

Health Cares:

A Novel

David Roochnik
Roochnik@bu.edu

*There were subtle flashings
of joy within him
that thus should be
his mind.*

Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*

Part I:

Basketball

Chapter One: Home

Even without an alarm clock, Harold Larson awoke promptly at 6:45, only four hours before he was scheduled to arrive at the basketball court. But he didn't want to get out of bed. He was thick and groggy and didn't welcome the morning ritual soon to begin. He would have to start the coffee, make lunches for his three daughters and himself, set out their jackets and packs, put together breakfast, get everybody in the house moving. And so he forced himself to stand up and walk to the bathroom. After splashing cold water on his face, and then looking into his pink and filmy eyes, he dressed quickly and headed downstairs. Susan arose soon after Harold began his descent to the kitchen. Her only job was to arouse the girls, and then make sure they got dressed.

When the breakfast bowls and the cereal boxes were on the table, when the fruit was cut up, the juice poured, the vitamins laid out, and the coffee nearly done, Harold went to the foot of the stairs and was about to exhort his family to hurry. But he chose not so say anything when he heard his youngest daughter Jenny pleading with her mother:

“Mommy! Would you put braids in my hair?”

“Just a minute, honey,” she replied, “I’m finishing Caroline’s.”

“But I need my braids now Mommy!”

“Just a sec, sweetie, I’ll be there.”

“Mommy! You never do my hair first!”

“Of course I do. Just wait one minute more.”

Even though he was bleary from yet another restless night of little sleep, Harold still had some wits about him, and so he knew better than to intervene. He returned to the kitchen. Finally, at 7:30, too late by his exacting standards, the three girls came down for breakfast. As soon as they all were seated at the table, Harold, as he had been doing for almost as long as he could read, surrounded himself with the sports section of the *Des Moines Register*. He tried to insulate himself from the distractions he knew would soon commence. To his younger two daughters, silence was an affront, an intolerable void, and they would rush to fill it. Six year old Jenny could detect immediately when her father wished to remove himself from her sphere of influence, and she instinctively shifted into what Harold called "the attack mode." She began her series of incessant questions.

"Daddy, why is that man sad?" she asked pointing to a picture in the newspaper and shaking the two braids of her strawberry blonde hair that her mother had hurriedly assembled. Her face was dotted with freckles and infused with energy. Since Harold believed that her question was motivated not by genuine curiosity, but by her need to control the airwaves, he was annoyed. Still, since it was morning, and he had some resources, he answered patiently

"Because his team lost a game."

"It's okay to lose if you play hard," his nine year old daughter, Caroline, chimed in. She was afraid of losing and wanted to defuse its power to hurt. She, like her father, was always anticipating the possibility of failure. She imagined herself losing, but then being comforted by words from her father. She repeated them.

"It's not so bad to lose if you play hard."

"That's right," her father said. "It's okay to lose as long as you try hard to win. And it's okay to try hard to win as long as you don't cry when you lose. When you lose you feel bad. But feeling bad isn't the worst thing in the world. Being too scared to play is worse."

"I hate to lose," Jenny responded, again shaking her head so vigorously that it seemed her freckles might fall off her face.

"I don't," Harold said. But to himself he added, "*I'll wipe the floor with that punk's sorry ass.*"

"Daddy?"

"What?"

"Is that man really sad?"

"Yes, he is," he said out loud. But to himself he spoke once again, "*Whatcha mean, sad? I'm not sad. I'm just lulling 'em to sleep. Pounce when I'm ready and they're not. Shiiiiiiit. Mutthafuckers can't play no ball.*"

"Did he really lose?"

"Yes he did. Time to stop talking now. Finish your cereal, take your vitamin, and go brush your teeth."

"Okay Daddy." She dutifully swallowed her vitamin, and with Caroline ran upstairs.

His oldest daughter, Katie, who was 13, had with efficient gloom, finished her breakfast, done her hair by herself, and gotten ready for the middle-school bus. She was a tall and skinny girl, with Harold's thin face and blonde hair, and she was on the verge of the explosion that is adolescence. Most of the time, she was still a happy little girl, an

innocent child, but already three bright red pimples were sprouting on her pale face, one just above her lip, two on her forehead, and in their infectious gleam Harold sensed the murderous passage of time. For the past month Katie had been either silent at breakfast or she had burst into tears with complaints about her hair, her glasses, the ugly, pimpled face she saw in the mirror. She was, of course, anything but ugly. In fact, her face was intelligent, kind and engaging. She was, however, rushing to become the sort of teenager who would have to suffer much before even beginning to flourish. For a moment, Harold looked at her, and suffered with her.

“Are you going to Samantha’s house after school, Katie?” Harold asked.

“Yeah.”

“How are you getting home?”

“Her mom.”

“Be home before 6, okay.”

“Of course, Dad. I know that.”

“Right, sorry, you know that.”

Harold tried to hug Katie before she fled the house ahead of her younger sisters. He wanted to hold her tight, Katie, the gleeful little girl, heading towards the abyss of selfhood. Harold already mourned her departure. He wanted to hold her, if even for a moment, to prove to himself that love could conquer time. Laughing she pushed him away.

The girls gone, Harold returned to the paper, but wasn’t able to concentrate. He took the cereal bowls to the sink, threw out the uneaten bananas, and at the foot of the stairs again urged Jenny and Caroline, the two dervishes, to finish brushing their teeth

and to get their shoes on. When they came down, he zipped up their jackets, helped them with their packs, gave them kisses, and bid them farewell at the door as they commenced their two block walk to the elementary school. "Make sure you hold each other's hands when you cross the street," he admonished them.

Each step of this process required deliberate effort and so took something out of him. He felt like going back to bed. But in Harold's eyes, his household would drift slowly into collapse without his active intervention. If he weren't there, his wife would never leave the bedroom, Jenny would never put on her shoes or stop talking, Caroline would dawdle endlessly in the bathroom. Without him, they'd all be late for everything. Only Katie, tuned as she was to the clock, could be fully trusted to be on schedule.

Harold would have preferred to wake up whenever his body told him to, and then eat breakfast at the Grove Cafe with only the *Register* and an endless cup of weak coffee for company. Susan probably wouldn't object to his doing so, and she was, of course, totally capable of taking care of her family. Nonetheless, on schooldays he forced himself to supervise his children. He believed, however, that if he had more time to himself, if he could make his own schedule, be his own man, he would sleep better.

The breakfast rituals over, Harold felt so weary that he returned to the table and a few sips of coffee with Susan, who had just come down.

"Did you have a bad night?" she asked him, her intelligent face and bright eyes trained on him.

"Oh, not too bad. I'm used to it, but it still feels strange. It's like a coiled spring at the crook of my spine."

"Why do you call it a crook? What is a crook, anyway? You're talking about the base of your spine, aren't you?"

"Yes I am, and I'm not sure why," Harold said, feeling slightly irritated at yet another round of questions. "It sounds right. Maybe because my body is stealing from me. It's betraying me. It's never done that before."

Susan listened patiently to Harold's complaints. This wasn't too hard to do, because even though they were repetitious, he didn't offer them very often. Susan wanted to know exactly what hurt and where.

"It doesn't really hurt," Harold explained. "It's just so uncomfortable. I feel such energy at night, such perplexity. My legs, my back, my muscles radiate confusion."

"Maybe you need to work out more."

"Susan, I don't work out, I play. There's a big difference."

"But you run when you don't *play* basketball. Isn't that working out?"

"No. I run only to relax, to lubricate my mind. I don't work out. And I can't *play* any more than I do already. My knee's been aching recently. Anyway, it seems that after I've played ball the feeling at night is even worse."

"Maybe you should start swimming."

"I don't like goggles, I don't like chlorine. Susan, I don't like to swim."

"Maybe you *need* to stop going to the gym."

Harold looked at his wife for a moment, his placid exterior giving away none of the turmoil he felt within. Stunned by her suggestion he firmly said, "That I simply cannot do."

Harold and Susan next began to negotiate chores.

"Katie's going to Samantha's after school."

"I know. I'll be back here for Caroline and Jenny by 3:15. Why don't you get supper ready?"

"Okay, I'll be home by 5, but as you remember I have to play tennis tonight."

"What time?"

"7:30."

Harold was annoyed: he would, yet again, be responsible for putting the girls to bed. No longer an overwhelming task, nothing like the years and years when all three girls were very young, it would still, like the mornings, require more concentration than he'd care to give. Why couldn't he just sit in front of the TV and watch a game with the sound turned off, as he imagined his basketball buddies regularly did.

"I can skip the tennis," Susan offered.

"No, don't. I'm just tired," he said and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Why don't you try the muscle relaxants again?"

Two months earlier, in October, Harold had consulted a doctor who, after two minutes of listening to his catalogue of night-time miseries, prescribed a drug called Akinetos.

"Is this stuff addictive?" Harold asked him.

"No. Not at all like Valium. And no euphoria either. Try it for a couple of weeks and see if you can break the cycle. I'll give you three refills and if necessary we can even use it for long-term maintenance."

"Any side-effects?"

"None that matter."

“My soul is what matters, you two-bit piece of medical shit,” Harold thought to himself.

Harold hadn't wanted to fill the prescription, but he gave in to Susan's urging. And the first time he took Akinetos, the drug was effective. He still woke up a couple of times, but after he peed he was able to return to bed and fall promptly back to sleep. But the following day his mouth was dry, and his head was dense. The long sleep had been welcome, though, and so Harold tried it the next night. Again, he suffered only a couple of interruptions, but the day after his mouth was drier and his head even worse, which suggested that Akinetos packed a pretty good chemical punch. Because the sleep had been fetching, Harold, who except for an occasional anti-biotic, had never taken a prescription drug before, worried that the drug could capture him. He abandoned it after two doses and chose instead the meandering of his nights. After all, he reasoned, even with his wretched sleep, he usually felt reasonably energetic and alert once his day got going. It was only his nights. His job, he reminded himself, was like everyone else's: to cope with infirmity.

Susan, ever practical and eager to tackle a problem head on, once suggested to him that he go to a sleep clinic. He ignored her. This morning, she again mentioned the possibility of him getting some professional help.

"I understand exactly why I get up three or four times each night: I'm not really tired. My day doesn't exhaust me. I'm not allowed to wake up as early as I want and I'm probably just not doing enough, not working hard enough, during the day. I close my eyes at 11 because that's when you go to sleep. I go to bed because there's nothing else to do."

Harold looked at Susan when he said this, and she seemed to retreat into herself. He wondered if she had taken what he had said as criticism, and if so, he thought, she might be right.

“Anyway, gotta go. See you tonight, Susan.”

“Bye Harold.”

He left the house without touching her.

Chapter Two: Office

It was early December, and the crush of the plains winter had not yet descended upon Centerville, Iowa. The sky was crystal blue, the air laced with the faint smell of hog manure from the nearby farms, and there was a surprising benevolence in the atmosphere. Iowa's citizens are predictable and mild, but the sky above is ever ready to wreck havoc. The midwestern sky is a place of violent thunder, stiff, relentless wind, bone-numbing temperatures far below zero in the winter, when the land turns to frozen tundra, the snow whips horizontally, and the radio broadcasts EFAs; "exposed flesh alerts." In the summer, giant masses of humid heat drench and sear. There are ferocious storms and, of course, tornadoes, the most miraculous violence the sky has to offer. During the past summer there had been terrible floods. After one long, horrifying night, a night when the thunder clapped for hour after hour and the rain never once moderated, a night in which he could not help but think that nature itself was determined to punish him, Harold's backyard had been transformed into a lake and his basement a pond. The nearby city of Des Moines had lost its electricity. Even worse, many farmers lost their crops to the flood or saw their animals drowned in mud, and a good number were forced to join their many comrades who had given up farming altogether and sold their land. As always, though, the people of Iowa persevered impassively under the strain, and went straightforwardly about the business of of pumping out their basements and putting life back into working order.

But this December day was clear and invigorating, and though he was in a fog, when Harold Larson, the Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy at the Iowa Institute of

Technology, paused at Ivy and 7th to look west, he was surprised to discover that he was able to appreciate the view of the flat expanse that stretched without interruption to the horizon. The familiar sensation of his own smallness felt good.

After walking the mile or so to Gustafson Hall, which housed the English, Religion, Classics, and Philosophy departments, Harold entered his office. He took off his winter coat, put it in the closet, and replaced it with the herringbone sports jacket he wore over his Lands End shirts and cuffed khakis every one of his teaching days. He was pleased to observe his well organized desk and the generally tidy condition of the little room. Books were either on the shelves, where Harold had devised a system combining both chronological and alphabetical categories, or placed carefully on a spot on the desk where they were ready to be opened. Papers were kept in three boxes, one containing his own writings, one with miscellaneous business items, and the third filled with articles and writings of others. Pens and pencils, which Harold did not use very often, were kept in a coffee mug emblazoned with a **New York Knicks** logo. On the walls were several brightly colored, exuberant drawings done by his children, a certificate declaring Harold the winner of a college teaching award, and two posters, one of Grant Wood's "The Birthplace of Herbert Hoover," and one depicting a detail from a 5th century Greek vase of old Sisyphus pushing his boulder to, and nearly reaching the top of, his deadly mountain.

The pleasure Harold took in contemplating the order of his office dissipated quickly when he reminded himself that he was not actually an orderly person. Inside he felt turmoil and so he recognized the neatness of his office as a holding action to keep his

chaos at bay. If he dropped his guard, his office would become a mess. But he was a man on watch against himself. His office was neat, he reasoned, because he was not.

Harold looked out the window and wondered whether he was right about this. After all, weren't his disciplined efforts to thwart himself as much a part of himself as any other?

His first task, as always, was to switch on his computer. As soon as the machine started to boot up, he jumped out of his chair and walked down the hall to the mailroom, where Edna would have the coffee ready. Harold glanced at his empty mailbox, poured himself a cup of coffee, and retreated back to his office. He sat at his desk, facing the computer screen, and double-clicked the e-mail icon. The modem made the connection and Harold began to read his emails.

Message 1:
From sysop Wed Dec 3 02:32:41 [pt] 1993
From: jfg@meaning.com
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: AinA

Harold...got your response to my AristotleToday article. Damn man lighten up would you please. I'm not writing an academic journal remember. This baby is for the public and where else would Aristotle want to be? What's missing in today's mcdonaldized world is anything resembling the ancient polis, the city, the community., We're just a bunch of atoms, man, floating through nowhereville, USA. In my column I was just trying to explain how Aristotle can help us understand that we've lost any sense of meaningful connection or intelligent public action. God we've lost the sense of intelligence itself. We're so obsessed with the technical scientific reason that we no longer have the wherewithal for rational practical decision making which of course can't be technical but can be intelligent can be right can be better or worse. We've got computers up the yin yang but not much else. I'm trying to inject Aristotle into the bloodstream of America Harold, and what could possibly be wrong with that? The world needs meaningful change and it needs it bad or we'll all fry. Yours, Jeff

When he finished reading Jeffrey's typically rushed e-mail, Harold sighed. He would, though, force himself to respond. Unlike his old friend, who was now the editor of the influential journal *MASHMA'UT*, which means "meaning" in Hebrew, Harold always double-checked his e-mails and never allowed one to go out with a mistake. He was an excellent typist and even if his writing was destined to fly across the country through a cable, only to be deleted at a keystroke and never to appear again on the face of this earth, Harold could not help but write with care. He appreciated and enjoyed e-mail, but, unlike his friends, he still felt some nostalgia for the hard copy of snail-mail.

