

Interlude 2

Jeffrey and Susan were both stoned, but Harold hadn't inhaled. When the joint had reached him, he summoned up an image of his arch-rival, Bill Clinton, a man he both held in contempt and admired, and like Bill he only pretended. Susan and Jeffrey, on the black couch, were leaning into each other, their shoulders touching, and didn't notice Harold at all.

"This is getting to be a tradition, you visiting me in the dead of winter here in Iowa."

"My friend, when you need me, I'll be there for you. We've known each too long for me to be stopped by a small Arctic blast."

"I'm not in such bad shape, you know."

"Yes you are, Harold," Susan said. "You're in pain all the time. You were in the hospital, remember? You are too in pain." Susan smiled and then repeated, "all the time."

"I was in the hospital only for a night. They pumped me up with so many drugs that my muscles were like jelly, and then sent me home the next day. Bastards."

"What'd you want them to give you? A room and no medicine?"

"I don't want their stupid drugs in my body. All they do is mask the symptoms. I screwed up my sciatic nerve. It was my fault, and I deserve the pain. I was working far too hard on the bike. I overdid it and I paid the price. Sciatica takes at least three months to heal. It's been about that long now."

What Harold said was close to being true. After the disastrous sneeze in October, and his short stay in the hospital, Harold had needed to spend a few days in bed. As a result, for the first time in his career he missed his Friday classes. But he had returned to

the classroom by the following Monday, despite the pain. He stood with his hands tightly gripping the podium and tried not to move. He found, much to his surprise, that the energy he devoted to controlling the pain actually helped him with his lecturing. He was cautious, tentative, delicate, and spoke more slowly than usual. But this was strangely pleasing because he felt more thoughtful. Equally strange was the fact that his sleeping had improved. Because he was unable to twist and turn without firing up his sciatic nerve, he was forced to be more still in bed. It was too difficult to get up and so he stayed put. He and Susan still did not touch each other, but at least they again shared the same bed.

The pain was often intense, but he didn't hate it. Pain had become his companion, his reminder, his cross to bear. The only truly intolerable activity was getting in and out of chairs.

Susan frequently enjoined him to take the anti-inflammatories the doctor had prescribed, or if not them, at least some over-the-counter ibuprofen. Harold refused. Pain would be his teacher, he had decided.

He could not explain why he was feeling pretty good tonight, even though his wife was snuggling next to his best friend in his own living room. Was it because his sciatica was improving? Or because he had coped without drugs? Or was it because of the resolution he had made and thought about constantly while lying awake in bed: to walk the Old Lincoln to New York City, take a right, and somehow make it to D.C. with his health care reform plan in hand. He would, finally, make his move and tonight, with a roaring fire in the fireplace, he would announce his intentions. But he wouldn't tell them the whole truth.

“I have an idea I want to share with you both,” he announced. They stopped giggling.

“As you know, I can’t do much physically these days. But I can still walk, and every day I feel a little better. Plus I’m simply getting used to the pain. So, I’m thinking of taking a long walk in the Spring. As soon as the semester ends, I’d like to walk East on the Old Lincoln. I’ve been thinking of my grandfather a lot. He helped build it. In a small way.”

“What’s the Old Lincoln?” Jeffrey asked.

“It’s the first transcontinental highway. Stretches from the Lincoln Tunnel in New York, to Lincoln Park in San Francisco. It’s been replaced by real highways, of course, but it still exists in bits and pieces. I’d like to walk the backroads of America. See if I can feel something of my grandfather’s spirit. Plus, I desperately need a vacation. It’s been a rough year.”

“How far would you go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe as far as the Mississippi River.”

“That’s 200 miles,” Susan said.

“I know. What would that be? Twenty miles a day. Maybe just walk for a couple of weeks. Maybe longer. Make it to Illinois. At least get out of Iowa. Who knows. Just walk East.”

“Wow. That’s a great idea, Harold.” Susan was bubbling with enthusiasm. Most likely, he thought, she was just delighted he’d be out of the house.

“Sure is Harold. I walk almost every Sunday, you know. Rebecca leads Chi-Walks in the hills.”

“What’s a Chi-Walk?” Susan asked.

“Chi; energy; lifeforce. On a Chi-Walk you try to absorb as much Chi as you can. Rebecca leads the group. We do breathing exercises, some sitting. We chant a little. Sometimes we just attend to the trees; sometimes we hug each other. We bring in the energy. It’s quite lovely, really. Sometimes we play recorders. It’s been very helpful since the election.”

“Wow! Sounds great, Jeff.” Susan was interested not at all in his grand scheme, while Jeffrey drew her like a magnet. Harold looked at his friend more closely. He was wearing a jacket whose leather was even softer than the one he had worn the previous year. A dark brown, close to being black, matching his dyed hair perfectly. Even his yarmalke was leather.

Just as had happened the previous January, Jeffrey had made a short detour from a speaking engagement in Chicago. He was hawking the new book, “The Meaning of Race: A Dialogue Between African- and Jewish-America,” that he had co-authored with Randell Eastwood. He and Eastwood, a prominent theologian who taught at Columbia, were travelling the country together on their book tour. The book’s cover was a photograph of the two of them staring at each other with the kind of intensity that Harold remembered from his days watching soap operas in Unit F. When he looked at Susan and Jeffrey on the couch, he saw it again: the horizontal gaze. The two had forgotten about him almost entirely and were talking about Chi-Walking in Northern California.

“Fuck ‘em, H, let ‘em go. You going on your walk in the springtime, and it will be sweet. You don’t need to tell them nothing about your trip.”

The feeling of concealing the truth while not actually lying pleased Harold. Every word he had said to Jeffrey and Susan about his reasons for walking the Old Lincoln were true. But they expressed only the surface of his reasoning. For while he really did want to walk and take a well-deserved holiday, his real plan was to hand-deliver his health care reform manuscript to Hillary Clinton.

Exhausted, his clothes reeking of his many sweaty days on the road, he stood by the gate to the White House. His pack was still on his back, and he looked forlorn. But when she saw him, and then began to run towards him, it was as if the sun had peaked through the clouds. Her blonde hair bounced in the sunshine, reminding Harold of the TV commercial from years ago for Breck shampoo. She smiled in recognition as she approached.

“I think I’ll enjoy walking the Old Lincoln. Both physically and psychologically, I think it’ll be therapeutic.”

“Great,” Susan said without enthusiasm.

He and Hillary were in bed together, pages scattered on the sheets. They weren’t talking, just stroking each other.

Harold knew where he was going, and why—he was going to save the Democrats after the disastrous election of 1994 and resurrect Hillary Clinton’s political career-- and this knowledge belonged to himself alone. He was living inside of himself, where he belonged, where he was invulnerable. This was, of course, the essence of his health care reform plan.

“In about four months, I’ll be ready to do it,” he announced, again interrupting the conversation on the black couch.

“Do what, Harold?” Jeffrey asked.

“Walk the Old Lincoln.”

“Walk the Old Lincoln. I love the way that sounds. Say, maybe you’ll write a column for me. ‘Walking the Old Lincoln,’ by Harold Larson, the Robert Hall Professor of Philosophy. But have you considered taking the New Lincoln instead? You’d like it better plus you wouldn’t get assassinated.”

Susan laughed uproariously.

“Ross Hall.”

“What?”

“Ross Hall. I’m the Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy.”

“Damn right you are, and don’t you forget that about yourself. You have a named chair! Even I don’t have one of those. Although Randell tells me Columbia would like me as a visiting professor for a semester. I haven’t been back there since I got my Ph.D.. Never liked the tweedy academic world much. Uptight assholes. Who needs them?”

“Susan and I are both professors, Jeffrey. Remember?”

“Oh, I’m not really a professor. That’s just what they say I am,” Susan retorted. “I make pictures on the computer, that’s all. I’ve never published a thing,” she said with something close to pride in her voice. “The only reason they gave me tenure is because I know CAD, and I can teach it.”

“That’s right! Tell it like it is, sister!” Jeffrey nearly shouted as he raised his hand to offer her a high-five. Susan slapped her hand against his, and while she again exploded with laughter the two hugged happily. “You know, Harold, maybe Randell and I should come with you on your walk. After all, it’s the Old Lincoln. What better

commemoration could there be than a black man and white man walking together. The two of us blazing a new trail? We can discover the meaning of race while on the road.

On the road, man, on the road!”

“But wouldn’t there be two white men and one black?”

“What?”

“Me. I’m going too, remember?”

“Oh yeah,” Jeffrey broke down into giggles. “Well, we’ll have to even it up.

Let’s see. Another prominent African-American intellectual? Maybe Skip Jones, from Princeton. Yeah, that would work. We could turn it into a protest march. Newt Gingrich and his Contract with America. Sounds like fascism to me.”

“Does he like to walk?”

“Who?”

“Skip Jones.”

“How would I know. But that’s a darned good question, Professor Larson, darned good. Penetrating even. Duly penetrated, I shall ponder.” And Jeffrey broke into giggles again.

“Do you really have to leave tomorrow morning, Jeff?” Susan’s said, her voice tinged with regret.

“Afraid so. I’m meeting Randell at O’Hare and the limo will drive us to Evanston. We’re doing a three day workshop at Northwestern. It’s not a lecture. We don’t do that anymore. Instead, we dialogue in front of people and invite them to encounter us.”

“And you’ll sell some books, I hope?” Harold asked.

“Hope so too. That book could do people some good, I think. I sent a copy to Hillary, and she sent me a very nice email. She told me it would fit well in her ‘it takes a village’ campaign. Did I forward that to you?”

At the mention of Hillary, Harold froze. If Jeffrey touched her again, he decided, he would have to kill him. He looked carefully at Susan and Jeffrey sitting on the black couch. They seemed perfectly comfortable with each other. Harold couldn’t remember when he had last been comfortable with her, or with anyone else.

“I think I did send it. Sure do wish she could invite me back to the White House. I haven’t been there for months. I miss those little chocolates they serve with the Presidential seal on them. But she can’t. Rick Brumbaugh would pounce on it and gear up his anti-semitic rhetoric. He’s got Newt’s ear. I don’t know how the Clintons will get re-elected in 96. Newt fucking Gingrich. What if he becomes president? How could we live with a president named Newt?”

As Jeffrey elongated his pronunciation of “Noooooot” Susan laughed. Did she long for Jeffrey’s embrace, an embrace Harold could not give her? Any wayward movement of his buttocks or hips and he was in terrible pain. If it were Hillary in his arms, he’d put up with the pain. But not for Susan.

Jeffrey and Randell Eastwod. Two blowhards staring at each other. He’d never tell his old friend, or anyone else, what his real plan was.

“Kids, I’m going to bed.”

“Harold, no! I’m leaving tomorrow! I came all the way out here to Siberia just to visit you!”

“I’m glad you did, Jeffrey. As always you cheered me up. My sciatica feels a little better. But it’s late. I’m a bit of invalid you know. I need to lie down.”

“Take some ibuprofen, Harold. Please. You’ll feel better, and then you can stay here with us,” Susan implored him.

“Sure, I will, if I need it,” he lied to her, while to himself he addressed his pain: *“you are my messenger, my companion, my friend. Just as my grandfather didn’t abandon you, neither will I.”*

When he got up from his chair, especially the last 45 degrees of the elevation, it hurt a lot. But once his back straightened, the pain subsided. Jeffrey got up to embrace him, and he actually kissed Harold on the cheek. *“Sei gesund, my old friend. Be well, kindele.”*

“Thanks Jeff. Tell Rebecca to send some Chi my way.”

“Will do.”

“Good night, Susan.”

She said good-night without getting up from the couch. Harold looked at her and wondered if she and Jeffrey would make love on the black couch. Realizing he didn’t care, he smiled at her and turned to go upstairs to bed.

Part Three:

Walking

In the flatness, everywhere is surface.

Michael Martone, "The Flatness"

Chapter One: On the Road

Harold awoke at 6. As he had been for the past several months, he was in his own bed rather than on the living room couch, and he had only gotten up twice to pee. Susan was breathing softly next to him, and he leaned over to awaken her with a gentle embrace. She instinctively turned to her right, snuggled backwards against him, and they lay peacefully in the chill of a May morning. Since his weight was now on his right side, Harold couldn't maintain his position for very long.

"I'm leaving now."

Susan awoke, turned around to look at her husband, and stroked his face with her hand.

"Good-bye Harold. Have a good walk. Have a great walk." She smiled and she kissed him

"I'll call you tonight."

"Okay."

"The girls' lunches are all ready. I made them last night."

"Okay Harold," Susan smiled in warm amusement at her husband. She didn't know that next to each lunch bag he had left a small package of chocolates wrapped in bright pink plastic.

"Take plenty of ibuprofen, okay?"

"Okay. If I need it."

"Oh, you'll need it."

Harold slowly got out of bed. He moved carefully in order to dodge the pain. A severe jolt still came in the final few degrees, those between 80 and 90, of standing

straight up. But it passed quickly, and by the time he had taken a few steps forward, towards his dresser, on the top of which lay his pile of clothes, he could walk free from pain. He left his room, carrying under his arm a pair of jeans, a tee-shirt, a sweat shirt, a good pair of socks, and running shoes, all of which he brought downstairs with him. His backpack, carefully filled with extra clothes, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, pen and paper, a bottle of water, and sun-screen and ibuprofen buried deep into a side pocket, was waiting for him on the black leather couch.

As he left his house, careful not to slam the door and wake up the girls, Harold slowly and cautiously bent down to pick up the newspaper. A was the case every Spring, there was a story on the front page of the *Des Moines Register* about encephalitis. It had been a wet April, and so the conditions were ripe for a large infestation of mosquitoes. Some would carry the deadly disease. The remedy: wear long-sleeved shirts and stay inside at dusk. It's especially important, the article reported, to keep children indoors then.

Harold felt a thick, gelatinous mass of sorrow and fear build in his chest. He imagined Katie with a virus crawling through her blood stream, heading for her brain, where it would implant and multiply. The child either dies or is never again bright and lively. Harold swallowed his fear. Last year, the article reported, there was a single fatality in Iowa. The odds were against it. What could he do? Forbid his children the great summertime joy of playing in the twilight and tasting the thrill of independence and the dangers of chance? Should he deprive his children so they wouldn't be bitten by a mosquito carrying a microbe capable of destroying everything on which his happiness was founded?

Harold reminded himself that, in fact, he wasn't really all that happy. Then he realized that, as usual, he had not even considered the possibility that the mosquito would bite him, just his children, and he wondered whether this was a good thing or not. He felt a stab of love for his girls and wanted to go back into the house, wake them up, tell them he wasn't leaving, that he'd be there this weekend to take them to Main Street, that he'd go with them to the Grove Cafe where they'd eat pancakes and eggs and toast and potatoes and bacon and donuts, the foods they liked best. He wanted to hold them tight, envelop them in his arms, feel their heads buried in his belly. They could read this hug of his, and they'd say, "I love you too Daddy."

Harold only had his eyes to squeeze tight, and when he did so he saw his children in pain, and he felt hot tears forming under his lids.

"What's the point of all this bullshit?" Harold wondered. *"Only the most obvious. We hang by a thread It can all be taken away."* He heard the whisper in his ear, *"Never say, 'I have lost it,' but instead 'I have given it back.'"*

"Fuck you, asshole," Harold retorted. *"I miss my damn kids. Already."*

The pack felt well positioned on his back. But as he swivelled his hips in order to toss the newspaper closer to the screen door, he felt the familiar pain shoot through the base of his spine and his right buttock.

"Pain is my comrade. It tells me who I am. It reminds me that I'm of flesh and bone and, worst of all, nerves. They're wearing out, deteriorating, as am I. All this crap about the soul. What soul? If the body wears thin, so do I."

Harold wondered why, at the outset of his journey through the flatness, he was thinking such morbid thoughts. So he shifted gears:

“If I didn’t have pain then life would become too precious. And then its end would be overwhelmingly sad. Pain, the kind I feel, the enduring kind that does not disappear day or night, is helpful in keeping my head stay screwed on straight. It makes me realize that if the mosquito does bite me and I’m the one to get the call, then, well, big deal. I won’t miss it all that much.”

“Yeah, right Dad,” he heard Jenny say.

“Let death and exile and everything terrible appear before your eyes every day, especially death.”

“No problem.”

“Pain tells me who I am. It excavates me, and makes room for my soul,” Harold told himself on the bright May morning on which he began his walk to Washington. He would explain this, and much else, to Hillary Clinton. If more people could be persuaded of this simple truth then health care costs could be dramatically reduced, the quality of the American soul radically enhanced, and the Democrats could regroup after their defeats in 1994 and regain the White House in 1996. The hospitals needed to be slimmed down, triage practised in all departments of medicine, cosmetic and elective surgery eliminated, physicians stripped of their elite trappings and returned to the status of merely competent tenders of the body. Afflictions whose only negative was the pain they caused would have to be accepted as part of the cost of doing business. The deterioration of age would come to be recognized as a vital element of human time. Wrinkles would be displayed with some pride, balding celebrated, memory loss reconceived as an elegant defense against the accumulation of misfortunes too great to be processed, the destruction of cartilage in the knee understood as a brake on the heedless momentum of youth. The

birth pangs of life, everything that drives us towards the future, require pain. And those temples of medicine, the hospitals, with their billion dollar budgets, their antiseptic hallways and color TVs in each room, were a monumental denial of pain. A denial that cloaked a resentment of life.

“Pain, my guide, my mentor, my comrade. Was that life? Well, then, once more! I can take it! Pain. Radiating pain, vibrating pain. Pain immobilizing half my lower half.”

“You tell them, H!” K roared in approval.

A few minutes after the Iowa dawn, Harold Larson stood in front of his house, staring vacantly. As he began his walk, his sciatic nerve ached mildly with a dull and persistent throb, but he anticipated loosening it up. He stepped from his stoop to the sidewalk and off he went, towards Main Street and the Grove Cafe. He wanted a big breakfast before he left for Washington.

Harold entered the Grove Cafe at 6:30. The Grove was a plain rectangular room whose walls were adorned with sports clippings and memorabilia, mostly of wrestling champions from Centerville High. It contained 8 booths, and a counter seating a dozen. When he came alone, Harold always preferred the counter, over which were strewn several copies of the *Des Moines Register*. At this hour, there were only a few farmers and the men who worked at the local power plant. When Harold entered, two booths were occupied by clusters of these thick men wearing seed caps and chatting about grain prices and local politics. He did not know them, but they were familiar to him nonetheless. For years, his own father and grandfather had rarely failed to visit Williamston’s diner, the Sip ‘n’ Snack, and on Saturdays Harold would, if he got up early

enough, tag along. When he did he had been greeted by men just like those who sat at the Grove.

Harold chose a seat at the empty counter. He was welcomed by the waitress, Annette Hansen, who with her husband Erik, owned and ran the Grove. Like Erik, who was busy at the grill and also welcomed Harold, she was chubby, cheerful and blonde.

“Good morning Harold. How’ve you been?” As she asked Harold this question, she placed a cup before him and started pouring the coffee.

“Not bad Annette. Yourself?”

“Fair to middling. Haven’t seen you in a while Harold.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m usually busy in the mornings getting my kids ready for school.”

