. "I have to say, she sounds clear, strong, and insightful."

"Of course you would. She probably had her therapist write it for her. For someone trying to be so independent, look how many times she says, 'my therapist says.' Is the goal of all therapists to make their clients dependent on them, creating little mimicking parrots?" I think to myself how many times these past months I've wondered What would Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe think say. It's demeaning.

"Are you feeling that we're trying to make you dependent on us?" The Rebbe interjects.

"Well, wouldn't that be to your advantage? If your patients need you, and can't think without you, then they'll keep coming back, and you've got them addicted--and a steady income stream for you."

"I hear some anger? Are you angry with us? With anyone else?" It's Dr. Lisbet, ever ready to confront.

I hate the way they do this. Always making it all about me. My anger. Of course I'm angry with them. And at Mery. And at myself. And my family. And my life.

I sit and say nothing. The Rebbe softly queries, "When you read us the letter now, what are your feelings, after the passage of all these months?"

"Anger, sadness. It's a sweet letter in parts. That's why I kept it. But, like the other one, it's mean too. I guess you could say she's the reason I'm here, in Israel, and in therapy with you two. I'm increasingly able to see that what she says about me in the letter has a lot of truth to it. I definitely wasn't ready to hear that from her, not at that time. But I've noticed that what she says is not unlike some of the things you all have said to me. I want to take that truth forward with me, and leave her behind once and for all. She seems the last piece of my past I need to come to peace with."

"Was that your last contact with her? Have you heard from her or written her since?"

"That was the last contact. The letters arrived on my birthday, with a birthday gift--a painting. I guess I've been carrying this one around for nine months." I pause, then say "The other one I threw in the toilet on the airplane. I'm not really sure why I kept this one." I smile, "Maybe so I could show it to you two." I look over at the Rebbe. "I guess it's time to throw it away, too?"

* * *

I can smell the food, and look up to see that the stewardesses are just a few aisles from me. I'm hungrier than I thought I'd be, but am still determined not to eat. I need to get back in shape for this new adventure ahead.

"My therapist says." How can she feel she is becoming an independent person when every other word is just parroting her therapist. How is that walking that lonely valley by yourself? What a hypocrite. I am well rid of her, my family, the materialistic, callous society of America, and the elite snobbery of Stanford.

As the stewardess approaches my aisle, she turns to the left, and offers a meal to the old lady sitting across from me. I pretend to close my eyes, but keep them open enough so I can see when she turns to me. I already have my plan: I will sleepily open my eyes, then lift my right hand, palm toward her in a gesture of stop, and say, "No thank you, I'm not hungry."

She finishes serving the old lady. I open my eyes, but before I can lift my palm and say anything, she apologizes, "I'm sorry. We've run out of lunches."

I'm stunned. Although I should be relieved that the universe is helping me with my diet, I'm furious. I want that meal with every fiber of my being. "What kind of lousy service is this. I should sue you. Is this any way to welcome someone coming to your country?"

"We're very sorry, sir. May I offer you some orange juice?"

"Yes, fine. And see if you can find any other scraps for the poor, tired, and hungry."

The old lady across the aisle signals to me, and offers me part of her meal. At first I refuse, but then she offers again kindly and I'm now so hungry that I accept. I dig into some kind of pancake thing, but it tastes disgusting. Then a yogurt sour cream dish, bitter and foul tasting. This is not a good start to this trip at all. I wonder if I give the food back to the old lady, I'd still have to thank her.

*

*

*

I reread the second letter. Should it face the same fate as the first? Maybe I should spread this white slime on it. That would serve her right. Like cum splattered all over her celibate words. I get up, go to the bathroom, and look in the mirror. A pale, pained-looking face stares back.

"You see." I look with some anger in the mirror "Your whiny approach

wasn't any more effective. She saw you as a weakling. And a self-absorbed one at that. What a bitch. She whines that I didn't think about **her** that night in Carmel. I'm falling apart and she's upset because I'm not focusing on her."

I feel her slamming the door on me again. Go walk that lonely valley, sad little boy. You've got to do it yourself. Good-bye. Knock Knock Knock and it will be opened to you. What a crock. She's shutting the door once and for all. Is she? Is there a chance I could still get her back? The way she ends this letter is heartfelt. Maybe she does still love me.

What a pathetic pipedream. The ninety-seven pound weakling, sniveling, whiny self and the macho, swaggering self both lost. I look in the mirror to see if I can see both the white knight and the dark knight. What I see is actually a bit of a smile forming. A smile of recognition. Well, fellow knights, we're in this together, for better or worse. We're all losers. The fair maiden does not now want us. We might as well call a temporary halt to our hostilities. Perhaps it's time to learn to accommodate, dialogue and, if necessary, civilly agree to disagree. A house divided against itself cannot stand. And I'm sure we have many more battles ahead for which we need to be on the same team. "Agreed?" "Agreed." "Agreed."

I feel like three actors in a play, a moderator talking to an audience of two parts of himself. A one person multi-faceted absurdist play. I wonder if my creative writing professor would accept this idea and finally let me graduate. Great idea.

Do "I" care? "No." "No." "Then we all agree."

I'm so cute.

*

*

*

"What was the gift that she gave you?" the Rebbe asks.

"It was actually quite thoughtful, and a total surprise. It was an oil painting with a brief note, both arriving as a birthday gift. The picture is

of the eighth hole at Pebble Beach, painted from the tee, behind a golfer who has just finished his swing. The style is impressionistic. You can see the back of the golfer's head, as he looks skyward to follow his shot. The ball is soaring up toward the sky, over a blind crest.

"I poured over the picture for days, looking for hints and hidden Meanings. I've memorized it. The colors are muted. The sun is behind some Gray- black clouds, but there are rays of soft light occasionally breaking through. I know she thinks of that as angels' speaking.

"There are several shades of green on the course, and just in the distance, the rocks and foamy darkish-blue ocean crashing against them. If you look carefully you can see the beginning of the inlet and the sides of the rocks where the land drops off precipitously into a cavernous abyss. Most of the picture was impressionistic, with muted colors, but there she painted more realistically, with dark blues and purples.

"She took some poetic license. In the picture there is no caddie, no Mery, and the sunny day has been changed to a cloudy one. She also added the lone Monterey pine from Cypress point, where I proposed to her. She wrote a caption, too: "Lech Lecha: 'May the seas always part for you and may you share your blessing with those on both sides.'"

* * *

I close my eyes and take a few breaths, then continue: "My shot actually landed just a few feet from the cliff. The second shot, the toughest second in golf, was over a cavernous valley—an abyss. My second birdie in a row."

"Hmm," the Rebbe smiles. "A terrific shot. Would you describe what you're feeling right now."

I pause, close my eyes again, and say "Nostalgia. I can see the ball in flight sailing over the abyss. There is such promise, such hope." I open my

eyes, and feel a few tears. "I feel Sadness. Why does the ball ever have to land? Can't we just fly over the valleys? It's easy sometimes to remember just the best days with her, and the dream of future ones. I writing, working on class papers, she painting. Both of us creating together, caressing each other. She my muse, and I hers. Reading to her at night. Giving, sharing, playing music, singing. She telling me how poetic I am as I proposed to her by the lone tree."

I take another, deeper breath. I don't really want to start crying again in front of them, so I just say matter-of-factly, "I know all that's behind me. I even tell myself I never want to have it again. That it was all a pipedream, like all relationships. But sometimes I feel pangs of hunger for what once was, what could have been."

*

*

*

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet both have solicitous expressions on their faces, which I find both comforting and annoying. I know they care. But I also know they can do nothing bring her back, and it's unclear whether they can do anything to heal the pain of the memories, which, nine months later, are still so strong.

"You mentioned there was a note with it. What happened to that?"

"I still carry it with me." I reach into my pocket, and hand them a light blue paper, with purple edges. In the top right corner, there is a yellow sun. I read it out loud:

I'm happy you came by, and understand why you wrote me rather than returning that afternoon. Two letters. I felt quite flattered. It seems your life is becoming more complex, as you discover more parts of yourself. Mine too, though I am also seeking to dramatically simplify at the same time.

I want you to know that these past days since I wrote you back, I've been thinking of you, and wanting to reach out to you, but wasn't sure how to. My therapist suggested I write you a letter telling you how I'm feeling for your birthday. But painting is my writing, and so I've been painting this picture. This was my way of staying connected to you.

In most ways, the picture speaks for itself. However, there are a couple of things only you and I can appreciate. Most people will focus on the ball in flight. We know the first shot lands close to the cliff, "the lonesome valley."

I call the painting after a Hebrew passage Dad would discuss with us from the Old Testament about Abraham. "Lech Lecha." Go forth. Abraham had just changed his name from Abram, signifying his new change in consciousness. It was time for him to go forth from the home of his father, the known, the habitual, to a new land, a new Father, a place that he did not know.

If you look closely, you will see a very small cardinal redbird off in the distance, flying over the abyss. Even when we have to go down and through the abyss, we need to keep our faith in the song of the redbird, and your grandfather's sense of humor. On our way to a place we do not know.

You are now about to go forth on that same journey, wherever it guides you. Feel my spirit and blessings with you as you go....

Love, simply, BETH

* * *

I put the letter down and look at them.

"She sounds honey sweet. And I know that should make me feel either sad, -- I lost a beautiful angel-- or happy, because she sounds so positive and so I wasn't an idiot for spending time with her. But I can't help but believe that there was a part of her that wrote this to show me how angelic she is, that I'm the one who's bitter and wrong. There's meanness in it, too. Like that smile of hers that was both a seemingly kind smile, and yet was meant to also hold me at a distance."

Neither the Rebbe or Dr. Lisbet say anything. I'm not sure they're yet convinced of my point of view, so I continue what I realize is becoming a tirade/ legal argument.

"For example, why does she sign her name 'simply Beth.' She's distancing herself from me. That's not how I knew her. She's becoming a new person, like Abraham, going forth, without me. And his name change. Isn't she inviting me, really telling me, pushing me to change my name, too, and go forth, to leave the house of my father, my wombs, her, and find the house of the Father instead?"

It feels patronizing and cruel. It's not as if I was being called so much as she pushed me out of the house. Didn't she force me down and through the abyss, when I wanted to go over, soaring like the golf ball?"

*

*

*

I'm starving. I ask the waitress for the lunch menu. Meat balls with pasta; veggies with Italian dressing, pita break, eggplant and humus, cake. I'll eat anything. But now I have nothing to do for several hours but wait for lunch. I pull out the letter Mery sent me with the painting, and read it. I sent the painting to my brother. I hope he takes good care of it.

Down and through. It's almost as if she takes a secret delight in having forced me to the ocean so that I could see the same nothingness and feel the same pain she does. Given a choice, I'd much rather keep the lofty perspective of the golf ball sailing over the abyss.

What's the problem with that? I know she criticizes me for keeping the world at one remove, but look what happens when I don't keep my distance. I got too close to reality, and lost my way.

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita, mi ritrovai per una selva oscura che la diritta via era smarrita. Mideay in the journey of life, I woke to find myself in a dark wood, where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Well, I am precocious. I guess I'm starting my journey through the twenty-four rings of the inferno early. Have I been exiled here like Francesca and Paolo, condemned for the sin of lust to pass eternity in the first of the descending rings of hell? Or is this just a way station? Who is going to be my Virgil to guide me on this spiritual and moral journey? Will I have to do everything myself?

From the lofty heights of the airplane, the problems of the past are seeming to recede and become smaller and more manageable. I can now longer see the litter on earth, the discarded gum that sticks to your wingtip shoes. Oh,

to be an astronaut, to see the earth in majestic beauty from 240,000 miles, to see what we have in common versus what divides To recognize that there is a unity of us all; we share the same planet, we are all ants on the same globe.

If only people would realize that we are drifting on a tiny ball in an infinite void, perhaps they would understand their shared common bonds. Perhaps then, all humankind would be able to share bread and wine, there would be no terrorists to make Nana worried. The rich would help the homeless on Sixth Street, rather than walk hurriedly past them. Ah, it sounds like all that lion and lamb stuff. Maybe it's easier for God to be happy because he's so far removed from everything.

The greater the distance, the more removed the problems. Even from this distance, it's a lovely image to believe we all have one creator, and everything is going to work out fine for everyone.

What a great myth. Yet as I image our lonely planet in the cosmos, with darkness all around it, suspended with no visible strings and supports; and as I leave my family and all that is known to me, and fly on this airplane with no visible strings and supports, there is a not insubstantial part of me that wants a Father/Mother somewhere to be looking out for and caring about me.

And I, in turn, in this lofty airborne chariot, am overcome, for a brief moment, by feelings of loving and caring for all humanity.

*

*

*

This is your Captain John speaking. I want to welcome you--one and all, knights of different colors and hues--on your flight to Israel. It will be interesting to have all of us be in one country again. Once we meet, we can see how we've all grown and changed, and if there is any way we can still get along. I guess the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet would call it an "inner" family reunion of sorts.

If you remember when we were young and on vacation in California, driving to Disneyland, Dad told us that the first child who saw the Matterhorn got to pick the first ride. Anticipation and excitement mounted. Then, you spotted the park. "I see it!" we'd shout with glee.

Remember that rush. Well, right now, that---and maybe Johannes' first orgasm--are the closest analogies I can share with you. But in some ways, they don't compare to the first sighting of the Holy Land.

You are in for an amazing experience treat. Sit back, keep your seat belt fastened, and have a safe ride. It will be nice to have some company. I look forward to greeting you upon your arrival

Welcome one and all.

*

*

*

Drifting, dreaming, and then I'm awakened by slight turbulence and the ringing of the "Please Fasten Seat Belts" sign. Out my window there is only blue sky, and below, no earth, completely cloud covered. I fasten my seat belt, lie back, close my eyes, and try to re-capture my dream, but its content eludes me.

I feel frustrated, annoyed, uncomfortable. I don't know whether this uneasiness is from the content of the dream, or the fact that I can't remember it. Grandpa \$ always told me you can't trust anyone but family. I learned that I couldn't even trust my family. Then that I couldn't trust the person I thought was going to be part of my new family, Mery. The only one left to trust is me.

If I can't remember my dream--the movie of my mind at night--what other feelings and emotions are locked inside, that I'm not aware of, yet that are affecting me? That makes me I'm not in control of myself, and I don't like that feeling. If there is something going on inside me that may be affecting my mood, how can I trust myself?

I look around the plane. What a smorgasbord of styles and colors. There are the black-hatted Jews seemingly straight out of the 18th century; women with kerchiefs; an assortment of backpackers; some families with small children How did I ever get thrown together with this assortment of people? None of them looks like me, and I can't imagine ever having anything to do with any of them. Although I packed my sandals, I wore my wing tipped shoes, which I have neatly stored under the seat in front of me. I'm wearing a dark blue turtleneck, and khaki slacks. I'm the only one who looks normal. How deceiving looks can be.

I pick up the inflight magazine to distract myself. There are beautiful color pictures of different sites in Israel, and welcoming statements throughout. I glance through an article on Aliyah--coming to Israel to live the rest of your life. Is that what I'm doing? I have no idea what will happen to me once I get there. Are any of the people on the plane making Aliyah? Or are they just vacationing? Returning home? I wonder if Israel is a big projective test on which each of us places our dreams and goals. I think of the Haggadah: make the story your own.

*

*

*

I lie back and once again close my eyes, letting my mind drift. I still need to catch up in my journal on this past hellacious month. Why did I stop writing in my journal. Every time I do, things fall apart. Or is it because things fall apart that I stop writing? How do you begin to untangle the Gordian knot? As I'm idly thinking this, my dream drifts back in. Where has it been hiding? Why did it decide to come back now? Is it an interruption and distraction from the thoughts about my journal, or an opportunity I should seize?

I choose the latter, pull out my dream journal, and begin writing.

July 12, Sunday, daylight. I have no idea what time zone. On a plane to Israel. Now, I'm situated in time in space. I had a repetition of my football

dream. I'm on a bare, brownish-yellow field, interrupted by a few patches of darkish, burnt green. Is the yellow from Mery? Fading? The football field my youth, where I excelled, now burnt? I've always thought the field was in the plains of Africa. Could it be the deserts of Israel? Could that dream have been calling me to Israel all along? It's fascinating how we interpret an event, even a dream, in light of our current situation. Even to imagine the yellow is from Mery, who was nowhere in my life when I first had this dream.

My brother and I are playing football, but the angle from which I'm viewing is a wide telephoto lens. There are lions within fifty yards of us. I guess that rules out Israel. I don't think there are any lions there.

For some reason, I'm not afraid. I turn to my brother and say what I always say: "Fake button hook at ten yards, then head for the right corner. On three."

Then I awoke to the fasten seat belt sign ringing and blinking. What does this dream mean? Maybe that the world is a lot bigger and scarier than I realized as an innocent child playing catch with my brother? But I'm still ok, courageous, handling the situation. Staying focused. I see it as a hopeful dream, that even though there are some dangers, I am able to proceed without disturbance and stay focused on the task at hand and keep playing.

A good dream. At least it seems my unconscious is under control.

That's about as hopeful an interpretation as I can imagine. I'd say your conscious mind just did a optimistically glib job of papering over the dangers. Perhaps, when faced with lions, it's best not to be in denial about the danger, or inappropriately minimize or ignore them. With only two people on the team, and one going out for a pass, there is no one to block for you. You're really defenseless in an open field, easy prey for wild animals, predators, all the vagaries of life. Is it really a good idea to continue to play football when you could be being eyed as the lion's next meal? Maybe when

you're in flight, in free fall, it's best to think that everything is going to work out all right. But isn't part of the reality of life that we either eat or are eaten? How does an all-powerful, all-good, all-loving God allow that?

But what do I know? I can imagine Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe having a different interpretation altogether. The Rebbe might say the lions represent Ari, the lion, the wise teacher Rebbe Luria at Safed. Maybe it really is a dream about Israel after all. And, following Dr. Lisbet's view that the dream can be all parts of oneself, maybe the lions are a wise part of yourself watching over you.

Who knows what is the true? If I can ever stop talking to them about Mery, maybe I can ask them about this dream. It's a question of dollars and sense. How much am I willing to pay to learn about myself, and how much is their view of this dream worth?

*

*

*

The last time I had that dream was at Mery's. Maybe it was a warning that I should have hightailed it out of there. Maybe Joplin's screeching and Mery's lewd dancing with others were the lions.

I wonder how much our relationship these last few months was an illusion, a dream. A poetic drama which gives the appearance of reality, but is only a fabrication? How much was I projecting my feelings of love and my desire to be loved onto her, just as she does with her God. I was lonely and adrift, especially after I left my family. I hear a snippet of the Beatles song in my mind:

Do you need anybody,
I just need somebody to love,
Could it be anybody,
I want somebody to love.

Did I really love her or just want to be in love. What irony. I get by with a little help from my friends. I'm my only friend. And it's only me that's going to help me get by. A one man Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

How much did she come to symbolize love in the ideal? How much of our relationship was simply my lust? Hers? Even if she had to hide it behind spiritual shenanigans. I thought I was conquering and defiling an innocent "quasi-virgin" Mery. Instead I got the nude model and harlot Mary Magdalene, sleeping with Al, then Pierre, dressing up in costumes for old guys for money, smoking dope and dancing seductively at the Fillmore.

The pot calling the kettle black? Or he who is without sin casting stones? Were you any better, Mr. so-called white Knight? Of course it was your lust that attracted you to her. Things were fine with your family and your career path. That's not an excuse. The relationship was born in sexual objectifying, with me going gaga over her breasts as play-toys.

Me? I don't like using first person pronouns. I want more distance.

You then proceeded through a series of calculating seductive moves and increased sexual depravity. You were a slave to your sexual appetites and lusts. Still are.

Mr. whiny sappy has to have his say. Look, you don't seem to get it. I've told you before, all life is seduction.

Yes, I sought to seduce women. But they are not passive recipients. They have their own moves: acting coy, innocent, and flirtatious as is their wont. It's all a performance. And they have their own motives for wanting to be seduced. Do you just want to forgive her and move on? Say it's all your fault, and you should divorce yourself from my body. Don't be an asshole?

What would be so wrong with forgiving her, for moving on and trying to pursue my search for happiness beyond the physical? We're aloft. This is a chance for a new beginning, a higher perspective, to not to be so ruled by the

body, Didn't I bring some of this pain on myself? Maybe I even need to forgive myself.

Nice try, jerko! Seeking a neat, simple formulaic package. Forgive, move on. A convenient way to bury your emotions, to try to avoid dealing with the real problems that led us here. You're right. There is no anger. How about this as a letter back to her.

Dear simple simply Beth, Mery, Elizabeth,

Thanks a lot for your thoughtful letters, and painting. I want you to know that I completely understand your position, and how hard it must have been for you to see my falling apart at the ocean. I admire and respect your newly found assertiveness, and want you to know that I'm not angry at you. And that I truly forgive you.

It doesn't bother me that I opened myself to you at a deeper level of trust than I'd ever done before. That you took that trust, lured me into challenging everything I believed in--my family, law, society, my goals-- the very structure of my life. Then, when I opened myself to this mysterious newness, you deserted me. Said we weren't good for each other, it would be better for "both of us" not to continue the relationship.

Thank you so much for displaying all your seductive sexuality, offering it to me freely and lovingly, then pulling back and withholding it. I really appreciate your showing me new perverted ways of depravity and putting each other in bondage sexually, then telling me I'm the one that has a problem being obsessed with sex.

Please hear my forgiveness for your leading me to the abyss, then deserting and betraying me when I had no one else left in my life. Again, rest assured, I have come to praise the relationship, not bury it, for Mery is an honorable woman. I respect you and thank you for all you have given me. I sign off again repeating that there is no anger, only admiration and forgiveness.

Your ever and still faithful white knight.

*

*

*

Clap clap clap. Does the big strong white knight feel better after venting

his passive aggressive rage? Ah, poor you, has the little rich boy been hurt, but afraid to admit it clearly, to feel it deep? Has your image of the suave, swashbuckling, romantic hero damaged? Oh, you sad little boy, it's so unfair. After all, you're entitled to happiness. You shouldn't have to suffer, shouldn't ever have to wash the shit out of your laundry. Isn't that what dry cleaners are for?

Pretty sarcastic there, aren't you sensitive little man? You don't exactly get off the hook, either, do you? She tells you, weepy black knight that you need to grow up on your own, without her; and that for all your self-indulgent tears, you weren't as sensitive to her as she would have liked. Forgive her? Ha. Oh, you're right I'm so sad and unhappy.

That's good. Mock your emotions. Don't let feelings come out. Stay closed. You're right, everything is fine. You have nothing to learn by looking back to her or your feelings about her. Why don't you just admit you're sad and miss her. Why try to hide the tears and hurt behind an angry bravado?

Would it really be better if I become a weeping willow, a fountain of tears? You, who, of course, bear her no anger, right? All you do is talk about how loving she is, how wise, how spiritual. But then you deflect your anger in a full frontal attack on me. You're right. I do have emotions. And those emotions are anger--not at me, but at her. I deny malice and evil intention on my part. If there is forgiveness to be done, it's me to her, not her to me. And I'm far from ready to forgive.

*

*

*

The plane begins to wobble and rattle. I clutch the sides of my arm rests, and pull my seat belt tighter. I hate flying. I lie back and take a breath, and remember my dream of the airplane. What do you do if these are your last moments? Why do I want the pilot to come on and talk to me? For false

assurances? What good does it do to hold on to the sides of my seat? An illusion of control? When there is none.

A house divided. It's frightening how Mery continues to be the cause of so much pain in my life, a month after I left her, and now, nearly nine months later. She broke me into several fragments, and those pieces fight among themselves. I can still run the gamut of emotions: sadness, anger, helplessness, impotence, and if I'm honest, somewhere buried way deep down, there must have been hope. Otherwise, why was I so crushed by Richard's letter. hope.

The one wise thing she said, even wiser than she knows, is that I was not ready for relationship. Not only that, I don't ever want to be distracted by personal relationships again. That was really the wrong path for me. I became so dependent on her, I no longer knew who I was. I'm still wondering in the desert trying to find myself. Bemidbar. A ship without a rudders. A train off its tracks. A plane, where I'm definitely not the pilot. But at least now I'm seeking the Pilot.

If my current metaphoric plane is oing to crash, what a useless way to spend my last few minutes, fighting among myself. Enough useless recrimination, on all sides. My mind still sounds like a group of strident, unrehearsed musicians who haven't yet learned how to play music together harmoniously.

I know that at some point, I need to learn to live in peace with myself, not in attack. And I will have to turn from analyzing and dissecting my past to living my present. Please, God, if you are there, help heal this ache, this pain which led me then, and still leads me now, only to a void.

* * *

The plane continues to shake, occasionally dropping several hundred feet in a lurching motion. I feel on the roller-coaster of my childhood, but now without my parents to protect me, and without the tracks. Everywhere are distorted faces, some screaming, some praying fervently. If I could rise above

it all, I'd feel it's a comic side show of freaks. I'm in a floating theme park without boundaries, hurtling through the sky. I'm an idiot, full of self-recrimination, for buying an entrance ticket to this carnival of the absurd, bound for death and destruction. I feel afraid and angry and weepy and tired all at the same time.

Then, for some reason, fear turns to calm, recrimination to pride. It's as if the music in my mind starts to harmonize, fragments turn to a whole. Death, indeed, focuses the mind wonderfully.

If these are my last moments, then I will not end them fighting among these various voices. This was my choice. It was the best one available to me at the time. My life was in chaos and coming to an end. I made a choice to board this plane. Lech Lecha. Going forth, leaving the house of the father for a place you do not know. No one made me do it. It was my way of trying to deal with my pain and channel it into some constructive action. This isn't the outcome I'd hoped for or expected, but I couldn't have foretold that. I can't blame myself for how it ends. There was nothing wrong, or to be ashamed of, in seeking to go to Israel, to learn about myself, my religion, my roots. It was an act of bravery, similar to the little child in me, jumping off the high dive, casting myself adrift as a stranger toward a strange land

Even if this life only lasts a few more minutes, it's the life that I am choosing, not one that has been chosen for me--either by family, society, or biological, sexual needs.

This flight is the beginning step, the foundation for a new self.

No matter how long it lasts.

I close my eyes. Take a deep breath.

And, against my better judgment, say a little prayer.

* * *
Moments later, I hear an audible series of gasps.

Then applause.

I open my eyes. We have sunk beneath the clouds covering
the earth. Glorious emerald sapphire water. And then I see it. Israel. The Holy
Land.

Lech Lecha. I am Moses leaving bondage. I am Joshua entering the Promised
Land. I laugh out loud--naturally I'm coming in a different direction than
Joshua, from West to East, not crossing the Jordan River from East to West. I
think of Asiya, and tell her, no, it's not in a chariot, but I am Elijah,
descending in my airplane, no longer Jonah in the belly of the whale. All the
images and fragments and pieces and metaphors unite into one feeling. I am
about to enter the Promised Land. I am free. I am alive. The chance for a new
beginning, to make the story my own.

Magical motherland. Majestic fatherland.

The birth of a new me.

Home.

* * *
* * *



he pink, taffy-like substance is malleable, stretches, can be pulled, but doesn't break. Rather than coming off my sandals, it stays stuck there, and now is also clinging tenaciously to my thumb and index finger.

My second futile effort since touching ground.

My first was to find the kibbutz kiosk.

It seems only fair that if I did my part---jumping off the diving board--there would be a clear, blue, safe splish-splashy soft pool of water which would catch, enfold, and embrace me in its welcoming womb. At the very least, there should be some greeting table, with a sign saying--in Hebrew and English--"Those interested in a kibbutz experience, sign up here. Those wanting to see the Wailing Wall, here. Bible study, here." That sort of friendly invitation to different activities was typical of the way campus organizations made it easy and free to find and join them. I expected no less from my new home country. And frankly, I expected more: "Welcome home, brave souls, from your new and loving family."

That's what the ads seemed to say. I know from my work as advertising manager at the Stanford Daily, that there is not complete truth in marketing campaigns, But this isn't even close. Who would I sue, if I were to file a legal claim for false advertising? The ad agency; the Government of Israel?

All I found, or was found by, was a discarded piece of bubble gum.

Only the smallest part of me is able to see any humor in this.

*

*

*

Confused and bewildered, I sit down on my luggage, determined to get the sticky gob off my finger. First things first. As I play with it, watching it expand to each new surface that touches it, I decide to play a game. Isn't this a

chance to develop a new me? Ok, let's pretend this is an opportunity, not a setback. We're in the Lod airport, taking a load off my body by sitting, and loaded with ideas about how this experience is going to evolve and unfold.

I can do anything. There are no boundaries, no structure. Maybe rushing to a kibbutz is a mistake, a misguided effort to find security, an oasis, going from one womb to another. Now that I'm here, I can ask what I want to do. There's no one telling me I have to do anything. I'm completely free.

I continue to roll the gum with my thumb and index finger. It's starting to form into a little ball.

Maybe I should go straight to Egypt and climb Sinai. Experience the desert before the oasis.

That sounds risky, confusing, and too far off the beaten path. How safe is Egypt? Shouldn't we see Israel first?

Who is "we"? Is that the royal "we", or the fragmented "we"? The T  at the start of this journal section seems to say it all. Like Janus, facing in different directions. Truly a house divided and confused--by so many choices, all, I might add, positive, and, from my perspective, all of which will be accomplished.

It's too bad we can't face the past and future at the same time. I from your future could face you, my past, and tell all of you that it's no use trying to control this experience too much. What is going to happen is going to happen. Not only is it not what you think, but it's not even what you could imagine. Could I have imagined this experience differently? I'm not sure. Was it inevitable? I'm not sure of that either. All I can say is the roller-coaster is reaching its apex, and is about to fling you over the top and down into the valley at a frightening velocity. So, try to just sit back, and let the ride begin. I know that's not easy because you have no idea whether the roller-coaster has any tracks. I can tell you, at least up to now, looking back, there are tracks till here. I know that's easy for me to say because I've gone through it, but I wish you could hear me, and trust me. I don't know a lot more than you but at least

I've had a little more experience. I just wish there were someone who could guide me forward.

Ok, let's defer Egypt and start with Israel. Why not go directly to the Holy City of Jerusalem, see the wall? Not for its religious significance, but as a sign of power. It's now ours. No more images of weak, sniveling Jews. Since the 1967 war, we are strong, powerful, mighty.

As the juice goes out of the gum, and it dries, it becomes less sticky, and starts to cling to itself.

I still vote for the kibbutz. We need a base, some place we belong. Otherwise we're too much the wandering Jew just drifting all over. I'd want to daven at the wall; or go to the mystical highlands of Safed. I read that's an amazing place. Why not start there?

Now, I've created a perfectly formed ball. I take it and flick it across the room toward a trash can. I miss.

Why all this religious fervor? Are you still trying to impress Elizabeth Mery? You're ignoring the beach, Tel Aviv, the night life. Lets start off by relaxing, having some fun. Israeli women are supposed to be frisky and fun.

Yes, you're right, I just want to go to the beach to see if there are any cute Israeli girls. But isn't this supposed to be a chance for a new beginning? I don't want to reflexively fall back into old ways. How about Bethlehem? Yes, you're right. I did tell Mery I'd go there. But I also desire to see it, too. The birth place of Christianity. We've got to see that. This is, after all, our chance for a rebirth.

I get up off my suitcase, walk across the several yards, and pick up the gum and toss it into the trash.

Why not understand our own suffering first? YadVashem. Massada.

Ugh, you're a downer.

You're the one who needs to face reality. This is not an escape. This is a time to be totally honest about all that life involves. And Massada was heroic, too.

There is still some gum on my fingers, and I head to the restroom to remove it.

This squabbling in my mind is driving me crazy. There's no leader. Who is there we can trust to create some order out of this chaos? It's like animals in a zoo let out of their cages, all clamoring for attention and going in different directions.

Who's in control here?

* * *

I sit on a bench, close my eyes, and the rhyme from "Through the Looking Glass" comes to my mind: Humpty Dumpty...."had a great fall...and all the king's horses and all the king's men Couldn't put humpty together again." Can I ever put me back together again? Then I remember the nursery rhyme my mom used to sing "When the bough breaks...and down will come baby, cradle and all." Splat.

How could my parents not recognize that these are horrible images to share with a child? What happened to the parents who told me that the Titanic never sank? That the little Match Girl was adopted into a warm and loving home? Did they tell me that eventually some wise soul figured out how to put Humpty Dumpty back together again? That the baby landed on a pillow mattress? I don't remember any softening of these rhymes. Maybe mom and dad thought they just seemed silly, cute, harmless nursery rhymes. They don't seem so now. I'm the broken, fragmented Humpty Dumpty baby splatting on the pavement.

* * *

I open my eyes with a start. Do I hear my name being called? At first I try to ignore it, but the sound becomes louder and clearer. My name is being called. This makes no sense. No one knows I'm here.

I look up and see a tall, perfectly postured soldier, close

cropped gray hair, maybe late 30's standing in front of me. He's carrying a rifle, staring down at me, and not looking very pleasant.

He repeats my name and asks sternly for my identification papers, my passport. What have I done now? I have no drugs on me. I don't even really smoke or drink. I'm not carrying anything contraband that I know of. I made it through customs. I'm Jewish. I'm supposed to be welcomed here, in the land of milk and honey. I don't deserve a military interrogation. I'm reminded of when I hand over my credit card, and the check-out clerk looks at me as it's being verified. I think everything is going to be ok, but I'm never sure. Only now the check-out clerk has a rifle and an unsympathetic face. Maybe he's stopped me because I left my suitcase unattended and went to the bathroom. I stand uncomfortably as he inspects my papers. This feels more rigorous and demeaning than applying to law school. I look downward, trying not to appear suspicious. I'm afraid to say anything. That damn bubble gum again. Why are things so much better from a distance?

Finally, he hands my passport back to me, and then, to my surprise, holds out his hand, smiles, and says, "Welcome to Israel, I'm Commander Judke. Your grandmother Nana says welcome, too."

*

*

*

July 22. I've been in Israel ten days, and have found a home. Thanks to Nana, and Commander Judke, I've been placed on a kibbutz in Northern Israel. My Nana, always looking out for me. Her great cousin twice removed was once married to the uncle of a cousin who knew Judke...who knows her connections! Apparently, even as she worried about my leaving and tried to get me not to go, she was finding a way to take care of me and keep me safe when I arrived so far from everything she knew.

I spent the first days at Commander Judke's home. At first I wondered if I was existentially depressed, and had returned to the belly of the whale. I'd sleep

in the day, an overwhelming exhaustion that I couldn't fight. But after a few days, I realized there was no serious trauma I was trying to hide from. I was just trying to get over jet lag.

When I'd awoken, Judke's wife had tea and great pastries ready for me. The family was welcoming and kind, and his children, a girl 4 and son 7, were playful, interested and curious about me, happy at the novelty of a stranger in their house. I felt cared for and warmly welcomed into their home, beyond any expectations that I could have imagined. This is how a family should be.

After a few days, I was recovered, and he found me a place on Kibbutz Ha'on on the Sea of Galilee. The nearest city is Tiberias, across the sea, which is actually a lake.

Why are things never what they are supposed to be?

In some ways, it's too bad Mery is not here, because she'd love being in the land where Jesus walked. On land and water.

Although I remind myself that it's really good that she is not here. I think of the Joplin Fillmore fiasco, where I was unable to dance, and completely lost my rhythm and the beat. That's what she did to my life. She really did throw me off track. My task here is to trust me more, regain my resilience, re-find my own rhythm and path.

And I couldn't be at a more perfect spot to do so. I feel I've arrived at my version of Mt Sinai-- from my kibbutz--our kibbutz-- I can see snow-capped Mt. Hermon in the distance. I'm at the base of a mountain, having crossed the desert wilderness-- leaving the bondage of my family, the oppressiveness of our capitalist, materialistic culture and its insensitivity to those less fortunate.

Though I have to admit, it wasn't that easy to leave Mr. Red behind. I was sad. But looking back, how ridiculous he would appear here on this kibbutz. I'm embarrassed at myself. I'm glad I've left that part of me behind. Here it's about survival. How pathetic my family's possessions, their silver jelly bowls, fine

china, even keeping furniture wrapped under plastic. I am so lucky to be free of all that.

Yet you still brought an expensive camera, a fine watch, a silver flute, and winged-tip shoes. It's interesting how what you define self-righteously as crass materialism are only those items that you no longer value.

And I'm even fortune to have finally removed the tentacles that-- what do I call her? Mery? Beth? Actually I want something more formal to create distance, just as "Dad" is now Senior to me. Removing the tentacles that Elizabeth Mery had wrapped around me.

All that is past. I can feel my present here.

*

*

*

Thank God I finally left the States. I don't think I could have stayed there any longer, and remained sane. I couldn't even allow myself to realize how bad it was, but now that I am no longer there, I see that I was cut off from everything and everyone, totally alone.

The kibbutz is everything I'd hoped for. I already feel part of it, and I'm confident I'm finding my new start. I'm a blank slate, the philosopher John Locke's tabula rasa, a baby being reborn in a new country, with a chance to start a new life. Lech Lecha, Elizabeth Mery. I've left the sad Job part of me behind; the insulated Jonah. I'm even playing with the idea of changing my name, just like Abraham changed his. I admit, I've thought pretentiously, but why not: maybe I could be "Moses" leading myself to a new land; "Joshua" entering the promised land. Lots of people here are named Moshe or Yehoshua. I wouldn't even stand out. And for once that's a good thing. The possibilities seem endless.

I want to be careful what imprints I make on that slate now that I am no longer bound by the confining, direction of the family, or society's confining legal mores. I am free. Maybe I should call myself after him: John.

How about baby John. You don't realize that you are really in a transitional time, and are seeking to be born to a new life, pointing the way to something beyond yourself.

My cabin is one hundred yards from the Sea of Galilee, and I can just discern it through the date fields. Yesterday, remembering the parable of Jesus walking on water, I went down to the sea, took off my shoes, and entered. I should have rolled up my pants. Apparently, my faith is not yet sufficient.

I smile. See, I've still got my quirky sense of humor.

*

*

*

The kibbutz welcome has been more business-like than the airplane's brochures. Still, I feel nothing but admiration for what they are accomplishing here in the desert. I can look one way and see the date trees; another, and see ninety-six thousand banana trees, a solid mass of yellow. I wonder what Mery would have done at the Fairmont faced with that crop.

Work lasts from 4 am till 12:00, with an hour for breakfast. It turns out that nasty white stuff first encountered on the plane is shemenet, a type of sour yogurt. But when you put lots of honey and bananas into it, it's not that bad. The land of milk and honey, indeed. Though I'm so hungry, I'd probably eat anything.

By working outside, I've been brought closer to the beauty and wonder of nature. My senses are reawakening to sounds of animal life, especially birds. I feel I'm back at summer camp living out in nature. This evening I went into the main hall, and put Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony on a portable record player the kibbutz owns. I had difficulty telling which music was from the record and which from the surrounding fields.

Beethoven, the forerunner of living theatre?

When I left the hall, and walked outside, I felt I'd entered a living tableau, becoming part of Van Gogh's Starry Night. Nature and art and music and life were all becoming intermingled.

As I stood looking at the stars, I realized I still needed to complete my play if I want to graduate from Stanford.

Art pointing the way to life.

But all that seems so unimportant, and so far away. We'll see. Trying to take my life and make it artistic for grades and graduation seems an irrelevancy of a past life, unconnected to who I am now. It's more important to live life than write about it, to create my life-- as an artistic picture, with musical accompaniment. Like tonight.

Life as art.

*

*

*

My task, along with several other foreigners living here, is to spend the first four hours of the morning working in the fields. I've been assigned two physical jobs: to pick ripened bananas and to clear the fields of rocks (we have to wear gloves and be careful not to be bitten by tarantulas). The final four hours of the morning are spent in the Ulpan, where we study the Hebrew alphabet, and learn basic language skills.

While working in the fields, or studying in the class, I don't have the feeling that my coworker is someone against whom I'm competing in order to get ahead. Instead, unlike the capitalistic competition of the States, we are all in this together, working for the common good of one another. What a wonderful way to reduce envy and commercial consumption and exploitation.

I end the day feeling exhausted, mentally and physically, but there is a certain relief, almost pleasure, that goes with pushing myself to the limit. I don't think I've ever done four hours of physical labor for even one day. This isn't like college, where you have a couple of classes a day, and can pick and choose when you work. We are up against the elements. Our crops are our life. We have to work each day.

I'm very proud of my work ethic.