He pushed R to respond to Jeffrey.

Jeffrey: You know that I don't disagree with you. I too think that Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom has much to offer in this postmodern landscape of ours. I think you do a good service in trying to bring these ideas to the public in your magazine. Still, I wonder about the kinds of simplifications you allow yourself. Anyway...keep up the good work...Harold.

Message 2:

From sysop Wed Dec 3 06:18:36 1993 "Re: ritalin"
From: gbishop@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: Ritalin

Hi Buddy!!! What time you going to the gym today? I'm feeling good, so you'd better watch out!!! I've been taking some of Bobby's ritalin. It's worked wonders for him. Poor kid was hyperactive as could be last year, probably has ADD, he couldn't sit still in class and he was getting bad grades, which is a shame because he's a smart boy and a good ball players but since we put him on the ritalin he's settled down and now he's pulling in A's and B's on a regular basis and we're not satisfied with those darned B's!!! Anyway, I decided I'd try it. It helps and the last week or so I've been able to concentrate better I think. I figured out something nice about neurotransmission in the Vietnamese pig and if I can duplicate the experient, I'm in business. Anyway, I'll tell you all about it when I kick your butt on the b-ball court today!!!! Hey Buddy, you should try ritalin!!! It works wonders!!! Gary

Every Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning, Gary Bishop, his friend, neighbor, and overweight colleague from the department of Meat Science, e-mailed Harold the same question: what time would he be going to the gym? Every day the answer was identical: he'd be there by 11. Despite his annoyance at Gary's pointless question, Harold always responded politely.

Gary: I'll be there by 11. Thanks for the tip on ritalin. I think I'll pass. While I too would welcome an increased ability to concentrate, I'd rather try to achieve this on my own. Even if I fall short, at least the falling short will be mine. It's who I am-- warts and all-- and to transform myself by chemical intervention seems to me ultimately to be dangerous self-deception. But I do look forward to hearing your reports. Let me know how your experiment goes.
Harold

Message 3:

From sysop Wed Dec 3 06:54:09 1993 "Re: study?"
From: awhite@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: study?

Dear Harold:

Have you thought about tonight's study group? We'll meet at my house at 8:00 pm. Our text is 2 Corinthians. What do you think? See you on the court. Alan

Alan White, another basketball buddy, was a chemist and a Christian. For a man so intelligent, he was stunningly quiet. His work in the laboratory was uninspired, but steadily productive. He was a devoted teacher, a responsible member of the academic community, a loving father to two girls and two boys, husband to a cheerful, equally blonde, wife, and a terrific ball player. He often invited Harold to join his bible study group, but never applied any pressure or showed any displeasure when Harold did not attend. Harold was occasionally tempted to join, but this was one of the many temptations he was able to resist.

Dear Alan: Thanks for the invitation. I'm afraid I can't make it this week. See you in a couple of hours. Harold

Harold was a morning person, for it was when he was best able to work. For twenty years, he had tried to begin every day by translating a bit of Greek. This was slow, sometimes painful, labor for him. He had started the study of classical Greek late in life, as a graduate student when he decided to write his dissertation on Plato, and while he was capable with the language, it remained a struggle for him, and he still needed the dictionary and his grammar book when he translated. The work was slow, and demanded a great deal of discipline. But Harold Larson relished discipline. He had, for years, trained himself as an athlete. Even in high-school, when he was the starting point guard for Williamston High, a team which in his senior year had made the quarter-finals of the State Championship, he had run wind sprints on his own and stretched faithfully before and after workouts. He could run, he felt, forever, and in graduate school he had proved this by entering and finishing a mini-marathon of twelve miles without ever having run nearly such a distance before. Whenever he suffered a sprained ankle or some other basketball injury, he'd force himself to the pool, even though he didn't like to swim, and so swam badly. (Although Harold had wondered, more than once, whether he swam badly because he didn't like to swim, or didn't like to swim because he swam badly. Somehow, he thought, answering this question would unlock an important door.)

Physical discipline came naturally to Harold. Much harder was the discipline required for first-rate scholarship. Harold had difficulty sitting still. Even now, at 44, he felt himself to be a hyper-active child and as a result he was forced to concede that Gary Bishop's suggestion about Ritalin wasn't far off the mark. For when he sat at his desk his fingers moved to his hair, to his bald spot, or through the smooth blonde beard on his

chin. He rubbed his thin nose, ran his hands over his eyes, he swivelled this way and that in his chair, got up frequently for coffee or to look out the window, put his legs on the desk (even though he knew this was bad for his back), returned his legs to the floor, shuffled the papers in front of him, crumpling some and throwing them out, filing others away in his well ordered cabinet. He flossed his teeth, returned books to the shelves, checked his e-mail when it didn't merit being checked, fiddled around with the various icons and then changed the desktop patterns of his computer screen. Harold went to the bathroom more often than was truly necessary, although at his age it was always possible to pee. For as long as he could remember it had always been hard for him to sit and read.

But read he had for the past twenty years. Harold had made himself into a more than adequate scholar, even when his instincts were not those of a sedentary man. What made this possible, Harold now understood, was typing. As a sophomore in college, he had learned to read with his fingers ready on a small manual typewriter. As he would read, he would type notes, page after page of notes. He would write paraphrases, or questions, or sometimes flights of fancy where his own thoughts would zip across the page. Sometimes he would, when he was feeling especially dry or restless, simply copy what he was reading. Whatever it was he typed, only the motion of his fingers allowed the rest of him to sit still in his chair.

Harold Larson, an athletic man of average height and weight with thickly muscled calves and dense thighs, whose face seemed to say little but whose eyes, if you looked closely into them, often seemed to be laughing gently at some internal joke, now used a computer instead of a typewriter. But the principle was the same: he needed accompaniment, he needed motion, and a keyboard in order to read. The clicking sound

of the keys was music to him, was as close to being a pianist as he'd ever get, and the instantaneous appearance of well formed words on the screen, each emerging from blackness into light, gratified him and made it possible for him to sit still. At least for a little while.

According to his ideal schedule, Harold should eat lunch at his desk, keep working and not stop until his concentration faded in blurry fatigue. Only then should he leave his desk for the gym, and that should be around 3 o'clock. The worst part of Harold's fifteen years as a professor at IIT was a simple and painful fact: the only time regularly open to play basketball was the Monday, Wednesday, Friday, noon game held in Unit D," a small self-contained basketball court in IIT's recreation center. This was the faculty game, and even though everyone called it playing at noon, it really began shortly after 11.

This morning, like almost all the mornings of the past two years, Harold was unable to do any serious work in his office. Rather than becoming increasingly more focused and animated, he became heavier and slower and more disengaged as the morning progressed. After his e-mail exchange with Jeffrey, Harold began with his translation exercise. He was working on Plato's *Symposium*, one of his favorites and the dialogue he was teaching in his Greek philosophy class that afternoon at 2 o'clock. He opened his book and began to translate.

Symposium 210a4-8:

“For,” she said, “the one who is to proceed correctly in this enterprise must begin, when he is young, with beautiful bodies, and first of all, if the one guiding guides him correctly, he must love one body, and then give birth to beautiful speeches.”

The speaker is Diotima, a mysterious priestess from Mantinea who, Plato tells us, taught Socrates about Eros, the limb-loosener, the mad desire, the driving force of Plato’s philosophy. Eros, the one subject Socrates claims to understand well. Eros, whose most beautiful manifestation is not the sexual impulse where it originates, but the love of wisdom in which it culminates. Diotima, in Plato’s *Symposium*, initiates Socrates into the mysteries of Eros, and so she tells him the story of the ascent. Eros begins at the bottom, and then moves gradually, step by step, higher and higher.

Eros begins by desiring a beautiful body. It longs to possess, to embrace; it aches, it reaches out to penetrate. But then in a flash of the eye, and represented only by the word “and,” Diotima leaves the body behind: “he must love one body, and then give birth to beautiful speeches.”

Harold always had trouble translating the Greek word *logoi*. Yes, it meant “speeches,” but it also could mean “thoughts.” For “logos” was both regular talking, and the kind of internal talking we call thinking. Harold was quite sure in this passage the word meant “speeches,” not “ideas,” which was the way Terry Fine had translated it in his Oxford edition.

“Honky punk,” Harold imagined himself saying to Terry Fine, as he shoved him against a wall. Fine’s glasses flew off his face, and at that moment the tweedy professor looked utterly lost. Harold worried that he had actually hurt him by pushing him so hard.

We long to embrace. We reach out in desire, we penetrate in the pleasure of union. And when we’re done, we’re finished, it’s over. And then what? And then we talk to each other. Sex seems to be enough, but of course it isn’t. We have to talk. So we say things, after we’re done, maybe just things like, “you know, that was great.” “For me too.” Or maybe, “you’re beautiful.” Or even, “You’re beautiful, I love you.” Or maybe even, “I love you because you’re beautiful.”

Symposium 210a8-b3:

“And then he must realize that the beauty of any body is kindred to that of any other body, and if it is necessary to pursue beauty in form, it would be entirely foolish not to suppose that the beauty of bodies is one and the same.”

The great mystery-- or is it the great tragedy?-- of our talking is that each word we use to describe the one lying next to us in bed does not refer solely to this individual. “You’re kind and gentle.” Yes, you are. But so too is he gentle, so too is she kind. Kind, gentle, red, green, smart, tough, good ball-player, all these words take us beyond the individual we are talking about. We give birth to speeches, and it is through these

that we leave behind single bodies. “I love you, you’re beautiful.” But of course, you are not beautiful. You are you. Somehow you have a share of beauty, but you and beauty are not the same, for that body over there, clean and light and lovely too, is also rightly called beautiful.

Realization, the light-bulb going off over the head, hits. “I love you because you’re beautiful.” That means, I love you but not because you’re you. I love you because you, somehow, partake in the form, in beauty itself. I realize that, and in that moment of illumination I am forced to say good-bye to the beautiful body lying next to me in the soft, drenched bed of love.

Harold knew this passage almost by heart and so he wasn’t really translating it, only transcribing his memories. He also knew that, even if he didn’t prepare at all, he’d have no trouble delivering his 2 o’clock lecture. He’d be serious, allusive and teasing; he’d refer to the sexual embrace that most of his students had only begun to experience. By even just suggesting sex he’d inject a small measure of discomfort into his students, and make them want to hear more. They’d listen, for they’d realize Harold wasn’t just talking about a dusty old textbook, but about what moved them powerfully.

Harold sighed, and put his hands over and then rubbed his eyes. He wondered if he should use Bill Clinton as an example of an erotic man, one who, unlike Socrates and himself, was unable to direct his Eros anywhere but to the beautiful bodies of the young women who hovered alluringly around him wherever he went.

“Mutthafucker,” Harold muttered unconvincingly as he imagined himself grabbing Bill Clinton by the shoulders, and shaking him hard. “Gennifer Flowers?”

Jesus fucking Christ! She's a two-bit lounge singer. And you're the fucking president of the United States!"

He wondered whether he should use Hillary Clinton as an example of someone who was able to lift herself beyond a single body-- that big lunk sleeping next to her-- and turn towards a higher and better love. She was, after all, leading the charge to reform health care in America. She longed to improve the well being of the American people, and not for the heavy embraces of her snoring husband.

When Harold thought about Hillary he pushed his chair away from the desk, propped his legs up-- even though he knew this was bad for his back-- and stared out the window. He imagined himself kissing, almost biting, Hillary's neck, and her face melting in desire.

No, he realized, this wouldn't work. His students didn't read the newspaper, didn't watch McNeil-Lehrer, didn't listen to NPR, and so wouldn't understand any reference he might make to their President or his wife. He sighed again.

This morning, neither the familiar words of Plato's *Symposium*, nor the spasm of anger he felt at the brilliant and graceful, but bafflingly adolescent man sitting in the Oval Office-- not to mention the brief spasm of desire he felt for his wife-- kindled anything in Harold or lifted the dull heaviness from his body. He was bored through and through, and even though it was only early morning, he was already glazing over. He knew he'd be fine in the classroom. But until then, he was worthless. Plato teaches Eros, and this morning, like almost all the rest of the past couple of years, Harold was feeling none.

Harold hoped the phone would ring, but it didn't. He hoped a student would knock on his door, but none did. IIT students almost never came to his office, and when they did, it was typically to ask him a question about an exam or grade.

Even though it had been just a bit more than a half-hour since he had done so, he was tempted to check his e-mail again. What was he looking for? It wouldn't be one from Jeffrey: he lived in California where it was 2 hours earlier. Perhaps Harold would find an invitation to speak at a conference.

"Prof. Larson: I loved your book on Plato and the Greek conception of technology. Found it totally refreshing. Can I come study with you? I'd be willing to put up with the flat plains, the brutal cold, the wind, the insane heat of Iowa summers. Yes, just to study with you."

Harold would have to respond, "No, I'm sorry, IIT does not have graduate programs in the humanities. But I would be glad to recommend departments that might meet your needs. Thank you for your kind words about my work, and please don't hesitate to contact me with further questions."

"The International Plato Society will hold its annual convention in May in Aspen, Colorado, and we are organizing a panel discussion on your recent book on Plato and the Greek conception of technology. Would you be willing to participate? Gail Irwin and Terry Fine have agreed to comment on your work. We can offer only a small honorarium, but of course you'd be our guest here in the mountains for the entire week."

Gail Irwin and Terry Fine? The two biggest names in ancient philosophy, both professors at Harvard. They were going to comment on Harold's book? All right, Harold

thought, let the bastards try. He'd be ready to do battle with the big guns. He could manage. They didn't know as much about Plato as he did (although he had to admit they were stronger on Aristotle). He would show no fear and, more important, he would show no resentment at having been systematically excluded from the academic elite. He'd just be Harold, a philosopher from Iowa, speaking clearly, firmly rooted in the text, and making good, clean sense.

"Thank you for the criticism. But it might be worthwhile to reread the text here..."

"That's an interesting point you're raising. But I do have a few questions..."

"What you say is reasonable, but I wonder about it. Have you considered the passage in the Symposium where..."

"Can I get a word in here, please. Thank you."

"Now, as I was saying..."

"Nonsense? I don't think what I'm saying is nonsense at all. Please, let me finish. Please. All I'm asking is not to be interrupted..."

"That's the stupidest thing you've ever heard? Jeez, you must spend your time with some awfully smart people..."

"That may be the way they talk at Harvard, but I'm from Iowa, and we don't operate like that. Back where I come from, if you don't have something nice to say, you just shut the fuck up and go about your business. Which is why I don't have much to say in response to your comments. If Plato holds the sort of views you say he does, then there's no reason for any of us to waste our time on him. We should be hiking in these

beautiful mountains which surround us. You've turned Plato into a footnote, into a pissant little scholar like yourself. But that's not Plato. His dialogues are swollen with life and to read them correctly means to plunge into thinking that explodes with the most basic questions of them all. My God, think of the prologue to the Theaetetus. Remember, Theaetetus is dying of dysentery. His life is literally flowing out of him as the dialogue unfolds. And this is what frames the entire dialogue. Plato will not let us forget that our lives are flowing out of us even as we speak right here in Aspen. Even though the food is gorgeous, and the wine is wonderful, and we're sitting in opulence, we're fading away even as we speak. And we must judge all we think and do in light of this. And so only one question really matters: is there anything at all immune to the flux? Is there anything that doesn't just flow away? Is there anything stable, anything to be known? What, if anything, gives our lives meaning?"

When he finished, Harold returned to his thickly cushioned leather chair. The crowd, stunned into silence by his abrupt departure from the podium only stared at him, but he could feel the warmth of their admiration.