“Well okay,” Annette replied. “What’ll it be?”

Harold ordered eggs over easy, a short stack of pancakes, potatoes, bacon, toast, juice, and coffee. A feast. His last before he hit the road. Annette wrote it down, then walked the few steps over to the grill to hand the slip to her husband. She carried her coffee pot over to the two booths that were occupied, and filled every cup. When she returned behind the counter, she did the same to Harold’s.

“Looks like it’s going to be a nice day.”

“Yes it does.”

“Glad the rain stopped.”

“Me too. Feels like it’s going to be dry today. And not too much wind.”

“I think you’re right.”

“We sure did have a lot of rain for a while there, didn’t we? Glad we didn’t flood again.”

“I’ll say. We lost our garden in 93. Turtle Creek just came right through our backyard. I sure don’t want that to happen again.”

“Don’t worry Annette. That was a 500 year flood. Can’t happen again for another 499 years.”

“Oh go on, Harold. What do they know about 500 year floods. It floods when it floods.”

“Guess you’re right Annette. But you know, I sometimes think we appreciate good weather here in Iowa more than they do in other places. We don’t get it very often, and so we like it more when we do. We’re used to getting punished and so it feels good when it stops.”

“I believe you’re right about that, Harold. Still, I wouldn’t mind more days like today.”

“I wouldn’t either.”

Harold ate his breakfast in silence while reading the sports section of the *Register*. He checked on the NBA playoffs, scanning the boxscores, looking in particular to see if the two former University of Iowa players still in the league had done anything of note. He even read through the baseball reports, although baseball was a game he didn’t take to. He finished his breakfast, and very slowly stood up to get off his stool. He was pleased when his pain consisted of but one single shot, which after firing disappeared quickly. He reached into his wallet and fished out a few dollars, put them on the counter, said good-bye to Annette, slung on his pack, and walked out the door.

The sun greeted Harold as he left the Grove. He headed north, and in a few minutes had reached Big Table Road, the old Lincoln Highway. With a sense of near glee, he took a right, and began his trek eastwards. He had taken these steps many times before, but this time, for the first time, he did not have to stop. He felt a pleasing sensation, one reminiscent of each of the two times he had begun his books. He was embarked on a long project, one that did not require an individual flash of brilliance or inspiration, but instead needed discipline and the refusal to relent when the going got bleak. He only had to move forward day after day after day, and this he could force himself to do. Each step he took on the Old Lincoln was small and slow-- he was determined to be careful and not to aggravate his injury-- but each was a step closer, a step he need not retrace, a contribution to his future. When Harold remembered that his future included lunch with Hillary, he shuddered.

After an hour or so of walking, Harold was flanked by immense corn and soybean fields reaching with but a few vertical interruptions to the ends of the visible earth. The sky was a translucent blue and, as always, stretched huge to form the circular horizon of the plains. It had been wet early in the spring, but the rains had stopped and so the crops were planted, ready to grow. The warm sunshine, falling even so early in the morning, promised nurture to the fledgling plants whose growth rumbled silently beneath the earth. There was little traffic on the Old Lincoln: just a few pickup trucks had zipped by Harold, their drivers probably wondering what a man with a backpack was doing walking down the road. Just as he had hoped, the sciatica had loosened up and Harold was feeling no pain. His hands clasped the straps of the pack tightly, he walked steadily, he breathed in the rich, promising smell of the fields, looked over the flatness to the distant towers of

the siloes and the grain elevators. He was sure he had made the right decision to leave his home.

“Damn straight, H,” K affirmed.

Fueled by good cheer and the morning’s grace, he increased his pace slightly. He glanced at his watch: 7:54, just when his children would need the extra push to get out of the house and, well equipped with their backpacks packed and teeth brushed, off to school. Every weekday morning, for year after year, Harold had to exert himself on behalf of his children. Instead of relaxing over the sports page at the Grove, as he had done this morning, he had to concentrate on them, their inability to move from point to point without distraction. Every day began in sacrifice, with his energy drained by his little girls who needed him so much. He knew they didn’t really need him quite as much as his actions implied they did. But fatherhood was an addiction, and Harold believed that he gave too much.

“Hi. I’m Harold.”

“Hi Harold!” the group of 9 men sitting in a circle of brown folding chairs in the basement of the Lutheran church said in unison.

“I’m Harold and I give too much,” Harold said, and the men all nodded in ritual agreement at his invocation of their motto.

“I give too much to my children, to my wife, to my students. I’m not a taker, I’m a giver, and I’ve got to stop, I’ve got to learn to give something to myself, to be good to myself. I don’t have much left. They’re bleeding me dry.”

Harold choked back the tears at the weekly meeting of Men Who Give Too Much Anonymous, a title which, despite the best efforts of its members, never lent itself to an

attractive acronym. The ease of the acronym was, of course, the true secret of AA's phenomenal success.

"I'm Harold and I give too much."

"What do you give Harold?"

"I make breakfast every day for my children. And I pack their lunches. And I make sure they brush their teeth and get off to school on time. I check for lice in their hair and look for dirt in their ears. I cut their finger-nails and toe-nails, and, if they ask me to, I brush their hair. I clean their bathroom, vacuum their floors, make up their beds. I'm home for work before 3 so they won't have to be greeted by an empty house. I take them to Main Street and buy them cookies. I rent them videos and buy them toys. I tuck them in at night and, when they ask me to, which is quite often, I tell them what to think about before they fall asleep. I give them images. Imagine it's raining, big heavy warm soft drops of rain, but instead of water, it's raining chocolate milk shakes. You're walking home from school with your sister, and when you get thirsty, all you have to do is stick out your hand, and catch a drop of milk shake, and then lick it right up. Yummmmm. Think of that, sweetie, and you'll drift right into slumberville, USA.

"That's the kind of thing I do and I do it constantly. And when I'm done, I'm so drained I can't bring myself to do anything except turn on the TV and stare at the screen. Christ, I've infantilized myself. I'm a man, capable of wonders, a man who should have a mission, a man who, at the end of the day, should be totally spent from his long hours of combat. I'm a thinker, I'm a philosopher. Thought is my work and work is what should be at my core. But work is precisely what I can't do any more, because these little girls of mine, when they don't require my tending, are constantly asking me to play. For years

I've given too much to those children, and look what it's done to me. I'm half the man I could be. I can't sleep at night. As drained and as empty as I feel, I'm not really tired. My night rhythm has been ruined. You see, when they were babies, they'd wake me up with their earaches, their croop, their coughs and bad dreams. A distant train whistle and they'd be screaming for comfort. They don't do this as much as they used to, but I'm constantly worried that they will. And so I can't sleep at night. I wake up every two hours, ready to give. I'm tired during the day, and every day is starting to seem the same. They're all turning dull gray on me and..."

"Thank you Harold," the facilitator, who looked just like Kent Pederson, said.

"Wait, I haven't told you about my wife yet."

"It's not really your turn anymore Harold."

"Yes it is! It's still my turn. That's not fair. I want to talk, I have to talk, you don't understand, I'm desperate. I give too much to my wife too. She's got a full time job and I've been completely supportive and I helped her get tenure and I take care of the kids when she needs to work late, or even when she wants to play tennis with her girlfriends, and that's just the beginning because she spends so much time on the computer making stuff that..."

"Harold! That's enough," the facilitator barked sternly. "It's not your turn. It's Bob's turn."

Harold turned angrily to his left to look at Bob. He was plump, wore a yellow polyester shirt and looked like a benign version of Gary Bishop. Bob could not meet Harold's ferocious eyes.

“That’s okay Harold,” Bob said, as he squirmed uncomfortably on his chair.

“You can have my turn.”

“Are you sure Bob?” the facilitator asked. “You can keep your turn if you want it. You don’t have to give it to Harold.”

“Oh, it’s all right,” Bob said blandly. “He needs to tell us how much he gives to his wife. I think he should keep talking.”

“That’s good of you Bob,” the facilitator said. “But I think you should reconsider. Isn’t this what always happens to you Bob? You often let people take your turn, don’t you Bob? You let them get in front of you in line, don’t you Bob? You’re the guy who makes the coffee in your office and then, when everybody else drinks it and nobody makes the second pot, you’re the one who makes that pot, aren’t you Bob?”

Bob, crestfallen, looked down at the floor and said, “let Harold have the turn.”

The facilitator seemed slightly surprised that Bob had not capitulated to his exhortation.

“Bob. You give too much. Don’t give Harold your turn.”

“That’s right Bob,” chipped in a handsome young man with thick and wavy dark black hair and a two day beard on his cheeks. “Take the turn, man. Don’t give it to Harold. Harold’s a punk.”

“Yeah,” a skinny African-American man with thick glasses agreed. “Keep the turn. Harold’s a punk.”

“Yeah, Harold’s a punk, Harold’s a punk,” the group of men chanted in unison.

“Fellas,” the facilitator’s strong voice interrupted the chant. “I’m proud of you. You’re standing up for yourselves.”

“No they’re not,” Harold objected. “They’re standing up for Bob. That means they’re still giving. Even if they’re telling Bob not to give, they’re giving to him. They’re worse than Bob. At least Bob isn’t afraid to do what he wants to do and say what he wants to say. I mean here he is, right here and now, trying to give me his turn. The rest of you guys are meta-givers. You give to the giver by telling him not to give. You’re a bunch of cowards. You don’t have the courage to take. None of us have that. After all, that’s why we’re here. But you’re so hopelessly mixed up that you can’t admit to yourselves that you’re still giving even when you think you’re not. You’re a bunch of givers. All of us are.”

The room was stunned into silence by Harold’s incisive analysis. The men sat motionless in their seats, their bodies drooped, as if his speech had taken all their energy from them. Even the normally confident and upbeat facilitator had nothing to say.

“Come on guys,” Harold said to them. “This is why we’re here. We’re all in the same boat. We give too much. We’ve got to stop. We’ve got to become men who take again. Come on, let’s have a big hug.”

Harold stood up from his chair and moved to the middle of the circle with arms outstretched. One by one, each man joined him, and soon the 9 of them had their arms draped around each other’s shoulders, their head bowed.

“How about a prayer?” said Bob.

“Sure. Of course. Let’s pray.”

“Why don’t you get us started there Bob,” the facilitator said.

“Okay. Oh Lord, please grant us our prayers. That we may find the strength not to give, not to our children, not to our wives, not to our corporations, not to our schools.

Oh Lord, you be the giver, not us. Let us become men who breathe the fire of conquest, who live life with gusto, who get they want and want what they get. Oh let us live in the company of men, and merrily go into battle. Amen.”

“Amen,” the chorus echoed.

Harold, delighted by the energy of the fantasy, felt his legs lighten and his step quicken. His sciatica forgotten, he was walking due East, into the sun, towards Washington, towards Hillary, and he had to make himself slow down. He shook his head in disbelief, amazed at his freedom, wondering why he hadn't done this years ago.

“This is it baby! I'm on the fucking road!”

An hour later, Harold was walking by the intersection of the Old Lincoln Highway and a dirt road as a pickup truck pulled up to make its turn. The driver was an older man, with thick wrinkles etched into his weathered face, and he looked something like Harold's grandfather. Harold and the man made eye contact, and they both nodded, almost imperceptibly. The man took a right, probably to go to Centerville, and when he passed he offered Harold a quick grin. It was as if from the cab of his truck he was acknowledging the rightness of a long, absurd walk on this beautiful May morning. Harold was gladdened by the encouragement and renewed his vow to traverse the Old Lincoln all the way to Washington; he would neither collapse in despair nor fear scorn. He would reach the White House; yes, he would.

When Harold got there a guard greeted him.

“Can I help you Sir?” asked the young man who looked to be a Marine.

“Yes, I have a small package I'd like to deliver to Mrs. Clinton.”

“May I see the package Sir?”

“Yes,” and Harold handed him the now wrinkled manila envelope. “It’s really an envelope, not a package, I guess.” Harold was angry at himself for betraying such indecision.

“An envelope, yes Sir. Please wait here Sir.”

“Yes, I shall.”

The Marine, whose badge identified him as Sergeant Neal Simpson, moved without taking his eyes off Harold into his little guard box and picked up a telephone. He was on it for less than 10 seconds. Within a minute, four other Marines, each with large pistols on their belts, had joined him.

“Sir! Would you follow me Sir!”

“Yes, of course I will.”

“Sir! Would you give Corporal Toler your backpack please Sir!”

“Oh yes, of course.”

“Sir! Will you allow Private Pederson to search you briefly? Standard procedure Sir!”

“Yes, of course.” Harold castigated himself for not having foreseen these predictable events. Of course they wouldn’t just let him enter the White House with an envelope addressed to Hillary. What he was doing was absurd, and he should have easily known that he’d treat him like a madman and potential assassin.

“I understand what you’re doing soldier. I know I look a little strange. I’ve been walking for 40 days. I’ve come from Iowa, from the plains, and have in this envelope a plan which will, I believe, save the American health care system from collapse. It’s

important that I hand deliver it to Hillary Clinton herself. I know she's no longer in charge of health care reform. Still, I invest my highest hopes in her."

"Yes Sir!"

The guards thoroughly searched him, and asked him for some sort of identification

"Sir! Why didn't you send this document through the mail? Why are you here Sir?"

"Why am I here?, you ask. Well, soldier, as you might well imagine that's a story too long, but I shall make it brief. I am a man who needs to be in motion. I am a thinking man. And I have written an essay that I believe will change the way Americans conceive of their bodies. To put the matter as briefly as possible, I am trying to de-center the body and return the soul to its rightful place as the fundamental locus of human concern. Simply put, Sergeant Simpson, I want to see the American people care more about their souls and less about their bodies. Perhaps this sounds foolishly idealistic to you, Sergeant?"

"Absolutely not Sir! A Marine is first and foremost concerned about the quality of his soul! The body is but is vessel! After all, death before dishonor is our motto."

"I'm delighted to hear you speak this way Sergeant Simpson. Perhaps we can someday talk about what honor itself really is. It probably isn't what you think. But that doesn't matter. What makes my health care reform plan so potentially fruitful, Sergeant, is that, while it is at its core philosophical, it is nonetheless thoroughly practical. I estimate that a gradual shift from body-centered medicine to soul-centered medicine, or

what might rightly be called psychiatry, will save upwards of 18 billion per year. Do you know what “psychiatry” really means, Sergeant?”

“Yes Sir! It means medicine of the soul Sir!”

“That’s right Sergeant. If we de-center the body and restore the soul to its rightful place, if somatherapy is replaced by pyscho-therapy, 18 billion, minimum, will be saved. And that savings could go into cutting costs for higher education for average Americans. For it is in higher education that the future of America lies.”

“That is correct Sir! Sir: why are you here? Why didn’t you send the envelope through the mail Sir? Would that not have been rational Sir?”

Harold smiled. He very much liked Sergeant Simpson. He was a tall black man, with wonderfully lively eyes.

“Rational? Only in a limited sense Sergeant. In fact, I did send it through the mail. Perhaps you can guess what happened Sergeant?”

“The response was a form letter Sir.”

“Exactly.”

“You are not the first to suffer such a frustration, Sir, nor will you be the last. On a regular basis letter-writers of various stripes come to my guard box at the White House with a similar complaint.”

Harold was taken aback. He was not the first to bring a letter to White House.

“Has anyone ever come with a letter for Hillary Clinton?”

“Oh yes Sir. Typically, however, the letters are from detractors, from Rick Brambaugh types who seek only to defame her.”

“That’s not me, Sergeant! I love her!” He had said it. He had revealed himself, in words he almost could not recognize, in words he had never dared to utter even to himself, to Sergeant Simpson. And yet, in the midst of his shame, he felt an enormous sense of relief. For the first time in months, he did not hurt at all.

“Let me clarify what I mean, Sergeant. When I say I love Hillary Clinton, I don’t mean in a romantic-sexual way. I’m not naive, Sergeant, and wouldn’t dream of being arrogant enough to deny that the sexual component plays some role in all of this. She is lovely, and I must confess a strong degree of attraction to her face, her dimples, her strong shoulders. I would like to embrace her. Yes, I admit that Sergeant. But I know the love I feel goes beyond the mere embrace. Have you ever read Plato’s Symposium, Sergeant?”

“Yes Sir! Of course.”

“Well, to me Hillary Clinton is quite advanced on Diotima’s ladder. She is obviously beyond the first stage, love of the beautiful body. After all, Bill-- excuse me, I mean President Clinton-- surely doesn’t mean much to her anymore. At least not as an individual body. She is a lover of souls, that’s what I believe. Her love now takes the form of love of institutions. In other words, she is a political woman. I am a philosopher, Sergeant, I love wisdom. I hate being so blunt, but this means I’m more advanced along the ladder than Mrs. Clinton. I can teach her Sergeant, I can help her ascend. She, perhaps alone among women of this age, has the capacity to rise. And if she could be charged with genuine philosophical energy, Sergeant, god knows how health care reform might be improved.

“Sergeant, I know what I’m doing seems ridiculous. But, and I know this is asking a lot, could you possibly ring Mrs. Clinton’s office, and tell her what I have here? Couldn’t she come out here, surrounded by Secret Service men I realize, and pick it up from me. I just want to give it to her personally, and then I’ll leave peacefully and forever.”

“Sir, I would be happy to give this letter to Mrs. Clinton’s secretary. What you have in that envelope strikes me as being of genuine significance. Please allow me to take the envelope sir.”

“No Sergeant, you misunderstand. I’ve invested everything I have in this manuscript and I need to give it to Mrs. Clinton herself. I cannot allow you to take the envelope from me.”

“I understand Sir. Forgive me Sir. Please permit me to make a telephone call.”

“Of course, Sergeant.”

Sergeant Simpson was a man, one of the few, who had succumbed to the radical temptation of being good. He retreated to his guard box. When he emerged from it, he was smiling.

“Sir, Mrs. Clinton tells me she will be out in a minute to pick up the health care reform plan. Please wait her with me Sir.”

“Thank you Sergeant.”

Harold, walking on the old Lincoln Highway a few miles east of Centerville, chuckled out loud. The fantasy was sufficiently exaggerated to distinguish it from being a hope. The sun was a chunk above the horizon now, and shining directly in his eyes. He stopped walking and turned to lift the pack off his shoulders. As he held the pack above

the ground, he felt a shot of bad pain in his lower back, and it wasn't until he had actually put the pack on the ground that it ended. He reached down and opened a small side pocket of the pack. He took out his sun-glasses and his favorite cap. On it was the logo, "Tony Smith Seed," with an ear of corn in place of the "i" in Smith.

When he straightened up, holding the pack by one strap, the pain followed him. As always, it was the last few degrees that hurt him the worst. *Erection hurt.* Harold chuckled again, and for a split second he loved himself. He put the glasses and hat on, and slung his shoulder through first one strap and then the second. Well balanced, he began to walk, and in doing so, the pain ebbed.

"Sir! Mrs. Clinton will be out directly."

"Thank you Sergeant."

Sergeant Simpson, who must have been at least 6' 2", never moved more than a few feet from Harold. Nor did he take his lively eyes off him. The other Marines, who with the exception of Corporal Toler, were all white men, surrounded Harold. Each of them kept their hands close to their pistols. Harold admired their vigilance, even if he didn't like the exaggerated feel of their manhood. Together they waited in the hot Washington sun. It was early July, just a few days after the 4th. The sun burned, the Washington humidity soaked. Harold was sweaty and tired and filthy and his feet were blistered from his walking more than a thousand miles.

