

Chapter Seven: Home

As Harold slowly walked home, an old memory floated by: he wished he had some pot. He wondered if it would still bring him the gentle cheer he remembered from his college days. But there was surely no pot waiting for him at home. Instead there was but mess, noise, and, if he was too weak to resist it, ibuprofen.

It was getting colder, the wind was picking up. Mike had been right: a front was moving in, and real winter, Iowa winter, was on its way. Harold tightened the collar of his coat against his neck and walked directly into the wind, which was blowing stiffly from the northwest. The struggle of moving forward was distracting enough for him to forget the ache of his knee.

When he got home, Jenny and Caroline had not yet arrived from school. The house was quiet and so even if it felt welcome, it was also slightly eerie. Harold put his pack down in the hall, hung his coat in the closet, walked up the stairs to his bathroom, and quickly opened the medicine cabinet. He grabbed three 200 mg tablets of ibuprofen, but just before taking them paused to stare at the round pills in his hand. He wondered what color they were: clay red? Or was it ocher? He realized he didn't know what ocher was, and this dismayed him. The three pills seemed innocuous, but to Harold they represented failure, and so he put them back in the bottle.

When he came back down to the living room, he put the Al Green tape into the machine, and flopped on the black leather couch in the living room, with his legs up on its soft arms, to wait for his girls.

I,
I'm so in love with you,
Whatever you want me to do
Is all right with me...
You make me feel so brand new
I want to spend my life with you.

The music barely penetrated the fog of his foul mood, but it soothed a little. After a few minutes, he thought he could feel the pain in his knee begin to shrink and he was pleased that he had accomplished this without the aid of medication. When Judy Carlson's ass came into view, he unzipped his fly. When he got on top of her, she melted into his arms, but it was Hillary's face that was contorted with the passion of his embrace. Just as he was becoming erect, Jenny and Caroline, two exuberant sprites, crashed through the door. Harold jumped up from the couch, his back to the girls as he zipped himself back up. Both were talking at once, but at least there was as yet no fighting. They flung off their shoes, threw their backpacks on top of his, and their coats on top of their backpacks.

"Hi Daddy!" Jenny said as she gave him a huge hug. "Take off that terrible music! I wanna hear Baby Beluga."

"No," said Caroline, "no more Baby Beluga. We always listen to Baby Beluga. I wanna keep listening to Al Green."

"No, Baby Beluga!"

Harold intervened by turning the tape deck off, and offering them cookies. When they were sitting together at the kitchen table over their glasses of milk, he gently

interrogated them with his usual set of questions. Careful as always to avoid asking anything too general, for to such questions the answer would usually be a single word, he began with Caroline.

“Who’d you sit next to at lunch today?”

“Ashley.”

“What’d you talk about?”

“We talked about “Full House.” She watches it too. We both think Danny’s crazy. He’s always cleaning. Sometimes he even cleans the mops.”

“But cleaning is good, don’t you think?”

“No. It’s boring. Danny does too much cleaning.”

“I think he’s a good Dad myself.”

“Oh Dad.”

“I like Danny. I’m like Danny.”

“No you’re not Dad.”

“Yes I am. I make you girls clean your rooms on Sunday mornings.”

“Danny makes them clean up every day.”

“Well, I think I’ll start making you girls clean up every day.”

“Oh Dad.”

“What about you Jenny? Who’d you sit next to?”

“Brittany.”

“Did she give you her chocolate milk again.”

“Yes.”

“Was it good?”

“It was great!”

“Did you eat the carrots I gave you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I didn’t have time. We only have two minutes for lunch. And Mrs. Pederson is so mean. She makes us eat so fast and then we have to go right back to class and I don’t have time to finish my carrots. She’s soooo mean.”

“But you had time for chocolate milk.”

“That’s different Dad. It doesn’t take a long time to drink milk.”

“Does it take a long time to eat carrots?”

“It takes hours. You have to chew so much. It makes my teeth hurt. Mrs. Pederson’s mean. Dad?”

“What?”

“Did you have mean teachers when you were a boy?”

“No, all my teachers were nice.”

“They were not!”

“Well if you know that, why’d you ask?”

“Oh Dad.”

The girls finished their cookies and rushed upstairs to resume a game they had been playing with their dolls. Harold cleaned up after them. As usual, Susan had not finished the breakfast dishes, and so he did them too. He sorted through the mail and threw out the junk. What remained was a bank statement and a bill. Nothing human. He

got out the vacuum cleaner and did a quick tour of the living and dining rooms. He swept the kitchen floor. By then the doll play had ended: it was only 4:00. Another hour until Full House came on. Harold was extremely tired, but at least the pain in his knee was retreating. When he heard the loud footsteps thundering down the stairs and headed his way, his heart sank.

“Dad, can we go to Target? I want more chapstick.”

“Me too.”

“No, girls. I’m too tired to get in the van.”

“But Dad, there’s nothing to do.”

“Caroline, do your homework.”

“I did that in school.”

“Daddy it’s not fair. I don’t have homework. Why not Daddy? Mrs. Pederson is dumb.”

“No she’s not, Jenny. Why don’t you girls go outside and shoot some baskets?”

“Oh right Dad.”

Not one of Harold’s three daughters had the slightest interest in basketball. Girls basketball had a long and distinguished history in Iowa, but neither this nor their father’s repeated invitations had ever appealed to his children. They played with dolls, they played school, they played games called orphan and teenager and wedding, they created miniaturized worlds in their closets and collected stuffed animals, they dressed up as often as they could, they were always eager to try on Susan’s make-up, they baked cookies and were ever ready to be invited out for ice-cream. They loved to shop. Their imaginations were harmless and sweet, their energy was creative, their bodies were lithe

and firm and took naturally to motion...but they didn't play ball. They weren't exceptionally uncoordinated, just uninterested.

“Why don't you play animal hospital.”

“Okay!,” they simultaneously exclaimed. “Will you play with us?”

“Sure I will,” Harold said. He reasoned that if he could get them started with animal hospital he could withdraw after a few minutes, and maybe they'd keep themselves busy until 5.

The girls each brought as many stuffed animals as they could carry into the den. Harold got the gauze, paper towels, masking tape, and the toy stethoscope. He took several volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from the shelf, covered them with sheets of paper towel, and set up a small operating table.

“Oh my gosh! Bunny's been hit by a bike! Nurse, doctor, can you help Bunny?”

And the girls were off, into their game. Harold was confident they'd last until 5, at which point they'd shift to the TV and Susan would come home.

“Girls.”

“Yeah.”

“I'm going upstairs. I'll be on the computer. I'll come down and check on you real soon, okay?”

“Okay Dad.”

“How's Bunny?”

“Good. We're fixing him.” Bunny was on the verge of being completely wrapped in tape and gauze.

“Nice work girls.”

Harold went to the third floor, to the small study he and Susan shared. He switched on the computer.

Message 1:
From sysop Wed Dec 3 12:54:02 [pt] 1993
From: jfg@meaning.com
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: sham?

Don't get on any high horse with me, my friend. My work with Hillary isn't a sham. Maybe it doesn't have the sophisticated technical detail yo're comfortoable with. It's not what we did in graduates chool. But damnd it I'm not writing learend books Harold. I'm trying to enter the public realm. There's a void there, Harold. You know that. What you call a sham I call a beginning. An infusion. I'm trying to rejuvenate the idea of the pugblic intellectual. The intellectual who can talk to learders, who can reach the average reader of newspapers. The intellectual whodoesn't just live in the ivory tower. I'm not satisfied with talking to fellow academics. That's why I didn't go into the professoriate. I want to have some impacton the world, make it a better place. MASHMA'UT has a circulation of nearly 180,000. That's better than the new republic. And we're better than tnr. the new republic is a harvard magazine and all they do is carp and criticize and stand above and pick pick pick and say how smar they are. We at MASHMA'UT are trying to make a postiive contribution. We're not ashamed of being concrete and useful. We're trying to make meaningful change.

There's no shame in being a sham.

You're lucky, my good humor's returning. I can never stay mad at you too long Harold. You're too cute.

you're frittering away your youth my friend. Why not drop out of IIT and come to californaia. I'll give you a column: Lutheran SWEETS, we'll call it. Just right for a jewish magazine. We're jewish but not sectarian. You know what I mean. After all, Hill has a subscription! And she ain't no jew.

Yours in meaning,
J

Fuck you, you two-bit pinhead, Harold thought. You've sold your soul to the devil and you puff yourself up and call it meaning. Meaning is here on the plains of Iowa, where the wind blows fierce and there is no beauty, just the flat denial of your own importance. No one out here is pretentious: there is, after all, no one out here to pretend to. And so only in Iowa can one test the proposition that virtue is its own reward.

Harold was mildly impressed with his own thought, and so he clicked R.

& R
to: jfg@meaning.com
Subject: Sham?

Jeffrey: I believe virtue is its own reward. That's a notion unthinkable in California or New York where the lure of external reward is so powerful. I'm convinced that Iowa--dull, dreary, barren Iowa-- is a good place to test this proposition. Here in Iowa I'm not congratulated for my books or my ideas or my thoughts. I write assuming no one will read my books. (But then why do I write?) I do have a nice professorship, good students, I live in a great house with an affordable mortgage etc. But, no, Hillary Clinton will not invite me to lunch and unlike you I'll never make it to McNeil-Lehrer. If my life has value, it will be because of the intrinsic quality of my soul.

I appreciate your invitation to write a column. But I don't think I'll go with the title you propose. Perhaps "Notes From Iowa," but certainly not "Lutheran Sweets." Jeez, where do you come up with this stuff?

H

Message 2
From sysop Wed Dec 3 14:18:36 (ct)
From: kpeder@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: teach

Bad news. Barry Dingleson is quitting. He's says he's had it with teaching. He's going back to Minneapolis and into software. He knows he's breaking his contract, and I told him that we won't be able to support him in looking for another job but he doesn't care because he's tired of being a gypsy scholar. He doesn't have any hope of ever getting a tenure track he's been a temp for 6 years, at 3 different

universities. I sympathize with him, actually, he has a family. Crummy business. Why not make some money?

This means we have three courses to cover next semester. Jorgensen can handle one, I'll take another. Would you be willing to do a section of intro? MWF 9-10? I know you like to keep the mornings open for your work, but it would be an enormous help to the department if you could take a section.

I know this is an imposition, Harold. But it's a crisis.

Thanks.

Kent

Harold had no objection to teaching another course. He had often done so in the past. Most of his colleagues in the humanities taught 6 courses a year, but he, as the Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy, only had 4. His frequent volunteering to teach overloads had kept him well liked in his department. But he had always insisted his classes be in the afternoon, MWF 1-2, or 2-3, or TTH 12:30-2 or 2:00-3:30. He had always wanted the morning, or at least a major chunk of it, open for work, and he needed MWF 11-1 free for basketball. Kent must be desperate indeed to ask him to teach MWF 9-10.

His immediate inclination was to say no, and he was even ready to click R and write this to Kent. But he hesitated. Harold realized that he had done no serious work for well over a year, and that there was no reason to suspect this was going to change. Why not teach a section of intro MWF 9-10? He could go straight to unit D after the class, and really warm up. Shameful, but Harold had to admit that, with winter coming, he needed to prepare himself for what he feared would be the descending gloom. There was, finally, no reason not to teach.

& R
To: kpeder@iit.edu

Subject: teach

Sure Kent. I don't mind teaching intro next semester. MWF 9 is okay. Yours, Harold

Message 3

From sysop Wed Dec 3 14:18:36 (ct)

From: gbishop@iit.edu

To: larson@iit.edu

Subject: self?

Hi BUDDY!!! We beat the pants off those bums in the third game!!!! (Any correlation between that and you're leaving? Just kidding!!!!) I guarded old Mike and he couldn't do a thing. Reminded me of the days when I was a defensive back. I used to shut them down!!! Or maybe it's the ritalin I took this morning. Golly that stuff works well. I'd give it to my hogs but the truth is I don't want them too alert. Just content. Which they are. And which you can be too, old buddy. Why not give it a try? Oh, I forgot, no chemicals for you. What do you think you're made of, pal? Chemicals, my friend. And so your hostility to my research is pretty silly, I think. Oh well, what do you expect? You're a philosopher. You poor guy!!!!!!

See you on Friday. ..Gary

Fucking overweight, pin-head meat-scientist can't play any god-damned defense,

Harold said to himself. He can't stop Mike Comstock. Fucking idiot's taking his kid's

Ritalin and cooking up chemo-therapy for hogs in his laboratory.

& R

To: gisbhop@iit.edu

Subject: self

Gary:

I'm once again appreciative of the concern you show for my well-being. And I'd have enjoyed watching your defensive prowess on the court. See you Friday. Harold

Harold was amazed at the energy Gary must have devoted to his self-deception. But, he wondered: did he really understand the meat scientist better than the meat scientist understood himself? Yes, he decided, this he could do.

Message 4
From sysop Wed Dec 3 15:09:27
From: awhite@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: ok?

Harold: You were limping. I saw you. Are you sure you're okay? Alan

R

To: awhite@iit.edu
Subject: ok?

I'm fine, Alan. My knee aches, that's all. You'll understand when you reach my age. Thanks for asking.

Harold

Message 5
From sysop Wed Dec 3 15:09:30
From: susana@itt.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: sched

Hi Sweetie. Home by 5. Managed to finish the Pioneer ethanol project this afternoon. It's okat. Next it's Dekalb. My students entering the Tony Smith Seed logo contest. So far, they're pretty good. Hope you're having a good day. Talk to you soon. Love, S

Harold's eyes grew heavy. He folded his arms onto his lap, leaned back in his chair, let his head fall towards his chest, and was almost instantly asleep.

"Daddy! Caroline's being mean to me!"

Harold awoke with a start, rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands, got up slowly and yelled clearly, "Okay, I'm coming down."

The complaint was actually a minor one. Jenny had insisted that she be the doctor and Caroline the nurse. This was fine at first, but after a while Caroline wanted a promotion. She wanted to be the doctor who operated on Spotty.

“Can’t there be two doctors?” Harold asked Caroline. “Why don’t I be the nurse?”

“Boys can’t be nurses Daddy.”

“Who told you that? Boys can be nurses and girls can be doctors.”

“You can be anything you want to be, right Daddy?” Caroline chirped.

“That’s right. But only if you work hard. Why look at Hillary Clinton. She’s President of the United States.”

“No she’s not, Daddy,” Jenny objected. “Bill Clinton is President.”

“Bill Clinton is a bumerooski. He wants you to think he’s president, but he’s not, not really. Hillary does all the hard work, you know. Bill just fools around all day and then he takes all the credit.”

“Oh Dad,” Caroline interjected.

“I know, I’m sorry. But seriously, Hillary does have a really important job.”

“What job does she have, Daddy?”

“Well, she’s in charge of changing all the hospitals in America. She’s going to change the way doctors and nurses do their work. She’s going to make sure everybody gets to see a doctor when they’re sick. Hillary’s trying to make everybody healthy, especially kids. No matter how poor a child is, if she gets sick Hillary’ll make sure she gets to see a doctor. That’s a big job, maybe the most important job in the whole country,

and she's a woman, isn't she? So I'll be the nurse. You both can be doctors. You tell me what you need to finish the operation and I'll give it to you.

“Hey look! Spotty's bleeding! Right there, from his nose. You'd better tape him up before you operate.”

Harold glanced at the clock: 4:54. He could make it. He watched the clock almost continually as the girls kept busy with Spotty. When it hit 5:00 he announced, “Hey girls, time for Full House.”

The girls dropped their animals and medical equipment immediately and ran upstairs to the TV room to watch their favorite show. Two half-hour reruns in a row: they'd be up there until 6, the only hour of TV they were allowed on weekdays.

Harold was free. But he was so tired and heavy that he didn't have a clue what to do with himself. Susan was due back at 5, but as always she'd be late.

Susan Anderson had never planned on being a professor, and even after nearly 15 years of teaching she still didn't really feel like one. Her first love had been painting, and in college she had majored in fine art. But Susan had a discerning eye and no fear of self-appraisal, and so she had realized that while she was adept with canvass and brush, line and figure, color and perspective, she wasn't driven to bring forth from within herself a world of images. She liked to paint and draw, she was good at it, but that was about it. She had joined a small graphic arts company directly after college, and here she had found just the kind of work for which she was suited. She was an aesthetic problem-solver. Tasks were given to her, and she found her way through them. The tasks could

vary from the nearly mindless to the highly complex, but Susan invariably enjoyed the process of transforming the intricacies of a given problem into a visually pleasing whole.

Susan received her M.F.A. in graphic design from the University of Iowa, and when a job was advertised for a professorship in the College of Industrial Design at the Iowa Institute of Technology, which was only 45 miles from her family's farm, she applied. Almost as a lark, she accepted the job when, to her surprise, it was offered to her. She had met Harold just weeks after arriving in Centerville, had quickly gotten married, and soon began to flourish at IIT. And so she had been teaching ever since.

The greatest change in Susan's field had been, of course, the introduction of CAD, computer aided design. Susan took to the computer immediately, for she was utterly without fear of her own ignorance. For her, the computer was a marvelous tool, and even if she had no idea by what scientific principles or properties of electricity and silicon it managed to do its tricks, she knew how to make it do them. She was delighted that the traditional work of cutting and pasting had been replaced by the lightning quick flashes of light on her screen. She was more delighted still by being mistress of the light, which she could bend to her will. She loved to scan images and make them reappear on her screen precisely as she wished them to, and to play with fonts and colors and backgrounds until she found what was just right.

Susan had been the first member of her department to master CAD, and so had become the computer guru to her colleagues. She was head of the college's Committee on Instruction, and she was leading the charge to outfit the entire building with computer labs. Her own office in the College of Industrial Design was dominated by equipment-- a huge MAC, a laser color-printer, a top-notch scanner-- and here she could spend hours

and hours in silence and alone, losing herself in some problem or another, often forgetting the time. At home, she had delighted in introducing her three daughters to the various tricks the computer could do.

Susan Anderson was not a small woman, but she came close. Her straight blonde hair nearly reached her shoulders. She was one of those midwestern girls, whose ancestors had come from Scandanavia, who missed being beautiful by a small but decisive step. Her features were fine, but neither delicate nor deep. She had an engaging smile, but it was too blunt to promise more than someone personable and intelligent. She had about her not a touch of elegance, for her face exuded straightforward competence, and so while she was undeniably attractive, she was not a beauty.

She was not big, but her frame was laced with taut muscles. She was an avid tennis player, a cyclist, and in the summer a swimmer. She loved to travel- although since the children there had been precious little of that- for she loved to look at the world. She was devoted to her large and flourishing garden, and her house was filled with prints and paintings and sculptures she had purchased, mostly from Iowa women artists.

Like her husband, Susan was from an Iowa farm. As a loyal midwesterner, and a northern European protestant, a deep distrust of the ornamental and seductive qualities of language was built into her bones. Language was temptation and represented the risk of fallenness and, like the computers with which she was so competent, its only virtue was to solve problems. She was uncomfortable with small talk, and frequently lapsed into the midwestern habit of opening a conversation by transforming a direct observation into a

question: “sweeping the floor, huh?” She did not know how to lie, was comfortable with silence, and had not an ironic bone in her body.

Susan, as Harold often noticed but never remarked, was careless with her pronouns. She threw around “he” and “she,” “it” and “you,” as if they were small, self-evident nuggets which needed no further explanation. It was as if she placed the moral burden of locating the antecedent noun on the listener, as if she were demanding of him what she expected of herself: hard work going on inside. She didn’t spend much time on the telephone, for she preferred e-mail as a way of staying in touch with her friends. Hers was a world of visual images and making sure the job, including the job of the family, got done. She would not tolerate laziness or the making of excuses.

Harold often chuckled when he compared Susan to the women he had known in New York. Most of them were Jewish and slightly mad, and for them only that which could be talked about was real. They were all in therapy of one sort or another, most were on some form of medication, and to them the various problems eating away at their souls were but occasions for further discourse. And so they talked endlessly about the various therapeutic angles they were taking on their lives. By contrast, Harold often imagined a therapy session with Susan: “Got a problem?” she’d ask, and before getting a complete reply, she’d interrupt and say, “Deal with it.”

“Hi honey.” She greeted him and, as almost always, didn’t move to touch him.

“Oh hi,” Harold responded. He was again lying on the black couch in the living room.

“You look beat.”

“I am beat.”

“Did you play ball today?”

“Yeah.”

“Even with your knee hurting?”

“Yeah.”

“How does it feel?”

“Not bad.”

“Girls okay?”

“Fine. Watching Full House. Katie’s at Samantha’s. Samantha’s mom will drive her home at 6.

“Well, you keep resting. I’ll make dinner.” She patted him on the head as she walked towards the kitchen. Harold remained motionless on the couch. Soon he was once again in bed with Hillary. This time, however, they were only talking, their eyes locked, pieces of yellow legal paper scattered over the bed. Harold assumed they were talking about health care, but just as he was falling asleep he realized that he wasn’t quite sure.

Keeping her promise, Katie arrived home promptly at 6. Just as her sisters had done, she woke her father up.

“Hi!” she roared as she threw her backpack and coat onto the floor and into the ever growing pile. She was flying, thrilled as usual by her long day at school and with friends.

“Hi Sweetie,” he said groggily. How are you? How’s my pal Samantha?”

“Oh she’s good. Oh Dad, can I sleep over at Kim’s house on Saturday. Samantha’s going to. Please Dad.”