Harold chuckled at himself. He knew he'd never be given the chance to confront his enemies on a level playing field, and that, even if he did, he wouldn't use such language in public. He knew there would be no e-mail invitations for him on his screen and resisted the temptation to double-click the icon. But upon resisting, he immediately reconsidered. What, he wondered, if he were wrong, and a message had snuck across the wires in the past hour? No, he reasoned, the best he could hope for was an e-mail from Edna or Susan.

As had happened so many times during the past two years, Harold quickly gave up all pretense to work. It was only 10:00, too early to go to Unit D of the IIT Recreational Center, but such a huge chunk of time remained before his 2:00 class. So to the gym he went, feeling sheepish and heavy. He'd be alone on the court before the rest of the players even got to the lockerroom. He would be thoroughly warmed up, but would have accomplished nothing.

Chapter Three: Unit D

The windowless Unit D contained only a less than regulation size basketball court, and a badly dented, metal water fountain. Its floor was beaten and scarred, the cinder-blocked walls a dull gray, the glass backboards dirty, the nets almost tattered, and there was no clock. But to Harold, Unit D, like all courts, glowed, and when he entered the small gym that morning, he immediately felt his load lighten. He had left behind the workaday world of desk, goals, dreams, worries and computer screen, and was finally at home.

Alone on his little court, Harold warmed up. His right knee ached, but he was convinced nothing was seriously wrong. He had suffered no specific injury, none he could recollect, anyway. The pain had started a couple of weeks ago, on the outside of his right knee, and hadn't gone away. Harold's knees often ached for days after a hard game. His back would be sore, his muscles would feel cramped with exhaustion. But almost all of those times he could work through the pain, and this was exactly what he planned to do today. All it did was hurt and he knew his job was to cope with pain. He would, however, take it easy.

Harold began his rituals by dribbling at mid-court. The familiar sound and feel of the leather ball hitting the wood soothed him, and the gloom of his morning's failure in his office lifted quickly. He dribbled low to the ground, through his legs, behind his back, without moving his feet. He dribbled high, and then higher, and then gave the ball a hard thrust down and watched it sail above his head. When it came down, he snatched it and started to dribble, still slowly, to the hoop. From the left side he tossed in a clumsy lay-up. He stayed under the hoop for a while, until he started putting in lay-up after lay-up, each more fluid than the next, moving from the left to the right side of the basket. He

was starting to loosen, to pick up some speed, and grace was returning to his bones. Harold sent the ball spinning on the backboard and then into the basket. Flipping it underhanded, he felt the give on the board, first on the left side with his left hand, and then on his right side, also with his left hand, but this time keeping his hand up straight and higher on the ball.

Next Harold moved to bank shots, first from the left, 6, then 9, then 12 feet out. If he kept the shot flat, Harold could put some extra push into the ball. Since he was banking it off the board, the margin for error in velocity was greater than it was for a shot aiming to go through the middle of the hoop. Harold shot faster and harder until he missed. Then he moved to the right side of the basket, where the perspective was less inviting. Finally, he turned to his jump shots, his favorites by far. 9, 12, 15, 18 feet out, not caring if he missed, just reminding his body of how to do it. Naturally, the shots soon started dropping, the clean sound of the net affirming the course the ball had taken. After the ball left his hand on his last shot, a long one which, from the moment of release, he knew would hit nothing but net, Harold flicked his wrist down, let it drop until his hand was parallel to the floor where it lingered arrogantly. There was no one watching his playground gesture.

“Check that shit out, mutthafucker,” he muttered out loud.

When Harold was a graduate student at Columbia, the playground at 118th Street was his sanctuary. The first time he had actually played, it had taken an inordinate amount of courage simply to invite himself into a game. The other nine players had been

waiting for twenty minutes for a tenth to show up. They were grouped around one basket, throwing up the occasional shot and affectionately pushing each other around, but mostly just talking. Harold was alone on the other end of the court, carefully practicing his foul shots. One after another went in, and soon the motion was unconscious. He desperately hoped for an invitation to play. When he realized that none would be forthcoming, he resolved to approach the group. At first he was afraid. They were black, comfortable in their gregarious jostling around the hoop, and indifferent to him. They were loud. But Harold was ashamed of his fear, so after taking a breath and reminding himself to be himself, he walked to the other end of the court.

“Would you guys like to get a game going?” he asked, his voice unwavering.

They looked him over in silence, and Harold felt sure he was about to be spurned. But then a skinny kid, no more than 17 or so, spoke. He was about Harold’s height, with genuinely black skin, thick lips traced by a faint mustache, and a closely cropped haircut. His eyes seemed slightly glazed, as if the outside world meant nothing to him. He was an unimpressive looking kid, with long arms and a partially open mouth. He wore a red tee shirt that was too big, and a ragged pair of black high-tops. His wide and rounded shoulders formed, with the rest of his upper back, a single sweeping curve, so much so that, at first glance, he seemed to suffer from some sort of spinal deformity. “Yeah,” he said, “we got ten. Let’s play.”

“Yo, K, this dude can’t play with us.”

“How you know that, Marvin? You ain’t seen him play.”

“Oh come on, Spesh, what you talking about? We don’t need this boy to mess up our game.”

“We got no game, Marvin, if he don’t play.”

Marvin was impressed with K’s logic, and he capitulated. “All right, K, let him play.”

“Who put you in charge?” Neal Simpson, an imposingly tall, muscular young man asked Marvin. “You just gonna walk on this court and tell the rest of us what to do?”

Marvin hesitated, but when he saw Neal was close to a laugh he said, “Oh man, come on Neal, let’s get us a game.”

Neal did laugh, slapped Marvin’s hand, and said “okay. Me, K, you, you, and white boy, we one team.”

And so it was that blonde Harold, nervous and bold, began to play ball with the brothers on the streets of Harlem.

Neal told Harold to guard Marvin, who was two inches taller, and at least fifty pounds heavier, than Harold. He was also obviously out of shape.

The game began, faster and rougher than any in which Harold had ever played. Every time Marvin came close to him, he put his hands on some part of Harold’s body, his arm or his chest or his shoulder, and gave him a little shove. When a rebound was up for grabs, space would be cleared by rushing bodies and flying elbows. On virtually every play a foul would be committed, but Harold noticed quickly that no one ever called it. The game was a strange blend of intensity and indifference.

Harold could keep up with the pace: he was fast and in excellent shape, but he had no idea how to enter into the flow of the game. When his team had the ball, he would either set picks, that went unused by his teammates, or keep in motion, circulating

through the base line, trying to get open, just as he had been taught to do by Coach Olafsson at Williamston High. Marvin didn't like to run very much, especially on defense, and so Harold was open a lot. But no one passed him the ball. He was surprised, because if they did, he'd have an open shot, which he would probably make. But his teammates were playing a different game. They wanted the ball, for only with the ball could they do what they loved best; drive to the hoop, where bodies stood in the way. Their instincts were to head straight for the hoop. If there were obstacles, all the better. Theirs was a game of contact, of challenge, of one-on-one, of twists and turns, of improvisation, of stylish intimidation. Harold's instinct, by contrast, was always to move towards open space, and only from there to release his shot. Short, long, it didn't matter to Harold; what mattered was being open.

Even though he wasn't tall or thick, K was one of the best. His strangely curved body was no deformity. Instead, he was coiled. His skinny legs were powerful springs, and he could leap. K's languid body seemed indifferent, but his eyes told the difference. He was all business on the court. The first time he had the ball, he knifed his way between two defenders, double-pumped the ball, and then gently slipped it off his fingers. It kissed the backboard, but then rolled off the rim. Before anyone else had even left the ground, K jumped for the rebound, and he tipped in his own missed shot.

"Yo, Special K!" shouted Neal Simpson in delight, as he gave his hand to K to slap.

On the next play, Brother Toler, called BT and improbably fast for someone shaped like a cannonball, drove towards the hoop. Marvin left Harold entirely and slapped BT's arm before he could get the shot off, but BT was so strong that his forward

momentum wasn't interrupted at all, and he made the basket. When it went through the net, he glared at Marvin.

The game went back and forth, with almost no jump shots being taken. The most intense moments came under the basket in the battle for rebounds. Harold, with thick legs useless for quick jumping, knew he was outmatched here, so he deployed an old strategy. Instead of fighting for a good position under the basket, and then competing for the ball as it came off the rim, he didn't jump at all. He kept himself to the side of a player who did have a chance for the rebound. If the guy got the ball, and then carelessly brought it down too low after snatching it off the backboard, Harold would slap it out of his hands.

About midway through the game, this is exactly what happened. Marvin got an offensive rebound, but Harold hit the ball out of his hands just as he landed. The ball came out, and Harold grabbed it. Before anyone else could react, he was off to the basket. He flew by his watching opponents and laid it in cleanly.

An efficient play, but since he had done no more than make an uncontested layup, he was greeted by indifference. Only K offered him a limp hand to slap. It became clear to Harold that this game was only marginally about victory. Its real purpose was to attain glory.

After Harold scored, Marvin was angry, and on the next play called for the ball. BT passed it to him on the low post, and Marvin began his slow push to the basket. He led with his weighty backside, and even though Harold tried to stand his ground, and so laid his chest almost flush against his opponent's oncoming back and shoulder, Marvin steadily made progress. Harold was, of course, fouled continually on this play, and

Marvin was in the key far longer than three seconds, but Harold kept silent. After a few more dribbles, Marvin was close enough to the basket to throw up an awkward little hook shot that went in. When he turned to go back on defense, he threw his shoulder at Harold and nearly knocked him over as he ran slowly down the court.

K brought the ball up on the next play. When he reached the top of the key he passed the ball to Harold, who was open on the right wing. The message was clear: “your turn, bro. He faced you down, you gotta face him up.”

Harold didn't really want the ball. He was not a one-on-one player. He was a point guard, a team man, who was trained to take the shot only when he was open and not before. Pass the ball at least 6 times before shooting; that was Coach Olafsson's mantra. But Harold understood the challenge K had just silently explained to him.

When he got the ball, Marvin ran to him and put one hand in his face. Before he started to dribble, Harold twisted his upper torso to his left to keep the ball away from Marvin. Marvin then put his hand on his right shoulder and pushed him. To get the hand off, Harold squared back up, stared Marvin in the eyes, and faked to his right, as if he were going to go baseline. But then he snapped sharply back to the left, his strong side, and dribbled quickly. Marvin had gone for the fake, and so he was a step behind. Harold took two dribbles, and started to pull up for a short jumper near the foul line. Just before he released the ball, he felt a sticky hand on his right arm. Not a crushing blow, just enough to throw his balance off. Again, he had been fouled, and this time he was tempted to call it. But again he resisted. He missed his shot badly.

Three plays later, K again passed him the ball when he was open on the right. Again, Marvin got in his face and put his hand went shamelessly on Harold's right

shoulder, but this time Harold slapped it away. Marvin was stunned, and Harold earned the extra second he needed. He dribbled twice towards the free throw line and released his shot without interference. It was not the familiar “swish” Harold was accustomed to, because the net was metal, but that clean and clanging sound was good enough. Harold had scored. K offered his hand for a slap.

Harold was in the game, though he didn’t touch the ball for the rest of it. He remembered one beautiful shot Neal Simpson had made. Guarded by the massive BT, he was near the top of the key, face to the basket, ball held tauntingly high in his right hand.

“Yo, baby, you think you gonna stop me?” BT was crouched low in concentration and ignored him. Neal then began dribbling slowly to his right, BT’s hand on his left arm. He then made the slightest move with the right side of his body, as if he were going to spin and reverse direction. BT froze, and then Neal went right and exploded to the basket. Two long steps and then he slammed the ball through the metal rim. He hung on the rim for a couple of seconds, and then returned to earth as four or five of the other players whooped in appreciation.

“I waxed your head, baby!” he shouted to BT. “You just stood there with your mouth hangin open like some dog. I’m gonna get you next time too, mutthafucker, and you gonna feel the pain.”

At that moment Harold, a student of Ancient Greek philosophy and literature, understood for the first time everything that he had ever been taught about a Homeric hero. It wasn’t enough to defeat your opponent, to kill him with a sword or a spear. There had to be recognition, talk, glory. The killer must stand over the killed and proclaim for all to hear, “I am the one who killed you, who turned your wife into a widow

and your children into orphans. I am the one who destroyed your dreams and your hopes. Your mother will see you never again. She will wander lost, with a broken heart... because I killed you.”

On the playground, Harold felt as if he were in a foreign but not too distant country, a country which beckoned him with a promise unfulfillable in his own land. Here he had to observe the new customs carefully and even if, after a few years, he was able to understand its language well, he dared not speak it out loud. But back in his shabby west-side apartment, in his thoughts and alone in his shower, Harold, whose own family never cursed at all, often spoke the language of the court.

“Why don’t you just be bringing me that soap?”

“What soap you talkin about? You talkin about this soap, this soap right here?”

“Shit yeah, that’s the soap.”

“Shitass mutthafucker, whatch you want that soap for? That’s my soap. You not gonna be takin my soap from me, are you?”

“Shiiiiit, don’t be tellin me that’s your soap. That’s my soap. Mutthafucker, I paid for that soap. If I feel like latherin up, shiiiiit, that’s just what the fuck I’m gonna do.”

“Whatch you talkin to me that way for? You think I got nothin better to do than listen to your trash? Shiiiiit, I’m a busy man, and I gotta be doing me some soapin. You tellin me that’s your soap. Mutthafucker, that shit ain’t your soap. That’s my soap.”

Alone in the shower Harold would spew out his playground invective as if he had a mini-version of Turret’s Syndrome, the sentences of a foreign tongue streaming out with no effort of his will. The sound of these vulgar syllables was mysteriously

satisfying to him. Saying them made him feel powerfully different from the thin-lipped academics against whom he had to compete on a daily basis. The words of the playground were crisp, judgmental, and exuberant, and they shattered the veneer of academic gentility with which Harold was becoming increasingly familiar. They were from the body, of the body, and so spoke directly and with a force that neither the self-absorbed voices of his Columbia colleagues, nor the flat monotones of Iowa, could muster. Even so, or perhaps just because of this, Harold would never utter these blunt, aggressive words out loud when in the presence of others.

Back in Unit D, Harold ceased dribbling for a moment. He clenched the basketball tight to his chest as he felt a familiar spasm of shame rush through him. He remembered that, even though he wanted to, he had never been able to ask any of the other players why, one day, K was not on the court, and why he never appeared again. Harold shook his head in disgust, and grunted to himself. But he soon broke this thought and resumed his dribbling.

Alone in Unit D, at 10:45 in the morning, when a serious man, a real scholar, a real writer, would have been hard at work in his office, Harold allowed himself to mutter some uninspired trash to an opponent who wasn't there.

“You say we’re only up by one? We’re up by two, but it doesn’t matter. Because I’m going to score on this play, no matter what you do. If you guard me tight, I’ll drive right by you. If you leave me alone out here-- doesn’t matter how far out-- I’ll bury the j. You double-team me and I’ll dump it off to one of my boys over there and he’ll just lay it

in. So for you there is no hope. I know we're up by two, but I'll let you call it one, because I'm going to score on you right now."

Mike Comstock entered the gym and interrupted Harold's spell.

"Hello Harold, how's it going?"

"Hi Mike."

