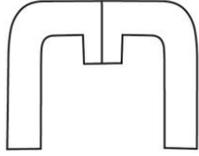


Book Five
Words



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, asks me to cough. He unbandages and looks at my foot. I wince. "It looks like it was well stitched. 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. Shed 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