“Sure, I don’t see why not,” Harold said, as he got up slowly from his couch.

“Thanks Dad.”

“Dinner in a few minutes, okay?”

“Sure Dad.”

Katie rushed upstairs, spent a minute bustling in her room, and then rushed back down again to join the family at the dinner table. At the dinner table, Harold looked at his oldest daughter. She was oblivious to her pimples, and to the mess of her thick blonde hair. At this moment, she didn’t care about being a clumsy teenager who was nearing the time when she would distrust everything in herself. Instead, she was still a child at home in the world, energized by the force of being good at school, having lots of friends, and a family who welcomed her home.

“Kim got new sneakers.”

“What kind?”

“Red high tops. Converse. They’re cool.”

“I want high tops.”

“Me too.”

“I want sandals. It’s going to be summer soon.”

“Summer? It’s December.”

“I know, but that means we can get a sale at the mall.”

“Mrs. Pederson was mean today. She made Joe go to the principal’s office.”

“Why’d she do that?”

“Because he put gum into the hamster’s cage and that can kill a hamster.”

“No it can’t. Gum can’t kill a hamster.”

“Yes it can. Mrs. Pederson said it can. Joe has to go to special education.”

“Why is that?”

“Because he gets angry.”

“And what does he do when he gets angry.”

“He throws things. And yells.”

“And puts gum in the hamster cages.”

“Yeah.”

“They’re going to give him pills.”

“What kind of pills?”

“I don’t know. The kind that make you nice.”

“Dad, can I bring my stereo to Kim’s for the sleepover.”

“She’s having a sleepover? That’s not fair.”

“I want a sleepover.”

“Can Lisa come over tonight.”

“It’s a school night.”

“But Katie gets a sleepover.”

“I want new shoes too.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I hate string beans.”

“Me too.”

“Can I have more juice?”

“Me too.”

“Not until you eat your beans.”

“Joe’s nice really. He’s not mean. He doesn’t need to take pills.”

“Why can’t I have more juice? I’m thirsty?”

“I’m thirsty too.”

“Me too.”

When the phone rang, all three girls got up at once to race for it. Jenny got there first. The rule in the house, one arrived at only after extensive negotiation, was that the girls could answer the telephone during dinner, but only if they quickly told their friend they were eating and would have to call them back. The exact meaning of “quickly” was not specified, but the girls typically made an honest effort to abide by the spirit of the rule. As usual, the call was for Katie, and Jenny reluctantly informed her of this fact and handed her the phone.

“Hi Kimmy...Yeah, I can come... Sorry I can’t talk now. I’m eating dinner. I’ll call you back soon.”

“Dad, I want a phone in my room.”

“Me too.”

“Me too.”

“That’s not fair. She gets all the calls.”

“I know, but you get to eat your stringbeans.”

“Stop it Dad.”

And on it went. When they weren’t talking, competing for air time, they were screaming or crying or whistling or singing. Harold was groggy from his tiny nap, and the noise pounded on him. He felt fragile, and, without moving except to turn his aching head down to look at his plate, he stared at his stringbeans.

Harold had arrived in New York to attend graduate school at Columbia in 1971, a year after the New York Knicks had won the NBA championship. Like so many New Yorkers, he was enthralled by the Knicks. Willis Reed, not big for a center, but a great fade-away left-handed shot, a tremendous rebounder and relentless competitor; Walt Frazier, always coming up with a steal when it was most needed; Dave Debuschere, a wonderful defensive player and long range shooter; Phil Jackson, Dick Barnett, Dave Stallworth, coming off the bench. And, of course, Bill Bradley, Princeton Graduate, Rhodes Scholar, intelligence in motion, the epitome of a team player. Jeffrey Greenwald, who had himself attended Princeton as an undergraduate, told Harold more than once that it was well known on campus that Bradley planned to be president one day.

The Knicks played wonderful team ball. Somehow their coach, Red Holtzman-- "the wily Yid," as Jeffrey called him-- had persuaded each of them that their value would be measured by the team's success, not their individual statistics. The players were so selfless and intelligent that the knowledgeable fans of Madison Square Garden would often give them standing ovations only to express their appreciation for the sheer beauty of their game. Harold went to the Garden often with Jeffrey Greenwald, whose father had two season tickets he frequently didn't use, and when the Knicks won the championship again in 1973, Harold, although he was by then a serious scholar, was overjoyed.

Even now, when the need arose, Harold could lapse into fantasy and imagine himself a Knick. The problem with this fantasy was that Harold always had trouble deciding exactly where he would fit into the Knicks' lineup. He was so taken by each of

the starting players that he couldn't bear to bench any of them. And Jackson, with his manic defense and helicopter arms, Barnett with his deadly left-handed jump shot, were too perfect as substitutes. How could Harold be so selfish as to disrupt such a lovely harmony? Even in his fantasies Harold was scrupulous, and this caused him trouble.

Bombarded by the incessant din of his three girls at the table, Harold continued to stare at the food on his plate, and instantly the scene changed.

He was in the backroom of an Italian restaurant. His apartment was on the upper east side, the restaurant only a block away. When he had first come to New York to play for the Knicks he was just a naive kid from the University of Iowa, and the owners of this nearby restaurant had been kind and welcoming to him. When the games were over, sometimes as late as 11 or 12, he'd come back from Madison Square Garden, and even though dinner was completed, a hot meal would be ready for him. Heaping piles of pasta, salad, vegetables, sometimes a steak, always a cold beer. The owners of the restaurant, who had no names, fed him well and offered him something resembling a home. They'd chat with him while he ate, sympathize with him when the Knicks lost a close game. Eventually Harold would repay them by simply letting it be known he was a regular patron and by giving their waiters enormous tips.

Suddenly the dishes in front of Harold turned little white boxes of Chinese take-out with handles on top. He was eating alone, watching a game on TV, and he was exhausted from yet another victory over the Celtics. The food and drink were replenishing him, though, and soon he would be fast asleep and recovering.

Did anyone else, Harold wondered, fantasize about being exhausted? He deliberately broke the fantasy and decided to time himself, to see for how long he could

pay attention to his daughters' chatter. A minute and then he was back on the upper east side.

Such a comfortable apartment. A custom made jacuzzi in the bathroom in which he would soak away the aches of the game and feel the best sort of pain go up in steam. Harold had made a large donation to a nearby private school, in return for which he was given a key to the gym. And so, during the summers, when most of the other Knicks cleared out of town, Harold stayed in New York. His routine was regular. Wake up, read-- for, even as a professional basketball player, Harold was taking philosophy courses at Columbia-- then go to the park to jog. He'd grow a beard in the summer and always wear sun-glasses so that no one would recognize him. After the run, he'd go to the gym and shoot. Hundreds and hundreds of jump shots. The downward drop of his wrist as the ball left his fingers, the lovely swish of net as the ball sunk through. He had purchased a good sound system for the school's gym, and he'd crank it up to listen to Tosca or Butterfly. He'd let loose with his longest jump shots at the pinnacle of the great arias, and when Carreras was belting out the final words of E lucevan-- Harold's kind of song-- he'd heave one from nearly mid-court.

“Daddy,” Jenny interrupted him. “Why are you whistling?”

“Sorry, a tune got stuck in my head.”

He resumed shooting. When he was finished, he'd spend an hour or two in the weight room he had donated, getting himself strong, improving his range. And then he'd return to his solitary apartment, take a long hot tub, and then have a silent dinner with several little white boxes of New York's very best Chinese take out.

“May I be excused?”

“May I be excused?”

“May I be excused?”

“Caroline, finish your rice and beans. Jenny finish your bread. You asked for it. Katie, you may be excused.”

“That’s not fair! Why does she always get to be excused and I don’t?”

“Yeah, that’s not fair! I want to be excused too!”

“Girls. You need to eat your supper. Take a breather, stop talking for just a little while, eat your food. Then you can be excused.”

The two girls gobbled down what remained on their plates. When all three girls had disappeared upstairs, and their sounds were too distant to be completely distracting, Harold and Susan sat for a moment of peace.

“I don’t know why they talk so much. I’m not talkative. You aren’t either.”

“I’m always talking inside, Susan.”

Harold and Susan sat there in a moment of silence. Harold broke it with this: “If you are fond of a jug, say, ‘I am fond of a jug!’”

“Okay. I’m fond of a jug. So what?” she asked.

“For when it is broken you will not be upset. If you kiss your child, say that you are kissing a human being, for...”

“Oh stop it Harold. Children aren’t jugs. Who is it? Socrates? Sophocles? Stupidites?”

“Epictetus.”

“You’re very fond of your children Harold.”

“I know I am. But they drive me insane. I can’t stand the noise, the mess, the interruptions. I feel like I can’t get a word in or a thought through my brain. Can’t use e-mail until Katie goes to sleep, because she’s always on the phone. Can’t stretch out on the couch without crushing a doll. Jenny’s room is a disaster. Caroline’s homework, which she doesn’t do. All I want is some peace and quiet. Maybe take a long walk. Go back to New York, walk the Brooklyn Bridge. Or the George Washington Bridge. Who knows, maybe do the Appalachian trail. Or maybe the Rockies. I can’t sleep at night because I don’t walk enough. And I worry about the girls all the time. I’m trying to calm myself down, Susan. With Stoic-style therapy. Instead of valium.”

“What are you talking about Harold?” Susan asked.

“Did you notice Katie’s new pimples?”

“I know.” Susan cringed. “She’s going to have lots of pimples, and they’re starting early. She has such a pretty face.”

He felt a stab of fright as he foresaw his daughter’s lovely face scarred with wicked acne, her prospects ruined. He felt a wave of sadness wash over him as he saw her retreating to her room, a flying bird caged by her own misery. But then he lifted himself by reminding himself that if it weren’t pimples, it would be something else. Besides, it was never a matter of if anyway. It was only a matter of when.

Harold recognized his own thoughts as a defense, and envied Susan’s straightforward dismay at Katie’s pimple.

“She’s getting so busy in school. So many friends. So many sleepovers, parties, make-up, talking talking talking. She needs to pull back. She’s falling into the world,

she defines herself through the world, and she doesn't have a strong sense of herself. She needs to go in on herself."

"Harold, she's a little girl having fun with friends. She doesn't need to do anything of the sort. She's happy."

"She's getting pimples. Red ones."

"That's right, Harold, they're red."

"They're filled with pus."

"Yes, pus. Bacteria and white corpuscles. It's sad. She had such pretty skin."

"Only pimples can save her now."

Susan looked at him.

"She needs to withdraw, burrow herself into herself, carve some room for a soul. Self-loathing can be useful. It's better than being popular. The worst fate is to peak in high-school."

"There's nothing wrong with being popular and having fun, Harold. I had fun in high-school. You had fun too."

"No, not really. I played ball and worked on the farm. That was about it."

"Well your team almost won the state championship."

"We only made it to the quarter-finals."

"But the town loved you."

"Maybe. When you win a game you can't help but be captured by the winning and so, even if you try, you can't really feel the pain of the loser. But when you lose, you can imagine what it is to win, and at the same time, of course, you suffer the pain of losing. Losing is a much richer experience. More complicated. It generates reflection

and self-consciousness. And so if Katie gets pimples and gets lonely and suffers in front of the mirror, and laments her miserable fate, she'll at least have a chance at becoming deep. Pretty girls get lost in the world."

"I was a pretty girl. I didn't come out too badly."

Harold smiled.

"She had such lovely skin when she was little. Soft and creamy. And she smelled so nice."

"And now she farts just like the rest of us, Susan. If people think you amount to something, distrust yourself."

"I don't think I have to worry about that one."

"Do not seek to have events happen as you want them to, but instead want them to happen as they do happen, and your life will go well."

"Well my life is going just fine, Harold."

"I'm going for a little walk," Harold said. "Do you mind?"

"No, I don't. But doesn't your knee hurt?"

"It's feeling better."

"Okay. I'm leaving for tennis in about half an hour."

"I'll be back soon."

The phone rang, and Harold picked it up the even though he knew it would be for Katie.

"Oh sorry Kate, I didn't know you were on the phone."

"That's okay Dad."

"Hello Mr. Larson."

“Hello Kim. Do you want to go for a walk Kate?”

“No, Dad, I’m talking on the phone.”

“How about you Kim?”

“Oh Mr. Larson!”

“Oh well. You girls don’t know what’s good.”

“That’s right Dad, we don’t.”

“When I was your age…”

“Bye Dad.”

“Bye Mr. Larson.”

The wind was cold enough to cut through Harold’s jacket. He wished he had worn a hat, for the Iowa sky was churning to a malevolent roar, as if to remind its subjects of its power to cause pain. He put his hands in his pockets, close to his thighs. As he walked down his street, he heard the familiar sound of a basketball being dribbled and then thrown against a driveway backboard: Bobby Bishop, Gary’s 15 year old son, was playing in his driveway, even in this weather. Harold paused in front of his house, and smiled. He was reminded of his own garage, his own backboard.

Even though his father had neither the time nor the inclination for athletics himself, he had built a wonderful court for his son. The hoop was exactly 10 feet high. The long driveway into the barn was smoothly paved with asphalt. The flood lights were placed perfectly to light up the whole court. And so Harold could practice as long as he wanted. Even though he always did his chores without protest, he did not take well to the life of the farm. He wasn’t interested in its many machines, and so he was useless when it came to repairing the tractors or the combine or the truck. He was a good boy, but he

did his chores carelessly, always with an eye only towards their completion. For all he wanted, really, was to get back to shooting baskets. He shot before and after dinner, at recess in school, and at night, just before sleep, he would fantasize about jump shots. One of basketball's beautiful paradoxes is that even though it is essentially a team game, a significant portion of the player's practice time must be solitary. All that was needed was a hoop, an internal compulsion that came close to being a mild form of autism, and an imagination.

When Harold was shooting his thoughts would flow effortlessly. He wouldn't be visited by the many worries about girls that haunted him during school, nor would he be thinking about his parents or tomorrow's chores. He'd lose himself in the motion of his body and with that find some peace. Like Bobby Bishop, he played year round. In the winter, he'd shovel the court dry, and wear gloves until his body warmed up. When it was 20 below and the wind was howling on the empty fields that surrounded the farmhouse, Harold would go into the barn and throw a tennis ball into a garbage can.

After watching Bobby shoot for a couple of minutes, Harold was tempted to join him. He had done this occasionally over the years, usually when he knew Gary was out of town at a conference. But Gary was probably at home now, his knee had given him a lot of trouble during the day, and it was cold outside. These were the arguments against joining Bobby. The argument in favor was simple: a ball was bouncing, making its siren call.

“Hey Bob, how ya doing?”

“Oh hi, Mr. Larson. I'm okay. Wanna shoot some with me?”

“Sure.”

Bobby, who was nearly 6 feet tall already, thick and on the verge of becoming a decent ball-player, passed him the ball. Harold caught it, his hands stiff with cold. He let the ball bounce in front of him as he blew on his hands, then he picked it up, and immediately took a short jump shot: swish!

“Nice one, Mr. Larson!” Bobby said, as he flicked the ball back to Harold. When he caught the ball he shot again, made it again, and, according to the standard rule of shoot-around-- make it, take it-- got the ball back. He made a fourth shot in a row. Feeling energized, he dribbled before taking the next one, and then pulled up about 18 feet from the basket, shot and missed. It was Bobby’s turn. The first shot he attempted, he missed, but Harold threw him the ball back anyway. The boy made the next one.

“Hey Mr. Larson, how about a little one-on-one.”

Harold knew he shouldn’t. “Okay, Bob.”

He moved to where the foul line would be, turned his back to the basket and said to Bobby, “your ball.” Bobby started dribbling. He turned his ample back to Harold and began a slow and graceless trajectory to the right baseline. When he got about half way, he turned around and took a quick and awkward jump shot. He missed, and Harold easily got the rebound. He dribbled the ball back to the imaginary foul line, faked right, went left, and laid it in.

“Nice move Mr. Larson!”

“Thanks Bob.”

On the next play, Harold didn’t even bother to dribble. He just took a long jump shot, which he missed. Bobby rushed for the rebound, got it, and started his slow dribble back to the top of the driveway court. Harold pretended to be uninterested in the boy’s

movement, and then, when Bobby was just about to turn around, he flashed to the ball, and stole it. The boy looked disgusted with himself.

Harold was inflamed now, and he didn't know why until he looked at Bobby, and instead of seeing the familiar face of his friend's son, he saw Al, the boy sitting next to Judy Carlson.

"Mutthafucker," he said to himself, "I'm gonna chop you to pieces. Hold on to your hat, you fat-assed, slow moving, brainless son of a bitch. I'm going so far so fast you'll need a map to find me."

He dribbled the ball hard, eyes fixed intently on Bobby Bishop's face. Then he started to move to the right, keeping his left shoulder between Bobby and the ball. When he got close to the base line, he spun around hard, and began the quick move to the basket. But on the second dribble, his left knee exploded in pain. When he found himself on the cold ground of the driveway, he didn't know how he had gotten there or why he was clutching his knee, and he didn't quite recognize the sounds he was making.

"Mr. Larson, Mr. Larson, are you okay?"

"Shit," he uttered. "Shit." And he moaned a little. It didn't make sense. The pain was in his left knee, not the one that had been bothering him all day. That didn't seem fair. "Shit," he said a third time as the pain rocketed.

"I'll get my Dad," Bobby said.

"Tell him to call an ambulance."

Interlude 1

“Shit, man, I never made it with no albino chick before.”

“Oh, come on K, she’s not an albino. She’s just white.”

“No, man, she’s an albino. She’s white all over. She’s pale white. She ain’t got a drop of color in her.”

Harold had to think about that. Could it be true? Could Hillary Clinton actually be an albino? Of course not. K just had seen so few white women before that he thought she, a blonde woman, was albino. Although it was possible he didn’t quite understand what an albino actually was.

“Do you know what an albino is, K?”

“Sure I do. It’s a superwhite woman. A woman so white that she ain’t got a bit of color in her.”

Hillary Clinton, an albino? A Methodist, yes, but an albino?

“K, just because she’s interested in health care reform doesn’t mean she’s an albino.”

“Oh man, I don’t give a fuck about health care reform. That woman can put out. That’s what makes her an albino.”

“What?”

“She’s an albino. She’ll fuck your brains out, and all the blood’ll be drained outta her. She’s like a ghost, man.”

“A ghost who fucks your brains out?”

“Exactly, Harold, now you got the idea.”

K held his hand out to be slapped, and Harold not only did that but he put his arm around the skinny, highly curved shoulder and back expanse that was the uppermost

torso of his friend Special K. The two of them laughed merrily, drunk as skunks, bottles of wine strewn all over the playground. A black man and a white man, nearly embracing and sharing one laugh, one absurd thought.

Harold chuckled softly. Neither Jeffrey nor Susan, who had each pulled a chair close to the roaring fire in the fireplace, and were engaged in an animated conversation replete with giggles whose origin Harold didn't understand, heard him. When Jeffrey Greenwald had come to visit, he had brought some pot. At first Harold was appalled, but because he had been in a cast for over a month and so wasn't going to the gym, because the Iowa Institute of Technology was on its winter break and so he wasn't teaching, because it was 10 below zero outside and he was barely leaving the house, he capitulated to Jeffrey's entreaties.

He had come to Iowa at Susan's behest. She was worried that Harold was becoming depressed. He had suffered minor injuries before, but nothing as serious as this one: anterior cruciate ligament tear which required reconstructive surgery. Harold had a cast from ankle to nearly his hip, and the prognosis for returning to basketball was bleak.

He had protested when Susan suggested that she invite Jeffrey to visit. He travelled all the time anyway, she argued, and it would be easy for him to fly to Des Moines, rent a car, and visit them for a couple of days. As usual she was right. Jeffrey was on a tour promoting his new book "Meaningful Change: Why, When and How," and had a speaking engagement in Chicago just after New Year's, and he did grab a flight to Des Moines. He was taking a twenty-four hour detour to visit them in Centerville, Iowa. He had arrived at noon and after greeting his old friend warmly, and making jokes about his cast and the frigid weather, they had spent almost the entire afternoon sitting at the

kitchen table talking. Mostly, Harold and Susan listened to Jeffrey fulminate about the radio talk show host, Rick Brumbaugh. He had coined the awkward phrase “Rodham-Greenwaldianism” to describe the Politics of Meaning conference Hillary had convened, and had repeatedly lectured his minions that this was but the new name for the old, failed, liberal policies of economic restructuring. His show was called “America Talks,” and he was most vociferous in his condemnation of Hillary’s health care reform plan.

“He’s a straight out liar who’s trying to scare people. He tells people that they won’t be able to choose their own doctors, that a bureaucrat will make decisions about their medical care. He tells them that the plan is one small step away from socialized medicine. Brumbaugh’s dangerous, a demagogue in the making. Plus, there’s more than a hint of anti-semitism in his condemnation of me. I haven’t even had that much input into the health care reform package, but he brings up my name all the time. Our advantage is slipping away, I can feel it, thanks to this schmuck and people like him. And you know what else? I hear there’s a scandal brewing. I’ve been told that the Republicans have dug something up on Bill when he was governor of Arkansas. State troopers bringing women to him, or something like that. One schmuck can’t his mouth shut, the other can’t keep his pants on.”