Mike was a thick, 6' 3", slow moving, good rebounding, fair shooting, economist. His research was in the price fluctuation of Southeast Asian rice. Like Harold, he was blonde. Like most economists, he played a selfish game of basketball. He didn't see the court well, and he passed the ball only when he had to. When he got a rebound, he'd dribble it upcourt himself, his head down in bullish fashion, rather than zip the outlet pass to a guard. He didn't understand the beautifully fluid dynamics of five men, each with a slot in a forward moving dance, headed for the hoop. He didn't understand that basketball was team play.

Since he was already warm, Harold let Mike take most of the shots. Even though his knee ached more than it should, he enjoyed retrieving the ball and then firing quick bounce passes back to Mike, who would usually miss. He congratulated himself on his ability to pass and felt a gratifying sense of his superiority to Mike.

"*Honky fat-ass,*" Harold thought. "*Chop you to pieces.*" Unlike his colleague, who counted Asian rice for a living, Harold Larson could see beyond himself.

"How's Anderson doing?" Harold asked, as he zipped a pass to Mike.

Paul Anderson was the powerful chair of the department of International Agricultural Economics. He was rumored to be leaving IIT for a position at the University of Illinois.

“I think he’s going to stay, Harold. He likes it here,” Mike responded as he took a hurried shot. It hit the rim hard, and bounced far. Harold chased it down, and then threw a long, crisp, two-bounce pass back to Mike.

“Oh come on, Mike, isn’t he like other administrators? Aren’t they all free agents, trying to work their way up the ladder? As soon as they get a job, they start looking for the next one. Don’t you think he’s looking at greener pastures?”

“I don’t think so, Harold. I think he’s going to stick around for a while.”

“Really? Well, maybe that’s because he likes the weather.”

Mike held the ball and laughed. Harold liked to tease Mike about the weather. Ever since he had returned from a conference in Hawaii, Mike frequently commented on the perfection of the weather there. That and the price of pineapples.

“No, Harold, I don’t think he likes the weather. He’s got a nice little empire here in Iowa and he’s not looking for change.”

“Are you happy about that, Mike?”

“Sure, Harold, sure I am. He’s a good boss. A little crusty sometimes, but, hey, we live in Iowa and we’re all crusty. In Hawaii the crust just melts away.”

“Oh come on, Mike. This is the heartland and you love it here.”

“Sure I do, Harold, sure I do. A front’s moving in, though, and the temperature will drop pretty low by tomorrow. See how well you like it then. I’m going back to Hawaii, Harold. Do you want to come?” Mike asked as he finally took his shot, which he made.

“No thanks, Mike, I like my suffering just the way it is.”

Other professors trickled in: Jack Hingham from Agronomy, Donny Quijana from Modern Foreign Languages, Ken Rosenfield from Genetics, Bill Robinson and Tom Peterson from Engineering, Pete Thorenson from English, and Mitt Walters, who commanded the ROTC unit at IIT. Soon they were followed by Harold's two oldest basketball colleagues, Gary Bishop of Meat Science and Alan White from Chemistry, each of whom Harold welcomed warmly. By 11:15 there were 10 players in the gym. Five took off their shirts, and the game began.

Gary Bishop, his overweight friend and neighbor who was doing research on antidepressants for hogs, guarded Harold. Gary described his wonder drug as Prozac for pigs, and he said that when he patented it he would call it either "Porkzac" or "Propig." He couldn't make up his mind, and he often asked Harold for his opinion. Unlike most of those in his field, he acknowledged that the present condition of the hog was a mighty unhappy one. While the farms of old were a hodge-podge of activities-- some hogs, cows, and chickens wandering around, some beans, corn, and vegetables growing in the insanely fertile soil, tractor parts and tools neatly stacked in the barn, children's toys thrown carelessly in the front yard-- present day agriculture, like the technology it was founded upon, was entirely specialized. The raising of meat animals had become almost totally industrialized. No longer did a farmer carry a few hogs. Now there were dedicated hog factories with nothing else around. On the Larson farm, where Harold had grown up, there were always animals visible from the house. In the contemporary hog facility, the animals never left their computer monitored stalls. They were fed by a conveyor belt which essentially forced the animal to eat its anti-biotic laced grain during all moments when it was not sleeping. The animals were not given the space to move

more than a few inches, since movement would produce muscle and so reduce the edible portion of the carcass. The only time a human visited their stall was to inject the young animals with growth hormones, or to repair a broken sensor in the stall. The stalls were cleaned automatically by high-pressure hoses fixed to the floor which washed the waste to the drain. The hogs never saw the light of day, never experienced fluctuation in temperature, never felt the wind or rain, and never touched another animal.

“Harold,” Gary would explain to his friend, “I care about animals, I really do. That’s why they need psychotropics. Their stress level is high, and sometimes they get so depressed that they won’t eat on their own. Jeez, the poor guys have to be force fed. They deserve a little happiness, don’t they Harold? You’re a philosopher, you ought to know. Anyway, I think they do. Plus, a happy hog is a healthy hog. A good life and a painless death; that’s the ticket.”

Gary envisioned a contented beast, calmly and cheerfully feeding itself 18 hours a day, warm, free from the snow, the sun, the bacteria, and all the competitive stress that living in the brutal world of nature invariably imposes on an animal. In his world it would not be just the fittest who survive. Instead, those who had the best self-image and a techno-palace in which to live had as good a chance as any. Of course, these happy hogs would eat more and so go more quickly, and therefore more efficiently, to slaughter, and it was for this reason, Gary hoped, that the grant money from large agricultural corporations would head his way.

Gary had been a good player once, but he was now heavy and slow, and Harold could drive by him almost at will. He was annoying to play against, though. He called numerous fouls, and would argue if someone called one against him. Sometimes, when

he himself was beaten, he would grab his opponent flagrantly and then call the foul on himself in order to stop the play. Over the years Harold had come to thoroughly dislike playing against Gary, but he never allowed this to show. He regretted the meat scientist's strong self-image, for it resulted in his frequently volunteering to guard him. Harold generally preferred to be guarded by Alan White, the best player on the court. Alan was 5' 11" and 180 pounds to Harold's 5' 10" and 175. He was thick and strong, and fierce under the boards. He didn't have great range on his jump shot, but he could pull up sharply from 10 or 12 feet out, and hit consistently. He would drive to the basket with a recklessness Harold hadn't seen since his New York days. And he could jump.

Alan was a sweet tempered, shy man, whose aggression was never cruel or exhibited for effect. Harold admired his play immensely. When they were on the same team, they were unbeatable, for Alan understood Harold's strengths and would let him bring the ball up and run the team. Alan moved beautifully without the ball, and Harold would hit him again and again with backdoor feeds and lobs which Alan would snatch and easily lay into the hoop. When Alan was his opponent and would guard him, Harold would simply give up the hope of driving to the basket. Instead, he'd float around the top of the key. Sometimes, he'd lull Alan into neglect by moving further out, and floating even more casually. Alan would drop down closer to the basket in order to help his teammates on defense. If his own teammates had any sense-- which they usually didn't-- they'd toss Harold the ball for an open jump shot. Those Harold rarely missed, even now in his 44th year.

Alan presented a challenge which Harold relished. He couldn't stop him completely, he knew that, but he also knew how to slow him down. He was as quick as

Alan, if he concentrated and kept his feet moving on defense, Harold could cut off the lane to the hoop and force Alan to take a jumper from slightly further out than he wished. If he did this consistently, and if he boxed Alan out and kept him away from the boards, Alan wouldn't score quite as many. And if his own team played well, they could win. The level of intensity required to accomplish this, though, was formidable.

Gary presented no challenge at all, and the prospect of being guarded by him usually deflated Harold. But not today. Harold was ashamed to admit to himself that he was glad that Mike, and not he, was guarding Alan. He felt sluggish, his knee was aching, and he didn't want to run hard.

"So how ya feeling today Harold?" Gary asked him just before the game began. "I'm feeling pretty good myself," he answered before Harold could respond. "My research has been going swell. Got the rate of weight increase up by nearly .5 percent last week. The hogs sort of just chew more slowly. You know, like they're savoring the taste of the grain. They seem to be enjoying themselves, that's what I think. And they eat more. Yup, it's going pretty good, all right."

"That's great, Gary," Harold replied.

On the first play of the game, Gary brought the ball slowly up the court himself, failed to notice that Alan had taken the back door to the basket and was wide open, and instead threw up a long set shot from beyond the key. He missed it.

Mike got the rebound and, like Gary, brought the ball up himself. He too stopped his dribble near the top of the key and launched a shot that missed. It hit the rim hard and bounced far, and Harold, just as he done in the warmup session, chased it down. He dribbled back to the center of the court and tried, without being explicit, to get his

teammates in order. No one was moving, but at least Mike could post up low. Finally, Mike moved to where he was supposed to be, and as soon as he did Harold hit him with a quick pass that even Alan couldn't intercept. Mike missed the shot.

The game progressed slowly, with neither Harold nor Alan touching the ball much. After a few minutes, though, Alan asserted himself. He took three consecutive shots, all of which he made. Harold's team was down, 5 to 2. After the third shot, Harold responded by keeping the ball to himself near the top of the key. He dribbled slowly with his right, his weak, hand, knowing that Gary could keep up with his pace. Mike was waving for the ball at the low post, but this time Harold ignored him. Gary was crouched in an exaggerated position, with his hands thrust forward, as if he were a serious defender, but Harold knew that his overweight neighbor couldn't keep up with him. Harold quickly crossed the ball to his left hand, and took three quick dribbles towards the foul line. He pulled up short, elevated, got his jump shot off the cleanly and knew, before seeing it, that it would go in. Just as it did he felt a heavy weight colliding against him and he was nearly knocked to the ground. Gary, a few steps behind the play, had rushed to catch up, stumbled and had fallen into him. He awkwardly grabbed Harold so that he didn't actually hit the ground, but in doing so Harold's right knee was twisted, and he felt a sharp pain.

"Oh jeez, sorry about that, Harold. Good shot, though. Too bad we don't shoot fouls. You could have had a three point play."

The pain was searing. Harold straightened up, disengaged himself from his friend's sweaty embrace, and limped away. After a few steps, he was relieved to feel the pain beginning to subside.

“Goddamn it, you fatass punk,” he thought to himself. “What the fuck you doing?” He imagined himself holding Gary’s throat hard with his right hand. He put his face close to his friend’s, pointed a finger at him, and said, “Watch what the fuck you do! You hear me? Mutthafucker, you pull that shit one more time, and it’s lights out!”

Alan came over to Harold, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, “Are you okay, Harold?”

“Yeah, I’m fine thanks, Alan.”

He said nothing to Gary, but gave him a friendly pat to indicate that everything was all right.

But Harold had no more interest in the game. He let Mike take most of the shots, and his team lost 15 to 9.

“Nice game, Alan,” Harold said as they waited in line for the water fountain.

“Thanks Harold, you too. Hey, are you still limping?”

“No, not really. A little sore, a little stiff. I’m not as young as you Alan. I’ve been playing this game since you were in junior high and mixing chemicals in your basement.”

“Good one, Harold. But you’re not that old.”

“Ah, who knows. You going to the faculty meeting tomorrow?”

“Oh sure. I want to hear the Dean’s report on the budget. More cuts, I hear.”

“I hear it too.”

“Hope you feel better, Harold.”

“Thanks Alan.”

They started the second game, which again came down to Mike versus Alan, and Harold against Gary. This time, Harold's knee hurt even when he wasn't running, and so he didn't once attempt to get to the basket. He fed the ball to Mike and let him do all the shooting he wanted, and he himself took only three or four open jumpers. His team lost, 15 - 7.

"Nope, not a third, not for me," Harold announced to his friends. "I have some work in my office I've got to get done before my 2 o'clock." A couple of graduate students had been waiting to play, and Harold was relieved that he could depart early without ruining the third game for the others.

"See ya, Harold, see ya on Friday," Mike said.

"Take it easy Mike, see ya Alan, see ya Gary."

"Okay Buddy," Gary replied. "Game a little too much for you today, huh?"

"Yeah, guess so," Harold said as he waved good-bye.

"You should take some anti-inflammatories for that knee of yours. Chemical ice, that's what it is all right. It's great stuff. You take care, okay buddy."

Chapter Four: Locker Room

In the empty locker room, Harold sat on a bench, elbows resting on his thighs. He wasn't breathing very hard, nor was he sweating as much as usual, for the game had been neither long nor intense. The pain in his knee was becoming more assertive, and for a moment Harold was distracted by it. Still, he remained convinced that nothing was seriously wrong. The pain was a throb more than a pierce, and so he reasoned that he hadn't torn cartilage or ligament. It must be some sort of inflammation, he decided, which itself was a version of fatigue. And since it was fatigue, he'd just give himself a

couple of weeks off. He would force himself to the pool, even though he hated it, and lift some weights. This decided, Harold let himself sink gratefully into his fatigue.

As he sat there, staring at the small puddle of sweat that had formed between his feet, he felt a familiar wave gently sweep over him, and leave him slightly disoriented. The game was receding. On the court, with its tight space, limited time, and a set of rules that clearly defined victory, nothing else mattered but playing the game. The future did not beckon, and the past did not call. Soon, however, Harold would be showered and dressed and ready to re-enter the everyday routine of books and students and herringbone jackets, a world big and messy, fractured with distractions, fraught with competing voices, responsibilities, anger, and fear.

Harold sighed, and then forced himself to reach down to take his shoes and socks off. Still sitting, he peeled off his sweaty shirt, and only then risked standing up. As he did, the pain in his right knee made him a little wobbly. He kept his balance by holding on to the locker's door, and when he was steady, he pulled his shorts off, and reached inside to grab his towel. He limped to the shower, and by the time he got there the pain had subsided.

With the hot water massaging his back, and his eyes staring at the tiles on the floor, Harold was transported back to his college days. It was at the University of Iowa that he had learned why he loved basketball so.

When he entered college, he was a farm kid, a good boy, who assumed he would follow his father's injunction to study engineering. He'd go to classes, get good grades as he always had, continue to play ball. He'd try out for the varsity team, but Harold was realistic even back then. The Iowa Hawkeyes were big time, and so he knew he wouldn't

make the team as a walk-on. Their players were not from Iowa farms but from Chicago and Flint, East St. Louis and Detroit, and they were far better and bigger than Harold. Believing he would fail, Harold nonetheless tried. Fail he did, but the disappointment did not linger. The University of Iowa had a well organized intra-mural league, and Harold dedicated himself to that and to pick-up games.

During his first semester, Harold was a diligent pre-engineering student. But in the second, he heard the cry coming from the long haired boys and the girls who wore no bras: "Be Here Now." Harold didn't understand, but he was intrigued. He was a methodical and serious farm kid with chores to do, and he didn't know how to lose himself in ecstasy or how to gyrate blissfully to the Grateful Dead. He didn't know how to smile peacefully. He was a Lutheran, not a Hindu or Buddhist. But the boys, with their wire-rim glasses, their wild hair down to their shoulders, their torn jeans and tie-dyed shirts, urged him to leave his Protestant work-ethic self behind. The girls with translucent blouses and merry faces invited him to come along to the anti-war demonstrations.

Harold began to despise his own seriousness. He longed to join the long-haired boys and girls, and so in his second semester he too let his blonde hair grow. He bought an army jacket and took a course on Chinese Philosophy. He read Lao Tzu, tried hard to Be Here Now and to throw the I Ching. He smoked dope and took LSD. He met girls when he was stoned, for then, he discovered to his surprise and pleasure, he could say more than a few words at a time. One girl, Molly Mortenson, who, like so many of the others, had straight blonde hair nearly to her waist, and skirts to her ankles, appeared at his dorm room one night, invited herself in, promptly took her clothes off and got into his

bed. He didn't know what to do, but she, generous and cheerful, showed him. And Harold Larson, excellent student he was, learned fast.