When she came into view, it was as if the sun had emerged from dark clouds. She left the White House from a side door virtually hidden behind a large marble column. She was guarded by a half a dozen secret service men, all wearing grey suits, all with ear plugs in their right ears. But even with all this flanking material, she shone. She was

smiling, and her smile lit up the fetid air. She smiled when she saw Harold Larson and moved to him with a quiet urgency, a graceful force. As she did, her hair bounced gracefully and Harold was reminded of a TV commercial from his youth. It had advertised shampoo, but he couldn't remember the brand name. He wondered if it was "Breck."

Hillary Clinton looked directly, expectantly, and intensely at Harold Larson. She recognized immediately the intelligence deeply etched into his face, and her smile, a smile that dazzled and lifted the hot gloom of a July day in Washington, broadened even more. She walked, radiant, dimples bursting, towards him.

Harold tingled with excitement, and his knees felt ready to buckle. But he maintained, as he always did and was determined to do, his sense of dignity and an outward facade of calm. He would not trouble the First Lady, he'd only present her with the envelope, tip the seed cap he was wearing, and be on his way. It would only be days later, when he was recuperating in a pleasant but not terribly expensive Washington hotel that she'd call him and invite him to lunch. To a private lunch of cold salmon with splendid white wine. They'd talk, their heads hovering near one another. The sweet fragrance of her breath, her skin, her very being, would intoxicate Harold Larson, but he'd not falter from his quiet dignity. Perhaps they would kiss and their tongues mingle. He wasn't sure.

Chapter Two: Madison Square Garden

Spring in Iowa is a precarious time. The weather can veer wildly from cold and wet to hot with a dry wind blowing day after day. The season sets a precedent for the entire cycle of the harvest. Farmers peer at the giant sky with an anxiety so habitual that it is hidden even from themselves, and they measure the temperature of the soil to gauge just the right moment to plant. They prepare their equipment and borrow the amount of money they need to get them through. So far this Spring, all meteorological factors seemed to conspire perfectly. It was warm, it had been wet. The ground was ready. Harold could see in the distance a tractor pulling a plow, disking the soil. Soon the first stalks would break the ground. The landscape of Iowa would then begin the only real drama it knew, its slow and gradual change in color, from black to green. Harold remembered the corn dance he and Molly Mortenson had danced during a Spring afternoon of many years ago, and he smiled at the recollection of her long dress, her laughing face, and his utter foolishness. The sun was shining, and his memories were fine. But Harold caught himself in time, and did not allow himself to embrace the hope he had just felt. He was the son of a farmer, and farmers, fearing the jealousy of the gods, never articulate hope. Even on a day like today, which seemed to promise a bumper crop, it would be foolhardy to count on success, for months of unpredictable weather lay ahead. The Iowa soil, richest in the world, can generate a gigantic crop, but only with the right amount of rain. Not too much, not too little. The day Harold began his walk was nearly perfect and, though no farmer would dare mention it, neither drought nor flood seemed forthcoming.

Harold walked directly into the rays of the sun. He wondered if he should apply some sun-screen, but it was still early, so he decided not to. This was a decision he would not have allowed his children to make. If they were on the road with him, he'd have applied a thick, sticky layer, with a rating of at least 30 spf, on every exposed inch of their lovely pale skin. But he himself could wait. He was like the truck driver he had just seen, a grizzled veteran, with leather tough skin, wounds buried deep inside.

Harold recalled a night of several years past. It was during the Gulf War. There were reports that Iraq had fired missiles loaded with chemical weapons at Israel. The TV reporter who made this horrifying announcement was himself wearing a gas-mask. Harold had been glued to the screen for hours, watching the war unfold, when all of sudden music exploded and his two little girls, Katie and Caroline, who were then only five and three, rushed into the TV room. They were each wearing tutus and dancing and screaming to the Beatles circa 1968. Harold was annoyed by their entrance: there was a war on TV, and he didn't want to miss it. But his little girls, two pink whirls, twirling and twirling, with madly huge smiles, were indifferent to the war on the tube. Harold impatiently sent them away, offended by their inability to distinguish the significant from the trivial.

When his children were so young, Harold and Susan's house was dominated by the kid stuff of his three daughters. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't keep up with the mess. Caroline was the worst offender, for she was continually putting her baby-dolls to sleep throughout the house. To do this she required at least two dish towels or cloth napkins per baby, one for the bottom and one on top. There were blanketed babies, some looking like miniature corpses, strewn on every floor, on every rug, on

Harold's black couch in the living room. At that point in her life, Caroline also spent a great deal of time changing socks. And tights, dresses, shoes, pants, shorts, and bathing suits. None of it, of course, ended up back in her room. Katie made houses, which were piles of blankets, pillows, cushions, and towels. There were mock picnics made from tiny silverware, tiny plates and fake food. Small objects, whose placement occasionally showed real deliberation, were everywhere. Jenny tried desperately to participate in her sisters' work, but her main contribution was giddy destruction.

When she was very young Katie demanded stories from him. Every morning on the way to pre-school, every evening on the way home from day-care. Harold always obliged. He encouraged her to interrupt and enter the story if she wanted to. She often did. As a result, Harold's stories took on more and more of her voice, her view of things. Harold remembered the story he had told most frequently, about Arnold, a little brown dog whose best friend is a white cat, Sara.

"One day Arnold and Sara woke up. They saw that it was warm and sunny outside, and so they decided to go on a picnic. They brought out the picnic basket"-- at this point Katie added: "and put in lots of chocolate-chip cookies, and two green apples, and a few tiny little pink and white marshmallows." She loved the unfolding of the homey details.

Harold went on. "Arnold and Sara spread a pink blanket over the sand in the sandbox. They didn't want their food to get dirty, you know. And they started to eat. First of all, they opened up their bag of potato chips. These were yummy chips, the kind with lots of salt that they liked best of all. So there they were in the sandbox munching on their delicious potato chips, when all of a sudden, they heard a wooshing sound. A big

black owl appeared and he swooped down and grabbed the bag of chips away from Arnold and Sara and he flew away.”

Even though Harold hadn’t thought about how to tell this story before he had begun it, at this point he had expected to launch into Arnold and Sara’s quest to get the chips back. Instead, Katie interrupted: "I know what happened."

"What?" he asked.

"They went back into the kitchen and got more chips."

Harold remembered that once, years ago, Katie said to him, "I love everybody I know." He couldn’t remember the context of this startling remark. Perhaps he should now be pleased that, for at least one moment in her life, she had felt this. He remembered how Caroline spent long stretches of time comforting her baby-dolls, putting them to sleep, wiping their tears, humming and talking to herself.

Another moment flashed through Harold’s mind. Once Caroline was playing in the backyard with Willie, whose father had come to visit and had brought his son who at first had been quite shy. The two kids somehow ended up with the garden hose, and they stumbled into a game of tug-of-war. They both laughed and laughed and then Willie said to his dad, "Look, I'm winning." Caroline’s comment was, "Look Daddy! Willie's playing."

During the long Iowa winters, when the children were very young, Friday was pizza night. Make a fire, order a pizza, get out the sleeping bags, bring out the drinks, and have a winter picnic. On one of these nights, years ago, Katie said, "I'm so happy." Harold asked why. She answered, "because I'm warm and I have juice."

Harold was beginning to feel tired. His legs ached slightly, his shoulders felt some of the pressure of the pack. He had been walking for nearly three hours straight and he thought he should stop. But his sciatic nerve felt fine, and when he remembered how painful it was to sit the pain he decided to keep walking.

He was 6' 10", a thick power forward with dark curly hair and an excellent outside shot. A Jewish kid from New Jersey whose eccentric father, a disgruntled chemist, had moved the family, when he was 10, to rural Iowa in order to escape the spiritual barrenness of the suburbs.

It wasn't easy growing up tall, Jewish, somewhat clumsy and hostile to both football and wrestling, as well as very intelligent, in rural Iowa. He made no friends, and was often locked alone in his room, buried in his misery. His father, petrified at the prospect of having damaged his son in order to live out his fantasy of bucolic Iowa, tried to help. He covered the Iowa dirt of their enormous backyard with black asphalt and built for him a basketball court. When he returned from school, and then quickly finished his homework, he'd grab a ball and shoot some baskets. His father installed an excellent set of floodlights, so he could shoot at any hour he wished. And this he did.

He wasn't very good at first, for he had not yet grown into his own body. But the ball felt right in his hands and he liked the sound of the dribble. He was afraid at first to try out for the school team. The coach, who was also the history teacher, had pressured him to do so simply because of his great height, but he didn't take to being pressured and so he declined. He felt his refusal as cowardice, and he hated himself for his failure. He

became obsessive on his backyard court, even shovelling the snow off in the winter so that he could practice.

Finally, in his junior year of high school, when the coach has stopped bugging him, he tried out for the team. Of course, he made it. It was, after all, a small rural school, and the competition was not great. He was an oddity, a spectacle on the court. Big, loping strides, curly black hair, hooked nose, a flabby tree of a boy. He felt himself to be ugly and close to deformed, and even though the other boys were not unfriendly to him, he always went right home after practice, to read and shoot baskets.

By his senior year in high school, he had improved significantly, especially his hands. He could catch, he had discovered, anything thrown his way. Since he was so much taller than the other boys, this was the gateway to success on offense. He'd receive the pass while posted low, and toss up some sort of awkward shot which, even if he missed, he could rebound and put in. He scored a lot and his team did well.

But his popularity did not soar. He felt alone in the school, even though he was now wearing a team jacket and was highly regarded by the male population as a sports hero. Their overtures struck him as insincere, and he was unwilling to acknowledge them. A few of the girls seemed in awe of him, and one or two of the bolder ones made overt passes at him. But their stocky bodies, their tight sweaters, their blond permed hair and pouty lips, terrified him, and he could do more than grunt a response to their giggling questions. His teachers, while well intentioned and competent, did nothing to capture his imagination, and for all of high school, only the basketball court in his backyard offered any sort of peaceful release. He'd dribble and shoot, dribble and shoot, he'd live in a fantasy world of his own making, and out there, under the huge Iowa sky,

he found an energy and a sense of home like no other. His backyard court was a refuge, an island in the flow of time.

Because of the poor coaching, the lack of competition, and an adolescent depression which manifested itself as an almost total lack of ambition, he was offered no scholarships to play basketball. He enrolled at the University of Iowa, where he majored in philosophy. There, in the relatively cosmopolitan town of Iowa City, he felt less the outcast. There were other Jews, usually from the suburbs of Chicago. There were other kids who felt as estranged as he, and meeting them was a near joyful experience. He enjoyed his classes, was good at writing his papers, and, for the first time, his hatred of his great height began to relax. He played in pick-up games, rapidly rising through the ranks, until, in the summer between his freshman and sophomore year, he was playing against varsity athletes. He wasn't yet up to playing against honest to god basketball players, but he found he could hold his own against football and baseball players, many of whom were superb athletes. Basketball started to draw him as never before. No longer was he animated simply by anxiety and a desire to escape; now he was propelled by love and the desire for victory. He began to understand the world stretched far beyond his backyard, and that he had every right to make his way through it. He started lifting weights, and after he began running regularly, his flab melted away to muscle, and he became strong as well as tall.

In his junior year he tried out for the Iowa Hawkeyes as a walk-on, and much to his delighted surprise, he made the team. He was, after all, 6' 10", strong, well coordinated, good hands, not slow, and he had a nice touch from the outside. The

problem was that he didn't really know how to play basketball, but the Hawkeye coaches were willing to teach.

He was a fast learner, and he loved to practice. His comfort with solitude served him well, and he spent hours after official practice continuing his workout. He became an obsessive shooter as he struggled to master the techniques taught to him by his coaches. He was deadly at the free throw line, and soon he had no trouble canning three pointers. At least when he wasn't guarded tightly. He had been slotted for rebounds, defense and the Iowa Hawkeye bench, but his stock rose and he actually became a player. He was a zone buster, with his great height and lovely set shot, able to stand beyond the reach of any zone defense, and can the threes. This was a tremendous asset for the Hawkeyes, who whenever they needed to could now force their opposition to play man-to-man.

His own offense suffered when he faced tough man-to-man defense, though. He hadn't grown up on the playgrounds, so he didn't really know how to get himself open for shots. This became his project between his junior and senior years. He developed an effective little turn-around from the base line. With this new weapon, he became a starter in his senior year, an excellent rebounder and a shooter who could make an occasional move to the basket. He finished the year exceedingly well, but not well enough to earn himself a spot in the NBA draft. He was unwanted, but undaunted, after college. He was, after all, schooled in the virtue of endurance that had been nourished during a lonely childhood on the flatness.

After spending the entire Spring and Summer working on his offense, practising on his own, but also forcing himself to go one-on-one with the very best guards in Iowa City, he tried out for the New York Knicks as a free agent. He made the team. The press

immediately scorned him as a clumsy Jewish kid hired only to amuse Woody Allen and all the many other Jewish fans who flocked year after year into Madison Square Garden to see their beloved Knicks. The black players on the team were hostile to him: he had taken a coveted seat on the bench, and was pulling down a salary that rightfully, they believed, belonged to one of their own. During his first year as Knick he endured a great deal of abuse, but he understood its cause.

He persisted and he grew hard, for he was capable of plunging deep into his own solitude and he could endure the taunts from the blacks, the mockery of the press, and the sarcastic cheers of the fans at Madison Square Garden. When he was allowed a minute or two in a game, he played furiously and far out of control. He banged for rebounds like a madman, and, since he had been steadily lifting weights for several years. To the surprise of many he became effective under the boards. He had much to learn, especially about elbows and pushing and the vicious tactics needed to excel in the game's most unheralded, but utterly necessary, skill. But, as always, he relished the opportunity to learn. He became the man off the bench to hit the boards. He played resolute defense as well. He was clumsy in comparison to the better forwards in the league. They were faster than he, and far too frequently he had to foul them from the hoop. But he persevered even when he had to hear the trash talk, the taunt of being a big Jew boy piece of shit, a hit man whose only job was to give the Knicks a white face and to foul players far better than he. He never responded to taunts, but he hit the floor diving for loose balls, and if pushed he could push back.

Late in his first season he started to shoot a bit. When the fans began to realize that his three pointers were not flukes, that if open he was deadly, they began to warm up

to him. Soon, he was brought in when the opposing team's defense had to be loosened up. He was a shooter, as well as a defensive rebounder. His game was still partial, but it was real. Everybody on the Knicks knew this.

In his second year he was much improved. He had spent the off-season strengthening his hands, and they had actually gotten larger. Because he was able to hold the ball so much more easily, he was able to dunk it effortlessly. He was actually quite a decent jumper, and his feet weren't slow. Yes, he suffered in comparison to the game's best, and, no, he was incapable of the acrobatic jams of some of his teammates. But he could post up low on the baseline, and spin in either direction in order to free himself for either a short jumper, a hook shot, or, best of all, a jam. He'd get the ball low, fake to his left, spin to his right, take but a dribble or two, and then slam it through, getting fouled on the way down, going to the line, making the play worth three. And the crowd was behind him now, the Jewish crowd especially. They sensed his stunning improvement, his reality as a ball player, his fearlessness, his intelligence, his commitment to rebounding and defense. His game was still awkward and flawed, but he contributed and, by the middle of his second year, he was in the regular rotation, getting a good 10 to 15 minutes per game. When the Knicks got to the playoffs that year, his minutes were reduced to 5, but he understood he was not yet ready for the pressure of the genuinely big time.

His third year, and then his fourth, all brought dramatic improvement. Each month, it seemed, he mastered one more aspect of his game. His dribbling in particular got better. He spent one entire summer, while most other players were in Hawaii or fooling on the golf course, jogging around the reservoir in Central Park, dribbling a

basketball with his right hand. He must have been quite a sight, but New Yorkers were used to sights, and he always wore sunglasses and a baseball hat so as not to be recognized. He got better and better, and soon he was not afraid to bring the ball up when he was needed to break a pressing defense. His passing improved as well, for somehow his ability to see had been sharpened. For this no technical instruction was available, nor was there a form of practice he could do on his own. Here it was his accumulating years on the court that taught him how to see. Now he was a shooter, a passer, a rebounder, a vigilant defender. He still didn't have an explosive move to the basket, nor could he shoot a quick release jump shot from very far out, but he had a small repertoire of moves to the hoop. His feet, like his eyes, had somehow gotten faster, and this allowed him to foul much less frequently. He learned exceptionally well how to cope with NBA violence, how much to retaliate, how much to ignore. He actually came to like mixing it up under the boards. Yes, he had gotten whacked time and again in his eyes, but he had suffered no serious injuries for he was bigger and stronger than all but a very few forwards, and he never complained to the officials. If the team became desperate he could substitute at center, but fortunately the Knicks did not ask him to do so.

His game was nearing a pleasing well-roundedness, and soon he was averaging 18 points and 9 rebounds a night. He became a starter, and his consistency was matched only by his ability to rise to the occasion when the game was on the line. He was not afraid to take the last shot. Unlike the greatest of them all, however, he never actually wanted to take the last shot. But if needed to, he would. He was contributing much to a successful team, he was loved, and, of course, he was exceptionally well paid. He lived in Manhattan, rather than the suburbs. He attended classes at Columbia whenever

he had some free time. He did laps around the reservoir in Central park. He was rich and he went to the very best restaurants where the knowledgeable staff was able to shield even his massive frame from the gaping eyes of his many admirers. He had a huge apartment with his own jacuzzi in which he soaked and watched TV on the built in screen above the faucets.

He called a press conference and spoke directly to the reporters in his usual clear and articulate manner, the manner which had long made him respected among the press corps.

“Yes, I’ve had a great season and, yes, I’ll be a free agent in July. I know I could make more money by leaving the Knicks. Miami, LA, Minnesota, they’re all ready to offer me a big deal. You know that, and I know that. But I’m not going to do it. I’m part of this town. I don’t want to leave. As you know, I don’t have an agent, so I’m just going to sit down with management as I do every year and figure out how much they can pay me. We’ll work out a deal, and that’ll be that. I make enough money already and I wouldn’t want to live somewhere else.

“Don’t get me wrong. NBA players have very short careers and so they have every right to take advantage of free agency and capitalize when things are going well. I don’t mean to criticize anybody for jumping teams and getting big contracts. Players have to take care of their families and set themselves up for life. Scottie, Shaq, Alonzo, P.J., Dikembe, Chris, Juwan, they’re all moving around, and I understand why. They’re making business decisions, and this is a business. But I’m making a business decision too. I just happen not to want to leave New York. It’s good for me here. I feel I have a future here. I don’t want to live in Boston or LA or Detroit. Don’t get me wrong, those

are great towns, but they're just not my town. This is my town. I was born in the suburbs of New Jersey, my Dad grew up in Brooklyn, my Mom in the Bronx, and even though I was raised in Iowa, I still feel like this is my home. I like it here and if the Knicks are willing to keep paying my salary, whatever it turns out to be, I'd like to stay."