“Schmuck is right,” said Harold, although the word didn’t feel right to him when it left his lips, and he didn’t know to which of the schmucks he was referring. When he looked at Jeffrey sitting at the table across from him he couldn’t take his eyes off the black leather sports jacket he was wearing. He had never seen leather so soft, and more than once Harold was tempted to touch it. His friend’s face was the same, slightly pudgy face he had known for over twenty years, but the tortoise shell glasses he was wearing so

perfectly matched the color of his hair, and the jacket fit him so well, that his old friend looked just like what the *The New York Times* said he was: “one of the country’s foremost public intellectuals.” Jeffrey was wearing a woven black yarmulke, in the middle of which was a small, yin-yang symbol.

Harold felt constricted in Jeffrey’s presence, and he didn’t know how to evaluate, or even identify, his own emotions. Was it jealousy at his friend’s proximity to the Clintons? Was it outrage that it was not he? Did he, as he tried to tell himself, really not care? Was he able simply to enjoy his own deep certainty that he was a superior being? These questions had been circulating so quickly during Jeffrey’s visit that he hadn’t been able even to try to answer them.

All three girls came home immediately after school, for Susan had made Jeffrey into something of a household legend. He was a famous man, she said, he had talked to the President and was friends with the President’s wife. He was a writer, he had his own magazine, and he had been on TV.

“He’s divorced, living in California, while his kids are back in New York City,” Harold added.

Jeffrey had charmed the children, telling them stories about New York and California, and expressing profound admiration for anybody tough enough to live through an Iowa winter. He wrestled with Jenny a little bit, talked with Caroline about her doll collection, and explained to Katie what a Bat Mitvah was. Katie already knew, but she pretended to learn a great deal.

After a big dinner of Susan’s famous lasagne, from which she eliminated the meat in order to keep it in line with Jeffrey’s Kosher-Vegetarian diet, and a bottle of California

Zinfandel that Jeffrey had picked out at the local liquor store, there was another round of story-telling and playing with the girls. It took several efforts, but Susan finally got all three of them upstairs to bed. When she came down, she built a fire in the fireplace.

That was when Jeffrey convinced them that the fire would inhale the smoke from the pot, and there wouldn't be a trace of their mischief. Even if one of the girls came downstairs, they could toss the joint into the fireplace. Worst case scenario: the girls would discover their crimes, and he'd take the heat. They should do a little weed for old time's sake, plus so much travelling made him tense. Normally, he explained, he would relax in his hot tub at home, but here in Iowa pot was the solution.

Susan and Jeffrey had always gotten on well together. Soon after she and Harold were married, they took a vacation to New York City and spent a couple of days with Jeffrey, his first wife, Rachel, and his two boys David and Paul. Harold had once arranged for Jeffrey to give a lecture at IIT, and he had spent the night with them. And they once drove to California with Katie and Caroline to visit Jeffrey in his new home, with his new wife, Rebecca, in Marin County. Susan, intimidated by no one, would respond to Jeffrey's long speeches with a blunt question. She wouldn't hesitate to interrupt him, and he seemed to like her for that. He often touched her. But then again, he often touched lots of people.

That night, Jeffrey and Susan were giggling like teenagers, and he, with his curls loosely hanging down to nearly his shoulders, was reaching out often to put his hand on her arm. Harold had his left leg propped up on a chair, and had been silent for nearly a half hour until the K fantasy had sprung itself.

"My man," he said to K one last time.

“What’d you say, Harold? Speak up, I can’t hear you,” Jeffrey said.

“Heh heh,” was all that Harold could muster.

“You talkin to me?” Jeffrey said, imitating Robert DeNiro. “You talkin to me?”

“No, I’m not. I’m talking to myself.”

“Talk to me, Harold, talk to me. What’s on your troubled mind? Has it been rough being on crutches? What does it feel like? You’ve been an athlete your whole life. It must be hard.”

“Hard?”

“It must be so hard. Do you feel like yourself? Or has your identity changed?”

“My identity?”

“My identity changed when I got divorced. But it had to happen. We got married so young, and Rachel had grown so much. I had too. It was hard on the boys, but we talked about it a lot. We worked through it. And now I visit them at least once a month. But I miss them terribly. They grow so fast. David’s headed to Princeton next year-- he got in early decision—and Paul’s going to be a junior at the Maimon School. They’re young men now, and their childhood was taken away from me. But when I go home we talk a lot. We usually go to Mo Schapiro’s for a bagel and a nosh and a catch-me-up talk. They’re going through a lot of meaningful changes, and working through a lot of stuff. Well, of course they are; they’re adolescents. But I miss them so much. It hurts.”

Jeffrey began to cry. Harold looked at him in amazed disbelief, but Susan got up from her chair and put her arms around him.

“There there,” she said, “it’ll be all right.”

“What will be all right?” Harold asked. She didn’t answer, and seemed almost unaware of his presence.

Jeffrey quickly recovered from his weeping, and then began talking about the great organic restaurant that had just opened near his house. What they could do with arrugula could, as he put it, blow your mind. Harold, who couldn’t quite remember what arrugula was, stood up awkwardly, and announced, “well, folks, I’m headed to bed.”

“No way, Harold,” Jeffrey said. “The night is young, and I’m only here for another few hours. I have to leave at 6. We’ve got to talk about everything.”

“Everything? Not even you can do that, Jeffrey,” Susan said as she giggled.

But Harold knew how to talk about everything. Of course this didn’t mean he could talk about every little thing; every dish, table, person, shoe-lace, etc.. What he could do is talk about what every thing had in common: they are all things; things that are. Harold knew how to talk about what it is to be.

“I can talk about everything, Susan,” he said.

“What did you say?”

“I can talk about everything.”

“No you can’t. Nobody can. Everybody can talk about a little something of this or that. I can talk about graphic design. Jeffrey can talk about health care reform.”

When she said this, Harold clammed right up. After listening to a couple of minutes more of giggling conversation, he told them again that he would have to go to bed. His knee was hurting, he lied, and the pot had gone to his head.

“Of course it went to your head. That’s where it’s supposed to go,” Jeffrey said. Susan laughed uproariously, and for a quick moment Harold wanted to strangle her.

“Yes, indeed, my head. My head tells me to go to bed. My heart tells me to stay. Jeffrey, I’m grateful for your visit. You helped me get through a pretty rough stretch. Thanks so much for making the trip. I won’t see you off in the morning. It takes me too long to get out of bed. But email me as soon as you get to California. I want to know that you arrived safely.”

Jeffrey smiled warmly at him, and said, “okay, old friend, I will comply.” When Harold stood to begin his slow march up the stairs, Jeffrey embraced him. “I love you, Harold.”

“Heh heh,” was all Harold could say.

Harold had mastered the techniques required to undress and bathe himself with the brace on his knee and his one crutch, and even though he was stoned, he did so that night, as he did all others, efficiently. After washing and brushing his teeth, he got into bed. Because of his injury he had been forced to stay in his own bed all night for the past month, and at times he thought he would be driven mad by the energy begging to be released from his spine and thighs. After the third day following the surgery, he had stopped taking the pain killers the doctor had prescribed. He welcomed the pain, for it distracted him from the diffuse energy waves that usually coursed through his body, and there were actually some nights when, even though it hurt too much to sleep, he felt more relaxed than usual.

Lying in bed, Harold was no longer able to hear the sounds of his wife and friend talking, but he could still smell the faint odor of the fire. He imagined them fucking on

his black leather couch, and he wondered whether Jeffrey would keep his beautiful sports jacket on while lying on top of Susan.

He and Susan hadn't made love for months. Harold was typically the initiator, but even before the knee injury he had been unable to muster the energy to perform his task. Susan had tried a couple of times, but he was unable to respond. For a moment he didn't blame her for fulfilling her needs with his friend, but he couldn't imagine how she could bear to feel his soft, flabby flesh on hers. He had no muscles! Nevertheless, he saw them writhing on the couch, still giggling.

“Susan, for Christ’s sake, he’s got a jelly belly. Like Saint Nick. Watch out for him, Susan, he’s got a woman in every port. He sleeps his way through these conferences and books tours you know. He’s a fucking Reichian for God’s sakes. He thinks the problems of the world are caused by sexual repression. Or at least he used to, before he became a Rabbi.”

And then a thought exploded in his head and nearly made him cry, a thought that was so clear and distinct that he believed it had to be true: Jeffrey was sleeping with Hillary Clinton. Not only was he her philosophical confidante, he was her sex therapist, there to help relieve the stress imposed on her by Bill's womanizing.

“Oh sweet Jesus,” Harold muttered to himself. “Sweet Jesus, Sweet Jesus.” His heart started to beat violently, he felt a throbbing in his temples, and every part of his body sprang to life, including his wounded knee. He began to perspire even though it was cool in the bedroom, and so he got out of bed. For a moment he simply stood there, keeping his weight on his right leg, and ignoring the crutch that was next to the bed. He took deep breaths to try to calm himself down, and then he hopped over to the window

and opened it wide. He put his head out, and hungrily sucked the brutally cold air. Speaking to no one, he repeated several times, “whatever the good lord dishes out, whatever the good lord dishes out...”

“Harold, what are you doing?” Susan asked as she entered the bedroom. “It’s freezing in here.”

He was shocked when he saw her, and so just looked at her stupidly.

“Do you need some help? I came up here to tuck you in.” She started to giggle as she said this. “Come on Sweetie, let’s go to bed now.” She was speaking to him as if he were a child.

“Okay,” he said placidly.

She helped him back into bed, and then closed the window. “Do you need anything? Want some water or something?”

“Are you coming to bed?” he asked.

“Not yet. Jeffrey was telling me about the cooperative Kasher winery he belongs to. He says that I could design the label for their new Merlot. We’re going to iron out the details.”

“The details?”

“Yes, the details.”

“What details?”

“About the wine label, silly. Your knee hurts, so you should just go to bed.”

“Trying to get rid of me, huh?”

“What?”

“Nothing. You go back downstairs, and I’ll go sleep.”

“Okay sweetie.” She kissed him on his forehead, and for a second he felt the urge to pull her down to him. But he knew his knee couldn’t sustain the pressure, so he did nothing. She left the room, but smiled at him just before she closed the door. He lay there for minutes, and when he gratefully realized that his legs felt relaxed, he turned the light off. He was determined, however, not to fall asleep until Susan had returned.

Harold was amazed when he looked at the clock: 8:54. That meant he had slept through the night, which he hadn’t done for years. Of course, it wasn’t that much of the night since he had stayed awake until Susan had come to bed, and that was close to 2. It also meant that the girls had left for school, and that Jeffrey and Susan were both gone. He got himself dressed, and slowly one-crutched his way downstairs. Even though he was vaguely ashamed by the thoughts that had kept him awake until Susan had returned, the first thing he did when he got downstairs was to look for semen stains on the couch. Then he realized that if he found any he wouldn’t know if it were Jeffrey’s or his own.

Susan had cleaned the kitchen thoroughly before she had left, and had set the sports page of the *Register* on the table next to an empty bowl, a spoon, a box of cereal and a banana. There was also a note, written in her hurried but elegant script: “hope you feel better. I’ll email you this morning. S.”

“*Bitch feels guilty,*” he said to himself. “*Kick her ass outta this house.*” He put his hands to his head, massaged it hard, and rebuked himself for his idiotic and vile suspicions. There wasn’t a chance that Susan had slept with Jeffrey last night. She was beyond reproach. Even this certainty, however, didn’t help. He felt as if his friend had mesmerized not only Hillary Clinton, but his own wife.

After eating his cereal, Harold used his crutch to propel himself up from the table, and he carried the bowl and the banana peel towards the sink. His grip wasn't firm enough, and when he dropped it the bowl broke into shards. He simply stared at the pieces for a moment, and then, without overt rancor, used his crutch to grind them into even smaller ones. When he was done, he trudged back to the living room in order to look out the window. Iowa was a dead-still, frozen tundra. He guessed it was below zero, but he didn't care enough to check.

Sitting on the black leather, couch staring out the window, Harold's mind slipped into gear. It was time, he realized, to figure out the next move, the next play. Things had to change. And so he made three decisions. First, he would teach all his classes in the Spring semester. He would hobble in front of his students and earn their respect. Second, he would begin a rigorous program of rehabilitation. Whatever was required to get his knee back, he would do. Third, even if he got his knee back into shape, he would give up basketball. This realization shocked him, for he knew that if he made this promise he would keep it. He would be done with the spontaneity, the wonderful jazz dance of his game. It was too hard on his body, and even if, somehow, he could rehabilitate to the point of being able to play, he'd never approach the level to which he was accustomed. He'd be no better than Gary Bishop, and he would always be at risk or in pain. He would say good-bye to what he loved best, but this, he rationalized, would be a great occasion for him. He would practice the art of loss, stare time straight in the eye, look back at what is gone forever. He wouldn't fight infirmity, he would understand it.

"No, man, you can't retire," K told him. "The team needs you, bro. You the point guard, the rock, the captain. You the man."

“Not anymore. I’m done. Washed up. Knees are gone. I’m not going to be one of those old jocks who can’t let go. We all have to learn how to let go, K. It’s part of life. It is life. I’m finished, washed up, done, gone. Amor fati, my friend, love of fate.”

“Whatch you gonna do for exercise, man?”

“I don’t know. Maybe cycle, or treadmill, or maybe even swimming. Just something to keep me in shape. I don’t look forward to this, but I know I can manage it. It will make me stronger. When my grandfather lost his vision and couldn’t drive the pickup any longer, he didn’t complain. Not once.”

K started to weep. “I’m gonna miss you, Harold. Will you come visit?”

“Of course I will. You play for me, K. You keep the team together when I’m gone.”

“Sure I will, Harold, sure I will. You can count on old K.”

Delighted that his friend had used his favorite metaphor, he embraced him warmly. They lingered for a moment, holding each other, on the playground.

Part Two:
Stationary Bike

Chapter One: Office

Harold had tackled his physical therapy with gusto, and two weeks after surgery, nearly a month earlier earlier than Dr. Lannstrom had predicted, he began to pedal slowly on a stationary bike. Soon after he began his regimen of squats and hamstring curls, and by March he was able to cycle nowhere for miles. By June he could sense that a return to the basketball court was not out of the question, but he had made his vow, and would not waver. So now his days revolved around a trip to Unit F, the cardio room of the Rec Center, for an intense workout on one of its many machines.

Today as Harold entered the most difficult stretch of his morning, 10-12, two hours before Unit F opened, he was tired, heavy and sinking. After a wretched night during which he had commuted three times from his bed to the kitchen to the black couch, and then back again to his bed, breakfast had been frightening. After he yelled at his children for not eating their fruit and spilling cereal on the floor, he rushed out of the house without saying good-bye to Susan. He had walked around campus for half an hour, had delivered a thoroughly uninspired lecture on Book 11 of St. Augustine's *Confessions* to his 9 o'clock Intro class, and then returned to his office and yet another email from Jeffrey.

Message: 1:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 09:03:09 [pt] 1994
Forward to: larson@iit.edu
To: jfg@meaning.com
From: first123@whitehouse.gov
Subject: Aspen

Dear Jeff: As always, your invitation tempts me. I still have fond memories of the "Takes a Village" symposium you organized in August. I especially enjoyed our evening walk

on the beach. Lovely. But, as you know, I'm not "getting out" as much as I used to, so I'm going to have to pass on the Aspen workshop. But we will, I trust, get together soon. Maybe you can join us at Camp David for Christmas or on the Vineyard again this summer. Hope so.

Love, Hill.

Message 2

From sysop Wed Oct 3 01:18:36 [pt] 1994

From: jfg@meaning.com

To: larson@iit.edu

Subject: Aspen

Planning sessions for MY MEANING AT THE MILENNIUM conference begin this summer. In Aspen. Workshops on civility, socially responsible investment, and the role of religion in politics. And more much more. Hill won't make it. She's taking a back seat. Ceck out the email I forwarded you. The democrats are pretty nervous about the election. There's a bigtime backlash brewing. She's too prominent. Maybe shel'll make a token appearance. Bring in cookies or something. Jst kidding. I'm hoping for Pat Schroder. Meaning and milennial politics. meaning and hte politics of the millennium. the meaning of polltiics at the end of the millenium. the end of hte millenium and the beginning of meaning. the end of meaning and the beginning of the millennium. millennial meaning. Time for reflection. Re-thinking our priorities. It takes a village baby!

What do you think? What should the title be? Can ou make it? You could run a workshop on Plato. The philospoher king and the millennium.. Plato at time's end. I don't know. I'd love to have you there with me, old pal.

j

An email from Hillary Clinton was actually on his computer screen! Her elegant fingers had touched the keys that produced the message. This meant that when Harold touched his keys he was almost touching her. This fact made Harold tremble. At first his shaking was from shock, but it soon evolved into fury. The level of intimacy between Jeffrey and Hillary was unbearable. She was being ill served again when it came to her choice of men. She was being passed from one con artist to the next. How could a

woman so intelligent let this happen? This was the mystery. Perhaps she sensed both Bill's and Jeffrey's deep neediness, and responded with pity and a caring heart. A real man, like Harold, didn't suffer such needs, and so would never attract her attention. This realization was almost unbearable. He had to meet her, to show her what she was doing to herself.

He closed his eyes, rubbed them hard with the palms of his hands, and tried to block out these thoughts. He was pleased that he succeeded and so he concentrated hard and wrote:

Dear Jeffrey: Thank you for your offer, but I'm skeptical about your focus on the millennium. There's enough to think about all year every year, isn't there?

Harold

Message 3

From sysop Wed Oct 3 08:54:27 [ct] 1994
From: fahlbeck@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: schedule

Harold: Thanks for agreeing. But are you sure you want to teach MWF 11-12 next semester? You have never let me put you there before. Don't you play basketball then? Edna

Dear Edna: It's okay. I'm not playing ball any more. I'm retired. I need to keep the 12-1 slot free, though. The exercise room opens at noon, and I need to arrive just then so I can get an empty machine. It's totally filled by 12:15. H.

Message 4

From sysop Wed Oct. 3 09:18:36 [ct] 1994
From: susana@iit.edu
To: larson
Subject: doc

Harold...She's got an appointment at the dermatologist at 4:30. I forgot to mention it. She'll stay late at school and then I'll pick her up. C has a play date with Jessie.

Deborah will pick her up at our house around 3:30. I'm not sure I completely trust her. Anyway, can you be home at 3 for the girls? Or do you have a department meeting? Love, S

Dear S: No meeting. In fact, nothing at all. So, I'll be home at 3. Don't forget to pick Caroline up at Jessie's on your way back with Katie. I'll be home with Jenny.
H.

Message 5

From sysop Wed Oct. 3 1 09:36:18 [ct] 1994
From: judycarl@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: letter

Dear Prof. Larson:

I hope you remember me. I'm an electrical engineering major and I received an A in your greek philosophy class last semester. I'm applying for the Bernice Wiser Scholarship, which is awarded annually to a woman from the Engineering College. Would you be willing to write me a letter of recommendation? My EE advisor thinks a letter from a humanities prof would help. Thanks a bunch!! Have a nice day.
Yours truly, Judy Carlson

Dear Judy: Of course I remember you. I'd be happy to write you a letter. Why don't you bring the forms to my office tomorrow morning?

Harold's mood changed abruptly. He continued to type:

Wait, I just realized that I'll be coming to campus this evening. Why don't you bring the letter to my office around 7 tonight? I won't be busy then and so we can talk a bit about the scholarship. The more information I have, the stronger letter I can write.

Yours,

Dr. L.

Message 6:

From: sysop 5 Wed Oct 3 09:36:54 [ct] 1994
From: awhite@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: retire?

Harold: Gee, it looks like you're really retired. You told me last spring, but I didn't believe you. I thought you'd make your usual outstanding comeback in the Fall. But it looks like you're really not here.

I'm sorry you're retiring. We made a good team. What are you going to do for exercise?

Any chance of coming to Friday's reading session?

All the best,
Alan

Harold thought to himself, *I'm through, finished, and your sweet Jesus can't do a thing for me now?* But he typed:

Yes, Alan, I'm through. Finished. I can't run anymore. I've shifted to a stationary bicycle in the UNIT F exercise room. It's a disorienting change of view, believe me. It's mostly young women, and all I do is sit there, chained to a machine, going nowhere. But at least I go nowhere fast. I try to zip along at 135 rpm for at least 6 minutes. It's an intense workout, and I'm in pretty good shape. I also lift some weights so I'm actually stronger in my upper body than I've been in a while.

I thought about trying to play a little ball, but I chose not to do so. I'm strangely eager to test myself, to see what it is like to confront the finality of my loss. The only thing I can figure out about time is that it doesn't go backwards. I'm saying good-bye forever to what I've loved best. It has to be done. If not now, at some point. I'm trying to face up to my finitude, to understand what it means to be on a machine headed to nowhere.

Sorry, Alan, I'm getting carried away. Think of it as the chemicals in my brain loosening up (ha ha).

I think I might well join you on Friday night. Harold

Message 7

From: sysop Wed Oct 13 09:54:03 [ct] 1994

From: kpeder@iit.edu

To: larson@iit.edu

Subject: taskforce

Harold...would you be willing to chair the task force on the language requirement for the college. Paula Fredrick asked me for some names.

Kent

Kent: sure. H.

Message 8

From: sysop Wed Oct 3 09:54:54 [ct] 1994 Re:
"seratonin"
From: gbishop@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: seratonin

Hey BUDDY. I'm off to the court!!!! Bet you miss our b-ball battles in Unit D. It was a great rivalry while it lasted!!! I'm having a pretty good year. I'd say I average about 5 baskets a game, 3 or 4 assists and a few rebounds, steals thrown in. my usual well balanced game!!!!