*

*

*

Although there is no one on the kibbutz over thirty-five, (they are all first generation immigrants--I wonder where they are from, and where their parents are), even now, they are building a place for the older members to live, when they can no longer work. The kibbutz seems to be one large family and the aging members will be cared for within the framework of that family. They won't be cast onto a metaphorical Sixth Street as discarded refuse. This is a culture more willing to share with one another, take care of each other, more sensitive to those in need.

All contribute as best they can, and everyone's needs are guaranteed: food, clothing, shelter for all. And provided equally. There are no disparities, no rich and poor. They don't need pathetic, meager Social Security legislation to care of the elderly. Maybe Mery was right. Laws aren't the answer. Not if you have love and values and family.

Lovely sentiments, baby John. But when you meet Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe, they will remind you of the psychologist, Abraham Maslow, and his hierarchy of needs. Both laws and love can be true, at different levels. Just like your wrestling with spiritual, mental, and physical needs. It needn't be an either/or.

The afternoons are free because it is too hot for work. At 12:30 when the physical and mental day ends, I have a feeling of accomplishment because I've strengthened my body, expanded by mind, and made a contribution to the community in exchange for my material needs. Because the kibbutz is socialistic, in return for the eight hours of effort--from each according to their ability-- all necessary goods and services are provided: clothes food, shelter and coupons for whatever you need to buy in the kibbutz's store.

Everything is paid for as long as you live here, and put in 8 hours of work a day, including having them teach you their language. Our language. What a wonderful philosophy. I feel that by 12:30, my day is done, and the morning provides the base for whatever activities I decide to undertake in the afternoon. I have lots of free time to play the flute, write in my journal, and

I've even decided to read the Bible, Old and New Testaments, as long as I'm here.
I'm studying Biblical Hebrew so I can read the former in the original. We'll see
how much my classical Greek helps with the latter.

I know that this Bible study would make Elizabeth Mery and even Asiya proud.
But why not. I can read it from it's historical and educational point of view, if
nothing else.

And what a great place to read it: in Israel.

I feel my body getting stronger, my mind more active, and what Mery and Asiya
would call my spirit--whatever that is-- being revived.

I am definitely home.

* * *

I'm taking it slowly in terms of meeting new people. I think partly this is
because I'm trying to get to re-know and meet me. I'm trying on different
identities--what I want to be when I grow up. I'm thinking maybe I want to be a
writer. I'm not exactly sure what that means, but when people ask me what I do, I
could, like Kafka's land surveyor approaching the castle, say boldly, "I'm a
writer." That feels better than saying "I'm taking a year off to find myself";,
or "I'm going to law school next year." It is true, I do spend a lot of my free
time writing in my different journals. We'll see. I'm still playing with different
scenarios. Maybe I'll just live here forever.

Then I won't need to say anything to justify my existence to anyone. What a
funny question, "What do you do?" It invariably comes from the foreigners. Never
from an Israeli. They don't have to question their identity. They live and work
on a kibbutz. Would that be such a bad life?

* * *

I play the flute daily. I'm glad I brought Grace, though
I get some funny glances. I guess it appears strange having a
silver flute amidst the ruggedness of life here. Still the rich American privileged
boy. But it brings me satisfaction both through its beautiful sounds, and because

it's a positive link to my past. At least I didn't bring my tennis racquet or golf clubs.

Sometimes, when I'm not too tired from the days work, I'll actually practice an etude from Andersen's book. My teacher said I should be able to play at the speed Andersen recommends. Although I do that with a few, some are ridiculously fast. #13, in D# minor, filled with accidentals, and x's and bb before notes, is supposed to be played at quarter note equals 104. On a good day I can play it at about 60% of that. So, I'm about 3/5 of a professional.

Somehow, here, that doesn't feel as frustrating as it did in America. I'm learning to be more accepting of my limitations. This is just who I am. I'm learning what I think I already knew, or at least suspected at some level---that I'm not the best, and never will be. Perhaps not in anything, but certainly not in music. Here I can be more honest with myself, for there are no expectations. No Grandpa \$ or University saying, "Be the best." In fact, once I do my daily labor, no one really cares what I do.

But I'm proud of myself that I still practice with the only goal of being the best I can be. And I'm doing that knowing that I will never be the best at it, not probably even achieve the beginning professional level. Of course, I still get frustrated when my fingers don't go faster. But I'm learning I can try as hard as a can, and enjoy the effort.

And I'm starting to realize that none of it means anything. It's all a game that vanishes, just as each note vanishes. I can't quite put into words the liberating feeling of playing each note the best I can, knowing it means nothing, in an existential sense, yet playing as if the act of creation is important, as if the intention to bring beauty matters. Thank you Henry James.

Even if I were the best flutist in the world, and could play the perfectly pure note, I am acutely aware that almost as soon as that note enters the world, it begins to die, and then the sound vanishes. Pure notes, breathy notes, squeaky

notes all meet the same fate. Somehow in this act of playing music, I'm actually living Camus' existential paradox and absurdity.

Despite all this, I try to make the notes as beautiful as possible. It is the act and effort of creation, a seeking of beauty and perfection that counts, no matter how ephemeral, no matter how meaningless. I'm slowly learning that each note has to be enough. There is nothing more.

Why does there seem something more permanent about writing? The flute note actually vanishes. Is it like speech? Are written words taped music?

Yet I'd never tape my flute playing as a way to communicate with myself in the future, nor do I feel I could learn about myself from listening to a recording of my own music.

Words, for me at least, seem different. When I can't turn my mind off, it helps to place the thoughts and words down on paper, as if I'm emptying my head of the chaos.

Then, I have all these scraps of papers where I've jotted down thoughts and scrawled ideas. Putting them together into some coherent form is my mental version of the way we created physical order on the kibbutz: removing the stones to prepare the fields for tilling, planting seeds, cultivating the date and banana trees.

The words remain. They tell me about myself in the past, and offer insights into who I am for the future.

Somehow there is something about writing that is suited to me. In the specific, as with the flute, the goal is to try to get one phrase, sentence, one melody right. In the larger picture, the goal is to share thoughts, ideas, feelings, myself in as pure a way as possible. That is the fruit of the labor.

But if the word lives in living, can the act of writing be seen as an act of living? Or is it an act of hiding-- behind the words--a way of avoiding living?

I wonder who bestows the exalted calling of a writer? As on the kibbutz, saying it makes it so?. Is it the daily doing, an existential act of will?

Too many thoughts. Too few answers.

For right now, what I am doing is writing.

Why? To find myself? To have a daily purpose? Hoping that what I share might help someone else somewhere who is struggling? Perhaps it's an illusion that anything really lasts or means anything. What happens after I die? What will happen to my journals? To the few poems I've already finished? What else do I want to write about? I guess all I can do is place the words into the hands of the universe, to do with as it pleases.

* * *

Last night we all had to go into the bunker. Mortars were being fired at us. The residents showed no fear. "It's just a part of living here," they said. It reminded me of when my family and I had to go into the basement when a tornado was approaching. There is a certain closeness and comraderie that comes from facing a common threat and danger.

But, I can't say I wasn't afraid.

Hmm, what an odd way to say, "Yes, I was afraid, but tried not to show it." I guess I'm trying not to write it too directly... I didn't want others to know or I even admit to myself how afraid I was.

I guess they could tell, though, because everyone took great pains to reassure me that the odds of our being hit were infinitesimally small. "Sure, I know. Of course," I nodded. But philosophically, even though nothing bad happened, the whole episode was troubling. It's one thing for Mery and me to fight, or even for Senior to punch me in anger. Or to battle with a stranger over the swimming pool lanes. But someone (Palestinians? Arabs? Muslims? Hezbollah? Lebanese? Syrians?—I realized I had no idea) was shooting at me, wanted to kill me, and they don't even know me. Other than Asiya, a Christina Arab from Jordan, I've never even met an Arab, and certainly don't hold bad feelings against them. How could they want to kill me? They don't know who I am, the struggles that I'm going through, trying to create a new self, to become a more positive healing force in

the world. I don't hate them. I think they wouldn't hate me if they met me. It makes no sense.

I admire this nascent desire to be a "healing force," to serve. The old reflexively angry Johannes has been tempered by a little Job like suffering, and Jonah is finally coming out of the whale to see where and how he might make a contribution to the world. Yet I can't help but also be struck by how self-absorbed you still are. It's still all about you. How could they do this to you? If only they could meet you, you could bring peace. And of course, you were concerned only about your fears, or how you might appear to others. Did you ever worry about the feeling of others in the bunker? Did you ever consider how you might comfort those people right in front of you, or were you too busy thinking about how you wanted to be a healing force for the world in the abstract? And what about the people firing the rocketsose firing? Did it occur to you to learn more about who they were? What might be their motivation, their reasons for taking such destructive actions?

I remember reading in a political science class--I forget who the teacher was, but know I agreed with him at the time-- that people who feel we need more understanding, not condemnation in the world are living in a dangerous state of moral relativism. You cannot defeat violence by appeasing it. That is simply flight into a fantasy world.

But what is the alternative? Should I become Senior, angry and violent? Decide I hate these unknown others, arm myself, and try and go seek to kill them. I know that's what the professor, and dad, would say. You've got to be a man and defend yourself. Is it just from fear that I want peace? Even Elizabeth Mery has told me that what I thought was kindness and generosity when she gave up her lanes at the pool, her therapist said was just her passivity, caving in from fear, her unwillingness to be assertive and stand up for herself.

I was too reflexively assertive and angry, and she was

too passive. But I wonder if there isn't some path between these two extremes.
It just seems absurd that I arrived on the kibbutz less than three weeks ago, and
already someone is shooting at me.

That's not exactly the paradise I am seeking.

* * *

I feel we are getting closer together, literally now that you are in Israel, and temporally, as I read what you write. I can cover weeks of your journal entries in days, sometimes hours. I know there is going to be a point where we meet and join. When the Union Pacific railroad was being built, some workers started in the West and moved East, while others, starting in the East, moved West. Eventually, there was only one stake left needed to create a joining of the tracks.

You're moving forward, and I'm coming back to meet you. Where will we put in the stake that allows us to finally merge? I try to image what the feeling will be when we join. When I was a child trying to saw a board from one side, when the sawing got rough, I'd turned it over and began from the other side. You hope that the two cuts will meet neatly in the middle, and create the effect you want. Hmm, not such a good analogy, breaking the wood in two. In our case, I hope you and I meet seamlessly, and that we will have learned all we need to know so that together we can cross gracefully into the future.

* * *

It's 4:30 a.m. and we have just been awakened for shemenet,
coffee, and bananas before beginning our chores. I emerge from a
dream, groggy as usual, and reach over for my dream journal. The dream
was a crazy quilt weaving of emotions.

As it begins, I am at a Veterans Administration Hospital. Why?
Am I in the military service? A patient? A therapist? A doctor? In
waking reality, none of these makes any sense. Maybe it's
because of the mortars, my subconscious I feel I've been enlisted. Or

wounded. Maybe I've created the hospital as my way of helping, caring for others .

A woman is talking to me, and, even though I don't know why I'm there. I immediately fall into "charming" mode, smiling, nodding my head shyly, yet wisely and meaningfully. As I look at her, I realize how large her breasts are. She is wearing a peasant blouse and there is substantial cleavage showing, maybe one and a half or two inches.

She tells me that she's read a detailed report about me, and that I'm doing just what she expected me to do, trying to cover up the real issue by flirting with her. I have no idea what she means by "the real issue," but feel guilty, as if I've done something wrong, and am caught. Maybe it's the staring at her breasts that is wrong. Where should I stare? Is that what she means? I wait to hear what I'm accused of. During the few moments of waiting, I'm nervous and, like last night in the bunker, try to act as if I'm not.

I see myself in the dream as jaunty, debonair, suave. At first the woman says only that she sees through my moves, and that I don't really give to others as much as I could or should.

But soon she is charmed by me, and toward the end of the dream, lets me pull her toward me, and we begin to caress each other. I slowly start to pull her long matronly skirt up, revealing lovely, shapely legs. I feel myself becoming aroused, as does she. This is disgusting, Johannes, and not very clear writing, or too self-consciously clever. Does she become aroused, or does she feel that you are becoming aroused? Why do I care? My only arousal is anger that your sexual neediness continues, even in your dreams. I lean forward to nuzzle my face in the cleavage between her breasts. But then the dream becomes very strange. I have the experiential realization that the cleavage, to which I'm attracted, is nothing but a shadow formed by the play of light, and even though it gives the breasts

condemnatory comment on your journal entry was too reflexive. Maybe this is your subconscious mind pleading for peace, for healing the wounds within you.

Also, it seems you're beginning to seek, as I still am, to live a life without illusions, breaking them down, facing life as it is. Of course, that may be the final illusion: that such a task is either wise, or possible.

I wonder if the dream also isn't just about myself, but also addressed to those shooting mortars. Can't we see that that which divides us, at the deepest level, is really illusory. Can't we work conflicts out in some peaceful (even if not erotic) way?

And might the dream also be addressing Freud's views of Eros and Thanatos. A way to find the life force amidst the strife, battles, and ugliness of war and death?

*

*

August 1. I've been on the kibbutz sixteen days and I haven't felt lonely once. The communal living reminds me of camp. We are always in a group, and the foreigners living here are especially easy to talk to. Several of the girls, in particular Marianne from Sweden, are cute. She approached me while I was reading the Bible, and taking notes. She told me how impressed she was by my studiousness, and that I would spend my free time in religious pursuits, especially given the secular nature of the kibbutz life. "Most of the foreigners are just here for the food" she smiled.

We spent a wonderful afternoon together, as she explained to me her interest in something called, liberation theology, which she described as the Christian doctrine that Jesus' teachings support revolutionary action against entrenched social injustice. She came to Israel to learn more about the country that birthed Jesus—also about the socialist values of the Kibbutz. She also is happy being near the Sea of Galilee.

As I see Marianne's animation, joy, and passion in discussing Jesus, for some reason I think about the time I told Mery how ridiculous her belief that a cracker is really eating her Lord. Perhaps that was a bit harsh and insensitive on my part. I feel less threatened by Jesus as I listen to Marianne. Is it because of the way Marianne speaks? Or that Mery was really my first prolonged exposure to Christianity? Or that now that I'm by the Sea of Galilee, I'm willing to be more open to the miracles of Jesus?

*

*

*

After Israel, Marianne wants to travel to South America to Learn more about the roots and practice of liberation theology in Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay to improve the lives of the poor. It's exciting to be meeting people who live outside the academic world, who are creating meaningful, productive, interesting lives.

Marianne becomes quite animated when she talks, and I love her accent. She wears a bandanna covering her light blonde hair, and looks both old fashioned and beautiful at the same time. I've dreamed of being with a Swedish girl, but there is almost no chance of romantic liaisons here. The proximity breeds brother-and-sister relationships. I'm not sure that's bad for me, for now. I enjoy getting to know the women and men, as people, as friends, which is a good healing experience for me.

Jeremy is the other person I've spent some time talking with. He's from Rumania, a communist country, but he also believes in Christianity, which wasn't easy to practice there. He and Marianne talked to me about a workshop in Jerusalem given by a rabbi and a psychologist from Switzerland that they were both very excited about. He said the workshop leaders were warm, funny, and wise, and brought a spiritual dimension to his experience in Israel that he's found lacking on the kibbutz. In coming to Israel, he expected a more spiritual, God-focused living, which not only isn't present on the kibbutz, but he was surprised to learn that even outside of kibbutz life, half of Israeli Jews consider themselves

secular and are not observant. He says he wants to learn from the spiritual Jews, and to visit the deeply religious Jews in Mea Shearim--if they'll have him as a non-Jew; and also a place called Safed, which he's also heard is very spiritual.

"When the student is ready, the teacher appears."

Jeremy is quoting a line he heard from the Jerusalem rabbi.

Jeremy likes to see everything as meaningful "There are no coincidences, no accidents."

Jeremy and Marianne They seem so clear why they are here. People who take risks for their beliefs, who live their faith. Do I know why I'm here? It does seem just an accident. There was no place else to go. Am I seeking a nation to live in? To make aliyah? To live closer to nature and be a modern day Thoreau? To find my Jewish roots? To learn about Jesus and trace His path through the Holy Land? To meet a cute girl? To get away from my family, and find another one? How could people my age be so much wiser and more thoughtful than I am , with so much more self-understanding?

*

*

*

Jeremy suggested that the three of us form a Bible study group, and that we go one weekend to hear the teachers in Jerusalem, or maybe even approach the kibbutz leadership--they must have some type of governing body--to see if we could invite the couple to come speak here on Sabbath as a way of bringing a little spirituality to the kibbutz.

Wouldn't Elizabeth Mery be surprised to hear that I'm part of a Biblical study group? I wonder why when I was with her, I resented her religious proselytizing, while here on the Kibbutz, I notice annoyance and judgment that the people aren't spiritual enough, and I seem to be gravitating toward more spiritually inclined people. Am I just a contrarian? Is my only sense of self that I define myself by being the opposite of who I'm around?

*

*

*

5 a.m. August 12. Wednesday morning. I've been here a month. Problems in paradise. Marianne, Jeremy, and I read passages from Lamentations and Job, and fasted in honor of Tish B'Av, the saddest day in Jewish history. This day is the repository of all the negative things that have happened in Jewish history: destruction of the first Temple, the second Temple, Moses learning that he and the people he led from Egypt would never reach the promised land. and expulsion from Spain in 1492.

How lonely sits the City.

I've left the womb of my family behind. And Mery, who I thought was going to be my temple shelter. All in ruins, I'm expelled.

I rub my forehead. I never get headaches, though mom use to constantly have them. But now I have a pain in my forehead. My temples feel like they're crashing inward.

Yet what good are these lamentations, these tears? As I write in my journal, the tears cause the ink to run, making words out of weeping letters. Here I go again, pouring out my story of woe, each word I write like tearing out a piece of my gut and putting it on paper.

I'm like a top I used to play with as a child. Someone keeps plunging the handle up and down, up and down, --winding the top tighter and tighter, so that it can spin forever. But a spring has busted, and I can't spin so I just get more wound up. Although my body stays flat and motionless, inside I scream and holler looking for release, some goal to seek, some reason to live, some pillars to push against.

Instead I push against emptiness, with insides spinning. Why do I keep forcing myself to justify myself....to myself. I am like the person who not only can't reach Kafka's castle, but can convince neither the villagers nor himself of his right to be there, to exist.

Descartes said, "I think therefore I am." What would I say? "I suffer, therefore I am." I sound like Job.

And what would I say? I reflect, therefore I am? I point the way, therefore I am?

I quest, therefore I am? I try to understand and integrate, therefore I am. I love, therefore I am?

It's not only a day of fasting, but you aren't supposed to work. Try telling that to the kibbutz. You would think it was just a normal work day.

I'm afraid my inner temple is beginning to crumble. I hate to admit it, but life here is getting old fast, and the constant, unrelenting, routine is grinding me down. The regimentation is really driving me crazy. Eat now, work now. Eat now. The same thing every day. I've never had a day where eight hours belonged to someone else. Everything is totally structured, and one day of monotony leads to the next. And there is no escape from this little village, no place to hide and be alone and have quiet time. I am constantly working or being told by others what to do. Then I'm so exhausted I do almost nothing the rest of the day, just try to sleep. Some people may like being told how to structure their day. Maybe that gives them a feeling of security. But I feel like a robot. All my free will has been taken away. I'm starting to feel trapped here. How do these people do this day after day? With no future but to do it over and over, forever. This is hell. Talk about a dead end life. What meaning is there in sheer survival?

How lonely sits the city. Maybe reading Job and Lamentations doesn't help. But at least they deal with the big themes of life.

I've been moved from the banana picking and rock clearing assignment to fertilization of dates. Whoopee. Not only a dramatic change, but female contact...of sorts. What excitement.

*

*

*

Wow, am I impressed. You spend four weeks, working eight hour days, four hours of which are Hebrew study paid for by the kibbutz to help you learn their language, and you feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and trapped. What a worker bee. I

have nothing but the deepest and most profound sympathy for your unbelievably difficult life.

*

*

*

When I was a kid, I used to love painting by the numbers. Now, I'm in a paint the numbers picture and my every move is calibrated and determined-- a cog in a machine. I've having difficulty getting motivated. It's not just the monotony, which is bad enough, living by rote.

It's also the lack of reward. There is no advantage to working hard. When I do a good job picking up rocks, no one notices. When someone else slacks off, no one notices. This creates a dullness in me. There is no meritocracy, no way to get ahead. Everybody passes, no one really fails, unless you are a complete jerk off. I need something to strive for.

I've heard talk about moshavs, cooperative farms in which individuals own their own land, but live together communally. Maybe that is the right place for me to be, truer to my nature, which needs community, but also needs a way to be recognized for my unique contribution.

At first it was great to not have to be proving myself, to not try to "be the best." I was accepted as I was, and if I did my work, no one pushed me to do more. Further, I do still appreciate that there is no conspicuous consumption, and not a materialistically driven motivation. But what then is the motivation? Beyond just survival mentality, there is no larger framework.

I tried playing the game of being filled with pioneering spirit, identifying with the bananas and dates as my crops, pretending I was the creator of a new land. Really, I was just a tourist passing through, like all the other young tourists, with very little money, looking for adventure in exchange for meals, a place to stay, and the chance to say I worked on a kibbutz.

Where, again, you wanted to be unique, special, different from everyone else.

But I don't have to do this. Maybe most of the kibbutzniks here have no choice, and they really have to have that pioneering spirit. It's not a game for them.

Marianne, Jeremy and I have wondered if they are the orphaned children from Europe's Holocaust. The thirty five year old would have only been ten in 1945, six years old in 1941. Maybe they arrived here with no family, no options. They have to live in these challenging, stifling, boring conditions, as part of Darwinian survival.

But frankly, harsh as it is to say, I don't need to do this. They may be trapped here by life's circumstances, but why am I allowing myself to be trapped here? I have been given the gift of sufficient resources through luck, upbringing, place of birth, so that survival is not an issue for me, as it is for them. Would Jeremy say this is not luck, but some spiritual gift I was given. But what am I to do with that gift? And why didn't God give them the same gift? And what kind of God was it that gave their parents the Holocaust?

But those are tangential questions. The truth is I feel I'm just putting in time in a regimented, tedious, barracks-like existence. Is that insensitive? Condescending? Distancing? I don't mean it to be. But everything is too patterned and ordered. These are not the railroad tracks I want for my life. I can see down them endlessly, and it seems pointless. You wake up, work eight hours a day, sleep, eat, study Hebrew, sleep, wake up, work eight hours a day, in an endless circle that leads nowhere.

This generation works the fields by the Sea of Galilee so the next generation can work the fields by the Sea of Galilee, so that next generation can work...

Yes, physical survival is provided for. But where does it end, where does it lead? What is the larger purpose? I realize that for some people survival itself is sufficient, indeed paramount. But this isn't working for me. It's not enough.

I'm afraid the jubilation of my first month was due to the change in scenery, but now the newness has worn off. Things are hard with me again, and I'm not sure I'm going to make it. I'm not sure what I mean by that. Maybe I mean, not going to make it here. But I worry that there is no magic place for me. The moshav is just another pipe dream. Maybe I'm never going to find a place where I fit in life.

*

*

*

July 11. I returned Mr. Red back today. Not only won't I be able to afford it, once Grandpa cuts off my funds, but I don't think it would be appropriate to drive it around in Israel, or if I go to a kibbutz. With a smirk, Richard has lent me his bicycle. I actually enjoy the exercise, being closer to the ground, seeing what's going past me. One thing I've noticed, which is quite interesting is that when I bike down Palm Drive toward Palo Alto, I make great progress and feel strong and powerful. But when I bike back toward Stanford, it's extremely difficult and I become fatigued much more quickly. This has happened several times. At first I thought it was because I was happy to be leaving the Farm, and sad and tired every time I returned. I calculated my speed, and my rpm's. In fact, I was averaging about 16 miles an hour going, and 11 returning, and my rpm average was 68 going, 48 returning.

So my general sense of what was happening was borne out by data. But I don't think the explanation was psychological after all. I was becoming winded by the wind. It's fascinating. When the wind is at my back, going toward Palo Alto, I don't notice it. It just seems I'm strong and biking well. On the return, I think, oh a strong wind has come up and is right in my face. But after several days of the same experience, I realized that the wind is there both ways. But when things are going smoothly, I just assume all is well, and I'm in control. I'm not as aware of all the forces that are helping me to make things "right." But when things aren't going well, I'm acutely aware of the wind in my face and all the obstacles I'm having to face.

Your biking experience reminds me of a joke the Rebbe told...maybe to show he does have a sense of humor, occasionally. I prominent Jewish man, Saul Ginsburg, was being honored at a black tie event for his philanthropy. Once dressed in his tux, he couldn't find his cuff links. He looked everywhere. Nothing. Finally in a panic, he closed his eyes, lifted his hands, palms up, to the heavens, and says "God, if You're there, please help me find my cuff links. I can't go to this reception looking un-cuffed and shabby. It would be unseemly and an insult to my hosts." Suddenly, he felt something, opened his eyes and lo and behold there was a cuff link in each palm. He looked at the cuff links, looked back at heavens and said "Never mind God, I found them myself."

* * *

The Rabbi and his co-teacher told Jeremy that their schedule is busy, but maybe they could come in a few weeks to the kibbutz in a few weeks to present a "fall preview of the holidays." I wonder if they are just holding out for more money. The kibbutz doesn't want to pay them anything. This is not a high priority for limited resources, in the leadership's view. Jeremy is pushing for us to take some time off to go to one of their Shabbat classes.

I'm not sure I want to meet new teachers, but the idea of getting away from the kibbutz is increasingly attractive. I know that's a negative motivation-- trying to get out of a situation. Am I running away again? I want to find something to run toward, but I'm not sure what that is. I know I'm eeling the need for something more. I also know that part of the desire to go to the workshop would be to spend some time with Marianne away from the kibbutz. I think that's a mistake on my part, falling back into old ways. At least I'm trying to be honest with myself, even if I don't like what I see.

The Fall preview. We're temporally ever closer, aren't we? You are a few weeks from hearing about Rosh Hashanah and new beginnings, order out of chaos. I, in Jerusalem, at Chanukah, reviewed what you learned a couple of months later. And then began reviewing your journals. Seeking "more light" in the darkness.

And I, in Safed, prepare for a new Days of Awe.

*

*

*

September 1. It's now week seven here at the kibbutz, and I do wonder why I ended up here. The first few weeks I felt the reason I was here was to see the limitations of American society and cultural values--a more egalitarian, sharing lifestyle. Unlike Jeremy, I don't believe there is any deep "spiritual" reason. At least I don't think I do. But Jeremy's response to that is to say if I were just trying to find alternatives to a materialistic society, why didn't I choose a communal farm in Norway or Africa? He keeps emphasizing the importance of seeking the spiritual perspective in Israel.

Marianne has told me that she chose this kibbutz specifically because of its location and significance for Jesus' ministry around the Sea of Galilee. Was I guided here too? When I met Elizabeth Mery, I had no interest in religion. It was just a means to pursue her. But she did lead me to church, and maybe in some strange fashion led me to Israel. Then somehow, through Nana and Judke, I ended up here. And met Marianne and Jeremy. It seems a series of coincidences. . . and yet.

Ah, the railroad tracks draw closer to each other. Welcome again, my little baby brother, not only to physical Israel, but to the path of the spiritual seeker.

*

*

*

What's missing in my life that I can't find here? Could it be Elizabeth Mery, Marianne, Jeremy are all right? Is there a spiritual dimension to life that I should start looking for more earnestly? Am I, the student, becoming ready, and they, or someone, will appear as my teacher? Do I need to open myself to this possibility? I find myself longing for something more than physical necessities.

THE INFINITE

The wind blows outside,
the trees are swaying in disorder
and there is a whistling sound,
accompanied in contrapuntal theme by a roar
like the ocean surf.
The infinite is at work again.

The kibbutzniks keep pretty much to themselves, and leave us foreigners
alone. I'm told this is because we tend to not last very long, and they don't
want to get invested in us only to have us leave. Well, I'm fitting into that
pattern. Our supervisor told me that I'm coming to be considered a bit of a
laggard-- a bit too much "off in the clouds". Maybe I should give him my poem.
Somehow I don't think that would help my case, although it might explain it.

I did send the poem to my creative writing professor, just to
let him know I'm still alive, and am going to start working soon on
my final class project. As he instructed me, I offered a brief
critique of my work, and an analysis of its shifts and development. I
wrote him that "It's certainly different from the joy and connection
of my first poem, "the Dance." It's also different from the pained
cathartic wailings of the Job-like dark poems that followed. In fact
it's almost a mirror of the empty shadowed one I wrote about the
disappearing bird outside Asiya's window.

"This is a simple poem, no symbols, no complex, sophomoric, punning
intellectualism. It could be criticized for being a little too abstract, a little
too direct, not inferential enough. But overall I'm satisfied with it. Hope all is
well on the Farm. More to come...."

*

*

*

Asiya's window. I remember looking out it for the last time the day I packed.
Even as I was placing things in my suitcase, I don't think I really believed that I
was going to leave. But what choice did I have? Everything had come to a halt in
my life after that day in Golden Gate Park. I surreptitiously drooped off my
letters at Mery's house, picked up Mac, and returned to the Farm for my last

classes. I don't even know how I lasted the month. The notes in my journal are fragmented. I promised myself at a later date I'd go back and write them more clearly. Now, as my time on the kibbutz comes to an end, I feel the need to catch up with myself again and fill in the missing month. Beginning with its ending.

July 10. I look around this room, as I continue to pack my belongings for Israel. The walls are now completely bare, a stale lime green color surrounding me on four sides. There is barely any room to walk between the boxes. There are two small windows, curtains pulled, holding out the light. Papers, pillows, a sheet, clothes, books, pajamas litter the floor. The carpet is barely visible. Four years of life packed into boxes. Most of the boxes filled with books and papers, all that's left of the life blood of relationships, some black and white writings.

What do I take with me for a new life; and what do I leave behind as part of the old? I debate whether to pack the charcoal and gauche nude pictures I made during art class, and the photos of many of the women I'd been with throughout those years. There is the faintest of stirrings and arousal, then an instant shutdown and darkness. How could pictures I once found so full of life and joy and voluptuousness seem so two dimensional and empty?

A side of life I want to leave behind once and for all.

It's a time that will not return. I tear them into little unrecognizable pieces, and toss them in the trash.

All except one.

Briefly and reflexively, I glance through the bathroom door, see my pale, drawn face in the mirror, and just as quickly turn away.

One more picture to throw away. A young woman in a yellow dress. Her eyes are closed, and there is a reddish backlight,

surrounding a face showing peaceful tranquility. I can also into the picture to the struggles, pain, as well as the tender, compassionate heart of this person, and feel myself becoming tearful.

There is a poignant beauty in this picture, someone who is looking deeply into herself. Will I ever again find someone that wise, that lovely? She helped me realize that I was just living on life's superficial surface, going round and round on a circular cribbage board. I stand before her picture, worshipping an icon, and I know that she knows the depths, yet can still feel joy and laughter. If ever I am lucky enough to have someone love me again, this is the only type of person I want to relate to, someone who has seen deeply into themselves, who has experienced the hell/nothingness of life, and come out the other side, so that they can look this peaceful.

I tear up the picture, and put it, too, in the trash.

* * *

September 2. I may have been able to tear up her pictures, but she follows me everywhere. Either I'm thinking about her constantly, or when I am able to distract myself by my work or tasks, something about them reminds me of her. The first time in the banana field was humorous, but then the idea of reliving the Fairmont chocolate covered banana memory became both nauseating and embarrassing. And I'm hating the sea of yellow around me. Yellow dresses, mustard seeds have become so associated in my mind, that seeing yellow everywhere is her taunting me.

Rationally, I tell myself to quit being a baby. Should I be angry at the sun? But emotionally, I can't shake her all-pervading presence. I asked to be switched to the vineyards. I was embarrassed to tell anyone the real reason and joked that perhaps one day I wanted to own a vineyard. With these social communitarians, that didn't win me any points. They said they didn't need me there, but would transfer me to the dates. They seem fed up with me. They're right. I'm pathetic. I know I can't keep running away from her.

Today, even as I was studying the Bible, she emerged. I was reading about variations of pronunciation of the Biblical Hebrew alphabet compared to modern speech. I was jarred when I read that in everyday common Sefardic speech in Israel, the transliteration of the second letter of the alphabet is Bet; but in the Masoratic Biblical Hebrew pronunciation of this letter in our best construction of the oral tradition, according to the National Association of Professors of Hebrew, is Beth. She follows me everywhere. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

March 6. In class today, we discussed where is God on Purim? Is He an absent God, with the implication that we have to rescue ourselves from the world's evil? Or is He a protective God, but allowing His children to grow up and test themselves against the world's challenges?

I'm beginning to work more on the play for my creative writing class. It's still about my family, but somehow the question that Purim raises is also interwoven throughout. Why do I say the "play for my creative writing class?" I really don't care about the professor, or the class, or the grade. The play is really for me. My class in life. And I guess it's interesting who is going to be the grader. Me or God?

Dr. Lisbet and Reb Jonathan have told us that they are leaving Israel for an extended sabbatical the day after Passover. They are going to visit his children and grandchildren in England, and her aging mother in Switzerland, and plan to work on a couple of books they've been thinking about for a long time. I write their words down, but mechanically because I am still in shock. I had no idea they'd be leaving. I never really thought about it, but I always assumed that they'd be here as long as I needed them. But why should they be any different from anyone else in my life, who eventually rejects and leaves me?

As a kind of parting gesture, they then shared their final thoughts. "Living consciously with wisdom in the ways of the world is a task each of you will have to face. Your view of the nature of God, and how you let God into your life, will

have to evolve according to your beliefs and faith. How much is our responsibility, how much is God's and how do you see the dance between the two? You will have to reconcile the God who is hiding at Purim with the God who parts the seas, after Moses takes the first step. Wherever your journeys take you, we hope you choose a community of likeminded souls to help you along the way. Life has many challenges, and having the support of others helps. We hope that this class has been that kind of support to help equip you for that larger life journey."

I was in shock. I never imagined that they would leave me. Not only did I think they cared for me, but I was paying them! I always imagined when I'd learned everything I could from them, we'd say goodbye. But I would be in control. Now I feel blindsided. Abandoned. It feels just like with Mery; my dad's leaving; my being exiled from home by mom; even my grandmother leaving.

How quickly you fall into self-pity, and bring up your litany of hurts. You are learning to keep the best parts of Mery, your parents, and Grandma alive within you. As for the Rebbe and Dr. Lilsbet, you don't know the future. And you will learn that they are always present within you, giving you wise advice and support—in your waking life and dream life.

After class, they asked if I wanted to meet twice a week with them, as they feel there are still many unresolved issues I have about Elizabeth, as well as about my direction in life. Great, just when I'm getting to know and trust them, they desert me, too. Plus, I'm going to have to pay double each week to continue to see them. How unfair is that?

Don't they see the hypocrisy of using high sounding words in class, talking about choosing a community of like-minded souls, "having the support of others helps." And then they withdraw their support. leaving me, but not before having me come in twice a week at my expense.

It's as if a girlfriend has told me that she wants to break up with me, but before she does, wants to see me twice as much for the next few weeks--at my expense-- then splat. Bye. Screw them. I told them I have plans for Purim, and

won't be able to see them for a week. I'm not sure what I'll do, maybe work on my play. Or maybe go back to Eilat. Or, maybe I'll go back to the kibbutz to see how my bananas and date trees are doing, if there is any new growth there.

Is there any new growth in me? Am I beginning to bud, or re-bud?

I remember my creative writing professor pointing out that we gain insights into human nature from fiction. Leopold bloom, the Jew, bloomed forth; and Anias Nin wrote "When the bud is too painful to stay closed, it starts to open."

My budding? How do I answer that? Is it something that can be found in my journals? Do I ask the Rebbe or Dr. Lisbet? Will it show up in my play.

I know the pain. Am I peeking out?

*

*

*

June 20. Graduation. My family was extremely disappointed that they couldn't come to see me graduate. Because I'm not going to. I can understand their disappointment. I guess for Grandpa \$ in particular, it would be as if I spent lots of money and four years of courtship trying to seduce a woman, and then didn't achieve the joy of the climax. I think he feel he's wasted his money on me, and got nothing in return. No reflected glory.

It's all because of that asshole creative writing professor who said my paper on the men of Sixth Street, and my suffering poems are not what he asked for as the final project, and that he would have to give me an incomplete. Screw him. I've got to get out of here. There is simply no reason to stay.

By July 4, Independence day, I no longer want to be in this country. I will use my freedom to go somewhere. To hell with everybody, creative writing professors, family, Elizabeth, too. I don't need any of them.

*

*

*

March 10. For some reason, I felt drawn back to the kibbutz. When I left, I felt I'd never go back. I hated it. But maybe there is some unfinished business there. Somehow I managed enough courage and energy to make it back to the kibbutz. When I arrived, Marianne and Jeremy were no longer there, and there was a whole new

crop of foreigners. For some reason, and to my great surprise, it was the kibbutzniks who were the ones who greeted me most kindly. Maybe they felt some compassion for the pain I'd suffered. Or maybe they feared that I'd returned to serve them with a lawsuit for my injury, pain and suffering, and wanted to forestall it.

Or maybe it is a deeper truth and why Israelis are nicknamed sabras, the cactus that is prickly, sharp, and rough on the outside, but has a soft inner core. And, further, by some miracle, over time, delicate flowers begin to emerge on that tough, harsh exterior. Those who were born here have had to develop a tough outer skin, but still seek to retain a kind and gentle core.

Doesn't that suggest that there is a tender, soft inner core to those people? I guess when you have great sensitivity, some strong, protective exterior is necessary.

As I walk around the kibbutz, I enjoy the smell of the lemon trees, seeing the growth and the flowering yellow in the banana fields, and even delight in finding my progeny among the date trees, the reddish brown purple color contrasted with the deep blue of the Sea of Galilee in the background. Although this is not my path or direction, I feel some pride that I was once part of the process of creation here. As I head to the Sea of Galilee, I see three small girls giggling and running after a bird.

As dusk transitions into evening, the full moon begins to glisten and sparkle on the water. The wind picks up slightly, and warms me with its breeze. I am struck by the silence.

I hear a thumping sound. At first, I fear that it's the mortars, but then I realize it's the sound of a drum. Soon it is followed by an accordion. As I return to the main dining hall, I smell the shashlik being cooked on the grill. It's an artistic palette of fresh vegetables, tomatoes, green peppers, mushrooms, and lamb cut into little pieces. My nose enjoys the aroma of spices, cloves, lemon juice,

cumin, salt and pepper. Though I don't eat meat any more, I must admit I'm tempted. Nearby is the falafel, hummus, tahini, salads, and lots of wine and bread.

The Purim feast and party is beginning. For most of the evening I sit quietly and watch, eating a little, drinking a little.

Sometimes the whole kibbutz would join arms, dancing, laughing, singing together. Arm in arm, accordions and drums playing louder. The accordion player shouts, "I am no longer playing with my hands, but with my soul." I experience a connected family, a team, a group of individuals who are flowering together, all the faces with joy in their eyes. Arms and bodies twisting, embracing like the Matisse dancers. Maybe God is in the dance and music. Or maybe they can really do it without God.

*

*

*

June 17. Two letters from Mery today, plus a painting as my birthday present. Happy birthday to me. I'm going to celebrate by going swimming. Her letters are not much of a birthday present, except that they ensure her lack of presence. I don't feel very witty.

She also sent a picture of herself. What a switch that is. I was always wanting to take more pictures of her; she writes asking me to destroy all of them, but then sends me one. Is that really a fair exchange?

Is this how she wants me to remember her? Peaceful, eyes closed, not even looking at me. I throw it on the bed, grab my towel and swim suit, and head over to the pool.

I change into my Speedo, but consciously avoid looking at any mirrors. I walk deliberately over to the towel exchange window, and throw in my dirty towel, and stick my hand out for a new one. A hand emerges from the window, and provides one for me. I murmur a thanks and walk away.

As I'm leaving, I realize this is the regular ritual I'd engage in several times a week. But now, returning after nearly a month away, I was struck by the

hand. Who was it attached to? All I ever see is a hand gives me a towel. What a lovely I-Thou relationship. And I'd never noticed it before.