He knew, of course, that even if he could make millions more somewhere else the Knicks would pay him exceptionally well. He also knew that he'd be welcomed as an anomalous hero in an age of free agency and self-interest, when no player was loyal to a team, when no owner was loyal to a city, when no city was loyal to a state. He was now a New Yorker in New York, and he would be loved and rewarded for declaring himself to be a self-flattering mirror image for those sitting in the expensive seats of Madison Square Garden. What he hadn't counted on was the severe umbrage taken by so many of his fellow ball players. Despite his denial that he was criticizing free agency, and therefore implicitly accusing other players of greed, he was perceived as someone eager to separate himself from his fellows. Especially among the black players, he generated a great deal of resentment. They suspected him of self-righteousness, which of course only a Jew Boy From Iowa Whose Father Built Him His Own Basketball Court In The Back Yard could afford. When you're black and from the ghetto and you've been struggling from day one, you grab the most money you can when it's offered to you. Only a Jew Boy can stand in front of the cameras and say he doesn't care about money.

He was hurt by their reaction, but not devastated. For he was hard and accustomed to solitude. The truth was, he did hold many of his colleagues in contempt. They made millions and spent huge quantities on their collections of cars and furs and mansions and women. They spent wantonly and stupidly and they strutted like peacocks

whenever a camera was trained in their direction. They did not understand the nature and fragility of their own gifts, nor did they comprehend that feeling self-important is a sure sign of self-deception. He himself owned only one very large apartment in Manhattan, and he drove one extremely well equipped Saab. He actually would have preferred a BMW, but the habit of not buying German he had inherited from his parents. He gave sizable chunks of his money away to various charities, but his real fantasy was to establish NBA BANK, a bank that would offer low interest loans and even grants to fledgling minority business ventures in all cities represented by an NBA team. With all the millions circulating among the players, surely this could be done. And such a venture, while helping those in need, might actually turn a profit. The cities of America were crumbling. Single mothers had replaced fathers, and the culture of gangs and drugs and nihilism was enveloping black America. What was needed was not charity, but economic opportunity and the chance to work. Basketball players, among the richest of all men, could help. They could restrain themselves from buying yet another Ferrari and instead help finance a shoe store in Harlem. Everybody needed shoes. Why buy them from a mege-retail place owned by a distant white conglomerate instead of buying local? But these kinds of business needed start-up capital, and that the NBA BANK could provide. Its logo, he fantasized, could be "BANK ON THE NBA" and its name in print could perhaps play on the letters: "NBANK."

After the resentment generated by his press conference, he was reluctant to mention his ideas out loud. Inadvertently, however, he let something slip out during an interview with a reporter. His casual remarks, which he thought were off the record, were published, and again interpreted as a form of self-righteous criticism of the other

players. For months he was subjected to genuine and overt hostility on and off the court. The very few invitations he had ever received to socialize dropped to zero, and he was now the target of tremendous violence under the boards. Especially hostile was Michael Jordan. When the Knicks played Chicago, Jordan insisted on guarding him. And, of course, he shut him down. He was unable to get off a long range shot because Jordan, his bald head pouring sweat, his eyes bright with the desire for victory, his incredibly fast hands flying this way and that, seemed always to be in his face, obstructing his eyes, making his life miserable in every conceivable way. Once, when the referee wasn't looking, Jordan smacked him in the ribs with a sharp and cruel elbow. Jordan wanted to humiliate him on the court, and he came close to doing so, but he didn't quite succeed. For even in the face of such intense opposition and pressure, he was still able to grab several rebounds, spin into the lane for a well earned basket or two, and play some defense as well. He could not, of course, accomplish much against the extraordinary Jordan, who was a paradigm of excellence and an incarnation of the will to power.

“Damn it, Michael,” he once said to him. “Keep your fucking elbows off me.” Jordan didn't deign to answer. His millions and millions were piling up in the bank while black boys and girls were hopeless in Harlem.

During the playoffs, which the Knicks were destined to lose, Jordan had bored of playing against him, and so Dennis Rodman became his man. Rodman was a blissful figure, so totally self-absorbed in his own game that he rarely bothered to single anyone in particular out for punishment. Dennis punished everybody indiscriminately. There was a manic purity in Dennis Rodman. In addition to being an athlete of astonishing gifts, the man was consummately silly, and utterly unafraid of being mocked. He was

tattooed from head to toe with wild, swirling, pagan designs, his hair was dyed orange, he had rings laced through every protusion possible. He was a dirty player who constantly grabbed and hit and pushed, but he didn't intend to seriously injure his opponents, just incense them. At such psychological warfare he was uncommonly successful. He was not virtuous, but his purity was admirable. He was flamboyant and bizarre and seemed to enjoy being photographed in women's clothes. As such, Rodman was a perfect foil to his own quiet dignity.

Rodman, who himself was a master of trash, was the only player who inspired him to talk back, and there was nothing more intoxicating than outplaying Dennis and then barking at him. Jordan was beyond him, beyond all of them: this simply had to be accepted. But Rodman could be beaten, even if the Bulls could not.

It was a playoff game at the Garden. He had been going head to head against Rodman for 4 quarters, and now the score was tied. He was shooting very well and Rodman, who was always a risk-taker on defense and generally preferred to concentrate on defensive rebounds rather than with shot blocking, was leaving him relatively open on the outside. After hitting four consecutive, and almost uncontested, three point shots, Phil Jackson called a time-out, and he and Jordan both yelled at Rodman to play some D. For a moment, he felt a spasm of fear, for he imagined Jordan shifting to him, shutting him down once again. To his relief, however, Rodman was still guarding him when the time-out ended. When the players returned to the court, Dennis guarded him closely. That was okay. He simply posted low, and despite the steady and violent jabs Rodman struck on his back, he lowered his shoulder and thrust himself towards the basket. He muscled Dennis Rodman out of the way and, spun, dribbled twice towards the hoop, he

jumped high to the basket, his hand grabbing the ball ever more tightly as he rose, and at the acme of his jump, he jammed the ball through the metal hoop. It was his 27th point of the night, and this was the basket that tied the game late in the fourth quarter. Best of all, he had been fouled by Dennis Rodman, who perhaps sensed that he had been soundly beaten, and was on the verge of being humiliated, and so in frustration fouled him hard and pointlessly on his way down.

When he heard the referee's whistle, he clenched his fists, beat his chest, roared like a lion, wiggled his hips, played to the hysterical crowd. The crowd was amazed and appreciative, for he had never allowed himself such posturing before, and they flung themselves out of their seats in manic appreciation. He was their man, their Jewish man, fighting off the tatoos of Dennis Rodman, tying the game, restoring New York to its rightful place as the first city of basketball. Madison Square Garden, its residents victims of the illusion that they might in fact beat the Bulls, became a bacchant revel, a madhouse, and he was its high priest, waving his arms wildly, exhorting the crowd to ever higher decibels of joy. If he made the free throw, the Knicks would lead. He pumped his fists a few more times, slapped hands hard with teammates on the bench, bumped chests with Patrick Ewing, who, for the first time in months, looked him in the eye, man-to-man.

He walked to the line with a hungry smile on his face, for he wanted to talk.

“Yo Dennis, how'd you like that play? What do you think Dennis? Did you like it?”

“Shit,” Dennis Rodman mumbled as he shook his head in amused contempt, his trademark smirk growing on his thick lips.

“What’re you going do with all these tatoos now, man? Your tatoos are shaking, Dennis, they’re shaking. Where’d you get those tatoos anyway? Back of a bus station? Those are some sad looking designs on your body, man. You ever worry about hepatitis? Huhh?”

He kept talking to him, and all the while Dennis Rodman, indifferent to the barbs, was shaking his head, smirking in superiority, as if he already knew Chicago would win and this outburst would count for nothing.

“What’s the matter Dennis? Nothing to say? I thought you always had something to say. I’m gonna make this foul shot, Dennis, I’m gonna get a three point play, and it’s against you, Dennis, against you.”

“Hey, shut the fuck up and take your shot,” Michael Jordan said to him. He even took a menacing step towards him. At that point, the referee, cued by the game’s greatest player, intervened. Even though he only came up to his chest, the referee sternly told him to be quiet before he called a technical foul.

“You’re going to call a foul on me for talking to Dennis Rodman? That’s funny. That’s ironic. He’s the talker, talk to him. He talks all the time, and you haven’t said a thing to him all night. Sort of a double standard, wouldn’t you say? He’s been pushing me and shoving me, and now you’re gonna call a foul on me? Come on. Or are you just doing it because Michael told you to?”

The referee warned him again, and this time he realized that even though it was late into a crucial playoff game, a technical might actually be called. Patrick Ewing, the elder statesman of his team, joined the referee at the free throw line, put his big arms around him, and told him to calm down and shoot the foul.

He turned his back on the other players, and took several steps towards mid-court. After a few deep breaths, he pivoted around sharply. He walked calmly to the free throw line and closed his eyes. He imagined the ball going in. He dribbled a few times, and tried to concentrate on the breath leaving his lips. He steadied himself, looked directly at the basket. Just before taking his shot, he lowered his gaze and focused directly on Dennis Rodman, who at precisely the same time was prompted to look straight back at him. And then, in a moment captured for eternity by a Sports Illustrated photographer, he winked. A slick, heroic wink of utter joy in conquest. Rodman, in appreciation of a lovely gesture, smiled.

The ball left his fingertips, spinning backwards as it sailed elegantly upwards, and it dropped through the middle of the metal rim. Swish. The lovely sound of affirmation.

Chapter Three: “The Egg ‘n’ I”

Harold guessed it was about 6 miles to the next town, Holmgren, Iowa. Like most small towns in Iowa, Holmgren’s Main Street, on the Old Lincoln Highway itself, was only two blocks, long enough for a small grocery, a post office, a diner, a bar, a Lutheran church, a farm equipment and hardware store, and a few other shops. Unlike other Iowa towns, however, Holmgren was not dying.

Harold had visited Holmgren many times, and looked forward to arriving there. It was a pleasant little place, with active schools, well tended trees and shrubs, and a small but nearly prosperous bit of commerce. The big-shot administrators at IIT had often bragged about a “golden row” of bio-tech and software firms that would stretch from Centerville to Holmgren, an Iowa version of Silicon Valley. Already Holmgren was home to a couple of small genetic engineering companies. One, Maizetec, in fact had succeeded in sequencing the gene responsible for kernel rot in corn, and so was poised to make a killing.

The agricultural economy pressured Iowa farmers to expand, to plant greater and greater acreage, to rely on giant machines which were ever increasing in size and efficiency, and to specialize either in crops or animals, but not in both. Most important, farms were less dependent on human labor than ever before. Machines, whose only need was for a driver, did most of the work. Family farms had been displaced by corporations, whose headquarters might be in Minneapolis or even San Francisco. The rural population was shrinking. Young people rarely stayed in the small towns. Instead, they moved-- usually to the southwest.

Once the flatness had been broken by small, nearly self-sufficient homesteads, stable, sturdy, dignified farm houses surrounded by a wind break of trees, bustling with chickens and hogs, guarded by the sanguine chewing of the cattle and the play toys of children. But now it was a tribute to industry's insatiable hunger. It had become one giant field on which to plant seeds, pour chemicals, drive big machines, and harvest a cash crop. Animals no longer lived outdoors. Confined to factory buildings, they were bred on an assembly line, never to see the light of day. There were few children left, and order reigned. At this moment in his long walk, the flatness seemed flatter and thus lengthier than ever before. Harold was getting tired.

Harold planned to have lunch at the diner. Maybe a burger, maybe a BLT, lots of fries, coffee and pie. He was burning off calories at a steady pace, and so he could eat whatever he wanted. He was getting hungry, and for this he was glad: the itching in his belly distracted him from the pain in his leg.

The sun was high in the sky, and although the temperature was probably only around 70, it felt, in the absence of shade, much hotter. Harold decided finally to put on his sun screen. He was willing to submit to the stab of pain that he knew would come when he twisted his torso in order to take off his pack. But he was unprepared when his entire leg went into spasm as he reached down to unzip the pocket to get the tube. Harold's hands grasped his thighs tightly and he had to breathe hard to make the pain go away. When it passed, he straightened himself slowly and rubbed the sun screen on his arms, his nose, his forehead. He even put a dab on his bald spot. Then he returned his cap and his sunglasses back to their positions. With as much gentleness as he could muster, he picked up his pack and began walking.

Harold's legs seemed to be growing thicker. Sweat mixed with sunscreen dripped into his eyes. What had begun, just after dawn, as an almost effortless opening of the gates, when he had only had to point his body in the right direction and his legs seemed to move on their own, now required grim concentration. His body was asking him to stop moving and soon, he feared, it would beg. And his sciatic nerve was throbbing. Harold reprimanded himself: shouldn't he have expected this? After all, he hadn't worked out in months, he wasn't in great shape, and so he shouldn't have been surprised at all when pain set in after his hours and miles on the road. Perhaps, Harold wondered, he should take some ibuprofen. The bottled, unopened, was buried deep in the small pocket on the front of his pack. He'd have to twist around again to get his pack off. Could he stand that pain?

"Don't do it! Don't take no drugs Harold. Remember what happened to my cousin Bernard."

"K, he was snorting crack. This is ibuprofen. It's perfectly legal and you can buy it in a drugstore."

"A drug's a drug, man. I'm telling you, you start using that shit, and it's downhill. Face it like a man, not like some fatass punk. Not like Bernard."

"I think he's right, Harold," his grandfather added. He was chuckling in delight at K's little speech. "Just keep your eyes pointed East. Take one step at a time. Do the best you can with what you've got."

"But what I've got isn't enough," Harold protested.

“It never is,” his grandfather responded. And then he broke into a small laugh, and then raised his arm high and opened his hand out for K to slap. “We’re all in the same boat,” Harold the elder said. “Buck up, youngster, buck up.”

“Yeah, buck the fuck up,” K echoed, the two of them burst into laughter. Harold realized he had no choice.

Harold stood motionless. His eyes were watering and he wiped them with the sleeve of his tee shirt, once again reprimanding himself, this time for failing to bring a handkerchief. He stared at the flatness, and suddenly yearned to lie down in a cornfield where he could fall asleep. But on he trudged.

After another long hour and a half, Harold finally reached Holmgren. His thighs, in particular, hurt and of course so did the back of his right leg. He found the diner, weirdly named “The Egg ‘N’ I,” and entered. It was the lunch hour, and the well kept chrome and formica cafe was crowded. No one gave him a second look when he entered. Harold slumped onto an empty stool at the counter, took off his pack and placed it by his feet. Tremors ran threateningly up and down his spine, and then all the way to his toes. If his sciatic nerve didn’t calm down, Harold realized, he wouldn’t be able to sit for very long. But he needed rest and wanted to eat and read the newspaper for a good stretch of time. He vigorously massaged his thigh, and after a couple of minutes the nerve did relent. Still, Harold couldn’t quite get comfortable on his stool. His impulse was to stand up and stretch, but experience had taught him that he’d be punished for doing so. Best of all, he knew, would be to lie down. But that he couldn’t do at the “Egg ‘N’ I.”

“Hi there; what’ll it be today?” the waitress, a large blonde woman, asked.

“Oh, sorry, I haven’t looked at the menu yet.”

“That’s okay. Take your time. I’ll be back.”

The waitress was young and looked a bit like Judy Carlson. Harold chuckled out loud. So many young women in Iowa looked like Judy Carlson. One who didn’t, however, was a small, frail looking woman with short, dark, curly hair who was sitting on the stool next to his. Dressed in black jeans, and a black tee-shirt, she was eating a salad. When he chuckled out loud, she looked up at him curiously, and he instinctively turned to meet her eyes. She was pretty: olive skin, big eyes, full, fun-loving lips. Slightly emaciated, but lively and open. She was definitely not a Lutheran. He wondered if she were Jewish. After the long, satisfying fantasy he had had just before lunch, this would have been a bizarre coincidence of blissful proportions. But he couldn’t meet her gaze for long. Harold was embarrassed so he thrust his face back towards the menu and kept his eyes fixed. He couldn’t read a word, but when the waitress returned he ordered anyway. “I’d like a cheeseburger with fries, some onion rings, and a large coke. And a side order of hash browns. Please. ”

“Okay.”

“Thanks.”

“Lots of calories there, pal.”

He was surprised that the small woman sitting next to him was speaking. “Excuse me?” he said.

“I said, lots of calories. I don’t mean to be rude, but you’re going to kill yourself with all that fried food.”

“I am?”

“Oh yeah.”

“Actually, I don’t think so. I exercise a great deal. In fact, I’ve been walking since seven a.m.. I need all the carbohydrates I can get.”

“No one needs the food you’re eating, pal.” The woman was brusque. Harold had never been called “pal” before, and so he was too surprised to respond.

“You can get your carbs through something other than potatoes you know. And you don’t need fried food. Why don’t you have some pasta and a salad? And a glass of milk?”

“Milk?”

“Or water.”

“Water?”

“You got it there, pal. If you take better care of yourself we may be able to see each again on another day.”

“Why are you telling me what to eat?” Harold asked, more puzzled than angry.

“I’m a scientist,” the woman laughed. “It’s my job to know more than other people about what’s good for them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, really. I work at Maizetec. Research. Silvia Russo,” she said as she reached out her hand for a shake. Harold twisted on his stool so that he could take her hand. As he did, he winced in pain.

“Hi,” he said, embarrassed by both the unexpected forwardness of the woman and the fact that he had divulged his pain to her. “Harold Larson.”

“What’s wrong?” Silvia asked. “Does your back hurt?”

“A little. Only when I move.”

“Bummer.”

“Oh, it’s not too bad,” Harold said, but as he shifted his position on the stool so that he could look at Silvia Russo, his sciatic nerve again fired up. He made a sharp grunting noise.

“Harold, you’re a wreck. What’s wrong with your back?”

“It’s not my back. I have some sciatica.”

“Bummer. That’s a painful one. My grandmother had it.”

Harold nearly laughed. Silvia was young: 28, 29, maybe 30. Was she associating him with her grandmother’s generation, he wondered.

“Fried food, bad back. Any chance of a correlation there, pal?”

“None.”

Silvia laughed. “What are you taking for it?”

“What do you mean?” Harold asked.

“Drugs. What kind of drugs?”

“None.”

“None? Not even anti-inflammatories?”

“No, nothing.”

“Big mistake there, pal. The anti-inflammatories don’t just get rid of symptoms. They aid in the healing process. Less swelling, more blood. Quicker recovery. You should be taking 2500 mg a day if you need to. Wouldn’t do you a bit of harm. Only bad for you long term.”

“No thanks.”

“Why not?”

“I’m doing okay.”

“Baloney. I saw your face. A lot of pain in that face. No reason to put up with that.”

“Of course there is. There’s a reason for everything.”

“Oh no. You’re not another one of *those*, are you? Ever since I’ve been in Iowa people have been telling me that everything happens for a reason.”

“I believe that, but not the same way *they* do. I don’t think God has a plan for us. Don’t worry.”

“Good. Even some of the scientists I work with seem to believe that. Weird. So what do *you* mean?”

“Just that things make sense. That’s all.”

“Sounds right to me,” said Silvia Russo.