Listen, are you feeling depressed? I know I would be. Without basketball. I strongly recommend Prozac. You'll feel much better!!!! I keep telling my wife to take the stuff. I've been getting great results in my lab. Hogs given 300 mg of a psychotropic similar to Prozac consume nearly .6% more feed per day than the ones who don't. This means they're happier animals, Harold, you should see how glad they are to be fed their little eyes just light rightup.

See you soon old BUDDY!! Gary

Dear Gary: Thanks for thinking of my well-being. But I'm not presently in the mood to take prozac. (Perhaps my self-image isn't good enough for that.) I must tell you that I don't think the mind can be reduced to the brain. Nor do I think one's happiness can be chemically engineered to suit one's needs. To be blunt, we're more than bodies and we're not machines.

Don't get me wrong: I'm willing to grant, as any sane person must, the existence of a brain that controls huge amounts of our lives. If you damage a part of my brain, I might well lose my memory or my ability to speak. I understand this. I understand too that schizophrenia or chronic depression may well be the result of a chemical imbalance.

My response to these impressive facts is this: so what? Even if my body is the necessary condition for being alive, even if my brain is the mechanism that controls so much of my behavior, there is vastly more about being human that needs to be explained. Science can tell us so much about the mechanical workings of the human body. And so it's very

good when something needs to be fixed. But can science tell us what it's like to experience having a body? What it's like, in short, to be a human being?

The scientific perspective is a view from nowhere. What I'm interested in is the view from right here. What I mean is this:

From a scientific perspective, there are no purposes, no meaning, in the universe, no point to existence. There's just matter in motion. My brain, on this view, is just a complex entity which moves according to the laws of chemistry and physics. In one sense, the scientific view is true. Your experiment with hogs is a good example. But in another, far deeper sense, the scientific view can never explain enough. For human beings walk through this world with purposes in mind. We experience ourselves as having a point...as having meaning. Science replaces meaning with matter in motion. And the replacement, even if amazingly useful in conjuring up all kinds of technical wonders and repairing those who are damaged, falls pitifully short of telling us who we are.

Who are we, then? We are beings with-- dare I say it-- souls? Now don't rush off to accuse me of being a Christian!!! I'm speaking only of the experience of being human.

Sorry, I'm getting carried away. Good luck with your hogs.

Harold

With his connection to the world exhausted, Harold put his legs on top of his desk, though doing so was hard on his back. A familiar squeamish, haunting regret began to assert itself. While his irritation with his children may have been justified, his outbursts, he knew, were pointless. Susan, of course, wouldn't stay mad at him. Her e-mail, even if it was business-like, was an obvious gesture of reconciliation. And his daughters would forget his outburst, as they always did. He sighed, and resolved to do better next time.

Harold also regretted his e-mail to Judy Carlson and had no idea why he had invited her to his office. Still, he hoped it wasn't a tennis night for Susan. No, it couldn't

be, he realized, for she had played on both Monday and Tuesday. He was free and he would meet Judy Carlson alone, tonight, in his office, and his office could remain as dark as he wanted it to.

Harold took his feet off the desk and the pain that had been tracking him for days shot from his buttock down the back of his thigh,. Hamstring pull, he reasoned, but nothing too severe. He walked to the window, a modern window permanently closed, and looked at the clear blue sky.

The Meaning of the Millennium. Pompous nonsense. What the fuck does meaning mean anyway? Sweet Jesus, he muttered to himself. He calls her Hill. Lovely fucking walk on the beach. At night. That slimey son-of-a-bitch. I bet he touched her! The punk assed motherfrukcer doesn't know a thing about meaning. All this bullshit about taking a village. Where does he get this crap from? From Africa. Motherfucker's never been to Africa. Never lived in a village. How could he? He wouldn't have his hot tub.

For the past few months, Harold had been catching no more than an hour of sleep at a shot. He was now even unable to fall asleep when he and Susan went to bed. When he closed his eyes, instead of sinking, a surge of energy gradually rose from the very bottom of his spine. His legs tingled, a sensation he could only describe by calling it "uncomfortable." He clinched his muscles, tightened every one he could find, and then release them in the hope of coaxing peace back into his bones. He breathed deeply. But his method invariably failed. Charged with energy he would have to get out of bed. Before his injury he had been able to fall asleep by conjuring up soothing images of himself playing basketball. There he would be dribbling with confidence and poise, but now his imaginary body was stiff and unresponsive, wooden and fake. Not his own.

Harold was stunned that 40 years of actual basketball, 40 years of kinesthetic impressions etched, he thought, deep into his soul, had been erased so easily.

Harold returned to his desk, and picked up his manuscript. It was contained in a dark blue binder, about a half an inch thick. He ran his fingers slowly and gently over its title:

CARING LESS ABOUT HEALTH CARE

By Harold Larson
Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy
Iowa Institute of Technology
May, 1994

He opened it and began to read:

We are assaulted, almost daily, by mind-numbing debates about health care in America. The issues are complex, but the goal is simple: to broaden the reach of health care, make it more secure for more people, and to cut its cost. The hard questions, of course, ask how.

The solution is to demote the institution of medicine, for it plays far too large a role in, and commands far too many resources of, our culture. Doctors, whose average salary is around 200,000 dollars, are now near the top of the professional ladder. Equipped with the awe-inspiring tools of modern science, they loom large in our imaginations, paradigms of the beneficent power of technology. Hospitals have become urban shrines, dwarfing schools, museums, libraries, theatres, and gymnasias. The jobs they house are crucial to the economic well-being, as well as the self-image, of every American city.

America has become a medico-centered culture. We are obsessed with health, offended by pain, contemptuous of old age. It is to the doctors we

foolishly turn in our battle against the inevitable suffering that is life.

The crisis in medical care has come about because we care far too much about health. True reform will come only by **CARING LESS ABOUT HEALTH CARE**, by de-centering the institution of medicine, indeed by de-centering the body itself and restoring the soul to its rightful place. True reform will come only when we understand that there is a fundamental distinction between life, which is all that the doctors can give us, and the good life, about which they haven't a clue.

Harold didn't read further. He wasn't in the mood for his long chapter on Descartes, or his painstaking analysis of how the body had replaced the soul as the primary focus of human inquiry and how, as a result, medicine had utterly annihilated ethics and dethroned metaphysics as the queen of the sciences. He wasn't in the mood for his vague predictions about the economic impact of replacing soma-centric medicine with psychiatry, which literally means "medicine of the soul," or for his chapters titled "The Phenomenology of Pain" and "In Defense of Teleology." And if he wasn't in the mood, he wondered, how could he expect Hillary Clinton or anyone else ever to get into the mood?

Maybe the essay just wasn't any good, he thought. Maybe he had just wasted his time. But why then had he already read the thing fifty times since he had written it in a burst of energy in the Spring?

In response to his letter describing **CARING LESS**, and inviting Hillary Clinton to request it, which he had sent to her in July, Harold had only gotten a form letter back from the White House. Even though he had carefully addressed his envelope to "First Lady Hillary R. Clinton," the form letter was machine-signed with a stylish "Bill

Clinton,” who thanked Harold for his letter and assured him that, despite the political setbacks, health care reform remained a top priority for his administration. But Harold wanted more. He had a manuscript on health care sitting on his desk, waiting to be read. His was not just one letter like the thousands of others. His was an invitation, an exhortation to thought. Most important, he had sent it to Hillary, not to Bill.

Obviously, he reasoned, no one had read his letter. Perhaps it had been briefly scanned by Secret Service agents who, after determining that its author was not threatening the First Lady, threw it onto the pile and sent him the standard form letter. But why, he wondered, didn't they show it to Hillary? Perhaps Jeffrey Greenwald, for once in his life, was entirely right. The Democrats *were* putting her backstage, keeping her out of the public arena where she had created such an intense backlash. Americans could not stomach a strong woman as a leader. And Bill was too busy rebutting the accusations brought against him by a woman named Paula Jones to think seriously about health care.

In September, health care reform had been officially pronounced dead by George Mitchell, the Senate majority leader, and one cause of death frequently cited was that Hillary Clinton had been in charge of the reform movement. She, as Rick Brumbaugh told his listeners day after day after day, was one of those feminazi-socialists who were trying to deprive Americans of their right to choose their own doctor. And the Democrats were not much better than the Republicans on this one, for once it became apparent that Hillary was hurting them in the polls, they dropped her like a hot potato. And now, it seemed, they weren't even letting her read her own mail. They prevented her, Harold believed, from requesting his health care reform plan.

Harold knew his manuscript didn't have the slightest chance of producing practical change. He had written it in four days and had never mentioned it to Susan or anyone else. Who among those nurtured by the vulgar sensationalism of the modern media would bother to slow down long enough to read a document as carefully constructed, as reflective, as historically informed, and well conceived as his own? But Harold's concern was that he himself didn't genuinely believe his own ideas.

And yet, he had taken them seriously enough to mention them in a letter to Hillary Clinton. Hillary, whom he knew to be superbly intelligent, hadn't bothered to answer him. Perhaps, he wondered, this was because she had his number.

Harold stood up from his desk, and walked back to the window. He looked out and realized that no one cared about his ideas. But Harold was quick to rebound: *"Damn it,"* he thought, *"my ideas may seem simplistic, but there's a deep truth in them. What if, just as I recommend, people were trained to think hard every day about death and the remorseless passage of time? It's not a matter of "if" only of "when." And this fact, above all others, must be stared at straight. If more people did that certainly they'd have less of a craving to pop Prozac and have plastic surgery to make themselves look younger. They'd reject knee replacements and hip replacements and chemo-therapy, and instead simply face up to the fact that life is relentlessly hard and God awful short. It wouldn't cost a dime and then more people would be better equipped to endure the aches and pains of the decay sure to come."*

Harold turned away from the window and left his office to walk to the bathroom where he splashed cold water on his face. He turned sideways and looked at his profile in the mirror to make sure that his stomach wasn't protruding too far over his belt and, for

the briefest of moments, believed that his book on health care could save Hillary Clinton's political future.

It was only 10:30. Harold returned his manuscript to the empty wooden box on his desk that contained his own writings. He decided to translate Plato's *The Apology of Socrates*, which he would be teaching in his 2 o'clock Greek Philosophy class. He took his much used, intensely annotated, paperback copy of it out of his backpack, yanked a Loeb edition, which contained both the Greek and the English, from his neatly arranged book shelf, and returned to his desk. He knew that translating was going to be difficult for him, since all he really wanted to do was tilt his chair back, put his feet on the desk, close his eyes, and go to sleep. Fortunately, he had virtually memorized the passage.

Apology 26c

For it's possible that neither of us knows anything important, but this man thinks he does know something, when in fact he doesn't, while I, just as I do not know, do not think that I know. So, it at least seems that I am wiser than he by just this little bit: I do not think that I know that which I do not know.

Harold thought about his old friend Socrates, defending himself at his trial, explaining to the Athenian jury of 501 citizens why he shouldn't be executed for corrupting the youth, why he was in fact a great benefactor to the city, not the pest he seemed to be. Socrates described his customary practice of interrogating anyone who had

a reputation for being wise, for thinking he knew something important. He showed that those who have the greatest reputation invariably know the least. Socrates especially targeted the politicians, for they think they know. This is why they can stand in front of a crowd and without hesitation tell the people what should be done. But all it takes is a little examination, Socratic style, and their puffed up self-images burst.

Harold stood up from his desk, and started pacing around the office, muttering to himself.

“Mr. President, you think it’s a good idea to legalize abortion. You think the fetus isn’t a real person with a full set of rights of its own, and so doctors should be allowed to hasten its death. Murder is wrong, but abortion isn’t murder. And so you think a woman’s freedom to choose an abortion is a good thing. This must mean that you know what the good really is. So tell me, Mr. President, what is The Good Itself? You must know. After all, you stand in front of the audience, in your inimitably charming way, telling us what we should do. So, tell me, what is The Good?”

He could see that Bill Clinton was utterly untroubled by his assault and was smiling slightly. So Harold didn’t give him a chance to respond.

“Real wisdom, what Socrates calls human wisdom, requires us to acknowledge that there really is no wisdom. To be human means to be incomplete, unfulfilled, ever searching, ever ready to question human life. There is no synoptic view, no answer to life taken as a whole. There is no point, only the desire to find one. The meaning of human life is to question the meaning of human life.”

Harold was struck by this thought, and so he stopped pacing and considered sending an e-mail to Jeffrey Greenwald. Perhaps he should propose a panel at the Aspen

Conference titled “*meaning as questioning.*” Human being as the questioning animal who wants above all else to know just because we know we do not. Only in questioning, therefore, is there meaning, is there truth. Harold hit the keyboard:

Jeffrey- one thought for a possible panel at your Aspen/millennium conference. Why not explore the notion that the meaning of human life can only be found in the very questioning of human life? That questions themselves are the answer. We are the questioning animal, the animal questioning itself. And we do so because we know that we don't know. For this, and only this, is the motive force behind the asking of questions.

Anyway, just a thought. Harold

Harold put his legs back up on the desk, and staring out the window he saw himself in Aspen, Colorado, leading a panel discussion on the question of meaning and the meaning of questions.

Everybody was wearing flannel shirts, including Hillary-- hers was a Blackwater plaid. She sat in the front row and looked right into him, with her fisted hand elegantly propping up her chin. Harold spoke with a quiet urgency, and a sense of deep conviction, in a voice forged on the flat plains of Iowa. Here in Aspen, where the mountains were beautiful, the homes luxurious, and the restaurants superb, there was no hope of serious questioning. What struck Harold, as he addressed Jeffrey's well-heeled group of CEOs, lawyers, Hollywood power-brokers, politicians, and academics, was the absence of any malice or envy in his own voice. Here was a man who had been ignored by the media, by the profession of academic philosophers, by his students, frequently even by his own wife, and yet he was clearly a man at peace with himself, a man who understood that virtue was its own reward, a man willing to share his ideas, but who

would do so only if invited. As a consequence of who he was, the audience listened to him with an intensity equal to his own.

Harold broke from his reverie. He didn't have to prepare for his lecture on the *Apology*. He could just start talking, and the right words would follow. The real question was, what would he do until noon, when Unit F opened up?

He retrieved the directory from underneath the phone and searched for the number of Centerville's sports shop. Harold was thinking of putting a stationary bike in his TV room. Perhaps he could then start working out twice a day, once in Unit F, and once at home. Maybe he would even put a Nautilus machine in his basement. For the past 9 months, he had been lifting weights in addition to the aerobic workout on the stationary bike. But without his customary two hours of basketball, he still had put on close to 10 pounds since his knee surgery in January.

Harold put the telephone book down and placed his hands on his hips. With his thumb and forefinger, he pinched his soft and pliant girth, and then grabbed a handful of fat in each of his hands, and squeezed it hard. When he released his grip, he let his flat hands slide down his belly towards his groin, feeling all the way the gentle rolling hill of his girth. With his hands gently massaging his groin, he walked around his office, with his head cast down.

The answer, he reasoned, had to be either women or death. The question he was asking himself was why, at the age of 45, had he become concerned as never before about the gradual but relentless expansion of his midsection? Harold stared out the window.

"Yo, Harold, what's up?"

"Not much K. I'm just a little worried about the weight I'm gaining."

“What fo, Harold? You ain’t fat. You don’t drink no Colt 45s like the rest of those bozos who hang on the stoop.”

“I know, but it bothers me. I want to be skinny, like you.”

“Harold, my man, you ain’t me. I eat my fries and drink my shakes all day, but it don’t matter, cause I don’t put on a pound. It’s just the way my skinny ass self does its thing. Besides, why you want to be skinny? You look all right. You got yourself a nice wife and you ain’t on the prowl for no more pussy.”

“True.”

“Then what’s it matter if you getting a little thick? You ain’t gonna die or nothing from being fat.”

“I don’t know, K, I don’t understand it too well. Vanity. Getting thicker symbolizes the passage of time. I can’t stop it, K, and it goes in one direction only. I don’t play ball anymore, K, it’s gone, irretrievable, not here, not now, not ever. It’s over. That’s what my extra 10 pounds means.”

“Harold, what the fuck you talking about,” K said and he started to giggle. “You stop all this bullshitting right now, you hear me. You just get your non-fat ass over to Unit F and ride your tail off on that stationary bike, you hear? Grow up, Harold, take it like a man. Don’t matter if you carrying a little bit extra weight. You doing all right for a man your age.”

“Right, K, got it.”

Harold said this out loud. As he departed, K almost bumped into Hillary Clinton as she entered his office.

He continued to look out his window and saw flocks of students moving towards their 11 o'clock classes. For a second, he thought he saw Judy Carlson, and his whole body awakened. But he was probably wrong. After all, Judy, with her big bones, big breasts sheltered by an IIT sweat-shirt, blonde hair permed, full lips and plain face, looked like all the rest.

Harold saw another student he thought he recognized. A big guy, a graduate student in agronomy, who had occasionally joined the noon game. He imagined he was on the court with him once again.

"I was really fast you know. Not big, not very strong, but quick hands, a deadly jump shot, excellent vision of the court. I could do it all: pass, shoot, play defense. I could run with you guys."

The big guy's wide open eyes stared at the man in the herringbone jacket who had grabbed him hard by his shoulders. He easily could have broken away, but, momentarily at least, was too befuddled to do so.

"You say we're only up by one? We're up by two, but it doesn't matter. Because I'm going to score on this play, no matter what you do. If you guard me tight, I'll drive right by you. If you leave me alone out there-- doesn't matter how far out-- I'll bury the J. You double-team me and I'll dump it off to one of my boys here and he'll just lay it in. So for you there is no hope. I know we're up by two, but I'll let you call it one, because I'm going to score on you right now."

When he shook the big guy it was rough, but almost affectionate, almost jocular. As if Harold himself knew he was acting.

“I used to play this game well. At night I could put myself to sleep with images of dribbling a basketball. I could feel the leather hit my hand, time and time and time again; I could hear the sound the ball made as it struck the wooden floor and feel the control I exerted over its direction. The images were real enough to constitute a practice session of their own, and so I’d invent new moves or hone old ones. That’s how I got through graduate school. I’d stare attentively at the professor, as if his droning lecture were actually interesting, but all the time I’d be on the court, running, faking right, going left, pulling up for the quick shot, snatching rebounds, flying high above the rim where, in reality, I’d never been. I could play this game.”

The big guy appeared unmoved.

“It’s strange and disturbing but true. Since my retirement from the court, my ability to bring such images to life has faded almost totally. When once I could summon them at will, and use them as a pathway to sleep, now they are inaccessible. For reasons I cannot fathom, the best I can do imagine myself hitting a baseball, a game which I have always found far too slow and never really liked.

“I no longer can imagine myself playing basketball. Don’t you see? The images are gone, they’re all gone, so terribly fast.”

Harold knew the big guy understood nothing, and certainly not the poignant finality of his loss. He had said farewell to what had been most reliable and dear. No longer would he enter the oasis of play, where the world shrank to a sacred rectangle, and the halves were measured in minutes, where the rules became rituals and what counts as victory was simple and agreed upon...where the future did not intrude and where the game, once over, could be resurrected the next day.

The big guy had dull eyes, broad shoulders and a wide waist. His hair was longish and sandy blonde, and he moved with the casual stride of a confident athlete. About 6' 1", he wore black and red basketball shoes, a gray tee shirt, a backwards cap, and the very baggy gym shorts of one who takes the look of the game seriously. A standard, uninspired, 23 year big guy. But a more than decent ballplayer. He had good hands, and his game was, by and large, solid and sensible. His few ventures into flamboyance exposed his weaknesses, however, and his jump shot was only effective from the baseline, and not far from the basket. But his inside moves were consistent, smart, and productive. He could rebound and he could run, but Harold quickly saw how both to defend and score on him. Force him to take a jump shot longer than he'd like, and, after establishing his outside game, blow by him to the hoop. 6' 1" with no range on the jump shot means the future is not promising, and so unless he was deeply serious, as Harold himself was, he'd become fat.

Harold had to reach up in order to place his hands on the big guy's shoulders. "Post low, I'll get you the ball. They double-team you I'll nail the jumper."

The big guy's look was dim-witted and, without trying to break away, he said, "What're you doing mister?"

"Just go low. I'll bring the ball up. Don't worry, you'll get your shots."

"Get off me, mister," he said as he broke away.

All the players were looking at him now.

If he concentrated, Harold could see a faint reflection of himself in the window. He winced as he recalled one of his more familiar strategies. Measured against his professional colleagues, especially those having written books published by prestigious

presses like Oxford or Princeton, he would remind himself that he was, without a doubt, the better athlete. When he came up against a superior ball-player, like the varsity players who occasionally played in Unit D, he consoled himself with the sure knowledge of his superior intelligence.

He was back in Harlem, this time talking to a young black kid.

“Where do you think you’re going to be when you’re my age, son?” Harold said with quiet authority. “You think you’ll be able to play the way I do now? I doubt it, I really do doubt it.” He paused and looked carefully at the tautly muscled black kid with the stooped shoulders and said, “frankly, son, I hope you’ll still be alive when you’re my age.”

The kid didn’t comment on the oddity of the sentence. He just sneered and said, “shit, man, you can’t play no ball. Get off this court. You just talking.”

The kid stared at him straight, and Harold walked off calmly.