I walk to the pool and see an empty lane. Before I jump in, I look around and see that there is no one waiting. Hurrah. I don't have to wait on my birthday, and my first day back. What a kind gift. Thank you, universe.

The coolness of the water feels refreshing. I feel at home here. Vigorous, strong, secure. I have my lanes, and my body remembers well how to take the long, slow strokes. As I swim, I think about the photo that Mery sent me. She looks so peaceful, gentle and soft in it. I feel just the opposite. I'm more of an ugly callous brute, grabbing from others, without any thoughts about their feelings. You, Mr. Hand, give me a towel. You, woman, give me pleasure. I feel my face contort, a hideous beast. My heart is filled with a crying rage of helplessness and hurt and sorrow. And anger, bitterness and self-hatred. What a toxic combination.

Mery's right. Who would want to be with someone with such ugly emotions. And meanness. I wanted to hurt anyone who encroached into my lane. My lane. It's the rules. The law. Hiding behind the law. De minimis lex non curat. Law does not cure all the little things. It's not a savior. Little things—people—sometimes get in the way. I condemned innocent Elizabeth who voluntarily gave up her lane to someone else. Why couldn't I have done that? What would I ever give up to help anyone? Instead I rage at anyone who gets in my way. And now I cry and weep in the pool. I feel I'm the worst of the anger of my father and the depression of my mother.

Who would want to love me? She's right. Mom's right. I'll never be able to be loved. Not even by myself.

*

*

*

"That can't have been a pleasant swim. You still have your mother and girlfriend ganging up on you, telling you that you are unlovable. And feeling you are the worst of your parents. That's a lot to carry." Dr. Lisbet's voice,

normally tight and clipped, is soft and compassionate, and I feel myself leaning over both to hear her better and to be embraced by that kindness. At the same time I'm annoyed at her efforts at sympathetic understanding. It's easy to be nice to me now that she knows she'll be leaving in a few weeks. And after all, she's getting paid to care.

And maybe you're also annoyed as a defensive, protective reaction to being so open and vulnerable?

I look at her, as if for the first time. She's very thin, with almost no breasts at all. Her graying once blondish hair is pulled back tightly behind her head in a bun. Can someone with that appearance really be a nurturing person? I wish I would have had this insight about her earlier.

Mery and Mom would be smugly satisfied to know I'm in therapy. I can hear them saying, "See, you're weak, too, just like us. You can't do it on your own." And Dad would be saying, "See, I always knew you were sick and weird."

I nod, and Dr. Lisbet continues. "Do you feel those thoughts of being unlovable is the best message to take away from your relationships with Mery and your mom?" Obviously this is a rhetorical question, but I still answer it.

"No, but it's also true. And it continues to be true. It's smeared everywhere throughout my journals. In Kansas City, in San Francisco, on the kibbutz, in Eilat, here in Jerusalem. Different journals, different places, same message. I am unlovable"

The Rebbe starts laughing. "You know, of all the people we know, you, with all your journals, are the closest to a living Talmud-commentary upon commentary. You just dive right into yourself, and swim around with all your thoughts and feelings." He chuckles again at his own punning. I don't find his mocking my experiences at the pool humorous. "You make our job simple."

I have no idea what he means by my being a living Talmud, and I don't want him laughing as I share the intransigence of my negative self-image. I tell him that.

"You're much more complex than a simple negative image, and your own journals show that. It's true that when you feel badly about yourself, you are able to find other examples of imperfect behavior; and feeling 'unloved.' But you've also shared with us many instances of strength and resilience; as well as being loved unconditionally, just think of your 'blue-eyed grandmother'; your red cardinal Grandpa."

I smile at the image of each of them, but then add, "What do you mean by calling ma a living Talmud?"

"Do you know what the Talmud is?"

"Kind of, but not really."

"The Talmud is commentary, discussion, and study over centuries to explain and elaborate written and oral law, supposed to have originated from Sinai. There is a central story, the moral and legal dilemmas, customs and history, and then around the edges--literally-- there is commentary upon commentary.

"Well, imagine your journals as stories where you try to understand your life from different perspectives and angles. Aren't you really doing the same--writing commentary about commentaries? Like the swimming episode. You see it from one perspective, as does Mery. Then, later, you come back to it, and see it slightly differently, and she does too, with the help of her therapist.

"As you know from Dr Lisbet's tai chi class, and as we have discussed with you --'xu-jing' and 'dongjing' from Taoist wisdom--it's important to know how to balance being centered so that you can find the right combination of assertiveness and yielding for each situation. That concept can be one more commentary when applied to the swimming situation, as well as others, like Mery and her therapist.

"Would you like to take a few moments now to explore perhaps an additional layer of depth to the pool, so to speak?" He gives a smile toward Dr. Lisbet and me.

The Rebbe made a kind of joke?!

"Sure, I'm ready to dive in," I respond in kind. I decide not to say, "That's what I'm paying you for."

* * *

"The way you've framed the issue is a battle between two viewpoints. But let me ask you to imagine that those two perspectives --yours and Mery's-- are both really parts of you. To be even more concrete, they are your fingers and thumb. What would be helpful is to learn to realize how to best coordinate them to advantage, rather than to have them be adversaries, opposing and punishing each other."

I take each of my thumbs and pinch them against my fingers one after another.

Dr. Lisbet smiles. "Excellent. You can imagine that as a meditation mantra 'Om mani padme hum.'"

I look confused. "Sorry," she says, "for another time." Was that an apology? From her?

"You have set up two opposing positions, and seen the limits of each. As the Rebbe said, it is admirable that you became aware of the limits of justifying callous, insensitive behavior, such as aggressive actions to own the swimming lane. You even were cognizant of how initially you rationalized that aggressiveness as helping society by keeping law and order. From that place of insight, you made Mery into an exemplar, a Christ-like figure who sacrificed herself on the altar of humanity, who literally waited upon others. She too created a philosophy which accords with and justifies her actions: 'The first will be last; I value humans over property rights.'

"This was all true, so far as it went. But later, Mery herself realized the limits of being too fearful of being assertive, and with her therapist's help was able to recognize her fears, and see that there was a part of her that didn't feel she was worthy, didn't value herself enough to stand up for her rights."

I nod. "Okay. Makes sense. But this is where I feel trapped. I don't want to return to the shallowness and callousness of Johannes. I don't want to have

that part of me that feels always said and mournfulness and unworthy. I see the problems in each. But that's where I get trapped. Am I again stuck in an either-or way of thinking?

"Is there a way out?"

* * *

"Remember when we talked about yin and yang? How, from a centered xu-jing place, it is possible to find the best dongjing strategy--a combination of yin and yang for a given situation? Why not try a synthesis of your and Mery's two positions? Get them to work in balance and harmony? Just to be very concrete about this situation ..." Dr. Lisbet stops and looks at the Rebbe, with a smile. "... and at the same time to be very fluid about it...." He smiles back, and she continues.

"There is nothing wrong with asking, kindly, for your place in the pool, in the world. There's no problem working with others in a negotiating, calm way...a synthesis between two counterpoints."

I think of times when the relationship was working between Mery and me. In those moments, we were perfect for each other. She softened me. I could help her properly assert herself. Like opposites attracting, our complementary tendencies fit in harmony like yang and yin. Or like the thumb and opposing fingers, working as a team. But without conscious self-understanding of ourselves, and each other, those times became fewer and fewer, and the times when our world views clashed increased. We really needed a guide, someone to teach us how to coordinate our fingers and thumb to advantage, rather than oppose and punish. It seems too late for Johannes and Mery, but...I realize I've been ruminating and not responding, as they both watch me. I say simply,

"Thank you, I see that my task is to learn to do for myself what at the time I couldn't do with Mery, to see if I can't integrate me better."

"Excellent. And what would that mean? Could you explore that a bit more?"

"I'm not quite clear. I guess I'd say there is nothing wrong with trying to follow some aspects of Mery's behavior, to be a servant of humankind, to

sacrifice oneself for others, and to achieve the goodness which her act represents. And to do these kind acts on the other side of a strong sense of self, not from a place of a weak or impoverished sense of self, and to do them with energy, determination, joyfulness and with sensitivity and an open heart is not only not wrong, but admirable."

"Very good, Dr. Lisbet nods. "Positive acceptance with grace, joy, determination can certainly be a wise dongjing strategy. And a great context. But just to remind, you, there is nothing wrong with trying to engage, from a centered place, and stand up for your appropriate goals. It may be helpful for you to learn to do that in small situations, with calmness, as a tai chi dance negotiation. To recognize the essential humanity of your fellow swimmers, that you are all just trying to get some exercise. Who goes first, for how long, what are your time constraints; how might you share the lanes, each swimming on your own side; or going in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction? Again, the content isn't as important as the process, and the practice of wise dancing."

I think to myself, in that way the Jesus part of Elizabeth Mery could be born in and as me. And I, John, could point the way to a wiser, more loving, more assured human being.

* * *

"Again, excellent!" This time it is the Rebbe speaking.

"By you and others sharing their thoughts about a single event, commentary around your commentary around your life journey emerges. Your meticulousness with your journal writing amazes me. I don't know anyone as self-reflective as you, who has such layers of documents dissecting the self. It's a testament to your drive to get at the truth. Look at how you rethink your reactions and feelings when you revisit this swimming episode. It's quite impressive."

I feel pleased at being complimented. But before I can say anything, the Rebbe turns to Dr. Lisbet and says, "I like that image of a living Talmud. Maybe on our sabbatical we could write a chapter on therapy as living commentary." He

looks back at me. "With your permission, of course. We would give you central credit for this idea, and also protect your identity by providing alteration of specific identifying details."

At first I am flattered that they would want to write about me and give me credit. My first publication. But wait, are they giving me co-authorship, or a tiny footnote of thanks? Then I wonder how they can give me credit but also mask my identity? Which would I prefer? Then confusion turns to anger. Are they seeing me as an interesting case study to write about and further their career? What about me, the person who's suffering? I'm not sure how flattering it is to be cited as a patient. And I'm also upset at their reminding me that they're leaving me for their sabbatical.

Dr. Lisbet interrupts my thoughts. She turns to the Rebbe, and with a curt nod says, "Our sabbatical writing does not seem an appropriate topic for this therapy session." Whoa, this is the first time I've heard her cut his balls off. She then turns to me, with a much softer voice. "I do admire the way you continue to evolve and rethink. We were talking about your 'unlovable' story that continues to surface. Would you be willing to do a gestalt visualization exercise with me now?"

I smile. I agree with her that the Rebbe was getting off track and deserved to be chastised. Continuing to smile, I respond, "Sure, what do I have to lose. . .except a negative self-image?"

* * *

I'm feeling myself becoming paralyzed. Each action is harder and harder to take. I'm beginning to hate what I do here. I thought I detested the banana fields because they reminded me of Mery. But the monotony, too, was driving me crazy. Sift through more bananas. Tear little pieces of brown leaves from the tips. Thousands and thousands a day. I tried to make a game of it. Then to set goals and have it a competition. But eventually it felt the same as working in Grandpa Dave's clothing store that summer when I was sixteen, putting price tags on

clothes. I'd finishing one box, and the reward was going to the next box. Endless repetition. In the banana fields, I tried cursing myself as motivation. What a spoiled baby. Why can't I stick to something. Maybe the clothes and price tags were stupid, and materialistic (though I hardly thought so at 16), but now I'm creating food for people to eat. Philosophically and intellectually, that's certainly a worthy endeavor. Someone has to do it. Do I think I'm above manual labor? But I couldn't argue myself into not becoming numbed by the task.

Initially, the newness of the date fields helped. My first job was pruning the dead and excessive limbs with a saw. It reminded me of my own life, coming off the tracks, and trying to find a way back on. First, you have to remove the unnecessary. Just as I left most of my possessions behind. Then, you try to find a place to begin on the main limb. At first, as the saw seeks a groove in the unknown, there is a rather clumsy hacking in different directions, tearing at the limb, making only superficial marks. But once the saw finds that groove, it can make long, smooth strokes towards the center. I keep waiting to find that new groove, to get back on some tracks.

There was something playfully erotic about being the male fertilizer of all those females. But the same mind-numbing, paralyzing sensation started up again after just a few days. I fertilize the dates, but don't seem to have the patience to watch my creation grow. Why isn't this enough meaning: a socialistic life that consists of sharing, working with others, tilling the land, being close to nature, building community? Isn't this the idyllic existence I said I wanted, being the natural man, working in the fields, being close to the earth? Why can't I make living this idealistic, communitarian life my base? Why isn't that enough? There was something playfully erotic about being the male fertilizer of all those females. But the same mind-numbing, paralyzing sensation started up again after just a few days.

THE WINDOW

A date tree limb;
insects crawling
Infinity through a small pane;
but I must continue...
Seeking something more

What's missing is a foundation, a groove, a track. Why can't I make the date tree my anchor, or the bananas? Yet, just the opposite seems to be happening. I am admonished to pollinate the date trees faster, but instead I am going slower and slower. The key to wind up me no longer works, and all motivation is dripping out of me.

I showed this poem and its linked verse, The Infinite, to my kibbutz supervisor. Oh, Johannes, still pretentious, still a need to feel special and seek approval. I offered them by way of explanation, and as a way to help him understand me, but he just stared blankly. Perhaps it was a translation problem.

Maybe John, he's just trying, as we all are, to be understood by another.

In many ways. He simply couldn't relate to my dissatisfaction, my longing for something more. Perhaps he can't allow himself the luxury of the questions. He did ask me, in clear English, "Why do you keep reading the Bible, and why the New Testament, also? Aren't you Jewish?"

I'm not sure which bothered him more, my reading the New Testament, or reading the Bible at all.

* * *

"As you are willing, let your eyes gently close, and take a few deep breaths."

As I listen to Dr. Lisbet's words, preparing me for this exercise, I think again of what the Rebbe said. The more I think about it, the more I resonate to the content idea of my life being a living Talmud. But it raises a fundamental question. One of words. Is the very approach I'm taking the wrong one? Is it possible to use words to describe a religious quest? Can words give self-understanding, a base into existence from which to relate to the Absolute? How is

to possible to write about yearning, to describe a search for the ineffable? Is seeking the Word via words a contradiction, a misplaced effort?

Or does the Word only live in living, which would mean I should stop writing altogether?

*

*

*

June 15. I played tennis today. If you could call it that. On the positive side, I was impressed that three days after I put my crutches aside in Golden Gate Park, I was back on the courts. Inamatsu had already left, but there was a new guy--Joe--who Richard brought. I figured he was a ringer, and Richard was going to play with him so he could crush Jeffrey and me. To make things fair, I volunteered to play with Joe. Richard seemed displeased that I'd seen through his ruse. so I was delighted.

At first, my game was pretty rusty. I moved gingerly, not really trusting my foot, but it seemed ok. After a little bit I actually began playing very well. Maybe I'd forgotten all my bad habits. However, Joe was horrible. He'd hit balls wildly out. Sometimes he'd even miss the ball completely, and his reactions at net were slow and ponderous. We lost 6-0.

In the second set, I demanded we switch partners, and forced Richard to play with his friend. They lost 6-2, and I felt much better. I'd gotten even with Richard.

During the break, I heard Richard ask Joe, "How are you feeling?"

"Much better. I'm done with my treatments now." Joe pulled up his shirt and showed a huge scar across his stomach. Then he smiled and walked over to the water fountain.

When he was out of hearing range, I asked Richard, "What's wrong with him?"

"He had major surgery for stomach cancer and just finished his radiation and chemotherapy treatment. Coming to play tennis today is his way of saying he's on the road to recovery."

I felt horrible hearing this, but as I thought about it, there was still one thing I didn't understand. "Would that affect why he's missing so many balls completely? Does it affect his vision."

"No, but he's also blind in one eye."

*

*

*

Joe came running back, smiling, and called out "Ok, what are the teams now, Jeffrey and me?." Normally that would be the next rotation, but in a burst of sympathy, I put my arm around Joe, and told him he and I would be partners again, and get revenge for our first "bagel."

I was embarrassed how insensitively I had treated Joe in the first set, even though I wasn't aware of his situation, with cancer and blindness. This was a chance for me to make amends.

This time, the match was much closer. We were ahead four to three and had a break point against them. If we win the point, we'd be up five three, and I'd be serving for the match. How sweet would that victory be. For me. For Joe. And how painful for Richard. A perfect combination.

Richard was serving. His first serve was wide. Second serve. "Come on, Joe. Make 'em work."

Richard piddled a second serve in. Joe took a swing, and completely missed it.

I knew I was wrong, but one eye or not, cancer or not, even a blind person could have at least hit some part of that ball. Focus, Joe, focus! At such a crucial time in the match. I was furious. I didn't say anything, but I couldn't control my facial expression and I turned away so he wouldn't see me. Needless to say, we lost the game, and the match.

I'm embarrassed at myself-then, and now. Even though I knew the right way to act, I couldn't do it. The match doesn't matter at all. I'm leaving the area. The game means nothing. The guy had cancer, is facing death, and is blind in one eye.

And still I got angry at him for missing a ball, thinking he shouldn't be on the court ruining my afternoon fun.

I'm pathetic.

*

*

*

I wonder if Mery is going to contact me, and how she's reacting to my letters. I'm glad she didn't see me at the tennis courts today. Then I'd have absolutely no chance with her.

I came back and crawled into bed after the match. To try to get to sleep and distract my mind, I play word games. Lie and lay. Lie is to recline, lay is to place. The past of lie is lay. So if I say, I lay down for a nap, that's correct for yesterday, but not today. I lay my tennis racquet on the bed. Today. I lay Mery. Today in my mind, many yesterdays ago in reality. I lie about my life. All the time.

I kept thinking of Joe, and what a horrible person I am. Then I remembered playing a match with my brother. I was toying with him, making him run to one side of the court to retrieve a ball, then to the other. Keeping them within reach, but ensuring that he'd have to work hard to get them. Just as toyed with the ant at the park a couple of days ago.

Then I made a drop shot. He rushed into the net to get it, but in his determination, couldn't stop himself. He tried to jump and leap the net, but one foot got caught, and like a bad dream in slow motion, I watched his foot and ankle flip up, his face contort into a scream, his neck catapult skyward as he stretched out his hands to protect himself as his body collapsed to the ground to my side. As I relive the memory, I still remember the horror of his face when he realized his leap was not sufficient and he was going to fall.

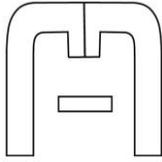
What is it about me? I wanted to run him ragged, but I know I didn't want to hurt him. A trip to the ER, some stitches, and he was ok. He seemed to have forgiven me, but even now it's hard for me to forgive myself. Especially when I

see the pattern repeating. With Mery and the boy at Golden Gate. Even mentally with Joe on the courts.

Somehow, amidst all these swirling painful thoughts, sleep overtakes me. But it seems my unconscious intended to punish me. In my first dream, I'm playing tennis, but there are no tennis balls, only pieces of paper, which I wad up to make into a ball. But I couldn't get enough power with my swing to hit it over the net. The papers might have been my political science honors thesis; or even my creative writing project. When I realize what I've done, I rush to get them, and try to uncrumple them. I run to Mr. Red to see if I have any tennis balls there. I find them and return to the courts, but my playing partners have left, and others have taken over the courts, and there's no place for me to play, and no one for me to play with.

* * *
* * *

"



s you are willing, let your eyes gently, and keep your breathing calm and relaxed. Very good. Now, imagine you see a tree stump, and next to it is a fishing pole. In front of the stump and pole is a meandering creek; and behind is a log cabin, with smoke coming out of a chimney. Take a few more easy breaths, and then just tell us what is going on in that scene."

When I look at the first letter , and think of this period of time with John in therapy, I see two people who are in love and care deeply about each other, heads together in an embrace, providing shelter for a young man--the dash-- who is trying to find his way. When I look at right hand side alone,  I see that young man, trying to stand upright, on his own, leaning forward, trying to care of and birth himself, learning to stand on his own. When I apply the  to my situation, I think of two people in love, hoping one day they may give birth--from that love-- to new life. And so the cycle continues.

When I say nothing, Dr. Lisbet adds, "Can you visualize it ok?"

I nod. "Good, now keep your eyes closed, and please share what you think is happening, and how does that feel to you?"

"What I see most clearly is the stump. There once was a tall, mighty tree, which was cut down, and now there is nothing left but a stump."

"Good. Now, remembering our early sessions, I'd like you to speak in the first person 'I': you become the parts of the scene. Keep the narrative going, but instead of saying 'the tree was', say 'I was'...."

Here we go again. It feels like I'm going in circles with these two. But I also seem to be going in circles on my own, and not making much progress either. They are really my last chance, so I reluctantly begin to play her little game.

"I was once a tall, mighty tree. I was cut down. Nothing is left but a stump." I feel like they've just played a magic trick on me. How

did they know I would pick the stump in the scen? But as I say the words, I also feel tears in my eyes. "All of this suffering has been caused by my hubris, hasn't it? I wanted to be the biggest and the best, to stand out, and look what happened to me. Cut down to size. I guess I've learned my lesson."

"Which is?"

I open my eyes and look directly at her. "Never stand out. Keep my ego in check. Stay out of others' way. I see it time and time again. When I ride the horse with Mery, I'm like a sadistic tyrant, whipping and cruelly beating the poor animal to find a pace that pleases me. Yet at the time I thought I was being 'one with the horse.' It's embarrassing to look back."

She says nothing and I continue. "At the swimming pool, or even the birthday party at Golden Gate Park where I first went with Mery, I felt like I owned the space, and anyone who got in my way deserved to be crushed. I was mean, angry, entitled. And now look at me."

I feel a pain in my chest and my breath catching in my throat and chest. Dr. Lisbet puts her arm on my shoulder, an unusually warm gesture for her. The Rebbe, meanwhile, begins softly singing, a repetitive meaningless word, a niggun.

"I'm such a plague, so ugly, insensitive, to little children frolicking, a guy with cancer and blind in one eye who just wants to play tennis. I compare that to Mery's kindness to the autistic kids and the men on Sixth Street. Tears are flowing now.

She places her hand on my diaphragm, saying, "Take a breath gently from here. Like a balloon softly expanding. Let the breath drop from your chest. Just allow the air to come in. And as you do so, listen to the Rebbe's voice. That's it. Nice and easy.

Though the pain continues to feel throbbing and sharp in my chest, my tears become less, and some of the tightness starts to diminish.

"That's it," Dr. Lisbet soothes. "You're being pretty harsh on yourself. You blame yourself for having brought on this pain and suffering behaving haughtily and

pompously. It almost sounds as if you feel you deserve being cut down to a stump." I feel sad when she removes her hand from my diaphragm, and hands me a kleenex.

I nod. "Everything I come near gets infected. Eventually I drive everyone away. Which is probably better for them. And then finally I infect myself."

"What you call plague, or poison-- which can infect and spread-- I like to call 'dust', Buddhist's refer to as dust on the mirror--which clouds the mirror, but does not infect it. We each have areas of challenge, habits and qualities that are not in our or other's interest. Most of us spend a great deal of time hiding from them, denying them, projecting them onto others. So, I admire that you are willing to look at yourself honestly. However, sometimes when we see our dust, we become overwhelmed by it, and that, too, is not in our interest. Does that make sense?"

"But how do you look at the dust and not become overwhelmed and demoralized? How can you be so sure it's not really poison?"

* * *

The Rebbe continues to hum softly, which seems strange, both confusing and annoying. Is he listening? Ignoring us? Aren't I paying for both of them? Suddenly, Dr. Lisbet stands and begins doing a tai chi exercise that I recognize from her class. I watch the slow, even graceful movements of her arms as they cross in front of her, as she balances on one leg. Then she shifts direction, her head moving just slightly and her eyes looking ahead, focused but also seeming to take in everything. There is a serenity and calm, and from my own feeble efforts, I recognize the hidden athleticism required. It's particularly impressive for such an old lady.

But I have no idea why she's doing this in my therapy session. Is this what therapy is really like? One person humming with their eyes closed, another waving their arms and legs through the air? If I weren't so sad, I might almost laugh. Except that I'm paying for this, too. Which makes me even sadder.

"Do you know what this form is called?" Dr. Lisbet asks when she finishes.

"I know it's tai chi. But no, I have no idea which form that is or why you're doing it in my therapy session."

She smiles and sits down. "It's called 'Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain.' And I'm doing it because it contains a profound lesson on how to deal with our dust."

I shrug my shoulders. What she's saying makes no sense to me. But I've learned to wait patiently, and often eventually she'll make sense. Is that positive trust, or illusory naivete?

"We all have internal 'tigers'--our failings, weaknesses, plagues, dust, whatever you want to call them. We have to come out of the self-created castles of denial in our mind and recognize our limitations. We don't run from these tigers, we don't hide from them, we don't indulge them, nor do we become demoralized and overwhelmed by them."

"What's left? Doesn't that exhaust the options?"

"First, we just notice them, while taking a calm breath". This is the xu-jiing, centering ourselves." Her voice is calming, comforting. "Then, we look to the first word of the form: 'Embrace.' We embrace them. With a loving compassionate awareness. But then we do more. We embrace them AND 'return to the mountain.' What do you think that mountain symbolizes."

"Did they have a Mount Sinai in China?" I love my sense of humor.

She smiles. "Exactly. The mountain is our spiritual home. Our soul mountain."

My breathing becomes calmer. What she's saying is beautiful and poetic. But like a lot of poetry, it feels like an unattainable dream. But a dream worth aspiring toward.

* * *

"Fascinating!" The Rebbe says, as he opens his eyes and stops humming. He looks over at me with bemusement and kindness in his eyes. Do you remember the Parashat we read during Hanukkah, around the start of the New Year?" I have no idea what he's talking about. I vaguely remember being in his class. What could possibly be fascinating about that.

"We read the last two passages of Genesis. The end of the beginning. Remember what happens..." He starts humming again, then continues:

"Jacob has gone down to Egypt. Note that the Bible calls him Jacob. Yet this is the same person who, at the river, wrestled with angels, and became Israel. Why use the old name? Now, in the Torah, everything can be read on multiple levels. On the surface, that may be a historical fact, a geographical location, Jacob going to Egypt. But, mystically, the word Egypt, 'mitzrayim' means narrow place. Each of us have to travel at least once, and usually often much more into our narrow place. As Jacob going to Egypt, he is re-returning to his "narrow place" from the lofty wisdom of "Israel" he had by the river. We each need to stay ever vigilant, even after 'awakening experiences" to that which can re-constrict and re-enslaves us.

What's fascinating is that this message, in our tradition, is that same one that Dr. Lisbet points out is embedded in the tai chi form, "Embrace Tiger." We need to confront the narrow places in ourself that creates hurts in others and ourself. In your case, it may well have been from your hubris, your being the cocky tall tree that only looked out for itself."

He closes his eyes again, and resumes his humming. Is he done? He doesn't seem at all interested in how I react or what I think about what he's just said. It feels like he's talking to me, at one level, but also as though he's thinking about his lecture for the Passover class tomorrow. Great. I'm the fertilizer for his talk, and he gets paid by me to prepare for his next class.

But, I must admit, it is interesting how different traditions have similar root themes. I wonder if there is a psychological basis for that. Something about the human condition. Then I realize, I'm letting my mind's reflexive penchant for intellectulization comfort me with words and ideas, avoiding the pain that only a few moments ago had me in tears. But maybe that's ok. I'm not really running from my dust. I'm just seeing that I'm not alone. Everyone, in every culture, seems to have to address this problem.

The Rebbe once again opens his eyes, and continues, "As we read on the secular New Year, in the last passage of Genesis, once we recognize our narrow places, once we

realize we are in Egypt, we need to trust that God will lead us forward and out. Look at it from two levels. One is what we need to free ourselves from our enslavements, face and even embrace the plagues and tigers within ourselves, to set out on a journey to leave our narrow places and cross the Reed Sea. But leaving narrow places is one thing, finding a vision to aspire toward is another. Where does that journey take us?"

He pauses, as if for dramatic effect. It seems he's preaching a sermon to a class, not talking to a client--me-- in therapy. "It takes us to the "sacred mountain"--the symbolic Sinai, the place where we meet and open ourselves to the deepest level of wisdom in the universe--HaShem,, the name, God, the nameless one."

* * *

The Rebbe looks over at Dr. Lisbet who seems to lower her eyes subtly, in a sign of approval. They exchange a glance of what I can only describe as tenderness, and then he closes his eyes and resumes his humming. I'm again struck by the beauty of his words. I like the idea that somehow my plagues and dust can be embraced and transmuted into spiritual wisdom. But I don't like that he may take my idea of the tai chi mountain being Sinai--and make it his idea. I wonder if I can sue for intellectual robbery if he uses it in his Passover lecture.

My thoughts are interrupted by Dr. Lisbet who says, "Before we end our session today, I'd like to discuss with you explicitly a topic I've mentioned in our classes, and also one you have brought up, directly and indirectly: Control. Let's talk about your need for control. I believe we all have, to a greater or lesser extent, that desire for a sense of control that you're seeking. Makes sense, doesn't it? It gives us a feeling of power, security, safety, to feel that things are in control. The question becomes, though, what if our desire for control is not matched by our actual ability to effect such control? Then, how do you feel?"

I place my hands next to my cheeks, then toss them skyward in a helpless gesture.

"Exactly. So, let's look at what we can control. Let's look just personally. We only have a certain percent of control over our physical body. It's not 100%, it's not 0%. The same with our mind and thoughts and emotions. With great motivation and efforts at self-discipline, we can increase and stretch by a few to several percent our control in each of these areas, but it is never absolute. Does that make sense to you?"

I nod in agreement.

"So how do we humans reconcile our desire for control with our limited ability to actually control things? One way is to recognize that things are not in control, but try to hide that from others, and not admit it: 'Everything's fine.' Another strategy is denial, and not even admit this out-of-controlness to themselves. But wouldn't you agree, from a therapeutic perspective, that denial to oneself or others is really an unhealthy way to gain a sense of control? It's so illusory! I believe that, in order to gain a positive sense of control, people have to admit their vulnerability, and accept feeling less in control some of the time. But that can be a healthy sign of personal progress, because they are letting into conscious awareness that there is a problem, and it's only then you can begin to address it.

"As we've discussed, once you recognize the issue, there are two wise ways to deal with it. The first is a positive assertive, yang change strategy, to make things better. In situations which cannot be changed, or active control efforts are inappropriate, a positive yielding, accepting yin control strategy, like Lao-Tzu's way of water is the best option."

"Is that why you teach Tai Chi?"

"Yes, in part, because I too, like you, wished to have more active control in my life than I did. What I learned in Tai Chi are several helpful lessons. For example, I learned balance, such as when we shift our weight from one foot to another. It teaches the two modes of control, yin and yang, when we do the form 'Wave Hands Like Clouds' and experience the shifts in energy in each hand. Tai chi also helps us learn to notice the external world, as we let our eyes follow our hands

during 'Hands Like Clouds.'" But this is a very special kind of noticing. Our head moves slowly so our eyes are both seeing what is before us, and then are like a mirror letting go as our gaze shifts, continuously moving. Further, Tai Chi help us learn, like the bobo doll in psychology experiments, what it is like to fall and stay centered; and how to regain our balance and continue. As well, doing Tai Chi we notice that there are times our body is not centered but our mind is, and that helps us regain balance. Conversely, sometimes our body is centered, but our mind isn't and the body serves as an anchor."

I'm busily taking notes as she talks.

"And I'd add one more thing. Even though Tai Chi is a 'soft" martial art, it also teaches you a warrior toughness. To be able to embrace life, be open, and sensitive, facing what is, and trusting you have the xujing centeredness and physical and mental focus to deal with what comes is a valuable lesson. This is exemplified at the end of the practice, when you bow, and your fist is covered by an open palm. Tough and peaceful at the same time."

I wonder if these aren't universal lessons. I think of tennis. I know there are obvious differences. Tennis has an external opponent. But Tai Chi also has "Fair Lady Works the Shuttle" to address "'external enemies." And in both you also need to address your internal "enemies"—embrace your inner tigers, calm your mind and emotions. In tennis, you theoretically have 100% control over when you serve—like a golf shot or a free throw—no one externally is blocking you. It is totally up to you where you want to serve the ball, what speed, what spin. But unlike Tai Chi or golf, in tennis you have to learn how to react when your opponent serves to you, or returns your serve. So the mind has to be open and allowing. There is both a plan and structure and a 'spine' on one hand, and a need for the ability to alter the plan depending upon the situation and circumstances—a spontaneity within the structure.

These are great teachings. Acknowledging my desire for control. Realizing when too high a desire for control might cause me to deny that things are getting out of control. When too high a desire makes me want to inappropriately control what I should

allow. Learning that there are two positive ways to gain a positive sense of control, and seeing Tai Chi as a way to practice those. These seem like good lessons for life

* * *

As I'm writing these thoughts down, I hear Dr. Lisbet say, "I have some homework for you to do between now and our next session. When you go to bed tonight, I want you to lie face up, and place your two index fingers next to each other, right below your navel. Allow your breathing to breathe itself--from the diaphragm. You will notice those two fingers will slightly part on the inbreath, return on the outbreath. Let yourself take three breaths like that. Interestingly, when we sleep, we naturally breathe from our diaphragm. So, this will both help you sleep better, and be excellent practice for catching yourself at other times in the day when you're awake, and notice yourself tightening, and breathing from your chest. Any questions?" she asks.

"No, I understand my homework assignment. I guess my only question is, are you a tough grader?"

She smiles and looks over at the Rebbe. "What is that line from the Wisdom of our Ancestors?"

With eyes closed, he recites, "The task is difficult and immense, the time is short, and the master is merciless," and goes back to his niggun.

* * *

"Two more assignments."

"Geez, merciless. I didn't get this much homework in school."

"And I bet you never took a class called self-learning either." Do I noticed the faintest trace of a smile. She continues, "All of us have 'dust' on our mirrors, and it's good to notice and try to work on areas that hold us back and are not in our interest. The first homework is to do a nightly prayer. This has three part. Firust, you offer forgivenss to those who have hurt you, intentinally,or unintentionally by their thoughts, words, or deeds. Secondly, you ask forgivenss for anyone you may have hurt, intentionally or unintetnially by your thoughts, words, or deeds. And finally,

you forgive yourself for any hurts you have caused yourself, intentionally, or unintentionally by your thoughts, words, or deeds. Is that clear?

"Crystal. But what if I don't feel I deserve to be forgiven, or don't feel like forgiving?"

"Fair point. You're being honest, and I appreciate that. Can you see how forgiveness, even if it doesn't yet seem possible, might be healing for you and others."

"Of course."

"Then, if you feel you're not ready, then try an approximation: such as I'd like to begin the process of forgiveness...."

"I can do that. Are we done?"

"One more. For extra credit. You--and all of us-- are so much more than our dust, for which we need to be forgiven. Therefore, spend some time before our next session, continuing to explore the gestalt exercise we just did. See if there are ways you can begin to see yourself in it in a more positive light."

I take a few notes. When I look up, I see that she has closed her eyes, and soon begins to join the Rebbe in the niggun. I watch them both sway gently back and forth, eyes closed. I close my eyes and listen to the beautiful, even haunting sounds. Then, though self-conscious because of my voice, I too join in the humming. Soon my self-consciousness vanishes, and I feel enclosed by the beauty and warmth of the melody.

* * *

June 13. Yesterday, after leaving Golden Gate, and dropping the letters by Mery's, I went to pick up Mac and drove him down to my class. As we were driving, he read me sections from his monograph, The Big Sickness, and also read out loud the poems I'd written about my experience the night before on Sixth Street. He was kind, even flattering, saying he respected the poems' openness, and vulnerability. He told me I had a good future as a writer if I chose to pursue it. But I think he was just

being tactful, for when he read his writing, it was so much more powerful than mine. He could make the people he described seem real so you ached and cried for them.

Maybe his writing was better because he'd suffered with them, and knew the experience from the inside. He knew them, they trusted him. You were just an outsider, ranting and railing about your own emotions.

I was hoping my political science professor would get uptight at having Mac come speak. Into the august sterile ivory tower, my professor would be confronted by a small, frail, pock-marked man, who'd lived on the street and by his wits most of his life. I was sure he'd be uncomfortable at the openness of the soul-searching in my writing, and be embarrassed by Mac's presence.

I was wrong. In fact, the professor seemed to become a changed person. His normal, aloof, distant self cracked open, and what emerged was a warm, caring, socially conscious human being. I hadn't realized it, but it turns out that my stiff boring elitist professor had actually written his dissertation on the role of wealth in New York City politics, and that he couldn't find a New York publisher because the thesis was so critical and unflattering of the idle rich.

It seems I was as unaware of the professor who was teaching me, as I was of the story of the humans that lived on Sixth Street. I'm amazed how little I know about people, and how profoundly I misread them. In fact, as I am continuing to learn, I was then and still am now pretty unclear on my own story, too. It's embarrassing, even humiliating how ignorant I am of everything and everybody around and within me.

Yes, Rebbe, so many "fascinating" interconnections. John, the day before Passover, is now reading Johannes' journal from Shavuot of last year--leaving Golden Gate Park, picking up Mac, and returning to the Farm for the political science class, where he sees more clearly some of his narrow places. A year later, John has actually climbed Sinai on Shavuot, and now Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe give him words of wisdom from Taoist philosophy about embracing his dust and "returning to the Mountain." The non-theistic Taoist "mountain; the theistic Jewish Sinai.

*

*

*

It's interesting to think back on Mac. He was a real friend to me. I have such admiration for his poetic exuberance, his social activism, his willingness to make me feel less awkward on his territory. But I also feared him. He knew how confused and disoriented I was. I had shared with him on the drive down the painful circumstances of my break-up with Mery, and my anger at women. Was it only out of caring for me--and to help me with my writing-- that he'd then he invited me after the class to come spend the night, or a few days with him? Was it more than abstraction and philosophical principle when he talked about the importance of men learning to love each other? He was never inappropriate, but I felt he wanted to cross sexual boundaries that I didn't want to cross, and at a time I was so vulnerable--emotionally, sexually, my very identity in question. I wanted his poetic spirit and wisdom. I wanted his deeper emotional understanding, his depth of love. But I certainly didn't want any physical intimacy with him, and I sensed that desire loomed in Mac. He respected my unstated limits, but nevertheless, I felt threatened and one part of me had to always be on guard. I wonder how often the women Johannes went out with would have preferred friendship to his one track sexual obsession.

It's interesting that although my time with Mac was so raw and vulnerable, that Johannes didn't even write about it during his last few weeks at Stanford

Is there anyone, anywhere with whom I ever completely let down my guard? Then? Now?

*

*

*

September 7. Today I stood in the shower, letting water freeze, then burn me. trying to find the right combination of hot and cold. I've been here nearly two months, and each time I take a shower I try to approach the faucets afresh, feeling the water until it is just right, and not analyzing how far I've turned each faucet. I do this because of Elizabeth's mocking laughter at how analytical I am. The result: I sometimes chill, sometimes scald myself, and it always takes longer than if I'd just

done it my way from the start,figuring out precisely how many twists to turn the hot and how many the cold to achieve the right temperature for me.

I'm twisting myself into a pretzel to do something different than I've always done, trying to be a new person, to be less analytical, and the result is pain, uncertainty, and confusion. If you don't analyze, how do you know how to act? I'm becoming pained, and even paralyzed in all parts of my life. I hate working in the date fields, a mechanized fertilizing robot. I feel my life is slowly coming to an end and I sit powerless, watching, not knowing what to do. Apparently, I'm not completely out of the desert wilderness yet. I wonder if I will ever be.

*

*

*

"How was your experience revisiting the kibbutz?" the Rebbe asks as I enter their office and am once again seated on my brown couch. "We didn't get a chance to ask you last session."

I wondered why they hadn't asked me, but I wasn't going to bring it up. I thought maybe I'd gone as an acting-out on my part, to punish the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet for saying they were leaving in a month. Then I thought they didn't bring it up because they felt hurt and offended, but didn't want to face it. But maybe they really just didn't care. Either way, it seemed best to ignore.

"I enjoyed the Purim dancing a lot. But the trip confirmed for me that the kibbutz isn't the right place for me. In your class last week you talked about God being absent at Purim. God is still absent on the Kibbutz—at least in their minds. Here. . ." I reach into my journal and pull out the two poems I wrote during my initial stay "The Infinite" and "The Window" and read them to him.

He nods, smiles, but doesn't say anything. Dr. Lisbet returns with the tea. "I like them," she says, as she hands me a cup. "The seedlings of your spiritual searching."