For a few months Harold devoted himself to the counter-culture of the 60's. He became a Taoist and dropped out of the engineering college, which for him and his new friends was emblematic not only of the military industrial complex, but of reason itself. Reason, Harold decided, had kept him distanced from the moment and robbed him of life. He was a thinker, an analyzer, a problem solver, and so he was cut off from the pulsating flow of experience. Reason, the urge to control life rather than let it flow, had kept him far from ecstasy and ease. It was pale, lifeless, dry reason, the reason of the engineers and their technology, that had started the war in Vietnam and had pronounced the body, with its dance of pleasure, evil. Reason had kept the black man enslaved and the rest of us separated from one another, and the earth, by an abstract wall. Harold Larson bitterly renounced his own rationality and longed for the spontaneity of life.

Drugs seemed to be a way of silencing the ceaseless chattering of the rational voice inside his head. Stoned he'd lie in a bed made of tie-died sheets with Molly Mortenson, surrounded by candles and glistening lava lamps, listening to the Grateful Dead. Even back then, however, Harold would give mini-lectures and offer textual exegesis.

Ripple in still water,
When there is no paddle tossed
Nor wind to blow.

“Check out what Jerry’s saying, Moll. Ripple in still water. Still and moving. Moving and still. You see, Molly, we gotta get beyond the western obsession with opposites. Same and different, different and same. It’s all one.”

Molly responded by murmuring, “that’s so cool, Harold, so cool,” and by stroking his chest. She lit the joint sitting in the coconut ashtray next to the bed, took a puff, and handed it to him. Harold inhaled deeply and held the smoke tightly in his lungs. When he exhaled, he said, “no paddles, man, no paddles. Just the still sweet water taking us wherever it is we need to go.” He closed his eyes and concentrated on the next few lines:

Reach out your cup,
If your cup be empty.
If your cup is full,
May it be again.

“Jerry’s telling us to go with the flow, Moll, go with the flow. We’ll get what we need but only if we don’t ask for it. No paddles, man, no paddles.” Molly smiled.

Let it be known
There is a fountain
That
Was not made
By the hands of men.

"Not made by the hands of men. Jerry's talking about the paddles, Moll. Breaking the still flow. Trying to control what can't be controlled. But the spirit of the people is greater than the man's technology, Moll, it really is."

Molly took another drag on the joint, put it back into the coconut, and then moved on top of Harold. "Go for it, Harold," she said as she buried her face into, and started licking and biting, his neck, her luxurious hair draped over his head, his shoulders, his chest. As they made love, with Molly taking the lead, Harold heard Jerry singing the Taoist anthem in the background:

There is a road
No simple highway
Between the dawn and the dark of night
And if you go
No one may follow
That path is for
Your steps alone.

Even with Molly Mortenson thrusting herself gracefully upon him, Harold wanted to explain those lines to her. He was disgusted with himself and so, without interrupting Molly's lovely undulations, he reached back to the coconut, got the joint, and took a drag. Molly smiled but was not interested in the pot.

As the hot water poured over him, Harold chuckled at himself. He stood up straight, turned the handle to maximum cold, and forced himself to be refreshed by its

sting. When he returned to his locker, he sat back on the bench and returned to his memories.

In the Spring of his freshman year, he had skipped most of his classes. He was regularly getting stoned and staying up all night to wander around the campus. On a bright day in May, when he should have been studying for finals, he was walking through the fields with Molly Mortenson, tripping on LSD, marvelling, in dumb awe, at the tiny green stalks of corn pushing, with the sumptuous violence of nature, through the soil. He had spent his entire life surrounded by corn fields, but had never really seen them before. Now the tiny shoots loomed large as they cracked the surface of the soil. The corn invited Harold to crack the surface of time and mingle with the soil of the universe. And Harold accepted the invitation gladly and spoke volumes to his gladness.

“Be faithful to the earth, Molly, don’t leave it behind by analyzing it or harvesting it. Don’t turn it into a thing, Molly, join it, rejoice in it, jubilate it, Molly. Separation kills. Join and be one and be glad!”

Harold and Molly, two tied-dyed children, wearing tee shirts and jeans, with long, flowing hair, held hands and twirled each around other in clumsy circles, beaming smiles on their innocent Scandanavian faces, eyes bright, dancing the corn dance, the dance of life and freedom and peaceful joy.

But off drugs, Harold came back to himself. Even though he thought he shouldn’t, he’d sneak into the library to study, and as a result he somehow managed to maintain a “B” average. He was not proud of his “B,” though. He knew it should have

been an “F,” the mark of authenticity, the grade Molly Mortenson achieved in three of her four courses during her last semester at the University of Iowa.

Even with his drug-taking and grades slipping, even with his sudden and complete disinterest in watching both collegiate and professional sports, Harold never stopped playing basketball. Because he wore his long blonde hair tied in a pony tail and a tie-dyed tee shirt, the other players would initially look at him with contempt when he entered the court. But Harold was almost always the best player there, and soon his skills would overwhelm the barriers, and he’d just be playing ball.

It was then, in that exhilarating and confusing time, that Harold had his realization. Playing ball was like taking LSD. On the court he was lifted out of the flow of time. When he was playing he wasn’t planning or organizing, worrying or regretting. He was in the moment, playing. Simple as that. The court was not merely an arbitrary rectangle framed by two raised hoops. It was a sacred space, a world of pure presence in which he didn’t have to tell his body, fluid and strong, what to do. In motion he was propelled by the mystical flow of play. Thoughtful, worried and responsible Harold Larson was transformed and sanctified when playing basketball. And so when his long-haired friends derided him for frequenting the gym, which they called a nurturing ground of fascist competition, he ignored them.

When he returned to the farm after his freshman year, he announced to his parents that he would not be working for them that summer. Instead, he’d be hitchhiking to California with Molly Mortenson. There was a ranch north of San Francisco that took in all comers and would let them pitch their tent wherever they could find space. Furthermore, he was dropping out of college and would not return to Iowa in September.

Harold's father, Richard "Swede" Larson, was thick and bulging with the muscles of a life-time of farmwork. His hair was a crew cut, his skin rough and weathered by years in the sun. He was several inches taller than Harold and much heavier. Like all of his neighbors, he was a quiet man. A deacon in the Williamston Lutheran Church, he was a highly regarded farmer, who had taken over 200 acres from his own father, Harold Larson, and turned it into a flourishing and prosperous 500, a long-time member of the School Board, and a regular at the local diner, Sip 'N' Snack, which functioned as the town meeting hall.

Swede was a man who did not quite recognize himself when he wasn't working. He was always up and in the fields or the barn before Harold got out of bed, and he frequently missed dinner. There were vehicles to fix, animals to tend, crops to harvest, grain to store, 20 mile trips into town to make, accounts to figure, and the elder Larson did it all with a steady energy and intense concentration. He did not allow himself to get sick, and he had an enormous threshold of pain. Once he had fallen from a ladder and broken an arm, but even then he didn't significantly slow down his pace. At night, he could will himself to sleep. He had learned how to do this, he explained, during his 5 years in the army, when sleep was a precious commodity. He had been a Buck Sergeant during World War II, and if needed, he could order himself to sleep. During the day he was tireless.

Harold liked his father best when, after dinner and a shower, he would sit at the dining room table and do his bookkeeping. For a man so used to physical motion, Richard was remarkably comfortable in the act of sitting. He seemed motionless and, when he was concentrating on his calculations, he was imperturbable. Harold could be

blasting the TV, screaming with delight at a football or basketball game, and his father didn't seem to notice.

Richard took a quiet pride in his ability to keep his own books and to master the complex calculations a farmer has to make. The successful farmer knows must determine when it is prudent to buy a new tractor, to sell the animals, to store the grain, to purchase new land. He calculates how much fertilizer per acre, how much herbicide, how much insurance. Most of all, he must calculate how much money he has to borrow in the Spring to make it until the harvest.

The elder Larson kept meticulous records, lovely charts drawn painstakingly in pencil. He would rebuke himself if he made even a small error.

It was from his father that Harold developed his affection for mathematics. Even during his senior year in high school, when Harold was one of only a handful of students taking calculus, his father helped him with his math. Richard had taken a textbook out of the library during the summer before, and studied the material himself. He was well prepared to help his son. His thick and powerful father would sit next to him at the table; he smelled clean. Harold would sit to his right; he was left-handed, his father right, and so their hands, each holding a pencil, would nearly touch as they worked together on a problem.

When they were doing math, his father never criticized him, never made him feel as if an error was shameful. He proceeded slowly, patiently; he understood each step of the various problems Harold presented to him; he had, after all, already worked through all the problems in the textbook. Even if not gifted, Harold became a fine student of mathematics.

Harold expected his father to disapprove when he saw how long his hair had grown, and then told him that he planned to travel that summer. For the first time in his life he was prepared to do battle with him, for he thought his father, who had almost never lost his temper, might yell or threaten to disown him when he learned that his son was going to drop out of school. Instead, Swede looked down at the ground and muttered, “Well, Harold, let’s talk about things a little bit this evening, okay?”

“Okay Dad,” Harold responded.

Harold’s father offered him a deal. He’d allow his son a summer away from the farm, he’d even give him some money for his trip to California, if only Harold agreed to return to the University of Iowa in the Fall and give college one more try. To Harold’s amazement, Swede Larson was not unsympathetic. He didn’t know that Swede, himself a veteran of World War II, had been telling his friends at Sip ‘N’ Snack that the Vietnam War was wrong, that American boys shouldn’t be dying in a swampy land, far away, whose people posed no threat. Those people were farmers just like us, Swede had often told his friends, and they should be allowed to take care of their own business. Most of them disagreed with him, but, good Iowans as they were, they tolerated Swede’s eccentric views and never once excluded him from their coffee klatch. A couple even ended up agreeing with him that the War was wrong and that the filthy boys and girls who were marching in the streets of the big cities weren’t so bad after all. At least they cared about what was right.

“If you drop out of college, Harold, you’ll lose your draft deferment. I don’t want you to do that,” Swede Larson told his son. He trusted his boy, and so he let him go to California, believing he would return to Iowa City in the Fall. “Just do one thing for me

before you leave. I want you to go to your grandfather's house and talk to him about your plans."

"Gramps? What for?" Harold asked. "He comes over here almost every night. Why should I go over there?"

"Just go talk to him Harold. He's alone in the house a lot these days. He could use the company. He doesn't get into town as often as he used to, you know, and his vision isn't good."

"Okay, Dad."

Harold's mother, Velma, was even quieter than Swede. A large, thick woman, whose graying hair was always kept up in a small and careless bun, she was the efficient and totally responsible mistress of the home. Her jobs were raising Harold, taking care of the food and the clothes, cleaning the house, which was always spotless. She tended to the kitchen garden and the few chickens running around the yard, and she helped Swede in whatever way was necessary. She didn't complain when it was hot, or when it was brutally cold. When the Iowa winds would blow for days at a time, the kind of wind that drove the original prairie settlers mad, she'd simply shut the windows, pick up her sewing, and sweep the dust. When her arthritis kicked in, her face tightened a bit, but that was all. Her pleasures were largely restricted to Sundays, when the day was spent in Church and at Church functions, and to watching some TV with her husband after a long day working.

Once, when Harold was eight years old, he nearly bumped into his mother as she came out of the bathroom. With the door open, he smelled smoke and because he was

too young to recognize the smell of tobacco he worried that there had been a fire. When he looked anxiously at his mother, she understood immediately what he was thinking.

“Don’t worry Harold. There’s no fire. I just lit a match.”

“Why Mom?”

“Well, sometimes it gets a little smelly in a bathroom Harold. The match helps take the smell away.”

He had accepted the explanation at the time. It was only years later that he figured out that the bathroom was where Velma smoked her occasional cigarette. And it was only years after that, when Harold was home from college, his long blonde hair reaching to nearly his shoulders, smoking pot himself and feeling full of his own righteousness, that he confronted his mother and asked why she had lied to him. She smiled, unperturbed that she had been caught.

“The cigarettes help me loosen my bowels. They help me go. Plus, I always liked them. Your father couldn’t stand it, so it was a good place for two reasons.” And she laughed.

She was a hard farm woman, and smart. Harold wondered if she had sacrificed too much to her role on the farm. She could have had a career, but instead had used her considerable intelligence to the keeping of the house. But she never seemed to feel it as a demotion. The farm had been demanding, and she and Swede had run it by themselves successfully. They had weathered the many crises that had plagued the agricultural economy, and had endured even when many of their neighbors had given up and sold out to corporations.

When her son was a hippy planning to hitchhike to California, Velma worried terribly but said little. She had made only one request: before he left would he please go to Rolfe's barbershop on Main Street in Williamston, where Harold and his father had been having their hair cut for decades. In uncharacteristically strong terms, she urged him to do this. Velma didn't want her boy shot by some redneck in a pickup truck. If he cut his hair, even just a trim, she'd give his trip her blessing. Harold agreed.

"Hello Harold," Rolfe said when he entered. He seemed to be completely unfazed by Harold's new look.

"Hi Rolfe," Harold said, a little sheepishly.

"How's college Harold? How'd you like those Hawkeyes? They whupped Minnesota pretty good this year didn't they?"

"Yes they did. But I don't think they're going to be very good next year."

"No, probably not. What can I do for you today Harold?"

"Just a little trim, Rolfe. About an inch or so off the back."

Rolfe didn't respond. Harold sat back in the chair and watched helplessly as Rolfe the barber cut off a very large percentage of his flowing blonde hair. When he was done cutting, he trimmed Harold's beard, more as a gesture of respect than out of barberly need, and then combed Harold's hair. Trained from birth not to complain, Harold watched in horrified silence as his strength flowed out of him and fell, in blonde swaths, to the barbershop floor.

"Thanks Rolfe. See ya."

"You're welcome, Harold. See ya soon."

When he returned home, Harold went straight to his room, and flopped on his bed. He was Sampson, shorn of his locks. He felt weak and ineffectual, and stayed in bed for hours until his mother called him for dinner. The family ate a quiet dinner of porkchops, potatoes, and beans, and no one acted as if anything was different or wrong. His mother, although of course she showed nothing, was delighted.

Years later, Harold reasoned that Velma must have called Rolfe and insisted he cut Harold's hair short. To his amusement, he found that he admired his mother for doing this. For after the haircut, Harold never grew his hair long again, and he had to admit that he felt more comfortable and actually looked better with short to medium length hair. During the remaining years of 60's he never gave up his army jacket, but he did without the silly hair.

Harold, now thoroughly dry, got up from the bench and slowly got dressed. When he was done, he walked to the mirror in order to comb his hair. When he looked in, he was surprised to see, not himself, but an image of his grandfather, who was also named Harold.

As he had promised his father, the day before he left for California with Molly Mortenson, Harold visited his grandfather, who lived in a small house on the northeast corner of the family's property. The old man had lost his wife twenty years ago, and had given up farming in 1958. For the past decade he had kept himself busy by tending to a large vegetable garden and with daily trips to Sip 'N' Snack and the hardware store. He had read the newspaper, watched TV, and regularly drove himself over to the big house

where Swede and Velma lived in order, as he put it, to supervise the farm's operation. He was a fixture in Harold's household, a dignified old man, whose stories were repetitious but not overbearing. Harold was so accustomed to his presence that he never gave him a great deal of thought.