Harold again walked by the Harlem playground. This time there were several kids playing ball, but an organized game had not yet formed. These kids were only 15 or so. Skinny, loud, tough, black kids, just like K. They were all fast. What was distinctive about their game was their refusal to take the open jump shot, the shot Harold himself had loved so well. In their quest for glory, these kids demanded that their shot be closely contested. They hurled their bodies into the fray near the hoop, twisted and turned and kissed the ball softly off the backboard and through the net.

“Listen, you’ve got to take the open jump shot,” Harold said after he had managed to stop a kid by grabbing him by the shoulders. “It’s there, you take it, you

score, you win. Your man guards you, then you go to the hoop. Otherwise, stay put. You got that?"

The boy was, at first, too surprised to speak. Harold interpreted his silence as disagreement.

"You should listen to me. I used to play this game, as fast as you, and what I couldn't do with my legs I did with my eyes and with my finger-tips which could send the ball flying gently towards nothing but net."

Harold shook the boy, harder than before.

"Get your hands off me, man," the boy said.

"Listen to me, son, you need to take the open jump shot. It's yours for the having. When I played, I could get 20 a night, and half would be open shots just like the one you ignored. Don't despise what's given to you."

"Get off me, man," the kid repeated, but Harold grabbed more tightly.

The kid broke away just as his several friends arrived around Harold. This time he was not a benevolent eccentric in a herringbone jacket, but a true offender. The boys started slapping Harold's head and pushing him. When he fell to the ground, one kicked him in the ribs, but the group as a whole had no taste for such violence, and when K told them to stop, they all did. They had, after all, come to play ball. The glasses, which Harold had never worn but for some reason had appeared on his face in this particular fantasy, lay bent on the court. He picked them up and walked away. There was some blood, not much, and he hurt. But the hurt was nothing like the pain he had known so well from the combat he had loved best.

Susan was concerned when she saw him, but he easily assuaged her. That night, after he turned the reading light off, and said his customary prayer-- “ Please God, give me the strength to see beyond myself”-- after he closed his eyes for sleep, he wondered what version of restlessness he would face. Would he wake up at 1 or 2, would he wander around the house, visit the kitchen, and then sleep on the couch?

This time he was on another playground, in New York City, but he didn’t think it was Harlem.

“I used to play some ball,” he said as he put his hands firmly on the boy’s shoulders. The boy looked up at him in curiosity.

“You did?”

“Yes I did. Why, does that surprise you?”

The boy, an Asian kid not more than 12, wearing a Knicks basketball shirt and baggy pants, looked down at his feet, a little embarrassed.

“That’s okay. I’m old now. Look, you’re left-handed like me. But you can’t do everything with your left hand. You’ve got to develop your right. Start off just dribbling with your right- like this. Remember, the defender probably thinks you’re right-handed; most people are. Dribble slowly to the right- like this; even look to the right, then quick- like this!- cross-over, blow by him on the left.”

The boy was clumsy as he tried to imitate Harold’s maneuver. When he transferred the ball from his right hand to his left, he couldn’t control it, and it went spinning away.

“I can’t do it.”

“Of course you can. You just need to work on it.”

The boy did, and Harold stayed to help him. Careful never to run, for that was when his knee hurt, he slowly went through his moves, breaking them down into their elements to be inspected and imitated by the boy. Soon another boy, also about 12, but this time one of the many recent Russian immigrants living in the neighborhood, came over and asked if he could play. Of course he could. Then another boy, a black kid, then two Israelis, a few Arabs, a Latino with a wry smile, then several other black kids. Harold organized them into teams, but spent most of the time drilling them, and much of the time retrieving the ball after their errant shots and passes. The boys were deferential for the first hour, but by the second they wanted to call Harold “Pops.” He wouldn’t allow them to do this, and so they settled on “Doc.”

After the second hour, the boys, who naturally were tireless, tried to persuade him to stay. They failed, but Harold assured them he would return the next day, and he, as these boys could sense, was one to keep a promise. The boys crowded close to him, several were even touching him, as he told them what drills to work on when he was gone. He said good-bye, patted a few of their heads, and walked off the court to the sound of young voices bidding him a cheerful farewell.

Harold was tired, and he walked slowly. The crowd clapped loudly and appreciatively. As usual, he had done well; a solid game, 18 points, a few rebounds, 9 assists and no turnovers. But Harold, never one to make a show, did no more than raise his head, then slightly his hand, to acknowledge their tribute. The sweat bit into his eyes, his body drooped in compelling fatigue. He walked with heavy steps, with the dignity that comes from an awareness of how quickly his accomplishments would fade. He knew

where he was going. He was headed off the court, to the locker room, where he would sit and listen to the steady rhythm of his breathing and feel the cleansing shower of his perspiration. Soon, when he would sit on the wooden bench, he would feel yet again the familiar but uncanny sensation; he'd be nowhere but in the still presence of the game finally over.

Harold picked up the toothbrush he kept in his desk, and headed to the departmental bathroom. After peeing, washing his hands carefully, and then brushing his teeth, he unbuttoned his shirt, took it off, and examined the reflection of his physique. He flexed his biceps for the mirror. At that moment, Kent Pederson, the chairman of his department, entered. Kent was short, squat and blonde. His glasses were large and concealed his intelligent but uneventful face. He was startled when he saw the half-naked Harold, but showed almost nothing but a friendly smile.

“Uh, hi Harold.”

“Oh hi Kent. I spilled some coffee on my shirt. Thought I'd better wash it off before the stain set in.”

Kent didn't respond.

“I must be losing my hand-eye coordination. Early onset Alzheimer's maybe.”

Harold actually squirted some soap on his clean shirt, and then began to clean the area of it that he thought most likely to receive a splash of coffee.

“Ironic, huh? I'm an old athlete, Kent, and here I am spilling coffee on my shirt.”

“Happens to everybody. Heck, I once spilled a hot chocolate all over a new suit just before a meeting with the Dean. That was really something.”

“Sounds like it,” said Harold as he put his wet shirt back on.

“Hey, listen to this,” Kent said, obviously relieved that Harold was now fully clothed. “I was on my way to the office when I bumped into a freshman from my intro logic. He said hi and I asked him where he was going. He told me to his writing class. You know, the freshman writing seminar they all have to take? Anyway, I asked him what they were doing in that class. And you know what he said? ‘Reading books and writing.’ So I asked him what kind of books they were reading. He said ‘oh you know, regular books. We just read them, that’s all.’ Can you imagine that Harold?”

“Geez, what’s the world coming to, Kent?”

“You got me Harold. Standards get lower every year it seems. I think we should change the writing requirement to two semesters.”

“That might be a good idea, but you know the engineering departments won’t like it. The students don’t have any time for electives as it is. Plus our own enrollments might go down if we did that.”

“Hmm, you might be right about that. But we need to do something about these students. They’re good with the computer, but borderline illiterate.”

“I’m with you on that one, Kent. Sorry about the shock I gave you.”

“Oh heck, that’s okay. See you later.”

“Fat-assed honky mutthafucker,” Harold said to himself when his chairman left the bathroom. *“Didn’t your momma teach you any manners? Walking in on me when I’m trying to have a little quality time with myself. Punk. Chop you to pieces.”*

Harold splashed cold water on his face, wiped it off, and stared intently at his reflection. He was looking at a serious man, a man with a purpose whose face was

etched by the nobility of his pain, a man who was wearing a wet shirt. He tilted his head to check his profile, and then walked out calmly to return to his office.

Harold's eyes ached with fatigue, his chest and shoulders were slumping under their own weight. He knew that if he didn't leave his office immediately he'd surely lean back in his desk chair and fall into the kind of sleep from which he would awaken feeling even worse. Harold gave up the pretense of work and productivity. The sky was a bright blue and this, with his memory of the fresh morning air which had greeted him on his walk to campus, beckoned him as the only possible defense against the miserable fate awaiting him in his chair. Despite a strong inclination not to, Harold forced himself to get up, grab his pack, and move out the door, even if it was only to take a spin around the campus to kill some time until Unit F opened.

Kill time. This is what he had come to. Harold Larson, former point guard, father of three, husband of one, Ross Hall Professor of Philosophy, author of two books and a stunningly innovative approach to health care...Harold Larson who used to play ball with the brothers in Harlem and had once even lunched with Hillary Clinton and kissed her cheek lightly upon parting...Harold Larson, a man who could think through the future of America, was unable to figure out what to do for the next half hour.

Chapter Two: Susan's Office

"Geez, Gar, you gave me a scare."

"Sorry old Buddy," said Gary Bishop, who had just tapped Harold's left shoulder from behind and then sprung to his right. "But I was so darn happy to see you. You're

heading over to Unit D, aren't you? You're finally making your comeback? That's great news, old buddy, just great. Let's hustle on over together; I'm a little late."

"No, Gary, I've explained to you that I'm retired. I'm taking a walk over to the library, and then I'll go to Unit F for a workout. No more basketball for me."

"Don't be nuts, Harold. If your knee hurts, just take a good anti-inflammatory after you play, and you'll feel fine. You should try 800 mg of Akaustos, which is a nice new one on the market. It's not just an analgesic, it's therapeutic as well. Swelling goes down, rate of healing goes up. Want me to get you some? I have plenty of samples in my lab."

"Do you give them to hogs?"

"Oh yes. Their joints often get swollen. They spend their days standing, you know. Poor things. Akaustos works pretty good. Give it a try, why dontch ya?"

"I don't think so Gar. I'm finished with basketball, washed up."

"Oh baloney! Geez, you sure do give up easy, dontch ya?"

"Easy? Gary, there's nothing I do that's easy."

"Okay, then. Hey listen old buddy, I've got to go to the gym. Big game today, I can feel it. I'll find my range and soon I'll be making hoops from the top of key. Sure you don't want to come?"

"Yup."

"Okay, bye Harold," and with that Gary waddled off to the Rec Center.

"Honky mutthafucker. Chop you to pieces. What gives you the right to tell me how live my life? You know nothing."

"You got that straight," K replied.

“He’s a mealy mouthed, overweight meat scientist. He’s a glad-handing, smiley faced dispenser of drugs.”

“Yeah, man, he’s a dealer. He reminds me of my cousin Bernard. Used to sell crack at 128th Street, and he’d always be on the corner smiling, advertising, trying to get little kids to try it. I’d tell him, ‘Bernard, that shit ain’t right. You shouldn’t be selling drugs to no little kids. If a man wants to buy your product, that’s one thing, but you ain’t got to expand your market. So wipe that smiley off yo face.’”

“Good point, K. I’m not going to take his drugs.”

The surge of anger he felt at his friend energized Harold, and his fatigue lifted so that his knee didn’t hurt at all. Even the pain in his buttock and thigh, the hamstring pull, evaporated. He stood on the sidewalk and tried hard to determine where to go.

Surprisingly, the only answer he could come up with was the College of Industrial Design. He’d walk over to Susan’s office, something he hadn’t done in years. Even more surprisingly, he wondered for a second whether they’d be able to have a quickie over her computer, something they had never done. In fact, Harold wasn’t sure that they had ever a quickie, for he wasn’t quite sure where the threshold of the quickie exactly was. Especially during the year before Katie was born, he and Susan had often made love in the afternoon, and these sessions were usually quick, but he still wasn’t sure they qualified as quickies. For they weren’t the least bit spontaneous. He and Susan had simply fallen into a pleasant and convenient pattern, one both of them soon could count on. Didn’t a quickie mean popping buttons and flying zippers? His and Susan’s afternoons never included those. Therefore, Harold concluded, he had never had a quickie. He resolved on the spot to change this sorry state of affairs.

But he worried. Susan could take quite a while to build to her orgasm, and when she reached it, it was often intense and prolonged. Harold remembered one night when she had come and come, even after he was done, and he was unable to comprehend what was transpiring in the oceanic waves undulating beneath him. For reasons unavailable to him, he had slipped into Jeffrey's New York accent, and said to her, "Okay, already, enough is enough." She had laughed uproariously.

It was unlikely, Harold understood, that he would face such a situation today. In fact, he reasoned, it was unlikely he'd succeed at all in having his quickie, for Susan was nothing if not methodical when it came to sex. For example, she seemed bound by a rule that limited them to having sex only once a day. This was true even during the height of their sexual passion. On a Saturday before Katie was born, they had been snowed in by a massive blizzard. It was Iowa at its worst. The wind was howling, the snow was horizontal, and temperatures were close to 20 below. They had made love in the morning, and then had taken a nap. After lunch Harold had tried to initiate round two, but without being the least bit hostile Susan had refused. Her quota had been met, and now she wanted to lie in bed and read design magazines.

When he reached Susan's building, he took the elevator to the 5th floor, and knocked on her door.

"Hi doll," she said as she looked up from the computer screen into which she had been staring intently. She looked glad to see him and not the least bit surprised.

"Hi Susan. I got bored and thought I'd take a walk before I went to the gym. So here I am. I can't stay. Just wanted to say hello."

"Well it's sure nice to see you. Why don't you sit down Harold."

“No, thanks. My hamstring’s been hurting, especially when I get up from sitting in a chair. Susan, I have a question.”

“What’s that, Harold?”

“Do you think you and I could have a quickie? I don’t mean right now—although that would be fine-- I mean sometime in the future.”

“What are you talking about Harold?”

“A quickie. You know. Short, unexpected sexual encounter. Happens quickly in an unusual place: a closet, an office, on the rug in a living room. Do you think you and I could ever have an experience like that?”

“I don’t know. But I don’t think so.”

“Well, I think we could, Susan. But we’d have to work at it.”

“Okay, Harold, why don’t we work at it.”

She got up from her chair and walked to the door, which she closed. She then put her arms around Harold and gave him a kiss. Her lips on his felt cold and dry, but he tried to respond with something resembling passion.

“Maybe tonight?”

“Oh sure, that’s fine,” he said with relief. “Well, I’ve got to go. I’ll be home at 3. You’re picking up Katie, right?”

“Yup. See you later Harold.”

“Bye Susan.”

Where was Judy Carlson at this moment, Harold wondered as he walked out of the College of Industrial Design and surveyed the expanse of lawn that lay between it and

the Rec Center. Should he walk over to the Engineering Building and look for her? No need, he realized. She'd be coming to his office this evening.

Chapter Three: Unit F

The guys from his old basketball game were already dressed and on the court, there were no students preparing for phys ed classes, Harold was early for the opening of Unit F, and so he was alone. Being in the gym, taking off his clothes and preparing to put on his shorts and shirt and running shoes, was enough to cheer him. Soon he'd be going

full blast. During his basketball days, Harold had always dressed hurriedly, sometimes jogging to the court with his shoes still untied. The habit had stayed with him, and even though he was only going to Unit F and not to a game, he got dressed in a flash and threw his street clothes into the locker with little care. He flexed his biceps into the mirror, smiled shyly, and then walked briskly away. He was standing in front of the closed door of Unit F a good 5 minutes before opening time.

At precisely noon, Harold entered the empty exercise room and got on his favorite stationary bicycle, the machine he had used for the past 6 months. Hoping that the pain in his thigh, which had re-appeared, would soon dissipate, he set his program: the 36 minute hill. 4 minutes of warm-up, then a steady climb for 10, then 10 minutes which alternated between climbs, which became progressively steeper, and valleys. Then 2 minutes of cool-off, followed by an 8 minute sprint, and then a final 2 minutes of cool-off. Harold set his work level at 11. 12 was the most difficult. He planned to average between 80 and 90 rpms for almost all of the program, until the sprint, when he'd bump it up to 130-140. Harold loved this workout. His heart would pound, his legs churn, he'd sweat like a demon and push himself to almost maximum effort when he scaled the highest hills or reached 140 on the sprint. When it was over, the meter would tell him that he had burned nearly 600 calories, but he had no idea whether that was a trustworthy figure or not. He'd then do his 50 sit-ups, lift weights for a few minutes, take a shower, and do some stretching while he dried off. The whole workout would be done in less than an hour, and each segment of his body would be well exercised.

But Harold recoiled at the word "workout." *Workout* meant work, wages, watching the clock, straining to finish, aiming for the work's end and caring most about

its result, which in this case was a trim body that was nearing 50 years old. What a workout wasn't was play. Play wants itself, not its end. Biking on a stationary machine in a room whirring with the mindless sounds of identical machines: no one wants that for itself.

This morning, when he got on the bike at noon, the TV had yet to be turned on. In just a few minutes, however, it would be since Unit F would be flooded by students, most of them young women who insisted the TV be on while they worked out. Despite the fact that he was appalled by the presence of the screen, Harold deferred to the wishes of the majority, and so every time he cycled, he had to watch "Time of Our Lives." The ominous opening, repeated after every commercial, began with the slow ticking of an antique clock.

In March, when Harold had first starting coming to Unit F, he was vaguely amused by the soap operas he was forced to watch. He had never seen them before, and he convinced himself that he was learning something important about the trivialities of his culture by cycling to Nowhere on his stationary bike, captive to daytime television. But after a week or so, every scene of these stories had become repulsive to him. A woman, usually pencil thin except for two staunch breasts, would talk to a man whose rock hard handsomeness had an edge of cruelty to it. The two would gaze into each other's sparkling eyes, and speak with an intensity they could barely contain. Scene after scene, most but a few seconds long, aimed to produce the same instantly high level of burning need.

It was the continual eye contact that had first come to distress Harold. Real conversations were conducted with flitting eyes, eyes looking down, up, away, here or

there in the discomfort of the moment, but almost never directly into the other. Eye-to-eye contact was reserved for extraordinarily rare instances, be they of philosophical dialogue or the intimacy of love. And then, even better, was the gaze beyond, towards the stars, the heavens, towards what is higher than the human. The mad illusion of the soaps was that human relationships could nourish the hunger for meaning, that the human eye was meant only to see itself reflected in another. Each scene segued seamlessly into the next and formed a relentless monotone of human discourse tanked up on phoney expectations.

Soaps feed the national need for meaning. Another thought for Jeffrey.

Barbara realizes John does care about her. Samantha fumes when Kirk says he's already been married three times before. Carrie and Mike are in a car accident and Kristen is stunned when Rudolfo tells her Pietro is not dying. Amber is determined to get Austin back and Meg is still upset that Ben thought she was his dead wife, Maria, when they made love while trapped in the cave.

Harold pedalled hard, reaching 110 rpms, even though he was only 12 minutes into the ride. The noise of the bike, coupled with his own intense breathing, was almost enough to block out the sound of the TV. The pain in his thigh was gone.

Harold did not understand why the students who exercised in Unit F always wanted the TV on. Didn't they wish for a respite, for a bit of silence and contemplative solitude in order to dwell within their own thoughts? Weren't they able, as he was, to feel those subtle flashes of joy that come from the discovery that, yes, this is my mind, this is myself, and it cannot be taken away from me?

Harold wondered if Judy Carlson ever worked out at Unit F. Perhaps he'd ask her tonight. He increased the pace on his cycle to 115 rpms. His fatigue had poured out of him with his sweat.

Every machine in the room was now occupied. A large young woman wearing headphones approached him and bluntly asked, "how long will you be on the bike?"

Without looking at her Harold answered, "about twenty minutes."

"What?" she asked, not realizing that she hadn't taken off her headphones or turned down her music.

"About twenty minutes," he said loudly.

"Can I have the bike when you're done?" she asked as she took her headphones off.

"There's a sign up sheet by the door," he told her. "You should put your name on it. That way you'll get the next available machine."

"Okay. But can I have this bike when you're done?" she asked again.

"It's not up to me," he explained. He was becoming annoyed. "There's a sign up sheet. Put your name on it."

She didn't respond because she was staring at the TV where a dark haired man with two days of beard was speaking intensely to a woman whose breasts seemed poised to grab his throat. Harold finally looked at her and saw that her unattractive face was covered with acne. He softened immediately and said, "You should sign up on the sheet," he repeated. "That way you'll get a machine."

"Oh, okay. Where is it?"

"By the door," he said patiently.

“Oh, okay,” she said. As she walked to the door she never took her eyes off the screen.

After a momentary lull when his sadness slowed him down, Harold resumed his climb of a steep hill and quickly regained his momentum. Suddenly there was a commercial. Normally he welcomed the commercials: their rhythm and the intonation of the voices were more familiar to him than the intense dialogue of the soap, and so felt soothing. This time, however, he was shocked to see Rick Brumbaugh, the fat talk-show host, with the look of a 12 year old choir boy and the soul of an assassin. One of Hillary Clinton’s most vicious critics, there he was, smiling away, with flags forming the background, advertising his radio show, “America Speaks.” He was fulminating about the femi-naziis who were destroying American culture, the gay rights activists who promoted sodomy, and the Dionsaur left-wingers, like Hillary Clinton and Jeffrey Greenwald, who were trying to destroy the American medical system. Only in America, Rick thundered, could you pick your own doctor, and this sacred right was being threatened by those whom he described with a sneer as the last of the liberal intellectuals. Greenwald, Brumbaugh explained, was an enemy of the free market whose views were formed during the radical 60’s and who had actually written a book in praise of socialism. And what else was Hillary’s health care plan, but socialized medicine, a system where you would be at the mercy of a vast governmental bureaucracy? Why, if Hillary Clinton has her way, Brumbaugh ominously warned, a bureaucrat from Washington will tell you whether you’re going to get an operation or not. He pontificated about health care, even though Hillary’s reform package had already been killed in the Senate, and when he

exaggerated the role Jeffrey Greenwald played in the formation of the Clintons' policies, Brumbaugh, Harold believed, was introducing an anti-semitic undertone to his diatribe.