Harold wolfed down his lunch in silence when it was served to him, and then ordered blueberry pie with vanilla ice cream, coffee, water.

“You don’t let up, do you Harold?”

“I told you. I’ve been walking all morning. And I’m going to walk all afternoon. And all day every day, for quite a while.”

“Why?” For the first time, Silvia seemed willing to listen. For a second, Harold was tempted to tell her the truth; that he was walking to Washington, D.C. to deliver his health care reform plan to Hillary Clinton. But he decided against this.

“It’s a vacation. I’m walking to the Mississippi River. On the Old Lincoln Highway. Which is the street right in front of the “Egg ‘n’ I.”

“Jesus, the “Egg ‘n’ I.” Who do you think came up with that? Anyway, what’s with the walk, Harold? You sure you’re not running away from the law?”

“Right,” he laughed. “I just told you, I’m taking a vacation. My grandfather helped build the Old Lincoln Highway you know. ”

“You Iowans are weird. Nobody in Brooklyn will believe me when I tell them what goes on in this place. Your grandfather built what?”

“You’re from New York?”

“Born and bred. Undergrad at NYU, and then my Ph.D. at Columbia. Genetics.”

“Really? I got my Ph.D. from Columbia too.”

“No kidding! What year?”

“1977.”

“Mine was last year,” Silvia chuckled. “Then I took this crazy job at Maizetec. Couldn’t resist the salary. Plus, I had to get far away from New York. I was just breaking up with a guy I had lived with for a couple of years. Robert had full custody of his kid, a 6 year old boy. I was the stepmother for a while. Too weird. I mean, I liked the kid. A lot, actually. We lived on Central Park West, ground level apartment. It was a little cramped, but we got along pretty well. I used to take the kid to the park all the time. It was nice, until it began to fall apart. Anyway, long story short, it ended.” She paused for a breath. “Then I got my degree, got offered a job the next day, and on a lark decided to spend a year here in Iowa. A refugee in Siberia. Paying penance or something for all my sins. But I’m outta here in June. Enough with the corn. Back to New York. So, what did you do your graduate work in?”

“Philosophy,” was all Harold could say. Silvia’s rapid speech had mesmerized him.

“A philosopher from Iowa! That’s so cool.”

“Cool?”

“Yeah. Who’d guess I’d bump into a philosopher in Iowa? I’ve been surrounded by scientists, farmers, and Christians.”

“Oh come on; I know it’s not that bad.”

“Says you. I’m outta here in June. I couldn’t possibly take another winter in this place. Jesus, that was amazing: for weeks it barely got above 0. No more for me. It’s back to New York.”

Harold watched as Silvia nibbled at her salad, and slowly chewed each bite.

Come with me. We’ll go together. We’ll walk the Old Lincoln. It’s the nice time of year in Iowa. Warm, no bugs. You’ll like it. I’ll drop you off in New York, and then take a right and keep going to Washington, D.C. Ah, what a trip it’ll be.

Thinking this depressed him, so he let his gaze drop to the blueberry stained plate before him, and said nothing. Silvia too fell silent. He felt her staring at him, though, and after a few seconds, forced himself to look back at her. In her large eyes he was quite sure that he saw a trace of longing. She was lonely, and he too had lived in New York. She was small-boned, but eager.

“Did you like New York, Harold?”

“I loved it.” When he said this, he saw himself climbing through the broken chain link fence and walking onto the basketball court. All the players were there, and when he arrived, they greeted him warmly. “Yo, Iowa boy makes 10! We got ourselves a game,”

Neal Simpson said with a wide grin on his face. Harold himself broke into a small smile, which Silvia noticed.

“It got to you, didn’t it. New York, I mean. There’s no place like it on earth. It pulsates with life. So, why didn’t you stay?”

“This is my home. And I got offered a very nice job at IIT. It’s near where my parents live. Near where my grandfather died.” He had twisted on his stool when he had said this, and so once again pain registered on his face.

“The one who built the Lincoln Highway, right?”

“Right,” Harold snorted a laugh. When he did he triggered a spasm and so he again winced in pain.

“Hey listen, why don’t you take a rest? You should lie down before you take your walk. You can rest at my apartment if you want. It’s right here in town Next to the lab, in fact,” she laughed. “Easy commute. That’s the best part of living in Iowa. So, why don’t you take a rest. When I get off work we can have dinner together. I’ll make you some pasta and a salad. It’ll do you some good.”

He knew that she wanted him, and he was tempted. He could take a shower, a nap, and then be ready to frolic with Silvia Russo. He could go to Washington tomorrow. But he hesitated. “Oh, I don’t know. I’m supposed to walk another 15 miles today. I want to make it to Blooming Prairie for dinner. I’ve got a long way to go.”

“Oh come on. You said it was a vacation. What’s the rush? Come back to my apartment. I’ve got ibuprofen. In fact, if you need something stronger, I can get you some Akaustos. That’s a big-time anti-inflammatory. A guy in my lab uses it on his pigs or something. I think he has pigs. Or maybe it’s horses. I don’t know. But he’s used in

on himself and says it's great. Your sciatic nerve is inflammed. Take the drugs and you'll feel better. Simple as that."

"Watch out, Harold! Bitch's a pusher! She trying to sell you some drugs. She wants to party, I realize, but don't let her give you no drugs. Keep on the move, bro. Get your ass back on the road."

"He's right, son," his grandfather chimed in. "Stay focused. Go forward. You've got a job to do."

Harold didn't want to agree with K, so he looked carefully at Silvia to see if he was right. Her thin and merry face was inviting. But she was, he feared, anorexic, and he didn't really want to find out why. And so he realized he'd have to say no.

"Thank you for the invitation Silvia. But I'm afraid I have to say no. I've got to get to Blooming Praire by dinner. I've set myself a schedule. I need to stick to it."

Silvia didn't look fazed. After a moment's pause she said, "Okay, pal. I wish you the best. But do me a favor and lay off the fries tonight."

He laughed quietly and said he would.

Chapter Four: The Flatness

The sun was pure and burning as the temperature neared 80. There was, of course, no shade, for there were no trees on the Old Lincoln, only cornfields to the north and south. Far in the distance, where the road vanished into a point, they lay waiting for him as well. At least, Harold thought, he wasn't walking directly into the sun's light. Still, it was frying his head, and his Tony Smith Seed cap was drenched.

“Jesus, what have I gotten myself into?” Harold wondered. *“I can't possibly make it 15 miles. I'm slowing to a crawl.”* He imagined himself taking a long, hot shower in Silvia's air-conditioned apartment. He saw himself in bed with her, eating a big plate of pasta.

Could he work through, will himself through, the pain, all the way to Blooming Prairie? Harold remembered the voice of Coach Olafsson when he supervised wind sprints: “Fight through it,” he would yell again and again and again. Could Harold fight through it this time and reach the welcoming bed of the motel?

As he often did when he was futilely trying to sleep, Harold summoned a fantasy to assist him. He tried his most familiar: playing basketball. It was difficult, but he finally saw himself getting the outlet pass from Mike Comstock, dribbling with his left hand down the court on the left side, stopping parallel to the free throw line where he transformed his run into a jump and his jump into a shot. But he felt awkward, rigid, clunky, and he couldn't quite get the angle of his approach right. He couldn't imagine the twist in his body as he shifted from the dribble to the shot, nor could he feel the

proper angle of his shoulders. Instead of heading to the basket, when the ball left his fingers it simply disappeared.

Harold stopped walking, and shook his head in sad amazement that this powerful detail meant nothing to anyone but himself.

He tried to return to his children. He saw himself sprawled on the carpet in his living room, his back on the ground, knees high, his three girls giggling madly climbing all over him, wrestling with him as they often did when they were tiny. He growled like a lion, pretending he was a predator when really his prey was but hugs and holds and as much of his daughters' lovely tactile selves as he could grasp. This didn't work either. They were too old. Katie and Caroline would be embarrassed to wrestle with him now, even if somehow his fragile skeleton could bear their weight. Jenny would go for it, though. He imagined wrestling with her. But he knew he couldn't do that either. His lower torso wouldn't be able to withstand her aggression.

He tried sex with Judy Carlson. In his office, she was propped against his desk, his pants and her skirt were down, she held his neck tightly and pressed her cheek tightly against his as she grimaced in ecstasy. But this image offered him nothing, and he realized it was some sort of abstraction. He tried Deborah Rosenfield. They were in his bedroom while their daughters were playing restaurant on the porch. This image was rudely interrupted when Jenny came bursting in. The little girl stared in shock: *what were Daddy and Deborah doing naked in Mommy's bed?* His image of Silvia Russo, surrounded by the white porcelain surfaces and test tubes of her laboratory was more vivid, but no more compelling.

He imagined his wife, and for the first time he felt a slight sense of departure. They were bonded together by years of hard work, the shared project of children, recognition and sympathy for one another. She could not articulate the true reasons for his trip, for she didn't know about Hillary or health care reform, but she knew it was important for him to walk and she genuinely, in the deepest part of herself, wanted him to be well. This fact, above all others, he trusted. And he knew he wanted well for her. Had she slept with Jeffrey? Had she built slowly to her orgasm and then undulated below his friend, as she had with him so many times before? He imagined them on the black leather couch, smoking pot and taking each other's clothes off. He was surprised that he was unable to identify his reaction to the image.

His fantasy was interrupted by the sound of a car with an ineffectual muffler approaching from behind. As it neared, Harold was shocked by a crude male voice screaming at him words he could not decipher. And then, an instant after the voice, he was shocked again by a beer can landing a few feet in front of him, a beer can which no doubt had been aimed at his head. The car flew ahead of him, with a driver and passenger, and from behind it looked like a Chevy from the early 70s. It was bright yellow, the color of a New York City taxicab, and Harold noticed a driver and a passenger as well as what looked like a large pair of foam dice hanging from the rear view mirror. It took a moment's reflection, but Harold decided that the boy had yelled "get a horse!" just before he threw the beer can at him.

The yellow car slowed down when it was about 50 yards ahead of Harold and started to pull to the side of the road. "*Oh shit,*" Harold thought, and he rebuked himself for being so stupid as to not have predicted this kind of encounter on the Old Lincoln. "*I*

don't have to fight these guys do I?" he wondered. "I don't know how to fight any more. Actually, I've never known how to fight. Only talk and play basketball."

The car stopped, but Harold did not. He would not interrupt his linear pilgrimage for some two-bit morons from Holmgren, Iowa, who were desperate for assertion and out to break their boredom with a random act of stupid violence. He'd stare the boys down, look at them with the steely glance of a man who knows, and the boys would wither. He walked more slowly, but he continued moving towards the stopped car. His head drooped down, but he forced it upright so that he could stare at the rear window, perhaps even memorize the license number. His eyes were irritated again by his sweat, and his sunglasses were smudged with sunscreen, so he even though he was getting closer to the car he couldn't yet discern the numerals on the plate.

Shit, he thought. *Deep shit*. As his heart raced, his fatigue disappeared, he was shot into full wakefulness, ready to do battle. There was a pen knife in his pack. Should he take it out? He saw a stick at the side of the road. Could such a weapon possibly be of use? He didn't know, and he also remembered that he was unable to bend down without pain, so he left it where it was. He kept walking. The yellow car, wide in its rear as those older cars were, sat menacingly ahead of him. The driver was gunning the engine, his foot moving up and down and up and down on the gas peddle, a pathetic version of rhythm. The boy, however, wasn't trying to make music, but only to remind the approaching walker that his was the power. The roar of the engine filled the air with stupidity. To this Harold was resigned, and his resignation felt like courage. His head cocked even straighter, he glared at the rear view window, daring it to challenge him to a fair fight.

“Fuck you asshole. You’re not doing shit to me. I’m gonna kick your ass. I’m gonna send you back to Holmgren, Iowa, and you can pick up the pieces later. You’re going back to the gas station where you pump shitass gas to shitass farmers, cuz you ain’t got nothin going for you. What’re you gonna do with those stupid fucking dice hanging on your mirror? Do you realize how pitiful you are? You probably don’t. That’s the mark of stupidity; you’re so dumb you can’t even tell how dumb you are. You probably think pumping gas in Holmgren, Iowa is the good life. You don’t know shit. I do and so I’m gonna kick your ass.”

“Cold-cock the mutthfucker, Harold!,” K roared in encouragement. “You remember that time Neal Simpson smacked Marvin upside the head? Marvin been hanging on him all game, and Neal just had enough. Heh, heh. When Neal finished with him, Marvin didn’t do nothing again.”

“K’s right, Harold,” his grandfather told him. “You need to take your stand right here and now. If they approach you, hit them first. And hit them hard, Harold.”

“Okay, Gramps, I will.”

Harold walked steadily towards the yellow car, and with each step he felt stronger and more ready to endure pain. He had made the commitment and he knew he would not falter. Just before he got within a stone’s throw of the car, however, the boy floored the gas pedal and peeled away, sending a flurry of pebbles into the air. The engine roared, but soon it faded down the straight line that was the Old Lincoln Highway. Harold stopped to watch it disappear. He realized he was unaware of his body.

“Fear-therapy. Asshole-therapy. Face-up-to-mortality-therapy. Get shocked-out-of-the-everyday, blasted-out-of-this-world-therapy. Bad-boy-therapy. Who knows

what I'll call it. But it works, damn it, it works." Harold chuckled to himself and kept walking.

The next mile was a pleasure, for his step was light and his heart was pumping much needed, cleansing blood through his body. But when the shock triggered by the speeding yellow car and the flying beer can faded, pain returned to fill the void. The walking became more difficult, and his pace diminished. "*At this rate,*" he calculated, "*I won't get to the motel until midnight. The diner will be closed. I will expire.*"

Harold smiled at his grim prospects. Perhaps he should reverse direction and return to Holmgren, go to the Maizetec building and tell Silvia he had changed his mind. She'd give him the key to her apartment. When she returned, he would fall asleep in her skinny arms. Or he could call his wife, tell her to pick him up and take him back to Centerville. He could check himself straight into the hospital, be treated by experts in white cloaks who knew what ailed him, how to cure it, and who wanted for him only the best.

Harold stopped and seriously considered both prospects. He removed his cap, put his left hand to his forehead, and wiped the sweat up and through his thinning hair. On the way down, his hand massaged the back of his neck. Before putting his cap back on, he looked at it, and gently caressed the corn stalk that functioned as the "I" in "SMITH." He ran both sets of fingers under his sun-glasses, over his eyes, and across his cheeks. When he squeezed his chin hard, "uhhhhyeeee" was the sound he thought he heard leave his lips. He couldn't go back. Not yet. He had to go forward. So forward he went.

Harold walked deliberately, each step a cautious advance, each breath a fearful waiting for the explosion of pain that would stop him dead in his tracks. Somehow,

though, he was able to continue forward, but it took him nearly 50 minutes to cover what he guessed was not even a mile. This was, he knew, very bad. The pain in his buttock and leg was screaming for attention, and this time it could not be denied. Harold stopped. He turned to his left and facing north he stared for a moment. Without knowing he had done so, he made a decision, and abandoning the Old Lincoln he walked into the cornfield.

When he reached the soil Harold fell to his hands and knees and began to crawl away from the road. His pack wobbled precariously when the support of his shoulders was released, and so he made it only about 10 yards into the field. Here he wiggled his pack off, fell to his side, and then lay down flat on his back. The pain came in waves, and he became the beach over which they were washing. Each time a wave hit, his entire body tensed, and when it subsided, he would breathe deeply waiting fearfully for the next. Harold lay on his back thinking it to be the only position in which the pain wouldn't be terrible. But the pain didn't cease. Relentlessly enveloping him, it suffocated Harold and he could not escape, He no longer could move and, he now realized with near terror, he could neither sit nor even lie down. He picked up two handfuls of black Iowa soil with each fist, and in doing so tore out the tiny root system of the embryonic corn. But he cared not a drop for the killed corn, only for the dirt, which he wiped on his forehead and cheeks. It was moist and cooling and smelled hopeful, and even though it hadn't actually reached his lips, he could almost taste it. Iowa soil, the stuff of life. Harold, for a brief delusory moment, almost let himself be comforted. "God," he thought, "*maybe I've discovered a remedy. Can you imagine that? I'll become rich and famous. 'Black Iowa Soil. God's gift. Good for you. Good for me.*

Good for us all. The natural medicine, soothing and nutritious, brought to you by Lutheran farmers of impeccable moral standing.”

For a second, he thought he heard Garrison Keiler’s voice reciting the lines he had just composed. But only for a second, for abruptly Harold realized that he was probably wiping chemicals on to his skin. Herbicides and pesticides and fertilizer were probably infiltrating his blood stream while he was amusing himself with advertising jingles. He quickly wiped off the soil in disgust and shame.

Harold turned onto his left side, his cheek lying on the pillow of his bicep, his knees drawn up towards his stomach. He was flat and stared at flatness. From his perspective it seemed to rise slowly, gradually, without interruption or end. Now that he had shifted his position, the pain had faded slightly and he could think:

“I’m disappearing. My thoughts are flat, my hopes, my aspirations, my dreams of Hillary Clinton and white wine are flat. I’ll never make it to Aspen or Washington or anywhere else. I’m a nobody compared to Jeffrey Greenwald. I bet Deborah Rosenfeld would be glad to sleep with him. Fucking Jews stick together. I bet he’s sitting in his hot tub in California right now, surrounded by gorgeous women, typing on his lap top, speaking at conferences all over the country, making big money, engaged in the world, and doing some good, all at the same time. Not me. She won’t sleep with me. Neither will Hillary, and Bill, even if he’s fucked up, he’s in Washington working his ass off, trying to get something done. Not me. I’m leaving, I’m nowhere, I’m flat, I’m nothing, all connection gone. I’ve done nothing, I interrupt nobody, influence nobody, nobody reads me, nobody listens, I just mutter to myself and walk around the block over and over again. Hot air is all I’ve spewed and I can’t sleep at night and I just puff myself up with

stupid hopes, stupid talk of the soul in a world flattened by chemicals. Bad air, bad air, and me a polluter as bad as any. God, what a waste. Stupid endless cornfield. Iowa's nothing but a big shithole. Stupid blonde fucking people running their tractors over the flatness until it sprouts corn. Corn corn corn and then more corn interrupted only by beans. Breadbasket of the fucking world. What am I doing here? This place has driven me insane. It's all been for nothing, all of it. The books, the children, the computer, the sex, the walk, white wine, pancakes, even the basketball. Dear sweet Jesus, I'm finished, and this flatness is swallowing me whole. "

Harold wanted to sleep, and he wondered whether he might want to die, but the pain kept him awake.

"This whole stupid walk, this ridiculous self deception, this monumental piece of arrogance. What in God's name was I thinking? What am I doing out here in a corn field? Good sweet Jesus Christ almighty, I'm lying in a cornfield and it hurts so much. Why have I been wasting my time, frittering it away on pitiful nonsense? I can't even do much to help myself, I can't even tolerate my own pain, how can I possibly counsel anyone else about coping with theirs? What could I possibly teach Hillary Clinton? What could I possibly think that she hasn't already thought of? It hurts. It hurts very badly and this time I can't get away, there's no escaping it and it's just getting worse. Good Christ, I'm sorry, I'm really sorry. I've never even published an article on health care. I understand nothing. Not pain. Not pleasure. And certainly not my children."