I nod in thanks, "Last fall, on the kibbutz, before I cut my hand, I knew I was missing something. It's interesting to read where I was then, and see that I still feel that restlessness now, this quest for something more." I look at both of them.

"I'm going to hold you to your promise, you know. At some point before you vanish next month, you have to tell me what you believe."

They both smile and nod, I assume, in agreement, but say nothing.

"What would you like to talk about today. Did you do more work with that geataalt exercise?"

"Yes, but first I've got a question about the way I analyse things, and I really would like a direct answer. I've just finished going through my journal entries about the first two mnths on the Kibbutz. In the last writing, I'm in the shower, feeling lost and paralyzed, having been alternately hot and cold, because I wasn't willing to analyze precisely the accurate turns for each shower faucet to prduce the right combination for me. I feel ashamed of my constant analysis of every aspect of my life because Mery—I mean Elizabeth—had mocked me. This may sound silly, but what do you all think about the value of analysis in day to day life?"

Dr. Lisbet closes her eyes, as if in meditation. The Rebbe bursts out laughing. I sit and watch their different theatrics. Finally, he says, "You want me to analyze what I think about analysis? That's rich."

My annoyance reaches a boiling point. I try to modulate my response and speak in careful, precise phrasing. "Look, if you don't want to answer, just say so. But I'm tired of your evasively putting me off when I ask a direct question--for example when I asked you 'Is the universe sacred.'" Fine, maybe that's too large. But this is a discrete direct question. Please, just answer me for once."

"I'm sorry. You're feeling that I'm dodging your question. Actually, I was trying to empathize with you. If you think--actually if you feel--or someone else tells you--that analysis is a problem, you're stuck, aren't you? How do you proceed? Take the example of someone who says, 'I want only unconditional love from you. If you find fault with me, or criticize me in any way, you're not being unconditionally loving.' The statement binds and traps you. In the first case, if you try to analyze whther you agree, you are guilty to that of which you are accused. In the second, does that mean you can never give the person any constructive feedback without

that violating 'unconditional love?' You're stuck, right?" I'm not sure, but he seems to give a sly nod toward Dr. Lisbet.

"Ok, I agree. But then, what do **you** think about it....your view. . .?"

"Look, son, you need to know what your normal body temperature is, don't you, so that you know when you have a fever. You need to know what feels good for your body, what temperatures are comfortable for it. That involves analysis, emotion, and judgement. Not only is there nothing wrong with that, it's essential for our survival. Our ancestors learned from experience. If they hadn't, we wouldn't be here. They learned which plants were edible, and which ones caused illness, even death. That's all analysis."

I think of my discussion with Elizabeth about the poisonous mushrooms. Point for me.

"So, if you want to save time and learn how to place your shower faucets at the right temperature, I'd say go for it."

"But I hear Elizaabeth saying I'm not approaching life fresh each moment. Even the book she gave me, I-Thou, urges us to live each new moment without preconceptions or predetermined understanding."

Dr. Lisbet opens her eyes. "One Zen teacjomg is 'Learn to see the flower the five hundreth time as you saw it the first.' In this way, we can see the world and others with the newness and freshness of a small child. That's the point you're making, isn't it?"

"Yes, exactly. Isn't that the opposite of analysis? I don't approach the faucets as if this is the first time I've encourantered them. fresh. I seek to control them. I place them just where I want, based on my prior analysis."

The Rebbe smiles. "Look, this is tricky, but the best way I've put it together is we need to figure out when analysis is helpful, and when it's not. It's a nuanced question, not an absolute. As I've said, sometimes you need analysis to survive. Other times it's good just to be present and feel. The same with relationships. Analysis is important at times when you're with a partner, to learn, for example, how

they like to be touched, where, when; and how they like to receive constructive feedback. That's a way of showing caring for them. All learning is analysis at some level. When to trust the heart, when to trust the mind. We analyze what we want, what makes us happy, what doesn't, what people it's good for us to be around, what ideas appeal to us."

"But what do you say to someone who says you analyze too much? Thank you for the feedback? Let me analyze that to see if it feels true?"

The Rebbe bursts into laughter again. "It's that Catch-22 type of question, isn't it? What is someone really saying when they make that statement? They're saying they feel you are analyzing too much. And, if it's someone you value, and want to learn from, then you should listen carefully and evaluate what they are saying. Are you? Of course over-analysis is possible. Have you ever tried analyzing a joke? it can take the laughter out of it. Or even analyzing 'love' or experiences of prayer and meditation. If you analyze something too much, you may keep yourself from becoming truly involved in and just enjoying it it.

"Similarly if you are always planning, analyzing, calculating, does that sometimes keep you from feeling passion, cause you to distance yourself from an experience? If you see your partner as a faucet—turn this so far, adjust that so much, then you may end up making love like painting by the numbers." He laughs again, and once more seems to glance toward Dr. Lisbet. Is he talking about what he's learned from and with her, as a way of sharing with me? This seems more than I need or want to know.

"In certain situations, it can be a kind of dance---at times you 'analyze' in the sense of learning from evaluating feedback, making adjustments, and at other times, you open yourself to just being, to 'flow with the experience.'" I wonder if he is talking about faucets or love making, but choose not to ask. He continues, "That way you learn what works for you, and for others. You learn when routinization is useful, and when to try to just be present without preconceptions and just experience the flower anew."

*

*

*

Dr. Lisbet takes a sip of tea, nodding reflectively. "I once had a professor who noted that there were two different types of people who came to him for training. One type had very creative minds, were always in their imagination, having a rich fantasy life. He would recommend they take a course in behavioral psychology to learn to ground themselves and be more precise. The other type of people were engineering in their precision. He would tell them that the last thing they needed was course work on behavioral training, rather they might want to consider immersing themselves in Jung, collective archetypes and dream analysis. Then, he told us he felt generalizations were to be distrusted--people were more complicated than a simple trait description--and if we ever quoted him, he'd deny he ever said it." She smiles.

"As the precise type, it was wonderful for me to feel the adventure of Jung's mind, yet always trying to ground and understand what he was saying. I've analyzed people who say you analyze too much, and what's interesting is what they're really saying, at least in part, is that they don't feel comfortable with the precision and care that you're bringing to a subject. You see, all people analyze, as the Rebbe said. Even those who criticize analysis, make calculations: like when it's safe to cross the street, what foods they like, which people they feel are too analytical!"

In rapid fire, the Rebbe comes in. "Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, before eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Perhaps there really was a time in our evolution when all was simple, pure, and undifferentiated. But, once you've tasted from the tree of good and evil, you can't go back. How do we learn about good and evil. Through careful analysis. I believe we can only go 'in and through.'"

*

*

*

I'm frantically taking notes on what they're saying. Finally, someone has said something that makes sense. Or, has articulated what I believe--if I could have said it that well. And they've given me a direct answer.

But it raises more questions.

"If you can't go back, but must go 'in and through' and Lord knows I've certainly gone 'in' awfully far, how do you keep from getting trapped by the never ending spiral of bits and fragments and pieces of yourself all clamoring for attention and to be understood? From this wonderful wholeness I once felt about myself--even it was an illusory myth--now I've faced with a hupty dumpty pile of selves screaming within me. And I don't even know which or who I can trust. Am I being impetuous or spontaneseous; too analytical or not enough; insensitive or too emotional; thoughtfully observing or too detached?"

Almost without taking a breath, I continue, "What I find most disconcerting is when I think I'm acting for one reason, only to discover it's for a different reason entirely. For example, I think I'm being nice by saying thanks to someone, but it turns out, in part, it's really because I want something from them, or want to be liked or ingratiate myself to them. Or I act tenderly toward a woman, as if I really cared about her, when all I wanted was to get my rocks off (pardon the expression). Or I thought I was trying to be giving and of service to the men on Sixth street, but maybe I just wanted to prove to me--and Mery--what a good person I was; and get a good grade on my paper. Phew. Done." I make a motion with my hands palms up, then arms and palms facing downward, as if I've just splattered a mess on the floor. "Can you help me clean that up?"

* * *

Dr. Lisbet takes another sip. "How do you like the tea?"

I pick up my cup and taste it for the first time. "Good. Thank you."

When I set the cup down, she says, "How about a couple of breaths from your diaphragm. Do you notice--I mean, have you analyzed-- that perhaps your xu-jing isn't exactly where you might want it to be?"

I do as she says. Meanwhile, the Rebbe has closed his eyes, and once again begins a niggun. I wonder if he does that as a way to help me relax further. It's actually a good strategy.

"Very good. What you are seeing is that there are lots of pieces and sides to you. As there are to everyone. I value that you are willing to face yourself honestly and clearly, and interested in learning to discriminate, to analyze, and become as self-reflective and knowledgeable as possible about yourself. You are also learning to be non-defensive, and to notice all the different nuances of motivation that can go into an action, trying to be as honest as you can about when you are being self-deceptive, when you say you are acting only from one motive when another may actually also be involved."

She pauses and takes another sip of tea, and I emulate her.

"But be careful again of your black and white thinking. The 'bad' motives aren't always the sole reason for behavior, just as the good ones may not be, either. Humans are quite complicated, and I can see why someone might throw up their hands and say 'Too much analysis.' But I also am increasingly convinced that there is no alternative but 'in and through.' And that means living with ambiguity, and a certain amount of confusion during the learning process."

She pauses while I continue to take notes, and the Rebbe continues to hum.

"Do you notice any similarities between learning about yourself and our class in tai chi?"

* * *

I look up from my writing, puzzled. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"Do you notice how simple it looks when I do a tai chi form?. But when we learn it, we have to break it down--what each of your hands do, your legs, your hips, your neck, where is your breathing, the weight on each of your feet; how the weight shifts from foot to foot; how your hand movements change--more yang, more yin? In the middle of learning, it becomes fragmented and complicated. There are lots of pieces. But the goal, which eventually happens, is that we put them together, and a fluid, graceful, whole reemerges. Simple. Complex. Simple."

"I like that analogy. And it rings true to me in other activities I've learned: tennis, golf, the flute. I can be very fluid, and competitive and passionate, but my

style is to learn slowly, piece by piece. I didn't think of it applied to tai chi, but that's exactly the way I learn. Maybe that's why I'm picking it up so well. You're the perfect teacher for me!" I grin. Do I feel safe enough to flatter her because she is leaving. Or is there a subtle dig, because she's leaving me. Or both? Ah, nuance and multiple motives.

"But I've never really made the connection between those physical activities and my journey into my self. So, basically you're saying that one day this will all become simple again?"

"Well, yes and no. What I'd say is that with each tai chi form, you eventually learn it, and it becomes simple. But, even, with the next form it's pretty much back to the drawing board, breaking each part down into its components. So, it's really a life-long learning process, with moments in which it all coming together. But if you want to keep learning new forms, in life, you have to be willing to go through the alternating process of fragments and whoeness, trying to keep a certain calm xujing as you go along, and hopefully enjoying both."

The Rebbe smiles, his eyes closed, and I hear a chuckle of pleasure as he once again repeats, Chapter 2: Mishna 20

Rebbe Tarfon says: The day is short, the task is immense, the workers are lazy, the reward is great, and the Proprietor is demanding.

Dr. Lisbet looks at me directly. "Initially this process may not have been of your own choosing, but now you are choosing to do this work in order to become a wiser, more compassionate, and more giving person. I...we think you should be quite proud of yourself."

* * *

September 22, Tuesday. Nothing much to report. These last two weeks have been a continuation of the same mechanized tasks each day. Jeremy and Marainne are worried about me. Jeremy tries to cheer me up by saying how much I'm going to enjoy meeting the Rabbi and his co-leader, Dr. Lisbet, who have agreed to come give a talk this Sunday, the 27th, in the afternoon, instead of our Ulpan class. He showed me their

flier. It's called "Fall Preview of the HolyDays." Jeremy was particularly excited to learn about Slichot, next Sunday, prayers of forgiveness leading up to the Jewish New Year. I guess the idea of a New Year and new beginnings does sound good to me, too. Things can't continue to go on as they are.

* * *

September 29. A group of us foreigners, led by a kibbutznik, took a walk on Sabbath up to the Golan Heights.

"Isn't this dangerous? Aren't the Heights mined" I ask him.

"Yes, but not with people mines, only with tank mines. We don't have to worry because tank mines won't go off unless something much heavier than a person steps on them."

"But why would they plant only tank mines?"

He looked at me, puzzled, like I was an idiot. "Isn't it obvious? Because people aren't that important."

I didn't feel completely reassured.

* * *

Oct 6. Tomorrow is Erev Rosh Hashannah. I'm still waiting for the New Beginning. The Rabbi and Dr. Lisbet did come last week. They gave us a lot of information about all the different holidays coming up. I took some notes, but have not put it into any coherent form. Just like the rest of my life. Lots of rough notes. They seemed like ok older folks, but nothing special. I thought there was an element of self-promotion in them.

They'd just begun talking about Slichot, the prayers of forgiveness, and were going to read the 13 attributes of God that were revealed to Moses after the sin of the golden calf from Exodus 34:6-7. Then they made a segue, I guess they were connecting it to the attributes and Sinai, that because of several requests they were doing a repeat workshop of the guided meditation up Sinai they'd conducted during the past Shavuot--as part of their Friday and Saturday Shabbat workshop October 23 and

24th. They made a point of saying it was quite a popular workshop, and if we wanted to come, we should make our reservations and place a deposit early.

I wrote down the attributes of God, three of which were just His name in various forms. But what really struck me was their hawking their own workshop. Jeremy and Marianne had a different impression. They loved the talk on forgiveness--maybe because it's built into and fundamental to their religion. And both of them were excited about the upcoming workshop. They thought it was y kind of the teachers to announce it to us, so we still had a chance to go. They immediately put down a deposit, for them--and for me, telling me I'd really like it. We'll see. If I don't go, I'll pay them back the deposit. I must admit it was nice that they're thinking about me. Though I think some of their concern is trying to be good Christians to someone they perceive to be in trouble. Maybe they're even trying to convert me. After all, Dr. Lisbet said she was a Christian, at least in part. We'll just have to see where things are in a month.

As I write this, we hear mortar shells firing. A welcome for the Rabbi and his friend? No one acts as if they notice, and the seminar continued I'll write more when I have some time to review my notes in detail.

*

*

*

March 23 It's frightening the way in which propaganda fills me with paranoia. In preparation for my therapy session tomorrow, I've been going over the gestalt exercise looking at the different aspects of the scene and trying to relate them to me and my story. Like a good little student. But something made me decide to burst out of my introspective bubble to look at the world around me. Maybe it was reading about the mortar shells on the kibbutz? How can I sit paralyzed in my little room thinking about a tree stump while the whole world is in chaos around me? Also, I remember I told a person I work with cleaning beans at the hotel that I'd meet up with him.

I leave my my room, board a bus, and I am riding through what was once the Arab sector of Jerusalem. The streets are being ripped up so that the Arab workers can improve them. My initial reaction to those Arabs is fear. That's a reaction which

would highly please Israeli propagandists. And certainly the people I met in the Mea Shearim.

Along the road, there are remnants of the walls which were used to divide Jerusalem. These walls separating Arabs and Israelis must be torn down. I know that I felt great pride at Israel's resounding victory in 1967. No longer would we Jews be seen as passive cattle herded into crematoria. I took pride in the strength and virility of the Charles Atlas Jew. No one was going to push us around again. It's like in a tennis match, you don't want to have sympathy for your opponent. Within the bounds of fair play, you want to crush him.

But what are the laws of fair play in war?

The bus is passing St. Stephens Church; now it is passing St. George's Cathedrals, two places where people pray for peace. Literal walls are being torn down. But interpersonal, psychological ones seems to be rising.

I think back to the mortar shells lobbed at us on the kibbutz. I again wonder, how do you create bridges with people who, at three in the morning, lob mortar shells at you; people to whom I have done absolutely nothing and don't even know me. Yet they were trying to take the only thing which is uniquely mine-- my life.

The bus passes St. John's Hospital; then St Joseph's Hospital. Two places where people, wounded by the war, come to be healed, or to die.

* * *

The blue and white flag showing a United World is flying in the distance. As I get off the bus, I see Karim waiting at the gate. He's the only Arab I've met in Israel--a fellow bean pot cleaner at the hotel. After weeks and weeks of ignoring each other, we finally began small conversations about the absurdity and frustration of cleaning pots of beans cooked for other people, and then washing their plates when they were done. He invited me yesterday to come visit him.

As I get off the bus, he glowers at me. "What happened? You were going to be here this morning"

"I'm sorry. I started writing, and lost all track of time." I think this is true, but I wonder what Dr. Lisbet would say. Did my fear keep me from remembering? Or did I want a simple reason for there to be tension between us--my tardiness--rather than the obvious and intractable context?

I am glad to see him, and smile awkwardly, and we give each other an awkward embrace, like distant relatives who haven't seen each other in a long time, and aren't sure they really like each other. But also think maybe they might, if the two sides of the family weren't always fighting.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to give you any more than a quick tour. We are opening a new school in Nablus, about ten kilometers north, and I must check on it.

"This center is in the main agency in control of all Palestinian refugee camps along the Jordanian Bank. There is another agency which works on the the east bank of the Jordan, but I'm afraid you can't cross the river because the Jordanian government won't honor your Israeli-stamped passport."

He brings me some grape soad pop. "Here, welcome. I'll wait until later, after dark, to drink the real stuff--the wine."

As we walk the grounds, he explains, "Through international Red Cross supervision and the aid of the United Nations, we try to provide food and shelter for homeless Palestinians." We enter a low-ceilinged building.

"Are you an Israeli citizen?" I ask.

"I am a Palestinian, but am now forced to carry an Israeli identity card." He is no longer smiling. "In 1948, my family was driven from Jerusalem during the Israeli war of aggression, when my mother was pregnant with me. Nearly twenty years later, another war. My family and I decided not to leave our home this time, because when we left it the first time, the Israelis stole it and never gave it back. So, this time, during the bombing, we went downstairs. But we still lost everything. To scavengers." He laughs, but in anger, mixed with helplessness and resignation.

"You either have to laugh or cry, don't you?" As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I feel sorry I've said them. But I really don't know what to say. Like with Asiya, is there a correct response?

* * *

We sit in silence, I drinking my grape juice. As I look around, I wonder what compelled me to come. I can't blame Elizabeth for what I see. But these are conditions only slightly better than what exists on Sixth Street. No human should have to live like this. I say that to Karim and then ask, as boldly as I can, "What do you think should be done about the Arab-Israeli conflict?"

He laughs. "You don't really want to know what I think."

"Please. Yes, I do."

"The main problem I see is the Palestinian refugees. There are hundreds of thousands of us who were displaced from our homes in 1948, and now again a few years ago. The example of your Sixth Street is a good one. We are a homeless people, without roots, living like garbage in garbage. And worse. Look around, you see we are like prisoners constantly being watched."

Even as I listen to the content of what he's saying, I'm impressed at how fluent his English is—learned from the hotel?

"But who caused the 1948 war? Israel was willing to live in peace as two nations, Israel and Palestine. The Arabs attacked. We were just fighting in self-defense."

"If you believe in that fairy tale, there is no use for us to talk more. Imagine living in your home in America and then imagine some United Nations saying we are going to let a group of Muslims take over the Midwest and establish a sovereign nation there. Would you allow it for a moment? Of course not, you'd fight back. Then, once they did, the Israelis seized every opportunity they could to drive us out so they could have even more land. They won't be satisfied until we don't exist. I've heard them call us cockroaches, and say they want to drive us to the sea." I've heard Israelis say the Palestinians would like to do the same thing to the Israelis.

This isn't going well. I now see a face behind the mortars lobbed at the kibbutz, and he doesn't like me that much better in person.

* * *

"If a group came into the Midwest, yes, there'd be a problem. We'd feel threatened. To improve your analogy, if a group of Native Americans wanted to establish a sovereign nation--they were there first, after all--I imagine there would still be a problem. And, no, I don't think there are perfectly clean hands on anyone's side. And yes, I've heard some in Israel use hateful terms and believe as you said. But clearly not all. And I think they're wrong. But, does that justify the language and killing on your side, the El Fatah, for example.. ,"

"Look at us. We have nothing. We don't really have homes, we're nomads. Do you expect us to lie back and die? To be born rootless and to be buried rootless?"

"But when people fire mortar shells at our kibbutz, trying to kill us--kill me--that can't be the solution. Killing makes you objectify people, lose part of your humanness, causes you to kill part of yourself."

"Which book did you read that out of? You sound like some pontificating academic. Many of us feel we are already dead from the day we are born. Arabs don't want us and treat us like second-class citizens. Israel's don't want us and treat us the same way. We have no power. We're nothing. At least El Fatah is trying to make themselves into something, The path for them is death. They kill, for they have nothing to lose. They don't have life. They kill, and by killing, they become human. Others stop and take notice, you can no longer pretend they don't exist. You can no longer keep silent about them. We are all going to die. At least their deaths mean something."

* * *

Again, there is silence. I think of the homeless in America, too weak to fight back. Of the blacks, Stokeley Carmichael's rage, the Watts riots. Though I don't agree with their methods, I can understand their anger and frustration, the feeling they are powerless and have nothing to lose, so they fight back in the only way they

feel they have left, so their pain can no longer be ignored, to say that society can no longer perpetuate racist institutions with impunity.

"If you were to have power, and at the same time do what a compassionate God—Allah—expected of you, what would your solution be, Karim, what would be fair and just to all sides?"

He looks at me awkwardly. "I've never really asked myself that question. I guess I've been too angry to. And yet my name says I should."

Now I am confused. "What do you mean, does your name mean something?"

He smiles. "I've heard a joke, 'Is the Pope Catholic?' You're asking if an Arab name means something! Karīm means "generous"; and the next part of my name is Abdurrashid, which means "Submissive to the Righteous One", one of the ninety nine names of Allah."

"So your full name is Karim Abdurrahid."

"No, that's just the start. It's Karim Abdurrahid ibn Maḥmūd al-Rashid al-Filistini. And even that's the short form, leaving out my grandparents."

"It sounds like a short story. Do all the names mean something, you generous servant of the Righteous One?" Finally, there seems to me some lightness and even playfulness in our banter.

He smiles, a genuine smile for the first time. "Maybe it's the answer to your question about fairness. Yes, each name means something. Ibn is 'son of,' *in this case sonof Mahmud, which means son of the praiseworthy*; al-Rashid means 'the righteous' or 'the rightly-guided'; and al-Filistini means from Palestine. So, somehow we need to come up with a solution that recognizes that I'm from Palestine, and am no longer in my family's home. Did the Arabs start the fight? The Israelis? Were we driven from our home? Did we seek to escape before we were killed? Certainly from my perspective, we can agree that whatever happened was through no fault of my own. I was in my mother's womb.

"In fairness, you Jews were driven from your homes in Europe. But one person's suffering does not justify inflicting suffering upon others. Somehow, my fellow bean

cleaner, we need to come up with a righteous, generous, rightly-guided solution that lets each of us have homes, which allows each of us to speak our languages, worship our God as we understand him, value our different cultures, and for now, tolerate, and maybe one day respect each other." Then he looks around, and adds, "But we are not there yet, would you agree?"

He puts his arm on my shoulder as he says this. I feel happy for his reaching out, and so sad by what I see surrounding us. We are the next generation. Maybe there is hope.

* * *
"What do the plagues represent?" the Rebbe asks, looking around the classroom.

Several people raise their hand, including me, but before anyone has a chance to say anything, or for the Rebbe to call on someone, Peter blurts out, "It's God's way of making Pharaoh change his mind and let the enslaved Israelites go." It's amazing to me how insensitive he is to others in the class, and how needy he is for approval and praise from the teacher. I wonder if he is even aware of his own reflexive, egotistical behavior, and his need to show off. I'm glad I did that exercise with Dr. Lisbet about the tall tree. I know I don't want to act like that. I know the result. He, too, will eventually get cut down to size. Dr. Lisbet is right, when she talks in her tai chi class about not standing out, being the small tree, that doesn't get cut down.

"Good! That's the historical, literal meaning of the text. Let's go deeper. Anyone else?"

"It teaches us that we should always be ready to fight against Pharaohs in our world, and help those who are enslaved." I'm delighted that Marianne has joined the class. I hear in her response her socially conscious liberation theology. I admire it, still, but I wonder why she needs to go to South America to practice it. Don't we have a living lab just a few miles from us? Could wisely and compassionately addressing the challenges of the Palestinians be Judaism's liberation theology story?

"Ah, very good. So the story is not just about the historical Pharaoh and Moses, but where in our world do we see the need to help those who are enslaved." I consider saying something about my meeting with Karim, but refrain. I want to share his anger and hostility--and mine-- how pathetic their lives are, but don't want to disrupt the Rebbe's class. Maybe I'll bring it up in my therapy session tomorrow. But then I become angrier. Why should I pay my money for private therapy, based on my cleaning pots in a dark, cluttered kitchen, so I can ask him a question that isn't about me, but about others' suffering?

"Let me ask you to go deeper still. This next question is really the result of Dr. Lisbet's influence on me. Think how would you apply the lessons of the plagues not to the world around us, but to the world within us. How might we apply it to our own lives?"

"It's what happens to people when they are stubborn and don't do the right thing." Peter again. It's amazing to me that someone can have such good insights abstractly, with absolutely no ability to apply them to himself. Though I must admit, I still have a ways to go. It's still hard for me to see my fellow classmates as brothers and sisters--even Marianne--as opposed to competitors. I know it's a stupid emotion, my need for centrality, to retain my number one son status with my family, to get good grades in high school, to be a top student at Stanford. I know how it ends--I become a tree stump.

Yet, with all that knowledge, I still notice the bubbling emotion of jealousy and competition, just below the surface, and sometimes breaking through. I feel like an idiot. It's like a plague, or virus, within me, like Camus said, always there, just waiting for the proper conditions to express itself. Maybe that's a good thing. At least I have enough energy and care enough to let something bother me. I guess that's progress. I've risen a step above indifference, and am just angry and tense and envious. The plague of my raging negativity can now come forth. What progress.

*

*

*

"What if you are the plague?" the Rebbe turns to see who just asked the question. I also turn to see. I know I wouldn't want to ask such a vulnerable question. Who would want to put themselves in such a bad light? I'm curious, though, for at least someone is thinking and feeling similarly to me.

Then I realize that some part of me had in fact let that internal thought become vocalized externally. Everyone is looking at me. In the ensuing silence, I look down at my hands, clasp and unclasp them, and then start to pinch my thumbnail into my index finger, hard.

"What does that mean to you?"

"It means what if you are filled with evil, sin, bondage, and infect all those around you." I say this almost defiantly.

The Rebbe seems uncomfortable, and turns toward Dr. Lisbet. Have I broken an unwritten rule, and brought too much of my baggage from therapy into their classroom? Tough. Let them do therapy with me, here, too. It's cheaper, and I don't really care what the others in the class think.

Dr. Lisbet dutifully responds, riding to the Rebbe's rescue. "I believe all of us have 'dust' within us, which includes bad habits, negativity, and other qualities which keep us in bondage, distort the way we see reality, and cause us to harm others, whether intentionally or unintentionally. So, though you've said it dramatically and poetically, and too black and white in a way, I agree with you, that we all have these challenging parts of ourselves; and frankly I feel much more comfortable around those who are aware of their own dust, than those who pretend they have none, and deny its existence within themselves.

"But if we can step back for a moment, and see the plague not as poison, or an infection, but, like a fever, as a warning sign that something is not right, what might be the positive learning we could take from that awareness? Yes, a fever is uncomfortable, but it fever is also a teacher, telling us that something is wrong, and asking us to investigate what we have to learn."

The room is silent. Even Peter must feel he's out of his league on this one, or that the river is too fraught with crocodiles to venture in. Finally, Dr. Lisbet answers her own question. "The plague, in the original story, and in our own lives, can be understood as catalyst for change and growth." She turns back to the Rebbe. And smiles.

Exactly!" The Rebbe looks at her happily, as he receives the melody from her. She's smoothed out a road full of rocks and potholes, and he's eager to resume his lecture.

"One way to read the story of Passover is on a deeper mystical and psychological level." I can hear the comfort and smooth rhythm in his voice. I've seen this happen between them many times now. It looks on the outside like improvisation, where the saxophonist yields to the percussionists, but I've been with them enough to know that they are now back on familiar territory, which they have practiced and rehearsed many times.

"Those of you who have worked with Dr. Lisbet on dream interpretation know that since we create our own dreams, one way to understand them is to assume that each character in the dream represents part of ourselves. She has taught me that we can read Biblical stories in the same way. Moses, Pharaoh, and the plagues can be understood as parts of ourselves in the process of change. Looked at in that light, what is Moses but that part of ourselves that wants to find out where we are enslaved, and lead us forth from bondage."

"And, to follow that idea, what part of ourselves might Pharaoh represent?"

* * *

I look over at Peter to see if Mr. Suck-Butt is going to again reflexively answer the Rebbe's soft-ball question. It's so obvious question, the Rebbe probably doesn't even want an answer. It's almost rhetorical. But when Peter doesn't say anything, and several seconds pass in silence, I offer, "Pharaoh is that part of us that resists change." Then before the Rebbe can acknowledge my statement, Mr.

Suck Butt adds "The part of us that hardens our heart against others, against our self."

At that moment, I feel my heart harden toward him for not allowing enough time for the Rebbe to praise me. He's the Pharoah, putting me in bondage, causing my anger.

"Both answers, excellent." He focuses briefly on each of us, then continues. "So, the plagues can be seen, as Dr. Lisbet has taught me, as karma, or samsara, from the Eastern viewpoint. When we don't change, when we are trapped in the same old unproductive habits, we continue to feel pain and suffering. And," he smiles, "we then ask ourselves, why does this keep happening to me!"

"It's hard," Dr. Lisbet adds, continuing their riff, "to be so non-defensive that we can look at ourselves and all the plagues that we see within us. We want to deny or repress, to blame others, or the external. But at some level, and at some time, we will all have to face our contribution to our own enslavement.

"To do this requires a constant vigilance, and I believe necessitates both psychological and spiritual wisdom. This means that every activity, no matter how small, is an opportunity to take a breath, learn about ourselves and to transform ourselves into the kind of person we want to be. St Paul in the First Epistle to the Thessalonians says to 'Pray without ceasing'; Sri Aurobindo says we need to make life into an 'uninterrupted yoga'; in Buddhism we have the statement 'every moment Zen.' Muslims pray five times a day, and in Judaism there are constant blessings throughout the day. But the prayers and activities can't be rote. Otherwise you can end up with particularistic fundamentalism. Rather, we have to dedicate ourselves to be mindful and aware of everything we do, including all the possible personal motivations involved. We need to gain as much learning from each activity about ourself as we can."

I notice an unusual intensity in Dr. Lisbet. Although this may be part of a pre-scripted talk, it seems she feels what she is saying at a deep personal level.

"Let me say this from the bottom of my heart, and it's not an easy thing to hear, but I believe it firmly. I have found that people are safe to be around only to the extent that they have engaged in a scrupulously honest process of self-reflection and self-understanding as part of the process of self-change and growth. The same applies to ourselves. We are as safe to be around as the work we have done to learn and grow. There are no exceptions. So, as Buddha said, 'Practice with diligence.'"

* * *

As I listen to her words, I feel a constriction, like I'm hearing a fire-breathing sermon from one of the Old Testament prophets, though in the guise of a thin old woman. It sounds like a chastisement. Then, to my own surprise, I actually feel myself taking a breath, pausing, and, as if stepping back and observing the irony of that moment in the class, I smile. I feel myself becoming softer, calmer, and, as I look over at Peter, who moments before had so rudely impinged on my answer, I see him just for an instant, not as evil, but as an opportunity, a catalyst to help me. As Dr. Lisbet's remarks swirl through my mind, I also remember the Rebbe's statement, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears." I feel my heart soften toward Peter. He's just been my teacher, causing me to experience a hardening of my heart at the very moment we are discussing that topic. He's allowing me to see my dust and learn from it. Damn. I wonder if I should thank him after class for being such a helpful jerk and great teacher. A lesson just when I least expected it.

Could I really learn something by reflecting on every activity that occurs in my life? If that's true, given how much I already reflect, then I could probably only do one or two activities a day, with the rest of my time spent reflecting on those events. No wonder some people choose to live in caves in the Himalayas.

* * *

"Do we have so much bondage, so many bad habits, such poor self-understanding because of original sin? And if so, does that mean we're doomed to failure, no matter how much we pray, or how diligent we are? Is that why we need God's grace, and to be

forgiven?" I look over and see Jeremy, asking the question with an expression that is pained, kind, and earnest all at the same time. His questions are inevitably ones with which he is personally struggling. There doesn't seem an ounce of conniving or ass-kissing in him.

The Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet look at each other, then both begin to speak at the same time. He defers and she replies, "You ask two questions. The first is 'why' is there dust. This question is philosophically, spiritually, and psychologically interesting. Are we genetically amoral, like classical Freud's 'id' psychology, or original sin, as Christianity teaches? Are we a blank slate, like John Locke, the existentialists, or behaviorial psychology would say? Are we genetically self-actualizing and positive as non-theistic humanistic psychologists argue?"

"If I may broaden your second question about grace, aren't you asking what is the wisest way to decrease suffering, depending upon which personality theory/belief you endorse? To what extent are 'we' responsible to work toward relieving suffering and learning how to transform and purify ourselves? And how much to we turn to a higher power? Would that be a fair summary." She looks directly at Jeremy who nods.

"If you push me, I'd say I value the Eastern view in Zen which speaks of our true self as an empty mirror, clean and pure, able to see clearly. The plagues are like dust on the mirror. Some fear the plagues are not dust, but poison, and to look at oneself is to see the poison within. I disagree. It is only poison if you fail to work on cleaning it away, for, ignoring it and leaving it there, will distort how you see the world, creating constriction, tension, fear, and anger, separating you from others and yourself.

"But if you gently work on cleaning the mirror, the separation between you and others, and you and yourself will dissolve. You will see clearly, reflecting all into yourself with equanimity and stillness. When you can begin that process--and it is a long process-- you will then truly be on your way

to self-understanding and liberation, leaving the bondage of your narrow places, and on your way to the promised land."

* * *

She glances at the Rebbe. "A perfect segue. Thank you. That's beautiful," he says to her. Then, turning to us, he continues, "In Judaism, there is the belief that the soul that God places within each of us is pure. *Elohai neshama shenatata bit'horah hi*. It's part of our daily morning prayer. Interestingly, that belief, from a theistic perspective, is quite similar to what Dr. Lisbet just described as the non-theistic belief of Zen's empty mirror.

I believe that we are all part of God's love and compassion, and that there is indeed a pure loving God within each of us. But we all know that there are times we don't always act in a pure, loving, and compassionate way. And that's why we have Passover, to remind us of the journey we need to take. Let me end our time today by giving you one example, which I'd like to ask each of you to consider practicing as homework before our next session.

"For those of you who know the ritual of Chametz—removing leavened bread from the house in preparation for Passover—the symbolic idea is that we need to search our selves for the chametz, for dust, for plagues. Leavened bread is considered puffy, prideful, egoic. Matzah is egoless, simple, the empty mirror, clear, lacking inappropriate pride. Clearing away chametz, dust, So we can see ourselves and others more directly and clearly, more compassionately and lovingly.

"As homework, before our class next week, we invite each of you to do as scrupulous a search as you are willing, for the chametz within and around you. And let me say on behalf of Dr. Lisbet and myself, we admire each of you for being here, and being willing to undertake this work. This is one of those situations where what you put into it is truly what you get out of it."

"There is a closing ritual the Rebbe and I would like to do to end this class. Before doing so, I want to bring God back into the conversation, as a way to address your question about grace, Jeremy. In many traditions there is a continuum of

understanding regarding human and divine effort. As St. Augustine advised, 'Pray as though everything depended on God; act as though everything depended on you.' Yes we pray, we ask divine guidance, and we do the best work we can at the same time. I see it as both/and, following The Indian mystic Ramakrishna: "The divine winds of God are always blowing, but we must raise our sail."

The Rebbe chuckles, "Thank you, Dr. Lisbet, as always. Now, let's hold hands for our closing ritual." I take Peter's and Marianne's hands, as the Rebbe closes his eyes and intones, "Oh Holy One of Blessing, May each of us look honestly and compassionately at the plagues with us. May we know that in beginning this process of recognizing the dust on our mirror, we are Moses leading ourselves from enslavement out of Egypt, out of our narrow places. Let us also have compassion for the Pharaoh side of us, who thinks he is protecting us, even as he holds us back from seeking our promised land, our revelation at Sinai, our connection with our sacred nature. Let us have compassion for the difficulty of the process of change, forgiving ourselves for all the resolutions we make, then don't keep. At the deepest contextual level, let us trust and be guided by Your wisdom. Now let us pray together 'Into Your arms, Your loving arms, I commend my soul.'

"Amen, blessings to you all, and see you same time next week for the next stage of our journey.

I notice joy, open heartedness and even a glimmer of hope as he concludes the blessing; but I also feel sadness as I reluctantly let go of Marianne's and Peter's hands.

*

*

*

"I feel like there's too much to do, and we only have three sessions left. As you said, the day is short, the task is immense."

"What is your concern?" Dr. Lisbet asks, ignoring my attempt at humor.

"That you're leaving, and I'm not sure we'll have covered everything I need to know. You said it in our class, we're only as safe to be around as we know ourself,

and I sometimes feel the deeper I go, the only thing I really learn is how little I realize I know about me."

"Let's take this exchange as an opportunity to learn and go deeper. I hear you saying there's so much to learn, and that you're concerned you won't be as wise as you'd like, won't feel as safe to be around, I assume both for others and yourself. Do I hear you."

"Yes."

"But I also hear some concern about our leaving. How do you feel about that?"

"I haven't really thought about it too much."

"I see. Ok. Fine. Take a breath, and if you're willing, close your eyes, and think about it. Feel about it."

I take a few breaths. I then close my eyes, feeling annoyed at her "invitation"—if I'm willing. She's telling me what to do under the guise of my having free will. What am I supposed to say, "No, I won't." Somewhat to my surprise, lots of other feelings do well up. "Pissed. Angry. Deserted. Ironic. Wealthier. It's ironic." I open my eyes.

"Tell me about ironic."

"Well, this week I just finished the last writing I did on the kibbutz before my accident—before I cut my hand and couldn't write. I'd just met you two. You were giving us the 'Fall Preview.' Somehow it seems ironic that on the one hand, I'm just meeting you this week, in my journal, and, in reality, you're telling me you're going to leave me. That's all."

"I understand. What about 'wealthier'?"

I smile. "Well, it's not really fair how hard and how many hours I have to work—over four hours cleaning pots— just for fifty minutes of time with you. Once you're gone, the money will be mine. That makes me feel just a little bit happier."

"Not a fair trade, eh?" the Rebbe is nearly convulsed in laughter.

I see the humor in what I said. But it's true, and his response actually makes me angrier--the unfairness and costliness of the payment, rage at his dismissive, mocking, laughing response; and yes, a feeling of being deserted, even abandoned.

"What are you laughing at? You don't seem to be taking me seriously. Not everything is a joke, which you seem determined to make it. All your classes, all these private sessions, they're all about doing this interminable work on inner feelings, this reflective minutiae. That's not a joke, that's my life. And now that I've burrowed deeper and deeper and am lost in the inner fragments, you decide it's time for you to take a sabbatical. Yes, I'm angry. Do you find that funny, too?"

And then I think of my time with Karim, and add "I just came from the UNWRA refugee camp. I see the terrible living conditions, the despair of the Palestinians, Do you realize how those people are living? Isn't Passover about freeing others in bondage? Are you hiding from the real bondage and misery in life by all this internal focus? And what about your own dust and plagues? Why is this always all about me?"

*

*

*

The smile disappears from his face. Fine, at least I'm having an effect on jolly Santa, and he's finally hearing me rather than trying to joke his way out of every encounter. "I'm hearing several things going on. Let me see if I am accurate. First, you feel that I don't take you seriously. I'm sorry. Please be assured that I do. You're right, I often use humor as a way to offer a broader perspective. But it sounds like in this case, that backfired, you felt I'm creating distance between us, and for that I apologize." He pauses, and looks at me. I nod, but rather noncommittally. If he thinks he's going to be forgiven that easily, he's sadly mistaken. He continues,

"I also sense that there is a lot on your plate right now, internal issues, external issues, pain and suffering all around. You're feeling frustrated, even angry at the slowness of our progress working together, and your helplessness to find answers?"