In May, 1968, Harold senior was 88 years old, he was losing his vision, and had a hard time hearing. He no longer drove his pickup truck at night, and so several evenings a week Velma would pick him up and bring him over to the big house for dinner. When Harold knocked on the door and yelled "Hey Gramps, it's me, Harold," the old man was asleep in his chair. He woke groggily, looked lost for a second, then tried to get up. He struggled hard to use his arms to elevate his body from the worn, plush chair, but failed and sunk back down.

"Hey, Gramps, don't get up," Harold said to him as he entered the small house, which because of Velma's labors, was as neat as her own. He came over and took the old man's right hand in his own. "How ya doing?" he asked.

The old man looked at him for a moment, not knowing who he was, but then his eyes focused and he smiled and said, "I'm okay. Can't get out of this darned chair, but I'm okay. Life's a bowl of cherries you know."

Gramps had been lean, strong and straight. He was never tall, but now was shrunken and bent. With his fine straight nose he was still handsome, with a thin but ample shock of hair left on his aged head. His eyes, when they cleared, could still sparkle, and he chuckled easily.

"You need anything, Gramps?" Harold asked. "Want me to get you something?"

"Why don't you bring over the mail. It's on the table. And the newspaper."

As Harold went to the table to pick up the small bundle of mail, he realized that the old man wanted him to read it to him so he brought a chair from the kitchen and placed it next to his grandfather's. He went through each piece of mail and explained carefully what it was, even though most were advertisements.

“Would you like me to read you the newspaper, Gramps?”

“Sure, that would be nice.”

The *Williamston Press Gazette* ran a couple of AP stories on its front page, but of course what made it essential to the citizens of Williamston was the local news. Harold read a short article about Gene McCarthy, who was making such an unexpectedly strong push for the Democratic nomination. Even though he was from the neighboring state of Minnesota, he was, as Gramps liked to put it, a little too “different” for his taste. So too was Robert Kennedy. It was Hubert Humphrey whom Gramps favored.

“That McCarthy causing quite a ruckus, isn't he?” Gramps asked.

“Yes he is. I like him, though. He's the only one who has the guts to say this war is wrong. I hope he wins, Gramps.”

His grandfather only nodded in acknowledgement.

Harold continued reading through the local news—stories about the school budget, the return of Johnny Jensen, who was missing a leg, from Vietnam, and the renovation of the county fair grounds-- until he got to the obituaries. He hesitated, not knowing if it would be appropriate for him to read these to his grandfather. But he decided that the old man would let him know, so he asked him whether he wanted him to read. He did.

“Knud Haakonssen died. Age 72. Did you know him, Gramps?”

“Of course I knew him. Took over the Swenson acreage in 1937. Did a nice job with it, too. Knew his dad. He died not too long ago, what was it, back in 62, I think.

“Annie Lindstrom died. Age 64.”

“No kidding?” Gramps shook his head. “Yup, people dying who never died before.”

Harold looked more closely into the old man’s face.

“Did you know her?”

“Not too good. Knew her mother somewhat. She was friends with your grandmother. That was a long time ago.”

“Gramps, I want to tell you something.”

“What’s that, Harold?”

“I’m not working on the farm this summer.”

“Is that right? Why not?”

“I’m going to California with a friend. We’re going to meet some people there, and do some, uh, exploring.”

“Exploring, huh? Well, that sounds pretty interesting.”

Harold was surprised that the old man, like his father, did not seem to disapprove.

“We’re going to hitchhike. Should be pretty easy. Get right on Route 80 and just head west for a couple thousand miles.”

At this remark, his grandfather smiled. “You know, the Old Lincoln used to be the only way to get to California. That was the first highway ever to cross this country. Main Street of America, that’s what they called it. I had a little bit to do with it too.”

Harold had heard this story before, but did not let on.

“You did? What was that like?”

“1913, and I went all the way to Indianapolis, which was a big trip in those days. The very first meeting of the Lincoln Highway Association. Back then, there was little paving in America because most people thought the rounded dirt road was just fine. But not me. I used to have big arguments with Bud Carlson and Jack Hintikka. I’d ask them what about rainstorms when the roads turned to mud. Well, they said, just roll some logs over them, and they come right back to normal. What did you need paving for, they used to ask me. Just a waste of money.

“But they were wrong. For I could see it even back then. A concrete highway going from the Atlantic to the Pacific. I understood what this country needed. So I became what they used to call a Local Consul for the Lincoln Highway. My job was to get local cement companies to donate their products for the purpose of building...now what were they called?... seedling miles, that’s it. You know, samples. I even got old man Torsen, who owned the Williamston Cement Company, to donate 2000 barrels. In 1918 we built a seedling mile of the Old Lincoln right here in Elrod County. It was the first concrete road in the state.

“Well, that seedling mile helped some, but in the early 1920’s people in Iowa just weren’t very interested. Everywhere else, even in Nebraska, it seemed that the Lincoln Highway was picking up steam. But not here. I have to tell you, I wasn’t too proud to be an Iowan back then. People seemed backward to me. Why, you couldn’t find but a mile or two of paved streets outside of Des Moines and Cedar Rapids. When it rained hard, children couldn’t get to school, grain and animals couldn’t be trucked. That didn’t make any sense to me.

“Now you see, Harold, the problem was this. Back then, in Iowa the counties controlled the roads. So nothing got done.”

The old man’s face was growing animated, his eyes starting to come life.

“The turning point big came in 1926. Thanksgiving. It was the day of the big game against the University of Minnesota. A storm broke and the roads turned into mud. Hundreds of cars were stuck, and many stayed there for three days. Many a Thanksgiving dinner went uneaten that year.”

Harold’s grandfather laughed.

“Well, the next spring the State Legislature ordered the counties to issue bonds for road-building, and soon there was a headline in this very newspaper that said, “Iowa Goes Hog Wild For Paved Roads.” Before the Depression kicked in, Iowa had produced some pretty good paved roads, all right.”

Harold wanted to tell his grandfather that the man’s technology had paved over paradise with highways and parking lots, that the air was polluted with the spew of the automobile, that he was going to Northern California precisely to get away from paved roads, but instead he said, “Maybe I should take the Old Lincoln to California, Gramps, instead of Route 80.”

“Nah, don’t be silly. It’s all chopped up now. You take the big highway. It’ll get you there faster.”

“Okay Gramps, “ Harold said, out loud, to the mirror, “I’m on my way.” He finished combing his blonde, thin hair, and then began a slow walk back to Gustafson Hall.

The weather, just as Mike had predicted, was becoming colder, but except for his knee Harold felt comfortable. As he walked gingerly, snippets of an old song came into his head:

While riding on a train going west
I fell asleep for to take my rest
I dreamed a dream that made me sad
Concerning myself
And the first few friends I had.

“Dylan,” he said out loud. A student wearing an IIT sweat shirt happened to be walking past him, and he looked up when Harold said this. He was aware that the kid had done so, but didn’t return the boy’s glance. Instead, he stopped in amazement as he realized that his eyes were warm and tearing. Was it the “first” or the “few” that had gotten to him, he wondered. He stood for a moment.

His stay in California during the summer of 1968 was at times a thrill, but never was it without strain. Harold forced himself to swim in the nude and to take drugs when he didn’t want to, and he pretended to enjoy the mindless conversations with the hippies on the ranch. He told himself he liked homemade granola with fresh goat’s milk, but he could barely stand it and he longed for bacon and eggs for breakfast. When a girl found a bag of unlabelled pills on a Berkeley street, and then proceed to take two of them without even wondering what they were, Harold was appalled. One afternoon, returning to his tent, he stumbled on a couple having sex on his sleeping bag. He tried to understand

Molly's explanation of why she enjoyed fucking the lead guitarist and the drummer of the Inner Space Blues Band, the commune's very own rock group. The sex was fun, she said, and she felt closer to the music for doing it. She loved Harold, but she wouldn't stop sleeping with Russ and Larry. Molly chastised him merrily for his prudishness and she couldn't wait, she told him, for his hair to grow back. She wasn't going to return to Iowa, as Harold had promised his father he would do. She had flunked out, and would stay in the commune, and she urged Harold to do the same. Harold couldn't and when he left California that summer he never saw Molly Mortenson again.

In his sophomore year, with his hair regularly cut, Harold again looked more like an Iowa farm boy than a 60's hippy. He marched against the war in Vietnam, but in April he didn't take his clothes off during the Freak Week celebrations held near the campus. He gave up LSD, but he still smoked dope occasionally, for he preferred the light, cheerful touch of marijuana to the dull heaviness of beer, and he liked the way it loosened him up with girls. It was so easy to sleep with girls in those days, but he was not moved by doing so. He had no one to love, and he often surprised himself by being reasonably content when he was alone at night with only his books and typewriter.

Harold became a philosophy major in Spring of his sophomore year at the University of Iowa. Philosophy, the most radical and sustained expression of wonder, required severe questioning of what it meant to be human, of what it was to be conscious of the passage of time. It was only in philosophy that his thinking was aroused with the same vitality he knew so well from the basketball court. Philosophy, to Harold Larson at least, was thought trying to come to life, trying to play.

Nietzsche was Harold's early favorite, but he loved reading Camus and Plato, and he relished the chance to denounce Descartes. Of all things academic, he enjoyed, and even was thrilled by, class discussion the most. For the first time in his life, Harold found himself talking in public. At Williamston High he had always politely answered the predictable questions of his teachers, but he rarely offered more than a sentence or two in class. But in the discussion groups of his philosophy courses, he spoke in paragraphs, and, had he not been reluctant to dominate, he would have spoken pages. He was provoked by his fellow students who were unable to say what needed to be said, and so he threw himself into words and found himself at home with language for the first time.

Typically his instructors were only graduate students, but what they lacked in knowledge they made up for in enthusiasm. Harold was one of the few undergraduates genuinely interested in the material, and so the Teaching Assistants took to him quickly. Several adopted Harold, and he would join them in the coffee shops, where he watched as they smoked non-filtered cigarettes and listened as they talked for hours about the precariousness of being and the unthinkability of non-being, about predication and existential phenomenology, about being-towards-death and the cogito and the ethics of euthanasia. Even then, Harold could sense that most of these graduate students knew very little, and were just puffing themselves up. Nonetheless, he felt himself growing, and since they were kind to him, Harold became part of their crowd.

By his senior year, Harold was taking graduate courses and had come to know a couple of professors reasonably well. One, himself a graduate of Columbia, recommended that Harold apply there, and despite the tingle of fear that he felt, he did so.

During his senior year he regularly visited the farm. His grandfather was in the late stages of pancreatic cancer, and he had moved in with Richard and Velma. He refused to go to a hospital or nursing home, or even to take the painkillers the doctor had prescribed. Harold would talk to him when he was conscious, but the old man would drift between the present and the past, and could only feign interest in what was being said to him. But he smiled occasionally, and once he blurted out, "I'm a lucky man; I've got a great family." When the pain was bad he only closed his eyes. Harold would then pick up the newspaper and read to him, usually stories that he had read before. His grandfather would mutter "hmmm," as if he understood what was being said. During the last couple of weeks, he was either asleep or moaning softly in agony. He died, at home, just after Harold graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Iowa.

"Tougher than I'll ever be," Harold said out loud. He continued his slow walk back to Gustafson Hall.

Chapter Five: Office

In his office, Harold clicked the mouse of his computer. The screen-saver flew off, and Harold summoned his e-mail.

Message 1:
From sysop Wed Dec 3 11:12:23 1993
From: fahlbeck@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: evaluations

Harold: A quick reminder-- don't forget to do your student evaluations this semester. Remember, it's a departmental requirement. E.

“Shit, woman,” he muttered softly. “Whatch you think I am? A bag of dirt? I’m not going to forget to do my evaluations.”

Dear Edna: Thanks for the reminder. I'll get to it right away. Harold

The second e-mail was from Jeffrey, who in California must have finally gotten out of his water-bed.

Message 2:

From sysop Wed Dec 3 09:18:36 [pt] 1993

From: jfg@meaning.com

To: larson@iit.edu

Subject: AinA

Oh Harold...oversimplifications pleases. I know my aristotl. Pretty well. Youk know what I mean. Look, I know I'm oversimplifying. But as long as I'm not distortng then what' sthe problem. Aristotle believes human beings are polticial animals. Tha5t's a good first step. We think ourselves to be radical indivcidauals. It takes a village Harold to raise a child. Can't do it alone. That's what I told Hillary. It's an african saying. It takes a community to nourish a human being. To have teh m actualize their potentiality. Hill understands this. She's a pragamastist, but she inspired by an ideal. Well, I don't know that she's really inspired. But she at least acknowleges that an ideal is needed in order to guide meaningful and beneficial legislation. She's going to push this administration in the direction of meangnful change, and I'm glad that I and my journal could be some use to her. es, Harold old friend, I'm oversimplifying. I'm not the professor. Yo're the professor, and I love you. I won't betray you. But I'm going ot have to part ways here old buddy, and you know that. I'm going to enter th epublic world infiltrate th epublic space and make some change. meaningful change. As ever, jeffrey.

Harold tilted his chair away from his desk, and put his feet upon it. He placed his hands behind his head, and stared at the unlit flourescent lights of his ceiling. He thought

about his old friend Jeffrey Greenwald. As a graduate student in 1971 Jeffrey had already made a name for himself as the author of a small book titled “A High Time for Socialism.” In the mid-80’s he was a psychologist who specialized in treating 60’s leftists who had become affluent but depressed during the Reagan years. In the late 80’s he had become a Rabbi, and in the last few years, as editor-in-chief of *Mashma’ut*, he had really hit his stride. He had made it to the op-ed page of the *New York Times* a couple of times, and even though his voice was pitched slightly high he appeared on the McNeil-Lehrer News Hour whenever they needed a liberal Jew to criticize Israel. When Harold had seen him on TV, he couldn’t take his eyes off his friend’s long, curly hair, which had been strategically arranged to look unruly. In the Spring of 1993, along with a couple of dozen other well-known theologians, professors, policy wonks, writers, film-makers and artists, he was invited to attend Hillary Clinton’s “Politics of Meaning” conference at the White House. Harold’s old and loyal, short and and now overweight friend from graduate school had been invited to have lunch with Hillary Clinton the day following the conference.

When Harold read Jeffrey’s garbled email, the stab in his chest was so strong that it immediately cancelled the pain in his knee. He brought his feet back to the floor, and rubbed his thighs vigorously. Yes, he believed, he himself should have been invited to the “Politics of Meaning” conference. But no, he countered, this was absurd. After all, he was nothing more than a mid-level academic who wrote obscure books on Plato and Greek Tragedy. Why in the world should he be invited? Because he understood something deep about the striving of the human soul that none of those big-timers did. Because he was honest to his core and his words rang with an authenticity forged from

profound solitude and contempt for public recognition. No, he had never been invited to appear on the McNeil-Lehrer News Hour. No, he was too careful, too serious, to make a quick impression on TV watchers. But, God, if he only got the chance! He had forgotten more than Jeffrey Greenwald would ever know. He had been nurtured on the plains of central Iowa, and so he had looked deeply within himself, and if only he could sit next to Hillary at lunch, alone in her private dining room or on the White House lawn, and talk with her about the nature of human striving. And yet, Jeffrey was expert at explaining issues to ordinary people in a simple and dramatic manner, one which Harold knew he could not match.