Harold reasoned that Rick's discomfort with the power and grace, the raw animal charm as well as the intelligence of Hillary Clinton, derived from his lack of success with women. He was chubby but his wrists were thin; he was a wimp, a boy terrified and confused by his morning erections and the girl sitting in front of him in his English class. But he and his cohort had succeeded: the Democrats' prospects of holding onto the House or re-gaining the Senate in November seemed dim. Bill Clinton himself, facing accusations by Paula Jones, seemed doomed for 1996. The tide was turning in America, and it was turning against government, against health care reform, against Bill and, most painfully of all, against Hillary.

"He's a fat-ass punk, Harold, you gotta take him down. Your girl is in big trouble."

"I know. But I tried, K, I sent her a letter, I offered her my book, 'Caring Less About Health Care.' But she didn't get the letter. She didn't ask for the book. I got a form letter back from the White House and it was signed Bill Clinton. Hillary never got the letter."

"Bill." K giggled. "Damn, that boy knows how to party. But you gotta get her your book, Harold. That shit's important."

"Do you really think so?"

"Sure do. You the man, Harold, you the health care man. Care less about the doctors and the hospitals and the body so that you care more about the soul. That shit's good."

Harold realized that K had just made a subtle suggestion: change the title, which now was entirely negative. Care less so that you care more. As usual, K was on to something. Less is more: an old saying, but dead on right.

“K, how do I get her the book?”

His friend paused, looking puzzled. Then he said, “Damn, I don’t know. But you gotta think of something. We counting on you to save the Democrats. We may lose the House in November, but we gotta keep Bill Clinton in the White House in 96. He’s a pin-head with a dick for a brain but he’s the best we’ve got. You gotta put the soul on the political agenda, and pump life back into your girl Hillary. You gotta do it.”

His dialogue with K was interrupted by Rick Brumbaugh hawking a new CD, “The Disk of Duties,” which consisted of various illustrated stories. Kids could click onto any figure on the screen, and learn of the character’s moral dilemma. Should Johnny Appleseed plant an apple tree in Mr. Wilson’s back yard if Mr. Wilson has not given him explicit permission? After all, the apples could feed a lot of people. But, no, private property, as the little parrot who came on the screen to remind the viewer of the correct answer, was not to be violated. What about finding a marijuana plant growing in Daddy’s basement? Should Sally report this crime to the local policer officer who led the D.A.R.E. program in her school? Of course she should. Daddy needs to be punished so that he can be helped. And protesting abortion at the Planned Parenthood clinic on Saturday mornings? Is that better than going to the soccer game? You betcha.

Harold was infuriated, and he churned his legs harder. Even though he was tackling the penultimate hill, his speed still hovered over 110 rpm. He only wanted to go faster and faster, harder and harder, he wanted to feel the pain in his legs spread

throughout his body and his heart to pound hard against his ribs as if trying to escape a cage. He wanted his lungs to become bellows and work with mindless efficiency. He was Harold Larson, athlete, eyes on the prize, willing to leave it all on the court, able to withstand the worst kind of pain in order to drive himself towards his goal. He may have been on a stationary bicycle, but inside he was flying.

He did it-- 140 rpms. *“Keep it going, keep it going, keep it going. Fuck, it hurts,”* he said to himself. The pain screamed in his legs. *“Can’t do it...can’t do it...oh yes I can, I can, I can.”* Harold did it. He finished the 8 minute sprint, and when the resistance in the pedals dropped, so too did his speed, all the way down to 80, to 70, to 60, to 50. He relinquished control of his legs, let his upper body slump, gave in to the fatigue. The machine seemed to be offering no resistance whatsoever. At first Harold thought this was an illusion caused by his having been going so fast, but then he realized that the little screen above the handlebars had gone dark. He felt a small flash of triumph when he got off the bike.

The young woman who had spoken to him earlier approached him again as he was getting off. “Are you finished?”

“I am, but the machine’s broken. I broke the machine.”

“Huh?”

“The bike is broken. It doesn’t work.”

“Do the wheels still turn?”

“Yes, but there’s no power, no resistance. It’s broken.”

“Oh that’s okay,” she said, “I don’t go very fast.”

“No, it’s not okay. You shouldn’t use a broken bike.”

The student ignored him and was about to get on the bike, when Harold said, “wait, I’ll wipe it off for you. It’s a little wet.”

“Okay,” she said.

Harold torn off a few paper towels that were kept by the door, and returned to wipe the broken bike thoroughly. The poor girl had enough problems. He didn’t want her to have to touch his sweat.

His shirt was drenched. He was done, spent, in the presence of a pathetic young woman, and his legs hurt. He turned to leave Unit F and as he did he K’s voice echoed in his head: *you gotta bring him down, Harod. You the man, the health care man. We counting on you.* He walked slowly towards the lockerroom.

Chapter Four: Class

Harold sat on the bench in front of his locker, lost in beautiful fatigue and pain. Sweat dripped from his head to the floor. He rose with difficulty, peeled off his shirt,

pushed down his shorts and removed his socks and shoes, leaving a soaking pile on the floor. He headed for the shower.

Still breathing hard, Harold stood for several minutes, bent over, his hands on the front of his thighs. A thick stream of hot water poured over his lower back. Finally, he was able to stand erect. When he did so, he felt the familiar pain in the back of his leg. He was too tired to go to the weight-room or do his sit-ups, or his usual stretching routine in front of the hair dryer, but his mind was still and he was no longer angry. He felt a wave of gratitude at Rick Brumbaugh, who had provided the fuel for his extremely fast ride, mix with the pinch of sympathy he felt for the tall girl with pimples.

Finally cleansed of his miserable night, Harold was able to notice the beauty of the day on his slow walk back to his office. He stopped for a moment, closed his eyes tight, tilted his head upwards to get a face full of autumn sunshine. In his office, he flopped into his chair, but didn't risk putting his legs on the desk. He pulled his sandwich and a bottle of Cornaid, a new sports drink invented by a nutritionist at IIT, out of the brown paper bag. It was 1:30, 30 minutes before his class. Naturally, he double clicked his e-mail icon.

Message 1
From sysop Wed Oct 3 09:03:09 [pt] 1994
To: larson@iit.edu
From: jfg@meaning.com
Subject: Aspen

H: Man I really like your idea about the question of meaning and the maening of ques6ion. Let's do it! I'll put together a dynamite panel for you. Maybe the entire empahsis of the confedrence should e onq uetsions. The

question of the millennium,,,that'd be a good title for the whoel damned thing! After all, no closure can be xpected. I realize we're not going to solve any problems the way a chemist fmight syntehzize a molecule. We're going to epxlore together, talk together, convene and join tgoether in the act of philosophical dialogue. And you're quite right...the quetsin neesz tobe primary.

You know in judaism the new year is celebrated not by a drunken orgy of forgettfulness, but by remembering, by thought. And the millennium, well it's one big Rosh Hashana fest, think of it that wya. I want to make sure that at leas ton once occasion im Americ we do more than drop confetti on Times Square. I'm going to bring together people from politics, from the arts, from TV and the media, from the universities and we're going to talk about what the hell it all means. And I WANT YOU THERE!!! We've booked the Antler Hotel for this summer's meeting. It's fabulous. Great pools and hot tubs indoors and out. How are Susan and the girls?

j

Dear Jeffrey: The Jewish celebration of the New Year, with its emphasis on reflection and thought is impressive indeed. I remember well the Passover Seders I had at your family's home. They too were impressive. I especially liked the way your parents brought in the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam throughout the service. We Lutheran-atheists aren't big on ritual, as you know. Our reflections run deeply private.

I appreciate your invitation, but I'm not big on conferences. Still, I could use a hot tub. My legs are killing me right now and there's a strange and disturbing pain that flows from my buttock to my ankle: I did a hard session on the bike while I was watching your friend Rick Brumbaugh on TV. My anger fueled me, and I had a fabulous workout. Thank you Rick.

The girls and Susan are fine, thanks. How're David and Paul?

I'll get back to you. Thanks again. Harold

Message: 2:

From sysop Wed Oct 3 09:06:09 [pt] 1994

From: gbishop@iit.edu Wed Oct 3: 12:54: 27 "Re: Great "

To: larson@iit.edu

Hi Buddy!!! You missed a great game today!!!! I was on fire. Made at least 60% of my shots from the top of the key. Rosenfield was guarding me, but he didn't have a

chance. Geez, he's only a geneticist. I got a good workout, too. Have you ever considered getting a knee replacement? They're doing some great work at the University of Iowa, and I think you should give them a look. Whatever you do don't give up the fight. You and I had some great battles and we can have them again. You're not THAT old Harold!!!!!!

Gary

&R

To: gbishop@iit.edu
Subject: Great

That's great Gary. Thanks for your tip but I don't think I'll have a knee replacement. I've said farewell to basketball, to running itself. It was a segment of my life, an important one which I enjoyed immensely, but now I'm content to look back on it and know it to be gone. Why prolong the inevitable? What would I accomplish? Another few years perhaps. But I don't need basketball to stay in shape. Why keep playing except in the pretense that what we love won't end?

I conceive of my retirement as good spiritual exercise Gary. I'm training myself to say good-bye and to appreciate finality. MEMENTO MORI. Time's arrow, Gary, runs in one direction only. At least so it does for us.

I briefly considered getting a knee replacement. But I decided against doing so. For me, the knee surgery would represent a total misunderstanding of the relationship between ourselves and our bodies. Our bodies are fragile things, sure to break, and to take them too seriously, to invest too much of ourselves in them, is a profound mistake. We think that through science we can make the pain go away, stop the body from breaking. But we can't. We need to invest our intellectual capital not so much in figuring out how to fix the broken body but how to understand the overwhelming fact that the body breaks.

You, I know, think that we just are bodies. That our minds are brains and what we call consciousness is but the firing of neurons. You think it's foolishness to believe otherwise, I know. And this is why you want me to get a knee replacement. I know you mean well, Gary, and we've been friends for a long time, but you're on the wrong track here. I'm an aging man, faced with the loss of what he held most dear. And I'm not going to pretend otherwise.

I'm going bald. Slowly, but unmistakably. Should I have a hair transplant? I develop small hard cysts on various

parts of my body. Should I have them removed? I never liked the sharp lines of my nose. Why not improve it, and add to it some bulk? We cannot make ourselves over; we are not self-creators. We cannot become Frankensteins engineering our own salvation. At some point, one has to look honestly and simply acknowledge who he is. We're human and frail and we're going to break, Gary. The challenge is not only not to flee from this, but to wonder if there is any way to affirm it.

Who knows.

Amor fati, old buddy. Harold

Harold immediately felt regret after he sent his e-mail to Gary. The meat scientist wouldn't know either of the Latin phrases, and he'd think Harold was just showing off. He wouldn't understand the irony in Harold's use of "buddy." The man was a pinhead, but that was not a good reason to open up such a vein and gush. He'd been gushing too much recently, Harold thought. Although maybe, he countered, he hadn't been gushing enough. Maybe it was finally time for him to let loose a few volleys. Maybe he'd reached the age where he should do a little exploding. Why not?

Message: 3:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 09:03:09 [pt] 1994
From: awhite@iit.edu Wed Oct 3: 12:54: 5427 "Re: time"
To: larson@iit.edu

Hi Harold: Boy, I'm tired. A very hard game today. Wish you had been there with us.
We had a good time. Your friend, Alan

& R

To: awhite@itt.edu
Subject: time

Yes, Alan, a good time. That I too used to have. And on a regular basis. But time, Alan, is not the issue, is it? Time, the fragmentary patchwork of past present future can neither account for nor sustain itself. It requires, in order to be comprehended fully, reference beyond itself. Time, to be time, needs that which is beyond time.

I suspect you'd agree.

Sorry for the ramblings. I'm getting pretty good workouts at UNIT F. Not much fun, I have to admit, but I'm in good shape.

Harold

Again, Harold felt a twinge of regret for having sent such a pointlessly revealing e-mail. Damned machine, he thought, sucks you in and then spews you out. And then you can't get yourself back. He sighed. He looked at the clock: 1:54. He'd be late for class.

With his muscles aching, Harold hurriedly picked up his text of the *Confessions*, and threw it in his backpack. He shut off his computer, glanced to make sure his desk was in order, and left the office

Harold entered the lecture room a few minutes after 2. As soon as he did so, the students in the class stopped shuffling in their seats. They got their notebooks out, and sat slightly more straight in their chairs.

The spasms of pain that had shot through his right leg were gone, but they were replaced by a single jolt of guilt: he was late for class. In his entire career, this had happened only once before, and then it was because he had stopped on his way to class to assist a librarian he knew who had fallen on the ice. Harold decided to compensate for his lapse by foregoing his usual glance at the text, his pre-lecture pacing, and his standard offer to answer any questions his students might have. Instead, he would plunge immediately into the topic of the day. Without even pausing to take his backpack off, he began to speak even while he was walking quickly towards the podium.

“Augustine begins his analysis of time simply enough. Time has a past, a present, and a future. Normally time looks like this--”

Harold walked to the blackboard and wrote:

Past → Present → Future

“Pretty simple. We all know what time is...right? But Augustine shows us, in this section of his book, that when we start thinking about time, we find out we don’t know what it is at all. What is most familiar becomes most strange. Here’s why.

“The future doesn’t exist yet. Right? It’s not here. It will be, but it’s not yet. That’s the key phrase: it’s not. So far, nothing fancy. You’re going to spend the weekend watching football and drinking beer, but you’re not doing it now, are you?

“Equally obvious is this-- the past is not. It was, but it is not now. It’s gone. Right?

“All right. So, where are we? The future is not, the past is not. So what’s left? The present, of course. The present is what is. It’s the only bit of time that really is. But here’s the problem, and it’s a big one. What is the present? It’s what we call the moment. It’s what we call the now.

“All right. So, what time is it? What time is it right now?”

The motionless class looked at him mutely, but Harold felt a sense of puzzlement spreading over them. He wondered if he had genuinely grabbed their attention.

“That’s a real question, folks. What time is it right now?”

Silence from the audience, but the class seemed even more puzzled, and almost uncomfortable. Harold now felt sure that he had hooked them.

“Look at the clock.” Harold wanted to add, “*you stupid motherfuckers,*” so badly that he could taste the familiar shape of the words forming on his lips.

“It’s 2:09.” He paused.

“Is it really 2:09?” Or is it 2:09 and 36 seconds? Watch that second hand,” he commanded. This time, a handful of blonde heads, and several Asian ones, turned lazily to the clock placed high on the side wall of the lecture room.

“It’s not 2:09 and 36 seconds. Not now it isn’t. Now it’s 2:09 and 54 seconds. Now it’s 2:10. Watch that second hand! It never stops moving, does it? Of course, we could unplug the damned thing, and make it stop. But then it wouldn’t be a clock. It would just be a dead machine.”

Harold paused again. He paced, he stared at the floor, he ran his hands through his hair, and as soon as he had said “damn” he regretted doing so. “Darn.” He should have said “darn.” He realized his was still wearing his backpack, but he didn’t want to take it off.

“Okay, what’s the point? The point is, there is no now. Is the now 2:09 and 36 seconds on Wednesday, October, 3, 1994? Is that the now? Of course not. Maybe the now is 2:09 and 36.3 seconds. Is that it? Of course not. Keep subdividing all you want, and you’ll end up with the same result. You can’t reach the now. It’s like a geometric point: it has no magnitude, no bulk, no extension. The now has no duration.

“This is deeply strange. We agreed that, number one, the future is not. It’s not here yet. Number two, the past is not. It’s gone. That leaves the present. And the present, as we just discovered, has no duration, no length. It too is not. Do you understand the implications of this? Think of it this way. Imagine you’re having a nice

lunch. Now, stare at the food for a minute. All right. Now you're going to eat that food. It's going to taste good. It's an excellent meal. Fish, let's say. Cold salmon and a salad. And you have a glass of white wine on the side. Now, put that food in your mouth. It tastes very good, doesn't it? But as soon as you eat it, it starts to disappear. And soon it's gone. That's the passage of time, folks. That's all we've got. Everything is like that food. Whatever you have, it's going to end. It's the time of your lives, slipping through your fingers like water."

"*Stupid fucks,*" Harold thought to himself as he paced in front of the room with his head bowed. He noticed that the students' feet in the first row were shuffling in discomfort.

"Look...here's the point. We have no present. The present is no more than a gateway between the past...which is not...and the future...which is not. And the present has no duration. Here today, gone tomorrow. That's our motto, folks. Time is a river, and you can't step into the same river twice. You all know this, deep in your bones, you all know this. This is you're always unsatisfied. The grass is always greener on the other side, right? You get something you really want, say a new car, or better yet, a new computer, and soon you want something else. Nothing satisfies because it's all here today and gone tomorrow. And we know this. Do you understand what this means? The past is not, the future is not, the present has no duration. And what that means, ladies and gentlemen, is that we're fucked. It's that simple. Fucked. We've got nothing to hold on to, nothing that lasts. We're victims. We just watch time sweep away all that's dear to us."

Fucked. Fucked. Fucked.

Harold was exhilarated and believed he had finally hooked them, for even though he wasn't looking at his students, he could feel their gaze of sheer wonder. He paced a bit, anxious to tell them the next step: that because of the nature of time-- because it is, by its nature, insufficient-- the most fundamental human need, the ultimate human desire, is for the present. But it is a need that can only be satisfied by the eternal, that which is pure presence. He looked up in order to speak when he saw a hand go up. A short, blonde boy with glasses who always sat in the first row, an earnest boy whose name, Harold thought, was Erickson, wanted to speak. Feeling confident that a breakthrough with this class was near, Harold decided to risk using the kid's name.

“Yes, Mr. Erickson.”

“Uh, I'm sorry Prof. Larson, but, uh, aren't we supposed to be talking about Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*? I mean, that's what it says on the syllabus and that's what you told us on Monday. I don't think St. Augustine is even on the syllabus.”

Oh God! Erickson was right. This was Greek Philosophy, not his Intro class. He had been repeating the lecture he had given at 9 in the morning.

“Oh sweet Jesus, I'm falling apart at the seams.” And then: “stupid motherfuckers. Who cares what's on the syllabus. Why can't they simply accept the wonders I offer to them. ”

“Mr. Erickson, thank you very much. You're entirely right. I must tell you that I don't feel too well. There is a pain that shoots from my buttock to my foot, and it is distracting me to a considerable degree. I taught St. Augustine this morning, and I was simply continuing my train of thought. I apologize.”

“Uh, Prof. Larson,” the boy stuttered with a pained expression on his face, “my name is Eric Johannsen, not Erickson.”

“Right. Sorry again, Mr. Johannsen. Clearly, this isn’t my day.”

Another hand shot up: a girl from the back of the room.

“Is Saint Augustine going to be on the final exam?”

“If I want him to, yes,” Harold answered abruptly. Then he stopped talking and was about to take his backpack off in order to search for *The Apology*, but before he did so he realized that he hadn’t brought Plato with him.

“Okay, open your books to line 26c.” The students responded dutifully. “This is Socrates at his most Socratic. Remember, he’s the guy who knows he’s not wise. He knows that he doesn’t know, and this, strangely enough, is what makes the wisest of them all.”

Harold knew he should continue discussing the passage, and that because he had memorized it he could do so well without the book. But the pain in his lower torso was resonating throughout his entire body, and he was mortified by all his mistakes.

“Listen, folks, let’s forget it. I really don’t feel too well today. And I got us off to a terrible start. I’m truly sorry. I’ve been preoccupied recently, mostly with the upcoming election. I’m afraid that Hillary Clinton will not be re-elected, and this prospect troubles me deeply. I think it best if we call it a day. Please read the material on the syllabus, and you have my word of honor that on Friday we will discuss the right book. Okay? Okay, see you Friday.”

Chapter Five: Home

When Harold reached his house he didn't want to stop for the walk had not only relaxed his painful leg, but it had provided him with enough mental dexterity to begin the process of diffusing the distress of the lecture. So instead of turning into his house, he walked right past it and kept going north, following his street as it ran its straight line directly into the unbroken flatness that was Iowa. Within a few minutes, the parallel lines of trees flanking the street ended, and soon the sidewalk itself gave way to an unpaved

road with houses few and far between. After several minutes more, Harold was on the outskirts of his small town, the point where what remained of his street intersected with Big Table Road, the old east-west route leading out of Centerville. In fact, Big Table was a part of the old Lincoln Highway, the first transcontinental highway in the United States. Long since replaced by state highways, and of course by the giant 3000 mile interstate tube that is Route 80, the old Lincoln nonetheless still worked its way through small towns and what now were back roads from California to New York. If Harold were to take a right on Big Table, and walk 1200 miles, he'd fall into the Atlantic Ocean. Either that or, when he reached the Ocean, he could take another right and walk another 250 miles or so and get to Washington, D.C.. Even though he'd be very tired, he reasoned that he'd still have enough energy for a lunch and chat with Hillary. They'd probably have salmon, with a cold white wine, which would taste especially good on his parched throat, and they'd talk about health care reform. She'd listen to him carefully, but she wouldn't stop eating. He'd enjoy watching her touch her cloth napkin to the corners of her ruby red lips. He'd explain to her that she had caved in too quickly to the Republican onslaught, that she should have hoisted Rick Brumbaugh on his own petard. She could have convinced the American people that she, and not the running dogs of the Republicans, cared most about their true well being, about their souls. *Storm the barricades, he urged Hillary. For Christ's sake, he told her, at least go down fighting. Don't just disappear on us. We need you. We must teach the American people how to accept the fact of pain. Memento mori, baby!*

Harold surveyed Big Table Road, the road his Grandfather had helped to build, and wondered, *why not?*

Harold arrived home at 3:15, later than usual. The girls were there, waiting for him on the porch. Lateness, another terrible lapse. When Jenny saw him coming, she didn't notice he was approaching the house from the wrong direction. Instead, she screamed, "Daddy! I hurt my elbow!"