"Exactly. Several months ago I came here in fragments asking for your help. I was like Humpty Dumpty after falling off the wall. All you two do is take my fragments and break them into smaller and smaller pieces, causing me to see even more problems than I even knew existed. Rather than getting better, I'm getting worse, more broken. The more I do the work you ask me to do, the further behind I get. Each session is a step backwards, and more issues pile up.

I don't know whether I want to scream or cry. But I don't want to let them off the hook that easily. I take a breath and continue, more even toned than I feel. "Like now. I'm still reeling from rejecting my family; from breaking up with Elizabeth; from cutting my finger on the Kibbutz. Instead of talking about any of these we're analyzing your sense of humor. And you're leaving, and more issues are piling up. It feels like I've fallen behind in my life, and can't catch up. Each time I see you two, I fall even further behind."

In spite of myself, I feel my voice raise to a tearful angry whine. "The whole premise of these sessions is ridiculous. Why should I have to work four hours or pay you for less than an hour. Why should I have to even pay you at all. If you hire an architect to prepare plans to build a house, and the house can't stand because there is no solid foundation and the plans aren't helpful, and then the architect just walks away, abandoning the project, you certainly wouldn't pay that person." I glare at them both defiantly.

* * *

The Rebbe looks down and away. Beaten into submission?. But Dr. Lisbet holds my gaze. Is she planning her attack back?

"Thank you for sharing your concerns with us so directly and forcefully. I admire your willingness to do that. You did it well, and for many of us, it's not easy to criticize another directly to their face." I know this chess move. It's followed by a but... and then a criticism.

But she surprises me, and asks, "Imagine yourself sharing a concern, or criticizing your parents to their face. And let's imagine that you are doing it very

well. You have taken a few breaths, calmed yourself, and are coming from a place of centeredness, of xu-jing. What might be their reactions?" I stare at her. Is this a trick? Why is she asking me this?

"It's hard to imagine I'd even do that."

"I understand, but if you're comfortable, why don't you close your eyes, and try to create that very scene in your mind, just to see what it would feel like." I feel both annoyed and vulnerable closing my eyes to do this exercise. Why? Do I feel she's trying to calm me down, pacify me, deflect me from my anger at them? Do I feel threatened with my eyes closed in front of them? Do I fear seeing my parents in my mind--dad lashing out, mom withdrawing in hurt passivity? I know intellectually figures in my mind are not going to physically hurt me or try to hurt themselves.

So I close my eyes, and listen to Dr. Lisbet's voice as she tells me to take a few relaxing breaths. I'm surprised how easily my parents come to my mind. What do I want to tell them? I realize it doesn't matter. Any criticism or concern, no matter how large or small, no matter how meanly or well I say it, will receive the same response.

"No matter what I say, or how I say it, their reactions are exactly opposite, and I can see each clearly. Dad becomes furious, and attacks back, instantly, finding something to criticize in me, telling me how selfish and ungrateful I am. His voice is harsh, angry, yelling, with a threat of physical violence in it. It doesn't make a difference how I express myself. Any criticism, any disagreement with him meets with rage and assault."

"And your reaction to that?"

"I feel myself tightening and fearful as I imagine his face. And I'm angry at myself for my cowardice."

"And how would your mom react?"

"The opposite. Again, no matter how well I might do it, she'd collapse, maybe saying how mean I am to cause her so much pain. She'd get a hurt, or panicky

look on her face. Her breathing would become labored. She'd rush to her room, slam the door."

"And your reaction to that?"

"I'd feel guilty, panicky, as if I might be driving her to another suicide attempt, and be the cause of her death."

"Both of those scenarios sound painful. You get abused, emotionally or physically by your father; and you are called an abuser by your mother. I'm sorry. Let yourself stay focused on your breathing. That's quite a burden you're carrying. You were even braver than we realized, bringing up your concerns to us."

"When you're ready, take a few more breaths. Then let your eyes gently open. Don't try to focus on anything, or grasp any object...just let your eyes open and gently accept what is...colors, forms, spaces."

As I open my eyes, I am amazed at how light the room is. I notice the way the light creates shadows of the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet on the carpet. My visual field expands and I see the whole of their faces as well as the parts, their eyes gazing at me, the shape of their mouths. Each has a unique expression, but both convey a real kindness and compassion. It's hard to realize that just a moment ago I felt that each of them was my enemy.

* * *

There is a silence. The Rebbe begins to hum, then after no more than a minute, says, "Thank you for trusting us enough to do that exercise. How are you feeling?"

"Mostly relief that I am no longer live in Kansas City, that I no longer have to face their demons." I pause. "My parents are not safe people to be around, just like you said yesterday." I glance around the room, trying to remember the light. "Is anyone safe to be around? I feel like I'm not safe, and I'm really working hard to do what you've asked me, to engage in a scrupulously honest process of self-reflection. But all I end up realizing is how pathetic I am, how much... dust...is in me."

"Welcome to the human race!" This time Dr. Lisbet cracks a smile

"Remember when the Rebbe said our work together, and indeed your inspection of your life is like a living Talmud? You take your basic experiences, and continue to add levels of insight and meaning. Now, for example, you've learned two ways you don't want to act when you are criticized--collapse or reflexive attack. So here, ironically, your parents are your teachers. Through your reflection, you begin to see how you do and do not want to be in giving and receiving feedback. That is the living Talmud aspect of your life." She nods at the Rebbe.

"But I also see you like the young Buddha who has just left the castle. Your parents, for all their faults, and their insensitivity to the pain they caused you, did in fact try to shelter you from the outside world's pain, as did Buddha's. Though that may not have always been wise, it was well-intentioned, and you might consider acknowledging that positive aspect of them."

I nod and say nothing. If she's going to push forgiveness of them, she's talking to the wrong person.

"But now you've left the castle. What you're realizing is that the world is complex, multi-leveled, and filled with suffering. You're seeing the suffering outside: the homeless in San Francisco, the deplorable conditions of the refugees here, and even the pain of illness, disease and death that is inevitable for us all. You're also seeing that there's a lot of silt--dust, chametz--floating about within each of us. It's hard to know ourselves. And so, it's understandable that you're feeling overwhelmed at what you see and feel" Her eyes rest of me intently for a moment with a curiously tender gaze. "Though this might not make sense to you now, the sensitivity, hurt, and confusion you're feeling at all suffering inside and out is really a sign of progress and maturity. I don't believe there is any other way than 'in and through'--and there is a certain amount of pain in that birthing process. But, please remember this--the opening of your heart in that process is actually helping you become a wiser, more compassionate person."

*

*

*

I listen to Dr. Lisbet's words, as I see out of the corner of my eye the Rebbe stretching, then getting up. "Would you like some tea?"

"Please." Then I turn back to Dr. Lisbet. "In and through. Frankly, it seems to me that all that's happening to me is I'm going in and in and in and in. I'm getting tired and frustrated by all that I discover about myself, and how confusing it is to take even the smallest action."

"What you're feeling is both frustrating for sure. It's also just part of the process. Do you know that story about the centipede who, walking one day, is asked by a butterfly, how do you coordinate all your legs so gracefully? With that, the centipede looks down, and stumbles."

I smile. "So you're saying this is all Mery's fault? She was really a devil disguised as a butterfly, who tripped me on my way to law school and happiness?"

At first Dr. Lisbet looks at me puzzled. "I think you're making a joke. No, this is really about more than her. Or the butterfly. It's about awareness and our journey through life. Let me try again. There is a Zen poem of three stanzas. In the first stanza, it says when a person is unenlightened, water is water, and mountains are mountains. In the second poem, when one seeks enlightenment, water is no longer water and mountains are no longer mountains.

"There is inevitable confusion when our old, unconscious and reflexive ways of acting are called into question. The butterfly, Mery, and thousands of other people or events can cause us to realize how limited and thoughtless our lives have been, and jolt us out of our slumber of ordinary routines. For some it occurs when oaks that society holds out as meaningful, either aren't attained, and one feels frustrated, or once attained, seem empty. For others, it's interpersonal loss—of a love interest, as in your case; as well as seeing the suffering, illness, and death of a loved one, something you also have had to face. And, for a few, there is a crisis, or jolt, based on no apparent cause, but which can be described in mystical, spiritual, or existential terms, like Sartre's character Roquetin in *Nausea*, what William James called the ontological sickness. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"All too well. But all you are doing is saying there are many reasons why we are forced to shift from the first to second stanza, and look how bad it feels. We have no disagreement there. I'm looking for "through"--the third stanza of the poem that you say exists. I need to know that people really do get through to the other side. That our lives are not just pain and suffering. Mine. Karim's. That this all makes some sense."

Reb Jonathan returns with the tea. We each sit quietly for a moment, and the only sound is a slight slurping. Which only I make as we drink. I don't know how other people imbibe hot drinks so silently.

* * *

I look at my watch." We only have fifteen minutes left. Are you going to answer me?"

The Rebbe takes another sip of tea, then holds his tea cup up towards me. "The answer lies in a talk that Dr. Lisbet and I give about tea, strawberries, tigers, and cliffs. But I don't think you're in a place to hear it. Maybe we can have you over for Shabbat dinner again, and remind me to tell you then." Reb Jonathan is back in smiling form. He then turns to Dr. Lisbet, and says, "Perhaps you could talk to him about lakes and yoga."

"Maybe" we can have you over for Shabbat dinner. Is that an invitation? I follow the Rebbe's eyes toward Dr. Lisbet. She has an annoyed grimace on her face. Is it towards me, or him? His smile disappears. Is it because he's asked her to talk to me about lakes and yoga? Or that that he's unilaterally inviting me over to dinner, without first checking with her. I wonder if he is going to get blasted. Her face is scary. I wonder who is really in charge in that relationship. Before Dr. Lisbet can say anything, I decide to act as if I've been invited. I've just been offered something free from them, a home-cooked meal. I'm not going to let him off the hook.

"I'd love to come. Thank you." Then I write down his words--strawberries, tea, tigers, cliffs, and purposely don't look at my non-verbally quarreling counselors. After a suitable pause, I look up at Dr. Lisbet, "I'm all ear. What is

the wisdom of lakes and yoga in fifteen minutes that will cure my suffering?" I don't like the way I sound. It's tinged with sarcasm, almost taunting. But it's as if I don't have control of it.

She ignores my tone, takes another sip of tea, sets her cup down, closes her eyes, and takes a slow gentle breath. I feel myself growing more restless and agitated, as I watch the seconds tick by, seconds I'm paying for while she drinks tea and meditates. She then opens her eyes and looks directly at me.

"The second stanza, though it may not seem like it, is a sign of progress. It means we are waking up to our slumber, our reflexive, thoughtless, habitual ways of acting. In that way, again, though it may not feel like it, the confusion, recognizing all the bad habits that we weren't previously aware of—even though they existed—is a gift."

"You're right," I interrupt her, "that seems absurd."

"I understand, but please try to hear me. You asked about going through, to the third stanza. Yes, it exists. But the way to get there is to be willing, in a calm, open, spacious way, to look at all the dust that you see within. And I mean ALL. Not in a self-punishing, attacking way, but in an open, non-defensive, exploring, even compassionate way. This is what is. We can now see ourselves-- the younger version in the first stanza, the less unenlightened self-- for who we are: we deny, we blame, we project, we distort, we manipulate. We are greedy, jealous, self-righteous, and we tell lots of stories to justify our actions and behaviors and make ourselves right."

"What a lovely gift. You must feel like Santa Clause giving these great presents to people, about how screwed up they are." As soon as I say the words, I wish I hadn't. I feel like I'm trying to punish the messenger. There's nothing she's saying that I haven't already said about myself. She's right.

"But if I'm like that, and unfortunately, I can't really argue with you, how can I ever trust myself and my actions? Frankly, if everyone else is also like that, how can I ever trust anyone else, either? And how do you know whether it's their

problem--their dust--or yours?" I pause, unsure whether to share candidly with them what I'm thinking, but decide why not, there's so little time left with them before they leave. "For example, to be really open with you, I have some resentment that you are are being unfair to make me work so hard cleaning pots just to see you. Is that your greed, or my greed projected onto you? Unless the other person is a saint, how do you know?"

They don't seem too overwhelmed by what I said. Then I think of their line, "When the teacher is ready, the student appears." I'm noticing a lot of hurt emotions rapidly arising. Once they were willing to share their energy and wisdom and caring with me for free. Was that just to lure me in? How authentic could it have been in the first place? They see a lonely, vulnerable person. They find out my family has money. Let's take advantage of his vulnerability for our benefit. It's almost like they're trying to seduce me, then pull back and leave me even more vulnerable so I become dependent on them. And now if I want private time with them, I'm forced to get that stupid job. If not, on to other students. I want them to know exactly what I'm feeling and thinking.

I decide to keep going. "In the same vein, that line you often say - 'When the student is ready, the teacher appears'- appears self-serving to me. It makes students feel that somehow they have been drawn to you as teachers, as if by a divine plan. That feels manipulative on your part. A sales pitch. 'Come, study and learn from me, and of course get a job and pay me.'"

* * *

As soon as the words are out of my mouth, I worry they are going to take offense. Just like my parents would. In fact, I'd never allow myself to be this honest with my family.

But the Rebbe smiles, and says, "Great questions. How can you tell whether we're being genuine or trying to con you, as you put it, whether it's our dust or yours?" He now chuckles as he says, "We're definitely not saints, everyone has dust, so how do you know how much is yours, how much theirs?"

I'm surprised at how non-defensive he seems, since in a way I've really directly attacked them, and impugned their integrity. Dr. Lisbet adds, "We believe the best way to address your question--which all of us have to face-- is to begin with ourselves, and that's why we have focused so much on self-reflection--learning about who we are, what we are feelings. Let's use your questions as an example. Let me invite you to close your eyes and take a cleansing breath. Look inside, what are you feeling right now?"

I feel some reluctance to close my eyes. Is she trying to deflect my question about their dust by turning it back on me? And I still feel that closing my eyes in front of them puts me in a position of vulnerability. But I do hear some caring in her voice; and there's really not much I can lose, so I sit back, smile and say, "You realize how trusting this is of me, don't you?" I close my eyes, and await her further words. It's like going underwater into a new setting. The external "above water" world disappears. I immediately feel the tightness in my stomach, my place of tension. My hands are cold. My mind is whirring with inchoate thoughts, feelings. I share this with them, eyes still closed.

"Good. Now, imagine that you are the creek in the exercise we did last time. Imagine it's a windy day, and the waters of the creek are foaming, rushing by the cabin and tree. When our minds are swirling like that, it's very hard to see clearly what is beneath the surface. Now imagine that it's a calmer day. The creek water slows, becomes still, almost like a lake. You can look into it and see what it contains: silt, rocks, maybe even a fish or two. Similarly, when we can calm our mind, it becomes less turbulent, a spacious, clear body of water in which we can see the contents of what's going on--the thoughts, the feelings, the dust. It also allows us to see what is within us, so we can know more clearly what we have contributed to any ongoing problem and what is the responsibility of the other person. Continue to take gentle, natural breaths, allowing your belly to expand on the inbreath, to fall on the outbreath."

"I can begin to feel the stillness you're talking about... motionless,

quiet, but what I notice is how filled with silt I am.”

“Excellent. Now, you’re beginning to answer your own question. You are turning inward to see what part of the dust is yours. Let’s stay with this exercise a bit more, while continuing your breathing. Imagine now you are the sky above the body of water, and it’s nighttime. Your mind is like the big spacious sky, filled with stars. In that sky, try to see all stars, each star representing a specific feeling, thought, a piece of dust. Don’t dwell on any star, just notice each of them. And notice them in a soft, gentle, compassionate, non-judgmental way. One may grow brighter, then its light diminishes. Try not to jump too quickly to conclusions or make a story about a particular star. Just observe.

“This slowing down allows you to be like a mirror—a clear body of water reflecting an empty sky. Then, when you look in calmly, you can see your own dust on the mirror; your silt in the water; your stars in the night sky. With practice, you can begin to learn, in every interaction, what you are feeling in your body and mind; you can be aware of and notice every emotion. With that increased awareness of all the different, nuanced motivations that are part of you, you will begin to see when it is your dust that causes you to tell a distorted story of projection, denial, or greed. And then, you can differentiate that from the challenges outside of you—see what are others’ “windy” conditions—their dust that is blowing at and effecting you.

“Finally, remember, as you become increasingly open and attentive to yourself, even as you notice more clearly what’s within, try to stay compassionate and kind toward what you are seeing, keeping your mind spacious and big and loving.—both toward yourself and toward others.”

*

*

*

“Can I open my eyes?”

“In a moment. Stay with your breath, and tell us what you are noticing.”

“That it’s not easy to still my mind. My body of water is filled with thrashing foam; my mirror has whirling dust clouds; and in my spacious big night, I’m seeing the

stars of helplessness and confusion, which shine brighter than all the rest." I pause, then add, "And I'm not feeling very hopeful or compassionate."

"Okay, that's good, that's fine. Just keep breathing, eyes closed, and tell me, when you learn a new skill in tennis, does it get better or worse initially?"

"Worse." Now she's speaking my language. I think of my backhand volley. I wonder if I still remember how to play.

"But it eventually gets better, right? Getting worse is something that happens, but is really part of the process towards getting better, and you just have to be patient and trusting during the transition. The same with moving from stanza one to stanza three of the poem. All the dust and silt have always been there, but in stanza one, you just didn't notice them. Now, you see are beginning to see more clearly, and initially it feels overwhelming. This can be a time when some would panic. But just keep breathing, and notice if the star of panic continues to shine brighter. If so, just watch and observe it. Don't run toward it, don't run away from it. Just notice."

"It's big and red and bright, and wants to block out all the other stars."

"That's fine, you don't need to do anything except stay with it."

"Maybe it's lessing a little bit, but not much."

"Again, fine."

"It doesn't seem fine. It seems like there is such a long way to go. And this is only one star. There are so many in me, so much dust."

"Keep breathing, eyes closed, Just listen to my words."

* * *

I keep breathing, trying to focus on the rise and fall of my abdomen, while observing the silt in the lake and the stars in the night sky.

"Have you ever done yoga?"

Huh? I'm startled by her words, and open my eyes.

She motions for me to close them, and repeats the question.

"Not really, just some stretches for golf and tennis. But what's the connection to dust and trust and second stanzas?" I try to listen to her and

breathe regularly at the same time.

"In yoga, as in the tai chi class you're in, the goal, if you will, is to begin in a centered, self-accepting place. In tai chi, we want to stay centered as we go through a new form, keeping a slow, calm movement. In yoga, you want to keep that centered place and stretch into a posture. You stop your stretch while you are still centered, and when you finish breathing out. Then you breathe in, staying motionless. On the out breath, you may try to stretch again, just a few inches, or an inch, or a fraction of an inch. Just a few degrees. When you have stretched as far as you are able at that moment, then you return to the accepting centered place."

"And the application to people --and me--being untrustworthy?"

"Your journey begins where you are. All of us have dust. That's where we are. All of us are in bondage, as the Rebbe, and the theme of Passover, reminds us. Recognizing and accepting that is the first step toward liberation. You are who you are and where you are. The desire to change and the effort to clean the dust is the stretch part. But you can only clean a little at a time. Not in anger, or fury, but with centered compassion. In yoga, if you try to stretch a muscle too quickly, you'll only hurt yourself. It will not stretch further, it will only get tense, and self-protectively pull back."

I then hear the Rebbe's voice, which breaks in eagerly, and seems somewhat startling to me. "It's like the Israelites, after they've left the bondage of Egypt, continuing to say we want to return. At least we were safe there. Why should we venture forth, look how difficult it is?"

Dr. Lisbet interrupts him, and I hear annoyance in her voice. I crack my eyes open a bit, and see she is looking at him saying "This is not the Passover class, Jonathan." I can see that the Rebbe has a sheepish grin, and replies, "I I'm sorry, dear. I need to bring it back to the Jewish angle, sometimes. That's how I ground it. Some people find it helpful."

She looks away from him and back to me, and I quickly close my eyes tightly. I feel like I've been a voyeur. "Slow, patient, steady progress, from a centered place, one or two degrees at a time." Dr. Lisbet looks at me in a completely clear, but not challenging manner.

"But there is so much dust. One or two degrees doesn't seem like meaningful progress. And then there is the backsliding."

"Exactly what I said to her when she first explained this view to me," the Rebbe interjects. "Then I thought, what a difference one or two degrees makes in our temperature. And what else can we do but try again and again to lower it to take care of ourselves." I peak again, and notice that as he says this, he looks over again at Dr. Lisbet, almost as if he's seeking to regain her approval. She smiles, although still with a hint of exasperation.

"It's a good analogy. It makes sense. Though I don't know if I have that kind of patience, or self-discipline."

I like their camaraderie, and banter, even when I can also sense some tension and awkwardness. None of us is a saint. We all have dust. I feel I'm not alone and maybe, just maybe, there is hope for me.

* * *
* * *

1

take my tea cup over to the sink, and rinse it out. Mom would be proud. Then I take the money and place it on the coffee table before them. Without even being asked. Grandpa would be proud. I'm becoming so responsible. But this was a good session, and they actually ran over a bit. They deserve my consideration.

We give each other a hug, and I turn to leave.

After I've taken a few steps toward the door, however, I stop, and turn back to face them. "You didn't answer my question?"

"Which one?" There is a gruffness in Dr. Lisbet's voice. Is it because she has unfinished business with the Rebbe, or because I won't leave and this is extending the session without extra payment? I ignore her tone, and continue.

"Actually, three pieces of dust, silt and stars have just shot through my mind. First, you showed me how to recognize my dust, but what about others'—like yours and the Rebbe's? Secondly, you're showing me how many problems I have, but in so doing, couldn't you be deflecting from addressing your own problems—your greed, your manipulation? Third, whether your convenient statement about teachers and students and readiness couldn't be misused?"

Dr. Lisbet points at her watch. "Make a note of it. Til next time. Bye." She walks toward the door, ushers me out of it, and closes it behind me.

*

*

*

As I walk out of their office, I turn back and look at the shut door locking me out. I only know one thing, that I am glad I don't ever

want to become involved in a relationship again. Why start a relationship if you know it always ends badly. This one ends with her shutting the door on me. So insensitive. I'm glad they're leaving in a few weeks. There's really nothing more I need or want from them.

And look at their own relationship. Two people devoted to mental health and they fight and bicker with each other like Mery and I did. There's always fighting and ugliness—just ask my parents.

I hear music. The Sanhedrin Park is ahead. Ha, the place where I pissed on the Tombs of the Judges. Look at this world and its ugliness. I wish I could piss on it all.

As I get closer, I see a bustle of activity. The quiet, deserted place of two weeks ago is completely transformed. Now, the ground is littered with people. It's like the way people—and ants—invaded my Shakespeare garden at Golden Gate Park. Nothing is fair in life.

There seems to be a festival on the park grounds, for which you need a ticket to enter. I'm not paying to get in when at another time I could walk for free. I stand outside the fence and peer in.

I notice an old lady, maybe seventy, with torn hose sitting on the ground, eating sunflower seeds, laughing, showing toothless gums. For some reason, a crazy thought pops into my mind. I wonder if I should visit Joie's grandmother sometime. Why would I think of her? Maybe the old woman could be a grandmother? Crazy associational mind. I haven't even left Elizabeth in my heart, and I'm thinking of going to see a person I've never met because she's related to a woman who sings well whom I've talked to twice. My mind is more foamy than even I imagined.

Children are dancing and singing. I hear lutes, drums, wailing voices. Amidst the confusion, some people are simply sipping tea. A young woman, maybe late twenties or early thirties, is lifting her baby carriage over the fence to keep from paying the entrance fee—about the

equivalent of sixty cents. Her husband, who has already jumped the fence, takes the carriage and sets it down, and then pulls his wife over the fence. A policeman runs up. They laugh at him. Oink Oink. Doesn't he have anything better to do with his life than keep a baby and its mother out of a park? Tombs of the Judges. Law and order. Pathetic.

As I watch a group of children dance, I think of when children were dancing around me in Golden Gate Park as I played my flute. Now, I stand outside a fence and observe. It's probably safer for them that way. No one will trip and fall, or, if they do, I won't be blamed again.

And how can these people dance when mortars are being fired at them? When men on Sixth Street are lying on hard cement, when Palestinian refugees don't have enough food? I turn to walk back to my room. It's too painful to watch the celebration. How can anyone rejoice when there is so much pain in the world, inside and out?

* * *

I place my socks in the sink, add some soap, and begin to knead them. I've become like my Grandfather \$, washing and sewing my own clothes to save money. I think of Grandpa Dave's advice last year at Passover. Make the story your own. Next year in Jerusalem. Well, here I am. Is this where my story ends? Washing socks at the YMCA?

I have nearly sawed through the board from both sides. The railroad tracks from east and west, my past and present are about to meet. I have only two more past times to write about in my journal--my final days on the Kibbutz, in September--Yom Kippur and Succoth, after I cut my finger, and could no longer write; and my visit in December to Yad Va Shem, right before I began to write again, near Chanukah. I've been avoiding writing about those periods -- they are painful to revisit. But they are the final stake that needs to be driven in, to complete the journey, connect past and present. Do I fear what will happen then? That rather than a

"When Reb Jonathan asked you to Shabbat, he'd forgotten or didn't realize that there is only one Sabbath left between now and Passover, and we have a workshop near Eilat we're committed to."

Fine. You're leaving anyway. No big deal. I stare at her expressionlessly. She continues, "But we are going to have a combined going away party, Passover celebration a week from Friday, the first night of Passover, and we'd like to invite you to join us."

"Thank you. That's kind," I say with what I hope is a tinge of irony.

Dr. Lisbet doesn't pick up on my tone, or chooses to ignore it. "Good, we're glad you can come. Our workshop lasts most of next week, so we're going to have to find another time for our final session, if we can work that out with you."

"You're changing the time of our last session?"

"Again, sorry, there's just so much we're trying to juggle these last two weeks here."

Juggle? So, now I'm just one ball among many being tossed between two circus clowns. "Why don't we just make this our last session. It will save me some money, and take one more ball out of the air that you don't have to juggle."

"Thank you. That's a possibility. Why don't we see how the session goes?"

I can't believe she's taking me seriously, with no guilt. And I'm paying for this aggravation. I think of getting up right there, throwing the money down in an insulting way, and walking out. The gesture seems gratifying, but, like throwing my tennis racquet, a few second later seems kind of stupid and pointless. Plus, once I leave here, then what? I no longer have to work to see them. I no longer have to do anything. It seems my life just ends. I'm out of options.

But I need to do something to show my displeasure. I say, "So, when the student is ready, the teacher just disappears?"

* * *

The Rebbe laughs. He always does that, it seems, at the most awkward situations. He says he often laughs to give and gain a perspective; I wonder if he doesn't also laugh to hide his own discomfort. I'm trying to insult them, and he chuckles. So, this is what it comes to, another exile and leave-taking, with bad feelings all around.

"That's a wonderful line. With your permission, I'd like to use it in our workshop this week." He looks over at Dr. Lisbet. "Isn't there a Zen saying like that If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!?"

"Yes, it means that the deepest wisdom comes from within oneself, not from an outside source. Applied to therapy, it means that the goal is to eventually reach a point where the clients are ready to fly on their own."

"You guys have it all wrapped up in neat little packages, don't you? That's the ending line, fly birdie fly, you're ready-- when you abandon your client for your own sabbatical travel. But at the start, when you need the money, and want students, you entice them by saying, 'Oh, when you're ready, the teacher appears. And since we've just appeared in your life, as teachers, you must be ready. Come pay us for our wisdom.' As I asked before, doesn't there seem to you a bit of the con artist in this, the pitch of the used car salesman" I realize my tone and words are sharp and harsh. But why hold back? What do I have to lose? They're leaving anyway.

"So a part of you feels that we conned you into therapy, and then kept you here, all for our financial gain? And now we are deserting and abandoning you, again for our own needs, and telling you that you are

ready to forge ahead on your own?" The Rebbe adopts a somber tone, but also has a smirk in his eyes, or at least some bemusement.

"You seem like you're mocking me. Take me seriously."

"I'm taking you seriously, very seriously. From one perspective your viewpoint is understandable, though a bit harshly stated. It's admirable that you question everything so assiduously. Of course the saying about teachers appearing can be misused-- as can any spiritual assertion. But consider how one of your pieces of dust--distrust of others--also might be part of the equation.

"Let me share my own reaction when I first heard this very statement. I was feeling lonely, lost, and confused when I heard these words. They gave me hope that if I kept myself open, someone would come along who could guide me. When I did find my first teacher (and I've found many), rather than feel I was being conned, I felt grateful. Grateful to the teacher; appreciative of myself for staying open; and thankful to the Universe for providing guidance for me."

"I appreciate your openness, and I am glad those words worked for you. But you have to admit, your story is a bit self-serving. First you point out my 'dust' of distrust--why? So I won't trust my own reactions and not even ask the question, how can I trust that you're the right teacher; that I won't question whether now you've just been conning me into gratitude when the appropriate response by me to your "teacher/student" saying *should be* wariness? Look at my experiences--with my parents, with Elizabeth. There are times I trusted too much. Why not learn from those mistakes? Distrust may not always be dust, and can sometimes be wise, appropriate self-protection, correct?"

He starts to respond, but I hold up my hand and say "Please, don't interrupt. That wasn't a real question, and I'm not finished." That should chastise him, give him a dose of his own medicine about

interrupting. "Now when you're ready to go traveling and desert your students, how do I know you're not conning me again, complimenting me for my progress--which makes you look good--and saying, you're ready to fly on your own, learned student? Everything you do has a self-serving purpose, and the fact that you're not admitting it means you're both being blinded by your own dust and self-interest. I don't think you really hear how abandoned I feel" I look at them both angrily, while trying to hold back some tears. The Rebbe is no longer chuckling. Dr. Lisbet speaks first.

"Do you feel we conned you into therapy, and are now abandoning you? Is that the story you're telling yourself now?"

"Yes, and it's not a story, it's the truth."

"Henri Poincaré once said that 'To doubt everything or to believe everything are two equally convenient solutions; both dispense with the necessity of reflection.' Whether this is our last session, or next to last session, let's make a commitment--all of us--to reflect as honestly and deeply and compassionately as we can. Does that seem fair to you?"

"Only if you do what you say, and not make this all about me. Only if you are honest about your dust and blind spots, too. Look, when you tell me to relax and get calm and take a breath, what happens? The problem doesn't seem as urgent or upsetting. That's to your advantage, isn't it? Then I say, oh, well, don't be mean to them, don't ask tough questions, don't rock the boat. It's very manipulative of you. By having me focus on my dust, and see all my issues--of which I admit there are many--you've got me so preoccupied turning inward, you deflect me from the question I asked you, how do I know some of the dust it's yours. So, yes, I agree to your commitment to total honest, as long as it's applied to all of us.

The Rebbe chuckles again. "I'm on board." Dr. Lisbet also nods, but with no smile. I don't see what's so funny. The Rebbe says, "Clear and irrefutable reasoning. You'd indeed make a fine lawyer."

* * *

The Rebbe gets up, and asks, "Tea?" Sometimes I feel his serving me tea is a nice nurturing act. But other times, like now, I feel he's running away at a time of conflict and leaving Dr. Lisbet to fight the battles. I'm paying for both, and I should receive attention from both. Again I've nothing to lose, and tell him that.

"I hear your concern. And if you don't want any tea, that's fine. But I think better when I have a cup of tea, and I believe that's in your interest. In that way, I offer what you're paying for--the clearest most focused attention I have. So, I'll listen as she talks, and don't worry, I'll jump in if it's appropriate." With that he walks toward the hot plate and begins to pour water into the kettle. How can he possibly hear what's going on over the noise, and he now can't even see me because he's turned his back on me. I want to point out his premise is not logical and accurate, ask for a percent discount for his inattention. But he'd just deny it, and we'd waste even more of the scant precious time that remains.

"Let me address your two concerns, one at a time. First, you are wondering if by encouraging you to take a breath and become calmer, we are in fact trying to pacify you so your queries about us will be mitigated, you won't feel as strongly about them, and therefore you'll, what's the expression?" The Rebbe chimes in "let us off the hook." Her voice is clipped, precise, and unfeeling. His more lilty. But at least he is listening.

"Yes, that's my first concern." I respond in the same tone and style as hers. I wonder if I'm mocking her, or singing her voice, as she herself has taught me not to do.

"Please notice, even as we talk, that I'm taking slow deep breaths from my diaphragm. I ask you to do the same. There is almost no situation in which talking a calming breath for a few seconds to center ourselves and clear our minds makes things worse." She glances at my stomach to make sure I'm breathing correctly. What an irritating woman. "Good. Let yourself keep breathing, let your body's wisdom guide the breath, your belly rising on the in breath, falling on the out breath. Very good.

"Now, remember our discussion in the tai chi class, and in therapy, we discussed the word 'xujing' from Chinese language and philosophy-- a place of stillness, centeredness, emptiness and void. It is the place before separation and conflict, where we are all part of the same unity. Understand that this is a critical starting point for any discussion, any action."

The Rebbe returns with the tea. "I've made one for you, too, if you'd like it. He sets it down on the round coffee table in front of me. I'm actually thirsty, but I let it sit, enjoying the cinnamon smell. "I think of xu-jing as the blank piece of white paper I was taught to meditate on before --and after-- Talmud study. It is a way to remind me, and us of the wholeness and Oneness of God. Centering ourself-xujing- is to remind us that in the original emptiness, we are all the same. The Chinese call that sameness the void; we call it the One. But whether you call everything empty, or full, same difference, yes?" His eyes have just the hint to a fun-loving sparkle in them, as if he's saying, "See I made tea and paid attention, didn't miss a beat--and connected theistic

and non-theistic theology at the same time." He slowly swallows a mouthful of tea with a bemused self-assuance.

Is this my dust, or his? I take a breath, reach for the tea, and also take a sip. Two can play at this game. I look at him and say "Thank you, it's very good." And then turn to her, while I'm sipping, and take a slow, elongated in-breath through my nose.

* * *

"Indeed, it is the same principle," Dr. Lisbet affirms, in that imperious tone that suggests that it is not so until she has declared it so. "Notice that after looking at the blank paper, Talmud study begins. Similarly, xujing is an important prerequisite for the next step, the Chinese word 'dongjing', the best response for a given situation, combining elements of assertive and yielding. Do you remember in class when I said xujing does not necessarily mean a maximum yin dongjing response?"

"I wrote that down, but it didn't make too much sense. I was thinking of asking you about it later."

"Let me make a note." She pulls out a paper and pen. "I want to make sure I repeat that in class tomorrow. It's a critical point. What it means is that just because you are centered, but it does not mean you always want to give the most yielding response possible. That should speak directly to your concern. Becoming centered is calming the mind, letting the body of water become still, so the silt settles, and you can see more clearly what you need to do. In a different analogy, it's like seeing the dust on the mirror.

In so doing, you are taking the time to create the space from which you can visualize and imagine wise responses. This is not about stuffing or repressing or even self-sedating. It's about clarity. From that place, you can then formulate several options, from maximum yin, to

maximum yang, and with the gradations in between. So, you see, we in no way intend to deflect your concerns by having you breathe first. What we hope to do is teach you how, in any situation, taking a breath and centering yourself can be the first step in having you respond as calmly and wisely as possible, so you neither collapse like your mother, or immediately lash out and attack, like your father. Does that make sense to you, answer your first question?"

As I continue to breathe and take notes, she picks up her tea. Her words make sense and I share that. I want to apologize, but I don't. This is really an inspirational model, and for the first time I'm beginning to see what they're getting at. I'm even embarrassed I asked the question. Not only had she already explained it in class, but I was misinterpreting pretty dramatically their intentions in trying to get me to breathe and calm down before acting. Now, during the course of her explanation, the tone of her voice seems to have changed. It sounds less tight and preachy, more comforting and thoughtful. Was it her voice that changed, or did I change in the way I heard it? Whose dust?

*

*

*

She seems to sense my thoughts, or at least stays on track, for she says, "Now, let's turn to your second question. You notice, as we all do, that often when we turn inward, we see lots of dust on our mirror, our mind filled with foamy waters. You wonder if we are having you do that so you'll be overwhelmed by your own issues, and be deflected from addressing ours. You also wonder if some of our own dust—like greed—colors our statements, and has us use them in a manipulative way, to keep our students bound to us, particularly the one where we say, 'When the student is ready, the teacher appears'. Do I hear you?"

"Clearly."

Somehow, wordlessly, the baton is handed to the Rebbe, who says, "Like everything in life, there are nuances and multiple motivations. Dr. Lisbet and I truly have devoted our lives to trying to be of service to others. That is our deepest core value and intention. But we also have to eat, and to earn a living. So, the question you are asking is even if our intention is good, is it fair we earn money for doing what we do? And also and does the desire for more money ever cloud our judgment?"

"These are appropriate questions. The short answer is we are aware of and talk often about these issues. You have certainly been helpful in constantly raising it for us." He smiles at me. "In that way, you have been a good teacher for us. So, we are aware of that potential conflict and dust within us, and all I can say is we have no perfect answer to it. Therefore, we remain vigilant and try to keep learning. Sometimes we feel we are too lenient, and do too much for tzedaka—for free—and at our expense. Sometimes, we feel like we're swayed too much by the fee we're being paid in terms of what we choose to do. We try to find the best, fairest, most ethical balance we can."

"Why didn't you never share this with me before? That's exactly what I'm talking about."

"Because you're paying us to help you, not to be our therapist and analyze us! We discussed this between ourselves often after our sessions with you. We both felt it wouldn't have been productive to discuss this with you at an earlier point, because you might have used it as an excuse not to look at yourself and your own dust. But now, as we reach our final sessions, there's no reason for us not to be completely transparent with you. You have done your homework of looking at yourself very well, and we feel you can learn and grow from hearing our struggles and and challenges in this area."

"Jacob becomes Israel, and Israel, as you know, means wrestling with and toward God. You see we still wrestle with these issues. The task and journey you've undertaken is one that will last a lifetime--moving toward your higher self. And on that journey, you will find both students and teachers everywhere."

* * *

He stops to drink his tea. I want to take notes on what he's said, but it also seems inappropriate to start writing. It would be like I'm the therapist taking notes on his problems, putting the writing as a barrier between us. I want to say something to him, but what? It seems pretentious to try to reassure and comfort him, although I have that impulse. I also feel appreciative. No words come. I merely nod.

"Hopefully, you can see, 'When the student is ready, the teacher appears' has many meanings, just as the Torah has multiple levels. There are many teachers. Your parents, for example, can teach you what to do, and sometimes what not to do. For example, As Dr. Lisbet has pointed out to you, they may teach you ways you don't want to react when people give you feedback: rageful, controlling, and counterattacking; or passive, helpless, collapsing like a victim.

But perhaps when you see injustice, the anger of your father is an appropriate emotion, and when channeled into healing service, can be a virtue. And, as you noted, your mother taught you to turn inward, learn about yourself, through keeping daily journals of your waking life and your dream life. So they were teachers in many ways."

I feel some sadness, and also tenderness toward my parents as he says this, but keep the emotions inside. I feel now it is ok to take some notes, and I do.

"Someday, when you are ready, we invite you to begin putting them in your nightly forgiveness prayers. Doing so does not mean you are

forgetting that they did things that really hurt you. But it does mean you are developing more understanding of their dust and limitations, and are willing to move on with your life in a kinder, gentler direction, , one less bound by roiling anger and feelings of being a victim."

I continue writing. Now Dr. Lisbet begins talking. "And you may come to see Elizabeth Mery in the same way. By your own acknowledgement, she also was a teacher for you, opening you to the spiritual quest you are on, being a catalyst to have you challenge your direction, your values. Did she have her own dust and issues? Of course. But, perhaps you are moving toward a time when you want to forgive those who have hurt you, and give thanks for the positive lessons you have received from them, and move on to the next phase of your life, a new beginning."

* * *

I finish taking notes on what they are saying. This seems like a perfect place to end my sessions. I start to close my notebook, but apparently they aren't finished. The Rabbi almost immediately starts speaking after Dr. Lisbet's comment about new beginnings.

"Isn't that the message of Passover, leaving our bondages? Isn't this what we've been working together with you on for these last several months? And remember our discussion of last week, about Moses, Pharaoh, and the plagues?"