At the thought of his daughters, Harold closed his eyes and exhaled a smiling little breath accompanied by the slightest shake of his head. *"Oh those girls. Without a father."*

“I lied to my wife. I told her I was taking a walk to improve my health and have a vacation, when I was really trying to reach Washington, D.C. and become a hero and save the American soul and be surrounded by beautiful women who think I have something to say. White wine in the Rose Garden, that’s all I’ve ever really wanted. I should have told Susan the truth. She wouldn’t have laughed. She would have helped me go. Although she would have recommended that I communicate my message electronically and not by walking for 40 days. Of course, she would’ve been right. She’s always right. Her virtue. I’m never right. I’m just hot air blowing hard, trying to elevate and fly above the flatness. I want to stand out and be recognized and make a difference. I want the fucking world to know who I am. I want people in New York to talk about me and to get published in The New Republic. I want to get invited to Harvard and be on the McNeil-Lehrer show. I want to be black and be pals with K and not just some two bit professor from Iowa. I want to play basketball again and be able to shake and bake and twist and glide and fly to the basket with the effortless grace of a dancer. But instead, here I am, lying in a cornfield, my face covered in dirt.”

“I should have stayed in Holmgren with Silvia. We could have eaten breakfast every day at the “Egg ‘n’ I.” Pancakes.”

Harold wondered what his options actually were. He could stay in this cornfield until the next tractor came by. Then he’d call out for help, and the farmer, good Iowan that he’d be, would help. He’d be sent to an insane asylum and never be heard from again. He’d be visited only by Jeffrey Greenwald, his loyal Jewish friend from California, and his Methodist wife, Susan Anderson.

Harold wondered whether in fact, without knowing it, he had been telling his wife the truth all along. Maybe he never had taken the Hillary business seriously and he really was out only for a long walk and a vacation. If so, it certainly had been a bust. Or maybe it was some sort of sexual obsession. He was a middle-aged man incapable of adultery and perhaps his appetites were satisfied only by fantasy. Or perhaps he actually hoped to save the American soul from the oblivion of technology. Harold did not know. He only knew that pain was burying him, that he was in the dirt, he was of the dirt, and that he now hated himself for once having wanted to walk to Washington.

Even though he was in the one position which had always offered him the most relief, lying on his left side curled like a fetus, the pain grew within him. No longer was it concentrated only to his buttock and leg. It had migrated to his center, to his lower back, the crook of his spine. Here it resonated and tore upwards towards his ribs. "*It's coming to get me,*" Harold thought. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, his face and lips were clenched in a grimace of self-containment. "*Oh Christ, go away, stop, it hurts.*"

Harold suddenly resolved to take his ibuprofen. He decided on six pills, 1200 mg, even before his hand started in motion. It was difficult to twist his torso in order to reach his pack, but he got there. He opened the bottle, pushing down hard on the child-proof cap, extracted the pills, then watched helplessly as several of them fell from his trembling fingers. After gazing for a few seconds at the little, clay-red pellets of hope as they lay peacefully against a background of black Iowa soil, he picked them up carefully and forced himself to reach back into the main compartment of the pack to get his water bottle. With a splash of warm water, he gulped a handful of pills down, having no idea how many there were. He curled his knees even closer to his stomach and tried to relax

his neck so that his head might droop more comfortably onto his arm. He closed his eyes and wondered again whether he wanted to die.

Waiting for the drugs to kick in, he tried to imagine the chemicals finding their way to the inflammation and then, somehow, magically, cooling it. Ibuprofen was chemical ice, a living, merciful substance whose invisible antennae were somehow able to locate and then extinguish pain. The swelling would shrink, the pressure would lighten, he'd be free and he could stand up again like a man and walk to Blooming Prairie, Iowa for a hot shower and a good meal in a country diner.

The hard part was waiting and enduring the frightening prospect that the ibuprofen would fail. He may have walked too far, stretched the nerve beyond some unknown boundary and so damaged it irrevocably. He closed his eyes in mute prayer and tried to guide the chemicals to their proper place. He concentrated on his breathing, carefully and forcefully emitting three short breaths, and then a longer one, a cadence he remembered from the Lamaz classes he had once taken with Susan, and which always reminded him of the opening of Beethoven's Fifth.

Harold remembered when Katie was born. Susan had an agonizing labor of 18 hours, and towards the end, as the contractions multiplied, her only words were a slurred and groaning "no, no, no, no." She lamented her decision, which Harold had urged upon her, not to have an epidural, and gladly accepted the nurse's offer of some Demarol. Still, she was in agony and her hand gripped Harold's wrist tightly for the entirety of the last two hours. Even though he had to pee terribly, she would not let him go. She was sweating and delirious. And then finally the obstetrician uttered the blessed words, "push, push, push," and within a few minutes Katie was out. From the blood and shit and

slimey fluid his tiny baby was extracted, her arms stretched wide, her eyes hugely open as if in wild ecstasy. Harold had held his newborn in quiet wonder. She was a beauty, almost unwrinkled by the long passage, and from her very first moments she breathed a sense of excitement. Even now, as a near teenager sprouting pimples, she still retained her manic enthusiasm, her open delight in small bits of life, a delight Harold worried often she would lose.

Caroline was noisy and furious when she arrived, crying bitterly, it seemed, at the recognition of some paradise lost. She soon calmed down, however, and of his three children, she had been the easiest to manage as an infant and the most consistently contented. Even now, she was the most placid of the three, and even if she could match her younger sister in endless verbiage, hers was more subdued and perhaps, Harold hoped, reflective.

Jenny was stern and silent when she was born. For some reason, she reminded Harold of Queen Victoria, even though he didn't have the slightest idea of what the old queen had actually looked like. But the new born Jenny seemed ready to give orders and wore a scowl, as if already bitter at her parents having spent so much time with her sisters. She peered over the landscape with critical scrutiny bordering on contempt. Her cry was angrier than Caroline's. Worst of all, she was a terrible sleeper and, until she was over two, she woke up three or four times a night to remind her parents of her unfailing ability to assert herself into the central regions of their lives. Coping with her sleep madness, and their own incessant fatigue, as well as taking care of two other children and their jobs, had pushed Harold and Susan to the outer limits of parenthood.

They were drained, their defenses weakened, and so they got sick often. This was the beginning, Harold believed, of his sleep problem.

At two, Jenny was transformed into an enormously bright little girl, who reveled in almost everything near her, although she was constantly frustrated and angry at being the youngest of three.

Lying in a Iowa cornfield in the middle of May, Harold Larson was glad to be visited by his little girls, and he was suffused with gratitude and pride in himself that he hadn't abandoned them. He was glad he had lied to Susan and hadn't revealed to her the the real reason for his walk. By her lights, he just needed a vacation. He had quit playing basketball and, like so many members of their vast demographic unit, he was having trouble adjusting to his age. He was suffering serious insomnia and needed to be by himself, which was perfectly reasonable considering how much time he spent with the girls. He'd return to Centerville refreshed and ready to resume the quiet business of their uninspired but steady lives. Lying in the cornfield, cheek near flatness, eyes closed, breathing deeply, exhaling deliberately, Harold was glad she believed this.

The medicine must have been starting to work, Harold reasoned, because he was able to replay this thought three or four times. He felt himself sinking deeper into the yielding soil, felt himself relaxing. The pain still covered him like a heavy woolen blanket, but even if it was thorough it could, he knew, be endured. "*It's working,*" Harold realized, and he let himself fall.

When he awoke, Harold didn't know how long he had slept. He guessed around an hour, but he didn't want to check his watch. He ached from head to toe, but the pain

was of a different order than earlier it had been. Now it seemed ordinary rather than demonic. He was sticky with sweat and sun screen, dirty all over, hot and stiff, and, yes, he hurt badly and his heart was beating way too fast, but he could tell immediately he'd be able to get up. He shifted cautiously from lying on his side to his hands and knees, exhaling in relief when his sciatic nerve did not torture him. It throbbed unmistakably, but it did not scream. He stayed in the crawling position for a minute or two, which alone in a cornfield is a long time, then slowly rose to his feet. It was not terrible, nor was it too difficult for him to shake off the dirt coagulated on his arm and face and sprinkled throughout his blonde hair. He reached down to pick up his pack, and when he did so his nerve shot back into gear. But once again he felt the pain to be of a different quality. It seemed willing to compromise, and so this time he was not afraid to stand erect. Before Harold put on his pack, he took a drink of water, and only then did he return to the Old Lincoln. The sun was still hot, and Harold had more than 10 miles to cover before he reached Blooming Prairie.

As he began to walk, he felt with certainty the effects of the drug. He knew he was returned to the living and had escaped the terrible dilemma of the cornfield. There was, he now believed, a way out and as always it was stretching before him as a path to be taken. As he walked the ache of his stiff body and the throb of his leg gave way to the lubricating flow of his steps, and he started to feel almost giddy when he realized that he had left much of his pain behind.

"See you, sucker," he said to his pain, as he looked to the cornfield on his left. Within a few minutes he felt almost like running. *"I can handle this shit,"* he thought proudly. But his pride was immediately censured by his admission that the chemical had

simply done its job. It was like magic. *“Who cares why I feel better,”* he thought. *“I just do. Now I can think straight.”* And Harold Larson, taking a quick glance at the sky above, began to whistle a crooked little tune. But he fell silent when he saw K and his Grandfather, each with their arms folded upon their chest, looking at him in grim disapproval.

“Fuck you guys. Remember Plato’s Republic: it’s okay for otherwise healthy people to receive medical treatment. If they can go right back to work. And that’s what I’m doing.”

His grandfather, embarrassed by Harold’s outburst, pursed his lips in disappointment, and looked at him with sadness.

“I know, I know! You died in bed without taking any drugs at all. But you were dying, Gramps, I’m walking. I needed the drugs to get back on my feet.”

Neither his grandfather nor K responded.

A pick-up approached from the east. When it drove by, Harold raised his hand in a lifeless response to the driver’s wave.

As he walked, his energy expanded, his heart pumped even harder, and the rushing blood helped to clear some space in his head. The easy churning of his legs, the increased rate of his breathing, the good feel of the pack on his shoulders, and the freedom from pain conjoined with the slight dizziness he was feeling. Harold heard a car or truck approaching him from behind. He hoped it wasn’t the yellow Chevy, but he didn’t really care if it was-- or so he told himself-- and he forced himself not to turn around to look. The sound of the engine got louder and louder, and just before it was ready to pass him, Harold grabbed the straps of his pack tightly, and muttered out loud,

“whatever the good Lord has in store for me.” But it was another pick-up truck, not a souped up Chevy with hanging foam dice, and its driver had the courtesy to veer as far as possible away from Harold. As it sped by him, he noticed the driver’s right hand go up in salute, and he realized it was the same truck he had seen early in the morning, the one driven by the man who resembled his father. He imagined the driver smiling in recognition and saying to himself. *“Wish I could join you, Bud, but I can’t. Planting’s in full swing. Gotta get back.”*

Harold raised his left hand as if to say, *“that’s okay, pal. I understand. I appreciate your good wishes.”*

The sun was behind him and even though it was rather low in the sky it was still hot. Harold turned around, removed his sun-glasses, closed his eyes, and stared at it. The heat cleansed his face and sharpened his resolve. His head felt light, his heart was pounding, his body was fatigued but somehow pleased with itself. With his eyes still closed, Harold turned around and resumed walking toward the darkening east. When he opened his eyes, the world was a kaleidoscope, with bursting lights and sparkling bits of color flying madly around. “Hey, that’s pretty cool,” Harold said out loud. Far in the distance, at the exploding horizon, he saw the face of Hillary Clinton. She was blonde, smiling, luminescent even if barely visible. Her head, nothing more, was floating in the sky. Harold smiled back at her.

“Professor Larson,” she said as she walked towards him, her hand stretched forward to shake his. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

Harold did not quite know what to do. He was filthy from his days on the road. If he shook her hand, she’d feel his damp sweat. But he could not risk appearing rude or

hesitant. Imitating her, Harold thrust his hand out as if he were confident. He worried for the briefest moment that his movement had been too abrupt, but he knew it was too late to retract it.

“How do you do, Mrs. Clinton. Thank you for inviting me here.”

“My pleasure, Prof. Larson. Please take off your pack, and come into the garden.”

Harold removed his back from his shoulders and at the very moment he was beginning to feel a stab of perplexity as to where he should put it, Seargent Neal Simpson, of the White House Marine Security Detail, stepped toward him to take it.

“Sir, may I take your backpack please, sir?”

“Oh,” said Harold Larson. “Sure. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome, Sir!” replied Sargeant Simpson. He took Harold’s pack and walked away.

With a graceful nod of her head, Hillary Clinton indicated in which direction Harold should go. She waited for him to begin and only when he was exactly by her side did she too begin to walk.

“I very much look forward to reading your essay,” she said. “I hope you’ll be able to tell me about it over lunch. Cold salmon and a salad. I hope that will be okay with you. And a glass of white wine.”

“That would be fine, thank you Mrs. Clinton.”

They walked together through an allee of trees to a gazebo, surrounded by rose bushes, on the expansive, perfectly green lawn of the White House. The air was fragrant, and despite the fact that it was August, cool. The table was set with a linen table-cloth,

elegant china, and fine silverware. In its middle was a small vase, which contained a single red rose. Black servants wearing tuxedos, one of whom was his old friend K, hovered around the table.

Harold and Hillary sat down simultaneously. He was famished, but he didn't begin to eat until she had already had a bite of her salmon.

The vision was starting to fade, and so Harold turned back to face the setting sun in the west. Again, he took off his glasses and closed his eyes tight. But after a minute he opened them for a split second. It burned, of course, but when he turned back eastwards and re-opened them, he could see Hillary Clinton more clearly than he had before.

They were talking quietly, and although he couldn't hear what they were saying to each other he could tell that they alternated, each allowing the other an identical unit of time in which to speak. She listened to him attentively, her chin resting gracefully on her gently fisted hand.

"Oh Jesus," Harold thought to himself. "I left the manuscript in my pack."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Clinton, but I was wondering if I could get my backpack. I left my manuscript in it and I think I'd do a better job of explaining it to you if I could actually read a little bit out loud."

Harold got up to retrieve his pack, but Hillary Clinton interrupted him. "No, Professor Larson, please sit down." She then clapped her hands together twice in an elegant, but inappropriately colonial, gesture, and K rushed over to her chair.

"Yes Ma'am."

"K, would you please get Prof. Larson's pack. I think Sergeant Simpson has it."

"Yes Ma'am."

Harold was surprised when K sprinted away from the table, and shocked when his old friend jumped high and pretended to dunk a basketball over a low hanging branch of a tree.

“Damn,” Harold whispered to himself.

Sergeant Simpson marched to the table, stopped on a dime, and turned to face Harold. “Your pack, Sir.”

“Thank-you, Sergeant,” Harold replied.

“You’re welcome, Sir.” He turned on his heels and left as quickly as he had arrived.

Harold extracted his manuscript. For a second he was puzzled about where to put his filthy, sweat-stained pack, but recovered quickly and simply dropped it to the ground without even bothering to zip it back up. He greedily started paging through his manuscript, and then opened it to the Chapter titled, “The Phenomenology of Pain.” Harold Larson began to read. Hillary Clinton again put her beautifully balled fist under her chin, and directed every ounce of her body and soul towards Harold. Her eyes glistened as he calmly read. Every sentence or two he’d look up, and gaze intently at her with a small smile barely cracking his parched lips.

Harold was losing sight of the table underneath the gazebo, so he turned back to the west. This time, he didn’t even bother to close his eyes. He forced them open, summoning all the power of his will so that he could take in the entirety of the sun’s light. After a couple of seconds, his eyes burned too much to stay open. He turned back east, hoping to return to the White House. But despite the kaleidoscopic explosion of color and light in front of him, Hillary Clinton was gone.

Chapter Five: The Ride

“You okay?”

Harold was aware words were coming from behind him, but they didn't fully penetrate his consciousness. He inferred that they must be directed at him, but he still didn't respond. Instead, he remained motionless in the middle of the road.

“You okay?” the voice repeated. Again Harold did not respond. “You're standing in the road.” This time the voice was next to him. Harold turned slowly to his left, and through his burning eyes he saw before him an old man. He was thick, short, bent over with his age. His squarish head seemed too big for his small, stout body. He was wearing overalls, a gray work shirt, a Tony Smith Seed cap, and his jowly face was centered by the edges of a smile. “You okay?” he asked again, his voice slow and delicate.

Harold looked behind him and saw a battered pickup truck parked on the side of the road. The man, he was touched to realize, had gotten out just to find out how he, his arms hanging lifelessly at his side, staring hopelessly to the East, was.

“I'm okay. Just tired.”

“Why're you standing in the road?”

The answer to this question was far out of his reach, but Harold had regained enough composure to say, “I'm taking a walk,. I got tired so I stopped a while to look.”

“Why didn't you get off the road?”

“I forgot.”

The old man said nothing.

“You need a lift?”

“A lift?”

“A ride. I’m heading east, to Blooming Prairie. How far you going?”

“Blooming Prairie.”

“Want a lift?”

“A lift? Yes, I’d like a lift.” The fact that with these words Harold had abandoned his walk without having completed a single, full day, saddened him. Remembering that he had taken the ibuprofen as well made him feel worse. Still, he had no choice, so he accompanied the old man to his truck. When he twisted his torso in order to swing his pack off, and then placed it in the back of the pickup, he was reminded that he didn’t hurt as much as he had before his nap in the cornfield.

“Thanks for the ride.”

The cab of the truck was filthy. The seats were torn, the dashboard dented, crumpled newspapers, empty coffee cups and cans of pop, were strewn on the floor.

“I’m taking a walk. To the Mississippi River.”

The old man almost looked interested but he didn’t speak.

“It’s a vacation. Taking a break from work. Just wanted to enjoy the Old Lincoln Highway. My grandfather helped build it. I’ve always felt it was a part of me.”

“I remember when they built it. Around 1925 in this part of Iowa. First highway to go all the way West.”

“And all the way East, too.”

“Yup. All the way East too.”

“So, I decided to walk the Old Lincoln to Washington, D.C.”

“Washington?”

“To the Mississippi River, that’s what I meant. Where the Old Lincoln ends in Iowa. In Clinton.”

“Clinton. Yup. That’s where it ends.”

“I overdid it today, though. I’ve had some back problems, and they got the best of me. That’s why I was so tired. That’s why I was standing in the middle of the road.”

“Your eyes okay?” the old man asked, glancing shyly at Harold’s bright red and rapidly blinking eyes.

“Yeah. Feels like they’re sunburned. Got some sweat in them, I guess. I’m sensitive to that.”

The old man, showing nothing on his face, didn’t push him harder with more questions.

“But I did something terrible today.” The old man looked at him with a trace of suspicion. “I took some drugs.”

The old man said nothing.

“Ibuprofen. I took some ibuprofen.”

“What’s that?”

“Anti-inflammatory; an analgesic.” The old man didn’t seem to understand. “A pain-killer.”

“You buy it at the drugstore?”

“Yes.”