Despite the pain in his knee Harold walked down the hall to the bathroom. When he got there, he stood in front of the mirror, unbuttoned his shirt, and then took it off. He looked at himself in profile, flexed his biceps, and after putting then his shirt back on, splashed water on his face. At that moment Kent Pederson, the chairman of his department, walked in.

“Harold! How are you?”

“Not bad Kent. Yourself?”

“Pretty good. Looks like the weather’s beginning to turn. Going to get cold tonight.”

“Probably will. Well, see ya later Kent.”

“See ya Harold.”

With that Kent entered a stall. Harold wondered if he was going only to pee, and if so why he needed such privacy. On his walk back to his office, he reminded himself that Hillary Clinton was nothing more than an ambitious politician. Her Politics of

Meaning conference had been a glitzy PR gesture designed to showcase the Clintons' compassionate intelligence and to make the Democrats more appealing to women voters. And yet, no matter what he told himself, he couldn't quite dismiss the Clintons. When Bill had won the election in 1992, with Hillary at his side, Harold, who felt superior to conventional politics, experienced an unfamiliar stirring of hope. Bill Clinton was a man like himself. About the same age. Well-educated, thoughtful, Vietnam War protestor who had grown up with rock 'n' roll. Pro-choice. Compassionate. After the barren years of Reagan and Bush, Clinton's bright appeal was hard to resist. Harold voted with an enthusiasm that embarrassed him, and he even was tempted to attend the celebration party at Ken and Deborah Rosenfield's house the night of the election. Susan went, but he stayed home because, as cheered as he was by the Clintons' victory, he was still made uneasy by Bill. Gennifer Flowers? An Arkansas floosy? Harold worried that, no matter what he said on "60 Minutes," President Bill Clinton would be much the same as Governor Bill Clinton: a brilliant seducer, of women and reporters, of politicians, voters and TV audiences. A large and graceful man who could understand a question and play the saxophone. Finally, however, because he was intoxicated with his own powers, he was unreliable. Gennifer Flowers? How was that possible in a man so intelligent, so fluent in fine and noble sentiments? How could a man who thought so big be capable of something so very small? Harold worried that something in Bill Clinton dripped with weakness.

But nothing was weak in Hillary. She was tough and crystal clear. Animated by the strength of her convictions, she smiled with dignified beauty. Jeffrey should never have called her "Hill." Because she understood what really mattered, she was able to

dismiss her husband's philandering for what it was: the selfish blunders of a bright boy who had always been rewarded by attention whenever he was bad. All these rewards, culminating in the presidency, had made super-smart Bill Clinton dangerously arrogant.

Even on election night, when he was alone in his TV room watching Bill and Hillary, Al and Tipper, swaying merrily to their rock 'n' roll victory song, Harold's pleasure was interrupted by images of Bill thrusting himself upon a faceless woman straddled upon his desk. He recognized his anger as absurd, but he couldn't fully extinguish it, and so more than once he left the TV room in order to walk to the bathroom, and stare at himself in the mirror. He wondered what Susan was doing at the Rosenfield's house. Was she dancing?

Harold took his lunch out of his backpack, and unwrapped the cheese and lettuce sandwich that he ate every workday. As he began to eat, he picked up the small book that Jeffrey had sent him and had been sitting on his desk for the past few weeks: *Health Security, The President's Report, October, 1993*.

As soon as Bill was inaugurated, Hillary took charge of Health Care reform, an issue the President had identified as the most fundamental of his administration. The book in his hands was the result of her work, and she had written the forward herself.

Together we stand at a unique moment in history.
In the coming months, we have an opportunity to
accomplish what our nation has never done before:
provide health security to every American--
health care that can never be taken away.

Harold, to his own surprise, was moved by these words. There was ambition here, and of the very best kind. In the coming months Hillary, her full cheeks glowing

with life and intelligence, would lead the nation to think seriously about its health. She cared.

Book after book has been written about the intricacies of the health care system and the difficulties of addressing these problems. But most of them have not been written for people like you and me-- people who may not be experts in health care policy but need and want to understand an issue so vital to our nation and our future.

I invite each and every American to read this book, to listen to the stories told here, to think about the issues and grapple with this complex-- but solvable-- problem. Then I invite every American to join in the debate.

Every month, two million Americans lose their insurance for some period of time. Every day, thousands of Americans discover that, despite years of working hard and paying for health insurance, they are no longer covered. Every hour, hundreds who need care walk into an emergency room because it is the only place they can go.

“Every month...every day...every hour...why not every minute, Hillary? Why not every second? Are you just talking, or are you, like me, serious about the passage of time? Health care that can never be taken away? Everything can be taken away, Hillary, and everything will. You must know this.”

Harold sighed. Her words were facile, but she herself was not. She had a plan, she was putting her vast resources of intelligence and energy and love at the disposal of the political process in order to serve. After all, like Susan, Hillary was a Methodist, committed to a gospel of social reform. Because she was so intelligent, she couldn't

really take these pat and easy words too seriously, Harold reasoned, but her commitment to health care reform, to the well being of her citizens, was genuine.

At the very moment Harold thought this about Hillary Clinton he rebuked himself. He couldn't believe he was taking her, her health care reform plan, her Politics of Meaning, seriously. It had been years since he had taken Jeffrey Greenwald, or anyone else who harbored illusions about conventional American politics, seriously. He had never let himself be duped by a media star before. He did, however, return to his reading.

I have read letter after letter of the more than 800,000 we have received at the White House from people all over our nation who took the time to sit down and share their concerns about health care.

“Clever. You don't quite say you've read 800,000 letters, but that's an impression a careless reader might well receive. You've read a lot of letters, though, haven't you? From people concerned about health care.”

Harold was concerned about health care too. He wondered if he should write a letter to Hillary. He snapped at himself: *“Don't be a sap.”* If he wrote to Hillary Clinton he'd receive only a form-letter as a reply. Still, he thought, why not? Jeffrey had been invited to a White House luncheon with Hillary Clinton. Perhaps if he wrote something genuinely philosophical it would intrigue her, and she'd invite him to lunch too. Although he felt silly, he turned back to his computer, and started to type:

The problem with health care in America today is that we care too much about it. We take the body too seriously. We exaggerate the significance of pain. We have become cowards who fear death and lament the passing of youth. The body is a thing, and like all things if you know how it works, you can fix it when it's broken. So we have invented a host of new machines to keep us alive and pain-free longer. But what's the difference, really, between living 60 years and living 80? When you look back to the past, no matter how long ago it was, it still ends up being next to nothing. The good life, and not the amount of life, is the issue. And the good life requires the work of the soul. We must learn to accept our finitude, resign ourselves to the inevitability of pain, and then concentrate on the quality of our lives. Instead of spending billions of dollars ministering to the body with expensive machines and powerful drugs, let's re-invest in self-knowledge and the human soul. It'll be better. And cheaper.

Harold looked briefly at what he had just written, but couldn't bear to re-read it. So he deleted it all, and returned to the booklet.

I have been moved by stories of parents who cannot afford a prescription for a child who is sick and hurting, of families barely hanging on financially and emotionally because of a health care crisis, of people trying to start a new business suffocated by skyrocketing insurance costs, of older Americans forced to choose between food and medicine, and of young people just leaving school unable to afford insurance. I have carried their stories in my mind as we worked long and hard to devise solid answers to tough questions.

Hillary carried stories in her heart. Maybe she'd like to hear the one about his grandfather. He was an older American, and although he could have had both, he chose food over medicine. The old man died at home, moaning in agony but surrounded by his family. He hadn't blinked at death; he understood it to be as natural as the browning of the cornfields in the Fall.

Could he persuade Hillary that the solution to the health care crisis was to care less about the body, and more about the soul? Could he ask his buddy Mike Comstock to do some rudimentary calculations? What would the benefit be if X number of people gave up their cholesterol-lowering drugs, started exercising instead, and learned to accept the fact that some day their arteries would harden and they would die? How much would be saved by making cosmetic surgery illegal, by forbidding dermatologists to treat teenagers with acne, by eliminating hair implants? What would ending genetic research save? No more psychotropics. People would have to learn to deal with their own misery. The easily repaired broken arms and legs of the otherwise healthy could be treated, the

occasional anti-biotic could be administered, but not much more. Those who were in any way obsessed with their own infirmity would be ignored. Those who were chronically ill would be left to die. Unlike today, when such a high percentage of hospital costs went to treating the very old who were near death, the very old would be asked to die at home. The money saved could be used to educate young women about the prenatal care of their babies. Instead of trying to conquer death, the task would be to understand its meaning; to understand that life wasn't all that it was cracked up to be, and that's why it was such a serious business.

Hillary had the brains to understand this. Maybe some day she would invite him to lunch, as she had invited his old friend, Jeffrey Greenwald. Care less, and so care more. Harold wondered if this would translate well into Latin. He'd give his plan a title, he'd bring the soul back to the negotiating table. He'd show the flaws, the fundamental cowardice of a world gone medical and single-handedly dethrone the new idol, technology. He would restore the psychiatrist, which literally means "the doctor of the soul," to his rightful place, at the top of the professional hierarchy. It would be better, and cheaper. And he'd be invited to lunch on the White House lawn.

As a mother, I can understand the feelings of helplessness that must come when a parent cannot afford a vaccination or well-child exam. As a wife, I can imagine the fear that grips a couple whose health insurance vanishes because of a lost job, a layoff or an unexpected illness. As a sister, I can see the inequities and inconsistencies of a health care system that offers widely varying coverage, depending on where a family member lives or works. As a daughter, I can appreciate the suffering that comes when a parent's treatment is determined as much by bureaucratic rules and regulations as by

a doctor's expertise. And as a woman who has spent many years in the workforce, I can empathize with those who labor for a lifetime and still cannot be assured they will always have health coverage.

Nice build up. Mother, wife, sister, daughter, woman. A woman in the workforce. Harold liked the sound.

"Always have health coverage." Her one slip. There isn't any always, at least not for us. But that's okay. She's not writing a philosophical treatise but a popular guide to health care reform.

As an American citizen concerned about the health of our nation, I stand with you as we confront this challenge that touches all of us. We can and will achieve lasting, meaningful change.

Harold wondered whether Jeffrey Greenwald had suggested these last three words to her. "Meaningful change" was his mantra. Had he whispered them to Hillary over lunch? Did he lean towards her? Did his hand inch closer to hers on the elegant white tablecloth? Were there lemon slices in the water glasses? Or were they drinking wine? His friend had always been a "schlinger," a word Jeffrey's mother had used to describe her son's wolfish eating habits. He inhaled food, and didn't savor a bite. Harold assumed that in the circles he was currently moving, Jeffrey must have learned how to appear more refined. If only Harold had a chance to speak with her. There would be no whispering. Just plain talk. Although he might risk touching her cheek. Gently.

Harold was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Come in," Harold said.

It was Judy Carlson, an electrical engineering major and a student in his Greek philosophy class who was averaging a B+. Like most Iowa girls, her hair was blonde, permed and thick. She was of medium height and made from large bones. Under her winter coat she was wearing a gray sweat-shirt with the initials IIT blazoned in front. Under the sweat shirt were large inviting breasts. Her full lipped and open face revealed the straightforward determination of an Iowa farm girl. She had slightly sleepy, but not unintelligent, eyes, the kind, Harold thought, Jeffrey might have described as “bedroom eyes,” the kind of eyes Harold himself could never recognize. Her skin was clear, and when she entered his office Harold longed to greet her with a hug.

“Hello Professor Larson. I was wondering if you could take a quick look at my last paper. I’m not arguing about the grade, really, but I was hoping you could tell me how to improve on the final paper.”

Harold’s spirit sank, but he forced himself to deliver his standard speech.

“Judy, it’s difficult to talk about writing in general. Writing is a skill. I could tell you how to shoot a jump shot, but unless you practised it over and over again, you wouldn’t improve. It’s not usually that helpful to look back at papers you’ve already handed in and see what was wrong with them. But I’ll be glad to do that with you if you want. We can go over your paper line by line, and I can show you what I think the problems were. But it would be better if you brought me a rough draft of your next paper. I could review it, give you some specific suggestions, and in that way be of some real use to you. Going over your old papers won’t help much.”

This speech, almost always a failure as an exhortation to students to hand in, or even just to write, rough drafts, was usually effective in dissuading them from wanting their graded papers reviewed.

“But I don’t understand what I did wrong in this paper,” Judy persisted. “How can I do better?”

By coming to my office late tonight, by rolling with me on my blue carpet, Harold answered to himself.

“All right, let me look at the paper.”

Harold took the paper from Judy and she, without being asked to, moved her chair closer to his desk. He put the paper on the corner of his desk, and Judy, apparently oblivious of the fact that her right shoulder had grazed his left, leaned over to read the paper with him. The feeling he felt from her proximity was a familiar tingling, but it was easy to control. In his carefully modulated voice, and with a sharp red pencil that he gripped tightly, Harold showed Judy a few things she could have done better. A bit more textual evidence here, pushing the argument a bit further there, smoothing out some awkward sentence structure in the conclusion, in general trying to translate some of these abstract concepts into her own words. Surprisingly, Harold suddenly realized, she had on some perfume and once again he felt a stirring.

“So I should use more quotes?”

“Yes,” Harold agreed. “And show me a rough draft of your final paper.”

“Okay Professor Larson. Thanks a bunch. See you soon in class.”

Judy Carlson was satisfied and she left the office. Harold was not, and as soon as she was gone he got up from his desk and walked around the office. The sharp pain that

burst in his knee abruptly put an end to whatever excitement he was feeling, and so he quickly returned to his chair and put his legs back up on the desk. He concentrated on the pain in his right knee for a while, and made it hurt even more than it had. A thin "beep" from the computer announced that there had been no activity for 10 minutes, and so Harold finally turned back to his e-mail.

& R

To: jfg@meaning.com

Subject: AinA

Don't forget, Jeffrey, that Aristotle really isn't as far from Plato as most people think. He's an elitist too. No, he doesn't propose a philosopher king, but he knows full well that a city run by non-philosophers will always be corrupt. Remember Book Ten of the Ethics. At that point, moral virtue, the only virtue accessible to the many, is left behind, and we discover that true human virtue is theoretical.

The best human life, Jeffrey, is spent trying to become divine. Which means, of course, that the best human life is spent trying to cease to be human. Which is what Plato is getting at in the Phaedo where he describes philosophy as the preparation for death. It's a private path, my friend, that can be shared only with a few, not many. Remember what Callicles says to Socrates in the Gorgias-- philosophers spend their time whispering in a corner with three or four boys. No, he's not talking pederasty. Only a moron, or Terry Fine, would think that. No, he's talking about the essentially non-political nature of philosophical inquiry.

You, Jeffrey, are trying the impossible: to be a philosophical public man. Remember Socrates: the truly just man will always be put to death by the city. The city is the place of compromise, corruption, mediocrity. Don't flatter yourself and MASHMA'UT by thinking you're injecting philosophy into it.

You and "Hill" want politics to be meaningful. But what IS meaning anyway? Typically, when people say meaning they really mean purpose or value. "My life is meaningless," he/she says. This means, "my life, when I look at it and try to take it in as a whole, has no definite purpose...and so no intelligible sense of value. Because I have nothing stable to use as a measure, I never really know the value, "THE MEANING," of anything I do. I only drift."

So, you want to put MEANING into politics? Can't be done, at least not in democratic politics. When decisions are made by allowing lots of people to argue for what they want, it's a sure bet that the final result will either be just what the winner of the argument wants- no matter what it is-, or some sort of pitiful compromise. In politics there's never any sustained and coherent discussion of what really matters, of what REALLY IS BEST. It's a system run not by knowledge, but by opinion. So the best we can hope for is that our government doesn't muck things up too badly, and they provide us with internal security, the chance for prosperity, and peace with our neighbors. If this is achieved, then at least philosophers and poets, the only ones with a realistic shot at what you call meaning, can operate in safety.