"She really did, Dad," Caroline confirmed. "She tripped when we were running home and hurt herself really bad."

Harold wasn't worried. His daughters had a spectacular ability to magnify the intensity of their minor injuries. They were histrionic complainers with stunningly low pain thresholds. They were not Stoics.

"It hurts Daddy, it hurts!" Jenny was crying profusely, wounded cries emanating from the infinite reservoir of tears buried deep within her. "Ow, Daddy, it hurts so bad!"

Harold, barely out of the reverie he had fallen into while he was walking, moved slowly towards his youngest daughter and stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry it hurts, sweetie, I'm so sorry. Let me take a look."

With his voice calm and concerned, Harold attracted his youngest like a magnet. Jenny knew she was to be the center of his attention. Her elbow was scraped from the fall, but wasn't bleeding, only a sidewalk burn, the classic badge of childhood.

"Let's go upstairs and I'll wash it for you."

"No Daddy! Washing it will hurt!"

"It might, sweetie, that's true, but only for a second. Then it will start to feel better. After I wash it, we'll spray on some Bactine. That always feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes," Jenny admitted, swayed as she often was by the lure of a brand name product.

“Then we’ll put on a bandaid.” Harold knew a bandaid was neither needed nor big enough to cover the scraped area. Still, he was confident that it would be an attraction. “Let’s go upstairs, okay sweetie?”

“Okay Daddy.”

Harold and his youngest daughter went to the bathroom, where he washed her scrape gently with cold water. Jenny protested only a little.

“We’ll let it dry for a minute, okay? Does it still hurt.”

“Yes. But not too much.”

“Good. I’m glad it doesn’t hurt.”

“Me too.”

As Harold looked at his daughter’s elbow, he was reminded of the joyful act of quizzing his children when they were toddlers: “Where’s Jenny’s elbow?,” the sing-song question would run. “Where’s Daddy’s elbow? Where’s Jenny’s nose? Where’s Daddy’s nose?” As he remembered his eyes filled with tears.

“Jenny, do you remember when I used to ask where your nose was, where your eyes were, where your tummy was?”

The little girl smiled happily. “Yes Daddy, I remember.”

“Do you really remember? You were just about one, I think. The prime time for body parts.” Harold recalled that Caroline had seemed slower than Katie in learning her body parts. He had joked to Susan that, in order to keep up with all the other academic families in town, they’d better get her a body part tutor.

“I remember it Daddy, really I do. It was fun. Let’s play it now.”

“Okay. Where’s your nose?”

Jenny pointed to her nose, but it was obvious to both of them that the little game had no spark whatsoever. But the little girl was happy enough with the pointless bandaid on her elbow, and ran out of the bathroom to join Caroline.

Harold lingered alone in the bathroom. He stared at his reflection in the mirror. The dull glaze of his eyes reminded him how tired he was. He checked his profile. He put his hands through his thinning blonde hair, and rubbed his skull hard, as if to squeeze some energy back into it. A memory flashed. Once Jenny had asked him, “Daddy, can I go to IIT for college when I grow up?”

“Of course you can, sweetie.”

“Can I be in your class, Daddy?”

“Of course, I’d love it if you were in my class.”

“Can I call you Daddy?”

He had paused in his delight, knowing full well that when they were ready his children would in all likelihood choose a college as far from Centerville as possible.

“No, honey, you can’t call me Daddy.” He paused again and continued with a mock parental voice: “You’ll have to call me Professor Daddy.”

Harold smiled and splashed cold water on his face. He was now prepared to face his children.

For the moment Jenny and Caroline were occupying themselves quietly, but soon Caroline had a play-date with Jessica. “*Play-date:*” how he despised the phrase. To schedule play was to violate its very nature. But because Jessica’s mother, Deborah Rosenfield, had offered to swing by and pick Caroline up at 3:30, and Susan was planning to retrieve her from Jessica’s house at 5:30 or so on her way home with Katie

from the dermatologist, Harold had to acknowledge that “play date” was precisely what Caroline was embarking upon. Harold glanced at his watch: it was only 3:20. He could slip up to the third floor and at least check his e-mail.

He pushed the little key in the upper right corner to turn on his MAC. It ran its familiar mechanical chime to signal the booting up. But just as he started to slide the mouse in the right direction, he heard the doorbell ring. Deborah Rosenfield had come for Caroline. Despite the pain which now consumed his entire lower torso, Harold zipped down the stairs. He was eager to see Jessica’s mother. She and her husband had recently moved to Iowa from New York, he to take a job in the genetics department, she to raise their two daughters in a large house which cost about the same as a small condo in New York, and to work part-time in a laboratory. Deborah Rosenfield was a woman whom Jeffrey would have called *zaftig*. Her thick and wavy black hair had yet to show even a trace of gray. Her lips were full, her breasts ample, and her eyes sparkled with mischief. She always seemed eager to talk, to laugh, and she frequently touched the person she was talking to. Harold looked forward to being in her presence. When he got down to the first floor, Caroline and Jenny were already there talking to Deborah and Jessica on the front porch.

“Hi sweetie!” Deborah exclaimed. She came up the stairs of the porch and gave him a hug. Before he could respond to her embrace, before he was fully aware of the soft give of her luxurious body, she had already pulled away. “How ya been, Harold?”

“Good Deborah. Yourself?”

“Fine, sweetie, fine. But the lab’s been busy, so I’ve been working too much. Other than that fine.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“What’ve you been up to Harold?”

“Not much. Taking care of my brood here. Susan’s been working a lot too. That and playing tennis. Taking care of my family. How’s Ken doing? I haven’t seen him much recently. Not since I gave up basketball.”

“Yeah, he mentioned that you were retired. Good for you Harold. Ken comes home injured about 3 times a month. You boys and your games,” she said with a snicker of cheerful contempt.

“But he’s fine. Busy as can be, though. You know, I was thinking about sitting in on your Greek Philosophy course next year, Harold. I studied some of that stuff when I was in college. I’d like to get away from science, at least for a little while. And from the scientists.” She snickered again.

“Well, I’d be delighted to have you in my class Deborah. Plato and Aristotle are wonderful, and I think you’d particularly enjoy the Pre-Socratics. They were very much like the natural scientists of today. You’d be amazed how contemporary they are.”

“I hope I can fit it into my schedule Harold. We’ll have just have to see.”

“I hope you can too.”

They paused and became aware that the children had started to play a game of restaurant with the collection of toys, cooking utensils, and little desks and chairs strewn amidst the chaos of Harold and Susan’s front porch. When he looked at the happy children, Harold realized immediately how hurt Jenny was going to be when Caroline and Jessica left. He wondered whether he should abort the game now, before the girls became totally immersed. Or perhaps he should invite Jessica to stay on the porch and

play at his house. He realized that wouldn't work. Within a few minutes Caroline would resent Jenny's presence and there'd be a big fight. Threesomes rarely succeeded at this age, and Harold had no desire to take care of someone else's child. But what if Deborah Rosenfield could be persuaded to stay while the three girls played restaurant on his front porch? He and Deborah could retreat to the black couch in the living room, perhaps have a glass of wine or beer, talk and let the girls play. Susan wouldn't be home until 5:30 or so.

Harold's heart beat quickly. To his amazement, he even felt a lovely surge of energy flowing to his groin.

"Deborah, would you like to come in and sit for a while. Would you like a cup of coffee? Or how about a beer, or a glass of wine? The girls seem to be doing fine."

"Oh, sweetie, I'd love to, Really I would, but I can't. I have to fiddle around with my computer this afternoon. I've got some new software I have to figure out. I'm hoping Jessie and Caroline will retreat to the playroom and let me do it. You want to know the truth, I need to borrow your daughter, Harold. Sarah won't be home until after 5, so if Jessie is busy I'll be able to get some work done."

Harold did not let the stab of disappointment show on his face. The feeling in his groin abated as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Ah yes, kinks in the computer. It's always so hard to get started with new software or a new computer. Once you get the hang of it, it's a great improvement, but until then it's so frustrating and seems to waste so much time."

"Tell me about wasting time, Harold. Come on girls, let's go. Bye Harold," she said as she gave him another brief hug and a kiss on the cheek

“Bye Deborah. Susan will pick Caroline up around 5:30.”

“Excellent,” she said. Deborah ushered the girls out of the porch and to her waiting car. She lived only three blocks away, but still had driven.

Harold watched woefully as she left. Only when Deborah’s car had turned the corner and left his field of vision did he become aware of the mixture of defeat and fury shimmering on his abandoned daughter’s face. She had been having a wonderful time playing restaurant with the big girls.

“Hey Jen. Can I play restaurant with you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I want to go to Jessica’s house too.”

“Oh, but you can’t.”

“But I want to. It’s not fair.”

“I know. It’s not fair.”

“It’s not fair.”

“Hey, I know. Would you like to invite a friend over?”

Jenny’s face brightened.

“Let’s see. Shall we call Ashley?”

“No. I don’t want to play with Ashley.”

“You don’t? Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“But why not?”

“Because.”

“Oh.”

“How about Lindsay? She only lives a block away and maybe she’s home. Should we give her a call? See if she wants a little play-date? You girls could play restaurant on the porch.”

“No. I don’t want to play with Lindsay. She’s stupid.”

“Stupid? How is she stupid?”

“She just is.”

“Okay. How about Brittany? We could call her right up?”

“Brittany’s stupid too.”

Harold realized the futility of the endeavor. There would be no play date. He would have Jenny alone for the afternoon.

“Hey! Should we go to Main Street and get a cookie?”

“I don’t care.”

“What do you mean you don’t care? You have to care. You love cookies, don’t you?”

“I want to play with Jessica.” Jenny’s pout was so comprehensive that her whole face descended.

“It’s a nice day. We’d have a great time walking outside.”

“No Daddy.” Jenny paused. “Daddy, can I play with play-dough in the kitchen.”

“No.”

“Why not? Mommy lets me.”

“Because it makes a big mess.”

“I want to play with play dough.”

“I said no.

“Please Daddy I won’t make a mess.”

“Yes you will. You always do. And then I’ll have to clean it up.”

“Please Daddy.”

“No.”

“Please Daddy please.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Puhleeze,” she whined ferociously.

“No! Damn it, can’t you understand English! I said no! That’s the end of the story. Find something else to do.”

She burst into hysterical, angry tears, and started to scream, “You’re mean. I want to play with play-dough! I want to play with play-dough. Mommy would let me play with play-dough. She’s nice and you’re mean! You use bad words! You’re the worst Daddy in the world!”

“That’s enough! If you can’t control yourself go to your room right now. Get out of here!”

The little girl rushed upstairs crying wildly. When she slammed the door of her room, the loud sound was a trigger. Harold flew up the stairs after her, threw open her door and screamed at his daughter, “Don’t ever slam that door on me again! If you do I’m going to spank you!”

“I didn’t slam it on you!”

“Don’t get fresh with me. Do you understand? And don’t you dare slam that fucking door ever again! Do you understand me?”

The little girl was shocked and said nothing. As mortified as he was by his own behavior, Harold was momentarily pleased by her silence. Still, he slammed her door shut, even harder than Jenny herself had, and went down to the kitchen, where he poured himself a big tumbler of scotch.

Of course he knew he had over-reacted. Even though she was being a brat and deserved to be told no, she didn't deserve what he had just meted out. She had just absorbed a heavy blow when Caroline left with a friend, and Harold should have been more sympathetic. But she had been impossible. He buried his face into his hands, and listened carefully. Jenny seemed to have stopped crying. He went back upstairs and knocked gently on her door. "Jenny?"

She didn't answer

"Jenny? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have yelled so much."

Harold opened the door. His daughter was lying in bed, red-eyed, furious, and not defeated.

"I'm sorry honey. I had a bad day. I'm very tired and I took it out on you."

She just glared at him. He went to her bed and stroked her.

"I remember when you were a baby, a tiny baby. I'd put you in your snugli against my chest, and the sun would be shining, and I'd walk with you for hours and hours and hours. You'd cry if I stopped and so I didn't stop. You'd sleep and sleep and sleep and I'd just keep walking. I liked doing that so much."

"I liked it too."

"Oh you always say that. But you don't remember it. Or do you?"

"Well sort of."

“How can you remember? You were a baby. You were asleep.”

“Babies can remember things.”

For a blissful moment, Harold left the misery of the present and was instead walking with Jenny, who had been such a difficult baby, especially at night. It was a cold but brilliantly blue winter day, and Harold had been alone with her in the afternoon. As usual, she had been crying furiously and resisting her nap. In desperation Harold had strapped her into the snugli, wrapped her tightly in a blanket, and despite the cold took her out for a walk. She fell asleep immediately and Harold, scared that if he stopped walking she'd awaken, walked for two hours, every minute of which felt like a reprieve.

“Maybe you're right. Come on. Let's play with play dough. You can make a mess. I'll clean it up.”

“Okay Daddy.”

Feeling a tenuous surge of confidence, Harold believed he could hold out with the play dough at least until 5, when he would be able to plug Jenny into the TV. Susan was due home soon around 5:30 with Katie and Caroline, and then, since she had played tennis the night before, Harold could legitimately claim the right to escape to his office directly after dinner. Remembering his invitation to Judy Carlson, Harold, for the second time that afternoon, felt a cheerful tingle.

Still, playing with Jenny was *so* tedious. She was making every decision, and each moment was far more difficult than it had to be. Clumps of dough she balled up for no reason, and then hurled them down on the table with such intensity that they'd either fall to the floor or flatten out right there on the surface before her. Jenny wildly waved

her arms, and sent flying the knives and the rolling pin she had been using to shape the dough. “Daddy, get that for me please,” she’d say. Clearly, the object of the game was that Harold be her slave.

“Honey, I’ve got to get up for a minute. I’ve got to check something in my office. And I’ve got to go pee.”

“No Daddy! You can’t leave! You said you’d play with me! You *promised!*”

“I will play with you, but I need to take a break for a minute.”

“No Daddy! You can’t take a break! You said you’d play with me! You promised!”

Harold was defeated by his daughter’s insistent recalling of his pledge. He owed it to her to be faithful-- was that so hard? Just a few more minutes were required, but he really couldn’t bear sitting at the kitchen table a minute longer.

“I’ll be right back,” Harold said, and he jumped up from the table before Jenny could protest, and scooted into the living room. He looked through the mail, and picked up an L.L. Bean catalogue.

“Here it is! I found what I was looking for.” Harold returned to the table. With the catalogue, he’d at least be able to turn pages and allow his eyes to fall on something other than a member of his family. Jenny, however, too familiar with this tactic to allow such an easy escape, intensified her assault on his attention as soon as he opened the catalogue.

“Daddy?”

“What?”

“I want to make a star.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to make a star.”

“So?”

“You have to get me a cookie mold, Daddy, the star shaped one.”

“Okay.”

Harold got up to search the drawers for the cookie mold. He couldn't find the star, but he did find a heart, which he brought to Jenny.

“No Daddy! I want the star! The star, Daddy, the star, not the heart!”

“I can't find the star.”

“But you have to find the star, you have to! Mommy always lets me play with the star!”

“But I just told you, I can't find the star.”

“But I want it! You *can* find it. Look harder, Daddy, look real hard! Look everywhere!”

“Everywhere? You want me to look *everywhere*?”

“Everywhere until you find it.”

Harold, raging inside, stood up and pretended to be deeply involved in a quest.

“Here. I'm looking in the drawer. I can't find it.” As he said this, in a loud and aggressive voice, he tossed various objects-- a couple of spatulas, two or three measuring cups-- onto the floor.

“Now I'm looking in the cabinet. Whoops. Not there,” he said, as he threw a roll of paper towels onto the floor.

“Oh, now I'll look inside the stove. Not there either.”

He put some power behind his thrusting of the oven door, and it slammed loudly when it closed.

“Maybe it’s in the fucking refrigerator. Hello! Mr. Star, are you home? No? Did you go to the movies Mr. Star? Where are you? Mr. Star, Mr. Star, where are you?”

He had slipped again. He hated himself, so he forced himself to edge back into good cheer.

“Mr. Star, please come home. We miss you so much. Maybe Mr. Star is hiding under the chair.” Harold pretended to look under Jenny’s chair, and when he came up empty-handed, he tickled the little girl in her ribs. His daughter, a worthy opponent, only glared at him.

“I can’t find the star, Jenny. I’m sorry. I tried. And now I’m getting tired.”

Jenny said nothing, and got back to work furiously shaping the dough on the table. This time, when Harold went to the living room, she let him go without protest.

Harold looked at the clock: 4:54. He was almost there. In fact, he’d precipitate his own release.

“Jenny, it’s 5 o’clock. You can watch *Full House* if you want.”

The little girl bolted from chair and upstairs to the TV room. She’d have to watch a few minutes of commercials, but these she actually enjoyed.

Harold’s heart was racing, and his head hurt when he glanced at the mess in the kitchen. He got up to pour himself another scotch, and then began the job of cleaning it. He was just starting to become absorbed in *All Things Considered* on the radio while he was sweeping the kitchen floor, when Susan, Caroline, and Katie rushed into the house and interrupted him. Caroline barely yelled a hello before she bolted upstairs to join her

sister in the TV room. Katie, whose face was red from the treatment she had received at the dermatologist, was subdued but greeted her father warmly, and then went to her room. Harold handed the broom to Susan.

“Here, you do it. Make supper while you’re at it. I’m taking a nap.”

“Wow, quite a job here,” Susan observed as she looked at the bits of brightly colored play-dough scattered throughout the kitchen.

“You betcha. Quite a fucking job indeed.”

Susan wanted them to work together in the kitchen, but Harold, a little drunk and aching all over, was interested only in finding his couch and lying down.

“I’m going to lie down.”

“Oh come on, give me a break. You can stay right here and help me with dinner.”

“Oh shit Susan, I’ve been with Jenny since 3. I’m tired of being home. I’m going to take a nap. I’m just tired. Period. I’ve haven’t been sleeping at all—much worse lately, you know that.”

Suddenly Harold was reminded of Judy Carlson. “Plus I’ve got to go back to campus tonight. I left some papers I need to grade. You played tennis last night. It’s my turn to go out.”

“But what about our quickie,” she asked with a smile.

“Heck with the quickie. I can’t even do slow anymore.”

Susan’s face assumed the cold neutrality now so familiar to Harold, and he was reminded that he hated her confident silence.

Harold flopped on his black leather couch, covered his eyes with his arm, and fell immediately into a heavy sleep that was interrupted far too soon by Susan’s call to

supper. Sick with longing for sleep, he nonetheless forced himself to get up; a spasm of pain shot through his buttock and travelled down his leg. He rubbed his butt and waited for the pain to disappear, and then went to the bathroom and splashed his face with cold water. In the mirror, Harold saw a man he barely recognized.

Susan had called the girls several times, but only Katie, now oblivious to her dermatological excursion, was actually in her chair.

“Why can’t they come when they’re called?” Harold demanded, though he actually dreaded sitting with his whole family through the upcoming mea.. “It’s after 6, they’ve had their dose of *Full House*. Girls! Right now! Come down right now!” The volume of his voice, set too high, had an ugly ring to it. Still, there was no evidence that it had any effect on his daughters.

“I said *now!*”

Caroline and Jenny came flying down the stairs, arguing about a doll, and headed straight for the chairs.

“Why do I have to say everything more than once? Why do you make me repeat myself?”

“We didn’t make you Dad,” Caroline responded. “You made yourself.”

“Don’t get fresh! Stop talking and eat your god-damned dinner.”

His whole family looked at him as if to ask, *Why is this man sitting here with us? Who invited him?* Harold sympathized with them all. He wouldn’t have invited himself to dinner either and was relieved to observe no trace of fear on their faces.

“Pick up your forks and begin to eat your food,” he commanded. “That’s what forks are for, remember?”

The dinner table was uncharacteristically silent, for even Jenny had nothing to say. Susan tried to ask their youngest several questions about her day in school, but Jenny had no interest in defusing the tension. She seemed to relish the poisonous effect of her monosyllabic answers.

“Katie, how was school?” Harold asked, feigning normalcy.

“Good.”

“How was your math class? Did you work on equations again?”

“Yeah.”

“Caroline, how was your play date? How’s Jessica?”

“Fine.”

“Jenny, did you enjoy playing dough with me today?”

“No.”

The silence was painful, but at least it allowed Harold to breathe. He gobbled his food quickly, gulped down his beer, and then announced that he had a lot of work to do. He would have to return to his office. Without bringing his dishes to the kitchen sink, for Harold a significant omission, he got up from his chair abruptly, paused to contemplate again the strangely mobile pain in his leg, and then walked to the door. He grabbed his jacket from its hook, and left the house without a single good-bye.

Outside he forced himself to slow down, then to stop and take several deep and what he hoped were cleansing breaths. He shook his head in disbelief at himself, and then began his customary walk to campus. The aftermath of the disastrous dinner felt like a layer of wool scratching his naked skin. The only solution was to walk. His legs were stiff and painful, but each step towards campus relieved some of the tension. By the time

he reached his building his head was clear enough to focus on the task in front of him. He needed more walking, however, so he continued past Gustafson Hall and on to the library. Finally, he brought some version of Judy Carlson into focus.