I wonder if Dr. Lisbet is going to become upset with him for shifting the topic to something tangential (and Jewish) again, but they seem back in sync with each other, as she says,

"The plagues in the story cause suffering. They occur because Pharaoh hardens his heart, and doesn't allow positive change. Can you see, from this perspective, how in your own life, every time you are in psychological pain, it's as if a plague is trying to help you learn a lesson? If you are willing and ready to be a student, then you can ask

yourself, how is this plague my teacher? What can I learn from it? What am I doing that causes this hurt to continue? How can this plague help me develop greater understanding so that I can free myself from it, move out of a narrow place to a greater level of freedom and wisdom?"

* * *

Everything they are saying makes such sense to me. Why couldn't they have told me all this before? Was all the work we did these last few months necessary? Is it because I'm finally ready to learn the lessons? Is it because they realize this is one of our last sessions, and they are finally prepared?

I think of how when they were giving this talk in class, Peter cut me off, and hardened my heart, and in so doing, helped me experience the very lesson the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet were teaching. I feel excited, almost overwhelmed with glee, about the benefits--of all things--plagues and their pain. I laugh and say "That means that everything can be a teacher, doesn't it...if I'm ready."

They both give a smile of pleasure, at me, and then at each other, but say nothing.

"Even cleaning the beans yesterday?"

"You tell us. Imagine yourself as a wise student, open to their teaching....Just take a breath, close your eyes, and talk out loud..."

"Beans. It's easy to get in touch with them as plagues."

"And the feelings they bring up in you?"

"Also easy, and well-rehearsed. I have these feelings every day. Anger, resentment. Blaming you for making me do it so I could see you. Anger at the wealthy patrons who have no idea I even exist."

"Good. Now, what can you learn if you are ready?"

I take a breath. "What are they teaching me?" I pause. "Actually, this is pretty simple. How I don't like to take responsibility, and so blame others. I'm choosing to earn the money to see you. And, if I'm honest, the beans tell me about my greed around money. I really didn't have to work. But I chose not to cash in some bonds or stocks which would deplete my income further. Maybe I was hoping you would feel guilty and not charge me. So, deceptiveness on my part. Anger at my grandfather who cut off my funds since I didn't go to law school this year like he wanted. But that's my choice, too.

I take another slow breath, and see so clearly, even as I close my eyes and continue speaking. "I should probably be thankful for what he did give me rather than what he's not. And I even tried to manipulate my grandfather with distorted wording to keep a few more months of funds coming in. I'm the one manipulating to hoard and keep money, and rather than face that in myself, I'm blaming you and grandpa and even am angry at the rich people who eat at the hotel. As if I'm entitled to an income. Maybe that's the tall egotistical tree that's been chopped down." I feel my breathing becoming quicker and shallower, and once again try to slow it down.

"That's it, the way you're working with your breathing is lovely. And A plus for honesty. Thank you. Now, keep your eyes closed, and notice your feelings toward yourself. Sometimes, as we've said, when we finally break through and look at our dust, we can be brutally honest, which is good, but also brutally judgmental and self-punishing, which is not the goal. Just try to notice all the thoughts and feelings, as stars in the night sky. Let the body of water stay calm and clear."

I do what Dr. Lisbet says, and then hear the Rebbe's voice, filled with compassion. "There's another lesson the beans have taught you, son, and it's right before your eyes. Empathy, compassion. Haven't you been,

at some point in your life, the wealthy patron, and at those times did you ever think about who cleaned your dishes when you went to a restaurant?"

"Of course not. I just assumed that was my due. Somebody should cook for me, do my laundry, make my life simple."

"I guarantee you will never be able to eat in a restaurant without thinking of those who make that possible for you. That is the"

"Does that mean I shouldn't eat in a restaurant again?" I interrupt him, and start to open my eyes. Dr. Lisbet puts her hand on my shoulder, "Please, keep them closed. Listen to what the Rebbe is saying. Let him finish."

He continues. "That is the beauty of the blessing before the meal. No matter where we eat, in a restaurant, at home, someone has served us, and made that possible. We thank all who provide for us, those who grow the food, harvest it, transport it. From your time on the kibbutz, in the kitchen, you are learning lessons from the other side of life. This can teach you an empathy with the difficulties of the lives of those who help provide for you. And it can teach you a deeper gratefulness. Finally, it can help you realize that we are all part of an interconnected web. Therefore, part of each of our task is to find our own unique way of how we use our gifts in turn to serve others."

* * *

I feel two contrasting feelings at what he is saying, a sadness and a palpable excitement. The positive feeling is clearer, even humorous, and it wins out, so I share it first: "What's exciting to me in what you say is what a great way to think of my cleaning pots and pans. I'm really serving others, rather than always being served--part of my vision at Sinai. I'm learning I'm part of an interconnected web, and I'm building empathy at the same time. For all I'm learning, I should be paying the

restaurant for letting me work there." When I hear them both chuckle, I feel good.

"But I also notice some sadness. I think my entitled attitude--that I should be served but not have to serve--is exactly how I treated you two." I'm glad my eyes are closed and I don't have to look at them. "As if I'm so special, and therefore entitled to see you for nothing. You should put in time and effort toward me, but I don't have to contribute anything back to you. I'm sorry."

I feel Dr. Lisbet pat me lightly on the shoulder, and hear the Rebbe say "Thank you for that. And forgiven."

I enjoy the feel of Dr. Lisbet's. It's comforting and reassuring. Then she says, "In your own way, you've actually given us quite a bit. Let's look again at the gestalt exercise."

She removes her hand, and to cover my feeling of loss at its leaving, I make a joke. "So you can show me once again how you've really cut me down to size?" I hear the Rebbe's light chuckle, and can almost see his impish smile.

* * *

"Notice all the parts of the scene. What do you think happened to the wood from the chopped down tree?"

As I visualize the creek, cabin, and smoke, it's my turn to smile. "Of course, the wood was used to make the log cabin, and some of it was burned to create the fire to warm the cabin."

"Good, but remember, in this exercise you are to say 'I' about everything."

"You never cease correcting me, do you?" But I say it playfully. At least somewhat. "I was cut down in order to create shelter and warmth. I am the cabin which can provide shelter. I am the fire wood which can provide warmth. I like that. No part of me goes unused! Even my

narcissistic, entitled, plague-like, huge tree self can be put to good use."

I hear hands slapping together, and then a sound like a hand hitting a thigh, then the Rebbe's voice. "Bravo. You've got it. You see, our plagues, our dust, don't have to be objects with which we beat ourselves up. They can in fact be transformed. Your ambition, energy, self-esteem, yes, even cockiness, can get you into trouble. But those same qualities can be teachers to help you become the kind of person you want to be. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I feel pleased. "Thank you. I hope you're not just saying this because you're leaving, and want to make sure I feel hopeful and not abandoned?"

I hear the Rebbe laugh again. "I hear the doubting mind. Take a breath and just notice it, as one bright star in your spacious big mind. You also may want to notice those times when it's difficult for you to receive a compliment. Again, every thought we have can be a teacher for us, if we allow it."

I smile, eyes closed, and see the star of doubt shine, and the star of humor, and the star of fear at their leaving, and even the star of gratitude for all the help they've given me. I sit and breathe and watch each one, running toward none, running away from none, just noticing. "It sounds like from this perspective, everything, absolutely everything can be my teacher, if only I'm ready as the student."

This time I hear Dr. Lisbet's voice: "As the mystical texts say 'The world is a university for the soul.'"

*

*

*

After a few minutes of breathing, guided by them, and myself, I allow my eyes to open. I look around the room. "This may be one of the last times, if not the last time I'll see this office. It's been my

sanctuary, my oasis in the wilderness, even though I didn't always treat it as such. I'm going to miss it."

"I like what you're saying. This office as an oasis. Even deeper, you're learning to find the space within yourself that is your 'office oasis' where you can retreat to find solace and understanding and wisdom. The oasis is not only outside, it's also inside. That's really what we've been working toward with you: empowering you to be your own teacher, to find your own 'oasis within.'" The Rebbe gives that lovely smile of his. "And what we're still working toward within ourselves." He looks affectionately at Dr. Lisbet. Although Dr. Lisbet doesn't often show much emotion, I think I notice a small blush as she looks down and away for a moment.

Even as I value hearing what the Rebbe is saying, I also feel some envy at their relationship. "It must be comforting to have a partner to share the journey with. I'm sure that is not my path, but there is at least a small star in my night sky that feels sadness and loss at not having an intimate, sharing relationship."

"Why do you say that having a partner is not your path? Is it from fear? From what your mother said to you? Because of your parent's acrimonious divorce? From your experience with Elizabeth Mery?"

"All of the above. I don't seem to be very good relationship material. Most of the experiences I've had don't work out well. And I also believe that my spiritual path is best followed alone."

"If that is the choice you make, clearly there have been some very spiritual people--Ramakrishna, for example, an Indian sage at whose temple at Dakshineswar I studied--who felt that woman and gold were impediments to the spiritual path. But let me plant a seed of doubt in you. You have amazing examples of successful enduring relationship in your grandparents. Weren't they both married nearly fifty years? And

I can tell you from my experience with the Rebbe, that a passionate committed relationship to an equally passionate, searching human being, and a commitment to God, are not antithetical. In fact, for us, it is just the opposite, we often help each other stay on the spiritual path, and have learned to see God in each other as beloveds." Dr. Lisbet looks over at the Rebbe. Now it's his turn to blush. I'm getting a little embarrassed too.

The Rebbe adds, You've shared with us that you had the wedding ring you selected engraved with that beautiful line from the Song of Songs. 'I am my beloved and my beloved is mine.' During this time of Passover, as you must know, we read from the Song of Songs. The Song is both a yearning between Israel--as a nation-- and we as individuals-- toward for our God-- and a sensual love song between two beloveds. I invite you at least to keep the door to a personal beloved too as your path evolves."

* * *

I think of Elizabeth, the ring, the inscription, and the dashed dreams. "If I really try, I can see the star of hope flickering faintly in my mind, but it's still painful for me, after all this time, to face the failure of my relationship with Elizabeth. I tried so hard." My voice quavers and I take a deep breath.

The Rebbe starts to say something, but I stop him. "I know what you're going to say. 'Wasn't she, in some ways, a teacher, too, guiding me to the spiritual path?' Yes. Yes, an imperfect teacher to be sure. But as a partner....a lover....Not a good fit. But who knows? Maybe you're right, maybe one day, when I've learned enough of the lessons. . ." I let the thought drift off.

"Actually, that wasn't what I was going to say." The Rebbe frowns a little. "Remember the lesson of non-interruption and non-assumptions, my

friend." Then he seems to relent. "Being a yenta isn't part of our service, but we did recently hear from Joie, the young teacher from New York. She's coming back to visit her grandmother, and wrote to ask us about our class schedule. She also inquired about you. We've invited her and her grandmother to our Passover Seder. We hope you'll come too. As you said, 'Who knows. . .'"

* * *

Cute. Long legs. Good voice. Stop, mind. What am I thinking? I'm still a mess. And even if I weren't, relationship is not my path. I'm letting myself be distracted. "Thank you for the invitation. I'll think about it, but probably won't be able to make it. Since we have limited time left, I have two more questions for you. The first has to do with what you just said, Reb Jonathan, about your goal of empowering me. I hear you and I believe that you've been trying to empower me, to give me more control over my life. But why did it so often feel that we were power struggling and wrestling, that you were trying to exert your power over me?" I feel I've asked the question well. I paraphrased him, then stated my concern directly, with no sarcasm.

"When we teach, we are sensitive to the fact that we have a lot of power. Many of our outreach students are vulnerable, searching, lost."

I point to myself with a shrug of my shoulders. "Present company excluded, right?"

He smiles. "Of course right. I like it when you lighten up and let your playful side come through. The spiritual path isn't a contest to see who can be the most serious and intense."

"So, we are very sensitive to trying to empower our students, to have them take responsibility for themselves, to not be dependent upon us. Until we get to know a person better, our style is to listen

carefully, and initially try softer, 'inviting' types of approach to guidance. But sometimes, with certain people, and yes, you are one of them, there is resistance, and that the proper dongjing involves a yang or two bar more of directness and clarity. We are sorry if that felt to you like we were power struggling with you. We both realized early on that even though you came asking for guidance and advice, you're not one who likes to be told what to do, and will initially resist."

I nod, recognize what he's saying, and don't even feel defensive. "That seems fair. Sometimes I need a bit of a kick in the pants, so to speak. I get that. Perhaps I may not have always initially been the most receptive?"

"Really?" He seems playful, picking up on my tone. He continues. "Just to make one more point. We also, as in the tai chi dance Dr Lisbet taught you, work very hard to listen to your responses, and seek to calibrate how to teach. And when you 'push back,' we try to listen and learn from that. As an example, I appreciate very much your image of an oasis. All of us, at some level are bemidbar--in the wilderness. I like to think of our work as giving hope and nurturance and succor to those who come to us, so that we become one helpful step of their journey. Dr. Lisbet and I were both quite touched by the revelation you had at Sinai 'serving water' I believe you said. We have adopted that for ourselves as a model, so you see, you've been teaching us, too.

"Our goal is to invite our students to learn about themselves, to take responsibility and make their own choices, to find their own inner still small voice. Then, it's up to them to go forth--lech lecha-- to where they feel called and drawn. We hope you will stay in touch with us. You have great potential. We are both curious how your journey will unfold."

*

*

*

His kind words wash over me like a healing balm. It reminds me of when mom would tell me I could do anything or be anything I wanted. It's nice to have someone, even if it's someone I'm paying, to believe in me. But I also feel a bit like a good-bye at an airport. His statement is one which could be the ending of our session. I then say thank you so much for all your help, I'll stay in touch. Good-bye. But I still have one more question, and it's the question I came into therapy with. I look at my watch. We've run over by several minutes.

I start to feel a panic. And anger. At them. Take a breath. See the anger and panic as stars. Center yourself. Xu-jing.

Good. Now, what is the dongjing? To just say good bye and leave without asking my question feels too passive. To get angry at them for leaving me and demanding they run over seems too hostile and entitled. Also, I hear Dr. Lisbet throwing it back at me, saying, "You really have a problem with boundaries don't you?"

What are other options. Maybe ask their help. State my concern and see how we might work it out.

"I'm sensitive to the fact that we've run a few minutes over, and I want to respect your boundaries. However, I notice that I have one more question I want to ask you. I'm wondering if I can pay you for some additional time now, or we can set up an alternative time to meet either later this week, or next, when you return from your workshop?"

* * *

I'm pretty proud of myself, and after an initial stare, Dr. Lisbet compliments me. "That was well done." They then look at each other, move closer, talk in hushed tones, glance at their watches, then Dr. Lisbet says, "We'd like to take a few minutes' break, have a short walk, and clear our heads. If you'd like to make yourself some tea, we'll be back in ten minutes for the next round, ok?"

I agree, and they leave. I watch them holding hands as they walk out the door.

As I walk over to the hot plate, I look around their office. There's a hanging rug from India on one wall; a statue of Moses carrying the Ten Commandments on the mantle. A very delicate painting of a brown-orange bamboo twig; and another painting near it with a bird resting on the limb. Could I see myself in an office like this one day, serving water to refresh troubled people, providing them an oasis in the wilderness?

I put water in the kettle, and try to summarize in my mind the lessons: xu-jing, centeredness, take a breath, calm the foamy waters so I can see the silt, notice the dust on my mirror, see the issue from a larger perspective, like stars in a spacious night sky. All that doesn't seem easy, but it seems clear. The next step, dongjing, seems more confusing. It's easy to see how passively capitulating or furiously attacking is not right. But how do you find the proper gradation for every single situation? Just now I feel like I did it pretty well, but could that be like when you take a golf lesson, with the pro, and you hit the balls perfectly. But after he leaves, your game falls apart, either because you revert to old habits, or aren't able to remember how to do all the things you've been taught. How well will I be able to practice these skills when Reb Jonathan or Dr. Lisbet are no longer here to serve as my guides?

For some reason, little elfin Zeke comes to mind. I hear him telling me that each green you reach is new. You have to size up the external situation, the angle, the slope, the lie, the contour, grain, wetness and firmness of the green, the wind direction and velocity.

Then you have to face who you are. If you think you are generally too aggressive, the one mistake you don't want to make is to hit a

putt that goes way too far past the hole. But sometimes that mind set causes you to hit the putt too short. Then you are called something like "Alice" or "Ginger" by yourself or partners--a real wuss. Unfortunately, Zeke said, when faced with a new putt, you may again try to overcorrect based on your last putt, so that the next putt is too long. You become caught in a vicious cycle of overcorrection and undercorrection. It's hard to get the porridge just right.

I guess it's the same lesson in daily life. We need to know who we are--consciously and unconsciously-- then keep correcting and self-correcting until we hit the right putt for each situation, each new green. More practice, more reflection on every situation. But if each situation is new, how does what you learn in one situation ever help you in a new situation?

I wonder if it's really more like playing the flute: finding the right note and rhythm for each situation. It feels like jazz improvisation---but unfortunately for me I certainly am not able to keep up in jazz because by the time I figure all this out, the music has moved to the next bar. Will I ever be able to do it in life? This is not an easy process, simultaneously dealing with my dust inside--and hoping it's not poison-- trying to assess the situation outside.

I see the stars of fear and doubt start shining brightly. Am I just engaging in mental masturbation as I once so frequently engaged in the physical act? Is my rumination something that won't really lead to anything--no actual procreation, no new learning, not even any pleasure? In my darker, hopeless moments, that's what I feel. But, in my more hopeful times, I don't think that's the case.

But how am I to know which is true?

*

*

*

The tea kettle screams, and I lift it off the hot plate.

I wonder if I knew a year ago, when I first met Elizabeth, what I know now, could that relationship have worked? If I'd corrected my mistakes, known more? Could I have found the right dongjing action for each situation? I'm not sure. But why do I keep thinking about her? Maybe I keep going over the relationship to learn more about me. But I wonder if I'm also not secretly hoping that if I can change, there may still be a chance to get back with her, or if not with her, then maybe with someone else, even as I consciously say that relationships are not something I want. Am I merely scratching a wound that is trying to heal, thereby keeping it inflamed? Or is this reflection part of the healing process?

What I do know is that I am in the wilderness. And it feels like one big sand trap, from which escaping was never a strong part of my golf game.

* * *

I pour myself some tea, and hear footsteps, which I assume are the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet returning. I pour water into their tea cups. Serving water. This is the first time I will have served them. That seems a fitting closing of the circle. First time in the last session. Ends and beginnings.

They enter, sit down, and thank me for the tea. Then the Rebbe says, "You've made us both very curious. What is the final question you'd like to ask?"

I don't like his use of the word 'final.' I don't believe I said that. I think I said I have one more question. What's the difference? As I think about it, there isn't any. Maybe it's just that 'final' seems so severe, and, well, final. I think through all the questions I've just been pondering, how do you know proper dongjing; is relationship in the

cards for me, should it be? Does reflection help me heal, or does it enflame old wounds? Why did I say I only had one more question? Are all these questions coming up now because I'm afraid of their leaving? Stop, mind, take a breath. Center yourself. I know clearly and fully what the one most important question is I have to ask them.

* * *

But for some reason, I don't ask. Yet. Instead, I tell them how I put together what they were saying about dongjing by thinking about Zeke and putting the ball in golf. "I wish my family, or my school, or someone had taught me about xujing and dongjing when I was younger. It feels like you all have just begun to teach me important lessons, and now you're leaving. Everything seems so complicated. How will I know how to apply what you've taught me in real life? I'm like a little child who's just learned something, and then my education ends."

"You're feeling confused and overwhelmed now, is that it? Like you're a little child who is being forced out to face life too soon, before you've had a chance to assimilate your newly acquired skills?"

"Exactly."

"And you wish your parents, or someone, had taught you these skills earlier?"

"Yes, I do. And I wish my parents had your listening skills, too."

"Thank you," Dr Lisbet replies. "For my part, I wish the educational system, or parent education classes taught these skills, too. Society seems to assume that people can pick up psychologically astute communication and life wisdom skills by osmosis. But your parents weren't taught these skills, and it's not fair to blame them because they never learned them. Yes, the earlier you can be exposed to these teachings the better, but frankly, you're learning them earlier than either the Rebbe or I did. And you have the opportunity to continue

practicing and refining them for the rest of your life. And, to teach them in turn, to others you meet, even to your family, if you so choose."

"But there seem so many areas I really haven't thought through very well. Obviously, this whole issue of relationship. And I'm realizing how many issues I have with money and what it means to me. I have no idea what direction my career path will take. And those aren't even the main question I wanted to ask you about. Help!"

* * *

Dr. Lisbet doesn't answer immediately, but takes a sip of tea.

"Let me ask you if you were your therapist, how would you respond to what you've just said."

"First, I'd sip my tea and take a breath so I could center myself." I smile at her. "Then I'd tell my client to take a breath." Which I do.

"A very good beginning. From my brief, and I might add, unsatisfying experience with golf, I know that just as no two greens are alike, no two putts on any one green are exactly alike. Each situation is different. As in life. There will be lots of "contents" in your life--specific putts, if you will. Our goal is not to teach you how to execute a specific putt--relationship, money, career. Rather, hopefully what you've learned from us are general principles--self-reflection, seeing calmly all aspects of a situation, learning about yourself. With these skills, and lots of practice, you can begin to approach each new situation as an interesting challenge, like a puzzle, about which you are curious to see if you can bring your best wisdom to it. Does that make sense to you?"

I look up at her and nod, then continue writing. She turns to the Rebbe. "Do you have anything to add?"

"There comes a point-- in raising children, as I've found, as well as in my spiritual counseling-- that it's less about the content, than,

as Dr. Lisbet said, about learning to reflect on, and trust the process. We've been trying to teach you about process, so that you can increasingly trust yourself in terms of what you should do in a specific situation. With my own children, there came a point when I would say to them, you know more about your situation than I do. I admire the way you think things through. You are trustworthy in yourself, and though I am here for you, I am no longer necessary. You're ready to fly, and are already soaring. That's what I would say to you, son. You're already flying, and doing it much better than you realize. Trust yourself a little bit more."

* * *

As I finish taking my "Trust myself more," I take a swallow of tea. On the one hand, I value what they're saying and it's advice, if I were a therapist, I'd give myself. But I notice fear arising. I watch it like a star brighten in the sky. Then I notice how that star creates other stars as I start to retell the story of blaming and distrusting the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet: "It's easy for them to say: 'Now, little bird, leave the nest, because we're through with you, we're leaving the country. But don't think we're deserting you. You're ready to fly. Shove, shove, push, push, now, show us you can fly. Don't worry, it's only several miles down into the abyss.'"

I take another sip of tea, and let go of the story, and just watch the stars of fear, blame, judgment. I keep focus on my breathing. I've already raised these issues and there's no reason to bring them up again.

So, I turn to my final question, where maybe they can be helpful.

"I hear what you've said. I'll try to practice what you've shown me, and I appreciate your trust in me. I just wish I trusted myself more, but we'll see, won't we?" I take a breath. "But my final question

is really the reason I came to see you in the first place. You've talked to me about my finding my piece of the cosmic puzzle, of trusting that that is my job here on earth, and then to trust that God will ensure that if we each do our piece well, somehow all the pieces will fit. Right?"

They nod, both looking at me intently.

"When I can believe that, then I say to myself my piece now is to go through all this self-scrutiny. That belief allows me to justify what I'm doing as making sense. But then I look at all the suffering in the world. Look at Karim. Look at Yadvashem and the Holocaust. Look at the dust in everyone. When you survey the world, how can you possibly believe that there is an all-good, all-powerful, all-loving God? And, with all respect to what you noted Poincaré said about doubting or believing everything, if you don't believe God is 100% all of those qualities, but only 99%, then the whole system breaks down. Then the puzzle may have flaws, and you can't completely trust anything--from yourself to other people to God. It seems to me it has to be all or nothing. But how can you look around and see all the evil and pain and suffering and really believe in that God? So, that's my question. Do you believe 100% that a 100% all good, all powerful and all knowing God exists? How can you? And if you can not, then doesn't everything fall apart?"

*

*

*

"You realize that is a two part question, yes? And each part is not uncomplicated. But I'm glad you decided to save the easy stuff until the end." The Rebbe starts laughing while picking up his tea cup, then changes his mind, and puts it down. "Let me answer you in two ways. First, let me take God out of the question. Then you're asking, given the suffering in the world, does it make any sense to turn inward and

look at cleaning my own dust, when I could be turning outward to help those in need."

"Yes. That's what I feel."

"I hear that question deep in my soul, and it's a tension I wrestle with constantly. Here's the best way I've put it together. First, again setting God aside, I believe that each of us has a responsibility to try to heal the world and make it a better place, to work toward relieving the suffering of others. There is a compelling need there, as you say, and every fiber in us says something must be done. So, I hear that side loud and clear. But sometimes those who do good deeds in the world, even with the best intentions, get so frustrated and angry at the pain and suffering they see, that unless they then take time to heal and restore themselves, they will cease to have the energy to continue what they do. Further, I also believe that sometimes their own personal dust--self-righteousness, anger--can get in the way of the good deeds, and so by taking time to work on themselves internally, they may in fact return to the world to be even more effective."

I take some notes. "That actually makes sense. But how do you know the right balance. How much time--what percentage-- should you be inward, and what percentage outward?"

"What I hear you asking is do I have some sheet music, telling you what notes to play and at what pace and time, when to take rests, when to play more quickly. Though, if I were to give you such sheet music for life, part of you would appreciate it, and part of you would resent being controlled by it, right?"

I smile. "Yes, you really do know me pretty well."

"This is where God comes in for me. I believe God provides us the ears and heart to hear and feel the suffering of others. Otherwise, where does that sense of personal responsibility to help and heal others

come from, that still small voice within that urges us to help heal ourselves, and heal the world?" I nod writing frantically, and he continues.

"Then you ask, what is our piece of the puzzle, how can we best contribute? As Dr. Lisbet knows better than I, people are different. Some are more reflective, some more action oriented. I believe each can learn from the other, but I don't think we can make each into the other, nor should we. I think we need to trust in a higher power and that each of us have different pieces to fulfill. The artist, the meditating monk in a cave in the Himalayas, the builder of schools, the relief worker in Gaza, all are pieces of the puzzle. Although I can't personally put all these pieces together—it's way too complicated and above my pay grade to figure out. I have to trust that if each one has looked within and is doing the best they can with their piece, some force larger than I am is putting it all together in a healing way, that the pieces of a 'cosmic puzzle' will fit together. All I can really do is ensure I do my piece as best I can. Let me remind you what I said in class, the wise words of Rebbe Nachman, 'Act as if everything depends on you. Know that everything depends on God.' That's the way I try to live. And that's really the best sharing I can offer."

*

*

*

I look over at the statue of Moses carrying the Ten Commandments. He looks old and tired. The stone tablets must be pretty heavy. I look at the Rebbe. He, too, looks old and tired. I'm almost sorry I asked him the question. He hasn't really addressed the question of does he trust God 100% or only 99%; nor the issue of why is there evil and unnecessary suffering in the world; and not even if there is no 100% all loving, all powerful, all knowing God, then isn't the world and all actions really meaningless—and why bother to do anything.

But what did I expect? That he had a straight pipeline to God.

* * *

Dr. Lisbet is sitting quietly, eyes closed. I guess in the God business, she defers to the Rebbe.

We all sit in silence for a time. I close my eyes, and try to settle my mind. After a moment or two. I hear the Rebbe begin a niggun. There's something sad about the song, yet strangely comforting. I peek between my eyes, and see him swaying. It's as if the tune brings him solace and strength. His face seem to relax. He looks younger and more refreshed.

I'm wondering if I should just get up and leave, allowing them to meditate in peace. I can leave the money on the coffee table. Is this the way it ends?

As I start to get up, the Rebbe opens his eyes, and motions me to sit. "If you have the time, I have a couple of stories I want to share with you. Remember what I said about tea, tigers, and strawberries."

"I've got lots of time," I say, as I sit back down with relief.

For the next three hours, he regales me with stories, jokes, wisdom, meditations. It was as if I was receiving a personal workshop from him, and alternately sat back and laughed, practiced, and took copious notes. He seemed to be making a conscious effort to fill me up before they departed, and I was ready to be filled.

Finally, as the sun starts to set, Dr Lisbet turns to me "We like to end our final therapy session by saying a conscious good-bye. Most of the time in life we end our time together with people in a more half-hazard way. But therapy provides an opportunity to practice how to say good-bye, and to explore how we've said good-bye to others in the past."

"I think that's a terrific idea, but since we may meet next week, and I may see you at your Passover Seder, why don't we wait?"

"That's fine. But we'd like you to begin thinking about that, ok?"
I make a note to write some farewell comments for them for next week,
maybe even in the form of a blessing,.

I nod to her, as the Rebbe begins one more niggun.

As the session draws to a close, the sun is setting. I thank them,
and pull out money for three sessions—which is how long I calculated this
one lasted-- and place it on the coffee table.

Dr. Lisbet picks it up, thanks me, and puts it in her pants pocket.

* * *

Then, out of a different pocket, she puts down several times that
amount.

"What is that for I ask.

"At your first session, the Rebbe and I, decided that it was
important for you to learn to go into the world and work for what you
received. You were pretty entitled, and seemed to feel that everything
in life should come to you for free. But we also made a decision that
when we felt you were ready, we would give half the money back to you."

I feel overwhelmed. The first star in the sky is gratitude. Then,
I notice a bright star of anger that I had to do so much stupid bean
cleaning, just so they could teach me a lesson. A story. Let it go, as a
star of embarrassment at my entitlement arises.

The Rebbe adds, "Let the money be a teacher, too. We invite you to
take a portion of that money, and spend it on yourself, giving yourself
something meaningful and nurturing and important to you. We also invite
you to take a portion of the money and give it as tzedaka, charity. In
that way, the money, as energy, which makes you happy, also goes into
the world, and makes others a little bit happier, too. In this way we all
continue to make the world, step by step, a better place."

I give them each a hug. I feel their embrace, and want to melt into each of them. When we let go, I feel awkward, and don't really know what to say. I look away, muttering "Thank you again. I'll see you next week."

"Shalom."

"Shalom."

*

*

*

*

*

*

1

stir my honey into the shemenet, and try to remember my dreams from last night. There are none that come to mind. I had such a calm and peaceful night's sleep. I feel refreshed, restored, hopeful. After I left the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet, I went straight to work. I felt a spring in my step that I haven't noticed since.....since I don't know when. I had hope in my heart and money in my pocket. The first thing I did was, very responsibly, give my two weeks' notice at the King David hotel With no therapy bills after next week--and they might not even charge me for the last session--I no longer need this job. Freedom. Thank the Lord. The second thing I did was, as they requested, give money--one half!--to charity. Karim was surprised, confused, and thankful when I told him I wanted him to use it for the school he's helping to build. What a good person I'm becoming.

I feel ready to tackle the final piece I've yet to write about. I've been putting it off because it felt too painful to face. But now, feeling strong from my session, this seems like the perfect way to spend the next few days. If recalling these things becomes too hard, I still have the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet to talk with next week. So, time to place the final stakes into the ground of my life

And then I will be whole, all the pieces joined in one linear format, the story completed. Past and present will be connected, and hopefully I will be ready to go forward into the future...healed, ready for new beginnings

As I begin to write, I still feel the warmth of my counselor's hugs. Trust myself, they said. Trust my process. I have nothing to fear. I stir the golden honey in a swirl through the white shemenet, scoop up a banana slice, and as a unit, place the delicious concoction in my mouth. All the parts coming together as one. Yum.

*

*

*

April 1. I really am becoming such a spiritual person.

Dawn.

I awake with gratitude. I say my morning prayer of thankfulness with regularity. Then, before beginning to eat this lovely shemenet, I say the blessing over the food. I think back to the Rebbe's teaching about the different levels of kashrut. Given that I'm eating very little these days, I value paying one step more sacred attention to the process of how I eat, and expressing gratefulness and connection to all who create the conditions that enable me to eat. The creamy white shemenet with honey has become my breakfast staple, and in the afternoon, humus. The humus looks like a creamy light tan swirled custard. I love the slightly bitter taste of humus created by putting it on pita, with some onions and tomatoes. My taste buds are beginning to return.

And now I'm doing tzedaka, by giving money to Karim and the Palestinians.

I'm pretty amazing. Physically and spiritually, my family wouldn't recognize me. I almost don't recognize myself.

The one area I'm still having some trouble with is forgiveness. Last night, before I went to sleep, I once again said my forgiveness prayers. I was hoping after the healing session with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet I'd be ready to deepen that process. But the best I can do is "I want to re-begin the process of trying to forgive those who have hurt me...."

I'm just not yet ready to forgive.

And that's where I am. Still pointing the way to where I want to be.

* * *

But this morning is another opportunity, for which I'm grateful. I feel strong, and ready to tackle the two missing sections of my journal that I have not yet written about. The days after I cut my fingers on the Kibbutz last September, and the last days in December before my fingers healed. The final pieces of my past before I can place the stake in the ground to connect me to myself.

I take another luscious bite of the shemenet, honey, and banana concoction. What a lovely breakfast ritual I've created for myself.

These are two of the most difficult pieces left to face. Still, several months later, I continue to relive that past in the present. I decide to begin with YadVaEhem, to face it as honestly as I can.

December 17. Even though it's morning, it's dark outside. Rainy and cold. A new day, I guess. I'm still here. I guess. I feel the shadows of emptiness surrounding me, outside and in. I have no reason to get up, nothing to do. I had once thought my path was to follow the secular law; then my path was to follow the religious laws. Now what am I left with?

It's interesting I'm reflecting on these questions now during this week where the Parashat is Leviticus, about laws, laws, and more laws. When I look back to me at Sixth Street, doing research for my political science pre-law class, I now clearly recognize that I was beginning to realize that even if I had the intellectual stamina and memory for the law, I didn't know if I had the strength and desire to spend my life honing adversarial differences, the front-line willingness to always be in a confrontational fray.

Strings of polysyllabic phonetically ponderous words, combining systematically to form precise, ordered phrases fill my mind: *Lex tutissima cassis sub clypel legis nemo decipitur*. The law is the safest helmet; under the shield of the law no one is deceived. Latin legal proverbs. Yet for me the very act of pursuing the society's law seems one majestic deception, a harness of legalese adversarial battles, with the casualties being often the very truth and justice, that the law was supposed to point toward.

I then had hoped that my path was to follow all the religious laws, which led me to the Orthodox venture in December at the legalistic Mea Shearim, where I was looking for God and Jewish spirituality. What I found was Halacha, the law. I felt the hollowness and obsessive absurdity of trying to follow all the ritualistic laws

as they do. That law felt similarly confining, as if religious law, which was to point the way to God, instead became a strait jacket binding and constraining.

* * *

I see so clearly the constraints and limits of religious and legal laws. Am I being too harsh, engaging in what Dr. Lisbet called my black/white non-nuanced thinking?

Doesn't human law help curb our worst impulses toward raw vengeance and enable us, in some way, to build a better society? Isn't the law intended, in its ideal formation and purpose, to protect each of us with the invention of proportional justice; a "blind," less biased, more deliberate due process, a movement from the polarity of black and white, right and wrong transformed into degrees of fault, including individual responsibility.

Is there still a ways to go? Of course. While an eye for an eye may be an improvement in that it represents proportionality rather than unbridled retribution, I don't believe that can be our end goal. I still feel there has to be more emphasis on honest dialogue with others rather than using an adversarial model to seek justice.

I also believe that mercy and forgiveness need to be incorporated into our legal system. I wonder, once more, can there be a synthesis or at least bridge building between seeming opposites?

Maybe I'm asking too much.

I have nothing as an alternative. Things seem to be closing down. I feel I've given the religious legalistic path a great college try. But my energy is nearly gone. I've run out of gas and am running on fumes.

What's left? I pull out my folder called "activities."

Hobbies: Whittle chess pieces. Too dangerous the way I feel. Work on a cross word puzzle.

Stupid and meaningless.

Mind activities. Continue daily Bible reading. Should I read Leviticus and the laws?

Pointless. The only words that make any sense now are Ecclesiasties.

Kohelet. Vanity, all is vanity.

Assignments. Long term: Finish the play for my last class at Stanford so I can graduate. Talk about procrastination. Yet to care about completing a class...how far away does that feel? And how absurd.

Short term: the assignment from Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe's class.. I take out my notes

"Notice in your own lives when you come upon a view that is "other"--that challenges you in a way that is hurtful or confusing--to see how you respond. How quickly do you become defensive? Do you immediately sing their "tone" of voice? Are you able to pause, and see the other person's viewpoint? Do you try to understand how they arrived at their belief and story, and how it serves them? For the next couple of weeks, keep a journal of any such encounters.

Since I don't see or talk to anybody, there's not much for me to write there.

Maybe I could comment on how it feels to meet me, and find me as the other. Or to realize I have no idea what I believe, no voice. I guess I'm doing their assignment, though a bit late.

Places to Visit :Mea Shearim. Done. Sanhedrin. Done. Safed. Too airy fairy. Yadvashem. Too depressing.

And that's all that's left of my life.

I try to fall back asleep, but can't. All I do is twist and turn and think how unhappy I am. Finally, I decide if I am this depressed already, how bad can it be to visit a depressing place, like YadVaShem. Maybe it will help get me out of myself and think of someone else's suffering. So I'll feel better in comparison.

As I try to become more conscious about my life, I realize that there are always intentions, of varying degrees of consciousness, that I have before undertaking any action. There are goals, thoughts, expectations, as I approach the action. If I really try to think it through, might I become aware, even before

experiencing the event, of how I imagine it might affect me, how I might feel and think differently after the event. How will it change me, if at all? With care and conscious attention, I think we can improve our predictive powers a little. But for some events, there is no way to foresee their impact.

I sit on the bus before YadVashem, the Holocaust memorial, and I wonder why am I here. I look around at others about to enter, and I wonder, why are they here? What do we expect or hope or fear will happen to us?

These are not bad questions, but I sense in them my usual style, trying to place an intellectual structure around an emotional experience, to see if I can't rationally contain it.

I notice considerable fear. Why? Perhaps because I feel I've been working so hard to piece my fragmented, confused self into some kind of coherent form. I fear that the rawness of the experience might open some collective unhealed wounds that I don't know how I can possibly understand or assimilate into a coherent worldview.

In the world I grew up in, the Titanic doesn't sink. Boys who eat their food at a restaurant get comic books as rewards. People, and the universe, are benevolent. I don't want to feel, and my family didn't want me to feel, what it means to be on the margins, to be vulnerable, dependent on the good will of others

The Holocaust was never mentioned in my family. They are not Holocaust deniers, but their attitude is what's past is past, and why stir up painful memories? Only once do I have a vague memory of hushed voices. Nana is talking, actually crying, saying Uncle Elias and his Eastern European family never rejoined her as they'd promised. Period. That's it.

I once said to my parents, after a discussion in Sunday School on Remembrance Day, "I don't want to be Jewish." When they asked why, I responded "People don't like us because we're Jewish. Why are people so mean to the Jews? Why do they want to kill us?"

They reassured me that this was a thing of the past, and wouldn't ever happen again. They pointed out how good it was to be Jewish. "Don't you like swimming at the big pool at the country club, where you have your birthday party, with all your favorite flavors of ice cream and chocolate, butterscotch, and marshmallow sauce?"

* * *

I was pretty easily convinced. How different was I, really? I was happy to have a Christmas tree; downplay my Judaism to my friends. Was that fear of their anti-Semitism? My fear of being different? I remember pride when I would hear about American's Judeo-Christian heritage. Yes, I fit. And that was our last family discussion about the topic.

I remember reading in a history class that President Eisenhower once commented on how many people were shielded from the horrors of the Holocaust through culture, geography, or history. I counted myself among the lucky to have been so shielded. I was even thankful to my family for doing so. Why shouldn't I be?

Then why am I here today?

I still remember Eisenhower's words when he wrote of his own encounter with a Nazi concentration camp:

Starvation, cruelty, ...in one room, piled up 20 or 30 naked men killed by starvation. People whose lives were ripped away from their homes, families. Mass graves when they were no longer useful. Gaunt faces and bodies, ribs sticking out, charred corpses, wasted bodies; horrific scenes.

This experience needs to be seen, ...we need to confront it to appreciate what human beings will do to other human beings; what happens if we are complicit or silent in the face of evil.....

I've tried to shield myself from the darkness of life as long as I could. But now I feel compelled to be here, a visceral, sober imperative. Just as Eisenhower said, there is a certain pain, ugliness, and darkness that needs to be faced. People still that shoot mortars at Jews, and want to kill

them, and me Darkness outside. Darkness inside.