You, Jeffrey, despite your protests of being a reality driven journalist/therapist (or is it the other way around?) are a dreamer. Your dream is selling big at the moment. Yes, you got invited to lunch with "Hill." Good for you. But you know the entire proceeding was but a sham.

H.

Harold clicked the send button, and then immediately regretted doing so. He lunged forward, as if he could retrieve the flying words back from the machine, but of course they were gone. He sighed, shut down his computer, gathered his papers and books, stuffed them into his backpack, and left his office.

Chapter Six: Class

Leaning on the podium, with his two books, the English and the Greek versions of Plato's *Symposium*, open before him, Harold tried to put as much weight as he could on his hands and off his legs. As usual, he had entered the classroom a few minutes before 2

o'clock. Judy Carlson occupied her customary seat in the front row. She was chatting with a tall and rather chubby blonde boy sitting next to her, whose name Harold was pretty sure was Al, and she did not look up at him. He felt a brief surge of hurt, which he then dismissed as unbecoming but also charmingly ridiculous, and so he pretended to read his notes.

Precisely when his watch read 2, Harold looked up to audience of some 60 students. A majority were blonde, Iowa kids, but sprinkled among them were a handful of Asian students. "Do you have any questions, before I begin?" He pretended to scan the room carefully. When not a hand was raised, Harold read out loud:

"For," she said, "the one who is to proceed correctly in this enterprise must begin, when he is young, with beautiful bodies, and first of all, if the one guiding guides him correctly, he must love one body and then give birth to beautiful speeches."

Harold explained to the students that this was the famous ascent passage of Diotima, Socrates' priestess-teacher.

"You begin with a single, beautiful body, and then progress upwards, higher and higher, to beauty itself. It sounds strange, but I'm going to show you, Diotima's really just talking about the lives we all lead.

"Look, the grass is always greener on the other side, isn't it? You know what this means, don't you? It means that if you want something, and then get what you want,

you're going to want something else. We want what we don't have. If we're hungry it's because our stomachs are empty. The story of our lives is the story of the negative."

Harold paused, bent his head downwards, stroked his thin beard, and stared at the floor. He wondered if he had just overstated the point, and whether, in fact, we really are driven only by what we don't have. In a flash, he felt demoralized. "*I'm no more than a wound,*" he said to himself. *Whenever I turn on the music of the 60's, I can't just let the music be and listen to it, I have to inject myself, always myself, into it, and imagine I'm the lead guitarist. Pitiful.*

Harold remembered that in college a few of his friends had told him he looked like Stephen Stills. When this memory zipped through him, he raised his head, stared straight at Judy Carlson for a brief second, and heard the refrain, "*love the one you're with, love the one you're with, love the one you're with.*" She looked back at him with her placid eyes, holding her pencil ready to write down whatever he said. Again Harold wondered: *is it just because I don't have it, or is there something out there to be wanted just because it is what it is, just because it is good?* This thought was out of his reach, he realized, and so he addressed the back wall of his classroom.

"As Diotima says, if you have something, you don't want it any more."

Harold wrote slowly on the blackboard:

Symposium 210a-212b

1. Single beautiful body
2. All beautiful bodies
3. Beauty of the soul

←—————speeches

4. Politics
5. Knowledge(s)
6. Beauty itself ←———— philosophy

“Look,” Harold explained, “the only way to understand what Diotima is talking about is to tell yourself a story. Imagine you love somebody. You think they’re beautiful. This isn’t hard to imagine, is it? And you desire this beautiful person, this boy, this girl whom you love. And so what do you do? You try to get them. To possess them. It’s like being hungry. If you’re hungry, you go after food, you grab it, and you eat it. You thrust yourself into motion, towards the object of desire. This is exactly what you do with the beautiful girl, the beautiful boy. You go after them, you reach out for them, you move towards them.

“And you succeed. You possess your beloved. You get what you want. And then you can’t take your hands off her, and she can’t take your hands off you. It’s wonderful, all these hands touching.”

Harold paused and smiled a barely visible smile. He remembered how he and Molly Mortenson, when they were both stoned, would embrace without shame in the middle of campus in the middle of the day, as hordes of fellow students were walking by.

“Now think of it this way: you’re in bed together...”

Harold paused, hoping some measure of uncomfortable energy would surge through his audience, and that they would look at him with new eyes.

“...and you’re just lying there, feeling terrifically satisfied. When all of a sudden, out of nowhere really and for reasons you can never quite figure out, you feel the need to

say something. So you say, 'I love you because you're beautiful.' Now you don't have to say this. You could just lie there and smile contentedly and stupidly and not move or say nothing. But of course most of us don't work this way. We're talkers," Harold explained to his silent audience, "and so we say things. And with the saying, the realization hits. I don't love you because you're you. I love you because of your beauty. But it's not really your beauty. There's you, and then there's beauty. You share in beauty. You participate in it. So I love you because of who you are not. And so, I really don't love you at all."

Harold struck his finger twice on the blackboard, hoping that his gesture wasn't too emphatic but that the noise it produced would at least stimulate a few.

"This is how you get from stage 1 to stage 2, and what it means to love all beautiful bodies. What Diotima doesn't mean here is some sort of bisexual Don Juan chasing after every body in sight. No, she's referring to the realization that the woman you love you love because of something not just she, but all beautiful bodies share: beauty. Beauty. It's a word. And like all words it doesn't refer to any particular thing, including the beautiful body lying next to you in bed.

"The ascent is fueled by language, by talking, by words, and so it's a movement away from particulars-- the beautiful body who is with you now-- towards universals, to what is named by the word 'beauty:' the form of beauty itself."

Harold stopped pacing and fell silent. Here, he thought, was the painful mystery of Bill Clinton. Huge, talented, graceful and bursting with ambition, he clearly longed to accomplish something substantial and fine. But he was incapable of regulating himself. Again and again he lapsed, he fell down the ladder, and began groping after some terribly

ordinary beautiful body which just happened to be available. Gennifer Flowers. Jesus, Harold thought, when he could simply curl up next to Hillary and talk to her about health care reform late into the night. Harold shook his head in dismay, again ran his hands through his hair, and wondered whether he should share such thoughts with his students. He decided they were not up to it.

“This is the reason for the shift between 2 and 3.” Harold jabbed his finger hard at the blackboard, precisely at the mid-point between 2 and 3. When he turned back to face his students, he noticed a hand was raised. It was the boy sitting next to Judy Carlson.

“Yes?”

“Prof. Larson, what is stage 5?”

“Knowledges? I’ll get to that in a moment.”

“No, I mean is that an ‘s’ at the end?”

“Yes, the word is in the plural.”

“Knowledges, not knowledge?”

“Right. Does that sound strange to you?”

The boy was silent, as if he had not heard the question.

“It probably does sound strange. The Greek is different from the English, on this one. I’ll explain why in a moment. Are there any other questions?”

There were none. Harold noticed that when the boy had turned back to his notebook, Judy Carlson had leaned over to him to whisper something, and their shoulders had touched. She looked comfortable with this small intimacy. The boy smiled at what she said, and then the two of them giggled slightly. Harold imagined himself grabbing

the boy by his collar, and shaking him hard. So he turned back to the blackboard and pointed again at Stage 2.

“Stage 2-- love of all bodies. Stage 3-- away from the body and to the soul. The soul. A funny word to use in 1993, isn't it? We're comfortable with the words “mind” and “consciousness” and “brain,” but “soul,” well, that sounds fishy, doesn't it? So what does Plato mean by it? Is he just an old-fashioned, religious, type? And is he, as a result, really just a primitive by our super-scientific standards? No. The soul is that within us that can't be reduced to our bodies. It's what longs for complete satisfaction, what pushes us forward, asks questions, wonders why, and feels despair. It's the part of us that speaks, and in speaking, as I've been trying to explain, we move towards the universal.”

“Prof. Larson?” The boy's hand was up again.

“Yes?”

“Is Plato religious?”

“No you stupid fuck,” Harold said to himself. “Haven't you been listening to a word of what I've been saying? You have the body of a bear and the brain of a pea. You're a dirt farmer from Oskaloosa, and you don't know your ass from your elbow. You fuck Judy Carlson on the weekends and you think you've got it made. But you don't know squat.”

“Well, not exactly. He believes that there is something in us that cannot be reduced to or identified with the body. And he calls it the soul. But it's not like what Christians call the soul. It's not some version of you that lives forever in heaven or hell.”

“So Plato is not religious?”

“Right. He’s not religious. He’s a philosopher.”

“*He’s a philosopher, he don’t look back,*” Harold said to himself.

Harold noticed that the boy was again scribbling in his notebook. Probably the words “Plato not religious,” he thought. When he was done he leaned over to whisper to Judy Carlson. She smiled again and touched him slightly on the arm.

“No other questions? You’re sure?” Harold said sharply, deliberately interrupting them.

“No,” the boy said, a touch of dull defiance in his voice. Judy, however, looked sheepish, and from this Harold took some hope.

Another hand went up. A girl sitting in the middle of the room. “Do we have to discuss this chart on our final papers?”

“*What makes you think I care about what you do on your papers?*”

“I think the chart is useful, but you can do what you think is best on your paper. Are there any other questions?”

Another hand from the back of the room shot up. Another blonde girl.

“Does the paper have to be double-spaced?”

“Yes. And remember to keep it to five pages maximum.”

“Do we need footnotes?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, should we go to the library and read books about Plato?”

“No, don’t use anything other than the original text.” *Unless of course you use my book. Ha ha.*

“Any other questions? Okay, then, back to the chart.”

“So what about stage 4? Politics. Look, imagine you’re 26 and happily married. But you’re not totally satisfied and so you feel the need for more. So you begin to look outwards, to your neighborhood, your town, maybe even to your country. You feel some sort of love for, not just your wife or husband, not even just for your kids, but for something bigger than yourself, bigger than all of them. Maybe it’s just a team. Or maybe you start to feel you want to do something good for your community. You want to make your city, your country, better. So you join the army and help the United States invade Iraq and protect its oil. Or you run for office, for city council, say, or the school board, or the House of Representatives. And when you get there, you work hard to change things for the better.

“My grandfather did this. He was a farmer from Williamston, and about 60 years ago he got involved in the construction of the Lincoln Highway. That was the first transcontinental, paved road across America. My grandfather wanted to make the world a better place, and in his own small way he tried. He helped the highway get built in Elrod county. It wasn’t much, and I’m not sure the automobile has actually done a great deal of good for this world, but in his own my grandfather was moving from stage 3 to 4. He longed for something better, bigger than himself.”

Harold paused, paced back and forth for a few seconds as his hands massaged his temples and then his eyes.

“Or think for a minute about Hillary Clinton, and what’s she trying to accomplish. She’s leading the effort to reform health care in America. Did you know that? And why is she doing this? Maybe she just likes attention. Or maybe, just maybe, she wants this

country to be a better place. Look what I said- wants. She *wants* something. Not just another body to lie beside her at night. She's tired of Bill, I'm sure of it."

No response from the audience, but he sensed that Judy was paying close attention.

"Hillary loves America. She cares deeply, for you and for me and for our children, and so she's working hard for meaningful and lasting change. She wants the world to be a better place. She embodies what Plato calls Eros."

Harold was surprised by the intensity with which he had said these words.

"Eros doesn't primarily mean sex. It means love and desire, and yes its original meaning is sex but this is the whole point of Plato's *Symposium*: we begin with the love of a single beautiful body, but we don't stay there very long. We want more. Hillary Clinton wants more. She's erotic. This is why she went into politics. This is why Bill Clinton went into politics too, I'm sure of it. Of course, he has his problems, we all know that. For him, the ladder is too greasy to hold on to, so he slips down quite a bit. He lapses, sometimes way back to the beautiful bodies of stage 1. You've all heard of Gennifer Flowers, I assume. You all saw him on '60 Minutes,' didn't you? He admitted he was a womanizer. He didn't say this in so many words, but it's what he meant. Still, you can feel the struggle within the man. He's fighting himself, trying to go up, trying to be a good, maybe even a great, president, trying to change America. I'm sure he loves this country. I only wish he could stay focused."

Harold paused, vaguely ashamed of himself. He looked down to the floor, and only slowly did he lift his head back up, this time determined to stay on track. But a wave of fatigue suddenly swept over him and made his upper torso feel so heavy and his

head so light that he had to bend over and put his hands on his thighs. He hadn't finished the assignment he had given himself: to take the students through all of the six stages of the erotic ascent; to explain to them what beauty itself meant and why it was different from this beautiful face or that beautiful sunset; to give them a taste of philosophy and to show them how different it was from the technical subjects they themselves were studying. This is what the pinhead Al had asked about, without knowing he was doing so, when he questioned the word "knowledges." But his energy was gone, and so when he straightened up he only said this:

"This whole ascent passage is pretty selfish, isn't it? Maybe you'll end up wanting to criticize Plato in your papers. That's okay with me. As long as you know what he's saying and argue against him."

He looked at the clock: 2:25.

"Are there any questions?"

There were none.

"Well, let's see. Some of you were asking questions about the final paper. Why don't we use the rest of the period to discuss it. Who has questions?"

There was no response, and he let the silence linger for a few seconds. "Nobody? Okay, then, let's call it a day."

The class didn't move. Harold usually dismissed this class before 2:50, but not this early. But when he started to pack up his books and papers, they followed his lead and started to file out.

At the podium, Harold slowly stuffed his books into his backpack, shuffled his papers purposelessly, and waited for students to barrage him with their naive but

nonetheless probing questions about Socrates, Diotima, Hillary Clinton and Eros. None did. Harold kept his head bowed, staring at the floor, pretending to be deep in thought, until he sensed Judy Carlson was still in the room. He lifted his eyes and saw that even though all the other students, including the boy who sat next to her, had already departed, she was still at her desk scribbling in her notebook. She finished writing and closed the notebook. When she stood up, she smiled at Harold, but didn't say anything. As she was packing her things, Harold wanted to speak to her, but couldn't think of a thing to say.

“Professor Larson,” Judy said, as she walked to the door, “are you feeling all right?”

He looked at her carefully. She seemed honestly concerned.

“Yeah, I'm okay. I hurt my knee this morning playing basketball. But it's nothing serious.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I'm okay.”

“Well, bye Professor..”

Harold was about to say good-bye, when instead he blurted out, “Judy.”

“Yes Professor Larson.”

“Let me know if you need any help with your paper. Come by my office any time.”

“I will. Thanks Professor.”

Harold hated being called “professor.” It always reminded him of the Soviet Union, and his impulse was to respond by calling the student “student.” But he forgave Judy Carlson.

“No problem, Judy. Good luck.”

As she walked out, Harold stared pensively at her ample, departing backside. He stayed at the podium for a minute or so to make sure that all the students had travelled far enough away from the lecture room, and then took a deep breath, not quite understanding the lightness in his head. He believed that at this moment he should be surrounded by young people eager to share, or simply to bask in, his wisdom. But instead he was alone. With only his thoughts and the throbbing, increasingly painful reminder of his knee, he walked into the cold, clear Iowa air. He stopped for a moment in order to try to sense the great expanse of the flatness that lay around him and to register its magnitude. He hoped to feel properly small, but he failed. And so Harold Larson, the Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy, started for home.