She was waiting for him, standing comfortably in front of his locked office door. "Hi Professor Larson. I came early."

"Oh Christ, I hope I don't," he thought.

"Your timing is fine, Judy, don't worry. Let's go in and discuss your fellowship application."

He opened the door for her and, good gentleman that he was, allowed her to enter before him. When he realized that she was walking into a totally dark room, he felt embarrassed by his gaffe, and so reached awkwardly to flip the light switch on. Doing so required him to reach behind her, to brush his arm against her shoulder, to position his hips not far from her ass. Simultaneously with the slight touch, the light came on, and Judy arched her head back to smile at him in what seemed to be delighted surprise.

"Nice trick Professor Larson."

"Trick? What trick?"

"Oh, you know," she said and smiled even more invitingly. Jeffrey Greenwald was right: she did have bedroom eyes. He could see that now. He touched her cheek with his hand, and when she didn't move away, he drew her to him, and kissed her gently. He felt the plush welcome of her breasts, the softness of her lips, and soon her tongue seeking out his own. He held her more tightly, and moved his hands appreciatively on her shoulders, her sides, the top of her ample thighs, and then to her ass. Their kissing became ever more intense when he realized the door was still open, so he pushed her

deeper into the office, broke their embrace and closed it. When he turned back to her, his erection growing steadily, he became aware of the blunt glare of the long fluorescent bulbs on his ceiling, and so he reversed direction again in order to turn the light back off. The room was pitched into complete darkness and for a moment Harold could not see Judy Carlson. He panicked slightly, fearing he had lost her, but soon he could feel her presence, smell her slight perfume, and had no trouble returning to her arms.

Harold was delighted to find that the fantasy had actually generated a real erection.

“Yo, H...good fantasy, man,” K said as he held his hand up high for a quick five, which Harold gladly gave him.

The erection wasn't much, but it was there, and it was enough to assure him that the madness of his family dinner was now officially over. With renewed confidence, he reversed direction and headed to his office.

“Yo, Harold, who you kidding? You ain't gonna be doing it to no u-grad. Shit, you ain't gonna be doing it to no one.”

“Fuck you, K. Why not?”

“Just ain't your style. You the good boy, remember?”

“I am a good boy, that's true. But something's got to give, K. I can't go on like this anymore. I'm falling apart.”

“Bullshit. You just having some hard times, that's all.”

“K, I haven't had sex in months. Besides, my wife wouldn't touch me now. I'm a monster in her eyes. I've been behaving badly, K, so why can't I try this with Judy Carlson?”

“Because that would fuck you up big time. You touch that girl and you’re finished. It’d be like you going inside and trying to post up old Neal Simpson. Son, that just ain’t your game, you know that. You need your open spaces. You on the outside, Harold, looking in. You gotta play your own game, no one else’s.”

“But K, my game is coming to an end. I can feel it. I’ve got nothing left. I’m finished. Either that or I’ve got to try something new.”

“Maybe, but it sure ain’t gonna be you and Judy Carlson! Shit, you put a finger on that girl and you’ll go cold as a stone. Your dick will shrivel to the size of a peanut. Go home Harold.”

Harold stopped walking and chuckled, feeling relieved that, as usual, K was probably right. He had, however, made a commitment to Judy Carlson, which he had to honor. And so he continued his march to Gustafson Hall.

Chapter Six: Office

When Harold noticed the manila envelope tacked to the bulletin board in front of his office, his heart leaped. Sure enough, on it was a note written by an unmistakably female hand.

Hi Prof! Sorry, I couldn't come to your office tonight. Enclosed you'll find the material for the fellowship application. Thanks a bunch!!! Judy Carlson

Totally relieved, Harold brought the envelope inside his office with him, and dropped it into the empty to-be-answered box on his desk. He leaned back in his desk chair, put his legs on the table, even though he suspected that his careless choice of sitting positions might have something to do with these strange pains he was feeling in his buttocks and leg, and stared. What the hell was he going to do? Nothing. So he straightened up again, and turned on his computer to check his email.

Message 1:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 15:09:18 1994
From: judycarl@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
.Subject: Sorry

Dear Prof: I'm so sorry, but I can't come to your office tonight. My fluid dynamics study group is meeting, and I can't miss that, now can I? I'll bring an envelope with a lot of information in it about me to your office. I hope it will be enough for you to write me a letter. Thank you again for all your help. I loved your class. Have a nice evening.

Sincerely,
Judy Carlson

"Bitch," Harold thought, and then immediately reprimanded himself for thinking an ugly word he had promised never to use. "Fluid dynamics...shiiiiit. My fluids are dynamic, baby, and you ain't ever gonna get near them again! Arrivederci, baby, say good-bye to your fellowship cuz it's going up in smoke."

"You tell her, H!" K roared. "Tell that bitch which way the wind's blowing. Tell her to take a ride." He put his fist out and Harold responded by giving it a touch with his own.

And then Harold banged his keyboard to delete the message. He sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes hard, and realized just how relieved he really felt.

& 2

Message 2:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 15:27:18 [pt] 1994
From: jfg@meaning.com
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: Aspen

David and Paul are fine. I don't see them nearly as much as I'd like. We'll spend some q-time together in december. I miss them, haorld, I really do. I miss their touch, the

physical presence of their innocence. I'm a good father, but the divorce had to happen. The boys are better with us apart. Rachel and I agree on that at least. They always spend a piece of their summers with me, and I always make it back east twice a year. And we email each other constantly. And phone too. They get along well with Rebecca, she's great with them. She's teaching them tai chi. Still, I regret the divorce terribly Harold, I really do.

I think I'll lead the "meaning of divorce" workshop myself in Aspen. Although I haven't figured out what I'm going to say I know Abraham and Sarah will make an appearance. I have mixed feelings about no fault divorce. In my case, it worked well. Made life smoother and better. But for most people...well I don't know. Maybe the laws should change to make divorce far harder to get. Perhaps attach certain financial penalties to divorce. What do you think? I do know that we have to think a lot more about what divorce has meant for our country during this century and what it will mean in the next.

Jeff

Harold was surprised, and almost moved, by the tone of the message. In a flash, Harold forgave Jeffrey every bit of his egotism, and for his walk on the beach with Hillary Clinton. Suddenly he could almost feel his daughters in his arms.

& R
To: jfg@meaning.com
Subject: Boys

Dear Jeff:

I can't imagine what it is to have sons. I don't know if I would have battled or played with them. Sometimes, having girls is torture. They live in a world and speak a language different from my own. (Why not invite Gilligan to Aspen?) They have needs I cannot fathom, and urges I do not recognize. So often I don't know who they are. And yet I live with four of them!

They're driving me crazy tonight, that's certain. I can't bear the thought of going home. They're so loud, so messy, their concerns are full of such trivial complications, and their energy is dissipated into such nonsense. They simply refuse to make life easier for me.

The problem with American marriages today is that the partners enter into it thinking that the relationship will make them happy. But it can't do this. Two individual psyches in free communion with each other simply don't have the wherewithal to produce real happiness. We need a larger context, a wider web. We need to look outward and beyond. The romantic expectations people bring to marriage are inflated, and so disappointment, and then divorce, naturally follow. Perhaps we need to reconceive marriage as more of a partnership, whose goal is simply to transact some piece of practical business: having children, being responsible members of, and so having a stake in, a community.

This, I realize, is not a fashionable way to look at sexual relationships. Mine is a rather grim view, isn't it? Getting married, having children, is a kind of bondage and a tragic admission of how paltry our prospects really are. But the real problem today is the excessive demand we place on sexual relationships. We ask too much from each other. Maybe marriage just can't be all that meaningful in and of itself. Maybe friendships, especially philosophical ones, are more sustaining.

I'm so sorry, my friend, that you miss your sons. I'm sure they miss you too. You are a good father. The divorce is a loss, but as you pointed out, the arrangements you and Rachel have forged are working well. The boys will rush into your arms in just three months, and you'll great fun splashing together in your pool.

Best to Rebecca, Harold

Message 3:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 16:18:36 1994
From: gbishop@iit.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: Soul?

Don't go Christian on me, old buddy. I have enough trouble at home, what with Ingvild always yanking me and the kids to church on Sunday. I can't believe you of all people would waste your time thinking about stuff like the soul. There's a brain, yes, and we can measure that. But a soul? Come on, Harold, get back to reality would you please!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

To: gbishop@iit.edu
Subject: Soul?

You're right, Gary. There's no such thing as the soul. I just said that to get you mad. Glad to see my strategy worked! (I always could fake you out.)
Harold

Message 4:
From sysop Wed Oct 3 18:09:36 1994
From: awhite@itt.edu
To: larson@iit.edu
Subject: Time

Dear Harold:

I think you're right. If we don't have something eternal to look to we just can't get along properly. The days of our lives pass by us like sand through a looking glass. We need guidelines which will endure forever or we will end up in chaos. I believe the Bible gives these to us. I know this is hard for a lot of people to swallow. But I believe it is true.

I am glad you are staying in shape Harold. I do not know if I would have the discipline you do. I am not sure what I will do when I stop playing basketball. Maybe just shovel snow.

See you soon I hope. Your friend,

Alan White

Harold was quieted by his friend's simplicity. Alan was an intelligent man, but he wore blinkers when looking at the world outside his lab. Certainly, Alan was devout; Harold could not take at all seriously the items of his friend's faith. But whenever Alan had invited his family to his home for dinner, Harold was so impressed by the silence that descended upon the large, crowded table as Alan led his brood and his guests in the saying of grace. To something in his voice, in his gentle but unmistakable authority, the throng of children responded. All of them bowed their heads, stopped their chatter, and didn't wiggle. Alan's children were tall and straight, energetic and clean, and all of them were athletic. They didn't seem like religious fanatics, just happy kids glad to play. Good kids capable of being quiet when their father told them to bow their heads in

prayer. Prayer was not a component of Harold's family life. Susan, Harold often bragged, didn't have a religious bone in her body, and to his children church was only a place where they weren't allowed to talk. But in the presence of Alan White, an unassuming, intelligent man thoroughly at home with himself and caring about others, Harold and his girls fell silent.

To: awhite@iit.edu
Subject: Thanks

thanks pal...harold

It was only 7:30, and Harold was determined not to return home until his children had safely gone to bed, but he left the office. At first, he considered a visit to the library, where he could browse some journals and pretend to be interested. But the prospect of so many students sprawled on the couches, their baseball caps turned backwards, chewing gum, sleeping, listening to their headphones and talking loudly at the same time, appalled him. Then he thought about going to the Sports Section, a bar on Main Street which had 18 TV screens broadcasting games from all over the world. He decided against this, too. Maybe back to the Rec Center, where he could dress and, even if he didn't get into a game, could just shoot some baskets. But this was the voice of old habit talking, and Harold was adamant not to listen to it. The only option left, as usual, was to walk.

So Harold walked towards his house and then retraced the steps he had taken that afternoon. He headed north until he reached the intersection with Big Table Road, the old Lincoln Highway. Peering at the dark ribbon heading east, Harold was once again entranced by the notion that all it would take was a right turn, and he'd be headed for

Times Square in New York City. He could then jump on a bus at the Port Authority and zip down to Washington, D.C.. His grandfather, always so proud of the small role he had played in the construction of the Old Lincoln, would have liked that, Harold thought.

With this thought came an image of one of his favorite possessions: a scrawled postcard that his grandfather, for some mysterious reason, had sent to him and Susan just before he died. The writing was barely legible, one line ran into the next, and each word seemed to collide with its neighbor. But by the good work of a devoted postman the address had been deciphered and delivered to his house. Harold had been able to decipher only the first two words: "*Dear Ones.*"

Harold the elder died at home, in terrible pain, because he refused to go to a hospital to be treated for his terminal bout of pancreatic cancer, or into a hospice to spend his last few days pain-free. Velma and Swede tended to him, and a nurse visited occasionally. Would he have lived longer if he had been ministered to by the doctors, or had endured the rounds of chemotherapy the oncologist had urged upon him? Old Harold had endured all that came to him, always playing his assigned role, and somehow had found the energy to scribble an illegible postcard with his shakey right hand on a day soon before his dying. "*Dear Ones.*" Harold believed that he himself would never achieve such grace. What if he could honor his grandfather by taking one grand walk?

The Old Lincoln Highway, Big Table Road when it ran through Centerville, was now just a two-laner usually bypassed by drivers who preferred the interstate. Its sparse traffic might actually make it a pretty good place to walk. One tranquil line, connecting the continent. Harold imagined himself on that line, heading east, and suddenly going home to his family seemed inconceivable. He saw himself, backpack strapped on, day

after day after day walking. Inside the pack would be his health care reform plan, which he would personally deliver to the White House. Perhaps then Hillary would be liberated from oblivion, and America, under her leadership, could be saved.

“Harold, you got it, man, you got it! Take the walk, man, get on the road,” K said as he shoved him hard in his chest. Harold stumbled backwards, puzzled why his friend had pushed him so hard.

“Geez, K, why’d you hit me?”

“You gotta get off your ass, Harold. You stuck, man. All this bitching and moaning, that ain’t for you. You the man, Harold, the health care man. Check this shit out-- you’ll be in the newspapers, maybe on TV. People will be saying, why this mutthafucker walking from Iowa to Washington DC? Who is this man? He’s a man with a plan. And then they’ll pay attention to you. Your albino girlfriend will perk right up when she sees you coming. She’ll welcome you with open arms. And you’ll be on TV. Put it to that fat ass Rick Brumbaugh. Fight fire with fire. Care less, and so care more. Son, you’ll climb the mountain, and you’ll finally get yourself heard. You don’t need no Judy Carlson. Get yourself a real woman. Check out Hillary, see what she’s got to say. Give that albino chick a squeeze. And you gotta get away from them little girls of yours. They weighing you down. Sprout your wings, Harold, fly east, into the sun. Damn, boy, you can do it. And on your way, you can stop back off at 118th and you and me can have us a little game. I’ll whip your honky ass just like I always do.”

“Big talk, K, but you never played much D, so don’t be so confident. I’m not as fast as I used to be, but I can still shoot.”

K just giggled.

Harold shook his head in amusement. Walk 1200 miles, take a right, and head straight for Hillary Clinton: this was the product of an imagination deprived of sleep. And yet taking this longest of walks was something he, a rational man, could well maintain the right to do. Wasn't his grandfather a founder of the Old Lincoln Highway? Didn't this give him some legitimate reason to retrace its route east? Couldn't he announce a desire to reclaim his ancestral heritage without being scorned? Such, at least, could be his disguise behind which he could hide his true goal from a skeptical world: to talk health care reform with Hillary Clinton over lunch. Whether they went to bed together afterwards wasn't really the issue. What mattered was whether his health care essay, his plea to de-center the body and restore the soul to its rightful place, got into Hillary's, not Bill's, hands.

There was also the therapeutic angle. He loved to walk and time away from his family would surely do him some good. He had earned a solitary vacation after his years of child care and house cleaning and shopping and cooking and driving the kids here and there and waking up in the middle of the night for bad dreams, ear infections, croop, coughing and quick trips to the emergency room for late-night antibiotics. He was a good father, but now he was unable to sleep for more than an hour or two at a shot. All the many nights of being awakened by the scream of a distraught child had etched themselves deep into his consciousness, and he woke up to listen for them even when the house was silent. He had to get away, he deserved to get away, it would be good for him, for his family, for his country. If he could walk all day, he could sleep all night. Or so he reasoned.

Hoping the girls would be asleep, and the house neat and quiet when he returned, Harold was jolted by disappointment when he entered. It seemed that after he had left, his daughters and wife had baked cookies. The kitchen was a total mess: mixing bowls and measuring cups were piled on top of the untouched dinner dishes on the counter. And now they were all upstairs listening to their favorite music, the soundtrack from the movie Grease. Harold had a visceral dislike for Olivia Newton John, but in spite of himself, he found John Travolta vaguely attractive, perhaps because, as he had heard so often, Jeffrey Greenwald had grown up with him in New Jersey. Even though he was several years older, Jeffrey had taken an interest in the young Travolta, encouraged him to defy local custom, brave the derision of the boys, and join the hordes of girls who tried out for school plays. As Jeffrey told the story, he had given John Travolta his first lessons in independence, and the results were on the screen for the world to behold. Harold didn't believe his friend, but he still couldn't bring himself to totally dislike John Travolta. But he did not, in any way, like the song, "You're the One that I Love, the One that I Love, hoo, hoo, hoooo," and this was what was blasting from the second floor of his house.

Harold went straight into the kitchen, and started to clean. While he was stacking dishes, Susan entered and greeted him with a cautious smile. "Hi. Want a cookie?"

"Good Christ Susan! This place is a fucking mess! And what's that smell? Did you burn the cookies?"

"Only the first batch. Made the mistake of putting Jenny in charge of the timer."

"You did what? That's nuts. And why aren't the girls in bed?"

“It’s only 8:30 Harold. I’ll get them to bed, don’t worry. We had a nice time. Even Katie helped out, and they didn’t argue once.”

“I’ll do the kitchen,” Harold barked. “You put the girls to bed.” Susan did not respond to his command. She only glared at him, then turned on her heels and left the room.

Harold busied himself in the kitchen. He cleared the dishes from the dinner table and began to wash. As he always did, he went over each dish carefully with a soapy sponge before he put it in the dishwasher. While he was angrily doing this, Susan came back into the kitchen carrying the two milk glasses Caroline and Jenny had left in their rooms. She started to put the dirty glasses into the machine.

“Susan, let me rinse those glasses before you put them in.”

“Why do you always wash the dishes before you put them in the machine? It’s a powerful machine, Harold, you don’t even have to rinse the dishes. It’s a Maytag, built in Newton, Iowa. It’s high quality, honey, it chops up the food. Sends it down the drain as liquid. You don’t have to rinse the dishes, especially when you’re going to run it right away.”

Harold understood, but only abstractly, that she was right. Still, since his mother wouldn’t have dreamed of placing a dish unrinsed into the dishwasher, Harold himself felt an almost physical pang when he watched Susan do so.

“I don’t know why I wash the dishes. Habit, I suppose. My mother always washed her dishes before she put them into her machine.”

His civil response to her question encouraged Susan to try once more to share some of the good cheer generated by his absence and her pleasant evening with her

daughters. She looked at her husband with a smile, put her hands on his shoulders, and gently whispered in his ear, “Trust the machine, Harold, trust the machine.”

He drew away from her, stared at her in disbelief, and barked, “why don’t you put the children to bed, Susan?”

With this remark, Susan lost her patience and so she almost ran out of the kitchen without saying a word. Harold was alone, his hands wet with useless soapy water. He hurried to finish his neat packing of the dishwasher. He dried his hands, hung the towel on the door of the cabinet under the sink, and picked up the broom to sweep. While he was doing so, he could hear Susan exhorting Jenny to finish brushing her teeth. The little girl was not listening to her mother. She was rude and assertive, and Harold was tempted to bound up the stairs to come to the rescue. But his vision of Hillary Clinton stopped him. He understood that he was done with the madness of the day, so he finished up the kitchen, poured a large glass of Scotch for himself, and went to the living room. He pushed the play button on the tape deck, not knowing what was in the machine. A choir opened and then Dylan began to sing.

...Knock knock knocking on heaven’s door...

...A long black cloud is coming down

...I feel I’m knocking on heaven’s door...

*Damn, that’s some gloomy shit. That shit’s about dying. But you ain’t dying
Harold, at least not yet. Man, you about to sprout your wings and fly. So turn it off.*

K’s remarks had jolted him out of the sadness that accompanied the warm swell in his his eyes, so he stopped the tape. He put on an old record.

How many roads must a man walk down
Before you call him a man?
How many seas must a white dove sail
Before she sleeps in the sand?

The rhythm moved him forward and so he was able to close his ears to the ruckus upstairs, and try hard to concentrate on the music. One song after another, so familiar because they had been the background music of his youth.

If you're travelling in the North country fair
Where the winds hit heavy on the border line.
Remember me to the one who lives there
For she once was a true love of mine.

Harold was delighted to find that he was actually listening to a bit of Dylan rather than thinking about his children or his wife or the pains shooting up and down his legs.

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

Suddenly Harold realized that ears were streaming down his face. He wiped them with the sleeve of his shirt, got up from the couch and walked to the stereo to turn it off. Just as he stood up, he felt the acrid smoke of the burnt cookies reach his nose. He felt the slight irritation spread into his nostrils just as Dylan sang,

We thought we could sit forever in fun
And our chances really
Was a million to one.

Harold sneezed a mighty sneeze, and his whole body exploded in pain. The twisting and brief convulsion of his upper torso, the spasmodic rush of the air, had activated his sciatic nerve, that giant, gnarly beast stretching from the base of the spine to the foot. The pain was so commanding that it blotted out consciousness of anything but itself. Without knowing how he had gotten there, Harold found himself on the floor next to the stereo system. He curled himself up and tried to remain motionless. The pain wouldn't subside, but at least he could bracket it. Hearing his own heavy breathing, feeling the sweat on his brow, he knew he had to remain still. It was then that he understood: it hadn't been his hamstring after all.

When Susan finally came downstairs, and saw him lying motionless in the fetal position, she nearly screamed, "My God Harold, what's wrong?"

He was calm, his teeth were clenched so tightly that his jaw was quivering. He barely managed to say, "please call an ambulance."