How can you shield a child from the world's evils? How can I shield myself? The answer is you can't.

No place to run. No place to hide.

*

*

*

An isolated hilltop. YadVashem.

A monument to the suffering, the devastation in my history that part of me never really wanted to face. Now I stand directly before it.

How do we see ourselves as we stand here about to descend, to confront history's worst manifestation of anti-Semitism? We, the survivors. We, the witnesses? We, the collective victims?

Guilty? Grief-stricken? Enraged? Ever watchful? What should our attitude be? I think of the Passover words "in each generation our enemies rise up to destroy us."

Two thousand years ago, we were enslaved. Then exiled in Babylon. My great-grandparents fled purges in Russia and Germany. Where does anti-Semitism come from? Fear? Ignorance. Looking at the artifacts around me, I begin to see how one group of people is taught to hate another, a lie created to enflame hatred and justify it. Photos of caricatured features, hooked noses, long larcenous fingers grasping the globe. Hitler's *Mein Kampf* repeating stories of Jews using Christian blood to make Matzos. So much time, energy, and creativity expended to create hate and ugliness between humans. *Judenrein*, cleansing of the Jews. The protocols of the Elders of Zion, a phony document of a Jewish plot to dominate the world. There is no faster way to create group solidarity than to find a common enemy. They do it? Do we? What a pathetic commentary on human nature. Are we all-- except for a few brave righteous

people--basically amoral animal?. If you remove a few staples of civilized life, will almost all of revert to a Hobbesian state of nature, a war of all against all? Lord of the Flies?

How do we as Jews, I as a person, come to terms with this? Does it forever become a source of personal and collective morbidity lodged in our soul? Look at what we have had to endure as a people. Grandpa Dave's family fled from Russian pogroms. Grandpa \$--ugh, am I just perpetuating the stereotype--fled from Germany. Jews were blamed by Stalin as being avaricious capitalist financiers. They are also blamed at times for being socialists and communists. They were blamed before Israel existed, and now blamed as Zionists because it exists. There is anti-Semitism in countries where Jews exist, and in countries where no Jews live. How do we, I, keep from turning this attitude toward us into a victimhood mentality, a constant hand wringing of self-pity? That I, as a Jew, am a victim. That I, as a person, am a victim?

Is there some part of me that has been running from identifying as Jew because of fear? Probably yes. But is there something now that can draw me toward being Jewish other than so "Hitler doesn't win," good old Jewish guilt.

What does all this say about trust? How can you ever trust others who, at some deep level, may be out to get me, just because of my religious birth identity? Is there at least a kernel of evil in all of us? Then I can't even trust myself. How is it possible to live without distrusting everyone around me, and even distrusting almost all parts of myself? Isn't this like being dead while alive, more animal than human? And yet now I have not only personal reasons for my distrust---dad, mom, Mery-- but societal and historical reasons as well.

I overhear a woman say to the person next to her "Don't trivialize Holocaust survivors by saying we are all survivors." Do I have a right to even have these thoughts, to try to draw lessons and understanding from this event?

How is it possible to imagine a life of joy, peace, and

Hope in the face of these monstrous acts? Is it sacrilegious to do so. To not do so?

* * *

Darkness. One and a half million children murdered.

Flickering lights represent each of their lost lives.

I experience a numbing pain. I feel helpless and vulnerable. So many innocent lives meaninglessly destroyed.

Elie Wiesel said that among those lives lost, there might have been someone destined to write words so great and powerful that they would eradicate hatred from the human heart; but then he noted "someone did write such words--Anne Frank, in her diary--and hatred is still alive and well."

I imagine a mother trying to protect her children, hiding them behind her, as they are torn from her. The next day she asks the guard where they are. He points toward the smoke.

* * *

When I was younger, I was always the rescuer in my life dreams. When I imagined my elementary school, Prairie School, crashing down about us, I could see my then 6th grade girlfriend (who didn't know of our relationship) screaming in fear. But I stayed cool, collected, and was quick witted enough to somehow magically save the two of us. I knew a reward awaited me once I pulled her outside, her everlasting devotion and affection. I would be her hero.

On those rare occasions when the Holocaust came into my mind, I'd remember stories and tales of survivors who managed through cunning, trickery, intelligence, luck, bravery and great heroism to somehow make it out alive. That's how I'd see myself. Each story, forged in pain, yet always ending in survival.

But what calculations and sacrifices would I have been willing to make to save myself? I'd be strong and fit, so I would have been selected as a worker.

Is there any work I wouldn't have done to spare my life? Would I have helped shovel corpses? Served as a kapo, policing my own people?

Would I have fought back, or acquiesced just to stay alive? Where would my heroism have been then? Too many difficult questions. I can't even imagine. Once you start down this path, and break through the denial and hiding, there is no out.

How is it possible to survive and face this horror honestly without feeling like a victim, without blaming the victims for not fighting back more, for compliance, for being passively co-opted? If you can't hide from the suffering, how can you experience it without making victimhood, perpetual loss, grief, guilt and death the basis of your identity?

Even now, months later the questions still remains. Ever the student, I turned to books for others' thoughts and guidance. I turn to my notes. Nelly Sach, Nobel Laureate in literature, 1966, tried to express the feeling that part of ourselves dies each time we face the Holocaust: "We rehearse tomorrow's death even today while the old dying still wilts within us." I understand what she means. But how can you live like that without ending up with o what the historian Salo Baron spoke of as the "lachrymose theory of Jewish history"-- seeing Jewish history through tears. Or the characterization of the scholar Simon Rawidowicz who called Jews the "ever dying people." I feel less alone in my feelings by reading these thoughts, but also anguished, as if in group therapy where everyone is suffering agonizing pain, but there is no guide to help us diminish our distress.

No answers, never any answers.

I continue writing about the Square of Hope.

*

*

*

As I sit in the Square of Hope, my thoughts and feelings are a jumble. But of one thing I'm sure. I'm glad I'm here.

Yes, glad. Does that make any sense? Glad because I know that if I want to face myself and life without any illusions, then an event such as this has to be faced, too. It happened. It is part of life. How can I create a worldview, an understanding of human nature by ignoring it? I can't.

My mind is racing, and I feel the need to write some notes if only to create a more ordered chaos. I feel guilty at even the idea of wanting to step back. But I also feel I have to create some distance from all the emotions and chaos within me. Maybe that's all right. Maybe for me it's about letting in unfiltered events, experiences, feelings, then taking the time to sort them out and try to regain a sense of control. Maybe that's why I want to have some understanding of the nature of reality, to create some categories, to help me from being overwhelmed by events.

I guess one danger is pulling back too far and becoming so detached here is not enough feeling. But I'm learning from experience that another danger for me is too much feeling, too raw emotions, leaving me overwhelmed and unable to cope with loss and suffering.

I find myself saying a prayer to God. Please help me understand this. Please show me ways to learn from this that are honoring, and not too self-indulgent. Though this is not about me, in some ways it is only through my experience of it that I can address it.

I guess the first question is can there be any positive lessons, any "square of hope," any meaning from this event that doesn't sound trivial, platitudinous, or demeaning? One lesson is the importance of standing up to evil. In hindsight, it is easy to see how many passive, denying bystanders did nothing and allowed evil to flourish—it is easy now to see the dangers of human complacency, denial, fear, which can allow a holocaust to occur. This is true of Jew and non Jew alike.

Then there are those whose higher nature shone forth. Jews who shared food with others when there was nearly nothing to eat and they themselves were starving;

"Righteous gentiles" who stood up to evil, despite the threat to their own lives, and sheltered Jews. Both inspire people to resist injustice and offer succor in times of great evil and suffering.

* * *

I find a scrap of paper, poorly written, stuck in my journal, the one entry I did make in December while I was at YadVaShem. I hadn't yet been cleared to write because of the injury to my hand, but I tried.

While sitting in the Square of Hope, I pull out my journal to make some notes. My first effort to write since I cut my fingers. It feels rough, scratchy, painful. But the whole situation is so distressing, I am completely overwhelmed. Who was it that said in the face of the Holocaust words are inadequate? I put my head in my hands and sit. This is not the time or place to recommence my journal.

Over these past several months, I've tried to keep myself from just turning away from the implications of YadVaShem, but have been unable to face it directly. I've told myself it's too much to confront, too raw, too far beyond anything I can understand. I realize this level of horror can easily become an excuse to say, oh, I have too much on my own plate, so many of my own issues and problems I have to address.

So, I've made it part of my learning, a little each day. I've placed notes and thoughts on additional readings-- Wiesel's Night, Anne Franks' Diary, Rubenstein's After Auschwitz, Wiesenthal's the Murderers Among Us; Frankl's Man's Search for Meaning, Boenhoeffler's Letters and Papers from Prison--in a folder. Now, after my session with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet yesterday, I feel ready to open those notes, and try once again to once again look at this monstrosity squarely without being overwhelmed.

But how do you apply lessons of letting the silt settle --big mind game, stars in the night sky-- to such an atrocity? How do you pretend to have xu-jing, centeredness, in facing this cataclysm? And what does dongjing mean--the perfect response for a situation--when we know there really wasn't a way to act--either resistance or accommodation--both ended in death.

I admire the resistance fighters, the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto—Jews who physically fought, who took up arms, even though their fate was usually the same as those who acquiesced. I admire their defiance and the courage they showed. Yet, at the time, it is possible to at least wonder whether fighting in the face of overwhelming odds might not be self-defeating, raising the ire of the perpetrators, causing even more deaths. I think of examples of non-violent responses—Gandhi in India against the British, the Dalai Lama with the Chinese. And in the US, Martin Luther King. In retrospect, nothing would have helped appease Hitler. But how do you know at the time?

Clearly with twenty-twenty hindsight, I would agree with Bonhoeffer, who, even though a devout Christian theologian, a pacifist, and a non-violent lover of life, plotted to have Hitler assassinated. To oppose Hitler was to fight against an explicitly racist, totalitarian state. Bonhoeffer's decision challenges my views of pure non-violence but makes sense to me nonetheless. If I'm honest, though I fear acting violently and ragefully, I was secretly very proud of Israel's stunning victory in 1967. I like the image of the proud, powerful, fearless Jewish fighter.

I can well understand my grandfather's view, and those of many in Israel, and many Jews, that you have to be self-reliant, strong and powerful, even aggressive, to ensure your survival, that you can't rely on others to take care of you. No one will do it for you. I wonder how much my own pacifistic leanings are influenced by my fears of recognizing my father's anger and violence in me?

I know this isn't all about me. But I am trying to figure out how I want to react to and live in the world. There is so much I haven't figured out that roil the waters, keeping me from seeing clearly: my respect for those who espouse a non-violent approach, yet my fear of being a passive wuss, a victim, taken advantage of; my admiration of strength in myself and my fear of being a rageful, angry man; the recognition of dust --in me and others-- and the need for its containment;

and the recognition of how little we know ourselves and our motivations and how hard it is too therefore trust ourselves or anyone else.

How do I know when I'm acting non-violently from fear and cowardice, or when I'm acting violently from misplaced anger when compromise and dialogue would work? I still believe in the principles I framed in Eilat about the sanctity of human life, and the need for a non-violent, rational and compassionate approach to dealing with people. But evil does occur. So how should I think about human nature? Are we pure beings at a deep level, with evil as "misplaced or hidden light?" Or are we actually evil, needing the constraints and threats of societal law and religious law to contain us? And even sometimes violence and force?

I read Wiesenthal's account of being liberated from Auschwitz, still wearing his faded uniform with a yellow J in a yellow-red double triangle on his arm, seeing a large gray tank with '11th armored division' written on it in white, the Stars and Stripes waving on the gun turret, his wanting to reach out to touch a star, but being too weak. Then he feels "the rough texture of an olive drab American uniform brush up against my bare arms." I swell with pride in America. I feel respect and admiration at the soldier's courage; happy at Wiesenthal's liberation, and fury at his captors.

What am I left with as a philosophy? A non-violent, but non naive, self-reliant pacifism? With allowances for exceptional circumstances? A universalist philosophy with allowances for particularistic patriotism?

* * *

Why am I struggling to write and create a coherent philosophy, and to ensure that that philosophy can incorporate the events of the Holocaust? I do know that others' writing helps me feel less alone as I wrestle and struggle to understand and find meaning—if that's possible—in what happened. But maybe the effort to impose meaning is just a way to hide behind words and stories. Maybe it demeans the actual experience and suffering of those who lived and died.

Am I trying to face and write about my experience at YadVaShem too soon? Elie Wiesel, who lost his sister and family in Auschwitz, made a vow not to write anything about the Holocaust for ten years after the fact. Then he wrote *Night* to bear witness, to create illumination "of man's darkest hour and broad shadows the holocaust continues to cast over humanity." He said that each of us needs to learn to speak for those who have no voice, to find a way to honor the victims, to remind ourselves of ways we can help, and vow this will never happen again.

I one day be able to speak for someone else? Mac and the Sixth Street denizens? Karim and the Palestinians? I know this is a lesson--finding a way to be of service to others. But I don't yet know how to apply it. What does it mean for me? What is my piece of the puzzle?

For Anne Frank, her piece of the puzzle was writing a diary, telling her story. Is that my task, to tell my story? I think of my interminable reflection and writing trying to find my own voice. Is that enough?

* * *

Certainly what people faced at that time puts my tiny, insignificant, personal trauma in perspective. Victor Frankl, while engaged in forced labor sees those around him tortured, abused and starved to death, witnessing family members and friends murdered. I should be able to come to terms with the paltry suffering of my existence--oh, poor baby, your family isn't being nice to you; your girlfriend left you; you're not sure what you want to do with your life, is the law really for you? From the perspective of YadVaShem, it's upsetting, even humiliating, and embarrassing to realize how paltry my issues are.

But I don't want to end this reflection with self-castigation. There needs to be a Square of Hope. Camus once said, "Where there is no hope, one must invent it." And there are stories of such great compassion, courage, and even affirmation that emerge from the Holocaust, that I believe there is hope, for me, for all of us. Children at a concentration camp in Terezin, Poland, planted a tree and kept it alive with their own water rations. At the end of the war, the

few children remaining planted it next to human crematoriums. Today it stands 25 feet tall. When I read about these children and this tree, I feel a renewed desire to seek to transform those parts of me that lead to hatred, anger, violence; to overcome my sloth and self-indulgence; my greed, all my narrow places, my dust. And then be a better vehicle to "serve water" to others.

I don't know where I heard this, possibly from Dr. Lisbet, or maybe Reb Jonathan, but it applies: "Everything is in our hands. It is up to us to take the piece of dust we all are and make it into a jewel of creation." I like the idea that from dust can come something holy. Maybe it's like replanting a tree next to the stump in Dr. Lisbet's gestalt exercise. I've been cut down, but I can regrow, and give shade and comfort as well. And maybe be cut down again, and be used to provide shelter and warmth. I remember someone once saying "Squander yourself for a good cause." I need to be willing to do that, not be afraid to be cut down, not be afraid even to die.

Dr Lisbet told a story of a Zen master facing a fierce Samurai warrior. The master sat meditating while the warrior yelled at him. "Don't you know who I am? I could run you through with this sword without blinking." The master looked up, peacefully, and said, "Don't you know who I am? I could let you run your sword through me without blinking." Of course in that story the warrior realized the master's stronger courage, bowed, and became his disciple. That's the way I want things to turn out. But regardless of the outcome, I certainly respect the faith, strength and courage to face death with such calmness, That is still an area I need to work on.

* * *

I leave the Square of Hope. What do you do after you've "visited" the Holocaust? Do I return to my outdoor café and have some tea? How do you recreate normalcy? Can you? Should you?

Everything seems trivial and meaningless. I wish I were a small child, and my loving, intact family, as I once knew them, were here to comfort me. Since I

left the kibbutz over two months ago, it's been impossible for me to receive mail, and I head over to the American Express office hoping there might be some mail for me from my family. There are three letters, one from mom, one from dad, and one from Richard of all people.

I place them in my back pocket, as I head toward my regular outdoor cafe for some lunch. I want to try to re-connect with my routines. At one level, it seems absurd-- how do you eat as if everything is normal. But what is the alternative?

I sit, trying to decide what type of liquid yogurt drink to order. I can't decide, and my inability to choose creates fury and helplessness in me. I can't make a decision on the most trivial question, between orange and mocha. The decision is too painful, too meaningless. I remember, when telling my professor how I'd lost my sandal in Carmel and then bursting into tears, his saying that the sandal obviously had some greater significance and symbolic value. What's going on here?

I feel my perspective on life has been shattered. An already fragile and fragmented mind, has just been broken into thousands of additional pieces. I realize this is not about what I'm choosing, but about making a choice. It's about whether I can say, somehow, everything is ok enough, life is still worth living, , and I'm going to go forward.

I order hummus, pita, and a small salad. Tea and lemon.

I open Richard's letter first.

So, how's the wandering Jew? Getting any tennis in? Practicing your grenade lobs? Ha, joke! I imagine you can't find the balls to play with, right? What a racquet your life is.

The food comes, and I begin eating.

I would like to reedit the past, just for the sake of my present. That sequence of action seems so anomalous now, to get food and eat it after YadVaShem. But what's the alternative. Am I feeling survivor guilt? How does that help those

who died? I wish I'd at least taken a pause before I ate, to at least utter a blessing, To feel grateful for all who ssisted in preparing that food that I might sit and eat. Thank you. May this food nourish me, and may I in turn provide nourishment and service to others." No, that wouldn't help anybody in the past. Maybe it helps me in the present. I'm keeping our tradition alive. Maybe it's a necessary, but crude way to affirm life, as I try to metaphorically hobble forward.

Actually, though I'm embarrassed to admit it, I feel hungry, and the meal sounds good. I leave my room, and head to the same café, and order the same dish.

* * *

When it arrives, I say the blessing.

Hey, let me tell you about an amazing experience I had the other day with a hot chick. There was an Abstract Expressionists exhibit in San Francisco, touting the rivalry over the last twenty five years between them and the Pollock and company New York school. Some of the best non-representational, highly gestural artists of the California School of Fine Arts were represented. Not like my Modiglianis, but I like to stay au courrant.

Anyway, I'm driving up in my XKE--by the way, what did you ever do with that red American heap of yours--dump it in the garbage?--hahaha-- and I decide, on a lark, to take a little meander down Sixth Street, to see if all the pathos, poetry, and tears you shed in your honors political science paper have made any difference. Just to let you know, it's still a mess. Did you really think that crying about it would make any difference? Nah, we both know it's just our friend Nietzsche's eternal recurrence. Someone's gotta be poor, that's just the way it is. Glad it's not me. Hope it doesn't become you. You and your pipe dreams! Don Quixote!

After my detour I pull up to the gallery. Valet parking. Very hoity toity . There was a spiffy bright red Mercedes convertible 180, mint condition. Maybe '62, and kind of a hot chick driving it. When she got out, the first thing I saw were these long legs and a short, tight skirt. Narrow waisted, a real beaut. I kept following her lines up. Man, talk about busty, and on a narrow, trim, svelte body. Woo. Dressed immaculately, very high society, Sachs Fifth Avenue would be my guess. Longish fingers, nails done immaculately, pale pink--I notice these things--; stylish Judith Lieber handbag--that's big bucks--this was definitely a high maintenance woman, one worthy of my efforts.

The valet was quick, too. Gallantly offered his hand which she took as she stepped out. I could see him looking her up and down, and watching her legs part as she got out of the car. Bet he had an eyeful!

I think to myself, poised, rich, Mercedes, interested in art, hair coiffed perfectly, make-up carefully applied. Yum, as you would say. I felt fate was knocking at my door.

I followed her in, and we started talking about some of the pieces in the exhibit. She thought the work from this period-- Corbett, Smith--is some of the most liberated and liberating forms of expressionism that have ever been done. To be truthful, though it may be avant garde, it's not my cup of tea. What I really thought was that this stuff was something I could paint if I were blindfolded, or had my pet lab walk through paints onto a canvas. But I have to admit this beaut was also very knowledgeable. Brains and body.

I knew that clearly sharing this perspective wouldn't have been the right move, given that I wanted to put the make on her. So, I just said, yes, it's fascinating. Reflects our times, doesn't it? We're living in a great epoch of American cultural history. I could see she was interested, so I continued. Have you noticed the way jazz has evolved from traditional Dixieland into bebop? I really laid it on. Kerouac's work on the road, combining soul searching and sexual liberation; Allen Ginsberg's "Howl;" the Fillmore, Joplin, Hendrix. Amazing times.

I could tell we were connecting. She pointed out how hard it was for the few women artists of that period to establish themselves. She liked Nancy Glenn's vibrancy. She was definitely intelligent. I could see she was a "libber" too. Not my preference, but I can handle it. She also had a fine eye for cars. She told me she'd noticed my XKE, and what a cool car it was.

Just as things were about to go to the next level, an old, not very attractive man came over and put his arm protectively around her. I thought it might have been her father. She turned to him, put her arm around him and gave him a kiss which was not at all fatherly, saying brightly, "Let me introduce you to an art collector. I'm sorry, I didn't get your name." I introduced myself, and she says, "And my name is Elizabeth."

At the time, I didn't make the connection. But let me go on. It turns out she's dating the owner of the gallery, a very successful art dealer and collector. He'd bought her the car as a little present, and had given her accounts at several exclusive boutique shops. He wasn't at all ashamed about bragging about what he had purchased for his "little girl." I felt flustered and frustrated listening to the braggart. I wondered if all her time flirting with me was just a performance for the old rooster. Or was she trying to get me to buy something at his gallery? Finally he left, but she stayed behind.

I knew I didn't have a chance, but that's the kind of fool I am. I told her I'd just graduated from Stanford, and she mentioned she'd briefly dated someone who was a student from there. Then she said your name. I was shocked. I'd never met your Elizabeth, and anyway, I thought her name was Mery, and for heaven's sake, she didn't look at all like that dowdy, chunky clunkily-dressed woman in the picture you showed me. She was much more poised, mature, confident, and thinner. And wow, was she dressed. And that car. I thought she was a poor, unemployed waitress! Not in this present incarnation!

I mentioned I was a friend of yours.

I thought I saw a tinge of blushing embarrassment, but I'm not sure. In any case, she quickly regained her composure, said to say hi when I wrote, and hoped your adventures in Israel were going well.

Oh well, easy come (joke), easy go.

Your tennis buddies miss your backhand (maybe not!) here at the Farm. In any case, it's almost time for all of us to scatter in our different directions to the far corners of the earth. I think I'll go to Paris for a while, then back to South Africa, where my dad is panting for me to take over the family business, so he and mummy can do some more traveling. I'm in no rush. Life's an oyster, as they say.

Toodles, oh wanderer. Hope you find what you're looking for...
As ever, Richard XKE, Esq.

* * *

I put the letter down, and look at my half eaten plate of humus and salad. I take a sip of tea. The humus, sitting in the sun, has a dark brown crustiness to it. I stir it, watching the flakes tear off and mix with some greenish white onions I shred into it.

I look at my fellow sojourners at the coffee shop, eating, conversing. I watch their expressions and hear voices that make noises I don't understand. Their faces take on contorted, almost grotesque shapes as they talk.

I look back at the hummus. Its texture and color remind me of two different contents I've seen in a toilet bowl. Once, the summer of 1955, when my father held my head as I puked. The second, when you make a soft, light brownish turd, and it swirls around in the water before departing down the toilet into the sewer lines.

Shit.

Beth. Shit.

* * *

Now my life is complete. It's the darkest time of the year. I'm all alone the week before Christmas. This is just the message I need right now. Am I jealous because I'm not fully over Elizabeth, and don't like the idea of her being with someone else? No, it's because I feel betrayed. I shouldn't have trusted Mery, that hypocritical Judas who preached love and simplicity and compassion and then

abandoned me for materialism and a Mercedes and an old rich guy, leaving me to sit here by myself in Israel with no appetite.

I can't trust my one "friend," Richard. He knew his "Mery sighting" would wound me. I detected plenty of gloating in this letter. He seemed to savor each cruel detail.

I'm feeling shock, surprise, disappointment, and self-pity. Useless emotions. Maybe I'm reading too much into Richard's letter. I take a breath. My thinking is if I read his letter again, slowly and carefully, trying to bring a soft, healing attitude toward its contents, I can calm myself down, remember the lessons from Sinai, practice some of the process of forgiveness I was unable to do last Yom Kippur.

What are the real issues here?

As I re-read the letter, while breathing calmly, my feelings do change. Shock and surprise and disappointment and self pity give way. . . and are replaced by anger and hatred and rage.

*

*

*

I feel for the two remaining letters. From my parents. I don't even want to open them. I certainly can't trust them, my abusive father and my crazy, guilt-inducing suicidal mother.

I think of Richard's comments about Sixth Street. I certainly can't trust my country, a cruel, inhumane, capitalist society that allows people to rot on the sidewalks like discarded refuse, to care for the poor.

I hear the mortar fire exploding in the distance. Not directly aimed at me, but isn't it, in a way? How can I trust those--whom I don't even know-- who are trying to kill me?

And the lesson from YadVashem? That there is evil in all hearts. Sometimes hidden, or repressed, but ever present. How can you trust anyone or anything when there is such a monstrously evil side of human nature that can destroy so many innocent lives.

Is there any reason to go on living in such a dark, ugly, brutal world?

*

*

*

Darkness at noon. Maybe my penultimate darkest hour. A week before I was to go to Bethlehem and finally sit down and start writing in as coherent a way as I can about whether it is worth going on, giving myself nine months to decide. Well, I'm half way there. What's my evaluation so far? Is there anything that has happened in the last four months that gives me hope and reason for living?

Maybe the easiest person to begin with is Richard.

Is it the message, or the messenger that is at fault? Yes, I was angry at Richard for being a callous messenger. But what did he really do wrong? He sent that letter six months after Elizabeth and I broke up, after a two month relationship. I never really shared with him how painful that time was for me. I always tried to keep a calm, carefree happy appearance. Like in tennis, I didn't want him to know I was vulnerable. So, why be angry at him for his giving me an update on Mery? It's actually curiously interesting--a Mercedes, expense accounts--an intriguing revealing insight into who Mery was, or has become. And Richard is just being Richard.

I no longer have a relationship with Elizabeth. To him, it's just an interesting story, a way to connect with who I was in the past, for he has no idea who I am now. I know what the Rebbe and Dr L would say, "Put him--and her-- in your nightly forgiveness prayer, "for hurts caused me, intentionally or unintentionally, by his thought, word, or deed."

Slow progress, but progress nonetheless. All because perspective and attitude changes. It's fascinating how what we see changes depending on our perspective, from hummus to swimming to Mery. It seems it's less the event and the person, and more how we see and respond.

*

*

*

I feel sick.

And enraged at Elizabeth. What a fucking hypocritical, deceptive bitch. I hear her questions still echoing in me: why are you so attracted to societal acclaim, why are you so materialistic—you're obsessed with your expensive car—rather than the world of the spirit? What good does your study of law do when people are starving? She made me question and challenge all my values, and then, she leaves me alone, confused, abandoned, while she ends up driving her new shiny Mercedes, in her new fashionable clothes. I sit here alone, poor, cleaning pots for a living, wearing raggedy clothes. On some stupid religious quest that I thought she would value.

Beth. Shit. Hypocritical, fucking Beth. She is full of shit.

* * *
I push my plate away. I am no longer hungry. But I don't want to get up to back to my room. I just sit, like a functionless vegetable. After some passage of time, I remember the other two letters, one from mom, dated Nov 20, sent over a month ago, right before Thanksgiving. I was still in Eilat, two weeks before climbing Sinai. Where did all the spiritual understanding and revelation go in a month? Dad's letter is dated December 13, just last week.

I open mom's first.

Dear Son

Thanksgiving is next week, and we will all be having a lovely turkey dinner. No spaghetti! I remember how upset you were when I broke the routine that one year. Never again. We will miss.

I wanted you to know how proud you should be of your father. All his life it's been a dream of his to surpass his father legally, and finally he may have come close. Your father appeared before the Supreme Court of Kansas. I know you think I sometimes don't give your father credit, and make up things to put him in a negative light so I am enclosing a copy of the Supreme Court ruling. Isn't he amazing!

I am very happy with my new husband Reuben. He is a fine, hard-working, moral, upstanding man. What a refreshing change.

Thanks for your round robin. I still don't completely understand what a nice Jewish boy from Kansas City is doing in Israel. But if that isn't bad enough, what's he doing studying the New Testament? Well, my daddy, in between watching for red birds, says to tell you he understands you well. And I guess I did have my stint at Notre Dame.

But that was for the French, not the Catholicism. Oh well, it's all too confusing for me.

We'll be thinking of you with love at Thanksgiving. And yes, there will be cranberries, too.

Love, MOM

PS I just heard your dad is unemployed again. He just quit--so he says--his latest job at Merrill Lynch.

I thumb through the pages mom has xeroxed. Dad had borrowed money from a bank, then found ways to say he didn't really have to pay it back. The bank sued him. He'd lost in the lower courts; appealed; lost in the he appellate court; appealed; and now lost in the state Supreme Court. Words used to describe his behavior were condemnatory. What he'd done was obviously deceitful, fraudulent, full of trickery. Yet he'd kept fighting, either because he hoped the bank would back down, or because he really thought he was right.

He's pathetic. And frankly, mom is pathetic for sending this to me, with her sarcastic, mean-spirited letter. I knew as I was reading it that she couldn't possible really be praising him, couldn't want me to be proud of him. How can the laws in Leviticus say as a commandment Honor and revere thy father and mother? A pox on both of them.

Re-reading these letters shows me that the work that I've been doing with Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe over the past several months has had an effect. Not only is it easy to forgive Richard, but I notice that while reading mom's letter, the anger is largely absent toward both mom and dad. Not every part of them is worthy of honor, of that I have no doubt. But I have more sympathy for them, two confused, struggling people who mess up a lot, don't really have much self-understanding, and never were able to heal their own bitterness, especially mom towards dad, and dad toward Grandpa \$ (perhaps a shorthand I should dispense with; replace with Julius?) Four months later, they seem more like little kids to be pitied than ogres I have to battle.

There is some relief, because I don't want to carry that kind of fury around in me. It's ugly, useless, and even counterproductive. Also, as I've seen more clearly in therapy, each of them did give me some positive things: mom the desire for learning and reflection, my dream journals; dad, well, the guy y has perseverance, a certain core of inner toughness. Though not used for very ennobling causes, perhaps I can internalize and learn from his doggedness, and find better goals to which to put it.

* * *

And what about Elizabeth Mery?

Take a breath. Remember the Rebbe and Dr L. talking about "right speech:" care in our use of words about others. I am not a victim. I am not a victim. I am not a victim.

Who knows who Mery really is now, four months after one snap shot sighting, reported by Richard, which may or may not have been accurate even at the time. And who she is--or was--is no longer relevant to me. She is past.

I remember the story of the finger and the moon. Could Beth be like the finger pointing to the moon? As Dr Lisbet said, tbe careful not to confuse the finger (that which points) for the moon (that which is your goal). What if Elizabeth Mery was just the carrier, the bearer of a message? Do I value that message independent of her, and even independent of whether she lives it or not? Was it the right message for me?

In my heart, though I am not happy, I feel the answer is yes, I did need to be challenged, to look beyond the fingers of the world, to at least seek the moon. I need to choose what I believe. I'd like to believe it would have happened at some point in my life, that I wouldn't have remained forever in my castle-like shell. Then Elizabeth was merely a catalyst, helping me birth and grow as I was intended to all along. She was right to make me ask tough questions. And I was right to open myself to this new path, which may have already been within me: the

law of love above secular law. Maybe that's what I am, just another finger, voice in the wilderness pointing the way to the path of love.

I think back to Sinai. There I felt I experienced and saw the moon. Elizabeth in some way led me there. I can thank her, say good-bye, and stop blaming her when I am feeling sad. It's not her fault any longer. I no longer need her as someone to blame. It's long past time to say goodbye. Do I love her still? I don't even know what that means. Maybe for the longest time I was just in love with the idea of being in love. Yes, I love her still. In some funny way. I feel sorry for her, too. I know her suffering, even if she looks shiny on the outside. I truly hope, wherever she is now, she's happy.

*

*

*

Richard as a messenger; Mery as a messenger. Even mom and dad as messengers. I remember the Rebbe saying Malachi, the last book of the Jewish Bible, is a Hebrew word that means both messenger and angel. Messengers are angels that bring us spiritual messages. I hear Dr. Lisbet saying, "The world is a university for the soul." How wise I would be if I could take every event as a message from an angel and try to find it's spiritual meaning.

*

*

*

I'm back at the beginning, in darkness and confusion, back in the wilderness. All traces of the joy and direction I thought I felt at Sinai have disappeared. I've just taken too many body blows. Richard, Elizabeth, Mom, Dad. Anyone could knock me over and out. And the only reason I went to see if I had any mail was to reconnect with something familiar --family and friends-- after YadVashem.

Now what?

Everything feels like it's coming to an end.

And at the end I'm at the beginning, a little baby, removed from the womb, orphaned and alone, awakening to find myself in a place of utter darkness and confusion. How do you go forward after experiencing a place where the

flickering lights in the darkness represent children gassed and killed?

** * **

It's dusk, early evening, and I don't want to go back to the silence of my room, but I feel too raw to stay out in public. I put the letters away, and retreat to my bed early.

I find myself rolling around sleepless. The covers and comforted don't hide or bring comfort. Nor do my family, family, friends, country. The image of firing mortars--pther people--who want to kill me. Who or what does that leave to trust?

Only myself and God are left, and we know the former is suspect, with all my demons, self-deception, anger, hard heartedness, lack of trust and unwillingness to forgive. Who's the real hypocrite, Mery or me? I say I'm on a journey of love and compassion, that I want to be someone who "serves water", but I can't sleep because I'm so filled with hatred, fear, distrust and anger

What an illusion that I'm making progress. I find no Square of Hope within me. I began in darkness, and, if possible, it's even darker now.

** * **

I fall asleep, and dream that I'm on trial, sitting on the witness stand. The bench is empty. There is no judge. The courtroom is dark.

At the far end, a door opens, and an indistinguishable form begins to walk towards me. I watch the shadows cast on the floor as the person approaches. He is lame. The light source is from the door, and it is impossible to see his face clearly.

He walks still closer, shadow preceding form.

He opens the gate which separates the spectators from the trial proceedings, and identifies himself as the cross-examiner.

He closes his eyes, as if in final reflection, or prayer, then, when he opens them, commences his assault, his words like sharpened stilettos, piercing and bloodying me. He relentlessly points out each of my sins, my crimes.

All night this continues. Dawn breaks, and the court begins to fill with light.

I look up. There is no cross examiner. Only sunlight reflected in a mirror.

* * *

I awaken, and it is still dark outside. As I close my eyes, I remember my commitment at Sinai to "serve water." I fall back asleep trying to figure out what that can possibly mean in a world where a Holocaust could occur.

* * *

Sleep returns, and with it a new dream. This time I'm in an ice cream store, ordering a hot fudge and butterscotch sundae with whipped cream and bananas and a cherry on top. The waiter brings me only a scoop of vanilla ice cream. I am disappointed, but stay calm and ask for the rest of my order. He brings only the fudge sauce. I start to get angry, as my ice cream is beginning to melt, and what I want is to have the perfect bite involving all the necessary ingredients.

But for some reason, in addition to the anger, I also find some smirky humor at his inefficiency, especially since I see that I am the only one in the room being served. I should put a dunce hat on his head. He can't even get one order right? What a complete idiot. Black humor turns to compassion, as I imagine what his life must be like. Someone so incompetent can't be a very happy person.

I then notice that there are several people preparing larger platters of food and drink, which they are carrying to a cavernous adjoining banquet hall. I feel lonely and resentful at not being invited. My anger returns. Those are probably the efficient waiters, and I get stuck with the dunce. I start to ask for the rest of my order. But you can get honey from a rock. I look for a different waiter, but they are all too busy to notice me.

I push my ice cream away, get up, and go to find the supervisor to ask for my whipped cream and other accoutrements. Once I find him, however, for some

inexplicable reason, all I ask him is if I can help carry some of the platters to the dining room. He says no, not to worry, and apologizes that they're so busy serving the "main guests."

I persist, he relents, and I am allowed to carry a tray of water into a large, banquet hall, with a myriad of round, elegant tables, each illuminated by candles. I feel proud to be in the main room, even though it is empty, save for the other waiters and waitresses. There is a thick, plush white carpet that provides a comforting cushion with each step, and creates a stillness to my walk.

I place my tray of water glasses gingerly on the table. Unfortunately, when I set down the tray, a bit of water from one glass spills. I look around. Since no one seems to have noticed, I try at first to just ignore the spilled water, telling myself that it's just a small amount, and will dry on its own.

Then I decide it might make a stain, which would be evidence of my incompetence--and laziness-- and I'd better wipe it up. I take a napkin, and as I start to pat it dry, I wonder if by doing so I'm not really being a good person, but rather trying to hide my guilt and cover up my incompetence. I also wonder if I'm making things worse, for now both the tablecloth and the napkin will be wet.

When the napkin I'm using touches the water, the water becomes a blood wine red, and the original small amount starts to expand. I see that it is about to spill over onto the floor, and I put one hand with a napkin on the table to block it, and another hand with a napkin on the floor to catch any that might fall.

Some of the red liquid begins to drip over the side. Now, my hands, the napkin, the table cloth, and the floor are all covered with blood. I realize this blood is actually indelible ink and all my motions are part of a story that I'm writing. And with each action, I create more havoc and chaos, and bloody more things.

*

*

*

I awaken, and now the sun is beginning to rise.

As I lie in bed, reflecting on my dreams, I feel a sickly smile crossing my face. If all I have left to trust is me and God, my dreams are reinforcing my conscious mind, affirming that I am are both suspect and a suspect.

In some ways, I'm my own harshest critic. In spite of the Fifth Amendment, I am a witness against myself. My life seems like a recurring attempt to justify my actions to myself, against a standard, which I haven't established, and which I can't yet evolve. I am the witness, trying to explain myself to others, at the same time that I am the prosecutor demanding I defend myself. Once again, I am the attacker, the attacked, and the battleground.

Even when I try to serve water, to be helpful, to overcome my egocentricity and self-pleasure--ice cream, whipped cream--I fail and spill--water, blood, making an indelible mark, a stain, on others.

*

*

*

The connections possible in a dream are fascinating. Is this dream about the past--Johannes' guilt at the bloody tablecloth during his Passover Seder with Mery? Is it a foreshadowing of my becoming a kitchen pot washer at the King David hotel, seeing the banquet hall to which I'm not invited for a meal, only as the help? It also interests me how the legal roles: defendant, prosecutor, judge can be understood in terms of Passover, as the Rebbe's lectures suggest. Who is the defendant in Passover? It's our bondage, our narrow places. When we resist and defend against seeing that, we are Pharaoh, refusing to acknowledge our... what, dust, crimes, sins, negative qualities? I am the prosecutor, Moses, who seeks to awaken us, to lead us out of our narrow places. And yet, even once escaped from Egypt, I am not only Moses trying to lead myself out of my own bondage, I am also the Jews in the wilderness wanting to be led, yet resisting and wanting to go back--regress--to the narrow places.

And I guess the final question in both the dream and the Passover story, is who and where is the Judge, our Father?

There's one more letter in the YadVashem file. It's from my father.

*

*

*

Before I open it, I look up at the picture of the man leaping across the puddle. God the Judge is the final leap for me. I take a few breaths, and begin to think about which parts of God I'm comfortable with.

God's presence at Passover is a God I could learn to like. He leads us from our narrow places, and towards the Promised Land. There are some problems with Him (or Her, as Dr. Lisbet would say), but there are pretty good explanations as well. A problem: why did God let Israel stay in bondage for 400 years before leading them forth? The answer is the Israelites had grown comfortable in their slavery, and had to awaken themselves to the fact that they were in bondage. I can accept that. We have to do our part. There is human free will.

Another problem is the pain of the Egyptians, the plagues that pollute their water, devastate their crops, and kill their first born. When Marianne asked the Rebbe about that in class, the Rebbe said that on the mystical level, we can interpret this as the "plagues" and suffering we cause ourselves by our unskillful habits; and that until we learn the lesson, we continue to suffer negative consequences. Dr. Lisbet said Buddhists call this samsara.