“What’s wrong with that?” the old man asked.

“I promised myself I wouldn’t do it. My grandfather never took any painkillers. Not even when he was dying of cancer. He died at home. In my house. My parents took care of him. He never complained or went to the hospital. He just moaned. He was in terrible pain.”

“Why didn’t he take some pain pills?”

“I don’t know. Pride. Purity. Wanting to feel the pain that killed him. Wanting to look it straight in the eye and not flinch. Honesty, I guess. Self-knowledge. He was a tough guy. Much tougher than me.”

“Maybe he was. But if your back hurts, you should take some pain pills.”

“I should?”

“Yes, you should. They you can get back up on your feet and go about your business. You’re a young man. Nothing wrong with a pain pill just to get you back on your feet.”

“You hear that!” Harold said triumphantly to K and his grandfather, who were standing in the bed of the pick up truck, peering into the cab. “Nothing wrong with taking a little medicine if it gets you back on your feet! You guys were giving me grief for no reason. I’m not a failure! I haven’t violated the precepts of my own health care reform plan! As soon as the sciatica dies down I’ll stop taking the drugs.”

His grandfather and K looked at him silently.

“I know I shouldn’t have accepted a ride from this man. But it was either that or go back to sleep in the cornfield. For good. I’m broken, Gramps, I’m starting to see things, and I ache like hell from top to bottom.”

“Watch your language, son” Gramps said gently.

“I had enough for one day. I’ll rest up at Blooming Prairie, and try again tomorrow. And if tomorrow feels terrible, I’ll spend the whole day in bed. And if I need ibuprofen, I’ll take it. This is crazy, what I’ve been putting myself through. I can take it a little easier on myself, can’t I?”

Neither K nor his grandfather responded.

“I appreciate this ride. I’m going to spend the night at the motel in Blooming Prairie. So you’re getting me just as far as I need to go.”

The old man seemed to smile. The two men were silent for a few minutes as he drove, quite slowly, but well.

“Do you farm?” Harold asked.

“Not any more.”

“My parents had a farm. Williamston. I visit them every few weeks. I never cared for farming, I’m afraid. My name’s Harold, by the way.”

“Ernie,” he replied.

“You still live on the farm?”

“Nope. In town. Kept a half-acre, though. Grow flowers.”

“Flowers? What kind of flowers?”

“Gladiolas.”

“What do you do with them?”

“First I plant the corms.”

“Corms?”

“Then I grow them. Then I sell them.”

“Where?”

“Holmgren. Grinnell. Mostly Centerville.”

“You’re the gladiola man!” Harold said, suddenly realizing who Ernie was. A typical Thursday afternoon in the summer flashed by. Having returned from the farmers’ market Susan was unloading the metal baskets on her bicycle. She took out her bags of vegetables, loaves of bread, and a large bunch of stalky, exuberant gladiolas. She never mixed colors, always preferring a monochromatic bouquet. Each week they went into the white vase that sat on the kitchen counter. The glads were a brief interlude, for only during their few weeks of harvest was their house adorned with flowers.

“My wife buys from you every Thursday at the farmers’ market. She loves your flowers! She makes sure to get to the market early because she says you run out quickly. Maybe you know her. Susan Anderson? Blonde, on the small size?”

Ernie nodded slightly, and he grinned. His large hands were holding the steering wheel firmly, and he looked entirely at home in his thick, aging body. Just then, the truck started to sputter, and began to lose power. As it came to a halt, he pulled it to the side of the road.

“What’s wrong?” Harold asked.

“Don’t know. Belt. Maybe.” Ernie didn’t look the slightest bit perturbed. When the truck came to a full stop, he slowly got out. Harold joined him as he opened the hood and started to peer into the engine. To Harold, the mass of parts was unintelligibly hieroglyphic, but Ernie seemed to know what he was looking for. He slowly walked to the back of the truck, and retrieved a toolbox. He took out a wrench and a plyers and started poking around.

“Wish I could help,” Harold said. “I’m a college professor. I’m no good with cars, no good with tools. No good with much of anything, really. I used to be a pretty good basketball player, though.”

At the mention of basketball, the old man looked at him with interest. “You ever wrestle?”

“Nope.”

“I was district champion in 1930. 119 pounds.”

“No kidding?”

Ernie smiled and returned to his examination of the truck’s engine. He discovered something, and went to work with the plyers. Harold had no idea what he was doing, and because the old man was working in silent concentration and had seemed to forget about him, he sat down on the side of the road, peering at the flatness to the east, amazed at how much better his body felt, and how much his eyes burned. He closed them, and lay down on the gravelly surface of the side of the Old Lincoln. In seconds, he was fast asleep.

He didn’t know how long he had slept when Ernie woke him up with a gentle kick to his foot. “Sorry. Fell asleep.”

“Truck’s better.”

“Great.”

The truck did not sound healthy, as they drove together in silence, but it made it all the way to Blooming Prairie. Ernie took him to the motel. Harold retrieved his pack and poked his head into the window in order to thank the old man. Ernie said nothing in

response, and only nodded and smiled his faint smile. But as Harold was walking away, he thought he heard the old man say, “Good luck.”

Chapter VI: Blooming Prairie

“Did you have sex with her, Jeffrey? I need to know.”

“I did, Harold. I’ve never lied to you before and I’m not going to start now. That night in Iowa, when it was 30 below, and you complained about your sciatica and went to bed early. She told me about your troubles, Harold. How you hadn’t made love to her in months, and how distant and peculiar you’d become. We’d been smoking pot, and I gave her a hug-- a Chi hug, just to try get some energy flowing-- and we lapsed. A bad lapse, I know, and I’m so sorry. But it was just a moment between two old friends. She’s your wife, and she loves you. Ours was nothing compared to that. Just a therapeutic shot in the dark.”

“I’m not talking about Susan you moron! I’m talking about Hillary Clinton? Did you fuck her too?”

“Hillary Clinton? Why ask me that? Are you insane?” Jeffrey paused as if he were actually waiting for an answer to his question. “Of course I haven’t slept with Hillary Clinton. Why did you ask me that? Have you lost your mind? Susan thinks you have.”

The relief swept through him in a single refreshing wave. “Sorry, I’m exhausted and I don’t quite know what I’m saying. I’m in a motel room in Blooming Prairie, Iowa. I’m walking the Old Lincoln Highway, remember?”

“Harold, what are you talking about? Why did you ask me about Hillary?”

“I’ve been thinking about politics a lot recently, and I got confused.”

Jeffrey seemed to absorb this odd explanation. “Look, I’m so sorry about what happened between me and Susan. It was a terrible lapse. But I swear it was no more than that, and it won’t ever happen again. Can you forgive me?”

Harold thought for a moment. Jeffrey had confirmed what he had long suspected.

“What about the previous January? When I was laid up with my knee injury? Did you have sex with her that night too?”

“No. Came closed but we just talked. Mostly about you. I suggested that you go into therapy. There’s a guy I know in Iowa City, Sidney Horowitz. An old lefty from the Bay Area who became a shrink and took a teaching position at the University of Iowa. I thought you should go see him. He’s good. I mean, he’s not great, and he puts far too much emphasis on the behavioral side of things, but he’s not bad. Anyway, it was just that one time. And it will never happen again. I swear it. We have to get beyond this, Harold.”

Harold didn’t respond.

“Can you forgive me? More important, can you forgive Susan? I’ve often thought the moment of forgiveness is paradigmatically human. Esau forgives Jacob, and the world begins anew.”

“It’s okay, Jeffrey. I haven’t been much of a husband for the last few years. I have no basis for complaint.”

“So you can work through this and move forward?”

“Yes. I can.”

“Good boy. I’m proud of you, Harold.”

They talked for a few more minutes, and the conversation quickly turned away from the painful subject of Jeffrey and Susan to complaints about the declining sales of *The Meaning of Race*. The publisher had stopped promoting his and Randall Eastwood's book almost immediately after mediocre sales followed their book tour.

"Someday, I'd like to write something of enduring value. You know, a serious work. Something more like one of your books."

"My books? Who are you kidding? No one reads them. I sell a few hundred to libraries, and then they disappear."

"Yes, but they're in the data-base of human culture. And they have some depth to them. I've read them both, you know. Your Plato and technology book is great Harold. It really is. You touch on subjects that go to the heart of contemporary culture, and you do it while discussing that dead old white European male. It's ingenious."

Harold was numb to Jeffrey's praise. He wondered whether the knowledge that his friend had slept with his wife had touched him yet.

"Listen, Jeffrey, I've got to get off the phone. I promised Susan and the kids I'd call, and I'm tired."

"Okay my friend. Are you sure you forgive me? It was a stupid, selfish lapse, but it was only a moment, a Chi-hug gone bad. That's all."

"I understand. And I do forgive you."

"Thank you Harold. And Susan too?"

"And Susan too. Good-night Jeffrey."

Dressed only in a pair of loose fitting shorts, Harold was lying on the bed in his room at the Blooming Prairie Motel. After Ernie had dropped him off, he had taken six more ibuprofen, a long hot bath and gone to sleep. When he woke up, his heart was beating furiously, and his stomach hurt. But after he vomited up a substance which looked like coffee grounds, he felt much better. His eyes were dry, and although they felt gritty they were no longer burning. He showered and had dinner at the restaurant a couple of blocks away from the motel. When he ordered spaghetti and meatballs, and a salad, he smiled slightly and was almost tempted to try to find Silvia Russo's telephone number. But throughout the dinner the image of Jeffrey Greenwald and Hillary Clinton together in bed continually interrupted him. She had left him so abruptly on the Old Linclon, and he wondered whether she had snuck off with Jeffrey. So he had called him in California.

That his friend had slept with his wife saddened Harold, but he couldn't muster a bit of rage, and he knew he should be more upset than he was. She had the right to betray him, for he had long betrayed her. True, his betrayal was only in his thoughts and fantasies, but it was no less real for that.

Harold felt a bolt of energy surge through his body. *No less real.* What went on inside his head was as real as what went on outside. He had fucked Hillary Clinton and Judy Carlson so many many times. No wonder Susan allowed herself a little fling with Jeffrey on the black leather couch in his living room. She deserved it. *Lex Talionis.* True justice. They were even.

Believing this, he called home. Jenny answered, and after listening to her complain about her teacher for a couple of minutes, he spoke with Caroline. Next was

Susan. He told her everything had gone well, but that he had gotten tired and so hitched a ride for the last few miles to Blooming Prairie. He told her that he had taken some ibuprofen and was feeling much better as a result. “Wonderful,” is what she said. He gave her the phone number of the motel room, and asked to speak to Katie. His oldest daughter was neither unfriendly nor communicative.

The obligations of family now completed, Harold was again tempted to find Silvia’s telephone number and call her. She was, after all, only a twenty minute drive away. She’d be more than glad to come right over. He called directory assistance and got her number, but couldn’t bring himself to dial it. He was still deliberating whether to call or not, when he heard a knock at the door. Forgetting to put on a shirt, he jumped off the bed and nearly ran to the door in order to open it. It was Silvia. She seemed unfazed by the fact that he was half-naked.

“Glad to see me, right Harold?”

“What?”

“Nothing. Aren’t you going to invite me in.”

“Oh, right, sure. Come in. I mean it’s only a crummy motel room. “

Silvia, still dressed all in black, but with a bit of make-up on and her short hair livened by a shower and some other sort of care as well, she looked nice. Without hesitation she walked into the small shabby room, and sat down on its one chair. “So, what’d you have for dinner? And what happened to your eyes?”

“Dinner? Spaghetti. Oh, and a salad.”

“Good boy! And your eyes?”

“Sweat. They’re a little irritated, that’s all,” he said as he sat down on the edge of his bed.

“They’re pretty swollen. But you’re moving better. I brought you some Akaustos. You know, the anti-inflammatory I was telling you about.”

“That’s okay. I already took some ibuprofen. And you were right, I do feel better.”

“Of course I was right.” Her smile made her seem bigger.

“Oh, you in deep shit now Harold. This girl gonna fry your ass.”

“So what. My wife slept with my best friend.”

“Don’t do it, Harold. She’ll fuck you up. She’s a bloodsucker. Besides, I’m your best friend, not Jeffrey.”

When Harold looked at her, he thought he saw K’s point. Silvia was awfully thin, her body must be frail. She looked like she needed nourishment. But she was lively and confident. What, he wondered, could be the harm?

“How’d you find me Silvia?”

She laughed. “ You told me you were going to Blooming Prairie. There’s only one motel in town. The old scientific method. A little bit of inferential reasoning and here I am.”

“Yes, here you are.”

“I was worried about you. You didn’t look so good at lunch.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry about what?”

Harold didn’t know what the answer to that one was.

“So?”

“So?”

“What are we going to do?”

“Do?”

“Do. You and me. A couple of New Yorkers stuck in Siberia.”

“I’m not a New Yorker. I come from Iowa.”

“But you lived in New York. And it touched you, somewhere deep inside. When you told me you loved your time in New York your eyes nearly misted up. You know what they say: the truest New Yorker is someone like you, from far away, who gets a taste of the Apple and then realizes there’s nowhere else on earth to live. You can’t get it out of your head, can you?”

“No, I can’t. But that was an interlude in my life. I *belong* here. In Siberia.”

“Baloney.”

“But I’ve lived here for a long time. My father and my grandfather lived here.”

“But you don’t belong here, Harold. I can tell that about you. You’re so uncomfortable. And you’re taking a long walk. I think you’re trying to escape. And I’m here to help you do that. We can escape together. I’ll quit my job and I’ll drive you back to New York.”

Harold was stunned. Silvia was flesh and blood, not a fantasy. And she was willing to drive. What would it feel like in her thin, commanding arms? Harold had slept with no one but Susan for so long. Still, even though she was right in front of him, he could not imagine touching Silvia Russo. She stood up from her chair, and sat down next

to him on the bed. For nearly a minute, she only looked at him. And then she began to stroke him, first his cheek, then lightly his hair.

“You have such nice, soft hair,” she said.

“It’s blonde,” he replied, his mouth feeling dry.

She kissed him on the lips, first gently and then with a touch of urgency. She put her small hand on his shoulder and with a surprising amount of force pushed him down to the bed. With both arms around him, she kissed him hard, and for the first time he began to respond. He closed his eyes, and when he wrapped himself around her she felt like a child in his arms. But her intensity and command of the situation were unmistakable. This was for real, Harold thought, and when she put her hand under his shorts he gave in to his building excitement. He reached under her shirt and was delighted to touch her small cheerful breasts. When he did so she abruptly separated herself from him in order to take her shirt off, and he quickly did the same to his shorts. When she had taken off her pants, they paused to gaze at each other. Harold was able to meet her determined eyes for barely a second, and then he reached out to pull her back down to the bed. He clasped her tightly, buried his face in her neck, and began to caress her thin back. At first he tried to soften his real desire, and so his touch was mild, but he dropped the pretense quickly, and put his hand between her thighs. Silvia offered no pretense whatsoever and reached down to him as soon as he had touched her. Then she put both her hands on his ass and invited him on top of her. Harold eagerly accepted.

Inside Silvia Russo he was lost. Her warmth captured him, and he was ready to move with her, but he wanted to try again to look her in the eye, and so he hesitated. Instead of the thrust they both wanted he lifted himself above her, almost as if he were

doing a push-up. He did look at her, but this time she had no interest in meeting his gaze, and she pulled him back down to her.

Harold began. But as soon as he did, he was finished. Hardly a thrust at all. He froze with shame, and fell silent and still. After nearly a minute he said, "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. We have plenty of time to practice. After all, there's not much else to do, is there?"

Just then the phone rang.

"Daddy?"

"Jenny?"

When he uttered her name, Silvia got up from the bed to go the bathroom. But she left the door open, so that she could hear every word of Harold's conversation.

"Is everything all right?"

"Daddy! Caroline's being mean to me. She won't let me play with her dolls. She told me to get out of her room! I want to play with her, Daddy!"

"Jenny, why did you call me?"

"Because Caroline's being mean. And Mommy told me to. She said you were all alone in a motel and that you were lonely. Are you lonely, Daddy? Do you miss us?"

"Yes, of course I miss you. Look, why don't you ask Katie if she'll play with you?"

"Katie's always doing homework. And she doesn't ever want to play with me."

"Well, why don't you play with the dolls inside your own room? You could play hospital. You can be the doctor *and* the nurse. In fact, you can be the president of the

whole hospital. That way you can tell everybody what to do. And you can save the lives of all your dollies.”

“The President? Like Bill Clinton?”

“Yes. Yes, just like Bill Clinton.”

“But then I can’t be the president because I’m a girl.”

“But what about Hillary Clinton?”

“She’s not the president.”

“I know, but she’s in charge of a lot of stuff. And I think she’s going to be president some day. I hope so, anyway. So if she can be president of the country, you can be president of the hospital.”

“Okay, Daddy, I’ll try. I’ll be the president.”

“Good girl. Honey, I’m going to go to sleep now. So I’ll just say good-night.”

“Good-night Daddy. Mommy says the weather is going to be beautiful tomorrow.”

“I’m a lucky man. Good-night sweetie.”

“So much for the fling, right Harold?” Silvia asked, still holding a towel.

“I’m afraid so, Silvia. I’m not really the sort of guy who has a fling.”

Silvia laughed. “That’s obvious, pal. No offense, Harold, but you’re kind of a schmuck. Cute, but a schmuck. You don’t have a clue what you want. I don’t believe a word you’ve told me about this walk of yours.”

“You shouldn’t believe anything I say, Silvia,” he said as he was putting his shorts back on. “I’m what’s known as an ironist. Like my hero, Socrates.”

She laughed again, and then began to get dressed. “You’re running away, that’s what I think. You’ve probably been in a witness protection program in Iowa, and someone’s blown your cover. They’re on to you and after you, aren’t they Harold?”

“Yes, they are, Silvia.”

“You sure you don’t want a ride. I can take a couple of days off from work, and drive you to the Mississippi River. Get you across the border at least. Don’t worry, I won’t pounce on you again.”

“I liked the pouncing part. A lot. I wish I were able to go through with it. You’re a fabulous woman, Silvia.”

“I know. And I’m going to seed here in Siberia. I want to go back to New York.”

“You want to go back to Central Park West, don’t you?”

She nodded, and closed her eyes.

“Is it the kid you miss, or the man?”

“Both.”

“Do you miss them a lot?”

“A lot,” she said. And then she began to weep, at first slowly and almost imperceptibly, but then with more force. Then she buried her face into her hands, and began to sob heavily, her thin shoulders heaving.

Harold was finally back in familiar territory: a sobbing little female who needed comfort. He put his arms around Silvia Russo, and gave her a firm, sexless, hug. A Chi-hug, he chuckled to himself. “I’m sorry, Silvia, I’m so sorry,” he said as he stroked her hair. She let herself be embraced.

“Silvia, you’re a wonderful woman. It’ll be okay. New York’s a big place. You’ll find someone else.”

She smiled through her tears. “You think?”

“I do. You’ll find a nice scientist to live with, and spend the rest of your life doing experiments. You’ll have a laboratory in your basement.”

“New Yorkers don’t have basements.”

“Well, you’ll have your own lab. Somewhere. And whenever you eat some corn, you’ll think of Iowa, and your year here. And you’ll feel affection for this strange interlude in your life. Because it’s going to heal you, and you’re going to be stronger when you get back to New York. Iowa can do that, you know. The flatness brings us all down to earth, and then we’re forced to build ourselves back up. And once you know you can do that, nothing will ever faze you again.”

“Nothing?”

“Well, nothing small.”

“What are you talking about, Harold?”

“I’m talking about Iowa. You’re going to be okay, Silvia.”

“You think?”

“It’s like a dark hole now. But it will be filled.”

“But it hurts so much.” And she began to cry again. But she stopped herself abruptly and said, “and you won’t fill that hole, will you?”

“I can’t. I’m from Iowa, and in Iowa we don’t do that sort of thing.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I just can’t. I’m not made that way. I’d destroy myself if I did.”

“And you don’t want to do that?”

“No. Besides, my grandfather would hate me for doing it.”

“The grandfather who build the road?”

“Yes, that’s the one.”

She emitted a small laugh.

“Want to go to the diner and get something to eat? You get fries, and I’ll get a salad? What do you say?”

“Okay,” she said. “Good plan.”

Epilogue

It was a Wednesday, and Harold was in the middle of his swim. The first 30 minutes or so had been consumed by thoughts of Bill Clinton. In early September, just a couple of weeks ago, Kenneth Starr, a resentful little man, had delivered his report to the House of Representatives. When Gary Bishop found it on the Internet, he printed a copy and put it into Harold's mailbox.

According to Ms. Lewinsky, she and the President had ten sexual encounters, eight while she worked at the White House and two thereafter...

During many of their sexual encounters, the President stood leaning against the doorway of the bathroom across from the study, which, he told Ms. Lewinsky, eased his sore back...

According to Ms. Lewinsky, she performed oral sex on the President on nine occasions. On all nine of those occasions, the President fondled and kissed her bare breasts. He touched her genitals, both through her underwear and directly, bringing her to orgasm on two occasions...

"Jeez, what a schmuck," Harold thought, as he awkwardly churned through the water. *"I never had sex with that woman.' That's what he told us, and I believed him. How could I not? I mean, how hard is it to resist a blow-job from a dopey young woman with big tits?"*

"Maybe he was telling the truth after all. Maybe what he did doesn't even count as real sex. They didn't go all the way, did they? I mean, I never really had sex with Silvia Russo, did I? I suppose you could say we did, but it wasn't the real thing. So it didn't really count. Or did it?"

This question propelled Harold, a man capable of being honest with himself, through a good four or five laps.

As usual, he had swum the first two laps as fast as he could. Because he was a poor swimmer, this wasn't very fast, but his goal wasn't to make time, but simply to dispel the initial discomfort he always felt upon entering the warm water of the highly chlorinated pool. With the first laps behind him, he had settled into his slow, methodical pace and soon had become fully absorbed by, and then nearly oblivious to, the rhythm of his exercise. Two strokes, his head up to the left, two strokes his head up to the left...for a mile. As always, the success of his swim would be measured by the extent to which his movements became automatic.

Harold swum every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at noon in the IIT recreational center. It took him about an hour. He knew his kick was almost totally ineffectual, and that his thick legs dragging behind him slowed him down. He occasionally wondered where his arms were actually supposed to be when they were underwater, and if there was anything he could do to improve his slow-motion turn at the wall. As a result, he had been tempted once or twice to get some lessons to improve his stroke. But as long as he was able to move without interruption or pain for an hour, he was content with what he could do. Unlike with basketball, where pain had been both the cost and the affirmation of exertion, when he finished swimming his body always felt solid and relaxed. Nothing hurt, and the work he had done felt distributed throughout his entire body, not just concentrated in his legs and lower back. The chlorine sometimes made him feel slightly nauseated, but this was a small price to pay.

His sciatica was gone. Every once in a while he'd twist his back with a wayward motion, and then feel painfully tight for a couple of days, but if he was careful that discomfort would soon disappear. As each year passed, he put on a little more weight,

but this no longer troubled him, and he no longer looked at himself in the mirror quite as often.

Harold was furious that the Republicans were trying to destroy Bill Clinton, even though he agreed that the president deserved to suffer. His sins were personal, not political, and his lies paled in comparison to Nixon's or Reagan's. Kenneth Starr's bloodlust was transparent. Clinton had done things he himself obviously wanted to do, but couldn't, and so he wanted the President impeached. It now looked like he might actually succeed. How many of these holy-roller Republicans, Harold wondered, had dirty little secrets of their own?

And how had Hillary endured this vicious nonsense?

It wasn't as if Harold was still thinking about Hillary Clinton-- at least not all the time-- and when he did it was usually because he had just read a story about her in the newspaper. After all, hadn't she deserted him on that blindingly sunny day on the Old Lincoln Highway? She had never returned, but Harold didn't miss her. When he returned to Centerville, after his long walk, he threw his health care reform plan into the recycling bin. He did keep the file of his manuscript on a floppy disk buried deep in his desk. Perhaps one day he could use it as material.

The country was sleep-walking through a state of euphoria. The economy was flying through the roof, the Internet promised to revolutionize the world, and even the occasional article about Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, who might some day acquire biological or chemical weapons, didn't seem to trouble anyone. The only topic of animated conversation, besides Clinton's sex life, seemed to be the stock market and real estate prices. Technocratic entrepreneurs and billionaire computer jocks were poised to

rule the world. Even Harold's friends, Gary Bishop and Mike Comstock, had joined together to make a pile of dough. Their small company, Hogtech, sold pharmaceuticals to hog farmers over the Internet. They could order everything from Gary's favorite, his very first anti-depressant, Propig, to Epithumia, his appetite stimulant. As soon as the start-up money began to pour in, Gary had bought a house in the new development that had been built on Centerville's west side. A few cornfields had been plowed under, foundations poured, and 5 bedroom, 3 garage homes seemed to sprout like giant ugly mushrooms. Harold's neighborhood seemed shabby by comparison and soon, most people predicted, all that would be left in it would be humanities professors and student rentals.

Susan had once suggested that they move. She was now the Chair of her department, and seemed a likely candidate to replace the current Dean. Because she was smart, efficient, fair, modest, and expert with computer technology, she was a natural administrator. But she quickly dropped the idea of moving when she got a good look at Gary Bishop's McMansion. She was still fond of her old house, especially its large backyard and garden, and of the trees on her street. But she still occasionally mentioned how shabby their place had become.

After returning from his walk, Harold and Susan's marriage had entered a new chapter. It turned out that, much to his surprise, he had been telling her the truth the whole time. He had walked only in order to take a short vacation, and he had gone only as far as the Mississippi River, which he had never even crossed. And he had done so cautiously, sometimes spending a whole day in a motel just to read and rest. He had taken plenty of ibuprofen, hitched a few rides when he was particularly tired, and at the

first inkling of pain, even if he had covered only a couple of miles, had quit immediately. He took a bus back to Centerville from Clinton, Iowa. The walk had taken two weeks, and he was tan-- or as tan as a fair-skinned Iowan of Swedish descent could get-- and had lost five pounds while on the road. Just as he had promised, the days away from his family had refreshed him after all.

After he and Silvia had their farewell snack together-- she a plate of greasy french fries, he the salad-- he had taken two more ibuprofen and had gone right to sleep. The next morning, he awoke, alone in a cheap motel room in Blooming Prairie, Iowa, with a clear understanding. He had been given his roles to play—father, husband, professor, son, friend-- and it was his job to perform them well. Each brought with it a set of responsibilities, and these he was willing to shoulder. In fact, he realized, he had no choice. As he had told Silvia Russo, that was just the way he was made.

Now, four years after returning from his walk, performing these duties had become second nature to him. Because he was swimming, not playing ball, he no longer had to drag his aching and exhausted body to class, and when he stood in front of the podium, he was glad to be on his feet. His teaching had become nearly effortless, for he had essentially memorized all the material he taught year after year, and he no longer prepared a single note for any of his classes. But he was neither demoralized by this fact, nor embarrassed by how perilously close he was to actually deserving the title “deadwood.” He enjoyed sharing his thoughts with students, however uninterested they were in what he had to say, and how uninterested he was in them. Because his books were so thoroughly underlined and scribbled in, all he had to do was open them up and he would be cued what to say.

Even grading didn't depress him any longer. Most of the papers were stunningly similar, but becoming a mindless judgment machine didn't bother him. He had developed what Kent Pederson called "eidetic intuition," the ability to scan a paper and take it in as a whole with a single glance, so that now grading could induce a pleasant trance-like state. Harold, of course, retained enough alertness to recognize the rare paper of real quality, and to shift gears and actually read and comment on that one. He performed his teaching and administrative duties scrupulously, and with a calm and cheerful demeanor.

He was more than half-way through his swim, when a story-line started to bubble through his brain. It was about a young English teacher and basketball coach from a small town in Iowa who was able to inspire his gangly farm-boy players to perform far beyond their abilities. His teams were regularly District Champions, and once had even won their division in the State Tournament. His success was so extraordinary that he was hired as an assistant at the University of Iowa, and in a few years he had become the Head Coach. At the college level he was working with black kids from Detroit, Flint, East St. Louis, Chicago. And, to the surprise of the intercollegiate athletic world, he had excelled. There was something in his Iowa self that allowed him to relate well to the young black kids from the cities.

Harold had already written this one up. When he was done with the first draft, he could see that his novel didn't have much of a plot, so he tried to juice it up with some sex and violence. He had one of his best players, a skinny kid whose nickname was G, have an affair with his white history professor, a young woman named Ellen Birnbaum.

After a particularly heartbreaking loss to the University of Minnesota, the affair was exposed in the local newspaper, and there had been trouble in Iowa City. G and some other black players had gotten into a fight with some drunken frat boys, but the coach saved the day by making an impassioned speech about racial harmony to the growing mob of enraged students.

It was a terrible book, and of that Harold was aware. But the thing did have a beginning, a middle and an end, and, even though he threw it out as soon as he had completed the second draft, he was pleased with what he had accomplished.

Harold never told Susan that he had abandoned academic scholarship, and was spending his many hours in his office writing stories. In fact, he told no one, and this pleased him all the more.

His next attempt was a political thriller that featured the first female President of the United States. She was single-handedly reforming the American medical system and moving the country towards a national health service modelled on the Canadian system. This time the bad guys were the doctors and the pharmaceutical company executives who conspired to assassinate the President and take over the government.

Harold hadn't gotten very far with this novel. It was ludicrous, and he lost interest.

Towards the end of his swim, on a Wednesday in late September, 1998, Harold started to think about his latest idea for a novel. This time, it would be a detective story. Ben Kaplan, the hero, would be a former philosophy major at Columbia who had dropped out, joined the Marines, served in Vietnam, and returned to become a homicide detective in New York. He would be divorced and completely estranged from his wife and two

sons. His life and loyalty would belong to the dead, and fighting for their justice would become his single, consuming passion.

Again, there would be bad guys, and again Harold conjured up images of tall pharmaceutical executives who wore expensive suits. The murder victim was going to be a young scientist named Brian Goldman, who was on the verge of a major breakthrough. His drug, Eudaimonia, was far better at generating a sense of well-being than Prozac, Zoloft and all the others on the market. The story would open with Brian found dead on the street, and the prime suspect would be a crusading anti-pharmaceutical activist named Ray Ngyuen, a Vietnamese immigrant who was a passionate champion of natural healing and Buddhist medicine. As he now conceived the book, Ben and his partner Neal Simpson, a young black detective, would begin their investigation convinced that Ray was their man. But this would turn out to be a false trail, for the real murderer would be Brian's wife Fern, whose reason for killing her husband had nothing to do with drugs, and everything to do with her own demons. The book would allow him to explore his many questions about America's ever-increasing dependence on drugs, and to present an object lesson in problem solving. We often go most wrong when we think we're most right.

An idea popped into his mind: maybe Neal Simpson should become attracted to, perhaps even obsessed by, the widow Fern. He wouldn't understand his own feelings for this silent, brooding woman, and he was haunted by her hollow eyes. Harold liked this idea and so the pace of his swimming picked up slightly.

The reason why a detective story appealed to Harold was that during the last three years he and Susan had become devotees of a TV show, "Homicide: Life on the Street."

Even though they had always told themselves they wouldn't, they had finally purchased a TV for their bedroom, and so they could watch what they wanted when the girls were in the TV room. They loved "Homicide," which featured the relentless, brilliant, lapsed Catholic, Detective Frank Pembleton. Partnered with the well-meaning but rather needy Tim Bayliss, Frank was a compelling, nearly Shakespearean figure. Tim worshipped him, as did Harold and Susan. His bald head gleaming, he'd interrogate his suspects with a subtle force that was impossible to withstand. Susan and Harold would often gossip about Frank and Tim, about Meldrick Lewis and Captain Giafolo, as if they were neighbors.

There was another reason there was now a TV in their bedroom, and this had to do with Jeffrey. He had felt so guilty about his lapse with Susan-- a fact which Harold never revealed to his wife that he knew-- that he had begun calling once or twice a week. Usually, he offered various forms of spiritual advice, which Harold ignored. He had made one suggestion, however, that Harold had followed: that he and Susan start smoking pot together. Jeffrey thought this might rejuvenate their sex life and their marriage. When Harold seemed interested, Jeffrey had sent him some pot in the mail. It was carefully stashed in the middle of a bag of organic tea called Avidiyuama. Within weeks he and Susan had developed a pattern: they'd smoke on Friday nights and then go to bed together. It turned out that, rather surprisingly, Jeffrey was right; the drug woke both of them up, and allowed them to concentrate on the friction of their bodies. Once a week, they rolled around in bed like youngsters again.

When Harold told his friend how successful the prescription had been, and described to him their Friday night ritual, Jeffrey had laughed in delight: they were

frolicking at the same time he was *davening* in *Schul* on Shabbat. Following their friend's lead, Harold and Susan began to refer to their Friday night sessions as "Shabbat." They stopped cooking for their kids, and let them order out for pizza, which they could eat in the TV room, and they didn't clean up after them. Regardless of how cold it was, they'd sneak into their backyard, have a few puffs-- for they never overdid it-- and return to their closed bedroom. It was in order to provide a plausible cover for their retreat into the bedroom that they had originally purchased the TV, which they claimed to watch on Friday nights. But, stoned, they watched no more. When their stash ran low Jeffrey would send them some more.

Harold wasn't sure if he had fantasies when he made love to Susan. Occasionally, he'd see Silvia Russo flickering before him. Occasionally, Susan seemed to him like a skinny black girl, and once or twice he did call her "my S B G," a phrase she didn't understand but at which she laughed. But more often than not she whom he was touching was no other than his strong, blonde, fair-minded, Iowa-bred wife.

Just as she had said she would, Silvia had returned to New York in June of 1994, and soon afterwards had started emailing Harold. They had become fast electronic friends. After a year in the city she had, just as he had predicted in Blooming Prairie, met a nice man named John Kaplan. He was a lawyer, not a scientist, but they seemed to get along extremely well. She had taken a position doing research for a genetic engineering firm called "Appletec," and had her first child in August of 1997. Harold thought she might name her son after him, but instead she called him Antony. She had, however, sent him a family picture.

Thinking of the picture of Silvia, John and Antony brought a smile to Harold's chlorine drenched lips. As a result, he swallowed a bit of water, and had to pause to clear his throat at the wall. He could tell that the heavy, older woman hovering above him was hoping that he was finished so that she could have the lane to herself. He resisted the temptation to leave the pool so that she could have what she wanted, and instead gestured that she was welcome to join him. She smiled, but mouthed a "no thanks."

Jenny was 11 and precocious. Her test scores were off the charts, and she was teaching herself French so that she could meet her goal of becoming trilingual. She still had a terrible temper, and often made their lives difficult. She had no real friends among her school-mates, for she tried to dominate them all. Her relationship to Caroline was turbulent, for her older sister was a steady 14 year old who was sprouting her social wings in middle school. Jenny couldn't understand that Caroline was no longer interested in, or even capable of, playing the imagination games-- restaurant, department store, orphan-- that they had enjoyed together just a few years earlier.

"It's not you, Jenny," Harold had explained to her many times. "It's not that Caroline doesn't want to play with you. She *can't* play with you, or with anyone else anymore. She's a teenager, and teenagers are concerned with reality. You're a little younger, and you can still live inside your imagination."

"I want her to play with me."

"She can't," was all that Harold could say, for Caroline had indeed taken the turn towards reality, and she now cared far more about what her friends thought, and wore, than about her little sister's silly fantasies. Even though she was intelligent enough to

understand Harold's patient explanation of this change in Caroline, Jenny would not accept reality. More often than he'd cared to admit, she was a bundle of rage.

Katie was a senior in high-school. Her acne had gotten worse, but she seemed resigned to it. She had a small group of close friends she had known since elementary school, and they were devoted to each other. A diligent student who was unwilling to accept even an A- in one of her classes, she seemed to be gravitating towards the sciences, for like all of the females in his house, she was not much of a reader. Harold doubted that she'd push herself very far in biology or chemistry, and suspected that she'd end up in psychology or economics. She had her heart set on going to either Carleton in Minnesota or Grinnell in Iowa. Both would get her away, but not too far away, from home, and her parents were willing to foot the tuition bill.

Harold was nearing the end of his afternoon's swim, and he decided to push a little harder than usual. He was feeling good, and he wanted to see what he had left. So he began to swim faster. When he began to do so, he remembered that he was going to Alan White's house again that evening for the Bible study group. He had been doing this for the past year. He still didn't attend church, and the thought of praying or being saved held no attraction for him whatsoever. But Alan was so patient, so resistant to excess, and so intelligent in his careful reading of the Bible that he set the tone for the entire group, and it had become, at least in Harold's eyes, more of a book group than a religious observance. Tonight they'd be reading the Sermon on the Mount. Harold did not hold the group in contempt, even though he wondered whether he should. But there was no denying the attraction of a group of decent, middle-aged men—for the entire group was men-- reading and talking together over decaffeinated coffee and cookies.

He was moving well, his shoulders felt powerful, and on each stroke he tried to imagine a string attached to his elbow which, like a marionette, was pulled straight upwards. He stretched his arms as far in front of him as they would go, cupped his hands when they re-entered the pool, and tried to push water hard as his arms were returning to his torso. When his head tilted to the left, he tried to raise it as little as possible, and so he felt himself being propelled through the water in a way that suggested he might be graceful. As usual, however, he had no idea if he was swimming with anything resembling proper form, but he didn't care. He was moving, his heart was beating, the bubbles pouring out of his mouth and nose were music to his ears.

On the penultimate lap, while raising his arm for a stroke, Harold felt a sharp pain in his left shoulder that radiated all the way down to his elbow. He had had small spasms of shoulder pain before, but nothing like this. He was tempted for a moment to try to work through it, and to complete the task of swimming exactly a mile. If he switched to a breast-stroke, he reasoned, he would surely be able to do it. But he caught himself, realized he was thinking in terms that were dead and buried, and decided to stop swimming immediately. As he walked through the water back to the wall, his arm hung limply at his side. When he stretched it above his head he once again felt a powerful, negating stab. He had no idea what the pain meant. But he knew, of course, that it meant something.