The Rebbe also reminded us that when the angels began to rejoice at Israel's success at crossing the sea, God told them not to, saying, I can't rejoice when any of my children, (in this case, the Egyptians), suffer. So, the suffering may have been self-created, and the punishment necessary, but God is not happy about it. This sadness is reflected in the Seder when we place a drop of wine on our plate as each plague is named. The idea is that wine brings joy, but our joy is diminished each time a plague occurs, even when it befalls those who are our enemies. This sign of compassion in us, and in God, make sense to me. This God is not everything

I would like God to be. But given the paradox of human free will, it is definitely an acceptable God.

*

*

*

It's fascinating to me how, at their best, things recycle and connect. In my first Parashat classes with the Rebbe--I look it up, December 19-- we read from Vayegash, which means "he went up, proceeded to do battle." That was the week when I began writing again, doing battle with myself. I look at my notes from that class. That was when I first heard the concept of Egypt as a "narrow place." I'd written down what the Rebbe said as accurately as I could.

On the surface, Jacob going to Egypt may be an historical fact, and Egypt a geographical location,. But, mystically, the word Egypt, "mitzrayim" means narrow places. Like Jacob, each of us have our narrow places. We have to be fearless to travel within to observe what constricts and enslaves us. This starts us on our path toward Sinai. For those of you who are taking Dr. Lisbet's tai chi class, she talks similarly of "embrace the Tiger." We need to confront the hurts our narrow places have created, in our self and in others. In this way, we can begin the process of "return to mountain."

These are nearly the same words he used last week in his Passover talk, harkening back to that Parashat section. Yet the recycled message is just as meaningful to me now as it was then. It's as if I need to continue to rehear and remind myself of my task, over and over again. That is my task.

I then see a scribble I'd made on the side of the page, that I'd completely forgotten about. Another quote from the Rebbe.

Chanukah will begin in four days, with the lighting of the candles. And next Friday, those of you in the class who are Christian may decide to go to Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We want you to be aware not only of the differences, but also some of the core, root similarities between the traditions. Realize that both occur at a time of darkness. Literally and symbolically, we are trying to find ways to birth and nurture light into the world. This is a topic of the universal and particular that Dr. Lisbet and I would like to write a book about one day.

I wonder if it was his comment that at some level influenced my decision to go to Bethlehem on Christmas.

I continue to thumb through my notes, and read what he said two weeks later, during the parashat that occurred during the secular New Year:

For me, as an aside, and on a personal note, as a grandfather, one of the more moving passage in the Bible is the conscious blessing of grandfather, father, and son which occurs in this parashat.

I remember how moved he was as he said that, almost as if he was going to cry. At the time, I was annoyed. How could he waste our time with his personal reminiscing? He should save that for his own therapy.

He then talked about how to deal with someone who has hurt you. "We can't sweep it under the rug; like Joseph we need to confront those whom we feel have wronged or ve hurt us. Joseph faced his brothers directly, and told them how much suffering they caused him when they sold him into slavery." I remember making a note to let Elizabeth and my parents know how much suffering they'd caused me. I liked that the Bible modeled a message of confronting those who have hurt us.

The second part of the message, however, I found less helpful then.

Joseph forgives. He tells the brothers, with full awareness 'Although you intended my harm, God intended it for good.'

At the time, that message rankled me on two levels. First, I wasn't ready to forgive. Now, even though it is still months before Yom Kippur, I am ready. I ask forgiveness from them, and offer it to them as well. I guess this means I'm making spiritual progress. I feel lighter and freer

The Rebbe said last December, and again repeated it last week, almost verbatim:

As you can see, on one level, we may be hurt by others, as Joseph acknowledged. It was only later that Joseph could see that his being sold into slavery was part of God's that plan--so that he could help feed both the Egyptians and the Israelites during the famine.

Wherever we are, we need to trust that God will lead us forward and out of our narrow places, out of Egypt.

The idea of God with a divine plan, which allows human suffering-- Joseph being sold into slavery, the fear and pain of his father at feeling he has lost his son--bothered me then, and it still bothers me. Does that suffering justify a divine purpose?

That feels a worthy question. But I also note that the Rebbe's words were almost exactly verbatim in December and now . I wonder if he was reading from

the same prepared lectures: he gets to use them for Parashats in December and January)—for which he gets paid; then uses the same lecture for a Passover workshop in March and April, for which he again gets paid), that it's all about God?

*

*

*

I reopen the YadVashem file, and it's my task to struggle with this God. Can I accept a God who allows a Holocaust to occur?

In almost any negative event, we humans try to assign blame. I've seen, with the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet's help, how, in my life, when things go wrong, I've tried to blame everyone around me: Mery, my parents, the law, our materialistic society. They taught me how I needed to take responsibility and learn what I did to contribute to what happened.

In a horror like the Holocaust, it's all the more understandable how we seek to assign blame. Whose fault is the Holocaust? Who can we blame?

On a human level, the easiest villain is Hitler, and his egocentric need for power. Then you can blame those who supported him, out of their own fear, and weakness allowed his cruelty, hatred, and prejudice to infect them. You can blame a culture of anti-Semitism, in which those who felt vulnerable blamed others—the Jews—for their problems. It's also possible and even easy to blame those who tried to pretend that nothing bad was happening, who used denial or self-serving rhetoric to avoid looking at and intervening in the atrocities that were occurring.

As ugly as all that is, this line of thinking lets God off the hook because it says that the evil that occurred was human created and human caused. That's all human psychology. What happened was based on human free will. It is ignorant, horrifying disgusting, but humans are to blame, not God..

Some, of course, blamed the victims, the Jews. Those who converted, those who thought of themselves as Germans rather than Jews, those who assimilated, those who learned to pass as gentiles if ever questioned. Others blamed the passivity of the Jews, as though resistance would have led to a different outcome.

Some religious Orthodox, becoming ever more zealous refused to fault God, but instead blamed their fellow Jews, attributing their assimilation and defying the ways of the Torah. In this view, the Holocaust was God's way of punishing the Jews, as the plagues once punished the Egyptians. To me, however, this line of reasoning is abhorrent. First, because it blames the Jews for their "dust." All people have dust; the Jews were not oppressing anyone; they were merely a convenient scape goat for other's pain. Why should they be punished for human imperfection we all have in such a horrendous way. Further, and more abhorrent, this line of reasoning, because it implies that Hitler was an instrument of God's intent, and thus absolves the actual barbaric perpetrators.

Others have proclaimed that the Holocaust was God's way of working through the world in mysterious ways. And that ultimately good came from it because Israel arose its ashes.

I am glad Israel exists, but to justify one with the other imposes a Pollyannaish meaning on a tragedy that doesn't allow for simple explanations. A good thing did occur. But that does not justify or remove the tragedy of the bad. Again, it seems best to leave God out of it, and understand the devastating evil perpetuated in human terms, without trying to impose or subscribe to God's mysterious ways.

So, where does this leave God the Judge? I remember during the Passover class, Peter asked the Rebbe, politely and cautiously, if he could talk about the role of God in the Holocaust. The Rebbe was quiet for a long moment, and Dr. Lisbet started to intervene, but the Rebbe stopped her and said, "Obviously I've thought about it a lot. I lost a good part of my family to the Shoah. But with all the thinking, the choices are pretty simple. Some blamed God, lost faith, and turned away. How could God let this happen? I can understand that view. I did that myself for awhile. Sometimes I think part of me still does. One of my friends said 'I didn't divorce God but I was angry. I still am. In our tradition, it's all right to be angry and argue with God.' I do that, too. And

many continued to place their faith in God, and, in facing their death, said the Shema, which as you know, ends in 'echad'—One. Even amidst such tragedy, they were able to keep their faith. All is one. Somehow they were able to maintain equanimity, trust, and belief." He looked at us. "I try do do that, too."

* * *

I remember looking up from rapidly taking notes, and seeing his face. It once again looked weary, old, tired, yet there was a strength and luminescence in his eyes. This was the man whose life I thought must be so easy, to explain why he was always smiling and joking.

Peter didn't seem to know when to stop "Have you been able to forgive Hitler? Aren't there some things that you can't forgive?"

The Rebbe turned to him, and I thought for a moment he was going to transform into a raging Prophet. I would have. But instead he answered, "That's a question I've also asked myself, every night, in my nightly prayers. What I would say is I'm working towards that--for me. But I have a big file of people and aspects of myself that I work on forgiving. Frankly, Hitler is way at the back of that file. One day I may get there. For now, it's still a work in progress. As am I."

* * *

I reach into my pocket and begin to open the letter from dad. It's light, and I can see that it's not very long. Before I read it, I wonder what he's going to say. Is he going to justify his being fired from yet another job? Criticize me for being a bum and not going to law school? Make some crude joke demeaning women?

Dear Son,

Your grandmother has died. The funeral was held yesterday.

Love, Your Father.

* * *

I am surprised by my first reaction, which is a numbness. Meursault's indifference. Mother died today, or was it yesterday. I reread and reread the

words, looking for deeper meaning, some sign of emotion. I then wonder, with some annoyance whether dad is criticizing me, blaming me for not coming to the funeral? I fold the letter into thirds, and put it down.

I pick up grandpa's letter, and look at the date on the envelope. Mailed the same day. Probably will say the same thing. I start to set it aside without opening it, and as I do I see the Devu picture of the hand of the drowning person reaching up.

Dear Grandson,

We have some sad news. Your grandmother has passed away. We already held the funeral, so no need for you to come back. We wanted to save you the travel and grief of being here, as well as the expense. We love you, and hope you are well.

Grandpa JC

I notice that the piece of paper on which the note is written is half the normal 8 1/2 x 11 typewriter sheet. It is neatly cut, probably by a scissors. I can imagine Grandpa thinking he doesn't want to waste the unused paper. Something he can control at a time of loss of control. The silly things we do to try to create an illusion of control. Like me now, ruminating about why he cut the paper. I run my hand around the outside edges feeling the difference on the cut side versus the other three "naturally" made ones.

I'm appreciative that Grandpa said I didn't need to come back, and took responsibility for my not being at the funeral. So there is no reason for me to feel guilty.

My quiet, calm reaction helps me realize how much I've changed since I've come to Israel. If I'd received this news while wondering in San Francisco, I might have reacted by turning and running through the door, outside, weeping and wailing, wringing my hands in pain, maybe even trying to call Mery to comfort me.

Instead, I just sit quietly, running my hand around the half-size note. I feel a slight flick of pain. Looking down, I notice that there is a

small drop of blood where the paper has cut my index finger. As I smudge the blood in a circular pattern with my thumb, my mind flashes back to the moments before I cut my fingers while working in the date trees. I feel danger around me. Within me. I have the same numbness as I did then. Is this cut just a warning to be careful? I look back at the dark waters surrounding the hand.

** * **

Who was this woman who just died? I really know almost nothing about her. I have some vague memory that her family had a sundries drugstore. Did she have brothers and sisters? What kind of dresses did she wear when she was a little girl? Did she hope when she was young that one day she would marry someone like my grandfather? I knew her as an old, fat, imperial woman. Yet, she eloped, and they borrowed \$150 to do so. There once must have been an adventurous, rebellious, even defiant streak in her, a spark that I never got to see. She was, as Grandpa told me, a tough ambitious woman, who pushed him to work harder in his law practice, so she could sail the world. Was that her dream?

As she wore her little-girl dresses; as she felt the fear and excitement of eloping, as she took her cruises, did she ever think she might die of cancer? If she had known at every turn that she would, how would that have effected how she lived her life? Does knowing the end spoil the journey? Even though the content reason for our death may be different, death's inevitability is always there. Knowing that, why do we keep going? And if we do, how can we not be engulfed every moment by the darkness of death.

** * **

I re-read Grandpa and dad's letters, and place them back in the YadVaShem file. Then I take them out and put them in a file marked G-d. A remnant spelling from my Orthodox efforts. I look at my watch. 2 a.m. But I can tell there is no sleep ahead.

Mery as a messenger; Richard as a messenger. Mom and dad as messengers. Months later I can see them all as angels, helping me to a new, higher wisdom. I can forgive them, and am ready to move on.

But what is the message in Grandma's death? Why did this blue-eyed grandmother, who loved me unconditionally, completely, have to die? I can find reasons to excuse God even for the Holocaust. But how do you excuse God for every human death? One human death?

Tears come. For her. For me. For all of us on this small planet. But they are not soft, comforting tears, not the tears that wash away the pain and open my heart to God. Just the opposite. They are rageful tears accompanied by a visceral, thunderous rumbling, a gnawing, gnashing anger surging through me. The tears erupt like a volcanic shout of molten liquid.

I stumble outside, eyes fogged, and start to run. Slowly at first, then faster, lifting my legs, crashing my feet onto the pavement. I'm fueled by a burning tension in my belly, a fire stoked so hot it's not containable, so hot it's like a churning, writhing, foaming ocean wave. I punch my clenched fists, pounding them impotently into the empty air in front of me.

After a while, my feet slow, and my hands lift seemingly without my will, toward the sky. At first they are still clenched, defiant. Then my palms open skyward, beseeching, in supplication. I hear, feel, and see a scream cry into the night.

The air remains still.

Does anyone hear? No one is around.

I look skyward through my pleading, almost groveling palms and outstretched fingers. Does anyone hear?

God?

I return my gaze straight ahead, and my eyes stare blankly forward. Step, step, step. My blue-eyed grandmother died of cancer.

Does Anyone hear?

*

*

*

Outside the air is damp, and I feel the coolness of my sweat dripping down my face and across my chest. I am closer to sunrise than to last night's sunset. Now there is only darkness, save for the occasional light from a half-moon that throws long, narrow, ominous shadows that blend into the darkness. Half full, the other half is there, but hidden. An entire side never seen. Is that enough to sustain me? And is the light that exists waxing? Waning?

I have found my way to Herod's tomb and see my own darkening shadow cast onto the structure *Fuit homo missus a Deo, cui nomen erat Joannes*. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to give testimony of the light, that all men might believe through him.

Herod's tomb, I remember you well. Christmas day, four and a half months ago, after returning from Bethlehem, I stood before you, fearing my death. That day marked the birth of my effort to write about my life in order to refind it, rebegin it, be reborn.

Does it end here tonight, as John died in the shadow of Herod's tomb? Do I now leave a shadow of my past behind at the head of Herod's tomb? Is there something more, something else to which I can point the way?

I continue walking, patiently, carefully, determinedly. I descend through an Arab village. I hear a woman's shrill wailing, piercing the late night air. As I listen closer, I realize it may be more a song than a cry. If a song, I wonder where it song comes from. . .

Then I am climbing stairs. Higher, ascending. I'm standing on Mt. Zion. I walk past the tomb of King David, upstairs into an old room with chipped pillars. The Coenaculum, site of the Last Supper. I'm a week early.

I feel myself re-connected to Johannes, as he drank wine from a silver chalice in Kerem-El, and ate from the seventh plate, Z'roa, the roasted lamb shank bone. The Word symbolized by flesh. His Last Supper with Mery. The night of the death of Johannes.

The words and writing of this journal, born on Christmas day, are my supper. Flesh made into words. And now it's time to leave the writing behind. Et verbum caro factum est. And the word is made flesh. Now it is time for me, in the flesh, to face God, without any words between us.

* * *

Leaving the Coenaculum, I enter into the Jewish quarter through Zion Gate, and stop on the Street of the Chain. To my left is Jaffa Gate, the cafe, David Street, all that is part of my known routine.

I turn right, The Western Wall is ahead. I bet You like it being called Wailing Wall better, don't You? Let us, the weak and vulnerable cry out to You, Our Protector, in times of trouble. Hah. So You can lead us out of bondage, and then kill us in the wilderness? Or let Moses see the Promised Land, but then kill him without allowing him to enter?

Months ago, I put on tefillin to worship you at the Wall, wrapping the leather straps dutifully first around my arm and heart, and then around my head, with such care and love and hope. I felt like a Native American warrior girding for battle, putting on his weapons, prepared to follow Your laws. Now I gird myself to battle the only One who is left. I think of Mery giving me Buber's I-Thou, Buber who wrote that Jesus is the man who faced God most directly.

I continue walking, now through Mount Moriah, thinking of Abraham's sacrifice. So, God, You ask Abraham to give up--to kill-- his only son, that to whom he is most attached, as a sign of his love and faith in You. What an indication of Your deep compassion and caring for a parent's feelings. If anyone were to step outside the bubble of faith, wouldn't that be considered criminal and sadistic?

But wait, all is ok. You sent a ram instead. Abraham didn't have to kill his son after all. I don't buy it. Does that lessen the suffering Abraham had to endure before the ram showed up? You, All-knowing, must have been aware of the terrible agony, the gnawing pain he felt on the third day of his walk up the

Mount. Do You demand this pain to ensure belief? Why do You constantly test us?
Don't You have faith in us?

* * *

As I leave the Old City through the Lion's Gate, I think of my dreams of lions. Is this what I feared, God the Lion? I remember when I was last here it was daylight, and a group of small Arab children rushed up to me. One child, about five, was holding her baby brother in her arms. Her clothes were gypsy-like, a long dress covering her ankles, her hair tied in a pony tail. She had haunting, beautiful brown eyes. They could have been like Mery's, only there was no sparkle. She looked directly at me and said "Give me money."

An old man on Sixth Street, an Arab girl in Jerusalem. She is starting out her life in the same way they are ending theirs. Our Father, give us this day our daily bread. At five, she is begging for existence. I gave her a few agora and watched her run away, as more children rushed up to me, hugging me, pleading for their lives. Give me money, give me food so I can eat tonight. I'd do anything to remove them from my sight. What about You, God, do You see them?

* * *

I head towards the Basilica of Agony and the Garden of Gethsemane. I don't fit in this world. I can't--don't want to-- fit while people are living like that.

I look around at the olive trees, painted by the light of the moon's reflection. The flowers are colorful, arranged in a neatly kept garden. If those children survive somehow, they can look forward to the same fate as my grandmother. Death.

Why death, God?

Because Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge which You forbade them? Bad Adam, bad Eve. They had everything, paradise, happiness, and yet they did the one thing they weren't supposed to do. But had You yet taught them about consequences for actions? Who put the desire for

"more" in them, all powerful God? And from this single act of disobedience comes death?! How convenient to blame Adam and Eve, our human dust, for all our subsequent suffering. Do You say "Ah, it's free choice." But what free choice did they have without knowing the consequences? And even if they deserved reprimand, is it fair to visit suffering on their descendants forever? One apple. Have a sense of proportion.

Doesn't anyone see that maybe Our Father deserves some blame, too? Or are we too afraid to say that?

I look for several moments at the olive tree in Gethsemane where Jesus taught His disciples. Finally, I look up at the sky. I hear his cry, "God, why have You forsaken me?"

Jesus, Job, the Arab girl. You want us all to cry and wail and beg for Your mercy and strength and protection.

Jacob becomes Israel, the one who wrestles with God.

No longer will I hide behind tears. Now, there is no one left to confront but You.

* * *

I look more closely at the flowers in the garden. Even as some are in full bloom and radiating beautiful colors, others are brown, withering, and dying. How many vibrant blossoms are needed to make it a real garden, rather than just a garbage heap? What proportion of life has to be good and positive versus filled with misery and suffering to make living a worthwhile choice? Can you just make two columns and add each up and compare? What is the spiritual unit of measurement? I need to devise a ruler, some way to evaluate. Am I looking for a preponderance of the evidence? Certainty beyond a reasonable doubt?

I remember a glimpse of last night's dream. I was standing in front of an cement wall. All around me were suffering people. I couldn't recognize them: Jews from the Holocaust or Russian pogroms; Palestinians in camps; homeless men on Sixth

Street; terminal patients facing their own deaths? Right around the corner and behind the wall was a glorious ocean with the sun setting across it. On that side there were lovers holding hands and walking together; small children dancing in the waves as their parents and grandparents watched with amusement, glee, and pride; an older couple (Dr. Lisbet and the Rebbe?), sat on the sand, their shoulders touching, their heads inclined toward each other.

A great psychological dream. Dr. Lisbet would enjoy it. Does it mean that it is just my vision and perception that are limiting me, that I am trapping myself behind this wall, wallowing in pain and suffering, when all I need to do is walk around it, enjoy the sunset, and have the wall block out the pain. Is it merely a personal choice of where you place your focus?

Or does it mean that both exist, and even with the wall, I know both exist. I can't hide from either. Then how do you decide if life is worth living? As Dr. Lisbet noted, Buddha said, "1000 joys, 1000 sorrows."

Does that make life worth living? Is 50-50 enough? Can you compare a joy and a sorrow? Do they balance each other out? Can you compare a life and a death?

I'd like to believe that each flower's death, each person's death means something. That Johannes has to die, that Job has to suffer, so that I as a better person can be born. But is that just a self-deceptive illusion you have taught us to create, God, to let you off the hook? The beauty of the flower is not a balm, but mocks me in my pain.

Maybe I shouldn't compare the beauty and joy of living to the pain and suffering of dying, calling one good and one bad. Maybe, as Dr. Lisbet would say, I should try to see them each as part of the natural cycle, the yin and the yang dark and light, thousand joys, thousand sorrows. Is each in the other? I look more carefully. What I see is a bleak world, even in a beautiful place.

I'm unwilling to begin down that path--of relationship, love, children, growing old with someone, until I know whether an all loving, all powerful God

exists. Otherwise, how can I enjoy the sunset, how can any of those people in the dream enjoy it, and their love, knowing what's on the other side of the wall?

*

*

*

I lie back on the ground, watching the moon filter through the olive trees. This is where my quest ends, the final confrontation. Every ending sets the stage for a new beginning, I once wrote. Every Genesis leads to an Exodus. But does it? I look again at the half of the moon I can see. Are the questions of waxing or waning, half empty or half full even relevant? Does it help knowing that the whole moon is there, just not seen? Would it help if I really knew that an all-powerful, all-knowing, all loving God existed, even if I couldn't see or understand HaShem completely?

I take out the sheet I made at the start of my questioning, my early efforts to answer the questions about the nature of the universe, the nature of evil. All the neat columns and rows. How do you add up something that has no way to be measured? I think of my elementary school efforts, each summer, to write numbers to reach infinity. It doesn't work. You can't get there, no matter how many numbers you write, or how much effort you put into it. I can ask the questions, but I can't find the answers. It's like a cross-wold puzzle that you can't do. The boxes and words within them keep shifting, evaporating, moving about, losing their form and dissolving.

Are the existentialists correct, and it's all just random indifference? Was what Dr. Lisbet said about the Buddha correct, that these are 'questions which tend not to edification?' Don't ask cosmic questions, just see that suffering exists and try to ameliorate it, in ourselves and others. And try to develop some equanimity in the process. Or was Job right when he said, fuck you, God, this is wrong and unfair. Maybe Jonah should have just stayed in the whale, Buddha should have never come out of the castle.

The moon is waxing. Over the next week there will be more light, even in the darkness. Next Friday, there will be a full moon. The first day of Passover. Good Friday. The Last Supper.

This is the moment I've been waiting for. I have completed my journey. The final stake has been stuck into the ground, and I have caught up with myself. I am whole. Johannes the seducer, the hiding Jonah, the suffering Job wailing both in America and after cutting his fingers on the kibbutz, the searching John in the wilderness, Orthodox John in Mea Shearim, I trying to point the way to something new, all are now connected. At this moment, I have completely caught up to myself. My past is my present.

Here my journal ends. And that is all to the good. Words reflect my thoughts, and I've been doing too much thinking, too much standing back from life rather than being immersed in it. In whatever time I choose to have left, I want to start living life, not write about living. I want to stop falling back on words as a crutch. No more reflections on reflections, thinking on thinking. The word lives in living.

* * *

I understand what John is saying, that he has completed his task, has reflected on his past to learn from his mistakes to make himself-- to the best of his ability--as good a person as possible. And that he has continued that self-reflective process into the present, so that now, in this present moment, he feels caught up with himself, with no loose ends. It seems to me, other than birth or death, there are only a few times in life when that really occurs, when all projects and all relations and everything is complete and one is caught up with oneself.

But I wonder if we ever become completely whole? If by whole he means a perfectly good person, I doubt it. It seems there's always more dust to be found, the deeper you go, and the more you polish. It's a tricky balance, I think, between change and acceptance. In the short term, focusing on my own dust brings it into

prominence and can be discouraging. It's hard to hold the mind steady and calm when attention, no matter how much effort is made to keep it soft, causes the problematic areas to become more evident, to be put in the spotlight, to realize there is so much work still to be done. How can you embrace acceptance and a soft, loving context when the dust causes so much pain and suffering?

Hopefully, long term, still, calm observing--the Big Mind Game Dr. Lisbet called it--can allow all to be seen in a softer, gentler context. And that can set the stage for self-improvement, polishing the dust. At the least, a Pollyannaish attitude, trying to see only the good, denying or sweeping dust under the rug and pretending it doesn't exist, though it might be easier, will never lead to my becoming a better person, the person I want to be.

But there are no guarantees, which is dispiriting. Heidegger used strenuous and admirable criteria for what kind of person he wished to be; but he behaved abominably during the Third Reich. Does that mean we shouldn't try? No. But that we need to be ever vigilant, as Dr. Lisbet said.

It's also interesting that even as John feels caught up with himself, he's not. There are still all the notes and jottings in his folder from the Rebbe and Dr. Lisbet's sessions that he's left for me to go over. Not that I mind. These notes are a way I can still stay connected with them; they allow me to review and deepen the lessons they offered.

I close my eyes, and in my mind I'm transported back to the final days on the kibbutz, a final piece of the puzzle I haven't yet written about since I cut my fingers.

The final day before the Days of Awe, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur. In the beginning was darkness and the void. The time for new beginnings, to trust that creative solutions can come from chaos.

I thought that was my mind-set during my last days in the date fields. I was pruning the date limbs so there would be room for them to grow to their full size. I was fertilizing them so they could bear fruit. This is what I hoped for in my

life as well: pruning away what I'd left behind would allow me to grow into the person I wanted to be. So each day, patiently, I walked though the trees. Carefully cutting; carefully impregnating. Tree after tree. Waiting for a sign. What sign? Godot?

Yet moments began to seem endless. Waiting for each day's work to be finished becomes an eternity. Not the Kairos of Mt. Sinai, where in a timeless moment, eternity is felt. Rather, an unbearable empty hollow of meaningless sameness stretched ahead of me.

At first I was unwilling to admit defeat, and felt that if only I tried harder, I could push through to the other side. I kept my head down, a battering ram attacking life. I expected somehow to break though the darkness and emerge from the despair. I didn't even know what was supposed to change. I sensed some of the bondages I wanted to escape but where—I have no clear idea yet what my Promised Land would look or feel like.

A day of work would end. Another day would begin. More eternities to wait, patiently plodding through the fields. Waiting, with tears, gasping for breath, gasping for life. Trying to be stoic, to dismiss the doubts. Each day in the date trees I waited for some revelation, some evolution of character to break through, some revolution in thinking and acting and feeling to overcome the inevitable cycle and help me enter a new phase. Yet eternities passed each day, and nothing happened. Nothing new under the sun. I knew I was just going in circles.

Don't despair, I told myself. Be patient. Be patient, endure, wait.

Rosh Hashanah is coming tomorrow. A time of new beginnings.

*

*

*

Red blood flowing over my hand as the scythe cuts into my fingers.

As I write, I see the blood on my hands as if it's still there, flowing out of fingers. I watch as it drips down my fingers and into the writing, creating bloody red words. Past and present commingle.

Emergency sutures patch up my bandaged fingers on erev Rosh Hashanah, the start of a new year, when, as the Rebbe said "The day when the Lord sits upon His throne with the book of Life and Nations spread before Him. In this book He inscribes the destiny of humankind and its countries."

The doctor is non-committal when I ask if I will have full use of my hand again? Will I be able to play the flute, play tennis, ever hold a pen to write? But what would I want to write? A book inscribing my destiny, the destiny of a profoundly confused and unhappy young man?

I close my eyes and my mind is a crimson swirling. I am in a trance-like hypnagogic free associational dream state. Everything feels jumbled. Red blood. Red words. A disembodied red-haired Elizabeth bloodying me, my heart being ripped out. Blood bleeding into the ocean, a Red Sea. Grandpa's red birds desperately flying about, disoriented, lost, confused at seeing their bloody bird bath.

I hear the sound of the shofar, which hits me like the unexpectedly sharp slap of my 2nd grade teacher. Am I being punished again for not being able to hear? I didn't know she was speaking to me. She didn't know who I was, what my handicap was. Is it my fault I'm deaf? Is it my fault no one understands me?

God, is it my fault I can't hear you? Are you speaking? Are you punishing me? Bloodying me?

"The shofar blows again, the anniversary of the creation of the world, heralding the coming of physical order out of chaos." Blow loudly oh shofar. I hear the Rebbe's words from his Fall Preview: "God proclaimed the day of the blowing of the shofar as a sign to every man and nation to bring his spirit out of chaos, and to rededicate himself to an ethical and moral life. God, in His infinite mercy, gives each of us nine days to repent. On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, He seals our destinies."

I wonder if those nine days are symbolic of life in the womb; nine days to be reborn, to cast off my sins. Just like my nine months now. I'm in my second trimester since I began writing on Christmas day. Am I any closer to my goal?

Is the rebirth even in my control?

The Rebbe continues, In ancient times the Jewish people would take two goats, and on Yom Kippur, their fate was determined by lot. One goat they sent to the Lord by sacrificing it in holiness. The other they sent out into the wilderness, and the sins of Israel were symbolically placed on that goat."

Is there really a difference, from the goat's perspective--be killed as a sacrifice to the Lord, or be sent to die in the wilderness?

Which would I prefer? First, even though it's not a choice, and both end in death, I'd want to be the one choosing, if only to feel I had some control over my life.

And, as I look back, I did choose. Or at least my unconscious mind chose for me. By cutting myself, I could no longer work on the kibbutz, and was able to escape that endless repetitive cycle. The cut fingers led me to into the wilderness, literally, with all my sins.

"On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we engage in tashlik--to cast away, a ritual," the Rebbe explains "from the book of Micah where God says He will cast our sins into the depths of the sea. We should take it upon ourselves to gather all our sins and hurl them into the water."

* * *

And that is what I've been working on for the past year. It was out of the depths of the ocean, with Elizabeth in Carmel, that I first realized the all-encompassing nature of my plagues, all the ugliness in me. To follow the law "Love thy neighbor as thyself" you first have to love yourself. And that's been a struggle. I've discovered so much self-hatred. So many sins.

Why the darkness, the evil within us? Within me. These sins which separate me from others?

I've made this my Sisyphean task. Each time one of these "sins" arises in me, I try to face it honestly and work on addressing it. Then I plunge down and attack another. I have to do this, to free myself from myself; to conquer the sins which separate me from myself, and from everyone else whom I've ever loved or who loved me.

I remember my anger at Elizabeth on Passover. I wanted to lash out at her, spit on her. **"And some began to spit on Him and strike Him."** I even wanted to hit her, even kill her because I thought she was the person who had enslaved me. Now I know I was only enslaved by my self, by my effort to keep the world contained within the rationally ordered words and laws of my mind. I have been working so hard to crucify that ugly part of me so that I would no longer be the prisoner to my sin.

I'm still trying to re-emerge from that wilderness, and be changed, to have my sins vanquished and vanished, my old self to die and a new purified and re-baptized self be born anew. Elizabeth, whoever and wherever you are, do you hear that? This is where meeting you has led me, this is what you've given birth to.

I was wounded, but spared. I must believe there is a reason, which I'm now striving to uncover. I've done the best I can, working on me to improve, to remove my "dust" as Dr. Lisbet calls it.

"Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement; At-One-Ment. On this day, we read about Jonah hiding in the whale, running away from our spiritual work, hiding from God, from our true purpose in life. We must come out of the whale. It is a time to forgive others, and ask forgiveness from others for hurts, intentional or unintentional, by thoughts, words, deeds."

I still hear the Rebbe's words. I certainly wasn't ready to forgive anyone then. Mery, my family. Richard, Al, the men on Sixth street, my professors,

myself. Now, it seems much easier to forgive those people who have hurt me. And to ask their forgiveness. Even to forgive myself.

My goal, upon leaving the dark confines of the whale, was to follow your calling, God.

With this stake, I've completed my journey to connect the parts. I've caught my past up to my present. I've gone "in and through."

Now do I live, or do I die?

"The days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when the Gates of Heaven are open, and it is written who shall live and who shall die" the Rebbe intones.

* * *

Lambs and goats. I would even be willing to be the other goat, to give myself as the sacrificial lamb, if only that would help this world. I would say to God, "Blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy Book" if only that would make this world a better place, if only my sacrifice would mean something.

I thought I had found the meaning and purpose of my life once and for all at Sinai. "Serving water," being a spiritual messenger for God. I thought all I had to do was keep my part of the bargain.

But where did that lead me? Unfortunately, the covenant Abraham made, that Moses made, the bargain I made involved two. I'm doing my work, my piece of the puzzle, God.

The wholeness that I envisioned once the pieces of my self were connected, was one of integration and light and peace. But the opposite is occurring. I am wholly in pain, as lost as ever, and now, without hope. This is the moment I have been working toward, but not what I expected or wished for. Moses dies in the final book of Deuteronomy, seeing the Promised Land but forbidden to enter. Did You forsake him by making him struggle through the wilderness, but then never allowing him entrance? Now I wonder, can I serve water for a Master whom I don't honor or respect? Are You the right leader, God? Can I forgive You?

God, if this is your Promised Land, it's not one I would want to enter.

*

*

*

"Sukkot is the third great Jewish pilgrimage holiday, a time of celebration after the deeper reflection and repentance of the ten Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The season of our happiness, celebrating after the harvest has been reaped. It begins with a full moon, and is followed by seven days of rejoicing and leading to and culminating in the unbridled joy of Simchat Torah, a time of celebration, with singing, dancing, flaming torches, hymns of praise.."

How ironic. The Rebbe's words about celebration are the opposite of what I'm feeling. I'm hardly in a rejoicing, dancing mood. I'm bloodied, an invalid, and feel suspended in a tightrope of my mind. Maybe the Jewish pilgrimage holidays are really a mockery of my life. On my Passover with Mery, commemorating the physical freedom of the Jews, I entered a world of bloody physical chaos. On Shavuot, when the Jews received the Ten Commandments and spiritual freedom, I was on Sixth Street, seeing the limits of man's laws, and feeling in total spiritual chaos.

How time shifts perspective. With what I know now, I could have seen how each Holyday was an important and necessary part of my evolution. Look at Sukkot. The Rebbe also said

We build a Sukkah, a booth made of live branches, a frail, thin structure to remind us of our vulnerability in the world. It is the very opposite of a fortress or castle in which man hides from and fights against his fellow man."

What a perfect symbol for me. And, yes, what great irony. Though I didn't realize it then. I was emerging from my castle of privilege--like Buddha, Dr. Lisbet said--and needed to learn to trust in God, to live naked under a primitive structure.

"As it says in Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of the Torah, 'Let thy son and thy daughter, thy man servant and thy maid servant, and the Levite and the

stranger, and the fatherless and the widow that are within thy gates, let them all rejoice together."

What a beautiful dream of a unified world. Yet how lonely and dark things seem to me. I feel like a stranger, outside looking in as people celebrate their faith in humanity, a prayer for peace. I can't join in...there is too much of my own inner turmoil. Is it because of my sin? Sin. What a perfect word to describe me. Sin, to be cut off, separation from God, separation from others. Does it take cutting my fingers to help me realize how cut off I am from my spiritual path, from God, from other people? I watch the kibbutzniks celebrate with passion. But it is a godless passion, similar to Purim. For me, there is no passion, other than anger. And sadness.

It's dusk, Simchat Torah, the last day of the Sukkot festival. But as other rejoice, dance, and celebrate the ingathering of crops, I feel empty and barren. As they read from the Wisdom of our Ancestors-- "Who is rich, he who is happy with his lot"--I feel poor and anguished at my lot. It is a time of joyousness and celebration for many, but a time only of darkness for me.

And what do I have to look forward to? The Rebbe said after Simchat Torah in the holiday festival cycle there comes a period of many many weeks of darkness-- mar-cheshvan; 'mar' literally meaning bitter; like maror at Passover, the bitter herbs. There is nothing until the Festival of Lights, Chanukkah. So I, at a time of darkness, have only more darkness ahead.

* * *

"Torah, the first five books of the Bible, mean teaching, law. On Simchat Torah, the last two chapters of Deuteronomy are read, and then the first chapter of Genesis, to signify that the written word of the Torah never ends, but is one continuous cycle after another."

Is everything just a repetitive cycle, like the moon. Hidden, new moon revealed, full moon, moon disappearing.

Is there anything we can do to change the moon's cycle. Nietzsche, or Santanya, or someone said, "Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it." Dr. Lisbet called it the endless cycle of samsara, eternal repetitions of pain.

Is that all there is? Don't I want more?

I look back at my notes from the kibbutz, where I said and felt the same thing.

Each day in the date trees I waited for some revelation, some evolution of character to break through, some revolution in thinking and acting and feeling to overcome the inevitable cycle and help me enter a new phase. Yet eternities passed each day, and nothing happened. Nothing new under the sun. I knew I was just going in circles.

I am no longer among the date trees, but I still want to break out of this cycle. I want to be able to recognize now what I failed to recognize then. I believe I unconsciously hurt myself because I couldn't find any other way out of the pain. No more unconscious acts. If life ends, it will be a conscious choice.

I think once again of the vision of hope and peace I felt when I first saw the pictures of the earth from the moon. The beautiful pale blue sphere suspended in darkness alone in space. The vision of Apollo on Christmas. The vision with which I started my writing on Christmas. Then the new moon was beginning to emerge, a few days old.

* * *

I want to believe that things and events and people have a purpose, a meaning, are not just random. If I look at the mental and physical pain I felt on the last days on the kibbutz in September, after I cut my fingers, I can now see in hindsight, that perhaps everything does happen for a reason. Leaving the kibbutz led me to the Rebbe's and Dr. Lisbet's workshop about Sinai, and then to Sinai itself. If I hadn't cut my finger, I might not have left. And that leaving catalyzed my religious quest in earnest. All from cut, bloodied fingers.

And my amazing experiences at Sinai catapulted me to live a more religiously passionate life. I think of Elizabeth and our conversations about secular law.

She helped me leave behind my naïve belief in the meaningfulness of the secular law. Perhaps all the pain she caused me was just part of a divine birthing plan to help spur me on to this spiritual journey. And, ironically, her voluptuous body helped me realize the limits of the physical. Elizabeth. Mery.

Beth.

We were wrestling from different sides. You were coming from a spiritual place, and trying to ground that in the finite. I was, clinging to your womb, fearing to slip into infinity. Now I am where you were. But, unlike you, I do not want to let myself become grounded--and trapped-- by the finite. I need to keep pushing this search as far as I can. There is only one thing I am seeking now.

The House of God.

Bethel.

* * *

God, now it's just you and me. I realize in my lame, feeble and weak way I've been trying to help You out, to soften the contours of Your actions, or lack of action. I've tried to argue, as if in a court of law, that everything that has happened to me can be understood as serving a divine purpose, leading me to exactly where I'm supposed to be on my spiritual journey to serve You.

But can I trust You? Is there really a divine purpose and meaning to the universe, or is it all random and indifferent? We humans see random stars, and try to create and impose a cosmic planned meaning---oh, look, that's the Big Dipper-- where none may in fact exist other than our paltry efforts.

We want a divine heavenly Father and Mother, all loving, all powerful, all knowing. Are You? Look at Your actions. It may have been your east wind that divided the Red Sea, and allowed the Israelites to escape from their bondage. But then what do You do after they have worked so hard to cleanse their narrow places?

Ask Hosea: "Though he flourishes among the reeds, An east wind will come, The wind of the Lord coming up from the wilderness; And his fountain will become dry And his spring will be dried up..."

I worked on myself, God. I thought I had found my meaning and purpose in "serving water" as a way to serve You. But you have dried me up. There is nothing left in me to give.

Why? Lama in Hebrew. The first letter of lama, l, is lamed. The same as the last letter of Israel.

Why do I feel this way? Like a lost lamb. A sacrificial lamb. For what? What purpose could my death have?

Only to let You know that Your Promised Land is unacceptable.

Striving after wind. Death by my choice, or yours? All is vanity. It all ends the same way.

I open my eyes towards the heavens. In anger, in defiance. I stand up, but my legs betray me, they've fallen sleep, are alternately tingling and numb. I lower my head and look toward the ground so as not to trip. Defiance starts to turn to resignation. Yet still some anger remains. I begin my final halting walk further into the lawless wilderness: lost, languid, lamed.

* * *
* * *
* * *